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Landscapes, settlers, and workforce in colonial Catamarca (Northwestern Argentina, 16th-18th c.). A historical archaeology project

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This paper presents a collaborative work on the impact of the European conquest and colonization on the conception, construction, and management of agropastoral landscapes in Eastern Catamarca (Northwestern Argentina). This research forms part of a broader project that includes case studies from Iberian and Canarian conquest and colonization contexts from the late medieval period onward. Every colonial experiences studied so far were founded on the destruction or severe transformation of the existing society, beginning with the population itself, and the productive areas and practices. The understanding of the new colonial order requires knowledge of the previous conditions upon which further destruction and construction coexisted, as well as the adaptative tools managed both of the indigenous population and of the colonizers in the specific resulting societies. In spite of the local diversity of the new societies, some common trends can be identified in the previous peasant organizations elsewhere and in the aims and methods of the colonization. In this work, we present the main characteristics of the *población* process of eastern Catamarca, both in the central valley and in the mountain range then known as Sierra de Santiago or, more lately, de Guayamba (present day Ancasti), between the late 16th and 18th centuries. Using both textual and archaeological evidence in an articulated manner, we analyze how the new colonial landscapes and practices were constructed in these two areas, focusing mainly on the procedures of dispossession and the forms of capturing and consuming labor force. One of the main conclusions of the work is that, despite the initial and decisive importance of European-origin livestock in indigenous dispossession, especially in the Sierra de Santiago, the consolidation of the conquest demanded the establishment of settlers who were also farmers. We will present three cases of settlement related to agricultural development involving people initially arriving from afar: on one hand, displaced people resettled in an *estancia*, family groups formed from *ingas* who arrived with the Spaniards during the second half of the 16th century from Peru and settled in the Sierra de Santiago, and a community of African-origin slaves associated with the irrigation system of Santa Cruz, in the Catamarca Valley. Then people of regional, Andean and African origins participated in the consolidation of the new order in eastern Catamarca after being dispossessed and displaced from their places of origin. Finally, we propose some lines of future work, taking into account mainly the perspectives of generating knowledge about the colonization process from an archaeological perspective.

KEYWORDS

Iberian conquests, settler colonialism, agricultural landscapes, indigenous labor, slavery, Catamarca, Gobernación del Tucumán

1 Introduction

The foundational document of the city of Todos los Santos, Nueva Rioja, dated to May 1591, conveys one of the most vivid descriptions of a colonizing contingent in northwest Argentina (Levillier, 1918–1920, p. 481–2; Boixadós, 2003, p. 29–43). The document recounts the arrival of the governor of Tucumán in the valley of Catamarca from Santiago del Estero, with 70 men, 750 war and working horses, fourteen carts, 120 oxen, a large herd of goats, sheep, and rams, and 400 Indians. The foundation of the city, immediately after the arrival of the party to the valley, and the distribution of land (*mercedes*) among participants also reveal the colonizing plans of the expedition, which in the documents of the period are typically made explicit with the word *poblar*. *Poblar* (or *población*) is a very powerful notion, frequent in the record and used for centuries from the onset of the Iberian expansion (Isla, 2002, p. 33–42). Generally, the significance of the term goes beyond its literal meaning of "settlement of a new population." In the context of the late medieval and early modern Iberian conquests, *poblar* meant the implementation of a new social order, conceived as irreversible and ever growing, directed and, to a large extent, sustained by people coming from afar, willingly or otherwise. This programme involved the development of new productive and commercial logic and practices, and also the imposition of new hierarchies and the shaping of a labor force, the composition and size of which had to be consistent with the productive programme.

Inevitably, *población* involved various forms of domination over, and management of, indigenous populations, which, sooner or later, resulted in the dissolution of local societies. However, it must be clarified that this domination was not always complete or irreversible, nor univocal. This simplistic perception springs from what S. Greenblatt called "sentimental pessimism," which, ultimately, is a way to unimpeachably seal the victory of the conquerors (Greenblatt, 1991, p. 151; Deagan, 1996, p. 136). In fact, as we shall see, groups and individuals operating outside their places of origin (*indios*, *yngas* -settlers coming from Peru-, and *mulatos*) participated in the consolidation and expansion of the colonial programme and also in the generation of new solidarities, built after their initial dispossession, that challenged the individualistic logic applied to the labor force.

Needless to say, the Iberian conquests applied a wide range of strategies, determined by the specific conditions of each colonizing project. In all cases, however, they led to a deep transformation of local biotas—including the human populations—economic practices, the organization of labor, and social hierarchies. The general patterns and local peculiarities of the processes of conquest and colonization can only be adequately explained by comparing enterprises in both the Old and the New worlds between the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern age (early examples are Bishko, 1952; Verlinden, 1954, among others). This work is framed by an interdisciplinary project that focuses on colonial societies in different episodes of the Iberian expansion, and, particularly, in the agrarian practices and landscapes generated by colonization (Díaz et al., 2021).

Obviously, the project is Eurocentric; it is primarily interested in the advance of the conquerors on both sides of the Atlantic. It is important, however, to qualify this statement. First, this Eurocentrism is analytical and has no laudatory connotations. It is guided by the belief that a good understanding of the organization and scope of conquest and colonization processes can help us to better comprehend the social orders built on the back of these, and to project this knowledge onto highly relevant debates, for instance about the origin of capitalism (although it does not cover conquests prior to the 15th century, see for instance Moore, 2003). Second, the scale of the transformations triggered by colonization can only be properly assessed by comparing its results with the social orders that it destroyed or altered so deeply, as a result of the management of plant and animal populations and the productive spaces of the conquered.

This has interesting and, in our opinion, highly wide-ranging implications. What did the practices of Andalusi peasants, rebranded *moriscos* in the early 16th century, have in common with the *canarios* of Gran Canaria, or, to mention just one more example, with so-called *diaguitas* in the old province of Tucumán? Distance and the diversity of specific conditions are an open invitation to focus on the peculiarities of each setting. And there is nothing wrong with that. However, it is also true that the productive practices of *moriscos*, *canarios*, and *diaguitas* failed to frictionlessly slot in the new colonial orders. Although indigenous peasant constructions determined the choice of place, and although they were distributed among, and avidly received by, the new settlers, in every case these were profoundly altered in terms of shape, size, and crop choices. Beyond the differences that separate these scenarios, it seems clear that these peasant systems shared some features that made them, in the short or the long term, unsustainable after the conquest, not even in an altered form. In other words, in every instance, the adaptation process led to the more or less rapid dissolution of the basic organizing principles of these peasant societies and the redistribution and composition of indigenous populations, with, in different degrees and chronologies, expulsion, extermination, fiscal demands, forced labor, and land occupation by the new colonists, until the pre-existing society was completely annihilated (on al-Andalus, Torró, 2019; on the Canary Islands, Aznar, 1994; Díaz, 2023; on the Gobernación del Tucumán, Lorandi, 1988, among others). The demographic losses and political defeat suffered by the indigenous groups was, in all cases, the foundational stage of processes of *población* (and not merely re*población*), and the pillar which supported the deep transformation of colonial landscapes, the new political hierarchies, and the forms of solidarity and resistance that crystallized after the initial dispossessions.

The contingent described in the 1591 document mentioned above was formed by Spaniards, their Indian allies and servants, animals, and very likely, although this is not mentioned, new plant species. They, however, lacked two decisive elements for colonization: land and labor attached to it. This article presents the main features of the *población* of eastern Catamarca, both in the valley and the hill range known at the time as Santiago, from the late 16th to the 18th century. Combining the historical and archaeological records, we examine the construction of new landscapes and colonial practices in these two areas, particularly focusing on methods of dispossession and the capture and consumption of labor force, both of which elements are inextricably

linked with irreversible shifts in the distribution and size of local communities.

We shall present three colonial settlements related to the development of an agrarian economy, with the participation of displaced populations, either indigenous groups subject to *reducciones*, *yngas* brought from Perú, who, no doubt, played an active part in the conquest, and enslaved *mulatos* (Figure 1). We shall see that the local indigenous groups, the Peruvian elements, and people of African descent, after being dispossessed and displaced from their places of origin, made different contributions to the construction of the new order in eastern Catamarca. Throughout the colonial period, their descendants suffered further dispossessions and the individualization of labor. Finally, we shall suggest several avenues for future research, considering the potential of historical archaeology to generate knowledge; as pointed out by Deagan (1996), this discipline possesses the most appropriate tools to understand the daily choices and adjustments made by the different groups in place in colonial America (on the concept and some examples, Orser, 2010; Montón-Subías et al., 2016).

Before, however, we shall review our evidence for the distribution and practices of indigenous populations in the hill range of El Alto-Ancasti (former sierra de Santiago or de Guayamba) and the valley of Catamarca. As previously noted, understanding pre-conquest societies is not only a necessary condition to comprehend the factors that determined the various colonization processes. The social orders absorbed or destroyed by the colonial logic were organized according to principles that was incompatible with that logic, making it impossible for these societies to easily integrate into the colonial society. These shared organizing principles deserve to be regarded as a subject of study in and by themselves and, as social experiences, they can help to think about alternatives to the hegemonic practices imposed by colonization processes.

2 What is known about Catamarca before the conquest

The three case-studies examined in this work are situated in the central and eastern regions of the province of Catamarca, formed by valleys and relatively low hill ranges, with a mild and humid climate (Figure 1). Surprisingly, despite significant archaeological research, which in some locations can be said to be intense, there are virtually no known contexts dated to the period immediately before the Spanish conquest, which is known in the local nomenclature as *Agroalfarero Tardío* or *Desarrollos Regionales* (roughly 12th to 15th centuries). This stands in sharp contrast with the western sector of the province, where the material culture of the Diaguita-Calchaquí, who long resisted the Spanish occupation, is well known: Belén, Santa María, Sanagasta, etc. (Sempé, 2005; Tarragó, 2000). The same can be said about the plain of Santiago, to the east, whose late societies have been thoroughly studied, especially with regard to the ceramic sequences in the Averías/Yocavil and Famabalasto styles (Lorandi, 2015).

This is also in contrast to the preceding *Agroalfarero Medio* or *Integración Regional* period (roughly 6th to 12th centuries), a period that witnessed significant agricultural and demographic expansion in relation to the so-called *Cultura de La Aguada* (Núñez Regueiro and Tartusi, 2002; Pérez Gollán, 1991). During this period, the valleys of Catamarca, Ambato, Paclín and the hill ranges of El Alto-Ancasti were peppered with numerous small and relatively dispersed settlements and their associated terraced fields in the hillslopes (Assandri and Gastaldi, 2018; Quesada et al., 2012; Villafáñez, 2012). As noted, from the 12th century onwards the archaeological visibility of these societies is limited to a few finds of Averías/Yocavil pottery in Ambato and the valley of Catamarca, which could correspond to groups displaced after the arrival of the Spaniards (Kriscautzky, 1991). It has been suggested that some geometric cave paintings in the hills of El Alto-Ancasti, which are similar in style to the decorations displayed by the Averías/Yocavil pottery, could be dated to the late period (Nazar et al., 2013). Late occupations in Salauca and Ampolla 1 Alero, barely 15 km from Tabigasta (Taboada and Rodríguez Curletto, 2022) have been dated somewhat more precisely. The typology of some late Averías/Yocavil and Famabalasto wares indicates a date between 1418 and 1628, but the absence of European items strongly suggest that the sites predate the arrival of the Spaniards.

The drastic drop in archaeological visibility after the 12th century in the central and eastern regions of Catamarca is disconcerting. There are no reasons to believe in a dramatic loss of population. There is no evidence of environmental shocks capable of affecting population numbers and distribution so dramatically. In fact, the period has been shown to be much more stable in terms of temperature and precipitations than the ones that came before and after (Marconetto et al., 2015; Meléndez et al., 2024). There is also no evidence for conflict between groups that could have led to forced migrations, like in the other colonial process undergone by the Argentinian northeast, the expansion of the Incas; no Inca buildings or material culture have been found in the region. On the other hand, 16th-century records attest to the presence of indigenous groups in both the valley of Catamarca and the hills of El Alto-Ancasti. As such, it has to be concluded that, after the 12th century, there were changes in the indigenous mode of life that caused a reduction in archaeological visibility, perhaps a concentration of population in larger centers around water sources, which were later obliterated by later colonial settlements. However, owing the lack of hard evidence, this interpretation must remain tentative. Also, in the same way that there are serious objections to the idea of a drastic fall in population numbers at the regional level, it seems very unlikely that the changes that led to this diminished archaeological visibility meant the abandonment of existing economic strategies, based on highly-diversified practices and managed at the household or village level (Dantas and Figueroa, 2018; Zuccarelli et al., 2022).

3 Taking land and consuming populations. Some case-studies in Catamarca

3.1 Tabigasta (Sierra de El Alto-Ancasti)

The colonization of the valley of Catamarca, all the way to La Rioja, which began with the 1591 expedition, was preceded by that of Sierra de El Alto-Ancasti, referred to in the documents immediately postdating the conquest as Santiago or de Guayamba. The *encomienda* of the Indians of Figasta (identified as Tabigasta

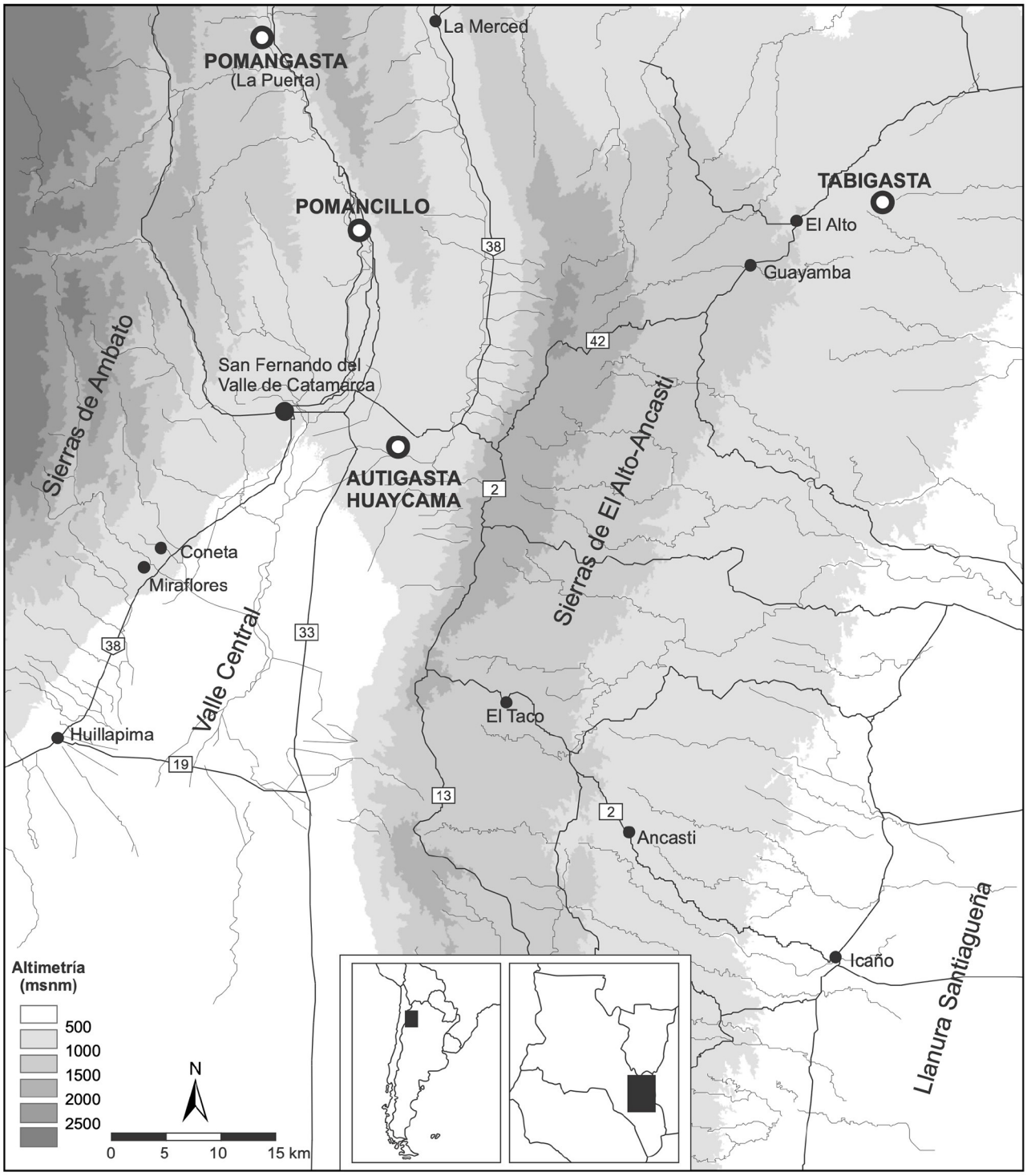

FIGURE 1
Location of the studied area in Catamarca.

by J.P. Vera), Alijilán (near modern El Alto and Santa Rosa) and Conando (in Andalgalá, in the west of the province), granted to Juan Bautista Alcántara in 1552, was the first awarded in the territories that now form the province of Catamarca (Levillier, 1918–1920, I, p. 350–1; Vera, 1955, p. 13–14; Guzmán, 1985, p. 242). The earliest references to the colonial practices deployed in the land of the then *pueblo de indios* of Tabigasta (or Tavigasta) come later, in the late 16th century. In August 1597, Isabel de Alcántara, widow and heir of Diego de Rubira, *encomendero* from Tabigasta and businessman in La Plata (modern Sucre, Bolivia), sold the livestock she possessed in the *sierra* near the village of Tabigasta to Francisco de Salcedo, treasurer of the cathedral of

Santiago del Estero (Archivo y Biblioteca Nacionales de Bolivia -ABNB, EP.64, f. 8r-14v, f. 8, 9v).

The sale also included the land and *estancias* where the animals grazed, the pens, the springs, and everything in the land, as long as it did not belong to the Indians or to other people (f. 9). This clause anticipated a legal problem that had to be addressed: the Indians in the *encomienda* of Tabigasta were recognized as owners of the land where Diego de Rubira's livestock grazed. In order to guarantee the legality of the sale, the return to the Crown (*dejación*) of the *encomienda* had to be formally declared, leaving the Indians the right to sell the land. The transaction was formally confirmed between December 1597 and January 1598 in Santiago del Estero. The *caciques*, in the name of the Indians of Tabigasta, sold Francisco Salcedo "barren and depopulated land" (*tierras yermas y despobladas*) in Tabigasta *la vieja* for a hundred sheep. According to the document, the few Indians that remained in place still had plenty of land to sale, allegedly better that the ones they had given away (Archivo Histórico de la Provincia de Tucumán -AHPT, Protocolo, A, fs. 5–12v; Lizondo, 1936, p. 118–124; Gramajo, 2001, p. 38–45; Guzmán, 1985, p. 241–6).

This operation completed Isabel de Alcántara's initial sale, so Francisco de Salcedo purchased, by stages, the livestock and the land in which the cattle and horses had grazed. The introduction of European livestock in Sierra de Santiago, after 1552 and before 1597, shows that in the first stage of colonization there was some dissociation between livestock, which was managed remotely by the colonizers, and the lands in which they grazed, which was in this instance solved with the dispossession of part of this land, formalized as a sale. Another kind of colonial livestock, sheep, was used in the appropriation of the land of Tabigasta, in this case as a means of payment.

Tabigasta was surrounded by other colonial possessions: the estates of Bartolomé de Sandoval, Luis de Gallegos de Guzmán, and Francisco *ynga* Guamantito, a colonist arrived from the Alto Peru with the Spanish, awarded for his participation in the conquest (ABNB, EP.64. 8r—14v; Guzmán, 1985, 250, *passim*). Of these three, two were remote, and generally, absentee, colonists. Luis de Gallegos and Bartolomé de Sandoval resided in Santiago del Estero, and as was typical among *encomienda* grantees and major landowners, had a wide business portfolio (Castro and Carmignani, 2017a, p. 18–21), managed remotely through agents. This combination of land ownership and business concerns is clearly reflected in the statements submitted by the residents of Santiago del Estero in 1608 (ABNB, ALP. CaCH.623; Pérez Sáez and Pérez Sáez, 1998, p. 17–108). Luis de Gallegos y de Guzmán, owner of an estate bordering with Tabigasta, is a good illustration of the first and second generation of colonial businessmen: he lived in Santiago del Estero and had a *chacra* (an agricultural land) to sustain his house near the town and an *estancia* for ranching. Despite having authority over "up to 120 Indians," he considered himself poor, to the point of having to manage his possessions himself (ABNB, ALP.CaCH.623, f.42).

The other Spanish *encomendero* with an estate next to Tabigasta, Bartolomé de Sandoval, does not feature in the 1608 statements. Sandoval died doing something that these men of affairs are found doing often: capturing people (*allanamiento y conquista*) in the province of Paraguay (Archivo General de Indias -AGI, Charcas, 102, n.15, f.2. Confirmación de encomienda de Pitambalá, 1654). Unlike Luis de Gallegos and Bartolomé Sandoval, who were Spanish-born and lived in Santiago del Estero, it does not seem that Francisco Guamantito (or Guamán Tito) *ynga*, the other *estanciero* in the vicinity of Tabigasta, lived outside his estate in Sierra de Santiago; 17th and 18th century documents about Francisco *ynga* and his descendants place the Guamantito and the Guamán (it is unclear whether they are one or two family lines) in different sectors of the hills, in the modern Departamento de El Alto: San José de la Cañada, the earliest (Guzmán, 1985, p. 251), Caña Cruz, Capiambalá, and other possessions north of Tabigasta. We think, therefore, that these *yngas* not only participated in these early distribution and purchase of *mercedes*, but that they were a colonizing contingent that settled in the hills early, in the late 16th century, where they remained for generations. As we shall see, the spatial distribution of colonists, and the development of an agrarian economy, after the initial focus on stockbreeding, were the two decisive factors in the consolidation of the colonial order.

3.2 Pomangasta/Pomancillo (North of the valley of Catamarca)

The earliest judicial file in Archivo Histórico de Catamarca is the lawsuit that pitched the Indians of Pomangasta, represented by the *protector de los naturales,* and Captain Andrés Gil de Esquivel. Gil de Esquivel, born in Tenerife (De la Orden, 2001), was the son-in-law of Nuño Rodríguez Beltrán and was at loggerheads with Nuño Rodríguez Beltrán Jr, his brother-in-law (the copy of the proceedings is in Archivo Histórico de la Provincia de Catamarca -AHPCat. Caja 1. Exp. 1. 1644; a fragment is transcribed in Larrouy, 1914, p. 9–10; comented by Guzmán, 1985, p. 161, *passim*). Nuño Rodríguez Beltrán "the elder" resided in San Miguel de Tucumán and was granted the encomienda in 1573 (AHPT, Sección Administrativa, I, fs. 1–2; Larrouy, 1915, p. 11; Lizondo, 1936, p. 77–79; Vera, 1955, p. 15–19). Around 1600, Nuño Rodríguez Beltrán's Indians, from Belicha, were *reducidos* in the village of Pomangasta (modern La Puerta. Figure 1), where, in addition of houses and a church, they are said to have good irrigated land, *algarrobos*, and hunting grounds (AHPCat. Caja 1. Exp. 1. 1644, fs. 26, *passim*).

Around 1625, the agent of Nuño Rodríguez Beltrán moved the Indians four leagues to the south (modern Pomancillo) and settled them in an *estancia* with cereal fields (*sementeras*), cotton fields, vineyards, and *árboles de Castilla*, where they bred wild mules (*chúcaras*) (fs. 30, 47, *passim*). It is likely that the fields of the colonial *estancia* that Nuño Rodríguez Beltrán Sr was granted as a *merced*, around 1600, was in former Indian land. This is suggested by the fact that the owner forbade them to sow inside the *estancia,* according to one of the court witnesses (f. 31). Obviously, this prohibition barred the Indians from managing the land inside the *estancia*, but not from working in it. Much to the contrary, for approximately 20 years, before they were definitely taken to the *estancia* (also called *chacra)*, the Indians had to commute daily from the village of Pomangasta to the fields of the *estancia*, under the foreman's supervision (f. 34).

One of the witnesses mentions a previous failed attempt to sow cotton in the land near Pomangasta (f. 36). No doubt, this

failure largely explains the daily commute and, finally, the final settlement of the Indians in the lowlands, more suitable for cotton, one of the earliest, and most decisive, for the configuration of the post-conquest agrarian landscape of the valley, colonial cultivars in Catamarca. After being forced out of the village of Pomangasta, the Indians *se fueron consumiendo*, according to one witness (f.35). In 1644, there were only seven of them left, and no *caciques*, in the *estancia* owned by Nuño Rodríguez Beltrán. The land around Pomangasta was left void, and the indigenous population, typically brought from Belicha and *reducida* in Pomangasta, withered away as labor force in the process that eliminated them as a coherent social group.

The early management of land and labor by colonists began in this instance with the expulsion of indigenous population of Belicha and their resettlement in Pomangasta, over 30 leagues away (more than 125 km). It is unclear if all the inhabitants of Belicha suffered this fate or only some, and it is also uncertain if there was population in Pomangasta when the people from Belicha were established there. As we shall see, the *merced* of Autigasta-Huaycama, farther south in the valley of Catamarca, shows that the early colonial action led to the total or partial displacements of population groups. In any case, the forced resettlement of people was the necessary prelude to dispossession and the extinction of these groups, not necessarily in a biological sense, but as politically relevant social groups able to manage land autonomously.

3.3 Autigasta-Huaycama

According to the record, Auti (or Autigasta) was the first *merced* granted after the expedition of the Spaniards in the valley of Catamarca and the foundation of La Rioja in 1591. In November of that same year, Alonso de Carrión, one of the conquerors and a new resident in La Rioja, was granted the *merced* of Autigasta by the governor of Tucumán (Larrouy, 1915, p. 3–8; Vera, 1955, p. 32–33; Brizuela, 2003, p. 71–75). The original records that, according to Larrouy (1915, p. 8) were in the Archivo de la Curia Eclesiástica de Catamarca, have not been found, although transcripts of the original document, in later judicial documents have survived (AHPCat, Causa Civil, Caja 14, 1872. Traslado de 1693, fs. 46r-48v).

The new Autigasta was three leagues from north to south (approximately 12.5 km) and as much from east to west, measured from the stream of Santa Cruz or of Huaycama, which ran across the middle of the *merced* (Figure 2). Based on a copy of the granting document, this land, over 150 km^2, was "barren and uninhabited." In the document in which the new owner takes possession (July 1592), it is said that Alonso de Carrión, in addition from receiving the *merced*, had purchased some land from the Indians (fs. 47r-47v). This contradicts the statement in the previous document that Auti was "uninhabited" (*el asiento viejo llamado Auti*, f. 47r). In any case, the documents generated after the conquest consolidated a new legal order, doubly endorsed in this instance by the concession of the *merced* and the sale. Most importantly, these documents based the legitimacy of the process on a perception of "empty" land, like with Autigasta, or with "surplus" land in the aforementioned case of Tabigasta (for this issue, see for instance Lorandi, 1988, p. 157).

Like in earlier instances, the resettlement of indigenous populations kickstarted the sequence of dispossession and appropriation of land and labor. It is impossible to establish to what extent the physical elimination, the escapes, previous captures, and the forced displacements led by *encomenderos* and their *mayordomos* drove the severe demographic upheavals brought by colonization. In this instance, it is possible that the toponyms "Huaycama" (or "Guaycama"), one in the *merced* of Capayán, approximately 50 km to the southwest, and another to the north, in the former land of Rodrigo Núñez Beltrán, are traces of the forced displacement of the inhabitants of the village of Huaycama from the *estancia* of Autigasta, as suggested by Vera (1955, p. 33).

The *población* of Autigasta anticipated the creation of *estancias* "for larger and smaller livestock and vegetable gardens," plus the hills and *algarrobales* included in the *merced* (AHPCat, Causa Civil, Caja 14, 1872. Traslado de 1693, f. 46r). In any case, from an early stage, the main crops in Autigasta were cotton and grapes. In 1597, barely 5 years after the *merced* was taken possession of, the land was sold "with cotton and vineyards" plus "pastures and springs" (f. 47v). In 1608, the buyer, Juan Bautista Muñoz, *vecino* of San Miguel de Tucumán, paid 450 silver *pesos*, a not inconsiderable amount, for 150 young bulls, with "all the cotton harvested in my villages of Guaycama in the valley." That same year, this same Juan Bautista Muñoz guaranteed a loan for 600 *pesos* with 200 *arrobas* of cotton "in the village of Guaycama" (AHPT, Protocolos, serie A, 1588–1610, s.f. Also, Dellepiane, 1966, p. 93–96).

The specialization of the *estancias* in the valley of Catamarca, like in Autigasta, was made possible, first and foremost, by the appropriation of land, turned legal by the concession of *mercedes* and sales contracts. Labor, the other necessary factor for the development of this colonial programme, was similarly captured and legitimized through *encomiendas*. The gradual expansion of these appropriations, however, was indirectly correlated to the availability of indigenous labor. It seems clear that the 1590s, the period in which the earliest land appropriations took place, in both the hills of Santiago and the valley of Catamarca, witnessed the sharpest drop in indigenous population (Carmignani, 2015, p. 15–16). A report, dated to 1607, about conditions in the valley of Catamarca, where "everything is cotton," and the hills of Santiago, referred to the *encomenderos*'s abuses, land appropriations, and the decrease in indigenous population, part of which sought shelter in the hills, where there were still places "free from Spaniards." These Indian *cimarrones* were the target of capture and punishment expeditions manned by armed Indians sent by *encomenderos* (Castro and Carmignani, 2017b).

Between 1630 and the end of the Calchaquí war, in 1666, some labor force were brought from the far away regions of Chaco and Calchaquí. In this way, the 350 *Calchaquíes* sent to La Rioja and Catamarca after the 1659 campaign were distributed "for the benefit of vineyards and cotton fields" (Lorandi, 1988, p. 163). Despite the continuing capture of families and *piezas* in the Chaco frontier (Guzmán, 2016, p. 76), labor from this source was becoming insufficient to supply the colonial crops. In 1693, Captain Sebastián Espeche, sole owner of Santa Cruz (Autigasta), declared to have a single male Indian and two females from *repartimiento* (Doucet, 1980; Farberman and Boixadós, 2006; Castro, 2017, p. 141; De la Orden, 2018, p. 150). The earliest references to the use

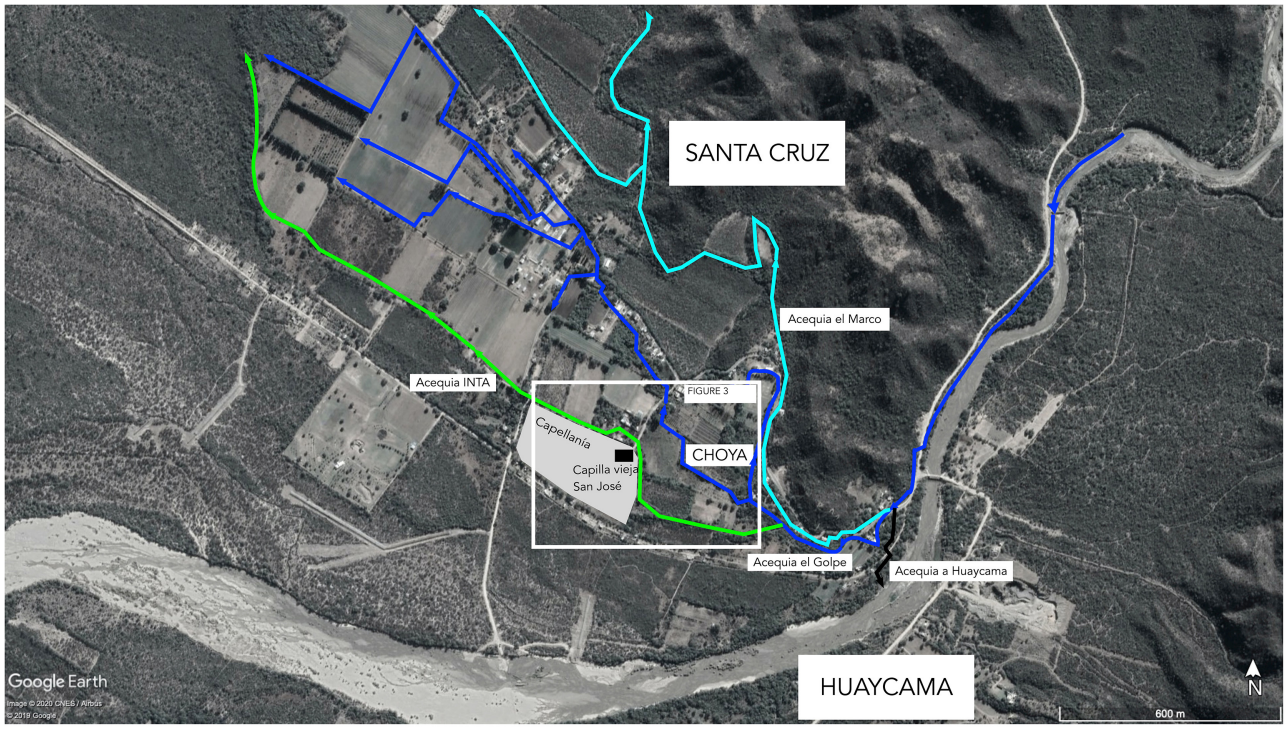

FIGURE 2
Irrigation system of Santa Cruz (former Autigasta).

of enslaved Africans as labor in Santa Cruz (part of the former *estancia* of Autigasta), date to the 1730s (Retamero and Quesada, 2024). It is, however, likely, that African slaves were an important part of the workforce in cotton and grain fields in the valley by the late 17th century. As noted by De la Fuente (1988), the new irrigated colonial agriculture could have hardly been developed without slaves, which were a key source of labor in the most critical points in the agricultural cycle, especially in July-August and November-December.

In contrast with the strict control of African slaves in the Jesuit *estancia* of La Toma, also in the valley of Catamarca (De la Fuente, 1988), the slaves in Santa Cruz, more than 40 in the late 18th century, enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy, facilitated by the lack of interest of the patrons of the chaplaincy (*capellanía*) to which they were attached (Figures 3, 4). The close association of irrigated fields, *ranchos* (small huts) in which the slaves lived, and the chapel built to their patron saint guaranteed their social cohesion and reflected their autonomy, upheld for three generations. This ability to make their own choices and manage the fields and crops, as well as the sale of the cotton produced domestically, was wiped away by the sale, and subsequent dispersion and individualization, of most members of the community (Retamero and Quesada, 2024).

4 Discussion

Coincidently, the *estancias* (or parts of them) of Tabigasta, Pomangasta, and Autigasta, initially granted to members of conquering expeditions, were subject to commercial transactions and legal disputes between the late 16th and early 17th centuries. The documents generated by these operations show how land in the hills of Santiago and the valley of Catamarca, distributed among the conquerors, were wrestled away from their previous inhabitants (often communities formed after earlier forced displacements) during the early steps of the colonial period. In this way, fields and crops could be managed autonomously from one another, so that the organic articulation of labor, land, and produce could be broken up and rearranged to adapt to the cumulative colonial logic. This formidable process of disruption rested on the initial dispossession, which had to be repeated time and time again afterwards, every time the link between human groups, land, and crops were shifted. This was the original and persistent condition of the colonial order. The examples presented in this work display different formats of this initial and recurrent dispossession, allowing us to seek for shared patterns despite local differences.

4.1 Silence and emptiness

Despite the large volume of documents generated during the construction of the new colonial order, references to the management of land and, especially, people, immediately after the conquest, are relatively scarce and, often, indirect. For instance, there are no known records from the concession of Tabigasta to Juan Bautista Alcántara, in 1552, to the earliest transactions undertaken several decades later, in the 1590s, by Isabel de Alcántara. This is also the case with Pomangasta. Nuño Rodríguez Beltrán was awarded, as second *encomendero*, the *pueblos* of

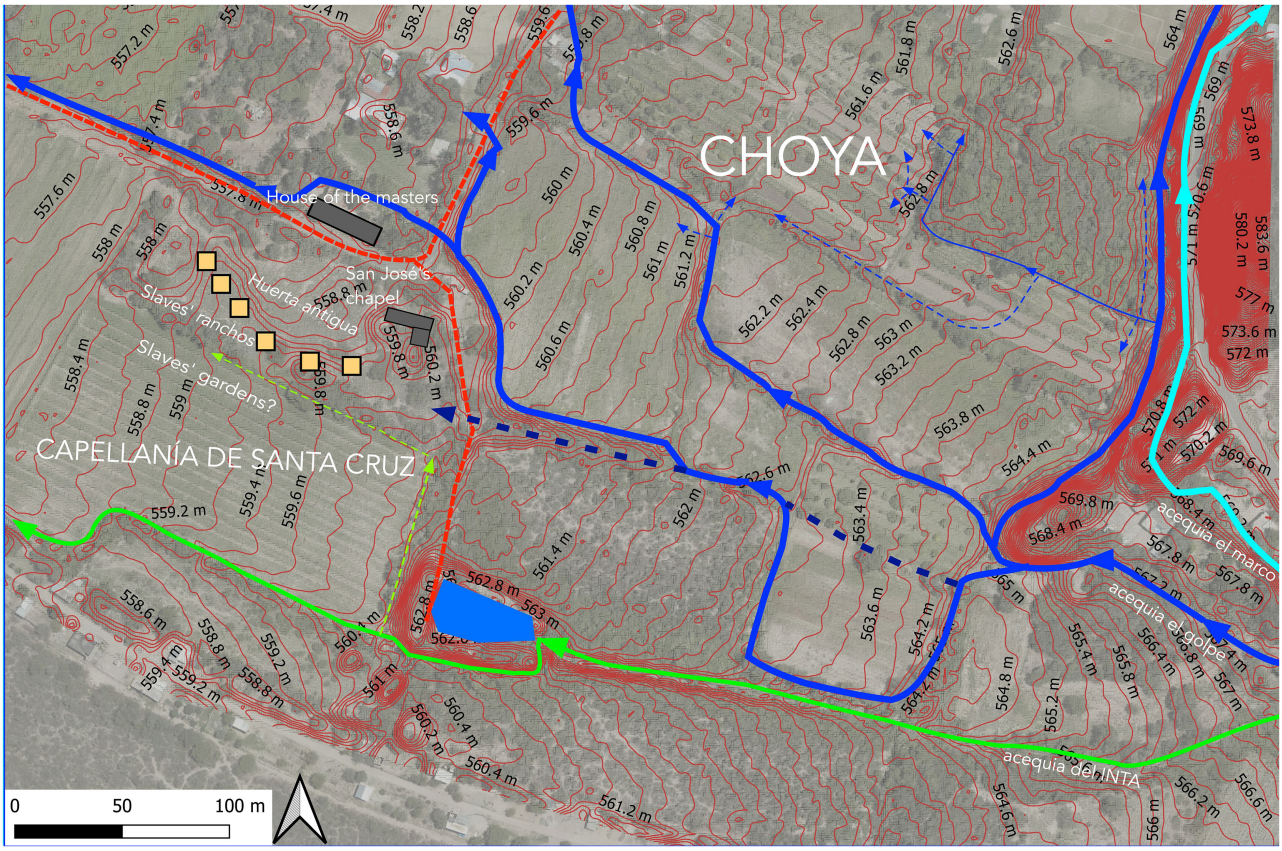

FIGURE 3
Location of the ranchos and fields of the slaves in the irrigation system of Santa Cruz.

Çucuma, *Belicha*, and *Pomangascha* in 1573 (Lizondo, 1936, p. 77–79). However, the references in the above noted lawsuit of 1644 allude to the situation as it was in 1600, when the Indians of Belicha, or some of them, had already been displaced from the village of Pomangasta, and when Nuño Rodríguez Beltrán was awarded the *merced* of the land of Pomancillo, where he established an *estancia*. Apparently, not much time passed between the conquest and the earliest distributions (1591) and references to colonial-style management of cotton and vineyard fields (1597), in the case of Autigasta. However, taking into account the proximity of the hills of El Alto-Ancasti (known as Santiago at the time), the distribution of which as *mercedes* and *encomiendas* had begun decades earlier, and references to earlier expeditions to the valley of Catamarca, it seems clear that some people were captured there before the colonizing contingent set off from Santiago del Estero in 1591 (Assadourian et al., 2005, p. 65–6). Probably, these captures and the destruction of *chacras* (cultivated fields), attested decades earlier in Catamarca and Salta, explain that Auti's *asiento antiguo* was found abandoned in 1591, when the colonization of the valley began.

Although the reasons behind the scarcity of written records about the earliest colonial operations are multiple, a direct relationship is generally observed between the intensity of the colonizing process (increase in the number of new settlers and the expansion of new crops and the fragmentation of the earlier allotments and occupation of the interstices between them) on the one hand, and the proliferation of conflicts and the increasing number of written documents, on the other. In the three examples at hand, the end of the silence or the increase in the documentation coincides with land transactions (concession of *mercedes* and purchases, for the most part), which can be related to the extension of cultivated land. In some instances, for example in Pomancillo, the establishment of an *estancia* to grow cotton, vines, and European cereals took a few decades, until after the granting of the earliest *encomiendas*. In Tabigasta, in the hills of El Alto-Ancasti, the earliest documents known after the award of the *encomienda* in 1552 had to do with the legal confirmation of rights over some lands purchased by Francisco de Salcedo, treasurer of the cathedral of Santiago del Estero, to the *caciques* and Indians from the village of Tabigasta between 1597 and 1599 (ABNB, EP64, 8r-16v; 752r-753v; 755v-757r; 766v-768r; Lizondo, 1936, p. 118–124). These lands, allegedly "wild and uninhabited" (*yermas y despobladas*), were to become "*estancias* with livestock and some *sementeras* (authors' emphasis), for shepherds and the sustenance of the country" (Lizondo, 1936, p. 119). Until then, there is no evidence for the development of a colonial-style agriculture in the hills of Tabigasta. However, the area had been frequented earlier by the livestock of Diego de Rubira and his wife and heir, Isabel Alcántara, residents in La Plata (modern Sucre). We shall have the opportunity to comment upon this later. It is in this regard significant that, the later and more abundant records, from the

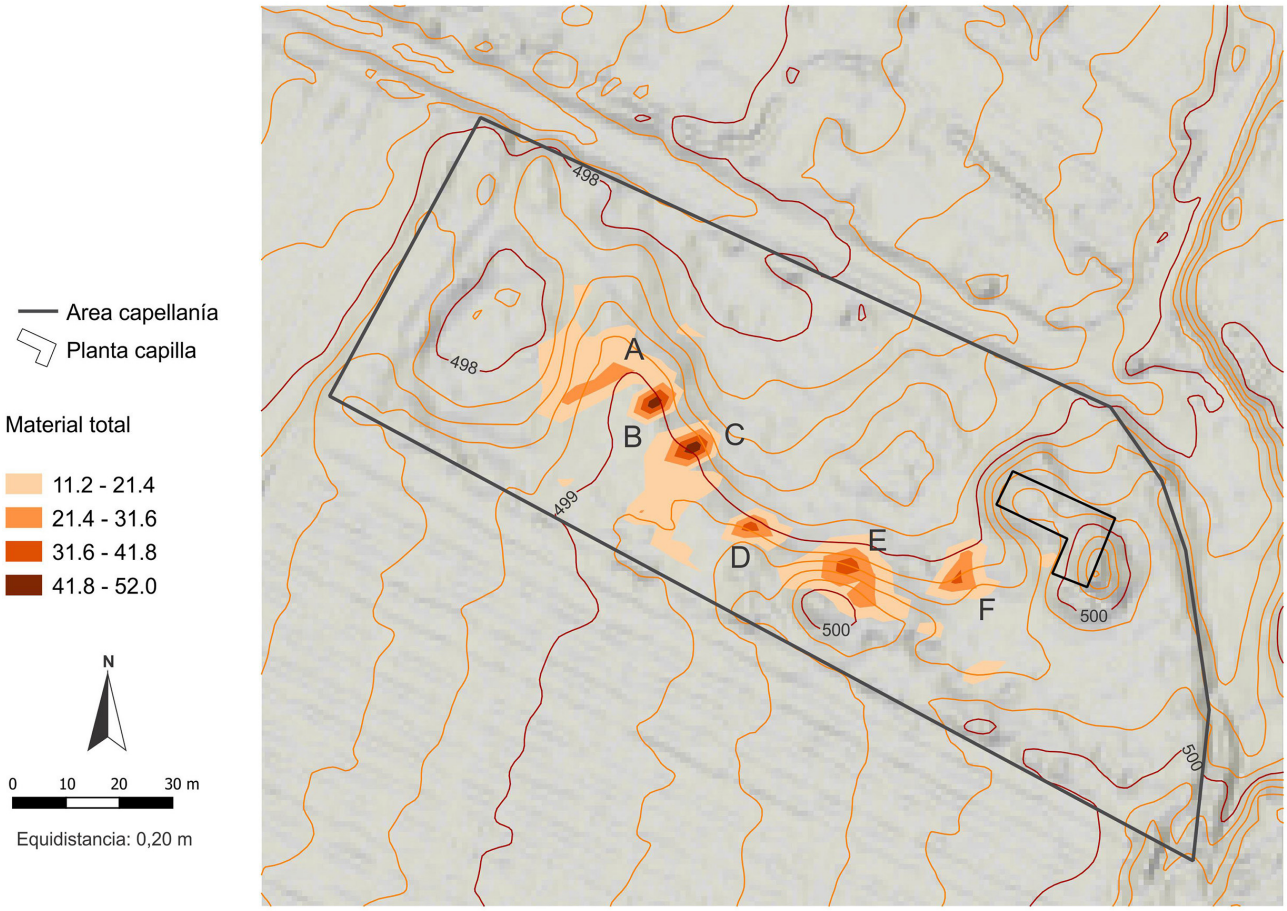

FIGURE 4
Concentrations of archaeological remains besides the chapel of San José (Santa Cruz).

late 17th and early 18th century, contain mentions to "plow oxen," "*fanegas* of corn and wheat," and "*sementeras* of wheat" in this area of Sierra de El Alto-Ancasti, although stockbreeding was still the predominant activity (for instance, AHPCat, Sucesorio. Causa Civil, secc. A; caja 4; exp 180; Castro and Carmignani, 2017b; Moreno et al., 2019).

On the other hand, documents for Tabigasta, Pomangasta, and Autigasta reflect the relationship between putting down in writing rights about land and the consideration of this land as "wild and uninhabited." This is the expression used to explain a purchase of land by Francisco de Salcedo to the local *caciques* and Indians, in Tabigasta *la Vieja*, in 1597. This consideration is based on to the fact that there "were few Indians, and less every day," with the implication that the did not need the land (Lizondo, 1936, p. 118). The purchase, therefore, was presented as a necessary operation to put land that could (and should) be improved to use. With Autigasta, Alonso de Carrión was granted the *merced* "of some land and *estancia*." In addition to these lands acquired by *merced*, the document, dated to 1592, implies that Carrión had bought land (perhaps the same or another in Autigasta) from the Indians, "who had already left" (Larrouy, 1915, p. 4). Again, a reference to the "void" on which the colonial appropriation of land rested, according to the written record.

As previously noted, Nuño Rodríguez Beltrán established the *estancia* of Pomán (modern Pomancillo) around 1600, building a water channel and a mill, and planting a vineyard and a cotton field in former Indian land in the "old *asiento* of Pomán" or Pomangasta (modern La Puerta), a few leagues to the north, where the Indians had previously been *reducidos*. The successors of, and litigants for, the rights over the properties of Nuño Rodríguez Beltrán also built a channel and a mill and planted vineyards and cotton in Pomangasta. Andrés Gil de Esquivel, one of the litigants, argued that Pomangasta was not a *pueblo*, but an *estancia*. This was based on his, and some witnesses', perception of the measures taken by the *estancieros*, who not only "injured and harassed" the Indians, but also took them to "remote provinces" to "expel them [from Pomangasta]" (AHPCat, Caja 1, Exp. 1, Causa civil núm. 4512. 1644, f.9). According to some statements, in the "old *asiento* of Pomán" the process was finally brought to a head in 1625, when the Indians that were left "moved on their own will [to the *estancia* in modern Pomancillo], because they were few," according to one of the witnesses summoned to court (f.25). That is, by 1644, in barely a few years, this good land, "enough for over forty Indians," with water channels and good hunting grounds, managed by the people of Belicha *reducida* in Pomangasta, had only seven Indians without *caciques* left, at which time they finally decided to move to work

exclusively in the cotton and wheat fields of the colonial *estancia* (fs.25, 31).

These examples illustrate that the systematic introduction of European crops in these areas of Catamarca began a few decades after the first signs of colonial intervention. Although, as we shall see shortly, the new ranching practices were a decisive tool for European occupation, we think that the colonizing project was consolidated with the gradual introduction of agricultural practices. These new practices led to the proliferation of documents to legitimize the appropriation of land and the need to displace labor to the new *estancias*. Putting down rights in writing consolidated and legally endorsed the separation of indigenous populations from the land that they had managed until then, even after they were displaced from their places of origin, like in Pomangasta and likely also in Tabigasta.

The relationship between dispossession, a fall in population, and the predominance of personal *encomiendas* in the former province of Tucumán is well known (Lorandi, 1988, p. 163–5; Doucet, 1990, p. 142; Rubio Durán, 1999; Sica, 2002, p. 13). It should, however, be noted that the notion of "abandonment" or "barrenness" was not solely related to the decline in the indigenous population. I also reflected a long-standing colonial practice of transforming spaces into agricultural land and a civilizing ideology that expressed itself in the notion of land "improvement" (*melioratio terrae*), a centuries-long feature of medieval Europe (Bartlett, 1993, p. 152–6). The programme responded differently to local conditions. In this way, while the valley was dominated by agricultural enterprises, the hills of Santiago were for the most part used for stockbreeding from the beginning of the colonial period. As noted by Castro and Carmignani (2017a, p. 19–21), the numerous examples contained in the written record show that these regional specialties were part of a strategy that aimed for various production and business opportunities to complement one another. Although in all of these areas agriculture and stockbreeding (and their associated crafts, such as spinning and tanning, among others) coexisted in variable proportions, it has been shown that the new crops, although not universally hegemonic, were the decisive factor in fixing rights over land. Colonial stockbreeding, while not being determinant in spatially fixing territorial dominion (it was in fact, the opposite, as we shall see shortly), played a pioneering role in the process of dispossession, at least in some areas, as we shall see.

4.2 Colonizing beasts

Although grazing areas for semi-wild livestock in Latin America grew especially from the second half of the 19th century onwards, the foundations of this massive transformation were laid in the beginning of the colonial period (Van Ausdal and Wilcox, 2018, p. 186). This not only had to do with the stockbreeding practices (ranching) introduced with the conquest and hegemonically developed in different areas, but also with the associated dispossessions. The examples at hand show that stockbreeding was a decisive component in the transformation of agrarian landscapes, and perhaps the earliest. As noted, the cattle, assess (stallions) and mares owned by Diego Rubira and later by Isabel de Alcántara, absentee managers in La Plata (Sucre), grazed in Tabigasta before the first documented land purchase. One of the witnesses in the lawsuit about Pomancillo, the *estancia* of Nuño Rodríguez Beltrán, said that he went there to seek cotton and untamed (*chúcaras*) mules (AHPCat, Caja 1, Exp. 1, Causa civil núm. 4512. 1644, f.47). In Autigasta, the *merced* included the creation of *estancias* "for larger and smaller livestock." Hundreds of larger and smaller animals featured prominently in the description of the expedition to the valley of Catamarca in 1591, which ended up with the foundation of La Rioja.

Obviously, this massive influx of European livestock was part of the programme of colonial specialization implemented with the *población* of the hills of Santiago and the valley of Catamarca. However, there is enough evidence to think that their introduction was also an effective tool to dispossess and undermine the indigenous communities. Of our three examples, that of Tabigasta illustrates their early (even before the arrival of new colonists) and invasive presence most clearly. We have already pointed out that the first and second generations of beneficiaries of distributions of land and people in the hills of Santiago were absentee colonists. The livestock that grazed in the *sierra*, near Tabigasta, was one of the business ventures managed by Diego de Rubira and Isabel de Alcántara from La Plata (for instance, ABNB, EP.10. 153–154r; ABNB, EP.48, 438–439v). The document that records the widow Alcantara's sale in favor of Francisco de Salcedo gives a rough estimate of the animals in question: 80 *çerreras* (wild) mares with their fowls; four *garañones* assess (stallions), a female donkey, an indeterminate number of horses, and 150 cows de *vientre* (they could breed). These animals were taken care of by four *yanaconas* shepherds (*yegüerosos y vaqueteros*) and their families. The animals grazed on land over which Rubira and Alcántara had no legal ownership, as we have said before.

This example illustrates, first, that the concession of Tabigasta as *encomienda* and not as *merced* did not prevent the use of the space associated to the *pueblo* given in *encomienda*; and second, that the initial ranching practices did not require for specific rights to be asserted over the land frequented by the livestock, nor for precise land boundaries to be put in writing (Nagel, 2018). The fact that mares, assess, and cattle roamed free in the *sierra* not only made that unnecessary but fairly impractical. The reference to identify the livestock was not the land it occupied, but the owner's mark. This practice is well documented in early colonial contexts. In this instance, we also know that the cattle bore Diego de Rubira's mark (*herradas y señaladas con el fierro*. ABNB, EP.64. f.8v). As such, the livestock had to be regularly gathered and counted in *rodeos*.

These stockbreeding practices, in open areas without precise boundaries, have been widely studied in various colonial contexts, both Iberian and Anglo-Saxon (e.g., on Nueva España, Chevalier, 1966, p. 84–114; Sluyter, 1996; Melville, 1997; on New England, Cronon, 2003, p. 128–148; Anderson, 2004, 2018; Probyn-Rapsey, 2022). Whether the deleterious effect they had upon indigenous spaces and populations was deliberate or not is irrelevant to the fact that they were predictable, and, ultimately, considered acceptable. Obviously, the introduction of this livestock not only had to do with the erosion of spaces and of the communities that had managed them theretofore. Stockbreeding was from the start a specialized economic activity that yielded high returns and opportunities to hegemonically dominate the construction of the social order; 80

mares and 150 cows, all of them *de vientre*, constitute a not unsubstantial number of animals, illustrating the speed with which herds grew from the beginning of systematic colonization. To pose just one example from the region, in 1608, Juan Bautista Muñoz, the then owner of the *estancia* of Autigasta, bought 150 steers and bullocks, whose price, 450 silver *pesos*, was guaranteed with the whole cotton production in Huaycama for the year (AHPT. Protocolos. Serie A. 1588–1610).

These open-space ranching practices have often been related to low human population density, and we have noted that, as the colonization process consolidated with an increase in fixed population, the fragmentation of initial allotments, and agricultural development, tensions for the use of space rose. Obviously, stockbreeding practices did not disappear, but had to adapt to new conditions in the midst of persistent, and often violent, conflict. In the example under analysis, the relationship between low human density and stockbreeding choices, although correct in general, must be qualified. In the previous section we saw that references to the dramatic drop in indigenous population numbers are recurrent from the 1590s and through the 17th century (Carmignani, 2015, p. 15–16). This process coincides with the consolidation of colonial agricultural practices, especially, but not only, in the valley of Catamarca. That is, overall, it can be argued that initial ranching practices were introduced to a context in which there were more people than when the fragmentation and regularization of boundaries began, from the late 16th century onwards. Conversely, in the valley, the rapid introduction of new colonial crops, such as cotton and vines, was parallel to a sharp demographic drop, for instance with the "abandoned" *asiento* (settlement) of Autigasta, and the emptying down of Pomangasta. Again, therefore, the relationship between depopulation and legitimized possession of land and the development of certain agricultural practices, hegemonic or not from a productive perspective, is clear.

4.3 Twice-dispossessed people

The sequence of colonization in the hills of Santiago (El Alto-Ancasti) and the valley of Catamarca shows that, after the capture of booty, mostly of people, came the forced displacement of the surviving populations. It is likely that all documented indigenous populations in this study were already the result of these early population shifts. It is also possible, however, that forced displacements were only a transitory solution in the long process of peasant dispossession by colonial forces (Spalding, 1974, p. 115). In all instances, it is observed that the dislocated populations, turned into workforce, rebuilt, whenever possible, organizations with a political profile, that is, with some ability, no matter how limited, to manage some agrarian spaces and their crops.

In the above noted sale of land in Tabigasta in 1597–8, mention was made of the *estancia* of don Francisco *ynga* as one of the property's boundaries. This *ynga*, also known by the surname Guamantito (or Guamán Tito), purchased some of the land of the village of Capiambalá (in the modern department of El Alto) between 1593 and 1597. This transaction took place when he was already well established in the hills of Santiago, probably in the land obtained through *merced* for his participation in the conquest (Lafone, 1898, p. 180; Guzmán, 1985, p. 250–1). The descendants of the first Guamantito (or Guamantitos) from Peru, who were awarded new *mercedes* and made additional purchases, became a significant factor in consolidating the colonial dominion, and their social status reflected this accordingly, as suggested by the title of *don* and *doña* and the fact that one of these descendants married María de Gaona, a Spanish woman (AHPCat. Caja 1. Causa civil. Exp. 32, 1693). The Guamantitos illustrate the participation of indigenous people in the construction of the colonial social order alongside the Spanish, as soldiers, taking part in conquests and *malocas*, and colonizers (other examples in Matthew and Oudijk, 2007).

From at least the late 17th century, the hegemonic position of the Guamantitos in this area of the hills of Santiago came under threat. In the 1690s, the Spaniard Luis Lobo de Mereles usurped part of the Guamantitos' land in Capiambalá. Although he was expelled by a court order and the Guamantitos kept the land, there is evidence to suggest that this was not an isolated incident. The wills of the granddaughters and great-granddaughters of Francisco Guamantito, the founder of the lineage, reveal that some of the women that kept the name, married to Spaniards, lost their right over the land. In this way, the main beneficiary of the land usurped by Luis Lobo de Mereles was the Spanish husband of a Guamantito woman (AHPCat. Caja 1. Causa civil. Exp. 32, 1693). Another example of the dispossession of the Guamáns was Lorenza, *mestiza*, single, and without children, whose land was at the center of a lawsuit between a Spanish landowner and the priest Juan Tomás Lobo de Mereles, who was very actively trying to hoard the testamentary bequests of some indigenous women in his parish (AHPCat. Sucesorios. Causa Civil. Sección M. Exp. 66, 1708). In this regard, the assets left by Teresa Guamantito, granddaughter of the first Guamantito in the hills of Santiago, are significant: 26 tame milk cows; two horses; tools; and some domestic utensils (AHPCat. Sucesorios. Causa Civil. Sección C. Caja 2. Exp. 71, 1709). This is a modest legacy compared to that left a few years later by Pascuala de Carrizo, the owner of the neighboring *estancia* of Guayamba, which included 823 mares, 364 mules, and over 200 cows, alongside other assets (AHPCat. Sucesorios. Causa Civil. Sección C. Caja 3. Exp. 91, 1715).

The history of the Belichas of Pomangasta was very different to that of the Guamantitos. The example of Pomangasta/Pomancillo illustrates the close link between forced displacement to the *estancia* and the rapid consumption of the workforce until its annihilation. As noted by Sica (2002, p. 13), uprooting people from their land destroyed the indigenous communities' ability to reproduce. In this instance, the outcome was fast. It seems clear that the forced displacement to Pomangasta, although including groups from different regions, did not undermine the ability of the Indians from Belicha and those that were likely already in Pomangasta to autonomously manage their land and hunting grounds. The initial displacement from the ancestral land did not cause an irreversible rupture of the organic relationship of indigenous groups and the land to which they were shifted. It is unclear, however, what effects this displacement had on their region of origin.

The first sign of the erosion of indigenous peasant autonomy in Pomangasta was Nuño Rodríguez Beltrán's project to build a water channel and a mill, to plant vineyards, and to build another channel for the Indians. According to the testimony of the *defensor*

de naturales, who took part in the above noted court proceedings of 1644, this initiative was forfeited by a "general uprising" (1630s). However, the successor of Nuño Rodríguez Beltrán, his son-in-law Andrés Gil de Esquivel, did manage to *poblar* in the land of Pomangasta, planting a vineyard and building a mill and a channel that deprived the Indians of water (AHPCat, Caja 1, Exp. 1, Causa civil núm. 4512. 1644, f.5). This must have happened after the forced displacement to the *estancia* of Pomancillo, as previously noted. In fact, this shift, not to a *pueblo* but to an *estancia,* was the decisive factor in the loss of autonomy of the community of Pomangasta. By exhaustively consuming indigenous work force, the colonial *estancia* ended up devouring the community, without land and without the ability to rebuild inside the Spanish *chacra*.

As previously noted, the document granting the *merced* of Autigasta (1591) mentions that the land was *yermas y despobladas*. In another document, dated to 1592, it is said that the Indians were already gone. In 1597, the cotton field and the vineyard were already in place at the *estancia*. In parallel, the nearby village of Huaycama was partially depleted (Larrouy, 1915, p. 3–8; Brizuela, 2003, p. 72). References to the emptying down of the valley of Catamarca included in an inspection report dated to 1607 are unambiguous, despite the interest that, no doubt, *encomenderos* had to hide their Indians (De la Orden, 2018; Gordillo, 1999). The cotton fields and *sementeras* of the *encomenderos* in the valley were largely supplied with Indians captured in Calchaquí and the Chaco, especially between 1630 and the end of the Calchaquí War in 1666 (Lorandi, 1988, p. 163). The compilation of the miracles performed by the Virgen del Valle as an active combatant against the Indians illustrates the importance of these captures for the continuity of the plantations (Larrouy, 1915). Despite later incursions across the Chaco frontier (Guzmán, 2016, p. 76), the captives must have been insufficient to attend to the colonial crops in the long term.

After the initial displacements, the demanding labor conditions in the cotton fields and vineyards spurred the capture of Indians in increasingly remote frontiers. In the 18th century, the colonial *estancias* in the valley of Catamarca were worked by enslaved people. The figures in inventories, parish books, and censuses in the valley of Catamarca reveal the high proportion of people of African descent (for instance Guzmán, 2007, 2016; Moreno, 2014). The *estancia* of Santa Cruz, in former Autigasta, was one of the main slave hubs (more than 40) in the late 18th century. According to G. Guzmán (1985, p. 295), there were African slaves in Catamarca in the early 17th century, only a few years after the conquest. The role played by this workforce brought from afar in sustaining the earliest cotton fields and vineyards is, however, unclear.

In any case, the small size of local indigenous communities and the limited contribution of frontier captures were one of the reasons behind the introduction of African slaves, which soon became a substantial and irreplaceable group. In addition to solving part of the main problem, that of the number of hands working in the fields, this enslaved population, mostly *criolla* by the 18th century, had another advantage: to facilitate keeping the workforce in place during the critical periods in which the demands of labor for the most important colonial agricultural products overlapped. This advantage was decisive for the operation of the Jesuitic *estancia* of La Toma, in the valley of Catamarca (De la Fuente, 1988) but was not as important in the *estancia* of Santa Cruz, in the former Autigasta, at least during the second half of the 18th century. In 1755, much of the land of the *estancia* of Santa Cruz, along with the attached slaves, were donated to the Church (*capellanía*) to cover the funeral expenses and masses for the soul of the donor and her late husband. The negligence of those in charge of managing these assets (*patronos*), who showed little interest in making a profit to save the souls of others, helped the slaves linked to the land, the water, and the *estancia*'s chapel, to become a closely-knit community, able to autonomously manage the land to which they were attached and even to sell some of the produce in the market (Retamero and Quesada, 2024).

The record of the lawsuit filed by the slaves against their sale (Archivo del Obispado de Catamarca -AOCat. Capellanías, 1. Capellanía de Santa Cruz. 1796) shows that their main aim was to avoid being torn from the community, which comprised three generations and was formed by families and households (six *ranchos* in 1783) led by women. In addition to this bold act of resistance, the collective ability to manage the land of the *capellanía* to which they were tied is remarkable; in the event, the community was dissolved when the sale took place, between July and August 1796. As well as managing the land, these slaves formed family bonds, as the increase in numbers over time was the consequence of biological reproduction within the community and not of the arrival of new members from abroad. To this, we must add relationships with free persons, with which they struck commercial deals and arranged marriages (Retamero and Quesada, 2024).

The sale, authorized by the bishop of Tucumán, yielded some capital with which to explore other business ventures. But this is, in our opinion, not the most remarkable aspect of the abrupt end of the "tacit freedom" which the slaves of Santa Cruz had enjoyed. The sale reproduced the same colonial practice of dissolving productive and organizational structures that resisted, or where difficult to make compatible with, the colonial order, which was largely market-oriented and sustained by an indentured workforce. The life of these slaves in Santa Cruz was thus marked by two dispossessions, whose victims—at least most of them—only knew, at least directly, one of them: the first, the initial capture that separated them from their African origin and led to their, and their descendants', depersonalization and exclusion; the second, a generation or two later, dispossession from the social life formed in the *capellanía* and the land upon which this had been built. The difference with earlier cases was the speed with which this took place. The initial hegemony of the Guamantito was eroded away over several generations; the consumption of the Indians of Pomangasta took a few years; the dissolution of the African community happened in one stroke.

5 Conclusions and future directions

The "void" to which the record often refers had to do, in our case studies, with the demographic and political crisis undergone by indigenous groups with the arrival of colonists geared for *población*, and with a perception of productive and unproductive soil based on the production of crops that met the colonizers' tastes and, especially, suitable to increase their economic profit and social status. Any space not used to these ends was regarded as hollow or susceptible to be "improved." As noted by J. Torró, references

to wilderness "deny occupation logics that contradict those of the colonizers" (Torró, 2019, p. 18).

The written record for eastern Catamarca barely mentions early colonization, let alone the indigenous society that predated the conquest. What we know about the archaeological record points to a surprising hiatus from the 12th to the 15th century, giving the impression that the Spaniards arrived to a depopulated region. This is in all probability not true. Accounts of expeditions before the 1591 expedition mention villages and irrigated fields in the valley of Catamarca (Larrouy, 1915, p. 475; Berberián, 1987, p. 110–114). In addition, it is hard to believe that the indigenous people from Figasta/Tabigasta given in encomienda to Juan Bautista Alcántara in 1552, when the colonization of the Argentinian northwest began (Vera, 1955, p. 12; De la Orden, 2001), had been previously displaced. We do not know to what extent the people from Tabigasta that sold their land in 1597 were the descendants of previously-displaced population, and the same applies to Pomangasta before the arrival of the Belicha. Concerning Autigasta, we can only speculate about the reasons behind the depopulation of the *sitio* when rights over land became legally binding.

The few written references to the early management of colonization can be explained, at least partially, by the time it took for colonizers, and especially crops, to become settled. Tabigasta illustrates the potential for attrition of the proliferation of European livestock, as the presence of said livestock was taken for dominion over land (Coni, 1930, p. 264–5). Once land became an alienable asset, the fragmentation and transmission of rights through wills or purchase led to the need to define boundaries. This largely explains the proliferation of documents turned (although not exclusively) into "instruments of oppression" (Moreland, 2013, p. 287–294), without prejudice to indigenous uses (or enslaved mulatos, as we have seen in the case of Santa Cruz) of the legal mechanisms of the colonial regime (Rubio Durán, 1999, p. 140).

The indigenous settlements that existed at the time of the conquest and the earliest colonization process are two of the most important topics to be addressed by future research, especially from an archaeological perspective. The new political ecology, sustained by what Crosby (1986, 270) called "portmanteau biota," resulted in a dramatic shift in the relationship between space and population. The details of this dislocation were never a priority in colonial documents, but are fertile ground for archaeological exploration, although not an easy one to plow. First, research must find features and objects from the earliest colonial period and distinguish them from those immediately predating this process and forced displacements of population. The difficulties are compounded by the expected modesty, in architectural and artifactual terms, of early colonial settlements, especially in those whose main economic activity was ranching. The precarity of dwellings in El Alto-Ancasti in the 17th and 18th centuries has been recently noted. Small square rooms, made with poorly-maintained perishable materials (mud, wooden posts, straw, leather) and extremely poor domestic goods, no more than the bare minimum to constitute *población*, in a context in which absentee landlords were far from exceptional (Nagel et al., 2023). That is, an archaeological record with little visibility and definition, which will require fine-tuned strategies to detect the process of production in the rural countryside, an issue that has rarely been addressed by historical archaeology in Argentina, which, except for some exceptions (e.g., Quiroga, 2003), has focused on the study of cities.

We need to describe and explain how pre-Hispanic agricultural landscapes, characterized by their heterogeneity (Zuccarelli et al., 2022), changed to enter the economic orbit of the colonial archipelagos as areas specialized in, if not entirely devoted to, the production of a few species (Castro and Carmignani, 2017a; Díaz et al., 2021). This meant the reorganization of space in properties (*mercedes*, and later, *estancias*) that revolved around the main house; their boundaries were at first imprecise, porose, and imperfectly signaled, in the best of cases. However, we think that the analysis of toponymy preserved by oral traditions and detailed survey will allow us to reconstruct, at least partially, and develop a cartography of the colonization process. The focus on stockbreeding in the hills of El Alto-Ancasti, especially mules, must have included the construction of infrastructures to manage *haciendas* of a Euro-Asiatic type, like corrals and *potrerillos*, which have not been found to be used in camelid-keeping in the pre-Hispanic period (Moreno et al., 2022). New tools to manage large livestock must have also been introduced. Although in the early decades of the process ranching tools must have been very modest, the practices to which it was related rearranged everyday time and space, introducing calendars and itineraries incompatible with traditional ones. For instance, herding sheep and llamas are two completely different operations, and the former ended up displacing the camelids, in a process whose pace can be established with the archaeo-faunal record.

On the other hand, we need to establish with certainty when major livestock was introduced to the hills of El Alto-Ancasti (or Santiago), and when the proliferation of agricultural fields forced the introduction of boundary markers. If European animals were introduced not much later than 1557–8, reaching Santiago del Estero from Coquimbo, Chile, and the Upper Peru (Coni, 1930, p. 264–5), we need to determine the nature of the operations undertaken in Tabigasta after the concession of the encomienda in 1552 and the arrival of livestock, it seems, some years later. The distribution of *corrales*, the chronology of *rodeos*, and the location of watering holes and grazing areas must also be some of the main focuses of research. In any case, it remains to be seen how easy it will be to identify controled, *cimarrón* (born in the wild) and *alzado* (stray) animals roaming free (Giberti, 1961, p. 25). Likely, all these animals were to be regularly captured, marked and counted.

As repeatedly noted, the construction of the colonial world began with the displacement of populations of diverse origins. Early accounts, for instance Sotelo de Narváez's (1580), refer to the diversity of indigenous languages in the jurisdiction of Santiago del Estero (Gentile Lafaille, 2012), as also suggested by toponymy. Ethnic differences should also reflect on material culture. The allochthonous nature of some materials, especially decorated pottery with regional styles found in Hispanic-Indigenous contexts, was interpreted as evidence for the beginning of this process of colonial reorganization of indigenous labor. For instance, Kriscautzky's study of Yocavil and Averías wares, characteristic of Santiago del Estero, in the valley of Catamarca (Kriscautzky, 1991).

The construction of the new colonial building from the foundations, that is, from productive spaces and practices, rested on

the flat rejection of pre-conquest social organizations, while initially depending on them. The earlier Spanish settlements were either built in existing villages or near them (e.g., fort of Sancti Spiritus, Azkarate et al., 2012). The chronicles of early expeditions reveal the obvious interest in *poblar* places in which indigenous groups lived. Governor Ramírez de Velasco's 1585 statement, "only he who has Indians eats in this land" (*en esta tierra no come sino es quien tiene indios*, cited in Lorandi, 1988, 144) summarizes the initial colonial dependence on indigenous labor and productive spaces. Only in this way could the initial groups of colonizers dig their roots, ensuring the survival of contingents that only in extreme conditions were willing to work the land themselves.

As noted, the term generally used to refer to this colonial construction, *población*, alluded to a recognizable social fabric, in which profit could be reaped without a visible limit; in which the domination imposed was nigh irreversible; in which dispossessions were an everyday occurrence; and in which social hegemony was a realistic aspiration. When *población* referred to the programme of colonization (most times), the concept contained radical foundational principle, including a narrative in which the indigenous order was deformed and diluted (for the foundational nature of accounts generated in processes of settler colonialism see Veracini, 2010, p. 14, 92, passim). The use of this term to refer to some indigenous social groups, like in the letter written by Jerónimo González de Alanis in 1566, to mention only one example, validated the inclusion of the indigenous social life in the colonial order, but only temporarily. Not in vain, the reference to a "populated land with many Indians and supplies" (*tierra poblada de muchos indios y bastimentos*) carried parasitic implications (by that time the Spaniards had started eating their horses). This is clearly observed in the explanation of the abandonment of some Spanish settlements in some areas of Tucumán, "they were not able to sustain themselves with the Indians" (*por no poderse sustentar con los indios*) (Levillier, 1931, p. 280). Eventually, indigenous organizations, sometimes the necessary prop of the colonial order, were destroyed when they were no longer essential for the survival of the colonists, while obstinately maintaining their secular practices in relation to the management of land and production. The cases analyzed show that the dispossession of local, Peruvian, and African populations, and their use as labor force, could operate at different paces.

In this process of landgrab, forced displacement stood as an alternative to expulsion, an inconceivable option for the initial contingents of colonizers, always small and invariably unwilling to work the land. The problem was that, like in our case-studies, indigenous (or slave) labor was often able to build relevant political bodies as long as they kept collective bonds with the land, even after being forcefully removed from their places of origin. As such, the initial dispossessions did not completely preclude the recasting of solidarities that challenged the colonial programme (as observed by Lorandi, 1988, p. 139). In any case, these recast solidarities, based on a limited capacity to manage land, were eventually also eroded away, sometimes over several generations, like with the Guamantito in the hills of Santiago, and sometimes in a single blow, like with the slave community in the chaplaincy of Santa Cruz. The apparent contradiction between the need for labor, recurrently disarticulated, consumed, and brought from afar, and the survival of those who were its source, is resolved if we take into account that the appropriation of land and the individualization of labor was always a priority, even if, circumstantially, the volatility of the labor force undermined production, slowing down and even compromising the colonization process. The *población* of east Catamarca, like that of other places, began with the prospect of developing a new productive programme, consolidated with the settlement of farmers, and demanded the systematic dispossession and disarticulation of politically-effective indigenous organizations. Only the third of these conditions was non-negotiable. The others could wait, if need be.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

FR: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MQ: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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