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The First Paleoindian Fishtail Point Find in Salta Province, Northwestern Argentina

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Abstract

Fishtail or Fell projectile points represent an excellent marker to know the presence of earliest hunter-gatherers populations living during the end of the Pleistocene and its transition to the Holocene. They are widespread in many places along Central and South America. However, there are certain areas with elusive occurrence. Adding new information on the continental and regional distributions of this paleo South American artefact, this paper reports a detailed morphological and technological study of the first fishtail point find in the Salta province, Northwestern Argentina.

Keywords

Fishtail Points; Lithic Technology; South America; Nothwestern Argentina

1. Introduction

For a long time, the western part of South America and mainly the Andean Cordillera has been proposed as the dispersion area of Paleoindian hunter-gatherers that used fishtail or Fell projectile points in their weaponry (Schobinger, 1969, 1974; Mayer-Oakes, 1963). They represent an excellent marker to know the presence of hunter-gatherers populations living during the end of the Pleistocene and its transition to the Holocene at about 11,000 - 10,000 uncalibrated radiocarbon years ago. Along the Andes, fishtail points have been found in Colombia (Ardilla Calderón, 1991), Ecuador (Bell, 1965; Mayer-Oakes, 1963), Peru (Chauchat & Zeballos Quiñones 1979; León Canales, 2007; Díaz Rodríguez, 2008; Briceño, 2010) and Chile (Nuñez, 1994; Nuñez et al., 2010; Jackson et al., 2007; Nami, 1987). In western Argentina, Fell points have been reported in the provinces of Mendoza (Schobinger, 1971, 1974) and Neuquén (Schobinger, 1974; Nami, 1992). However, despite

the existence of sites of the same antiquity, fishtail points have not previously been reported in northwestern Argentina. Indeed, their finding has been elusive for many years. Therefore, from that region, in this paper we report a detailed morphological and technological study of the first fishtail point find in the Salta province.

2. Morphological and Technological Observations

The example described in this article was found near Cobres (23˚38'59"S, 66˚17'17"W), a small settlement in La Poma department. Cobres is in the Sierra de los Cobres mountain chain in the eastern Andean puna, near the border of Jujuy province, west of Salinas Grandes at 3.545 m elevation (**Figure 1**). It was found by a local resident and donated to a small museum in the school locality. The specimen (**Figures 2(a)** and **(b)**) is made of high

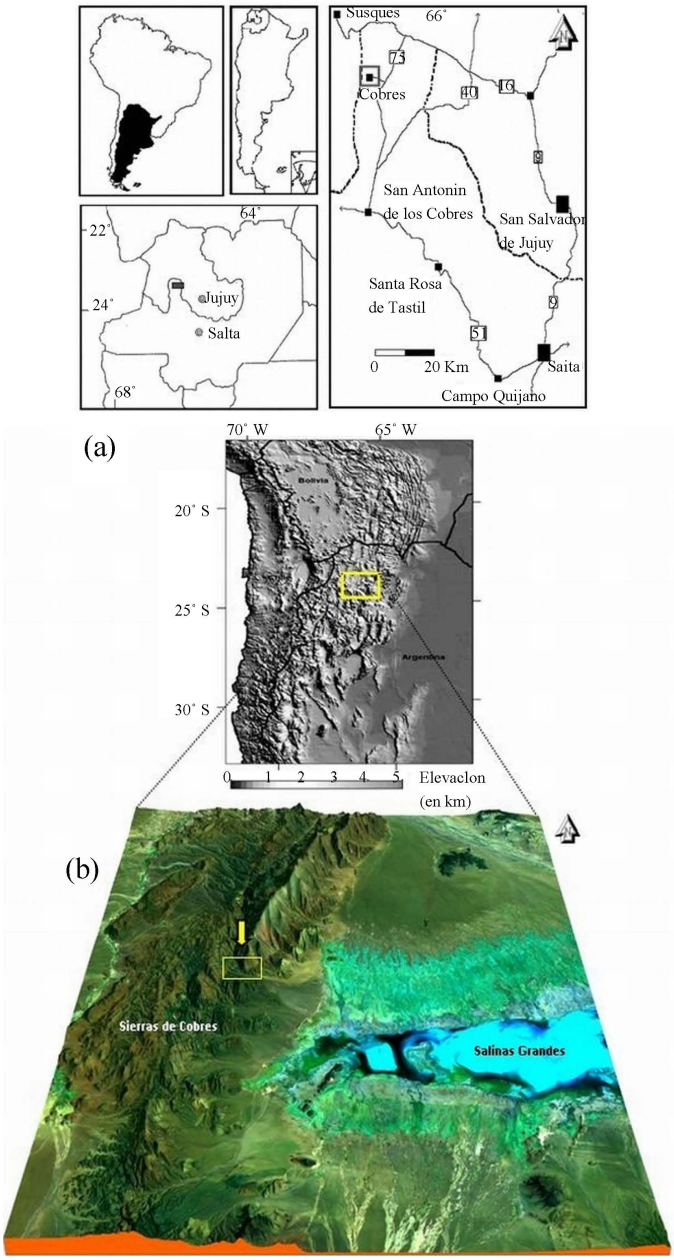

Figure 1. Location of Cobres in Salta province, NW of Argentin (a) related with the Salinas Grandes (b).

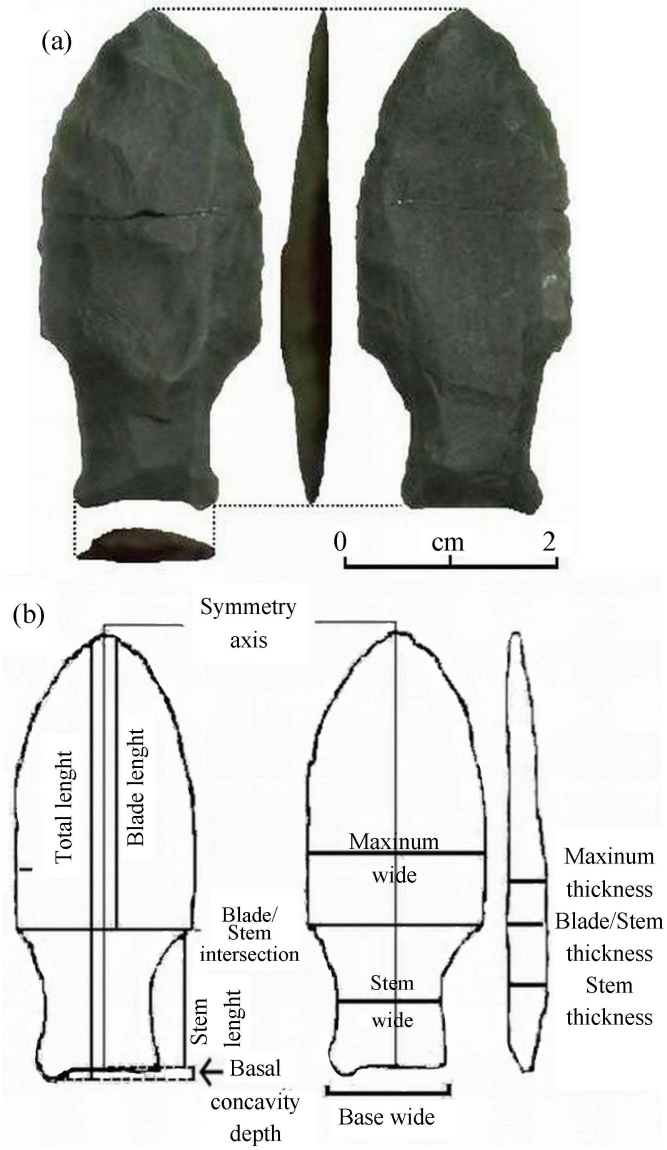

Figure 2. (a) Fishtail point from Cobres; (b) Measurements' position.

quality green siliceous phyllite, a common rock west of Salinas Grandes (Kirschbaum, pers. comm. 2011). It has a transversal fracture in the middle and was refitted by its finder. It is 45 mm long, 21 mm wide, and has a symmetrical plano-convex transversal cross-section. Thickness is 6 mm in the middle and 5 mm at the blade/stem intersection. The blade is 31 mm long and the stem is 14 mm long by 12 mm wide at the middle and 19 mm wide at the base. Stem thickness is 4 mm in the middle and the concavity in the base is 1 mm deep. As usual in Fell points, the stems show abrasion along the edges. The junction between the blade and the stem has a slightly rounded shoulder, a variation observed in other fishtail points (Nami, 2010, 2012, 2013). The obverse shows flake scars that might result from thinning by soft percussion flaking on the dorsal face. The final shaping was by fairly regular pressure flaking that left short retouches no deeper than 10 mm from the edges. The flake scars on the flat ventral face suggest a similar procedure was applied there. The base of the stem was finished on the reverse using short retouches superimposed on a kind of flute 11 mm long. This kind of manufacture was a regular pattern among hunter-gatherers using these points during the last millennium of the Pleistocene. Pieces of similar manufacture have been found in Ecuador and Chile (Bird, 1969: Figures 2a, 3f), Argentina (Martínez, 2001), Brazil (da Silva Lopes & Nami, 2011), and Uruguay (Bosch et al., 1980: Figure 17; Nami, 2013: Figure

3p, 4b and d). As observed by Bird (1969) and shown experimentally by Nami (1987: Figure 27, 2010, 2011), this kind of point was made from flakes of similar thickness and not much larger than the finished product. Also, longitudinal and transversal cross-sections are generally plano-convex due to the use of thin flakes.

3. Final Comment

On the puna in NW Argentina, two unreported fishtail points have been found south of Salta in northern Catamarca province. One is from Antofalla (Haber, pers. comm. to Grosjean et al., 2005) and the other from Laguna Blanca in the Bolsón area (Aschero, pers. comm., 1999, Martinez, pers. comm., 2011). At similar latitude across the Andes but in the Republic of Chile, a fishtail point was found at the Salar Punta Negra 1 site in the Atacama Desert (Grosjean et al., 2005; Nuñez et al., 2010). These finds indicate that foragers using fishtail points were present in the southern Andean area during the end of the Pleistocene.

In summary, the specimen depicted here is the first carefully reported fishtail piece found in NW Argentina and the first Paleoindian evidence from Salta province. Its exhaustive analysis indicates that its technology and morphology are basically similar to other fishtail points in South America and adds new information on the continental and regional distributions of this paleo South American artefact.

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