

Musical instruments in the pre-Hispanic Southwest

Figure 1. One of more than 1,250 musical objects studied, this decorated gourd rattle from Canyon de Chelly National Monument (Arizona) is 5.3 inches (13.5 cm) in diameter. Collection of the Western Archeology and Conservation Center, Tucson, Arizona, Catalog No. CACH 811.



COURTESY OF EMILY BROWN

By Emily Brown

STUDYING THE MUSIC OF PAST ERAS is challenging, even when written manuscripts are available. In archaeological contexts without written records, it becomes yet more difficult. However, a surprising amount can be learned by studying musical instruments from archaeological sites. Researchers studying the social and physical contexts in which music took place (Brown 2005) and the instruments themselves (Olsen 1990) have identified some roles music may have played in prehistoric societies. Music lends itself well to ritual; strategic use of ritual is one way Ancestral Puebloan leaders in the American Southwest established, validated, and maintained their social authority.

In the course of my research in nine museums, I studied more than 1,250 musical objects from the Four Corners area of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Utah, primarily from sites within 17 national parks, including Chaco Culture National Historical Park, Aztec Ruins National Monument, Bandelier National Monument, Pecos National Historical Park, Canyon de Chelly National Monument, Mesa Verde National Park, and Wupatki National Monument. The different instrument types included bone and wood flutes; bone, wood, and reed whistles; copper and clay bells; shell trumpets; shell, stone, hoof, and nut tinklers; gourd, tortoiseshell, hide, clay, and cocoon rattles (fig. 1); bone and wood rasps; stone kiva bells; and wooden bullroarers. Curiously, I found no evidence of prehistoric drums other than the controversial foot drums—stone vaults dug into the floors of subterranean ceremonial chambers known as kivas and covered with planks. Drums may be a relatively recent addition to Puebloan culture, perhaps during the late 1400s or early 1500s. They may

have been introduced through trade with nomadic Plains groups or native Mexicans traveling with Spanish groups. Though some rock art images suggest flutes were present in the Archaic period, the earliest instruments I found in museum collections were from the Basketmaker II period (AD 200–500). Of course, music made by the human body leaves no trace in the archaeological record.

Basketmaker II (AD 200–500) and III (AD 500–700)

During this time, people lived part of the year in pithouse villages but were more mobile for the rest of the year. Instruments from this period were flutes and whistles of bone, reed, and wood. While instruments of perishable materials such as these rarely survive, some Basketmaker sites are in protected alcoves and caves where archaeologists have discovered well-preserved examples. One pair of wooden flutes found in a dry cave in northeastern Arizona was decorated with feathers that could still be identified as to species (Morris 1959). Some may have been used as animal calls for hunting. Others may have been used for shamanic ritual. Rock art images of flute players associated with birds (thought to symbolize a state of trance) may represent people with shamanic skill that held positions of religious and social authority.

Pueblo I (AD 700–900)

During this time, the reliance on agriculture grew, and habitation was changing from pithouses to communities with a mixture of above- and belowground architecture. These sites tend to be in more exposed locations and there are consequently far fewer examples of musical instruments from this time, but the use of bone whistles continued, and people began to use bone tinklers. Foot drums also appeared at this time. Many native groups in the Southwest believe they emerged into this place from a series of underworlds through a hole in the earth; if the vaults were used as instruments (foot drums), they may have been a way to communicate with ancestors in the underworld (Wilshusen 1988) as part of an ideology linking people to a place in the landscape they had chosen to settle more permanently (Bird-David 1990).

Pueblo II (AD 900–1150)

Chacoan society rose to its height in the Pueblo II period. While the degree and nature of the social and political hierarchy at the environmentally marginal sites in Chaco Canyon are subjects of ongoing research and debate, most researchers agree that religion played a large role. Some even believe a theocratic priesthood was present (see Lekson 1999). The elite at Chaco imported copper bells (Vargas 1995) and conch shell trumpets from Mexico. In addition to bone whistles, which continued from earlier periods, Chacoan people used large carved and painted wooden flutes, ideal for spectacle, and the first stone tinklers.

Pueblo III (AD 1150–1300)

Collapse of the Chaco system defines the Pueblo III period. This collapse and migration over much of the Southwest was due at least partially to severe drought and declining environmental conditions. Pueblos in the remaining inhabited areas were larger than in the past, and community-level social organization took precedence at this time. Few of the instruments found at Chaco persisted beyond its collapse. Wooden flutes disappeared and the first eagle bone flutes appeared (fig. 2). Possibly people were experimenting with different ceremonies and rejecting aspects of those used at Chaco because they failed to alleviate the drought. As time went on, members of lineages with greater ritual knowledge, valued by their communities, may have had access to better land and resources than those with less.

Pueblo IV (AD 1300–1540)

The large-scale migrations of the Pueblo III period culminated in aggregated communities of unprecedented size with enclosed central plazas and multistory room blocks. These communities required different levels of sociopolitical organization and community integration than had previously been used (Potter 1998). Most researchers agree that the kachina religion began in the early 1300s (Adams 1994; Schaafsma 1994). Kachinas are associated with ancestral spirits, clouds, and rain, and their visits are thought to ensure successful crops. This period of religious reinvention involved multiple new musical instruments in great numbers; archaeologists have found more instruments from the Pueblo IV period than any other period. New instrument types included clay bells made in imitation of their copper predeces-

Figure 2. Bone flutes such as these from San Lazaro Pueblo, Santa Fe, New Mexico, appeared during the Pueblo III period (AD 1150–1300). Private collection.



Spanish mission bells were systematically destroyed during the Puebloan revolt against the Spanish in 1680. ... the silencing of the Spanish bells declared the Puebloan rejection of Spanish-imposed religion.

sors, leather rattles, bone rasps, kiva bells, and bone tinklers. The Spanish encountered this large and varied musical environment when they first came to the Southwest.

Spanish contact (AD 1540–1680)

Some of what we know about Pueblo music comes from the writings of Spanish explorers, though some accounts are not particularly complimentary or accurate (see Hammond and Rey 1940). The manuscripts do contain information on whether music was made by men, women, or both, and whether people played singly or in groups. The writings of Spanish officials say that music was one tool through which the Spanish missionaries drew Puebloans to church ceremonies. While my research did not focus on this period, I find it revealing that Spanish mission bells were systematically destroyed during the Puebloan revolt against the Spanish in 1680. Music clearly had a powerful association with ritual in Pueblo cultures; the silencing of the Spanish bells declared the Puebloan rejection of Spanish-imposed religion.

Conclusions

As Ancestral Puebloans first settled into an agricultural way of life, ritual played a role in establishing and maintaining systems of landownership and tenure. During the height of Chaco culture, leaders used religious spectacle complete with musical instruments, which were luxury trade items, to display social power and authority in the first example of a truly hierarchical Southwestern society. When Chacoan society collapsed, community leaders revised their ceremonies, seeking a more inclusive and less ostentatious system. The kachina ceremonies are community oriented, but in some cases they seem to be superimposed over an older socioreligious system (Ware 2002). One clue to the importance of the past role of music in Puebloan ritual is the destruction of Spanish mission bells during the Pueblo revolt against the Spanish.

Future research

The next step in researching precontact instruments from the Southwest is to incorporate the Native American voice. As rich as the ethnographic literature from the area is, much could be learned from people in native communities about aspects of their history and traditions of musical instruments. What would the drum-makers at Cochiti Pueblo say about why archaeologists have not found evidence of drums at precontact sites? Could flute players at Taos elucidate whether game calls are purely utilitarian or have a place in more formal musical forms? What insights would people at Hopi provide about clay bells made in imitation of those from copper? Such research will add a tremendous richness and depth to our understanding of the human cultures behind the objects.

Many of the objects most important to this research came from National Park Service collections, which is no coincidence. Sites become part of the National Park System because of their historical and natural significance and integrity; no research on Southwestern prehistory would be complete without data from these sites. Research in collections has the potential to inform park resource management and contribute to various academic disciplines. It also has the potential to greatly enrich regional interpretive programs because people today recognize and relate to musical instruments. Instruments provide park staff with a way to discuss subjects beyond survival and subsistence, presenting people in the past as creative and artistic and illustrating the continuity between past cultures and the modern Pueblos. In an era when the National Park Service is consolidating collections

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and centralizing management, not losing sight of the value of collections to researchers is important. Collections should remain as well cared for and accessible as possible, if for no other reason than the study of musical instruments from archaeological sites is only possible using museum collections.

Acknowledgments

No collections research is possible without the assistance of museum curators; I am grateful for the assistance they provided me at the museums I visited. Canon U.S.A., Inc., has my deep appreciation for the generous funding provided by a Canon National Parks Science Scholars award. Thanks also to Dr. Nan Rothschild of Columbia University for her support of this somewhat unusual project, and to Polly Schaafsma, Charlotte Frisbie, Margaret Berrier, Dennis Gilpin, and Jane Kolber for sharing their own research.

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