

A Real Mystery: Who Were the Salado?

Around 900 AD, a group of people wandered into the Tonto Basin near the modern town of Globe, Arizona. No one knows who these immigrants were and early sites show signs of Ancestral Puebloan, Mogollon and Hohokam influence.

Like their contemporaries, the wanderers lived in pit houses and grew corn, squash and beans as well as cotton and amaranth. They learned to build platform mounds and dig irrigation ditches like the Hohokam and adopted many of the same farming practices.

Whoever the wanderers were, they established the foundations of a culture that thrived for over 500 years. Distinctive traits include beautiful polychrome pottery, unique burial practices and adobe walled compounds.

Today, collectors prize Salado polychrome (“multicolored”) pottery and it is among the most beautiful ceramic traditions in the world. The earliest version had black painted geometric designs over a thin white slip. The most distinctive type (Gila Polychrome) featured images of snakes, lizards, parrots, stars, the sun, and eyes along with abstract figures in complex, asymmetrical designs. Many designs incorporate a lifeline, a heavy, broad band of paint around the rim.

Characteristic Salado villages are single story rock and adobe pueblos surrounded by adobe walls. Many have platform mounds for elite residences or ceremonial structures. Around 1250 AD, some of the people moved into cliff dwellings like those of their northern neighbors, the Ancestral Puebloans.

The Salado prospered until the beginning of the 15th century and population in the Tonto Basin probably exceeded 10,000. As the Hohokam society collapsed, the Salado reoccupied parts of their territory, apparently without opposition. Between 1400 and 1450, floods destroyed many of the Salado’s irrigation networks and the prolonged drought that followed made it impossible for the culture to recover. Some archeologists speculate that surviving people migrated to Mexico or joined the scattered remnants of other cultures. Curiously, none of today’s Native Americans count the Salado among their ancestors.

Salado sites pepper the Tonto Basin but few have been preserved. Construction of Roosevelt Dam (1906-1911) destroyed many and Roosevelt Lake inundated more along with irrigation canals. Today, the best preserved sites include Besh Be Gowah, which has a beautiful museum, and cliff dwellings in Tonto National Monument.