



RITUAL ROADWAYS AND PLACES OF POWER IN THE CHACO WORLD

(ca. AD 850–1150)

INTRODUCTION

Around one thousand years ago in what is now the Four Corners region of the US Southwest, the ancestors of Pueblo and Diné (Navajo) people demarcated sacred places in their environment by etching sunbeam-straight, 9-meter-wide roadways into the high desert landscape. Known as Chacoan roads, these monumental avenues have long been of interest to archaeologists studying the so-called Chaco Phenomenon, a period of Indigenous Southwestern history from ca. AD 850–1150 characterized by the regional sharing of monumental architecture and the emergence of institutionalized inequality (Lekson 2006). Southwestern archaeologists have long debated the sociopolitical organization of Chaco Canyon and its world, developing a panoply of models ranging from a Mesoamerican-style *altepetl* city state (Lekson 2015) to a house society (Plog and Heitman 2010) and even newly minted concepts such as “rituality” (Yoffee 2001). Despite the contention over how best to categorize Chaco, most researchers agree that the regional spread of monumental Great Houses and roads and privileged social status of elites were underlain by ritual, ceremony, and cosmology (Judge and Cordell 2006; Plog and Heitman 2010; Sofaer 2007; Stein and Lekson 1992; Van Dyke 2007; Weiner 2015; Yoffee 2001)—in short, the focus of this thematic issue of the *Review of International American Studies: Sacred Spaces in North America*.

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The invocation of such concepts as “ritual” and “sacred” to understand this chapter in the precolonial history of the US Southwest raises the larger issue of what exactly is meant by these terms—especially in light of critiques of the secularist baggage frequently accompanying discussions of ritual and religion in contemporary North American archaeology (Deloria, Jr. 2003; Fowles 2013; Pauketat 2013). If, as most archaeologists agree, Chacoan history is inseparable from issues of ritual, we must develop an understanding of sacred spaces in the Chaco World that is informed by the ontologies of descendant Southwestern Indigenous people in dialogue with anthropological theory. Towards this end, my article engages the question of what constituted a sacred space in the Chaco World through the vantage offered by Chacoan roads, the places they lead, and the entities of land, water, and the sky they engage.

In this paper, I argue that Chacoan roads were constructed to establish connections with places and entities of *power*—a concept derived from the worldviews of Indigenous peoples in the US Southwest and across North America—that were recognized as such through the inherent affordances of particular places on the landscape. I begin with a brief review of the archaeology of Chacoan society and then develop the notion of *power* as a more culturally informed way of conceptualizing the “sacred” in the Indigenous Americas. Next, I present three case studies of recently documented sites located along Chacoan roads, with attention to the powerful qualities of these locales: naturally occurring “roadways” in the form of topographic breaks and parallel rows of rock outcrops, visual alignments between roads and prominent landforms, the pooling of water on exposed desert bedrock, fossilized traces of past watery eras, and the physical remnants of ancestral dwellings. While I argue (following Indigenous theorists) that power was inherently available to Chacoans in the places that roads led, specific human practices were necessary to leverage that potency. As such, in the following discussion I briefly review evidence for practices of ritual racing and making offerings of broken pottery on Chacoan roads. I close by reflecting on the larger point that the sacred powers inherent in the places demarcated by Chacoan roads should be understood as fundamental actors in the story of how and why the unequal, regional-scale society focused on Chaco Canyon developed, a relational

understanding of the world that is still central to Indigenous North American activist movements to protect sacred lands and waters.

THE CHACO WORLD AND ITS ROADS

Chaco Canyon is an arid sandstone canyon located in the center of the San Juan Basin of what is now northwestern New Mexico. Between ca. AD 850–1200, Ancestral Four Corners people constructed massive structures known as Great Houses in Chaco and throughout a 100,000 square-kilometer area of the Four Corners region surrounding the Canyon (Fig. 1 & Table 1; Lekson 2006; Kantner and Kintigh 2006). Chaco Canyon and its world are defined by Great Houses, multistoried buildings constructed with core-and-veneer architecture that contain hundreds of rooms and kivas (circular rooms) enclosed within roomblocks. Great Houses are monumental architecture; the thickness of their walls, massive room sizes, towering heights, and their astronomical alignments are built far beyond what is necessary for daily, domestic needs. As such, Great Houses mark the first evidence of widespread monumentality in the Four Corners region. Most Chaco researchers agree that ritual and cosmology played a major role in the design and function of Great Houses (Judge and Cordell 2006; Lekson 2006; Sofaer 2007; Van Dyke 2007).

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Basketmaker III period	AD 500–700
Pueblo I period	AD 700–900
Chaco Era (late Pueblo I through early Pueblo III periods)	AD 850–1150

Table 1. Archaeological time periods referenced in the text.

Along with its monumental architecture, the Chaco Era also marks the first evidence of institutionalized inequality in the Four Corners region. The clearest evidence of Chacoan social inequality comes from burials in Pueblo Bonito accompanied by vast quantities of turquoise and shell, as well as the interment of fourteen members of a matrilineal dynasty in a family crypt over 330

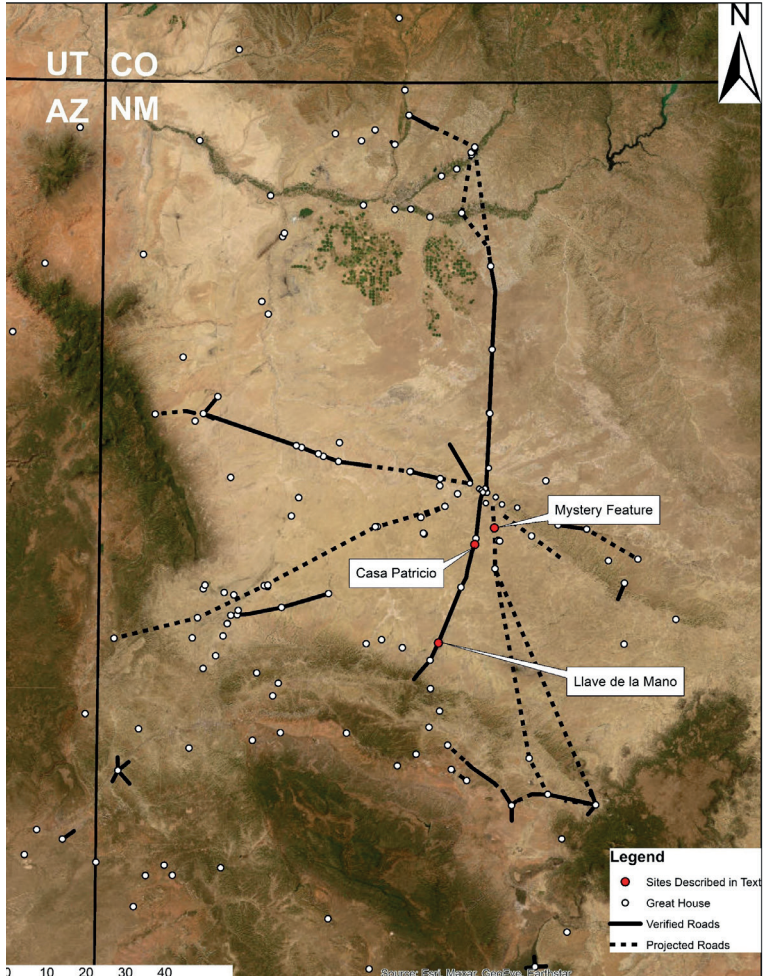


Fig. 1. Map of Chacoan Great Houses and roads in the San Juan Basin, with sites described in the text indicated in red. Note that the distribution of Chacoan Great House and roads extends far beyond the region shown in the map. Map by author.

years (Kennett et al. 2017; Plog and Heitman 2010). In contrast to the monumental Great Houses occupied by elites on the north side of Chaco Canyon, dozens of humble, small residential sites known as Bc sites, or unit pueblos, fill the southern half (Lekson 2006). Skeletal analyses of those interred in Great Houses and small sites revealed that Great House inhabitants were consistently taller and more robust than small house occupants (Akins 1986). The glaring contrast between Great Houses and Bc sites suggests distinct social classes in Chaco Canyon and throughout the Chaco World (Lekson 2015). The privileged social status of Chacoan elites is also underscored by their ability to mobilize labor forces for monumental Great House construction, as well as their control over exchange networks of turquoise, ceramics, high-elevation timbers, and Mesoamerican exotic goods including macaws and cacao (Judge and Cordell 2006; Lekson 2015; Plog and Heitman 2010; Weiner 2015).

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Chacoan Great Houses—along with monumental, 9-meter-wide roadways—are found throughout a 100,000 square-kilometer region surrounding Chaco Canyon. Known as Chaco outliers, there are approximately 150 of these settlements stretching throughout and beyond the San Juan Basin (Fowler and Stein 1992; Kantner and Kintigh 2006). Many Chaco outliers exhibit the same iconic architecture found in the canyon: multistoried Great Houses, often ringed by earthen mounds, with multiple monumental roads and a surrounding community of unit pueblos (Stein and Lekson 1992). The nature of the connection between Chaco Canyon and outliers is poorly understood. Some scholars (e.g., Lekson 2015) argue for a highly integrated regional system, whereas others posit multiple independent communities emulating Chacoan principles (e.g., Kantner and Kintigh 2006).

Monumental roads are a central element defining the Chaco World. Chacoan roads were created by clearing vegetation and topsoil to create 9-meter-wide linear depressed pathways, sometimes lined by berms or low walls, that run in straight trajectories (Marshall 1997; Nials et al. 1987; Roney 1992; Sofaer et al. 1989). Every Great House in Chaco Canyon is associated with at least one monumental avenue, and regional-scale roads up to 57-kilometer-long also emanate from Chaco Canyon to the north, southwest, and west.

Hundreds of shorter roads are also present throughout the 100,000 square-kilometer Chaco World (Roney 1992). The 9-meter width of Chacoan roads far exceeded functional necessity in a culture without pack animals or wheeled vehicles, and the roads' straight trajectories often ignore topographic obstacles (Nials 1983: 6–27), problematizing straightforward associations of roads with efficient travel and the movement of goods. Rather than domestic architecture, most sites along Chacoan roads are shrine-like constructions called herraduras (Nials et al. 1987: 13). Some roads connect Great Houses with Great Kivas (circular, semi-subterranean ritual structures), though most lead to herradura shrines, prominent features in the landscape, or align to solstice events (Marshall 1997; Roney 1992; Weiner 2023)—all of which might be considered sacred spaces. In the discussion to follow, I present new documentation and interpretation of three Chacoan roads that underscores the relationship of Chacoan monumental avenues to such locales, which I conceptualize throughout this paper as places of *power*.

Chacoan roads are a clear manifestation of the shared “Big Idea” (Stein and Lekson 1992) or “Dream” (Renfrew 2001)—that is, a set of religious beliefs and practices—that many archaeologists identify as centrally implicated in Chaco’s regional influence (Judge and Cordell 2006; Kantner and Kintigh 2006; Plog and Heitman 2010; Sofaer 2007; Van Dyke 2007; Yoffee 2001). The key point is that the Chaco Phenomenon, however we come to define it, was deeply entwined with ritual, and that approaching a fuller understanding of Chaco—and, in a larger sense, histories of the precolonial US Southwest—requires grappling with questions of the sacred, questions that are illuminated by the new documentation of Chacoan roads that I will present below in dialogue with Diné, Pueblo, and other Indigenous North American ontologies.

POWER AND “THE SACRED” IN INDIGENOUS NORTH AMERICA

What made (and still makes) the places that Chacoan roads led sacred? Is the concept of “sacred” even applicable in the context of precolonial Indigenous North America? Numerous scholars have asked this question (Deloria, Jr. 2003; Fowles 2013; Nongbri 2013; Pauketat 2013). Here, I propose that “sacred spaces” in the Chaco

World can be better conceptualized through the Indigenous North American concept of *power*, meaning locales, substances, and beings recognized as possessing dense concentrations of efficacious, causal force that can be harnessed and leveraged by humans (Deloria, Jr. 2006; Gunn Allen 1992: 72; Miller 1983; Trafzer 2017; Zedeño 2008). While my discussion draws from the work of Indigenous intellectuals across North America, I focus on examples from the US Southwest given my focus on sacred spaces in Chacoan society.

The concept of sacredness is often considered fundamental to the study of religion and ritual, but, like so many concepts, it is not easily defined and carries the baggage of Western modernity from its scholarly explications in the twentieth century. Early anthropological understandings of the sacred were contrastive, with the term defined through opposition to the everyday. Émile Durkheim, for example, established a paradigmatic, but flawed, vision of the sacred, writing: “The sacred and the profane are always and everywhere conceived by the human intellect as separate genera, as two worlds with nothing in common” (1995: 36). Few, if any, scholars of religion would take such a definition at face value today. Durkheim’s view evinces a segmentation of religion from other realms of society such as politics and economics that Weber identified as a defining aspect of modernity, a view that has remained influential in academic discourse on religion. This disjuncture does not apply in many (or perhaps any) cultural contexts (Barber and Joyce 2017; Fowles 2013; Guthrie 1996; Nongbri 2013), and in fact, the very notion of segmented spheres of society is more representative of an analytical framework than an emic reality.

Many Native peoples of the Americas are apt to remark on the lack of a distinct category of “sacred” (especially as opposed to “profane”) or “religion” in their worldviews (Deloria, Jr. 2003). Instead, to give an example from the US Southwest, “Pueblo philosophy differentiates *the sacred from the sacred*” (Fowles 2013: 102; emphasis in original). This statement points to the fact that many Indigenous North American ontologies past and present recognize the importance of maintaining proper relationships with a diversity of beings, places, and entities beyond the human—rains, water, winds, thunder, landforms, astronomical bodies, spirits—

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as a fundamental responsibility for maintaining life and the balance of the cosmos (Cajete 2000; Deloria, Jr. 2013; Kimmerer 2013; Stonechild 2016; Swenson and Jennings 2018; Wilson 2008). Klara Kelley and Harris Francis explain, for example, that

Navajos, like other Indians, say 'The whole land is sacred.' This statement evokes how soil, moisture, air, and light in human hands become food that in turn become people's flesh and blood. It also evokes the social relations between mortals and the immortal 'Holy People' whose outer forms are landscape features, animals, plants, the atmosphere, and celestial bodies. (1994: 1)

Here, there is no separation between religion and economics (or any other proposed "domain" of society), but rather a world defined by interconnection and relationality grounded in a particular landscape. Thus, recognizing the generative power of elements of the world considered "inanimate" in modernist Western ontologies is the very basis of the practices, philosophies, and architecture conceptualized by non-Native researchers as "religion" (Fowles 2013; Pauketat 2013).

Within these matrices of relationality, however, certain acts, objects, beings, and places are more profoundly implicated in the course of what happens and why—moments, places, utterances, and times of more densely concentrated power, or what might etically be called sacredness or religiosity. Many Native North Americans leverage a concept of *power* to describe what would be considered "ritual/religious" practices and "sacred" spaces/objects from an outsider perspective (Deloria, Jr. 2006; Gunn Allen 1992: 72; Miller 1983; Pauketat 2013; Trafzer 2017; Zedeño 2008; for Andean examples, see Swenson and Jennings 2018). The concept of *Puha* among Numic peoples is a particularly illustrative case in point (Miller 1983), but similar concepts are widely shared throughout the Indigenous Americas. "Almost any tribe can be examined," Vine Deloria, Jr. writes, "and the result will be a bevy of stories about how the people used spiritual powers to live, and these powers are almost always made available to us in a sacred place where time and space do not define the terms of the experience" (2003: xvi-xvii). Paula Gunn Allen further clarifies notions of power from a Laguna Pueblo perspective:

The word *sacred*, like the words *power* and *medicine*, has a very different meaning to tribal people than to members of technological societies [...] [meaning] something that is filled with an intangible but very real power or force, for good or bad [...] Having power means being able to use this extra force without being harmed by it. This is a particular talent that human beings possess to greater or lesser degree, and medicine is a term used for the personal force through which one possesses power. Medicine is powerful in itself, but its power can be used only by certain persons, under certain conditions, and for certain purposes. (Gunn Allen 1992: 72)

Questions about sacred spaces in Indigenous American contexts—including the monumental roads of Chacoan society—are therefore entwined with concepts of power and the ways by which humans can engage it.

Gunn Allen's statement on power underscores that while power is something infused in the landscape, certain *practices* are required for knowledgeable humans to access and leverage it. To give a culturally specific example, the Diné speak of *binahagha'* ("moving about ceremonially") in referring to the ways human beings can engage and harness power (Frisbie 1987: xxiii). Through visiting locales where the power of the Holy People (deities, whose outer forms are landforms, waters, animals, celestial bodies, and other elements) is concentrated and performing specific prayers and other ritual acts, Diné *hataááhii* (ceremonialists) can leverage the Holy People's power towards restoring *hózhó*, a state of balance, beauty, order, and happiness. Similarly, Pueblos speak of "doings" that "are distinguished from other practices by the extent to which they mark and make explicit the mutual entanglement of people, things, and cosmos" (Fowles 2013: 102; emphasis in original). The medicine bundles of Indigenous peoples across North America, and especially among the Great Plains, are another particularly illustrative example of power (Frisbie 1987; Pauketat 2013; Zedeño 2008). Bundles are infused with potency that can be increased, lost, or transferred through different practices and actions; opening a bundle, for example, requires proper knowledge and protocol, as to open a bundle is to unleash its awesome power (Chamberlain 1982: 45; Zedeño 2008: 368). Thus, Diné *binahagha'*, Pueblo doings, and Plains medicine bundle-related practices can justifiably be described as religious or "sacred," but not in the sense of radically set-

apart practices of modern Western religion. While recognizing the potential semantic pitfalls, I nevertheless employ the term sacred at times throughout this paper in keeping with the theme of this journal's special issue and in recognition of the general reconcilability of Indigenous North American notions of power with a non-Durkheimian concept of the sacred.

The forgoing discussion raises the challenging question of *why* particular places are recognized as loci of power to Indigenous American peoples and, in this specific case, the builders of and travelers along Chacoan roads. Undoubtedly, a wide variety of aspects combine to make a place powerful. Some sacred spaces may be locales where important events occurred in the deep mythic past. Such a place may become materially marked with shrines, architecture, and other evidence of human elaboration at a later time even if there is no physical manifestation of the initial occurrence that brought the locale importance. On the other hand, many Indigenous places of power are recognized as such given the affordances naturally occurring in particular landscapes (Pauketat 2013). By affordances, I mean the inherent, sensory aspects of a particular environment, space, or substance which affectively impact those who experience them and, as such, are implicated in the course of history (Hamilakis 2014; Knappett 2004; Pauketat 2013). Thus, many Native North American places of power are natural features with striking visual, olfactory, tactile, auditory, gustatory, and affective dimensions, such as springs, lakes, mountains, rocks, buttes, caves, waterfalls, and canyons, or locations where specific animals, plants, or minerals are present (Deloria, Jr. 2003; Cajete 1999: 204; Nabokov 2006).

Especially salient sacred places to peoples of the US Southwest are prominent mountains in each of the cardinal directions that define a group's traditional homeland (Matthews 1994: 78-79; Ortiz 1969: 19). Mountains in Southwest offer distinctive biomes that contrast with the sparsely vegetated desert landscapes below and afford characteristic sensory experiences: the songs of different birds, envelopment of towering pine trees and thicker underbrush, the rushing sounds of creeks and streams, lingering snow and ice, and cooler temperatures. Mountain environments are home to animals, plants, and minerals that play a variety of crucial

roles in Diné and Pueblo societies as food, medicine, and for ritual purposes (Anscheutz and Merlan 2007; Kelley and Francis 1994; Parsons 1996: 173; Reichard 1977). Mountains are also the settings of events that unfolded in the deep mythic times of creation, primordial eras that are infused with power (Matthews 1994; Ortiz 1969). Thus, the natural abundance and sensory impacts of mountains, along with the histories of what happened on them in the deep past, mark them as places of power.

But perhaps most importantly in the arid US Southwest, mountains are strongly connected to water—a highly valued and scarce resource crucial to the sustenance of life, and the focus of much Indigenous Southwestern ceremonialism (Ortiz 1969; Parsons 1996: 227–228; Swentzell 1990: 6; Reichard 1977: 609). As in any environment, mountain peaks in the Southwest alter the movement of winds, causing clouds to condense above their summits. Additionally, the headwaters of the rivers that nourish villages in the valleys and basins of the Southwest originate in the mountains. It is clear to see how mountains are rightfully perceived as water-generators and, as such, places of great power. In the section that follows, I present multiple examples of water-related and other striking landscape affordances that were intentionally incorporated along Chacoan roads as, I argue, places of power.

Tangible traces of past eras are another element that afford places sacredness for Indigenous societies in the US Southwest. Gregory Cajete of Santa Clara Pueblo explains that: “Knowing the origins of their people, their place, and the all-important things the place [where they dwell] contains is considered essential orientation for a tribal person. A people’s origin story maps and integrates the key relationships with all aspects of the landscape” (1999: 74–75). Thus, the physical places associated with narratives of creation, ancestors, and the past are among the preeminent sacred places for many Native Americans, and certainly for Pueblo and Diné people (Basso 1996; Kelley and Francis 1994; Nabokov 2006; Ortiz 1969). Among Pueblo people, for example, origin stories describe the migrations of ancestors following emergence in which people stopped for a time at various locations throughout the landscape to learn important lessons. Eventually, when the time was right,

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the founding ancestors of a group arrived at the locations of their current villages, frequently understood as the “center place” (Duwe and Preucel, 2019; Ferguson and Colwell-Chanthapohn 2006; Ortiz 1969). Pueblo and other Indigenous Southwestern peoples visit ancestral villages, which outsiders would call archaeological sites, as sacred places to connect with their ancestors and gain wisdom about how to live properly (Ferguson and Colwell-Chanthapohn 2006). Thus, locations recognized as “ruins” by archaeologists are often valued, or avoided, as places of power by descendants of the inhabitants of the Chaco World.

CHACOAN ROADS: THREE CASE STUDIES

In the section that follows, I present three examples of locations along Chacoan roads that I suggest constituted places of power. These places were recognized as sacred, I argue, because they afforded striking relationships between the humans who visited them, water, landforms, and distant eras of the past. The first two examples— Casa Patricio and Llave de la Mano—come from Chaco’s South Road, and the third—Mystery Feature—is located on Chaco’s Southeast Road.

THE CHACO SOUTH ROAD: OVERVIEW

The Chaco South Road is one of three regional-scale roads in the Chaco World, connecting Chaco Canyon with the Dutton Plateau, a vertically prominent, laterally extensive landform that defines the southern edge of the San Juan Basin (Figure 1; Nials et al. 1987: 18–19). The road emanates from South Gap, a break in the sandstone mesas that form Chaco Canyon, and extends 57-kilometers southwest across the dry, treeless expanses of the San Juan Basin. It connects three Great Houses, numerous herradura shrines, and other ritual structures and villages that pre-date the Chaco Era before terminating at a shrine, the Ko’ Pavi Herradura. The Ko’ Pavi Herradura at the road’s terminus is positioned to offer a dramatic view of Hosta Butte (Ak’i Dah Nást’ání in Diné bizaad), a soaring butte atop the Dutton Plateau whose trapezoidal profile stands prominently on the southern skyline of the San Juan Basin (Figure 2; Nials et al. 1987, 32–51). Many researchers identify the South Road as a ritual corridor constructed to connect Chaco

Canyon with Hosta Butte, perhaps in cosmographic balance with the 50-kilometer North Road that links Chaco with the striking, multicolored badlands of Kutz Canyon (Marshall 1997; Sofaer et al. 1989; Van Dyke 2007).

There is good evidence that Hosta Butte was considered a place of power in the Chaco Era. Indeed, the very presence of the monumental South Road terminating at a shrine that clearly addresses Hosta Butte speaks to the butte's significance. Rainclouds cluster around the Dutton Plateau and Hosta Butte as elevated landforms defining the edge of a basin, and their heights also offer thick tree strands and habitats for deer, mountain lions, and other animals. Ak'i Dah Nást'ání (Hosta Butte) is a sacred mountain of Diné people who live in the Chaco region today and maintain various degrees of cultural connection with the Chaco Era, including performing ceremonial practices that originated in Chacoan times (Warburton and Begay 2005). In Diné traditional history, following the establishment of the Fifth World (this current one we inhabit), the deities First Man and First Woman created Ak'i Dah Nást'ání, endowing it with the deities Mirage Stone Boy, Carnelian Girl, and Corn Ripener, along with "mirage stone" (banded calcareous aragonite) and male rain (Matthews 1994: 79). Important events in the histories of numerous Diné ceremonies including the Nightway, Blessingway, Red Antway, and Gun Shooter Red Anyway also occurred on the butte (Linford 2000: 218–219).

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Fig. 2. View of Hosta Butte (Ak'i Dah Nást'ání) and the Dutton Plateau as seen from the southern San Juan Basin. Note, this is *not* the view from the Ko' Pavi Herradura at the terminus of the Chaco South Road. Photo by author.

Heading south from Chaco Canyon on the South Road, the first major architectural structure is Casa Patricio (LA 34208), a Great Kiva (circular, semi-subterranean ritual gathering place) dating to ca. AD 800–950 (Figure 3; Nials et al. 1987: 50–51). Casa Patricio is located at the base of a low butte (Corral Gap Butte), which—intriguingly—the South Road passes directly over the top of, running through a narrow break in the caprock (Figure 4). Along the rim of a badlands exposure approximately 150 m south of Casa Patricio is LA 34209, a locus of intensive activity in the Pueblo I and early Pueblo II periods (ca. AD 800–950) that resulted in the deposition of an “abnormally dense sherd scatter” of hundreds of ceramics amidst lithic debris, ground stone, upright slab hearts, burned spalls, and architectural rubble—likely an area of ritual feasting (Figure 5; Stein 1983: 8–14). The construction of the Casa Patricio Great Kiva at the base of Corral Gap Butte, the nearby presence of a feasting area, and the decision of the Chacoan roadbuilders to thread the road directly across the top of the butte suggest this location was long recognized as a place of power, likely even before the South Road was formally constructed—but why?



Fig. 3. Ground view of the Casa Patricio Great Kiva, visible as a circular depression in the center of the image. Corral Gap Butte (over which the Chaco South Road passes) is visible behind the Great Kiva. Photo by author.

Casa Patricio and LA 34209

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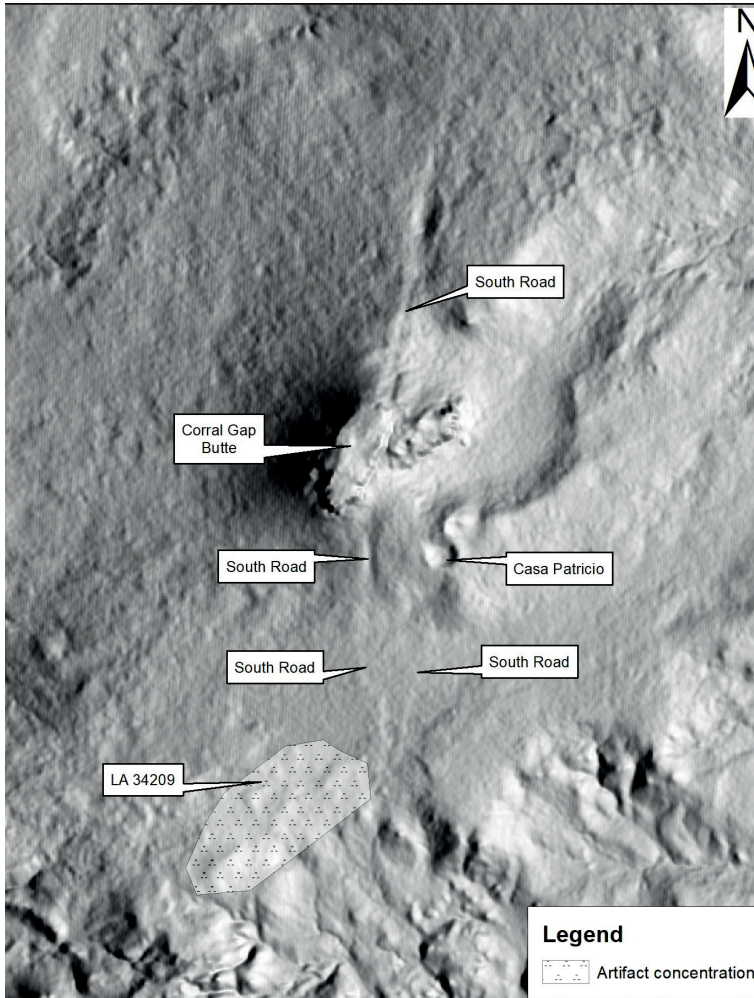


Fig. 4. LiDAR digital elevation model showing the Chaco South Road passing directly over the top of Corral Gap Butte adjacent to Casa Patricio Great Kiva. Map by author.

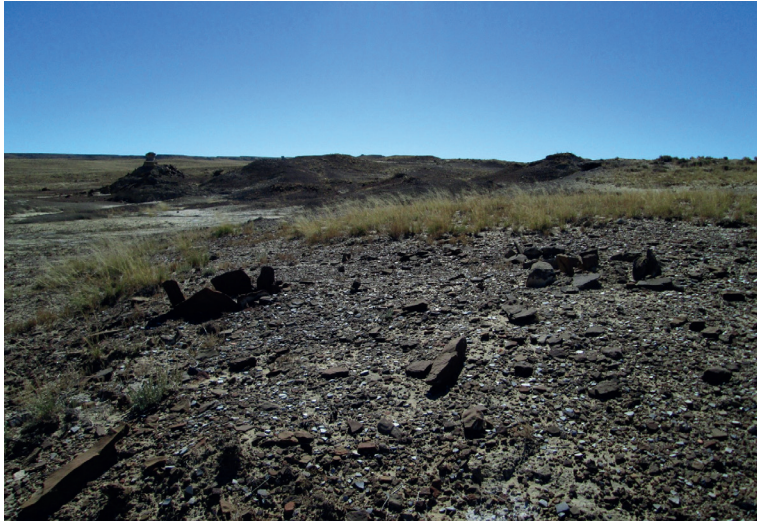


Fig. 5. Ground view of upright slabs and a dense artifact scatter at LA 34209. Photo by author.

In 2022, I performed an archaeological survey and new mapping of the South Road where it crosses over Corral Gap Butte adjacent to Casa Patricio. My fieldwork revealed that the butte's caprock gap fortuitously frames two highly significant landforms in the San Juan Basin. To the north, the gap perfectly frames Red Mountain (Dził Lichíí' in Diné bizaad), a prominent small mountain just outside the southern walls of Chaco Canyon (Figure 6). One element of Red Mountain that marks it as a place of power are the large quantities of argillite—a stone with a distinctive pale red hue from which the Chacoans crafted hundreds of pendants, effigies, and other ornaments (Mathien 1997: 1120–1207)—that outcrop along its flanks. Additionally, Red Mountain is the setting of foundational events in Diné ceremonial histories of the Eagle Way and Wind Way (Newcomb 1940; Linford 2000: 250). Looking south, the gap frames Hosta Butte (Ak'i Dah Nást'ání)—the ultimate destination of the South Road—as it peeks over the southern horizon (Figure 7). I inspected the gap for modification and found no evidence it had been shaped or enlarged. Thus, the gap appears to be a natural aspect of the mesa's geology—that is, an affordance—that auspiciously offers a natural window framing two sacred landforms.

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Fig. 6. View looking south towards Hosta Butte (Ak'i Dah Nást'ání) framed by the natural caprock gap on Corral Gap Butte over which the Chaco South Road passes. Photo by author.



Fig. 7. View looking north towards Red Mountain (Dził Lichíí') framed by the natural cap-rock gap on Corral Gap Butte over which the Chaco South Road passes. Photo by author.

The decision of the designers of the South Road to thread the road alignment through this gap demonstrates a conscious effort to integrate the road corridor with a hierophantic location, and it ensured that those walking along the road were physically brought into direct, embodied engagement with this sacred nexus of three landforms. It is quite possible that the placement of Casa Patricio (a Great Kiva, and therefore ritual gathering space) at the base of this auspicious butte was also informed by the alignment afforded by the gap. In short, the natural alignment between powerful landforms present on Corral Gap Butte would appear to have determined the South Road corridor in this location.

Chaco Era travelers along the South Road would not only have experienced the alignment of the gap in Corral Gap Butte's caprock

with two sacred landforms, but also would have literally walked through the past. Still today, Casa Patricio—a structure predating the Chaco Era by 50–150 years—is connected to the South Road via a spur road and is highly visible as a deep pit in the earth. Additionally, at LA 34209, pre-Chaco Era ceramics are so dense that the ground surface is virtually paved with sherds (Figure 5). Chaco Era road travelers would therefore have been confronted with highly perceptible traces of the past when moving along the South Road at Casa Patricio.

Multiple lines of evidence support the notion that physical traces of the past—what we would call archaeological sites—were valued by Chacoans as places of power, much as contemporary Pueblo and Diné people look upon ancestral sites as loci with great potency. Numerous roads throughout the Chaco World, known as “time bridges” or “umbilicals through time,” connect to sites that were no longer occupied during the road’s main period of use (Fowler and Stein 1992: 115–119; Van Dyke 2003). Chacoan religious leaders also drew on the power of past eras by basing the design of many Chaco Era ritual objects on Basketmaker III period (AD 500–700) prototypes (Webster et al. 2014). Additionally, Chaco Era Great Kivas and earthworks may have been architectural allusions to the Basketmaker III period that sought to link Chacoan authority with the distant past (Van Dyke 2007). Thus, while the power inherent in Corral Gap Butte’s natural framing of Red Mountain and Hosta Butte was likely what drew the Pueblo I builders of Casa Patricio and LA 34209, the eventual transformation of these sites into “ruins”—tangible traces of the pre-Chacoan past—would have further lent the locale power during the Chaco Era.

LLAVE DE LA MANO COMPLEX ON THE SOUTH ROAD

Near the southern terminus of the South Road, 26 km south of Casa Patricio, the road articulates with another place of power that was marked with the construction of an earthen platform and multiple herradura shrines, known as the Llave de la Mano Complex (LA 38109 & 38110) (Figure 8; Nials et al. 1987: 38–39, 176–181). Ceramics on the Llave de la Mano Platform show distinct periods of use in the Basketmaker III period and the Chaco Era, the later range of which I interpret as Chaco Era visitation to a con-

struction built centuries prior. Thus, the Llave de la Mano Platform, like the Casa Patricio Great Kiva, appears to predate the major formalization of the South Road (Weiner 2023 : 248–255). Notably, Llave de la Mano is the last location moving south along the South Road from which Hosta Butte—the South Road’s final destination—is visible. This visual affordance is likely one of the reasons why the Llave de la Mano Complex was constructed where it was. Hosta Butte, as a high point on the Dutton Plateau, is a rain-generator, and as such may have been a place of making offerings for rain (cf. Weiner and Kelley 2021). Furthermore, the summer thunderstorms of the North American monsoon—the primary moisture source for the Chaco World—are carried by south/southwesterly winds that ferry moisture northward from an origin in the Gulf of California (Becker 2021). Thus, it is reasonable to propose that the Chacoans were particularly interested in rains arriving from the south/southwest, and that Hosta Butte, as the prominent high point on the southern horizon of the San Juan Basin, was seen as centrally implicated in the arrival of rains from the south.

Another landscape affordance that appears to have manifested the power of the Llave de la Mano locale is a naturally occurring corridor formed by two parallel rows of circular sandstone outcrops (Figures 8 and 9). The South Road is clearly visible as an excavated linear 9-meter-wide swale as it approaches the Llave de la Mano Complex from both the north and south, yet as the road passes alongside the platform, its corridor merges with the naturally occurring “road” formed by the outcrops. The circular shapes and parallel linear distribution of the outcrops are striking in that they appear to be anthropogenic, but are not (Figure 9). It is conceivable that Chaco Era road travelers interpreted the outcrops as traces of a road constructed in a distant past era, especially since the only structural sites near the Llave de la Mano Complex date to the Basketmaker III period, predating the Chaco Era by multiple centuries (Nials et al. 1987, 38–39; Weiner 2023: 237–262). Regardless, the road’s designers made a clear choice to thread the South Road through the outcrop-framed corridor—much like the decision to pass the road directly over the Corral Gap Butte—presumably in recognition of the power inherent in the naturally occurring road present at the last location from which Hosta Butte is visible to those heading south along the South Road corridor.

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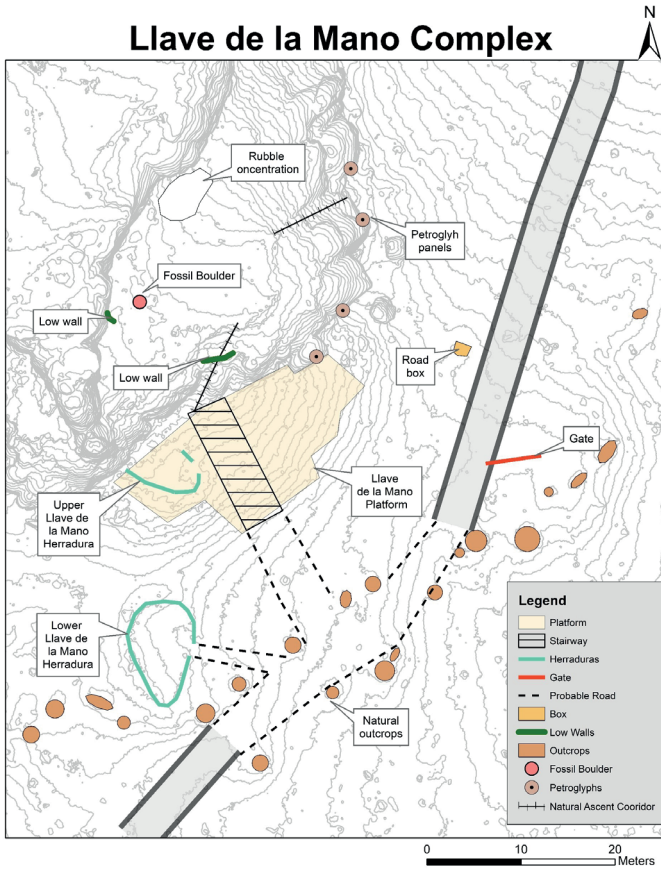


Fig. 8. Site map of the Llave de la Mano Complex. Map by author.



Fig. 9. Example of one of the circular sandstone outcrops that form a natural corridor through which the Chaco South Road passes at the Llave de la Mano Complex. Photo by author.

Short spurs leave the main South Road alignment, passing between the outcrops (Figure 8). One articulates with the Lower Llave de la Mano Herradura shrine, and the other ascends the earthen platform via a staircase, where a second, smaller herradura constructed of purple-hued sandstone is present. The natural outcropping of this visually striking purple sandstone in the vicinity of the Llave de la Mano Complex was likely another element that indexed this locale as a place of power. From the top of the earthen platform, a route continues up the cliffs to a natural terrace above, where a small sandstone boulder is conspicuously situated on the otherwise clear bench (Figures 8 and 10). While ultimately originating from the adjacent cliff face, the boulder has clearly been placed in its current location. This boulder's placement on the bench above the earthen platform suggests it may have been another powerful component of the Llave de la Mano Complex, access to which would have been spatially and visually restricted from those passing along the road corridor below.

This unassuming sandstone boulder, upon closer inspection, is seen to be filled with the fossilized impressions of a distant watery era (Figure 10): fragments of shells and cracked mud patterns lithified from shallow beach deposits of the Western Interior Seaway of the Late Cretaceous and early Paleocene epochs (100.5–66 Ma). The elites of Chaco Canyon's Great Houses acquired hundreds of shells from the Gulf of California and Pacific Coast (Mathien 2003: 129–130), some of which were crafted into jewelry, and fossilized shells were also cached in Great House rooms (Agostini and Notterpek 2020). Shells, whether fossilized or of recent origin, were likely valued by the Chacoan for their associations with water (Weiner 2015: 227–230)—and the presence of fossilized watery traces in the sandstone cliffs adjacent to the Llave de la Mano Complex, like the outcrop-framed corridor and final fleeting view of Hosta Butte, afforded power to the locale. Pueblo and Diné oral histories recall previous worlds of water inhabited by their ancestors prior to their eventual emergence into the present world (Cushing 1966: 13; Matthews 1994: 63–64), and fossils like those of the Llave de la Mano boulder may have connected Chaco Era road travelers with the powers inherent in archaic times.

Like at Casa Patricio, the presence of numerous traces of the past at Llave de la Mano—whether Basketmaker III period structures or the fossilized traces of ancient seashores—also afforded the South Road power during the Chaco Era.



Fig. 10. Fossilized mud impressions in the sandstone boulder on the embayment bench above the Llave de la Mano platform. Photo by author.

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The Llave de la Mano pottery assemblage is composed of mixed Basketmaker III and Chaco Era ceramics, suggesting that later travelers along the road deposited ceramics—likely as a form of offering¹—at an earlier site. Additionally, various lines of evidence (summarized in Weiner 2023: 237–262) suggest the portion of the road connecting Llave de la Mano and the Kin Ya’a Great House—and perhaps the entire South Road corridor—was first

1. Pottery sherds are nearly ubiquitous across the archaeological landscapes of the US Southwest. While in many cases these ceramic fragments are broken wares discarded in middens, there are also many contexts in which small numbers of ceramic sherds are found in association with religious architecture far removed from living areas or middens (such as Llave de la Mano). Many Southwestern archaeologists identify sherds in the latter contexts as intentionally deposited offerings, often drawing connections with practices of offering ceramic sherds among descendant Pueblo cultures (Ortiz 1969: 54; Toll 2001; Walker and Berryman 2022).

constructed in the Basketmaker III period, then enlarged and formalized over centuries of use. Chaco Era travelers on the South Road may therefore have walked along a centuries' old route, at least along the road's final stretch. To move along this ancient corridor was not only to experience ruptures in time by periodically visiting older structures; the very act of walking on the road itself, in less tangible form, was a continuation of an ongoing, multicentury act of pilgrimage, procession, and prayer. Finally, it is likely that Hosta Butte, the focal point of the South Road, was associated with ancient mythic events by the Chacoans, much as contemporary Diné people recall the mountain's formation and endowment with spiritual powers in the early days of the Fifth World.

MYSTERY FEATURE ON THE SOUTHEAST ROAD

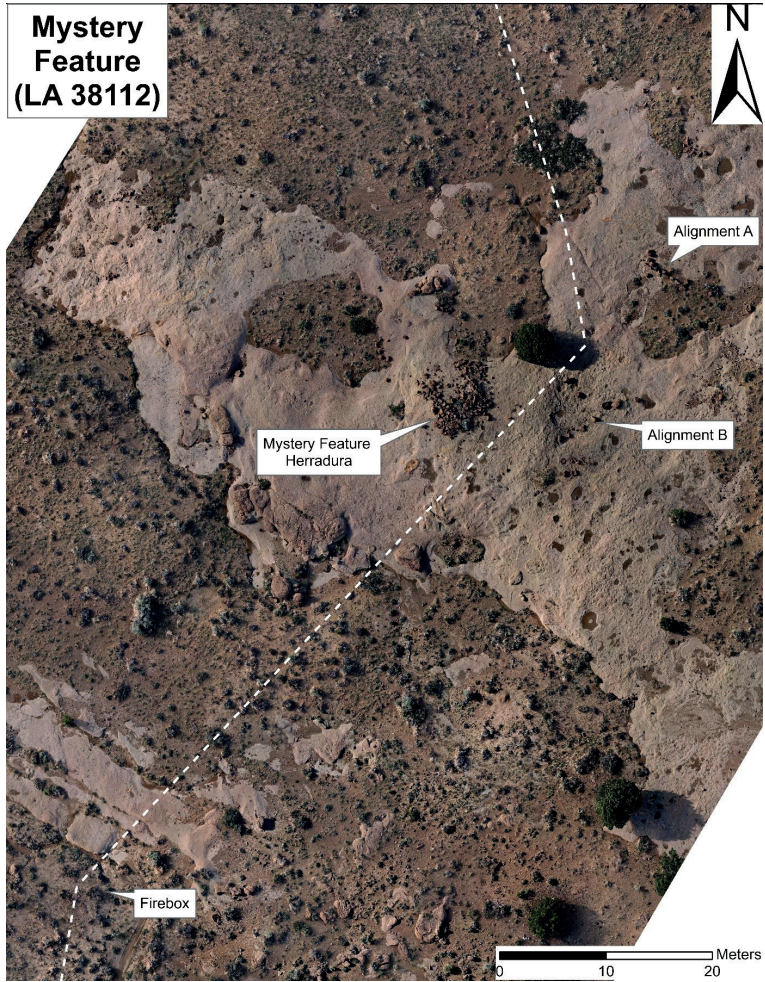
A third example of a place of power along a Chacoan road is the Mystery Feature Complex (LA 38112) located along the Chaco Southeast Road (Nials et al. 1987: 64–65, 187–188; Weiner 2023:423–442). In the 1980s, analysis of aerial photographs revealed a possible roadway emanating southeast from Fajada Gap in Chaco Canyon, known as the Southeast Road (Obenauf 1980). While follow-up ground-truthing surveys failed to identify traces of a constructed roadway along this corridor, archaeologists did encounter a Great House and series of herradura shrines—a feature type highly diagnostic of Chacoan roadways—along the alignment (Nials et al. 1987: 20–21). More recently, LiDAR data has revealed a subtle ground signature consistent with those of known Chacoan roads along the Southeast Road corridor, suggesting it may have been originally formalized as an excavated roadway that has significantly deteriorated over the past millennium (Field 2023).

Approximately 12-kilometers southeast of Fajada Gap and prior to its arrival at the Mystery Feature Complex, the Southeast Road passes through a cluster of Pueblo I (and therefore pre-Chaco Era) households. The presence of pre-Chaco Era constructions along the road alignment, like Casa Patricio and Llave de la Mano, again suggests that Chaco Era road travelers moving along the Southeast Road would have passed through highly perceptible traces of the past in the form of rubble mounds, pottery sherds, and ashy soils. Furthermore, the original Pueblo I people who inhabited these

structures may have been drawn to the locale because of the powerful affordances inherent to the Mystery Feature locale.

The Mystery Feature Complex consists of an herradura and two linear alignments of sandstone blocks situated on a sandstone bedrock exposure, with a firebox located near the southern edge of the exposed bedrock (Figures 11 and 12; Nials et al. 1987: 187–188; Weiner 2023: 423–442). Additional bedrock exposures are present to the north-northwest of Mystery Feature, but they are neither as large nor as flat as the location where Mystery Feature was constructed. The linear alignments of sandstone blocks at the site (labeled “Alignment A” and “Alignment B” in Figure 11) are enigmatic, but may have channeled the movement of ritual processants passing through the Mystery Feature Complex. Fireboxes like the one located at the southern edge of the Mystery Feature Complex are commonly found in association with Chacoan roads and may have been used in rituals of purification, perhaps at night when fire’s heat and light are most salient (Weiner 2023: 758–766).

Two prominent affordances of the Mystery Feature Complex’s setting made it a place of power. First, looking north from the site back towards Chaco Canyon, one is confronted with the striking visual alignment of two landforms—Fajada Butte (Tsé Diyilí in Diné bizaad) and Huerfano Mesa (Dził Ná’oodií in Diné bizaad)—the latter of which appears to sit directly atop Fajada Butte from the vantage of the Mystery Feature Complex (Figure 13). Fajada Butte, home of the famous Sun Dagger petroglyph, is a vertically prominent, isolated sandstone butte located within Chaco Canyon widely recognized as a place of power to the Chacoans (Sofaer 2007; Van Dyke 2007; Weiner and Kelley 2021). Huerfano Mesa is one of the three sacred mountains of the interior of the Diné homeland (along with Ak’i Dah Nást’ání [Hosta Butte]). The mountain is endowed with multitude of powerful associations, substances, and beings, including dark clouds, male rain, “soft goods” (pollens, rugs, hides, and cloth), First Man and First Woman, the Hero Twins, and Goods of Value Boy and Goods of Value Girl (Linford 2000: 219; Matthews 1994: 79). The mesa is also the setting of foundational events in the Diné origin story, as well as the first girl’s puberty ceremony (*kinaaldá*) (Matthews 1994: 106; Reichard 1977: 11).



*Sacred Spaces
In North America*

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Fig. 11. Drone aerial photograph showing the features at Mystery Feature Complex, with the movement pattern suggested by the arrangement of constructed features marked. Map by author.



Fig. 12. Ground view of the Mystery Feature Herradura. Photo by author.



Fig. 13. View of Huerfano Mesa (Dził Ná'oodiñi) situated directly above Fajada Butte (Tsé Diyili) on the northern horizon as viewed from Mystery Feature. Photo by author.

Second, the bedrock upon which Mystery Feature is constructed offers a powerful affordance related to water: namely, the sandstone exposure contains various natural shallow basins, which, after rain, fill with water (Figures 14 and 15). I visited the site shortly after a heavy July rainfall, and the impression of numerous glimmering pools scattered across the sandstone surface was an unforgettable experience. While the fact water pools in bedrock basins is not particularly noteworthy per se, the sandstone exposure atop which Mystery Feature is constructed is anomalous within the surrounding terrain, suggesting an intentional decision to construct the shrine complex atop this bedrock exposure where rain would pool. It is also noteworthy that the Southeast Road emanates from Fajada Gap in Chaco Canyon, a break in the sandstone mesas forming the south side of the canyon through which northward-moving rainclouds—such as those of the summer monsoon—are funneled and trapped, the result being that more rain falls in the gap and adjacent to Fajada Butte than elsewhere in Chaco (Vivian et al. 2006: 148–149; Weiner and Kelley 2021: 20). Thus, the Southeast Road is also a “road” along which rainclouds arrive to Chaco Canyon, further underscoring the power of a shrine-ornamented bedrock exposure along this corridor where water pools after rain.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In the preceding section, I outlined some of the landscape affordances evidenced at prominent locales along Chacoan roads that I suggest were recognized as places of power. At a fundamental level, such locales can be understood as *inherently* powerful or sacred given their pre-given characteristics: specifically, the convergences they afforded between landforms, water, fossils, ruins, and the emotions, memories, and subjectivities of road travelers. Chacoan road designers identified the elements of power naturally present in the landscapes of Casa Patricio, Llave de la Mano, and Mystery Feature and further embellished their preexisting power through the construction of roads, herraduras, a Great Kiva, earthen platform, and other architectural features. In this way, affordances of the natural landscape in tandem with human constructions combined to make certain places powerful/sacred in Chacoan society.

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Figs. 14 and 15. Water pooled in natural basins in the bedrock exposure upon which Mystery Feature is located, ground view (above) and over-view from nearby mesatop (below). Photos by author.

Almost certainly, another crucial element in activating the power of places along Chacoan roads was the performance of specific ritual practices, as evidenced widely throughout the Indigenous Americas: for example, *binahagha* (“moving about ceremonially”) for the Diné, “doings” for Pueblo people, or bundle-related practices on the Great Plains. A combination of archaeological evidence, Diné and Pueblo oral traditions, ethnographic data, and cross-cultural analogies suggest some of the likely ritual practices through which the power of places along Chacoan roads was activated and harnessed by people. Ritual running and processions are two of the best supported Chacoan road-related practices, along with making offerings of intentionally broken ceramic sherds—especially water jars—along roadbeds and at herraduras. I have described the evidence for these Chacoan road-related practices and others in detail elsewhere (Weiner 2023: 691–769) and plan to further explore their significance in future publications.

Considering places of power (in the sense of sacred, generative potency) along Chacoan roads has the potential to shed light on questions about how and why some members of Chacoan society acquired authority and prestige. As reviewed above, many researchers agree that the privileged status of Chacoan elites derived in large part from their “ritual” knowledge and skill (Judge and Cordell 2006; Plog and Heitman 2010; Sofaer 2007; Van Dyke 2007; Yoffee 2001). Assessment of the empirical record of Chacoan Great Houses and roads suggests that such ritualism centered on the power of water and rainfall, the in-dwelling potency of prominent landforms, and associations with distant eras of the past (see Van Dyke 2007 and Weiner 2015 for explorations of other elements of Chacoan religious ideology). The acts of creating roadways and performing rituals at places of power along them were likely seen as necessary for maintaining cosmic balance—most tangibly manifest in the Four Corners as reliable rainfall—and these acts appear to have been coopted by particular members of Chacoan society over time. Indeed, in a review of Native North American leaders from the seventeenth through the early twentieth century, Pauketat noted that “*religious figures were as likely—perhaps more so—to alter the cultural histories of other native peoples or to ‘consolidate’ leadership authority as were*

more overtly political leaders or war captains" (2010: 177; emphasis in original). The sacred and the political, both etic categories, were not separate domains in Chacoan society or elsewhere throughout the ancient Americas (Barber and Joyce 2017; Fowles 2013; Pauketat 2013), and the power inherent in sacred places along Chacoan roads therefore *was also* political power.

Finally, the archaeology of Chacoan roads and the places of power they engage underscores the major role of other-than-human actors in how history unfolds: not only in the precolonial Four Corners, but continuing to this day. The rainclouds condensing over Hosta Butte, natural occurrence of a sandstone outcrop roadway at Llave de la Mano, manifestation of distant watery eras as fossils in boulders, and channeling of rain through the break of Fajada Gap became entangled with human agriculture, ritual practices, political machinations, and social life to produce largescale social transformations. While posthumanist approaches in archaeology can, of course, be carried to excesses that obfuscate abuses of power within human societies (see critique in Preucel 2020), it is also crucial to recognize that a cognizance of the agency of other-than-human beings and forces is resonant with ontologies of Indigenous North American peoples (Deloria Jr. 2006; Kimmerer 2013; Wilson 2008).

Furthermore, many contemporary Native American activist efforts are focused on the protection of both "natural" and "cultural" landscapes—without dichotomization of these supposed domains—in the face of energy development and other extractive activities. Prominent recent examples include movements to stop the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline across ancestral Sioux territories, the intertribal coalition formed to protect Bear's Ears National Monument, and efforts to prevent further oil and gas drilling in the Greater Chaco Landscape. Outsiders and governmental agencies tasked with managing public lands often fail to comprehend the deep significance—that is, the sacredness—of Indigenous North American landscapes threatened by oil drilling, fracking, and other disturbance. Such sacredness derives not from some Durkheimian rupture between the everyday world and a set-apart sphere, but rather a recognition of the intricate interconnection and astonishing power of the natural environment. What I hope

to have shown here through the case study of Chacoan roads is that power, or sacredness, is *inherently in* landscapes, substances, and places—proper relations with which define Indigenous North American identities and ways of being, and improper relations with which must be remedied. The sustenance of such networks of relationality between humans and an interconnected world of causal forces is crucial to the lifeways and spiritual wellbeing of the aboriginal inhabitants of the Americas (Wilson 2008). While not always connected along formally constructed ritual roadways, such places have been—and will remain—sacred.

Abstract: This paper considers the topic of sacred spaces in North America through the vantage offered by Chacoan roads, monumental avenues constructed by Ancestral Four Corners people of the US Southwest from ca. AD 850–1200. I begin with a critique of the concept of the “sacred” as applied to the Chacoan past, suggesting instead that the Indigenous North American concept of power (in the sense of potent, generative force infused throughout the environment) offers a more culturally relevant framing. Next, I present three examples of locations along Chacoan roads that I argue were recognized as places of power due to the inherent landscape affordances of these locales. I close by briefly describing some of the practices carried out along Chacoan roads and drawing a connection between the understanding of “sacredness” evidenced through the archaeology of Chacoan roads and contemporary Native American activist efforts to protect landscapes of great power and meaning.

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