



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Quaternary International

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

The memory of the landscape: Surface archaeological distributions in the Genoa Valley (Argentinean Patagonia)

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Patagonia
Genoa Valley
Landscape archaeology
Taphonomy
Hunter–gatherers

ABSTRACT

In this paper we focus on the regional/local scale of the archaeological record of the Central-West area of Chubut (Argentinean Patagonia) through the characterization of its regional taphonomy, considered from an archaeological perspective. We focus our research in the comparison of three different landscape situations: 1) a slope leading to highlands, 2) an azonal vegetal community (wetland or *mallín*), and 3) a salt lake. Our main goal is to compare those situations, in order to determine the main taphonomic factors that regulate the archaeological material distribution in those locales. The ultimate goal is to address how past hunter–gatherers inhabited these landscapes. We depart from the assumption that distributions of artifacts are mainly explained by the action of post-depositional processes. To evaluate this assumption first we postulate a series of hypothesis and expectations for each locale, considering the main post-depositional agents present in them, and we evaluated if the patterns of material distributions can be explained by one or many of those processes. Only if explanation cannot be achieved by them, we recurred to human depositional activities. As a result we managed to explain most of the archaeological distributions in terms of post-depositional processes. Only in two cases we propose that human deposition occurred.

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So I began to get an idea of bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it (Seamus Heaney, 1980, Preoccupations, p. 54).

1. Introduction

Deserts around the world share similar characteristics. They are subjected to similar abiotic selective pressures, mainly determined by moisture scarcity (Brown et al., 1979). Biologically, there is a limited scope of answers to deal with this constraint, so it is reasonable to expect biotic convergence. The assumption that there exist patterns operating at a large scale, emerging as system properties that cannot be dealt as the mere addition of local results

is what has been termed “macroecology” (Brown and Maurer, 1989). This view has also been applied to humans. Following Burnside et al. (2012) “We define human macroecology as the study of human–environment interactions across spatial and temporal scales, linking small-scale interactions with large-scale, emergent patterns and their underlying processes”. This is the sort of effort that a “Desert Archaeology” deserves: the linking of small (local) scale interactions between humans and the desert environment with large-scale emergent patterns common to the archaeological record located at those environments. Hence, the very first step is to determine the interactions at the local scale. There exists by now a certain quantity of works around the world settled at this scale (Holdaway et al., 1998, 2005, 2008, 2010; Bailey, 2007; Holdaway and Faning, 2008; Douglass and Wandsnider, 2012; Davies, 2013) but fewer are trying this effort at a macroscale level (for example, Holdaway et al., 2015).

In this paper we will pay attention to the local scale in order to contribute to the characterization of the regional taphonomy of the Central-West area of Chubut in Argentinean Patagonia, South America (Fig. 1, up). In this region we will focus our study in the Genoa Valley, setting our spatial focus at the mesoscale (*sensu* Delcourt and Delcourt, 1991) totaling 3542 km² (Fig. 1, down).

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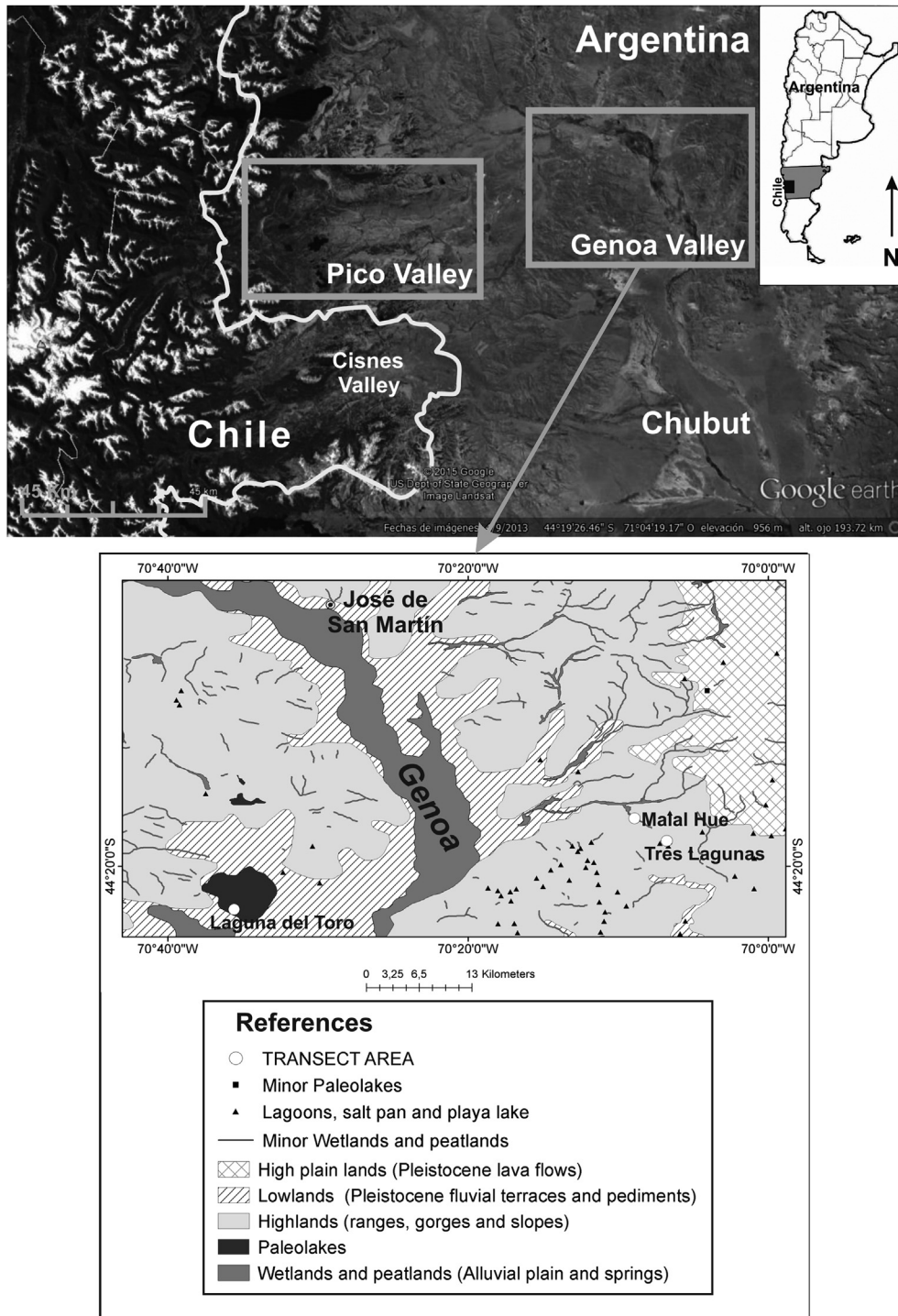


Fig. 1. Areas mentioned in the text and detail of the Genoa Valley geomorphology.

In a previous work (Rizzo et al., 2015), we compared the archaeological record of two biomes present in Central-West area of Chubut in a coarse-grained scale: the steppe, represented by Genoa Valley versus the forest represented by the Pico Valley. Both valleys are connected, situated at similar latitude and are part of our research area (Fig. 1, up). Genoa Valley, located at the Precordillera, offers a quick access to Andean forest resources to the West, and to the steppe and its lava mesa and plateaus (highlands), to the East. The Pico Valley conforms an East-West corridor (Matteucci et al.,

2011), modeled by Pleistocene glacial action, which facilitates the Cordillera de Los Andes crossing (since it is located at low altitude), leading to the Pacific and allowing access to forest resources (mostly vegetal ones as wood, cane, medicinal plants, etc.). Our results allowed us to consider that in Genoa Valley, although the predominance of aeolian and hydric erosion, there are different situations probably related with a variety of taphonomic modes (*sensu* Behrensmeyer and Hook, 1992) or landscape variations within the steppe.

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