

BOOK REVIEW



Southwestern Pithouse Communities, AD 200–900

Edited by Lisa C. Young and Sarah A. Herr, 2012. 232 pp., 2 b/w photos,
63 illustrations, 17 tables, Index, References Cited.
The University of Arizona Press. \$55.00 (Cloth).
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A compelling cast of southwestern archaeologists has contributed to this timely and overdue summary of “pithouse era” communities across the American Southwest. Beyond the geographic coverage provided, chapters in the book tackle most of the important issues for this period: economy, architecture, subsistence, demography, migration, social organization, and community.

As I read the individual chapters, one thought struck me over and over: southwestern archaeologists struggling to understand the pithouse era consistently lament the absence of data! As archaeologists, we always need more data. But, in this case, this often trite lament seems apropos. The methods archaeologists have developed to study post-900 developments are much harder to apply to earlier sites. Pithouse sites are much less visible at the survey level and the total number of structures at a site is nearly impossible to determine without remote sensing or subsurface work. Beyond this, I think we’re biased toward larger, later (post-900) sites to which we can bring more analytical tools and this has left the earlier period much less studied than I would hope. This volume clearly begins to redress this shortcoming but additional research is necessary if we are to understand the early periods of development and do more than just borrow models used to frame the post-900 era.

Surveying the volume, I begin with Lisa Young and Sarah Herr’s introductory chapter, which sets up the issues to be discussed and the overall themes. They do this quite well but the lack of a roadmap at the end of the chapter left me wondering about the ordering of the book (more on this below). Following this, Mike Diehl (Chapter 2) provides a very comprehensive summary of early subsistence across the entire region. The subsequent five chapters focus on different subregions in the Southwest, with a topical paper tossed in. In Chapter 3, Henry Wallace and Michael Lindeman discuss early Hohokam villages in the Phoenix and Tucson basins, followed by the same authors (plus Doug Craig) discussing

early ritual transformation in the southern Southwest (Chapter 4). Jeff Clark and Pat Gilman bring us up to speed on the deep sedentism of southeastern Arizona in Chapter 5, followed by Sarah Herr (Chapter 6) discussing the poorly known and sparsely settled transition zone of east-central Arizona. Moving mostly across the border into New Mexico, Steve Swanson, Roger Anyon, and Margaret Nelson summarize southern Mogollon pithouse adaptations in Chapter 7. Lastly, Tom Rocek and Alison Rautman take us across central and southeast New Mexico during the Mogollon pithouse period, documenting the diversity of communities.

Moving to the second half of *Southwestern Pithouse Communities*, the authors take us to the northern Southwest. Steven Lakatos and Stephen Post give us a glimpse into the low populations and small communities of the Developmental period in the Northern Rio Grande Valley (Chapter 9). Chapter 10 showcases one of the more densely settled areas in the pithouse period, with Rich Wilshusen, Winston Hurst, and Jason Chuiyka describing the transition from Basketmaker III hamlets to late Pueblo I villages in the Northern San Juan region. The authors emphasize population movements and increasing sedentism after AD 600. Lisa Young and Dennis Gilpin take on the vast territory of Eastern Arizona and the Central San Juan Basin in a fairly short chapter. The authors do a good job of summarizing a complicated, huge expanse of territory that probably should be divided into two chapters. The last regionally focused chapter concentrates on the greater Zuni area (Chapter 11). Matt Peeples, Greg Schachner, and Ed Huber address the nature of communities in this area, concluding that low population density and high mobility probably precluded the development of true communities prior to 900. The volume concludes with two well-done synthetic papers. Chip Wills (Chapter 13) addresses the relationship of pithouses to the households that inhabited them, concluding that the fit is not a good one. Focusing on property rights, among other issues, Wills envisions a very complicated relationship between families/households and the houses they built, with economic concerns most critical. Finally, in Chapter 14, Sarah Schlanger and Doug Craig survey the current state of demographic data for the pithouse era across the Southwest. The authors summarize general population patterns, growth, the demographic transition, population density and carrying capacity, and the complicated relationships among population, community structure, and the emergence of villages. They emphasize the need for higher quality data to reach a better understanding of pithouse period demography.

Several omissions in the volume puzzled me. The front matter lacks a list of figures and tables, which although considered optional in compiled volumes, would have been particularly helpful here as almost every chapter contains data and numerous illustrations. Reading would have also been aided by bringing all of the regional papers forward, and grouping the synthetic chapters. Regardless, I was impressed with all of the authors' abilities to marshal data to address the larger questions of economy, social organization, and community. Furthermore,

the volume contains several comprehensive appendices that provide a wealth of data for pithouse era sites across the Southwest. Certainly, some conclusions were viewed more tentatively in the absence of better data. But, the overall approach was appropriately implemented in every case.

In sum, this book encapsulates in a single volume the current archaeological state of knowledge for the pithouse era in the American Southwest. In some of my own research, I have grappled with this difficult period (see Chapter 1 in *Foundations of Anasazi Culture*). I commend the authors for cutting through some of the haze and truly advancing our understanding of this most important transitional period. As a parting thought, every time I step back into the pithouse period fray, I am overcome with the diversity of remains, and not just as we compare locales and regions. The extent of intra-regional and local heterogeneity is phenomenal. Paradoxically, this period has been described by some archaeologists as undifferentiated. I find it to be exactly the opposite and quite challenging, as a result.

