Casas Grandes
Archaeology in Northern Mexico

The spectacular ruins of Casas Grandes in northern Mexico (see map on inside front cover) stand in stark contrast to the common image of the prehistoric Southwest as a place where small kin groups lived in pastoral settings, unfettered by the trappings of "civilization," all generations part of an endless, unchanging, and milenarian cultural tradition. Casas Grandes (Spanish for "great houses"; also known as Pápame) was one of the largest and most influential communities of its day in the North American Southwest. It covered 36 hectares and had over 2000 rooms; many ritual structures, a sophisticated municipal water system, an accumulation of extravagant wealth, and evidence of the mass production of goods (Fig. 2).

Southwestern prehistory is rarely associated with large-scale societies incorporating class differences, tribute payment, cities, monumental public works, and the integration of many communities over a wide region. It is true that the prehistoric societies of the
Southwest were never as large as those in the neighboring areas of Mesoamerica to the south or the Mississippian cultures of eastern North America. Yet, archaeological research over the past two decades has clearly shown that at various times and in different places regional cultural networks linking many communities did emerge in the Southwest, although their nature is currently a source of profound debate among archaeologists. One clear example of a complex southwestern society is Casas Grandes in northwestern Chihuahua (Fig. 1).

Our research focuses on understanding the regional character of Casas Grandes society. In the absence of efficient prehistoric transportation, that is, watercourses or beasts of burden, was the community of Paquimé able to control a large area or was its influence less direct? Did the relationships between communities in the region change with the well-documented fluctuations in precipitation that affected other prehistoric Southwesterners? How closely was the development of Casas Grandes tied to the formation of other southwestern regional systems, such as Chaco Canyon in southwestern New Mexico or the Classic Period Hopi硅谷 of central and southern Arizona? Although our initial six-week survey project could only begin to address these and other issues, we did conclude that the core or nucleus of the Paquimé system was remarkably small, with a diameter on the order of only 30 kilometers around the site.

Casas Grandes has not received the attention it deserves, largely because it is neither in Mesoamerica nor in the northern Southwest. For most Mexican archaeologists, the prehistoric sites of the far northern states have not had the luster of the great prehistoric cultures of Mesoamerica and Central America. And few North American archaeologists look south of the border, a modern demarcation of no prehistoric significance. To most, the center of the prehistoric Southwest is the Four Corners of the Colorado Plateau, where Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado meet. Here, the spectacular and well-preserved Anasazi cliff dwellings and surface pueblos, such as those at Mesa Verde and Chaco Canyon, have justifiedly received attention for well over a century from both professional archaeologists and tourists alike. The images of the prehistoric North American Southwest so clearly engrained in our minds come from this area. However, this perception is in part the reality that most of the "Southwest" is south of the Four Corners. In fact, the center of the prehistoric area we now call the Southwest probably lies closer to an "International Four Corners," the region where the states of Sonora, Arizona, Chihuahua, and New Mexico come together.

Paquimé: The Center

An appreciation of the regional nature of the Paquimé system must begin with a view of its center. Although de Obregón first described it over four hundred years ago, scholars and travelers have recognized the significance of this site. Paquimé's importance was finally documented through excavation in 1930-1931, when the late Charles C. Di Peso, Director of the American Foundation in Dragon, Arizona, marshaled the foundation's resources and collaborators to complete the joint Casas Grandes Project (JCP), an expedition conducted with the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico. While only a portion of the site could be excavated, the project's eight-volume summary report (Di Peso 1937; Di Peso, Renaldo, and Hamner 1947) clearly illustrates the complex nature of the community, class differences, specialized economic production, enceinte wealth accumulation, and monumental architecture.

The city of Paquimé was the culmination of a long archaeological sequence that begins with the earliest gatherer-hunters 12,000 years ago (Fig. 3). The region's prehistory followed a pattern common to much of the Southwest and far northern Mexico. The first farming communities developed around A.D. 200, and up until Casas Grandes' florescence during the Medio period, most people lived in small, mostly self-contained villages, conducting limited trade with other communities. The Medio period, which probably began sometime during the latter part of the 12th century (A.D. 1150/1250) and ended between A.D. 1350 and 1450, was a time of obvious wealth, development of large communities within
a regional network, and probably increased conflict. The following Taruio
period was a time of substantial popula-
tion reorganization and movement that
only intensified with Spanish contact
and colonization in the 1600s.

Paquimé is located at the headwaters
of the Rio Casas Grandes where tributaries emerge from the Sierra Madre
Occidental mountains. Here the agrari-
an Paquiméans and their ancestors found
a floodplain nearly a kilometer wide,
with rich soil and abundant water. The
growth and influence of Paquimé was
not, however, due solely to its excellent
farming potential. There is clear evi-
dence of specialized economic produc-
tion during the Medio period that
presumably was largely responsible for
the accumulation of wealth.

Two items of exchange, macaw par-
rrots and shell, were especially critical
for Paquimé. Di Pesu found the re-
main of macaw breeding at Paquimé,
including many nesting boxes and
macaw skeletons (Fig. 4). As many
macaw skeletons were recovered from
this one site as had been found to that
point in all the hundreds of other sites
evacuated in the Southwest. The macaw
was a necessary item for rituals for
many prehistoric groups in the North
American Southwest, and there is little
question that Paquimé was the source
for the macaw trade and probably con-
trolled macaw production and distribu-
tion. The discovery of nearly four
million shell artifacts in a few store-
rooms at Paquimé provided all the
evidence needed to show that shell
deposits were critical for Paquimé.

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trade was also an integral part of Casas
Grandes commerce, especially in light
of the fact that the site is situated
hundreds of kilometers from any coast
(Fig. 5).

While exotic artifacts such as macaws
and shell have received the greatest
attention, there is evidence that spe-
cialized economic production of more
mundane goods flourished at Paquimé
as well. The century plant and turkey
are two examples. Since the number of
turkey skeletons and turkey pens found
is nearly equal to that of macaws, turkey
breeding may have been on the same
scale as macaw production. And like
macaws, turkeys seem to have been
raised for ritual use: none of the hun-
dreds of turkey skeletons found had
been butchered for food.

Similarly, processing of the century
plant (Agave) was also carried out on
a large scale. This succulent, with its
conspicuous flowering stalk and dense
rossette of spine-tipped leaves, is native
to the deserts and mountains of the
North American Southwest, and its
fibers and baked hearts were widely
used by native Southwesterners. The
mooning pits at Casas Grandes are by far
the largest known, and their extreme
size suggests that massive quantities of
garage, beyond those normally con-
sumed by a family, were being cooked.
This conclusion is consistent with the
fact that the roasting pits are restrict-
ed to two areas within Paquimé and are
not spread out across the community as
might be expected with a more widely
practiced activity.

Figure 5. Several rooms
were excavated contain-
ing millions of shell
artifacts and other exotic
goods. These finds provide
some of the best evidence
for accumulated wealth and
its control by a small
segment of the community.
Here two workmen sift through one of the
richest storerooms during the
evacuation of Casas
Grandes from 1989 to
1961. The tray in the
foreground contains some
of the 4 million shell artifacts
discovered in this and an
adjacent room.

Photograph courtesy of The American Foundation, Inc., Tucson, AZ. neg. #029-1375.

Figure 6. The two large L-shaped ballcourts at Paquimé are
similar to those from Mesoamerica to the south where
ritually significant games were played. Although the forms of
the structures is similar to Mesoamerican ballcourts, it is not
certain that the same games were played at Casas Grandes.

Photograph courtesy of The American Foundation, Inc., Tucson, AZ. neg. #029-1412.

Casas Grandes society had elites, as
is evidenced by the integrating presence
of a few burials entombed in two small
chambers within the Mouth of the
Offerings, at the northeast end of the
site. Unlike the hundreds of other bur-
ials excavated, these were afforded the
special treatment of being placed inside
ceramic vessels within special tombs.
Further evidence of class differences
came from a few rooms that yielded
eenormous amounts of exotic goods. Mi-

lions of shell artifacts, rare ceramics,
and other unusual artifacts were excava-
ted from these rooms. The restricted
distribution of such wealth is best ex-
plained by tight control of the economy
by a relatively small group.

Additional evidence that Paquimé
was something other than an egalitarian
village came to light with JCPG
research. The massive and integrated
architecture of Casas Grandes hints at
planned and coordinated labor.
Furthermore, a sophisticated system
of canals brought water from a spring to
the site where it was emptied into a
settling tank and then into a main
reservoir. A series of smaller canals
distributed water to the suites of rooms,
and an additional system of drains
removed excess water from the
community.
Paquimé practiced a rich ritual life. The presence of public "monumental" ritual architecture has been used to infer patterns of social integration among prehistoric peoples. The large number of such structures at Paquimé suggests that the community was also a religious center. The western portion of the site housed many mounds in monomorphic or geometric shapes. While none is especially large or required massive labor to construct, the diversity of shapes is not matched at any other site in the North American Southwest. The Mound of the Offerings, which contained the special burial crypts mentioned above, also had a room with unusual symbolic items, such as a T-shaped stone altar, and was located next to a ceremonial plaza with a series of nodding rooms.

Balconies were used for a religious baldaquin among Mesopotamian groups, and three balconies, two of which were T-shaped and similar to those in Mesoamerica, have been excavated at Casas Grandes (Fig. 6). Balconies are also found among Holokam sites in central and southern Arizona; however, the Holokam balconies are not T-shaped. We do not know if Paquimé balconies were used like Holokam ones or if, in fact, the Paquimé actually performed a Mesoamerican ritual dance in their balconies.

**Paquimé's Hinterland: Recent Survey Data**

Few questions that Paquimé was the heart of a complex society with specialized economic production and the presence of elites and wealth, but what were its relationships with outlying communities? We know that there were hundreds of communities in the International Four Corners area contemporary with Casas Grandes that had similar architecture and pottery types. Did Casas Grandes maintain an hegemony over outlying regions, or did it control only a small area? Previous archaeological reconnaissance surveys in northwestern Chihuahua conducted in the 1920s and 1930s provided insufficient data to address such questions. Furthermore, the large amount of archaeological work undertaken in the United States in the past quarter century has failed to deal adequately with Casas Grandes' regional relationships. Part of the reason for this is, of course, that any sites in the United States would have been at least 130 kilometers from the center at Casas Grandes and thus might well have had the weakest relations with Paquimé.

One must work closer to Paquimé in Chihuahua, in order to study sites that most likely had the strongest connections with Casas Grandes. The little research available for northwestern Chihuahua provides tantalizing clues about the regional system. Prehistoric trails have been noted informally. Although they have not been mapped or studied, their presence points to some ongoing relationships between communities. More interesting are atlatl stone structures found on the summits of hills and along ridge tops. Based on information in early Spanish accounts, these structures have been interpreted as parts of a free communication network that would have linked together villages many kilometers distant. We expect that there was a regional nature to the Paquimé polity, and that there is some evidence to suggest that it might have been wide-ranging.

The primary purpose of our survey project was to provide more up-to-date archaeological data on the regional character of the Paquimé polity. Given the possible size of the Paquimé system, we believed that our initial survey should cover a broad area; that is, we could not restrict our survey to a small drainage and then extrapolate these patterns to the entire system. On the other hand, we had very limited funding; enough for a modest six weeks of survey. Therefore, we conducted a targeted reconnaissance survey of larger, known sites in northwestern Chihuahua (Fig. 1). We searched out important sites, recorded and mapped them, and collected a sample of surface artifacts, such as pottery sherds, chipped stone debris, and grinding stone fragments. With this approach, our analyses could look for the broadest regional patterning. We were also able to conduct systematic surveys in two areas. Survey crews members spaced 20 meters apart walked back and forth for complete ground surface coverage. By using both data-gathering techniques, we increased our ability to interpret the survey data. The survey data were divided into four analytic clusters.
centred on drainage areas. Casas Grandes, Rio San Pedro, Carretas Basin, and Río Santa María. We recorded a total of 87 sites. Despite the fact that severe looting of ancient pottery for illegal sale on the international antiquities market had taken place, we were able to record much information on site location, site size, architectural variety, and the types and abundance of surface artifacts, mostly ceramics, chipped stone, and ground stone (Figs. 8, 9). These data reveal trends and patterns that provide insights on the Paquime polity.

A Population Explosion

The population of Medio period sites is much greater than in the pre-Medio period. Even though our project focused explicitly on the Medio period, we did record sites of other periods in our count of 87. The low number of pre-Medio period sites is striking. No such sites were located on systematic surveys, and we recorded only three on the targeted reconnaissance survey. With the current data, we cannot accurately estimate the magnitude of the population explosion or discern the reasons for it (local increase, immigration, or both).

We do not understand how Casas Grandes’ power may have affected or been affected by changing demographics.

There are clear regional differences among Medio period sites within northwestern Chihuahua. Specifically, sites within 30 kilometers of Paquime, especially to the west and southwest, are different from those farther away. Several lines of evidence independently point toward this conclusion.

Our surveys yielded surface evidence of maize production. Circular stone circles with a central hole were found in place at Paquime as entrances for mucus pits (see Fig. 4). We recorded similar stone circles at five sites, all within 30 kilometers of Casas Grandes. However, we found no surface evidence of these artifacts at sites farther than 30 kilometers from Casas Grandes in our study area. Thus, the present evidence suggests that maize breeding occurred at a number of sites integrated within the Paquime-dominated system, but only at those a short distance from the center. The presence of public ritual architecture has an important but nonetheless important because of the character of regional systems throughout the world. None of our outlying sites showed evidence of the ritual mounds present at Paquime, again emphasizing the unique nature of this site. However, we did find numerous I-shaped ballcourts, ballcourt-like structures, and stone circles. Two features were clearly classic I-shaped ballcourts (Fig. 7), and the others, which we call ballcourt-like features (Fig. 10), were composed of an especially flat area with two parallel walls and one narrow entrance. They are long and often with slight earthen berms at the ends. All ballcourts and ballcourt-like structures are approximately the same size. We recorded four ballcourts or ballcourt-like structures along the 9-kilometer stretch of the Tenaja systematic survey area. Two were more present in the El Acatlito systematic surveys. While at least one site each in the Carretas Basin and in Hidalgo County, New Mexico, just to the north, had a ballcourt, there appears to be a greater concentration of ballcourts and ballcourt-like features within a 30-kilometer radius of Paquime.

In addition to ballcourts, “stone circles” may be evidence of ritual practices (Fig. 11). These features are circles of stones usually 6 to 12 meters in diameter. We do not believe that they are ancient ovens, even though they appear to be quite similar on the surface. They are often located near ballcourts. While we do not know their function, the features are quite common at sites within 30 kilometers of Paquime here at more distant sites. Sixteen were recorded in the two systematic survey areas, and many others were noted during the reconnaissance survey.

Sites closer to Casas Grandes tend to be different in other ways also. The largest sites within 30 kilometers of the center have greater architectural diversity and include adobe mounds rather than those farther away. Further, this area has a much higher than expected number of the largest mounds. Without the excavation, it is impossible to evaluate the reasons for this pattern, but we suspect a different occupation history for communities close to Casas Grandes.

Conclusions

Our short project began as an attempt to discover basic regional patterns that would help us to formulate an initial understanding of the Paquime-centered regional system. We would argue that, compared with other regional networks in the Southwest, such as Hohokam, Chaco, and Mesa Verde, Paquime provides the clearest evidence of a strongly centralized polity with accommodation of wealth, status differences, and specialized economic production. Its splendor must have drawn visitors and tourists. And there is no denying that through economic interaction it must have influenced groups throughout the southern Southwest. Yet it comes as a surprise, if not at least, that the core or nucleus of the regional system appears to have encompassed a relatively small area within 30 kilometers of Paquime.

We have only begun to understand some basic characteristies of the Paquime polity and the geography of northwestern Chihuahua. Within this time, the dating and historic dynamics of this regional system remain largely unknown. For example, are the large sites near Paquime early population centers on the same scale as Casas Grandes, with Paquime gaining dominance through time? Or were these sites always large communities and always subordinate to Casas Grandes? Clearly, only excavation will provide the material information to evaluate these detailed interpretations. We can end here by going back to Blackstone who stated over eighty years ago that “even at the present day the extent and boundaries of the civilization of the inhabitants of the Casas Grandes of northern Mexico has not been fully determined.”

**Bibliography**


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Figure 11. We do not know what these “stone circles” are. They vary greatly in size and other characteristics and may have served different purposes. All stone circles recorded by the project were within 30 kilometers of Paquime. This stone circle is larger than most.