Insights into the Salado Phenomenon from the Cliff Valley

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Introduction

In southwest New Mexico, Salado occupations (AD 1300-1450+) are known as Cliff phase and characterized by adobe construction and Roosevelt Redware pottery. Archaeologists working primarily in the Mimbres Valley have proposed that Cliff phase sites represented short-term sedentary occupations by farmers who moved frequently between valleys. Frequent movement allowed valley resources to recover between short occupations.

This study evaluates the short-term sedentism model in the upper Gila area by focusing on three large villages: Dinwiddie, Ormand Village, and Gila River Farm. These sites generally meet expectations for the short-term sedentism model, although some site occupations here were longer than those in the Mimbres Valley.

The Short-Term Sedentism Model

The short-term sedentism model is based on three key characteristics of Cliff phase villages in the Mimbres Valley:

1. Lack of trash middens (indicating short village occupations)
2. General lack of remodeling and superimposed features (indicating short room use-lives)
3. Substantial variability between valleys and widespread distribution of artifact styles (indicating thinly spread populations and noncontemporaneous valley occupations)

Single course of cobble cimientos

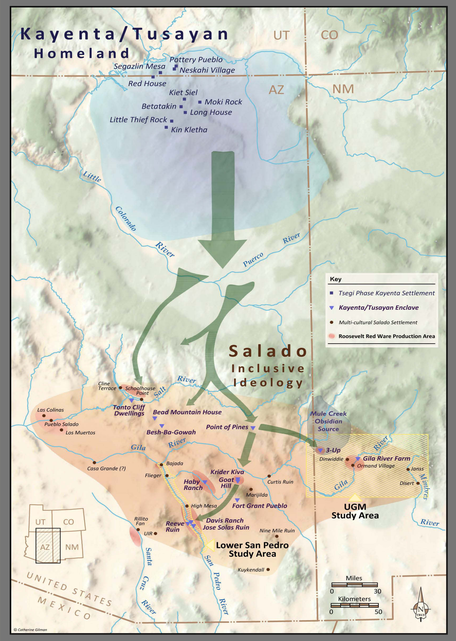
Double course of slab cimientos

In order to test the model in the Cliff Valley, we collected several types of architectural data that provide information on the length of site occupations, length and intensity of room use, and site construction sequences.

- Wall footings or *cimientos* are stones forming the bases of adobe walls. Variations in footing construction reveal temporal and/or cultural variability.
- Adobe used for wall construction may vary within sites, showing temporal and/or cultural variability in construction techniques.
- Site layout, wall corner alignments, and bonding and abutting patterns in walls indicate how quickly villages were built and how they grew over time.
- Structural remodeling of rooms or floor features indicates the length of room use (either through repeated reoccupations or continuous occupation).
- Floor replastering in rooms indicates the length of occupations, as more foot traffic causes more floor wear.
- Trash middens and trash-filled rooms indicate a longer site occupation than a lack of these features. Trash under room floors indicates whether rooms were added gradually (after residents of preexisting rooms disposed of trash) or quickly (before trash had time to accumulate).

Salado

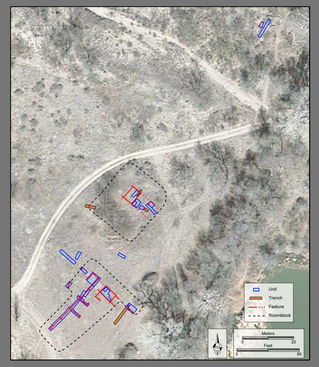
During the late 1200s, farmers from the Kayenta area of northeastern Arizona left their homeland and moved southeast. As they settled in southern Arizona and New Mexico, their traditions intertwined with Mogollon and Hohokam practices already present in these areas.



Expressions of Salado show regional variability. The multiethnic Cliff phase communities in southwest New Mexico are characterized by adobe architecture and Roosevelt Redware (Salado Polychrome) pottery. This pottery combines Kayenta decorative elements, integrative Mesoamerican iconography, and Mogollon traditions like smudged vessel interiors.

Cliff White-on-red bowl from Dinwiddie showing Salado decoration and a smudged interior.

Perforated plate sherd from Gila River Farm. Used in pottery making, these items show connections to the Kayenta area.



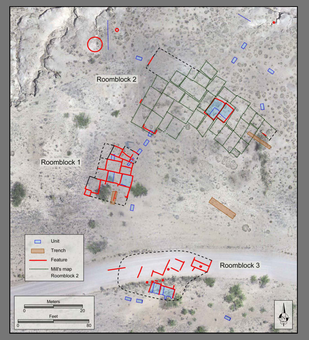
Gila River Farm (LA39315)

This site is located north of Cliff, NM on a low alluvial fan west of the Gila River. Architecture consists of about 80 rooms in four room blocks. The Archaeology Southwest / University of Arizona 2016–2017 field school conducted the excavations.

- All wall foundations consist of single-coursed *cimientos* (more rapid growth)
- Walls show several different adobe materials (accretional growth)
- Walls line up well but are not continuous (accretional but rapid growth)
- No room remodeling, occasional feature remodeling (short use)
- Some room floors replastered (continuous use)
- No clear midden, only one room with trash under floor (less intensive use)

Long walls within room blocks at Gila River Farm consist of multiple segments rather than one continuous construction, showing they were not built in one construction episode.

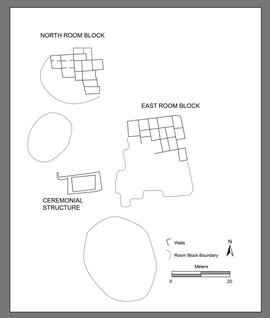
Mealing bins are characteristic Mogollon area features, and show how Mogollon and Kayenta influences combined in Cliff phase sites.



Dinwiddie (LA106003)

The Dinwiddie site is an 80–100 room adobe pueblo located west of Cliff, NM on Duck Creek west of the Gila River. Three room blocks are preserved; a fourth was destroyed by mechanical disturbance. The site was partially excavated in the late 1960s by avocational archaeologists, and tested in 2013–2015 by the Archaeology Southwest/University of Arizona Preservation Archaeology Field School.

- Wall foundations include single-coursed and double-coursed *cimientos* (accretional growth)
- Walls don't line up well (accretional growth)
- Several rooms have remodeled walls and floor features (long use)
- Several room floors replastered (continuous use)
- No clear midden or trash under floors (less intensive use)



Ormand Village (LA5793)

Ormand Village is located just south of Cliff, NM on a terrace west of the Gila River. Architecture consists of four adobe room blocks, with possible Late Archaic and Early Mogollon pithouses beneath. Excavations by the Museum of New Mexico took place in 1965–1966.

- All wall foundations consist of double-coursed *cimientos* (more rapid growth)
- Walls show change in adobe material in earlier vs. later rooms (accretional growth)
- Walls line up well (more rapid growth)
- Very few rooms remodeled or replastered (shorter use)
- No clear midden; very little trash under floors (shorter use)

Conclusion

The three Cliff Valley sites examined here generally fit the short-term sedentism model, although they also show some interesting variability.

- Wall foundations, adobe materials, and wall alignment indicate accretional growth at all three sites. Gila River Farm and Ormand Village grew more rapidly. Variation in cimientos and poorly aligned walls at Dinwiddie suggest comparatively slower growth.
- Remodeling was rare at Gila River Farm and Ormand Village, and more common at Dinwiddie. Floor replastering was common at Gila River Farm and Dinwiddie, but rare at Ormand Village. Although most rooms were not used for long enough to require remodeling, rooms were commonly occupied long enough to need floor repairs due to wear from foot traffic. This suggests these sites were used more intensively than previously thought, despite the scarcity of trash.
- The lack of trash middens supports the short-term sedentism model; sites were not inhabited long enough to produce a substantial amount of trash. Similarly, a general lack of trash under floors indicates less intensive occupation despite accretional growth of rooms.

Although expectations for the short-term sedentism model were met, the Cliff Valley sites show more evidence for intensive use than the Mimbres Valley sites the model was based on. In particular, some structural remodeling, more frequent floor replastering, and variability in construction between rooms and among the three sites all indicate longer and more continuous occupations in the Cliff Valley.

Resource depletion has been a recurring problem for sedentary agriculturalists worldwide. In other regions, approaches to soil depletion included letting fields lie fallow without moving villages, or adding soil amendments. Short-term sedentism may have allowed soil and other wild resources to regenerate at a valley scale, addressing multiple sources of depletion. Continuing research on soils, plant and animal remains, and more precise dating of Cliff phase occupations will allow us to investigate the extent to which short-term sedentism eased pressure on local resources.

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Photos and maps: Cliff white-on-red bowl from the Mills Collection at Eastern Arizona College; photo by Mathew Devitt. Ormand Village map by K. Dungan, adapted from Wallace 1998:16. Dinwiddie and Gila River Farm site maps by Catherine Gilman with data from Michael Brack and Tyler Thenot. Regional map by Catherine Gilman.

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