BOOKS: ARCHAEOLOGY

Lessons from Chaco Canyon

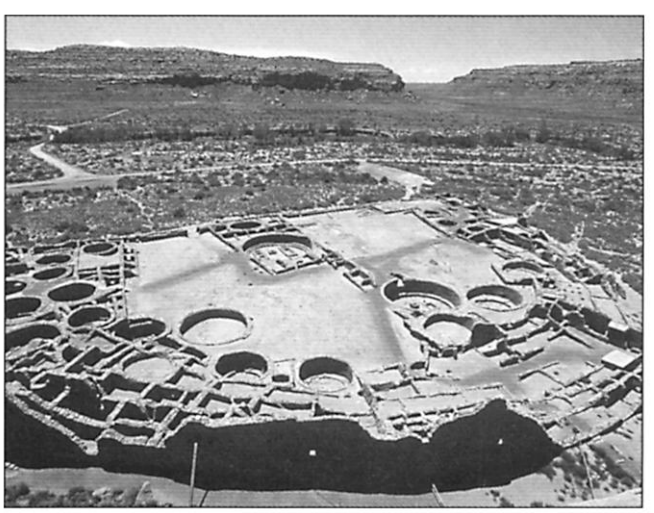
Michael Adler

I began reading David Stuart's *Anasazi America* last March while on my way to New Mexico to participate in a television special celebrating Earth Day 2000. I was an eager traveler because the filming was to take place in Chaco Canyon National Historic Park, one the most significant archaeological preserves in the United States. Chaco is my favorite archaeological pilgrimage destination, where bare sandstone meets the New Mexico sky and silent Anasazi (ancestral Pueblo) ruins captivate all who visit. I arrived at Pueblo Bonito, a millennium-old Chaco "great house," to find the production staff stringing electric cables across ancestral dance plazas and filling the 800-room edifice with artificial lighting, which bleached the subtle yellows and reds of the native sandstone. Directors and members of the film crew yelled threats at plebian technicians. The canyon echoed with stress and discord; this was not the Chaco I knew.

Anasazi America
Seventeen Centuries on the Road from Center Place
by David E. Stuart
University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 2000. 265 pp. $29.95. ISBN 0-8263-2178-X. Paper, $15.95. ISBN 0-8263-2179-8.

I took *Anasazi America* to a quiet corner of the sprawling ruin and, as I read, found the book's main theme to be an interesting parallel to my experience. The frenetic pace of the film crew offered a modern vignette of Stuart's prehistoric Chaco. According to the author, human socioeconomic strategies can be dichotomized into "efficient" and "power" systems. The former follow a steady state of little to no growth in population and production; the latter aspire to Keynesian growth models of production, surplus, and population expansion. Stuart describes Chaco Canyon as an experiment in power politics and overheated economic growth, an anomalous blip in the otherwise efficient and environmentally conservative puebloan occupation of the U.S. Southwest. An archaeologist by training, he argues that massive multistory great houses such as Pueblo Bonito were built by an emerging class of social elite. The chosen few of Chaco were able to manipulate the economic surplus and labors of their agrarian brethren, who lived in small humble homesteads scattered around each great house complex. The earlier Anasazi formed "efficient," small-scale agrarian communities that eschewed population growth and energy production and consumption. They built small domestic structures, farmed lightly on the landscape, and moved hearth and family when the need arose. In contrast, Chacoan agrarian communities farmed more intensively and produced surplus foods. The surplus, in turn, supported the construction of "great houses," the architectural edifices built to exalt the flourishing class of Anasazi leaders and the communities they controlled.

Stuart's explanations rely heavily on climate change as the primary "kicker" for most major cultural changes through the rise and fall of Chaco. This is a highly environmentally deterministic interpretation, but one that he backs up with climatic data. Favorable farming conditions during the 9th century fostered a shift in ancestral Pueblo society from one of efficiency to power. Stuart documents this transition with archaeological evidence for surplus agricultural production and the regional exchange of pottery, turquoise, Mexican macaws, and other exotic goods. Over the next two centuries, these heady days of surplus corn and free trade zones fueled an economic expansion of the Chaco system, one that Stuart compares to our nation's present economic boom. Economic booms are defined in time and magnitude by the bookends of bad times, and Chaco was no exception. The Anasazi prosperity of the 9th and 10th centuries crashed to an end with serious droughts that began in about 1090. Within a few generations, the great houses of Chaco's social experiment were left to crumble as the ancestral Pueblo people moved to upland areas outside the San Juan Basin, areas from which the founding populations of modern Pueblo communities would come.



A "center place." Extensive and nearly continuous 11th-century expansion at Pueblo Bonito produced the jewel of Chaco Canyon's great houses.

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Stuart's book presents fresh insights and arguments that will spur debate, particularly within the already contentious field of Chaco scholarship. He proposes a high level of post-Chaco period depopulation across the ancestral Pueblo (perhaps as high as 75%), particularly after the further climatic downturns of the 13th century. I favor lower population estimates and hence lower rates of depopulation, but these are quibbles that rest on our use of different estimates of the duration of site occupations. Nonetheless, such catastrophic levels of depopulation have heretofore been attributed to disease and conflict that followed European contact. Stuart is arguing instead for an ancestral Pueblo world that had already declined in population when Europeans arrived and would then experience a second dramatic decline.

Stuart's characterization of pre- and post-Chaco Puebloan communities as relatively egalitarian political systems also tosses the book into an already heated debate on the degree of political inequality within ancestral and historic Pueblo communities. Though I think he underestimates the level of sociopolitical hierarchy within extant Pueblo communities, his characterization of an emerging Chacoan elite is convincingly argued. These debates are far from over, but Stuart's contributions reach out with a commendable clarity, backed by well-researched discussions of archaeological evidence and impressive endnotes.

Perhaps the book's greatest contribution is a well-crafted dialogue that unites archaeology with our present world. *Anasazi America* contrasts community conflict one

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thousand years ago with the bloodshed in Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland, making links that bring the Native American past into a tumultuous yet understandable present. Stuart relates the painful circumstances of high infant mortality among the ancestral Pueblo peoples to similarly devastating conditions in less economically developed parts of our own world.

Stuart's depiction of the Chaco system as a failed experiment in power politics and overspecialized agricultural strategies is both compelling and correct. From a dry and dusty archaeology, Stuart crafts an understandable story that is depicted in a thought-provoking and contemporary context. There are lessons, he argues, that historic Pueblo societies learned from the unraveling of Chaco society—lessons that we, in turn, should take to heart: Do not extend food production systems beyond the bounds of a capricious environment. Depend more upon community and less on an elite leadership. Though somewhat romantic in some of its passages, *Anasazi America* still succeeds in melding an often opaque past into our own often disquieting present.

BOOKS: PHILOSOPHY

On E. O. Wilson and His Religious Vision

Michael Ruse

Toward the end of 1998, I was in a bookstore just off Harvard Square. Like most authors interested in the competition, I picked a copy of Edward O. Wilson's book *Consilience* off the shelves and checked just after the title page. Although the book was first published late that March, the copy in my hands was from the tenth printing (in September). I realize print runs these days are pretty small, but this was some best-seller. Which in a way is something of a paradox, because the reviews—especially those from professionals like philosophers—had tended to be united in their hostility. The review that appeared in *Science* (*1*) was withering in its scorn for Wilson's arguments and his conclusions.

There was something interesting at work here, and really it is not too difficult to see what it was. The professionals were reading *Consilience* as a work of scholarship; they were looking for heavy-duty empirical research, formal arguments, and footnotes that qualify the main text sufficiently so that the author can deny what was said explicitly. The general public was reading, and liking, what Wilson had set out to write, namely an inspirational manifesto for our time. The manifesto is more than just inspirational, for at least since his Pulitzer Prize–winning *On Human Nature* (*2*), Wilson has been trying to use science (particularly evolutionary science) as an alternative to Christianity, which he thinks no longer viable. A deeply religious man, Wilson is trying to define a new vision—materialistic, reductionistic, evolutionary, humanistic—that will be adequate for our time and can approach properly the major challenges we humans now face. Those of us who have read Wilson's other books know that the need to cherish and preserve biodiversity is for him perhaps the supreme ethical commandment. It is hardly tendentious to say that *Consilience* is Wilson's Sermon on the Mount.

Life is a Miracle
An Essay Against Modern Superstition
by Wendell Berry
Counterpoint, Washington, DC, 2000. 163 pp. $21. ISBN 1-58243-058-6.

Religions bring forth disbelievers, heretics, and adherents to other faiths. The essayist Wendell Berry has now written an elegant little book, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition*, which is as much a stand against *Consilience* as anything penned by Martin Luther was against the Pope. Berry thinks that Wilson's vision is wrong, wrong, wrong: Wilsonian religion uses vile misleading metaphors (with the metaphor of humans as machines the most dreadful). It illicitly reduces thought to substance, without noting the existence and power of ideas. It brushes aside free will as an illusion. It has no time for poetry, fiction, art, and all else that makes us distinctively human. And it also fails and misleads at the practical level. Scientific discovery (the Wilsonian act of Eucharist) is greatly overvalued. The joys of teaching and of humble jobs like postal delivery are unfairly downgraded. And all is sacrificed to the great and false god of progress. Like an Old Testament prophet thundering against Baal, Berry will have none of it.

At one level, it would be easy for Wilson or a supporter to take on Berry. As seems to be the norm in these kinds of cases, Adolf Hitler is wheeled out and the philosophy endorsed by Wilson is found to be a major causal factor leading to the dictator's power and actions. But surely one could say that the horrors of Nazi race theory came precisely because those criminal madmen did not take note of modern genetics. More than this, today's scholars like Saul Friedländer (*3*) argue that the real roots of Nazi anti-Semitism lay in the mystical, Volkish philosophy of 19th-century German romantics, especially the "redemptive antisemitism" of the Wagnerians in Bayreuth. I hardly think Wilsonian science can be blamed for overweight tenors prancing around in mock-medieval, fancy dress.

Even where Berry gets specific we can defend Wilson. How, asks our essayist, is Wilson to explain David's lament over his rebellious, dead son? "Oh my son Absalom, would that I had died for thee." Quite easily, I should have thought: in terms of kin selection. For all that our children can be awful, our biology compels us to love and care for them because they carry our genes. To ask Berry a return question, why did David not lament over the body of Goliath? As I remember, the usual practice at times like this was to cut off your foe's foreskin and dangle it from the belt at your waist.

Yet, in a way, simply responding with debating quips is a mistake. It is to miss the point, as I fear is true also of Berry. Wilson is not the real enemy. Of course, *Consilience* is written in a flamboyant style and it sets out to irritate. It makes all sorts of grand, ambitious statements, and it throws out predictions and hopes that many will find deeply upsetting. But the point is that Wilson does care to make sense of existence, and he does value above all the worth of our life within that existence. He thinks, perhaps with some reason, that traditional religion does not speak to the problems of our age, and he offers an alternative. His alternative may be flawed, but Wilson is at least trying to provide an ethic for this new century.

Berry's real enemies are those who could not care less: those who think that giving a few dollars to the United Way is enough to assuage all doubts and fears about the worth of life and the way that we are treating our planet. Frankly, I doubt that anything is going to change Wendell Berry's mind. But I hope that some who pick up and read this book—and I say again that it is elegant, forceful, and concerned with important issues—will ask whether those on the same spiritual journey might combine forces and work together. Such cooperation is much better than (as is so often the case in religious disputes) simply tearing one another apart and letting those with no vision continue in their blind and directionless ways.

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3. S. Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (Harper Collins, New York, 1997).