Preliminary Insights into Marine Shell Trade Economy on the Upper Gila River

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Introduction

Purpose: To provide preliminary information regarding marine shell artifacts found at Salado sites along the Upper Gila River, specifically regarding possible trade origins of saltwater shell species.

Method: Analysis of shell species data provided by Desert Archaeology and Archaeology Southwest.

Implications: Provides a solid base for continued research into the economic organization of marine shell trade among the Salado, and other groups along the Upper Gila River.

Background: Salado

- The Salado represents a coalescence of Kayenta migrants and southern locals, including Mogollon and Hohokam peoples, during the 13th and 14th centuries.
- These diaspora groups maintained connection for at least 100 years, trading intensively across southeastern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico, especially obsidian from Mule Creek, New Mexico.
- This obsidian source inspired more data recovery investigations from the Upper Gila River by Archaeology Southwest.

Shell

- Shell is a fairly common occurrence at sites along the Upper Gila River, both worked and unworked.
- Most of the shell recovered from the Upper Gila River come from riverine species, but marine shells are also found in smaller concentrations.
- Shell, like obsidian suggests a wide trade network to bring material long distances to arrive in the Upper Gila River.
- The Salado must have had connections with groups close to the source of these shells.
- By looking at the source of shells, we can ask: How did the Salado acquire marine shell?

What can shell tell us about the economic organization of the Upper Gila River Salado?

Site Name | Conus sp. | Cerithidea | Olivella | Nassarius | Turritella | Glycymeris g. | Laevicardium e. | Spondylus | Argopecten c. |
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Dinwiddie | 3 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
Gila River Farms | 4 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 0 |
3-Up | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
Gamalstad | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
Total | 7 | 1 | 11 | 2 | 1 | 11 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

Many species of shell found in Upper Gila River sites, such as the popular Olivella, as well as Turritella, Cerithidea, and Conus sea snails can be found on many different beaches all over the world. Similarly, the Nassarius, which is a genus of murex shells can be found along much of the East Pacific. A different shell called Glycymeris gigantea is a large clam and can be found in shallows along sub-tropical and tropical regions including the Gulf of California. Glycymeris is also commonly used by the Hohokam, who use the entire shell to fashion bracelets. Much of the worked Glycymeris found at sites along the Upper Gila documented by ASW are fragments of shell bracelets of the type worn by the Hohokam.

Laevicardium e. is a cockle and is found from Central California to Panama and is most often used to create disk, and other types of beads. Spondylus, also known as Spiny Oyster has a large distribution from the Gulf of California down to the northern beaches of Peru. Spondylus is also used to fashion beads and is sought after due to its orange, red or purple coloration.

Argopecten c. is a scallop and comes from Southern California. Of other types of shells, we can ask: How can we further reconstruct marine shell trade routes throughout the American Southwest?

Next Steps and Further Research

- Most of the shell found at sites along the Upper Gila river likely originated in the Gulf of California.
- The Hohokam were likely involved in the transport and distribution of Glycymeris g. Throughout the southwest.
- How did the Hohokam obtain Glycymeris? Did they travel long distances to gather it themselves or did they trade for it with a group closer to the gulf of California?
- How can we further reconstruct marine shell trade routes throughout the American Southwest?

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