

The Apachean Saga - On The Other Side Of The Mountains

By Gene Gade

An immense inland area of what is now Alaska and northern Canada is populated by groups of people who speak variants of the Athabaskan language and who are loosely related as shown by genetic analyses and similarities of cultures. Many Athabaskan speakers remain in their original homeland, an area characterized by long, dark, fiercely cold winters and dominated by vast conifer forests. Much of the land there is poorly drained because it is underlain by permafrost or bedrock. It is also pock-marked with millions of glacial depressions that fill with water. Within the forests are myriad ponds, lakes, marshes, bogs, and muskeg areas that provide habitat for caribou, moose, fur-bearing mammals, fish, an astonishing variety and quantity of birds, and a gazillion blackflies and mosquitoes. Large slow-moving rivers meander across the landscape enroute to cold oceans. The Athabaskan groups have subsisted there, primarily by hunting, fishing, and harvesting wild plants, for a very long time.

The Epic Migration

A little over a thousand years ago, some groups of Athabaskan speakers fled south, out of the frigid, well-watered spruce-fir forests. Centuries later they occupy a region that could hardly be more different from their starting point. They now live in the hot, dry, plains, deserts, plateaus, and mountains of the Southwest. They are most commonly known now as Apaches and Navajos.

The extraordinary migration of these Apacheans, a term that includes both Apaches and Navajos, has intrigued anthropologists for more than a century. All the classic questions — who, what, when, where, why, and how — pertain to this mystery. Some answers have emerged via oral traditions, archaeology, linguistic studies, cultural comparisons, genetics, and other sciences, but questions remain.

The “who” question was answered first. As early as early as 1852, William W. Turner recognized that there were many similarities between northern Athabaskan and Apachean languages. Research by Edward Sapir in the 1930s confirmed the linguistic relationship and showed that the migration had been from north to south. Many other lines of evidence, including genetic and cultural affinities, have also established the northern Athapaskan and Apachean relationship.

“When” the Apachean folks arrived at their current locations has been narrowed down by archaeology, oral traditions, and written records of the Spanish explorers and missionaries. There is no definitive date for Apachean presence in the Southwest, but the first groups were certainly in what is now New Mexico and Arizona between 1300 and 1400 A.D., quite possibly earlier. Others, like

the Apachean Dismal River people and the so-called Plains Apaches and Kiowa-Apaches were still hunting buffalo on the southern Great Plains as late as 1800 and are now located in Oklahoma. The Dismal River/Plains Apaches probably used the Vore Buffalo Jump before being pushed to the south by other tribes.

“Why” there was a migration has had scholars scratching their pates for many decades. What would motivate an exodus that played out over thousands of miles, multiple routes, unfamiliar ecosystems and terrain, through or among the territories of many potentially hostile tribes and, probably, several centuries. Several hypotheses have been put forward, but the debate continues.

There is now a growing consensus that there were at least two major Athabaskan migrations. In recent decades many scientists have accepted the hypothesis that both waves were triggered by catastrophic volcanic eruptions in the Wrangell-St. Elias mountains of southern Alaska (most



Explosive eruptions like this one in the Philippines can cover enormous areas with thickly with ash and blast it over 30-40 kilometers into the atmosphere. It can circle the earth many times and reflect enough sunlight to cause significant, temporary lowering of global temperatures.

probably Mt. Churchill). According to that theory, the first eruption occurred about 500 A.D. and sent the refugees to various parts of the Pacific Coast ranging from what is now British Columbia to northern California. The Apachean migration to the Southwest likely resulted from a volcanic catastrophe that occurred about 803 A.D. If that event and date are correct, it may have taken 250 years or more for the leading edge of the Apachean migration to reach the Southwest from eastern Alaska and Yukon.

Briana Doering, an archaeologist who joined the University of Wyoming in 2021, has excavated four Athabaskan sites in Alaska and analyzed data from multiple sites and sub-disciplines. She postulates that the migration could have resulted from more gradual social changes and population growth rather than catastrophic volcanism.

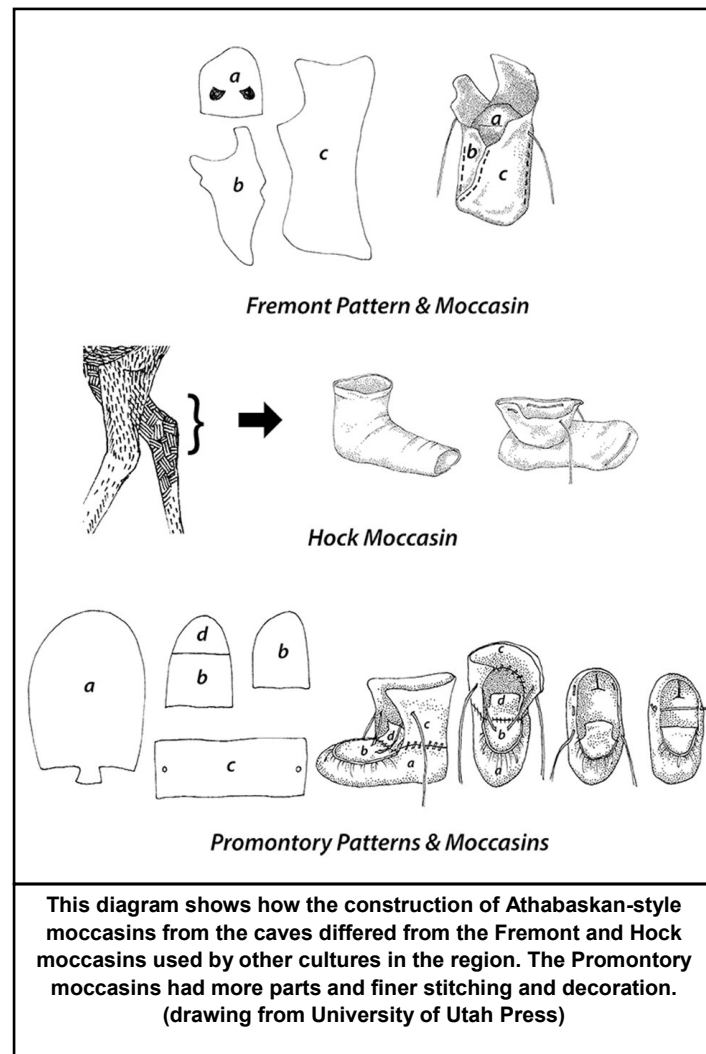
Debate also continues about the route Athapaskans used on their way south. The Dismal River/Plains Apache saga establishes that at least part of the journey took place east of the Rockies and through the Great Plains. However, recent archaeological evidence suggests that some Athapaskans passed through British Columbia, the Columbia River Plateau, and the Great Basin west of the Rockies. Some archaeologists argue that they moved through the mountains. It's quite possible that all three routes were used.

The Promontory Caves Bonanza

Archaeological evidence from the Promontory Caves on the northern end of the Great Salt Lake in Utah provide nearly conclusive evidence that Athapaskans lived in that area for 20 to 50 years, most likely between 1250 and 1290 A.D. There are a few other probable Apachean sites in the Salt Lake Valley that are dated somewhat earlier or later (+/- a century or so).

Excavations of the two Promontory Caves, first in the 1930s and again in 2011, yielded thousands of artifacts including intact bows and arrows and many stone tools and ceramics. The most remarkable find was a trove of well-preserved, well-constructed moccasins, most of them for children. Promontory Cave moccasins are quite

unlike those made by people of the Fremont Culture who inhabited the region earlier or those of the hunter-gatherer Shoshone who are indigenous to the Great Basin. The construction, tanning, and style of Promontory moccasins, including some decorated with fringes and/or porcupine quills, are nearly identical to those created by Athabaskans in the sub-arctic.



The Promontory Cave moccasin at left shows the high-top style and more complex construction typical of sub-arctic cultures is dated at around 1250 A.D. At right is a Fremont-style moccasin from the Hogup Cave site also in Utah, dated at 420 A.D. Both cultures sometimes lined their moccasins with the shredded inner bark from juniper trees as a kind of padded insole or insulation. The Fremont moccasin shown here still contains such fibers. (Natural History Museum of Utah)

Other Promontory Artifacts

The bows recovered from Promontory were recurve-style and sinew-backed like those of the far north peoples and the bison-hunting Plains tribes, but not like those associated with Great Basin people of the time. Likewise, the caves occupants used a D-shaped biface tool for cutting meat and scraping hides like those of sub-artic and some Plains hunters, but also different from those used by Great Basin peoples. The obsidian in the Promontory points were quarried from sources farther north in what is now Idaho than obsidian commonly used by other regional tribes.



This photo was taken from inside one of the Promontory Caves by archaeologist Jack Ives of Brigham Young University during the excavation in 2011. The site provides evidence that Athabaskans likely occupied these caves near the shore of the Great Salt Lake for a generation or two on their migration to the Southwest.

Promontory Cave ceramics were crude compared with those of the Fremont Culture or the Puebloans of the Southwest. However, Navajo ceramics are generally of higher quality than those of the Promontory Cave folks and most other Apacheans. That may be due to more contact with the modern Puebloans and their adoption of pastoralism, farming and dwellings that resulted in Navajos not moving as often or as far as the other Apacheans.

Almost a century ago, archaeologist Julian Stewart, suggested that the Promontory Cave people were Athapaskans migrating south. The 2003 excavations of the caves by Jack Ives and his colleagues dramatically strengthened that hypothesis. Nearly all archaeologists who have looked at the evidence now believe that the Promontory folks were Athapaskans though some think that these people had branched off from bison-hunting Athapaskans who were migrating through the Plains or Rockies.

The consensus seems to be that there were Athabaskan groups migrating on both sides of the Rockies — the

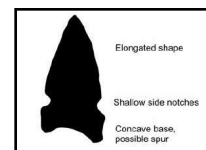
Dismal River/Plains Apache groups on the east and a separate group represented by the Promontory people on the west. Further, some scholars think that the Promontory folks were the ancestors of the modern Navajos and that the Dismal River people were the ancestors of other Apachean sub-groups. Thus, it seems there are only partial answers to the “what” and “how” questions. Clearly further study is still needed to understand the full story of the epic Athabaskan migrations.

Athabaskan Points In The Vore Site?

The July 2022 issue of *Over The Edge* contained an article about the Dismal River/Plains Apache Culture that pointed out the similarities of Dismal River projectile points with some found in the Vore Buffalo Jump. There is also a similarity with Athabaskan points excavated from sites in British Columbia (B.C.).

Canadian archaeologists have been publishing research related to the Athabaskan migrations since the 1970's. Two Canadian archaeologists compared artifacts from Athabaskan sites with those of the Plateau Pithouse Tradition that occupied the same area of B.C. from 2500 to about 600 years before present. After that, Athabaskans dominated. If the volcano-trigger hypothesis is correct, these might be artifacts from the first migration toward the Pacific coast.

It's not possible or appropriate to summarize all of that work here, however Martin Magne and R.J. Matson, archaeologists with Parks Canada and the University of British Columbia, respectively, published paper that included what they called “A Typical Athabaskan Point” shown below. It is remarkable how similar the British Columbian Athabaskan point is to the Dismal River/Plains Apache point from a site in the Nebraska sandhills and two points excavated from the Vore Site. They have the same triangular shape and side-notching, but the most unusual commonality is the concave but slanted base. It may not mean anything, but it's intriguing!



Drawing at left shows Magne and Maton's “Typical Athabaskan side-notched point”



Dismal River



Vore Site



Vore Site