Archaeological Investigations at the Salmon Beds

The Salmon Beds in Regional Perspective

The cultural history and the dynamics of human occupations of the upper Columbia and upper Kootenay areas are not well understood. Several factors have contributed to obscuring the situation. European influences during the last two centuries triggered a number of changes among First Nations groups. In particular the effects of epidemic diseases in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries considerably reduced First Nations populations throughout North America. In the Upper Columbia Trench populations were drastically reduced and some bands were eliminated. These were replaced by the Kinbasket and Ktunaxa groups in the mid nineteenth century. Information about how the Kinbasket and Ktunaxa utilized the area is also limited. There are only a few references in journals of explorers and fur traders in the nineteenth century. In addition, the Ktunaxa did not become a focus for ethnographic study until the 1930s and 1940s (Turney High 1941; Schaeffer 1940). Even when these ethnographers were working in this area, they tended to focus on the southern portion of the Ktunaxa area where larger populations are currently. As a result there is only sketchy and indirect references to the cultural system in the nineteenth century. Prior to the nineteenth century the introduction of the horse would have also caused considerable changes in the subsistence pattern, affecting travel patterns and altering hunting strategies. The recorded pattern of the Kootenay crossing the Rocky Mountains to hunt bison may have been enhanced, both in the speed of the crossing and in the amount of dried buffalo that could be carried back for later use.

Archaeological investigations may be used in reconstructing earlier cultural patterns; however, these have been limited to date. These have been restricted to a fairly extensive excavation at the Columbia Lakes site EbPw 1, and test excavations a small number of other sites.

When this area first became occupied is unknown but it can be assumed that people occupied the region at the end of the last glaciation. Carlson (1996) identified five early basal cultural traditions in British Columbia each of which occupied different areas of the province. Choquette (1996) identified two of these for the upper Columbia area. The Intermontane Stemmed Point Tradition is recognized in the Goatfell Complex which was focussed on the southwestern Purcell Mountains ".where its bearers quarried black tourmalinite and processed it via a biface core technology into large bifaces and side-struck flake tools. Most of the projectile points are stemmed forms"(Choquette 1996:50). The second major tradition, the Microblade Tradition, is represented by the Shonitkwu Period assemblages focused on Kettle Falls and the confluence of the Columbia and lower Kootenay rivers. "It is characterized by a microblade industry and the utilization of an almost entirely different suite of raw materials, predominantly argillites and rhyolites" (Choquette 1996:50). At the Vermilion Lakes site and the Lake Minnewanka site, in the Bow Valley in Banff National Park, materials of another early tradition, the Fluted Point Tradition, have also been located. Projectile points characteristic of all of these traditions have been located in the Invermere area in private collections suggesting that this area may have been an area of early cultural overlap and interaction.

Little is known of the development of prehistoric cultures until the late Middle Prehistoric Period at site EdQa 8 dated to approximately 2100 to 2400 years B.P.(Bussey 1986). At that time a variety of animals were being hunted, principally elk and deer.

The Late Prehistoric Period (A.D. 500 -1800), is represented best in the region at Columbia Lake Site EbPw 1, at Fairmont Hot Springs, and the Salmon Beds. The location of these sites in close proximity to locations with good fishing potential suggests a considerable reliance on fishing in this period and it is probable that Chinook salmon runs were relatively reliable in this period. A wide variety of animals were also hunted in the Columbia Trench at this time including elk, deer, and possibly bison. Mountain sheep, mountain goats and caribou were likely hunted in higher altitude areas. Bear, beaver, rabbit, mink, weasel, martin and ground squirrel have also be identified at either Columbia Lakes or the Salmon Beds.

There are several historic references to the Ktunaxa crossing the Rocky Mountains to seasonally hunt bison. How long this trans-mountain travel pattern has occurred is not yet clear. There may be a correlation between Top of the World chert distribution and Ktunaxa utilization. At Site EdPp 21 on the Sheep River in the Rocky Mountain foothills of Alberta west of Turner Valley, occupations date from approximately 3500 BC to 1000 A.D. (McCullough and Fedirchuk 1983). Exotic stone materials constituted 14.5 per cent of the lithic assemblage including obsidian, Montana chert, Top of the World chert, and Knife River Flint. However exotic materials formed 30.4 per cent of the projectile points, 33.3 per cent of the scrapers, and 46.7 per cent of the retouch flakes. The variety of exotic materials suggests that a trade network existed to bring materials from the east (Knife River Flint), south (Montana chert, obsidian) and west (Top of the World chert). Whether Top of the World chert was being traded or whether it was brought first hand into the upper Highwood basin of Alberta is unknown. At Site EfPq 5, in the Alberta foothills along the Elbow River just over 1 per cent of lithic materials were exotic including Top of the World chert and obsidian (McCullough and Fedirchuk 1983). However, two of the six projectile points, including one identified as Bitterroot (ca. 5500 B.C. - 3500 B.C.) were made of Top of the World chert. At nearby Site EfPq 6 one end scraper and a small amount of flaking debris was made of Top of the World chert (McCullough and Fedirchuk 1983). The Sibbald Creek Site in the foothills just south of the Bow Valley was a major campsite occupied repeatedly for the last 11 000 years. Most of the lithic materials were locally derived and no Top of the World Chert was identified (Gryba 1983). In Banff National Park, At site EhPw 4 (Muleshoe Lake Site) the lithic assemblage is also dominated by local materials but one Plains Side notched arrow point was identified as made of Top of the World chert (Damp et al. 1980: 87). Similarly at the Vermilion Lakes site, only 0.2 % is fine grey chert which is probably Top of the World chert (Fedje and White 1988:275). At the Second Lake Site the percentage of fine grey chert is in slightly higher percentages 7.1% (Occupation Layer 2), 6.4 % (Occupation Layer 3), 4.5%(Occupation Layer 4-5) and 6.7 % (Occupation Layer 6). These layers correspond to Hanna and Pelican Lake Phases of the Middle Prehistoric Period. The vast majority of lithic materials utilized were from local sources (Fedje 1986). The presence of small amounts of Top of the World chert suggests that finished tools of that material were being brought to the west side of the Rocky Mountains. Local materials were then used for more expedient tools and for replacing Top of the World tools that required replacement. This indicates that the tools made of Top of the World Chert were made elsewhere and brought to the east slopes. This seems a pattern of direct transport rather than trade where blocks of raw material were traded to be finished later. Recovery of mainly finished tools made of Top of the World Chert may be consistent with the historic pattern of seasonal movements across the mountains from the Columbia Trench to the east slopes to hunt bison. On the other hand, the characteristics, size and shapes of the projectile points should be similar to those of the Columbia Trench if they were made there. However, this does not seem to be the case as most of those recovered from the east slopes area are more characteristic of projectile point styles common on the plains to the east. A definitive answer to the question of where and for how long the Ktunaxa engaged in trans-mountain travel requires considerable more research. A larger sample

from the Columbia Trench representative of a greater time range and detailed statistical comparisons are required to clarify this question.

The almost exclusive use of Top of the World Chert at the Salmon Bed and the large amounts of finishing flakes indicates that the occupants of the Salmon Bed had a long time pattern of direct acquisition of the chert from the source. However items brought to the Salmon Beds were already largely formed into tools and required only finishing or resharpening. This implies that this group had constant interaction with the Top of the World area, possibly that as part of the seasonal round the group visited the Top of the World quarry prior to coming to the Salmon fishery at the Salmon Beds.

It should be noted that it is not possible to determine precisely which aboriginal groups utilized the Salmon Bed. David Thompson's records clearly indicate that the Ktunaxa utilized this area in the early nineteenth century but that other groups were also familiar with area, in particular, a Secwepmec speaking group as well. It is likely that utilization of the area by these two groups extended back in time for several hundreds and even thousands of years.

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