

**EIGHT THOUSAND YEARS ON SISNATHYEL MESA:
EXCAVATIONS AT LA 16257 (NM-G-53-19)
ALONG THE N46 ROAD NEAR COUNSELOR, NEW MEXICO**

Phase III of the N46 Project

Completed under:

NNAD 96-214

HPD-96-517.3

BIA N46-N34292

NMCRIS Activity no. 56248

New Mexico BLM Permit no. 10-8152-99-10

State of New Mexico Permit nos. AE-81, AE-84

Navajo Nation Papers in Anthropology no. 36

Final Technical Report

Edited by

Paul F. Reed and Kathy Niles Hensler

Contributions by

Robert Begay

Andrea J. Carpenter

James Feathers

Kathy Niles Hensler

Richard E. Hughes

Meredith Matthews

John J. Ponczynski

Susan J. Smith

Scott Wilcox

James H. Burton

William L. Deaver

Joell Goff

Vern H. Hensler

Barbara A. Murphy

David O. Ortiz

Paul F. Reed

John A. Torres

Submitted by

Anthony L. Klesert, Ph.D., Director

Lawrence E. Vogler, Supervisory Archaeologist

Co-Principal Investigators

Navajo Nation Archaeology Department

P. O. Box 689

Window Rock, AZ 86515

Prepared by the Farmington Roads Office, Navajo Nation Archaeology Department
under the direction of Paul F. Reed, Project Director,
with administration by the Roads Planning Program
of the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department
for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Navajo Region,
Branch of Roads, Gallup, New Mexico

July 2001

ABSTRACT

This report is submitted to the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department, Roads Planning Program (HPD-RPP) as the final data recovery report for Navajo Route 46(1) (N46 road) to complete the compliance process. Archaeological data recovery was undertaken by the Navajo Nation Archaeology Department (NNAD) as Phase III of the N46 Project, a multiyear, phased project that mitigated the adverse effects of road construction on cultural resources along the N46 right-of-way (ROW). The project is sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Navajo Region, Branch of Roads, and is administered by HPD-RPP. The proposed project will involve the construction of a paved road, planned both within the existing gravel road grade and across new territory. The types of ground disturbance expected to result from the project are surface and subsurface disturbance resulting from blading and contouring the landscape along the ROW.

The proposed N46 road is located in Sandoval County, New Mexico, beginning on the south end at New Mexico State Highway (NM) 509 and ending approximately 15 miles to the north at NM 44. The legal description for the project is multiple sections in Township 21 North, Range 7 West; Township 22 North, Range 7 West; Township 22 North, Range 6 West; and Township 23 North, Range 6 West. The N46 project area can be located on Lybrook SE, 1978, Mule Dam, 1966, and Counselor, 1978 (all New Mexico) 7.5 minute series USGS quadrangle maps. LA 16257 lies on State of New Mexico land in Section 16, Township 22 North, Range 6 West and Bureau of Land Management lands in Section 21, Township 22 North, Range 6 West.

Archaeological data recovery during Phase III of the N46 Project was completed at LA 16257/NM-G-53-19 under New Mexico BLM Permit no. 10-8152-99-10 and State of New Mexico Permit no. AE-84. Fieldwork was undertaken between August 16 and October 7, 1999. Excavations and analysis revealed

a complex site with at least five occupations by two cultural entities spread across five spatial loci. LA 16257, then, consists of five loci, defined both spatially and temporally. Locus A, located at the north end of the site, consists of two hearths dating to the middle Archaic period (between 3600 and 2800 B.C.). Based on faunal analysis, Locus A served as a short-term hunting camp. Locus B, located in the eastern portion of the site, is a Navajo camp consisting of two low density middens and two hearths. Absolute dates place the use of Locus B between A.D. 1410 and 1625. Locus C is also Navajo and consists of a compound hogan and associated features. Structures 1 and 2 are paired portions of a single, compound hogan, connected via a small passage. A large extramural hearth was the only other feature located in Locus C. Based on multiple absolute chronometric data and ceramic findings, Locus C dates between A.D. 1590 and 1655.

Locus D, originally thought to be Archaic in origin and to contain two pit structures, failed to produce any intact cultural features. Nevertheless, numerous artifacts were recovered from the surface. Thus, Locus D is interpreted as a disturbed Archaic context. Locus E was formerly a part of Locus C but was assigned a separate locus designation following excavation. Locus E consists of two basin-shaped pits, a hearth, and a roasting pit. One of these features (Feature 18), was radiocarbon dated to the middle Archaic (3520–3355 B.C.), while Features 19 and 69 produced early Archaic dates (maximum range between 5815 and 5365 B.C.). LA 16257 therefore, is a multicomponent site with early Archaic, middle Archaic, and early Navajo occupations dated by absolute means. Lithic analysis of the assemblage indicates that a late Archaic occupation is present, as well, although it could not be spatially identified and tied to a specific locus.

FOREWORD

This volume, *Navajo Nation Papers in Anthropology* no. 36, is one in a series of final reports describing the results of archaeological data recovery on BIA road construction projects across Navajoland. This work taken as a whole is huge in scope, and nested as it is within P.L. 93-638 contracting, not without its ups and downs, but the effort is ultimately quite rewarding and of enormous consequence. The current report describes our excavations at a single site, LA 16257, but as the reader will find, this site fairly encapsulates the point of our work.

LA 16257 is a large and complex multi-component site located between Pueblo Pintado and Counselor, on Sisnathyel Mesa on the eastern extreme of the San Juan Basin. This immense site covers more than 40 acres and contains the remains of at least six distinct occupations covering an 8,000 year time span, as the report title suggests. Identifying these components by survey and mitigation has allowed us to successfully recover useful comparative data for Paleoindian (an isolated fluted point fragment), the Early, Middle, and Late Archaic, Early Navajo and recent historic periods, all at this one locale. Remarkably, no signs of Anasazi use were encountered at the site, and very little along the entire road.

During the N46 Project, data for a large area surrounding LA 16257 were assembled to explore patterns of Archaic settlement across the region. The settlement study revealed that the Archaic use of LA 16257 was not isolated; several other sites that date to the Archaic period have been documented in the surrounding area. At this stage of research, too little is known about these other sites and how they may relate to LA 16257. Nevertheless, the Archaic inhabitants clearly lived alongside other groups making their living across Sisnathyel Mesa and beyond.

Between A. D. 1590 and 1655 (and probably more specifically between 1600 and 1630), a Navajo family constructed a hogan at LA 16257, on the edge of Sisnathyel Mesa. This family built an unusual form of the typical Navajo hogan, which has been termed a "compound" hogan. It started

out as an ordinary forked-pole hogan (about 5 m in diameter) with six sides, an internal hearth, and a mealing bin. At some point a smaller addition was added. This renovation consisted of a smaller version of the basic Navajo forked-pole hogan, and included a central fire pit. A series of posthole impressions found during excavation confirmed the connection of the two structures and their simultaneous use.

An issue documented in this volume is the problem of recognizing early Navajo sites. As noted in Chapter 6, this site was originally recorded as having an Anasazi component, based on surface ceramics. Later analysis demonstrated that these gray ware sherds were in fact Navajo in origin, not Anasazi. While I hesitate to use the term, this case points out a persistent Puebloan or at least prehistoric bias in our standard assumptions and expectations, and I fall prey to this as much as anyone. If we come across gray pottery on a site in the San Juan Basin, it's bound to be Anasazi. If we find a low density lithic scatter, then surely it's Archaic in origin, or maybe Anasazi special-use. Yet time and again these ingrained presumptions are proving incorrect (see *NNPA* 38 for a remarkably similar situation). As currently practiced, "normal" archaeological science needs to at least more overtly recognize this fact and be more open to multiple working hypotheses.

The problem of course is that most sites receive no treatment or scrutiny beyond the initial routine inventory. In the case of LA 16257, the site, or portions of it, were slated for excavation, a perceptive eye upon reinventory recognized the Navajo pottery for what it truly was, and subsequent excavations have confirmed that new interpretation. But what about the many sites like it that are visited once and subjected only to a typical recording? As this report notes, in contrast to the Archaic component, there are scant signs in the archives of nearby contemporaneous sites for the Navajo component here, and we really don't have much choice but to accept that for now, but given the demonstrable problems with proper identification here and elsewhere, how can we be sure? It is ironic that geochemical and petrographic analysis of the

Dinétah Gray pottery and the presence of Jemez Mountains obsidian establish a link with the Jemez people, but our understanding of local ties is much less secure. But as this and other reports make inroads into the study of Early Navajo, I am

optimistic these problems will be resolved.

Anthony L. Klesert
Window Rock, Arizona