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Looking at Hohokam may help us live today

By Ron Dungan

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PHOENIX — The Earth is warming. The economy is reeling. The housing market has collapsed, and the future is unclear. We drink coffee from a paper cup, talk about the environment, the need for sustainability.

Near Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, a mound of dirt and rock can tell us much about subsistence in the desert. That mound now is part of a museum, but archaeologist Todd Bostwick believes it was built as a temple of sorts by the Hohokam, who lived in the Sonoran Desert for 1,000 years. They planted corn, beans, cotton and squash, and they built a community that grew to about 40,000 people. They did this without wheels or machines, without heating or air-conditioning.

Bostwick, of the Pueblo Grande Museum and Archaeological Park in Phoenix, has studied the Hohokam for 30 years. His office is near the temple mound, and a map on his wall shows the 1,000 miles of irrigation canals that once fingered through metro Phoenix, some built so well that their remnants were used centuries later by early settlers and the Salt River Project.

"We call the Hohokam an urban society, because they had villages that lasted for hundreds of years," Bostwick said. "That is a remarkable model of sustainability that we need to look at."

"One of the advantages of having a mound this tall in the flat desert is that you can see everything," said Stacey Mays, visitor-services supervisor at the museum.

A room in the mound at Pueblo Grande marked the solstice. There were rooms at the top of the mound, though archaeologists do not agree on what they were for.

Urban villages and canals are only part of the story.

"There's this constant flow of people coming in and out of Hohokam society," Bostwick said of an ancient flow of migrant labor that brought workers from far-flung places to create a complex, specialized society, organized in part by priests and engineers.

Sometime around 450, a distinct way of life emerged in Southern Arizona and the Salt River Valley.

These people had strong influences from Mesoamerican cultures to the south. They traded with Pueblo people to the north. They made red-on-buff pottery, built ball courts where games were played, much as the Aztecs did.

From 450 to 1450, the Hohokam built their villages, based on agriculture and specialized labor that allowed them to withstand the pressures of living in the desert.

Sometime around 1,100, the ball courts were abandoned, and the temple mounds were built. Some kind of shift had taken place. A few villages were abandoned, but the society remained.

Then they left. The farms were abandoned, and the people scattered.

Researchers still struggle to explain the fall of Hohokam society. We know that in the Four Corners, the Pueblo tribes faced droughts and scattered in many directions, some of them coming to what is now metro Phoenix to live with the Hohokam.

Their system of farming relied on water in the Salt River, which flooded in wet years and dropped in dry years. The challenges came in the wet years between droughts, when floods knocked down the canals, but Bostwick says the people rebuilt.

There are stories of a great ruler being overthrown, and some researchers believe this marked the downfall of the Hohokam. Even if such an event did mark the end, the people did not leave all at once. The Hohokam drifted away and reinvented their way of life.

They became the O'odham, a people who farmed the rivers of Southern Arizona but did not bother building large communities or structures. They simplified their lives, to the point that for years, archaeologists believed the

Hohokam were a vanished civilization.

"People decided that the Phoenix region was not a good place to live anymore," Bostwick said.

Archaeological links between the O'odham and the Hohokam are not sharply defined. How and why they changed is not clear. Bostwick won't say whether he thinks we're on a sustainable course. His job is to gather data and practice archaeology. But the question is valid. And obvious.

"The questions are valid because ... the desert is a dangerous environment to live in," Bostwick said.

"We're asking the same questions the Hohokam asked themselves."