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Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

Title

Kroeber and Fontana: *Massacre on the Gila: An Account of the Last Major Battle Between American Indians, with Reflections on the Origins of War*

Permalink

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Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 8(1)

ISSN

0191-3557

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Publication Date

1986-07-01

Peer reviewed

REVIEWS

Massacre on the Gila: An Account of the Last Major Battle Between American Indians, with Reflections on the Origin of War.

Clifton B. Kroeber and Bernard L. Fontana. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986, viii + 231 pp., \$26.50.

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By any standards the battle fought at Maricopa Wells, Arizona, just east of the junction of the Santa Cruz and Gila rivers, on September 1, 1857, was a major and bloody engagement. It began with an attack by Quechan or Yuma, Mohave, Yavapai, and possibly Tonto Apache warriors, on a Maricopa village. It ended when the regrouped and reinforced Maricopas, aided by mounted Pimas, essentially wiped out the Quechans and Mohaves who stayed after the initial engagement. By chance Isaiah Woods and three companions were camped at the site and were in the process of establishing a station for the San Antonio-to-San Diego mail route. They were within a mile of the main fighting but refused to take part in it. In all probability, more than a hundred people were killed, most of them the invading Quechans and Mohaves. For the Quechans who had already suffered the establishment of Fort Yuma in the heart of their territory, this was their last attempt to get at their traditional enemies. The Mohave, who had hitherto been independent, were brought under control by the U.S. Army in 1859.

Kroeber and Fontana's book is an effort to understand the context in which this sui-

cidal and senseless invasion took place and to use the data on it to theorize on the origins of warfare in preliterate societies. As the work of historians, it is indefatigably documented with 470 endnotes, each containing one to ten citations.

Three sequent but not completely separated themes make up the study. The first is an effort to get the most complete documentation on what actually happened from both White and Indian sources. In addition to Woods, a number of White travelers over the next few years wrote newspaper and magazine articles about the carnage, generally lowering the estimate of fatalities, confirming Woods' basic report but also muddying it. Indian accounts were collected by ethnographers, beginning in 1901 and continuing until about 1930. No one engaged in the battle was interviewed, but Pima and Maricopa informants were aided by calendar sticks. All the combatant tribes except the Tonto Apaches held a memory of the battle in their traditional lore, but as would be expected, details became more variable as distance in time increased. The outcome was agreed on, but there was a tendency to minimize the informants' tribes' losses, increasing those of allies and enemies.

The bulk of the book uses historical and modern ethnographic data to reconstruct those aspects of the culture of each of the combatant tribes, particularly as it related to their war patterns. Arms and other military equipment, battle tactics, the socialization and training of boys to become warriors, civil and military leadership in the tribes, and shamans' functions in maintaining a warlike value system and in interpreting omens about battle success were noted. At-

titudes toward combat dead, both those of one's tribe and his enemies, were intense. Among all groups except the Yavapai, elaborate, and probably highly unpleasant, purification rites were required for anyone who had killed an enemy. Aided by Piman calendar sticks, a chronology is developed listing 21 campaigns carried out between 1832 and 1857 across the 160 miles of extreme desert between the Quechans and the Maricopa villages. Both sides were about equally aggressive, but the invaders almost always lost.

In the 150 or so years prior to that last battle, some five tribes had been driven far from the Lower Colorado Valley by the Quechans and Mohaves, the last to leave being the Halchidhomas in the 1830s. Probably badly depleted in numbers, they all fled up the Gila River where they joined and mixed with their linguistic kinsmen the Maricopa, probably better called Opa (Ezell 1963), who had left the Colorado in prehistoric times. All these groups were supported by the numerous but linguistically distinct Pima. In the eighteenth century the Cocomaricopas lived farther down the Gila, below Gila Bend, the glacial having expanded before 1832.

Three different war patterns were prevalent among the combatants of 1857, but their distribution did not correspond to the alliances. Both the Colorado tribes and those grouped with the Maricopa shared a war pattern, a common culture, and closely related Yuman languages. While they might engage in raids and ambushes against traditional enemies, they were prepared to conduct expeditions far across the desert to annihilate or drive out an enemy in a set battle, basically in retaliation for previous similar attacks. Prestige accrued to the successful warrior. The Pima, however, although they were effective fighters, did not accord special prestige to warriors. They

defended and conducted retaliatory sorties against Yavapai and Apache raiders, but war was a loathsome necessity. Scalps were not taken and purification rites after contact with an enemy were intensive. The Yavapai to a considerable degree, and the recently intrusive Apaches completely, did not have a war pattern. Living in poverty in difficult country, almost without agriculture, they raided their sedentary neighbors for property, fighting only if they were caught. This raiding must have intensified after sedentary groups got readily moveable livestock from the Spaniards.

As they draw their book to a conclusion, Kroeber and Fontana move to a more general consideration of why warfare has been so prevalent in a wide diversity of societies though not in all. Generally, organized warfare, as opposed to interpersonal violence, begins in neolithic societies, though the authors note that the bison-hunting Plains tribes and the salmon fishermen of the Northwest Coast had active war patterns though they did not practice cultivation. They convincingly demonstrate with the Lower Colorado-Gila record that population pressure, scarcity of resources, and the desire to conquer and occupy territory can scarcely be a basic cause. The Mohaves and Quechans drove the Halchidhomas from the Colorado River, but neither tribe moved to occupy their lands effectively. The capture of slaves and trading them for desired goods occurred occasionally, but male captives were seldom taken and women and children were more likely to be adopted into the capturing tribe. The authors are not attracted by theories of the inherent aggressiveness of the species. If it exists, it would be better satisfied by interpersonal violence.

Kroeber and Fontana's final generalization centers on warfare being a male rather than a female preoccupation. When cultiva-

tion (the woman's role) superseded hunting (the man's role) in sustaining the community, men sought a distinctive role as an avenue to prestige and status. The authors use the anomalous development of warfare in the Plains and Northwest Coast to support their position, noting that mounted bison hunting, and salmon fishing, could provide a year's food supply in a few weeks. Men needed a prestige-earning occupation for the rest of the year.

This extreme generalization is not very satisfying to me. There are too many counterexamples of peaceful cultivators and societies in which women seem to be the principal instigators of intergroup hostilities. A series of specific historic events leading to the initiation of a regional war pattern seems to be a more fruitful line of investigation. Once begun, it is easy to see how a regional war pattern would sustain itself indefinitely if one party could not completely dominate or wipe out the others.

Perhaps less than one hundred years before European contact an overwhelming physiographic event took place on the Lower Colorado River (Rogers 1945; Ezell 1963; Aschmann 1966). For the previous several hundred years the Colorado River had been flowing into the Salton Sea Depression forming the Blake Sea, a great freshwater lake that spilled southward near Cerro Prieto and on to the Gulf of California. An effectively continuous fishbone midden follows the several-hundred-mile shoreline of the Blake Sea. Many thousands of people lived there. The Colorado River suddenly changed its course to flow directly to the Gulf of California. In a few decades the waters of the Blake Sea became too saline for fish and then dried up completely. The Indians living around its southern end could only survive by moving to the new course of the Colorado. Hernando de Alarcón in 1540 found

six tribes living between the mouth of the Colorado and its juncture with the Gila. By the 1830s all had been driven first north of the Gila juncture and then up the Gila to join the Maricopa.

It is suggested that these forced displacements stimulated incipient tribal hostilities that through retaliatory attacks developed the full-fledged war pattern of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was not pressure on resources. When the Colorado flooded normally there was more good soil available than could be cultivated. If it did not flood all had to seek sustenance from wild resources such as mesquite beans. Social crowding of already prickly tribes speaking Yuman languages seems to be a useful historical explanation for the rise of a debilitating militarism.

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