Chimney Rock and the Ontology of Skyscapes: How Astronomy, Trade, and Pilgrimage Transformed Chimney Rock

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.1558/jsa.v1i1.26954

Keywords: Chaco Canyon, animism, ontology, pilgrimage, Great House pilgrimage

Abstract

Because of its architectural style and excellent masonry, the Great House of Chimney Rock in southwestern Colorado has been identified as one of some 225 outliers of the Chaco Regional System. Located just below the spectacular double rock towers, the Great House is set in a dramatic and unique skyscape containing a number of sight-lines to extremes of the Sun and Moon. Once considered important as a calendrical station, which communicated astronomical information southward to Chaco Canyon, the Great House may have been primarily important as a place for viewing the juxtaposition of the gods of earth and sky, a theophany similar to that of darshan of India. This paper proposes that the initial identification of a number of skyscapes as horizon calendars and calendrical stations should be reconsidered in the perspective of animism and alternate ontologies. Construction of the Great House may have been initiated by the local community and accomplished with the help of masons from its closest neighbour the Great House of Salmon. The area appears to have become a pilgrimage centre in its own right, not under hegemonic control of the powerful elites of Chaco Canyon. Rejection of the Chacoan influence is indicated by the construction by the local community of a structure that restricted entry to the area of the Great House. The decline of Chimney Rock as a pilgrimage centre sometime after 1093 AD was accompanied by the abandonment of the Salmon Great House, the breakup up of a trade network, and out-migration to the Taos Pueblo.

Downloads

Download data is not yet available.

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Chimney Rock National Monument is a protected archaeological site with limited access through tours only from May 15 through September 30. There is no entry fee at the Monument; tour fees covering these “expanded amenities” are the only fees. All tours begin at the visitor cabin where fees are collected. Guests then drive in their own vehicles to the high mesa. Only people on tours may drive to the mesa top. The drive is 2 1/2 miles up a steep, winding gravel road to the upper parking lot (7,400 feet elevation), where both Guided Tours and Audio-Guided Tours begin. The ancient structures Chimney Rock finds you visiting your cousins, Jane and Michael, in Connecticut. Nearby is a huge stone house with turrets, walled terraces, and a square tower that looks like a chimney. Windows are boarded up and vines and bushes are growing all over. Your cousins tell you that Chimney Rock (for that's the name of the house) is rumored to be cursed and that people who have gone in have never come out. When you scoff at the idea that Mrs. Bigley, the last owner, died and put a spell of some sort on the house so her cat could live there without anyone bothering it, your cousins dare you to Chimney rock and the ontology of skyscapes: How astronomy, trade, and pilgrimage transformed chimney rock. Journal of Skyscape Archaeology 1(1), 39–64. Oosterbeek, L. 1993. Gruta dos Ossos – Tomar – Um ossário do Neolítico Final. Boletim Cultural da Câmara Municipal de Tomar 18, 10–27. Oosterbeek, L. 2004. Megaliths in Portugal: The western network revisited. In G. Burenhult (ed.), Stones and Bones: Formal disposal of the dead in Atlantic Europe during the Mesolithic–Neolithic interface 6000–3000bc , 27–37. Oxford: Archaeopress. Oosterbeek, L. & Cruz, D. 1985.