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REVIEW

# From fossils to fables, a regional bestiary of Northwest Argentina

## De fósiles a fábulas, un bestiario regional del Noroeste Argentino

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**ABSTRACT**

Inspired by medieval codices, this project proposes the creation of a regional bestiary focused on the native fauna of Santiago del Estero and the northwestern region of Argentina (NOA). Integrating archaeological evidence, local myths, and past and present religious beliefs, the aim is to (re)construct a symbolic cartography in which each species is described not only in biological terms but also as cultural agents with ritual, moral, pedagogical, and narrative attributes. The theoretical-methodological proposal is framed within landscape archaeology (Tilley, 1994) and seeks to combine quantitative osteological analysis (NISP, MNI) and qualitative analysis (traumatology, cut marks), together with ethnographic studies aimed at preserving living memories of traditional uses and stories surrounding the vast diversity of fauna in the Chaco-Santiago region. The bestiary is structured in illustrated files that include a biological and archaeological description while highlighting mythical attributes that operate in the identity construction of a people and a culture. As a result, we hope to generate an interdisciplinary tool for teaching and heritage dissemination and to provide an alternative interpretative model that shows how the human–animal interrelationship is at the core of symbolic practices that shape the memory and cultural identity of Santiago del Estero. This bestiary aims not only to rescue species and stories but also to demonstrate the continuous co-construction of meanings between humans and nonhumans over time.

Keywords: bestiary; identity; archaeology; narrative; pedagogy.

**RESUMEN**

Inspirado en los códices medievales, este proyecto propone la elaboración de un bestiario regional centrado en la fauna autóctona de Santiago del Estero y la región del Noroeste Argentino (NOA). Integrando evidencias arqueológicas, mitos locales, y creencias religiosas pasadas y actuales, se busca (re)construir una cartografía simbólica donde cada especie sea descrita no sólo en términos biológicos, sino también como agentes culturales con atributos rituales, morales, pedagógicos y narrativos. La propuesta teórico-metodológica se enmarca en la arqueología del paisaje (Tilley, 1994), y busca combinar un análisis osteológico cuantitativo (NISP, MNI) y uno cualitativo (traumatología, marcas de corte), junto con estudios etnográficos orientados a preservar memorias vivas sobre usos tradicionales y relatos en torno a la basta diversidad de fauna chaco-santiagueña. El bestiario se estructura en fichas ilustradas que incluye una descripción biológica y arqueológica, al mismo tiempo que resalta atributos míticos que operan en la construcción identitaria de un pueblo y una cultura. Como resultado, se espera generar un instrumento interdisciplinar para la docencia y la difusión patrimonial, y aportar una alternativa de modelo interpretativo que muestre cómo la interrelación humano-animal es núcleo de prácticas simbólicas que configuran la memoria y la identidad cultural santiagueña. Este bestiario no se propone sólo rescatar especies y relatos, sino demostrar la continua coconstrucción de significados entre seres humanos y no-humanos a través del tiempo.

Palabras clave: bestiario; identidad; arqueología; relato; pedagogía.

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## INTRODUCTION

From relational archaeology

The relationship between humans and animals has been constant throughout history, and representations of animals in human culture have played a crucial role in shaping our attitudes toward nature. In this vein, over the past decade, archaeology has moved from explanatory models centered on human action to relational approaches that conceive humans, animals, plants, and landscapes as co-constituents of cultural worlds. This shift questions the nature/culture polarity and recovers contributions from landscape phenomenology and Amerindian traditions that endow the nonhuman with agency and meaning.

Philippe Descola, Christopher Tilley, and Donna Haraway, among others, have promoted conceptual frameworks that show how elements of the environment actively participate in the social production of space and memory. In northwestern Argentina (NOA), ethnographic and archaeological research on the Diaguita and Chané-Guaraní peoples, for example, points to the persistence of sacred dualities, owners of places (iyas), and networks of meanings linked to species and topographies. Such studies force us to rethink the material record not as unconnected residues but as nodes of meaning in multispecies networks. This background justifies the need for hybrid interpretive tools—such as the proposed regional bestiary—to articulate osteological data, landscape features, and living memories in an integrated reading of the past and present.

The overall objective of this work is to show how the systematic inclusion of multispecies agencies in the archaeological analysis of the NOA allows us to reconfigure narratives of belonging, territory, and collective memory and to offer practical proposals for the management and dissemination of Santiago's biocultural heritage. The specific objectives are (1) to characterize the ways in which material records (fauna, offerings, landscape features) refer to multispecies practices and social meanings; (2) to identify and reconstruct "nodes of meaning"—places, ceremonies, routes—that articulate identity and coexistence with other species; and (3) to contrast classical archaeological interpretation with ethnographic and testimonial accounts to identify continuities and transformations; and (4) propose strategies for dissemination and engagement with local communities that recognize and protect the intangible heritage associated with these biocultural frameworks.

The materials and accounts gathered show that certain landscapes in the NOA—wetlands, mountain foothills, canals, and marshes—function as active settings for community life: spaces where the economic (gathering, fishing, hunting), the symbolic (offerings, myths), and the ecological (biodiversity refuge) converge. The recurrence of certain taxa in ritual contexts and their presence in oral memory indicate that species play moral, therapeutic, and pedagogical roles that transcend their strict nutritional value. The creation of a regional bestiary shows that fauna is both archaeological material and a narrative agent of belonging.

The central issue, therefore, is no longer just "how were animals used? ", but "How did that use—understood as a practice situated within a dynamic landscape—shape and reformulate the cultural identities that persist today in regional memory?" To answer this question, this approach is expected to reveal a network of inhabited landscapes where the boundaries between the natural and the cultural dissolve. Thus, the identity of the region studied will not be understood as a static legacy but as a living process woven daily at the confluence of bodies and voices. Ultimately, this proposal seeks to demonstrate that only by interpreting the landscape as another actor can we decipher the traces of a multispecies past that continues to resonate in the practices and collective memories of the present.

## DEVELOPMENT

Of Beasts and Their Uses

To this end, I consider the reconstruction of a regional bestiary to be vital. Bestiaries offer a rich source of symbolism that goes beyond the mere description of creatures, often related to virtues, vices, or aspects of human morality. The beasts contained in these collections are personified and placed in moral lessons, becoming powerful pedagogical tools, already which not only provide information about nature but also instruct proper behavior and virtuous values. In turn, these manuscripts were often illustrated, as images served as a visual language for the illiterate public of the time, who learned the stories through Catholic sermons and remembered the moral teaching when they saw the beast depicted. The importance of medieval bestiaries lies precisely here in their ability to use the natural characteristics of animals as metaphors for human virtues and vices.

These works not only educated their readers about known—and in many cases imaginary—fauna but also provided them with moral lessons; allegory becomes a fundamental tool for transmitting ethical teachings, using animal life as a mirror in which humanity can see its own behaviors and aspirations reflected (Barrón, 2024). In this vein, I propose to briefly present two beasts that inhabit the memory and archaeological materiality of the NOA region: the kakuy and the almamula. The former has Quechua roots, while the latter has colonial origins.

It is said of the first beast that, on dry nights in the mountains of Santiago, when the earth creaks underfoot and the branches look like old bones, a blood curdling cry can be heard from the treetops: "Kakuy Turay!... Kakuy Turay!" It is not the wind. It is not an echo. It is the Kakuy, a nocturnal bird with large eyes and a sad gaze, which does not fly in search of food but rather is justifiable. Long ago, a young woman lived with her older brother. She was cruel. She forced her brother to work tirelessly, denying him food and water when he returned. He endured it. One day, in desperation, he told his sister that she would find the richest honey at the top of a very tall tree. She climbed up. While she enjoyed the richest honey, he climbed down and cut the branches. Thus, his sister remained at the top of the tree. Over time, her body turned into feathers. Her voice became a cry. Since then, the Kakuy has lived through the mountains calling for her brother. That is why, when it is heard, a fire is lit, and forgiveness is asked.

The second beast is known to run through the shadows, crack branches, and neigh at night as if something were chasing it. However, no one is chasing it. It is she who chases men. In addition, she never rests. It is the Almamula, a creature half mare, half woman, condemned by guilt and desire. Its origin varies, but all versions agree that it was a transgressive woman cursed by priests or by the earth itself. Some say she had forbidden relations with a relative. The condemnation transformed her into a beast. Horse's legs, body covered in fire, breath of sulfur. She runs without stopping, neighs in pain, and attacks lustful men, especially those who wander at night in search of pleasure. However, the most terrible thing about the Almamula is not her appearance, but her human moan, which she lets out between neighs, as if she were crying for what she was, or for what they did not let her be. Some say that if you see her and do not run away, she stops. She looks at you. She recognizes you. In addition, she gallops, alone, among the shadows of the mountain.

This multispecies reading has several implications that should be discussed in theoretical and applied terms. First, from the perspective of intangible heritage (according to criteria that integrate practices, expressions, knowledge, and wisdom), wildlife narratives and worldviews linked to animals and landscapes are central components of Santiago's identity: they uphold norms of coexistence, punish transgressions, and shape models of behavior; they form repertoires of songs, stories, rituals, crafts, and ecological knowledge that require active safeguarding. Recognizing these repertoires as heritage implies recognizing communities as custodians and managers of this knowledge and not simply as subjects of study. Second, for the archaeology of cultural identity, this approach represents a methodological contribution, as it shifts the reading of identity from exclusively material indicators (ceramics, architecture, etc.) to relational networks where belonging is constructed through practices, memories, and links with species and places. Thus, identity ceases to be a static feature and is required as a performative and multisensory process anchored in coexistence with other forms of life. Third, there are implications for cultural and heritage policy, as the integration of nonhuman agency forces us to rethink conservation instruments that transcend the mere preservation of objects and promote the continuity of living practices, the protection of landscapes, and co-management with local communities.

Similarly, recognizing the symbolic value of species and wetlands provides arguments for the creation of biocultural protection programs that articulate biodiversity and memory. Finally, in epistemological terms, the proposal contributes to decentering anthropocentrism in archaeology, proposing richer readings that are ethically committed to the plurality of agents that construct regional identity.

On discussion and identity

This multispecies framework implies that collective memory and territory are woven together through reciprocal relationships with nature. Archaeology, in this context, acts as a bridge between the material record and the symbolic narratives that sustain belonging, as it emphasizes the co-construction of landscapes, where regional identity and memory are intertwined with the multiple natures that inhabit the NOA.

The background to this approach converges in two main lines: on the one hand, criticism of the nature/culture dichotomy that characterizes classical archaeology and has been the subject of theoretical revisionism in recent decades; on the other hand, the specific developments of landscape archaeology and ethnoarchaeology that vindicate the agency of nonhuman actors and the need to incorporate relational perspectives to understand the social production of space.

Within this theoretical framework, I believe it is essential to add to traditional studies in Argentine archaeology an analysis that integrates indigenous worldviews of the animal and plant world as influential social, pedagogical, and moral agents. Moreover, it is essential to consider the role of the landscape as an active agent of cultural transformation. By compiling a regional bestiary that brings together faunal remains with mythical stories and living beliefs, we attempt to show that communities have attributed values, moralities, and memories to a wide range of species.

Understood in this way, the territory appears as a dynamic network in which identity and memory are forged in human interaction with the nonhuman. Each species linked to an archaeological site refers to a network of meanings. Ultimately, incorporating the agency of animals, plants, and landscape not only enriches archaeological interpretation but also reaffirms that collective belonging is woven through coexistence with all forms of life that inhabit those same spaces.

Species function as vectors of memory; each faunal presence in the archaeological record, each story about a beast, and each practice associated with wetlands or foothills refers to shared histories, moral frameworks, and repertoires of belonging. These plots are transmitted and, together, produce a sense of belonging to a place and a repertoire of possible identities that are updated daily. Therefore, identity does not appear as a set of immutable linguistic or ethnic traits but as a narrative and practical process where the relationship with the nonhuman is constitutive; belonging to a territory in Santiago del Estero implies learning to read the landscape, to name its creatures, to participate in its ceremonies and to respect the agreements that regulate coexistence with other species.

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## APPENDIX

Figure 1. Pictographic recreation of Kakuy.

Figure 2. Pictographic recreation of the Almamula.