



Danger Cave is one of the oldest human dwelling sites in the Great Basin. What have modern archaeologists learned from studying artifacts they found in the cave?



Prehistoric American Indians

Archaeologists use the term **prehistoric** to refer to people who lived before white explorers and missionaries wrote about them. We know of these native people only by the artifacts they left behind.

You can probably guess, then, that “historic” Indians are people about whom we do have written records, although the records were written by others and not by the Indians themselves.

Much of what we know about Utah’s prehistoric people comes from two caves in the West Desert near Wendover. These caves are Danger Cave and Hogup Cave.

Danger Cave

Jesse Jennings from the University of Utah found a variety of fascinating artifacts, from beetle wings to textiles, at Danger Cave. He also found leather scraps, pieces of string, nets of twine, basket fragments, and bone and wood tools such as knives, weapons, and millstones. The age of the oldest material was over 11,000 years. Dog bones found at the cave are about 9,000 years old. This means Danger Cave is one of the oldest human sites in the Great Basin.

The evidence at the cave suggests that the desert population at the time was

sparse, with small family units of about 20–30 people in each group. The people were hunter-gatherers. They gathered seeds, roots, and nuts, roasted their meats, and used the cave as a shelter.

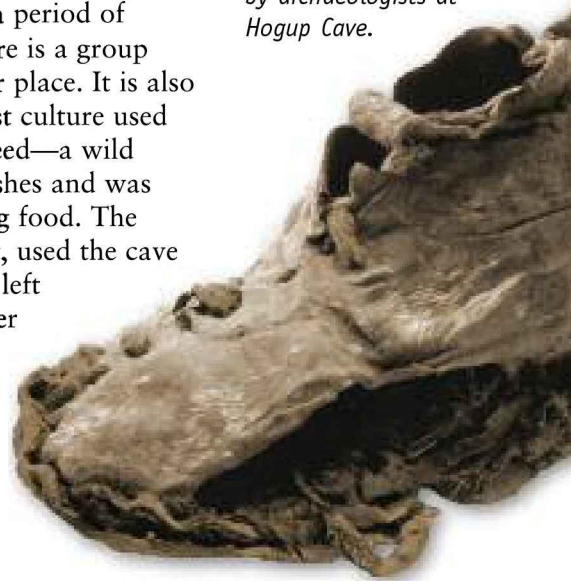
Hogup Cave

Many archaeologists recognize Hogup Cave as one of the state’s most important prehistoric sites. A few miles into the West Desert, beyond the shores of the Great Salt Lake, a limestone cavern has two chambers. The outer one is about the size of a large house; the second one is half that size.

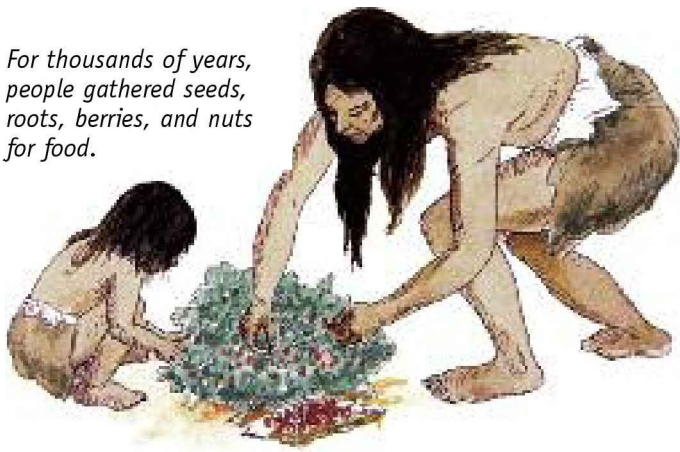
About ten years after Danger Cave was explored, archaeologists carefully studied the first chamber of Hogup Cave. Their work showed that the site had been used by different **cultures** over a period of about 8,000 years. (A culture is a group living at a particular time or place. It is also their way of living.) The first culture used the cave to harvest pickleweed—a wild herb that grows in salt marshes and was probably used for preserving food. The second culture, the Fremont, used the cave as a temporary camp. They left moccasins, jewelry, and other artifacts. Much later, the Shoshone left pottery and items made from animal hides. The cave provided shelter to many people over thousands of years.

In 1970, Hogup Cave was destroyed by vandals. This was a tragedy for Utah’s history.

This moccasin, made of deer hide, was found by archaeologists at Hogup Cave.



For thousands of years, people gathered seeds, roots, berries, and nuts for food.



When Columbus crossed the Atlantic Ocean and landed on a small island, he thought he was in a part of the world called East India, so he called the people he met there “los Indios.” Today, we call those people American Indians, or Native Americans. In their languages, they usually called themselves a name that means “the people.”

The Paleo-Indians: Nomadic Hunter-Gatherers

Historians call the earliest people of North America “Paleo-Indians.” Paleo means very ancient. The people lived all over North America, from the coldest parts of Canada to the tip of South America. The Paleo-Indians followed large mammals and other prehistoric animals and killed them for food.

The people used hard rock or animal horns to chip away the edges of hard stones to make spear points. Then they lashed the points to strong, thin sticks to make spears. In addition to hunting animals, the people probably gathered seeds, roots, nuts, and other wild plants to eat. Because they had to move around for food, they probably never settled in one place very long.

During this time, people lived in the Four Corners region. There is also evidence that different groups lived in and around Danger Cave.

The Archaic Indians: Desert Gatherers

After the Paleo-Indians, another group lived here. Historians call them “Archaic (ancient) Indians.” Like the Paleo-Indians, the later groups lived all over North America, not just in Utah. Because much of Utah is so dry, historians also call these people “Desert Gatherers” because they spent most of their days searching for food in the dry climate. They lived here for about 6,000 years, much longer than any other group of people has ever lived here. They lived here long after the prehistoric animals had died out.

Adapting to the Environment

The Desert Gatherers knew what could be found in certain places at certain times of the year, and they timed their moves to be in the right place at the right time. In the spring and early summer, the people lived around lakes and marshes. They hunted buffalo, deer, antelope, rabbits, and birds. They also ate lizards, insects, mice, and gophers. They collected duck eggs and fished for trout. The people gathered tender new cattail plants, sunflower seeds, and seeds from Indian ricegrass. They ate the bulrush, sego lily bulbs, and other roots and bulbs.

In the late summer they moved to mountain valleys and higher mesas where it was cooler. They gathered acorns, pine nuts from pinon trees, and berries from juniper trees. They hunted animals and dried the meat for winter.



Pine Nuts

Pine nuts were a very important food. Hunter-gatherers stored hundreds of pounds of pine nuts to eat during the winter. After the people collected seeds and nuts, they put them on a slab of stone called a *metate*. They held another stone, called a *mano*, to grind them into flour. Then they put the flour into a woven grass basket, added water to make mush, and cooked it.

They could not put the basket right on a campfire, so they put hot stones from the campfire into the basket to cook the food. They had to move the hot stones constantly so the basket would not burn. The people had not yet learned to make baked clay pots that could be used right on the fire.



Desert Gatherers built small open shelters, often not high enough for a person to stand up in. We call these shelters *wicki-ups*. They made them out of tree branches and limbs, and sometimes they covered them with earth. These homes shaded the people from the sun and helped to break the wind. When the people moved, they simply built a new wicki-up in the new place.

Baskets

The people made all kinds of baskets from plant fibers. They turned strips of willow, sumac, and other wild plants into baskets. These baskets were important for gathering seeds. Women used flat baskets to sort and dry their food and deep, cone-shaped baskets to gather and carry things. They made tightly woven, jug-like baskets and lined them with pine gum so they could carry water.

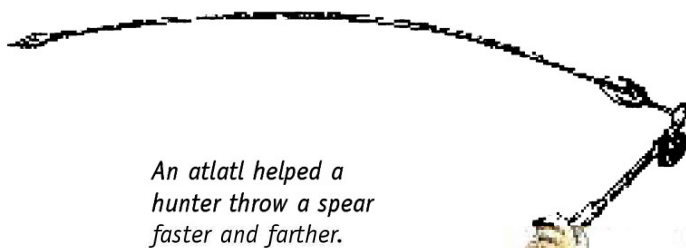
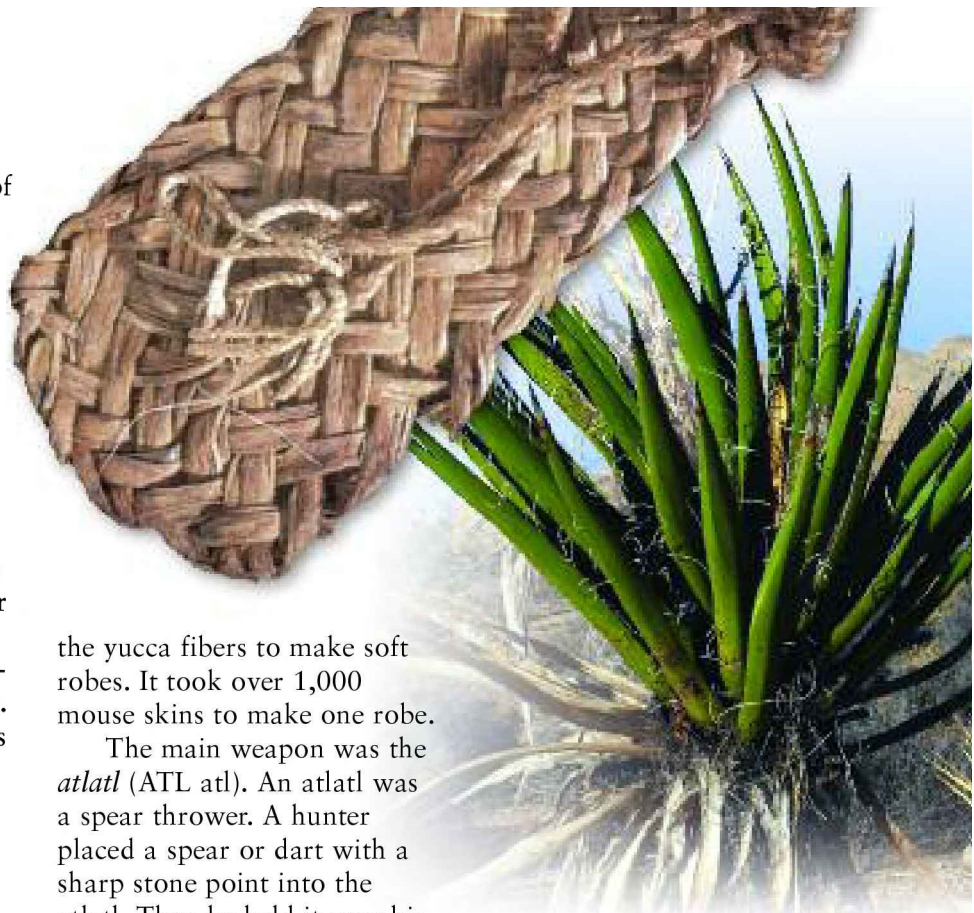
Tools and Weapons

Plant fibers, especially yucca fibers, were used to make sandals, mats, ropes, string, and thread. From the rope and string the people made nets, snares, and traps. They wove rabbit skins and even small mouse skins and bird feathers into

the yucca fibers to make soft robes. It took over 1,000 mouse skins to make one robe.

The main weapon was the *atlatl* (ATL atl). An atlatl was a spear thrower. A hunter placed a spear or dart with a sharp stone point into the atlatl. Then he held it over his shoulder. He launched the spear by holding the atlatl and thrusting it forward. This made the spear fly farther and faster than throwing it by hand.

This sandal artifact (above) is made of fibers from the yucca plant.



An atlatl helped a hunter throw a spear faster and farther.

