

## RESEÑAS BIBLIOGRÁFICAS

*Historias del Desierto: Arqueología del Norte de Chile,\**  
Mario Rivera, Editorial del Norte, 2002, pp. 238, La Serena.

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Northern Chile and the Atacama Desert, in particular, has long been recognized as rich repositories of well-preserved archaeological remains and for its diversity in material culture. Conceptualizing this richness, however, became a major task for archaeologists who eagerly introduced John V. Murra's vertical archipelago model as the preferred explanatory paradigm. Once transferred from the ethnohistorical to the archaeological context this model provided the much needed theoretical framework for understanding the variety of archaeological finds, and the tools to look into past resource exploitation practices and systems. Today, we know that the coast and valleys of southern Peru and north Chile were settled by multiple ethnic groups that displayed exchange-based mechanisms responsible for trans-Andean movement of a large variety of natural resources. Indeed, understanding Chilean coastal and hinterland archaeology north of the Loa River—particularly when looking at similarities in artifact

assemblages—heavily relies, at least for the Andean Formative, on the existence of a core upland polity that was in need of and accessing maritime, coastal, and valley resources west of the Andes.

Over the past thirty years, Mario Rivera, has been one of the leading advocates of this explanatory paradigm. *Historias del Desierto*, a timely synthesis of the prehistory of the Chilean desert north, follows up on this line of thought incorporating an up to date discussion of what we currently know about coastal adaptations, highland developments, and the wide-range of valley-oases settlement patterns present in the Atacama Desert. Totalling some 198 pages of text, this book is organized into eight chapters preceded by a brief introduction. Informative figures, tables, and color photographs add to the extensive bibliography that represents almost the full bag of references to the most important works on the archaeology of north Chile.

*Historias del Desierto* opens with three exquisite quotes of Chilean poets followed by a brief summary on the history of archaeological research and a discussion of the geographic background and a culture history of the Chilean north. Past this section, the first two chapters of the book address early and Archaic upland and coastal adaptations. A brief look into the early upland hunters reveals that only a few archaeological localities have been systematically excavated and that most of our current knowledge relies on the analysis of surface reconnaissance, limited test-pits, and occasional excavations. Rivera's presentation and discussion of this evidence is cautious in interpretative comments, a fact that points to the weaknesses in the proxy data. The book continues in its second chapter with a comprehensive chronology of the Chinchorro tradition that includes a brief discussion of the distribution of coastal sites with close attention given to maritime-coastal adaptations and their material culture. Here, mortuary practices take a leading role at the time of defining culture change. What I perceive is missing in these two chapters is a presentation and further discussion of the archaeological evidence provided by upland and coastal southern Peruvian sites. Early fish-shellfish gathering-oriented settlements such as those evidenced at Quebrada Jaguay, Quebrada Tacahuay, and Quebrada de los Burros in the nearby Tacna area are absent in the discussion. In all, a

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missed opportunity to integrate findings and explanations beyond borders, even in a book that is *per se* bounded by its title: The Archaeology of North Chile.

The third chapter deals with Mario Rivera's area of exceptional expertise: the Formative of North Chile. Here is where the author focuses on what appeals most to him bringing to the project much of his own experience of working along the eastern escarpment and coastal areas of the north. The work he started in the 1970's and has continued for more than three decades led him to define and characterize the Alto Ramirez Phase, a local development neatly tight through exchange and interaction to Wankarani (early Formative) and Pukara (full Formative), two contemporaneous upland developments in the nearby area of Lake Titicaca. Abundant and well-preserved surface evidence of human habitation and of highly-developed land use practices - that were already in place by approximately 2,800 B.P. - are evident almost everywhere in north Chile. Two coastal localities, Camarones and Pisagua are treated extensively and a large number of radiocarbon age determinations are provided. At the core of Rivera's argument is the existence of a transitional phase in which the Chinchorro Tradition coexists with an emergent Andean Tradition along the coast.

Chapter four includes the most recent information available for Ramaditas, a Late-Formative village-farming site in the Quebrada de Guatacondo. In many ways, Ramaditas and the group of sites in the Guatacondo archaeological district are unique because of excellent preservation of architectural features, the presence of a vast network of irrigation canals and agriculture fields, fabric, basketry, and macro-botanical remains. The settlement area -including structures and agricultural fields- has been estimated in approximately 600 hectares. Radiocarbon age determinations place occupation at this site within the Alto Ramirez II Phase, between 2,500-2,000 years B.P., a time span when large village-farming communities first appear in this sector of the Andes. Indeed, Ramaditas represented one of the earliest occupations in the Guatacondo District, a series of six roughly contemporaneous village-farming sites and associated structures arranged along the present-day Guatacondo gully. Archaeobotanical samples from Ramaditas provide evidence of *Prosopis*, *Zea*, and *Chenopodium* among the edible plants and the analysis of human feces suggests that wild algarrobo pods may have been at the core of the community diet. In addition, the combined study of pollen, starch, and phytoliths shows a diet that included *Chenopodium*, potato, algarrobo pods, and maize. Protein residue analysis of feces also suggests reliance on small mammals and fish for meat. In all, this chapter wraps up a little more than ten years of work by Mario Rivera at this site and lays the groundwork for the years to come in which remaining questions on water availability, irrigation, cultigens, and agriculture practices are certainly going to be addressed. The text in this chapter is supported by useful in-text

tables and by exceptional color photos such as air-views of the site and agriculture fields.

Chapters five and sixth address the periphery, specifically the areas of Tiwanaku expansion in the lower valleys of Arica and San Pedro de Atacama. The chronological sequences developed by M. Uhle, J. Bird, and P. Dauelsberg for Arica are discussed and reinterpreted by Rivera as he stresses the impact of Chiribaya and Tiwanaku on the Azapa sequence. The periphery role is also addressed, more extensively, when looking at the Inka State and its political area of influence. A few sites are discussed and a long list of localities ascribed to this time-period is given.

Chapter seven moves beyond the realm of archaeology and into the field of ethnohistory as it addresses Colonial north Chile. Trade, exchange, and the role of ethnic groups in pursuing this practice are at the core of this section that also includes the reproduction of old Colonial-era maps that help stress the economic and political meaning of this otherwise marginal area of the Chilean north. Here too, trans-Andean commerce and interaction plays a leading role in understanding this time-period.

The last chapter of this book provides space for reflection on the legacy and withstanding of adaptive strategies in this part of the Andes. The archipelago model is by all means a compelling paradigm for addressing the long occupation sequence that spans for more than 10,000 years. Indeed, following Mario Rivera's line of thought, the two Traditions, Chinchorro and Andean, trace back their roots to the Amazon lowlands and the Titicaca uplands respectively. My feeling here is, however, that little emphasis is placed in addressing alternative explanatory models, such as horizontal-type movements along the coast, which could also account for similarity -and divergence- in material culture and settlement patterns.

The chronological and geographic focus of this book provides for both strength and weakness. Strength because Mario Rivera fluidly brings to the project much of his own experience of working along the eastern escarpment and coastal areas of north Chile, a work that in the 1970's took him to define and characterize the local Alto Ramirez Phase. Weaknesses because of the major task of producing a synthesis that starts more than 10,000 years ago and ends with the Colonial history of the region, an endeavor that, although magnificently done by Rivera, does not allow for the discussion of specific site characteristics, site formation processes, and for addressing thoroughly the enormous amount of data that each locality provides to the archaeologist. Because of this, it is a *short* book, but, by no means, a book short of ideas.

For those with specialized interest either in the prehistory of South America or the archaeology of the Atacama Desert, *Historias del Desierto* is unavoidable. Beyond a few production flaws in editing, Mario Rivera succeeds quite nicely in achieving a well thought synthesis of the archaeology of north Chile.