



Communities of Movement: Ancestral Puebloans

In the American Southwest, on the vast Colorado Plateau, the Ancestral Pueblo built large agricultural communities, big cities, and monumental architecture. Yet, the Ancestral Pueblo relied on movement—on repeated migrations—to sustain their communities and thrive in a challenging landscape. In this video, Jerad Koepp speaks with Theresa Pasqual (Acoma), Natalie Martinez (Laguna), and archaeologist Kurt Anschuetz about how Pueblo people have managed their patterns of life in this region for thousands of years. We can learn about this history from archaeologists and by listening to the oral history traditions of Pueblo communities today.

0:11

Textbox introducing Koepp; map of U.S. that zooms in on New Mexico; textbox: Colorado Plateau

Clips of New Mexican cliffs and Puebloan architecture

Map zooming in on Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde

1:08

Clips of Puebloan architecture

Transition music; header: Origin Stories

Textbox introducing Pasqual

1:58

Map of Chaco Canyon, Chacoan outliers, and the Pueblos of the present

Photo of a light in at the end of a tunnel

2:54

Photos of early art on rocks

Time-lapse of a desert; map with photos and locations of Puebloan settlements

Hi, I'm Jerad Koepp. I'm Wukchumni, a tribe in Central California and I'm the Washington State teacher of the year. I'm standing in North America, in the Southwest part of the United States, in a region called the Colorado Plateau among the cliffs in high desert of a place we now call Chaco Canyon. In this region, expansive, complex societies arose, but their development doesn't fit the mold that's often found in world history courses.

Beginning around 500 CE, Ancestral Puebloans began building great houses, cliff palaces, towers, astronomical instruments, and Road systems across the vast Colorado Plateau. These sites, and the communities who built and lived in them, challenge world historical assumptions about complex societies.

Why? Well, like other indigenous American societies, ancestral Puebloans built great cities and extensive long-distance trade networks.

Yet they depended on movement, on repeated migrations, to maintain their agricultural communities. This long history of movement remains important to descendant Pueblo communities today.

Who were the ancestral Puebloans? How do they organize their communities? And why did their agricultural communities move around so often?

I'm here in New Mexico to speak with Pueblo educators, historians, and archaeologists to learn the answers to those questions.

PASQUAL: Hi, my name is Teresa Pasqual, and I'm a member of Acoma Pueblo. I serve currently as the director of Acoma's Historic Preservation Office.

KOEPP: What are some places or some ways that Pueblo people talk about their origins?

PASQUAL: These narratives that we have in our community, these, these, migration narratives, um, really are stories of movement of our people after they emerged into this world. Our origin points differ.

So if we talk to the people of Zuni Pueblo, if we talk to the Hopi tribe, if we talk to Ohkay Owingeh, different Pueblo communities, tribal communities that we're related to, their points of origin differ a little bit.

In our history of, as Acoma people, we talk about the point in which our people came into this world and began to start their journey of becoming.

We talk in our retelling of our movement a time in which the Earth was still wet, in which it had not been formed yet.

But from that point of emergence and even for our own people we can't place a dot on a map. We know broadly where that may be. We refer to that as a place to the north.

In those movement narratives, we tell the journey of how our people settled into different places, places like Mesa Verde, places like Bears Ears, places like Chaco Canyon, Aztec, Salmon.

3:43

These are all places that are important to our people, where they settle for a period of time, and began to develop really that skill and that knowledge of how to exist on this land, where to find game, where to find water, where to find clay sources and pigment types to decorate their pottery, how to exist in this landscape, and they had to build that skill so that when they arrived in their present-day communities, they will have all of that knowledge with them.

Our history, unlike Western history where you can pull the books from the library or the bookshelf and take a chapter of that history, our history isn't written that way. It's not written at all.

We don't have a written language. We don't have an alphabet.

4:37

All of our history here at Acoma is held in that collective oral narrative.

Two images of indigenous art

Textbox introducing Martinez

MARTINEZ: Introduces herself in Keres language.

My name is Natalie Martinez and I am K'awaika-meh from the Pueblo of Laguna here in New Mexico.

KOEPP: Why are these stories still important today?

MARTINEZ: So the stories that we have and that we hold dear as Pueblo people are still important. They're relevant.

Images of indigenous art

They teach us who we are, they teach us where we have come from, they teach us how to exist, how to be in a right way. We have, our values are embedded within those.

And so, we have scientific knowledge that is included within those stories.

5:26

We have ways of, you know, every type of study, every science that you can imagine, has been incorporated within our histories and those are all part of the stories that we carry with us, and it is really important for us because they're still relevant. We're still here, and we still need to learn how to be human beings on this planet. And, you know, one of the things about the concept of civilization, is it is a Western construct, and the people who have defined what a civilization means, have defined it according to the value systems that would, um, exclude others. And a lot of times, a formal writing system is something that, um, is the marker of what a civilization is.

6:20

Images of Puebloan architecture

Textbox introducing Anschuetz

And when you think about the complexities and the sheer strength of the survival of an oral history and an oral-based society, that really does strengthen the idea of what civilizations can be.

ANSCHUETZ: Each of the Pueblos talks about its place of emergence and the migration to find the land that had been promised to them, the home that have been promised to them at the time of emergence.

Photo of a river in New Mexico; photos of a starry sky; illustration of landscape; textbox: Haak'u; photo of a desert

7:12

Photos and paintings of ancient Puebloan architecture; photo of an ancient pot with artistic depictions of Homer's epics

Transition music; header: Life as Movement

So, many of the Pueblos start in the North. And they talk about this, in the case of the Pueblo of Acoma, they talk about the promise home Haak'u, meaning the place prepared. And they have this epic migration.

They talk, Acoma members talk about it as migration. And hearing them talk about their history, I go, "You're telling a story that is so profound. It's so compelling. It's so full of detail. . . This is akin to what Homer wrote down."

It is an epic migration. It's an epic story.

Movement is Pueblo life. But movement is hunter-gatherer life. This is what humanity did for most of its existence, is we moved, and we moved a lot. We would have movements during the day, going in and out of the house.

8:08

Photo of ancient Pueblo architecture

Art depicting everyday life

We would have seasonal movements of, during the summers you go into the mountains, and up north.

They're moving, shifting, staying in place and moving on. And soon their movements are throughout, over the course of generations, huge territories. Why are they doing that? Well, as some of the Pueblo authors, like Tessie Naranjo from Santa Clara Pueblo, talks about, the land has to rest, the land has to breathe.

Some people would say, "Oh, that's folkloric. I don't know what to do with it."

Textbox: Fallow; photo of a plant growing in an arid climate

All we have to say is, "You ever heard of fallowing?" We fallow. You have to let the ground regenerate. And you have to have sustainability to live in really difficult climates such as the north and Southwest.

9:03

Photo of a desert landscape

Images of Puebloan farming techniques

These semi-arid settings are incredibly difficult.

Agriculture was 12 months out of the year. When the people harvested their crops in the fall, how they harvested their crops, how they treated the silage, how they treated the soils, were the first steps in the preparation for the next agricultural cycle. They're doing things, making repairs, to funnel water into their fields.

They build devices in their fields that are miniature snow fences, whether it's a single row of big hand-sized cobbles or prickly pear pads, it captures snow that's blowing at ground level. It roughens up the ground, so instead of flat, the air goes like this.

9:58

Image of Pueblo buildings

Well, the farmers understood aerodynamics. And they were working with the aerodynamics to roughen up the soil, place fields in ways where wind would blow snow up the side of a mesa, lose its energy, and the snow would fall out onto the planting area. And then they had treatments for the field surfaces that encourage that water, once that snow melted, would percolate into the ground, into the area of the root zones, and then the surface treatments would prevent evaporation in the spring, so that the sun in the drying air couldn't work that moisture right out. It's kind of like the ground being treated as a reservoir.

10:44

Image of woman sitting in a Pueblo village

PASQUAL: I think part of the struggle is that, from a Western perspective, in almost anything that we do, is very linear. There's a beginning and there's an end. And when we date things, there's the very early periods and there is present day and everything that falls between that has a date.

Images of Pueblo buildings

But for our Pueblo communities, and I would dare say for almost all of our indigenous communities, that is not the way that we approach things. We have struggled to convey this concept of time. Time for us as Pueblo people can be present, it can be the future, it can be the past, and it can be all of those things at the very same time.

11:33

Clips of petroglyphs on a rock

And so, while we can't specifically pinpoint a place on the map, there is evidence through the pictographs, the petroglyphs, the things that our ancestors left behind, that are our confirmation, our proof that our ancestors settled in those areas as they made their way, generation through generation, to places like Chaco. Those movements weren't linear. They weren't from point A to point B. They happened to move and almost move like waves of—of the ocean upon the beach: in and out, back and forth.

12:23

They moved across the landscape, depending on what resources were available to them.

And I think that really becomes the theme of our people is this perpetual movement and motion, not just in present day, but really what kept us moving into, in our journey towards this village. But as I say to our children, what is the next iteration of our village for the future? I won't know that. Only they will be able to tell that story, a hundred, two hundred, a thousand years from now.

*Transition music; header:
Interpreting the Past*

13:08

*Map zooming in on the Colorado Plateau; textbox:
19 Pueblos of New Mexico today*

KOEPP: People have lived here on the Colorado Plateau since time immemorial. Ancestral Puebloans prospered in the frequently changing climate of this landscape, thanks to migration, trade, and brilliant irrigation strategies. Beginning about 1,000 years ago, many Pueblo people had begun large migrations to the south, to the Pueblos of the present.

Photos of archeologists examining the land

Archaeologists continue to examine the buildings and materials left behind by the Ancestral Pueblo for clues to how they lived. However, archeology isn't the only way to understand this history.

Photos depicting Puebloan culture

For descendant communities, oral traditions keep this history alive by passing down detailed historical and technical knowledge through the centuries. As historians, we can interpret this history by examining archaeological evidence, and by listening to Pueblo histories to form a more complex and complete image of the past.

By including and valuing this knowledge, we can begin to challenge and shift some of the big world historical narratives. What do you think? How does the history you've heard today change your understanding of world history?



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