

Some Notes on Chacoan Outliers

Roughly 200 Chacoan Outliers are known to exist. All of them have the look and feel of Chacoan structures, and archeologists use specific criteria to distinguish them from other structures:

1. Chacoan structures are built with fully shaped stones. Kayenta structures typically use unshaped stone and Mesa Verdean builders usually shaped only the exposed faces. In contrast, Chacoan builders shaped all six faces of each stone resulting in walls with uniform courses and little exposed mud mortar.
2. Chacoan structures all exhibit an overall design that is lacking in structures built by other peoples. Common designs include squares and rectangles, E- and D-shapes, and even oval or circular pueblos.
3. Chacoan structures use “intramural beams,” beams embedded within the walls to mitigate stress just as we use reinforcing steel within concrete walls.

Use of intramural beams is considered to be particularly important. People unrelated to the Chacoans could look at a structure and see the fully shaped stones and overall designs. That means these features could be copied easily. Intramural beams, on the other hand, were buried within walls and could not be seen on casual inspection. As a result, use of intramural beams exhibits considerable familiarity with Chacoan building.

Archeologists have struggled to explain the presence of Chacoan structures far outside the Chacoan heartland. Three hypotheses have been proposed:

1. People from other cultural affiliations were trained in the use of Chacoan building practices.
2. Small groups of Chacoans colonized remote areas and supervised local people building the Chacoan great houses.
3. Large numbers of Chacoans migrated and built the outlying great houses.

To date, no one has produced compelling evidence that favors one of these hypotheses at the expense of the others. Steven Leckson has recently added an interesting speculation that may ultimately contribute to the answer.

Leckson argues that the Chacoans were ruled by kings and that each of the great houses in Chaco Canyon was the seat of an individual monarch. Each of the outliers, he says, was affiliated with a specific great house and he believes we might ultimately be able to identify outliers tied to Pueblo Bonito, Chetro Ketl, and so forth.