



# Ornaments as socially valuable objects: Jewelry and identity in the Chaco and post-Chaco worlds



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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between identity and demographic reorganization through an examination of the extent to which Chacoan identity and practice, as demonstrated by the social values attributed to ornaments at Pueblo Bonito during the cultural florescence at Chaco Canyon (A.D. 900–1130), were maintained or transformed by the post-Chaco period inhabitants of Aztec's West Ruin (A.D. 1140–1290s). The study includes the analysis of the large ornament assemblages from both of these sites, with an emphasis on identifying socially significant dimensions of physical variation through a contextual approach. Utilizing the concepts of value gradations, inalienability, and structured deposition, both similarities and differences in the social use and potential meaning of ornaments at the two sites are identified. Based on similarities in the attributes of ornaments associated with structured ritual deposits and high-status interments, it appears that the residents of Aztec Ruin continued to participate in at least some elements of the Chacoan ritual-ideological complex. I suggest that the depositional practices associated with these socially valuable goods served as citations or references to Chacoan cosmology and the powerful leaders and/or ancestors connected to Pueblo Bonito. Local leaders at Aztec Ruin may have used these references to legitimize their authority by affirming real or reconstructed historical links to Chaco Canyon.

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## 1. Introduction

The prehistory of the American Southwest is marked by periods of demographic upheaval and attendant social and settlement reorganization. Such dynamic periods of abandonment, population movement, and reorganization are generally thought to entail social disruption and structural change, including the redefinition of identity. Central components of this renegotiation of identity are transformations in both social relationships and ritual practice linked to the failure and rejection of previously held ideologies, the adoption of the ideologies of other communities or groups, and/or the appearance of new integrative ideologies (Adams, 1991; Aldenderfer, 1993; Cordell, 1995; Crown, 1994; Nelson and Schachner, 2002; Schachner, 2001; Ware and Blinman, 2000).

The decline of the regional system centered on Chaco Canyon, beginning in the early A.D. 1100s and ending circa A.D. 1130–1150, coincides with a period of demographic upheaval within the San Juan Basin. An important aspect of the subsequent population reorganization was the expansion of Aztec Ruin, a Chacoan great house located 50 km to the north on the lower Animas River

in the Totah or Middle San Juan district. There is much debate surrounding the relationship, if any, between Aztec Ruin and Chaco Canyon during and following the decline of the central canyon communities (Clark and Reed, 2011; Lekson et al., 2006; P. Reed, 2008, 2011; Wills, 2009). Researchers argue variously that the residents of post-Chaco Aztec Ruin (A.D. 1140–1290s) were related to populations from Chaco Canyon (Durand et al., 2010; Lekson, 1999; Van Dyke, 2008; Vivian, 1990; Washburn, 2008; Webster, 2008), indigenous inhabitants of the Totah area (Rohn, 1989), migrants from the Mesa Verde and Northern San Juan areas (Adams, 2008; Morris, 1919; Brown et al., 2008; Clark and Reed, 2011; Windes and Bacha, 2006), or some combination of all these (Glowacki, 2006; L. Reed, 2008; P. Reed, 2011; Stein and McKenna, 1988). Several researchers have suggested that the post-Chaco residents of Aztec Ruin continued to associate themselves with Chaco through continuation of the Chacoan ceremonial order (e.g. Lekson et al., 2006, ed.; Toll, 2006; Webster, 2008) or the “Chacoan ritual-ideological complex” (Lipe, 2006). The persistence of Chacoan traits in post-Chacoan communities in other parts of the San Juan Basin has also been interpreted as evidence for revitalization or continuation, to varying degrees, of Chacoan ideology and ritual practices (e.g., Kintigh et al., 1996; Lekson, 1999).

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Transformations in identity are particularly pronounced in the use and meaning of socially valuable goods—objects that are embedded within social transactions and embody symbols of identity, including cultural and/or sacred principles and values (Lesure, 1999:25; Spielmann, 2002). Ornaments, both those used for personal adornment and those used in ritual contexts, comprise a class of objects that appear to have been symbolic and valuable in Chacoan society. In this paper, I explore the relationship between identity and demographic reorganization through an examination of the extent to which elements of Chacoan identity and practice, as demonstrated by the social values attributed to ornaments at Pueblo Bonito during the Chaco florescence, were maintained or transformed by the post-Chaco period inhabitants of Aztec Ruin. Specifically, I attempt to identify socially significant dimensions of physical variation in ornaments by utilizing the concepts of value gradations, object biography, alienability, partibility, and structured deposition (Chapman, 2000; Fowler, 2004; Gosden and Marshall, 1999; Lesure, 1999; Mills, 2004, 2008; Walker, 1995; Weiner, 1992, 1994).

## 2. Chaco Canyon

During the eleventh and early twelfth centuries, Chaco Canyon served as a major ritual and sociopolitical center in the San Juan Basin of northwestern New Mexico (Fig. 1). The most visible hallmarks of Chacoan communities are great houses—massive structures with distinctive masonry, formal layouts, and associated great kivas (Lekson, 1991). These structures, which are often associated with road segments, map out the geographically known extent of Chacoan influence (Judge, 1989, 1991; Kantner and Kintigh, 2006; Neitzel, 1989; Powers et al., 1983). Although first emerging in other portions of the San Juan Basin during the Pueblo I period (Lipe, 2006; Wilshusen and Van Dyke, 2006), the architectural elements associated with this system appeared in Chaco Canyon during the Early Bonito phase (A.D. 850/900–1020). In the Classic Bonito phase (A.D. 1020–1115), encompassing the peak of the system, Chacoan traits were formalized and outlying great house construction reached its farthest extent (Judge, 1989). During the Late Bonito phase (A.D. 1115–1140), the Chacoan system appears to have undergone dramatic reorganization. The architectural characteristics displayed in both new buildings and in the remodeling of existing structures during this time resemble those seen in the northern San Juan Basin (Sebastian, 1992; Van Dyke, 2004; Vivian and Mathews, 1965; Wills, 2009). Widespread occupation diminished markedly after A.D. 1120/1130, and the position of the canyon as a regional center deteriorated (Judge and Cordell, 2006; Kantner, 1996, 2004; Sebastian, 1992, 2006).

The Chaco system has been the subject of archaeological research for over a century, but there is still much disagreement over the level of sociopolitical organization it may represent, the functions of great houses and roads, the relationships between the residents of the central canyon to those of outliers, and the nature and areal extent of Chacoan cultural influence and contact. The current, and general, consensus among Chacoan researchers is that Chaco Canyon was a center for ceremonial activity to some degree (Earle, 2001; Kantner, 2004; Lekson et al., 2006; Mills, 2002; Stein and Fowler, 1996; Stein and Lekson, 1992; Renfrew, 2001; Yoffee, 2001). Some researchers implicate the canyon's ritual importance as the major underlying factor in the development and functioning of the Chacoan system. For example, Renfrew (2001) calls Chaco a "location of high devotional expression" at which the production and consumption of goods was of primarily ritual significance, a view upheld by Toll (2006). Recent literature also tends to support Judge's (1989) suggestion that the canyon was a pilgrimage destination for populations from surrounding regions (Judge and

Cordell, 2006; Kantner, 2004; Lipe, 2006; Malville and Malville, 2001; Mills, 2002:79; Toll, 2006). Although some have interpreted the large core canyon great houses as primarily non-residential, built to accommodate periodic influxes of pilgrims and a small permanent population of ritual specialists, more recent research is revealing that these structures were occupied relatively intensively. Based on re-examination of archaeological data from the Pueblo Alto trash mounds, Wills (2001) and Plog and Watson (2012) argue that the midden contents are most consistent with domestic consumption, episodes of construction, and smaller-scale feasting and ritual events. This is also supported by new evidence from the Pueblo Bonito middens (Crown, 2016; Wills et al., 2016).

Pueblo Bonito, the largest Chacoan great house, appears to represent the ceremonial and/or political hub of the Chacoan system (Neitzel, 2003). The massive structure, including as many as 800 rooms and four stories, is located within a cluster of five other large great houses in the central canyon bottom (Fig. 2). In conjunction with other structures in the canyon, Pueblo Bonito is part of a formal built landscape, the layout of which some researchers suggest may be related to the canyon's ideological significance (Farmer, 2003; Fritz, 1978; Lekson et al., 2006; Renfrew, 2001; Stein and Lekson, 1992; Sofaer, 1997; Van Dyke, 2008). Excavations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries recovered an astounding quantity of imported and unique items, including objects made from turquoise and shell, copper bells, macaw feathers, and other distinctive objects such as cylinder vessels and ceremonial sticks. Many of these valuable items are associated with burials, caches in rooms, and offerings in kivas (Akins, 1986, 2003; Neitzel, 2003; Mathien, 2003; Mills, 2008). Other great houses also contain some of these items, but none rival Pueblo Bonito in either quantity or concentration. Two main burial clusters, both located in the oldest, north-central portion of the structure, contain the majority of the ornaments and other lavish objects collected. The northern burial cluster includes Rooms 32, 33, 53, and 56 and contains approximately 26 individuals (Akins, 1986, 2003; Crown et al., 2016; Marden, 2011). Room 33, one of the richest collections of burials documented in North America, includes two males (and several other individuals) associated with thousands of ornaments and ceremonial items, among other objects (Pepper, 1920). Based on several lines of evidence, the burial with the most associated offerings (Burial 14) dates to the Pueblo I period, early in the Pueblo Bonito construction sequence (Coltrain et al., 2007; Plog and Heitman, 2010). It appears that the Room 33 crypt remained accessible throughout the occupation of the site, and that offerings were placed in this location for at least 150 years (Judd, 1954; Marden, 2011, 2015; Pepper, 1920; Plog and Heitman, 2010). The western burial cluster is comprised of at least 70 individuals interred within Rooms 320, 326, 329, and 330 (Akins, 2003; Crown et al., 2016; Judd, 1954). Based on biological evidence, the two burial clusters may represent separate lineages or populations (Akins, 1986:75, 2003:101; Schillaci et al., 2001; Schillaci and Stojanowski, 2003). More recently, it has been proposed that these burial clusters may reflect larger social units, such as clans or 'houses' within a house society model (Heitman, 2007; Heitman and Plog, 2005; Mills, 2015; Wills, 2005).

Pueblo Bonito contains 35 kivas of different sizes, including great kivas, court kivas, and room block kivas (Judd, 1954; Mills, 2008; Pepper, 1920; Windes, 2014). Great kivas are the largest of these and contain the most numerous and formal suite of floor features. Ritual deposits, both dedicatory and termination/retirement, are associated with kivas of all sizes at Pueblo Bonito and were commonly placed within wall niches, under floors and vaults, and within pilasters and benches (Judd, 1954). These deposits tend to be somewhat standardized in that they almost all contain ornaments, turquoise, and marine shell; in addition, many also contain

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