

## EXPANDING ATHABASKAN CHRONOMETRIC BOUNDARIES IN WEST- CENTRAL NEW MEXICO

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Early Spanish documents chronicle 1500s Athabaskan or nomadic presence for almost all mountainous areas of New Mexico. While early Spanish explorers encountered these people on almost every expedition into the New Mexico hinterlands and noted numerous *rancherías* and tepee villages, few documented Athabaskan sites exist in the archaeological record. Most early sites have been found in northwestern New Mexico and generally consist of isolated, collapsed forked-stick hogans and/or associated Navajo ceramics. Dates for the earliest of these are currently estimated as early as the mid-1400s (Brugge 1992:337; Hancock 1992:287). In southwestern New Mexico and eastern Arizona, Athabaskan remains consist of 1800s wickiups, ramadas, windbreaks, rock shelters, and stone-ringed fortifications (Donaldson and Welch 1991:94-99). The authors (1991:100) comment that there is no unequivocal evidence for Apache occupation of the west-central Mogollon Highlands prior to 1800. However, Opler (1983:382) believes that these Western Apache may have reasonably been in the Southwest as early as 1400.

So why have only a handful of earlier Athabaskan sites been recorded within the entire state? Certainly, archaeological visibility of Athabaskan sites is minimal.

Wood-pole or brush structures are highly impermanent; Athabaskan pottery is of limited manufacture; and lithic artifacts are currently nondiagnostic and considered basically indistinguishable from Archaic scatters. Perhaps, given the historic mobility of Athabaskan groups and the impermanence of their structures, it is understandable why so few sites have been recorded.

But, is this state of Athabaskan archaeology acceptable today? Is it possible to compensate for the low-visibility problem and improve New Mexico Athabaskan site frequencies? Current archaeological survey methodology will never be able to identify those Athabaskan sites that lack surficial structural remains or diagnostic pottery. It is these low-visibility, nondiagnostic, minimal artifact density sites—Athabaskan or otherwise—that frequently are bypassed when formulating data-recovery programs that focus on the larger, structural sites for excavation. Yet, only through excavation of these minimal-artifact, nondiagnostic, or isolated hearth/burn areas will many Athabaskan sites be found. Often, probing, testing, or excavation of these types of sites can yield subsurface datable materials or diagnostic artifacts that will allow for identification.

## ATHABASKAN SITES NEAR RESERVE

The benefits of testing or excavation in identifying Athabaskan sites were clearly made during recent excavations conducted by the Museum of New Mexico, Office of Archaeological Studies, in the mountainous region of west-central New Mexico near Reserve and Datil. Several Athabaskan sites were recorded during investigations for the New Mexico State Highway and Transportation Department within the Gila and Cibola National Forests, through the excavation of small lithic scatters. Journals from Spanish military and exploratory campaigns in southwestern New Mexico and eastern Arizona suggest Athabaskan groups were fairly common in the area. A few recordings are documented in Table 1.

From this documentation, it is obvious that Athabaskan were frequently sighted in the vast mountains of southwest New Mexico, eastern Arizona, and Mexico from at least the early 1500s to about 1900. But where are the archaeological sites that substantiate the written record? To date, only a few sites have been documented. A hearth containing Athabaskan Utility sherds produced a radiocarbon date of  $390 \pm 90$

B.P. near Quemado (Oakes 1986). An Athabaskan olla was recovered from Delgado Cave near Reserve, and Utility sherds were found on the surface at Y Canyon Cave (Martin et al. 1954:70). Two sites with small, circular, stone rings and plain brown ware were recorded near Devil's Park (Peterson 1988:114). At the Burned Dune site in southeastern Arizona near the Picacho Mountains, a fire pit yielded a  $^{14}\text{C}$  date of  $460 \pm 40$  B. P. (Bayhem and Morris 1990:31). These seem to be all of the known Athabaskan sites in the region, particularly for the mountains of west-central New Mexico. This type of site has been truly archaeologically invisible!

1980  
460  
1990  
4

OAS excavated 25 sites along U.S. Highway 180 and State Road 12 near Reserve in Catron County; prior to field work, five of these sites were thought to be Archaic because of the extent of lithic artifacts present. Some of the excavated sites had large, corner-notched projectile points. After excavation, it was found that two of the five sites were Archaic, two were Athabaskan, and one had both Archaic and Athabaskan components, based on radiocarbon dating. Two other later Mogollon sites also had evidence of Athabaskan reuse.

1560 ± 90  
Table 1. Observations Made of Apache in Southwestern New Mexico and Eastern Arizona.

Year	Observation	Reference
1400	San Carlos Apache say had contact with Pueblo Indians at Dewey Flat on Gila River in Arizona	Forbes 1960:xviii
1537	Fray Marcos mentions a <i>despoblado</i> at San Pedro, Arizona	Danson 1957:112
1540	Coronado probably saw what were Apache in the Mogollon Mountains living in rancherias	Riley 1985:160
1581	Apache seen heading for Piro Pueblo near San Marcial	Hammond and Rey 1928:286
1583	Espejo saw "Mountain" Querecho near Acoma	Opler 1983:384

add Hammond  
1928:286  
165-166  
Navalton  
Comado  
1912

**Table 1. Observations Made of Apache in Southwestern  
New Mexico and Eastern Arizona (cont.).**

Year	Observation	Reference
1598	First use of the word "Apache"	Hammond and Rey 1953:345
1610	Apache or Navajo near Lower Chaco River	Eschman 1983:384 ?
1620	Benavides says Apache de Xila living in pueblo 14 leagues west of Piro Pueblos near Socorro	Hodge et al. 1945:82
1634	Benavides describes pueblos surrounded on all sides by huge Apache Nation	Ayer 1916:39
1640	Apache as far west as Zuni	Schroeder 1963:7
1666	Spanish campaign against Apache near Acoma	Schroeder 1963:7
1672	Bancroft states conflict between Spanish and Apache began at about this time	Thrapp 1967:7
1680	Father Kino mentions Apache trading with Zuni	Danson 1957:112
1681	Apache camped near Piro Pueblo of Senecu	Hackett and Shelby 1942:203
1692	First mention of Warm Springs Apache	Buskirk 1949
1747	Revillagigedo military campaign to rid area west of Rio Grande of Apache	Kessell 1971:136
1756	Mexican and Spanish soldiers met in Cliff area to track Apache	Kessell 1971:131
1785	Spanish expedition by Cordero to hunt Apache near Cliff	Kessell 1971:149
1835	Authorities in Sonora, Mexico, offer 100 pesos for each Apache scalp	Thrapp 1967:10
1864	Apache noted near Fort West on Gila River	McFarland 1974:13
1875	Apache chase Mexican settlers near Luna	Hough 1907:58
1879	Apache in mountains south from Zuni to Silver City	Green 1990:84
1885	Apache in Gila Mountains killed prospector	McFarland 1974:8
1900	Apache at head of Mogollon Creek	McFarland 1974:56

The five Athabaskan sites are briefly described below along with their radiocarbon dates. All dates are from wood charcoal samples and are shown at one sigma with all calculations computed by Beta Analytic, Inc.

*Rocky Hill* (LA 37917) is an extensive lithic artifact scatter. It produced a pooled date of cal. A.D. 1520 ± 62 from two subsurface burn areas with concentrations of lithic materials in the east and middle portions of the site. One corrected <sup>14</sup>C date is 300 ± 130 B.P. (Beta 57450), with calibrated ranges of A.D. 1440-1670 and A.D. 1780-1790 and only minimal representation in the later range; the other corrected date is 460 ± 70 B.P. (Beta 64061), with a calibrated range of cal A.D. 1420-1480. The west edge of the site yielded a corrected date of 120 ± 100 B.P. (Beta 57449), with a calibrated range of A.D. 1670-1950. This is a later occupation than displayed on the rest of the site, but because of the association lithic material nearby, is still likely to be a Late Athapaskan date. No historic artifacts were present.

*Apache Woods* (LA 37919) is an extensive lithic artifact scatter. A subsurface burn area produced a statistically pooled date of cal. A.D. 1450 ± 75. One corrected date is 510 ± 110 B.P. (Beta 64062), with calibrated ranges of A.D. 1320-1350 and A.D. 1390-1470. The earlier calibrated range is minimally represented. The other corrected date from the site is 380 ± 90 B.P. (Beta 57451), with a calibrated range of A.D. 1440-1650. A Chiricahua-like projectile point was also recovered.

*Raven's Roost* (LA 70188) is mainly a Late Archaic campsite; however, overlying several small, dated Archaic pit structures is a layer

with three dates in the 1700s and early 1800s. One corrected date is 200 ± 80 B.P. (Beta 64066), with calibrated ranges of A.D. 1640-1690 and A.D. 1730-1810. A second corrected date is 160 ± 90 B.P. (Beta 69808), with a calibrated range of A.D. 1660-1950. The third corrected date is 140 ± 60 B.P. (Beta 78271), with calibrated ranges of A.D. 1670-1780 and A.D. 1795-1945.

A nearby pit produced charcoal-filled soil with a corrected date of 500 ± 50 B.P. (Beta 64067), yielding a calibrated range of A.D. 1400-1470. A burned area (with lithic artifacts) to the west of this concentration yielded a statistically similar corrected date of 580 ± 100 B.P. (Beta 69811), and a calibrated range of A.D. 1300-1430. Therefore, it appears that the site also has an earlier 1400s occupation.

*Lightning Strike* (LA 70189) is the location of a Reserve phase roomblock, dating circa A.D. 1000. A nearby charcoal and stone-filled roasting pit produced a corrected <sup>14</sup>C date of 340 ± B.P. (Beta 57459), with a calibrated range of A.D. 1460-1650.

*Ladybug Junction* (LA 75791) is a Pithouse phase site with dates in the A.D. 600-800s. However, a very shallow pitstructure (Figure 1) produced a corrected date of 300 ± 60 B.P. (Beta 57466), with calibrated ranges of A.D. 1510-1600 and A.D. 1620-1660. A roasting pit yielded a corrected date of 250 ± 70 B.P. (Beta 57467), with calibrated ranges of A.D. 1530-1550, A.D. 1640-1680, and A.D. 1770-1800. The earliest range is a minimal representation. Three small, eroded, basin-shaped hearths adjacent to the shallow pit structure (Figure 2) yielded an Athabaskan Utility sherd but no dates. These are probably associated with the pitstructure.



Figure 1. Apache roasting pit at Ladybug Junction.



Figure 2. Eroded Apache hearths at Ladybug Junction.

Identification was made of these five sites as Athabaskan on the basis of 13 radiocarbon samples recovered from subsurface features and an Athabaskan sherd. The 13 corrected dates, in summary, are A.D. 1370, 1440, 1450, 1490, 1570, 1610, 1620, 1650, 1700, 1730, 1790, 1810, and 1830, spanning a period of 440 years. Through excavation, we uncovered probable Athabaskan hearths, roasting pits, shallow pit structures (possibly depressed floors), burned areas, and the Athabaskan sherd.

A comment on the lithic artifacts recovered from the five sites is in order. All of the artifacts are generally indistinguishable from similar debitage found on nearby Archaic sites in terms of quality and choice of raw materials, workmanship, and projectile-point typology. Most points are strikingly similar to Archaic styles, including the Chiricahua point from the Apache Woods site. No definite Apache-type projectile point was identified. Ferg and Kessel (1987:50) comment that the Apache frequently scavenged points of "various ages and cultural affinities from prehistoric sites." They describe Apache-made points as crude and barely symmetrical.

All five sites are located either in the high valleys or adjacent lower foothills of the mountainous Mogollon Highlands at elevations ranging from 1,882 to 2,048 m (6,175-6,720 ft). Three are on adjoining finger ridges in areas of dense shrub oak, piñon, and juniper overlooking the expansive Pine Lawn Valley.

### ATHABASKAN SITES NEAR DATIL

In 1994, we excavated three artifact scatters of unknown cultural affiliation in

White House Canyon, within the Datil Mountains on the northern border of the Mogollon region (Hayden et al. 1996). Like the Reserve area, the region is rich in wild game and laced with small valleys separated by hills covered in oak, piñon, and juniper. One of the sites may be Early to Middle Archaic, but this is based on a single  $^{14}\text{C}$  sample with a corrected and calibrated date of 7020 B.C., which must be viewed with great caution.

One artifact scatter, Dust Devil Hill (LA 104381), has a dated Mogollon component. But it also contains the subsurface, charcoal-blackened outline of a probable brush structure with an associated hearth that contained 175 sherds from several vessels identified as Athabaskan Thin Utility.

All are relatively wide-rimmed jars probably used for cooking. The volcanic temper suggests the vessels may have been locally made (Dean Wilson, personal communication 1995). The charcoal from the nearby burned area produced a corrected  $^{14}\text{C}$  date of  $340 \pm 110$  B.P. (Beta 77841), with a calibrated range of A.D. 1445-1665.

The other site, Elk Crossing (LA 39998), was also a multicomponent locus with Late Archaic, Mogollon, and again, a charcoal stain with a  $^{14}\text{C}$  corrected date of  $360 \pm 60$  B.P. (Beta 77833), with a calibrated range of A.D. 1455-1640. A small activity area on the site produced 26 Athabaskan Utility sherds from at least 5 vessels, all probably jars. Also in this area were 22 ceramics from at least 3 vessels, mostly bowls, which are representative of the Piro Pueblos near Magdalena and Socorro, 96 km (60 mi) to the east.

The Piro Pueblos are known to have traded with Apache tribes in the

Protohistoric period and to have traveled west into the surrounding mountains to hunt. Hough (1907) recorded a six-room cliff dwelling only several kilometers from Dust Devil Hill, which he says had pottery like that of Magdalena and Socorro. In light of this finding, perhaps there were actually small enclaves of Piro peoples living in or utilizing the Datil Mountains.

By the 1620s, Hodge and others (1945:82) state that enmity had developed between the Apache and Piro, and by the late 1660s, the Piro had suffered more than most pueblo groups from Apache attacks (Scholes 1930:400). As Spanish control over the New Mexico Pueblo Indians increased, trade between the Apache and the pueblos vastly decreased and Apache raiding increased (Garner 1970:26-27). The Piro Pueblos were abandoned by 1680, therefore two <sup>14</sup>C dates from Dust Devil and Elk Crossing sites in the late 1500s and early 1600s is perfectly compatible with known Piro-Apache relationships at that time. The Elk Crossing site could represent an Apache occupation with Piro trade wares obtained from excursions into Piro territory or a Piro hunting trip into the Datil Mountains. The presence of Athabaskan sherds on the site would tend to favor the former explanation.

### CONCLUSIONS

The excavation of the small campsites in the Datil Mountains and the Mogollon Highlands have proved to be significant for several reasons. The obvious one is to never underestimate the potential of a small

artifact scatter. On all of these sites, the presence of subsurface datable materials was virtually a necessity for identifying Athabaskan sites unless they happened to have the distinctive ceramic wares. More important for west-central New Mexico, this is the first archaeological verification of an Athabaskan presence in the Datil Mountains prior to the late 1800s and in the Mogollon Highlands from approximately A.D. 1400-1500. Also, the occurrence of Athabaskan Utility sherds presumably dating to the late 1500s and early 1600s should give us cause to reevaluate our dates for the beginnings of Athabaskan pottery. Until recently, archaeologists have believed that ceramics were not present in Athabaskan assemblages until after the Pueblo Revolt in the late 1600s (Baugh and Eddy 1987; Brugge 1982). However, Navajo sites from northwestern New Mexico may also have ceramics that were produced as early as the 1500s (Brown and Hancock 1992; Reed and Reed 1992).

The discovery of five Athabaskan sites within the narrow ribbon of highway right-of-way in the foothills of the Mogollon Highlands suggests that many more such sites are likely to be present. The range of <sup>14</sup>C dates for these sites, from the early 1400s to the early 1800s, indicates an early and long history of occupation for Athabaskan peoples in west-central New Mexico.

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