

## **Chaco 'Culture' and the Kin Klizhin 'Community':**

**Estimating Human Relationships in Southwest Archaeology**

At Chacoan Outlier Kin Klizhin and surrounding sites, the ubiquity and continuity of visibility in the built environment points to this being an important principle for residents. In my previous research, visibility relationships at Kin Klizhin suggested that visibility was materialized as both an expression of Ancestral Puebloan ideas and as a technique of community constitution. This begs the question: what does the word 'community' mean when it is used to describe the complex of material signatures we call Chaco Culture? And how do what seem to be meaningful, smaller 'communities' relate to it? In this presentation I will discuss different levels of 'community' as they are used by Chacoan scholars, and how we might understand the layered nature of identities which are collapsed in the concept of 'community'.

## Starting points

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- ▶ The concept of community as singular, bounded, untouched
  - ▶ Scholars focusing on heritage have tackled the construction of this concept, based in colonial thought
  - ▶ Does this concept help or hurt us when we try to make sense of the constant change we see in the archaeological record?
- ▶ Then, I used the word 'community' in my thesis 111 times and 'communities' 22 times
  - ▶ How many different concepts did I mean to express with these terms?



-Smith and Waterton, along with other heritage-focused archaeologists, have described "community" as a construction based in colonial thought:

- Who are 'they' and how do we recognize 'them'? The other.
- In living communities, geographic and named group identifications don't capture the sense of who is related to who
- Shared beliefs and experiences and familiarity likely played a larger role than we see in the archaeological literature because these things are so difficult to access through our research

-So, if community is imprecise and constantly changing for living people, is our dependence on the word 'community' getting in the way of us conceptualizing the lives of the past people we study?

-I will start with some ways 'community' is being employed in the Southwest Archaeology literature, specifically that which relates to the prehistoric sociopolitical center at Chaco Canyon, New Mexico and its influence in that region

-Then, I will reflect on my own thesis as a case study of the concepts expressed by this single word, evaluating the epistemological utility of it for my work

## Terminology, epistemology, and “community”

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- ▶ Community
- ▶ Communities
- ▶ Networks
- ▶ Kinship groups
- ▶ Alliances
- ▶ Descendant communities
- ▶ **Relationships**



This deserves analysis to understand our intellectual goals, and whether we’re reaching them with this concept

## Definitions of community in recent Southwest archaeology literature

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- ▶ **Material:** “Great House community” as large-scale, more formalized complex of house and associated ceremonial structures surrounded by smaller habitation clusters
- ▶ **Multi-scalar:** Physically recognizable site clusters not sustainable communities until connected to network of viable mates (Kantner and Mahoney 2000)
- ▶ **Historical:** “Great House construction at Albert Porter Pueblo drew on deep Puebloan shared beliefs (“the San Juan pattern”) as well as more recent Chacoan symbolism” (Ryan 2008)



## Definitions of community in recent Southwest archaeology literature

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- ▶ **Phenomenological and ideological:** Bodily experience of built and natural environment; connected by intentionally constructed, symbolic connections between places (Van Dyke 2007)
- ▶ **Arena for agency** The agency in the act of establishing identity (establishing a built environment) motivates social cohesion (Potter and Yoder 2008)
- ▶ **Constituted through practice:** “communities] are a nexus for face-to-face interactions, which are the primary means by which the rules and resources that structure society are both reproduced and transformed” (Varien and Potter 2008:1)



## “Chaco community” – Material aspects

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- ▶ “Site-equals-community” clearly does not work in this context
  - ▶ Central and peripheral settlements, different size and genetic makeup, but similar architectural styles
- ▶ Chacoans beyond the center place:
  - ▶ “In many ways, these outlying communities were miniature versions of the complex architectural landscape of Chaco Canyon” (Kantner and Mahoney 2000:1)



## “Chacoan community” – What is shared?

- ▶ Something more than architectural elements (trends?) shared here
  - ▶ Political leaders
  - ▶ Importance placed on spiritual knowledge, few people who have access to it
  
- ▶ Some of the evidence:
  - ▶ Four aspects of Chacoan ideology expressed materially in architecture: directionality, balanced dualism, and the canyon as a center place (Van Dyke 2004)
  - ▶ Long distance visibility networks connecting Chacoan sites and spiritually significant high places (many authors)

*On long distance visibility (from thesis page 27):*

“ So far, the work on visibility that has been done in the Chacoan world has identified many highly visible places across the landscape (Hayes and Windes 1974; Kantner and Hobgood 2003; see Kantner and Kintigh 2006:169-170; Robinson et al. 2007; Van Dyke 2007:137-168). This is the first step to understanding the complex network constructed by the Chacoans that framed the perception of those who knew about it. Outlying great houses and other significant structures (such as shrines) were connected with Chaco Canyon by a series of lines-of-sight that indicate the influence of Chacoan ideology across large distances (Dungan 2009; Kantner and Hobgood 2003; Robinson et al. 2007). Although the purpose and meaning of these visual connections is not known, the fact that they exist in such abundance has compelled Kantner and Kintigh (2006:169-172) to study the nature of the network as a way of understanding what connects Chaco-style sites across the San Juan basin. Smaller-scale analyses are few in number, but seem to have a lot to contribute to understanding the network’s significance. “

## Case Study: My thesis

- ▶ “SCALES OF VISIBILITY AT A CHACOAN OUTLIER: THE VISUAL WORLD OF PEOPLE AT KIN KLIZHIN” (2012)
- ▶ Intervisibility among habitation structures over time (AD 500-AD 1250) at site Kin Klizhin
- ▶ How might visibility have operated as an identity-formation tool for Ancestral Puebloan residents?
- ▶ Residents were constantly able to see neighbors over an 800 year period
- ▶ Influx of Chacoan material markers coincided with a slight shift, but did not revolutionize visibility for them
- ▶ Multiple scales of community identity represented

### Abstract of thesis:

The focus of most archaeological research on visibility is on inter-community communication and warfare. In this thesis, I focus instead on tracking historical changes in visibility within Kin Klizhin community near Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, United States. I use Geographic Information Systems to analyze intervisibility among habitation structures to better understand how visibility may have operated as an identity-formation tool for Ancestral Puebloan residents. My results indicate that on a community (rather than landscape) scale, residents were consistently able to see their neighbors over an 800 year period. Kin Klizhin residents experienced subtle, but archaeologically noticeable, differences in their visual landscape during a period when ideas from a nearby regional center at Chaco Canyon were influential there. The ubiquity and continuity of visibility in the built environment points to this being an important principle for the residents of Kin Klizhin. I conclude it is likely that people were building intervisible habitations and modifying the landscape on a large scale significantly before Chaco became a center of influence. This work is significant in two ways: my research supports that Ancestral Puebloans were preoccupied with visibility; and it suggests that visibility was materialized as both an expression of Ancestral Puebloan ideas and as a technique of community constitution. Intervisibility between people is one possible signifier of the symbolic world, the identities and world views of past peoples. Studying its material representation in archaeological remains is one possible way to access past peoples' conceptualizations of the world.

## Word use

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- ▶ Again, used 'community' 111 times
  
- ▶ **Community as daily practice**
  - ▶ Lived community with regular physical contact
  - ▶ Intervisibility as technique of community constitution
  
- ▶ **Community as shared interest**
  - ▶ People in community as collective actors (who constructed, experienced intervisibility network)
  
- ▶ **Community as shared ideas**
  - ▶ E.g. "outlying Chacoan community", a community that is also connected to a larger phenomenon (two levels)



Without all three of these concepts, and drawing from the subtle formulations of others in describing their studies, it would have been difficult to express the complex of experiential, geographic, social, political, and other factors that are incorporated into what we think of as "community."

I was only able to describe my study effectively when I figured out how to articulate in what sense "community" was important – in this case, visibility was important because it seems to have been a technique by which people constructed and lived together as a group.

## Reflecting on word use

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- ▶ It impacts how we think about our work, how we define the boundaries of sites
  - ▶ Rather than re-defining or proposing new words, interrogating the varying ways we use “community” are what are interesting
    - ▶ Enables and limits our thinking
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This brings up the question of whether the concept of community, formed in the mind of a Western scientist educated in a colonial tradition, got in the way of understanding the lived experiences of past peoples. In this case, I did geographically bound my research area using land divisions (ownership) and concepts developed in Western ways. I also found what seemed to be some consistency in choices made by people over time that indicate that intervisibility was consciously experienced and built in by past peoples. In that sense, the geographically bounded community concept is challenged in my thesis – it challenged my starting point, and makes the case for multiscalar studies of community constitution such as those done by Van Dyke for the last 10 years.

In other words, the concept of community is wonderfully complex. I think the mental process of explaining what it means for us, in our specific research contexts, can help us work out difficult epistemological issues instead of separating into different ‘camps’ by creating new terminology. In Southwest archaeology, a productive conversation about the quality of Chaco’s influence on the region has resulted in an ever more subtle understanding of how regional political dynamics could have impacted the lives of less powerful people, as well.

As for using the word a lot, well I will try to vary my words more in my dissertation.