



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Quaternary International

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/quaint

In search of a lost village. Prospecting techniques at the site mariano miró (la pampa, argentina, early twentieth century)

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Plow land
Prospecting
GIS
Distributional analysis
Design excavation

ABSTRACT

Archeological research started in Mariano Miró (Chapaleufú, La Pampa, Argentina) site in 2011. In this site there are remains of a rural village, founded in 1901 by the railway station under the same name of the Ferrocarril Oeste, with its header in Buenos Aires city. This village was inhabited by nearly 500 people and there was a series of shops typical of an agricultural-livestock occupation (stores, a baker's shop, a smith house, etc.). Towards 1911 it had to be abandoned forcibly because its inhabitants could not renew their lease agreement over the lands they settled in. As from that moment, its owners destined that space to agricultural exploitation, and therefore no village structures were left standing.

The Mariano Miró archaeological study is included in an investigation that aims at learning population dynamics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During those times, lands were incorporated to the national territory after military campaigns against indigenous populations. This study presents results obtained through different prospecting techniques applied to delimit the old village common land. Although nowadays no surface structural remains are seen, the presence of a great number of vitreous, ceramic and metallic fragments was recorded, from which a 240 × 140 m study area was set. Over the whole surface of that area, covering 39,200 m², transects were laid out; prospecting was conducted with a metal detector and a systematic collection of surface material was made. The diversity of data obtained was processed by Geographic Information System (GIS) which, together with ARCGIS10 software, enabled us to correlate multiple variables. The use of documentary sources (aerial photographs, cartography and village layout blueprints) helped identify site formation processes, old buried structures and areas associated with specific social practices. The prospecting design applied let us guide archaeological interventions in such a large area and, based on the distribution and density of these findings, it helped differentiate sectors that would respond to deliberate social practices during village occupation (e.g. dumps), from those that would be the result of post-depositional anthropic and natural processes.

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1. Introduction

Mariano Miró was a rural village that was founded in the beginning of the twentieth century. It was located in the then so-called *national territories*, in the current Chapaleufú Department (35° 01' 31.1"S and 63° 48' 71.1"W), La Pampa Province, Argentine Republic (Fig. 1). Argentina's *national territories* were territorial political delimitations in regions within the national territory

where historically the provinces created during colonial times had no jurisdiction. In practice, national territories were intended to exercise tutelage over indigenous peoples or/and send a message from bordering countries or former owners of those territories about the will to occupy and integrate them to the Argentinean nation.

The site is located on a sandbank plain formed by sandy deposits of aeolian origin during the late Pleistocene. However, the advance of the agricultural frontier by the end of the nineteenth century and the caldén forest clearance in the first decades of the twentieth century, modified the landscape significantly in less than a hundred years. Some sandy formations are still preserved today, but in most

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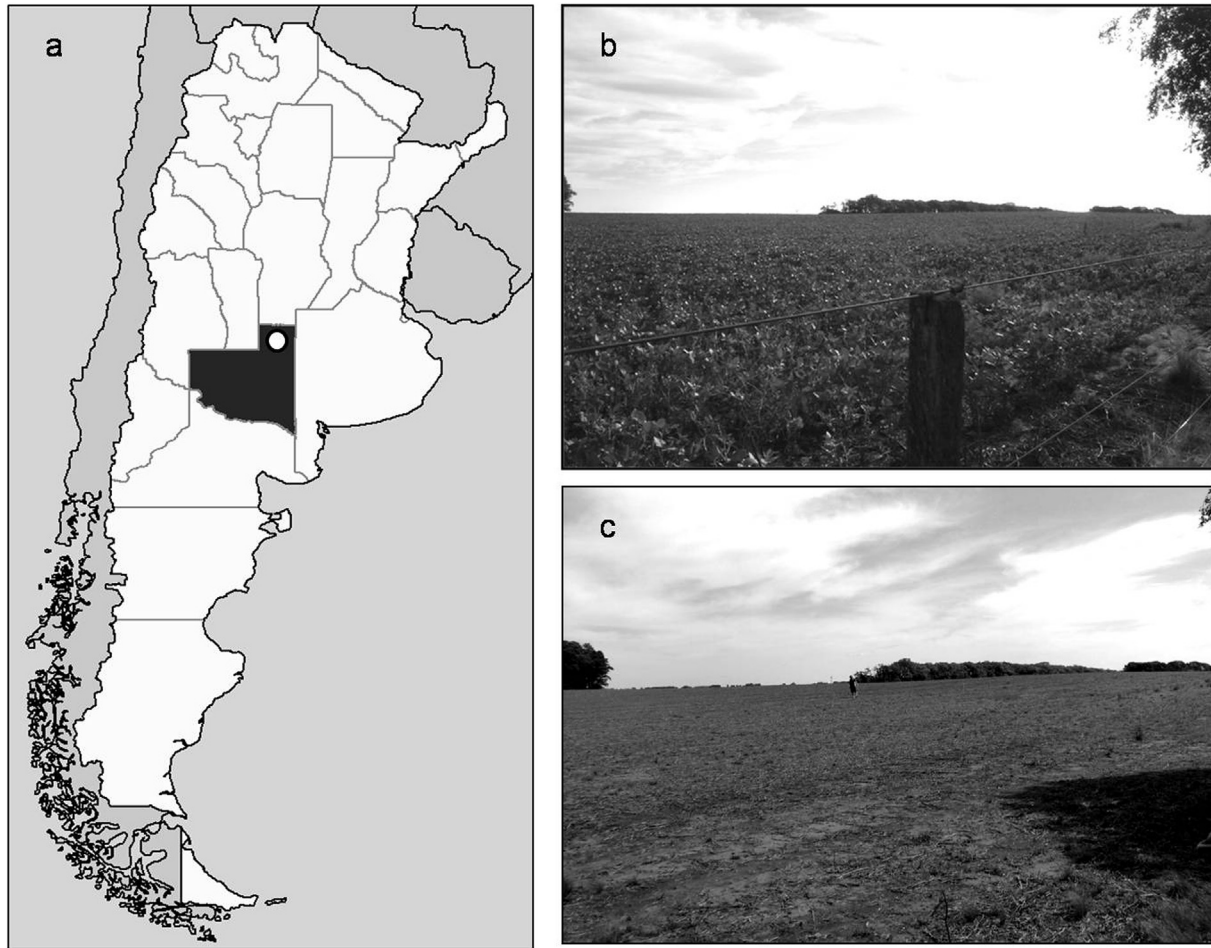


Fig. 1. a- Location Mariano Miró site in the province of La Pampa, Argentina; b-view of site extension during of soybean cultivation period (January 2011); c-view of site extent after the harvest (October 2012).

cases they are fixed by vegetation and Mollisols (according to Soil Taxonomy) that allowed the development of intensive agricultural-livestock activities. Mollisols are soils developed from organic materials and mineral sediments under wet weather, semi-arid conditions and also in some colder patterns and warm patterns with a graminoid cover, with a dark surface horizon (mollic horizon) with moderate to high organic matter content. Ph testing of soils in the area shows values ranging from 5.2 to 6.2, i.e. slightly acid (Landa et al., 2014).

In Argentinian historiography, the so-called “Conquest of the Desert” was set up as a series of military campaigns and actions carried out by the Argentinean Army, against diverse indigenous people between 1878 and 1885 in the Pampean and Patagonian regions. Its outcome was the conquest of the territory and the control and reduction on those latitudes’ inhabitants. After the Conquest of the Desert, thousands of hectares of productive lands in the southwest of Buenos Aires province were incorporated to the national territory. Lands were divided into lots and awarded to individuals, thus creating large latifundia (Guerín, 1980; Marre and Lurnagaray, 1987). Exploiting those lands made a great contribution to Argentina’s insertion in international markets, by means of economic expansion and the consolidation of the Nation State (Aráoz, 1988; Maluendres, 1995; Di Liscia et al., 2007). As time went by, different social actors started to occupy rural space –settlers, tenants, migrant workers, farmers and merchants– and the first

rural villages and other types of settlements started to develop, such as “estancias,” outposts, rural business and agricultural colonies (Scobie, 1968; Guerín and Gutierrez, 1983; Maluendres et al., 1995). This process was accompanied by railway expansion that helped connect distant areas, people, ideas, and merchandise on different levels (Mayo, 1980). Whereas some population nuclei prospered and became currently existing villages, other settlement attempts were not successful. From these failed experiences, which also form a meaningful part of the regional identity’s framework, there are still remains of their ephemeral existence, as in the case of Mariano Miró site (Pineau et al., 2014).

The settlement was initially raised by a Ferrocarril Oeste station under the same name as the village in 1901 and it once reached around 500 inhabitants. There was a series of stores typical of a business and agricultural-livestock occupation in the common land: a general store, a smith house, storage structures or sheds. It is estimated that the surface occupied by the village main nucleus comprised 3ha in the south and, although there could be some occupation in the northern area, it has not been detected yet. Initially the lands where the occupation settled were leased by many colonists from the Santa Marina family, but after ten years these owners ceased use of their lands. After terminating the lease agreement in 1911, settlers started a forced abandonment, founding new villages in the region, Alta Italia and Aguas Buenas (now called Hilario Lagos). Mariano Miró was abandoned gradually, as shown

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