

## **Copiapó People      1100 CE – 1400 CE**

### **(Late Agro-ceramic Period)**

#### **Environment and Geography**

The Copiapó people settled in what is today the Atacama Region, mainly occupying the upper reaches of the Copiapó River and its numerous tributaries, while making some incursions into the Atacama Desert and the coastal zone and reaching as far north as the Huasco River valley. This territory has a marginal desert climate with little annual precipitation, although its valleys are relatively fertile.

#### **Economy**

These groups were farmers and herders who lived in the mountains, taking advantage of the mountain pastures as forage for their llama herds. They grew maize in fields watered by irrigation canals to complement the wild fruit they gathered from the *algarrobo* and *chañar* trees. They traveled frequently from East to West, seeking out products for trade—fish and mollusks from the Pacific coast, sumptuary objects and prestige goods, and even foods such as peanuts, which were brought from the valleys and rainforests of the eastern watershed of the Andes Mountains.

#### **Art**

Noteworthy among the ceramics produced by these groups are *escudillas*, deep dishes painted in red and decorated in black with geometric figures, human faces and above all very stylized camelid motifs. Other typical ceramic forms of this period include large orange-surfaced vessels or jugs with face designs molded onto their necks, and geometric motifs painted in red or black. The Copiapó people were also expert metallurgists, using copper smelting techniques to manufacture earrings, bracelets and brooches, as well as axes and chisels. They also made necklace beads from copper and seashells, textiles from camelid wool, bone spatulas, and wooden tubes and tablets for inhaling hallucinogenic substances. These they adorned with a variety of engraved animal and human figures. They also made baskets and used woodburning techniques to burn designs onto gourds and bone artifacts.

#### **Social Organization**

The Copiapó people probably lived in kinship-based societies with no social classes but with some individuals having more status based on their ability to mobilize the population and redistribute food and goods.

#### **Religion and Funeral Rites**

To date, little information is known about the burial practices of the Copiapó people, but evidence has been found of a very deep, bubble-shaped chamber accessed through a very narrow cylindrical opening. Among the grave goods that were deposited with the bodies of the deceased,

ceramic pieces were common, as were metal objects and implements for inhaling hallucinogenic substances.

### **Settlement Pattern**

Most settlements attributed to this culture consisted of small groups of dwellings or villages dispersed along the fluvial terraces of valleys. Their residences were circular or rectangular structures built of dry stone walls and were situated alongside corrals and growing fields. In some parts of the upper Copiapó valley, the people built compact, tightly grouped villages on hilltops with fortified perimeter walls, much like *pukaras* or forts. These were located to safeguard strategic agricultural zones or the headwaters of rivers. Cemeteries attributed to the Copiapó people were located apart from the villages.

### **History**

When they adopted an agricultural and pastoral way of life, the people of the Copiapó Valley differentiated themselves from groups living in the southern valleys of the Norte Chico. This was especially seen in the fluid exchange of products and ideas between the Copiapó people and contemporary populations of the Atacama Puna and the valleys of northwest Argentina. These interactions promoted the development of a unique cultural identity for the Copiapó people, and when the Inka arrived in the region they encountered strong resistance from its inhabitants. Ultimately, however, the valley was conquered by the *Tawantinsuyu* Empire with the assistance of allies living further to the south, the Diaguita people.