**Who were the Ancestral Pueblo People (Anasazi)?**

They were the ancestors of the modern Pueblo people, today about 20 communities living in New Mexico and Arizona.

There never was an "Anasazi tribe", nor did anyone ever call themselves by that name. Anasazi is originally a Navajo word that archaeologists applied to people who farmed the Four Corners before 1300 AD.

Archaeologists identify a culture through its artifacts, since members of a culture share traditions of architecture, crafts, symbolisms, etc. When the Anasazi or Pueblo culture began is a matter of definition, because there is no single event or trait which defines it. The earliest traces of the culture date before AD 1 (perhaps as early as 1500 BC) in characteristic kinds of basketry, sandals, art, tools, architecture, settlement patterns, and incipient agriculture.

According to Pueblo oral traditions, different groups came from different directions and points of origin before meeting to form the clans and communities of today. Modern Pueblos speak several different languages and do not share a common term for their ancestors. The Hopi name is ***Hisatsinom***.

The ancestral Puebloan homeland was centered in the Four Corners region of the Colorado Plateau-- southern Utah, northern Arizona, northwest New Mexico, and a lesser section of Colorado-- where their occupation lasted until 1280 or so. By 1300 AD the population centers had shifted south to the Rio Grande Valley of New Mexico and the Mogollon Rim in central Arizona, where related people had already been living for centuries. The Spanish who arrived in the 1500s named them the Pueblos,meaning "villagers," as distinct from nomadic people.

Modern Pueblo people dislike the name "Anasazi," which they consider an ethnic slur. This Navajo word means ***ancient enemy*** (or old-time stranger, alien, foreigner, outsider) although it has been in common use for about  70 years.

Today, however, no doubt remains that these prehistoric people were ancestral to modern Pueblos, who insist that their ancestors did not permanently "abandon" their former territories. Modern Pueblos still make pilgrimages to ancestral village sites, have oral histories about them, and maintain shrines in the Four Corners region.

**What happened to these people?**

The Ancestral Puebloan farmers were relatively successful in the Four Corners area for over a thousand years, but by AD 1300 they had left the entire region. Long-term climate changes that reduced crop yield may have been among the reasons that the Ancestral Puebloans finally moved away from their former homeland.

Tree-ring records and other indicators show that persistent drought and/or shortened frost-free seasons affected this region during several prehistoric periods, including the early 900s, the early 1100s, and the late 1200s. Each of these periods corresponds to shifts in settlement pattern. The last period (late 1200s) witnessed the final, widespread Puebloan migrations out of the Four Corners. Other factors responsible for this exodus may have been deforestation or other kinds of environmental degradation, a growing scarcity of land or other resources, and/or political conflicts related to these problems.

The Ancestral Puebloans may have reached the limit of the natural resources available to them. When crops consistently failed, the people moved to a better location. Archaeologists also see evidence of social changes over time, changes perhaps related to internal pressures or to outside competition from non-Pueblo groups.

In the Dolores Valley, research revealed that people began settling in small villages around AD 500. The settlements were heavily populated between AD 600 and 900 when conditions were most favorable for agriculture. The number of households, hamlets, and villages increased as the population grew.

Environmental conditions began to change around AD 900, as cooler temperatures made farming unreliable. Families began leaving the Dolores area to pursue agriculture and community life at lower elevations nearby. In later centuries the population rebounded and use of the area continued through the 1200s. In southwestern Colorado, some settlement areas persisted for centuries but with internal changes such as a trend toward concentration into larger, fewer villages.

**What was Ancestral Pueblo architecture like?**

Pueblo people have created and lived in a variety of shelters over the last 2,000 years. The earliest constructions were family unit pithouses, which were shallow excavations roofed over by earth and wood. The first hamlets and villages were usually a row or arc of small, square rooms, built of sticks and mud plaster, set behind a cluster of pithouses.

The Ancestral Puebloans generally did not make adobes or mud bricks. The earliest pueblos often had walls made of clay covering a lattice of sticks-- called jacal construction-- usually anchored to a row of foundation stones. Later villages had stone stem walls below upper jacal walls. Later still, walls were mostly stone masonry-- sometimes carefully shaped, sometimes not-- held together with mud/clay mortar. Roofing was layers of brush and clay over a frame of sticks and logs.

Later, multi-family "pueblos" were built with shaped stones. One major advantage to pueblo construction is that adding rooms to a pueblo is much easier than digging a new pithouse. The first pueblos were single story buildings, but evolved into larger multi-level complexes beginning about 900-1000 AD. Pueblo-type villages resemble modern apartment blocks, but with many rooms devoted to food storage. A classic, modern example is Taos Pueblo in New Mexico.

Pithouse-type villages and pueblo-type villages overlapped in time. The earliest pueblos were really an arc of storage rooms behind a cluster of pithouses. Gradually the above-ground storage rooms became living/sleeping/working rooms, while the pithouses became deeper and less numerous. After this transition, archaeologists often refer to them as kivas. Some kivas in the western Anasazi area were square rooms, as are Hopi kivas today.

There are several differences between the kivas in modern Pueblo villages and the "kivas" found at Ancestral Puebloan sites. The kivas in archaeological sites are much more numerous than kivas in modern villages, and may have had different functions. They may have belonged to individual families or clans. Since their form evolved from earlier habitations (pithouses), ancient kivas probably were used more often as working or sleeping quarters than are modern kivas.

"Great Kivas" are a different kind of building. They are usually not found connected to any single family unit or set of living rooms. They are larger than simple kivas, and apparently they were used to host community events. The oldest known great kivas are as old as the earliest pithouse villages, dating from around AD 1. In terms of use and meaning, great kivas may be the true ancestors of modern, communal kivas.

It is worth pointing out that the actual "living room" space in Ancestral Pueblo villages was usually outside on a rooftop or plaza during good weather. Indoor areas were mainly for sleeping or working in wet, windy, or cold weather. Most of the rooms in a pueblo were storage rooms, like a house full of closets.

Between AD 1200 and 1300 in the Four Corners region, many large and small pueblos were built into shallow caves. Known today as "cliff dwellings," these village sites offer several environmental advantages: They shelter the buildings from rain and snow, they usually have a good solar orientation (shade in the summer, sun in the winter), a spring is often found at the back of these caves, and cave villages do not occupy scarce agricultural land. However, the absence of cliff dwellings before AD 1200-- and their sudden, widespread adoption throughout the Four Corners region after that date-- indicate other motivations for this change. Many cliff dwellings have very defensible locations and defensive architecture; the difficulty of access must have been a disadvantage to some inhabitants. Recent evidence indicates that malnutrition and famine were not uncommon during this period, and that violent events sometimes took place, so cliff dwelling architecture may represent a response to social stress.