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BETTER FOR IT



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Cover image: In 2023, in coordination with the Coronado National Forest Heritage Management Program and Catalina State Park, Archaeology Southwest conducted an ARPA (Archaeological Resources Protection Act) damage assessment and restoration training at the Romero site. The 2020 Bighorn Fire had exposed significant looting damage.
IMAGE: P.K. WEIS

This issue is a companion to our 2022–2023 season of Archaeology Café. To watch videos from this season and previous seasons, visit youtube.com/@ArchaeologySouthwest.



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Collaborating with Diné Communities: Reconsidering the “Pueblito” through a Diné-Oriented Archaeological Lens

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Nestled amid the pinyons, junipers, and natural gas wells that today dot northwest New Mexico, scores of tumbled masonry structures quietly look out over Dinétah, the rugged canyon and mesa country of the Upper San Juan region that forms the ancestral homeland of the Diné, or Navajo. Some three centuries ago, these buildings would have been full of life and activity as local Diné communities employed them for a range of social, economic, and defensive purposes out beyond the frontier of Spanish New Mexico.

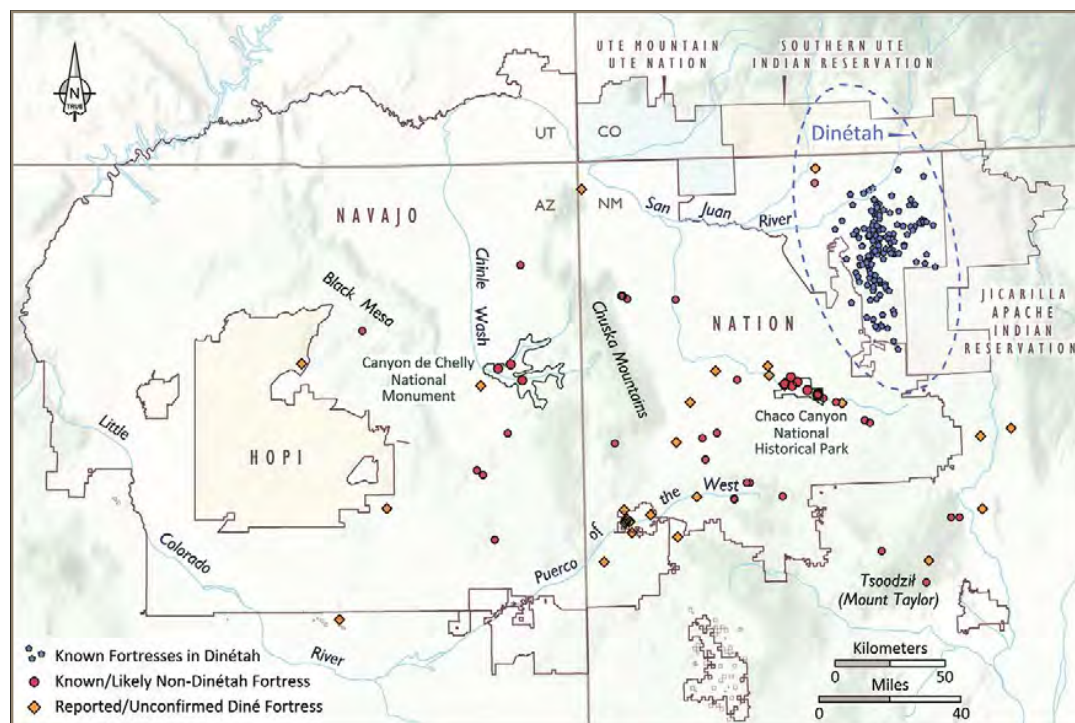
Given their ready visibility and charismatic character, it is perhaps unsurprising to learn that these structures—commonly called “pueblitos” by archaeologists—have been the focus of much early Navajo-oriented archaeological research over the past century. Between 1910 and 1940, early luminaries like A. V. Kidder, Earl Morris, and Dorothy Keur investigated Navajo sites in the Largo, Gobernador, and Rio Puerco drainages, giving the masonry buildings the name used by local Hispano

homesteaders. The observations they made about the material culture present at these sites in turn formed the basis for decades of archaeological thinking about the role of these structures in Spanish colonial-era Navajo society and the origins of Diné people in the Southwest.

Specifically, early Southwestern researchers interpreted the early (pre-1868) Navajo archaeological record in terms of early-1900s theoretical frameworks that essentialized the Navajo community as Athapaskan-speaking nomads distinct from sedentary Pueblo farmers. Earthen “forked-stick” hogan structures and pointed-base gray ware pottery found at pueblito sites were viewed as typically “Navajo,” whereas maize agriculture, polychrome pottery production, and the masonry structures themselves were viewed as evidence for recently introduced “Pueblo” traits. The mechanisms behind this hypothesized acculturative process were linked to the aftermath of the 1680s Pueblo Revolt, whereby some Pueblo peoples fleeing the Spanish “Reconquest” of New Mexico in 1692 sought refuge with Diné communities, presumably bringing with them the knowledge of pueblito building, pottery painting, and other material practices.

Following the Second World War, Navajo-focused

Map showing the location of known Diné defensive sites in Dinétah (blue) as well as other likely (red) and possible (orange) pre-1868 Diné defensive sites across the greater Four Corners region. MAP: WADE CAMPBELL AND CATHERINE GILMAN



archaeological research slowed. As a result, the “Pueblo Refugee Hypothesis” remained prominent and was repeated throughout numerous academic and popular texts discussing Navajo history in the American Southwest. The situation only began to change in the late 1980s when extensive development of the Dinétah region’s underlying Fruitland Formation coal gas reserves ushered in decades of cultural resource management (CRM) fieldwork. The immense amount of data collected and analyzed by CRM professionals and academics alike as a result of the Fruitland work highlighted that those material culture markers most associated with the Refugee Hypothesis did not fit the old acculturation model’s Revolt/Reconquest timeline! Most pueblitos were built between 1720 and 1760, the Gobernador Polychrome pottery style appears in the 1630s, and the earliest tree-ring-dated Navajo site shows that hogan-dwelling maize farmers were already living along the San Juan River in 1541.

Reconsidered in light of these findings, how might archaeologists moving forward think about the “pueblito phenomenon” if they were most likely not being built by Pueblo refugees? One way is to continue the process begun by the Fruitland

researchers and expand study of the dual social and defensive role that Diné fortresses played in Diné community life in the 1700s. After all, this period sees the intensification of both the Diné sheepherding tradition and (t)raiding with the Utes, two factors that go on to define the Diné historical experience into the 1800s and beyond.

Another way is to consider the advent of fortress building in early Diné society on a broader spatial scale. Archaeologists have recognized since the 1940s that similar types of Diné defensive structures are present outside Dinétah both on and off the modern Navajo Nation, including Chaco Canyon, Mt. Taylor, Canyon de Chelly, and Black Mesa (map on page 24). These sites have been comparatively understudied, however, and are rarely considered in relation to the fortresses in Dinétah. What might be the links between different Diné regional communities throughout the greater Four Corners before 1868?

Since 2022, I have been working with the Navajo Nation Heritage & Historic Preservation Department, fellow Diné community members, and Archaeology Southwest to explore this second question in the San Juan Basin and elsewhere.



The Citadel, Ensenada Mesa, Dinétah. IMAGE: WADE CAMPBELL

As befits their outsized legacy in the history of early Navajo archaeology and their presumed importance to earlier Diné communities, the fortresses unavoidably form a key part of this study. As of November 2023, our team has identified approximately 70 potential Diné fortress sites—structures and defensible landforms—across northwest New Mexico and northeast Arizona through literature reviews, remote sensing analysis, and conversations with other Navajo-focused archaeologists. We have also conducted a series of field reconnaissance surveys and tree-ring sampling missions over the past year and a half, and more work awaits.

Three preliminary observations from the ongoing work stand out. First, the pre-reservation-era Diné history of the Navajo Nation itself has been comparatively overlooked by researchers. There are an untold number of early Diné sites on Tribal land that have not been documented fully, let alone identified. The paired activities of being on the land and

working with community members, however, provide consistent reminders that Diné families have known about these sites and stewarded them for generations (pages 28–31). Indeed, “undocumented” and “unidentified” come with the caveat “...by archaeologists”! Talking with other Diné individuals about how minimally invasive archaeological research projects on family lands can lead to new insights is key to any effort to broaden our understanding of Diné history on the reservation proper.

Second, the persistence of old theoretical essentialisms in Southwestern archaeology have led to situations where, even if field archaeologists do work on reservations, they are often unfamiliar with the archaeological signatures of more mobile Southwestern communities—Diné, but also potentially Indé (Apache), Numunu (Comanche), and Nuche (Ute). This can result in the misidentification of sites—and an interpretive imbalance when compared to Pueblo sites where villagers lived for longer periods of time—that hampers our ability to talk



Site NLC-LC-UO-DD, Kits'ili/Black Mesa Chapter, Navajo Nation. IMAGE: WADE CAMPBELL



about the historical ebbs and flows of inter-Tribal relations in the greater Four Corners.

The third observation is perhaps more properly a question. Given that the hypothesized central role of the “pueblito” in the Refugee model has proven outmoded, does the use of a Spanish settler label adequately capture the nature of these sites and the role they played in early Diné society? Perhaps it is time to consider an alternative term that engages with these sites from a Diné perspective. An informal social media poll of other Diné individuals in April 2023 suggests that traditional knowledge about pre-reservation defensive sites persists even though these kinds of safe spaces are no longer needed in today’s Southwest. Notably, several respondents identified the Diné Bizaad word *bee hotdzil*, or “stronghold,” as a community-oriented term that is inclusive of both defensive landforms and structures, and also shifts the interpretive lens away from that of simple acculturation (merging of cultures over time) toward something more complex and true about the Indigenous experience in the ancestral Southwest. When combined with a renewed form of community-oriented Diné archaeological research, such work can only help to move our understandings of past Diné life in the ancestral Southwest in fascinating new directions. ■

A previously unrecorded Diné defensive site on a family’s grazing lands in the San Juan Basin. A small hogan site dating to the late 1700s is located 250 meters (820 feet) away at the head of a nearby drainage.

IMAGE: WADE CAMPBELL

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