

Early Ceramicists of Choapa 100 – 1550 CE

(Early Agro-Ceramic Period)

Environment and Geography

The Province of Choapa is located in the semi-arid north of Chile. The Early Ceramicists of this region occupied the valleys and ravines near the Illapel and Chalinga rivers, tributaries in the Choapa basin, which boasts a semi-desert climate in the lowlands and a steppe climate higher up, around the headwaters of these rivers.

Economy

These groups had a very mobile way of life, with an economy based on hunting and gathering of wild plants. They supplemented their diet by dry farming (without irrigation), with some evidence that they grew quinoa and possibly beans.

Art

These groups were the first in Choapa province to produce ceramics. They manufactured small vessels with narrow mouths, well-fired and durable so they were less likely to be broken or lost while being constantly carried around. The necks of some pieces had decorative fields and rims with incised geometric motifs. Rock art that has been attributed to the Choapa groups generally consists of engravings of anthropomorphic masks, simple human figures and naturalist camelid images, although in somewhat rigid and schematic form.

Social Organization

The Choapa people were a mobile society that lived in low-density regions, probably in extended family groups that were egalitarian in organization with a division of labor based on age and sex.

Religion and Funeral Rites

They buried their dead in the fetal position, possibly wrapped in some perishable material or tied with cord, but the moistness of the soil has destroyed all traces of such material. Alongside the bodies they deposited ceramic jugs and bottles, and in some grave sites circular stones perforated in the center have been found, as well as lip ornaments (tembetás) made of clay or stone, and ceramic pipes in an inverted-T shape. The pipes indicate that, like their northern neighbors of the El Molle culture, these groups practiced a form of shamanism that involved the consumption of hallucinogenic plants during religious rituals.

Settlement Pattern

They located their residential camps and semi-permanent villages along the tributary ravines and upper reaches of the region's river valleys, always close to water courses and in sheltered areas with good views of the surrounding landscape. With their seasonal migration pattern, these groups occupied other sectors of the region for specific activities, installing temporary camps and way stations in the high mountains to hunt guanacos and replenish their supply of stones for weapon-making and in the lowlands to collect plants.

History

Heirs to the Archaic hunter-gatherer way of life, the early ceramicists of Choapa began to practice dry farming of crops to supplement their diet. Their pottery has certain stylistic features in common with the Argentine Valleserrana cultures of Agreló and Calingasta (based in Mendoza and San Juan, respectively), which suggests that these groups had some kind of interaction, though the nature of that interaction is not yet well understood. By around 1,000 CE, the middle reaches of the mountain valleys and ravines were no longer occupied by the Choapa culture but by Diaguita communities that had a more sedentary way of life based on agriculture. However, they did continue to occupy the upper reaches of the Choapa (Chalinga) river basin until very late, though that environment was not suited to the development of intensive agriculture.