Towering red sandstone cliffs provide a dramatic backdrop to archaeological research at the Bluff Great House in southeastern Utah. The rubble mound that was once a massively constructed, multi-storied building is visible from the valley below, as it must have been in ancient times. The Bluff Great House is just one of some 200 Chacoan
community great houses scattered across the northern Southwest, but recent investigations at Bluff have lead to a new understanding of these sites and their users' relationships with Chaco Canyon, located far to the southeast in New Mexico.

Great houses are just one kind of archaeological site attributed to ancestors of the Puebloan peoples who reside in the southwestern United States. Dating primarily to the period from A.D. 900-1150 (the Chaco era), recent research, including that at Bluff, has shown that great houses continued to be used and built during the post-Chaco era. Great houses were first identified in Chaco Canyon, so much of the research that has been conducted at Chacoan community great houses elsewhere in the Northern Southwest can best be understood by turning first to the developments there.

CHACO CANYON AND THE CHACOAN WORLD

Chaco Canyon was a spectacular place. During the Chaco era, Ancestral Puebloans constructed more than a dozen elaborate great houses that contrasted sharply with the average residential hamlet (also called a pueblo). Both types of buildings are located in Chaco Canyon. Unit pueblos consist of a small arc of 10-20 living and storage rooms; one or two subterranean round rooms, or kivas; and trash middens nearby. These small sites were apparently used as residences for the vast majority of people living in Chaco Canyon.

Great houses, by contrast, are massively constructed, with floor plans that vary from 20 to 30 times the size of unit pueblos. Pueblo Bonito, the largest, had 750 rooms. Great houses in Chaco Canyon were part of a larger pattern extending across the northern Southwest. Some of the Chacoan roads lead out of the Canyon and straight toward other great houses. In fact, scores of other great houses have been found in this region. These sites, termed "outliers" or Chacoan community great houses, are presumed centers for their own residential communities. They have been identified on the basis of a number of distinctive characteristics — characteristics shared with great houses in Chaco Canyon but built at significantly smaller scales.

Research at these Chacoan community great houses has grown substantially. Many scholars feel that we will understand Chaco's role in the larger world when we begin to understand Chacoan community great houses.

Prehistoric roads radiating from Chaco Canyon in all directions confirm Chaco's role as the center of a much larger world.

The Bluff Great House Project, under the direction of Drs. Catherine Cameron and Stephen Leekson of the University of Colorado, has been underway since 1995. I have been associated with the project since 1999. The original research design was aimed at understanding the Bluff Great House in three cultural contexts. First, we wanted to understand the relationship between great houses outside and those inside Chaco Canyon during the Chaco era (A.D. 900-1150). Second, we wanted to determine the relationship of Bluff with the larger Northern San Juan region of the northern Southwest; and, finally, its relationship with residential, or habitation, sites in its immediate vicinity. A more recent research design calls for us to pay greater attention to the post-Chaco era use of the Bluff Great House, and to expand our research to include another site nearby, the Comb Wash Great House, for comparison.

Bluff was almost certainly an important center for its local community, but our research so far suggests that it was not a political outlier of Chaco Canyon. More likely, the people at Bluff were attempting in some way to become a part of, or to emulate, the religious and social system that they had heard about or even seen far away in Chaco Canyon. When the center at Chaco collapsed in A.D. 1150, however, people did not stop using the Bluff Great House. A post-Chacoan occupation has been identified at the site, and recent research — at both Bluff and Comb Wash — is directed at understanding the new uses of the old Chacoan structure. Our research at Bluff is exciting, and this research project has already informed our understanding of the Chaco and post-Chaco era in the northern Southwest.

WHAT IS A CHACOAN GREAT HOUSE?

"Great house" implies a single structure, but the term also refers to the complex of features found together. These include the great house, one or more great kivas, road segments, and terraces or earth mounds. Each of these features is discussed in turn below.

Great houses and residential unit pueblos exist side by side in Chaco Canyon and at outlying great houses throughout the Bluff area. Great houses themselves were probably only home to a few families — but very special families — and more likely were centers for ceremonial and communal activities. Great houses are massive masonry constructions with blocks of rectangular and round rooms. In cross-section, the walls are very thick, employing a construction method called core-and-veneer, where stones are placed to form two faces, or veneer, and the space between is filled with a rubble core. Although these thick walls support multiple stories, they are often thicker than necessary. Such "overbuilding" — more effort than needed simply to keep the building upright — is characteristic of Chacoan construction. Great Houses were clearly laborious of love — like the cathedrals of Europe — and not simply functional municipal buildings.

Chacoan great houses have extra large rectangular rooms. Additionally, round rooms ("kivas") are blocked in, or built into square rooms, throughout the structure. The function of round rooms has long been debated in southwestern archaeology, with some seeing them as ceremonial chambers and others seeing them as functional storage rooms. The round room form comes from the ancient Below ground pit structure, which was the primary residence for Pueblo people prior to about A.D. 700. The round, subterranean form continued in unit pueblos, where pit structures or kivas were located in front of the pueblo itself. Chacoan blocked-in kivas are thought to be a continuation of this traditional architecture.

Great kivas, or extremely large subterranean structures, are found in pueblos fronting many of the great houses and in isolated areas between communities. There is no doubt these were ceremonial chambers. Great kivas come with a very specific set of features, including wall niches (often containing offerings), foot drums, a raised, raised floor, and many having distinct ceremonial connotations. Plazas front the great house and are often at least partly enclosed by short walls. At Pueblo Alto, which lies on the mesa top above Chaco Canyon, archaeologists found a well-defined prepared plaza surface. It had postholes, storage pits, and earth ovens. Plazas likely provided community space for food preparation as well as cooking, dancing, and other group activities.

Prehistoric roads are a key element of the Chacoan landscape. Chacoan roads are wide and linear, generally heading straight across the landscape, regardless of topography. They have been found linking great houses in the Canyon and leading out of and into the Canyon in all directions. Scholars have debated their function, with ideas ranging from trade or military routes, to symbolic ways of tying the surrounding landscape and other great houses to Chaco Canyon. Some roads run for long distances, while others are simply short segments associated with a Chacoan great house community.
THE BLUFF GREAT HOUSE

The Bluff site has all of the characteristics of a Chacoan great house — a large, multi-storied masonry great house, a great kiva, a "bem" (the outer version of Chaco trash mounds), and prehistoric roads. Like many outlying great houses, it has a prominent location, perched where it would have towered over the surrounding community. It looks south over fertile farmland and the San Juan River.

We have investigated all of the major features at the Bluff Great House. The great house was constructed in at least two, or possibly three, different episodes. It was multi-storied, though many walls supporting it were narrow. In the central section we found core-and-vener walls, but their similarity to Chaco wide walls diverges through the use of poor-quality local sandstone. The great house probably had between 20 and 40 rooms; only a few have been fully defined. Four blocked-in kivas run along the front of the great house.

Formal, constructed mounds, like those fronting Pueblo Bonito, have not been found outside Chaco Canyon. Smaller earthen berms however, have frequently been found that partly enclose the great house. Berms were likely not defensive, but instead may have defined boundaries, such as "in" from "out", or "us" from "them". The Bluff berm was probably never very high and is now visible only as small hillocks that hardly could have created a physical barrier to entry. None of these berms outside Chaco Canyon are very tall. They could have created symbolic barriers to those who sought entry to the great house's precinct.

The great kiva is small in diameter by most southwestern standards (around 14 m across) but was dug deep into the terrace surface. It is surrounded — at least in the four cardinal directions — by a series of rooms, or antechambers. The inner chamber of the great kiva has been partly exposed; the wall of the inner chamber was constructed of crudely worked sandstone blocks, very unlike the orderly Chaco Canyon masonry. We also exposed a small section of the top of the bench, which consisted of an adobe surface with cobble randomly inset. We did not reach the floor, but expect it to be about half a meter or so below the bench.

In 1997, CU graduate student Pete Hallert conducted an archeological survey around Bluff and found a community of nine contemporary sites in the vicinity of the Great House. Few of these smaller sites have escaped the ravages of modern and historic land use or flooding of the river, thus making further investigation of the community difficult. In other areas across the Chacoan world, however, communities ranging from just a few to a dozen or more unit pueblos surround great houses. Clearly, great houses functioned as important community centers.

As a community center, the Bluff Great House provided public, and probably ceremonial, space for the resident population around it. A plaza may have been located in front of the great house, within an area bounded by berm segments. At Bluff, a plaza surface has yet to be defined, and it may have been destroyed by the near constant winds that scour the sandy ground surface.

Several prehistoric roads can be seen at Bluff that pass through seemingly intentional gaps in the berm. One road points to the southeast, in the direction of Chaco Canyon. Another leads to the north, then northwest, across a mesa, where it continues toward Comb Ridge, an intimidating monoclinal. Comb Ridge poses a problem in the present for wanderers and hikers alike, and undoubtedly did in the past as well. The road, however, leads to a place where the crossing has been eased by steps, pocked into the soft but steep sandstone.

Recently, University of Colorado graduate student Jonathan Till and archaeologist Winston Hurst investigated the interwoven nature of these roads, not only in association with southeastern Utah great houses, but also in the role they played historically in the lives of residents of the region. Rock art and other cultural landscape features would have guided people walking on the roads as they approached natural topographic obstacles, such as Comb Ridge.

RECENT INVESTIGATIONS OF A POST-CHACO WORLD

Many Chacoan community great houses continued in use after the remarkable center at Chaco Canyon fell around A.D. 1150. Some were remodeled, but some entirely new great houses were also constructed after the center at Chaco had fallen into disuse. Some scholars argue that there was a revitalization of the Chacoan idea, while others argue that there was an attempt by Chacoans to continue as leaders of the Chacoan World from a new "capital" at Aztec Ruins, located to the north of Chaco Canyon.

The Bluff Great House, it seems, was initially constructed and used in the Chaco era, but also was used and reconstructed during the post-Chaco era. Parts of the great house were remodeled; segments of the berm may have been entirely built, and the north antechamber of the great kiva was partitioned. Future investigations will continue these explorations into the post-Chaco use and re-modeling of the Bluff Great House. Further, the continued University of Colorado investigations at Bluff Great House, and our new research at Comb Wash Great House, will persist in exploring this post-Chacoan occupation in southeastern Utah.

Located about 25 km northwest of Bluff, the Comb Wash Great House appears to have been built during the post-Chaco era, but within an existing community. Residential sites surrounding it were used during both the Chaco and post-Chaco eras. Prior to the building of the Comb Wash Great House, the community may have been associated with a Chaco-era great house nearby. The recent addition of Comb Wash to the research design allows us to look at the relationship between a great...
house and its community during the post-Chaco era. Comparing Comb Wash with the Bluff Great House, we are able to examine how these relationships changed over time. There are several great kivas in the Comb Wash community area and a network of roads that run to the north and south along the base of Comb Ridge.

At Bluff, Comb Wash, and across the Chacoan world, great houses, great kivas, berms, roads, and other features formed an intricate ritual landscape. Research at Bluff has shown that, as an “outlier,” the Bluff Great House was probably not built by Chacoans trying to establish a frontier outpost, but more likely by local populations trying to emulate what they saw or heard about far away in Chaco Canyon. When that impressive center at Chaco collapsed, the memories and ritual landscape endured. New great houses, like that at Comb Wash, were built, and old ones, like Bluff, were remodeled. Both continued to be used well after the Chaco era, and ongoing research at both these sites will continue to inquire into the relationships that were initially developed during the Chaco era but far outlived the actual use of Chaco Canyon as a center.

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