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The archaeological landscape of Late Prehispanic mixed foraging and cultivation economy (Sierras of Córdoba, Argentina)

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ABSTRACT

A short review of current data regarding the landscape use in the Sierras of Córdoba Late Prehispanic Period (ca. 1500–300 BP) is presented in this article. Resulting expectation about residential mobility and subsistence are analyzed in light of new evidence and interpretative framework. The lack of substantial middens, few evidences of year-round residence and the low investment in farming fields support the inadequacies of the assumption that the agriculture led to the sudden dependence of crops and to the sedentary way of life in pit-house villages. Other archaeological indicators as the intensity of landscape use, the taxonomic richness of food residues, the abundance of projectile point-types and isotopic evidence reinforce these arguments. However, the evidence suggests that the Late Prehispanic peoples showed flexible subsistence and mobility patterns as one of their defining traits, where nuclear families moved around the landscape to take advantage of both agricultural and wild resources as available. Thus, farming was a fluctuating component in a mixed foraging and cultivation economy where wild animals and plants were intensively exploited through seasonal co-residential group fission–fusion mechanisms that follow the pre-existing Middle Holocene forager lifeways. Nevertheless, many variables can affect this equation, including regional population densities, social boundaries or annual variation in foraging opportunities and a mosaic of strategies combination is also predicted.

1. Introduction

Most archaeological interpretations of the Sierras of Córdoba Late Prehispanic Period (Argentina; ca. 1500–300 BP) associated the adoption of farming with sudden cultural changes resembling those observed in many places around the world during the Neolithic or Formative Transition. It was assumed that food production through plant cultivation quickly derived in a new mode of socioeconomic organization with a high reliance on domesticated plants – mainly maize (*Zea mays*) – and a sedentary way of life in year-round pit-house villages (Aparicio, 1939; Berberián, 1984; Canals Frau, 1953; González, 1943; Outes, 1911; Serrano, 1945). Thus, the significance of foraging and mobility has been understated in the archaeological narratives, which emphasizes the role of agriculture and sedentary village life.

Fortunately, the archaeological interest in other modes of production and their impact on mobility increased over the last years discrediting this normative point of view. The architecture, rock-art and site-type evidence have now become the focus of new questions related to the dynamic of the sociopolitical, economic and landscape-use organization. The aim of this article was to present a review of these topics through the analysis of new archaeological data about the distribution of artifacts, rock-art and features at broader landscape level (Schmader and Graham, 2015; Zvelebil et al., 1992). It is argued that the prehispanic people occupying pit-house villages were more residentially mobile than previously assumed and that the use of maize did not instigate a decline in taxonomic richness. Thus, categories as "hunter–gatherer" and "agriculture" as well as some indicators of sedentism must be now open to question.

The study focuses on the Sierras of Córdoba, a low-altitude mountain range (500–2800 m asl) with a complex of peaks, valleys and high-plains located in central Argentina (Fig. 1). Most of the regions were included in the Sierra Chaco which comprises a semi-arid xerofic forest with edible wild fruits and the prime slope-circumscribed lands for farming. Above 1500 m asl, upper mountain grassland range supported wild ungulate herds such as guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*) and pampas deer (*Ozotoceros bezoarticus*), main prey of Holocene human foragers.

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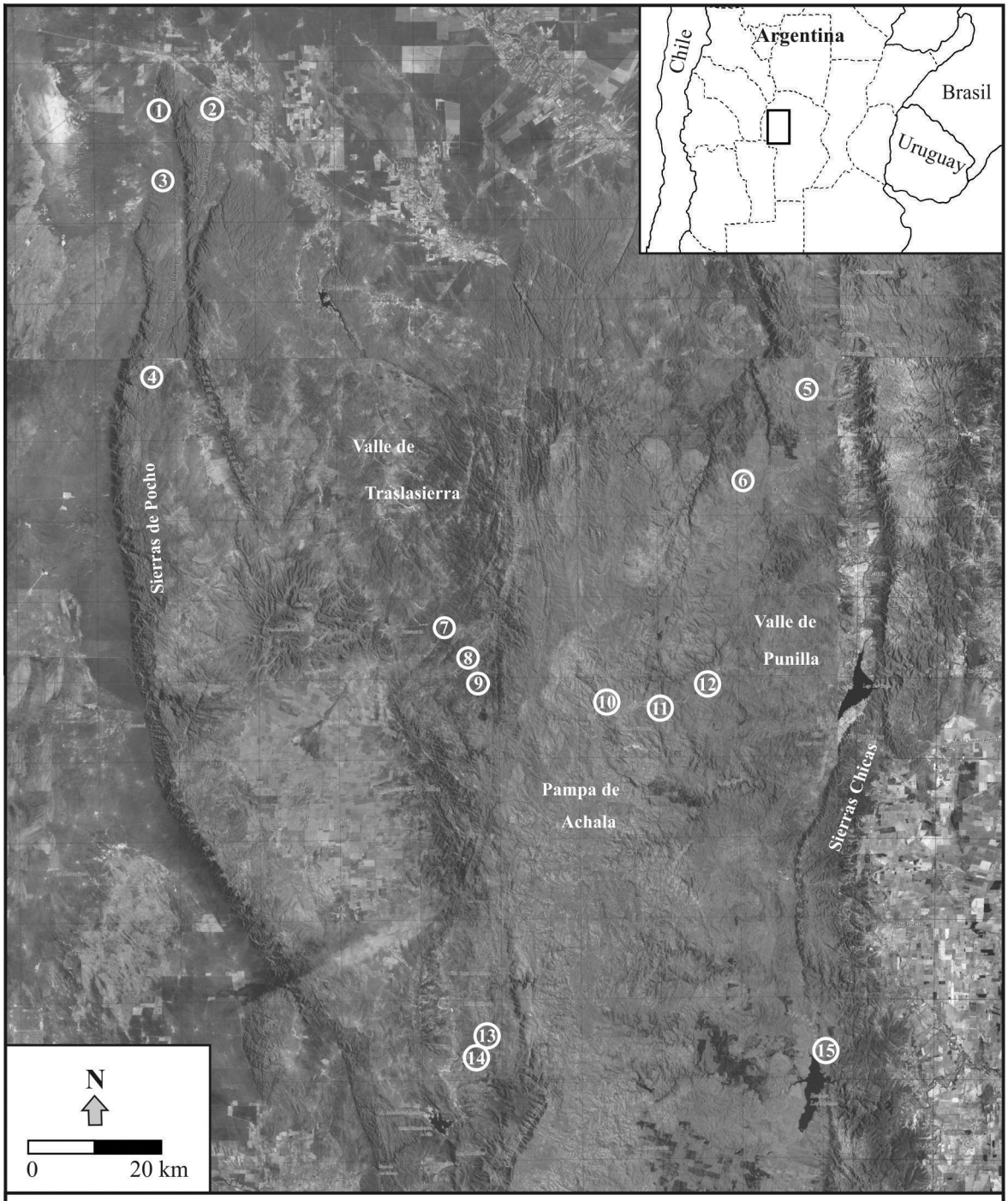

Fig. 1. Geographic locations of the archaeological sites referred to in text.

In seeking to move away from the descriptive and stadial categorizations that have tended to dominate the Sierras of Córdoba archaeology, some terminology must be well-defined. The term "sedentary" is used here to indicate the annual occupation of a site at least by a part of the population (Rafferty, 1985) and "residential mobile" to indicate those strategies that involve frequent changes in the location of the entire co-residential group (Binford, 1980). The number of times that co-residential group changes its location in any given year is used as a measure of "residential mobility" (Diehl, 1997). "Foraging" entails here the obtaining daily suste-