Introduction

During the summer of 2016, Archaeology Southwest and the University of Arizona’s Upper Gila Preservation Archaeology (UGiPA) field school conducted limited excavations at the Gila River Farm Site (LA 39315), a Cliff Phase [A.D. 1300–1450] site near Cliff, New Mexico that is owned by the New Mexico Nature Conservancy. The site is composed of three main adobe room blocks that are visible on the surface due to differing degrees. The 200s room block was heavily looted and recognizable as a series of large contiguous pits within an architectural mound. A portion of the 300s room block is preserved as an architectural mound, but it has suffered mechanical disturbance on its east and west sides. The 400s room block is in a leveled area, with no obvious architectural mound. It was visible only by patterns in the vegetation (known as the Brigadoon effect), where the plants above the adobe walls are slightly stunted and walls are only visible during certain times of the year.

Prior to our excavations, the only archaeology that had been done on the site was a survey in 1983. During that survey, archaeologists drew a rough sketch map of four architectural mounds (only three have been re-located by the current project) and made notes, but no collections. Ongoing work at the Gila River Farm Site contributes to our understanding of trade networks, population densities, and settlement patterns and social dynamics in the region.

One surprising thing that we found during excavation of the northernmost room block at the site was evidence of an earlier Mimbres occupation. Even though the rooms had been heavily disturbed by pot-hunters, through our limited excavation we were able to discern the cimenteros of a Cliff Phase room block above an earlier Classic Mimbres structure from the eleventh century. Not many Cliff Phase villages were built directly on top of Classic Mimbres structures, so this is an unusual and surprising combination that we will explore further next season.

Conclusion

The 2016 field season at the Gila River Farm Site showed that excavations of a looted, pot hunted, and disturbed site can still yield valuable information. Despite past human interference (both historic looting and modern agricultural activity) excavations revealed intact architecture and artifacts. Future excavations at the Gila River Farm Site will continue to provide information on site structure, population densities, traditions, and lives of the past residents of the site.