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Jean CLOTTE

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Short articles



EARLY EVIDENCE OF HUNTER-GATHERER ROCK ART IN LA PUNA (NORTHWEST OF ARGENTINA)

María Mercedes PODESTÁ, Carlos A. ASCHERO

The earliest evidence of hunter-gatherer rock art in the Argentine Puna comes from sites in two different archaeological areas: Inca Cueva and Antofagasta de la Sierra and involves rock paintings which, according to stratigraphic ¹⁴C dating, were first produced between 10 600 and 8 900 BP. We published papers on some of these sites between 1979 and 1985, however subsequent archaeological research and rock art surveys call for a new overview that takes into account the presence / absence and diversity of the rock art during the early Holocene (ca. 10 000 to 8 500 BP).

The rock art in both areas includes simple, abstract geometric motifs, such as horizontally-aligned vertical lines, dots that have been aligned or grouped together without forming discernible geometric figures, lines in the shape of a comb or inverted “U”, irregular figures made with cross-hatching or with a rectangular outline, and sets of finger flutings. The paintings are found on sandstone and ignimbritic overhangs, caves, and rock faces, which are exposed to natural light, accessible, easily visible, and located in areas with plenty of natural resources. It is precisely these resources (permanent water; natural pastures for wild camelids; plant species that can be used for firewood, food and medicine; grasses for covering floors and funerary purposes; and appropriate quality rocks for carving artefacts) together with the repeated occupation of the sites where the rock art shows the greatest range of motifs and superimpositions that indicates a close relationship between the location of these resources, the rock art, the areas that were occupied or where much activity took place, and other sites where no stratified evidence was found. The presence of sites with rock art, whether they were repeatedly occupied or unoccupied (but located within a practical distance of the occupied sites and also with available natural resources) has allowed us to establish a relationship between the sectors of economic importance, the location of the rock art, and the role of this rock art in the construction of a distinct hunter-gatherer landscape.

The sites that were repeatedly used should also be understood in terms of the control of resources – throughout the late Pleistocene / early Holocene in La Puna, they were located in “clusters” in relation to the surrounding desert (Inca Cueva) or extreme desert (Antofagasta de la Sierra) and at over 3 400 m above sea level. This simple geometric rock art can be understood to have been used as “*markas*” (in the Andean sense of the term) that denoted spaces used by specific family groups or lineages in the areas where the resources and topography favoured hunting and gathering activities. In this sense, as “*markas*” and regardless of the particular meaning of the paintings, the rock art denoted, emphasized and qualified these places and was a fundamental element in the hunter-gatherer landscape at that time.

In contrast with the simple geometric styles that are typical of the eastern part of the northern Argentine Puna (Inca Cueva) and the southern Puna (Antofagasta de la Sierra), an overhang has been located (Hornillos 2, near Susques) with rock art dating to 9 000 / 8 000 BP, which is



Inca Cueva 4, Eastern edge of the north Argentine Puna:
geometrical paintings from the early Holocene.

primarily characterized by images of moving camelids and human figures, depicting hunting scenes or other activities involving men and camelids (Yacobaccio *et al.*). Similar rock art was also recently found in another stratified archaeological site (Alero Caído, Coranzulí), covered in archaeological sediment (Aschero *et al.*). These iconographic representations, which are very different from those described above, are located in the western part of the Jujuy Puna, and are contemporaneous with the former (non-iconic) paintings that were produced in the eastern sector of the northern Puna and in the southern Puna.

Moreover, the similarities between the simple geometric designs from the two sectors of the Argentine Puna imply repeated interactions and exchanges of information between the two areas. There also are marked similarities in the early Archaic Tuina–Inca Cueva lithic artefacts (11 000–8 500 BP) that were produced in the two areas, and which have been observed at sites to the east and northwest of Salar de Atacama (Chile), and in the Jujuy Puna and Antofagasta de la Sierra (Argentina). However, in the areas close to Salar de Atacama and the upper-middle Loa River (northern Chile) no evidence has been found of rock art from the early Archaic. This absence is striking and should be contrasted with the findings from the Argentine Puna. On the other hand, in the south of Peru, rock art sites have been found dating to the early Holocene, although their contextual framework is not entirely clear.

Given the evidence of the absence / presence and diversity of rock art on both sides of the central and southern Andes, it seems clear that the rock paintings from the early Archaic were used as a social diacritic and were a marker of differences or a marker of distinct areas of territorial control (between the western and eastern Puna, and between the western Puna and Salar de Atacama / Loa). Their similarities also imply constant interaction and little territorial rivalry between the eastern and southern Puna.





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