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The First Stages in the Peopling of the Salta Province, Puna Region (Northwest Argentina): A Review Based on Projectile Points

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We present an analysis of “fishtail” and triangular non-stemmed projectile points from the puna of the Salta province (northwest Argentina), which are thought to date to the late Pleistocene/early Holocene. These findings position the puna of Salta in current debates concerning the early period of human colonization.

Keywords puna, Argentina, archaeology, projectile points, early peopling

The puna of the Salta province (northwest Argentina), until recently, has had little archaeological research relating to the first stages of human peopling. Our work aims to rectify this through the study of late Pleistocene diagnostic projectiles (“fishtail” points) and their early Holocene counterparts (non-stemmed triangular points), which recently have been found in three areas of the puna of Salta. These types of lithic artifacts have been uncovered from excavations of radiocarbon-dated contexts and from the surface at other sites of the Puna de Atacama (e.g., Grosjean et al. 2005; Hocsman et al. 2012; Núñez et al. 2006).

Here we present an analysis of 17 projectile points. These include one fishtail point from the locality of Cobres and 16 non-stemmed triangular points from the sites of Cangrejillos ($n = 2$), Alero Cuevas ($n = 11$), Quebrada Alta ($n = 1$), and SHM-S2-S4 ($n = 2$) (Figure 1). Most of the triangular points come from the radiocarbon-dated stratigraphic contexts at Alero Cuevas (the F4 layer) and range in age from ca. 9650 to 8500 ^{14}C yr BP (Restifo 2013), while the points from Quebrada Alta and Cangrejillos were collected during surveys and the points from SHM-S2-S4 were recovered during impact-assessment studies. The fishtail point was found by locals in a surface context. Cangrejillos, Cobres, and SHM-S2-S4 are situated in

open plains near salt flats, and Alero Cuevas and Quebrada Alta are in ravine/piedmont settings.

For our analysis we applied the Aschero (1975, 1983) macroscopic and morphological criteria. The fishtail point has a maximum length of 45 mm and a maximum width of 21 mm (Figure 2A). Microscopic studies reveal that the raw material used was quartzite, available locally. The point has a lanceolate blade with a prominent stem and concave edges and base; its dorsal face was marginally retouched while its ventral face was extensively retouched. The fishtail point's stemmed base exhibits a flaked area creating a kind of flute. This is the only example of a fishtail point from northwest Argentina which has been published in detail (Patané Aráoz 2011), although two others pieces have been reported in the nearby province of Catamarca (Grosjean et al. 2005, 651–652).

The non-stemmed triangular points from Alero Cuevas have a maximum length of between 20 and 30 mm and maximum width varying between 18 and 26 mm (Figure 2B). The predominant raw material used is obsidian from the Quirón source, 40 km distant. Two points are on local material, quartz and siliceous rock. The triangular point recovered from Quebrada Alta was made on locally available andesite and has a maximum length of 37 mm and maximum width of 24 mm. Among these, the typical non-stemmed point bears a triangular blade as well as

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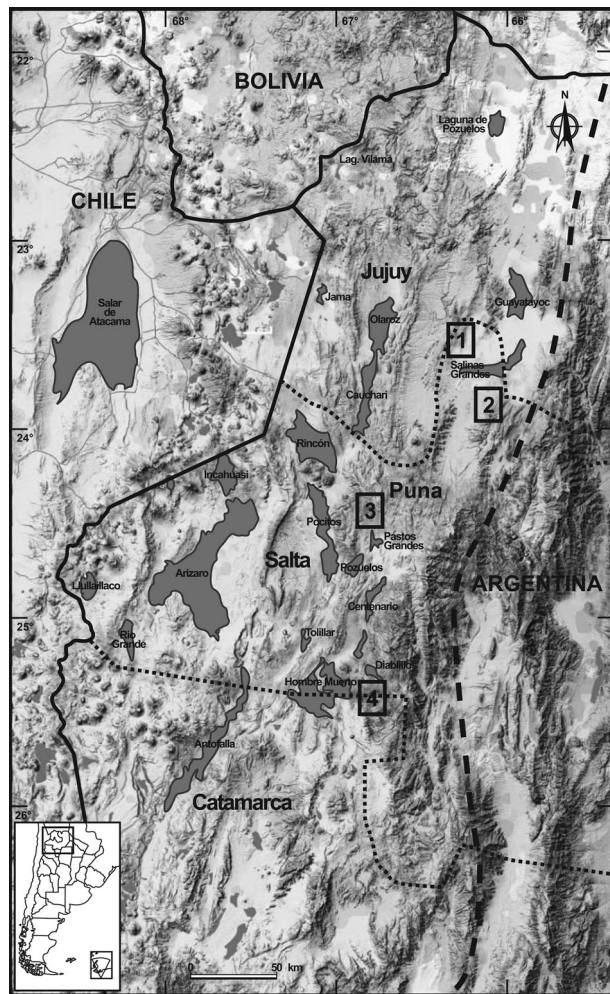


Figure 1 Map of the puna of northwest Argentina, showing locations of archaeological sites mentioned in the text (1, Cobres; 2, Cangrejillos; 3, Alero Cuevas and Quebrada Alta; 4, SHM-S2-S4).

mainly straight lateral margins and a straight base, although convex lateral margins and concave bases also have been identified. Typically these points bear anywhere from extensive to intermediate to marginal retouch on both faces. They likely served as weapon tips for dart throwers.

Of the projectile points from Cangrejillos, one has a maximum length of 31 mm and maximum width of 24 mm, and was made from local quartzite. It has a triangular blade, convex edges, and straight base, with extensive, invasive retouch on both faces. The other Cangrejillos point has a maximum length of 24 mm and maximum width of 20 mm (Figure 2C). The raw material used was a transparent obsidian with black inclusions, possibly from the Quirón source. It has a triangular blade, convex edges, and a straight but inclined base. The two triangular points found in the boundary zone between Salta and Catamarca (SHM-S2-S4) have maximum lengths of 28 and 24 mm and maximum widths of 23 and 18 mm, respectively, and were made on a local basalt. Their blades are triangular, one has a straight base, while the other is concave. Given the long surface exposure, it was not possible to ascertain the type of retouching given the eroded nature of the faces (Figure 2D). The samples from Cangrejillos and SHM-S2-S4 are similar morphologically and metrically to those described for layer F4 of Alero Cuevas, suggesting they belong to the same weapon system.

These findings place Salta’s puna in the macro-regional context of discussions of the early peopling of southern South America. The surface-collected nature of some of these artifacts prevents us from making detailed interpretations; however, some conclusions can be drawn. First, the discovery of a fishtail

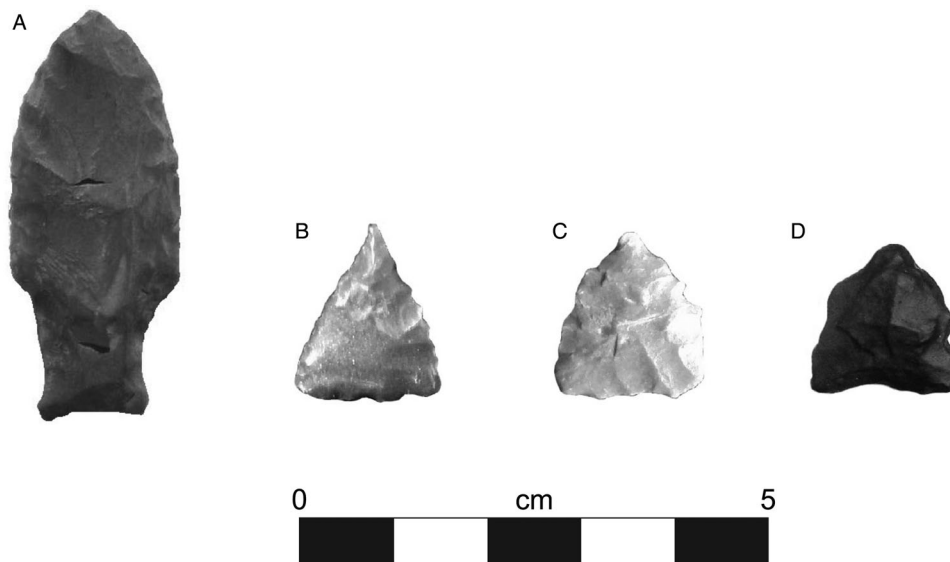


Figure 2 Projectile points from northwest Argentina discussed in the text (A, fishtail point; B, triangular point from Alero Cuevas; C, triangular point from Cangrejillos; D, triangular point from SHM-S2-S4).

point suggests a late Pleistocene human occupation of the region, while the techno-morphometric variables of the non-stemmed triangular points presented here are consistent with similar artifacts found in the Puna de Atacama, suggesting the transmission of an early Holocene dart-throwing technological system across a vast spatial area, albeit with local manufacturing variants (see Hocsman et al. 2012).

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