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Mimbres Lives and Landscapes

Margaret C. Nelson and Michelle Hegmon

Mimbres painted pottery, with its intricate geometric designs and naturalistic figures of humans and animals in black and white, has captivated millions of viewers over the span of more than a century. Some writers have speculated about, and others have researched, the lives and landscapes of the people who made these beautiful vessels. They lived in what is now southwestern New Mexico, northern Mexico, and eastern Arizona for more than a millennium. Archaeologists have documented the development of their cultural traditions, use of the land, and social arrangements, leading up to and following the Classic Mimbres period (1000–1130 CE), when the most outstanding of the black-on-white pottery was made. The chapters in this book explore the Mimbres region and its people from well before the Classic period until well into historic times, highlighting the Classic Mimbres way of life.

Figure 1.2. A bird, a fish, and a turtle, images common in representational paintings on Mimbres Black-on-white bowls from as early as the ninth century and continuing into the twelfth.

Who Were the Mimbres?

"Mimbres" means "willow" in Spanish. A lazy river running through a broad valley and trickling out into the expansive Deming Plains in the Chihuahuan Desert of southwestern New Mexico earned this name centuries ago because of its rich streamside

Figure 1.3. Most rabbits depicted on Mimbres bowls have black-tipped ears like this jackrabbit's, though not all the bowl depictions are jacks.

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vegetation (plate 1). That river fed the fields of prehistoric farmers and offered habitat for a spectrum of mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. Some, such as deer, rabbits, hawks, and swallows, are commonly seen today. Painters depicted many such animals in elaborate designs on the white-coated surfaces of their pottery bowls.

As archaeologists began to explore the remnants of villages left by these farmers in the Mimbres Valley, they transferred the place name to the

Figure 1.4. Representations of people in designs painted on Mimbres bowls.

Mimbres: What's in a Name?

"That's inconvenient." "Isn't that just a bit too academic?" These are some of the reactions we've heard when we ask that the prehistoric residents of the Mimbres region not be referred to as "the Mimbres people" or "the Mimbreños."

"Mimbres" was the name adopted in the nineteenth century by residents of a small town that formed along the banks of this cottonwood- and willow-lined river. Archaeologists then applied the term to a style of pottery found in the Mimbres River valley and eventually to the people who made the pottery. The people did not call themselves Mimbres, but why make such a big deal about avoiding this well-established label? As we see it, there are at least two interrelated reasons not to use the term "Mimbres people."

As archaeologists, we pose research questions about identity—asking, for example, whether people who made pottery in the same style also behaved in similar ways. The label "Mimbres people," which links the people's identity to their pottery style and their geography, presumes that we already know the answer, so it diverts our attention away from interesting questions such as how identity might have changed over time. For example, during the Classic Mimbres period, the people who lived in the Mimbres region might have considered themselves to be a unified group, but at other times they might have been diverse "peoples" who happened to share a general style of pottery decoration and a geographic place.

When people ask, "What's the most interesting thing you've ever found?" we often talk not about an object but about an understanding. We have learned that although many changes took place at the end of the Classic Mimbres period, much continued just as it had been before. By labeling the pottery "Mimbres" and then extending that label to the people, archaeologists and museum professionals communicate the view that the end of the pottery marked the end of the people. Pick up nearly any popular article or visit nearly any museum exhibit on Mimbres culture and you will be confronted with the "mystery" of the disappearance of the Mimbres people.

Although the pottery did come to an end in the middle of the twelfth century, the people did not—they neither died out nor disappeared. They changed their painting styles, shifted their residences, and created new social networks, but many of them stayed in the area. This understanding is almost impossible to achieve if we equate people with pottery. The real mystery is how, during the twelfth century, in the face of considerable climate change and a population larger than any that had lived in the area before the twelfth century or has since, people managed to reorganize themselves and remain in their homeland. Chapter 12 suggests some answers.

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archaeological traces of its one-time residents. Scholars, art historians, and museum experts began referring to the exceptional black-on-white pottery the archaeologists uncovered, which has become internationally renowned for its beauty and intricacy, as "Mimbres." It was a short leap to name the people after the pottery, as archaeologists often do: "the Mimbres people." But this convenient transposition of label from place to pottery to people has long misled scholars and the public about the history and identity of the people. Although it is important to identify place and style, we do not know what these prehistoric people called themselves or how they identified with their homeland. By referring to them as the Mimbres people and associating their identity with the Mimbres Valley and its black-on-white pottery, our thinking about prehistory and identity has become clouded.

Words matter. Labels for people matter very much. We know this in our contemporary world, and it applies to the past as well. Throughout this book, we are careful to ask who these people were, what they did, and how they changed over time, without assuming that they had an identity as "Mimbres people." And by asking who they were, we are drawn to the question of who their descendants were. That is, who were the makers of "Mimbres" pottery in relation to contemporary Native peoples?

We have a few lines of evidence, but the answer is complex and remains elusive. People now living in the Western Pueblo villages of New Mexico and Arizona (map 1)—the Zunis and Hopis—claim cultural affiliation with the people of the Mimbres region, and stories about their origins tell of migrations from the south. Studying pottery from Classic and Postclassic Mimbres villages, where people lived from the eleventh to the fifteenth century, we find a connection to the Western Pueblo people, expressed in pottery designs and manufacturing techniques.

Christy Turner, a physical anthropologist, however, found a different direction of connection from the Mimbres region to contemporary people. He examined teeth from village dwellers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries in the southern Mimbres region and compared them with teeth from modern populations in surrounding areas. He observed strong similarities to groups in northern Mexico. Archaeologically, we have found that in the southern part of the Mimbres region, people adopted many southern styles of pottery and house forms, indicating southern affiliation.

The question remains—who were the people of the Mimbres region? We believe that those who lived in the southern part were ancestors to many groups in northern Mexico, whereas those in the northern part were ancestors to some of the modern Zunis and Hopis. The wide-ranging movements of people all around the Southwest, however, may have created ancestral connections throughout the region and northern Mexico. Much more work needs to be done before we can answer questions of identity.

Mimbres Archaeology

On a map, we can draw a line around the Mimbres region, encompassing the southwestern corner of what is now New Mexico and extending into Arizona and Chihuahua (map 2). But if we were to draw the line around what was distinctively "Mimbres," then the size and shape of the area would be different for every time period. Before the tenth century CE, what we call Mimbres was simply part of the general Mogollon culture area, which includes much of central Arizona, southern New Mexico, and northern Chihuahua, as well as parts of Texas and Sonora. From the tenth century into the twelfth—the late Three Circle phase and the Classic Mimbres period—Mimbres was a single, unique region, archaeologically distinct from other traditions of the Mogollon area. By the middle of the twelfth century, after the Classic period, different segments of the Mimbres region had become parts of what archaeologists recognize as different regional traditions.

People have lived in southwestern New Mexico for millennia. Archaeologists find evidence of people they call Paleoindians dating as early as 9500 BCE and of the mobile, Archaic-period hunter-gatherers who succeeded them. In this book, we focus on the pottery-making farmers of the common era, so our story begins with the Early Pithouse period, spanning the centuries from about 200 to 550 CE (see chronology on page x). The label "Early Pithouse" applies to most of the Mogollon area,

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and for that time period we see few differences between Mimbres and Mogollon in general. People lived in dispersed pithouses—structures dug partially into the earth and often situated on hilltops—and they made undecorated brown pottery bowls and jars. They grew crops but also depended heavily on wild plants and animals for food, and they probably moved their residences frequently.

In the subsequent Late Pithouse period, people increasingly lived near more arable land in or just above stream floodplains, indicating that they were relying more and more on farming (see chapters 3 and 4). In their larger villages, they constructed "great kivas," ceremonial gathering places made in the same form as their pithouse homes but somewhat more elaborated and considerably larger (plate 9). In most settlements, people also made and used smaller kivas. And they began to decorate their pottery. They first coated a vessel with a red slip, or thin wash of watery clay (in a style archaeologists call San Francisco Red), and a bit later used red paint to make designs on the brown paste (Mogollon Red-on-brown). Beginning around 750 CE, people in the Mimbres region started covering the brown paste of their pottery vessels with a white slip and then applying red and eventually black designs to it. Although archaeologists recognize the Late Pithouse period all across the Mogollon area, by the later part of the period—the Three Circle Phase, 750–1000 CE—some of the distinctive characteristics of the Mimbres region were beginning to emerge (plate 2).

By the last century of the Late Pithouse period, many people in the Mimbres region were living in well-established pithouse villages and making increasingly elaborate pottery. In the mid-900s they transformed their religious organization, purposefully burning and ritually disassembling many of their great kivas (see chapters 4 and 6). By 1000 they had moved into larger, aboveground rooms known as pueblos (see chapter 3). This was the beginning of the Classic Mimbres period, which lasted until about 1130. The line archaeologists draw around the Mimbres region encompasses what we see as Classic Mimbres settlements and pottery. The Classic Mimbres is well defined, and people in that period seem to have allowed relatively little outside influence into their lives (see chapter 8).

Until recently, archaeologists took a narrow view of Mimbres prehistory, a view fixed almost entirely on the Mimbres Valley. As a result, they equated a twelfth-century decline in population in the Mimbres Valley with the end of the Mimbres "culture." Looking beyond the single valley, researchers have lately discovered an intricate variety of ancient lifeways spanning the territory from eastern Arizona to the Jornada del Muerto east of the Rio Grande in New Mexico and stretching south into northern Mexico. Work by Patricia Gilman and her students along the western edge of the Mimbres region, for example, documented a more mobile lifeway of farming, hunting, and gathering than the way of life people followed in the Mimbres Valley. In our own research along the Rio Grande, we have identified shifts between villages and hamlets that sustained a local population well into the fifteenth century. In contrast, the people living in the Mimbres Valley itself experienced a dramatic decline in numbers in the twelfth century, marked by an end to the manufacture of their beautifully painted pottery. Widening the lens on the people of the Mimbres region beyond the Mimbres Valley has enlarged archaeologists' understanding.

Beginning around 1130 CE, definitions of "Mimbres" become much less clear-cut, and archaeological finds are generally called Postclassic Mimbres. The people themselves did not disappear (see chapter 12), but they reorganized themselves in different ways and were no longer united by a single style of pottery and architecture. In the southern Mimbres Valley, where people reorganized around already established large villages, this time is known as the Terminal Classic Mimbres phase and is dated from about 1130 to the late 1100s. In the eastern Mimbres area, where people moved to dispersed hamlets, this time block is known as the Reorganization phase, which lasted from about 1130 to the early 1200s. Subsequently, people in parts of what was previously the Mimbres region developed different pottery styles (plate 3) that linked them to adjacent areas and warrant a series of different phase names: Tularosa in the northwest, and Animas, Black Mountain, and El Paso in the south. Finally, after 1300, at least the western part of the region was encompassed by the Salado

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Figure 1.5. Harriett Cosgrove, one of the earliest women archaeologists in the Southwest, excavating at Swarts Ruin with her husband, C. B. Cosgrove, in the 1920s.

archaeological culture, in a development known as the Cliff phase (about 1300–1450). We know little about the end of the Postclassic period, and even our dating of this final Puebloan occupation is just an educated guess. We can only speculate about why it ended. We do know that by the 1500s, Apache people had moved into the area, which remained part of their homeland until the late 1800s (see chapter 13).

Archaeologists have been exploring the Mimbres region for decades. Wesley Bradfield carried out early excavations at ruins known as Cameron Creek and Three Circle Village, and C. B. Cosgrove and Harriet Cosgrove dug at Swarts Ruin, Galaz Ruin, and Treasure Hill. Paul Nesbitt excavated at Mattocks Ruin, and Emil Haury at Mogollon Village. Museums took an early interest in Mimbres villages, too—especially in their spectacular black-on-white painted pottery. Among the museums and other institutions sponsoring collections or excavations were the Smithsonian Institution (the Osborn collection), the Southwest Museum of Los Angeles (Galaz Ruin), the University of Minnesota (Galaz Ruin), and the Logan Museum at Beloit College (Mattocks Ruin). Excavations during the 1920s and 1930s laid the groundwork for the definition of a Mimbres tradition and influenced Emil Haury's initial delineation of the Mogollon archaeological culture.

More contemporary archaeological work has featured two large research programs. The first, sponsored by an organization called the Mimbres Foundation, began in the early 1970s, around the time Steven LeBlanc established the foundation to study prehistory and preserve archaeological sites in the Mimbres Valley. LeBlanc and his teams located and dug sites dating across the span of the Mimbres chronology, from the Early Pithouse period to the Postclassic phases. They are to thank for the breadth of understanding we currently enjoy about the archaeology and prehistory of the valley. LeBlanc, as director, and the foundation's board continue to work diligently to preserve and protect

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Figure 1.6. Steven LeBlanc (*second from left*) and his students during archaeological fieldwork in the Mimbres Valley in the 1970s.

Mimbres archaeological sites. Many of the contributors to this book began their careers working for the Mimbres Foundation.

The second large project, led by Harry Shafer at NAN Ranch Ruin, was a detailed study of a single Classic Mimbres village. Shafer and his students have produced a depth of knowledge about this village that is unavailable for any others of the Classic period in the valley.

Archaeological research has continued in the Mimbres Valley and has grown in the Rio Grande Valley and its eastern tributaries, the upper Gila River area, and along the peripheries of the region, right into the present. The results of these decades of work inform our chapters and offer an up-to-date glimpse into the lives of the people who lived long ago in southwestern New Mexico.

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Michelle Hegmon, a professor of anthropology at Arizona State University, is best known for her work on pottery and the archaeology of the social realm. In 1993 she and Nelson began the Eastern Mimbres Archaeological Project, which showed that the end of the Classic Mimbres period was a time of reorganization and continuity rather than collapse.

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The Art of Making Mimbres Pottery Replicas

Figure 1.7. Pottery vessels by Paul and Laurel Thornburg, who make accurate reproductions of Mimbres bowls and jars for sale to the public.

Laurel and Paul Thornburg are extraordinary artists who have perfected the art and science of making twenty-first-century replicas of ancient Mimbres pottery. The Thornburgs are soft-spoken but intense about their work. Not only do they make pots that look like Mimbres vessels, but also they actually use the same techniques and materials that prehistoric potters used a thousand years ago. Together they gather materials from the land and prepare the clay. Laurel then usually forms the pots, Paul does most of the painting, and together they fire them. Imagine painting such complicated, fine-lined designs with a thin yucca fiber and then relegating the vessels to the mercies of a wood fire.

The Thornburgs' delicate, detailed work has had a great effect on Mimbres archaeology, stirring public interest in Mimbres culture and giving people who want to own a Mimbres bowl a beautiful, legitimate, and legal alternative to illegally acquired, or "pothunted," artifacts. The purchase of a prehistoric Mimbres bowl increases the market value of the pottery and thus encourages the looting and destruction of Mimbres sites.

The Thornburgs speak about their work: "Mimbres bowls are some of the most literal surviving images of life a thousand years ago in North America. We greatly respect the people of the Mimbres region for the ceramics they created, not only for their technical expertise but also for the immense range of figurative images and sophisticated geometrical designs they created. Their use of positive and negative space in their painting is visually compelling and challenging to execute. Their pottery is truly amazing.

"We have been replicating prehistoric Southwestern ceramics since 1987, using clays and pigments gathered from the wild. Every step in creating the bowls has been carefully researched. The clay choice and preparation, construction, stone grinding of the pigments, and especially the delicate process of painting the complex and fine-line designs all contribute to accuracy in design and process. We use clays, temper, and pigments from the areas where the original bowls were found in New Mexico. Our tools and scrapers for the 'coil and scrape' method of construction, originally used to shape Mimbres pottery, are made from our old pottery sherds. Fine yucca brushes are made for painting, and polishing stones and leather are used in finishing the painting surface.

"Our construction and firing methods are as close as possible to those of the potters who made Mimbres bowls and jars. Our reproductions are fired in an earthen tunnel, which may have been one of the techniques used prehistorically, although pottery firing areas have not been preserved in the Mimbres region. The earthen tunnel conserves fuel and allows considerable control of the fire. But firings are at the whim of the weather. Wind, rain, and humidity affect the outcome, as do the size and type of wood used as fuel. Each firing is started by hand with a wooden fire drill, based on a prehistoric model.

"To assure that our efforts are not mistaken for original Mimbres work, we adhere to strict ethical protocols. We embed each bowl with the date of its manufacture, using the mineral scheelite, which is viewable under a black light and cannot be removed. Institutions scanning incoming materials with black light to identify small cracks and turn-of-the-century repairs will reveal the object's authenticity as a replica. In this way, our replicas can never be used out of context. . . . We hope our efforts will be an ethical substitute for those who seek the visual reward of beautiful, intricate Mimbres designs."