

BOOK REVIEW



The Neighbors of Casas Grandes: Excavating Medio Period Communities of Northwest Chihuahua, Mexico by Michael E. Whalen and Paul E. Minnis. 464 pp., 31 b/w photos, 89 illustrations, 100 tables. The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 2009. \$60.00 (Cloth). ISBN 978-0-8165-2760-1.

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Whalen and Minnis's book title is fitting. However, *The Neighbors of Casas Grandes: Discovering the Division between the Early and Late Medio Period* would be just as good given their focus on distinguishing between the early and late Medio period. The focus on chronology makes this one of the most significant contributions to Casas Grandes archaeology. For them, the chronological questions are a starting point to understand the relationship between Casas Grandes (the region's largest site) and the smaller sites they excavated west of Casas Grandes. They spend about half of the book comparing and contrasting their sites to the "primate" center of Casas Grandes. Their excavations reflect only a small portion of the western part of the Casas Grandes world, and it will be interesting to see the results of future researchers testing their chronology and views of social organization elsewhere. On the basis of my work to the north, I suspect that many of their observations and conclusions will hold but some may not. Below, I outline what I see as their major contributions.

Southwestern archaeologists will appreciate the authors' new scheme of "Medio period ceramic evolution" and the definition of a new ceramic variant, White Paste Babícora. These are significant contributions, although Whalen and Minnis are perhaps unnecessarily critical of earlier work. It is true that Di Peso et al. (1974) were unable to chronologically order the nine Medio period painted types, but it is not true that their "ceramic discussion was not phrased in the specific developmental terms of earlier works" or that they ignored Sayles's assertion that Babícora polychrome is the oldest type (pp. 110, 112). To the contrary, Di Peso et al. (1974) sought to evaluate previously proposed schemes of ceramic development and concluded that Sayles's was incorrect. The excavations at the Convento Site and Casas Grandes indicated to them that "Mata polychrome seems to have been the beginning of the polychrome tradition of the Casas Grandes ceramic school" (Di Peso et al. 1974:75).

Whalen and Minnis (p. 112) in contrast don't seem to mention Mata polychrome at all, but do conclude, in accordance with Sayles (1936), "that Babicora is one of the oldest of the Chihuahuan polychromes." They further find that Villa Ahumada and Dublan polychromes were introduced during the early Medio period prior to A.D. 1300, and suggest that their new White-Paste Babicora polychrome "was likely the predecessor of Ramos Polychrome." These, and the other polychromes, were then produced after A.D. 1300. My own research in the Janos area of Northern Chihuahua, at the 76 Draw Site near Deming, New Mexico, and in the Boothill of New Mexico indicates that there is a strong black-on-white Casas Grandes ceramic tradition in this area. Perhaps it is the White-Paste Babicora polychrome that Whalen and Minnis define.

Whalen and Minnis also present a detailed consideration of differences in architecture, stone artifacts, farming, gathering, hunting, and the use of exotic and ritual items before and after Casas Grandes's florescence around A.D. 1300. These changes are too numerous to summarize here, but appear to have occurred together as the Casas Grandes elites exerted increasing economic and political power over their neighbors, especially settlements within 15 km. The authors suggest that satellite centers were established as special-purpose settlements to help spread and maintain the elite-controlled ritual and political system using Ramos polychrome (the pinnacle of the polychromes with a complex of elite symbols) and ball courts beyond the 15 km boundary. In particular, Site 242 was established as a "central node" for organizing highland agriculture and for conducting important public ritual. It thereby allowed closely related communities (such as site 204) to have economic and political interactions and perhaps maintain kinship alliances. In some ways these arguments are a reiteration of the Core and Periphery model that they have been presenting for over a decade, although they discuss ritual and exotic artifacts in more detail. Their model has been challenged by a number of researchers, and I am sure that it will continue to be evaluated (e.g., Harmon 2005; VanPool et al. 2005). Still, researchers will benefit from the increased detail and further development of their ideas.

Ultimately, the authors' book is exciting. It provides a new chronological division, a well-developed ceramic development sequence, additional insight into the social and economic system of the region, data concerning flora and fauna remains, and a great deal of information about a variety of artifacts. This volume is a primary source of information for all who work in the area. It also provides a framework to further evaluate and elaborate upon Casas Grandes archaeology. Whalen and Minnis have shown that what many researchers think of as *the* Casas Grandes World with its complex of ball courts, effigy mounds, copper artifacts, macaws, and Ramos polychrome was a post-A.D. 1300 phenomenon, and that undoubtedly will change how we think about it in relationship to Mesoamerica and the American Southwest.

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