

Paleo-Indian Hunters of the Extreme South of Chile 12,000 – 8000 BCE

(Paleo-Indian period)

Environment and geography

These lithic groups were the first inhabitants of the Patagonia region of Chile and Argentina, at the southern extreme of South America, where they lived in the harsh conditions of the sub-Antarctic climate. The melting of the Pleistocene ice layers formed rivers and lakes and opened migration routes that were extended further by a sea level lower than that of the present day. The predominantly warm, dry climate led to the formation of steppe plant life and open woodland, creating a suitable habitat for a variety of herbivores, including both extinct and modern species.

Economy

The Paleo-Indians hunted large herbivores that became extinct at the end of the Pleistocene period (the *megafauna*), such as New World horses, prehistoric lamoids (llama relatives), and mylodons (ground sloths), but the guanaco always remained their main food source. Their group hunting techniques required coordination among a large group of people, which surrounded or cornered game animals before incapacitating them with bolas or darts flung with atlatls (spear throwers) tipped with characteristic 'fishtail' points. These groups also hunted birds, rodents, and the Ñandú or Rhea (a large flightless bird), and gathered certain plant materials. Their economy was notably land-based, and no evidence has been found to suggest that they used any marine resources. They lived in highly mobile groups and the low population density allowed them to move freely throughout their extensive territories.

Art

The ancient inhabitants of Patagonia painted representations of their cosmic vision on the walls of the rock shelters they inhabited, illustrating the high degree of ideological complexity that they had already achieved. The most common motifs were 'hand paintings,' which were made by placing the hands on the rock face and forcefully blowing pigment around them, leaving the outline of hands. Despite their simplicity, these paintings show variation over time in the colors used. While red, black, and white were common throughout the range, in some regions yellow and even green were incorporated. Group hunting scenes featuring guanacos were also painted, while other paintings feature stationary guanacos, exaggerating parts of the anatomy that relate to fertility and to fat, highly prized aspects of this food source.

Social Organization

The Paleo-Indian peoples were organized into small family groups without social hierarchies, although certain individuals probably attained a level of prestige and authority in decision making

through experience or special ability. Social and cooperative relations existed among different groups, which sometimes joined together to hunt, as the large prey required bigger groups.

Beliefs and funeral rites

At many sites that were occupied by these Paleo-Indian hunters, “discoidal stones” have been found, stone disks with finely worked geometric patterns that show no evidence of having been used as tools. We do not know exactly what their role was in early Paleo-Indian cosmology, but they clearly had a ritual purpose. Red and ochre pigments were also often used in ceremonial and funeral rites. Although little is known about Paleo-Indian funeral customs, it is likely that practices such as covering the body with stones or cremation were practiced even in these early times.

Settlement pattern

The early inhabitants of Patagonia were highly mobile and ranged freely over hundreds of kilometers, taking advantage of both the open woodland and the steppe environments. They returned time and again to the same rock shelters, some of which were inhabited on a more permanent basis and used for a variety of activities, while others were used only for short stays.

History

Evidence from Paleo-Indian sites in Patagonia suggests that these southern regions were colonized from the east, through the territory of what is now Argentina, or perhaps along the Atlantic coast, where sea levels were far lower than in modern times. The colonization of these lands demanded a cultural adaptation to the environments of the steppes and woodlands, but it is noteworthy that these groups made no use of the abundant marine resources that are so plentiful along the region’s coasts. One of the stone tools that is considered most typical of this period is the ‘fishtail’ projectile point, named after the shape of its base. This point was tied to the shaft of a spear, which was then thrown using an atlatl or spear-thrower. These projectile points have been found at many sites dating back to this period in South America. In terms of rituals, the presence of the discoid stones suggests cultural relations with other groups that inhabited the Pacific coast of South America at roughly the same time and who inhabited sites such as the Huentelauquén complex in North-Central Chile or the Las Vegas complex in Ecuador. Similarities in artifacts suggest some cultural connection or shared background linking these ancient peoples who colonized South America from the North.