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Dunes, hills, waterholes, and saltpeter beds: Attractors for human populations in western Pampa, Argentina



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ABSTRACT

Desert environments have generally been considered unsuitable places for the development of human communities. However, archaeological research shows that they have been intensively populated and traveled landscapes. These environments share common characteristics (scarcity of surface water, desert vegetation, high evapotranspiration, water imbalance, among others). But archaeological investigations account for the variability of both, desert settings and social trajectories of their populations.

In Western Pampa (southwest of La Pampa province, Argentina), the distribution and availability of fresh water is the main variable for spatial organization of prehispanic populations. Also the crossroads of Indian trails or *rastrilladas*, articulated and connected places that mitigated its hostility, such as dune fields, springs, hill ranges, natural pools, temporary or permanent ponds. It is around these reservoirs that prehispanic human activities are recorded. Archaeological sites are sometimes ephemeral, in other of recurrent use. Considering the significant environmental dynamics of this landscape, it is possible to discuss the differential organizational patterns recorded alongside this arid region.

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1. Introduction

Western Pampa comprises the mid-continental region in the center of Argentina. It is an arid and semiarid environment that comprehends about 100.000 km² and is included between the 600 and the 200 mm isohyets (Fig. 1).

Hunter-gatherers populations lived throughout this region during the last 9000 years, at least, although not continuously in any given sub-area (Gradín et al., 1984; Berón, 2014). These populations adopted different mobility patterns along the time, generally tethered to water supplies, used lithic stone tools, items made from organic materials like malacological and ostrich eggshell beads, worked leather and bone and had a diversified diet (Berón, 2004; Cimino, 2006; Berón et al., 2012b; Barberena et al., 2015). About 1500 years ago gradual changes began: they incorporated decorated pottery and intensified the use of different kind of ornaments, as copper mineral beads, copper earrings and adornments, mobile and rock art, use of pigments, burial in formal graves, some of them very complex. By these times temporary settlements were more frequent, located in the better watered parts, and social differentiation began to be shown through the

presence of grave goods or evidences of expertise tasks in some child's burials (Aranda, 2007; Berón et al., 2012a).

Towards the last 1000 years, population growth is archaeologically recorded, suggested by emergence of formal burial areas, the redundancy of use of domestic campsites with high density of material culture as well as an increasing record of wide social networks transposing the Andean range, and the occurrence of violence and conflict (Berón, 2004, 2014; Berón et al., 2012b; Berón et al., 2012c; Salazar Siciliano and Berón, 2013). It was surely motivated by demographic pressure and, from XVI th century, the pushing menace of European colonizers, located on east and west sides of their territories. Historical records mention several ethnic groups with defined identities and territories all around the area, reaching the Andean slopes.

By the end of XIX Century (between 1879 and 1885), this complex socio cultural system was broken up by military campaigns carried out by the central Argentine government, during the paradoxically called “Desert Campaign”. Different military divisions went into these territories, killing, impeaching and pulling the survivors towards the less favorable lands. In this way the environmental category of desert was employed as a metaphor, regarding low demographics of indian people, to whom Spanish names were imposed in order to better identify and assort, and thus justifying its occupation by colonizers. The main goal of this paper

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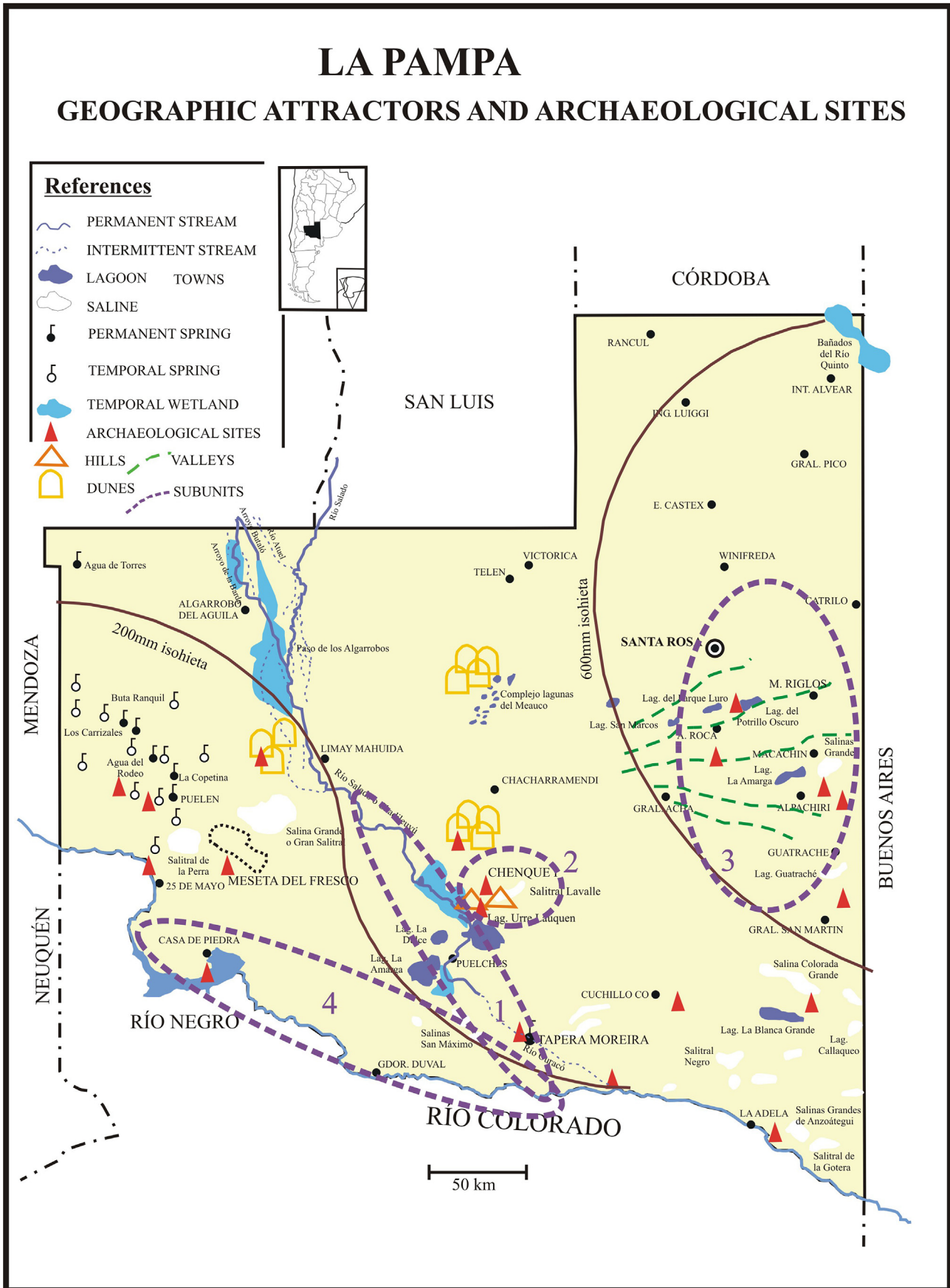


Fig. 1. Western Pampa. Main geographic attractors and archeological sites.

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