

THE

The Mesquakie

FOX

Challenge

to New France

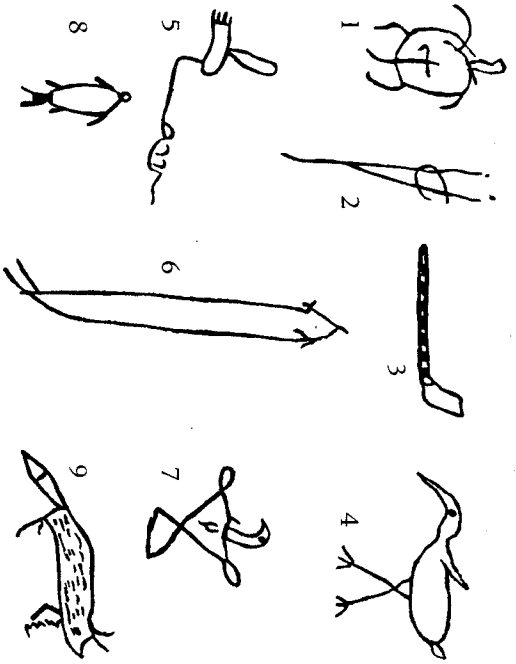
WARS

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Some of the thirty-nine tribal marks on the great 1701 peace treaty of Montreal between the Iroquois and the French and French-allied tribes. The manuscript identifies the marks as follows: (1) Toarenguenion, a Seneca; (2) Soucbon, for the Oneidas; (3) Garonhiaren, a Cayuga; (4) Chippewa chief Gabanque (Ouabangué); (5) Chichicatalo, chief of the Miami village at the St. Joseph River; (6) Le Rat (Kondiaronki), chief of the Hurons; (7) Winnebago village chief Baban; (8) the Sacs; (9) the Outagamis (Foxes). Copied from the National Archives of Canada, MG18, C12.

was aware that the Foxes often had vexed his government, and Miskousouath's speech seemed to underscore their recalcitrance. The Fox-French relationship had never been harmonious, but it soon would worsen.⁹



Frenchmen first officially encountered the Foxes when Father Claude Allouez had established a Jesuit mission among several large villages of Ottawas and Petuns who were encamped at Chequamegon Bay, on the southern shores of Lake Superior. In 1666 or 1667 a trading party of

120 Fox men, women, and children, accompanied by Indians from several other tribes, arrived at the mission to barter their furs for French trade goods. Attempting to spread the gospel, Allouez met with the Indians. He later described the Foxes as a populous tribe, "given to hunting and warfare," who inhabited a country that lay "southward toward the Lake of the Ilimouek" (Lake Michigan). He indicated that they grew large quantities of corn, but were not proficient canoeists, preferring to make "their journeys by land, bearing their packages and their game on their shoulders." Allouez also hinted that the Foxes had some previous contacts with French *coureurs de bois*, for he added, "It is said of them and of the Osaki (Sacs), that when they find a man alone and at a disadvantage, they kill him, especially if he is a Frenchman."¹⁰

Allouez may have encountered the Foxes in Wisconsin, but tribal traditions trace their origins farther east. The Foxes believed that they once had lived on the shores of the Atlantic, but had migrated up the St. Lawrence Valley eventually to occupy eastern Michigan and northwestern Ohio.¹¹ Some historians and anthropologists argue that the Foxes abandoned lower Michigan, fleeing the Iroquois and the Neutrals during the Great Dispersal of the 1640s and 1650s, but there is strong evidence to suggest that they migrated to Wisconsin before that time. Both the Foxes and the Chippewas agree that the Chippewas, not the Iroquois or the Neutrals, drove the Foxes from Michigan's lower peninsula. If such traditions are historically valid, then the Foxes would have vacated the lower peninsula before the Iroquois expansion. In addition, when the French reached Michilmackinac, both the Chippewa and the Ottawa residents of the region referred to the Foxes as the Outagami, or "the People of the Opposite Shore," a name suggesting that they had occupied the eastern shores of Wisconsin for some time.¹² Moreover, if they had once lived in the Saginaw and Detroit areas, and had shared in the traditional Woodland culture

of the region, their way of life had changed markedly by the last quarter of the seventeenth century. When French travelers first entered their villages in Wisconsin, they found that Fox subsistence patterns more closely resembled the prairie-dwelling tribes of Illinois or Iowa than the Woodland peoples of Michigan or northern Wisconsin.¹³

In 1669, when the Jesuits began to proselytize among the Foxes, they found them living in eastern Wisconsin. During October, Allouez encountered Fox tribespeople intermixed with Sacs, Potawatomis, and Winnebagos residing in three intertribal villages along the western shores of Green Bay. Other Foxes were scattered in winter camps as far distant as Chicago, but most of the tribe evidently lived at Ouestatimong, a fortified village of over two thousand men, women, and children, located on the Wolf River near modern Lee-man, Wisconsin.¹⁴

In April 1670 Allouez journeyed to Ouestatimong, which he described as being "in an excellent country—the soil, which is black there, yielding them Indian corn in abundance." The Foxes welcomed him to their village and listened politely to his attempts to spread the gospel, but they informed Allouez that one of their hunting camps in northern Illinois recently had been mistakenly attacked by the Iroquois, and they "were too dispirited to speak, being all occupied in mourning their dead." According to the Foxes, the Iroquois had been seeking revenge against the Potawatomis, but instead had fallen upon the small village of Foxes, killing almost seventy women and children, and capturing thirty others while the men from the camp were absent hunting. The Foxes thanked Allouez "for having come to visit and console us" and asked the priest to dwell in their midst and "teach us to speak to the great Manitou." A Fox spokesman also pleaded with Allouez to intercede with the Iroquois and "tell them that they have taken me for some one else. I do not make war on them, I have not eaten their people."¹⁵

Allouez assured the Foxes that he would carry their requests to French officials in Canada, and he admonished the Indians to "fortify themselves in their resolution to obey the true God." Before leaving their village, he announced that he was founding a new mission, St. Marc, in their midst. No priest was yet available for permanent residency, but Allouez assured the Indians that a black robe would regularly visit their village. He later informed his superiors that although neighboring tribes still held the Foxes "in very low estimation," the tribe would provide a "glorious and rich harvest for a zealous and patient Missionary."¹⁶

The "harvest" was much leaner than Allouez anticipated. Throughout the 1670s the Foxes welcomed Allouez and other priests to their villages, but their acceptance of the gospel was markedly affected by secular concerns such as economics and politics. At first the Foxes seemed eager for the black robes' message. Allouez returned to Ouestatimong during February 1671, and although many tribesmen complained that they recently had been cheated by French traders, they listened politely to his teachings. Prominent warriors tolerated his denunciation of their polygynous marriages, and several parents allowed the priest to baptize their children. Moreover, two adults, an aged man and a woman, also embraced Christianity, and Allouez reported that the Foxes, from whose "haughty natures" he had expected nothing "but jests, repulses and mockery," were "being changed from wolves into lambs."¹⁷

Throughout 1671 and 1672 interest in the black robes' manitou seemed to increase. From the Foxes' perspective, the new faith cost little, and although most tribespeople evidently made little attempt to embrace the totality of the priest's teachings, Roman Catholicism seemed to offer a new set of symbols whose medicine was potentially very powerful. Long-embroiled in a series of conflicts with both the Sioux and the Chippewas, and facing new aggression from the Iroquois, the Foxes were willing to incorporate

new manitous into their cosmology if such spirits offered them medicine. Before he had departed from Ouestatimong, Allouez had erected a large cross, and in the months that followed many of the Foxes incorporated the symbol on their lodges and possessions. Moreover, they had been fascinated by the ritual of the mass, and when Allouez returned to their village in November 1672, he found many of the tribespeople making the sign of the cross on numerous, if sometimes inappropriate, occasions. During Allouez's brief visit in their village about fifty Foxes accepted Christianity, and late in November, when the priest left Ouestatimong, much of the tribe seemed to be under the Jesuit's influence.¹⁸

Conditions changed in the months that followed. During November 1672, convinced that the symbol of the cross would enhance their endeavor, a small party of Fox warriors painted crosses on their weapons and clothing before leaving to attack the Sioux in what is now eastern Minnesota. They surprised a small camp of their enemies and, on returning to Ouestatimong, praised the new medicine, "proclaiming everywhere that they were solely indebted to it for such good success." But other Foxes who later followed their example were ambushed by the Sioux and suffered over thirty casualties. When Allouez again visited their village in the spring of 1673, the Foxes were much less hospitable. They refused to share their lodges with the priest, and he was forced to "seek shelter in an old Cabin that was open on all Sides." Some tribespeople remained interested in his teachings, but others declared that "prayer had caused them to die" in their warfare against the Sioux. Tribal leaders confronted Allouez, asking, "How can we pray to God? He does not love us; he loves only our enemies, for he always Delivers us into Their hands, and hardly ever Delivers any of them into ours." Allouez attempted to answer their questions, but when a woman whom he had recently baptized suddenly sickened and died, his influence among the Foxes diminished.¹⁹

Fox attempts at reconciliation with the Iroquois also threatened the Jesuits' efforts. Still convinced that the Iroquois attack on their hunting camp had been a mistake, the Foxes sent emissaries to the Senecas during the fall of 1672. Pleading that they had never attacked the Iroquois, the Foxes admitted that they held a few Iroquois prisoners in their villages, but said these captives had been given to them by neighboring tribes. The Foxes assured the Iroquois that the prisoners had been adopted and "they are living... as [our] children." In response, the Senecas promised friendship, but they warned the Foxes against both the French and the Jesuits. When the emissaries returned to Ouestatimong, Allouez attempted to negate the impact of the Iroquois message, but the offers of an Iroquois alliance had been extended and the Foxes would not forget them.²⁰

Other circumstances further weakened the Foxes' ties to the Jesuits. Although Allouez and other priests shrewdly incorporated certain Fox beliefs with Catholic teachings (for example, Fox traditions of fasting were redirected toward Lent), they were less tolerant of other tribal ceremonies. The priests particularly disliked the Fox reliance on dreams and visions, which the priests considered to be at best superstitious and at worst a form of devil worship. At first the Foxes tolerated the priests' denunciation of such practices, but when Allouez and others attempted to prevent young men from experiencing a vision quest, they encountered the wrath of many tribal elders. In response, the priests refused to baptize all who adhered to such traditions, but their decision then limited most of their converts to young children, the infirm, and the elderly.²¹

The Foxes also were dismayed at the priests' reaction to several natural disasters. In the summer of 1675 the Foxes' corn crop was severely damaged by a late freeze, and during the following autumn much of the sparse harvest was afflicted by a fungus that destroyed the ears in the storage pits. Weakened by food shortages during the winter of