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Introducing the Fremont

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“Fremont” is a label archaeologists use for the northern contemporaries of Ancestral Pueblo people. Fremont peoples lived mostly in what is now the state of Utah, in the eastern Great Basin and on the northern Colorado Plateau. Their range extended slightly beyond the modern borders of Utah.

Sometime during the first few centuries A.D., people began growing maize (corn) in the region. The first farmers might have been immigrants from the south, or indigenous hunter-gatherers who incorporated maize into their diet; most archaeologists think evidence shows a combination of both patterns. Over the next several hundred years, people across the Fremont region became more sedentary (living in one place year-round), and they adopted material culture (pottery, architecture, tools) appropriate to this more settled lifeway.

By about A.D. 1000, small settlements of Fremont farmers extended from just west of the Utah–Nevada state line into northwestern Colorado, and up the eastern side of the Great Salt Lake to a little north of the modern city of Ogden. Fremont peoples across this region shared styles of pottery, architecture, rock art, figurines, and moccasins. Ceramics, obsidian, and marine shell artifacts circulated among local Fremont groups.

Despite broad similarities across the region, Fremont peoples were not a homogeneous cultural group. Local Fremont populations probably did not all speak the same language, and they varied in other ways. Some lived in sedentary villages and relied on maize as much as any ancient Southwestern society. Others were more mobile and less reliant on domesticated crops.

Settlement patterns, architecture, and some details of material culture also vary geographically, with notable differences on either side of the mountains that divide the Great Basin from the Colorado Plateau (pages 18–19). Most of the largest villages are in the Great Basin, adjacent to good water sources. Many such villages are along streams that issue from the Wasatch Mountains, with especially large settlements in the Parowan, Sevier, and Utah valleys. This pattern suggests that many Fremont farmers in the Great Basin did not rely solely on rainfall to water their crops. Instead, they planted where the water table was high, or they relied on small-scale ditch irrigation. Archaeologists have documented a few large Fremont villages in the Uintah Basin and elsewhere on the Colorado Plateau, but settlements on the Colorado Plateau were generally smaller and more dispersed.



Owl effigy pendant from Baker Village in eastern Nevada. Fremont rock art and figurines often depict people wearing necklaces and ornamented belts, and stone, shell, and bone ornaments are common in excavations of Fremont sites.
COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF PEOPLES AND CULTURES,
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At Fremont villages in the Great Basin, people built semisubterranean pithouses and aboveground adobe storage structures, and they occasionally constructed adobe houses. Many villages included one or more structures that were so large, communities probably cooperated in building them and used them for communal activities (see pages 6–8). Some are pit structures as

much as four times the size of an average pit structure, and others are aboveground central structures. Settlements on the Colorado Plateau have similar kinds of structures, but their builders frequently made them of stone. Away from villages and other permanent settlements, Fremont peoples sometimes used ephemeral brush wickiups, and they built isolated, nearly inaccessible granaries in rock shelters and cliff ledges.

Like Ancestral Pueblo and other Southwestern farmers, Fremont farmers also gathered wild plants and hunted game (pages 12–13). Interactions between farmers and full-time foragers must have been especially important in the Fremont region. Over the thousand years or so that Fremont farmers endured, the frontier of maize horticulture in western North America ran through the Fremont region. To the north and west, beyond this frontier, hunter-gatherers inhabited the rest of the continent. In the northern part of the Fremont region,

Above: Probable headdress (UCM 6178) recovered from a buckskin pouch in Mantle's Cave, Dinosaur National Monument, 1939–1940. Dating to A.D. 996–1190, it comprises more than 370 feathers sewn together with sinew and placed between strips of ermine, as well as rawhide thongs at either end that the wearer may have used to hold the adornment in place. The central feathers are from the yellow-shafted flicker, which lives east of the Rockies, and the others are tail feathers of the red-shafted flicker, which lives west of the Rockies. IMAGE: FRANÇOIS GOHIER. COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM



Left: Worked bone gaming pieces recovered during Neil Judd's excavations at Paragonah (1916 and 1917). Such objects are often found at Fremont villages in considerable numbers, and archaeologists have interpreted them as evidence of periodic "trade fair" gatherings when people would have gambled and exchanged goods. IMAGE: JAMES R. ALLISON. COURTESY OF THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM OF UTAH. SEE ARCHAEOLOGYSOUTHWEST.ORG/ASW29-4 FOR MORE INFORMATION

Major locations mentioned in this issue. Archaeologists named the Fremont archaeological culture for the Fremont River, which was in turn named for John C. Fremont, a nineteenth-century explorer, military officer, and politician. MAP: CATHERINE GILMAN

hunter-gatherers lived in the marshes along the east side of the Great Salt Lake, in close proximity to farming villages.

Influences from the south are manifest in people's adoption of maize and other cultigens, in pottery designs (pages 8–9), and in the occasional occurrence of Ancestral Pueblo pottery at Fremont sites. At about the same time Ancestral Pueblo people left the Four Corners region (ca. 1240–1300), Fremont farming ended, population dropped, and most of the distinguishing characteristics of the Fremont disappeared from the archaeological record. Current archaeological data do not provide clear indications of the fates of Fremont farmers and their descendants.

Many Fremont people might have joined Ancestral Pueblo groups in migrating south. Others might have remained in the area but ceased farming. Evidence of dramatic changes at about 1300 leads many archaeologists to infer that new populations moved into the area. The Ute, Paiute, and Shoshone people who now



live in the area usually claim descent from the Fremont. If some Fremont remained in the area after the end of farming, then both possibilities could be correct. □

Food for Thought...

“...of what value are objects of a past people if we don’t allow ourselves to be touched by them. They are alive. They have a voice. They remind us what it means to be human; that it is our nature to survive, to be resourceful, to be attentive to the world we live in.”—Terry Tempest Williams, foreword to David B. Madsen, *Exploring the Fremont* (1989)