

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57468-6 - The Chaco Anasazi: Sociopolitical Evolution in the Prehistoric Southwest

Lynne Sebastian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

In the tenth century AD, a remarkable cultural development took place in the harsh and forbidding San Juan Basin of northwestern New Mexico. From small-scale, simply organized, prehistoric Pueblo societies, a complex and socially differentiated political system emerged which has become known as the Chaco Phenomenon. The origins, evolution, and decline of this system have long been the subject of intense archaeological debate.

In her book, *The Chaco Anasazi: sociopolitical evolution in the prehistoric Southwest*, Lynne Sebastian examines the transition of the Chaco system from an acephalous society, in which leadership was situational and most decision making carried out within kinship structures, to a hierarchically organized political structure with institutional roles of leadership. She argues that harsh environmental factors did not provide the catalyst for such a transition, as has previously been thought. Rather the increasing political complexity was a consequence of improved rainfall in the region which permitted surplus production, thus allowing those farming the best land to capitalize on their material success. By combining information on political evolution with archaeological data and the results of a computer simulation, the author is able to produce a sociopolitically based model of the rise, florescence, and decline of the Chaco Phenomenon.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57468-6 - The Chaco Anasazi: Sociopolitical Evolution in the Prehistoric Southwest

Lynne Sebastian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*NEW STUDIES IN ARCHAEOLOGY*

---

# The Chaco Anasazi

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57468-6 - The Chaco Anasazi: Sociopolitical Evolution in the Prehistoric Southwest

Lynne Sebastian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

NEW STUDIES IN ARCHAEOLOGY

---

*Series editors*

Colin Renfrew, *University of Cambridge*

Jeremy Sabloff, *University of Pittsburgh*

*Other titles in the series*

Ian Hodder and Clive Orton: *Spatial Analysis in Archaeology*

Kenneth Hudson: *World Industrial Archaeology*

Keith Muckelroy: *Maritime Archaeology*

R. Gould: *Living Archaeology*

Graham Connah: *Three Thousand Years in Africa*

Richard E. Blanton, Stephen A. Kowalewski, Gary Feinman and Jill Appel: *Ancient Mesoamerica*

Stephen Plog: *Stylistic Variation in Prehistoric Ceramics*

Peter Wells: *Culture Contact and Culture Change*

Ian Hodder: *Symbols in Action*

Patrick Vinton Kirch: *Evolution of the Polynesian Chieftdoms*

Dean Arnold: *Ceramic Theory and Cultural Process*

Geoffrey W. Conrad and Arthur A. Demarest: *Religion and Empire: The Dynamics of Aztec and Inca Expansionism*

Graeme Barker: *Prehistoric Farming in Europe*

Daniel Miller: *Artefacts as Categories*

Rosalind Hunter-Anderson: *Prehistoric Adaptation in the American Southwest*

Robin Torrence: *Production and Exchange of Stone Tools*

M. Shanks and C. Tilley: *Re-Constructing Archaeology*

Bo Gräslund: *The Birth of Prehistoric Chronology*

Ian Morris: *Burial and Ancient Society: The Rise of the Greek City State*

Joseph Tainter: *The Collapse of Complex Societies*

John Fox: *Maya Postclassic State Formation*

Alasdair Whittle: *Problems in Neolithic Archaeology*

Peter Bogucki: *Forest Farmers and Stock Herders*

Olivier de Montmollin: *The Archaeology of Political Structure: Settlement Analysis in a Classic Maya Polity*

Robert Chapman: *Emerging Complexity: The Later Prehistory of South-East Spain, Iberia and the West Mediterranean*

Steven Mithen: *Thoughtful Foragers: A Study of Prehistoric Decision Making*

Roger Cribb: *Nomads in Archaeology*

James Whitley: *Style and Society in Dark Age Greece: The Changing Face of a Pre-Literate Society 1100–700 BC*

Philip Arnold: *Domestic Ceramic Production and Spatial Organization*

Julian Thomas: *Rethinking the Neolithic*

E. N. Chernykh: *Ancient Metallurgy in the USSR: The Early Metal Age*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57468-6 - The Chaco Anasazi: Sociopolitical Evolution in the Prehistoric Southwest

Lynne Sebastian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)



New Alto (Photograph by Patrick Hogan)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57468-6 - The Chaco Anasazi: Sociopolitical Evolution in the Prehistoric Southwest

Lynne Sebastian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*LYNNE SEBASTIAN* *State Historic Preservation Division, State of New Mexico*

---

# The Chaco Anasazi

Sociopolitical evolution in the prehistoric Southwest



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57468-6 - The Chaco Anasazi: Sociopolitical Evolution in the Prehistoric Southwest

Lynne Sebastian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1992

First published 1992

First paperback edition published 1996

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Sebastian, Lynne.

The Chaco Anasazi: sociopolitical evolution in the prehistoric southwest  
/ Lynne Sebastian.

p. cm. – (New studies in archaeology)

Includes bibliographical references (p. ) and index.

ISBN 0 521 40367 7 (hardback)

1. Pueblo Indians – Politics and government. 2. Pueblo Indians –  
Social conditions. 3. Pueblo Indians – Antiquities. 4. Social  
archaeology – New Mexico – Chaco Canyon Region. 5. Social  
archaeology – San Juan Basin (N.M. and Colo.). 6. Chaco Canyon Region  
(N.M.) – Antiquities. 7. San Juan Basin (N.M. and Colo.) –  
Antiquities. 8. New Mexico – Antiquities. 9. Colorado –  
Antiquities. I. Title. II. Series.

E99.P9S45 1992

978.9'82 – dc20 91–38431 CIP

ISBN 0 521 40367 7 hardback

ISBN 0 521 57468 4 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2001

WD

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57468-6 - The Chaco Anasazi: Sociopolitical Evolution in the Prehistoric Southwest

Lynne Sebastian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*To my parents, Ernie and Helen Sebastian, without whose love and absolute faith in me  
this and many other things in my life would not have been possible*

---

## CONTENTS

---

*List of illustrations* xiii

*Acknowledgments* xiv

- 1 Introduction** 1
- Social organization studies in archaeology 2
  - Definitions 7
  - Preview of coming attractions 8
- 2 The Chaco Phenomenon: background and history of research** 9
- Environment and paleoenvironment 9
  - Discovery and exploration 13
  - Previous research 14
  - The Chacoan archaeological record 21
  - Arguments and explanations 40
- 3 Sociopolitical complexity and the Chaco system** 42
- Settlement pattern and site hierarchy 43
  - Distribution of material culture items 45
  - Architectural and construction data 48
  - Burial data 48
  - Demography 51
  - Craft specialization 54
  - Construction and administration of water-control facilities 56
  - Conclusions 56
- 4 Routes to sociopolitical power** 59
- Typological and nontypological approaches 59
  - Power relationships 62
  - Why does sociopolitical complexity increase? 63
  - How does sociopolitical complexity increase? 70
  - Conclusions 80



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57468-6 - The Chaco Anasazi: Sociopolitical Evolution in the Prehistoric Southwest

Lynne Sebastian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*Contents*

xii

**5 Previous explanations for the Chaco phenomenon 82**

The 1970s 82

The late 1970s and early 1980s 84

Redistribution and sociopolitical complexity 85

Cultural complexity as a buffering mechanism 91

**6 Relations of power, labor investment, and the political evolution of the Chaco system 98**

Setting the stage 99

The hypothesis 104

Available capital and major construction 106

Political process and the Chaco Phenomenon 114

**7 Summary and new directions 142**

Appendix: The computer simulation 153

*References* 166

*Index* 179

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-57468-6 - The Chaco Anasazi: Sociopolitical Evolution in the Prehistoric Southwest

Lynne Sebastian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*ILLUSTRATIONS*

- New Alto *frontispiece*
- 1 Map of the Chaco region 11
  - 2 Ceramic vessels, Room 28, Pueblo Bonito 15
  - 3 Comparative chronologies for Chaco Canyon 23
  - 4 Chetro Ketl 31
  - 5 Typical ground plans of great houses, small sites, and McElmo structures 32
  - 6 The Haystack outlier 33
  - 7 Plan of the Haystack outlier 34
  - 8 The system of Chacoan outliers as defined in the 1980s 35
  - 9 Chaco Black-on-white cylinder jars 47
  - 10 Red Mesa Black-on-white bowls and pitchers 50
  - 11 Trade wares dating *c.* AD 1075–1150 51
  - 12 Chaco McElmo Black-on-white pitchers 53
  - 13 A Chuskan corrugated utility vessel 57
  - 14 Simulated crop yield AD 900–1200 110
  - 15 Simulated corn in storage, available surplus, and timing of construction events AD 900–1200 112–13
  - 16 Estimated labor investment in great house construction in Chaco Canyon 115
  - 17 Great house and McElmo sites in Chaco Canyon 116
  - 18 Peñasco Blanco 117
  - 19 Major construction episodes at Pueblo Bonito 124–5
  - 20 The Bee Burrow outlier 127
  - 21 The West Ruin at Aztec 137

---

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

---

First and foremost, I would like to express my appreciation to Dr. Jim Judge of Fort Lewis College, who has been a good teacher and a good friend and has staunchly defended my right to be wrong about the “why” of Chacoan complexity. I also appreciate the help and advice of Dr. Don Morrison of the University of New Mexico, who taught me most of what I know about computers and programming, and Drs. Jeremy Sabloff (University of Pittsburgh) and Wirt Wills (University of New Mexico) who read and commented on several drafts of this work.

Special thanks should go to my colleagues in the School of American Research Advanced Seminar on *Cultural Complexity in the Arid Southwest*. The intellectual overload of the week that we spent in Santa Fe was a major catalyst in the development of this book.

I would also like to acknowledge here a special debt that I owe to Drs. Kristen Hawkes and Robert Anderson of the University of Utah, who taught me about politics and economics in cultures very different from my own, and to Dr. Jesse D. Jennings of the University of Oregon, who taught me what a field archaeologist should be.

The outside readers for Cambridge University Press, Drs. Linda Cordell and Michael Schiffer, provided many helpful suggestions about places where my arguments could be better supported in a manuscript that I had read too many times. Dr. Jessica Kuper of Cambridge University Press was very helpful to me in getting my manuscript accepted for publication, and Ms. Marigold Acland and Dr. Margaret Deith, my editors, were invaluable in helping me to track down missing pieces and deft at straightening out my syntactic tangles. Just as doctors make terrible patients, former editors make difficult authors, but Ms. Acland and Dr. Deith were models of patience with this former editor.

My thanks also to those who helped me to prepare the manuscript: Ms. June-el Piper, who typed, edited, indexed, and empathized; Ms. Cheryl Wase, who drafted the figures and showed remarkable patience in the face of indecision and dithering on the part of the author; and Ms. Kim McLean of the National Park Service, who ferreted out the negatives for most of the photographs and had them printed for me.

Most of all, I want to thank my husband, Dr. Patrick Hogan, who has taught me much of what I know about being an archaeologist; who has been my friend and companion, my constant help in time of crisis; and who always knew that I could write this book, even when I didn't believe it myself.