Untangling the Tularosa Phase: Preliminary Results from Archaeology Southwest’s Mule Creek Archaeological Project

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I. Introduction

In 2011 and 2012, Archaeology Southwest (formerly the Center for Desert Archaeology) has collaborated with the University of Arizona School of Anthropology to offer a Preservation Archaeology Field School as part of a larger research focus on the Upper Gila region of New Mexico. The excavation of the Tularosa Phase component of the Fornholt site (LA16447T) in Mule Creek, New Mexico, included five weeks of fieldwork in 2011, followed by a continuation of the field school in 2012. The Fornholt site contains two room blocks and a midden or trash deposit. The room blocks are located on a south-facing slope in a steep valley that has been modified by erosion. The midden is located between the two room blocks and has been cut by a gully. The site is located on the northern edge of the Tularosa Phase distribution in southern New Mexico, including Playas and other ceramic types more characteristic of Tularosa Phase sites. This “boundary” position is reflected in the presence of Tularosa Phase ceramics in the midden, but the presence of Pinedale Black-on-white and Tularosa Black-on-white. In addition, the site includes St. John’s Polychrome painted diagnostic types recovered from the site. The Tularosa Phase ceramic assemblage includes Incised and El Paso Polychrome.

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II. Habitation and Storage Rooms

As of the end of the 2012 season, portions of six rooms have been excavated. Two of these had no surviving floor or floor features. Two were single story habitation rooms. Both of these had rectangular slab-lined hearths. The hearths were filled with ash, and the rooms had been cleaned out at the end of the occupation. Excavations during the 2011 season uncovered a catastrophically burned storage room in the southern portion of the southern room block. The lower story of a two story room contained a substantial quantity of carbonized corn cobs, along with fragments of burned basketry, whole and reconstructible ceramic vessels, and a plain cotton textile (probably a bag). Beams from this room have been submitted for tree-ring dating.

Excavations intended to investigate another two story area in the western part of the southern room block during the 2012 season found instead a room that had been heavily remodeled. The early occupation of the room consisted of several floors associated with adobe walls. Masonry walls were later built up from the adobe wall stubs. While a post supporting the ceiling of this masonry room did burn, the space above the collapsed room appears to have been subsequently filled with trash, suggesting that the fire was not associated with the end of the Tularosa Phase occupation of the site.

The northeastern corner of a habitation room in Fornholt’s southern room block. The slab-lined hearth is visible in the lower right corner.

III. Great Kiva

A major focus of the 2011 and 2012 field seasons was the large depression within the southern room block. A rectangular outline and a southeast facing entrance are visible at the modern ground surface, suggesting that this feature resembles Reserve Phase and Tularosa Phase great kivas in the eastern Mogollon Highlands and the Point of Pines area.

Excavation of the great kiva suggests this structure is somewhat unusual and even that “great kiva” may not be the best label for this feature. The material recovered from the center of the feature does not provide evidence for ritual activity, however. The ongoing analysis of the material recovered during excavation will shed more light on the structure of deposits in the “great kiva” and on the complex occupational history of the site.

Acknowledgments. This project would have been impossible without the support of the community of Mule Creek, and particularly the owners of the Fornholt Site. The 2009 and 2010 students, staff, and volunteers laid the groundwork for the research reported here, and we would like to thank them, as well as the 2011 and 2012 field school students, for their hard work and enthusiasm. The aerial photographs were taken by Henry Wallace. Archaeology Southwest’s research in the Upper Gila was funded in part by a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF Project No. 0819657) and was supported by the University of Arizona, Hendrix College, and generous donors to Archaeology Southwest.

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The heavily burned lower story storage room in the southern part of the southern room block. Carbonized basketry fragments (right) were among the material recovered from the room.

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A sample of carbonized musk from the burned storage room.

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