

Las Ánimas 600 CE – 1000 CE

(Middle Agro-Ceramic Period)

Environment and Geography

The Las Animas culture populated the territory that extends from the Copiapó River in the north to the Limarí River in the south, including the respective coastal strips. These rivers channel a large volume of water, with flooding in winter from the rains and in summer from meltwater. The climate in the north is marginal desert, with the scant precipitation increasing to the south, forming a steppe environment.

Economy

The Las Ánimas people developed an economy based on horticultural activities with a marked emphasis on exploiting coastal resources. They grew maize, squash and beans, among other plants, and gathered the fruit of the algarrobo and chañar trees, which they ground in stone mortars to make flour. They fished and hunted on the sea, developing a major technological innovation for this purpose—the inflated sea lion skin raft, which enabled them to seek out more varied resources, especially on the open ocean.

Art

The typical ceramic forms of the Las Ánimas featured high flaring sides, polished black interiors and exterior decorative fields with geometric designs in black on a red, salmon, crème or yellow background. Polychromatic iconography in ceramics also took hold at this time. With mollusk shells they manufactured pendants, recipients, and tablets, tubes and spatulas for the ingestion of hallucinogenic substances, while with white *combarbalita* stone and copper ore they made bead necklaces. The Las Ánimas people were also skillful metallurgists, especially with copper, which they used to make a variety of jewelry such as earrings, pendants, bead necklaces and brooches, as well as tools such as tweezers, fishing hooks, knives, chisels and hole-punchers. Their art included rock paintings, in which they used red pigment to create images of human figures, camelids and birds, as well as geometric designs. Another rock art image was “the sacrificer,” an emblematic figure in Andean religions who holds in his hands an axe and a severed human head.

Social Organization

The cultural variations observed among Las Ánimas groups living in different valleys suggest the existence of distinct populations, each under the direction of its own leaders and religious experts, but still with no clear class distinctions. At the same time, however, the large number of shared cultural features indicates that, despite local variations, all of these groups can be seen to belong to a single people.

Beliefs and Funeral Rites

While cemeteries in different valleys exhibit some major differences, the custom of burying dead individuals along with whole or partial guanaco cadavers was common, perhaps as a form of protection. These animals were apparently sacrificed to accompany the dead individual, which points to a close affective relationship between the social group and their animals. In the valleys of Huasco and Copiapó, the Las Ánimas groups built extensive cemeteries with artificial mounds filled in with sticks and stones, while further south this practice did not occur. Noteworthy among the variety of grave goods left with the dead were many kinds of metal, bone and shell adornments, ceramic vessels, and tools. It is likely that their religion was a form of shamanism that involved the inhalation of hallucinogenic substances as a ritual practice used to communicate with the deities.

Settlement Pattern

Las Ánimas settlements were situated along the region's coast and its nearby valleys, with only a few in the much more arid interfluvial areas. In the upper basin of the Copiapó Valley the people built several fortified villages close to fields where they grew crops. In the small encampments they established in the valleys, evidence of both coastal and mountain resources has remained, indicating a pattern of transversal movement across the territory. Their cemeteries were located outside their villages on hillside terraces and more commonly in coastal zones.

History

In many ways, the Las Ánimas groups broke with the past to begin a new cultural tradition. The formerly common *tembetás* or lip adornments of the El Molle culture evolved into amulets, sometimes with holes so they could be worn as pendants, indicating a profound change in custom. The consumption of hallucinogenic substances persisted, but the previously popular pipes were replaced with the snuffing paraphernalia so typical of the San Pedro culture of the Atacama region and of the Tiwanaku Altiplano. Their ceramic and metallurgy industries, in turn, reflect strong stylistic influences from trans-Andean cultural developments, especially from the Aguada culture of northwest Argentina. This reflects the close cultural ties that existed between these peoples. The Las Animas Complex was the common underlying culture upon which the widely divergent Diaguita and Copiapó societies of the semi-arid North region would later be built.