

# 2017 Preservation Archaeology at the Gila River Farm Site

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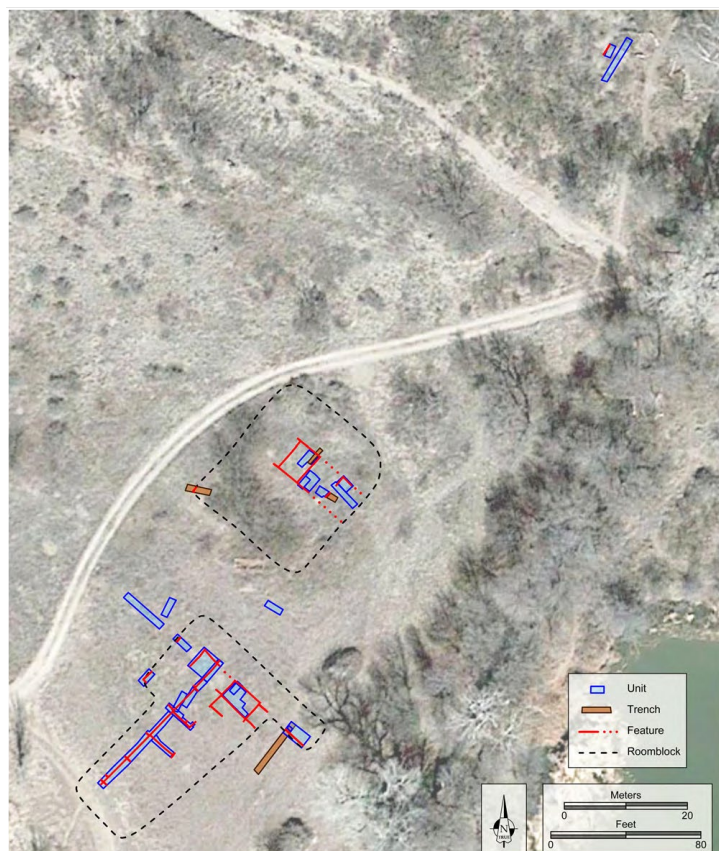
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The Archaeology Southwest–University of Arizona Preservation Archaeology Field School completed our second field season of excavations at the Gila River Farm site (LA 39315) near Cliff, New Mexico, in the summer of 2017. Eleven undergraduates from institutions across the country spent six weeks learning excavation, archaeological survey, experimental archaeology, and laboratory analysis skills by doing hands-on archaeological research.

Farmers lived in the village we call the Gila River Farm site during the Cliff phase (A.D. 1300–1450). The village included at least three separate areas of adobe architecture, or “room blocks.” The northern two are visible as mounded areas today, but the southernmost block is not readily apparent from the surface.



**Above:** Chris, Emily, Ashley, and Leslie take a quick break on our backdirt pile. **Left:** Map of 2016–2017 excavations at the Gila River Farm site. Map by Catherine Gilman based on data from Michael Brack and Tyler Theriot. **Below:** Sam and Sophie reveal the tops of ancient adobe walls.



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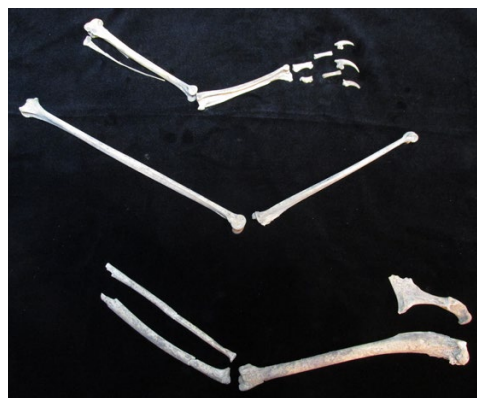


*Some of our shallow wall trenches traced a long north–south axis through the site, eventually reaching the modern road. This wall extended along multiple rooms, and was clearly built in multiple sections that do not align perfectly. This suggests people added rooms to the pueblo in different building episodes over time rather than constructing the whole room block as a single planned event.*

This year, our crew put a lot of energy into digging shallow trenches in the southernmost room block that exposed the tops of walls without disturbing intact deposits lower down. To our surprise, this room block is quite large, extending all the way to (and under) the modern dirt road at the south end of the site. Although they're invisible from the surface, these rooms are very well-preserved lower down.

We also did more intensive excavations in two rooms in the southern room block, removing and carefully screening all the deposits down to the preserved room floors. One had a large number of fish bones on the floor, an unusual finding in archaeological sites in this area. Another had wings and legs from at least seven different birds, including the left wing of a loon, the right leg of a small heron or large egret, the right leg of a red-tailed hawk, legs and wings

from at least three additional hawks, and a very large eagle talon. People purposefully left these bird limbs on the floor of the room, which then filled with washed-in soil and trash from nearby on the site. This room also contained broken pieces of several different perforated plates, a base used in pottery-making. Both excavated rooms also held pieces of minerals used for pigment, and some grinding stones with traces of pigment left on them.



**Left:** Emily excavated a pigment-stained metate. **Center:** Johnny holds up a fragment of a perforated plate. Potters used these plates as forms or bases for building up clay coils to form a pottery jar or bowl. Potters living in the Four Corners area commonly used these items, as did some of their descendants who migrated to other parts of the Southwest. **Right:** Bird bones from the southern room block include portions of a red-tailed hawk leg (top), a heron or egret leg, and a loon wing (bottom).





In the central room block, we excavated in a room near the edge of the area where architecture is visible on the surface today. This room showed evidence of several different kinds of disturbance over time. The room's floor showed signs of weathering and a large pit where someone dug through the room, either in ancient times or more recently. After people stopped living in the room, it was partially filled in by washed-in dirt and debris. Later, it was reused briefly by ancient people whose activities formed an ephemeral floor-like surface that held a few artifacts. Much more recently, hand-dug pot holes and mechanical disturbance created additional pits in the deposit. The centuries of disturbance in this room give us an interesting view of activities here by different people over time.



*Finger-grooved mano.*

At the north end of the site, our crew focused on looking for undisturbed remnants of architecture. Our work in 2016 had revealed a combination of older Classic Mimbres (A.D. 1000–1130) pottery along with the Cliff phase deposits found here and across most of the site. This year, we placed a 7.65m-long trench across a series of three hand-dug looters' holes, hoping that we would find remnants of ancient walls. No traces of intact architecture remained in this area, which was very heavily impacted by pothunters in the past. Still, the broken pottery sherds we located in this trench do confirm the presence of both Classic Mimbres and Cliff phase deposits here. We also recovered a finger-grooved mano, a type of grinding stone linked to people living in the Four Corners area.



*Karla excavates a deep trench in search of intact architecture at the north end of the site.*





Our 2017 work raised several interesting questions. The perforated plates, pigments, and pigment-stained grinding stones concentrated in the southern room block suggest potters may have lived there, a possibility we look forward to investigating by testing surrounding rooms. This year's shallow wall trenches revealed that the site is larger than previously thought, and we plan to continue this testing next summer in order to improve our estimates of how many rooms the site consisted of and how many people once lived there. We also look forward to identifying the many fish bones and additional bird bones from the excavations, which will provide interesting information on the species present in this riverine area in the past compared to today.



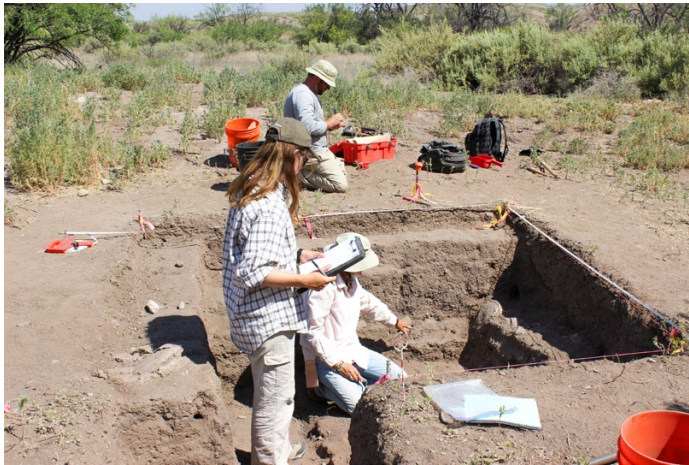
## Acknowledgments:

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## Photo highlights from the 2017 excavations



**Above left:** Stacy and Susie describe excavated deposits in their field notes while Steve labels the bags of artifacts collected there. **Above right:** A shell ornament found in the southern room block. A type of ornament often called a "tinkler," this bell-like item is crafted of Conus shell from the Gulf of California.



We excavated about 2/3 of this ancient room, which would have been a house for a family or similar social unit. The adobe walls are visible at Taylor's back, left, and in front of his orange buckets. The edge of the unexcavated dirt filling the room shows in profile to Taylor's right.

