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ALBERTO REX GONZÁLEZ, DEAN OF SOUTH AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY¹

Tom D. Dillehay²

Dr. Alberto Rex González was an Argentine archeologist and anthropologist who I knew for more than thirty years. His intellectual and professional achievements and influences are highly worth honoring and remembering here.

Dr. Alberto Rex González was the Dean of southern cone South American archaeology and the founding father of modern Argentine archaeology. For over 60 years, his experience in archeology focused on the first human populations in the southern cone, the beginnings of complex societies in the Andes, and the art and symbolism of those societies. He supervised, oversaw, or helped to arrange archeological excavations at sites all over Argentina. Rex's long distinguished career in anthropological archaeology established the first basic chronology for most of Argentina. He meticulously documented cultural sequences for contiguous regions in Northwest Argentina, northern Patagonia, southern Bolivia, and northern Chile, and once radiocarbon dating became more available in the 1950s and 1960s, he was able to substantiate the timing of migrations and diffusions over considerable distances. He also was one of the major players in the debates surrounding the development and application of the period/horizon style concept in Andean archaeology. Yet, his interests were not purely in formal chronology and phase building. Early in his career, he was concerned with questions of diffusion, migration, environmental change, political economy, symbolism, and others. As a consequence, he helped to place the archeology of Argentina and particularly Northwest Argentina on the South American map and in the international arena.

Although his archeological and anthropological research were largely concentrated in Argentina, his professional visits and talks and his widespread development of students and protégés in

neighboring countries such as Chile, Bolivia, and Uruguay made him an international figure. A man of great wit and warmth, as well as learning, he trained generations of anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians. He was a master synthesizer, and his major works contained many of his most provocative and influential writings. Outside of South America, he was perhaps best known for his research into the Formative cultures of Northwest Argentina, the La Aguada post-Formative culture, and art and iconographic analyses of a wide range of archaeological materials.

For many of us, one of the most important features of Rex's approach to anthropology was that he always maintained an empirical dimension without becoming atheoretical. He was always focused on data collection, which necessitated intensive and extensive fieldwork. Beginning in the late 1940s, Rex built on the work of other scholars to establish the basic groundwork for an understanding of the major attributes of several important cultures, including Tafi, Cienega, Condorhuasi, Belem, among others. His field collaborations with other scholars were of such scope that many widely used terms for archaeological cultures derive from these investigations. Terminologically, then, he leaves an indelible imprint on the archaeology of South America. He also laid the empirical and theoretical groundwork for understanding one of the earliest complex societies of Northwest Argentina—the La Aguada culture.

In recent decades, González's middle-range theoretical interests in comparing and dating cultures led him to pioneer innovative ways of analyzing artifacts. To trace relatedness and change in cultures through ceramic classification, for instance, he defined many type-variety ceramic models in Northwest Argentina. For González, the comparative

¹ **Nota del Editor:** Este comentario/obituario está basado en una carta de apoyo a la postulación de Alberto Rex González al premio Lifetime Achievement Award Society for American Archaeology enviada por el autor al comité *ad hoc* de la Sociedad Americana de Arqueología en diciembre de 2008.

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analysis of ceramic and iconographic styles was fundamental to space-time systematics and the identification of migrations, diffusion, culture change, and the rise of social complexity. Other remarkable achievements in his career included excavations in numerous archaeological sites. In many of these excavations, he documented for the first time the existence of Formative and later cultures. The cultural sequences in regions where he worked are more complete, better dated, and largely have withstood the test of time better than those in the stamping grounds of other archaeologists. To be sure, as more sites are excavated and dated, the chronologies established by González have been refined, but the overall frameworks are still in place. In recent years, younger scholars armed with new concepts and approaches have reinterpreted the data and chronologies and developed new models. Yet, his work still provides the cultural historical framework within which new explanatory models are being developed.

Despite the major redirection in his studies from the reconstruction of culture history to anthropological theory and broad cultural syntheses over the past sixty years, he remained consistent with the goals he projected half a century ago, that is, to expose the cultural variability in the prehistoric record of Argentina, to study and explain processes of long-term change, and to move beyond the limitations of the language of ethnographic description. Many scholars may challenge Dr. González's interpretations of regional culture history and his understanding of human nature, but the fact is few any longer attempt to write cultural syntheses from the holistic perspective he did. I tend to trust his kind of interpretation as opposed to more ambitious ones based on little data and on a singular conceptual or theoretical explanation.

For Dr. González, as with many other archaeologists, anthropology was aesthetically, not just intellectually appealing. Although I never discussed the issue with him, I always had the impression that anthropology to him was a source of delight, adventure, and social experience, a liberating disciplined way of understanding the world and enjoying life as well. During my various trips to Argentina, I would accompany colleagues to the field in the vicinity of Tucumán, Jujuy, and Catamarca. We almost always encountered individuals in these areas who had excavated with "el Doctor" and remembered their experience with him very fondly.

To Dr. González, no division exists between anthropological and archaeological research. It is apparent in all of his works that he thought of research holistically, following the model of knowledge that developed through his archaeological research, through his contact with indigenous peoples, and through his formal academic education in different countries. In his primary emphasis on data, his readiness to combine the methods and perspectives of ethnography, ethnohistory, archaeology, and allied fields, and in his focus on culture history and general theory in the social sciences, he exemplified what I believe to be essential in anthropological scholarship. In short, all information and perspectives were grist for his intellectual mill. Despite many theoretical changes in the discipline over the past 40 years and most recently the shift to postmodernism, he was an unwavering proponent of the holistic and empirical approach to anthropology. And although his work had been concentrated in the southern cone of South America and more specifically Northwest Argentina, it is of immense importance to the discipline as a whole.

Individually and collectively, the publications of Dr. González represent a distinctive stance with respect to the theory, method, data, and practice of anthropology. The diversity of research programs that he undertook is clear in the publication of his book on *Arte y Estructura* (1974), which examines the cultural relationship between art—especially the feline motif—symbolism and the emergence of complex social systems. In the last twenty-five years of his research, he turned especially toward the cognitive and aesthetic dimensions of his data. Perhaps this grew out of old abiding interests, ones that had originally attracted him to archaeology. Always thinking broadly and comparatively, Dr. González noted the similarities between the La Aguada feline iconography and that of the Peruvian late Nazca polychrome pottery. He also saw a sharing of the treatment of trophy-head representations in the two styles and broader transAndean connections. His work on Andean symbolism and on indigenous cosmology still stands as classics in the discipline. Some of these works are fine examples of pioneering research in ethnoarchaeology and cognitive anthropology. He also published two other tomes. These volumes are *Cultura La Aguada: Arqueología y Diseños* (1998) and *Las Placas Metálicas de los Andes del Sur: Contribución al Estudio de las Religiones Precolombinas*. KAVA

Materialen. Band 46. Kommission für Allgemeine und Vergleichende Archäologie des Deutschen Archäologischen Institut (1992). These are massive works that combined detailed empirical data, interdisciplinary methods, and rich theoretical insights into the power, authority, and symbolism of late complex societies in Andean Argentina. In addition to these books, he published numerous other volumes and hundreds of research articles in international journals.

In summary, from his various academic and field experiences and publications, he elaborated the fundamental approach to the study of southern Andean anthropology. A feature of his basic approach to anthropology was his constant consciousness of the history and structure of the discipline itself, and particularly of national scholarly identities. He keenly fostered the development of professional anthropology in Argentina and indirectly in several other South American countries. Perhaps more than any other South Americanist of his era, he promoted the development of institutions, individual scholars, and scholarly ties between the Andean countries in the west and the lowland countries in the east. He worked hard to break down national borders by offering formal and informal instruction in local settings and by helping students to find educational and field opportunities.

Aside from his theoretical and methodological innovations, González had a characteristic inspiring effect on other researchers, particularly younger researchers. Several major figures in Argentine and Chilean archaeology worked with him and served as his protégés. He produced numerous Ph.Ds, and he touched many lives of archaeologists, including my own when I lived and worked in Chile during the Pinochet years. He was always encouraging and supporting. During those years in Chile, he often traveled to Santiago where he gave lectures and informal discussions. He induced a very relaxed and engaging intellectual atmosphere in these sessions, and he presided over them with good sense and wit. Argument was encouraged; there was never any “putting down” of anyone; one came away with the feeling that it had been enjoyable learning.

Intellectually, González was inquisitive and insightful; a careful reader who enjoyed making up his own mind about issues and encouraging others to think things through equally carefully. He had a keen nose for what the critical issues were. And he had an air of mature eagerness and personal

self-confidence, and an ability to communicate that he knew what he was talking about without implying any comparisons to others or a lack of interest in what others had to say.

An amicable man, he was always generous of his time to all who wanted to confer with him. He also helped several women on to influential careers, encouraged the work of several non-Latin Americans working in Latin America, and initiated collaborations with colleagues from other countries. His collaborations reached beyond academe to also include vocational archaeology.

When one not ones look to the many disciples produced by Dr. González over the decades, you can see his influence. The works of his ex-students and close colleagues demonstrate the many facets of his contributions to anthropology. Their primary concern always seems to be to base their interpretations on empirical data and, either explicitly or implicitly, to ask what the past means to the present and how best to reconstruct and interpret local histories. His students recognize—even celebrate—the importance of new data, fresh description, and basic analysis; they do not deny the importance of theory, but they recognize that its proper use requires rich data and elaborate analysis. Put simply, many of these disciples are an extension of Alberto Rex González—they adopt a historical perspective on every issue and freely blend ethnographic, historical, and archaeological data. That they do so with such diversity bears witness to the great scope of his impact on the field. His work and their work deserve the widest possible audience.

Reflection on his career as an archaeologist, anthropologist, and teacher can leave no doubts to the immense impact he had on the profession and to South American archaeology. I know from many conversations with his students that they recall him as a teacher who inspired them in many different areas of anthropology. His colleagues remember him with a respect of extraordinary proportions and with a large debt of gratitude for the countless ideas he freely shared in many cooperative research ventures and books and articles.

During the last several years of his scholarly career, Rex González continued to pursue knowledge in history, iconography, and cultural history. Everywhere he went he would seek out local archaeologists and friends through a practice session in the historical anthropology of the region. He always displayed his own special blend

of historical seriousness and anthropological play. He was enormously inquisitive. In his writings, he saw monuments, buildings, and other historical sites as the markers of ways in which memory and history collided and then combined, requiring serious attention both to the quotidian nature of the lived world and its multiple historical determinations. Rex wore his learning with lightness and grace, but along with the originality and influence of his publications, he had a wit and capacity to engage both young and old scholars. He gave us models about how to do –as well as to conceptualize– historical scholarship, but he also gave a

model of how to be a scholar in the world. All of us interested in Andean archaeology and of Latin America more generally must walk in his shadow for a very long time to come.

To close, Dr. González was a warm and generous person who cared much for his discipline and for friends and colleagues. He was an unstoppable researcher. Even in his early eighties he continued to study and to publish. It is no exaggeration to say that Alberto Rex González was truly one of the most knowledgeable and high-powered anthropological archaeologists who has ever worked in South America.



Alberto Rex González junto a Betty Meggers y Lautaro Núñez. Simposio sobre el periodo Formativo de la arqueología sudamericana organizado por el Instituto Smithsonian y la Organización de los Estados Americanos, Cuenca, Ecuador, 1992. Gentileza Proyecto Archivo Digital Dr. Albert Rex González (Convenio CONICET - Museo Etnográfico J. B. Ambrosetti (FFyL, UBA) - Familia González).