

## Public architecture as performance space in the prehispanic central southwest

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### ABSTRACT

Public or religious architecture in non-state societies has traditionally been interpreted as integrative, an assumption that has limited the ability of archaeologists to study religious change in these settings. We argue that considering such structures within their local historical contexts offers a better approach to understanding diversity in religious architecture. This study examines great kivas, large public or religious buildings in the prehispanic U.S. Southwest, as potential performance spaces, using structure size to estimate audience capacity relative to community size. We compare circular great kivas present along the southern edge of the Colorado Plateau with rectangular great kivas used in the Transition Zone to the south between the 11th and 14th centuries CE. The two traditions share certain similarities, and some great kivas in the area where the two traditions meet appear to be “hybrids.” However, examining great kivas as potential performance venues in relationship to the surrounding settlements suggests that the social roles played by rectangular and circular great kivas followed notably different historical trajectories. Although settlement size increased in both areas, circular great kivas became less restricted and more accessible through time, while the latest rectangular great kivas were probably less accessible and more exclusive than their forebears.

### 1. Introduction

Historically, discussions of large-scale public architecture in non-state societies, including the prehispanic southwestern United States, have focused on the potential of those spaces to serve an integrative function for communities, a perspective grounded in a larger view of religious or ritual activities as necessarily functioning to hold communities together. Such approaches often draw on anthropological and sociological traditions including the work of Durkheim (1915) and Rappaport (1971a, 1971b, 1979, 1999), among others (see, for example, the treatment of religion in discussions of scalar stress [Coward and Dunbar, 2014; Johnson, 1982]), to suggest that public spaces served as venues for public performances that transmitted messages about community membership, naturalized social relationships within the community, or generated feelings of *communitas* (e.g., Bandy, 2004; Crabtree et al., 2017; Houle, 2009; papers in Lipe and Hegmon, 1989; Rautman, 2015:54–55). The construction of public spaces, in and of itself, is often taken as evidence for the existence of shared communal identities and of efforts to bridge social divisions among small social units. In this traditional view, constructing public spaces equates to constructing communities.

Like many other authors in recent years (e.g., Chamberlin, 2006;

Fogelin, 2003:149, 2008; Fowles, 2004, 2013; Plog and Solomoto, 1997; Walker, 1998), we find the assumption that public spaces were or should be solely integrative to be highly problematic. Such an approach severely limits our ability to examine the range of possible social contexts in which past religious performances were carried out and hinders explorations of religious change and the potential role of religion in social transformation in non-state societies. Abandoning the assumption that religious and public architecture was uniformly integrative and, instead, adopting a historical and comparative approach allows us to examine potential temporal and spatial variability in the social roles played by large scale architectural space. In taking a historical approach, we follow other scholars (e.g., Beck et al., 2007; Fowles, 2005; Pauketat, 2011:236–238; Pauketat and Alt, 2005; Schachner, 2001) who have argued that events and individual agency would have been critical in the archaeological past as in the present. Building on this work, we argue that public religious spaces in “small scale” societies as much as in ancient states are best viewed as venues of complex social negotiations existing within and contributing to local histories rather than simply spaces that served to hold communities together.

With its diverse religious spaces, rich body of archaeological data, and well-defined and high-resolution chronology, the U.S. Southwest is particularly amenable to studies that explore the intersection of ancient

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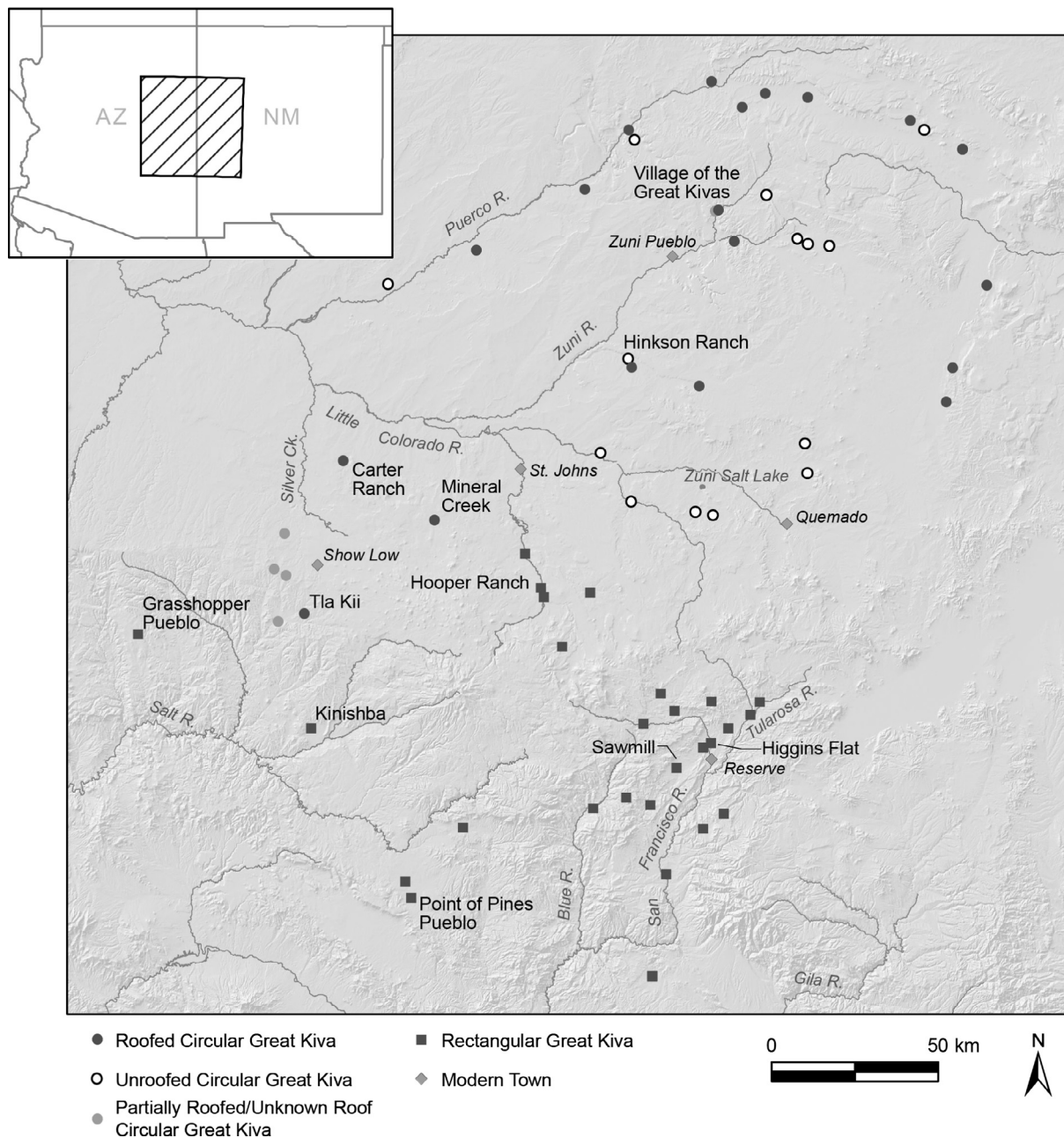


Fig. 1. The study area, showing the spatial distribution of the great kivas listed in Table 1. Again, note that these include only great kivas for which measurements are available, not all known great kivas.

religion and local demographic histories. We focus here on a form of religious architecture common throughout much of the northern and central Southwest: the large, typically semi-subterranean, spaces that archaeologists label “great kivas.” With their very substantial size, formalized or standardized features, and otherwise clear separation from more generalized domestic space, great kivas are among the most clearly public structures in the prehispanic Southwest, and the enduring interpretation of these spaces has been that they are fundamentally “integrative.” As we will show here, the long-lived great kiva architectural tradition was characterized by distinct local forms and, importantly, distinct local historical trajectories of development even in areas characterized by frequent interaction and broadly shared material cultural traditions. Specifically, we focus on the adjacent (and partially overlapping) traditions of rectangular and circular great kivas in the Transition Zone of east-central Arizona and west-central New Mexico and along the southern Colorado Plateau from the 11th into the 14th

centuries CE (Fig. 1), a period broadly characterized by settlement growth across the entire study area. We examine great kivas as venues for performance and in particular are concerned with how the physical properties of great kivas framed or constrained such performance.

Performance has been employed as a theoretical concept in the social sciences in a variety of ways, including in discussions of identity as embodied and acted out (Butler, 1993; Goffman, 1959), in speech act theory (Austin, 1962), and in studies focusing specifically on theatrical aspects of events and institutions (e.g., Geertz, 1980; Turner, 1986). We follow recent studies by Inomata and others (Inomata, 2006; papers in Inomata and Coben, 2006) in discussing the theatrical elements of performance—that is, performance as meaningful, interpretable action carried out by performers in front of an audience of spectators—and on architectural space as framing such performances. In focusing on performers and spectators, we have a number of aims. An underlying assumption in the integrative emphasis long applied to large-scale

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