

Paquimé: a visitor's companion



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A mystery surrounds this place, and it may never be fully solved. Hundreds of years ago, in the drylands that are now northern Chihuahua, a village and then a city emerged between hills and river. It grew larger and richer and more complex, supported artisans and religious leaders, and participated in a far-flung trade network — and then fell on hard times and was eventually abandoned, possibly after a violent end. When Spanish explorers arrived in 1565, the hunter-gatherers living among its deserted farmlands and canals could tell them little, except that the last surviving city dwellers had fled, possibly to the west.

Because of the epidemics that swept into the region with the Spanish, it is difficult to trace the movements of native people during this time or to match early Spanish observations with later ones; so far, the fate of these people has not been traced with any certainty. The indigenous people called the site Paquimé, which means “big houses,” as does its Spanish name, Casas Grandes.* The ruins, with their unique combination of traits evoking northern (Anasazi) and southern (Mesoamerican) cultures, are now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, interpreted by a first-rate museum, and the subject of ongoing research.

They are also the subject of much debate. What triggered the rise of this city in the arid region north of the Mesoamerican empires and south of today’s Pueblo homeland? Some have argued that it was an outpost of a grand empire in southern Mexico, others that it was built by royal refugees from the collapsing Chaco Canyon culture to the north, still others that it was a homegrown phenomenon: The lords of Paquimé were local, even if they borrowed foreign images and ideas to bolster their authority.

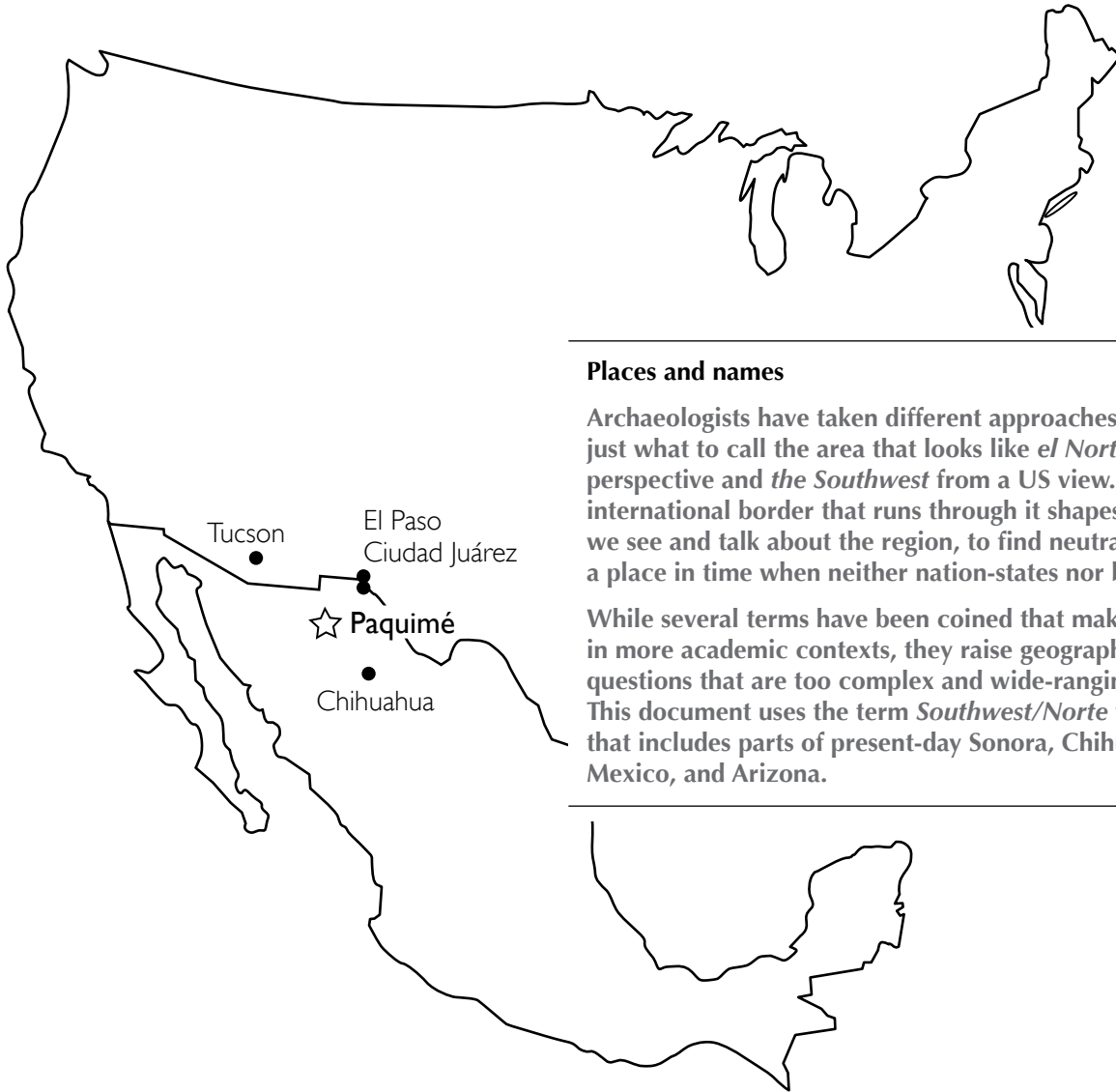
Are the massive amounts of pottery and worked and unworked shell, copper, and turquoise found in the ruins evidence that Paquimé was a hub of trade? manufacturing? ritual? How far did its influence reach, and how strong was that influence? Within the city itself, was there a sharp division between haves and have-nots? Did rulers rely on brute power? spiritual authority? consensus and reciprocity? Where did Paquimé’s survivors go when they left, and what kind of impression did they make when they got there? Are there traces, for example, of Paquimé spiritual values in contemporary Pueblo life? Did the city’s downfall become a cautionary tale that is remembered in legends farther north?

The literature on Paquimé is rich in conflicting answers to these questions and others. Research has not been as intensive in this area as it has north of the US-Mexico border and farther south in Mexico. Much remains to be discovered, but parts of Paquimé’s story are likely to remain untold. Some of what its people tried to build was lost forever, while other aspects of its legacy may still be part of us in ways we cannot know or trace.

Very little of Paquimé’s story comes in the form of take-it-to-the-bank facts. For every statement made in these pages, there is likely to be a respectable opposing opinion. (Researchers seem to agree more about concrete aspects of everyday life like clothes, cooking, and farming techniques than about what people believed or how they were organized.) This booklet aims to

Indigenous people called the site Paquimé, which means “big houses,” as does its Spanish name, Casas Grandes. The ruins are now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

* The name Paquimé usually refers to the specific city site; Casas Grandes can refer either to that site or to the larger area surrounding it.



Places and names

Archaeologists have taken different approaches to the question of just what to call the area that looks like *el Norte* from a Mexican perspective and *the Southwest* from a US view. It's tricky, when the international border that runs through it shapes so much of how we see and talk about the region, to find neutral words to describe a place in time when neither nation-states nor borders existed.

While several terms have been coined that make a lot of sense in more academic contexts, they raise geographical and cultural questions that are too complex and wide-ranging to discuss here. This document uses the term *Southwest/Norte* to describe an area that includes parts of present-day Sonora, Chihuahua, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.

summarize the highlights of recent research, not to present new evidence or interpretations. With luck it can provide an enjoyable introduction to a fascinating site; but for heaven's sake, dear reader, stay curious. This isn't the final word.

Rise and fall

People have lived in the Casas Grandes area since as early as 5000 BC, dwelling in caves and practicing a mix of hunting and farming. The earliest known villages emerged around AD 200. They consisted mostly of circular pit houses, with the lower walls underground and the upper walls and roof made of poles covered by dirt.

Paquimé began as just such a pit-house village in the 8th century AD, possibly founded by Mogollon people moving into the area from what is now New Mexico. Over time, the population grew, trade with other areas

intensified, and pit houses gave way to above-ground buildings, first made of mud and wattle (interwoven sticks) and later of adobe.

Sometime around the 12th century, the settlement underwent a “dramatic expansion and cultural shift”^{*} that produced large, multistory adobe dwellings, ceremonial architecture, and a sophisticated water supply system. The village had become a city and had begun to merit the name of Paquimé or “big houses.” (This name was given to it later by outsiders; nobody knows what its inhabitants called it.) Whatever sparked the change, “something major happened quite abruptly, and the changes were spread throughout the region quickly.”[†]

Paquimé’s heyday, described in the following section, lasted from about AD 1200 to 1400. After that, the city grew weak and demoralized. It lasted another half-century in this diminished state, after which, many students of Paquimé believe, it met a bloody and fiery end. Survivors fled the area, leaving nothing but ruins and a few vague memories to greet the first Spanish explorers.

The prosperous years

Only about half of Paquimé has ever been excavated. At its peak, it had up to 2,000 rooms; its population has been variously estimated at 3,000 to 5,000. Besides homes, the city contained ceremonial mounds and ball courts, market and feast areas (including large ovens for roasting agave), warehouses, and a complex water supply and drainage system.

The water system was begun in the earlier Viejo period (before Paquimé’s grand buildings took shape) and expanded during the city’s peak years. It carried fresh water from a spring now known as Ojo Vareleño, about five miles to the northwest, along a complex system of ditches, tunnels, settling tanks, cisterns, and reservoirs, through the city and into the farmlands on the other side. There was a sewerage system, and drains diverted rainwater (which might otherwise have undermined the adobe structures) out of the plazas. A building that archaeologists have dubbed the House of the Well contained a well deep underground, accessible only by walking down two flights of stairs.

Paquimé was a hub, maybe *the* hub, of an immense network of trails with wayside shelters that led north to the mountains and west to the Pacific coast. Many of these converged on the Cerro de Moctezuma, a hill a few miles west of the city, which also boasted a permanently staffed *atalaya* or signal tower — part of a far-flung signaling system, many of whose towers were still in use when the Spanish arrived in the mid-16th century.

Architecture

In its heyday, Paquimé may have contained much more vivid color than today’s muted earth tones suggest. The first Spaniard to write about Paquimé was Baltasar de Obregón, who accompanied General Francisco de Ibarra through the region in 1565. At Paquimé they saw

* UNESCO, “Archaeological Zone of Paquimé.”

† Schaafsma and Riley, *The Casas Grandes World*, 247.

Canals and ditches carried fresh water from a spring about five miles northwest of Paquimé, along a complex system of ditches, tunnels, settling tanks, cisterns, and reservoirs, through the city and into the farmlands on the other side.

many houses of great size, strength, and height. They are of six and seven stories, with towers and walls like fortresses for protection and defense ... The houses contain large and magnificent patios paved with enormous and beautiful stones resembling jasper ... [and] pillars of heavy timber brought from far away. The walls of the houses were whitewashed and painted in many colors.*

But by the late 1950s, archaeologists found only a small amount of paint on a few interior walls.†

To construct the city's adobe walls, earth was sifted to a fine consistency, mixed with water, and poured into a mold made of planks. Later, the walls were covered with two layers of even finer mud. The outer layer, made of river sediment and lime, was polished with a stone. Roofs consisted of *vigas* (wooden beams) covered by branches, mud, and grass.

Steps or a foothold in the wall helped people climb up to built-in beds that were about a meter high. Some beds had a fireplace underneath; others had bodies buried under them. Paquimé is known for its strange T-shaped doors, a design it has in common with many Southwest/Norteño prehistoric sites, the purpose of which remains a mystery. Grain was stored in buried pots; wall niches held household goods and ornaments.

As time went on, Paquimeans abandoned some buildings, renovated others, and built new ones. As the population increased, some buildings were subdivided. Doors were filled in or turned into windows or niches; in other places, new doors were opened. Room shapes became more complicated; one room at Paquimé has 15 walls.

Everyday life

The average Paquimean did not live to be much older than 30; women may have outnumbered men three to two. Based on the configuration of the houses, archaeologists believe that families averaged four to five members.

The diet was primarily vegetarian, featuring corn, squash, maybe beans, toasted cotton seeds, and amaranth, as well as wild food such as mesquite seeds, piñon nuts, acorns, and agave hearts. But hunters brought home meat, too — bison, antelope and deer, rabbits, dogs, and possibly also fish, turtles, and lizards. Hunters used bows and stone-tipped arrows.

Paquimé people, like many of their neighbors in the region, were short and strong, perhaps similar in appearance to today's Tarahumara. Pierced ears and noses were common, along with a flattening of the back of the head that came from being strapped to a wooden cradleboard as a child. Pottery images suggest that both men and women used cosmetics and that there was little difference between men's and women's hairstyles and clothing.

Paquimeans made clothes from plant fibers such as cotton, yucca, and agave, and from animal skins and human hair. They used spindles to make thread, which they wove on horizontal looms and dyed white, red, green, and brown. Clothing consisted of wrap-around skirts or kilts of different lengths, capes or over-the-shoulder drapes, leggings, and sandals or moccasins.

* Hammond and Rey, *Obregón's History*, 206. The translators/editors expressed some uncertainty as to whether the site Obregón described was actually the site we now know as Paquimé, but they considered it the most likely alternative.

† Di Peso, *Casas Grandes*, 444. The 1958–1961 Joint Casas Grandes Project began the current wave of research on Paquimé. While many of Di Peso's interpretations have since been called into question, he and the binational team he led are respected for the solid foundation they laid for subsequent work.

Clothing consisted of wrap-around skirts or kilts of different lengths, capes or over-the-shoulder drapes, leggings, and sandals or moccasins. Paquimeans wore jewelry, primarily made of shell, but also of copper, turquoise, and bone — sometimes human bone.

They wore jewelry, primarily made of shell, but also of copper, turquoise, and bone — sometimes human bone. Jewelry included hair and nose ornaments, necklaces, armbands, and rings.

Musical instruments found in the ruins include rasps, rattles, copper bells, hand drums, shell trumpets, bone whistles and flutes, and gongs, including a large stone gong found hanging from a beam in the House of Macaws.

Besides the farmers, hunters, and artisans needed to produce these goods, Paquimé was also home to other specialists: potters, ball players, macaw breeders, traders, and religious leaders.

Little trace of a military class has been found at Paquimé, except for nearby hillside forts, and soldiers don't seem to be represented in the pottery images that eloquently depict so many other aspects of life and society.

Pottery

The centuries of exquisitely worked pottery from Casas Grandes and neighboring regions form an immense subject well beyond the scope of this document. The reference list includes suggested readings on this subject, but there are many other books, articles, and websites available to help the pottery aficionado delve more deeply into this subject.

Casas Grandes pottery ranged from the simple and utilitarian — cooking pots and storage urns, including quite large ones — to elaborate trade goods, grave offerings, and effigy vessels in the shape of people and animals. Artisans formed rolls of clay and coiled them into pot shapes, which they then smoothed and polished. Styles incorporated both Mesoamerican and northern themes.

During the early years, the plain, utilitarian pottery predominated. A flowering of more elaborate, artistic work during Paquimé's peak era seems to be associated with the rise of a new political and religious system, possibly presided over by shaman-priests, and is arguably a sign that an elite class had emerged that could afford to commission specialized workers to produce fine pottery.

Birds and snakes, sometimes horned or feathered, are among the most common pottery imagery; and there are also mounds at Paquimé in the shape of a snake and a bird. Throughout North America, snakes are often associated with water and rain, and birds are often portrayed as animal spirits that help shamans on their journeys. Bird-snake-man combinations might

Paquimé ruins facing east



represent the Mesoamerican deity Quetzalcoatl. Serpents with horns, feathers, or wings are widespread both north and south of Casas Grandes, and scholars debate whether the images in the Southwest/Norte were directly derived from Mesoamerica or arose (or at least developed) independently in the two areas.

Less frequently, images of other animals appear — badgers, fish, turtles, lizards, and sheep — as well as fantasy figures, such as creatures that are part rabbit and part bird. Some animals known to be important to Paquimeans — such as bears, rabbits, and mountain lions — never appear on pots. Macaws appear frequently, but turkeys do not.

Unlike its neighbors, Paquimé produced many pots in the shape of human figures. Women were almost always portrayed sitting with legs extended, men kneeling or sitting with one knee flexed. Women figures are often pregnant or breastfeeding. Men are commonly associated with serpents and women with birds.



Casas Grandes pot with stylized macaw image and bird-shaped handles (photo courtesy of the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, University of New Mexico, photographer Bernie Bernard, accession number 65.24.96)

Religion and ritual

Some pottery figures show a man smoking. These are believed to represent shamans, who may also have ruled Paquimé.

Tobacco shamanism relied on a more potent type of tobacco than that found in the average pack of cigarettes today. A shaman might use tobacco (possibly in combination with other powerful plant-based drugs) — along with dancing, prayer, sleep deprivation, fasting, and other endurance exercises — to produce a deep trance, during which he was believed to travel to the underworld and commune with the spirits, seeking their advice or help on behalf of his community, usually for healing, successful hunting, good farming weather, or insights into the future. On this dangerous journey, he would be accompanied and advised by an animal spirit. Casas Grandes shamans might have worked especially hard on rainmaking.

Other Casas Grandes pottery images that could be related to shamanism include human figures with macaw heads, figures dancing or holding odd and difficult postures, and certain geometrical designs, including circles and pound signs (#) with a dot in the middle. Some pots appear to show shamans in the process of metamorphosis — smoking, then flying,

accompanied by animal spirits, and transforming into supernatural beings. Some shaman-related pots, unusually for Casas Grandes work, are decorated across the bottom and not just along the sides.

Scholars see connections between Paquimé's spiritual imagery and Mesoamerican deities such as Tlaloc, god of rain, and Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, as well as between these and Pueblo shamans and kachinas farther north. However they are connected, the traditions are not identical: Kachinas are not considered to be gods but intermediaries between gods and humans. And Pueblo shamanic practices have been open to a wide range of men, while in Mesoamerica (and apparently in Paquimé) shamanism was practiced only by the ruling class.

A meteorite in the Smithsonian Institution's collection offers another ambiguous clue to Paquimé's religious and ritual life. It is believed to have been found in the ruins, a few years before it was donated to the Smithsonian, covered in the same kind of cloth as nearby burials. Whether it fell to earth near the city or was brought from elsewhere, and what it meant to Paquimeans, nobody knows.

Other clues to Paquimé's religious and ritual life include the remains of birds used in rituals, the presence of ceremonial ball courts, and burials.

Macaws and turkeys

Macaws were used in ceremonies and as grave offerings, and their images (both stylized and realistic) appear often on pottery. The scarlet macaw, which played the strongest role in Paquimé rituals, comes from far to the south.* Although this bird and its feathers were traded throughout the Southwest/Norte, Paquimé is the only site in the region known to have bred macaws; hundreds of skeletons of birds of every age, as well as eggshells, were found in the ruins. It must have taken a great deal of work to keep the birds alive and thriving in the chilly Casas Grandes winters.

Turkeys were also raised in Paquimé. They were used in rituals, primarily burials, but apparently not eaten; for some reason, their images almost never appear on pottery. Both turkey and macaw pens can be seen in the ruins today; the macaw pens are the ones with circular stone doors.

Ball courts

An aspect of Paquimé life almost certainly inherited from civilizations to the south was the ceremonial ball game. Paquimé had three ball courts, I-shaped with raised sides; while there were other courts in the region, these were the most elaborate. It's not certain exactly how the game was played, but it was a serious affair with strong religious and political overtones. Early Spanish visitors to the region witnessed ball games preceded by mock battles and dances and accompanied by wagers of turquoise, bows and arrows, and other goods.

Of the three ball courts, only one is visible to visitors today. Another was inside the structure now called the House of the Pillars, and a third, on the south side of the city, is badly eroded and covered in vegetation.



* The green-feathered military macaw (not shown), which is native to the Casas Grandes region, appears to have played a less important role. Scarlet macaw photo courtesy of Tony Hisgett.

The ball game was a serious affair with strong religious and political overtones.

Burials

While most of Paquimé's dead were buried in the ground, some were kept in urns — some of which were stored under beds. Some were buried with grave offerings, such as pottery, macaws or turkeys, jewelry, paints, or tools.

Some burial practices would seem strange to us now. About a tenth of the graves that archaeologists have studied show evidence that the bodies were moved again after burial and in some cases had body parts removed. Some skeletal parts, especially skulls, were removed and used in rituals. There is also evidence of human sacrifice.

Decline and demise

There is some evidence that Paquimé went into a decline about a half century before its end. During that time, buildings were not maintained and no new houses were built. When houses fell down, people lived in the ruins. Public buildings were turned into living quarters; some houses were subdivided with thin, shoddily built walls. People were buried in the canals, which suggests that the water system wasn't working any more. Artisans kept working, but the goods they produced seem to have just accumulated rather than being used in trade or ritual exchange.

Scholars have speculated that Paquimé's decline might have been caused by salinization or other irrigation-related problems, drought, disease, or political turmoil. Power shifts farther south may have cut off the trade routes on which the city depended.

The end came around AD 1450. Many archaeologists believe that it was sudden and violent, although others believe that Paquimeans, succumbing to longer-term stresses, simply walked away. When Paquimé was abandoned, its ovens were filled with agave hearts as if in preparation for a feast; macaws and turkeys were left to die in their pens; unfinished crafts were left behind; houses were put to the torch, and many people died under their collapsed roofs.

Where did the survivors go? Some say west, over the Sierra Madre into Sonora; others say north, to mingle with the ancestors of today's Pueblo people. Perhaps they did both.

The first known written record of Paquimé comes from Baltasar de Obregón, who chronicled an expedition led by General Francisco de Ibarra in 1565 through what is now Chihuahua and Durango. By that time, Paquimé had probably been abandoned for about a century; in the area lived “wild, coarse, and roaming people”^{*}— Suma Indians, hunter-gatherers, who told the Spanish that the people who used to live in the city had left for the north after being attacked by people from across the mountains to the west. That scrap of oral history regarding the fate of the city appears to be the only one of its kind. There is an alternate theory, based partly on linguistic evidence, that some or all Paquimeans might have gone west instead; the Opata people of Sonora are said to have had a tradition that they both built and destroyed Paquimé.

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^{*} Hammond and Rey, *Obregón's History*, 297.

Some of the imagery that appeared on Casas Grandes pottery, such as the plumed or horned serpent, also appears in Pueblo art. Some scholars believe that Pueblo kachina rituals could have their roots in practices that go back to Casas Grandes, but others find that unlikely.

Hopi legends contain references to a “red city of the south,” Palatkwapi, a distant earlier home that met a calamitous end either through warfare or natural disaster. Some scholars and elders in and outside the tribe believe that Paquimé was the red city; others think it may have been Teotihuacan or Palenque, which flourished earlier and farther south. The dates seem to be off — the Hopi homeland at Oraibi was settled well before Paquimé met its end — but as with other aspects of the mystery that is Paquimé, much remains to be learned.

Interconnections

There wasn’t always a border here. What held people together and kept them apart, what was foreign and what was familiar, must have been very different in Paquimé’s day. Scholars disagree on many elements of this puzzle — who founded the city, who had the strongest influence on it, and what kind of influence it had, in turn, on the surrounding region. But most agree that prehistoric contacts and connections of one form or another reached from what is now the Pueblo homeland to central Mexico, or even from the Great Plains to the Yucatán. Mexican codices (books from the precolonial and early Spanish eras) describe northern people called *teochichimecas* and include illustrations of northern desert living.

Origins — north or south?

Scholars have argued at different times that Paquimé was founded by Mesoamerican traders, or by nobles fleeing Chaco Canyon after the collapse of that culture to the north, or that it was a local development. Undeniably, the city’s remains represent an intriguing mix of northern and southern elements.

Paquimé’s residential buildings, with their adobe walls, plazas, and T-shaped doors, have much in common with architecture farther north. Its ceremonial structures — the ball courts, elite tombs, and platform mounds — are much more like those of Mesoamerica. Ball courts are an example of an almost purely southern phenomenon. Outside of the Casas Grandes region, the nearest known ball courts are at La Quemada in Zacatecas, hundreds of miles to the south.

Paquimé pottery has much in common with pottery from Mimbres and Mogollon groups to the north — except for the human effigies, which are rare in the Southwest/Norte outside the Casas Grandes area. Small animal figures — for example, bears, mountain lions, birds, and turtles — are reminiscent of the animal fetishes that are still a part of northern Pueblo

Some believe Paquimé was Palatkwapi, the ill-fated “red city of the south” of Hopi legend.

Mexican codices describe northern people called *teochichimecas* and include illustrations of northern desert living.

cultures. Some images — bears, macaws, and plumed serpents — were common in both the north and south.

The ritual focus on scarlet macaws, which are at home in a much warmer climate, was also clearly inherited from the south. Although the birds and their feathers were traded far to the north, Paquimé is the northernmost site at which they were bred.

Some of Paquimé's burial practices — such as interment under the floors of homes, dismemberment of bodies, and use of skulls in rituals — also probably came from Mesoamerica. Many scholars see evidence of a highly hierarchical society at Paquimé, a trait that also would have had more in common with the south than with the north.

Perhaps the most widely held view now is that Paquimé and its leaders had local roots. The powerful Mesoamerican symbols and practices evident in the city may have been adopted by those leaders in order to enhance their prestige and credibility. Influences spread over such long distances for so many centuries that it's even possible that some of the Mesoamerican traits in Paquimé arrived there indirectly, from people farther north.

Sphere of influence

How broad an area fell under Paquimé's influence, and what sort of influence was it? Early studies suggested a large sphere of influence and a tight, hierarchical form of control. But as researchers learn more about other nearby sites, their view of the relationship between the city and its surroundings is changing.

Most now think that the area directly controlled by Paquimé was relatively small, with perhaps a 20-mile radius, and that the city had a looser, more indirect influence over perhaps 25,000 to 40,000 square miles. This sphere of influence or interaction lies in what is now Chihuahua, Texas, and New Mexico, and possibly also Arizona and Sonora. Some researchers concede that "we have no idea how the region might have been organized politically."* Others, while they do propose a specific notion — whether competition between Paquimé and other (as yet undiscovered) local powers, or centralized rule but with a relatively light hand — offer their theories tentatively and look forward to future discoveries in the hundreds of known archaeological sites in the region and — who knows? — in new sites yet to be identified.

One interpretation

Power can come in many forms — military, political, economic, and religious. There is little evidence of a military presence at Paquimé. One recent interpretation[†] suggests a fairly loose form of control, both for Paquimé's internal government and for its influence over the region. Paquimé, these authors argue, was a "mid-level" or "intermediate" society, much less centralized and hierarchical than Mesoamerican states.



T-shaped door

* Schaafsma and Riley, *The Casas Grandes World*, 237.

† Whalen and Minnis, "The Casas Grandes Regional System."

In a society in which military and political control are not firmly established, ritual is often especially important. According to this view, the tremendous store of luxury goods at Paquimé could be evidence, not of a trade hub, but of the center of a system in which power relationships were worked out through gifts and obligations.

Some of the same items that were once interpreted as evidence of a powerful central rule are now seen as suggesting a more decentralized system. The fact that shell and turquoise workshops, as well as bird breeding stations, were spread throughout the city suggests that crafts were organized by families or small guilds rather than centrally controlled. Agricultural improvements (such as irrigation canals and terraces) that were once seen as part of a vast, centralized system, possibly built with conscript labor, have been reinterpreted as a collection of smaller, locally managed projects — still built to serve the city, but voluntarily, by individuals or small groups motivated by economic gain.

While proponents of this view do envision a broad sphere of influence and interaction in the Casas Grandes region, they argue that the bonds between the region and Paquimé were varied and complicated. They do see a central and important role for the city. One type of evidence for this is the fact that, within about a day's walk of Paquimé, none of the many sites discovered so far contain ritual architecture, bird pens, or heavy agricultural infrastructure. At a distance of more than a day's walk, these elements appear again, but on a smaller scale — suggesting a powerful center and several satellites at which important activities could be carried out, for people who couldn't easily reach the center, on a smaller scale.

Trade

There is good evidence for long-distance trade in the prehistoric era between the Southwest/Norte and Mesoamerica. Turquoise from Cerillos in New Mexico has been found as far away as Chichén Itzá on the Yucatán Peninsula. While the details of Paquimé's role are up for debate, it seems clear that it was, at the minimum, an important stop on trade routes stretching north well into the continental interior, west to the Pacific Ocean, east to the Rio Grande and Conchas River, and south to Sinaloa and beyond.*

Into this trade network, Paquimé sent macaw feathers as well as whole birds, pottery, worked shell, turquoise, and possibly more perishable items such as food and textiles. Copper, shells, and macaws came into the city from the west, turkeys and turquoise from the north, and pottery from both north and south.

Of course, just because a trade item traveled from one far-flung spot to another doesn't mean that the same individual carried it the whole way. But ideas, values, and images do travel along trade routes. Scholars once even argued that Paquimé was founded by traders from Mesoamerica,[†] but this view is no longer widely held.

Ideas, values, and images travel along trade routes.

* North-south trade, especially in turquoise, dates back to at least 200 BC, well before the rise of Paquimé.

† Di Peso, *Casas Grandes*.



Aztatlán

There is also evidence for a connection between the Casas Grandes region and what archaeologists call the Aztatlán trading tradition of western Mexico, which in turn was influenced by visitors, possibly traders, from Ecuador. The three areas — Casas Grandes, Aztatlán, and Ecuador — produced similar types of textiles and practiced similar tobacco shamanism.

Neighbors and forebears

Much remains to be learned about Paquimé's relation to other cultures in the deserts and mountains stretching north and south from what is now the US-Mexico border. Where Paquimé people came from is as much of a mystery as where they went when they left. But with all the evidence of far-flung contacts in the region, it is safe to assume that the city didn't develop in isolation.

To many dates mentioned in discussions of the region, it would be safe to tack on the phrase "give or take a couple of centuries"; exact time frames are rare, and estimates are constantly challenged and revised. Take the dates you read here with a large grain of salt.

As mentioned briefly above, there was a modest pit-house settlement at the site before it flowered into the city we know as Paquimé around AD 1200–1400. Many neighboring cultures seem to have flowered and faded a little earlier. This region seems to have seen a great deal of ebb and flow, settlement and abandonment, during the prehistoric era.

Other great ancient cultures in the region include the Hohokam, Anasazi, and Mogollon.*

- The **Hohokam** lived in what is now central and southern Arizona. They are perhaps best known for their sophisticated irrigation systems — hundreds of miles of exceptionally well-engineered canals transporting water from the Salt and Gila Rivers, some of which were later discovered and re-used by European settlers. Some Hohokam

*

Farther east, near present-day St. Louis, Missouri, Cahokia — the largest known city north of Mexico in pre-European days — experienced an equally mysterious growth and decline at about the same time.

settlements, such as Snaketown (near present-day Phoenix), had Mesoamerican-style ball courts, and Mesoamerican imports such as copper bells and macaws have been found there. The Hohokam produced pottery and shell jewelry. They used an etching process to decorate shells, with fermented cactus juice as the acid, long before Europeans discovered a similar technique.

- The **Anasazi** lived to the north and west, in what is now the Four Corners region of Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico. One of their most well-known settlements, at Chaco Canyon, also boasted an elaborate irrigation system, along with large, multistoried buildings and circular underground kivas (ritual spaces). The long, straight, wide roads leading in and out of Chaco (a culture without wheels or pack animals or other obvious need for such grand avenues) present an enduring mystery. Chaco had T-shaped doors and bed platforms much like those in Paquimé. As in Hohokam and Paquimé, copper bells and macaws have been found there. Chaco is believed to have been abandoned by about AD 1130, and the entire Four Corners region by 1300.

One intriguing theory has it that Paquimé was founded — or at least ruled, in its more complex, urban phase — by elite refugees from Chaco Canyon. Chaco's fall seems to have come about shortly before Paquimé's rise; one archaeologist has developed an argument for a Chaco-Paquimé connection based on the fact that the two settlements are closely aligned north-south at longitude 107°57' west.*

- The **Mogollon** people inhabited a broad territory in what is now southern Arizona and New Mexico and northern Sonora and Chihuahua. A subgroup of the Mogollon, the **Mimbres** people, named for the river in southern New Mexico that ran through their homeland, built what appear to be the first (fairly primitive) multi-unit Pueblo-style homes in the region. The Mimbres are best known for producing exquisite pottery with vibrant, finely worked depictions of people and animals, including faraway animals such as armadillos and macaws. Some Mimbres motifs find an echo in Paquimé pottery; but most of the evidence for contact between the two cultures dates to the Viejo period, before the pit-house village became the city of Paquimé.

The Mimbres culture, too, appears to have collapsed in the mid-12th century. Some scholars believe that Mimbres people — after leaving their original homes and spending years in desert sites such as Black Mountain, near Deming, New Mexico — moved south to Paquimé.

While terms like Mimbres and Anasazi can be helpful in organizing our thoughts about the past, there's nothing absolute or infallible about them. All these terms were made up by scholars centuries after the people themselves had come and gone. All they really reflect are differences that researchers believe they have identified in the ways people lived — their pottery, architecture, burial practices, and the like.

* Lekson, *A History of the Ancient Southwest*. Lekson discusses this theory in more detail in *The Chaco Meridian: Centers of Political Power in the Ancient Southwest* (AltaMira Press, 1999).

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Today

Paquimé is now home to the world-class Museo de las Culturas del Norte. The Casas Grandes region, which was long somewhat neglected by archaeologists — at least compared to areas farther north and south — is the focus of a number of ongoing studies seeking clues not only to how life was lived at Paquimé but also to how the city related to the outside world and what its role was in the region.

Earlier theories — that the city was founded by powerful emissaries from the south and run in a centralized, authoritarian way, using slave labor to build the irrigation system and the imposing public architecture — have given way to a growing belief that Paquimé was a local phenomenon, perhaps influenced by southern and western Mexico, with an elite that drew on symbols and practices from those prestigious places to reinforce its own power, but was not ruled by them. Others suggest that a powerful spiritual leader arriving from outside might have inspired the city to adopt new practices and symbols.

Other questions remain more unsettled — even the question of how big Paquimé was (a large area believed to contain more ruins has not been excavated). How far did Paquimé's influence reach, and what kind of influence was it? Was it a center for manufacturing? trade? religion? Was government — within the city, and to whatever extent it reached out into the region — centralized and hierarchical, or did it take a looser form? Was the city's end as abrupt and violent as it appears to many to have been? The dates for Paquimé's emergence, growth, and decline, like those for most other groups in the area, are still uncertain.

What evidence does exist can often be interpreted in more than one way. Ball courts could be a sign of a stable, well-organized society or of intense political competition (remember that ball games were serious affairs). Nearby ruins could have been satellites of Paquimé or peers competing for power. Great amounts of luxury goods could be a sign of wealth and success — or of political instability and rivalry that led to a greater need for ritual gifts.

Shaman's pipes and other ritual items were found on the stairs of the House of the Well; was that house a ritual center? Were the items dumped on the stairs by attackers? Or had the building or the rituals (or both) fallen into disuse? Did people whose bodies were found in collapsed buildings die suddenly as the city met a cataclysmic end? Or had buildings that no longer served their original purpose become burial grounds, either during Paquimé's declining years or after its abandonment?

Evidence of connections between people of the Casas Grandes region and others far to the north, west, and south — trade goods, artistic techniques, tribal legends, language patterns, even DNA — paint an intriguing but maddeningly incomplete picture. Even today, long-dead artisans are touching new hearts and minds with the pots and sculptures and other fine work they left behind. But when we look at these things, are the thoughts and

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feelings they evoke in us at all similar to what they inspired in the people for whom they were made seven centuries ago?

These graceful, silent ruins inspire questions not only about the past but also about the future. What will our world look like to the people who come after us? Seven hundred years from now, which of our belongings will they put in their museums? Will they know what was funny and what was serious to us, scary and safe, sublime and tacky?

What will we leave behind? What are we putting in motion now that might endure, perhaps in some unanticipated form, long after we are gone?

Appreciating Paquimé means being open to mystery — and mystery is present there in ample supply.

Mound of the Serpent,
facing Casas Grandes town



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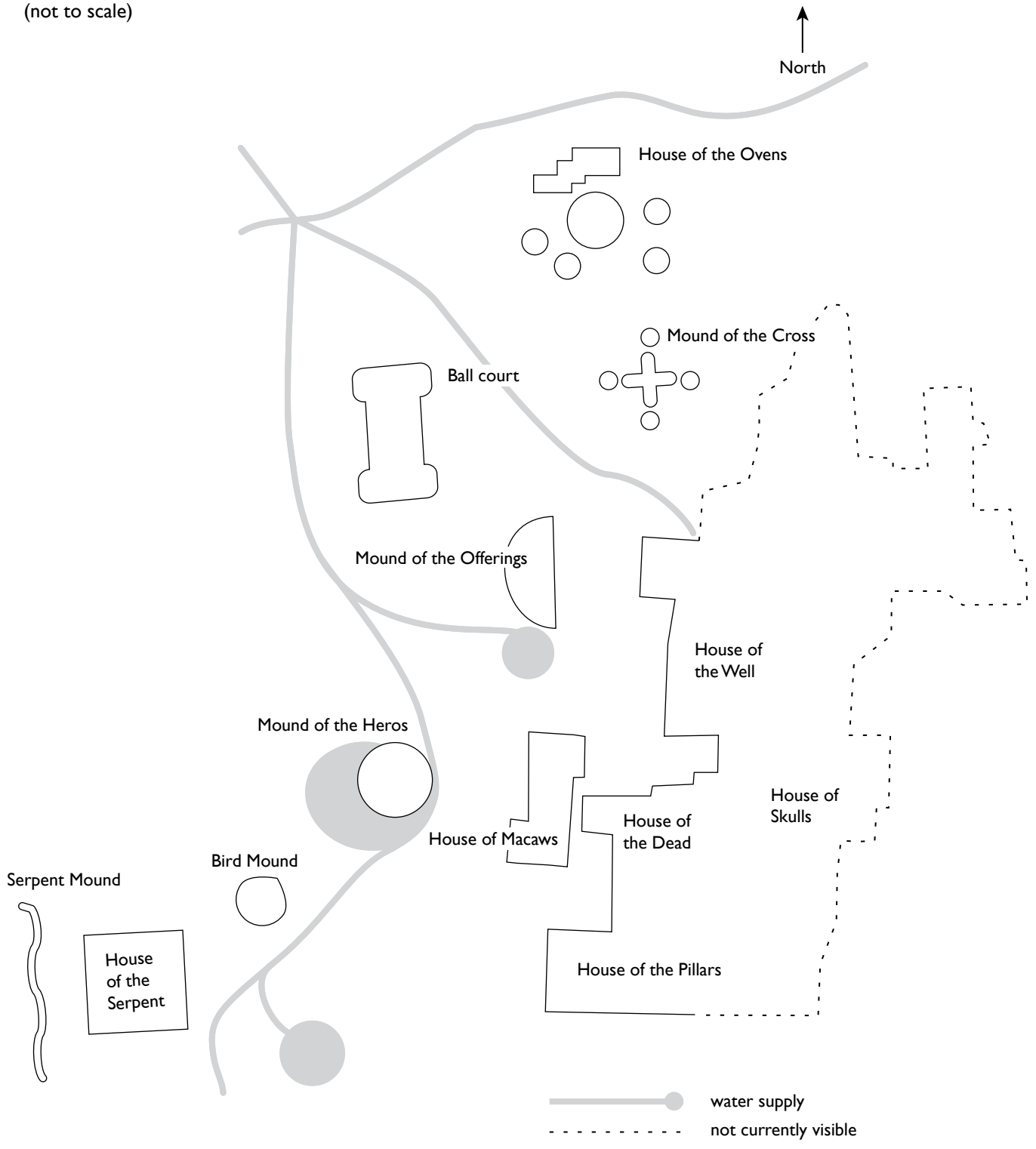
Thanks also to Luis Benavidez (<http://www.thepinkstoremexico.com>), tour director extraordinaire and expert in all things chihuahuense, and to his colleagues at la Tienda Rosa in Puerto Palomas, que son muy bien chidos.

All remaining errors are, of course, the author's own.

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Simplified site map

(not to scale)



Site map notes

House of Ovens

A single-story house sits behind four pits used for baking agave. They may have been placed in this location so that the smoke would blow away from the city.

Mound of the Cross

The four arms of the cross point just slightly off the four cardinal compass directions. This structure may have had a religious significance.

Ball court

Paquimé had three ceremonial ball courts; this is the only one that is easily viewable today. There is another ball court inside the House of the Pillars, and a third, badly eroded, south of the public area.

Mound of Offerings

Inside this structure are three elite burials and a temple area with sacred items. An elaborate ramp led up to it from the central marketplace.

Mound of the Heroes

Also fronting on the central marketplace, this structure was once four meters high, but looters destroyed most of the summit. Archaeologists believe it may have been part of Paquimé's communication system, because it was once covered by ash and is in line of sight with the signal tower at the top of Cerro Moctezuma. Eighty-five soldiers who died during a battle of the Mexican Revolution are buried inside the mound.

Mound of the Bird and Serpent Mound

Bird and snake images appear to have had a strong religious significance not only in Casas Grandes but far to the north and south as well. Birds and snakes also appear frequently on Casas Grandes pottery.

House of the Serpent

This house was so named because of its nearness to the Serpent Mound. Macaws and turkeys were raised here. There is some evidence that people tried to take refuge here during Paquimé's final days but were overcome and killed.

House of Macaws

This structure had a courtyard with nesting boxes as well as single-story room blocks for the people

who raised the macaws. At one point it had a formal entrance adjoining the marketplace, but this was later sealed and a small entry on the east side was used instead. It is not the only macaw-raising site in Paquimé.

• • •

These buildings were named by 20th-century archaeologists and not by Paquimé's original inhabitants. Those described above are relatively small, free-standing structures. Those described below are part of a large, interconnected structure with several internal plazas that archaeologists dubbed the "high-rise apartment building."

• • •

House of the Dead

Priests lived here who specialized in burial rituals and possibly in raising turkeys for sacrifice. The many broken hand drums and headless turkeys found here are believed to have been used in funeral rites.

House of Pillars

This building was named for its elegant columns. At its peak, less than half of it was residential; the rest was made up of what Di Peso (1974, p. 394) called "conspicuously grand" ceremonial and public spaces, which became "ramshackle" living spaces near the end.

House of Skulls

This was one of the more modest residential areas. In one of the rooms, several "trophy" skulls were discovered hanging from the ceiling.

House of the Well

Stairs led down to the well for which this house is named, 46 feet below the plaza level, dug deep to access the low water table and perhaps to provide a secure water supply during a siege. Hints of the building's ritual importance include a human skull cap embedded in the floor in one of the rooms, and a number of copper bells, beads, and small effigies on the stairs leading down to the well. The presence of a sweat bath, high-quality water and sewer lines, and a well-stocked warehouse suggest that members of Paquimé's elite lived here.