

Athapaskan Migrations

The Archaeology of Eagle Lake, British Columbia

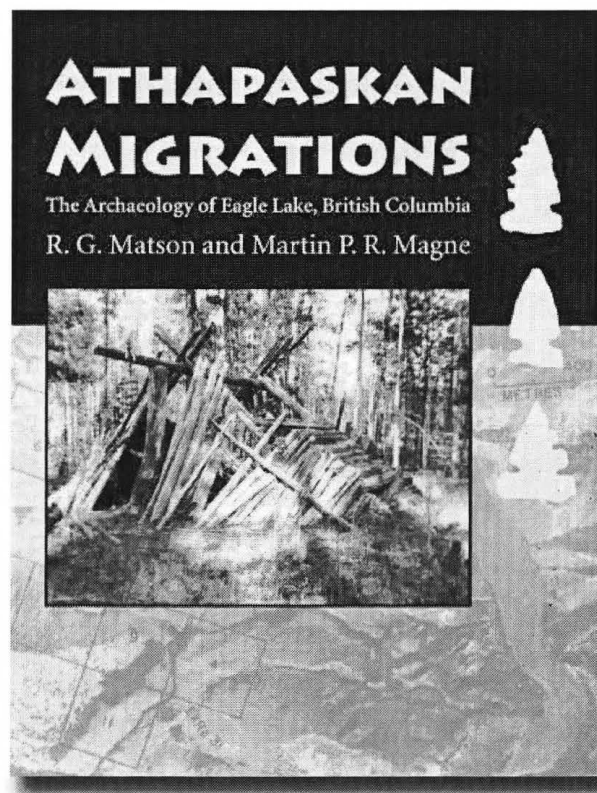
By R.G. Matson and Martin P.R. Magne

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Anthropologists have long been fascinated with the problem of Athapaskan migrations. No other socio-linguistic group in North America has moved such great distances and adopted such disparate life styles. Athapaskan peoples harvested moose and caribou in the northern Subarctic, hunted sea mammals on the Northwest Coast, collected salmon in the streams and rivers of the Canadian Plateau, drove bison on the Great Plains, and became horticulturalists and pastoralists in the American Southwest. Yet, despite separation of hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles between groups, the spoken language and some idiosyncratic cultural practices remained virtually identical. How could this be? When did it happen?

Many archaeologists have sought to answer these questions and unfortunately, a large proportion failed typically due to weak methodological approaches and slim data. One of the main problems, perhaps *the problem*, derives from the nature of those movements and the apparent ability of many Athapaskan groups to shift the fundamentals of their basic socio-economies to adjust to local settings. If the Athapaskans lived by the dictum "When in Rome..." then recognizing their appearance in new environments might be virtually impossible from an archaeological standpoint. This could be particularly true if they not only shifted their basic food-getting tactics but altered many of their artifact manufacture styles as well. So, is it game over? Do archaeologists once again look to the cultural anthropologists and historical linguists to fill in the gaps?

Fortunately, the answer is no. During the 1970s, archaeologists R.G. Matson and Martin Magne undertook a long term study of Athapaskan archaeology in interior British Columbia with the intent of expanding our understanding of Athapaskan migrations within this province and by proxy elsewhere in North America. Their research program has persisted for over two decades and now culminates in the publication of *Athapaskan Migrations*. The book and its associated web-materials provided a wealth of data, much of it previously unpublished, on the archaeology of the Canadian Plateau with a focus on the Eagle Lake region. In order to avoid problems encountered by previous researchers, the authors take a multi-pronged approach to identifying and tracking the Athapaskan people in the archaeological record. The result is an important new contribution to Athapaskan archaeology and



to the archaeological study of ethnicity in general.

Matson and Magne present their analytical strategy, termed the "Parallel Direct Historical Approach" in their introductory chapter. This clever methodological approach permits the authors to compare cultural chronologies from adjacent regions, one with a likely Athapaskan presence, the other without. Recognition and interpretation of Athapaskan cultural patterns is enhanced by a thorough review of historical, ethnographic and ethnoarchaeological studies of the Chilcotin people in Chapter One. Linda Burnard-Hogarth's description of ethnoarchaeological research in the Eagle Lake region is a particularly significant contribution in this context. Chapters Two and Three summarize results of field surveys and excavations conducted at the Mouth of the Chilcotin, Eagle Lake and Taseko Lakes. These chapters provide a rare detailed examination of the Plateau Pithouse tradition (PPt) and late period Athapaskan settlement and subsistence patterns. It is truly fascinating to recognize indicators of PPt and "Lillooet Phenomenon" occupations in the Chilcotin area clearly associated with distinctive Athapaskan populations during the closing centuries of the prehistoric period. The final chapters of the book are dedicated to teasing out evidence for Athapaskan occupations and subsequently considering implications for understanding Athapaskan migrations on a more grand scale.

Archaeologists (particularly from the Great Plains) have often relied upon projectile points and other stylistically sensitive artifacts as markers of ethnicity. Matson and Magne have been contributors to this approach and this research is reprised and expanded in the current effort. Multivariate statistics are applied to their projectile data set to discriminate Athapaskan from PPt projectile points. Results of the projectile point study

are then tested with two subsequent analyses focusing on lithic tool and debitage assemblages. The reader will need a significant amount of training in statistical analysis to fully appreciate these studies. And while aficionados may quibble over some details of variable definition and model development, results are clearly provocative. Whether examined from the standpoint of features, tool assemblages, projectile points, or even debitage, the conclusion is inescapable that a culturally distinct pattern of occupation appears in the Eagle Lakes area during the terminal late prehistoric period, presumably the direct ancestors of today's Athapaskan speaking Chilcotin people.

After an exceptionally detailed review of the archaeological literature on Athapaskan migrations spanning the Subarctic to the Southwest, Matson and Magne consider the implications of their findings for tracking and explaining the broader pattern. One of the important implications of this discussion concerns the visibility of the Athapaskan groups despite their significant socio-economic transformations. The authors suggest that certain idiosyncratic practices and stylistic markers might survive the sometimes dramatic cultural transformations undertaken by the Athapaskans. Such things as northern forest adapted settlement and subsistence behavior, rectangular houses, contracting stemmed projectile points, and certain shield warrior rock art designs could serve to differentiate Athapaskans from other superficially similar groups. These conclusions permit the authors to propose that the Athapaskan groups may have traveled to the Southwest via the western mountains rather than the Great Plains (e.g., the Avonlea complex) as has been so often argued by others.

While this book offers an exciting new approach to tracking ethnic groups and offers significant implications for understanding Athapaskan movements, it also opens up many new questions. Some proposed markers of an Athapaskan presence such as settlement patterns and lithic tool and debitage assemblage variability could be identified not as unique ethnic markers or emblems as much as byproducts of adaptive strategies that happen to be utilized by these Athapaskan peoples. The archaeology of the Great Plains Middle Missouri area tells us that multiple socio-ethnic/linguistic groups (ancestral Cheyenne, Arikara, Mandan and Hidatsa) could participate in a single adaptive strategy (in this case Plains village horticulture), thus making it difficult to recognize ethnicity from the standpoint of functional variation in lithic assemblages. In the Chilcotin case, it could mean that a more northerly derived collector settlement and subsistence strategy was transported into parts of southern British Columbia effectively replacing the previous PPT winter-village strategy but, unlike the Middle Missouri case, not crossing any ethnic boundaries (e.g., from ancestral Athapaskan to Salish populations). However, this does not mean that sometimes particular artifact styles could not be transmitted between groups providing ambiguity in some sites. Future researchers will benefit from careful consideration of these issues. Meanwhile, Matson and Magne offer us an innovative and significant contribution to the archaeology of ethnicity and Athapaskan migrations.

Anna Marie Prentiss, Department of Anthropology, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812

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