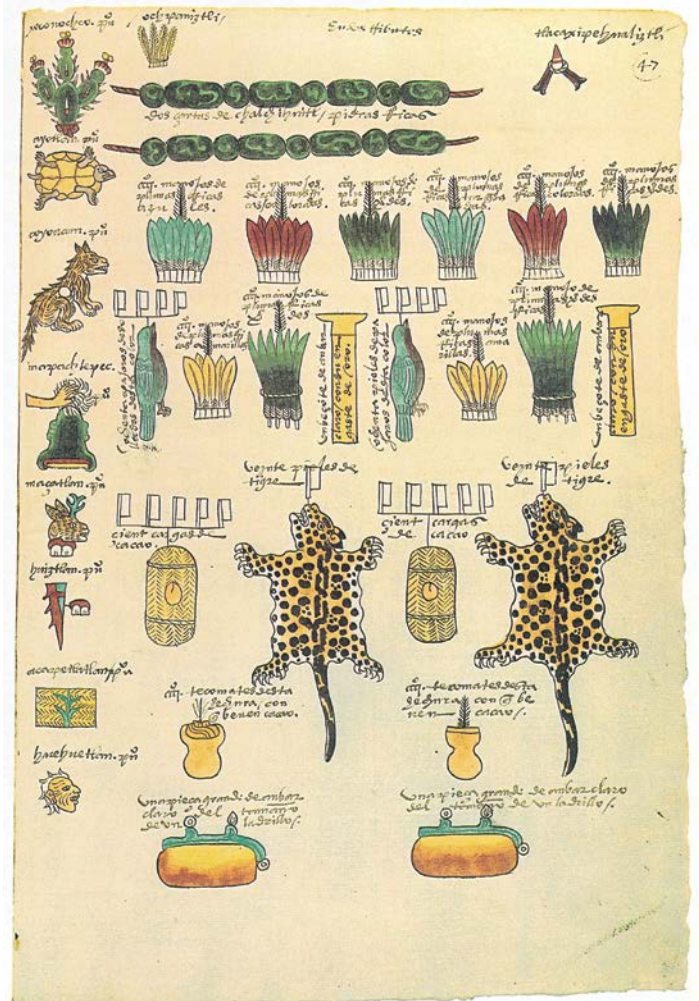
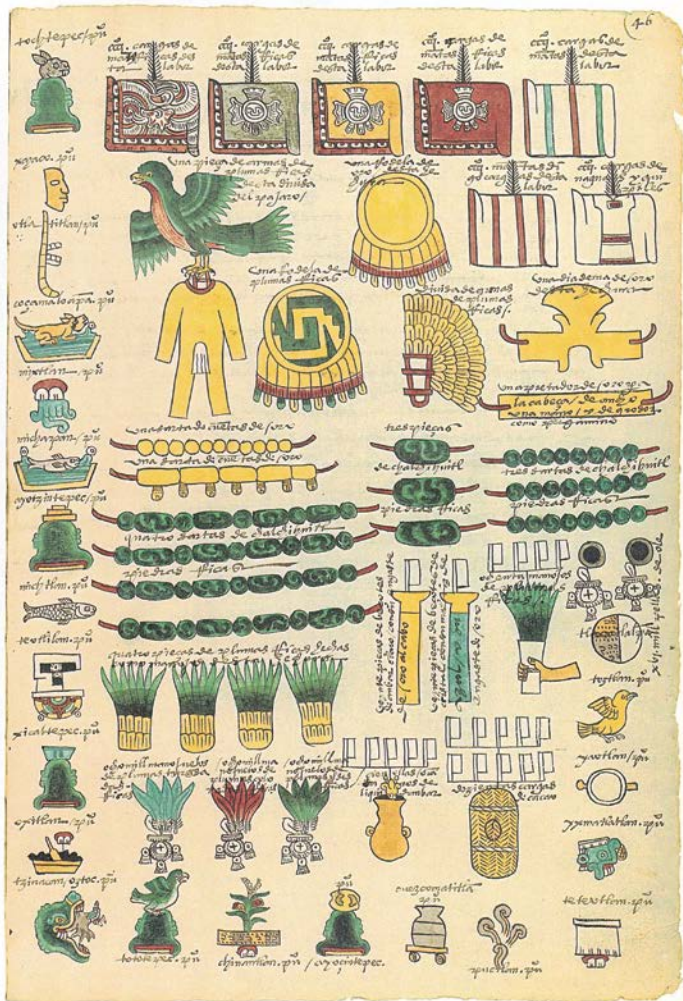


# Scarlet Macaws in Mesoamerica and across the US Southwest and Mexican Northwest

PATRICIA GILMAN, UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA (RETIRED)  
 CHRISTOPHER W. SCHWARTZ, NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY  
 STEPHEN PLOG, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA (RETIRED)

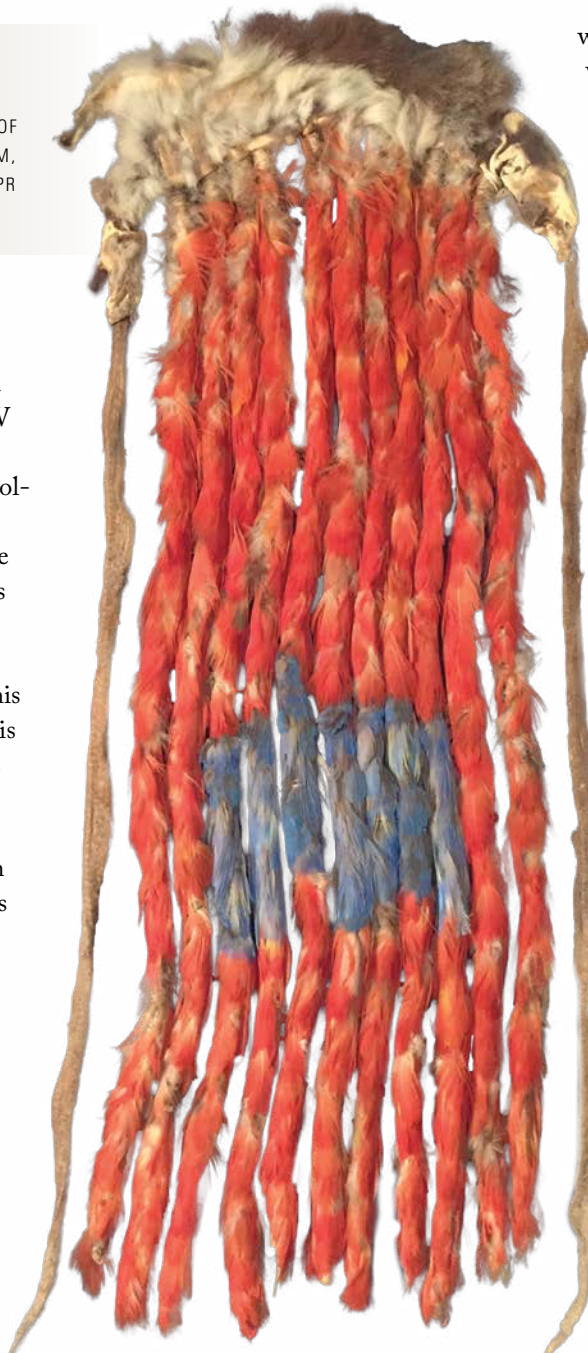
For years, archaeologists working in the US Southwest and Mexican Northwest (SW/NW) have understood that the presence of Scarlet Macaws at archaeological sites in the region demonstrates a connection with Mesoamerica—the area of

shared culture and language spanning from today’s northern Mexico to Central America. Scarlet Macaws are native to parts of ancient Mexico, but the northern extent of their natural habitat is hundreds of miles (and kilometers) south



Depictions of Scarlet Macaw feathers exacted as tribute in the Mesoamerican Codex Mendoza, circa 1541 (Folios 46 recto and 47 recto). IMAGES: PUBLIC DOMAIN; ORIGINAL AT THE BODLEIAN LIBRARY

*Macaw feather garment, often called an apron, from Lavender Cave, southeastern Utah. IMAGE: JONATHAN TILL, COURTESY OF EDGE OF THE CEDARS STATE PARK MUSEUM, UTAH STATE PARKS, CATALOG NUMBER ECPR 12571*



of the SW/NW (see map on page 26). Remains of Scarlet Macaws in Mesoamerican settlements date well prior to their occurrence in SW/NW communities, and macaws figured prominently in Mesoamerican cosmology and exchange networks.

Archaeologists continue to debate what the presence of Scarlet Macaws and their feathers in the SW/NW shows about the nature and strength of relationships between people in this region and Mesoamerica. This issue is particularly difficult to parse because the presence of macaws and their feathers at settlements in the SW/NW was neither continuous through time nor uniformly distributed across the landscape.

Moreover, the uses and meanings of Scarlet Macaws between Mesoamerica and the SW/NW—or even within Mesoamerica—were not particularly uniform. The broad region archaeologists call Mesoamerica comprised several culturally diverse areas encompassing substantial time depth and spatial extent. Not unexpectedly, there was considerable variation in the associations and treatment of macaws throughout Mesoamerica.

Nevertheless, there are broad similarities in macaw cosmological associations and feather use between the SW/NW and Mesoamerica. In the Maya region and West Mexico, for example, Scarlet Macaws represent the sun, fire, light, lightning, the dry season, and rain. Some of their many associations are mirrored in the SW/NW, where macaws represent the sun, the color red, summer, agriculture, fertility, salt, salt-gathering, rain, the rainbow, and southern or southeastern directions. In the SW/NW, Scarlet Macaws are almost always associated

with the color red and the direction south, whereas Mesoamerican Scarlet Macaw color and directional associations are more variable.

Macaw feathers were important parts of ritual and economic life in both Mesoamerica and the SW/NW. The Aztec Empire exacted annual tributes in thousands of macaw feathers (see image on page 16). The two provinces that paid in red macaw feathers, Tochtepec in contemporary Veracruz and Xoconochco (Soconusco) on the border of Chiapas and Guatemala, were both areas within the natural range of Scarlet Macaws. These feathers were supplied to skilled workers who produced intricate headdresses, shields, cloaks, and mosaics. Feathers were worn as personal adornments, deposited in ritual offerings, and even wagered in gambling venues. Ethnohistoric accounts of Indigenous communities in the SW/NW detail the relatively smaller-scale trade of macaw feathers and use of macaw feathers in ceremonial regalia and in the production of ceremonial objects, such as katsina masks, prayer sticks, and macaw-feather garments (as pictured on this page).

Even so, there are substantial divergences in the treatment and deposition of macaws among peoples who lived in Mesoamerica and the SW/NW. Scarlet Macaws were far less abundant at archaeological sites in Mesoamerica than in the SW/NW. There are about 700

macaws in SW/NW sites, compared to fewer than 50 known from Mesoamerican sites. This is particularly interesting in light of the antiquity and widespread use of rare and colorful birds other than Scarlet Macaws—such as quetzals and eagles—in dedicatory offerings and ritual performances throughout Mesoamerica.

A broad look at patterns of Scarlet Macaw acquisition across time and space at SW/NW settlements highlights the discontinuous and temporally episodic occurrence of macaw remains there.



## Scarlet Macaws

IMAGE: RODRIGO FLORES, VIA UNSPLASH

Scarlet Macaws (*Ara macao*) are intelligent birds holding deep meaning and value among ancestral and contemporary Indigenous communities of the US Southwest and Mexican Northwest (SW/NW). Bones of these special birds—whose homelands were hundreds of miles away in what is now eastern and southern Mexico—have been found at many archaeological sites in the SW/NW. The value of their cosmological associations, their iridescent red, blue, and yellow feathers, and their ability to mimic human speech was so great that people in the SW/NW acquired, raised, and traded these birds over great distances.

This would not have been easy. Scarlet Macaws are notoriously independent-minded (page 19), and the variable climate of the SW/NW is very unlike their neotropical homeland. Still, people came up with innovative solutions for transporting, raising, and perhaps even breeding these birds outside their natural habitat (see map on page 26).

— Christopher W. Schwartz

- » Postdating one Military Macaw in southern Chihuahua at about 1 CE and a few skeletal elements in the Hohokam region of southern Arizona beginning at about 600 CE (pages 22–23), the first concentrations of whole birds occurred in the Mimbres and Chaco regions from the late 900s to the end of the 1000s (pages 12–13 and 9–11). The archaeology of Mimbres and Chaco—separated by over 300 kilometers (186 miles)—differed in many ways.
- » Overlapping with and continuing past the Pueblo habitation of Chaco Canyon, the next appearance of dozens of macaws took place at Wupatki Pueblo north of Flagstaff (pages 24–26) and a few nearby settlements, in a region that was spatially distant from Mimbres and Chaco.
- » Coming into the late 1200s and early 1300s, the highest concentrations of macaws were at four large pueblos in the Mogollon Highlands of present-day east-central Arizona (pages 20–21).
- » More or less concurrently, people began building the large and unique settlement of Paquimé in northern Chihuahua—more than 400 kilometers (249 miles) distant—where they acquired and possibly bred hundreds of Scarlet Macaws and procured large numbers of Military Macaws, some of whom could have come from nearby mountains.

Equally noteworthy are the regions where people did not acquire macaws.

- » In northeastern Arizona, for example, which was heavily populated from the 900s through the late 1200s, we are aware of only a single macaw skeleton and an isolated macaw skeletal element from Kiet Siel, a large cliff dwelling that largely dates to the latter half of the 1200s.
- » Similarly, Scarlet Macaws seem to have been absent anywhere in southeastern Utah or in southwestern Colorado, where the Mesa Verde and McElmo regions were also densely populated in the late 1100s through 1200s.

The northern limit for SW/NW peoples acquiring Scarlet Macaws appears to have been Wupatki in north-central Arizona, Kiet Siel in northeastern Arizona, and the Aztec great house in northwestern New Mexico. Interestingly, some of the best examples of macaw feather artifacts and macaw imagery on rock art and kiva murals were present in the areas where live birds were absent. □

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**This issue is dedicated to the memory of Charmion McKusick.**

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**Cover image:** A raven in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. IMAGE: PAUL VANDERVEEN