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Making Prehistoric Music: Musical Instruments from Ancestral Puebloan Sites

The world of the Ancestral Puebloans, or Anasazi, has been a major research area for archeologists of the Southwest, who have examined the nature and evolution of these prehistoric people from many angles. Emily Brown, a former NPS archeologist, is taking a fresh approach to the Ancestral Puebloans: she is studying the instruments that were used to make music.

For Brown, combining archeology and music was almost inevitable. Her bachelor's degree is a double major in music and anthropology, and her master's and doctorate degrees are in archeology. She classifies herself as an archeomusicologist. Brown finds music a natural gateway into the world of the past because there are no known human societies without music in some form. Instruments are a primary source of music, a frequent component of ritual, which in turn was used for social and political ends.



Decorated gourd rattle from Canyon de Chelly National Monument. Collection of the Western Archeology and Conservation Center. Photo by Emily Brown.

Brown has studied 1,300 ancient musical instruments from 17 national parks in the Southwest, where the Ancestral Puebloans once lived. The time period of her research goes from A.D. 200, the first period from which Brown was able to find instruments, to 1540, when the Spanish entered the region. The majority of these instruments are found in museum collections on the East Coast and in the Southwest, and some are in NPS collections. Though the items from more recent excavations have better documentation, she found that collections from earlier excavations and now housed at the National Museum of Natural History, Washington, DC, the American Museum of Natural History, New York, and the two Peabody Museums in Boston had the more unusual instruments.

What Brown discovered is a surprising range and variety of both materials used and the kind of sounds that could be produced. Falling into the basic percussion and wind categories, the instruments yield a sonic picture that in its own way is as varied as the modern orchestral world of strings, winds, and percussion.

Brown first measured the instruments and developed instrument typologies. Then, she examined anything depicted on the objects themselves as well as musicians portrayed in rock art, kiva murals, and on pottery. Brown also consulted historical and ethnographic sources. These included Spanish accounts of Puebloan music that yielded information on the places where the ritual performances took place, such as plazas and kivas, and who the performers were. Then, she analyzed the materials in archeological terms, looking at the distribution, provenience, and contextual information for each site. Architectural features of a site were of particular interest since they might offer clues about where and how the instruments were used.

Brown did not actually play any of the instruments. "Curators would frown on the hot, moist air and vibrations going into objects in their care," said Brown. But, she found that a great deal of sound information was gained simply by gently examining them, turning over small bells, for example, or handling a kiva bell made out of resonant volcanic rock called phonolite. And, she made replicas—flutes made from turkey bones.

Her inventory conjures up a vivid sound world that includes flutes and whistles made of wood, reed, and bone from a wide variety of species such as turkey, Canada goose, whistling swan, eagles, fox, and bobcat. Bells were made from copper and clay. So-called kiva bells were large suspended stones that resonated when struck. Rattles were divided into two categories—tinklers and rattlers. Tinklers referred to objects that could be strung on a string, like seashells, walnut shells, pieces of petrified wood, or hooves. Rattlers referred to cases with things inside to shake, like gourds with dried seeds inside or leather cases stretched around

wooden frames filled with seeds or small stones. Brown also studied delicate, small-scale rattles made of cocoons and the tube-shaped nests of trapdoor spiders that could be filled with little seeds. Rasps—pieces of wood or bone with a serrated edge yielding a percussive sound when rubbed with another stick or bone—were also examined. There were trumpets made from large shells and a possible wooden bull roarer as well. She also points out that people can sing, whistle, clap, and make other kinds of sounds without the aid of musical instruments of any kind.



Tubular bone whistles from Sapawe Pueblo. Collection of the Maxwell Museum. Photo by Emily Brown.

Curiously, she found no physical evidence of drums, which are ubiquitous in Pueblo culture today. Drums made from pottery or baskets might not be recognized as instruments. Brown asks, "Is there a long tradition [of drumming] and we archeologists just are not seeing it? Or, are they really a much more modern invention or introduction and, if so, how did that happen?"

Apart from foot drums, the term given to trenches found in kivas that were covered with a board that was danced on, no drums have ever been found in the prehistoric Southwest. Brown has checked various sources in the archeological record, including rock art. She has found many images of the little flute player popularly known as Kokopelli and depictions of people carrying rattles and shell tinklers, but she has never found an image of a drum.

Having documented and classified this large body of instruments, Brown then applied that data to questions of authority and leadership among the Ancestral Puebloans. Would the instruments and the settings in which they were used yield possible connections between music and ritual, political and social life?

The earliest instruments, wood and reed flutes of the Basketmaker period (A.D. 400-700), were few in number and most of them came from small village sites in northeastern Arizona. There are some rock art sites from this period depicting flute players with shamanic characteristics like flying or wobbly legs. She concluded that a few shamans in the society probably used the instruments.

Brown found less than a dozen instruments dating to the Pueblo I period (A.D. 700-900). These instruments were found primarily in the Mesa Verde region in southwestern Colorado. It was a period when people were settling down, becoming more agricultural, and it marked the first appearance of foot drums. Brown theorized that in the process of settling down, questions of land tenure and access to resources would arise and that it might be useful to have connections to the land in your mythology and rituals. In the 1980s archeologist Richard Wilshusen interpreted foot drums as representing sipapus, the holes where Pueblo ancestors emerged into this world according to the origin myth. There is also ethnographic evidence that dancing on the foot drums was viewed as a way of communicating with ancestors in the underworld.

The Pueblo II period (A.D. 900-1150) marks a florescence of Ancestral Pueblo culture, epitomized by the civilization at Chaco Canyon in northwestern New Mexico. Designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987, Chaco Culture National Historical Park contains many spectacular sites, some with vast plazas and great kivas. According to archeological interpretations, Ancestral Pueblo social organization became more complex, a development that Brown finds reflected in a florescence of new instruments. Their sonic power or visual appeal led her to theorize that they were used for public ritual spectacle as well as in the kivas.

Some, like conch shell trumpets, copper bells, and shell tinklers imported on trade routes from Mexico, were valued items. Based on the volume of the modern shell trumpets played by Tibetans, Pacific Islanders, and other cultures, Brown surmises that shell trumpets could have sent loud waves of sound across the plazas, while the copper bells, often found associated with beads, and shell tinklers were eye-catching musical additions to costumes.

There were also elaborate versions of earlier instruments, notably the wooden flutes. At Chaco Canyon, they are decorated with painted geometric designs and carved animals, and one example was more than three feet long. They were visually arresting, both in their size and their decorations though their pitches would have been low and relatively quiet.

Brown theorizes that these flutes could have been used to enrich the spectacle and also to invoke the past and thus add the weight of tradition to Chaco rituals. Foot drums, which the Ancestral Puebloans continued to use, could have served a similar purpose.

Brown noted that the Chaco burials in which instruments were found contained more grave goods than any other burials uncovered in the Southwest. They included “thousands and thousands of pieces of turquoise, lots of pottery, and carved wooden staffs that modern Hopis recognize as being ritual objects,” she said. Brown posits a close correlation between the people buried with so many luxury and ritual items and the music, which might have been either for secular or ritual performance. “Chaco [culture] was all about spectacle,” explained Brown. “It’s the people at the top who are putting these things on and they have either the power or means to. And that’s what these [instruments] are being used for.”

Early in the Pueblo III period (A.D. 1150-1300) Chaco Canyon and its outliers were abandoned due to an extended drought. The disruption is reflected in the instruments. Wooden flutes disappear altogether and shell trumpets and copper bells vanish from Chaco and places where Chacoan influence spread. Brown theorizes that since these instruments had been significant components of ritual spectacle at Chaco, their absence points to a rejection of Chacoan ideology. In her view, “Whatever rituals and ideologies were in place at Chaco ultimately didn’t meet people’s needs during the great droughts.”

By A.D. 1400 the Ancestral Puebloans had regrouped along the Rio Grande Valley, western New Mexico, and eastern Arizona, where their modern Pueblo descendants live. Brown theorizes that a surge in the number and types of instruments and the expanded variety of materials from which they were made reflect the rise of new ritual practices. Rasps, clay bells, kiva bells, eagle bone flutes, and certain kinds of rattles and whistles appear for the first time. Some instruments, like rattles and tinklers, would have been easy to make and play. Others, like eagle bone flutes, were more difficult to play or construct, or the materials they were made from were hard to obtain. Elaborate kiva murals with people carrying instruments offered additional indications of an efflorescence of ceremony.

Brown also noted architectural differences between the Pueblo IV pueblos and those from previous times, particularly a shift in the kivas, which overall are much reduced in number. Whereas before communities were composed of roomblocks associated with individual kivas, there were now big, rectangular plazas surrounded by large roomblocks with kivas in the plaza. It was an arrangement where certain very public dances took place in the large plazas and a tradition of secrecy surrounded the most sacred knowledge of rituals performed in kivas.

Brown theorizes that community leaders used kiva fraternities with specialized ritual knowledge coupled with large, community-wide ceremonies as a means of organizing and knitting together these large pueblos. In her view, these leaders “acquired and maintained their personal, social, and political power by keeping their sacred knowledge very secret and by having, for example, only certain people be able to play these eagle bone flutes. Whereas some of these other rattles and things that are pretty easy to make and play—many more people could use them in the public dances in the plazas.”

Besides giving us a better understanding of the way that music supported social and political power through ritual, Brown hopes that her work will benefit the public at large. Her research adds a new dimension to our knowledge and gives a more vivid sense of Ancestral Pueblo life. Brown hopes to break through the silence of the past, and make ancient music come alive.

From article by Joanne Sheehy Hoover, published in American Archaeology, Winter 2004-2005. Posted with the permission of the editor and the author.



Rattle of Arizona walnut shells from Antelope House, Canyon de Chelly National Monument. Collection of the Western Archeological and Conservation Center. Photo by Emily Brown.

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