Anasazi and Chaco Canyon

The three major archaeological cultures of the Southwest are the Anasazi, Mogollon and Hohokam. The Anasazi were the first peoples in the region to build residences that consisted of contiguous rectangular rooms (pueblos). Prior to that time, the people lived in individual, semi-subterranean, soil-covered structures we call pithouses. Pithouse villages and later, small and extremely large pueblos are found in Chaco. Ceremonial rooms known as kivas are associated with pueblos. Some kivas are small, rectangular subterranean rooms while others are above ground and are circular in form. The largest are known as “great kivas”.

Most Anasazi and Mogollon pueblos consist of anywhere from a few rooms to perhaps about one hundred. In Chaco Canyon and in some areas strongly influenced by it, extremely large, truly monumental pueblos were constructed. Pueblo Bonito, which was four stories high, had well over 600 rooms and an architectural style unlike that of ordinary dwellings of the time. Chaco Canyon became a center of apparently enormous influence. For a civilization of this kind to develop in such an arid region – one that was marginal for agriculture – is remarkable. We are still trying to understand how it happened and why it disappeared.

Key Questions:
- What was the Chaco Phenomenon and how did it come about?
- What led to its dissolution?

Environmental setting:
- Climate difficult for maize
- Erratic and localized

Evidence from tree rings and pack rat middens

Two primary models:
2. Ideological: roads symbolic connections; pilgrimages

Proponents of both models agree: emphasis changed over time

Newer model: emphasis on potentially integrative nature of Chacoan astronomical observations. Timing of ritual and secular activities. Some now argue for coercive force and a strong connection with the powerful civilizations of Mexico [these will be explored in the second and third videos].
[The following material is tied primarily to the first video]

Peñasco Blanco, Pueblo Bonito, and Una Vida located at junctions of major canyon drainages.

James Judd: served as communal storage facilities for redistribution. Controlled agricultural land associated with drainages \(\rightarrow\) surplus, thanks to generally good rainfall at time. Turquoise processed. For exchange for food when needed.

After A.D. 1050, 80 years of generally good rainfall. Much new construction, much of that storage rooms (or were they?). New Great Houses such as Pueblo Alto no longer situated adjacent to drainages \(\rightarrow\) other considerations such as nonmaterial, ritual aspects.

In 1100’s more formalized exchange, alliances with outliers more formal. Administration of exchange networks controlled from Chaco.

Chaco center for turquoise trading – 25,000 sq. mile area of exchange


Chaco Phenomenon: way of supporting large pueblos and growing population in harsh, unpredictable environment. Interdependence of isolated communities. First, Chaco buffered by agricultural production because of favorable location, then buffered crop deficits by turquoise objects for ritual.

Early Bonito phase produced surpluses that were used opportunistically by leaders to establish dependency relationships among less fortunate villages. Feasts and festivals producing obligations. Competition among leaders.

In 11\textsuperscript{th} century A.D. power probably based on religious knowledge and perhaps coercion. BUT followers may have drawn to particular leaders who competed successfully in displays of power and wealth: architecture for show, with some structures serving no utilitarian function.

Outliers: client communities? Copycats?

Gwinn Vivian: initially two ethnic groups as reflected in great houses versus small house sites in Chaco. Irrigation features associated with great houses and organization: profited from runoff irrigation systems.
Roads: economic explanation untenable. Some run parallel to one another for miles. Roads and outliers established by Chacoan groups seeking improved farmland. Outliers often established within existing small house communities – linked by roads that were functional and symbolic.

In all models: failure linked to major drought that began in A.D. 1130. Surplus production not possible in 1130’s and 1140’s. If small surplus, why use it to pay for failed management?

Shift of Chacoan system north to Aztec?