Chaco Canyon

Geography & Environment
Geography

- Canyon within Colorado Plateau
- Chuska Mtns to west
- San Juan Mtns to north
- San Pedro Mtns to east
- Canyon cuts Chacra Mesa
Geography

- Canyon cut by Chaco Wash
- Flows northwest to Chaco River,
  - Tributary of San Juan River
- Southwestern facing cliffs
- ‘Rincons’ cut into cliffs
  - Intense funneling of runoff
Chaco Wash
Climate

• The Chuska Mountains = rain shadow
• Orographic precipitation west side
• Dry katabatic winds, Chaco side
• Rare tropical insurgence from south
  – 8 inches of rain annually
• Temperature extremes
  – -38 to 102 F
Chuska Mountains
Vegetation

• High desert scrubland
• Dominated by sagebrush \textit{Artemisia tridentata)}
• Sparse scrub piñon/juniper forests
Sonoran Desert Region

The Sonoran Desert Region consists of the Sonoran Desert itself plus the surrounding biological communities, including the Sea of Cortez (Gulf of California) and its islands.
Vegetation
Vegetation

• Chuska Mountains
  – 50 miles to west
  – Supports ponderosa pine
  – Supports fir trees

• Nearest source of beams
Fauna

- Coyote
- Deer, elk, & pronghorn
- Small carnivores: bobcats, skunks, badgers, foxes
- Prairie dogs
- Cottontails & jackrabbits

- Never rich in terms of animal biomass
Modern Chaco

- Chaco claimed by modern Hopi & Pueblos
- Region sparsely populated
- UNESCO World Heritage Site
- US National Historical Park, NPS
- Chacoan roads often managed by BLM
- Modern focus is preservation & restoration
- Close management link with Native Americans
The Rise of Chaco
Early Pithouse Villages

• AD 400s
• Shabik’eschee
• 29SJ423
  – Each had 100+ pithouses
  – Spanned canyon bottom to rim (south side)
  – Each had a great kiva
  – Large amounts of refuse
  – Probably seasonally occupied

• Represent large pithouse villages
  – Abandoned after about 1 century
Shabik’eschee
Famous pithouse village near Chaco Canyon, NM

Excavated in the 1920s & 1970s

19 houses in map

45 “storage bins”

Inhabited between 1500 & 1300 years ago
Fajada Wash

• AD 800
• Immigrants from the south
  – Pottery & lithic refuse non-local
• Built w/ view of Fajada Butte & Huérfano Mtn
• 27 houses, clustered in small area
• Two larger buildings of masonry, visible
  – Connected to great kiva by a road
• Contemporaneous hamlets in Chaco much smaller
McPhee Village

• Far north in Mesa Verde region
• Late AD 800s, aggregation occurring
• Crescent-shaped roomblocks
  – Roughly 100 rooms

• “If archaeologists had found this site in Chaco Canyon, they would certainly have classified it as an early Great House” (Windes, pp. 17)
McPhee Village

Figure 3.6. Plan of McPhee Village with enlargement of McPhee Pueblo. An outline of the Knobby Knee site is inserted for size comparison.
Great Houses

- Massive, multistory building
- Large, thick masonry walls
- Kivas inside structure
- Roadways
- Earthen platforms
- Nearby great kivas
Exceptions

- Some have large rooms, others do not
- Some have multiple stories, others don’t
- Some have roads, great kivas, earthworks
- Some have massive walls, some do not
- Most Chacoan Great House Communities have several of these traits, but not all
- In San Juan Basin, great houses w/o great kivas, but large plazas
Great House Community

• Community w/ Chacoan great house
  – Great house in center of village
  – Often topographically prominent
• Includes surrounding village
  – For example Guadalupe Village
Early Great Houses

• Casa del Rio
  – On Chaco River, near Peñasco Blanco
  – Late AD 800s
  – 28 rooms, masonry – overlies huge P1 adobe structure
  – 16 foot high trash midden
  – Nexus point for several roads

  – Other similar sites on Chaco river: Willow Canyon, Lake Valley, Great Bend
Early Great Houses

- Within Chaco Canyon
- Mid to late AD 800s
- Peñasco Blanco, Pueblo Bonito, Una Vida
- Built into massive pueblos over time
- Last for hundreds of years
Una Vida

http://dennisr holloway architect.com/UnaVida.html
Peñasco Blanco

Aerial view of Chaco Canyon at sunset (Copyright, Paul Logsdon), looking approximately East. The circular structure in the foreground is the (unexcavated) ruin of Peñasco Blanco, the westernmost large dwelling in Chaco Canyon.
Peñasco Blanco

http://dennisrhollowayarchitect.com/PenascoBlanco.html
Early Great Houses

• Casamero
  – Red Mesa Valley
  – 50 mi south of Chaco Canyon
  – AD 900s
  – Two-story structure
  – 20+ rooms

– Others in Red Mesa Valley: Blue J, Andrews
Spread of Great Houses

- Earliest near Chaco Canyon
- By middle AD 900 Red Mesa Valley & San Juan Basin
- Late AD 900s Rio Puerco
- AD 1000s Chuska Mountains
- AD 900 to 1150, Mesa Verde Region
Chaco Interaction Sphere

• Traditionally thought, small groups moved out from Chaco = “outliers”
• Perhaps a single political-economic system?
• **Chaco Interaction Sphere**
  – Central canyon = center of sphere
  – A extensive systems of goods & information
  – Network between outlying communities & central Chaco
  – Often referred to as “Chaco World”
  – Members of sphere have “Chacoan Great Houses”
Mesoamerican Outpost Myth

• Mesoamerican Overlords
  – Thought to have developed Great House architecture

• Great houses developed in situ
  – Required distinctive masonry
  – Masonry evolved over time
Chaco Mystery

• Why such large Chacoan centers?

• “Massing” = the creation impressive architecture forms

• Pueblo Bonito = mostly dark, interior space under stories of architecture
Late Centers

• Kin Kletso
• Pueblo Alto
• Wijiji

• Little indication of site use, just huge architecture, unused rooms
  - Little to no refuse
  - Pueblo Alto = one story, 12 foot ceilings

http://dennisrhowayarchitect.com/KinKletso.html
Chaco Culture

• Thought that Chaco Canyon was center of massive political system
  – Goods from surrounding areas came in
  – Artifacts from Chaco did not spread out
  – Ideas spread out

• Was there a Chaco elite?
  – 90% of people lived in small unit pueblos near farms

• Were the pueblos ceremonial centers?
Chacoan Roads

• “North” and “South” road well preserved
  – North road 43 miles long; South = 37 miles
• Many sites have short roads
• There are also shrines
  – “line of site system”
  – Strategic high points on landscape
  – Fire boxes, shrines
  – From southern Colorado to Chaco