

## **Hunter-gatherers of the Puna 10,000 - 2000 BCE**

### **(Archaic Period)**

#### **Environment and Geography**

Chile's Norte Grande boasts three ecological strata: the coast, the Pampa or desert, and the Puna or Altiplano. The last of these is further divided into the Puna Seca (dry Puna), which stretches from Arica to Iquique and is humid enough to allow for agriculture, and the Puna Salada (salty Puna), which runs from Iquique to the Atacama Salt Flat and where conditions are so harsh that human occupation is impossible most of the year. For its part, the desert Pampa is scored by valleys and ravines in the far north, then gives way to the Tamarugal Pampa, with its vast forests of *tamarugo*, *chañar* and *algarrobo*. South of the Loa River is the absolute desert. On the coast, in contrast, both the climate and resources available are much more stable.

#### **Economy**

The hunter-gatherer way of life is characterized by an economy based on hunting, fishing and gathering resources for food and other uses. These groups hunted a variety of species, including both larger animals such as wild camelids (guanacos and vicuñas) and tarucas (Andean deer), which provided meat and skins for clothing and shelter, and smaller ones such as birds and rodents. They were hunted using wooden darts with triangular or leaf-shaped stone points. To slaughter their prey they used tools made of stone, wood or bone. Their gathering included food species, medicinal plants, and woody and fibrous plants for making cord and baskets. They also collected materials for making instruments. Towards the end of this long period these hunter-gatherers, who were already experts in hunting camelids, would use their extensive knowledge of these creatures to begin domesticating them.

#### **Art**

The earliest evidence of artistic expression during this period includes stones painted with abstract designs. Lumps of red pigment have also been found that were used to color bones, shells and other artifacts, and also possibly as body paint. By the end of the Archaic Period, a new form of artistic expression emerged that was to become widespread: rock art. One of these early rock art styles, known as the Kalina-Puripica style, featured lifelike camelid images with two legs, engraved on the rock walls of ravines or on small boulders used for the walls of their dwellings.

#### **Social Organization**

These hunter-gatherer groups had an egalitarian society with a division of labor by sex and age only. It is likely that these communities lived in small family bands that could move around easily, a necessity for their nomadic way of life. Towards the end of this period, lower rainfall in the Puna region led to increasing aridity, concentrating subsistence resources around lagoons, freshwater

springs and foothill oases. As a result, these hunter-gatherer groups moved around less and less, which made it possible for them to live in larger groups, establishing semi-permanent encampments and villages, though still without any institutionalized social hierarchies.

### **Beliefs and Funeral Rites**

Though there is scant evidence of burial rites attributed to the Archaic Period, there is one notable case: the Patapatane cave in the Puna of Arica. This site contains the grave of a young woman buried around 4000 BCE, her body having clear signs of post-mortem alteration that included mutilation, dismemberment and broken bones. She was placed in anatomical position except for her head, which was placed on top of her trunk with the brain removed. The burial place was partially covered and surrounded by rocks of different sizes.

### **Settlement Pattern**

In the Early Archaic period, the moist environmental conditions allowed small bands of hunter-gatherers to roam around in search of different resources, occupying caves and rock shelters along established routes. The emergence of a more arid climate beginning in 7000 BCE limited the number of habitable places, preventing the groups from traveling over large distances. In the Dry Puna, groups took advantage of resources that were concentrated around the wetlands of the high Puna in winter, and also made small temporary camps at lower altitudes. In the Salt Puna, in contrast, the people began to establish more stable settlements in oases and lowland ravines, also making smaller summertime camps in the high Puna. Thanks to increased humidity in the environment, around 3000 BCE these groups began to make use of different kinds of settlements in different ecological strata, building more permanent settlements in both the dry and salt punas.

### **History**

For some 8,000 years, the people of the Norte Grande lived in highly mobile hunter-gatherer groups in a region of low population density. Their comprehensive knowledge of the camelids they hunted on the Puna allowed these groups to domesticate these animals, a process that eventually led to a completely new and distinct way of life: pastoralism. Over time, the settlement patterns and economies of these Archaic populations underwent a process of growing social complexity that forever changed their ancient way of life.