

**Analysis of Perishable Artifacts from Four Stabilization Excavation Projects  
at West Ruin and East Ruin, Aztec Ruins National Monument**

**Final Report for Western National Parks Association Grant 08-01**

**Laurie D. Webster**

**September 2009**

Stabilization efforts at Aztec Ruins National Monument (AZRU) over the years have led to the recovery of significant quantities of artifacts from the East Ruin and West Ruin, but only a few of these projects have recovered perishable artifacts. Until recently, none of the artifacts had been intensively studied. During the past five years, the Western National Parks Association (WNPA) has funded two projects toward this end, a study of the worked perishables from Jim Trott's 1984 excavations in the west wing of the West Ruin (Accession 61) (Webster 2007), and the present study, which resulted in the analysis of 143 perishable artifacts from four earlier stabilization projects. These WNPA grants have contributed to the author's ongoing study of the perishable material culture from Aztec Ruins (Webster 2008). The current project was featured in WNPA's 2008 annual report.

Perishable artifacts from four stabilization projects were analyzed for the current study:

- George Boundey's ca. 1927 excavations at the West Ruin (Accession 15)
- Charlie Steen's 1938 excavations at the West Ruin (Accession 11)
- Joel Shiner's 1961 excavations at the West Ruin (Accession 54)
- Roland Richert's 1957 excavations at the East Ruin (Accession 23)

One hundred forty-three (143) worked perishable artifacts, including baskets, mats, sandals, woven fabrics, cordage, and items of worked wood, were identified and analyzed during the project. One hundred ten (110) of these artifacts were analyzed at the Western Archeological and Conservation Center (WACC) in Tucson, Arizona, and the remaining collections were analyzed at the park. The analysis was completed in January 2008.

Analysis entailed the recording of a detailed physical description, digital photography, and a conservation assessment of each object. Information recorded for each object included construction method, raw material composition, dimensions, and condition. Basic information about each artifact was summarized in an Excel spreadsheet. Data and photographs from the current project were integrated into a larger spreadsheet and photo file of all cataloged AZRU perishable artifacts. These were delivered to the park in November 2008.

In this report, I summarize each stabilization project and its perishable assemblage, and also highlight a few of the more significant artifacts from each project. An expanded version of this report with detailed analytical data and photographs has been prepared for the park for use by future researchers (Webster 2009).

**George Boundey's Excavations at the West Ruin (Accession 15)**

George L. Boudney was the first official custodian at Aztec Ruins, serving in that capacity from April 1927 to November 1929 (Lister and Lister 1990:86-101). During his first year of residence, Boudney conducted excavations in seven first-floor rooms in the northwest corner of the West Ruin: rooms 197, 198, 141, 142, 199, 200, and 201. In late 1927 and early 1928, he also cleared the line of rooms immediately to the south of this east-west passage (rooms 239, 147, 144, 126, 205, and 206). Boudney claimed to have drawn a plan of each room detailing the locations of the artifacts, but no record of this has been found.

Boudney's excavations produced a diverse assemblage of 76 perishable artifacts:

- 1 plaited rush bag
- 10 baskets (8 coiled baskets, 1 plaited ring basket, 1 wicker basket)
- 5 twined turkey-feather blankets
- 2 examples of braided plant material
- 6 bundles of plant material (raw material for basketry production?)
- 2 yucca-leaf chains
- 2 collections of plain-weave cotton cloth fragments
- 5 collections of cordage (2 of hide, 1 feather-wrapped, 1 of human hair, 1 of yucca)
- probable remains of 3 cornhusk baskets
- 6 hide artifacts
- 8 plaited rush mats
- 1 threaded willow mat
- 1 fragment of interlinked netting
- 1 reed pannier
- 1 plaited yucca pot rest
- 6 coiled pot rests or coils of raw materials in a variety of plant materials
- 1 yucca quid
- loose reeds (remains of a reed mat or pannier?)
- 2 yucca leaves tied into a ring
- 9 sandals (2 twined, 7 plaited)
- 2 batches of yucca-leaf ties in square knots
- 1 possible yucca-leaf carrying strap

Two noteworthy artifacts from this assemblage are a wicker basket and a reed pannier. AZRU 1413 is the base of a wicker basket or plaque (Figure 1). The base is flat, has 18 radiating spokes, and is woven in 1/1 interlacing (plain weave) of willow elements. No other examples of wicker basketry have been encountered during recent studies of the Aztec, Salmon, Mesa Verde, or Chaco Canyon collections. AZRU 1283 is a large rectangular twined reed mat that probably served as a pannier, or large carrying basket for transporting goods on the back (Figure 2). It was apparently used with a frame, now missing. The pannier is composed of two layers of reeds (*Phragmites* sp.), each with a wooden bar at one end. The bars are lashed together in three places with yucca cordage. The end with the lashed bars served as the bottom of the basket, the other end was the mouth opening. Based on a complete example from Mesa Verde, Carolyn Osborne

(2004:277-279, Fig. 189) has convincingly argued that such objects served as carrying baskets, or panniers, for packboard frames.

### **Charlie Steen's 1938 Excavation of Room 203 at the West Ruin (Accession 11)**

- NPS archaeologist Charlie Steen conducted excavations in the West Ruin in 1938 to improve visitor access. During this work, 6 perishable artifacts were recovered from Room 203 in the central portion of the north wing. Steen's excavations represent the earliest systematic collection of perishable artifacts from the West Ruin by NPS personnel. Although the perishable assemblage is small, it contains an interesting assortment of artifacts, many apparently of a ceremonial nature:
- 1 reed cigarette
- 1 triangular piece of pigmented hide
- 1 yucca rope
- 1 probable ceremonial stick
- 1 bundle of grass bound with cornhusk (possible brush?)
- 1 cornhusk container filled with corn tassels
- Small fragments of cotton plain-weave cloth with red coloration

The most significant artifacts from Room 203 are AZRU 1758, a probable ceremonial stick, and AZRU 1760, a cornhusk container. AZRU 1758 is a finely worked piece of wood, flat on one face with a rounded shaft and knoblike triangular ends. The catalog card identifies the wood as pine and proposes a ceremonial use for the object. Although many examples of ceremonial sticks were found at the West Ruin, none are shaped like AZRU 1758, nor are similar examples reported from Chaco or Mesa Verde. AZRU 1758 appears to be unique. AZRU 1760 is one of numerous cornhusk containers recovered from the West Ruin (Figure 3). Such objects are believed to have served as specialized receptacles for sacred or precious materials. The object was constructed by folding a collection of cornhusks in half and enclosing them in a network of yucca strips. The husk is wrapped crosswise with yucca strips, and these are wrapped vertically with additional yucca strips worked in 360-degree wrapping. The yucca strips are joined in several places with square knots.

### **Joel Shiner's 1961 Excavation of Room 224 at the West Ruin (Accession 54)**

Joel Shiner's excavation of Room 224 produced 29 worked perishable artifacts. The assemblage provides an excellent comparative sample to the one excavated by Jim Trott's from adjacent Room 225 in 1984 (Accession 61) (Webster 2007).

The perishable artifacts from Shiner's work are:

- 4 pot rests or coils of plant raw materials
- 1 bundle of plant raw material
- 2 coiled baskets
- 1 plaited ring basket
- 2 plaited rush mats
- 1 threaded willow mat
- 1 twined sandal

- 2 objects of worked wood
- 9 hide artifacts (thongs, tanned buckskin, pierced hide)
- Miscellaneous examples of cordage, braided plant material, and yucca ties

Among the artifacts from Shiner's excavations is a very large, incomplete, yucca plaited ring basket with a probable diamond design (AZRU 3554). Several artifacts from Shiner's work closely resemble those from adjacent Room 225 excavated by Trott. For example, AZRU 3541, a small bundle of folded strips of probable juniper bark, is nearly identical to bundle AZRU 9200 from Room 225, and both rooms produced wooden billets of wood (AZRU 3502 from Room 224, AZRU 10428 from Room 225).

### **Roland Richert's 1957 Excavations at the East Ruin (Accession 23)**

The perishable assemblage collected by Roland Richert (1964) constitutes nearly all known examples of perishables from the East Ruin, which is still largely unexcavated. Richert recovered worked perishables from rooms 8, 11, 12, and 14. Most are from Room 11.

The 25 worked perishable artifacts recovered by Richert and studied during the current project are:

- 1 probable reed-stem container
- 1 coiled basket
- 4 plaited mats (1 from door sill)
- 1 plaited pot rest
- 2 coiled pot rests or coils of plant raw materials
- 6 bundles of plant materials (folded yucca strips, yucca fiber, yucca cordage, juniper bark, cornhusks, unidentified twigs)
- 1 dumbbell-shaped bundle of yucca fiber
- 1 fragment of plain-weave cotton cloth
- 1 sample of cotton fiber
- 1 gourd rattle

The most unique artifact collected by Richert is AZRU 1764, the remains of a probable incised gourd rattle from the upper level of Room 14 (Figure 4). The incomplete object consists of one large fragment and six smaller ones. Three pieces can be fitted together. This section is crisscrossed by two dark brown bands, which branch off into additional lines. The bands appear to have been made by peeling away the surface of the gourd and are filled with small indentations. No other gourd rattles are reported from Aztec, and no examples with this type of decoration are known from Chaco or Mesa Verde. The post-AD 1200 date of the room suggests a similar date for the object.

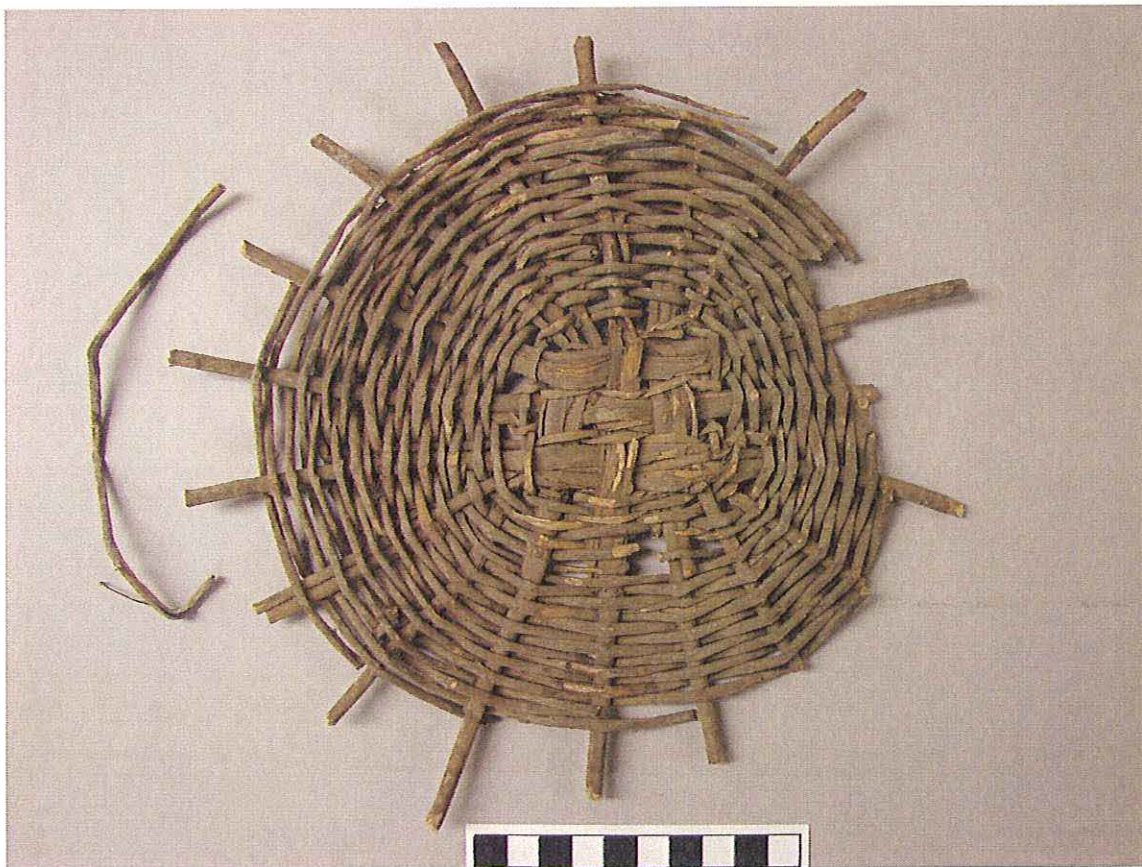
Another noteworthy artifact from Richert's excavations is AZRU 757, a small 2/2-twill plaited bulrush mat found in situ on the wooden doorsill between rooms 8 and 12 (Figure 5). Richert's notes identify the original length as 64 cm, the width as 4.5 and 2.9 cm. Much of the mat is now missing.

## Conclusions

This analysis of 143 worked perishable artifacts broadens our understanding of perishables production at the West Ruin and East Ruin. All artifacts are more fully described and interpreted in Webster's (2009) final report to the park. Two previous WNPA grants have supported the survey of perishable collections from AZRU, one a survey of artifacts at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and the other the analysis and interpretation of collections excavated by the NPS during a 1984 stabilization project. The current project completes this analysis, paving the way for a synthesis of the rare and remarkable perishable collections from Aztec Ruins National Monument.

## References Cited

- Osborne, Carolyn M.  
 2004 *The Wetherill Collections and Perishable Items from Mesa Verde*. Self-published on [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com).
- Richert, Roland  
 1964 *Excavation of a Portion of the East Ruins, Aztec Ruins National Monument, New Mexico*. Southwest Parks and Monuments Association Technical Series, Vol. 4. Coolidge, Ariz. Reprinted 1975.
- Webster, Laurie D.  
 2007 *Perishable Artifacts of Worked Fiber and Wood from the 1984 Excavations at West Ruin, Aztec Ruins National Monument*. Final Report presented to the Western National Parks Association, Tucson.
- 2008 An Initial Assessment of Perishable Relationships Among Salmon, Aztec, and Chaco Canyon. In *Chaco's Northern Prodigies: Salmon, Aztec, and the Ascendancy of the Middle San Juan Region after AD 1100*, edited by Paul F. Reed, pp. 167-189. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.
- 2009 *Analysis of Perishable Artifacts from Four Stabilization Excavation Projects at West Ruin and East Ruin, Aztec Ruins National Monument*. Final report presented to Aztec Ruins National Monument, Aztec, New Mexico.



**Figure 1. AZRU 1413, wicker basket from northwest corner of West Ruin.**



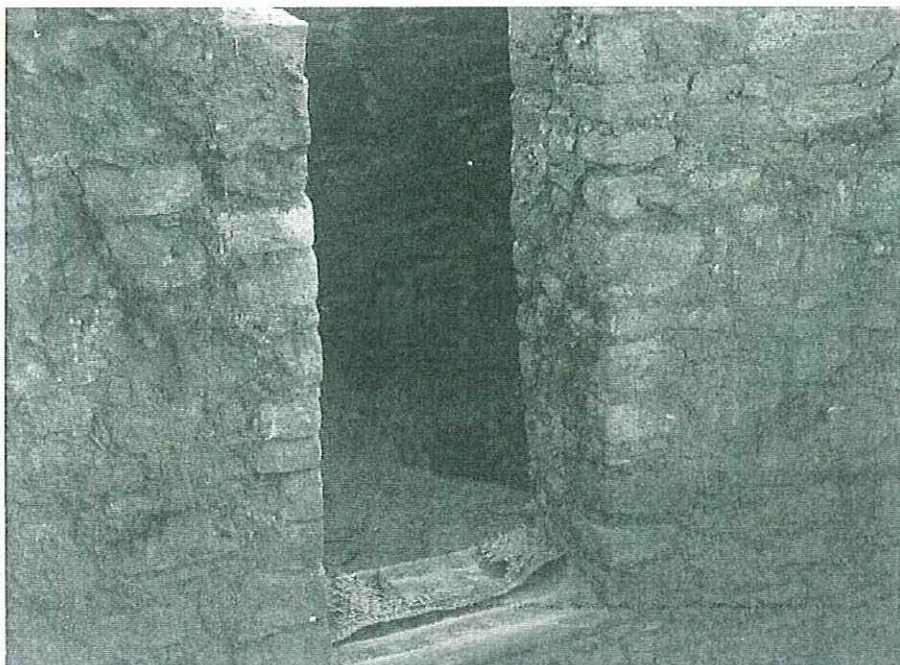
**Figure 2. AZRU 1283, reed pannier from northwest part of West Ruin.**



Figure 3. AZRU 1760, cornhusk container from Room 203, West Ruin.



Figure 4. AZRU 1764, incised gourd rattle from Room 14, East Ruin.



**Figure 5. AZRU 757, plaited mat on doorsill between rooms 8 and 12, East Ruin.**