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THE CONCEPT OF PROTOHISTORY IN ARCHAEOLOGY
AND ETHNOLOGY: A MISSIVE FOR COLORADO ARCHAEOLOGISTS

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With the exception of Bill Buckles' dissertation research, there has never been any sustained archaeological study of the protohistory or the postcontact history of any of Colorado's Native American populations. For the most part, this also extends to all historical archaeology in the state. Until quite recently historical archaeology was treated in a very cavalier fashion or even openly disparaged by many archaeologists. Until the advent of regular CRM work, most archaeologists working in Colorado had barely even noticed the specialized contexts of protohistory and contact history. This is readily understandable, because most archaeologists were trained in programs that emphasized prehistory and involved no historical archaeology. Now these archaeologists are confronted more and more with archaeological contexts that are new to most of them. These contexts also require the entirely different methodological and theoretical tool kits of the historical archaeologist and ethnohistorian. Many archaeological approaches used in prehistoric studies are poorly suited for historical archaeology.

This is manifested in confusion about the meaning and application of the term *protohistory* and concepts of the stages of culture contact. This problem is evident in the

CCPA's five volumes of prehistoric contexts published in 1999. Among these generally fine tomes on prehistory, the confusion over protohistory ranges from minor to extreme.

The authors of this paper are preparing the chapter on Colorado's historic Native Americans for the CCPA's **Historical Archaeology Context**, which will compliment the **Prehistoric Contexts**. From this perspective we wish to share some of our understandings and clarify the concepts of protohistory and culture contact so that Colorado archaeologists may be in concert with the broader scholarship of historical archaeology. It is particularly critical to do this now because the very fabric of the Ute cultural landscape, namely the surface and near surface sites with extant ephemeral architecture, is very rapidly disappearing. Efforts to learn as much as we can about the Ute cultural landscape before it is gone completely cannot be delayed or confused by misunderstandings of basic historical archaeology concepts. If one chooses to study these themes, they must understand the concepts and learn to use them correctly. We are aware that many of you present today do understand the concepts. Nevertheless, we must still preach to the choir to get our message to those who need it most. We anticipate their understanding and patience on the matter.

When Europeans or other non-indigenous peoples first entered the North American mainland and left written accounts of the cultures that they encountered, the prehistoric period of the indigenous Native American populations technically ended. However, face-to-face interaction and written documentation did not occur evenly across the continent. This transition from prehistory to history is commonly referred to as *protohistory*. The

protohistory of some peoples was quite short, while for others it lasted much longer. Some societies were quickly and radically transformed while others were little affected by the presence of European colonies somewhere on the continent.

Perhaps the most immediate of the devastating changes were the introduction of new diseases that disrupted or wiped out entire populations (Romenofsky 1987; Swagerty 2001:256-25) and escalation of the Native American slave trade. Although forms of slavery were indigenous among some Native American societies, the varied new markets that accompanied the colonization of North America radically transformed the practice of slavery. It was equally as dramatic and unsavory as that experienced by many African societies. The peoples in and around Colorado were not spared from this. The trade in Indian slaves contributed to population declines. Along with other trade-related competitiveness, it encouraged internecine warfare, dislocated populations, and forced a range of entirely new behaviors, including vigorous postures of elusiveness and defense.

Even though poorly documented transoceanic contacts had occurred well before the 1500's, the first ones to have been recorded in the area of the western U.S. were those of the Spanish Conquistadores following the conquest of Mexico in the 16th century. Some Native American peoples, including those of the pueblos of New Mexico and some Plains groups, were in direct contact with the Spanish during this period. Nevertheless, these early contacts had little if any impact on most other Native Americans. This appears to have particularly been the case for those in Colorado. These early contacts among the pueblos and out on the Plains have, however, commonly been cited by archaeologists

dealing with these areas as marking the end of prehistory. These first contacts mark the beginning of the protohistoric era for the Native Americans of the region. This in turn ultimately gave way to the contact period. There was no place in Colorado that protohistory continued into the 19th century.

It is not entirely clear when the term protohistory first entered the lexicon of Plains archaeologists. The term had come into common use in European social history and classical archaeology by the mid-1800s. There it was used to refer to the periods of emerging literacy and urbanism that had left scattered records of transactions, but no coherent history. As the age of exploration expanded, it was logically extended to the period of indirect and initial contact with non-literate societies. Alfred Kroeber may have contributed to its introduction to American archaeology. One of the still surviving great names in Plains archaeology, W. Raymond Wood of the University of Missouri, was also consulted on the subject. He suggested that it was most likely William Duncan Strong who first introduced the concept to the Plains in his 1935 **Introduction to Nebraska Archaeology**. While Strong uses the term readily in his now classic volume, he does not attempt to define it. He seemed to presume that everyone who might read his book already knew what it meant. It appears to have been a well-recognized concept by the time Strong wrote. Richard Carrillo and Steve Baker were both familiarized with its application on the Plains as students at K.U. in the 1960s.

From the archaeological perspective long used on the Plains, protohistory is simple and easy to define as the interface when written history begins. Most simply stated, the term

refers to the period represented by archaeological assemblages that contain European derived goods, but for which there is no written record or other evidence of direct contact between the Native American occupants and Europeans. Most of you are aware that application of this straightforward concept to a specific site can be problematic.

Protohistory implies no specific time frames. Rather, it implies that, after the initial acquisition of non-native goods through direct contact, for example, between a Native American and a Spaniard, these goods were conveyed to other Native American peoples through existing trade networks. It also implies that literate European cultures were aware of the existence of other cultures that they had never seen.

Protohistory *explicitly does not*, and never has, referred to any prehistoric period or to the documented portion of any group's history. It is inappropriate to ever classify prehistoric or historic components as protohistoric. Contact culture history is by definition historic. Contact implies not only that there is written documentation of individual groups, but that there is direct interaction between Native Americans and Europeans, or European-derived groups. This is the time in which indigenous societies were commonly subjected to entirely new forms of direct and immediate stress with resulting radical and rapid culture change.

Another term that should be briefly clarified before continuing is ethnohistory. This term is sometimes used as if it were interchangeable with protohistory. Ethnohistory is the historical anthropological or social historical study of an ethnic group or community

using primary historical sources, oral tradition, ethnography, and archaeology. It is an analytical approach to cultural interpretation of nonliterate or under-documented groups. *Ethnohistory has no temporal restrictions. There is no such thing as an ethnohistorical period.* However, many ethnohistorians focus their research on the period of early contact between literate and nonliterate societies. Ethnohistoric studies addressed to archaeologists or relying heavily upon archaeology often attempt to reconstruct aspects of protohistoric societies. *This does not make ethnohistory equivalent to protohistory.* Ethnohistory can be as readily applied to a contemporary ethnic community that is outside the mainstream of journalism and public records. There are also no ethnohistorical documents, only historic and ethnographic ones that can be used in ethnohistorical studies.

A Colorado example of the transition from protohistory is the Tabeguache Ute Band of extreme west-central Colorado. Despite the long presence of the Spanish Colony in New Mexico and the near certainty that they were preyed upon by other Indians as a source of slaves, the Tabeguache themselves stated that no Spaniard had ever visited them in their home territory until 1765. Until then there are no known written descriptions specific to the Tabeguache. At that time, Juan Rivera traveled into their territory and left the first known written account of this band of Utes. This visit involved face-to-face contact and written documentation. It also heralded a period of increasing contact and interaction and the accumulation of a coherent body of primary and secondary accounts of an identifiable group. This event ended the protohistory of this specific Ute group. Tabeguache protohistory, including the acquisition of non-native trade goods, was quite lengthy,

lasting from about A.D. 1540 to 1765. In an ethnographic sense protohistoric is as much a “*cultural composure*” as anything. It entails no specific time frames.

There are many examples of the appropriate use of the term protohistory in areas surrounding Colorado, and particularly on the Great Plains. For the Southwest, Wilcox and Masse (1981:1) described it as the period “*between prehistory and the ethnographic present*” which they felt ended in the early 18th century. In her excellent overview of the “*Southwest Heartland*,” Linda Cordell ended her consideration of her “*protohistoric period*” in about A.D. 1700 and viewed it as intermediate between the prehistoric and Spanish Colonial periods. Joel Janetski appropriately recognizes the applicability of the term for the Ute culture context in Utah. It is noteworthy that only a few of the various contributors to the original symposium, *Archaeology of the Eastern Ute...*, used the term. George Frison and James Gunnerson have relied upon the concept for Wyoming and the central High Plains, including eastern Colorado. Swagerty also considered the term in his cogent discussion of Plains culture history. Frison emphasized, however, just how little is known of this time in Wyoming and suggests that it commenced with the introduction of the horse. This is an interesting and clearly ponderable idea, but should not be perceived as a cause-and-effect relationship. Surprisingly, Bill Buckles does not appear to have ever even mentioned the term protohistoric anywhere.

The concept of protohistory can at times be difficult to apply. In their prehistoric context for the Arkansas River basin, Kalasz, Mitchell, and Zier (1999:250) provide a thoughtful discussion of the difficulties of applying the traditional concept of protohistory because it

involves the use of subjective measures of *"European and aboriginal interaction."* The concept cannot be applied solely on the basis of physical archaeology, but must use the analytical approaches of historical archaeology. They propose a date of A.D. 1725 for the end of protohistory in that region of Colorado, because that is the time when there is some historical record developing for the general region.

Among the prehistoric contexts, Wilshusen and Towner developed a particularly cogent treatment of the protohistoric and historic periods for the southern Colorado River basin. These writers avoid use of the terms protohistoric or protohistory in their thoughtful consideration of the *"Post-Puebloan Occupation"* from A.D. 1300-1840. They acknowledge the significant lack of data from Ute and Navajo sites of this period in their study area. Despite this problem they accomplish a very good discussion of the general subject without framing it taxonomically, because there are still so few data available. They state that the subject is not yet ripe for summation.

In closing it is imperative that Colorado archaeologists begin viewing and treating the historical archaeology of Native Americans with the same critical eye that they apply to prehistory. If one of us, as historical archaeologists, undertook studies of the Archaic Era anywhere in Colorado, or of the Anasazi core area, we would be expected, as required under the CCPA's Code of Ethics and Standards of Research, to exercise great care and due diligence to become informed of appropriate terminologies and conventions before we even began to do field work, write or speak, let alone try to lecture and teach, on the subjects. If we did not, we would expect a pretty hard and merciless drumming from the

brethren on the matter. In quite short order our views would be summarily dismissed by those who were better informed on the subject, we would be dragged to the high altar of scholarship for peer review and appropriate chastisement, and particularly so if our views managed to find their way into publication. Faculty members might find themselves under severe scrutiny. In short, if you want join the ball game of historical archaeology, then you have to at least learn the basics if you wish to be taken seriously and meet your obligation to the resource base, Native American culture history, and our profession. It was Bill Buckles (1988) who once pointed out that any successful archaeological study of the ephemeral Ute resource base would, in particular, challenge anthropological method and theory “*to their limits.*” This will be particularly so in the historical archaeological study of the protohistoric and historic Ute record.

Thank you