

Central Chile's First Communities 400 BCE – 200 CE

(Early Agro-ceramic Period)

Environment and Geography

These early groups occupied the valleys and coast of Central Chile at a time when the climate was similar to the present but before human activity had eroded the landscape. They therefore lived in a land covered with forests with abundant nutrient-rich fruit and animals in numbers not witnessed in modern times.

Economy

What little information we have indicates that these groups probably subsisted on a diet of quinoa, which they cultivated. This assumption is based on examination of the only two skeletons found to date for this period. On the coast, like their predecessors these early settlers took advantage of marine resources, complementing their diet by hunting and gathering on land.

Art

These people were the first to produce ceramics in the region. They crafted thin-walled vessels in simple forms, with dark surfaces that were sometimes polished. Some pieces featured nipple-shaped appliqués close to the lip, while others were decorated with red paint on a cream-colored glaze or with red ochre. They also made personal adornments such as stone bead necklaces and ceramic *tembetás* (adornment worn in the lower lip), although these were not typical of their culture. Like other groups of this era, they made ceramic pipes.

Social Organization

Little is known about the social organization of these groups, although their settlement pattern indicates that they lived in extended family groups composed of a couple, their children and other relatives such as grandparents and single siblings.

Beliefs and Funeral Rites

Only two funeral contexts have been found for these communities: one a burial of at least six individuals, without any apparent grave goods, and another a woman who was buried on her side in the fetal position with some broken ceramic vessels left as offerings and a mortar placed face-down upon her body. The earliest evidence of pipes, though very scant, has been attributed to this period, suggesting the social or ritual use of hallucinogenic substances.

Settlement Pattern

Though little evidence remains, these groups seem to have established settlements along the main water courses of the region and only occupied more distant sites occasionally, probably because

the river bank sites offered the best location for their emerging horticultural activities. They were not sedentary, however, but still moved around quite a lot during this period.

History

These communities were the first in Central Chile to produce ceramics. As they demonstrate a continuity with the stone tool making tradition and emphasis on hunting found in the previous Archaic Period, it is likely that it was these same groups that first began to make pottery and grow crops. Since they lived in relatively independent and quite distinct social units, however, they did not all use the same ceramic designs. Other evidence of their autonomy is found in the funerary practices described. Despite the scant information available, the differences between the two burials identified to date reinforce the idea that the groups were independent of one another. Around 200 CE, cultural changes that are still not well understood led to the emergence of the Bato and Lolleo societies, which would represent the Early Agro-ceramic period in Central Chile.