

The socio-ritual organisation of the upper Limarí Valley: Two rock art traditions, one landscape



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ABSTRACT

The Limarí Valley stands within Central Northern Chile and forms part of the foothills of the western Southern Andean region. In terms of altitude, much of the upper reaches of the valley stands over 1000 m above sea level. The natural environment comprises mainly semi-arid scrubland. During later prehistoric times, the Limarí Valley would have provided an important access route between the Pacific Ocean and communities occupying the valley (and its tributary valleys to the north and south). It is within the upper reaches of the valley that prehistoric rock art is located in a variety of locates including rock shelters and open-air sites. Many sites show that both painting and engraving techniques have been applied. This diverse media, along with changes in style, composition and subject matter reflects at two different chronological phases: hunter-gatherers and agrarian communities.

In this short paper we compare the socio-ritual organisation of landscape among these two communities that at different times occupied this semi-arid area. Despite the aridity of this landscape, water appears to be the main focus for ritual activity among hunter-gatherers, especially within the secluded upland side valleys. Whilst hunter-gatherer rock art is associated with settlement, agrarian rock art relates to route-ways and the movement of people; here panels appear to act as markers within a transitional landscape. Fieldwork has revealed that hunter-gatherer rock art was usually placed close to flowing water, whilst agrarian rock art sites were located in isolated places, and with no apparent relationship with water. Both hunter-gatherer and agrarian communities are paradoxically contradicting each other in that hunter-gatherer rock art is metaphorically sedentary and agrarian rock art is fluid.

Both regimes show how two different ways to engaged with arid places in the Southern Andean region; one related with water and the other with the movement of people and commodities. Both are key aspects to how communities utilised the same landscape, but in different ways and at different times.

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1. Introduction

The Limarí Valley is located approximately 400 km north of Chile's capital city Santiago, within the western foothills of the southern Andean region. Standing east of the valley are the foothills of the Central Andes mountain range. The environment within the valley can be described as semi-arid with annual rainfall restricted to just 95 mm per annum. The soils, influenced by the underlying geology vary in depth. Towards the foothills and the mountain zone in the east, the soil cover is limited to the valley floor. The intermediate slopes comprise extensive rock outcropping and is usually

devoid of continuous soil cover, especially in those areas of the valley where rock art occurs. In terms of human occupation, the valley contains archaeological evidence that extends at least 10,000 years. Associated with this expanse of time are two economies: initially hunter-gatherer followed by agrarian. Although there is a chronological sequence in economy, it is more than probable that pockets of hunter-gatherers existed alongside agrarian groups. In addition, one can also consider agrarian groups also adopting hunting and gathering as part of a mixed-economy. Despite the semi-aridity, the most frequent mammal in this region was the camelid guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*), which was intensely exploited during prehistory and would have freely roamed the intermediate slopes and upper reaches of the valley. Since the first hunter-gatherer groups ventured into the valley, little climatic change has occurred with the exception of an increase of temperature

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during the Middle Holocene; this change has led to desertification (Jenny et al., 2002; Méndez et al., 2015). However, although we recognize the first evidence of cultivation of cereal crops around 200 CE, an agrarian way of life developed around 1000 CE (Troncoso et al., 2016). During the centuries of hunter-gatherer activity impact on the landscape was more subtle and included probable land demarcation and division.

2. Creating a clearer picture

The study of rock art within the Limarí Valley includes specific research by authors such as Ampuero (1985), Ampuero and Rivera (1971), Iribarren (1973), Niemeyer and Ballereau (2004), Moya et al. (2014), among others. Existing alongside both economies was the concept, production and use of engraved and painted rock art imagery, what we term as *visual modes of communication*.¹ The period of interest covering both hunter-gatherer and agrarian communities employed in the execution and use of rock art extends at least 3500 years. The earliest rock art are painted forms which were made by hunter-gatherer of Late Holocene (2000–500 cal. AD), followed by engravings that were made by more advanced hunter-gatherer groups during the Early Ceramic period (500–1000 AD). Similar engravings were made by agrarian communities during the so-called Diaguita Culture (1000 AD–1450 AD). Following the colonization of the Inca, elements of motif design from the Diaguita Culture were incorporated into the final phase of the local proto-historic sequence (1450 AD–1540 AD) (Troncoso et al., 2008). It should be noted that engravings were still made after the post-Spanish Conquest, thus extending the practice until the beginning of 20th century; however, its frequency was very low compared with pre-Hispanic times.

The repertoire of imagery and symbols are markedly different between hunter-gatherers and agrarian communities. The painted symbols from hunter-gatherer rock shelter sites are mainly abstract, comprising mainly of lines and dots. The engraved imagery on open-air panels combines schematic and abstract motifs, including pecked and gouged lines, dots, circles as well as figurative motifs, mainly anthropomorphic figures and camelids. The main characteristic images though are human heads, sometimes decorated with elaborate headdresses. In addition to these assemblages is rock art that belongs to the Inca people. During the period of colonization, Inca communities created a new way of expressing visual communication through the medium of rock art. The preferred medium was engraving using comprising complex patterns of symmetry. Some of the visual grammar used in this form of rock art is also found on ceramics and textiles (Troncoso et al., 2016).

In terms of chronology and rock art style, we suggest that a relationship exists between rock art and various features within the wider landscape. Generally speaking hunter-gather rock art has an association with water, whilst agrarian rock art has a connection with communication routes and the mountains. Although the general chronology of both economies is clear and the distribution of known rock art sites shows a recurring landscape semiotic grammar, the relationship between, say, settlement and the ritual-symbolic behaviour remains difficult to assess. What can be determined though are the following observations:

3. Hunter-gatherers rock art

- Hunter-gatherer rock art sites are usually multifunctional and remain in use over long periods of time (evidence of encampment);
- Hunter-gatherer encampment sites may be temporary and seasonally visited - hunter-gatherers moving around a proscribed landscape;
- Hunter-gatherer rock art sites form the foci for seasonal visits;
- Hunter-gatherer rock art sites were located close to seasonal resources; and
- Hunter-gatherer rock art sites are usually close to running water (either as a water supply or ritual association [or both]) and away from the main valley;

4. Agrarian rock art

- Agrarian rock art succeeds the hunter-gatherer tradition but sites are located in different landscape locates;
- Agrarian rock art sites are usually some distance from running water and settlement;
- Agrarian rock art appears to be associated with routeways and possibly acting as territorial markers between different farming groups who were occupying strategic areas of the valley during the Diaguita period;
- Agrarian rock art distribution appears to be along natural corridors within the intermediate slope zones and eastwards into the foothills and mountain zone of the southern Andean region - what we term *semiarid catchment points*; and
- Agrarian rock art distribution represents ritualised space whereby the artist and the audience form an intimate relationship that extends beyond mundane daily life.

5. Theoretical considerations

In this summary we have argued that rock art within the Limarí Valley (and beyond) is chronologically-phased, extending two general styles of imagery; the first of these is hunter-gatherer, the second agrarian. The agrarian phase incorporates two cultural horizons, one later prehistoric, and the other protohistoric. In terms of distribution, rock art from both phases is intentional with hunter-gatherer rock assigned to mainly rock shelters and caves and agrarian rock art on open air panels, located within the intermediate slopes of the valley (Fig. 1). These distributions may also reflect the socio-political division of landscape, delineating, say, private and public, socially hierarchal or engendered space. Based on these clear divisions, we promote two possible scenarios. Rock art may have been interwoven into the daily lives of both hunter-gatherer and agrarian communities; however, the mindsets of each may have seen and used the same landscape but in different ways. The distribution of hunter-gatherer rock art sites are restricted to uplands and side valleys in sometimes discreet locates such as rock shelters and rock overhangs. The agrarian panels, however, are mainly engraved and are usually located away from the valley floor. During the two rock art phases, landscape was more likely unchanged; however, the vegetation cover would have been different; the River Limarí flowing through the central part of the valley being the main focus for economy and ritual (as it is today).

Over the past 50 years, archaeologists have managed to geo-prospect and in some cases, excavate a number of sites, sometimes yielding ceramics and aceramic items such as tool lithic kits associated with both economies. Hunter-gatherer rock art sites

¹ We use this term carefully and considerately to challenge the concept of art being an aesthetic medium rather than it conveying socio-political or ritual-symbolic messages.

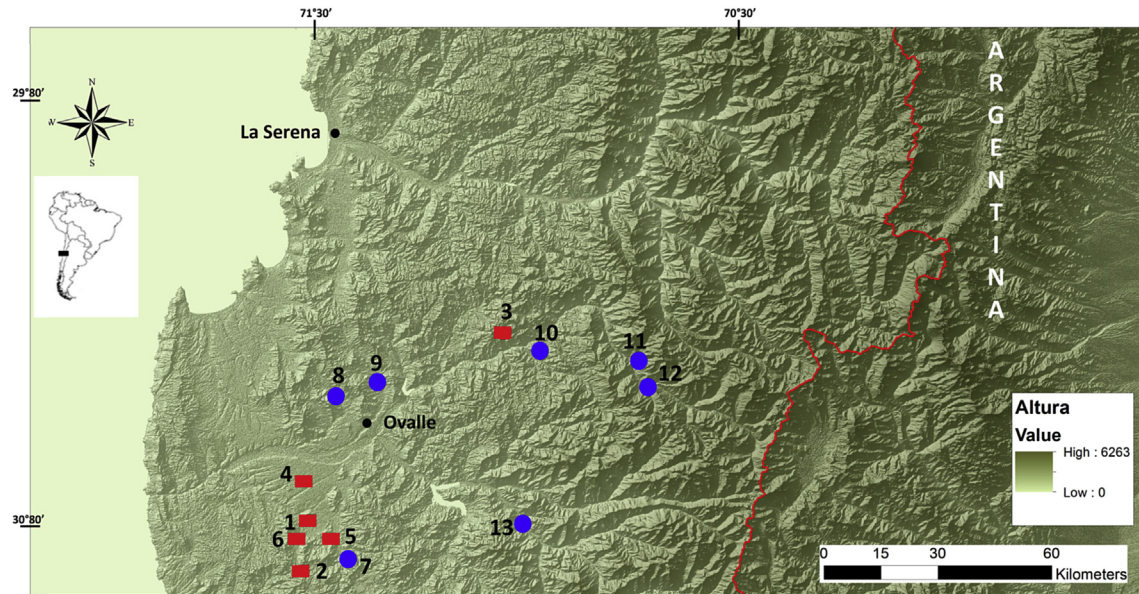


Fig. 1. Distribution of selected hunter-gatherer (red squares) and agrarian sites (blue circles) within the Limarí Valley (1 = Melina, 2 = Rocas de Francisca, 3 = San Pedro Viejo de Pichasca, 4 = Valle El Encanto, 5 = El Tranque, 6 = Covacha Pintada, 7 = Altos de la Rinconada, 8 = VillorioTalhuen, 9 = Valle del Sol, 10 = Hacienda La Cortadera 2; 11 = Cuesta Pabellón, 12 = San Agustín, 13 = Quebrada Chupallas),(For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

such as Melina, Valle El Encanto, San Pedro Viejo de Pichasca, Rocas de Francisca, El Tranque, Covacha Pintada have revealed distinct material culture traits that can be indirectly connected to the rock art close by. One particular site, San Pedro Viejo de Pichasca, located c. 70 km east of the provincial town of Ovalle in the Limarí Basin is considered one of Chile's most significant prehistoric sites with a human presence dating to at least 9000 BCE (Fig. 2). This rock shelter site has in the past been thoroughly investigated. Between

1960 and 1970 much of the central section of the rock shelter was excavated (Ampuero and Rivera, 1971). Within the same area of the shelter, above an excavated hearth and settlement area on a ceiling is a unique set of abstract and representative motifs that are painted in a variety of pigment types (Fig. 3). Conversely, a significant engraved agrarian rock art assemblage including the sites of Altos Rinconada, Villorio Talhuen, Valle del Sol, Hacienda La Cortadera 2, Cuesta Pabellon,, San Agustín and Quebrada Chupallas, found close



Fig. 2. The San Pedro Viejo de Pichasca rock shelter, located within a side valley (Image: Nash/Troncoso).

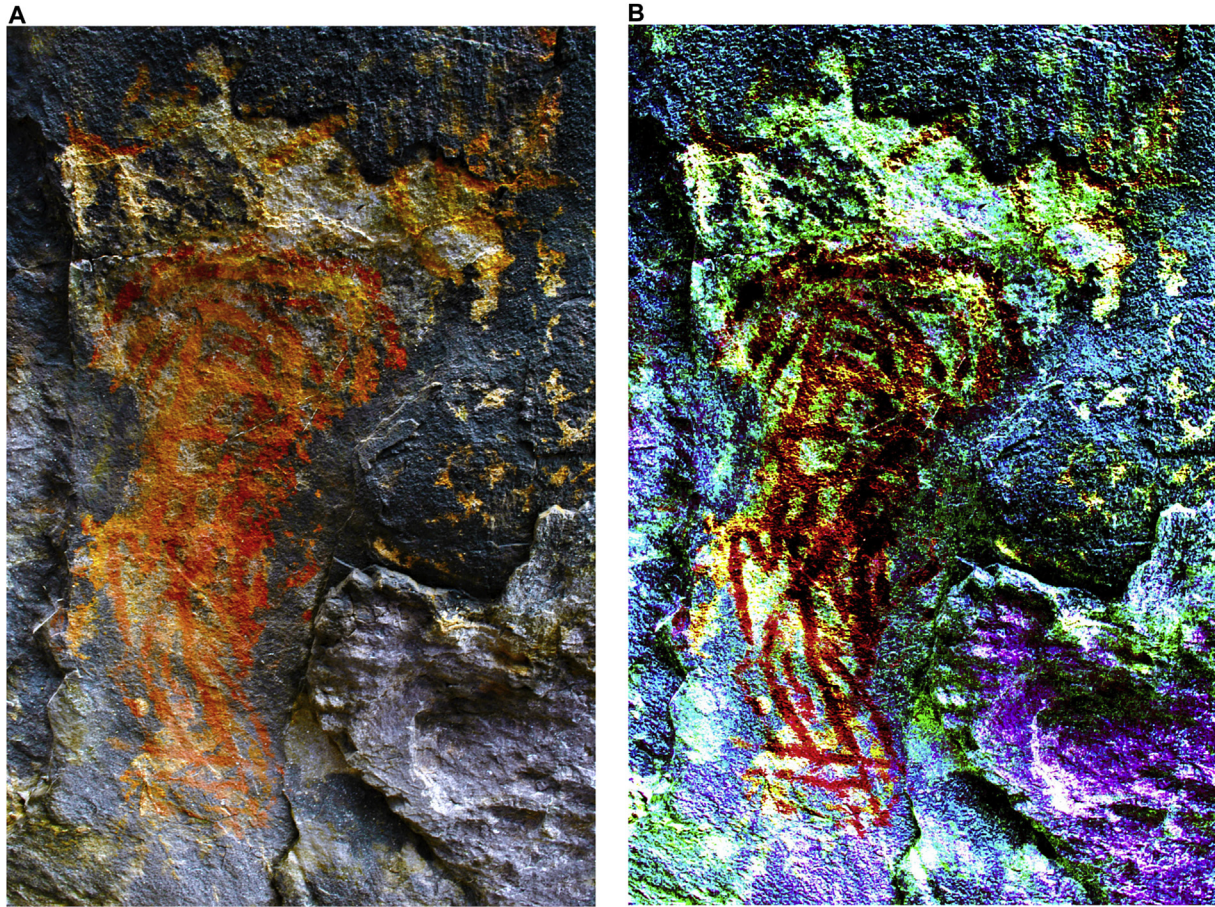


Fig. 3. a–c One of a small number of intricate abstract motifs located on the ceiling of San Pedro Viejo de Pichasca (Fig. 3a) and digitally-enhanced imagery using D-Stretch (Images: Nash/Troncoso).

to the valley floor have been recorded revealing a variety of engraved imagery (Fig. 4).

Rock art sites from both economies were probably multifunctional and in use over considerable periods of time. For hunter-gatherers, rock art sites were also places associated with quotidian life (temporary encampments) (Fig. 5). For agrarian communities, engraved rocks were also places associated with the movement out of the habitation areas and agrarian fields (Troncoso and Vergara, 2013) (Fig. 6). However, we beg the question, was the initial meaning associated with certain dominant motifs fully understood throughout the duration of both periods and did landscape play an essential role in what and by whom was engraved and painted?

If one is to consider the interplay between socio-political modes of production and the Heideggerian approaches to deconstructing landscape, rock art becomes a device that could be used to control and manipulate society (e.g. Heidegger, 1962, 1982; Chippindale and Nash, 2004). One must assume that some form of segmented society existed in both regimes, albeit through different mindsets (spanning the millennia). Heidegger considers things - objects (in this case rock art) as a lived experience that should be devoid of abstract philosophical concepts and theories (Heidegger, 1982). However, to omit such philosophical discourse would be problematic in our attempt to understand things from the distant past. Heideggerian theory does promote the concept of *being-in-the-world*, what we would term a *lived and shared experience*. According to philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1965), the body is the primary site for knowing the world (i.e. people objectifying themselves from the

world around them in order to set themselves apart from it). Based on Heidegger (1982) and later Tilley (1994), artists would have been bound-up in an ancestral history that involved landscape, mythology and social hierarchy. These strategically chosen rock art sites would have created both a physical and metaphysical barrier between artists and the society they represent. As Ingold has pointed out, daily life and history are inextricably linked and would have involved, at a primary level, an interplay between people and things; both would have been restricted to one landscape (Ingold, 2015). Within the various landscapes of the Limarí Valley, day-to-day activities such as food procurement, social relations between individuals and groups and the rites associated with birth, death and rebirth would have been tied into a ritual palimpsest; here the mundane became sacred. In many respects, the system that we are witnessing replicates Tilley's *being-in-the-world* hypothesis, whereby the body is not just skin and bones but a participant in the experience of the world in which one lives - what we would term: *the conscious being*. Part of this process that involves the *self* and *the conscious being* would have included ways of expressing experience; in this case through the medium of engraving and painting imagery onto a rock surface. We suppose that at a primary level, rock art can be adapted and used by people/communities in many different landscapes; however, at a more intense level is the rock art specific to arid and semi-arid environments. Here, the underlying structures for artists to visually communicate meaning is directly associated with the harshness of an arid environment, for example the need to express fertility, food procurement, the availability of water and the flow of information. Although one can

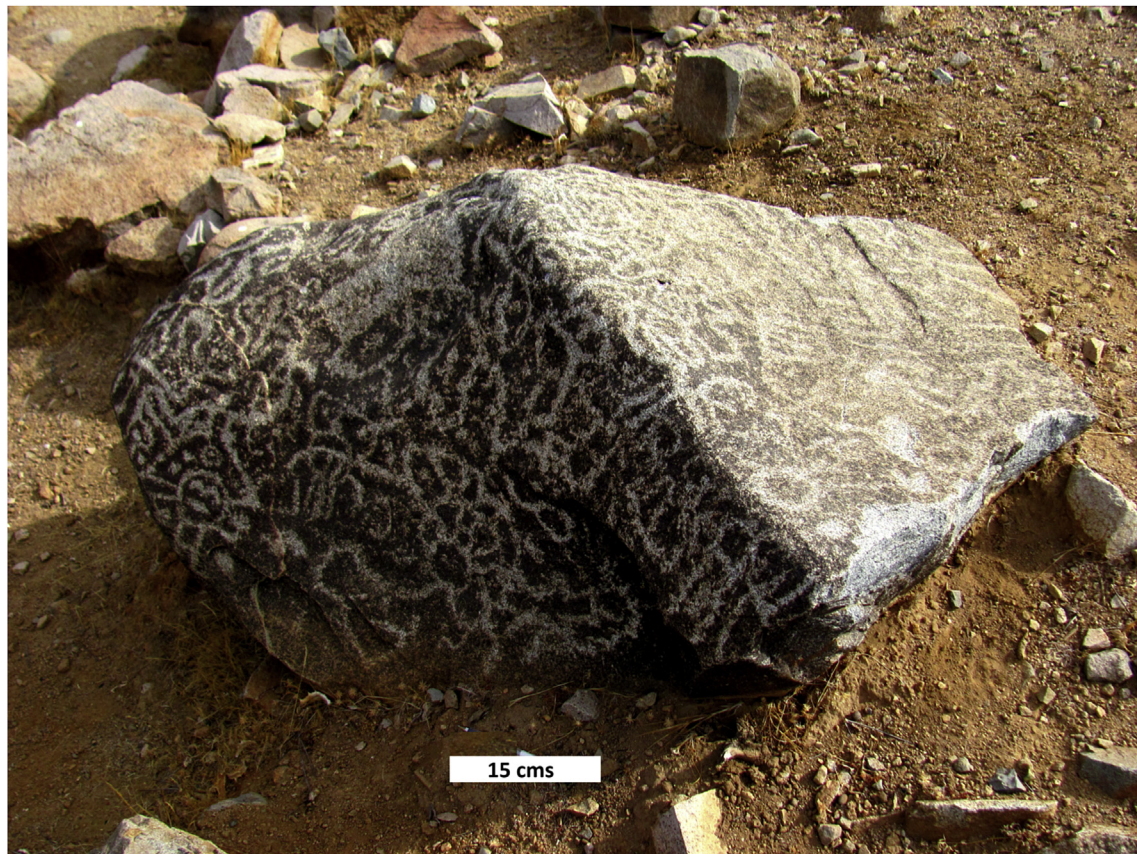


Fig. 4. Engraved imagery from the agrarian site of Quebrada Chupallas (Image: Nash/Troncoso).

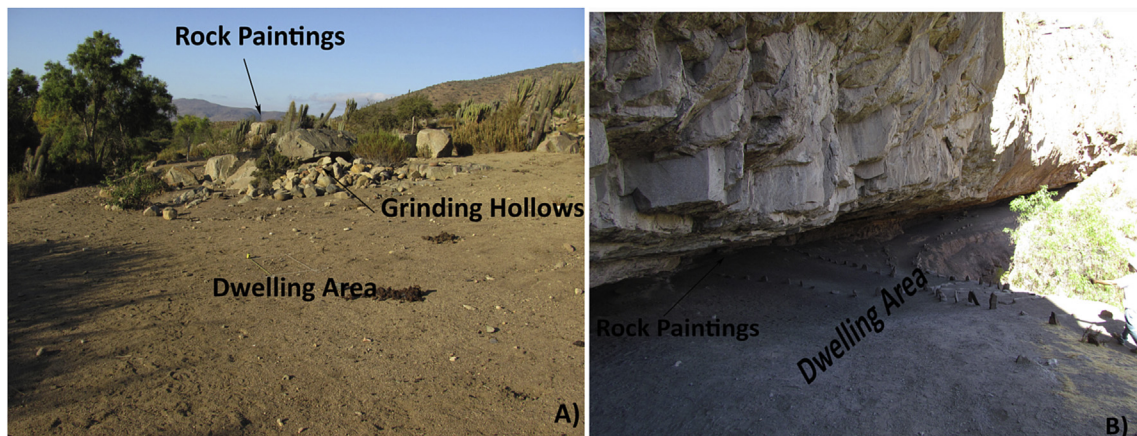


Fig. 5. The spatial relationship between rock paintings in dwelling areas of two hunter-gatherer sites: a) the site of Melina and b) San Pedro Viejo de Pichasca (Images: Nash/Troncoso).

never fully understand the meaning of rock art, probably much of the imagery portrayed on both sets of rock art largely replicate the *things* that were considered important by individuals and communities during this period of prehistory (e.g. Nash, 2011).

The subject matter is one thing, but what of landscape? Landscape would have formed part of the *being-in-the-world* narrative, along with the interactions from the artist and his or her audience. Based on general points raised by Chippindale and Nash (2004), landscape would have formed part of a complex package of ideas and experiences. Clearly, the relationship between artist/audience,

rock art and landscape are intimately entangled. We would argue that site distribution within the valley was deliberately chosen for their physical qualities which could be:

- Altitude of the panel in relation to other landscape features;
- Appropriate rock surface qualities (i.e. the accessibility and surface of the canvas);
- Size of the site and its intimacy;
- The site's location within the surrounding landscape;
- The surrounding topography; or



Fig. 6. An agrarian landscape: a) The spatial relationship between settlement areas and rock art sites; and b) the Quebrada las Chupallas rock art site (Images: Nash/Troncoso).

- A combination of the above.

We, as modern humans tend to take landscape for granted in that we know it is there, and that the various components from a [semiotic] language, but within our world this language is usually unread and not fully understood. In this paper we suggest that features within a landscape (topographic or otherwise) act as signs or signifiers and these control social and political behaviour, in particular, a sense of belonging and territoriality. In this case the overwhelming feature of the Limarí Valley is not its aridity but its landscape. Similar to Richard Bradley's ideas (1993; 1997; 1998) monuments such as rock art evoke memories to various landscape forms, thus creating a sense of time and belonging. This is not a notion that can be created overnight, but one that takes many generations to establish and run. This would certainly account for the number of rock art sites within the valley. Bourdieu (1977, 4) has suggested that on a human level, landscape or the phenomenology of landscape is created as a *lived experience*. We would add that the construction of landscape becomes a critique; a collection of chapters that are chronologically and geographically ordered, in this case over four millennia. With each moment in time, individuals add more to these chapters, creating a sense of meaningful space that is ancestor-driven. This is made clear by the slight changes in rock art style on those panels that contains multiple images.

6. Summary

In this short paper we have outlined the broad chronological and spatial distribution of rock art within the Limarí Valley. This spatial/temporal distribution exists elsewhere within the Central Andean region. The location of hunter-gatherer and agrarian sites from this part of the prehistoric world possibly reflects the complexity of each economy, much of which was bound-up in ritual-symbolic behaviour (e.g. Nash, 2012). The examples we have used within this paper certainly reflect a number of elements such that are influenced by social-political ideology such as territoriality, restricted visual access and socio-political hierarchies. We are aware that there could be a tendency to intellectualise the past by

searching for a deeper meaning to what rock art represents; a trait that Olsen (2010, 86) claims is inherent in many rock art studies. Despite this, and based on anthropological and ethnographic studies much of the daily life in prehistory appears to have been integrated to a series of ritualised systems associated with day-to-day economy and politics. It is conceivable that the various stages in rock art production formed part of a more intense ritualised behaviour, resulting in a performance whereby artists became the intermediary between the rock, and the spirits that dwelled within and the audience who were engaged with the artist (Bradley, 2009; Clottes 2003). Of course, we are aware that we can never fully understand the mindset of a prehistoric hunter-gatherers or farmers; however, the rock art and its location show a clear causality and intentionality to select the panel, the subject matter and the audience (and their possible participation); these traits create a unique rock art heritage within this part of South America.

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