The Archaeology of Aztec North


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Introduction
In June 2016, Binghamton University conducted limited test excavations at the Aztec North great house at Aztec Ruins National Monument. Aztec North is carefully positioned as part of a constructed landscape that includes Aztec West, Aztec East, tri-wall structures, and a road segment. Surface ceramics indicate Aztec North was built earlier than Aztec West, in the late 1000s to early 1100s (Stein & McKenna 1988; Turner 2015).

Aztec North has the massive size and D-shaped outline of a Chacoan great house, but the lack of visible sandstone and standing masonry led archaeologists to believe that the great house was built of cobble-reinforced adobe rather than masonry. As the nearest sandstone source is 3 miles away, Van Dyke (2008) has argued the structure represents an expedient effort to build a great house with a small labor force. Once plastered in white like other great houses, Aztec North would have looked the part without requiring as much effort. Brown and Paddock (2011) also argued that Aztec North was an early effort to imitate a Chacoan great house, but for them the builders were very specifically locals as much effort.

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We proposed subsurface investigations to assess these competing ideas. Our research questions focused on identifying the construction, dating, and use of the great house, so that we might better understand its relationship to the larger Aztec landscape and to Chaco. After tribal consultation, the National Park Service granted us a permit to conduct limited excavation of the great house. We excavated 18 square meters distributed among four test units: a trench perpendicular to the north wall, a trench across a purportedly looted room, and two test units in deflated midden areas. Here we present preliminary findings for each of our research issues based on our work.

Construction
Based on surface materials, we expected to encounter cobble and adobe walls, with little to no sandstone. Instead, we found that at least some of the walls of the great house had coursed sandstone masonry veneers. This greenish, local sandstone was a friable material that did not weather well, and may not have been preserved on the surface. Behind the masonry veneers were crumbly cores made of handfuls of adobe reinforced with river cobbles. Although the builders of these walls were aware of the idea of core and veneer, the use of adobe cores is extremely unusual and is not a Chacoan construction technique.

However, the size of the rooms we uncovered is on a par with Chacoan great houses. Moreover, the walls of the great house are anchored in what look like Chacoan footer trenches, with large river cobbles set in hard mortar under the floor levels. These “low-visibility” Chacoan features resemble footers at Aztec West, indicating the direct involvement of builders with Chacoan knowledge at North Ruin.

The walls also raise another set of questions. We found evidence of substantial remodeling along the great house’s north wall, with some period of time elapsing between two building episodes. But our testing (including our work in the very deflated trash middens) revealed a paucity of trash at the site, which suggests that people did not inhabit or use the great house very intensively. Why remodel a structure that was not in active use? Did Aztec North primarily serve a symbolic role within the Aztec cultural landscape?

The Archaeology of Aztec North suggests a complex relationship between Aztec North and Chaco Canyon. As noted above, the cobble footers, large rooms, and coursed sandstone veneers suggest Chacoan construction knowledge, but the adobe and adobe-cobble cores are a local, non-Chacoan building technique. Van Dyke (2008) has argued that the Aztec cultural landscape as a whole was meant to emulate downtown Chaco Canyon, with Aztec North standing in for Pueblo Alto, but was this formal spatial relationship planned by the builders from the outset, or was Aztec North incorporated later as a way to include a local building in a Chacoan scheme? The architectural evidence remains ambiguous on this score, although absolute dates may help. Ceramic and lithic analyses (underway) will improve our understanding of interaction with Chaco and other regions. A surprisingly large quantity of obsidian suggests connections between Aztec North and the Jemez area.

Relationship with Chaco and Other Regions

Subsistence
Analysis of botanical & faunal remains are underway and are already providing information about subsistence. Because there was no local population in the immediate area before the construction of Aztec North, we will be comparing the faunal assemblage at this site to other places where wild resource depletion was more of a problem. We can already report that people here ate fish. Near a small charcoal feature in one of the great house rooms, we found these fish vertebrae. Fish are extremely rare for Ancient Pueblo sites, but since Aztec Ruins is right on the Animas River this finding is perhaps not so surprising.

Conclusion
Our test excavation has confirmed some assumptions about Aztec North and filled in a few details in its story, but our work also raises new questions. In the coming months, we will continue analyzing our data and artifacts to learn as much as possible about this little known site, and we will work with the archaeologists at Aztec Ruins National Monument to turn that data into information that they can then share with the public.

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References Cited

