7.1 The Anasazi

Anasazi is the name given to the ancestors of the present-day Hopi and Zuni tribes that live along the Rio Grande in New Mexico and Arizona. The Anasazi civilization flourished in the centuries around 1000 AD in the region that corresponds to the border area joining Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico. This is not a particularly fertile area, but the Anasazi succeeded nevertheless in building a thriving economy based on hunting and efficient farming (Brody 1990). The Anasazi dwelt in villages that often boasted monumental architecture. Around 1250 AD, however, their life changed drastically: many villages were abandoned, and new settlements were built in out-of-the-way, almost inaccessible, places. Abandonment of sites is a phenomenon common also to other civilizations of the Americas, but the Anasazi version was extremely striking and difficult to account for. For example, the Anasazi constructed an enormous 420-room building at Sand Canyon, which was created, inhabited, and abandoned, all in the space of 50 years around 1200 AD.

We have little information about the life and society of the Anasazi. As far as we know, they did not have writing, and until recently they were thought to be (along with the Mayas) a sort of “sons of the flowers.” This view, however, now has been modified considerably. For instance, at the so-called Castle Rock site, in Colorado, also inhabited for an extremely short period between 1256 and 1274, there is no doubt that the occupation ended in a
massacre. The human remains discovered there show unmistakable signs of cannibalism and scalping. It is thus clear that isolation in inaccessible villages was due to the need for defense. And yet this question of abandonment is far from being fully explained, although there is evidence of repeated droughts, invasions, and social and demographic tension (Nelson and Scachner 2002). It is also possible, as we shall see, that the Anasazi social customs, religion, and way of thinking played a role in this large-scale desertion, and to further explore these issues it is essential to trace their astronomical ideas, as the study of celestial cycles was undoubtedly one of the basic constituent of their very existence.

The place where this is most evident is Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. The Anasazi site there is made up of various two-story buildings, called *pueblos*, which are often enormous. Each pueblo contained dozens, even hundreds, of rooms as well as numerous spaces known as *kivas*. Kivas are circular rooms or buildings dug into the ground and elaborately fitted out inside; some, such as Casa Rinconada, which we shall discuss, are enormous. Access to the kivas was normally from above, and inside were to be found alcoves on the walls and an opening in the floor, set on the north–south axis. A fireplace with ventilating shaft completed the fittings. Archaeologists attribute a symbolic interpretation to the kivas, based on analogous structures (albeit rectangular) still in use today among the Pueblo Indians. It is difficult to

**Figure 7.1:** One of the Anasazi great Kivas: Chetro Ketl