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Review of *The Archaeology of Chaco Canyon: An Eleventh-Century Pueblo Regional Center*, edited by Stephen H. Lekson

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BOOK REVIEW



The Archaeology of Chaco Canyon: An Eleventh-Century Pueblo Regional Center, edited by Stephen H. Lekson. 540 pp., 8 color and 65 black-and-white illustrations, time line, foreword, two appendices, notes, references, and index. School of American Research Press, 2006. \$34.95 (Paper). ISBN 1-930618-48-4.

Reviewed by Carrie C. Heitman, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.



The *Archaeology of Chaco Canyon* is one of two synthesis volumes resulting from the National Park Service Chaco Project (1971-1982) (see also Mathien 2005). As the capstone to that project, this volume has much to offer the student of Chaco and those interested in the intellectual history and trajectories of archaeological theory. From 1999 to 2004, Stephen Lekson (and many others) organized six working conferences to address different dimensions of Chacoan prehistory. Broadly called the Chaco Synthesis, the topics included ecology and economy, architecture, the organization of production, the Chaco world, and society and polity and concluded with a meeting chaired by Lynne Sebastian. (The results of some of those meetings are published in detail elsewhere: *Kiva* 69:2; Cordell, Judge, and Piper 2001; and *American Antiquity* 66:1.) In addition to summary chapters on these six topics, the volume also includes five contextualizing studies that frame the Chaco phenomenon both in space and time.

The aim of this volume was to pull together Chaco Project data from the roughly 22 published monographs. But given the time and expertise that went into the process, the results are far richer and more varied. The volume also includes a comprehensive time line that charts 19 variables and a detailed appendix on Chacoan ecology and economy. The wealth of information addressed and interpreted in the text is truly a valuable contribution to the discipline. Many contributors have spent their careers working with these data; and their perspectives are both informed and, at times, in direct conflict with one another. In Sebastian's words, "When attempting to identify points of agreement that would lead to a

reconstruction or interpretation of the organization of Chacoan society, we could reach only a very few general agreements" (p. 402).

In her synthesis chapter, Sebastian concludes that the persistent disagreements among contributors hinge on two unresolved questions: "Was Chacoan society marked by institutionalized differences in social, economic, and political power? If so, what were the basis and structure of those inequalities?" (pp. 405–406). To use an apt analogy, the border pieces of the puzzle are in place, there are patches of clarity, but the whole picture is still coming into focus. The text contains many plausible and well-thought-out interpretations of what Chaco was, how it worked, and what became of it, but many contributors admit that some fundamental questions currently remain unanswerable. How many people lived in the great houses at different stages of development? What were the functions of great houses? What precisely was the relationship between great houses and small houses? These lacunae partially undermine the synthesis effort and obscure the bigger picture. The length of the text prohibits me from adequately addressing each contribution in turn. Using Sebastian's unanswered questions as a point of departure, I will instead touch on five broad themes present throughout the book: inequality, leadership, politics, ritual, and ethnographic analogy.

Contributors seem to generally agree on the presence of inequality during the Chaco era (witness the disparity between great houses and small houses), but the vertical differentiation of that hierarchy and its status as institutionalized remain contested. And while priritual and propolitic camps find evidence for priests and aggrandizers respectively, the basis of their accumulated power and leadership remains undetermined (see also Mills 2002:92).

While I agree with Sebastian that binary oppositions such as simultaneous versus sequential hierarchy might simply be another dyadic conceptualization that masks underlying questions (p. 405), it is clear that the conflict over the basis of inequality permeates all aspects of the discourse. Writing about Hopi, Whiteley (1998:80) made a similar observation regarding contradictions within ethnographic writings, arguing that "the reason lies in the epistemological disjunction of 'politics' from 'religion' in Western theoretical discourse, which is inadequate to systems of social inequality not assimilable to rationalist and materialist models of political structure."

Instead of searching for vertical hierarchy in the form of powerful individuals, Sebastian suggests that scholars focus on the collective power manifested in corporate entities such as clans, lineages, etc. Drawing from Ware (2001), some authors (Judge and Cordell, pp. 195, 208) use Puebloan ethnographic analogy to consider how nonkin-based sodalities may have integrated people and acquired power vis-à-vis other sodalities. But if (in these cases) we're looking for clear material signatures, Whiteley (1998:93) warns that "control of material wealth is simply not the measure of power in the Pueblos" and that ritual knowledge "serves as the same 'scheme' of value, the 'currency,' perhaps, of power."

One latent theme recurs throughout the volume regarding the ethnic or linguistic diversity of the canyon and outlier communities (Lekson, Windes, and McKenna, pp. 94, 96, 112; Judge and Cordell, p. 197; Toll, p. 149; Kantner and Kintigh, p. 175). Some see shared stylistic horizons as a low-grade method of integration (Kantner and Kintigh, p. 179). Others see something like hachure as much too broadly distributed (Toll, p. 132) and argue instead for overall organizational patterning as a shared ideological complex (Lekson and Duff, p. 336). Various authors stress the importance of scheduling for agriculture, labor, ritual events, and perhaps mate selection (Judge and Cordell, p. 194; Toll, p. 148; Vivian et al., p. 52) and envision an important role for dual organization as a possible integrating mechanism (Judge and Cordell, p. 195; see also Vivian 1990).

Relative to Sebastian's conclusions, it seems that specific or general stylistic complexes or perhaps event cycles offer preliminary insights into agency—a theme not explored in this volume. The contributing chapters generally focus on a top-down analysis of Chacoan social dynamics by exploring indicators of elite status (Lekson, pp. 12, 30–31; Lekson, Windes, and McKenna, p. 92; Lipe, pp. 286–287) and strategies of leadership legitimization (Kantner and Kintigh, pp. 175, 187; Nelson, pp. 341, 246, 369). If a broadly shared stylistic horizon served to reduce transaction costs and maintain broad assistance networks (Wiessner 2002:233), perhaps these equalizing dimensions also offered a way for participants to both buy in and level out degrees of hierarchical differentiation? As Toll warns (p. 149), our interpretations have become remarkably “joyless,” and clearly something joyful about the Chaco era must have inspired participating individuals for over three hundred years.

Finally, I agree wholeheartedly with Sebastian's suggestion to broaden the pool of cross-cultural comparisons. But I would caution against an abandonment of the underutilized corpus of Puebloan ethnography (Sebastian, p. 418). Individually and in aggregate, the contributions to *The Archaeology of Chaco Canyon* demonstrate the high level of scholarship that continues to inform and advance our understanding of local and regional social dynamics.

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