

The Ancient Pueblo Landscape of the Galisteo Basin

The focus of this year's Pecos Conference is the Galisteo Basin of northern New Mexico. The Galisteo is a large, arid basin located west of the Pecos Valley, south of Santa Fe and northeast of Albuquerque. Sliced by rugged volcanic dikes and ridges and surrounded by mesas and mountains, the Basin drains to the Rio Grande through the intermittent Galisteo River. The Basin was occupied by Puebloan farmers from the early 13th to late 17th centuries, and it contains some of the largest Puebloan villages in the Southwest. Their zenith occurred in the mid-15th century, but a few northern basin villages persisted through the early Spanish Colonial period. Several of these pueblos became seats of Franciscan missions and then became hotbeds of Puebloan resistance. The Galisteo's largely Tewa inhabitants rose in 1680 along with the Native population throughout the northern Rio Grande to expel the Spanish. Though reconquest by Spain followed the revolt by only 12 years, the Galisteo Basin pueblos were never resettled, and the Spanish attempt at reestablishing Galisteo Pueblo sputtered and failed. Spanish demands, attacks by the Comanche, and changing climatic conditions made life there an insurmountable struggle.

The rich cultural heritage of the Basin remained largely ignored until the early 20th century when Nels Nelson of the American Museum of Natural History conducted extensive excavations at a number of the pueblos. Research has been conducted intermittently in subsequent decades, but the Galisteo is still archeological terra incognita. Once off the beaten track, the Basin's isolated ranches are being replaced by high-end homes and subdivisions. Recognizing the threats posed by development, erosion, and vandalism, Congress passed the Galisteo Basin Archeological Sites Protection Act in 2004 to preserve and protect the Basin's significant archeological sites. In 2007, the state of New Mexico followed with a similar act providing funds for initial assessment of 24 sites. A resurgence of archeological research is underway that promises to illuminate the Galisteo Basin's important role in northern Rio Grande prehistory.