

THE CHACO NAVAJO ROCK ART PROJECT

The Chaco Navajo Rock Art Project was funded for three years by the Western National Parks Association. The majority of the Navajo rock art in Chaco Canyon has been seen and studied. Much has been learned. Many questions have been answered.

We spent four years working on the project. In the field we recorded 138 rock art sites that included Navajo images. Some of these were recorded during the Chaco Rock Art Reassessment Project and added to our studies. Informational data was gathered in addition to photographs and drawings. All records have been submitted to the office of the Chief of Cultural Resources at Chaco Culture National Historical Park. A lengthy study has been presented to WNPA.

Chaco Navajo rock art is an interesting and worthwhile area of study. It is a product of a living culture and, therefore, provides access for some understanding, although much has been lost or forgotten by the current descendants. Vestiges of Navajo culture persist and continue to expand and endure in this vibrant tradition.

Navajo connection and value continue to be placed on the remains from the past of the most recent inhabitants back to the prehistoric Chacoans. Tribal and personal ownership and respect is still embedded within the Navajo people of the present. Some older beliefs are retained. As a result, the ruins of both historic and prehistoric peoples are avoided as well as the rock art depicting images of the ceremonial holy people.

There is no definitive date for the entrance of Navajo people into Chaco. Concrete evidence of Navajos living in the Four Corners area has been found dating to the late 1500s.

There is a good possibility that Navajos were present while the Anasazi still inhabited Chaco. Navajos probably entered the canyon from the north and began creating rock art images soon afterward.

In Chaco Navajos began their rock art tradition by creating ceremonial holy figures, which they ceased to make after about 1750. The Spaniards introduced the horse into New Mexico probably sometime between 1600 and 1638. After acquiring horses, they began to draw horses on the cliffs and boulders and have continued to do so up to the present or as long as they had access to rock surfaces. Rock images of people probably began being made after ceremonial figures were no longer made and before horses first became regular possessions.

Navajos tended to create mostly representational rock art elements. There are animals other than horses, transportation vehicles and other objects. Many of these subjects are displayed in scenic interrelationships. Fewer than a third of the elements are nonrepresentational and include abstract forms, some of which are symbolic.

Most of the Navajo rock art in Chaco was produced by scratching. Deeper scratching or light incising was the next preferred method. The earliest technique of pecking seems to have passed out of favor. Incising and painting were usually reserved for ceremonial figures. All paintings are in sheltered places, but that may be because unprotected paintings were destroyed by natural erosion.

Due to the taboo against visiting places where burials were found, there is very little Navajo rock art in close proximity to the prehistoric ruins. The majority is located on boulders at ground level often on boulders with flat surfaces and rounded tops. Specific subjects are concentrated in particular areas and often grouped together.

Navajo rock art in Chaco Canyon has proven to be very interesting and worthy of study. We have found out much about the lives of these people in both their early and later periods. Stylistic classifications have been proposed to enable statistical analysis. There is a need to find out the extent and limits where each of these styles was created in the surrounding landscape. Nothing in our conclusions is definitive and there are exceptions to each idea proposed. Many more questions have arisen regarding the Navajos' work and lives in relation to their rock art. Substantiated dates, dates for more subjects, connections to rituals, relationships to specific Navajo clans are but a few that present themselves. Further recording and research based on our accumulated efforts will surely provide more information.

It is recommended that efforts be initiated to conserve Chaco Navajo rock art. Monitoring systems should be developed and activated to protect it from further vandalism and natural erosion. Educational programs should be created to inform both the scientific community and the general public. The vast amount of documentation produced by this project must be archived to insure longevity and provide access to future researchers. Navajo people should be included in all processes and encouraged to lead their own projects.

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