

Southern Maritime Hunters or Canoe Hunters 6000 BCE – 1550 CE

(Early Hunter, Late Hunter, and Historic periods)

Environment and geography

These groups inhabited the western coasts of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego in the far south of Chile, a region of rugged islands, fjords, and channels extending southwards from Reloncaví Sound. The climate here is cold to temperate, with abundant rainfall year-round, strong winds, and low temperatures. This is where the Chilean Coastal Mountain range descends into the sea, creating an environment of enormous rocky archipelagos and dense woodlands. Seafaring is the only viable means of travel along these rugged coasts.

Economy

These canoeists had a hunter gatherer lifestyle and based their diet mainly on marine mammals, which they hunted with harpoons made from animal bone and tipped with stone points. They also hunted land animals—including local deer species, Pudú and Huemul—and seabirds, collected shellfish and plant material, and fished from the shore. They lived a highly mobile lifestyle, using their region's resources in a sustainable way by moving on before any food species became extinct in a given spot. They moved around almost exclusively by water, using canoes made out of tree bark or wooden boards.

Art

The Southern Canoe Hunters made a wide range of items from the bones of the marine mammals that they hunted, adding spiritual power to them with fine geometric incisions and occasional animal motifs. The teeth of sea lions and fox were drilled at the base to make pendants and necklaces. The walls of some caves in the region were painted with geometric forms using red pigments, although rock art seems to have been very infrequent among the southern canoe peoples. The same red pigments may have been used in body painting, which the people practiced from ancient times and continued until first contact with Europeans.

Social Organization

The center of canoe hunter society was probably the extended family, which moved around the southern Chilean sea channels in their canoes. Camps were probably occupied by one or two families at a time, except for special circumstances such as whale beachings, when larger groups

would gather. Bio-anthropological evidence indicates that the division of labor was based on gender and age, with only women and children diving for shellfish and men likely taking charge of hunting. Such gender and age distinctions are known from historic times, from the different patterns of body painting that these groups used, particularly during rites of passage.

Beliefs and funeral rites

These groups employed a number of different techniques to bury their dead, and frequently used middens or rocky outcrops as burial sites. Bodies were sometimes laid out straight and sometimes buried in a very flexed position, and were accompanied by some artifacts or necklaces or with no grave goods at all. Some burials are associated with camp fires, evidence of burning, and the presence of red pigment. In later periods in the northern part of their range, the canoe hunters began to leave their dead in caves, with branches and tree bark as the only accompaniment. Further south, bodies were placed in canoes which were filled with rocks and launched into the sea to sink. The first Europeans to make contact with these groups wrote that they believed in a creator deity, intermediate spirits, and mythical ancestors. Their most important ceremonies included complex 'rites of passage' relating to different stages of life. Over time, they adopted certain ritualistic elements from similar ceremonies practiced by neighboring land-based groups.

Settlement pattern

These were highly mobile groups that spent most of their lives in their canoes. On land they repeatedly occupied the same sheltered beaches, where over time large middens built up, full of sea shells from their food waste. In some locations they dug out shallow pits in these middens to build their shelters, making walls from the shells. In general, their dwellings were made from a frame of tree branches covered with animal skins to protect those inside from the cold and the southern winds.

History

It is not clear how the first maritime hunters or canoeist groups arrived in these lands in the extreme South of Chile. One theory suggests that the area was populated from Chiloé Island, while another proposes that inland hunters came to the coast by land and adapted to the coastal environment in those few places where the steppes extend as far as the channels of the Pacific Ocean. However, it is known that the first evidence of this way of life in Southern Chile dates back to around 6000 years ago, with the emergence of clear cultural differences between the canoe peoples and the hunters who wandered the eastern steppes further inland. Despite some similarities between early sites where groups adapted to the marine environment, significant variations existed across different regions of this vast territory, suggesting cultural differences

between groups. These differences grew over time, giving rise to the different ethnic groups that inhabited Chile's extreme south at the time of first contact with Europeans: the *Chonos* in Chiloé and the Guaitecas Islands, the *Alacalufe* and their subgroup the *Kawashkar* in the archipelagos situated around the Gulf of Penas and the Strait of Magellan, and the *Yámana* on the southern shore of the same strait and the Beagle Channel.