Old Pueblo Archaeology Center's "Third Thursday Food for Thought" Series

The Sinagua: Fact or Fiction?

Free Online Presentation by Archaeologist Peter Pilles

Online via Zoom (See link below)

Thursday March 17, 2022

7 to 8:30 p.m. Arizona Time (Same as Pacific Daylight Time)

The Ridge Ruin and ballcourts east of Flagstaff, Arizona: Is this a Sinagua archaeological site?
(Archaeology and artifact photographs on pages 1-3 courtesy of Peter Pilles)

"Sinagua" is the name first coined in 1939 to refer to the pre-European people who inhabited the Flagstaff region of north-central Arizona. But what, exactly, does this mean? Does Sinagua refer to a geographic area, a specific kind of pottery, an actual grouping of people, or is it something else? These are difficult questions this presentation will attempt to explore.

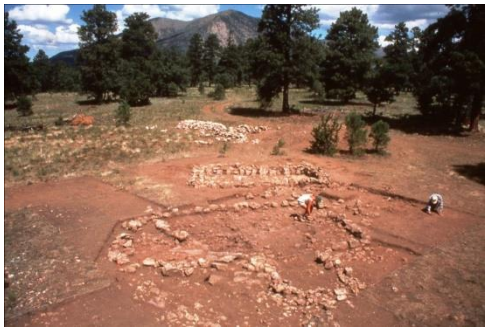
(See next page)

To register for the Zoom program go to

https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_Ik2kE-mAROaksDhLE-6iUQ

For more information contact Old Pueblo at 520-798-1201 or info@oldpueblo.org.

The Sinagua: Fact or Fiction? . . .



Dwelling outlines found in a Sinagua site archaeological excavation

The Sinagua archaeological area of Arizona has been considered a cultural "frontier," characterized as a blend of other cultures, yet unique enough to warrant its own cultural designation. However, over the years, this uniqueness dissolved as old interpretations were no longer satisfactorily explaining what archaeologists were finding.

By the 1960s, new areas of study and new explanatory models were developed. However, these paradigm shifts have failed to satisfactorily answer the questions posed by past interpretations. These shifts beg the major questions: Who were the Sinagua, how do they fit into the "Big Picture" of Southwest prehistory, and what happened to the culture?

A pithouse excavated in the Sinagua area

In order to bring closure to these questions, archaeologists need to explain how past questions have been . . . not exactly the wrong questions, but they need to be re-fitted and examined under a different lens, focused by degrees of scale.

This presentation will attempt to illustrate these different approaches, as well as to demonstrate that the concept of "Sinagua" is both fact AND fiction. For background information see page 3.

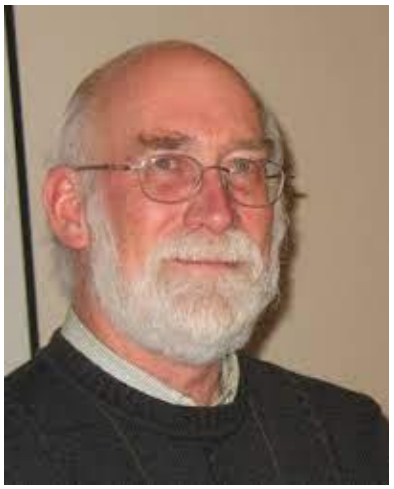


Photo of Peter Pilles courtesy of *The Petroglyph* newsletter of the Arizona Archaeological Society

This month's guest presenter Peter J. Pilles, Jr. received his BA degree from Arizona State University in 1967. He worked at the Museum of Northern Arizona from 1967 until 1975, when he became the Forest Archaeologist for the Coconino National Forest. Most of his archaeological survey and excavation work has been on the Navajo Reservation and in the Salt River valley, the Flagstaff area, and the Verde Valley.

Peter has presented over 100 papers, authored 70 publications, and given numerous lectures and presentations that reflect his specialty areas of precontact central and northern Arizona, rock art, and ceramics, and cultural resource management and public archaeology. Major achievements in the latter include the Elden Pueblo Project, which has received awards from the Governor of Arizona and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. In addition, he has received awards for his work in public archaeology and archaeological interpretation from two Arizona governors, the Hopi Tribe, the Secretary of Agriculture, the US Forest Service, Tuzigoot National Monument, the Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society, the Arizona Archaeological Society, the American Rock Art Research Association, the Arizona Archaeology Advisory Commission, and the Arizona Preservation Foundation.

Shell ornaments from some Sinagua archaeological sites

Peter's interest in rock art and archaeological site management spans many years and includes research as well as conservation, interpretation, and development. He has been actively involved in planning site developments, such as Homol'ovi State Park, Honanki, Palatki/Red Cliff Heritage Sites, Elden Pueblo, and the V–V Petroglyph Site. He also has served as advisor to the National Park Service for various site development and interpretive plans and for the Heard Museum, the Museum of Northern Arizona, the Hopi Tribe, and the Coconino National Forest for museum and exhibits planning. He has been an advisor for the Northern Arizona Chapter and the Verde Valley Chapters of the Arizona Archaeological Society for many years, the AAS State organization since 2017, and has taught a variety of AAS certification classes, most notably, the AAS Elden Pueblo Field School, which was active between 1980-2009.

(More on next page.)

For more information contact Old Pueblo Archaeology Center at info@oldpueblo.org or 520-798-1201.

Background to the Sinagua

Peter J. Pilles, Jr.

In southwestern archaeology, material culture, such as pottery, projectile point shapes, architecture, burial patterns, ceremonial structures, unique artifacts, etc., are used to define cultures, based on differences between these "cultural traits." Archaeologists realize (or should!) that these "cultures" are constructs made by archaeologists and may or may not have actual reality in terms of how precontact people perceived themselves and their social relationships.

By 1927, southwestern archaeologists realized they had no commonly accepted framework by which to organize and compare the results of their work. This resulted in the Pecos Classification concept, which focused on the northern Southwest. However, archaeologists working in central and southern Arizona quickly realized the Pecos classifications did not work in their areas. Consequently, a separate conference was held in 1931 to establish a similar classification scheme that worked for the southern part of the Southwest, and by 1939 two somewhat different classification systems were proposed and various cultures were delineated, based on material culture traits, primarily ceramics, and the regions in which those ceramics dominated.

Initially, this was further refined as the people who produced a distinctive type of pottery, Alameda Brown Ware, which differed from that made by contemporaneous people in surrounding areas. Further distinctions were provided by the types of structures, burial customs, and unique artifacts not found in those surrounding areas. But as time progressed some archaeologists began to question the uniqueness of the Sinagua "culture," noting the presence of other architectural and burial styles, and artifact types also found in surrounding groups –most notably, the Pueblos to the north and east, and the Hohokam to the south. Recognizing that the Sinagua region lies between these much larger, geographically expansive groups, the Sinagua area was identified as a prehistoric frontier characterized by a blending of diagnostic attributes from these more dominant cultures, and questioning the uniqueness of the Sinagua as a distinctive cultural group on equal footing with other recognized prehistoric traditions. This relegated them to a mongrel identification, simply reflecting, and adapting, the developments and achievements of the more dominant surrounding groups.

Over the years, the uniqueness of the Flagstaff area began to dissolve, with the discovery that Sunset Crater erupted during the time people lived in the region. Excavations suggested colonies from surrounding cultures appeared in the region to take advantage of new farmlands created by the eruption. As more archaeological work was conducted, it became more obvious that the old cultural distinctions were no longer satisfactorily explaining what archaeologists were finding.

New explanatory concepts started to appear in the 1950s. Rather than focusing on differences between cultures (the basis of the 1930s approach), more attention was paid to similarities between different regions and taking a broader look at "traditions" that crosscut the earlier cultural distinctions. By the 1960s, research moved away from questions of cultural relationships, and new areas of study and new models were developed to understand cultural processes in general, divorced from the confines required by the old cultural classification framework.

However, the paradigm shifts that have occurred in southwestern archaeology over the past 75 years have failed to provide satisfactory answers to the questions posed by the culture history interpretation that archaeology has presented to the public. The profession has essentially dropped it and moved on to other interests. This begs the question at the end of the culture history story regarding the Sinagua – What happened? Did they mysteriously disappear, only to emerge 300 years later as Hopi?

In order to bring closure to the Big Picture, archaeology needs to provide a transition to explain how our past questions have been found to be not exactly the wrong questions, but need to be refitted and examined under a different lens and a different perspective. Black and white identifications of cultural identity need to be tempered with explanations of scale. Relationships between people and events can be examined and interpreted at different scales. At one level, relationships between different "cultures" can be explained in broad, generic, macroscopic terms, while at another level, much more specific, microscopic levels may be more appropriate.

Archaeology is the study of past cultures, with the intent of learning how people in the past adapted to change, both environmental and social, through time. The objective is the hope that, by better understanding how and why people made decisions in adapting to change, we can better understand ourselves, and the ways people make decisions to respond to change.

Honanki cliffdwelling and pictographs near Sedona, Arizona, photograph by Allen Dart

More about Peter Pilles

Peter has served on numerous boards and commissions, including the Arizona Archaeological Council, the Governor's Archaeology Advisory Commission, the Arizona Archaeological Society, the Society for American Archaeology, the American Rock Art Research Association, the Archaeological Conservancy, the Verde Valley Archaeology Center, the Picture Canyon Cultural and Natural Preserve Working Group, and seven years on the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Northern Arizona.

He served as chair of the Governor's Archaeological Advisory Commission's Site Stewards Subcommittee from 1988-1990 when the Arizona Site Stewards program was developed, and directed a number of Site Steward training programs. In 2007 he and Tonto National Forest archaeologist J. Scott Wood, who also was a member of the subcommittee, were presented with awards for their contributions in making the Site Stewards program a reality. In 2011, they also shared in the recognition of the Site Stewards program by the Arizona's Culture Keepers program, which was created in preparation for Arizona's Centennial Celebration to recognize 100 groups or individuals that have made noteworthy contributions to preserving and protecting Arizona's cultural heritage.

In addition to being an adjunct professor at Northern Arizona University, he has been an instructor in archaeological law enforcement for the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center and has taught courses in rock art conservation and management for the American Rock Art Research Association, the J. Paul Getty Conservation Institute, the Instituto Brasileiro do Patrimonio Cultural of Brazil, and at the VI Simposio Internacional de Arte Rupestre, San Salvador de Jujuy, Argentina.

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