

Pica Culture ***900-1535 AD***

Environment and Geography

This culture, also known as the Pica–Tarapacá, occupied the desert in northern Chile between the Camiña valley and the mouth of the Loa River. This region is famous for the Pampa del Tamarugal, a region of native tamarugo forest that offers shade to travelers, wood for building and craftwork, and fruit and nuts for human and animal consumption.

Economy

The Pica lived in farming communities in inland valleys and oases, complementing the produce they grew with those from the higher altitudes of the sierra and Altiplano. They constructed irrigation works and farming terraces to grow maize and quinoa, taking advantage of the water that flowed down their ravines from the high mountains after the summer rains. They also gathered the fruit of the algarrobo and tamarugo trees and hunted wild animals. From the ocean they obtained marine resources, establishing small settlements on the coast close to freshwater sources. They moved goods to and from these different zones by llama caravans that traversed the desert and foothill regions.

Art

The Pica people are perhaps most well known for their geoglyphs, but they also produced notable examples of rock art, leaving behind engraved boulders (petroglyphs) at many sites. The images they engraved depict significant aspects of the Pica's domestic and ceremonial lives, and include animals, anthropomorphic figures and geometric shapes. The typical Pica ceramic style is red-washed monochromatic and decorated with appliqués of molded anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures. Pica textiles were multicolored and included bulky mantas and *unku* tunics. These groups were also skilled in leathercraft, making bodices and quivers, and in basketmaking.

Social Organization

The Pica lived in entities similar to chiefdoms, with a relatively complex hierarchy and authorities that organized the work force within a circumscribed territory. The smallest social units were based on kinship as well as reciprocity and redistribution among leaders, who also

maintained ties with other groups of this ethnicity. Social distinctions within units were based on status and expertise in certain activities.

Beliefs and Funeral Rites

The Pica people buried their dead in cemeteries, inside casket-like tombs that usually held a single individual. A few graves have been found with several people buried together who may have held a special status within the group.

Settlement pattern

Their settlements were usually established in inland ravines and oases, on high ground beside freshwater springs and at altitudes of 1000–1200 meters. Their farm fields were located nearby. One of the most outstanding Pica sites identified to date is the village of San Lorenzo de Tarapacá, which contains a large number of enclosures built close together, with paths resembling roads running between them. This village was built at the peak of the Pica culture, and was probably the “headquarters” of this society. Caserones is another major site, also located in the Tarapacá ravine, that consists of numerous rectangular structures enclosed by a defensive wall.

History

The Pica culture flourished during the Late Intermediate period, also known as the Regional Development period. Building on routes established through their relations with the Tiwanaku Empire in the previous period, the Pica culture developed major trade routes that allowed them to maintain ties with the San Pedro de Atacama and Altiplano Meridional (southern Altiplano) cultures, and even with groups as far away as northwest Argentina. They were later subsumed by the Inka Empire.