

Hisat'sinom and the Sierra Sin Agua

Ancient Peoples and Places of the San Francisco Peaks

Christian E. Downum

The landscape surrounding modern Flagstaff, Arizona, is a stunningly beautiful place of extremes, rising from hot desert lowlands to snowcapped mountain peaks. The vegetation is mostly pine forest, piñon-juniper savannah, and grassland, subtly transitioning from one to the other with changes in elevation. More than 600 volcanoes dot the landscape. They include the San Francisco Peaks, a graceful, glacially sculpted mountain that is the highest point in Arizona and perhaps its most revered summit. Around the peaks lies a rough expanse of volcanic debris, chaotically strewn atop neat layers of sedimentary rock. Black, jagged lava flows and reddish brown, cone-shaped volcanoes interrupt deep, undulating cinder dunes. These features remind us of a fiery, violent past and give the land an otherworldly quality.

Everywhere, water is scarce. High elevations often receive abundant winter snows and summer rains, but porous volcanic cinders and fractured sedimentary rocks absorb much of the moisture and keep it from concentrating into bodies of surface water such as rivers and lakes. This circumstance led early Spanish explorers to dub the region “Sierra Sin Agua”—mountains without water.

Despite the aridity, abundant archaeological remains testify to a thriving ancient population. Many of the best-preserved archaeological sites now exist as parks and monuments. Each year hundreds

of thousands of visitors come from around the world to view large pueblos such as Wupatki, Elden, and Tuzigoot, in and around the Flagstaff area. They flock to picturesque cliff dwellings at Walnut Canyon, Honanki, Palatki, Montezuma’s Castle, and Montezuma’s Well. Rock art is commonplace, decorating remote outcrops, mesas, and canyons. Agricultural fields and small field houses—simple shelters used for daily farming chores—appear by the thousands, testifying to the skill and faith of ancient farmers.

For more than a century, the remarkable archaeological remains in the Sierra Sin Agua have attracted scientific and scholarly attention. A great deal is known about the region from oral history and archaeology, but vastly more is still to be learned. The contributors to this book describe recent archaeological studies and offer fresh perspectives on ancient life in the Sierra Sin Agua. Among them are Native American voices speaking about the deeply held meanings of sacred places and ancient sites.

The prehistoric peoples of the Sierra Sin Agua interacted with each other in complex ways at different times, at varying geographical scales—sometimes locally, sometimes across far-reaching distances—and through different forms of social relations. We do not know precisely how they conceived of their group identities or what they called themselves. For that reason, we refer in this book to

ancient peoples simply as Hisat'sinom, a Hopi term that translates as “those who lived long ago.”

Archaeology in the Sierra Sin Agua returns repeatedly to a few common themes. One is continuity between past and present. The land and its archaeological remains are alive with meaning. Legendary places abound, consisting of points on the landscape that are rugged, large, beautiful, sacred, historically significant, strategically important, well remembered, or any combination of these. Here, people of the past may be gone, but their deeds and contributions to the present live on in the consciousness of the region's Native Americans.

The Flagstaff area holds particular significance for the Hopi people, who maintain religious shrines at local landmarks and continue to make prayers and leave offerings to the Hisat'sinom. In many ways the development of Hopi culture and the archaeology of the Sierra Sin Agua are inseparable. Hopi people know the area just east of the San Francisco Peaks as Pasiwvi, the legendary “place of deliberations.” This was where the indigenous Hisat'sinom—descended from the very ancient ones, the Motisinom—and more recent arrivals gathered into pueblo communities and conceived of a new way of living. They rejected the complexity and corruption of older ways in favor of a simpler, humbler, and more difficult life. These principles lie at the core of Hopi cultural values, and they were debated and agreed upon within the walls of places like Elden, Old Caves, and Wupatki Pueblos.

Another theme is the importance of grand geographical features. Two mountains dominate both the landscape and the region's cultural history. First in importance is the San Francisco Peaks. Four distinct summits atop a dormant stratovolcano, the peaks form an eminence massive enough to create its own weather and high enough to be seen from more than 100 miles away. For eight or nine months of the year the peaks are capped with snow. On many days they are covered with clouds, even when the surrounding sky is clear. Summer thunderstorms are born here, coming to life in the early morning as tiny breaths of white clouds at the mountaintop and maturing in the afternoon into dark, booming thunderheads that envelop and drench the surrounding countryside.

At least 14 nearby American Indian groups, including the Yavapais, Havasupais, Hualapais, Navajos, Zunis, Acomas, Mohaves, Hopis, Utes, and Apaches, regard the San Francisco Peaks as a holy place and relate it to their origins and cultural vitality. To the Hopis the peaks are Nuvatukya'ovi, “place of the high snows.” To the Navajos they are Dook'o'os-ííid, “shining on top,” a term that also refers to high-elevation snow. In Hopi belief, the Katsinam, spiritual guides and helpers of crucial importance to the world, reside here. Some 700 years ago a Hisat'sinom painter rendered the silhouette of the peaks on the plastered wall of a kiva at Homol'ovi Pueblo, near modern Winslow, Arizona. The painting shows that the peaks were as significant to ancient peoples as they are to modern ones. It would be difficult to overstate the religious, meteorological, and geographical importance of this mountain to the region. The San Francisco Peaks are not just another mountain; they are a transcendent earthly feature and a sacred spiritual home.

Sunset Crater, the other important landform in the area, has an entirely different character. Relative to the San Francisco Peaks, it is a mere bump on the landscape, rising only 1,100 feet above a terrain of cinders and lava. Squat and rounded, this small volcano at first seems indistinguishable from hundreds of similar cinder cones in the surrounding San Francisco volcanic field. But like the peaks, Sunset Crater is vastly more than a physical feature. It is an actor in its own right, a presence whose behavior forever changed the world of ancient local residents. When Sunset Crater finished erupting sometime in the late 1000s CE, it left behind about two billion tons of fresh lava, scoria, and cinders. The eruption was a visually overwhelming, noisy, and no doubt terrifying spectacle that destroyed a large stretch of the landscape, killed wild plants and animals, ruined crops, and drove people from their homes.

It also brought new possibilities. After the eruption, formerly uninhabited areas sprang to life as people adjusted to cinder deposits that, according to some archaeologists, actually brought agricultural success. The cinders acted as a mulch, retaining precious moisture, and they made growing seasons longer by absorbing the sun's heat. Archaeologists traditionally have split the past of the Flagstaff area



Figure 1.2. Aerial view of Sunset Crater, looking southwest.

into “pre-eruption” and “post-eruption” periods, and for good reason. Whether through ecological transformation or coincidence—the debate goes on—the eruption heralded a time of rapid cultural change and florescence.

Another persistent theme is the way early people of the Sierra Sin Agua incorporated and adapted elements of many different cultural traditions into their lives. In the past, as it is today, the Flagstaff area was a geographical and cultural crossroads, a point of contact for people and ideas. Years ago archaeologists tended to put great effort into identifying which of several named “cultures” the people of a given area belonged to. They found it difficult to fit the ancient people around Flagstaff into any one category. In the 1930s and 1940s they vigorously debated whether any of the existing labels, such as Anasazi, Hohokam, and Mogollon—archaeological cultures recognized to the north, south, and southeast of the Flagstaff area, respectively—could accurately be applied to the people of the

Sierra Sin Agua. Some researchers offered new cultural categories such as “Sinagua” and “Cohonina” in an attempt to capture the distinctiveness of local architecture, pottery, and other cultural traits.

Today archaeologists no longer ponder the appropriateness of such classifications, but they still have many questions about the origins of local peoples and the ways in which they moved about, interacted, and changed. What seems clear is that the Hisat’sinom living around the San Francisco Peaks both shared and altered the cultural patterns of their neighbors. They sampled generously from the traditions of others throughout the region, reinventing and recombining cultural elements into unique and eclectic styles that were repeated nowhere else. Only in the Flagstaff area can one admire the architecture of a Chaco Canyon–esque great kiva, perhaps adopted from ancestral Pueblo people in northwestern New Mexico, while standing alongside a Hohokam-style ball court, with its origins in present-day southern Arizona.

Two final and related themes are those of endurance and resilience. From an archaeological perspective, this region has witnessed virtually all the major transitions and developments in the human history of the American Southwest. People began living here as early as at any other place in the Southwest. The most ancient inhabitants date to Paleoindian times, beginning at least 13,100 years ago. When major climatic and environmental changes came at the end of the Pleistocene geological epoch, local people responded in much the same way their counterparts did elsewhere in the Southwest. During the subsequent Archaic period, they changed their technologies and strategies for hunting and food collecting, moving with the seasons to take advantage of the full range of possibilities offered by the Sierra Sin Agua's varied environments. Eventually people adopted agriculture, although it arrived here especially late—not until around 400 CE, or nearly 2,500 years later than in surrounding regions.

After the people became farmers, their populations grew and their cultures changed rapidly. The eruption of Sunset Crater seems to have accelerated these changes. By the mid-1100s, large communities, sophisticated religious systems, far-flung trade relationships, social hierarchies, and territorial boundaries had appeared in the Sierra Sin Agua, paralleling developments in some other corners of the Southwest. In the early 1200s, people began to leave their communities, a process that continued until the century's end. The reasons they left remain elusive, but some combination of worsening climate, exhaustion of natural resources, and social conflicts seems a plausible explanation. Few Native people have lived permanently in the heart of the Sierra Sin Agua since then, although many have traveled through the area over the centuries, sometimes leaving offerings to the memory of Hisat'sinom who once lived here.

Throughout all the changes, a human presence on the general landscape appears to have been continuous—no major gaps exist in the sequence. Native people have endured in this place for more

than 130 centuries, surviving and adapting as their world changed around them. The transformations have included climate shifts and major extinctions of large game animals at the end of the Pleistocene; pulses of nearly unbearable heat and drought during the Archaic period; cold spells, droughts, and floods during the farming centuries—not to mention an unexpected volcanic eruption—and an invasion by Europeans and their plants, animals, diseases, technologies, and ideas. Resilience and the ability to adjust with the circumstances were the keys to endurance. The same propensity to adapt in ancient times surely served people well during more recent times of stress. People in and around the Sierra Sin Agua represent true survivors. They have always drawn on the wisdom—and the mistakes—of earlier traditions, remembering and building on older ways to chart new courses forward in the face of environmental and social changes.

In this book we explore these common themes by addressing a wide variety of subjects. Given the vast sweep and complexity of thousands of years of human life in the Sierra Sin Agua, our inherently fragmentary and incomplete stories cannot be tied together into a neat, linear narrative. Instead, we sketch a broad outline of what we currently understand about the ancient past in this place. The following chapters include both anthropological and Native views, often tacking back and forth between scientific knowledge and cultural meaning. This is as it should be. In a place where events of the past are so intimately connected to people of the present, it would be impossible to separate the two.

Christian E. Downum is a professor of anthropology in the Department of Anthropology at Northern Arizona University and former director of the NAU Anthropology Laboratories. He has conducted archaeological research in the Sierra Sin Agua since 1982, mostly at U.S. national parks and monuments. He also serves as archaeological advisor to the Footprints of the Ancestors project, an intergenerational learning program that teaches Native American youths about the ancient places of the American Southwest.