

## ***Sudden Departure***

### ***The Anasazi "Collapse" - New York Times Article***

*"Until very recently, the most perplexing mystery of Southwestern archeology -- what caused collapse of the ancient Anasazi empire -- seemed all but solved. Careful scrutiny of tree-ring records established that in late 1200's a prolonged dry spell called the Great Drought drove ancestors of today's pueblo Indians, to abandon their magnificent stone villages at Mesa Verde and elsewhere on the Colorado Plateau, never to return again.*

*"But in the last few years, archeology has been shaken with a quiet revolution. Textbooks are being rewritten as common wisdom, taught to generations of students, is overturned. Nobody is talking about great droughts anymore!*

*"What all these theories have in common is rejection of the old notion of negative environment as the single determining cause, with Anasazi no more than passive pawns of blind forces. You have to look further than just environment. There is a whole social dimension to abandonment we are only now starting to realize."*

*Quotes from Science Desk, New York Times, G. Johnson, 1996.*

### ***Since Then...***

In the 12 years since that article was written, many pieces of evidence indicate all work on such elaborate masonry structures was abandoned in a relatively short period of time.



### ***What Can Sand Canyon Pueblo Tell Us?***

Crow Canyon Archaeological Center has studied Sand Canyon extensively since 1983. Sand Canyon is a late Pueblo III site whose structures and human remains suggest a tragic end, probably shortly after the last tree ring date of 1277 A.D.

Sand Canyon Pueblo is part of Canyons of the Ancients, above McElmo Creek drainage. Beginning in the mid-1200s, hundreds of people built a large village situated on and just below the canyon rim of a small side canyon. Many families

probably relocated from scattered, upland farmsteads within the Sand Canyon community.

Villagers built many residences that grew by accretion. They also cooperatively planned and constructed public architecture (not ordinary domestic structures), such as a great kiva, a D-shaped bi-wall building, and a massive, masonry wall enclosing much of the village.

Sand Canyon was primarily a place where people lived. Much of the village layout suggests kinship ties and other links between families and social groups. The Pueblo was built around a canyon-head drainage. Excavated structures were those families used for domestic purposes. Two public buildings, a great Kiva and D-shaped block were built.

### *The Villagers - Human Remains*

These people had a diet heavily reliant on maize. They had above average stature. They were relatively healthy. Disease did not adversely affect them.

Villagers at Sand Canyon used a wide variety of plant materials for food, fuel, and construction material. They significantly altered in the natural environment around the village during occupation. Food remains indicate villagers relied heavily on resources they produced or raised themselves-primarily turkey or maize. They ate rapidly reproducing cottontail rabbit and edible plants.

### *Village Depopulation*

Drought, environmental degradation, population pressure, conflict, and social and religious upheaval are among causes commonly cited for regional depopulation, although all may have contributed. Important evidence of events associated with depopulation was found in abandonment contexts.

The timing of this cataclysmic change was associated with the most severe drought, characterized by low groundwater levels, low crop yield potential, disrupted seasonal precipitation patterns, and a reduced dry farming belt. The great drought began in A.D.1276 lasting through 1299.

Near the time of village depopulation, consumption of cottontails increased. Turkey flocks, which required a great deal of maize and water, dwindled. Available data suggest 1/4 to 3/4 of villagers departed before settlement was completely depopulated. Remaining residents were probably compelled to consume most of their turkeys and stores of seed maize.

Just before village depopulation, little maize or turkey was cooked. Rather, residents adopt a largely hunting-and-gathering subsistence strategy and ranged ever farther afield for game and wild plant foods, which it also would have been

reduced by the drought. As wild animal use for food increased, villagers hunted animals such as pronghorn antelope, big horn sheep, mule deer, Bobcat, and other carnivores. Some of these animal remains have cut marks and localized burning indicating butchering and cooking.

### ***Post-1277A.D Attack***

Most people still residing in the village perished. Two victims struck down while on the roofs of the rooms along the village enclosing wall might have been in lookout positions. Three others might have been on the roof of a structure along the enclosing wall or perhaps were in the second story of a tower. Some bodies were dumped down roof hatch ways. The expediency and carelessness of this action suggests it was done by attackers, apparently during the time they remained in the village. Several villagers died in the kivas, perhaps caught while sleeping or hiding. Clustered articulated remains of 23 individuals were found in abandonment contexts. Another 11 died near the end of village occupation. None of these 44 people was formally interred. The remains of several of these people as showed direct evidence of violent death.

It looks like some people remained behind for a short time after the assault. We conjecture they were seeking hidden food stores; anthropophagy (consumption of human flesh) may have occurred. If so, this would be additional evidence of severe subsistence stress. Most proposed incidents of cannibalism in the Mesa Verde region date from the middle 1100 A.D. and late 1200 A.D.; both were times of severe drought.

The roofs of many kivas at Sand Canyon were burned.

### ***Finale***

Depopulation of this large village thus appears to have been stimulated at least in part by failure of the subsistence base—heavy dependence on maize and turkeys—to support its sizable population during an abrupt climatic downturn and after probable long-term environmental degradation. It is likely competition for dwindling resources was at least one catalyst for violence at Sand Canyon and at other regional locations during late A.D. 1200s. The definitive village event of depopulation was a lethal attack that resulted in deaths of many residents and sealed the fate of this once-prosperous and successful village.

If the evidence of acute subsistence stress in the late A.D. 1270s at Sand Canyon Pueblo is representative of conditions and events across the region, then Anasazi residents could well have been largely "pushed" from the region. Drought, crop failure, decimation of turkey flocks, depletion of natural resources, and lethal

attacks on villages were very persuasive "push" factors that were enough to depopulate the region.

Sand Canyon's analysis provides new and stimulating data about sudden departure. It ties human behavior to climatic conditions. It shows changes in behavior, migration, cataclysmic battle, and death - ranging from child to grown adult. There's clear evidence of an attack; following the attack, whether by returning villagers to honor their dead or by chicanery to promulgate a 'victory', buildings were burned...

Yet 125 years of archeology and recent modeling still leaves the puzzle.

"Why, after 700 years of relatively steady growth, did Anasazi go to a defensive position, then within about 20 years, either die or move away?"

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