On the Fringe: Community Dynamics at Cox Ranch Pueblo

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ABSTRACT:
Cox Ranch Pueblo is the center of a sizable Chaco-period (A.D. 1050-1130) community in the southern Cibola region. The Cox Ranch Pueblo Community Research Project has been exploring the connections distant communities may have had with a center in Chaco Canyon. The site contains numerous roomblocks and a great house that possesses a number of attributes consistent with Chaco-style buildings. However, most materials from the site suggest roots below the Mogollon Rim. This contribution summarizes the research aims and findings of the project to date, emphasizing the importance of local social dynamics in incorporation of ideas from afar.

INTRODUCTION

So why come to the Mogollon Conference to talk about Chaco Canyon and things Chacoan? While I clearly recognize that this is the Mogollon conference, and that we are in the heartland of things Mimbres, I believe that Chaco was too much to be ignored by populations living near the Mogollon Rim nearly a thousand years ago and, because of that, Chaco requires at least some of our thought if we are to understand the archaeology of Mogollon Rim area in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. I hope to make the reasons for this evident by describing work I have been directing at and around Cox Ranch Pueblo for the last three years.

THE COX RANCH PUEBLO COMMUNITY RESEARCH PROJECT

Cox Ranch Pueblo is located about 5 miles south of the sacred Zuni Salt Lake and about 25 miles north of the Mogollon Rim (Figure 1), roughly due north of Luna and Reserve and northwest of Quemado. The Salt Lake would have been a key resource to populations throughout the region and the Red Hill obsidian source is about a dozen miles to the southwest. Research in this area has been limited to a few surveys, first by Danson (1957) and later by Whalen (1984) for the BLM, and work related to the now-tabled Fence Lake strip mine (e.g., Hogan 1985, 1987). This work suggests, along with surveys I have directed in the area since 2002 (Duff 2003a; Duff and Mueller 2005; Duff and Robinson 2004), that this landscape was most extensively used throughout the Archaic and then again, though more intensively, during the A.D. 1000 and 1100s.
Figure 1. Distribution of great houses in the Cibola region during the Chaco period, with southern Cibola great houses labeled.

The area of Cox Ranch Pueblo is perhaps more typical of areas above the rim than below, with a broad, dry, and presently barren flood plain, low relief mesas, and a sparse open-juniper woodland (Figures 2 and 3). What is unique about the region is the appearance of several sites and communities in the mid-1000s in an area with few local precursors and limited evidence for residential occupation during the A.D. 900s. While this expansion may be the result of the AD 900s population boom throughout the Southwest, sites in the region come to center around focal buildings constructed using the architectural canons of Chaco Canyon “Great Houses,” hence the logic of discussing Chaco.
Figure 2. Overview of Cox Ranch Pueblo with great house and Roomblock 2 kiva-like feature labeled, view to north (Photo: Andrew Duff 7/2002).

Figure 3. View of Cox Ranch Pueblo vicinity, view to northwest (Photo: Andrew Duff 7/2002).
Figure 4 depicts one formulation of the Chacoan Regional System, that published by Lekson and colleagues in 1988. Twisting Marlowe's reference to Helen of Troy: “this is the map that launched a thousand interpretations.” This map shows locations of Chacoan outliers known at that time, but the key point for my purposes here is that Cox Ranch Pueblo is one of a small group of Chaco-style buildings that defines the southern edge of the great house distribution.

Figure 4. Distribution of Chacoan great houses with location of the southern Ciblola region and Cox Ranch Pueblo highlighted (modified from Lekson et al. 1988).
This more recent map (Figure 1) highlights the relatively dramatic fall off of great houses as one moves towards the Mogollon Rim, and also plots the study area. Though Lekson (1999) and a few others have suggested that a now-destroyed site in the Pine Lawn valley—Aragon—was also a great house, our best present evidence indicates that Chaco-style great house do not occur below the rim.

Cox Ranch Pueblo (LA 13681, BLM NM-02-185) is a pretty typical Chacoan great house community. It has about 18 residential roomblocks (somewhat stylized and numbered in Figure 5), most with associated middens (also numbered), all of which are clustered around a building that is much larger than the others—the great house. There are about 250-300 rooms at the site (Duff 2003a; Stuart and Gauthier 1988:163). In addition to the great house, there are two areas with some form of public architecture. At the center-left of the map is a Roomblock 2, an architectural complex with an appended large elliptical area that is bounded by walls, but open on both ends. This feature has been referred to as ballcourt-like (Fowler et al. 1987:161), but I would argue that it is better described as an early version of the later unroofed circular great kivas we know about from the Mariana Mesa area (Kintigh 1994; McGimsey 1980). Near the center of the slide is circular depression that was at first thought to be a great kiva (Fowler et al. 1987:Figure 13.10), but after archaeological testing in 2003 and 2004, it appears to have been a well used for domestic water. Though likely to be a walk-in-well, an entry ramp has yet to be detected (Duff and Nauman 2004).

![Figure 5. Plan Map of Cox Ranch Pueblo (LA 13681), with extent of rubble and midden areas mapped, wall alignments mapped and projected (map Andrew Duff, July 2004).](image)
Great houses are usually characterized by being larger than all other buildings in the community, with extra-tall rooms, core-and-veneer walls, banded or Chaco-style masonry, blocked-in interior kivas, often with formal public space attached (Lekson 1991; Marshall et al. 1979; Powers et al. 1983). A view of the great house roomblock from upslope provides some sense of its size (Figure 6). A plan of the structure—slightly stylized, but based on visible wall alignments, wall-clearing, and test excavations—accurately shows the structure's dimensions and key features (Figure 7). The great house is a large, roughly rectangular structure with a D-shaped wall that encloses a slightly elevated plaza. The great house has at least 40 rooms and at least one interior or “blocked-in” kiva. We tested the kiva last season, and we can say for sure that it is a partially subterranean kiva and falls within this part of the building, however, it may well turn out to have a form other than the perfect circle depicted. Our excavations have exposed several wall sections with banded masonry resembling that of Chacoan buildings (Figures 8-10). The exterior of the back (upslope or west) wall (Figures 8 and 9) shows variation likely related to both different construction events and intended wall height. Figure 8 is the exterior of a 70 centimeter-wide core-and-veneer wall preserved to a height of 2 meters (Unit 4 on Figure 7).

Figure 6. The great house at Cox Ranch Pueblo during excavation in 2004, view to northeast (Photo: Andrew Duff June 2004).
Figure 7. Plan of the Cox Ranch Pueblo great house with 2003 excavation units. Note: Wall alignments projected based on exposed and mapped wall segments.

Figure 8. Exterior Cox Ranch Pueblo great house wall exposed in Unit 4 (Photo: Andrew Duff July 2003).
This is located at the highest preserved point of the great house and testing of the room it is associated with revealed only a single story. Figure 9 represents a section of the exterior wall about 13 meters north of the previous section (Unit 3 in Figure 7), preserved to a height of approximately 1.25 m. Figure 10 shows what was probably an original exterior wall, later incorporated into another bank of rooms on the north-central portion of the roomblock. There is clearly variation in the amount of tabular stone and chinking in these walls—potentially related to different construction events and planned function—but several of the great house walls have a distinctly Chacoan appearance, most closely resembling Chacoan Type II wall construction (Lekson 1986:Figure 2.4).

Figure 9. Exterior Cox Ranch Pueblo great house wall exposed in Unit 3 (Photo: Andrew Duff, July 2003).
To date, we have tested seven middens (Middens 1, 3, 7, 10, 12, 13, and 15; Figure 5) with five or more randomly selected 1-x-1 meter units. Trash that was piled up against the back wall of the great house provides an assemblage definitively associated with the great house, as is the midden just off its plaza (M12). Assemblages from five of these middens and the great house, those excavated in 2003 and analyzed and reported in Duff and Nauman (2004), produced approximately 40,000 sherds (the 2004 season data is not presented here), about 60 percent of which was undecorated. Both brown and gray unpainted pottery occur, but about three quarters of the undecorated pottery is brown ware and it is found throughout the site (Duff and Nauman
2004:Tables A12-A22). Brown ware includes both smudged and un-smudged bowl and jar forms, with plain, plain corrugated, indented corrugated, incised corrugated, and patterned corrugated exteriors. Gray ware occurs almost exclusively as indented corrugated jars (Figure 11). If you travel 20 miles north of Cox Ranch Pueblo, contemporaneous utilitarian assemblages are almost exclusively indented gray corrugated. Similarly, if you drop below the Mogollon Rim 30 miles to the south of the site, utilitarian assemblages are almost exclusively brown ware.

![Figure 11. Representative undecorated wares from Cox Ranch Pueblo.](image)

Arguments about the meaning of brown and gray wares have a long history, but we have tried to look more closely at the technology of their manufacture (Nauman and Duff 2004). The assemblage from Cox Ranch Pueblo demonstrates that the way these wares were built—the average thickness of coils, the number of indentations per square centimeter, thickness, temper, and paste—indicate two different historical traditions or learning frameworks related technological manufacture. Gray and brown wares are found intermixed in all of the middens at the site, and this pattern appears to persist through the occupation of the site based on midden excavations. Clays from the region are iron rich and fire to the same colors as refired brown ware sherds, and were probably used to manufacture the brown ware at the site. We have yet to find local clays that could have been used to manufacture the gray ware, and it was either traded in or brought by people who joined the community (Nauman and Duff 2004). In short, we have a
northern architectural pattern somehow related to Chaco Canyon and utilitarian a technological tradition of pottery manufacture with historical roots in the mountains below the rim. This suggests to me that the majority of the founders of Cox Ranch Pueblo had histories south of the rim; what I remain unsure about is whether people from areas north of the site helped found the community, if they married in, or if persistent exchanges with neighboring groups are responsible for the gray ware at the site.

The decorated assemblage is dominated by Cibola White Ware, with lesser quantities of White Mountain Red Ware (Duff and Nauman 2004:Tables A12-A22). The main decorated types include varieties of Puerco Black-on-white (Puerco, Escavada, and Gallup), Puerco Black-on-red is also common, and Reserve Black-on-white (Figure 12). Wingate Black-on-red—the stylistic equivalent of Reserve—constitutes only 5 percent of the decorated assemblage (Duff and Nauman 2004). Decorated ceramics from the Cibola region are reasonably well dated (Carlson 1970; Crown 1981; Duff 1996, 2003b; Hayes-Gilpin and van Hartesveldt 1998; Mills 1999), and the Cox Ranch Pueblo assemblage suggests occupation between AD 1050 and 1130. Earlier and later types, such as Red Mesa Black-on-white or Wingate Polychrome, are relatively rare in the Cox Ranch Pueblo assemblage (Duff and Nauman 2004).

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**Figure 12.** Representative examples of decorated types (and varieties) from Cox Ranch Pueblo.
Grouping adjacent levels from test units together or combining all of the levels from shallow units, a correspondence analysis shows the similarity of assemblages from throughout the site (Figure 13; from Duff and Nauman 2004:Figure 17). Correspondence analysis orders assemblages—the red dots—with respect to types in a pattern that accurately reflects time (see Duff 1996), with early assemblages and types in the bottom right, arcing toward the latest on the upper right. Although there is some spread among the individual assemblages, the majority of these cluster together and are characterized by similar types. Additionally, no one part of the site appears earlier or later than the rest. These data permit two important inferences. First, all portions of the site tested so far appear to have been contemporaneous, at least as best we can tell with ceramics. Second, these data suggest that Cox Ranch Pueblo was founded by a relatively large group at approximately the same time—suggesting at least some degree of communal planning.

![Figure 13. Correspondence analysis of Cox Ranch Pueblo decorated ceramic assemblages.](image-url)
Preliminary analysis of the recovered fauna from 2003 provides some insight into site activities, based on the ongoing thesis work of Jenn Mueller (Duff and Nauman 2004; Duff et al. 2004). Although artiodactyl is relatively rare overall, it is better represented in household middens than at the great house and its associated midden. Conversely, bird remains constitute a small fraction of the overall assemblage, but almost 90 percent of all non-turkey bird remains and all known Falconiforms and other ritually important birds occur in the great house and its associated midden. Falconiforms, other bird species, and their feathers are associated with Puebloan communal ritual and their differential distribution links ritual activity to the great house and the persons residing there or using the building. Additionally, preliminary comparison of breakage patterns and identifiability indicates that bones associated with the great house and its midden, especially lagomorphs, were deposited more quickly and were less intensively processed during cooking. This pattern differs from the household middens, and is consistent with preparation of food for feasts. Bone deposition is also dramatically higher in and near the great house, another potential indication of differential consumption (Duff et al. 2004:Table 2). These data suggest that the great house was the focus of public rituals involving feasting on rabbits that, historically, were taken in cooperative drives.

Expanding our analysis from the site to the larger community, Figure 14 plots contemporaneous sites recorded in the nearly 7 square miles that have been surveyed in the area to date, including about three sections covered by Whalen (1984), with the large red block in the center the site of Cox Ranch Pueblo. We have recorded about a dozen additional residential roomblocks—plotted in red, all but one of which appears to have been contemporaneously occupied. Additionally, about three dozen 2-4 room field houses—the blue boxes—dot the surrounding landscape, a feature common in the region during this period (Danson 1957; Whalen 1984).
A few of surveyed roomblocks had middens that were systematically collected. When these are included with the excavated assemblages in a correspondence analysis (Figure 15), with survey assemblages shown in blue, they generally fall within the excavated group and the types again fall in an arch that can be interpreted as time. One survey site has a decorated assemblage consisting entirely of Kiatuthlanna and Red Mesa and may have been the founding settlement in the area. These data suggest that the settlements in the vicinity of Cox Ranch Pueblo were largely contemporaneous, making for a relatively large community with over thirty residences totaling about 450-500 rooms, with a network of smaller field houses scattered between them.
CONCLUSION

Cox Ranch Pueblo and its sustaining community were founded sometime in the mid-1000s and were occupied into the 1100s (Duff 2003a; Duff and Nauman 2004), corresponding with a relatively favorable period for rainfall farming. As you can see from photos of the area (e.g., Figure 2, a north facing overview with the great house near the center), this area is not an oasis, and the worsening of climate beginning about 1130 probably contributed to the community's decline and a regional settlement shift to higher elevations near Mariana Mesa (Duff and Lekson 2005; McGimsey 1980). A sizable social entity that I believe had roots below the Mogollon Rim founded Cox Ranch Pueblo and two or three other communities in the Salt Lake area in the mid-1000s. These communities also appear to have incorporated groups from northern areas, but how these populations were integrated remains a key topic for future project research. Thus, the Cox Ranch Pueblo community includes migrant groups, possibly with different social histories, co-residing around a great house constructed using Chacoan...
architectural canons. Feasting and ritual events appear to have been concentrated at the great house. The great house indicates an awareness of things Chacoan, though we have no indications of any material connections to Chaco Canyon. In fact, my current thinking is quite the opposite. Based on the data we have at present, I would submit that enterprising individuals or groups from below the rim sought to exploit aspects of what appeared to be or was powerful in Chaco, and that they did so—literally—by building their community around a structure that references Chaco. Although that much seems clear, I think they filtered this system through a lens of difference. For example, the community lacks a traditional underground circular great kiva, but it does have an open, unroofed, great-kiva like structure that is attached to another different roomblock at the site. The key difference unroofed great kivas have is that what occurs in them is visible to those outside of them. Unroofed great kivas become common in this region in the 1200s, and this may be a form that had its roots in the interpretation of Chacoan ideas from a distance. Ideas, patterns, and perhaps some people from areas north of the rim appear to have been adopted and translated into local terms during the AD 1000 and 1100s, a process that resulted in the blending of histories we are more familiar with for the later 1200s. I would suggest that the incorporation of ideas from afar began a few centuries earlier than that, and that the settlements in the Quemado and Reserve areas, and consideration of things Chacoan will continue to be critical to understanding this process.

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