The Hohokam Culture

The Hohokam Culture developed in the deserts of southern Arizona, extending southward into extreme northern Mexico and northward at times as far as present-day Flagstaff, Arizona. The culture resided in this area from as early as 300 B.C. to 1450 A.D. Archaeologists disagree on the beginning date for the Hohokam. Some believe it is as late as 500 A.D. The name Hohokam comes from the Tohono/Akimel O'odham language and means “all used up.”

No one is sure where the first Hohokam came from. They could have migrated from Mexico by following the streams of the desert, or a group of archaic people may have developed into a society and culture. The Hohokam, however, are known as farmers. They are said to have become the most skillful desert agriculturalists. With just the simplest tools of stone, the Hohokam built an irrigation and network system of canals that spanned from the Salt and Gila Rivers which watered their farmland, and they grew many crops in the arid, harsh desert of the Southwest.
Archaeologists who have studied the Hohokam have established time periods for the culture based on major changes in their architecture, agriculture, and ceramics. Those periods are the Pioneer Period, the Colonial Period the Sedentary Period, and the Classic period.

**Architecture**

During the Pioneer period (300 B.C. – 550 A.D), the Hohokam built small, scattered settlements of mud houses over shallow pits. Their houses were usually constructed of pole, brush, and mud. They were not pithouses like other Southwestern prehistoric people were building because the houses were built *inside* shallow holes in the ground. Most pithouses were built over the pit rather than inside it.

By the Colonial period (550 A.D. – 900 A.D.), true pithouses were being built over the pit. Because of the warm climate, the Hohokam probably spent as much time inside the home as outside. Houses were places for cooking and sleeping during the winter or for cool refuge on hot summer days. At this time, Hohokam homes were arranged in groups around a common plaza. The villages became large and platform mounds, which are hard-surfaced, flat mounds for ceremonies, and ballcourts began to be constructed. The ballcourts were oblong, usually large and plastered with mud and in the shape of a modern football field. They are thought to be used largely in rituals or celebrations. The Hohokam seemed to have been influenced by the Mesoamerican peoples to the south. Platform mounds and ballcourts for ritual activities are characteristic features of Central American cultures at this time.

During the Sedentary period that followed (900 A.D. – 1100 A.D.), sites were larger and there were more of them. One of the largest villages *excavated* by archaeologists was named Snaketown, north of the Gila River. The architectural advances in this period improved slightly, compared with the Colonial Period. These advances involved the ceremonial structures. The mounds or platform mounds were better constructed, and some underwent reconstruction. Overall, the patterns of settlement changed very little,
although there was more variety in the types of sites in this period. Some sites had both ballcourts and large plazas. The shape of the pithouses also changed through the years from square, to rectangular, to elliptical.

http://www.cavecreekmuseum.org/hohokam_of_the_southwest.htm
Pithouse during excavation

During the Classic period (1100 A.D. – 1450 A.D) Hohokam building techniques were much different than those of past periods. The communities of the Hohokam were much larger than the ones found in the Sedentary Period, but there were fewer occupied villages. The Hohokam were still building their houses from wood, brush, and mud over pits, but a new and different architectural form appeared at this time. Ground level adobe structures known as compounds became common. These walled enclosures contained from four to ten special purpose rooms and living spaces facing a courtyard. These walls were then surrounded by a stockade-like adobe wall that could be up to twenty feet in height. Some believe that because the walls and structures were constructed so high, ladders had to be used to climb over the walls. In the beginning, these early high
structures were only a single story, but later they became multi-storied buildings such as the buildings found in the Casa Grande Ruins south of Phoenix. People were living in pithouses outside the compound walls at this time also. Ballcourts were still being constructed. Massive adobe platform mounds like that found at Pueblo Grande in Phoenix were built at larger villages along major irrigation canals. Archaeologists have various explanations for these changes: perhaps an upper-class priesthood developed, warfare, influence from Mexico, or influence from a culture known as the Salado originally found in the Globe and Lake Roosevelt area to the northeast of Phoenix.

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Hohokam ruins at Casa Grande Ruins National Monument

Agriculture

As was said earlier, the Hohokam were farmers. During the Pioneer period, an agricultural way of life based on the domestication of corn, beans, squash, and cotton began to appear. They learned to water their crops with the use of irrigation canals. Canals were dug
without the use of any machines or draft animals. Stone hoes, wooden sticks, and baskets were the tools used to dig the canals.

The Colonial period brought the expansion of the irrigation system to support agriculture and a growing population. Also at this time, the canals grew in length. The canals were cut deeper and narrower so more water could flow through them and with less surface evaporation. The Hohokam grew a large amount of crops in the desert environment. They grew cotton, corn, and several types of beans and squash. The Hohokam also modified the desert to grow agave and other native plants.

Irrigation systems continued to be increased throughout the later periods and main canals fed a series of smaller canals reaching villages as far as ten miles away from any river. Archaeologists have discovered more than three hundred miles of major prehistoric canals, and nearly three times that number of smaller ones in the lower Salt River Valley area. Not only did all of these canals have to be dug with stone and wooden tools, but they had to be maintained in order to keep the water flowing.

http://www.mc.maricopa.edu/dept/d10/asz/archy_sims/hohokam.html

Hohokam Canals along the Salt River near modern-day Phoenix
The Hohokam practiced hunting and gathering to add to their diet. They would gather Mesquite beans that grew in the valley along with the fruits of the local cacti such as the saguaro, cholla, prickly pear, and barrel cactus. They gathered edible plants such as pigweed, sunflower, and tansy mustard. They also collected agave crowns, acorns, manzanita berries and other small fruits of the Northern Mountain region. Plants were also gathered for basket-making. When the Hohokam wanted a lighter vessel for storing or carrying, they could rely on baskets that they weaved. These vessels were light and durable, which could serve many purposes such as gathering and storing foods, sifting corn if the pieces were woven loosely, and even sleeping mats. The baskets were woven from the leaves of yucca, cattail, and beargrass. The Hohokam hunted for deer and rabbit as the main source of meat in their diet.

Ceramics and Artwork

At the beginning of the Pioneer Period the Hohokam were producing plain brown and gray bowls and jars. These plain wares were gradually replaced by buff-colored vessels decorated with red designs known as red-on-buff pottery design. Other materials produced at this time were polished stone bowls, palettes, axes, and shell ornaments. The Hohokam also used grinding stones to grind dry plant food.

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Hohokam red-on-buff effigy pottery
Palettes were used for grinding pigments and were probably personal possessions of individuals. From Snaketown, Gila River, Arizona

The Colonial Period is one of expansion and with this expansion, trade was more extensive. One reason or theory that has been stated is that the Hohokam still had close ties with the Mexican societies of that time. The red-on-buff pottery also became more detailed. The designs, such as quail and rows of dancers, were repeated bands on plates and bowls. There was also another change in the art work of the culture. Ceramic figurines and non-utilitarian (non-useful) objects were drawn and sculpted from clay with much care. The ceramic figurines were very lifelike and were both male and females figures. These objects included sculptured stone bowls or effigies which were decorated with a wide assortment of animal designs. Finally, there were plaques or mirrors which were mosaic or made from pyrite which is reflective in nature. Such plaques were often also found in the Mexican cultures.
Hand-holding dancing figures are the most commonly depicted version of human forms on Hohokam pottery. The posture and repetitive motion suggests something of the nature of Hohokam dancing. From Snaketown, Gila River, Arizona

During the Sedentary Period, designs on Hohokam pottery changed and there were more types of ceramic vessels produced. Large storage jars were made at this time. The red-on-buff patterned bowls and jars were still used, but the patterns were more geometric and became more complicated. The palettes of stone that the Hohokam used were less detailed.
The Hohokam started to work more with shell during this time period and made some remarkable art work with this material. They used techniques such as etching to shape and design their shells. The Hohokam discovered how to decorate shell by etching. The Hohokam were the only culture in the Americas to use this process, and they did so centuries before cultures in Europe began to etch objects and designs. They could etch a design in the shell by dipping the shell in a weak acid produced by cactus juice which had fermented and would eat away the surface of the shell. They used the black pitch from the mesquite tree to coat and protect the part of the shell design that was not to be etched.

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Etched Hohokam shells
The Hohokam also created necklaces and earrings from shell beads. They made pendants in forms of discs, circles, frogs, birds, and horned frogs. The famous small, copper bells of Mesoamerica which, like the shells, must have been received through trade were first found in this period. Some experts believe that the Hohokam had an extensive trade with the Mesoamerica/Mexico Indians of the time. The culture placed a high value on the shell in which they etched, so perhaps a trading party traveled to the California coast to trade or gather this product. The Hohokam are believed to have traded pottery, cloth, and other such products for shell material. Mesoamerican artifacts such as the copper bells, polished plaques of iron pyrite, parrots and macaws were found at some sites.

Hohokam art still was changing in the Classic period. The red-on-buff pottery was still made and used, but a white-and-black-on-red pottery started to appear. These colored pottery pieces could have been used as trade or copies of pottery that were used by people living to the north of the Hohokam, which indicates they also must have traded with those groups. Items such as stone bowls, effigy figurines, stone palettes, and etched shells were no longer made during the period.

The Hohokam tilled the soil of the arid desert for about 1500 years. During that time, they expanded their culture, built a widespread canal system, had extensive trade with Mesoamerica, and developed a unique and distinctive art form that dealt with beautiful pottery and wonderful shell artifacts. For whatever reason, the Hohokam culture ended and left us with a mystery to unravel.

Adapted from:
http://www.cavecreekmuseum.org/hohokam_of_the_southwest.htm
http://www.beloit.edu/~museum/logan/southwest/hohokam/introduction.htm
http://www.ci.phoenix.az.us/PUEBLO/dfindex.html#contents

Standards Connections: Grade 6
Social Studies: Strand 1 Concept 2 PO 3
Reading: Strand 1 Concept 4, Strand 3 Concept 1