CHAPTER 29

SITUATING (PROTO) HISTORY ON THE NORTHWESTERN PLAINS AND ROCKY MOUNTAINS

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The Northwestern Plains and adjacent areas are well known for a rich Paleoindian archaeological record, dating back more than 12,000 years. Holocene occupations are somewhat less recognized to those unfamiliar with the plains, although certainly buffalo jumps, tipi rings, and medicine wheels are part of a broader knowledge and lexicon about the archaeology of the continent. Inspired by a growing interest in colonial and frontier encounters and in bridging artificial divisions between prehistoric and historical archaeology as well as recent methodological innovations, plains and mountain archaeologists have begun turning their attention to study of the other side of the time spectrum, that is, the material record of Native lives in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. This work compliments well-established programs of plains ethnohistory and also adds an important material aspect to an often-biased written record. The goals of this chapter are to problematize the relationship between the so-called prehistoric and historic eras on the Northwestern Plains and middle Rocky Mountains and to present two cases that exemplify recent research within a defined study area centered on the Bighorn Basin and Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem of northwestern Wyoming and south central Montana.
In part because of their somewhat inaccessible location within the middle of the continent, Native people of the western plains and mountains did not see permanent American settlement until late in the 19th century, almost 400 years after Spanish ships landed on the shores of Hispaniola. Townships in Wyoming and Montana were not founded until the early 1900s, long after places like Santa Fe, St. Louis, or even Denver. Twenty generations of nomadic residents in the short grass plains, high country plateaus, and mountain forests witnessed and participated in unprecedented change, much of it only distantly related to what was occurring outside the region. What this means is that archaeologists working in the western plains and mountains have access to an extended material data set that continues through the 19th century. This record is in some cases hundreds of years longer than in the rest of the country, before forced movement to reservations, missions, and ranching settlements. This time period is often referred to as the protohistoric, after the coming of French, British, and Spanish explorers but before everyday contact with American settlers. We contend that using this transitional shorthand between prehistory and history has important methodological and theoretical implications.

The western edge of the plains and the adjacent mountain corridors were a crossroads for numerous Native peoples during this dynamic time on the American frontier. Among these inhabitants were the Crow, Shoshone, Lakota, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Blackfoot, Assiniboine, Atsina, Kiowa, Comanche, Ute, and Plains Apache. European contact brought many changes as Native peoples became increasingly involved with the fur trade and were pushed and pulled into new territories. These changes are reflected in subsistence and settlement strategies, marriage patterns, trade negotiations, labor, and demography. Material inventories changed as well; firearms, equestrian tackle, metal pots and personal adornments, cotton and wool clothing, and glass beads were innovatively incorporated into native lifeways. Inter-marriage among Native groups and between Native peoples and Europeans additionally led to new identities and group memberships.

Until recently, much of what we know archaeologically from this time period has come from burial contexts, especially as these burials were more actively sought by early collectors, hoping to find beadwork, old guns, axes, and knives. Most of these burials are single interments in rockshelters and small caves, but occasionally they are from cemeteries associated with European and American trading posts and forts. Analysis of human physical remains from these sites demonstrates a clear decline in average age at death after AD 1700. The average individual age during the Protohistoric/Historic (AD 1700–1900) was 25 years, compared to 33 years during the Late Prehistoric (AD 150–1700) and to 47 years during the Late Archaic (1050 BC–AD 450). More young people were dying, and very few adults survived to old age (Scheiber 2008). The Pitchfork burials (48PA.42) represent an example from the recent past. In the first decade of the 19th century, the bodies of two young Crow men in their 20s were placed high in a rockshelter overlooking the Greybull River. They were buried with numerous European and Native-manufactured objects, including glass beads, dentalia shells, shell hair pipes, metal jewelry, buffalo robes, a wool coat, and a carved wooden bowl. From the high number of ectoparasites (lice) recovered from preserved hair, researchers
concluded that these individuals were living away from their home for as long as a year prior to their death.

Additional archaeological data from this time period has come from the discovery of occasional campsites, as at River Bend (48NA202) or Medicine Lodge Creek (48BH499), of biographical style rock art sites such as No Water (48WA2066) or Joliet (24CB402), and of isolated vertical pole lodge structures in the mountains such as Paint Creek (48PA1085) or the Soapy Dale Peak Lodge (48HO107; Figure 29.1).

Figure 29.1 Map of the Northwestern Plains and Middle Rocky Mountains (base map from Frison 1991:5). (a) Pitchfork (48PA42), (b) Medicine Lodge Creek (48BH499), (c) No Water (48WA2066), (d) Joliet (24CB402), (e) Hagen (24DW3), (f) Big Goose (48SH313), (g) Piney Creek (48JO311), (h) River Bend (48NA202), (i) Paint Creek Lodge (48PA1085), (j) Soapy Dale Peak Lodge (48HO107), (k) Legend Rock (48HO4), (l) Eden Farson (48SW304), (m) Bull Elk Pass (48FR307) and Black Mountain (48FR494), (n) High Rise Village (48FR589), (i) Bighorn Canyon, (2) Boulder Ridge.
Information from these sites however is not well-disseminated outside of a local context and word of mouth among regional archaeologists.

**Crossing Divides**

The western plains in Wyoming and Montana are located on the edge of the North American continental divide, and the metaphor of crossing divides in time and space is particularly salient in conceptualizing the recent past here. Archaeologists interested in the material record of recent Indian occupations straddle several culture areas, traditions, and frameworks for conceptualizing the past. The term *protohistoric* is often used as an intermediate period between prehistory and history, although definitions may emphasize material goods and encounters over indigenous culture change and continuity.

The protohistoric is regarded as the transitional period between the initial receipt of European goods by the aboriginal inhabitants of a region which signals the end of the prehistoric, and the arrival of Europeans in the area which marks the beginning of the historic period [Ray 1978:26].

The end of the prehistoric on the western plains would therefore probably date to somewhere between 1600 and 1700 and is typically signified by access to and use of some European-manufactured goods. Demographic patterns and other factors suggest that disease epidemics affected sedentary farmers in the eastern plains along the Missouri river by the early 1600s. Although some Indian people in the far west may have had regular contact with European trappers and traders during this time, these encounters were probably uncommon. The spread of the horse across the plains beginning in the early 1700s is probably one of the most concrete changes that affected Plains cultures throughout the area. The spread of the horse may have been patchy, however, and conclusions about changing mobility may be oversimplified. Mobility, territory, and accessibility certainly changed, but to what extent and by whom remains to be explored. A variety of written accounts are available before sustained contact with European Americans in the wider region, although it is not until after the Louisiana Purchase and Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery in 1806 that we have any written documents of Native people living in the Greater Yellowstone area.

The start of the historic period is also problematic. On the western plains, history is set sometime during the 19th century, in the 100 years between Lewis and Clark’s travels in 1806 and the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890. The historic period is often subtly defined by and symbolically connected with cultural destruction, and dissociation from former ways of life, when mobile hunter-gatherers become ranchers and farmers on government-mandated reservations. Forced settlement or daily constraint on the mobility of hunter-gatherers is, then, what ultimately defines
the historic. This is the decisive end to a protohistoric or transitional period, and most archaeologists have not been able to trace (or been interested in tracing) the material signature of reservation-period occupants. How do we cross this divide between prehistory and history and the legacy of prehistoric and historic archaeology? We have three main concerns with the appropriateness of designating a separate period (protohistory) from what comes before or after.

1. Is the protohistoric a date or a process? As archaeologists, we are not accustomed to measuring time in decades, and we often lack the fine-grained information to accurately refine our dates within the two or three centuries under investigation. However, we know from written records that considerable culture change occurred during this time, where decades do make a difference. The protohistoric is often defined by artifact presence—trade beads, cartridges, metal arrow heads—so that the definition becomes more about these objects than choices to incorporate these items into traditional material cultural repertoires.

2. How do we define these centuries without overreliance on artifact ratios (that is, marking time by the relative percentages of indigenous to introduced materials)? There is a tacit assumption that people uncritically chose European-manufactured objects soon after they became available. These artifacts become diagnostic index fossils, not hallmarks of change in the resulting interpretations. In fact, native people often chose to use a mixture of old and new materials following access to metal and glass objects. Matching material change to social change is thus difficult when artifact assemblages of the 1830s could be very similar to those from the 1530s, but originating from very different social, economic, and political contexts. This is complicated by the high mobility of plains peoples, which in many cases is not conducive to extensive discussion of cultural identity and similarity and difference between specific groups. In the absence of European trade goods, however, we may not be able to separate circa AD 1500 occupations from circa AD 1800 occupations, and thus in practice we may extend what we call (late) prehistoric sites all the way into the 19th century.

3. How does cultural identity become visible in archaeological contexts? Because of a fairly extensive ethnohistoric and ethnographic literature on the plains, we have a sense of the type and distribution of Native groups that may correspond with archaeological assemblages. Although we can rarely associate archaeological complexes with known descendant communities, after about AD 1700 these tribal identities can be explored in more detail.

Stemming from these concerns is the realization that the archaeology of this period of time on the Northwestern Plains and Rocky Mountains may differ from other areas of North America because of
1. The relative geographic isolation in the middle of the country
2. The unique physical surroundings in overlapping zones of transition among three primary research and cultural areas (Great Plains, Interior Plateau, and Great Basin), all having their own archaeological chronologies and taxonomies
3. The character of hunter-gatherers’ mobility compared to settlements of farmers in much of the rest of the continent
4. The relative position of Native peoples vis-à-vis different kinds of European colonial settlements and outposts (with differing agendas and philosophies)
5. The late American settlement in this area
6. The extensive research by ethnohistorians and ethnographers characterizing the people and lifeways of the Great Plains that may inhibit or discourage pursuing other lines of evidence
7. The dominant historical narrative of the settling of the West

**Two Case Studies**

Two case studies involving the archaeology of recent nomadic hunter-gatherer occupants of the Northwestern Plains and Rocky Mountains exemplify relevant issues related to researching the material record of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Our conclusions are based on archaeological research focused on documenting Crow and Shoshone migration, residence, and landscape use in northern Wyoming and southern Montana, in the Bighorn Basin, and in the Greater Yellowstone area.

**Tipi Rings, Domestic Space, and the Crow**

According to oral histories, the Crow separated from the Hidatsa in the Middle Missouri region of present-day North Dakota during the 1500s and resettled on the western plains of Montana sometime between 1550 and 1650. A handful of archaeological sites document this journey, notably a single earthlodge at the Hagen site (24DW2) on the Montana–North Dakota border and bison processing campsites on the eastern slope of the Bighorn Mountains such as Big Goose (48SH313) and Piney Creek (48JO311). Identifying these sites as Crow is primarily based on pottery that is stylistically similar to that found in the Middle Missouri area. By just 300 years later, during the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851, the Crow leader Awé Kúalawac-chish (Sits in the Middle of the Land) defined the Crow homeland, known as *ičiía Shoopé*, as extending from the Black Hills in the southeast to the Wind River Mountains in the southwest, from the Beartooth Mountains in the southwest to the Bear Paw Mountains in the northeast. The Crow people lived within these four corners, represented symbolically and metaphorically by the four-pole foundation of the Crow tipi. The words *ičiía Shoopé* literally mean the four base poles of the tipi.
Our first case study focuses on an extensive domestic tipi ring landscape numbering in the thousands at Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area (Figure 29.2). Tipi rings, or stone circles, are one of the most common archaeological sites on the Northwestern Plains. Rocks that were often placed around the base of the tipi to hold it down remained in place when the camp was moved. They also preserve the footprint of the lodge, the conceptual and symbolic home of the Crow people. Archaeologists studying stone circle sites can address daily lives in a domestic context, use of space, social and economic organization, and ideology. Bighorn Canyon is located on the northern edge of the Bighorn Basin and is adjacent to the modern Crow Reservation. The Crow continue to tell many stories about the canyon area. Studying tipi rings at Bighorn Canyon is important for addressing Native-centered identity and migration in a domestic context.

Most of the data at stone circles sites can be retrieved from the surface, minimizing the potential impacts due to subsurface investigation. Limited test excavations target potentially datable buried hearths. A number of the dated rings at Bighorn Canyon were occupied during AD 1400–1600, which falls within the few centuries when the Crow probably arrived in the western country. The majority of Plains Indians construct their tipi from a three-pole tripod foundation, which leaves an oval footprint and an oval stone circle. However, the Crow, Blackfoot, and Shoshone all used four-pole foundations. Although we cannot definitively say the Bighorn Canyon campsites were left by Crow people, they are contemporaneous with the Crow migration, and the circular footprint is more likely from a four-pole lodge.

Figure 29.2 Stone circle at Two Eagle site, Bighorn Canyon (BICA 08–01-SC29; note possible doorway opening in lower center).
The Crow call events that happened in the past “the time when we used stones to weigh down our lodges.” The word for this is Biiaakashissihipee. According to Crow tribal history, a boy named Big Metal or Uuwatisee was raised by bighorn sheep after he was abandoned by his stepfather in the mountains. He later returned to his people bringing metal and tipi stakes, and stakes replaced stones for holding down tipi covers. This pattern appears to hold true throughout the plains, and it is exceedingly rare to find rocks, not stakes, around the base of tipis in historic photographs. Campsites that date to the 18th or 19th centuries are thus quite difficult to identify. Some researchers have suggested that very large rings postdate the introduction of the horse, but this age-size correlation remains unresolved and is not supported by the evidence. Therefore the archaeological signatures of these campsites only loosely point to the time period of interest, after Crow migrations into the area. Although we could simply label these stone circle sites as prehistoric in age because of their lack of diagnostic historic artifacts, we think it is important to acknowledge changes to the social landscape of this time in the metaphorical context of domestic spaces.

Sheep Traps, Hunting Landscapes, and the Shoshone

As a comparison, the Shoshone people of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho are essentially a Great Basin group, some of whom migrated east across the Rocky Mountains during the last thousand years. Considerable debate exists as to the duration of Shoshone occupation in the west, with arguments ranging from 5,000 years to 500 years ago (Nabokov and Loendorf 2004). The Shoshone world in the 17th through 19th centuries covered most of the mountains, plains, and basins of Wyoming, although the Snakes (as they were often called) expanded extensively throughout the plains as horse traders, raiders, and middlemen traveling as far south as the pueblos in New Mexico and as far north as Blackfoot country in Saskatchewan (Secoy 1953). By the late 1700s, military power shifted away from the Shoshone as their neighbors became mounted and armed, and they may have been intensifying resource procurement in and occupation of new places. During the 1930s, anthropologists such as Julian Steward recorded numerous Shoshone bands of the 19th century throughout Idaho, Wyoming, and parts of Utah and Nevada designated by primary food resource (sheep eaters, buffalo eaters, salmon eaters, pine nut eaters). These designations were fluid, with flexible group membership.

In Wyoming, the Shoshone are best known as being buffalo eaters in the interior basins and plains and sheep eaters in the mountains. The plains sites include well-known examples such as the Dinwoody style of rock art at Legend Rock (48HO4) and the Eden Farson antelope processing and campsite (48SW304). The mountain sites are characterized by a handful of high-elevation wooden sheep trap complexes that include cribbed log structures, drive lines, and catch pens (Figure 29.3). These sites, such as Bull Elk Pass (48FR307) and Black Mountain (48FR494), show evidence of bighorn sheep hunting and possibly of intensification of mountain
Figure 29.3 Sheep traps of the Absaroka Mountains: (a) Black Mountain sheep trap, wooden catch pen; (b) Bull Elk Pass sheep trap, wooden catch pen (note two v-shaped drive lines in upper right).
resources in the 19th century. Killing bighorn sheep is also metaphorically associated with hunting magic and rain shamanism among Numic-speaking (Shoshonean) groups living farther west (Whitley 1994).

Our second case study focuses on these hunting features and associated campsites in the Absaroka mountains on the western side of the Bighorn Basin in northwestern Wyoming. The antiquity of these sites is not clear. The state of wood preservation would indicate a fairly recent age, and a few dendrochronology dates place creation of the wooden drivelines and cribbed log features around 1800. It is possible, though, that wood from earlier visits decayed and disappeared. Very few associated artifacts (and no metal) have been found in or near the sheep traps. We cannot say for certain if the Mountain Shoshone used these sites prior to 1800 (although some evidence for this seems to exist at the High Rise Village sites in the Wind River Mountains). Undated stone drivelines in the vicinity suggest a possible older presence.

Recent forest fires have exposed a number of late period campsites that are associated with the sheep traps and that contain what have traditionally been considered diagnostic Shoshone pottery, projectile points, and other tools. These campsites show diverse activities associated with animal hunting, along with an intriguing mixture of materials: obsidian, Intermountain Ware ceramics, steatite, metal arrowheads, cans, and glass trade beads.

This case study concentrates on two sheep traps and at least six campsites at an area known as Boulder Ridge. These sites may have been occupied serially through time, with occupations ranging from 2,000 years ago to 100 years ago. Most were visited during the height of the Rocky Mountain fur trade, and we are interested in the extent to which these mountain people chose to participate in this phenomenon. The mountain sites appear to have been mostly abandoned by 1850, although with continued use into at least the 1920s. We are hesitant to draw a line between Indian and American use of the ridge, and we are considering the pathways and kinds of Indian access to traditional landscapes after 1870.

Making distinctions among prehistoric, protohistoric, and historic at the high-elevation sites is particularly challenging. In the absence of dated contexts and Euro-American-manufactured objects, we would likely call these assemblages prehistoric; if one or two beads, protohistoric; if hundreds of beads, late protohistoric or historic; and if 1920s trash, we may assume it was left by local ranchers, not Indians. Archaeologists can avoid these models of unidirectional change relating percentage of Euro-American objects to time by integrating other events related to movement and mobility (see Oetelaar, this volume), using obsidian sourcing, ceramics sourcing, activity area analysis, GIS-based landscape patterning, and other means of dating these sites (radiocarbon, obsidian hydration, and thermoluminescence). On the basis of these kinds of datasets, we think the Shoshone who occupied the hunting landscapes at Boulder Ridge and the region may have developed new identities as mountain people during the 19th century, related in part to their relationships with other Shoshone bands and to other plains residents (both foreign and familiar).
Conclusion

These case studies are unique examples in the archaeology of the recent past of the Northwestern Plains and Rocky Mountains because we are able, with some interpretive license, to isolate the cultural identity of the occupants of the sites. With nomadic peoples, this can be extremely difficult, and it certainly sets the research and time period apart from work done in other places with well-established community farming signatures.

These case studies share a focus on interpretation of the domestic spaces, landscapes, and daily lives of nomadic hunter-gatherers between about 1500 and 1900. Both look at migrations of Indian people from faraway places: former farmers moving east across the plains from the Missouri River and into the unglaciated Missouri Plateau of Montana, and Great Basin foragers crossing the mountains from Idaho and Utah, and coming into the high country surrounding the interior basins of Wyoming.

As archaeologists, we are interested in tracing why they moved, regionally and locally. We want to know what materials they brought with them and what items they adopted once they got there. We ask how they created social landscapes in their new homes. Only indirectly were these decisions related to European and American colonies on the coasts, as opposed to internal social dynamics. If we simply refer to these centuries as an initial reaction to European people and their material inventories, we take away Indian decision making during this time and do not acknowledge long-term indigenous histories. This is especially true given the many years of residence and resistance between introduction of horses from the south and growing entanglement in the French fur trade to the north in the 1700s, and arrival of American homesteaders in places like the Bighorn Basin in the 1890s. Archaeologists can provide narratives that transcend these artificial boundaries. At the same time, we acknowledge that this time is central to how identity is revealed, negotiated, and transformed among historic Plains Indian societies. Perhaps we as archaeologists want to designate a separate period because we want a time before as much as after, a time that is in fact neither.

We prefer to recenter Native history not just as influenced by the Americans or French or British or Spanish. What happened on the Northwestern Plains and Rocky Mountains between 1500 and 1900 occurred over the course of 20 generations before sustained European contact. Designating a separate period between prehistory and history continues to mark a contrast between the two. We feel that the terms protohistoric and contact period inhibit research on recent hunter-gatherers, and they should be abandoned or used with caution. Instead, we choose to present chronologies by calendric dates, whenever possible. This decision requires a different kind of training on the part of the archaeologist, combining strengths and knowledge of archaeology, historical archaeology, history, ethnohistory, and anthropology.
REFERENCES


SUGGESTED READING


