

The Salado: People of the Salt River

Shallow caves overlooking the Tonto Basin in southeastern Arizona shelter masonry ruins nearly 700 years old. This was home to the prehistoric Salado people, named in the early 20th century after the lifegiving 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, rabbit, quail, and other game flourished in this setting. Nomadic peoples found their way to the basin as early as 5000 BC.

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 up into the Tonto Basin. By AD 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, that span of time saw distinct changes in their way of life. 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 their predecessors, the Salado were farmers. Their pueblo villages dotted the riverside near irrigated fields of corn, beans, pumpkins, amaranth, and cotton. Groups ventured into the hills to hunt and to gather buds, leaves, and roots. They exchanged surplus food and goods with neighboring tribes, joining the trade network

that reached from Colorado to Mexico to the Gulf of California. As the Salado prospered, their numbers increased. By the early 1300s some of the Salado had migrated up into 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 Ruin consisted of 16 ground floor rooms, three of which had a second story. Next to this was the 12-room annex. The Upper Ruin, 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 the Tonto Basin for about 300 years. Sometime between 1400 and 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 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 handprints on pueblo walls—all reminders that humans once led rich and productive lives here by the Salt River.

Illustration by Greg Harlin

Your tour of Tonto National Monument begins at the visitor center, located one mile off Ariz. Hwy. 88. Prehistoric Salado crafts and tools are exhibited here, and an audiovisual program describes the setting and introduces Salado culture.

The park is open daily except Christmas, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Hours may be extended during the summer. The trail to the Lower Ruin is open until one hour prior to park closing. A half-mile self-guiding trail climbs 350 vertical feet to the 19-room Lower Ruin. Allow about an hour for the

trip up and back. The 40-room Upper Ruin may be visited only on a conducted tour; contact the park staff in advance of your visit.

Disabled access The visitor center is accessible to the mobility impaired. The ruins are not accessible by wheelchair.

Expect summers to be very hot (100° F and higher) and winters to be mild. March and April bring pleasant weather and a colorful array of wildflowers; visit early in the day to avoid parking delays.

Facilities Picnic tables are located near the visitor center. No camping is permitted in the park. Campsites are plentiful at nearby Roosevelt Lake (3 miles). Motels, restaurants, and gasoline are available at Roosevelt, Globe, and Payson, Arizona.

For your safety and the park's protection It is unlawful to disturb any archeological or natural specimen. Do not lean or climb on ruin walls. Pets must be leashed and under physical control. Steep grades and uneven surfaces can make trails hazardous. Visitors with heart or respiratory conditions should use caution, especially during hot weather. Stay on established trails. If you see a rattlesnake, retreat slowly and report the sighting to a park ranger.

Getting here Tonto National Monument is 90 miles (3 hours' drive) east of Phoenix, Arizona, and 5 miles east of Roosevelt Dam via any of three routes: Ariz. Hwy. 88 west from Globe; Ariz. Hwy. 188 south from the Beeline Highway (Hwy. 87); or the Apache Trail beginning at Apache Junction (the last 22 miles of this route are unpaved mountain road).



Administration Tonto National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Contact: Superintendent, P.O. Box 707, Roosevelt, AZ 85545. Phone: (602) 467-2241.

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 ruins. 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 available for study the very objects the Salado created for their own use or obtained in trade. To our further advantage, a good many 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 make your way through the remains of 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.

For centuries civilization has etched its mark on the landscape. The ancient people built dwellings in the valley and on the hillsides and diverted water for crops. Cattle grazing in the 19th century obliterated some plant species and increased erosion. Today Roosevelt Lake covers the old farmlands, providing electrical power and water for irrigation and recreation.

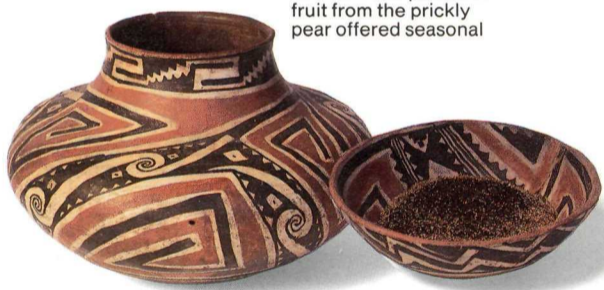


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Plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert The Salado looked to the desert to supplement cultivated foods and fulfill their material needs. Mammals, birds, and reptiles were im-

portant to the diet; bones were fashioned into tools. The yucca provided edible stalks and buds, sewing needles from leaf tips, and leaf fiber for rope, nets, mats, and sandals. Soap was extracted from its roots. Succulent new leaf pads and fruit from the prickly pear offered seasonal

variety, as did the sweet, red fruit of the saguaro. The ribs of dead saguaro made sturdy ceilings. The beans of the mesquite tree, eaten raw or roasted, or ground into flour, were rich in protein.



Polychrome pottery Because vessels and fragments survive the centuries and because artistry and component materials vary from place to place, we can identify Southwestern cultures by their pot-

tery. Like other pueblo people, the Salado women fashioned plain and decorated wares for cooking, storage, and ceremonial use. Red clay came from local pits along the river or on hillsides, and coloring was

derived from plant and mineral sources. These polychrome wares, a jar and bowl, are prime examples of the Salado's art and imagination.

George H. H. Huey



Jerry Jacka

Cotton shirt One of the few Southwestern peoples to cultivate cotton, the Salado spun thread for weaving cloth. Tradition among modern pueblo groups suggests that it was the men who practiced this art. This shirt, with its intricate linked-diamond pattern, is the best example known of Salado weaving.

Yucca

Mesquite tree

Elf owl

Saguaro cactus

Yucca

Cactus wren

Teddybear cholla

Gila monster

Prickly pear cactus



Woven sandals Footwear was crafted from yucca or agave fibers. Many Tonto specimens show exquisite workmanship. Matting might be woven from nolina or sotol. The Salado also made a variety of close-coiled and coarse baskets.



Stone grinding tools The mano and metate, commonplace in Southwestern agricultural societies, were used to crush corn, beans, seeds, and nuts.

Illustration by Greg Harlin