

MORMON SETTLEMENTS IN MEXICO

By

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THE CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE
MORMON SETTLEMENTS IN MEXICO

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

After Carl Lumhotz returned from his famous exploration in Mexico (1898-1901), he told of the Mormons in these words, "Wherever they go, the Mormons transform waste land into scenes of prosperity, so much so that the Mexicans attribute the success of these indefatigable developers to a gold mine, which they are supposed to wash secretly at night."

One of the first projects the Mormons began, when they arrived in Mexico, was the construction of irrigation canals. Soon other, typical ideas of the Mormon pattern were developed by the Latter-day Saints colonizing Chihuahua, namely, the wide streets, a block having four lots, and poplar trees.

In 1885, the Mormons came to Mexico in desperation. The reason was that many of the members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were being prosecuted by the United States government for plural marriages. Twenty-seven years after their arrival in Mexico, they were forced to flee back to the United States, this time to escape the demands made upon them by the Rebel forces in the Mexican revolution. It was not many months before some of the Mormons returned to the Colonias to find them sacked. Even with the great destruction to their homes and farms, there was little for them to do but start over, as they still had their farmland, which was more than they had in the United States. From their return to the Colonias until the last few years, they have struggled to raise their standard of living, and some have struggled just for existence. It has been during and since the war years that prosperity has begun to reward their long years of hard work.

When I was prompted to look into this group of people I found that one book called: The Mormon Colonies in Mexico, by Thomas C. Romney, 1938, had been written. The author lived in the Colonias until the Exodus of the Mormons at the time of the revolution. He deals to a great extent with the political and spiritual aspects of this group of people. On the other hand, I have devoted a great deal of space to the agriculture of the Colonias, and to the one Colonia of Dublán, since the existence of the

Mormons in Mexico has depended almost entirely upon their tilling of the soil for a livelihood, and Colonia Dublán has been the most diversified in its farming practices and had the most land under cultivation. Inasmuch as the political and spiritual problems have been reported and analyzed by Dr. Romney, little attention has been paid to them in this report.

A great amount of the material presented has been derived from interviews with people who have lived, or are living today, in the Colonias. When one depends a great deal on interviews for his information, there are bound to be inaccuracies, due to the lapse in memory. But an attempt has been made to interview several people on the same subject in order that the most accurate account can be determined. It is unreasonable to think that all errors have been eliminated from the manuscript, but it is hoped that they are not numerous.

From living with these people for six months, a great amount of information was obtained without directed interviews and I wish to thank all of these people for their unknowing assistance. I also wish to express my sincere appreciation to Mr. William Walser, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Memmott, Larry and John Memmott, Mr. Fletcher Memmott, Mr. Anson B. Call, Mr. Claudius Bowman, Jr., Mr. Albert Wagner, Mr. Joel Martineau, Mrs. Nellie Hatch, Mrs. Ella Farnsworth, Mr. Harlo Johnson, Mr. George McClellan, Mr. and Mrs. James Skousen, to mention only a few, for all their hospitality and patience in answering my questions.

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THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE BEFORE THE MORMONS

The scenery of northwest Chihuahua was only slightly differing from that of the regions left by the Mormon colonists. There was a basin and range topography, with its interior drainage, that was most familiar to the Mormons from Utah; there was the Sierra Madre Occidental, with its high plateaus and deep canyons, familiar to the southern Utah and Arizona Mormons.

The basin and range region lies at an elevation of 4,000 to 5,000 feet above sea level, with mountain peaks rising to 6,000 to 7,000 feet. The plains between the generally short, parallel ranges are almost continuous; yet there are scarcely perceptible water divides, which separate the region into a number of areas of interior drainage. The mountain ranges usually follow a north-northwest to south-southeast direction; each range is generally less than 30 miles in length and averages between 5 and 10 miles in width.

The intermontane plains, bolsons, are composed of alluvium and wind-borne materials from the surrounding mountain ranges. The depth of fill in the basins is difficult to judge due to the almost complete absences of deep-water well drillings. In the area of Colonia Dublán alluvial depth is known to be greater than 300 feet, as shown by water well logs. Eight miles up the valley of the Río Casas Grandes at the former Mormon Colonia of Guadalupe, the valley fill is over 1,000 feet deep, as shown by wells drilled to that approximate depth. Other well logs in this same vicinity indicate a ridge of bed rock lying in a north-northwest to south-southeast direction at a depth of about 750 feet below the present valley surface. The composition of the fill is alternating beds of gravel and red or green clays so far as is known from the few well logs. There are too few water wells drilled and too few well logs kept to determine the underground structure. In a number of places a few spurs detached by alluviation rise above the level of the plains. An excellent example is Cerro de Ramos, which can be seen to the northwest from Colonia Dublán.

The east edge of the Sierra Madre rises abruptly, whereas the western portion is gently rising. The greater masses of the mountains are of rhyolites on the higher ridges and intrusive rocks below. The northern section of the mountains is a plateau surface, with the relief in the form of steep-walled canyons and slightly dissected basins, which are separated by low ridges. The plateau surface has an elevation near 7,000 feet above sea level, with peaks to over 9,000 feet.¹

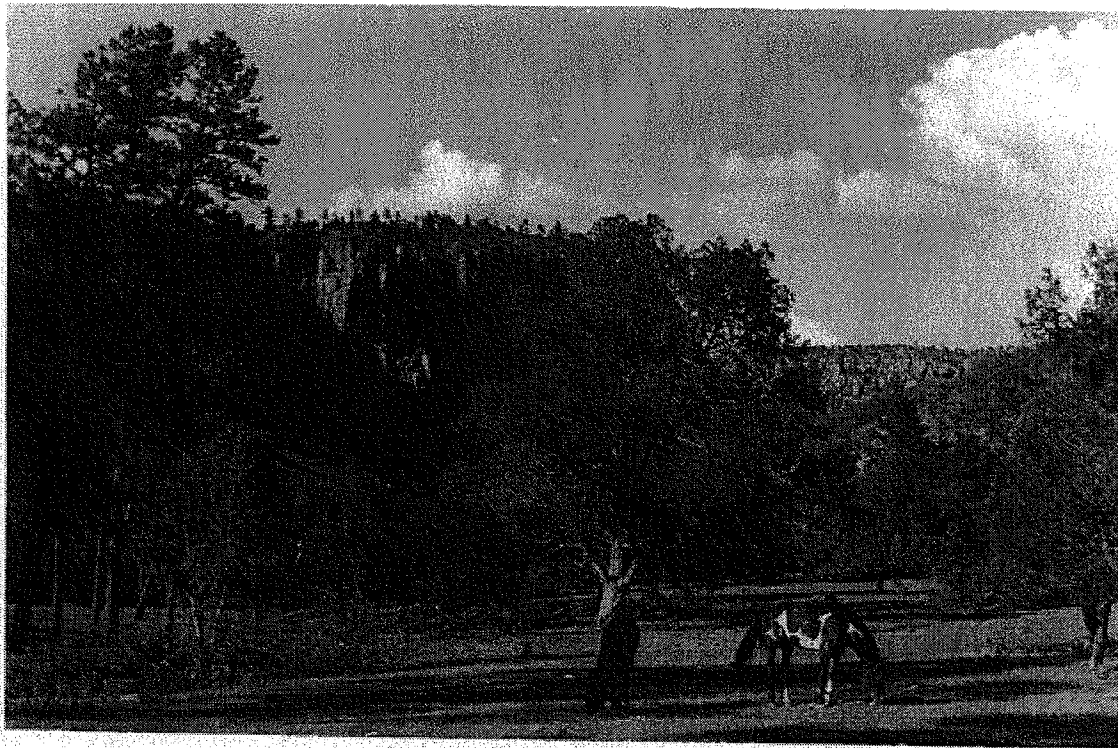


Figure 1: SIERRA MADRE OCCIDENTAL. Piedras Verdes Canyon. One of the few open spaces in this canyon. Elevation about 5,100 feet. .

The general drainage of streams in both the basin and range, and the Sierra Madre regions is in a northward direction. On the east side of the continental divide the water from the mountains flows eventually into sinkholes of the basin region. Laguna de Guzmán is the largest sinkhole in northwest Chihuahua, the water coming mainly from the Río Casas Grandes. On the western side of the continental divide the streams flow northward then reverse their course and flow south and westward to the Gulf of

¹ Brand, Donald, Historical Geography of Northwest Chihuahua, PH.D. Thesis, University of California, 1932, p. 25-27.

California. Most of the mountain streams flow year round, but by the time these streams enter the basin country much of the water has disappeared underground. Only during the rainy seasons, in July, August and September, and several times in the winter, do the streams from the mountains carry enough water for it to reach the basin region and interior basin lakes.

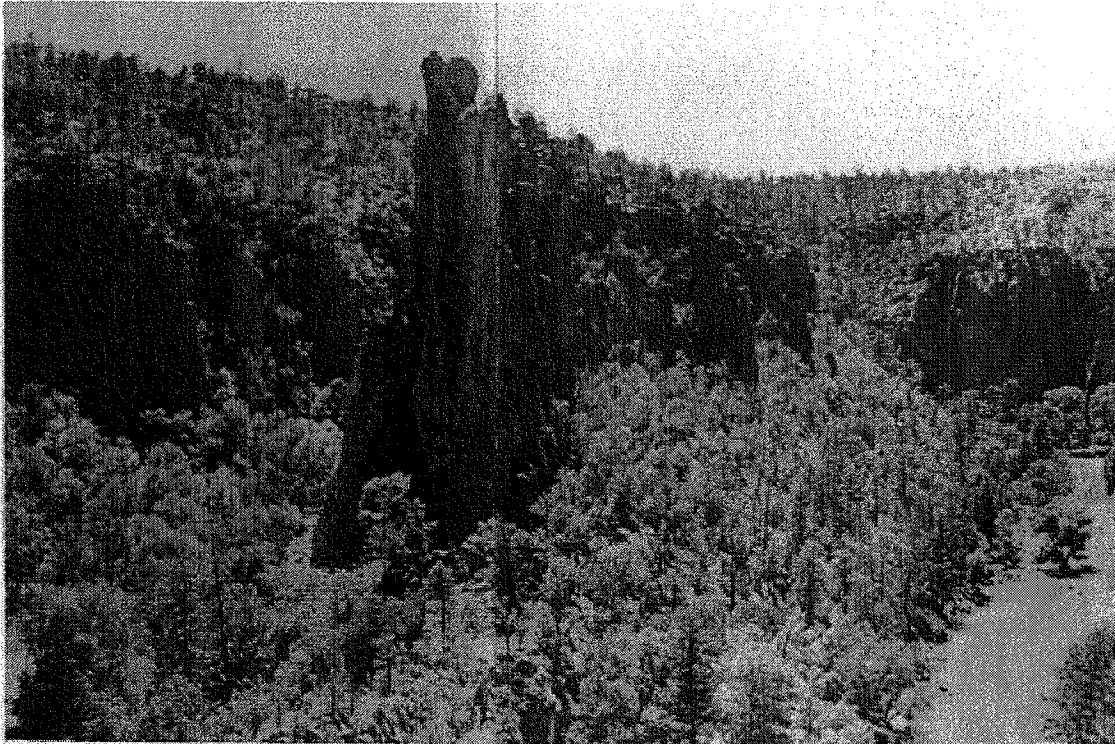


Figure 2: SIERRA MADRE OCCIDENTAL. Río Piedras Verdes. The river can be seen in the lower left and again on the right as it meanders through the canyon Elevation about 5,200 feet.

In both the mountains and basin-range regions the precipitation comes at the same time of the year, three quarters of it during the summer, and the remaining one-quarter during the winter months. In the mountains the summer thunderstorms begin about mid-June, whereas the thunderstorms in the basin area frequently do not develop until mid-July. How much average precipitation falls in either zone is difficult to estimate, since no meteorological stations exist. It has been estimated that 11 to 16 inches fall in the basin country, while the mountains receive twice that much.²

² Ibid., p.31

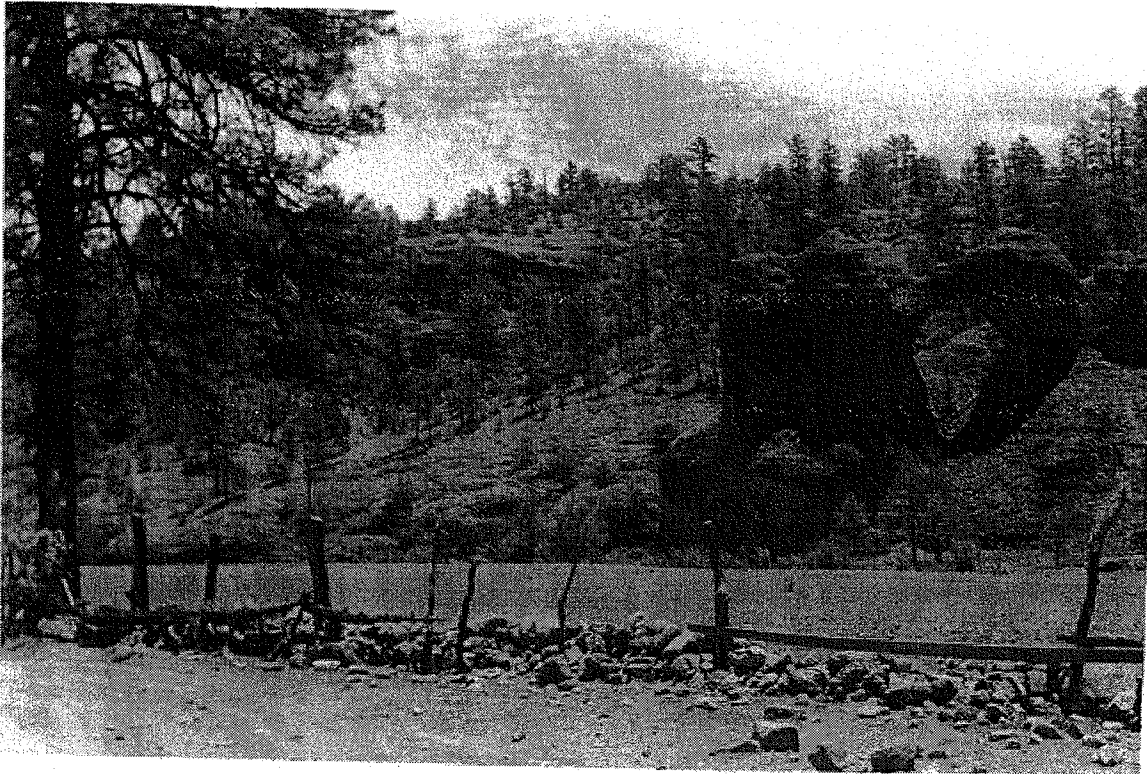


Figure 3: SIERRA MADRE OCCIDENTAL. Arch flat. Corn field in the foreground. Near this spot and on the slopes in the background is located the Arch flat Cliff dwelling. Elevation about 6,000 feet.

The temperature of both regions are the coldest in December and warmest in June, before the rains begin. In the basin country the winter temperatures rarely go below zero and generally not much below freezing during the nights. The snow that falls in the winter usually lasts but a few days. The residents of the mountain communities have reported 22 degrees below zero, with temperatures of zero quite common. There are periods of warmer weather in the mountain areas during the winter time when rains melt the snow. The melted snow and rain sometimes causes flooding in the lower elevations. The maximum summer temperature of the basin-range country rises to slightly over 100 degrees during the day cooling to about 65 degrees at night. The mountains are 10 to 15 degrees cooler than the basin area during the summer period. The first frostless mornings usually occur in mid-April in the lowest elevations, but in the mountains frosts continue to the last of May. The beginning of frost in the lower elevation is in mid October; in the mountains it comes much earlier, usually by the middle of September.



Figure 4: SIERRA MADRE OCCIDENTAL. Plateau surface of the mountains. Corn field that has been developed after the lumbering operations. Elevation about 7,500 feet.

There are three vegetation zones in Northwestern Chihuahua, the basin and range country, the foothills, and the mountains. The basin country has mostly desert plants. The dominant species are mesquite, creosote brush, saltbrush, desert yucca, Spanish bayonet, cacti and grasses – primarily of the grama type. The watercourse tree life in the basin and range regions and the foothill zone consists of willow, cottonwood, sycamore, and black walnut. In the foothills between the basin and the range zone and the mountain zone, vegetation is composed mainly of juniper, oak, agave and grasses. About 6,000 feet in elevation, the mountain or Pine zone begins. Here pines are predominant. Other trees mixed in with the pines are oaks, madrono, and manzanita. Along the mountain streams are found maple, cedar (false) and willow trees.

In the days before the norteamericanos and their lumbering activities, a great many mammals existed in all of northwestern Chihuahua. The drier areas had bison and pronghorn antelope, whereas the mountains were frequented by grizzly and black bear, deer, peccary, wolf, coyote, jaguar, mountain lion and wild cat. The bird life in the

mountains was also plentiful with parrot, pigeon, woodpecker, quail and turkey. And in the streams trout were abundant.

This was the land which the Mormons saw when they came from the north, in so many ways similar to that which they had left. The land from which they had come may also have been much the same as the new lands in the ways of the peoples of the pre-Columbian period of the Americas.

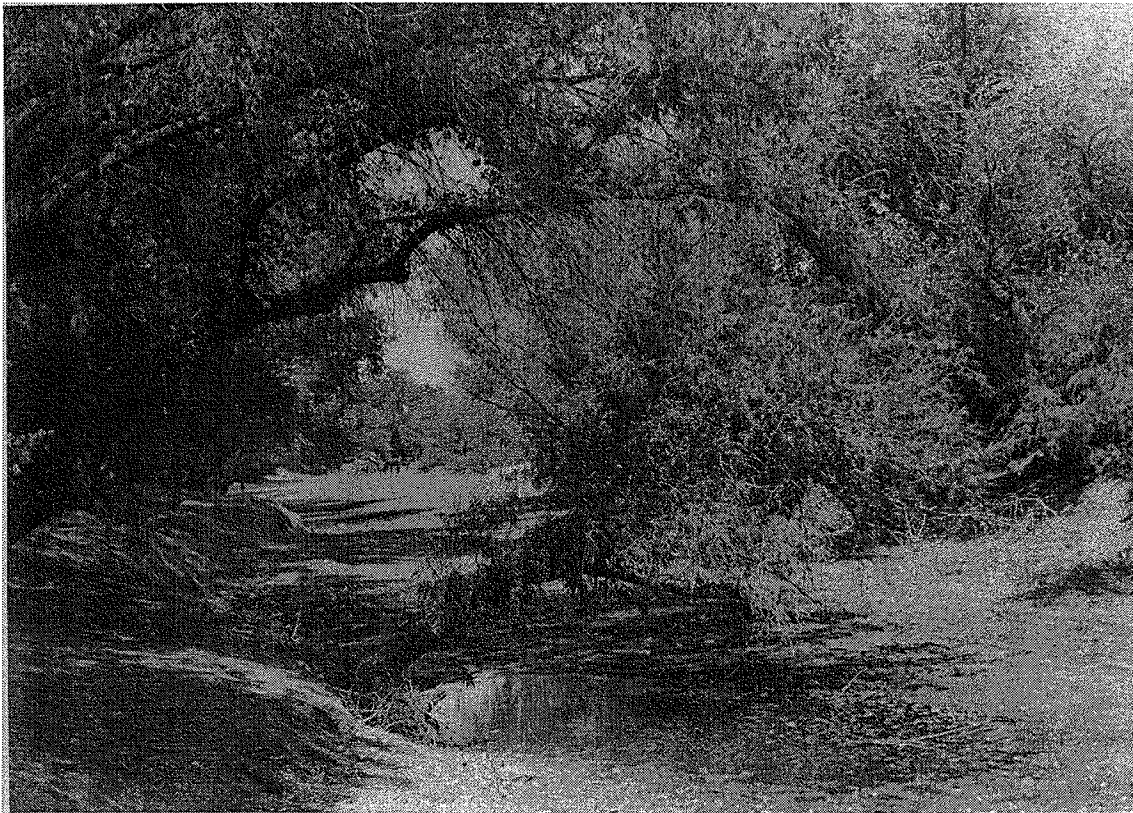


Figure 5: Río Casas Grandes near Colonia Dublán when dry.

The life of the pre-Spanish Indian is almost unknown. The archaeological work so far completed has been mostly surface observation, and a few trenches into mounds. But from the few investigations some idea as to the pre-Columbian Indian life can be reconstructed.



Figure 6: RIO CASAS GRANDES. Río Casas Grandes at same location as above when there is about two feet of water. This occurred after heavy rains in the mountains, yet no rain occurred at this point.

The Indians of the basin and range country, particularly the Casas Grandes drainage area, built their houses of puddled mud, and on the style of a multiple dwelling, rather than the individual house. The largest and best known ruin is Casas Grandes, just south of the pueblo of Casas Grandes. The buildings here may have been four stories high with possibly as many as 700 rooms, though there is little standing on the site at present.³ There are signs of irrigation having been practiced here. The water was brought by a ditch from the Ojo, a hot spring about three miles to the northwest of the ruin. To the west of Casas Grandes about four miles rises a hill, which is called Cerro de Montezuma. A well worn trail from ruins, which are on the order of construction of those at Casas Grandes, leads to the top of Cerro de Montezuma.⁴ On the hilltop are two semicircular enclosures built of stones, one enclosure inside the other one. It is not

³ Sayles, E.B., "An Archaeological Survey of Chihuahua, Mexico", Medallion Paper XXII, Gila Pueblo, 1936.

⁴ Brand, Donald, op. cit., p.47

known if the semi-circular walls were for protection or for ceremonial purposes. Also, 11 miles to the west of Casas Grandes, in the upper ends of the Tinaja and Tapasita(Tapiasita) washes are several more ruins of the same type as those at Casas Grandes.⁵

In the mountains the Indians lived in cliff-dwellings, much the same way as those in the Southwestern United States.



Figure 7: INDIAN RUINS. Casas Grandes ruins. All that is left of a large group of adobe buildings, built by the pre-Columbian Indians. Presumably rooms are located under the mounds.

In these overhanging rock shelters there usually are a number of rooms built of the same construction as the ruins of the Casas Grandes, puddled-mud. The rooms are generally about six feet square with “T” shaped doors and holes near the top of the walls, indicating poles were used to make part of the roof. In some dwellings there is an indication of there having been two stories. Several of the best known of these cliff-dwellings are at Cave Valley, on the Río Piedras Verdes; at Arch Flat, and near the Colonia of Chuichupa. “Olla Cave” in Cave Valley, seven miles down stream from Colonia Pacheco, has a large

⁵ Schwatka, F. In the Land of Cave and Cliff-dwellings, New York, 1893, pp. 47-52.

storage container near the mouth of the cave. It is approximately 12 feet high and 11 feet in diameter. Corn cobs are reported to have been found in the bottom of the storage olla in 1890.⁶ In one of the rooms of the dwelling at Arch Flat small cobs were found. They were all less than three inches long and one-half inch in diameter.⁷

In some of the valley bottoms mounds have been reported and excavated, but no mention was made as to the contents, except of the pottery and burials.⁸

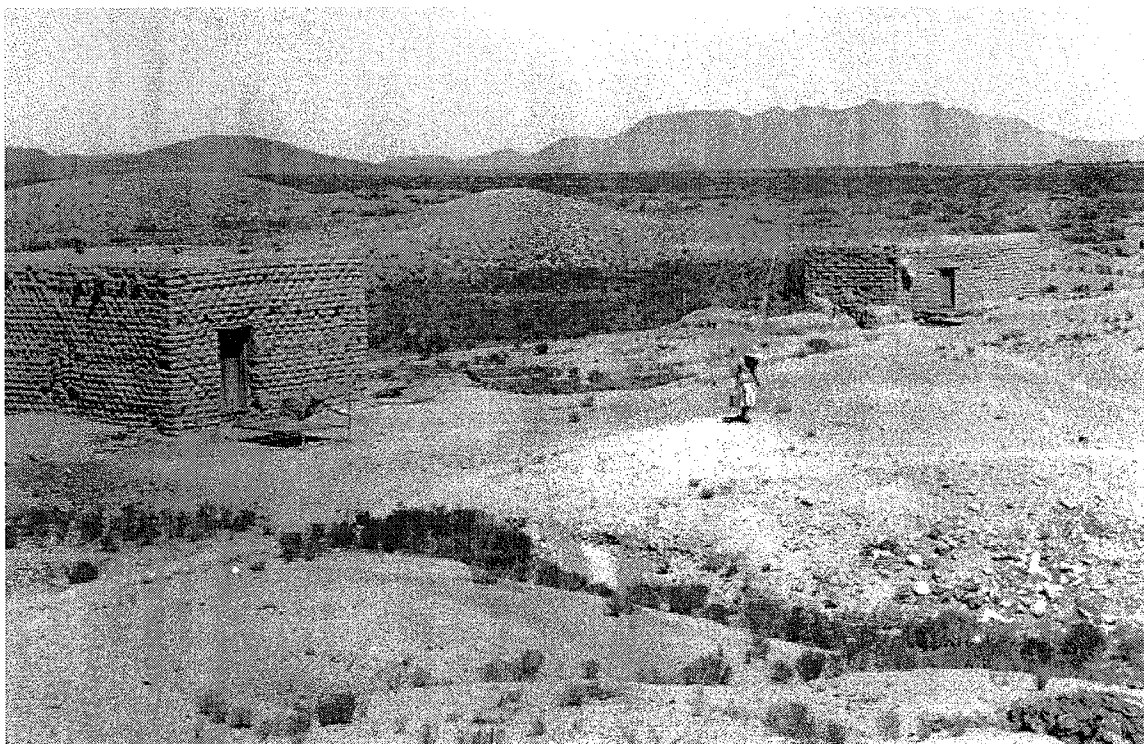


Figure 8: INDIAN RUINS. Casas Grandes Ruins. Two mounds shown are said to have nothing in them. From where the soil came and why it was placed in mounds is not known. The two one room houses are occupied by Mexicans.

In small side canyons throughout the mountains can be found rock terraces. There is a series of four or five in some canyons, one behind the other. Dirt has been filled in flush with the top of each terrace, forming a level area behind them from five to

⁶ Found by Joel Martineau, who lived in Colonia Pacheco, now living at Colonia Juarez. Interviewed by the author.

⁷ These corn cobs were sent to Dr. E. Anderson, at the Missouri Botanical Gardens for analysis, by Dr. Carl O. Sauer, for the author.

⁸ Lumhltz, Carl., Unknown Mexico, New York, Vol. I 1905.

twenty feet, depending on the steepness of the short, small canyons. The height of the terraces varies from one foot to seven feet, depending upon the slope of the canyon floor. The terraces were probably built by the Indians to increase their crop land, and to catch the water that ran in the side canyons after a summer thunderstorm, thus further irrigating the crops.



Figure 9: INDIAN RUINS. Cerro the Montezuma. Looking at the top of the mountain. This wall construction may have been built for protection or religious purposes by the Indians. It is located about four miles west of the Casas Grandes Ruins.

The crops the Indians planted can only be postulated from the evidence of the storage ollas, and the crops of the Indians that were present when the Spanish arrived in the Casas Grandes area. Corn was probably the main staple. Other crops were probably beans and squash, though none have been found in any of the ruins.⁹ These three plants were grown by the Indians in the Casas Grandes area when the Spanish arrived.¹⁰ It also

⁹ It was reported to the author by Harlo Johnson of Colonia Pacheco that his son found a cliff-dwelling to the west of Pacheco about 25 miles, during a hunting trip. This dwelling had squash stems scattered on the floor.

¹⁰ The species of these plants are unknown.

seems probable that cotton was grown for the weaving of cloth, since it was grown by the Indians to the north and south in the prehistoric past.



Figure 10: INDIAN RUINS. Cerro the Montezuma. On top of the mountain and inside the rock enclosure. One small piece of orange colored pottery was found here.

The type of pottery indicates that the Indians in the mountains lived about or during the same period as those in the large adobe houses on the flatter, more open areas, such as at Casas Grandes. The pottery was polychrome, using the colors red and black. Designs painted on the pottery were geometric and lightning patterns. Birds also were often painted on the pottery. Too, they made their pottery into the shapes of animals and humans, or had them in relief on the outside. Such figurines as turtles, horny toads, dogs, humans – both male and female – were represented. A few bowls were decorated on both the inside and the outside.