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Late Period Cultural Sequences in the Northeastern Great Basin Subarea and their Implications for the Upper Snake and Salmon River Country

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ONE of my oft-stated concerns has been to gain insight into the ways in which prehistoric peoples adapted to the environments of the Upper Snake and Salmon River country. Some progress has been made in the knowledge of the nature and changes in these environments over the time in question, but far less is known of the lifeways and material culture of the prehistoric inhabitants. In part, this is because we continue to think about the prehistoric inhabitants in terms of what is known about the Numic-speaking peoples who lived in the western Great Basin. Such thinking may have merit in some parts of the Great Basin, but does it have equal merit in all? Probably not, and certainly not in the Northeastern Great Basin during the greater part of the Late Period as revealed in regional sequences.

The subarea in question includes the territory of all the Numic-speaking peoples found beyond the northeastern corner of the Great Basin physiographic province, such as the Shoshone of eastern Idaho and the Wind

River Shoshone of western Wyoming; it is coextensive with the geographic distribution of these peoples during the early part of the nineteenth century (Kroeber 1939:51-53).¹ These peoples, most of whom were horse-mounted bison hunters, ranged through the Upper Snake, Salmon, and Green River drainages, the Bear River drainage west of the Continental Divide, and the Upper Missouri and Yellowstone River drainages east of the Divide, a topographically diverse geographic area that included the Eastern Snake River Plain and adjacent parts of the Northern and Middle Rocky Mountains as well as the western half of the Wyoming Basin and the extreme northeastern corner of the Great Basin (Fig. 1). According to early travelers, it was here that the western limit of the great bison herds in the United States was to be found (Butler 1978a: Fig. 12.1) and it was here that several major passes between the Great Plains and the intermountain region occurred. By most accounts, the Shoshoneans had only recently migrated into the area from the Great Basin, probably arriving in eastern Idaho and western Wyoming no earlier than

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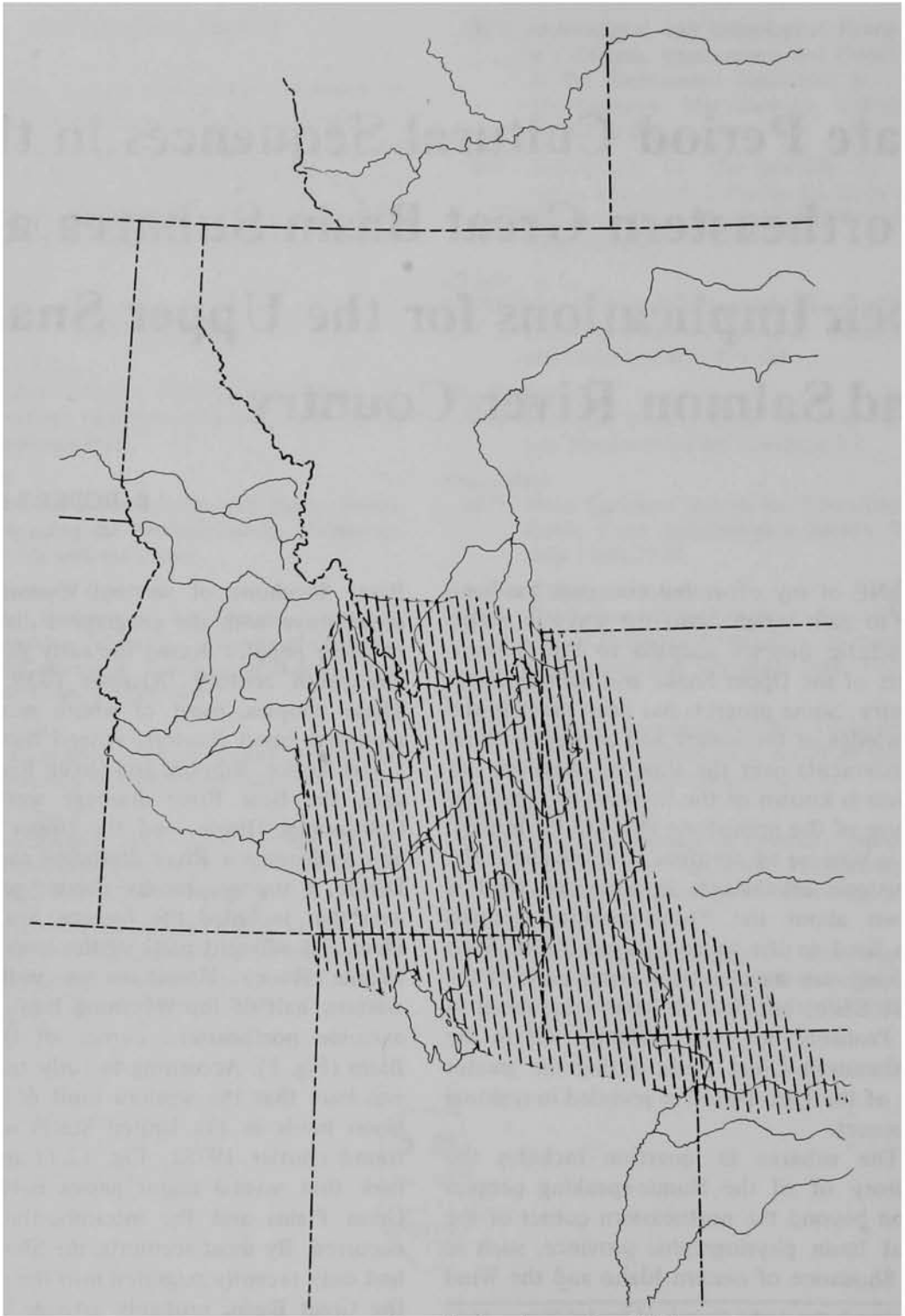


Fig. 1. The Northeast Great Basin subarea after 1800.

the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries (Butler 1981); only Swanson (1972) argued that the Shoshoneans had occupied the Rocky Mountains as early as 8000 years ago and continued to occupy them into the historic period. But no matter what is believed to have been the case, most students of southern Idaho prehistory assume that descriptions of Shoshonean lifeways and material culture provide an appropriate basis for predicting or interpreting the lifeways and material culture remains of all of the late prehistoric (i.e., post-A.D. 500) occupants of the region. Examination of Late Period (*ca.* A.D. 500-1800) sequences in western Wyoming, northern Utah, and eastern Idaho, such as shown in Fig. 2, reveals that this assumption can be very misleading. Prior to occupation by Shoshoneans from the Basin, the geographic area in question was inhabited by peoples related to or strongly

influenced by peoples from the Northern Plains moving southward along the eastern flank of the Rocky Mountains. According to one major hypothesis, ancestors of such southern Athabascan speakers as the Navajo and Apache were among the latter. Archaeological evidence bearing on that hypothesis is briefly reviewed in conjunction with a discussion of Late Period sequences found in the Northeastern Great Basin subarea.

THE LATE PERIOD SEQUENCE OF WESTERN WYOMING

Because it begins with cultural elements and components that clearly originated outside the Great Basin, this sequence serves as an excellent point of departure for discussing some of the critical differences between Great Basin and Northeastern Great Basin prehistory. It also provides an opportunity to

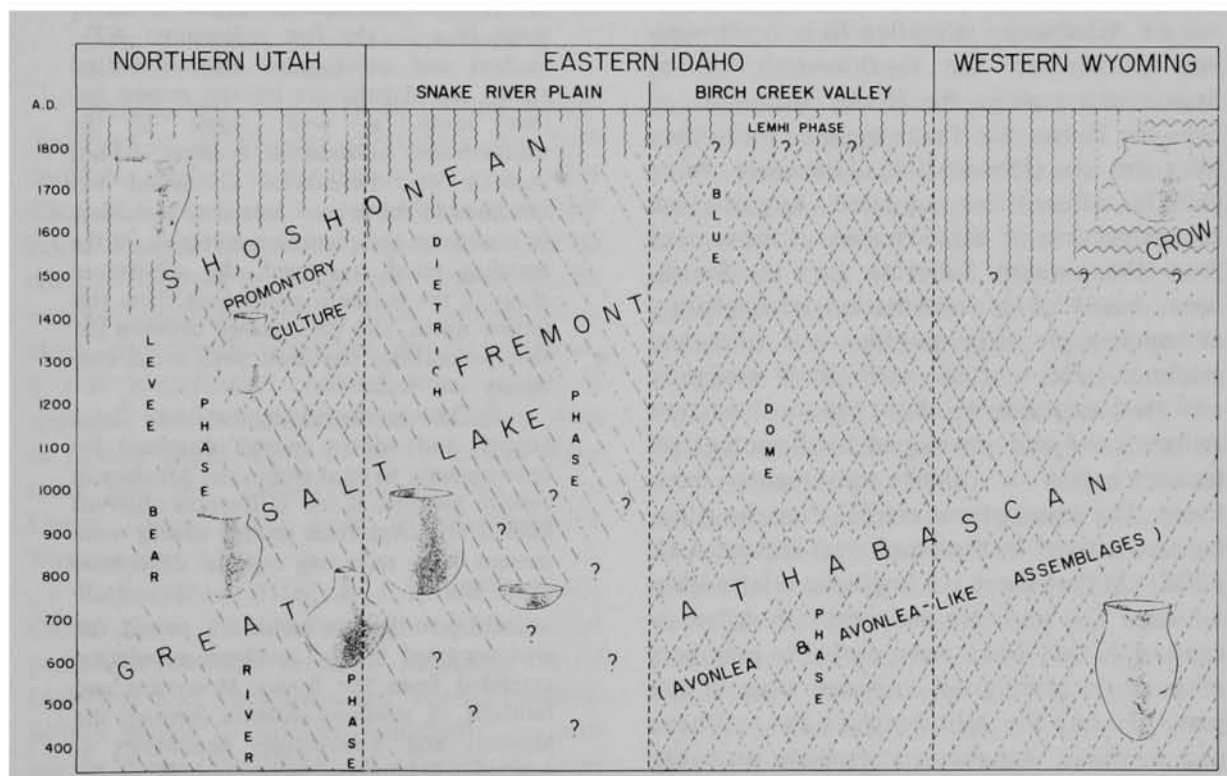


Fig. 2. Cultural sequences in the northeastern Great Basin subculture area during the Late Period (taken from supplement to Butler 1978b).

review the Athabascan migration hypothesis as it relates to the Northeastern Great Basin subarea.

According to Frison (1978), the Late Period hallmarks in Wyoming are: small side-notched and corner-notched points, presumably indicative of the bow-and-arrow complex; pottery of several different traditions, each apparently originating outside Wyoming; serrated cannon bone fleshers, usually made from a bison metatarsal; and grooved mauls, usually made from river cobbles. Although sharing much in common, including large-scale communal bison hunting, the peoples who moved into Wyoming during the Late Period evidently came from distinctly different geographic areas and spoke unrelated languages. Earliest among these may have been the ancestors of such Athabascan-speaking peoples as the Navajo and Apachean groups in the Southwest.

An Athabascan migration from northwestern Canada to the southwestern United States, either along the Rocky Mountains or over the Plains, was first suggested more than 30 years ago (Hewes 1948). Recently, Perry (1980) offered an updated hypothetical reconstruction of the Athabascan movement from the western Subarctic into the Southwest, based on a combination of linguistic, archaeological, ethnographic, and historical evidence. He started with four generally accepted assumptions about the southwestern Athabascans and developed his hypothetical reconstruction of their movements from there. The assumptions are (1) that the Athabascans arrived in the Southwest around A.D. 1500; (2) that there is a linguistic relationship between the southern and northern Athabascans such that both were probably members of a single population at some time in the past; (3) that the split between the southern and northern Athabascan speakers probably took place in the north rather than in the south; and (4) that this split, based on linguis-

tic divergence, probably took place around A.D. 600. From these and other considerations, he hypothesized the following series of events (Perry 1980:281-282):

a) The Pre-Apachean [i.e., pre-southern Athabascan] background entailed a hunting subsistence base encompassing a variety of resources. Mountain ranges, which concentrate multiple ecological zones within a minimal geographic area, were central to this lifestyle. Caribou may have been a major food source, but other game ranging from buffalo, mountain sheep, deer and smaller mammals to fish would have rounded out the food supply.

b) This Pre-Apachean [pre-southern Athabascan] phase was associated with the close of a period of cold conditions up to about 0 A.D., when the ranges of caribou and other boreal fauna extended to the south of their present distributions. Athabascans who hunted these animals also were located farther south.

c) When the climate began to warm some time in the first millennium A.D., caribou and other game animals shifted north, and Athabascan hunters moved farther north as well. Some of the southernmost Athabascans, however, did not readjust their territories northward but remained in the general area they had come to occupy in the preceding centuries. As the warming trend continued, the subsistence quest of the northern group took them still farther north, and the distance between the two populations stretched until social contiguity was lost.

d) The southern segment was large enough and widely enough dispersed for heterogeneity to exist within the Athabascan culture patterns. A few differences observed later among Apachean groups already were present here, reflecting regional differences in the North.

e) Up to the late prehistoric period, the area occupied by the southern population extended from the Rocky Mountains and foothills of southern Alberta through the Missouri and Yellowstone headwaters in west central Montana, into central Wyoming and perhaps into the mountains of northern Colorado. They continued to exploit a

mixed subsistence base, utilizing the varied ecozones of mountain ranges on a seasonal basis.

f) At some time during this phase, the population segment ancestral to the Kiowa Apache broke off toward the east.

g) By the fifteenth century A.D. Athabascans had abandoned this area and moved south, and Shoshoneans moved into the region from the southwest via the Great Salt Lake area and the Snake River Valley. The Apachean [Athabaskan] exodus was not a mass migration but an irregular movement of small groups down along both sides and through the Rocky Mountains, with some entering the Southwest by way of the Colorado Plateau, others along the eastern slopes and into the Sangre de Cristo Range and through the mountain chain itself. Most remained in or near mountainous areas.

h) Despite the independent movement of Apachean [Athabaskan] population segments, intermittent contact was maintained, and beyond a probable eastern/western phonetic variance, cultural differences among Apacheans [Southern Athabascans] were quite minor compared to later periods.

Overall, this is a very promising reconstruction of Athabaskan prehistory, one that could be applied to the geographic area under discussion. However, as Perry himself readily acknowledges, the archaeological data that he cites in support of his general hypothesis are merely suggestive rather than confirmative. More importantly, they are also inconsistent, if not specifically contradictory, which is apparent in his discussion of such diverse sites as Spring Creek Cave in north-central Wyoming and the Wardell buffalo trap in the Upper Green River basin of southwestern Wyoming.

Radiocarbon dated at A.D. 225, Spring Creek Cave yielded a large collection of perishable cultural remains, including coiled basketry and medium-sized corner-notched points bound to wooden foreshafts. According to Perry (1980:288), the foreshafts from this site and those from Wedding of the Waters Cave "show a notable similarity to the

nineteenth century Western Apache arrows pictured in Goodwin and Basso (1971:228)." Conversely, a fragment of coiled basketry from Spring Creek Cave, along with coiled basketry fragments from another nearby cave site of the same age (Late Plains Archaic), were identified as Fremont by Adovasio (1970, 1975). Perry does not mention this, although he does draw attention to Wedel's (1978:206) identification of several obliquely worn pole butts from Spring Creek Cave as ends of dog travois frames, an item not found among the sixteenth-century buffalo-hunting southern Athabascans.

The communal bison pound and meat-processing area at the Wardell site was in use from at least A.D. 370 to 960 and yielded a different array of artifacts than those from Spring Creek Cave, including sand or granite-tempered paddle-and-anvil shaped pottery different from any other found in the area. It was this pottery that prompted Frison (1973:82) to suggest that "the Wardell site may somehow be connected with Athabaskan southward movements." Another possible connection between the Wardell site and Athabascans are the small side-notched obsidian projectile points which form a consistent type from level to level. Frison (1978:229) notes that some of the points "bear resemblance to the Avonlea type common to the Northern Plains but most bear no such resemblance . . . even though the dates of the Wardell site are comparable to some of those of Avonlea, it is difficult to claim cultural relationships based only on present evidence." Avonlea points occur at the Heads-Smashed-In buffalo jump in southeastern Alberta from the first to the eleventh century, and are found over a large area of Montana east of the Continental Divide and well into northern Wyoming and eastern Idaho during most of that time. Consequently, some writers regard Avonlea and Avonlea-like points as a possible indicator of Athabaskan movement along the

Rockies from southern Canada to the Southwest (Kehoe and Kehoe 1968, but see also discussion in Johnson 1970:50-51), and this is reflected in the accompanying chart (Fig. 2). However, Perry himself (1980:286) considers the earlier, medium-sized Besant corner-notched and side-notched point complex to be a more likely indicator of the Athabascan movement, primarily because these signal an important change in buffalo drive techniques in the Northern Plains.

Whatever the cultural affiliation of the earlier Late Period components in Wyoming, it is clear that beginning some time after A.D. 1400, distinctly different cultural materials are found. Those in northeastern Wyoming are probably the result of a Crow-Mandan expansion, while those in western Wyoming, including flat-bottomed Intermountain ware, are generally viewed as evidence of Shoshonean occupation (Frison 1978:64-67). There appears to be no evidence of Shoshonean occupation in Wyoming before this date, but abundant evidence in the centuries that follow. Both the Crow-Mandan and Shoshonean are shown in Fig. 2 as co-successors to the hypothetical Athabascan occupation, in agreement with Perry's position, but also because Shoshonean pottery is often found at early Crow sites (Frison 1978).

THE NORTHERN UTAH SEQUENCE

Of the regional sequences under consideration, that for northern Utah, though still not well understood, is the best documented. It again suggests that the events taking place on the Plains between the third and fifth centuries had a marked effect on cultural developments in the northeastern corner of the Great Basin from that time on through the fourteenth century. The sequence consists of two successive phases of the Great Salt Lake variant of the Fremont culture followed by a Shoshonean occupation that continued into the Historic Period. The Great Salt Lake is the

oldest and longest lived of the Fremont regional variants. The earlier phase, the Bear River, dates from *ca.* A.D. 400 to A.D. 1000 and the later, the Levee, from A.D. 1000 to A.D. 1350 and possibly as late as A.D. 1600 (the Injun Creek site). Madsen (1979) correctly points out that the Fremont culture has yet to be defined in an explicit manner and that there is considerable debate regarding its origins. With reference to the latter, he mentions three possibilities (Madsen 1979:712): "(1) that the Fremont constitute an extension of the Anasazi north of the Colorado River (e.g., Morss 1931; Gunnerson 1969; Berry 1975); (2) that the Fremont are derived from an *in situ* Archaic base with a thin veneer of overlying traits derived from the Southwest (e.g., Wormington 1955; Jennings *et al.* 1956; Aikens 1970; Marwitt 1970); (3) that the Fremont are derived from the northern Plains and acquired some southwestern traits (Aikens 1966; Sharrock 1966)." The last is particularly applicable to the Great Salt Lake Fremont, especially in the later phase. Madsen himself does not believe that the Fremont was a single cultural entity. Rather, he suggests that two or three separate groups co-existed in the area north and west of the Colorado River, among them an unnamed Plains-derived culture, of which the Great Salt Lake Fremont is a part. The arguments surrounding Fremont origins are of more than passing interest, especially where the Great Salt Lake variant is concerned.

Although big-game hunting occurs in all Fremont regional variants, bison hunting is reported only from the Great Salt Lake variant. The only known bison jump in Utah, radiocarbon dated at A.D. 615, may have had a Great Salt Lake affiliation (Marwitt 1970:147), but no diagnostic artifacts were found at the jump site. Maize horticulture formed an important element in the subsistence pattern of the more southerly Fremont variants, but appears to have been a relatively

minor one in the Great Salt Lake variant, where big-game hunting, fishing, waterfowl collecting, and seed gathering were of greater consequence. There are several differences between the Levee and Bear River phases. In the main, the Levee phase houses are larger and square, rather than round. The proportion of painted and imported pottery is higher, and includes the very distinctive Promontory pottery, along with the typical Great Salt Lake gray ware. Unlike the latter, which is reminiscent of Southwestern utility wares in general, Promontory pottery is like the earlier Late Period Plains pottery, in that it is paddle-and-anvil shaped and often calcite tempered. The cultural materials that Steward (1937) found associated with this pottery at the Promontory cave sites were also distinctly different from those collected at Fremont sites. They had a Plains cast to them and were referred to collectively as the Promontory culture. Excavations in the Bear River locality immediately east of the Promontory cave sites subsequently yielded Promontory pottery in association with Levee phase Great Salt Lake Fremont artifacts. This led Aikens (1966:76) to conclude that the Promontory and Fremont cultures were not distinct from one another. However, detailed studies of Promontory ware by David Madsen (1973) indicate that this pottery-making tradition was alien to the Fremont culture, leaving open the possibility that the Promontory culture may have developed independently and later partially merged with the Great Salt Lake Fremont in northern Utah, much as the Northern Paiute-speaking Bannock did with the Fort Hall Shoshoni in early historic time. This possibility is shown in Fig. 2, which also indicates that the Promontory culture is linked to the dominant Late Period culture in Wyoming under the rubric "Athabascan," a linkage suggested in part by Aikens (1966). Notably, however, no pottery of definite Promontory character has been found in Wyoming (Frison

1978). As mentioned earlier, however, coiled basketry of a type characteristic of the Fremont culture throughout its history occurs at cave sites in Wyoming at an earlier date than in Utah and in association with possible Athabascan material culture remains. Perhaps there was a series of Athabascan movements onto the Northern Plains and into the Eastern Basin, each characterized by somewhat different material culture traits: an early intrusion characterized by Besant points; a later one by Avonlea or Avonlea-like points; and a third by materials characteristic of the Promontory culture. One outcome of such a possibility is that the Navaho might be the historic descendants of the prehistoric Great Salt Lake Fremonters, themselves among the first of the Athabascans to intrude into the Eastern Great Basin. This was alluded to by Kluckhohn and Leighton (1946) in their work on the Navaho, and Aikens suggested it again in a personal communication to me dated July, 1981.

The exact time and circumstances under which the Great Salt Lake Fremont ended in northern Utah are not yet known. At some cave sites near the western border of the state, there is clear evidence of Shoshonean occupation commencing sometime after the fourteenth century but definitely before the end of the sixteenth century. Whether this was a process of displacement of Fremont peoples or simply the utilization of abandoned sites remains to be determined. Clearly, the newcomers did not occupy all of the sites formerly occupied by Fremont peoples; many of the village sites appear to have been abandoned or left unused after A.D. 1300. One radiocarbon date from the Injun Creek Village site indicates occupation of that site by Fremonters perhaps as late as A.D. 1600 (Aikens 1966). The persistence and fate of the Great Salt Lake variant of the Fremont culture after A.D. 1300 is of special interest in connection with the Dietrich phase in south-central Idaho.

THE EASTERN IDAHO SEQUENCE

The cultural materials comprising the Dietrich phase, dating between *ca.* A.D. 1300 and 1650 at the western end of the Eastern Snake River Plain, were originally identified as Shoshonean (Gruhn 1961*a*, 1961*b*), but have since been determined to be typical of Great Salt Lake Fremont (Butler 1981). A Shoshonean phase for this region has yet to be defined and described; there are excavated materials that could be attributed to Shoshonean occupation, but these have not been adequately analyzed and dated. Of the cultural materials immediately preceding those of the Dietrich phase, nothing is known at this writing. Possibly these are also Fremont in character; a variety of Fremont materials of uncertain age and association, including painted pottery and corn cobs, have been found along the Snake River and on the Eastern Snake River Plain (Butler 1981). The Dietrich phase may represent a northward relocation of Great Salt Lake Fremont peoples following their abandonment of that area, in which case a cultural phase unrelated to Fremont may have preceded the Dietrich phase. Such a cultural phase is known from Birch Creek Valley.

The Late Period sequence in Birch Creek Valley begins with the Blue Dome phase, dating from *ca.* A.D. 500 to possibly as late as A.D. 1700. It is characterized by projectile points closely comparable to the Avonlea or Avonlea-like points found in Montana and Wyoming. There is no pottery known to be associated with Blue Dome materials, possibly because current collections are entirely from hunting encampments at rockshelters. The relationship between the Blue Dome and Dietrich phases is presently unknown. A Blue Dome side-notched point was associated with Dietrich phase materials at Wilson Butte Cave on the Snake River Plain and Fremont basketry was recovered from Late Period occupa-

tions in cave sites at the foot of the Lemhi Range bordering the west side of Birch Creek Valley (Butler 1981). Blue Dome points were also recovered from the Meadow Creek Rockshelter in the low hills bordering the south side of the Snake River Plain southeast of Birch Creek Valley (Powers 1969), but no basketry of any kind was recovered from this site.

On the basis of present evidence, Shoshonean occupation of Birch Creek Valley appears to have been limited entirely to the Historic Period. There is a cultural-stratigraphic hiatus between the Blue Dome phase components in Birch Creek Valley and this historic occupation, called the Lemhi phase by Swanson (1972). A now unnamed phase preceding the Blue Dome phase in Birch Creek Valley is characterized by a complex of corner-notched and side-notched points reminiscent of the Besant complex found on the Northern Plains.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The Late Period sequences in western Wyoming, northern Utah, and south-central and eastern Idaho, comprising most of the historic Northeastern Great Basin subarea, exhibit considerable cultural diversity, except towards the last, when all of the territory in question was occupied by Numic-speaking migrants from the Great Basin. Strongly coloring the earlier parts of these sequences are cultural elements emanating from or originating in movements of peoples into the Northern Plains and along the northern Rockies shortly after the beginning of the Christian era and within a few centuries thereafter (Fig. 3). Hypothetically, these peoples were Athabascans moving southward from their subarctic homeland, ancestors of the historic Apachean and Navajo-speaking peoples of the Southern Plains and Southwest. If so, they left behind typologically

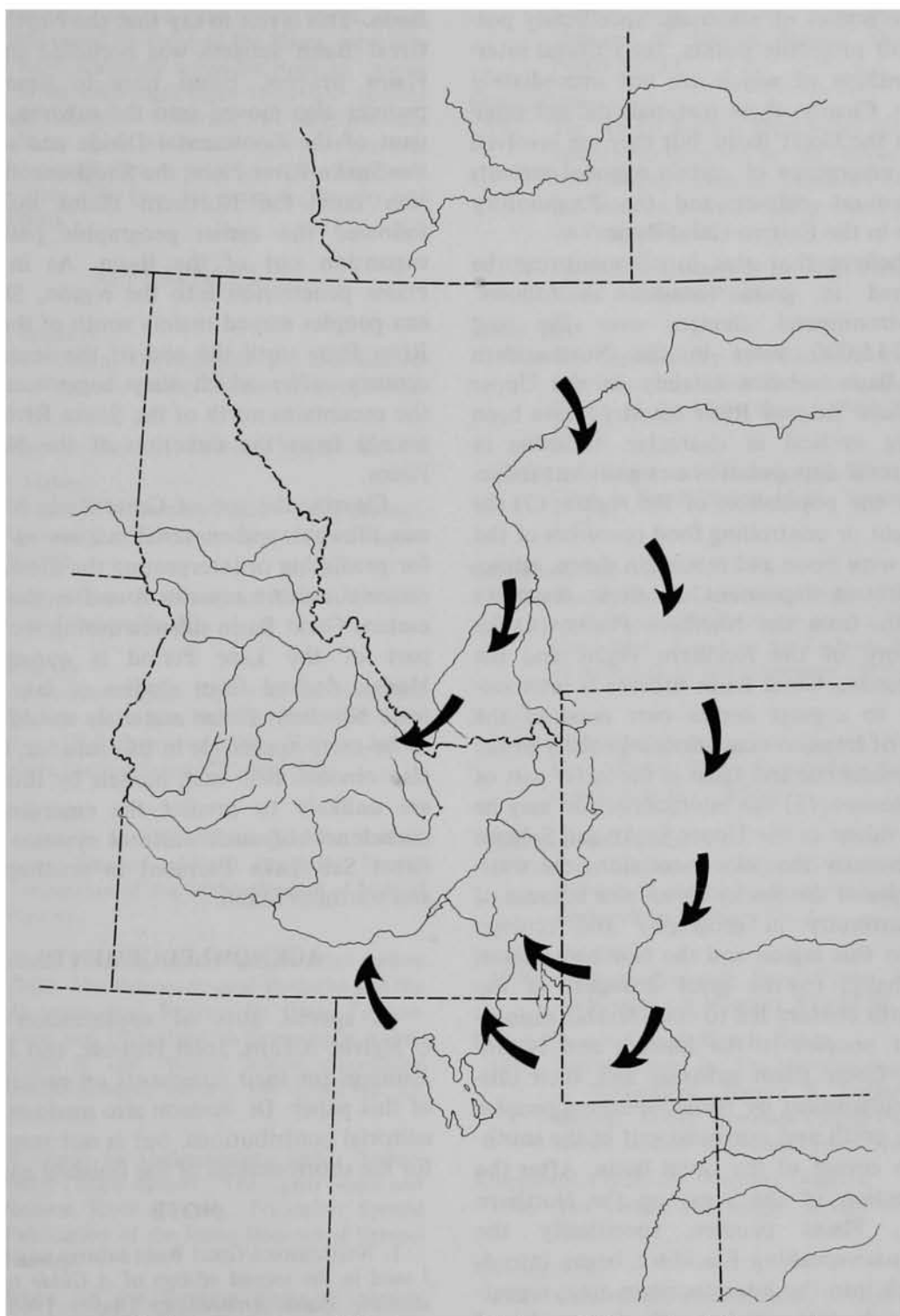


Fig. 3. Hypothetical movements of Northwestern Plains and Plains-related Fremont into the Upper Snake and Salmon River country in the Late Period.

variable bodies of materials, specifically pottery and projectile points, the cultural interrelationships of which are not immediately evident. Clearly, these materials did not originate in the Great Basin, but they are involved in the emergence of certain regional variants of Fremont culture and the Promontory culture in the Eastern Great Basin.

I believe that this involvement can be explained in good measure as follows: (1) environmental changes over the past 12,000-15,000 years in the Northeastern Great Basin subarea (mainly in the Upper Snake and Salmon River country) have been strongly cyclical in character, resulting in (2) periodic depopulation or significant reduction in the population of the region; (3) the dominant or controlling food resources of the region were bison and mountain sheep, attracting hunters dependent on these resources primarily from the Northern Plains; (4) the prehistory of the Northern Plains and the Northeastern Great Basin subarea is interconnected to a great degree over most of the period of human occupation, especially in the Late Pleistocene and again in the latter part of the Holocene; (5) this interconnection may be more evident in the Upper Snake and Salmon River country than elsewhere along the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains because of the continuity in geography and ecology between this region and the Northern Plains; and finally, (6) the great droughts of the thirteenth century led to considerable dislocation of peoples in the Eastern and Northeastern Great Basin subareas and their ultimate replacement by Numic-speaking peoples moving north and northeast out of the southwestern corner of the Great Basin. After the introduction of the horse on the Northern Plains, Plains peoples, specifically the Algonquian-speaking Blackfeet, began intruding back into the intermountain area, repeating the hypothesized continuing cycle of Plains occupation of the Northeastern Great

Basin. This is not to say that the Northeastern Great Basin subarea was occupied solely by Plains peoples. From time to time, Basin peoples also moved into the subarea, usually west of the Continental Divide and south of the Snake River Plain; the Shoshonean expansion onto the Northern Plains may have followed the earlier geographic pattern of expansion out of the Basin. As in earlier Plains penetration into the region, Shoshonean peoples stayed mainly south of the Snake River Plain until the end of the seventeenth century, after which they began occupying the mountains north of the Snake River Plain, mainly from the direction of the Northern Plains.

Clearly, the use of Great Basin Shoshonean lifeways and material culture as models for predicting or interpreting the lifeways and material culture remains found in the Northeastern Great Basin subarea during the greater part of the Late Period is questionable. Models derived from studies of late prehistoric Northern Plains materials would appear to be more applicable in this subarea, but it is also obvious that such models by themselves are unlikely to predict the emergence and persistence of such cultural systems as the Great Salt Lake Fremont in northern Utah and southern Idaho.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTE

1. Northeastern Great Basin subarea was the name I used in the second edition of *A Guide to Understanding Idaho Archaeology* (Butler 1968:51 and Fig. 11) to embrace Kroeber's (1939:53) Basin subareas 1b, "the Bannock and Shoshone of the Snake-

Salmon drainage," and 1d, "the eastern border tribes recently influenced by those of the Plains, especially the Wind River Shoshone across the Rockies," which I found to be indistinguishable from one another either linguistically or culturally. In fact, the first group probably spent the greater part of their lives on the Plains until thrown back across the Continental Divide after 1780 (see, for example, Murphy and Murphy 1960).

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