

Aconcagua **(900 – 1536 AD)**

Environment and Geography

The Aconcagua people inhabited Central Chile, from the Aconcagua River in the north to the Cachapoal River in the south, although they were concentrated in the Maipo and Mapocho river valleys. This region has a temperate climate and rises from sea level to 6000m in just over 100 km, from the Pacific Ocean to the peaks of the Andes Mountains.

Economy

The economy of the Aconcagua groups was based on agriculture, with clear-cutting carried out to enable crops such as maize, quinoa, beans and squash to be grown. They also gathered wild plants, especially the fruit of the algarrobo tree, which was an important part of their diet. Hunting provided animal products, as livestock raising was not introduced until Inka times. On the coast the people made use of marine resources, especially shellfish, which were to lands further inland.

Art

In terms of craftwork, the Aconcagua culture is best known for its ceramics. The most common type were the brown, undecorated smooth-sided pots and pitchers produced for daily use, while more elaborate pieces with black designs painted on the an orange clay surface were more noteworthy. Decoration almost always consisted of linear designs—geometric, zigzag, straight line, “triangle with pestañas” and especially the very characteristic *trinacrio* motifs. These ceramic vessels were mainly *escudillas*, bowls with designs painted on the exterior surface. The Aconcagua people were master craftsmen, also manufacturing flutes and insignias of authority called *clavas*.

Social Organization

While the members of the Aconcagua culture may have felt a sense of belonging to the same society, they had no extended political units or marked social differences. Leadership was based on prestige and probably was not hereditary, although the head of each family would have usually held political authority.

Beliefs and Funeral Rites

In general, the dead were buried in individual or collective graves covered over by a mound of earth. These burial mounds (*túmulos*) were described by early Spanish historians, who told that the deceased were dressed in their best attire and laid to rest with offerings of maize, beans, ceramic items, copper earrings and necklaces, and other grave goods. The rituals of the Aconcagua people seem to have left their mark to this day on the inhabitants of the Aconcagua River valley: The dances performed by the “Chinos”—fraternities of

fishermen and peasants who dance in reverence to the Virgin Mary and specific patron saints—still contain some elements that likely originated with this prehistoric culture. A case in point is their use of a flute that produces a unique sound, called “rajado,” which matches the sound produced by prehistoric flutes attributed to the Aconcagua culture.

Settlement patterns

The Aconcagua built their dwellings on valley floors and riverbanks, forming small groupings of 10 residences or less. These were detached from each other and built in the *quincha* style, which used a combination of mud, straw and cane. The people who lived in these small settlements were likely members of the same kinship group. Some of these settlements were directly associated with the exploitation of specific resources: those on the coast were focused mostly on collecting marine products, while those in the mountains carried out copper mining.

History

Little is known about the origin of the Aconcagua culture, few elements of which can be ascribed to their predecessors, the Bato and Llolleo peoples, although neither is there evidence that they migrated from other latitudes. Some evidence, such as their ceramic designs, suggests that their development was influenced by groups in other regions, perhaps northwest Argentina or the Bolivian Altiplano. When the Inka arrived in the 15th Century, the Aconcagua people adopted many cultural elements from both the Inka and the Diaguita, the latter being a culture from further north that expanded into this part of Chile through their association with the Inka Empire of *Tawantinsuyu*.