

RESEARCH ARTICLE

REPRESENTATIONS AND SPATIAL USES OF THE PREHISTORIC PAST IN CAÑAR AND SÍGSIG, ECUADOR

Miguel Angel Novillo Verdugo, Estefanía Priscila Palacios Tamayo, Fredy Domínguez Iñiguez

Facultad de Filosofía, Letras y Ciencias de la Educación, Universidad de Cuenca, Ecuador
(✉ miguel.novillo@ucuenca.edu.ec)

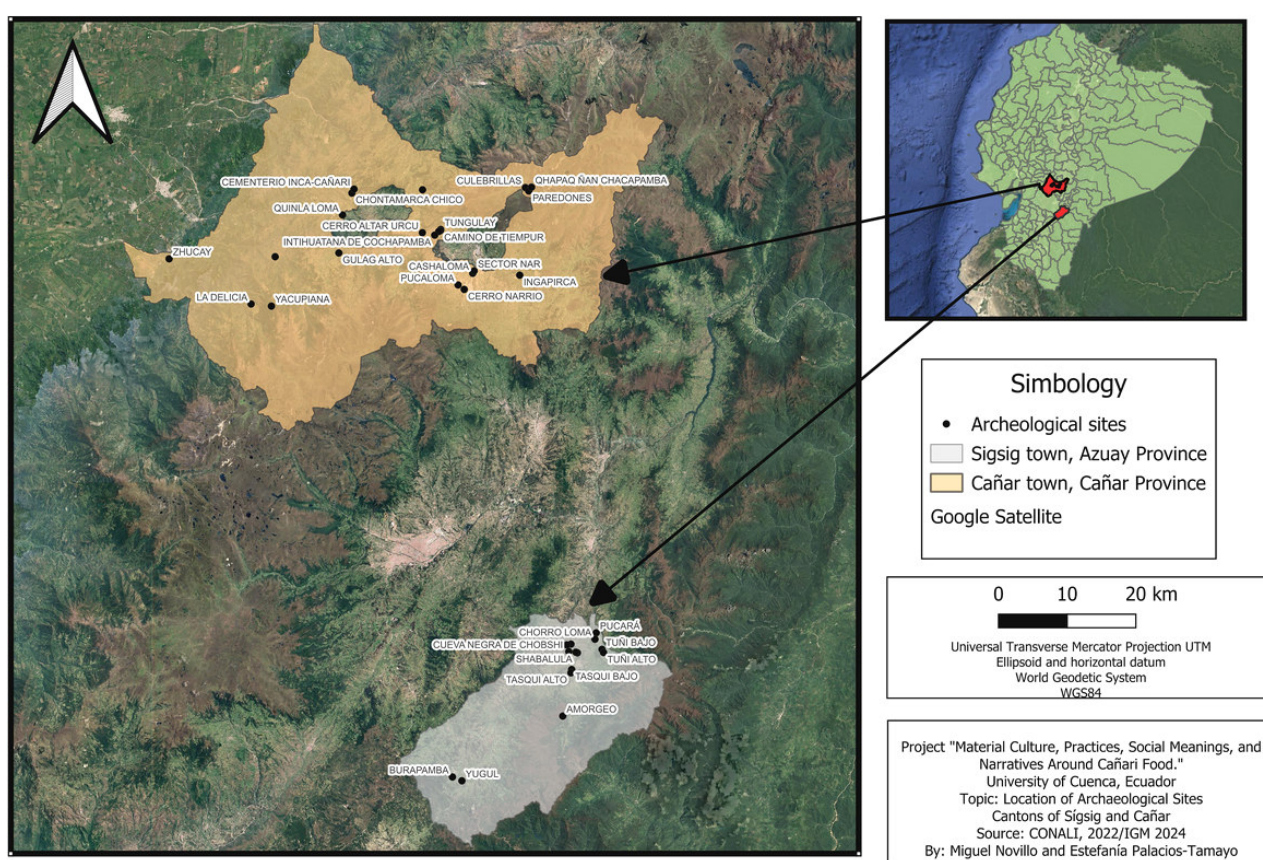


Figure 1. Location of the archaeological sites in *Cañar* and *Sigsig*, Ecuador.

ABSTRACT. *The towns of Cañar and Sigsig, located in the Ecuadorian Andes, serve as cultural and archaeological settings where the Kañari and Inka cultures thrived in Ecuador's prehistoric past. This phenomenon has given rise to multiple perspectives and representations of the past that inhabitants continue to construct in relation to their history and identity. These constructions are rooted in the continuous interaction between people and their environment. The incorporation of the past through spatial representations and uses allows for an understanding of the reinterpretation of material culture and historical-archaeological discourse. Therefore, this paper aims to identify the representations and images that emerge in Cañar and Sigsig, both in urban and rural settings, using methodological tools such as social mapping and direct observation. From this, it becomes evident that the inhabitants shaped their spaces and landscapes based on a symbiotic relationship between culture and nature.*

Received: January 4, 2025. Accepted: February 3, 2025. Published: February 8, 2025.

Edited & Published by Pascual Izquierdo-Egea [P. I. Egea]. *Arqueol. Iberoam.* Open Access Journal.
Creative Commons License (CC BY 4.0). <https://n2t.net/ark:/49934/364>. <https://purl.org/aia/5508>.

KEYWORDS. *Archaeological representations, uses of the past, landscape, space, Cañar, Sígsig, Ecuador.*

RESUMEN. *Las localidades de Cañar y Sígsig, en los Andes ecuatorianos, son el escenario cultural y arqueológico donde se desarrollaron las culturas cañari e inca durante la prehistoria de Ecuador. Este fenómeno ha dado lugar a múltiples perspectivas y representaciones del pasado que los habitantes siguen construyendo en relación con su historia e identidad. Tales construcciones tienen su origen en la continua interacción entre las personas y su entorno. La incorporación del pasado a través de representaciones y usos espaciales permite comprender la reinterpretación de la cultura material y el discurso histórico-arqueológico. Por ello, esta investigación tuvo como objetivo identificar cuáles eran las representaciones e imágenes que se manifestaban en Cañar y Sígsig, tanto en su ámbito urbano como rural, mediante el enfoque metodológico de la cartografía social y la observación directa. Lo anterior evidenció que los pobladores configuraron sus espacios y paisajes basándose en una relación simbiótica entre cultura y naturaleza.*

PALABRAS CLAVE. *Representaciones arqueológicas, usos del pasado, paisaje, espacio, Cañar, Sígsig, Ecuador.*

INTRODUCTION

This manuscript has as its space of analysis the towns of *Cañar* and *Sígsig*, located in the southern Andean region of Ecuador (Figure 1). The area is characterized by a diverse geography in terms of their shapes, reliefs, soils, and consequently, the presence of ecosystems ranging from 1,500 meters above sea level to 4,500 meters above sea level. In addition to this physical uniqueness, from a historical perspective, this area has been home to societies that date back to approximately 12,000 years ago. Thus, settlements have been established throughout various historical periods, from the earliest habitation phases (10,000 BC) to the present day.

The historical synthesis of *Cañar*, based on material evidence found in various areas, indicates the establishment of archaeological sites dated to the Early and Late Formative periods, with *Cerro Narrío* standing out between 2,000 and 400 BC (Ontaneda & Fresco 2010). This archaeological site serves as the reference point and foundation of the *Kañari* culture, who have inhabited the region for millennia (Collier & Murra 1982), including during the *Inka* expansion (AD 1463–1532) and the Spanish colonization process.

The town of *Sígsig* contains several archaeological sites, with the *Chobshi-Shabalula* complex standing out as one of the most notable. This complex includes sites such as *Cueva Negra*, *Castillo de Duma*, and *Shabalula*. Historical narratives highlight the importance of this location, with evidence from *Cueva Negra* indicating the presence of Ecuador's earliest inhabitants, dating back to 10,000–8,000 BC. In 1972, Lynch and Pollock recovered animal bone remains, including white-tailed deer, rabbits, porcupines and spectacled bears, among

others, dating back to 9,000 BC (Saville & Segarra 2000). Additionally, lithic tools such as scrapers, projectile points, and knives have been documented at this site, indicating domestic and hunting activities carried out by hunter-gatherer bands (Salazar 1984, 2004; Reinoso 1969). Based on this evidence, an occupation is proposed from the Regional Development period (500 BC–AD 500) to the Integration period (AD 500–1500), supported by the presence of *Tacalshapa* and *Cashaloma* ceramics.

The presented background confirms a continuous human presence in the region. This factor has led to constant landscape modifications and, consequently, a reinterpretation of that ancient past by local inhabitants. These reinterpretations are manifested in various forms and settings, such as murals, street names, monuments, iconography, signage, and mountains, among others. Locally, these elements have become identity markers shaped by the presence and development of the *Kañari* and *Inka* cultures. As a result, the inhabitants recognize and identify these features as integral parts of their cultural heritage.

In general terms, the convergence of geographical and historical aspects underpins the creation of cultural narratives (representations, meanings, and perceptions). These narratives reflect the continuous transformation and shaping of landscapes, along with the strategic use of certain images as part of an identity-building process. The foundation of the research problem is based on the idea that landscape is a social construct materialized through discourses and representations of space. So, both the material and immaterial dimensions of human existence are evident, shaped by perceptions arising from multiple sensory and emotional interactions with the environment (Smith 2003). Consequently,

Table 1. In general, representations of the prehistoric past are available in both urban and rural environments corresponding to the localities of *Cañar* and *Sigsig*.

City		Country	
Monuments and Services	Streets and Shops	Components of the environment	Atmospheric Elements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Origin Myth • Heroes • Iconography in Squares and Parks • Transport 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Street Naming • Banks • Commercial Establishments • Government Institutions • Schools • Murals • Markets • Restaurants • Tourist Centers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rivers • Lakes • Streams • Mountains • Food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rain • Sun • Moon • Wind

this article aims to identify the forms of representation and uses of the prehistoric past in the contemporary landscape, within the urban and rural contexts of the localities of *Cañar* and *Sigsig*.

THE ANDEAN LANDSCAPE IN CONSTRUCTION: CONCEPTS AND METHODOLOGY

The concept of landscape is employed as a reference, having undergone various developments stemming from fields such as geography, history, anthropology, and archaeology. Each of these disciplines, from its epistemic standpoint, proposes a set of relationships between nature and culture as determinants of space. Therefore, a complex discursive relationship emerges in archaeology, considering spatial representations as part of a historical past that is projected into the present.

The point of discussion revolves around the assumption that archaeology, in a general and traditional sense, tends to reproduce epistemological notions conceived as the foundation of modern Western science. These notions often lack a contemporary discourse that reflects upon and critiques the factors of modernity, which are frequently contradictory to social development and the landscape. It becomes necessary to have the coexistence of diverse voices and the existence of various points where these voices can be expressed (Curtoni & Paredes 2014; Raas 2020).

In this way, the landscape perspective is categorized as a series of compositions formed by humans, not only

geographically and materially but also in terms of immateriality (Saldi *et al.* 2019). This perspective is reinforced in the mentalities of the inhabitants, who combine the social practice of landscape with their active role in its production, reproduction, and social transformation, generating a multiplicity of realities (Álvarez 2012; Cruz 2012; Ortiz 2022). In archaeology, the focus on materiality and space, as a foundation for interpreting social and past events, contributes to the development of a Western discourse of knowledge and an associated project of domination. This occurs due to the separation established between the object and the written word, as well as the delineation of what is considered knowable and unknowable (Haber 2016; Arano 2017).

In this scenario, cultural representations of the past (Table 1) are proposed, which are constructed in a collaborative or participatory manner, allowing for the incorporation of local spatial perceptions (Álvarez & McCall 2019). This aspect, to some extent, gives archaeology a local meaning, influenced and represented by the perceptions of individuals and communities. In this case, it is important to highlight a series of considerations that characterize the Andean landscape as such. This landscape profoundly diverges and cannot be analyzed from the perspectives and theories of the Western world, as it requires analysis specific to the society being studied, outside of Western frameworks (Ortiz 2022).

Building on the conceptual framework, this research adopts a qualitative methodology with an emphasis on social cartography (Figure 2), drawing on the work of



Figure 2. Social cartography workshop at the Quilloac Community, Cañar.



Figure 3. Map created by teachers from the *Unidad Educativa Intercultural Bilingüe Quilloac, Cañar*.

Álvarez and McCall. These authors present social cartography as a methodological tool that facilitates the recognition and integration of local spatial knowledge into landscape archaeology studies (2019). This approach provides archaeology with a localized perspective, shaped by the perceptions of the people. As a graphic representation, social cartography captures the reality of a locality, identifying weaknesses, situations, and issues through collaborative reflective and analytical processes (Martin *et al.* 2019).

In addition to social cartography, it has conducted direct observation. This allowed for the exploration and description of contexts, environments, and space—elements of society and culture—aiming to investigate their meanings and actors. This technique also facilitated the understanding of the connections between people, situations and experiences, along with their respective sociocultural issues (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza 2018; Endere *et al.* 2021).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPRESENTATIONS IN RURAL SPACES

The starting point is the conception of the Andean landscape, which is largely linked to rural life and nature. In this scenario, daily activities and festive human practices blend with the environment in the creation of ideologies that, over time, shape the variety of landscapes (Raas 2020) in a symbiosis, due to new socio-economic and political activities. Thus, the inhabitants of this region identify their space through various social uses such as mobility, agricultural activities, and the

provision of natural resources. These elements are grounded in an ancient legacy, linked to the landscape and its constitutive components, such as paths, sacred sites, and archaeological remains (Figure 3).

The various uses attributed to nature give the landscape an integral meaning, which transcends the conception of the environment as something static and merely physical, evolving into a socially dynamic and historically constructed place over time. Thus, the landscape, as a result of the relationship between humans and their environment, possesses social and collective memory. In the expressions of those who inhabit and traverse rural areas, the ontological dimension of these spaces is manifested: rivers, lakes, hills, and ravines acquire profound emotional connotations with great symbolic significance for their inhabitants, as they form the foundation of a belief system that contrasts with the rational-human understanding of the world. In this way, the Andean landscape emerges as a cultural metaphor, where the physical environment serves as a medium to project the subjectivity of its inhabitants.

The vast Andean landscapes of *Cañar* and *Sigsig* consist of mountains, lagoons, ravines, and rivers. These transcend their physical-geographical connotation and become socially inhabited places where it is possible to find extensive networks of relationships that the inhabitants have created with their environment over time. This nature-culture duality presents the landscape as a space that houses knowledge, meanings, materialities, memory, from both the past and the present.

Therefore, at the summit of the tutelary mountains of the towns, between pre-Hispanic terraces and local vegetation, crosses that adorn the landscape become vis-



Figure 4. Crosses and objects placed at archaeological sites considered sacred, *Sigsig*.



Figure 5. Ancestral ceremony held at the *Cojitambo* archaeological site, *Cañar*.

ible. The presence of the main symbol of Christianity at the peaks originates from the celebration known as “the feast of the crosses,” held during the month of May. The syncretic celebration, due to the blend of Catholic and pre-Hispanic religious aspects, brings together a large portion of the population in a procession that culminates with the placement or covering of the symbol on the mountain. Additionally, it is common to see these representations as part of the Stations of the Cross and a process of reusing spaces previously known as *huacas* or places of worship (Figure 4).

The influence of the Andean cosmogony and the certainty of a pre-Hispanic settlement in the area have established an innate connection between the inhabitants and the geography of the place. The mountains, holders of resources, also become sacred sites that contain myth-religious narratives of general knowledge. Madrigal, Escalona and Vivar (2016), in their approach to sacred landscape, suggest that it refers to a portion of land transformed by the community over time, which has maintained a connection with its deities or supernatural forces. Thus, ascending the mountain involves exercising caution during the journey, as despite knowing the path and having traversed it multiple times, the mountains retain the potential to enchant their visitors.

In *Sigsig* and *Cañar*, these dynamics can be observed both generally and specifically. Easily identifiable customs are established, as well as those whose knowledge is known only to a small group of people, who act as guardians or bearers of wisdom that fades over time (Figure 5). That said, we can affirm that today, practices and knowledge of landscape use, inherited generationally, still persist, referring to practices of continuity and du-

rability. Meanwhile, modernity has been interrupting rural reality by incorporating visions and uses of the landscape aligned with new ways of life and thinking, which manifest through processes of re-signification and change.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPRESENTATIONS IN THE CITY

In contrast to rural areas, the cities of *Cañar* and *Sigsig* are made up of a series of images from the prehistoric past, in various forms. Therefore, infrastructure, administration, and educational spaces, among others, are the settings where scenes, symbols, and iconography of regional identity are represented. It should be noted that archaeology provides discourses, narratives, ways of life, places, and objects that are located in time and space; thus constituting one of the contemporary political devices responsible for organizing and classifying histories, landscapes, people, and their relationships. As such, it is necessary to frame it within a legal context that includes the voices and experiences of the socio-cultural protagonists, who inhabit and live the heritage in their daily lives (Curtoni & Oliván 2023).

The incorporation of prehistoric elements linked to *Kañari* culture into the urban space is a recent development. This approach contrasts significantly with the modernist, hegemonic, and Eurocentric (white or mestizo) urban project that prevailed at the end of the last century in Ecuador (Kingman 2006). Therefore, some authors (Vidal & Pol 2005; Lindón 2011) interpret the use of these new symbolisms as a process of appropriation of public space, as these elements not only create



Figure 6. Monuments representing the heroism of *Cacique Duma* (*Sigsig*) and the origin myth of the *Kañari* people (*Cañar*).

marks of cultural identity but also consolidate new visual narratives of the “others.” Furthermore, it is essential to highlight that these symbolisms function as vehicles for the expression of iconographic discourses with a political and power-driven charge, aimed at activating or reanimating collective imaginaries (figures who were involved in community struggles), especially within the indigenous population of *Cañar*.

Thus, a primary instance where images of the past are reproduced can be found in monuments, placed in areas of congregation such as squares, parks, and en-

trance points to the towns (Figure 6). The concepts behind the monuments generally represent scenes from the origin myth of the *Kañari* culture: the great serpent and the macaws. Then, in *Sigsig*, there is the representation of the *Cacique Duma*, who is historically recognized for resisting the *Inka* expansion in the region and is thus considered the “first hero of the nation.” Additionally, in areas adjacent to or near public institutions, images of the sun, the moon, and iconography of archaeological objects found in the region, such as the *Patecte* plaque or the so-called *Chunucari*, are displayed.

Other representations are found in street nomenclature, signage for restaurants, bars, banking institutions, markets, tourist operators, among others. This uniqueness becomes effective when thinking about the promotion of identity elements of the inhabitants, as these are spaces with mass public attendance, providing constant exposure to these images. On the other hand, the governmental, political, and administrative infrastructure of these territories uses the same communicative resource to recreate and capture the historical relationship between the territory and its citizens. This is even reflected in the public transportation system, where buses and taxis use names and images related to the sun.

Finally, it is important to mention the educational spaces, where murals capture an entire informal learn-



Figure 7. Murals with iconography of the Andean peoples at *Cañar* and *Sigsig* (*Chunucari* and *Patecte*).

ing process through visualization (Figure 7). These devices are accompanied by a community-oriented, didactic, and educational discourse, embedded in schools and colleges. Here, the need to identify elements intrinsic to ethnicity is emphasized, as well as the connection generated with food, nature, and, above all, the care of the Earth. The past serves as a model for life, grounded in awareness of the environment and for future generations.

CONCLUSIONS. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

People of *Sigsig* and *Cañar* are deeply immersed in their environment, where the material factor influences their lives and social activities. In this way, imaginaries, narratives, practices, and knowledge bring the surroundings to life, in which the inhabitants, with their rich archaeological and cultural heritage, reproduce these images of the past in their rural or urban environment. However, social identity related to rurality is fading over time. This is because historically, in Ecuador, rural life and its ways of living have been given a secondary role in the construction of the identity of the towns and, therefore, in their cultural meanings. Many of these meanings, indirectly inherited by urban inhabitants, are rendered invisible and reinterpreted through a vision adapted to the trends of modernity.

The re-significations that the Andean rural landscape has undergone in recent years lean toward the utilization of past manifestations. This cultural shift, intentionally aimed at reclaiming a subaltern population, demonstrates the reincorporation of ancient practices in the territory, with slight modifications adapted to a modern vision under concepts of ancestrality. As relatively modern practices, there is, among the public, a

demand driven by the need to seek not only a cultural and ethnic origin but also a way of life. This is rooted in the continuous and constant interaction that people have with the space.

Although historically, the relationship with the natural environment and the way humans converge within it have been lost in favor of new lifestyles and structures marked by modernity. It is important to consider how the geographic environment remains significant and generates both positive and negative perceptions regarding human adaptation. Under the characterization that the case studies correspond to the towns of *Cañar* and *Sigsig*, spaces with a rich historical and cultural background, where discourses in constant development (and circulation) intersect, directly and indirectly influencing the conceptions and perceptions that people have of the past and the present.

Finally, these elements represented in the landscape lack an explanatory sense and a sense of appropriation (temporal-spatial) between the inhabitants and, therefore, symbolize a value for the locality, often unconsciously. Based on this, it is proposed that the discourse and archaeological material acquire multiple meanings and, consequently, various uses. From this perspective, in this case study, it is evident that cultural elements are used for different purposes: tourism, identity, advertisement for spaces, among others.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the University of Cuenca, through the project awarded in the XX University Research Project Fellowship by the Research Vice-Rectorate, entitled “Material Culture, Practices, Social Meanings, and Narratives Around *Cañari* Food,” 2024–2026.

REFERENCES

- ÁLVAREZ, A. 2012. Somos en el mundo... seres, materialidad y paisajes. *La Zaranda de Ideas* 8, 1: 9–30.
- ÁLVAREZ, A.; M.K. MCCALL. 2019. La cartografía participativa como propuesta teórico-metodológica para una arqueología del paisaje latinoamericana. Un ejemplo desde los Valles Calchaquíes (Argentina). *Antípoda* 36: 85–112.
- ARANO, S. 2017. Repensando una ontología de la arqueología del paisaje en los Andes. *Surandino Monográfico* 2: 21–36.
- COLLIER, D.; J.V. MURRA. 1982. *Reconocimientos y excavaciones en el sur del Ecuador*. Cuenca: Centro de Estudios Históricos y Geográficos de Cuenca.
- CRUZ, P. 2012. El mundo se explica al andar. Consideraciones en torno a la sacralización del paisaje en los Andes del sur de Bolivia (Potosí, Chuquisaca). *Indiana* 29: 221–251.
- CURTONI, R.P.; A. PAREDES. 2014. Arqueología y multivocalidad en la encrucijada: aportes críticos desde Sudamérica. En *Multivocalidad y activaciones patrimoniales en arqueología: perspectivas desde Sudamérica*, pp. 89–109. Buenos Aires.

- CURTONI, R.P.; A.S. OLIVÁN. 2023. Arqueología como política. De la *res cogitans* a la decolonialidad de la práctica. *Vestígios* 17, 2: 25–41.
- ENDERE, M.L.; M.G. CHAPARRO; M.V. GIACOMASSO. 2021. Grupos de interés, valores y significados del sitio arqueológico Intihuasi, provincia de San Luis, Argentina. Un análisis orientado a su gestión patrimonial. *Arqueología* 27, 1: 69–90.
- HABER, A. 2016. Arqueología indisciplinada y decolonización del conocimiento. En *Arqueología y decolonialidad*, pp. 123–166. Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Signo.
- HERNÁNDEZ-SAMPIERI, R.; C.P. MENDOZA. 2018. *Metodología de la investigación: las rutas cuantitativa, cualitativa y mixta*. Ciudad de México: McGraw-Hill Interamericana Editores.
- KINGMAN, E. 2006. *La ciudad y los otros, Quito 1860–1940. Higienismo, ornato y policía*. Quito: FLACSO, Sede Ecuador.
- LINDÓN, A. 2011. Las narrativas de vida espaciales: una expresión del pensamiento geográfico humanista y constructivista. In *Memoria, espacio y sociedad: cuestiones sobre la esclavitud*, pp. 13–32.
- LYNCH, T.F.; S.M. POLLOCK. 1972. *La arqueología de la Cueva de Chobshi (Azúay), con un análisis de los artefactos líticos*. Quito: Banco Central del Ecuador.
- MADRIGAL, B.E.; M. ESCALONA; R. VIVAR. 2016. Del meta-paisaje en el paisaje sagrado y la conservación de los lugares naturales sagrados. *Sociedad y Ambiente* 1, 9: 1–25.
- MARTIN, V.B.; M.E. ZABALA; M. FABRA. 2019. Cartografía social como recurso metodológico para el análisis patrimonial: experiencias de mapeo en Miramar (Córdoba, Argentina). *Perspectiva Geográfica* 24, 2: 125–148.
- ONTANEDA, S.; A. FRESCO. 2010. *Las antiguas sociedades precolombinas del Ecuador: un recorrido por la Sala de Arqueología del Museo Nacional*. Quito: Banco Central del Ecuador.
- ORTIZ, A.J. 2022. Sawasiray y Pitusiray: paisaje sagrado, ancestros, agua y fertilidad. *Arqueología y Sociedad* 37: 71–108.
- RAAS, K. 2020. De humanos y no-humanos. Reflexiones y debates actuales en la antropología de los Andes. *Revista Chilena de Antropología* 42: 95–111.
- SALAZAR, E. 1984. *Cazadores recolectores del antiguo Ecuador*. Cuenca: Banco Central del Ecuador.
- SALAZAR, E. 2004. Cuenca y su región: en busca del tiempo perdido. En *Cuenca, Santa Ana de las Aguas*, pp. 18–85. Quito: Libri Mundi.
- SALDI, L.; L. MAFFERRA; J.A. BARRIENTOS. 2019. Ontologías en disputa. Diálogos entre la antropología y la arqueología para la problematización de paisajes regionales. *Antípoda* 37: 3–26.
- SAVILLE, M.H.; G. SEGARRA. 2000. *El Tesoro del Sigsig, Ecuador*. Quito: Corporación Editora Nacional.
- SMITH, A.T. 2003. *The Political Landscape: Constellations of Authority in Early Complex Polities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- VIDAL, T.; E. POL. 2005. La apropiación del espacio: una propuesta teórica para comprender la vinculación entre las personas y los lugares. *Anuario de Psicología* 36, 3: 281–298. <<https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=97017406003>>.