

Diaguita Culture
900 – 1500 AD

Environment and Geography

The Diaguita culture developed in Chile's Norte Chico, which extends southward from the Copiapó River to the Choapa River. This territory has a semi-arid environment traversed by many valleys and mountain chains that run from the Andes Mountains to the Pacific Ocean.

Economy

The Diaguita were a farming culture that built irrigation networks to enable them to grow a wide range of crops such as maize, quinoa, beans and squash. It is not clear whether they also raised livestock before the arrival of the Inka, but after that time this practice became a part of local Diaguita economies. The sea also provided them with a variety of resources, such as fish, mollusks and marine mammals (sea lions, whales, etc.). For hunting and fishing on the open ocean they used rafts made of inflated sea lion skins.

Art

In artistic terms, the Diaguita are known above all for their distinctive ceramics, which feature two-colored geometric designs applied on a base of a third color. This kind of decoration is found on a variety of vessels they produced, such as pots, urns, duck-shaped pitchers, and bowls. The Diaguita's highly complex designs are thought to be representations of shamanic visions; many of their vessels bear feline motifs or people with feline features. Apart from ceramics, the Diaguita also produced some of the geometric designs and mask forms found in the rock art of the region.

Social Organization

Archeologists believe that the Diaguita people lived in small, autonomous villages, each with its own leader. Each valley, and perhaps even each locality, was also considered autonomous, although they all belonged to the same culture. When the Inka invaded these lands, the Diaguita were reorganized into a twofold system in which each valley had two chiefs—one who ruled over the lower and one over the upper reaches, with the former subordinated to the latter.

Beliefs and Funeral Rites

The vast majority of decorated vessels used to characterize this culture were found as grave goods in Diaguita tombs. In their most common form, these tombs were constructed with five large stone slabs that formed a casket or rectangular box in which the deceased person was placed. The dead were accompanied by grave goods that might include earrings, axes,

tweezers, copper chisels, finely worked bone spatulas or spoons, and ceramic vessels. The frequent appearance of feline figures on Diaguita funerary vessels suggests that the people worshipped this animal.

Settlement pattern

The settlement pattern is one of the least known aspects of Diaguita culture. They are thought to have lived in small villages of simple huts made of wood, mud and straw, which were distributed along river valleys and close to the areas they cultivated.

History

The most direct predecessors of the Diaguita were the Ánimas, as the ceramic designs and forms of the former display a style that is highly reminiscent of the latter. With the incorporation of their territory into the Inka Empire, the Diaguita became key agents in the Inka expansion into Central Chile. As a result, by the time the Spanish conquistadors arrived the Diaguita presence extended far beyond their original territory, even across the Andes Mountains.