



Ancestral Pueblo People and Their World

About 1,400 years ago, long before Europeans explored North America, a group of people living in the Four Corners region chose Mesa Verde for their home. For more than 700 years they and their descendants lived and flourished here, eventually building elaborate stone communities in the sheltered alcoves of the canyon walls. Then, in the late A.D. 1200s, in the span of a generation or two, they left their homes and moved away.

Mesa Verde National Park preserves a spectacular reminder of this ancient culture. Archeologists have called these people Anasazi, from a Navajo word sometimes translated as “the ancient ones” or “ancient enemies.” We now call them the Ancestral Pueblo people, reflecting their modern descendants.

The First Ancestral Pueblo People in Mesa Verde

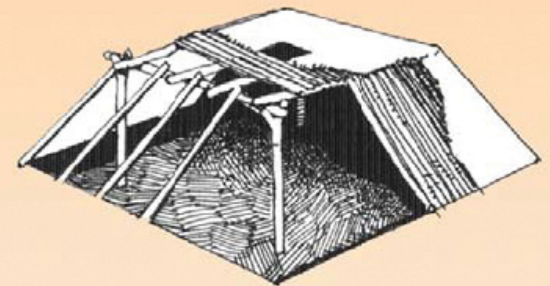
The first people settled in Mesa Verde (Spanish for “green table”) about A.D. 550. They are known as Basketmakers for their skill at the craft. Formerly nomadic, they were beginning to lead a more settled way of life. Farming replaced hunting and gathering as their main livelihood. They lived in pithouses clustered into small villages usually built on mesa tops but sometimes in cliff recesses. They learned to make pottery and acquired the bow and arrow, a more efficient weapon for hunting than the atlatl, a spear thrower.

These were fairly prosperous times for the Basketmakers, and their population multiplied. About A.D. 750 they began building houses above ground, with upright walls made of poles and mud. They built the houses one against another in long, curving rows, often with a pithouse or two in front. (Pithouses would later evolve into kivas.) From here on, these people are known as Pueblo people, a Spanish word meaning “village dwellers.”

By A.D. 1000 the people of Mesa Verde had advanced from pole-and-adobe construction to skillful stone masonry. Walls of thick, double-coursed stone often rose two or three stories high and were joined together into units of 50 rooms or more. Pottery also changed, from simple designs on a dull gray background to black drawings on a white background. Farming accounted for more of their diet than before, and much mesa-top land was cleared for agriculture.

Between A.D. 1100 and A.D. 1300, during the Classic Period, the population may have reached several thousand. It was mostly concentrated in compact villages of many rooms, often with the kivas built inside the enclosing walls rather than out in the open. The stone walls of the large pueblos are regarded as the finest ever built in Mesa Verde, with their straight courses of carefully shaped stones. Baskets show evidence of decline in quality, possibly because widespread use of pottery meant less attention to the craft. About A.D. 1200, another major population shift saw people begin to move back into the cliff alcoves that sheltered their ancestors centuries before. Why did they make this move? We don’t know. Perhaps it was for defense; perhaps it was for religious or psychological reasons; perhaps alcoves offered better protection from the elements. Whatever the reason, or reasons, it gave rise to the cliff dwellings for which Mesa Verde is most famous.

Pithouse



People lived in pithouses from about A.D. 550 to A.D. 750, as settled agriculture began. The pithouse (above) featured a living room sunk a few feet in the ground. Four corner timbers supported the roof. The firepit had

an air deflector. An antechamber might contain storage bins or pits. The sipapu was a hole for passage to the underworld, from which the people had come. Pithouses later evolved into kivas.

The Cliff Dwellers

Ever since local cowboys first reported the cliff dwellings in the 1880s, archeologists have sought to understand these people's lives. But despite decades of excavation, analysis, classification, and comparison, scientific knowledge remains sketchy. We will never know the whole story: they left no written records and much that was important in their lives has perished. Yet for all their silence, these structures speak with a certain eloquence. They tell of a people adept at building, artistic in their crafts, and skillful at making a living from a difficult land.

The structures are evidence of a society that, over centuries, accumulated skills and traditions and passed them on from generation to generation. By the Classic Period (A.D. 1100 to A.D. 1300), the Ancestral Pueblo people were heirs of a vigorous civilization, whose accomplishments in community living and the arts rank among the finest expressions of human culture in North America.

Using nature to advantage, they built their dwellings beneath the overhanging cliffs. Their basic construction material was sandstone that they shaped into rectangular blocks about the size of a loaf of bread. The mortar between the blocks was a mix of mud and water. Rooms averaged about six feet by eight feet, space enough for two or three persons. Isolated rooms in the rear and on the upper levels were generally used for storing crops. Underground kivas, ceremonial chambers, were built in front of the rooms. The kiva roofs created open courtyards where many daily routines took place.

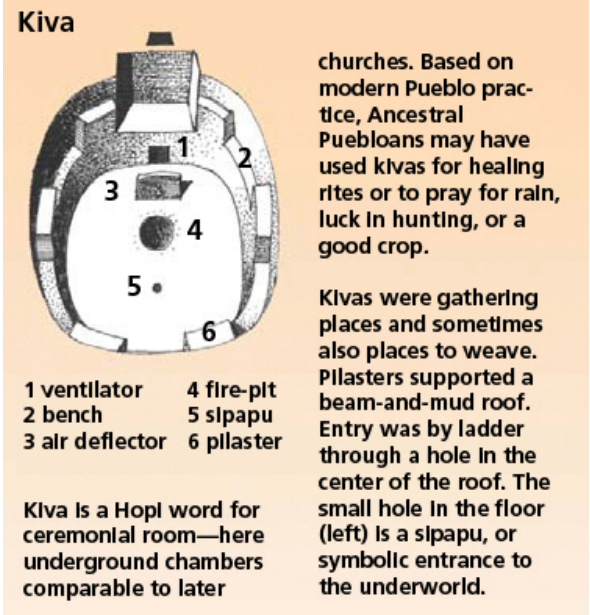
Fires built in summer were mainly for cooking. In winter, when the alcove rooms were damp and uncomfortable, fires probably burned throughout the village. Smoke-blackened walls and ceilings are reminders of the biting cold these people lived with for several months each year.

They spent much of their time getting food, even in the best years. They were farmers, but they supplemented their crops of beans, corn, and squash by gathering wild plants and hunting deer, rabbits, squirrels, and other game. The soil on the mesa top was fertile and, except in drought, about as well watered as now. The vegetation is also about the same then as it is today, but with less pinyon and juniper. Then, the Ancestral Pueblo people cut pinyon and juniper for building materials and firewood, and to clear land for farming. Their only domestic animals were dogs and turkeys.

Fortunately for us, they tossed their trash close by the cliff dwellings. Scraps of food, broken pottery and tools—anything not wanted—went down the slope in front of their homes. Much of what we know about daily life here comes from these garbage heaps, or kitchen middens.

Ancestral Pueblo people lived in the cliff dwellings for less than 100 years. By about A.D. 1300, Mesa Verde was deserted. Several theories offer reasons for their migration. We know that the last quarter of the A.D. 1200s saw drought and crop failures—but these people had survived earlier droughts. Maybe after hundreds of years of intensive use the land and its resources—soils, forests, and animals—were depleted. Perhaps there were social and political problems, and the people simply looked for new opportunities elsewhere.

When the cliff dwellers of Mesa Verde left, they traveled south into New Mexico and Arizona, settling among their kin who were already there. Whatever may have happened, some of today's Pueblo people, and maybe other tribes, are descendants of the Ancestral Pueblo people of Mesa Verde.



Family Life at Mesa Verde



This Ancestral Pueblo family (left) is wearing hides, warm footwear, and feather-cloth robes for winter. The turkey was important in their economy—providing food, feathers used in weaving, and bones used for tools.

Archeology has yielded some facts about Mesa Verde's ancient people, but without a written record we cannot be sure about their social, political, or religious ideas. For insight into these, we must rely on comparisons with modern Pueblo people of New Mexico and Arizona.

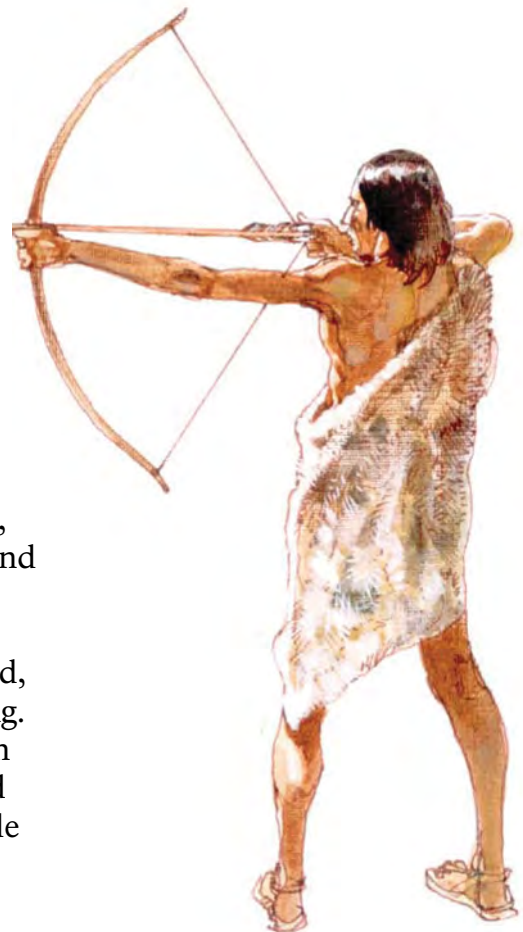
During the Classic Period at Mesa Verde (A.D. 1100 to A.D. 1300) several generations probably lived together as a household. Each family occupied several rooms and built additional rooms as the family grew. Several related families constituted a clan, which was probably matrilineal, tracing descent through the female line. If the analogy with current Hopi practice is correct, each clan would have had its own kiva and rights to its own agricultural plots.

Tools

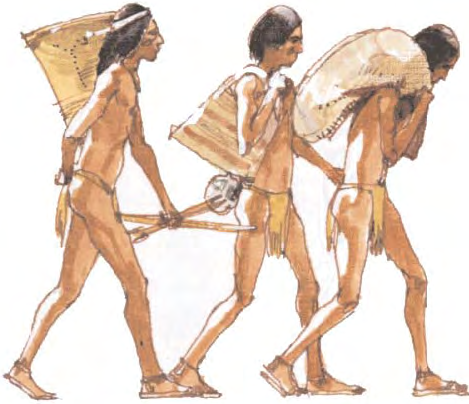


Ancestral Pueblo people did not have metal, but used materials available from their environment. They made tools for grinding, cutting, pounding, chopping, perforating, scraping, polishing, and weaving from stone, bone, and wood.

They used digging sticks for farming, stone axes for clearing land, bows and arrows for hunting, and sharp edged stones for cutting. They ground corn with the mano and metate and made wooden spindle whorls for weaving. They fashioned awls for sewing and scrapers for working animal hides from bone. They usually made their stone tools from stream cobbles rather than the soft, cliff sandstone.



Trade



Mesa Verde's economy was more complex than you might suppose. Even in a small farming community, some individuals undoubtedly had more skill than others at weaving, leatherworking or making pottery, arrowpoints, jewelry, baskets, sandals, or other specialized articles. Their efficiency gave them a surplus, which they shared or traded with neighbors. This exchange went on between communities, too.

Seashells from the Pacific coast and turquoise, pottery, and cotton from the south made their way to Mesa Verde. They were passed along from village to village or carried by traders on foot over far-flung networks of trails.

Basketry



The finest baskets made at Mesa Verde were created before the people learned how to make pottery. Using the spiral twilled technique, they wove handsomely decorated baskets of many sizes and shapes and used them for carrying water, storing grain, and even for cooking. They waterproofed baskets by lining them with pitch and cooked in them by dropping heated stones into the water. The most common coiling material was split willow, but sometimes rabbitbrush or skunkbush was used. After the introduction of pottery about A.D. 550, basketry declined. The few baskets found here from the Classic Period (A.D. 1100 to A.D. 1300), are not as well made as the earlier baskets.

Pottery



The people of Mesa Verde were very accomplished potters, making vessels of many kinds: pots, bowls, canteens, ladles, jars, and mugs. Corrugated ware was used mostly for cooking and storage. The elaborately decorated black-on-white pottery may have had both ceremonial and everyday uses. Women were probably the potters. Designs tended to be personal and local and most likely were passed down from mother to daughter. Design elements changed slowly, a characteristic that helps archeologists and modern descendants track the location and composition of early populations.

Buildings



Most of the cliff dwellings were built from the late A.D. 1190s to late A.D. 1270s. They range in size from one-room structures to villages of more than 150 rooms such as Cliff Palace and Long House. Architecturally, there is no standard ground plan. Builders fit the structures to the available space. Most walls were single courses of stone, perhaps because alcove roofs limited heights and protected the walls from erosion by the weather. Masonry work varied in quality -- rough construction is found alongside walls of well-shaped stones. Many rooms were plastered on the inside and decorated with painted designs.