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## **Basketry, Textiles, and Ceramics from Aztec's West Ruin: What Have We Learned About Ancient Craft Production?**

by Paul F. Reed, Laurie D. Webster, and Lori Stephens Reed

The vast archaeological collection from the West Ruin at Aztec Ruins National Monument has lain dormant for decades, largely hidden from view in the cavernous storage basement of the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Archaeologist Earl Morris was hired by the Museum in 1915 to excavate its newly acquired archaeological wonder. The sites and surrounding lands were subsequently transferred to the National Park Service, to guarantee protection of the irreplaceable sites and environs in perpetuity. Artifact and sample collections gleaned from work at Aztec into the 1920s were packed up and taken to New York. Intermittent, limited research has been conducted on these collections, but most of the potential of these amazing items has not been realized.

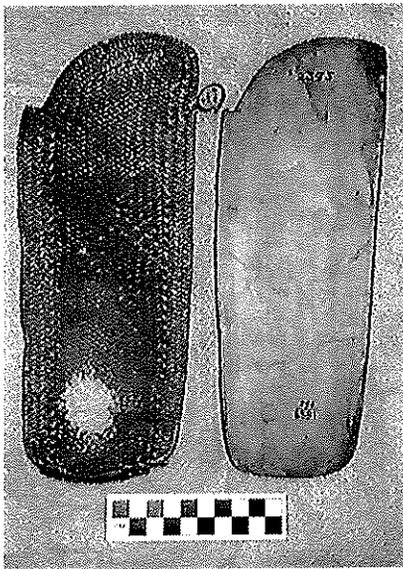


Aerial view of Aztec's West Ruins (Adriel Heisey).

Coincident with renewed research interest in Chaco Canyon and its unparalleled suite of great house sites in the late 1990s, a series of summary conferences (known as the Chaco Capstone conferences) aimed at reframing our understanding of Chacoan society, were convened. Nearly simultaneously, archaeological research in the Middle San Juan region surrounding the Aztec Community experienced a resurgence. The Center for Desert Archaeology-Salmon Ruins partnership was launched in 2001, with primary goals of completing a research report on archaeological work at Salmon and addressing long-term curation problems. At about the same time, archaeological research at Aztec Ruins was jump-started with a long-term architectural study of the West Ruin and the laying of plans to interpret and open the East Ruin to visitation in the near future. These undertakings breathed life in the research agendas of both Salmon Ruins and Aztec Ruins, and set the stage for the most ambitious work at either site in the last 35 years.

In conjunction with the reinvigorated research at Salmon and Aztec, researchers associated with the Center for Desert Archaeology (Paul Reed-Co-Principal Investigator; Laurie Webster-Co-Principal Investigator and perishable-textile analyst; and Lori Stephens Reed, ceramic analyst) proposed a pilot study of Aztec's West Ruin materials, held at the American Museum. This study was funded by the Western National Parks Association in 2003 and work was completed in 2005.

Laurie Webster and Lori Reed traveled to the American Museum in New York City, to study the incomparable Aztec West collections on-site. Their trip covered a month's time in June 2004. The work accomplished was quite impressive: Webster was able to survey and inventory nearly 900 perishable fiber and wooden artifacts. Lori Reed studied more than 50 whole or reconstructible ceramic vessels from Aztec.

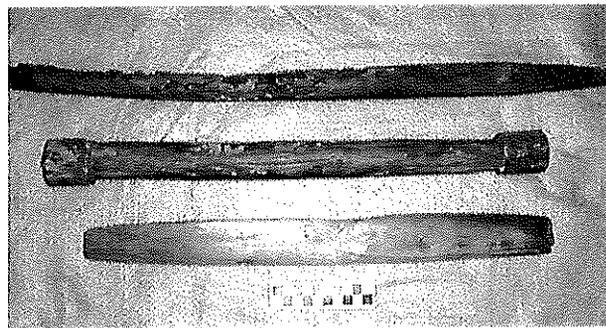


Plaited sandal and form from Room 115.

The results of these studies are quite interesting and will expand and revise interpretation of the activities reconstructed for Aztec's West Ruin.

Looking first at textile, basketry, and other fragile, perishable material from Aztec, we see a great amount of diversity and breadth in the collection. The collection includes the remains of coiled and plaited baskets, plaited pouches, plaited and twined sandals, turkey-feather shoe socks, tumpbands, 80 examples of cotton cloth, several twined fur or feather blankets, 50 mats, 60 cornhusk baskets, 24 braided objects, 110 samples of cordage, 3 examples of rope, 6 feather ornaments, and 85 bundles of raw materials. The assemblage also includes many other kinds of fiber constructions.

Evidence of weaving and weaving tools were found during the analysis. The most important weaving assemblage identified at Aztec is a complete backstrap loom and batten recovered from Room 115 behind Kiva L. The ventilator shaft of Kiva A, in the southeastern part of the pueblo, also produced a possible loom bar and batten. Possible spindle whorls were recovered from rooms 111 and 115.



Backstrap loom bars and weaving batten from Room 115.

Conclusions we can draw from study of the perishable artifacts tells us several things. First, not surprisingly, there are close similarities between the "Chacoan" (or more accurately, McElmo phase 1100s) and "Mesa Verde" age (1200s) perishables of Salmon and Aztec, which demonstrate strong connections between the people occupying these sites. In particular, similarities between the Chacoan assemblages from these two sites suggest close linkage between the builders and inhabitants of Aztec and Salmon. Most of the Chacoan refuse was cleaned out prehistorically at Salmon, whereas much of the Chacoan refuse at Aztec was left in place, resulting in a huge assemblage of Chaco-related perishable material for study. A preliminary assessment suggests that much, if not most, of the perishable collection from Aztec is associated with McElmo rather than Mesa Verde ceramics and that most of these artifacts come from Chacoan storerooms in the northern and eastern wings of the pueblo. If these observations are correct, then Aztec Ruins appears to have yielded the largest assemblage of 12th-century perishables of any site in the Southwest!

There is a strong emphasis on ritual paraphernalia and clothing in these late Chacoan (1110-1130) assemblages. This is reflected in the high numbers of labor-intensive textiles, such

as finely-woven twined and plaited sandals and twill-woven cotton textiles, recovered from some Chacoan rooms. Some rooms produced sandals still in the process of manufacture as well as caches of prepared yucca fiber, cordage, and splints, indicating that textile craft specialists were actively engaged in the production of such goods at Aztec. Other kinds of ritual paraphernalia found in these rooms, presumably also dating to the 1100s, include a basketry rattle covered in red paint or clay, examples of clay-covered painted baskets, various forms of prayer sticks and altar pieces (some painted green or blue), feather ornaments, and reed cylinders that may have served as quivers for ceremonial arrows. Many of these same objects occur in earlier Bonito-phase (AD 1020-1120) contexts at Pueblo Bonito. Despite the evidence of continuity in ritual practices between Pueblo Bonito and Aztec (and to a lesser extent, Salmon), certain kinds of perishable ritual objects found at Pueblo Bonito have yet to be identified at Aztec, including bifurcated baskets (or their ceramic effigies) or cylindrical baskets (or their related cylinder jars). Perhaps the production of such objects did not continue into the 1100s. Nevertheless, this emphasis on ritual artifacts and other high-status, exotic objects at Aztec, in addition to some richly furnished multiple burials reminiscent of Pueblo Bonito, lends credence to Steve Lekson's idea that some of the leadership from Chaco Canyon resided at Aztec at some point in time.

Ceramic artifacts from Aztec's West Ruin were also very informative and exciting. Study of ceramic bowl, jars, effigies, and other items from the Aztec collection provided a unique opportunity to collect valuable data related to pottery

production, paint design style, and function or use of specific items. Rather than examining broken fragments of pottery, the focus of the study was to record, analyze, and photograph complete pottery vessels, some of which Earl Morris had reconstructed during cool summer evenings at Aztec Ruin in 1915. Many of the bowls and jars in the collection were recovered during excavation as complete items. Others were broken at the time of discard or when the roof of a room

collapsed after the pueblo was abandoned. Morris reconstructed many of the pots himself or museum staff at the American Museum reconstructed others as they were shipped to New York City.



Unique rectangular bowl with corrugated exterior, traded in to Aztec, from Tularosa region to the south.

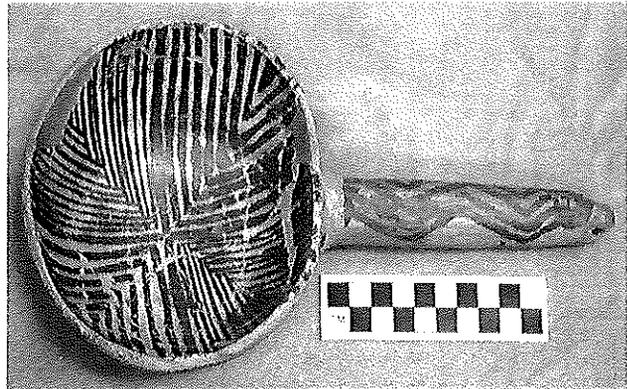
The collection of ceramic artifacts at the American Museum is breathtaking and overwhelming. Many of the pots in the collection were used on a daily basis for cooking, serving, and storage of food or other critical items of subsistence. Other items in the collection were

obviously used for ceremonial or ritual purposes, such as the human and animal effigies, unusually shaped bowls imported from distant regions, and some of the larger decorated serving bowls for communal feasting. Most of the pottery was produced locally, using local clays available in washes or along the mesa bluffs. A significant number, however, were obtained through trade or gifting from other regions, such as the Mesa Verde region to the north, the Kayenta region to the west, Chaco region to the south, Chuska Valley region to the southwest, and as far south as the Mogollon region in south-central New Mexico. Pottery in the Aztec collection from these distant regions were identified by technological attributes unique to these area, such as temper added to the clay, pigments used paint, white or red clay slip application techniques. The firing technique of smudging to create black surfaces is characteristic of Mogollon pottery. Painted design styles are distinctive of specific time periods and occasionally regional pottery traditions.

Many of the Aztec bowls had been used for serving and had clear indications of such use on their surfaces. Ceramic ladles had distinctive patterns of wear along their rims, indicating use for scooping foodstuffs such as dried beans or shelled corn. On all of the ladles examined, analysis revealed that right-handed persons had used the ladles! Details this precise and personal allow archaeologists to reconstruct ancient life at Aztec, and truly tell the story of its people.

Study of the Aztec ceramic collection has provided abundant information indicating local production of pottery commonly associated with Chaco Canyon. Local folks made some of this pottery, not only at Aztec, but also at other Middle San Juan sites such as Salmon Pueblo and the small Tommy site along the San Juan River. We are still working through the information from the study but initial results suggest two things: 1) migration of Chacoan people into the region; and 2) local people making pottery similar to Chaco pottery – a process archaeologists describe as emulation.

In sum, the WNPA-supported project on Aztec's ceramic and textile crafts has produced some outstanding examples of ancient arts. These materials tell us not only about every day economic and social life at Aztec. They also inform us regarding the ancient rituals that were a critical part of life in the past. Perhaps most importantly, this project has contributed new, valuable information that will broaden and enrich public interpretation of Aztec Ruins, the centerpiece of ancient life in the Middle San Juan region.



Mesa Verde-style ladle from Aztec.