Rain falls from the sky, some never reaches the ground, some runs off down rivers, and some soaks down into the aquifer. In Banámichi, northwestern Mexico, which has a close but uneasy, centuries-old history with mining operations, water emerges from a natural spring and flows through a human-made canal system that was modernized in the 1930s and 1940s. The system is older, but how much older remains unclear.

Early explorer Cabeza de Vaca reported an area with “permanent houses and many stores of maize and frijoles” (Vaca and others 2003[1542]:152). One particular historical narrative that emerged from archaeological research in the 1970s and 1980s is currently displayed in Banámichi’s Plaza Juarez/Plaza de la Piedra Histórica (Plaza of the Historic Rock): a fountain featuring a corn stalk and a boulder supported by four Ópata-inspired figures representing four Río Sonora pueblos founded by Father Bartolome Casteñedos. On that boulder is a petroglyph that geographer William Doolittle interpreted in the 1980s as depicting the pre-Hispanic canals and fields in the floodplain below. That narrative is often repeated today by water managers who attribute the tradition of canal irrigation to the Ópata peoples, as attested by the petroglyph displayed in the town center.

* See more information on next page.
Living with the Canals: Water, Ecology, and Cultural Memory . . .

Order your own dinner off of the restaurant’s menu at your expense starting at 6 p.m. The presentation will start around 7.

Donations will be requested to benefit Old Pueblo Archaeology Center’s educational efforts.

Photos by Elizabeth Eklund:

Right: While heavy mining equipment is often thought of as “modern,” mining in northwestern Mexico has a complicated history.
Below: Selfie.

Page 1, upper: The Río Sonora is often dry near Banámichi but during the monsoon season the rains refill the river.
Page 1, lower: A monument stands in center of a plaza in Banámichi. It features a boulder, supported on the shoulders of Opata-inspired figures, with an incised petroglyph, which is sometimes referred to as the “first map” of Banámichi, based on one of the most widely known interpretations of the motif.

This month’s guest presenter Elizabeth Eklund has focused on the intersection of nature and culture. Her undergraduate thesis was on the changing views of ecologists across the 20th century in the San Francisco Bay area reflected in their notes about crows and ravens, archived in the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (University of California, Berkeley). Her Master’s degree in Environmental Sciences (University of Virginia), and Master’s in Anthropology (San Diego State University) examined how the United States and Mexico create and designate federally protected areas. Her doctoral research in northwestern Mexico is on canal irrigation in Banámichi, Sonora. This work has been funded by the Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society, the Edward H. and Rosamond B. Spicer Foundation, and the University of Arizona’s Graduate Student and Professional Student Council, Social and Behavioral Sciences Research Institute, and School of Anthropology.

Page 1 source cited:

Cabeza de Vaca, Alvar Núñez, Patrick Charles Pautz, and Rolena Adorno, The Narrative of Cabeza de Vaca (2003, University of Nebraska Press; original by Vaca in Spanish, 1542)

Map shows location of the restaurant where the dinner and presentation will be held.