

## 1 The ancient Puebloan Southwest: an introduction

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In the late 1800s, as Anglo-American settlers moved into the Four Corners area of the United States where New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado meet, they encountered a large number of ancient ruins, some of which were exceptionally imposing. Racist views about the indigenous inhabitants of the region, combined with a comparatively widespread knowledge of the Aztec empire encountered by the Spanish *conquistadors*, led many newcomers to assume that the local ruins with their impressive artifacts represented outposts of Mexican civilization. A substantial minority believed that they derived from the “lost tribes” of Israel or even more fanciful sources.

Although the evolution of the Four Corners region was influenced by developments in the great civilizations of Mesoamerica, and while many groups in the Southwest did interact with their neighbors to the south, the Aztecs did not build these structures. Archaeologists have instead determined that ancestors of current Native American groups living in this part of the United States built and lived in the villages now lying in ruins throughout the Four Corners. However, many of the questions raised by the nineteenth-century pioneers – Who were these people? Where did they come from? When did they live here? Why did they leave? – still structure the archaeology of this region, and they will be essential themes in this book.

One of the interesting problems in writing a general-interest book on archaeology is deciding how to bound your topic, both in time and in space. Human societies tend to form a web of connections with their neighbors. Often these relationships are not the formal “government to government” kinds that we are used to observing and studying in more recent history, but instead are personal ties between individuals and families. These relationships can exist over long distances and persist for generations, and they involve both the movement of material goods and ideas and the actual relocation of people. The net effect of these webs of relationship is to make the “boundaries” of early societies fuzzy and difficult to define, especially when observed through the filter of long time

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depth and the methods of archaeology, both of which tend to capture patterns rather than particular events.

This book discusses early societies in what is often called the “American Southwest.” To establish appropriate and manageable boundaries for this topic, a good place to start is by addressing the basic newspaper reporters’ questions that are drilled into journalism students everywhere: What, Where, Who, When, and Why? This first chapter will address the “big W” questions to explain how and why the temporal and spatial boundaries used in this study of early societies in the Southwest were chosen.

### What?

At first glance, the American Southwest might seem out of place in a book series that includes such archaeological “heavy hitters” as *Ancient Mesopotamia* and *Ancient Oaxaca*. In each of these regions, the evolution of human societies culminated in one or more of the great urban civilizations of the ancient world. Although societies of the American Southwest prior to European Contact were among the most complex cultural developments in North America, they did not approach the scale or complexity of these ancient civilizations. And yet, despite the relatively modest achievements of societies of the ancient Southwest, this region has one of the most intensively studied and best-known archaeological records in the world.

This widespread interest among both the public and professional archaeologists is the result of several factors. Thanks to the work of artists, filmmakers, photographers, and writers, the landscape of the American Southwest and its indigenous people have achieved an almost mythic quality. John Ford did not invent Monument Valley, but because of his work, people in every corner of the earth can identify it as the home of John Wayne, Maureen O’Hara, and a cast of larger than life characters. Zane Grey imagined the Four Corners states so vividly that millions of people who have never been there can experience an intimate relationship with its inaccessible canyons and mesas, its rivers and vast deserts and stark mountains (Figure 1.1). Tony Hillerman and Louis Lamour, Charles Russell, Georgia O’Keefe, and David Muench, each through his or her own medium has made the Southwest familiar throughout much of the world.

The landscape of this mythic American Southwest includes the ancient and modern homes of American Indians. There are few places in the world where indigenous people have been able to maintain their own culture and lifeway in their ancestral land as successfully as the native people of the Southwest. The cultural richness of these people and the



1.1 Monument Valley is the stereotypical landscape of the American Southwest.

clear and tangible link between the modern and archaeological societies of this region have made the archaeology of the Southwest especially accessible and interpretable for the layperson.

At the same time, this clear link between the ethnographic present and the archaeological past has proved endlessly seductive for archaeologists. One of the great burdens of archaeology is our ultimate inability to *know*, to be certain that our interpretations of the past are correct. This is especially true for those of us working with societies that never developed writing. We can draw on multiple lines of evidence and test hypotheses with rigorous methodology, but we can never know for sure. And during late-night worrying sessions, we might be tempted into all kinds of Faustian bargains if we could just have the opportunity to ask those people in the past what on earth pattern *X* or phenomenon *Y* was all about.

So here we have the American Southwest, with living and relatively intact cultures descended from the pre-Contact people of the region, people with oral histories and cultural practices whom we could “interview” about the meaning of the past. Is it any wonder that archaeologists have been practically tripping over each other here for the past hundred years? The presence of descendent populations and the opportunity to use the ethnographic present to elucidate the pre-Contact past have been

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a bane of Southwestern archaeology as well as a boon to it, but certainly this opportunity has contributed heavily to both its popularity and its success (Figure 1.2).

Although the importance of the Southwest to developments elsewhere in the ancient world might appear limited, the contributions of Southwestern archaeology to the theory and method of the entire discipline have been substantial. The hundred years of intensive study, the historical links to Native people, the superb preservation, and the relative lack of disturbance have made this an excellent laboratory for several categories of archaeological investigations. In terms of the focus of this book, the most important of these are investigations of the origins and development of social and political complexity in human societies.

At several points in time and in several different locations, societies in the pre-Contact Southwest began moving along a developmental trajectory toward greater differentiation in social, political, and economic roles. The organization and material culture of these societies became increasingly complex and elaborate. Then, in each case, those developments were truncated – in the final instance, by the arrival of the Spanish, but in all others, by factors internal to the society and its relationship to its environment and its neighbors. Because the archaeological record left by these initial forays into increasing sociopolitical complexity were not obliterated by any subsequent development of more complex societies, the Southwest offers a unique opportunity to understand the origins and nature of the human impulse toward social and political elaboration.

### Where?

Establishing boundaries around a culture area is always an exercise in artificiality. No matter how carefully the boundaries are based on physiographic or linguistic or ethnic data, there are always caveats and exceptions. For the purposes of this book, the American Southwest is defined as encompassing most of the US states of New Mexico and Arizona and the Mexican state of Chihuahua, along with neighboring areas of Utah, Colorado, and Sonora (Figure 1.3).

This huge region encompasses a wide range of environments, from high mountain peaks that retain portions of their snow cover throughout the year to torrid desert basins where summer temperatures are in the triple digits for weeks at a stretch. It is bisected by the Continental Divide – the western two-thirds is drained by a mighty web of tributaries to the Colorado River, while the eastern one-third drains into the Rio Grande. Biogeographers recognize five major environmental zones: the Colorado Plateau, the southernmost extension of the Rocky Mountain chain,

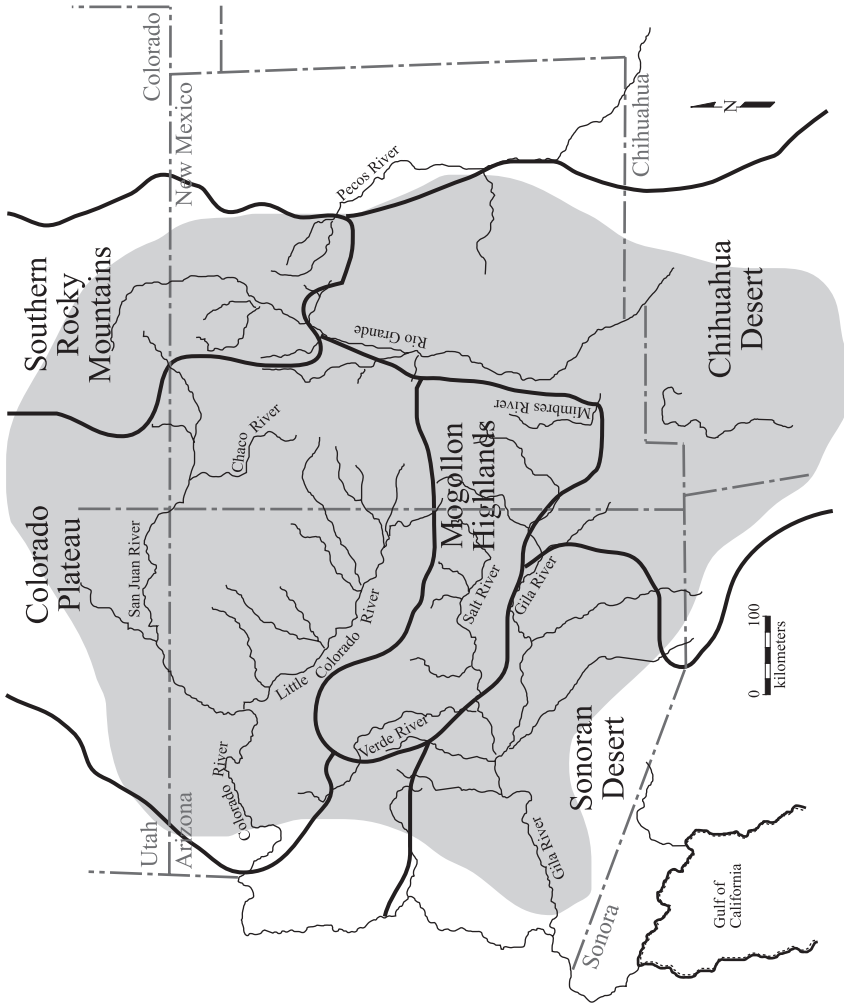
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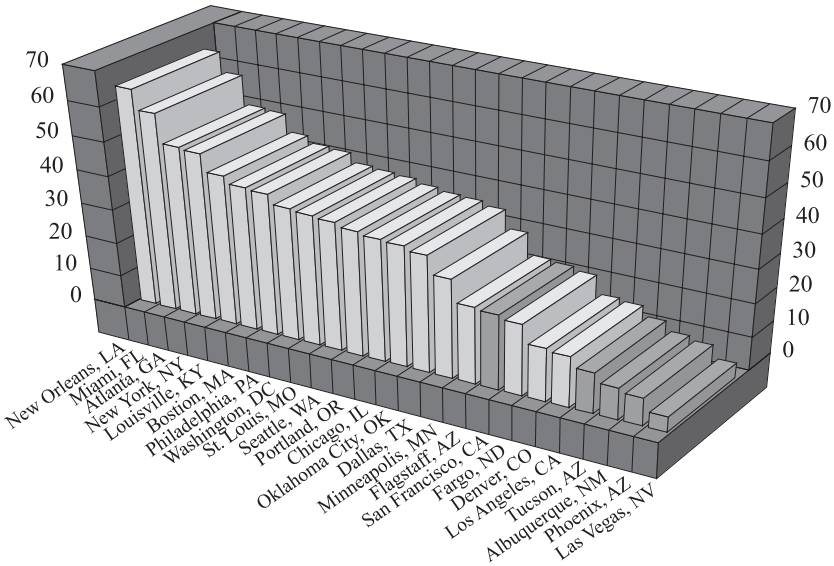


1.2 Similarities between the architecture of the ancient Puebloans, such as Chaco Canyon's Pueblo Bonito at the top, with the architecture of modern Pueblo people, exemplified by Taos Pueblo at the bottom, has erroneously led both casual observers and professional scholars to regard Puebloan culture as unchanging.



1.3 The American Southwest is often defined as encompassing most of New Mexico and Arizona and neighboring areas of Utah, Colorado, and the Mexican states of Sonora and Chihuahua. This enormous region includes portions of several major physiographic provinces.





1.4 The American Southwest is very dry. While New Orleans and Miami receive around 60 inches (1524 mm) of rain each year, Albuquerque and Tucson are lucky to see 9 inches (230 mm) of precipitation. Flagstaff, located at a higher elevation than most Southwest towns, gets almost 23 inches (584 mm) of rain and snow each year (based on averages from 1971 to 2000).

the Mogollon Highlands, and the Chihuahuan and Sonoran Deserts. Chapter 2 provides a more detailed description of these varied environments, but it is worth mentioning a few aspects of the physical and social environment that have contributed heavily to both public popularity and successful scholarship in the American Southwest.

It is dry here. Really dry. In much of the Southwest, the average annual precipitation figures are in the single digits (Figure 1.4). Even in the better-watered areas, average precipitation amounts rarely exceed 500 mm, except in the highest – and thus most frigid – mountain ranges. For archaeological preservation, this arid climate means not only less damage from standing and running water, but less damage from vegetative growth and better surface visibility.

As for population density, the states of Arizona and New Mexico alone comprise a larger land area than the combined states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Rhode Island, and Virginia. The entire population of New Mexico is slightly greater than that of

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Portland, Oregon; the population of Arizona is slightly less than that of Philadelphia. This extremely low population density has meant that a great deal of the archaeological record has not been destroyed by subsequent occupation and its associated development.

This is not true everywhere, of course. The growth of the region's larger cities, especially Phoenix, and to a lesser extent Albuquerque and Tucson, has eradicated the remains of earlier settlements. Additionally, the large water impoundment projects needed for modern settlement in this arid region and extractive industries like mining and oil and gas development have impacted the archaeological record. In recent years, however, historic preservation laws have ensured that much of the archaeological information is recovered prior to development, and overall the vastness of the region and the limited impact of modern land uses have left us with an extremely rich and relatively undisturbed archaeological record.

In many areas of the Southwest, the greatest threat to preservation has been not development but the curiosity and, sometimes, the greed of the modern inhabitants. Vandalism, looting, and unscientific excavation of archaeological sites have been a serious problem. On the positive side, the earliest preservation efforts in the USA directed toward archaeological sites originated in the Southwest and resulted in the passage by Congress of the Antiquities Act of 1906. Preservation is still an important value among the people of this region, where avocational archaeology societies and site stewardship programs have an excellent record of education, outreach, and public service.

### Who?

Over the past 12,000 years, this landscape has been the home of a wide variety of human societies. For the past hundred years, the remains left behind by those societies have been the focus of thousands of investigations. Given this embarrassment of archaeological riches, the first challenge for planning this book was to select a manageable yet logical and coherent portion of this archaeological world on which to focus.

Because of my interests in the origins of sociopolitical and economic complexity, the field was narrowed considerably (the first 10,000 years could be distilled into a relatively brief synopsis!), but still a large proportion of the archaeological information from the American Southwest concerns just such societies. For the past 2,000 years, this region has been occupied by people of several distinct archaeological traditions exhibiting considerable dependence on agriculture and a largely sedentary way of life (Box 1.1). The three major archaeological traditions, the "Hohokam" and the two ancestral Puebloan groups that have been termed "Anasazi"



### **Box 1.1 Naming archaeological cultures of the Southwest**

Early in the development of Southwest archaeology, scholars recognized that different geographical areas exhibited distinct archaeological remains. To distinguish these from one another, archaeologists working in the 1920s and 1930s assigned names to geographically discrete patterns of material culture. One of the first, “Anasazi,” was used to label pre-Contact inhabitants of the northern Southwest who appeared to have shared a number of cultural traits and a common history. Borrowed from the Navajo, non-Puebloan people still living in the Four Corners area, the term “Anasazi” has been variously translated as “old people,” “enemy ancestors,” or “ancient non-Navajos” (Walters and Rogers 2001).

Patterns in pre-Contact remains common to the Gila and Salt Rivers led to another label, “Hohokam,” which also entered the archaeological lexicon in the early 1930s. Literally meaning “all used up,” this word was adopted from indigenous Piman inhabitants living in southern Arizona. At the same time, the pre-Contact patterns of the rugged highland areas of southwestern New Mexico and central Arizona were considered distinctive enough to warrant yet a third addition to the nomenclature: “Mogollon,” from the Mogollon Mountains, which themselves were named after the eighteenth-century Spanish governor of New Spain, Don Juan Ignacio Flores Mogollón (see Cordell 1997:153–88 for a summary of Southwest archaeological nomenclature).

Since the early 1930s, more labels have been assigned to various pre-Contact cultural patterns that are constrained both across space and through time. From the “Patayan” of the far western Southwest, to the “Sinagua” of central Arizona, to the “Salado” found along the Hohokam–Mogollon boundary, these names are used to describe distinctive suites of cultural characteristics. These terms represent “archaeological cultures,” meaning that they identify patterns only in the *material* culture; they do not necessarily reflect social groups, political affiliations, or ethnic identities. In fact, most of the nomenclature disguises almost as much variability as it describes – the Anasazi, for example, probably had very little shared identity but instead consisted of many different groups, some of whom were friends, some of whom were enemies, and some of whom never even knew the others existed. The challenge for archaeologists, then, is to take the patterns represented by the gross nomenclature and tease apart what life was

like for different Anasazi and what meaningful identities they formed and maintained.

In addition to obscuring important variability, the terms adopted by early archaeologists inspire controversy. Many contemporary Pueblo Indian people, for example, take offense at use of the term “Anasazi.” They consider these people to have been their ancestors, and they therefore see it as inappropriate to apply a term taken from another indigenous group, especially since they have comparable words in their own languages. For example, to refer to pre-Contact Puebloan remains, the Hopi use “Hisatsinom” while the Tewa Pueblos use “Se’da,” with both words meaning “ancient ones.” Since archaeologists cannot reasonably use *all* of these terms, most now employ “Ancient Puebloans” to refer to the ancestors of modern Pueblo people, which technically includes the Anasazi, Mogollon, and arguably even some Hohokam. Although I have never been happy with any of the alternatives, this book will largely follow the current convention and refer to the ancestors of contemporary Pueblo people as “Puebloans.”

and “Mogollon” by archaeologists, developed elaborate ceremonial systems, monumental architecture and engineering features, sophisticated and labor-intensive craft items, and relatively complex social and political structures.

The Hohokam were desert dwellers. For most of their history, they settled along the river valleys of southern Arizona, especially the Gila and the Salt. Compared with their neighbors, the defining characteristics of the Hohokam were their extensive use of canal irrigation, the construction of platform mounds and ballcourts, cremation of their dead, and a ceramic technology using the paddle-and-anvil technique. Not only was the manufacturing technology used by Hohokam potters distinct from that used by Mogollon and Anasazi potters, vessel forms and shapes were also distinctive (Figure 1.5).

Other differences include substantial numbers of non-utilitarian artifacts that are unique to the Hohokam cultural tradition, including stone pallets and carved and etched shell jewelry. The basic house form during the entire Hohokam sequence (AD 300–1350) was a freestanding structure built of poles that were woven together and covered with mud, all set into shallow depressions. The architectural details of these houses varied, as did the settlement organization and the associated public architecture, but the Hohokam people never adopted the large, multistory “apartment