

A Military Button from Baja California

by:

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Figure 1 Military Button from Baja California.

INTRODUCTION

In 1983, a group of American tourists, including a professional archaeologist, was exploring the areas between the communities of Rosarito and Punta Prieta near Mission San Borja. They encountered a large prehistoric archaeological site and discovered an historic artifact - a military button – on the surface of this site (Figure 1). Recognizing its potential significance, the group collected the artifact and later donated it to the CAL FIRE Archaeology Program for use in that state agency's archaeological site and artifact recognition training programs. The button has been included within the CAL FIRE Archaeology Training collection from 1985 to the present day.¹ The purpose of this paper is to describe this artifact and the context of its discovery, and to consider its potential significance.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

The button was found at a large, dispersed archaeological deposit in the central desert of Baja California some 7 km north of the community of Rosarito (Figure 2). The setting is a landscape

¹ CAL FIRE is consulting with Mexico's National Institute of Archaeology and History (INAH) about repatriating this button.

of shattered volcanic rock and scattered boulders that straddles the Transpeninsular highway (Highway 1) at this location. For the purpose of this paper, we named it the *Rosarito Site*, in recognition of its relative close proximity to that nearby community.

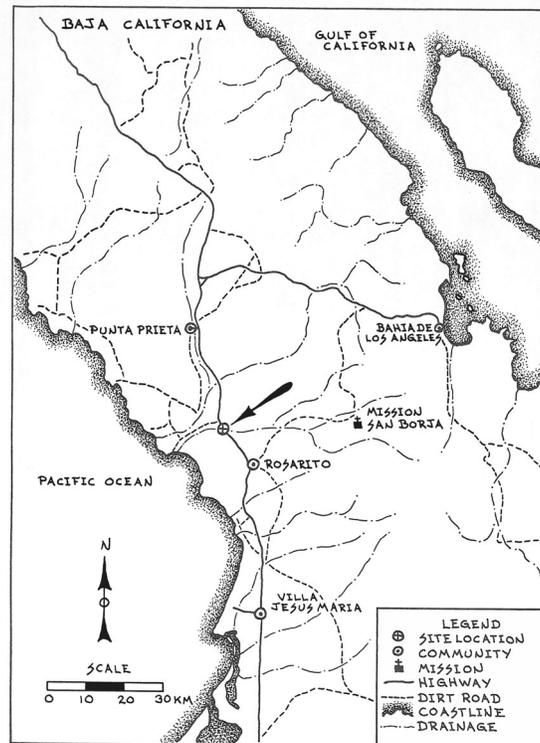


Figure 2 Vicinity map.

The site is situated on both sides of a major drainage which originates in the mountains (Sierra de Calamajue y San Jose) and drains west to its terminus at Punta Santa Rosalillita. Although this drainage is dry during most of the year in this desert region, it is a principal stream and no doubt provided a source of water to the prehistoric inhabitants that camped here. The site occupies an area approximately two acres in size (Figure 3). The site surface is literally covered with abundant chipping waste and chipped stone artifacts, many of these from fine grained greenish colored stone – possibly felsite or rhyolite. The site surface also readily displays quantities of bean clam shells (*Donax sp.*), which was an important food source (made into a stew) that is more frequently encountered at late sites in southern California (Byrd and Reddy 2002; Byrd and Raab 2006: 223). The button was found in the center of the site, on the north side of the drainage without any other associated historic artifacts or features which might provide clues as to how it ended up here.



Figure 3 View of site.

Humans were attracted to this place because of the presence of water. A major drainage, *El Becerro*, is forced through a small opening in the volcanic hills to the east of the highway and surfaces for a distance of a kilometer or so, forming a rich riparian setting. Beyond the site the drainage joins the *Arroyo Santo Dominguito* and empties into the Pacific at Punta Santa Rosalillita (Figure 4). Upstream from the site is a broad desert valley occupied by Mission San Borja.



Figure 4 Google Earth, 2012.

The habitat at the site is dominated by scrub vegetation: *saldadilla* (*Frankenia palmeri*), *palo adán* (*Fouquieria diguetii*), *incienso* (*Encilia sp.*), *copalquin* (*Pachycormus discolor*), *galloping cactus* (*Machaerocereus gummosus*) and *sangregrado* (*Euphorbia misera*). Tree *yucca*

(*Yucca valida*) and the coastal century plant (*Agave shawii*) can also be seen along with an occasional *cirio* (*Idria columnaris*) (Colson and Roberts 1975, Nelson 1966) (Figure 5).

Archaeological materials at the site occur over a broad surface area. They consist of scraping tools, percussion flakes, cores and core tools along with abundant shattered rock. Basalt, andesite, meta-volcanics, and granite were noted as parent materials for artifacts. These materials were locally available in the drainage channel that bisects the site, as well as from other nearby sources. No temporally diagnostic artifacts were observed on the surface, leaving little to judge the antiquity of the site. The technology present represented appears crude and simple, with an emphasis on cobble reduction for flake production. This rudimentary technology, together with the apparent absence of milling tools, suggests the site may have considerable antiquity.



Figure 5 Overview of site looking west.

The scattered shell remains imply transport of coastal food resources to the surface water in this region – a distance of less than 10 km. Concentrations of bean clam (*Donax sp.*) were noted as well as other mollusk species. Along the coast of southern California, the use of *Donax* is associated with processes of intensified resource exploitation that are characteristic of later patterns of ecological adaptation (Byrd and Reddy 2002; Byrd and Raab 2006). The presence of these concentrations probably reflect the use of at least some areas of this site occurred rather late in prehistory, perhaps even within historic times. Although we presently have little else to rely on, it would appear that the Rosarito site probably manifests a long history of occupation. The association of the site with permanent water and other resources, as well as its location where north-south and east-west routes of travel intersect must have made this a favorable place for humans to camp for thousands of years. The large surface area of the site also implies a long, although not

necessarily continuous, period of occupation is represented here. The presence of an historic military button attests to some use of the site within the historic era, but the nature of that use remains conjectural, and may have nothing at all to do with the Native American archaeological deposits found here.

Historian Dr. Michael Mathes informed us that he knew of the Rosarito Site and that it was “an old one” that was once called Santo Dominguito.² It was a small ranch and there used to be an adobe house here that was occupied by a rancher. He also stated that this site was on the mid-19th century official military itinerary from Cabo San Lucas to San Diego that was established in 1847 to help in the movement of troops against the United States. Mexico established a series of military colonies in northern Baja California in 1848 and 1849 and he believed the button likely would date to the post-1848 period because there was a lot more military movement between the north and south after 1848 than at any time before that (Mathes 2012). As described below, however, the technology of manufacture of this button indicates an earlier historic event at this location is probably represented by its appearance here.

BUTTON DISCRIPTION

Button weighs 6.1 grams

Shank is 7mm long and 2 mm thick

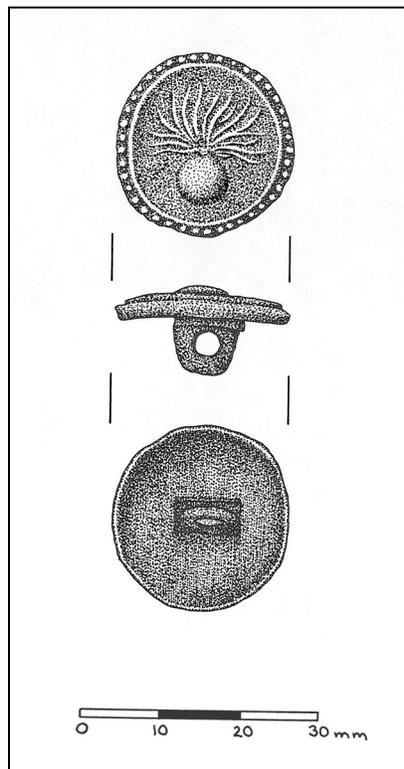


Figure 6 Drawing of button.

² These recollections from Dr. Mathes date to his childhood (he grew up in Baja California) and to a time before the construction of the current paved highway.

The button is a wedge shank type, two piece button, made of non-magnetic metal, of the type commonly made during the time period of 1700-1765 (Olsen 1963:Fig. 1A)(Figure 6). Based on the lack of casting marks and the uniformity of the image of the face of the button it appears to have been constructed from a stamping process. The button appears to be made of a copper alloy; either bronze or brass. Because of the brightness where the underlying metal shows through on small scratches on the shank side of the button (Figure 7) it is more likely that the button is constructed of brass. The button is a uniformly dark brown color. There is no verdigris evident anywhere on the button.



Figure 7 Shank side of button showing small scratches

The shank portion of the button has a hole in it and appears to be made of the same type of metal as the circular portion of the button---certainly the shank is the same general color as the circular part of the button. The shank is made of a separate piece of metal which was then attached to the backside of the button by soldering it to the center of the back side of the circular part of button.

The button weighs 6.1 grams. The circular part of the button is between $7/8''$ and $57/64''$ (.875'' and .895'') in diameter. The variations in diameter measurement are a function of the crudeness of the button which is not uniformly round. The rim thickness of the button varies between .60'' and .50'' The shank is .370'' at the base and narrows to .345'' at the top. The shank is .280'' in height and the hole in the shank is slightly off center. (Figure 8)



Figure 8 Shank of button.

The front of the button has 41 small circles of varying sizes on the very outer edge with spacing between the small circles of 8.78 degrees. The 41 small circles line a small raised, flat topped ring which in turn encloses a larger circular object (Which represents the grenade itself) with approximately 15 slender tendril like lines emanating from the top of the circle (The tendril like lines are a depiction of the "flame" is emanating from the lit fuse of the grenade.)

DETERMINING THE BUTTON'S AGE

Techniques used in the manufacture of this button allow us to date it roughly to the period from about 1700 to the 1820's. It is hand made and relatively crudely made. Buttons manufactured during this period were quite variable in form because they were hand made. We have discovered no exact copies of the button described here, although many similar examples can be seen in only a few minutes of internet searching because this was a common military button design for many different nations (e.g. [www, artifacts.org](http://www.artifacts.org): Military Artifacts of Spanish Florida 1539-1821). Buttons manufactured between 1650 and 1700 had a looped, cotter pin-like, iron wire eye attached to the back. The integral shank with the laterally drilled hole, as seen in the Rosarito Site button, was developed about 1700. The use of the flaming bomb motif dates to around 1680 and by the early 1700's was common to all European military powers (Dillon 2012). Spanish military buttons found in Florida are plain and unmarked between 1700 and 1790, but otherwise are structurally identical to the specimen found at the Rosarita site. In 1795, the Spanish government passed a decree requiring the marking of military buttons with identifying emblems, and thereafter they were made that way. Stanley Olsen's classic article on dating military buttons suggests an age of approximately 1700 to 1765 for the style of shank found on this button, however, these are known to have been used into the early 1800's. The presence of the flaming bomb insignia and the likelihood that this is a Spanish military button indicate an age somewhere between 1795 and 1820 is a reasonable guess for this artifact.

SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS

A primary purpose in preparing this brief paper is simply to describe a distinctive style of early military button that to our knowledge has not previously been reported. Our attempts to learn about this artifact have led to no other accounts of a button exactly like this, in spite of consulting with knowledgeable experts on both military artifacts and Baja California history. Both library and internet searches also were negative, although there are many other examples of other similar buttons and other styles of military insignia containing the "flaming bomb" motif. This design motif is a well known emblem (Figure 9) in terms of its general history and meaning, but none of these other examples is quite like the specimen we have described in this paper.



Figure 9 William T. Dillon's U.S. Flaming Bomb insignia from World War I.

The insignia on the button is unquestionably that of an exploding grenade, also known as “the flaming bomb.” This design has been in use on military buttons since the 17th century and was adopted by many different nations to designate soldiers who were trained specialists in the use of hand grenades. A hand grenade is defined as any small bomb that can be thrown by hand. Grenades first came into military use, in Europe, around the 15th century. The earliest grenades were hollow iron balls that had been filled with gunpowder and were ignited by use of a slow burning wick. Once the wick had been ignited the grenade was thrown at the enemy by a soldier who had been specially trained in the igniting and throwing of grenades. Logically enough these specially trained soldiers were known as grenadiers. The occurrence of a button with this insignia on it implies the presence of military personnel during the 17th or 18th century in central Baja California who were specialists in the use of this type of ordinance.

This leads to the second reason for this report, and that is to call attention to the location of its discovery. Future research in this region may find its occurrence a helpful clue for reconstructing the history of early military events in Baja California, for understanding relationships between native people and early European contacts, or for some other area of study. It might very well be worth the effort for some future archaeological work be undertaken at the site of discovery to determine if this is an isolated find of a button that was merely lost, or whether this site represents the location of either an early military camp or a contact period Native American settlement. In the case of either it is possible that there are other related historic artifacts at the site and their nature could help explain its presence. At present we have limited information about the button’s context and association, which leads to speculation about its meaning and occurrence, but does not fully explain how the button arrived at the site or for what purpose.

Our review of Baja California history has indicated that this location is identified on the official Mexican military itinerary of 1847 and the site may have seen military use as a camp or way station along the route from Cabo San Lucas to San Diego. Our research, however, has not revealed any specific event or the location of any earlier 18th century military facility that might directly explain its presence at this location. Mission San Borja is located approximately 25 km upstream from the site along the same drainage and this site would have had some military presence. It is possible the button may have originated from there. The Rosarito site may in fact be located along a prehistoric trail that led from the coast to the interior following the El Becerro/ Arroyo Santo Dominguito drainage. The small discontinuous scatters of shellfish remains seen on the surface of the site provide evidence for the aboriginal transport of marine products up this drainage system leading toward the mission site. Mission San Borja, like others, would have been placed where there was a sufficient Native population to support and justify its existence. All of this implies the Rosarito site was situated along a natural corridor leading from the coast to the interior and it is reasonable to suggest that the button could easily have traveled from the San Borja mission site.

The button was found associated with a Native American archaeological site, but this association may simply be coincidental as this location is one with permanent water and other resources that would have always made it a desirable place for people to camp in the harsh desert climate of Baja California. This means that military expeditions, lost or run-away soldiers, other individual

travelers, or local Indians might each have had reason to stop here and spend time. Any of these scenarios could have produced the button. Since military uniforms and other objects were desired by Indians and often used for exchange, it is possible the button may have arrived in this manner. In Alta California, military buttons and other insignia are often found in Native American archaeological sites (Woodward 1965; Strong 1959). The best known of these are the “Phoenix buttons” derived from Haiti that were widely traded to Indians in western North America during the early part of the 19th century (Strong 1960). Those buttons were exchanged as individual items, but military uniforms were also given to Indians. In southern California, a well-known Cahuilla leader named Chief Juan Antonio wore a military officer’s coat presented to him with the title of “Captain-General” by General Bean of the U.S. Army as a reward for the capture of Chief Garra who organized an Indian revolt against white settlers in 1852. His remains were identified when the surviving epilates from this uniform were found in his grave (Quimby 1975; Smith 1960). The bright shiny brass military button found at the Rosarito Site would have been highly desirable (and a coat with these attached even more so) as an item of exchange, or to pacify the Indians (O’Neil 1992). Surface inspection of the site, however, produced no obvious evidence that this site was any sort of a contact period village and there is little to suggest this artifact represents an exchange object except its association with a Native American archaeological site. Therefore, the likelihood that it occurred here is no greater for this scenario than it is for any other.

The fact that this location has been identified as a military outpost in the itinerary of 1847-48 suggests another possible explanation for the button and that is that it simply represents the use of antiquated military uniforms and equipment by the Mexican army during this early period of their existence. Perhaps there were individuals dressed in 25 year old uniforms, or pieces of uniforms, because this was all that was available in this remote part of the world. If this case is possible, the button may have simply fallen off an old uniform while the military was present at this outpost.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have described what we believe is an 18th century military button from the field blouse of a Spanish or Mexican grenadier. In doing so, we have also drawn attention to the location from which it was recovered, which itself has an interesting history. The Rosarito Site is worthy of further study to learn more about it and to determine if there are any other early military artifacts here, or perhaps other clues to its occurrence. The button itself is a testament to the fact that this remote region of northern Baja California has an intriguing and largely unknown history. It is important for comparative purposes, adding to our knowledge of the range of variation exhibited in these early “flaming bomb” military buttons. To our understanding, this is the only example of such military insignia reported from the western coast of North America. Its presence should be of interest to military historians, to archaeologists and historians of Baja California, and to specialists in military insignia.

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