

**San Juan Basin Archaeological Society**  
a Colorado Non-Profit Corporation



**Field Trip Report**

Trip Description: Paquime, Chihuahua, Mexico Date: October 14-18, 2026

Trip Leader(s): Hunter McCleary Participation Limit: 15 limit but 8 went

Participants: Lorie Hansen, Mary Moorhead, Tish Varney, Susan Hicks, Lynn Hughes, Jim Horn, Lorraine McCleary, Hunter McCleary. Joel and Tammie Barger paid but dropped out at the last minute.

Remarks: Tour operator was Fiesta Tours International which arranged for all expenses on the Mexico side: lodging, food, transportation, and the archaeologist guide. Cost was \$1,150 per person. US side expenses were paid by each traveler.

Suggestions if trip is repeated: Fiesta Tours run by Cathy and Marshall Giesy was excellent. I would use them for any tour they ran.

Prepared by: Hunter McCleary

Attachment is report submitted to Moki.

## Trip Report: Paquimé and the Casas Grandes World, October 14–18

SJBAS embarked on its first international trip in years last month when eight SJBAS members traveled from Deming, New Mexico, into northwestern Chihuahua to see the marvels of the Paquimé world. Our scholar and guide was Dr. Paul Minnis, a noted authority on Paquimé who co-led much of the field work over the past few decades that has helped shape our understanding of the region.

### On the Road to Casas Grandes

Our trip began with a reminder that today's border tensions looked quite different in 1916 when Pancho Villa forces attacked a small military outpost in Columbus, NM and sparked an invasion of Mexico. Ten thousand US troops traveled this same road. [General Pershing's HQ was in Colonia Dublán, a suburb of the city of Nuevo Casas Grandes.] After crossing the border at Palomas, we followed Mexican Highway 2 through open desert to Ascensión, a town founded by Mesilla Valley residents who wished to remain Mexican citizens after the U.S. acquired the Las Cruces area in the Gadsden Purchase. Farther south lay Janos, which began as a Spanish military outpost, and then the Casas Grandes River valley, where Mennonite and Mormon communities are a familiar sight.



### Cerro Juanaqueña: Archaic Trincheras

Our first encounter with deep antiquity came near Janos, where Paul pointed out Cerro Juanaqueña, a cerro de trincheras. We viewed it from a distance, but the scale was clear. Excavations by Robert Hard and John Roney decades ago showed that this 140-meter basalt hill, overlooking the Casas Grandes and San Pedro rivers, was covered by terraces spanning about 20 acres, with more than eight kilometers of terrace walls and 108 stone circles.

The surprise was the date. The terraced village was built roughly 3,000 years ago, in the Late Archaic, well before pottery appeared in the region. Hard and Roney argue that such sites are the earliest fortified villages in the area, and that they reflect early dependence on agriculture, collective labor and the first experiments with village life. Long before Paquimé, people here were already building on a monumental scale. At noon we ate lunch at the mission of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad de los Janos.



## Paquimé's Two Great Eras

Paquimé, also known as Casas Grandes, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the heart of the region's later story. Archaeologists divide its prehistory into two main eras.



The Viejo period, roughly A.D. 700 to 1200, was a time of small farming villages. People first lived in pit houses, then in surface structures

and eventually adobe-walled rooms, and they made distinctive early pottery. The Convento site (picture right), near Paquimé, is a key Viejo community.

The Medio period, roughly 1200 to 1450, is when Paquimé became a regional capital. Contiguous, multistory adobe room blocks grew to about 2,000 rooms. The city had ball courts, ceremonial mounds, reservoirs, elaborate water-control systems, and extensive macaw breeding, along with imported shell and fine polychrome pottery. Charles Di Peso, who led the great 1958–61 excavations, credited outsiders from Mesoamerica with inspiring the city. Minnis and his colleague Michael Whalen see more local continuity: they found Viejo remains beneath Medio sites, including Paquimé itself, suggesting local people simply expanded on earlier settlement. Radiocarbon dating suggests Paquimé was abandoned between about 1420 and 1460, though the chronology is still being refined.



## Walking the City

An afternoon walking tour brought the site map (picture to right) to life. We moved among the Plaza, the market area, the I-shaped and T-shaped ball courts, the Mound of the Offerings and the great room complexes with names such as the House of the Dead and the House of the Well. Standing among the adobe walls, with their T-shaped doorways, it was easy to picture a bustling trade center. The macaw pens are especially striking, since the birds were brought from far to the south for their feathers. There were also turkey pens.



## Cueva de la Olla: Granaries in the Cliffs

A climb into the Sierra Madre brought us to Cueva de la Olla (picture to right), a cliff-dwelling site southwest of Nuevo Casas Grandes that dates to the earlier Viejo era, roughly A.D. 950 to 1060. Its namesake is a remarkable granary shaped like a giant jar, or olla. Standing about 3.5 meters tall and 2.5 meters across, it is built from rolled straw and clay, with a small original opening at the top.

This was a strikingly different way to keep the harvest from the one used by the Ancestral Puebloans to the north, who typically stored corn in stone-walled cists and masonry rooms or in ceramic jars. Here, an entire granary was modeled like a pot, in a style that echoes the highland storage structures known elsewhere in Mexico. It was a vivid reminder that farming communities in the Southwest and northern Mexico solved the same problem in very different ways.



## Paul's Own Sites: 204 and 242

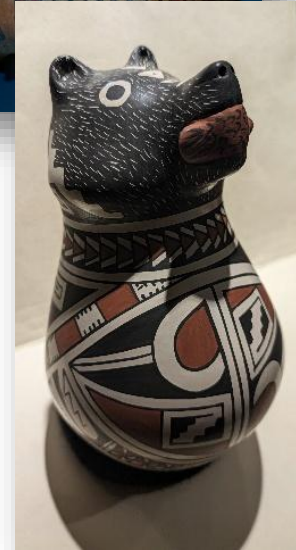
Two memorable visits were those excavated by Paul and Whalen's team as part of their study of Paquimé's hinterland. They surveyed and excavated Medio communities to learn how the region was organized, concluding that Paquimé directly controlled an area only about 30 kilometers across, with outlying communities beyond that. This is as opposed to SJABS members' experience with Chaco and its outliers spanning thousands of square miles.

Paul's Site 204 lies about 17 kilometers from Paquimé and is among the largest settlements near it. It has a ball court and substantial mounds, and excavation found pit houses beneath the Medio remains, dated to about A.D. 1030–1160, evidence of long occupation of the same farmland.

Site 242, about 27 kilometers from Paquimé, is the southernmost of the group. Its Casas Grandes–style architecture includes an I-shaped ball court with a stone-faced end mound, aligned to true north like one of the courts at Paquimé, and a residential mound of unusual height. Radiocarbon dates place it in the 1300s. Seeing these places with Paul, who could point out where he had dug and explain what each find meant, was a highlight of the tour.

### The Potters of Mata Ortiz

The village of Mata Ortiz is famed for hand-crafted pottery inspired by ancient Paquimé ceramics (see ancient pot above and modern day one below), a tradition revived by Juan Quezada and now carried on by many families. We visited several galleries, and most of us bought pieces. We also had a local potter give us a demonstration of how he forms a pot from clay he has gathered and cleaned.



### Reflections

While this trip was mostly about the archaeology it also offered a wonderful chance to interact with the people of

Chihuahua. We

stayed in a local hotel where the small staff took very good care of us and fed us tasty local fare. One

evening we all had dinner at the home of a good friend of Paul's.



The trip tied together three thousand years of human history, from Archaic terraces to the adobe city of Paquimé to the living craft of Mata Ortiz. Thanks go to Cathy and Marshall Giesy of Fiesta Tours International for superb logistics and insights into the local communities and their warm-hearted residents. And to Paul Minnis for his expertise and good humor. We came home with a far deeper understanding of this remarkable corner of the Southwest's ancient world.

Members on the trip were Tish Varney, Lynn Hughes, Jim Horn, Susan Hicks, Lorraine and Hunter McCleary, Lorie Hansen and Mary Moorehead. *Pictures by Lynn Hughes and Tish Varney.*

