

## Tonto Basin's Prehistoric People of the Salt River

Shallow caves overlooking today's Theodore Roosevelt Lake in central Arizona shelter dwellings that are nearly 700 years old. Lying between the northern Colorado Plateau and the southern Sonoran Desert, this Tonto Basin is one of many valleys and basins with evidence of early farming activity.

Encompassing about 300 square miles, Tonto Basin supports diverse animals and plants, from mountain pines to desert cacti. Tonto Creek and the Salt River deposit rich soils along the valley floor, nourishing mesquite, Arizona walnut, and sycamore. Hillsides and mesas are blanketed with saguaro, cholla, prickly pear, agave, and jojoba, the higher elevations with oak, juniper, pinyon, and ponderosa pine. Deer, rabbit, quail, and other wildlife are integral parts of this ecosystem. For thousands of years people took advantage of the basin's bountiful offerings.

The first people to settle here permanently arrived between the years 100 and 600. Eagle Ridge, a village of 15 pit houses, is one of Tonto Basin's earliest farming communities. Like their hunter-gatherer predecessors, Eagle Ridge occupants harvested plants and hunted animals but, unlike their ancestors, they grew corn, beans, and cotton. A valuable archeological find, Eagle Ridge allows us to see people in the transition from hunter-gatherer to sedentary farmers. They were the forerunners of agricultural groups soon to emerge. About the year 600 people left this community, with no evidence of human activity in Tonto Basin for 150 years.

By 750 people from the lower Gila and Salt river valleys (near today's Phoenix) built pithouse villages in Tonto Basin. Identified by the settlement patterns of their villages and their red-on-buff pottery, they were an extension of the southern Hohokam farmers. For 400 years they used irrigation farming to grow corn, beans, squash, and cotton. They traded goods across a network that reached from Colorado to the Gulf of California. Populations to the north and east had grown too. They were the puebloan groups, and by 1100 their populations rivaled the desert Hohokam.

Starting in the 1100s population centers approached their social and economic peak. Archeological evidence indicates that drought, plant and animal depletion, and population growth pushed resource availability to critical levels. Faced with instability, many northern pueblo groups left their homelands, and the Colorado Plateau and Central Mountain populations declined. According to the traditions of their descendants, people settled, then moved on, as part of their preordained quest to find permanent homelands. Social and environmental upsets were often signals to resume migrations and fulfill their destiny. Migrations took them to what is now western New Mexico and central, southern, and eastern Arizona. Evidence of such a migration emerged in Tonto Basin's archeological record. By 1250 people occupied prime land on the valley floor, and the new arrivals began settling in the basin's upper elevations.

As people arrived, communities absorbed their new ideas, technologies, and philosophies, resulting in changes to Tonto Basin's cultural identity. At this time Salado polychrome pottery appears in the archeological record. Deriving its name from the *Rio Salado* (Salt River) that flows through the basin, this pottery style reflects the changing times. Migrations continued, and populations grew. By 1275 thousands of people lived in Tonto Basin. Archeologists refer to this mixed-cultural phenomenon as Salado.

During the early 1300s climate favored the people of the basin. Moisture increased farming potential, and plant and animal populations flourished. Then around 1330 a dramatic change occurred. The region became more arid - lowering water tables. The changing climate decreased farming and increased hunting and gathering, severely impacting the ecosystem. Important plants and animals declined or disappeared. Competition for dwindling resources created stress among the villagers.

As tensions grew, people left their smaller villages and crowded into communities on the valley floor. At the same time people aggregated in the Tonto cliff dwellings. Some built defensive walls around villages, while others built on defensible hilltops and in caves. During the late 1300s resource depletion intensified, and populations declined.

The 1300s were also marked by catastrophic flooding of the Salt River that destroyed low-land farms and villages. When the waters receded, many of the 100-year-old irrigation canals were undermined or destroyed, and hundreds of acres of farmland were useless. By 1450 those struggling to maintain their way of life gave up - and another migration began. Oral histories say this migration from Tonto Basin took their ancestors in many directions, guiding each to the place their descendents now call home.

The cliff dwellings at Tonto National Monument are but two of hundreds of once-thriving communities in Tonto Basin. Preserved and protected by the National Park Service, they stand as icons of people who flourished and struggled as their world changed.

### **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 Theodore Roosevelt Dam, bringing 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 Theodore 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, showing that the owners participated in trade with remote groups. Ideas made the circuit along with trade goods, for much of Salado technology resembles that of other native people.

We are fortunate to have available for study the very objects the Salado created for their own use or obtained in trade. 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. As you explore this ancient place, please remember that you, too, are responsible for its preservation. Keep the pieces of the puzzle together. What you find here, leave here.