

# Pottery leads to discovery of peace-seeking women in American Southwest

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From the time of the Crusades to the modern day, war refugees have struggled to integrate into their new communities. They are often economically impoverished and socially isolated, which results in increased conflict, systematic violence and warfare, within and between communities as the new immigrants interact with and compete with the previously established inhabitants. Now, University of Missouri researcher Todd VanPool believes pottery found throughout the North American Southwest comes from a religion of peace-seeking women in the violent, 13th-century American Southwest. These women sought to find a way to integrate newly immigrating refugees and prevent the spread of warfare that decimated communities to the north.

First discovered in 1930's Arizona, Salado [pottery](#) created a debate among [archaeologists](#). According to VanPool, the Salado tradition is a grassroots movement against violence. The mystery of the pottery's origin and significance was known as "the Salado problem." This southwestern pottery was found among three major cultural areas of the ancient southwest: the ancestral Puebloan in northern Arizona and New Mexico, the Mogollon of southern New Mexico and the Hohokam of central and southern Arizona, all with different religious traditions. Even though the pottery was found in three different cultural areas, the pottery communicated the same, specific set of religious messages. It was buried with both the elite and non-elite and painted with complex, geometric motifs and animals, such as horned serpents. Instead of celebrating local elites, the symbols in Salado pottery emphasized fertility and cooperation.

"In my view, the fact that the new religion is reflected solely in pottery, a craft not usually practiced by men, suggests that it was a movement that helped bring women together and decreased competition among females," said VanPool, who is an assistant professor of anthropology in the MU College of Arts and Science. "Women across the region may have been ethnically diverse, but their participation in the same religious system would have helped decrease conflict and provided a means of connecting different ethnic groups."

Salado pottery dates from the 13th to 15th centuries in which there was major political and cultural conflict in the American Southwest. Brutal executions and possible cannibalism forced thousands of people to abandon their native regions and move to areas of Arizona and New Mexico. Another source of conflict appeared after the female refugees and their children arrived in their new homelands.

"Conflict was defused through the direct action of women who sought to decrease the tensions that threatened to destroy their communities," VanPool said. "The rise of the Salado tradition allowed threatened communities to stabilize over much of modern-day Arizona and new Mexico, altering the course of Southwestern prehistory. Given that the Salado system lasted from 1275 to around 1450, it was most certainly successful."

**More information:** VanPool's research has been published in *Archaeology* magazine. A more extended version has been published as a chapter in *Innovations in Cultural Systems: Contributions from Evolutionary Anthropology*, published by MIT Press (2010).

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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