

## **Paleo-Indian Hunters of South Central Chile 14,500–11,000 CE**

### **(Paleo-Indian Period)**

#### **Geography and Environment**

When the first humans arrived in the Americas, the glacial climate of the Pleistocene era was beginning to wane, and in the south of Chile the melting ice left behind a series of lakes and rainforests that attracted herds of large, now-extinct herbivores known as the *megafauna*. These large animals included mastodons, early llamas and milodons. Archeological evidence found at the Monte Verde site, close to Puerto Montt, testifies to the presence of the southernmost group of mastodon hunters on the American continent.

#### **Economy**

These groups developed a broad-based subsistence strategy that was adapted to the rainforest environment. In addition to hunting the so-called megafauna, they used spears and bolas to capture smaller prey. But the bulk of their time was spent gathering fruit, nuts, seeds, wild potatoes and medicinal plants (notably boldo, *peumus boldus*), as well as freshwater mollusks.

#### **Art**

Little material evidence remains from this time period. However, some implements have been found at the Monte Verde site, including bolas and other stone tools and wood and bone instruments, the last of these made of mastodon teeth. These groups did not produce spearheads or projectile points for hunting.

#### **Social Organization**

These groups probably lived in small semi-sedentary family bands that ranged freely around this forested territory and divided their labor efficiently among family members.

#### **Religion and Funeral Rites**

The scant evidence found to date does not provide any information on this aspect of the southern Paleo-Indian culture.

#### **Settlement Pattern**

The inhabitants of Monte Verde built 12 aligned semi-circular and rectangular tent-like enclosures that would have been framed with logs and may have had floor and roof coverings of animal skins. Close to these tents were large collective hearths that were probably used for cooking the meat they obtained from hunting. They were highly mobile groups that ranged widely around their territory and in its mountainous zones may have used natural rock shelters.

## History

Although there is still some debate around when exactly the Americas were first populated, it is now an accepted fact that the first colonizers came from Northeast Asia across the Bering Strait more than 15,000 years ago. From there, they began to populate the lands to the south, and by around 14,500 BCE were inhabiting encampments at Monte Verde. The unique conditions of the site have preserved some evidence, allowing us a window into how these early hunters adapted to the rainforest environment. After the extinction of the *megafauna*, the cornerstone of their early economy, these Paleo-Indian groups reoriented their hunting activities to new, smaller species, giving way to the Archaic Period.