

Pueblo La Plata is one of the largest prehistoric archaeological sites in the Agua Fria National Monument. The mound in front of you is what remains of the prehistoric pueblo village. It once resembled an apartment house built of thick stone walls and contained 80 to 100 rooms. Pueblo La Plata was built near A.D. 1250, more than 750 years ago. By A.D. 1450, its residents moved elsewhere for reasons unknown.

A Close Look at Architecture

Archaeologists and ecologists from the Museum of Northern Arizona and Arizona State University are conducting scientific research at Pueblo La Plata. The builders of the pueblo constructed walls by piling basalt rocks and possibly using clay from the soil to secure the rocks. Archaeologists have not yet found a roof in good condition, but it is likely that roofs were constructed of tree trunks, branches, and thatch.

Pueblo La Plata had no obvious windows or exterior doorways that allowed easy entrance from the outside. People probably climbed wooden ladders and entered the pueblo through openings in the roof. This architectural design may have helped to defend against enemies. The rooms in Pueblo La Plata were used primarily as living quarters and for storage. Most daily activities, such as cooking, likely took place outside the pueblo.



People of the Perry Mesa Tradition

Pueblo La Plata and the other pueblos were inhabited by people of the Perry Mesa Tradition, which is the local name given to the prehistoric inhabitants of this time period. It's a reasonable estimate that 150 to 200 people may have lived in Pueblo La Plata at any one time, over several generations.

As many as 3,000 people lived on the monument's mesas during this time period. There were at least six large communities whose buildings contained a hundred or more rooms. There were many smaller villages dispersed over the mesa as well. In addition to traveling among the villages, the people communicated through smoke signals. Archaeologists have discovered a network of hilltop sites that were used to relay these signals among villages over long distances.

Similar to Today's Climate and Environment

Pueblo La Plata is named after Silver Creek, which flows through the canyon north of the pueblo. "Plata" is Spanish for silver. The pueblo sits atop Perry Mesa, a plateau marked by sheer cliffs on the south, west, and north. The rocky surface of the mesa is of volcanic origin. The landscape of Perry Mesa consists of flat areas and low rolling hills, cut by deep canyons.

Overall, the environment and climate would not have been drastically different from the present. Plant remains, animal bones, and pollen from archaeological sites indicate that, at times, the climate may have been more cool and wet than it is now. Tree-ring evidence from surrounding regions indicates that the climate would have been good for farming, without drastic changes from year to year. During the early 1400s, the weather appears to have gotten warmer, with periods of drought, and was unpredictable from year to year.

Living Off the Land

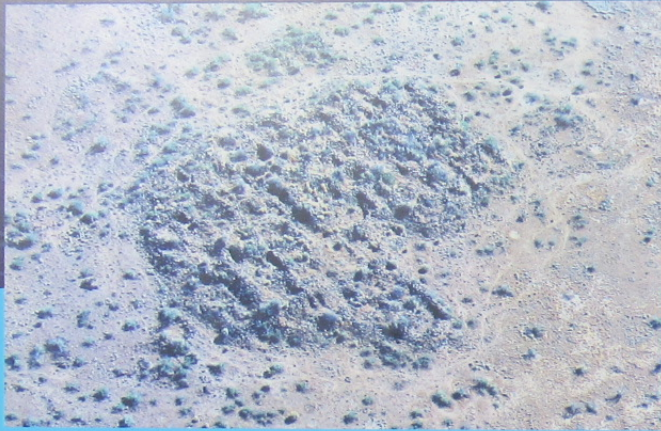
The people of the Perry Mesa Tradition used a variety of farming techniques in different microenvironments. They grew corn, beans, and squash. They also gathered a variety of wild plant foods, including grass seeds, edible weeds, wild barley, nuts, cactus fruits, and agave hearts. Hunters contributed meat from deer, bighorn sheep, and rabbits.

Roasting pits served the purpose of ovens. The remains of several roasting pits, marked by piles of fire-cracked rocks, are in the area southeast of Pueblo La Plata. The cooking technique was similar to a pit barbecue. Wood was placed into the pits and set on fire. When the rocks were hot, the food was placed in the pit, possibly covered with a layer of grasses or other plants, and then covered with soil. The heat and steam trapped in the pit cooked the food.

Departure Remains a Mystery

For reasons still unknown, the people of the Perry Mesa Tradition left the area close to A.D. 1450. Droughts or other changes in climate may have made it more difficult to farm and survive on the mesa. The population may have grown too large to exist on the available food supply. Conflict and warfare may have been a factor. It is likely that the people eventually moved into the mountains and Colorado Plateau areas of northeastern Arizona.

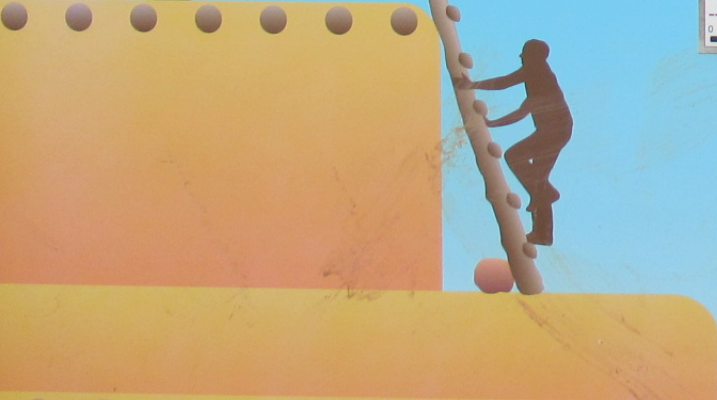
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roof opening



wooden ladder



tree trunks

basalt rocks and clay soil used as mortar



AGUA FRIA NATIONAL MONUMENT

PUEBLO LA PLATA

Features

Pueblo La Plata is one of the largest prehistoric archaeological sites in the Agua Fria National Monument, which has at least 400 prehistoric sites, including stone masonry pueblos, ancient agricultural fields, rock art, and scatters of pottery and stone tools. Between A.D. 1250 and 1450, as many as 3,000 people lived on the Monument's mesas. For reasons still unknown, they left the area after A.D. 1450.

Pueblo La Plata is a large village of 80 to 100 rooms. It was named for Silver Creek, which provided a source of water in the canyon north of the village. The pueblo sits on a strategic point at the northwestern rim of Perry Mesa. It may have been the first stop for visitors to the Perry Mesa communities, who may have been friends or relatives, enemies, or traders.

Pueblo La Plata would have been an imposing sight, a large building with massive stone walls. Most of its rooms were probably used for living areas or storage. Doorways are visible between rooms, but people probably entered the rooms from ladders leading to the roof. Daily activities, such as cooking and tool making, likely took place outside in the area surrounding the pueblo.

The prehistoric people grew corn, squash, and other plants. They also gathered wild foods, including grass seeds, edible weeds, wild barley, and agave, and hunted deer, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, cottontail rabbits, and jackrabbits.

Etiquette

Pueblo La Plata contains important scientific information that may reveal how people lived during good times and bad on Perry Mesa, how they interacted with surrounding communities, and why they left the area. Illegal digging and removal of artifacts have damaged the site. These activities not only destroyed important scientific information, but also created safety hazards by exposing walls, irregular surfaces, and loose rocks.

If you visit the site, stay off the walls and watch your footing as you walk around. You will see artifacts, such as pieces of pottery or stone tools. You may handle and photograph these items, but leave them where you find them. If you remove them, you will be taking away important pieces of the prehistoric puzzle, and you will be breaking the law. Please help to protect and preserve this ancient site.

Current Research

Archeologists and ecologists from the Museum of Northern Arizona and Arizona State University are conducting scientific research at Pueblo La Plata. These scientists have prepared detailed maps of the site and its architecture. The maps show that the pueblo was constructed in several stages, possibly by groups who had moved to Perry Mesa from the west or the south. Researchers have also collected and analyzed prehistoric pottery and stone tools. Some of these items were imported from as far away as the Flagstaff area and the Hopi mesas in northeastern Arizona. As part of the Legacies on the Landscape project, ASU scientists are examining the long term impacts of the prehistoric settlement on the present-day environment. They are also studying the various types of fields and farming techniques used by the prehistoric people. Other topics of research include prehistoric warfare and alliances; long-distance signaling systems; and, of course, why so many settlers came to the mesa and left by A.D. 1450.





Figure 5. Map showing the results of architectural mapping at the main architectural mound at Pueblo La Plata.