

Scott August

Ancient Native Flutes in the American Southwest: An Overview

Dixie Archaeology Society Meeting

Dunford Auditorium, Val Browning Learning Resources Center

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Scott August is a premier musician and teacher of Native American flutes. His recordings are found in National Park Association centers around the country and he has won a NAMI (Native American Grammy) award. He has written books of Native American and Pre-Puebloan Anasazi flutes, teaches at the Zion Canyon Flute School in Springdale, Utah and gives lessons on Skype as well as at his own flute school in Santa Fe, NM. Further, he does research on the earliest archaeological findings of native flutes in the Southwest US.

The presentation is an Anglo-European view of the flutes played by the pre-Puebloan Anasazi peoples from the Basketmaker III to the Pueblo III periods, approximately 500-1300 ACE. The photographs, most in black and white, are primarily from original archaeological articles and reports from around the turn of the twentieth century. Many of the photographers are as of yet unknown.

The first location of interest is Broken Flute Cave in the Prayer Rock District near the Chuska Mountains in New Mexico. This was a Basketmaker III, pre-Chacoan site dated around 620-670 ACE. The flutes were found in one of fifteen caves excavated there by Earl Morris in 1931. Among the six flutes found in the cave, two were severely broken and four were intact. They were made of box elder wood, ranged from 68.5 to 73.5 cm, or 27 to 29 inches long and were in remarkable shape for their age. Morris in fact played one of the flutes onsite. This flute, named flute "B", was tuned to a Bb major pentatonic scale not too different than the scale played by Native American flutes of today. This does not mean all ancient flutes played the same scale, since each one differs in length, finger hole placement and bore size. In addition, feathers from stellar jays, sapsuckers and other birds were tied tightly to the body of the flutes near the blowing end. The shafts of the feathers were pointed away from the stream of air so that the looser tendrils ruffled and spread apart as the flutes were played. This visual effect may have been a representation of the breath of prayers rising upwards.

The second site of interest is Mummy Cave in Canyon del Muerto. It was occupied in the post-Chacoan, Pueblo III period around 1250 ACE. The cave contained a ruin three stories high and a large midden, or refuse pit, outside. The density of occupation and lack of access suggest a time of turmoil and violence, with evidence of cannibalism among various groups as the Chacoan hegemony declined. An American Museum of Natural History expedition in 1923 excavated the site and discovered in the midden a desiccated mummy with a massive amount of grave goods; shell beads, an atlatl, buckskin clothing, baskets and a blanket covering the body. Across the body was placed a flute entirely encrusted by white beads. Despite its location in a midden, which was a common practice, the deposit of rich material suggests that this was a major burial of an important person and that the flute was a sign of leadership and importance.

Flutes were found at several other sites including White Dog Cave, Pictograph Cave, and Tsegi Canyon. The richest burial in the Southwest, though, contained a significant number of decorated flutes. It was unearthed in 1898 at Pueblo Bonito in Chaco Canyon by the Talbot and Fred Hyde Expedition led by Richard Wetherill and George Pepper. The story of the Hyde Expedition is interesting in and of itself. It involves the inheritors of the Babbitt's Best Soap fortune (the Hydes), an ambitious archaeologist (Pepper), and a Western rancher (Wetherill) whose interests converged at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. One of the results of their collaboration was the discovery of the largest cache of flutes found to date in the Southwest.

The discovery at Pueblo Bonito marks the high point of Chaco's power, occurring from 700-900 ACE. Interestingly, the greatest find was located in Room 33 a tiny, low-ceilinged enclosure placed deep within the eight hundred rooms of Pueblo Bonito. Fourteen bodies reportedly were discovered there, two of them in a lower chamber below the false floor. Recent mitochondrial DNA analysis has suggested that nine of the individuals interred in Room 33 descended from a common matriarch in a familial line extending from approximately 800 to 1150 ACE. The bodies and grave goods fall under the jurisdiction of NAGPRA, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, and are not accessible to the general public.

Some twelve thousand turquoise beads, many shell objects from the Pacific Coast and a conch trumpet were buried with the two lower bodies, individuals described by archaeologist Steven Lekson as "major dudes." Three hundred ceremonial staffs and paho (prayer) sticks were also discovered. Eight flutes, most of them in the northeast corner of the room, were placed with their blowing end pointing upwards. One in particular had orange, green and black designs painted on its surface and was approximately 69.5 cm or 27.4 in. long; others displayed small raised totems or images of animals carved in relief. The orange green and black flute has since been replicated by modern makers and played by Scott and other performers.

Finally, some evidence such as bell or squash-blossom ends on pre-Puebloan Anasazi flutes might link them to flutes made by the Hopi people in modern times. In the early twentieth century there were two Hopi flute clans, the Drab or Grey Flute Clan and the Blue Flute Clan. The Drab Flute Clan conducted a Flute Ceremony every other year alternating with the Snake Dance. The ceremony involved a long, circuitous procession that terminated at Mishongnovi Spring, a deep pool surrounded by stone steps not far from the Hopi Mesas. Flute priests who sang the sacred songs in a circle, flute players behind them who functioned as a chorus, and male and female children were involved in the ceremony. They sang and played while a gourd in a net was lowered into the pool, bringing water up from a spring at the bottom. Presumably this act evoked the emergence of water needed at the start of the growing season.

According to the existing photographs, the flutes of the Hopi were straight and relatively long, with a bell-shaped flare at the end. They varied in length and finger hole placement and were played side-blown, interdentially, and across the lip of the blowing hole. The result was a cacophony of sound that was likely more percussive than melodic. Archaeologist Byron Cummings described the collective sound as a “weird chant” that probably did not resemble the plaintive, lyrical Native American style flute music of today. This was sound apparently intended for spiritual and ritual purposes, not relaxation and quiet enjoyment.

Many questions followed Scott’s presentation referring to the Zuni use of flutes, the importance of the breath in Puebloan societies and the relationship of song to flute music. Scott then played a short improvisation on a modern replica of a pre-Puebloan Anasazi flute to conclude the talk.