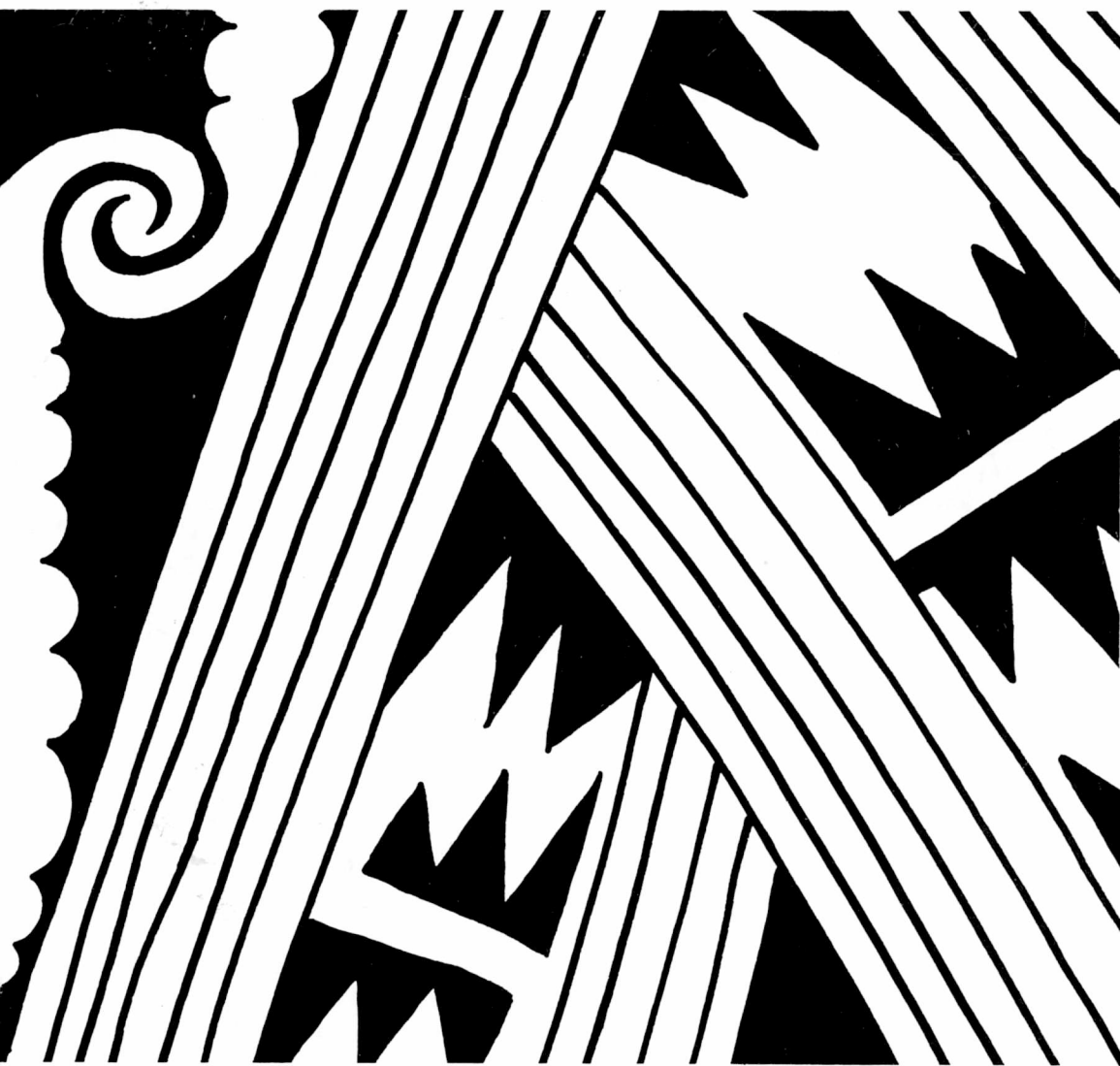
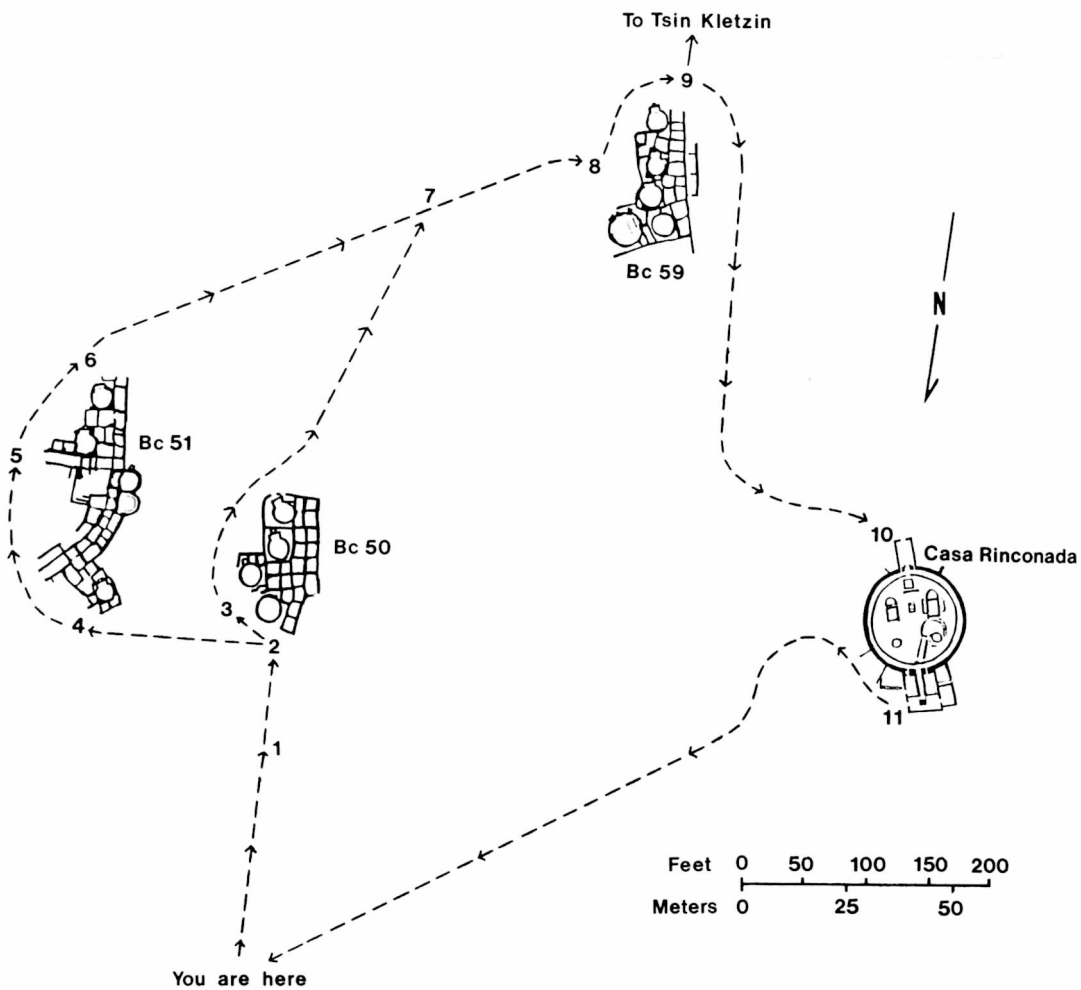


**CASA RINCONADA
TRAIL**



**CHACO CULTURE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
NEW MEXICO**





SMALL HOUSES AND CASA RINCONADA

This 4/10 mile trail visits three small house sites, and the great kiva of Casa Rinconada. The trail is steep in places, with loose gravel on slopes, and slippery when wet. Sometimes it comes close to deep excavated rooms. Please stay on the marked trail, and watch your footing!

Congress made these sites part of a national park because they are national treasures, which belong to everybody. Help us preserve them by not disturbing or defacing them, and not removing artifacts. Each one removed robs all of us of valuable information about Chaco, and it is illegal. The walls can be unstable, so to help protect them, and yourself, please do not climb or lean on them.

The “rincon” (box canyon) saw much archeological work from 1931 to 1947, when the University of New Mexico and the School of American Research operated the country’s first archeological field school. Many professional archeologists around the world today first learned their science in the dust of Chaco.

The trail visits three Anasazi house sites, then Casa Rinconada (“House in a Box Canyon”). Numbered markers match numbered paragraphs in this booklet. The lighter printed portions give “a little more.” If you have a question after the regular paragraph it might be in there. If not, ask a Ranger and we’ll find out together.

At Stop Three, you can either visit the second house site, or cut across to the third house site, prior to Casa Rinconada.

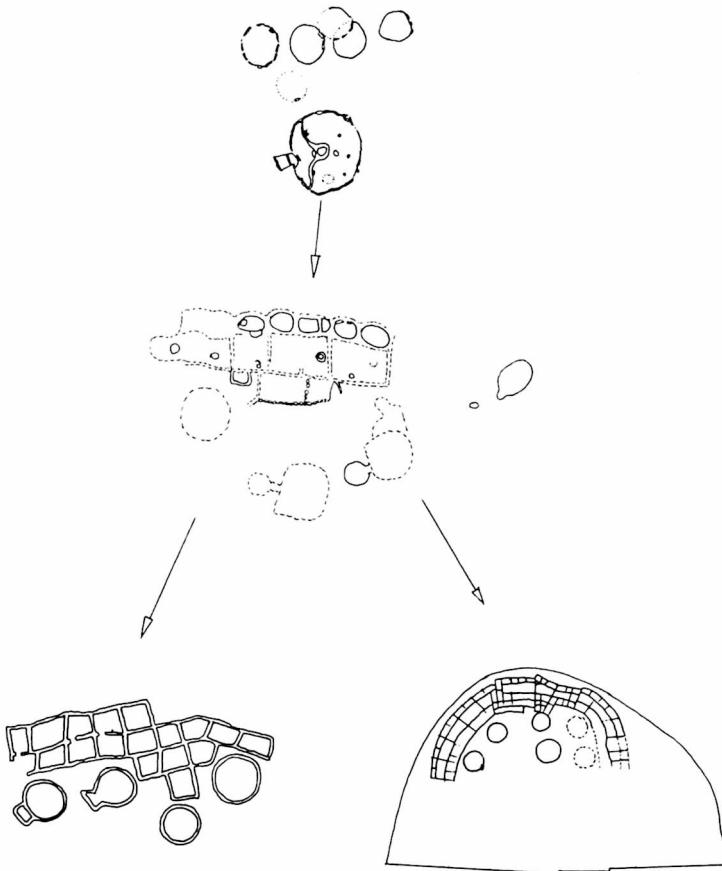
STOP ONE

Buried around you, invisible, are some of the first homes in the canyon. As ancestors of the Anasazi settled into the new life of agriculture about A.D. 400, which meant living in one place, they first dug pithouses. Families lived here in pithouses four hundred years before the masonry homes up ahead, and the great houses such as Pueblo Bonito were built. Remains of pithouses have been found throughout Chaco Canyon.

Surely we have not discovered all the pithouses in this rincon. Because pithouses were underground, they don’t last well. The roofs collapse, then sand blows in. But what we have found tells us that Chaco Anasazi culture did not suddenly spring into being with the great buildings on the other side of the canyon. The pithouses, which are here though you can’t see them, begin the story of the Anasazi in Chaco Canyon.

STOP TWO

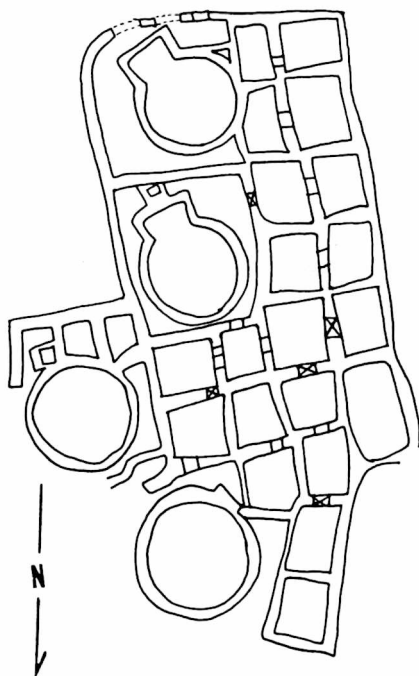
By A.D. 750-800, Anasazi families began to move from pithouses to above-ground masonry houses. This was not sudden, and for a long time they used both. Archeologists have noticed they developed a house plan which lasted for three centuries, even showing up in some great houses (see diagram this page). The pattern began as an arc of single-story masonry storage rooms, with their pithouse dwellings in the curve of the arc. Later, the arcs developed into living and working quarters backed by smaller storage rooms, but still with pit structures, often lined with masonry walls, in front of the roomblock. This combination of a pit structure with a block of rooms forms the basic construction unit of Anasazi buildings. Although the round masonry-lined pit structure probably evolved into the below-ground ceremonial room, the kiva, some archeologists think these pit structures were still used for both living quarters and for ceremonies.



Transition of sites from A.D. 450 to 1050

(Drawing by Lyle Yazzie)

Small houses are quite different from great houses in architecture and masonry technique. For one thing, small houses are generally only one story, while great houses are multi-story. (The small house in front of you was a single-story with a five-room block of two-story rooms at the center.) Another difference is that small houses had scant or no foundations, and rooms were added a few at a time, as needed. Great houses were architecturally preplanned, with wide foundations. Even the masonry technique is very different. This small house has walls of randomly sized rocks, laid up with much mortar. Great house masonry is finely dressed stone carefully laid to make massive “cored” walls (see drawing), with little mortar between the facing stones. This is one reason the great houses tend to have lasted better than the small houses. They were not so dependent on mortar, which eventually washes out, to hold the walls together.



Bc 50



Cored Masonry
(Can be seen at Pueblo Bonito
and other great houses)



Compound Masonry
(Found here and at some
great houses)

(Drawing by Lyle Yazzie)

STOP THREE

People continually modify neighborhoods. We remodel our homes. We abandon buildings, and build new ones. Often, then as now, people build new buildings right over the remains of old ones. Archeologists call this 'time depth.' Here, some floors lie *five feet* and *three hundred years* above the first Anasazi home floor. The walls you see are from the last home built here, some time after A.D. 1050.

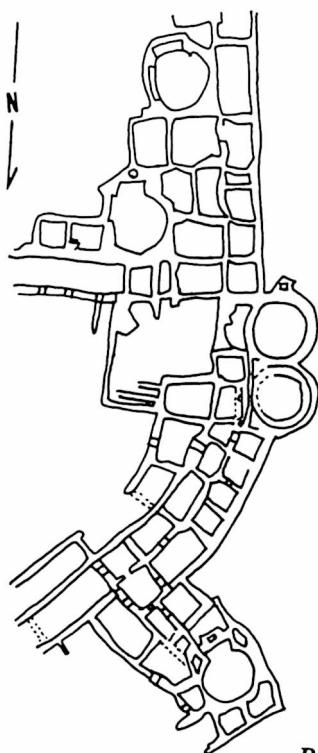
Archeologists once believed these relatively simple small houses must have been built long before the grandeur of Pueblo Bonito and other great houses across the canyon. However, tree-ring dates show these small houses existed at the same time as the great houses. People who lived in this house could look across the canyon and see the activity at Pueblo Bonito and Chetro Ketl.

Here you may either take the trail to the left to visit another small house, with more and different information; or you may go to the right and rejoin the path at Stop Seven.

STOP FOUR

This site was excavated in 1936-37 by Clyde Kluckhohn with the University of New Mexico. Nineteen rooms and six kivas were examined, but the house probably contains more. Although this house has many rooms, only a few were used at any one time. The "fill" in most of the rooms contained refuse and human burials, indicating that some rooms had been abandoned while others were still in use; these became trash bins. The rest of the fill was debris from collapsed walls and roofs, then windblown sand.

Again, as at the last stop, an earlier structure fronted by pithouses was beneath the building you see. Tree-ring dates (A.D. 1043 and 1077) prove the one you see was built during the same period as the great houses. (this is quite a puzzle, discussed more at Stop Seven.) Trash deposits, particularly broken pottery, show time depth of several hundred years.



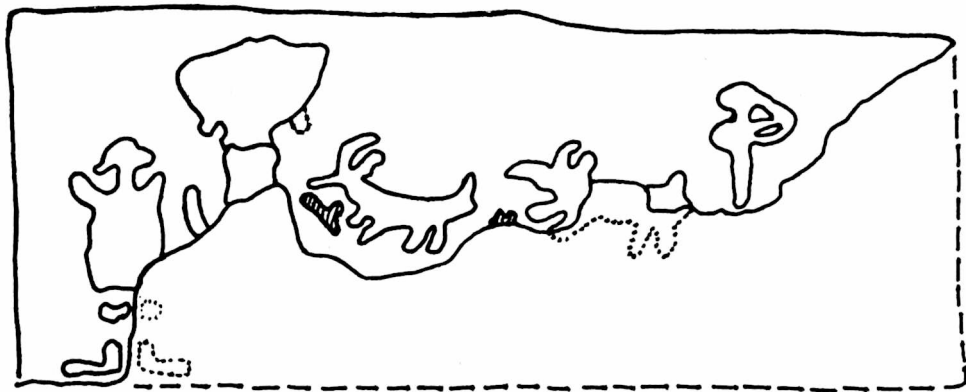
Bc 51

The two rooms to your right and front contained fallen roofing materials. They showed that roof beams usually were cottonwood, sometimes pinyon. Pinyon branches and juniper slats were laid across the beams, finally covered with a layer of adobe.

STOP FIVE

The large recess on the south side of this kiva is sometimes found in Chacoan kivas built after A.D. 1050. Similar kivas excavated north of here, in the Mesa Verde region, are called "keyhole" kivas. Their presence here in Chaco Canyon suggests increasing influence from the north after A.D. 1050. All the kivas at this house site have been partially backfilled to preserve floor features. Beneath the fill of this kiva are an encircling masonry bench, a niche in the north wall, and a central firepit. A masonry ventilator shaft under the southern recess supplied fresh air. A hatch through the roof let smoke out, as well as being where the Anasazi entered via ladder.

All these kivas show extensive use and remodeling. For instance, this one has seven layers of plaster. A painted mural, one of thirty-one layers of plaster, was discovered in another keyhole kiva on the southeast side of this house. It has red and white figures, including men with bows and arrows, a humpbacked flute player, and maybe dogs. That kiva was completely backfilled to preserve it.



Kiva mural

(Kluckhohn - 1939)

STOP SIX

Many of the approximately 130 burials from these three houses were within rooms, others in trash mounds. Typically, remains are in shallow pits, with few grave goods. Adults were often laid on twilled grass mats, and infants

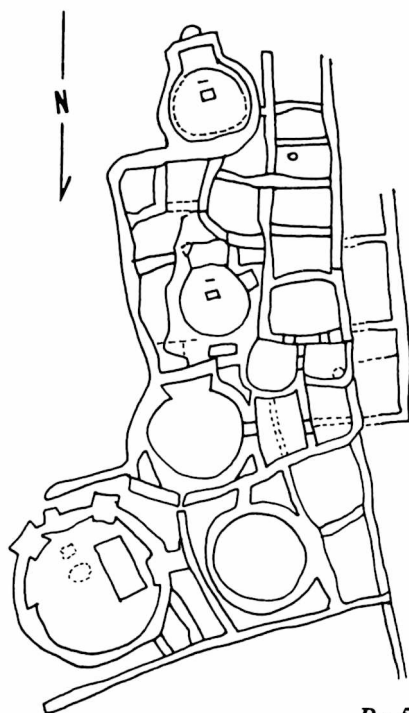
sometimes wrapped entirely in mats. Because graves are shallow and not lined or covered with masonry, most burials were disturbed by later Anasazi burials and by animals. Isolated human bones were scattered throughout the fill in both the rooms and the kivas, probably the remains of yet earlier burials.

Burials at small house sites differ from those at the great houses. Pueblo Bonito has been extensively excavated and serves well as a comparison. Here in small house sites, burials usually contained utilitarian items, such as a broken bowl, or a worn “metate” (corn-grinding stone). Over at Pueblo Bonito, some of the approximately 125 burials were accompanied by enormous quantities of worked shell, and much turquoise in beads, bracelets and pendants. This difference might reflect Anasazi social organization, or might indicate how the two types of buildings functioned. There is also a difference in the number of burials. The great houses don’t have as many as we’d expect. Some think that the relatively few burials found at Pueblo Bonito suggest a seasonal occupation, while the proportionately larger number of burials at the small house sites could indicate year-round habitation. Another interpretation is that this reflects different uses for the buildings.

STOP SEVEN

The three small houses on this trail have been left open, but virtually every mound you can see is another small house, which has been either excavated and backfilled, or not excavated. The site in front of you looked like all the other mounds before it was excavated. Some *three hundred* small house sites have been found in the central canyon area.

One of the great puzzles of Chaco is the relationship between these small houses and the great houses. In size, masonry, design, burials, and other ways small houses seem different from great houses. Yet today we realize they were built and used at the same time, and perhaps by the same people! Some researchers think perhaps an elite group lived in the great houses such as Pueblo Bonito and Chetro Ketl, while common folk lived in these small houses. Others suggest that most Anasazi lived in small houses,



Bc 59

while the great houses were community buildings or storage facilities. (This is common today. Most of us live in modest homes but work, shop and worship in larger community buildings.) Yet another idea is two separate cultural groups living in the canyon, following different lifestyles. Each model has evidence for it and against it. It's a great subject for argument at archeological meetings!

STOP EIGHT

This house, site BC 59, had at least twenty rooms and five kivas. As usual, the house you see is the last one built at this location. Time depth is most evident in the kiva to your left. With each successive construction, the Anasazi built a new kiva right over the old one. Each time, the kiva was larger and higher.

The houses in the rincon were part of a dense settlement of about fifty homes clustered around South Gap, the major break between the mesas to the southwest. A similar community flourished at Fajada Gap, four miles east. Each of these natural gaps was the route for prehistoric roads entering the canyon.

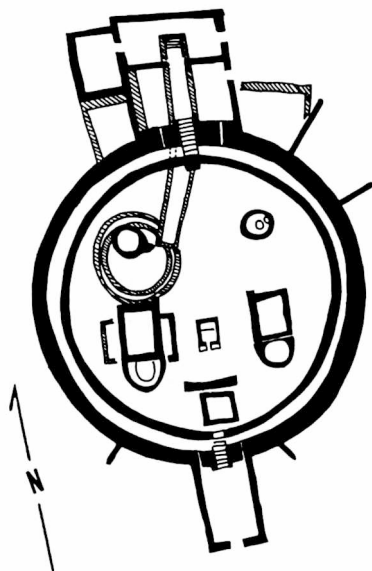
STOP NINE

This is the trail to Tsin Kletzin, an unexcavated great house on the mesa top. The hike is three miles roundtrip. A backcountry permit is required.

Go to the right to get to the great kiva of Casa Rinconada.

STOP TEN

If Chaco had only small houses, it would be like many other Anasazi communities. But something different happened here. Chaco Canyon became the center for some sort of a regional system. Archeologically we know the system is there, but we are not at all sure how it worked. However it was organized, the system involved far flung communities ("outliers") tied together with a network of roads, and it produced magnificent structures such as the great houses across the canyon, and Casa Rinconada, which you are about to enter.

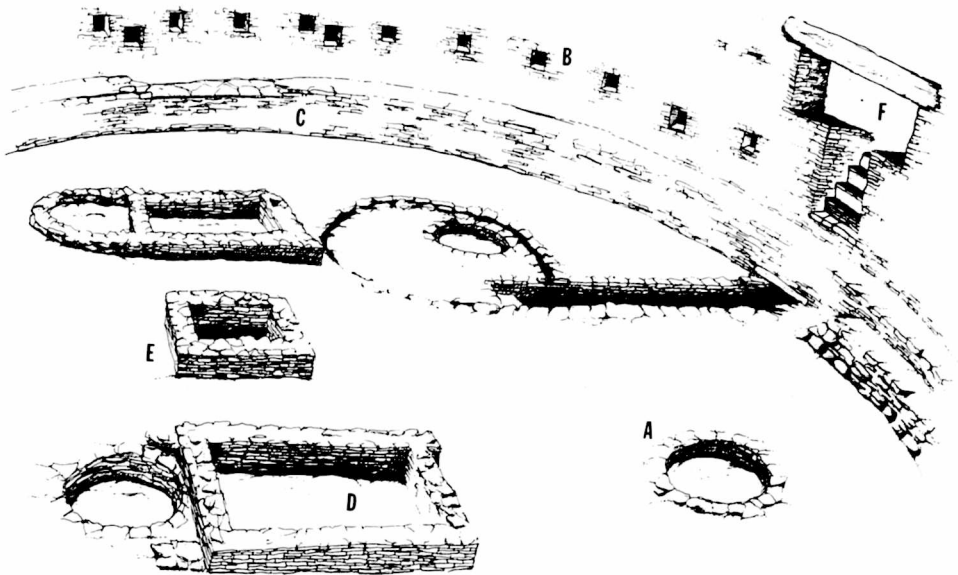


Casa Rinconada

Enter the great kiva through the south antechamber and down the stairs, as Anasazi did 900 years ago. If there is one Anasazi structure an archeologist would like to have seen in its heyday, this is it. We can only speculate what went on in here, from tantalizing hints in the archeological record. Take a few minutes to rest. Sit on the bench if you like (but remember, this is the only place you can do that!) and try to go back 900 years.

A word about kivas. You have probably seen small kivas in many ruins, including here in Chaco Canyon. Small kivas existed in archeological times, and have continued to exist right up to today in modern pueblos. We know something of how the Pueblos use them today, so it's a good guess that something similar went on in prehistoric times too. But the situation is not so clear with great kivas. Great kivas were no longer constructed after about 1400, and we don't have that string of evidence right down to today, so there's much more guesswork about what they were for.

We find great kivas in nearly every major Anasazi community from about A.D. 900 to 1200, some as early as 500. There are unexcavated great kivas in the plazas of great houses here in the canyon, and at most outliers. (If you would like to see what it may have been like, there is a great kiva reconstructed to the "best guess" of what it was at Aztec Ruins National Monument, about two hours north.)



Casa Rinconada

(Drawing by Lyle Yazzie)

A. Roof Support Foundations

These circular masonry-lined pits were bases for four massive roof support posts of ponderosa pine. The posts stood on a stack of two to four carefully shaped sandstone discs, which were about three feet below the floor level. (You can see the discs in the great kiva at Chetro Ketl.) Heavy timbers connected the tops of the posts, making a square in the air. Smaller roof timbers lay from this square to the wall, making a roof about 12 feet above the floor. This arrangement is typical for great kivas. We don't know if the center part was roofed.

B. Niches

The twenty-eight niches, evenly spaced around the wall, were open and empty when the kiva was excavated. (At Chetro Ketl similar wall niches, still sealed, held shell and turquoise necklaces.) The six lower niches, two on the east side and four on the west, do not appear to have a pattern. There has been speculation that one was used as a solstice marker, because on the summer solstice, June 21st sunlight passes through the northeast opening and eventually fills a niche on the west side. There are problems with this idea — for instance, there are wall stubs outside that opening, and if there was a room out there, little sunlight could have shined into the kiva. Also, one of the posts may have been in the way. Regardless of whether this particular circumstance was an astronomical marker or not, there are many astronomical alignments in Chaco. Recognizing these has led to great insights into Anasazi engineering skills.

C. Benches

An encircling bench is standard for great kivas. It seems natural to sit on it, but in some modern kivas the bench is reserved for spirits, and people sit in assigned areas on the floor. Notice the different masonry in the lower, secondary bench along the east side. That was added later, and the stonework is typical of that found north of the San Juan River. It shows there was continued use of the kiva during the last period of occupation, when there was much influence from the northern Anasazi.

D. Floor Vaults

These vaults are typical of great kivas, and a few have been found in small kivas too. Usually we find them in pairs, oriented north-south. These were found open and empty, but others have been found filled with clean sand, and others had the remains of a cover made of planks, poles, or willow matting. In at least one modern instance a similar structure is used during initiations

as a “foot drum,” echoing loudly as dancers dance on it. Some researchers suggest that floor vaults may have been used to ritually sprout corn, beans and squash seeds; a modern example exists among the Hopi. Others think the vaults may symbolically represent features in Anasazi mythology.

E. Masonry Hearth

The hearth placement and construction is typical. Unlike the dug firepits of regular kivas and pithouses, great kivas had above-ground masonry fireboxes. Note the fire-reddened stones inside. It must have taken intense fires to provide light for this large space . . . which suggests that a large roof opening existed to act as a chimney. While great kivas are generally oriented north-south, Casa Rinconada is aligned precisely to celestial north. This should not be surprising; archeologists have learned to respect Anasazi skills in engineering roads, massive buildings, and water control systems, all besides their remarkable artwork.

F. North Antechamber

These rooms built against the north side may have been used to store religious equipment, and as a place to get ready for ceremonies. A direct entry through a northern antechamber is a standard feature in great kivas, but here there is also a unique “hidden” entry under the steps. Associated with this entrance are parallel upright stone slabs arranged in a spiral. This may have been the foundation for closely-spaced upright poles that would have formed a screen. Priests could have come in the hidden entrance, behind the screen, and appeared “magically” in the middle of the floor.

STOP ELEVEN

As you leave Casa Rinconada, look across the canyon to the mesa above Pueblo Bonito. You can see the walls of Pueblo Alto jutting up like fins from the mesa top, and from there one catches glimpses of ancient roads leading to the horizon. Chaco Canyon was not a phenomenon unto itself. The pithouses, great houses, small houses, and Casa Rinconada, all were involved in the development of a regional system that extended far north into Colorado, and equally far south and west, and that eventually collapsed. We understand these remarkable people much more than we did before excavations, but many questions remain. Research continues.

The trail to the left returns to the parking lot, passing several excavated and backfilled small houses on the way. Enjoy the rest of your visit to Chaco Canyon.

For further reading on great kivas and small house sites, consider:

***Archeological Surveys of Chaco Canyon, New Mexico* by Alden C. Hayes, David M. Brugge, and W. James Judge; *Small Site Architecture of Chaco Canyon, New Mexico* by Marsha Truell and Peter McKenna; and *Great Kivas of Chaco Canyon* by Gordon Vivian and Paul Riter.**

This trailguide is published by Southwest Parks and Monuments Association, a nonprofit organization supporting the educational work of the National Park Service.

OTHER PLACES TO VISIT IN CHACO CANYON

- 1) Just across the canyon is PUEBLO BONITO, Chaco's largest ruin, 7 miles on loop, one way.**
- 2) A quarter mile west of Pueblo Bonito is PUEBLO DEL ARROYO, 7¼ miles on loop, one way.**
- 3) CHETRO KETL, the second largest pueblo, is three-quarters of a mile east of Pueblo Bonito, access via Bonito parking area.**
- 4) The VISITOR CENTER, 4 miles up the canyon, has a museum and information desk and restrooms. A campground is another mile-and-a-half beyond.**

**PLEASE RETURN THIS BOOKLET,
OR IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO KEEP IT,
DEPOSIT 50 CENTS IN THE STAND AT
THE BEGINNING OF THE TRAIL**

