

Pitrén Culture

400–1000 CE

Environment and Geography

The Pitrén people were the first horticulturalists to inhabit the lands between the Bío Bío River and the northern shore of Lago Llanquihue. In the East, they were present on both sides of the Andes Mountains, and in the west they occupied the lands up the Nahuelbuta Range. The landscape here is dominated by temperate rainforest, which covers the land from the Pacific coast all the way to the Andean foothills. Between the forest and the eternal snows of the high Andes are forests of Araucaria trees, a coniferous species endemic to this region.

Economy

As horticulturalists, the Pitrén people grew crops such as potatoes and maize, but they very likely subsisted mainly on the fruit and nuts they gathered (such as the Araucaria nut or *piñón*) and hunting of guanaco and deer. This type of economy was based on seasonal migration in search of resources, especially among groups inhabiting the mountain zone.

Art

Pitrén pottery is the oldest in the region and tends to share some stylistic features with other early ceramic traditions of the Southern Cone of America, such as the use of monochromatic surfaces, a preference for dark tones, and emphasis on molded decorations. The Pitrén produced a large variety of ceramic forms that range from simple globular bottles to more elaborate items such as jugs in the form of animals, plants (squash) or humans. Also appearing at this time were the first asymmetric vessels, known as *Ketru Metawe* or “duck-shaped jug.” These vessels are still manufactured today by Mapuche communities and have a strong symbolic value, especially among married women. The Pitrén people are also thought to have crafted objects in wood.

Social Organization

Little is known about the social organization of the Pitrén people, though it is thought that they lived in relatively autonomous nuclear family units, with the head of the family as the only authority.

Religion and Funeral Rites

Pitrén burial sites identified to date are few, and generally limited, although some sites contain numerous graves. The deceased were buried with offerings of ceramic vessels and pipes in the shape of an inverted-T, which usually had a hole for inhaling and a handle. The presence of these objects may point to the ceremonial consumption of hallucinogenic substances.

Settlement Pattern

The Pitrén groups inhabited small clearings in the forest, where they erected their dwellings and cultivated the land. It is not clear whether they lived permanently in one place, but it is likely that they were sedentary during certain seasons.

History

These groups are known to have had ties with trans-Andean groups with a very similar ceramic style. Nevertheless, the Pitrén people seem to have more cultural similarities with certain groups in Central Chile, especially the Llolleo people. There is little doubt that the later Pitrén groups maintained relations with the El Vergel culture and other proto-Mapuche peoples in the area that ultimately replaced them in occupying the region.