

Chaco Digital Initiative. An online archive of archaeological data published by The Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities.*

Reviewed by Andrew I. Duff

Chaco Canyon is a singular place.¹ It continues to resonate in the histories of Pueblo peoples whose ancestors built and occupied the structures in Chaco Canyon in the 9th through 12th centuries. During its occupation, Chaco Canyon rose to a position of prominence and importance, touching the lives of Puebloan people living throughout the Colorado Plateau. Home to several magnificent buildings known as “Great Houses,” and hundreds of smaller residences, Chaco Canyon has also long captured the attention of archaeologists and the public. The Great Houses represent considerable planning and construction energy, and these buildings were modified and expanded over the course of three centuries. Smaller scale structures resembling Canyon Great Houses are found throughout the Colorado Plateau, attesting to the influence or resonance of Chaco in the lives of its contemporaries over a large area. Archaeologists agree that Chaco Canyon became a central location with evidence for periodic gatherings and rituals that likely brought together people from distant areas. They disagree, however, on the mechanisms that lead to this centrality and how widely direct Chacoan influence extended. Ideas vary from those who see the development of a strong political and ritual leadership based in the Canyon that exerted power over distant areas through force and the exchange of rare and precious goods, to those who see Chaco Canyon’s power as based in ritual and a widely shared ideology, its centrality a function of regular pilgrimages made by the devoted and as home to skilled religious practitioners.

This centrality has led to over a century of exploration, speculation, and archaeological research. Extensive excavation of Canyon Great Houses in the 1890s was among the compelling reasons for passage of the Antiquities Act in 1906, providing initial protections for sites on public lands. Chaco Canyon National Monument was established in 1907; it became a National Historical Park in 1980 and a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1987². Systematic archaeological research conducted in the Canyon from the 1890s to the mid-1900s has produced a vast array of archaeological data, providing the rationale for the Chaco Digital Initiative. The Chaco Digital Initiative is a web-based clearinghouse curating data, images, and other materials from these early projects. A two-phase project, the first phase centered on developing an inventory database “designed to track the location of archival materials pertaining to the early projects in Chaco Canyon” and is presently up and running.³ The second phase, slated to appear in 2009, will include a more functional and queryable relational database.

The home page provides a summary of the project structure and goals, with links to key resources. This includes an extensive and detailed bibliography of published and unpublished materials related to Chacoan research, a useful guide to the vast literature that has been generated. A “Chaco Timeline” link provides graphic overviews of temporal trends in architecture, environment, material culture, and subsistence. These color graphics are useful summaries that were published elsewhere, but with small pages and lacking color.

* This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

The “Image Gallery” marks a major contribution to Chacoan scholarship, with access to over 7500 images. These images provide visitors with an unparalleled view of the rich material culture recovered from sites in the Canyon and a window into what early archaeology was like as the discipline developed from its relic-hunting origins to more systematic methods of data collection. Images are searchable by collection, site, or keywords, which can narrow search time for those interested in specific materials. Accessible materials in the searchable database relate primarily to major sites within Chaco Canyon proper, though information and materials from Aztec Ruins are also included. Aztec, a complex of sites related to Chaco Canyon and to later periods, is also a National Monument and is located on the Animas River some 50 miles north of Chaco Canyon.

The “Inventory” link provides access to several searchable databases for retrieval of several different categories of information, and was largely functional at the time of this review, though a few links were not. The database structure requires some practice; they provide a link to an overview of database structure and logic for some help, but trial and error worked too. The database will be expanded in the second phase of the project. A “Maps” link provides a few general locational images and plan views of two sites; hovering and clicking on rooms initiates built in queries that return basic information about records and excavated materials. Plans to add a map of Pueblo Bonito, the largest of the Canyon Great Houses, will dramatically expand this feature. The “Text” link provides access to scanned documents ranging from field excavation notes to published materials since out of print, and is a treasure trove for Chacoan scholars. Detailed descriptions of room contents, stratigraphy, and other otherwise unavailable observations lie buried within these documents, and they are also likely to be useful to those reconstructing detailed histories of these early projects. The final substantive link is “Tree Ring Data,” which lets the user download an Excel spreadsheet detailing all recorded tree-ring dates and related information (species, age, etc.) from sites in Chaco and at Aztec.

The Chaco Digital Initiative makes primary documentation from early archaeological projects conducted in the Canyon accessible to everyone electronically, a major feat and noteworthy contribution. Consolidation of these materials in a single (virtual) location and their availability to all makes it increasingly likely that these resources will be mined by Chacoan scholars in the years to come. The site is not a source for popular access to Chaco Canyon and aspects of the Chaco Phenomenon; these sites are plentiful and several provide useful summaries of the culture history and relationships to regional archaeology. Yet, the site does contain a number of links to some of these other sources and contains some such information internally. The site is primarily a resource for scholars wishing to conduct research using materials from these under-published early excavations at the signal sites in Chaco Canyon. The digital text resources and photos alone make this a valuable resource, with access to primary field notes and other rare documents invaluable, even if it may take time for scholars to make the most of their use. As the second phase comes online, additional materials and greater integration of database entries will only make the site more useful. The web site’s structure is simple, navigation is easy, and the database interface will be relatively familiar to those used to working with online or computerized inventories. The structure and site are likely to remain viable over the longer term, but projects such as these require persistent maintenance and upgrades, and often decline once completed. We can only hope that the Chaco Digital Initiative persists, best ensured by having people explore its contents and making use of them in their own scholarship.

Notes

1. At the time this review was finalized, (July 30, 2009), *Chaco Digital Initiative* could be accessed online at: <http://www.chacoarchive.org/index.html>.
2. National Park Service, "Management," <http://www.nps.gov/chcu/parkmgmt/index.htm> (accessed July 30, 2009).
3. Chaco Digital Initiative, "Inventory Database," http://www.chacoarchive.org/chaco_p1.html (accessed July 30, 2009).

Andrew I. Duff is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Washington State University. An archaeologist specializing in the Southwestern United States prior to European contact, his research focuses on the increasing complexity of social and ritual institutions and on problems of integration and emergent inequality observable as scale increases within the context of middle range societies. He has contributed to numerous journals and edited collections and is the author of Western Pueblo Identities: Regional Interaction, Migration, and Transformation. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002).