Socio-politics at Chaco
Quandary

- Chaco is monumental
- It also shows little evidence of occupation

- Why? What were the pueblos used for?
Two models

• 1) Egalitarian – specialized ritual
  – Ceremonial connection to Chaco
  – May have been priest residents
  – Large groups would visit at points in year
  – Proponents argue there is no evidence for elites
    • No differences in wealth at Chaco (wrong)
  – Argue that Chaco like modern Pueblos
    • No chiefs
Two models

• 2) Social inequality w/ political elites
  – Aristocrats lived at Chaco
  – Trade came in as tribute
  – May not have been a chief, but a group

Mills, pp. 127
Two models

2) Social inequality w/ political elites
   – Proponents argue that there are elite burials
   – Also argue that Chaco (architecturally) not like modern Pueblos
   – Scope of building required power
   – Many small sites; few great houses
   – Elites would’ve controlled ‘esoteric knowledge’
What I think...

- Massing of architecture
- Some rich burials in great houses
- Huge labor manipulation
- Chaco not like modern Pueblos

- Probably a socio-political elite lived at Chaco
Problems

- Dichotomizing ritual & politics
- Poor excavation record for main Pueblos
- May be no analog for Chaco
Ritual - Politics

• Politics mischaracterized as
  – Competitive
  – Secular
  – Leaders hold office and benefit from it
    • Equates to self-aggrandizing behavior of leaders
Ritual - Politics

• More accurately
  – Politics = “web of relationships of social power that structure human societies” Sebastian pp. 97

  – Evidence of ritual at Chaco does not diminish possibility of complex politics

  – Chaco architecture = wealth

  – Corporate groups can lead w/o elite individuals
Poor Excavation Record

• Great houses poorly understood
• Poor record of domestic features
  – Few there in the first place
  – Excavated a century ago
Modern Analogy

• Modern Pueblos indeed fairly egalitarian
  – Provide rich record
  – Physical layout of sites, landscape different
• May need a different source for analogy
• Sebastian suggests late prehistoric Africa
How did they survive?

Farming Chaco
Chaco Canyon Basin

- Moisture depends on montane runoff
- Summer precipitation also important

- Corn requires 110 to 130 frost free days
  - Most year have less than 100
  - Never more than 150

Vivian, pp. 9
The Western Dune

- A large dune bridged mouth of Chaco Canyon
  - Prevented rapid erosion up the canyon
  - Prevented “arroyo cutting”

- This kept basin water table high

- The dune was breached in AD 900
  - Arroyo cutting began
  - Water table lowered
A multi-pronged approach

• Good soils chosen
• Exposure to sun maximized
• Water was the critical element

• The dune was critical
  – When present, runoff spread evenly over basin
  – When breached, water rushed out the wash
Location w/i the Canyon

- Steep north face produced high velocity runoff
- The gently aggrading south side was favored
- Large Pueblos situated at “funnel zones”
- Water diversion of runoff to gridded fields
- Terracing used to capture soil moisture

Vivian, pp. 12
Breaching the dune

• From AD 900 to 1000 = less of an impact
• Moist climate offset the shift in water table

• At around AD 1000 the breach was filled with a masonry dam
• Climate continued to be favorable

• By AD 1080 great houses being built away from Chaco due to drier climate
The big one

• Major drought in roughly AD 1130
  – Lasted for 50 years
• Water table already low, despite stabilization
• Farming collapsed
• Chaco Canyon abandoned

• Aztec & areas to north become important
Sustainability

• Defined as: “use of resources at a level that makes it possible for future generations to use the same resources at the same level”

• Chaco Anasazi: widely considered an example of unsustainable
  – A lesson from the past
Questions

• Where did each groups live?
  – Hohokam
  – Mesa Verde Anasazi
  – Hohokam

• How long did each culture last?
• Which culture was the most sustainable?
• What led to the downfall of each culture?
• Are modern societies more sustainable?