

## ***Rocks are in the Eye of the Beholder: Rock Art and Perception of the Territory in the Talampaya National Park***

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A rocky landscape like the World Heritage Site of Talampaya-Ischigualasto may be geologically described as a mere natural formation comprising a variety of geofoms. However, its awe-inspiring orography, as well as its strategic location, has not gone unnoticed by the people who passed through the region. The identity of diverse agents can be traced in this landscape, from the prehispanic populations and historical cattle drivers to modern researchers, local communities, the Administration and visitors. Each of them established a different relationship with the landscape, transforming it according to their worldviews.

Talampaya has not yielded evidence of either permanent settlement or domestic structures, though some open-air accumulations of lithic and bone material support the idea that the area was, through most of its life-history, used as a transit territory and a reference for short-time occupations. However, graves and fences, as well as artefact-rich interwoven straw and sediment matting dated to 640 BC, were found within small caves and rock shelters, which, along with the presence of open-air circular stone structures, testify the recurrent use of the place.

The profuse rock art provides a unifying symbolic frame to this former natural landscape, which from now on should be considered a social territory, devoid of meaning without the human agents who re-created it. So, the area is loaded with cultural significance which transformed their simple materiality in a more complex phenomenon, a territory which belongs to somebody and is thus perceived by those who visit it. This paper aims to explore these past perceptions and ways of engaging with the stone formations which characterise Talampaya, to define how the permanence of the landscape interplays with the temporality of human lives and is perpetuated in the marks left on these rocks. In other words, the intention is to re-draw the biography of Talampaya by contextualising what the eye of the beholder may have seen.