

The pucar past and present in the landscape

Abstract

This article analyzes the relationship between present and past of the landscape in a group of pastoralists in the Santa Mara Valley (Catamarca Province, Argentina). This traditional community lives close to several archaeological sites, well known in the academic literature. Along their routes, these pastoralists encounter particular places and their material culture, establishing a certain connection to the landscape. Although the local people have their own interpretation of places and events, considering the places as repositories of actions that, through time and repetition, integrate the knowledge and memory of this people while promoting their identity. The article sought to analyze the interpretation of a group of pastoralist women about one archaeological site, considering the perception of the group and the incorporation of the landscape as a mark of identity. An ethno archaeological approach was followed, that creates a dialogue between the researcher and the local people. The result shows a particular view about the place and the persistence of the ruins for local people, which is considered as a mark of indigenous persistence in the region. Results also call attention to the importance of doing a more collaborative work to integrated local classifications.

Keywords: archaeology of landscape, northwest argentina, pastoralism, ethnoarchaeology

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Introduction

This article investigates how pastoral mobility and ways of appropriating the archaeological record are entangled with the landscape, in the construction of a sense of belonging and identity and with a specific place and territory. To achieve this goal is taken, as a case of study, a pastoralist population in the Santa Mara Valley, Northwest Argentina. These pastoralist groups in this area are specialized in long distance travel and in the husbandry animals resistant to low temperatures and high altitude, have maintained their way of life in the mountains since the pre-colonial period, at the margin of disputes beginning with the Incan, Hispanic and Capitalist advances.^{1,2} In these higher altitude regions, more distant from urban centers, the persistence of various pre-Hispanic customs and traditions comes into stark relief. This persistence has been discussed by other authors,³⁻⁶ demonstrating the importance of documenting these holdouts. Registering these behaviors makes possible more expansive interpretations about the archaeological record and the ways humans have adapted to this environment over time.

The area is a center of ancient settlement, offering diverse archaeological contexts. Archaeological data shows a complex dynamic in pre-Hispanic moment, with presence of agriculture and livestock and high quality production of pottery and metallurgy. This area was also the scene of Inca conquest, for this moment the local people was organized in cities in the climb of the mountains, probably fortified.^{7,8} The ruins of this impotent cities are still visible, as part of the landscape. The herders walk all around the routes in the mountains to reach pasture areas and water resources, in this walks pastoralist also access the archaeological sites disperse through the area. In the path between one place and another is possible to identify an intertwined with pastoralist activity, the landscape and the meaning assigned to them. It is presumed that mobility implies an internalization of

the landscape, place and material remains. During their routes, the pastoralists contact several particular places and their artifactual assemblages and this gives a determined meaning to the landscape. Through these routes and paths, they assign significance to a space, with the places as symbolic markers of their routes. Each place is a repository of actions that, through time and repetition, integrates the knowledge and memory of these people. Therefore, movement, paths, places and archaeological remains are recognized and signify building traditions and feelings of belonging and identity.^{9,10}

In this context, the past and the present are integrated in these everyday pastoralist practices, in size the sense that we are dealing with a way of life that possesses temporal persistence and spatial recurrence. These practices were accumulated and marked in the landscape through time. The dynamic of mobility and the maintenance and transformation of spaces result in meaningful places, which allow relating archaeological sites to event and their representations in different moments. In this way, understand the contribution of the places to fixing the memory of the actors, as well as the way these meaningful spaces evoke identity, brings the past to the present in a contextualized way. As well, to understand the notion that implies a continuous use or recognition of the space in a meaningful way.¹¹⁻¹⁴

Methods

The study area

The Santa Mara Valley region (26° 41' 14.93° latitude South- 66° 02' 56.97° longitude West, 1900 meters above sea level) is located in the Catamarca Province, in Northwest Argentina (Figure 1). The valley is crossed by the Santa Mara River, originates between the Pizca Cruz and Cajon Mountain ranges. This area possesses a mountainous topography, with heights exceeding 5,000 meters, the climate is arid and semi-arid and the driest season takes place in winter, when only in

the high of the mountains persist a kind of cold-resistant pastures. The municipality of Santa María is divided into an urban center and a rural area. Pastoralism, however, has been concentrated almost exclusively in the rural, mountainous region. Within the Cajón Mountains, the population is dispersed and dedicated almost exclusively to pastoralist activity, as well as low levels of subsistence agriculture and a perceptual of jobs outside the pastoral system. The herders in Santa María valley can be identified as a traditional community. They recognize themselves from the pastoralism, with which they share identity.¹⁵



Figure 1 Map of the area with the study area highlighted.

Alongside the small sources of impermanent water, each pastoralist maintains temporary posts in different altitudinal zones. These are occupied in different moments throughout the year. Pastoralism is an activity eminently for men, the mobility is marked by a gender division, men move with the flock and women remain in the residential area. The mobility of these herders is vertical, residing in the valleys (height between 2,000 m and 3,000 m) during the summer months and in the high mountains (between 3,000 m and 3,500 m) during the winter. In the mobility period the herders are in their routes in the inner mountains, moving themselves between the temporary posts with the animals.¹⁵

Methodology

An ethnoarchaeological approach was used to obtain data, seeking to identify the relationships between behaviors, knowledge, activities and their material results. In this way, as a method of analysis were focus on oral information along with the observation of the landscape, places and the material record as interpreted by local people. This perspective was important to relativize the researched categories from a native perspective and break with the distance between people and the material record of the region. The proposal was to consider an archaeology of the contemporary world and try to blend the archaeological research data with the local knowledge.^{16,17} Fieldwork was divided into different stages, each approximately 20 days over the years of 2011 to 2015, have worked with approximately 6 different groups of families and their support web. The information in this article corresponds to last days of autumn in the region, May and June of 2015. This period is when there are less fertile pastures in all the valleys for the herds and pastoralists can be found walking with the flock looking for resistant pastures, children are at school break with leisure time. In that moment, accompanied by some pastoralists women (3 adults of different ages, which are relatives) and young girls (3 with about 10 years and 1 about 5) was performed a survey of the area, identifying the meaningful sites for the pastors in the lower part of the valley, close to the residential area.

Theoretical approach

The theme of mobility has been studied in a renewed way, having focused on the fluidity and on the agency of nomadic peoples during the whole cycle of their movements. It is now considered that despite the analyzing the movement of people through landscape, mobility is actually determined by natural and sociocultural organization choices. In this way, mobility is defined as the combined time and type of movement and the motivation that incites this behavior.^{18–20} The literature demonstrates that pastoral groups possess a spatial memory. Their routes of movement do not change and the routes are identified by signified markers.²¹ These markers do not only refer to the prerogatives of spatial orientation, but also contextualize memory and are indices of identity. Pastoralism, therefore, is a multifaceted phenomenon with various possible that definitions that involve environmental questions as much as they do variable socioeconomic patterns.^{22–24} For their part, the analyses of landscape have emphasized a socio-symbolic dimension. In this way, landscape is defined as a continuum of conceptualization and construction, because it is an entity that is perceived, experience and contextualized by people.^{13,14,25} Despite the spatial focus of analysis, it is important to demonstrate a holistic perspective of landscape, one which compels us to see the interrelations between people and their traces, places and characteristics, in space and in time.

Therefore, the landscape is a signature of meaning and identification of space that integrates the social and the natural. Humans create strategies to access resources that transform or “colonize” the nature of the landscape.^{11,26} In this way, when we think of mobile groups it is fundamental to think in what way each group articulates with their surroundings in everyday activities and in social meanings that represent their world. Movement is a determining factor in the perception of surroundings. In this way, the recurrent use of certain areas acquires a fundamental importance in the elaboration of memory and in the notion of belonging to a specific place and territory. Landscapes become cultural and their markers and characteristics become indices of identity.^{9,14} For this work landscape is consider as culturally constructed and signified. In which the cultural landscape may be considered as the very earth perceived individually by beliefs and values. It is constructed culturally, by groups, from a natural environment considering that the cultural landscape is the result of the relationship between culture, as agent and the natural area, as mediator. In this way, the land is as important as human activity that occurs on it and it is in the markers on the earth that the past exists and takes a form in the present. These places implicate their associated histories, objects and structures that constitute them. The function of these could be—or not—modified in contemporary action, but their importance resides in the process and in the meaning of these spaces as markers of history.^{13,27}

Therefore, in the landscape archaeological sites present themselves as places that integrate concepts like history, tradition and spirituality. Sites transform these spaces into metaphors of a tangible past. The past and the present are integrated and play an important role in the generation and perpetuation of identity.⁹ The elements of a site represent the past, but their interpretation makes sense in the present. The past and the present are connected cognitively and through the landscape they comprehend a contemporary world that, while keeping itself alive, projects this ancestral past.²⁷ These routes help situate people in events and histories, contextualizing the present and social cohesion. Therefore, the process of movement and stopping

in specific places depends on the ability to “read” the landscape and orient oneself via traces that are meaningful to one’s own existence and that of the group. These journeys in memory represent the past and its contemporary interpretation, just as they incorporate the landscape itself.^{25,28}

Results and discussion

On the slope of the sierra del Cajón with a view to the Santa María River, shows the ruins of an ancient site known as “Cerro Pintado de Las Mojarras”. Among the local people, this hill is known as *Pucará* or just *Cerro Pintado* (Painted Hill). This last nomination is given precisely by the archaeological experience that the view represents, local people said that it was possible to see the ancient walls on the hill, which were decorated with blocks of white rocks arranged between lead rocks, giving the hill the appearance of being dotted with white. Today the walls and structures are less visible. The *Cerro Pintado* remains are located close to the city of Santa María (Figure 2). In the lower of the hill there are several houses, the surround is inhabited mostly by pastoralists who have chosen to live closer to the urban area in the last 50 years. This neighborhood is called *Las Mojarras* and *Cerro Pintado* is an iconic structure there. Archaeologically the *Cerro Pintado* is one of many fortified cities from the pre-Hispanic period, showing buildings all arranged with a certain symmetry on the climb of the hills along the Santa Maria valley. For this period, archaeological data shows a complex system which integrated agriculture and llama pastoralism, important architectural buildings and presence of pottery and metallurgy in large scale.^{7,29,30} Precisely, *Cerro Pintado* consist in a large group of structures on the rise of the hill associated to an important structure on the top of the hill. This higher complex consists of a set of structures arranged with certain symmetry, associated to a major structure with 40 by 12 meters, possibly a central square. Close to this complex stand out a small enclosure well preserved.³⁰



Figure 2 Cerro Pintado located in Las Mojarras, close to Santa María urban center.

For the local people this hill has a special representation. It incorporates a particular symbolism, integrating references to personal histories, archaeological material and its possible meanings. While the low part is an area of housing, animal breeding and small agriculture, the high part of the hill still maintains the magnitude of other times (Figure 3) (Figure 4). Today it has become a place of appreciation and revitalization of the indigenous past, through the material remains that persist there. A walk through *Cerro Pintado* with the local people was possible in a field season in 2015. The walk was organized by some women of a pastoralist family who live in Las Mojarras. The walk was intended to show the children the behavior expected in

mountains walks. It attempted to reinforce social rules, pace of the walk and the relation to meaningful places in landscape. The walk was divided in two moments, first to access the middle of the climb, where there is a recent structure with a catholic icon; it consists of a platform designated for visitation and pilgrimage. This place is considered a good place to stop and rest because the ascent becomes steeper



Figure 3 View of Cerro Pintado from distance.



Figure 4 View of the neighborhood in the lower of Cerro Pintado.

The second moment of the walk was to access the higher part of the hill where the structures of the ancient *Pucará* is more preserved. The hike added the experience of walking between ancient walls and enclosures. Sometimes the path followed the side and inside the persistent rocks walls, at other times the path went over the structures of stacked rocks (Figure 5).



Figure 5 Walls and enclosures of the ancient *Pucará*.

In the high of the climb people stop and seat, it is a place to

make picnics and enjoy the view. Women told children stories about the Cerro Pintado and their interpretations of the structures in which we were standing. Most of the stories referred to indigenous resistance to the Colonial Government and a persistence over the time of the resistance, with scape tunnels and places to hide. They told that a shaman lived there for many years and was responsible to reconstruction of an enclosure isolated in the high of the climb. On the top of the hill, where we were sitting, it was possible to perceive the presence of the walls of a large structure, possibly it was the central square that literature designated.³⁰ One of the women believes that this place was a meeting center, justifying the large space which is still visible even when the walls were partially overthrown. The woman kept talking, saying that she believed that indigenous people in the past were more connected and not in war like History told, because to survive in these valleys must live together in community. She said that and looked through the valley to spot the other fortified cities not so far.

How almost winter was in the region, the animals of the herders were not close to the houses anymore. A woman said that in summer is possible see the animals walking through all these places. This was one of the many signs she saw as indicator of a presence of pastoralism from many years, even in the past. For pastoralist, one of the indicators of this activity is the presence of a certain plants that is considered essential for grazing called *Cardón* (*Pachycereus pringlei*), as seen in the Figure 6. The wood of this plant is used for construction and the inner part is ground and given as food to the animals. The presence of large numbers of *cardones* across the entire hill is seen as an important landmark that attests identity of these people with the past of this place.



Figure 6 *Cardones* in the ruins of the Pucará.

For these people the walks through archaeological remains are normal but represent an ambiguous condition. It is important to enjoy the surrounding of the mountain structures, also is essential not to disturb the material record in the soil. This situation is indicated by many local people, who consider it not acceptable behavior for an honest person. Remnants of other times represent the other life of the past, can be part of the landscape but not part of a particular person.

For the local community the intense presence of ruins is attesting the existence of indigenous people. The permanence of the walls and structures despite the time is seen as attesting the efficiency

of the people in the past. In this way, walking through the path of the hill creates a moment of interaction between people of the present and those from the past. Also, the walls and enclosures of the *Cerro Pintado* represent the houses of those who lived there and probably they have carried out many activities similar to that of the people in present days. Considering that the location studied has been used since pre-Hispanic times, it presents both a symbolic and a practical value. Because recurrent places are used in many activities, like teaching children how to behave, to protect and feed the flock and as a signified one becoming a mark of memory and identity. To draw attention to the meaningful places that are markers of landscape and the designated identity, as has been stated previously, the pastoralist paths are important, because this relationship is more pronounced in these mountainous regions. The routes in the Cajón Mountains are marked by a landscape that at all times brings the past into view and contextualizes it in the present.

In this way, the interactions in the landscape are printed and these impressions have different effects according to the activity that is carried out in different places. Even a same place can imply different sensations for different people. The interactions implied in the landscape are materialized in the present and can be understood. *Cerro Pintado* represents the persistence of the indigenous way of life that pastoralists associated with the same activity, for other people represent a place for praying or just an archaeological site. The use of land for the people is an indicative of the occupations that occur there and this behavior is related to the identity of the people. Based on the people trajectories, it is possible to rebuild the history of people and materials in a landscape and their guidelines identity. Therefore, the landscape is dynamic because it is interpretive and exists in time, which varies and represents multidimensional constructs, between historically determined structures and contingent processes. The landscape is understood as a reflection of human behavior in a given environment, the actions, choices and meanings. As a mark of identity, this landscape in Santa María Valley is the result of the comprehension and the transformations through time, both in the sphere of subsistence and in the symbolic sphere.

Conclusion

The article sought to show the importance of landscape as an analytical concept, especially the relationship of places and people. To understand space for its fluidity is to acknowledge that, through time and repetition, people integrate routes and places into their traditions. These Santa María pastoralists perpetuate their landscape and identity through mobility, when they come into contact with certain places. To analyze this case is to understand the very elements of their landscape and that flux of apprehension and meaning. How, for example, does this nomadic way of life persist and how permanent is a living ancestral landscape. By focusing on the analysis on the walk through *Cerro Pintado*, it was possible to achieve an uncommitted dialog, women felt free to teach me their own view of places. The landscape in this case, with all its elements, is signified as a mark of the several moments of people living in the same place carrying out similar activities. In that way, women identified themselves with the indigenous past marked in the Pucará of *Cerro Pintado*, because they had the perception of the same use of the area by pastoralists. This became clear when they showed *cardones* growing and perceived their importance of living in community. Consequently, a more collaborative archaeological perspective, open the dialog to other voices to construct a more genuine and multifocal knowledge, allows us to expand the range of anthropological conceptions and archaeological interpretations, especially in Northwest Argentina when these approaches are still

few. This expansion of knowledge upsets old paradigms concerning the scope of archaeological science. It places archaeology as a science that reflects also about present human populations. It is archaeology capable of integrating past and present. In the case study in Santa María, where the past and present are connected and form part of the landscape projected onto the contemporary world, understanding and integrating these two ways of knowledge and apprehension of the landscape is a challenge. Nevertheless, it is the only way to acquire this knowledge that can lead us to more interesting avenues of research, prioritizing other perspectives of time and space and establishing an effective dialog between researcher and interlocutor.

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Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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