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IDAHO PREHISTORIC CULTURE AREAS

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Prehistoric culture areas in Idaho correspond to two biotic areas after 5,000 B.C. Before that time most of Idaho was occupied by people who manufactured and used lanceolate projectile points for hunting big game. The forms vary in space and time but compare with standard types on the Plains, e.g. Clovis, Folsom, Agate Basin, Eden, Scottsbluff, etc. The earliest occupation in Idaho dates from 13,000 B.C. at Wilson Butte cave with nondiagnostic artifacts.

About 6,000 B.C. elements of the Old Cordilleran culture appear on the Clearwater plateau. This culture pattern appears to have spread from the west and to be identifiable with humid or subhumid environments in the Northwest. It is the first variant in the Early Man pattern common to Idaho and adjacent Plains states, such as Montana and Wyoming.

After 5,000 B.C. there were two culture areas: (1) the Great Basin to the south and east of the Salmon River and (2) the Plateau north and west of the Salmon River. The north-south border in Idaho appears to have been the Payette River valley. The distinction between these two areas lasted into the 19th century although its boundary fluctuated with changing physical environments in the region. From 5,000 B.C. onward it is possible to identify the ethnographic pattern in the Basin culture area, while this pattern is not so clear north of the Salmon River Valley until perhaps 1,000 B.C.

In the Basin area there may have been two or more subareas. One in eastern Idaho lies above 4,500-5,000 ft. contour interval and was associated with bison hunting in the taking of deer, antelope, elk, and mountain sheep. It is called the Bitterroot culture and may have begun to develop as a distinct pattern as early as 6,000 B.C. The second subarea lies south and west on the central Snake River plain, the South hills, and the Owyhee uplands. Bison and other big game hunting may have been less important and communities appear to have been smaller in size. The culture of the subarea is very similar to the Lovelock culture of northern Nevada.

The culture type in both areas can be traced into the late 19th century. The result is that prehistoric and historic culture areas appear to correspond and it may be possible in time to connect subareas with ethnographic distinctions between the northern and western Shoshoni and between Nez Perce and Coeur d'Alene Indians.

Prepared by Earl H. Swanson