Goal: To make an interesting article that communicates the ideas and people that makes BYU.

Thesis: At such an uncertain stage in Dr. Searcy’s research, the possible discoveries to be made in Chihuahua outweigh the difficulties of funding, threats of safety, and procuring information.

Transitions in Time

Tracking Cultural Evolution in Prehistoric Northern Mexico

Michael Searcy and Felicity Warren

For seven years I’ve made the trek to Mexico to work among the ruins of a lost people in the Chihuahuan Desert. The opening in the steel-and-concrete fence that intermittently scribbles along the U.S.-Mexico border still provokes anxiety for parties driving through. Gun battles still occasionally spark between drug cartels and the Mexican military, but the last five years has seen a marked decrease in violence. Now when I travel, I find the reality of border guards and frequent car checks less harrowing as inconvenient.

After paying the obligatory fees and filling out the copious paperwork at the border, I watch as the landscape transforms from manicured lawns and franchise signs to plastered facades with loud and vibrant colors; the summer heat borders on the obscene, averaging 105 F. As cars pass through the dusty streets, the smells of authentic street food and diesel fuel remind me that I am back in the land of the original cowboyand *siestas*.

Eventually the city gives way to desolate basin and range. I now approach Paquimé, the largest pre-Columbian archeological city ever discovered in the U.S. Southwest/Northern Mexico.

During the summer, I gather with a handful of other archeologists in this sunbaked region in the modern town of Casas Grandes to conduct on-foot surveys, excavate ruins, or analyze relics held in the local museum. While Chihuahua is beginning to receive the scrutiny it deserves from the archeological community, it has long been neglected in the past in favor of the grandiose temples and sprawling metropolitan ruins of the Olmec, Aztec, Zapotec, and Maya further south. This oversight has left a gaping hole in our knowledge of northern Mexican cultures.

Research in Chihuahua constitutes a number of risks and nuisances—the difficulty of procuring grants and border permits, the possible threat to our safety, and the lack of historical remains to aid our search for sites. The pragmatic significance of this research is promising but still developing. Meanwhile, the Mexican government or our sponsors can pull the plug on our research at any time. But the prospect of discovery in such a complex and uncharted city as Paquimé is what drives me to return year after year to conduct fieldwork.

*Gaps in the Record*

In 2011, I attended the Amerind Seminar, an intensive five-day symposium that allows American archeologists to exchange ideas, debate issues, and explore new avenues research. I’d been working in Paquimé since 2006 and had just completed my doctorate.

Forty of us decided to vote on which issue regarding prehistoric Chihuahua we knew about the least. We then ranked the issues on a chalkboard. The **decline and disappearance of the Cases Grandes people** ranked only number four on our list. The **period’s chronology** just barely missed the top tier. (Even with carbon dating, we only know that the Cases Grandes people inhabited the region probably from 700 to 1350 AD.)

Occupying the number one slot on our list was **the Viejo-Medio transition**, a dramatic sociopolitical and structural change that occurred around 1200 AD. This period ties deeply with the rise of Paquimé—and yet lack of historical remains and scholarly interest in the past leaves us with precious little knowledge.

This timing of this conference coincided with my own plans for research regarding the Viejo-Medio period. I planned to collaborate on fieldwork in Paquimé with a colleague of mine, Dr. Todd Pitezel, now Assistant Curator of Archaeology at the Arizona State Museum. We were united in the belief that the key to understanding Paquimé’s prehistory was in discovering the **lifestyles and culture of the Viejo people**, the ancestral people that lived in Cases Grandes **before this great transition**. In June of 2013, Pitezel and I formed a team with five college graduates and spent three weeks in Chihuahua performing a reconnaissance survey—an initial gathering of information before excavation.

*An Ancient Transition*

Here I would like to have a description of one of the Viejo sites pithouses you’ve excavated. This narrative will demonstrate the simplicity of the Viejo lifestyle—and your particular focus on their culture—and then guide us into talking about the transition.

The Viejo people were agrarian communities that were loosely dispersed along rivers where there was easy access to water. These people built pit-houses homes dug three feet into the ground and then covered with an adobe/ wood roof. Their ceramics were mostly plainwares, but they also produced a red-on-brown type that exhibited geometric shapes in patterns on bowls and jars.

Around 1200 AD these people abruptly evolved, shifting from a simple culture to a highly complex one. The transition began with an unexplained explosion in population. The Casas Grandes people began to aggregate or to move into more densely clustered communities. They eventually founded the city of Paquimé, likely built by the hands of organized labor groups. They people also moved aboveground; their dwellings switched from subterranean pithouses to sturdy adobe-walled mounds. Their ceramics shifted to vibrant polychrome vessels. Even the symbolism of their art changed, adding new images of macaws and plumed serpents. Now concentrated and many, many times bigger than other sites, Paquimé may have carried some political and commercial weight among neighboring prehistoric communities during this period. Present-day archeologists refer to this period of growth and change as the Medio or “middle” period.

What spurred this remarkable transition? What caused a smattering of rural, simplistic communities to found one of the most impressive prehistoric cities in the Southwest? To undergo a Renaissance of ideas, structures, and symbolism? This change is even more remarkable when one considers the setting. Every time I travel through the bleak basin and range landscape of northern Chihuahua, I ask myself: How could anyone manage to survive in this arid desert, much less thrive for hundreds of years?

Archeologists theorize the change came from either distant stimuli, such as trade or migration, or homegrown stimuli, such as the actions of social agents or political entrepreneurs,. My own research on the iconography of Medio pottery has led me to believe that Paquimé was developed by a combination of both foreign and local stimuli—from Mesoamerican south, from the western Four Corners region, from the north, and from within Cases Grandes itself.

By 1350 A.D. these people had reached the apogee*,* or the peak, of their culture. Shortly before the arrival of the Spanish sometime during the fifteenth century, the Casa Grandes people had abandoned their great city.

*Relevancies of Research*

Discuss Dr. Searcy’s personal and professional reasons for performing this research. Draw on the reasons he provides when applying for grants and the sources he mentioned on how this research ties into “pragmatic archeology.”

*Missing Pieces*

Trying to piece together information about the Viejo period is like trying to construct a puzzle without the box top. You have no clue how large the puzzle is or even what the picture looks like. And you have very few pieces to begin with.

A number of factors have stolen “puzzle pieces” from us, creating a gap that we now try to reconcile. First is the unwillingness of past archeologists to travel across the border to perform fieldwork in Cases Grandes. It is difficult enough to justify the expenses of archeological research to tax payers, let alone to justify a project that requires paying a steep interest to the Mexican government. There is also the uncertainty of getting a border permit. My team and I didn’t know whether we sanctioned or not until the night before we were due to leave.

The largest issue we struggle with is the obscurity of the historical properties we are searching for. There are no historical remains of the Viejo period to pore over, no observers or descendents to speak to. Our sole chance for illumination comes from the artifacts and dwellings we excavate. Frustratingly, semi-subterranean Viejo pithouses are often hard to locate because the dwellings have slowly been filled up and covered with dirt over the centuries. Many are buried under adobe mounds built by people later in time, or appear only as scatters of artifacts on a flat landscape.

To locate these sites, my team and I slowly sweep the landscape outside Paquimé in a long line, scrutinizing the dirt beneath our feet for any signs of pottery, discarded trash, or depressions in the earth from collapses pithouses. This is called a pedestrian survey, though it looks very much like a manhunt. Any promising finds are collected and analyzed.

*Threat of Violence*

There are complications to our research that lie outside of the earth and outside of anything to do with the authorities. A bloody war has raged among drug cartels and law enforcement in border cities like Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez since 2006. It has decimated local economies and practically halted tourist traffic into the northern Mexican states. Thankfully the violence has abated much in the last several years, and my team has not encountered any violence or calamity. However, the rates of violent crimes such kidnappings and robberies are uncomfortably high. U.S. citizens are encouraged to travel only during daylight hours.

Our home base is unfortunately a thoroughfare between the city of Chihuahua and the border, so the highway that I travel when commuting from the modern-Chihuahua to Paquimé is peppered with checkpoints. We often hear reports of drug traffickers caught transporting their merchandise near where we work.

The fiery social climate in Chihuahua is such that no BYU students are allowed to participate in the fieldwork we do in Cases Grandes.

*The Human Element*

Our largest triumph came not from under pacing the desert but hitting the pavement. Part of our preliminary research was to speak to homeowners about the presence of artifacts on their properties. We visited a home where a couple had discovered Viejo pottery sherds while making adobe bricks in their yard. There we met [could we know his first name?], whose parents owned the property. During our conversation, we quickly deduced that our new friend was actually a looter. Looters are commonly loathed for the indiscriminate pilfering of artifacts and the destruction of valuable archeological sites. But their indigenous knowledge of the area is invaluable. Our friend helpfully agreed to collaborate with us, for no charge, to find six Viejo sites that were previously unknown to us.

The people living in modern-Chihuahua and the Mexican government have been vital to our research. Friendly locals have helped us jump through political and municipal hoops—gaining permits, meeting important leaders. I have come to regard some of the locals as family away home.

The Mexican government also offers a type of freedom that we wouldn’t ordinarily have in the U.S. Private property in the U.S. is not subject to the same protection as federal or state lands, even if the property is of archeological importance. But Mexico is much more stringent in protecting prehistoric sites and artifacts. Investigators are able to gain legal access to private property, as well as power to protect artifacts and dwellings from private landowners.

*Into the Future*

If grants pan out, Dr. Searcy will be heading back to Chihuahua to begin excavating the sites his team found last summer. This time he will have a team of university students (not from BYU) and laborers.

Biography

Originally from Memphis, Dr. Michael Searcy is an assistant professor and new addition to the Anthropology Department at Brigham Young University. He received his BA in journalism from North Texas University (2000) and became a post-production editor crafting TV commercials and movie trailers. He later moved to Utah and earned his MA in Anthropology through BYU (2005) and his PhD from University of Oklahoma (2010). His research includes Casas Grandes culture, Fremont archeology, long-distance interaction, and ethnoarchaeology. He has published in [these magazines] and is currently collaborating on a project titled *Discovering the Roots of Casas Grandes* with Todd Pitezel, Assistant Curator of Archaeology at the Arizona State Museum. Dr. Searcy currently lives with his family in Provo.