

LESSON

8

The Mystery of the Anasazi

Step 1 · Starting With What I Know



Listing

In many ways, the goal of science is to solve mysteries. Write a few sentences about one scientific mystery that intrigues you.



Known Concepts

Dendr is a word part that means “tree.”
Chron is a word part that means “time.”
-logy is a word part that means “study.” Use these clues to write your best definition of the word **dendrochronology** on the lines below.



Synonyms

Cross out the word in each column whose meaning is least similar to the others. Write a sentence telling why you chose as you did.

- | | |
|-----------------|------------|
| 1. agricultural | 2. plateau |
| rustic | prairie |
| pastoral | ravine |
| nomadic | mesa |
| agrarian | plain |

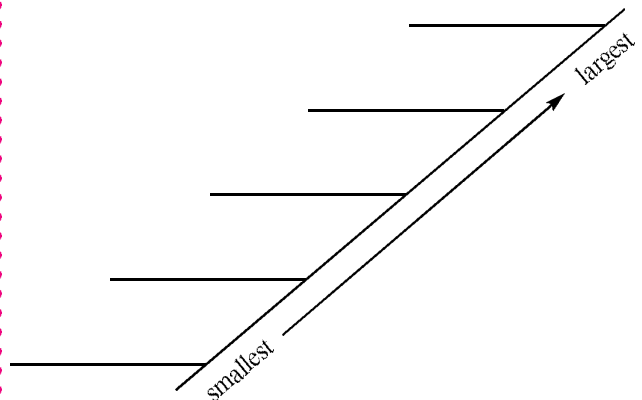
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Clines

Complete the cline by listing the words below in order from smallest to largest.

- chasm abyss pit crater plateau



The Mystery of the Anasazi

In 1888, a rancher named Richard Wetherill and his brother-in-law, Charles Mason, rode across a **plateau** in southwestern Colorado. The plateau is called Mesa Verde, which is a Spanish name that means “green table.” The two men were searching for missing cattle. They rode to the edge of a deep canyon. When they looked across the **chasm**, they were amazed to see a group of stone buildings wedged under the overhanging rock of the canyon wall. The cowboys had discovered Cliff Palace, **remnant** of a long-lost civilization called the Anasazi.



Anasazi ruins at Mesa Verde

Who were these ancient cliff-dwellers of the Southwest? Their dwellings have been found in shallow caves recessed in the cliffs of box canyons all over the Colorado plateau, an area that

extends from southern Colorado and Utah to northern New Mexico and Arizona. We know that they are the ancestors of the modern day Pueblo Indians who currently inhabit the region. We

also know that they were superb basket makers, they hunted and gathered, and they grew meager crops of squash and maize. As the Anasazi culture developed, the people came to rely more and more on agriculture for their sustenance. Archaeologists have learned a great deal about these early people in the last hundred years, but one great mystery remains. In about A.D. 1300, the Anasazi abandoned their homes, never to return. What made them disappear? No one knows for sure.

Early Anasazi Ancestors

Today, a body of water called the Bering Strait separates North America from Siberia. Thousands of years ago, though, the water level was lower than it is now. A bridge of land briefly connected the two continents.

Sometime around 30,000 years ago, **nomadic** bands of hunters crossed the bridge in search of food. Over the centuries, they made their way south, to what is now the southwestern United States. These were the first inhabitants of the Southwest. The relationship between these

Pronunciation Key

Anasazi: AH • nuh • SAH • zee

kiva: KEE • vuh

Mesa Verde: may • suh VAIR • day

pueblo: PWEH • bloh

yucca: YUH • kuh

peoples and the Anasazi, who came much later, is unclear. Archeologists have determined, however, that the early Anasazi were influenced by other nearby groups, such as the Hohokam in what is now southeastern Arizona and the Mogollon in present-day southwestern New Mexico. It was from these people that they learned to make pottery and domesticate maize (wild corn) and squash. Maize was ground into cornmeal and probably baked in small flat cakes.

The Basket Makers

Agriculture brought an end to the nomadic life on the Colorado plateau. The people began to settle down in temporary communities in the shade of the desert rock. These are the people we call the Anasazi, a Navajo word meaning “ancient ones.” Because they made fine baskets from the fibers of yucca plants, which they used to store and prepare food, they are also known as the Basket Makers.



Anasazi artifacts found at Mesa Verde

In about A.D. 550, the Anasazi moved to Mesa Verde, where they built their first permanent villages. The Anasazi constructed dwellings archaeologists call pit-houses because they look like shallow craters dug into the earth. Walls and roofs were made of sun-dried mud and clay formed over a frame of wood

and grass. A hole in the center of the roof allowed smoke to escape.

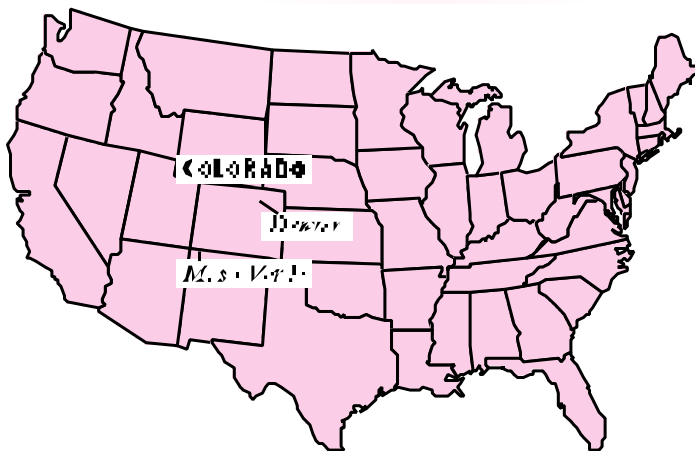
The Mesa Verde Basket Makers also used clay to make pottery. Clay cooking pots were a major innovation that allowed the Anasazi to improve their ways of cooking. They added beans to their diet. Beans are rich in protein, and this change made the Anasazi healthier. In addition to corn and squash, they grew cotton and tobacco and raised turkeys.

The Early Pueblo Period

Another important transformation in Anasazi life took place around A.D. 750. The Anasazi began to build square dwellings with straight walls. Several dwellings were connected to form a straight line or a semi-circle. Archaeologists call these



Anasazi pueblo made of stones and mud



collections of dwellings “pueblos,” from a Spanish word for “village.” “Pueblo” is also the name for this period of Anasazi life.

At first, the pueblos at Mesa Verde were made of sun-dried mud reinforced with wooden posts. Later, stones were added to the mud. Eventually, entire walls were made of stone. Stone walls made the pueblo houses sturdier and thus more permanent. In front of the pueblo was a room dug into the ground. This room, called a kiva, was an important part of pueblo life and was used for social gatherings and religious ceremonies.

The Classic Pueblo Period

By about 1100, small Anasazi pueblos had joined together to form larger communities located high up in the cliffs. Cliff Palace dates from this period. It is one of the largest pueblos and contains more than two hundred rooms. To reach the cliff houses, the Anasazi used ladders or toe-holds dug into the rock. Cliff houses were advantageous in that they stayed cool, even during the hottest part of the day. They would also have prevented enemies from invading the pueblo—but what enemies did the Anasazi have to fear? Archaeologists know of no other inhabitants of the region during the Anasazi era, except for a few small bands of nomads. Therefore, they think the Anasazi pueblos may have begun to fight among themselves. Perhaps they quarreled over water, which is hard to find in the arid Southwest.

Did you know?

The nomadic hunters who crossed the Bering Strait 30,000 years ago worked together to bring down big game, such as the mastodon and the woolly mammoth.

The Disappearance of the Anasazi

Sometime between 1250 and 1300, the Anasazi abandoned



Interior of an Anasazi kiva

Keeping Sharp

Look at the list of words below. Put a check mark next to each word that describes a type of change or improvement.

- transformation
- remnant
- innovation
- plateau
- fiber
- reinforce

their home in Mesa Verde. In some places, families left behind clothing, tools and supplies, as if they intended to return someday. They never did.

What caused their departure? Archaeologists think the Anasazi may have depleted their natural resources. The Anasazi had to farm every inch of good land to grow enough food to feed the population. Over time, the soil may have worn out. The animal population may have dwindled, too, from centuries of being hunted. It may have become more difficult to find enough wood to build houses and to burn for fuel.

Then came the drought. Even in a normal year, the average rainfall in Mesa Verde is only eighteen inches. There had been dry spells throughout the Anasazi's history, but they lasted only a few seasons. In 1276, however, a drought began that lasted for years. Archaeologists know this from studying the patterns of growth in tree rings, a science known as dendrochronology. There was not enough rain to water the crops in summer. Winters were cold but dry, which meant there was no melting snow the following spring. Crops failed year after year. Eventually, the Anasazi had no choice but to seek greener pastures. Perhaps they anticipated a return home when the drought ended, but they never went back. The Anasazi people and their culture disappeared, but traces of their lives remain scattered among the canyons of the Colorado plateau.

Step 3 Refining and Extending What I Know

Self-Assessment

Part A: Look at each word. If you don't know the word or if you aren't sure about it, write 1 on the line.

Part B: If you are sure you know the word well and can use it in any situation, put 2 on the line.

The words with 1s are the words you need to study.

_____	chasm
_____	crater
_____	dendrochronology
_____	departure
_____	deplete
_____	domesticate
_____	drought
_____	dwindle
_____	fiber
_____	innovation
_____	maize
_____	nomadic
_____	plateau
_____	reinforce
_____	remnant
_____	transformation

Other Interesting Words

Add any other words from the article you think you need to study or would like to know.

Comprehension: Perceiving Structure

Both pairs of sentences below are related in the same way. Write a phrase describing the relationship, and find two other sentences in the article that are related in the same way.

Pair #1 The Anasazi began making beans an important part of their diet. Beans are rich in protein, and this change in their diet made the Anasazi healthier.

Pair #2 Thousands of years ago, though, the water level was lower than it is now. A bridge of land briefly connected the two continents.

Relationship: _____

Example from the article: _____

Analogies

For each analogy, choose the word that best completes it.

1. MUSTANG : HORSE :: CORN : _____

FIBER MAIZE MASTODON

2. FLOOD : _____ :: SURPLUS : SHORTAGE

FIBER DWINDLE DROUGHT

3. DECREASE : _____ :: INCREASE : SWELL

REMNANT DWINDLE TRANSFORMATION

4. ARRIVAL : _____ :: COME : GO

DEPARTURE DEplete DOMESTICATE

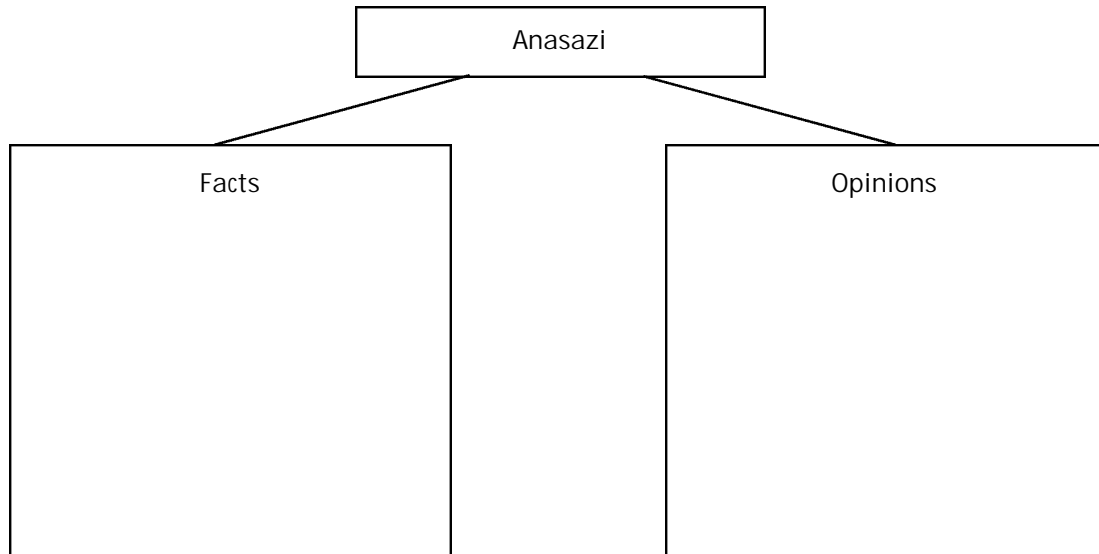
5. MOUNTAIN : HILL :: VALLEY : _____

CRATER PLATEAU CHASM

Step 4 · Applying What I've Learned

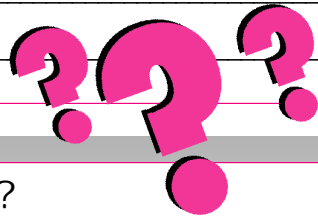
Comprehension: Fact and Opinion

Use words or phrases from the article to finish the chart below. Write facts about the Anasazi in the box on the left. Write opinions about the Anasazi in the box on the right.



Comprehension: Summarizing

Now use the chart to write a few sentences summarizing what scientists know for certain about the mysterious Anasazi.



Questions, Anyone?

- *The Anasazi* by Eleanor H. Ayer. Walker, 1993.
- *The Anasazi: Ancient Indian People of the American Southwest* by J.J. Brody. Rizzoli, 1990.
- *Ancient Cliff Dwellers of Mesa Verde* by Caroline Arnold. Clarion Books, 1992.
- *Ancient Indians of the Southwest* by Alfred Tamarin and Shirley Glubok. Doubleday & Company, 1975.
- *The Pueblo Indians, Farmers of the Rio Grande* by Sonia Bleeker. Morrow, 1955.