

# Preservation Archaeology at the Gila River Farm Site: Research Update for 2016

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Archaeology Southwest completed our first field season of excavations at the Gila River Farm site (LA 39315) near Cliff, New Mexico, in July 2016. This year's Archaeology Southwest–University of Arizona Preservation Archaeology Field School introduced 13 undergraduates and two graduate students to field archaeology. Our students represented a mix of large universities, small colleges, and community colleges from the Southwest and around the country. This brief update summarizes some highlights of our summer research.

The Gila River Farm site is an adobe village where people lived from about A.D. 1300–1450, a time period archaeologists call the Cliff phase. Our initial observations of the site's surface showed obvious architecture on the small mounded area we labeled the 300s room block and in the heavily looted area of the 200s room block to the north. Faint lines of slightly stunted plants in the vegetation cover on the site hinted at some walls in the 400s room block to the south, but we weren't sure how much architecture would be left there.



*Four of our happy 2016 field school students after a muddy work day: Emily (U. of Pittsburgh), Carrie (U. of South Florida), Kaiti (U. of Delaware), and Lindsay (Cochise College).*



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*Our 2016 map of the Gila River Farm site shows three clear areas of architecture, including some walls not visible from the surface. Map by Michael Brack.*

We were happy to discover that the architecture in all three room blocks was very well preserved. Our team was able to trace ancient walls in each area, and we excavated portions of four rooms. In the 400s room block, we excavated roughly half of a large room. Although part of this room had been dug out by pot-hunters at some time in the past, a large portion was undisturbed. We found a well-preserved adobe-plastered floor with several partial pottery vessels upon it. These included most of a corrugated jar (an everyday pottery type used for cooking and storage), about two-thirds of a Gila Polychrome jar (a typical Cliff phase decorated pottery type), and several fragments of perforated plates (discussed later in this report). The crew working in this room also spent time tracing out the walls of neighboring rooms using shallow surface trenches, and discovered that this room block is much larger than surface indications had led us to expect. A small test area excavated near the wall of a room to the southeast contained hundreds of fish bones, which is an unusual discovery for this region and time period. We look forward to investigating this more thoroughly next year.

In the 300s room block we excavated portions of two different adobe rooms. One had especially interesting architecture. Its south wall held a row of horizontal holes or sockets for wooden poles 60cm (2 feet) above the room's floor, an unusual arrangement that may have supported some type of heavy shelf or similar structure. This room also contained a mealing feature, a built-in area dedicated to grinding corn. Two bowls (found broken into many small pieces) were recessed into the room's floor next to two large metates. Both metates had been popped out of their plastered recesses in ancient times, when people had placed manos underneath them and then replaced the metates on top. Several artifacts were found resting on the floor of this room, including a large stone tool with a long "thinning flake" removed from its base. Although we cannot be sure when this tool was made, this type of thinning was most often done in the Paleoindian period (before 10,000 years ago), raising the intriguing possibility that the





fourteenth-century villagers found a much older tool, recognized it as ancient, and purposely placed it on the floor of the room when they stopped living there.

The second room we excavated in the 300s room block held many burned roof beams. Adobe structures are fairly difficult to burn thoroughly, so we suspect this room was burned on purpose by those who lived there. This room also had a well-preserved floor with a very large hearth or fireplace. People had left a number of artifacts near the hearth, including two axe heads, a possible axe in progress, and a hammerstone used for making stone tools.



*We found four axe heads at the Gila River Farm site, all in one room with burned roof beams in the 300s room block.*

At the north end of the site, our team excavated a small test unit in a room heavily disturbed by pot-hunters at some point in the past. Based on this limited exposure, we suspect this area consists of a fourteenth-century Cliff phase room superimposed on an earlier Classic Mimbres period structure from the eleventh century (A.D. 1000s). A line of cobbles on the modern ground surface and some Cliff phase pottery sherds are consistent with a Cliff phase room, but abundant cobbles and wall construction adobe lower down, along with Mimbres Black-on-white pottery, indicate another, older residence or structure in this area. Cliff phase villages are not often found directly on top of Classic Mimbres structures, and we are looking forward to returning to this area to continue investigating this unusual combination.



*Crew members discuss the complex stratigraphy in the northern portion of the site.*







*Left: Broken sherds of perforated plates (like this one, found by a very excited Emily Marturano) and Maverick Mountain Polychrome pottery show influence from the Kayenta area of northeastern Arizona. The whole vessels shown here (below) are from southern Arizona.*

As at most Cliff phase sites, these villagers participated in the Salado ideology, a system of shared beliefs and traditions evidenced by the villagers' use of Roosevelt Red Ware pottery. People moving from northeastern Arizona (specifically from what archaeologists call the Kayenta region) in the late 1200s brought some

important aspects of this ideology with them. Their ideas fused with elements from the Mogollon traditions of people already living in the Cliff area to form a belief system that incorporated people from both backgrounds into thriving Cliff phase villages like the one at Gila River Farm.



Signs of the influence of Kayenta culture at the site include several broken pieces of perforated plates. People of Kayenta heritage used these plates to make pottery, and they were culturally specific household items. Fragments of Maverick Mountain Polychrome pottery found at the site also show a link to the Kayenta region. Our team also found many pieces of Cliff Polychrome and Dinwiddie Polychrome, pottery types with interior "smudging" (purposeful soot blackening), which shows close ties to the local Mogollon tradition. The Gila River Farm site also shows the adobe architecture and widespread additional Roosevelt Redware pottery that characterize Cliff phase sites in general.

Some villages in the area (like the 3-Up site near Mule Creek) show evidence of groups arriving from the Kayenta area to join existing villages. Others, like the Dinwiddie site west of Cliff on Duck Creek, show evidence of ideas and cultural influences from that area but no evidence of immigrants.





So far, we have not found evidence of Kayenta immigrants at Gila River Farm, but we do know residents were participating in the multiethnic Salado ideology and using a combination of local Mogollon and nonlocal northern-influenced artifacts. We look forward to returning to Gila River Farm in 2017 to continue learning about the traditions, architecture, and daily lives of Cliff Valley's residents in the 1300s.

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## Important artifacts found at the Gila River Farm Site:



*Two bowls plastered into the floor of this room were part of a mealing area. The adobe stubs above them in the photo once anchored the large metates, which were removed in ancient times and then set back down in the same corner of the room, partially covering some manos (a few of which are visible partially buried in this photo) and the tops of the bowls embedded in the floor below them. In the past, people would have knelt near the metates and ground corn on them using the manos, catching the corn meal in the bowls set into the floor.*



*A dense deposit of bones from fish and other small animals was found in the southeastern area of the 400s room block.*







*Fragments of a partial reconstructable Gila Polychrome jar and a corrugated jar from an excavated room in the 400s room block.*



*El Paso polychrome sherds from the Gila River Farm site. This widely used pottery type is linked to areas to the south-east, particularly northern Mexico and the El Paso area.*

