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Naasgo: Moving Forward – Diné Archaeology in the Twenty-First Century

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Given mainstream Southwestern archaeology's overwhelming engagement with Ánaasáí[†] research, it might come as a surprise to some to learn that Diné (Navajo) people have been directly involved in archaeology since its formative years in the region. Beginning in the late 1800s and continuing through the early decades of the twentieth century, Diné excavators, guides, and informants facilitated the foundational research of early luminaries like Wetherill, Pepper, Judd, and Morris at sites throughout the Four Corners region, including Canyon de Chelly and Chaco Canyon (Judd 1954:7, 343–354; Lister and Lister 1968:122–123). During the early 1950s, field crews – including unnamed Navajo “laborers” – surveyed and excavated archaeological sites within the rights-of-way of a series of El Paso Natural Gas pipelines that crisscrossed the reservation, marking the birth of the modern cultural resource management industry and presaging the later explosion of natural resource extraction-related projects on tribal lands (Wendorf et al. 1956). One of these later programs, the coal-related Black Mesa Archaeological Project, ran from 1967 to 1983 and trained a generation of American anthropology students, thanks in no small part to the logistical and intellectual support of hundreds of Navajo staff and informants (Powell and Smiley 2002:3–6).

In a similar vein, the Navajo Nation began employing archaeologists and anthropologists as early as the 1950s, and formally established the Navajo Nation Cultural Resource Management Program (NNCRMP) in 1977. The NNCRMP was later subsumed under the Navajo Nation Archaeology Department (NNAD) in 1988 when both NNAD and the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department (NNHPD) were established. These departments employed dozens of Native and non-Native Southwestern archaeologists who parlayed their experiences into a

range of academic and professional positions (Klesert 1990; Two Bears 2006). In 2015, the Archaeology Department and the Historic Preservation Department merged into a single entity, the Navajo Nation Heritage and Historic Preservation Department (NNHHPD). Today, the NNHHPD comprises the Cultural Resources Compliance Section, the Traditional Cultural Program, and Heritage Management Services while the Navajo Nation Department of Transportation's Project Management Department oversees archaeological work related to road construction.

Despite the rich legacy of Diné contributions to the field, comparatively few archaeological studies have attempted to engage with or incorporate Navajo traditional knowledge and material culture into the broader anthropological and historical discussions that define modern archaeology. Diné peoples' experiences and understandings of their own position within the *longue durée* of Southwestern history have not been given equal attention or weight by researchers in the region (Faris 2006).² As a whole, mainstream Southwestern archaeology's longstanding preference for certain materials, time periods, and interpretive or ethnographic analogs has privileged the creation of artificially distinct cultural spaces/narratives that obscure various facets of the complex relationships that once governed the Southwestern world (Lekson 2018; Liebmann 2012; Seymour 2017a; Thomas 2017; Upham 1988). Many of the same historic relationships that once linked together Native (and, eventually, non-Native) communities in the region survive today and continue to inform the cultural, political, and economic reality of the modern Southwest. Seen in such a light, diminishing the historicity of certain groups through archaeological research (or the lack of it) is a danger that should not be easily dismissed. Wherever possible, archaeologists should collaborate with Native communities to develop archaeological projects that recognize the validity of traditional histories and highlight the richness of Indigenous societies in relation to the pre- and post-contact history of the greater Southwest in order to correct this imbalance (Liebmann 2018).

As this special issue seeks to demonstrate, such a movement is underway on the Navajo Nation. Where once non-Native archaeologists working within the greater framework of cultural resource management developed and conducted the majority of Navajo-focused research (e.g. Brown et al. 2014; Hester 1962; Powell and Smiley 2002), a new generation of Diné researchers and non-Navajo collaborators inspired by the call to indigenize archaeology have begun to develop and conduct their own research projects that explore a range of historical and anthropological themes (e.g. Atalay 2006; Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2010; Two Bears 2010). As the articles in this issue attest, the result has been a fascinating series of discussions that draw upon a diverse array of methodological and theoretical influences, combine the results of previous research with traditional Diné knowledge, and evaluate new archaeological data to ask various questions about the history of Diné presence in the American Southwest.

Contextualizing Navajo Archaeological Research

In 1912, A.V. Kidder set out to investigate reports of ruined masonry structures in the upper San Juan River drainage of northwest New Mexico, a region also known

as *Dinétab*. At these sites he identified a distinctive new polychrome pottery style, elements of European-influenced material culture, and the “Closely associated ... remains of structures identical to modern Navajo *hogáns* [*sic*]” (Kidder 1913:90). Perhaps due to a lack of familiarity with Diné culture and history, Kidder (1913, 1920) interpreted these data as evidence of Pueblo peoples fleeing the 1696 Spanish Reconquest of New Mexico and exchanging their cultural knowledge for haven with Navajo families already living in the area. Kidder’s “Pueblo Refugee Hypothesis” combined with anthropology’s fascination with Southern Athapaskan origins formed the interpretive touchstones for most Navajo-focused archaeological research over the next century. During the past three decades, much new data have come to light that permit researchers to reevaluate and expand Navajo archaeology beyond these old models. A summary of these trends is presented below.

Navajo Origins and Ethnogenesis

The presence of Apachean peoples – that is, speakers of Southern Athapaskan languages (i.e. Navajos and Apaches) – in the Southwest is not in dispute. A long-standing fascination with the linguistic connections between Apachean communities and Athapaskan groups in Canada, Alaska, and along the Pacific Coast has led to most research into Navajo origins focusing primarily on identifying and timing the presumed entry of these groups into the Southwest. Archaeologists have speculated about two potential travel corridors since the 1930s, one an Intermontane route through the Rockies linked to a pre-1500 CE arrival, and the other via the High Plains post-1500 CE (cf. Towner 2000 for a lengthier exposition). There is no evidence in Diné oral tradition of anything resembling a migration from the northern Athapaskan area. Moreover, at present the archaeological or linguistic evidence tracing large-scale movements of Athapaskan speakers from Canada to the American Southwest is limited and equivocal (Rice 2012; Seymour 2012). Recent isotopic studies of Subarctic-style moccasins from Promontory Cave, Utah, however, present evidence for long distance travel by possible Athapaskan-speaking peoples in the thirteenth century AD (Metcalf et al. 2021). While this finding may represent an avenue for further research into the “Athapaskan migration” question going forward, it is our belief that it is necessary to separate the question of Navajo origins from “Athapaskan migrations.”

We take the view that Diné culture is an autochthonous development in the Southwest. In this alternative model for Navajo origins, Archaic hunter-gatherer maize farmers are ancestral to both Puebloan and Diné communities. Navajo culture then is a fusion of knowledge from among various pre-existing mobile groups in the Four Corners region *and* an Athapaskan-speaking hunter-gatherer migrant population, as well as Puebloan groups who join this ancestral Diné core (Brugge 2012; Kelley and Francis 2019:33–114; Warburton and Begay 2005). Echoing other recent discussions of migration and ethnogenesis elsewhere in the Southwest (e.g. Hopi [Bernadini 2005; Bernadini et al. 2021; Fladd et al. 2019]; northern Tiwa [Bernadini and Fowles 2010]; Tewa [Ortman 2012]; Jemez [Tosa et al. 2019]; Jicarilla Apache [Eiselt 2012]), this framework emphasizes the validity

of Diné clan histories, oral traditions, and ceremonial narratives as a basis for exploring Diné relationships with the places and other people of the ancestral Southwestern world circa AD 800–1400, including Chaco Canyon, Aztec Pueblo, Mesa Verde, and points farther afield (e.g. Dykeman and Roebuck 2012; Kelley 2020; Kelley and Francis 2019:46–114; Weiner 2018; Weiner and Smith 2021).

This model also builds upon the longstanding critique of Southwestern archaeology's historical lack of in-depth theoretical and methodological engagement with *mobility* and the role(s) of mobile peoples in the region following the Archaic/Basketmaker transition circa 1500 BCE (see Seymour 2017b and Upham 1984, 1988, 1994a, 1994b for similar discussions of this issue). Specifically, this framework suggests that highly mobile newcomers were incorporated into existing Four Corners communities with similar lifestyles and who were actively engaged in similar types of trade and social relationships with village-dwelling Southwestern populations attested to at the start of the colonial period (Eiselt and Snow 2017; Kelley and Francis 2019:46–83). Fowles and Eiselt (2019) have recently explored aspects of this relationship, highlighting the antiquity and extensive nature of hunter-gatherer/farmer interactions in the context of the northern Tiwa Pueblos' relationships with the Jicarilla Apache. It is likely that Athapaskan presence in other parts of the Southwest can be similarly contextualized through participation in regional trade and social networks, with the eventual adoption of Athapaskan languages among certain multiethnic Southwestern populations occurring via their use as trading *lingua francas* (e.g. as observed with the Navajo language in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries [Brooks 2002:80–116; Escalante 1995:130–131; Parsons 1936:xxvii, 943]).

Navajos in the Southwest – Acculturation, New Data, and Interpretive Biases?

Early Navajo archaeological research in the Southwest has traditionally focused on the Dinétah region and its dual importance as the perceived site of “Navajo” Athapaskan ethnogenesis as well as its role as the center of Spanish colonial-era Navajo settlement and subsequent expansion to the south and west. The influence of Kidder's (1920) Pueblo Refugee Hypothesis on subsequent literature has given rise to the anthropological stereotype of Navajos as highly adaptable, assimilative cultural borrowers (Bsumek 2004). Athapaskan migrants to the Four Corners region were long thought to have undergone four acculturative episodes – Puebloan, Spanish, Mexican, and American – that transformed them from hunting and gathering nomads to the Navajo agropastoralists seen today (e.g. Hester 1962; Keur 1941; Sapir 1936). An explosion of CRM-related archaeological research in the Four Corners during the late 1980s and 1990s, however, revealed that the Pueblo Refugee Hypothesis' two main archaeological markers – stone built pueblo (“little pueblo”) fortresses and Gobernador Polychrome pottery – post-date and pre-date respectively the 1692 Reconquista of New Mexico by several decades (Reed and Reed 1996; Towner 2003). Without evidence to support a large influx of Pueblo people into the Dinétah region, there is no evidence

that Navajo cultural practices like pottery production, ceremonial practices, or the clan system are the result of cultural borrowing from Pueblo “refugee” groups.

By about 1760, Navajo family groups were residing across a large swath of the Four Corners region from the Rio Puerco/Mt. Taylor area in the southeast (Keur 1941; Towner 2016) to the Chuska Mountains and Black Mesa to the west (Gilpin 1996; Towner 1996). Navajo expansion out of Dinétah throughout the second half of the eighteenth century is thought to coincide with increased Spanish and Ute raiding and the widespread adoption of a more mobile pastoral lifeway (Towner 2008). Our understanding of the timing and nature of this expansion, however, remains poor due in large part to a lack of focused research in these regions, as well as a general lack of familiarity with Diné material culture that hampers its identification in other Southwestern regions beyond Dinétah (Chuiпка 2015; Cyler Conrad, personal communication 2021; Matthew Liebmann, personal communication 2018; Doug Loebig, personal communication 2019). Most notably, Navajo archaeology depends upon the identification of hogan structures as its key ethnic marker and unit of analysis. However, the English word “hogan” is derived from the Navajo term *hooghan*, which is less a defined building and more like a category. Put simply, in Diné *bizaad*, *hooghan* is a “home place” and can equally refer to a specific geographical space, campsite, forked-stick structure, circular structure, masonry structure, log cabin, or three-story mansion. Explanations of Navajo culture and history that uncritically rely on hogans as the primary markers of Navajo identity treat Navajos as a monolithic population building hogans and adopting a pastoral lifestyle all at the same time. It is more appropriate to think of a hogan as representative of only one type of Diné structure and activity in the past.³

One of the largest Navajo archaeological projects undertaken was the Navajo Land Claim (NLC) in the 1950s and 1960s. The focus of the NLC was on documenting Navajo habitation and use of a 32,213 square mile claimed area in New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah between 1846 and 1868. This means that NLC sites tend to be hogan sites and other site types identified as Navajo by local Navajo field personnel. The earliest chronologies in Navajo archaeology are based on research completed for the NLC and the later Navajo Reservoir project (Brugge 1982; Dittert et al. 1961; Hester 1962). Although Navajos have long been characterized as the descendants of hunter-gatherers, the classic Navajo chronology tends to begin with recognizable hogans and pottery types and does not fully engage with the possibility that other types of structures and features (e.g. artifact scatters lacking substantial surface structures) are potentially indicative of Navajo presence.

What scholars of Navajo archaeology have largely ignored is what Navajo oral tradition says about Navajo history and culture. Although Navajos experienced catastrophic losses at the hands of the American government, there is a corpus of published oral tradition recorded after the Navajos’ internment at Bosque Redondo (AD 1864–1868) and return to their homeland in 1868 that provides significant historical information told by Navajos themselves. Although early twentieth century scholarship on Diné oral traditions focused primarily on recording ceremonial information (e.g. Haile 1979; Matthews 1994; Reichard 1974; Wyman 1970), critical reading of these same accounts provides the reader with a

bird's eye view of Navajo history as conceptualized and understood without substantial Euro-American influence. That history is here in the Southwest and records Navajo movement and places of significance throughout the Southwestern landscape.

Nat'ááh Nahane' Bina'jí O'hoo'ah: Telling Our Stories Is How We Learn About the Past

The papers presented here developed out of a 2019 symposium session at the 84th Society for American Archaeology Annual Meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico that marked the first focused discussion of Navajo archaeology at the conference in twenty years. Importantly, the session centered the voices and work of seven Diné archaeologists and one Diné-owned CRM company. Although not all the session participants were able to take part in this special issue,⁴ we have sought to maintain a focus on Diné scholarship while also highlighting the collaborative work of non-Navajo researchers whose interests mirror our own. The result is a collection of five articles whose topics engage with relatively recent events in Navajo life and the older pre-Chacoan past, as well as a pair of book reviews that discuss the historical role of trading posts in Navajo economic history and the contemporary Diné literary movement.

All the papers share the use of Navajo oral tradition in archaeological contexts. Weiner and Kelley examine the possible Basketmaker III antecedents of the Chacoan system through a study of astronomy, landscape, and rain ceremonialism at Chaco Canyon. They present an analysis of narratives from two Navajo ceremonies, the Waterway and the Windway, to argue that the Waterway narrative is a metaphorical description of astronomical activities at the famed Three Slab/Sun Dagger Site while the Windway narrative describes offerings for moisture on Fajada Butte. Using Navajo oral tradition in this context presents archaeologists with the unique opportunity to engage with the Chacoan system through an interpretive lens that draws on localized, place-based Indigenous knowledge rather than imported Euro-American theoretical frameworks.

Campbell, Two Bears, and Wero and Martin's use of oral tradition concerns the more recent past. Spanning the nineteenth through twentieth century, the authors address changes to Navajo lifeways wrought by ongoing American colonialism in the Southwest. They use archaeology and oral tradition to demonstrate ways that Diné have historically worked within and around American systems of containment – the reservation, boarding schools, and wage labor – to live life as Diné. Contemporary ethnographic work among Navajo weavers helps Lee to examine history as it relates to the material manifestations of communities of practice. Lee's work also demonstrates that communities of practice among Navajo weavers can be fluid but that the practice itself is a consistent dimension of Navajo identity across time. Wero and Martin similarly use ethnography to illuminate the history and impact of uranium mining on Navajo land and lifeways. In particular, their paper shows the variable ways in which Navajo communities accommodated the opportunity presented by uranium mining wages into the persistent struggle of rebuilding a post-Bosque Redondo Navajo reservation economy.

The papers by Campbell, Lee, and Two Bears also share the consideration of *K'é* as an organizing principle of material culture (Campbell and Lee) and explanations of experience and survivance (Two Bears). The concept of *K'é* is most easily understood as the interrelatedness, interconnectedness, and interdependence among all things (Austin 2009), including prehistoric peoples (Warburton and Begay 2005). Although it can be understood in other contexts as a principle of cultural knowledge transmission from generation to generation and Lloyd Lee (2020) describes it as a foundational principle of one's identity as Diné, it has not historically been used as a theoretical or interpretive framework in archaeology. Navajo archaeology primarily relies upon Western definitions of "site" and "settlement" to interpret larger patterns of population movement. As Campbell demonstrates, *K'é* is an important concept in understanding herd management practices and other dimensions of pastoral land use in the late nineteenth century on Black Mesa. Insights from Campbell's Early Navajo Pastoral Landscape Project (ENPLP) may provide useful models for understanding earlier Navajo pastoral landscapes particularly in the western Navajo area.

In her study of technological styles among Navajo weavers, Lee illustrates both the operationalization of *K'é* in a material manifestation of communities of practice but also explains the inherent variability that *K'é* can also engender. Familial relationships among Navajo people encompass a broad definition of family that can include any number of relatives in almost infinite combination. When the disruptions to *K'é* caused by the consequences of American colonialism and the ways in which *K'é* can accommodate those disruptions are also considered, the presentation of technological style in Navajo weaving can be an important way to both trace communities of practice and identify their internal variability. Lee's study also highlights the potential for collections-oriented studies of crafting and technological style to help identify and reclaim the work of "anonymous" Indigenous artists in museums and other repositories.

As with Campbell's and Lee's projects, Two Bears relies upon the knowledge of Diné elders to build models for ethnohistorical analysis and interpretation. By tracing the lived history of the Old Leupp Boarding School (OLBS) site, Two Bears describes how Navajo families – parents and their children alike – leveraged the principle of *K'é* to survive the chaos of the boarding school experience. Echoing the work of the Diné historian Farina King (2018; 2020), Two Bears' research challenges readers to think of Navajo boarding schools as nuanced spaces of Indigenous survivance, where the tools of oppression and assimilation existed alongside memories and experiences whose seemingly paradoxical positivity was rooted in traditional Diné teachings.

With the exception of Weiner and Kelley's contribution, the papers in this issue demonstrate another shared theme, namely the great potential value of "reservation-era" historical archaeology to explore the effects of "settler colonialism" (Veracini 2010; Wolfe 2006) in Indigenous communities. In the American West, the period between c. AD 1850 to the present day arguably saw the greatest and most substantial shifts in Native life since the initial arrival of Europeans three centuries earlier; however, this period remains severely under-researched (Dale 2020; Dixon 2014). Outright warfare and political machinations leading up to

and following the US Civil War led to the relocation and internment of Native communities on reservations by the turn of the twentieth century. Reservation life became marked by the dispossession of traditional lands, besieged cultures and languages, and the advent of a range of social ills linked to outside economic and political influences (e.g. natural resource extraction and landscape transformation, government policies promoting Native diaspora, industrial capitalism and changing lifeways). The papers by Campbell, Lee, Two Bears, and Wero and Martin join a small but growing wave of Indigenous archaeology work (e.g. Cipolla 2013; Cipolla et al. 2019; Gonzalez et al. 2018; Kretzler 2019; Wadsworth et al. 2021) that harnesses the tools of archaeology and ethnography to examine the ways reservation-era Native communities have successfully continued to negotiate the myriad influences of settler colonialism to this day.

***Naasgo*: Moving Forward**

Generations of researchers have delved into various aspects of Navajo society past and present, yet few Southwestern archaeological studies have attempted to incorporate the Navajo archaeological record into anthropologically meaningful discussions. Indeed, mainstream Southwestern archaeology has long promoted a marginalized view of Navajo culture and history with little input from Navajo peoples themselves. Many segments of contemporary Navajo society distrust the discipline even though it has proven integral to arguments for economic development and tribal sovereignty in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (e.g. Begay 1997, 2020; Marek-Martinez 2016; Thompson 2011; Thompson and Marek-Martinez 2021). It is clear that the lack of sustained research programs that engage with the full scope of Navajo history has hindered attempts to better understand the complexity of Diné life in the Southwest, including pre-contact relationships and varying responses to four centuries of Euro-American colonialism. Regrettably, this situation is echoed throughout many other Indigenous communities in North American and beyond.

With this in mind, although the papers in this issue focus on specifically Navajo-related contexts, it is our hope that the questions they raise and the points they discuss provide inspiration to those asking how they might collaborate with and further the development of Indigenous archaeologies that increasingly features the input and direction of Indigenous people themselves. Methodologically and theoretically diverse archaeological projects that engage with a combination of archaeological materials and ethnographic information to ask questions of interest to Indigenous people themselves have the power to link past and present and contribute a unique long-term perspective to the mission of reclaiming traditional knowledge and revitalizing cultural practices for the future.

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Notes

- 1 Ánaasázi is a Navajo term for the ancestral populations of the greater Four Corners region and is inclusive of Paleoindian, Archaic, and other past peoples. For an in-depth discussion of the term's *Diné bizaad* roots, see Walters and Rogers (2001) and Warburton and Begay (2005). It is differentiated here from two English-language archaeological terms which specifically refer to the most well-known archaeological culture in the northern Southwest: Anasazi and Ancestral Pueblo(an). The latter term, although currently in vogue, is particularly problematic as its usage inadvertently connotes an exclusionary one-to-one link between modern Pueblo tribal communities and ancestral Southwestern peoples that hampers critical evaluations of the numerous and highly diverse Indigenous communities that lived throughout the region in earlier periods.
- 2 This oversight is not a uniquely Navajo experience. Similar arguments can be made regarding Southwestern archaeology's comparative lack of engagement with the material culture and traditional knowledge of groups like the Apache, Ute, Pai, Comanche, and others, while further afield the K'iche' Maya scholar Avexnim Cojti Ren (2006) has voiced similar concerns about Maya archaeology in Central America.
- 3 In this regard, Walter Taylor's mid-century warning/call to action is particularly apt: "There is no automatic, axiomatic assurance that the forms, types, and classes established today by the archaeologist are coextensive with any separable entities that existed in the minds or life ways of a bygone people. At best, the declaration of any such correspondence is a matter for explicit hypothesis and testing, not implicit assumption. It constitutes one of the archaeologist's greatest problems, not one of his self-evident truths" (Taylor 1983 [1948]:123).
- 4 The work of the other SAA session participants is briefly summarized here as they represent significant contributions to the current Diné archaeology movement being discussed here. In particular, the Dinéyah region remains the center of early Navajo-focused research, including the projects of Timothy Wilcox (2019) and Alicia Becenti (2019). Their respective studies highlight the potential of collections-based research to better understand the impacts of Spanish colonialism on early Diné communities. Wilcox's study of Gobernador Polychrome production and design features links this distinctly Navajo pottery style to the spread of a pan-Indigenous anti-colonial movement in the Southwest in the mid-1600s, while Becenti's zooarchaeological study highlights the continuance of older Diné butchery practices even as metal tools become more prevalent during the early 1700s. Both projects draw heavily on personal experiences and ethnographic accounts to develop their arguments, a point that was further developed by the session discussants William B. Tsosie, Jr. and Richard M. Begay, who stressed researchers' need to be more familiar with *Diné bizaad*, as it was through that particular linguistic and cultural framework that Diné ancestors interacted with the world.

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