

## **El Molle 1 – 600 CE**

(Early Agro-Ceramic Period)

### **Environment and Geography**

The El Molle people lived in the Copiapó, Huasco, Elqui and Limarí river valleys, and in the countless tributary ravines that open onto these valleys. These rivers channel a large volume of water, with flooding in winter from the rains and in summer from meltwater. The climate in the north is marginal desert with scant precipitation, which increases to the south to form a steppe climate.

### **Economy**

The El Molle people grew maize, squash, quinoa and probably cotton, tilling the land using stone shovels and hoes and channeling water from the ravines. They also hunted wild camelid and smaller animals and birds, using bows and arrows tipped with triangular projectile points. To crush the algarrobo and chañar seeds into flour they used *piedras tacitas*, boulders with multiple mortar cups, located at streamside. Both hunting and gathering continued to supply important elements of their diet.

### **Art**

The El Molle people were expert stoneworkers who sculpted and polished stone to produce pipes in inverted-T forms, as well as their characteristic lip ornaments known as *tembetás*, which they wore inserted into the lower lip. They used copper ore and Pacific sea shells to make beads for long necklaces, and copper and sometimes silver and gold to make other personal objects such as tweezers, needles and especially jewelry—rings, bracelets, breastplates, pendants and necklaces. Their ceramics were predominantly monochromatic and finely polished, although some vessels were decorated with white, red and black paint or with series of incisions with geometric motifs. The rock art attributed to the El Molle people includes engravings and petroglyphs, for former illustrated by the La Silla style, which includes engravings of human figures leading animal herds that have been interpreted as domesticated camelids, as well as abstract geometric motifs that have been related to shamanistic practices that included the use of hallucinogenic substances. In the latter case, the Limarí style features engravings of human masks with ornate headdresses, such as those found in the Valle del Encanto, stylized human figures with splayed arms and legs, and geometric forms, such as circles with two appendages.

### **Social Organization**

The regional variations observed among the El Molle groups—their distinct burial patterns and types of ceramics, for example—suggest that, despite their common cultural foundation, each valley was inhabited by an independent social unit under the direction of a local leader and

religious expert, but without major social distinctions. Still, the wide territorial distribution of the El Molle culture was facilitated by a certain ideological and social unity that joined the groups as a single people.

### **Beliefs and Funeral Rites**

In the Copiapó and Huasco valleys, the El Molle people usually buried their dead in artificial earth and stone mounds encircled by a line of stones. Most of the burial sites contained several individuals and, in some cases, were protected by a foundation of algarrobo wood trunks. The cadavers were buried with metal necklaces and adornments, along with ceramic vessels and stone pipes. Males generally had *tembetás* (lip ornaments). In the cemeteries of the Elqui and Limarí valleys it was common to find piles of gravel on the bodies or encircling them as tomb markers. The high occurrence of pipes as grave goods suggests a shamanic religion with a complex smoking ritual probably involving hallucinogenic substances. The complex construction and size of these mound cemeteries, some with associated hearths and evidence of camelid sacrifice, points to a high degree of ceremonialism in the funeral rites of the El Molle people.

### **Settlement Pattern**

Their settlements were distributed mainly in valleys, foothills and interfluvial ravines. Despite the fact that the El Molle groups were highly mobile, they also achieved a large degree of sedentarism, which is most notably reflected in the existence of complex village constructions. Examples of these are found in the Copiapó valley, which have platforms dug out of the hillside and retaining walls on the valley side. Their residential structures were built with stone foundations, but their walls were of light materials such as cane and mud, and therefore have not been preserved. The mound cemeteries were often located in well defined places in or very close to the villages.

### **History**

The El Molle people were heirs to the hunter-gatherer tradition of the Archaic period, but they developed a new way of life based on horticulture and village life. They may have intermixed with new populations, perhaps through the close relations they established with peoples on the Eastern side of the Andes (such as the Ciénaga, La Candelaria and Condorhuasi people), with the people of the Atacama Desert, or with the Bato and Lolleo people of Central Chile. Around the 7<sup>th</sup> Century of our era, a major cultural shift took place in the semi-arid north that would lead to the emergence of the Las Ánimas culture.