

Arica Culture **(900–1470 AD)**

Environment and Geography

The Arica culture inhabited a region known as the “Western Valleys,” which extended from Mollendo in Peru to Taltal in Chile, although most lived in the Azapa and Camarones valleys of Chile. While their settlements have been found across that territory, from the heads of the Sierra de Arica valleys down to the Pacific coast, they mainly inhabited the middle reaches of these valleys, the places most suitable for cultivating the temperate and subtropical crops they grew.

Economy

The three distinct environments in which the groups of the Arica culture settled—mountain, valley and coast—allowed them access to complementary resources from different ecological strata. Surplus goods were moved by llama caravan, a form of transportation suited to this mountainous region. During this period, the people expanded the area available for growing by building farming terraces and platforms, along with irrigation canals. A large quantity of tools for working the land, including wood-handled stone shovels, point to the importance of farming among these groups. On the coast, the Arica people invented the “three-beamed raft,” which allowed deep water fishing of species such as eel and houndshark. Miniatures of these craft were laid with these fishermen in their graves. The guano that accumulated at sea bird nesting sites on the coast was taken inland to be used as fertilizer for farming. The Arica people also crafted copper into brooches, hooks and other instruments, and used gold and silver to make other ornaments.

Art

Arica ceramics display high technical quality and their painted polychromatic decorations feature anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and geometric designs. The level of standardization this ceramic tradition achieved reflects a solid identity, although the different styles are also in evidence—an earlier style, denominated San Miguel, with red- or black- on white designs, and the later Pocoma-Gentilar style, which features motifs in black, white and red on a natural colored background. Arica textiles also achieved a high level of technical and iconographic complexity. The most typical textiles of the Arica culture are the trapezoidal *unkus*, wide tunics that were fastened at the waist with a braided sash. Semicircular hats and bags (*chuspas*) were also typical products of the Arica people. The wooden or ceramic *kero* cups, which had originated in the previous period, now incorporated new motifs, such as the llama and the condor. A similar situation occurred with wooden spoons, which featured simpler decoration than in the prior period. Another key artistic development of the Arica culture were the *geoglyphs*, huge drawings constructed on hillside slopes. These displays were associated with the caravan routes that criss-crossed the region during that period.

Social Organization

The Arica people lived in small *kurakazgos* or chiefdoms, in which certain individuals with authority or prestige held a special social status that distinguished them from regular members. Their chiefs were ethnic leaders responsible for performing ceremonies and organizing productive activities within their group. Other individuals in the society were recognized for being experts in a given trade; these included ceramicists, weavers, farmers, herders and fishers. These chiefdoms seem to have had a dual organization, with one chief presiding over the upper part of each valley, and one over the lower.

Beliefs and Funeral Rites

The Arica culture possessed a religious system based on shamanism, which is reflected in the importance they placed on instruments used to inhale psychoactive substances, and perhaps in the *keru* cups from which they may have drunk mind-altering, hallucinogenic potions. Their ceramic and textile iconography commonly depicts individuals in a trance state, two-headed or winged beings, as well as animals known to have hallucinogenic properties, such as frogs and toads. They buried their dead in underground burial chambers in large cemeteries. The bodies were laid to rest with legs bent and accompanied by a rich array of grave goods, including ceramic vessels of a single style, camelid wool textiles and a variety of domestic utensils.

Settlement patterns

The Arica people lived in large villages, some containing more than an thousand enclosures. In these places, different functions were apparently ascribed to different sectors such as living quarters, corrals and storerooms. The enclosures had a rectangular or circular floor plan and were built using materials readily available. In the mountains, many of these villages resembled fortresses or *pukaras*, with defensive walls and high ground locations to control agricultural lands, caravan routes and exterior threats.

History

The Arica culture descended from the region's previous inhabitants, the Cabuza and the Maytas, who were subjugated to the cultural hegemony of the Altiplano Tiwanaku empire. After the collapse of that empire, the Arica maintained close relations with other Altiplano groups, which is reflected in the discovery of ceramics from those groups in the mountain and even coastal Arica culture settlements. These settlements were later annexed to the Inka Empire.