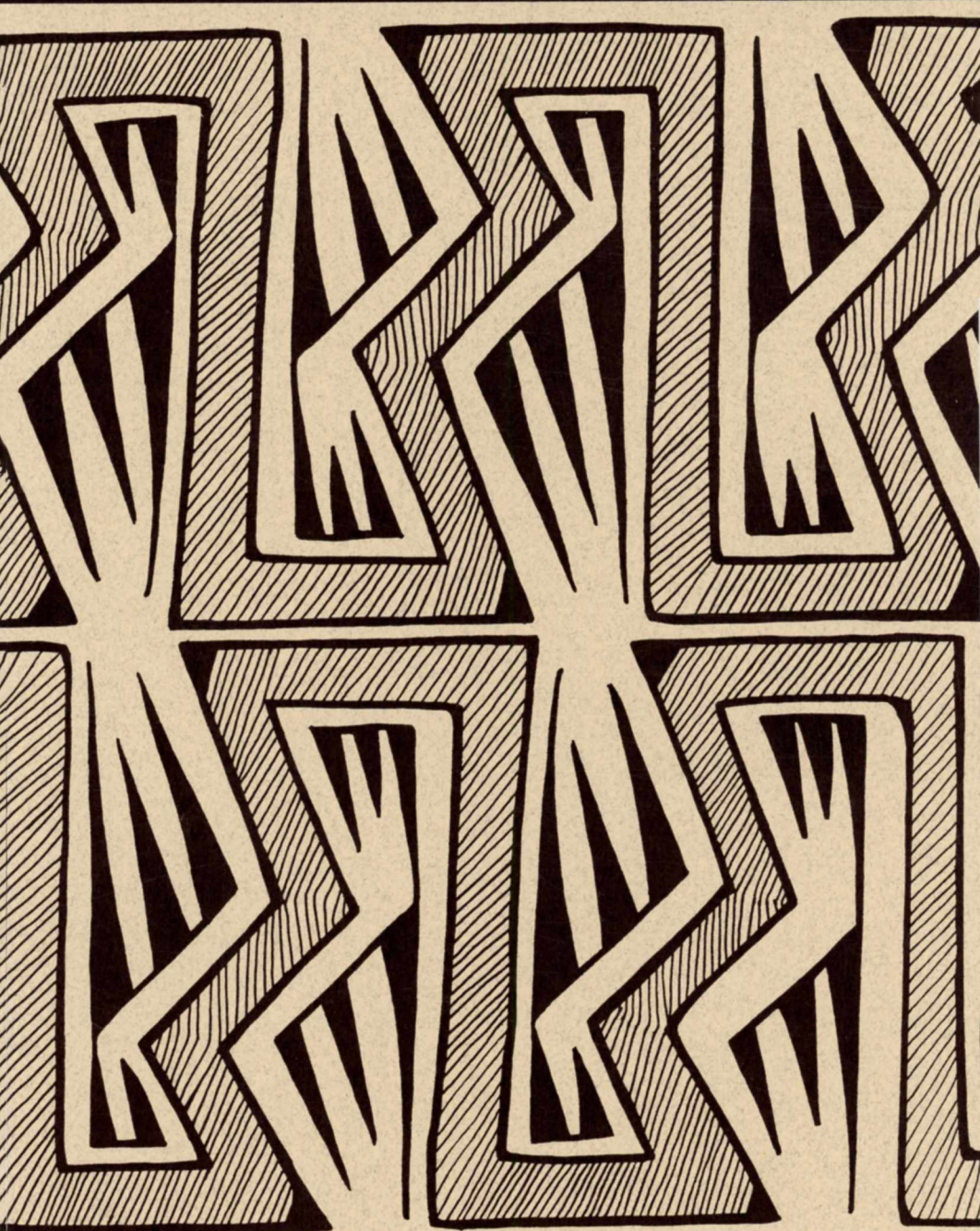
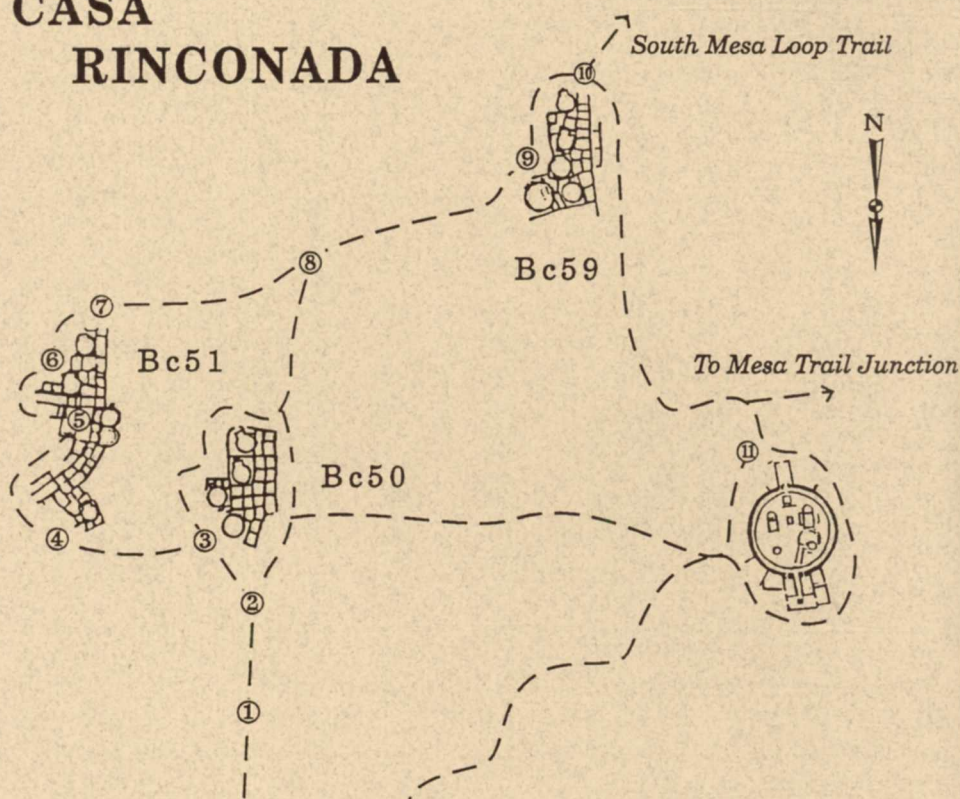


Casa Rinconada



CASA RINCONADA



Please Stay On Trail and Off Ruin Walls

Welcome to Casa Rinconada

To use this trail guide, follow the numbered stops along the trail which correspond to the numbered items in the text. Exploring the small house sites and the great kiva of Casa Rinconada will enable you to recognize several unique characteristics of these structures.

The trail through the small house sites and Casa Rinconada is 0.5 mile long. This trail is steep in places with loose gravel on the slopes, and when it is wet, it is slippery. The trail leads to the trailheads for Tsin Kletzin and the South Mesa Loop. These are back-country hiking trails that require permits, which can be obtained at the visitor center or from a park ranger.

The archaeological resources in Chaco Culture National Historical Park are fragile, irreplaceable, and a significant part of our nation's cultural heritage. The park received international recognition for the prehistoric cultural resources it contains when it was designated a World Heritage Site in 1987. You can help protect and preserve this part of our nation's cultural heritage by following these basic rules. Stay on the designated trails. Do not walk, climb, stand, sit, or lean on the walls. Do not deface, add to, or alter the rock carvings and paintings. Do not collect pottery or other artifacts anywhere in the park. If we all take responsibility for these resources, they will be here for the education and enjoyment of future generations.

Kivas are viewed as places of spiritual significance among many of the American Indians that live in the Southwest. Please be respectful of their beliefs and do not leave anything in the great kiva of Casa Rinconada.

For your safety, do not climb canyon walls, or onto the mesas except where designated by a trail. Children should remain with the guardian responsible for their safety.

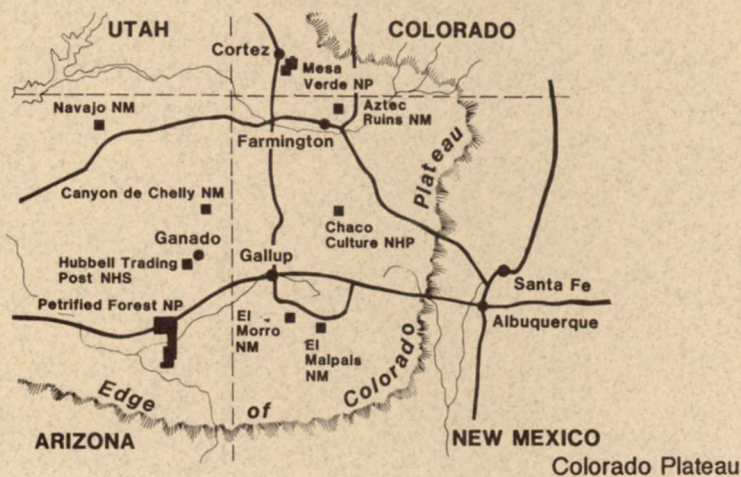
Pets are **not** allowed in the ruins.

Chaco Canyon is known for its large-scale, multi-storied masonry buildings that were planned and constructed over a thousand years ago by the people archaeologists call Anasazi. These large buildings, like Pueblo Bonito and Chetro Ketl, are commonly referred to as great houses, but they were not the earliest or the only structures to be built at Chaco Canyon.

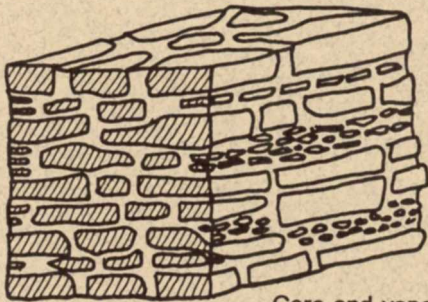
Humans occupied the Chaco Canyon area for at least 8,000 years. At first, the people were hunters and gatherers who made use of wild plants and animals available in the area. They lived in temporary campsites as they moved to seasonal food source areas. With the exception of stone tools, the bones of game animals, and heat-cracked rock from their fires, very little remains at these Paleoindian and Archaic sites.

By 1000 B.C., these people were cultivating varieties of beans, corn, and squash which they used in addition to wild plant foods. Initially these were secondary food sources, but their use increased through time and by around A.D. 400, they became dietary staples. This transition brought an increase in the size of the population as people adopted these more dependable food sources. A growing population and increased agricultural production led to a more sedentary way of life in small villages.

These same basic developments were occurring throughout the Four Corners region of the Colorado Plateau. Beginning around the middle of the ninth century, and continuing through the eleventh, changes took place that set Chaco apart from other areas. The Chaco region was unique because the sites being built were immense, some cover-



ing up to three acres. Room-blocks were extensive and multi-storied. A distinctive core-and-veneer masonry was developed

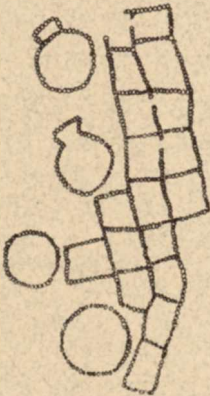


Core-and-veneer

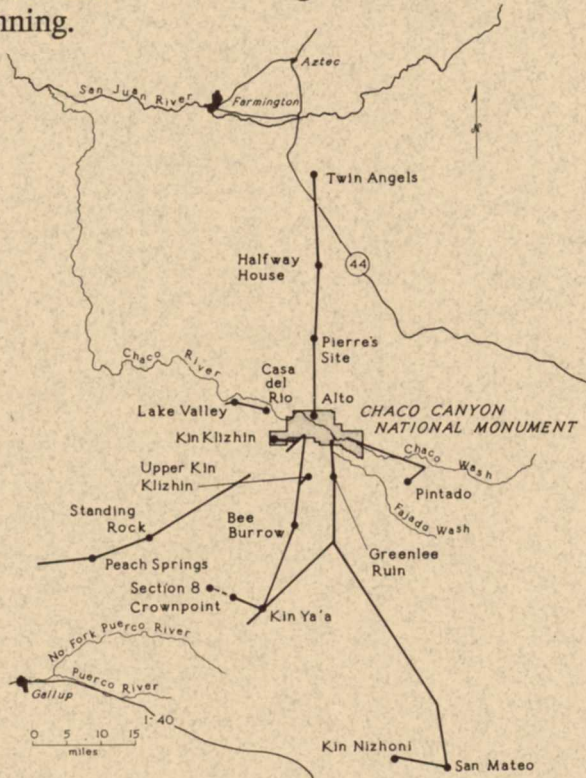
adding to structure size and stability. Roadways, stairways, and ramps were constructed, connecting sites together within the canyon and beyond. Almost everything built shows evidence of advance planning.

Large sites like Pueblo Bonito and Chetro Ketl were probably used for public functions, serving community rather than household needs.

Construction of these great houses began around A.D. 850. Other structures built during this period included small pueblos or small house sites and large round subterranean structures called great kivas.



Small house



Chacoan road system

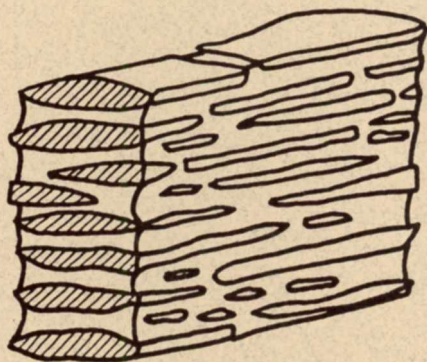
1 Here in the bottomlands of the canyon, the vegetative cover is mixed shrub-grassland. There are concentrations of four-wing saltbush and stands of black greasewood, interspersed with Indian rice grass and galleta grass, all of which are characteristic of this ecosystem. Some of these plants, especially the grasses, were used for food by the early inhabitants. Other plants, like black greasewood, were used for firewood.



Rice grass

2 The University of New Mexico conducted archaeological field schools in Chaco Canyon from 1936 through 1947. During the fieldwork, several small house sites were partially or completely excavated. The three small house sites along this trail were excavated during this period. They have been left open, but virtually every mound in this area conceals another site, which has been either excavated and backfilled, or left unexcavated. Architectural

styles are quite different between small houses and great houses. Small houses are generally one-story, while great houses are multi-story. Great houses are frequently built in a D or C shape and contain plazas that are customarily enclosed. Small house sites are frequently built over earlier sites, and rooms were built as they were needed. Great houses were pre-planned, and substantial foundations were laid before the walls were built. Masonry techniques also differ. In cross-section, the walls of



Wall-wide slabs

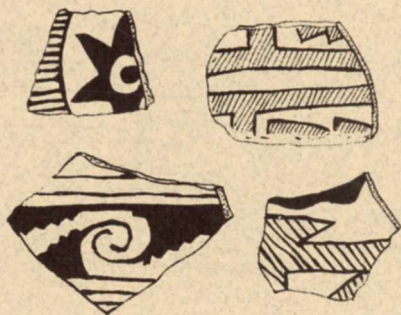
small house sites are built of wall-wide sandstone slabs laid one upon another in generous quantities of mortar. These single-width walls differ from the core-and-veneer masonry of great houses.

3 This site is known as Bc 50, and the Navajo name for it is Tseh So, which translates as rock crystal. (The site designation of Bc does not relate to the original construction date, but refers to the University of New Mexico's site numbering system.)

During the course of the field school excavations, it was found that the Chaco Anasazi built in different ways. Sometimes they built over the remains of old buildings; other sites were abandoned; and other sites were renovated or incorporated into later structures. There are several earlier structures beneath this site. These walls are from one of the later periods of occupation, dating to some time after A.D. 1050.

Archaeologists once believed the small house sites were built before the great houses across the canyon. Evidence supporting this interpretation included the complexity of great houses, compared to the more simple design of small houses. However, tree-ring studies and the distribution of pottery have demonstrated that small houses and great houses were contempora-

neous. They date to the same time period, and the same pottery types have been found at both sites.



Ceramic types

At this point, take the side trail to the east to visit another small house site or continue on the path and rejoin the trail at stop 8.

4 Under the direction of Clyde Kluckhohn, the University of New Mexico field school students excavated this site in 1936-37. Kluckhohn was very interested in explaining the differences between small houses and great houses in the canyon. He believed the architectural differences in construction indicated occupation by two distinct Pueblo Indian groups with contrasting cultural traditions. Kluckhohn was not able to

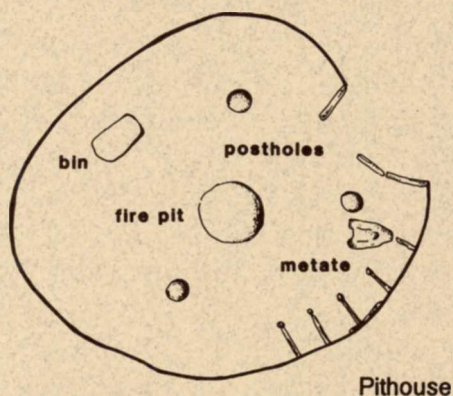
prove his theory through the excavation of Bc 51, but his theoretical model hasn't been discarded. Explaining the difference between great houses and small houses, and what each signified to the culture, continues to be a question of debate among archaeologists.

Beneath this pueblo, there is an earlier structure fronted by pithouses. Trash deposits, particularly broken pottery, show that the site was occupied for several hundred years. When excavated, many of these rooms contained fallen roofing materials. These roof beams were predominantly cottonwood, with

Great house timbers needed to span wider rooms and more structural support was needed for massive roofs.

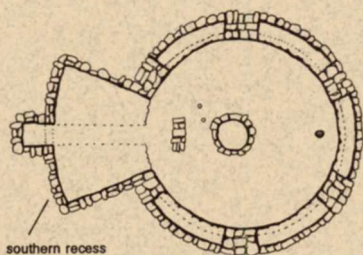
5 The field school completely or partially excavated nineteen rooms and six kivas at this site. When it was occupied, only a few rooms were used at a time. One of the ways that archaeologists determine when and how rooms were used is by examining the contents of the fill. The fill that was removed from many of these rooms contained trash. This indicates to archaeologists that these rooms were not being used for habitation. Fill that consists of blown sand, roof debris, and occasional trash on the floor surface indicates a room was being used just before it was abandoned.

Since the time of excavation over sixty years ago, the walls of this small house have been deteriorating at an alarming rate. Spring winds, summer rains, and the freezing temperatures of winter have taken their toll. One effective preservation measure is to refill the rooms. In an attempt to preserve this site, rooms with inadequate drainage and severely deteriorated walls have been filled with earth.



some piñon. Cottonwood and piñon were more extensively used in the small houses. In the great houses, ponderosa pine was the most prevalent timber used in construction. The different use was probably related to function.

6 On the south side of this kiva, there is a large recess that provides this structure with a unique shape, for which it was named. This type of kiva is referred to as a keyhole kiva and they are typically found farther north in the San Juan River drainage and Mesa Verde region of southern Colorado and Utah. Their presence here in Chaco Canyon supports the

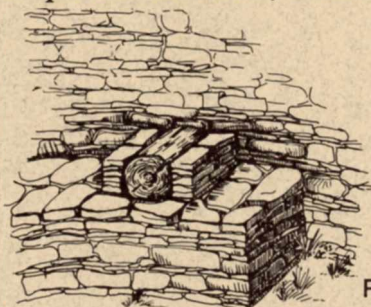


Keyhole kiva

theory that ideas were being exchanged between the people of Chaco and northern population centers.

There are several other keyhole kivas in the small house sites

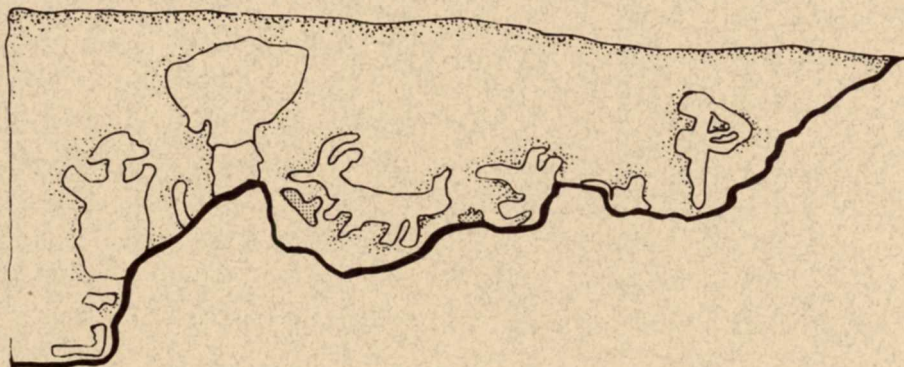
that can be seen along this trail. Features of keyhole kivas include; a ventilator tunnel and shaft in the southern recess, a firepit and deflector, a masonry



Pilaster

bench encircling the kiva interior, and masonry pilasters. Pilasters formed the support for the kiva roof, which was made of logs.

Wall murals were discovered in two of the six kivas that were excavated in Bc 51. White gypsum and red and blue pigments were used to apply the designs that included representations of human figures and a hump-backed flute player. After excavation, these kivas were completely backfilled to preserve them.



Mural

7 During the excavation of these three small house sites, approximately 130 burials were found. Although complete vessels, sherds, and shell bracelets were recovered with some of these burials, most contained very few artifacts. Adults were often laid on twilled grass mats, and infants were sometimes wrapped entirely in mats. These burials differ from those at the great houses. Pueblo Bonito has been extensively excavated and serves well as a comparison. At Pueblo Bonito, some of the multiple burials were accompanied by enormous quantities of worked shell, and an abundance of turquoise in the form of beads, bracelets, and pendants. This difference in burial customs might reflect Anasazi social organization, or might indicate how the two types of buildings were used.

8 One of the more intriguing questions about Chaco, and a subject of great debate, is the relationship between the small house sites and great houses. Some researchers think an elite group lived in the great houses, while common folk lived in these small house sites. Others suggest that the small houses were for habitation while

the great houses functioned as community buildings, providing services that filled socio-political and ceremonial needs. A third theory is that there were two distinct cultural groups occupying the canyon, following different lifestyles and living on different sides of the canyon. There is evidence to support all three models but none of it is conclusive.

9 This small house ruin is Bc 59, which had at least twenty rooms and five kivas. The exposed walls are the most recent house built at this location. The deep kiva provides an excellent illustration of reuse and renovation of a site through time and, when compared with the rooms around it, aptly illustrates unequal fill levels.

The small house sites in this rincón or box canyon were part of a dense settlement of approximately fifty sites that were clustered around South Gap, the major break between the mesas to the southwest. (This gap can be seen from across the canyon.) A similar community flourished at Fajada Gap, four miles to the east. Each of these natural gaps was a route for prehistoric roads entering the canyon.

Chaco would have resembled many other Anasazi communities in the San Juan Basin area if only small houses had been built. However, here in Chaco, a centralized regional community system emerged. The principles that ordered the system were probably a combination of economic, socio-political, and religious entities. The level of organization achieved by the culture enabled the people to build magnificent, massive structures, like the great houses, and other structures such as Casa Rinconada. The most compelling evidence that Chaco was a regional center is the architecture. The architectural features characteristic of Chaco can be seen at sites far beyond the confines of the canyon walls. Outlying great house communities have been located as far away as southwestern Colorado, southeastern Utah, and northeastern Arizona.

10 This is the trail to Tsin Kletzin, which is an unexcavated great house on the mesa top. Before reaching the next stop, the ruins trail crosses the trailhead to South Gap Overlook and Mesa Trail Junction. Permits required for these back-country trails can be

obtained at the visitor center or from a park ranger.

To the right, the ruins trail continues, leading to the great kiva of Casa Rinconada.

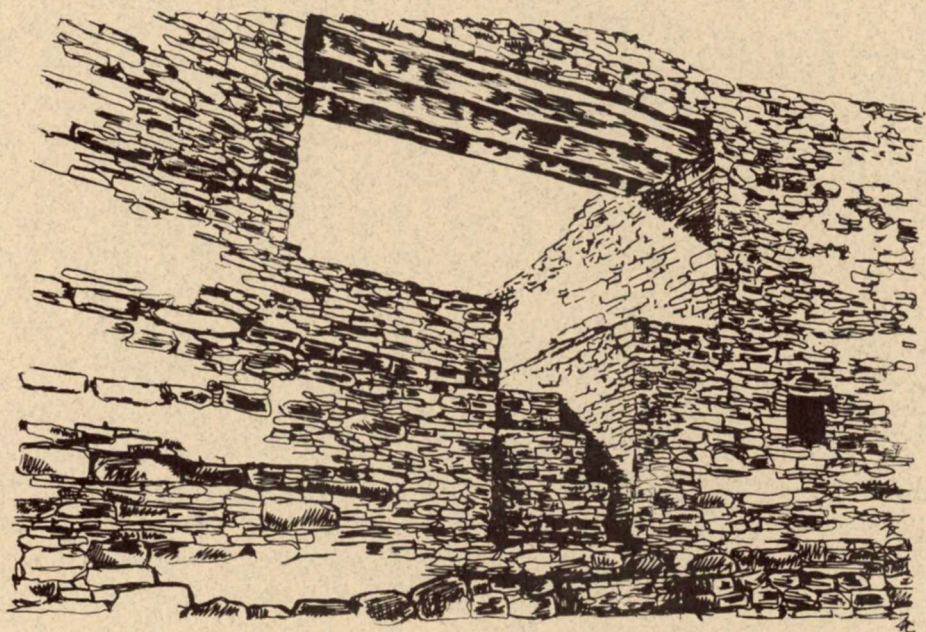
11 There are dozens of small kivas associated with the great houses and small sites here in Chaco, and there are varying interpretations of these round rooms. Some scholars believe they were only used as ceremonial chambers, citing as evidence the modern pueblos use of these structures. Others contend they were used in a more routine manner (as habitations), citing as evidence the large number of round rooms that are found in the great house sites. Whether or not their use was restricted, small kivas were an important architectural feature in Anasazi structures and are still important components of modern pueblos. This historic analogy cannot be made for great kivas.

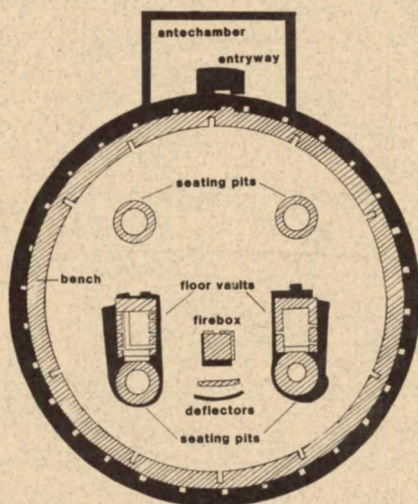
Great kivas are found in nearly every major Anasazi community from about A.D. 900 to 1200, with some appearing as early as A.D. 500. There are unexcavated great kivas in the plazas of great

houses here in the canyon, and at most of the great house communities beyond it. Other great kivas are placed centrally to small house communities like Casa Rinconada, while others are built outside the plazas of great houses like those of Penasco Blanco. The formality of architectural design, labor investment, size, and the central position of great kivas strongly suggest they served as ceremonial chambers. They created a ritual setting that served the needs of the entire community.

Casa Rinconada is the largest known great kiva in the canyon and lies within a cluster of small

house sites. As with other great kivas, it has a standard set of features that are described below. Aside from these standard features, Casa Rinconada includes some unique characteristics. Like other great kivas, the internal alignment of the features are set on a north-south axis. However, those of Casa Rinconada are within one degree of true north, and when this axis is extended, it connects with the great houses of Tsin Kletzin and Pueblo Alto. This precise orientation of features and alignments is seen throughout the canyon and is repeated in the road networks and at outlying great house communities.





Great kiva

A. Seating Pits: These circular masonry-lined pits housed the four upright timbers that supported the roof. When they were excavated, one of these pits contained a portion of a timber that was almost 2 feet in diameter. These massive upright timbers stood on a stack of two to four carefully shaped sandstone discs that were layered in the pits about three feet below the floor level. These discs are estimated to have weighed a half-ton each and helped to prevent settling of the kiva roof (similar discs can be seen at the great kiva of Chetro Ketl). After the timber was set in the pit, the space between it and the masonry wall was filled with rubble for support.

B. Niches: There are a total of thirty-four wall niches in Casa Rinconada. Twenty-eight of

them are uniform in size and evenly divided in number by the north-south axis of the kiva. The six lower niches, two on the east side and four on the west, do not reflect an obvious pattern. One of these lower niches appears to function as a calendrical marker. At sunrise on summer solstice, sunlight passes through the opening just to the east of the north entrance and fills a niche on the west side. There are problems with this interpretation; there may have been a room beyond the opening that might have blocked the sunlight, and the opening is partially reconstructed and may not be an accurate representation of the original. Although it is uncertain whether or not this particular alignment represents a solstice marker, there are astronomical alignments in Chaco that have been verified. This knowledge of

astronomy seems to have been an integral part of the construction at Chaco.

C. Benches: Encircling masonry benches are common features of great kivas. The obvious interpretation of these benches is that they served as seats, but this is only an assumption. In some modern pueblos, kiva benches are reserved for spirits, and people sit in assigned areas on the floor. Notice the different masonry style in the lower, secondary bench along the east side of Casa Rinconada. The secondary bench was added after original construction, and the stonework is characteristic of later sites in the northern perimeter of the San Juan Basin. This suggests that Casa Rinconada was used during the later occupation of the canyon.

D. Floor Vaults: Raised floor vaults are usually found in pairs and oriented north-south. These were found open and empty, but others have been found filled with clean sand. Upon excavation, others have included remnants of a cover made of planks, poles, or willow matting. In at least one modern instance a similar structure is used as a foot drum, echoing loudly as dancers dance on it. Some

researchers suggest that floor vaults may have been used to germinate seedlings, citing the modern day Hopis use of similar kiva vaults. Other scholars believe the vaults may represent concepts of the Anasazi world view.

E. Raised Firebox: Raised masonry fireboxes are characteristic features of great kivas. They are always located just south of the center of the room on the main north-south axis of the kiva, resting upon or extending into the floor. Nearly all great kivas have a fire screen, located to the south of the firebox and aligned with it. When Casa Rinconada was excavated, a single low wall was found just south of the firebox. The wall consisted of large stones set with abundant mortar. Very little remained of this wall, but its placement and curvature suggested it was the fire screen.

F. North Antechamber:

A direct entry through a north antechamber is a standard feature in great kivas, but at Casa Rinconada there are both northern and southern entryways. This great kiva is also atypical in that there is a unique entry beneath the steps of the north entryway. The lower entryway

consists of a stone-lined trench that is associated with upright stone slabs arranged in a spiral on the kiva floor. These may have been the foundation for closely-spaced upright poles that would have formed a screen. The rooms built against the north side may have been used to store objects associated with kiva rituals, or as a place to prepare for them. Exit the kiva through the north entryway.

Before taking the return trail back to the parking lot, look across the canyon to the mesa

above Pueblo Bonito. Rising from the mesa top are the walls of New Alto, and stretching out in the bottomlands are the great houses of Pueblo del Arroyo, Pueblo Bonito, and Chetro Ketl. These great houses and others are linked, and several of the great houses have significant alignments between them that are more than coincidental. Together, these structures form the core of the Chaco Anasazi world; a world that extended far beyond the canyon, and one that continues to captivate and stimulate the imagination.

Read More About It!

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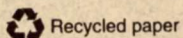
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