

Recent Research in the Prehistoric Southwest

The Southwest has been long been renowned for its spectacular archaeological sites and for the contemporary Native American groups whose ancestors those sites represent. Although the broad outlines of Southwestern prehistory have been known since the first quarter of the present century, the past decade has brought a tremendous increase in our understanding of the social, economic, and technological environment in which the prehistoric people of the Southwest operated. This issue of Expedition showcases the results of recent field projects and methodological studies, and a rethinking of the “received wisdom” of past archaeological generations.

What we have learned about the Southwest over the past century has (and will continue to have) much to do with the institutions who fund archaeological research. Christian Downum chronicles the effects of changing institutional support as he traces the history of Southwest archaeology from the first American military expeditions to the cultural resource management projects of the 1970s and 1980s. Ceramics have been crucial in the development of a culture history for the prehistoric Southwest, but Eric Blinman shows

how much more can be learned about prehistoric interactions through careful study of changes in ceramic technology.

The earliest studies of the prehistoric Southwest focused on the cliff-dwellings and large pueblo ruins of the Four Corners area (where Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah meet). The Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona and vast expanses of northern Mexico (certainly an environmental and cultural part of the American Southwest) have, until recently, been far less well-known. Glen Rice and Charles Redman discuss the results of major excavations of Hohokam and Salado platform mound communities of the Classic period in the Sonoran Desert. Their study adds significantly to our knowledge of the social, economic, and religious life of these prehistoric groups. Paul Minnis and Michael Whalen present the initial findings of a survey of the Casas Grandes area of northern Mexico, a project that permits them to evaluate the role of the enormous site of Paquime as one of the most important regional centers in the prehistoric Southwest.

Contemporary Native Americans have provided Southwest archaeologists with models for past lifeways since the late 19th century. My study of architec-

tural change at Oraibi Pueblo continues this fruitful practice. Historic photos show the rapid construction, abandonment, and reconstruction of houses at Oraibi. Household growth, population fluctuation, and outside cultural influences may have had similar effects on prehistoric pueblo structures.

Finally, Stephen Lekson provides a new look at three archaeological regions traditionally considered discrete cultures: Anasazi, Hohokam, and Mogollon. He suggests that these prehistoric “cultures” are better understood as environmental adaptations covering vast parts of the Southwest rather than as ethnic groups.

The articles in this issue are the result of current, ongoing research that has dramatically enhanced our picture of life in the prehistoric Southwest. They were chosen because they represent a broad sample of the latest methodological, theoretical, and substantive developments in the field of Southwestern archaeology. They show how far Southwestern archaeology has come during the past century, and suggest the direction that future research may take as we move into the 21st century.

Catherine M. Cameron

The Pillar Site is a ceremonial building, or big house, in the Tonto Basin of central Arizona that was eventually converted into a platform mound. The adobe columns in each of the two rooms at the upper right served as the bases for wooden posts supporting the main ceiling beam. See article by Rice and Redman.

