

Cocoraque Butte: Signs of History in the Storied Landscape of the Tohono O'odham

Tohono O'odham means "desert people." The Tohono O'odham have lived in the Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona and northern Mexico for centuries. The Tohono O'odham tell how I'itoi, the Elder Brother, led their ancestors upward into an arid and beautiful land. Over many centuries, the O'odham learned from the land and used it to create their enduring cultural traditions. The ceremonies and stories that help define the Tohono O'odham as a unique people are intimately tied to the desert landscape of their homeland.

Stories of I'itoi are connected with the Huhugam, the ancient people that archaeologists call the Hohokam. Huhugam means something that has disappeared or has been used up; so the Huhugam are the people who have disappeared. In some accounts, one of the Siwani, Hohokam priest-chiefs who lived in the large platform mound sites found in the Salt-Gila Basin, killed I'itoi. Eventually, O'odham groups from the east came to fight the Siwani and in an epic series of battles drove them from their platform mounds. Out of these events, the modern Tohono O'odham and Akiel O'odham (River People) came into being. At the same time that O'odham traditions describe the defeat of the Huhugam chiefs, the O'odham believe that the Huhugam are an ancestral people. Hohokam archaeological sites are therefore respected and revered.

Today the Tohono O'odham Nation has more than 28,000 tribal members, most of who live on their reservation in southern Arizona. The Garcia Strip, where the main body of the Tohono O'odham reservation extends into Avra Valley, is immediately adjacent to Cocoraque Butte. Surrounding the Tohono O'odham reservation is a much larger area of aboriginal land whose extent was established by the Indian Claims Commission. This aboriginal territory was used by the Tohono O'odham to support themselves in their traditional economy, which included a seasonal round of agriculture along valley streams in the summer, followed by hunting and gathering of wild resources near well-watered villages in the winter.

AOLT project manager Liz Petterson and anthropologist T. J. Ferguson met with the Tohono O'odham Cultural Preservation Committee on April 29, 2008, to discuss tribal cultural values relevant to Cocoraque Butte. The Cultural Preservation Committee, comprised of Tohono O'odham Legislative Council (TOLC) members, is chaired by Frances Conde. Wavalene Romero of the Cultural Preservation Committee and Peter Steere, the manager of the Cultural Affairs Program of the Tohono O'odham, also participated in this meeting. The members of Cultural Preservation Committee said that the Tohono O'odham Nation supports open space and historic preservation, and they expressed interest in visiting Cocoraque Butte so they could personally examine the petroglyphs and other cultural features, and gain a better understanding of the site location in relation to the Tohono O'odham reservation.

Two field trips to visit Cocoraque Butte were organized with Tohono O'odham tribal members. On June 3, 2008, the Cultural Preservation Committee sponsored a visit to the butte. The O'odham delegation participating in this trip included Frances Conde, TOLC-Cultural Preservation Committee; Gerald Fayuant, TOLC; Denise M. Flores, Schuk Toak District; Phyllis Juan, Schuk Toak District; Alice Sahmmie, Tohono O'odham Nation Cultural Center and Museum; Addison Smith; and Peter Steere, Cultural Affairs Program. Liz Petterson, T. J. Ferguson, and archaeologist Henry Wallace accompanied the Tohono O'odham during this initial field trip. The Tohono O'odham delegation met the landowner, Jesus Arivzu, and his colleague Tracy Carstensen,

who showed them the property. On July 21, 2008, a second trip to Cocoraque Butte was made by tribal cultural experts, including José Enriquez and Joseph Enriquez of the Schuk Toak District, and Joe Joaquin, representing the Tohono O’odham Cultural Affairs Program. Jesus Arvizu, Henry Wallace and T. J. Ferguson accompanied the Tohono O’odham delegation during this second visit.

During this work, we learned that the O’odham name for Cocoraque Butte is Shontok. In the O’odham language, the root of this place name, “shon,” has several meanings, one of which is the “source” or the “beginning.” Shontok is thus an allusion to the source of water used to supply a hand-dug well, about twenty-five feet deep, at the Cocoraque Ranch. This well, still visible today, was fed by seepage from the adjacent stream that Jesus Arvizu reports used to flow year round. “Shon” also means to pound, and in this regard, the O’odham visiting Cocoraque Butte suggested the place name may also refer to the pounding and pecking that was part of the technology used to produce the numerous petroglyphs at the site. As José Enriquez noted, O’odham place names often date “way back” to Huhugam times, the period when many of the petroglyphs at the site were created.

On both trips, the Tohono O’odham delegations climbed to the top of the western peak of Cocoraque Butte, examining hundreds of petroglyphs pecked into the dark brown boulders and rocks found on the steep escarpment of the butte (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Hundreds of petroglyphs are pecked into the rocks and boulders on the west facing slope of Cocoraque Butte.

The petroglyphs on Cocoraque Butte include a variety of images of geometric shapes, abstract forms, fluid lines, insects, animals, plants, and anthropomorphs or human figures (Figure 2 and Figure 3). These petroglyphs span a long period of time, as much as two thousand years or more. The earliest petroglyphs, represented by meandering line designs, date to what the archaeologists refer to as the Archaic Period, ca. two to three thousand years ago. These are followed by a profusion of petroglyphs from the millennium of the Hohokam period, ca. A.D. 450 to 1450. Hohokam petroglyphs are often found near water holes and along trails, and the O’odham consider them to be o’ohadag, sacred representations of spiritual presence embedded in the terrain that forms the

O'odham cultural landscape.¹ The rock images found on Cocoraque Butte provide excellent examples of the Hohokam petroglyphs found in southern Arizona.²



Figure 2. Geometric and reticulate designs on Cocoraque Butte are signs of Huhugam history connecting the Tohono O'odham with their ancient ancestors.



Figure 3. The meandering line petroglyph on the left is a common design from the Archaic Period. O'odham consultants say the cluster of circles in the middle image may represent a cactus flower, while the petroglyph on the right represents a snake. Snakes, lizards, animals, crosses and lightning are familiar designs to the O'odham.

¹ Darling, Andrew J., and Barnaby V. Lewis, 2007, Songscapes and Calendar Sticks, in *The Hohokam Millennium*, edited by Suzanne K. Fish and Paul R. Fish, pp. 131-139. SAR Press, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

² Boswick, Todd W., 2002, *Landscape of the Spirits*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson.

Ferg, Alan, 1979, The Petroglyphs of Tumamoc Hill, *The Kiva*, vol. 45, Nos 1-2, pp. 95-118.

One petroglyph at Cocoraque Butte depicts what appears to be the edifice of a Catholic church, and this would have to date from the eighteenth century or later (Figure 4). There is also some recent graffiti consisting of initials and dates from the twentieth century. The initials “RG” appear several times on the butte, including within the image of the church, and these initials are often associated with the dates of 1931 and 1936. The Enriquez brothers noted that these dates coincide with the period that Tohono O’odham tribal member Richard Garcia was ranching in the adjacent Garcia Strip. The Enriquez brothers also described how Cocoraque Butte is located along the route that some residents of the Schuk Toak District used in traveling to the annual feast day at San Xavier Mission. The depiction of a mission in a petroglyph on Cocoraque Butte may be related to this travel route.

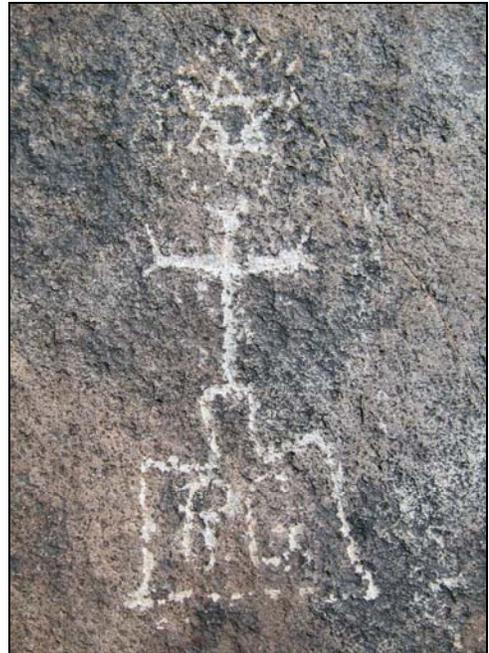


Figure 4. Church petroglyph.

In pondering the ancient petroglyphs at Cocoraque Butte, Frances Conde noted that it is difficult to find people today who can interpret what they mean. She reflected on her personal experience at the butte, saying “Every time I go to a site like this, I try and think what people were thinking when they drew pictures—what does it mean? What were they thinking?” Even if the meaning of petroglyphs is elusive to younger tribal members, Ms. Conde’s remarks bear witness to the fact that she considers them to be important signs left by her ancestors who traveled through this land in ancient times. “The Huhugam are our ancestors,” Ms. Conde explained, “this is significant to us.” The petroglyphs help tell the story of the Huhugam ancestors who lived in this land long ago (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Joseph Enriquez views a profusion of Hohokam petroglyphs at Cocoraque Butte.

On his visit to Cocoraque Butte, cultural expert Joe Joaquin echoed Ms. Conde’s remarks, noting that “We may not fully understand what the glyphs mean but they deserve respect as symbols of past traditions. You think of traditions when you see these sites.” Mr. Joaquin explained that before the O’odham had a written language, petroglyphs were used as a means to transmit tribal traditions. He noted that some petroglyphs may have been made when men marked what they saw on pilgrimages or spiritual quests. Cocoraque Butte and other sites are therefore useful for educating Tohono O’odham youth about how things were in the past and what their tribal traditions are. “It’s important to educate people in a changing world,” Mr. Joaquin concluded.

While some petroglyphs at Cocoraque Butte are enigmatic, others resonate with meaning for the Tohono O’odham. One of these is a spectacular depiction of an early style “man-in-the-maze” design (Figure 6). José Enriquez said that he learned about this design from an elderly woman at the O’odham village of San Pedro, who explained to him that this was the original maze design used in O’odham basketry. In recent years this old design has been supplanted by a newer design that features a recognizable man within the maze.



Figure 6. Joe Joaquin inspects the early style man-in-the-maze petroglyph that represents Tohono O’odham tribal identity.

While reflecting on the maze petroglyph, José Enriquez noted that this early style maze design is also scratched into the plaster of an interior wall at the Classic Period Hohokam site of Casa Grande. He then recalled that the Siwani (priest-chief) who ruled Casa Grande had used adobe to construct his dwelling. This Siwani was known throughout the land, and they called his village Wa’aki, “The Center” or “Great House.” Later, Mr. Enriquez described how the daughter of the Siwani of Casa Grande was abducted and taken to the top of Picacho Peak, and how after many attempts to rescue her failed, a man from the east finally came to try his hand at setting her free. This man planted a vine that magically grew to the top of the mountain, and he climbed up the vine to save the girl and bring her down to the valley floor. The stories about the Siwani of Casa Grande, elicited after viewing the maze petroglyph, provide a vivid example of how one traditional place is linked with many other traditional places in a network that constitutes a meaningful cultural landscape. As Joe Joaquin explained, these traditional sites are connected into a string of sites that extends from southern Arizona into northern Mexico. The visits to Cocoraque Butte with the Tohono O’odham demonstrate how this place is useful in recalling tribal history and cultural practices, and situating these in a regional geography.

Joe Joaquin noted that a maze petroglyph similar to the one on Cocoraque Butte is located on the Tohono O’odham reservation near the Mexican border. These maze petroglyphs are relatively rare, however, and Mr. Joaquin said this fact increases the cultural significance of

Cocoraque Butte. He considers Cocoraque Butte to be an “awesome site,” and he thinks the maze petroglyph is proof that this area is part of the traditional lands of the Tohono O’odham Nation. “It takes you back to the time it all started after the great flood,” Mr. Joaquin explained, “and connects to the things coming into being.” Wherever the O’odham traveled, they made settlements and petroglyphs, and these places are today considered to be sacred shrines to be protected.

Upon arriving at the crest of the peak, the Tohono O’odham visiting Cocoraque Butte surveyed the landscape (Figure 7). They looked to the south, where the Garcia Strip lies at the base of the butte. They pointed out Recortado Mountain, where tribal traditions describe the Tohono O’odham seeking refuge during Apache attacks in the nineteenth century. In the distance, they noted the Sierrita Mountains, where all the game animals were penned in the ancient past, causing the Huhugam to seek the help of Coyote to free the animals so hunting could continue, and the people could once again enjoy meat. Looking to the northeast, the Tohono O’odham gazed at the encroaching urban sprawl of Tucson, which constitutes a marked contrast with the rural character of the land around Cocoraque Butte.



Figure 7. José Enriquez and Joseph Enriquez survey the Tohono O’odham cultural landscape from the crest of Cocoraque Butte.

At the crest of the peak, Alice Sahmmie exclaimed, “It’s beautiful.” Frances Conde echoed this sentiment, saying “I’m glad I came. It’s beautiful, beautiful.” Later, after she came down from the butte, Phyllis Juan affirmed that the area is “nice, very nice.” Today, Cocoraque Butte and the adjacent Garcia Strip are a quiet and dusty backwater of Pima County but, as Peter Steere noted, in the 1880s there were as many as 200 people living in this area.

During their hike up Cocoraque Butte, the Tohono O’odham delegations passed by ancient mortars pecked into the bedrock at the base of the hill. These mortars are identical to features traditionally used by the O’odham for grinding mesquite beans that grow along the small washes like the one that flows at the base of the butte. Peter Steere reported seeing the base of a San Pedro projectile point, another archaeological indication of occupation of the region during the late Archaic period.

Sitting under the shady porch of the historic Cocoraque Ranch house, the Tohono O’odham delegations discussed the history of the area with Mr. Arvizu. “There is a lot of history in this area,” José Enriquez said, “that is important to the O’odham.” Mr. Enriquez and his brother Joseph Enriquez recalled that tribal member Ramon Garcia homesteaded the adjacent Garcia Strip in the 1880s, and that Richard Garcia continued to ranch in the area in the early twentieth century. More recently, Harry Domingo has been associated with the Garcia Strip. Mr. Domingo came from an O’odham community across the border in northern Mexico, and married into a family that had long resided in the Schuk Toak District. José Enriquez reminisced about the time the location of the fence bounding the Garcia Strip was adjusted, and how various O’odham villages were given a few miles of the old fence to take down and reuse as they saw fit. “We were working together,” Mr. Enriquez said, “We were pretty good neighbors.”

José Enriquez described how in his youth the O’odham people in the Schuk Toak District used to travel along the road through the Cocoraque Ranch on their way to the annual feast day at San Xavier Mission in early December. During these trips, which were made on horseback or using wagons, the O’odham would visit local ranchers who spoke Spanish and buy cheese from them. Lorenzo Enriquez used to hunt in the lands surrounding Cocoraque Butte, so he and other tribal members were well acquainted with this area. In recent years, locked gates in this area have prevented Tohono O’odham from using the traditional route through the Cocoraque Ranch. Upon hearing this, Jesus Arvizu assured the O’odham that he will open the gates for them if they let him know when they want to use the ranch roads.

Mr. Arvizu told the Tohono O’odham delegations that he has fond memories of Harry Domingo, the Tohono O’odham tribal member who ranched in the adjacent Garcia strip. Mr. Domingo was always a welcome visitor at the Cocoraque Ranch. Mr. Domingo was married to Priscilla Garcia, the daughter of Ramon Garcia. Mr. Arvizu also described how his family uses Cocoraque Butte as a religious shrine, explaining that in the past they placed a statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the western peak of the butte. Today, Mr. Arvizu brings guests from the Cocoraque Ranch Pavilion to visit Cocoraque Butte, but these visitors generally only look at a few petroglyphs at the base of the hill. Consequently, the numerous petroglyphs higher on the slope are in pristine condition, with little or no impact from visitation.

The Tohono O’odham visiting Cocoraque Butte thought there are probably more petroglyphs and rock art in the vicinity. They described how people in the past traveled seasonally for different activities. They would go to the mountains when mesquite and yucca were ripe for harvesting, and reap the bounty of the desert in different seasons. These extensive land use activities produced many archaeological sites that attest to Huhugam and O’odham use of the land. Ms. Conde said that if the area is acquired by Pima County for open space, it would be good to locate and record all of the archaeological sites on the property so they can be

protected. When people work together and the Tohono O’odham Nation is involved, important cultural sites can be preserved and made available for public visitation. The Tohono O’odham Nation has a long history of supporting conservation and historic preservation of the lands that comprise their aboriginal territory.

Gerald Fayuant confirmed that he thinks the Huhugam who pecked the petroglyphs into the rocks at Cocoraque Butte are the ancestors of the Tohono O’odham. In his opinion, the petroglyphs and other archaeological features at the butte add important value to the place as open space. He cautioned that places like this need protection, and that visitors need to show respect. Mr. Fayuant thought this butte was appropriate for public visitation as long as people show respect for the land and don’t harm the petroglyphs.

The consensus of the Tohono O’odham Cultural Preservation Committee and cultural experts is that Cocoraque Butte is a valuable place, well worth preserving as open space for the enjoyment of Pima County residents and visitors. Frances Conde said she thought that allowing the ranching to continue around Cocoraque Butte will add to the protection of the site by ensuring site stewardship on a regular basis. Peter Steere observed that there are layers of nature and history at Cocoraque Butte, and that the historic ranch would make a good cultural center or meeting facility.

Frances Conde expressed her appreciation for Mr. Arvizu working with Pima County to protect Cocoraque Butte as open space, and for allowing Tohono O’odham tribal members to visit the area. As she concluded, “This is part of our history.”

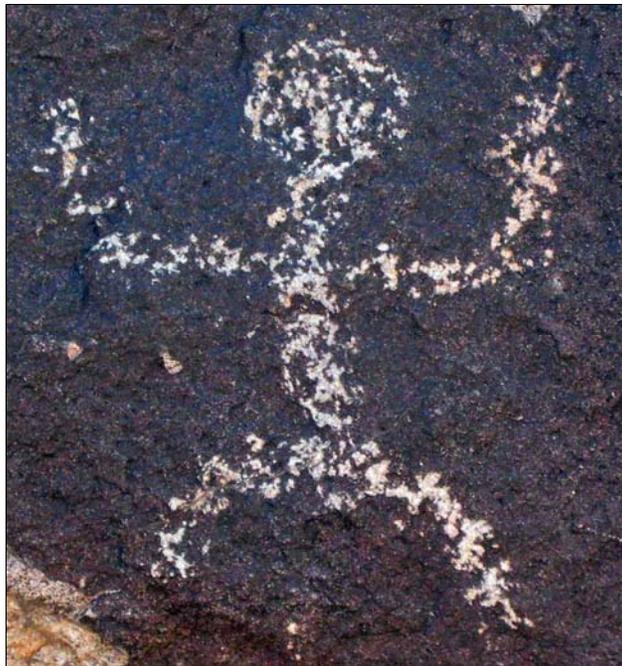


Figure 8. This “stickman” or anthropomorphic figure on Cocoraque Butte is a widespread Hohokam motif.