"I think that these patterns of movement are one of the issues that we're really able to address here."

The Mimbres region of New Mexico is a place that reminds you how big the American Southwest really is. The region's grassy slopes stretch for miles in all directions, turning orange
Sometime during the 11th century, before Columbus and Cortez and the host of European explorers who would come and change the continent, people stacked the cobbles to form one of the largest settlements in the Southwest. The people were masters of the environment. They hunted with flaked stones and grew enough food from the arid landscape to feed a village. They were artists, developing an elaborate style of pottery with geometric designs and illustrations of mythic figures such as horned serpents.

Archaeologists know these people as Mimbres, according to Margaret Nelson and Michelle Hegmon, archaeologists and professors of anthropology at Arizona State University. The Mimbres people flourished for generations. But then, somehow, they vanished. Based on the archaeological evidence, it appears as if the Mimbres simply picked up their belongings and walked away, leaving behind little more than forgotten tools and broken pottery.

Traditionally, archaeologists have explained this abandonment with the concept of cultural “collapse.” After years of stability, the Mimbres culture declined, at one point becoming so bad that it “died off” and was replaced by other groups.

But how does an entire culture die? Is this what really happened in the Mimbres region? Not according to the ASU scientists. Hegmon and Nelson have spent their careers studying the Mimbres. They challenge the popular concept of cultural collapse in the Southwest. Together, in a previously unstudied part of the region, they have found where some of the Mimbres went, and the new culture they were in the process of becoming.

Destroying the Past  “The Mimbres didn’t just disappear into some mysterious void.” Nelson chuckles, as she sits on a bucket and sketches the remains of a prehistoric wall below her feet.

The time is early June 1998. Her field crew has been working in the eastern part of the Mimbres region for the past three weeks, digging out several sites thought to have housed Mimbres families 800 years ago.

Nelson chats about the features of the room that interest her, what they could have been used for and when they were made. The wall, she thinks, once supported a small field house that served as a temporary shelter for people from larger villages.

Archaeology is about making connections between people and what they left behind. It usually involves a laborious process of excavation and interpretation—one that has been much more difficult in the Mimbres region than in other areas.

When Nelson began studying the Mimbres in the early 1970s, pot-hunting was the predominant form of digging being done in the region. Mimbres black-on-white pottery was highly prized at art shows and museums around the country. People frequently ransacked the ruins with pickaxes, shovels, even backhoes, to get at the prehistoric art. Some were even converted to anything that could be sold.

Until recently, however, little was known about the people who had made the pots. A few studies had been conducted on Mimbres sites in the 1930s. Most of the sites were so badly damaged by looters that frustrated archaeologists turned their attention to more pristine areas of the Southwest, ignoring the region for the next 40 years.

But the pot-hunting continued. Such haphazard digging takes artifacts out of their original context, yielding little, if any, information for archaeologists, Nelson explains.
The People Who Made the Pots

Fearing that eventually there would be nothing left of the Mimbres to study, archaeologists went back to the region in the 1970s. Their first excavations focused on the Mimbres Valley, an area east of Silver City along the Mimbres River.

There, they found more than a dozen large sites dating back to 1,000 A.D. The lichen-covered cobbles were still embedded in the grassy soil, forming the outline of each structure. The buildings appear to have been set up like apartment complexes, housing as many as 300 people in 100 to 200 connected rooms. Each box-like room followed the same type of building pattern. Every roof had an opening through which people could enter by descending a ladder to the floor. Inside was a hearth used as a warming oven. There also were stones for grinding corn, ceramic bowls, and sleeping mats.

For 150 years, people were settled here. But then something made most of the families leave. Perhaps their farmland wore out. Perhaps there was some sort of intertribal conflict. Or perhaps people heard of better opportunities in other communities. Whatever the reason, most of the people living in these villages began moving. And hundreds of years later, the scientists who had defined them as the Classic Mimbres could find little evidence of their presence dating after 1150 A.D. Many researchers concluded that the Classic Mimbres collapsed. Why, however, was not yet understood.

"That was absolutely the party line," Hegmon says. "But 'collapsed' is a silly word for that situation. The Mimbres did move out of some of the big sites, but people were always moving."

One place she thinks the Classic Mimbres went to was a series of drainages east of the Mimbres Valley, between the Black Range Mountains and the Rio Grande River.

Nelson first came to the eastern Mimbres area in the summer of 1982. She went at the request of a rancher who had found a number of ruins on his property. Nelson went to was a series of drainages east of the Mimbres Valley, between the Black Range Mountains and the Rio Grande River.

While there, she saw some of the same Classic architecture and pottery styles found in the Mimbres Valley. But there was also evidence of settlements that, although they contained Classic Mimbres pottery, were much smaller and built in a completely different way.

Instead of the large Classic villages, these consisted of only one block of three to 12 individual dwellings. Each was unlike the next, containing a different style of masonry, grinding stones, and cooking hearth.

"We'd even find rooms that had four walls. Each wall had a slightly different kind of construction," says Hegmon, who joined Nelson in 1993.
The daily winds which usually push across the 350,000-acre Ladder Ranch in eastern New Mexico are gone for the moment. It is around 4:30 a.m. The only thing awake is a lonesome buffalo, which stands quietly munching the grass around base camp. The sun is not up, but the day is about to start.

With a sudden flurry of zips, groggy archaeology students pull themselves out of their sleeping bags, then shuffle into the kitchen for breakfast. They eat quickly. By 5:30 a.m., they hop aboard trucks and rumble off to various research sites.

Fast forward to 10 a.m. At Avilas Canyon Village, field staffer Gavin McCallough and students Eric Cox and Greg Wolf chop chunks of sun-dried earth with pickaxes. They search intermittently for a slight change in the soil’s color—and indication of the room’s floor. “We’re not sure if this is the actual floor,” Cox says between swings. “We haven’t seen a hearth yet, and there probably should be one around here.”

In a connecting room, Tiffany Clark has found her floor. Behind the site director, remnants of the room’s center post, hearth, and vent lay on the ground. Left behind by someone more than 800 years before.

Melissa Paugh, a Penn State undergraduate, looks over Clark’s shoulder and spots a discoloration in the soil. Clark stabs at it with her trowel, cutting into what was once a small hole in the floor. Just above it, they make a discovery. From the alignment of wall stones, they notice that it could have supported a door between the rooms.

By 2 p.m., the diggers have returned to camp, bringing with them hundreds of artifacts. Sitting in circles, the students use old toothbrushes and pails of water to scrub the dirt off of chipped stone and pottery sherds. They measure the size and shape of each pottery sherd. From its particular style, they will be able to tell when each piece was made, and where it came from. Chipped stone will be examined to find out what kind of tools the inhabitants used. Charcoal from burnt roofs will be analyzed with carbon 14 dating to determine when the room was abandoned.

Another day of research ends as the sun goes down. The infamous eastern Mimbres winds once again push across the hillside, bending the tents into precarious shapes as the students climb back into their sleeping bags. Tomorrow morning will come early.

—Chris Kahn
So who were these people? How did they get there? And if they were somehow related to the Classic Mimbres, why were they living in such a different way?

Carbon dating of organic material found in the rooms showed that they were built after Classic Mimbres villages were abandoned. Some of the room blocks were obviously younger—constructed on top of old Classic structures.

Hegmon and Nelson realized that these people were from the same culture that had abandoned the Classic villages. They think some of them moved into field houses—built as temporary shelters during the Classic period—and remodeled them to accommodate a more long-term use. Others apparently had come from the Mimbres Valley to settle among the locals in the eastern Mimbres area.

During the process, their society changed. They were not living in the same way, and their neighbors came from a mix of different backgrounds. This explains why there were so many pottery styles and why the architecture varied from room to room.

A Transitional Time

By the end of the Classic, they had made it worse.

Nelson and Hegmon decided to call this phase “Postclassic Mimbres,” because it suggests the continuity of population and of some of the Mimbres traditions of the Classic period.

This was a transitional time. People accustomed to living in large, stable groups were now relatively alone. The social constraints that they lived under during the Classic had broken down.

“The Classic period was a pretty miserable time to live,” Hegmon says. “There was a lot of pressure on conformity, and everyone was crowded into the same places at the same time.”

So, like the American homesteaders, people chose to leave the security of their villages in search of a more self-sufficient, independent lifestyle.

“I think the reason was ecological reasons for shifting. In order to maintain a population in this region, you cannot keep people in dense groups for very long.”

The Classic villages expanded with every generation. To accommodate their increasing numbers, people cut more and more trees for construction, built more
dams, and cleared more land for farming, Hegmon says. “They were using their environment pretty hard,” she says. “By the end of the Classic, they had made it worse.”

Although deserting their villages was a major change to the Mimbres society, it was not a clear cut end to the culture, Hegmon insists. Instead, she thinks the switch from Classic to Postclassic was simply one of the many “reorganizations” people went through in the prehistoric Southwest.

“Most parts of the Southwest were actually settled for only a short time,” Hegmon says. “I think that these patterns of movement are one of the issues that we’re really able to address here.”

It was natural to move around about every 20 years, she says. Moving was something that people expected to do to avoid problems like drying up their water sources or over-farming their soil.

If the ASU scientists are right about the Postclassic Mimbres being mobile, then it is possible the tiny hamlets were used intermittently by small groups of families. The Postclassic also shows something else. It reveals a link between the Classic Mimbres and other cultures in the Southwest.

Hegmon and Nelson have found that gradually, as people were moving around in the Postclassic period, the architecture and ceramics stop looking like Mimbres and more like Tularosa, another culture that existed to the north.

“If you came into this area and you dug only in the large sites, it would look like the Tularosa moved into the area,” Nelson says. “But by paying attention to the smaller Postclassic sites, we can see the actual identity transformation. We’re seeing the Classic Mimbres become the Tularosa.”

Scientists missed this transformation in earlier work. Southwestern archaeology was usually focused on defining the homogenous, easily distinguishable, cultural periods that prevailed in the prehistoric Southwest.

Hegmon and Nelson are showing that there is much more to the story. In between these dominant styles, people were moving around from place to place. As they moved, their culture changed.

The ASU researchers have made a connection between the Mimbres and other groups in the southwest. The Mimbres did not “vanish” after all. They just became something different.