

Summary of Zoom Presentation February 10, 2021 7:00 pm
San Tan Chapter of the Arizona Archaeological Society

Presentation by Dr Michelle I. Turner, Crow Canyon Archaeological Center
The Archaeology of the Aztec North Great House

Text summary below is based on notes taken by Dennis DuBose, who is solely responsible for all errors and inaccuracies in it. Dr Turner's presentation included some fine photographs of Chaco masonry and of Aztec West Chacoan style masonry. Since I do not have access to her photographs, I have substituted some of my own amateur photographs to illustrate.

Michelle Turner is a postdoctoral scholar at Crow Canyon Archaeological Center, where she works on the Northern Chacoan Outliers Project. She received her PhD in 2019 from the Department of Anthropology at Binghamton University.

Aztec Ruins National Monument of the U.S. National Park Service is in Aztec, New Mexico, on the Animas River, near Farmington, New Mexico. There are three major ruin sites in the Monument. The Aztec West site has been excavated, stabilized, and partly restored. It is open to the public. The other two major sites are unexcavated and not open to the public.

Note that the name "Aztec Ruins" was given to the site by early travelers. There is no association of the site with the Aztecs of Mexico. Throughout this presentation "Aztec" is just a name used to identify this group of ruins in Northwestern New Mexico.

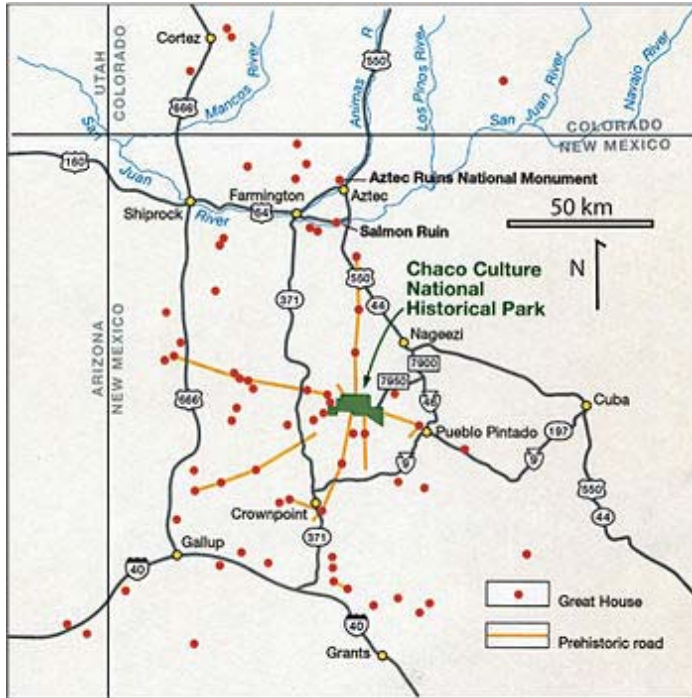
In 2016, a team from Binghamton University conducted archaeological testing at the previously unexcavated Aztec North Great House at Aztec Ruins National Monument. Dr Turner was a participant in the excavation and analysis. This presentation grew out of her dissertation research on the Aztec North Great House.

Chaco Great Houses are impressive examples of monumental architecture with certain specific characteristics. These include wall footings, veneer masonry over a rougher masonry core, and large timber beams. They also typically are associated with a small number of extraordinary burials.

The following map shows the location of Aztec relative to Chaco and other landmarks (It comes from Wikipedia

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaco_Culture_National_Historical_Park,

not from Dr Turner's presentation).



Aztec West is clearly a Chacoan Great House. It is large with about 400 rooms and three stories high originally. It has typical Chacoan masonry with core-veneer walls supported on low-visibility footer trenches. And it has Chacoan artifacts.



Part of Aztec West Ruin

Aztec West was excavated in 1916-1928 by the legendary Earl Morris, with significant contributions from his wife Ann Axteil Morris. But there are two other apparent Great Houses near Aztec West, namely Aztec East and Aztec North. Aztec East is at about

the same elevation as Aztec West. Aztec North is on a higher natural terrace than Aztec West, and it is not visible from there despite being only about 400 meters away. Aztec West was an imposing ruin even before excavation, but Aztec North is simply a large area mound today.

The primary research questions that the 2016 excavators wanted to try and answer were these ...

What was the Site chronology? – When was Aztec North initiated, finished, inhabited, and abandoned?

What construction methods were used? What was the Chacoan influence, if any?

What were relations with Chaco Canyon and other regions?

What was daily life and subsistence like?

The physical research design consisted of test pits dug in two trash mounds, a short trench dug to traverse an exterior wall, and another short trench in a room block.

Artifacts found included charred wood, a corn cob, seeds, animal bones, lithics, and other items.

First, Dr Turner described the evidence to tie down the time line of Aztec North ...

Radiocarbon dating indicated occupation sometime between 1025 AD and 1155 AD. For European context, this includes the date of the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 AD.

Ceramics were identified from Cibola Trade Wares of types that date in the range 1000 AD to 1150 AD, but no San Juan Red Wares were found, indicating a date after 1070 AD. The Mean Ceramic Date was 1101 +/- 38 AD. From this she estimated the occupation was 1070 AD to 1139 AD.

Dr Turner displayed graphics which collated these dates with known dates of the other two Aztec Ruins Sites and also Chaco Canyon, something like this ...

1025 Aztec North Earliest Radiocarbon date
1070 Aztec North Earliest Ceramic Date
1110 Aztec West Start Construction
1120 Aztec West End Construction
1139 Aztec North Latest Ceramic Date
1140 Chaco Last Cutting (Tree Ring)
1155 Aztec North Latest Radiocarbon Date
1275 Aztec Occupation Ends

The excavated wall trench at Aztec North shows a coursed masonry veneer on both sides, but the wall core is adobe. This is not adobe bricks but just amorphous adobe between the inner and outer coursed masonry veneer. The veneer is typical of Chaco masonry, but Chaco masonry has a heavy stone block core, not adobe.

Under a typical Chaco wall is a footer trench filled with large stones to support the thick stone wall. This footer is not visible unless the wall is torn apart. The excavated wall section at Aztec North has a footer trench with large stones bonded in adobe.

In summary, the Aztec North site has the Chacoan architectural features of a footer trench, thick core and veneer walls, and a prominent place in the cultural landscape. But the adobe core (instead of stone) is not Chacoan. It is as though the people who built Aztec North had not built a Great House before. They apparently had some Chacoan knowledge about the footer trenches and the core and veneer structure, but they filled it out with local traditional construction methods using adobe. Consequently, Aztec North must predate Aztec West, which was built with full Chacoan knowledge.



Chaco Core and Veneer Construction, Tsin Kletzin Left and Hungo Pavi Right
At Aztec North the Core Stones are Replaced by an Adobe Mass

So, Dr Turner updated her timeline as follows ...

- 1070 Aztec North Construction Begins
- 1110 Aztec North Construction Ends, Occupation Begins,
Aztec West Begins Construction
- 1120 Aztec West End Construction, Aztec East Begins Construction
- 1139 Aztec North Occupation Ends
- 1140 Chaco Last Cutting (Tree Ring)
- 1275 Aztec Occupation Ends

Dr Turner said that Archaeologists equate Chaco masonry with complexity, knowledge, ritual, and hierarchy. They see Chacoan hierarchy as elites mobilizing labor to build great structures, with men as stonemasons. They see adobe as a local, expedient egalitarian, and boring construction method. This is despite a long history of adobe construction before, during, and after Chaco.

She sees the construction of Aztec North as an experiment of a community in transition. They brought many people together, both men and women, to build on this massive scale. She speculates that it was an egalitarian labor project in adobe of a community coming together. But at the same time they were turning towards a Chacoan hierarchical labor regime using masonry.

Next Dr Turner turned to the question of the Aztec Community relations with Chaco Canyon and other regions.

The location of ceramic origins can often be identified by the temper that is used in the clay. An analysis of the temper in the Aztec North potsherds collected showed they were over 60% Animas (local). About 15% was Chuska and about another 15% was Cibola (Chaco). This is a very typical Chaco outlier ceramic assemblage.



Locations of Chuska Mountains and of Jemez Mountains

The Chuska Mountains are southwest of Aztec and about 50 miles East of Chaco, which is about 50 miles south of Aztec. These mountains were a source of the large timber beams and posts used at Chaco. Aztec clearly had connections with Chaco.

The obsidian piece count from the four study units at Aztec North is remarkable compared to counts from Mesa Verde sites, Chaco sites, and Salmon Ruin. Most Chaco and Mesa Verde pieces are finished tools. The Aztec North pieces were virtually all debitage with no finished tools. It was as though the Aztec North knappers were not trying to conserve their obsidian, like it was not a precious material. It was something of ready access. But it was not local. The source was the Jemez Mountains to the southeast. Aztec North apparently had some relationship to the Jemez area that Chaco and other sites did not have.

Finally, Dr Turner turned to the evidence of the daily life and subsistence of the prehistoric people at Aztec North.

A small assemblage of animal bones was found. About 30% were rabbit and about another 30% were cloven hooved mammals like deer and elk. There were three turkey bones. No bones of carnivores or birds of prey were found. The Aztec North assemblage is similar to other regional Chacoan sites of a similar age, except some fish vertebrae were found. The Aztec sites are adjacent to the Animas River.

A wide variety of botanical items were found, including maize, pinon, prickly pear, hedgehog cactus, banana yucca, juniper, bulrushes, reeds, purslane, spurge, ground cherry, and others. Aquatic plants like bulrushes and reeds are not a part of other Chacoan site plant assemblages. Of special interest was amaranth seeds. These uncharred, domestic amaranth seeds were the first ever found at a Chacoan Great House.

The final takeaway points ...

Aztec North was constructed between 1070 AD and 1110 AD.

The builders had not built a Great House before but had some Chacoan construction knowledge.

The construction occurred during a transition from a communal labor pattern to a hierarchical Chacoan pattern.

Artifacts were typical Chacoan, indicating that the transition occurred quickly.

Obsidian indicates different trade relations than at Chaco.

There was a connection with the wet river landscape involving fish, plants, and adobe, something not found at other Chacoan sites.