

THE BATTLE OF ASTIALAKWA

CONFLICT ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE SPANISH RECONQUEST IN NORTHERN NEW MEXICO

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At 1:00 am on July 24, 1694, a Spanish military force of 120 presidial soldiers and militiamen gathered with 100 of their Puebloan allies in the obsidian-black darkness of the northern New Mexico night. The journals of their general, Governor don Diego de Vargas, record that they assembled at the base of a soaring mesa with the stated goal of making offensive war against their enemies, the natives of Jemez Pueblo and their partisans, “because of the rebellion and backsliding of the Jemez nation.” The Jemez were said to be “rebels against the royal crown” for refusing to comply with the governor’s orders and their repeated assaults on neighboring pueblos. In anticipation of the impending attack, approximately 530 Jemez people and their supporters fortified themselves in a mesa-top village known as Astialakwa, which had recently been constructed on the cliffs that now towered more than 300 meters above the Spaniards’ heads (Hendricks 2002:190; Kessell et al. 1998:281–284, 323–325).

When the morning star appeared, Vargas gave the signal to his soldiers to begin climbing the mesa. Splitting his force into two units, the majority of the Spaniards ascended from the south while their Puebloan allies (who hailed from the Keresan-speaking villages of Zia, Santa Ana, and San Felipe) circled around to the north. As the light of dawn broke, the opening volley from a Spanish harquebus cracked the morning silence, and Jemez warriors rushed to defend their village against both wings of the attack. The battle raged for hours, with the residents of Astialakwa raining rocks and arrows down upon the Spanish-Keres troops as they clawed their way up the steep and narrow trails that provided access to the mesa top. Eventually the fortifications surrounding the refuge were breached and the Jemez were caught in the middle of the pincer strategy of their aggressors. The defenders retreated into the village, barricading themselves inside their houses, where they continued to engage the enemy. The Spaniards set fire to the rooms of Astialakwa, burning at least four men and one woman alive. With the village in flames and their escape routes blocked, seven Jemez warriors leapt from the cliffs, choosing death over surrender. As the day wore on, the Spaniards secured the village room by room. By 4:00 pm the fighting had ceased, the muskets

cooled, and the village was once again quiet. The Spanish-Keres militia had carried the day. All told, 84 Jemez people perished in the battle at Astialakwa, while the Spaniards took 361 native women and children prisoner. (An additional 81 Jemez people reportedly escaped the grasp of their foes.) Following the battle Vargas awarded the spoils to his Keres allies—cattle, sheep, goats, and maize—before ordering the remaining structures of Astialakwa to be “burned and reduced to ashes” (Kessell et al. 1998:325–337).

Archaeology and the Battle of Astialakwa

Between 2001 and 2007, the Pueblo of Jemez Department of Resource Protection and I collaborated on a research project that sought to document the archaeological remains of Astialakwa (Figure 1) and two other ancestral Jemez villages that were constructed and occupied during the Pueblo Revolt-Spanish reconquest era of 1680–1696 (Liebmann 2006, 2008). Our investigations included non-invasive methods of architectural documentation at Astialakwa, a site that retains many of its original standing walls to this day, along with intact foundations of numerous rooms and roomblocks that are still visible on the modern ground surface. During the course of these investigations we found many conspicuous signs of the battle that occurred in July of 1694, including remnants of Spanish armor (links of chain mail and thin copper plating that may have been used for protection); defensive walls and fortifications erected around vulnerable areas of the mesa top; piles of fist-sized granite cobbles stacked at trailheads (which served as ammunition for the slings of Jemez warriors); charred plaster and corn that bore witness to rooms set ablaze during the battle; and clear signs of the razing of the village after combat hostilities had ceased. Furthermore, we documented broken pottery scattered in abundance throughout the architectural units of Astialakwa with no circumscribed midden area, a pattern that likely has its origins in the violent destruction of the village in 1694.

While the material remains of the battle are striking, at first blush the archaeology of Astialakwa might seem easy to dismiss as yet another “handmaiden to history” (Noel Hume 1964), offering few new details about this conflict that were

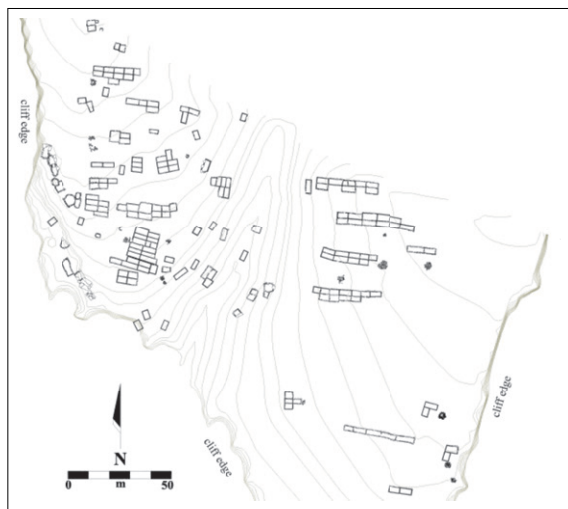


Figure 1: Plan view of Astialakwa architecture; 50 cm contour interval.

not previously and readily apparent in the documentary record. Yet this ignores one of the crucial contributions that archaeology can provide to studies of this and other historic-period armed conflicts: a diachronic perspective. Because histories of military engagements tend to be framed in terms of discrete, short-term, temporally bounded events, it can be easy to overlook the longer-term social factors that often play critical roles in determining the strategies, tactics, and ultimate outcomes of these battles. Furthermore, archaeology can aid in documenting the experiences of participants who may be un- or under-represented in historical accounts of these battles. Such is the case of the seventeenth-century Jemez, who did not record their versions of July 24, 1694 in writing. Material culture imparts critical new information regarding the factors that shaped this conflict which are not contained in the documentary record, ultimately resulting in a richer, more nuanced understanding of the Spanish Reconquest of New Mexico.

Architecture and Society in the Wake of the Pueblo Revolt

The Battle of Astialakwa was the culmination of a series of events set in motion 14 years earlier, when more than 30 Pueblo villages, speaking six different languages, united in a coordinated uprising known as the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. On August 10 of that year native warriors killed 401 Spanish colonists and Franciscan missionaries, raided Hispanic settlements, and laid siege to the colonial capital of Santa Fe. The surviving Spaniards and their partisans fled the northern Rio Grande region as the Pueblos ushered in a dozen years of native independence. In the wake of the rebellion many of the Pueblos, including the Jemez, destroyed their former mission facilities and erected new villages as part of a revitalization movement that sought to rid their world of Spanish influences and revive traditional, pre-Hispanic prac-

tices (Liebmann 2008; Liebmann et al. 2005). Tree-ring dates and documentary evidence suggest that between 1680 and 1683 the Jemez constructed two new pueblos, Patokwa and Boletsakwa, occupying each of them until through the return of the Spaniards in 1692–93. A comparison of the architecture of these villages with that of Astialakwa reveals new insights into the social practices and military strategies of the Jemez people in the years, months, and weeks leading up to the 1694 battle.

Patokwa and Boletsakwa (Figure 2) share many similarities in architectural form: both consist of long, narrow roomblocks defining two proportionally large plazas, a layout identified as the “linear plaza” form in the American Southwest (Cameron 1999:207). Linear plaza pueblos are frequently utilized in construction resulting from large-scale, well-organized communal migrations. They are typically a product of pre-construction planning, developing out of work activities in which many rooms are built at the same time by erecting two or more parallel axial (long) walls first, then subdividing the space between them with multiple (shorter) cross-walls to form individual rooms. This technique, termed “ladder-type” construction (Creamer et al. 1993:16), results in rooms of similar size and walls with shared azimuths (Liebmann 2006:277). It is a very efficient method of building a new pueblo quickly, and suggests that inhabitants would have moved into these new villages in large groups rather than one family at a time (LeBlanc 1999:65). Ladder construction requires coordination of labor above the household level (Cordell 1998:27; Kidder 1958:63) because it is typically undertaken by communal work groups rather than individual family units. As LeBlanc notes, “this was group-effort construction,” resulting from strong centralized leadership. It is also an archetypal defensive pueblo layout (LeBlanc 1999:56–66).

It is ironic, then, that the village of Astialakwa—a pueblo known to have been rapidly constructed for defensive

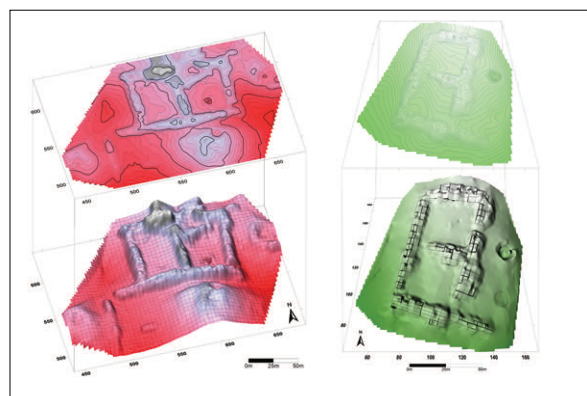


Figure 2: Topographic maps of Patokwa (left) and Boletsakwa (right); 20 cm contour intervals.

purposes—displays such a markedly different architectural layout from that of its immediate predecessors. Astialakwa was built by the Jemez people who left Patokwa and Boletsakwa between December 1693 and July 1694. The remains of construction debris and stockpiles of masonry scattered throughout the village suggest that many of its rooms were still under construction at the time of the battle (Liebmann 2006:300–304). The irregular shapes of the simple biflagged stonework used in building the walls attest to the rushed nature of construction in preparation for the impending attack. Furthermore, patterns of wall bonding and abutment reveal that Astialakwa's roomblocks were built in suites of one to four rooms at a time, rather than as coordinated projects in which all adjoining rooms were constructed together. The resulting dispersed layout of the village (with discrete groups of rooms exhibiting highly variable floor areas scattered across the mesa top) allows us to infer that the construction of each architectural unit occurred independently of the others, and was carried out by relatively autonomous work groups. Together all these data indicate that construction was organized on the level of individual households and not by a centralized community leader or group of leaders. Finally, the noticeable lack of circular, subterranean kivas at Astialakwa—the chambers in which much of Pueblo communal religious activity is conducted—is a conspicuous divergence from the architectural patterns of its predecessors, Patokwa and Boletsakwa (as well as that of virtually every other ancestral Jemez village constructed between 1350 and 1694).

What then are we to make of the conspicuous differences in site layouts among these villages? And what do these architectural changes tell us about the 1694 battle between the Jemez and their enemies that we didn't know already? In short, we can infer that the centralized leadership which characterized the building of the linear plaza, ladder-constructed pueblos in the early 1680s was absent in the following decade. As the spring of 1694 gave way to summer, Jemez people began to anxiously move their families and belongings up the precipice of the mesa. There each family hastily constructed a few rooms for their protection. There appears to have been no overarching authority directing the construction of Astialakwa in the months leading up to the battle; rather, the strong communal leadership that had characterized the Jemez in the early 1680s had given way to a decentralized system of authority in which each family took care of themselves. The result was a village that was not architecturally optimal for defense. This lack of centralized leadership likely had repercussions on the battlefield as well, as the Jemez were ultimately unable to stave off the colonizers that they had successfully routed 14 years earlier.

When the Spaniards and their allies appeared in the valley below Astialakwa on that ominous night in late July 1694, some of these houses were still under construction. They would never be completed. Still, archaeology enables those

yet-unfinished walls to talk, and the story they tell allows some insight into the strategies and tactics employed by their builders on that fateful day in 1694. Clichéd but true, history is often written by the winners, and as a result we are regularly left with myopic accounts of military conflicts. Archaeology can (in some cases) help to redress this one-sidedness by representing voices long silenced both on the battlefield and in the documentary record. In the case of the Battle of Astialakwa, archaeology helps to build a more complete picture of the Jemez side of this important conflict, affording a glimpse into their social world in the years and months leading up to the attack that is not contained in historical documents.

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