

El Condor mine Prehispanic production and consumption of hematite pigments in the Atacama Desert, northern Chile

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Abstract

The mineral richness of the Atacama Desert permitted the development of a diverse array of mining activities, including the production of metals, lapidary, and pigments, which developed into significant sociocultural practices for desert dwellers throughout the occupation of the region. El Cóndor mine is an important hematite source located in the middle section of the Loa River, exploited from the Formative Period (ca. AD 300) until Inca times (ca. AD 1500). In contrast to other mining sites of Atacama region, the El Condor mine complex contains specialized infrastructure where different kinds of activities were carried out: extraction pits, processing areas with multiple anvils and grinding tools, and semicircular structures used for domestic activities. Pigment production was initially developed as a small-scale craft that intensified during later periods (ca. AD 1200). It was most extensive following the Inca expansion (ca. AD 1400), as evidenced by wider networks of distribution and consumption, as well as infrastructural changes. El Cóndor mine constitutes a notable example of a large-scale hematite operation that articulated important networks of exchange, and as such provides a case study for evaluating the organization of mining activities during late periods of the pre-Hispanic sequence in the Atacama Desert. We then emphasize that the circulation of pigments constitutes an important social practice and a salient economic activity, fulfilling a political role through the production and reproduction of social relations between different cultural entities that could be compared to similar cases from other regions in the world..

Keywords

Iron oxideMining, ColorInca, Late pre-Hispanic periods, Andes region.