

Other Types of Artifacts

Also found at the Mesa Site are various large stones from the nearby creek that were used as hammers or anvils. Other stones were brought in from greater distances, and their use at the site is unknown. These include 11 quartz crystals not otherwise found naturally nearby. We can only speculate that they might have had some type of religious or other cultural use.

Other Cultures at the Mesa Site

During the first few years of excavation, only Paleoindian style artifacts like those described above were found at the mesa. This led to the presumption that only the ancient Paleoindians had used the site. But later, in a few locations away from the Paleoindian activity areas, very different styles of artifacts were found. These were made by a much more recent cultural group that briefly utilized the site about 3,500 years ago. These people based their stone tool industry around small stone flakes, called “microblades,” which they inserted into wooden or bone handles and shafts for use as cutting and piercing implements. These microblades, flaked off of specially prepared rock cores, also may have been used for engraving and other special culturally distinct purposes. Microblade-based cultures were common throughout northern and interior Alaska during this time. While Paleoindians occupied the North Slope, a microblade-producing culture closely related to those in Siberia was present in interior Alaska, primarily in the Nenana and Tanana valleys. It is unknown if the Mesa people and the Nenana people with apparently different cultures were closely related to each other. There is no evidence how (or if) they may have interacted. Equally unresolved are whether they dressed alike, shared similar beliefs, or spoke the same language. Future archaeological discoveries may help answer such mysteries.



Mesa archaeological site.

Help Us Preserve and Protect the Past!

All archaeological sites of Alaska are important for the scientific information they contain about our state’s fascinating past. If you see historic or archaeological remains, please don’t disturb them. Enjoy looking at them and taking photographs, but leave them intact for future generations. If possible, please report their location to the nearest state or federal land manager. With your help, we can protect Alaska’s past for the future!



Mesa Site biface tool over 11,700 years old.

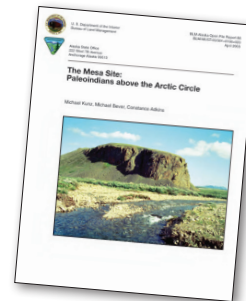
Learn More About It

For further information about the Mesa Site, including a downloadable 82-page report entitled “The Mesa Site: Paleoindians above the Arctic Circle,” by Michael Kunz, Michael Bever, and Constance Adkins (originally published April 2003 as BLM Alaska Open File Report 86) visit:

<http://www.blm.gov/alaska/archaeology/mesa-site>

For printed copies of Mesa Site information contact:

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Cover photo: Excavator working at the Mesa archaeological site in the Central Arctic Management Area Wilderness Study Area.

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Mesa Site

Ancient Hunting Lookout

Northern Alaska

Cover photo: Excavator working at the Mesa archaeological site in the Central Arctic Management Area Wilderness Study Area.

The Mesa Site

Importance and Location

The Mesa Site is a scientifically important ancient archaeological site located on land managed by the Bureau of Land Management on the northern edge of the Brooks Range in arctic Alaska. The site lies on a ridge nearly 150 miles north of the Arctic Circle and 160 miles from the nearest road. Between roughly 11,700 and 13,600 years ago, hunters used this site, located atop a mesa-like ridge, as a lookout to spot game. What they left behind, including distinctive stone tools and the remnants of ancient campfires, is among the oldest evidence of human presence in the Western Hemisphere. From discoveries made at the Mesa Site, archaeologists have learned how some of the very first Alaskans lived.

Intriguing Connections Elsewhere

Many of the stone tools found at the Mesa Site are of the same style and type as those found in the ancient Paleoindian sites on the North American High Plains. Artifacts from those sites suggest an economy based primarily on hunting Ice Age big game animals. Finding artifacts like these in Alaska has very important implications. It suggests that the “Mesa Paleoindian people” also may have relied on late Ice Age animals, including now extinct bison, mammoth, and horse. It also suggests a close cultural relationship between inhabitants of these two diverse geographic regions. Exactly what such a relationship might mean is a fascinating mystery tied to when and how the first people came into the Western Hemisphere.

How Was the Mesa Site Found?

The Mesa Site was discovered in 1978 by archaeologists working for the Bureau of Land Management. They were looking for remains of past human use of the foothills region of the North Slope in the National Petroleum Reserve in Alaska, so that such places could be protected during future oil and gas exploration activities. When archaeologists first climbed this ridge, which provides a spectacular 360-degree view of the surrounding valley, they found distinctive Paleoindian style stone tools with the small flakes resulting from their manufacture.

Archaeological Work

Archaeologists began work at the Mesa soon after its discovery to determine its size, amount and type of cultural materials, and scientific importance. Excavation of the Mesa Site required 13 field seasons, which were spread out over a period of 22 years between 1978 and 1999. The work was done by federal archaeologists and experienced volunteers under the direction of the Bureau of Land Management.

Artifact Types & Lifestyle

Artifacts recovered from the Mesa Site tell us about past human activities there. The primary artifact types found were flaked stone tools used for hunting. The remnant charcoal of the ancient campfires was radiocarbon dated to determine the site’s age. Only stone tools, and not organic artifacts like clothing, bones, or wooden items, survived at the site. Organic artifacts like clothing, bones, or wooden items are gone because of the shallow soil and natural decay of the non-stone objects. Thus, we can never know with certainty everything used by the people at the Mesa Site. The Mesa Site’s arctic location suggests that it was used only during the warmer months.

Mesa Site Stone Tools

The stone tools made by the Mesa people include three major categories:

1. bifacial tools, where a stone was flaked on two surfaces to form an artifact (e.g. projectile points used for spear tips),

2. unifacial tools, where a stone was flaked on just one surface to fashion an artifact (e.g. some scrapers for processing hides or shaping wood and bone artifacts, plus various informal flake tools including graters crafted from sharp spurs on flakes),

3. flaking debris, the stone flakes and chunks resulting from the manufacture of the tools. These three categories comprise well over 90% of all artifacts found at the Mesa Site.

Bifacial Tools

Bifacial Tools, including spear and dart points, and some knives, are the most distinctive Paleoindian artifacts found at the Mesa Site. In general, projectile points are lanceolate (lance blade-shaped) in outline and manufactured by removing parallel flakes perpendicular to the long axis of the point. This results in a ridge down the centerline of the point, creating a lenticular to diamond-shaped cross section. The bases of most of the points were thinned resulting in a concave shape, although some are flat or convex. Most of the projectile points were edge-ground (dulled) on the lower half so that the edges would not cut through the sinew that bound them to the shaft. Many of the points were also resharpened after the tips were broken during their first use. Thus, many Mesa Points are “recycled” and consequently shorter than they were when first used.

