

Book Review

– *La diáspora de Capdeville: Flujos epistolares y de objetos precolombinos*,
by Benjamín Ballester, Pampa Negra Ediciones, 2024

Benjamín Ballester's *La diáspora de Capdeville* offers a critical intervention in the historiography of archaeology in Chile, examining the early development of the discipline through the circulation of letters and artefacts during the 1910s and 1920s. Centring on the figure of Augusto Capdeville Rojas – a customs official based in the nitrate port of Taltal and an amateur archaeologist – Ballester reconstructs the extensive networks of individuals, institutions, and exchanges that shaped the production of archaeological knowledge in Chile. Drawing on insights from the history of science and material culture studies, the author challenges centre-periphery models by foregrounding the local and transnational agencies that configured the archaeological field in the region. The book proposes that archaeological knowledge in Chile emerged not solely from academic elites or the metropolitan institutions but from a broader constellation of actors and through the movement of objects across national and disciplinary boundaries.

The book is structured into a presentation and five chapters, each mapping a distinct *trama*, circumscribed in two *redes*, one epistolary (pp. 19-46) and another of knowledge (pp. 141-160) in which Capdeville was involved. Ballester contextualises Capdeville's activities within a broader early twentieth-century enthusiasm for pre-Columbian artefacts in northern Chile. The first *trama* examines Capdeville's epistolary relationship with Carlos Oliver Schneider in Concepción, Chile, which led to the donation of objects to the local museum. Here, Ballester highlights how gift-giving functioned as a strategy for social positioning while also serving to distribute archaeological knowledge. Many of Capdeville's gifts – as well as his private collection – displayed a notable degree of creativity, particularly in the arrangement of objects for exhibition and/or preservation. He often assembled artefacts into configurations that diverged significantly from their original contextual settings; for instance, he would construct a harpoon by combining different parts from multiple contexts. While such practices might alarm a professional curator, Ballester demonstrates, including photographic evidence, that the composite forms created through these

arrangements acquired a new dimension. Ultimately, this effect constituted a contribution in its own right, offering a more or less coherent impression of how these objects might once have been naturally embedded in everyday life.

The second *trama* examines Capdeville's connections to the United States, focusing on the American Museum of Natural History and the Taltal collection of Paul L. Thommen. Correspondence with Professor John Montgomery Cooper demonstrates how Capdeville used photography and documentation to generate international interest in his collection, ultimately attracting the attention of Max Uhle or Junius B. Bird, a pivotal figure in Atacama Desert archaeology. The third *trama* links Taltal to Hamburg, Germany, via the collector Oscar Schmidtt-Pizarro, who donated artefacts to the Museum am Rothenbaum-Kulturen und Künste der Welt. Ballester suggests a likely association between Schmidtt-Pizarro and Capdeville, illustrating the tight-knit and often transcontinental nature of nitrate-era collecting networks. Particularly insightful is Ballester's emphasis on the logistical infrastructure – steamships, postal services, and railways – that facilitated these material flows. The fourth *trama* investigates Capdeville's indirect connections with British institutions, including the British Museum and the University of Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

An English-language newspaper in Chile, *The South Pacific Mail*, is identified as a vehicle for disseminating archaeological information, suggesting that knowledge circulated multi-directionally, mediated through expatriate communities and local publications. The fifth and final *trama* of the network revolves around Capdeville's collaboration with the Société Scientifique du Chili and other societies (namely, Sociedad Chilena de Historia y Geografía, or Sociedad Ecuatoriana de Estudios Históricos), and the publication of his photographic album, *Industria de los pueblos prehistóricos de Chile*. The album had a significant impact on the visual and conceptual framing of the Chilean past, reproduced on multiple occasions, including by the prominent Chilean intellectual Ricardo Latcham.

By combining archival research, biographical reconstruction, and material culture analysis, Ballester constructs a nuanced and richly textured narrative. His focus on the materiality of knowledge allows for a holistic understanding of how archaeology was practised and institutionalised. Nevertheless, the work does present certain limitations. Despite treating the movement of materialities as diasporas, no reference is made to Paul Basu's (2011). Also, while the text details the international trajectories of artefacts collected by Capdeville and his peers, it avoids sustained discussion of current debates concerning repatriation and restitution or provenance studies. For example, the chapter on the Hamburg collection notes that items remain on display in Germany but does not explore the ethical or political ramifications of their continued presence abroad, especially considering the current context of German museums, which openly questions its past and explores new forms of decolonisation (Noack, 2020).

Despite these issues, *La diáspora de Capdeville* constitutes a valuable contribution to Chilean and Latin American archaeology, the history of science, and

material culture studies. It challenges entrenched narratives by foregrounding the role of peripheral and amateur actors in the development of the archaeological discipline. It appears as another chapter in the efforts of the Chilean academy to critically unravel its history, as in the case of recent publications on the topic (Garrido Escobar & Vilches Vega, 2024). Ballester's work is not only a testament to the historical complexities of archaeological practice in Latin America but also a model for future research that seeks to understand the material, institutional, and transnational dimensions of scientific activity.

Joaquín J. A. Molina M., Universität Bonn
joaquinmolinam@gmail.com

References

Basu, P. (2011). Object diasporas, resourcing communities: Sierra Leonean Collections in the Global Museumscape. *Museum Anthropology*, 34(1), 28–42.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1379.2010.01105.x>

Garrido Escobar, F., & Vilches Vega, F. (2024). Un epistolario de cuatro décadas (1940–1980). *La arqueología chilena a través de las redes de Grete Mostny* (F. Garrido Escobar & F. Vilches Vega, Eds.). Ediciones de la Subdirección de Investigación del Servicio Nacional del Patrimonio Cultural.

Noack, K. (2020). Objetos, coleccionismo, museos y los global turns. Una propuesta para descolonizar el museo. In K. Noack, C. Jaimes Betancourt, & N. Rattunde (Eds.), *Global Turns, decolonización y museos* (pp. 19–42). Bonner Altamerika-Sammlung und Studien (BASS) e.V., Plural editores