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The SHA Newsletter

Quarterly News on Historical Archaeology from Around the Globe

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Latin America

Argentina

Transformations in 19th-Century Indigenous Society, Buenos Aires Province (submitted by Julio Fabián Merlo and María del Carmen Langiano, Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires)

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to present the research on the archaeology and ethnography of the Southern Frontier (Buenos Aires Province, Argentina). The analysis of fortified sites and documents enables us to understand the cultural changes that took place in the indigenous societies, generated by the appropriation of their territories and the expanding state.

Resumen: El objetivo de este artículo es presentar las investigaciones en Arqueología y Etnohistoria de la Frontera Sur (Provincia de Buenos Aires, Argentina). El análisis de los sitios fortificados y los documentos permite comprender los cambios culturales ocurridos en las sociedades indígenas, generados por la apropiación de sus territorios y el avance del estado en formación.

Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar a investigação em Arqueologia e Etnografia da Fronteira Sul (Província de Buenos Aires, Argentina). A análise dos sítios fortificados e documentos permite-nos compreender as mudanças culturais que ocorreram nas sociedades indígenas, geradas pela apropriação dos seus territórios e pelo avanço do Estado em formação.

Résumé : L'objectif de cet article est de présenter les investigations en Archéologie et Ethnohistoire de la Frontière Sud (Province de Buenos Aires, Argentine). L'analyse des sites fortifiés et des documents permet de comprendre les changements culturels survenus dans les sociétés indigènes, générés par l'appropriation de leurs territoires et l'avancée de l'Etat en formation.

At the beginning of the 19th century, in the context of a growing capitalism on a global scale, the nascent Argentine state sparked a struggle for dominion over territory. A group of elites south of the Salado River in the Province of Buenos Aires appropriated land belonging to the indigenous people in order to export primary products to Europe. Other interested parties were England and Portugal.

This generated the need to secure the internal borders by means of military enclaves, a process that lasted from Argentina's gaining of independence in 1816 until the military offensive known as the "Desert Campaign" in 1880, which rendered the native populations invisible and expelled them from their lands.

Archaeological and ethnohistorical research has advanced our knowledge of topics related to everyday life on the frontier, notably interethnic relations, trade and supply circuits, and questions of gender and power (Langiano 2015), as well as the forms of the disciplining of the rural population (Rosas [1828] 1992) and of the "friendly Indians" (Ratto 2003). The only frontier roads were *rastrilladas*—deep parallel furrows that the "indians" had left with their constant comings and goings in the countryside and that formed a wide and solid road.

The *rastrillada* known as Camino de los Indios a Salinas Grandes (Barros [1872] 1975) or Camino de los Chilenos (Melchert 1873) (Figure 1) connected the low passes of Chile with the territory south of the Salado River. The study of a group of archaeological sites in the vicinity provided insight into the advance of the frontier from the beginning of the 19th century until 1880. Some of these sites are the following forts and fortlets: Independencia (1823), Blanca Grande (1828), Esperanza (1858), Lavalle (1872), La Parva (1858), El Perdido (1865), Fe (1872), and Arroyo Corto (1872) (Merlo 2014; Langiano 2015; Merlo et al. 2021).

Contact between indigenous and euro-creole peoples contributed to the transformation of both societies and their cultures. This process took place economically, linguistically, demographically, socially, and ideologically. There were moments of friction and moments of peaceful coexistence along this frontier, where different cultural expressions intertwined, family groups were broken up due to forced relocation, and new beliefs and customs were either imposed or brought closer together (Figure 2). These situations began to transform the indigenous society (Langiano 2015). In one document, General Lavalle stated that "he called Chief J.P. Catriel to Fort Lavalle and, surprisingly, without the consent of his parliament, made him sign

a contract that included the transfer of his family and eviction from their fields" (AGN 1875).

The colonized others and those considered modern and civilized (the dominant sectors) were both characterized by diversity. The "uneducated" could be "gauchos," "chinas" (a derogatory way of naming women), "indians," or "gringos" (Europeans), all of which were considered different, strange, and sometimes "dangerous" established ethnocentric representations. Gravano (2008) affirms this, in this sense that "conflict is the basis of culture. . .

. . . At the time of the Conquest[,] . . . the Indians took 'captives' while the whites took 'prisoners'" (108–109). If we take these conceptualizations and unpack them, we can affirm that there existed in 19th-century frontier society an ideological and power paradigm according to which "other" cultures were situated as subordinate, degraded, or marginal (Langiano 2015).



FIGURE 1. Raked road called Camino de los Indios a Salinas Grandes (Barros [1872] 1975) or Camino de los Chilenos (Melchert 1873).

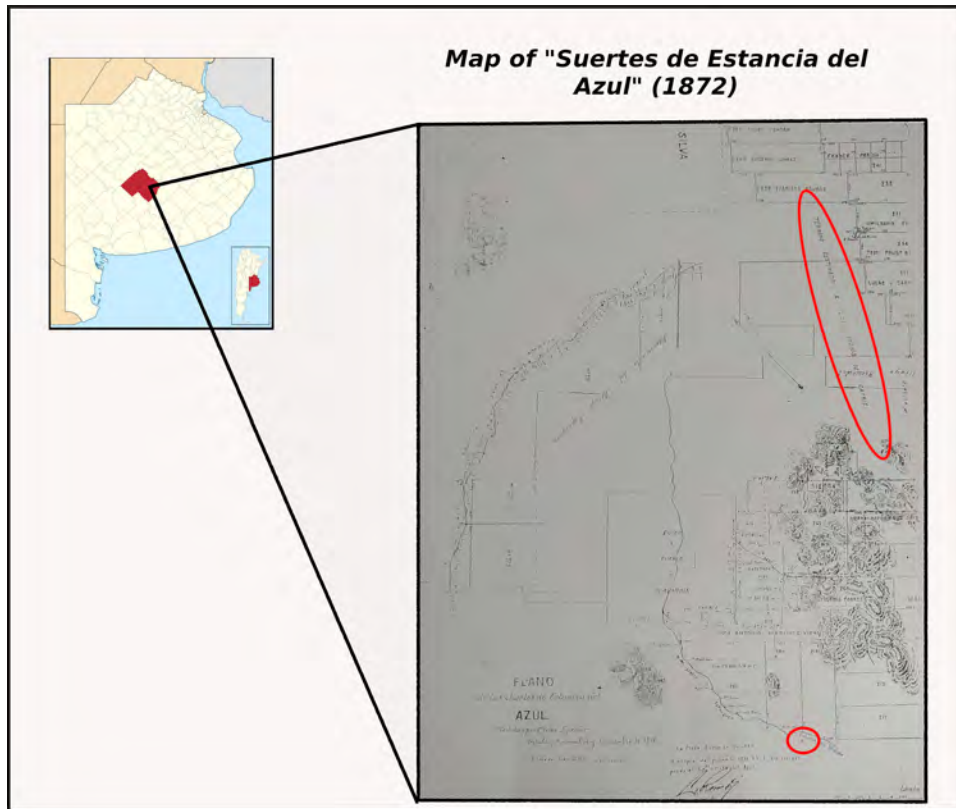


FIGURE 2. Map of Suertes de Estancia del Azul. Lands allotted to Catrie(l) Indians. Partido of Olavarría, Buenos Aires Province, Argentina (Dillón 1872).

tionally thought out to offer a picture of the desert where social actors pose according to the photographer's suggestion, thus showing more what was imagined than what was real, which is how these visual representations fixed valuable meanings for the nation-state (Figure 3).

The introduction of new ways of eating; the exchange of various goods and technologies; alliances; the reduction of indigenous territory; the granting of rations and military titles to Indian chiefs; and the manifestations of power, persuasion, and violence initiated cultural changes in the indigenous people. Symmetrical relations shifted toward a more hierarchical reciprocity. The appropriation of European goods and the possession of territory, cattle, weapons, and silver ornaments became the new symbols of prestige. The perspective of ethnicity was superseded by an ideal conception of the nation-state which, according to the official discourse of equality and national identity, prioritized the appropriation of indigenous territory and



FIGURE 3. Army chaplains, Desert Campaign of Roca and Alsina. (Photo by Antonio Pozo.)

footprint. At present, the Danish Church is located in the area of the fort. Archaeological excavations began in the original courtyard, which dates from 1873. Material was recovered from before and after the occupation of the fort that consisted of artifacts of indigenous origin as well as elements of European origin, with items that show the continuous use of the space up to the present day. With the permission of the current residents, test excavations were carried out in the courtyards of houses, public spaces, and buildings in the process of demolition. In Independence Park, the presence of human remains and lithic artifacts associated with European materials from the 19th century was recorded.

Cartography places the “indian friends” (Ratto 2003) nearby, who, in exchange for economic resources, cooperated with the settlers.

Fort Blanca Grande: This was founded in 1828 on the shores of the lagoon of the same name, 80 km west-northwest of the city of Olavarría. A year later it was abandoned by the government, leaving a settlement of colonists, indigenous people, and soldiers in its place. A second government occupation began in 1869 that lasted for 10 years. The archaeological remains come from different sectors of the site: discard areas, housing areas, and surface collections on the perimeter of the fort and in the southern area comprising the back of the fort and the lagoon (Merlo and Merlo 2018). We recovered fragments of glass, earthenware, kaolin pipes, metal, remains of weapons, buttons, and bones of native and introduced animal species. Cartography shows this site as the settlement of the Chief Chipitruz indians (Figure 4).

Fortlet La Parva: This is located 10 km from Las Flores stream in the city of General Alvear. It dates

FIGURE 4. Poster “The Frontier World”: upper right, map of *tolderías* of “friendly indians” in the area studied; center right, historical background on indigenous peoples of the area studied (“The caciques of the area”) (above) and excavation at and artifacts from Fort Blanca Grande (below); lower right, aerial view of the Fort Blanca Grande (1828–1879) site; lower left, background of and excavations at Fort Blanca Grande; center left, artifacts recovered during excavations at Fort Blanca Grande.

ignored the cultural ethnic diversity present on the frontier.

Some archaeological sites

Fort Independencia: This site is located in the urban area of Tandil. There are no visible remains of it nowadays; the fort, officially founded in 1823, was demolished in 1865 and the city was built over its

THE FRONTIER WORLD

Los caciques de la zona
 La composición de los “indios amigos” que habitaron nuestra región fue muy variada y cambió a lo largo del siglo XIX, ya sea por divisiones dentro de las tribus más importantes o por el agregado de nuevos grupos. Entre los linajes de caciques principales se destacaron los Catriel y los Cachul que, desde la época de Rosas, se radicaron en Tapalqué y Azul, sumando entonces más de 2600 personas. Pero también deben mencionarse muchos otros caciques secundarios y capitanes, tales como Tracaman, Raylef, Cayupan, Quiñigal, Maicá, Chipitruz, Manuel Grande y Calquif, quienes lideraron a distintos grupos de guerreros con sus familias. Para la década de 1850 la población indígena de la zona se estimaba en unas 6000 personas.

Fuerte Blanca Grande
 Fue fundado a orillas de la laguna que dio origen a su nombre en el actual partido de Olavarría. Rosas encomendó su creación al Coronel Mariano García, al mando del Regimiento Nº 6 de Caballería, quien fue acompañado por Ramón Fresno (cirujano) y Saturnino Salas (Ingeniero).
 Junto a otras fortificaciones, que conformaron la nueva Frontera Sud, tuvo la función principal de controlar el tráfico de ganado que se arriaba a lo largo del “Camino de los Chilenos”. Gracias a las excavaciones arqueológicas desarrolladas en este fuerte desde la década de 1990 se recuperó una gran variedad de materiales: vidrios, lozas, municiones y otros objetos de metal y restos de animales. Se identificaron distintos sectores: un polvorín, el hospital, viviendas, un posible cementerio y áreas de sembrados.

Indios de Chipitruz
 Vista aérea del Fuerte Blanca Grande.
 Carriles, Cementerio, Área de Sembrados, Área de Boscado, Viviendas, Polvorín, Torre de la Fosa Oeste, Torre de la Fosa Este.



FIGURE 5. *El Perdido* archaeological site: upper center and upper right, maps of site and of the region where the site is located, respectively; lower right, open excavation unit with members of the research team; middle and lower center, artifacts recovered during the excavations; left, open excavation unit.

from 1858; the inhabitants of the area “donated the bricks for the construction of the fort” (AJPS, Letter from neighbours to the Justice of the Peace of Saladillo, S/N, of September 1858).

Surface collecting (8 transects parallel to the pits in a plowed field) and the excavation of 10 grids in the central mound, 2 in the northeastern pit of the fortlet, and 6 in the ravine of the secondary mound (northeastern sector) recorded a high density of material of European origin as well as of native and introduced fauna (Merlo 2014).

El Perdido Archaeological Site: This is located in the basin of El Perdido-Tapalqué Stream, Olavarría, in the northwest sector of the Tandilia hills. Mensura N° 41 located El Perdido Fortlet in 1865 (General Geodesy Archive of the Ministry of Public Works of the Province of Buenos Aires). It also includes five natural ridges and seven euro-creole *taperas* (abandoned and ruined houses in fields).

Excavations of four grids in the fort’s mound, six in the main mound, and two in Lomada 1 and surface collecting led to the recovery of lithic tools, glass carved using indigenous techniques, artifacts of European origin, and bone fragments similar to those found at the sites mentioned above (Figure 5). In Arce’s cartography (1872) these lands are labeled as allotted to “the Indians of Chief Catriel” (Figure 2).

Fort Lavalle: This is located at the intersection of San Quilco Stream with the Camino de los Indios a Salinas Grandes. The traveler Armaignac (1974) mentions it as the most important of all the frontier fortlets of Buenos Aires Province due to its strategic position. At present, its architectural structures are obscured by agricultural work and the construction of a neighboring road. Surface collecting proceeded along 10 transects in a plowed field and 4 grids were excavated. We recorded material of European origin, material associated with native and introduced fauna, fragments of indigenous pottery, and side scrapers made of glass (Figure 6).

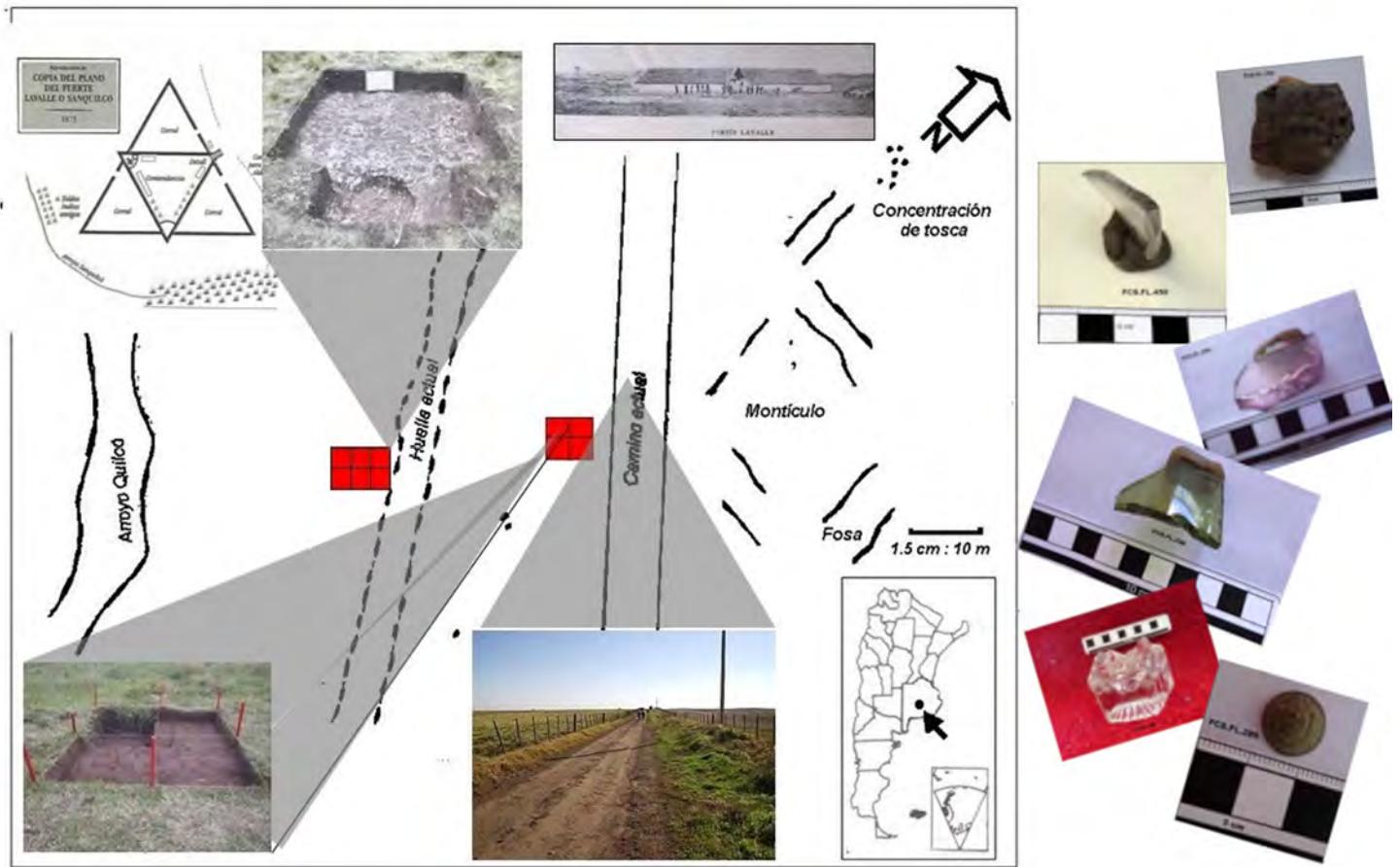


FIGURE 6. Fort Lavalle: map of site overlain with upper left, excavation unit; upper right, historic photo of Fort Lavalle; lower right, location of site in Argentina; lower center, present-day road; lower left, excavation unit. Artifact photos on the right side of the figure show worked glass, ceramics, and material of European origin.

Conclusions

Documentary sources and archaeological data show the strategic place occupied by these sites for the domination of the native communities, settlers, and immigrants. In this complex frontier of the 19th century, we understand the panorama of the occupation of space through questions of power (Langiano 2015). The written documents consulted enable us to establish a complex system of interethnic relations, which at first was a reciprocal exchange between euro-creoles and the indigenous factions (i.e., Forts Independencia and Blanca Grande). As the population on the frontier increased, relations between the different actors became more conflictive, with moments of friction, establishing more-asymmetrical relations with the euro-creoles gaining greater control of the aboriginal space. European fauna and foreign materials were replaced by the region's natural resources. The making of artifacts from fragments of glass bottles using indigenous techniques, similar to indigenous tools made from lithic materials, indicates the interaction between euro-creole and indigenous people (Merlo 2014). In addition to this, there is cartographic evidence of the presence of "friendly indians" near the fortified posts (Merlo et al. 2021).

Questions for further research on the complex rural world of the 19th-century Buenos Aires Province frontier concern the dynamics of rural trade and the use value given to the various materials that circulated on the frontier and their sources.

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