

# The Contemporary Past of San Pedro de Atacama, Northern Chile: Public Archaeology?

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## ABSTRACT

Historically, the relationships between archaeologist and the indigenous communities in San Pedro Atacama (northern Chile) have been complex and conflicting. The study of the contemporary past in this oasis situates us fully in the present, in a horizontal timeframe that gives us the chance to try a new approach to archaeology, letting our practice be guided in a critical, reflexive manner and acknowledging that it is immersed in a fabric of social and political relations. In this article, we examine our archaeological practice as we embark on the study of capitalist expansion in San Pedro de Atacama.

Résumé: Les relations entre les archéologues et les communautés autochtones à San Pedro de Atacama (au nord du Chili) sont traditionnellement complexes et conflictuelles. L'étude du passé contemporain dans cette oasis nous situe pleinement dans le présent, sur une durée horizontale qui nous offre la possibilité d'essayer une nouvelle approche archéologique, laissant notre pratique être guidée de façon critique et réfléchie, tout en convenant qu'elle est immergée dans un tissu de relations sociales et politiques. Dans cet article, nous examinons notre

pratique archéologique alors que nous entamons l'étude de l'expansion du capitalisme à San Pedro de Atacama.

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Resumen: Históricamente, las relaciones entre el arqueólogo y las comunidades indígenas en San Pedro de Atacama (norte de Chile) han sido complejas y conflictivas. El estudio del pasado contemporáneo en este oasis nos sitúa plenamente en el presente, en un marco de tiempo horizontal que nos ofrece la posibilidad de probar un nuevo enfoque en arqueología, dejando que nuestra práctica sea guiada de una manera reflexiva y crítica y reconociendo que está inmersa en un tejido de relaciones sociales y políticas. En el presente artículo, examinamos nuestra práctica arqueológica a medida que nos embarcamos en el estudio de la expansión capitalista en San Pedro de Atacama.

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**KEY WORDS**

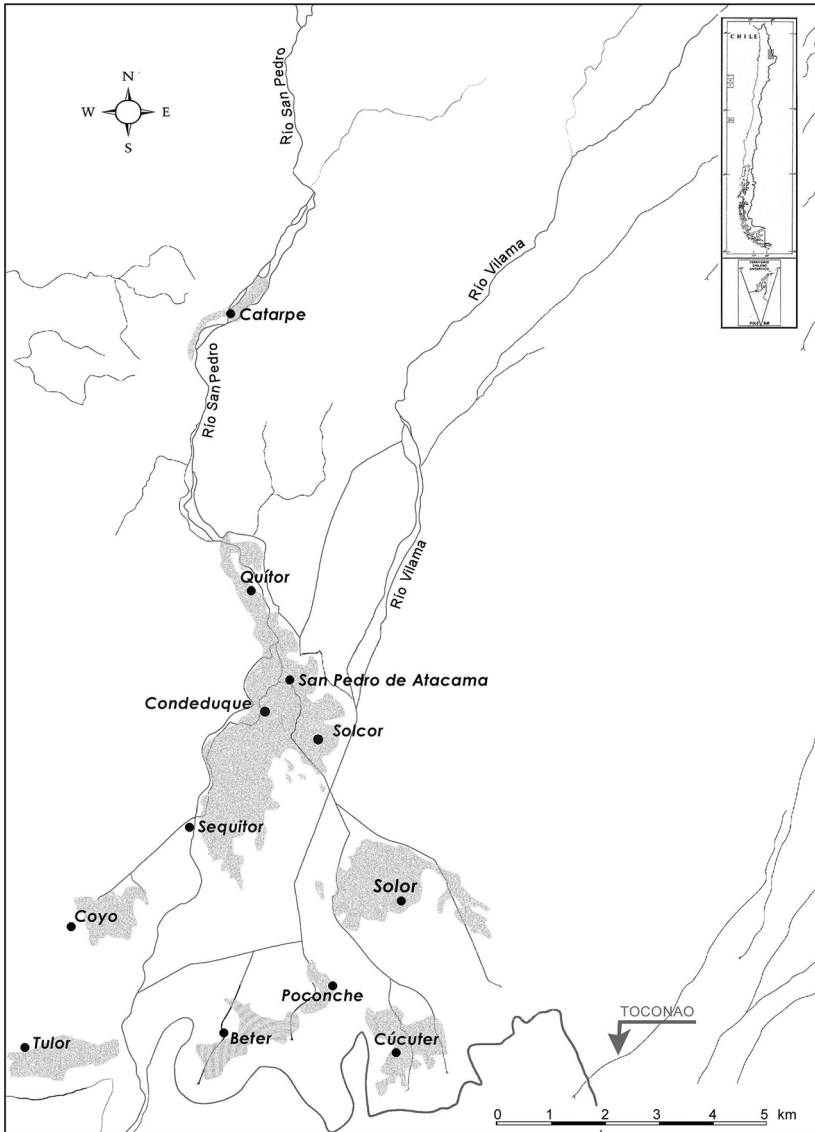
Public archaeology, Contemporary past, Atacama, Indigenous communities, Capitalism, Multiculturalism

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## Introduction

Studying the archaeology of the recent past forces us to face the contradictions and inequalities of our own time. This may seem obvious, but in the locality of San Pedro de Atacama, in the far North of Chile (Figure 1), archaeologists' insistence on studying the prehistoric past has brought them, whether consciously or unconsciously, to use that distance to shield themselves from their object of study, as though their work was taking place in another time, and was completely innocuous in the time and place in which it was being carried out. In fact the opposite is true, as an ethnography of Atacameño archaeology has recently demonstrated (Ayala 2008). Indeed, throughout the past century, the social nature of the practice of archaeology has engendered a series of complex, dynamic relations among indigenous peoples, the State, and archaeologists.

Since its creation in the late 1950s, the Museo Arqueológico R.P. Gustavo Le Paige has played a central role in disputes between indigenous communities and archaeologists. Only since the 1990s have the latter come to experience the social scope of their work—the political context in which the local population, with the backing of the State, has actively questioned archaeological work through such concrete actions as denying permission to intervene in sites—especially cemeteries—and, currently, to dispute the administration of the “new” Le Paige museum.<sup>1</sup> As a result, many archaeologists have stopped practicing archaeology in the area or have simply



**Figure 1.** Map of San Pedro de Atacama indicating the cluster of oases (Drawing by Paulina Chávez)

chosen to work in other regions where their work is not challenged in this way.

While archaeology has tended to situate its observations and objects within a vertical conception of time—a stratigraphic cross section in which

one moment follows another—the local population situates those same objects always in the present—within the here and now—rather than ascribing them to some chronological moment in the Gregorian calendar. Within this context, our study of the contemporary past in San Pedro de Atacama situates us fully in the present, in a horizontal timeframe that gives us the chance to try a new way of doing archaeology, letting our practice be guided in a critical, reflexive manner and acknowledging that it is immersed in a fabric of social and political relations—in short, archaeology with the community, not despite it (cfr. Edgeworth 2006; Castañeda and Mathews 2008).

Today, considering the abundance of committed or public archaeologists and the need to analyze the phenomenon from a global perspective (Matsuda and Okamura 2011), it is worth asking at what point along the spectrum we can situate our practice, or rather, what can our practice contribute to the global discussion about archaeologies that are increasingly interested in being relevant to contemporary society, beyond the labels that name them. In this article, we examine our archaeological practice as we embark on study the period of capitalist expansion in the oasis of San Pedro de Atacama. In our 2 years here we have taken an approach that focuses on building horizontal relations with the local community and obtaining mutual benefits from the application and results of our work.

### **Background: Why the Contemporary Past in San Pedro de Atacama?**

In the second half of the 19th century, northern Chile underwent a profound change as a result of growing investment by large private capital and the expansion of the mining, and especially saltpeter, industry. The War of the Pacific (1879–1883) provoked by the clash of private interests between Chile (and England) and the Bolivian state, culminated in the incorporation of 11,000 km<sup>2</sup> of Bolivian territory in the Atacama puna region into Chilean territory. Along with that land came a population of mainly indigenous peoples, who were added to the pre-existing Atacameño population. In the decades following the war, the development of successive large-scale industries such as the Caracoles silver mine (which had been in operation since 1870), the nitrate “offices” (operations) and the Chuquicamata copper mine, led to far-reaching transformations.

During this process, Atacameño indigenous society experienced profound changes in its modes of subsistence, moving from a fundamentally agricultural-pastoral economy to a more diversified capitalist one (Núñez 2007 [1991]; Sanhueza and Gundermann 2007). This process of insertion into the regional economy had begun centuries before, although on a

much smaller scale, with the tribute demanded by the Spanish colonial system and later with that of the Bolivian Republic (Sanhueza 2010). According to Rivera, the Spanish crown considered San Pedro de Atacama a multidirectional corridor that enabled transactions of great administrative importance for sustaining the development of an economy that tended toward bureaucratic dependency; economically, this drove the territory and its inhabitants toward “subsidiary dependence and not capital accumulation, whether investment or consumption” (Rivera 1994:189).

Beginning around 1850, the increasing demand for the region’s minerals prompted the importation of livestock from Argentina’s trans-Andean valleys, generating a new and different specialization—salaried cattle drivers. Large herds of cattle were brought to San Pedro de Atacama, where they were fattened and then distributed to mining and saltpeter centers. Alfalfa production in the zone expanded, and indigenous lands began to be bought up and concentrated in the hands of large landowners who, in turn, required more and more seasonal agricultural laborers (Núñez 2007 [1991]; Sanhueza and Gundermann 2007). Simultaneously with these changes, however, the Atacameño people continued trading and dealing in traditional products with indigenous peoples of nearby regions (Núñez 2007 [1991]; Sanhueza and Gundermann 2007; Cárdenas 2007; Ibacache 2007).

Throughout the 20th century, the growth in mining led to increasing dependence on the Atacameño people as a labor force in that industry, which in turn led to large-scale migration to the urban-industrial centers of Calama and Antofagasta. However, another contingent of oasis inhabitants continued and even intensified the semi-artisanal extraction of salt and llareta (*azorella compacta*), or joined the local sulfur industry, which in one way or another were industries subsidiary to the flourishing large-scale mining industry of the region.<sup>2</sup> As these enclaves of lesser enterprises were located in the zone—salt in Valle de la Luna, sulfur in the mountains around San Pedro de Atacama, and llareta on the slopes of nearby mountains—they did not exacerbate the exodus prompted by the demands of the large-scale copper and saltpeter mining sector (Martínez 1985; Ibacache 2007). In all, the consolidation of international trade relations emerging in the context of the state and the expansion of its bureaucratic apparatus enabled the insertion of local residents into the new economic model, but “without the political and financial backing with which to achieve modern development” (Rivera 1994:187). This situation remained the same with different emphases until the end of the 1980s (Vilches et al. 2014a), when the opening of a labor market centered on tourism and based in San Pedro de Atacama expanded the options for salaried work, not only for the indigenous population but for the floating population that flowed steadily through the oasis (Gundermann 2004).

While anthropology has begun to study these processes of cultural transformation and integration through documentary records (eg., Sanhueza and Gundermann 2007) and, to a lesser extent, oral information (eg., Núñez 2007[1991]; Rivera 1994; Gundermann 2004; Cárdenas 2007), it has not paid sufficient attention to its material dimension. Neither has archaeology done its part, as evidenced by the national and regional scenario in the discipline—particularly in reference to San Pedro de Atacama—which notably emphasizes the investigation of the pre-Hispanic past to the detriment of more recent times (Sanhueza et al. 2004). In effect, as of the second half of the 20th century, the presence of the State in the Atacama region translated into the formal institutionalization of territorial administration, not only of economic resources but also of its cultural and symbolic goods, promoted in large part by the priest-archaeologist Gustavo Le Paige in the 1960s and following (see below). The rhetoric that developed in this context centered on pre-Hispanic archaeological remains and thus has helped feed not only the boom in the tourism industry but also the content of current discourses of ethnic demands (Ayala 2008). Thus, the predominant Atacameño identity today looks to the past, although its links to that time are strongly questioned (cfr. Gundermann 2004).

Beyond proving (or disproving) this connection, what interests us here is the invisibility in that identity of the recent material past corresponding to capitalist expansion in the zone. In that context, we find it worthwhile to add an archaeological perspective to the current understanding of the contemporary past in the oasis of San Pedro de Atacama. In other words, we wish to explore the ways in which the local population has negotiated the advent of modernity through strategies that very often operate in the interstices of capitalism (cfr. Johnson 1996; Leone 1999; Potter 1999), as well as their impact on processes of identity building over the past century.

### **Recovering Materiality**

The contribution that an archaeological perspective can make to studying the past century in Atacama is not only relevant for the physical aspects of its material remains, but also for exploring experiences situated at the heart of material life, the constitution of the world of objects and, certainly, its role in mapping human experience (Meskell 2004). We agree with Miller (1987) that materiality encompasses the “objective conditions” of a determined cultural order in which the subject lives, and has his or her basic experiences, acting primarily on the unconscious but establishing the “parameters” for conscious action. The material world, therefore, integrates individuals into the normative order of the larger social group, acting as a medium for the intersubjective order generated through *habitus* (Miller

1987 sensu Bourdieu 1977). In this sense, one can speak of “*material habitus*” in relation to the world that is conceived of and structured by persons, but also forms human experience in everyday practice (Meskell 2005).

From this perspective, archaeology presents itself as a doorway into recovering the “material density” (cfr. Buchli and Lucas 2001) of the Atacameño world of the 20th century and so enables us to question the invisible agency of recent history in the current lives of its inhabitants. Following Miller, the humility of objects and spaces associated with the period of capitalist expansion in the zone promises to yield crucial information that could even reveal continuities and reformulations of cultural practices parallel to those brought by capitalist life, or that are incorporated within those very reformulations. In this scenario, the study of oral and documentary accounts as a resource for sociocultural validation is as important as the objects themselves, as it enables us to examine how encounters with the material dimension influence practices of formulating and reconstructing the past. Because of this, it is impossible to conceive of archaeological practice that is not the collective effort of specialists from different fields and the local community.

### **In the Orbit of Public Archaeology: Debating Concepts and Defining Experiences**

From the beginning, our project was not intended as an *ex profeso* effort to shape public archaeology, as several authors have proposed (Green et al. 2010; Gómez 2010; Moi and Morales 2010). In fact, public archaeology lacks a universally accepted definition because it has developed at different times and in different countries and disciplines, although it is often generally recognized as a movement or a social commitment to contemporary society (Matsuda and Okamura 2011). Furthermore, multiple models have emerged in the US, Britain, and Australia that attempt to summarize the ways in which archaeologists relate to society in general. Some of these are more oriented to the practical side—education and public relations—while others are focused on the critical-theoretical and multivocal side, though all of them take into account both stages in alternating, dynamic and complementary ways (see Merriman 2004; Holtorf 2007).

In Latin America, a new paradigm known as “social archaeology” (Lorenzo 1979) emerged in the early 1970s that had much in common with the “social commitment” of public archaeology. Such efforts were cut short in Chile, however, by the military dictatorship, and the same thing occurred in several other Latin American countries under similar political conditions (eg., Kojan and Angelo 2005; Tantaleán and Aguilar 2012). In that sense,

Matsuda and Okamura (2011) are right to affirm that public archaeology began to capture attention beyond the English-speaking world only in the early 21st century. Reviewing the specialized bibliography and papers presented at recent Chilean archaeological conferences, archaeological work that is more “committed” has appeared since the late 1990s, and more consistently since 2000 (Cfr. Ayala 2003). Among these works, we can identify experiences that take the educational/public relations approach (meaning more practical than theoretical), although they do not necessarily bear the label of public archaeology or any other from the approaches that predominate in the English-speaking world. It is also evident that the discussion about the social commitment of archaeology has been intensely permeated by the issue of indigenous peoples, which is coherent with the multicultural policies within which this reflection has developed (See Volumen 35, N° 2 2003, *Revista Chungará*).

### **The Direction of Archaeological Practice in San Pedro de Atacama**

As it has evolved, the archaeological discipline in San Pedro de Atacama has generally been characterized by conflict-laden, vertical, asymmetrical relations between archaeologists and the local indigenous population (Ayala 2008, 2011). From the early days of archaeological investigation in the zone in the late 19th century, the discipline has reproduced colonial relations with the Atacameño people. When Belgian priest and amateur archaeologist Gustavo Le Paige arrived in San Pedro de Atacama in the mid-20th century, archaeology perpetuated and even deepened these kinds of relations. Le Paige defended the idea of the continuity of Atacameño culture over time, but this did not mean that he acknowledged these indigenous peoples as valid interlocutors entitled to express their opinions about his archaeological work; neither did he legitimize the cultural significance of the practice. Furthermore, his notion of cultural continuity went hand in hand with a conception of the Atacameño as a society on the verge of extinction, disappearance, and assimilation, a people whose advancement had to be promoted to support the Chilean nationalist project. This was reflected by La Paige’s disproportionate interest in excavating pre-Hispanic cemeteries despite the fact that this activity violated local beliefs in “the grandfathers” or “*gentiles*.”<sup>3</sup> In particular, Le Paige’s collection of thousands of skulls evokes the colonial epistemology of fragmenting the body and its corresponding documentation into different parts held in different collections (Vezub 2009). Although Le Paige rigorously recorded the provenance of his finds and kept them in a single collection, the separation of crania from their bodies invokes that same colonial logic. It is also worth



noting that La Paige's archaeological practice had a very special quality—he was an evangelizer and administrator of souls, and thus, his relations with the community were woven in a complex web. This position gave the priest a comparative advantage in accessing material goods. From this analytical perspective, the scope of his “archeological” investigations would have been much more limited had he not been a priest whose relations with the community were based on symbolic and material interdependence, as evidenced in the many instances of cooperation, mutual assistance, and favors granted.

In the 1980s, armed with the investigative methodologies—and problems—of the professional archaeologist, but on a smaller scale than previously, a new generation of investigators continued the excavations of pre-Hispanic cemeteries in the oasis. In 1984, the Museum's permanent exhibition—a legacy of Le Page's time—was revamped, but the changes did not fundamentally alter the colonial mechanisms and aesthetic: despite local discontent, the new exhibit continued to display the bodies and other remains as a museographic resource. In this way, archaeological practice perpetuated the effects of preterization of the indigenous and through this contributed to the national project of the time, in which the Atacameño people were relegated to the realm of folklore, to the past, and to museum spaces.

The return to democracy and the implementation of a multicultural policy in the 1990s exerted pressure on archaeologists to democratize access to the past and control over archaeological sites, and encouraged increasing reflection on the links between archaeology and society. Within this scenario of political and economic change at the national level, however, in the discipline of archaeology itself, the opening up of Atacameño archaeology was once again postponed. In effect, up to 2001 the perpetuation of the same colonial relations and the exclusion of indigenous perspectives continued in San Pedro de Atacama. While the archaeologists submerged themselves increasingly in their investigations of the pre-Hispanic past—assuming that their practice and its repercussions only affected that time—the Atacameño people publically questioned the excavation of cemeteries and the displaying of human bodies while calling for community permitting of, participation in and administration of archaeological sites and the museum as well as claiming ownership of the archaeological heritage.

Finally, as the 21st century dawned, archaeologists and the San Pedro de Atacama museum became open to dialogue and to the participation of indigenous communities, as well as to the diversification of the spaces in which archaeological discourse circulated. In response to ethnic demands, they first of all created “Dialogue Forums” (*Mesas de Diálogo*) (2001–2004) and instituted the Heritage Education Program “Escuela Andina” (2002–2010). Later, the “Atacameño Community Relations Unit” (URCA 2004–

2010), the Program to Remove Human Bodies from the museum permanent exhibition (2007), and the Chrysalis Dissemination Program (2007) were created, and an Educational Unit was officially created (2009).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, scientific institutions based in the territory became willing to conduct investigations in the heart of indigenous communities by establishing new ways of observing and analyzing the context of study and integrating the indigenous population, which enabled the launching of the IIAM-ALMA Ethno-astronomical research project (2008–2015). Through these efforts, Atacameño archaeology changed the way the discipline was practiced, as the public finally became part of its agenda.

The Escuela Andina and URCA were explicitly associated with public and heritage archaeology in the Museum's institutional discourses, which also had repercussions on research projects that included dissemination of their results and community participation. In this way, the educational, public relations and management aspects of socially committed archaeology were furthered, and gradually became installed as the new local "format" of the discipline and the "right way" according to many professionals, constituting what Ayala (2011) has called a "multicultural archaeology" in San Pedro de Atacama. For this author, this is a traditional archaeology adjusted to fit the mandates of multiculturalism, a "belt-tightening" that is characterized by talks and outreach courses that promote limited indigenous participation.

Certainly, the lack of a critical focus in public archaeology during the first few years of the 21st century is evident in the scant analysis of spaces that were created to encourage dialogue and indigenous inclusion in archaeological practice during that time. Nevertheless, a study of those participatory spaces revealed that "multicultural archaeology" had not restructured or decolonized the discipline or transformed power relations (Ayala 2011) mainly because, despite some political and discursive changes, the colonial devices of negation continued to be deployed in Atacameño archaeology, and still continue today. Examples of this include some archaeologists' invalidation of the community's right to authorize investigations performed within their territories and the refusal to acknowledge indigenous claims to ownership of the archaeological record; this stands in contrast to the Atacameño position, in which research permits are granted on the basis of Convention 169.<sup>5</sup> Still, the above-mentioned study also demonstrated that "multicultural archaeology" has opened up previously non-existent spaces for indigenous participation, has fostered discussion of the social and political consequences of our discipline, and has brought to light the difficulties of articulating theory with practice in the construction of new relations between archaeologists and indigenous peoples. Parallel to this, participatory spaces such as Escuela Andina, URCA, the Program for the Removal of Human Bodies from the Exhibition, and the Crisálida talks

have been appropriated and used by the Atacameño people to promote their ethnic demands, as well as to drive their own processes of historic construction and identity building and to confront scientific practice with the same State-validated tools and language (Ayala 2011).

As we can see, “multicultural archaeology” has had just as many positive as negative effects in San Pedro de Atacama; while on the one hand it has generated spaces for the inclusion of Atacameño people in archaeological work, on the other it has promoted limited indigenous participation that neutralizes and controls ethnic conflicts. It has also brought to light the reality that relations between archaeologists and indigenous peoples are complex, conflictive, and shifting over time, and has shown how complicated it is to move from a colonialist archaeology to another that seeks to revert and transform it. And the complication arises not only because the process is still underway, but also because of the challenge of articulating the theory with the practice. In this context, what Ayala (2011) proposes is a reflexive archaeology that incorporates the contributions of the critical side of public archaeology as well as those of postcolonial, collaborative, indigenous, and relational archaeologies (Zimmermann 2001; Colwell-Chanthaphomh and Ferguson 2008; Watkins 2000; Atalay 2006; Gnecco 2008; Gnecco and Ayala 2010) in an attempt to denaturalize archaeological practice and unmask its process and the conditions under which it is produced; reflect on the social and economic inequalities that give rise to and perpetuate it; and question its scientific authority and place of enunciation by conceptualizing it as the study of power and not only of the past. In other words, the idea is to do archaeology otherwise, with and for indigenous peoples and not in spite of them.

The specialized literature demonstrates that there is no single formula for practicing archaeology in the context of indigenous communities. In Brazil, for example, we find experiences led by Lesley Green, David Green, and Eduardo Neves (2010) that have managed to implement collaborative processes in which archaeologists and members of indigenous communities participate jointly in the investigative process and in decision making. In this context, the topic studied, the type of methodology used, and the interpretations that emerge are the product of a collective process. Further examples can be found in the United States, in the work of Sonia Atalay (2006) and Joe Watkins (2000), who take a decolonizing, collaborative and indigenous approach to conducting investigations in which archaeologists and native people work together to study and manage the past. Nevertheless, both authors also illustrate the complexities involved in the process of articulating indigenous interests with scientific ones while attempting to build new ways of relating.

### **Winds of Change (or the Will to Change?)**

At the local level, the study of archaeologist–Atacameño relations and proposals for action have not to date been incorporated into research projects on the pre-Hispanic, historic, or contemporary past of San Pedro de Atacama (Cfr. Ayala 2008, 2011). By integrating the results of these archaeological ethnographies into our investigation in the zone, we hope to fill this gap while challenging our work team to think of archaeology “in another way,” not only by situating ourselves in a temporality that is different than what is traditionally studied, but also to position ourselves and localize ourselves in a different place in light of archaeology’s social commitment and repercussions. To achieve this, we take up the contributions made by more critical currents in contemporary archaeology on the topic to offer below a series of theoretical concepts that we believe should be present in an archaeology that is practiced with the San Pedro community:

1. **Reflexivity:** This involves an investigative practice that incorporates a permanent reflective process not only in regard to the recording, analysis, and interpretation of information, but also with respect to how the investigative process itself is carried out, what are or might be the social repercussions of the knowledge constructed, and how does the political context in which the project is being conducted influence, impact, or determine the work performed.
2. **Displacement of the place of enunciation:** Historically, archaeology has occupied a privileged place in decision making about the past, as a producer of scientific knowledge legitimized by the political and economic powers that be. Given this, we propose to decenter or displace archaeology’s authority and place of enunciation, which means having an investigative process in which decision making about the knowledge and objects of the past is shared.
3. **Localization:** This involves displacing the logocentric gaze (exteriority, neutrality, and distance) and presenting it from the perspective of the geopolitics of knowledge, ie., to resituate the archaeological discourse in order to share it through dialogical action with indigenous peoples. This localization also means speaking from the context in which the archaeological investigation is produced and leaving aside all-encompassing, over-generalizing discourses.
4. **Co-production and collaboration:** This means addressing relations with indigenous peoples in a dialogue that addresses the repercussions of colonialism while aiming for horizontality and transparency, striving to work together to achieve mutual benefits and respond to the diverse interests in play. This is long-term work that requires sys-

tematic, ongoing instances for dialogue that promotes respect for and appreciation of both local and archaeological knowledge.

5. **Self-representation:** This involves collective discussion of the mechanisms of representation historically promoted by archaeology as well as about the process of constructing local memory. In this context, archaeology refuses its (self-given) role of representing the other in favor of accompanying indigenous representations. In this way, it seeks to “contribute to restoring the historicity of local histories to subvert their colonial ontology instead of seeking essential alterities to escape their modern-colonial domination” (Gnecco and Ayala 2010:44).
6. **Positionality:** This means taking sides beyond the limits of the discipline, in other words, acknowledging the political nature of our discipline and taking a clear stance in the social context in which we work.

Our archaeological investigation of the recent past of San Pedro de Atacama coincides with the objective underlying all of these concepts—to avoid the use of positivist theoretical frameworks to defend the neutrality and depoliticization of archaeology. Nevertheless, the project was developed entirely in the Academy, without the participation of members of the communities involved, although it was informed by the team’s experience in the area. While these theoretical concepts were proposed by one team member based on previous studies (Ayala 2011), they were discussed and analyzed by the entire team before fieldwork was begun in San Pedro de Atacama. In this context, it was interesting to learn of our differing perspectives on how to bring these definitions “down to earth.” Because of our particular professional careers in Atacameño archaeology, anthropology, and history, we conceived of this process in different ways, and so it was challenging to discuss how to articulate the theory and practice in light of our own San Pedro experiences and taking into consideration the information collected in the literature.

Empirically, the investigation has also been enriched by the conflicting views and approaches of our respective disciplines. Beyond the interpretation of the materiality, it has been interesting to note the diverse perspectives that have emerged vis-à-vis subjective relations with that materiality. In fact, a myriad of information, often contradictory, has emerged for a single archaeological site, or even for the reconstruction of one biography associated with a given site, challenging us to integrate it into our analysis of the work methodology and take into account inconsistent first person accounts, and then superimpose them all upon the material, giving them more than one significance, origin, owner, and/or use. In our attempts to sift through these differences to understand what has occurred in the terri-

tory, the participation of Atacameño people in the investigation, far from clarifying those differences, multiplies them, presenting us with the additional challenge of re-situating ourselves in the temporal and spatial geographic, political, economic and identitary context.

It is important to note that while all of the team members have worked in the territory in our respective disciplines for more than a decade, we have also lived there, indeed some of us still do today. We have even been linked in different ways to the Instituto de Investigaciones Arqueológicas y Museo G. Le Paige. These experiences have allowed each of us to weave an extensive web of social relations with the inhabitants of San Pedro, earning positions in the community through our work and the political, practical and ethical context of our work. In that regard, despite the fact that our investigation was designed, articulated and obtained funding from the trenches of academia, we accept the responsibility of trusting our experience of San Pedro. Indeed, honoring that experience was precisely the reason we chose to practice archaeology that was more relevant for contemporary San Pedrino society.

The challenge, therefore, has been to maintain the coherence between theory and practice, opening the discussion to include the pertinence of the concepts defined by public, collaborative, indigenous, postcolonial, and relational archaeologies that are suited to the particular context of San Pedro de Atacama. But it is also necessary to face the methodological challenge of responding to the contractual obligations of an investigation that is approved and, by being funded, legitimized by the State.<sup>6</sup>

### **From Theory to Practice: Toward a Situational Archaeology of San Pedro de Atacama**

As Lesley Green and her team, working in the Uacá community of Brazil, have recounted, moving from ideas to practice is a complex enterprise that is not easily achieved, especially given the need for mutuality (Green et al. 2010). According to these authors, seeking to establish collaborative relations among parties who do not have the same cultural capital makes informed consent impossible, owing to the lack of the local community's exposure to archaeology. In the case of San Pedro de Atacama, we could say that the situation is ambivalent. While the community has been intensely exposed to archaeology since the arrival of Father Le Paige, it has been only a partial exposure, an exposure to only one way of doing archaeology, one that has left a profound mark on the popular imagination. In that context, it became obvious that the ethical is *situational* (Green et al. 2010; Hamilakis 2007), given that it was only feasible to face the displacement of the place of enunciation of the archaeological discourse, as well as the

localization and positioning of our work team within the social and political context, *gradually*. Certainly, moving from a historically colonial practice to another that takes on this legacy and seeks to revert it is a challenge. It requires the articulation of the rhythms, commitments, and needs of both the Academy and local organizations over a period of time that is more like the “collective ethnographic time.”

Furthermore, it appeared important to us not to become imprisoned by a new academic discourse that would hinder us from seeing the heterogeneous nature of the San Pedrino people. San Pedro de Atacama has been a transit hub since pre-Hispanic times, but in the past 100 years different processes—such as the very changes in economic subsistence strategies we are studying here—have gradually changed the composition of the population, which is no longer exclusively indigenous Atacameños. This view of the local community as “San Pedrino” and not exclusively “indigenous” is important, as archaeological practice forces us to relate to all agents in the place. Furthermore, we are aware that the indigenous population itself is not a single, homogenous, coherent group, neutral, or depoliticized, but rather a divided community whose political differences are expressed in different spheres, including local power, representational disputes, and ideological and theological differences, among others. In fact, one contribution this investigation makes is precisely to contribute to an understanding the different identity-building processes that have unfolded along with the introduction of industrial capitalist modes of living in the zone.

### **Project Startup**

The work dynamic has shifted qualitatively as the project has progressed. In year one (2012), the sociocultural and political scenarios, including municipal elections, showed us the importance of beginning by demonstrating our work ethics in practice. To obtain the permission of the Atacameño people at the beginning of our investigation, we relied upon the trust that *they felt* in us as a result of our previous investigative and personal experiences *among them*. This helped lay the foundation for a kind of partnership that had the shared goal of understanding the modern history of San Pedro de Atacama.

We decided to present the results of our previous work (Garrido 1999, 2007; Cárdenas 2007; Ayala 2008, 2011; Vilches et al. 2008, 2012) to the leaders of the indigenous communities associated with the project, clearly indicating the gaps and our proposal for filling them in gradually. In those conversations, we received counterproposals for action that very often, if not always, coincided with our work plan.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, based on our personal network of local inhabitants with whom we shared mutual

trust—both Atacameños and non-Atacameños—we proceeded to investigate materialities situated in public and private spaces along with accounts about them. In parallel, we began to work with local researcher and teacher Eva Siárez, and with the local expert in conservation and local oral history, Jimena Cruz, both of whom are Atacameño. Both individuals participated in the archaeological fieldwork, office work, and ethnographic interviews with local residents. They also participated in meetings with team members to discuss and integrate the information gathered. These different strategies enabled us to work on producing concrete knowledge and to launch and protocol for presenting the results and later share them with the local communities, in order to acknowledge, to the extent possible, their own versions of history about local people and places.

Only beginning in year two did we begin to put the results to the test by disseminating them (Figure 2). Presentations were made to assemblies, in which the work team shared the study's objectives and initial findings, as well as our questions about them, by handing out copies of the respective reports and their associated inputs (plans, photos, etc.).<sup>8</sup> Community members participated more actively and enthusiastically than we had expected—some providing information, others directly asking to be interviewed, still others simply celebrating the attempt to address a time in their history that few speak about publically, but that is still part of their present lives in material terms, in a way that was devoid of taboos and demystified, in contrast to pre-Hispanic materialities. In fact, the participants have expressly requested that we deposit copies of any texts we produce in community libraries to allow the younger generation, and the not-so-young as well, to learn about this history.



**Figure 2.** Presentation of our work to the Community of Guatín



We believe that the positive reception our project has received is to a great extent a result of the time we invested in explaining what we were doing, how we were doing it, and why. For example, the methodology used for the virtual collection of archaeological materials by taking photographs of them was highly appreciated, as it allowed us to avoid picking them up unnecessarily and therefore minimized the impact on the sites.<sup>9</sup> While this is a strictly academic strategy, it broke the *sine qua non* association of archaeological work with a systematic practices that have in the past involved over-intervention in many settlements of the zone, especially burial contexts and those from pre-Hispanic times. At the same time, we have restructured our fieldwork plan to respect the wishes of landowners, administrators, and indigenous communities. Overall, the general work dynamic has meant adhering to more flexible timeframes that are more in line with ethnographic investigation than traditional archaeology.

Special attention must be paid to the use of informed consent. While in terms of the ethics of the State this is a means to an end, from the standpoint of community ethics it is seen as an end in itself. This has to do with the signature of the key informant, which becomes an object of value in itself, an object of power through which “things” are acquired, or lost. In that context, the signing of a document is not taken lightly, owing to its recognized destructive power, which has been demonstrated in the loss of land, water, and heritage throughout history. The challenge, therefore—notwithstanding academic critiques that make informed consent an ethical imposition within a rhetoric that is very similar to that which invalidates the community’s right to authorize investigations in indigenous territories—is to reflect upon the implications of this procedure in the Atacameño context and the context of the matters under investigation.<sup>10</sup> This had led us to propose shared narratives under the principle of reciprocity, not on the basis of clientelist relations; in other words, once the informant agrees with the final product (an agreed-upon narrative based upon his or her interview), informed consent is achieved.

Certainly, by proposing participation and negotiation on the basis of our competencies and investigative results, we have shown that we are situated in a different place of enunciation in relation to the community. Part of our investigative time, in fact, has been spent working for the interests of indigenous communities, who we consider the legitimate owners of Atacameño territory. Our knowledge has helped support land claims, lend academic support to political discussions, disseminate information, raise awareness, and foster appreciation of the recent history of San Pedro de Atacama.

## **Remembering Life in the Contemporary Past: New Questions, New Challenges**

The comprehensive, collective work we have undertaken, not only within our interdisciplinary team but also with the San Pedro community, has enabled us to envision a topography rather than a chronological timeline (Witmore 2007) for the period of capitalist expansion in the zone. This has become apparent in the different times that permeate the present.

The continuity in the use of objects and structures created in the mid-20th century, as diverse as it is, distances them from the category of “ruin”—especially archaeological ruin—commonly associated with pre-Hispanic times. They remain in use despite their deterioration, and in that sense they are “alive.” In practice, spaces such as livestock corrals, the estate houses of rich capitalists, and salt mines continue to play an active role in the daily lives of San Pedro residents as storehouses, restaurants, convenience stores, and tourist attractions (Figures 3 and 4). Others, including extensive fields of hay, are now abandoned; but as they are located in an urban area, to the constant stream of locals and tourists passing by they are merely part of the contemporary landscape, even if only as



**Figure 3.** Abaroa family residence currently hosting a drugstore, San Pedro de Atacama



**Figure 4.** Housing complex and ranching complex from the cattle-driving period in Catarpe

canvases for graffiti or as public washrooms, or as abandoned properties that are subsumed into the agricultural landscape, in the sense of domesticating those ‘wild,’ open, uninhabited spaces. A similar thing occurs with objects, many of which are piled up in warehouses, others safeguarded in museums, while still others have been passed down through generations for their monetary and/or symbolic value (Figure 5). Whatever the case, this is a material world that does not signify in the same way as that of the most remote ancestors.

Despite their new “lives,” the majority of these relics are remembered as part of an era that was glorious, though not without its setbacks. What we encounter is basically an incomplete story, full of amendments and veiled memories of those who remained in the Atacama, as well as those who left; or rather, those recognized as the first generation of descendants from the “cattle-driving time,” and those who were protagonists of the sulfur and salt mining era and the time of llareta collection, along with their descendants.<sup>11</sup> The former offer accounts of their childhood (the ‘20s, 30s, and 40s), while the latter are able to contribute first-hand memories, although not necessarily in chronological order, which emphasizes the topographic, multidimensional nature, not only of memory but also of the past.



**Figure 5.** Mr. Mario Ramos showing us the remnants of a forge that he keeps in his house

One memory we wish to highlight in particular is that of the Yutronic family, who managed the general store during the cattle-driving times. The memories collected consistently underline how this family came to own land through a debtor system under which many Atacameño customers, eager to acquire imported goods like tools, leather saddles, work clothes,

packaged foods, and sundries but lacking cash, signed promissory notes that they defaulted on and were forced to sign over their land to liquidate their debts. Most people interviewed say that this was also the practice of other capitalist families either related to or politically or commercially associated with the Yutronics. In particular, they identified the “Yugoslavians” or “Austrians” as ‘swindlers’ who stole others’ lands then used them for the cattle-driving trade, meaning exclusively to produce forage. This memory is still alive among many Atacameño people today, as evidenced not only in the difficulty we encountered in convincing people to sign our Informed Consent forms, but also in the way that locals view such actions as another way to lose things (land, water, rights, etc.) (Vilches et al. 2014b).

The salt mines, for their part, trigger fresher memories, as they remained in operation until more recent times. Valle de la Luna—once known as ‘Las Salinas’ for its salt mines—is now used primarily as a tourist spot; its official designation as a nature reserve prohibits the extraction of natural resources, and thereby the management of those resources by local inhabitants. Despite the fact that the area is administrated by a joint government-indigenous entity, the pro-tourism narrative promoted by the indigenous operators offers an image of local heritage held captive by the State, unjustly and incomprehensibly, in an attempt to transform it by controlling not only the space but the past (Vilches et al. 2014a).

Following Smith, heritage is not a given, but an “authorized heritage discourse” (2006:11). More than something with well-defined meanings and values, the author says, it is an inherently discordant political practice that underscores the cultural practice of the present. It can be used by different individual and groups for different purposes as well as to further hegemony and legitimacy, and thus, it is a tremendously dynamic process. In that context, the metaphorical invisibility of the period of capitalist expansion in San Pedro de Atacama makes more and more sense.

Atacameño communities have been facing the rapid changes imposed by the modernization process through a “rhetoric of nostalgia” (Gundermann 2004:231). This translates into a schematic idealization of the ancient past that has gone hand in hand with collective ethnic demands made in the multicultural political context, not only in San Pedro de Atacama, but among indigenous peoples in other parts of Chile as well. If archaeological investigation of the pre-Hispanic past has played an active role in nourishing the content of those demands, among other things, it is valid to ask what role an archaeology that studies the contemporary past of the locality will play in the future.

The material remains of the past century, as well as their associated memories and the coexistence of San Pedro residents with them, tell us that the style of modern life is compatible with the most traditional Ata-

cameño forms. Of course, all of this is articulated within a complex web of presences and absences, gains and losses. Both are unavoidable. And so, although we agree that the recent history of San Pedro de Atacama is far from being a visible domain, it is interesting that its very discursive “invisibility” gives it the capacity to provide the residents of the oasis with frames of action. In other words, the “humility” of these objects (Miller 1987)—both fixed and portable—makes them inconspicuous, but that does not make them any less constituent of the “Atacameño being.”

Modernity has gradually permeated the fabric of Atacameño life, as the processes of transformation that accelerated in the early 20th century moved sinuously and at a dizzying pace. This was a space of constant accommodation and negotiation—albeit not always happy—in the interstices of capitalist expansion. Archaeology can help shed light on the darker side of these processes, that which marginalizes, betrays, and, in the worst case, annihilates the communities we work with (González-Ruibal 2009). Archaeology of the contemporary past addresses a key moment for the Atacameño population—perhaps not the first, but certainly an important one that involves the gradual, large-scale loss of ancestral lands and the irreversible reconfiguration of the territory.

## Conclusion

The results obtained to date have illustrated the more opaque side of capitalist modernity in San Pedro de Atacama, along with detailing a complex, continuous process of identity transformation. The challenge now is to complement and reorient our initial questions, armed with the knowledge that the “public” aspect of archaeology is not a final or discrete stage in the investigation but is woven throughout the archaeological process and is never univocal.

In the framework of public archaeology in the English-speaking world, our project could well be situated along the theory axis, with emphasis on a critical focus. In effect, we are questioning the invisible agency of recent history on the present-day lives of the inhabitants of San Pedro de Atacama as we attempt to outline the interests that this discourse serve—who, what, how, and why. And we are also attempting to do the opposite—identify the who, what, how, and why behind the alternatives that challenge said proposition. To accomplish our task, a multivocal approach is vital; not because it satisfies legal mandates or independent neoliberal ones, but rather because those voices constitute the history (and present) of Atacama.

Perhaps the question that Matsuda and Okamura are posing is, to what extent has the notion of public archaeology reached different localities, and in what ways has it been *accepted and/or adapted*. The idea is more about

listening to the pulse of the history of a place, whether San Pedro de Atacama or any other locality. Taking advantage of the trust we had built with the Atacameño people through previous investigations and the time we spent among them, we have been able to embrace a multiple time and, from there, we are generating a space for intersubjective discussion and reflection that will help solidify a partnership with the community within the context of understanding the modern history of San Pedro de Atacama and its oasis. Beyond the labels, it is an archaeology that is more relevant to contemporary society.

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### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

### Notes

1. A project is presently underway to renovate the archaeological museum. It is being implemented jointly by the Undersecretary of Regional Development, the San Pedro Municipality, and the Universidad Católica del Norte. The project involves the replacement of the museum building that was constructed gradually by Le Paige in 1960 and following.
2. Energy resources such as firewood (*algarrobo* and *chañar*) were also extracted on a smaller scale (Green 2013).
3. These are other “human” entities from another time who will cause sickness among living humans if their rest is interrupted or they do not receive their ritual offerings. They are thus respected, feared, and not to be touched, and this is the reason why the Atacameño people object to the excavation of cemeteries and the display of human bodies.
4. It should be noted that unlike the previous instances, which were specifically focused on the local indigenous population, this one was oriented to the general public, especially children.
5. While as investigators we are not legally obligated, out of respect for and as an expression of good faith, as enshrined in Convention 169, we

contacted the communities to inform them of what was being done on private properties located within traditional indigenous territory.

6. Fondecyt projects like ours assume a linear, well-defined timeline (in our case, 4 years) and include the preparation of annual academic reports in pre-established formats, evidence of the informed consent of those interviewed, the publication of articles in indexed journals (ISI, Scopus), the submission of biannual financial reports justifying expenditure of the funds allocated, and the education of undergraduate and graduate students.

7. We are referring to conversations with presidents of communities and/or assemblies in which our objectives were supported and methodological ideas were offered that coincided with our own proposals (make audiovisual recordings of older adults to preserve their testimonials; undertake a kinship study for the cattle-driving era and following; but above all, recover the stories/objects of the “forgotten” or better yet “postponed” 20th century).

8. When it was not possible to speak directly to the assemblies, we organized meetings with community leaders to present the results. These received the same positive response as the assembly presentations.

9. This methodology was implemented in similar contexts in the Saltpeter pampa (Vilches et al. 2012).

10. We are aware of the public objections that have been made to the Fondecyt bioethics committee by different social science scholars, particularly anthropologists.

11. The stories alluded to in this text come from a total of 9 informants interviewed in 2012 and another 6 interviewed in 1996–1998 and 2008–2010. The cattle-driving era is associated with a productive cycle that lasted until around the 1930s or 1940s; meanwhile, the salt, sulfur, and llareta industries were most active from the 1930s until the 1980s (or 1960s in the case of llareta).

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