

## **Coastal Hunter-Gatherer-Fishers 2000 BCE – 1550 CE**

### **(Archaic, Formative and Regional Development Periods)**

#### **Environment and Geography**

These groups inhabited the segment of the northern Chilean coast that extends from Pisagua to Chañaral, a riverless zone where one of the planet's richest seas meets one of its driest deserts. Along this entire strip of land, no rivers cross the intermediate depression to the ocean, except for the Loa. This rugged coast boasts the highest peaks of the Coastal Mountain range, and in some places the mountains drop down to the sea so sharply there is no beach. The mountain barrier also traps the sea mist, called *camanchaca*, which provides enough moisture to produce a variety of vegetation on its slopes, including cacti, bushes and grasses. These plants sustain animals like the guanaco, the taruca or Andean deer, the chinchilla and other rodents, as well as birds.

#### **Economy**

These coastal hunter-gatherer-fishers had a subsistence economy based on hunting, fishing and gathering of marine resources such as mollusks, fish, marine mammals and sea birds. They complemented their diet with land animals and plants from the Coastal Mountains. Sea lions were a central source of food, but they also provided bones for tools, as well as skins that the people sewed together and inflated to use as seagoing rafts. Sailing on these rafts enabled these groups to obtain food within a larger radius, allowing them to hunt for new kinds of prey (open ocean fish species and whales). At the same time, the use of copper to make hooks and other tools enhanced their fishing activities, allowing them to more fully exploit the nearby marine resources. Their diet was complemented with cultivated crops that they obtained through trade with the agricultural communities living inland in the North.

#### **Art**

Through their contact with the agricultural and herding groups living in the desert and inland valleys, these hunter-gatherer-fishers obtained objects such as ceramics, metal and fine woven cloth of camelid hair, while they themselves made clothing from sea bird skins and ornaments of feathers and shells, especially pendants and bead necklaces, which they often traded with other groups. Despite these accomplishments, it was in their rock art in which these groups achieved their highest form of artistic expression. Two distinct rock art styles have been attributed to these groups—one featuring painting and the other engraving. Noteworthy examples of the former have been found at the El Médano ravine, north of Taltal, where a 10 km stretch of river contains hundreds of red drawings. These include images of marine animals, mainly fish and turtles, and scenes with men riding on sea lion skin rafts hunting those same animals. Engravings have been found at Las Lizas, a beach site south of Chañaral that contains primarily figures of fish, apparently already caught.

## **Social Organization**

These groups lived in small family bands and moved up and down the coast. As their marine-based economy became more established they gradually became less mobile, organizing themselves into larger groups based in semi-permanent camps located mostly in resource-rich locations. At times, several different groups that maintained relations through political alliances and kinship ties would meet for a time. Social organization within each group was relatively egalitarian.

## **Beliefs and Funeral Rites**

Inside their dwellings, these hunter-gatherers installed floors of mortar made of seaweed ash and sea water, which were laid to cover the bodies of their dead. Red pigment was deposited alongside the heads of the cadavers, which were accompanied by offerings of instruments and necklaces. In later times, these hunter-gatherers installed large cemeteries close to their camps, burying bodies in individual graves, wrapped in blankets tightly to keep the bodies in a bent position. Grave goods commonly included objects from other cultures that had been obtained through trade. Contact with inland groups also led to the practice of inhaling psychoactive plants in ritual contexts.

## **Settlement Pattern**

In the early stages of this period, the people lived in large or small villages made up of circular, half-buried dwellings grouped around a common patio. Their settlements were usually located around river mouths and ravines with a year-round source of fresh water. Their dwellings were used for both the living and the dead. They moved frequently along the coast, establishing temporary camps in small rock shelters close to coastal springs, or erecting and dismantling tent-like structures made of easily transported materials. In the times of European contact, the descendants of these ancient fishermen built their "rucas" (huts) with cactus wood pillars or whale bone covered with sea lion skins and reeds.

## **History**

These coastal hunter-gatherer-fishers adapted to their environment over centuries, developing a specialized economy that took full advantage of the resources available to them. Around 2000 BCE, the northernmost groups began to practice basic farming, using arable land in the coastal valleys. In contrast, the isolated populations of the riverless desert coast did not adopt farming and herding but maintained and perfected their ancestral way of life. The increasing complexity of the societies of the Atacameña area, which was closely tied to the traffic of goods with llama caravans, strongly influenced the culture of these early fishing communities. Those inland groups visited the coast regularly to trade a rich and varied range of products for dried fish and shellfish, which led to a more complex material culture among coastal groups and the addition of cultivated plants to their diet. Around the year 1450 CE, the Inka conquerers also arrived on these coasts, bringing finely crafted status goods, which they traded with the local inhabitants for fish, shellfish, and guano to use as fertilizer on their crops. In historic times, these coastal communities were

known as the *Changos* or *Camanchacas*. Today, the name denotes not so much a particular ethnic group as the traditional way of life practiced by these coastal fishing communities of northern Chile, regardless of their ethnic identity.