

The Fremont

Today we call these scattered groups of hunters and farmers the Fremont, but that name may be more reflective of our own need to categorize things than it is a reflection of how closely related these people were to each other. "Fremont" is really a generic label for a people who, like the land in which they lived, are not easily described or classified. The Fremont culture was first defined in 1931 by Noel Morss, a young Harvard anthropology student working along the Fremont River in south-central Utah.

Because the Fremont are not easily categorized and do not readily fit into archaeological classification schemes, they have been a source of confusion and debate among archaeologists since they were first identified in the late 1920s. The differences between the many small bands of the Great Basin and those of the northern Colorado Plateau areas of the Intermountain West were often quite great. As a result, archaeologists have had a difficult time defining just who these people were and how they were related to each other. There are actually few artifact similarities among these groups. While the similarities include such things as a particular way of making baskets, a unique moccasin style, clay figurines, and gray pottery, the problem of categorizing Fremont groups is compounded by a number of factors. The figurines are quite rare, for example, and the baskets and moccasins are perishable materials which do not survive in most archaeological sites. There is, in fact, only one single non-perishable trait which ties these people together--a thin-walled gray pottery whose many variations have been found as far west as Ely and Elko, Nevada, in the central Great Basin, as far north as Pocatello, Idaho, on the Snake River Plain, as far east as Grand Junction, Colorado, at the foot of the western Rocky Mountains, and as far south as Moab and St. George, Utah, along the Colorado and Virgin rivers, respectively.

Most archaeologists believe the Fremont developed out of existing groups of hunter-gatherers on the Colorado Plateau and in the eastern Great Basin. These small groups were, like their Fremont descendants, diverse, flexible, and adaptable. They ranged from fairly large and relatively sedentary populations in environments where resources were more readily accessible, to small, highly mobile family-sized groups where resources were widely dispersed. Over a span of about a thousand years, from sometime after 2,500 years ago to about 1,500 years ago, different groups of these hunter-gatherers gradually adopted, in a piecemeal fashion, many of the traits associated with the farming societies of the Southwest and Mexico.

First, corn and other cultivated plants (called domesticates), initially developed in what is now Mexico, then diffused northward throughout the greater Southwest and were added to the wild food subsistence base of native people sometime about 2,500 to 2,000 years ago in areas on either side of the southern Wasatch Plateau. This early use of corn and other domesticates occurred well before settled villages developed, and it seems that farming at first was just a part-time affair practiced by people who were still essentially nomadic hunters and gatherers. The earliest "Fremont" corn, radiocarbon dated to 2,340-1,940 years ago, comes from a cache near Elsinore, Utah; corn in sites along Muddy Creek in the San Rafael Swell date to just after the time of Christ. These sites suggest that farming was well established in some areas by 2,000 years ago. Outside this region, however, full-time hunting and gathering lifestyles seem to have continued unchanged. For example, in the deserts of the eastern Great Basin, at all of the many cave sites like Fish Springs, Lakeside, Black Rock, and Danger Cave, domesticates are absent throughout this early period and subsistence was based entirely on wild foods.

Second, between about 2,000 to 1,500 years ago, many of the objects associated with the use of domesticates, such as pottery and large basin-shaped grinding implements, were added to the people's tools. It is noteworthy that Fremont pottery first occurs as early as 1,500 years ago in several caves and rock shelters associated with mobile hunting and gathering groups and is not found in what we think of as settled villages until several hundred years later. The production and use of these tools, in addition to

the growing of corn, beans, and squash, appears to have spread to other hunting and gathering groups to the north as well as to both the east and west of the central Wasatch Plateau region. By about 1,300 years ago, sites with corn and pottery are also found in the Uinta Basin and around the Great Salt Lake; and within several hundred years after that, corn and/or pottery are present throughout the Fremont region.

Third, between about 1,750 and 1,250 years ago, architecture at some (but far from all) open sites changed from small, thin-walled habitation structures and subterranean storage pits to larger semi-subterranean timber and mud houses and above-ground mud- or rock-walled granaries. The presence of such substantial buildings suggests that, at some sites at least, some people were becoming more fully sedentary and were relying more on farming than on the collecting of wild foods.

By about A.D. 750, hunting and gathering groups on the east and west sides of the Wasatch Plateau had adopted and modified many features of settled village life and to a greater or lesser extent had integrated them into their subsistence and settlement patterns. For the next five hundred years or so, this crystallized Fremont pattern remained essentially unchanged in the heartland of the Fremont region, but many of its features, such as its pottery, spread to groups as far away as central Nevada, southern Idaho, northwestern Colorado, and southwestern Wyoming. Whether these items were present in all these areas as the result of trade or local manufacture is presently unclear.

Significantly, there are actually very few common traits that distinguish what can be considered "classic" Fremont. Pithouse villages and farming are found over large areas of the United States about this same time and are not very helpful in distinguishing the Fremont from other groups. Many artifact forms, such as projectile point styles, also are not unique to the Fremont and are not helpful in separating the Fremont from their contemporaries. A number of other material items--such as stone balls, basin-shaped metates with small secondary grinding surfaces, and elongated corner-notched arrow points--are characteristic of the Fremont, but they are either so variable from place to place, or so limited in distribution, that they are not very useful traits for distinguishing the Fremont.

Fortunately, there are four relatively distinctive artifact categories which do distinguish the Fremont, materially, from other prehistoric societies. Unfortunately, they are only rarely found together. The first is a one-rod-and-bundle basketry construction style so unique that it has led some to suggest that the Fremont culture can be defined on the basis of this single artifact category alone. This technique is markedly different from that used by both contemporary Anasazi groups and from later historically known Numic-speaking groups such as the Ute and Shoshoni.

A second trait is a unique "Fremont" moccasin style constructed from the hock of a deer or mountain sheep leg. This and other moccasin types found in Fremont sites are very different from the woven yucca sandals of the Anasazi. A third item is actually an art style represented in three dimensions by trapezoidal-shaped clay figurines with readily identified hair "bobs" and necklaces. These same trapezoidal figures are depicted in Fremont pictographs and petroglyph panels. Magic and/or religious functions have been ascribed to these painted and sculpted figures, but no one really knows their purpose or meaning.

The fourth and last major artifact category is the gray, coil pottery which is most often used to identify archaeological sites as Fremont. This pottery is not very different from that made by other Southwestern groups, nor are its vessel forms and designs distinct. What distinguishes Fremont pottery from other ceramic types is the material from which it is constructed. Variations in temper, the granular rock or sand added to wet clay to insure even drying and to prevent cracking, have been used to identify five major Fremont ceramic types. They include Snake Valley gray in the southwestern part of the Fremont region, Sevier gray in the central area, Great Salt Lake gray in the northwestern area, and Uinta and Emery gray in the northeast and southwestern regions. Sevier, Snake Valley, and Emery gray

also occur in painted varieties. A unique and beautiful painted bowl form, Ivie Creek black-on-white, is found along either side of the southern Wasatch Plateau. In addition to these five major types found at Fremont villages, a variety of locally made pottery wares are found on the fringes of the Fremont region in areas occupied by people who seem to have been principally hunters and gatherers rather than farmers.

At the height of this classic Fremont period, about 1,000 years ago, people who in one way or another fit the rather broad description of Fremont could be found from what is now Grand Junction, Colorado, on the east to Ely, Nevada, on the west. They lived as far north as modern Pocatello, Idaho, and on the south to present-day Cedar City, Utah.

After about A.D. 1250, the Fremont as an identifiable archaeological phenomenon began to disappear in much the same uneven fashion that it appeared. That is, between the years 1250 and 1500, classic traits such as one-rod-and-bundle basketry, thin-walled gray pottery, and clay figurines disappear from the Fremont region. No one can quite agree on what happened, but there seem to be a number of interrelated factors behind this change. Two seem most likely. First, climatic conditions favorable for farming seem to have changed during this period, forcing local groups to rely more and more on wild food resources and to adopt the increased mobility necessitated in collecting wild food. By itself, however, this climatic change probably would not have resulted in the Fremont demise, because the flexibility and adaptability which characterized the Fremont had allowed them to weather similar changes. However, new groups of hunter-gatherers appear to have migrated into the Fremont area from the southwestern Great Basin sometime after about 1,000 years ago. These full-time hunter-gatherers were apparently the ancestors of the Numic-speaking Ute, Paiute, and Shoshoni peoples who inhabited the region at historic contact, and perhaps they displaced or replaced the part-time Fremont hunter-gatherers with whom they were in competition.

Whether or not Fremont peoples died out, were forced to move, or were integrated into Numic-speaking groups is unclear, and even the matter of the postulated Ute/Paiute/Shoshoni migration remains a matter of spirited debate. It appears that the sudden replacement of classic Fremont artifacts by different kinds of basketry, pottery, and art styles historically associated with Utah's contemporary native inhabitants suggests that Fremont peoples were, for the most part, pushed out of the region and were replaced rather than integrated into Numic-speaking groups. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that the most recent Fremont or Fremont-like materials, dating to about 500 years ago, are found at the northern and easternmost fringes of the Fremont region, in the Douglas Creek area of northwestern Colorado and on the Snake River plain of southern Idaho--areas at maximum distance along the postulated migration route of Numic-speaking populations.

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- See: David B. Madsen, *Exploring The Fremont* (1989).

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