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Pre-Columbus Irrigation in the Southwest

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PRE-COLUMBUS IRRIGATION

in the Southwest

By

DR. CHARLES E. DIBBLE

THE story of the American Indian’s life in the arid southwestern United States, the story of his struggle with nature to gain his food, was illustrated by Dr. Emil Haury, anthropologist of the University of Arizona, when, with co-workers, he located an early irrigation canal in Papago Indian country.

Irrigation, a practice which enabled the Indians to rely on agriculture, was an important step in their cultural progress. It enabled them to become a sedentary people, to live together in larger groups, plan their labors, and to use free hours to develop and improve their arts and industries.

From the air, Dr. Haury recently sighted a long thin line of green vegetation stretching across the Papago Indian desert near the Baboquivari Mountains and identified it as a ten-mile pre-Columbus irrigation canal. The canal was originally five feet deep and eight feet wide. The Indians constructed the ditch to gather the run-off from the Baboquivari Mountains and carry it ten miles to the flat desert lands. Digging into the silt and fill of the canal, Dr. Haury’s workmen discovered broken pottery discarded by the original builders. Dr. Haury studied the pottery and correlated it with pottery from archaeological sites dated by a tree-ring method developed by Dr. Douglass, a colleague of Dr. Haury at the University of Arizona. It was concluded that the canal was constructed and used by the Indians during the fourteenth century.

Archaeologists have revealed that intricate irrigation systems dotted the southwest in pre-Columbus times. In the Salt River Valley, Arizona, two hundred fifty square miles of desert land was reclaimed by an irrigation system. The Gila Valley possessed a network of canals.

These irrigation networks were constructed by the Indians without beasts of burden and only with the aid of stone and wooden implements. The planning, digging, and maintaining of the canals imply a people with vision, able leadership, and a complex social structure.