

## ANNUAL REPORT: ARGENTINA – USPALLATA 2016 FIELD SCHOOL

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Students excavating near a rock shelter

This was the first year of the Uspallata field school. Students actively participated and contributed to the project's research goals and to the archaeology of the Argentine Andes. This was a smaller project so everyone's participation was important in the field. Back at the hostel where we were staying, students took charge of organizing field forms, photographs, and artifact bags. We excavated and surveyed in areas adjacent to a famous rock art site, Cerro Tunduqueral. This research provides the first clues about the people who made this rock art, which is roughly contemporaneous with the other archaeological contexts we investigated. The field school had three phases.

First, we excavated a rock shelter near the rock art site. We hit bedrock about five feet down. Students took turns digging into the pit's colorful sandstone stratigraphy, screening for lithic artifacts and ostrich eggshell, and recording the excavation on field forms. The profile of this deep excavation is important for understanding this site. Students used Photoshop to process photos and draw the site's profile. They also organized notes and artifacts from a 2010 excavation of the same site, in order to integrate data from a previous excavations. The site was used only occasionally by foragers, so artifact density was low. However, there were artifacts even in the deeper levels, including a few diagnostic lithic tools, suggesting that people had used this place for thousands or years. Spending all day at the rock shelter, it was easy for us to imagine people in the past looking out on the open landscape to the north. They probably knew when and where to look for ostrich eggs, a reliable source of protein in the late Spring and early Summer. The data from this rock shelter are important because it is located in the middle of the valley bottom, while nearly all other excavations in the area are from high-altitude rock shelters.

Second, we moved our research down to the plain visible from the rock shelter. This area has extensive dispersals of artifacts on the surface, but the area had never been excavated. We

excavated two units in a large surface concentrations of artifacts. The first was part of a hearth – the stones were still in a circle, left untouched for centuries. There was ash, ceramic sherds, and expedient lithic tools visible on the surface, so we surmised there might be stratified remains, but no – erosion had not left anything cultural below the surface. Nearby areas had been severely impacted by seasonal water flows and in this case, wind was enough to remove the sediment and leave the artifacts on the surface. Judging by the arrangement of the hearth stones and the artifacts, their position was not significantly impacted by the erosion. This led us to take a fresh look at the concentrations of surface artifacts, which might have been discarded at different times, but wind and water erosion has left them all together on the surface.

Third, we surveyed and documented the surface concentrations. We laid out radial survey transects, with the goal of documenting the ebb and flow of artifact densities over space. This large area, called Uspallata Norte, included two alluvial fans. The northern one was much wider and moved much smaller rocks and artifacts. The southern one was narrower and moved larger rocks, which ancient inhabitants used to make lithic tools and ground stone. The consistent presence of ground stone and ceramic sherds is a strong indicator that people were spending long periods of time at these sites to make pottery and grind plants. Some areas had stone alignments reminiscent of canals, further supporting the possibility of agriculture. The survey transects documented that this archaeological material spread over four kilometers, and was densest adjacent to a dry river bed. It seems likely that this riverbed would have had water in the past, when the climate was more humid. We discussed this possibility with a visiting geomorphologist. We spent multiple days organizing and correcting forms and labels, as students learned first hand how sensitive field data can be to tired afternoons, unreliable GPSes, and illegible bag labels.

After the end of the field school, students submitted an abstract of a poster to be presented at the 82nd meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in Vancouver in April, 2017. The poster will present the preliminary results of the field research. Analysis of the artifacts is ongoing, which will be the basis for conference presentations and journal publications beginning next year.