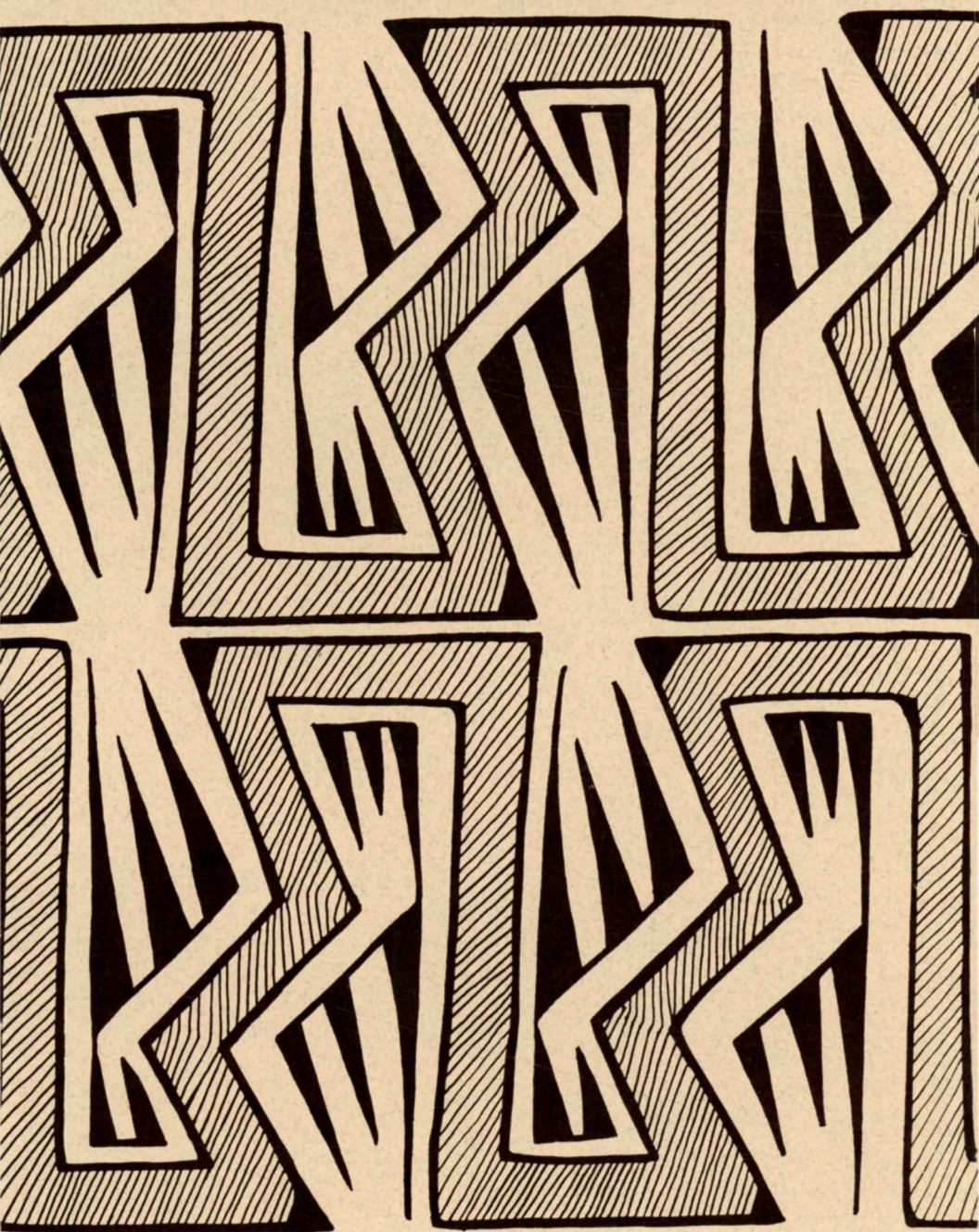
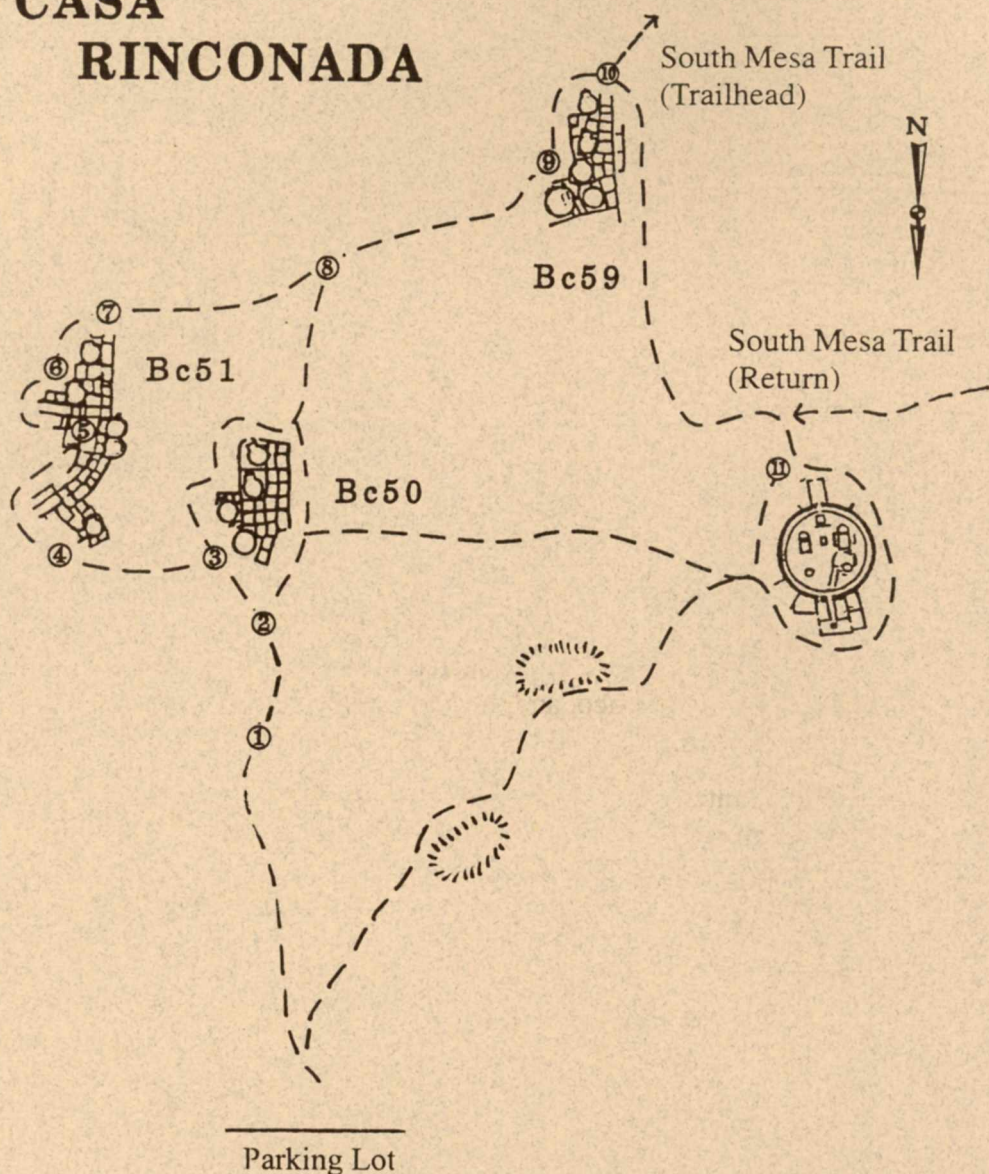


Casa Rinconada



CASA RINCONADA



PLEASE WALK ON DESIGNATED TRAILS

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.

The trail through Casa Rinconada and the nearby villages is 1/2-mile long, roundtrip. It is graveled, and climbs several short, steep rises, so assistance is recommended for people using wheelchairs.

While you visit Casa Rinconada today, use this trail guide to learn about the diverse types of Chacoan architecture and building styles, and the placement of these buildings in the Chacoan world.

The trail passes the trailhead for the South Mesa Trail at Stop 10. The South Mesa Trail requires a free backcountry permit, which can be obtained at the visitor center or from a park ranger.

The cultural sites of Chaco Culture National Historical Park are fragile and irreplaceable, and comprise a significant part of our cultural heritage. Today, they are considered part of the sacred homeland of the Hopi, the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico, and the Navajo, all of whom continue to respect and honor them.

The park received international recognition for its cultural resources when it was designated a World Heritage Site in 1987. You can help protect and preserve this part of our global cultural heritage by following these basic rules as you enjoy the trail.

Do not collect pottery, artifacts, plants, or rocks anywhere in the park. Do not walk, climb, sit, or lean against fragile walls. Stay on designated trails. Do not deface, add to, or alter the petroglyphs, pictographs, and rocks. Do not climb canyon walls. Children should remain with the guardian responsible for their safety. Pets are not permitted in the Chacoan cultural sites.

If we all take responsibility for these sites, they will be here for the education and enjoyment of those who come after us.

This is a sacred area. Visit with respect. For many American Indians, kivas are places of spiritual significance. Please respect their beliefs and do not leave behind anything in the great kiva. Do not enter the kiva.

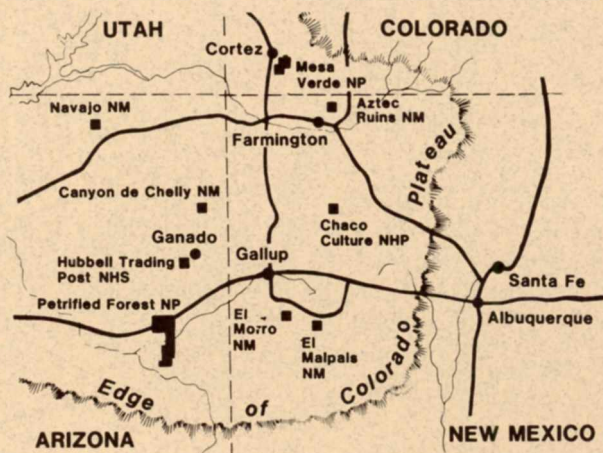
Diverse groups of people occupied the Chaco Canyon area for at least 10,000 years. The earliest were Archaic hunters and gatherers who made use of the area's wild plants and animals. They lived in temporary camps, and moved seasonally to sources of food. With the exception of stone tools, animal bones, and heat-cracked rocks from their fires, very little remains to indicate their time here.

By B.C. 1,000, people in the Colorado Plateau were cultivating early varieties of corn obtained through trade with Mexico. Initially used to supplement wild foods and game, domesticated corn eventually became the dietary staple. Squash and beans were later added to cultivated fields. This increase in agricultural production led to more sedentary

way of life. Populations grew, and small villages were built.

These same developments were occurring throughout the Four Corners region of the Colorado Plateau. Beginning as early as A.D. 850, and continuing until the 1150s, changes took place that set Chaco apart from other areas.

The Chaco region was unique because the buildings constructed were immense—some of them towering four and five stories high and covering several acres. Distinctive masonry was developed that added to the structure and stability of the buildings. The structures were not farming villages, but rather were public buildings used by communities and regions for ceremonies, trading, and civic events. Resident

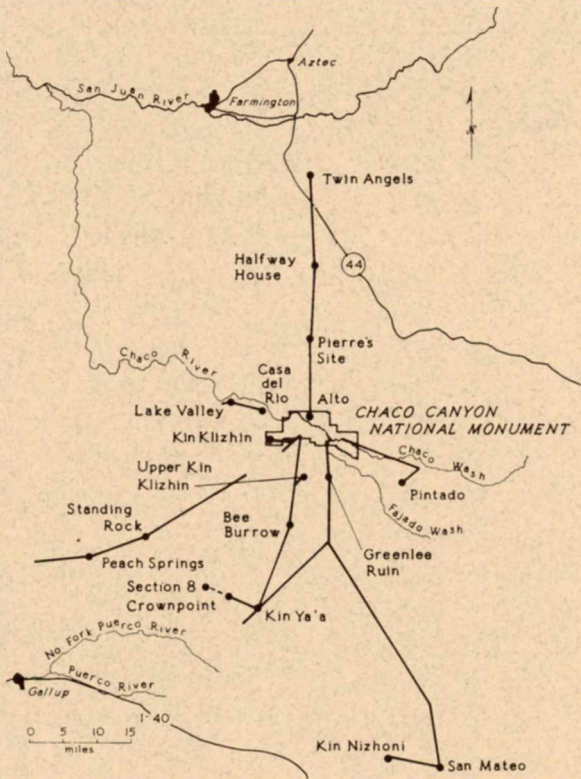


populations are thought to be small for the buildings and for the canyon itself, except when special annual ceremonies and gatherings brought affiliated people to Chaco.

Roadways, stairways, and ramps were constructed, connecting sites within the canyon, and to sites far beyond. More than 150 distant communities emulated Chacoan architectural designs, construction, and layout of their public build-

ings. What began at Chaco soon encompassed a vast area of the Southwest within its sphere of influence.

While the grand public buildings like Pueblo Bonito and Chetro Ketl were in use, smaller, more typical villages existed alongside. This trail will introduce you to the diversity of architecture that existed within the core area of Chacoan culture.



Chacoan road system

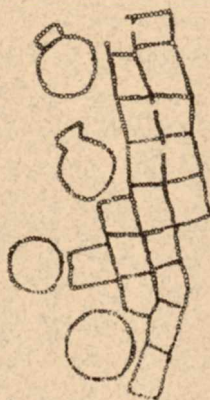
1 Today, the canyon floor reveals only a portion of the Chacoan world, which dominated the landscape a thousand years ago. Wind-blown sand and native vegetation covered the remains of the small villages that surrounded the great kiva (massive ceremonial and community building) named Casa Rinconada. The small hills and mounds you see are the remains of that extensive community.

Imagine standing here a thousand years ago. A great kiva was set high upon the ridge overlooking many small villages. A straight Chacoan road connected the great kiva to Pueblo Bonito on the other side of the canyon. Other monumental public buildings dotted the landscape.

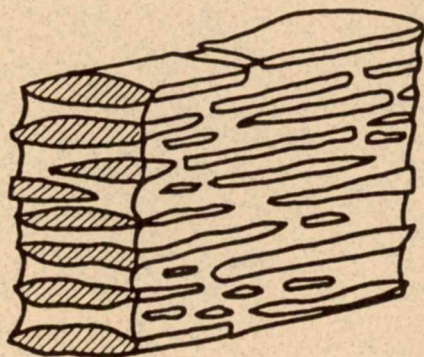
This was a highly modified landscape, where massive public buildings, earthen mounds, and roads reflected the worldview of the Chacoan people, just as modern architecture reflects cultures today. You are looking at what was the core area of Chacoan culture—"downtown Chaco"—an urban area in which public buildings served as the ceremonial, trading, and political center of the culture for 300 years.

2 The Casa Rinconada area was the focus of the University of New Mexico archeological field school from 1936 to 1947. The school's summer camp was located to the east of Casa Rinconada: nearby tents and hogans (traditional Navajo homes) housed students and staff.

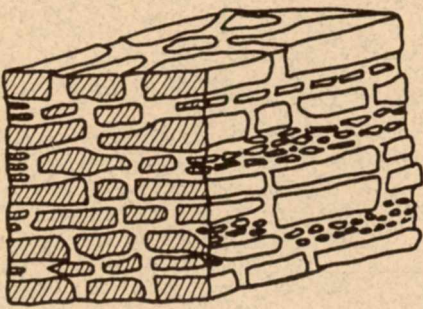
Students partially or completely excavated several small villages during the field school. You'll visit three of them along this trail (Bc 49, Bc 50, and Bc 51). Many other sites were left excavated, others were back-filled (re-covered with sand) or left unexcavated. Amazingly, virtually every mound you see in this area is a cultural site.



Small house site



Single-course masonry



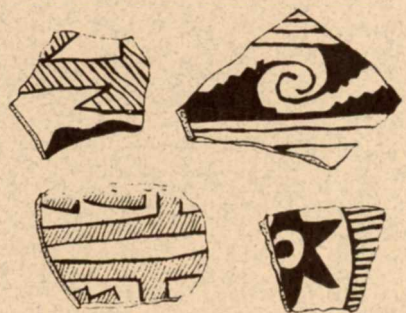
Core-and-veneer

Architectural styles are very different for the villages and the great houses. The villages are usually single-story buildings that were renovated and expanded as the villages grew. Walls were built with a single course (row) of masonry. Slabs of rock were set in place with generous amounts of mud mortar. The villages usually lacked formal plazas (open areas where ceremonies, trading, and daily activities take place). Great houses were pre-planned and pre-designed multi-storied public buildings with enclosed plazas. Substantial foundations were laid before the walls were built with core-and-veneer masonry (a core of rock and rubble with mosaic-like facing stones on both sides of the wall). Great houses are thought to be public buildings that were the focus of public events, ceremonies, and trading for nearby and distant communities, and were often associated with great kivas, highly developed sections of roads, and earthen mounds.

3 This site is known by the Navajo name *Tseh So* (rock crystal) and by the University of New Mexico site system number “Bc 50” (note that Bc does not refer to the time period). The visible walls date from a later period of occupation (post-A.D. 1050), but several earlier structures lie buried beneath this site.

The field school excavations revealed many fascinating details about Chacoan lifeways and village construction: the people often built new structures over the remains of buildings that were no longer in use, and they often renovated and remodeled old buildings, or incorporated those buildings into newer constructions.

Early archeologists assumed that villages were built before great houses, because these villages were less complex than great houses. However, tree-ring dating and pottery studies have demonstrated that both styles of

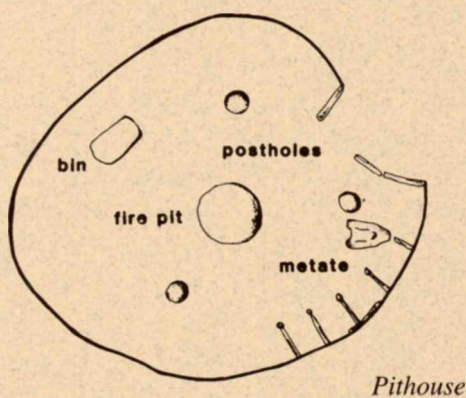


Pottery types

architecture coexisted throughout the canyon.

At this point, take the side trail to the east to visit another village, or continue on the path and rejoin the trail at Stop 8.

4 Under archeologist Clyde Kluckhohn's direction, the field school excavated this site (Bc 51) in 1936–37. An earlier structure was found beneath this site, fronted by pithouses (an earlier style of construction that predated masonry construction). Trash deposits and pottery revealed that this area had been occupied for several hundred years.



Kluckhohn believed that the differences in the villages and great house architecture indicated occupations by two distinct Pueblo Indian groups with distinctly different cultural traditions.

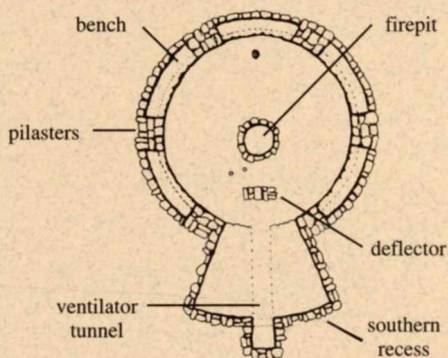
Actually, it is highly likely that many groups of people occupied Chaco Canyon at the same time, perhaps speaking different languages. Today, Puebloan descendants include Hopi, Zuni, Acoma, Laguna, Zia, and other Rio Grande Pueblos. These peoples represent many different cultures, languages, and clans—and their ancestors came from many different geographic areas. Puebloan oral history traditions, passed down through generations, speak of clan migrations from Chaco and affirm their ties to this special area. Chacoan descendants continue to return to Chaco to pray and honor the spirits of their ancestors.

Representatives from pueblos and neighboring tribes now actively consult with Chaco Culture NHP on important management issues. They share their knowledge and history of the area with park staff and visitors. They provide valuable assistance with museum collections, site preservation, and public education. We are fortunate to have access to their significant insights, which enable us to better understand the history and the legacy of their Chacoan ancestors.

5 The field school completely or partially excavated nineteen rooms and six kivas at this site. When the village was occupied, only a few rooms were used at any one time.

One of the ways that archeologists determine when and how rooms were used is by excavating the fill (contents of each room). Room fill includes the original contents of the room, collapsed walls and roofs, and wind-blown sand. The fill in a domestic room might include a fire hearth and ash, tools, and personal items. The fill in a storage room might contain storage vessels and remnants of stored food. Many rooms at this site were filled with trash, indicating that the Chacoans had converted them into refuse areas.

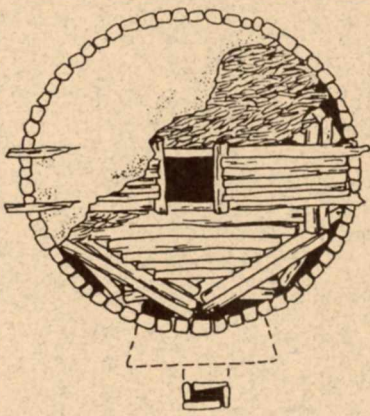
After the Chacoans moved away from this site, roofs and walls began to collapse. Over centuries, windblown sand and plants covered over the site with a protective blanket of fill. Archeological excavations removed the fill and left the walls and empty rooms exposed to spring winds, summer rains, the freeze-thaw cycles of winter, and other forces of nature. Many walls rapidly deteriorated. One effective preservation measure currently used to halt deterioration is backfilling (refilling excavated rooms with sand to protect them).



Keyhole kiva

6 Backfilling has obscured the features of this kiva. However, if you look closely, you will see a large recess on the kiva's south side that provides the structure with a unique shape—and with a name: keyhole kiva. Keyhole kivas are typically found in the Mesa Verde region of southwestern Colorado and in southeastern Utah. Their presence here in Chaco Canyon indicates that ideas were exchanged between the people of Chaco and population centers to the north. You will find several other keyhole kivas in the villages along this trail. In modern Puebloan cultures, kivas are buildings used for religious worship, similar to churches, mosques, and synagogue—which suggests that their prehistoric purpose may have been similar.

Features of keyhole kivas include a ventilator tunnel and shaft in the southern recess, a firepit and deflector, a masonry bench



Cribbed roof

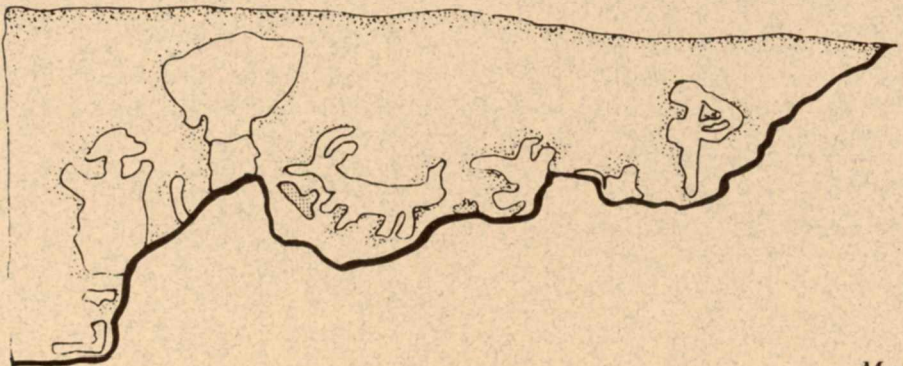
encircling the kiva interior, and masonry pilasters (roof supports).

Kivas were roofed by placing logs from one pilaster to the next, and continuing the process to create a stacked log or domed structure that covered the kiva interior. The top of this cribbed roof was leveled with juniper bark, rock, and dirt. A central hatchway was left in the center of the flat roof. People entered and exited the kiva using a ladder. The hatchway also allowed smoke from the firepit to escape.

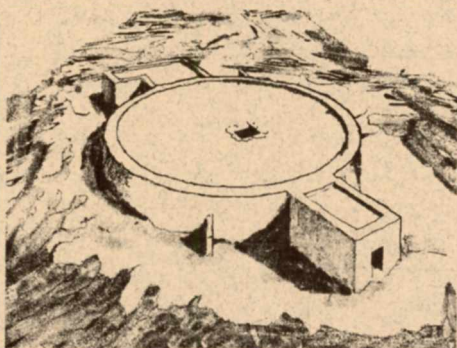
Archeologists discovered wall murals (paintings) in two of the six excavated kivas. The people used white gypsum and red and blue mineral pigments to depict animals, human figures, and a humpbacked flute player. After excavation, these kivas were completely backfilled to preserve them.

7 Archeologists found approximately 130 burials during the excavation of these three villages. Some burials contained complete clay vessels, potsherds, and shell bracelets, but most held few artifacts. In these burials, adults were often placed on twilled mats, and infants were sometimes wrapped entirely in mats. The burials differ from many found in great houses.

At Pueblo Bonito, enormous quantities of worked shell, turquoise pendants and beads, conch trumpets, flutes, and other



Mural



Reconstruction drawing courtesy of Ron Cox. Actual roof configuration is not known.

specialized items accompanied a few burials. Difference in burial practices may reflect individuals of higher rank and status at the great houses, and a stratified society (class differences) in Chacoan social organization.

8 The Chacoans constructed the Casa Rinconada great kiva atop a natural hillside, within a large community of small villages. The imposing public architecture of the great kiva dominated the view from the villages. Across the canyon, Pueblo Bonito, Chetro Ketl, Pueblo Del Arroyo, and Pueblo Alto formed the core area of Chaco. A segment of Chacoan road connected Casa Rinconada to Pueblo Bonito, passing through the earthen mounds in front of Pueblo Bonito.

The positioning and placement of buildings within the landscape seems to have been of paramount concern to the Chacoan people. Great house orientations were often aligned to cardinal directions. Building sites were chosen that allowed great houses to communicate to other great houses by signal fires. Great houses were connected to other public buildings by roads and earthen architecture. Roads also connected the core of the Chacoan world with mesas, lakes, and mountains within the sacred landscape.

Researchers believe most aspects of the Chacoan world were part of a planned, designed, and constructed environment that reflected the Chacoan worldview. Researchers sometimes compare this core area of Chaco Canyon to public architecture found associated with our capitals of government and religion.

9 This village (Bc 59) had at least twenty rooms and five kivas. The exposed walls are the most recent construction. Once again, older architecture lies buried beneath what is visible.

What appears to be a deep kiva is actually three distinct kivas, superimposed one on top the other.

The oldest kiva is at the bottom and the most recent near the surface. This illustrates the re-use and renovation of rooms in a village through time.

The villages in this rincon (box canyon) were part of a dense settlement of approximately fifty villages clustered around South Gap—the major geographic break between South Mesa and West Mesa. A similar community flourished at Fajada Gap, four miles to the east. These gaps were routes for Chacoan roads entering and leaving the canyon.

Chaco could have resembled many contemporary Puebloan communities in the San Juan Basin area if only the villages had been built. However, here in Chaco Canyon, a centralized regional system emerged. The principals that ordered the system were probably a combination of religious, economic, and administrative.

The high degree of organization enabled the Chacoans to build massive great houses, great kivas, roads, ramps, and earthworks. The widespread effects and influence of Chacoan organization are apparent in over 150 great houses that have been documented far beyond the confines of Chaco. These buildings are smaller scale versions of Chaco Canyon great houses. They are located through-

out the San Juan Basin of New Mexico, and in northeastern Arizona, southeastern Utah, and southwestern Colorado.

10 The South Mesa Trail begins here. This mesa-top trail provides spectacular views of the surrounding landscape, passes by Tsin Kletzin (an unexcavated great house), proceeds through South Gap, and arrives back in this area near Stop 11. You will need permits (free) for this and all backcountry trails, and you can obtain them at the visitor center, or from a park ranger.

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

11 Great kivas are a key element of Chacoan public architecture. They are found in nearly every Chacoan community built between A.D. 900 and 1200. Great kivas are often located in the plazas of great houses, or nearby. Casa Rinconada and others were placed centrally within villages and communities. Some are located along roads, and placed on prominent ridges and hills.

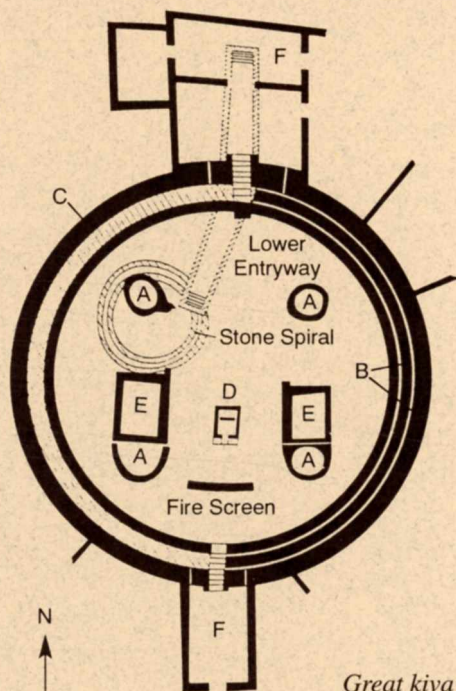
The formal design, size, central position, and labor investment of

these buildings suggest a ceremonial purpose—gathering places for communities and regions. Great kivas, like modern kivas, would have accommodated hundreds of people.

Casa Rinconada is the largest excavated great kiva in Chaco Canyon and one of the largest in the entire Chacoan world. The alignment of the kiva's architectural features are set on a north-south axis—within one degree of true north. When this axis is extended, it connects with the great house of New Alto to the north. You can see this precise orientation of features and alignments throughout the canyon. It is repeated within the road network, and at outlying great house communities.

As with other great kivas, Casa Rinconada has standard features, which are described below.

A. Roof Supports: Great kivas may have been partially or completely roofed. Circular masonry-lined pits housed four massive upright timbers that supported the roof, whose actual configuration remains a mystery. When archeologists excavated the roof support pits here in this great kiva, they found portions of a timber almost two feet in diameter.



The space between the timber and the masonry wall was filled with rubble for support. Timbers stood on stacks of two to four carefully shaped sandstone disks (resembling the disks at Chetro Ketl), which weighed a half-ton each. They were layered in pits about three feet below the floor level, presumably to help keep the roof from settling.

B. Benches: Great kivas commonly contain encircling masonry benches—but we do not know for certain that they actually functioned as seating areas. We do know that in some modern pueblos, kiva benches are reserved for the ancestors, 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. This was added after original construction; the stonework is of a later style, indicating that the great kiva was modified during a later occupation of the canyon.

C. Niches: There are a total of thirty-four wall niches in Casa Rinconada. The builders set these niches into the interior wall that encircles the great kiva. Twenty-eight of them are uniform in size and evenly divided by the north-south axis of the kiva. The lower six niches (two on the east and four on the west) do not reflect an obvious pattern.

One of the lower niches appears to be a solstice—or astronomical—marker. At sunrise on summer solstice, sunlight passes through an opening in the eastern portion of the wall and shines on the interior western wall. A small rectangle of sunlight slowly moves downward along the wall until it lights a lower niche and finally reaches the kiva floor. However, this interpretation is problematical. For instance, this effect would not have worked if—as early researchers indicated—there were once rooms surrounding the outer wall of the present structure. Too, the opening on the eastern wall is partially reconstructed, and may

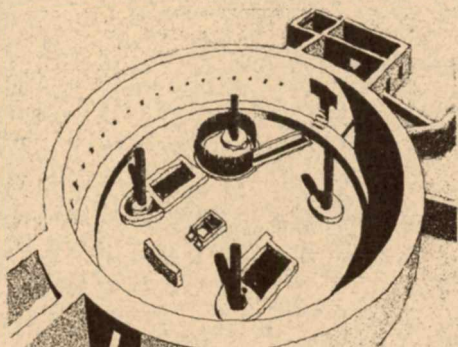
not be an accurate representation of the original.

Although it is not certain that this alignment is a true solstice marker, other astronomical alignments in Chaco have been verified. Knowledge of astronomy was an integral part of the Chacoan world, and is also important in modern Pueblo cultures.

D. 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. Most great kivas have a fire screen, located south of the firebox.

E. Floor Vaults: Raised floor vaults are usually found in pairs, and oriented north-south. These particular vaults were found open and empty, but others were found filled with clean sand. Still others contained remnants of covers made from wooden planks, poles, and willow matting. In some pueblos today, similar structures have been used as foot drums, which echo loudly as dancers dance on them. Some similar structures in Hopi kivas are used to germinate seeds.

F. Antechambers: A typical feature of great kivas is an entryway



*Reconstruction drawing of interior space
courtesy of Ron Cox.*

through a north antechamber. Casa Rinconada has this feature, along with a southern antechamber entryway. People entered through the antechambers and descended the steps set below the large T-shaped doorways.

An unusual feature of Casa Rinconada is a lower entryway placed beneath the steps of the northern entryway. This entryway consists of a stone-lined trench that connected with a spiral pattern of stone slabs on the floor of the great kiva.

Entry onto the floor of Casa Rinconada is not permitted due to the fragile nature of the walls and foundation.

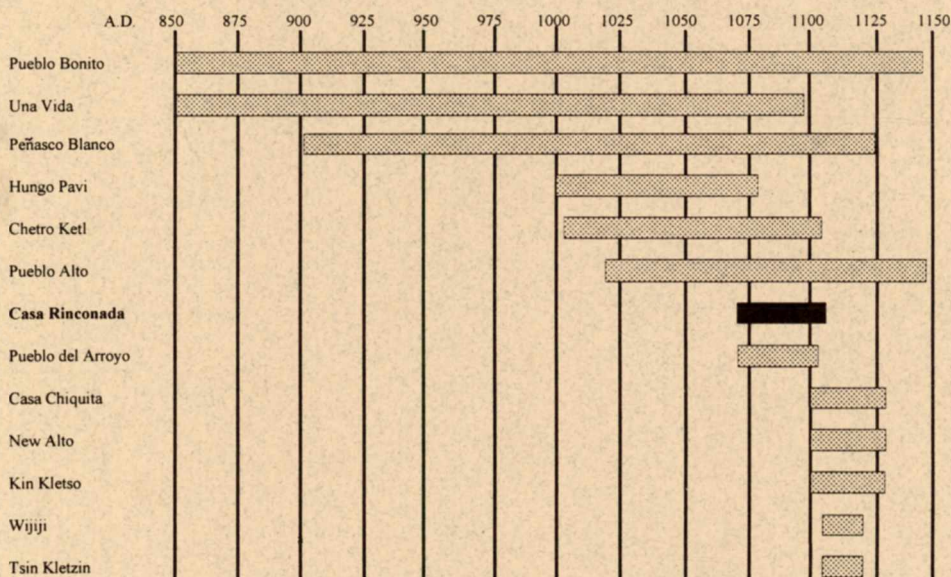
Before returning to the parking lot, look over toward the skyline above Pueblo Bonito. Rising from the mesa-top are the walls of New Alto, situated along Chaco's Great North Road leading to dozens of distant great houses in the northern periphery of the Chacoan world.

Look also at the great houses of Peñasco Blanco, Pueblo del Arroyo, Pueblo Bonito, and Chetro Ketl. These buildings were planned, designed, and constructed over a 300-year period in the core area of Chacoan culture. The buildings were aligned to solar, lunar, and cardinal directions. The great houses were linked together by formalized roads, by line-of-sight communications, by the uniqueness of the architecture, and by the shared vision of the Chacoan people and their place in the world.

Together with their surrounding communities and villages, these buildings formed the center of the Chacoan world—a world that extended far beyond this canyon, a world that is still alive with meaning and significance for American Indian descendants, a world that still touches us today.

Chaco Culture National Historical Park National Park Service

Construction Dates for Chacoan Sites



This publication was produced with funds
donated by Western National Parks Association.