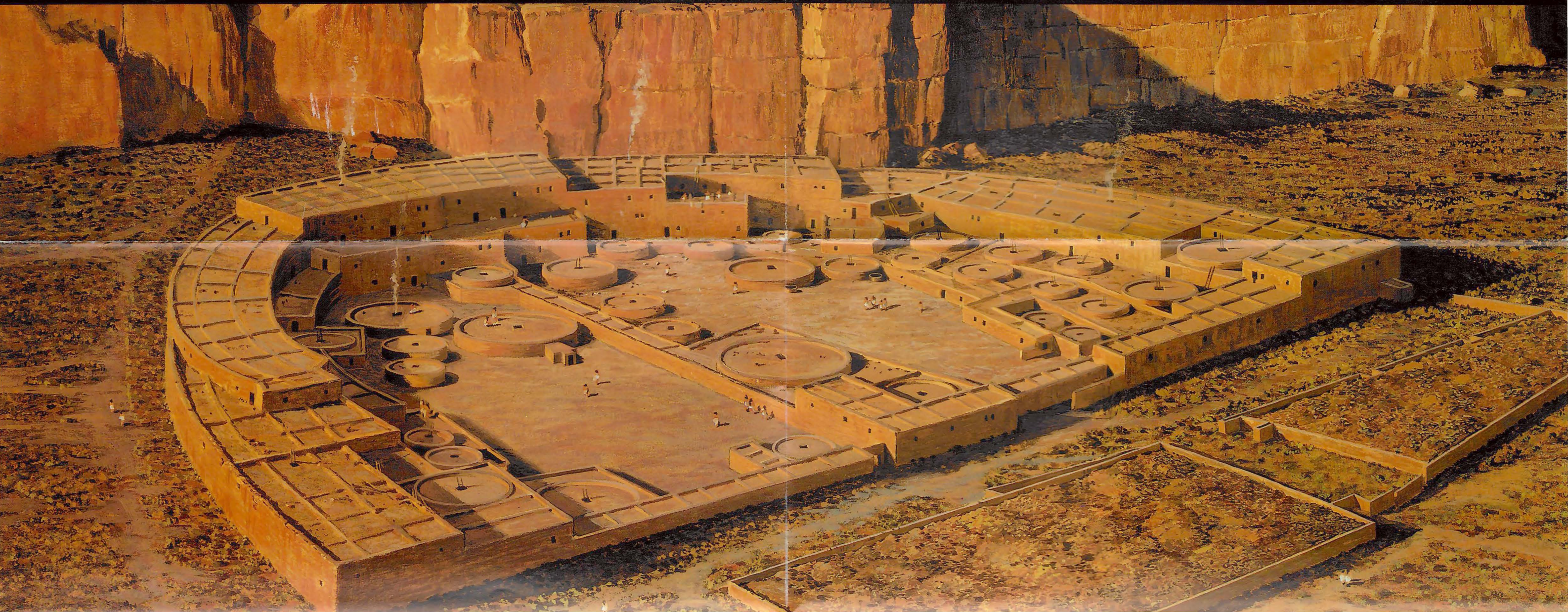


Chaco

Chaco Culture
National Historical Park
New Mexico

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Pueblo Bonito was the largest and may have been the most important town in the Chacoan system. This painting by Lloyd K. Townsend is a well-researched though still hypothetical view of the greathouse about A.D. 1100, when it stood four stories high and contained hundreds of rooms and dozens of kivas.

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A City of Towns

Chaco Canyon, for all its wild beauty, seems an unlikely place for the Anasazi culture to take root and flourish. This is desert country, with long winters, short growing seasons, and marginal rainfall. Yet a thousand years ago, this valley was a center of urban life. Pueblo Indians farmed the lowlands and built great masonry towns that connected with other towns over a far-reaching network of roads. In architecture, in complexity of community life, in social organization, the Anasazi of Chaco Canyon reached heights rarely matched and never surpassed by their kindred in the Four Corners region.

The cultural flowering of the Chaco Anasazi began in the 10th century A.D. We can see it most clearly in the architecture. They started building on a much larger scale. Using the same masonry technique as before—walls one stone thick with generous use of

mud mortar—they built rooms several times larger than previously and added second and sometimes third floors to older structures. Six of the large pueblos—Pueblo Bonito, Chetro Ketl, Una Vida, Peñasco Blanco, Hungo Pavi, and Kin Bineola—were started at this time. This pattern of a large pueblo with oversized rooms, surrounded by conventional villages, caught on throughout the region. New communities built along these lines sprang up. Old villages added large pueblos. Eventually there were more than 75 of these towns, all closely tied to Chaco by an extensive system of roads.

In the 11th century Chaco became firmly established as the political and economic center of the Chaco Plateau. There may have been as many as 5,000 persons living in some 400 settlements in and around Chaco Canyon. A new masonry technique—

the use of cored masonry walls with outer surfaces of shaped stone—allowed walls to rise to more than five stories in height. Some large buildings show signs of being planned from the start, in contrast to the usual Pueblo custom of adding rooms as needed. Chaco at this time may have been the hub of an extensive political and economic system, which drew in goods and commodities and directed affairs over a wide region.

How to account for this sudden blossoming? One likely theory is that Chaco developed as a regional center mainly in response to environmental changes. The vagaries of weather made farming chancy. One year might be wet, another dry, one growing season long, another short. Chaco may have been a kind of capital that directed the agricultural life of the community over a wide area, tempering bad years with good. Food could be stored

here and redistributed as required. The outlying towns can be thought of as satellites that performed for their locality the same function that Chaco did for the region as a whole. This theory might explain the distinctions of architecture at Chaco and why more elaborate artifacts—the belongings of an elite?—have been found in the large pueblos than in the smaller dwellings.

The decline of Chaco apparently coincided with a prolonged drought in the San Juan Basin during the 12th century. Lack of rainfall combined with overpopulation may have led to food shortages that not even the clever irrigation methods of the Chacoans could overcome. Under these pressures there came a slow social disintegration. The people began to drift away. They retreated to better watered regions, leaving behind impressive evidence of their former sway over a vast territory.

Clues to the Past

The Road System

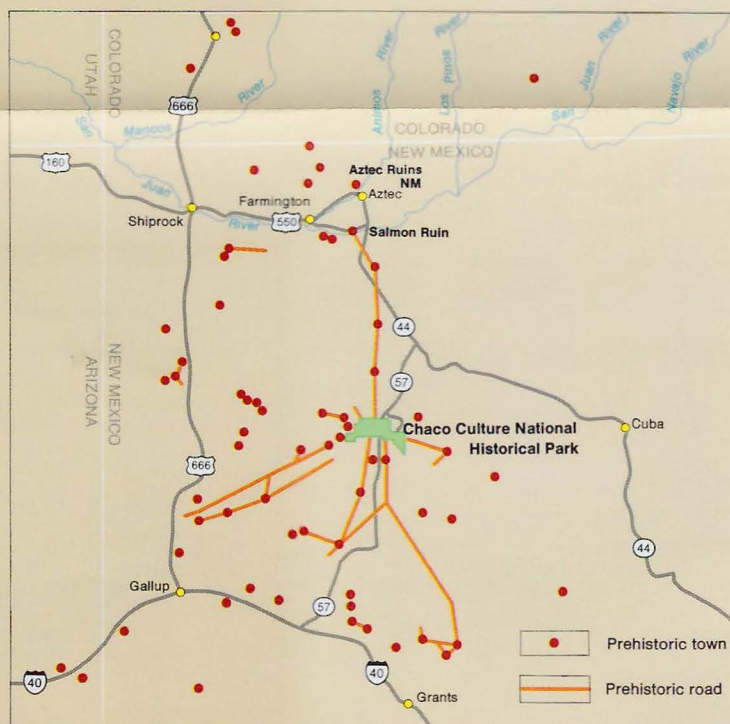
The true extent of the ancient Chacoan road system, as revealed by aerial photographs, impressed even veteran archeologists. There were more than 300 miles of road connecting Chaco to some 75 communities. The longest road presently known runs 42 miles north toward the prehistoric towns now called Salmon Ruin and Aztec Ruins. On the north-south roads, settlements lay at travel intervals of approximately one day.

These roads were not simply trails worn by centuries of foot travel. They were the productions of relatively sophisticated engineering and required a great deal of energy to plan, construct, and maintain. They were laid out in long, straight lines with scant regard for terrain. The roads averaged 30 feet in width. Construction was simple. On sloping ground the roadbed was leveled and a rock berm built to retain the fill. Where the road passed over bare rock, it

was often bordered by masonry walls or a line of boulders.

The roads appear to date from the 11th and 12th centuries, a time of expanding population. Several roads converged at Pueblo Alto from the north and a well-defined stairway led to the canyon bottom. Aside from its obvious purpose of easing travel within the Chaco world, this network could have facilitated communications and the transport of goods and materials between towns and helped bind Chacoans into a single society.

Chaco
and Its Principal Outliers ▶



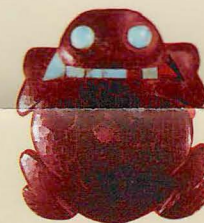
Trade

During Classic times, Chaco was the center of a far-flung trading network. Goods were exchanged internally within the Chacoan system and externally with groups as far south as Mexico. The distinctive Chaco black-on-white pottery (two fine examples are shown at right) largely originated in out-lying towns to the south and west. One estimate is that only about 20 percent of the pottery used here was made here. There were good reasons for this: better clay in other villages and more wood available there for firing the vessels.

What Chaco lacked in pottery it more than made up for in turquoise ornaments. Raw turquoise was imported from distant mines and transformed with exquisite craftsmanship into necklaces, bracelets, and pendants. Great quantities of such jewelry have been found here, more than in any other Southwestern area. The small jet frog above, found in Pueblo Bonito,

has eyes and a collar made of turquoise.

Other evidence of the extent of the trading system are the great number of seashell artifacts, which were also strung into necklaces, and several dozen copper bells and the remains of macaws or parrots. The two latter finds suggest contact, if only indirectly, with Mexico, perhaps with the ancient Toltecs.

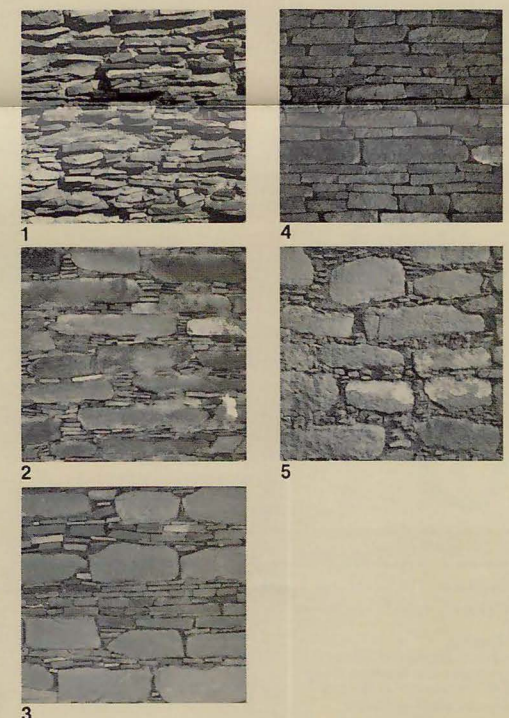


American Museum of Natural History

Masonry

The Chaco Anasazi were skilled masons. Working without metal tools or any formal mathematics, they put up vast communal buildings that still compel admiration. Their methods evolved over the centuries. The earliest dwellings were constructed with simple walls one stone thick, laid up with generous courses of mud mortar. The oldest walls in Pueblo Bonito used this type of masonry 1. When the Chacoans began to build higher and more extensively, they employed walls with thick inner cores of rubble and fairly thin veneers of facing stone. These walls tap-

ered as they rose, evidence of the planning that went into the large-scale construction of Classic times (A.D. 1020-1120). An early example of this type of wall 2 is characterized by large blocks of irregular sandstone chinked with smaller stones set into the mortar. About half the ground floor of Pueblo Bonito was built in the style of masonry types 3 and 4 (late 11th century). Oddly enough, both of these building types were employed at roughly the same time. While both types are pleasing to the eye, there's evidence that the stone-work was plastered over. The last distinctive masonry style, called McElmo 5, appears in Kin Kletso, a late 11th century dwelling. Its walls were built with a thin inner core of rubble and thick outer veneers of shaped sandstone, somewhat similar to the masonry style used at Mesa Verde. To our taste, it's less workmanlike than the earlier types, but the Chacoans may have thought differently.



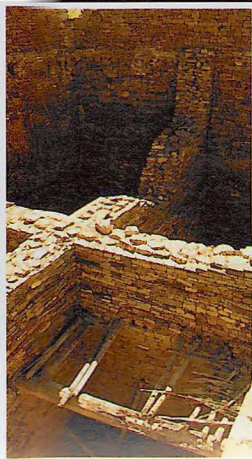
A Guide to Chaco



Pueblo del Arroyo was a D-shaped greathouse that rose three and four stories high in the rear, stepping down to one story in front. About 400

persons could have lived here. Abutting the rear wall is a tri-walled structure, one of a handful known in the Southwest. These structures are sub-

jects of some speculation, but no one can say for sure what they were used for.

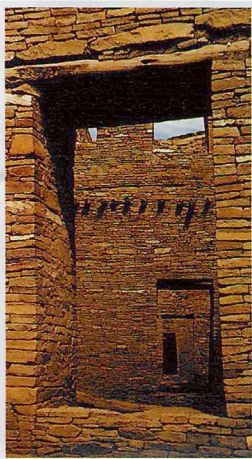


This flooring in del Arroyo was carefully constructed of layers of beams, poles, sticks, bark, and adobe mud.



New Alto is a small ruin that stands on the north mesa, near Pueblo Alto. Originally two stories high in places, it had 51 rooms and a single kiva.

The village was built in late Classic times, in the masonry style known as McElmo. The builders may have been migrants from the north.



Chacoan masons worked with precision and care, as these doors at Pueblo Bonito show.



One of the largest Chacoan villages, Chetro Keti flourished in the mid-11th century. Among its interesting features are two great kivas and two

elevated kivas. The remains of a colonnade (later filled in during remodeling) along the rear wall of the plaza suggest influence from Mexico. One

extraordinary find here was a pile of broken wooden objects of various shapes and decoration. They were probably part of some ritual apparatus.



Casa Rinconada was built about A.D. 1100, near the end of Classic times. There is speculation that because it is not close to any village it may have

been a center of some sort for the community at large.

Photo above by David Muench.

The Ruins of Chaco Canyon

The best way to see the ruins is by conducted walks, given periodically by rangers. For information on these tours and the evening campfire programs, inquire at the visitor center. Groups expecting special services should schedule them in advance with the superintendent.

Begin your visit at the visitor center. Exhibits there will help you understand Chaco and its early inhabitants. Rangers will answer your questions and help you make the most of your time.

The ruin closest to the visitor center is **Una Vida**, reached over a short trail from the parking lot. Only partially excavated, it looks much as it did when Lt. James H. Simpson, U.S. Army, described it in 1849. Construction started in the mid-10th century and continued for about a hundred years. It held some 100 rooms and 8 kivas at the time of abandonment.

Further down the canyon are clustered five major ruins. The largest and best known of the Chacoan

greathouses is **Pueblo Bonito**, occupied from the early 900s to about 1200. Built in stages, this pueblo in its final form contained some 800 rooms and 37 kivas and rose four stories high. The pueblo was intensively excavated in the 1920s and is the "type" site for the Classic Bonito Phase (A.D. 1020 to 1120) of Chacoan culture.

Chetro Keti was started about A.D. 1038. Completed in most respects by 1054, it was remodeled and added to in the early 1100s. It holds an estimated 500 rooms and 16 kivas. The enclosed plaza is typical of pueblos built during Classic times.

Pueblo del Arroyo, like its close neighbors, was also built in stages. The central part was started about A.D. 1075; the north and south wings were added between 1105 and 1117. It contains about 284 rooms and 17 kivas.

Kin Kletso, beginning about 1059, was built in the masonry style called McElmo. The last construction

date recorded is 1178. It has 55 rooms on the ground floor and 5 enclosed kivas, and may have risen three stories on the north side.

Casa Rinconada, on the south side of the canyon, is the largest great kiva in the park. The trail leading to this ruin passes by several villages contemporary with it and continues up the mesa to **Tsin Kletsin**, notable for the fine view.

Hiking trails, as indicated on the map, lead to a number of other ruins. **Pueblo Alto**, on top of the mesa, is important as the junction of several prehistoric roads. **Casa Chiquita** and **Peñasco Blanco** can be reached by hiking from the central canyon. **Wijiji**, whose construction resembles that of many outliers, can be reached by a trail from the campground.

About Your Visit

The park is located in northwestern New Mexico. From the north turn off N. Mex. 44 at Blanco Trading Post and follow N. Mex. 57 for 30 miles to the north entrance. The visitor center is 3 miles farther. From the south, turn north on N. Mex. 57 from I-40 at Thoreau and go 44 miles on the paved road. A marked turn-off begins a 20-mile stretch of unpaved road leading to the south entrance. The visitor center is 1½ miles ahead. Inquire locally or call the park (505-786-5384) about the condition of the dirt road during bad weather.

No lodging, gasoline, repair service, or food are available at the park. The nearest town is 60 miles away. On weekdays staples can usually be purchased at trading posts on N. Mex. 44. The Park Service operates a campground a mile from the visitor center. Tables, fireplaces, and central toilets are provided; water is only available at the visitor center. There are turnouts for small trailers but no utility connections. Trailers over 30 feet long cannot be accommodated. Camping is limited to 14 days.

Regulations The superintendent and his staff are here to help you understand and enjoy the park and to protect all prehistoric remains and the plant and animal life. The Federal Antiquities Act of 1906 and the Archeological Resources Protection Act of 1979 prohibit the appropriation, injury, destruction or removal of any object of antiquity, or the excavation, injury, or destruction of any ruin on Federal land. Please leave all antiquities and broken bits of pottery where they lie. They may contribute to research and to the enjoyment of visitors who come after you. **For your safety and the preservation of the park's resources, stay on designated trails and do not climb on the ruins.**

Administration Chaco Culture National Historical Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Star Route 4, Box 6500, Bloomfield, New Mexico 87413, is in immediate charge.

To learn more about Chaco Robert H. Lister and Florence C. Lister, *Chaco Canyon: Archeology and Archeologists* (Albuquerque, 1981), an account of the human habitation of the canyon as revealed by a century of archeological work. Alden C. Hayes, David M. Brugge, and W. James Judge, *Archeological Survey of Chaco Canyon, New Mexico* (Washington, 1980), a technical summary of recent archeological investigations at the park. Douglas and Barbara Anderson, *Chaco Canyon: Center of a Culture*, a popular summary of Chacoan prehistory.

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