

THE SPLENDOR OF MEXICO

# Chihuahua's Ancient Cultures

Arturo Guevara Sánchez\*





▲ The unique form of its doors is one of Paquime's distinctive characteristics.

Several cultures flourished in northern Mexico during the pre-Hispanic and colonial periods. One of the most outstanding was that of Casas Grandes, which developed in what is now the west of the state of Chihuahua and in part of neighboring Sonora. This culture was part of the societies known in the southwestern United States, where groups still exist who are descendants

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\* Archaeologist and researcher at the National Institute of Anthropology and History, Chihuahua.

of the original occupants of the region's ancient archaeological zones. Its most important site is Paquimé, an ancient settlement located around Casas Grandes, the small modern city that has given it the name by which it is known throughout the country.

At first glance, clearly, the Paquimé culture is geographically located mid-way between Mesoamerica and the other sub-areas of the U.S. Southwest. Cultural traits from both regions can be noted. Among the Mesoamerican characteristics of Paquimé are the representations of deities like *Quetzalcóatl* and

the practice of ball games. The U.S. Southwest contributed the style of ceramic decorations, the adaptation of the architecture to caves and buildings on different levels. Among Paquimé's main characteristics are its adobe constructions and the form of its doors.

With such humble antecedents as the hunter-gatherers who inhabited the Western Sierra Madre, the Paquimé culture managed to develop into one of foremost importance for the history of Mexico. In what we now call the Cueva de la Golondrina (Swallow's Cave), remains have been found that speak to agricultural practices dating back 5,000 years, vestiges of a society that gave birth to a strong, advanced group that established itself in what is now Paquimé, a settlement that became the ruling center of a very large territory.

Paquimé's basic chronology, developed by Charles Di Peso in 1974 and, although currently debated, still accepted by most researchers, situates the first settlements in the area during the Pre-ceramic

Horizon before the year A.D. 1 with different periods that last up to the colonial period, although the decline of the dominant group is pinpointed during the Devil Phase, from A.D. 1262 to 1340.

Paquimé developed a system of government based on tribute and in its surrounding areas even today it is possible to see what must have been the villages that were dependent on it; we can also see those areas that were part of its trade routes, where its expeditions sought shelter, which must have been very important given the proximity of enemies. We know that these routes connected Paquimé with the cultures of the Pacific Coast and Mesoamerica, with the cultures of the U.S. Southwest and probably with groups from the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

Among the places that must have sheltered travelers is one excellently located on the heights of the mountain cliffs: a group of caves with buildings known as the Forty Houses, which clearly show the characteristics of the Paquimé culture. This kind of cliff dwellings are very attractive and have con-

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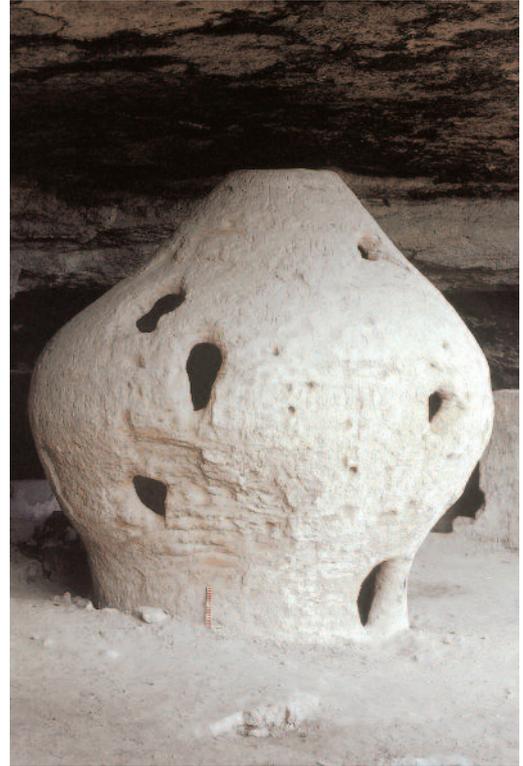


▲ Paquimé's housing complexes are differentiated by social status.



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▲ Paquime's wells provided water in the dry season.



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▲ The Cave of the Pot granery, two meters wide at the base.

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tributed valuable information for understanding the cultures of Chihuahua.

Inevitably, contact with other cultures left a noticeable mark on Paquime's culture. The architectural remains and objects of daily life show evidence of traits of other cultures taken into the city as the result of trade, basically in luxury items: copper, selenite, salt and turquoise. We know that the group worshipped Quetzalcóatl, the plumed serpent, deity of wisdom in central Mexico; we also know that it honored the deities of water, fire and death.

Trade and social organization made it possible for Paquime to achieve notable development. Scholars think that the city could boast specialists who were dedicated full time to their skills: architects, ceramists, raisers of fowl and, above all, priests, who must have worked with the aid of slaves. As a result of its power, the city itself developed interestingly and its inhabitants had facilities little used in the rest of Mexico: they built large housing complexes made of poured adobe that were up to four or perhaps even more stories high. In the small rooms, we can still note the impressions of their beds, built-in stoves and adobe stairs with closets. Another of the

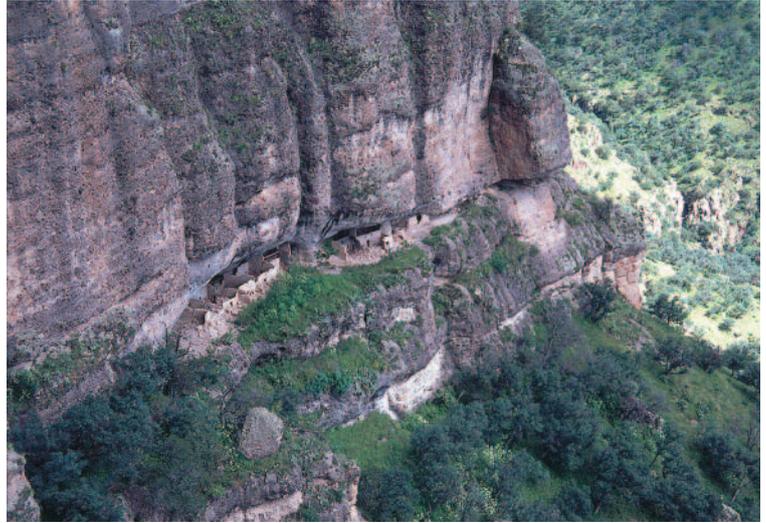
most interesting aspects are stone spouts that provided the inhabitants with running water.

Paquime's housing complexes can be differentiated; for example, the leaders' houses had their own private wells, something very significant in a region as arid as Chihuahua. The remains of the steam baths, called *temazcal* baths in Central Mexico, as well as cists (roofed storage pits) and underground spaces can still be observed. Another complex, the House of the Guacamayas, was dedicated to raising beautifully plumed birds for their feathers, used to decorate luxury apparel. We can still see the walls of the adobe cages where the birds were kept, as well as the aqueduct that supplied the potable water that raising birds requires, and the stones used to grind the bird seed.

Another building that must have been important was known as the House of the Pillars, with its private space for a ball game, common in Mesoamerica. This building has large pillars after which it is named and is near the remains of a circular temple and a large space where the ball game must have been played before a larger audience. Grain must have been stored here and in other houses in large receptacles and, in



▲ The Windows Cave, the largest of the Forty Houses complex.



▲ Aerial view of a cliff, pre-Hispanic buildings, center.

Warriors are represented on the culture's ceramics and must have had a powerful influence in the society.

some cases, in granaries, like those still preserved on the sides of the mountains, such as the Cave of the Pot.

Seemingly, the ancient inhabitants of this house must have worshipped some Mesoamerican deities and celebrated some type of ritual at one of the ceremonial mounds called the Mound of the Heroes. In one of the rooms, the mound is still visible through a hole built in one of its walls; this window must have served as an observation point for some old priest to watch the activities there; a step up to the window was even built so the observer could watch comfortably.

To guard all of this, militarism must have been born practically at the same time as Paquimé. Warriors are represented on the culture's ceramics and must have had a powerful influence in the society, where they must have formed a specialized priesthood. It is possible that several of the archeological sites along the trade routes were veritable barracks where the militia carried out constant surveillance, very often from watch towers built expressly for the purpose.

One of these look-out points is atop the Cerro de Moctezuma (Moctezuma Hill), relatively near Paquimé. It is a place that must have been under the protection of the god of the wind; the hill dominates

a vast territory and guards could communicate with Paquimé by smoke signal. In the city's House of the Skulls is another point where look-outs must have vigilantly scoured the skies for warnings.

The reasons Paquimé society went into decline are not exactly known, but it is very possible that it had to face many problems because of droughts in North America. Supposedly because of the climate, groups of hunter-gatherers became very aggressive and their attacks weakened the city's defenses until it fell before them about 1340, when it was burned and heavily pillaged.

The city was not re-occupied by its enemies and we know that an expedition of Spaniards arrived there. It was then that the first extant description of it comes down to us from chronicler Baltazar de Obregón, who mentions some of Paquimé's basic characteristics, to the benefit of historians and archaeologists. After it was abandoned for a time, the region was occupied by the Spaniards who established the San Antonio de Padua Monastery in the area surrounding the remains of the city (ca. 1664).

After achieving the fall of Paquimé, Chihuahua's hunter-gatherer groups continued their way of life



Sector Chihuahua

▲ These cliff dwellings must have given shelter to travelers.

without notable change until the arrival of the Europeans, who were the first to describe them. Among other things they mention that the hunter-gatherers, distributed throughout the state, had different levels of development: some of them, like many of the Chizo, were beginning to carry out incipient agriculture. We also know that there were groups of Concho, who occupied a wider expanse of land, and other lesser-known groups like the Manso, the Jumano and the Patarabuey, who lived in the northern part of the state. Other groups like the Toboso and the Lipan may have been Atapascan, that is, related to the Apaches; it is known that they lived in southern Chihuahua, in the area of the Bolsón de Mapimí.

These groups were the most outstanding of the great number of societies that occupied Chihuahua in the sixteenth century. By that time, Paquimé had been abandoned, though it is possible that many of these now-extinct groups were influenced by it. Drought, war and epidemics during the

colonial period, as well as intermarriage, caused the gradual disappearance of the hunter-gatherer groups; only a few survived the nineteenth century and today four culturally assimilated tribes are known. Since these societies did not have writing, study of these sites must be limited to archeological materials; for that reason, they are all the more appreciated by modern Mexicans. **NM**

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#### NOTE

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#### FURTHER READING

- Di Peso, Charles, *Casas Grandes. A Fallen Trading Center of the Gran Chichimeca* (Flagstaff, Arizona: The Amerind Foundation, Inc., Dragoon, 1974).
- Guevara Sánchez, Arturo, *Apuntes para la arqueología de Chihuahua*, Working Paper 1 (Chihuahua: Centro INAH, Chihuahua, 1985).