

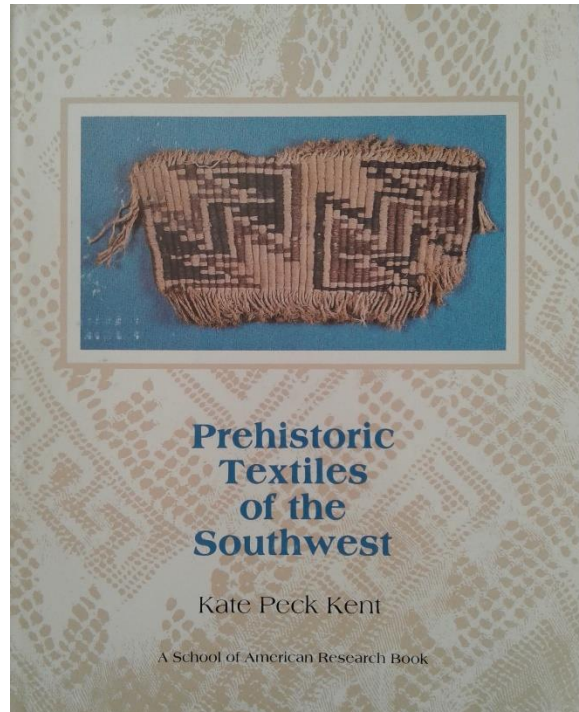
Treasures in the Desert: The exploration of textiles in the American Southwest

A review of *Prehistoric Textiles of the Southwest* by Kate Peck Kent
New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 1983

Lin Bentley Keeling
Contribution to Complex Weavers Archaeological Textiles Studies Group
January 2021 (contribution for 2020)

What we now call the American Southwest, which encompasses the states of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and parts of Nevada and Texas, was once home to vibrant, sophisticated societies with rich fiber traditions that also encompassed the northern frontiers of Mexico for more than a thousand years, between 300 BC and AD 1400, before the arrival of the Spanish and other Europeans around AD 1500. In her groundbreaking text, *Prehistoric Textiles of the Southwest*, Kate Peck Kent has cataloged and analyzed approximately 3000 examples of textiles found in museum collections and other institutions and described in published archaeological reports (xix) representing the wealth of weaving in this region, home to four major cultural traditions, the Hohokam, Mogollon, Anasazi¹ and Casas Grandes, as well as the Sinagua and Sinaloa. Peck's research covered materials found in 182 archaeological sites in this region, shown on maps, pages 4 and 6, and her text is illustrated by 161 figures (photographs of the artifacts, drawings of their designs and cloth construction, and proposed heddle configurations for loom woven artifacts) and 18 color plates of the more spectacular textile examples.

Peck begins by discussing the contexts in which the textile artifacts were found, their geographic distribution, the analytical techniques she brought to the study, including ethnographic comparisons, examination of other fiber artifacts and studies of textile representations in murals, and a brief discussion of what has been lost because of careless excavation and the fragility of textiles in comparison with pottery, stone, and architectural features. In chapter 2, Kent discusses the yarns and dyes used in the textiles she examined. Both bast and leaf fibers were used including yucca and agave leaves and to a lesser extent, sotol and bear grass. Bast fibers found included



milkweed and dogbane (also known as apocynum). Fur and feather yarns are also discussed as yarns from animal hair from dogs, wool from bighorn sheep, and human hair, and the introduction of cotton to the region. Spinning and other processing techniques are covered and an extensive discussion of the use of color in the prehistoric Southwest follows, beginning with the use of color in non-cotton yarns followed by an examination of the use of eight distinct colors found in roughly one quarter of the two thousand examples of cotton fabrics (39) covered in her text.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine number of nonloom textiles and their production, geographic distribution, and occurrences through time, including looping, knotted looping, netting, braiding and plaiting, and a discussion of whether sprang existed in the prehistoric Southwest. Articles created using these techniques with a single element are discussed in chapter 3 include looped bags and sacks from yucca and cotton yarns, shoe-socks, belts and sashes, carrying and hunting nets and an interlinked cotton shirt (figure 34, page 71). Two element, warp-weave woven articles created without the use of a loom follow in chapter 4 including narrow bands used on cradle boards, fringed aprons, tumplines and sashes. Weft-twined wide fabric bags, fur and feather robes and blankets are also discussed.

Chapter 5 covers cotton loom-woven fabrics, dated between AD 1000 and 1400 after the introduction of cotton to the region. Kent begins the chapter by discussing the three types of looms utilized in the region, vertical, back-strap and horizontal, staked-out, along with other weaving implements based on indirect and ethnographic evidence. She then discusses fabrics within five categories: plain weave; openwork weaves; float weaves; compound weaves and fabrics with decorative elements applied after weaving, postulating heddle rigs for a number of the examples along with diagrams of the woven cloth illustrating its structure. Of the cotton woven artifacts examined by Kent, 85 percent are white, undecorated plain weave (125,128). This still leaves us with many tantalizing examples to study and attempt to replicate.

There is an “eccentric plain weave” fragment (134-35; figure 67) which measures only ca. 4 cm. square, a white cloth from Tonto National Monument created by alternating picks of tabby with twining. There are color-and-weave effect plain weaves including checks and plaids and an example of log-cabin color patterning (130-31, Figure C2). Weft-wrap openwork in which lace-like pattern is created in sophisticated and complex patterning and gauze weave (what we would call leno weave) (143-53; figures 76-86) follow.

Weft-float and warp-float pattern weaves, creating by interspersing plain weave picks with float picks, are discussed early in the next section of chapter 5, followed by a discussion of weft-dominant and weft-faced twill weaves. Kent separates the twills, discussed on pages 155-175, into regular and irregular examples, including four examples of irregular twills with continuous wefts (162) and ten examples of irregular twill tapestryⁱⁱ (166-67). The distinction she makes here are that irregular twills are created by “purposely breaking the regular heddle order, or by shifting from twill to plain weave within a single pick of weft (162). She returns to the discussion of weft-float patterning in the section on compound weaves (175-182), including examples of plain weave with extra-weft float patterning also known as brocade weave in the archaeological literature, and twills with extra-weft float patterning, double- or two-faced twills and warp-float weaves. These are

followed by a section on applied decorative techniques (183-98) including embroidery, couching, stamping, tie-dyeing, and painting.

Chapter 6 analyzes the different styles of textile design using comparative studies of basketry and mural depictions of woven textiles in order to place loom woven textiles within the larger context of Southwestern graphic design, separating woven design into two classes: self patterning, created by the weave structure and discrete motifs or geometric elements. She connects both to pre-loom fiber technologies including basketry, matting, weft-twining, and interlacing (201) and discusses the influence textile processes had on Southwestern design (220).

In chapter 7, Kent summarizes the forms and functions of the Southwestern textile examples within her book used as clothing, utilitarian objects and later in ceremonial contexts, and their roles within the different cultural contexts, again using comparative examples from other Southwestern creative traditions. In chapter 8, Kent describes the regional and temporal distributions of the textiles she has been discussing, suggesting the interplay between the cultural groups through the changes, similarities and differences in textile processes and products. This is followed by a detailed appendix which cycles back to the maps in the opening chapter, providing information about the fiber artifacts found at each site, the cultural period(s) and dates for the site and the sources she used to study these artifacts, found in museum collections and other institutions, and written reports. A list of the abbreviations used in the text, figures and appendix for institutions can be found on page xv and a comprehensive bibliography and index complete the book.

Peck limited her studies to artifacts of “flexible or pliable fabric constructed from spun plant or animal fibers by various weaving, looping, netting, plaiting, ... or braiding ... processes.” (7) She did not include basketry artifacts except as technological references when examining structure or design elements. Though I believe it is long past time to eliminate this delineation between basketry and other woven textiles, this book is nonetheless comprehensive in its examination of the textiles as artifacts, the materials and techniques used to create them, their designs, forms and functions and a comparison of the styles which developed within this extensive cultural region over time.

Archaeologists working in the Southwest still do not incorporate textiles into their larger view of cultures and traditions as readily as they do pottery, architecture, and other ‘hard’ artifacts. Kate Peck Kent’s text gives a window into this fascinating arena which we can use as a guide to study the individual textiles as well as their place within their cultural contexts, the ways textiles worked as symbols and texts, their use in ceremonies and rituals and as tradegoods across the region. While this book is necessarily a broad strokes view of prehistoric textiles in the Southwestern United States, Kent provides a wealth of information and many tantalizing glimpses into the world of weaving in this region. The technical skill and artistry of these examples shows the importance of cloth and weaving to the peoples living here before the arrival of Europeans and they provide us with so many avenues for study as contemporary weavers interested in archaeological textiles. I highly recommend Kate Peck Kent’s book to the members of this group and to the Complex Weavers community as a rich source for study and inspiration.

ⁱ In 1983, “Anasazi” was the common name given to the peoples who lived in northern Arizona and New Mexico and southern Utah and Colorado as well as a small area within Nevada. Currently, these peoples are referred to as Ancestral Puebloan. I will continue to use Anasazi within this report to remain consistent with Peck’s text.

ⁱⁱ In chapters 4 and 5, Kent uses the term ‘tapestry’ in discussions of discontinuous weft patterned fabrics, and we would more likely use the latter term since the designs of these artifacts in geometric rather than pictorial. However, the use of the term ‘tapestry’ for any weft-dominant or weft-faced fabric or design whether plain weave or twill seems to be fairly common within archaeological and anthropological literature.