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So near, so distant: Human occupation and colonization trajectories on the Araucanian islands (37° 30′ S. 7000–800 cal BP [5000 cal BC–1150 cal AD])

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ABSTRACT

The initial human occupation and colonization of island areas are linked to a set of ideas and assumptions about when and how these processes occur. This paper discusses these ideas in light of archaeological evidence from the Araucanian islands (in Southern Chile) with regard to the different trajectories experienced there mostly by hunter–gatherer groups. The evidence indicates that rather than presenting a homogeneous and shared regional pattern, each island represents a particular trajectory of human history. This is represented by differing dates for the earliest human presence on each island, as well as distinct processes of abandonment and re-occupation. In addition, despite a long history of prior hunter–gatherer occupations, these islands were ultimately colonized solely by food-producer groups. This highlights the importance of considering factors such as the cultural construction of space and the constraints it places on inhabitants and their technology, as well as a population's dynamic history in terms of its relationship with the mainland and the island(s).

1. Introduction

The occupation, colonization, and abandonment of previously unknown and uninhabited territories is a topic of much interest given the different forms that these processes can take in distinct settings – a testimony to the richness and variety of human experience (Borrero, 1989–1990; Cameron and Tomka, 1996; Rockman and Steele, 2003). Islands in particular have been some of the most fruitful areas for exploring these topics, since it has been assumed that their relative isolation provides a methodological advantage in terms of segregating variables and phenomena (Mead, 1957; Evans, 1973).

This paper will discuss these issues by focusing on the Araucanian islands (Quiriquina, Santa María, and Mocha), located in the South Pacific Ocean off the coast of Chile (Fig. 1). These islands are geographically peculiar in that they are among the very few islands located today along the entire South American Pacific Coast north of Chiloé island and the archipelagic Patagonian Channels (41° 45′ S). In addition, their different human presence trajectories help to illustrate that a single overarching model to explain these processes does not fit all cases, as it is both inappropriate and fruitless. In turn, evidence from these islands highlights the importance that local and regional characteristics can have in explaining the development (its relative success, failure, and consequences, as well as its timing and signatures) of these processes.

Regarding island colonization, Takamiya (2006) has denounced the existence of a "common wisdom" or "traditional model," which states that islands that are large (10,000 km^2 or more), are close to a continent or other islands (less than 100 km roughly), or are rich in large sea mammals and other marine resources, or any combination of the these three traits, will be suitable for colonization by hunter–gatherers. Such is the case for the Aleutians Islands, the California's Channel Islands, Great Britain, or Japan. In contrast, small and distant islands are colonized by human groups that have agriculture and/or a sophisticated maritime technology. The Polynesian islands are an example of this case. As a counterexample, Takamiya proposes the case of Okinawa, a small island, far away from the mainland and other islands and deficient in marine resources. Okinawa was colonized by hunter–gatherers, who based their subsistence mostly on wild vegetal resources, complementing these with native wild boar, reptiles, and coral reef fish. Takamiya's study highlights the significance that local variables can have for explaining colonization scenarios that do not fit the traditional model.

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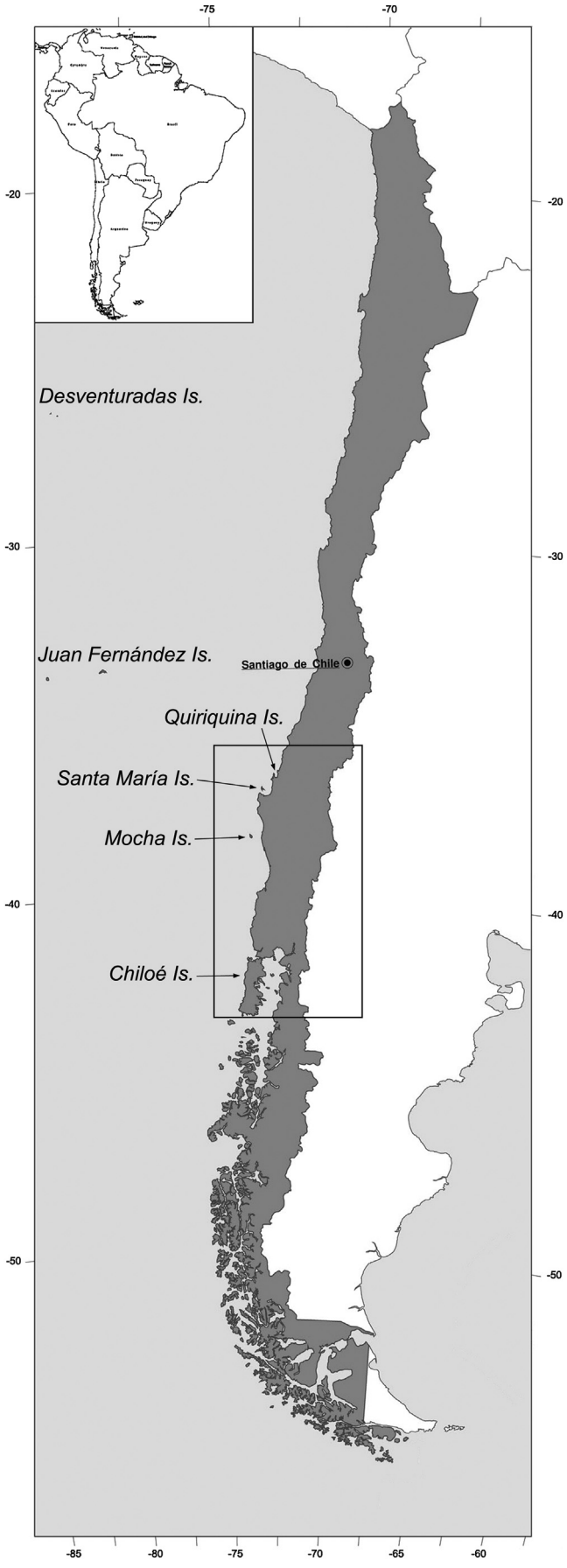

Still, there are aspects that need further refining. On the one hand is the issue of what we understand as "colonization" – as well as "discovery," "arrival," "establishment," "occupation," "abandonment," and other related concepts – in the context of island research. In other words, a set of questions is posed as follows: What are we implying when we say – and by what means can we do so – that an island has been colonized? What of an island that is permanently visited or intermittently occupied but never "colonized"? When and how it becomes necessary to colonize an island? Should we expect hunter–gatherers to colonize islands? In the case of an island that was occupied for a couple of years – or even decades – and then abandoned, was it colonized? Can an island that is close to the mainland, or even visible from it, be discovered? How far/close to the mainland does an island have to be in order to inhibit or facilitate its occupation and colonization? What are the implications, if any, of an island that remains uncolonized or unoccupied?

On the other hand, and related to the previous point, is the need for hypotheses to explain cases in which the traditional model's expectations are not fulfilled. These hypotheses are intimately related to different aspects of how the world is conceived and modified by different cultures. They include: What is "close" to one culture – given their worldview and/or technology – can be "faraway" for another; certain lifestyles are easier to replicate in a new territory, such as an island, than others; and certain organizational or subsistence patterns are more amenable to the occupation of new territories than others.

In a sense, behind the lack of consideration of these aspects lies a paradigm derived from the seminal island research on the remote and dispersed Polynesian islands. On the one hand, this paradigm came close to equating "discovery" with "colonization" and "establishment," as well becoming part of a teleological way of thinking in which the territory – islands, in this case – is there to inevitably become occupied. In addition, this paradigm also led to the diffusion of the "island as lab" model, in which islands were treated as isolated units where one could more easily segregate variables to understand a variety of biological and social processes. However, using single islands is misleading because they are not the ideal spatial units for analyzing insular societies. Instead, single islands usually show indisputable connections to other areas, and studying them therefore entails consideration of those other areas as well (Broodbank, 2002; Anderson, 2004; Cherry, 2004; Curet, 2004; Mitchell, 2004; Erlandson and Fitzpatrick, 2006; Boomert and Bright, 2007; Dawson, 2011).

This paper will present the regional and specific geographical and biological setting of the Araucanian islands, and then describe the human history of mainland Araucania and how the islands became, or did not become, part of it at different moments. Later, I will discuss the data these islands have provided and what this tells us at a regional level about their human historical peculiarities, and also contribute to the refining of our conceptualizations of early human presence on islands and its later developments.

2. Regional setting

Araucania (36° 00′–39° 25′ S), in Southern Chile, is peculiar in that today it has, along some 200 km of coast, three continental islands – from north to south: Quiriquina, Santa María, and Mocha (Fig. 2). These islands are among the very few islands located along the entire South American Pacific Coast north of Chiloé island and the archipelagic Patagonian Channels.

Fig. 1. Chile. Insert indicates location of Southern Chile (see Fig. 2). Modified from GinkgoMaps http://www.ginkgomaps.com.