

Aztec, Salmon, and the Puebloan Heartland of the Middle San Juan



A School for Advanced Research Popular Archaeology Book

Since 2004 the School for Advanced Research (formerly the School of American Research) and SAR Press have published the Popular Archaeology Series. These volumes focus on areas of interest to archaeologists and the broader public. They contain up-to-date archaeological data, described in language that is accessible to a wide audience, and a wealth of images. The resulting volumes reflect SAR's commitment to the dissemination of new ideas and to education at all levels. The complete Popular Archaeology Series can be found at www.sarweb.org.

Also available in the School for Advanced Research Popular Archaeology Series:

First Coastal Californians, edited by Lynn H. Gamble

Medieval Mississippians: The Cahokian World, edited by Timothy R. Pauketat and Susan M. Alt

Living the Ancient Southwest, edited by David Grant Noble

Hisat'sinom: Ancient Peoples in a Land without Water, edited by Christian E. Downum

Mimbres Lives and Landscapes, edited by Margaret C. Nelson and Michelle Hegmon

The Great Basin: People and Place in Ancient Times, edited by Catherine S. Fowler and Don D. Fowler

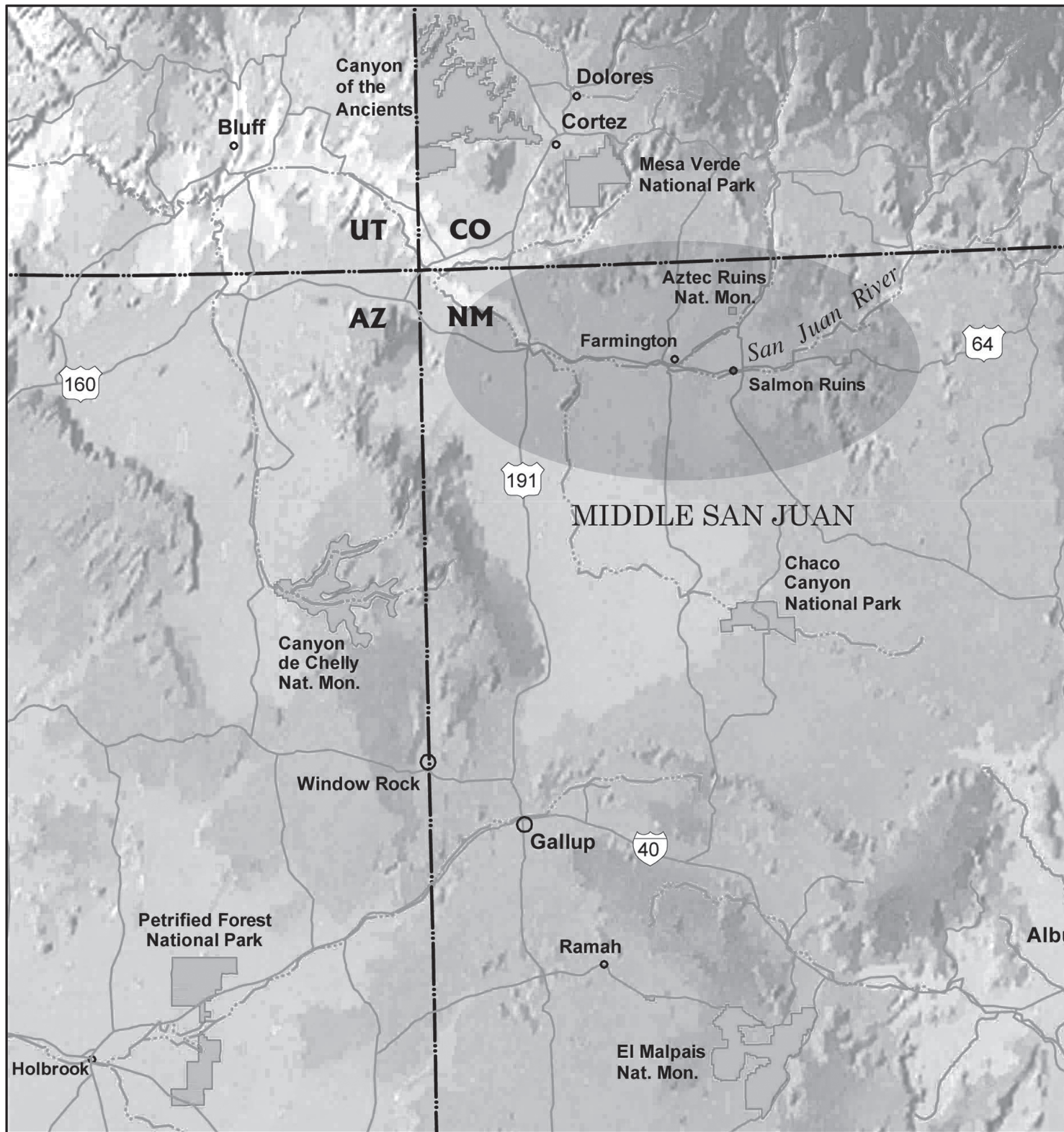
The Hohokam Millennium, edited by Suzanne K. Fish and Paul R. Fish

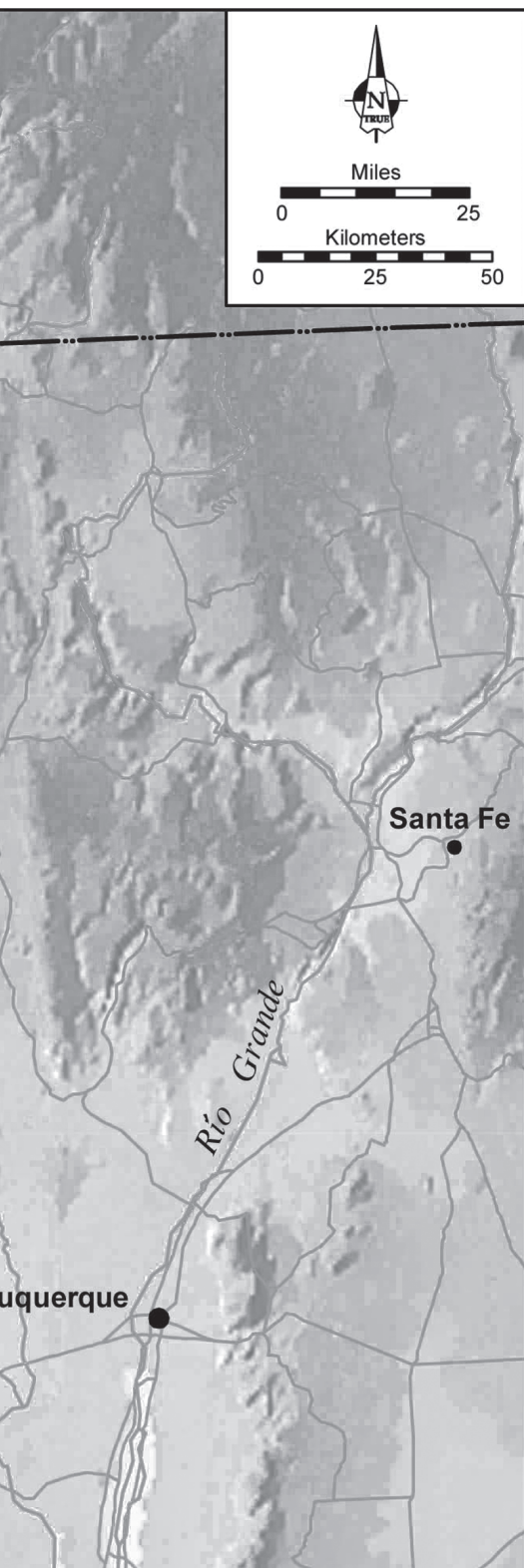
The Mesa Verde World: Explorations in Ancestral Pueblo Archaeology, edited by David Grant Noble

The Peopling of Bandelier: New Insights from the Archaeology of the Pajarito Plateau, edited by Robert P. Powers

In Search of Chaco: New Approaches to an Archaeological Enigma, edited by David Grant Noble

For additional titles in the School for Advanced Research Popular Archaeology Series, please visit unmpress.com.





Aztec, Salmon, and the Puebloan Heartland of the Middle San Juan

Edited by **Paul F. Reed and Gary M. Brown**

Foreword by **David Grant Noble**

SCHOOL FOR ADVANCED RESEARCH PRESS • SANTA FE
UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS • ALBUQUERQUE

© 2018 by the School for Advanced Research
All rights reserved. Published 2018
Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Reed, Paul F., editor. | Brown, Gary M., editor.

Title: Aztec, Salmon, and the Puebloan heartland of
the Middle San Juan / edited by Paul F. Reed, Gary M.
Brown; foreword by David Grant Noble.

Description: First edition. | Albuquerque: University of
New Mexico Press: Published in Association with School
for Advanced Research Press, 2018. | Series: School for
Advanced Research Popular Archaeology Series | A
school for advanced research popular archaeology book.

| Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017060735 (print) | LCCN
2018022108 (e-book) | ISBN 9780826359933 (e-book) |
ISBN 9780826359926 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Salmon Site (N.M.)—Congresses.

| Pueblo Indians—New Mexico—Antiquities—

Congresses. | Pueblo Indians—Material culture—New

Mexico—Congresses. | Excavations (Archaeology)—

New Mexico—Congresses. | Pueblo architecture. |

Pueblo Indians—Migrations. | Aztec Ruins National

Monument (N.M.) | San Juan River Valley (Colo.–

Utah)—Antiquities. | BISAC: SOCIAL SCIENCE /

Archaeology.

Classification: LCC E78.N65 (e-book) | LCC E78.N65

A95 2018 (print) | DDC 979.2/59—dc 3

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017060735>

Cover photograph: courtesy the National Park Service;

photograph by Joel Gamanche

Designed by Lisa C. Tremaine

Composed in Myriad Pro and Arno Pro

Contents

	Foreword	ix
	<i>David Grant Noble</i>	
	Preface	xi
	<i>Paul F. Reed and Gary M. Brown</i>	
	A Chronology of Middle San Juan Regional History	xiii
1	The Ancient Pueblo People of the Middle San Juan Region	1
	<i>Paul F. Reed and Gary M. Brown</i>	
2	La Plata Layers	13
	<i>H. Wolcott Toll</i>	
3	Ancient Lifeways at Salmon Pueblo on the San Juan River	21
	<i>Paul F. Reed</i>	
4	The Great Houses at Aztec, Built to Last	31
	<i>Gary M. Brown</i>	
5	Aztec West's Great Kiva	45
	<i>Florence C. Lister</i>	
6	Chacoan Archaeoastronomy of the Middle San Juan Region	53
	<i>Larry L. Baker</i>	
7	Putting Meat on the Puebloan Table	63
	<i>Kathy Roler Durand and Ethan Ortega</i>	
8	Ancient Puebloan Clothing from the Aztec and Salmon Great Houses	73
	<i>Laurie D. Webster</i>	
9	Ancestral Pueblo Pottery of the Middle San Juan Region	81
	<i>Lori Stephens Reed</i>	
10	The Intertwined Histories of the Chaco, Middle San Juan, and Mesa Verde Regions	89
	<i>Mark D. Varien</i>	
11	An Acoma Perspective on the Middle San Juan Region	99
	<i>Theresa Pasqual</i>	
	Suggested Reading	105
	Contributors	107
	Index	109

Foreword

David Grant Noble

In the 1970s, when I was first learning about Chaco Canyon, Aztec Ruins, and Mesa Verde, I was informed that Aztec was one of numerous outlying great houses of Chaco Canyon. “Chacoans” built it, lived in it, and eventually left. After their departure, winds then blew in sand and dust that covered roofs and floors. Later, people from Mesa Verde reoccupied and remodeled the building; thus, Aztec West experienced two separate occupations by two distinct cultural groups. As to local Middle San Juan people, they were barely mentioned.

After Earl Morris excavated at Aztec (1916–1921), the Middle San Juan region commonly was considered in its relation to the architecturally stunning centers of Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde, located to the south and north, respectively. Research in recent decades, however, has stimulated fresh thinking about human history and interactions along the Middle San Juan. In the process, the traditional narrative has shifted.

The authors of *Aztec, Salmon, and the Puebloan Heartland of the Middle San Juan* assert that this region—known as the Totah by Navajos—was, between circa 1000 and 1300 CE, an important and influential cultural and political center in its own right. Given the presence of fertile land, abundant water, and good hunting and foraging, no one should be surprised that people were drawn here in large numbers, thrived, and acquired power, status, and some wealth. To recognize the importance of communities in the Middle San Juan in no way diminishes the significance of Mesa Verde and Chaco; it simply gives credit to many people who have long existed in the archaeological shadow of their famous neighbors.

Popular literature and even sometimes academic texts often give nonspecialists the impression that in ancient times the Southwest was divided into distinct and separate cultural groups. In the Four Corners region, for example, were the Chacoans, Mesa Verdeans, and Kayentans; maps often show what look like territorial borders between them. Paul Reed, Gary Brown, and the scholars who have contributed chapters to this book help to dispel this somewhat distorted concept.

We know from so many examples around the world, past and present, how much peoples of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds interact, even when they are separated geographically and speak different languages. Families relocate, large groups migrate, armed forces go to war and take captives. People travel, visit neighbors, trade, and intermarry. They also exchange thoughts and beliefs and share their cultures. Inevitably, change occurs. The communities of the Middle San Juan were no exception to this pattern; indeed, they were perfectly situated to enjoy and benefit from social, economic, and cultural interactions with their neighbors.

This book is the latest volume in the Popular Archaeology Series, which was born in the 1980s as the School of American Research’s annual bulletin, known as *Exploration*. Those magazines developed into books such as *New Light on Chaco Canyon* and *The Hohokam: Ancient People of the Desert*. Later, the series evolved into longer and more comprehensive volumes that include the perspectives of Native American scholars and storytellers.

Our common purpose throughout has been to bring current findings, insights, and knowledge in Southwestern anthropology to a wide general readership. In recent decades, the public has shown a growing interest in, even fascination with, the American Southwest and the history and culture of its Native peoples. The following pages help satisfy a general thirst for knowledge and understanding. It should be noted, too, that archaeologists need the public to know about and appreciate what they do, for as taxpayers, donors, and sometimes grant-application reviewers, we play a significant role in supporting their research.

The Popular Archaeology Series, which is now a collaboration between the presses of the School for Advanced Research and the University of New Mexico, is helping to educate us about American archaeology and to understand why the places where our ancestors lived should be cherished and protected. Reed and Brown devoted much time and effort to bringing this book to fruition, and it will be an invaluable resource for scholars, students, and the general public.

Preface

Paul F. Reed and Gary M. Brown

The idea for this book grew out of conversations we had at the 2012 Pecos Conference, held at Pecos National Historical Park in New Mexico. Among those we talked to was David Grant Noble, who has written the foreword to this volume and edited several books in the Popular Archaeology Series. David encouraged us to pursue the project and produce an easily readable archaeological summary of the often-overlooked Middle San Juan area. Despite some of the challenges along the way, we are very glad we took his advice.

The Middle San Juan lies between the ancient Puebloan homelands of Chaco Canyon (to the south) and Mesa Verde (to the north), positioned somewhat closer to the Mesa Verde region. Most people are much more familiar with these places. Yet archaeologists have studied the Middle San Juan and explored its spectacular ruins for more than one hundred years. Earl Morris's excavations at Aztec West from 1916 to 1921 (sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History) were among the earliest large-scale projects in the Southwest. Other projects were undertaken in the area in succeeding decades, but none was as intensive as his until the San Juan Valley Archaeological Program (the Salmon Project) was initiated by Dr. Cynthia Irwin-Williams in 1969.

Much of the archaeological research and exploration reported in this volume follows in the footsteps of these two pioneering archaeologists—Morris and Irwin-Williams. We believe that this book and the research completed offers homage to their legends. Their extraordinary efforts to describe and explain the sudden appearance of large towns similar to those at Chaco Canyon, yet well outside the Chacoan regional center, established the foundation for generations of scholars to build on and ultimately to reconsider how and why ancient Puebloan civilization developed as it moved from place to place across the Southwest.

We have a list of people to acknowledge. First and foremost, we wish to thank all of the authors who contributed to this book for working hard and responding to an often-demanding schedule. Jane Kepp coached us all during a workshop and encouraged us to think outside the scholarly box in which we were most comfortable. In addition, her editorial assistance helped improve our first drafts. Two anonymous reviewers provided valuable commentary that allowed us to sharpen our focus and clarify important points in the volume. Our publishers at SAR Press went through personnel changes but nevertheless stood by us and the book project. We appreciate the assistance of, first, Lynn Baca (former director of SAR Press) and Lisa Pacheco (former managing editor of SAR Press) and, subsequently, Sarah Soliz (managing and acquisitions editor for SAR Press) and Michael Brown (president of SAR). We feel strongly that SAR Press's commitment to publishing books that speak to a popular audience is particularly valuable.

Lori Stephens Reed (one of our authors) and Cyresa Bloom, both of Aztec Ruins National Monument, helped find various photographs for use in the volume. Larry Baker (executive director of Salmon Ruins Museum, and one of our authors) was most helpful in providing access to Salmon's archive of images for this book. Catherine Gilman, of Desert Archaeology Inc., produced our regional map of the Middle San Juan area. Both of the editors and two additional contributors to this volume, Lori Reed and Laurie Webster, worked together for several years on research that underpins much of what is presented in these chapters. This research was supported by grants from the National Science Foundation. Additional research that contributes to this endeavor was supported by the Western National Parks Association and Archaeology Southwest.

A Chronology of Middle San Juan Regional History

Dates are given as BCE (before the Common Era) and CE (of the Common Era).

11,000–6000 BCE. This period marks the Paleoindian era in the Four Corners area.

6000–500 BCE. Archaic era peoples inhabit and use the landscapes of the Middle San Juan and surrounding areas for their highly mobile hunting-and-gathering lifestyles. Families begin to supplement their diet of wild resources by planting corn before 1000 BCE.

500 BCE. Basketmaker era peoples first use the Middle San Juan region, practice corn horticulture, and continue to supplement their diets with hunting and gathering.

500–750 CE. The Basketmaker III period marks the occupation of sophisticated subterranean structures known as pit houses. The widespread use of pottery accompanies baskets, and the bow and arrow replaces the atlatl (spear thrower) and spear as the main weapon.

500s CE. Pueblo people establish the first sedentary villages in the area.

600s CE. The population in the La Plata Valley expands, and the valley becomes the population center of the Middle San Juan for the next five hundred years.

700–750 CE. Pueblo people construct the first aboveground masonry (pueblo) structures in the Middle San Juan during the Pueblo I period. The use of pit houses continues, and they are frequently associated with small pueblos.

750–900 CE. The Pueblo I period is characterized by elaboration of architecture and further establishment of large villages, in addition to occupations at

numerous smaller farmsteads in parts of the Middle San Juan.

850–875 CE. Initial construction, dated by tree rings, begins at Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon. Pueblo Bonito is to become the largest and most impressive great house in Chaco Canyon and the American Southwest.

900–1140 CE. The Pueblo II period throughout the Southwest is characterized by unit pueblos with masonry roomblocks paired with a distinct type of pit structure known as a kiva.

1050–1075 CE. The Great North Road is built, making a formal connection between Chaco Canyon and the Middle San Juan. The attention of many residents of Chaco Canyon begins to shift to the north and elsewhere in the region. Chacoan outliers appear across much of the greater San Juan Basin.

1090–1105 CE. Salmon Pueblo, a three-story, three-hundred-room great house on the San Juan River north of Chaco, is constructed.

1100 CE. The Puebloan society of Chaco Canyon reaches its peak in population, organizational complexity, and geographic extent.

1100–1110 CE. Construction begins at the western great house at Aztec Ruins, a four-hundred-room structure, on the Animas River north of Salmon Pueblo.

1115–1125 CE. Some Chacoans leave Salmon Pueblo and settle at the Aztec community. Construction begins on the eastern great house at Aztec. Salmon Pueblo is remade as a San Juan–style pueblo. By 1125 Aztec West is the largest great house outside of Chaco Canyon, and the Aztec community together with associated structures is the largest site complex in the Middle San Juan.

1125–1150 CE. The ancient Aztec community, with three great houses, a great kiva, several tri-wall structures, and a host of other dwellings, assumes a primary but short-lived role as the Chacoan center in the north.

1128 CE. This year coincides with the last tree-ring date from a Chaco Canyon great house in the twelfth century.

1130 CE. Organizational stresses begin to cause disintegration of Chacoan society. A prolonged drought begins across the ancient Puebloan region, lasting until 1190. Settlement across the region is disrupted, and the Chacoan system begins to collapse.

1140–1290 CE. The Pueblo III period reflects widespread construction of large multistoried pueblos in new styles not in accordance with the Chacoan great-house architectural tradition.

1150 CE. This year marks the effective end of Chacoan society.

1150–1300 CE. Reduced occupation and habitation are evident at Chaco Canyon.

1200s CE. Post-Chacoan societies emerge across the greater San Juan Basin, with descendant links to Chacoan society but with local and largely autonomous social, political, ritual, and economic institutions. Chacoan traditions persist at Aztec, and great-house construction continues with expansion of Aztec East in the mid-1200s.

1275–1300 CE. Most of the greater San Juan Basin is abandoned by Pueblo peoples. Groups relocate to the Rio Grande and its tributaries, the Zuni-Acoma region, the Hopi Mesas, and other areas.

1280s CE. A catastrophic, intentionally set fire sweeps much of Salmon Pueblo, as part of the abandonment of the great house. Fire destroys much of the western great house at Aztec Ruins, leading to its abandonment.

1300s–1800s CE. Pueblo people make inferred, sporadic visits to great houses in Chaco Canyon.

1450–1500 CE. Ancestral Navajo people migrating from the north settle portions of the Middle and Upper San Juan regions.

1540–1800s CE. Spanish explorers and colonists make sporadic, undocumented visits to Chaco Canyon.

1776 CE. Spanish cartographer Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco produces the first known map of the greater San Juan region. The Dominguez-Escalante expedition traverses the Middle San Juan, noting large ruins in the vicinity of Aztec.

1874 CE. Members of the Wheeler Survey visit the Aztec and Salmon great houses. Timothy O’Sullivan takes photographs of the “Pueblo San Juan,” the site that would come to be known as Salmon Ruins.

1878 CE. Anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan visits Aztec Ruins and produces the first map of the western great house.

1896–1900 CE. The Hyde Exploring Expedition conducts excavations at Pueblo Bonito and other sites under the direction of George Pepper and Richard Wetherill.

1906 CE. The Antiquities Act is passed, protecting Chaco and other sites on public lands from unauthorized excavations.

1916–1921 CE. Earl Morris directs major excavations on behalf of the American Museum of Natural History at the West Ruin of Aztec and limited excavations at several other sites in the Animas Valley.

1923 CE. Aztec Ruins is donated to the National Park Service and becomes Aztec Ruins National Monument through presidential proclamation under authority of the Antiquities Act.

1972–1979 CE. Cynthia Irwin-Williams, her colleagues, and a huge team of students and volunteers undertake the large-scale excavation of the ruins of Salmon Pueblo.

The Ancient Pueblo People of the Middle San Juan Region

Paul F. Reed and Gary M. Brown

A traveler leaves Chaco Canyon on an autumn morning. He walks past the large town of Pueblo Alto on a broad, ancient path known today as the Great North Road, heading into the brilliance and warmth of the desert sun (fig. 1.1). Several hours' journey brings him to a series of monumental buildings at a settlement that would later be known as Pierre's Site. He enjoys a quick bite of cornmeal cakes and beans—an ancient tostada—then he resumes his journey to the north, spending the night at a small pueblo “inn” along the road.

Another long day of walking brings the traveler to the end of the road at an outpost that archaeologists know as Twin Angels Pueblo, named after a picturesque natural rock feature located on the opposite side of the

canyon (fig. 1.2). This settlement is similar in design to the great houses of Chaco Canyon, although the scale is much smaller than that of Pueblo Bonito—the center of Chacoan life. To reach his destination, our traveler descends into the deep, wide canyon. A large, swift river comes into sight; the traveler breathes a sigh of relief, knowing that he is nearing his destination. After his journey through the high desert, he doesn't mind wading across the river and rinsing the dirt and sweat from his weary body. He needs to freshen up and get ready for human interaction again.

The year is 1100 CE, and our traveler gazes upon a bustling town, known today as Salmon Pueblo, after the family that homesteaded this part of the fertile San Juan



Figure 1.1. A view looking north along the Great North Road from the Chacoan great house at Pueblo Alto. The Great North Road begins at Pueblo Alto and runs approximately thirty-five miles north to the vicinity of Twin Angels Pueblo. Courtesy of Paul Reed, photographer.



Figure 1.2. An aerial view of Twin Angels Pueblo, a small Chacoan great house. The site is in the middle of the photograph, on the edge of a steep cliff that drops into a large rock shelter. The main portion of the Great North Road ends just south of the site. Courtesy of Paul Reed, photographer.

Valley. Although he has walked for two days, the traveler immediately feels comfortable in this new setting. Salmon has been built in the classic Chacoan style, with massive walls and a towering three-story layout that together recall Pueblo Bonito and other monumental buildings at the man's home in Chaco Canyon (fig. 1.3).

A dozen years later, our traveler leaves Salmon Pueblo, heading north toward the next major river that runs through the Animas Valley. After an easy day's walk, he sees the sprawling community where a huge building is rising from the valley bottom. A smaller yet imposing pueblo sits on the mesa above it, with a road like the one



Figure 1.3. Pueblo Bonito, Chaco's greatest great house, from the overlook point. Readers will note Bonito's towering back wall and massive footprint on the south side of Chaco Canyon. It truly is monumental architecture. Courtesy of Paul Reed, photographer.

the traveler is on leading up to it from the valley below. The cluster of large buildings, ceremonial structures, and numerous smaller dwellings will come to be known as Aztec Ruins when Euro-American homesteaders settle the area centuries after the Pueblo people have left. Aztec and Salmon reflect the Chacoan style of architecture and settlement, with huge buildings that rise over large, open gathering places, or plazas, for local residents and their guests. Like Salmon, the plaza is the only point of entry into the main town at Aztec.

The traveler is greeted by a throng of people. He has been here before to celebrate various occasions, including the summer and winter solstices, which he presided over. His brother is married to a woman from Aztec. The largest building is still under construction, but the massive grouping of rooms on the east side borders a large open area, like the plaza at Salmon, where ceremonies and daily discourse bring people together. The building is very similar to Salmon's and to some of the newer great houses at the man's original home in Chaco Canyon.

The people of Aztec stop their building activities to welcome the visitor. They provide him with food and drink. His announcement takes them by surprise: several prestigious families at Salmon may wish to move to Aztec. The workforce at Aztec already includes a diverse population of migrants from Chaco Canyon in addition to natives of the Animas Valley. In good time, the residents of Aztec and Salmon agree that work will begin on another large pueblo to the east. Aztec is already the largest Pueblo community north of Chaco Canyon, and it is about to become even bigger. Sustained work at these pueblos will eventually result in a group of monumental great houses that rival and even surpass the many buildings in "downtown" Chaco.

The traveler in this narrative was born and raised at Chaco Canyon, where centuries of construction resulted in gigantic masonry buildings with multiple stories—a Pueblo center that attracted people from across the large region we know today as the Four Corners (fig. 1.4). Although many people lived in Chaco for generations, some people migrated from far-flung areas, and others made shorter visits to congregate and celebrate occasions such as the changing of seasons and the passing of years. People shared new ideas from throughout the

area and forged social relationships. They traded various items, some from distant places and some from nearby. Chaco must have been special because people brought exotic items with them, but relatively few tangible goods produced at Chaco were taken back to the outlying communities that participated in these congregations. Many archaeologists think that Chacoan religion was the major attraction and that some gatherings involved pilgrimages.

Chaco Canyon is an arid place with no permanent rivers. Well to the north lie the Rocky Mountains, and major rivers flow from snowy peaks into the canyon and mesa country of the San Juan Basin. The largest is the San Juan River, a major tributary of the Colorado River. In this book, we refer to this part of northwestern New Mexico as the Middle San Juan region. The Animas and La Plata Rivers also flow through this area, providing abundant water not found anywhere near Chaco Canyon. The three rivers converge into one at Farmington, New Mexico, the largest city in the area today.

Often lost in the shuffle between the spectacular Pueblo centers at Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde, the Middle San Juan is one of the most dynamic territories in the ancient Southwest. Pueblo people lived and died in the area for more than one thousand years before Aztec and Salmon rose and transitioned during the closing decades of the 1200s. The earlier time periods are fascinating, as is the later occupation by Navajo people, who arrived after the Ancestral Pueblo inhabitants had left the area. However, we focus this book on the interval from 1050 to 1300. This interval is relatively brief for an area that was occupied for more than ten thousand years, but understanding the events that occurred in the Middle San Juan during what Southwestern archaeologists commonly call the late Pueblo II and Pueblo III periods is a complex and intriguing endeavor.