

## The Salado: People of the Salt River

Shallow caves overlooking the Tonto Basin in southeastern Arizona shelter masonry dwellings nearly 700 years old. This was home to the prehistoric Salado people, named in the early 20th century after the life-giving Rio Salado, or Salt River. For three centuries, they made their living from what nature provided in mountainous desert terrain.

This rugged land is full of life. The basin's topography - a river valley surrounded by steep slopes rising some 2,000 feet - created different local environments, each with its own community of wildlife. The Salt River and Tonto Creek deposited rich soil in the floodplain, nourishing thick stands of mesquite, black walnut, and sycamore. The hillsides and mesas supported vegetation characteristic of semiarid climates: saguaro, cholla, prickly pear, agave, and jojoba. A few pinyon and juniper trees grew on the higher hilltops. Deer, rabbits, quail, and other game flourished in this setting. Nomadic peoples found their way into the basin as early as 7,000 years ago.

The first permanent settlements date from the latter half of the 8th century AD. Hohokam colonists, expanding their domain in the lower Gila and Salt river valleys (near present-day Phoenix), moved into Tonto Basin. By 850 the Hohokam were established in pithouse villages, where they lived for a few hundred years. Perhaps because of conditions within, perhaps because of outside influences, their way of life changed. Pottery styles, construction methods, settlement patterns, and other traits indicate that by 1150 the inhabitants of the basin no longer followed Hohokam traditions, or those of any other Southwestern group. A new culture had apparently emerged - the Salado.

Like the Hohokam, the Salado were farmers. Their pueblo villages dotted the riverside near irrigated fields of corn, beans, pumpkins, amaranth, and cotton. They supplemented their diet by hunting and gathering buds, leaves, and roots. Surplus food and goods were exchanged with neighboring groups, part of the trade network that reached from Colorado to Mexico to the Gulf of California. As the Salado prospered, their numbers increased. By the mid 1200's some Salado were settling in the surrounding foothills.

Erosion had long been at work carving out recesses in a layer of siltstone partially exposed on the hillside. The floors of these alcoves were littered with debris from the ceiling. Bonding rocks with mud, the Salado constructed apartment-style dwellings adequate for sleeping, storage, cooking, and protection. The pueblo now called the Lower Cliff Dwelling consisted of 16 ground floor rooms, three of which had a second story. Next to this was the 12-room annex. The Upper Cliff Dwelling, located within a similar shelter on a nearby ridge, was much larger - 32 ground floor rooms, eight with a second story. Terraces and rooftops provided level open space for work and play. The highlands offered a bounty of useful plants and animals. A favorite was the fruit of the saguaro cactus, which ripened in midsummer and was harvested by Salado women. Steep slopes and rough terrain made farming difficult. Apparently, some hill-dwellers began to specialize in weaving and pottery making, trading their wares for food and cotton grown in the valley.

The Salado lived in Tonto Basin for about 300 years. Sometime after AD 1450 they left. No one knows why, though the Salado were not the only ones to depart their homelands in the southern mountains of the Southwest around this time. The cliff dwellings, less than 150 years old, were abandoned to the sun and wind.

Archeological study continues to reveal aspects of this culture. Even so, we have only a vague notion of who the Salado were. They left no written record of their existence, no chronology of events that shaped their society. The most vivid signs of life are in their pottery, in remnants of fabric, in smoke stains from their cook fires, and in hand prints on pueblo walls - all reminders that humans once led rich and productive lives here by the Salt River.

## Reading the Salado Past

Distance and rugged terrain isolated the cliff dwellings from the modern world until the mid 1870s when ranchers and soldiers came to the Tonto Basin. In 1906 construction began on Roosevelt Dam, bringing increased attention to the dwellings. The following year, recognizing the need to protect the sites from vandals and pothunters, President Theodore Roosevelt set the area aside as a national monument. Today these cliff dwellings give rise to questions about the Salado people and their way of life. Most of what we know - or think we know - about the Salado has been reconstructed from what remains of their material culture - their personal and community belongings. Taken together, Salado artifacts give us a picture of an adaptable people who coped successfully with a dry, harsh climate and made the most of their environment.

Some of the findings: Salado dwellings were permanent, indicating a farming people were on hand year-round to tend crops. Outlines of irrigation canals were visible until flooded by Roosevelt Lake. Decorated earthenware and intricate textiles reveal that not all of the people devoted their efforts to farming; some had the interest and time to master other skills. Seashells found here came from the Gulf of California and macaw feathers from Mexico, thus the owners must have participated in trade with remote groups. Ideas made the circuit along with trade goods, for much of Salado technology resembles that of other peoples.

We are fortunate to have the very objects the Salado created for their own use or obtained in trade. In addition, plants and animals that made up their natural environment still thrive here. Like pieces of a puzzle, each element contributes to the larger picture of Salado culture.