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Source: *Kiva*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Fall, 1984), pp. 55-60

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of the Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30247678>

Accessed: 02-03-2019 00:59 UTC

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DATING CASAS GRANDES

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ABSTRACT

LeBlanc's revision of Di Peso's dating of Casas Grandes is critically reviewed. A date for the end of the Medio Period about one century later than LeBlanc's is supported by reference to ceramic assemblages in southwestern New Mexico, and to absolute dates and ceramic assemblages at Casas Grandes.

Key Words: Chihuahua; Casas Grandes; Medio Period.

INTRODUCTION

Charles Di Peso (Di Peso 1974) defined three temporal periods for the late prehistory of northern Chihuahua: Viejo, Medio, and Tardío. The site of Casas Grandes (CHIH D:9:1 [AF]) spanned the Medio period, which Di Peso dated from A.D. 1060 to A.D. 1340. Within the Medio period he defined three phases:

Buena Fe	A.D. 1060-1205
Paquimé	A.D. 1205-1261
Diablo	A.D. 1261-1340

Archaeologists working in southern Arizona (Wilcox and Shenk 1977) and southwestern New Mexico (LeBlanc 1980) have raised serious objections to these dates. LeBlanc (1980) demonstrated that Di Peso's beginning date for the Medio period, and the Buena Fe phase, is far too early; he suggested that the Buena Fe phase began about A.D. 1130-1150, I have no argument with this dating.

Di Peso dated the end of the Medio period at A.D. 1340. LeBlanc felt this was too late and suggested a date closer to A.D. 1300, but both Di Peso's and LeBlanc's end dates for the Medio period present serious problems. One of the major decorated pottery types during the latter part of the Medio period at Casas Grandes was Gila Polychrome (Di Peso et al. 1974c:Figure 649-6), dated in southern Arizona to about A.D. 1300-1450 (Doyel and Haurly 1976:Table 1). LeBlanc and Di Peso both argued that the Gila Polychrome at Casas Grandes predated A.D. 1300. LeBlanc dated the end of the site, and the Gila Polychrome there, to A.D. 1300, while Di Peso felt that Gila Polychrome was present throughout the Medio period, that is, as early as A.D. 1060 (or A.D. 1130 by LeBlanc's Buena Fe phase date).

This paper is not the place for an extended ceramic discussion. I will assume that Gila Polychrome is sufficiently distinctive to allow valid comparisons of pottery so classified between Casas Grandes, southern Arizona, and southwestern New Mexico. This is an important assumption that may be questioned (Steven A. LeBlanc, personal communication 1981).

PRE-A.D. 1300 GILA POLYCHROME

LeBlanc's (1980) main evidence in support of pre-A.D. 1300 Gila Polychrome at Casas Grandes comes from Animas and Black Mountain phase sites in southwestern New Mexico, which he dates from about A.D. 1150 to about A.D. 1300. LeBlanc and Nelson (1976:73) note that "Gila Polychrome has been recovered primarily from surface collections, but it has also been recovered in excavated contexts." They cite the Villareal Site (Lekson and Klinger 1972) for evidence of excavated materials. Following the preparation of a more detailed report on the Villareal site (Lekson 1978), LeBlanc (LeBlanc and Whalen 1980:308) re-evaluated the ceramic situation at Villareal, suggesting three distinct occupations: Classic Mimbres phase, Animas phase, and a later Cliff phase (A.D. 1300-1450).

In spite of the arguments of Stuart and Gauthier (1981:209) supporting my original dating of the site, I now agree with LeBlanc's interpretation of Villareal. The Gila Polychrome at Villareal would then be assigned to the Cliff phase occupation, eliminating the site as an excavated context with pre-A.D. 1300 Gila Polychrome.

LeBlanc's end date of A.D. 1300 for the Medio period also reflected his dating of the Black Mountain phase, which he saw as an extension of the Casas Grandes sphere into the Mimbres area. As noted above, LeBlanc dated the Black Mountain phase to about A.D. 1150-1300, and he felt that the end of the Casas Grandes influence in the Mimbres corresponded to the collapse of Casas Grandes itself. However, beyond occasional surface finds, Gila Polychrome is absent from Black Mountain phase ceramic assemblages (LeBlanc and Whalen 1979:Table 21). It is difficult to understand why the end of the Black Mountain phase, which lacks Gila Polychrome, should determine the end date of Casas Grandes, where Gila Polychrome is abundant. Given the established dates of A.D. 1300-1450 for Gila Polychrome, this suggests that Casas Grandes simply continued to be occupied for some time after the end of the Black Mountain phase.

RADIOCARBON DATES AND THE BUENA FE PHASE

Di Peso (Di Peso et al. 1974a:Figure 10-4) shows Gila Polychrome in all three Medio period phases. These associations in the pre-A.D. 1300 contexts assigned to these phases can be questioned.

There are several radiocarbon dates from Casas Grandes (Di Peso et al. 1974a:24) that are applicable to this problem. LeBlanc (1980:801) listed four dates from this series that Di Peso felt indicated terminal-use. These dates “produce an average end date of A.D. 1265 ± 68” (1980:801), which, if true, would support an A.D. 1300 end date for Casas Grandes. However, the four dates are not end dates for the site. One (CG[d]/262), with a corrected date of A.D. 1300 ± 50, is a construction date from a Buena Fe phase room, Room 38-11 (Di Peso et al. 1974a:25). As a construction date it is not an end date for the Buena Fe phase, much less the Medio period.

Two other dates (CG[c]/185 and CG[c]/189) are from another site altogether. They are from what Di Peso (Di Peso et al. 1974a:25) described as Paquimé phase contexts at the Reyes Site 2 (CHIH D:9:14 [AF]). The corrected dates are A.D. 1275 ± 115 and A.D. 1275 ± 40, respectively. The ceramic assemblage at Reyes Site 2 (6,316 sherds) included only two sherds of Escondido Polychrome, a locally made type resembling Gila Polychrome. One sherd of Gila Polychrome is noted from Reyes Site 2 (Di Peso et al. 1974d:152), but this sherd is not listed in any ceramic counts (Di Peso et al. 1974a:176-195, 1974b:856-865). This single sherd is troublesome, but I feel Reyes Site 2 contained a middle or late A.D. 1200s ceramic assemblage probably lacking Gila Polychrome.

The fourth radiocarbon date (CG[c]/6) is listed by Di Peso (Di Peso et al. 1974a:25) as coming from an agave roasting oven in Unit 1 at Casas Grandes. The fill of the oven (Di Peso et al. 1974a:276) clearly represents last use, but this use may not have been in the final stages of the Casas Grandes occupation. The oven, Pit Oven 4-1, produced an uncorrected date of A.D. 1310 ± 30, and Gila Polychrome and related types were absent from among the 412 sherds recovered from the oven’s fill (Di Peso et al. 1974a:Figure 202-4). These types were also absent from stratigraphic tests in nearby Mound 1, “an accretion mound composed of the accumulated fill from the pit ovens located around it” (Di Peso 1974; Di Peso et al. 1974a:272). It is possible that the absence of Gila Polychrome from agave roasting pits and the debris they generated may have more functional than chronological significance, but both the pit and the mound contained fairly significant proportions of Carretas, Ramos, and other polychrome sherds, suggesting that decorated ceramics were utilized in activities in and around pit ovens. Rather than a Diablo phase “last use” of Pit Oven 4-1, this feature probably evidences a final use about A.D. 1310, *prior* to the appearance of Gila Polychrome in the Casas Grandes assemblage.

There is a fifth radiocarbon date (CG[p]/233), not considered by LeBlanc, which is also relevant. This is a supposed Tardio period date given as A.D. 1480 ± 90 (Di Peso et al. 1974a:25), but corrected to A.D. 1290. At A.D. 1290 this is probably not a Tardio period date, and in fact it comes from the final use of a modified Buena Fe phase room, Room 24-11. The date comes from the same

Buena Fe phase compound, Unit 11, as CG[d]/262, the A.D. 1200 ± 50 construction date. Unit 11 was considered by Di Peso to be the "least contaminated evidence of the Buena Fe phase" at Casas Grandes (Di Peso et al. 1974b:475). Of over 18,000 sherds from Unit 11, only about 50 sherds were of Gila Polychrome and related types. As the last evident use of Room 24-11, the A.D. 1290 date may apply to the later ceramics of Unit 11, but I suggest that this date, like the A.D. 1290 date from Pit Oven 4-1, is probably associated with a ceramic assemblage predating Gila Polychrome.

If these dates are in fact associated with a ceramic assemblage lacking Gila Polychrome and related types, the dating of that assemblage would begin at least as early as A.D. 1200 (CG[c]/6 and CG[p]/233). Thus, the Buena Fe phase would date from about A.D. 1130-1150 to about A.D. 1300.

TREE-RING DATES AND THE PAQUIME PHASE

The dating of the Paquimé phase is based almost entirely on 54 tree-ring dates from construction beams and posts, all of which share a crippling defect: the timbers were all shaped, removing the outer rings. All the dates are "vv" dates, indicating there is no way of estimating how far the last ring is from the true outside. While Di Peso was fully aware of this problem (Di Peso et al. 1974a:9-11), he utilized the dates as though they were, in fact, construction dates. To establish an end date for the Paquimé phase he selected the two next-to-latest dates, both A.D. 1261vv (Di Peso et al. 1974a:14). One of the dated beams also produced a corrected radiocarbon date of A.D. 1275 ± 100 (GG[d]/118). Even if these beams were part of the last Paquimé phase construction, the loss of an unknown number of outer rings indicates that the date of that last construction is well after A.D. 1261 (the radiocarbon date, at 1 standard deviation, could be as late as A.D. 1375). But it is fallacious to assume that last construction dates anything but last construction; the labor investment alone suggests that Casas Grandes was intended to house its original users for some period beyond the year of construction.

TRADE CERAMICS AND THE PAQUIME PHASE

The latest dated construction from Casas Grandes is actually A.D. 1338 or later, based on a tree-ring date from Room 34A-C (CG[d]/231). If Paquimé phase building took place as late as A.D. 1338, how much beyond that date did the Medio period last? Trade ceramics, other than Gila Polychrome, give some indication of occupation into the late A.D. 1300s. Using the "best dates" for tree-ring dated pottery, trade ceramic types (Di Peso et al. 1974a:Figure 10-4) show dates ranging into the late A.D. 1300s (Galisteo Black-on-white and

Heshotauthla Polychrome both have latest dates of A.D. 1393), but none date after about A.D. 1400. The Paquimé phase could thus date from about A.D. 1300 to about A.D. 1400.

It would be reasonable to assume that trade ceramics decreased or disappeared following the collapse of the Casas Grandes system. It is also likely that Casas Grandes continued to be occupied for some time after wide-spread trade connections diminished. Thus we could expect the Diablo phase, the period of decline at Casas Grandes dated by Di Peso at A.D. 1261-1340, to show fewer long distance trade ceramics. On the basis of trade ceramics the Paquimé phase cannot be extended beyond A.D. 1400, but "trade ceramics" do not include Gila Polychrome, dated as late as A.D. 1450, as discussed above. Large quantities of Gila Polychrome were either in use or in mass storage (for example, 49 vessels from Room 18-8) at the time of the final collapse of the city. This suggests possible occupation in the A.D. 1400s at Casas Grandes, and a shortened but considerably later dating of the Diablo phase in the early A.D. 1400s.

In summary, I would date the Medio period phases at Casas Grandes as follows:

Buena Fe	A.D. 1130/1150-1300
Paquimé	A.D. 1300-1400
Diablo	early A.D. 1400s

Acknowledgments. I thank Dr. Steven A. LeBlanc for his cooperation in our discussions of this topic. I am sure Dr. LeBlanc will reserve the right to disagree with my conclusions. This paper is Contribution No. 47 of the Chaco Center, National Park Service and the University of New Mexico. It was originally an appendix to a paper (Leskon 1983) read at the 1981 Anasazi Symposium. The body of that paper has been published with the Symposium Proceedings, but the appendix was omitted.

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