

## INITIAL COALESCENT: A BLENDING OF CULTURES

All cultures are limited in many ways by their environments, and in fact, all cultures must adapt to the environments in which they live. The Central Plains tradition peoples living in Nebraska and Kansas were no exception. They were forced to make adjustments in order that their culture might survive. The particular problem faced by the Central Plains tradition peoples was the drought that appeared to be prevalent over the Central Plains area starting in the 12th Century A.D. This drought was brought on by what has been called the Pacific Climatic Episode. There was a gradual increase in temperature accompanied by warm, dry, northwesterly air. These dry westerlies brought drought to the region and made the practice of maize horticulture very difficult. The Central Plains tradition peoples found that their standard of living was threatened, and they left their homelands. Many of the groups moved into the northern Plains area along the Missouri River, a constant source of water for the growth of their crops. This movement brought them into contact with the peoples of the Middle Missouri tradition who were already living along the river in well established villages. With this contact came gradual changes in both cultures, a kind of blending of cultures that has been labeled Coalescent by archaeologists.

The movement of Central Plains tradition peoples into the South Dakota Missouri River region was probably a gradual movement accomplished over a number of years. There is some evidence that a very early coalescence appeared sometime in the early 13th Century, in what are now the northeastern Nebraska counties of Cedar, Thurston and Dixon. This first movement seems to have caused a very limited blending that archaeologists have labeled St. Helena culture. Much of the St. Helena material is related to the Nebraska Central Plains tradition materials but there are a few basic differences. The artifact inventory is identical except for some differences in pottery, some kinds of tobacco pipes, and a few other relatively rare items. One archaeologist has suggested that certain of these traits may have been derived from the Oneota peoples as well. Many of the St. Helena traits are closely related to the Middle Missouri tradition cultural materials found along the Missouri River in South Dakota and northeastern Nebraska. Little research has been done on St. Helena in either Nebraska or South Dakota and archaeologists know of no reported St. Helena sites actually in the state of South Dakota, although many are literally across the river from Clay, Yankton and Union counties in South Dakota.

The major thrust into this area probably came at a later date, sometime after 1250 A.D. None of the village sites excavated in South Dakota are what could be called truly Central Plains tradition. Many of the sites are assigned to what archaeologists label the Initial Coalescent variant. This

means that these sites were a kind of modified Central Plains tradition but with traits that were apparently borrowed when these southern people came into contact with the Initial and Extended Middle Missouri villages. These Coalescent sites represent the first stage in the blending of cultures which led to the large village complexes of the northern Great Plains just after European contact. The Initial Coalescent is represented by about 15 village sites in the Big Bend region of the state between Chamberlain and Pierre. Most of the villages were located on the east bank of the Missouri River. Many of these sites have been excavated but relatively few have been reported. Among the sites are the Arzberger in Hughes County, Black Partizan in Lyman County and Talking Crow and Crow Creek sites in Buffalo County. Other sites, like Medicine Creek, Farm School and Useful Heart, have been excavated but little analysis has been done and very few full reports have been published. Each of these villages may represent the people from one Central Plains tradition locality. That is, the people from the Glenwood locality of southwest Iowa may have established the Arzberger village, the people of Weeping Water formed Talking Crow and so forth. To prove this would take detailed analysis of artifacts, however.

The houses of the Initial Coalescent variant were relatively consistent in some details but varied widely in other aspects. The primary structure of the house was round rather than square as the Central Plains tradition houses had been. This tendency toward rounded, dome-shaped lodges was broken by a few houses which had squared floors. These squared floors had been directly borrowed, of course, from the Central Plains tradition. The superstructure of the house consisted of four heavy central support posts, or sometimes pairs of lighter posts, set in a rough square around the firepit of the house. This was very similar to the Central Plains tradition house structure. Four beams carried most of the load of the dome-shaped house. Houses had an entry passage from four to five feet wide which extended outside the house wall for some distance. The entryway was

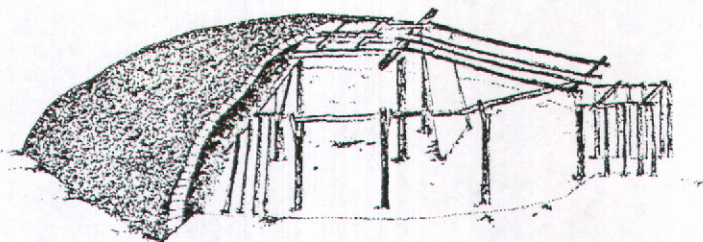


Fig. 1 Round earthlodge which shows construction method.

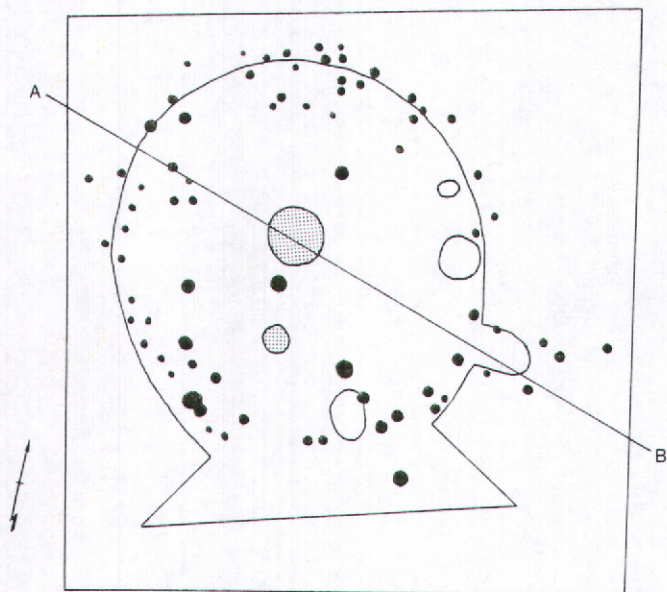


Fig. 2 Excavation of lodge showing floor plan. Dark circles are postholes; shaded area is fireplace; open circles are cache pits.

very similar to Central Plains houses. All the Coalescent houses had cache pits in their floors and on the exterior of the lodges. The cache pits were very much like those described for the Middle Missouri and Central Plains traditions, that is, some were irregular, some were basin-shaped, and many were bell-shaped.

The Initial Coalescent settlement pattern, especially in village layout, was very similar to that of the Central Plains tradition. The Central Plains tradition houses were widely scattered, apparently in no particular order within the villages or hamlets, and sometimes isolated lodges occurred. No fortifications were present. The Initial Coalescent villages contained more lodges than did Central Plains tradition villages but there was still a very low density of houses per acre. Most Initial Coalescent villages were fortified. This low density of houses was much less than the house density for the Middle Missouri tradition sites. By way of example, the Huff Village site of the Terminal Middle Missouri variant had fortifications which enclosed an area approximately 700 by 800 feet. Inside this fortification were over 100 houses, an average density in excess of 11 houses for each acre enclosed. By contrast, the Initial Coalescent site at Arzberger had an elliptical fortification which had axes of about 1,300 and 2,000 feet. It enclosed only 44 houses which was a density of approximately 1 house per acre.

Some archaeologists suggest that, like the typical Central Plains tradition sites, the first Initial Coalescent villages were not fortified and had scattered lodges. Later, pressure from other groups necessitated fortifying these villages which had not been built with fortification in mind. Had they been so, they would probably have been more tightly organized like the Middle Missouri variant structures. The fortification systems at many of the sites like Arzberger, Black Partizan and Crow Creek consisted of long ditches which were backed by palisades on the inside of the ditch. Many of the sites had bastions, horse-shoe shaped protru-

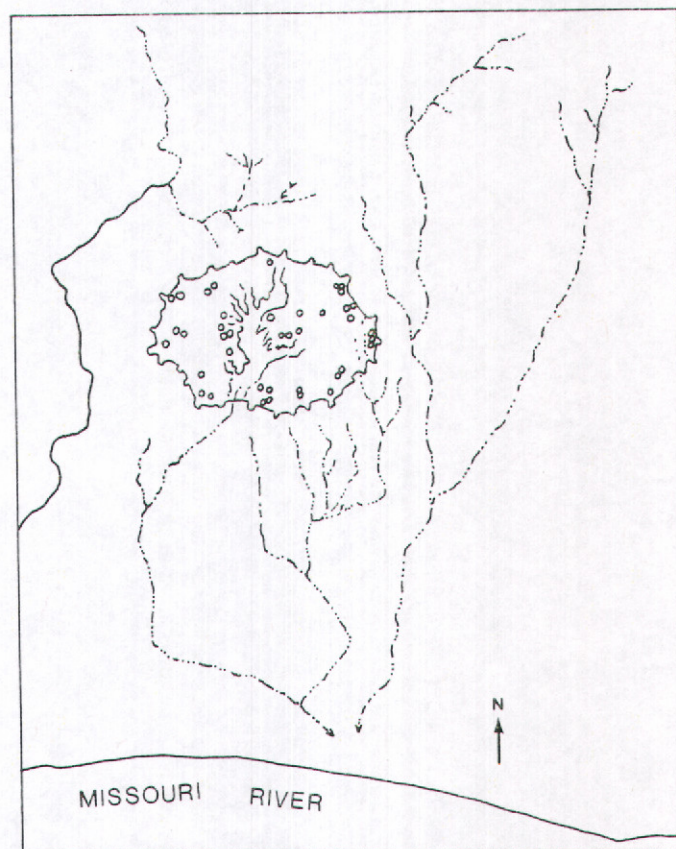


Fig. 3 Arzberger fortification showing bastions and house depressions.

sions from the ditch. This bastion system allowed a more effective system for firing on an enemy invading the village. Many of the Initial Coalescent sites used a fortification system similar to that employed by the Initial Middle Missouri groups, that is, the village was built on a high terrace overlooking the river, perhaps on a peninsula of land. This meant the fortification needed to be built only on the landward side because the steep slopes or cutbanks along the river protected the river portion of the village.

Initial Coalescent ceramics were a blend of Central Plains and Middle Missouri characteristics. Most of the vessel forms

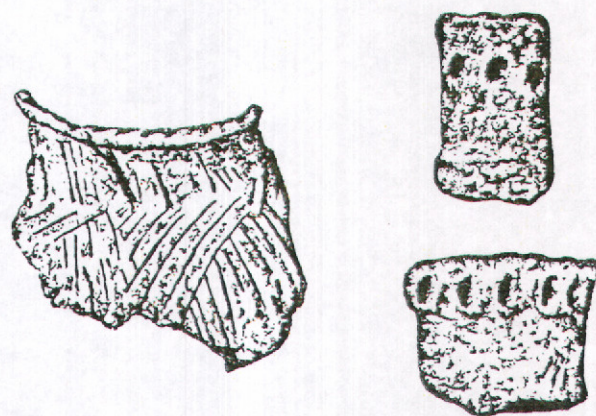


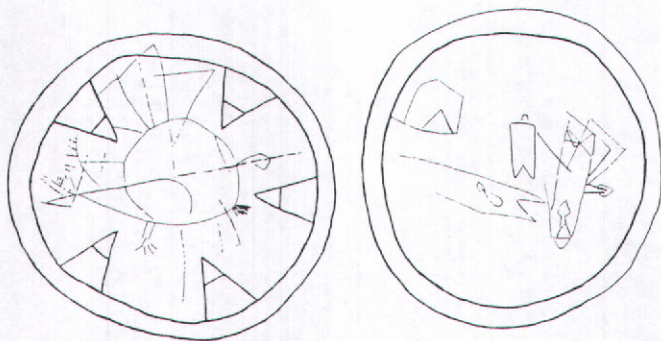
Fig. 4 A variety of pottery decorations and rim shapes were used during the Coalescent.

were jars with flared, vertical, or collared rims, very reminiscent of those of the Central Plains traditions sites. Cord-impressed decoration was almost completely absent. The bodies of the vessels were usually plain but some body sherds were cord-roughened, simple stamped, or, on occasion, check-stamped. Cord-roughened pot sherds were only a small percentage of the sherds at most sites. The cord-roughened bodies of Initial Coalescent pots probably directly reflect their ancestry in the Central Plains tradition and this trait is seen as being diagnostic of Initial Coalescent ceramics. Simple stamping was done on vessels by using a paddle which had grooves cut into it. This trait on Initial Coalescent pottery was a direct borrowing from the Middle Missouri tradition and is considered to be the hallmark of the blending that occurred between the two traditions.



*Fig. 5 Small triangular arrow points with notches on sides and base were used on Coalescent arrows and are similar to those of other Plains village groups.*

Blending also occurred in other parts of the material culture inventory. For instance, tobacco pipes and diamond shaped knives with beveled edges like those made by Central Plains peoples occurred in the Coalescent tradition. Other artifacts found in Coalescent sites occurred very rarely in the Central Plains tradition complex in the south. These traits were borrowed from Middle Missouri peoples and included such things as horn scoops, grooved mauls, and knives made of plate chalcidony. In most other aspects of material culture, many of these Initial Coalescent groups were very similar to the Central Plains tradition peoples.



*Fig. 6 Disc of catlinite or pipestone from the Talking Crow site. Both sides have incised lines and figures. This was probably used in ceremonies.*

Very little is known of the burial customs of the Initial Coalescent peoples. Occasionally, skeletons have been found in cache pits of houses. Perhaps the most striking evidence of death and mortuary practices of Initial Coalescent peoples comes from the Crow Creek site. The site was first occupied by Initial Middle Missouri groups but was occupied during the 14th Century by Coalescent groups. The site resembles many of the other Initial Coalescent villages in that it was unfortified at the time of its first occupation. A fortification ditch, some 1250 feet long, was built at a later date. Sometime, perhaps even during the construction of the fortification ditch, the village was attacked by another group and at least 500 people from the village were killed. They were mutilated by having hands, feet and other body-parts cut off and were also scalped. At some later time their remains were gathered up, perhaps by the victorious group or perhaps by survivors of the massacre. The remains were thrown into one end of the fortification ditch and a layer of clay was brought up from the river bottom to cover the pile of skeletons.

Archaeologists know from skeletons found at the site that a pattern of warfare had been going on for some time. In at least two instances, individuals had been scalped but had survived the scalping only to be killed later during the Crow Creek massacre. Other individuals had been hit earlier by arrows. The projectile points from these arrows were stuck in their bone and the bone had regrown over the points. Recent discoveries at the Whistling Elk village site suggest that warfare activities were more widespread than simply at the Crow Creek site. At Whistling Elk, most of the lodges that were examined showed evidence of burning, just as many of the lodges at Crow Creek had been burned. In one lodge, the inhabitants apparently left rather quickly, leaving all their pots on the floor of the lodge around the firepit.

While archaeologists knew that the fortification systems that had been constructed indicated warfare, few individuals had any idea of the intensity of the conflict that must have gone on along the river. The causes of this conflict are unknown, but nutritional stress may have been at least related to the conflict. The Crow Creek skeletons show several evidences of nutritional deficiencies, especially of protein and iron. One suggestion has been that these individuals of the Coalescent tradition were battling with individuals of the Middle Missouri tradition. Others have suggested that there may well have been some kind of intra-Coalescent group conflict over scarce resources and arable land during a time of climatic instability.

The movement of the Central Plains tradition peoples into the Missouri valley, displacing the Middle Missouri cultures that were already well established there, was the beginning of a series of major population movements that would occur during the next 400 to 600 years. As populations moved they came into contact with other groups and established new territories and hybridized cultures. The amalgamation of the Middle Missouri and Central Plains traditions into the Coalescent tradition led eventually into what historically is called the Arikara nation. Archaeologists still have many questions about how the blending of cultures occurred and about the lifeways of the Coalescent groups. As more of the archaeological material from sites excavated during the 1950's and 1960's is analyzed and new materials

are excavated, many questions will be answered. Archaeologists do know that the Initial Coalescent was a time of great cultural change and upheaval.

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