

Discussions

Human Occupation during the Mid-Holocene in Western Argentina

A Comment on Neme and Gil

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As suggested by Neme and Gil (2009), the environmental changes during the mid-Holocene must have stimulated important changes in certain aspects of the human occupation in the western portion of Argentina between 32° and 38°S latitude. Nonetheless, the database used and the hypotheses proposed to explain the chronological hiatus—low density of sites, low demography, and high mobility—lead to some reflections.

First, although there is no specific publication about the subject, it would have been useful to consider the dates known (Bárcena 1998) for the stratified site Paso Paramillos, Beta 27893 (6080 ± 90 ¹⁴C BP) and UZ-210 (5875 ± 70 ¹⁴C BP), which nullify the hiatus proposed for the cordilleran zone between 6500 and 7500 cal ¹⁴C BP.

Further, it would have been useful to include the existent set of surface sites with archaeological materials corresponding stylistically to the mid-Holocene (García 2005) in the discussion, inasmuch as it increases the number of sites known for this period in addition to stating clearly that the absence of ¹⁴C dates does not necessarily imply the absence of human occupation.

Third, it would have been useful to explore other alternatives to explain the alleged paucity of mid-Holocene archaeological sites, primarily the low visibility and destruction of sites that can be attributed to several factors: (a) the windy and arid conditions and the scarce vegetation of the mid-Holocene (Gil, Zárate, and Neme 2005:85), which would lead to erosion and result in palimpsests, etc.; (b) the subsequent deposition of extensive sandbanks on the eastern flanks of the plains (Rodríguez and Barton 1993); (c) the marked changes of river courses in the central northern region during the Late Holocene, which would have resulted in the destruction of archaeological sites (Abraham and Prieto 1981; Rod-

riguez and Barton 1993); (d) late deposition of several meters of sediments in the valleys adjacent to the mountain region (Regairaz and Barrera 1978); and (e) the development of modern towns and cities in the most favorable portions of the plains (many times directly superimposed on prehistoric sites).

Fourth, the proposal of an extended hiatus of 3,000 years in the plains is based on data from only two sites that cannot be considered to be representative of the archaeological record for the entire plains area (covering approximately 100,000 km²). Furthermore, a major portion of the plains lacks systematic survey.

Finally, with respect to “very low population levels” and “high mobility” (Neme and Gil 2009:160), these in reality are not inferences generated from the analysis of available data but are simply a continuation of the initial suppositions of the investigation. Neither the decrease of occupation (or abandonment) of some sites, the changes in lithic technology, nor the lack of increase in the density of the biological taxa that are exploited (Neme and Gil 2009:153–158) can be directly or exclusively associated with a diminishing demography or with an increased mobility in a settlement pattern.

The failure to consider the processes of archaeological site formation in the region, the biogeographic regional differences, the low-level visibility of archaeological sites in the area, the numerous possible superficial mid-Holocene sites, and the nonrepresentative nature of the database seems to have introduced an important bias to the study. Consequently, the available archaeological record could simply be reflecting changes in the occupation of some stratified sites in rocky shelters (probable interruption or less intense occupation) but in reality would not be representative or indicative of changes in the region or of tendencies associated with mobility or demography.

From this perspective, it is difficult to agree with the authors that “the regional archaeological record supports a more intensive use of the cordillera than of the eastern plains” or that “the occupation of the plains tends to be ephemeral between 8,000 and 4,000 BP” (Neme and Gil 2009:158), when these simply seem to be premature interpretations of the scant data available.

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