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CASAS GRANDES: A BYGONE METROPOLIS OF THE GRAN CHICHIMECA

by

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ABSTRACT

Casas Grandes, a National Monument of the Republic of Mexico, is a great ruined city covering 260 acres. It is situated in Chihuahua, northwestern Mexico. With a contract signed in 1958 by the Amerind Foundation and Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, excavations began that year and continued until 1961 under the leadership of Dr. Charles DiPeso, Director of the Amerind Foundation.

Archaeological finds were so extensive that the staff of Amerind is only now in the final stages of completing a number of volumes for publication. Casas Grandes was a great Frontier Trading Center, reaching its cultural peak between A.D. 900-1250. Here came Toltec puchtecas in quest of turquoise and other items, including slaves, bringing with them the Plumed Serpent religion. Toltec leaders eventually lived in the metropolis. Dwellings consisted of great adobe buildings, once one to five stories high. Elaborate architectural features may be seen throughout. The city also contained Toltec-type platforms, an I-shaped ball court, and an elaborate water control system, including underground drainages. Skilled artisans were housed in special quarters. Thousands of macaws and turkeys were raised for their feathers to be used in the Plumed Serpent ceremonies.

Smaller communities in the Valley raised corn and other produce for the metropolis. Communication with other settlements was by means of protected foot trails, and signal towers on nearby mountains.

After A.D. 1250 Casas Grandes leaders lost control. The common people took over the public areas, and a period of cultural deterioration set in.

Casas Grandes was in ruins when seen by early 16th century Spaniards, one of whom was told by a native tribe nearby that the great trading center had been destroyed by Opatas. The expedition found evidence of this disaster, which took place in A.D. 1340. Temple furnishings were destroyed, and hundreds of dead were left where they had fallen. Survivors scattered, and eventually founded smaller communities in southwestern New Mexico, Pimera Alta and the Sierra Madre, conducting their former culture in a much reduced form.

RESUMEN

Casas Grandes, un monumento nacional de la República Mexicana, es una gran ciudad en ruinas que cubre 260 acres. Esa situada en Chihuahua, al noroeste de México. Mediante un contrato firmado entre la Fundación Amerind y el Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia en 1958, se dió principio en este año, a las excavaciones que continuaron hasta 1961 bajo la dirección del Dr. Charles DiPeso, Director de la Fundación Amerind.

Los descubrimientos arqueológicos fueron tan numerosos que el grupo de la Amerind está todavía en su etapa final, completando un número de volúmenes para su publicación. Casas Grandes fue un gran centro comercial fronterizo, y llegó al máximo de su cultura entre 900-1250 A.D. Aquí vinieron los puchtecas Toltecas en busca de turquesas y otros artículos, incluyendo esclavos, y trajeron consigo la religión de la Serpiente Emplumada. Los dirigentes de los Toltecas vivieron eventualmente en la metrópoli.

Las habitaciones consistían de grandes edificios de adobe, de cinco pisos de alto cada uno. Los rasgos arquitectónicos elaborados pueden verse en todas partes. La ciudad contiene también, plataformas de tipo tolteca, un torte en forma de J, y un sistema elaborado de control de agua incluyendo drenaje subterráneo. Expertos artifices fueron alojados en cuartos especiales. Miles de guacamayos y pavos fueron criados para usar sus plumajes en las ceremonias de la Serpiente Emplumada.

Pequeñas comunidades en el Valle cultivaban maíz y otros productos para la metrópoli. La comunicación con otros poblados era por medio de senderos protegidos y destacadas torres de señales en montañas cercanas.

Después de 1250 A.D., los dirigentes de Casas Grandes perdieron el control. La gente de la comunidad tomó posesión de las áreas públicas y se inició un período de decaimiento cultural.

Casas Grandes estaba en ruinas cuando fue descubierto por los Espanoles a principios del Siglo XVI. Uno de ellos fue informado por una tribu nativa cercana, que el gran centro comercial habia lido destruido por los Opatas. Le expedición encontró evidencias de este desastre que tuvo lugar en 1340 A.D. Los ornamentos del templo fueron destruidos y cientos de muertos fueron abandonados en el lugar en donde cayeron. Los dispersos supervivientes fundaron eventualmente pequeñas comunidades en el suroeste de Nuevo Mexico, Pimera Alta y la Sierra Madre, conduciendo su cultura anterior en una forma muy deficiente.

THE GREAT CITY

This great ruined city, covering some 260 acres, is situated in Chihuahua, northwestern Mexico, a short distance from Nuevo Casas Grandes. It is a National Monument of the Republic of Mexico. Through a contract signed in 1958, by the Amerind Foundation and the Institute Nacional de Antropologia e Historia, excavations were launched in that year, and continued for three years under the direction of Dr. Charles DiPeso,* Director of Amerind. The tremendous complex is the largest known site in the American Southwest. About one-sixth, or 40 acres, of the site was meticulously uncovered, mapped and studied. So vast were the archaeological discoveries—pottery, ceremonial items, articles of adornment, stone tools, etc.—that the staff of Amerind has since devoted most of its time to the study and recording of these materials. The preparation of a number of volumes concerning Casas Grandes is now well on the way toward completion.

Casas Grandes ruins and environs were first mentioned by 16th-century Spaniards. The site may perhaps have been seen by Cabeza de Vaca in 1536. Obregón, who accompanied Ibarra to the Casas Grandes Valley in 1564-65, was told by a primitive tribe living near the large ruins that the inhabitants of the great houses had been vanquished by enemies, perhaps Opatas, who lived on the west side of the northern Sierra. Other Spaniards—explorers and missionaries—came to the Valley, but settlement efforts met with failure because of Apache raids in 1684. It was not until the 19th century that the Casas Grandes area was again visited by white explorers. These ventures included a few Norte Americanos such as Bartlett in 1854, and Bourke in 1885.

In 1885 the first anthropological study of the Casas Grandes region was made by the archeo-historian, Adolph Bandelier. In the early 20th century, Lumholtz, as a result of extensive travels and explorations in Mexico, described his finds in and about Casas Grandes. Further survey and/or research has since been conducted in northwestern Mexico by such men as Hewett, 1908; Kidder, 1924; Brand, 1930; Sayles, 1936; and more recently Lister and others. The results of their work played a large part in the Amerind Foundation's decision to launch the Joint Casas Grandes Expedition (DiPeso, 1968a, pp. 25-26).

The Casas Grandes civilization developed on the northern frontier of Mesoamerica. It is part of a much larger geographical and cultural whole, the Gran Chichimeca, which spans the country lying above the Tropic of Cancer and northward to the thirty-eighth parallel—to San Fran-

* Note: In preparing this paper the writer has drawn heavily on the written work of Dr. DiPeso, a colleague and personal friend. If there is any misinterpretation of fact, then I am solely responsible. DiPeso's papers are listed at the end of this article. cisco, California, and as far east as Wichita, Kansas. "It has always been a land

of challenge—a harsh country of drastically changing moods which constantly tested the mettle of man." (DiPeso, 1968h, p. 47).

Within this vast region, some 12,000-15,000 years ago, palco-Indian hunters roamed throughout the land in quest of such extinct fauna as the mammoth, camel, small horse, and giant bison. These people also utilized wild plants as food. Their stone weapons and tools, often in association with fossilized faunal remains, have been found throughout the Gran Chichimeca area.

The subsistence pattern of the Northern Borderlands Chichimecans changed between B.C. 7,000-5,000, a period marked by a different kind of climate and the disappearance of the Pleistocene megafauna. Their way of life is referred to as Desert, and/or Western Archaic culture by archaeologists. They continued to live as simple food-gatherers and hunters, and were adding a few new tools to the simple ones they already had. They sometimes buried their dead in a folded position in shallow pits.

Much further south than the Casas Grandes Valley, Mesoamericans were becoming farmers. By domesticating corn, which was soon to become the staple of the New World, and other vegetal products, they were now able to live a sedentary communal way of life. Well before the birth of Christ some of these southerners, whose descendants were later to play a part in the lives of the Casas Grandes Indians, were manufacturing pottery, and becoming more sophisticated. Civilization was on its way!

At about the time of the birth of Christ, in northern Mexico, and parts of Arizona and New Mexico, numerous small, scattered villages existed. The people had learned to make plainware pottery, and although they still subsisted by some hunting and gathering, they too had become, or were becoming, agriculturists. Cultural traits from Mesoamerica were continually spreading ever northward through the Chichimecan country from A.D. 1-900. In addition to the increase of sedentary village life during the eighth century, *puchteca*, or merchant groups, were exerting more and more influence on the Casas Grandes Valley inhabitants and other Chichimecas living to the north. The people of the Casas Grandes Valley had adopted new agricultural crops, and some were making decorated pottery, a combination of both painted and textured techniques.

It was during the tenth century that turquoise became the god-stone of the people to the south of the Valley. Toltec merchants were dispatched to the dry mountainous regions of the northern Gran Chichimecans, the only place in which this precious stone could be found. Along with an enforced mercantile system, which grew up at this time, came the spread of the Plumed Serpent Cult. Aspects of



Macaws, whose plumage was used at Casas Grandes in the Plumed Serpent religion, were raised in these pens.

Photo by H. L. James

this religion may still be noted throughout many parts of the Indian Southwest today. Large population centers appeared, with a greatly increased cultural inventory, and one of these was the great frontier trading center of Casas Grandes. It was here that the southern puchteca collected such material wealth and commodities as turquoise, selenite, narcotics, herbs, salt, copper, peyote, skins, plus other items, including slaves. In addition to the thousands of items of local manufacture, Dr. DiPeco's crew unearthed numerous objects introduced to Casas Grandes by these southern merchant men.

Today the visitor is filled with awe as he rambles through the remains of this great center: as he looks down upon the great I-shaped Toltec style ball court, views the Mesoamerican type platform structures, the plazas, and the great multi-storied adobe apartment buildings, houseblocks once one to five stories high, in which lived the inhabitants of the great metropolis. One may also see the remnants of a water system, cisterns, underground drainage devices, plus an elaborate irrigation plan. When occupied, the upper levels of the dwelling contained mezzanine decks, and split level architectural features which were reached by staircases. Colonnaded galleries, square pilasters, and handsome T-

shaped doorways may be seen throughout.

The Joint Casas Grandes Expedition discovered that lapidary and shell artisans, copper workers, and other such experts, were housed in exclusive quarters. Their workshops contained a wealth of both finished objects and raw materials. Another discovery consisted of a series of breeding pens, for the city raised great quantities of macaws and turkeys. The feathers of these birds were an absolute necessity in various ceremonies and rituals pertaining to the Plumed Serpent religion.

Without exaggeration, millions of shells were transported from the Gulf of California across the Sierra Madre to Casas Grandes to be made into articles of adornment. Serpentine was mined near Silver City, New Mexico, as was meerschaum from southern Arizona, and these were transported to Casas Grandes to be made into fetishes and other artifactual forms.

Casas Grandes and other Chichimecan population centers communicated by means of protected foot trails, which extend through the mountains and over waterways. Towers were located on nearby peaks from which smoke and fire



Remains of the Paquimé water-supply system. Rock-lined conduits brought water within easy reach of the inhabitants.

Photo by H. L. James

signals could be sent. There were hundreds of smaller communities in the area whose inhabitants raised corn and other crops for the great metropolis of Casas Grandes, which, in turn, offered to them religion and guardianship.

Beginning in the 11th century Casas Grandes became strongly dominated and influenced by Toltec Mesoamericans. This is reflected in the material culture excavated at the site. One of the most ingenious soil and water conservation programs ever launched in the Americas was conducted under the leadership of Toltec engineers. It included trincheras controls, check dams, various architectural schemes and irrigation systems planned for the purpose of producing the great quantities of foodstuffs necessary to support the population of Casas Grandes.

The future of Casas Grandes and other Northern Frontier settlements was to be greatly affected by the fall and disintegration of the Toltec Empire to the south when Xolotl (the Monster), rose to power. But Casas Grandes was to continue with a period of prosperity until about A.D. 1250, at which time the leaders seem to have lost control, the massive building program ceased, and a marked

deterioration set in.

An interesting discovery made in 1870 may explain in part the collapse of the social order in the mid-thirteenth century. The find consisted of a 3,000-pound fabric-covered meteorite in one of the Casas Grandes rooms. The sudden and tremendous impact of this great object falling from the sky (if it fell at this early time) can well be imagined. The fear-ridden inhabitants may have felt that this was not only an ill omen, but that they had in some way angered their gods, whose wrath would again shower upon them.

Following the diminished power of the leaders, the public areas of Casas Grandes were taken over by the commoners. The great water system fell into disuse. Underground water channels became depositories for the dead, and the galleries were used as sleeping areas.

The demise of this great frontier trading center came in A.D. 1340. The tragedy enacted during the final days at Casas Grandes is mutely reflected in the finds which were made during the excavation. In addition, there is a native Opata myth from the Bavispe river region which states that their Chichimecan predecessors sacked and burned the site because of a strong aversion to slavery practices.

The Amerind scientists uncovered sacred temple furnishings deliberately smashed and scattered, as well as several hundred dead which had been left where they had fallen. The survivors scattered after this dreadful affair, with remnants of the Casas Grandes population eventually founding new and smaller settlements in southwestern New Mexico, Pimera Alta, and the Sierra Madre where they continued to practice some aspects of the former culture, but in a much reduced form. Some of these settlements have been scrutinized by scientists, thus adding proof to what happened.

The Convento Site

In addition to the excavation of the Casas Grandes metropolis, the Expedition exposed a Mogollon-Chichimecan village, and at the same site brought to light much information regarding the mission of San Antonio de Padua de Casas Grandes. The ruin encompassing these two excavations is also within a short distance of Nuevo Casas Grandes.

Not long after the 16th century, Spaniards had conquered the Aztecs (who in turn had caused the downfall and scattering of the Toltecs), and they began moving northward to the Casas Grandes Valley and beyond. The Europeans followed the same old communication routes laid out by Chichimecans centuries before. Such adventurers as Coronado, de Niza, Chamuscado, Oñate, Ibarra, and others came in quest of gold and other metals. Turquoise, the godstone so precious to earlier puchtecas, was of little interest to them.

Following the Conquistadores, Christian religious men launched an "infidel" conversion program among the natives, early in the 17th century. But Spanish exploiters had little effect on the Casas Grandes Valley until 1663 when Captain Andres Garcia of the El Paso area was ordered to take a missionary, Fray Paez (Perez) to Casas Grandes for the purpose of founding a settlement. He was shortly re-

placed by Fray Pedro Aparicio and Nicolas Hidalgo. As a result the building of San Antonio de Padua church was completed in 1667. This mission was short-lived however, for only four years after the 1680 Pueblo Indian Rebellion in New Mexico, the church was burned, the dwellings wrecked, women were taken, and the Spanish survivors had to make a hasty departure southward.

Amerind's crew found numerous items in the excavation of this site to support historical accounts of the 17th century catastrophe, an event which had been caused in a large part over Teras land disputes, as well as resentment regarding Spanish support of the Bavispe Opatas against the Casas Grandes Valley Janos. With the support of Apache allies from the north, the Janos, in this case, were the victors.

The account of this part of the Joint Casas Grandes Expedition's excavation will also be published in the forthcoming Amerind Foundation's volumes concerning its work in

the northwestern part of Mexico.

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