

# The Chaco Experience

## Landscape and Ideology at the Center Place

### 1 Orientations

The events of one's life take place, *take place*. How often have I used this expression, and how often have I stopped to think what it means? Events do indeed take place; they have meaning in relation to the things around them.

—N. Scott Momaday, *The Names* (1976:142)

In a remote canyon in northwest New Mexico, thousand-year-old sandstone walls waver in the sunlight, stretching like ancient vertebrae against a turquoise sky. The stillness is broken only by the occasional crunch of boots on sandstone gravel and distant tourists' fragmentary voices, floating on the breeze like paper streamers. Overhead, a solitary redtail rides an updraft until she disappears. This storied place—Chaco Canyon—carries multiple layers of meaning for Native Americans and archaeologists, writers and tourists, explorers and artists. Here, isolation, arid conditions, and dry-laid construction have conspired to preserve ruins that are monuments to ancient creativity and perseverance. The north wall of Chetro Ketl undulates and bulges, its banded masonry mimicking the Menefee shale and Cretaceous sandstone behind the great house. A line of multiple doorways in Pueblo Bonito telescopes like a corridor through time. The subterranean passageway at Casa Rinconada hints at esoteric ceremonies in the dimly lit great kiva. Light and shadow, stone and sky, come together in the canyon, inspiring those who have lived, worked, and traveled here (plate 1).

Chaco Canyon draws its power not only from the ancient architecture sheltering beneath its walls but also from the ever-changing light and the far-flung vistas of the Colorado Plateau. From high above the canyon floor, the San Juan Basin stretches away in sedimentary waves lapping against mountainous shores. Bands of golden sunlight illuminate distant swaths of

Tertiary and Quaternary sandstone. To the west, the Chuskas sleep the deep blue sleep of the Cretaceous, indented by Narbona Pass with its promises of chert and wood. To the south, flat-topped Hosta Butte peeps coyly above the dark line of the Dutton Plateau. Around a canyon bend, Fajada Butte's isolated knob protrudes like the controls of some giant chronometer (plate 2).

At the heart of this sky-filled landscape lie twelve massive great houses. The Chacoans used a masonry technique called *core-and-veneer* to craft these buildings at an exaggerated scale, with formal symmetry, according to specific designs (Lekson 1986). Over the course of three centuries, they stacked hundreds of very large rooms—many devoid of hearths or other indications of use—in rows up to four stories, or 8 m, high. The rooms surround blocked-in kivas and embrace plazas toward the east or south (plate 3). In great house plazas, Chacoans often built circular, masonry-lined, semi-subterranean great kivas. They constructed great kivas, like great houses, according to formal guidelines for size, layout, and orientation. The Chacoans modified the landscape in other ways as well, building earthen mounds, ramps, staircases, and road segments. Archaeologists use the term *Bonito-style architecture* to refer collectively to all these architectural elements (Gladwin 1945). The overbuilt, monumental, Bonito-style great houses contrast dramatically with the many small, domestic pueblos that form clusters of low mounds along the south side of Chaco Canyon.

The Classic Bonito phase (AD 1020–1100) was Chaco's heyday, and during that time the canyon's influence spread across the surrounding San Juan Basin. Cleared linear alignments, or road segments, extended from the canyon toward the north, northwest, and southwest. Across the Basin's buttes, dunes, and drainages, Ancestral Puebloans built Bonito-style architecture in nearly a hundred *outlier* communities. The collapsed remains of some outlier great houses, such as Red Willow and Whirlwind, form mounded silhouettes against the sky. At others, such as Kin Bineola and Kin Ya'a, multistoried sandstone walls rise tenaciously from the Basin floor. Often, outliers include great kivas, earthworks, and road segments. There is usually a surrounding community of thirty to forty (or more) small, domestic sites (Fowler, Stein, and Anyon 1987; Kantner and Mahoney 2000; Marshall and Sofaer 1988; Marshall et al. 1979; Powers, Gillespie, and Lekson 1983).

Archaeological research has been under way at Chaco Canyon since the days of Wetherill and Pepper in the 1890s. From Hewett and Judd in the first half of the twentieth century, through the Chaco Project in the 1970s and 1980s, most Southwest archaeologists alive today can link themselves to Chaco through less than six degrees of academic separation. Along the way, Chaco has attracted and addicted generations of scholars (Lister and Lister 1981; Mathien 1992; Mills 2002; Vivian 1990:37–78).<sup>1</sup> After more

than a century of research, we have gathered an astounding amount of information about Chaco Canyon and about the Ancestral Puebloan farmers who inhabited this place. We know, to the year, when trees were harvested to build great house roofs and floors. We can pick up a potsherd and know, within a 50-year window, when it was made (and sometimes where it was made). We know how the local precipitation changed from year to year, and we can calculate the ways in which this affected corn crop yields. We know that individuals interred in Pueblo Bonito were better nourished than those buried in small house sites. We know that corn, pottery, wood, and lithic materials were carried to Chaco from the Chuska Mountains, 75 km to the west. We know that feasts were held at Pueblo Alto and ritual paraphernalia was cached at Pueblo Bonito and Chetro Ketl.

But we still have more questions than we have answers. Chaco seems an isolated, difficult place in which to live today. It appears strange to us that subsistence farmers should have invested so much of their energy in monuments that have lasted across a millennium. Great houses remain enigmatic structures variously interpreted as apartments, elite residences, storehouses, empty stages for ceremony, and assorted combinations thereof. It seems odd that the largest and best-preserved great houses are in Chaco Canyon, as opposed to the comparably well-watered slopes of the Chuska Mountains or the lush valleys of the Animas and La Plata rivers. The specific nature of the relationships between outliers and Chaco Canyon is not particularly clear.

Although archaeological interpretations for Chaco are sometimes conflicting, scholars agree that planned, massive, Bonito-style structures required a substantial investment of labor and design. Bonito-style architecture “exceed(s) the requirements of any practical functions that a building is intended to perform” (Trigger 1990:119). These large-scale, long-term construction projects suggest the presence of social inequalities and institutionalized leaders, yet the evidence for sociopolitical hierarchy in the canyon is ambiguous. As a result, Chaco has great appeal for scholars of ancient sociopolitical complexity.

Most current explanations for Chaco revolve around the idea of the canyon as a central place for ritual gatherings, with leaders’ power legitimated through exclusive access to ritual knowledge (Judge 1989; Kantner 1996; Saitta 1997; Sebastian 1992; Toll 1985; Wills 2000; Yoffee 2001). But how did ritual leaders come to power? Why was their authority perceived as legitimate? Why would people agree to act as subjects—that is, to participate in a situation that was to their social or material disadvantage? Bonito-style architecture looms large in the background of all these questions—were the great houses, great kivas, roads, and earthworks stages for ritual events? The Chacoan landscape, with its formally constructed, carefully

situated architectural features, is charged with symbolism (Fritz 1978; Marshall 1997; Stein and Lekson 1992). What can this landscape reveal to us about the nature of Chacoan beliefs and social relationships?

## Lived Landscapes

Landscape provides archaeologists with an excellent window through which to construct a comprehensive picture of Chacoan society and polity. This book is built on a vision of landscape as a reflexive dimension of human social interaction. Landscapes both create and reflect ideas we hold about ourselves and our societies, our worldviews and our ideologies. All human experience is spatialized, and some aspects of Chacoan life may have been deliberately and consciously so. For many contemporary Puebloans, there are interrelated, overlapping spatial dimensions to society, ritual, cosmography, and politics. These ideas likely have a deep Ancestral Puebloan history. As Chacoans constructed monumental buildings and positioned structures and features to engage with the natural topography, they communicated aspects of a Chacoan ideology. The Chacoan landscape is laden with meaning, and although we cannot access ancient meanings at a specific level, we can trace the large-scale outlines of a Chacoan worldview.

Landscapes embrace the intersection of the social, the emotional, and the material. Spatial experiences have a powerful aesthetic dimension. The term *place* encompasses the lived experiences and meanings bound up in a particular space. In the Apache ethnography *Wisdom Sits in Places*, Basso (1996) employed the term *sense of place* to describe the ways humans imbue their surroundings with memories, meanings, and aesthetic resonance. Lived, spatial experiences help to affirm and challenge ideas about the world and our place in it. Because worldviews and ideologies are negotiated within a complex web of the social and the material, they are at least partially accessible to archaeologists willing to take an interpretive approach to the past. My interpretively constructed vision of the Chacoan landscape has a twofold purpose. First, I have attempted to understand some of the ideas that resonate through Bonito-style architecture. Second, I have employed these ideas to try to gain a clearer understanding of Chacoan sociopolitical relationships across Chaco's rise, zenith, and decline.

### *Archaeological Landscapes*

Over the past two decades, landscape has emerged as a unifying concept for the archaeological study of place and social reality (for example, Ashmore and Knapp 1999). Many current areas of archaeological interest, including

identity, ethnicity, ritual, power, and ideology, intersect at the nexus of landscape. In the American Southwest, the term *landscape* is invoked by archaeologists straddling a wide range of epistemological positions. Some equate landscape with settlement patterns, examining the changing and variable distributions of people and resources across space. Some explore “cultural landscapes,” investigating the links—which may involve oral traditions, as well as archaeology—that connect indigenous groups with specific places. Still others view spatial experiences as reflexively constructed over time and landscape as a window through which to investigate less tangible aspects of ancient life, such as meaning and ideology. Although each of these approaches has different theoretical roots, they can be complementary. Material remains, ethnography, and cognitive perceptions can all have a place in well-rounded interpretive analysis.

Settlement pattern studies have enjoyed a long run of popularity in cultural ecology and processual archaeology. Horizontal and vertical measurements describe relationships between people and natural or cultural resources, and landforms provide raw materials or opportunities to engage in various kinds of subsistence behavior. Traditional settlement pattern studies tend to view space as a neutral container for action. Clearly, ancient peoples were concerned with factors such as the presence of competitive neighbors and the availability of arable land or water, but landscapes are more than backdrops or sets of resources waiting to be exploited.<sup>2</sup> Although measurements of physical distances among populations and resources can constitute useful information, reducing landscape to material patterning leaves the meaningful and experiential aspects of place unexplored. People have reactions, perceptions, opinions, and experiences of their constructed and natural spatial surroundings.

During the 1980s and 1990s, geographers, philosophers, and anthropologists began to move beyond “space as container” models, developing a holistic concept of space as a socially produced, relational medium vital to the construction of identity and society (for example, Altman and Low 1992; Lefebvre 1991).<sup>3</sup> Archaeologists seeking ways to move beyond the limitations of settlement pattern studies began to focus on landscape as a way to integrate human perceptions and relationships into the picture (Anschuetz, Wilshusen, and Scheick 2001). In the Southwest and in other postcolonial settings, archaeologists working with indigenous peoples developed the concept of cultural landscapes to weave together oral histories, migrations, and traditional land use (for example, Ferguson and Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2006; Morphy 1993).<sup>4</sup>

But landscapes are not only culturally constructed—they are also inherently ideological. Landscapes comprise the spatial milieu within which

bodies and the social and material worlds interact and intersect, as identity and power are negotiated. Highly visible monumental architecture is often employed in the construction of identity or the legitimation of power. The commercial skyscrapers that form the nucleus of the urban landscape may be seen as embodying the dominance of capitalism and capitalists, towering over (yet based in) the wreckage of the inner-city poor (Zukin 1991). Landscapes do not simply evoke meanings—they also constrain and order (Foucault 1977). Spaces are both the site and the stake of social struggle (Harvey 1989, 1996). An investigation into space must extend beyond “the relationship between bodies, forms, and elements” to include “the product of negotiations between an array of competing actors with varying practical capacities to transform relationships” (Smith 2003:72). Archaeologists working on monumental landscapes in Mesoamerica (Ashmore 1989), Roman Greece (Alcock 1993), and Neolithic Britain (Bradley 1998, 2000) have turned their attention to landscape as a way to think about ancient ideologies, worldviews, and power relationships.<sup>5</sup>

Landscapes are more than reflexive representations of social or political relationships. Much of the potency of spatial experiences for enhancing or challenging power relationships comes from the fact that landscapes are also inherently sensual. Place making—the construction of a meaningful landscape—involves sound, smell, taste, touch, sight, and emotion. Tuan’s (1974) *Topophilia*, today a classic geography text, was the first book of its kind to deal with the aesthetic and sensual dimensions of landscape. Tuan (1974:27) pointed out that spatial experiences can elicit powerful emotions, particularly when multiple senses are involved. Cathedral interiors provide a familiar example. The exaggerated height and emptiness of the space, the shadowy light shot through with stained glass beams, the suffused odors of incense and candle wax, the blurry echoes of chants or organ music, the coolness of marble underfoot—all combine to create strong aesthetic and emotional responses.

Lefebvre (1991:38–46) proposes a useful organizational scheme for thinking about these interrelated dimensions of landscape. For Lefebvre, space is a tripartite concept that includes the material world, spatial representations, and spatial perceptions. Smith (2003:73–75) has helped translate these ideas into archaeological terms. The material world is, of course, the archaeologically familiar patterning of sites, features, topography, and resources. These physical landscapes are invested with meaning through representations and perceptions. Spatial representations refer to the ways people draw, describe, and imagine landscape, through art, texts, photographs, maps, or cosmographic schemes—this dimension may be accessible to Southwest archaeologists through rock art, pottery motifs, and indi-

genous oral traditions and histories. Spatial perceptions encompass the sensual, emotional, aesthetic dimensions of landscape, involving such archaeological factors as visibility, memory, and iconic symbolism. Investigations into past perceptions pose no small challenge for archaeologists. One potentially useful method involves phenomenology—experiencing the landscape.

### *Experiencing the Landscape*

Contemporary visitors to Chaco Canyon do not approach the canyon as eleventh-century visitors did. As we drive into Chaco Culture National Historic Park, in the air-conditioned comfort of our automobiles, we are insulated from the sandy dunes underfoot, the gnat-scattering breeze, the sun on skin. We approach the canyon through the Gallo Wash, weaving our way past low cliffs until we round a bend to see Fajada Butte and the sign for the public campground. Those who are a bit more adventurous brave multiple tire punctures to travel rocky Route 57 north from Seven Lakes. Some ancient visitors probably also entered the canyon through the Gallo Wash or Fajada Gap, but many probably arrived from other directions. Major concentrations of outlier communities are situated to the north, the west, and the southwest of Chaco; a few large settlements are located to the east. Ancient visitors likely arrived from all these directions, traveling along the North Road via Pueblo Alto, along the Chaco River from the west, through South Gap from the southwest, along Chacra Mesa from the southeast, or through the canyon from the east. And, by important contrast with our own experiences, Chacoans arrived in the canyon on foot. Time and movement were not compressed along the journey as they are for us today, in our cars and campers.

But once we reach the canyon core and begin to move through constructed spaces such as Pueblo Bonito, some aspects of the contemporary and the ancient Chacoan spatial experience are likely to be similar. All humans know the world through bodily experience, so all humans share body-relational perceptions such as directionality and scale. The builders of monumental architecture intend for their work to be seen and experienced by others. As visitors walk within the canyon today, navigating park service trails through great house ruins, we catch partial glimpses of the Chacoan architects' intentions. We are impressed with Pueblo Bonito's massive, looming walls, exaggerated size, and rigid, repetitive formality. What sensory reactions were great houses originally designed to elicit? What beliefs about the world were they intended to convey? I investigate these questions and others, using a phenomenological approach.

Phenomenological archaeologists such as Tilley (1994) have used the commonalities in all human spatial perception as a starting point for exploring the ways in which ancient peoples might have experienced landscape and architecture. Of course, the contemporary archaeological landscape is but a distorted remnant of the ancient landscape, and interpretations of both are and were culturally situated. We can never replicate the perceptions and reactions of past peoples, and we cannot help but bring our own subjectivities to any experience. Nevertheless, phenomenology provides us with one route of ingress into the ideologically charged, complex social and physical landscapes of the past. Keeping the various caveats and pitfalls of a phenomenological approach in mind, I set out to experience the Chacoan landscape.

Armed with a 35 mm camera, a digital video camera, and a notebook, I made formal and informal data-gathering forays in Chaco Canyon and across the San Juan Basin, visiting great houses, great kivas, shrines, stone circles, small sites, road segments, and high places over a period spanning more than a decade. I walked the last few kilometers of the major road segments and access routes that lead into Chaco Canyon, and I visited more than 50 outlier communities across the San Juan Basin. Along the way, I asked specific questions about spatial perceptions and the ways in which perceptions were directed and enhanced by Bonito-style architecture.

Chacoan travelers, of course, did not carry cameras. I used photography to help create a visual record of these experiences, but the cameras were more than recording devices (Geuens 1994; Himpele 2003). The creation of still and moving images helped focus my attention on the specifics of the surroundings, enabling me to perceive things I otherwise might have missed, such as the way great houses on the north side of Chaco Canyon momentarily throb with golden light when the sun drops below cloud cover on an overcast winter day, or the way a prominent Bonito-style building can appear and disappear from different vantage points within an outlier community.

Maps constitute another important tool of the landscape scholar. I manipulated digital topographic data with ArcGIS and MapTech Terrain Navigator. I used these programs to plot sites on the terrain, compare elevations, measure distances, and look for potential line-of-sight connections among architectural and natural features. I used aerial photographs to help locate Chacoan roads on the ground. However, maps, aerial photographs, GIS databases, and other kinds of large-scale, top-down representations of space do not show us the landscape as Chacoans would have seen it. “Distanced, geometrical, ‘outsider’s’ approaches to space can claim no priority over the social and the experiential” (Thomas 1993:27).

My phenomenological observations coalesce around three perceptual attributes—visibility, movement, and memory—that seem to be of impor-



tance on the Chacoan landscape. These observations gain additional support and dimensions when considered together with representations of landscape derived from contemporary and historic Pueblo ethnography (chapter 3). For many modern Pueblo peoples, the social, ritual, and mythic worlds are expressed and represented by physical and imagined landscapes. Memory, movement, and cosmography are three overlapping attributes that emerge from the ethnographic literature.

### *Interpreting the Landscape*

Archaeologists work to understand the past from within a double hermeneutic, developing partial and imperfect interpretations of the meanings constructed by the peoples under investigation, on the basis of material objects that are likely to contain multidimensional, ambiguous, complex, and incomplete connotations. The interpretations offered in this book can represent but one partially understood set of possibilities. But I have attempted to craft my interpretations so that they are faithful to material evidence, ethnographic information, and phenomenological observations.

The Chacoan landscape can be understood as the large-scale spatial representation of a worldview shared by many Ancestral Puebloan inhabitants, builders, and visitors. Chacoan architects actively designed a landscape that elicited a powerful emotional response in visitors. This worldview revolved around interrelated themes that are omnipresent at Chaco, as well as in many other Ancestral Puebloan spaces: sacred geography, balanced dualisms, directionality, visibility, cyclical renewal, social memory, and center place.

When those who shared this worldview moved through the buildings and across the modified landscape of Chaco Canyon, the experience actively reaffirmed their beliefs about the nature of the world and their place in it. Architecture and worldview were transformed into a powerful Chacoan ideology. Leaders' authority was naturalized and legitimated by spatial messages that celebrated Chaco Canyon as the center of the Puebloan cosmographic, social, and ritual world, and visitors transformed themselves into subjects. It seemed inevitable and desirable to travel to Chaco for periodic ritual events and to contribute labor and resources for the ceremonies necessary to continue the Puebloan way of life. And where else should these ceremonies take place but in Chaco Canyon—the cosmographic, social, and ritual center of the eleventh-century Pueblo world?

### Notes

1. Early investigations in the canyon include excavations conducted by Richard Wetherill and the Hyde Expedition (1896–1900), Edgar Lee Hewett and the School of American Research

(1920–1921, 1929–1935), Neil Judd and the National Geographic Society (1921–1927), and Hewett and the University of New Mexico (1928–1947). Chaco Canyon became a national monument in 1907, following the passage of the Antiquities Act in 1906, as advocated by Hewett. During the 1950s and 1960s, research continued as part of a stabilization program directed by Gordon Vivian. In the 1970s and 1980s, a joint venture called the Chaco Project was initiated between the University of New Mexico and the National Park Service under the direction of Robert Lister, then James Judge. Coal and natural gas development during the 1970s and 1980s led to regional studies by the Bureau of Land Management and the Public Service Company of New Mexico. One outcome of the Chaco Project was the creation of a Chaco Archive at the University of New Mexico, where copies of all data and publications pertaining to Chaco from the past 150 years are ostensibly housed. However, information and collections from various expeditions are scattered, from Washington DC to the canyon itself. Steve Plog and others are working on the Chaco Digital Initiative, construction of a digital database to facilitate access to information. Over the past several years, Steve Lekson, one of the original participants in the Chaco Project, has spearheaded efforts to create a series of final, synthetic reports on the Chaco Project (for example, Cameron and Toll 2001; Cordell, Judge, and Piper 2001; Kantner 2003b; Lekson 2006; Noble 2004).

2. For examples of absolutist approaches to landscape, see Hodder and Orton (1976), Steward (1955), Washburn (1974), and Willey (1953). For a detailed critique, see Smith (2003:33–54), Tilley (1994:7–11), and Wagstaff (1987).

3. For additional influential examples of geographers who have worked on holistic concepts of space and landscape, see Agnew and Duncan (1989), Cosgrove (1984, 1993), Davis (1992), Duncan and Ley (1993), Harvey (1989, 1996), Jackson (1984), Lowenthal (1985), Schama (1996), Soja (1980, 1988, 1996), and Tuan (1974, 1977). Some influential anthropological landscape investigations of note include Appadurai (1988), Basso (1996), Feld and Basso (1996), Hirsch and O'Hanlon (1995), Ingold (1993), Lawrence and Low (1990), Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003), and Rodman (1992).

4. Other good examples include Carroll, Zedeño, and Stoffle (2004), Ferguson and Anyon (2001), T. King (2003), Taçon (1999), and Zedeño (1997).

5. The ranks of this genre of landscape studies are increasing at an exponential rate. For additional influential examples, see Ashmore (2002), Ashmore and Knapp (1999), Barrett (1991, 1994), Bender (1993), Bowser (2004), R. Bradley (1993), Donley-Reid (1990), Edmonds (1999), Joyce and Gillespie (2000), Leone (1988), Smith (2003), Thomas (1991, 1996), Tilley (1994, 1999), and Ucko and Layton (1998).