

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Chaco & Hohokam: Prehistoric Regional Systems in the American Southwest, By Patricia L. Crown and W. James Judge.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4qs8j1rf>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 16(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Upham, Steadman

Publication Date

1992-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Chaco & Hohokam: Prehistoric Regional Systems in the American Southwest. By Patricia L. Crown and W. James Judge. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991. 384 pages. \$35.00 cloth. \$15.95 paper.

Perhaps nowhere else in the world have archaeologists had as difficult a time coming to grips with the nature and complexity of ancient native sociopolitical and economic systems as in the American Southwest. For the last twenty years, substantial controversy and debate have surrounded this issue and have led to dramatically different interpretations of American Indian prehistory in this important region. This disarray or "creative chaos," as one leading Southwestern prehistorian has described it, has led to a fragmentation of Southwestern archaeology and to a remarkable illustration of the principle of equifinality in archaeological interpretation.

In some cases, competing equifinal interpretations are the product of inadequate or insufficient information, leading archaeologists to speculate broadly about lacunae in their data. In the Southwest, however, the quality of archaeological data is superior, especially in the essential categories of site recognition and identification, assignment of cultural affiliation of remains, and chronological control of occupations and material culture. Consequently, lacunae in basic and essential information are increasingly rare in the most intensively studied Southwestern regions. This has led some archaeologists to claim variously that differences in interpretations of the same events and processes are the result of errors in sampling or data manipulation, have been ideologically motivated, stem from institutional rivalries, or arise from jealousies over differences in federal funding. Fortunately, such controversies have not impeded the pace of archaeological investigation in the region. Unfortunately, however, they have not lessened the rate at which new equifinal interpretations are offered. If these aspects of Southwestern archaeology define the field, then *Chaco & Hohokam: Prehistoric Regional Systems in the American Southwest* is clearly a pacesetter book with appeal for many who find the state of Southwestern archaeology anthropologically interesting.

For the last one hundred years, Chaco Canyon has been a focus of intensive archaeological activity. The Chacoan regional system encompasses a very large area and includes some of the most important archaeological sites in the Southwest. It is widely known

for its elaborate architecture, extensive system of prehistoric roads, richly appointed burials, intensive exchange and logistics network, well-engineered agricultural system composed of complex water and soil control devices, and many other features. For decades, Chaco Canyon and the Chacoan regional system have resided at the symbolic center of Southwestern archaeology. The fascination of archaeologists with the Chacoan Anasazi has encouraged attempts to explain the origin and evolution of the Chacoan regional system. This has led to the development of a variety of different and sometimes mutually exclusive interpretive scenarios to explain the origin and development of the Chacoan system, including some based on the development of complex, asymmetric decision-making systems and social stratification and others based on the egalitarian Pueblo ethnographic model. Such diversity of opinion is carried forward in *Chaco & Hohokam*.

In my opinion, major advances in data acquisition and the definition of a largely new set of problems have now moved the Hohokam and the southern deserts of Arizona to the symbolic center of Southwestern archaeology. In fact, many archaeologists now argue that the Hohokam were the most highly developed and politically complex prehistoric Southwestern society. Crown and Judge make this assertion and believe their claims are validated by the conclusions of several contributors (especially Doyel and Wilcox). A desert agricultural society founded and built on an extensive network of irrigation canals that tapped the waters of the major rivers and drainages of southern Arizona, the Hohokam had highly developed systems of procurement and supply that were augmented by quite specialized productive systems and far-flung trade networks. Moreover, Hohokam villages exhibit complex architectural patterns that contain many Meso-American features (including platform mounds and ballcourts), as well as a mortuary complex and iconography that are distinct from any other prehistoric Southwestern group.

Chaco & Hohokam focuses on these issues and many more to provide a comprehensive, if equifinal view of these two prehistoric societies. This book grew out of an advanced seminar held at the School of American Research in 1987 and is the product of intensive discussions that occurred at that time. Following the seminar, participants finalized their papers, and the editors have compiled thirteen chapters by eleven different contributors that represent the most current thinking on the Chacoans and the Hohokam. The main themes of the volume focus on topics related

to the origin and growth of the two cultural systems, the manner in which they were bounded and maintained, and the factors responsible for the sociopolitical and economic collapse of Chaco and the Hohokam. Crown and Judge also discuss theoretical issues related to the identification of cultural systems at large spatial scales.

Each of the editors (Crown for the Hohokam, Judge for the Chacoans) provides a comprehensive summary of past research, then surveys current interpretive trends, analytical developments, and empirical needs. Both focus on the concept of regional system and describe its strengths (many) and limitations (few, but important) in relation to Chaco and the Hohokam. These two chapters constitute "must" reading for all serious students of Southwestern prehistory, because they provide the perspectives of researchers who have been intimately involved with the expansion of new knowledge about Chaco and the Hohokam. Following each of these discussions, contributors line up to deliver chapter-length syntheses that deal with key social, political, economic, or environmental aspects of each cultural group. Of particular note are Stephen H. Lekson's expansive discussion of the areal extent of the Chacoan regional system, W. Bruce Masse's thorough examination of Hohokam subsistence, and David A. Gregory's comprehensive analysis of Hohokam settlement patterns. These three studies provide important new insights into the changeable and increasingly specialized nature of Southwestern prehistory.

For example, Lekson discards orthodox definitions of the Chacoan regional system (whose boundaries traditionally have been drawn based on the distribution of Chacoan outliers and/or the extent of the Chacoan road system) and instead argues that the Chacoan system can be defined based on the distribution of quite specific architectural components. Lekson defines *Chacoan* as a "distinctive settlement pattern of the eleventh through twelfth centuries: a community of unit houses focused on a great house and a great kiva" (p. 48). Defined in this manner, the Chacoan system no longer is solely a manifestation of the San Juan Basin but extends to include virtually the entire Anasazi region of Arizona and New Mexico. Lekson argues for uniform settlement throughout this zone, for the extension of the Chacoan sphere of influence over a much wider area, and for a sociopolitical and economic coherence to this newly defined region. Lekson's idea is radical, and traditionalists will object, but it makes sense, especially if one is interested in delimiting the extent and changing configuration

of interaction during this 150-year period. More importantly, in this scenario the Chacoan abandonment is not necessarily viewed as a catastrophic event but rather as an attenuation of the system's core area in the mid-A. D. 1100s. Following this time, the peripheries of the system continued to flourish and differentiate until the Spanish *entrada* of the mid-1500s.

Beyond their substantial academic contributions to Southwestern archaeology, the studies by Masse and Gregory provide an added dividend to test takers: For those who thought "drought" was the answer to the Southwestern cultural collapse question on the multiple choice exam in North American prehistory, please wait. In the case of the Hohokam, it now turns out that the answer is "flood." Based on extremely fine-grained paleoclimatic (tree-ring) data, Donald A. Graybill and Fred L. Nials (whose primary work is not represented in the book) have reconstructed streamflow records for the Salt, Gila, and Verde rivers for a 630-year period between A. D. 740 and 1370 and have related it to climatic and geomorphological variables associated with canal irrigation. The result is an unparalleled paleohydrologic curve for the Hohokam core area that allows for sophisticated modeling of cultural events and processes in relation to the streamflow information. Both Masse and Gregory have used this information to advantage.

This newly acquired precision is manifest in Masse's explanation of upland colonization in the Hohokam region following A. D. 900. The ostensible cause: a devastating flood in A. D. 899 that wiped out irrigation canals, diversion dams, and other water and soil control features of the irrigation system and resulted in the widespread movement of populations from the Salt and Gila basins into areas where dry farming could be practiced. Another flood in A. D. 1358 completely destroyed the canal network and resulted in major sociopolitical and economic realignments.

Such findings elevate the study of Southwestern prehistory, making it more than simple antiquarian speculation. Southwestern archaeologists have always been concerned with the effects of the natural environment on the origin, development, and collapse of the native cultures. In the past, however, environmental data have not been of sufficient quality to argue for specific cause-and-effect relationships with more than a passing degree of certainty. Now the use of high-quality paleoenvironmental information such as the Gregory and Nials streamflow records, in concert with data from the long-term cultural records of different groups, brings a new level of precision to archaeological inference.

Unfortunately, this level of precision is not uniformly present in *Chaco & Hohokam*. Much interpretive disarray is evident in the ranks of the contributors to this volume, and what emerges from their effort is far from a single view of either the Chacoans or the Hohokam. Instead, widely divergent interpretations of both groups are offered by contributors. The issues in the book that generate the most heat (and the least light) are those related to sociopolitical organization, decision-making complexity, vertical hierarchy, and social control. The chapters dealing with these issues underscore the remarkable diversity of opinion current among researchers who all have access to, and base their interpretations on, the same data. I find it a worrisome state of affairs for the field that no common language or interpretive currency has emerged to identify, describe, and explain the correlates of inequality in social, political, and economic affairs. Nevertheless, I commend this book to readers of prehistory. It clearly sets forth the state of current knowledge of the Chacoans and the Hohokam. If that is something less than hoped for, perhaps others will be inclined to the challenge.

Steadman Upham

In Search of Columbus: The Sources for the First Voyage. By David Henige. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1991. 359 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

Between August 1492 and March 1493, Christopher Columbus, a relatively unknown navigator commanding three inferior ships with equally substandard crews, made what may well be the most important voyage in the history of mankind, for it brought the planet into realistic geographic and ethnographic perspective for the first time. Five hundred years after the event, its impact is still being experienced in both positive and negative fashion. The first, second, and third centenaries of the 1492 Columbian voyage found the lands it had opened for the most part still within the colonial world, and commemoration was ignored, although the fourth centenary in 1892 brought festivities in which various nations participated.

Now, on the eve of the fifth centenary, virtually the entire community of nations is involved in the "Encounter of Two Worlds." While there are always those who focus on the negative