

Chapter 2

Bioarchaeological Research in Argentina: Past, Present and Future Challenges

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Introduction

It is not possible to reach an understanding of the particular circumstances that have shaped the development of bioarchaeology in Argentina without taking into account the main historic, socio-cultural, ideological, and political conditions that have shaped the idiosyncratic development of the nation itself. A brief account of historical happenings that paralleled the development of bioarchaeology in Argentina is presented here.

By the time of the Iberians arrival in the New World, Spain was an absolute monarchy and had initiated the religious programs of the Counter Reformation and the Inquisition (Olin 1992). Through these monarchical and religious institutions, Spain succeeded in firmly imposing the religious zeal of Catholicism in Latin America, as well as establishing the commercial monopoly of the Metropolis over the newly incorporated territories. This era of Spanish colonial rule in Latin America would continue for nearly three centuries until the rise of regional liberation movements in the nineteenth century. This stage, which marked the end of the dominion of the Spanish kingdom over Argentinean territories, was subsequently succeeded by the beginning of yet another epoch of diplomatic, economic, ideological, and political dependency: that of the British Empire, whose influence

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would last until the first half of the twentieth century. This penultimate phase of dependence would be followed by yet another era of foreign control in Latin America, one which has lasted well into the twentieth century. That was the hegemonic diplomatic, ideological, and economic influence of the USA over the entire Latin America continent. This most recent chapter in a long history of dependences is well known as “America for the Americans”, a statement known as “the Monroe Doctrine” (Perkins 1927).

It was within the context of these diverse influences that the consolidation of the Argentine nation state took place. These efforts were decisively influenced by the political ideology of what is known as the “Generation of the 1880s” (the presidencies of Bartolomé Mitre, Domingo F. Sarmiento, Nicolás Avellaneda, and Julio A. Roca, from 1862 to 1886) (Foster 1990). One of the socio-political results of this ideology was the opening of the borders of Argentina to a massive immigration of people. Most of these immigrants were drawn from Europe, which was considered to be pinnacle of the development of civilization. This migratory phenomenon was paralleled by a series of cruel military raids that in many cases escalated into true genocides of the native populations. This was particularly the case with those living in the Pampas whose fertile lands were coveted due to their richness and potential to foster the intense agricultural production and extensive cattle farming that would transform Argentina into “the granary of the world” (Lewis 1990).

It is in this way that the history of modern Argentina has developed. On the one hand, a narrative of Argentina’s past has been founded upon the denial of the existence of its native peoples, who have been dismissively labelled as “barbarians” and “primitive”—categorizations that in actuality have been accompanied by a discriminatory disdain for their cultures, ethnic origins, population roots, and subsistence economies. On the other hand, the construction of the Argentine national narrative has been based on the idyllic notion of Europe as the apogee of civilization and thus a social model that newly emerging nations such as Argentina must aspire to copy, emulate, and achieve. As a result of this latter mindset, the doors of academic life in Argentina were open to everything coming from Europe or that seemed European-like, because it was considered the most advanced, the most modern, the most exceptional, and, as a result, the most desirable. In many cases, the concepts and constructs mimicked by intellectuals in Argentina were already obsolete in their centres of origin, such as occurred with ideologies founded upon racism, totalitarianism, and segregation, all of which were characterized by intolerance as well as a strong resistance to change in paradigms (Boschín and Llamazares 1984). As this paper will evince, these circumstances contributed to the constraining of the development of bioarchaeology in Argentina.

Historical Background (1850–1970)

Historically in Argentina, the study of peoples of the past was the main focus of research in Archaeology and prehistoric physical anthropology. Although generally these two disciplines seem to have walked hand in hand in the development of prehistoric research, this paper aims to demonstrate that due to theoretical as well as historical reasons, osteological studies were almost always subordinated to archaeological research (Carnese et al. 1991–1992; Cocilovo and Mendonça 1989). This asymmetrical disciplinary dependence resulted in a delay in the development of prehistoric physical anthropology when compared to Archaeology, since the latter benefited from an ever-increasing number of researchers as well as from the innovations in theory and professional practice.

Human skeletal remains from burial sites have been systematically studied in Argentina since the early 1900s. This early and long-lasting phase of study spanned from the turn of the twentieth century until the late 1970s and was largely characterized by typological and racial approaches to the characterization and categorization of human remains. Guided by the prevailing notion that archaeological research serves to gather collections from cultures either already extinguished or in process of vanishing, researchers rapidly and repeatedly filled the shelves of the main museums (i.e. Museo Bernardino Rivadavia, the Museo Etnográfico, and the Museo de La Plata) with bone collections of “dead cultures and peoples” (i.e. Casanova 1943; Debenedetti 1930; Marelli 1910; Paulotti and de Paulotti 1950). Although these researchers performed systematic excavations of the human remains, the associated archaeological contexts were either dismissed as unimportant to the bioarchaeological research or simply recovered and stored separately. Additionally, skulls were often added to collections in the absence of accompanying postcranial bones (Fig. 2.1). As a result, the early days of prehistoric physical anthropology in Argentina was a time in which academic agendas were dominated by descriptive and largely uncritical studies, and the osteological reports were limited to mere appendixes attached at the end of archaeological papers (i.e. Chávez de Azcona in Cigliano 1967, Fortich Baca in Madrazo 1966; Marcellino and Ringuet 1973).

From an academic perspective, cultural as well as osteological remains from native peoples were considered “objects” that were worthy of collection. At the same time, the indigenous were simplistically and reductively grouped into a single, undifferentiated social category and were considered to be “peoples without history”. Among the cultural and political reasons for this trend was the intellectual worldview inherited from the Spanish conquest, which viewed the defeated native peoples as well as their cultures with a Eurocentric attitude of disdain (Olin 1992). This academic intellectual arrogance prevailed, leading to the disregard or outright denial of the importance of the indigenous Pre-Columbian past as a tool for the construction and consolidation of national identities and in defining the historic patrimony of the nation (Fig. 2.2) (González 1985).

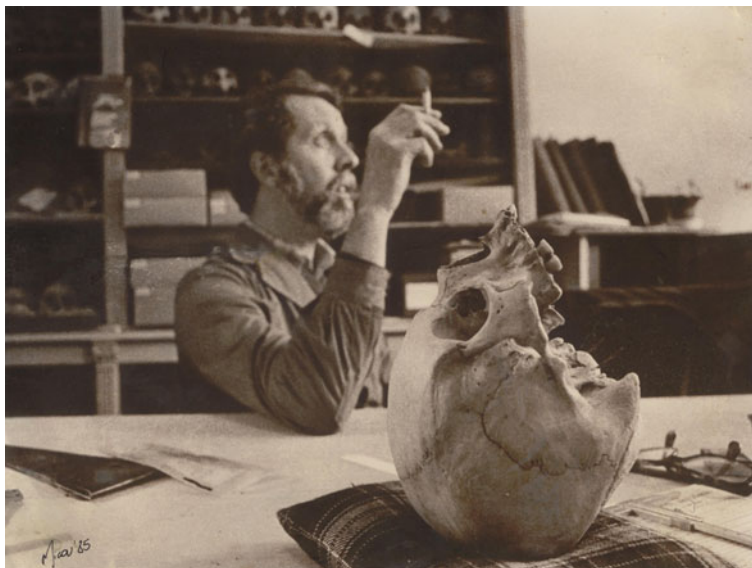


Fig. 2.1 Shelves filled with skull collections (Museo Etnográfico, Buenos Aires, Argentina)

The racial and typological approach to osteological studies predominated in Argentina from 1850 until 1970 and was characterized by morphological as well as metrical analyses of mostly craniological collections, the main goal being the study of racial diversity (Chillida 1943; Dillenius 1913; Scolni de Klimann 1938). The academic trend was influenced by the arrival in Argentina of representatives ideologically identified with “School of Vienna or Mödling” (Boschín and Llamazares 1984; González 1985; Madrazo 1985). This influx of foreign academic conceptual frameworks was augmented with the migration of many scholars from different European countries such as Germany, Austria, and Italy to Argentina soon after the end of World War II (Boschín and Llamazares 1984, González 1985; Madrazo 1985). As a whole, these foreign researchers were not only warmly welcomed, cared for, and protected by the Argentine government, but were also offered important academic positions in the main institutions of the country. Additionally, they enjoyed the sympathy of the then government in Argentina that was openly demonstrated towards the ideologies sustained by the defeated totalitarian regimes in Europe (González 1985; Madrazo 1985).

As a result of the constant inundation of intellectuals from an array of European countries and their significant influence in research institutions, typological as well as racial approaches to bioarchaeology continued to prevail in the academic life of Argentina during decades in the period between the close of nineteenth century and the second half of the twentieth century (cf. Carnese and Pucciarelli 2007). Furthermore, after World War II, the important theoretical and methodological developments that took place in countries such as England, France, and the USA or even in those countries from the Western Hemisphere (i.e. Peru, Mexico, and

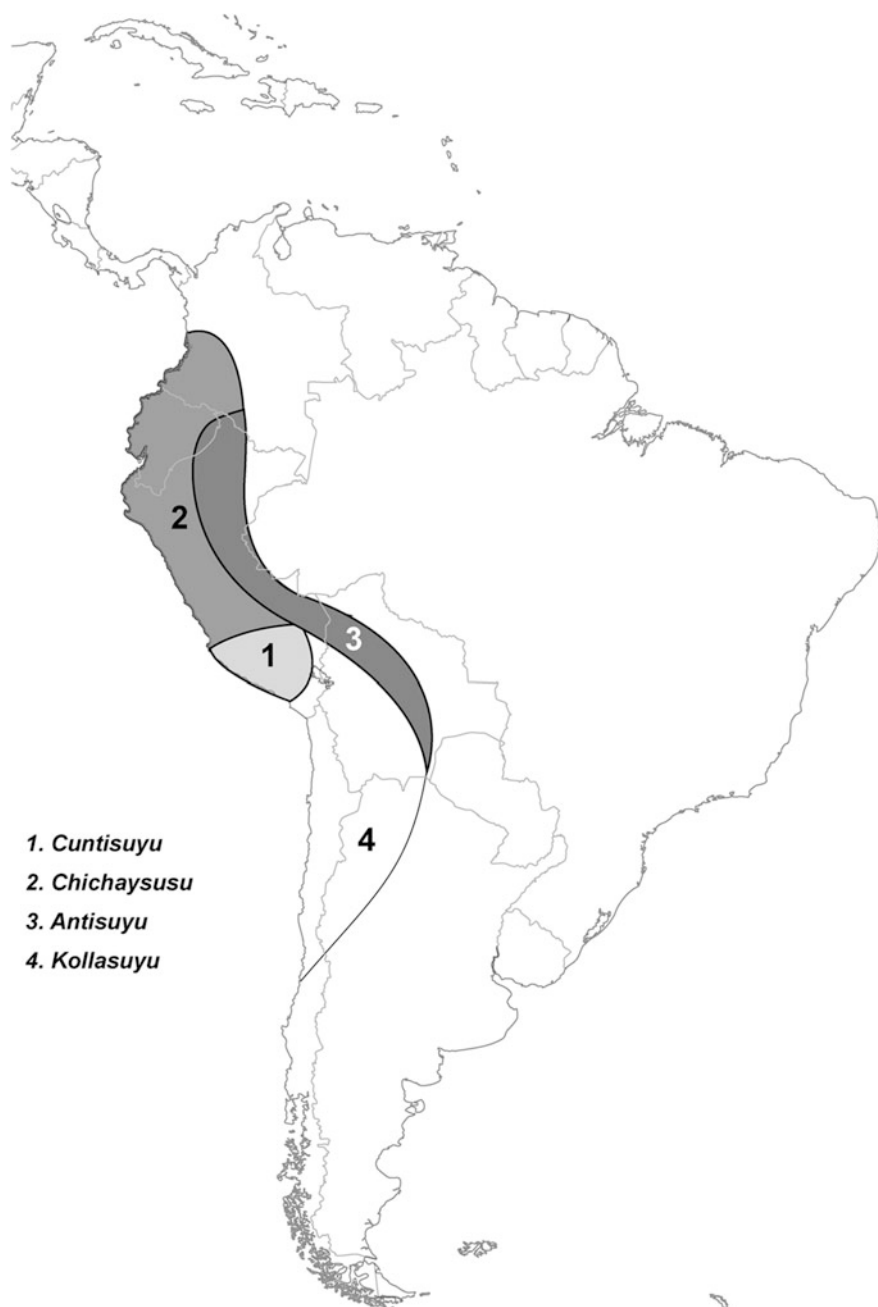


Fig. 2.2 Area covered by the Inka empire at the time of the conquest. As shown, the ultimate expansion of the Tawantinsuyu to the south (Kollasuyu) incorporated significant Argentinean territory

Chile) were not reflected in Argentinean academic discourse. Instead, academia in Argentina remained stagnant, with theoretical discussions continuing the aim of sustaining outmoded conceptualizations of race and the prehistoric peopling of the Americas (Stewart 1944, 1960). The reluctance to liberate physical anthropology from the antiquated principles associated with racial and typological approaches continued to persevere in spite of the pioneering efforts of scholars at the Museo de La Plata such as Alberto Rex González (González 1985), who postulated the need for introducing up-to-date modifications in the theory and practice of prehistoric physical anthropology. Perhaps the most important and influential academic figure in Argentine physical anthropology, as well as one of the most significant causes of its hindered development, was José Imbelloni, an Italian scholar with strong ties to the School of Vienna and the racialized, creationistic narratives of diffusion and typological differentiations endorsed by Frassetto (1918) and Sergi (1930).

For decades, the vigorous personality of Imbelloni succeeded in dictating the academic agendas in Argentina and was considered as one of the most prominent and iconic figures of the physical anthropology in the country. While his studies included the anthropometric recording of native populations, most of his research was purely descriptive and with an emphasis on craniology. Imbelloni's approach to the past was firmly grounded in concepts of biological and cultural diffusion and in a political ideology with a strong conservative basis. He became a powerful voice sustaining the idea that behind the veneer of morphological homogeneity, a great variety of forms and racial types was hidden and that it was this racial diversity that characterized native populations in the Americas. In this way, "pure" racial types were proposed to explain morphologic differences observed between different native peoples of the Americas (Imbelloni 1938). Those "pure" racial types were subsequently attributed to different population waves in which, according to Imbelloni, constituted the initial peopling of the Americas (*ibid*). Furthermore, in order to explain those morphologies that did not match exactly his idea of "pure", morphologic racial types, Imbelloni proposed the concept of "metamorphic types". This was his way of explaining the heterogeneity he observed which he interpreted as "hybridizations" between the different "pure" racial types that populated the Americas across the Bering Strait during successive waves of migration. In this way, Imbelloni's decades-long dominance drove osteological research in Argentina towards a true academic dead end and hampered the work of scholars as well as the arrival of new theories and academic practices. Although a series of papers published in the USA by T.D. Stewart (1944, 1960) criticized Imbelloni's approach, those publications and the ideas expressed in them were largely ignored at the time. Instead, the creationist-like theories and conservative ideas of Imbelloni endured in Argentinean academia until the 1970s (Boschín and Llamazares 1984).

Yet another obstacle to the development of physical anthropology in Argentina was the absence of comprehensive and continuous excavation of human remains in archaeological research projects. For decades, most physical anthropologists performed very little, if any, fieldwork to excavate skeletal remains (e.g. Chávez de Azcona in Cigliano 1967, Fortich Baca in Madrazo 1966; Imbelloni 1938;

Lehmann-Nitsche 1898, 1907, 1908; Marcellino 1981; Méndez and Salceda 1989, 2009). Instead, they were purely laboratory-based. The resulting reports would give a general analysis of race, pathology, stature, and, at best, some basic demographic data, although often using old-fashioned standards (Barboza et al. 2002, 2004). If the researcher was unable to reach a clear racial diagnosis, at least some morphological clues denoting the presence of more than one racial trait in the skulls were provided. This model for academic research was unquestioningly and unreflectively replicated in research projects throughout the greater part of the twentieth century. Imbelloni's typological and racial approach was finally abandoned in the 1970s and replaced by the biological concept of population (Mayr 1970).

Among the reasons for ideological resistance to academic change was the political and ideological intolerance that characterized the years of military dictatorship in Argentina (1955–1983). This period was characterized by a greater darkness than that presented by academic neglect, as the restrictive political–military regimes compelled many promising scholars to leave the country for fear of being suspected of subversive activities. All of these circumstances intertwined to generate an insurmountable obstacle for the academic innovation in a country that was already strongly marked by ideological colonialism, intellectual dependence, violent repressions, and theoretical paralyses (Madrado 1985). Although the first census of native populations was undertaken by the Argentinean government in 1966, this did not augur greater inclusivity nor did it result in the improvement of socio-cultural conditions of these peoples, nor the traditional approaches to the indigenous in academic agendas.

While physical anthropology stagnated under Imbelloni's influence, some changes occurred in archaeological theory and practice. This was thanks to the leadership of Alberto Rex González, who has since become considered the father of modern archaeology in Argentina. From the 1950s on, the concepts of diachrony as observed in stratigraphies and in absolute radiocarbon dating were incorporated into Argentine archaeology, along with the chronological framework of archaeological sequences characterized by cultural influences, cultural changes, and cultural replacements (Fig. 2.3).

It was ultimately with the arrival of Processualism in the 1970s that the approaches and schemes of diffusion and typology were definitively abandoned in Argentina. Coinciding with the advent of democracy, many young scholars started to introduce innovative theories and methodologies into their research projects, once and for all, leaving behind the obsolete paradigms previously described. Later, some scholars embraced the postulates of Post-Processualism. Ever since the early 1970s, the contributions of modern biological dynamics and evolutionary synthetic theory influenced academic arenas in Argentina (Dobzhansky 1962; Mayr 1970, 1976, 1982; Simpson 1967; Thienemann 1956). Additionally, statistical approaches have gained credence in academic agendas, when some researchers focused on skull assemblages from museum collections (Cocilovo 1981; Cocilovo et al. 1982, 1987–1988, 1994; Marcellino 1981; Marcellino and

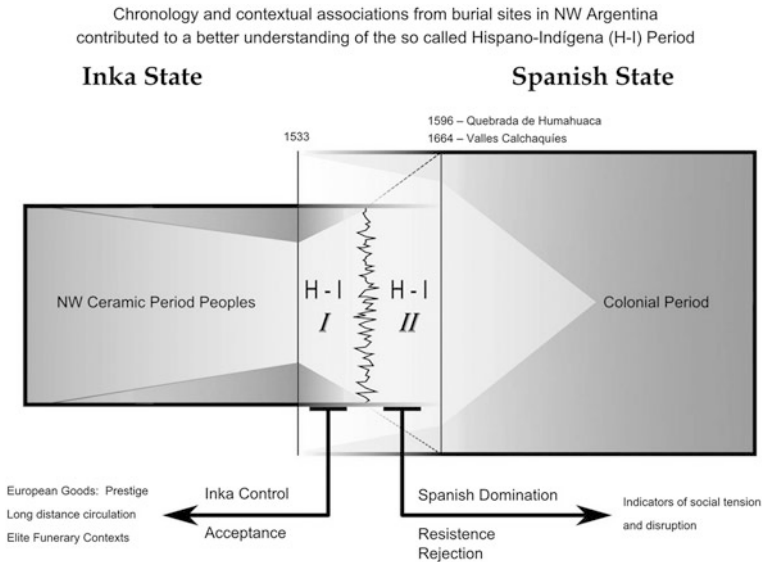


Fig. 2.3 The initial phase of Imperial Inka influence in NW Argentina took place sometime in the first half of fifteenth century. The fall of Cuzco in 1533 and the end of the resistance of native peoples to Spanish penetration in 1664 set a period of cultural overlapping, in which the understanding of the extent and meaning of the so-called Hispano-Indígena (H-I) Period (*crooked line*) ought to be regionally approached. According to our findings, it is the Inkas, not the Spanish influence what is shown in H-I I funerary assemblages (after Mendonça et al. 2013:69)

Colantonio 1993a, b; Méndez et al. 1984, 1997a, b; Rothhammer and Silva 1989, among others). Several papers written by Argentinean scholars were published in prestigious, peer-reviewed, international journals, thus contributing to a more complete understanding of past peoples in the Americas.

As seen, the history of the development of theory and professional practice in the academic discipline of osteological research in Argentina has always been paralleled by a series of ideological, political, economic, and cultural associations. The denial of native peoples and the primacy of European ideologies in the formation of skeletal and archaeological collections were two important inhibitors to the inclusion and integration of the diverse groups of people who form the Argentine population. With the surmounting of these obstacles, a regrettable chapter of Argentine history has been closed.

Current Status of Bioarchaeological Research in Argentina

The idea that bones with cultural associations from archaeological sites ought to be seen and studied as the living organisms they once were was first introduced in Argentina in the early 1980s by Jane E. Buikstra, who studied the human remains

from the abandoned old city of *Cayastá* or *Santa Fe La Vieja*, offered several lectures at Santa Fe city, and provided bioarchaeological reports released to the Provincial Government. In the late 1980s, Walter Neves, a Brazilian bioarchaeologist, offered a graduate course on “Functional Anatomy and Life Style Reconstruction” at the Museo Etnográfico in Buenos Aires. These two events introduced the praxis of bioarchaeology in Argentina and opened the doors to a new era in the study of human remains in the country.

These academic trends prompted a realization that research teams ought to integrate and interact with physical anthropologists trained in bioarchaeological research (Aguerre 1996; Berón and Luna 2007; Borrero et al. 2000, 2001a, b, c, 2003a, b; Politis and Barrientos 1999; Tarragó et al. 1997, 2004, among others). The idea that both archaeologists and physical anthropologists should work hand in hand, getting equally involved in the systematic excavation of human remains and sharing common research goals, eventually predominated in the practice of bioarchaeological research in Argentina and continues to inform the organization of research projects today.

Slowly yet steadily, an increasing number of scholars have become actively involved in the excavation and systematic recovery of funerary contexts (Barrientos 2001, 2002; Barrientos and L’Heureux 2001; Barrientos et al. 1999; Martínez and Torres 2000; Martínez et al. 2004, 2006, 2007; Politis 2000, 2001, 2002, among others). Young Argentine scholars interested in archaeological research have started to become acquainted with biological concepts and their potential applications in bioarchaeological issues (Barrientos et al. 1999; Berón and Luna 2007; Berón and Politis 1997; Martínez 1999; Luna 1996; Mendonça et al. 1993; Novellino et al. 2003, 2004; Scabuzzo and González 2007, among others). Bones are without doubt an integral part of the archaeological record. As such, they have to be excavated, recorded, analysed, interpreted, and preserved in order to utilize fully their immense potential to increase our understanding of peoples of the past. These endeavours have become the foundation of modern osteological research in Argentina regarding peoples of the past, which is, as elsewhere, termed bioarchaeology (i.e. the discipline that places emphasis on the biological component of the archaeological record) (Buikstra 1977; Larsen 1997, 2002, 2006).

Finally, it is important to mention the work and contributions performed by the Argentinean Team of Forensic Anthropology, led by the American anthropologist Dr. Clyde Snow, for their role in the identification of more than five hundred individuals murdered during the years of military dictatorships (1970–1982) in Argentina. The outstanding work done by members of the forensic team is well known not only in Argentina but also worldwide.

The current generation of Argentine scholars is committed to the systematic recovery of bones and their associated cultural materials. As a consequence, various sponsoring institutions (most notably the Universidad Nacional de La Plata, the Universidad de Buenos Aires, the Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto, the Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, and the CONICET, among several others) have made significant changes in the practices

and protocols for the conservation, preservation, and storage of osteological materials and associated contexts. Due to these systematic transformations in academic, theoretical, and methodological approaches to the study and treatment of human remains, bioarchaeology in Argentina is now considered to be an emerging discipline that has a great potential to contribute to the integrative anthropological understanding of the peoples of the past.

Future of Bioarchaeological Studies in Argentina

In the last few decades, an increasing number of researchers in Argentina have become involved in academic exchanges with North American and European scholars interested in bioarchaeological affairs (e.g. Douglas Ubelaker, Jane Buikstra, and Ana Luisa Santos, to mention a few). Linkages with laboratories that specialize in dating methods and chemical analyses of bones and teeth have also been important to the work of Argentine bioarchaeologists. Equally relevant to the continued development of bioarchaeological research in Argentina has been the passage of new legislation regarding the indigenous communities in the country (Leyes Nacionales 25.743 y 25.519). The government has finally recognized the historically denied rights of the numerous native communities living in the country. As a consequence, a long-anticipated, socio-cultural, political, and economic transformation is taking place in Argentine society. The implications in the academic and cultural spheres are still in the process of unfolding. One of the main results of this legislation is that it protects the archaeological record and clearly establishes the academic need for respect and consideration for the ancestors of native peoples as well as their descendants, i.e. present-day Quechua speakers (NW Argentina); Guaraní speakers, Tobas; Pilagás (NE Argentina); Patagones (Southern Argentina); Pampas; Ranqueles; and Mapuches (Central Argentina), among many others. Native communities in Argentina are shedding the bonds of centuries of European, colonial, and modern state domination and are making claims for their ancestral lands as well as for the skeletal remains of their ancestors. This is a major issue for anthropologists in Argentina today. Political, ideological, socio-cultural, and historical issues are being aired in national discussions, while also being seriously considered in academia.

In spite of many efforts, thus far, no organized institutional or corporate response to these claims has been settled. However, it is our conviction that the human as well as constitutional rights of native peoples to equality and respect should not become an obstacle to the human and constitutional rights of scholars to do their academic duty and to do it well. In several meetings held at Santa Rosa in La Pampa Province and elsewhere in the country, we had the opportunity to observe all that can be gained from a fruitful interaction and sincere exchange of opinions, ideas, and information. In such discourses, representatives of native communities were invited to express their thoughts and ideas. They demonstrated a respectful understanding of the fact that anthropologists should not be seen or

perceived as the visible faces of centuries of European as well as national domination and genocide. Furthermore, they proved to have a clear and consistent knowledge regarding the work of bioarchaeologists as well as the importance and enormous heuristic value of the skeletal remains of their ancestors in the improvement of our knowledge of the past of native peoples living in Argentina today. The future of bioarchaeological research in Argentina is thus more than promising from our point of view.

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