

Ethnoarchaeology: Current Research and Field Methods

Conference Proceedings, Rome, Italy,
13th–14th May 2010

Edited by

Francesca Lugli Assunta
Alessandra Stoppiello Stefano
Biagetti

BAR International Series 2472
2013

Published by

Archaeopress
Publishers of British Archaeological Reports
Gordon House
276 Banbury Road
Oxford OX2 7ED
England
bar@archaeopress.com
www.archaeopress.com

BAR S2472

Ethnoarchaeology: Current Research and Field Methods. Conference Proceedings, Rome, Italy, 13th–14th May 2010

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ISBN 978 1 4073 1083 1

Printed in England by Information Press, Oxford

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The Archaeology Viewed from an Ethnoarchaeological Perspective

Ivan Briz, Myrian Álvarez, Edgar Camarós, Jorge Caro, Adriana Mariela Lacrouts, Lorena Salvatelli, Luisa Vietri, Debora Zurro

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show how an ethnoarchaeological perspective can be profitable when applied to improve a crucial issue of the archaeological and anthropological fields of research: processes of social aggregation between hunter-gatherer populations. For that purpose, we present the analytical framework of a project addressed to identify the material correlates of an aggregation event developed by hunter-fisher-gatherer societies who inhabited the southern tip of South America.

KEYWORDS: Ethnoarchaeology, Aggregation Process, Hunter-Fisher-Gatherers, Tierra del Fuego, Methodology.

Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est de montrer comment une perspective ethnoarchéologique peut être rentable appliquée pour améliorer une question cruciale de l'archéologique et anthropologique: le processus d'agrégation sociale entre les populations de chasseurs-cueilleurs. À cette fin, nous présentons le cadre d'analyse d'un projet adressé à identifier les corrélats matériels d'un événement d'agrégation développés par les sociétés de chasseurs-pêcheurs-cueilleurs qui ont habité l'extrême sud de l'Amérique du Sud.

MOTS CLES: ethnoarchéologie, agrégation sociale, chasseurs-pêcheurs-cueilleurs, Tierra del Fuego, méthodologie.

Introduction: the Ethnoarchaeological Perspective

For many years archaeologists have been improving theories, methods and techniques in order to achieve more accurate explanations of past societies. Within this scenario Ethnoarchaeology has become a powerful tool to unveil the material correlates behind different social processes (GOULD 1980; AGORSAH 1990; ESTÉVEZ, VILA 1996; BÉYRIES 1997; DAVID, KRAMER 2001; KUZNAR 2001; BRIZ et al. 2006; ROUX 2007). Despite the lack of an overall consensus to define what Ethnoarchaeology encompasses that led to significant debates and disagreements into the archaeological field (BRIZ 2010), this approach can be envisioned as an interpretative framework that involves the critical use of comparative data from historically/ethnographically documented populations to develop applicable models and methods that would serve to relate material culture (VILA, PIANA 1993). Based upon the unicity of the social sciences, -regarding to their object of study-, this Ethnoarchaeological proposal (ESTÉVEZ, VILA 1996; VILA, ESTÉVEZ 2001; VILA et al. 2007) relies on the dialectical contrast between the anthropological knowledge and the archaeological inquiry. This mutual confrontation between methods, sources and outcomes between both fields of knowledge opens the possibility to readjust and to reassess the ethnographical information yielding at the same time the improvement of archaeological methods and techniques.

Following this conceptual framework we started to carry out a project addressed to analyze the processes of aggregation between hunter-gatherers societies in order to unveil the mechanisms of cooperation and the dynamic of social interaction (BRIZ et al. 2009). Aggregations represent the transitory banding together of groups

otherwise dispersed. They promote cooperative activities and constitute an arena for dynamic social interaction (CONKEY 1980; SAFFIRIO 1980; DEL REAL 1981; WENIGER 1987; HAYDEN 1993; KELLY 1995; HOFMAN 1994; FRIESEN 1999; SHOTT 2004). Nevertheless, archaeologists have had to face two problems in considering this issue. First, the situations under which an aggregation might occur are very variable, so the material correlates of an aggregation process are difficult to identify (CONKEY 1980). Second, the limited temporal resolution of many cultural deposits makes this topic difficult to undertake.

According to our ethnoarchaeological approach the study of aggregation processes may be best addressed by assuming an Ethnoarchaeological approach focused on the critical review of ethnographical sources to formulate hypothesis that will be tested against the archaeological record. In what follows, we will attempt to show that Ethnoarchaeology is a valuable tool for archaeological research, giving an account of the aims and analytical framework of an ongoing project that has been carried out on the Beagle Channel region (Tierra del Fuego, Argentina) with the aim of studying the social aggregation processes between hunter-gatherer societies.

Case Study

In the mid-Holocene, the Magellan-Fuegian archipelago, located in the southernmost extreme of South America, was peopled by nomadic hunter-gatherer-fisher societies (specialized in the exploitation of maritime resources) who moved along the coasts and the channels using some nautical craft (ORQUERA, PIANA 1999). Their economy heavily relied on the exploitation of littoral resources such

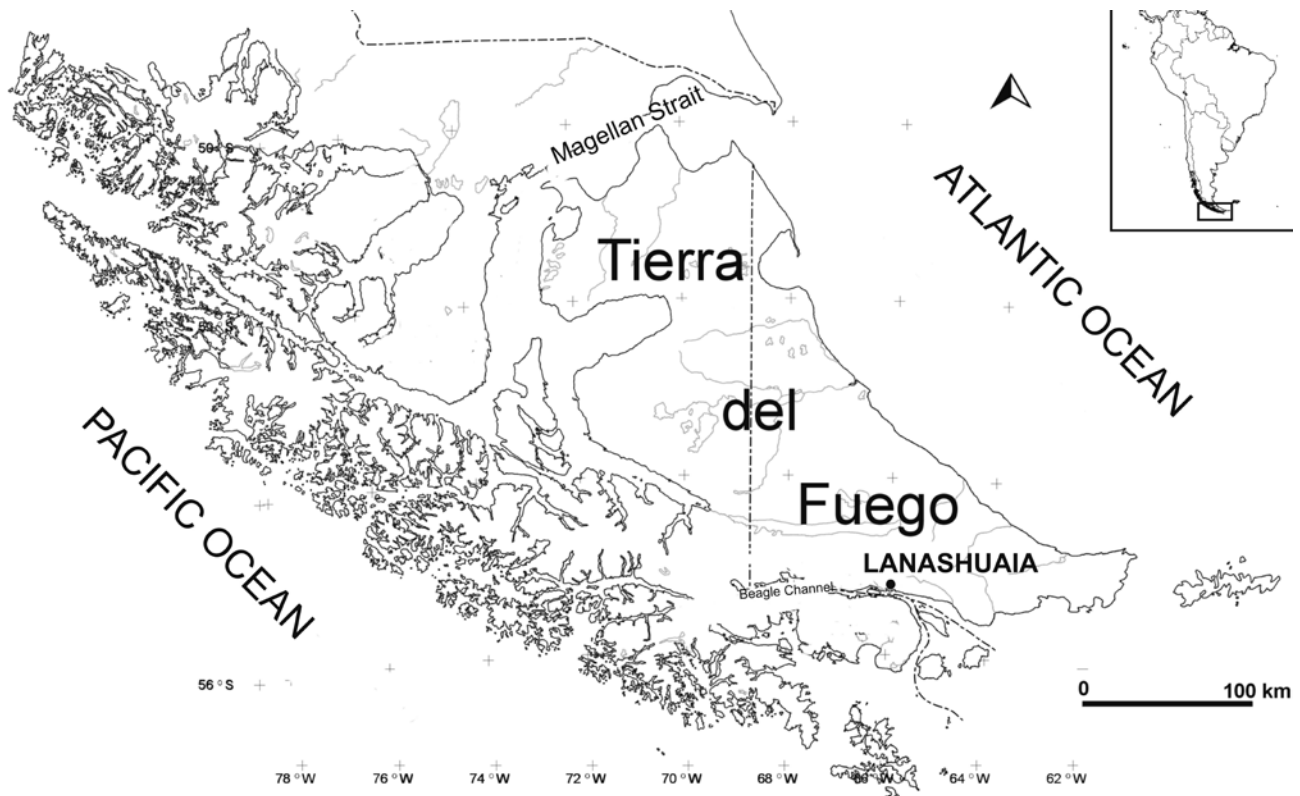


Fig. 1. Map of Tierra del Fuego.

as pinnipeds (*Otaria flavescens* and *Arctocephalus Australis*), marine birds, like seagulls (*Larus dominicanus*) or albatross (*Diomedea exulans*), fishes, shellfishes and stranded cetaceans; on the other hand, guanacos (*Lama glama guanicoe*) constituted the only terrestrial faunal prey hunted by sea-nomad people, and mineral and forestry's sources from the inlands (Fig. 1).

Nearly all of the known archaeological sites recorded on that region are shell middens that form isolated domes or anular structures on the ground surface. The annular shell middens are interpreted as the result of the accumulation of the human residues around the perimeters of dwelling units that were placed in the same spot during a length of time on different occupational events (ORQUERA, PIANA 1992; ESTÉVEZ, VILA 2006a). The study of the formation processes led to recognize very short episodes of midden deposition; as a result, a fine-scaled record of past societies' activities was achieved (BAILEY 1977; ORQUERA, PIANA 1992; STEIN 1992; ESTÉVEZ, VILA 2006A; VILA et al. 2009). These contexts decrease the acidity in the soil providing increased preservation of organic artifacts allowing the use of independent lines of research.

During historical times, these societies were called Yamana or Yaghanes (GUSINDE 1937) and their long-standing system (ORQUERA et al. in press) collapsed due to the arrival of the Europeans who provoked a deep disintegration of their social order as a consequence of introduced diseases, the over-hunting of pinnipeds carried out by western industrial exploitation and the forced integration into a western way-of-life by the missions (GUSINDE 1937). In contrast, the western populations provided a rich ethnographic and historical record of Yamana

people, mainly during the period spans over XIXth Century to the beginning of XXth Century (ESTÉVEZ, VILA 2006b; VIETRI 2010). According to the ethnographic sources, temporary concentrations between Yamana people occurred when cetacean or sardine beached and offered the opportunity to celebrate youngsters' initiation ceremonies (GUSINDE 1937).

Consequently, the archaeological and ethnographic records hold enormous potential to carry out an ethnoarchaeological approach addressed to identify the material correlates of the aggregations that could be applied to different archaeological contexts (BRIZ et al. 2009; BRIZ et al. in press) (Fig. 2).

Lanashuaia archaeological locality -placed on the northern side of Beagle shore (54° 52,75' S - 67° 16, 49' W) provides valuable data for testing the aggregation hypothesis (PIANA et al. 2000) due to the spatial organization of shell midden structures (evenly spaced, in a linear distribution and presumably corresponding to simultaneous occupations), their depositional pattern and the presence of whale bones and offshore fish remains that might have implied cooperative capture techniques. Up to the present research in the area has been focused on two adjacent structures: Lanashuaia I, fully excavated during different field seasons: 1995 and 1996 (PIANA et al. 2000), and 2005 (ÁLVAREZ et al. 2009) and Lanashuaia II, which started to be digged in 2009 (BRIZ et al. 2009) (Fig. 3).

Methodological Improvement

In order to analyse the intra-group interaction processes in the context of an aggregation event, we are developing a transdisciplinary multidimensional approach that combines



Fig. 2. Lanashuaia archaeological locality on Cambaceres Bay.



Fig. 3. Lanashuaia II site. Annular structure.

different lines of research. After a critical review of the ethnographic sources from an ethnoarchaeological perspective, the main hypothesis as well as methodological steps could be drawn.

One of the primary issues of this topic to elucidate if the dwelling units (Lanashuaia I and II) are in fact the result of simultaneous occupations. The achievement of this purpose implied both appropriately designed fieldwork strategy and accurate laboratory analytical techniques. Different lines of research have been implemented to accomplish this issue:

- Radiocarbon dating program that includes the dating of charcoal samples collected from different layers of both sites;
- Refitting of lithic artifacts and faunal remains (HOFMAN, ENLOE 1992; ENLOE 2003, 2004; MORIN et al. 2005; COOPER, QIU 2006);
- Sclerochronology (which includes the analysis of the periodic growth structures in limpets (*Nacella magellanica*); this technique provides indirect indicators of contemporary occupations to the extent that it allows to define seasonality of shell midden deposits (QUITMYER et al. 1997; VERDÚN et al. in press) (Fig. 4).
- Improvement of DNA analysis on whale bones remains (COOPER, WAYNE 1998; REUTHER et al. 2006) in order to establish if they belong to the same species, and, if so, to the same individual (Fig. 5).

The second challenge of this project consists on unveiling the spatial patterns and organisational principles of group gathering during the aggregation event. Extensive excavations (ORQUERA, PIANA 1996; ESTÉVEZ, VILA 2000), including exhaustive three-dimensional plotting of the finds, and detailed stratigraphic studies have been undertaken with the aim of understanding the formation processes (ORQUERA, PIANA 2001) that lead to shell midden accumulations, obtaining a chronological and spatial framework to place the human finds and post depositional disturbances as well as the recording of the residential spaces and activity areas in and around the annular structures (MOYES 2002). The stratigraphic studies also involved the analysis of matrix composition of the discriminated layers of sediments to detect single depositional units (ORQUERA 1996; ESTÉVEZ, VILA 2000). Following the aforementioned procedures, the inter-site variability can be assessed and the cooperative practices can emerge. From our perspective, a shared management of social space, resources and their production and consumption processes, like lithic tools production and use, or the direct consumption of the same sea lion by the inhabitants of both dwelling units, for example, can be assumed as cooperative activities markers (BRIZ et al. 2009).

Finally, the social practices involved in the event are another key issue in the study of the aggregation process. An array of standard and novel methods are being integrated to tackle this question following a model of resources exploitation derived from the ethnographic information. Current zooarchaeological and anthracological studies, bone and lithic technology examination that

include form-function relationships and use-wear analysis have been conducted to unveil the production-consumption activities developed in both sites. However, the historical sources point out that Yamana people took advantage of a wide range of resources that do not preserve in the archaeological record. For that reason a residue analysis approach has started to be developed in order to overcome this constraint. This approach includes two independent methodological procedures. The first procedure consists on the extraction of possible residues from stone tool edges (phytoliths, fatty acids, blood residues) and the afterward confrontation with the results obtained from use-wear analysis (SHANKS et al. 2001; ZURRO et al. 2008). A control sample of the matrix in which the stone tool was recovered is also examined to identify possible contamination problems (ÁLVAREZ et al. 2009; BRIZ et al. in press). The second procedure implies phytoliths and fatty acids of sediment samples collected in different places of the dwelling units with the aim of identifying productive and/or consumption areas. This procedure is supported by an intensive sedimentary sampling program. These studies combining with the spatial distribution activities will enable to distinguish areas of production and consumption of resources.

Concluding Remarks

The increasing interest of archaeological research in the analysis of social relationships poses a remarkable inflectional point that encourages a theoretical and methodological debate. The study of intra-group interaction processes in the context of an aggregation event, can contribute to this discussion providing important insights into the analysis of social relationships. Within this framework, Ethnoarchaeology become a heuristic tool to the extent that it can be used as an experimental framework to derive and to adjust different methods and techniques from the ethnographical information. The critical review of historical sources available for Yamana case study allowed us to develop testable hypothesis about social aggregation and its material correlates, including more accurate methods to deal with the archaeological record.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge Associazione Italiana di Etnoarcheologia for the invitation to assist to this Congress. Special thanks also go to the people who collaborate during the fieldwork seasons. The projects from which this paper arises benefitted from funding by The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, USA (Social aggregation: a Yámana Society's short term episode to Analyse Social Interaction), Ministry of Science and Innovation of Spain (Marcadores Arqueológicos de Relaciones Sociales: etnoarqueología de cazadores-recolectores en el Canal Beagle-HAR2009-06996) and National Council of Scientific and Technical Research-CONICET, Argentina (PIP0706).



Fig. 4. Lanashuaia II: shell midden layer.



Fig. 5. Lanashuaia II: whale and pinniped bones.

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