

SOUTHBOUND

Late Pleistocene Peopling of Latin America

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Current Research in the Pleistocene

SOUTHBOUND

Late Pleistocene Peopling of Latin America

Editors

**Laura Miotti • Mónica Salemme
Nora Flegenheimer • Ted Goebel**

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of the First Americans**
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SOUTHBOUND: LATE PLEISTOCENE PEOPLING OF LATIN AMERICA

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Part 1
Peopling Models and Bioanthropology



PART 1

The Impact of Early Man Debates on Argentine Archaeology around 1900

PART 1

*Irina Podgorny*¹

► **Keywords:** Classification criteria, museum studies, history of archaeology

This paper argues that the coming into being of the supposedly fossil man found in the Tertiary beds of the Pampas created a paradoxical context. Whereas it attracted international interest in Argentine findings, it radically transformed the practice of local archaeology (Podgorny 2005). Historiography had rooted this transformation in Aleš Hrdlička's rejection of the evidence of early man in South America. As this paper proposes, however, Hrdlička's impact on the Argentine practice of archaeology and anthropology was overvalued, creating an argument that veiled the dynamics of the practice of science.

In the late nineteenth century, "prehistoric man" as a scientific object had emerged on the borders of scientific legitimacy. Fake prehistoric objects abounded in Europe and the Americas, where it was difficult to assess the character of those objects arriving from an unknown past. At stake was what, why, and whom to believe. In Argentina—as everywhere—scientific societies appointed commissions to judge and evaluate a rather controversial kind of evidence (Cohen and Hublin 1989; Coye 1997; Podgorny 2000a; van Riper 1993). After the acceptance of fossil man late in the 1850s, prehistory was consolidated in Europe by creating a common sequence of human stages to be applied to the most remote periods of the human past. While some prehistorians proposed that sequences had only a local meaning, others advocated the universal character of the earliest human technological stages. In the U.S., for instance, William Holmes "rejected the effort to establish New World archaeological periods of technology to parallel those of Western Europe" and assumed that "Paleolithic man had never existed in North America" (Hinsley 1981:105). In Argentina, however, naturalists supported local man's great antiquity, partially owing to the presence of two European promoters of the "interna-

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PART 1

tional movement of prehistory”: Giovanni Ramorino and Pellegrino Strobel, Italian professors of natural history in Buenos Aires, who early in the 1870s reported “prehistoric news” to Europe and also encouraged local naturalists to search for prehistoric artifacts. Ramorino was a patron to scholars. One, an Italo-Argentine schoolteacher named Florentino Ameghino (1854?–1911), late in the 1870s reported on the association of fossil mammals with objects of human manufacture (Podgorny 2000a, 2009).

Moreover, since the 1850s French collectors led the trade in fossil mammal bones from the Pampas. For them, “prehistoric man” was another object to be offered to the museums. In a context where the search for “prehistoric objects” was seen as a mere attempt to create a new commodity for the European market of natural history, Ameghino’s reports were not fully accepted. Pursuing further legitimacy, in 1878 Ameghino attended the International Exposition in Paris, where he exhibited the evidence of the “Man of the Great Armadillo,” sold part of his collections, and became trained in geology and the classification of fossil mammals. In 1880 Ameghino published *La antigüedad del hombre en el Plata*, describing the methods of geological archaeology to be applied in Argentina and Uruguay. Ameghino returned from Paris in 1881, having arranged the local prehistoric tools in a sequence inspired by the model proposed by Gabriel de Mortillet, which patterned the whole Argentine prehistory in parallel with the European sequence (Podgorny 2000b, 2009).

Once in Argentina, Ameghino included in the sequence several deposits from the Plata basin (Ameghino 1885). He was then appointed assistant director to the newly established Museo de La Plata (Podgorny and Lopes 2008), where he shifted his interest to the earliest Patagonian mammals. In 1887 Ameghino broke with Museo de La Plata researchers, starting a war—comparable to the U.S. “bone wars”—in describing the most primitive mammals of Patagonia (Brinkman 2010, Podgorny 2002). As a result, Ameghino published his *Contribución al estudio de los mamíferos fósiles* (1889), which included a rather sophisticated classification of local prehistory that was his last work devoted to the topic. The “fossil mammal rush” of the 1890s gave birth to hundreds of new fossil species, new genera, and also uncountable debates over the age of the Patagonian stratigraphic beds and the origin and distribution of mammals (Podgorny 2005; Simpson 1984).

As for his research, Ameghino returned to the subject of mankind. In 1884 he had sketched a theoretical phylogenetic tree, describing man’s hypothetical ancestors and predicting the species to be found in the years to come. As Director of the Museo Nacional de Buenos Aires (1902–11), Ameghino described supposedly human fossil remains from the Pampas. The hypothetical genus of the 1880s then became an actual species; the Old World fossil specimens (Spy, *Pithecantropus erectus*, Heidelberg) became offspring of the Homunculus from Patagonia; and the anthropomorphic apes became bestialized forms of man (Podgorny 2005).

Ameghino’s proposals were received as a matter of fact by educators working at the newly established University of La Plata; some Argentine newspapers created a favorable context for accepting the local origin of all humankind. As analyzed elsewhere (Podgorny 1997, 2005), Ameghino’s ancestors of man were discussed in several languages and scientific meetings; for several years they attracted worldwide attention. All over the anthropological world, casts of the South American human ancestors circulated in different academic circles to analyze their morphology.

Ameghino’s interpretations, however, were far from being generally accepted by scientists either from Argentina or abroad. Aleš Hrdlička’s visit to Buenos Aires in 1910 has to be framed in this world of facts and doubts (Podgorny and Politis 2000). Hrdlička’s rejection of the evi-

dence could have been conclusive for the North American anthropological field, but it was not definitive for European anthropologists who analyzed the evidence following their own methods and hypothesis (Podgorny 2005). Ameghino replied only to the European responses. His death in 1911 meant that he avoided reading Hrdlička's conclusions published in 1912 in a book that did not circulate among Argentinian scholars. In this sense, the impact of Hrdlička on Argentine anthropology still deserves further study.

Moreover, Ameghino would soon become a national icon. During the Great War, Argentine socialists, some writers, and philosophers began to promote Ameghino as an example of the evolution of Argentine thought. In this context, the debates about the Tertiary man of Buenos Aires, an idea held by his brother Carlos in the 1910s, was interwoven with cultural disputes, confining the issue within national boundaries. These unsolved controversies and the so-called "ameghinismo," i.e., the honors paid to the national savant, shaped the classification of anthropological and archaeological collections of Argentina's museums. Geographical criteria replaced the contested 19th century geochronology and French-shaped sequences in the displays and school books (Podgorny 1999). This drift from chronology to geographical distribution was partially a result of the controversial character of Early Man findings in the Pampas. Ameghino could hardly have imagined that his endeavors to include time in his findings would turn into the rejection of time as the crucial dimension of local archaeology, something that would survive even when the Ameghinian debates were almost forgotten.

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