Eighteenth-Century Navajo Defensive Sites in the Dinétah

Ronald H. Towner, Laboratory of Tree-Ring Research, University of Arizona

IN THE NORTHWEST corner of New Mexico around the Largo, Gobernador, and La Jara drainages is Dinétah, the ancestral homeland of the Navajo people. The region is host to a distinctive group of sites, known as pueblos, that offer intriguing insights into one native population's responses to historic-period conflict. Data from historical sources, archaeology, dendrochronology, and Navajo oral traditions all suggest that the Navajo used these sites as defensive fortresses during the eighteenth century.

Pueblos are a diverse class of sites distinguished by their occurrence in defensible settings. Recent surveys have identified more than 125 such sites in the Dinétah. Most include masonry buildings, but some consist of only simple forked-pole hogans (the traditional Navajo architectural style). The sites are generally small, but can range up to 40 rooms. They are found on isolated boulders, mesa rims, in structures built at this time, and all are relatively high above valley floors. Intervisibility may have permitted rapid communication and group action, and the larger the interconnected population, the larger the group available to repel an attack. Forked-pole hogan sites of this time period are also located on high prominences above steep cliff faces in virtually inaccessible areas. Taken together, these sites represent a population concentration in settings that were difficult for the Spaniards to attack, especially on horseback. The rockshelter sites are smaller, and may represent a different defensive strategy. By staying hidden in small sites, the Navajos using the rockshelters may have hoped to avoid detection by the Spaniards.

The political situation in New Mexico changed in the 1700s. The Pueblo Revolt of 1680 had precipitated a dramatic expansion of the availability of horses to groups out-

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rockshelters, and in other defensible positions. Some occur in site complexes that include nearby nondefensible groups of hogans.

Recent survey information and the data generated by a detailed program of tree-ring dating indicate that most pueblos were constructed in two waves, the first in the 1710s, and the second between 1725 and 1755. Differences between them in terms of architecture and site setting can be correlated with changing styles of conflict documented in the historic record.

The pueblos constructed between about 1710 and 1720 may have been built to counter the threat posed by large Spanish entradas, such as that conducted by Roque Madrid in 1705, whose mission was to “punish” the Navajos and recover “captive.” They can be classified into three groups: large multi-room structures, relatively inaccessible forked-pole hogan complexes, and hidden rockshelters. Clear lines-of-sight are present between all the large multi-room side New Mexico, and in the early 1700s, the French began trading guns up the Arkansas River into the Colorado mountains. The Ute, a nomadic group that previously lived farther west, used this increased mobility and firepower to threaten both Navajo farmsteads in the Dinétah and Spanish settlements in the Rio Grande. In 1716, the Spaniards signed an informal peace treaty with the Navajo, mainly to use them as a buffer against the increasingly powerful Ute. The Navajo, who were mostly hunter-gatherer-agriculturists, had neither the mobility nor the firepower to confront the Ute directly. What they did have, however, was a defensive strategy to minimize the Ute advantages.

The primary goal of Ute raids on Navajo settlements was probably the procurement of slaves, particularly children and women, who could be sold for large sums in the Rio Grande Valley. Most of these captives ended up as household servants in the Spanish settlements, or as labor-
ers in the mines of Mexico. Slave raiding was a very different type of conflict than that conducted by the Spaniards. The Ute strategy appears to have been one of small raiding parties conducting surprise attacks, and seizing captives before an adequate defense could be organized. Speed, surprise, and minimal contact with Navajo warriors were probably the most important aspects of these tactics.

Navajos apparently countered this strategy by building small pueblos on boulder tops and mesa rims—locations where the Utes could not ride their horses. Indeed, the majority of pueblo sites built between 1725 and 1755 are small structures built on boulders amidst several forked-pole hogans, or hogan and masonry sites at the very edge of precipitous mesa rims. The masonry structures were probably refuges used only when danger loomed. Their locations would have forced the Utes to dismount and fight, something that was counter to their quick-strike strategy.

While the archaeological and historical data contribute to a general interpretation of the pueblo phenomenon, it is the combination of pueblo construction dates and tree-ring-reconstructed precipitation data that led to one of the most interesting discoveries: most of the sites were built during periods of above-average precipitation. Why would this be the case? One commonly thinks of raiding and warfare as being most likely in times of drought and famine, when necessity forces conflict. Historic data point to a different scenario: among the Ute, raiding was most commonly conducted in years when subsistence stress was minimal. In short, raiding was an optional activity, only conducted after that seasons’ essential duties were complete.

The last pueblo was built in the spring or summer of 1754, and the entire Dinétah was probably abandoned by 1762 or shortly thereafter. If pueblos had been successful in countering both the Spaniards’ efforts at “punishing” the Navajos, and the Utes’ slave-raiding endeavors, why were they abandoned? In the past, some archaeologists and historians have suggested drought as a cause, but tree-ring evidence shows that is no longer a viable explanation. Others have suggested that the increasing Navajo reliance on sheep, and the subsequent desire for better pastures, were factors. Such explanations may be partially valid, but more adequately explain why some Navajos moved south into the San Juan Basin, not why they abandoned the Dinétah.

Current research is again examining the changing nature of the threat against the Navajo. One suggestion is that, in the late 1740s and early 1750s, the nature of conflict in New Mexico changed from the “for-profit” enterprise of slave raiding, to one of revenge, killing, and “total warfare.” In such a climate of mayhem, small pueblos may simply not have provided enough protection for anyone, young or old, male or female. Thus, the best option was to migrate farther away from the enemy.