GEOGRAPHICAL FIELD NOTE

IN SEARCH OF A NAVAJO SACRED GEOGRAPHY*

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"One must know one's terrain." This phrase, mumbled by George Garrad, the gin-soaked cartographer in the 1995 film *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill but Came Down a Mountain,* directed by Christopher Monger, voices a vehement rationale for understanding mountains through field exploration. Garrad and his assistant, Reginald Anson, have arrived in Wales to measure the heights of mountains. But Garrad's irksome personality and penchant for condescension inspire those around him to great lengths of avoidance, and his commitment to mapmaking falls lamentably short of his devotion to the bottle. Conversely, Anson's passion for fieldwork and fascination with what the local summit means to the Welsh enable the village to succeed in its efforts to raise the height of the "hill" so that it will appear as a mountain on government maps. While George Garrad accepts determination of an exact elevation as the utmost task, his young partner Anson and the Welsh can see beyond this quantification to the more powerful symbolic qualities of landscapes.

Half a world away, in the wild and tumbled mountains of eastern Arizona, the ethnographer Keith Basso discovers another kind of drinking: "As Apache men and women set about drinking from places—as they acquire knowledge of their natural surroundings, commit it to memory, and apply it to the workings of their minds—they show by their actions that their surroundings live in them" (1996, 146). The rich place-names and tribal narratives of the sacred landscape of the Western Apache homeland recall its mythical importance and deeply influence the Apache sense of self and place.

The Englishman and Keith Basso also share an evocation of the importance of knowing where we are, especially in fieldwork. It is understood that this knowledge runs deeper than a single attribute (Fisher and Wood 1998). Technologies such as global positioning systems may help many people record their spatial coordinates, but the raw data fall well short of accounting for the cultural and symbolic qualities that are needed in the geographical sleuthing of the precise location of sacred mountains. To find the earthly manifestation of a mythical sacred mountain we must instead rely on qualitative assessments of landform shape, relative location, intervisibilities (line-of-sight views of one sacred mountain from another), folklore, place-names, ceremonial use, and previous explorations.

Gobernador Knob, one of the preeminent Navajo (or Diné) sacred mountains and a critical piece of the Navajo sacred geography, is often terra incognita in the

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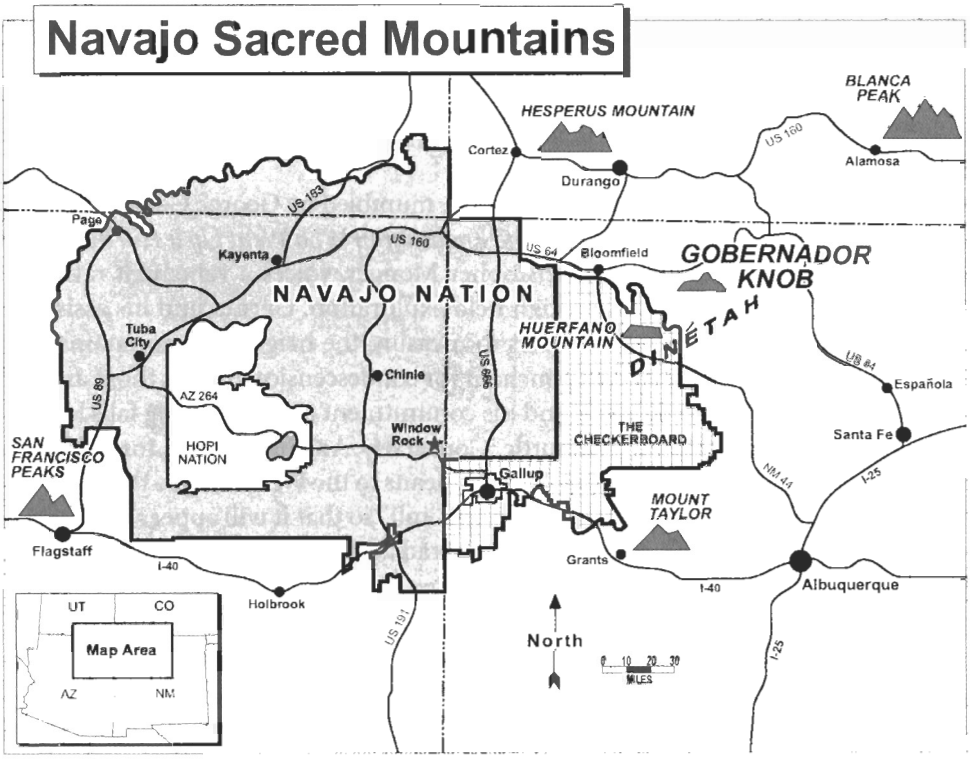

FIG. 1—Gobernador Knob and five other major Navajo sacred mountains. (Cartography by the author, with the assistance of Jeffrey S. Smith)

literature and maps of Navajo lands. Unknown terrains hold great imaginative appeal for the likes of John K. Wright (1947), but geographical omissions or misplacements take on even more potent significance in pilgrimage and sacred-land studies.

NAVAJO SACRED GEOGRAPHY

There is consensus today about the precise location of five of six deeply symbolic Navajo sacred mountains. The Navajo world is bounded by four cardinal mountains: Blanca Peak, Colorado, in the east; Mount Taylor, New Mexico, in the south; San Francisco Peaks, Arizona, in the west; and Hesperus Mountain, Colorado, in the north (Wyman 1957). Within Dinétah, the original Navajo homeland, lie two sacred mountains: Huerfano Mountain and Gobernador Knob, both in northwestern New Mexico (Jett 2001) (Figure 1).

But the geography is not so simple. In an effort to complete fieldwork at each sacred summit, with the goal of comparing the actual land use of these mountains with their symbolic values (Blake 2001), I found a great deal of confusion, even among the Navajo, about the exact location of Gobernador Knob. With such misinformation, how can the Navajo connect with the spiritual power of the place, and

how can culturally sensitive land management be ensured? For the Navajo, events need to be spatially anchored, or their significance is reduced and cannot be properly assessed (Basso 1996). It is widely accepted that Gobernador Knob is in the vicinity of Dinétah, which is located east of the main Navajo Reservation near "The Checkerboard," an area of mixed private, state, federal, and Navajo lands. It can also be readily surmised, toponymically, that Gobernador Knob may be located near Gobernador Canyon east of Bloomfield, New Mexico. Approximate location, however, is of limited value when searching for a relatively small, indistinct knob set in a sea of similar mesa and butte landforms.

So, I set off in search of a Navajo sacred geography.[1] The task was complicated by the many scholars of Navajo land and culture who mistakenly identify, misplace, grossly generalize, or omit the location of Gobernador Knob on maps and in place descriptions, even when sacred mountains are an explicit focus of the work.[2] Confusion also exists among Navajo-authored works about their own sacred lands.[3] Although it is tempting to believe that these mistakes are instances of deliberate protection of American Indian religious beliefs from prying eyes (and some efforts along these lines are necessary), all of these errors are probably inadvertent. No effort is made or mandated to hide the location of major Navajo sacred landforms (Jett 1995). Furthermore, the knob is located beyond the reservation boundaries on land under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management; its location is a matter of public record.

The inference to be drawn from the rather copious literature is that the scholars and cartographers who misplace Gobernador Knob have not visited the place. Field exploration is typically beyond their central focus, but their work nevertheless confounds the Navajo sacred geography. I am not the only scholar of Navajo sacred mountains to have climbed Gobernador Knob or to understand its correct location, but the detailed landscape exploration and understanding of mountain symbolism that I used to find the exact sacred summit reveals important aspects of place attachment and the value of qualitative methods in fieldwork.[4]

Searching for Gobernador Knob

The misinformation about the exact location of the knob stems from many factors. Greater scholarly emphasis has typically been placed on the higher and more dramatic four cardinal mountains, resulting in less attention to the details of Huerfano Mountain and Gobernador Knob. Also, Gobernador Knob has the second-lowest elevation of the six sacred mountains (2,316 meters) and the least local relative relief compared with the surrounding terrain, only about 60 meters to the east and 220 meters to the west. Simply put, it is not nearly as visually or topographically impressive as are many Four Corners landforms. Complicating matters is the limited visibility of the knob from any major roadway. The knob is barely discernable from U.S. Highway 64, even if one knows exactly where to look. Next is the matter of accessibility. Even if one knows the approximate location of Gobernador Knob, actually getting there is relatively difficult. It is well off the beaten track, and al-

though the effort is not all that strenuous, it requires persistence and route-finding skills by automobile and on foot. The distant location of Gobernador Knob from major population centers further conspires to keep the knob in obscurity, with little visitation.

Confusion is also created by the multitude of "Gobernador" place-names in the area (Julyan 1996). A Spanish word for "governor," the name "Gobernador" was also given to a major tributary of the San Juan River, a townsite, and, most significantly, a survey benchmark. No maps for this area include the name "Gobernador Knob," but the county, Bureau of Land Management, National Forest Service, and U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps all show survey benchmark designations, including the one named "Gobernador." When someone wants to locate Gobernador Knob, the natural tendency is to zero in on the Gobernador benchmark. Placed in 1945, this benchmark sits atop Manzanares Mesa overlooking Gobernador Canyon.[5] The problem with this location is that nothing there quite looks like a prominent knob. The terrain is fairly nondescript, hardly what one expects for a sacred mountain. In reality, the Gobernador benchmark is located nearly 26 kilometers northwest of Gobernador Knob. Why is the Gobernador benchmark not on Gobernador Knob? When the knob benchmark was placed in 1906 it was named "Snyder."[6] The etymology of "Snyder" is long forgotten—the survey record book simply notes that the summit of Gobernador Knob had the name (Marshall 1910).[7] The crux of the misunderstanding is that the Snyder benchmark is on Gobernador Knob and that the Gobernador benchmark is on Manzanares Mesa.

Evidence supporting the assertion that the Snyder benchmark is on Gobernador Knob begins with the observations of Richard Van Valkenburgh, a Bureau of Indian Affairs employee in the 1930s who compiled a detailed geographical dictionary of the Navajo lands (1999). His notes, now on deposit in Tucson, describe the location of Gobernador Knob, and he also made a sketch showing the knob just southwest of four small knoblike summits or *cerritos* (Van Valkenburgh n.d.). Barely noticeable along Laguna Seca Mesa to the northeast of the Snyder station are the four cerritos, hardly enough to merit a glance without the archival map. To actually find the knob I searched for each benchmark in the area, driving the maze of narrow and winding back roads maintained in various states of decay by the Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, or natural-gas production companies. The closest road access to the Snyder benchmark still requires a moderate hike westward through a dense piñon pine and juniper woodland. Suddenly, emerging from the forest at the edge of the mesa at the headwaters of Gobernador Canyon, a knob comes into view (Figure 2). Indeed, this is the place! It is the only prominent knob in the area, and it fits the Van Valkenburgh description and map perfectly, located on the western escarpment of Laguna Seca Mesa, 8 kilometers south of U.S. Highway 64.[8]

Sacred–Mountain Symbolism

Even more significant to the identification of Gobernador Knob as one of the central Navajo sacred mountains than the Van Valkenburgh archives is the symbolism

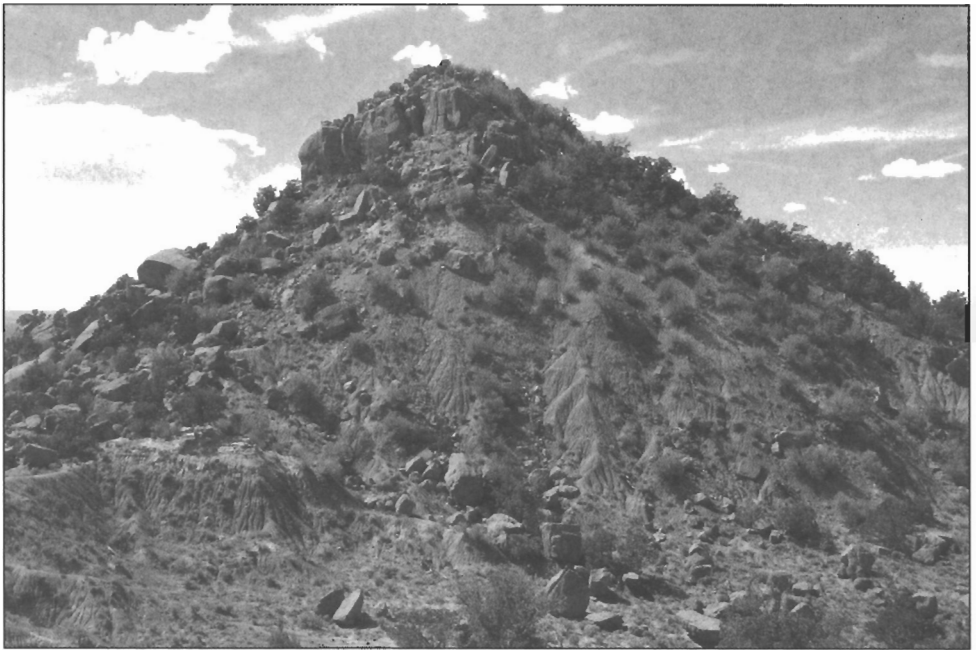

FIG. 2—Gobernador Knob, viewed from the east across the headwaters of Gobernador Canyon. Sandstone caprock boulders armor the slope as they tumble down after the underlying shale is eroded. No trails lead to the summit, but a scramble is possible up the eastern or northern slope. The dominant vegetation is piñon pine, juniper, mountain mahogany, and manzanita. (Photograph by the author, September 2000)

of the landform shape. On top of Gobernador Knob, First Man created Changing Woman, the most trusted Navajo spirit and the near-personification of the natural order of the universe. Here she gave birth to her twin sons, who heroically killed the monsters that once imperiled all of the Navajo country (Reichard 1950). The centrality of Gobernador Knob in Navajo lore created a symbolic link between the shape of the summit and the first type of Navajo dwelling. The hogan, or Navajo home place, is most commonly seen today with a (female) rounded top, but the earlier style was called a (male) conical forked-pole hogan because of its construction method (Wyman 1970). The Navajo spirits decreed that this form of hogan have a fine tapering shape in association with Gobernador Knob (Figure 3).

The summit of the knob is surprisingly flat and large (10 by 30 meters). In addition to the Snyder station mark at the high point, three aspects of sacred-mountain symbolism are visible: a symbolic tie to a Navajo toponym, intervisibilities with other sacred places, and evidence of ceremonial visits. The Navajo descriptive name for Gobernador Knob is "Ch'óol'į'í," a name that likely refers to a lookout or vantage point and perhaps also to spruce trees (Julyan 1996). The knob certainly is a superb lookout, commanding a view of nearly 200 kilometers across northwestern New Mexico and into northeastern Arizona and southern Colorado. Spruce trees

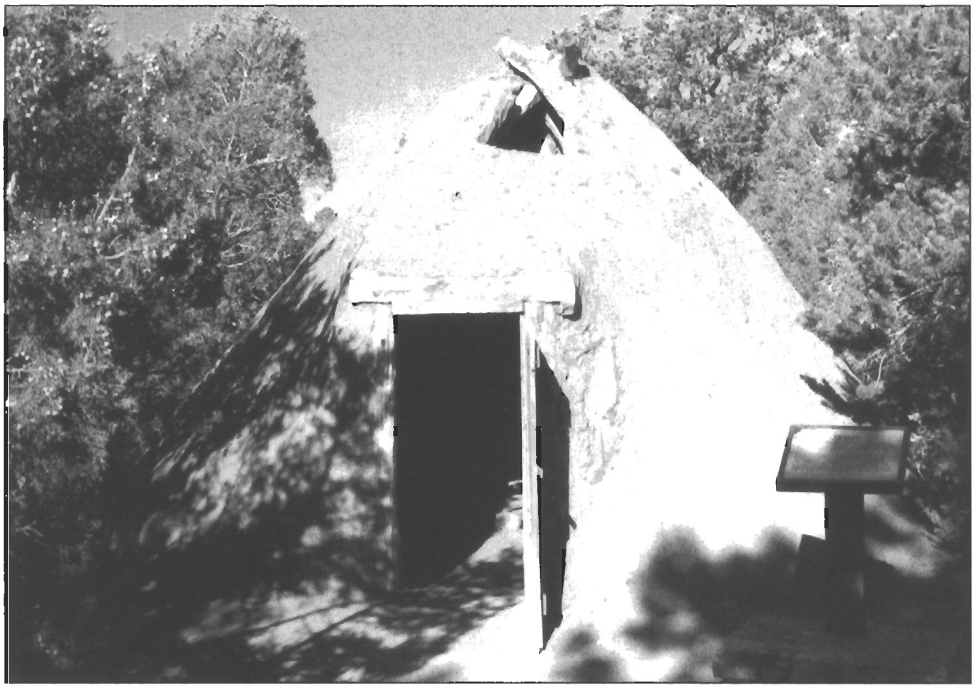

FIG. 3—Replica of a male forked-pole hogan at the Navajo National Monument, near Black Mesa, Arizona. The form of this early type of Navajo dwelling is tapered in symbolic association with Gobernador Knob (compare the shape shown in Figure 2). (Photograph by the author, June 1999)

are absent at Gobernador Knob, yet in clear skies the westward view can encompass the Chuska Mountains in northeastern Arizona, whose Navajo descriptive name means "White Spruce Mountains" (Wyman 1970). Another key intervisibility is a view to the southwest from Gobernador Knob that includes Huerfano Mountain, the other central sacred summit, approximately 50 kilometers distant (Figure 4). The relative position of Gobernador and Huerfano along a line trending northeast–southwest results in a solstitial alignment: At sunrise on the summer solstice, a view from Huerfano sees the sun rise over Gobernador, and on the winter solstice the sun sets behind Huerfano when viewed from Gobernador.[9] Completing the symbolic accretions at Gobernador Knob are the numerous pottery shards found in a wide area to the north and east, as well as their ceremonial arrangement at the summit. There is no recreation in this area, and no casual visitor would seek this out-of-the-way knob—the pottery-shard arrangements speak to Navajo visits. Repeated fieldwork at the summit confirms that stones, shards, and forked sticks are part of the ongoing ceremonial display at the summit.

This fieldwork has proved once again the value of get-your-boots-dirty fieldwork. I would never have found the correct sacred summit without immersing myself in the exploration of the area, and this also furthered my understanding of the

FIG. 4—Mural by Lawrence Jacquez on a water tank at the abandoned Nageezi, New Mexico, Trading Post, located south of Huerfano Mountain on New Mexico Highway 44. The design highlights the spiritual significance of the intervisibilities of sacred landforms, including (from left to right) Huerfano Mountain, Huerfanito Mesa, and Gobernador Knob on the horizon. (Photograph by the author, September 2000)

contribution that precise knowledge of Gobernador Knob's location makes to Navajo place attachment. A resurgence of Navajo identity based on traditional sacred geography has occurred in recent years. In part this is indicated by the teaching curriculum in Navajo schools, which includes a section on the locations of the sacred mountains, and it is also manifested in Navajo visits to the sacred peaks. In each case, knowledge of exactly where the spirits rise is elemental to place attachment.

Paradoxically, the virtually unknown summit of Gobernador Knob is among the Navajo sacred mountains most threatened by development. Natural-gas wells and booster stations in the San Juan Basin have long been visible and audible from the summit of Gobernador, but an expansion of the drilling activity since 1999 places drill pads and well operations within 0.8 kilometer of the knob, well within the zone of pottery shards (Figure 5).[10] Energy development causes great change in the character of a sacred place (Talbot 1985), making it all the more important to know the exact location of Gobernador Knob. Without an understanding of the symbolic significance of the landform, little can be done to monitor and potentially modify the drilling activities.[11]

Knowledge of the exact location of sacred summits is elemental to place attachment and to determinations of appropriate land uses given the pertinent environ-

FIG. 5—Natural-gas well-production facilities located 0.8 kilometer east-northeast of Gobernador Knob. The view of the knob from the east was obscured by trees prior to the grading of this well pad in 2000, but now this is the best place to park before hiking to the knob and to contemplate the juxtaposition of land uses based on widely divergent environmental ethics. (Photograph by the author, September 2000)

mental ethics. Gobernador Knob should be protected for its symbolic qualities, even if that involves transfer of the land from the Bureau of Land Management to the Navajo. Unlike many other Navajo sacred sites located off the reservation, such as Rainbow Bridge or the San Francisco Peaks, Gobernador Knob has little significance to other cultures, and an appropriate transfer might only involve about 1 square kilometer. Precedents exist for the transfer of sacred sites to American Indians, including the return of Blue Lake to Taos Pueblo (Talbot 1985) and a portion of Huerfano Mountain to the Navajo (Brugge 1999). But limits must exist on the degree to which Gobernador Knob is signed or otherwise popularized. In the long run, even gas wells would likely have less impact than would the trammeling of a constant stream of sacred-mountain curiosity mongers. After all, every culture needs wild places like Gobernador Knob to explore and to reaffirm spiritual awareness.

NOTES

1. My efforts to find Gobernador Knob commenced in 1994 and culminated in field explorations of the summit in 1996, 1999, and 2000.

2. Gobernador Knob's location is misplaced or grossly generalized on the maps of Brugge (1983), Jett (1992), Trimble (1993), Time Traveler Maps (1998), and Jett (2001). The knob is omitted from the maps of Gilpin (1968), Goodman (1982), Kelley and Francis (1994), and Baars (1995), even though other sacred places are mapped and the sacred mountains are explained in the text. A photograph caption in Baars mistakenly identifies Huerfano Mountain as Gobernador Knob (1995).

3. Bingham and Bingham correctly identify Gobernador Knob in a photograph, but their detailed map misplaces it by approximately 26 kilometers (1982). The gazetteer description in Wilson (1995) generalizes the location of the knob to a similar extent.

4. Wyman (1957), McPherson (1992), Julyan (1996), and Linford (2000) correctly map or describe the location of Gobernador Knob. David M. Brugge, a leading anthropologist of Navajo culture, has also visited the knob, and the Bureau of Land Management Farmington (New Mexico) Field Office is aware of the precise location.

5. The National Geodetic Survey Gobernador benchmark (elevation 2,126 meters) is located at 36°42′55″ N, 107°36′05″ W, in the northwestern quadrant of Section 20, Township 29 North, Range 7 West, Rio Arriba County.

6. The National Geodetic Survey Snyder benchmark (on Gobernador Knob, elevation 2,316 meters) is located at 36°38′15″ N, 107°20′9″ W, in the northwestern quadrant of Section 26, Township 28 North, Range 5 West, Rio Arriba County.

7. Survey station names are generally chosen to reflect a nearby natural feature or a landowner's name. Perhaps Snyder was a local rancher at the time: The initials "D. S." are deeply carved into a large boulder on the summit.

8. The best access to Gobernador Knob is to follow Forest Road 314 southward from U.S. Highway 64 at a point approximately 0.3 kilometer east of mile marker 105, just west of the western boundary of Carson National Forest. After 8 kilometers in a generally southern direction a right turn leads past the Muñoz benchmark and communications towers, and then the road again bends south. At a total of 11 kilometers the road intersects the graded natural-gas well-production site pictured in Figure 5 (Burlington Resources, San Juan 28–5, Unit 103M). From this parking area, the knob is approximately 0.8 kilometer west-southwest. No current maps for the area indicate the correct alignment of Forest Road 314, but the 7.5 minute Gobernador Quadrangle is helpful in orienteering.

9. After being alerted to the possibility of this spatial alignment by David M. Brugge (with attribution to Hugh Rodgers), astrophysicist Steve B. Howell confirmed the solstitial relationship, with Gobernador Knob and Huerfano Mountain along an azimuth of approximately 65.5°. This alignment could in part account for the prevalence of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puebloan and Navajo settlements in the immediate area (Brugge 1983).

10. In 1999 the decline of well pressures in the San Juan Basin prompted an aggressive infill well-drilling program that will add approximately 2,000 wells over the next ten years. Additional secondary recovery operations (involving greater use of equipment, such as pumpjack units and more land disturbance) will also supplement the well-drilling program. Most of the mineral production in the San Juan Basin is natural gas.

11. The Bureau of Land Management is aware of the significance of Gobernador Knob and has included it as a 360-acre Area of Critical Environmental Concern in its Noise Sensitive Area Program. The program is designed to monitor and improve noise quality emitting from oil and gas operations, yet other environmental impacts and visual impairments are unaddressed.

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