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CHEROKEE MOUNTAIN ROCK SHELTER

by

Charles E. Nelson and Bruce G. Stewart

ABSTRACT

Cherokee Mountain Rock Shelter is south of Denver, in Douglas County, Colorado, and overlooks Plum Creek near the small town of Sedalia. The shelter was formed in a sandstone conglomerate in an area of high bluffs and gently rolling hills. Three intermixed levels were excavated, with artifacts from each dating from the Late Prehistoric Period. A few sherds, suggestive of a Shoshonean occupation, were in the top two levels.

Cherokee Mountain Rock Shelter was excavated by the Mountain and Plains Archaeological Organization in cooperation with the landowner, Tweet Kimball, and the Denver Museum of Natural History. The authors' purpose was to make a general archaeological survey of Kimball's Cherokee Ranch, and to excavate some of the more important sites. Population growth in the Denver area and land development made this project an urgent one, to salvage archaeological remains before they are victimized by man's progress; it was also hoped that the information gained from the work would cast more light on Colorado's prehistoric past.

AREA DESCRIPTION

Cherokee Ranch is approximately 20 miles south of Denver and ten miles east of the Front Range. It lies near the confluence of the Platte River and Plum Creek, which flows north from Monument Hill to the Platte River. Geologically, the region consists of sharp bluffs and rolling hills cut by small sandy washes that carry water after heavy rains in late Spring and early Summer. Stone-capped bluffs of rhyolite, lava and conglomerates overlook the Plum Creek basin.

East of Plum Creek the terrain is much the same as that near Sedalia and Castle Rock, with wide, north-flowing streams such as Cherry, Mustang, Kiowa and Bijou creeks. Near the town of Kiowa, however, some 25 miles east of the Cherokee Mountain site, the high bluffs start to gently merge with the rolling plains of eastern Colorado.

Most of the geological formations along Plum Creek and the headwaters of West Bijou Creek were formed millions of years ago during the Eocene and Oligocene by uplifting and volcanic action. Volcanic action can be seen in the Dawson Arkose caprock. Other bluffs are of soft sandstone and conglomerates, known as Castle Rock conglomerate. Below the Castle Rock conglomerate is the Dawson Arkose formation, forming smaller bluffs of gentle nature and consisting of disintegrated rhyolite, lava, tuff and conglomerates, intermixed with disintegrated particles of the Pikes Peak formation. These three geological formations extend north from Colorado Springs and blend with the Arapahoe formation in the Denver basin (Richardson 1915).

The local flora and fauna fall into the transitional zone between Mountain and Plains. Although the area is somewhat detached from the Front Range, this gap is bridged by Monument Hill, a finger of high land that juts out from the Front Range east onto the Plains.

Ponderosa pine is the most abundant tree, but the basins are dotted with broadleaf trees, the most common being cottonwoods. Scrub oak thickets occupy many of the side slopes and small arroyos. Prickly pear is common on the rocky slopes and open parks, and short prairie grasses cover the table tops and meadows. Sage is not common in this area, but is abundant further east. Precipitation is about 13 inches per annum.

The fauna seems to lean toward Plains species at the present time. This may be due to the fact that Interstate Highway 25, which connects Denver and Colorado Springs, has cut off access to the area for some types of montane fauna. The area has also become very heavily populated over the last 10 to 15 years. A few antelope may be seen now and then, but their range is further east. Mule deer have been seen in the area, along with coyote, cottontail rabbit, badger, bobcat,

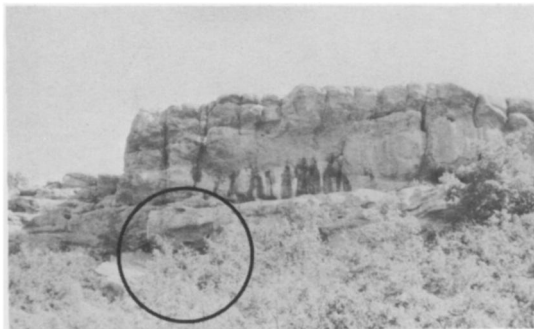


Figure 1. Cherokee Mountain Rock Shelter (within the circle). The upper shelter is on the stone ledge above the overhang. View is northwest.

porcupine, skunk, and meadow mice. During prehistoric times herds of bison and elk would have found good forage here.

A few reptiles are still found in the area, including prairie rattlers, bull snakes and a few small lizards. Nesting birds such as the cliff swallow are abundant on the cliff rocks. Night-hawks, meadow larks, magpies and other birds undoubtedly nest in the area, along with migratory birds.

SURVEY AND SITE CONDITION

In May, 1971, a general survey was made of Cherokee Mountain (the name, of course, has nothing to do with the Cherokee Indians), at which time two rock shelters and one surface site were located. The surface site is a mesa top littered with flakes. Only two artifacts were found there, a nicely flaked endscraper and one broken tip biface. The site has been surface hunted for years.

The rock shelters were on the southwestern face of the mesa, one above the other; the main shelter is illustrated (circled in Fig. 1). The upper shelter consists of only a rocky ledge with a few burned bones near a fire hearth built on the rocky floor. There were a few scattered flakes, but the site was devoid of other cultural material.

Our main concern is with the lower shelter (not totally visible in Fig. 1) just below the rocky ledge. Standing inside this shelter one can see from the small town of Sedalia, south along the banks of Plum Creek to Dawson Butte. The Front Range and Pikes Peak are in clear view.

The inner portion of the shelter is diamond-shaped in plan view, with a 15-foot high ceiling at the outer face of the overhang. The shelter is 35.7 feet wide and 24.7 feet deep, with part of

the back floor consisting of a sandstone bench. On the west edge of the living area is a large slumped area, most of which washed out during the flood of 1965; it is referred here as the "slump pit" (Fig. 2).

Several dates were cut into a sandstone panel under the overhang. The earliest identifiable date was in the 1840's, the last digit of which was obliterated in the soft sandstone. Another date was in the 1860's, and others were in the 1950's and 1960's. No native petroglyphs or pictographs were visible. If once present, they would surely have disappeared over the years due to the softness of the sandstone.

EXCAVATION

The grid in the cave was laid out in magnetic north-south lines, the lines parallel to each other but at irregular intervals. Varying pit widths were desirable because large boulders and sandstone benches projected out from the back wall. Before formal excavation was undertaken in the undisturbed area, the slump pit and eroded deposits were screened. The slump pit contained several artifacts, and was an ideal spot to dump screenings, which later helped in restoring the cave floor.

All deposits were passed through 1/4 inch wire mesh screens, and all specimens were bagged as to level. A profile was cut after completing the excavation of the slump pit (Fig. 3). This profile exposed three inter-mixed levels, with a total depth of about three feet. Eventually, two-thirds of the site was excavated. Sandstone boulders hampered excavation and made separation of levels difficult.

The only features were three shallow fire hearths containing a number of stones. The hearths did not vary in form from one level to another. There were three occupational levels; the lowest level is designated Level 1; the most recent level, Level 3. Levels were inter-mixed in some areas, but in other areas they were separated by disintegrated conglomerates and sandstone deposits.

Level 1 was approximately five inches thick, with some areas merging with Level 2. Level 2 was the most concentrated of the three levels, and was about eight inches thick. Level 3 was about five inches thick. Artifacts recovered were very similar in all three levels.

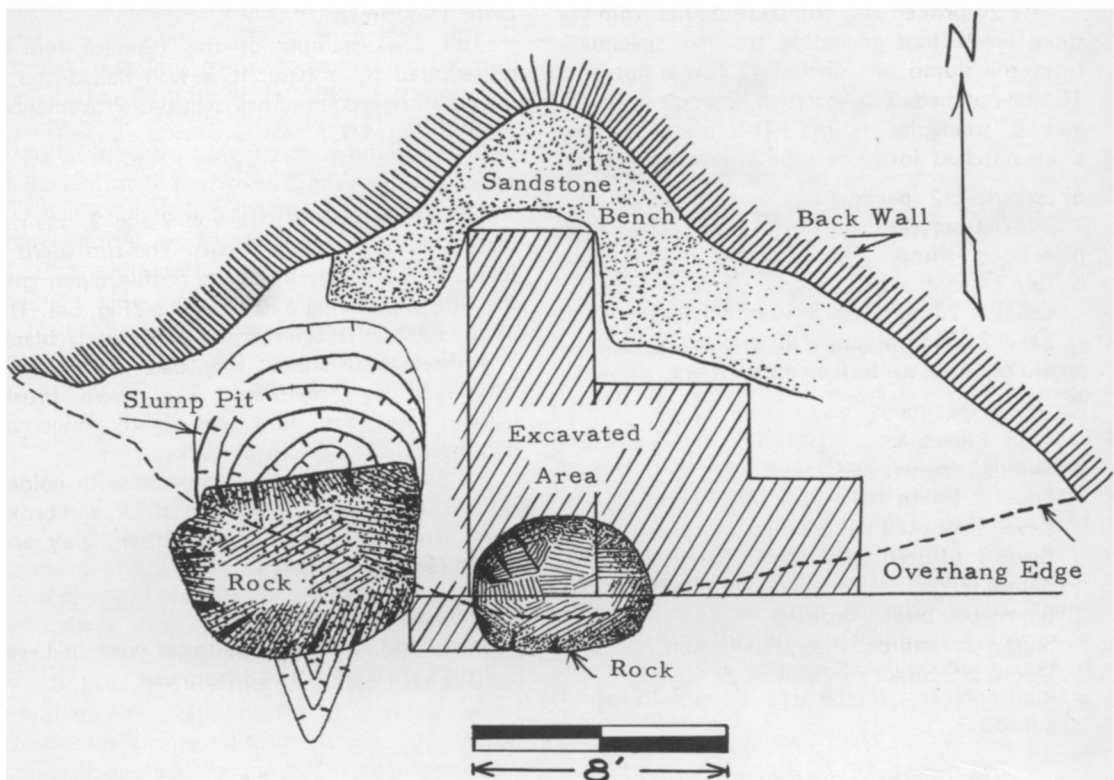


Figure 2. Site map. Note the size of the slump pit, which destroyed much of the site.

ARTIFACTS

Stone Projectile Points:

Projectile points comprise the bulk of the artifacts recovered. There is very little difference in point typology, but it is hoped that in the future clarification of point styles will help detect cultural differences between the levels.

Level 1: 4 specimens (Fig. 4*t-w*)

- Corner-notched: 18x15 mm., serrated.
- Side-notched: 27x17 mm., straight base.
- Side-notched: 24x15 mm., concave base.
- Side-notched: concave base, broken.

Level 2: 21 specimens (Fig. 4*c-r*)

- Side-notched: 27x15 mm., straight base.
- Side-notched: 31x15 mm., straight base.
- Side-notched: 28x14 mm., straight base.
- Side-notched: straight base, broken.
- Side-notched: 19x11 mm., slightly concave base.
- Side-notched: slightly concave base, broken.
- Side-notched: 17x8 mm., concave base.

Side-notched: slightly concave base, broken

Side-notched: 27x17 mm., concave base.

Side-notched: 25x16 mm., concave base.

Side-notched: 22x12 mm., concave base.

Side-notched: slightly concave base, broken.

Tri-notched: concave base, broken.

Tri-notched: concave base, broken.

Corner-notched: heat treated, broken.

Single side-notched: 22x17 mm., slightly concave base.

Single side-notched: broken.

Triangular: 26x15 mm., slightly concave base.

Triangular: broken.

Triangular: broken.

Triangular: broken.

Level 3: 1 specimen (Fig. 4*b*)

Side-notched: straight base, broken.

Slump pit: 5 specimens

Side-notched: 22x14 mm., concave base, broken.

Side-notched: 22x15 mm., concave base.

Three broken unnotched points or preforms.

The 26 broken and complete points from the three levels (not including the five specimens from the slump pit), include 2 corner-notched; 15 side-notched, 2 tri-notched, 2 single-notched, and 6 triangular points. The triangular and single-notched forms may be incomplete points.

Endscrapers: 2 specimens

Two endscrapers (Fig. 4s, γ) were recovered in place; one example is from Level 1 and the other is from Level 2:

Level 1: 70 mm. long x 40 mm. wide.

Level 2: 35 mm. long x 40 mm. wide.

Slump pit: Two broken endscrapers.

Knives: 7 specimens

Four knives were bifaces (Fig. 5g-i) and the remaining were worked flakes.

Level 1: biface, lanceolate, 33x20 mm.

Level 3: worked flake, uniface, broken.

Level 3: utilized flake, 63x42 mm.

Slump pit: biface, well worked, 64x26 mm.

Slump pit: biface, broken

Slump pit: utilized flake, 65x41 mm.

Slump pit: biface tip, broken.

Drill: 1 specimen

The one example of this type of tool is represented by a base; it is well flaked and is diamond-shaped in cross section. Provenience: Level 3 (Fig. 4a).

Pottery: 4 sherds

Four sherds were in Levels 2 and 3, one rim sherd and three body sherds. The rim sherd is plain, with a gently incurving profile tapering to the rim, and having a rounded lip (Fig. 5c). The other surface is brush-marked. Color is black. The three body sherds (Fig. 5a-b, d) varied in outer surface treatment. Two were brush-marked, and the third was lightly fingernail impressed, over light brush marks.

All sherds are lightly tempered with golden mica. The sherds are 7 to 8 mm. thick, and broke along irregular lines; they are black, gray and brown (Fig. 5a-b, d).

Hammerstones: 2 specimens

Two hand-sized hammerstones were in Level 2. Both were well battered from use.

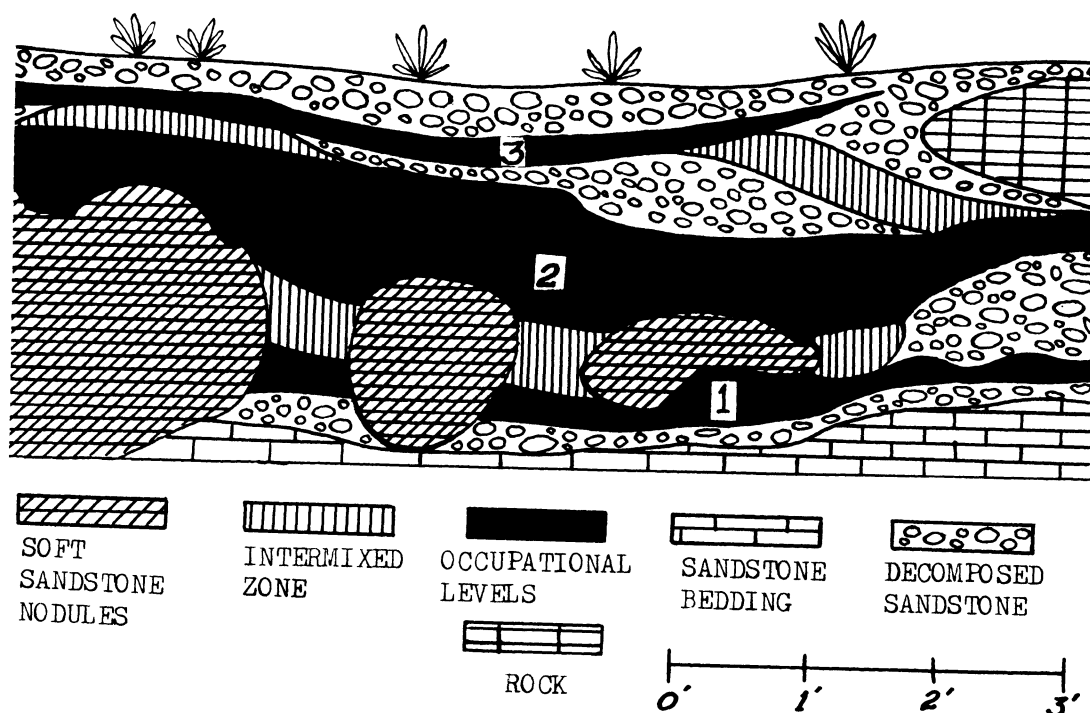


Figure 3. North-south profile wall, view east.

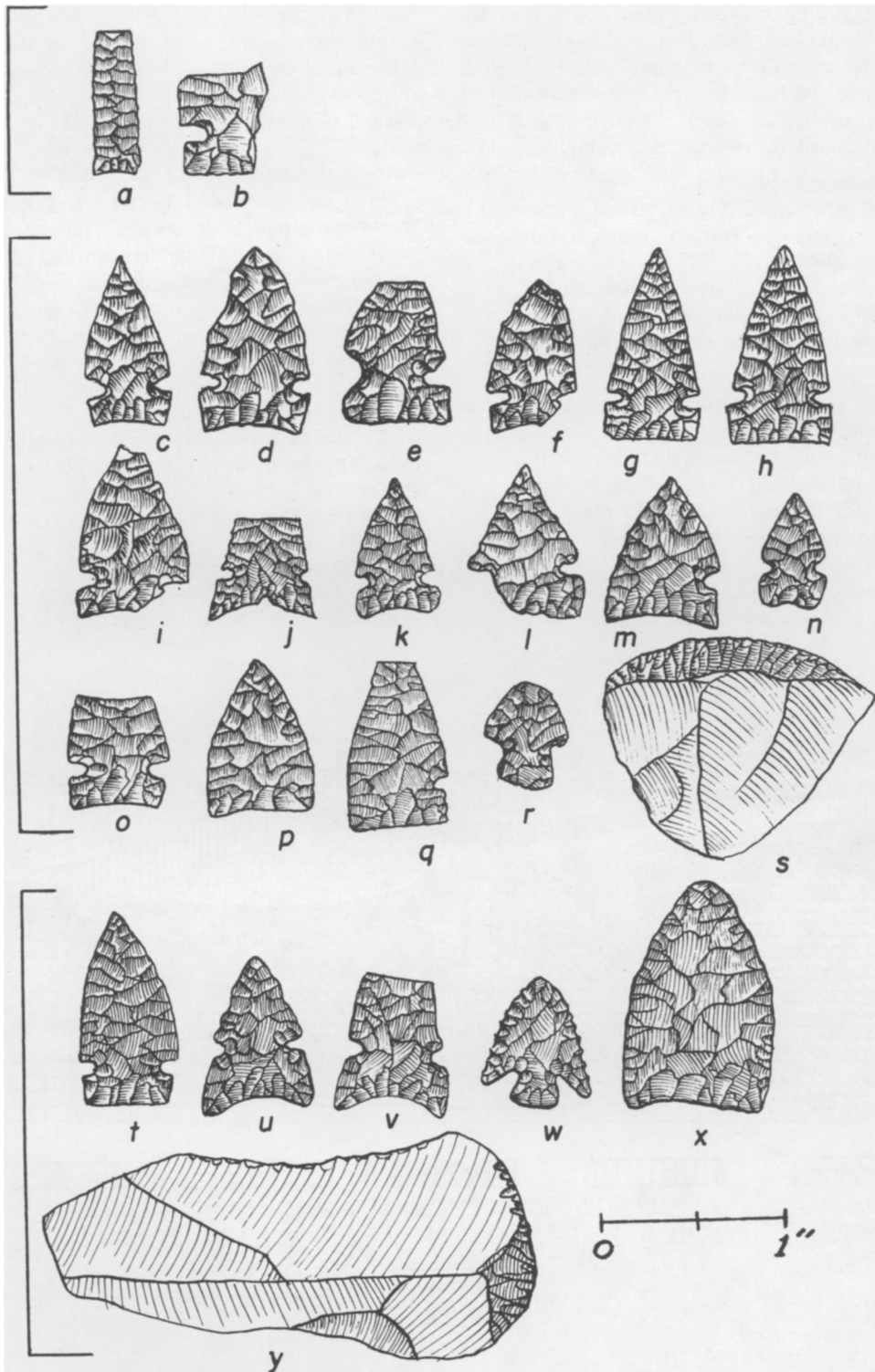


Figure 4. Chipped stone tools. *a-b*, Level 3. *c-s*, Level 2. *t-y*, Level 1.

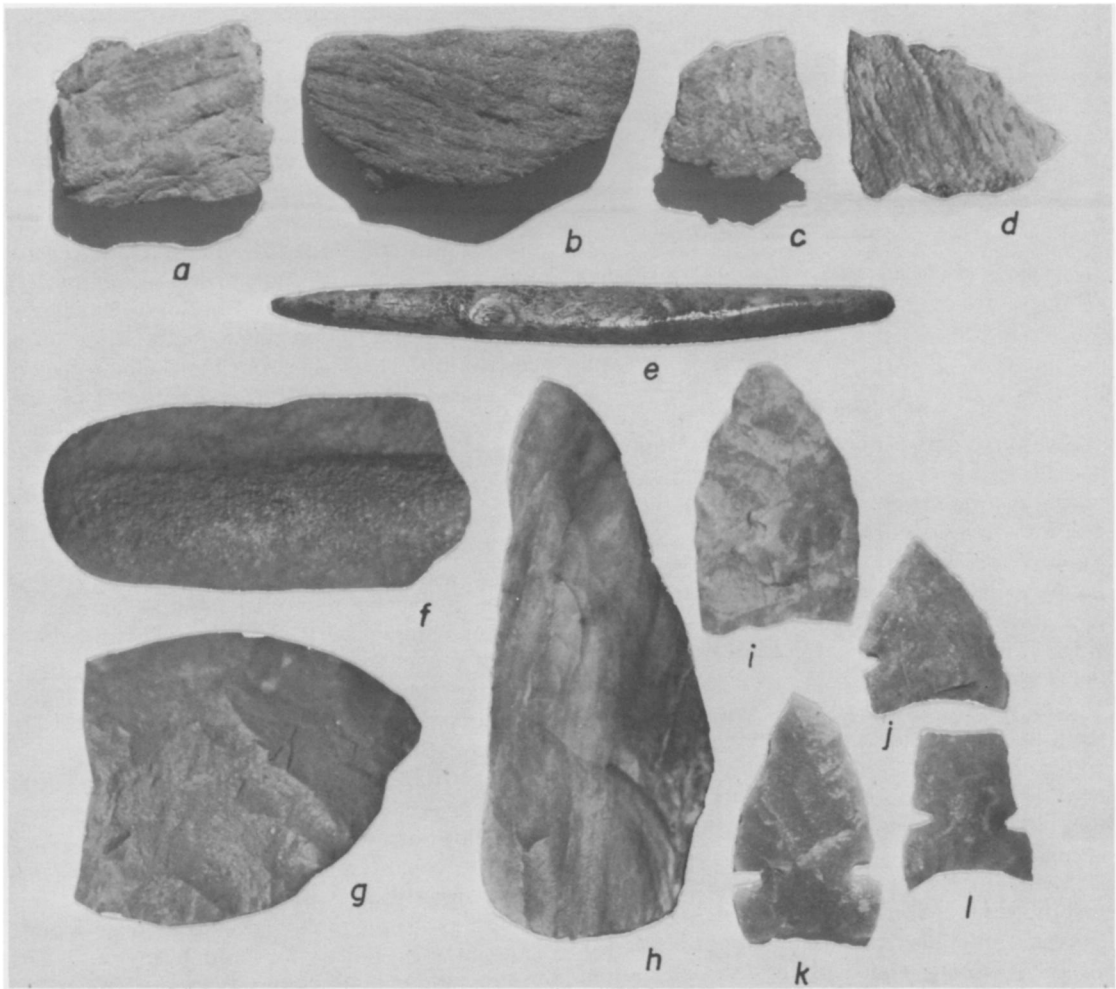


Figure 5. Miscellaneous artifacts. *a-d*, Pottery sherds (*c* is a rim sherd). *e*, Bone awl. *f*, Shaft abrader. *g-i*, Knives. *j-l*, Arrowpoints.

Shaft Smoother: 1 specimen

This arrowshaft smoothing tool was in the slump pit. It is made from a gritty porous stone with a shallow groove along the flat side of the stone. Dimensions, 52x25 mm. (Fig. 5f).

Metates and Manos: 9 specimens

One basin metate was in Level 1 and another was in Level 2. One was complete, but the other was broken in half. Both were of sandstone, and both were reburied in the shelter after excavation. Five metate fragments and two biface manos were in the slump pit, both of the one-hand type (Fig. 6).

Bone Awls: 3 specimens

Three bone awls were recovered. Two broken

examples were in Level 3 and one complete example was in Level 2. The complete example was made from a bone splinter (Fig. 5e).

Faunal Remains:

Faunal remains were disappointing, although a quantity of bones were recovered. The authors felt that professional identification would be unrewarding due to their splintered and fragmentary condition. There were no large mammal teeth, but there were mandibles from several small rodents. The only large bones recovered, where reasonable identification could be made, were two large rib bones from Level 1. The size of the bones suggest they are from bison or elk.

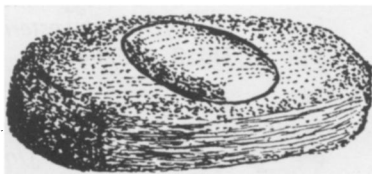


Figure 6. Basin metate (463 x 324 mm.), and biface mano.

CONCLUSIONS

The three occupations at Cherokee Mountain, based on the types of side-notched projectile points recovered, appear to represent the Late Prehistoric period. This suggestion is based on Kehoe's (1966) work on the small side-notched points in the Northern Plains. Using this system as a guide, we date the upper two levels about A.D. 1250 to 1590, with Level 1, of course, being somewhat earlier.

Subsistence activities of the people of all three levels seems to have been centered on hunting and gathering, with most of the emphasis on hunting; there is no direct evidence for agriculture. Pollen samples are available but have not been analyzed.

There is a very high degree of consistency in the projectile points from all three levels. This consistency argues for occupation of the site either by closely related groups near one another in time, or successive occupations by a single group. The first alternative is quite possible: in the late prehistoric period, most groups on the Plains seem to have used side-notched points, including the Upper Republican, Antelope Creek Focus, Franktown Focus, and late Shoshonean groups of eastern Colorado.

The second alternative is that the site was occupied by a single group and the occupational levels were deposited over a long period of time. As the crumbly sandstone and conglomerates eroded from the shelter ceiling, a layer of sterile fill was deposited over each cultural level. This separated the cultural levels in such a way that the stratigraphy implies a long use of the shelter, but from point styles this appears not to be the case.

Identifying the cultures at Cherokee Mountain is difficult, but the authors have tried to isolate traits that may be distinctive. The most sensitive

artifacts are the distinctive pottery sherds, although they are not plentiful. Brushed and fingernail indented sherds have been related to Shoshonean groups although the diagnostic sherds from flat bottoms are lacking (Mulloy 1958). Brushed Shoshonean sherds were in Graeber Cave (Nelson and Graeber 1966), a site about 20 miles northwest of Cherokee Mountain on the eastern slope of the Colorado Front Range. Thumbnail and fingernail impressed sherds have also been found in South Park, near the headwaters of the South Platte River. In a description of pottery from the Collbran region of Colorado, Annand (1967) notes that fingernail impressed pottery is related to Shoshonean groups, including the prehistoric Ute.

Morton (1952) in his article on Cliff Swallow Cave (some 20 miles southeast of Cherokee Mountain) also reports a small shelter on the canyon wall opposite Cliff Swallow Cave. At this small shelter he recovered a large number of fingernail impressed sherds together with a number of side-notched points similar to those from Cherokee Mountain (Morton reported no fingernail impressed or brushed sherds from Cliff Swallow Cave itself). The occupation at Cliff Swallow Cave is identified as Franktown Focus (Withers 1954), a late prehistoric period complex with side-notched points and with cord-marked pottery which resembles that of both Woodland and Upper Republican.

The projectile points from Cherokee Mountain are very similar to those from the Eden-Farson site in southwestern Wyoming, identified as late Shoshonean. There were two tri-notched points at Cherokee Mountain, but only one of them is complete enough to compare with the Eden-Farson site (Frison 1971: Fig. 6z). Both sites also contained serrated corner-notched points. Cherokee Mountain also shares traits with the upper (Shoshonean) levels of Birdhead Cave, on the south slope of Owl Creek Mountain in Northern Wyoming (Bliss 1950).

The authors therefore identify the Cherokee Mountain site as a late prehistoric Shoshonean group, but it is not possible at this time to be more specific.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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