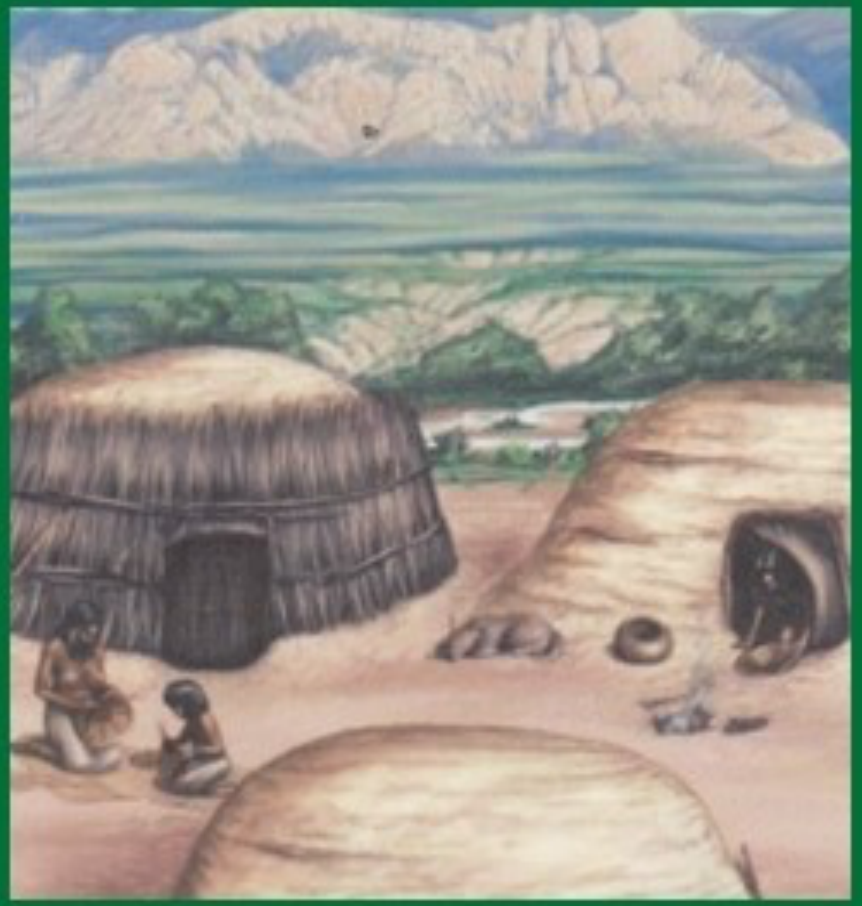
The perspectives conveyed in this exhibit reflect a combination of traditional knowledge maintained by Wa:k O'odham elders along with historical documentary, ethnographic, and archaeological research. These sources have been critically assessed in order to link them in a way that provides an accurate and rich representation of the history and heritage of the Wa:k community.



The Wa:k Community

Wa:k was the largest of the permanent Sobaipuri river communities. When Father Kino arrived in 1692, the community comprised more than 800 residents and 166 homes. The village was so large that it included three distinct residential neighborhoods.

Many of the descendants of the Sobaipuri that Kino encountered still live at the community of Wa:k today.

The images:

Top left: visualization of a traditional Sobaipuri village as Kino would have seen it on his arrival at Wa:k (Image by Scott Seibel; courtesy of Deni Seymour).

Top right: Piman dwelling, circa 1907. The woman sitting by the door is weaving a basket (Image courtesy of Edward S. Curtis collection/ Library of Congress, Washington D.C.).

Bottom: Welcome sign at the village of Wa:k (Image courtesy of Stanley Graham).

A Rich Tradition of Agriculture

When Father Kino arrived at Wa:k in 1692, he encountered a lush landscape in the riparian strip along the river. Both sides of the river were irrigated by a series of canals supporting fields of corn, beans, squash, and cotton.

Cottonwood, willow, and mesquite trees were plentiful. Tunnels created by their dense canopies defined walking trails. Immediately south of the community, marshland extended for five miles.

The images:

Top left: Visualization of a Sobaipuri agricultural field. Crops included maize, beans, squash, and cotton (Image courtesy of National Park Service).

Top right: Lush riverbank oasis on the Santa Cruz River, Santa Cruz County, Arizona (Image courtesy of Daniel J. Macy/Shutterstock 1351322957).

Bottom left: Woman with burden basket walking a trail through riverside vegetation (Image courtesy of Edward S. Curtis collection/Library of Congress).

Bottom right: Sobaipuri farmers irrigated their fields with systems of canals and ditches (Image courtesy of National Park Service).

People of the Upper Pima (Pimería Alta)

Hia C-ed
("Sand People" -- Hunter-gatherers)

Tohono O'odham
(Two village people -- seasonally near rivers or desert mountains)

Akimel O'odham
(includes the three groups inside the circle -- Permanent riverside settlements)

We are River People

The Sobaipuri and their descendants are Akimel O'odham who established permanent settlements along rivers.

The Tohono O'odham (Desert O'odham) established "two village" communities, living and farming along desert arroyos and rivers during the summer but retreating to settlements in the mountain foothills during the winter.

A third group, the Hia C-ed (the Spanish called them "Areños" or "Sand People") were hunter-gatherers who moved around the landscape and who did not maintain permanent dwellings.

The images:

Top left: Diagram showing the three subsets of Akimel O'odham.

Top right: The Santa Cruz River near the village of Wa:k (Image courtesy of Stanley Graham).

Bottom right: Map showing spatial relationships of the O'odham groups (Image courtesy of Deni Seymour).

Sobaipuri means "like the enemy," a reference to their war-like character. "O:bi" means "enemy" or "Apache."

The Sobaipuri

The Sobaipuri, were known as diplomats, traders, and the best warriors. Their river communities were on contested lands so they needed both great skills of diplomacy and excellent fighting abilities to secure their land and its bounty. The Sobaipuri even defeated Apache bands making raids on their villages.

While the common belief is that the last of the Sobaipuri died out in the 1930's, many Wa:k O'odham know that the Sobaipuri are a rich part of their heritage.

The images:

Left: Map of Sobaipuri communities on the Santa Cruz and San Pedro Rivers, southern Arizona (Image courtesy of Deni Seymour).

Right: Pima girl, late 19th century (Image courtesy Edward S. Curtis collection/Library of Congress, Washington D.C.).

What's in a Name?

As with many place names in the area, the community of Wa:k takes its name from an O'odham word.

Like many desert rivers, the Santa Cruz had a perennial flow, but not always on the surface. In places, the water flowed beneath the ground. The water came to the surface two miles to the south the village of Wa:k and then went back underground north of the village. Hence the name: Wa:k, meaning "enter," referencing where the water entered the sand.

When Father Kino arrived, Spanish did not offer him a "W" sound. He created the corruption "Bac" to name his mission: San Xavier del Bac (Wa:k).

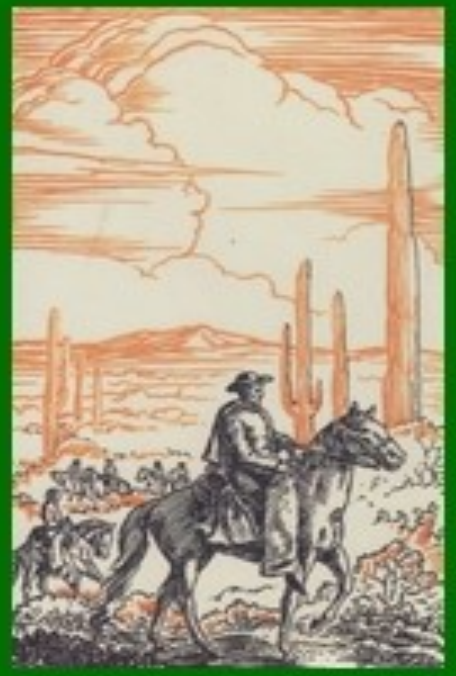
The images:

Top: Lush vegetation along the Santa Cruz, a perennial river flowing both on the surface and below the surface at different points along its course, near the present-day village of Wa:k (Image courtesy of Stanley Graham).

Bottom: Sunrise on the Santa Cruz. Lush vegetation belies the desert setting but perennial water made agriculture possible (Image courtesy of Charles T. Peden/Shutterstock #1656956443).

"Living by the river, it just makes sense, we are river people."

Tony Burrell,
Member of the Wa:k O'odham community



The images:

Top left: Distribution of Native American groups in the Pimeria Alta (Image courtesy of Deni Seymour).

Top right: Father Kino heading north into the Pimeria Alta. Kino knew there were significant numbers of Sobaipuri along the Santa Cruz River.

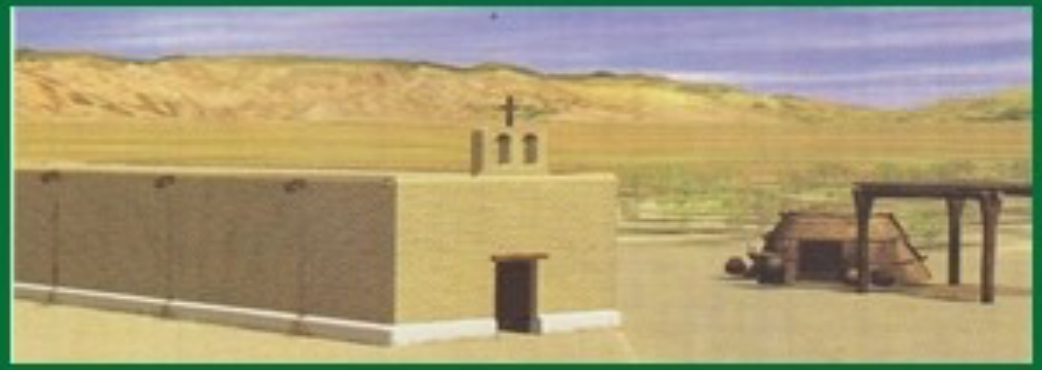
Bottom right: Piman trade networks in the Pimeria Alta and beyond. Trade relations were maintained as far south as the Gulf of California, west into California, and north as far as Hopi and Zuni (Base map courtesy of the National Park Service).

Why did Kino come to Wa:k?

The Wa:k O'odham were traders. Well-worn trade routes went south into Sonora as far as the Sea of Cortez, north to Zuni and Hopi, and west into California. It is likely traders brought information about Kino's presence to the south where he had already established other missions. They probably brought positive reports back to the community.

In 1691 community members, curious to know more, issued an invitation to Kino to visit Wa:k. He made his first visit a year later, arriving in August, 1692.

This peaceful visit was facilitated by Kino who brought translators and had acquired some native language. The willingness of some of the native people to allow him to establish his mission and to carry out baptisms is consistent with the welcoming character and graciousness of the Wa:k O'odham.



Kino's Impact

Wa:k's river-dwelling community had a thriving irrigation-based agricultural system when the Spanish arrived. Kino's contribution was the introduction of livestock and new crops: Winter wheat, pomegranates, figs, grapes, and European herbs.

These crops and livestock supported the new mission rather than initially supporting the O'odham. Despite the introduction of the much-valued winter wheat which extended the growing season, it may have taken a generation for the O'odham to develop a taste for it.

The O'odham worked the fields to support the Mission enterprise. The priests shared crops with the O'odham communities in return for their work in the fields, their labor building churches, and serving as allies in war.

The images:

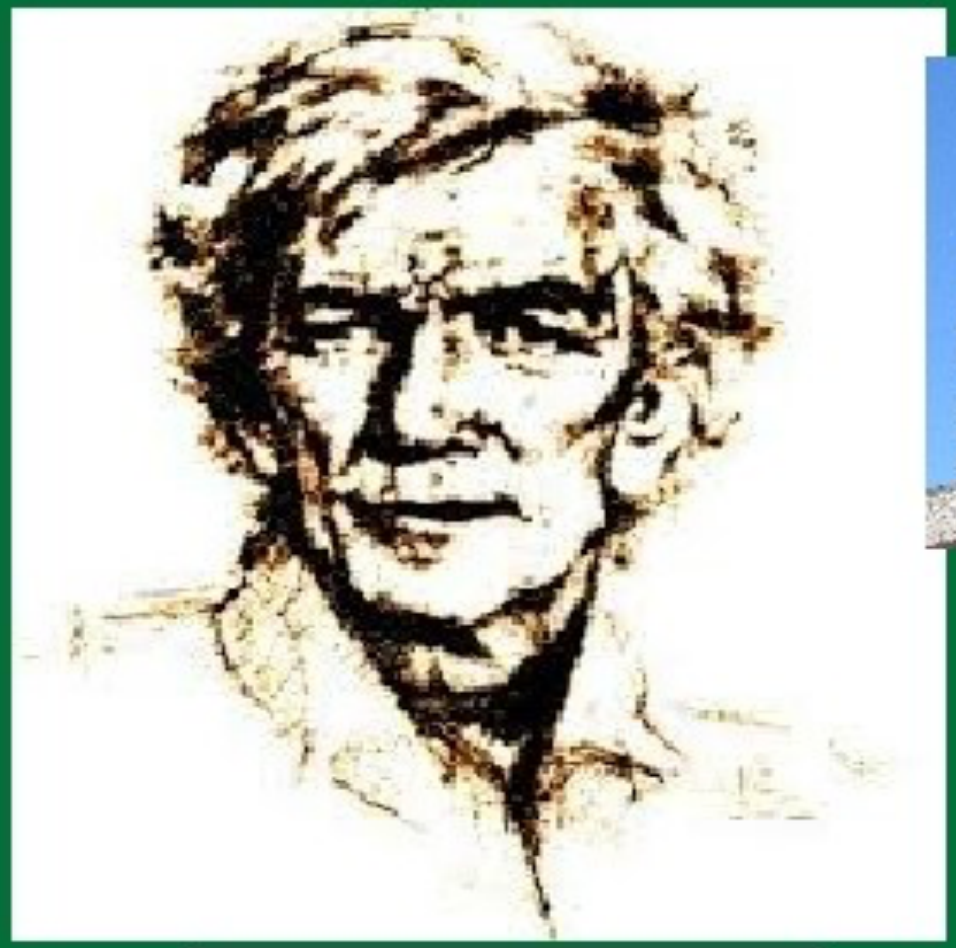
Top left: The Jesuit chapel built by Fr. Espinosa circa 1756-1763 (Image courtesy of Doug Gann, in memory of Bunny Fontana and a tribute to William Robinson).

Top right: Spanish king Charles III ejected the Jesuit Order from all Spanish-held territory in 1767. The Franciscans arrived at San Xavier del Bac the following year and started building the present church in 1783 (Image courtesy of Keyani/Creative Commons Atribution Share-Alike 4.0 International).

Middle right: Traditional O'odham basket with the Franciscan seal woven into the design (SXMM 89-1-39).

Bottom right: Winter wheat (Image courtesy of Jurema Oliveira/Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike 3.0 Unported).

Bottom left: Father Kino introduced cattle to Wa:k (Image courtesy of Iakov filimonov/ Shutterstock #323442659).



The images:

Top left: Father Kino, drawn by Francis O'Brian (Image courtesy of the National Park Service).

Top right: Father Kino, sculpted by Mexican sculptor, Julián Martínez (Image courtesy of Stanley Graham).

Bottom right: Sculpture by Suzanne Silvercruys (Image courtesy of the Office of the Architect of the Capitol).

Kino, the Storyteller

Father Kino was able to weave into his biblical stories various themes and elements that resonated with the O'odham's own understanding of the world.

Kino scholars report that Kino was tolerant of native beliefs and religious practices, allowing them to coexist during their conversion to Christianity.

This tolerance was not practiced by many later priests who came to Wa:k. They expected a ritualistic adherence to Catholicism. Not every villager chose to convert to or become part of the mission culture. This remains true to this day.

Baskets

The baskets displayed in the cases were made by the O'odham from both the District and from the larger section of the Nation near Sells, Arizona, west of Tucson.

Basket-making requires considerable skill, time, and patience. The basic materials used are bear grass, yucca, desert willow and devil's claw. Because basket weavers used plants thatgrew close to where they lived, yucca is more common in baskets coming from the west.Some are quite worn showing actual use over the years.

Many of these baskets were gifts to the Franciscan friars, notably to Father Theodore Williges, OFM. Many others were purchased from community residents by Friars or friends of the Friars and saved for posterity. The baskets are exceedingly well constructed, with some having the ability to carry and hold water.

The two baskets (A and B) are made of yucca and beargrass. They are of more recent origin. In later years, baskets became a commodity and are now made almost entirely for sale.

The images:

Top left: O'odham woman with baskets, 1916.

Top right: O'odham woman with basket hat tray (Image courtesy of Edward S. Curtis collection/ Library of Congress, Washington DC).

Bottom row, left to right:
Desert plants used to weave baskets.

- Desert Willow (Image courtesy of Stan Shebs/ GNU Free Documentation License version 1.2).
- Bear Grass (Image courtesy of Tucson Botanical Gardens).
- Devil's Claw (Image courtesy of Didier Descoulins/Creative Commons Share-Alike International 4.0).
- Yucca (Image courtesy of Stan Shebs/GNU Free Documentation License version 1.2).

The Man in the Maze

Earliest versions of the man in the maze depict the maze without a man. The maze was also oblong rather than circular with the opening to the maze at the bottom. Research is suggesting that the man was added in the 19th century, perhaps by basket weavers or other artists for the tourist industry.

While the meaning of the maze is consistent throughout the O'odham world, the interpretation of the man is as varied among the O'odham as is dialect, lifeway, and spiritual belief. For some, the man is i'itoi, the Creator. For others, the man is just a regular human being.

In all cases, the maze depicts a person's journey through life and his himdag or "way of life." It is the story of every human being; the path is one of many turns. With each turn, facing tragedy and triumph, but growing stronger and wiser as death (in some cases at the maze's center) comes closer. One turn at the end offers a chance to look back on one's trail, one's himdag. Here there is time for reflection and an opportunity to find acceptance of one's life.

The images:

Left: "Modern Man in the Maze" design (Image courtesy of the Western National Parks Association store, Oro Valley, Arizona).

Right: Man in the Maze incorporated into a Franciscan monstrance (SXMM 89-13-1(A)).

The images:

Top left: Feast Committee in front of San Xavier Mission, sometime before 1995.

Top center: St. Francis of Assisi ready for his procession (Image courtesy of Susie Moreno).

Top right: St. Francis Xavier with past Feast Committee member (1960s - 1995), John Lewis, Sr. (Image courtesy of Tim Lewis, also a Feast Committee member).

Middle: Procession consisting of current and in-coming Feast Committee members, 1980s (Image courtesy of Tim Lewis).

Bottom left: Ceremonial cane head used by the Feast Committee (Image courtesy of Tim Lewis and Matilde Rubio).

Bottom center: Badges worn by male members of the Feast Committee (Image courtesy of Tim Lewis and Matilde Rubio)

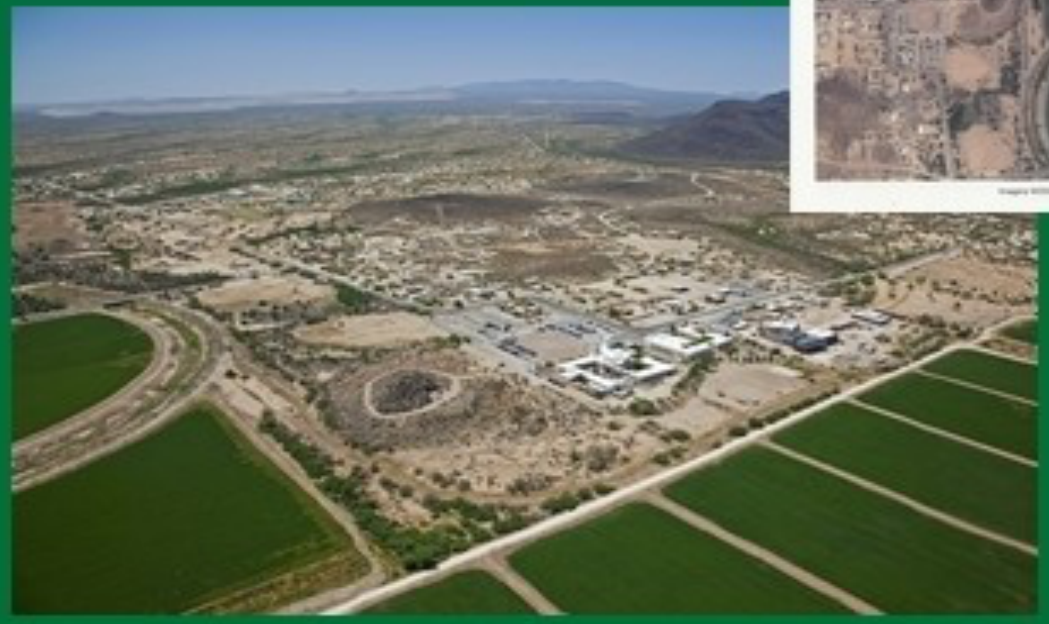
Bottom right: Badge worn by female members of the Committee (Image courtesy of Susie Moreno).

The Feast Committee

Feast committees were a separate social structure designed to celebrate important dates on the Catholic calendar. They emerged as a way of protecting and preserving the intersection between O'odham and Christian cultures. Feast committees were established to plan meals, activities, and rituals within the context of carrying out Catholic religious celebrations of the saints: St Francis of Assisi, San Xavier, Mary, San Juan and the Holy Cross. That was and remains their main function.

Despite the fact that not all of the Community practiced Catholicism, the whole community was invited to celebrate these feast days. Otherwise the role of these feast committees within the community was limited.

Certain families have customarily carried on these feast committee duties from generation to generation, although their organization has changed through time as has the role of the feast committees in the community.



Wa:k Today

The Wa:k community became its own reservation in 1874 and was called the San Xavier Papago Indian Reservation. Later, it was incorporated into what was called the Papago Tribe.

In 1937, the federal government enacted legislation creating the Papago Tribe which later became the Tohono O'odham Nation. This imposed name was intended to represent all the inhabitants of the current tribal nation. The Wa:k O'odham, however, are working to reclaim their name and distinctive aspects of their river culture.

The images:

Top left: Aerial view of Wa:k, towards the southwest. The mission and Grotto Hill are at bottom center and are surrounded by fields of organic alfalfa on the Wa:k Cooperative Farm. The village stretches toward the southwest (top center). The Santa Cruz River is located off the left side of the image (Image courtesy of Tim Roberts Photography/Shutterstock #103967594).

Top right: San Xavier del Bac mission (left), Santa Cruz River (right), part of a modern runoff diversion channel at center. North at top (Image courtesy of Google Maps/Maxar Technologies/ U.S. Geological Survey/ USDA Farm Service Agency).

Bottom right: Alfalfa field with mission in the background (Image courtesy of Stanley Graham).

Bottom left: San Xavier Cooperative Farm sign (Image courtesy of Stanley Graham).