

Alto Ramirez

600 BCE – 500 CE

(Formative Period)

Environment and Geography

The Alto Ramírez people settled on the desert coast and subtropical valleys of Chile's Norte Grande, in places where year-round water sources allowed crops to be grown. Most of their typical burial mound cemeteries appear in the lowland valleys adjoining the coast, although some have also been identified further inland in places such as the Guatacondo Ravine.

Economy

The Alto Ramirez group had a mixed economy that combined agriculture with gathering (of plants and mollusks), fishing, and hunting of sea and land animals. They grew maize, peppers, cassava, quinoa, beans and squash, using stone shovels to work the land and large baskets, called *capachos*, to carry their produce. They made flour by grinding up the plants they collected in stone mortars. On the sea, they used the same instruments employed by their coastal hunter-gatherer ancestors but for hunting on land they used an innovative implement, the spear thrower.

Art

The Alto Ramírez people became highly skilled in textile making. Their designs incorporated geometric and figurative motifs for the first time, including images of human faces with rays emanating from them, "trophy heads" and stepped designs. Such designs were typical of the artistic iconography of the people living around Lake Titicaca, which suggests a strong linkage between these two groups. The Alto Ramirez people also were highly skilled basket weavers, incorporating decorative elements such as geometric motifs, and they carved bird-like designs on gourds. Musical instruments have also been found associated with the Alto Ramirez groups, such as whistles, horns and rattles.

Social Organization

The presence of monuments, in the form of many large burial mounds, tells us something of the social life of the Alto Ramírez people. Building these complex structures would have required the participation of a group of people coordinated by a leader, which suggests some form of social distinction among members of the group. This idea seems to be reinforced by the presence of prestige goods such as objects used to inhale hallucinogenic substances, and the iconography found on certain items of clothing. The broad range of artifacts and the complex techniques that were used to manufacture them suggest a high degree of specialization of craftsmanship among the Alto Ramirez culture.

Beliefs and Funeral Rites

A distinctive feature of the Alto Ramirez people was their burial mound cemeteries, large groupings of artificial mounds up to 3 meters in height. The graves tended to be marked by sticks or lengths of cane implanted in the ground and contained a variety of different grave goods, notable among which are miniature versions of local textiles and/or baskets. The heads of the deceased were often covered with round colored knotted hats or wrapped with camelid or cotton cord, which has led to their name of “the turban wearers.” Some mounds have been found containing only heads, others without any human remains, which suggests that these structures had a ceremonial function beyond burial, which in turn points to a more complex ideology. The use of hallucinogenic powders inhaled through the nose (using tablets and tubes) appears to have become more prevalent as a ritual practice at this time, and later on it would become even more important in the shamanism of several northern Chilean peoples.

Settlement Pattern

The Alto Ramirez people inhabited permanent settlements, small villages with buildings that were more solid than in previous periods. These were able to accommodate a larger number of residents and had different areas for distinct types of labor. Their cemeteries were groupings of artificial mounds of dirt and plants, sometimes located at some distance from the village and, in most cases, on high plateaus overlooking valleys, such as in Azapa and at the mouths of coastal rivers.

History

The Alto Ramirez people inherited the horticultural and seafaring traditions of the Azapa and Faldas del Morro groups, respectively. The moist climate prevalent during this period, coupled with the skillful management of their environment, enabled this group to practice more extensive farming in the valleys and thereby establish settlements near their fields. Their development was strongly marked by ideological and technological influences of the Peruvian Bolivian Altiplano, reflected mainly in the images that decorated their textiles, which were similar to those of the ceramic art and rock sculptures of the Pukara, Chiripa and Wankarani cultures of that region. Around the middle of the first millennium, the agricultural societies of Alto Ramírez began to be affected by the powerful influence of the State of Tiwanaku, which expanded into the north of Chile, bringing with it all kinds of cultural changes.