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Deni J. Seymour

To cite this article: Deni J. Seymour (2012) Gateways for Athabascan Migration to the American Southwest, *Plains Anthropologist*, 57:222, 149-161

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/pan.2012.015>



Published online: 25 Mar 2014.



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# Gateways for Athabascan Migration to the American Southwest

Deni J. Seymour

*The earliest known dates (A.D. 1300s and 1400s) for ancestral Athabascans are found along the Rio Grande valley in the Southwest and in the bordering mountains of southern New Mexico and Arizona. This evidence suggests that there was at least one mountain or intermontane route into the Southwest, probably in addition to Plains routes. Still unanswered has been why the earliest Athabascan sites are located where they are and not in adjacent areas. New, geographically specific information about restrictions to travel suggests that early Athabascan site distributions may result from more than just sampling deficiencies. Limited access routes (or gateways) were available to the migrants in low-lying areas west of the Rocky Mountains owing to deeply incised and impassable canyons. Recent investigations of these restricted passageways provide clues as to why ancestral populations were funneled through the Four Corners area (and not further west), which brought them down the Rio Grande valley and into the adjacent mountains. This information is important for those who study Athabascans or who are concerned with ethnicity and culture change in the terminal Prehistoric and Historic periods on the Plains. These data indicate that parallel or even earlier developments were occurring in the mountains that must now be considered.*

**Keywords:** Athabascans, migration, intermontane route, western slope, barriers

Most early models of ancestral Athabascan migration to the American Southwest from the Subarctic argued in favor of a Plains route (Carlson 1965; Gunnerson 1960; Gunnerson and Gunnerson 1971; Hester 1962; Keur 1941:5; Schaafsma 1996, 2002; Wedel 1940; Wilcox 1981). These models posited entry into the Southwest in the sixteenth century just prior to the 1540–1542 Coronado expedition. Assumptions regarding this Plains-only route and a late arrival rest largely on an absence of mention by Coronado expedition chroniclers of Apachean-like groups to the west and one rather vague historical reference by an expedition chronicler Pedro de Castañeda de Nájera. When examin-

ing one of many Galisteo Basin pueblos destroyed by attackers, the Spaniards were told that 16 years earlier, or about 1525, the Teyas had “come into that land in large numbers and had destroyed those pueblos” (Flint and Flint 2005:420; see Gunnerson 1956, 2006:5; Lambert 1954:6; Riley 1995:184). While this view of a late arrival remains popular among some scholars, there are numerous other more viable interpretations of this passage, especially since there is DNA evidence that the initial Athabascan migrants arrived in small numbers and chronometric evidence that ancestral Apacheans were present much earlier in the mountainous Southwest than on the Plains (e.g., Malhi et al. 2008; Seymour 2008a,

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Deni J. Seymour, Research Associate, Jornada Research Institute, 2916 Palo Alto Dr NE, Albuquerque, NM 87112

*Plains Anthropologist*, Vol. 57, No. 222, pp. 149–161, 2012

2009a, 2013a). Moreover, this passage could reference any of the many other non-Athabaskan mobile groups who were present on the Plains at that time. At a minimum, a violent presence among or first inter-cultural encounter with these pueblos does not incontrovertibly or intrinsically imply the initial migratory occurrence of any of these groups in this region. This passage implies and known regional ethnographic behavior documents sequences of amiable relations followed by violent ones and vice versa, not the all-out enemy or friend scenario familiar to these Europeans. Historical documentary passages are rarely as unambiguous as implied by early interpretations of this specific documentary content.

For quite some time many active researchers have suggested arrival also via a mountain or intermountain corridor (Brugge 1993, 2012; Harrington 1940; Huscher and Huscher 1942, 1943; Magne and Matson 2004; Opler 1983:385; Riley 1954; Spencer 1947:27; Steward 1936:63; Thomas 1907:193; Underhill 1956:12, 22–23, 25–26; Van Valkenburg 1938; Wilmeth 1977). Recent research in the mountainous Southwest has raised new evidence in support of a mountain and/or intermountain route. In fact, the preponderance of the evidence suggests, at a minimum, passage through the mountains or along the western slopes and foothills of the Rocky Mountains (Gordon 2012; Seymour 2008a, 2012a, 2013a), “between the treeless heights and the treeless plains,” as a Chiricahua account indicates (Cole 1981, 1988). On the other hand, it is likely that other groups took a Plains route. Some may have stayed on the Plains, while others may have moved down the Plains-mountain margin, utilizing both zones, which would include a course along the eastern mountain slopes. A split in migration tracks north of Colorado would explain some of the key differences between Plains- and mountain-oriented Athabaskan groups on the one hand, and the dual-use (Plains-mountain margin) adaptation of other groups. Some of these differences include house types, rock art symbolism, and pottery (e.g., Seymour 2008b, 2009b, 2010a, 2012a, 2013a). A generalized but dispersed movement to the south, in small family groups, by no specific route (Harrington 1940:521; Huscher and Huscher 1942:82; Magne and Matson 2004; Seymour 2012b;

Thomas 1907:192; Underhill 1956:12) would also contribute to this explanation of the known distributions.

The earliest known dates for ancestral Athabascans are from the mountain corridors and adjacent basins, rather than from the Plains.<sup>1</sup> These dates place ancestral groups in the heart of the Southwest in the 1300s, perhaps earlier (Seymour 2002a, 2008a, 2012a, 2013a). While sample sizes of dated sites from the earliest period are still small, the contexts are exceptional with high quality direct dates (including on annuals) on ancestral Apachean material culture—artifacts and features—whose cultural affiliation has been confirmed in multiple contexts (Seymour 2013a).<sup>2</sup> As a result of these new data there is increasing reason to believe that the mountain ranges that straddle the New Mexico-Arizona state line were the core of Southwestern Apache occupation and also the (or a) corridor by which early migrants entered this region.

All of these issues are of interest and many have been addressed elsewhere. In this article I would like to focus on why this particular geographic location was the western corridor to the Southwest. Understanding the basis for this restricted route may help focus research in relevant areas where additional evidence can be identified and existing data can be reevaluated. Documentation of a western corridor would go far toward explaining the differences between the Plains Apache adaptation and that of the mountainous Southwest (as I have discussed elsewhere; see Seymour 2008b, 2009b, 2010a) and why the earliest known Athabaskan dates are in the mountainous Southwest.

Understanding the various routes of migration is important because knowledge of route restrictions explains why the earliest Athabaskan evidence is along the Rio Grande corridor and in the mountains of southern New Mexico and Arizona. This also explains why there might be an occupational hiatus in the 1400s and 1500s in central Arizona (e.g., Haury 1985) but not further south or to the east in New Mexico where a continuous presence of people has now been documented (e.g., Seymour 2013a).<sup>3</sup> Adjustments to regional environmental and political variations are reflected in later

Apachean adaptations, suggesting that these distinctions might have originated in earlier practice by groups choosing different routes south.

The content of this article is relevant to both the Plains and Southwest because it discusses routes taken by Athabascans to their historical homelands. Plains researchers often reference Southwestern processes, events, and groups in their research, but rely on outdated models of migration routes, much later dates of an Athabascan presence, and often place other forms of evidence before archaeological data, rather than considering all lines of relevant data. Discussions of the earliest Athabascans and their migration are often viewed as Plains issues and many archaeologists are still under the misimpression that there was a Plains-only route to the Southwest with an initial Plains adaptation. Yet, in fact, initial Athabascan migration must now be considered a Southwest issue as well, with distinct material culture signatures, earlier dates, and different routes. The following discussion should clarify the nature of evidence from the Southwest, convey reasons for the geographical distribution of the earliest-dated Athabascan sites, and point to references where additional information regarding several related and complex topics can be obtained.

### GATEWAYS, ACCESS POINTS, AND BARRIERS

Previous researchers have pointed out that geography was critical in the location and direction of prehistoric and historic indigenous trade routes and Spanish trails (Baker 2008, 2012; Bandelier 1892:27–28, 31–32; Huscher 1939). This concept that terrain characteristics form barriers to travel, thus necessitating the use of a limited range of travel corridors for migration was suggested by Bandelier (1892:31–32), although he was not very precise in his reckoning: “transverse upheavals of the surface, and often barriers of that nature have changed the fate of a group, compelling it to retrace its steps, even to ‘go back to the place of beginning’.” Harrington (1940:524) mentioned that for ancestral Apache migration through an intermontane region “the only barrier to a direct march south through eastern Utah and western Colorado would have been the Uintah Range running east from Great Salt Lake” but that migrants could have

easily crossed or gone around this barrier. He continued, saying that if they went around the eastern end of the Uintah Range:

They would undoubtedly have come down the Green River valley to the junction of the Colorado River, and then traversed the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains to what is now western New Mexico. They would certainly not have followed down the canyon of the Colorado below the Green River, but would have cut across high mesa country into the San Juan drainage (Harrington 1940:524).

More recent studies in Colorado provide much more detailed and relevant information about passage through this western area based on investigation of the routes of Spanish-period explorers (Baker 2008, 2012). These discussions suggest alternative routes south, above the confluence of the Green and Colorado rivers, that provide viable alternatives to the western slopes of the Rockies. These studies clarify that west of the Continental Divide there are a few, but only a few, places where horses and modern traffic can easily cross the barriers created by the deeply entrenched Colorado River and its Gunnison River tributary. These would likely have been the major crossing points for pedestrian travel throughout prehistory. These crossing points are at the great travel access points (sometimes referred to as gateways) on the Gunnison River at Delta, Colorado and on the Colorado River at Moab, Utah (Figure 1; Baker 2008:4, 8). These are the only places where the deep canyons of these rivers can be readily crossed. There is another less easily accessed travel opportunity at the confluence of the Dolores River and the Colorado River near Cisco, Utah. According to Steven Baker (personal communication 2011), however, this involves a tortuous trail of many miles along the floor of the Dolores Canyon.

As Steven Baker (personal communication 2011) notes, the Colorado River above Grand Junction, Colorado to the Continental Divide can be crossed at many points, but to the south the massive Black Canyon of the Gunnison River and Dominguez and Escalante Canyons form a formidable barrier that can only readily be crossed at Delta (Figure 1). The canyon of the Colorado River below Moab also presents a substantial obstacle to travel. Once through the Moab access point,

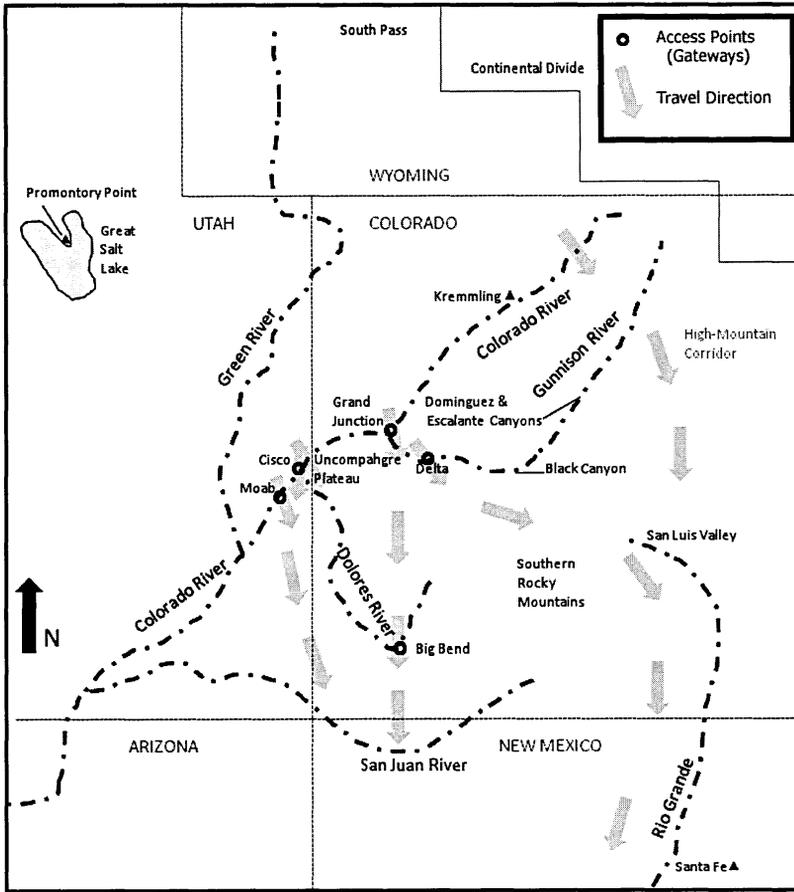


Figure 1. Map showing the limited number of access points for an intermontane route and a high-mountain corridor on the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains.

movement to the south soon encounters the entrenched canyon of the San Juan River, which becomes much more fordable at its upper reaches in New Mexico.

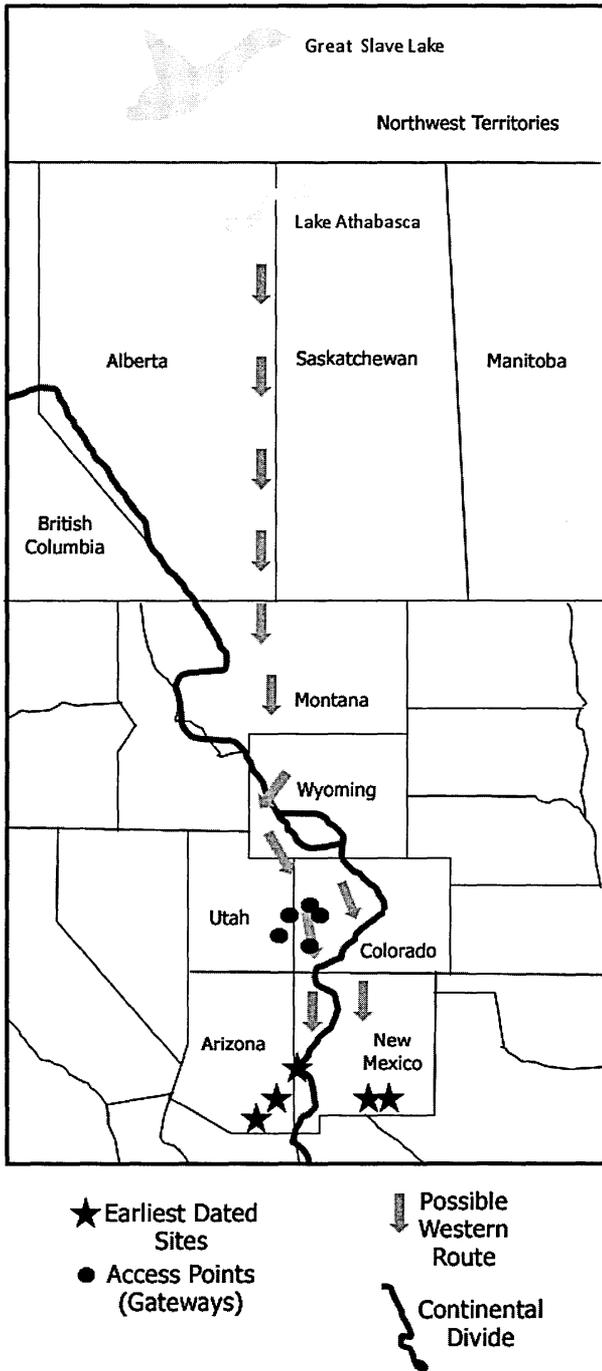
All traffic northward or southward, west of the Continental Divide, unless proceeding through the especially rugged mountains had to go through either the Big Bend of the Dolores River or via the San Luis valley (Figure 1). The San Luis valley is where the Rio Grande heads, providing an easy route to southern New Mexico and, with little effort, to southeastern Arizona. The Big Bend of the Dolores is the only place one could skirt the southern Rockies west of the San Luis valley portal. Traveling south through the Moab access point, geography would channel people southeast to the Big

Bend then onward toward the upper San Juan River, where they would cross into New Mexico's Farmington area, the Dinétah heartland. To continue on south from Moab to the San Juan River would involve routing through rocky canyons of the Colorado Plateau all the way to the upper San Juan River. If ancestral Athabascan peoples came south from either the Moab or Delta access points, a greater number might have followed the easier portion of the route south from Big Bend that became the Spanish Trail.

A more general perspective on these access routes shows that these are clustered together geographically and provide passage north-south along the west side of the Continental Divide (Figure 2). Of relevance, their clustering

lies directly north of the areas in New Mexico and Arizona with the earliest evidence of ancestral Athabascan presence, which presents intriguing possibilities for narrowing the search for the earliest Athabascan routes south.

These topographic constrictions may have assisted in the rise of the earlier and unrelated prehistoric archaeological manifestation in Colorado and Utah referred to as the Gateway Tradition. These large Gateway Tradition sites are positioned at these funnel points and derive their name from these natural topographic gateways (Baker 2008; Reed 1997; Reed and Metcalf 1999). They rose to importance because there are only so many good ways through the rocky terrain, and they controlled access. Here entrenched steep-sided canyons are



sometimes over 2,000 feet deep (Baker 2008, 2012; Huscher 1939:27). These earlier patterns of travel seem to have been mimicked by later Athabascan migrants likely owing to the presence of these natural gateways or funnel points.

Once to the west of the mountains, the above-treeline spine of the Rockies probably kept some groups of ancestral Athabascan people to the west side of the mountains, at lower elevations where resources could be exploited as they traveled. People on foot could negotiate their way through mountainous passes by traveling south along the western slopes of the southern Rocky Mountains, as Harrington (1940:524) had suggested, yet virtually all other north-to-south travel between Moab and the Continental Divide has long been channeled to one or the other of the lower-elevation access points.

At a certain point along this western route their southern trek would have been blocked in most places by the deeply entrenched, wide, and fast-flowing Colorado River. The Colorado River has its origins in La Poudre Pass at the Continental Divide and soon becomes a wide and entrenched river downstream from about Kremmling, Colorado and certainly by Grand Junction, where commitment to this westerly route would have been finalized (Figure 1). This is not to say that ancestral migrants could not backtrack or otherwise find their way around, but it seems many did not.

These access points, or gateways, probably account for the funneling of ancestral Athabascans through a few locations on the trek south. Just as Baker (2008:8) notes “Topography funneled all traffic headed to regions north of the Colorado [from the Southwest] toward one or the other of these three river crossing points,” so too was southern oriented travel focused toward these access points.

It is important to recognize that the limited occurrence and distribution of these routes does not mean that people walking

Figure 2. Inferred travel routes south from the Subarctic on the west side of the Continental Divide. General locations of access points are indicated and sites with the earliest known chronometric dates are plotted showing their placement in the southernmost Southwest.

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could not get through other areas. Early Athabaskan migrants were not mounted, and horses are more limited than pedestrians with respect to their ability to negotiate steep and rocky slopes. There are steep and narrow trails that were used by people on foot, such as the later Ute (Baker 2008, 2012). In response to Bandelier's (1892) suggestion that migration followed corridors because these offered fewer obstacles, Harrington (1940:521) noted "Indians on foot would as readily traverse mountain ranges or other rough places as follow an open corridor." Still, many places were impossible to cross owing to the sheer faces of the river channel where the river has cut through the rock. These limiting factors related to topography make it more likely that a greater number of Athabascans would have come down through these key corridors which provided the widest and easiest access, on established trails where they would not run into dead ends within the maze of canyons. As Baker (2008:4) notes, the trails that went through these access points "were the only reasonably accessible ways for people to pass through the basin's rugged topography." In effect, the more migrants that went through an access point the more likely some would have survived and that some would have continued south. This is a matter of numbers. Also ease of access would potentially have meant an earlier arrival.

Such barriers as have been described above did not exist to the east of the Continental Divide, where travelers would have been free to move south and were largely unobstructed by terrain as they entered and left the Plains and utilized the Plains and mountain slopes and foothills. This scenario also fits with the work of Brunswig (2012) and Gilmore and Larmore (2012). Ancestral Athabaskan sites have been found as high as 3,048 m (10,000 ft) elevation east of the Continental Divide (Brunswig 2012). Their chronometric dates are not as early as those from sites to the south in New Mexico and Arizona, and have been reported so recently that many believe that there has not been time for independent examination or review. Moreover, they are keying their identifications on a slightly different material culture set (especially different pottery) than Athabaskan materials present to the south. This suggests that either their Athabaskan evidence

represents a later adaptation after people had already arrived and then differentiated, or that by the 1400s the ancestral Athabascans inhabiting the eastern slopes of the Rockies and the Plains had split further north and then on their trek south became differentiated from those traveling further west. Contact with different resident tribes on the way south would result in this pattern of differentiation in some aspects of material culture, such as pottery production, which is thought to have been adopted from others. Given that the portion of the Dismal River aspect that seems to be Athabaskan may extend all the way north to the Black Hills (Tweedie 1968:1134), it is most likely that the split occurred far to the north. Insufficient information is available to determine how later movements affect currently known distributions of Dismal River (also see Gully 2000).

### TRIBAL SEPARATION

A directional change in movement seems apparent somewhere to the north of Colorado, where some groups slipped down the migration track further west and others remained east of the Continental Divide. Such a split would result in some of the substantial differences between Apachean groups found in the Southwest and on the Plains (e.g., house types, rock art symbolism, and pottery; Seymour 2008b, 2009b, 2010a, 2012a, 2013b). This more northern divergence may correspond with traditional accounts that describe such a split. A Chiricahua traditional account mentions that Yús told the people to separate and after they did they named everything. And then "All the tribes were together at Hot Springs where they were to receive supernatural power and all customs. At the place of the prairie branching in four directions they met" (Opler 1942:14–15). Archaeologists have suggested that this location might be in the Black Hills (Wilcox 1981:219), but it could just as likely be the hot springs of Yellowstone in Wyoming, consistent with Mescalero tradition (Carmichael and Farrer 2012:Figure 8.3), or any of the many other hot springs in the region. It seems likely that some people moved down the Rockies as the mountain range bends through British Columbia, Alberta, and Montana. This implies a commitment to the mountains early in the process, perhaps even at initiation, conceivably by a subset of people already

dependant on mountain zones. Alternatively, a southward trajectory down the northwest Plains from Alberta and Saskatchewan (Figure 2), may have been followed by a westward turn in Wyoming at South Pass (Harrington 1940:523), similar to Gordon's (2012) suggestion that they turned at the Green River. This turn would have the same early result of separating groups and placing them on both sides of the Continental Divide defined by the spine of the Rocky Mountains. Here, on the west side of the Rockies, the Grand Junction and Delta access points would be the first encountered (Figure 1).

The north-south trending Rockies would have presented a formidable obstacle, both wide and high, but not a barrier to these early Athabascans who became (if some were not initially) mountain adapted. The barrier effect of the mountains should be perceived differently relative to circumstances of use. Traversing this area for a campaign or exploration trip, as did Juan Rivera in 1765 and the Franciscan Fathers Domínguez and Vélez de Escalante in 1776 (e.g., Baker 2008, 2012), is a different matter than crossing a region as part of a daily routine when there is time to become familiar as game is hunted, and when camp can be established wherever, whenever night falls. As Harrington (1940:521) wrote, "the whole area was meshed with trails, some even following ridge tops and providing quite passable routes for migrating bands." For those familiar with the terrain, foot routes were available into and across the mountains that would have been used for trade, resource procurement, and migration, including shifting from one side of the range to the other. Sprague (1964) has described high-mountain passes that allowed west to east travel though the Rockies, and Huscher and Huscher (1942:82) and Brunswig (2012) have reported high-elevation sites, some near passes, that they suggest are ancestral Apachean, although as noted, more research is needed to assess these inferences.

Many groups would have taken this mountain corridor south and, if they kept to the western slopes between Kremmling/Grand Junction and the Continental Divide (high-mountain corridor west of the Continental Divide on Figure 1), they would not have been foiled by deeply entrenched rivers.

In effect, their trip would have resulted in a similar geographic effect as taking the lower-elevation western corridor across the plateaus, other than the fact that they may have had less contact with the Fremont or ancestral Ute people of the "treeless plains." Historic groups commonly shared and crossed through portions of one another's territories so a common-use zone on this portion of the plateau or western slopes of the Rockies is not unrealistic. Most likely many Athabascan groups seasonally exploited resource zones at different altitudes, as did later Apaches, and this may have led some to a higher altitude transit while others found their way through the lower-elevation access points.

By either high- or low-elevation routes along the west side of the mountains, ancestral Athabascans would have ended up near the Four Corners area. This is the ancestral Dinéétah or Navajo homeland tree-ring dated to A.D. 1541, though earlier pre-Dinéétah phase dates have been obtained (Seymour 2009a, 2013a). Most importantly the Four Corners and San Luis valley are situated in and immediately north of the Navajo and Apache heartlands in the Southwest and north of where the earliest chronometric dates have been obtained in southern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona (Figure 2).

Some groups may have traveled the lower-elevation path of least resistance within their foothill and mountain niche (Huscher and Huscher 1942:82, 88) remaining west of the mountains while others likely moved adroitly through the mountains, though perhaps avoiding the towering peaks and steep barren slopes above timberline, as Harrington (1940:521, 524) suggests. Others who had committed to an easterly drift would have continued that general trajectory, staying east of the Continental Divide, some remaining on the Plains, others exploiting the Front Range of the Rockies and the western Plains margin. This type of diversity with respect to landscape use is reflected in later Apachean adaptations, thus there is no reason to believe these differences did not originate in earlier practice.

#### OTHER IMPLICATIONS

The distribution of early chronometric dates in the heart of the Southwest and the availability of these topographic access points present a scenario

that shifts one migration track far enough to the west to accommodate the Promontory Point material identified at the Great Salt Lake as Athabaskan by Steward (1937, 1940, 1942, 1955; also see Huscher and Huscher 1942:86; Tweedie 1968:1134). This Promontory Point material is now being reexamined, continues to be thought of as Athabaskan by some researchers owing to the similarities of artifacts to those found in the Subarctic, and dates in the A.D. 1300 to 1600 period (Grayson 2011:333). Specifically this ethnic association is based on moccasin characteristics as well as discontinuities with the preceding Fremont culture in clothing, ceramics, lithics, burial traditions, and a number of other attributes (Ives 2013). This evidence is now just beginning to be submitted for publication and so has yet to be independently evaluated.

The difficult task will be to identify archaeological sites that relate to this early Athabaskan presence in this low-elevation, access-restricted region and north. The zone was occupied by a number of different mobile groups as well as stationary farmers. As Huscher and Huscher (1942:80) noted:

The question of prehistoric Athapaskan movements, of course, is inextricably bound up with questions of the final withdrawal southward of the Pueblo proper, 650 years ago, and of the arrival of recent Shoshoneans from the west at some un-determined later date.

Evidence of these early Athabascans should be overlain, temporally speaking, by the Ute (and Comanche/Shoshone) signature. The Ute and Athabascans shared similarities in material culture that arose from similar adaptations. Both groups were mobile, so their land-use and house signatures may be comparable and sites related to both groups tend to have low frequencies of material culture.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the Ute occupied the area even after it was no longer used by Athabascans. A Ute signature has been identified that includes structures, rock art, pottery, Desert side-notched points, split-cobble scrapers, and flaked Shoshonean knives (Brunswig et al. 2009:57; Buckles 1971; Kearns 1996; Reed 1988). This signature differs from the Athabaskan signatures defined to the south and east but many of the results are new, few data are available, and the data have not been independently assessed.<sup>5</sup> Like those of the Apache, owing to a

raiding and trading adaptation, Ute sites tend to have material culture from other groups on them and because of the otherwise scant Ute assemblage, Ute sites are often mistaken for sites of these other groups (Seymour 2002b, 2010b; Truesdale et al. 2010). It remains to be seen if the cultural signature and sites identified by Huscher and Huscher (1942:85, 87–88) are actually Athabaskan, as many believe they are not, and to assess how these relate to the Cerro Rojo complex (Seymour 2002b, 2004b, 2012a) and the Dismal River aspect (Brunswig 2012; Gilmore and Larmore 2012) defined to the south and east, respectively.

### CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Of the many questions remaining about ancestral Athabascans one of the most persistent is the route south. It is now obvious that Wilcox's (1981:217) emphatic statement was premature: "Progress in the last several years has virtually eliminated support for an intermontane or Rocky Mountain route [and] has confirmed a late entry date." In fact, Athabaskan manifestations in the Southwest are rapidly becoming better known and their presence again raises the question as to why the earliest evidence is in the mountainous, southern portion of the Southwest. The most parsimonious explanation is that there were both Plains and mountain routes south. This new evidence on the specific nature of these limited access points provides a surprisingly simple explanation for why their early occupation focused along the Rio Grande and points east and west, toward the southern end of the Rocky Mountains.

For decades archaeologists have thought of the Plains as the initial source of mountain Athabaskan groups, with a far southern Plains loop into the Southwest. Regrettably, many researchers continue to defend this outdated notion, apparently unaware of this new evidence (e.g., Carrillo 2008). This old Plains-route-only view, however, is not sustained by evidence for a much earlier ancestral Athabaskan presence in the mountains. Rather, it seems that mountain groups followed their own route south, and, as is typical of later Athabaskan groups, people dispersed by the White River ash fall may have coalesced at a predetermined location. This volcanic eruption occurred around A.D. 800 in northwestern Canada and is

thought by many to be the impetus for Athabascan groups migrating out of the area and beginning their trip south (Derry 1975; Ives 1990: 42–46; 2013: 267; Magne 2012: Figure 16.3; Workman 1979). One location where they gathered on the way may have been the hot springs noted in Apachean traditional stories, before taking separate routes south. At some point far to the north, perhaps at South Pass, some Athabascans likely moved to the west side of the Continental Divide and on through the restrictive terrain north of the Colorado River or above these constrictions, high on the western slope of the Rockies. Once passing the limited access points, they could again expand their routes, heading down the Rio Grande and west to the mountains of central and southern Arizona and New Mexico. This restriction in accessible routes to the south also explains the generally recognized absence of early ancestral Athabascan sites around the Mogollon Rim, in areas that later become the Western Apache (Cibecue, San Carlos, White Mountain) homeland, and the earlier dates in the ancestral Chiricahua and Mescalero areas.

The earliest ancestral Athabascan sites are of a nature that they will not be recognized and distinguished unless researchers are aware of the possibility of their presence owing to training that deemphasizes or distrusts ephemeral remains. Such is the case in many circumstances where the distinctive attributes of culture groups are not widely known and therefore field personnel not attuned to local variations do not distinguish these remains or recognize their significance. This is why well-crafted and up-to-date culture histories are so central to reports carried out for compliance purposes, as these show a familiarity with the intricacies of the regional and local record. In today's theoretical landscape, culture history is often undervalued but until the basic signatures and temporal and spatial frameworks for all Southwest and Plains groups have been discerned, including the mobile ones, it is crucial that researchers remain open to less mainstream notions. Moreover, it is important that archaeologists consider the theory behind their cultural historical reconstructions, rather than eschewing efforts to connect material culture to ethnic, cultural, and historically referenced groups. The perspective gained by evidence of these limited

access points (or gateways) presents a geographic basis for understanding why the earliest Athabascan sites are found in the mountainous Southwest and encourages effort toward identification of additional sites in the low-lying regions of limited access and on the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains, as well as searching for equally early dates on the southern Plains.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have wondered for some time how geography might have restricted the travel routes of early migrants, specifically Athabascans, west of the Rockies and how this might relate to the distribution of the earliest known Athabascan sites in the southern Southwest. It was not until I reviewed a book manuscript by Steven Baker that the pieces fell into place. He has spent decades studying access through the rough and incised terrain west of the Rockies in his efforts to trace historic Spanish trails. His research provided the answer, which led to the writing of this paper. Thanks to David Hill and Robert Brunswig for providing up-to-date information on the Numic signature and chronology, to John Ives for information on the ongoing Promontory Point work, and thanks to all four for providing comments on early drafts of this paper.

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### NOTES

1. Many more chronometric dates are available from the mountainous Southwest owing to focused research by this author and others. Further research on the Plains may expose a sampling bias, with relatively early dates occurring there as well. Even so, an arrival by a western corridor is indicated by this early presence in the mountainous Southwest, the clustering of early sites south of these access points, and the differences in material culture and adaptation between these mountain-oriented groups and those on the Plains.

2. Some archaeologists are still under the misimpression that the few sites that can reliably be attributed to the Athabascans date to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and are located only in the San Luis Valley and the northern Rio Grande and its tributary, the Rio Chama, and that no identifiable Athabascan materials have been found in the Rio Grande valley south of this area. Yet, this is no longer true. Numerous chronometric dates are available from further south from a series of Cerro Rojo complex sites from features directly affiliated with the ancestral Apache and found in direct association with Apachean material culture. Many of these dates were originally presented in contract reports but are gradually being

published in journal articles and books (Seymour 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004b, 2008a, 2008c, 2010b, 2013a; Seymour and Church 2007). The Apachean identification of the Cerro Rojo complex has been critically assessed by the author and other Athabascan experts, and the hypothesis that these are Athabascan sites has been tested repeatedly (Seymour 2012a). Moreover, numerous New Mexico and Arizona archaeologists are now locating Cerro Rojo complex sites and contemporaneous Canutillo complex sites, demonstrating that the signature is identifiable, results are replicable, and the attributes defining these complexes are consistent. Many new scholars are building on these initial findings.

3. Questions remain as to whether the absence of early sites in areas to the west relates to an archaeological sampling effect or real distributions. I have spent less time in those areas and so have not invested the effort looking for the early sites in suitable landscape sectors so even in this western area the hiatus may be more apparent than real.

4. Some attributes, such as housing types, are attributable to mobile group behavior in general rather than to any specific culture group, so it is often necessary to distinguish between specific mobile groups on the basis of stylistic evidence, associated artifacts, or distinctive spatial or landscape information (Seymour 2009b, 2009c, 2010a, 2010b, 2013b).

5. As Seymour (2002b, 2004a:135) and Matson and Magne (2004) have previously argued, it is necessary to look at the suite of assemblage data to distinguish these groups. Individual artifacts, such as Desert side-notched points, are widespread throughout the region and so are not in themselves culturally diagnostic.