AZTEC RUINS NATIONAL MONUMENT 1984 ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS

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Condensed Version:

In the Spring of 1984 I was the archaeologist at Salinas Missions National Monument conducting a stabilization project at Abo and Quarai Missions which involved some archaeological excavations. I was contacted by Larry Nordby, an archaeologist at the then Southwest Regional Office in Santa Fe, New Mexico, as to whether I could oversee an archaeological excavation at Aztec Ruins National Monument. Essentially I was to go up and check on the progress of the project every 2 weeks and see that it was going okay. Evidently there was some doubt about the qualifications of the person in charge of the project. Upon the first trip I determined there were problems and assisted the person in charge in getting the project going. The regional office was notified and at the second inspection determined that were significant problems in the excavation whereupon with agreements between the AZRU, SALI, and SWRO personnel I was selected to take charge of the excavation. A temporary archaeologist was hired to take over my project at SALI. I excavated at AZRU between June and the first week of December of 1984. Archaeological excavations were conducted in 8 rooms lowering there static loads down to the first story level with the exception of Room 225 which was lowered 10-13 feet.

Rooms 221, 222, 223, 204, 158^2, 129, and 232 were lowered to the first story level and a drainage system installed. Many of the rooms contained disturbed deposits from past preservation projects and backfill. Intact deposits were also encountered in portions of some of the rooms. Room 225 was lowered to just above the floor level of the first story which involved excavations through a midden deposit and collapsed roof. Several perishable artifacts were recovered from this room. A burial of a small child was recovered and later documented by Joan Mathien and repatriated in Hubbard Mound.

Two drainage trenches were extended across the northwest corner to drain Rooms 221, 222, 223, 158, 129, and 232 to the drain system located north of the Great Kiva and ultimately out the southeast corner of the ruin. Trash deposits were encountered in the plaza which contained numerous bone material. No additional rooms were encountered but the trenches were shallow, three feet in depth.

Additional drain trenches were installed north of Rooms 112 and 113, one east to west trench that connected to a north to south trench that connected to the 1982 drain north of the ruin. Fairly sterile deposits were encountered.

All deposits that I encountered seemed to be late Mesa Verdean in context although it will be interesting to see what analysis utilizing better ceramic classifications determines.

All artifacts and data were then sent to the regional office at Santa Fe where they were curated and catalogued. They were later sent to Western Archaeological Conservation
Center in Tucson in 1992 and 1997. Funding was not provided at the time of this excavation for any kind of analysis or write up. Consequently, twenty years later I was requested by the park to write some of this material up. The park is funding some analysis the artifacts, perishables and ceramics at this time. I am doing the lithics and ground stone. With luck we can provide some data on this project which according to WACC recovered an estimated 60,000 artifacts. That is if I can make any sense out of my notes twenty years hence.
Gary: Below is a short synopsis of what I did in 1984 and how it developed for your information. There aren’t many people left there who remember those excavations and how they developed.

Synopsis:

In 1984 Aztec Ruins received funding from two different programs for a drainage project and the rehabilitation of protective roofs. Larry Nordby an archaeologist with the then Regional Office prepared a scope of work, “Modifications to West Ruin Drainage (AZRU) Project Design and Recommendations,” that I followed for this project. A list of priorities on page 17 of this document was what I followed. The scope of work is ambitious for one seasons work and required extensive backfilling and equalization of fill levels. I did accomplish a fair amount of work in that I completed priorities 1-5, 9, and parts of 7 and 8 out of the 9 priorities.

I was not initially part of this project as it was funded with the understanding that the then archaeologist at Aztec, Bill Schart was supposed to run the project. I think Bill was officially the Chief Ranger but supposedly had an archaeological background. As it was related to me they had some kind of difficulty in the past with Bill and some project whether it was at AZRU or CHCU I don’t know. The powers that be at that time decided to give him another chance and went ahead and funded these two projects. I was at Salinas at the time and had a major preservation project at Abo and Quarai which required archaeological excavation. The drainage project at Abo was encountering earlier church deposits which was later further developed and completed by Jake Ivey. In the spring of 1984 I received a call from Larry asking if I would be able to go over to Aztec every couple of weeks and check on Bill and these two projects which I agreed to do. This was initially just supposed to be an oversight kind of assignment, just to check on him.

I first went over to Aztec in June to check on Bill as he was supposed to have started the project. When I got there I found the crew, 7 or 8 high school kids who were part of YCC program, sitting on the walls in the NW corner of West Ruin but no Bill. I think they had started digging in one of the rooms. No one knew where Bill was which I found to be a typical answer of teenagers later on in the summer. At any rate I got Bill going and gave him instructions on what to do and how to do it and to call if he got into something that was difficult. When I looked at Bills records they were minimal with no maps or profiles, although I won’t say much for my own notes, etc.

I informed Larry that Bill might be having a trouble with this project. I returned in a couple of weeks and not a lot had been accomplished. I asked to see maps and profiles which Bill had done but in labeling them he had identified strata as just “dirt.” I had assumed up to this time that Bill was an archaeologist but if he was he had only minimal experience and probably no field experience. Bill was also a Vietnam vet who was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome which I had no reason to doubt. He wasn’t very present or into his job at all. In defense of Bill I will say that he had a minimal crew of teenagers for whom this was a first job experience, not an ideal crew for
this type of project. These kids were typical teenagers and had no experience with archaeology or recognition of artifacts, etc. which made for a tough job. Bill could at least identify artifacts but was not transferring any of that knowledge to the crew. Sherds were readily identified but items like flakes, hammerstones, etc. were not. I had several sit down sessions with the crew on what constituted an artifact.

I left again and notified Larry that he had a problem there. Somehow I was suggested as taking over the project even though I had a major project of my own at Salinas and my Superintendent agreed. Not sure how this happened but I am sure that I was for it for some reason. The regional office funded a second archaeologist to take over my job. I ranged back and forth between AZRU and SALI through the summer checking on these projects. I spent most of my time at AZRU. The archeologist that was hired for SALI unfortunately turned out to have an anxiety problem and took medications for this problem which weren’t working very well. To compound problems she was unable to work with an all Hispanic crew and Hispanic Work Leader which added to her stress levels and increased her problems with anxiety and crew animosity. Consequently, the work at both AZRU and SALI suffered. I mention the above to provide some understanding of the environment this project took place in. I had to pick up some of the pieces at Salinas every couple of weeks. Fortunately, I had a good crew but the archeology may have suffered some.

To get beyond all that I started first excavating in the NW corner of West Ruin with the high school kids. Rooms 223, 222, 221, 129, 239(now 204) and 158 (called B-3) were excavated to the level of the first story line. As I remember, which is pretty fuzzy after 20 years, we encountered trash deposits containing sherds, lithics, ground stone, bone, and some perishables. Some rooms seemed pretty sterile also. I used the screened fill from these rooms to backfill Kiva B, Kiva I, and we started on some of the eastern most rooms of the south wing but ran out of dirt before we could finish these backfilling of these rooms (if I remember right).

It should be noted that a backhoe was used to remove fill from a couple of these rooms. Larry arrived at some time in the project and realized we wouldn’t get some of this work done by digging and screening and used a backhoe to remove some of the materials. I can remember going back out on the weekend and screening a piles of backdirt from this action and recovering a quantity of artifacts.

A note on Room 158. Morris describes 158 as a room remodeled into a kiva by Mesa Verdeans. However, we didn’t find any kiva nor was there any evidence that the room had been excavated. The map I was provided with in the scope was a poor copy of an older map of the West Ruin. I can remember having trouble with what the room was referred to on that map and used the designation B-3 which on clearer maps appears to be a survey offset out room 239(now 204). Use of a different designation for this room avoids any confusion in the future with whatever Morris collected in Room 158 wherever that may be located.
I then started Room 225. On later maps a subdividing wall is identified in this room with the room 199 designation for a 2nd story room, however I didn’t find much evidence of this and Morris’ description of this room doesn’t fit this area. Also there are two 199’s in three places through time on the maps. I think he might have been describing 194. Consequently, I used Room 225 for this room’s designation which incorporated most of the trash that collapsed into the first story of that room. I was just getting down to the floor levels in Room 225 when I ceased the excavation. Room 225 was excavated 10-13 through trash fill and the collapse of the second story roof. There were numerous sherds, bones, ground stone (a lot of cobbles with minimal wear), and vegetal materials. I collected numerous fragments of what appeared to be basketry, matting, cordage, feathers, and feather blanket cordage. An infant, probably 6 months plus, was found buried in the trash. It was wrapped in a feather blanket, and still had some skin and hair remaining. It was later in 93 or 94 that this burial was reburied as one of the first repatriations in the Southwest Region in Hubbard Mound.

At some point in time the roof in Room 225 collapsed and part of it shielded material against the northeast corner of the room. This deposit was dry and similar to a dry cave deposit. Several perishable specimens were collected from this deposit which includes, wrapped yucca blades, willow matting from the roof still strung together, cordage, worked pieces of wood, basketry fragments, rush mat fragments, coprolites, and digging sticks. Some or most of this material was described in a report documenting the burial of the above mentioned child prior to repatriation but was not part of the burial, (see “An Analysis of Material Recovered from Room 225, Aztec West. AZRU,” 1992, by Mathien, Joan, Livingston, Jerry, and Barthuli, Kaisa).

The excavation of Room 225 took several months with decreasing crews as the summer ended and the YCC program ended and students went back to school. During this time several volunteers showed up to help me, notably, Cindy Bunker and her husband, Ron Hefner, Judy Husted and Kate Harper, and Melba King. Unlike the weather today it was a wet year and in October we encountered cold weather fairly early along with snows. I worked until December 5 of that year in that room which by that time was rather chilly. James Brown and I strung an extension cord from the Visitor Center to Room 225 to string lights across the room so I could dig at night in late November. I don’t recommend this. I finally got to a level just below the doorways and ended the excavation there before I got into floor materials. James was a great help in this project. His son Jerome was also part of this project.

During the period that Rooms 221-223, 204,129,158 and 225 were being excavated I also worked in Room 232 and excavated the level of that room down a couple of feet and extended a drainage trench to the east of that room connecting to the drainage from system from the northwest corner. Sherds, bone, ground stone, lithics were all recovered from these excavations. My notes indicate a small child scattered through the fill. Obviously quite disturbed.

Drainage trenches were dug in Rooms 221-223, 129, 204, 158 and 225 which connected to a long drainage trench that extended to the drain on the north side of the Great Kiva.
The trench extending east out of Room 232 connected to this drain. Both of these drains were excavated in part by a backhoe. I remember hitting a lot of trash with a lot of bone in the trench to the Great Kiva drain.

I didn’t encounter any rooms east of Room 232 or southeast of Room 129 that were definitive. I did encounter a couple of rock alignments in the east trench out of Room 232 which I designated a room (X1) initially but I don’t think they were very definitive. However the trench was not very deep, probably 3 foot at it’s deepest.

On the north side of West Ruin a trench was extended across Rooms 112-113 and then north to connect to the 1982 French drain. This was done primarily with a backhoe in part due to the hardness of the ground out there. Minimal artifact recovery if I remember right.

Drains were installed in Room 218 (I think) and wall repair completed by James Brown. In the course of this action beams were either encountered in the wall (I believe) and possibly in the trench. I think I collected tree ring data from this room. I did map and document the wood. I believe I also altered the grades in these rooms (218,118 and 119). James and his crew may have done some of this work.

The second project funded for that year was a protective roof project which involved the re-roofing of the Great Kiva. This also put in the actual drainage systems for the trenches mentioned above.

Collections from this work were accessioned under number 61 for the park. Material collected was sent to Santa Fe (where I think it was catalogued and eventually sent to WACC where it now resides.

I have records for flotation samples and pollen samples. Most of these came from Room 225 where I collected pollen in measured segments down the baulk. I also collected C-14 materials and tree rings. I think most of the tree ring data has been sent in. Dates may have come back but I don’t have them at present. There are by my estimate probably 375-400+ photos on this project of variable quality which would be really nice as a memory jogger (if any “memory” is left).

Of note is that James Brown helped me off and on all summer and fall and may remember details that I don’t. I have notes from Cindy Bunker and some from Kate Harper. Also, some from Bill Schart.

My notes are sporadically laced with comments about Bill especially when I would return to SALI and I would give him a job to do and he would do part of it but wouldn’t document it.

As to numbers of artifacts, the 60,000 identified by Lister surprises me but I wasn’t really counting.
We did the best we could, given the situation of crews, less than qualified personnel, additional park problems, time constraints, etc. The volunteers helped a great deal and I will say that the students worked hard when you could separate them. They did more than you could expect of them. I had to use students to do a lot of the mapping which they did. Most of it is minimal but has some value. Overall we got a lot of the work done but the archaeology probably suffered given the types of rooms and deposits we were digging in. Fortunately we didn’t encounter anything that Morris hadn’t already encountered.

The above is a brief narrative of the project off the top of my head without the aid of notes or anything. Hope it is of use. I already sent you the scope of work by Nordby and the Burial doc. by Mathien.