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Chaco: Notes on Light and Darkness

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On the high desert of northwestern New Mexico lies a small canyon. Its ancient inhabitants left no written words and no name for their canyon. We call it Chaco.

The canyon’s historical, archeological, and cultural importance is indicated by its designation as both a National Historical Park by the United States and a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Studies reveal that nomadic peoples visited Chaco for thousands of years before settlement began. Then, for reasons not fully understood, the residents of the canyon began constructing large, complex structures in stone: many-roomed pueblos, or Great Houses, giant sunken ceremonial chambers (kivas), large public spaces, and cool chambers for the fruits of farming and their far-reaching trading networks. Seashells and tropical bird feathers have been discovered in Chaco. Tree ring patterns in wood incorporated into the buildings indicate this burgeoning of construction and activity started more than a thousand years ago.

On the sandstone canyon walls around the pueblos, artists incised hundreds of petroglyphs. Some of the images are familiar (big horn sheep, frogs, lightning bolts) and some fantastical (intricate geometric patterns, repeated arrangements of dots and lines, strange human forms—or gods). Endowed with power, they compel attention.

By the middle of the twelfth century—eight centuries before others would proclaim the land New Mexico—something stopped the voices of Chaco. After a period of more than 300 years, the masons built no longer. The discarded sandal and the broken pot remained, but the hands that made them disappeared. For reasons lost to us—some say deforestation, some say drought—the ancestral Puebloan people, the Anasazi (“Old Enemies” or “Old Ones” in Navaho) abandoned Chaco. Legends say they migrated to other places, often settling near the river to the east now known as the Rio Grande. During ensuing centuries of silence, Chaco has remained sacred to its descendants, even as many of its former structures have crumbled and returned to earth, their source. The kivas slowly filled with sand and rabbitbrush, and the assaults of frost and sun randomly toppled walls.

Chaco’s remoteness has long protected it, so today, most who pass on busy Interstate 40 more than fifty miles to the south are unaware of the canyon. The canyon fingers out among cliffs and tablelands of sun-bleached sandstone. As during previous millennia here, the sun probes red-orange bluffs, and white
and silver clouds tumble soundlessly above distant blue-green mountains. Preserved in eloquent stillness, this open-air gallery merges perfectly with the land, leaving no clear line between the two. Winds, the sun, and infrequent rains have split and honed the cliffs into countless facets and grooves. They show different shapes and colors at each hour of the day: a fresh and subtle rainbow in the morning light, but timid and muted during mid-day. In the long shadows of evening, the landscape becomes bold and sharp-edged. Hues shade from yellow and orange into the browns and dark purples of desert varnish, the surface coating on rocks exposed for centuries to the elements.

A small stream, barely moist most of the year, winds through the middle of the canyon, submerged ten or twenty feet below its fragile vertical banks. Here and there, rising from the stream banks among the gravel bars, loom craggy old cottonwoods—gray-green sentries, on the lookout for water-thieves.

Chaco seems haunted by watchful spirits. Visitors have the sense of being in an inhabited landscape that still rings, like a struck bell, with vibrations from lives and events and struggles of long ago. Many-layered mysteries confound our understanding of what happened here.

Some present-day visitors know of the spiral solar calendar carved into a rock ledge—high on a butte, inaccessible to casual visitors—that continues to announce the seasons and stations of the sun. Aerial photographs reveal long-disused pathways of unknown purpose. They extend arrow-straight for great distances from Chaco.

On the canyon wall, a pictograph clings to the underside of a rocky overhang. The rock painting, executed in bright red, consists of a ten-pointed star, a crescent moon, and the left handprint of the artist. Ancient Chinese astronomers recorded the sudden appearance of an intensely bright supernova, an exploding, dying star. The supernova—we have named its remnant the Crab Nebula—would have flared above Chaco in the summer of 1054, next to a crescent moon. The pictograph, sealed against the centuries by desert air, is still vivid; the artist seems intimately present.

All day, the canyon crouches low under the sun, faded, its life somnolent. Then, as the breeze of evening flows down the canyon, the sun, having once more demonstrated its power, touches the canyon rim. Insects sing, grow quiet. Night-blooming plants awaken. Colors evaporate. Warmth dissipates into the thin air. The departing light obscures the splendid wreckage of Chaco. At such times, the ancients seem to return. Under the moon and razor-sharp stars of night, the councils of Chaco reconvene to recall and commemorate its long-held secrets. But, when the sun returns, they will not speak of the things they have seen.

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