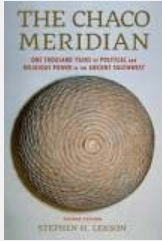


# The Chaco Meridian: One Thousand Years of Political and Religious Power in the Ancient Southwest.

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**Author:** Stephen H. Lekson

**Publishing:** *The Chaco Meridian: One Thousand Years of Political and Religious Power in the Ancient Southwest.* By Stephen H. Lekson. Second edition Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2015. 255 pages, index, bibliography, appendices, photos and illustrations, 5 ½ x 8 ½ paperback, \$34.00 (Kindle edition \$23.49)

**Reviewer:** Kimberly Field

Chaco Canyon speaks to us. The enigmatic Great Houses, those massive rabbit warrens of dark rooms, T-shaped doorways and the myriad of circular kiva structures must mean something. Visitors know—they just know—something was happening here, if only they could divine what it was. For some, the ten-minute slide presentation in the visitor's center is enough. Let's just get a cold drink, and get back on the teeth-rattling gravel road. But for others, the canned ranger spiel is not satisfying. They want to know more about this place, about the Chacoan phenomenon.

At its height from about AD 1020 to 1125, Chaco was the seminal event of Southwestern history. Chaco Canyon, deservedly so, is a UNESCO World Heritage site and the subject of countless scholarly tomes, lavish coffee table photography books, and archaeological tours. With iconic Great Houses including Pueblo Bonito (the largest building in America until the nineteenth century), Chetro Ketl and Pueblo Alto in "Downtown Chaco," the canyon has been the focus of endless fascination for over a century. For most of that century, archaeologists have argued over what Chaco is.

Archaeologist Steve Lekson is not one to run away from an argument. In 1999 he upended the archaeological apple cart with his controversial (and soon to become classic) *The Chaco Meridian*. He's back with a second edition that even pulls Colorado into the fray.

Lekson knows Southwestern archaeology. He began investigating Chaco Canyon in the 1970s, first as a shovel bum and then as a scholar. He earned his doctorate from the University of New Mexico, spent a decade with the National Park Service, worked at the Arizona State Museum and the Museum of New Mexico and was director of the Crow Canyon Archaeological Center in Dolores, Colorado. Currently, he is curator of archaeology at the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History and a professor of archaeology at the university. He's been a principal investigator on archaeological projects throughout the Southwest, including at Chimney Rock, a National Monument near Pagosa Springs in southern Colorado.

If Lekson has been bouncing around the Southwest, you should hear what he thinks folks did a millennium and a half ago!

Lekson's original premise in *The Chaco Meridian* is simple. In Pueblo prehistory, there were three sequential and historically related "capitols": Chaco Canyon, Aztec Ruins (both in New Mexico) and Paquime

(Casas Grandes) in the Chihuahuan desert of Mexico. He maintains that the “biggest, weirdest, most interesting sites in the Southwest in every archaeological era were on this line of longitude—107° 50' to 108°.” (1 and 99) In this second edition of *The Chaco Meridian*, Lekson doubles down on his theory by pushing the Chaco Meridian hundreds of miles north and south as well as centuries back in time.

During the past fifteen years, the movement from Chaco north to Aztec has become accepted as fact by most Southwesternists. Lekson writes: “If a practitioner denies Chaco-North-Aztec, I dismiss him or her as hopeless.” (98) The rest of the theory is hotly debated.

According to Lekson, things start to get weird on the eastern edge of Chaco Canyon around AD 500, in Basketmaker III times, at a site called Shabik'eschee. There's nothing to see here; during Basketmaker times, people lived in pit houses partially below ground. There is no beautifully executed masonry, no pottery littering the ground, but something unique was happening at Shabik'eschee. Lekson points out that this anomalously colossal Basketmaker III site differs from any other site in the region during its time period. Largest? Check. Weirdest? Check. On the meridian? Check.

He suggests that the inhabitants of Shabik'eschee moved north along the meridian in the eighth century to establish the expansive Pueblo I sites of Sacred Ridge and Blue Mesa south of Durango, Colorado. Major construction projects in the area in the past decade led to archaeological investigations that revealed an unexpectedly large population and a shockingly violent end to these substantial towns. Lekson writes that the settlements were not defensive and “the people were not anticipating war.” He believes, “the killings were an inside job, the brutal climax of social and political tensions that ended [its] history—an event surely remembered for generations.” (104)

Again, largest, weirdest and on the meridian? Bingo. On to Chaco Canyon.

Lekson has long argued that a political hierarchy with ties to Mesoamerica ruled at Chaco Canyon. The massive Great Houses were palaces, built to impress and intimidate by nobles bent on ruling a sprawling vassal state. Over the past century of intensive research, many archaeologists have resisted ascribing such a political structure to Chaco Canyon, preferring to characterize Chaco Canyon as a locally grown, peaceful place of ritual in a relatively simple society of farmers and craftspeople much like the modern Pueblos found in Arizona and along the Rio Grande in New Mexico. (171)

Turn off the Carlos Nakai flute music. Lekson's view of Chacoan history is darker than the more egalitarian model we see in current Puebloan society. Lekson postulates that Chaco was a place of tight, top-down control punctuated with acts of brutality and violence. He cites today's Puebloan legends of the “White House,” which Lekson says refers to both Chaco and Aztec. In his *A History of the Ancient Southwest*, Lekson describes White House as a place or metaphor for events and bad memories that ultimately turned Puebloan peoples away from class societies. (Lekson: 2009).

Lekson asserts that by AD 1125 the elites of Chaco Canyon decamped seventy miles north to Aztec, in New Mexico on the north side of the San Juan River, very close to the present Colorado border, where they built the preeminent city in the northern San Juan region and dominated a far-flung geographic area in southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah with a population of over 30,000 people. The Aztec familiar to visitors today is no more than a quarter of the mammoth site. He further theorizes that as Aztec declined in the thirteenth century, its rulers (make no mistake, Lekson believes they were indeed rulers) moved south along the meridian to Paquime. Ultimately, Lekson traces the meridian south to Culiacán in Sinaloa and to the time of European contact. (166)

*The Chaco Meridian* is a serious scholarly work, but Lekson's clear, jargon-free prose laced with silly puns makes it accessible to casual readers. He explains how ancient peoples could have engineered a north-south meridian before the days of transits, GPS, or even the concept of longitude. It's not complex. All one has to do is find north and prolong the line by visual alignment. (125) His supporting evidence includes architecture, pottery, macaws, Navajo and Hopi ethnographic accounts, and historical information including early Spanish accounts of the Southwest. (149) Extensive chapter endnotes expand and riff on the ideas presented, and are not to be missed.

Persuasive as Lekson is, not all Southwest archaeologists are onboard with the Chaco Meridian. Some dismiss Lekson's alignments as happy coincidence rather than intentionality. In 2005, writer Brian Fagan called the Chaco Meridian "an archaeological myth." (170) Lekson acknowledges that the meridian is somewhat "smearly" and that adaptation to the local landscape sometimes trumps the meridian. (143)

Archaeologists will argue about *The Chaco Meridian* and students will study it for years to come. For those who want to break out of the visitor's center and expand their understanding of the ancient Southwest, *The Chaco Meridian* will be a valuable reference and a delightful read.

### **Reviewer Info:**

*Author Kimberly Field writes about more recent history in The Denver Mint: 100 Years of Gangsters, Gold and Ghosts. Back in the deep recesses of her own history, she earned a degree in archaeology.*

The Chaco Meridian book. Read 9 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. In this return to his lively, provocative reconceptualization of ...Â Lekson's lifelong thesis is that the great centers of Southwestern power relocated along a precise and culturally significant north-south axis over the course of about a millennium. He's made headway: several of the moves are no longer significantly contested, while the final leg was deep into what's now Mexican drug-cartel territory, and not a great place for archaeological evidence-gathering.Â An absolutely fascinating perspective of the roles and influences of the Chaco culture upon the larger prehistoric Anasazi of the American southwest. I think Dr. Lekson may be onto something with his meridian theory.