The World of Indigenous North America

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“Anasazi” No More

Publication details
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Published online on: 22 Dec 2014

Accessed on: 11 Sep 2019
Within the contiguous United States, the American Southwest is unique in that it is home to the largest number of Native peoples who have continuously occupied their original homelands and retain their languages, customs, beliefs, and values while participating fully in the twenty-first century. It has been defined as a culture area (Kroeber 1939) based on the similarities of the material cultures left by the archaeological and contemporary populations who inhabit this area.

Archaeology is the study of the human past and is involved in trying to understand the adaptations humans have made over time as they attempt to survive in the environment where they live. Archaeology looks at material culture to gather information that can be used to infer the cultures people might have had while at the same time trying to understand how human behavior in the past can be used to inform human behavior in the present. People who study past human cultures using their material culture, architecture, and their habitation sites are called “archaeologists.” Archaeologists have long been aware that, as Native populations adapt to the climatic and environmental variations of geographic regions, they adapt their material cultures as well. Archaeologists utilize the similarities and differences of these shared technologies as a means of creating “regional cultures” comprised of many smaller cultural groups, each group perhaps slightly different from the others around them. The archaeologists who study large areas use the broad similarities and differences to provide answers to generalizable cultural studies, chronologies, and human adaptation.

EARLY “SOUTHWESTERNERS”

Once humans established themselves in North America, a generalized culture of wandering groups of people roamed across what is now the United States. Named “Paleoindians” based on the stone tools, animal remains, and other sorts of materials culture found (usually) in association with ancient and extinct animals, these Paleoindian cultures used combinations of strategies to survive including hunting many small and medium-sized game animals. Still, because early archaeologists found
evidence of early generalized hunters associated with large game, they have often been called “big-game hunters.”

As the people became more adjusted to the environment, and as their population numbers grew, people became more aware of which plants were edible and which were dangerous; they were able to understand the movements and locations where animals congregated and/or migrated through their regions; they also became more aware of the necessity of interacting with other groups of people in order to gain resources which they did not have, such as stone raw material, certain types of plants or other products, and the need for unrelated people to serve as new mates for families and other needs. This period following the Paleoindian period, called the “Archaic” by archaeologists, was a time of growing regional and geographical specialization.

People adapted to local and regional environments. This regional adaptation over time allowed the local people to know where to establish camps, where local water and food sources became available, and when the local climate would make survival and habitation either more difficult or more comfortable. In some situations the people undertook long migrations; in others, the people stayed within local regimes—from valleys in the summer to nearby mountains where the climate was cooler, or from the mountain cold to the valley warmth. In this way, local knowledge served
as a means of adaptation—rather than grow thick body hair or extra body fat, the people migrated to areas where they could survive with their culture and their human relationships.

Archaeologists have recognized that, after the Archaic period, people developed into generally distinct regional cultures in the American Southwest. Archaeologists have defined archaeological cultural traditions as a means of more conveniently describing the cultural developments for the people during the centuries after the development of agriculture in the American Southwest. These “cultures”—the Ancestral Pueblo, Hohokam, and Mogollon, the Chihuahua, Fremont, Patayan, Sinagua, and Trincheras—were initially established and described during archaeology’s early development in the 1920s and 1930s. Rather than provide discussion of each of these archaeological culture traditions, I intend to focus only on the Ancestral Pueblo. More interested readers should consult a recent volume—Archaeology of the American Southwest by Linda Cordell and Maxine McBrinn—for in-depth description and coverage of this large region.

**WHO WERE ANCESTRAL PUEBLO?**

This is a perfect time to discuss the terms that are applied to cultures known only from archaeological material. These “archaeological culture traditions” do not represent “real” people—they represent only the portion of culture that can be described by archaeologists. While there is likely some agreement concerning aspects of the culture that left the artifacts behind, we can never know the true culture that did so, since we have only an unknown portion of the entire cultural catalogue of past groups. We don’t know the people’s kinship structures, religions, or education systems, to name a few, and must rely on contemporary groups to offer suggestions about those social structures in the past group.

The archaeological culture that contemporary archaeologists call “Ancestral Pueblo” was initially called “Anasazi.” It is uncertain how the “Anasazi” as an archaeological culture got its name (see discussion in Colton 1943; Walters & Rogers 2001), but it was first established in archaeological terminology through the Pecos Classification system in 1927. Some archaeologists attribute the name to the Navajo workers who guided the early archaeologists as they ventured into the American Southwest in search of artifacts to fill museums in the Northeast and in Europe. Cordell and McBrinn discuss the word’s etymology and use, writing “For many years, archaeologists used the name Anasazi, derived from a Navajo word meaning ‘enemy ancestors’ for this tradition, but because the term is offensive to so many people, they now use Ancestral Pueblo” (2012: 36–37). Readers will likely continue to encounter “Anasazi” in older books on Southwestern United States archaeology (see Neusius & Gross 2007: 45–46), but the term is being rapidly replaced as such books get updated and revised. Still, even Ancestral Pueblo is not without some issue, as its application has been questioned by Hegmon (2002), Riggs (2005), and Warburton and Begay (2005), even if for different reasons.

Archaeologists have inconsistently applied labels to archaeological cultures based primarily on the presence or absence of particular bits of information within the archaeological sites they have excavated. The absence of an archaeologically identified cultural trait or suite of artifacts does not necessarily indicate that the information
 wasn't available, merely that the inhabitants at the archaeological site either did not choose to embrace those artifacts, did not have the need for the artifacts, or that the artifacts were there but were not preserved within the site. Because of this, the actual presence or absence of an archaeological trait within an archaeological site cannot and should not be considered to be the reality of the presence or absence of the trait or product.

In the American Southwest, archaeologists have been blessed to be able to provide relatively accurate dates for the habitation of and dispersal from the archaeological sites. The use of *dendrochronology* (determining the dates that trees were cut for use as building material based on the tree rings present) was developed and perfected here and enables archaeologists to develop fairly accurate timelines for the construction, use, and disuse of the archaeological sites. In addition, radiocarbon dating (C¹⁴) dates allow archaeologists to construct rather accurate time frames for periods that inhabitants used items containing natural carbon materials.

Because of these generally accurate dating capabilities, archaeologists in the American Southwest generally believe the Ancestral Pueblo (and its even earlier ancestral Basketmaker antecedents) to have been present in the area from about 2100 BCE (Before the Common Era) to the time of the European contact at about 1540.

**ANCESTRAL PUEBLO CULTURE CHRONOLOGY**

The general culture chronology for the Ancestral Pueblo was proposed by early archaeologists doing work in the American Southwest. Again, Cordell and McBrinn *(2012: 74)* offer a broad chronology of the general culture periods proposed for the Ancestral Pueblo groups, and a broad discussion of the generally accepted culture traits of the groups is included here in order to provide an overview of the cultural development in the American Southwest.

Archaeologists in the early period of Southwestern archaeology proposed a series of names to describe the developmental stages the archaeological groups were thought to have gone through. These culture stages were defined by the presence or absence of various culture traits or elements. The archaeologists who developed these phases decided that architecture (building) styles and the pottery styles the inhabitants of the sites used were both culturally and temporally sensitive. They did not believe that these changes occurred at the same time everywhere in the American Southwest, and relied on specific categories of artifacts to refine the chronological placement of sites within local areas such as the Mesa Verde, Chaco, and Rio Grande areas. As archaeological work in the Southwest has grown, more specific information on these areas has allowed archaeologists to refine the chronologies and interregional relationships.

In describing the Ancestral Pueblo, archaeologists proposed the term “Basketmaker” for those sites in the general area which were inhabited prior to the development of pottery-making. A series of culture phases based on architectural building styles, Pueblo I–IV, follow the Basketmaker phases. The archaeologists of the time did not begin with Basketmaker I, since it was thought that a pre-agriculture culture might be found that offered information on the transition from the Archaic to agriculture-dependent people that had not been discovered at that time. Instead, the early twentieth-century archaeologists began with Basketmaker II. The progression from Basketmaker II through to contemporary Puebloan groups was defined by the addition of pottery
and shifts in architectural structures over time. At one time archaeologists went into
great detail about the particular phases of cultural development, but recent authors
tend to provide more broad perspectives on localized developments in an attempt to
chronicle the overall cultural changes. Additionally, since this chapter is meant to
provide a more general overview of the archaeology of the Ancestral Pueblo, less
archaeologically specific information will be presented.

In general, Ancestral Pueblo groups in the American Southwest can be discussed
in relation to three transitions: the transition from reliance on gathering to reliance
on agriculture; the transition from widely dispersed settlements to larger villages; and
the transition from the larger villages back to smaller, more distinct, culture groups.
Each of the transitions can be indicated through the material culture these people
used as well as the structures and communities within which these people survived.

While the material culture underwent changes in the sorts and types of material
culture, the architecture of the general area essentially underwent change as well.
There was not consistent change throughout time or through the geographical area,
but there was a general relationship in changes in the architecture and the agricul-
ture. As was mentioned earlier, the increase in food production that resulted from
agriculture contributed to a resultant increase in population as well as to more
densely inhabited communities.

Figure 3.2 Basketmaker artifacts. Aztec Ruins National Monument, New Mexico.
Photo by author.
The Transition to Agriculture

Generally during the Archaic period, people across the North American continent survived through hunting and gathering, with encouragement of local plants. In the American Southwest, people learned to rely on a combination of hunting animals and gathering wild plant foods. Initially these people only encouraged plants to grow as they encountered them on their seasonal rounds, but eventually the people actively took care of the plants and developed a reliance on the plant resources. Around 2100 BCE, the people in the Southwest added corn, beans, and squash (derived from Mesoamerica far to the south) to their diet. Once the people stopped “encouraging” the plants and actively took part in planting, protecting, and selecting the seeds for future years, agriculture developed into a major contributor to the people’s lifestyles. This sort of reliance on agriculture has happened across the world—first in the area of the Mesopotamia River Valley but in lots of other places at various times—and in the American Southwest it led to the development of more settled groups of people.

With the availability of plant resources, the local areas could support larger and denser concentrations of people. The more reliable crops also allowed the people to be able to store food for future needs, something they had not been able to do reliably in the past—but it also created the need for more land on which to grow the crops. As the crops increased, so too did the population; as the population increased, so too did the need for more crops. Eventually, it was necessary to have access to more areas to grow the corn, beans, and squash the people relied upon. As the population grew in number, too, more and more people banded together and concentrated in particular areas that supported agriculture—good soils, available water, long enough growing seasons, availability of building materials, and so forth.

With the establishment of agriculture, and as the population stayed in one place more and more often—tied to the plants and the farming plots—populations grew more sedentary. People still hunted and gathered wild foods, but more and more often groups relied on the crops produced in their garden plots. Agriculture can be a tricky business, as the plants need not only rainfall and relatively mild growing seasons, but they also need particular elements in the soils. Without the necessary nutrients being replenished, corn will use up the soils and eventually stop producing a crop. Beans add necessary nutrients back to the soil and complement corn in such a way that the two plants supplement each other.

As these populations began to rely on the agricultural products in the general area, they also began to develop a similar “suite” of tools with which to process the vegetable materials into food. Grinding stones (“manos” and “metates”) were used to grind corn and other seed grains into fine meal for use in baking and in soups; first basketry and later pottery were used not only to cook the food but also as storage vessels; as less time was necessary to gather enough food for survival, people were able to turn to other pursuits such as art, and ornamentation.

Later on, as another outgrowth of this localization and increase in population, people’s access to resources was curtailed or stopped. Because groups were no longer able to freely wander in large regions, some regions developed control of specific resources within the territory that they occupied. Some groups who lived in areas where unique items occurred developed specialized exports to provide unnecessary
but coveted products such as turquoise, rare bird feathers, jet (a form of very hard coal), obsidian, and other colorful stones. Others crafted products to trade with groups further away from source locations. Archaeologists can recreate “trade routes” by looking at some of the artifacts which occur in areas far away from their sources and, in this way, better understand ways that populations at this time were interrelated or linked by trade networks.

The material culture of these people was marked by the manufacture of particular types and styles of pottery. In general, the Ancestral Pueblo people of this time produced pottery that was gray or white-bodied pots with black painted designs. The pottery types have been used by archaeologists to provide general ideas of dates that villages were inhabited, based on the pottery’s relationships with dates derived using dendrochronology.

The Transition to “Communities”

At the same time that the communities were increasing their reliance on agriculturally produced food stuffs, the size and density of the communities where they lived increased as well. At about the time of Basketmaker III (about CE 500 to 700), population density increased along with a change in the structures the people inhabited.

Initially, during Basketmaker II times, people lived in small communities comprised of several semi-subterranean pithouses (see Figure 3.3). These were habitation structures that were built within areas dug into the soil. Posts were placed within the excavated areas and roofs and the upper structure extended above or even with the ground level. Individual families or extended families inhabited these structures and occasionally constructed less substantial structures above ground as storage areas.

These pithouse villages progressed over time as the population grew. As the population amalgamated into a more centralized area, these pithouse villages became more commonplace. The above-ground structures became more substantial storage areas, perhaps used during more comfortable weather for habitation and activity areas. Eventually the above-ground areas became more fully developed as people moved into areas less impacted by dampness and darkness. The structures became places where communities gathered, and perhaps areas where family groups lived—the large groups of room blocks with internal connecting doorways have been interpreted as such. Ultimately, these large room blocks were called “pueblos” by the initial Spanish explorers, and they continue to be called that today. In addition, archaeologists use these above-ground structures and the associated artifacts (especially the pottery styles) to separate the cultural manifestations into the various Pueblo periods (Pueblo I–IV). These “Pueblo” periods indicate times of growing technological sophistication as well as increasing adaptation to local environments and intensified trade with regions further away.

Over time, as more and more people became involved in agricultural processes, and as more people lived within the area, the above-ground structures developed into the primary living areas while the below-ground structures became more and more important as social and ceremonial areas no longer used for living areas but for social gathering places. The “pithouse” was no longer used as a primary
habitation structure, but the below-ground structures came to be used as “kivas”—places that contemporary Southwestern groups use today as ceremonial and cultural centers.

As population continued to grow, and as population density required that farming land be available to grow crops, large villages with ceremonial structures became more common. These villages became areas where extended families lived or where people congregated when times were good and at times of (perhaps) ceremonial importance. These large villages were able to support a denser population as agriculture allowed the farmers to feed people who were no longer actively searching for food but were able to survive based on the surpluses derived from harvesting agricultural crops. In the Mesa Verde region of southwestern Colorado, for example, it is estimated that more than 20,000 people lived in the area at the height of its occupation (Cordell et al. 2007: 385).

In the American Southwest during this time, some locations increased in importance. These “ceremonial” villages were places that might not have been occupied throughout the calendar year but were perhaps occupied by smaller groups of people over the year, with more full occupation at particular times of the year—that is, were ceremonial or religious villages. There are indications that suggest that some of the villages in Chaco Canyon in northern New Mexico, as well as perhaps Mesa Verde in southwest

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**Figure 3.3** Reconstructed Basketmaker pithouse. Utah State University Eastern Prehistoric Museum, Price, Utah. Photo by author.
Colorado, were not occupied year-round, but were instead locations where some people lived permanently while others came to the area only during certain festivals or ceremonies.

However, not all archaeologists agree that the Basketmaker III transition to larger pithouse villages is indicative of agriculture and settled living. “Chip” Wills and Tom Windes (1989: 365), working in the Chaco Canyon region, believe that the structural and social organization suggests “periodic aggregation, and not sedentism.” It is likely that the people of the area during this time period were very locally adapted and practiced varying levels of agriculture and hunting and gathering.

The Transition to Dispersed Settlements

Eventually, however, as a result of numerous environmental and social factors, these large villages were no longer able to support the populations. The Ancestral Pueblo cultures that inhabited much of the north-central parts of the American Southwest survived within the climate and cultures of the area until about CE 1300, when the environment forced the people to move out of the larger villages and back into smaller, more dispersed settlements. Archaeologists have excavated archaeological sites that seem to indicate that environmental and population pressures led to conflicts between populations in the area. Indications of conflict and perhaps warfare have been found in the archaeological record that suggest there was perhaps a climate-induced crisis that led the inhabitants to either move away from the area or to relocate in areas more easily defensible against raids and/or attacks.

By the time Coronado entered the area from Mexico in the 1540s, the Ancestral Pueblo cultures were no longer as productive or widespread as previously, but they had contracted into areas more amenable to localized farming, gathering, and protection. Cordell et al. (2007) suggest the Ancestral Pueblo people of the Mesa Verde region migrated to the south and east into areas where they had previously established “partnerships” with other groups and became integrated into the pueblos of the Rio Grande encountered by Coronado and his men.

WHERE WERE ANCESTRAL PUEBLO?

In the American Southwest, the archaeological cultures that have become known as the Ancestral Pueblo were situated in the area generally around the “Four Corners area” where the states of Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado join together. Their locations extend more to the south from the area than to the north, but the people who have been defined in this culture also extended at various times to the north. As such, the people who practiced the cultural elements that have been included within “Ancestral Pueblo” cultures covered much of the northern portions of Arizona and New Mexico, the southwestern portions of Colorado, and the southeastern portions of Utah. The Ancestral Pueblo occupied large areas of the American Southwest, but there are other important areas where archaeologists have identified clusters or concentrations of habitations of Ancestral Pueblo people.
Mesa Verde

Near Cortez, Colorado Mesa Verde is now the site of a national park. The Ancestral Pueblo people built pithouse villages, but eventually developed what are known today as “cliff dwellings” underneath overhangs in the area that provided shelter from the elements as well as protection from outsiders. People began inhabiting the area at about CE 600, and lived there until about 1280, when many people left the area. The archaeology of the Mesa Verde region is complex and distinctive; it is not the purpose of this section to delve too deeply into it, but rather to highlight it as one of the primary regions where Ancestral Pueblo habitation developed.

Chaco Canyon

Chaco Canyon in northwest New Mexico is an area where populations congregated to construct large contiguous roomed structures constructed from local sandstone (see Figures 3.6 and 3.7). While it is no longer considered that the structures were occupied at the same time and on a year-round occasion, the structures seemingly indicate that the area was of major importance to the inhabitants of the general area. Chaco Canyon development was slightly earlier than that of Mesa Verde, and its social influence has been seen by archaeologists to be much more widespread.

Figure 3.4  Cliff Palace. Mesa Verde National Park, Colorado. Photo by author.
than that of Mesa Verde. Cordell and McBrinn (2012: 185–202) offer an extensive discussion of the archaeological complex, technological changes, and the geographic influence held by the people of Chaco Canyon from about CE 900 until Chaco Canyon’s decline as a place of major importance at about CE 1130, perhaps resulting from a major drought at that time period.

Bandelier

Another location where groups of people lived together in a more centralized location is Bandelier National Monument, located west of Santa Fe (see Figure 3.8). Structures constructed in areas dug into volcanic tuff in the cliff face were occupied by small family units from about CE 600 to 1180, while larger pueblos built on the mesa tops and in the canyon bottoms between CE 1180 and 1325 supported larger populations.

Aztec National Monument

Early settlers mistakenly thought that people from the Aztec Empire in Mexico created these buildings and named the site “Aztec.” Aztec Ruins, built and used over a 200-year period, is the largest Ancestral Pueblo community in the Animas River valley. Concentrated on and below a terrace overlooking the Animas River, the
Figure 3.6  Pueblo Bonito. Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Photo by author.

Figure 3.7  Details of Structures from Pueblo Bonito. Chaco Culture National Historical Park. Photo by author.
people at Aztec built several multi-story buildings called “great houses” and many smaller structures. The construction at Aztec shows a strong influence from Chaco Canyon, the site of a major Ancestral Pueblo community to the south. Aztec may have been an outlying community of Chaco, a sort of ancillary place connected to the center to distribute food and goods to the surrounding population. It may have also been a center in its own right as Chaco’s influence waned after CE 1100. About CE 1300, the Ancestral Pueblo people left the region, migrating southeast to join existing communities along the Rio Grande, south to the Zuni area, or west to join the Hopi villages in Arizona. Excavations in the early 1900s uncovered thousands of well-preserved artifacts that provide glimpses into the lives of the Ancestral Pueblo people. A remarkable variety of food remains, stone and wood tools, cotton and feather clothing, fiber sandals and mats, pottery, and jewelry made of turquoise, obsidian, and shell reveal much about their use of local resources and trade with others.

Others
There are other large structures and amalgamation of population that have been found throughout the American Southwest. Archaeologically, such sites are relatively easily recognized and apparent, thus making them easy targets for illicit excavation and disturbance. Such archaeological ruins on federally owned or controlled lands, on lands owned or controlled by tribal governments, or on lands owned by other
American Indian or government agencies, are supposed to be protected by federal, state, and tribal laws against illegal actions. However, many people continue to disturb and loot archaeological sites for their artifacts and materials for numerous reasons.

Archaeologists have been able to trace the development and centralization of populations in the area of the Ancestral Pueblo until about 1250, during the time of what has been labeled the “Little Ice Age” when it was difficult for agriculturalists to grow crops (Cordell et al. 2007; Fagan 1999). When it became difficult or impossible to continue to support large populations in the areas where it had been possible in the past, the groups moved away from their centralized locations and into areas where smaller populations would be better able to survive. As the climate changed, people were able to adapt (or re-adapt) to local ecological niches that could support smaller groups of people.

CONTEMPORARY PEOPLES OF THE AREA

By the time European explorer Coronado entered the area in the mid-sixteenth century, local populations no longer lived in the sites that archaeologists see as the “pinnacle” of Ancestral Pueblo accomplishment. People had moved from the centralized areas such as Mesa Verde into areas where the populations could more easily support themselves. Religious systems were likely intact, but more localized rather than dependent on a centralized structure. Some regional areas have shared cultural backgrounds as well as shared archaeological histories.

The Spanish conquistadores encountered groups of people living in localized areas along permanent watercourses and in areas where agriculture was a relatively reliable economy. While they practiced similar technologies, these groups also no longer congregated in areas either seasonally or geographically, but remained in large multi-room and multi-storied structures. The Spanish (if they encountered the archaeological ruins) were unable to connect them directly to local pueblo populations.

Still, anthropologists believe that the descendants of the people who constructed, lived in, and participated at the archaeological sites across the American Southwest are directly related (by a series of generational gaps) to the people who now live in the pueblos of the American Southwest along the Rio Grande as well as to the west, such as the pueblo of Laguna and Acoma pueblo. The pueblo of Zuni lies near the border of New Mexico and Arizona. As Ferguson and Mills (1987: 244) note, the initial occupation of this pueblo probably began around CE 1325, while occupation of a pueblo south of current Zuni was occupied by about CE 1275.

Another group of pueblos occupy three mesas in northwestern Arizona called the “Hopi mesas.” The Hopi are a contemporary group of people who live today in the midst of the Navajo Reservation. The Hopi are comprised of fourteen villages, the oldest of which (“Old Oraibi”) is thought to have been continuously occupied since CE 1200. In addition, Hopi traditional stories and oral histories talk of many migrations (see Ferguson and Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2006: 148–149).
CONCLUSIONS

All the contemporary pueblo peoples of the American Southwest trace their ancestry to the Ancestral Pueblo people of the Four Corners region. Even the Navajo Nation traces some of their clans to what they continue to call Ánaasází (Warburton & Begay 2005: 535). People in the area developed out of a generalized hunting-and-gathering economy that relied heavily on natural plants and wild game. Over time, they began to rely more heavily on introduced and encouraged foodstuffs such as corn, beans, and squash as well as the technology associated with food production and storage. Throughout time the Ancestral Pueblo social organization in the area developed into a large and complex series of near-urban population centers stationed throughout the American Southwest. At about 1350, however, as a result of climatic and other pressures, the Ancestral Pueblo system waned, with population moving from the regional centers to more diffuse and peripheral areas. At the time of European contact in the sixteenth century, the pueblo populations of New Mexico and Arizona were fairly well established within their current locations.

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