The Battle of Santa Cruz de Gaybanipitea:  
Historical Narratives and Archaeological Insights

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It is appropriate to commemorate the year marking the 300th anniversary of Father Eusebio Kino’s death (March 15, 1711) by considering the archaeological evidence for one of the most famous historical events described by this still-revered Jesuit priest – a battle between the Sobaípuri O’odham and a coalition of Apaches and their allies at Santa Cruz de Gaybanipitea, a small Sobaípuri farming village in the San Pedro River Valley of southeastern Arizona (see maps at right and on pages 2 and 3). Although Kino and his military escorts did not witness the battle, they arrived shortly after it occurred and described the aftermath and obtained eyewitness accounts. These accounts are reviewed in this article in light of recent archaeological discoveries.

Historical Accounts

As described to Father Kino and others, on Easter Sunday (March 30), 1698, a large coalition of Apaches, Janos, Jócomes, Mansos, and Sumas attacked the Sobaípuri village of Santa Cruz de Gaybanipitea, which had about 80 residents at the time. By some counts, there were 400 to 500 attackers, including both men and women, who descended on the barely stirring settlement at dawn, probably arriving from the east. Some of the more industrious Sobaípuri women may have been up, preparing fires for the morning meal, but most other villagers were still asleep in their houses.

As the battle ensued, the village’s residents retreated to a large adobe-walled structure where the defending archers fired arrows at their attackers. The defenders were unable, however, to overcome the superior size of the attacking force, and soon the village had been ransacked and burned. Although versions vary slightly, as many as five Sobaípuri may have been killed, including the village headman. After most of the remaining residents were rounded up and put under guard, the attackers sat down to celebrate and prepare a feast. They reportedly killed three cattle and three horses and began to roast and stew meat and beans. They also parched and ground corn for pinole.

The Sobaípuri (soh-BY-per-ee or soh-by-pooh-ee) Indians were an Upper Piman group who occupied southern Arizona and northern Sonora (the Pimería Alta) from some time in the 1400s into the 1800s. They were a subgroup of the O’odham or Pima, surviving members of whom include the Tohono O’odham (Papago), Akimel O’odham (Pima), and Wa:k O’odham (those now residing at San Xavier del Bac south of Tucson). The Sobaípuri were one of several O’odham groups present in what is now southern Arizona; and the O’odham were one of several indigenous groups who occupied the larger region.
If this were the story’s end, the several Sobaipuri families that were captured at Santa Cruz de Gaybanipitea would have been taken away by the victors, and today would be called Apaches or find themselves affiliated with the El Paso area mission Indians. But as fate would have it, a man coming from the nearby Sobaipuri settlement of Quiburi saw smoke and heard the battle cries. After he hastily returned to Quiburi and sounded a warning, 500 O’odham warriors came to Gaybanipitea’s aid and launched a counterattack. These warriors included residents of Quiburi and some from west of San Xavier. These western visitors had been trading for maize and preparing for a campaign against these same enemy groups when the Gaybanipitea attack occurred.

At this point in the narrative, the Jócome headman Capotiari is reported to have proposed the fight be settled by a contest of champions. This ancient form of contest sets the best fighters of each side against one another, thereby providing an effective means for resolving conflicts without inflicting heavy casualties, which is especially practical for small groups with warrior ranks that are evenly matched. With 10 opponents on each side, the contestants formed two groups of five each and began shooting arrows at one another. But the Apache and other enemy champions were not as adept at dodging arrows as the Sobaipuri and soon all except the Jócome headman, Capotiari, were killed. Kino reports that it was at this

**Illustration provided by the author.**

*Historic maps show distinct locations for named villages north and south of a key tributary drainage to the San Pedro River. The site Charles Di Peso excavated was north of that drainage, consistent with the location of the village of Santa Cruz del Pitaiutgam. Site excavated by Seymour is south of the drainage, consistent with location of Santa Cruz de Gaybanipitea. Arrangements of Sobaipuri structures at each site are in lower part of this figure.*
point that Capotiari insulted the Sobaipuri by saying their headman and fighters were not men but women, which incited them to strike him with a boulder and kill him. The remaining attackers fled to the safety of the nearby mountains, though many were killed along the way.

Three weeks later Father Kino arrived at the village, where he found Captain Juan Mateo Manje and other soldiers who were verifying the dead. They documented 50-60 enemy deaths at the village, and more than 100 bodies were found along the trail back to the mountains. Many of the surviving attackers were also wounded and apparently died later from the effects of poisoned arrows. In total, the enemy casualty rate is believed to have approached or exceeded 50 percent.

The Archaeology of Santa Cruz de Gaybanipitea

For a variety of reasons – descriptions of the landscape tend to be vague and most maps are not to scale – it is seldom easy or straightforward to correlate places mentioned in early historical texts with archaeological sites. The site of Santa Cruz de Gaybanipitea is a case in point. In the early 1950s, archaeologist Charles Di Peso of the Amerind Foundation excavated a site that he believed to be Gaybanipitea. His belief was based on several lines of evidence, including the site’s location along a tributary of the San Pedro River and the presence of European and Native American artifacts dating to the late seventeenth century. The size and layout of the site were similar to Gaybanipitea as well, which is reported to have contained roughly two dozen domed structures of branches covered with mats and mud (similar to the one illustrated on page 4), and a large adobe structure – the one that villagers took refuge in and which was ultimately burned during the attack.

There are a number of discrepancies, however, that have led many to question Di Peso’s claims. In particular, Di Peso’s site is located on the wrong side of the tributary creek from where Gaybanipitea is shown on Kino’s map (see maps on page 2 and at right). It is also on the wrong landform, according to journal entries. In short, it is doubtful that the site investigated by Di Peso is Gaybanipitea; rather, in all likelihood, it is another Sobaipuri village called Santa Cruz del Pitaitutgam. Regardless, Di Peso’s work not only laid the foundation for Sobaipuri archaeology for many years to come, it also highlighted the role that violence played in the abandonment of many Sobaipuri settlements, not just Gaybanipitea. Indeed, the large number of burned houses and arrow points found during my work at Pitaitutgam suggests the village likely met a similar fate to Gaybanipitea.

In the 1980s, I identified another archaeological site that is situated in the correct location and on a suitable landform for Santa Cruz de Gaybanipitea. The site also appeared to have the correct number of houses, an
Traditional O’odham house, showing the elongate shape with a domed roof, and dirt on top and at the base of the structure to seal it from the weather. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Sobaipuri made similar houses, with dirt added over woven mats. Photograph from U.S. National Archives.

The nearly rectangular arrangement of rocks in this photograph marks the location of a former Sobaipuri house. Sobaipuri houses were elongate with a domed superstructure of brush, mats, and earth. The earth was added to sides of the structure to make the base relatively waterproof. The rocks were located between branches and also helped keep the house dry. On many sites the entire or partial outline of houses are visible on the surface, providing unmistakable evidence of a Sobaipuri occupation. Houses were paired, one a general-use dwelling and the other a storage or sleeping structure. Such household pairs were aligned in rows, forming a distinctly Sobaipuri site layout. Photograph provided by the author.
adobe-walled structure similar to the one described by Kino, and late seventeenth century metal and glass artifacts in association with Sobaípuri arrow points and pottery. Although it took a couple of decades to get permission to dig at this site, we were rewarded for our patience with a wealth of new information about an event that has figured prominently in early historical narratives.

In contrast to the one-room adobe structure found at Pitaitutgam, the adobe structure we found at Gaybanipitea had three rooms. The entire structure (illustrated at right) measured about 9.5 by 4.25 meters (31 by 14 ft), or about 40 square meters (434 sq ft). Wall collapse in three locations indicates that the single story walls were no more than 1.75 m high (less than 6 ft), which would have allowed the enemy to jump on the roof and shoot from above, as documents tell us they did, thus bringing the initial stage of the battle to an end.

Importantly, similar adobe structures are described in early historical documents. For example, Father Kino noted an adobe structure near Saric, Sonora, that had three rooms – “one serving for a church, and apart, its kitchen, bakery and oven.” Similarly, when Kino first arrived in what is now southern Arizona in 1691 he went to the Sobaípuri settlement of San Cayetano del Tumacácori where the residents “had prepared us three arbors, one in which to say mass, another in which to sleep, and a third for a kitchen.”

Documentary and ethnographic sources further indicate that large adobe-walled structures were often used as council houses by native groups, in part because they could accommodate large gatherings. For example, Ruth Underhill, ethnographer to the Tohono O’odham, discussed “Rain Houses” that were used for council meetings and seasonally for fermenting ceremonial liquor. These durable adobe-walled structures also served as the focus of community gatherings. Likewise, Frank Russell, ethnographer to the Akimel O’odham, noted that “The decrees of the councils are announced from a house top by a village crier.” This practice by village criers seems to have considerable time depth among various O’odham groups throughout Sonora; it is even mentioned by the Coronado expedition chronicler Pedro Castañeda de Najera.

Another important use of these substantial structures seems to have been for defense. This use has prehistoric precedents and wide geographic parallels, suggesting defense in substantial adobe structures was a traditional regional use. For example, an O’odham migration legend notes this use for the Casa Grande Ruins Great House, and Father Perez de Ribas describes similar uses among different groups in Sonora and Sinaloa in the early 1600s.

The adobe structure at Gaybanipitea was built somewhat differently than those reported in early historic documents. For the outer walls, a foundation trench was filled with mortar or puddled adobe. Shaped adobes of three general sizes were laid in rows on this mortar bed and then encased when another thick layer of mortar was added (see figures on page 6). Pebbles were sometimes included in the wide mortar-filled spaces between adobes, presumably to stabilize the mixture. In some locations rocks were
Exterior walls consisted of a shallow trench with puddle adobe to prepare the foundation. Adobes of various sizes were then laid on a thick bed of mortar and another thick layer of mortar and adobes applied, repeated, with some rocks added, both to stabilize mortar joints and to substitute for adobes. White dotted lines added to lower photo show the outline of the mortar joint between adobes.

Partition walls consisted of a rock foundation with mortar, then a thick bed of mortar applied, flat sandstone slabs and river cobbles added (instead of adobes), then another mortar layer. Also substituted for adobes as intact segments of fallen walls indicate. The partition walls had rock and mortar foundations, whereas the upper portions of these load-bearing walls consisted of flat sandstone slabs and river cobbles. These were laid on a thick mortar bed instead of adobes, so that the repeated sequence of mortar then rocks was followed until the desired height was reached. Mortar was also added to coat these interior walls like plaster, in some instances coating the surface of the horizontal layers while forming a thin lip at the floor (consistent with a baseboard effect), and in other instances holding upright slabs and cobbles in place to form a façade.

This layering technique is similar to that of the wattle-and-daub structures used historically throughout Sonora and portions of Sinaloa, including among the Lower Pima and Pee-Posh (Maricopa), the main difference being the use of stone and adobes versus wood. It is also similar to the O’odham sandwich house type of construction, which beginning in the 1920s was made of adobe and milled lumber in alternating horizontal courses. In the sandwich house, however, the milled lumber framework was constructed first and the interspaces filled with rammed adobe. While achieving the same effect, the use of rocks rather than branches or milled lumber necessitated a reversal of stages in the construction process, because the rocks would not form a free-standing framework. In contrast to modern adobe house building techniques, at Gaybanipitea the mortar was laid in a continuous layer and as thick as the adobes themselves so it produced the same look as when added to a wattle-and-daub structure. Thus, the techniques used at Gaybanipitea seem to be a continuation of an earlier and more widespread tradition.
combined with new adobe-forming techniques. Local variations and differences through time seem to relate to material availability.

Our archaeological investigation of the adobe structure at Gaybanipitea revealed that each of the three rooms probably served a different function. In the westernmost room, where the floor was cut by two pits, we found thousands of burned wheat seeds, as well as corn cobs and beans. Bones tentatively identified as deer and elk were also present, along with bird bones. A broken cooking jar, most of the beans, and two large fire-cracked rocks were positioned as if they were used at an impromptu cooking fire in this room (see illustration at right), consistent with documentary evidence for the feasting that occurred after the initial triumph. Because of the abundance of food items we think this was a granary and food storage room – the source of the spoils roasted and stewed by the victors.

The middle room was probably used as a kitchen and for food preparation. We found a large hearth in the middle of the floor and abundant ground stone nearby. Two very large trough metates with minimal but clear use-wear reinforce this interpretation. These may have also been used by the temporarily victorious attackers to grind their corn for pinole.

The easternmost room may have been intended for visiting missionaries to say mass and use as a guest room. If so, the room apparently was used as a work or storage space when not in use by guests. This inference is based on the large number of ground stone artifacts and broken ceramic vessels found during our excavations.

This multifunctional structure at Gaybanipitea was apparently designed with defense in mind as well, though any evidence of the loopholes or embrasures described by Manje has long since eroded away. Regardless, there are good indications that the entire structure burned, which is consistent with historical accounts of the battle. As a result, valuable

Because the structure burned catastrophically, many items were preserved within. The thickness of the fill, and the fact that it was capped with fallen wall and roof materials, preserved an abundance of rarely encountered floral and faunal food products. Perishable items like the wheat seeds, tepary beans, and corn cobs from the structure, shown here, tend not to preserve on Sobaipuri sites owing to their shallow deposits, but rather are most often found in Spanish Colonial site contexts and are mistaken for Sobaipuri. In fact, the material encountered in this adobe-walled structure represents more than has been found in all previously excavated Sobaipuri contexts combined.

This schematic drawing of artifacts and features found in the western room. These are consistent with the feast mentioned in historic documents, which say that the attackers sat down to feast and celebrate: “They killed three cattle and three mares and began to roast and stew the meat and beans and to parch corn and grind pinole.”

Illustrations on this page provided by the author.
evidence of construction techniques and materials was preserved. The details of roof construction are consistent with a description by Father Ribas of roofs of adobe structures in Sinaloa that were made “of heavy rafters covered over with brush and a layer of several inches of earth.” This description is in line with the burned debris found in the fill. Gravel, cobbles, and much earth are mixed in with an abundance of burned roof beams that stretched across the width of the room.

In contrast to the large adobe structure, residential houses at the site were elongate in form and were made of bent branches with a domed roof that was probably covered with mats and mud. Also, the typical Sobaiipuri household was composed of paired structures, consisting of a general-use structure and one that was used for storage and possibly sleeping. Importantly, these are not the rectilinear adobe-walled structures set in the multi-house compounds first seen in the late 1800s.

Ethnographers have thought the adobe-walled architectural form was a late addition to the O’odham repertoire, even borrowed (Underhill suggested) from the Yaqui in the 1800s. Rather, the architectural details found in this 1698 adobe-walled structure seem to incorporate a technology that was used much
earlier and represents a widespread Sonoran (and Sinaloan) tradition. It varies geographically (and climatically) as to whether such architectural forms were used for residential purposes or instead (or in addition to) for communal, storage, and defensive structures. When the O’odham lived in elongate structures their special-use structures were also often rectilinear; when they switched to building rectilinear adobe-walled residences their special-use structures were often the dome-roofed traditional house or ki. It seems the contrast was sought to maintain and reinforce the unique uses of these structures.

Evidence of the Battle

Perhaps the most compelling archaeological evidence for the battle was found in the catastrophic burning of the adobe-walled structure and housing. The Pompeii-like context of the adobe-walled structure, in which everything was buried suddenly and left in place, has preserved a relative abundance of jewelry including European glass beads and shell beads from the Gulf of California and from California’s Pacific Coast. Metal items were in each room, and ground stone, broken pottery vessels, and stone tools were left in place. The richness of its contents and the burned seed grains and beams attest to the conflagration, the violent end to the settlement, and the nature of the structure itself.

Variations are found in the narratives with respect to which groups were involved but Kino said that the Janos, Jocômes, Mansos, Sumas, and Apaches were present. One of the primary archaeological research questions about this site, then, is whether evidence for each of these groups can be identified in the archaeological record. Because of the type of the encounter we expect weapons from the attackers but not other types of cultural items, such as pottery vessels.

Projectile points found within this burned adobe-walled structure and across the site are one of the most informative aspects regarding the nature of the attacking groups. While some Archaic and Hohokam points have been found (artifacts a and b in the page 8 photograph), these relate to the earlier occupations and the incorporation of earlier fill into the building materials of the adobe structure. Most of the points found, some of which are shown on page 8, are relevant to this battle. These include the snapped ends of tiny side-notched points, which for this period in this region are only associated with the Apache (page 8 photograph, artifacts f-i). Other non-Apache groups are thought to have made small triangular basally indented points, which until recently most Arizona archaeologists have assumed were “Sobaipuri points.” In fact, this ethnic name has been assigned to points now known to originate among a number of different groups. For example, the Suma are thought to have made small triangular indented-base points referred to as “Soto” style (s and t in the page 8 photograph), and similar ones with less pronounced ears are found in Janos territory. These look superficially like Sobaipuri points, and many made by other groups have been misidentified as Sobaipuri points. In looking at a broader cross-section of the southern Southwest and northern Mexico we see that there is a continuum of similar point types throughout a vast area. Only a subset of the points, however, was made by the Sobaipuri, I now refer to as Huachuca points (page 8 photograph artifacts q, r, v, w, and y). Even now, because of events like this battle, trading, intermarriage, site reuse, and so on, it is not always clear which were actually made by the Sobaipuri. This is a subject of on-going studies.

One of the most revealing point types found are Guerrero points (artifacts c-e, page 8 photograph), which are common in El Paso and South Texas mission contexts in the post-1600s. The use of this arrow point style...
may indicate the presence of “sometimes-mission” Indians from along the lower Rio Grande, suggesting many supposedly “tamed” natives were actually periodically marauding throughout the countryside. This is consistent with the record that Janos, Jo-cómes, Mansos, and Sumas were present at the battle because these were the groups who visited the missions and resided there occasionally. Importantly, their familiarity with mission life means that they would have known it was Easter and had intentionally chosen this day for the attack.

Documentary sources tell us that both Gaybanipitea and Quíburi were abandoned shortly after this incident, and that people from both settlements moved to the Sonoita area. They returned to the valley eight years later but did not re-establish residence in this location. Although throughout the subsequent years other places along the middle San Pedro would be called Santa Cruz, this precise location was not again occupied by the Sobaipuri. Typical village abandonment behavior for some historical O’odham groups involved moving to a new residential location when people died. As ethnographic sources convey, when a headman died, after a battle, or in other circumstances, villages tended to be abandoned. This practice would prevent the deceased’s spirits from revisiting, make an enemy’s revenge attacks less likely, and would alleviate bad feelings and memories associated with the places’ tragic events.

The archaeological record also supports the documentary and ethnographic data on this notion of formalized abandonment, providing supplementary evidence of the cultural process by which this 1698 event was brought to a close. An abundance of quartz crystals in the adobe-walled structure, and in and near burned houses in the surrounding settlement, suggest the razed site was ritually cleansed or blessed, as modern cultural specialists indicate this would be one of the ritual uses of crystals. A cache of broken projectile points and flakes under a piece of ground stone suggests also that battle-related offerings were left after the event, much as offerings are left today by modern Wa:k (San Xavier del Bac) community members who visited this ancestral site with me, some 300 years after its unfortunate end.

Conclusions

The battle at Santa Cruz de Gaybanipitea is important for a number of reasons, including because it was the location of one of the best documented events in the region during this era. Described by numerous narrators, the battle was a key turning point, both in perceptions on all sides and in the rate of attrition of enemy forces. It showed the Spanish that the Sobaipuri were their allies and so would be less subject to massacres, as had recently occurred from over-reactions and misunderstandings. From the perspective of the apostate groups it also established in undeniable terms that the Sobaipuri were now their enemies and that the Sobaipuri were a warrior force to be
reckoned with. Equally importantly, it spelled the end of most of these mobile groups as free operators. After this battle most of the non-Apache enemy survivors found refuge in the El Paso and Janos area presidios and missions. The non-Apache mobile groups involved in this incident sued for peace and protection with the objective of gaining new allies in their anticipation of eventual retaliation against these formidable Pima warriors. The few that remained at large comingled with Apaches, who remained free and in revolt for centuries more.

Learn More about the Sobaípuri

Seymour, Deni J.
2011 *Where the Earth and Sky are Sewn Together: Sobaipuri-O’odham Contexts of Contact and Colonialism*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.

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