

THE NATIVE AMERICAN ANASAZI INDIANS

The Anasazi (pronounced ah-nah-SAH-zee) were a prehistoric tribe of [Native Americans](#) that lived in the Four Corners area of the southwest United States, encompassing what is now northern Arizona, northwestern New Mexico, southern Utah and southwestern [Colorado](#). The Anasazi, who inhabited this area from about 200 to 1300 AD, descended from a prehistoric group of nomadic hunter-gatherers, dubbed the “Clovis” people, who hunted many animals such as mammoth, bear and [rabbit](#), possibly the first to migrate to the continent. It has been accepted that humans first came to North America around 10,000 years ago, but new sites found on the American continents suggests a date twice that old. At about 1000 BC, some of the nomads began to form permanent settlements and soon came the birth of the Anasazi culture.

Two hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Anasazi began cultivating maize. Horticulture became increasingly important in the growing Anasazi culture and at 1200, the cultivation of maize, squash and beans had become a major food source, possibly more important than hunting. Due to the harsh environments of the deserts the Anasazi inhabited, much of their time was invested in feeding themselves. Agriculture was no easy feat for the Anasazi, rainfall came sporadically between draughts, some of which lasted for years. Most of the wild game in the area were small and thus hard to catch, so the men spent much of the day hunting for meat. The women also labored, weaving cloth by hand and grinding maize into flour with stones. Examinations of the remains of the skeletons of many elderly Anasazi women show severe arthritis caused by constant bending, kneeling and grinding.

The Anasazi lived high on the mesas and in the [canyons](#) of the southwest. Most Anasazi settlements were built in caves and on ledges of the walls of the narrow canyons. They built surprisingly large buildings in these relatively narrow cliff dwellings. Many of these cliff dwellings are still standing, scattered across the Southwest. The most famous of all the dwellings is Chaco Canyon in New Mexico. The Anasazi use of stone masonry and adobe influenced all descending Southwestern cultures and is still used today. Anasazi houses were communal; several families shared one large house. The Anasazi also constructed kivas, deep circular pits, and large plazas where they performed religious rituals.

The Anasazi were also astute pottery makers. Their distinctive black on white pottery was another tradition passed on to their descendants. The Anasazi actively traded with other cultures and formed roads leading out of their villages to their trade destinations. Although the Anasazi had no writing system, they labeled roads and landmarks with symbols. The most frequently used symbols

were a clockwise spiral to represent a good path and a counter-clockwise spiral to represent a bad one.

The Anasazi culture began to decline around 1300 AD and by 1600 all of the villages had been abandoned. What has drawn so much attention to their departure is the fact that they left all of their belongings in the villages, taking nothing with them. There are several theories as to why the Anasazi left their homes. Some speculate that the Anasazi left because of a severe draught which destroyed their crops and caused all of the animals to migrate, and they simply left their belongings because they were too burdensome to carry. Others believe that invaders attacked the Anasazi and they left with no time to bring their things. Still others attribute the fall of the Anasazi to depleted resources, population increases or breakdowns in social structure. Although there is no evidence as to why they abandoned their homes, the Anasazi did not simply disappear as many people believe. Their descendants live today and have since formed 18 tribes throughout the Southwest.