Microfossils as narrators and protagonists in the stories of agricultural landscapes

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Résumé

Through agro-archaeological studies in the El Bolsón valley (Catamarca, Argentina), we have identified different modalities of productive spaces as well as different agricultural practices that gave rise to a specific history for the place. We have carried out multiple microfossil extractions from sediments sampled in agricultural structures, as an avenue through which to interpret the special relationship through which farmers have involved themselves with plants under cultivation. While these studies allow us to interpret these relationships in local contexts or restricted to the site itself, the integration of information allows us to think about the different ways in which farming practices coexisted and also in its changes and continuities over time. In this paper we present a comparison of two nearby areas (El Alto El Bolsón and Yerba Buena) which, from the archaeological point of view, are considered two separate sites. They settle in different geomorphological scenarios, and present different architectural and artefactual features in surface. These supposedly indicated a technical and perhaps chronological differentiation, but the advancement of research has allowed us to review this idea, so both sites have participated in the same historical process. In order to compare the two sites regarding land use and agricultural practices, we studied microfossils. This approach allows us to understand farming practices in the long term. In this sense, the approach is contextual and not nominal. This implies that it is not the identification of a given taxa from phytoliths or starches (in the case of plants) or diatoms in particular, what allows us to interpret changes and continuities in farmers landscapes conformation, but rather the relationships, links and causalities that form the structure of land use itself. So, this study shows continuity in the variability of agricultural practices rather than a correspondence with different times of occupation. By the time the comprehensive and integrated evidence makes us think that the variability in agricultural practice was not exclusive to one or the other site, but rather appears in both, excluding then the chronological factor from the equation. This contextual approach, together with the methodology of multiple extraction of microfossils used by the team, allow us to visualize in a more complex, in the original sense of the word "landscape" to what otherwise would be only profiles, levels, samples and microfossils.

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