

“Paiutes and Prehistory: An Archaeological Problem or a Problem with Archaeologists”

By

David Van Alfen

Presented to the Dixie Archaeology Society

November 14, 2012

David’s presentation focused on the Paiutes and their lineage.

David’s initial point is that “identity” is a difficult concept and that “identity” was imposed on Native Americans throughout the southwest by Europeans or by the government.

The St. George / Southern Utah / Arizona Strip areas have been occupied since the archaic period. This region is generally thought to have been occupied by the Virgin Anasazi (Puebloans) from about 300 AD to about 1300 AD followed by the Paiutes.

The **accepted view** by archaeologist and anthropologists for this transition is one of “Population Replacement”. This is summarized by the abandonment of the area by the Virgin Anasazi, who were sedentary farmers, from around 1150 to 1250 AD. The theory is that the Virgin Anasazi migrated east to northern Arizona or New Mexico. The population was then replaced by hunter - gathers (Paiutes) who migrated into the area from the west beginning in about 1000 to 1400 AD.

David explained that this was thought to have happened because of drought, competition for resources, violent conflict (Paiutes drove the Anasazi out) or a combination of all of the above.

The **heretical view** for the transition is one of “Population Continuity”. In other words the Paiutes are really descendents of the Virgin Anasazi.

David explained the population continuity theory in this way. The drought caused the farmers crops to fail causing them to become more reliant on natural resources, i.e. become hunter - gathers. This required a life style change from sedentary to mobility. This life style change looks different from an archaeological view. He said that it is likely that many of the Virgin Anasazi did migrate, but many also stayed and adapted to the changing environment and became what we call the Paiutes.

David summarized what we know:

- There was a severe drought from 1150 to 1250 AD
- No new rock style structures were constructed or no new pottery styles were created during this time
- Puebloan groups are found in Northern New Mexico and Arizona
- Numic speaking people (Paiute, Ute, and Shoshone) were found in areas occupied the “farmers” in AD 1776 by the Spanish

He also summarized what we don't know:

- Prehistoric population levels in 1050 – 1250 AD
- We know very little about the Paiutes before about 1870 due to “invisible” archaeology. The first Paiute ethnography was done in the 1930's.
- The impact of European contact – i.e. disease and slave trade

David then talked about Mobility and Identity. Archaeologists originally believed that the Basket maker and Puebloans were different groups of people because of skeletal evidence, spear vs. bow points, baskets vs. pots. Really what was seen was a changing culture due to new technology. Archaeologists also believed that the various branches of the Anasazi were distinct tribes based on differences in pottery type.

David asks – “Why can't archaeologists agree”?

- The Problem of time – Puebloan “occupation” lasted from about 300 to 1250 AD – 950 years. We know something about that time. They were growing corn, living in pit houses and above ground pueblos, etc. The Paiute “occupation” lasted from about 1000 to 1850 AD – and we know essentially nothing about that time period.
- The problem of Garbage – Garbage yields a small sample of objects that people used. How does garbage reflect identity?
- The problem of Identity – who are you? This question depends on who is asking and in what context. We all have numerous social identities. How is this defined?

David then considers the question of Abandonment vs. Adaptation during the 1050 to 1776 time period. Here archaeology is finding hints of change from a sedentary vs. mobile life style.

- At the end of the puebloan period people lived in surface pueblos that were relatively large. Later sites show small, round, rock lined structures that are thought to be field houses or temporary structures that imply mobility.
- Storage rooms in pueblos are found to have been used as habitation sites (guest houses?)
- Reuse of structures – people moving from site to site (mobility)
- Roasting pits imply mobility

There is very little known archaeology of the Paiutes from 1100 to 1776 AD. A site is considered Paiute only if it has either a very specific type of projectile point and / or a certain type of “brown ware” pottery. Typical conical shaped pottery associated with the Paiutes does not imply Paiute but rather implies mobility.

There are other hints of continuity. The shapes of some puebloan pots are very unique. Basketry has been found with similar shapes and designs. Basketry vs. pottery implies mobility.

David suggests that we have to relook at current assumptions relative to pottery, structures, subsistence strategies, farming vs. hunting, etc. The differences are really differences in degrees of mobility not the identity of the people.

In Summary

- We need to look at sedentary vs. mobile people
- Identity is complicated.
- The archaeological record is not suited to recognize identity.
- Humans are inherently “place based”. We all have what we call home.
- The question of Paiute or Puebloan is not settled. Population Continuity should not be dismissed.

David was asked about the spread of the numic language from essentially California into Nevada, Utah and the northwest which is used by some to trace the ancestry of the Paiutes. He said that too much may have been made of this theory. He said that the numic language is a subset of the Uto-Aztecan language group that is prevalent throughout the southwest.

John Mangels