



## The World of Chaco

Though the history of Chaco Canyon remains contested among Indigenous people, archeologists, and historians, one thing is certain: Chaco Canyon is more than just a place for members of Pueblo communities today. For Indigenous Americans, Chaco Canyon—a place that connected people through ideas, networks, and trade—represents their lasting connections and shared histories.



**0:11**

*Textbox introducing Koepp*

*Clips of a road in New Mexico*

*Clip of Pueblo Bonito*

*Map of the U.S. that zooms in on Chaco Canyon*

I'm Jerad Koepp. I'm Wukchumni—a tribe in Central California, and I'm the Washington State teacher of the year.

Today, I'm standing here in New Mexico, in front of the greatest of the Chaco Canyon great houses. It, and dozens more like it, were built by Indigenous Americans who lived here over a thousand years ago.

Today we call this huge complex of buildings behind me Pueblo Bonito.

The people who built them are called the Ancestral Pueblo and they left behind no written records. Yet their descendants have maintained oral history traditions for centuries.

Over a thousand years ago, from about 850 to 1150 CE, Ancestral Puebloans built this great house, and others like it, in hundreds of locations across the Southwest. They connected these communities with miles of perfectly straight roads in every direction across this region. Other communities imitated the art, architecture, and culture of Chaco Canyon.

**1:06**

*Photo of indigenous architecture; drawing of Chaco Canyon; clip of a shed under sun rays*

For three centuries, the people in and around Pueblo Bonito lived at the center of a vast, interconnected region.

You might look at this place and assume these are ruins, but for Pueblo people, this is a living part of their history. Chaco Canyon wasn't built by some different, ancient society. It's a home built long ago by their ancestors, their family. Pueblo people today remain stewards of this place, its history, and its future.

I've traveled to Chaco Canyon with Brian Vallo, a historian, artist, and former governor of Acoma Pueblo. He has spent decades advocating for the preservation of Ancestral Puebloan sites like Chaco Canyon.

*Transition music; header: The Chacoan Landscape*

*Textbox introducing Vallo*

**1:59**

*Graphic showing Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde on a map*

*Textbox: Chetro Ketl; clips of Chetro Ketl*

*Textbox: Kivas; more clips of Chetro Ketl*

*Map showing Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde; textbox: Chaco Canyon; photos of indigenous structures with respective descriptions in textboxes*

KOEPP: Where are we today?

VALLO: So we are, we are in Chaco Canyon, um, the Acoma name for Chaco Canyon is W'aasrba Shak'a. And we are at the site called Chetro Ketl. And this is where my clan group—I'm of the Sun Clan at Acoma Pueblo—and this is where our clan settled when we made the migration from Mesa Verde.

Here at Chetro Ketl, you have a series of dwellings. When they were built, they were three, four stories high. And not all of this site has been excavated.

The main village of Chetro Ketl has been excavated and this is where you see one of the very large ceremonial chambers or what some folks would call Kivas.

The clan groups who settled here at Chetro Ketl lived very much the way that they did in Mesa Verde. Now, there weren't structures here, of course, they had to build them.

**2:54**

*Clips of New Mexican  
landscapes*

But, you know, this explains why we have many outlier sites and many small sites in this area.

And there was a process, it wasn't just someone saying, oh, we're going to build our house here, but it was a process of following the Sun and determining the positioning of the main structures where ceremonial chambers—whether they were clan houses or society houses, medicine society houses—would be built. And so it took some time. And as we can see in the architecture, there's such great detail.

**3:34**

*Photos of detailed  
indigenous architecture;  
clip of Vallo and Koepf  
walking through ruins*

When you think about the detail in both the exterior walls and just the details on the interior spaces, the window systems and door systems, you see this process of careful thought and critical thought about place and space, that these weren't just places to live, but that these would become sacred places once they left.

*Text introducing  
Anschuetz; map of U.S.  
that zooms in on Chaco  
Canyon; textboxes pointing  
out Kin Bineola and  
Pintado*

ANSCHUETZ: Yeah, I'd encourage people to look at Chaco and to think about how the people could set up so-called downtown Chaco and then they could project lines out of from those houses that cut through maces to establish outliers, like Kin Bineola or Pueblo Pintado. They're on a line. That takes us surveying equipment.

**4:29**

*Transition music; header:  
Living at Chaco*

We can use satellites in our handheld devices and get down within sub centimeter.

These folks lack the satellites, they lack transects, but they figured out how to go across three-dimensional terrain and maintain relationships and they did so because those relationships were important, and the community members understand why those relationships are important.

**5:24**

*Photos of ancient  
indigenous architecture*

KOEPP: How many people is estimated to have lived here? Because we've also heard that, um, because the ceremonial cycles, like the population at places like this, may not have always been consistent throughout the year.

VALLO: Yeah, there are different, um, stories about the numbers of people that occupied.

At its peak it's estimated that there were probably close to 30-40,000 people who lived in the Chaco region. Pueblo Bonito alone, you had maybe four or five thousand people living within that village. Chetro Ketl—probably another three to four thousand people.

KOEPP: How do we know what each structure was used for?

*Clips of Pueblo ruins*

How would we know what was like a family residence versus a ceremonial site?

VALLO: These were not nuclear family homes. These were extended family homes, so you had large numbers of people living in one structure. And if one family group was in a three-story unit, the main floor of the first floor would serve as storage. The main living areas would be on the second and third floor, usually the third floor being the cooking areas.

*Illustrations of indigenous settlements and kivas*

Now, you can distinguish in these ancestral settlement ceremonial chambers, or again what are called Kivas, because they're round.

**6:22**

*Clips of ancient ruins*

They are round structures. Some of them are very large and these would be communal, ceremonial gathering spaces while you have others that are much smaller, um, that would belong to a particular clan group or perhaps a society within the group of clans who occupy these sites.

*Transition music; header:  
"Of Chaco"*

ANSCHUETZ: I think it's really useful and interesting to contrast what we archaeologists talk about Chaco and then what I hear in my conversations with descendant community members. So, as an archaeologist, we take a Chaco-centric point.

*Map showing Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde*

Chaco sits in the middle of this vast San Juan desert basin.

**7:17**

And there's this civilization there and we go it's a center, it's the center of the Pueblo world at this period of time. Pueblo folks go, they'll say to me, "Oh, you archaeologists, sometimes you guys lack such common sense." And they say, "Chaco existed because we existed here. Chaco depended on us. And we depended on Chaco."

*Map showing Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde*

Chaco is, in some senses then, for the Pueblo of Acoma or the Pueblo of Laguna, for example, the center is Acoma, the center is Laguna, and Chaco is an edge.

*Photo of Chaco ruins*

Well, the takeaway is there's tremendous genius—the engineering of Chaco.

**8:16**

*Map showing the 19 Pueblos*

That the civilizations in the Pueblos, this is all the different Pueblos—the 19 Pueblos of New Mexico and Hopi and Ysleta del Sur down in El Paso, Texas. That this is the inheritance. A lot of this stuff that's at Chaco was being developed before it was Chaco! It didn't come out of nowhere.

*Photos of Acoma*

Chaco is a relatively short-lived phenomenon, it's only a couple hundred years.

There are things at Acoma that are contemporary. It's not lost. It's not dead. It's very much alive

**8:55**

And it's alive in the sense from the community traditions and understandings of the world, their ancestors are still there, all the Pueblos maintain a relationship with Chaco because all their ancestors are of Chaco and of other places on the migration. Chaco was just one of the stops along the way.

*Clip showing a New Mexican desert*

So oftentimes we hear that the Indigenous communities are the stewards of the land, they have moral obligations to the land. But they're also the trustees of their cultural inheritance.

In the case of Acoma: Acoma will say, "We are of Chaco." They don't say we're from Chaco. I would say of my German ancestry, "My, my history is from Germany." But from and of are such little words, but their meaning is so important.

**9:55**

Of—when Acoma says they are of Chaco, that is carrying a, the implication of a moral obligation.

*Transition music; header:  
Chacoan Networks*

*Graphic showing Pueblo trade routes*

KOEPP: Did the people here trade with other regions?

VALLO: Yes, they did. They traded vast areas into Mesoamerica and to each of the edges of North America. They not only traded, but they also were on pilgrimage—constant pilgrimage.

*Images of raw materials that were incorporated in trading life*

And so, some cultural leaders, religious leaders may have left Chaco for periods of time to go check on the oceans, to check on the sea creatures, and they would return with shells and coral and other raw materials that they incorporated into the ceremonial life.

**10:51**

Further south, there was also trade, but there were also pilgrimages made further south for specific reasons, to gather items that were significant to the practice of the ceremonial cycle.

Later on, as they were becoming exposed to some of the civilizations in South America, there was a series of trade that occurred.

*Photos of stones, cacao and copper bells*

Uh, trade for copper bells, um, some precious stones, and cacao, uh, which, which they discovered in many of the house blocks at Chaco.

KOEPP: What sort of influence did Chaco have on surrounding communities?

*Clip of stars moving above Chaco ruins*

VALLO: So there was a great level of knowledge that had evolved here at Chaco, and this knowledge was being shared with others, um, by cultural leaders.

But we were also extracting information from other civilizations.

**11:48**

*Photo of ancient indigenous art; photo of the Milky Way*

Uh, there was kind of this, um, sharing of knowledge but also sharing of process in terms of monitoring the seasons, monitoring the solar and lunar cycles. But also, you know, sharing stories, sharing histories of that time and the stories associated with migration and settlement.

*Photo of Acoma Pueblo; Photos of Acoma buildings*

So even today when you visit our—let's call them contemporary Pueblos, our descendant communities like where I'm from at Acoma, you see the influence of Chaco architecture in terms of the use of space and settlement of and design of buildings.

**12:43**

*Photos showing Chaco  
architecture style*

The materials that are used in the construction of these places are also very similar if not exactly the same in our present-day communities.

Hunting and agricultural practices, the creation of material culture, whether it be pottery or clothing, hunting practices—all of these were carried by the people on their migration and are still part of our cultures today.

*Transition music; header:  
Shared Histories*

*Graphic showing Chacoan  
connections*

KOEPP: The Chacoan world was vast and complex. It created lasting connections throughout this region and beyond. The people who call this place home sat at the heart of an extensive cultural zone and linked long-distance trade networks between North America and Mesoamerica.

**13:37**

*Time lapse of a sky  
changing over Chacoan  
ruins*

Chacoan society inspired others and helped connect people through ideas. Networks of culture, trade, and mutual dependence helped ideas move among different societies. Today, you've heard from Pueblo historians about the deep and lasting connections they feel to this place and their ancestors who lived here. But you've also heard that this place and its history are contested.

Historians, tribes, and archaeologists debate its past. But for the many Pueblo communities of the present, it's more than a place, more than an archaeological site. Chaco Canyon represents lasting connections to personal histories of those who came before.

*Text: Shared histories...*

In world history, you're learning that these are the kinds of connections that bind human communities together, as shared histories help us to make sense of the past and prepare for the future.



Unless otherwise noted, this work is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Credit: "The World of Chaco",



OER Project aims to empower teachers by offering free and fully supported history courses for middle- and high-school students. Your account is the key to accessing our standards-aligned courses that are designed with built-in supports like leveled readings, audio recordings of texts, video transcripts, and more. Offerings include a variety of materials, from full-year, standards-based courses to shorter course extensions, all of which build upon foundational historical thinking skills in preparation for AP, college, and beyond.

To learn more about The OER Project, visit [www.oerproject.com](http://www.oerproject.com)