

Travels in ancient lands

Jeremy A. Sabloff

In Search of the Old Ones: Exploring the Anasazi World of the Southwest. By David Roberts. *Simon and Schuster: 1996. Pp. 271. \$24.*

PUBLIC interest in archaeology seems to be at an all-time high. Across the globe, archaeological materials are featured in newspapers, magazines, books and television programmes and on videos and even compact discs. Archaeology is further blessed (although some academics might say cursed) by growing numbers of amateur archaeologists who are becoming more actively involved with the field. Such pursuits run the gamut from participation in carefully run excavation programmes to the occasional visit to museums to — unfortunately — the looting of ancient sites.

One of the most time-honoured (and honourable) forms of amateur activity is the exploration of previously unknown or little known archaeological sites. The melding of wilderness adventure and archaeological discovery frequently results in publications that range from travelogues to detailed accounts of archaeological finds. David Roberts's modern travels across the rugged landscape of south-western North America are an excellent example of the best of this amateur tradition.

Roberts is a professional writer and an avid hiker. Here he recounts his visits to a wide variety of renowned and relatively unknown architectural remains of the pre-Columbian ancestors of modern-day Pueblo peoples, who are known in the archaeological literature as the Anasazi. Roberts writes well, and his enthusiasm for exploring the outdoors, his interest in the environment and his appreciation of both the ancient and modern cultures of the American southwest make the book an entertaining and informative work that quickly absorbs the reader in the author's narrative. While

his introspective examination of his own reactions to the sites and people he encounters in his travels is quite engaging, his understanding of the intellectual and

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Window on the past — the remains of Anasazi villages or pueblos in Mesa Verde National Park. The ruins date from the Pueblo III period (twelfth to fourteenth centuries AD), which saw the fullest development and eventual decline of the cliff-dwelling culture.

emotional issues that dominate south-western archaeology today is particularly impressive.

Through his examination of the archaeological literature, interviews with knowledgeable individuals and travels in the region, Roberts is able to provide a

perceptive discussion of modern archaeological debates about the abandonment of many Anasazi sites at the close of the thirteenth century AD, as well as Native American views of this topic. He seems to favour the argument that environmental stress led to endemic warfare and the growing need for defence. Eventually, the ever-present conflict and the pull of the socially cohesive Kachina Phenomenon to the south led to the abandonment of much of the northern Anasazi area. But Roberts is careful to point out the variety of professional viewpoints on this topic and to indicate that there is still much disagreement.

B. Norman/Ancient Art and Architecture Collection

The author also makes a strong case for the contributions of the Wetherill brothers, especially Richard Wetherill, at the end of the last century and the early part of this one, in helping launch the field of Anasazi archaeology, and dismisses claims that the Wetherills were nothing more than glorified pothunters. Roberts further offers some useful comments about the policies of the US National Park Service regarding the preservation of archaeological sites and public access to them, and the contradictions and problems faced by past government stewards and by interested tourists.

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Although there are some inaccuracies and gaps in Roberts's coverage, occasional reliance on out-of-date archaeological information (on the Toltecs or the dating of the domestication of maize in Mexico, for example), or over-romanticism (as in the chapter on the "open museum"), the author has done his homework and is usually judicious in his discussions of contentious issues.

Both the general reader interested in exploration in general or the American southwest in particular and the academic will find this evocative book worthy of their attention. □

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