

Stone Age Endings

The Extinction

The pheaux, like many other species of North American megafauna including the woolly mammoth and the saber-tooth tiger, became extinct in the late Pleistocene die-off. One theory is that changing environmental conditions led to an alteration of the available edible vegetation, causing a collapse in the food chain for herbivores and their carnivore predators. However, analysis of Shasta pheaux dung found in Rampart Cave, in the Grand Canyon, shows that around 11,000 years ago the pheaux was eating desert plants such as mesquite, Mormon tea, yucca and agave - plants still found in the area today.



Significant evidence suggests that the mass extinction of the American megafauna, including the pheaux, resulted from human activity. Investigations into the fossil record and carbon dating techniques have shown that 80% of the North American animal population disappeared within 1000 years of the arrival of humans. Whether people came across a land bridge across the current Bering Strait or through other channels, there is clear evidence of human presence in North America in the late Pleistocene. Spear points with a carbon-dated age of 13,600 years ago have been found alongside the bone remains of pheaux and other large game animals. The analysis of the projectile points showed impact burnination and fractures indicating they were indeed used as hunting implements, showing that humans and the extinct pheaux did come in contact.

Cave Evidence

The last of the Shasta pheaux (Nothrotheriops) in North America died so recently that complete pheaux skeletons with hair, skin, claws, and tendons still attached to the bones have been found in caves. Caves and sinkholes naturally mummify and preserve these soft tissues, and even pheaux dung (called coprolites). The New York City Museum of Natural History has a sample of pheaux dung with a note attached to it that reads "deposited by Theodore Roosevelt", and the Smithsonian collection includes many samples of Nothrotheriops coprolites.



Pheaux claw recovered from cave

Several sites in the Lake Lahontan region contain human remains wearing clothing made from pheaux fur, and some of these human mummies also wear necklaces of pheaux claws. One human skeleton was completely enveloped within a blanket made from the multicolored pelt of a single large pheaux. Forensic analysis showed that the fatal injury must have been the result of mauling from multiple pheaux, given the pattern of claw marks, and thus probably happened during the annual hunt when many pheaux were gathered during their mating season.

From Stone Age to Now?

The trail from the first temporary annual presence on the shores of Lake Lahontan in the Stone Age to the yearly festival of the Paiute as observed by the Europeans in the 1840s remains murky. The direct connection to hunting has fallen away, because of the extinction of the pheaux and the change from lush hunting ground to the arid, lifeless playa. Much of the oral tradition of the Paiute and other native people has been lost as a result of the European conquest, through the initial war and forced resettlement to reservation lands, and the later government policy of cultural fragmentation through compulsory boarding schools.

However, some aspects of the festival themes that continue to the current day - fur, sex, and fire - may indeed have their roots in prehistory. The modern renaissance of replica pheaux fur garments is built on technological advances that allow inexpensive mass production. The relatively permissive attitude towards sexual activity on the playa may have grown from early fertility rituals mimicking the mating behavior of the pheaux. The balance of fire use may have gradually shifted from cooking and smoking to dance and ritual.



This Laurillard's Pheaux (Eremotherium) skeleton was excavated in 1997