

What Does Salado Mean?

The origins and disappearance of the Salado inhabitants of the Tonto Basin has perplexed archeologists for many years. Between A.D. 1250 and 1450, the Salado people influenced a large number of cultural groups within the southwestern United States through their iconographic pottery designs. The spread of the Salado culture became known as the Salado Phenomenon. The distribution of Salado polychrome pottery encompasses a 130,000-square kilometer (more than 50,000 square miles) area in central Arizona, southwest New Mexico, and the northern Mexican states of Sonora and Chihuahua (Clarke 2001; Crown 1994). Despite the great influence of the Salado culture, archeologists continue to debate the Salado Phenomenon.

What Does Salado Mean?

The term Salado comes from the Spanish name Rio Salado, or the Salt River, that runs from the White Mountains in eastern Arizona through the Tonto Basin to its confluence with the Gila River in central Arizona (Houk 1992). The term Salado, when used in reference to southwestern archeology, can have three different meanings:

- 1) A prehistoric cultural group living in the Tonto Basin from A.D. 1250-1450.
- 2) Particular types of artifacts and architecture found in southern Arizona and northern Mexico.
- 3) A prehistoric religious belief system or “cult” (Crown 1994).

Here we reference the first definition for Salado, which was put forth in 1930 by Harold and Winifred Gladwin of the Gila Pueblo Archeological Foundation in Globe, Arizona. The Gladwins defined the Salado as a cultural group by stating:

“Salado is the name suggested to cover the remains of the people who colonized the Upper Salt River drainage, and who developed various specialized features in the region adjacent to Roosevelt Lake” (Gladwin and Gladwin 1930:3).

The distinct features to which the Gladwins referred included multistoried adobe and masonry structures, cliff dwellings, compound or defensive walls, polychrome pottery, polished redwares, black-on-white and corrugated pottery, sheet trash and storage pits, and primary inhumation (burial) of the dead (Gladwin 1957:264). Because of these cultural characteristics,

OVERVIEW



The Lower Cliff Dwellings at Tonto National Monument.

the Gladwins proposed that the Salado people were Puebloans who moved southwest from the upper Little Colorado River area around A.D. 1000, with a second migration from the Four Corners region bringing the Puebloan architecture and Gila polychrome ware influence (Clarke 2001).

“An inferred migration of puebloan peoples loomed large in the first models advanced by archaeologists to account... for the development of the Salado concept. As more data accumulated, researchers realized that many of the... artifacts and architecture...previously attributed to outsiders were actually the result of long-term, in situ development” (Lyons and Lindsay 2006:33).

Today, the Salado cultural phenomenon of the Tonto Basin is seen as the result of both migration and in situ development, but in a much more sophisticated way than was proposed in the 1930s. The current view of Salado development suggests that the multi-cultural population base in the Tonto Basin and surrounding area derived not only from northern Puebloan people and the local Archaic/Early Agricultural tradition, but also from the adjacent Hohokam and Mogollon territories. This interpretation of Salado origins is supported by evidence from physical anthropology and ceramic analyses indicating population movements and ethnic co-residence were the norm for Salado people.

Tonto Basin Salado

The Salado Phenomenon consists of two different patterns - the “Local Salado” culture of the Tonto Basin, and the





Looking out over Roosevelt Lake from Tonto National Monument's Lower Cliff Dwelling.

“Regional Salado” distribution of Salado polychrome ceramics and iconography (Dean 2000). Both patterns date to the Roosevelt and Gila phases of the Late Classic period, and in the Tonto Basin, these phases reflect the core of Salado culture in the region.

The Roosevelt Phase (A.D. 1250-1350) in the Tonto Basin was characterized by small hamlets and villages with shallow pit structures. Small platform mounds - structures lacking local precedents - were centrally located within the communities and were the center of religious, political, and ceremonial life (Reid and Whittlesey 1997). Special-use sites, such as field houses and camps for gathering and processing resources such as wild plants or game, were dispersed across the landscape away from the hamlets and villages. Farming was conducted using irrigation canals, floodwater fields with check dams, and dry farming. Cotton was grown and woven into products that were possibly traded for items such as ceramics and shell from other regions. Pinto Polychrome ceramics were common during this time, as were Tonto and Salado Corrugated utilitarian wares and Pinedale Polychrome and Cedar Creek Polychrome pottery from the neighboring Mogollon (Elson 1996). Local Salado treatment of the dead included both cremation and inhumation (burial) during this phase.

The Gila Phase (A.D. 1350 to 1450) saw major changes in settlement patterns. Most lowland platform mound and upland communities of the Roosevelt Phase were abandoned near the end of the Roosevelt Phase (Reid and Whittlesey 1997). The populations aggregated in

a small number of large settlements, including Tonto Cliff Dwellings in Tonto National Monument, and Cline Terrace and Schoolhouse Point along what is now Lake Roosevelt. Gila and Tonto Polychromes were made during this time, and were widely traded and emulated across a large area of the southern Southwest (Simon et al. 1998).

During both phases, Salado people constructed and lived in platform mound communities. Platform mounds supported structures for housing people as well as activities representing communal support for social, political, and religious leadership. The communities surrounding these platform mounds appear to have been stratified societies in which elite and non-elite membership was indicated by burial treatment (Dean 2000). Evidence suggests that the power differential between the elite and non-elite members of these communities was neither great or absolute, and that even elite members did not accumulate significant amounts of wealth (Dean 2000). The platform mounds of the later period were larger, however, with more substantial walls and fewer access points, suggesting a need for defense to some archeologists (e.g., Reid and Whittlesey 1997).

Complex, hierarchical communities like those observed from the Late Classic Period in the Tonto Basin, are characteristic of larger societies. However, the low population estimates in the Basin suggest that complex, hierarchal communities are sustainable with fewer people than previously believed (Dean 2000). Some researchers think that the Tonto Basin communities were organized into “confederacies” around irrigation systems by elite social connections (Dean 2000).

Competition and conflict between these confederacies could explain the more defensive locations and organization of the latter-period sites, including the Upper and Lower Cliff Dwellings of Tonto National Monument.

The Spread of Salado Iconography

The spread of the Salado Polychrome iconography across the region may have been a response to environmental and cultural changes during the period of A.D. 1250-1450. Regional and local environmental crises, such as droughts, would have increased the uncertainty of food production, which, in turn, would have exaggerated social inequalities, unequal access to resources, and unequal distribution of wealth (Dean 2000). Many communities were mobile during this period, causing different social group interactions, ethnic mixing, and the displacement of established groups in the region. These changes would have required the development of new methods for incorporating immigrants into established communities, interacting with other social groups, managing internal and external disputes, and organizing multiethnic communities (Dean 2000).

In the 1990s, Patricia Crown identified the Regional Salado Phenomenon as a regional religious cult. Crown (1994) suggests that the appearance of Salado Polychrome wares across the Southwest and into Mexico was the expression of a regional religious system. In her view, the pottery represents the symbolic expression of a religious or ideological movement she calls the “Southwestern Cult.” Through her research, Crown determined that Salado Polychrome vessels were often locally made at the sites where they were found and not imported. She suggests that people across the southern Southwest were adopting new symbols representing a new religious belief system and expressing this adoption through ceramic manufacture and display.

The pan-regional adoption of Salado wares could have facilitated community and individual adaptation to local and regional competition and perhaps conflict. Dean (2000) suggests that the spread of the Katsina Cult to the north of the Tonto Basin through the distribution of Jeddito Yellow Ware ceramics and design styles may represent a parallel northern response to similar environmental problems faced by the southern groups during the Late Classic Period in the Southwest. However, unlike the spread of the Katsina Cult, which was traceable because all Jeddito Yellow Ware was produced in and disseminated from a single area in the Hopi Mesas, the local “copying” of Salado style in the 130,000-square kilometer area of the Salado Phenomenon may forever prevent archeologists from identifying how the Southwest Cult was organized as a system or how it was spread through the region.



Tonto Polychrome ceramic vessel.

The Disappearance of the Salado

The Salado began migrating out of the Tonto Basin after A.D. 1350, and by A.D. 1450, the Salado inhabitants of the region had moved on to other places. Some archeologists suggest that the preceding years of drought and flood cycles and salinization of the fields collapsed the agricultural systems and alliances of the Salado people (e.g. Reid and Whittlesey 1997). Others, including Glen Rice (think conflict and warfare provided the impetus for emigration. Archeologists are also not sure where the Salado people went when they left the Tonto Basin. Native American oral traditions indicate that some Salado people moved north and east to the Hopi and Zuni pueblos, west into the lower Salt River Valley, and south into the Rio Grande and into northern Mexico. Just as the development of the local Salado culture in the Tonto Basin and the regional Salado Phenomenon remain a mystery, so too do the reasons for the disappearance of Salado iconography and the Salado way of life in the Southwest.

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Top: The Upper Cliff Dwelling at Tonto National Monument.
Right: Salado Red Ware vessels from Tonto National Monument.