Commentary

About 13,000 years ago, the people that produced the Clovis phase appeared in Alberta. Clovis material represents the first people to enter this vast, unpopulated land. The Clovis phase spread rapidly from the northwestern part of North America to cover most of the western half of the continent. This peopling event likely started within the Ice-free Corridor in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, around the current border between British Columbia and Alberta. Since deglaciation had been underway for centuries, the corridor was likely quite wide and not a restrictive passage as often suggested. Currently in Alberta, the Clovis phase is known only from surface finds of its large fluted spear points. Further south in the United States, the people of the Clovis phase left evidence of their high mobility, curated toolkits, and a focus on large game for subsistence. Social groups consisted of family units with, perhaps, only few families residing together at any one time. A redundant land-use pattern by these pioneers reveals their unfamiliarity with the nuances of the new setting. This inexperience with the landscape is reflected in their lithic technology; it was designed for mobile people (i.e., large biface cores, macroblades, Clovis points) and ensured that good-quality lithic raw material was always at hand. These and other technological improvements in the hunting system would certainly help to explain how the Clovis people spread so far so fast. In fact, the change in relatively straight-sided Clovis specimens, commonly found in Alberta, to more excursive-sided forms, found to the south, may reflect an evolution toward increased penetrating power of the Clovis point. As
well, the traditional interpretation of Clovis as a thrusting spear has been challenged; some evidence suggests that Palaeoindian points are better understood as dart tips on unfletched darts launched from atlatls. Lastly, the high quality and regularity found in Clovis lithic craftsmanship suggests rigid organization in some aspect of these people’s social structure, whether it be kinship, craft specialization, or sodalities. Of significance to Alberta’s search for the Clovis material was the highly dynamic environment that likely destroyed or deeply buried much of the evidence of this early part of the province’s human past.

Between about 12,800 and 12,200 years ago these same people continued to flourish in the western half of North America. Clovis technology changed and the subsequent material culture is called the Folsom phase. Overlap between the material remains of the Folsom phase with the ancestral Clovis phase is apparent in the continued use of large fluted points with highly curated toolkits designed for high mobility and a focus on large game for subsistence. These two phases geographically coincide over the western half of the continent. Unlike their Clovis ancestors, the Folsom people were restricted to bison hunting on the Plains, as mammoths and other large game animals had become extinct. Folsom kill sites provide evidence that Folsom people took advantage of the behaviour of numerous animals, utilizing natural traps. The regularity and exquisite form of Folsom points suggests that knowledge transmission within tight kin-groups or working with designated craft specialists was an intricate part of an individual’s upbringing. Practices of stone conservation, the use of biface cores, multifunction stone tools, and Folsom point preforms as tools were all elegant adaptive responses to a highly mobile lifeway focused on hunting bison in stone-poor areas. Retooling at quarries would still have been necessary. The social unit remained small, with a few families gathering at any one time. There is evidence that such gatherings took place over substantial distances at predetermined locales, indicating increased familiarity with the landscape. In the eastern half of North America and in South America, the spread of this same population is seen in Folsom-like fluted points.

Regionalization within Alberta may have begun as early as 12,000 years ago with the Sibbald phase in northwestern North America, people that used basally thinned triangular points, not unlike short Clovis points, subsisted in the mountains and foothills on large game such as bison and bighorn sheep. Gone was the focus on exotic lithics and finely crafted tools within highly curated toolkits. Local lithic sources and less curation of
toolkits predominated these assemblages. Small family groups continued to be the norm at this time. The relationship between Clovis, Northern Fluted points, and basally thinned triangular points is difficult to assess. Currently, it appears that all three groups of material were isolated in space and time. Thus, the practice of basal thinning is related to fluting, but is not the same, so basally thinned points are not simply resharpened Clovis points. Further, basally thinned material, in the Sibbald phase, appears to date more recently than Clovis material. The coinciding geographic distribution, the relationship between fluting and basal thinning, and the focus on large game provide overlap between the Sibbald people and the previous Clovis and Folsom people.

In contrast, on the plains and foothills about 12,000 to 11,500 years ago there were people employing a slightly different technology, represented by the Agate Basin/Hell Gap complex. The complex occurs over much of the same geographic area previously inhabited by people using Folsom material, but was contracted to the north (north of Colorado and Kansas). Arguments for and against deriving Agate Basin/Hell Gap projectile point technology from the preceding Folsom phase have been made. The focus on bison as the main subsistence animal continues from the preceding period. Small and large kill sites occur, usually in areas of natural traps. The use of lithic raw materials was more locally focused compared to the previous Folsom phase. Similarly, while the lithic craftsmanship was still very good during the Agate Basin/Hell Gap complex, it was not at the same exquisite standard as the Folsom phase. Social groups continued to be small, consisting of no more than a few families camped together at any one time. The overlap between the projectile point technologies of Folsom phase and Agate Basin/Hell Gap complex has not been established with certainty; however, the geographic distribution and subsistence strategy exhibits substantial continuity between the two cultural units.

People continued focusing their subsistence strategy on bison from 11,500 to 10,800 years ago. The material culture associated with these people is represented by the Alberta phase. Numerous lines of evidence indicate continuity between Agate Basin/Hell Gap and Alberta cultures. Researchers have inferred that the lanceolate shape of the Alberta point indicates that the phase originated from the preceding Agate Basin/Hell Gap complex. Alberta phase distribution coincides with the Agate Basin/Hell Gap complex. Evidence indicates that a sustained focus on bison, with kill sites indicating natural traps, continued to provide avenues for ambushing.
substantial numbers of animals. Lithic craftsmanship remained relatively high, with utilization of local raw lithic materials. Still, in Alberta, items manufactured on a dull red “jasper” at the Bayrock and Norquay sites should inspire interesting lines of research in terms of quarrying, exchange, seasonal movements, and group contact. Social groups remained small with known campsites representing a few family units camped together.

By 10,800 to 9,200 years ago, a subtle change in technology is evident in the archaeological record, represented by the Scottsbluff-Eden material culture. The material culture occurs in the same core area as the Alberta phase, but appears to have expanded to the surrounding lands, particularly western Ontario, Michigan, Wisconsin, Colorado, northeastern British Columbia, and northeastern Alberta. The Scottsbluff-Eden phase exhibits a strong reliance on bison for subsistence, especially when found on the Plains, but is also now known to exhibit a more diverse subsistence strategy both on the Plains and the Plains periphery. The frequent recovery of Knife River flint in many Scottsbluff-Eden sites suggests that these people either moved around substantially or had increased interactions with each other. Perhaps an expanding grassland allowed the Scottsbluff-Eden people to also increase in number. The diagnostic projectile points are strikingly similar in form to the preceding Alberta point. As well, the characteristic Cody knife was also present in the preceding Alberta phase. Overlap between Alberta phase and Scottsbluff-Eden phase is substantial, including the strikingly similar point morphologies, the continued presence of Cody knives, bison-focused subsistence, and coincidental geographic distributions.

Between 9,200 and 8,500 years ago, people that produced Plains/Mountain material thrived in the mountain/loothills/forest surrounding the Northern Plains, while people that produced Lusk material were on the Northern Plains. This period provides the early and good evidence for regionalization in Alberta’s archaeological past. The origin of the Plains/Mountain complex will likely be resolved as data from the central Rocky Mountains and Northern Plains periphery increases. The Lovell Constricted material in Alberta and farther east to Manitoba is morphologically distinct from the original Lovell Constricted in the south. This spread of “northern” Lovell Constricted and Castle stemmed material across the Plains periphery may reflect the establishment of the southern extent of the northern forest after a more open environment during the Scottsbluff-Eden phase. Although evidence is limited, big-game subsistence continued as a focus despite the
more forest-oriented nature of this phase. Large bison kills in natural traps and the transportation of butchered meat units to central locations indicates comfort with procuring large animals. On the Northern Plains, the Lusk complex continued the long tradition of lanceolate points. The adoption of new dart technology added innovation in the form of corner-notched projectile points to the hunting system repertoire. The smaller corner-notched points likely represent experimentation with the hunting system. The new points signify an attempt to fine-tune fletched darts, tipped with corner-notched points, to the atlatl. A focus on bison procurement and local lithic raw materials continued. The social groups continued to be small, with a few family units cooperating in subsistence activities. Although climatic changes may have forced the people of the Lusk complex to utilize waterways and the periphery of the Plains more, the complex still exhibits some continuity with the preceding Scottsbluff-Eden phase.

Lusk points continue to be found in the subsequent complex. By 8,500 to 8,000 years ago, Lusk points overlap with diagnostic artifacts in the Country Hills complex. This latter complex is defined by the recovery of Burmis barbed points. Bison kill and processing sites continued to be common around the periphery of the Plains during this phase. Some of these bison kill sites are relatively large. The earliest lithic artifacts from this phase are very finely crafted. The points exhibit ties to material recovered in Wyoming, suggesting a possible foothills/mountain origin for the phase. Up to this period in time, the archaeological record appears to represent settling-in of people. That is to say, the initial peopling of the region progressed to regionalization at an increasingly geographically restricted level. The geographic distribution or territory of each archaeological culture became increasingly smaller. The Country Hills complex appears to represent the first instance in which people from one area moved to another area. The finely crafted points in the Mummy Cave site appear slightly earlier in the archaeological record than the very similar Burmis barbed points in Alberta, suggesting a physical movement of people. The earliest Country Hills artifacts are finely crafted; however, craftsmanship within the lithic assemblage deteriorates through time. This change in aesthetics might reflect a move from a highly structured kinship to a generational kinship system with less structure, or a shift from craft specialization to more generalized modes of manufacture. The recovery of Country Hills sites almost exclusively around the periphery of the Plains suggests that the Hypsithermal conditions played a role in site establishment.
Around 8,000 to 7,700 years ago the Country Hills complex was replaced by the Mummy Cave complex. This is interpreted as a replacement of people rather than a change in technology. Similar assemblages are found in the foothills/plains areas of Wyoming, suggesting a possible movement of people from that area. At this time, finely crafted side-notched dart points (Bitterroot and Blackwater side-notched) appeared. This is the first appearance of side-notched projectile points in the archaeological record in Alberta. The quality and uniformity in craftsmanship suggests high fidelity of transmission with respect to lithic tool manufacturing. While bison was still a subsistence focus at this time period, there is evidence of a broader diet. Compared to earlier periods, bison kill sites are not particularly visible, or perhaps were not particularly common. This may be a product of increased aridity during the Hypsithermal interval, reducing bison numbers. Alternatively, sampling problems may have limited the number of sites found. Large bison kills may have been present during this period that have not been discovered. Social units continued to be quite small, with single family or extended family gatherings being common. The Mazama Ash fall event provided a massive blow to these people. There is little evidence of Mummy Cave complex for subsequent times.

There is a stretch of a few hundred years for which no or little archaeological material is recovered in the province, possibly owing to the devastation brought by the fallout of the Mt. Mazama eruption. It has not yet been determined whether people remained in southern Alberta after the Mazama Ash fall or returned once things were more amenable. This gap in the record may also be a product of sampling rather than the reality of the devastation of the eruption.

By about 7,300 to 6,200 years ago, the Maple Leaf complex was established throughout the Plains periphery in Alberta. The diagnostic projectile points, Salmon River fishtail, and Salmon River oval base, are mediocre in the quality of their manufacture. Bison procurement was still the focus of subsistence. Hunting strategies continued to focus on the use of natural traps, such as coulees and springs, which also provided trap or ambush locales of choice for these hunters. There might be evidence at Head-Smashed-In buffalo Jump for early use of this “natural trap,” but further examination of the recovered artifacts would be required to confirm this idea; if verified, the Maple Leaf phase would represent the earliest use of the jump. This is interesting since the evidence continues to suggest the social group was quite small with a family or two cohabitating at sites. The evidence for the
gathering of the numerous people required to conduct a jump has not been recovered from the archaeological record.

There is very little data available for the Gowen complex. It is not clear whether it represents an actual cultural entity in Alberta archaeology, although it appears as a consistent phenomenon in Saskatchewan. In Saskatchewan, it dates reliably to about 7,000 years ago. The limited data suggest that bison were the main subsistence animal. Hunting strategies included solitary stalking, with meat units being brought back to camp, and small kills at natural traps. The recovery of a single hearth or two hearths within sites encircled by camp detritus supports the notion that social groups were restricted to one or two family groups encamped together.

By 6,200 to 5,500 years ago the Calderwood complex was present on the Plains periphery. At this time, people were living through the end of the Hypsithermal interval. Projectile point diversity was substantial for this time, with as many as four types identifiable. Such heterogeneity represents a loosening of social filters concerning the manner in which things are made. The harsh reality of the Plains kept social groups smaller and more fluid. Less-rigid social controls presented more room for individual expression in the material culture. Pockets of uniformity in material culture arose where heritability was strongest, but isolation and fluidity created other areas where transmission of different ideas occurred. Despite the apparent increase in the fluidity of social structure during the Calderwood complex, bison jumping at Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump and the formation of the Majorville cairn began. Perhaps the waning of the Hypsithermal interval provided opportunities that pulled social groups together as well as circumstances that pushed them apart. In addition, the appearance of modern bison and modern bison behaviour may have occurred around 6,000–7,000 years ago. The congregation of large numbers of bison near Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump might have provided incentive for a people used to trapping small numbers of animals in natural traps to gather themselves in larger numbers for a larger operation. At the same time, the bison concentration would last only briefly before the animals moved on. The hunters would likely have had to break into small social groups and follow suite. The bison bone beds at Head-Smashed-In indicate jumps were not frequent compared with later times.

Bison jumping at Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump ceases after the Calderwood complex, as new people arrive in southern Alberta. Between 5,500 and 4,900 years ago, the Estevan phase appears to have replaced the
Calderwood materials. It is during this time period that certain areas across the Plains begin to be inhabited for the first time since the onset of the Hypsithermal interval. As well, the earliest evidence of stone boiling occurs with the Estevan phase, as large amounts of fire-broken rock (fbr) appear in the archaeological record for the first time. The oldest mauls are also recovered from this time period. These events are not coincidental, as stone boiling provides a means to extract grease from bone for preserving meat. Mauls would provide a way to smash bone, to increase its surface area for better grease extraction in the boiling pits. Preserved meat stocks would allow people to be bolder in the travels they undertake. Further evidence of this group’s intrusiveness rests in their finely crafted and very regular Long Creek dart points, which have been recovered from a number of campsites as well as the Gray Burial site. The Long Creek point is strikingly similar in morphology to the Oxbow point in the subsequent phase. Similarly, Oxbow material predominates at the Gray Burial site. The overlap between the point forms and burial practice suggest heritable continuity between these phases. The movement of Estevan phase into Alberta was a tipping point in Alberta’s prehistory. Until this point in time, movement of people onto the Alberta plains had occurred from populations in the mountainous west. After the Estevan phase, movement of people into Alberta comes exclusively from the east, with the exception of the McKeen complex, which originated from the south. Population build-up in the east reached a threshold by about 6,000 years ago and people began looking for, or were force to move to, a new home. In many instances, people moved west onto the Plains. This scenario is especially well known from the Protohistoric and Historic periods.

Oxbow dates to between 4,900 and 4,400 years ago. The structured nature of the Estevan and Oxbow projectile points, the presence of a burial complex, with some exhibiting copper, and the use of stone boiling all indicate the movement of people into southern Alberta from elsewhere, likely from the east. The significance of the Gray Burial site should not be downplayed. The nature of the Oxbow burials and their associated grave goods is relatively consistent, and is not duplicated at other periods. As well, the site itself is centrally located within the distribution of the Oxbow phase. Oxbow burials aside from the Gray Burial site are located at the periphery of the Oxbow phase distribution, suggesting that the substantial effort to transport the individual to the central cemetery out weighed the need to bury the body. Whether the Gray site was truly a hub of Oxbow phase
lifeways is difficult to assess without further data. In terms of subsistence, solitary stalking and small kills predominated Oxbow bison procurement. Social units remained small, consisting of a few cooperating families. Circular distributions of artifacts suggest conical dwellings were being used at the time, but do not definitively indicate tipis.

By about 4,400 to 3,500 years ago, the McKean complex arrived in southern Alberta. The initial diagnostic projectile point is a lanceolate form that becomes increasingly “stemmed” through time. The earliest McKean lanceolate points are quite large and finely crafted with deep basal concavities. The spread of this material from the Big Horn Basin/Black Hills area to Saskatchewan and Alberta is fairly well documented. In the associated burial complex, the deceased were placed in the floors of living areas rather than cemeteries as in the preceding phases. Similarly, the people of the McKean phase used ambushes to capture prey, as opposed to use of solitary stalking of animals in Oxbow times. Once the McKean phase arrived in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, northern North Dakota, and northern Montana, it was expressed as a regional variant from the material to the south. The southern material exhibits items such as grinding slabs, cobble-lined hearths, edge-ground cobbles, pit houses, and Mallory points, none of which appear in the north McKean record. Intensive processing tools are not noted. Instead of pit houses, at least one circular debris pattern indicated that conical structures were likely used for habitation, although evidence of a tie-down stake is absent. The data is scarce, but it suggests that McKean shows continuity within the McKean-Duncan-Hanna sequence although it is quite different from the preceding Estevan-Oxbow material.

The Hanna projectile point is the last diagnostic within the point manifestations of the McKean complex. Some scholars have argued that it represents the material link between the McKean complex and the Pelican Lake complex. Pelican Lake points, dating to between 3,500 to 3,000 years ago, are finely crafted dart points. In terms of morphology and craftsmanship, they are quite different from the stemmed and more crudely flaked McKean points. While there is evidence for ambushes and small kills of bison during McKean times, the Pelican Lake complex exhibits evidence for stalking bison and other prey individually. Pelican Lake material is distributed across the Canadian Plains (Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba) and northern Montana, while McKean materials cover a greater area in their northern expression and an even greater area when their southern expression is considered. There is little overlap between the McKean and
Pelican Lake complexes. Social groups were small, with a couple of family groups cohabitating a site. Contemporaneous stone circles recovered from this period suggest that conical lodges were utilized. These may have been tipis, although tie-down stakes have not been found. The finely crafted Pelican Lake points are interpreted as evidence of a kinship system exhibiting multiple bonds between a limited array of relatives that were maintained through generations, or possibly craft specialization likely originating out of the east. Material similar to the Pelican Lake complex is known from Minnesota; this is a likely locale in which population pressure, among other forces, would have placed stress on groups, forcing them to move out on to the Plains proper.

Between 3,000 and 2,100 years ago the Bracken phase was well established on the Northern Plains. The large corner-notched diagnostic points are not unlike crude versions of the preceding Pelican Lake points. The form of the points became increasingly crude and heterogeneous through time, suggesting an increased fluidity within the social structure. At the same time, the burial complex associated with the Bracken phase is distinct. It is tempting to link the Bracken phase back to the Pelican Lake complex. The Highwood site might represent a late Pelican Lake burial rather than an early Bracken burial. The burial pattern is a mound of cobbles overlying the body. This is a burial pattern well known to the south and east, in which earth replaces the cobbles. Whether it arrived with the Pelican Lake complex or the Bracken phase is an important question because it seems unlikely to have developed in situ without any precedent. There are stone circles present in both archaeological units and they exhibit similar lithic assemblages. Large bison kill sites are lacking from the Pelican Lake subsistence repertoire, yet the development of large kills may have been brought on by later pressure from increasing eastern populations.

While the Pelican Lake complex occurred over Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and Montana, the Bracken phase failed to occur in Manitoba. The first large encampments of up to eighteen stone circles (possibly representing 100+ people) are known at this time. As well, industrialization of bison jumping and pounding occurs as kill sites are used repeatedly. The increased aggregation of people and escalation in subsistence pursuits are likely intertwined. The issue of whether people started aggregating more and thus required more food or whether the ability to produce more food allowed more aggregation to occur as a possible chicken-and-egg situation arises. Still, at this time, population pressure from the east continued to
force the distribution of archaeological cultures increasingly farther west. The increased activity at bison kill sites provides the archaeological evidence for the strengthening in the population base on the Plains. Mixed into this story is the development of stone circles with tie-down stakes, which occur within the Bracken phase, suggesting that the true tipi was being utilized. The slow and gradual changes within the Bracken phase, however, seem to lead inevitably to the origin of the Besant phase.

Around 2,600 years ago, the Outlook and the Sandy Creek complexes appeared in scattered locations across the Northern Plains. The Outlook complex has large lanceolate points made on Knife River flint. The sites tend to emphasize bison procurement. The finely crafted points and their association with bison kill sites have all the hallmarks of an intrusive group. Further, the lithic assemblage associated with the complex strongly suggests ties to the Middle Missouri area. The faunal assemblages show few signs of intensive processing, which suggests a "gourmet" approach to carcass utilization. There can be little doubt that this complex represents archaeological evidence for Eastern pressure onto the western Plains. The Sandy Creek complex is more mysterious. In Alberta, some of this material may simply represent aberrant Bracken material culture, as Bracken projectile points are known to have become increasingly heterogeneous through time. Regardless, the Sandy Creek complex appears relatively consistent in Saskatchewan. The most interesting aspect of these archaeological cultures is that both the Outlook and Sandy Creek complexes are present on the Northern Plains during the tenure of the Bracken phase. The Bracken phase, of course, exhibits the first strong evidence in the archaeological record of dramatically increased social group size.

The Besant phase dates to between 2,100 and 1,500 years ago. Large Besant stone circle camps are known, as are bison jumps and pounds. A number of researchers have noted the overlap between the lithic assemblages of the Bracken and the Besant phases. The craftsmanship of the points is relatively crude and resembles a degenerated but homogenous form of Bracken points at the end of its tenure. The Besant phase appears to represent an in situ development from the preceding Bracken phase of a socially fluid people adapted to life on the Northern Plains. Like the Bracken phase before it, the Besant phase distribution was limited more to the west; it was geographically restricted to southwest Saskatchewan, southern Alberta, and northern Montana. The Sonota phase occupied the southeastern corner of Saskatchewan as pressure, presumably from increasing sedentism and
agriculture from the east, continued to limit the distribution of archaeological cultures in the west.

By 1,500 to 1,350 years ago, the Sonota phase expanded into southern Alberta. Before 1,500 years ago, the Sonota phase co-existed with the Besant phase as a separate cultural entity around the Middle Missouri area. The Sonota phase exhibits large lanceolate dart points often manufactured on Knife River flint. This is in stark contrast to the short Besant points mainly manufactured on local lithic raw materials. As well, the Sonota phase utilized pottery, a technology not found in Besant sites. Sonota burial mounds are known along the Middle Missouri, but these are not found in Besant sites nor are they found in Sonota sites in Alberta. Most of the Sonota sites in Alberta are bison kill sites, suggesting a task-specific purpose to their foreign presence. Previous Sonota phase excursions into Wyoming suggest that this movement may have been part of a procurement or expansion strategy. The movement of the Sonota phase into southern Alberta, southwestern Saskatchewan, and Montana replaced the existing Besant phase. The Sonota phase likely shared direct ties to the preceding Outlook complex: both of these archaeological cultures exhibit traits of being intrusive onto the Canadian Plains from the Middle Missouri area.

As the Sonota phase moved into southern Alberta, the Avonlea phase was moving from northern Minnesota into south-central Saskatchewan. Climate for this period was wetter and cooler, providing a good environment for bison. A number of sites indicate that people of the Sonota and Avonlea phases co-occupied campsites in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and ultimately Alberta. It is tempting to suggest that the Avonlea phase was “piggybacking” on the preceding Sonota phase movement. While Sonota people controlled the very southernmost Canadian plains, Avonlea people spread to the adjacent area and filled in the void left behind as Sonota moved west. The Avonlea phase was present in Alberta between 1,350 and 1,100 years ago. It produced small, finely crafted, side-notched arrow points. Lithic raw materials tended to be procured locally except when the Avonlea phase is found in association with the Sonota phase. In these instances, Avonlea points were often manufactured on Knife River flint. Subsistence is more generalized in the eastern sites with an increasing focus on bison in western sites. Avonlea pottery is limited in surface treatments (parallel grooved, net/fabric impressed, and plain) and is generally conoidal. Researchers have provided strong arguments that stylistically link it to pottery in Minnesota. Some of the most recent Avonlea pottery has shoulders, a trait common in
Old Women’s pottery. The finely crafted points and restricted vessel forms suggest a highly structured kin system or craft specialization. Avonlea burials tend to be interments under cairns, harkening an eastern origin for the cultural pattern. The time-transgressive movement of Avonlea sites from east to west, the burial pattern, and the evidence for an eastern origin of the pottery leave little doubt of an eastern origin for the Avonlea phase.

About 1,100 years ago, a number of sites exhibit traits of both Avonlea and Old Women’s sites. Avonlea and Cayley Series points co-occur in campsite and kill site deposits in southern Alberta, southern Saskatchewan, and north-central Montana. The shouldered pottery vessels that appeared in late Avonlea sites are common in Old Women’s sites. The range of variability in Cayley Series points and Saskatchewan Basin Complex: Late Variant pottery is substantial. The strict filters that produced the structured Avonlea points and pottery broke down and came to be represented by the more heterogeneous Old Women’s materials. The rigid social structures of the people of the Avonlea phase were slowly reconsidered in the face of the harsh Plains environment in favour of a more fluid band structure. The result was the in situ development of the Old Women’s phase, which exhibits heterogeneous point and pottery forms. Interestingly, it was approximately 1,050 years ago that the cool and wet period that Avonlea enjoyed began to fail and a more unpredictable environment of drought and plenty was established for the next 1,000 years. This environmental change placed tremendous stress on the Avonlea phase in terms of its internal social relationships and subsistence practices.

The Old Women’s phase existed on the southern Alberta plains between 1,100 and 250 years ago. Like their ancestors represented by the Avonlea phase, the people in the Old Women’s phase continued a strong tradition of bison hunting, tipi camps, and utilization of local lithic raw materials. A number of features and artifacts attributed to the Old Women’s phase are recognized as traditionally used by the Blackfoot. Iniskim or buffalo stones, burial lodge medicine wheels (types 3 and 4), and human boulder outline/Napi figures provide archaeological links between the Old Women’s phase and the Blackfoot people. Given the Old Women’s-Avonlea relationship, of particular importance are some linguistic studies that suggest the Blackfoot had their origins at the west end of the Great Lakes, which is roughly the area where the Avonlea phase originated. The Old Women’s phase came under increasing pressure from the east by the time of the Mortlach phase; many scholars believe this latter archaeological entity was ancestral.
to the Assiniboine. There are increasing lines of evidence for linking historically known Native groups of people with archaeologically recorded sets of material culture.

At about five hundred years ago, intrusive people apparently arrived. The Highwood phase exhibits Late Side-notched points often manufactured on exotic raw materials such as porcellanite, obsidian, and Madison Formation cherts. These points are typically well crafted with unusual basal notches or spurs. Pottery associated with the phase is often flat-based and vase-like in form. Few sites of this kind are known from Alberta, but their age correlates well with oral tradition of the Blackfoot being forced north by the “Snake.” A number of researchers have attributed Snake material to the Shoshone, based on its distribution and spread.

The overlap between the Old Women’s phase and the Protohistoric Old Women’s phase is undeniable. The projectile point and pottery forms remain the same. Trade items, however, are recovered from these otherwise Old Women’s sites. Owing to the use of horses, the settlement pattern appears to concentrate more around water bodies than for the preceding period. Iniskim and burial lodges recovered from the Old Women’s phase are also recovered from the Protohistoric Old Women’s phase and overlap with traits known amongst the historic Blackfoot. The Blackfoot are a classic band-oriented society. The fluid nature of band structure is reflected in the heterogeneous point and pottery forms of the Old Women’s phase.

Despite the presence of the Protohistoric Old Women’s phase on the Alberta plains, the One Gun phase arrived about two hundred years ago. The One Gun phase is mainly represented by the Cluny fortified location along the Bow River. Researchers agree that the pottery exhibits traits similar to those found to the southeast. The settlement type and artifacts also suggest ties to the southeast. Again, population pressure, perhaps even the spread of disease with the arrival of Europeans, encouraged westward movement. In a few late Protohistoric Old Women’s sites some of the pottery exhibits the traits observed at the Cluny site. The intruders were likely overwhelmed and wiped out by the local forces, with the survivors enculturated into the local group.