

Photo Summary of Field Trip to Gisela Ruin

December 18, 2022

Led by Scott Wood (AAS, and Friends of Tonto National Forest).

Sponsored by Rim Country Chapter (RCC) of the Arizona Archaeological Society (AAS), Coordinated by Brent Reed, Board Member. Photos by Dennis DuBose, Brent Reed, and Mari Townsend.

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Scott Wood Introduces Gisela Ruin

Photo by Brent Reed

Scott Wood narrated the story of Gisela within the larger context of the Hohokam Culture. The Hohokam Culture was centered in the Greater Phoenix area Valley of the Sun along the Salt and Gila Rivers in the form of centralized irrigation districts. Irrigation agriculture leads to land ownership tenure systems. The investment in the irrigation works drives long term ownership of irrigated lands, leaving some people landless. Hence, some of the landless begin to look elsewhere for alternative places to live and prosper. Ideally, they sought places where they could do irrigation agriculture.

The Tonto Basin qualified. Scott Wood began with a geography lesson using a classical allusion: All Tonto Basin is divided into four parts – Salt Creek, Tonto Creek, Rye Creek Valley, and Gisela Valley. The two latter together are the upper parts and the two former together are the lower parts.

The Hohokam who settled in the Tonto Basin and adjacent areas are called “Salado” by Archaeologists. But, Scott said, the Hohokam people were very adaptable and Salado is fundamentally a Hohokam adaption to different local environments. Hohokam and Salado are variations in the same overall culture.

In the Pre-Classic period the Hohokam and Salado lived in pithouses. The Pre-Classic Hohokam in the Greater Phoenix area built “Ball Courts.” There are no Ball Courts in the Tonto Basin.

Snaketown, south of Phoenix, was the major center of Pre-Classic Hohokam. There was no decorated pottery except Red-on-Buff, manufactured at Snaketown and traded widely. Snaketown was destroyed about 1070 AD. The potters moved to Queen Creek and continued to make similar pottery but using a different clay. Also, around this time a new religion began to take hold. Earlier, burials had been cremations with little or no grave goods, while now inhumation burials began to become more common, phasing out cremations. By 1150 AD there was no more Red-on-Buff pottery being produced. This pottery characteristically occurs only in Hohokam Pre-Classic Sites.

The year 1150 AD may be considered the end of the Pre-Classic Hohokam period and the beginning of the Classic period.

The Lower Tonto Basin had a dozen irrigation canal districts. Rye Creek had many suitable irrigation sites and became populous. Gisela Valley had only one place on Tonto Creek where water could be pulled out for irrigation.

In the Classic period elaborate inhumation burials with all sorts of grave goods increasingly became more common. These graves have attracted pot hunters in historic times, leading to site destruction. Gisela has been severely damaged by pot hunters. In the Classic Period surface dwellings replaced pithouses. Such dwellings are more visible to pot hunters, also leading to damage. Pithouses are much more obscure after several centuries.



Photo by Brent Reed

Scott Wood Points out the Surface Indications of a Prehistoric Pithouse Structure.

Photo by Mari Townsend



In the Classic period, Platform Mounds were built in the larger aggregated communities. It appears that the ruling elites lived in homes atop these platform mounds. There are about a dozen platform mounds in the lower Tonto Basin, and then one at Rye Creek, and one more at Gisela. There were many more near the Salt River in the Phoenix area and some along the Gila River south of there.



Gisela Tour Group Examines a Mound at Gisela Ruin

Scott said that this may be a platform mound or it may be the remains of a large housing structure. He said that there is a definite Platform Mound across a nearby ravine.



When asked how high this structure was in it's Prime, Scott Demonstrates
Photo by Mari Townsend

The stones available for building in the vicinity of Gisela are mostly rounded river worn small boulders. These do not stack well unbound by mortar. They do not hold together well even when mortared with clay. And the clay mortar easily washes out with rainfall. Consequently, much of the Gisela Ruin is indeed in ruins. Extensive pothunting has not helped either.

Scott said you cannot make a multi-story building with walls made of round boulders and mud, it will not hold up.



Gisela tour Participants Look for Potsherds and other Artifacts on the Surface of the Mound

Not many artifacts were visible on the surface at Gisela as the ruin has been pretty much picked over.

Continuing Scott's narrative ...

A great drouth began in 1275 AD, lasting to 1300 AD. Previously people had been more spread out, but now they concentrated. Upland people came down to water, including Gisela. It appears that these people were used as laborers. Into the 1300s there appeared to be increasing conflict and violence. Trade and production declined. By the 1380s the Hohokam and Salado were in decline. There were massive floods in the Salt River valley, destroying irrigation works again and again. By the 1400s the Salt River and its tributaries, including the Tonto, were largely abandoned.



View of the Gisela Mound from the Creek Side

These boulders are what remains of massive terracing of this slope. There are no doubt more boulders not visible here than visible as the terracing has collapsed upon itself.

Some Gisela Tour participants spread out near the Mound searching for artifacts. One was overheard saying, "It looks like a war zone over here." As the other Gisela Tour participants moved to the area, it was apparent what he meant. The area looked like it had been pocked with shell holes.

Scott said this area was a cemetery area, and had contained the artifact treasures pot hunters sought after. It had been really churned up.

The photo below does not really capture the scene very well.



Pot Hunter Cemetery Digging Area Showing Numerous Pits Dug Searching for Artifacts

Marked in the version below ...





Hammer Stone at Gisela Ruin

Photo by Brent Reed



Tour Participants Gather in the Main Plaza of Gisela Ruin



Scott began diagramming in the dirt the layout of the components of Gisela Ruin.
Photo by Mari Townsend



The large Gisela Plaza was probably a marketplace for local, neighbor, and trader products. Scott noted that several other platform mound sites like rye Creek and Cline Terrace also have large open plazas like this, probably for the same purpose.

A few artifacts of interest were found by Gisela tour participants ...



Scott Identified this Potsherd as Cibola White Ware

Pot hunting in the Southwest began in 1893 with the early “archaeologists” such as Adolph Bandelier began excavating pots and other artifacts for exhibits back east and even in Europe. The Wetherill brothers displayed Southwest artifacts at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893. Museums and private collectors wanted some. When local people realized that artifacts could be sold, pot hunting went from occasional hobby to profitable business. Gisela did not fare well.

The pithouses in the area were not much disturbed because the pot hunters could not see them easily. Scott said it would be really interesting to excavate some pithouses at Gisela as they are undisturbed.



This small, crude ceramic object was found near the Plaza. Similar items are found at other sites from time to time. Since they often look like something a child would make, some speculate that they were made by children, imitating what older people were making.



After the Tour, the participants returned to the parking area, got out their snacks, lunches, drinks, and broke up into groups discussing whatever crossed their minds, with some moving from group to group as their interest took them.

