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Re-evaluating the “House” in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico

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IN RECENT YEARS, a growing number of archaeologists have explored the potential of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s concept of “house societies.” His and subsequent works describe ethnographic contexts where people are organized through houses ranked according to their age and connection to ancestors.

Using Puebloan ethnographic literature and crosscultural comparisons, the house model helps to draw out the symbolic meaning of Chaco-era architecture. Looking specifically at the classificatory distinction between “great houses” and “small houses” in Chaco Canyon (A.D. 850–1180), my research compares the evidence for house creation, manifestation, maintenance, and abandonment in both great and small house contexts. Using data generated in part by the Chaco Digital Initiative, I evaluate how a house society model might yield new insights with regard to four symbolic dimensions of house construction: the use of wood, directional offerings, resurfacing practices, and intramural human and animal burial practices.

Over the last decade, Chacoan scholarship has focused less on the canyon core and more on the vast network of approximately 200 outlier communities in the San Juan Basin. These outlying great houses demonstrate degrees of architectural similarities and differences with those great houses in the canyon. Identification of road network segments and a shared suite of architectural characteristics has yielded new perspectives on the scale of this cultural florescence and raised new questions about the significance of parallel developments. Recent studies have compelled researchers to ask questions about the nature and function of the Chaco world in a larger spatial context.

To better understand what the Chacoan florescence meant and how it organized people, my house-centered research endeavors to explore their vision of the cosmos, as well as their place in it. Shifting the theoretical lens in this way will serve to complement quantitative studies (for example, labor, environment, and room size) with qualitative estimates of what anchored the world view of canyon residents. The house model can serve to integrate ceremonial dimensions of house creation and allow better understanding of how these structures shaped and wholly reflected changing patterns of social organization through directional associations, differential access to origins, and cyclical processes of ritual renewal.



Top: Excavation of rooms and walls in Bc51, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. Bottom: Section of Bc50, showing floor features. (Images courtesy of the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, University of New Mexico).

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