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# Bison hunters and the Rocky Mountains: An evolving partnership

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## ABSTRACT

Euroamericans who encountered the Blackfoot in the late 19th century believed that these Plains bison hunters held the Rocky Mountains in awe and fear, preferring to remain on the prairie even as bison and elk herds dwindled. This incorrect assumption has hampered our ability to understand deep-time relationships between mountain and Plains cultural expressions. Although the historic Blackfoot did not dwell in high elevations, the character of their relationship with the Rocky Mountain Front began in “time immemorial” with the creation of the world, the establishment of social mores, and the group’s ethnogenesis. Historical ethnography and contemporary practices furnish rich detail on the depth and significance of relationships among people, mountains, and other-than-human persons, not the least of which is the Blackfoot’s partnership with bison. Archaeology tells of an ancient partnership that the ancestors established with the Rocky Mountain Front, which in turn explains their intimate familiarity with elevated environments; as the glacial ice retreated, the ancestors folded this new landscape into their worldviews and practices. This paper tracks the dynamics of this partnership to provide a cultural context for deriving connections and uncovering contrasts among the people who populated America’s backbone.

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## 1. Introduction

This article explores the intersection of ecological and religious interactions between people and mountains. Mountains are much more than repositories of unique resources: there is a holy character to mountains that is recognized around the globe. Mountains bring people closer to the heavens and so when they go to a mountain or an elevated place to pray, they may improve their chances to be heard by the gods. Mountains are places of reflection, of fasting and visioning, of sacrifice and atonement. Such is the case of Blackfoot hunters of the North American Plains, who maintained a unique and sometimes puzzling physical and spiritual relationship with the Rocky Mountains.

Blackfoot life was traditionally oriented toward the foothills, prairies, and streams that supported bison herds. They were specialized bison hunters who lived within sight of the northern Rocky Mountains in a vast territory extending from the North Saskatchewan River in Alberta, Canada to the Yellowstone Lake in Montana, USA and from the Great Sand Hills in Saskatchewan, Canada to the Continental Divide (Fig. 1). They were not mountain dwellers in the strictest sense, yet the Rockies were central to their

ethnicity, cosmology, and territoriality. At the core of this interaction were the intangible entities that inhabit the mountains, with whom the Blackfoot established long-lasting social relations. A wealth of narrative history, ethnography, and archaeology provide a fruitful avenue for unpacking the role of the Rocky Mountain Front in the constitution of Blackfoot metaphysics—their understanding of peoples’ place in the natural and spiritual worlds, their forms of knowledge acquisition, and their ordering schemes. Although this role has its roots in the deep past it is by no means static, but intricately linked to the contingencies of environment and Blackfoot social history, past and present.

The article incorporates all these data sources to track the trajectory of the Blackfoot relationship with the Rocky Mountain Front throughout the Holocene and into the present. It further places emphasis on the interplay of local and regional ecological, economic, and sociopolitical conditions within which Blackfoot attachments to the Front developed and changed, often dramatically so. The specific context of investigation is Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park that once formed part of the group’s aboriginal territory and that today shares a boundary with the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Montana (U.S.). The St. Mary area of the park is the focus of archaeological investigations that illustrate many aspects of this discussion.

A multiscale approach is employed here to reconcile and

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Fig. 1. Extent of Aboriginal Blackfoot Territory and Hunting Range (after Jackson, 2000).

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