

"Viewpoint"

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View from ancient Hohokam ruins near Phoenix, Arizona.

Look closely at the picture accompanying this story. See that ribbon of asphalt stretching off in the distance? That is something the occupants of this stone structure could never have foreseen. They would not have understood its purpose.

I had just finished hiking up a rubble-covered slope, so steep that several of the others in our hiking group that morning didn't even make it to the summit. Loose soil, angular chunks of rock, and a nasty-looking *cholla* seemingly within an arm's reach no matter where one stood had all contributed to a bewildering, grueling climb. It wasn't a hot day -- just warm. But you couldn't tell that by looking at us, with our shirts all drenched in sweat.

My friends had given up at just the wrong place, just short of where the climb ended. No amount of coaxing could convince them to go any further, which was too bad. Because once on top of the mesa, after a last few feet of hand-holds and muffled grunts, the world changed completely. There, in front of those of us that had made it to the top, grassy flats stretched off to the distance. Towering above them stood the

steep slopes of nearby desert mountains, their serrated shapes purplish in the morning haze. But separating the mesa top and the mountains was a deep valley, and seeing this we realized right away the meaning of "sky island", a term sometimes used to describe this type of unlikely setting -- one that ancient peoples sometimes chose on which to build their homes.

The grassy, cactus-covered plain spread only to the left, however. To the right the mesa top choked down to a narrow promontory. Edged by vertical, massive basalt precipices on three sides, the rock shelf pierced the expanse all around, and at its tip stood an amazing set of imposing stone walls. Not just a few either, but a multitude that defined an ancient fortress, its quarters separated into small rooms of various sizes. Strategically placed in some of the walls were tiny openings, looking down onto the slopes leading up to the cliffs below, no doubt having given the past residents a narrow view of anything that threatened their home in the sky.

Built sometime between 1200 and 800 years ago, this settlement was a home to the ancients we now call the *Hohokam* ("all used up", in

Piman), and much of their world remains a mystery to us. Why here, of all places, to build this place to live? Water was a long, long ways below, and life would definitely have been easier elsewhere. It couldn't have been the view.

Or could it? What if all of our theories about why the Hohokam lived in places like this are wrong? Or at least misguided. Maybe their mind-set was just so different from ours, so alien to our way of thinking, that we are missing the point completely.

There is no question that ruins such as these look like they were built for defensive purposes. Defense may have been a major consideration. After all, living out in the open anywhere in days-gone-by was dangerous. Better to live somewhere that offered protection. But there is an air to sites such as this one that also suggests majesty. I have seen it at other archaeological sites in the Southwest, and you can even see it where people live today. Go up to the Hopi Reservation in northern Arizona, and take a look at *Walpi*, a village located on what is called First Mesa. There you will see (and can tour, with a Hopi guide) structures, with panoramic views, that do not look unlike these Hohokam hilltop ruins. Walking around Walpi changed my view about those we now call Indians, and drove home the differences between Hopis, for example, and Navajos, who now surround their homeland.

Get a book from the library about Tibet, with pictures (or visit that now-occupied country if you want some real adventure), and look at some of their architecture. Very similar. When I saw my first picture of Walpi, I thought it was Tibetan. The buildings and temples of Tibet were put where they were because of the "power of place" in those spots.

Hopi and Hohokam cultural traits are perhaps more similar than many researchers give credit, and the two groups most likely share ancient

ancestors. The Hopi religion has some of the characteristics of the Tibetans' religion, and then there is always to remember that, as far as we know, native American peoples migrated primarily from Asia.

Staring out from the ruins on the cliff's edge, I could see what we now call civilization creeping ever closer to the mesa. I could even hear the roar from the freeway below -- a relentless stream of cars, SUVs, and eighteen-wheelers flowing between Flagstaff and Phoenix, completely oblivious to the old citadel within their sight. I crouched down and peered through one of the holes in the walls. It framed only a few big rocks that lay across a small ravine cut into the basalt. The rocks were confined by more *chollas*. Was there something about those rocks that inspired this narrow view? I hiked down and across the ravine to inspect the stones, but found nothing of note there. When I turned around, however, to face the walls of the stronghold, I saw below them worn and barely visible petroglyphs the Hohokam and their ancestors had cut into the boulders.

A fortress? A temple of sorts? A place of power? Or simply a nice view? It all depends on how you look at it.

Author's note: If you manage to find these or any other ruins on your own, please take care to preserve their nature, and don't take anything but pictures! You can see more scenes of ruins, petroglyphs, and other rock art by logging on to www.gemland.com. Go to the "Geology" section, and click on "Shaw Butte" to begin one series of pictures, or go to the "GeoArt" section and click on "Deer Valley Rock Art Center" for other views.

--- Richard Allen

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Contact Richard Allen at GemLand ®

602-294-6775

info@gemland.com

www.gemland.com