

BEYOND MATERIALITY: SYNTAXIS AND RELATIONALITY OF ROCK ART AND SOME OF THE THINGS WE CALL NATURE

by

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Abstract: From the analysis of the spatial distribution of the rock art in three zones of the upper basin of the Aconcagua River in central Chile, **please insert the phrase: we discuss** the materialization of a particular settlement pattern through a necessary and significant dialogue that is established between the engravings and certain elements of its surrounding environment. Dialogue which trespasses our classical notions of culture and nature to face us with a different reality, in which the meaning of rock art transcends the **rock delete** materiality of the rock to be inserted in a more complex totality, which seen from an Andean perspective corresponds to Uyuwáña.

Key-words: Rock art; Space; **Dialogue;** **Eliminar- Delete** Uyuwáña.

Resumen: A partir del análisis de distribución espacial del arte rupestre en tres zonas de la cuenca superior del río Aconcagua, Chile central, se discute la materialización de un patrón de emplazamiento particular que descansa en el dialogo necesario y significativo que se establece entre los grabados y ciertos elementos de su entorno circundante, dialogo que traspasa nuestras nociones clásicas de cultura y naturaleza para enfrentarnos ante una realidad diferente, una realidad en que el significado del arte rupestre trasciende la materialidad de la roca para insertarse en una totalidad más compleja, la que desde una perspectiva andina corresponde a Uyuwáña.

Palabras-clave: Arte rupestre; Espacio; **Dialogo** **Eliminar-Delete;** Uyuwáña.

INTRODUCTION

“I think, therefore I am”. This phrase of Rene Descartes holds within a set of the basic proposals upon which modern knowledge was established. This phrase serves as a foundation for a set of oppositions which cause the subject to be segregated

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and differentiated from the object, just as culture does with nature, and thus becoming independent and separate entities. These are two of the keys of modern thinking, ones that without any doubt trespass multiple spheres of the activity and the theoretical reasoning of the archaeological practice, leading to the comprehension of the material culture as an entity restricted to its volume, weight, cohesion, texture and functionality (Thomas 2004). The material culture was in itself unaware of man and space, more still, the material culture could be understood as a cultural resource through which humanity dominated and controlled nature (for example Childe 1951 [1936]). It was the imposition of one speech over another, where the scale leaned to one side or another depending on the economic stage the society was at.

With this logic of reasoning, rock art was seen as a materiality full of conflict. A visual production against a natural setting did not do more than expose the delicate equilibrium between culture and nature, making apparent the opposition between the both (Leroi Gouhran 1964). Starting with the application of a hit that led to the making of an engraving, or with some strokes of paint, the rock changed from a natural element to become a cultural reality.

One of the most used perspectives of study of rock art has been the spatial perspective due to its immobile material character. From one point of view, that is, from a functionalist and economical perspective, the rock art distribution was an indicator of displacement routes or of the concentration of critical resources for the economical reproduction of society, thus representing a cultural imposition that took advantage of the natural order with the object of maximizing the adaptive processes of a community. On the other hand, from a perspective focused on the spatial symbolism of rock art, the first theoretical proposals of landscape Archeology understood rock art as culturizing and semantizing element of space, therefore reproducing by one means or another, the subject-object dichotomy and the opposition between culture and nature like two separate and exclusive elements.

To our understanding, both of these lines of thoughts are based on a modernist perspective that reproduces a vision of the environment like that of a globe (Ingold 2000), where we, and in this case, rock art are separate beings, separated from the world. "The global environment is not a lifeworld; it is a world apart from life" (Ingold 2000: 210).

Though both points of view have given us a many interesting contributions for the archeological understanding of rock art, the question arises if it is possible to transfer this approach in search of a perspective that advances beyond the dichotomic fundaments that have predominated in the spatial interpretation of rock art.

We believe this is possible. As some authors have proposed (Battaglia 1983, Gell 1998), the relationship established between individuals and materiality are not necessarily relationships between delimited and separate entities, on the contrary,

they complement each other and constitute a totality where the object-subject dichotomy does not have a greater validity, instead they form a being-in-conjunction (i.e. Bloch 1995). In the case of rock art, we believe that this relationship and to be-in-conjunction begins with the surrounding space, that we call nature. Nevertheless, this does not exist as an imposition and segregation between the rock engravings, space and nature, where the first organizes the following two, rather we believe that rock art, space and the elements that conform nature have syntactic and significant relations between them and each of them needs the others in order to conform an integrated totality.

Rock art, space and nature conform an imaginary architecture which overcome the nature-culture dichotomy producing a complex, structured and expanded reality that rests upon dialogues, interaction and symmetric and significant relationships amongst them. Without these interactions simply none would make sense. Thus, this architectural conformation goes beyond the materiality of material culture, and embraces the rationality that gives it sense and value.

It is through this perspective that we think it is feasible to undertake the study of the rock art in the central zone of Chile, escaping the necessarily functional reasoning and search of meanings in order to approach other forms of being of the material culture.

CASE STUDIES: THE INTUITION

We pretend to undertake three case studies in this discussion. The three are located in the upper basin of the Aconcagua River, central Chile (Figure 1), and two rock art styles have been proposed for these localities (Troncoso 2005). The first of them is associated with the Late Intermediate period (1000 – 1430 a.C.), time of local prehistory in which we find basically self-sufficient peasant communities and in which there is no evidence of great social differentiations. A second style is assigned to the Late period (1430 – 1530 a.C.), time at which the populations of the area of study are incorporated to the Inca State sphere of power.

Case I: Casa Blanca, Putaendo

In the *rinconada*¹ of Casa Blanca, valley of Putaendo, one hundred and three rock engravings have been identified and are associated with the two styles of rock art previously mentioned, finding no notorious differences in the locations of either of them.

¹ Angle that is formed by the union of two mountains.

In trying to comprehend the disposition of these blocks of rock art, we found that they are not located in the entire *rinconada*, but only in the Southern half of it (Figure 2). The absence of rock art in the Northern sector could be interpreted as a bias produced by three specific factors. The first being the existence of another particular archeological record which would explain this dichotomy. The second would be the association with some particular resource in that space that would in turn define an opposition and, third, the absence of rocks that could be engraved.

To this respect, great part of the investigation was oriented at falsifying the significance of this North-South pattern, and which now permits us to indicate that none of the three previously proposed alternatives are feasible. On one hand, so much in the North sector as in the South of the *rinconada*, there does not exist any other type of archeological record that would justify an opposition of this type between both halves. Likewise, the distribution of resources is the same in both sectors, so we cannot assume a differentiation of this type in either sector. Finally, we quantified the rocks that could be engraved in the Northern sector of Casa Blanca, and that, nevertheless did not present engravings. This count allowed us to identify at least 100 rocks whose surface and prime material could be engraved, but did not present signs of petroglyphs.

In this scenario, we considered that the differentiation between both halves of the sector is significant for the understanding of the spatial logic of the rock art in this sector.

Case II: Paidahuen Hill

Paidahuen Hill corresponds to an extensive hill island with an extension of over one kilometer. Two hundred and eleven blocks of rock art have been identified and all are associated with the two styles of rock art previously mentioned.

As in the case of Casa Blanca, the distribution of the blocks with engravings are concentrated in the Southern portion of the hill, exactly two hundred ten of the blocks were located in the Southern sector and only one in the Northern sector of the hill. This dichotomy is even more significant considering that the blocks were found in 20% of the hill and the remaining 80% of the hill had no signs of petroglyphs (Figure 3a).

Once again, we believe that such differentiation is significant and does not respond to investigation bias. This is especially true when we consider that a sum of rocks that could possibly have engravings in the Northern half of the hill, which easily surpassed two hundred rocks.

Case III: Campos de Ahumada

Twenty two sites of rock art were identified, summing a total of forty seven blocks with engravings.

When we observe the distribution of the blocks of art rock we find that these tend to be concentrated in one particular area of the zone under study, leaving an infinite amount of other areas that were not greatly altered by the production of rock art (Figure 4a). Once again we find a concentration of the rocks with engravings in the Southern sector of the studied area, thus registering forty two blocks with engravings. Meanwhile, only five petroglyphs were identified in the Northern sector of Campos de Ahumada (Figure 4a).

As in the previous cases, we once again find that the differentiation is significant due to the fact that in the Northern sector of Campos de Ahumada a great amount of blocks that potentially could be carved, had no engravings.

CASE STUDY: THE POSSIBILITY

The previously analyzed cases reproduce a spatial distribution pattern of the rock art in three different zones from the upper basin of the Aconcagua River. This pattern is characterized by the opposition between a Northern half that presents scarce or no rock art and a Southern half where the engravings are highly frequent. But, the question arises. To what extent are these distribution patterns and the North-South differentiation significant and not impositions of the investigator regarding archaeological records? To what extent are the investigators overcoming the modern invention of material culture?

First of all, we should recall that in the three zones that were studied, the first act to falsify this pattern was to quantify the amount of blocks in the Northern half of the study areas that had the feasibility of being engraved, nevertheless, they presented no rock art. In all the cases we found that there was a real and significant availability of rocks that could have been carved, and the absence of rock art in these areas leads us to think that this is a product of intentionality.

Secondly, and contrary to what a functionalistic logic would suggest, this distribution pattern cannot be explained in any of the cases by the association between rock art and particular resources or mobility routes within the area. In no case does either of these arguments explain why the three different places present the same pattern, even though they have different environmental and geomorphologic conditions and resources.

Thirdly, in order for these patterns to be significant, they need to be anchored in objective references that will allow us to define an axis of segregation and differentiation between what we call a Northern sector and a Southern sector. If we review the particular characteristics of the three zones under study, we find that these axis, or thresholds, is constructed starting from particular and significant elements of the space. These elements are specific features that mark a distinction in the configuration of the surrounding space where the rock art is located.

Case I: Casa Blanca, Putaendo.

If we review the location of the rock art blocks in the Casa Blanca area, we find natural characteristics that exist in this area, which enables the construction of a visual axis that is anchored in the space forms. The space in question is a ravine that extends from East to West and it is where the site Casa Blanca 14 is located. This is the longest, deepest and narrowest ravine in the entire *rinconada* and it has the peculiarity that if we make a lineal projection of it, we would see that it crosses the saddle that is on the East border of the ravine and separates the small hill, where the sites Casa Blanca 2, 3, 4 and 6 are located, from the mountainous cord that is located towards the North. Therefore, it generates this natural characteristic, a visual alignment in the space that allows to project an imaginary line of the continuation Ravine towards the East of the *rinconada* of Casa Blanca (Figure 2).

The generation of this visual axis enables us to create a division in the space based on the conjunction of this particular element of nature and the frequency of blocks with engravings, defining a Southern area abundant in rock art and a Northern area with only one block with engravings.

Moreover, the construction of this spatial and visual axis trespasses the limits of this place, inasmuch as its projection toward the East shows continuity in the spatial organization of the adjacent *rinconada*. This situation becomes even more dramatic, inasmuch this *rinconada* is quite greater in dimensions than that of Casa Blanca and, nevertheless, does not present engravings North of this possibly constructible imaginary axis, where the blocks are exclusively located on the hill island that is situated South of this line.

Case II: Paidahuen Hill.

As in the previous case, the revision of the spatial characteristics in which rock art is inserted and located in this site gives us the keys to unravel the significant value of the North-South differentiation. The answer lies in the configuration of the hill. Though it has a form that extends along the North-South axis, as one observes the details, one can appreciate that in the last third of the sector, where the differentiation between a Southern half and a Northern one is established, one can see a significant inflection in the relief of the hill. Although in the air photography such inflection is minor, in the visual phenomenal reality this inflection generates a greater visual effect, greater because from this point the Northern sector of the hill looks different, as if the it had another form, its peaks separate and are differentiated from the Southern peaks, where the engravings are located. This inflection produces a breaking of the lineal visual axis that differentiates and segregates these two sectors (Figures 3a and 3b).

In this case, the differentiation between a Northern and a Southern part responds again to the production of a visual axis, one that in this case takes advantage of the

inflection of the hill and the presence of a saddle between one sector and the other, originating the division of the space. Again we find that this dichotomy is materialized in a subtle difference in which the opposition is defined by the frequency of blocks in each zone and that the separation is established as of an imaginary oblique axis that is anchored in a clearly identifiable different, particular and natural characteristic in the space

Case III: Campos de Ahumada.

Considering the spatial distribution of the blocks of rock art in this sector, we can suggest that once again the segregation between a Northern and a Southern half rests in a specific natural and significant element, in this case, the El Arpa ravine. In fact, the disposition of the majority of the blocks of rock art in the area suggests that this ravine constitutes a visual conduct that articulates great part of the rocks. If we were to extend an imaginary line from this ravine, it would divide the space in two halves and in these two halves we would appreciate a frequency pattern of the rock art similar to the patterns described previously, scarce blocks in the North and abundant engraved rocks in the South (Figure 4a).

This characteristic is not random since the El Arpa ravine is a natural element that clearly differentiates itself from the other ravines in the Campos de Ahumada zone. It is the only one in the area that forms part of the premountain range and differentiates itself from the rest due to its deepness and extension; it also presents a series of live colors on its surface, product of the mineral substrate of the mountains that enclose it (Figure 4b).

Therefore, based on the particular natural elements of the local space, this axis is built. It generates a differentiation founded on its intrinsic properties, which segregates it from the rest of the surrounding elements. And it is on this particular element that rock art gravitates and produces the North-South separation axis. In fact, the specific analyses related to the definition of the complexity rates in the disposition of all the rock art in the area indicate that the most complex petroglyphs are found in the Eastern sector of Campos de Ahumada and in the proximity of the El Arpa ravine, constituting a second level to contrast this hypothesis. (Troncoso 2006).

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the three cases analyzed in this work we find the reiteration of a pattern of the spatial location of the rock art that rests upon the opposition between a Northern half, that presents scarce petroglyph records, and Southern half with an abundant frequency of engravings. In all the examples, this spatial structure is anchored on

the surrounding space that is particular and different and acts like a delimitating axis that divides and organizes this distribution. The alterity of the space becoming an active and essential reference for the location of the rock art. When inserted in a finite space, materiality dialogues with its' environment and alterity, thus articulating a syntax and relation of symmetry that enables the construction of a significant totality. It is through this spatial alterity that interchain the differences and particularities of the space in order to produce and reproduce a system of dualistic organization.

Thanks to this dialogue, rock art engages in significant chains with environmental elements in a relation of symmetry and interanimation (Kirk 2006). One that enable the construction and definition of one another, thus anchoring the content of the engravings in a dimension that transcends the materiality of the rock and the composition of the designs. Thereby founding itself on a greater context: its surrounding space and certain aspects of it.

The materiality and possibilities of the sense of rock art transcend the material culture, overcoming its modern conception and it approximates us to a more open and fluid reality that starts from the necessary and significant dialogue and dialect that has already been stated. Thus, to understand the engravings without comprehending the local space and the presence of these different elements, and understanding these spatial elements without the existence of the rock art, will unable us to appreciate the complexity of the expression and content of these cultural manifestations. Rocks, engravings and the surrounding space conform an integrated reality which cannot be understood separately. Neither subject, nor object, nor culture, nor nature. On the contrary, we are in presence of an Andean spatial logic; we are in presence of Uywaña, an Andean concept that defines the following: "neither nature nor culture exists as objects in itself. What do exist are relationships between beings... These are not hierarchical in orders of reality, but are included and nested in a same integrated reality, in which one type of relation implicates the other, and so on uninterruptedly" (Haber 2004: 27). Rocks, engravings and the alterity of the space materialize Uywaña.

Not only does the relationship between rock art and space remit to Uywaña, at the same time it also responds to a greater Andean logic, which is the materialization of the concept of duality at a spatial level. As it is known, amongst the different elements that structure the Andean thought, three are key references that are reproduced at different levels of the social life: duality, tripartition and cuatripartition, being the first of these the base for the cuatripartition (Harris and Bouysee Cassagne 1988, Wachtel 1976). Thus, in the three study cases, a particular Andean spatial concept takes form – duality –, and repeats the same pattern: the predominance of the South over the North. Once again, it is this Andean structuring concept that transcends the physical perspective of the material culture and anchors itself in the concept of

Uywaña, conforming a dichotomy between two spaces in which nature and culture, or spaces without engraving and spaces with engravings, conform an integrated totality in which there is no domination of one over the other, rather a particular and necessary dialogue in which they articulate to conform that totality that is a culturally constructed space.

Nevertheless, this dualistic conformation does not act as an imposition on space, like a pre-constructed model that is laid out on a flat and fixed dimension, but very on the contrary, it is a product of a manner living that constructs, a living that is materialized by the strokes on a rock and the conformation of designs, a living in which the alterity of space transcends itself, as it does the logic of material culture, conforming these distributions that originate the archaeological record. We are in the presence of an imaginary architecture that materializes a space through the rock art, and the space simultaneously materializes the engravings as of its particularities.

The material culture has transcended its physicality, rock art is not rock and its engravings, it is more than that. Rock art remits to space, as space remits to rock art. Its meanings and logic are relational and necessary for the production of this imaginary architecture that denies our concept of material culture, culture and nature, to conform an imaginary all whose lines materialize into an archaeological record that in itself transcends the artifact for being-in-the-totality.

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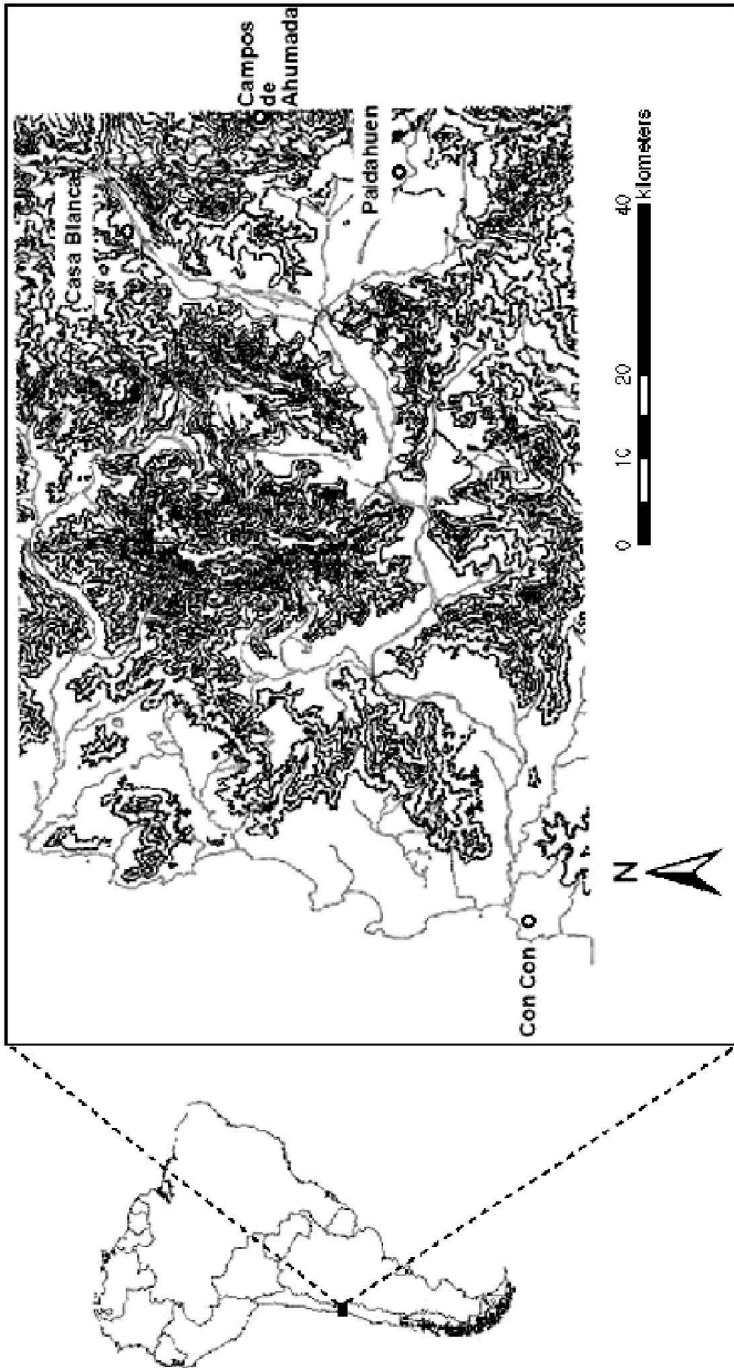


Fig. 1 – Map of the study area.

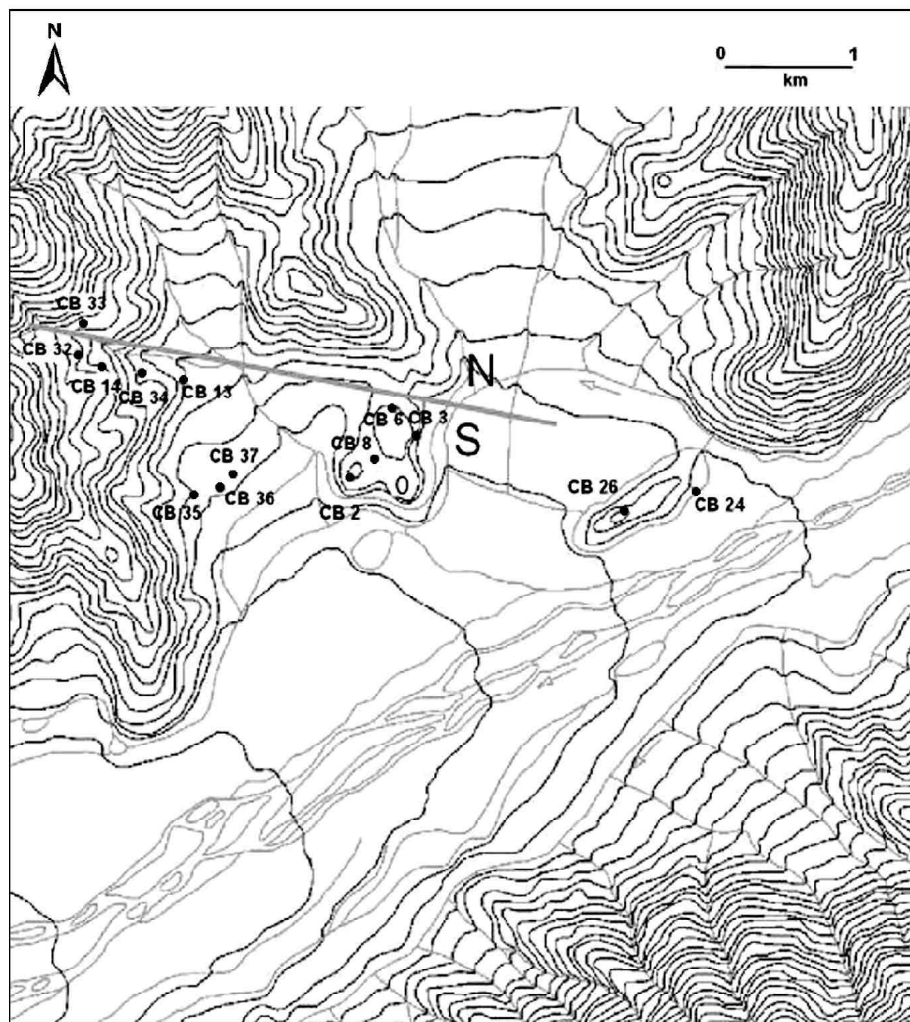


Fig. 2 – Spatial distribution of the rock art in the Casa Blanca zone, with the North-South segregation.

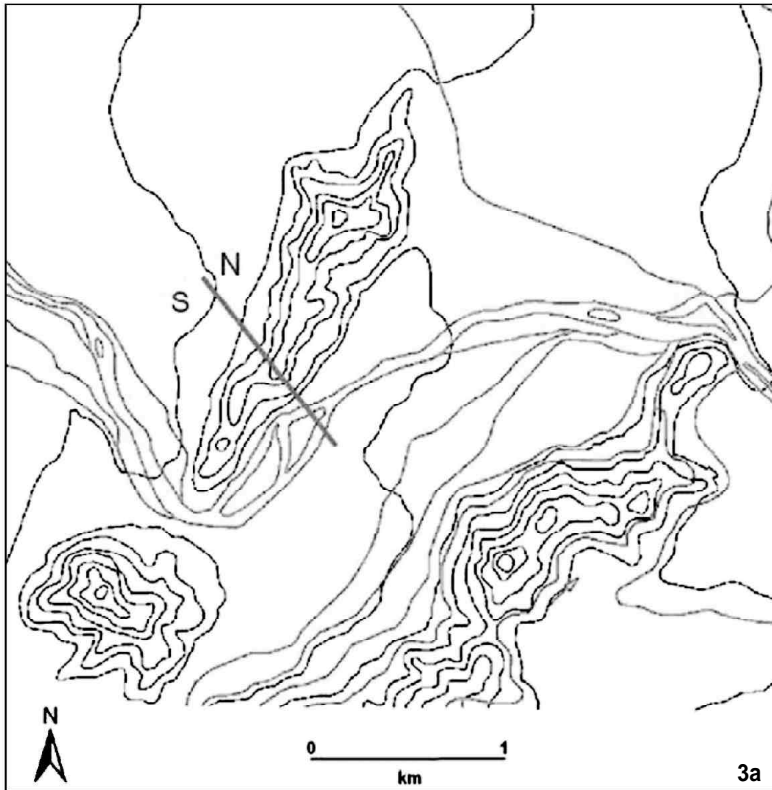
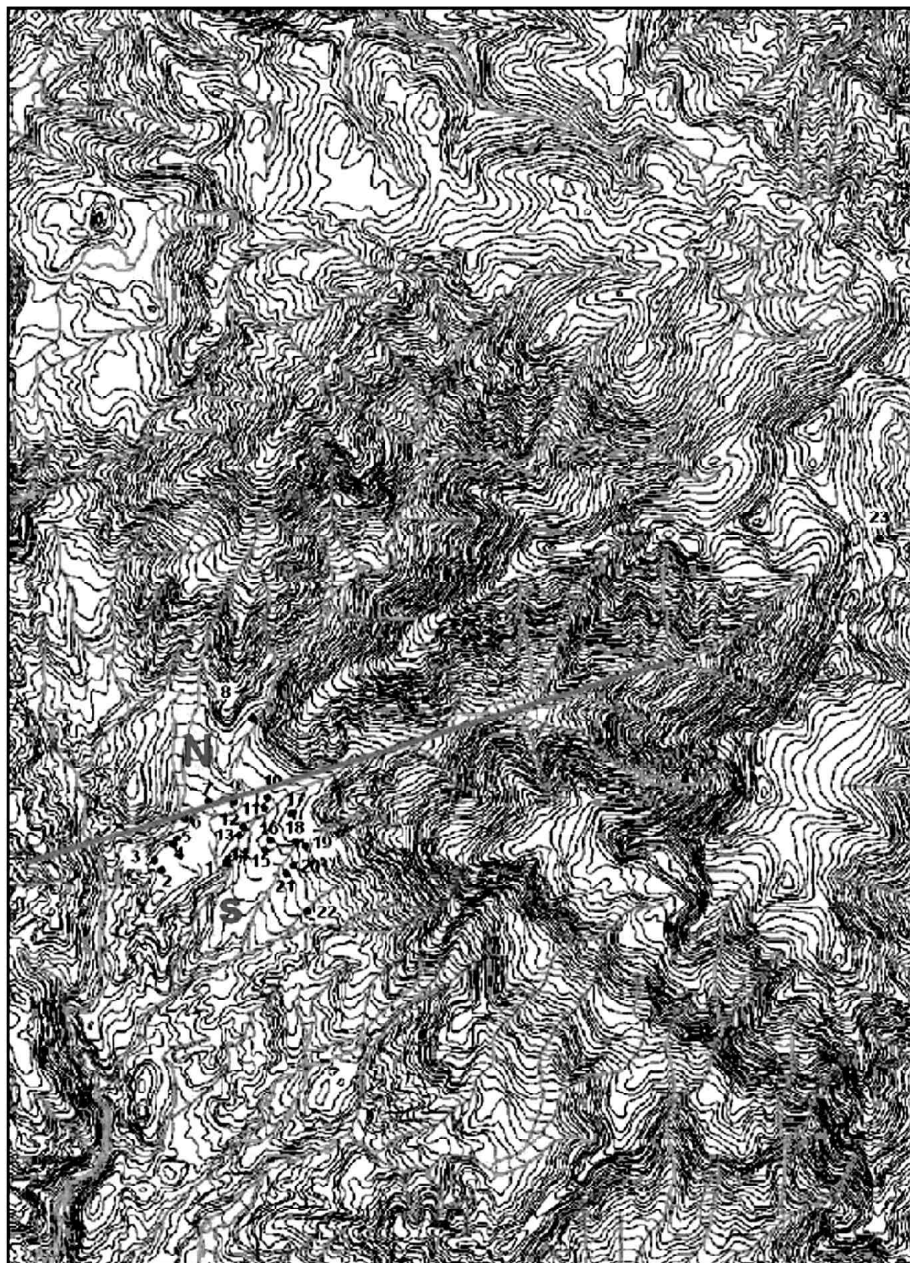


Fig. 3 – Cerro Paidahuen rock art: **3a**, North-South segregation of the rock art distribution; **3b**, view of the saddle and the mountain inflection that generates the dual division axis.



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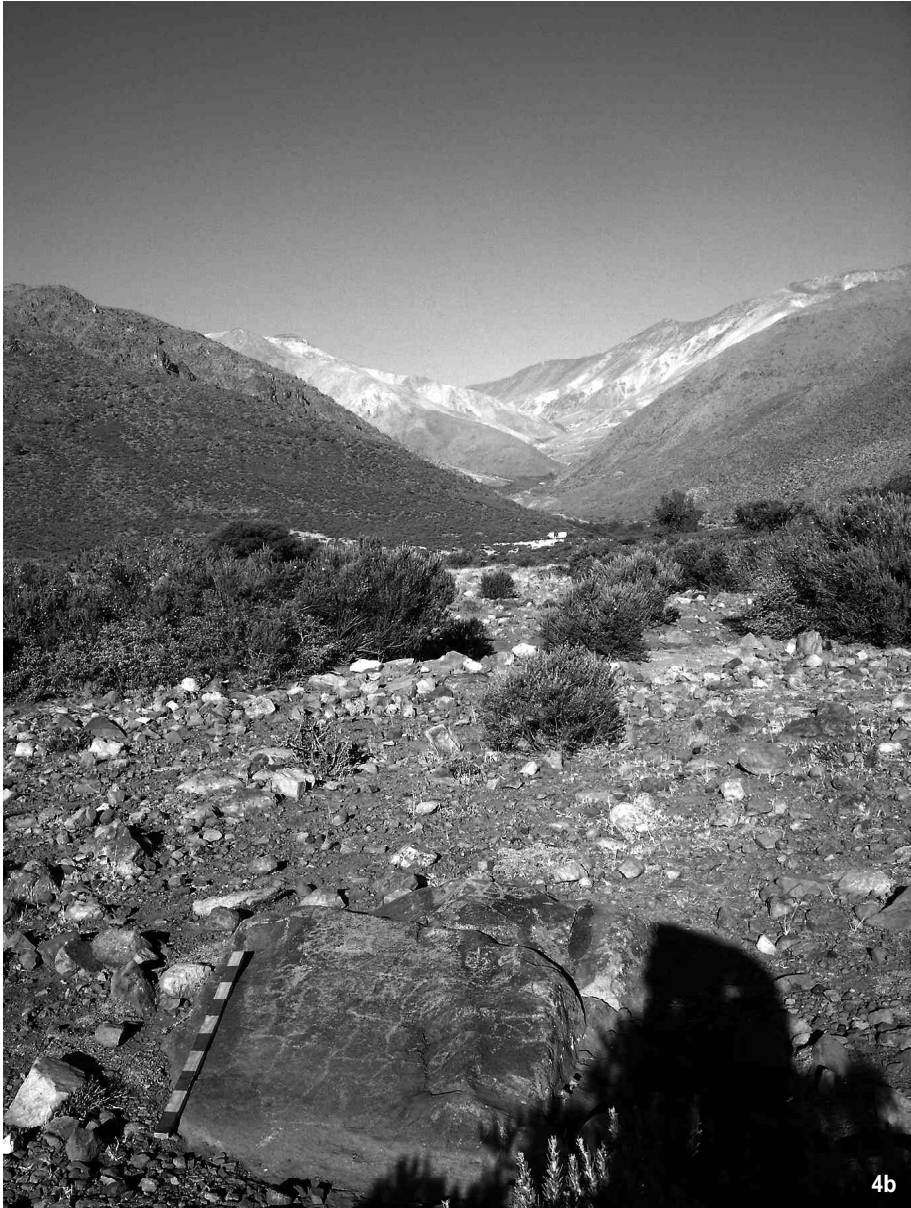


Fig. 4 – Campos de Ahumada rock art: **4a**, distribution of the rock art sites with the North-South segregation; **4b**, View of El Arpa Ravine. **Figure 4a and 4b must be in the same page. This could be more small?**