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Idaho beginnings: A review of the evidence

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ABSTRACT

Evidence sought here for a pre-Clovis presence in the Snake River basin of Idaho and northeastern Oregon in the millennium ending at 11,600 yr BP includes radiocarbon and tephrochronological dates, extinct Pleistocene faunal associations, depositional context and living floor and feature integrity, and typologically or technologically legible lithic industries. Results of a review of eleven sites found ambiguous evidence for pre-Clovis hearths in two caves, but no convincing support for the temporal priority of the Western Stemmed over the Clovis tradition. However, intact sites of the Western Stemmed tradition, dating to 10,200–9800 yr BP, survive at 4 + m below surface in deep Quaternary alluvium in canyon floors in west-central Idaho below 610 m elevation. Deeper and earlier deposits may be found in the same settings.

1. Introduction

This paper reviews evidence for the "pre-Clovis millennium" in Idaho's Snake River basin. Following Haynes (2015), the period is defined as ending with the appearance of Clovis at 11,600 yr BP. This start-date for the Clovis culture or technocomplex is based on hearth charcoal from the Aubrey site in Texas, and from wood charcoal at El Fin del Mundo in Sonora and the Beach biface cache in North Dakota (Haynes, 2015, pp.134–135). Evidence from the East Wenatchee Clovis cache in Washington State includes glass shards of the Glacier Peak B and G couplet, originally dated at 11,200 ± 100 ^{14}C yr BP (Mehringer et al., 1984), an age recently revised to 11,600 ± 40 ^{14}C yr BP (Kuehn et al., 2009). The tephra shards were embedded in a silica film on the undersides of several bifaces, suggesting the cache was emplaced shortly after the eruption (Mehringer and Foit, 1990).

Ritual deposits prompted by volcanic eruptions have been suggested for the Clovis caches at East Wenatchee, and at Simon in south-central Idaho (C. V. Haynes, cited in Fiedel, 2006, p. 43; Morrow, 2016, p.5; Kohntopp, 2010, p. 37). A similar explanation for the Simon cache is more circumstantial than scientific, resting on the cache's viewshed proximity (80 km) to eruptions dating to 11,940 ± 300 ^{14}C yr BP and 11,980 ± 300 ^{14}C yr BP at the North Robbers lava field in the Craters of the Moon flows (Kuntz et al., 1986, p.175; Kohntopp, 2010, p. 37). These ages almost overlap the revised Glacier Peak date at one sigma, and may indicate regionally synchronous volcanism in the interior northwest. Finally, the revised Glacier Peak age of 11,600 yr BP is contemporaneous with a radiocarbon age of 11,550 ± 60 ^{14}C yr BP on the infant burial associated with the Clovis cache at the Anzick site in western Montana (Owsley and Hunt, 2001), although cogent arguments have been made for preferring younger ages for this site (Morrow and Fiedel, 2006).

Only one radiocarbon age has been reported for a Clovis feature in Idaho, where agency constraints and tribal objections forestall further investigation of the site (Reid et al., 2015). However, the age of 10,880 ± 260 ^{14}C yr BP at Heil Pond is accommodated at the younger end of both the long and short chronologies for Clovis (Haynes, 2015; Waters and Stafford, 2007), and is consistent with the hypothesis that Clovis in Idaho is the same age as elsewhere. Available dates on the Western Stemmed Tradition in Idaho suggest that it postdates the Clovis tradition. However, arguments for the priority or contemporaneity of stemmed points with fluted ones continue (Beck and Jones, 2013). Data presented below provide additional context for framing the problem.

Due to the study area's position midway between the mouth of the ice-free corridor on the northwestern plains and the Pacific coast/Columbia River route into the interior, a long Clovis chronology implies that sites left by pioneering populations prior to, other than, or ancestral to Clovis might be recognizable in the millennium before 11,600 ^{14}C yr BP (Haynes, 2015). Several candidates for this priority have recently been examined in terms of radiocarbon dates and "chronological hygiene" (Reid, 2011; Goebel

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and Keene, 2014; Reid et al., 2015). Others have received less recognition in the growing literature on the subject.

The sample examined here falls into two groups: caves, lava tubes and rockshelters on the Snake River plain above the confluence with the Weiser River, and open sites formed in alluvial contexts below the Weiser River. The former include Diversion Dam Cave, Kelvin's Cave, Wilson Butte Cave, Owl Cave, and Jaguar Cave. The latter include Hetrick, Pilcher Creek, Spalding, Wewukiyehpuh, and Kelly Forks (Fig. 1). Not considered here is the Coopers Ferry site on the lower Salmon River, where ongoing investigations continue to address the potential age of Pit Feature A2 (Davis et al., 2014, pp. 601–603).

2. Regional setting

It has been widely recognized that Idaho's Snake River plain and downstream canyons might constrain and channel the zonal movement of a colonizing population expanding out of northeast Asia or Beringia. The study area figures prominently in regional and continental-scale models of the initial settlement of western North America (Beck and Jones, 2010, 2012, 2013; Davis et al., 2014; Erlandson and Braje, 2012; Pinson, 2011). The Snake River plain extends across southern Idaho along six degrees of longitude, tilting ramp-like from east to west. At its confluence with Weiser River on the west, the Snake River begins an abrupt descent through Hells Canyon to the confluence with the Clearwater River in the Lewiston Basin. Elevations above sea level drop an order of magnitude between early sites in the east like Jaguar Cave (2256 m) to Wewukiyehpuh and Hatwai in the Lewiston basin (224 m). Visual cues, wayfinding, and traffic flow have an east/west rather than north/south "grain." An exception is the cul-de-sac topography of Hells Canyon, which encourages north/south movement on either side following the more forgiving Little Salmon canyon on the east or the valleys of the Grande Ronde and Imnaha on the west.

3. Materials and methods

Here eleven sites will be examined in terms of (1)

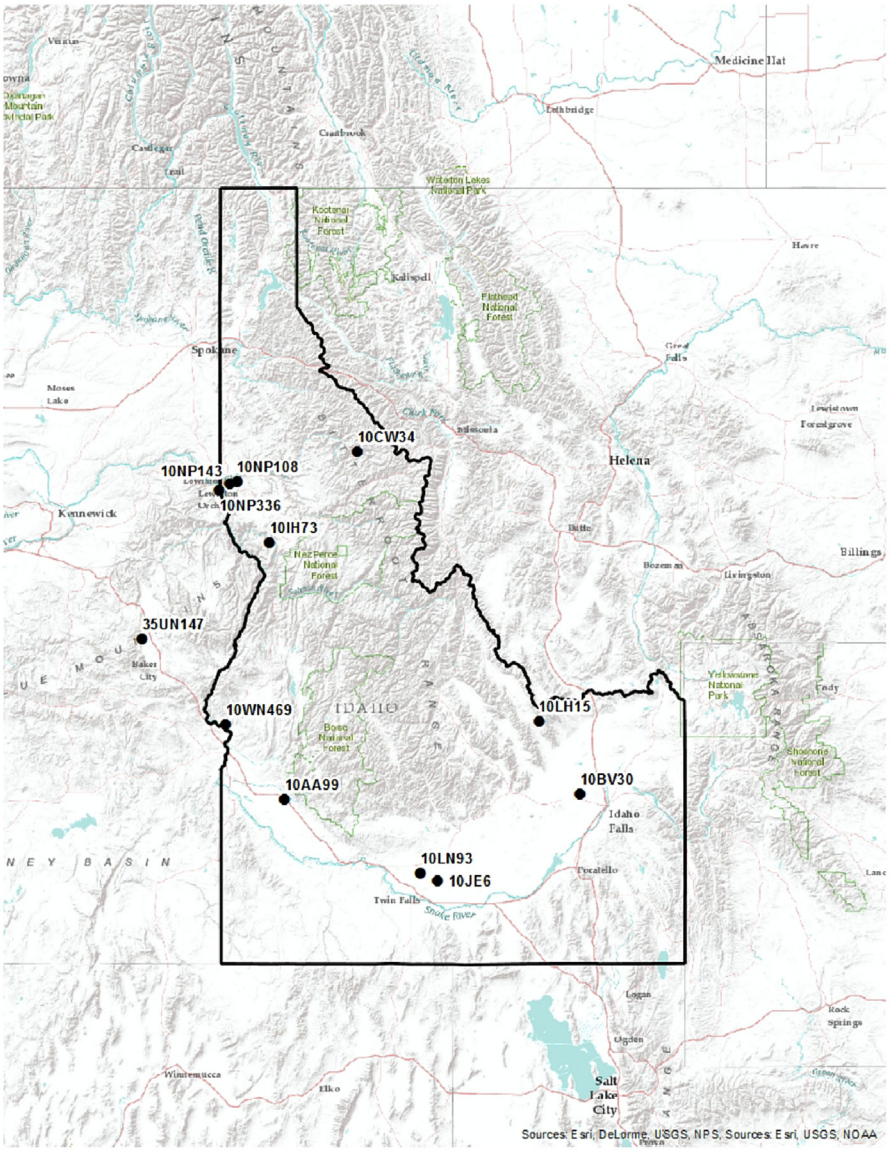

Fig. 1. Archaeological sites discussed in the **Results** section.

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