


Mesa Verde and the Refugee Question

A group of archeologists have recently concluded that it wasn't just climate change that led to the sudden disappearance of the Pueblo ancestors who used to occupy the Mesa Verde cliff-dwellings roughly 800 years ago. While historical climate change impacts are certainly relevant to our times, archeologists' beliefs that migrants and culture clashes had a greater impact may be even timelier.

According to [Nature](#),

“Archaeologists have long puzzled over what drove these  farmers, the ancestors of the Pueblo people, from their homes and fields. ‘That is one of the iconic problems of southwestern – and world – prehistory,’ says archaeologist Mark Varien, who is executive vice-president of the Crow Canyon Research Institute in Cortez, Colorado. Early scholars blamed nomads, the ancestors of the Apache and Navajo, for violently displacing the farmers. Over the past couple of decades, the main explanation has shifted to climate – a profound drought and cold snap that hit in the 1270s.

But a series of studies by Glowacki, Varian and other researchers reveals a much more complex answer. The scientists have used detailed archaeological analysis, fine-grained climatic reconstructions and computer models to simulate how ancestral Pueblo families would have responded to their environment. The interdisciplinary strategy has enabled the researchers to examine prehistoric societal changes at a level unattainable in most other regions. ‘We have enormous detail on this archaeologically. Unparalleled detail,’ says Steve Lekson, an archaeologist at the University of Colorado Boulder.

The emerging picture is one of a society rocked by troubles until it eventually toppled. More than a century before the Mesa Verde villages emptied out, political disruptions and a monster drought destabilized the entire ancestral Pueblo world. Thousands of people moved into the Mesa Verde region from nearby areas, straining the agricultural capacity of the landscape and eroding established cultural traditions. This led to violent conflicts that further undermined the society, spurring some people to leave. When another drought hit in the late 1200s, the remaining population departed en masse.

Political instability, cultural conflict, violence, overcrowding and drought. Many of the challenges encountered by the ancestral Pueblo seem all too familiar in 2015, as hundreds of thousands of migrants flee from the Middle East and Africa towards Europe. When Glowacki looks at the events of more than seven centuries ago at Spruce Tree House, she sees many similarities. 'There was a splintering that went on and an implosion of this political system. It was a rejection, them saying, "We can't live that way anymore. There has to be a better way".'

From the historical record beyond the story of Mesa Verde, the issues of migration and culture are woven throughout. A culture represents the way a people live their lives, what beliefs they hold in common about life, family, society, and government. Historically, religious beliefs have almost always been the foundation that shapes the culture and traditions of a people.

Does this matter for the current clash of civilizations and internal culture wars that are rocking much of the world? Absolutely.

Glowacki, one of the archeologists cited by *Nature*, seems to believe that those leaving the Middle East are rejecting their

old ways. But is that actually the case?

Europe has not been like America, with waves of different immigrant groups making up the tapestry of its history. Additionally, until very recently, American immigrants overwhelmingly came from Europe, with a common civilizational bond. The great rifts were between Protestant Americans worrying about Catholic Europeans messing things up as well as the character of Southern and Eastern European immigrants compared to those hailing from Northern Europe. The differences were certainly there in cultural views, but some incredibly important commonalities of ethnicity, general religious outlooks, and even culture existed.

That is not the case for mixing Muslim immigrants with the West – even a largely secular West. Whether the secular West wants to admit it or not, it is built upon Christianity. Its way of looking at people, human dignity, equality, freedom, etc. all have their roots in Christianity and its interpretation of Ancient Hellenism. The broad secularism we have today is only decades old, which is but a blip compared to thousands of years of historical inertia.

When Americans considered the issue of immigration in the past, there was certainly an openness to it, but there was also the understanding that people had to assimilate to the American way of life, something with deep roots in the West's traditions. Here's an example from James Garfield in 1880:

“The material interests of this country, the traditions of its settlement and the sentiment of our people, have led the government to offer the widest hospitality to emigrants who seek our shores for new and happier homes, willing to share the burdens as well as the benefits of our society, and intending that their posterity shall become an undistinguishable part of our population.”

And so the question must be asked by Americans and Europeans,

will new immigrants become an “undistinguishable part of our population”? But before we can even ask that one, we must ask whether or not we even have unity in defining what it is to be American, French, German, etc.?