



Relating archaeology and environmental history of the American past: the case of Hohokam irrigation

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When the first Europeans entered the Salt River Valley, they found abandoned platform mounds, ball courts and irrigation canals. In the mid-1800s, these canal remains became the source of inspiration for new irrigated farming – often through re-use of these canals. A new European-based agricultural civilization would rise from the ashes of Hohokam society – as the culture that had produced these remains was labelled. In Arizona, we encounter a rather direct, material connection between those that are typically studied within archaeology (Hohokam) and within environmental history (Europeans and Native Americans). Another link that we should explore are the many cultural claims on “the Hohokam”. Hohokam society would be a major symbol of how irrigation-dependent societies would collapse, even though the reasons for rather sudden disappearance of Hohokam society in the 15th century are still not clear. A third link is the importance of Hohokam heritage for current society, as for example expressed in the activities of the Gila River Indian Community, whose Department of Natural & Cultural Resources develops modern irrigation facilities and preserves the canal remains of the Hohokam as much as possible. The story of the Hohokam not only extends the time frame of American environmental history into prehistory, but also allows us to study how ideas and interpretations of our archaeological and historical pasts are claimed, changed and maintained in history and our own present.