CHAPTER 3

Lords of the Great House
PUEBLO BONITO AS A PALACE

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Palaces in the United States? Perhaps for colonial governors or railroad barons or newspaper moguls, but surely not for pre-Columbian natives. That seems odd: native peoples built palaces in Mexico, but not apparently in the United States. In this chapter, I argue that the idea of “palace” be allowed to cross that border. Rather than an extended description of elite residences, palaces, and palace life in the pre-Columbian cultures of the present United States, I limit this essay to an examination of U.S. archaeological attitudes toward palaces and their implications, using Southwestern cultures as my primary examples (Figure 3.1).

The idea of pre-Columbian palaces in the lower 48 states seems somehow absurd. Why? There are two obvious reasons and a third one that is less obvious and perhaps more sinister. I address the two evident reasons first and save the third for later in the discussion. Why are we disinclined to use the term palace in the continental United States? First, the political implications of the term make us nervous. Palaces imply states. Second, palaces are complicated, multifunctional facilities. We like architecture simple and straight: “house,” for example. The third problem faced by palaces is the “glass ceiling” placed by anthropology over Native American societies. I will address the first two objections and return to the third in the conclusions of this chapter.

Palaces imply states. And, indeed, palaces in many parts of the world were accoutrements of state-level polities. In the eastern Mediterranean and the classical lands, palaces are type-fossils of states and empires: Minoan and Aegean civilizations were palatial and palace centered. Only short-lived democracies avoided palatial excrecence. Thus, to call a building a palace is to imply that its occupants ruled a state, but U.S. archaeology doesn’t permit pre-Columbian states north of Mexico.

The obvious, best candidate for a pre-Columbian state is the great eleventh- to fourteenth-century site of Cahokia, near modern St. Louis (Pauketat 2004, among others). Cahokia was a cosmopolitan city of tens of thousands of people, with monumental architecture that included an earthen pyramid (Monks Mound) rivaling in mass and scale those of Teotihuacan. But
a Cahokia state has been demoted by an establishment archaeology seemingly intent on leveling the pre-Columbian playing field (most recently, Milner 1998, among others). Our (distantly) second-best candidate, the Chaco-Aztec-Paquimé nexus of the ancient Southwest (Lekson 1999), is similarly discounted by sane and sober archaeologists (Renfrew 2001; Vivian 1990). [We will return to Cahokia, Chaco, Aztec, and Paquimé shortly.] We do not speak of Native palaces in the United States—outside Hawaii—because it is generally accepted that no Native state ever existed in our country. No states, therefore no palaces.

Our second objection to the term *palace* comes from the bundle of functions and activities we expect to see encompassed within such buildings. Minoan (and other) palaces had storerooms and specialist workshops for economic functions; temples and shrines for ritual functions; assembly areas and audience halls for governance; armories for warfare, and—we can only hope—private apartments for the king or queen to curl up with the latest adventures of Gil and Enki and a rhyton of the best. For many archaeologists, it is the architectural attachment of those key functions—economic, ritual, government, military—to a royal or sovereign household that defines palaces.

There was even more to palaces than compartmentalized functions: palaces were capital A architecture, built environments that mirrored or projected structures of power. If peasant houses reflect something about domestic worldview (Nabokov and Easton 1989; Rapoport 1969), palaces manifest larger cosmologies and economies in both their incorporated functions and formal design. We can speak of palatial canons: rules of geometry and layout that both structure and monumentalize larger political realities. Monumentality is a clue, but so is formal layout. There were many large buildings—*casas grandes*, or “great houses”—in ancient North America. But size alone is not enough.

Are there rulers’ houses with attached economic, ritual, governmental, and military functions in Native societies north of Mexico? The chiefly houses of the Mississippian Natchez and the Northwest Coast Kwakiutl were multifunctional, incorporating assembly, ritual, and residence, but they lacked palace guards, palace craftsmen, palace priests—the anticipated (but perhaps not necessary) appurtenances of kingship. A case can be made, I think, for palacelike architecture in the ancient American Southwest, in the land of the modern Pueblo peoples. The sites of Chaco, Aztec, and Paquimé are my candidates (Figure 3.1), but before discussing these sites, I must digress slightly to set the stage. The claim of palaces in the ancient Southwest seems unlikely, even perverse: Pueblo peoples are famously egalitarian, famously peaceful, famously Apollonian. Ruth Benedict codified this view in 1934 in *Patterns of Culture*. Consider Benedict’s description of Zuni Pueblo government, or nongovernment:

> Zuni is a theocracy to the last implication. . . . To our sense of what a governing body should be, they [the major priests] are without jurisdiction and without authority. [Benedict 1934:67]

Was it always so? Indeed, was it ever so? Zuni origin stories tell of epic battles and warfare (Wright 1988) and of earlier forms of government that seem rather more centralized, rather less Apollonian. Frank Hamilton Cushing, who lived at Zuni a half century before Benedict’s book was published, reconstructed a pre-Columbian government that was only faintly echoed at Zuni in his day, and even less so in Benedict’s time.

The body which governed . . . was a council composed of the chief “priests” of the six cardinal directions . . . These august figures were the
“Masters of the Great House”—“house” in this context meaning literally their place of meeting, thought to be located at the exact center of the world. [Green 1950:373]

The Masters of the Great House did not work; they and their families were supported by tithing taxes called the “good share.” They appointed officers of the Pueblo who administered Zuni’s economic, social, legal, and ritual life—a proto-bureaucracy. I have argued [Lekson 1999:26–28] that the Masters of the Great House at preconquest Zuni were themselves a pale reflection of a ruling class first apparent, half a millennium earlier, at Chaco Canyon. I like Cushing’s location, and I have altered his phrase to fit the Chacoan situation: “Lords of the Great House.”

Chaco was a ceremonial city, the center of Pueblo political, economic, and social life from about A.D. 900 to 1125 [at least according to Lekson 1999; for recent summaries of Chaco research, see Frazier 2005; Mills 2003; Noble 2004]. Its monumental Great Houses—icons of Pueblo architecture (Figure 3.2)—attracted archaeological attention in the 1880s that continues undiminished into the present. Great Houses began in the tenth century as monumentally upscaled versions of regular domestic structures—the tiny single-family “unit pueblos” ubiquitous across the Southwest—but Great Houses soon took a canonical turn in form and function that distinguished them forever from regular residences [Lekson 1984]. The scale of the Great Houses was hugely larger than that of the unit pueblos; an entire unit pueblo would fit into a single large room at a Chaco Great House. The dozen major Great Houses at Chaco were placed over a 15 km length of the canyon, but the largest were concentrated in a “downtown” zone 2 km in diameter around Pueblo Bonito.

Pueblo Bonito is not so much typical as archetypal: it took almost three centuries (ca. A.D. 850 to 1125) to complete this huge building [Lekson 1984; Windes and Ford 1996]. The roads of ancient Chaco led viewers to the edge of Chaco’s sheer sandstone cliffs, where the D shape of Pueblo Bonito was spectacularly evident.

The building began as a huge version of ninth-century unit pueblos, built three stories tall [whereas a conventional unit pueblo was one short story]. But the ninth-century masonry was not up to the task of supporting multiple stories. When the rear wall failed in the early eleventh century, Chaco architects preserved the old building by enveloping it in an exterior wall of superior masonry, buttressing the sagging older structure. In many other cases, existing sections of Great Houses (including Pueblo Bonito) were razed to make way for new construction, but Old Bonito remained the heart of the building throughout its long history. Beginning about A.D. 1050, the architects of Pueblo Bonito began a series of a half dozen major additions, each of which was enormously larger than anything previously built in the Pueblo world. The culmination, when building ceased about A.D. 1125, was almost

FIGURE 3.2 Photo of Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico

700 rooms, stacked four and perhaps five stories tall, covering an area of almost 0.8 hectares. The remarkable D shape was maintained throughout the long history of construction and modification, as was the original orientation of the building, to the southeast, until late in its history when a meridian orientation [focused on a north-south line] replaced the older, presumably solar layout. Entering the building from the valley floor, the visitor would walk past two huge platform mounds south of the building, through a single entry in a forbidding plaza-enclosing wall, and into one of two plazas—the D had been bisected by a dividing wall running exactly north-south. In the center of each plaza was a huge subterranean Great Kiva—an assembly chamber for larger groups—and each plaza was edged by a row of round rooms [also conventionally called kivas but more likely residences], behind which were terraced masses of rectangular rooms. Only the outermost of these rooms had sunlight; the other interior rooms—and there were hundreds and hundreds of interior rooms—were dark and had limited access, suited only for storage. We now believe that only a score of families lived in this huge building. They were very important families, and they had control of [or at least access to] enormous numbers of storage rooms.

Pueblo Bonito, like other Great Houses, was expensively built. That is, the labor per unit measure of floor area or roofed volume or total mass was hugely larger than that needed to build unit pueblos. Pueblo Bonito and the other Great Houses were distinguished by their site preparation [leveling and terracing]; extensive foundations; massive, artfully coursed masonry walls; overtimbered roofs and ceilings [hundreds of thousands of large beams brought from distant forests]; carpentry, which can only be appreciated today from masonry remnants of elaborate wooden stairways, balconies, and por-
ticoes; and features and furniture unique to these remarkable buildings. Among these last were colonnades [an import from Mexico], unique raised platforms [for storage or sleeping?] built within rooms, and the use of large sandstone disks (approximately 1 m in diameter and 30 cm thick), stacked like pancakes beneath major posts [particularly in Great Kivas] as foundations or dedicatory monuments or both. The division of labor, manifested architecturally, was unlike the family economy of unit pueblos: at Great Houses, whole rooms were devoted to batteries of corn-grinding metates fixed in bins, where meal was prepared by gangs of grinders for larger groups; and huge ovens were found in the plazas, where, presumably, cooking for larger groups took place. The few families who actually lived in Pueblo Bonito could not possibly have built that building themselves. It was built by others, and it seems likely that much of the domestic work (grinding corn, cooking, etc.) was done by others as well.

Elite burials—deep, wood-lined crypts with astonishing wealth and scores of retainers—have been found at Pueblo Bonito, the largest and arguably the most important of the Chaco Great Houses. Two middle-aged men were buried in these crypts in the early to middle eleventh century, deep in the rooms of the original late ninth- and early tenth-century construction at Pueblo Bonito, that is, Old Bonito [Aikens and Schelberg 1984]. [Other Chaco Great Houses have not produced such burials, but only a few Great Houses have been thoroughly excavated.]

These two men may well have been the Chaco rulers remembered as “our kings” by a traditional Navajo man from a Chaco-area clan [Taft Blackhorse, personal communication, 1999]. They may have been principals among those “people at Chaco who gained power over people”—improperly, disastrously in present Pueblo worldview—alluded to by Paul Pino, from the Pueblo of Laguna: “In our history we talk of things that occurred a long time ago [at Chaco], of people who had enormous amounts of power: spiritual power and power over people ... these people were causing changes that were never meant to occur” [in Soqaer 1999]. Other Pueblo accounts similarly describe stern political leaders and their city, which rose and fell in ancient times [summarized in Lekson 1999:143−150]. These “people with enormous power over people” were probably the two middle-aged men in the crypts. Found anywhere else in the world, the high-status burials of Pueblo Bonito would suggest political power at Chaco: Lords of the Great House.

The lords may also have been the architects, or that role may have been held by specialists. An elevated role for planners, designers, or architects is suggested by the buildings’ remarkable shapes. Formal geometries structure the D shape of Pueblo Bonito and other Great Houses, which [we must assume] were meant to be viewed from the cliffs above. There were canons of Chacoan Great House design: Alignments, ratios in plan, and patterns of massing followed rules that we are only beginning to decode [Soqaer 1997]. These rules and ratios were continued and respected in other, lesser Great Houses. We are, perhaps, behind in this effort because archaeologists did not expect to find this sophistication north of the border, but a glance at the much earlier Hopewell geometric earthworks of the Ohio Valley [Morgan 1999] demonstrates that Natives north of modern Mexico were the engineering equals of their southern contemporaries. The architects of Chacoan Great Houses worked within a well-developed continental tradition or school of geometry.

The Great Houses are sited in a complex, planned cityscape that mirrors and manifests the ruling cosmology: the Chacoan world order [Fritz 1978; Soqaer 1997]. The great families or clans represented by these several buildings may or may not have been dominated by Pueblo Bonito; but, together, the Chaco Great Houses represented a political center unknown in contemporary or ethnographically described Pueblo life, but remembered in Pueblo traditional histories [a subject to which we will return]. Recent reanalysis of Pueblo Bonito supports the conclusion that Pueblo Bonito was an elite residence, among other things [Neitzel 2003]. Jill Neitzel concludes that Pueblo Bonito began as an elite residence of a “network” hierarchy [sensu Blanton and Feinman [Blanton et al. 1999]], and then shifted in dominant function to a ceremonial center of a “corporate” hierarchy at about A.D. 1050. Elite residence ceased about 1150, but ceremonial structures at Pueblo Bonito continued to be maintained for a century thereafter [Neitzel 2003].

Early excavations established that Chaco was a magnet for exotic prestige items, such as tropical birds and copper artifacts from western Mexico [Mathien 1986], and for more local rarities, most notably turquoise [Mathien 2001; Weigand and Harbottle 1993]. Later excavations discovered turquoise workshops in both the Great Houses and their attendant not-so-great peasant residences [Mathien 2001]. Turquoise mining and production in the eleventh- and twelfth-century Pueblo world was probably controlled by Chaco.

Still later analyses have linked Chacoan political power to military force: Chaco was not Tenochtitlan, but it was the biggest, nastiest kid on the block [LeBlanc 1999; Turner and Turner 1999]. I argue elsewhere that Chacoan power was projected, at least in part, by the socially sanctioned use of force, manifest in the brutal group executions discovered in excavations at scores of sites throughout the Chacoan region [Lekson 2002]. Chaco ruled in an era of “unprecedented peace,” in the words of Steven LeBlanc [1999], but that “Pax Chaco” came with a price: coercive enforcement.

Almost every statement I have made in the preceding paragraphs would be heatedly challenged by varying factions [factions!] of my Southwestern colleagues. However, my reconstruction is based on good data and peer-reviewed research [mostly others’ research, summarized in Lekson 1999, 2003]. That is, my reconstruction is not unreasonable in terms of standard archaeological practice. It is only [and merely and importantly] unthinkable in view of stereotypes of happy, peaceful Pueblo people, living in harmony
with their environment and their neighbors, projected backward a millennium into the deep and different Southwestern past.

Another argument I make, based on others’ research but which many of my colleagues would reject, is this: Chaco was followed by two subsequent capitals, each of which legitimized itself by conscious reference back to Chaco, the primate center [Lekson 1999]. Chaco ended about A.D. 1125. It was followed, in turn, by Aztec Ruins from 1110 to 1275, and then by Paquimé from 1350 to 1450 [Figure 3.1]. I suggest that remarkable similarities in palace architecture at these three sites mark a possible dynastic, historic, or at least symbolic linkage from one capital to the next. We know relatively little about Aztec, but it is emerging archaeologically as a second Chaco, built 80 km due north of the first capital [McKenna and Tso 1992]. We know much more about Paquimé, so let us make a great leap forward to the third and final Pueblo capital.

Paquimé is located in northern Chihuahua, Mexico [Di Pesto 1974; Figure 3.1]. Its beginnings are safely dated to A.D. 1250 [Dean and Ravlosott 1993]. Paquimé has also been called Casas Grandes—Great Houses—not to be confused with the smaller Casa Grande (singular) near Phoenix, Arizona—to which we will return later.

Paquimé was a city of poured adobe [Figure 3.3]. The massive walls reached four stories high—a perilous undertaking for that material, but apparently the importance of verticality overrode mere technical concerns. Designers specified deep foundations [like those of Chaco and Aztec] and included many-cornered rooms [unlike any at Chaco or Aztec]—some of which, in plan, resemble giant pixilated butterflies. The many corners and short wall segments functioned to buttress [almost to corrugate] the high walls. In any event, the building stood monumentally tall over the floodplain of the Casas Grandes River, creating a fabulous city surrounded by Mesoamerican-style ballcourts, platform mounds, and [small] pyramids.

Paquimé continued canons used in Chaco and Aztec [Figure 3.3], as well as Chaco’s remarkable penchant for exotic prestige goods. Just as Chaco was the regional epicenter of exotica in its time, Paquimé was an astonishing treasure trove—a warehouse of exotic shell, copper bells and other objects, and tropical macaws and parrots [Di Pesto 1974; see also Lekson 1999:94–101]. Indeed, macaws were raised on a commercial scale—one of at least four craft specializations documented at Paquimé [Minnis 1988]. As at Chaco, elites at Paquimé were buried in elaborate subfloor tombs with impressive grave offerings and—again, like Chaco—scores of retainers. Paquimé itself was massed rather differently than Chaco: at Chaco, a dozen Great Houses were spread over a 15 km stretch of canyon, whereas Paquimé appears to represent a score of Great House-sized, palacelike structures conjoined in side-by-side proximity. Built of poured adobe rather than the sandstone masonry of Chaco, Paquimé would have looked a bit like modern Taos Pueblo—but Paquimé was not Taos.

FIGURE 3.3 Plans of Pueblo Bonito, Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, and Paquimé, Chihuahua, Mexico

At both Chaco and Paquimé—and, by interpolation and [some] evidence, at Aztec—elite groups lived in monumentally constructed buildings. And those monumental buildings were only partly residential; they also incorporated workshops, public and private ritual structures, and—perhaps—guard rooms or barracks. An argument can be made that palace functionaries and bureaucrats were also housed in or near the Great Houses: at Chaco, for example, a Great House shows evidence of a dozen or more elite households, but only two primary elite burials. That is, not everyone who lived in the Great House, and enjoyed its luxuries, was buried with pump and circumstance. Many of those living in the Great House may have added to the circumstance—by being buried as retainers alongside their rulers.

Are Great Houses and Casas Grandes palaces? They are monumental architectural complexes that combine elite residence, governance, craft workshops, warehouses, public and private ritual, bureaucracies, and—perhaps—military functions. They are canonical in construction, and those canons
survived from at least A.D. 900 to at least 1450, a five- or six-century run—not bad by any standards.

Chaco, Aztec, and Paquimé were, in my opinion, palaces. Can we have palaces without the state? Why not? The 1980s and 1990s saw the deconstruction and demolition of old lockstep political taxonomies. Those old ordered progressions of band, tribe, chiefdom, state have been confounded and their constituent elements reassembled in odd iterations of alterative formulations. Hierarchies devolve into heterarchies. Collectives construct monuments of Neolithic Europe (and no chiefs need apply). In the stateless, pre-Columbian, temperate North America, these brave new nonhierarchies are warmly welcomed.

U.S. archaeology is nothing if not temperate, seeking safety in simplicity. Cahokia a state! Never! Chaco-Aztec-Paquimé something more than Ruth Benedict’s Zuni! Not in my backyard! Political complexity had a short, swift time in Southwestern archaeology, riding the crest of a more cosmopolitan New Archaeology. New Archaeology may have suffered from acute [even fatal] scientism, but it did at least think globally while it acted too locally. Cross-cultural contexts and comparative studies were the order of the day, in the service of middle-range theory. In that hopeful if naïve context, Chaco looked like starter-kit kingdoms seen elsewhere and at other times in our world [Schelberg 1984]. But that cross-cultural divide could not, in the end, be crossed. Why? With the postmodern retreat to local scales and local stories, even otherwise un-deconstructed, science-minded U.S. archaeologists embrace the idea of social simplicity and small scales. We cling to the idea of a stateless Native United States as we do to our hope of heaven. Again, why?

That question brings me to the other Casa Grande—the one near Phoenix, Arizona (Figure 3.4). Contemporary with and [to some degree] related to the larger Mexican Paquimé, the Arizona Casa Grande is a fine example of the Great Houses of the Upper Sonoran Desert. Arizona Great Houses are often considered variants or outgrowths of platform mounds—the ground floor of Casa Grande was apparently filled to provide an elevated platform. Platform mounds and Great Houses have been the particular focus of archaeological study in the last decade [see Dean 2000 for a review]. One of the larger recent research programs, a New Archaeology relict, approached platform mounds as elite residences, visible monuments to social and political hierarchy. The archaeologists assumed that platform mounds were elite residences. That view has been supported and attacked along the same familiar ideological lines that structure debates about Chaco. Recent thinking, paralleling Old World developments in the deconstruction and demotion of monuments, seems to be swinging toward interpreting platform mounds not so much as elite residences—protopalaces—but as communal ritual structures, built collectively, without hierarchy [see papers in Mills 2000].

That view runs counter to many Native traditional histories. Pima people remember the residents of platform mounds as rulers, and not necessarily benign rulers [Bahr et al. 1994; Teague 1993]. The Pima, led by a culture-hero, rose up and destroyed those leaders, going from mound to mound to dispatch hierarchical overlords. This was class warfare—an American revolution four centuries before Lexington and Concord. Pima traditional history and archaeology seem congruent and complementary: Arizona Great Houses certainly can be interpreted as elite residences or chiefly houses—indeed, that was the ruling interpretation until wind from France blew into American journals and textbooks—and Pima histories confirm that ascription. I am not so much concerned about the truth of Great Houses and platform mounds: they may be elite residences, they may be communal ritual facilities, or [more likely] they may be both. I am concerned about our precipitate abandonment of interpretations leaning toward political complexity, in favor of those proposing kindler, gentler forms of collective action: heterarchies, collectives, ritualities. These social formations are simpler, and therefore they are preferable to older, more complex formations like chiefdoms and states.

There is a confusion, I think, between the simplicity of Ockham’s razor and the simplicity of social forms. What I have come to call the Sin of Ockham is this: misapplication of the razor to the question of interest rather than to the logic of its answer. Life was always more complicated than we would represent by a close reading of the data. Humans do not now live, nor have they ever lived, parsimoniously, else we would still be swinging through trees. To err cautiously in archaeology is to err egregiously.
alarms and excursions, winners and losers—but not the Native peoples of the United States.

In conversations and debates with Mississippian and Southwestern archaeologists, there almost always comes a time when those denying Chaco-Aztec-Paquimé or denoting Cahokia say: “They couldn’t have done that.” At one Southwestern meeting, I was sternly admonished by a senior scholar to “remember the scale of the societies we are dealing with.” I find that troublesome: Chaco and Paquimé were the size of a second-tier Mesoamerican city, and Cahokia was much larger, as large as many well-known Mesoamerican capitals. Why is it so impossible to imagine a past that differs from the stereotype model of Zuni or from French accounts of the poor tattered Natchez? Why do we insist that “they couldn’t have done it”?

A close analysis of that glass ceiling will not reflect well on the deeper history of archaeology in the United States [for a polemical but sobering analysis, see Kehoe 1998]. There is, I fear, at a distant intellectual remove, an almost racist aspect to the limits we set for what might have been. American intellectuals who set the tone of anthropological discourse long before anthropology was an accepted discipline—not today’s archaeologists—saw the Indian as inferior, not capable of establishing lasting political formations, much less the state. That attitude toward Natives made their disposition philosophically acceptable and propelled Manifest Destiny [see, for example, Kehoe 1998 and Kennedy 1994]. Today’s archaeologists do not share the antique racism—our anthropology rejects racism—but we are heirs to the founding intellectual traditions, at whatever remove in time and theory. And this is the third, far-from-obvious but most alarming objection to pre-Columbian palaces in the United States. Ancient societies in temperate zones around the world flirted with statehood; ancient societies around the globe built palaces. Yet we find these possibilities unthinkable for Natives within our national boundaries. But not, I think, for lack of evidence.

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