



## *Human prehistory in southwestern New Mexico*

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# HUMAN PREHISTORY IN SOUTHWESTERN NEW MEXICO

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The archeology of southwesternmost New Mexico has produced major contributions to the understanding of Southwestern prehistory. Most famous and conspicuous is the exceptionally skillfully painted black-on-white pottery called "Classic Mimbres". But more significant and scientifically interesting are the smaller earlier sites with unspectacular materials.

In fact, a major subdivision of the Pueblo Southwest is named from a geographic feature of southwestern New Mexico, the Mogollon Mountains.

The material called by archeologists "the Mogollon Culture" includes primarily very early phases, beginning with introduction of pottery-making from northern Mexico about the beginning of the Christian era or perhaps a few centuries earlier. Later horizons in the Mogollon tradition incorporate several important elements from other sources.

The origin of the Mogollon culture is generally seen as the addition of certain major traits to a pre-ceramic group represented by sparse and relatively crude stone implements. Among the types of stone tools, a particularly important item is the occurrence of lower and upper milling stones (*metate* and *mano*). Evidently the early people of "Desert Archaic" culture subsisted only in part on game and also depended largely on wild plant foods.

There is also considerable evidence for a very early introduction from southern Mexico of corn (maize, "Indian corn"). A few sites representing this ancient occupation have been located and excavated in the southwestern part of New Mexico as well as in southeastern Arizona.

In addition, a couple of mammoth kill-sites have been found, along the San Pedro River in southeastern Arizona, in which there are flaked points of the Clovis type (earlier than the Folsom type) intimately associated with the elephant bones. Until these fairly recent discoveries it was believed that the ancient "Paleo-American" or "Paleo-Indian (i.e., Upper Paleolithic) big-game hunters of the High Plains, equipped with spears using beautifully flaked stone points (Folsom, Clovis, Plainview, etc.), had not occupied the Southwest proper. Sites of the Desert Archaic type apparently extend about as far back in time.

In any case, the building of pithouses, agriculture (corn, squash and beans), and finally pottery-making were brought to the Mogollon culture through group-to-group diffusion, which continued within the South-

west—from the Mogollon area of southwestern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona to more northerly Mogollon outposts and then on to the other main Puebloan group, the Anasazi of the Four Corners region. The term "Basketmakers" has been used particularly for the early phases of the Anasazi culture, roughly from A.D. 450 or before to about 700-750 when additional new traits appeared in the north—certain pottery-types and occipital deformation (flattening of the back of the skull because of rigid binding of infants to a hard cradleboard), again from the Mogollon.

With increasing differentiation and local specialization, several varieties or groups or subdivisions of Pueblo culture have been recognized. The primary basic distinction, however, still is that between Anasazi and Mogollon.

Criteria of these two major cultural groups include the following: rough gray utility pottery of the Anasazi, polished brown ware in Mogollon; cranial deformation of the lambdoid style (oblique, high-angle) in Anasazi, never in Mogollon; standardized ceremonial chambers, generally circular, known as "kivas" from the Hopi Indian name, ubiquitous in Anasazi sites, while kivas are either missing (i.e., unrecognizable) or else rectangular in groups of Mogollon extraction; full-grooved or notched pebble axes in the Anasazi groups, finely made  $\frac{3}{4}$ -grooved axes of hard igneous rock predominant in Mogollon.

There are many traits which are common to both Mogollon and Anasazi but are specifically Pueblo, others that are Southwestern in general (including, that is, the ancient Hohokam and modern Pima-Papago Indians of southern Arizona, and the Yuman groups of western Arizona; and in some instances the late-arriving Apaches including the original Navajos). And of course there are many features which are shared by all or most North American Indian groups, at least in their prehistoric culture. Some of the important items in this category are negative ones: lack of metals and metalworking, absence of livestock, no wheels, no true arches in their structures.

At least two important and conspicuous traits spread southward from the unique Anasazi group to the Mogollon area somewhat less than a thousand years ago. The larger of these features was above-ground stonemasonry residential architecture, or "pueblo-type"

structures, gradually superseding the semi-subterranean pithouses.

The other introduction from the north was black-on-white painted pottery. About as far south as the Gila Cliff dwellings area the painted ware was "genuine" black-on-white. That is, the pottery-type called Tularosa Black-on-white resembles in firing technique the Anasazi material to the north.

In the Mimbres River-Silver City district, however, the pottery was produced in the same oxidizing atmosphere as the earlier brown, red, and red-on-brown types, but a pure kaolin white clay was applied as a slip to bowl interiors before the designs were applied. The pigment used included an iron mineral, and frequently the Mimbres Black-on-white vessels are, from oxidation of the iron, actually red-on-white. The skilful brushwork in fine-line geometric designs and the unique naturalistic pictures make the Mimbres black-on-white pottery strikingly distinctive and particularly attractive.

Largely destroyed long since by pot-hunters, with also a few having been excavated legitimately and scientifically, the Classic Mimbres pueblos generally consisted of a fairly large number of contiguous rooms, many of them small, grouped around a plaza or plazas. Certain rooms, rectangular like the rest but with certain special features, are considered kivas.

Within Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument, in addition to the cliff dwellings, in three partly separate but interconnected caves, of the thirteenth century, there is also a fairly large pueblo in the open, across the river and above the confluence of the West Fork and the Middle Fork of the Gila River. Unexcavated, it is known as the Heart Bar site or the TJ ruin. It seems to combine a good bit of Mimbres pottery with an otherwise Tularosa effect. Careful investigation and study of this pueblo, scheduled for the fairly near future in the research program of the National Park Service, should yield a great deal of valuable information on this whole subject.

Both the Mimbres culture and the Tularosa group disappeared by about or before A.D. 1300, the former perhaps considerably earlier. But in the Mimbres area and also further south and west, in Hidalgo County, there also occurs material of a slightly later stage, often atop the Mimbres ruins. This fourteenth-century complex is distinguished by the variety of painted pottery types—from the El Paso area and from the Tularosa Basin, from Chihuahua where the notable Casas Grandes culture was reaching its climax, and from wherever the striking Gila Polychrome (black and white on red) was being manufactured at the time. This last originated in central southern Arizona and spread widely.

Unfortunately there is very little known as yet on the double question, why did they leave?—and, where did they go? But this is also true for many other Southwestern areas where the prehistoric occupation apparently ceased either between A.D. 1275 and 1300, a period of severe drought, or else at some time between A.D. 1450 and 1540.

On reaching and exploring the Southwest in 1540 and thereafter the Spanish found occupied pueblos in essentially the same districts as today—the Hopi and Zuni area, isolated Acoma on its mesa, and the Rio Grande valley and tributary streams.

Recent studies have determined that the Apache tribes reached the Southwest comparatively late, and in 1540 were still to the east of the Rio Grande, spreading across to eastern Arizona only within the historic period. Consequently, the desertion of large areas by the Pueblo Indians between 1275 and, say, 1525 can hardly be ascribed to attacks by hostile nomadic Indian tribes. The drought of A.D. 1276-1299, as indicated by tree-ring work, probably affected southern areas as well as the northern Southwest. But why the Pueblo occupation vanished in certain districts only in the 14th-15th centuries after surviving the drought is entirely unknown.