

COCORAQUE BUTTE HISTORY

Cocoraque Butte (pronounced Co-co-rock) is a rocky outcropping in Avra Valley just to the northeast of the Roskrige Mountains (pronounced Ros-scrooge). The butte is located next to the southern boundary of Ironwood Forest National Monument and just north of the Garcia Strip segment of the Tohono O'odham

Nation Reservation. The area surrounding the butte is a sparsely populated segment of the Sonoran Desert, the hottest desert in both the United States and Mexico.

When it was listed in the National Register of Historic Places on October 10 1975 as the Cocoraque Butte Archeological District one might wonder why. When viewed



Figure 1. Cocoraque Butte

from a distance the butte doesn't look like anything special, just a few rock covered hills (See Figure 1). But if the butte could talk what a story it could tell. Southern Arizona and northern Mexico have been home to humans for thousands of years and evidence of the cultures that have inhabited this area may be found in numerous locations. Archeologic surveys of approximately 20% of Ironwood Forest National Monument have identified over 250 sites in that area alone.

The climate has not always been hot. During the Paleoindian Period (11,000 to 8,000 BC) the climate was significantly different. This was near the end of the last Ice Age. The area was cooler and wetter with many streams and marshy areas and with entirely different types of vegetation and wildlife. The people were nomadic hunters and foragers who relied primarily on the hunting of large extinct animals such as the mammoth, mastodon and bison and were referred to as the Clovis Culture. Evidence of this culture's presence in the southwest were the bone and ivory tools such as scrapers, drills and blades and the fluted stone projectile points and scrapers (Clovis Points) that were found at temporary camp sites and large animal kill sites. Although the majority of the Clovis sites that were identified in southern Arizona were in the San Pedro Valley, Clovis Points were also found in the Tucson Basin and a suspected Clovis Point was found at a site in Ironwood Forest National Monument.

The environment of the Southwest changed dramatically after the end of the Ice Age. The climate became warmer and drier, the vegetation gradually adapted and the large animals that had existed became extinct. The cultures of the humans in the area also changed gradually. During the Archaic Period (8000 to 2100 BC) the people were still nomadic and their existence was based on the foraging of local plants and the hunting of small animals. The artifacts that they left behind were primarily scraping and chopping tools and stone milling tools used for processing seeds and other plant related substances. During the next 2000 years the major changes to the native cultures were related to the adoption of raising crops as a way to

supplement their food supply with the main crop being corn. This eventually led to the establishment of more permanent settlements, especially near more reliable sources of water.

Around 300 AD a new culture began to evolve in southern Arizona and northern Mexico that the archeologists refer to as the Hohokam culture. Why Hohokam? The O'odham people refer to their ancestors as the Huhugam, the people who have disappeared. It is thought that when asked, the answer was misinterpreted as Hohokam and that name stuck. The Hohokam culture gradually evolved into agricultural based communities that were either sedentary or partially nomadic depending on the local environment. In the Gila and Salt River basins they developed relatively large villages and worked cooperatively to construct extensive irrigation systems. By contrast, the settlements along the Santa Cruz River Basin were generally smaller and the people were usually nomadic foragers outside of the crop growing season. Archeological surveys have identified the remains of numerous indigenous sites within Ironwood Forest National Monument and surrounding area. One of these sites was at Cocoraque Butte. With the advent of a more sedentary society other changes to the Hohokam culture occurred. A major change was the development of a capability to make ceramic pottery. Another cultural change was their tendency to create rock art, particularly petroglyphs.

The Hohokam were very prolific in the creation of petroglyphs and there are numerous locations where you will find Hohokam glyphs. Some of these sites have just a few glyphs while others may have hundreds or even thousands. The glyphs are thought to be of religious significance. Petroglyphs are not found in villages or homes, but probably were located many times at ceremonial spots near springs or on elevated vistas. The sites with a large number of glyphs were probably associated with areas used by the Hohokam for social gatherings along travel routes as they traveled seasonally for different activities. The O'odham, believed to be descendants of the Hohokam, consider them to be o'ohadag, sacred representations of spiritual presence embedded in the terrain. The three Hohokam sites with the largest number of glyphs were Picacho (4000), Southerland Wash (3000) and Cocoraque Butte (11,200).

What was there about Cocoraque Butte that resulted in such a large number of petroglyphs? One can only speculate. One reason might be the continued availability of water. As the area dried out, and gradually transitioned to a desert environment there remained an artesian spring on the western side of the butte that continues to flow even today. Another reason might be its location along trade and travel routes. The butte is located in Avra Valley, a main travel route between the large Hohokam villages in the north and the smaller settlements in southern Arizona and northern Mexico. The Hohokam were a social people and interacted frequently with their neighbors. Probably the main reason was the configuration of the butte itself. The hills that comprise the butte are covered with large granite boulders. Many of these boulders have large flat patina covered surfaces that are ideal for the creation of petroglyphs. While all of the hills have glyphs there is one on the northeast side of the butte that contains the majority. This hill is depicted in Figure 2 and might be considered the "history book" of the Hohokam. Representative Hohokam petroglyphs are depicted in Figures 4 through 11.

The Hohokam culture continued to evolve. Between AD 800 and 1100 the larger settlements began to include what some have referred to as “ball courts”. In addition to sports activities these areas were probably also use for public gatherings, ceremonies and trade fairs that encouraged the gathering of people from the surrounding areas. Also, cotton became an additional major crop and pottery was improved by becoming thinner and stronger.

A major cultural change occurred during the Hohokam Classic Period (AD 1100 to 1400). During this period a tribe from the Ancestral Pueblo Culture mingled with the Hohokam and significantly influenced the architectural styles of the settlements, introduced the art of basketry and introduced beans and squash to the Hohokam diet. During the latter part of this period though, the Hohokam abandoned their settlements and their population crashed. A 23 year drought that started in 1276 combined with 150 years of sparse and unpredictable rainfall is felt to be the main cause of the disintegration of the main native cultures (Hohokam, Mogollon and Ancestral Pueblo) of the southwest.

The Hohokam did not completely disappear though, they merely evolved. The next cultural classification to arise was the O’odham Culture which is still in existence today. This culture also went by other names. Father Kino called them Pimas and referred to the northern portion of their territory as the Pimeria Alta. In the 1800s, the Spanish started referring to the O’odham as Papagos which is a shortened version of papabi-ootam that was derived from an O’odham term that translated to “tepari bean people”. The O’odham culture was significantly influenced by other cultures entering the area. The Apaches migrated into the area in the 1600s and because part of their culture was raiding, they became bitter enemies of the O’odham. The next external cultural influence was by the Spanish starting in the 1680s with the establishment of missions in Sonora by Padre Eusebio Kino. The O’odham initially welcomed the Spanish and adopted many of their ways including the raising of livestock and incorporating many of their foods into their diet. The concept of Christianity was also introduced.

Also with the arrival of the Spanish came the concept of property ownership. Starting in 1750 the Spanish



Figure 2. Petroglyph Hill



Figure 3. Cocoraque Ranch

began bestowing land grants to encourage settlement by Spanish and Mexican ranchers. This practice was continued by the Mexican government after Mexican independence until 1836. The area around Cocoraque Butte was originally part of a large Mexican land grant and had been owned by Sr. Benito Robles. After the Gadsden Treaty of 1853 the area became part of the United States with its cultural influences. This resulted in difficulties in resolving title and land ownership. In 1890 the Cocoraque area was homesteaded by Oscar Robles, the grandson of Sr. Robles. The Cocoraque Ranch is the oldest working ranch in Avra Valley and is currently owned by Jesus Arvizu.

One might wonder how the ranch and the hills got the name of Cocoraque that appears on current maps. The answer may be lost to history. It is interesting to note though that the name Cocoraque is not unique. There is a small town in Sonora Mexico 33 kilometers south of Obregon named Cocoraque that is located next to a stream named Rio el Cocoraque. Both locations have a Mexican connection since Cocoraque Butte was part of a Mexican Land Grant. It is possible that there was a distant connection between the two places. An effort was made to determine if the Robles family had ancestral ties to Cocoraque Sonora but without success. The O'odham name for the butte is Shontok. "Shon" has several meanings, one of which is to pound which might refer to the pounding and pecking used to create the petroglyphs.

Some of the petroglyphs, those with meandering line designs, are probably from the Archaic Period. Most of the petroglyphs in the butte are of Hohokam origin but there are some that are more recent. There is a glyph of a cross (Figure 14) and also a glyph that appears to represent the San Xavier Mission that are probably O'odham. There are glyphs with recent dates and some with initials. Those with the initials RG were probably made by Richard Garcia, a tribal member of the Tohono O'odham who was ranching in the Garcia Strip adjacent to Cocoraque Butte. A rather unique modern glyph is depicted in Figure 16.

A site on the western peak of the butte that overlooks the ranch once had an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe mounted on a pedestal. The image is no longer there (Figure 15) but it appears that there are thoughts of remounting an image there in the future.

Summarized by T. Johnson in November 2022 from Old Pueblo Archeology Bulletin #73, History of Cocoraque Butte by T, J, Ferguson and various web sites. Figure 2 by Harry Jephkama. Figures 9, 11 & 12 by Dave Kean. All other figures by T. Johnson



Figure 4. Maze Glyph



Figure 5 Various Glyphs



Figure 6. Various Glyphs



Figure 7. Animal Glyph



Figure 8. Human Figure



Figure 9. Various Glyphs



Figure 10. Various Glyphs



Figure 11 Various Glyphs



Figure 12 Various Glyphs



Figure 13. Various Glyphs



Figure 14. O'odham Cross Glyph



Figure 15, Pedestal



Figure 16. Modern Petroglyph