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Benjamin Ballester, Francisco Gallardo

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Painting a lost world

THE RED ROCK ART OF EL MÉDANO

An intriguing corpus of red-painted rock art has been found in northern Chile. Benjamín Ballester, Francisco Gallardo, and their team have been working to record the art – and the lost world of the artists – as they explained to CWA.

Chile's Atacama Desert is a forbidding, desolate place. The world's driest non-polar desert, its inhospitable terrain has near-zero rainfall rates and only a few rivers supply it with water. Yet on its western margin, where the ancient coastal mountains sink under the waves of the Pacific Ocean, there exists one of the world's richest marine ecosystems. Between the sea and the steep desert mountain cliff is a coastal plain, no more than 2km wide, where people once lived, their history intimately linked to the sea and its resources. They drew their universe on the stone, in distinctive red-painted rock art known as El Médano, after the desert ravine in which it was first found. What do we know about this art, the artists, or the world of extremes in which they lived? Since 2010, our project has striven to unravel their story.

Picturing the past

Augusto Capdeville, a post-office manager from Taltal on the Atacama Desert littoral, first encountered the red rock art in 1910. Thereafter, the Chilean archaeologist Hans Niemeyer returned to study more in the 1970s. However, much remained to be discovered. Indeed, our project has already located El Médano art in four other nearby

desert ravines and at a few other coastal rock shelters (see location map above). The ravines are high on the mountain cliff, some 700m and 1,300m above sea level, and around a 12km trek from the coast, and all of them are rich with red art. For example, at the ravine of Izcuña alone, we recorded over 300 paintings.

The sea and its inhabitants dominate the art: whales, turtles, swordfish, dolphins, sea lions, and sharks saturate the panels, with some allied depictions of humans, their sailing craft, and camelids (guanaco and the like). The artists painted with red ochre, a pigment with a long cultural tradition in this littoral, which is produced using iron oxide extracted from the coastal mountains.

Although El Médano art appears to be a homogenous and well-defined rock art style, we have in fact identified at least two artistic traditions. One comprises realistic, naturalistic, meticulously detailed depictions, which are finely rendered, and carefully delineate each anatomic feature of the animals. The other contains schematic, more abstract, less detailed motifs, although still focused on sea-related subjects.

One of the most complex and frequently recurring themes is the hunt. Again and again we find images of tiny craft,



ABOVE An example of a hunting scene from the El Médano ravine. Note the size of the marine creature (49cm long in the original) in comparison to the tiny craft.

carrying one, two, or no seafarers, pictured alongside marine prey. The scenes focus on the sea creatures, which are scaled up typically in a proportion of three to one in comparison to the craft. The animals are painted in solid fill, with emphasis on their anatomical features, such as their dorsal, pectoral or caudal fins. Meanwhile, the tiny craft lack detail; they are sometimes vanishingly small, and are linked to the enormous prey with straight lines that appear to represent harpoon ropes.

In most cases there is one craft per prey, each using up to four retention



ABOVE LEFT Sea creatures under attack, from the newly discovered Izcuña site. ABOVE Depiction of a marine creature (also 49cm long) being captured, from the El Médano site. FAR LEFT Tiny craft are attached to these sea creatures (the longest measures 16.3cm) by what appear to be harpoon ropes. From the El Médano site. LEFT Each boat in this image is attached to its prey by up to four lines (the largest creature is 33cm long). From the Izcuña site.

lines and harpoons. However, sometimes we find a single craft catching or dragging several animals – though whether this represents a visual exaggeration or a real reflection of their hunting capabilities remains unclear.

Who were the people? What can we say about when, or how, they lived? To understand more, we need to turn to excavation and ethnohistory.

Digging deeper

In a bid to discover the lost world of the artists, we excavated three of the coastal rock shelters found to contain El Médano

art, several coastal shell midden dumps, and hundreds of human graves.

All of the data points to a local society heavily reliant on the sea. Fishing-related items (including hooks) first appear on the coast from 5000 BC, while the excavated middens (which date from 4000 BC onwards) include the bones of large marine prey. Moreover, though a hunter-gatherer people, they left cemeteries (which date from 4000 BC to AD 500), and within the graves we often find offerings of marine creatures, again presumably reflecting the importance of such creatures. In addition, we have

uncovered complex harpoon heads, complete harpoons, and relatively well-preserved hunting lines made of sea-lion skin, sometimes up to 70m long, plus entire sailing oars, and even a few poorly preserved sea craft.

With respect to understanding their sailing technology, the historical ethnographic accounts provide much useful information. It seems that their rafts were quite sophisticated, comprising two floats, each made from a complete sea-lion skin, with hundreds of cactus spines used one beside the other to join both skin pieces, and then sewn together ▶

RIGHT There was a world reliant and focused on the sea. This human burial, dated to c.1000 AD, contains the remains of a boat.



BELOW View across the coastal strip that lies between the mountains and the sea. This was home to the people who left the captivating El Médano red rock art.





LEFT Examples of the fishing gear retrieved from graves within the coastal cemeteries.

ABOVE Some of the graves also contained well-preserved hunting line made of sea-lion skin, as shown here.

ABOVE RIGHT To understand more about the technologies being used, the team also turned to historical ethnographic accounts. This image shows two seafarers sailing in an inflated seal-skin raft with their harpoons. It was painted by the French naturalist Alcides D'Orbigny, based on observations at the bay of Cobija in 1830.

RIGHT A lost art: here we see early 20th-century experiments in sailing traditional craft.

with a cotton cord to carefully seal the junction. The sealed float would then have been caulked with a coat of sea-lion grease mixed with red fine powder to obtain impermeability and resistance.

The world of the fishers

Such craft continued to be used several centuries after European contact, at least until the beginning of the 20th century in some littoral locations. The first written reference to these rafts dates to 1558, by Jerónimo de Bibar, a writer and historian who travelled with Pedro de Valdivia during the conquest of the territories that now make up Chile. But the 1616-1618 report by the friar Antonio Vásquez de Espinoza contains perhaps the best description not only of the inflated raft, but also of the whale-hunting activities using harpoon devices and skin lines. In his words,

There is abundance of copper in that province, and with it they make prongs or spears... then they go out hunting whales... when the Indian has spied one asleep... he goes out to it on his sea-lion skin raft... [and] gives it a harpoon thrust under the fin, where its heart is, and immediately drops into the water to escape the whale's reaction; for when it feels the wound it is furious and bellows loudly and dashes the water high in the air in the wild and angry struggles which the pain causes; then it starts off bellowing toward deep water, until it yields to mortal fatigue. Meanwhile the Indian has recovered

his raft and returned to shore to watch and locate the point off the coast where it is dying, and they remain on guard till they see it stop. Then all that clan and family group who have been carefully watching, go there at once together with all their friends and neighbours for the feast; they open it up on one side, and some stay inside gorging and others outside for six or eight days until they cannot stand it any longer for the stench.

This, then, was the value of sea hunting and seafarers in this littoral society. Aside from the significant economic benefits handed to the community by this activity in the form of big banquets and daily food, they also occupied a central role on their representational universe and visual imaginations, ideologically reinforcing the social position gained through their economic practice.

As to the thorny question of the date-range of the rock art, this remains unsolved. Representational correlations between paintings, technological devices (harpoons and some arrows), and marine animals only allow us to conclude that

the art was left by these coastal people probably sometime between 5000 BC and AD 1500. With time and through working on new projects in the area, we may refine this chronology, but for now we have been using the art as a means to flesh out a wider archaeological picture, and to begin to 'get inside the heads' of the people who once lived on this formidable stretch of the coast – after all, their representational world is clearly very closely linked to the material needs of everyday life.

Our next step is to try to understand more about the harpoon and its chronology, and to learn more about the technological subtleties of the rafts. A marine biologist and ichthyologist are also currently helping us to identify all the individual species shown in the art, which is helping us to appreciate this people's knowledge of the sea and its creatures.

Already we are beginning to understand more about the lost world of these artists – and what a world it was. Simply recording their art and archaeology, in this environment of extremes, has been hard physical work. Their art – painted a good 12km from their coastal camps – whispers to us about the vastness of their territory. And each year we discover more. It has been quite extraordinary to have the chance to record this large corpus of rock art, which is the most remarkable of its type in the South American Pacific watershed. ■

SOURCE Benjamín Ballester and Francisco Gallardo work at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Intercultural and Indigenous Studies (ICIIS) of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, in Santiago. Ballester is a specialist on coastal and marine archaeology, especially the economic and political issues of the Atacama Desert hunter-gatherers. Gallardo's research focuses on material visual culture, economy, ideology, settlement patterns, and mobility from the Atacama Desert.