Ongoing Investigations at the Gila River Farm Site

Devlin Lewis (University of Arizona) and Leslie D. Aragon (Archaeology Southwest, University of Arizona)

Introduction

During the summers of 2016 – 2018, Archaeology Southwest and the University of Arizona’s Upper Gila Preservation Archaeology (UGPA) 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 to varying degrees. The 200s room block to the north has been heavily disturbed, and our excavations have focused on the two southern room blocks. The 300s room block is partially preserved as an architectural mound, but it has suffered mechanical disturbance on its east and west sides. The 400s room block lies within an area that was formerly an agricultural field, which has been leveled and also shows significant signs of looting.

Although most of the architecture was not visible from the surface, our excavations revealed large preserved room blocks beneath the surface. People built the walls of the Cliff phase rooms using coursed adobe. Large cobbles called cimientos provided footings for the adobe walls. Average individual room size at this site was much larger than what is expected for the area and time.

Several of the rooms in the 300s room block have mealing bins, or grinding stations, built into the floors of the rooms. This is a trait that is generally associated with Mogollon houses in pre-Salado times. Their presence here is an example of the blending of Mogollon and Kayenta cultures to form Salado.

Prior to our excavations at the site, the only work done was a survey in 1983. Manmade disturbances by bulldozers have damaged portions of the site and their trenches are observable today. Work at the Gila River Farm Site contributes to our understanding of trading networks, settlement patterns, population densities, and social dynamics in the Upper Gila region.

Excavations of the 400s room block revealed a room with hundreds of fish bones. Fish bones are relatively rare in archaeological contexts from this area, and their presence here may indicate a special use for this room. The fish bones (probably as whole fish) were placed over the floor of the room when it was retired. There is no other examples of this type of room retirement in the Upper Gila.

One surprising thing from our excavations was the discovery of a long and continuous wall running east from the 400s room block. This wall was unexpected, and its size and lack of cross-walls suggest the presence of an interior plaza feature. The extent of the wall was only fully revealed during the final days of the 2018 field season. More excavations during the 2019 field season are needed to understand its role.

Conclusion

Excavations at the Gila River Farm Site have revealed a complex Salado settlement that differs from others in the area. The lack of pattern at Salado settlements in the Upper Gila is an interesting and somewhat frustrating phenomenon that demands more research. Despite heavy looting and other human disturbance, there is more to be learned from this site. Future excavations will continue to contribute to our understanding of site structure, settlement patterns, and the traditions and lifestyles of past residents.

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