

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Elinore M. Barrett. *Conquest and Catastrophe: Changing Rio Grande Pueblo Settlement Patterns in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002. xi + 180 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8263-2411-5.

Reviewed by Steven M. Fountain (Department of History, University of California-Davis)
Published on H-West (April, 2003)



Catastrophes, Yes—But Which One?

Catastrophes, Yes—But Which One?

At the time of Francisco Vazquez de Coronado's expedition in 1540, Puebloan settlements numbered roughly one hundred. Speaking multiple languages and dialects (Tiwa, Tewa, Towa, Tano, Piro, Tompiro, Pecos, and Keres), the "Pueblo" peoples inhabited agricultural settlements (pueblos) stretching across two hundred miles of the upper Rio Grande watershed. By 1700, fewer than twenty pueblos remained.

Conquest and Catastrophe traces the changes in the number and distribution of these pueblos as Spaniards and Pueblo peoples encountered, interacted, and clashed with each other in Nuevo Mexico. The first segment is an overview of the period of Spanish *entradas* and exploration, 1540-1598. Barrett is hesitant to overreach in making claims concerning this period. While admitting the likelihood of disease epidemics originating from European contact elsewhere, the author avoids any concrete declarations to that effect. Barrett makes the most compelling claims in the second, central section, titled "Colonization and Its Consequences, 1598-1680." In the forty years following Spanish settlement in 1598, Pueblo populations dropped by nearly three-quarters and half of the pueblos were abandoned. A final segment covers the period from the Pueblo Revolt through the end of the seventeenth century. Readers of the journal *Ethnohistory* will be familiar with at least a portion of the evidence and argument presented here as Barrett's article in the Winter 2002 issue (49:1) is drawn from the same material.

The principal contribution of Elinore M. Barrett's slim volume (116 pages of text) is a compelling case that the primary cause of the precipitous decline in the number of Rio Grande Pueblo settlements was not the violence of Spanish conquistadors, consolidation under missionaries, coerced labor, or even increased land grants to colonists. Barrett instead depicts an epidemic in the mid-seventeenth century as the single most critical moment affecting the distribution and population of Pueblo peoples. Contending that sixteenth-century *entradas* into Nuevo Mexico had little effect on the number of Pueblo settlements, Barrett also provides evidence that the most significant change in Pueblo demographics occurred long before the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 or the following Spanish re-colonization.

Barrett acknowledges the shortcomings of both historical and archaeological materials to reveal the past, but this synthesis is convincing, especially in its treatment of the patterns of settlement geography. Wary of making unfounded claims about population changes, Barrett repeatedly notifies readers that the number of settlements may or may not correlate with advances or declines in population. According to Barrett, efficiency and security in the face of raiding and population losses were the motivating factors for consolidation into fewer pueblos. At the outset, Barrett demarcates the central purpose as providing "a baseline settlement location pattern for the whole of the Rio Grande Pueblo Region and to document the changes in that pattern" (p. 1). Barrett fulfills this goal admirably, but also implies much more with a thesis

of disease as the primary trigger for the consolidation of Pueblo settlements.

Seventeenth-century Pueblo communities were dependent upon isolated valleys fertile enough to support agriculture. This factor alone explains much about the world of consolidating Pueblos as population declined and pressures from Spanish colonists for land and supervision increased. The option of moving into the high desert itself was apparently as untenable as we might expect. Aside from exceptions such as the group from Taos Pueblo who joined “Apaches” on the Great Plains at El Cuartejelo, most Pueblo peoples chose to remain in a shrinking world. Barrett argues that it was finally the realization of lost territory, culture, and autonomy that created the conditions spawning the uprising of 1680.

Long the subject of speculation, the events leading up to the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 have spawned numerous books, articles, and arguments. The population decline from Onate’s estimate of 60,000 indigenous Pueblo peoples to 30,000 by 1640 and to about 17,000 by 1680 is a familiar set of figures to those studying Pueblo society. Accurate population figures are difficult to assess, especially before Spanish colonization, but Barrett agrees that these seem to be sensible estimates. The usual explanations for this striking decline are a combination of Spanish violence, intertribal warfare and raiding, a period of drought and poor crops, and European disease. Barrett does not contradict these theses, but places a greater weight on disease in conjunction with the other factors.

The debate concerning the roots of the Pueblo Revolt lingers about this work. This is not a book about the revolt per se, nor is that the author’s intent, but it is certainly relevant in that context. Though avoiding several specific issues directly concerning the revolt—even to the point of not mentioning Pope—Barrett indicates that neither *encomienda* nor Christianity was behind the decline in population. Barrett places the critical incident that led to such a loss of the Pueblo world forty years before the revolt. The 1630s were a key period of decline. Epidemic disease, made worse by the consolidation of pueblos (*congregacion* or *reduccion*), struck at a particularly vulnerable time for Pueblo peoples. *Congregacion* was initially a response to population loss, Barrett argues, not the reverse. Smaller pueblos consolidated into larger, more defensible settlements in the face of increased Apachean raids. The maize tax was also levied per household, rather than individually. In response to drought conditions, and the increased demand from Spanish colonists for food, the number of Pueblos per household increased. Thus,

a population in decline became more concentrated. Perhaps inevitably, the diseases that struck exacted a severe cost from Pueblos. The smaller southern pueblos were weakened more severely than their larger northern counterparts, but all regions suffered.

Barrett’s argument, though based upon an impressive synthesis of evidence, still relies upon some “best guess” assumptions. Barrett gives a range of between ninety-three and one hundred two extant pueblos at the time of Spanish contact and a more certain eighty-one in 1598. The argument that the changes between contact and settlement “did not change significantly” (p. 50) depend in part upon the lower figure—if a 13 percent decline in the number of settlements over sixty years can be considered insignificant. If the higher number is more accurate, then something like one-fifth of the 1,540 pueblos had been abandoned by the time of Spanish settlement. Drought, disease, and raiding may have taken an earlier and more significant toll than Barrett can muster evidence to show. Barrett does offer some tantalizing hints to this end, but reserves more definite conclusions for the following period.

The larger seventeenth-century decline in settlement numbers was indeed swift. From eighty-one pueblos in 1598, the number dropped to thirty-one in 1680. Barrett gives a convincing account of the causes of what was clearly an even more significant change. Barrett’s suggestion that the losses of the 1630s and 1640s somehow led to the Pueblo Revolt is less well founded. It is certainly feasible that the reactions of Pueblo society after the severe contraction of their settlements had much to do with later events, but the particular connections remain murky. The question remains: why did the uprising not occur earlier than 1680? Were conditions so poor that Pueblos could not muster the strength? Did they lack leadership that could unite the disparate pueblos in this single cause? These may be questions unfair to suggest that settlement geography should answer, but Barrett has made a significant contribution to our conception of change over two centuries.

Given the level of geographic description in *Conquest and Catastrophe*, it may surprise readers to find only three maps included. Two are large-scale overviews of extant pueblos in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, respectively. These are labeled only with indications of geographic areas and are not sufficient to trace the names or locations of individual pueblos discussed throughout the book. The third is a modified reproduction of a 1602 Spanish map. Even native New Mexicans may find them-

selves hard pressed to keep track of the many watersheds and locations detailed here. Literary description does not convey the same sort of impact that well-executed, accurately labeled, small-scale regional maps of settlement change might. Readers interested in the full revelation of Barrett's work would be well-advised to have USGS maps close at hand.

This shortcoming aside, Barrett breaks the static images of Pueblo peoples before the arrival of Spanish colonists. Changes in Pueblo settlement patterns extended from long before colonization and continued well after, including the eventual abandonment of Pecos Pueblo in 1838. In synthesizing an enormous amount of archaeological evidence and juxtaposing it against surviving Spanish documents, the author deserves the thanks of many scholars in the field.[1] At a minimum, this work will serve as an authoritative guide to the

sixteenth- and seventeenth-century location and distribution of Pueblo settlements. The implications for the interactions of colonizing Spaniards and the indigenous peoples of the greater Southwest are significant. Anyone attempting to disentangle the contradictory and sometimes misleading descriptions of Spanish explorers and archaeological evidence will find this work most useful, if not essential. Further, this work will add to the debate about Pueblo demography and the many catastrophes of the first two centuries of the Pueblo-European encounter.

Note

[1]. More accurately, Barrett relies heavily upon published translations of Spanish documents and journals by George P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, John Kessell, and others. Spanish records for New Mexico preceding 1680 are relatively scarce as many, if not most, colonial records were burned in the plaza at Santa Fe during the revolt.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-west>

Citation: Steven M. Fountain. Review of Barrett, Elinore M., *Conquest and Catastrophe: Changing Rio Grande Pueblo Settlement Patterns in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. H-West, H-Net Reviews. April, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7459>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.