



Colorado Plateau Archaeological Alliance

**The Greater Canyonlands Region:
A Cultural Overview**

By

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The Canyonlands Region: A Cultural Overview

The Canyonlands Region is a spectacularly arid land with merciless deserts and impassable river gorges – a seemingly unlikely refuge for human interaction. In reality, the Canyonlands Region is teeming with tens of thousands of archaeological sites – each a testament to the ability of humans to adapt to their surrounding environment, not only surviving but thriving. And because the region's rugged inaccessibility, it now stands as a largely untapped library of 12,000 years of human history, from the Ice Age hunters to the ancient farmers who cultivated corn where none can be grown today. This library now constitutes a treasure trove of scientific knowledge that could one day unlock the mysteries of human adaptations to the deserts of western North America.

The First North Americans

The northern portion of the Canyonlands Region looked much different twelve millennia ago with vast expanses of waist-high grasslands and forested slopes and ridges. It was lush, green and cold – a habitat ideally suited to mammoths, mastodons, camels and sloths, and the massive short-faced bear and saber-toothed tigers that preyed on them. But climates started to change, gradually becoming hotter and drier, with fewer and fewer environmental niches to accommodate the diminishing Pleistocene mammals. The Green River corridor appears to have been one of these refuges -- a lush oasis for Late Pleistocene mammals tethered to the river and nearby springs, but which also made them easy prey to Ice Age hunters. Two of the most Paleoindian sites in western North America are found in the Canyonlands Region. The Montgomery Site, located on a terrace above the Green River, yielded 188 Ice Age tools that were interpreted as a relatively large concentration of several families, possibly a band, who engaged in tool production and maintenance, faunal procurement and processing. The location of the site indicates large mammals concentrating along riparian corridors in an otherwise increasingly arid landscape in terminal Pleistocene times.

The nearby Dawson Site is a large, dense lithic scatter located in what are today sandy dunes around an ancient spring and playa. The assemblage consists of numerous Paleoindian projectile points, bifacial tools and debitage. More than 200 surface artifacts were collected, including the largest Paleoindian point assemblage yet documented in Utah. Point types represented include two Cody Complex points, 14 Folsom points, six Clovis fluted points, two Midland points, three lanceolate points, nine Great Basin Stemmed points, and a single Elko Series dart point. Researchers speculate that the area was repeatedly occupied as a campsite where they manufactured and maintained their stone hunting tools over hundreds if not thousands of years.

Dozens of other sites in this area have produced distinctive stone points that characterized the lithic technology of the Ice Age hunters. The fact they are found both east and west of the Green River suggests the river itself was not an impediment to human migration, but rather human groups moved freely throughout the canyon country. But as climates warmed and the massive ice sheets had melted away by 8,000 years ago, the Green and Colorado Rivers became raging torrents that became impassable, isolating groups living north and west of the rivers from those living south and east of the rivers. And over the next 8,000 or so years, the rivers emerged a formidable barrier to social and economic exchange.

The Desert Culture

The transition from Ice Age to modern environments occurred gradually over several thousand years, and with the disappearance of large Pleistocene fauna. Human responses to the disappearing herds was remarkably uniform across western North America as they became highly efficient harvesters of plants and seeds, and hunters of small mammals like rabbits and deer. Their technology evolved to reflect his adaptability, as evidenced by a proliferation of manos and metates to grind wild seeds into digestible flour, snares to procure rabbits, birds and rodents, and lighter-weight dart throwers more suited to the smaller, fleeter deer, elk and bighorn sheep (called atlatls). Families moved in constant response to the ripening of different plants and the season migration of game animals, making their temporary homes within the sheltering confines of large alcoves. Generally, this period of time is called the Archaic Period.

Today, the myriad large caves and alcoves found in the northeastern and western portion of the Canyonlands Region contain evidence of sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic changes in human adaptations spanning more than 10,000 years – each a layer cake of scientific evidence that holds clues to the human ability to respond to changing climates. Nowhere is this more evident than at Cowboy Cave in The Maze area. Cowboy Cave was a summer base camp for gathering Indian rice grass, goosefoot, pigweed and drop seed during spring, summer and early fall. And for 10,000 years, human families returned over and over to this predictable food source, leaving behind remnants of their constantly improving tool kits, their figurines and their mysterious red images painted on the canyon walls. The Canyonlands Region has hundreds if not thousands of Cowboy Cave-like alcoves – each with a rich record of these Archaic hunters and gatherers, each awaiting scientific study by future generations.

The First Farmers

With an origin in Mexico, the farming of maize, beans and squash marks a watershed moment in human adaptive responses in the American Southwest. Instead of pursuing food in a constant annual migration, humans could produce food (and lots of it) and store the excess in granaries for later consumption during the lean winter months. At about 2,500 years ago, early Southwestern farmers began moving north from Arizona and New Mexico into the plateaus of southern Utah along the southern periphery of the Canyonlands Region. They built subterranean houses, called pithouses, and they carefully crafted large storage chambers that would protect their foods from rodents. Today, we call these people the Basketmakers, a reference to their exceptional skill at producing woven textiles that have been recovered from dry caves and alcoves throughout the Southwest, especially in southeastern Utah.

The Basketmakers were highly adept at farming maize, even in desert climates, although exactly how they accomplished this feat is a matter of some debate among archaeologists. Remnants of these earliest farmers are found throughout the southern portion of the Canyonlands Region in White Canyon, Arch Canyon and the south and west slopes of the Abajo Mountains that ultimately drain into the Colorado River. There is even some evidence that small groups of Basketmakers ventured north of the Colorado River at this time, introducing the resident Archaic hunters and gatherers there to the economic advantages of agriculture. Over time, these southern groups (Ancestral Puebloan) shared their pottery-making technology with groups to the north, and those in the north (the Fremont Culture) imparted their bow-and-arrow know-how – a much more efficient hunting technology – to those living south of the river. But by and large, the Colorado River remained a boundary between peoples, a boundary perhaps reinforced by ethnic or linguistic differences, but a boundary nonetheless that impeded the free flow of ideas and technology.

Barrier Breakdown

At about 900 A.D., something happened in the American Southwest that changed thousands of years of cultural isolation between south and north, although archaeologists cannot agree exactly what the driving force was. It could have been the emergence of the Chacoan culture in New Mexico with its walled communities and great kivas and network of roads. It could have been massive population increases that mandated a need to find new and more productive farmlands. It could have been persistent droughts in one area displacing populations to another. It could have been a combination of factors that remain elusive to archaeologists.

Whatever the impetus, the Colorado River suddenly ceased to be a barrier between north and south. Rather, a massive migration of farmers occurred as Ancestral Puebloan groups swarmed into central and northern Utah, in some cases hundreds of miles from their ancestral homelands. This migration may have been peaceful in some instances (assimilation of local populations), but in other cases it was rife with conflict as resident Fremont populations sought to maintain their way of life by retreating into defensible niches.

Most of the visible archaeological evidence in the Canyonlands Region is attributed to the period of time from about A.D. 900 to 1300 when groups living north of the river became indistinguishable from those to the south. This is manifest in the scores of cliff dwellings along the Colorado River corridor, the construction of “forts” along the Green River that appear to be defensive outposts or early warning stations, by the emergence of different rock art styles wherein different groups maintained their distinct cultural identities, and by the blending of Fremont and Ancestral Puebloan populations into a unique hybrid that was neither one nor the other, as was the case at Bull Creek. The Canyonlands Region is at the heart of this unprecedented change, and the sites found along the Green and Colorado Rivers and their tributaries most certainly hold secrets that will ultimately explain the rise and ultimate collapse of this remarkable and unprecedented cultural manifestation.

Summary

Archaeological sites found in the Canyonlands Region constitute some of the most scientifically important cultural resources in North America, each with evidence that could help unravel secrets into our collective human past. At least four different periods of human history are abundantly represented here:

- Paleoindian hunters exploited the northeast and northwest portions of the Canyonlands Region from about 12,000 to 10,000 years ago. Sites in this area are among the most important yet documented in Utah.
- Archaic hunters and gatherers thrived in this desert environment for at least 9,000 years, harvesting a bounty of wild seeds, plants, small and large animals, nuts, berries and other wild foods. Their remarkable foraging skills are well preserved in large alcoves found in the northern and western portions of the Canyonlands Region.
- Basketmaker farmers arrived in the southern portion of the Canyonlands Region about 500 B.C. They soon shared their farming technology with hunters and gatherers north of the Colorado River, resulting in the emergence of the Fremont Culture that is found throughout the western portion of the Canyonlands Region.
- At about A.D. 900, Ancestral Puebloan farmers began migrating north of the Colorado River, assimilating some Fremont groups and displacing others. This incursion may have been violent as some groups retreated into defensive postures high on cliffs and defensible mesas. Evidence of this is found along the Green and

Colorado River corridors and in the tributary canyons throughout the Canyonlands Region.