Sears-Kay Ruins – Guided Tour with Scott Wood
(Notes by Franco Farina Jan 15, 2022)

These notes have been collected during a guided visit on January 15, 2022, to the ruins, organized by the AAS Rim Country Chapter and under the directions of Scott Wood, retired Archaeologist of the Tonto National Forest and now a volunteer with Friends of the Tonto, which maintains the Sears-Kay site.

The Sears-Kay Ruin are located just off the Seven Springs Road (Forest Road 24), 6 miles East of Carefree, Arizona. A self-guided trail will take you through the ruins.

The site was discovered in 1866 by soldiers from Camp McDowell visiting the area on patrol and takes the name from the Sears-Kay Ranch established nearby in 1887.

The Sears-Kay Ruin are one of a series of prehistoric hilltop villages located between Phoenix and the mountains to the north. The Sears-Kay is a “defensive site” with the top flattened by bringing soil from outside and contains the remains of about 40 rooms in 5 separate walled buildings called “compounds”.

The room’s structure was built using local shist rocks and with the addition of a different type of rock transported from several miles away, called “tuff”, used as entry door delimiters and step stones.

If the rooms were all occupied at the same time, we estimate a population of about 100 individuals.

The site holds a special importance because it represents a transition in the Hohokam timeline between the Pre-Classic and the Classic periods.

Prehistoric Forts (from the Sears-Key flyer)
By about 800 AD, the Hohokam had developed a fairly extensive irrigation system in the major river valleys (Salt, Verde, Gila Rivers) and had begun filling them with many small villages that would soon grow together into larger communities.

Many small groups left the river valleys to find areas with less competition for resources while still maintaining contact with the homeland.

Most of these areas were already occupied by hunters and gatherers who quickly adopted the Hohokam culture.

Over time, the combination of local traditions with the influx of the Hohokam from the river valleys led to the development of a distinctive local traditions that became increasingly different from the Hohokam of the river valleys.

The desert foothills between the Agua Fria and Verde Rivers were one such area.

Between 750 AD and 1070 AD
The Hohokam people were spread across central Arizona from the river valleys to the peripheral upland and were connected by an Integrated Economic System.
While the Riverine Hohokam produced surpluses of corn, squash, beans, and cotton, they did not have much in the way of the raw materials to produce tools. The Upland Hohokam, on the other hand, had an abundance of tool stone raw materials and agave – a major source of food and fiber – and while they produced their own corn, squash, and beans, they were probably unable to grow much cotton, something that could be produced in quantity only along the rivers. This economical connection between the two Hohokam regions does not seem to be casual but rather a coordinated effort to establish an integrated economy, fueled by the surplus of an increasingly sophisticated agriculture in the riverine areas. This system also promoted distinct areas of specialization in different sectors.

Here are some examples:

Tools mass production: about 300 stone axes were found in a room of Pueblo Grande, all identical and made by the same rock material coming from the same area of the Upland. Decorative Ceramics: only a few locations along the Gila River produced decorative ceramics, using a distinct clay that is not found in any other place in the region. Agriculture Surplus: surpluses of corn and cotton were moved from the Riverine to the Upland region. Murphy Agave, and tool stone material, were moving from the Upland to the Riverine region (Azatlan, along the Verde River was probably a site that facilitated the economic connections between the two regions by processing the agave and other things).

Around 1070 AD something happened - Long Drought and Cultural Changes

Long period of drought:
A long period of drought around 1150 AD forced the Hohokam of the desert Uplands at the edge of the Salt River valley to move farther North looking for areas of more reliable rain precipitation and better soil. The economic system based on agriculture surplus and connection/cooperation between Riverine and Upland collapsed.

• Snaketown was burnt to the ground, apparently intentionally
• No more ballcourts were built
• Sites, like Azatlan along the Verde River, were abandoned during the late Sedentary Sacaton Phase (circa 1100 AD)
• Hilltop forts, like Sears-Kay, were constructed all along the area that divides Riverine and Upland regions. Even though we cannot be entirely certain, this appears to be an attempt of the Upland Hohokam to protect against the incursion from the Riverine Hohokam looking for resources no longer available through the previous economic connections.

Cultural changes:
Cremations faded out after 1070 AD and ended entirely in many places. Up to this point, the cremation of the body symbolized the transition of the body from a physical to a spiritual form. The presence of palettes and censers in graves, intentionally broken, for the burning of colorful incenses symbolized this spiritual concept. Consequently, the graves did not contain any tangible offering to the diseased.
It has to be noted that remains of important people of the Hohokam villages were often buried at the center of the Main Plaza, possibly as symbols of village identity. After 1070 AD all this changes. The body of the diseased assumes more importance, the cremation is limited or disappears entirely. The full body was inhumated in the lower level of a two-level crypt, where the first level contains offerings and deceased's memorabilia. This new ceremony seems to reflect strong influences from Mesopotamia's believes that the deceased would not transition to spirit immediately after death, but that he/she would spend four years in a sort of "Purgatory" to address his/her unresolved issues before the final transition to spirit. So the presence of the body was important only for the first four years after death.

In fact, archaeologists found some crypts with well organized bones in the lower level of crypt while bones on the upper level were carelessly piled up on the side. This seems to indicate that the crypts were reused and that the remains on the upper level were of a diseased who discounted the four years of "Purgatory", and of no value anymore. Similar practices have been confirmed to be in use by the Pima (O'odham) until the late 1800's.

All of these changes resulted in what is known as the Early Classic Period of the Hohokam.

**Hilltop Fort System is active until 1200 AD**

The use of hilltop forts only lasted for 2 or 3 generations! Sears-Kay represents a sample of such massive effort of defense.

The question of why Sears-Kay was constructed in that specific location, when a nearby location would have offered a better strategic location could have a possible practical explanation:

That hilltop already had a preexisting structure, and readily available materials, that could be used as a base to become a fortification.

It has been observed, in fact, that several other hilltops have stone walled enclosures, that are believed to have been used as Ceremonial Sites.

Some of these sites offered a natural place to later become developed as Defense Fortifications!

**Around 1275 AD for 25 years - Another Major Drought**

The Upland is abandoned, and people moved toward more reliable resources of water, like the Salt River valley, Verde Valley and Tonto Basin.

This marks the beginning of what we call the Hohokam Late Classic Period, with great concentration of population, major expansion of canal systems, large mounds and adobe construction as standards dwellings. Society structure also become more complex with the establishment of a permanent leadership structure associated with massive structures called platform mounds as the one at Pueblo Grande.
Around 1382 AD - First Major Flood
The Salt River valley is affected while the Gila River valley is affected marginally. The Hohokam canal systems were designed to withstand intermitted, and expected, floods, and the society was organized to deal with the repairs. There is evidence that the 1382 flood disrupted the head gates and required the redesigning the entire canal system. This effort probably required great human resources and the use of most of the food reserves.

Around 1384 AD - Second Major Flood
The Salt River valley greatly affected while the Gila River valley was less disrupted. The Hohokam economic system finally collapses, probably due to the magnitude of the disruptions and the exhaustion of food reserves from the previous flood. The Gila Riverine community initially helped the Salt Community, but the limited capacity of the Gila’s agriculture, estimated only 10% of Salt valley, created deep tensions among the two communities.

Around 1450 AD - The Peon’s Revolt
The oral history of the Pima and Hopi communities (Hohokam Chronicles and others), for these days, seems to suggest that the Gila community attacked the Salt community and killed all the people in their way. People of the Salt community, who could escape, moved in various directions, some toward the lower Colorado and some toward North, joining the Hopi community.
In fact, the Hopi oral tradition includes several references to the influx of population joining from the South and recounts how the newcomers were integrated within the Hopi culture. The Hopi did intentionally modify their traditional ceremonies to incorporate elements provided by the ceremonies of the newcomers in such a way that the execution of each ceremony required the active presence and participation of all elements of the society, old and new.
This process intended to promote social integration, but not by a free choice. The Hopi elite ensured, and enforced, the participation to all ethnicities/clans to communal ceremonies during the year, as the non-participation would have broken the social fabric and would have been severely punished.

Not directly related to the visit, but mentioned during the visit
If you want to know more about the “social strength” of the Hopi social structure, read the book “Mesa of Sorrows: A History of the Awat’ovi Massacre” by James F. Brooks.
The book deals with a tragic and little-known episode that occurred among the Hopi in late 1700. The incident was the massacre of the pueblo of Awatovi, perhaps the most complete act of genocide ever recorded in the Southwest.
Here is an abstract of the book:
The original Spaniards knew the Hopi by the term Moqui. In the 17th century, they built three missions among them, but these were destroyed during the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and their priests slain. During the reconquest of the 1690s, Gen. Diego de Vargas returned to the Moqui villages in northern Arizona with his army and accepted their rather sullen submission. But he placed no friars or soldiers among them.

Then in 1700, two padres, Fray Juan and Fray Antonio, came to Awatovi from Zuni and began preaching. Surprisingly, the Awatovis appeared receptive. Many remembered Christian practices dating back to the pre-revolt years. Awatovi was located atop Antelope Mesa, some distance East of the other villages. This separation gave it an air of independence, much resented by the remaining Moquis. After a few weeks, the Spanish missionaries went back to Zuni and from there wrote a letter to the governor at Santa Fe. Saying they wished to rebuild the Awatovi church, burned in 1680, they asked for a soldier escort. But before the padres received a reply, news reached them that Awatovi was no more. The other Hopi had assembled an army and under war chiefs sent it marching eastward to exterminate the defecting town.

They fell upon it at dawn while all the men were in the kivas preparing for a pending ritual. The attackers pulled up the ladders, trapping the occupants, then threw flaming bundles of sticks into the kivas. Everyone inside was smothered or burned to death. Next, the vengeful army went on a rampage through Awatovi. Archeologist Jess W. Fewkes found the grim evidence when he excavated part of the village in 1892. Wholesale slaughter of the population had occurred near the church. “The earth was literally filled with bones,” he reported, “left where the dead fell.” Fewkes noted that most of the skulls were broken, some pierced with stone weapons. More excavations in the 1970s raised the possibility that cannibalism had been practiced. That subject, among the ancient Anasazi, has been widely reported in the press.

A pathetic remnant of Awatovi women and children were herded together and led away by the victors. According to Witzeman, at one place on the road, the warriors fell into bitter argument over distribution of the captives. That led to renewal of the massacre at a place known since as the Skeleton Mound.

After this episode, no Franciscan, or Jesuit, Missionaries were to be ever able to access, or convert, Hopi communities.