

Afro-Argentine Archaeology: A Case of Short-Sighted Academic Racism During the Early Twentieth Century

by

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Abstract

During the early 1930s an African cemetery was discovered fortuitously at *Arroyo de Leyes*, a free settlement of the former enslaved near the town of *Santa Fe la Vieja* in Argentina. Hundreds of bodies were buried there, with pottery dating from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. But since the discoveries could not be related to the native archaeological culture of the area, most of them were destroyed or neglected by museums and archaeologists, and for the next fifty years, the name of the place and its objects remained a forbidden topic in academic circles, until the find's importance was recently reconsidered. However, by this time, the site and the objects had almost vanished, which included the people who lived at or near the site.

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The Discovery of Arroyo de Leyes in Argentine Archaeology

Near the city of *Santa Fe* there is a site known today as *Los Zapallos*, which was reported simultaneously as an archaeological site by two different well-known people interested in archaeology: a local collector called Manuel A. Bousquet and one of the first women archaeologists, Amelia Larguía. Unfortunately, the controversy surrounding who found the site first (both fought over the discovery for years) has obscured the date of this event, which can be placed at some time between 1928 and 1931.

Bousquet excavated intensely without method, notes, drawings or photographs, gathering an enormous collection which was then broken up, sent out to specialists and collectors and then to all the museums in the country (Bousquet 1936). There were probably around a thousand complete pottery pieces at one time. The first academic reference published by Larguía was in the *Anales de la Sociedad Científica Argentina*, placing it within the scientific sphere (1935, 1936). She took up academic ties with the director of the Department of Archaeology at the Ethnographic Museum in *Buenos Aires*, Francisco de Aparicio, and also with Federico Daus and Joaquín Frenguelli, both from the Natural Sciences Museum at *La Plata*. Bousquet –a typical nineteenth-century collector- made a large part of his collection available to Antonio Serrano, head of the Museum of *Paraná* and an expert in pottery, who went on to publish some newspaper articles and to write the first article on the subject, in which he posited the existence at the site of a sequence of three periods or stages, of which the last stage is of interest to us here (Serrano 1934a, 1934b). There were no good feelings between the scientists at the two museums at that time (Ceruti 2006).

The finds described by Serrano consisted in modeled vessels and figures, among which were depictions of cows, horses and iron axes, and fifty pottery pipes “with representations of human and animal faces” (Serrano 1934a, fig. 1). Serrano understood that these were of relatively recent manufacture but not forgeries (a suspicion held by many of his contemporaries), in fact attributable to historical indigenous settlers from the nearby *Chaco* region. No forger would have made objects that copied such obviously modern and non-indigenous goods; these were ethnic, post-Hispanic products, made in good faith. This position was presented first by a young historian, Father Guillermo Furlong in a brief article (Furlong 1935) in which he attributed the ceramics to the *Mocovi*, an indigenous group, dating them to the eighteenth century and associating them with the Jesuit settlement of *San Javier*. When the site of *San Javier* was excavated, it was proved that the two places were not connected (Ceruti 1983).

The Problem Arises But, the Door is Still Closed

By the time of the early days of Argentine scientific archaeology, the *Arroyo de Leyes* pottery already had a tentative chronology and an ethnic attribution, flimsy though it was, and all the experts agreed that these were not pieces of pre-Columbian pottery. We can now interpret this as one more attempt to identify a carrier culture of the pottery in the historic-cultural tradition of anthropology, following the ideas of the time. But there were no excavation reports, which was a serious drawback. Such was the prevailing strength of the view of the object outside of its context. During the time of the discovery a first and unique great exhibition of the pottery was organized at the Ethnographic Museum in *Buenos Aires* in 1935, backed by the active society *Los Amigos del Arte*, which presented a large part of Bousquet’s collection, later on donated to the Museum. It was a major event in the city and it helped to arouse interest in these strange ceramics. The brochure emphasized their aesthetic value and attributed the objects to the *Mocovi* people of the eighteenth century, as mentioned above. For the moment, the matter seemed closed.



Figure 1: Two pottery vessels founded during the Francisco de Aparicio controlled archaeological excavations in 1935 (Courtesy: Library of the *Instituto de Arte Americano*, University of Buenos Aires).

But matters were not so simple and would lead to the most tragicomic controversy in Argentine archaeology. It started with the publication of the results of the first controlled excavation, carried out by Francisco de Aparicio (1937). Good academic archaeologist as he was, he only believed in what he excavated, and he stated that at the site the ceramic objects which were sold to the few tourists there —archaeologists as well as collectors— were ceramics which “clearly revealed a swindle; while others only raised new questions”, and that to answer these questions he had to excavate (Figure 2). The terrain in question had already been dug up by innumerable acts of looting, and had the appearance of a place which had suffered “an intense bombardment”. Aparicio did his work, and the excavation showed that the pottery objects were indeed buried, many of them broken, and that at one of the excavated sites there was a “veritable hoard of human bones” associated with the ceramics. It was clear that they came from burials, regardless of whether among the pieces retrieved and sold there were some forgeries, which were perhaps copied from previously-found pieces. To make copies, originals were needed.

An opposing stance was that published by Joaquin Frenguelli (1935, 1937), who assumed that the ceramics were clumsy forgeries. Conclusive proof was provided by the fact that few ceramics had been decorated by pressing on the pottery surface military buttons of the nineteenth century, thimbles, iron nails and metal bottle tops. That served to deny the antiquity of the pottery and provided it with a particularly naïf component unknown before. Frenguelli claimed it was true that there were ancient settlements at the site, that human remains had been found, and that historians had proven before that Mocovi indigenous peoples had lived in the area, but that did not detract from the fact that everything else was of recent provenance. To add further weight to the controversy, an article by Raúl Carbajal was published, indicating that, without informing others, he had been excavating there between 1931 and 1935, and was thus the true discoverer of the site and the man responsible for digging the hundreds of pits archaeologists found there (1938). Although his work was not considered scientific, he wrote a history of the place, presented the etymology of the name, the history of the first white settlers, and described his findings, from which we can highlight that there were “numerous” human remains and especially a corpse which “was placed in a sitting position”. But he did not find a single one of the ceramic pieces under debate, which he called “pseudo-pottery”, and which he attributed to a local settler, or at least that is what he claimed.

It is interesting to note, although at the time it was unknown, that the use of metallic elements to decorate surfaces, especially the use of square-headed nails, was a common feature in Western African pottery during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, both for making incisions and prints and for hammering into wooden figures. And we find it in African archaeology in Argentina, thanks to the state of archaeological knowledge today (Schávelzon 1999, 2003).

With only these few studies and articles the matter was closed and the pottery from *Arroyo de Leyes* was proclaimed a fake. As a result, many museums decided, around 1937 and later, to destroy the objects. Carlos Ceruti estimates that only 20 % of the total was saved: about 250 complete pieces (Ceruti 2010: 1112).

The matter was forgotten and only Antonio Serrano would bother to include, many years later, some examples in a book on indigenous pottery (Serrano 1955). The following fifty years of archaeology gave up on the issue, and to speak of *Arroyo de Leyes* became a mortal sin in the academic world (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Vessel with two heads from *Arroyo de Leyes* found during the 1930s excavations, saved from 1937 destruction (Photo: C. Ceruti, Paraná Museum).

The Rediscovery of the Afro Presence

Nearly half a century went by before anyone even cited the matter, and this happened when Alberto Rex Gonzalez wrote two phrases on what was considered a forbidden subject. Gonzalez said that the pottery could be attributed to “post-Hispanic indigenous groups among whom African groups may have been present” (1980: 427). It was the first time that someone from the academic world made reference to a possible ethnic attribution of any pottery to the African enslaved in the country. But at that time the site had already been destroyed without any proper studies having been carried out, while on the other hand, the potters who had supposedly made the forgeries (if indeed they were forgeries) had gone unstudied too. It seems now unbelievable that if a family was selling ceramics and living

over the grounds of a burial place, the ceramics were not studied to see whether they were the same as those that had allegedly been dug up, or were different and showed the potters’ continuity, or were in fact forgeries. And if the last were the case, where did the potters find the models to copy?

It is interesting to say that from 1930 to 1980 (the years when archaeology neglected the existence of African culture in Argentina) historians published many articles on African presence in the country, and proved that cities like *Buenos Aires*, which today has less than 1% of its inhabitants descending from Africans, had over 30 % around 1800 (Andrews 1989: 19).

Gonzalez’s work was the first to dare to connect the ceramics, albeit partially, with Africans; never before in Argentine archaeology had anyone even imagined that Africans or Afro-descendants could have created their own objects, regardless of how acculturated they were. Of course, no one can now accuse the archaeologists of the 1930 generation of being unable to think of multi-ethnic cultural expressions or take into account the Africans. As far as they were concerned, they had not existed.

But we *can* accuse them of ignoring the potters who lived at the site –so many ethnographers were researching this topic in the country- and of discontinuing excavations. Only recently have the first articles suggested that the site could have been a cemetery for the enslaved or the formerly enslaved –a *quilombo*- from the nearby city of Santa Fe and that the ceramics were related to African pottery and the Africans in the Americas, and this has opened the door to in-depth studies (Schávelzon 1999b, 2001).

The vessels in question are simple in manufacture and poor in quality, but sophisticated in forms and decoration, made without a potter's wheel (they are hand-modeled), with poor oxidation during firing, most having a spherical body and a smaller mouth -like a bottle- with several cracks and fissures, made of brown paste, brown on the outside, and with the slip flaking off. They would not have been capable of containing liquids, but were ornamental or for funerals. They depict grotesque human heads, with bulging, fat eyes and mouths, often with a larger face above and a smaller one below, sometimes bifacial, with marked eyebrows, and a flat and very broad nose; they were decorated using fingernails, metal or wood objects, with sequences of spots or stripes. There are vessels that also depict grotesque animals: *iguanas*, fish, snakes, dogs, horses, cows and even birds. The few utilitarian vessels, with wide mouths, are decorated on the surface with stripes and spots forming drawings in continuous sequences. Where metal objects have been used for decoration this has not been concealed, and there are at least two isolated figures of native Indians with *boleadoras* and arrows. The common elements present in all cases are the lack of a potter's wheel, the poor quality of the ceramics, the grotesque elements, the obese heads, and the animals, as well as the culinary non-functionality of most of the items (Schávelzon 2003).

The drawing of modeled animals on vessels is a typical African feature (as it is of many other cultures), as seen in seventeenth-century bronze work from Benin as well as in nineteenth century ceramics from Nigeria. Ceruti's detailed studies suggest that the oldest of the *Arroyo de Leyes* ceramics were even older than previously thought (Ceruti 2006, 2010) and might have dated to between 1620 and 1670. Ceruti considers the pieces were made by the enslaved who ran away from the city of *Santa Fe la Vieja*. Studies have been carried out on the pipes and other ceramics from *Santa Fe la Vieja* following the same trail, bringing to light functional and stylistic features (Carrara and De la Penna 2005) which had already been seen and marked by Agustín Zapata Gollán in the 1950's (1987). This was probably the origin, but the cemetery was in use until the beginnings of the nineteenth century when the great bowls with faces were made. The motif of two superimposed heads, or the animal decoration in relief and the printing with metallic objects, were common too in ceramics made by Africans throughout the American continent. This was one of the factors that led us to rethink the question, considering that in the 1930's, when the controversy flared; African American pottery had yet to be studied in any country, so it was impossible for somebody to have made these pieces by copying them from inexistent books. Today we understand them as expressions of the cultural heritage of the enslaved scattered across the continent, which the enslaved adapted and crossbred without losing their original identity (Rout 1976). (Figure 3)

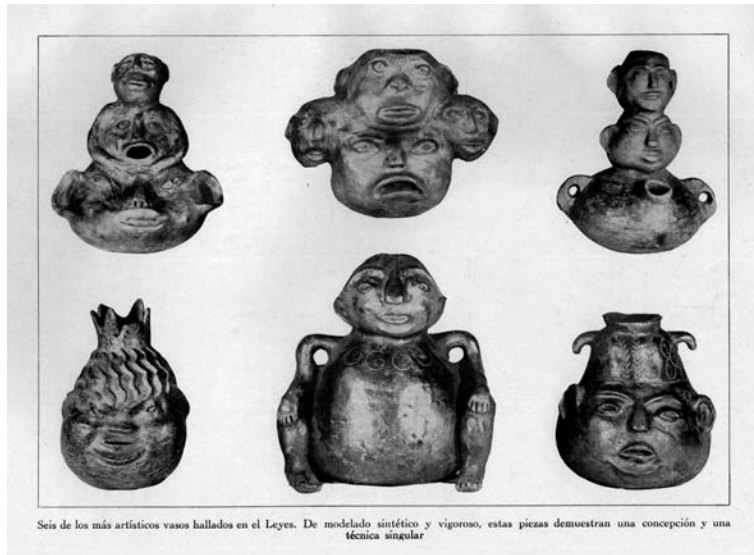


Figure 3: Six bulbous heads from *Arroyo de Leyes* published in 1938 (Courtesy: Library of the *Instituto de Arte Americano*, University of Buenos Aires).

Facing the Present, Tied To The Past

Several other studies on the archaeology of Africans or descendants of Africans in Argentina have followed the early works (Schávelzon 1999b, 2003), and although the body of bibliography is not yet large, research on the topic is budding. The researchers' main focus has been the identification, description and interpretation of objects or types of objects exhibiting shapes and styles related to African traditions, or identified with the African population when compared with finds from other regions of the diaspora. Efforts to identify the African peoples through archaeological remains have been interpreted by researchers as a contribution to the visibility of population groups which were consistently relegated by the official history and by traditional archaeology (as was the case of the *Arroyo de Leyes* remains), two fields which considered exclusively European, native American or mixed-breed culture. Perhaps this explains why most published research has focused on the identification, description and interpretation of the *Arroyo de Leyes* pottery (Ceruti 2006, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, Ceruti et al. 2012, Iwanow and Igareta 2011), a belated vindication of an error not yet completely overcome. (Figure 4)



Figure 4: Pottery reproduction of a metal teapot, early nineteenth century from *Arroyo de Leyes* (*Museo de la Facultad de Humanidades y Arte*, University of Rosario).

Another topic of research has been the interaction of the African population with other ethnic groups, and the objects scientists have most focused on are smoking pipes (Carrara and De la Penna 2005, Cornero and Ceruti 2012, Sportelli 2012, Zorzi and Davey 2011, Zorzi and Schávelzon 2014), and pottery (Cornero and Ceruti 2012, Zorzi and Agnolin 2013). Interest has arisen in the identification of spaces and architecture related to enslavement (Schávelzon 2013, Stadler 2013).

Likewise, few academic events have taken place around the topic. During the Third National Congress on Argentine Archaeological History in 2006, Theresa Singleton presented her lecture “Why study plantations? Lessons learned from the archaeology of slavery and plantations” (Singleton 2008). Her presence as an international benchmark on the topic helped to validate the issue in Argentina. Only two articles connected with slavery were presented and both came from abroad: Brasil (Carvalho 2008) and Cuba (Rodríguez Tápanes and Hernández de Lara 2008). At the Fourth National Congress on Argentine Historical Archaeology in 2009 a symposium was organized to discuss the archaeology of the African diaspora. The meeting was entitled “Africans and African Americans in the Archaeology of America” and it showed how the issue developed when the African tradition was considered as part of the construction of cultural identities, and discussed the construction of myths around (and the denial of) Africans and descendants of Africans in Argentina, as well as the cultural resistance developed by these groups to protect themselves from assimilation, and the importance of archaeology in providing visibility to erased peoples. Five articles were presented at that meeting: two on the *Arroyo de Leyes* pottery (Ceruti 2011, Iwanow and Igareta 2011), one on Cuba (Hernández de Lara 2011) and two that focused on historical issues not involving archaeology (Giménez 2011, Rosal 2011). The symposium was held again in 2012 and there were two articles on the *Arroyo de Leyes* pottery (Ceruti 2012, Ceruti et al. 2012) and one on African religiousness in *Buenos Aires* (Giménez 2012). At the same Congress there was a workshop on the archaeology of slavery conducted by Brazilian researcher Lucio Menezes Ferreira.

Conclusions

Based on the evidence we have now, there are several conclusions to be made on *Arroyo de Leyes* and its pottery. The site must have been a cemetery for runaway or freed enslaved who had interbred with indigenous or *mestizo* groups, from whom they copied some forms of decoration, so that when archaeologists reached the site these ritual ceramics were still being made. The date is still complex to determine but it was certainly in use throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and possibly earlier (perhaps from as far back as 1650). Ceruti, like Serrano did years before him, suggests that there were three stages of settlement at *Arroyo de Leyes*: two wholly pre-Hispanic, and then the one described here, hence the mix of materials that were found in what is a highly looted site. Perhaps instead of criticizing the potters or the probable gullibility of some colleagues, it would have been better to dig and to study the production of the surviving family of potters at the site. We do not even know what they were called or what techniques they worked with.

Afro archaeology in the USA began in the 1970's and it was the first country in the Americas to show pieces of pottery like those of *Arroyo de Leyes*. Robert Thompson attributed *Voodoo* pots to Africans or descendants of Africans (1983) and it was also this book that suggested the existence of this issue, considering the African ingredient as the basis even though the features varied. Studies by John M. Vlach (1990) and Wyatt MacGaffey (1990) sought out the African sources and showed the metaphysical meaning in the shapes and decorations, and the use of part of that production in death ceremonies. Thus the debate on the ceramics of the Africans in the American continent was opened up, and *Arroyo de Leyes* became one more case. Hundreds of publications followed, in country after country, but later.

Arroyo de Leyes shows how the strength of prevailing paradigms determines interpretations, even when it is necessary to dismiss evidence that does not fit these preconceptions. The archaeology of Argentina, which considered a past composed of *mestizos* as the offspring of Europeans and Indians, ignoring Africans, prevented the understanding of the presence of another group in its history. To merit study, a cultural element had to be pre-Columbian, but the pieces from *Arroyo de Leyes* were not pre-Columbian, and so it was simpler to throw most of them away. It was not until the end of the twentieth century that the paradigm was rejected. It is interesting to note that, starting with the total denial of the issue in the 1930s and up to the present, although the subject has become an accepted one in the academic archaeological world, it is still a marginal topic. Perhaps some of the mental attitudes which led in 1937 to the destruction of what was incomprehensible for the establishment are still in force.

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