

HARD  
TIMES  
AT LIZARD  
MAN

by John Whittaker

Few of us would bother with archaeology if we weren't emotionally involved with the past. We don't dig for dry bones and dusty potsherds, but for people. My wife Kathy and I lead a field school at Lizard Man Village, near Flagstaff, Arizona. Lizard Man was a small Sinagua community occupied sporadically between A.D. 1060 and 1260. There were never more than a few

families there, living in semisubterranean pit houses and small stone pueblos. They made their living by farming and hunting and gathering—we have found ample remains of corn and other crops, and the bones of the animals they hunted. Such a small village must have been part of a larger community of vil-

Although we can put together a good picture of how the Sinagua lived, most of us would like to know what it was like to *be* a Sinagua. Few of us would spend summers sweating in the sun, getting dirty in excavations and scrabbling up cliffs to explore the land, or suffer the academic year sorting potsherds and reading technical articles while trying to instill in our students some enthusiasm for prehistory if we did not care about trying to understand people. As a result, most of us, even the most detached, develop a strong feeling for "our" site, "our" people.

I admire the Sinagua, who made a living in a difficult land. I have tried to plant a garden as they would have, and have watched the corn shrivel during a drought almost before the blisters from the digging-stick healed on my hands. I have made stone tools, and exulted when I could surpass the knappers at Lizard Man, and I have tried to reproduce the smooth symmetry of their pots and have failed miserably. I have explored their land in great detail. But I can never come close to knowing what it was like to *be* a Sinagua.

lages. We have found shell ornaments and other artifacts, presumably imported from considerable distances, so we know that they did not live in isolation. We can be very confident about this kind of inference, and from what we know of pre-industrial villages elsewhere in the world, we can guess at a lot more.



*A crippled child's leg bones reveal a healed fracture of the right femur and bowing of the right tibia and fibula, top. Left femur and tibia were normal.*



*Lavish grave goods including characteristic Sinagua pottery were placed alongside the skeleton of a crippled child at Lizard Man Village. A necklace made of olive shells and a frog-shaped shell pendant also accompanied the burial.*

It always pains me when I realize that. Even though I don't think I want to be a Sinagua, I want to understand them. I admire them, and I love the land in which they lived. I like to sleep on the site, and, ignoring the rumble of traffic and an occasional train, I smell the trees and hear the wind. I think of the homey chatter of a small village, a few families living in peace; sturdy, active people who hope the gods will be good and bring the rain, look forward to seeing a friend from a nearby village, and plan the next day's work. I like to think of happy Sinagua, living the kind of lives I would wish on my own friends.

But life was not all so idyllic. In 1989 I worked with two experts, Marc Krouse, a forensic pathologist for a county coroner's office, and Marcia Regan, a physical anthropologist. With their special skills, we examined the burials from Lizard Man, and I received some shocks. Some of what we found fit my preconceptions. There were no signs of

violence and intentional injury. The small scattered villages of this time seem to have lived in peace, in contrast to the later larger sites where human remains show some evidence of wounds and scalping. The Sinagua bones were large and robust, often with heavy muscle markings. These would have been strong, tough people, as you would expect from their life in the wilderness, and as I like to picture them. But they were not healthy people, and their lives were probably much harder than I had imagined.

Most of them died young. First, there was heavy infant mortality. Many babies died soon after birth, and even older children were at risk because there were periodic shortages of food. The teeth of the survivors usually show bands of discoloration, resulting from periods when growth was interrupted by sickness or malnutrition. The bones of children are generally shorter than they should have been. I was not the only one whose corn

failed, but if it was a disappointment for me, it was fatal for some Sinagua. Our burials probably come from the later occupation of the site in the 1200s, when agricultural conditions seem to have been deteriorating; by A.D. 1300 or so, the area was abandoned and scarcely occupied for the next 600 years.

Once a Sinagua had survived six or eight years, he or she was probably accustomed to many of the common diseases, and used to going without food from time to time. Nonetheless, the chances of reaching what we consider old age were slim. Pregnancy and childbearing were times of stress for women. Even most men died before they were 40, often earlier.

Life was not only short, it must often have been full of pain. Arthritis in many joints attests the heavy labor endured by the Sinagua. There was little they could do for injuries and infections. The Sinagua diet probably included plenty of corn, at least in good

years. Sticky carbohydrates promoted cavities, and the grit from grinding stones wore the enamel off their teeth. Those who managed to live to "old age" had lost at least half their teeth, usually years before they died. Almost everyone had cavities, receding gums, and plaque, as well as active and probably painful abscesses, some of which may have caused fatal infections.

Most of the time archaeologists make fairly general conclusions about the way groups of people lived at a particular time. Archaeologists are fascinated with burials because they bring us as close as we can come to actually seeing people, reconstructing what they looked like, and learning some of the history of individual lives. At Lizard Man, for instance, one burial contained the remains of a Sinagua child. At five or six, it is hard to tell the sex from a skeleton, so we don't know whether it was a boy or a girl, but I can imagine the child's life with painful clarity. About a year before death, the child's right leg had been broken, probably in a fall. Healing was almost complete, but the upper leg had been shortened somewhat. During the period of inactivity while the leg healed, the muscles and bones of the lower leg had atrophied, and when the child began to walk again, the bones warped. By age six the child had several cavities and had lost one tooth to an abscess that was still festering. Tiny pores in the eye sockets indicate the child had an anemic condition, probably from malnutrition, and the child was very small for the age indicated by its teeth.

My students called the child "Tiny Tim," not just because of the leg injury but because he or she was probably a valued person in the village, loved and cared for. There were more artifacts in the grave than in any other at the site. Around its neck was a string of shell beads, imported from the coast, with a pendant in the form of a frog. The necklace was valuable jewelry in its day. There were several locally made pots, some



*Tooth loss and abscesses apparent in this skull of a Sinagua woman in her twenties reflect the hard life at Lizard Man. Flattening of the back of the skull resulted from the use of a cradleboard during childhood.*

shapely and finely polished, and three that were small and crude, probably a child's work. Most touching was a pair of pots in the shape of shells, nested together. One was very finely made, the other thick and lumpy, and I cannot resist the image of a child sitting in the shade of a wall, its mother watching proudly as small hands try to imitate her work. I know that someone wailed as they put a small still body into a grave, and laid its toys beside it.

I am dealing, of course, in speculation. I cannot prove that the crude shell pot was a copy of the other, or that the child in the grave made it, or even that it was not made by a clumsy adult. But it is a reasonable speculation, because people are that way. I think of my own nine-year-old daughter and share the joy and the sorrow of a parent dead for 700 years. The power of such images in my mind tells me something. It tells me why

I do archaeology, and why archaeology interests the public.

It pains me to learn that the Sinagua were probably not as happy as I would like them to have been, although I know that is irrational. I still admire their skills and knowledge, even though they probably didn't bathe and had rotten teeth that stank. I'm sure that like the rest of us they could be mean and stupid, loving and kind. And I am quite certain that I would like to meet them and talk to them, touch their battered, calloused hands. God forbid that I should ever have to live their life, but the Sinagua are real people to me, and I care about them and want to tell their story. ■

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