

CERRO EL SOMBRERO AS PLACE, PERCEPTIONS AND EVOCATIONS

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Abstract. Archaeological sites of early hunter-gatherers in the Argentine Pampas are not obvious nowadays since they do not exhibit any constructions or other outstanding cultural feature. Neither has any oral tradition about the world of their inhabitants currently persisted. Therefore, these places become significant when someone tells a part of their history, for instance, through the archaeological record. Bearing this in mind, in the Tandilia range (Argentine Pampas), we are working trying to understand how memories are evoked through these places of hunter-gatherers.

1. Introduction

The southern lands of South America were occupied by hunter-gatherers until colonial times, so their prehistoric archaeology deals mainly with open air or cave sites which often are not recognizable as landmarks to an inexperienced viewer. This is the case for early archaeological sites in the Argentine Pampas; they are not obvious nowadays since they do not exhibit any constructions or other outstanding cultural feature as rock art. Neither have oral traditions about the world of their inhabitants currently persisted as a result of the Spanish conquest. Therefore, these places and their past inhabitants only become significant when someone tells part of their history, for instance, through recreations based on the archaeological record.

People, particularly hunter-gatherers, usually identify different features of the landscape connecting them to past events, whether personal, historical or mythical (Santos Graneros, 1998). As a result, a memory that is always linked to certain places is forged (Augé 1998). Moreover, among hunter-gatherers fragments of memory are constantly *written* in nature. Therefore, mountains, caves, hilltops or the surroundings plains with archaeological evidence can help us evoke some of these fragments in order to think about the character of hunter-gatherers' places.

We are developing our archaeological research in the Tandilia range (Argentine Pampas) bearing in mind that it can be used as a

threshold to create a perception about places once commonly used by hunter-gatherers. Pieces of history can be found in the techniques of manufacture of the lithic assemblage and the distinctive raw material selection, in the reconstructed travels to and from the lithic raw material sources or the visibility and accessibility of the sites and the meaningful use of landscape. The combination of this information provides an opportunity to think about people and their places during Late Pleistocene/ Early Holocene times. Also, the current use and knowledge of the same places serves as contrast for the past situation.

We present the case of a very particular archaeological site, Cerro El Sombrero Cima assigned to the Pleistocene /Holocene transition, where the largest assemblage of fishtail projectile points of the region has been recovered. It is our aim here to discuss its importance for early societies in the Pampas. Through the analysis of the material record, space surveying and the application of Geographic Information Systems we propose a partial reconstruction of its history. This perspective plus the present inhabitants' perceptions convey the multiple interrelated visions that give character to this place. We believe that the history of this place represents an intangible Heritage that requires recognition from current local inhabitants and authorities.

2. The mountains as environment

Tandilia range is a plateau mountain system with a northwest-southeast orientation that traverses the eastern pampas plain along more than 350 kilometers. It is a discontinuous and squat range with flat hilltops as an outstanding feature in those sections where quartzitic rocks outcrop. The study area is located in the southeast angle of the system, in the county of Lobería, Buenos Aires province (Argentina). Cerro El Sombrero stands out among the neighboring ranges because it is one of the highest hills in the area with 429 m a.s.l. However, it only projects 200 m above the surrounding plains. Its flat hilltop has an extension of 25.000 m² with a quaternary loess sediment cover and quartzitic bedrock that outcrops along the edges of the summit (Flegenheimer and Zárate 1989). Numerous small rock shelters surround the hilltop; however, they are not often seen from the plain because their entrance is covered by ferns.

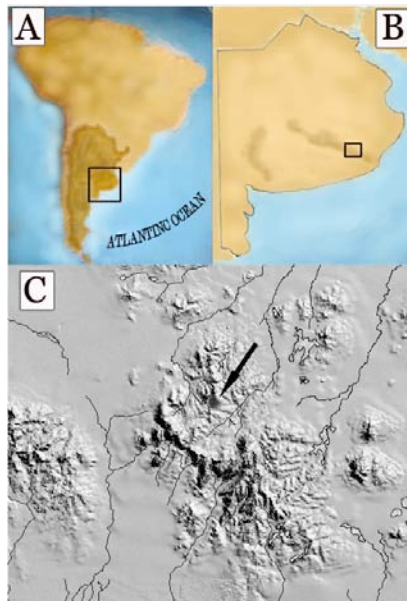


Figure 1. **A-** South America; **B-** Buenos Aires province; **C-**Cerro El Sombrero

The area is humid temperate and the hill slopes are currently often used as grazing land. As most of the surrounding plain is deeply modified by agriculture, the uncultivated hillsides still remain as less modified environment which preserves the autochthonous flora and fauna.

A great variety of resources is available in these ranges. First, different plant communities can be distinguished along the hillsides and even on the hilltops. The presence of specific communities responds to altitude and variations determined by micro environmental parameters such as water table depth, incidence of sunlight and wind. Several species of grass and ferns are widespread; also moss and lichens are common. Even though native trees are scarce and their distribution is limited, there are some autochthonous bushes, among them a woody bush, known as curro that covers the lower parts of the hillside; it can reach 2 m in high and provides firewood.

Second, several animal species are still frequent in these hills, among them, many birds, lizards, and snakes several animal species. Nowadays mammals are mainly medium to small in size; however, larger mammals such as puma, guanaco, and ostrich were abundant some years ago.

Finally, water, a vital resource in the area, is also easily obtained in the hills which act as headlands to the Quequén River, one of the major rivers that flows through the Pampas plains. A few springs and many filtrations through the rock walls usually offer fresh water.

In addition, as we will further discuss, the hilltops and many of the highest rock shelters give an open view to the surrounding plains and to other ranges. Depending on sunlight, haze and climate conditions a visibility of more than 40 kilometers is possible.

3. Mountains and people

Confucius said, "...mountains have abundant bushes and numerous birds and animals, and they produce all things that people need; the resources are inexhaustible in supply and always available for use, and yet the mountains never ask people for anything in return. People from far and near come to get what they need, and mountains always generously offer what they have. Mountains can also stir up winds and thunder and create clouds and rain to link heaven and earth and harmonize Yin and Yang energies, bringing rain to water all things on earth, so that they can grow and people can have food and clothes as a result. This is the reason why compassionate people enjoy mountains."¹

Shelter, raw materials, food and water are offered by the hills; however, they are more than merely a supply of resources. Mountains can be used and seen as an object but they are also experienced, perceived and thought by human groups. Through history, all over the world, people have assigned them an assortment of meanings and functions. Thus, mountains and caves could represent simply *places* to human groups considering that every physical space becomes *place* through human actions; it is both a cause and a consequence of daily activities. The relationship between people and places provides a frame and context to human life (Thomas 2001; Tilley 1994). Therefore, each place holds both spatial and social features; they are conceptualized, seen, smelled, touched, used or avoided according to particular identities and traditions (Bender *et al.* 1997). Places become home to hunter-gatherers through the incorporation and the embodiment of their characteristics in everyday life (Ingold 2000).

As salient geographical features mountains are considered in many Native American cultures a source of water, generators of local weather and the symbolic home of gods and ancestors (Saunders 2004). Such is the case all along the Andes, South America's mountainous backbone, and Mesoamerica.

As home of the ancestors, origin of kinship, or the dwelling of spirits associated with the earth's forces and fertility, these landforms became sacred places to numerous societies. In several ancient Mesoamerican rituals, for instance, people asked the hills to bring water either from their entrails or from the height where clouds are formed (Sánchez Vázquez 2007). From Olmec, Cañari and Inca to Mapuche mountains are believed to link different worlds, and therefore they connect and reinforce ties between beings from those worlds (Aldunate and Lienlaf 2002, Saunders 2004, Reinoso Hermida 2005, Grove 2007).

¹ <http://www.clearharmony.net/articles/200611/36410.html>

On the other hand, the highest points of natural landscapes can be considered strategic places related to defense or domination. Visual command over the surroundings allows awareness of any danger and controlling people and animal movements. An example of this strategic settlement on the top of the hills is the building of *pukarás* in the South Andean region (Chacama 2005).

Thus, for both practical and symbolic reasons, ranges or specific mountains themselves have played an active role on human lives of different cultures.

4. Early people in Cerro El Sombrero: archaeological investigations

Although the Tandilia ranges are relatively low, they stand out as a prominent feature in the flat Pampas plains and provide natural varied resources. At Cerro El Sombrero a visibility analysis was developed through fieldwork surveys and the application of Geographic Information Systems. As a result, several processed images of the area are available (Mazzia and Gómez 2007).

These studies have revealed that it is possible to control a wide view from the hilltop of Cerro El Sombrero due to its privileged topographic situation; however, the view varies with direction. There is a visibility of up to 40 kilometers towards the east, north and northwest through the open plains and hillocks; although no more than 10-15 kilometers can be commanded towards west and south because of neighboring ranges that disrupt the vision. One can only have a narrow view of the plains beyond, through the lowest sections of these nearby hills. The site has been described as a probable look-out since its view allows having control over potential preys' movements, the availability of temporal water and the activities of other group members (Flegenheimer 2003).

The visual relationship between this place and the nearest sites also assigned to early hunter-gatherers, such as Cerro La China and Zoro Cave is not direct. The areas where these sites are located are perceived but the exact place of the sites cannot be seen, yet people from all these sites could easily communicate for example, by smoke signals. On the other hand, people on the top of Cerro El Sombrero can be seen from the plains or from the nearest hills only if they are standing on the edges of the summit.

Not only vision is important in the hilltop, sounds can travel far depending on weather conditions. On calm days, voices of people talking normally on the summit can be heard on the plains, on windy days instead, it is even difficult to communicate between people in different areas on the hilltop.

According to information gathered from the farm workers living around this hill and amateur archaeologists from the nearby

town of Balcarce several people have either collected surface remains from the hilltop or excavated the sediments surrounding it. Yet, only three collections are housed in Museums and are known in the academic circle; these are: the Madrazo Collection, housed in the Museum Damaso Arce, Olavarria; the Nosedá Collection, housed in the Museum of Natural Science "G. P. Nosedá", Lobería and the Flegenheimer Collection housed in the Area Arqueología y Antropología, Municipalidad de Necochea. This last collection includes both excavated and surface remains and has been used in the following description.

Archaeological remains are scattered throughout the hilltop. Although only 37m² have been excavated up to the moment, the pits are distributed to cover different areas in the flat summit. All of the pits yielded archaeological remains and these present similar characteristics throughout the hilltop, yet artifact density varies in different areas. No organic remains have been preserved, so, the collection is limited to lithic artifacts and mineral pigments. The assemblage includes a total of 1,631 flaked tools, five cores, one hammer stone, 11 artifacts manufactured by pecking and abrasion, two abrasive clasts, two mineral fragments and flaking debitage (Flegenheimer 2004, Mazzia *et al* 2005). These artifacts exhibit a set of characteristics which are unique among other regional assemblages corresponding to the same time range. These are:

- Flakes are mostly small in size, with no cortex and correspond to the last events of a sequence of manufacture (Cattaneo and Flegenheimer 2008), 19% of them are identified as bifacial thinning flakes (Flegenheimer 1991).

- An outstanding trait of the tools is their high breakage ratio, 93% are fractured, on going experiments are being carried out to explain this high index (Weitzel and Flegenheimer 2007).

- Bifacial artifacts amount to 40% of the sample, also some of the unifacial tools were manufactured on bifacial thinning flakes (about 20%); that is, bifacial reduction was frequently used as a manufacturing technique. Also, the tools show a tendency to be slightly thinner than those from other contemporaneous assemblages and a variety of tools present in other early assemblages are absent or scarce on the hilltop (as for example, bipolar remains).

- Fishtail projectile points are frequent, a total of 82 tools that can be assigned to this diagnostic early type have been recorded, including preforms and recycled points. Most of them are fractured points and basal portions of stems, complete points only account for a small portion of the assemblage (17%). Also, tools with fishtail morphology comprise a variety of artifacts, although of the remains originally were medium sized projectile points, some large points were also recovered. There is another group of small artifacts

exhibiting fishtail point design, manufactured on flakes with scarce modification which are not useful as points and must have served other functions. One of these functions could have been the transmission of information which probably was encoded in this design (Bayón and Flegenheimer 2003).

- Other outstanding artifacts are a discoidal stone with a central engraving and three fragments of small spheres. The function of all these artifacts is still open to debate.

- Another interesting feature in the assemblage is the choice of colored tool stone. A preference for colored orthoquartzites has been identified in the selection of raw material for flaked artifacts and has been assigned symbolic purposes (Flegenheimer and Bayón 1999). Although this feature is common to other regional early sites it is more pronounced in this context.

Based upon the characteristics of the lithic assemblage, Cerro El Sombrero Cima has been considered a re-equipment site where weapons were refurbished and projectile points replaced (Flegenheimer 2003). Yet, the presence of some infrequent artifacts as the small fishtails, the discoidal stone and the small spheres, plus the prevalence of colored stones and the small range assigned to the flaking debitage discarded at this place reveal that the activities carried out on the hilltop probably had a special meaning for its inhabitants.

5. Cerro El Sombrero as place, perceptions and evocations.

5.1. PLACE

As has been mentioned, two uses are evident at this place during the Pleistocene/Holocene transition: as a look-out with control of the landscape and as a re-equipment site. Both activities probably were undertaken by a group of people and not by the whole community. Yet, it is difficult to tell for how long the site was visited by these groups of hunter-gatherers or for how long the visits lasted.

Some of the characteristics of the assemblage as the prevalence of colored tool stone imply that these artifacts and the tasks in which they were employed carried a symbolic meaning. As no area that can be assigned to general domestic activities has been identified on the summit, the place must have been reserved for certain special activities. We therefore believe that this place itself must have had a significant value for people inhabiting the area.

No remains that can be clearly assigned to the Middle and Late Holocene have been identified at the hilltop, although the area was also inhabited during these times (Mazzanti 1993). Clearly there was a change of perception of Cerro El Sombrero in later peoples.

5.2. PERCEPTIONS

Nowadays, Cerro El Sombrero is within a farm owned by a private company, it is visible all around but permission is necessary to have access to it; people that live close in the neighboring farms rarely climb it. Some local workers ride on horseback on its hillsides to check the livestock and sometimes the farm owners climb the hill.

The hill itself is only visited regularly by the “helecheros”, fern gatherers, who cut the ferns which grow at the higher locations for sale to florists. However, the hill acts more as a background for the local inhabitants than as an active part of their daily activities.

On the other hand, residents of the nearby city of Lobería (about 40 kilometers), almost never visit the hills. Some think that ascending the hilltop is too difficult and risky; also, they believe that it is dangerous because of snakes and even because of vandalism.

Both, city and countryside people, know little about the past significance of the hilltop of Cerro El Sombrero, and most of them only think about the past in terms of the colonial period. Nevertheless, there is an active local museum² and those who visit it, attend its conferences or are in touch with the archaeologists during field work, acknowledge the relevance of this place in the regional past history.

5.3. EVOCATIONS

Based on archaeological knowledge, the hilltop of Cerro El Sombrero has inspired narratives that evoke early hunter-gatherers and the character of this place. Two reconstructions were created in order to bring alive an image of what life might have been at the turn of the Pleistocene/Holocene transition.

On one hand, a short description of a group of men performing their tasks and refurbishing their hunting equipment on the summit has been published in a book about the early peopling of Argentina addressed to the general public (Flegenheimer et al 2007). On the other, a story for children is based on the feelings of a child who is lost while playing, climbing the hill during the Pleistocene/Holocene (Iannamico and Pupio 2008). In both descriptions special attention is given to the details of place in the form of view, sound and smells and the feelings these produce.

In sum, Cerro El Sombrero Cima was an early hunter-gatherers' place where some members of the community performed specific tasks related to re-equipment of stone tool assemblages and the visual control of the surroundings. We here propose that the hilltop was not a simple background for these activities, it was instead a part of them, and probably carried a meaning of its own for these groups.

² Museum of Natural Science “G. P. Nosedá”, Lobería

The recognition of the character of this place as a relevant chapter of regional past history by current local inhabitants and authorities is still limited. Therefore, writing evocations of ancient people experiencing everyday life in this place is a way to transmit its importance.

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