

Hunter-gatherers of the Semi-arid North 11,000 BCE – 0

(Archaic Period)

Environment and Geography

The Semi-arid North of Chile is a territory in which the Andes Mountains and the Coastal Mountains converge, virtually eliminating the Intermediate Depression, with rivers forming transversal valleys where semi-arid plant species such as chañar and algarrobo trees grow. The coastline here offers a rich and stable source of food throughout the year. The region's first inhabitants arrived at the end of the Pleistocene when temperatures began to rise, the ice retreated, and the territory began a process of desertification that has continued to this day.

Economy

Two kinds of hunter-gatherer societies occupied this territory, each with a distinct subsistence economy: in the inland ravines and valleys groups based their diet on hunting of land animals, moving around frequently according to the seasons, traversing the mountains, transAndean valleys and the coast. In contrast, the groups that adapted to the Pacific coast consumed mollusks gathered near the shore, complemented by marine products: fish and other animals, which they hunted, and seaweed and coastal plants, which they gathered. They moved up and down the coast to prevent depleting resources in any one location, and in certain seasons journeyed inland in search of stones for toolmaking, firewood, and plants.

Art

Notable examples of artistic expression attributed to the hunter-gatherers of the early Archaic period are pieces of polished sandstone with geometric forms, known as discoidal or geometric stones. The function of these artifacts is unknown to date. The same material was sometimes used to manufacture projectile points. Other examples of their craftsmanship include circular stones perforated at the center, called *piedras horadadas* (perforated stones), which had an important symbolic value, as did the pendants and necklaces made of shell and stone beads that they left to accompany their dead.

Social Organization

These hunter-gatherers lived in small nomadic family bands and divided their labor according to age and sex. They probably maintained social and kinship ties with other bands inhabiting the same territory.

Beliefs and Funeral Rites

The burial practices of these hunter-gatherers varied, especially over the long period of time in which they occupied the territory. From the beginning, however, these groups usually buried their

dead in some way. Collective graves, probably family groups, were common in the early part of this period. Grave goods were uncommon however, except for some notable exceptions such as discoidal stones that appear not to have been used as tools and therefore may have had a purely ritual function. In graves of the middle Archaic phase, individual graves appear, located in specific areas of encampments. On the coast the dead were covered with piles of seashells, while further inland they were covered with piles of stones. The bodies were often accompanied by “perforated stones” and buried close to *piedras tacitas* (cup stones), large boulders with multiple hollowed-out cups that were used as collective mortars. Hunter-gatherers of the late Archaic period were buried under piles of gravel, with a circle of stones outlining the grave itself. Offerings of lip adornments (*tembetá*) and stone pipes also begin to appear in graves attributed to this period.

Settlement Pattern

The oldest coastal groups moved constantly up and down the coastal strip, occupying the same sites time after time and making occasional journeys inland. In the same period the inland hunters occupied rock shelters as base camps, staying in other more transitory settlements only occasionally, when they needed to obtain certain resources in other areas. This settlement pattern continued in the Middle Archaic, with base camps established for specific activities. The inland hunters, however, occupied their sites for longer periods and brought coastal resources to make use of there. Towards the end of this period more permanent camps began to appear on the coast. In regard to burials, bodies were interred under the floor of their dwellings.

History

In the Early Archaic period (11,000 – 6,500 BCE), the presence of discoidal stones at sites attributed to the first coastal communities suggests a connection or underlying cultural similarity with other relatively contemporary South American populations, such as the PaleoIndian groups of Patagonia and the Las Vegas complex in Ecuador. In addition, the similarities between certain stone instruments used by these northern peoples and those used by hunting groups on the eastern side of the Andes points to possible relations between the two, established perhaps during the occasional journeys that both groups made across the mountains in search of particular resources. About half way through the Middle Archaic Period (6,500 to 2,000 BCE), aridity increased in the region and groups living in the Argentine foothills, relatives of the Los Morrillos culture, began to visit the Pacific coast more frequently in search of more stable food sources. In the early part of the Late Archaic (2,000 BCE –0) the climate and humidity stabilized, enabling more permanent, year-round occupation of the coastal region, which led to population growth here. At the same time, the coastal hunter-gatherers in the northern part of this territory established ties with similar groups on the Norte Grande coast, reaching as far north as Taltal and Antofagasta. This long cultural period came to a close in the first few centuries of the present era, when the production of food radically changed the way of life of these peoples, leading to the development of the El Molle Culture.