

The Long Struggle between Santa Fé and the San Javier River

Javier García Cano

Head of Underwater Cultural Heritage Program
University of Buenos Aires
Argentina

Introduction

In 1573, a group of Spaniards founded the city of Santa Fé La Vieja, by the San Javier river (part of the fluvial system of the great Paraná river), today in Argentinean territory but at that time part of the Virreinato of Peru, the southern portion of the Spanish Empire in America.

This article deals with the archaeological site resulting from this settlement, and reviews how the natural action of the river in relation to the site's topography represents a clear situation of "heritage at risk," imperilling both the terrestrial portion as well as submerged elements of the site.

Location

The site known as "*Santa Fé La Vieja*" is situated in the central region of the present Province of Santa Fé (see maps.) The surrounding landscape basically consists of flat lowlands with some very subtle undulations, a formation known as *albardones* (terraces) when located next to rivers. The existence of this geomorphology gave rise to the location of the settlement, as it allowed the city to be built next to the river. Access to the San Javier River, the only available communication channel, made survival, in its most absolute and integral sense, possible for the population. The river facilitated travel, commerce, food supply, and constituted a means of defence.

The settlement's position on the terraces also offered protection from the river's flood cycles. Depending on seasonal rain conditions, Santa Fé was frequently totally surrounded by water, resulting from the raised river level. Whilst the settlement itself was safe from flooding, it became temporarily isolated from the surrounding lower countryside.

The permanent flow of water over this terrain made of clay and sand causes constant erosion, and therefore changes to the riverbanks. This systematic cycle of flooding creates an erosive process and the transportation and deposition of geological materials. The city of Santa Fé was affected by this never-ending erosive action for which there is no permanent solution. The river and the topography led to the founding of the city; however, they also led to its loss.

Santa Fé

Juan de Garay founded the city of Santa Fé. Sailing down the river from the already established city of Asunción (1537), he decided to create a permanent settlement, intended as a mid-way resting point to the ocean and then on to Spain. In principle, with this objective of territorial control and consolidation of the European presence, Santa Fé was a city with a European population from several origins (Spanish, Venetians, Germans, and Portuguese) as well as local indigenous inhabitants and black Africans. The city grew, remaining in its original location, until 1690.

The repeated flooding of the river and the resulting periods of isolation together with the erosion process of the terraces banks created difficult living conditions. The city started to suffer the loss of dry land, especially along the river front,

Figure 1: Localisation

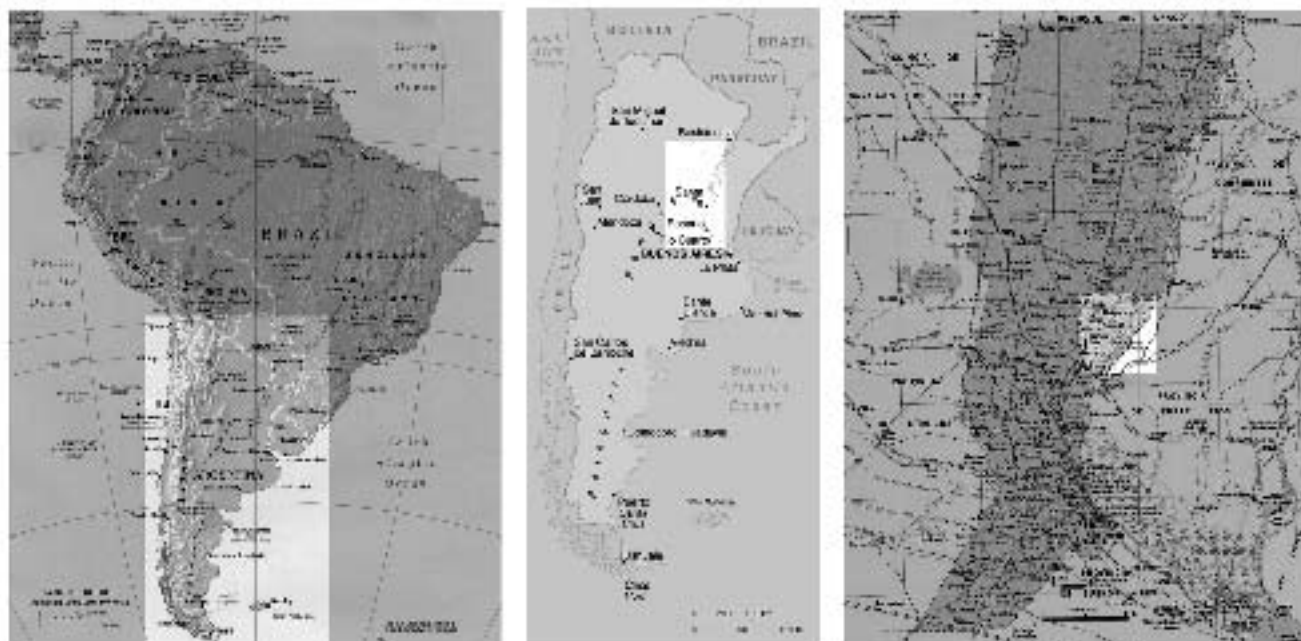


Figure 2: Archaeologic site and the San Javier River; erosion zone marked in black



where the blocks near the river were gradually collapsing into the water. This slow, but continuous, process led to Santa Fé losing several main buildings and land lots, which had played a central role since the city's founding, and often belonged to the more influential citizens and groups. In this way, the city's own founder, Juan de Garay, lost his house, and the city square survived till the present (2006) with only 50% of its original surface area (see plan). Furthermore, three of Santa Fé's five churches were lost to the constant erosive action produced by the river (see map of the city in its actual situation).

Understanding that this process was irreversible and progressive, the population decided to move the city to a new location 85 km south, by the central branch of the Paraná River (main river of the system and one of the largest in the world). In this new location, the city was re-founded, but under the name of "Santa Fé de la Veracruz." Beginning in 1690, the new settlement copied perfectly the distribution of the lots and the design of the old city.

Archaeological Site Formation

It is clear that due to the permanent action of the river, the city was in constant danger and that cultural material from the occupied dry land was transported into the river bed. It would therefore be possible to affirm that the archaeological site known today as "Santa Fé La Vieja" existed from the beginning of the European occupation. It should be remembered that the city underwent a process of abandonment and re-founding in a second location. This process obliged the population to reuse as much material as possible in the new city. It thus defines the formation of an archaeological site with a natural process of erosion and re-deposit of material together with the sudden removal of all materials that could have been reused in the second location. The first part of the process has not, however, finished, and continues even today. This has led to an archaeological site formed by active anthropic

action (the human presence during the city's life) and passive action (abandonment), both basically determining the remains found in the ground. Simultaneously, the river has transported material deposited in dry ground into the water. The process had and has no end. It could be said that this is a case of permanent "mutation" of a combined "terrestrial and underwater" site into an underwater site, if the erosive process of the San Javier River were never to stop. It is clear that from the founding of this settlement, the interaction between man and his environment has been the basis for the formation of a site with two faces (terrestrial and underwater). However it is also clear that this site acquires its identity as an archaeological site starting from a specific moment and due to the continuity of a natural action.

In 1949, Dr. Zapata Gollán, after several years of searching for the remains of the first Santa Fe, located the city and began his research according to archaeological methodology. From the outset, Gollán was aware of the problems the river erosion posed to the site and its determining effects on the existence and deterioration of the remains. In 1995, a five-year project concerning the site's underwater archaeology began under the direction of Mónica Valentini.

The underwater archaeology project resulted, among other things, in an understanding of the natural auto-migration process of the San Javier River, and how this process affected and continues to affect both the terrestrial and underwater archaeological remains. The project also was able to establish the speed of the erosive process and to measure its magnitude—information which is of the utmost importance for the future conservation of the site. It determined that while the site is threatened by several problems, the evolution of the San Javier River is the most significant. It exerts a major impact on the site of Santa Fé La Vieja (as much as in the days when it was inhabited) which contains the only existing remains of a sixteenth-to-seventeenth century Spanish colonial city in America, and which was abandoned after almost 100 years of use.

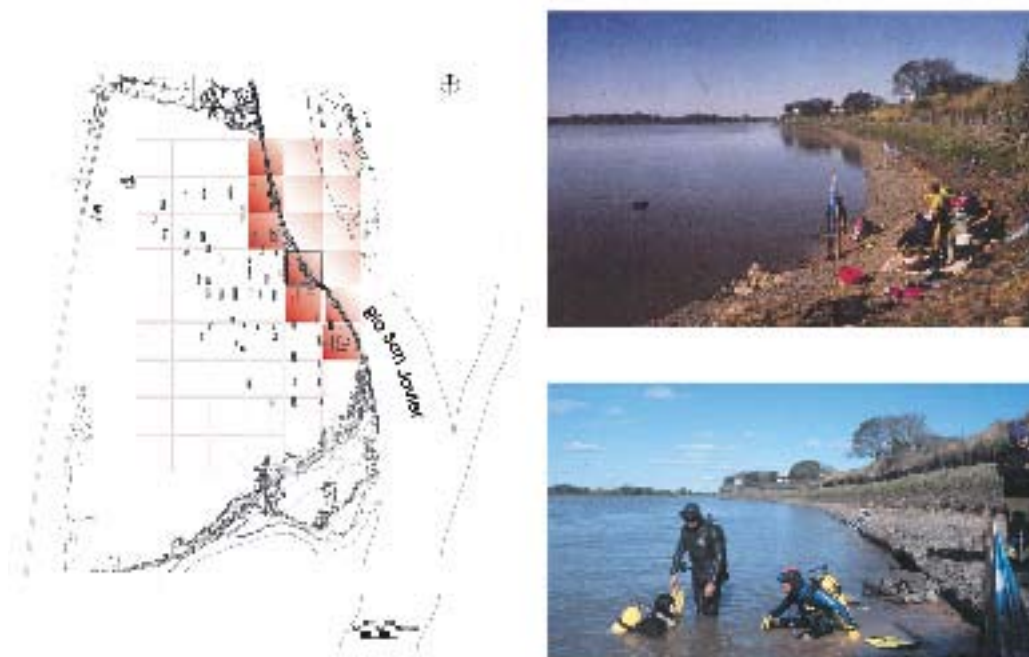


Figure 3: Erosion of the San Javier river banks; the map shows the area lost due to erosion

At the same time, the project illustrated the site's indivisible relationship with the river. Not until this project was carried out were archaeological remains in Argentina seen as being the direct results of the interaction between humans and their environment. In general, previous archaeological investigations did not include studies of waterways or basins, and in this manner they often missed the fundamental reasons that a city's inhabitants chose to settle in a specific place and lacked an understanding of their subsequent relationship with their environment.

World Heritage List Nomination

Given the importance of the site of Santa Fé la Vieja, the provincial authorities decided to initiate the World Heritage List nomination process, according to the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. Argentina, a signatory country of the Convention, began working on the nomination dossier. Yet at the moment, this process is complicated by the very threats that the site faces. In fact, the main issue is to determine how to mitigate the erosive process of the terraces and the site as a whole. Though many attempts have been made to consolidate the banks and the terraces in an effort to at least minimize the erosion, none of these have achieved any stable or lasting results.

Conclusion

It is clear that this site possesses sufficient value on a local, continental, and international level so as to provide an outstanding example to the world of European colonization

in the Americas. Yet this status is threatened by natural processes, and therefore this site must inevitably be seen as "Heritage at risk." Santa Fé La Vieja is also distinctive in that it is not exclusively an underwater site; it derives some of its complexity from encompassing both a land and water phase. How can we reconcile the fact that the same elements which created it and today allow us to read into its past are also those that are threatening its very existence. The challenge lies in the struggle to continue being able to read from this site, a struggle against nature.

Information Sources

García Cano, Javier. 2000. "Estudio de la porción sumergida de una fundación española del siglo XVI. Arqueología Subacuática de las Ruinas de Santa Fe La Vieja, un enfoque metodológico". En "Crítica 2000". Instituto de Arte Americano e Investigaciones Estéticas "Mario J. Buschiazzo", Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Urbanismo, Universidad de Buenos Aires. N°110, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

García Cano, Javier. 2001. "Las ciudades históricas como sitios integrales. Los Casos de Santa Fe La Vieja (1573-1660) y Federación (1810-1847-1979). Seminario Internacional de Ciudades Históricas Iberoamericanas. ICOMOS España e CIHIB. Ciudad de Toledo, España.

Valentini, M. Y J. García Cano. "El registro arqueológico subacuático como un componente necesario para obtener un análisis integral de sitios en regiones con importante presencia de cuencas acuíferas". En Signos en el tiempo y rastros en la tierra. III Jornadas de Arqueología e Historia de las regiones Pampeña y Patagónica. Mariano Ramos y Eugenia Néspolo Editores. Departamento de Ciencias Sociales. Universidad Nacional de Luján. Páginas 271-276. ISBN 987-9285-18-2.