

Navajo Origins and Early Occupations

By Red Wolfe

Introduction

This article explores the possible origins of the Navajo people, one of the most adaptable and successful cultures to inhabit the Colorado Plateau. This culture is more properly referred to as Dineh, which is a Navajo word referring to "the people." Of course one could ask a Navajo, but this article attempts to explore the question from an Anglo/European archaeological perspective and in no way attempts to substitute a traditional Navajo explanation.

Athabascan Migrations

Today, the Navajos are the most populous native group in the United States, and occupy a reservation encompassing over 24,000 square miles. The Navajo are descended from Athabascans, a group of societies with a shared language who inhabited much of the interior of northwestern North America. Athabascans came to the North American continent across the Bering Land Bridge from Asia in fairly recent times. As these Athabascan speakers gradually moved south, they seemed to have branched off in different directions. Some of their descendants are found along the Pacific Coast of the northwestern United States, southern Canada, and also in the interior of western Canada. One group, the Apachean Athabascans, made it all the way to the southwestern United States.

By studying dental affinities between modern Asians and Native Americans, it appears that Athabascans left the forests of northeast Siberia about 12-14,000 years ago. A three-rooted molar is a common trait of Athabascans and can be traced back to specific regions of Siberia.

Understanding prehistoric migrations is difficult. Lacking written records, archaeologists must resort to material remains to reconstruct past events. A big problem with this approach is that many cultural changes occurred en-route between a hunting/gathering subsistence in Siberia to the semi-nomadic, partly agricultural subsistence of today's Navajo. Four contending routes have been suggested: Plains Border, High Plains, Rocky Mountains, or Intermontane. Three time periods of possible arrival have been suggested: AD 800-1000, AD 1200-1400, or post-Spanish (AD 1540). The most recent evidence points to the Plains as the migration route. The linguistic evidence suggests the Apachean Athabascans diverged into the ancestors of the present day Apaches and Navajos about AD 1300 and may

have entered the Southwest at about AD 1400.

Some investigators have proposed an entry into the present-day Four Corners region as early as AD 1000. These groups most likely left western Canada as a result of famine. Another possible explanation is based on known volcanic eruptions that produced large ash falls over large areas of western Canada around AD 750. This natural disaster may have made the area temporarily uninhabitable, causing Athabascans to diverge in different directions. This event occurs at a time which linguists estimate was the beginning of the separation in Athabascan dialects. Dental similarities between Athabascans and burials found in some sites in eastern Colorado, dating to AD 1000-1200, may indicate an Apachean presence close to the northern edge of the Anasazi region at about the same time as the great Pueblo Abandonment, around AD 1300.

Spanish and Pueblo Interaction

The first arrival of the Spanish occurred in AD 1540 with the arrival of Coronado. After this point, we can begin to look at historical accounts for information of what native groups were living where. A problem with Spanish documents is they are often ambiguous when identifying groups of Southern Athabascans.

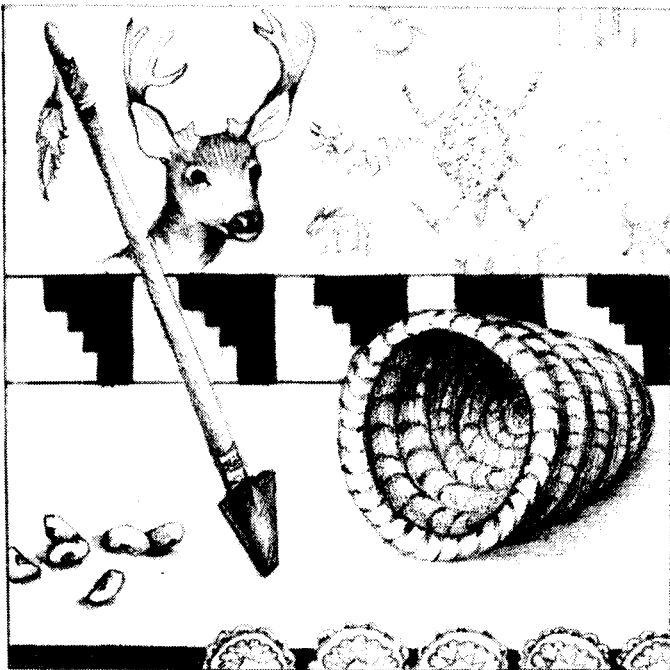
These accounts, mentioning semi-sedentary Apachean groups who practiced some agriculture, fail to acknowledge a long--time presence of these groups in the Southwest. During this time period, much interaction between the newly arrived Athabascans and the Puebloans led to the development of what we today recognize as Navajo culture. The often brutal attempt by the Spanish to subjugate native cultures in the Rio Grande Valley led to the Pueblo Revolt of AD 1680. Before this time Navajo and Spanish contacts were sporadic; however, they became more frequent and soon hostile. The hostility was in part due to the Spaniard's desire to keep the Navajo, which they obtained from the Hopi, as captives. As the Spanish defeated one Navajo alliance after another, refugees began leaving the Rio Grande Valley; some went to Hopi, some went to join the Plains Apache, and some went north into the drainage of the San Juan to join the Navajo. At this time the horse and metal objects began to become part of Navajo culture. Navajo groups teamed up with Pueblo groups in an effort to repel attempts at domination and colonization by the Spanish.

The Pueblo Revolt was a major event in Southwestern cultural history. Pueblo groups, together with other native groups including the Navajo, expelled the Spanish from the Rio Grande Valley and all of New Mexico. At this time, Navajo groups were

occupying the drainage of the upper San Juan River near the present-day Navajo Reservoir. This area is referred to as the "Dinetah" by modern Navajo who claim it as their ancestral homeland. The Dinetah contains the earliest clearly identifiable and datable Navajo archaeological remains.

Dinetah Phase

The Dinetah Phase refers to Navajo culture prior to the intimate contact with Pueblo refugees. Many Dinetah sites have been recorded in the Navajo Reservoir area of Colorado and New Mexico as a result of fieldwork undertaken during the construction of the Navajo Dam on the San Juan River. Dates of AD 1550 to 1700 have



been suggested on the basis of tree ring dates, intrusive pottery, and accounts in Spanish documents. The Dinetah Navajo are assumed to have been non-agricultural hunters and gatherers living in mobile bands who utilized seasonally both high and low areas of northern New Mexico. The high site density around Navajo Reservoir indicates a sizeable population.

Gobernador Phase

In 1696 the Spanish attempted the Reconquest of New Mexico, causing Puebloan refugees to flee north. It is during this time period (1696-1775) that the Gobernador Phase is observed. This period of Navajo/Pueblo interaction lasted until about 1755, when it appears the Navajo were forced out of the upper San Juan by Ute raids.

The material culture from this time period includes forked-stick, cribbed log and stone masonry hogans; pueblitos, towers, fortified sites, ramadas, sweat

lodges, rock art with Puebloan motifs and recognizable Yei figures, corn and beans, horses and sheep, and small numbers of European trade goods. Spanish documents describe wooden implements for farming of maize, beans, pumpkins, and watermelons. Domestic animals included horses, goats and sheep.

These early groups seem to be a mixture of Navajo, Tewa, Cochiti and Jemez. During this early Gobernador Phase, the Navajo underwent much Pueblo acculturation and the Navajo practice of matrilineal descent, matrilineal residence patterns, and clan structure are believed to be Puebloan in nature. It also appears that aspects of Puebloan religion were being incorporated by Navajo as part of their own belief system. The first Navajo rock art is recognized at this time. It is ceremonial in content and resembles both the Pueblo religious art of this time and modern Navajo dry-painting art.

Post-Gobernador Phase

By the mid-18th, century severe pressures were brought upon the Dinetah by drought and intensified Ute attacks, causing conflicts between Apachean values and Pueblo values that by now were very much a part of Navajo culture. The 18th century changes seen in Navajo culture toward a more mobile and dispersed population and the raising of livestock, may have provided the ability for Navajos to escape their enemies. Economy at this time shifted to agriculture, animal husbandry, and manufacturing (primarily the weaving of woolen cloth). All of these traits are what is known as traditional Navajo culture. At this time Navajos expand to the west and south and begin to occupy Canyon de Chelly and areas of the present-day reservation. These more open areas would have offered better pasturage for their increasing animal herds. The many versions of Navajo creation stories often speak of the boundaries of their territory as being defined by sacred mountains. These correspond to the La Plata Mountains of Colorado, the San Francisco Peaks of Arizona, and Mount Taylor and Blanca Peak of New Mexico, and also correspond to the territory occupied by the Navajo during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Recent Archaeological Studies

In recent years, much archaeological activity has occurred in the Dinetah country of southwestern Colorado and Northwestern New Mexico as a result of cultural resource activities associated with oil and gas production on public lands. Recently excavated occupation sites

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of hogan-like structures in a narrow strip along the Colorado-New Mexico border have yielded radiocarbon dates from the mid AD 1400's, but many archaeologists doubt the validity of these new early dates as truly representing a Navajo occupation. Navajo often used wood they had found laying around or wood out of preexisting structures to build their own structures.

Conclusion

Trying to figure Navajo origins is difficult and perhaps may never be fully understood. The culture history of the Southwest results from a complex series interactions between various groups. The Navajo culture we know today developed from an interaction of Athabascan speakers with several cultural groups as they migrated south. These groups include Plains bison-hunters, Pueblo farmers, and later the Spanish missionaries and settlers. This process, by late 17th century, had led to a well-defined Navajo culture based on hunting and agriculture. The Navajos are a very adaptable people who have borrowed and enculturated that which has been useful to them and discarded those characteristics that were not useful. Early Navajos and Utes often incorporated Pueblo artifacts for their own use which clouds the archaeological record.
