

# The Tunica Treasure

“Takuhpanitetimili Yoroni”



A Museum Companion to one of the largest  
archaeological collections of 18th-century  
American Indian relics ever discovered

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Heni (*Greetings*)

The Tunica Treasure represents a rich cultural legacy of entrepreneurship and political influence in the eighteenth century. This companion booklet to the Tunica Treasure will help you learn more about this magnificent archaeological and cultural collection.

Joey P. Barbry, Chairman  
Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana



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## **Trudeau Landing Site**

### **1731-1764**

In 1731, the Tunica moved their village to what is now called the Trudeau site in West Feliciana Parish. The Tunica prospered there by becoming expert traders and business partners with the neighboring French communities.

At Trudeau, the Tunica expanded on their business as horse and salt traders with the French. Since about 1720, the French had become dependent on the Tunica for supplying horses for use on farms, as draft animals and for military use. Due to the expense of shipping horses from France, the French found it more economical to buy them in La Louisiane (the Louisiana Colony) from the Tunica.

Proof of the Tunicas' wealth, regional power, and skill in new colonial trade economies during the 1700s was revealed in the 1960s when the Trudeau site was discovered and excavated.

Large amounts of European trade goods including beads, porcelain, muskets, kettles and other items, as well as locally produced pottery in the Tunica style, were buried with the deceased in a Tunica cemetery near the village at Trudeau Landing.

Beyond its influence on the interpretation of regional archaeology, the Tunica Treasure would change how indigenous trade with European colonies would be discussed and make a notable impact on modern American Indian Law.

## **The Legend of the Tunica Treasure**

In the summer of 1968, a pothunter began an unsystematic desecration of over 100 graves from an historic Tunica village located at Trudeau

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Landing in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana. “One of the greatest archaeological finds of the 20th century” was discovered.

The looted cultural heritage of the Tunica was carried off from the cemetery and stuffed and stored unceremoniously in a home in Bunkie, Louisiana, for the next two years.

## **An Archaeological Treasure is Revealed**

In 1969, the pothunter, looking to sell the collection, asked local archaeologist Robert Stuart Neitzel for help. Neitzel contacted Dr. Jeffrey P. Brain of the Peabody Museum to lend his considerable knowledge of Tunica archaeology to help determine what to do with the collection.

A decade of court battles over rights of ownership to the historic collection followed...

## **Who Owns the Treasure?**

Dr. Brain reached an interim arrangement on September 10th, 1970, where the collection would be stored and studied at the Peabody museum while a possible sale was discussed. In 1972, Dr. Brain obtained permission to begin formal excavations of Trudeau Landing by the landowners, the Bell family.

The pothunter attempted to gain formal rights to the Tunica Treasure he had unearthed from the plantation. When this was not forthcoming by the Bells, he filed a lawsuit. The Louisiana Archaeological Survey and Antiquities Commission (LASAC) ultimately intervened. The LASAC claimed that the collection should be returned to the state of Louisiana to protect indigenous people’s burial sites.

The Tunica-Biloxi Tribe remained unaware of the finding of the Tunica Treasure or of the meetings with Dr. Brain or the movement of the collection to Massachusetts until 1975 when the LASAC intervened on their behalf.

## **The Fight for Recognition**

The Tunica-Biloxis' long fight for sovereignty culminated with federal recognition in 1981. Shortly thereafter, the State of Louisiana joined the newly recognized tribe in its lawsuit for ownership of the artifacts in 1985. A key part of the ensuing legal battle was ensuring the pothunter received no recompense. Looting should never be rewarded.

The court ruling supported repatriation of the Tunica Treasure to the Tunica-Biloxi people and became a landmark case in American Indian history. The decision, simply stated, "Grave goods belong to descendants."

## **Victory and NAGPRA**

The precedent set in this case laid the foundation for a new federal law: The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) signed in 1990. This law triggered the largest return of American Indian grave goods in the history of the United States and represents a pivotal role in the federal recognition of the rights of indigenous people and their control over their own heritage.

NAGPRA declares that grave goods and other objects which are held by museums, federal and state agencies, and which are identifiable as to a particular tribe, must be returned to that tribe.

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## **Takuhpanitetimili Yoroni**

The Tunica Treasure or Takuhpanitetimili Yoroni totals to nearly two tons of Tunica artifacts and cultural items. The collection dates from the first half of the 1700s before the arrival of the Tunica people to Marksville, Louisiana.

During the early 1700s, the Tunica people were friends and allies of the French colonial government and had very positive and long term trade relationships with the colonial settlers.

The Tunica people maintained their customs in many cases, such as burying their family members with their material possessions.

Thus, the Tunica Treasure (Takuhpanitetimili Yoroni) contains many European trade goods such as glass beads, ceramics, iron tools, copper and iron pots, even flintlock muskets, along with some Tunica pottery, baskets and Gulf Coast shells.

## **Why is the Tunica Treasure so important?**

The Tunica Treasure (Takuhpanitetimili Yoroni) is the largest collection of artifacts from the early colonial period in the United States and represents the enduring heritage of the Tunica people. Examples from this great collection are highlighted here.

## Copper Pots

*ashkachehkini laspikayi*



Copper pots and kettles were traded widely across the Southeastern United States and were a great commodity among indigenous peoples. Stronger than ceramics and more durable when cooking, these everyday kitchen items were staple cooking vessels.

## Brass Bells

*laspichahuru laspikayu*



Bells were a luxury trade item used as decoration on such items as clothing, cradles, blankets, and dance sticks. Tinkling cones were small rolled pieces of brass or copper which were often worn on clothing, leather bags, boots, or belts. Many types of bells have been found at the Trudeau Landing site which shows the popularity of these items as well as the close relationship the Tunica and French maintained.



## Deep Clay Vessel

*kohinamahkina*

## Little Clay Vessel

*kohinathku*

## Clay Plate

*kohin'esa*



In addition to utilitarian uses such as carrying water, cooking, and storage, ceramic cups and pots were used for religious and ritual purposes as well as prized trade items. And the motifs and designs were important markers of place, kinship, family, and tribe.

## Sea Shells

*tahkishi yanera*



Seashells from the Gulf Coast worn in a variety of ways, from shell ear pins, gorgets and beads were meticulously carved with incredible motifs. Shells were also used for their decorative purposes, and much like today, they are indeed beautiful and prized by the Tunica people.

## Glass Beads

*sayçhta*



European beads were trade goods and important in daily and ritual life. Hundreds of thousands were recovered from the Trudeau Landing. The massive quantity of these important trade items is largely due to the Tunica prowess in trading horses and salt to acquire so much wealth.

## Baskets

*lòhka*



**Tunica Basket Fragment  
from the Tunica Treasure**



**Contemporary Tunica Basket  
Made by Alice Picote**

Basketry is an enduring and distinguishing indigenous art form.

For years, many Tunica and Biloxi weavers made baskets from local plants, such as dyed river cane, and sold the lòhka (baskets) for income.

By the mid-20th century Tunica-Biloxi weavers adopted long leaf pine needles because the materials were easier to procure. Today, long leaf pine is in short supply near the reservation.

Each element of the weave and design are steeped in the history and heritage of the Tunica-Biloxi tribe.

## Iron Pot

*oshkachehkini laspimeli*

## Iron Ax

*yaruhki laspimeli*



Originally brought in as a trade good, iron was used for numerous things in Tunica communities often replacing shell and ceramic tools. From cooking pots and kettles, to bracelets, axe heads, musket parts and other weaponry. Small pots, such as the one at right, were also used to make kettle water drums. The Tunica Treasure is an excellent example of how iron was used in a wide array of activities.

# Conservation Today

Today the Tunica Treasure is expertly curated and maintained by Tunica-Biloxi conservators. This magnificent collection is here today for the benefit of the Tunica-Biloxi people and the global community to enjoy.

The Tunica Treasure is truly one of the most significant archaeological and cultural discoveries of the 20th century; no other collection provides as an intimate a view into of the Mississippi Valley in the 18th century.

These materials are the heritage of the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe and stand as testimony to the colonial era and the deep impact the French and indigenous peoples made upon one another.



**Tunica Treasure objects in storage at the Old U. S. Mint,  
Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans, LA, (1988).  
Photograph by Rose White.**

## Suggested Reading:

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**Tunica-Biloxi Cultural  
& Educational Resources Center (CERC)**

The CERC houses a museum exhibit hall, conservation and restoration laboratory, gift shop, library, auditorium, classrooms, distance learning center, meeting rooms and tribal government offices.

Located on the Tunica-Biloxi Reservation  
at LA HWY 1 near Marksville, La.  
150 Melacon Road  
Marksville, La., 71351  
(800) 272-9767

**Tunica-Biloxi Museum**

Open 9:00AM-4:00PM, Monday-Friday  
For group tours contact  
Melissa at (800) 272-9767, ext. 6421  
or mbarbrin@tunica.org

**Tunica-Biloxi Language  
& Culture Revitalization Program**

CERC Library: 9:00AM-4:00PM, Monday-Friday  
For information contact Ryan  
at (800) 272-9767, ext. 6433 or rlopez@tunica.org  
[www.facebook.com/tunicabiloxilcrp](http://www.facebook.com/tunicabiloxilcrp)

For more information on the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe go to:  
[www.tunicabiloxi.org](http://www.tunicabiloxi.org)  
[www.facebook.com/tunicabiloxitribeoflouisiana](http://www.facebook.com/tunicabiloxitribeoflouisiana)

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*"Sauvage matachez en Guerrier," watercolor painting by Alexandre de Batz (1732). Gift of the Estate of Belle J. Bushnell. Courtesy the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, PM# 41-72-10/18 (digital file #99020018).*

Brides les Boeufs, holding a staff with three Natchez scalps, and the son and wife of the slain chief Cahura-Joligo, 1732.