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Archaeological discontinuities in the southern hemisphere: A working agenda

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ABSTRACT

This introductory overview presents the frame of research and general goals of the special volume “Archaeological Discontinuities: Comparative Frameworks for the southern hemisphere”. We begin by deconstructing archaeological discontinuities in terms of time and space in order to assess what sort of past phenomena are we dealing with when assessing discontinuities in different scales. It is one of our main contentions that we need theory and data connecting discontinuities as recorded on different analytical scales, thereby contributing to evaluate often-undescribed mechanisms that produce archaeological discontinuities. On this basis, we face the key task of deconstructing archaeological discontinuities from ‘top to bottom’, moving from the averaged material record that is visible in archaeological scale toward the short-term human decisions and interactions that, when occurring cumulatively, produce those discontinuities. Nevertheless, while an understanding of the short-term behavioral mechanisms and social agency behind discontinuities is necessary, it is certainly not sufficient for building a frame in which to make sense of the long-term record.

Archaeological discontinuities recorded at different spatial scales require different explanatory mechanisms that can be connected hierarchically. The most productive analytical take here would be to move from the bottom to the top, building from the site or local scales to the regional and continental levels. This strategy provides a solid frame for assessing the genesis of discontinuities at different scales by disentangling the incidence of sampling deficiencies in the field, the selection of samples for chronometric dating, taphonomic biases, the reorganization of mobility and technology, local and regional abandonments, and actual demographic changes.

We finish by selecting a few issues that we consider worthy of systematic comparative attention in the years to come. These issues impinge on different levels of theory and methods and can only be pursued with an interdisciplinary focus that encompasses not only archaeology but also ethnography, genetics, linguistics, paleoclimatology and paleoecology. We are convinced that there is much to learn from a comparative perspective in terms of structural similitudes in historical processes across regions and continents. The conceptual structure of a number of debates from South America, Africa, and Australia is remarkably similar, notwithstanding important differences in terms of chronology and tempo. We look forward to international joint endeavors such as this one that help to formalize questions and data-collecting strategies for the southern drylands and beyond.

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“There is a genuine paradox here, and a familiar one: we cannot work out what tools we need until we know what sort of phenomena are there in the longer-term record to investigate, and we cannot investigate those different phenomena until we have some tools to do it with. And to solve that paradox we will need to work at both simultaneously.”

[(Bailey, 2007, 220)]

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1. Archaeological discontinuities: An introduction

Change is the norm rather than the exception in archaeological scale, though its rate and mode are not uniform in time or space. Change accelerates its pace at given times and places along the course of human history, producing what we perceive as discontinuities or transitions in archaeological scale. Beyond its empirical or historical basis, recording and –above all – explaining archaeological discontinuities are eminently theoretical endeavors. Two of the most important sources of obfuscation of archaeological debate on discontinuities stem from this apparently obvious statement.

First, even some of the most widely used archaeological discontinuities in use today as the basis for archaeological taxonomies, such as the African Middle/Later Stone Age, involve research decisions made in the context of specific paradigms and goals (MacKay et al., 2014; Mitchell, 2002; Pargeter et al., 2016; Sampson, 1985). As Veth et al. (this volume) suggest about the Australian Late Glacial Maximum, “The artificial, analytical barriers, that currently characterize work on many LGM sites should be ‘unpacked’ in favor of a more ‘continuous scale’ approach which allows intra-LGM variability to be investigated without artificially contrasting and promoting the LGM as ‘inherently different’”. The character of *discontinuities as artificial units of analysis* defined and characterized in the context of specific research questions, as opposed to purely natural phenomena, is one of the main sources of complexity when balancing arguments on rates of change and continuity vs. discontinuity debates in archaeological scale.

Second, *archaeological discontinuities are multidimensional phenomena* that can be recorded in different realms of past societies, such as population biology and genetics, linguistics, demography, technology, subsistence modes, and/or information flow, among others. The papers included in this special issue illustrate aspects of this variability, as well as some trajectories of interaction between different domains, which are inextricably linked in historical and evolutionary processes. This multi-faceted character of archaeological discontinuities can be yet another source of analytical obfuscation, since evidence supporting their presence/absence can be simultaneously invoked without there being necessary contradictions between them.

Two other factors are additional sources of complexity to the archaeological assessment of discontinuities: taphonomic and chronological biases. First, discontinuities may be the product of preservation biases acting at different temporal and spatial scales (Behrensmeier et al., 2000; Farrand, 1993; Surovell et al., 2009). At a general level, it is arguable that the formation of the archaeological record is episodic by nature, because of combined sedimentary and pedogenetic dynamics (Birkeland, 1999; Farrand, 2001) on the one hand, and human patterns of spatial organization and use of the landscape (Binford, 1982; Borrero, 2001; Kelly, 1995;

Harcourt, 2012) on the other. Regarding chronology, there is an incidence of problems associated not only with the resolution inherent to the dating techniques themselves, but also with the variation in how they are applied by archaeologists across the southern hemisphere. Too often, this is done sparingly across a site’s sequence due to budget limitations. Bayesian modeling holds great potential for maximizing chronological resolution on the basis of limited sets of dates and without greatly increasing costs (e.g., Bronk Ramsey, 2008; Marsh, 2014).

Lack of sufficiently explicit formulations on the artificial nature of discontinuities –defined in the context of specific paradigms and research objectives – as well as on the multiplicity of historical domains at which relevant evidence can be sought for, are the main sources of analytical obfuscation interfering in productive debate. As in many other fields of archaeological enquiry, the best prospects for advancing debate lie in being as theoretically and methodologically explicit as possible. With theory, we have to fully describe the artificial units used to define discontinuities, the scale of analysis at which they are framed, and the historical domains and lines of evidence where we expect them to be represented (Shea, 2014). In the methodological realm, we have to operationalize the debate on discontinuities by providing material expectations about the magnitude and speed of change observable in archaeological scale.

Building on this perspective, this volume presents case studies and reviews ranging from the local to the subcontinental scale in deserts from Australia, southern Africa, and South America, based on diverse fields of evidence that operate on different temporal and spatial scales (Fig. 1). These papers, plus a few others that could not be included, were originally presented at a Wenner-Gren Foundation-sponsored symposium held at the *4th Southern Deserts Conference* (Mendoza, Argentina, 2014). Besides contributing to a series of regionally specific issues, the papers combine to construct a comparative frame for the study of human societies in desert ecosystems from the southern hemisphere (Smith and Hesse, 2005; Veth et al., 2005, 2016). The goal is to compare historical trajectories of socio-demographic change, seeking to identify shared and unique patterns across the continents. In doing this, we expect to converge eventually with other past and ongoing projects of comparative archaeology of different time periods and world regions (e.g., Anderson et al., 2007; Drennan and Peterson, 2012; Smith, 2012; Soffer and Gamble, 1990; Veth et al., 2005, 2016).

2. Deconstructing discontinuities I: time

As championed from different backgrounds by Braudel’s (1958) *Annales* school and Bailey’s time perspectivism, ‘differing



Fig. 1. Location of the case-studies in the volume.

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