

THE GATEWAY TRADITION: A FORMATIVE STAGE CULTURE UNIT FOR EAST-CENTRAL UTAH AND WEST-CENTRAL COLORADO

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ABSTRACT

Formative stage sites have been recognized in the vicinity of the Uncompaggre Plateau in west-central Colorado and east-central Utah for several decades. Such sites are characterized by masonry structures, evidence of corn, and relatively small quantities of Anasazi ceramics. Attribution of these sites to the Anasazi or the Fremont cultures is unsatisfactory, however, because key diagnostic elements of both cultures are not evident in the regional archaeological record. A distinct cultural tradition has been recognized since the 1960s, when Albert Schroeder contrasted regional excavation data to the archaeological records of the Fremont and the Anasazi culture units. The lack of a name for the Formative stage manifestation of the Uncompaggre Plateau area has hampered our ability to communicate about this archaeological unit. Although formal culture units exist only in the minds of students of archaeology, and undoubtedly reflect poorly how prehistoric peoples would have described their cultural affiliations, designation of a formal cultural unit, in this case, may convey important information about variability in the archaeological record. It is proposed that Formative stage sites of the Uncompaggre Plateau area be referred to as representing the "Gateway tradition."

Archaeologists have long created classes, types, and categories for material culture. We have used these constructs as the basis for the creation of cultural stages, horizons, traditions, aspects, foci, periods, phases, and complexes. In general, our constructions are useful, as they permit communication. If one archaeologist tells another that she found a McElmo phase habitation near Mesa Verde, the other has a good idea about the nature of the dwelling, the pottery and projectile points that might be found there, and the types of plants and animals consumed. There are, however, drawbacks to classification schemes. We sometimes fail to remind ourselves that our constructs are artificial and should be subject to change. As our archaeological data base grows, culture units should be freely created or discarded—whatever it takes to maximize our ability to communicate. Our cultural units also tend to obscure fine-grained variability. Students of the Fremont have struggled for years to define such broad constructs as *Fremont culture*, and have been frustrated by the degree of variability characterizing the unit that has traditionally been called the Fremont culture. They now point out that archaeological categories can be an impediment to understanding past human behaviors because they mask variation (e.g., Simms 1990). Simms (1990:1) points out that variation is the key to the explana-

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tion of culture form and change, and cautions against “reductionist stereotyping.” In spite of these drawbacks, few would probably advocate abolishing our cultural categories. They are imperative for communication because properly defined units impart at least some information about variability.

The purpose of this paper is to define a new cultural unit that differentiates the archaeology of Formative stage groups that once inhabited west-central Colorado and east-central Utah from that of the Fremont groups to the north and west and Anasazi groups to the south. To describe the Formative stage groups of the subject area as either Anasazi or Fremont obscures more information about archaeological variability than does designation of them as a distinct group.

The area of concern is roughly north of Monticello, Utah, south of Interstate Highway 70, west of the Uncompahgre River, and east of the Green River (Figure 1). The Formative stage sites recorded in this area are characterized by noncontiguous, circular stone habitation structures with low masonry walls (Figure 2); small corner- or side-notched projectile points; and very low frequencies of Anasazi ceramics. The Anasazi ceramics generally date to the Pueblo II period and include Mancos Black-on-white and

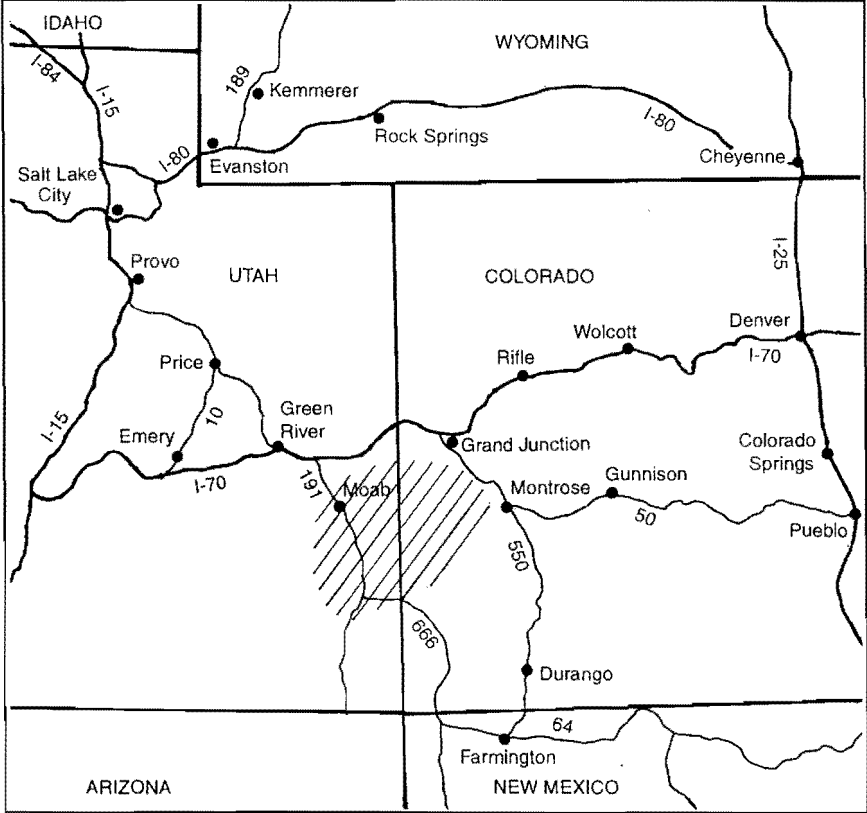


FIGURE 1. General location of the Gateway tradition.



FIGURE 2. An excavated circular stone structure atop the Uncompahgre Plateau, western Montrose County, Colorado. Photograph courtesy of Douglas D. Scott.



FIGURE 3. Tabeguache Pueblo in western Montrose County, Colorado. Photograph courtesy of Douglas D. Scott.

corrugated sherds. Basketmaker III, Pueblo I, and Pueblo III period sherds are much more rare. Evidence of corn is sometimes found at these sites, in quantities sufficient to suggest at least limited cultivation. In addition to circular habitation structures, granaries were constructed, especially in Utah. Much less common are pitstructures and contiguous, rectangular rooms. There are two or three references to pitstructures in the area, but none are adequately reported (Pierson 1981). Kivas appear to be wholly absent. Roomblocks are reported at Cottonwood Pueblo (Hurst 1947) and Tabeguache Pueblo (Hurst 1946), near Nucla, Colorado (Figure 3), and at Site No. 2 in the Paradox Valley (Woodbury and Woodbury 1932). These so-called pueblos, however, are unlike typical Anasazi pueblos because they lack associated kivas, lack typical Anasazi site layout, and have relatively small quantities of Anasazi ceramics. Rock art possibly associated with regional Formative stage sites tends to share attributes of both Anasazi and Fremont cultures (Cole 1990).

The Formative stage sites in west-central Colorado and east-central Utah have been attributed to various cultural groups, including Athapaskans (Huscher and Huscher 1943), "Fremont" (O'Neil 1993), Pueblos (Woodbury and Woodbury 1932; Hurst 1948), Anasazi (Pierson 1981), and an unnamed, indigenous group (Reed 1984). Cultural affinity with Athapaskan immigrants has not been supported by recent research, especially that concerning Dinetah phase Navajo sites in the La Plata Valley of northwestern New Mexico (Reed and Horn 1990). Puebloan or Anasazi affiliation was initially ascribed decades ago when the area was regarded as the "northern periphery" of the great Southwestern Formative stage traditions. Archaeologists commonly refer to sites with masonry or Anasazi ceramics in eastern Utah as Anasazi, however, though with qualifications. Pierson (1981) viewed the area's Formative stage sites as a diluted version of the Anasazi tradition of the Four Corners area, with the variation being due to geographic distance from the core Anasazi homeland. He formulated a new culture unit to account for the variability, termed the La Sal Mountain Anasazi, a regional variant of the Anasazi tradition (Pierson 1981). The differences between the La Sal Mountain Anasazi sites and the Anasazi sites of the core area are sufficiently great, however, to make Pierson (1981:64) question whether the same culture was represented. The Anasazi tradition of the core area is characterized by the following attributes:

1. Distinctive gray ware, white ware, red ware, and polychrome ceramic traditions.
2. Early pitstructures with considerable homogeneity of intramural features, such as antechambers, wingwalls, and sipapus.
3. Universal use of kivas for social integration and possibly for ceremonial functions.
4. Complex late residential sites, with kivas and rectangular roomblocks, sometimes representing multi-storied structures.
5. Highly patterned residential site layout, with room blocks north of pit structures and middens south of pitstructures.

6. Water control structures such as canals, reservoirs, check dams, and terraces.
7. Complex intraregional relations, with Chaco Outliers, Chacoan roads, and hierarchical distribution of site types of varying complexity.

These key elements of the Anasazi tradition are not represented in the area in question. The relatively few Anasazi ceramics in the area were apparently brought in or traded from the core area of Anasazi culture to the south; no kilns or other signs of ceramic manufacture have been documented. Residential pitstructures are scarcely mentioned in the archaeological record, and these do not evidence characteristic layout of common Anasazi pitstructure features. Kivas are apparently absent. Rectangular roomblocks are rare and lack highly patterned site layout. Water control features are unknown, as are Chacoan roads and outliers. That so many fundamental aspects of the Anasazi tradition are absent in the study area make it unlikely that an incursion by Anasazi is represented.

Fremont affiliation is also unlikely. In spite of pronounced regional variability, Madsen (1989:9-11) notes that the Fremont tradition shares the following attributes:

1. One-rod-and-bundle basketry construction.
2. Moccasins constructed from the hock of a deer or mountain sheep.
3. Artistic representations, as either clay figurines or rock art motifs, of trapezoidal-shaped anthropomorphs with elaborate ornamentation.
4. A distinct coiled pottery tradition.

One-rod-and-bundle basketry is present in very small quantities in west-central Colorado and east-central Utah (Wormington and Lister 1956; Hurst 1940, 1942), and other basketry construction styles are also represented. No ornate clay figurines or leather moccasins have been reported in the region, though yucca sandals are known from cave sites in western Montrose County. Of course, baskets, moccasins, and figurines are rare in almost any area. Ceramic artifacts, however, are neither perishable nor unusual, and Fremont ceramics are virtually unknown in the area. The attributes of Fremont culture listed by Madsen (1989) do not indicate Fremont affiliation of the subject Formative stage sites. There are similarities, however, especially in architecture. The circular habitation structures are similar to Fremont sites such as the Turner Look site (Wormington 1955) and those in Nine Mile Canyon east of Price, Utah (Spangler 1995).

If the subject Formative stage sites are neither Athapaskan, Anasazi, nor Fremont, then it stands to reason that they represent another group. In his 1964 analysis of the cultural affiliation of C. T. Hurst's Formative stage caves and "pueblos" in west-central Colorado, Albert Schroeder (1964:77) suggested that a distinct culture unit might be represented. He suggested that Anasazi traits diffused northward from core areas and were adopted by indigenous peoples, to form "northern peripheral blends" of the Anasazi pattern and the generalized Great Basin culture. Schroeder (1964:77) rec-

ognized three cultural groups reflecting this diffusion, including the "Puebloid" of southern Nevada and southwest Utah, the "Fremont" of Utah and western Colorado, and the "development in the Uncompahgre-Gunnison Basin area." Each group incorporated Anasazi traits to varying degrees, based upon local cultural dictates, access to Anasazi culture and products, and vagaries of diffusion.

Since the 1960s, when Schroeder suggested that the Formative stage sites of west-central Colorado and east-central Utah were distinct from those of Anasazi or Fremont affiliation, a considerable amount of archaeological investigation has occurred in the region. These investigations have failed to undermine Schroeder's position, and instead have led some to agree that another cultural group was represented (e.g., Reed 1984). Those in agreement that a distinct cultural group was represented have been hampered by the lack of a term for the cultural group (e.g., Horn et al. 1993). We have been compelled to use such terms as "Late Prehistoric" or "Formative stage," while adding various qualifiers to distinguish the unit in question from other Protohistoric or Formative stage culture units.

A name for the culture unit is, therefore, needed. I propose use of the term "Gateway tradition." Gateway is a small town on the western side of the Uncompahgre Plateau, perhaps central to the perceived geographic extent of the unit. By designating the unit as a tradition, the concept that a regional variant of either the Anasazi or the Fremont is represented is rejected.

The proposed Gateway tradition is characterized by the following attributes:

1. Limited reliance upon corn horticulture. Gateway tradition peoples apparently relied less on corn production than either the Anasazi or the Fremont.
2. Manufacture of small arrow points, including the Rosegate variety.
3. Procurement through trade small quantities of Anasazi and, much less frequently, Fremont ceramics. Such trade with the Anasazi may have occurred primarily during the period between A.D. 900 and 1050.
4. Apparent lack of ceramic production.
5. Late habitation of noncontiguous circular masonry structures with low walls. Habitation structures occur singly or in small hamlets.
6. Possible habitation of pitstructures, at least late in the tradition.
7. Relatively short-term use of habitation structures, as evidenced by shallow midden deposits.
8. Construction of granaries and storage cists in rockshelters.
9. Rock art that evidences both Anasazi and Fremont influence.

The Gateway tradition is tentatively dated between 500 B.C. and A.D. 1250. It is coterminous with corn horticulture in the area. Corn appears in the archaeological record of east-central Utah sometime between 400 B.C. and A.D. 60 (Jett 1991), roughly the same time as it appears in the Basketmaker II unit (Matson 1991) and at the Elsinore Burial Site in cen-

tral Utah (Wilde and Newman 1989). The ending date is suggested by data recovered from archaeological excavations in Verdure Canyon, just south of Monticello, Utah. At site 42SA10986 in Verdure Canyon, Fetterman and Honeycutt (1990) report eight noncontiguous, circular masonry structures with evidence of corn. The ceramic assemblage was dominated by McElmo Black-on-white sherds, but several Mesa Verde Black-on-white sherds were also found. These types were manufactured by the Anasazi during the Pueblo III period. Radiocarbon and ceramic data combine to suggest occupation sometime between A.D. 1200 and 1300 (Fetterman and Honeycutt 1990). The investigators rejected site affiliation with the Anasazi, but speculated that a group of unknown affiliation may have occupied the site and maintained trade with the Anasazi (Fetterman and Honeycutt 1990:61). The site in Verdure Canyon appears to be the latest representation of the Gateway tradition.

In summary, I propose merely to give a name to a culture unit that has been recognized by some as distinct from the Anasazi or the Fremont for several decades. Whether the Gateway tradition construct persists will depend on its usefulness in describing variability in the archaeological record.

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