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Initial Peopling of the Córdoba Mountains, Argentina: First Evidence from El Alto 3

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This report focuses on the initial archaeological findings made in the Córdoba Mountains (Argentina), specifically the site of El Alto 3, a rockshelter located in the headwaters of a mountain stream (31° 24' S, 64° 44' W) at 1,640 m a.s.l. Temperatures in the region are low and the landscape is rough, with a vegetation dominated by herbs and grasses characteristic of high mountain environments (Cabido et al. 1998).

El Alto 3 has been under study during the last five years (Roldán et al. 2004). Excavations 5 m² in area have reached a depth of 140 cm. In the exposed profile we have identified four sedimentary units containing cultural remains and have obtained six ¹⁴C dates (Figure 1).

In Sedimentary Unit 3, we have uncovered ten lanceolate projectile points made of quartz and some debitage. Similar artifacts were recovered by González (1960) in the lowest level of Intihuasi, located 150 km southwest of El Alto 3 and dated to ca. 8000 RCYBP.

In Sedimentary Unit 4, the basal unit that lies at a depth of 110–130 cm, we have uncovered the oldest evidence for human occupation in the Córdoba Mountains. Lithic artifacts (a tool and some debitage) are the only materials recovered from this unit. Two charcoal concentrations associated with the cultural remains recovered from depths of 119 and 127 cm were dated to 9790 ± 80 (LP-1420) and 11,010 ± 80 RCYBP (LP-1506), respectively (Roldán et al. 2004).

Only one tool has been recovered from Sedimentary Unit 4, a graver made of opal, a non-local raw material. Lithic debitage is scarce, confined mainly to small internal flakes and a few resharpening and bifacial thinning flakes. Most of the debitage is of quartz, a local rock; however, one bifacial thinning flake is made of breccia, a non-local raw material. The analysis of the remains found thus far in this component indicates a low frequency of tools, low frequency of resharpening flakes, and high frequency of local raw material.

In the context of the human peopling model proposed by Borrero (1994) for southern South America, these results match Franco's (2002) expectations of an occupation assignable to the territorial exploratory stage. Thus the significance of El Alto 3 lies in the fact that it records the early stages of exploration and colonization of the Córdoba Mountains in Argentina.

We wish to thank our Director Dr. Eduardo Berberian and Lic. Nora Flegenheimer for the critical reading of the manuscript. This paper is part of the "Proceso Histórico y Uso del Espacio en los Sectores de Sierra y Piedemonte-Llanura de la Provincia de Córdoba," a research program directed by Dr. Berberian and financed by CONICET (PIP 02443).

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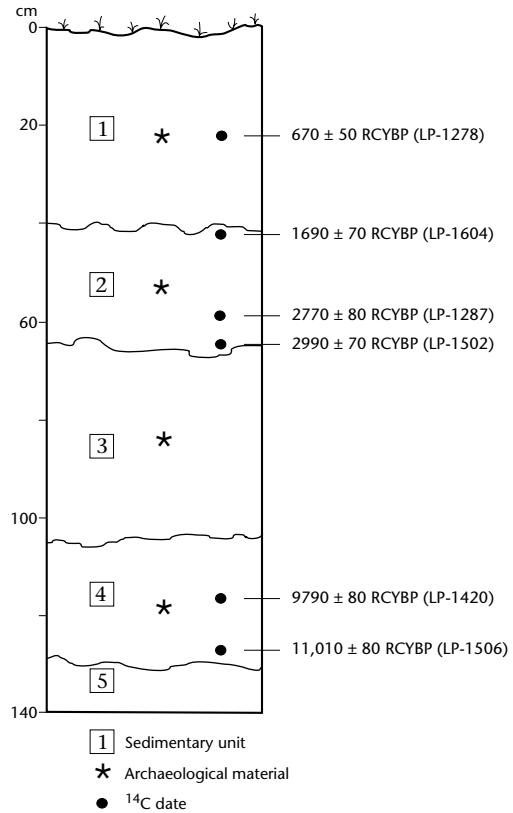


Figure 1. Representative stratigraphic profile of El Alto 3.

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