

Is all the UNESCO's Qhapaq Ñan really Inca? Problems with the incorporation of sections and sites from San Juan (Argentina)

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Abstract

The nomination and acceptance of the Qhapaq Ñan as World Heritage took more than a decade of work in the six countries involved. In Argentina, a centralized coordination system in charge of articulating the proposals of the provinces that were part of the national program was implemented. Some people expressed certain inconveniences in the program's development, mainly related to the participation of native communities. Furthermore, the presentation approved by UNESCO shows some shortcomings associated with the identification of some of the proposed elements. In this sense, and in order to provide relevant information to better understand the Argentinean nomination process and its outcome, this article shows the divergences between the Inca Road system known in San Juan and the one accepted in the project, the nomination of a section and associated sites without the corresponding evidence of their Inca character and a failed previous proposal to incorporate historical sites to the project. Also, to help explain this situation, some aspects related to the actions of different agents and the possible incidence of political power are discussed.

1. Introduction

In June 2014, at the session of the World Heritage Committee held in Doha (Qatar), the inclusion of the Qhapaq Ñan on the UNESCO World Heritage List was approved [1]. Before and after this event, numerous criticisms were raised towards the project, which fundamentally pointed out:

(a) its management by modern states, which would thus impose a vision distant from those of the indigenous communities [2];

b) the scarce or null participation of local communities in the elaboration and discussion of the proposal [3-5];

c) the exclusion of local stories and the promotion of a homogenizing discourse on very diverse territories [6];

d) the economic contribution of large mining companies to the project, as a means to legitimize their activities [6];

e) centralized decision making and lack of information to local communities and authorities [7];

f) the absence of prior archaeological research to responsibly define the components to be incorporated into the project [7];

g) the lack of understanding between the different organizations involved [3].

However, there have been no adverse criticisms linked to the validity of the archaeological data presented there. These were not questioned, as was to be expected in a program of this importance, which brought together the specialists on the subject in the six countries involved. But this does not mean that in reality there were no problems.

In this respect, the information referred to the Qhapaq Ñan in the province of San Juan (one of the seven provinces crossed by the state road in the Argentine territory) presents some important errors and inconsistencies. Added to this is the apparent choice of sectors that were not the most representative or the most convenient from the point of view of the objectives of the project, which among other aspects sought the development of the local communities linked to the road. Equally striking is the existence of serious drawbacks in the first part of the selection process of sites and road sections, which should have implied a more rigorous control over the final proposal. This information is relevant not only to make transparent some aspects of the development of the project but also to contribute to

avoiding the repetition of similar cases or actions and to reflect on the need to improve the structural conditions that serve as a basis for its implementation. In view of the above, this article describes the San Juan sectors that were part of that declaration and its selection and application process, analyzes its relationship with the current knowledge on regional Inca roads and exposes the resulting divergences.

2. Method and Antecedents

All available documents related to the development of the project in Argentina and the selection and application of sites in the province of San Juan were gathered and analyzed. Likewise, oral sources were sought that would contribute to establishing the origin and function of some of the proposed sections. Part of the information comes from the author's direct participation in some of the academic meetings which dealt with the topic. In the same sense, the analysis and interpretation of the data was facilitated by the in-situ knowledge of the sites described in the text and that acquired through more than three decades of research linked to Inca domination in the central west of Argentina. The quality of the images coming from the UNESCO nomination document has been improved through the use of Adobe Photoshop and Microsoft Office Picture Manager.

2.1. National and international meetings

The initiative to declare the Qhapaq Ñan as World Cultural Heritage arose in May 2001, when Peru proposed to include it on the tentative list of Unesco World Heritage [8]. These authors review the international meetings related to the project. The World Heritage Center in Montevideo reportedly made a commitment at a meeting in March 2002 to prepare the first meeting of experts to initiate the procedures for the presentation of the candidacy. Shortly thereafter, on May 23, 2002, the presidents of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru signed the commitment to promote the nomination process. In 2003, significant progress was made with several meetings in Jujuy (February), Lima (April) and Cusco (May and October). In 2004, agreements were signed between Unesco, the IDB and the government of Peru for the implementation of the "Action Plan for the Development of the Qhapaq Ñan or Main Andean Road", a non-reimbursable technical cooperation project from the IDB. On January 21, 2013, the complete dossier was submitted to Unesco and on June 21, 2014, the Qhapaq Ñan was declared a World Heritage Site in Doha.

In Argentina, in the first stage of work, each of the seven provinces involved in the project (Jujuy, Salta, Tucumán, Catamarca, La Rioja, San Juan and Mendoza) had to identify the sections of the Qhapaq Ñan to be submitted to UNESCO. Once this task was completed, further work would be done on the ethnographic, cultural and local development components, issues on which the provinces had already begun to work before July 2005 [9]. According to the action plan submitted by Argentina, the main components of the project were a) cultural heritage; b) natural heritage and territory; c)

community development; d) sustainable tourism; and e) crosscutting lines. This makes clear not only the relevant role of local communities but also the interest in sustainable use through tourism. It should be noted that in each province the choice of the specialists involved in the project depended exclusively on the local authorities in charge of applying National Law No. 25,743 on the protection of archaeological and paleontological heritage, i.e., these decisions were political.

In the following years, several meetings were held at the national and binational level (with Chile) to advance in the characterization of the declared sites, in the summary of cartographic information, the integration of information, etc. [10-11]. After the declaration, this dynamic of meetings continued and intensified from 2020 onwards at the national level and in the other participating countries [12-18].

2.2. The failed initial proposal and the problem of the submission deadline

The first national meeting related to the project was held in Tilcara (Jujuy) in 2003, with the presence of the author of the article as representative of the province of San Juan. A few months later, after José Luis Gioja took office as governor of the province, there were changes in the area of Culture, which resulted in the official appointment of Dr. Catalina Teresa Michieli as the new representative to the project.

In a very short time, the sites that San Juan would propose for incorporation to the project were selected. The core of the proposal consisted of a group of sites and stretches of Inca Road located in the proximal sector of the Conconta ravine, in the northwest of the province. The public presentation of these sites in an academic environment took place in September 2004, on the occasion of the XV National Congress of Argentine Archaeology. There, at the West Central Communications Table, the representative of San Juan presented the work entitled "Investigaciones arqueológicas y protección de las instalaciones incaicas de la Quebrada de Conconta (San Juan, Argentina)", carried out together with two visual arts professors. Michieli and her collaborators were then warned about the risks of considering the proposed sites as Inca. The response to these observations was the hasty publication of the work in a local magazine [19]. An abstract with the same title appeared in 2010 in the conference proceedings [20].

As a result of these events, in October 2007 the paper "¿Ocupación incaica en la quebrada de Conconta? Una propuesta alternativa" (Inca occupation in the Conconta ravine? An alternative proposal) was presented at the XVI National Congress of Argentine Archaeology, held in San Salvador de Jujuy [21]. In that article, the Inca affiliation of the Conconta sites was seriously questioned. Diana Rolandi, the National Technical Secretary of the Qhapaq Ñan/Main Andean Road Project, expressed to the author her total perplexity and concern for the information presented, mainly because shortly before she had met with Chilean specialists to coordinate actions that would allow the articulation of the Conconta sites with the nearby sites on the trans-Andean side through the Tórtolas pass. Indeed, in a "Regional Action

Plan for an integration and cooperation process" on the Qhapaq Ñan [22], the section proposed by San Juan appears as "Toconta (sic) - Tórtolas (potentially binational)". According to this plan, the identification and registration of the sections of the Qhapaq Ñan should have been completed by January 2007, although at a meeting held in Nariño this deadline was extended to April 30, 2007 [23]. Based on this timeline, it is understood that at the International Meeting concerning the process of preparation of the nomination process for the inscription of the Qhapaq Ñan - Main Andean Road, in the framework of the process of preparation of the nomination of this property to the UNESCO World Heritage List [24], held in Paris between November 19 and 21, 2007, the Conconta ravine appeared as the only section proposed by the province of San Juan, with 90% of the work carried out in terms of road sections and associated Inca sites. At that time, the list of sites for the entire international program was already defined, and the representatives of the National Committees of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru committed themselves to finalize the registry with all its components: road, archaeological sites, environmental, geological, ethnographic-oral and photographic record of the Qhapaq Ñan property by June 1, 2008, in order to comply with a schedule that will allow the property's nomination to be submitted to the World Heritage Center for a first formal examination in August 2009 [24].

In the weeks following the Jujuy congress, the doubts about the Inca affiliation of the sites proposed by the province of San Juan for the Qhapaq Ñan project were spread by the print media. When they learned of the news through a regional newspaper, the officials of the Culture Secretariat of San Juan had an exaggerated response: on November 7, the Undersecretary of Culture of San Juan, the Director of Heritage and the provincial representative of the project gave a press conference to express the full support of the Government to the latter. In the following days, in various newspapers and radio and television channels of the province, a strong official attack was organized in order to "clarify the situation". In summary, the local officials expressed their defense and endorsement of the official advisor's research, and strangely maintained that in reality the underlying problem was a confrontation between researchers, between the provinces of Mendoza and San Juan and between the national universities of Cuyo and San Juan. The attitude of the government of San Juan, although unjustifiable and at odds with advisable academic and ethical practices, is understandable in the context of the progress of the overall project and what it meant to have to change the proposed site and give the relevant explanations, both for the time delay and for the damage to the prestige of the province and of the local agents involved.

But apparently the San Juan authorities were not aware of Rolandi's concern about the issue. As a result, in February 2008, without being reported in the local media, the national responsible for the Qhapaq Ñan project arrived in San Juan to visit and evaluate the sites under discussion. The consequence of this trip was the early withdrawal of the Conconta sites from the San Juan proposal, although this action and the reasons for it were

never communicated to the press nor publicly transmitted by the National Technical Secretariat. It is evident the disruption that this meant not only for San Juan's participation in the project but also for the overall Argentine proposal, which seems to be referred to in a newspaper article that, while celebrating the 2014 declaration, was however titled "Inka Road: a journey full of difficulties that almost made the project fall" [25].

After the incidents of the "Conconta case" the local activities linked to the project adopted a total secrecy, probably to avoid controls and similar unwanted interventions, so that only in 2014, when the proposal was approved in Doha, it was possible to know the details of the sites involved. At the same time, academics continued to defend the Inca affiliation of the Conconta sites [26-27], although all the evidence showed a completely different reality [28].

2.3. Conconta: The "confusion" between inca sites and 20th Century constructions

The Conconta ravine connects the eastern foothills (2,900 m a.s.l.) with the Cura Valley (3,900 m a.s.l.) in northwestern San Juan. The supposedly Inca sites are located in the upper section of the ravine. There are five groups of structures named A35, A34, A27, A18-19 and A13, and three road sections (A15-14, A11-5 and A100). Michieli and her collaborators carried out excavations in several of these sites and proposed that they were lodging tambos, intermediate constructions and sections of imperial road.

The only argument put forward by the authors was the presence of "the most characteristic architectural features (...) present in almost all Inca installations" [19], among which stand out the construction of groups of connected rooms of rectangular shape combined with rooms of circular shape, the trapezoidal shape of hornacinas or niches, entrances and openings, the entrances closed with lintel of a single piece of stone or the entrances open up to the ceiling without lintel, the presence of stone jambs in the entrances and the presence of artificial platforms of different sizes. Other proposed features are less justifiable than the previous ones, largely because of their wide spatial and chronological use in multiple construction systems, even in Hispanic times: the selection of stones for construction, the care in the foundation, the union of the stones of the walls with mud mortar, the double course stone wall with constant thickness and the constant width of the openings.

However, the biggest problem is not that the Inca affiliation is based on architectural elements or that some of them (such as the miradors or the niches or trapezoidal openings) are not actually observed in these sites. Neither is the location of some of these structures in the middle of a steep slope, with the subsequent problems of great investment of work in the previous conditioning and maintenance of the site. The major archaeological drawback is that the only cultural component detected in the excavations presented exclusively very recent materials (empty shells of shutguns of different caliber, bones of guanaco and domestic animals cut with saws, remains of old footwear

repaired with a saw, and remains of old shoes repaired with a saw, remains of old shoes repaired with pieces of automobile tires, tin cans, glass and plastic containers, bottle caps, remains of goggles, fragments of canvas and other fabrics, wires and nails, pieces of sheet metal, batteries, a fork, a detonator, metallized papers, etc.) and that in none of these sites were indigenous elements discovered (nor Inca, obviously). The explanation put forward by the authors is frankly unusual and unsustainable: these sites were being built when the news of the fall of Cuzco arrived, so they would have been abandoned suddenly (see more extensive analysis in [28]). And if there was still any doubt of the legitimacy of the sites, there is a conclusive documentary proof: the existence of a report indicating that the sites were erected between 1955 and 1956, during the construction of the road that runs along the Conconta ravine and allows access to the Cura Valley. In this case, the author of the report declared having participated in these works and narrated some problems they had in these sites due to the inclement weather [29]. Given this panorama, it is evident that the supposed stretches of Inca Road (which in no case show any associated indigenous archaeological record) were in fact old sectors of a modern road that were abandoned as the road was altered by the floods of the stream on whose bed and banks it ran and the corresponding repairs and corrections of the layout were carried out.

As already mentioned, the forcefulness of the arguments put forward did not prevent the Inca character of the Conconta sites from continuing to be proclaimed and reaffirmed, although without empirical support. Thus, to prove its connection with Cerro Tórtolas (where members of the High Mountain Group of the Chilean Andean Club had found remains of a capacocha [30-32], the discovery of a site called Quebrada de las Máquinas-Confluencia was presented. This is located in "the lowest and most sheltered place of the Conconta-Tórtolas route (...) and approximately halfway (15 to 20 km)", and its "fragments [ceramics], especially one with decorated interior and exterior engobed in red, refer to the stage of Inca presence in the region" [26]. However, shortly afterwards this author admitted that the site actually "is contemporary with the first moment of the installations of the late pre-Inca agricultural stage between both *portezuelos*" [27] and that its pottery would be similar to the pre-Inca known as initial Diaguita and the Ánimas of central Chile, and a dating of 790 ± 50 BP (LP-2851) was presented for it [27].

It is worth mentioning the existence of a precedent on the subject of mistakenly considering a site as Inca, taking its architecture as a fundamental criterion. In central Chile, near Los Andes, Coros and Coros [33] proposed the existence of the Tambo del Salto del Soldado, a group of quadrangular enclosures that they associated with a possible section of the Inca Trail. Although only elements apparently corresponding to its use by the workers of the Trans-Andean Railroad (nails, nuts, cans, etc.) were found at the site, the authors considered that the absence of indigenous or Inca archaeological record was not an obstacle to attribute these constructions to the Tawantinsuyu. However, later archaeological and documentary studies by Stehberg,

Niemeyer and Coros [34], which included excavations in all the enclosures, indicated that the site would date from the late 19th century and would have been an auxiliary camp for the workers who built a pair of tunnels for the passage of the railroad.

The above is enough to note the unfounded nature of the postulation of these modern sites and the impossibility of maintaining them in the Argentine proposal, even when their change was made in a framework of extreme urgency that ended up giving rise to other slightly less obvious errors.

2.4. The Inca Road System of San Juan in the UNESCO Declaration

After withdrawing the Conconta proposal, it was urgent to find a replacement, for which two sections located in the northwest of the province were selected. The northernmost one was called Segmento Llano de los Leones (Figure 1); in the declaration it carries the code AR-LLL-16/CS-2011. It is a straight section, 228 m long and an average width of 2.5 m, which joins Tambo Pircas Blancas with the Morro Negro site. This one does not present architectural structures, but there is an accumulation of Inca pottery, which also appeared associated with the trail [35]. In addition, according to the proposal, this section is located in an area rich in minerals and vicuñas, and Morro Negro could have been part of the Cerro del Toro trail (where a capacocha has been found).



Figure 1. View of the segment Llano de los Leones. Modified from [36].

The other section is called Angualasto-Colangüil (Figure 2). It is 3,314 or 3,109 meters long (according to [35]) and an average width of 2.3 m. Two archaeological sites have been associated with this stretch: Punta del Barro, located 7,310 m to the SE and Angualasto, 8,440 m to the SE [37].



Figure 2. View of the Angualasto-Colangüil stretch.

This section's central area was at a lower ground level than its edges, which would have been produced by the transit of cattle [35]. The arguments for considering this stretch Inca [35] were:

- a) its similarity with others that in Chile are attributed to the Incas.
- b) Its linearity.
- c) Its width of 2.35 m, "ideal for a double row of llamas".

d) That would join the Angualasto and Punta del Barro sites with another one called Las Casitas, located at the northwest end of the trail. In Las Casitas there would exist what the informant Augusto Vega calls "chozas de barro" (mud huts), apparently similar to those that exist in the Angualasto site. Therefore, that site would also be ascribed (like the latter) to the Late Period and its "use by Incas must not be ruled out", not because Inca architecture or materials have appeared, but "because they were good at integrating technologies and systematically annexed regions" [35].

e) Some people (whose references are not provided) call it "Colangüil Inca Road".

f) Previously, it had already been considered Inca by a local andinist and a geologist (Beorchia Nigris, 2001; Miolano, 2004) (the bibliography corresponding to these references does not appear in the relevant document published by UNESCO on the Internet).

g) Fragments (supposedly ceramic) found by the park ranger Alejandro Carrizo "were ascribed by Michieli to the Tawantinsuyu" [37].

With respect to the associated sites, the nomination makes it clear that in the case of Punta del Barro "Inca presence in this mine is up to now an assumption" [35]. For Angualasto, the presence of a mixed Inca ceramic piece in the site museum is mentioned, and it is simply noted that "as for the case of Punta del Barro archaeological site, we suggest there was contact with Incas" [35]. In addition to these sections, the final UNESCO statement shows a map with the location of Inca roads in San Juan. This map shows several entry roads of the Inca Road from the north of San Juan, and several sections that in general do not follow the route of the main longitudinal and transversal ravines (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Detail of the map of the final Nomination showing the route of the Qhapaq Ñan in the province of San Juan [35].

In the extreme NW, a first axis with an approximate N-S direction runs approximately 110 km through the San Guillermo Reserve and after being crossed by a

branch that directly connects the sites Cerro El Toro and Paso del Lámar, it goes through the Valle del Cura ravine to end up forking into two routes that head towards Chile

(near Cerro Tórtolas) and towards the center of San Juan (apparently through the Conconta ravine). This second section follows an approximate NW-SE direction and at the height of the locality of Rodeo a road opens towards Chile, apparently through the ravine of Agua Blanca. Later it ends in a longitudinal branch that has an approximate NNE-SSW course, although about 50 km to the north of the meeting point it turns to the E and then to the NE, towards La Rioja, without crossing Inca sites in all that sector. To the south, the branch passes through the foothills towards the San Juan River and then turns to the SW. Once it reaches the current border with Mendoza, a section of it branches off to the west, which

then forks into two roads that enter Chile through SW San Juan.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Differences between the local archaeological knowledge and the declaration

3.1.1. The map of the Qhapaq Ñan

In the section corresponding to San Juan, the Nomination map showing the location of the Inca Road [35] exhibits notable differences with the known and published information for the region (Figure 4).

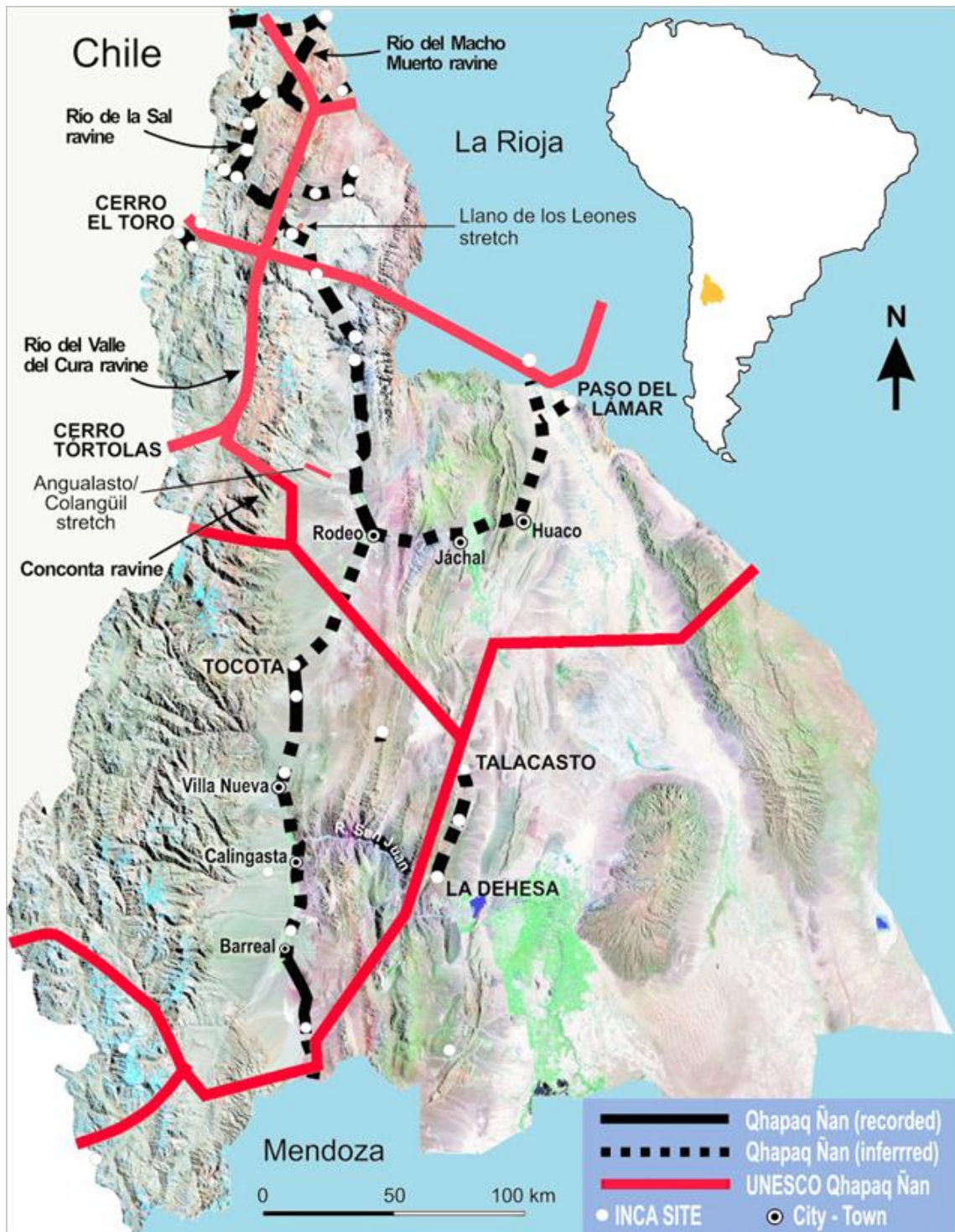


Figure 4. Comparison between San Juan's proposal and that resulting from current archaeological knowledge.

As can be seen, the proposed network of Inca roads does not match the distribution of Inca sites or of the stretches of Qhapaq Ñan known in San Juan. Let us look at some of the divergences:

a) in the extreme NW, instead of joining the known Inca sites on the axis of the Macho Muerto ravine [37], the road is drawn to the east of it, probably to bring it closer to the sites closer to the Llano de los Leones section.

b) As a result, to the south, instead of passing through the Sal ravine (natural continuation of the Macho Muerto ravine around which several Inca sites have been found [38], the road coincides with the Río del Valle del Cura ravine, where there is no Inca evidence.

c) The section that branches off from the previous one to the SW passes through the Conconta ravine, whose lack of Inca evidence has already been analyzed [28].

d) From Conconta, the broken section that heads towards the center of the province does not fit the archaeological evidence and was simply created to obtain a link with the locality of Talacasto, through which a pre-Cordilleran Inca trail would have passed, linking two known Inca sites (La Dehesa and Matagusanos) and a third that would have existed in Talacasto [39].

e) To the north of Talacasto, there is no known Inca evidence nearby to justify the route described, and the same happens in the sector through which the supposed Qhapaq Ñan is crossed towards the east, in the direction of La Rioja.

f) To the south of the La Dehesa dairy farm, the road crosses obliquely through various foothills, with a layout far removed from any that could actually be realized in reality.

g) At the southern end of this longitudinal section there is a detachment to the west, which then opens into two sections that would point to the Portillo and Valle Hermoso passes. There are no published data to verify the use of these trails in the Inca period [37].

h) Even if the inferred routes along which the Qhapaq Ñan would have run according to Raffino [40] and Levillier [41], approximately north and east of the town of Rodeo, were not taken into account, the presence of the main road in the pre-Andean valleys of Iglesia and Calingasta, at least from Tocota to the border with Mendoza, is indisputable [42-43], and this route differs significantly from the one approved by UNESCO.

i) In short, it should be noted that in no case were the stretches that appear in the map of the Nomination based on identifications produced by direct surveys that would allow the detection and identification of the supposed sectors of the Inca roadway included therein.

3.1.2. Sections and associated sites

Most of the sections and associated sites in San Juan declared as part of the Qhapaq Ñan do not present a situation very different from that of the map analyzed. The Llano de los Leones section seems undoubtedly Inca: it joins sites of evident state character and presents ceramic material corresponding to that period. In this sense, the most ostensible criticisms that can be made are linked to superfluous and poorly used information to support the insertion of the section, fundamentally the fact that it is located in an area rich in minerals and

vicuñas, since it is not these circumstances but the aforementioned elements that support the Inca character of the path. In addition, no study has provided elements that allow us to relate the functionality of the Tambo Pircas Blancas or any other in the region with the exploitation of vicuñas, despite their repeated affirmation [38-39, 26, 44].

On the other hand, there are peculiar drawbacks to the postulation of the Angualasto-Colangüil section. This section is particularly strange, since it consists of some trail segments located in the upper part of some hills, with no direct link to archaeological sites.

Firstly, the introduction in such a large-scale project of a section with an Inca attribution which was not only unproven but also completely unsustainable due to the weak arguments used in its presentation (see below) is inexplicable and academically inadmissible. Another curious element is that Argentina's defense of the Angualasto-Colangüil section against an objection from the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) was based on the fact that said segment "relates directly to the economic practices that financed the institutional apparatus of Tawantinsuyu and, specifically, to the extraction of vicuña (Vicugna vicugna) fiber" [35], which is by no means researched or proven and simply constitutes a hypothesis to explain the presence of Inca sites in the San Guillermo area [38].

With respect to the arguments (already mentioned above), the first three (the similarity with Chilean cases, the linearity and its "ideal" width) do not withstand the slightest analysis. Something similar happens with the fourth one: the trail does not link Inca sites but pre-Inca settlements, assigned to the Late Period, one of which (Las Casitas) does not appear in any previous publication. But according to the authors of the proposal, the Incas "were good" at integrating systematically annexed technologies and regions, so it cannot be ruled out that they used this path. An interesting fact is that it is mentioned that the informant Vega "discovered mud huts" near Las Casitas [35], which suggests that the author of the report only took this information but did not verify it personally, which also does not seem to have been done by those responsible for the project at the national level.

Equally incomprehensible are the following two arguments: that some people called the path "Colangüil Inca Road" and that an andinist and a geologist regarded the path as being Inca. In fact, in the province of San Juan itself there are studied examples of errors in the oral tradition that consigned the Inca character of an irrigation system [45] and in the already commented evaluation of the Conconta sites [19]. In the case of Beorchia Nigris, in a volume on high mountain archaeology, he mentions having traveled the Colangüil section, about which he states that the opinion of the baqueano Aníbal Vega was that "it must have linked the *toldería* of Angualasto with the *tambos* of the Frío river" (a *toldería* was a residential camp formed by portable conical tents similar to the *teppes*) and that "it could have had some relation with the Osorio tills [mines] (...) and with the current gold mines existing in Chilean territory" [46]. This author simply thinks that this idea of the baqueano "is an acceptable assumption", but he does not

affirm that it is an Inca road nor that he knows evidence of it. In view of the above, to use as a proof the simple opinion of several non-experts in the matter is as risky and striking as it is scientifically improper.

This set of non-evidentiary elements includes the finding of non-georeferenced and unpublished ceramic fragments, made outside the framework of the project. In this regard, it is interesting to note that there is no mention of the Inca character of the sherds but rather "their ascription to the Tawantinsuyu by Michieli" [35], which suggests that the author of the report did not have the opportunity to see and analyze the pottery of reference.

Finally, another unclear aspect is the linkage of the proposed section with the associated sites, which are approximately 7-8 km away from the currently visible trail segment. According to the corresponding illustration (Figure 5; [35]) this spatial linkage was not ascertained but merely inferred. More serious is the non-Inca character of these sites. According to the Nomination, with respect to Punta del Barro "the Inca presence at this site is so far an assumption" [35], while for Angualasto "we suggest that there was contact with the Incas" [35].

This self-condemnatory confession contrasts directly with what is stated in the Nomination with respect to the authenticity of the nominated properties, an essential element frequently reiterated in the document. Thus, it states that "authenticity is the essential qualifying factor concerning values" and that "the archaeological evidence

registered in the road's sections and associated archaeological sites proposed for nomination are supported by a significant quantity of scientific and technical studies carried out in the last fifty years" [35]. But, in fact, in the Angualasto-Colangüil section, no previous studies had been carried out and, even worse, those developed in Punta del Barro and Angualasto did not support its Inca status. The document then points out that "from an archaeological perspective, this evidence allows the establishment of the authenticity of the archaeological sites and their context" [35]. Certainly, it can be accepted that the sites and even the analyzed section are authentically archaeological, which in no way means that they are Inca.

How, then, can the presence of a section of trail at this site be explained? The answer, as in the case of Conconta, comes from direct witnesses of the formation of the trail. On this occasion, according to the statement of a local baqueano, his father and grandfather, as well as other local settlers, went to the fields to look for firewood. The demarcation of the trail was done by the action of the "rastras de leña que traían con los burros", that is, the bundles of firewood that were dragged by these animals and were clearing the path (Juan Díaz, personal communication, 21/4/2023).

In conclusion, the Angualasto-Colangüil section would correspond to a recent path, which does not present attributes that allow defining it as Inca nor links Inca sites; therefore, there is no evidence to support its integration to the Inca Road system.

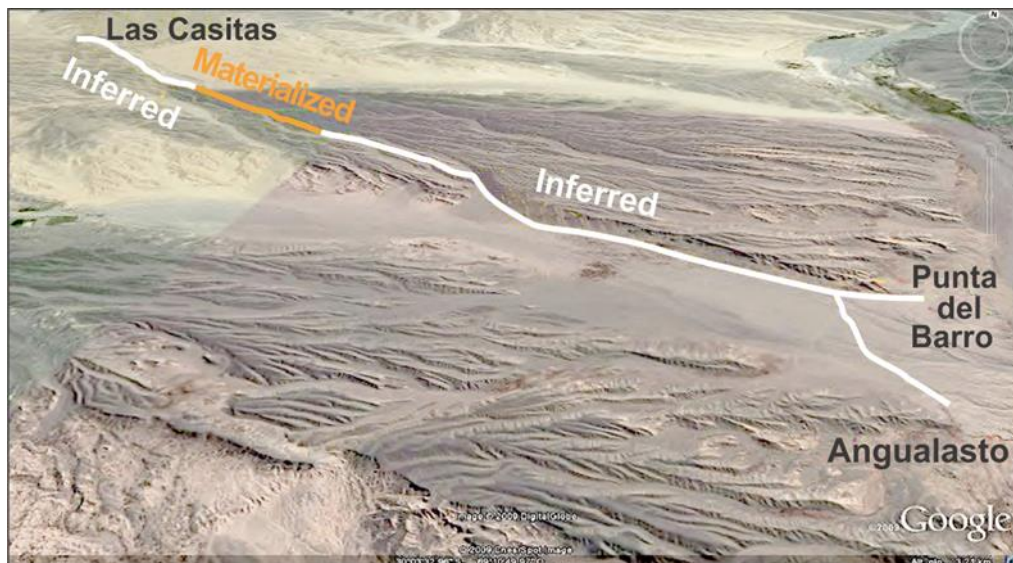


Figure 5. Location of the Angualasto-Colangüil section according to the UNESCO Nomination [35].

4. Discussion

It is very difficult to explain the errors previously pointed out. In order to warn the seriousness of the case, it is worth reiterating that the final Nomination was very close to proposing as Inca several constructions that in fact dated from the middle of the XX century. On the one hand, it is clearly observed that the basic criteria commonly accepted to consider when a road or trail is Inca were not respected. Hyslop [47] defined the Inca Trail as "any route (...) which was used at the time of the empire and which was continually associated with

structures and/or settlements whose functions were related to the operation of the Inka state". Therefore, the Inca character of the different sections of the road is given by its association with Inca or local constructions modified, expanded or used in function of the operation of the Tawantinsuyu [21, 48-51] and by the evidence of its state use, for example diagnostic ceramics from that period [21, 51, 53]. Additionally, in some sectors, other useful criteria can be added at a local or regional level, such as place names, constructive characteristics, the presence of road architecture and the straightness of the road [48-49]. As previously seen, the basic identification

criteria were not considered neither in the previous case of the Conconta sites, nor in Punta del Barro, Angualasto or the Angualasto-Colangüil section, but were completely replaced by the subjectivity of the agents involved.

On the other hand, when trying to understand this remarkable mismatch, it is striking that the stretches postulated by San Juan are adapted to the assumptions previously published by the advisor of the Government of San Juan on archaeological issues [52]. In that work, unlike what was pointed out by other authors [42, 44, 53-55], Michieli proposed that the Qhapaq Ñan did not run through the pre-Andean valleys of Iglesia and Calingasta, but through the precordillera, further east. However, the best section that San Juan could postulate for this project was undoubtedly the one recorded south of Tocota; alternatively, the one starting from the town of Barreal could have been presented. In the same sense, the sites postulated previously (Conconta) and in the final document (Punta del Barro and Angualasto) had also been studied by this researcher [19-20, 26, 56-58]. As Díaz [59] suggests, "it is inevitable to think that the fluctuation in the selection of sites must have been related to the interests of the professionals who had participated in the project".

Why did the Government of San Juan insist on supporting the actions of its representative, even when the mistakes made were obvious? Why did the Argentine project managers agree to support those mistakes? It is very difficult to answer these questions, especially if we take into account that after what happened with Conconta, the issue should have been handled with much more care. Just as the supposed Inca sites had not been inspected and evaluated by the National Technical Secretariat and the Technical Coordinator of the Qhapaq Ñan program, it is very difficult to admit that these authorities had analyzed the Angualasto-Colangüil section before accepting it, without noticing the serious inconveniences described in this work. Among the factors to be considered to explain this situation are the already mentioned delay that the San Juan case caused to the international project, and possible official pressures (from the government of San Juan and/or the Argentinean government) to solve the problem as soon as possible.

Equally serious is the fact that the situation described above was not noticed by the inspection carried out by ICOMOS. This problem adds to other serious shortcomings of the UNESCO World Heritage Program previously noted [60]. At least one ICOMOS technical evaluation mission visited the sites nominated by Argentina, between September 25 and October 6, 2013 [61]. There is no detailed information available about this evaluation (number of evaluators, names, time spent visiting each site, local host, etc.), so it is impossible to go deeper into the subject. However, it is likely that it was a group of technicians not specifically specialized in the subject, more interested in verifying compliance with the basic criteria to justify the nomination of the sections and sites than in verifying their Inca character (since this was an obvious factor to be handled by local specialists).

5. Conclusion

The Qhapaq Ñan program required the identification and incorporation of unquestionably Inca roads and sites that were of special significance for the understanding of their role and cultural value within the framework of the practices and ideology of the Inca state, and that would contribute to the development of local communities and the implementation of tourism activities. On the contrary, it did not constitute a testing laboratory for the detection of sites that could eventually or remotely be proven to belong to the Tawantinsuyu.

These premises were not fulfilled when first the sites of Conconta and later those of Punta del Barro and Angualasto were postulated in association with the (supposedly Inca) Angualasto-Colangüil road segment, nor was the principle of authenticity, one of UNESCO's essential bases for its declarations of cultural heritage properties.

The fact that mistakes have been made and that progress is still being made based on those mistakes (in fact, activities related to the program continue with work meetings and specific actions at the sites involved) implies the responsibility of various agents, mainly officials and researchers, and a damage to the public image of the province of San Juan. As has been analyzed, it is relatively easy to note the absence or presence of actions or omissions that contributed to the situation discussed here (for example, the lack of verification in due time and form by the authorities of the national program and by UNESCO inspectors of the sites nominated by San Juan, the wrong choice of the specialists in charge of identifying the sites, or the insistence of the San Juan government in defending the Conconta sites to the last consequences). On the contrary, it is very difficult to understand the political decisions that supported these mistakes. It seems that the preeminence of political-partisan interests over academic ones cannot be ruled out.

Two main consequences can be drawn from the above. At a local level (provincial and national, in Argentina), a major problem is the probable persistence of conditions that in matters of a fundamentally academic nature allow the making and imposition of political decisions, sometimes (as in the present case) based on opinions that do not reflect a careful handling of scientific information and that could be aimed at satisfying other interests. These conditions are linked both to the lack of institutional or informal controls and to the absence of administrative or academic sanctions, i.e., of procedures that make the healthy concern for correct performance prevail and encourage the abandonment of arbitrary practices.

On the other hand, at an international level, the approval of a project that contained markedly erroneous information supports the doubts raised about the performance of UNESCO's World Heritage Program [60] and should serve as a serious wake-up call to be taken into account in future evaluations of cases involving the participation of multiple nations that present heterogeneity of procedures and internal controls.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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