

SECRETS OF

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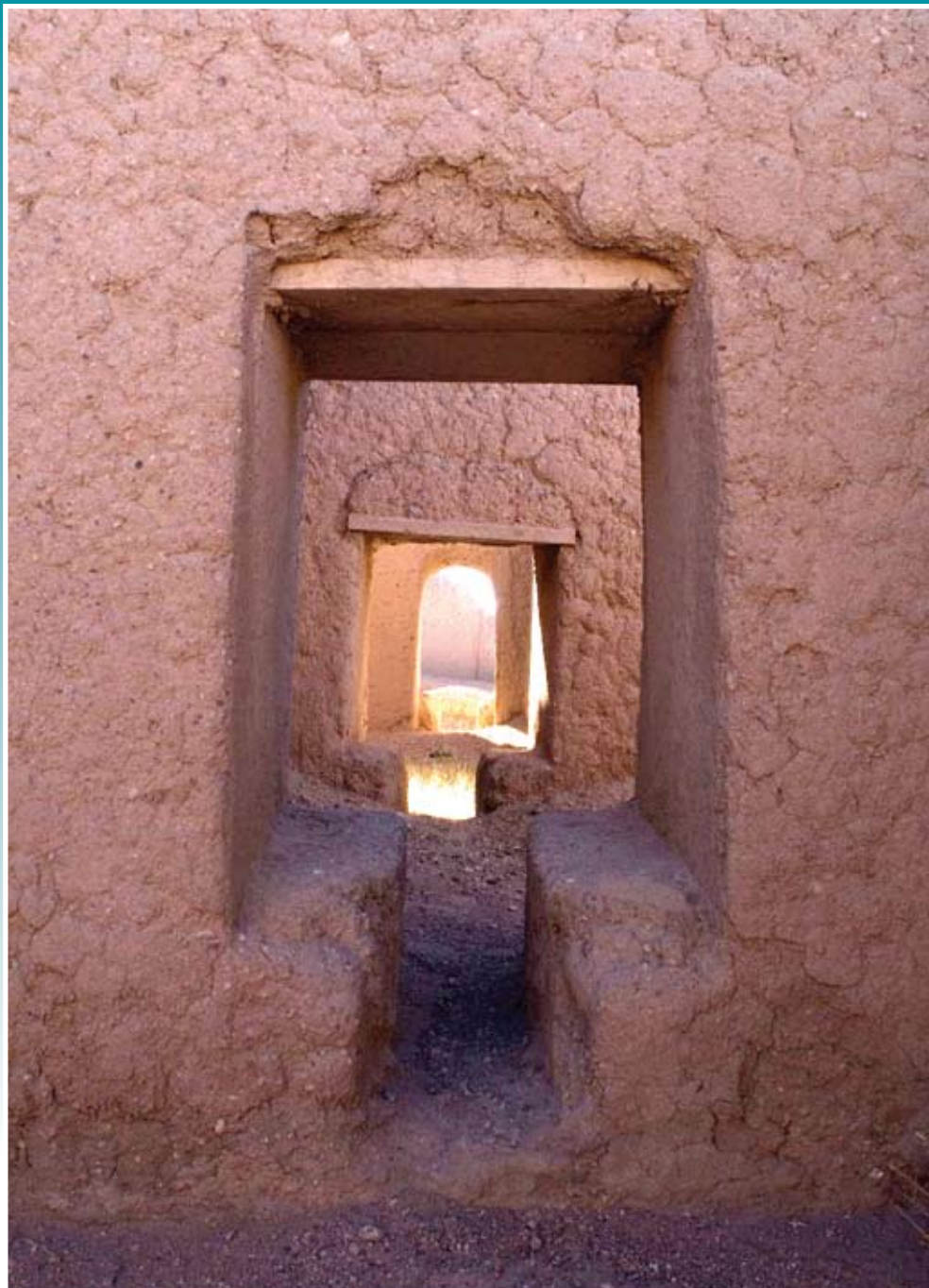
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Casas Grandes holds many secrets, some of which have been revealed through archaeology, and others we have yet to unlock. It is a story of remote ruins, precious artifacts, and scientific discoveries—but more importantly, it is the record of the lives of the people of Casas Grandes. The prehispanic culture is primarily known for its beautiful ceramic tradition, although the real story is about the people who made and used the pottery and about a past culture of the Southwest that emerged in a desert valley of northern Chihuahua over eight hundred years ago.

In a time before there was an international border between Mexico and the United States, in the thirteenth century, the people of Casas Grandes built a city like no other. We don't know what they called their home, but today it is known as Paquimé. During the Medio period of A.D. 1200–1450, the prehistoric city was the center of the Casas Grandes world. Exotic goods

CASAS GRANDES



ABOVE: Several hundred T-shaped doorways were found at Paquimé. Photograph by Leif Percifield.

LEFT: Casas Grandes plain ware effigy jar with closed eyes, Casas Grandes, A.D. 1200–1450. Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology, 8335/11.



ABOVE: Adobe architecture at Paquimé, the largest Casas Grandes site.



RIGHT: Charles Di Peso examining a macaw pen at Paquimé. Macaws were symbolically important and prized for their feathers, which were traded to other areas of the Southwest. Courtesy of the Amerind Foundation, Inc., Dragoon, Arizona.

at the site—copper, shell, turquoise, and macaws—tell us that Casas Grandes participated in a widespread trade and interaction network that extended from northern Chihuahua into what is today the US Southwest.

In many aspects Paquimé looks like a Southwestern pueblo, with multistory adobe roomblocks bordering plazas and pottery that is clearly part of the Southwestern polychrome tradition. In other ways, Casas Grandes is an enigma. Ballcourts, monumental architecture, a stratified social hierarchy, macaw breeding, and ceramic effigies all suggest Mesoamerican influences. Casas Grandes is not uniquely Puebloan or Mesoamerican; it blends elements of both cultures. Located far north of classic Mesoamerica and south of the US Southwest, Casas Grandes has often been overlooked from both sides of the border, despite being one of the largest and most significant cultures of its time.

Explorers and travelers to the Chihuahuan desert encountered arid basins separated by the Sierra Madre Occidental Mountains and by three river valleys. Less than ten inches of rain fall each year, making rivers and springs essential for sustaining life. The first written accounts of the desert ruins

were made in 1584 by Spanish General Francisco de Ibarra and Baltasar de Obregón, who observed:

There are many houses of great size, strength, and height. They are of six and seven stories, with towers and walls like fortresses for protection and defense against the enemies who undoubtedly used to make war on its inhabitants. The houses contain large and magnificent patios paved with enormous and beautiful stones resembling jasper. There were knife-shaped stones which supported the wonderful and big pillars of heavy timber brought from far away. The walls of the houses were whitewashed and painted in many colors and shades. . .

Charles Di Peso and the Amerind Foundation excavated at Casas Grandes from 1958–1961. In bold style, Di Peso presented the vision that Paquimé was founded by Mesoamerican traders—*pochteca*—who established political control over

BELOW: Ramos Polychrome male smoker effigy jar, Casas Grandes, A.D. 1200–1450. Collection of Alan S. and Alice B. Fleischer.



ABOVE: Ramos Polychrome olla with stylized macaws, Casas Grandes, A.D. 1200–1450. Collection of the Amerind Foundation, Inc., Dragoon, Arizona, 4605.

Casas Grandes. He believed Paquimé was the outpost of a Mesoamerican state where merchant rulers exploited local resources and controlled the exchange of shell, ceramics, copper, and turquoise, all channeled to classic Mesoamerica.

Today there is little accepted evidence to support a model of direct Mesoamerican intervention. However, Di Peso's fascinating work still tells us much about the people of Paquimé. The great pueblo was the home of potters, stone workers, craft specialists, weavers, ball players, macaw breeders, hunters and farmers, traders, religious leaders, and families. The city was densely populated with three to five thousand people.

Visitors to Paquimé immediately notice thick-walled adobe roomblocks, some with unusual cross and butterfly shapes. Paquimé contained about two thousand rooms. Setting it apart from other Southwestern sites, a ceremonial precinct includes ballcourts, a colonnaded gallery, an elite tomb complex, and seven massive platform mounds. Archaeologists Michael Whalen and Paul Minnis characterize the imposing, substantial nature of the buildings as architecture of power, designed to awe visitors to Paquimé eight

hundred years ago, much as it does today.

The control of water was an integral feature, with a sophisticated water system linking domestic reservoirs to a spring. There was an underground well, and stone-lined canals supplied water and drained refuse. In surrounding areas, irrigation ditches directed water for the farming of corn, beans, and squash, a diet supplemented by the hunting of game.

Casas Grandes is the only area of the Southwest with evidence of macaw breeding. Nesting pens with heavy entry stone rings protected caretakers from the sharp beaks and claws of the birds. Several hundred macaw skeletons, along with eggshells, are evidence of breeding. Scarlet macaws (*Ara macao*) are not native to Casas Grandes. Their natural habitat is tropical lowland areas such as Veracruz. Macaws were raised for trade in feathers, or less commonly for export of the birds themselves. Macaws were prized for their brilliant feathers, used in ceremonies. Most macaws found in contemporaneous archaeological contexts in the Southwest probably came from Casas Grandes. Macaws appear on Casas Grandes pottery in realistic and stylized designs, emphasizing their great cultural significance.

THIS PAGE: Ramos Polychrome bird effigy jar, possibly a duck or killdeer, Casas Grandes, A.D. 1200–1450. Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology, courtesy of John and Linda Comstock and the Abigail Van Vleck Charitable Trust, 8365/11.



OPPOSITE PAGE: Huerigos Polychrome Janus-faced jar, Casas Grandes, A.D. 1200–1450. Collection of Alan S. and Alice B. Fleischer.

Casas Grandes ballcourts were places for gatherings of great importance. Southwestern kivas are absent, and ballcourts linked together neighboring communities. Paquimé has two I-shaped ballcourts of Mesoamerican style with a playing field enclosed by raised sides. I-shaped ballcourts occur at fifteen smaller Medio-period sites in northern Chihuahua, most within a day's walk of Paquimé. Visiting teams from other areas of Casas Grandes may have traveled this distance to participate in games.

The ballgame was probably an exciting part of community life played for diversion and to mark ritual occasions. The events were likely accompanied by feasting at nearby agave roasting pits. We do not know exactly how the Casas Grandes ballgame was played. It may have been similar to an Aztec version where players hit a rubber ball with the hips, while other depictions show the ball returned with sticks or the hands and feet. Mesoamerican ballcourts occur in areas with factionalized, competing leaders, leading some archaeologists to propose that Casas Grandes ballcourts signify ongoing competition and rivalry between neighboring elites.

ORIGINS

One of the secrets of Casas Grandes is where the people originated. Some look to distant sources, such as Stephen Lekson's assertion that Chaco Canyon elites traveled south along a Chaco Meridian to found Casas Grandes. A stronger case can perhaps be made for development from local beginnings in northern Mexico. *Cerros de trincheras*—fortified hilltop terraces—were residential and agricultural sites from 1000 B.C.—A.D. 500, a surprisingly early date. The terraced settlements reveal a significant late Archaic population in the area and demonstrate the importance of sedentism, defense, and the appearance of agriculture.

Origins of Casas Grandes are seen in pithouses and plain pottery that appear around A.D. 200, traits shared with the Mogollon culture of the Southwest. People lived in farming villages of clustered pithouses and made textured and red-on-brown pottery during the early Viejo period (A.D. 600–1075). By A.D. 1075–1200, their descendants lived in surface houses with plazas. A dramatic change occurred when Paquimé was built in the Medio period (A.D. 1200–1450), a time of greater population aggregation and a profusion of eight different polychrome ceramic types.

THE CERAMIC TRADITION

The people of Casas Grandes left no written accounts but their pottery has endured to tell us about their society. Potters collected high-quality local white clays to form vessels by hand. The typical form is a globular jar or *olla*. Ceramics were used everyday in both domestic and ritual contexts.

The striking pottery of the Medio period (A.D. 1200–1450) has bold geometric designs painted in red and black on a light background. Casas Grandes potters produced a wide variety of types and forms. Ramos Polychrome is the most prevalent, and appears to have been made in the core area and exported to other villages. Archaeologist Maria Sprehn finds that the rise of pottery specialization coincided with the rise of an elite in the Medio period, as elite patrons may have commissioned specialist artists to make the finest pieces.

The symbolic importance of macaws and serpents is unmistakable, as they are among the images most frequently depicted on pottery. Serpents may symbolize Quetzalcóatl, Mesoamerican deity of the underworld, or they may be connected to the Water Serpent of the Pueblos. Although the bird serpent may have been transmitted from Mesoamerica, it is likely that the underlying ideas may have been interpreted differently as this symbol spread throughout the Southwest.

One of the secrets of Casas Grandes that continues to puzzle archaeologists is why potters made such a variety of ceramic effigy jars. Effigies are sculptural forms depicting animals, humans, and other beings. They portray birds, badgers, fish, and turtles, along with fantastical composite creatures such as a cross between a rabbit and a bird. “Janus” pots have the same face on both sides, reflecting the importance of duality. Hooded effigies, with a human-like head above a jar, have been interpreted by Di Peso as Mesoamerican deities. One researcher argues that effigy vessels were set in wall niches in domestic rooms, where they may have been used to present food and drink offerings.



Female and male effigies may be more closely related to a Mesoamerican tradition, as human effigies are rare in the Southwest. Information about dress and adornment are seen in details of jewelry, textiles, sashes, headbands, and facial decoration. Females are seated with both legs extended, while males kneel or have one knee flexed to the chest. Archaeologist Christine VanPool argues that smoking male effigies depict ritual activity and may represent shamans, possible religious leaders of Casas Grandes.

EXOTIC GOODS AND ELITES

Exotic artifacts at Paquimé surpass amounts found at other Southwestern sites. Workshop and storage rooms contained ornaments of shell, copper, and turquoise. Over four million pieces of shell were found, weighing one and a half tons. Shell was transported from the coast and made into jewelry. Five thousand pieces of turquoise were found, as jewelry and buried in room corners as offerings. Turquoise likely originated from the Cerrillos mines or Burro Mountains of New Mexico. A probable trade network exported the sacred stone from the Southwest to central Mexico.

Casas Grandes society appears to have centered around a prestige goods economy based on long-distance trade of macaws, shell, and turquoise. One of its secrets is why exotic goods were stockpiled at the site. Some propose Paquimé was a pilgrimage center or that the goods represent stored wealth. Exotic goods may have been controlled by elites who were religious leaders. The association of elites with rare artifacts and symbols of authority reveals status differences among the Casas Grandes people.

THE REGIONAL SYSTEM

We are only beginning to understand the role of Paquimé within the larger region. The surrounding area contains hundreds of sites, just now being scientifically studied, that were all part of the Casas

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Grandes system. Nearby villages also have polychrome ceramics, T-shaped doors, macaw pens, and ballcourts. Some outlying sites share similarities with the core area, but do not appear to have been under direct political control of Paquimé.

The wider Casas Grandes interaction sphere included people who lived in what is today southern New Mexico and Arizona. The Joyce Well site in Hidalgo County, New Mexico, has Casas Grandes ceramics, T-shaped doors, and ballcourts, indicating ties to Paquimé. Similarities in ceramics also demonstrate interaction with Jornada Mogollon people to the northeast and with the Tonto Basin of central Arizona.

THE END OF THE CASAS GRANDES WORLD

By A.D. 1450, Paquimé and the surrounding area were abandoned. Di Peso argued that the city was destroyed by burning during an attack from outside enemies. He described macaws left in pens, unfinished crafts in storerooms, pit ovens filled with agaves, and broken altar stones. Some archaeologists think that the close of the Casas Grandes era was less dramatic, and influenced by forces such as changing environmental conditions.

The remaining people of Casas Grandes migrated to the Sonoran river valleys, according to Di Peso. They may have

Casas Grandes at the Maxwell Museum

By David A. Phillips, Jr., Ph.D., Curator of Archaeology, Maxwell Museum

Photo courtesy Maxwell Museum

Once you've seen the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture Casas Grandes exhibit, be sure to visit Beyond Borders at the Maxwell Museum at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Beyond Borders began life as a traveling exhibit on international cooperative studies in the Casas Grandes region. (For more information on those studies, see Tim Maxwell's August 2006 article in *El Palacio*.) The December reincarnation of the exhibit will include artifacts from the Maxwell's collections.

No Casas Grandes exhibit would be complete without examples of the pottery, for which the culture is best known (and which, sadly, has encouraged so much looting in Casas Grandes sites). The Albuquerque exhibit includes several pieces to help illustrate current theories about the pottery's symbolic content. One of the authors of those theories, Christine VanPool, developed her ideas while a graduate student at UNM, so it's especially appropriate to mention them in the expanded exhibit. Dr. VanPool studied the Maxwell's pottery but also examined hundreds of



vessels from other collections, including those at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture.

The Museum of New Mexico and the Maxwell Museum have common roots, through—who else—Edgar Lee Hewett. Besides founding the museum system and School of American Research in Santa Fe, Hewett established the department of anthropology at the University of New Mexico (and a few other programs besides). The Maxwell Museum began as a couple of display cases of the department's holdings, in a university hallway, back in 1932; today it's an independent unit of UNM. Next year we'll celebrate our 75th anniversary.

The Beyond Borders exhibit opening will be from 11:00 to 2:00 on Saturday, December 2, 2006, and will continue until early May 2007. We invite our *El Palacio* friends to drop by that day, or in the following months, to get a second look at the Casas Grandes culture. Admission to the Maxwell Museum is free. For more information, please call 505-277-4405. ■



Ramos Polychrome female effigy vessel, possibly depicting a birth scene, Casas Grandes, A.D. 1200–1450. Collection of Alan S. and Alan B. Fleischer.

joined new statelets that also participated in extensive trade networks. Others may have resettled in ancestral Pueblo communities that were part of the Casas Grandes interaction sphere. When the Spanish arrived at the end of the sixteenth century, Suma Indians were living in the area, and the vibrant regional center of Paquimé was only an abandoned ruin.

Regional surveys and Mexican-US collaborations are underway, research that will bring to light more answers to the remaining secrets of Casas Grandes. With these projects comes growing awareness that Casas Grandes is a significant part of the Native American heritage of the Southwest, bringing this important culture the recognition it deserves.

The pottery of Casas Grandes lives on today in a different form. The village of Mata Ortiz, located sixteen miles from Paquimé, is a community of 400 potters known for its contemporary art. Although not direct descendants of the Casas Grandes people, Mata Ortiz potters have revived the designs and forms of the prehistoric pottery over the past thirty years, finding acclaim on the international art market. Today Mata Ortiz ceramics have moved far beyond direct imitation of the prehistoric vessels. The new styles reflect the constantly evolving diversity and creativity of Mata Ortiz potters—an artistic tradition they share with the ancient potters of Casas Grandes. ■