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The role of the Rocky Mountains in the peopling of North America

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the Rocky Mountains played a significantly more important role in the process of the peopling of the New World than archaeologists have traditionally recognized. Although First Americans did not reach the Rockies before they set foot in any other New World region—they could not have, regardless of their point of entry—by Clovis time, evidence suggests that Clovis people knew the Rocky Mountain landscape intimately.

Archaeologists should have long anticipated this, given the many resources the Rocky Mountains offer that adjacent, albeit archaeologically better-known regions such as the Plains and some parts of the Far West do not; at least not as ubiquitously. These include plentiful water in the form of streams, lakes, snowpack, and glaciers; high-quality sources of obsidian, chert, quartzite and other knappable stone; and a vertically oriented landscape that maximizes floral and faunal diversity within comparatively condensed space.

Two other non-economic characteristics likely contributed significantly to the appeal of the Rocky Mountains to some First Americans: the power and sanctity nearly all humans attribute to mountains, and the seemingly little-recognized fact that northeast Asian Upper Paleolithic people who populated the New World during the terminal Pleistocene occupied mountainous landscapes for some 45,000 years prior to their departure. For many First Americans, mountains—not the flat, windswept tundra of Siberian stereotypes—had always been home.

Evidence for the familiarity of Clovis groups with the Rocky Mountain landscapes comes principally from three Clovis caches: Anzick, Fenn, and Mahaffy. All three caches are located in the Rockies, collectively contain artifacts made from ten of the highest-quality stone raw materials available in the Southern, Central and Northern Rockies, and at least one of the caches accompanies the burial of a young child who appears to have been interred intentionally on a prominent and likely sacred landform in a mountain valley.

Bringing the paper's argument full circle, that same child's genetic profile shows a direct link to that of another youngster buried thousands of years earlier at the Late Glacial Maximum Mal'ta site in the mountainous Trans-Baikal region of Siberia.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I argue that the Rocky Mountains played an earlier and more significant role in the peopling of the New World than archaeologists have traditionally recognized. There is currently no evidence that Pleistocene immigrants from northeastern Asia populated the Rockies prior to any other New World region ... nor will there ever be, barring an instance of spontaneous generation mid-continent. However, there is strong evidence that by at least Clovis time (*ca.* 11,200–10,900 rcybp [Waters and Stafford, 2007]),

First Americans were intimately familiar with the Rocky Mountain environment and used that landscape routinely.

Recognizing the very early familiarity of humans with the Rockies is important for two reasons. First, evidence indicates that the role of the Rockies in the broader peopling process was non-trivial; in fact, it was likely central to the large-scale colonization of western North America. Second, the evidence adds to archaeology's growing recognition of the nuanced character of the peopling process. This recognition has been a long-time coming; peopling scholars for decades tended to focus their research on black-and-white research questions, the most central of those whether or not Clovis people were, in fact, the First Americans. By pre-occupying themselves with a "Clovis First/Not-First"

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dichotomy, many archaeologists sacrificed time and energy they could have more productively directed at how colonization of the New World occurred, in all of its complexity.

I begin the paper with a brief history of archaeological research of Paleoindian sites in Rocky Mountain settings, emphasizing how much longer it took archaeologists to recognize early prehistoric occupation of that region than of the adjacent High Plains, Far West, and other New World landscapes. Next, I summarize key environmental characteristics of the Rocky Mountains. This may strike readers, particularly those who live in or know the Rockies well, as unnecessary. However, archaeologists have more often than one might imagine conceptualized the Rockies as, for instance, a “part” of the High Plains (see a thorough discussion and condemnation of this practice in [Husted \[2002\]](#)). They are not; they are the Rockies, their very own physiographic region ([Fenneman, 1931](#)). Unfortunately, perceptions otherwise have unduly convoluted some archaeological interpretations, such that discussions of Plains hunter-gatherer settlement strategies, for example, draw upon evidence from sites located in the Rockies (e.g., [Bender and Wright, 1988](#); [Larson, 1997](#); [Stafford et al., 2003](#)).

In the environment-focused portion of the paper, I also highlight characteristics of the Rocky Mountain ecosystem that individually and especially collectively, made the Rockies desirable for mobile people of the recent and deep New World past. In short, I show that regardless of long-standing archaeological perceptions to the contrary, basic hunter-gatherer ecological theory predicts that the Rocky Mountains would have been inviting to foragers throughout the prehistory of the continent. For that matter, non-economic characteristics, most notably the ubiquitously recognized power and sanctity of the Rocky Mountains, contribute to the appeal we should have long predicted the region would have held for First Americans.

The final and most important environmentally oriented point I make is that the northeastern Asian homeland of First Americans was itself fundamentally mountainous, and not the flat, windswept Siberian tundra that some envision based on largely—and literally—two-dimensional presentations of peopling scenarios and likely in no small part, Hollywood stereotypes. I suggest that First Americans were therefore predisposed to populate the mountains of North America shortly after their arrival because that environment of all those that highly mobile people encountered, most closely approximated the high-relief, Old World homeland of ancestral First Americans throughout the Upper Paleolithic, ca. 45,000–12,000 radiocarbon years ago.

The final component of the paper reviews archaeological evidence for Clovis use of the Rocky Mountains. I include maps showing that during both Clovis and immediately subsequent Folsom time, isolated occurrences of projectile points clearly indicate at least a light presence of Clovis hunters in the Rockies, and a heavier one of Folsom groups. More significantly, I review and discuss data from three well-known Clovis caches: Fenn, Mahaffy, and Anzick, emphasizing that all three are not only located in Rocky Mountain settings but include lithic and other raw materials procured from numerous different, but all very high-quality Rocky Mountain sources. I argue that the cache locations and their contents unequivocally signal the presence of Clovis people who knew the Rockies and their resources intimately and utilized them in robust fashion.

2. Background: research of Paleoamerican sites in the Rocky Mountains

Archaeologists have been slow to recognize that the Rocky Mountains constitute a discrete environmental region with a distinct archaeological record dating to the terminal Pleistocene.

The Plains, in contrast and in particular, have enjoyed enthusiastic archaeological attention since the find of fluted points embedded in the ribs of now-extinct bison on the High Plains of Folsom, New Mexico in 1927 ([Folsom, 1973](#)). The subsequent “point-rush” spawned by the Dust Bowl years and the collection of thousands of ancient spear points from blow-outs, led many archaeologists to perceive the Plains as the epicenter of the North American peopling universe ([Meltzer, 2009:92](#)). Cognitively, that scenario meshed well—and no doubt in part inspired—the “Clovis First” peopling paradigm, which envisioned late glacial Siberians migrating on foot across the Bering Land Bridge and south through an Ice-Free Corridor that channeled them to the eastern front of the Rocky Mountains and then south/southeast to the Plains.

The concordance of the many fluted-point sites found in Plains settings in the early 20th century and, I suspect, still-fresh perceptions of the Rocky Mountains as a hostile barrier to Euro-American caravans headed west on the Oregon and other pioneer trails, led to an archaeological self-fulfilling prophecy. If archaeologists continued to look to the Plains as the heartland for Ice Age settlement of the Americas, they would continue to find evidence for early sites in that region. This of course, did occur (e.g., [Barbour and Schultz, 1932](#); [Davis, 1953](#); [Howard, 1943](#); [Hughes, 1949](#); [Roberts, 1942](#)). So did the corollary: late 19th and early 20th century archaeologists did not look upon the “harsh” Rockies, despite their having been as accessible as the Plains to Ice-Free Corridor immigrants arriving at their flanks in the Terminal Pleistocene, as a fruitful region to search for sites related to the peopling of the Americas. Consequently, they did not search for early sites in such settings, and unsurprisingly, failed to find them.

With only a few exceptions, it took until the 1960s for archaeologists to turn their attention to early human occupation of the Rocky Mountains (for elaboration of the exceptions, see [LaBelle and Cassells \(2015\)](#) and [Pitblado and Brunswig \[2007\]](#)). In 1962, Wilfred Husted wrote a master's thesis outlining a 10,000-year archaeological chronology for Rocky Mountain National Park (also see [Husted, 1965](#)). A few years later, Husted moved north and conducted excavations at the sheltered Mummy Cave site in the foothills of the Absaroka Range of northwestern Wyoming, producing a ten-millennium chronology for that region as well. Husted recognized that his work at sites in both the foothills of Wyoming and higher altitudes in Colorado revealed an archaeological sequence entirely distinct from those established years earlier for the adjacent Plains and Far West. [Husted \(1969\)](#) coined the term “Western Macrotradition” to describe a specialized adaptation to life in the Rockies that he argued began 10,000–9500 years ago and continued throughout prehistory.

During the latter half of the 1960s, Wyoming-born George Frison also recognized the importance of foothills environments to First Americans. He conducted excavations at a number of sites in such settings, among them the Medicine Lodge Creek shelter in the low reaches of the Bighorn Mountains ([Frison and Walker, 2007](#)). Like Mummy Cave to the west, Medicine Lodge Creek revealed evidence for occupation dating back at least 9500 years and continuing through the recent past. Also like the Mummy Cave sequence, the material culture of Medicine Lodge Creek differed from what Frison had encountered at the many Plains sites he had also excavated. This prompted him to suggest that by 10,000 years ago, “there were apparently two concurrent and separate Paleoindian occupations with different and mutually exclusive subsistence strategies;” one on the Plains and the other in “foothill and mountain slope areas” ([Frison, 1991:67](#)).

Others gradually began conducting work throughout the Rocky Mountains from Canada to New Mexico and from low elevations to the highest Rocky Mountain peaks (e.g., [Benedict, 1974, 1981, 1985](#); [Davis, 1993](#); [Gryba, 1983, 1988](#); [Jodry, 1987, 1999](#); [Larson et al.,](#)

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