

# Chapter 7

## Oregon Cultures in Perspective

The traditional cultures of Oregon were varied and distinctive, reflecting the different environments they grew in and the particular social factors that channeled their own courses of development. In a broad way, however, the forces that shaped them have also shaped other cultures, and native Oregon lifeways share much in common with those of other places, near and far. This concluding chapter briefly places early Oregon cultures in a larger comparative context, to show some of the ways in which they relate to or resemble other important developments in the northern hemisphere.

### The Peopling of the North and the Peopling of America

It is abundantly clear that human origins lie in the tropics and semitropics of the Old World, probably in Africa and probably around three million years ago. The north-temperate zone was populated only very late in the human career, and the far north much later yet. With the emergence of fully modern humans and their development of a varied and sophisticated technology, people began adapting to the arctic climates of the Old World

about 30,000 years ago. The far north is an extremely rigorous environment for humans, but fish, fowl, and mammals school, flock, and herd there in overwhelming concentrations. Once people learned the habits and developed the technology to live in the arctic and exploit its riches, the entire north was opened to human occupation. From Norway on the west to Greenland on the east, the arctic biota is remarkably uniform, and that was perhaps even more true during the terminal Pleistocene period, when mammoths, mastodons, horses, camels, caribou, musk ox, and other large animals were widespread throughout the north. The peopling of the arctic was prerequisite to the peopling of the New World, and indeed the two events are seamlessly related. The precise dates of this epochal expansion of the human domain are not agreed upon, but the best evidence suggests that it began about 30,000 years ago, with the crossing to America achieved between about 18,000 and 14,000 years ago (Fagan 1987; Aikens 1991, with references).

The first Americans came from northeast Asia across the Bering Land Bridge. A broad plain more than 600 miles wide emerged from the shallow Bering Sea as terminal Pleistocene glaciers grew, and increasingly kept much of the world's water from returning to the oceans. The first immigrants probably crossed Beringia shortly after the last glacial maximum, when world climate was beginning to warm but much glacial ice remained unmelted, and sea level was still relatively low. Large parts of Alaska had remained unglaciated throughout the ice age, and during the time of the Bering Land Bridge, this territory was continuous with the arctic tundras that stretched endlessly across northern Asia and Europe.

An earlier entry into the American interior is rendered unlikely by the fact that during the last glacial maximum, the Laurentide ice sheet, spreading outward from the Hudson Bay region, and the Cordilleran ice sheet, spreading outward from the northern Rocky Mountains, covered much of Canada. In one area of northwestern Canada the terminal moraines of these two glaciers overlapped, suggesting that for at least the period of greatest cold, continuous glacial ice would have blocked movement southward from Beringia and Alaska into the continental interior. Human movement down the west coast at that time is equally unlikely, because there the way southward was blocked by immense glaciers that extended to water's edge, calving directly into the sea. A theory that people traveled along this coast by boat during terminal Pleistocene times (Fladmark 1979), though highly implausible given the ice-age conditions, must nevertheless be conceded as not wholly beyond imagining. As recently pointed out in a broad-ranging examination of this problem, there is archaeological evidence for human occupation in Australia and New Guinea 40,000 to 50,000 years ago; in the New Britain, New Ireland,

and Solomon islands 20,000 to 32,000 years ago; and on offshore islands of Japan during about the same period. Such facts do show clearly that people of these areas were living on coastal resources and travelling substantial distances across water at an early time (Erlandson 1992a, 1992b). Whether such clues from the equatorial and middle latitudes foreshadow an archaeological finding yet unmade, however, that seagoing people also spread along the arctic shores of the northern Pacific in terminal Pleistocene times, remains to be seen. The archaeological evidences so far discovered on these coasts documents only post-Pleistocene occupation.

A  $^{14}\text{C}$  date of 13,200 BP for Fort Rock Cave in Oregon, and dates of 14,500 and 15,000 BP for Wilson Butte Cave in Idaho (Gruhn 196), are the earliest to be possibly associated with evidence of human presence in the Northwest. They are in fact among the earliest dates that might reasonably be claimed for human presence in the New World as a whole, but it must be noted that all currently available dates in this and earlier time ranges are controversial, due to limitations or ambiguities in the evidence.

By at least 11,500 years ago, however, people were clearly present all over North America. Numerous  $^{14}\text{C}$  dates from Arizona, New Mexico, and elsewhere establish a time range of 11,500 to 11,000 BP for sites of the highly distinctive Clovis complex (named for a discovery near the town of Clovis, New Mexico). Clovis fluted points have been found from Nova Scotia to California, and from Alaska to Panama (Haynes 1969; Bryan et al. 1978). Well-made spear points of the Clovis fluted type have been found in all parts of Oregon, and the Dietz Site, in the eastern half of the state, has yielded a considerable number of Clovis points and related artifacts. How much before 11,500 BP the Clovis people or their direct ancestors entered North America remains to be determined. So far, fully convincing evidence for earlier occupation has not been found, but many devotees continue the search.

The Clovis Paleo-Indians of late glacial times are known from a number of sites in North America to have been hunters of mammoth, giant bison, and other large game animals which shortly became extinct as the cool, moist conditions of the ice age gave way to the warmer and drier climate of postglacial times. It is a reasonable presumption that Oregon's Clovis people hunted the Pleistocene animals then extant in the area, and at this period Oregon cultures were probably more closely related to those elsewhere in North America than they ever were again. The Clovis horizon marks the only time in North American prehistory when a single diagnostic artifact style spread over the entire continent. Manifestly, Paleo-Indian hunters traveled fast and far over the rich, untapped

landscape of the New World, and in so doing laid down the cultural base from which all later regional traditions sprang.

## **Postglacial Readaptation: Archaic Hunter-Fisher-Gatherers**

North American environments changed dramatically as the climate warmed and dried with the waning of the glacial age. By shortly after 11,000 years ago, the mammoth, horse, camel, giant bison, and other species once hunted by Paleo-Indians were reduced to extinction. Only in the Great Plains, where vast grasslands and herds of bison persisted, did a big-game hunting way of life continue. In the east, forests replaced open tundras, grasslands, and parklands. In much of the west, shrubby semidesert vegetation replaced richer, grassier floradas as warmer postglacial climate dried the landscape and shrank the great lakes once present there. In both east and west the large herding species were replaced by smaller, more scattered animals, and Paleo-Indian big-game hunters gradually became Archaic foragers and collectors, hunting and gathering a wide variety of plant and animal foods.

The Archaic lifeway developed differently in various parts of the country, as individual societies adapted themselves to woodlands, rivers, seacoasts, mountains, or deserts. All these groups were characterized by broad-spectrum hunting and gathering, hence may all be labeled by the same general term. But they differed in detail, in ways reflecting the specific environments to which they became adapted. During the Archaic period, the continent-wide uniformity of the Clovis horizon gave way to a large series of regional culture patterns. Within Oregon five regional traditions have been recognized, as reflected by the central chapters in this book. All these traditions represent cultures of Archaic type, and all continued from the early postglacial right into historic times.

In the Great Basin of eastern Oregon the Clovis Paleo-Indian way of life is well-attested at the Dietz Site. But even at Dietz was foreshadowed the Archaic desert culture tradition that was emerging by 11,000 years ago at the Fort Rock and Connley caves. By 9000 years ago, the Desert Archaic pattern was well-developed. Hallmarks of this adaptation were the milling stone and mano, for crushing seeds; woven textiles that included carrying baskets, nets, matting, and other elements; woven sandals of sagebrush bark or tule; rabbitskin robes; the atlatl and dart (early) and the bow and arrow (late); and a highly mobile, wide-ranging pattern of life, suited to the collecting of sparse and scattered resources over a vast territory. Dwellings included lightly built pole-and-brush wickiups, and

more substantial pithouses. This way of life was not restricted to Oregon, but was practiced, with local variations, all over the Great Basin province of Oregon, Nevada, and Utah, and beyond into the deserts of northern Mexico.

In the Plateau portion of north-central Oregon, salmon fishing nearly 10,000 years ago at The Dalles prefigured a riverine adaptation of Archaic type that became characteristic of the entire Columbia River drainage. The uplands were exploited for game during hunting seasons, and several species of edible roots were gathered there at appropriate times of the year, but the main focus of human habitation came to be the banks of the big river and its tributaries. The late spring-early fall salmon runs became an economic mainstay, and the abundance they provided—which could be dried and stored for leaner seasons—supported many small villages of substantial pithouses. Here the community wintered, and many people lived and worked throughout the year. Here too task groups returned home after spending some weeks or months at nearby summer fish camps, or came back from briefer hunting and gathering forays into the uplands. The mortar and pestle, for pounding roots into meal, were characteristic tools. So were various items of fishing gear such as net weights, net floats, fish hooks, and fish spears. The atlatl and dart, and the bow and arrow, served as projectile weapons. Stone mauls and antler wedges, along with other tools, formed part of a well-developed wood working complex. The Plateau pattern extended not only along the Middle Columbia in Oregon, but northward throughout trans-Cascadian Washington and into the Fraser Plateau of British Columbia.

The cultural tradition that developed along the Lower Columbia River and Pacific Coast embodied both riverine and marine adaptations. On the Lower Columbia between the Cascades and the Coast Range, settlements of large communal plank houses were established along the banks of the river. Along the sea coast, plank-house villages tended to be situated on bays, or on estuaries where rivers emerged from the interior. Fishing and wood working were of great importance in all these societies, and related tools are common in the archaeological assemblages. The mortar and pestle for processing plant foods were also common. The atlatl and dart, and the bow and arrow, were both in use for hunting in earlier and later times respectively. At the mouth of the Columbia, and at places along the coast, seals and sea lions were hunted, using harpoons with bone points. The wooded mountains beyond the water's edge were exploited for plant and animal foods, but apparently, at least on present evidence, the interior forests were only lightly utilized by societies that harvested mainly the resources of watery environments. All these characteristics mark this traditional Oregon life way as part of the great Northwest Coast

cultural pattern that stretched some 1800 miles from Yakutat Bay, Alaska, to Cape Mendocino, California.

Oregon's Willamette Valley cultures occupied a distinctive grassland / parkland setting, where people maintained a balanced economy based on diverse wild foods. River fishing, root and seed gathering, acorn harvesting, and the hunting of deer, elk, small mammals, and wildfowl were all important. There was no overriding focus on any one food source. Willamette Valley societies were quite mobile, ranging seasonally across territories which included riverine, gallery forest, grassland, and wooded foothills zones. Many sites known on the valley floor were spring and summer camps with large earth ovens, where roots of the camas lily were baked and preserved for storage. The Hurd Site, on slightly higher ground along the valley edge near Eugene, was a residential village where the remains of a large oval house with a slightly sunken floor were found. It may be typical of the more stable base settlements of the region, which have so far proven hard to find. In the adjacent mountains, especially the Cascades, small upland sites have been discovered. Some of these undoubtedly represent the hunting camps of valley groups, but others were probably occupied by prehistoric people who, like the historic Molala, occupied the mountains on a year-around basis. From various Willamette Valley sites there has been recovered a cultural inventory including the mortar and pestle for plant food grinding, large and small projectile points for hunting, and a variety of cutting and scraping tools for hide and woodworking. The Willamette Valley was a distinctive natural and cultural area in its own right, although it had close affinities to both the Plateau and Southwestern Mountains.

The Southwestern Mountains were rugged territory occupied by small groups oriented to the rivers—the Umpqua, Rogue, and others—which cut their way from the Cascades to the sea. In both environment and culture the region seems to have been a northern frontier of prehistoric California. Where the mountains touched the Pacific Coast, the local societies shared in the greater Northwest Coast cultural pattern. In the interior, salmon ran in the rivers, and a wide variety of game was to be found in the mountainous uplands that dominated the region. Acorns were available from extensive stands of oaks on the valley floors, and were probably more heavily relied upon here than they were farther north in the Willamette Valley. Stone bowl mortars, hopper mortar bases, and carefully shaped pestles—probably used principally in acorn processing—are common artifact types in the area. Hunting is well attested by an abundance of small and large projectile points, and by the bones of deer, elk, antelope, bighorn sheep, beaver, rabbit, and other

creatures. Characteristic dwellings were substantial pithouses, usually built in small clusters in favorable streamside locations. In late times a pottery complex of distinctive character appeared, perhaps invented independently of other ceramic traditions in the west.

## Connections and Convergences

As the preceding sketches show, within the territory of modern Oregon four native culture areas of vast scope came together. The Plateau, Northwest Coast, Great Basin, and California provinces extend far to the north and south of the state's boundaries, but each culture type is well represented by Oregon examples. The Willamette Valley harbored traditions of more localized cast that do not fit completely into any of the larger cultural patterns, but in a general way were intermediate between the Plateau and California. Because of these connections, the present account of Oregon prehistory may also serve as a general introduction to traditional lifeways once extant over much of western North America. More importantly, such similarities between ancient Oregon and other regions demonstrate far-flung networks of communication and the sharing of ideas and experience among prehistoric populations over many miles and many millennia.

Interesting parallels between early Oregon cultures and the lifeways of even more distant places may also be noted. These parallels are due not to any recently shared common heritage or communication, but to evolutionary convergence, fostered by the necessities of human existence in habitats of similar character. They further illustrate the power of adaptation to environment, much referred to in preceding pages as a dominant force in shaping human culture.

For example, native people of the Willamette Valley and Southwestern Mountains ranged widely in the course of a year, fishing in the rivers, hunting for deer and elk in the mountains, harvesting acorns in the oak groves, gathering seeds in the grassy parklands, and digging roots in the wetter low-lying areas. A very similar economic cycle characterized the pre-agricultural Archaic people of the eastern United States, where most of the same plants and animals were available and exploited. Farther afield, early Japanese of the Jomon period exploited a highly similar flora and fauna in highly similar ways between about 10,000 and 3000 years ago, before rice cultivation began. Close environmental and economic parallels can be found as well in the forest hunting-fishing-gathering cultures of Mesolithic period Europe between about 10,000 and 5000 years ago. In all these areas, similar though not identical hunting-fishing-

gathering technologies included basic items such as the bow and arrow, the mortar and pestle, a range of stone tools for cutting, scraping, and woodworking, and basketry and cordage industries which served in catching and gathering (Aikens and Dumond 1986; Aikens, Ames, and Sanger 1986).

Comparable parallels may be drawn between the coastal peoples of Oregon and coastal folk from other parts of the world. The Northwest Coast culture pattern, in which western Oregon participated, extended from northern California up the coast through British Columbia to Alaska. The historic Ainu of Japan, and their archaeological predecessors, practiced a very similar littoral way of life. They built substantial villages along the seacoast and at the mouths of major rivers, from which they exploited the salmon, sea mammals, and shellfish of the ocean shore, and the deer, elk, bear, and other biota of the wooded hills behind. On the coast of Pacific Northeast Asia, ancestors of Koryak, Kamchadal, and other peoples practiced similar lifeways in similar settings. The deeply fjorded coasts and protected inland waters of northern Europe provided comparable habitats and resources for human use, as did the New England coast of eastern North America (Aikens and Rhee 1992).

Similarly, the Great Basin desert and the Plateau (the latter, like the Basin, generally arid but veined with rivers connecting to the sea) exemplify general habitat and cultural types found elsewhere. The Chacoan and Patagonian regions of southern South America include arid terrains remarkably similar to both the Great Basin and the Plateau, and the hunting-gathering cultures of these regions were comparable in their simplicity to those of the Great Basin and Plateau (Lynch 1983). The Kalahari Desert of southern Africa, and the interior desert of Australia, also harbored ancient desert cultures that were broadly like those of interior North America, though if anything adapted to even more rigorous conditions (Yellen 1977; Gould 1977).

Such similarities among cultures remote from one another give evidence that human beings, who have the same fundamental needs and potentials the world over, have tended to respond in similar ways to the task of making a living when faced with similar environments. Such evolutionary convergences are not mistaken for direct historical relationships, not only because of the distances involved, but because important aspects of social form, and of artifact styles, clearly differ from group to group. By contrast, many of the social and artifactual forms common to contiguous, historically related groups are often nearly identical, the product of direct face to face sharing of specific ideas and examples. In sum, both historical connections and evolutionary convergences have operated to create human societies

in prehistoric Oregon that shared much in common with other societies across the continent and around the world.

## **Future Research**

This narrative of Oregon prehistory has emphasized straightforward interpretations that are factually well supported and unlikely to be transformed by future discoveries in any radical way. But it has also been repeatedly mentioned that much remains unknown, and each chapter has closed with a section titled "future research." All the problems mentioned in these sections will demand attention, and additional questions will certainly occur to other investigators.

Because so much remains to be learned, it is appropriate to close this account with a warning that the precious cultural record of prehistoric Oregon—ancient sites and artifacts lying on and in the ground—is endangered. Construction activities, hobbyist artifact collecting, and outright pillaging of sites for objects to sell on the antiquities market are major and growing threats to a decidedly finite and non-renewable cultural resource. Archaeological interpretation depends on the analysis of artifacts and cultural features of known context, and many kinds of questions simply cannot be approached at all when objects have been improperly removed from their place of origin. Federal and state laws exist to protect our cultural resources, but the best protection will come from citizens who care about Oregon's rich prehistoric heritage and want to preserve the archaeological library from which it can be read studied. Precious pages are being torn out and scattered at an alarming rate.

