

H-Net Reviews

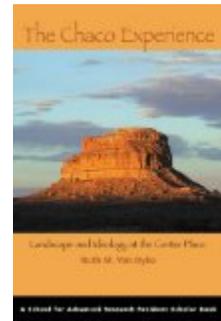
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ruth M. Van Dyke. *The Chaco Experience: Landscape and Ideology at the Center Place*. United States: School of American Research Press, 1999. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-930618-76-3.

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Among the major archaeological areas of the world, Chaco Canyon, in northwestern New Mexico, stands out. It represents one of the most intensively studied areas anywhere, and as a result the scholarly literature on the place is even more monumental than the ancient buildings that adorn the canyon. Also, due in no small part to the number of researchers working on it, the range of interpretations offered for Chaco is rich, varied, and contentious. Indeed, it is remarkable, given the attention lavished on it by archaeologists, that there is so little consensus on Chaco's fundamental nature. For some, Chaco Canyon was a concentration of especially prosperous Pueblo towns in an especially advantageous location. For others, it was the ritual center of an ancient Pueblo world organized along the same lines as more recent Pueblo societies documented through ethnography. Finally, for some, Chaco was a proto-urban political center of a stratified Mesoamerican-style regional polity, complete with attached specialization, a monopoly of coercive force, and gods-on-earth rulers.

It has been difficult to suggest a good first book for those interested in diving into Chaco Canyon the place, the ancient phenomenon, and the object of archaeological scrutiny. Much of the literature on Chaco assumes substantial background knowledge, and many works are clearly written for those already initiated into Chaco-arcana. In this context, Ruth Van Dyke's concise, non-technical, and well-written book stands out as an exception. Van Dyke's book is neither an introductory text nor a survey of the literature. The author has a definite perspective on Chaco and seeks to expand the range of evidence used to interpret the place. At the same time, the author presents a good summary of the Chacoan archaeological record, takes few shortcuts in introducing

the range of perspectives on the Chaco Phenomenon, and cites most of the relevant literature. The result is a book that works just as well as a first book on Chaco as it does as a book with specific points to make about Chaco and about archaeological practice in general.

The book consists of nine chapters. The first introduces the Chaco Phenomenon and proposes that its social and political dimensions can be clarified by examining the messages Chacoan leaders intended to convey through Bonito-style architecture, the hallmark of the canyon and the wider Chacoan world. The second introduces the physical environment of Chaco and the basics of its archaeological record. The third develops the main thesis of the book: that a phenomenological approach to the Chacoan landscape, informed by Pueblo ethnography, helps to clarify the ways Chacoan leaders perceived and represented landscape in pursuit of their goals. Chapters 4 through 8 apply this approach to Chacoan culture history, literally walking the reader through important sites and places associated with the Chaco Phenomenon, from its precursors in the canyon to its final manifestations. In the final chapter, Van Dyke summarizes the primary messages Chacoan architects appear to have intended to send, and comments on how these messages promoted and supported sociopolitical developments in the canyon.

Throughout, the book promotes a basic argument about Chaco: that it reflects the appropriation of existing, pan-Pueblo worldview concepts by leaders who promoted an ideology of Chaco as the center of the world. It also promotes a basic argument about archaeology: that archaeologists need to spend more time "looking up" when they walk to and between archaeological sites so

as to better understand how their creators perceived and conceived of the world around them, and how they utilized these perceptions and conceptions in pursuing their interests. Both points are developed thoroughly and consistently throughout the book, and thus it has much to offer archaeologists specifically interested in Chaco, cultural landscapes, and phenomenology.

There are points over which the author and I disagree. With regard to Chaco, for example, Van Dyke takes parallels in the cultural-landscape concepts of contemporary Pueblo peoples as indications of a shared ancestral Pueblo worldview that Chacoan leaders appropriated. Given the fact that contemporary Pueblo languages derive from four distinct families, however, it seems equally likely that these commonalities derive from the era of Chacoan hegemony as opposed to some more ancient cultural stratum. I also think Van Dyke pays insufficient attention to “maximalist” interpretations of Chacoan society as a part of a post-classic world system linking the Southwest to the rest of Mesoamerica. Such views may not be dominant among Chaco specialists, but they do have some basis, and it seems important for those who disagree with such views to articulate why.

Also, with regard to “a phenomenology of landscape” (the title of the seminal 1994 work by Christopher Tilley), I think Van Dyke oversells the role of universal perception vs. cultural representation in understanding the ways ancient peoples experienced the world around them. While I share her conviction that a good social

theory should build from human biology, research in anthropology, cognitive science, and neurobiology (reviewed most recently and accessibly by Guy Deutscher in *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* [2010]) demonstrates that culture sinks its tendrils far deeper into our “perceptual” apparatus than phenomenological approaches to archaeology sometimes care to admit. Van Dyke acknowledges this to some extent by grounding her explorations in Pueblo ethnography, but in doing so, she presents Pueblo representations as being more static, timeless, and homogeneous than they probably were among the people who actually participated in Chacoan society. What is missing from Van Dyke’s work, and from most such interpretive works, is a method for reconstructing how the worldviews of ancient peoples were different from those of their living descendants, and how they have changed from their ancient configurations to the present. It seems to me that this can only come through application of historical and cognitive linguistic methods to the languages spoken by descendants, and through increased attention to ways of reconstructing cultural representations through analyses of archaeological material culture.

Nevertheless, Van Dyke’s book is a welcome addition to the literature on Chaco and landscape archaeology that deserves to be read by those interested in either topic. It is also one of the best books available for those interested in initiating themselves into the fascinating intellectual landscape of Chacoan archaeology.

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