The Mesa Verde Region

Chaco's Northern Neighbor

William D. Lipe

In public perceptions of Southwestern archaeology, two images compete for attention—Pueblo Bonito, its massive masonry walls rising above the floor of Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, and Cliff Palace, its many rooms clustered under the canyon rim at Mesa Verde in Colorado. Both of these iconic sites are in the drainage basin of the San Juan River, an area of more than thirty thousand square miles that nurtured the growth and florescence of early Puebloan culture between about 500 and 1300 CE. Chaco Canyon is located on one of the southern tributaries of the San Juan, whereas the Mesa Verde culture area occupies the northern part of the drainage basin, extending across parts of southwestern Colorado, northeastern New Mexico, and southeastern Utah. This area has large tracts of wind-deposited soil that can be productively dry-farmed (that is, watered by direct rainfall alone). The Puebloan communities of the Mesa Verde region knew about, interacted with, and were affected by the growth and decline of the major Chacoan centers at Chaco Canyon and, later, Aztec.

Maize, that great promoter of Native American population growth, was introduced to the Mesa Verde region by the late centuries BCE, but population didn’t “boom” until the 600s CE, in the late Basketmaker III period. At that time, small communities composed of scattered, one- or two-family farmsteads flourished in many parts of the region. People lived in large pithouses.

Between 750 and 900 CE—the Pueblo I period—Pueblo families in the greater San Juan River basin built more extensive dwellings, each consisting of a large pithouse, or “protokiva,” used for cooking, sleeping, and rituals, and, just to the north, a small cluster of adjoined surface rooms that provided additional living and storage space. This basic arrangement persisted in the San Juan region through the end of the Pueblo III period in the late 1200s. Another persistent architectural form that was present by the 700s was the much larger “great kiva.” Members of a number of families must have collaborated in the construction of great kivas. People used them for community gatherings—undoubtedly often involving religious ceremonies—that reinforced cooperation and a sense of shared identity.

During the Pueblo I period, the inhabitants of some parts of the Mesa Verde region moved from dispersed farmsteads into settlements of up to several hundred people. A few of their larger villages included one or two architecturally distinctive U-shaped roomblocks that had an “oversized” protokiva with especially elaborate ritual features (such as large vaults built into the floor on each side of a central fire pit). Evidence from excavations near Dolores, Colorado, suggests that families living in these special roomblocks probably gained status and political influence by hosting ceremonies and feasts.

Population began to decline in the Mesa Verde region at the very end of the 800s and remained small through the 900s (the early Pueblo II period). A severe drought that affected dry farming apparently contributed to the decline. Concurrently, population seems to have been growing in the southern San Juan River basin, where farming typically depended on
Figure 15.1. Cliff Palace in Mesa Verde National Park, the Southwest’s largest cliff dwelling.
water from periodic floods in stream valleys or runoff from slopes. Evidence from pottery styles has enabled Richard Wilshusen and Scott Ortman to trace the migration of some groups from southwestern Colorado to new homes south of the San Juan (see chapter 3). This was also a time of population growth at Chaco Canyon. Construction at Pueblo Bonito and other early great houses followed a U-shaped plan perhaps derived from the special roomblocks at the earlier Pueblo I villages of the Mesa Verde region.

**Chacoan Great Houses in the North**

In the middle and late 1000s, population built up again north of the San Juan. Dispersed communities of scattered one- or two-family farmsteads were once again the norm. Each family had its own small kiva and set of surface living and storage rooms. Between about 1075 and 1130 (the late Pueblo II period), a number of communities built great houses with obvious architectural connections to Chaco Canyon. These include the Chimney Rock, Wallace, Escalante, Porter, and Lowry sites in Colorado, the Bluff great house in southeastern Utah, and the very large centers of Salmon and Aztec in the “Totah” region. The Totah—the word means “rivers come together” in Navajo—is the area of northwestern New Mexico surrounding the confluences of the Animas, La Plata, and San Juan Rivers (see map, p. xii). This well-watered area was a focus of population and social development during the Pueblo II and Pueblo III periods.

In size and elaboration, Salmon and Aztec West rival the major great houses in Chaco Canyon, where new construction was winding down at this time. As at Chaco, well-organized teams built these large, multistory buildings in several episodes of intense effort. Tree-ring dating tells us that the builders of the Salmon great house, near Farmington, New Mexico, did most of their construction in 1088–90, 1093–94, and 1105–6. The even more massive building at Aztec West was largely built in two bursts of activity between 1112 and 1125. Many of the construction beams were spruce, fir, or pine logs carried from highlands thirty or more miles away.

Aztec West is the most imposing building in a much larger site complex, much of which remains unexcavated. This group of sites, which extends along the bluffs above the Animas Valley for more than a mile, contains many structures that appear to date to the early 1100s. A convincing case can be made that in the early 1100s, the seat of Chacoan religious and political power had moved to Aztec. (The site’s name reflects erroneous nineteenth-century beliefs about connections between the
Puebloan culture of the Four Corners area and the Aztec empire of central Mexico.)

The other Mesa Verde–region great houses, centered in existing communities of scattered farmsteads and hamlets, are much smaller than Aztec West and Salmon Ruin. Built with locally available stone and timbers, they are distinctive not so much for their size but because their architecture contrasts strongly in formality, elaboration, and positioning with the architecture of the surrounding residences. And unlike the ordinary residences, they usually were built in one or a few construction episodes instead of growing gradually as families needed additional rooms.

Typically, these small great houses are multi-storied, with large rooms, blocked-in kivas (built within the surface roomblock), and thick, well-constructed masonry walls. They usually are associated with a masonry-lined great kiva with elaborate floor features, and often they are situated so that they can be seen from a considerable distance. On the other hand, floor plans and modes of construction vary considerably from one great house to the next. My interpretation is that they were built under the direction of local leaders to serve as their residences and also as the religious and political centers of their respective communities. These leaders must have gained influence at home by associating themselves with the politico-religious elite of Aztec or perhaps even Chaco Canyon. They probably gained spiritual power and local respect by participating in ceremonies at one of these major centers and by making contributions of food, timbers, other goods, or labor as part of the visit. It seems reasonable to call these visits pilgrimages.

The Chimney Rock, Escalante, and Lowry great houses have been excavated and stabilized and are open to the public. Chimney Rock Pueblo, located near Pagosa Springs, Colorado, and managed by the US Forest Service, lies at seventy-six hundred feet in elevation on the narrow spine of a mesa overlooking the southern Rockies and the high valleys of the upper Piedra River drainage. Two closely spaced rock pinnacles at the end of the mesa give the site its name. Chimney Rock Pueblo consists of a compact roomblock of thirty-five ground-floor rooms with two large, blocked-in kivas. Portions of the building were probably two stories high. Tree-ring dates indicate that building took place in two episodes—in 1076 and 1093 CE. The archaeoastronomer J. McKim Malville has pointed out that these dates correspond to major lunar standstills and that at these times, a person standing close to the pueblo would have seen the moon rise between the twin pinnacles of Chimney Rock (see chapter 12).

One of the most striking aspects of Chimney Rock Pueblo is the contrast between its formal, very Chaco-esque architecture and that of the structures housing the surrounding community. Dubbed
great house continued to be used and remodeled perhaps into the 1200s.

Escalante Ruin, located near Dolores, Colorado, is adjacent to the Bureau of Land Management's Anasazi Heritage Center, a public museum and collections repository. Small even by southwestern Colorado standards, it stood only one story high and had twenty-five rooms with one blocked-in kiva. It is also the latest of the Mesa Verde–region great houses: tree-ring and pottery data indicate construction in the late 1120s and 1130s. There is no associated great kiva.

At this writing, Crow Canyon Archaeological Center is conducting research on the Albert Porter Pueblo northwest of Cortez, and the University of Colorado is working at the Bluff great house on the outskirts of Bluff, Utah, in the San Juan River valley. Catherine Cameron has documented an earthen berm surrounding the Bluff great house—a feature shared with many of the great houses at Chaco Canyon and elsewhere in the southern San Juan region. Both the Bluff and Porter great houses show extensive evidence of remodeling and occupation into the late 1100s and early 1200s; they evidently continued to be important buildings in their respective communities.

During the period of strong Chacoan (or perhaps I should say Aztec) influence, from about 1075 to 1130, people in the Mesa Verde region frequently were able to trade for pottery and marine shell ornaments from outside the region. Even a few cast copper items—probably transported from western Mexico along Chacoan trade routes—have been found at sites in Colorado and Utah. People, goods, and ideas appear to have moved more freely and widely across the northern Southwest than they did either before or after this brief era. Ceremonies held at the major centers in Chaco Canyon and the Totah, and the attendant religious pilgrimages, likely promoted such interregional connections.

"crater houses" by their excavator, Frank Eddy, these are essentially aboveground pithouses with extremely thick (three to five feet) rubble masonry walls.

Lowry Ruin, managed by the Bureau of Land Management and located northwest of Cortez, Colorado, was excavated in the 1930s by the archaeologist Paul Martin of the Field Museum in Chicago. The great house is a small but massive masonry roomblock with a nearby Chaco-style great kiva. Tree-ring dates indicate construction in 1085–1090, with additional building between 1106 and 1120. The domestic architecture of the surrounding community was very much in the Mesa Verde regional tradition. Also unlike Chimney Rock, the Lowry

Figure 15.4. A portion of Lowry Ruin.
The biological anthropologist Christy G. Turner II and his wife and coauthor, Jacqueline A. Turner, in their book *Man Corn: Cannibalism and Violence in the American Southwest* (University of Utah Press, 1999), present an alternative view of the sources of Chacoan influence and power. They argue that political leaders at the major Chacoan centers used occasional acts of extreme violence and even cannibalism to extend and enforce their control over outlying areas. This hypothesis implies that in the Mesa Verde region, archaeological evidence of violence should coincide with the expansion and consolidation of the Chacoan great-house system between 1075 and 1130 CE.

Instead, the best-studied cases of extreme violence and cannibalism (from several sites near Cortez, Colorado) are dated between about 1130 and 1160, when the Chacoan great-house system appears to have been in decline. These years were, however, the first decades of a severe drought that lasted until about 1180. Before this, the Chacoan system seems to have promoted stable local leadership and peaceful relationships among communities. In contrast, the weakening and eventual breakdown of Chacoan influence, perhaps a result of the onsets of the mid-1100s drought, might have allowed suppressed intra- and intercommunity conflicts to surface. Social instability was likely exacerbated in some areas by localized food shortages resulting from the drought.

The archaeological record for the middle 1100s (the early Pueblo III period) in the Mesa Verde region is sparse and hard to interpret. Although the region was not abandoned, population probably declined, and most families and communities were "hunkered down" trying to get through the drought. Construction beams dating to the 1150s through the 1180s are particularly rare, indicating that few structures were built during those decades. The excavators of the great Chacoan centers of Aztec West and Salmon Ruin interpreted the evidence as indicating that these sites were largely vacant during the middle 1100s. Recent compilations of tree-ring dates from limited excavations at Aztec East—another major great house located adjacent to Aztec West—indicate that construction did continue there at a low level during these years. Some of the smaller habitation sites in the Aztec group probably also date to the middle and late 1100s, indicating that the locality continued to be populated at some level.

The tree-ring data from the Aztec complex and from Salmon Ruin also document a significant shift in the source of construction timbers after 1130. Thousands of ponderosa pine, spruce, and fir beams had been imported from distant mountains for the massive construction effort at Aztec West in the early 1100s. After the mid-1130s, people relied much more heavily on local juniper for the continuing construction at Aztec East. This implies that the systems for cutting and transporting large beams had broken down at Aztec after flourishing for only a few decades. A burst of building activity at Salmon in the late 1200s, however, included much juniper but also a few large conifer beams imported from a substantial distance, indicating that such efforts could still be organized on occasion. In general, though, the long-distance movement of goods seems to have declined in the Mesa Verde.
area after the early 1100s. Items such as turquoise, shell, obsidian, and pottery from other parts of the Southwest appear less frequently in sites dating to the late 1100s and 1200s. Perhaps as the great Chacoan centers declined, the major religious ceremonies and the long-distance movement of people and goods they had fostered declined as well.

By the end of the 1100s, population was growing again throughout the Mesa Verde region, and the tree-ring record indicates that construction boomed as well. Most people continued to live in communities of dispersed farmsteads located close to their fields, but increasingly, communities of the early 1200s were centered on small villages housing a number of families. In some of these central villages, newly constructed two-story buildings stand out as the probable residences of leading families. The architectural contrasts between these buildings and surrounding ordinary residences are much more subtle than they were during the heyday of Chacoan great houses in the late 1000s and early 1100s.

Most of the Chacoan-era great houses in Colorado and Utah, as well as in the Totah region of New Mexico, saw renewed use during the 1200s. Many were remodeled by subdividing the large Chacoan-era rooms and inserting small Mesa Verde-style kivas into unused rooms. The changes seem designed to adapt the structures to residential use by numerous families, rather than to restore the great houses' architectural distinctiveness, formality, and exclusiveness. In some cases—especially in the Totah region—the great houses remained at the centers of their communities, but elsewhere these buildings frequently became peripheral as settlement locations shifted. Nonetheless, it seems likely that people recognized the symbolic importance of these Chacoan great houses, and they—or the people who lived in them—may have continued to play a role in the ceremonial life of their communities.

During the middle and late 1200s (late Pueblo III), large numbers of people occupied Salmon Ruin and the Aztec complex, confirming that these buildings continued to be politically and ceremonially central to their communities. Elsewhere in the Mesa Verde region, people increasingly moved to new kinds of sites in new locations on canyon rims, usually close to good springs. In areas where natural shelters were large and numerous, as on the Mesa Verde, cliff dwellings flourished—this was the time when Cliff Palace, Spruce Tree House, and the other well-known sites of Mesa Verde National Park reached their greatest size. Where natural shelters were unavailable, large villages such as Sand Canyon Pueblo, west of Cortez, were built in the open on the edges of canyons.

Novel architectural features and layouts characterized these late Pueblo III villages in Colorado and Utah. Although towers were present at a few sites in the 1100s, they became much more common at the canyon-oriented sites of the middle and late 1200s. This was especially so near the Utah-Colorado border, where good examples are preserved in Hovenweep National Monument. Also present at many of the canyon rim villages are large D-shaped structures with interior courtyards and peripheral storage structures; masonry walls surrounding all or part of the settlement; open plaza areas; and a bilateral layout in which two parts of the site were separated by a natural drainage or, in a few cases, a constructed wall. In location and architectural patterning, the late Pueblo III canyon-oriented villages of Colorado and Utah seem not to have been modeled on the Chacoan-era buildings at the Aztec center, even though these continued to be occupied. The bulk of evidence indicates that Aztec's influence over the larger Mesa Verde region continued to decline throughout the Pueblo III period.

Warfare intensified among the ancestral Pueblos of the Mesa Verde region during the late 1200s. We see evidence of this in the clustering of people into villages that are situated in defensible settings and have defensive features such as site-enclosing walls and towers. In addition, archaeologists have found human remains showing traces of violence. Recently, researchers were stunned to discover that in the late 1270s, an attack killed most or all of the residents of a small village west of present-day Cortez, a village known as the Castle Rock site.

In the Totah region, the old Chacoan great houses at Aztec West and Salmon and the "new" great house at Aztec East were in heavy use until the regional depopulation of the 1270s and 1280s. Their inhabitants were not immune to the cycle of violence that was playing out in the larger Mesa Verde region.
In the late 1260s or 1270s, a tragedy occurred at Salmon Ruin. Its tower kiva, located centrally in the great house, was burned, incinerating the bodies of forty-five to fifty-five individuals—many of them children—that had been placed on the roof prior to the conflagration.

Although Southwestern archaeologists once postulated that the Mesa Verde Puebloans were driven out by the ancestors of the Navajos or the Utes during Pueblo III times, they now believe that these people did not move into the area until later. It is likely that hostilities broke out sporadically among the Puebloan communities, with cycles of revenge and retribution escalating the conflicts. The histories of both modern and ancient societies are replete with such episodes of violence, and small-scale tribal societies have not been exempt. The decline of Chacoan influence in the Mesa Verde region may have removed or weakened the previous ceremonial and economic ties that promoted peaceful relations among that area's communities and opened the door to escalating hostilities.

Climatic fluctuations must also have promoted conflict during the late Pueblo III period. Researchers at the Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research at the University of Arizona have discovered that summer rains—vital for both dry farming and runoff farming—became less reliable after about 1250. The early years of the "great drought" of 1276 to 1299 coincide almost perfectly with the rapid final depopulation of the Mesa Verde region. Although the regional population had declined somewhat after its peak in the early 1200s, thousands of people still occupied the Mesa Verde region as late as 1270. By sometime in the 1280s, however, a combination of emigration and in-place population decline had emptied the area of its ancestral Pueblo residents. Much of the emigration probably took place in small groups; in a few cases, whole villages may have traveled together. Warfare and frequent crop failures in the late 1200s must have contributed to the area's depopulation. The trend in the late 1200s of building large villages around springs used for drinking water may also have contributed to rising rates of disease and mortality.

For more than a century, professional archaeologists have failed to find any Pueblo habitation sites dating later than the 1280s in the Mesa Verde area. Yet they have uncovered abundant evidence that down through the centuries, Pueblo people continued to visit shrines and ancestral sites there and perhaps to hunt big game or to trade with the Ute, Paiute, or Navajo people who had moved into the area. Popular writers and filmmakers frequently assert that the
Mesa Verde “Anasazi” simply “disappeared.” In fact, archaeological evidence supports Pueblo peoples’ traditional knowledge that at least part of their biological and cultural ancestry traces to the Pueblo III communities of the Mesa Verde region.

Widespread warfare and unpredictable rainfall might have made life miserable for the Mesa Verdeans, but it seems unlikely that everyone left for those reasons. The drought of the middle 1100s, after all, was longer and probably more severe than the one of the late 1200s, but in that earlier instance, people hung on until it had passed.

In understanding the depopulation of the Mesa Verde region, “pull” factors—attractions to the south—also need to be considered. Up through the Pueblo II period, the San Juan River drainage was the population center of the Pueblo world. The rise of Chaco made the southern part of this area a hearth of ceremonial, political, and economic influence. That began to change with the waning of Chacoan influence in the early 1100s. Although the Mesa Verde area boomed in the 1200s, so did other parts of the Southwest, such as the Rio Grande, Zuni, and Hopi areas, as well as much of the upper Little Colorado drainage and the Mogollon Rim highlands. By the mid-1200s, many more ancestral Pueblo people lived in these areas than in the Mesa Verde area. Thus, the “center of gravity” of the Pueblo world was definitely shifting southward, leaving the Mesa Verde region isolated on its northern periphery. The depopulation of the late 1200s thus was part of a much larger trend. Migrants from the Mesa Verde region moved to areas that had growing Puebloan populations, where trade networks were flourishing and where different forms of ceremonial practice were associated with more reliable summer rainfall.

Pottery made in the late 1200s and the 1300s in several parts of the Rio Grande area of New Mexico closely resembles Mesa Verde styles, suggesting that Mesa Verde migrants settled there. Other aspects of Pueblo III Mesa Verde culture, however, didn’t make the trip. These include the family dwelling unit composed of a small kiva and associated surface rooms that had originated during Pueblo I. Also dropping out were the distinctive public architecture and settlement layouts typical of the late Pueblo III canyon-oriented villages, as well as the characteristic Mesa Verde pottery mugs and kiva jars. Instead of maintaining the patterns they had grown up with, the Mesa Verde migrants adopted new types of kivas, village layouts, and vessel forms. Possibly they had been attracted to religious practices and ways of organizing villages that were already established in their new homelands. Their adoption of new types of architecture and material culture might reflect those more basic changes.

For more than a hundred years, archaeologists and a broad spectrum of the public have been fascinated by the well-preserved sites of the Mesa Verde area. For much longer, the Pueblo peoples of the Southwest have viewed these places as important parts of their cultural heritage. The rich archaeological resources of the Mesa Verde area are of tribal, national, and international importance, and their educational, research, and heritage values are only beginning to be realized.

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