

# Preservation Archaeology at the Gila River Farm Site

RESEARCH UPDATE FOR 2018



Prepared by  
KAREN SCHOLLMAYER  
January 2019



Archaeology Southwest

300 N Ash Alley Tucson, AZ 85701

| (520) 882-6946

| [www.archaeologysouthwest.org](http://www.archaeologysouthwest.org)

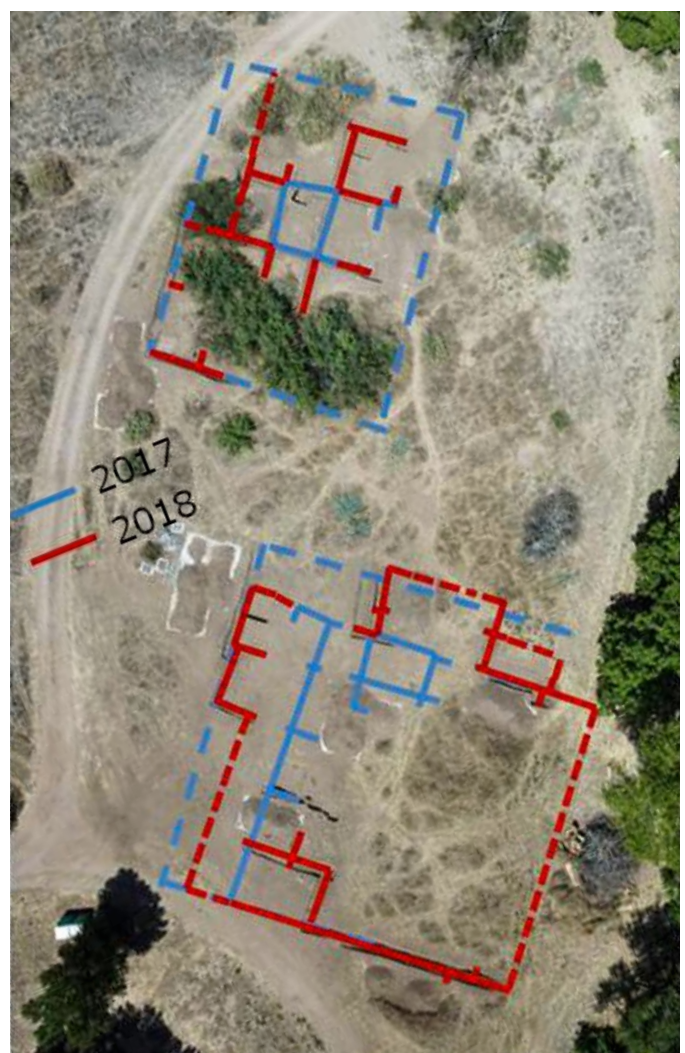


In 2018, the Archaeology Southwest–University of Arizona Preservation Archaeology Field School completed our third summer of excavations at the Gila River Farm site (LA 39315). Our field team of twelve undergraduate students from eleven colleges around the country and seven staff members spent six weeks in Cliff, New Mexico, working together on excavation, archaeological survey, experimental archaeology, and laboratory analysis.

The Gila River Farm site was home to farmers during a time period archaeologists call the Cliff phase Salado (AD 1300–1450). The village consisted of adobe rooms joined together into “room blocks,” the southernmost two of which were the focus of this year’s excavations.

As in previous seasons, the southernmost room block continued to surprise us. The architecture here is nearly invisible from the modern ground surface, yet the shallow wall trenches we dug revealed a previously unsuspected group of rooms extending far to the east of our previous excavations. Earlier maps of the site—including a survey from the 1980s when some of the architecture here was still visible from the surface—suggested rooms here formed an L-shaped room block. This year’s explorations show the room block was actually a large square area, possibly with an open plaza in the center.

Our excavations focused on four adobe rooms, two in the middle room block and two in the southern block. One of the rooms in the middle room block had been badly disturbed by pot-hunters, but the other contained intact deposits. Two bowls were plastered into this room’s floor. These



**Above:** Map of our 2016–2017 excavations (in blue) and newly excavated walls located in 2018 (in red). **Left:** Devlin and Laura excavate the first of two bowls plastered into an adobe room floor. (The second bowl is still filled with soft dirt, visible next to Devlin’s leg.)

bowls would have been part of a mealing feature that included two large grinding stones (later removed) from which ground cornmeal was swept into bowls set into the room floors. We found a similar mealing feature in another room in this room block in 2016. A small test trench in the southern room block also exposed part of a mealing feature, the first we have found in the southern room block.

We also excavated portions of two rooms in the southern room block. One showed interesting evidence of remodeling: sometime after the room's original adobe floor was used, residents deposited a thin layer of soil rich in fish bones on top of it, then built a new adobe floor for the room. The room's walls remained in the same position; only the floor was remodeled. The second excavated room in this area had been heavily disturbed in the twentieth century, and contained interesting historic period trash in a pit cut into the fourteenth-century room below. Artifacts such as historic glass and fragments of a hobnailed shoe dated to the early 1900s, whereas a Coors pull-tab can higher up in the trash deposit dated to the 1950s or 1960s. This layered deposit is a testament to the many generations of farmers drawn to the fertile floodplain around Gila River Farm.



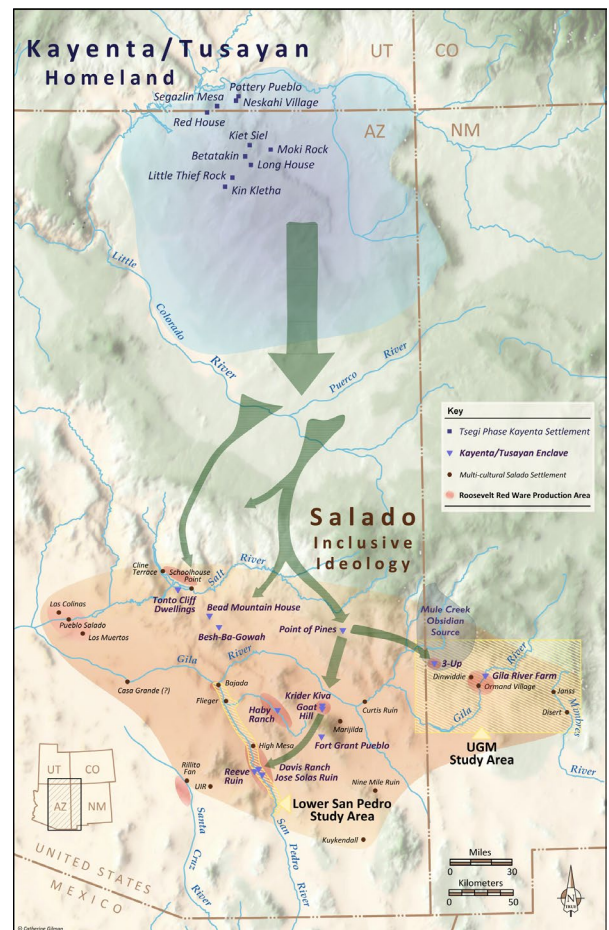
*Historic period items from a trash pit dug into older Cliff phase deposits include a Coors can, glass items, and fragments of a hobnailed shoe.*

As at other Cliff phase Salado sites, villagers at Gila River Farm were part of a system of shared beliefs and traditions archaeologists call the Salado ideology, evidenced by use of Roosevelt Red Ware, or Salado, pottery. People moving from northeastern Arizona (specifically from the Kayenta region) in the late 1200s brought some important aspects of this belief system with them. These ideas fused with elements from the Mogollon traditions of people already living in the Cliff area to form an ideology that incorporated people from both backgrounds into multiethnic Cliff phase villages such as Gila River Farm.



Now that we have amassed three field seasons of excavation data, patterns in artifacts and architecture relevant to identifying villagers' links to these traditions are becoming easier to interpret. Chris LaRoche, one of our undergraduate students from 2017, has been working in our lab in Tucson and identifying some key differences:

- The middle room block has artifacts showing ancestral connections to the local Mogollon area, including  $\frac{3}{4}$ -grooved axe heads, grinding stone manos made in the local style, two of the three built-in mealing areas found at the site so far, and many sherds of El Paso Polychrome pottery. This room block contained only one fragment of a perforated plate—a pottery-making tool linked to the Kayenta area to the north.
- The southern room block contains items showing residents had ancestral connections to the north, including many fragments of perforated plates and several manos with finger grooves on the edges. This room block contains only one mealing feature in the area excavated so far, and much less El Paso Polychrome pottery.



MAP: CATHERINE GILMAN

Despite these differences, everyone in the village used predominately local Salado polychrome pottery and lived in very similar rooms, and it appears that people were living in both room blocks at the same time. Although residents differed slightly in the degree to which they showed ancestral connections to the Kayenta area to the north or to local Mogollon traditions, all were part of the cultural phenomenon archaeologists call Salado. Our research is focused in part on understanding how these villages successfully integrated residents

of different backgrounds into successful and long-lasting communities. We look forward to continuing to investigate these processes at Gila River Farm.



*El Paso Polychrome pottery (right) was more common in the central room block at Gila River Farm, whereas all parts of the site contained abundant sherds of Salado polychrome (left).*





## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

*We thank the Nature Conservancy and the landowners who provided access to the Gila River Farm site and friendship throughout the field season: the Davises, our hosts in Cliff; our fabulous cook, Julie Gierhart; and the residents of the Cliff/Gila area who welcome us each year. Funding for this project was provided by the National Science Foundation (NSF REU-1560465), the University of Arizona Foundation, and Archaeology Southwest members. Thanks also goes to the hard-working students and staff of the 2018 Upper Gila Preservation Archaeology Field School: (back row) Stacy Ryan (Archaeology Southwest), Alexis Miller (University of Delaware), Constance Connolly (University of the South-Sewanee), Leslie Aragon (Archaeology Southwest/University of Arizona), Lisette Wittbrodt (Wayne State University), Matthew Steber (Arizona State University), Samuel Rodarte (Cochise College), Kiley Stoj (State University of New York Cortland), Evan Giomi (Archaeology Southwest/University of Arizona), (front row) Laura Rojas (Adelphi University), Shiloh Craig (University of New Mexico), Jordan Matson (Utah State University), Deianira Morris (University of Arizona), Johnna Oliver (Mesa Community College), Karen Schollmeyer (Archaeology Southwest), Devlin Lewis (University of Arizona), (not pictured) Jeffery Clark (Archaeology Southwest), Allen Denoyer (Archaeology Southwest), and Maxwell Forton (Archaeology Southwest/State University of New York Binghamton).*





# Mogollon and Kayenta traditions in Cliff phase Salado villages

## MEALING FEATURES

These features consist of a bowl and grinding stone built into the adobe floor of a room. Corn was ground into meal on the grinding stone or metate, and then collected in the bowl. Often found in pairs, the examples from the Gila River Farm site so far have had the grinding stones displaced or removed. The bowls are cracked or broken; in at least one case, this happened before they were plastered into the floor, suggesting perhaps this was in part a way to continue using an otherwise unusable vessel. Mealing features are found in the Mogollon area in the centuries before the Cliff phase, and continued to be used after local people began participating in the Salado ideology.



*This mealing feature excavated in 2016 at Gila River Farm includes two bowls set into the floor in the corner of a room (an adobe wall is visible at the left of this photo). The two large metates and other grinding stones shown here were located just south of these bowls, but had been pulled out of place in ancient times after people stopped using the feature.*



*Excavated in 2018, this mealing feature also includes two bowls. No trace of the associated metates was found, showing people must have moved them to another location after they stopped using the feature. The cobble foundations of this room's wall are visible to the left.*





*Lacking a mealing feature, Kiley lifts her metate to sweep ground cornmeal into a basket in 2018.*



**Left:** A portion of a mealing feature found in a shallow wall trench near the south end of the Gila River Farm site in 2018. **Right:** Sam and Johnny grinding corn on experimental metates in 2017.



## MANOS

These items were most often made from basalt, and used in grinding along with a metate. In the Four Corners area manos were sometimes made with grooves

along their sides for the user's fingers (upper right), whereas those made in the local Mogollon tradition do not have these grooves (upper left).



## STONE AXES

Made of ground basalt or other hard stones, axe heads have a groove near their back ends for hafting them to a wooden handle. Traditional local Mogollon axes have a groove extending  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way around their heads (as shown below), but people living to the north in the Four Corners region (including the Kayenta area) made a groove all the way around the axe heads for hafting.



**Above:** Alexis pecks a groove in a replica stone axe head during a 2018 experimental archaeology lab. **Right:** Shiloh, Alexis, and Erica clean logs for our replica structure using experimental stone axes.



## PERFORATED PLATES

These flat pottery dishes were used as bases for making clay pots. Although they normally have holes around their rims, the holes are not always evenly spaced, and archaeologists are not certain of the holes' function. These plates were traditional household items in the Kayenta area, and used by people of Kayenta heritage in Cliff phase Salado sites.



**Above:** Perforated plate from the northern San Pedro River area. Image: Janine Hernbrode. **Left:** A perforated plate sherd found in our excavations at Gila River Farm in 2018. **Below:** Danny, Peter, and Lara make experimental pottery using pottery bases in 2016. Danny's base (on the left) is the shape of a perforated plate. Today's Pueblo potters use a similar item, known as a 'puki'.

