

BACK TO THE PAST

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Back to the Past provides a wonderful opportunity for children to imagine how it would be to live without modern technology and materials they take for granted.

The Back to the Past activity focuses on the Hohokam, a culture in southern Arizona between approximately 450 and 1450 CE (Common Era). They lived along the Salt and Gila Rivers and other waterways where wildlife and plants were plentiful and the soil was rich. The Hohokam culture extended from Mexico in the south to Flagstaff, Arizona in the north. Evidence of their presence has been discovered in the Tucson basin, including Sabino Canyon. This activity helps students understand how archaeologists learn about the Hohokam by studying that evidence. . . their material remains.

Hohokam means “*those who have gone*” or “*all used up*” in the language of the Tohono O’odam, present day people whose oral tradition suggests they may be descendants of the Hohokam. With the support of visual aids and hands-on activities, students will learn how the Hohokam were able to meet all their survival needs using only the natural materials from the immediate surroundings.

For shelter, they built pit-houses by digging a pit one to two feet deep into the ground using various tools including rocks, sticks, and clay scoops. Trunks of Douglas fir or other trees and saguaro ribs were used for the frame, which was then covered with brush and plastered over with mud and dirt. This design allowed the house to stay relatively cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

The Hohokam depended on farming for much of their food. They grew corn, beans, squash and agave, as well as tobacco and cotton, which they used to make cloth. To water their crops, the Hohokam created a complex network of irrigation canals, which was unsurpassed in prehistoric Northern America. The canals, some as long as 10 miles, rerouted the Gila and Salt Rivers and other waterways to water their fields. Some of the more than 150 miles of canals in the Salt River valley were renovated and put back into use in the 20th century.

In addition to farming, the Hohokam continued the hunting and gathering practices of their ancestors. An important source of food was the beans of the mesquite tree. Mesquite beans were collected and ground with a stone mortar (*metate*) and pestle (*mano*) or on a bedrock mortar. The mesquite flour was used for broths, breads, and stews. Another important source of food was the ripe fruit of the saguaro. Because saguaros reach up to 50 feet in height, the Hohokam would use a long stick—usually a “rib” from a dead saguaro—to reach up to the top and knock the fruit down to the ground. The fruit was boiled down into syrup and cakes were made from the dried seed. The Hohokam supplemented their diet by hunting rabbit, deer and other animals.

The Hohokam were also active traders with people from what is now Mexico. They obtained goods such as rubber balls, copper bells, turquoise, obsidian, and macaw feathers to use in games and ceremonies and for making jewelry. They obtained shells from people living near the Gulf of California and the Pacific coast. They etched decorations into the surfaces of these shells with acid, becoming the first people in the world to use this technique. Shell jewelry made by the Hohokam was a valuable trade item. They also traded baskets they made from plant materials and pottery they produced using clay from the bottom of rivers or creeks.

Although the Hohokam lived successfully in the desert for about 1000 years, they abandoned their settlements or “disappeared” between 1350 and 1450. The reason is unclear. Students are encouraged to suggest possibilities. Perhaps environmental factors such as drought, floods, and worn out soil, as well as disease, were the reason. Cultural strife caused by changing social/political structures and religious beliefs may have contributed. Recent findings suggest the Hohokam culture “evolved” rather than “disappeared” as the people merged with other groups and adopted different technologies and traditions. It is a matter of debate and speculation among scientists.

HOHOKAM ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MUSEUMS IN ARIZONA

[Casa Grande Ruins National Monument](#) — Coolidge, Arizona

[Indian Mesa](#) — Peoria, Arizona

[Mesa Grande Cultural Park](#) — Mesa, Arizona

[Park of the Canals](#) — Mesa, Arizona

[Pueblo Grande Museum Archaeological Park](#) — Phoenix, Arizona

[Arizona Museum of Natural History](#) — Mesa, Arizona

[Arizona State Museum](#) — University of Arizona — Tucson, Arizona

Virtual reality tour — [Paths of Life: American Indians of the Southwest](#).
“Explore the origins, history and contemporary life ways of ten native cultures in an exciting mix of prehistoric artifacts, historic objects, life-size dioramas and audio/video presentations.”

[Other online exhibits](#)