

Aztec Ruins

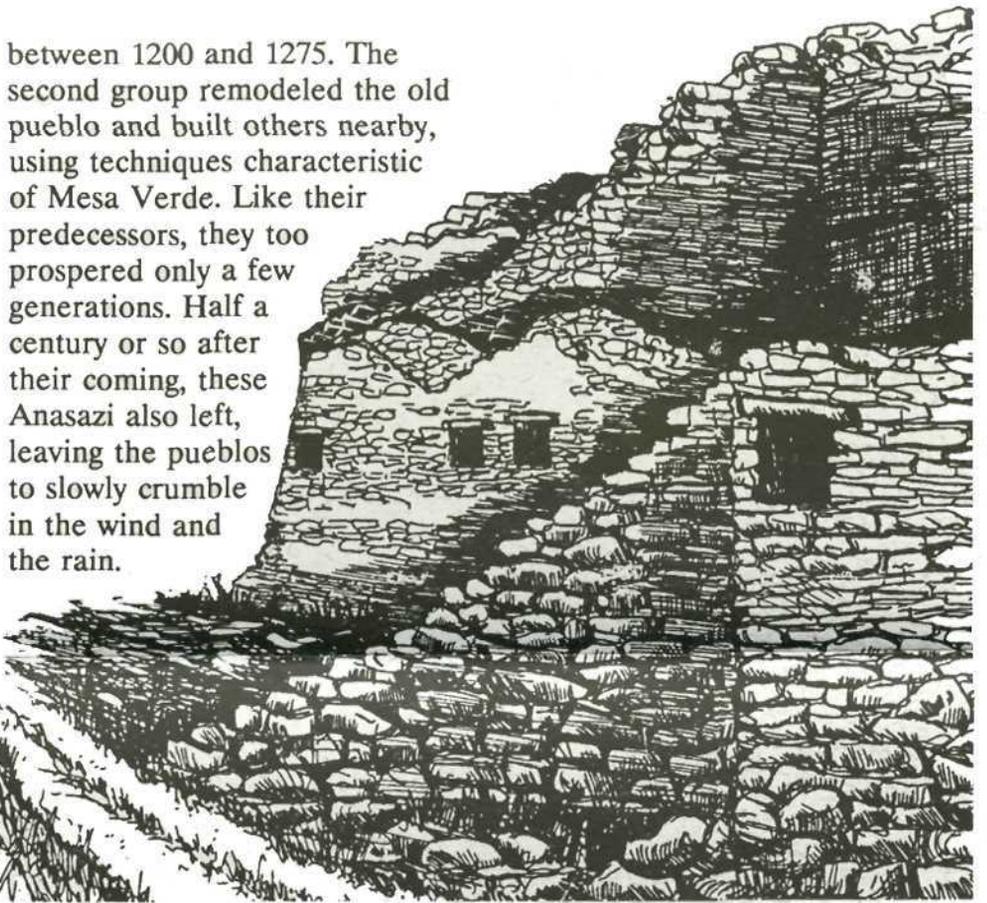
National Monument
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

A Bridge Between Two Cultures

Sixty-five miles south lay Chaco, a sprawling community of large pueblos that flourished between AD 1050 and 1150. The first settlers at Aztec, if not actually Chacoans, were strongly influenced by their ideas about architecture, ceramics, and ceremonies. They built the original pueblo and lived in it for half a century or more before moving on.

A few decades later another people settled here. Also Anasazi, they were culturally akin to the cliff dwellers of Mesa Verde. This cultural center, 40 miles northwest of here, flourished

between 1200 and 1275. The second group remodeled the old pueblo and built others nearby, using techniques characteristic of Mesa Verde. Like their predecessors, they too prospered only a few generations. Half a century or so after their coming, these Anasazi also left, leaving the pueblos to slowly crumble in the wind and the rain.

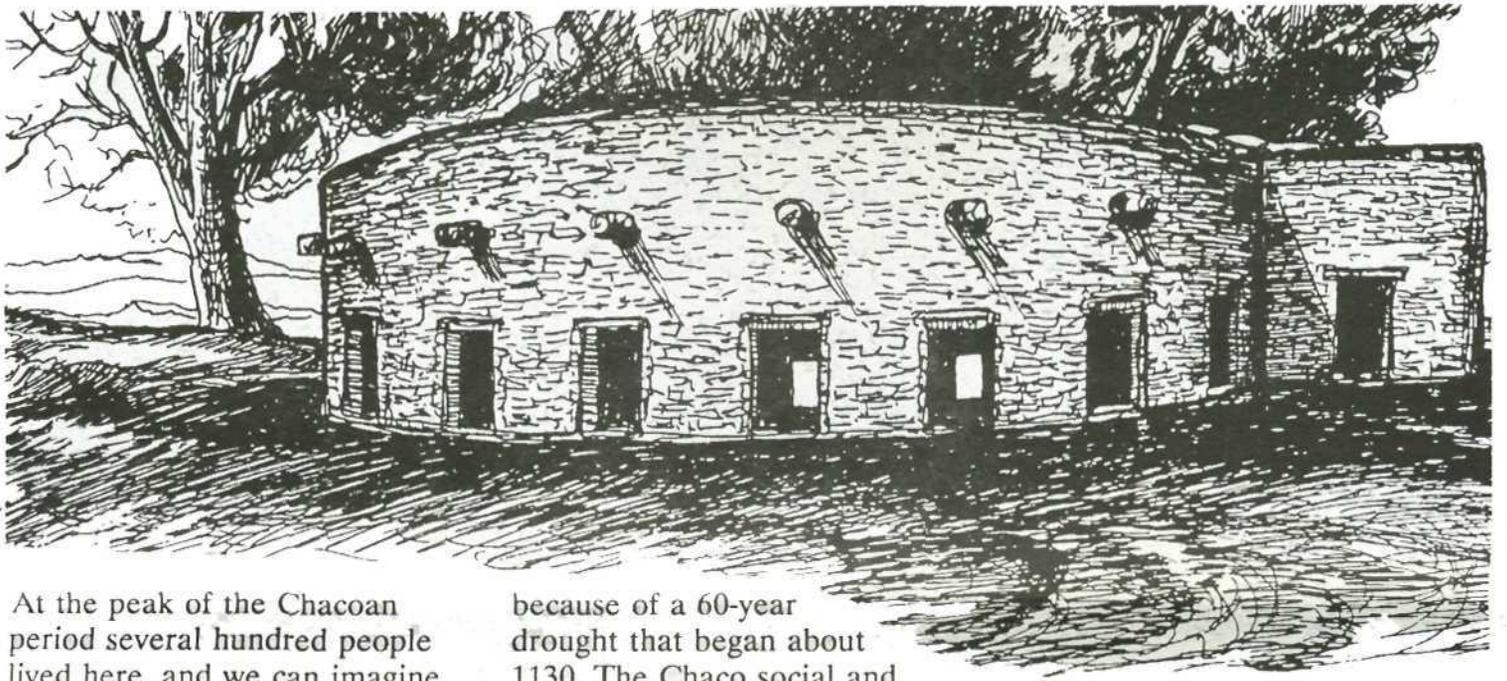


AN ANASAZI TOWN

It is the river that makes this land hospitable. Rising in the San Juan Mountains to the north, the Animas flows year-round across the plains of northwestern New Mexico. Near Aztec it runs through a narrow valley lush with cottonwoods and willows. Farmers have long made a good living raising crops in the valley's fertile bottomlands.

The earliest farmers of the Colorado Plateau were the Anasazi, as they were named by archaeologists; ancestors of today's Puebloan Indians. Besides farming, they are known for their architecture and pottery. Late in the 11th century these people began to build pueblos in this vicinity, including the large multistory building (the West Ruin) on high ground overlooking the river.

Tree-ring comparisons date the major portion of this structure to between AD 1111 and 1115. In construction technique and layout this pueblo resembled the great houses built earlier at Chaco Canyon, indicating a strong cultural link with the builders' southern neighbors. The massive Chacoan walls consisted of a core of unshaped stones cemented with mud and sandwiched between veneers of dressed sandstone laid in patterned courses. About 400 contiguous rooms, three stories high in places, and two dozen kivas (usually circular chambers probably used for ceremonies) enclosed a large central plaza. The rooms had a variety of uses: sleeping quarters, cooking and eating areas, workshops, food and supply storage, and garbage dumps. Room use varied with the needs of the occupants.



At the peak of the Chacoan period several hundred people lived here, and we can imagine the pueblo buzzing with activity on a bright summer day. The women were grinding corn on the rooftops, making baskets and pots, minding the young, plastering walls and repairing them. Along the river some of the men tended crops, while others hunted deer or antelope or small game like rabbit and squirrel. At night the pueblo lay dark and quiet, lit only by small fires flickering here and there.

This settlement prospered for decades as an administrative, trade, and ceremonial center. Activity at Aztec diminished around 1150, perhaps in part

because of a 60-year drought that began about 1130. The Chaco social and economic system no longer had a strong influence over the region. Then about 1225 the town sprang back to life. New inhabitants brought with them the ways of yet another Anasazi farming people: the Mesa Verdeans. The Mesa Verde influence is especially apparent in building construction. The newcomers remodeled the old pueblo, subdividing rooms and adding new ones. As with the earlier inhabitants, the pueblo's rooms were used for working, storage, ceremonies, and refuse disposal. The occupants expanded their daily activities to another pueblo, now called the East Ruin.

Like their predecessors a century before, these people flourished for a time. But once again, the population began to dwindle; Aztec's farmers were gone by 1300. Was it because of drought, depletion of fertile soil, overharvesting of timber, or simply a search for a new homeland? Some people made their way southeast to the better-watered Rio Grande country. Others went south and west into present-day Arizona where their descendants, the Pueblo people, live today. Whatever their reasons for moving on, they left the great pueblos to stand alone against time and the elements.

EXCAVATING THE RUINS

Contrary to the name, these ruins were not built by the Aztecs of central Mexico. The Aztecs lived centuries after the rise and fall of this Anasazi town. Thinking that the Aztecs built the pueblos, early Anglo settlers named the site. The town eventually took its name from the ruins.

Dr. John S. Newberry, a geologist, found the pueblo in a fair state of preservation in 1859. Newberry saw the ruins before vandals and pothunters got to them over the next half century.

Not until 1889, when the site passed into private ownership, did

the pueblo become relatively safe against looting. In 1923 Aztec was declared a national monument.

Earl H. Morris led the first systematic dig at Aztec under the auspices of the American Museum of Natural History. Morris spent seven seasons excavating and stabilizing the West Ruin, the Great Kiva, and a few rooms in the East Ruin. Morris anticipated the refinement of the science of archeology that the decades would bring. He left portions unexcavated for investigation by future archaeologists certain to apply new techniques to the job.

ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The park is northwest of the city of Aztec, near the junction of U.S. 550 and NM 44. The hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, longer during summer. The park is closed December 25th and January 1st.

Aztec Ruins National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is P.O. Box 640, Aztec, NM 87410, is in charge.