



THE SALADO OF THE TONTO BASIN

The Tonto Basin is a large intermountain basin rich in natural resources. The broad valley floor and steep mountains contain several different microenvironments, producing a wide range of resources within a small geographic area. Thick stands of mesquite, walnut, and sycamore grow near water. Saguaro, cholla, prickly pear, jojoba, and other species that produce edible buds and fruits grow on the slopes and mesas. At higher elevations, the pinyon-juniper belt is rich in game and edible fruits and nuts.

Pre-ceramic groups may have been using these resources seasonally as early as 5000 BC. Evidence from the Upper Cliff Dwelling has been dated at 3500 BC. The first evidence of permanent occupation comes from the east end of Tonto Basin; one of the earliest communities was dated at AD 100-600. Architecture and ceramics indicate Western Pueblo, Mogollon peoples of central Arizona were irrigating fields of cotton and maize. Supplementing with resources from the surrounding environment, they thrived here for 500 years. For unknown reasons, the site was abandoned around AD 600. No permanent occupation occurred in the basin for another 150 years.

At AD 750, Hohokam colonists from the lower Gila and Salt River Valleys began moving into the Tonto Basin. Villages of up to a dozen pithouses lined the terraces overlooking the Salt River. Like their predecessors, their emphasis was on agriculture. They practiced forced irrigation farming, constructed houses-in-pits, and used Hohokam Red on Buff pottery traded in from the Gila and Salt River Basins. Unfortunately, data from the Hohokam period is scarce, due to the inundation of the area by Roosevelt Lake in 1911. The Hohokam continued to inhabit the basin for the next 300 years, farming the alluvial terraces and sending work parties into the upper piedmonts to gather wild plants and to hunt game.

By AD 1150, small villages were strung along the flood plain from one end of the basin to the other. These sites show a culture in transition; pottery types, burial practices, houses, and settlement patterns began to change and can no longer be considered pure Hohokam. In the late 1920's, archeologist Harold Gladwin identified these new characteristics, calling the people who created them "Salado". The name was chosen for the Rio Salado, or Salt River, which flowed through the valley of their homeland. Gladwin believed this new development to be the result of migrations of people from the upper Little Colorado River area and Kayenta Basin. He suggested these groups brought most of the Salado traits with them.

Other possible explanations of Salado origins include migrations from other pueblo cultures to the north and east. Some suggest that Salado may be a regional variant of Hohokam. Many Salado sites are constructed atop earlier Hohokam sites and there are similarities between the artifacts, architecture, and settlement patterns of the two cultures. The differences may be due to variations in the environment, and from proximity to non-Hohokam populations - primarily Mogollon groups to the north and east. Perhaps a combination of factors was involved; years of additional research will be necessary before archeologists can give definitive answers to the riddle of the origins of the Salado.

Regardless of their origins, a well-established culture existed in the Tonto Basin by AD 1200. These early settlements were regularly spaced along the river valleys close to the fields. River valleys in the prehistoric Southwest bore little resemblance to the down-cut, rock strewn channels of today. Overgrazing by cattle, arroyo cutting, and the extermination of beaver have irreversibly altered the character of these valleys. During the Salado era, the Salt River Valley was a flat, almost marshy area where water flowed through cattails, river reeds, and grasses for most of the year. Once irrigation canals were dug to the river, water flowed freely onto fields of corn, beans, squash, and amaranth. These canals were still visible until the rising waters of Roosevelt Lake covered them. Although the Salado were primarily farmers, hunting and gathering supplemented their diets.

The typical Salado community consisted of a multi-room masonry pueblo in which rooms shared adjacent walls. These communities were frequently enclosed within high compound walls, perhaps for protection or some unknown social function. Sites of 150 or more rooms have been recorded, though most pueblos have less than 20 rooms.

Dramatic population growth is indicated by the thousands of reported sites from all over the area. As the population increased, the valley centers became crowded and a diverse settlement strategy was developed. Most of the population remained in the valley and continued the major agricultural activities there, but around AD 1300 part of the population moved to higher elevations, possibly concentrating on non-agricultural activities. The cliff dwellings at Tonto National Monument were built at this time.

This expansion opened up new resource areas. Twenty-six small field houses have been located in the monument, suggesting short-term farming in the upland areas. Perhaps these Salado became skilled artisans, or concentrated on hunting and gathering. These upland products could then have been traded in the valley, thus supplying the cities with resources not locally available.

The Salado prospered in the Tonto Basin for approximately 300 years. They were a surprisingly healthy people. Skeletal remains show little evidence of the nutritional deficiencies so often found in puebloan agricultural societies. Although in many burials the teeth are worn down from the large amount of grit in their stone-ground food, the rate of dental decay was much lower than researchers expected.

The population steadily grew, developing increasingly complex settlements, and expanding trade routes and influence into regions to the north and south. They developed specialized crafts and became increasingly dependent upon centralized leadership. Then, between AD 1400 and 1450, they vanished from the Tonto Basin. What happened has been a subject of debate for decades. Their departure seems to have been a part of the general abandonment of the southern mountains of the Southwest at this time. Gladwin suggested the abandonment was due to Apache raiders invading the basin, but recent findings have led archeologists to conclude that the Apache were probably not in the area before AD 1500. Other causes, such as climatic change, salinization of croplands, and internal strife have been suggested, but the abandonment of the basin was probably the result of a number of complex factors, not yet fully understood.

Some archeologists suggest that the Salado may have moved north or west and been absorbed by the Hopi or Zuni cultures. Others believe they moved south into northern Mexico, or into the lower Salt River Valley. However, these and other theories remain to be conclusively proven. For now, the riddle of the Salado disappearance remains one of the fascinating mysteries of the prehistoric Southwest.