

# Evidence of Animistic Practice at Casas Grandes: Marine Shell and the Walk-in Well

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The settlement of Casas Grandes occupies a liminal space between the realm of Mesoamerica and Southwestern Puebloan society, exhibiting characteristics typically associated with both cultures. Located in present day Chihuahua, Mexico, Casas Grandes, also known as Paquime, was a bustling hub of activity and trade by the time of the Medio period, which spanned from 1200 to 1450 AD.<sup>1</sup> During the Medio period, Casas Grandes was at the peak of its wealth and influence, with trade routes spanning thousands of kilometers from the rainforests of what is today southern Mexico to the massive civic center of Mesa Verde in southern Colorado. The Medio period is also the time during which a mysterious phenomenon occurred where broken marine shells were amassed in an enormous hoard, known as the shell hoard. The shell hoard, this paper argues, is an important key towards understanding the worldview of Casas Grandes and how the city fit itself into that worldview.

Since the first published findings in 1974 by renowned archeologist Charles C. Di Peso, the purpose of the shell hoard has been debated hotly among scholars. Di Peso, who excavated less than half the city, uncovered a grand total of 3,909,096 shell artifacts.<sup>2</sup> Of these millions of shell artifacts found, 2,914 pounds, or 3,819,664 objects were discovered in just two adjacent interior rooms in Building 8, and it is this mass that comprises the shell hoard (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> It cannot be overstated that both the size and nature of the hoard are at this point in time unique within both the Mesoamerican and Southwestern regional contexts. Of the contents of the hoard, 3,740,308 of the artifacts Di Peso classifies as “beads,” these being defined as perforated shells. An overwhelming majority of these perforated shells belong to the genus *Nassarius* and are common in the shallow waters of the Gulf of California, 400km away. This paper argues that Di Peso’s classification of these perforated shells as “beads” is not accurate, postulating an original theory, as well as examining the previous theories that have been used to explain the presence of a quantity

of shells more than five times greater than any other shell hoard in the region.<sup>4</sup>

Di Peso argued that the shell hoard represented the major source of industry for Casas Grandes and believed that the city served as a processing plant: accepting the raw shells; having a large number of slaves or lower class workers under the direction of a few elite managers work them on site; then passing the finished shell ornaments along through an extensive trade network to serve Mesoamerican mercantile needs. Di Peso goes so far as to say that the structure of Building 8 is indicative of its nature as a shell-working facility. He claims that a low wooden covering or ceiling, discovered during excavations, represents a multi-level operation where slaves or workers were stationed on the floor above and worked the shell they pulled up from below through holes in their wooden floor (Figure 2). He speculated that the Toltec civilization established Casas Grandes as a trade outpost for the explicit purpose of distributing shell, though this theory was later definitively disproven due to more advanced dating techniques that firmly placed both civilizations thousands of years apart.<sup>5</sup>

There are several inconsistencies that arise with Di Peso’s theory. The first is that there are very few shell-working tools at Casas Grandes, and none were found accompanying the hoard. There appear to be several small workshops spread through the settlement of Casas Grandes, but even if both members of every single family in the entire settlement did nothing but work shell, the hoard still represents too great a mass to process; also, no debris or unfinished shells were found accompanying the hoard, and only forty-eight broken or unfinished shell artifacts were discovered at Casas Grandes.<sup>6</sup> This represents a sharp contrast with the well-documented Hohokam shell workshop at Snaketown, where excavation reports state that “all parts of Snaketown, whether house-fill or trash, regardless of age, are saturated with shell manufacturing residue of various kinds.”<sup>7</sup> Di Peso’s

<sup>1</sup> Christine S. VanPool and Todd L. VanPool, *Signs of the Casas Grandes Shamans* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2007), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Charles C. Di Peso, John B. Rinaldo, and Gloria J. Fenner, *Casas Grandes: Fallen Trading Center of the Chichimeca 6: Ceramics and Shell* (Flagstaff: The Amerind Foundation, Inc., with Northland Press, 1974), 385.

<sup>3</sup> Di Peso et al., *Casas Grandes*, 401.

<sup>4</sup> Michael E. Whalen and Paul E. Minnins, *The Neighbors of Casas*

*Grandes: Excavating Medio Period Communities of Northwest Chihuahua, Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 238.

<sup>5</sup> VanPool and VanPool, *Casas Grandes Shamans*, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Di Peso et al., *Casas Grandes*, 405.

<sup>7</sup> Michael E. Whalen, “Wealth, Status, Ritual, and Marine Shell at Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, Mexico,” *American Antiquity* 78, no. 4 (October 2013): 627.

explanation of the architectural context of the shells has also been called into question, with later authors theorizing that the “low ceiling” was actually a cupboard, vault, or other means of compartmentalizing the shell hoard.<sup>8</sup>

An adaptation of Di Peso’s original theory was later formed by Ronna Bradley who posited that the hoard represents a stockpile for trade.<sup>9</sup> This assertion is also problematic because the shells found in the generally accepted Casas Grandes trade network, whether perforated or in the form of finished beads, are more refined than those found in the hoard, and only a tiny fraction of the sheer mass of the hoard ever entered that network. The hoard is almost entirely comprised of low quality, perforated *Nassarius* shells. These are not trade-quality goods, and few examples of this species are found in either the neighboring communities or anywhere within the Casas Grandes trade network. Thus, the extant data does not support the theory that the Casas Grandes shell hoard was accumulated for the purposes of mercantile trade.

An alternative theory that has gained great favor and is the most commonly cited explanation for the Casa Grandes shell hoard has been the prestige goods model. This model dictates the use of certain luxury commodities symbolically associated with cultural values and religious principles. This model is typically employed to explain concepts of social hierarchy and a justification for the use of power by the elite class. Elites do not retain exclusive control over these symbolic luxuries, but distribute them among themselves and to certain members of the lower class to establish or reinforce beneficial alliances. These goods also act as physical manifestations of the elite’s wealth and power and would typically be worn or displayed publicly to enhance one’s social status. This model is prone to instability and usually is believed to occur as a transitional stage of an attempt to consolidate political power on the part of a few extremely wealthy individuals competing for the largest share, and once this power is consolidated these individuals usually abandon the prestige model in favor of a more stable form of social control.

The problems with applying this model to Casas Grandes are numerous. One reason why the prestige goods model has persevered is that it has been used with great success to explain behaviors and relationships in recent and contemporary anthropological case studies, but there is shockingly little agreement among archeologists as to what evidence could be used to signify this model’s use in the past. The presence of luxury goods is not enough to indicate the model’s use, so it would seem the presence of a prestige goods-based economy

is indicated by the nature of social and political interactions. This makes it seemingly impossible for the model’s use or presence to create a sound archeological record, and therefore this theory must go unsupported by physical proof. A lack of evidence leads to the same inconsistencies that seem to disprove Di Peso’s theories. In a prestige goods model, one would expect to find the item of prestige being traded with surrounding neighbors and important trade partners to cement and bolster relationships, and *Nassarius* shells are highly uncommon in both settings. If a central tenet of the prestige goods-based economy is social esteem and the visual presentation of wealth and power, how does this relate to the shell hoard? There is no reasonable way to present or wear several tons of shell, so of what use, within this model, is that massive pile of wealth to the person who cannot display it and does not seem to have distributed it?<sup>10</sup> It has been speculated that the shell hoard could have been assembled as a sign of chiefly status, or construed as the divine sanction for the owner’s rule.<sup>11</sup> Such a theory begs the question of how this hoard was displayed, since—when the legitimacy of the ruler is questioned—the visible proof of the justness of a ruler’s claim is often of supreme importance. A below-ground, interior room with limited access would seem to be a poor place to make a grand statement of a ruler’s legitimacy or of divine approval for his claim to power.

This author’s theory explains the shell hoard in terms of the relationship of Casas Grandes to the settlement’s natural environment. Casas Grandes, arguably more than any other site, was a city obsessed with the precious and limited resource of water. The people of Casas Grandes had substantially altered their surrounding environment through the use of an extensive irrigation system that flowed through individual homes and living spaces and also fed the terraced fields ideal for agriculture (Figure 3). As the scope of Casas Grandes agriculture grew to include new domesticated plants and fields of agave, the early irrigation ditches were widened into canals, and the role and importance of water to the community took on new religious significance.

Water, like many limited resources, was regarded as sacred to the people of Casas Grandes, as is clear from recently excavated Casas Grandes ceramics, offering caches at nearby water sources, as well as the evidence of ethnohistory that the people who lived there had a complex and coherent cosmological system that emphasized and revolved around the preciousness of this resource. In this system, which is similar to that shared by many Mesoamerican cultures, the universe is split into three worlds. The upper world, the sky, is home to celestial beings, whereas the middle world, the

<sup>8</sup> Ronna J. Bradley, “Networks of Shell Ornament Exchange: A Critical Assessment of Prestige Economies in the North American Southwest,” *The Archeology of Regional Interaction: Religion, Warfare, and Exchange Across the American Southwest and Beyond, Proceedings of the 1996 Southwest Symposium*, ed. Michelle Hegmon (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000), 167.

<sup>9</sup> Bradley, “Shell Ornament Exchange,” 167-187.

<sup>10</sup> Some of the confusion surrounding how the prestige goods model is used at Casas Grandes may be the fact that there is some evidence to suggest that finely worked shell ornaments could have been employed as prestige goods throughout the Southwest, but this is a separate issue from the roughly perforated *Nassarius* shells that comprise the shell hoard.

<sup>11</sup> Whalen, “Wealth, Status, Ritual, and Marine Shell,” 631.

Earth's surface, is the home of humans. The underworld, however, is closely associated with water and tied to supernatural serpent imagery. There is considerable dissent within the literature whether this supernatural serpent represents the Southwestern *avanyu*, or the Mesoamerican quetzal serpent, though both are associated with this watery underworld within their respective cultures.<sup>12</sup> The horned serpent is sometimes shown at Casas Grandes with feathers or a scaled fish tail, which further obscures the exact identity of this supernatural being.<sup>13</sup> These supernatural serpents feature heavily in Casas Grandes ceramic designs and are clearly distinguishable from earthly snakes.<sup>14</sup> Frequently shown in pairs, the horned serpents are used in rock art in the Casas Grandes area to mark the locations of springs.<sup>15</sup> There is also a horned serpent effigy mound at Casas Grandes, which is putatively a site of public religious ceremony. The rituals that took place at the horned serpent mound are speculated in the literature to be related to fertility and renewal, these being "symbolized" by the main focus: rain and plant growth, further linking the horned serpent to water.<sup>16</sup> While other groups employed the horned serpent motif, it is clear from the archeological record that this was simply one form of snake to the surrounding southwestern communities, while to Casas Grandes the horned serpent was a ubiquitous part of Medio-period iconography.<sup>17</sup>

Horned serpents are creatures inhabiting the liminal space between water and sky, conceptually uniting the celestial and underworld realms. It may be that these serpents represent the goal of the traditional shamanic journey, which may have been an attempt to influence these powerful beings. There are also depictions of shamans wearing horned serpent headdresses, as well as turtle totem necklaces, linking their shamanic powers to the acquisition of water and rain.

The elite shaman class limited access to religious deities by becoming the exclusive intercessors on behalf of the larger community; this fact is one of many pieces of evidence confirming water to be a focus of religious fervor and may explain the limited access to the shell hoard as well. Atop Cerro Moctezuma, the mountain adjacent to Casas Grandes, is an unexcavated site consisting of a design comprised of

low masonry walls in the form of a conch shell.<sup>18</sup> The site is almost certainly ceremonial in nature, and it is believed to be the ritual center where shamans would attempt to influence celestial beings on behalf of the community; the site served as a conduit for communicating with the upper world. As opposed to the public ritual space of the Mound of the Cross or that of the Horned Serpent Mound, this site was a private ritual space with limited access and a strong connection with water imagery due to the form of the marine shell outline.

This paper argues that the correlating space for communicating with the underworld is the walk-in well. Hidden in the very center of Casas Grandes, the walk-in well was a subterranean water source with extremely limited access and was a site surrounded by ritual and symbolism. To enter the walk-in well, one had to step over a human skullcap embedded in the floor, and then continue down nineteen stairs to the secluded pool (Figure 4). Precious objects were strewn about the stairs, including copper, turquoise, as well as numerous bones belonging to both animals and humans. The presence of effigy vessels in the form of subterranean animals, denotes these artifacts as ritual offerings to the underworld. These are accompanied by shell artifacts, including both whole and perforated *Nassarius* shells, some of which bear decorations. Along with rarer and more valuable species, finely worked shell jewelry was also found on the stairwell, as well as shells inlaid with turquoise, heightening an association with water. The stairwell is also the location of what Di Peso refers to as "the altar piece," a unique artifact comprised of a polished strombus shell inlaid with 148 pieces of turquoise (Figure 5).<sup>19</sup> The extremely fine quality of the piece, finer even than the other mosaicked shells found in the walk-in well, Di Peso argues, marks it as a potent religious tool, though he can only guess at its exact meaning. The walk-in well was a significant religious site and closely connected with water rituals and symbolism in both its nature as a conduit to the underworld and the offerings left there. Conceptually, the walk-in well may have been the location where water emanated for the Casas Grandes community, in tangible form as a sacred well and as the location where prayers for rain on the part of shamans were answered.

<sup>12</sup> Supernatural serpents play a key role in the symbolic systems of many prehistoric groups, though the precise associations of these serpents seem to vary from group to group. Casas Grandes also represents the horned serpents in a unique fashion, with forward-pointing horns and with a negative outline of white, which are artistic conventions not seen elsewhere, even among their trading partners or closest neighbors. These artistic differences are interpreted as representing different worldviews regarding the horned serpent, and it is believed the serpent served very different roles within their respective societies as a result. VanPool and VanPool, *Casas Grandes Shamans*, 119.

<sup>13</sup> Quetzalcoatl is frequently depicted as a feathered rattlesnake, but no horned serpent image at Casas Grandes has a rattle. Some scholars refer to the horned serpent as a "plumed serpent," seeking to link this figure closer to the Mesoamerican tradition, though its depiction at Casas Grandes is so unusual and unique as to isolate it from both Southwestern and Mesoamerican associations.

<sup>14</sup> Earthly snakes are often faithfully represented, and they are distinguishable by species and are modeled so as to emphasize the sinuousness of their movements and the coils of their bodies. Supernatural serpents have structural differences, such as horns or feathers, and are more angular in their depictions. VanPool and VanPool, *Casas Grandes Shamans*, 124.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>18</sup> It has been speculated that Cerro Moctezuma represents the cosmic mountain to Casas Grandes, though this theory is, at the present time, difficult to prove or disprove. VanPool and VanPool, *Casas Grandes Shamans*, 132.

<sup>19</sup> Di Peso *et al.*, *Casas Grandes*, 515.

Several of the ceramic effigies found in the walk-in well were “decapitated”—their necks purposefully broken. Such a treatment reveals the presence at Casas Grandes of the belief in animism, which, as this paper asserts, relates directly to the purpose of the shell hoard. Animism, the belief that inanimate objects are, in fact, animate with a soul, a life cycle, and spiritual power, is a practice often used to maintain or rejuvenate the sacred nature of a location. These “animate” objects live out their ritual function, usually “feeding” their spiritual power to the location so it retains its sacred nature and can act as a portal between worlds. When these objects have run the course of their “lives”, they are ritually killed, symbolizing that their power is no more, and a new, fresh, “alive” resource is brought to serve the same purpose and take the “dead” object’s place in maintaining the cosmic order. The ceramic effigies fulfilled their purpose, lived out their lives, and were “killed.” This paper hypothesizes that shells served the same function.

The walk-in well is one of the few places in Casas Grandes where unperforated, whole *Nassarius* shells can be found. These specimens are shells that are still “alive,” whole, and feeding their power, born of their association with water, to the walk-in well site. When these shells’ energies were spent, they were killed by ritual perforation, though the objects themselves were too precious to discard. To throw away the spent shells would have been disrespectful of the life it gave to bring water to Casas Grandes, or to bring the prayers of the shamans for rain to the horned serpents. The shells were therefore kept in what is essentially a vault, with limited access out of respect for their sacrifice and ritual use, and they probably continued to be sacred objects even in death. In this context, quantity was more important than quality since the entire mass of shells giving power to the walk-in well had to be replaced as their predecessors’ “lives” ended. Thus, though there are a number of rare and worked shells at the walk-in well, the primary source for the well’s sacred power were the imported *Nassarius* shells, which, upon their loss of energy, were “killed” and gradually formed the enormous mass of the shell hoard.

This theory would explain many aspects of the shell hoard that the previous theories could not. Since the quantity and presence of shells was the primary concern, less desirable *Nassarius* shells were able to fill this function rather than more costly and desirable species. Shells from the sea, being associated with a large body of water, would have had a stronger tie to water than less spiritually powerful freshwater shells. No other community had a walk-in well of this nature that has been discovered: the lack of *Nassarius* shells outside of Casa Grandes is logical because they have no function outside of this specific religious context.

Di Peso’s argument that the perforated *Nassarius* shells are beads was also fraught with difficulty. The perforations are inconsistent with the bead-making practices found within

the Casas Grandes trade network and Di Peso struggled to explain the supposed methods by which they were strung.<sup>20</sup>

The argument that the shell hoard represents the aftermath of a tradition of using water-related items as an animistic tool solves or explains many of the problems and inconsistencies that plagued previous models for explaining the shell hoard. By means of the shells, shamans, who were the intercessors of the community for the purpose of encouraging rain or ensuring the rainy season, strengthened the line of communication or connection with the underworld and the water beings that dwelled there. The nature of working with a site that remains less than half-excavated means that conclusions can be changed in an instant by a new discovery or unexpected finding. However, with the evidence currently available, an animistic theory represents a more thorough interpretation of the relics and their place within Casas Grandes culture than the previous models.

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<sup>20</sup> Di Peso et al., *Casas Grandes*, 393.

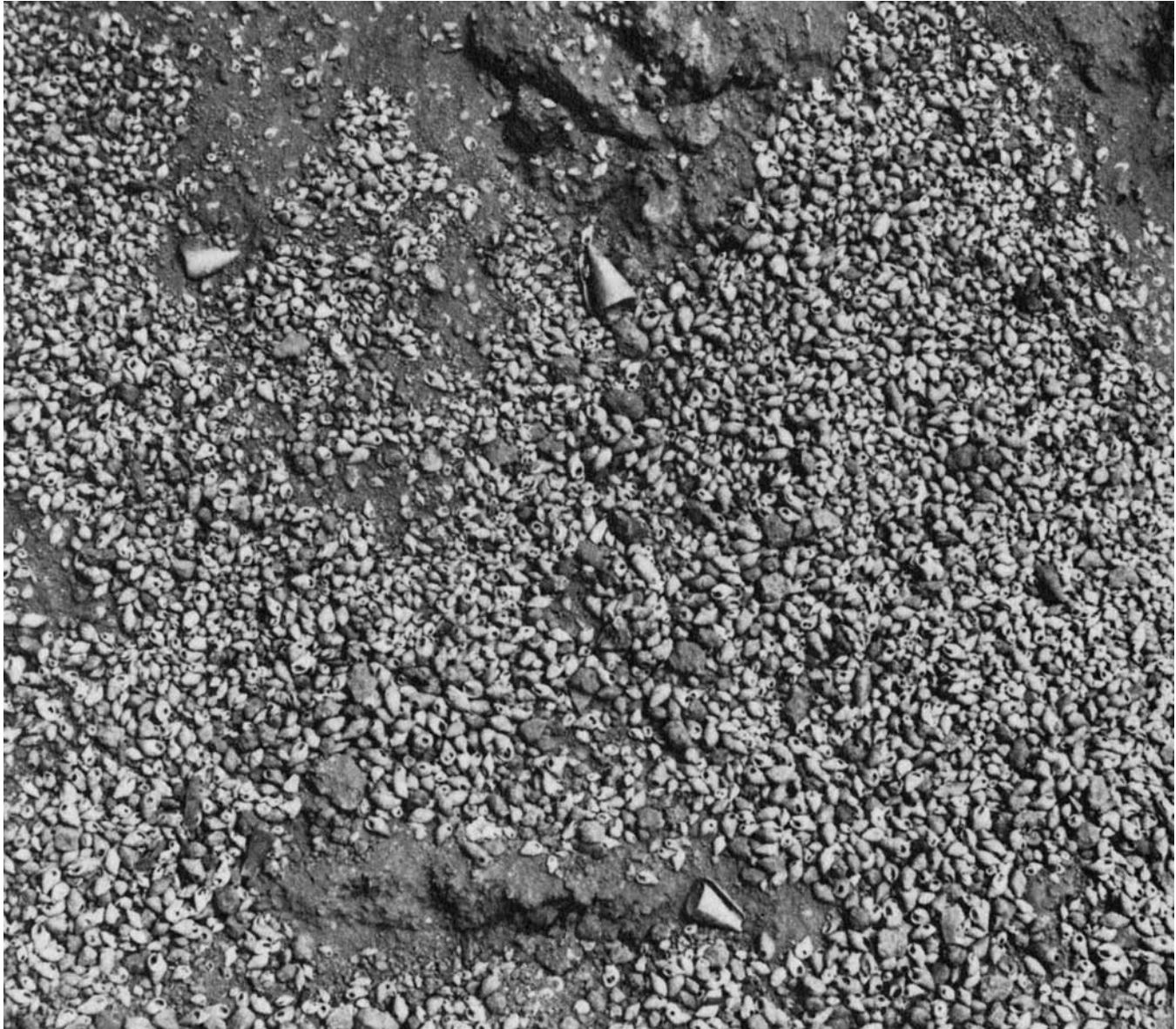


Figure 1. A small portion of the mass of the shell hoard. Charles C. Di Peso, John B. Rinaldo, and Gloria J. Fenner, *Casas Grandes: Fallen Trading Center of the Chichimeca 2: The Medio Period* (Flagstaff: The Amerind Foundation, Inc., with Northland Press, 1974), p. 502. Image courtesy of the Amerind Foundation.

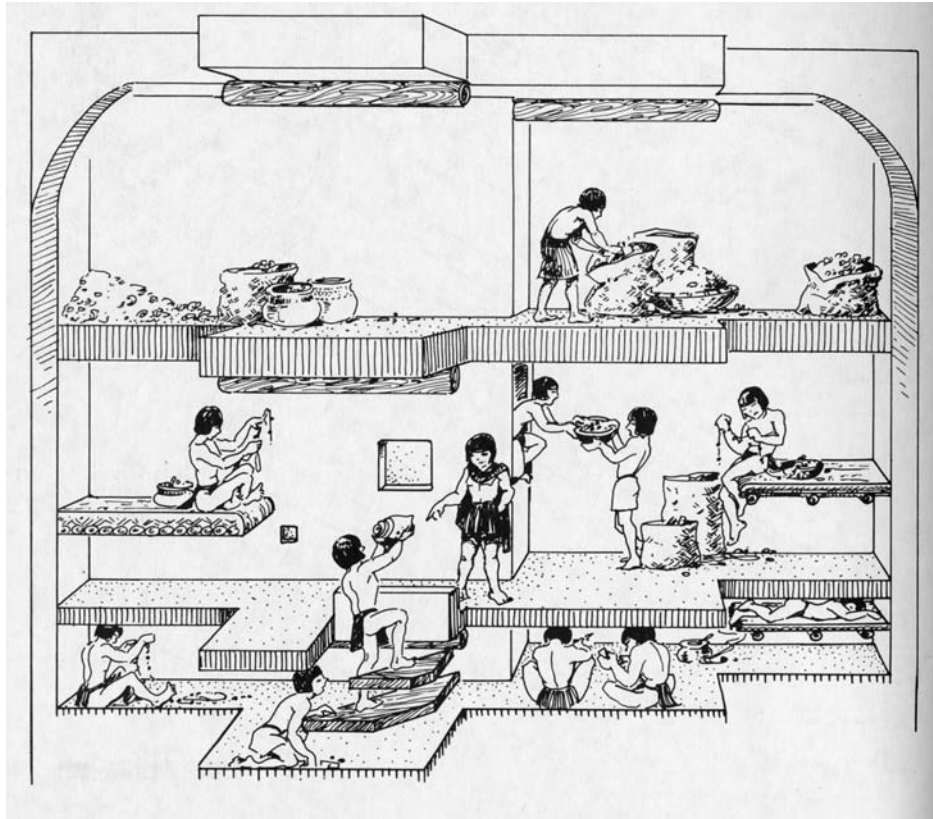


Figure 2. Di Peso's interpretation of the use of room 15-8. Illustration by Alice Wesche. Charles C. Di Peso, John B. Rinaldo, and Gloria J. Fenner, *Casas Grandes: Fallen Trading Center of the Chichimeca 2: The Medio Period* (Flagstaff: The Amerind Foundation, Inc., with Northland Press, 1974), p. 424. Image courtesy of the Amerind Foundation.

Figure 3. [below] Beneath Casas Grandes a web of channels carried water through the settlement, linking cisterns, wells, irrigation channels, and potable water. The walk-in well is notable in that it is the sole source of water in the settlement not connected to this network. Charles C. Di Peso, John B. Rinaldo, and Gloria J. Fenner, *Casas Grandes: Fallen Trading Center of the Chichimeca 2: The Medio Period* (Flagstaff: The Amerind Foundation, Inc. with Northland Press, 1974), p. 349. Image courtesy of the Amerind Foundation.





Figure 4. A diagram of the structure of the walk-in well. Image redrawn by Jennifer Clary after Charles C. Di Peso.

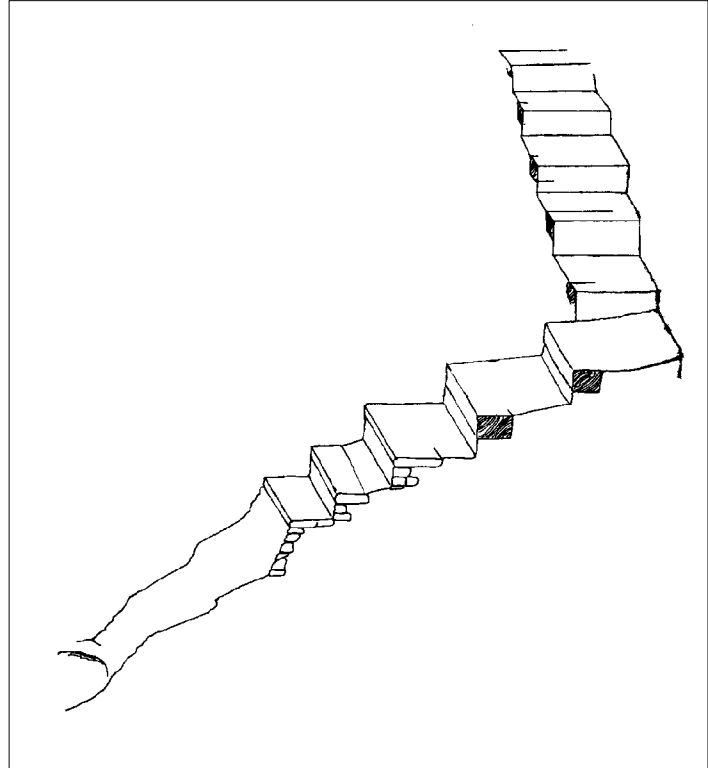


Figure 5. [below] The Altar Piece. Illustration by Alice Wesche. Charles C. Di Peso, John B. Rinaldo, and Gloria J. Fenner, *Casas Grandes: Fallen Trading Center of the Chichimeca 6: Ceramics and Shell* (Flagstaff: The Amerind Foundation, Inc., with Northland Press, 1974), p. 575. Image courtesy of the Amerind Foundation.

