



A Century of Archeological Research at Mesa Verde National Park

Ute Mountain Ute Conference Center
Towaoc, Colorado
May 3, 2006 to May 6, 2006



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Library of Congress Number: 2008942678

Comments on the Papers in Session I: Archaeological Foundations

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I'll start by thanking the symposium organizers for including me in this celebration of Mesa Verde National Park's centennial and the century or more of research in the park and surrounding areas. As the initial paper in this session by Richard Sellars amply details, the history of the congressional act establishing the park is intertwined with that of the 1906 Antiquities Act. Further, Sellars shows how the early history of Mesa Verde National Park contributed to the codification of the park service's mission of public education and enjoyment, as expressed in the 1916 National Park Service Act and subsequently.

The Antiquities Act and the act creating Mesa Verde National Park were foundational documents, both for American archaeology and for the course of federal management of cultural resources on public lands. In the early 1900s, the American public's interest in Southwestern archaeology had been whetted by the Wetherills' discoveries at Mesa Verde and by the extensive exhibits of items from the greater Mesa Verde cultural area at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. One result was a growing public appetite for collecting southwestern archaeological pottery and other objects, which in turn gave rise to widespread unsystematic digging for artifacts to feed the burgeoning commercial market.

In this context, one could imagine an Antiquities Act that would have allowed claims to be filed on particular sites for the purpose of exploiting their commercial potential, much as the 1872 mining law had established procedures for claiming mineral deposits. Or, we could have had a law that protected a list of sites determined at the time to be "significant" and worthy of preservation, with those not so designated left open to commercial exploitation.

Instead, however, the 1906 Antiquities Act and its regulations applied to all archaeological sites on federal lands and provided for the issuance of excavation per-

mits only to recognized educational and scientific institutions, provided their work would result in an increase in knowledge. Archaeological research and education were thus defined as representing the public good and as the only justifications for granting federal permission to excavate sites on the federal public lands.

When Mesa Verde National Park was established in the same year, it was defined expansively to include all the archaeological sites within a large land area, not just the spectacular cliff dwellings that had already been recognized. The 1906 act creating the park was even more specific than the Antiquities Act in limiting permits for "examinations, excavations, and gatherings" to properly qualified persons. It provided that these activities were to be undertaken for the benefit of a reputable scientific and educational institution "with a view to increasing the knowledge of such objects and aiding the general advancement of archaeological science."

As Sellars points out, the Antiquities Act and the establishment of Mesa Verde National Park set powerful precedents for the development of public policy about how archaeological sites were to be treated. These precedents affected the development of subsequent laws and policies dealing with the protection of archaeological sites and helped promote the view that archaeological research and public interpretation serve a broad public interest.

David Breternitz's paper gives us a brief review of the history of archaeological research in and around the park, then concentrates on one important but relatively little-known aspect of that history – the work of teams from the University of Colorado between 1965 and 1977, directed by Breternitz himself, Robert Lister, and/or CU graduate students and research associates. Lister had earlier established a CU research program in the park and had published several well-circulated monographs on excavations done in the 1950s.

For the period 1965-77, Breternitz chronicles a

remarkable number and variety of surveys, testing programs, and excavations conducted by CU in the park or in surrounding parts of the greater Mesa Verde region. According to the data Breternitz presents in his article, during the thirteen years the memorandum of agreement between CU and Mesa Verde Nation Park was active, 351 students were trained; tests and excavations were carried out at dozens of sites; a number of sites were stabilized; and nearly 1,900 sites were recorded in the park and more than 3,000 more in other parts of the region.

Some of this work was undertaken specifically to expose or stabilize sites so they could be opened to public visitation at Mesa Verde Nation Park, in the newly designated Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Park, or on BLM lands – as with the stabilization field school at Lowry Ruin. Some of it was undertaken to address specific research questions. But most of the testing and survey, and some of the excavation projects, can be seen as initiating the era of cultural resource management in southwestern Colorado. Federal agencies needed to know what cultural resources they were responsible for managing, and what values these resources might have for research, public education, or cultural heritage. They also needed specific information about the locations of cultural resources so these could be considered in planning development projects, and in some cases, they needed excavations to be done to recover information that would otherwise have been lost to those developments. The University of Colorado teams responded to those agency needs, often with incredibly – by today's standards – low levels of funding.

In addition to ushering in the era of cultural resource management, the 1965-77 CU work multiplied the number of recorded sites in Southwest Colorado many times over, and in total, these CU survey, testing, and excavation projects greatly increased the regional knowledge base. Subsequent research and public interpretation, both within and outside the park, continues to benefit from the energetic efforts of Breternitz and his CU colleagues and students between 1965 and 1977.

Arthur Rohn chronicles the fieldwork and contributions of the Chapin Mesa Survey and the Wetherill Mesa Project. The Chapin Mesa Survey was conducted by park personnel starting in the 1950s, as were some of the mesa-top excavations still on display. In the early 1960s, Rohn used these survey data plus the results of excavations done over the years to produce a disserta-

tion at Harvard that represented one of the first systematic settlement pattern studies in southwestern archaeology. A revised version of the dissertation was published in 1977 and has continued to be a basic reference both for researchers and for public interpretation of the archaeology of the park and the greater Mesa Verde region.

Rohn's analysis of the Chapin Mesa data was based on classifying sites according to their probable function – e.g. habitation, ceremonial, water control – and then using chronology and spatial propinquity to recognize prehistoric settlement clusters that represented communities that occupied Chapin Mesa during particular periods. He was also able to use site size and room counts to make estimates of the number of people in each community. An analysis of potential farm lands, water sources, and location of water management devices added an ecological perspective that helped account for the location and in some cases re-location of communities through time. In the early 1960s, Rohn also published an account of the numerous check dams and other water collection and control devices found on Chapin Mesa, bringing the archaeological community a new awareness of the extent to which water was being actively managed by the prehistoric inhabitants. These functional, demographic, and social interpretations added powerful new dimensions to the prevailing chronological and taxonomic emphases that characterized archaeological practice at the time.

The Wetherill Mesa Project was in the field from the late 1950s through the early 1960s and also broke new methodological and interpretive ground in the study of ancient southwestern societies. Its primary purpose was to excavate and stabilize sites on Wetherill Mesa to accommodate the great increase in park visitation that was anticipated in the "Mission 66" plan. But it was also conceived as a multi-disciplinary research project that would not only provide the information needed for interpreting the sites to be developed on Wetherill Mesa, but that would result in a general increase in knowledge of southwestern archaeology.

In my opinion, the Wetherill Mesa Project had a high rate of success in meeting these goals. The incorporation of biological and other natural history studies helped the archaeologists incorporate cultural ecological relationships into their interpretations. Hayes' monograph on the intensive survey of the mesa, published in 1964, was a landmark for demographic and settlement pattern studies in the Southwest. Published in a 1965

article and in the 1971 site report, Rohn's analysis of the social use of space at Mug House was also a pioneering effort. He used multiple lines of evidence to infer the presence of several levels of socio-economic grouping, from households, through multiple-household courtyard groups, to a dual division of the site's population – the latter evidenced by a wall that kept people from moving directly from one part of Mug House to the other. Rohn defined his social units in behavioral terms instead of identifying them as manifestations of lineages, moieties, or other units based on concepts held in the minds of prehistoric people. He thus avoided some of the critiques that followed other attempts by southwestern archaeologists in the 1960s to “do social anthropology” with archaeological data.

The settlement pattern, cultural ecological, demographic, and social analyses resulting from the Chapin Mesa Survey and the Wetherill Mesa Project were very much in keeping with the shifts in archaeological method, theory, and problem orientations that characterized the “new archaeology” of the 1960s and early 1970s. In my opinion, however, the many contributions of these two projects did not receive the attention they deserved from the broader archaeological and anthropological community at the time. This was due, perhaps, to the fact that many of the studies were published as parts of technical monographs rather than as articles in major journals, and because publication of some studies was rather delayed. Furthermore, the archaeologists working in the park did not publicly identify themselves as proponents of a revolutionary “new archaeology,” as did some other groups of researchers.

However they were viewed at the time, the site reports, books, articles, and reports that resulted from the Chapin Mesa Survey and the Wetherill Mesa Project provide useful descriptions and interpretations of the archaeological record that are of continuing value to southwestern researchers and to those involved in the public interpretation of southwestern archaeology. The sites opened for public display on Wetherill Mesa continue to receive thousands of visitors a year, even though the initial, expansive Mission 66 plans for Wetherill were scaled back.

The paper by Mark Varien and others details recent National Science Foundation (NSF) funded research in an 1,800-square-kilometer area extending from just west of the Mesa Verde National Park boundary over to approximately the Utah border. More generally, this

project rests on a foundation of more than twenty years of excavations and surveys conducted in this Southwest Colorado study area by the Crow Canyon Archaeological Center. The remarkably detailed reconstructions of regional population and settlement history that Varien and his colleagues have given us here is a testament to the benefits of a robust, long-term program of problem-driven research focused on a single region.

The greater Mesa Verde culture area is an ideal setting for such research because of the extremely detailed chronologies that can be constructed by combining evidence from tree-ring dates with that from seriations of pottery and architectural styles. In addition, the tree-ring, pollen, and other environmental records available from this area permit very fine-grained reconstructions of environmental variability through both time and space. Finally, the great amount of cultural resource management-related survey and excavation that has been done in the study area since the late 1960s has provided a knowledge base upon which the Crow Canyon Center's problem-oriented research can build.

It is also worth noting that the research reported by Varien et al. has been accomplished using conservation-oriented methods – that is, methods that have a minimal impact on the total extant archaeological record. The great majority of the data in the paper by Varien et al. come from surface recording of sites and in-field analysis of surface collections of time-sensitive artifacts. The majority of these surface records were generated by CRM surveys, but the study reported here also involved recent visits by the NSF-sponsored team to many of the larger village sites to map them and do in-field analysis of time-sensitive artifacts and architectural variables.

Certain critical types of data can only be obtained by excavation, however, and this is not inconsistent with a conservation archaeology approach. Over the years, Varien and the Crow Canyon Center researchers have made sophisticated use of sampling theory to obtain an abundance of data from small test pits that ordinarily affect well under one percent of the area of selected sites. These sampled sites, in turn, represent only a small fraction of the total site population. Good use has also been made of data from sites previously excavated or tested as part of CRM projects.

At the meeting of the Society for American Archaeology this year, a colleague who works on the

origins of agriculture and settled life in the Near East remarked to me that the Mesa Verde region was one of the best areas and perhaps *the* best area in the world for pursuing anthropological questions of socio-cultural change in early horticultural societies. He thought this was because of the opportunities that this region offers for building extremely fine-grained cultural and environmental chronologies and also because both the site populations and landscapes remain relatively intact due to lack of really extensive modern development and land alteration. In addition, Puebloan ethnography provides abundant analogs for interpreting Puebloan archaeology, and the Pueblo peoples of today can provide many insights into archaeology by sharing some of their oral history and providing examples of how their ancestors might have shaped and reacted to the events chronicled in prehistory. Thus the Mesa Verde region, including Mesa Verde National Park, is truly a world class resource for investigating how human societies interacted with their environments and how their communities were organized in the past. It also has been, and continues to be, a testing ground for the development of ever more refined research methods, as the paper by Varien et al. demonstrates.

Finally, Paul Reed discusses the archaeology of the Middle San Juan region from the perspectives he and his co-workers have gained while synthesizing the field research done at Salmon Ruins in the 1970s. Their research, done under the sponsorship of the Center for Desert Archaeology, has also resulted in a number of new analyses of materials from the Salmon site as well as from other sites in the Middle San Juan region. In his paper for this symposium, Reed reports on new analyses of pottery from Earl Morris' excavations at Aztec done more than seventy-five years ago and from Cynthia Irwin-Williams' work at Salmon Ruin in the 1970s, as well as from more recent excavations at the Tommy Site.

Reed makes a good case that the Middle San Juan – Including the Totah area of the lower Animas and La Plata valleys – was a populous area extending to both sides of the San Juan River and displaying cultural patterns that differed in some ways from those of the Chacoan (Cibolan) area to the south and the classic Mesa Verde area to the north and northwest. The traditional view that the San Juan River served as a boundary between Cibolan and Mesa Verdean cultural provinces thus is not a good fit with the data from the Middle San Juan.

Reed's assessment points up the fact that terms such as "Mesa Verdean" just refer to large-scale, not very precisely defined taxonomic categories, based largely on selected characteristics of ceramics. To the extent that these categories are useful, it is in referring to large-scale patterns of cultural variation across very large areas. We need to be careful not to essentialize these categories and the terms that label them. There is little or no evidence that terms such as "Mesa Verde" delineate large groups that shared some kind of overarching social or political organization or that all the people so labeled even spoke the same language. We are much closer to evidential – and perhaps social – reality when we describe cultural variation within and between local population clusters such as the one Reed characterizes as Middle San Juan.

The work of Reed and colleagues with pottery from the Middle San Juan reveals some fascinating patterns through time. Substantial amounts of non-local pottery occur in the period of maximal Chacoan influence in the late A.D. 1000s and early 1100s, including large amounts from the Cibolan area, indicating close ties were being maintained with Chaco Canyon or environs. This was the time when massive Chacoan-style great houses were built at Salmon and Aztec West, and the Chacoan socio-economic system was still functioning and evidently facilitating the movement of goods over wide areas of the northern Southwest.

In the late 1100s through 1200s, however, locally made ceramics thoroughly dominated the assemblages from the Middle San Juan. Imports from the Chaco Canyon area become rare, and those from Mesa Verdean sites to the north and northwest continued to make up a relatively small fraction of the total assemblages. These patterns contradict some statements in the Southwestern literature proposing 1) that Chaco Canyon continued to be the center of a macro-regional socio-economic system into the A.D. 1200s; or 2) that an extensive system of this sort continued to function long after the early 1100s, but with Aztec rather than Chaco Canyon as its center.

I just received Paul Reed's three-volume report summarizing thirty-five years of research at Salmon Ruins, and am look forward to studying it. Understanding the cultural dynamics of the Middle San Juan is important for understanding the inter-regional connections – or lack thereof – of both the Chacoan settlements to the south and those of the classic Mesa Verde region to the north and northwest. As Reed demonstrates, the

Middle San Juan represents a population cluster with its own long – and in some ways distinctive – culture history. Reed’s paper in this symposium gives us a taste of what has been, and can be, learned through systematic analysis of both old and recently excavated artifact collections from the Middle San Juan area.

In conclusion, this is a group of interesting papers that document the great importance of the archaeological resources of Mesa Verde National Park and the greater Mesa Verde cultural area. Research focused on these resources has been and can continue to be of major significance to Southwestern and American archaeology. Furthermore, continuing high quality research both within the park and in the surrounding region is essential to serve the growing public demand for more and better interpretation of the region’s archaeological history. Research drives interpretation and keeps it fresh, but public interpretation is what makes archaeology visible and relevant to the larger society that supports it. ♦

{ ABSTRACT }

**MESA VERDE, THE ANTIQUITIES ACT,
AND THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE ACT**

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The Antiquities Act and the Mesa Verde National Park Act of June 1906 were among the first congressional acts for archeological site protection. These two acts marked the true beginning of an enduring commitment to archeological site preservation: one act establishing federal responsibility for archeology on public lands and opening the way for the creation of many future “national monuments” and the other preserving an extensive cultural resource area and designating it as a national park.

Yet neither act contained specific reference to a third component: tourism and on-site public enjoyment. Rather, both acts addressed research permitting and authorized penalties for vandalism to park resources. Nevertheless, early archeological work and related activities gradually moved Mesa Verde toward the more traditional national park concept that connects preservation with tourism. Subsequently, Mesa Verde’s 1910 legislation foreshadowed the public-enjoyment concerns that Congress would articulate in the 1916 National Park Service Act, which applied not only to national parks, but also to many national monuments that followed. ♦