

Anasazi Cannibalism

By: Sarah Clinger

Although the question of Cannibalism among the Anasazi Indians is an emotionally charged one, and should be approached with care, recent findings by Christy Turner and Tim White bring to surface considerable evidence that cannibalism did occur.

Previously thought to be peaceful farmers living in harmony with the land and one another, occupying much of the four-corners area, the Anasazi Indians were heralded as attaining an almost utopian society. However, recent findings have shed a new light on these simple desert dwellers.

Christy Turner is a physical anthropologist with a background in police forensics. While studying bones at the Museum of Northern Arizona, it occurred to him that some of the bones he was examining reminded him of the remains of individuals who had been savagely beaten to death, which he had encountered through his police work. It also occurred to him that these remains looked exactly like many of the animal remains he had found in prehistoric garbage mounds, food trash. Focusing at first upon sites where it was apparent that remains had undergone a violent death, Turner discovered consistent markings that he could attribute only to cannibalism. Through his research, Turner began to quantify cannibalized human remains as having to meet the following criteria:

1. Bones had to be broken open as if to get at the marrow.
2. Bones had to have cutting and sawing marks on them, made by tools, in a way that suggested dismemberment and butchering.
3. Anvil abrasions, or parallel scratches, most often found on

skulls, caused when the head (or another bone) is placed on a stone that serves as an anvil, and another stone is brought down hard on it to break it open. When the blow occurs, a certain amount of slippage takes place, causing the parallel abrasions.

4. Bones had to be burned. Skulls had to show patterns of burning on the back or top, indicating that the brain was cooked.
5. Most of the vertebrae and spongy bone had to be missing. Vertebrae and spongy bone are soft and full of marrow. These can either be crushed whole to make bone cakes, (something the Anasazi did with other mammal bones) or the grease can be extracted through boiling.

Upon studying bones from seventy-two Anasazi sites, Turner found that the remains of at least two hundred and eighty six individuals had been butchered, cooked, and eaten in about thirty-eight of the sites. In an effort to study how widespread cannibalism may have been, Turner then examined a collection of eight-hundred and seventy skeletons stored at the Museum of Northern Arizona. He found that one skeleton in twelve showed clear evidence of being cannibalized.

Roughly during the same time, Tim D. White, a well-known Paleoanthropologist, made another discovery, which was later added to Turner's criteria of cannibalism. He noticed a faint polishing and beveling on many of the broken tips of bones excavated from Mancos canyon, Colorado. Already familiar with Turner's work, White wondered whether this polishing may be a result of bone

ends scraping on the edges of a rough ceramic pot while being boiled and stirred to render the fat. To test his theory, White did an experiment with deer bones in a ceramic pot on a Coleman stove. Under magnification, the deer bones showed the same microscopic polishing that many of the Mancos bones had. White called this "pot polish."

White went on to examine 2,106 bone fragments from the Mancos site, all of which were highly fragmented and deposited in what was believed to be a broken state, just like discarded food remains. What he found was that eighty seven percent of the bones had been fractured at the time of death. White found many of Turner's criteria, as well as the fact that jaw and facial bones, among the most delicate in the entire skeleton, were often relatively intact, whereas other bones were literally reduced to powder. It became clear that all fracturing and destruction was aimed at those bones which provided the most nutritional value. The violence used to break apart the Mancos bones was not a result of typical hand-to-hand combat, but rather by meticulous butchery processes used on game animals every day.

Despite these findings, there are many who still dispute the idea of cannibalism. The subject is deeply troubling to present-day Pueblo peoples, who are the known descendants of the Anasazi. It is one thing to identify butchery of human remains, but it is quite another to infer cannibalism. This is where Turner and White's research is open to criticism. In the past, posters announcing Turner's lectures have been torn down, and at the 1988 Pecos Conference, a symposium on

cannibalism was cancelled after protests by Native American groups.

In 1979 William Arens, a professor of Anthropology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, published The Man-Eating Myth, in which he reports he had been unable to find even one anthropologist, living or dead, who claimed to have witnessed cannibalism. He showed that reports of cannibalism have been mostly a result of hearsay, from unreliable witnesses, who talked about something they had not seen personally. Arens goes on to bring up the question of whether reports of cannibalism were attempts to justify slavery and colonization, and subversion. Arens has concerns that in light of Turner and White's findings, most people would conclude that all the Anasazi were cannibals, and by extension, all Native Americans.

Kurt Dongoske, an Anglo who serves as Hopi tribal archaeologist, objects to Turner's conclusion that any people were actually eating the cooked meat. Many have brought up alternatives such as bizarre mortuary practices, witchcraft exorcism, or ritual practices. In 1996, Dogonske was quoted in the National Geographic as saying, "Claims of cannibalism are deeply offensive to all Pueblo peoples. As far as I'm concerned, you can't prove cannibalism until you actually find human remains in prehistoric human excrement."

In 1992, at a place called Cowboy Wash, at the base of Sleeping Ute Mountain, Colorado, a team of archaeologists began to uncover what at the time seemed a typical Anasazi site, but which in its course, seemed to address this very issue of human excrement. In one kiva, the team found a pile of chopped up, boiled, and burned human bones at the base of a vent shaft.

It looked as if the bones had been processed outside, on the surface, and then dumped down the shaft. In a second kiva, they found the remains of five individuals, again apparently processed as food. In that same kiva, the team found a stone tool kit, typically used in the butchering of a midsized mammal. The tool kit was submitted to a lab, and two flakes tested positive for human blood. In a third kiva, the team found a human excrement, or coprolite, among the ashes of the central hearth, the symbolic center of the household. Since the excrement most likely was left by one of the perpetrators of these acts, this would appear to have been the ultimate insult. Lab tests indicated that the coprolite was made up of digested meat. Later, Richard Marlar, a biochemist, tested the coprolite for the presence of human myoglobin, a protein only found in skeletal heart muscle, which could only get into the intestinal tract through eating. Marlar declines to release his findings until he publishes his paper on the findings. Rumors of his results, however, indicate that they were positive.

Other findings at Cowboy wash bring about the greater question of “why was cannibalism happening?” Although filled with valuable, portable items, such as baskets, a rabbit blanket, pots, and stone tools, little, if anything, seemed to have been taken from the settlement. It was found that the site was subsequently abandoned, but not looted. To casually kill and process the victims in their own communities, and not to bother to burn or loot the village, may indicate a demonstration of authority, rather than warfare.

There are also the unpleasant calculations that show that the individuals at Cowboy Wash would have

produced a staggering 1200 pounds of meat. Cannibalism as a result of starvation does not explain this huge amount of charnel deposits, the extreme mutilation of the bodies, or the subsequent abandonment of these sites. Also, there is no evidence of cannibalism among the Anasazi’s immediate neighbors, the Mogollon and the Hohokam, who lived in equally harsh environments and endured the same climatic shifts, such as drought. The Mogollon, especially, experience winters much harsher than other cultural regions and where one would expect such starvation emergencies to occur. When food supplies ran low, most people simply moved away.

Evidence of cannibalism in the U.S. Southwest is, with the exceptions of one or two sites, concentrated in the Anasazi region. It is within the Chacoan sphere of influence that evidence of cannibalism occurs most often. David Wilcox, curator of the Museum of Northern Arizona, has prepared a map showing the distribution of Chaco Canyon’s Great Houses and roads. The maps showed that the charnel deposits were often associated with Chaco Great Houses and most of them dated from the Chaco period. The first instances of cannibalism coincide with the beginning of Chaco civilization, around A.D. 900, peaked at the same time of Chaco collapse and abandonment, around A.D. 1150, and then vanished.

In his book, In Search of the Old Ones, David Roberts summarizes this theory by saying, “Before A.D. 900, the Anasazi had always been a fiercely individualistic, egalitarian people. Suddenly, around 920, in a shallow canyon in western New Mexico, a whole new way of life sprang into being. For the first time, Anasazi villages affiliated

in a vast network stretching 250 miles from north to south. Scattered for eight miles along Chaco Wash, fourteen Great Houses, symmetrical, planned towns with a uniform architectural style, centered the network. The greatest of all, the true hub of the Chaco universe, was Pueblo Bonito. More than seventy villages all over the Southwest, called outliers, were tied into the Chacoan system, mirroring the structure of the Great Houses and sharing their culture. The complexity of the network itself, scholars believe, required the Anasazi for the first time to abandon their egalitarian ways in favor of a hierarchial society. Neil Judd's discovery at Chaco of several burials teeming with precious grave goods suggests that these dead might have been powerful rulers."

In his book, Man Corn, Christy Turner theorizes cannibalism might have been used as a form of social control by a powerful elite residing in Chaco Canyon.

Brian Billman, head of the Cowboy Wash archaeology site claims, "When I excavated it, I got the sense that it may have been taboo. We are proposing that this may have been a political strategy. One of several communities in this area may have used raiding and cannibalism to drive off people from a village and prevent other people from settling there. If you raided a village, consumed some of the residents, and left the remains there for everyone to see, you would gain the reputation of being a community to stay away from."

In the last chapter of Man Corn, Christy states, "We find it quite plausible that a few score or hundred well organized and fanatical warrior cultists using rule-breaking but example-setting cannibalism and human sacrifice

as conspicuous elements of terrorism might quickly and easily dominate small farming communities."

Although there are many ethnohistorical accounts of warfare among prehistoric Pueblo Indians, accounts of cannibalism or human sacrifice are spotty, at best. Southwestern rock art and kiva art, Mimbres pottery, as well as Hopi legend hold strong correlations between two ancient Mesoamerican deities, Quetzalcoatl and Xipe Totec. It is believed that the same feathered serpent which first appears in Anasazi rock art around A.D. 900 correlates to Quetzalcoatl, who was worshipped in a pyramid at Teotihuacan. Buried beneath the pyramid were many sacrificial victims. The horned serpent cult at Walpi village among the Hopi is said to have been introduced from the south. The feathered serpent in legend is linked to human sacrifice. The legend of the great snake who causes a momentous flood has the snake telling the village chief that he will eliminate the flood if the chief will "sacrifice to me your son," which the chief did.

Xipe Totec was the war and fertility god who wore the flayed skins of his sacrifice victims. Victims to Xipe Totec were killed by having their hearts torn out, then after being flayed their skins were worn by Xipe impersonators for a period of days or weeks. Their flesh was eaten. The Hopi deity, Maasaw, shares many of the features of Xipe Totec, including a major ceremony in February. Oral traditions invariably attribute human sacrifice to Maasaw. His dress basically constitutes a death shroud, and must be obtained directly from the dead.

Turner's theory begins in prehistoric Mexico. Around B.C. 200

the Teotihuacan culture developed, with human sacrifice being practiced ritually. The Toltecs eventually emerged out of this group, but around A.D. 1000 their tribute-demanding militaristic theocracy collapsed. It is speculated by Turner and others that with this breakup, displaced warrior-cultists may have migrated northward, explaining the emergence of warrior priesthods in the Southwest, as well as many Mexican traits and trade-objects. With them they brought their theology which included human sacrifice and cannibalism. The architectural findings of Chaco Canyon help to support the idea of practiced terrorism and social control, and a hierarchical social system. A general Mesoamerican presence is supported by ethnographic as well as archaeological evidence, including square columns, T-shaped doorways, copper bells, macaws and parrots, shell trumpets, roads and signal stations, and observation of astronomical data, to name a very few.

These Mexican links may prove that Chaco was in contact with the Toltecs, who ranged from central Mexico to Yucatan and Guatemala, and who at the time were the most advanced civilization in North America, and who incidentally also practiced human sacrifice and cannibalism.

In room 33 of Pueblo Bonito, an interesting subject was uncovered. A description of the burial, from Steven LeBlanc's Prehistoric Warfare in The American Southwest, is as follows.

"Described are two "high status" individuals who were interred on a specially prepared bed of sand sealed by a planked lid, in other words, a formal burial vault. Above the planking, deposited in some fashion, were the skeletons of twelve other individuals. The burial vault contained 30,000 beads

made of turquoise and other materials, dozens of vessels, and other rare items. One individual was buried with several thousand beads, but the other had the bulk of the turquoise and other items, which Pepper interpreted as an elite burial. Of interest is that this burial, a male, had a bashed in skull (Pepper, 1909). One suggestion is that the twelve individuals were sacrificial victims placed there at the time the two individuals were buried, even though they were above the two elites in the fill. The skeletons of the twelve individuals were partially disarticulated, which lends credence to this interpretation. As mentioned, like most Chaco Great House sites, there are few formal burials from Pueblo Bonito, and the likelihood that fourteen individuals just happened to die simultaneously and be buried together - when there are so few burials overall- is remote. Pepper (1920) found fourteen parrots in room 38, which is not far from Room 33, containing the fourteen burials. It appears that the two parrots had been given special treatment and the other twelve had not. Thus there is the interesting correlation of two (elites?) plus twelve (sacrifices?) humans buried in one location and not far away two (special?) plus twelve (nonspecial?) parrots buried in another location."

The interesting find, however, is that one of the elite individuals, a 45-60 year old male, showed signs of multiple notching in his teeth. Dental transfigurement, or the alteration of one's teeth, is another form of evidence which has recently linked the Chaco culture with that of Mesoamerica. Dental transfigurement was a common practice in Mexico from A.D.200 onward. This new line of evidence suggests that Mexicans were physically present in the Southwest.

According to Christy, “The Chacoans apparently had different values regarding the consumption of humans from those prevailing before, and elsewhere at the same time, in the prehistoric Southwest. The interregional contrast in Southwestern Cannibalism seems to fit the idea of an actual Mexican Indian presence stimulating or even directing the Chaco Phenomenon. We propose that these southerners were practitioners of the Xipe Totec (or Maasaw) and the Tezcatlipoca-Quetzalcoatl (or plumed serpent) cults. They entered the San Juan basin around A.D. 900 and found a suspicious but pliant population whom they terrorized into reproducing the theocratic lifestyle they had previously known in Mesoamerica. This involved heavy payments of tribute, constructing the Chaco system of Great Houses and roads, and providing victims for ceremonial sacrifice. The Mexicans achieved their objectives through the use of warfare, violent example, and terrifying cult ceremonies that included human sacrifice and cannibalism.”

Though still disputed, Turner and White’s research leads conclusively towards the fact that during the Chaco era, human bodies were mistreated and in some instances show signs of butchering like that of game animals. Whether one believes Turner’s model of social-control in Chaco canyon, or some other explanation, the fact is that there is insufficient information that makes any one cause for such mutilation more valid than the other.

What can be learned from Turner and White’s research is that cannibalism probably happened in the Southwest, specifically among the Chacoan influence. If this were so, perhaps it would be prudent for the

anthropology/archaeology disciplines to reexamine and be wary of tendencies to cling to certain trends in the occupation such as that of the “peaceful Anasazi”. Also, as Turner suggests in Man Corn, rather than just concentrating upon societal norms, perhaps much can be found about a society by instead examining the works of individuals or small factions outside of the greater societal whole.

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Editors note: Sarah Clinger is often seen down in Cat working for Sheri Griffith, artwork by Sarah.