

Galisteo Basin

Centuries of Collaboration and Conflict

The Galisteo Basin is home to sheep, cattle, horses, ranchers, and an increasing number of residents who are attracted to its beauty and serenity. Besides spectacular and nearly pristine archaeological sites that record Puebloan cultural development and Spanish colonial occupation, the Basin could also hold economically valuable deposits of oil and gas. In an interview for *El Palacio*, **ERIC BLINMAN, PH.D.**, Director of the Office of Archaeological Studies, gives his perspective on the impact of people and plans on archaeological sites identified by the federal Galisteo Basin Archaeological Sites Protection Act, with this caveat: “I’m not sure why anyone should believe an archaeologist who predicts the future.”

The Creston, also called Comanche Gap, provides a vantage point for the northward expanse of the Galisteo Basin. Photograph courtesy of the Office of Archaeological Studies (MNM/DCA).



Suspended over a natural rainwater basin, this image of corn reflects the essential relationship between people and climate in the Galisteo Basin. Photograph courtesy of the Office of Archaeological Studies (MNM/DCA).



Q: What's so special about the archaeology of the Galisteo Basin?

A: How much time do you have? If I have to narrow it down to a soundbyte, I'd say that the Galisteo Basin represents an incredibly well-preserved record of the most dramatic cultural transitions of the past 10,000 years in northern New Mexico. It sounds like hyperbole, but I think it's true.

Q: What are those transitions?

A: The most significant climate change in the Southwest occurred around AD 1200 and opened up the Galisteo Basin for maize agriculture. What followed was a sequence of migration, homesteading, population growth, and community building, culminating in the super-Pueblos of the fifteenth century. The Galisteo Basin neighborhood was multiethnic, with evidence for collaboration and conflict that defined the shape of modern Pueblo cultures. The climate change was reversed about AD 1500, causing social and economic crises that led to a progressive abandonment of the area. Since then it's been all about ranching rather than farming or urban life, so the Galisteo Basin holds a nearly pristine record of both cultural florescence and decline.

Q: Is it all about Pueblo Indian history?

A: Most of the archaeological record is Native American history, but Coronado's party and others explored the region, followed by a strong Spanish colonial mission presence in the seventeenth century. That Spanish colonial influence allowed the Pueblo populations in the Galisteo Basin to hang on longer than they could have otherwise, so seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century archaeology is a complex story of indigenous persistence, adaptation, and colonial exploitation. The record of the Mexican and Territorial periods is a lighter veneer on the landscape, and then there are late additions like the set for the 1972 John Wayne movie *The Cowboys*.

The small sites are perhaps more at risk than the big ones because they appear to be less impressive and important.



Wall remnants of the San Cristóbal church, constructed in the 1620s, still stand with the help of several stabilization efforts. Above: Neg. No. 12070, Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA). Below: Photographs courtesy of the Office of Archaeological Studies (MNM/DCA).

Q: Why is this any different from the archaeology in other areas of northern New Mexico?

A: The Galisteo Basin is analogous to Bandelier National Monument in terms of being a mirror for human adaptation—in both places you can see the remains of a relatively pristine sequence of human responses to climate change. What's important is that the two records are contemporary but different, and the differences are an important key to the diversity of modern Pueblo peoples. In Santa Fe and the Rio Grande Valley bottom, most of the archaeology is obscured or obliterated by many subsequent layers of occupation, especially the population explosion of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the Galisteo Basin has been populated mainly by sheep, cattle, and horses since the Pueblo Revolt, the archaeological sites are much easier to see and much less disturbed.

Q: There seems to be a heightened interest in Galisteo Basin archaeology of late.

A: That's in part because our memories are relatively short. Archaeologists have been fascinated by the Galisteo Basin since Adolph Bandelier was hosting scholars at the Fisher Brewery beer garden on Palace Avenue in the late-nineteenth century. Extensive excavations were carried out by Nels Nelson in the 1910s, but since then the basin has been viewed much like a preserve. Bertha Dutton carried out some important but only partially published excavations in the mid-twentieth century, but archaeologists haven't felt much urgency about the area until recently.

Q: Why now?

A: There are two reasons for the resurgence in interest. First, research done in the 1980s and 1990s on the Pajarito Plateau and the Rio Grande Valley has posed some interesting questions about Puebloan cultural development. The Galisteo Basin is the next logical place to look for answers. The second reason for interest is the perceived threat of development to the integrity of the basin as a whole.

Q: Are Native Americans as interested in the Galisteo Basin as the archaeologists are?

A: The simple answer is yes, but as I get older I find there are few simple answers to anything. As recently as a decade ago, Pueblo elders were arranging permission for pilgrimages to some of the sites, but those visits have stopped with the passing of that generation. The Pueblo of Cochiti contributed funds for the purchase of Pueblo San Marcos by the Archaeological Conservancy, and some Pueblo families still have stories that relate to the Galisteo Basin in the time before the Spanish Reconquest. However, private land ownership has had an intimidating effect on visitation, so many Pueblo people, including religious leaders, have never set foot in the basin.

Q: Do you see interest increasing?

A: I do. The current preservation efforts led by the Bureau of Land Management include a formal Native American advisory group. For many of the representatives the field trips have been the first chance to see the sites. Many times the sites, and especially the rock-art images, are too sensitive for discussion with us non-Natives, but a sense of reverence comes across clearly. When they are comfortable enough to tell us stories, it can be fascinating. Elders find that the sites can serve as a touchstone for telling stories and passing on religious information to younger members of the tribe. We hope that the formal consultations will lead to more visitation by religious leaders.

Q: Do archaeologists and Native Americans agree on the history represented by the sites?

A: Most of the time the histories are parallel and compatible, but not always. Interesting contrasts emerge where the archaeologists simply need to step aside. Comanche people have kept stories alive about the rock art at Comanche Gap without anyone having seen the rock art in generations. We helped a group of Comanche elders visit the site, and they quickly departed from the archaeological script that attributes the rock art to Pueblo people. In their stories, the images are vital Comanche symbols authored by Comanche artists at a formative time in Comanche history.

Q: How do you resolve the conflicts?

A: We don't need resolution. There's really no need for only one interpretation, and I can't claim that my archaeological story of today is truth since it may change when the next new piece of information comes along. A panel of Galisteo rock-art images will hold a full suite of

meanings for a visiting Hopi, even though the panel may have been created by a Keres or a Tanoan religious society five centuries ago. Much of the imagery is common to all the Pueblos, regardless of language or cultural boundaries, due to the spread of religious concepts in the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It's ironic that Tano and Keres refugees from Spanish repression in the Galisteo Basin carried their images out to the Hopi Mesas, completing a circle that started with what archaeologists see as the eastward spread of religious ideas from the Hopi-Zuni area centuries earlier.

Q: Is oil exploration in the Galisteo Basin the greatest threat to the archaeology?

A: Not in the way you might suppose. The drilling rigs and their access roads can be placed so that they don't directly damage archaeological sites. In that sense, obvious impacts of development can be managed and controlled by current laws and regulations. However, the work crews and roads mean that more people would have easier access to the area, increasing the risk of both casual and deliberate damage to the sites. A finders-keepers ethic pervades our society, and even people who value preservation can be guilty of taking home sherds or flakes as mementos of the past or touchstones for the feelings of being in a beautiful or spiritual place. One sherd isn't a problem, but the cumulative effects of one sherd per person are inevitable and devastating to the archaeological record. The small sites are perhaps more at risk than the big ones because they appear to be less impressive and important, and yet they contain essential evidence of the foundations of the later cultural developments.

Q: So people are the problem, not just oil and gas.

A: Yes. Ranchers are reporting damage to sites that can be traced to the movie crews that use the area, and people-pressure will continue to increase as ranch land is converted to housing. On one hand people need to be able to see these sites to appreciate and enjoy the importance of this record of human history, but on the other, visitation results in the inexorable destruction of the sites. The sad truth is that the best-preserved sites are those that have been carefully protected by private landowners rather than those that are in public parks or monuments.

Q: Are you against the current plans for oil and gas development?

A: On a personal level, yes, in both predictable and complicated ways. I value the incredible vistas of the Galisteo Basin. The isolation I feel when I'm working on one of the sites is refreshing. Roads, pump jacks, drilling rigs, and even houses would compromise that experience as well as hasten the destruction of the sites themselves. However, I also recognize the selfishness inherent in my opportunity to enjoy an experience that others can't. I'm not sure how to cope with the moral ambiguity of my privileged position. I wish there were a way to give everyone the experience without degrading the resource.

Q: Isn't development necessary and inevitable in the bigger picture of northern New Mexico?

A: I see the issue as a contrast between short- and long-term thinking. Although I'm not sure why anyone should believe an archaeologist who predicts the future, I'm pretty sure that the best long-term use of the land under present and future climatic and economic conditions will continue to be low-impact ranching. Suburban sprawl is an inefficient use of energy and even time, and I think our communities would be strengthened, socially and economically, by bringing people back into town and preserving the outback. As for oil and gas, those commodities will be far more important to us several generations from now than they are today. Their extraction today would likely just encourage us to squander the energy unnecessarily in an effort to maintain an ultimately unsustainable rate of consumption.

Q: Any last thoughts?

A: There's at least a little irony in that the ancient people of the Galisteo Basin struggled to hang on to their way of life long after it was no longer possible. It's unfair to call it "denial," but hoping that the early sixteenth-century climate change wasn't really happening simply set up the Pueblo communities for a harder collapse when the change became real. The adoption of wheat, rye, sheep, and cattle from the Spanish delayed the collapse, but those additions to the Pueblo economy were the short-term technological fix of the seventeenth century. It seems as though today we can't help but repeat that pattern of denial and looking for quick, short-term fixes, even though we have fairly clear warnings from the past that crises are periodic rather than unique events. ■



ABOVE: Agnes Simms sketching rock art at the Galisteo Dike, 1946.

Neg. No. 67, Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA).

BELOW: Vandalism in the basin leaves its mark, from new images etched into rock to failed attempts to steal ancient drawings by chipping them from their boulders.

Photographs courtesy of the Office of Archaeological Studies (MNM/DCA).

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