

San Pedro Culture
500 BC – 1535 AD

Environment and Geography

The San Pedro culture developed in the Atacama Salt Flat and Loa River valleys in the north of Chile. They inhabited the Atacama Desert oases, the ravines and river valleys of the Andes Mountains, and the highlands of the Atacama Puna.

Economy

The San Pedro people had an agriculture and livestock based economy that was complemented by the gathering of algarrobo and chañar fruit. They built primitive irrigation systems that mainly involved flooding lands close to the salt flats to grow maize, beans, chili peppers and squash. Herding of camelids, llamas in particular, was crucial for their short and long distance caravan trade. Indeed, caravan traffic transformed the settlement of San Pedro, and to a lesser degree that of Chiu Chiu, into bustling interregional trading hubs.

Art

Unlike the ceramics found in other zones of northern Chile, that produced by the San Pedro culture is monochromatic and finely polished. In some cases, ceramic vessels bear appliqués of molded faces or linear incisions in delimited geometric fields. Along with being able potters, the San Pedro people were also fine woodworkers. The objects most commonly manufactured were those used to consume hallucinogenic substances: tablets and tubes for inhaling, which they decorated with three dimensional motifs of human and animal figures, and small spoons, mortars or spatulas, all decorated as well. Indeed, such items were so common that around one-fifth of San Pedro men were buried with an assemblage of such items as grave goods.

Social Organization

Early hierarchical structuring among the San Pedro people has been deduced from the presence of different assemblages of grave goods, which suggests that some individuals enjoyed a more privileged social position than others. This would have intensified under the influence of the Tiwanaku culture, which established ties with the elite residents of the desert oases in order to insert the Atacama trading network into the economy of its Altiplano empire. The mastery and skillfulness displayed

in the crafts manufactured by the San Pedro people suggest the existence of experts who dedicated themselves to such work. The social status accorded such experts would have led to social distinctions within San Pedro communities.

Beliefs and Funeral Rites

The use of hallucinogenic substances was a central part of the San Pedro culture. Initially, psychoactive substances were smoked in angular ceramic pipes, but this practice was gradually replaced by snuffing, which was practiced using ornately engraved wooden tubes and tablets. Snuffing paraphernalia was kept in a bag or wrapped in a piece of cloth.

Settlement pattern

The San Pedro people resided around the desert salt flats and oases, establishing villages of considerable size, around which they located their farm fields and cemeteries. One of the oldest and most representative sites of the early San Pedro culture is Túlor, which contains circular mud-walled dwellings joined together in a way that suggests the spontaneous growth of the settlement. Access to and from these enclosures was through the many interior walkways and courtyards, where the residents performed tasks such as grinding. During the Regional Development period two- or three-room rectangular adobe dwellings were added. Also characteristic of this final period were the *pukaras* or walled settlements, which were built on high ground. One of these is Quítor, which contains more than 160 rooms, courtyards, narrow passages and storage silos.

History

The San Pedro culture emerged from the first agro-ceramic groups that inhabited the oasis of the same name. These groups established villages such as Túlor around 400 BC. This early period gave way to subsequent stages marked by key events—the establishment of trade routes to and from the Tiwanaku Empire, and incorporation into the Inka Empire. The caravan trade fostered robust relations with groups in northwest Argentina and the Bolivian Altiplano. The influence of the San Pedro culture extended beyond the vastness of the Atacama region, as far south as Copiapó.