

## ***CHINCHORRO CULTURE*** ***5000–2000 BC***

### **Environment and Geography**

The Chinchorro people inhabited the Pacific coast of southern Peru and northern Chile, from what the present-day port of Ilo to Antofagasta. Though the land here is extremely arid, the region is abundant in marine resources due to the cold Humboldt Current. The small valleys that cross the land to the sea bring freshwater to this desert coast, as well as animal and plant species that provided sustenance to these ancient peoples. The Chinchorro people were called after the beach of the same name near Arica, Chile, where evidence of their culture was first found.

### **Economy**

The Chinchorro were fishers, hunters, and gatherers, expert at taking advantage of the marine resources available and manufacturing an assemblage of special tools for this purpose. Notable among these was the cactus needle fish hook and the harpoon points they made to hunt different prey. Tumors found in the ear cavities of mummies attributed to this period indicate that they dove to great depths in the ocean waters. Despite their intense focus on the marine environment, they also made use of terrestrial plant species, which provided food and raw materials for making a range of objects.

### **Art**

Evidence of the Chinchorro's artistic development has come almost exclusively from the arrays of fine grave goods that accompanied their mummified remains, and to some degree from their elaborate funerary practices themselves. Turbans made of twisted plant or animal fiber cord and decorations made of seashell and malachite beads covered the mummies' heads, which had been intentionally deformed during life. Their faces were covered by finely crafted mud masks and their bodies were wrapped with sashes and ropes made of animal and/or plant fiber. Color combinations varied over time, though natural colors, ochre and terracotta were common. Some mummies wore reed skirts. The bodies were laid upon mats made of plant fiber or animal skins, and many of them were accompanied by a selection of grave goods that included spear throwers, knives, harpoons and other implements, and occasionally sheets of native copper.

### **Social Organization**

The Chinchorro lived in small bands or groups of 30 to 50 individuals, apparently based on kinship. They would certainly have had a division of roles based on expertise and skill; for example, the individuals who were skilled in mummification would have held a special place in the band.

### **Beliefs and Funeral Rites**

The Chinchorro culture offers the earliest complex expression of a cult of the dead and ancestor worship on the arid South American coast. This is seen through the complicated mummification process, which involved extracting the muscles and internal organs of the deceased person and replacing these with plants, feathers, pieces of leather, wool fleece and other material. The body was then covered with a layer of clay and a wig made of human hair was placed on the head. The Chinchorro mummification process evolved through several stages: Initially, they mummified only infants and children, adorning them with vibrant colors and placing clay figurines with them. At the zenith of Chinchorro culture, around 3000 BC, all members of society were mummified (men, women, and children of all ages), smeared with a thick layer of red, black or brown pigment. In the final days of this culture, the mummies bore only mud masks. The mummies were apparently not buried but were stood upright in a visible location in the camp, perhaps to indicate the group's lineage from a common ancestor. In addition, not all members of Chinchorro bands were mummified; some were buried in simple graves. Such graves have been found on elevated terraces and containing one or more individuals who may have been family groups.

### **Settlement patterns**

The bands established semi-permanent camps at seaside bays and lower ravine reaches near the coast, some of which—such as the Camarones ravine south of modern-day Arica—were heavily occupied.

### **History**

Some of the earliest evidence of the Chinchorro culture may have been found at Ancha, a site more than 8,000 years old located in the Azapa Valley of Chile. Although the site contains no obviously Chinchorro mummies, it is believed to show the earliest evidence of that culture's funerary tradition. The Chinchorro have been linked to the so-called Anzuelo de Concha culture and with the Abtao, with whom they share some technological features, particularly the harpoon. In the later stages, around 2000 BC, the Chinchorro began to blend with the Quiani groups, who simplified the previous complex mummification techniques as they inherited the culture and ancient traditions of the Chinchorro.