

“Mining Towns”



Crumbling ancient walls are all that is left of this “mining town”.

Mining has got to be one of humankind’s oldest professions. In fact, it is probably only just behind food-gathering, and oh well, you know, that other one, too. For tens of thousands of years, people have dug up rocks for whatever uses they could think of – the making spear-points or arrowheads, to trade as bits of currency, or for some kind of ornamentation. This is not to mention the use of big chunks of rock for creating buildings, bridges, or pyramids, even.

Much of what the ancients valued is very different from what we value in today’s world. They had uses for things that we don’t even think about these days, and vice versa. Obsidian, a volcanic glass, was once highly sought-after, and traded far and wide, because it was the perfect stone from which to shape points and blades. How about good old salt? Yes, salt is a mineral, and it was once an expensive commodity, used as a form of payment.

People once catapulted balls of acrid, burning sulfur at each other, well before they started using it in gunpowder. And back then they thought of smelly, oily, petroleum tar as a curiosity – something that trapped certain animals in the pits where it occurred – and wondered why on Earth anyone would ever need very much of that stuff.

Not that any of these musings had been on my mind as I headed into the backcountry for a little archaeological adventure. I had been wanting to check out some more ancient cliff dwellings – remnants of what we now call the Salado Culture. What that trip turned into was a reminder that you never know what to expect out there. There is always some stone to be upturned, so to speak.

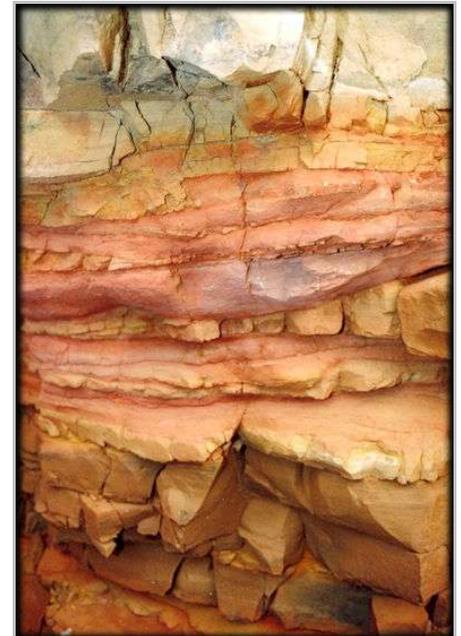
It began as a gray, windy, rainy day, though springtime, and as I started out I wondered whether the hike would be a good one. I was headed into the gentle, lower reaches of a canyon in the craggy Sierra Ancha. This area is home to some of the most remote and undisturbed prehistoric ruins in the Southwest. The mountains sort of blend northward into the Mogollon Rim, so they don’t stand out as a separate island of peaks like so many other ranges in this part of the world. That belies how rugged the wilderness really is there, however. Sheer cliffs of hard, massive reddish and purplish Precambrian quartzites rise abruptly out the creek beds, presenting formidable walls to any easy passage, and one has but a limited number of routes by which to penetrate the cliff-dwellers’ domain.

Add to that numerous thickets of chollas, and tall stands of plump, green Saguaro cacti, and you have a scene of bewildering beauty.

Within a few hours, the land started to rise higher and higher above me, and after crossing a small divide, I started to feel almost surrounded by the towering ledges. Groves of trees closed in too, along with prickly brush and tall grass, and my eyes searched everywhere I was planning on putting down a footstep, lest I put it right on top of an idle rattlesnake. The fresh moisture in the desert air added both a sense of thickness and security.

I would have missed the dwellings, had it not been for the tiniest of a crumbly, worn trail leading up through a leafy thicket, right up to the base of some red overhangs. Then appeared the stone walls, the dry, daubed-on mud, and the small doorways of the ruin. I had read of this place just before my journey, so I thought I knew what to expect. And it was just like how the author described.

Except for one thing: he missed *the reason* for the place being where it was.



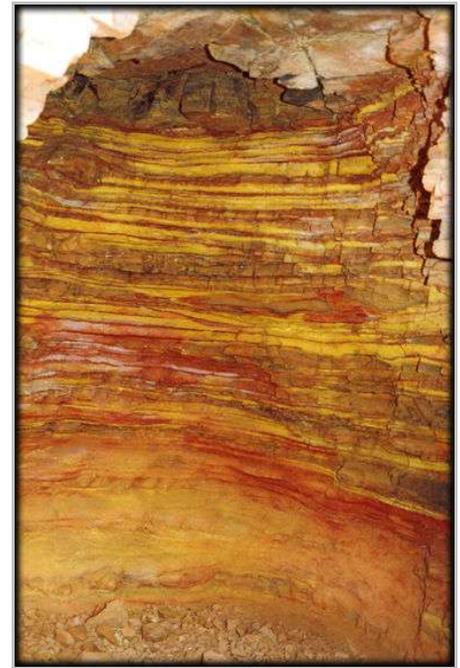
Bands of red and yellow iron oxides.

The stone forming the back walls of the musty, old rooms was a rich rusty color, layered with alternating bands of golden ochre, making for a half-completed rainbow look. The rock had been scoured and scooped-out by perhaps generations of residents, and the dirt all around was red and yellow, too, and soft and powdery. And I knew right at that moment that this was no ordinary cliff village.

The previously-visiting writer had seemingly missed its significance completely: *that this was a mine*. The rooms were where the miners lived and worked. What they mined was the soft, brightly-colored rock from behind, and from this spot, those powdered pigments were probably exported to faraway villages and cities of the time.

I was fortunate. Had I not been a geologist, and one with some archaeological training, I don't think the significance of the place would have even dawned on me. I thought of all that red and buff ancient pottery I've seen in museums, the vermilion, angular markings, and the paint once covering the "big house" at Casa Grande National Monument, and I thought to myself, "I'll bet I know right where that coloring came from!"

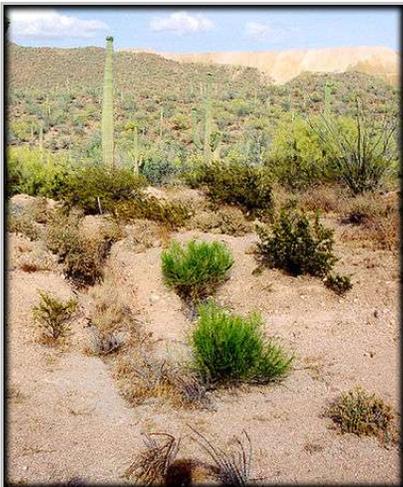
The place had come to life for me.



A rainbow of color inside the mine.

The continuing story I want to convey here is not just the history of that place in particular, however.

There is a deeper side to it. – the real theme is how wrong, or at best, simply misunderstood, our perception of the past is. The narrow, "locked in" view of "how it was" is very often incomplete when examining the record of human history.



Shallow trenches and rubble form the remains of the Village of the Scorpions.

Bringing that history to life is what is necessary. Dusty, old ruins merely tell part of the tale. The relationship between all those sets of ruins is something else – indeed, it is the very fabric of that old society, and, by virtue of human descent, of us.

In a previous GeoStory™ ("She of the Jade Skirt"), I wrote about the "Village of the Scorpions", a place where ancients had mined and crafted turquoise for a period of some 800 years. It sits along a one-time trade route that extended from a *Hohokam* city we now call *Snaketown* (near the present-day Gila River bridge, on I-10 southeast of Phoenix) into western and central Mexico. The village was then, and is now, clearly "in the middle of nowhere".

But it was next to a place where copper minerals occurred, and those inhabiting the region around 1700 years ago had already recognized those minerals by their brilliant blue and green colors. One type of pretty rock found there was turquoise, the most desirable of the ornamental copper minerals.

When I wrote that piece, I had not yet visited the actual village site. Few people had ever even heard about it, and references to its precise location were almost non-existent. It took two trips into the blazing desert, a lot of map interpretation, various wanderings around through the scrubby landscape, numerous vicious little bites from gnats and other insects, what seemed like hundreds of "stickers" in my legs, and the braving of encounters with both the US Border Patrol (friendly), and people-smuggling "coyotes" (who roared by in a pickup truck packed with humans, not really in a mood to talk), but I finally found it.

I think by then, my good friend, who had accompanied me on both of these desert excursions, was probably wondering about me and my obsession with the place. But for me, having only read about it was not enough. I had to actually see the spot, *feel* the desert, and *experience* the place. *I had to bring it to life*.

The Village of the Scorpions (its present-day Indian name) is now a series of shallow ditches and low piles of dirt and rock, sitting on a gentle ridge offering sweeping, lonely views to the north and south. Where miners and artisans, along with their families, had once lived and died over a period of eight centuries, now lay only desolation and the quick work of some archaeological crews in the last decade. The remains of a pit house could be seen in one spot, a few stone piles in others, and there were a few pieces of blue turquoise scattered about.

The archaeologists had done their job well. And it's a good thing, too, for without their detailed work and documentation, the place would have been obliterated by present-day mining activity, and we would have never known the detail of what took place there, and just how that little village had fit into a far-ranging trade network.

As I stood there in the heat of the day for what seemed like a long time, I imagined I could barely make out a small trading caravan in the distance, headed for whatever-they-called-Snaketown then, bearing a load of bright blue stones and carvings.

I suggested to my friend (who had been with me at the "pigment" mine also) that we were probably among a few living humans – maybe we were the *only two* – that had actually been to these *two* old contemporary mining villages of the prehistoric Southwest.

I noted that we had quite possibly retraced the footsteps, so to speak, over a few trips, of a couple of ancient Hohokam traders – us finding one old mine by accident, the other after a lot of research and driving. We were, in a way, reliving their adventures, and at the same time, creating some of our own.



Prehistoric traders traveled through this valley towards Snaketown.

The point? You can't relate to the experiences of our predecessors simply by reading about them. You should go there, stand in that place, imagine and feel what those that lived, worked, and died there felt. Bring it to life for yourself. You don't have to venture into the wilds to do it. There are places all around, like Casa Grande National Monument, or Pueblo Grande here in Phoenix, or the Deer Valley Rock Art Center, close to I-17, a few miles from the Loop 101.

Just go there, and imagine.

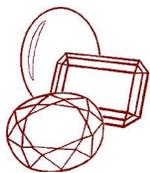
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----- *Richard Allen*

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At right: natural blue sapphire and platinum wedding set by GemLand © 2004



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info@gemland.com

• Phone/FAX 602-294-6775

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