Fremont Numic Transitions

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One of the remaining grand questions in North American archaeology is how the Fremont are related to the ancestors of today's Ute and Shoshoni. There has been extensive discussion concerning the suspected incursion of Numic speaking people into the northern Great Basin (e.g. Madsen and Rhode 1994) around AD 1300, and whether existing Fremont populations were displaced or replaced. There seems to be a correspondence between an archaeologist's area of experience and whether they argue continuity through the Fremont and Numic periods or favor migration as an explanation for the transition. Archaeologists working in the northern Fremont area (e.g. Holmer 1994; Simms 1990) see more continuity between the Fremont and the Numic than do those working further south (e.g. Janetski 1994). We believe Simms (1994:83) is correct when he suggests any Numic spread was more complicated than a single movement of people, and occurred over thousands of years.

The debate about Fremont/Ute transitions can generally be framed in two theoretical questions. Did the Fremont people modify their behavior until they became the later Ute; or did a migration of Numic people replace local Fremont populations? These questions may limit or discourage archaeological inquiry. For instance, what if Fremont people in some locations persisted and changed without becoming the Ute?

Consideration of Fremont denouement in northeastern Utah is complicated by the recovery of very late Fremont material culture. The Texas Creek site (Creasman and Scott 1987) in northwestern Colorado has caused some authors (e.g. Reed and Metcalf 1999:118; Madsen and Simms 1998:291-292) to consider the possibility of a formative lifeway continuing on the periphery of the Uinta Basin. Texas Creek contained Fremont material culture (Uinta Gray ware, Rose Spring Corner-notch and Uinta Side-notch projectile points), architecture, and evidence of maize. Based on this single site, Reed and Metcalf (1999:118) have even proposed a Late Fremont period they have labeled Texas Creek.

However, there is additional evidence of post AD 1300 Fremont occupation in the region. Spangler (1995:473-500) indicates there are no maize dates from the Uinta Basin "proper" after about 900 Cal BP, although his radiocarbon table (Spangler 1995:518 Table 8.6) lists maize dates between 900-650 Cal BP from the Dinosaur National Monument and Browns Park areas (north and east of the Fremont core area). In addition, Spangler (1995:520) noted an AD 1473 corncob date from a northwestern Colorado site (5Mf373). Two ANF sites with maize post date 900 Cal BP. A hearth from 42Da545, dating to 790 Cal BP, had maize evidence (Johnson and Loosle 2002:77). Stored maize from 42Da668, dating about 855 Cal BP, showed extreme denting and a high proportion of beaked kernels, which might indicate genetic drift of Fremont maize in Red Canyon, which is well north of the core area (Johnson and Loosle 2002:213). Additionally, five of the nine ANF components dated between 900-505 Cal BP (two brush structures, a rockshelter hearth, a pit storage feature and an inverted basket storage feature) show a continuity of both locale and subsistence mode with earlier components attributed to logistical uplands use by Fremont farmers

(Johnson and Loosle 2002:Chapter 5). None of the nine post-900 Cal BP dates represent residential uplands use. In the absence of late dates from the core area, the late dates and the demonstrated continuity both support the idea that cultigen production persisted at least on the northern and eastern peripheries well after it was abandoned in the core area (Johnson and Loosle 2002).

Problems with the Data

Although late Fremont-like material has been noted, the issue of when Numic people arrived in the Uintas remains problematic. In spite of extensive excavations and the crafting of two detailed monographs we cannot identify a precise time at which Uinta Mountain sites change from Fremont to Numic material culture. There are three problems encountered in addressing the Fremont/Ute transition in the Uintas. One is post AD 1300 occupations that appear to be a continuation of Fremont lifeways. Second, a paucity of excavated sites with clearly Numic material culture. Finally, confusion in what should be called "Numic" material culture.

Late Fremont Sites

In addition to the Texas Creek site mentioned earlier. Sites dating between about 2000-790 Cal BP in the Uintas clearly represent Fremont archaeological culture. Some Uinta Mountain prehistoric features, including brush structures, date between AD 1300 and 1420. These features lack unambiguous Fremont, or Numic diagnostics, yet they resemble earlier Fremont occupations in location, construction, season of occupation, and resource use. Fall occupations, logistical procurement, and collection of seeds for storage are hallmarks of a collector or farmer strategy in the Uintas (Johnson and Loosle 2002). A nomadic group like the Ute would be expected to have residential summer occupation in the uplands, similar to Archaic hunter-gatherers (Loosle and Johnson 2000:253-255). We have found no such transition at these late sites. In additional to the Uinta sites already noted, Spangler (1995:633) mentioned a rockshelter in Dinosaur National Monument that has Fremont material culture with dates as late as AD 1585. There are also sites in Browns Park with mixed Fremont and Numic material culture that yielded post AD 1300 dates (Spangler 1995:631-633).

No Buried Numic Deposits

The second problem with evaluating the Fremont to Numic development for the Uintas is the current lack of intact, buried Numic components. Two excavated hearths illustrate the paucity and inadequacy of data from this crucial period. One feature excavated at Dutch John (a hearth at 42Da599) yielded dates of 690 and 600 BP. This hearth was a compact concentration of charcoal approximately 50 cm in diameter and 15 cm in depth. No pollen, macrofossils, or other cultural materials were associated with this feature (Loosle and Johnson 2000:69) Another hearth at 42Da372 dated to 450 Cal BP, but it was slumping from a cutbank exposed during a canal failure. This hearth was not associated with any material culture and the site is primarily a Late Archaic occupation (Wilson 1997a). Spangler (1995:633-634) has noted a similar "meager" amount of Numic chronometric data from the region.

Numic Diagnostics

The final issue is, what is diagnostic Numic material culture? Artifacts considered diagnostic of Numic occupations include Desert Side-notch points, brown ware ceramics and distinctive basketry. The most common recovered items are projectile points. ANF excavations have recovered Desert Side-notch points and one small point sometimes referred to as a Shoshoni "bird point" from surface contexts and from shallow, disturbed deposits, sometimes in association with brown ware ceramic sherds. However, Desert Side-notch points have also been recovered from the fill of ANF Fremont features, but not in the context of dated, post-Fremont use of these features.

An example from Allen Creek illustrates the dilemma. Structure 4 at 42Da791 is a shallow pithouse with a light framed superstructure. A radiocarbon date of AD 1040 was obtained from this structure. Diagnostic points from the fill of Structure 4 include three Desert Side-notch points dated between about AD 1000 - 1800, six Uinta Side-notch points use of which dates between AD 750 - 1150, and five Rose Spring Corner-notch points locally associated with Fremont occupations between AD 220 - 1100 (Wilson 1997b; Loosle and Johnson 2000:230-231). The structure fill was removed as one level, and no stratigraphy was apparent during excavation that might have suggested a chronological sequence (Johnson and Loosle 2002:160). The Structure 4 point assemblage suggests several possibilities. The assemblage may represent a Fremont occupation followed by a Late Prehistoric Numic occupation. If projectile points are actually diagnostic of culture, Fremont and Ute or Shoshone peoples may have shared, or alternated occupation of this feature. If local Late Prehistoric "Numic" people are simply post-Fremont period "Fremont" (the same folks but with different lifeways), perhaps the assemblage represents this transition.

Given large enough samples, typological boundaries among projectile point types are often not clear. Johnson (Johnson and Loosle 2002:271) has noted Rose Spring Corner-notch points in the Uintas appear to represent one end of a continuum of a size reduction and refinement in Elko Corner-notch points. Although most medium to small Uinta Mountain corner-notch points can be unambiguously typed as either Rose Spring or Elko, some cannot. Desert Side-notch points may represent a similar continuum with Uinta (Fremont) Side-notch points, and may thus be a better indicator of time period than of cultural affiliation. Spangler (1995) listed a number of sites with Fremont era dates and Desert Side-notch points. Truesdale (personal communication, 2003) has also noted Desert Side-notch points in Fremont residential occupations. No Numic basketry has been recovered from ANF sites. Uncompahgre Brown ware (Ute) ceramics have been recovered only from surface contexts and from shallow, disturbed deposits on the ANF.

Deadman Lake

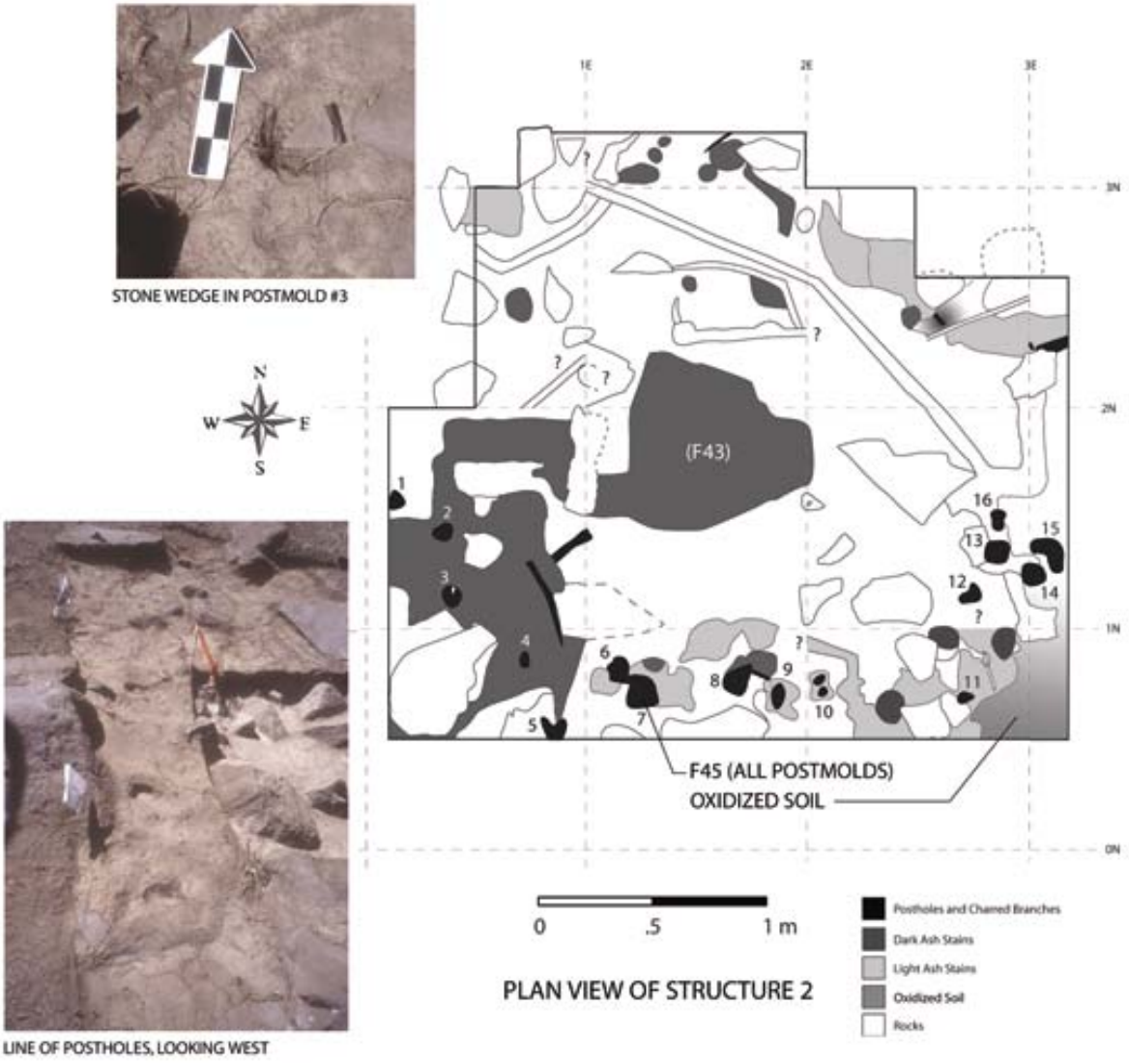
Discovery of Uncompahgre Brown ware ceramics and an associated brush structure at Deadman Lake raised hopes of filling the void in Uinta Mountain occupation between AD 1450 and 1800.

Numic presence on the Ashley National Forest is not limited to lowland or midland sites. A historic Numic period brush structure was uncovered during an excavation near Deadman Lake at 3350 m (11,000 ft) above sea level. Deadman Lake

is a multicomponent timberline site located on the eastern end of the Uinta Mountains. Excavations in the summer of 2002 uncovered six occupation areas with dates ranging from the early Fremont (AD 405, 670 and 665) to the historic Numic period (AD 1850). The Fremont occupations consisted of two structures and a hearth. A knapping station and a feature of undetermined function have not been dated. The Numic occupation consists of a fairly well preserved brush structure. Limited data was recovered from the Fremont occupation. Botanical data suggests some lowland plants were transported to the site. Starch in one structure resembles maize, but is not conclusive. Charred Cheno-am and mint seeds were found in the hearth. This indicates a fall occupation. The faunal record was also sparse with very limited bone (29 pieces) recovered. All bone was small mammal and may be marmot (Knoll 2003).

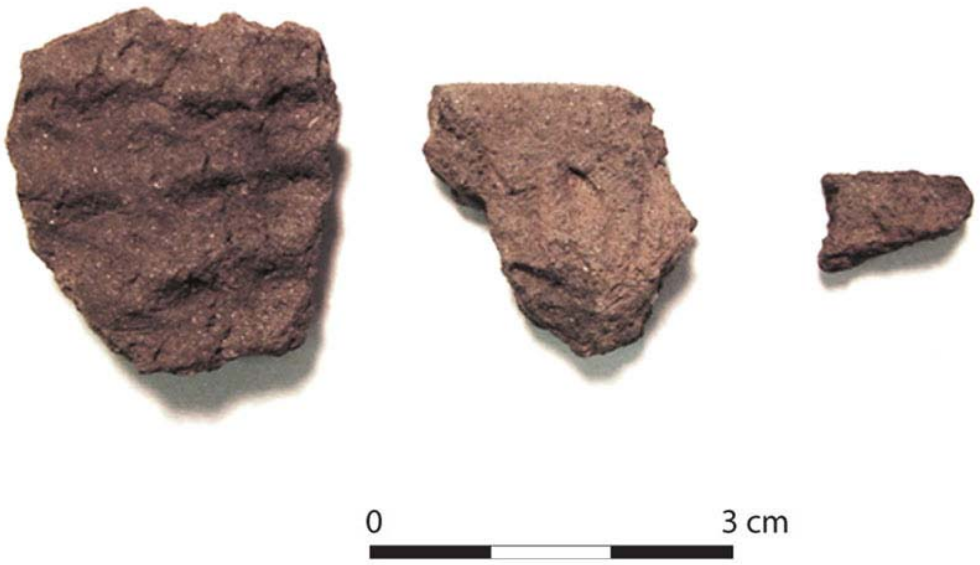
The Numic occupation at Deadman Lake coincides with the Ute occupation of the Uinta Basin. The Uintah-Ouray Reservation was established in 1861 and covered much of the Uinta Basin, some of the Uinta Mountains, and the Tavaputs Plateau (Lyman and Denver 1969:66; Smith 1992:xiii) by 1904. The Numic period structure, ca. 1830-the early 20th century, had several postholes, a few charred branches, and a stone wedge in one of the postholes (Figure 1). The postholes, which had a mean depth of 2.8 cm, were apparent only on one half of the structure. However, the other half contained charcoal stains that suggest postmolds once existed there as well. There was no formal hearth, though a large patch of oxidized soil was noted in the center of the structure. Artifacts recovered from this structure include 56 pieces of debitage, two utilized flake tools, five pieces of bone from a small mammal, a globule of melted metal, a metal tinkler cone, 12 Intermountain brownware sherds, and charred mint and *Ribes* seeds (which suggest a late summer to fall occupation). The botanical remains are not local and thus were transported from lower elevations.

Figure 1. Plan View of Numic Structure



All sherds associated with Deadman Lake were typed as Intermountain Brownware, a Late Prehistoric ware (Figure 2). Based on the ceramic assemblage and the region's proximity to the Ute reservation the site was probably left by a local Ute group. The Utes made only limited amounts of pottery, being better known for their skills in basketry, and usually obtained their pottery from the Apache and the Pueblo Indians in New Mexico (Lyman and Denver 1969:126; Rockwell 1956:43;). However, Hill (2003) posits that the sources of the temper may be local, suggesting that these vessels were manufactured in the Uinta Basin region.

Figure 2. Intermountain Brownware recovered from structure.



The metal artifacts recovered represent an interesting period in time when Native Americans were living in a post-contact world. The globule of melted metal, if melted intentionally, is curious because the occupants of this structure were still using bifacially flaked tools. A metal tinkler cone was also found in this structure (Figure 3). Tinkler cones, which were traded for with European Americans as adornments, were attached to hair, clothing, and other personal objects (Stone 1974:131) like "vanity bags." Vanity bags were commonly carried by Ute men and women. Rockwell (1956:43-44) describes the vanity bag as "made of heavy leather with two stripes of blue beads on each side and a green stripe on the bottom. Small cone-like metal objects were attached to the bottom of the bag as well as on the buckskin flap which covered the opening. These caused the bag to jingle musically when being moved or carried."

Figure 3. Metal tinkler found in structure.

Conclusion

Numic speaking (Ute and Comanche) people were in the Uintas and the Uinta Basin at Anglo contact in AD 1776. Some time between about AD 1400 and AD 1776, the rich, extensive and intensive evidence categorized as the Fremont culture was replaced by the relatively sparse evidence categorized as Numic. The exact nature and timing of this process remain unknown. Numic evidence in the Uintas is mostly in the form of surface finds of Uncompahgre Brown ware and small, side-notch projectile points. These materials often occur at locales used for thousands of years by previous groups. This may indicate nothing more than a pan-human mental template regarding pretty campsites, but could also be used to argue some cultural continuity.

Recovery of surface Numic pottery and project points suggest use of the Uintas during this period, but these occupations appear to have been transitory, perhaps indicative only of use of the area as a travel corridor. An erosional regime during this period might have resulted in lack of site preservation, and such a regime is at least suggested by the Southwest-wide droughts after 1000 BP (Eckerle 1996:156). The unstable climate of the Little Ice Age may have affected preservation of sites occupied during this period. However, relatively good preservation of shallowly buried Dutch John sites dating from 7120-1060 BP argue against widespread or long-term erosion in the area.

The Deadman Lake excavation indicates the Fremont extensively used the High Uintas, like other upland environmental settings. It is disappointing that the Numic structure dates to AD 1850. It appears that small resilient bands of Fremont who practiced a seasonal rotation, farming in the spring and summer and collecting upland resources in the fall, persisted well after AD 1300 on the periphery of the Uinta Basin. These groups may have lasted in some locations until around AD 1600 and the onset of the Little Ice Age. There is still no Numic material culture from before AD 1850 in the Uintas. Does this mean the Ute are a late arrival? Or are they survivors of the Fremont culture that transitioned from horticulturalists to hunter-gatherers between AD 1600 and 1776? Unfortunately we do not have the answers today.

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