

Investigating Post-Casas Grandes Cultural Change in Northwest, Chihuahua, Mexico

Jaron T. Davidson

University of Oklahoma

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Introduction

The overarching purpose of this research was to begin investigations into the material remains left by the Native population present in the Casas Grandes Valley just before and at the time of European contact (Tardío Period). This report describes the results of a two-week preliminary survey that I conducted in the summer of 2023 in the Casas Grandes Valley, Chihuahua, Mexico. Because of the ephemeral nature of Tardío sites, the survey included a mix of site revisits, pedestrian surface reconnaissance, and local resident collaboration. This mix of methods led to mixed results, but archaeological data likely dating to the Tardío Period were found and provide a path forward for post-Casas Grandes research.

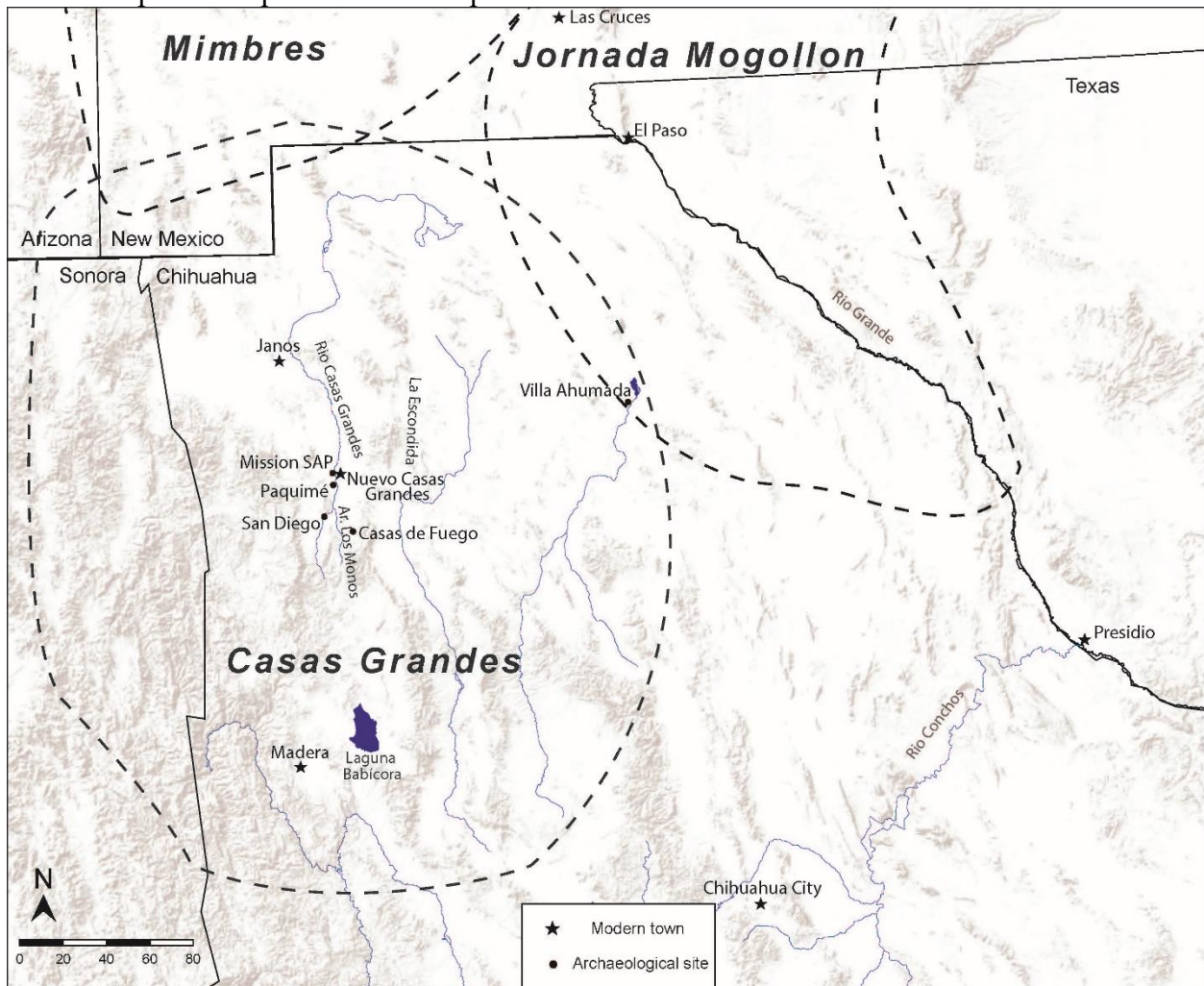


Figure 1. Map of Northwest Chihuahua with important locations indicated.

Despite obviously intertwined histories, northwest Mexico has received much less archaeological attention when compared to the U.S. Southwest. The people that inhabited northwestern Chihuahua before the arrival of Europeans built a major urban center called Paquimé and exerted influence across the Casas Grandes region (~AD 1200-1450) (Pailes and Searcy 2022). Little is known about the fall of Paquimé and the descendants of Casas Grandes. No modern or historic population has conclusively been identified as a descendant community. The first European to record entering the valley reported that the inhabitants of the valley at the time, the Suma, claimed Paquimé's people left the region after being attacked (Hammond and Rey

1928). This one claim led most subsequent researchers to dismiss ties between the preceding Casas Grandes people and the historic Suma and surrounding groups, opting instead for a narrative of replacement (Douglas and Brown 2023; Naylor 1969). The Spanish colonial record is also limited as colonial officials failed to keep records as detailed as those in Sonora, New Mexico, and other provinces. Nevertheless, Spaniards described the Suma and other groups in Chihuahua as generally nomadic foragers.

Methods

Given that Tardío Period sites have gone unidentified by previous formal surveys, I took a few different approaches. The first involved visiting previously recorded sites that had indications of Colonial remains or otherwise appeared different from typical Casas Grandes sites. The second involved systematic pedestrian survey on landscapes that had not been targeted by previous surveys. The third approach required finding landowners and/or collectors who could take me to sites of interest. For the latter two, I worked with local officials to recruit volunteers.

Results

Of about six revisited sites, only two contain potential Tardío Period data. The first is an Archaic Trincheras site called Boquilla de San Diego by Hard and Roney (2020). At the top, I found plain Casas Grandes buff ware mixed with 18th to 19th century rancho debris. The second was at the already-excavated San Antonio de Padua Mission site. Original maps from Di Peso (1974) show that nothing on the east of the main church structure was much investigated. They suspected little to be present except a low garden retaining wall. I identified an area where exposed features appear to be untouched small structures and middens.

I targeted two areas for formal pedestrian surveys – Arroyo de Los Monos and El Potro Arroyo, which are minor drainages within foothills to the south and northwest of Paquimé respectively. Of the two, I encountered archaeological remains only in Arroyo de Los Monos. The pedestrian survey followed the lower arroyo and revealed eight separate ephemeral features made up mostly of aligned or stacked stones. About three are sites that potentially represent the Tardío Period because of associated lithic scatters, shallow sediment deposits, and proximity to historic remains.

I was shown four Medio Period mound sites through collaboration with local landowners. One rancher gave me a tour of La Escondida, an isolated mountain range on the eastern edge of the Casas Grandes Valley. Half a dozen rock shelters were recorded that date from the Archaic to the Medio period based on ceramics. But I was also shown three separate stone feature sites near Spanish style rock inscriptions and historic artifacts that suggest later site use typical of highly mobile groups.



A



B



C



D



E



F

Figure 2. A-B: Stone features at Arroyo de Los Monos and La Escondida respectively, C-D: thermal feature and plainware ceramics at San Antonio de Padua, E-F: historic artifacts found with projectile points by local rancher at La Escondida.

Table 1. Total recorded sites based on method and period.

	Potential Tardio Sites Recorded	Other Sites Recorded
Site Revisits	2	4
Pedestrian Survey	3	5
Informant	3	10

Conclusion

This short, limited survey provides evidence that future research into post-Casas Grandes archaeology is feasible but requires a creative approach.

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