

A Retrospective on the Four Corners Archeological Program

The Dolores Archaeological Project (DAP) was one of the largest cultural resources mitigation programs in American history. It spans a time frame of approximately 25 years at a cost of approximately \$25 million. The initial surveys in the 1970s for the Dolores Water Project indicated large numbers of complex and well-preserved archeological sites would be impacted by project construction. Therefore, in 1980, Congress passed legislation allowing for 4% of authorized project costs to be dedicated to the recovery and preservation of archeological materials.¹ This not only expedited construction of the water project, but was an opportunity to transcend the “salvage” mentality that was so pervasive in cultural resources management in the mid-to-late 1970s. Indeed, the work conducted by the University of Colorado under the direction of David Breternitz and William Lipe at McPhee Reservoir (typically called the Reservoir Dolores Archaeological Program or RDAP), and continuing with the efforts of the archeologists cited presently, set the standard for subsequent large-scale archeological mitigation in the Southwest.

The DAP occurs in the Colorado portion of the Northern San Juan Region, an area best known for its extensive Pueblo II and Pueblo III Anasazi or, if you prefer, Ancestral Pueblo ruins. This paper emphasizes DAP data recovery conducted after the conclusion of mitigation for RDAP. To reduce confusion, I will refer to the post-RDAP collectively as the Four Corners Program.

Beginning in 1983, a series of consecutive contracts with private consulting firms was issued for the Four Corners Program. By 1995, fieldwork was complete.

In comparison to the RDAP which conducted excavations at 101 sites centered within the McPhee Reservoir takeline (see the article by Lipe in this issue), the Four Corners Program conducted excavations at 145 sites along a 60-mile arc which extends from the Utah border south of Sleeping Ute Mountain to Dove Creek and Hovenweep. While the RDAP’s primary contributions were to the understanding of late Basketmaker III/Pueblo I and historic Euroamerican occupation of the Dolores River valley, the Four Corners Program’s significant contributions are to the Late Archaic/Basketmaker II, Basketmaker III, Pueblo III, and historic Ute/Navajo periods. The absence of early Pueblo II components reinforced RDAP findings that a brief exodus occurred in this part of the Northern San Juan Region in the early part of the 10th century.

As another function of a project configuration, the Four Corners Program utilized site-specific research designs and intensive data recovery, while the RDAP employed a broad-based research design and extensive sample excavation strategies. Both approaches have their advantages

Conservators applying consolidant to Mural Section IV in Pitstructure 6, Knobby Knee Stockade.



and disadvantages. While the RDAP enabled examination of community systems and settlement within a large contiguous area, the Four Corners Program provided a cross-section of an extended area and enabled the examination of activity areas within sites. Therefore, the Four Corners Program complemented the RDAP in terms of the cultural/temporal manifestations investigated and the methodology employed.

The following is a summary of what I consider to be the most significant findings of the Four Corners Program, or what has piqued my interest the most. This program intersects with three (southwestern, northern, and Mesa Verde core) of the four subdivisions of the Northern San Juan Region as defined by Fuller.² Below are the primary findings in chronological order.

**Late Archaic/Early Basketmaker II—
Land Use on the Ute Mountain
Piedmont (500 BC–AD 100)**

Among the 21 sites with Late Archaic and/or Early Basketmaker II components investigated during the Four Corners Program, the most significant is 5MT10525, excavated by Soil

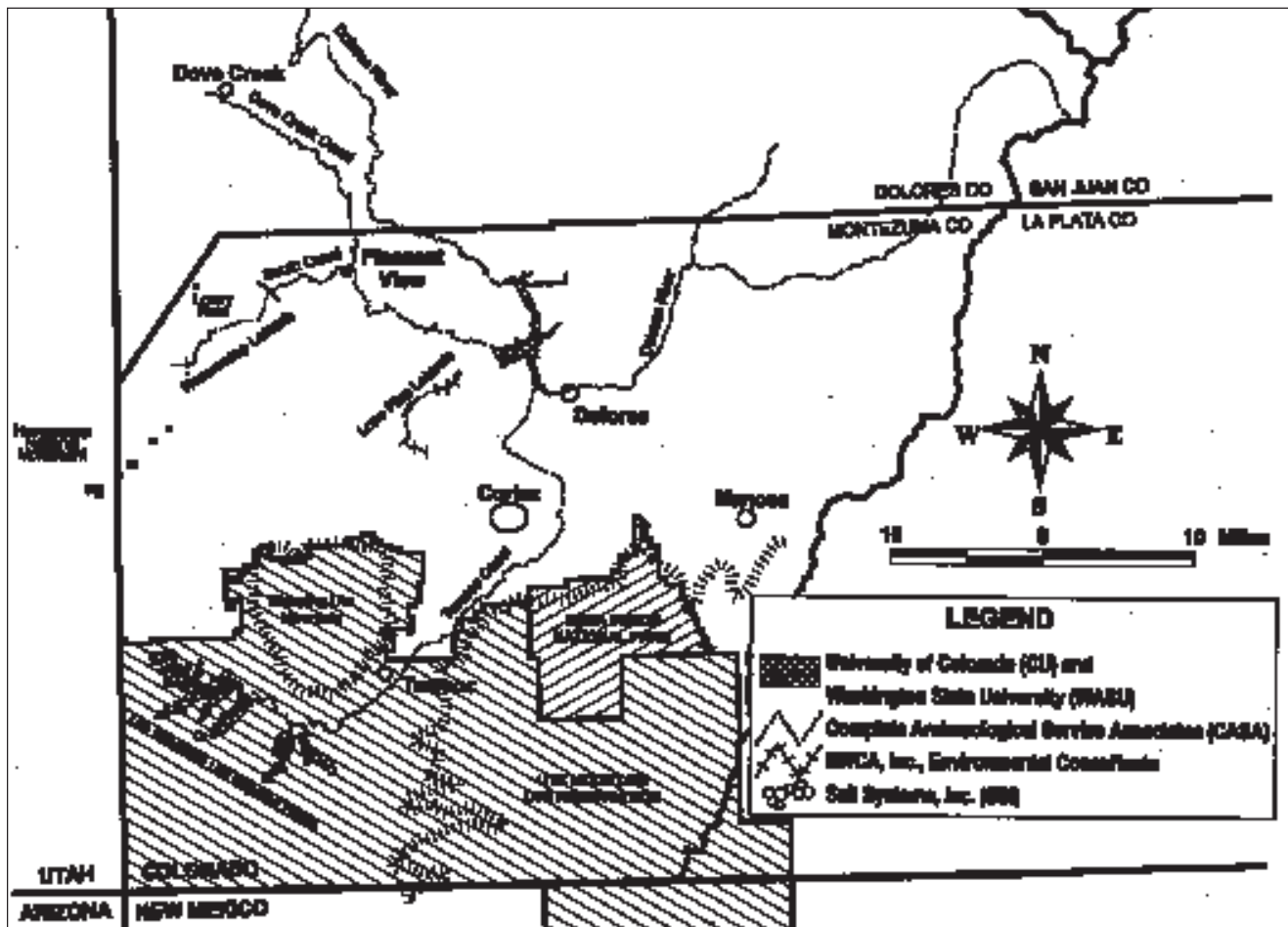
Systems, Inc. (SSI), consultant to the Ute Mountain Tribe, on the southern piedmont of Sleeping Ute Mountain. It is the earliest site with pithouse architecture yet found in the southwestern corner of Colorado. While radiocarbon dates (between 405 and 75 BC) are within the range of Basketmaker II, the En Medio Phase projectile point assemblage and lack of cultigens suggest that the site was possibly occupied by Late Archaic peoples.

This site raises new questions on land-use patterns and seasonality for the Late Archaic/Early Basketmaker II Period. The permanent architecture, artifact assemblage, and the presence of an interior hearth imply the site may have been occupied in cold weather months.³ This type of land-use pattern may have set the stage for the beginnings of horticulture.

**Stockaded Basketmaker III—Sites on
the Northern Periphery (AD 600–700)**

An unusual concentration of sites with stockaded features was excavated on the northern periphery of the Northern San Juan Region by Complete Archaeological Service Associates

Location map for the Dolores Archaeological Program. Bureau of Reclamation map.



(CASA) and SWCA, Inc. All together, 11 Basketmaker III sites with stockades or possible stockades have been identified within a 10-mile radius of Pleasant View, Colorado. Stockades are inferred by a series of postholes which encircle the central pitstructures. They are presumably latticework of small poles and brush woven into and supported by closely spaced posts.

A variety of theories exist that explain the function and distribution of these features. Suggestions have ranged from such mundane tasks as turkey management, containment of children and dogs, or midden garden enclosures, to defensive fortifications for pioneering settlements on the northern frontier.⁴

The location and condition of this cluster of stockaded sites appear to support the latter suggestion for the Basketmaker III period. Chenault and Motsinger cite the "... extensive burning and rich artifact assemblages ..." at these sites as evidence that "... warfare is the best explanation for their destruction."⁵ Since the Basketmaker III Period represents the earliest colonization of this area it is likely that nomadic groups were displaced, which may have led to conflict.

This may be some of the earliest direct evidence of warfare in the pre-Puebloan Northern Southwest. The phenomena of burned and stockaded Basketmaker III hamlets are now well recognized and a large contribution has been made to the understanding of early colonization (and the limits thereof) in the Northern San Juan Region.

Evidence of Cannibalism at Early Pueblo III Sites (AD 1125–1150)

CASA and SSI excavated a suite of six sites on the southern piedmont of Sleeping Ute Mountain that date to the Early Pueblo III period. Four sites are within a 1 km by 2 km area and are part of the late Cowboy Wash Community. The Cowboy Wash sites share a common thread; all were suddenly abandoned in AD 1150 and contained disarticulated human remains. The context and disposition of these remains have been interpreted as evidence of violence and possible cannibalism.^{6, 7} This finding corresponds with other evidence of early Pueblo III cannibalism in the lower Mancos River drainage⁸ and elsewhere in the Mesa Verde Region.⁹ Brian Billman argues that cannibalism did occur at Cowboy Wash, and the physical and

contextual evidence is compelling. It was a possible consequence of two factors: severe drought and the social and ideological breakdown due to the collapse of Chaco Canyon roughly 10 years prior.

The sites of Cowboy Wash share a number of similarities indicating the inhabitants may have been an immigrant community from the Chuska area, to the south. The Chuskans, perhaps viewed as interlopers, may have been victims of intercommunity strife.

Conclusions of cannibalism should be approached with caution. Billman has interpreted this case as a short-term response to a situation of competition for limited resources, not a motif of Puebloan culture. Unfortunately, the Cowboy Wash findings have been recently sensationalized in the popular media, before the evidence could be rigorously peer-reviewed and published in scholarly fashion resulting in incorrect characterizations of Puebloan society.

Preservation of Mid-to-Late Pueblo III—Material Culture (AD 1150–1275)

Among the more important findings on the Four Corners Program were kiva murals at two sites on the Hovenweep Laterals. The uncovering of these features posed a particular challenge to the excavators and conservators, because of their fragility, and because they were integral to the walls of the kivas. Preservation of the murals was of tantamount importance because the only other good example in the area, from Lowry Pueblo, has since disintegrated. Because the structures were going to be destroyed by construction, backfilling to preserve the paintings was not an option. While only limited conservation technology existed, and methods for removing intact mural sections had to be developed in the field, the removal of the mural sections was an unqualified success. They are now conserved at the Anasazi Heritage Center in Dolores where they were recently on display as a part of the "Fragile Legacy" program. These are some of the best preserved examples of Pueblo III wall paintings in the Northern San Juan Region.¹⁰

The mid-to-late Pueblo III findings are remarkable for other aspects besides the murals: the masonry architecture and the rich ceramic assemblage was well preserved and is emblematic of the fine artistic traditions of the Northern San Juan Region.

Pitstructure 6 at
Knobby Knee
Stockade.



**Historic Archeology on the Ute
Mountain Ute Indian Reservation (AD
1880-1950)**

Nine historic sites were excavated as part of the Four Corners Program.^{11, 12} Archival research and oral histories supplemented this endeavor. Prior to the Four Corners Program, historic archeological research on the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation was virtually nonexistent. The investigations revealed a pattern of live-stock grazing and seasonal use of the Ute Mountain piedmont from the 1880s to the 1950s by the Ute and maybe the Navajo. The findings demonstrated a contrast in historical land use patterns between the Ute Mountain Utes and the neighboring Southern Utes, and established a preliminary site typology for the area.

Notes

- ¹ David A. Breternitz, "The Dolores Archaeological Program: In Memoriam," *American Antiquity* 58:1 (1993): 120.
- ² Steven L. Fuller, *Cultural Resource Inventories for the Dolores Project: The Ute Irrigated Lands Survey*, Archaeological Research Associates Four Corners

- Archaeological Project Report 13. Cortez CO, (1988): 18-19.
- ³ Brian R. Billman (editor), *The Archaic Period Occupation of the Ute Mountain Piedmont*, Soil Systems Publications in Archaeology No. 21, Phoenix AZ, (1997).
- ⁴ James N. Morris, *Archaeological Excavations on the Hovenweep Laterals*, Complete Archaeological Research Associates Four Corners Archaeological Project Report 16, Cortez CO, (1991).
- ⁵ Mark L. Chenault and Thomas N. Motzinger, "Stockaded Basketmaker Sites in the Mesa Verde Region," Paper presented at the 60th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, Minneapolis MN, (1995).
- ⁶ Patricia Lambert, Banks Leonard, and Brian Billman, "Symposium on Anasazi Cannibalism," Papers presented at the 62nd Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology (1997).
- ⁷ Michael Dice, *Towoac Reach III Disarticulated Human Remains*, Complete Archaeological Research Associates Four Corners Archaeological Project Report 22, Cortez CO, (1993).
- ⁸ Tim D. White, *Prehistoric Cannibalism at Mancos 5MTUMR-2346*. (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).
- ⁹ Mary Errickson, *Archaeological Investigations on Prehistoric Sites, Reach III of the Towoac Canal, Ute Mountain Ute Reservation, Montezuma County, Colorado*, Complete Archaeological Research Associates Four Corners Archaeological Project Report 21, Cortez CO (1993).
- ¹⁰ Susan Thomas and Nancy Mahaney, "Field Conservation of Kiva Murals," in *Archaeological Excavations on the Hovenweep Laterals* by James N. Morris, Complete Archaeological Research Associates Four Corners Archaeological Project Report 16, Cortez CO, (1991): 1105-1113.
- ¹¹ Ross S. Curtis, *Historical Archaeological Investigations in the Mariano Spring Vicinity, Ute Mountain Ute Reservation, Montezuma County, Colorado*, Archaeological Research Associates Four Corners Archaeological Project Report 23, Cortez CO, (1992).
- ¹² Ross S. Curtis and Brian R. Billman (editors), *The Ute Mountain Ute Irrigated Lands Archaeological Project: The Historic Period Occupation of the Ute Mountain Piedmont*, Soil Systems Technical Report No. 96-15, Cortez CO, (1996).

Warren F.X. Hurley is the Area Archaeologist, Western Colorado Area Office, Bureau of Reclamation, Durango, Colorado.

Photos courtesy Complete Archaeological Service Associates.