On April 12, 1680, a Belgian monk-turned-missionary named Louis Hennepin tinkered with a canoe on the banks of the Mississippi River. As two French servants boiled a wild turkey for his lunch, Hennepin surveyed the strange and beautiful country before him. His party had traveled the Mississippi for eleven days without incident, but, as he awaited his meal, Hennepin “suddenly perceived … fifty bark canoes, conducted by 120 Indians, entirely nude, who descended this river with great speed.” Hennepin called out to them, twisting his tongue around rudimentary Algonquian to assure the Indians of his good intentions. “Mistigouche,” he cried, using the Algonquians’ name for his people to identify himself and his servants as their friends. As Siouan speakers, the approaching war party did not understand his words. But, unfortunately for Hennepin, they got the message: these bearded foreigners were allies of the Algonquian-speaking peoples of the Mississippi Valley, the very peoples the Sioux had come to attack.1

Hennepin and his party quickly realized the danger and scrambled to evade an impending assault. Ditching the turkey in the brush, the servants ran to the canoe, joining Hennepin in a hasty retreat. Within seconds, Sioux canoes surrounded them. Raising ceremonial war cries, the attackers boarded Hennepin's canoe and took him captive. “We offered no resistance,” Hennepin later recalled, “because we were only three against so great a number.” Now using signs because he “did not know a word of their language,” Hennepin tried to urge the Sioux on to their original target, but to no avail. Next he offered bribes, first tobacco from Martinique, then two wild turkeys they had saved for dinner. This pleased his captors, and their demeanor seemed to soften, but by nightfall Hennepin and the Frenchmen still feared for their lives. The servants resolved to die fighting like men, but Hennepin was more resigned to his fate, whispering a vow that he would “allow them to kill me without resistance in order to imitate the Savior, who gave himself voluntarily into the hands of his executioners.”

Rather than dying a martyr, Hennepin lived the next eight months as a captive among the Sioux. For nineteen days he and his companions were forced to row their overburdened canoe against the Mississippi’s strong current. Reaching the northern edges of navigable waters, the Sioux destroyed Hennepin's canoe to prevent his escape and then marched the prisoners over half-frozen marshlands toward their villages. The prisoners faced daily threats to their lives, enduring “hunger, thirst, and a thousand outrages … marching day and night without pause.” When Hennepin’s hunger and fatigue caused him to lag, his captors set fire to the meadows behind him, forcing him to push

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Throughout this study I use the term “Sioux” rather than the recently fashionable “Dakota” because the latter term excludes those Sioux who are Lakota or Nakota and because “Sioux” is a much more widely recognized term among Anglophone readers. French sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries do not allow a clear distinction between various Sioux bands, so the broader term also better reflects the historical record. Several modern tribal organizations in the United States use “Sioux” in their official names, but none uses “Dakota” except to designate their location. See Raymond J. DeMallie, “Sioux until 1850,” in Handbook, xiii, Plains, part 2, 718; and, for a different perspective, Gary Clayton Anderson, Kinsmen of Another Kind: Dakota-White Relations in the Upper Mississippi Valley, 1650–1862 (Lincoln, Nebr., 1984).

2 “Nous ne faisons aucune resistance, parce que nous n’étions que trois contre un si grand nombre,” 316; “Je ne savois pas un mot de leur langue,” 320; “J’avois resolu de me laisser tuer sans resistance afin d’imiter le Sauveur, qui s’étoit remis volontairement entre les mains de ses bourreaux,” 319: Hennepin, Nouvelle découverte.