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Explorations in Viejo Period Archaeology at the Vista del Valle Site in Chihuahua, Mexico

Michael T. Searcy
Brigham Young University - Provo, msearcy@byu.edu

Todd Pitezel

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Explorations in Viejo Period Archaeology at the Vista del Valle Site in Chihuahua, Mexico

Michael Searcy and Todd Pitezel

Abstract: Since Charles Di Peso's excavations from 1958 to 1961, there has been little research on the Viejo period (700–1200 A.D.) in the northern Casas Grandes area. As director of the *Proyecto Arqueológico Chihuahua*, Jane Kelley and her colleagues have added significantly to our knowledge of this time period in the southern area where this cultural tradition also flourished. Following her lead, we recently embarked to better understand the Viejo period in the north by excavating at a site along the Palanganas River, just south of the Casas Grandes River valley. This paper reports the initial results of our 2015 excavations at the Vista del Valle site with an emphasis on architecture and site integrity.

Introduction

Over the last three years, we have explored the little understood Viejo period (700–1200 A.D.) in the northern Casas Grandes area of northwestern Mexico. This work was largely inspired by the work of Jane Kelley and her colleagues to the south, and we feel that a session at the 48th Annual Chacmool Conference was rightly dedicated to Jane, whose work in Chihuahua showed us that the Viejo period is an open book. Her dedication and encouragement spurred us to continue in the research she started, and our work reported here is, we hope, just the beginning of one of the next chapters in the long volume on Chihuahuan prehistory to which Jane has contributed.

Our initial work in northwestern Chihuahua included reconnaissance survey in a small area that we suspected had evidence of occupation that preceded the better understood Medio period communities, including Paquimé (Pitezel and Searcy 2013; Searcy and Pitezel 2015). On the first terrace above the Palanganas River, south of where it joins the Piedras Verdes River to form the Casas Grandes River, we identified several sites, most of which appear to be single component Viejo period settlements (Figure 1).

Previous surveys conducted by Whalen and Minnis (2001) in the 1990s, led to suggestions that many Viejo period sites lie beneath Medio period occupations because they found Viejo period ceramics interspersed among Medio period ceramics on top of Medio period architecture. This was later supported during their excavations at Sites 204, 315, and 317 where Viejo period pit structures were found underlying Medio period architecture (Whalen and Minnis 2009:15–17, 29–31). Our limited survey suggests that there are still many single-component Viejo sites that have yet to be discovered. The Viejo period sites that we identified were flat expanses of surface artifacts and looters' pits, which can be the only visible indication of Viejo settlement locations. The work of Kelley and colleagues, as part of the *Proyecto Arqueológico Chihuahua* suggests the same surface manifestation in the southern Casas Grandes region (Kelley et al. 2000, 2001, 2008, 2009, 2012). (See Pitezel and Searcy 2013 for a more in-depth discussion of previous work regarding Viejo period archaeology.)

Vista del Valle Site

After assessing the sites we identified in 2013, we decided to conduct excavations at the Vista del Valle site because we believed portions of it had not been looted. Vista del Valle, approximately 175 m^2, gets its name from its commanding view of the Palanganas River valley from the east terrace above the floodplain, approximately 1 km northeast of the town of Mata Ortiz (Figure 2). It is also at the edge

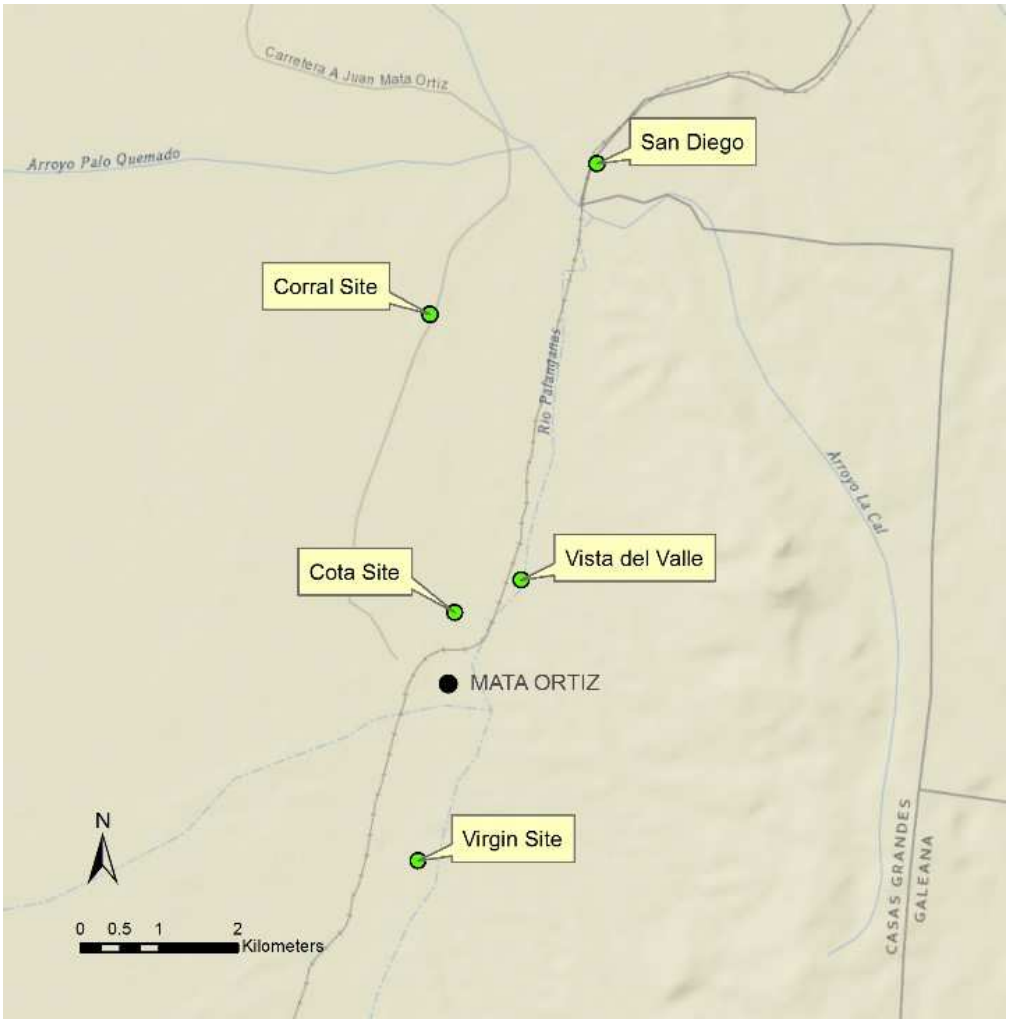

Figure 1. Map of identified sites and modern towns.


Figure 2. Overview of Palanganas River valley from the Vista del Valle site, looking west.

of a large arroyo that local residents call "Los Cables," a name derived from the large balls of industrial steel cable that were placed under the bridge that crosses the arroyo. We estimate that approximately 50–75% of the site has been significantly disturbed or destroyed by looting activities, predominately in the central portion of the site. According to several looters who visited our excavations in 2015, the site has been exploited since the 1950s. Most looters were in search of burials that often include ceramic vessels, the most highly-prized of which are Mimbres Black-on-white bowls. One looter informed us that six Mimbres vessels were once removed from a single burial at the site. Whole ceramic vessels are likely the most valuable items recovered during looting. Nevertheless, surface artifacts across certain areas that have not been looted indicate subsurface integrity.

Our four-week field season with a crew of five graduate students first focused on testing a disturbed area to assess the amount of damage caused by looting, as well as an undisturbed area with surface artifacts to hopefully identify undisturbed architectural features. In all, we identified evidence of five structures (Figure 3). In the first week we excavated a trench (32.0x0.50 m) spanning the undisturbed south end of the site into the most heavily looted area toward the center of the site. An extramural thermal feature and several prepared surfaces were identified. We expanded the test excavation around one of the plastered surfaces toward the south end of the trench and found it to be the floor of a structure that was mostly destroyed by looting. It is inferred that the other plastered surfaces were floors of structures. We also excavated nine shovel test units at 5 m intervals in the undisturbed southeastern portion of the site. Two structures were identified and fully excavated over the next three weeks.

Architecture

The three excavated structures were in varying states of deterioration, in part from sheet flooding (observed on several occasions at the site during excavation) that eroded the walls, floors, and interior features of at least two of the structures. The floors of each of these structures at the south end of the site were 15–20 cm below the ground surface, in contrast to the floors of other structures that were 48–70 cm below ground surface in the central portion of the site.

Structure 1 appeared to be a pit structure, semi-oval in shape and approximately 3 m in diameter (Figure 4). Only a small portion of the plaster floor was found intact at 15 cm below the ground surface. Chunks of hardened mud with stick impressions from the excavation suggest that the structure had a wattle and daub superstructure. The floor assemblage included a metate, likely *in situ*, a *molcajete* (mortar), *manos*, a hammerstone, and a ground stone fragment. A thin, plastered wall lined the northwestern edge of the pit structure, and concentrations of wattle and daub were found along portions of the eastern perimeter. Where plaster was not present within the boundary of the pit structure, the floor appeared dark, in contrast to deposits above and below. A faint concentration of ash near the center of the structure indicated the possible location of a hearth.

One possible posthole was identified in the northwestern portion of the floor of Structure 1. The lack of postholes is comparable to a few structures excavated by Di Peso at the Convento site in the nearby Casas Grandes River valley, with few to no postholes. For example, Structures F and G at the Convento site exhibited an oval shape, approximately 2.5 m in diameter, and lacked evidence of postholes (Di Peso et al. 1974:164–165).

Structure 2 (Figure 5), about 4 m north-northwest of Structure 1, was likely a surface structure because excavations around the exterior western margins of the floor exposed a dark compact surface at the same level as the structure floor. We interpret this exterior dark area to represent a prehistoric use surface. Prominent on the western edge of the structure was a series of postholes that averaged 7.5 cm in diameter, 8.6 cm in depth, and were spaced approximately 25 cm apart. These measurements are consistent with the averages of posthole diameters and distances found at the Convento site (Di Peso et al. 1974:134). The shape and size of structures are also comparable to those uncovered at the Convento site, especially from the Pilon phase (e.g. Pit House B and C) (Di Peso et al. 1974:162–163).

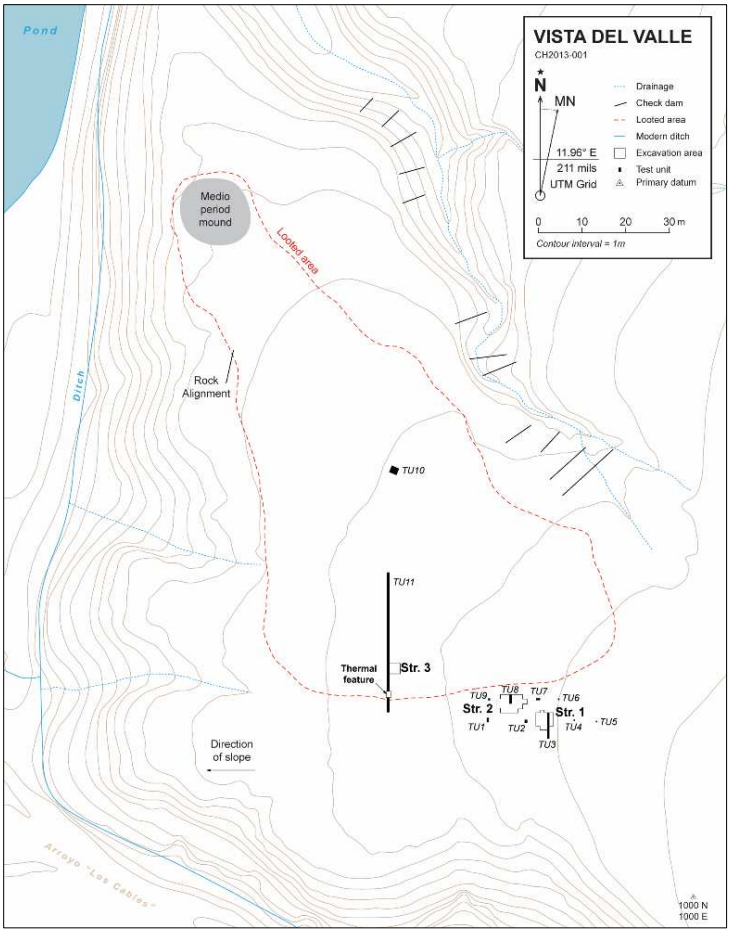

Figure 3. Plan map of Vista del Valle site.

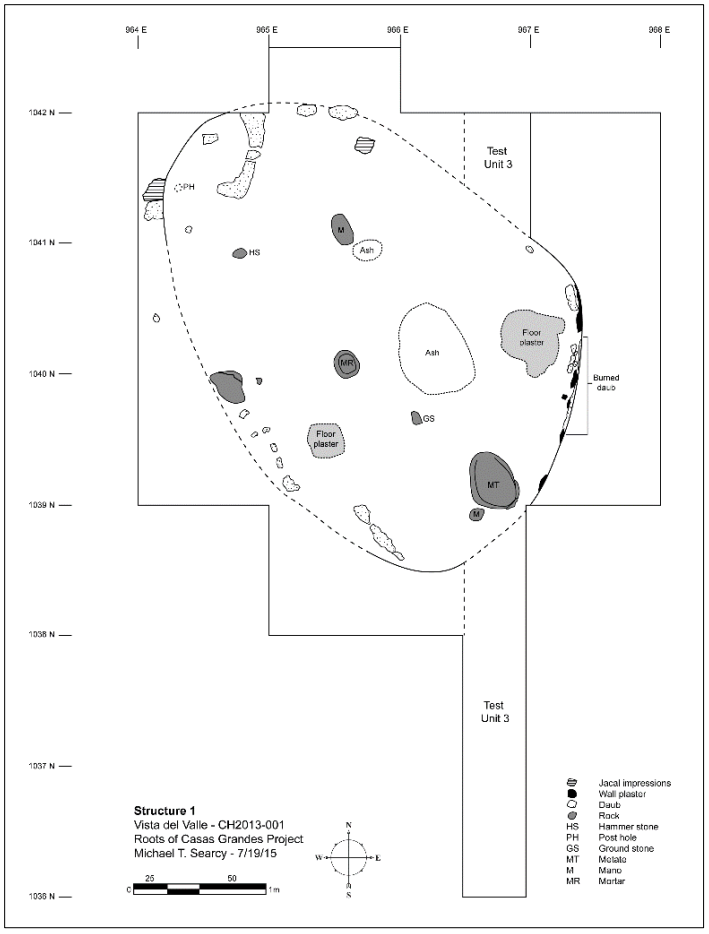

Figure 4. Plan map of Structure 1.

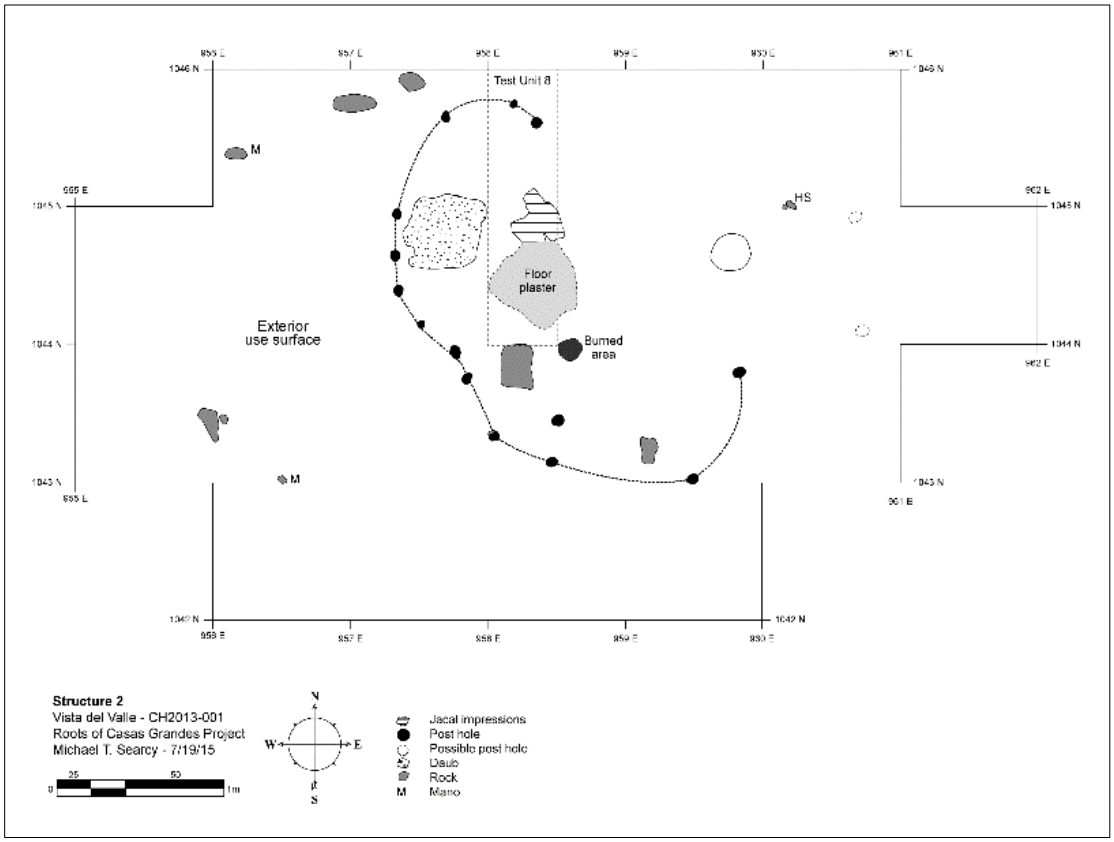

Figure 5. Plan map of Structure 2.

No artifacts were found on the floor, and only a small portion of plaster was located in the center of the structure. The postholes created a partial outline that was semi-oval, much like Structure 1, although the eastern edge was not definable due to the lack of postholes and damage caused by flooding during excavation. Several large concentrations of daub, including impressions of a layer of grasses in hardened mud and small branches or reeds (2–4 cm in diameter) in hardened mud, were exposed during excavation that suggest that this was a jacal structure. Structure 3 was severely damaged due to looting. It was identifiable from a small portion of plastered floor and wall (Figure 6). A concentration of burned maize was found on the floor. The only human remains uncovered during our excavations were found in a disturbed portion of this structure, and unfortunately, they were disarticulated and incomplete from being looted. Portions of the skull, long bones, ribs, and a scapula were recovered. Very little other data was obtained from this structure due to its poor condition.

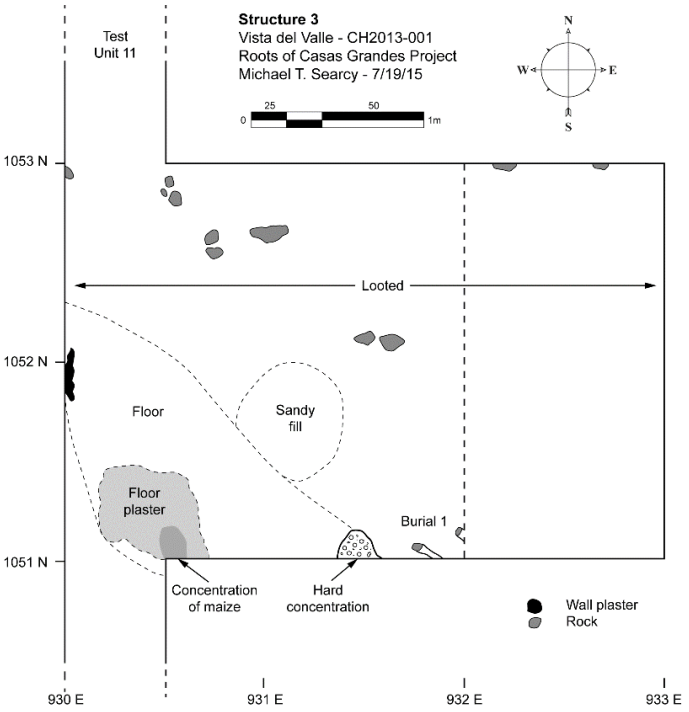

Figure 6. Plan map of Structure 3.

Summary

The limited survey and excavation that we have undertaken thus far demonstrates that there is untapped information in the northern Casas Grandes area. We excavated an apparently undisturbed portion of Vista del Valle and discovered two structure types, use surfaces, and a thermal feature. While the structures were morphologically similar to those found by Di Peso at the Convento site, they were different from those identified in the southern region by Kelley et al. (2012), suggesting possible regional architectural styles. At the time of this publication, we continue to analyze faunal bones, human remains, pollen, and radiocarbon samples. We anticipate that these analyses will shed light on the timing of the structure types and a provisional chronology for the site. We also excavated in a heavily disturbed portion of Vista del Valle. While structure surfaces were identified – one with a concentration of charred corn on it – the degree of destruction and the level of effort extended to this portion of the site indicate that heavily looted Viejo period site areas are not attractive for filling the Viejo period information gap.

Looking Forward

Our work at Vista del Valle was the first specifically targeted Viejo period excavations in the northern Casas Grandes area since Di Peso excavated nearby more than 50 years ago (Di Peso et al. 1974). We envision a long-term research program designed to illuminate the roots of the Casas Grandes Medio period that we believe formed in the Viejo period (Pitezel and Searcy 2013; Searcy and Pitezel 2015). We have identified aspects of Viejo period archaeology that require attention. First, and simply, more survey should be conducted to identify sites that will provide more information on the Viejo period settlement system. Second, more excavation for acquiring information on intra- and inter-site structure and variability is needed to address socio-political organization. Moreover, more datable materials from excavations are needed for addressing the poorly understood Viejo period chronology. Relatedly, and third, the ceramic typology of the Viejo period is in need of revision. It appears that sampling error and the lack of whole vessels has contributed to an inflation of actual Viejo ceramic types. For example, we were shown a funerary urn that was uncovered in 2013 at the Cota Site (CH2013-005). Its various characteristics, including red paint, buff/brown paste color, textured neck, and painted rim, would fit four different ceramic types in the current typology of Viejo period ceramics. We plan to study whole vessels in museums and personal

collections to refine the typology as it now stands. We believe that a refined vessel typology would be useful for refining the typology for excavated sherds from dated deposits, leading to a Viejo period ceramic chronology.

Acknowledgements

Most importantly, we thank Jane Kelley, from whom we have learned so much in the few years we have known her. We know of few other people that have continued to work as persistently as Jane does, even many years after retirement. She was still conducting fieldwork in her late seventies and leading projects in her eighties! She is an example and inspiration to us all.

We would also like to thank our crew, who worked tirelessly, even through monsoon rains. This included Scott Ure (Brigham Young University), Marco Martinez (University of Tulsa), Andrew Fernandez (University of Missouri), Andrew Krug (University of Missouri), Christopher Schwartz (Arizona State University), and Sean Nolan (University of Oklahoma). Scott Ure also led the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle reconnaissance portion of the project from which he created the topographic map in Figure 3. Our crew was undercompensated and perhaps overworked, but they carried on without complaining. We also thank Michael Whalen and Paul Minnis for lending us their field equipment. We owe a debt of gratitude to Julian Hernandez for his unending friendship and for facilitating so many important relationships with local government officials. The work was also made possible by funding through the Rust Fund managed by the Department of Anthropology at Brigham Young University.

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