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Understanding Chaco: A Digital, Archival Approach

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MANY ASPECTS OF Chacoan prehistory remain unclear due to the inaccessibility of unpublished excavation records and photographs for the earliest excavations and explorations. As a result, key unanswered questions about the nature of Chaco itself and individual Chaco villages and towns—small- rather than large-scale issues—have become more, rather than less, significant over time. Despite the magnitude of the excavations at Pueblo Bonito and Pueblo del Arroyo and the amount and range of materials recovered, our knowledge of why these sites were built and how they were used remains remarkably uncertain or, at best, highly contested.

To explore some of these questions, in June 2002, the School of American Research, in Santa Fe, invited 12 Southwestern archaeologists and information science specialists to explore the creation of a digital research archive of information from the Chaco Canyon region.

As an initial step toward accomplishing this goal, the group suggested that the effort concentrate on a small set of diverse sites: Pueblo Bonito, Bc 50, Bc 51, Bc 53, and Aztec Ruins. In 2003, the research proposal for the Chaco Digital Initiative was generously funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, with further support from the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville.

To date, we have compiled extensive information from 17 collections nationwide, including the Latin American Library at Tulane University, in New Orleans; the Smithsonian's National Anthropological Archive, in Washington, D.C., and the American Museum of Natural History, in New York. In April 2005, we released an inventory database of the compiled collections information on our website. Since that time, we have begun to work with the Chaco Culture National Historical Park (CCNHP) Tribal Consultation Committee to develop the best practices with regard to the dissemination of archaeological data online. Over the last two years, we have also worked closely with the CCNHP to digitize roughly 50 years of "before and after" stabilization image documentation, which will be available for researchers' use. In addition, funds from the Mellon Foundation grant have gone toward the digitization of the Neil M. Judd and Frank H. H. Roberts photo collections at the National Anthropological Archive and

the University of New Mexico/School of American Research field school photographs at the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, in Albuquerque. We ultimately hope to include the excavation images from the Hyde Exploring Expedition and Earl Morris's work at Aztec Ruins, which



Excavated eastern portion of Pueblo Bonito, showing unused foundation walls exposed by trenches on the northeast side of the ruin (lower left). Photo by O. C. Havens, 1923; reproduced courtesy of the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

will allow researchers greater access to these important images.

We are currently in the final development stages of the relational database. Once data entry is completed, this database will integrate information from the archival sources into a query-driven and web-accessible relational database, which is due to launch in early 2008.

In a paper presented at the 2006 Southwest Symposium in Las Cruces, New Mexico, we explored how recently acquired archival documents might shed new light on old research questions. The paper focused on two important issues: the often-debated question of the numbers of inhabitants, both for the canyon as a whole and for individual great houses, and the role of ritual in Chacoan society. A more complete version of that paper is currently in development; in the space remaining, we would like to briefly consider the potential of archival resources to help address these issues.

To date, estimates of population levels within the canyon as a whole or even for particular great houses have varied tremendously, with recent studies increasingly proposing small (50 to 125 people) populations at great houses. Consistent with these estimates has been the long-recognized, but inadequately understood, paradox of the limited numbers of burials recovered during excavations at Chetro Ketl, Pueblo Alto, Pueblo Bonito, and Pueblo del Arroyo. The result, as Gwinn Vivian has noted, is that current understandings of Chaco often suggest “vacant cities, festive pilgrims, and wholesale consumption of goods in brief but periodic events at canyon great houses.” Taking one such unique example under consideration, the northern burial complex in Pueblo Bonito, how can archival sources help us better understand some of these issues?

Mounting narrative evidence from the archives suggests that pervasive looting took place in the “burial mounds” on the south side of the canyon from the 1890s to the 1930s. These mounds were, quite plausibly, the refuse mounds associated with small house sites like Bc 50 and Bc 51. The frequency of burials and associated grave goods was noted by Marietta and Richard Wetherill, War-

Bonito may have had even greater significance in relation to extramural burial practices. Who was buried in Bonito and why?

Located in the oldest portion of Pueblo Bonito in an interconnected complex of four rooms (28, 55, 32, and 33), the northern suite arguably contained the most remarkable assemblage of materials

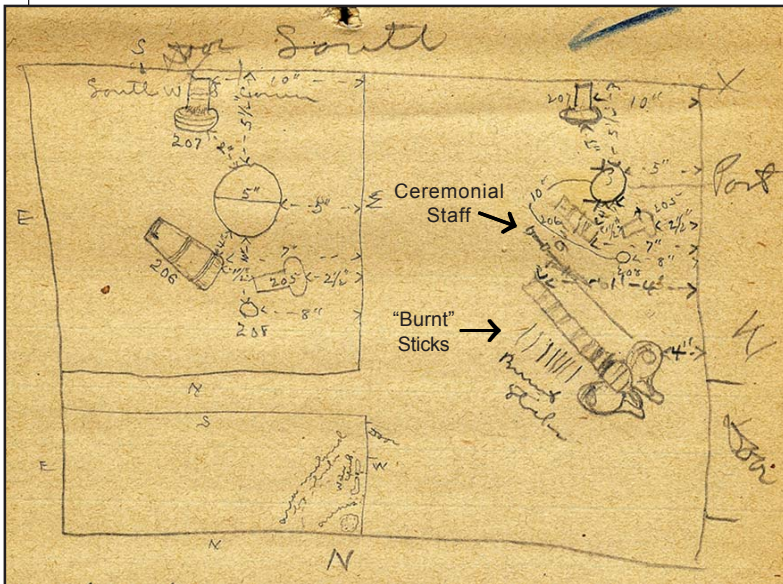


The cover of George Pepper's 1896 field journal for rooms 32 and 33 in Pueblo Bonito, at Chaco Canyon.

Previous considerations of the disarticulated and articulated human remains in both suites (the northern and the western) have concluded that the fragmentary remains were the result either of flooding or vandalism. In the northern cluster, Pepper argued that water was to blame. However, field drawings from his 1896 notebook (such as the one reproduced here) show intact stratigraphy in room 32—the room through which water would need to have flowed to ever reach room 33. His field drawings also reveal that the fragmentary human remains from room 32 included intact grave offerings. For example, the right side of the figure at the left shows a pelvis and spinal column. Note the line of “burnt” sticks to the left of the spinal column and the ceremonial staff to the right.

While these provocative sources do not bring closure to a century of debate, they do give researchers new data to work with for those up to the challenge of deciphering handwriting and pulling together pieces from an ever-incomplete puzzle. Perhaps the relatively small numbers of great house burials are not indicators of great house population levels, but rather, a specialized form of burial practice that was limited primarily to certain individuals. We need not assume that all great house residents were necessarily buried within the great house itself. Some may have been buried in the abundant small house mounds, for example, that were contemporaneous.

In time, we hope the aggregation of these resources will lead to a greater understanding of Chacoan prehistory. For more information on the Chaco Digital Initiative and to download a selection of original field notes and drawings, please visit our website at www.chacoarchive.org.



This drawing of a section of room 32 in Pueblo Bonito at Chaco Canyon was done by archaeologist George Pepper in 1896.

ren Moorehead, Frederick Putnam, Alfred Tozzer, William Farabee, Edgar Hewett, and Neil Judd. In his field journals, George Pepper also recorded the frequency with which Wetherill and his crew would return with whole pots from sites on the south side during his excavation tenure at Pueblo Bonito.

Taken cumulatively, these sources suggest a greater number of human remains dating roughly to the Chaco era existed and that the two dense burial clusters in Pueblo