

# Archaeology Southwest

Volume 17, Number 4

Center for Desert Archaeology

Fall 2003

## The Archaeology and Meaning of Mimbres

*Michelle Hegmon, Arizona State University*

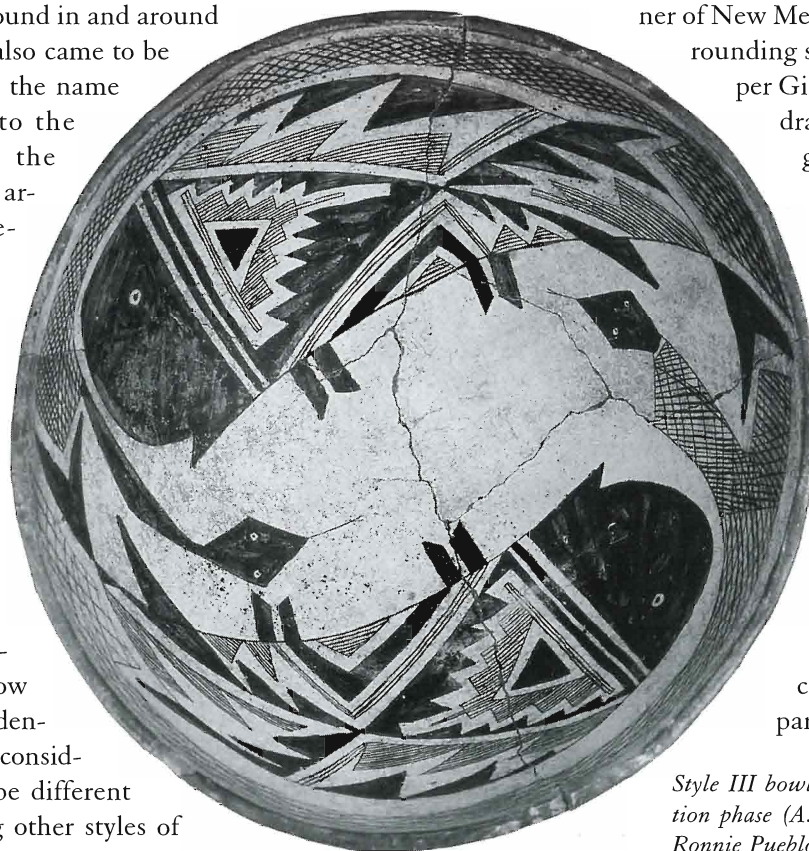
*Margaret Nelson, Arizona State University*

**M**IMBRES, WHICH MEANS “WILLOWS” in Spanish, is the name given to a cottonwood- and willow-lined river in southwestern New Mexico. The very spectacular pottery found in and around the Mimbres Valley also came to be called Mimbres, and the name was soon applied to the people who made the pottery. Therefore, archaeologists sometimes talk about the Mimbres people and Mimbres culture, though these labels are really just shorthand for the people who made the pottery we call Mimbres Black-on-white. We do not know what the people called themselves, nor do we know if they linked their identity to their pottery or considered themselves to be different from groups making other styles of pottery.

Although it is black-on-white like wares from the northern Southwest, Mimbres pottery was a local development. In fact, Mimbres pottery is black and white on the surface only; inside it is brown, like other Mogollon wares. In addition, the Mimbres archaeological region is defined based on the extent of Mimbres Classic period (A.D. 1000-1130) developments. In earlier times, the area was not particularly distinctive, and in the Postclassic, various portions of the region saw different developments that

are more appropriately thought of as parts of other archaeological regions.

The Mimbres region includes the southwestern corner of New Mexico and portions of the surrounding states. In the west, is the upper Gila River. The Mimbres River drains the central part of the region, and flows underground in the vicinity of the town of Deming, New Mexico. And on the other side of the continental divide, the eastern Mimbres area encompasses a series of drainages that flow east into the Rio Grande. Eastward-moving rain clouds are often stopped by the Mimbres and Black Range Mountains, so the eastern Mimbres area is considerably drier than other parts of the region.



*Style III bowl from the Mimbres Reorganization phase (A.D. 1130-1200s), recovered from Ronnie Pueblo (LA 45103).*

The Mimbres region is part of the larger Mogollon culture area. The Early and Late Pithouse periods (A.D. 200-550 and A.D. 550-1000)—discussed by Swanson and Diehl (see page 3)—saw an increasing use of pottery and reliance on agriculture across the Mogollon area.

*This issue was made possible by a generous gift in honor of June Harper Doelle.*

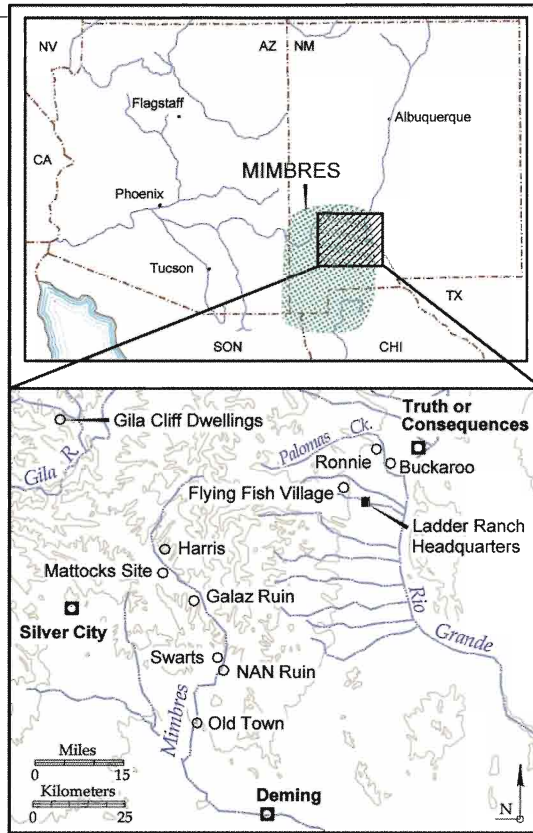
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is a Quarterly  
Publication of the  
Center for Desert  
Archaeology



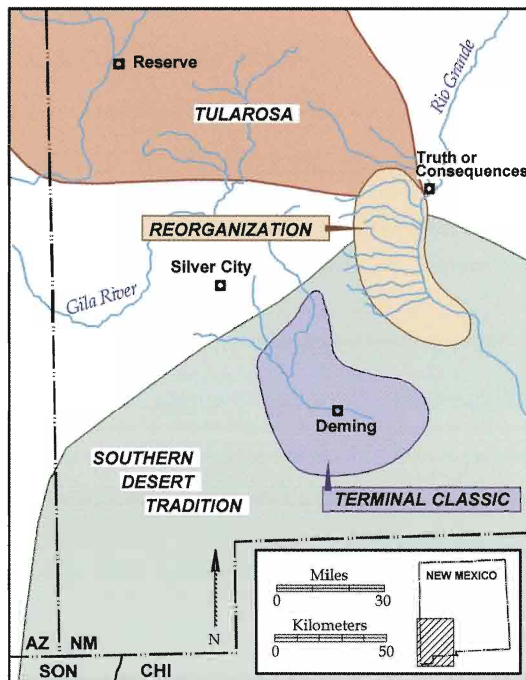
However, by the latter part of the Late Pithouse period, the Mimbres tradition—including early types of Mimbres Black-on-white pottery—became more distinctive and elaborate. Villages grew, large kivas were constructed, and around 900, these community ritual structures were ceremonially destroyed in spectacular conflagrations, a major social and ritual transition recently recognized and here described by Creel and Anyon (see page 4).

The Mimbres Classic period is characterized by pueblos; densely packed villages along the Mimbres River valley; fairly heavy reliance on agriculture watered by small irrigation systems; and elaborate, sometimes naturalistic, pottery designs. Gilman and Shafer (see page 5) discuss Classic village formation and growth, while Brody (see page 6) and Hegmon (see page 7) consider aspects of Classic pottery design.

Previous researchers saw the Late Pithouse and Classic periods as times of rapid growth, environmental degradation, and the eventual collapse and abandonment associated with a climatic downturn in the early twelfth century. We review less dramatic—but probably more accurate—interpretations in this issue of *Archaeology Southwest*. Most importantly, although many large villages were depopulated around A.D. 1130, settlement continued in other villages, and people remained in the region in new kinds of



Map of the Mimbres region, as defined by the extent of Classic Mimbres remains. Detail map shows the locations of sites discussed in this issue.



Map of the Mimbres region illustrating the many traditions of the Postclassic era.

smaller, hamlet-style settlements. Consequently, the change is better characterized as a regional reorganization rather than as an abandonment (see pages 9 and 11).

Different developments in different parts of the region illustrate the changing nature of archaeological traditions. The western Mimbres area, around the Upper Gila, was depopulated fairly early (probably before A.D. 1100), and was not permanently settled again until around 1300 (the Saladoan Ranch Cliff phase). The northern Mimbres Valley was mostly depopulated after 1130. However, the central and especially southern parts of the valley saw very late transitional developments known as the Terminal Classic (A.D. 1130-1200).

At the same time, in the eastern Mimbres area, there is strong evidence of continuity from Classic villages to slightly later occupation of dispersed residential hamlets, known as the Reorganization phase, because their occupation represents a reorganization of land use that probably enabled people to remain in the region. By the later A.D. 1200s, the entire southern portion of what had been the Mimbres region is better understood as part of what is currently known as the Southern Desert phenomenon, associated with the eventual rise of Casas Grandes (also known as Paquimé). Concurrently, the northern portion of the region became incorporated into the Tularosa tradition.

Much of what we know and continue to study in the Mimbres region has been possible because of the preservation efforts of local land owners, agencies, and archaeologists. LeBlanc (see page 10) describes the history of preservation developments in the Mimbres region and elsewhere. In our own experience, directing the Eastern Mimbres Archaeological Project, property owners—such as Ted Turner and the Ladder Ranch, and the owners of the A-Spear Ranch/Las Palomas Land and Cattle Company—have worked diligently to protect archaeological sites and they have generously supported our research.

# Mimbres Pithouse Dwellers

*Steve Swanson, Arizona State University*

*Michael W. Diehl, Desert Archaeology, Inc.*

**L**ARGE STRUCTURES with wood-frame roofs and walls and deep foundations were the primary house form in the Mimbres Mogollon region from approximately A.D. 200 to 1000. Recent efforts by Steve Swanson, Mike Diehl, and Michael Cannon build on two decades of research, and show that the coincidence of pithouses with the earliest high-quality pottery marked the beginning of increasing agricultural dependence that continued through the first millennium A.D. Their research supports Steven LeBlanc's long-held hypothesis that Mogollon pithouse occupations mark a break from the preceding Late Archaic period, with a greater emphasis on crops during the Pithouse periods.

The ancestors of pithouse dwellers ranged farther afield from their residential sites and probably shifted their locations several times in any given year, as they relied more heavily on hunting and gathering wild seeds. In contrast, the earliest pithouse dwellers were relatively sedentary and more oriented towards farming. The emphasis on year-round site occupation and crop growing increased throughout the Pithouse periods.

The shift from hunting and gathering wild foods to agricultural production provides an interesting case for archaeologists to study, because it is not obvious that farming, which requires more work, was an inherently attractive choice. The transition occurred in an area that contained abundant wild foods, especially in the rich upland areas between the headwaters of the Salt and Gila rivers, where large game, pinyon nuts, juniper berries, cacti, and acorns were all available in quantity. An explanation of the increased emphasis on crops still eludes researchers, primarily because few archaeologists have focused their efforts on the oldest Mogollon pithouse settlements.

Fewer still are the numbers of well-researched Late Archaic sites. If trends that occurred during the Pithouse periods were initiated during the Late Archaic period, then overhunting and other human pressure on wild resources may have caused maize and other cultivated crops to be viewed as relatively attractive resources.

Crops could be grown in quantities as necessary, were easily stored, and were available at times and locations that were known in advance to their growers. In contrast, as wild game populations declined, their timing and availability became less predictable and their reduced numbers may not have been adequate to support a growing human population.



*This hilltop near the Gila Cliff Dwellings, New Mexico, is a typical location for a Mimbres Early Pithouse period site.*

To test whether regional population growth lies at the heart of subsistence change, archaeologists need accurate estimates of Early and Late Pithouse period populations. Our current research has found that few pithouses on any given site were occupied simultaneously. When the pithouse assemblages can be seriated, we often find a long temporal sequence with many breaks. Together, these lines of evidence point to relatively short occupations by small groups of people, with frequent reoccupations over long time spans.

Our results further reveal not the formation of villages, but rather, the practice of an entrenched pattern of movement by small residential groups in the Mogollon uplands. This interpretation points to low regional population density. Was this the occupation pattern in riverine settlements along the Mimbres River? The question remains to be answered; however, it has significant implications for the Pithouse period and for the transition to the "pueblo" settlements of the Classic period at approximately A.D. 1000.

# Ritual and Societal Transformation at the End of the Late Pithouse Period

Darrell Creel, University of Texas, Austin

Roger Anyon, Pima County Cultural Resources Office

**A** DRAMATIC SPECTACLE was witnessed by the occupants of the Mimbres Valley sometime between A.D. 915 and 925. A huge plume of smoke billowed into the sky from the village of Old Town as the communal pit structure, the community's largest ceremonial building, erupted into a raging inferno. This was no accident. In fact, the ritual retirement of what we call Structure A16 may have been envisioned during its construction in 875, some 50 years earlier.



*Large communal pit structure, A16, at Old Town, partly excavated. The major floor features—hearth, floor grooves, and center posthole—are visible, but the sipapus are not yet exposed. The extended entryway is on the left.*

The tradition of constructing and retiring communal pit structures, the Mimbres equivalent of great kivas, has a long history, beginning around A.D. 200 and ending by about 1100, when plazas seem to have replaced them. Each large village had one in use at any particular time. By the late 800s, these buildings reached their zenith.

These communal structures were built, used, and retired according to prescribed conventions. The process of building included placing offerings—barn owl wings and fragments of crystals, shell bracelets, stone palettes, beads and pendants—in walls and roofs. In some cases, the walls were specially constructed to allow their easy toppling upon the structure's retirement. During the building's use, a different set of objects was placed beneath floors. Most floor offerings were ceramic vessels, but in one case a beautiful carved and painted tuff frog effigy was buried beneath a floor. At retirement, yet a third class of offerings was placed on communal structure floors: carved stone bowls and pipes. Once offerings were emplaced, the buildings were filled with inflammable materials and then ignited. After the roof had collapsed onto the floor, the walls were systematically pushed in on top of the fallen roof. Following this, the center post was dug out and removed, and the resulting hole filled with rocks.

The dramatic inferno in Structure A16 at Old Town

was not unique. Communal pit structures at Galaz, Harris, Swarts, and other sites were similarly retired in intense conflagrations, each of which must have been visible throughout the Mimbres Valley. We find it intriguing that the two tree-ring-dated structures at Old Town and Harris were built only three years apart, suggesting that they were ready for retirement at about the same time. Were all of these structures retired the same day, the same month, the same year, or over the space of a decade or more? We do not know, but we suspect that the timing was more likely close rather than spread apart.

In the 800s, Mimbres society underwent rapid and dramatic transformation. Our interpretation of many lines of evidence—such as domestic architecture, burial practices, ceramics, plant use, hunting practices and the like—is that people in the Mimbres region became sedentary agriculturalists living in year-round permanent villages and relying on riverine irrigation agriculture. We think it no coincidence that this was the century when there were close ties between the Mimbres and Hohokam. Perhaps the spectacular retirement of the communal pit structures in the early 900s signaled not only a major transformation within the Mimbres region but

the beginning of significantly decreased ties with people in the Hohokam region. By the next century, Classic Mimbres society had emerged.



*A sample of the objects found in the roof adobe of structure A16. Intentional breakage of shell bracelets, stone palettes, and a stone bowl was probably part of placing these offerings.*

# Mimbres Families and Households

Patricia A. Gilman, *University of Oklahoma*

Harry J. Shafer, *Texas A&M University*

**WHAT WERE MIMBRES FAMILIES** and households like during the Classic period? The two of us see different kinds of families and households, based on the evidence from two large Classic sites—NAN Ruin and the Mattocks site—in the Mimbres Valley. Our interpretations suggest that people found a variety of family structures suitable for their needs and that the Classic Mimbres period was a time during which such flexibility could be expressed.

Shafer has documented the evolution of Mimbres households from pithouses through surface pueblos at the NAN Ruin, a site containing more than 100 rooms, formed into at least four room blocks, in the middle of the Mimbres Valley. This involved a change from nuclear-family households to extended-family or lineage households with private storage facilities and family cemeteries beneath the floors of designated rooms. It was during this transition that the first granaries at the NAN Ruin were constructed as part of the household architecture. The extended family household that emerged in the Classic Mimbres period began with a single habitation room that formed the core of each room block. Through time, other habitation and storage rooms were added, including communal storage rooms, granaries, and one or more rooms designated ancestor shrines or corporate kivas. Households either stood alone, as represented by the southern room block at the NAN Ruin, or became incorporated or merged into a larger room block, as with the eastern room block at the NAN Ruin, among other examples. Following Shafer's interpretation, the growth of room blocks is the result of the increasing size and extent of families. Thus, differences in room-block size indicate variations in family size.

The Mattocks site, a Classic Mimbres pueblo with about 180 rooms in eight room blocks, has a different configuration of rooms and array of domestic architecture.



*The relatively lush floodplain of the Mimbres River Valley.*

Gilman notes the presence of room suites consisting of one or more habitation rooms and an attached storage room; unlike the NAN Ruin, there are no communal storage rooms, granaries, or corporate kivas. Each suite appears to have been the home of a single family rather than a large, extended family or a lineage household. Room-block size was determined by the length of occupation, not by the size of the family unit. One family began each room block with the construction of a single suite. Upon the death of the founding couple, the earliest core rooms



*Excavation of a large room block at the Mattocks site.*

were abandoned and replaced with a new, attached suite constructed by a descendant couple. The room block grew over time as each suite was abandoned and a new suite built. The final room suite occupied is the only one in which artifacts remain on the floors; burials are beneath the floors of many suites in a room block, except the final suite occupied.

These differing interpretations of Classic Mimbres period family structure have two implications. First is that flexibility was an important aspect of household and community organization. Second is that population size, as well as its associated effects and organizational strategies, are difficult to measure.

# Mimbres Painted Pottery in the Modern World

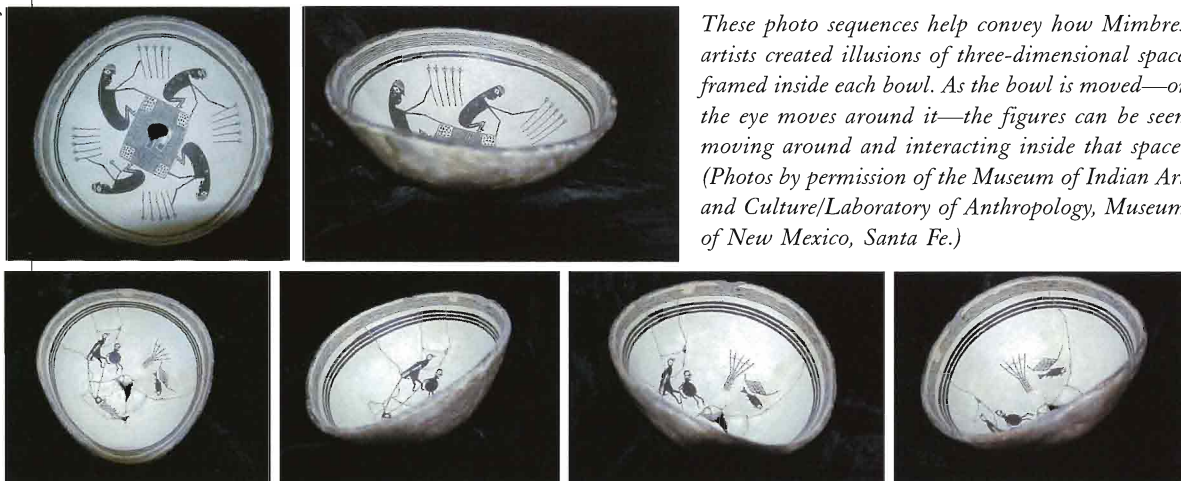
J. J. Brody, University of New Mexico

**M**IMBRES POTTERY, painted in black or red-brown on a white surface, has been valued by Euro-Americans for more than a century. Most designs on this pottery are abstract, though suggestive of mountains, clouds, lightning, rain, and other natural phenomena. And a signifi-

Our Euro-American ways of seeing are not those of Native Americans of the past. We learn to see pictures as static, two-dimensional, vertically oriented images. We experience them on mobile, small-scale surfaces, as in books, or on immobile, large-scale vertically oriented surfaces, as

in museums. We also expect them to either project illusions of three-dimensional, real-world observations or to be nonrepresentational abstracts. We tend to forget that they can be both, simultaneously. We tend to view Mimbres pottery paintings in the same way.

*These photo sequences help convey how Mimbres artists created illusions of three-dimensional space framed inside each bowl. As the bowl is moved—or the eye moves around it—the figures can be seen moving around and interacting inside that space. (Photos by permission of the Museum of Indian Art and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe.)*

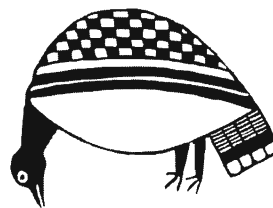
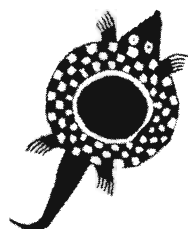
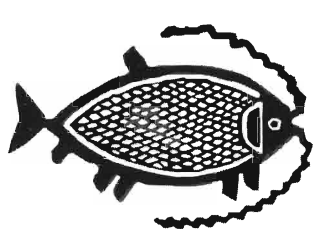


cant minority are representations of animals, humans, or fantastic beings. Demand for these vessels by an insatiable art market is largely responsible for the mechanized looting that has destroyed many dozens of Mimbres villages since the late 1960s. For some people today, the pots may be trophies or collectors' items, but for the people who once lived in those Mimbres villages, the pots—made by themselves or by their relatives, friends, or neighbors—were serving or storage containers, parts of their daily lives that might later be sacrificed and buried with the dead.

Since they were introduced to the modern world, Mimbres paintings have been archaeological artifacts, precious art objects, trivial decorations, statements of profound spiritual significance, emblems of ethnic identity, subjects of casual humor, and everything else imaginable. Rather than asking what these pictures meant to the Mimbres—a question often posed by archaeologists—as an art historian, I wonder what it is about these pictures that allows them to convey so many different meanings today.

Whether in books or in a museum exhibit, the Mimbres pots we see are static and often at eye level. We view them as two-dimensional images in a standard orientation.

Can we move beyond these ways of seeing? We can consider Mimbres paintings in their original settings—as pictures on the interiors of concave bowls, placed on the ground, below eye level, in a setting that had no furniture as we know it. Each image is defined by framing lines without reference to top or bottom. The bowls were moved about, seen from every angle, and sometimes filled with food or other substances. The set of photographs shown here is intended to convey these multiple views. When seen in this way, Mimbres paintings acquire a three-dimensional reality, perhaps closer to that experienced by their makers and users. Even with this perspective, the intended meaning or meanings of Mimbres paintings remains elusive. Translation is always on our own terms, but perhaps when we see the paintings in a different way we can expand the realm of our understanding.



# Mimbres Pottery: Meaning and Content

Michelle Hegmon, Arizona State University



**B**LACK-ON-WHITE Mimbres pottery was a local development, and has antecedents in earlier brown and red types. Black-on-white became common after A.D. 900, about the time of the religious transformation described by Creel and Anyon (see page 4), and most naturalistic designs occurred after 1000. Although Mimbres pottery is found in all contexts at sites, most whole bowls are recovered from burials, where the bowls were commonly placed over the deceased's head. The majority of bowls show use wear, indicating that they were probably used in daily life before they were buried.

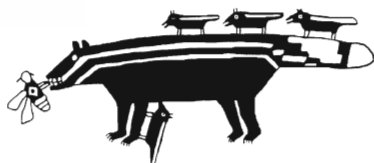
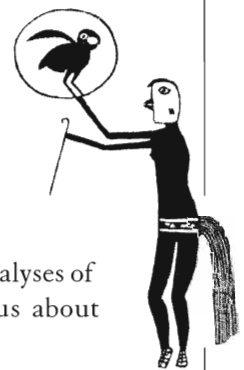
Numerous studies of clay and temper demonstrate that the pottery was made in a number of locations, perhaps at most villages, and moved or traded across the region and beyond. Today, Pueblo pottery is made mostly by women, and one Mimbres burial of a female with pottery-making equipment suggests that the same may have been true in the past. However, some researchers have argued that men painted at least some of the designs, since some vessels depict rituals carried out by men. And, in a controversial 1996 study, Wenda Trevathan and I argued that birth scenes are anatomically unusual (or even incorrect) and thus were likely painted by people unfamiliar with the details of birth—that is, by men.

There are many ways to think about and appreciate Mimbres designs. Although they appeal to our modern, Western aesthetic sensibilities, we can also attempt to understand their content and analyze exactly what is being depicted. We must bear in mind that the designs are not a direct reflection of reality; they are instead representations of what the artists—for whatever social, religious, or aesthetic reasons—chose to depict. For example, corn and rabbits were both staples of the Mimbres diet, but while many vessels depict rabbits, very few show corn. Several

designs seem to be scenes of everyday life and the natural world, whereas others depict fantastic or supernatural figures (such as an armadillo putting on a deer mask) or relate to Pueblo mythology, including the world of the dead.

Most naturalistic designs are stylized, but this does not mean that they are inaccurate. Many show details, almost like naturalist field guides, that allow us to identify the particular species being depicted. For example, although both jackrabbits and cottontails were commonly eaten, almost all Mimbres rabbit designs have black spots, indicative of blacktail jackrabbits, at the tips of their ears. An ichthyologist was able to determine that many of the fish depicted in Mimbres designs are saltwater species, suggesting some people traveled more than 350 miles, from the Mimbres region to the California coast. Most parrotlike birds depicted are likely scarlet macaws, which are native to southern Mexico, hundreds of miles to the south of the Mimbres Valley. In addition, some depictions allow the sex of human figures to be determined, and thus particular styles associated with women, like string aprons, and men, such as feathers in a headband, could be identified. While most hunters depicted on the vessels are men, women are also depicted in numerous active roles, including as handlers of ritually important macaws.

Just because we can identify the subjects and species does not mean that we grasp the full meaning—or, more likely, meanings—of Mimbres painted pottery. “Well-proportioned, somewhat sulky young man” does not tell us all that we want to know about Michelangelo’s *David*. But there are many ways to know. We can appreciate that meaning is more than content, but we can also appreciate what the art—including analyses of what was and was not depicted—tells us about Mimbres lifeways.



# The End of the Mimbres Classic Period

Michelle Hegmon, Arizona State University

**A**.D. 1130 MARKED THE END of the Mimbres Classic period. Although we now know (as Nelson explains; see page 9) that the people did not disappear and there was no great abandonment, many people did leave their large villages (moving to smaller, dispersed hamlets) and Mimbres Black-on-white pottery became less common. It was the end of an era, but not necessarily a downturn. In fact, the changes may have been perceived positively by the people involved. As Tessie Naranjo, from Santa Clara Pueblo, reminded archaeologists in 1995, “movement is a part of the pueblo peoples.”

In 1985, archaeologist Paul Minnis concluded that, in the Mimbres Valley, the early twelfth century was a time of food stress, probably caused by a combination of population growth, environmental degradation, and drought. Although his basic conclusions have stood the test of time, recent research paints a more complicated picture.

The population certainly grew, but perhaps not as much as Minnis thought. An understanding of population growth rates requires better estimates of the number of people per structure or room block, and especially a better estimate of how long structures were occupied; research on these issues is ongoing (see Gilman and Shafer, page 5, and Swanson and Diehl, page 3).

By studying the firewood in cooking hearths, Minnis found that, over time, people in the Mimbres Valley used less wood from species such as cottonwood, suggesting that they had denuded their once-rich riparian environment. The Eastern Mimbres Archaeological Project recently conducted similar analyses in the drier and apparently less rich eastern Mimbres area. To our surprise, we found much less evidence of degradation. The drier area may simply have attracted fewer people, but it is also possible that people learned to tread more carefully in this sensitive environment, and thus established a more sustainable way of life.

The decades prior to A.D. 1130 were generally good times to be a farmer in the Southwest, and 1130 began a period of decreased rainfall. But the effect of this change depended on people’s ways of life. In the Mimbres Valley, it seems that people had begun to take the good times for granted. They established upland fields that were dependent on plentiful rainfall, in effect setting themselves up for catastrophe. In the drier east, these risky strategies would never have worked, and so people focused on less-expansive but in the long term more-reliable kinds of fields in the floodplains.



*In the eastern Mimbres area, well-watered arable land is found primarily in fairly small patches—such as the floodplain of Seco Creek on the Ladder Ranch. In contrast, in the Mimbres River valley to the west, the floodplain provides a broad continuous swath of arable land.*

The end of the Classic Mimbres period was associated with decreased rainfall. The mid-twelfth century was a time of transformation across the Southwest, including the transition to the Hohokam Classic period and the end of the Chaco regional system. But the relationship between the climate and sociocultural changes, in the Mimbres region and elsewhere, is complex and varied, and depends very much on the way the people were already interacting with their environment. The contrasts between the Mimbres Valley (which had a large population and relatively rich but overexploited and degraded environment, and where many people left their villages) and the eastern Mimbres area (which had a smaller population, a less-rich but better-preserved environment, and where people resettled in hamlets) provide important perspectives on these human-environmental relations.

Certainly the people made beautiful pottery, but their lives may have been fairly difficult. Many people were living in fairly crowded conditions and engaged in labor-intensive agriculture. Their architecture and pottery styles were homogeneous, suggesting they were under pressure to conform, perhaps analogous to life in a small town. And some of the designs on their pottery, including at least one scene of a sacrificial beheading, are reminiscent of the repressive civilizations of Mesoamerica. While there is little evidence of physical violence in the Mimbres region, the people were probably aware of it elsewhere. The movement to small hamlets, with new, wide networks of contacts, and diverse material styles, may have been perceived as a relief, at least for some.

# Abandonment Is Not As It Seems

Margaret Nelson, Arizona State University

THE “MYSTERIOUS” DISAPPEARANCE, in the mid-twelfth century, of the people from Mimbres Classic villages is a common misconception that is now being challenged. Archaeologists have long interpreted the depopulation of these villages as the end of the Mimbres culture. However, more recent research has altered archaeological and popular understanding of this and other prehistoric “abandonments” in the North American Southwest. Recent research in the Mimbres Valley and along western tributaries of the Rio Grande has documented population continuity and reorganization within the region following the depopulation of most large villages, which marks the end of the Classic Mimbres period.

“What happened to the people we call the Mimbres?” They no longer made and used exclusively Mimbres pottery after A.D. 1130; thus, they are not recognized as Mimbres in archaeological classification. But this does not mean they disappeared! In the mid-twelfth century, they reorganized, moving from aggregated villages to other kinds of settlements. Some left the region; some, in the southern Mimbres Valley, stayed in their villages (during the Terminal Classic phase), and some, in the eastern Mimbres area, remodeled their seasonally used fieldhouses into residential hamlets (during the Reorganization phase). People continued to use the same suites of resources: they cultivated corn, beans, and squash, and hunted and gathered locally available wild resources. However, their new way of life involved increased residential mobility and more extensive regional ties. Whereas they had previously made and used only one kind of decorated pottery—the famous Mimbres Black-on-white—after 1130 they made, imported and used a wide range of painted ceramic wares.

The Mimbres region was eventually transformed: the southern portion was incorporated into a southern desert set of styles associated with the Hohokam, Casas Grandes, and Jornada regions, and the northern portion became part of a regional set of styles labeled Tularosa and centered to the north and west of the Mimbres region (see



*Excavation at the Buckaroo site (LA 70259), a Classic fieldhouse converted into a Reorganization phase hamlet. People resettled from their villages to these small hamlets at the end of the Classic period, remaining in the region while restructuring their social landscape.*

map of Postclassic phase; see page 2). People did not disappear.

This new interpretation aids in our understanding of the ecology of farming and the continuity of native people in the North American Southwest. First, arid-land farming in the Mimbres region varied across time and place; over the long term, we can detect a cycle of adaptive change. Prior to the Classic period, emphasis was on

relatively high residential mobility and diverse field settings; during the Classic period, people cultivated some fields more intensively and moved less frequently; in the Reorganization phase, they returned to the earlier strategy involving higher residential mobility and dispersed settlement; and finally, the cycle returned to aggregation and reduced residential mobility later in the Postclassic. This flexibility allowed people to remain as arid-land farmers for millennia in the Southwest.

Second, the people of the Mimbres region did not disappear. Continuity and change are seen by tracking ceramic styles. The Mimbres Classic Black-on-white style was replaced with new painted types as people reorganized, aligning themselves with the emerging centers of growth to the north and south. Ultimately, these later traditions were replaced, as regional ties were transformed. The people we recognize as Mimbres during the Classic period, and their descendants, became part of a southern desert tradition and a northern plateau tradition. Current evidence points to links between the people of the Mimbres and later people living in the northern and southern Southwest.

These new insights matter because they change the way we see the past and the present. What we sometimes call abandonments were, at times, part of an ongoing cycle of change that allowed people to remain in their homeland and maintain a farming economy. They were not necessarily failures, nor did the people of the past disappear. Their styles changed, their villages were shifted and reorganized, but their descendants continue to live in their Southwest homeland.

# Mimbres Archaeology and Site Preservation

Steven A. LeBlanc, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology

**B**EAUTIFUL AND UNIQUE Mimbres bowls have always been both a benefit and detriment to the study of Mimbres archaeology, and looting to find bowls has gone on for more than 100 years. In the 1970s, when I decided to see if there was still research potential in the Mimbres region, I was told not to waste my time there, because all of the sites had been destroyed. Ignoring this advice, I formed the Mimbres Foundation to try to save what remained of Mimbres archaeology.

Over time, those of us at the foundation learned how to find undisturbed portions of sites and concluded that even very damaged sites had value. When we received permission to excavate Mattocks Ruin, which lay on private land, the site's owner included an option to purchase the property, which we did a few years later. This almost-accidental preservation of the Mattocks site set off a chain reaction of additional site preservation and protection.

While we excavated the Mattocks site, we could hear the roar of a bulldozer looting the next village site down the valley. This was followed by the partial bulldozing of the Galaz Ruin, of which we subsequently excavated a small portion before it was completely leveled. Then we discovered that the Old Town site (see Creel and Anyon, page 4), which by the 1970s was covered with pothunters' holes and bulldozer cuts, was on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land. This meant that the site had always been entitled to legal protection, but the BLM did not even know it owned it! At this point, the foundation launched a multifaceted attack. We found a New Mexico legislator who introduced a bill outlawing looting on private land with mechanical equipment. The bill passed, and thus emboldened, we tried to get a new federal antiquity law passed. A private individual hired a lobbyist, and a draft

bill was conceived. Swiftly, New Mexico State Senator Pete Domenici and Arizona State Representative Morris Udall sponsored the bill, and soon the Archaeological Resources Protection Act became law. Not long afterward, Ron Bradsby, the Mimbres District ranger, apprehended looters on Forest Service land, and a landmark conviction was obtained.

That left the problem of sites on private land, so we quickly purchased several other sites in the Mimbres Valley. However, realizing that this was not a feasible long-term strategy, the Foundation turned to the Nature Conservancy and proposed that it, too,

protect archaeological sites. The Conservancy declined, but indicated that if we started our own conservancy, it would teach us how to operate it. In 1980, the Archaeological Conservancy was created. Today, it is one of the largest archaeological membership organizations in the world and has preserved almost 250 sites.

Although looting in the Mimbres area has not stopped—as a recent conviction of some notorious looters attests—it has greatly diminished, and Forest Service and BLM sites are mostly well protected (but see the article by Turnbow in the 2001 [volume 15, no. 3] issue of *Archaeology Southwest*). However, the story of site preservation in the Mimbres region is one of unintended consequences. For example, through its efforts to preserve natural areas, the Nature Conservancy has inadvertently saved more archaeological sites in the Mimbres region than were protected through all the efforts of archaeologists. And the Archaeological Conservancy, although it began as a way to protect Mimbres sites, has actually had only a minor effect in the Mimbres region, but as it has grown, it has led to a quantum increase in the preservation of sites nationwide.



*EMAP 2002 excavations in room block 100 at Flying Fish Village, a Classic Mimbres village. The excellent preservation at this well-protected site on the Ladder Ranch is in sharp contrast to the devastation that is common at sites in the Mimbres Valley.*

# Styles Change, People Continue

Michelle Hegmon, Arizona State University

**STYLES CHANGE.** Pottery types come and go. The decreasing frequency of Mimbres pottery after A.D. 1130 does not represent the decline of a people—instead, it indicates that people began to make new kinds of pottery. Archaeologists now seek to answer two new questions: How did the pottery change? And what did that change mean to the people who made and used the pottery?

These three vessels were found together on the floor of a Reorganization phase room, indicating that they were used after 1130. The bowls are typically Mimbres, but the jar is different. Although its design is Mimbres, its clay and paint are typical of other types (Socorro or Chupadero). This jar is a hybrid, and it is not the only example. On Reorganization phase sites, Mimbres pottery is consistently found in association with a diverse array of types, including imports and local copies of distant styles. Also, Postclassic burials in Mimbres Valley villages often have typically Mimbres interment techniques with non-Mimbres bowls.

Mimbres painted pottery—its iconography and placement in burials—must have meant something special to the people who manufactured and used it. Perhaps it was part of the tradition of living in those large villages. When that lifestyle changed, the pot-

tery style became less important, though it was not rejected outright. As people moved out of the villages, they developed extensive social networks, bringing them into con-



Two Classic Mimbres Black-on-white bowls and a Chupadero Black-on-white seed jar. All three were recovered from Ronnie Pueblo, a Reorganization phase hamlet.

tact with new styles, which they then adopted to signal their new social ties. Mimbres pottery did not disappear; instead, people began making new kinds of pottery for new reasons.

See the Center for Desert Archaeology website for more information: <<http://www.cdarc.org>>

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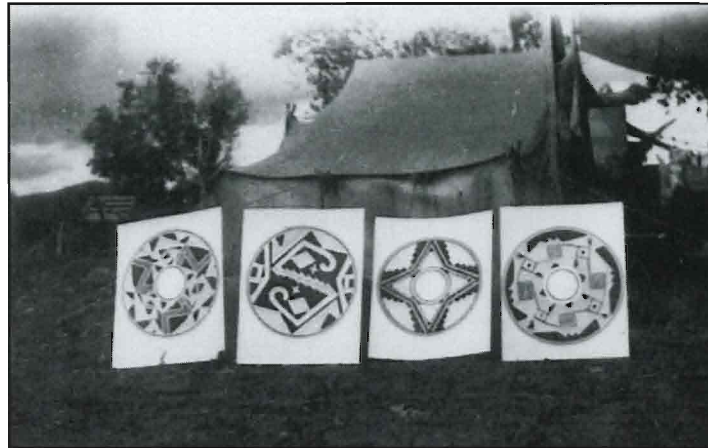
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## Back Sight

**Q**UINTESSENTIAL ICONS. That is the shortest description I can come up with to relate Mimbres pottery to the incredible human story of the Mimbres region. I had serious misgivings about printing a Mimbres pot on the cover of *Archaeology Southwest*. Were we just pandering to the lowest common denominator? Fortunately, some further reading and discussion has brought out a slightly different perspective.

I knew a little bit about the early work of Bert and Hattie Cosgrove in the Mimbres area. The Cosgroves were fairly well-to-do folks from the mid-continent who ended up in Silver City, New Mexico, in the early 1920s. They were soon made aware of the incredible pottery of this area, and they began their personal quest to explore the local caves and ruins. Fortunately, the Cosgroves made a relatively rapid transition from a focus on things to a focus on the people who made the things. Gradually they educated themselves by reaching out to prominent archaeologists like A. V. Kidder, who was working at Pecos Ruin at the time.

A wonderful book—Carolyn O’Bagy Davis’s *Treasured Earth*—provides a biography of Hattie Cosgrove. It recounts



*Hattie Cosgrove completed detailed ink drawings of many hundreds of Mimbres pottery designs to preserve the information and share it more broadly. Here recent drawings are drying on the line next to the Cosgrove's camp at the Swarts Ruin in 1925. Photo courtesy of C. Burton Cosgrove and Carolyn O'Bagy Davis.*

her transition from a fascination with Mimbres and other artifacts to an ultimate focus on preservation of the ruins that

held the pottery that everyone felt was appropriate to dig. The pottery was the starting point.

Peggy Nelson pointed out to me that the remarkable Mimbres pots have been the starting points for many other people. The funding that Steve LeBlanc was able to obtain for the Mimbres Foundation was aided by the fact that Mimbres pottery was such a fascinating “hook.” The pots piqued the interest of donors, and responsible archaeologists like LeBlanc were then able to conduct scientific archaeological excavations and purchase sites.

Peggy Nelson also recounted how both media magnate Ted Turner and the new owners at the A-Spear Ranch have developed a deep respect for the Mimbres sites on their properties. They adjust their land-use plans based on what is best

for preserving sites. This is a refreshing perspective on the land and the people who once lived in this region.

So, on the one hand, it is discouraging that collectors and pothunters will destroy over 90 percent of the heritage that a remarkable people left behind in order to put an undeniably stunning pot in their collection. On the other hand, those stunning pots have inspired a surprising amount of good behavior as well. Let’s all try to keep tipping the scale toward the good behavior.

**back sight (băk sīt)** n. 1. a reading used by surveyors to check the accuracy of their work. 2. an opportunity to reflect on and evaluate the Center for Desert Archaeology’s mission.

*William H. Doelle, President & CEO  
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