

El Vergel 1100 –1450 CE

(Late Agro-Ceramic Period)

Environment and Geography

The El Vergel people inhabited the central valleys and coastal zone of southern Chile between the Bío Bío and Toltén rivers, in what is now called the Araucania Region. The climate here is temperate, with the Nahuelbuta Mountains acting as a natural barrier to produce a climate in this valley that is drier and less cold. The predominant vegetation here is temperate rainforest.

Economy

The El Vergel people had a broad-based economy in which hunting and gathering on both land and water (rivers, lakes and sea) complemented their agricultural activities. They grew potatoes, quinoa, maize, beans and squash. They were highly skilled in handling guanaco, practicing semi-domestication by capturing wild young guanaco, which the early Spanish chroniclers called *chilihueque*. They also hunted sea lions, pudus (small native deer), foxes, otters, coypus (native rodent), frogs and aquatic birds, fished from the shore and gathered mollusks and plants such as reeds, wild strawberries and the fruit of the peumo tree.

Art

El Vergel ceramics featured large dishes used as funerary urns and jugs in the form of ducks (called *ketru metawe* in the local Mapudungun language), decorated with geometric motifs in red and black over a white glaze, or simply painted red. Using copper and sometimes silver they crafted bracelets, pendants and the emblematic square earrings. They also made pendants from the bones and teeth of sea lions. Their pottery also included ceramic pipes, which they sometimes made in the form of camelids. As the moist climate of the region was not conducive to preserving organic material, little is known about their textile art or woodworking, although the discovery of a well-preserved young woman buried in a ceramic urn shows evidence of very finely crafted textiles and a wooden spoon with the image of a human face upon it.

Social Organization

The El Vergel people lived in small family groups and maintained social relations with other nearby groups, with whom they formed larger socio-cultural units.

Religion and Funeral Rites

They often buried their dead in small groups, probably based on kinship. Typically, they buried their dead inside large ceramic urns accompanied by *metawe* jugs. Most grave goods that may have accompanied these burials have deteriorated due to the soil conditions here, but in a few cases fragments of textiles, copper adornments and wooden artifacts have been found. Other

funerary practices include burial sites encircled with stones, simple burial of bodies in prone position and bodies buried in wooden canoes (called *wampo* in Mapudungun). The discovery of pipes or *quitras* suggests that these people engaged in shamanistic religious practices that included the consumption of hallucinogenic substances in ritual contexts.

Settlement Pattern

The El Vergel people occupied the valleys and coast of this region, taking advantage of wetlands, lakes, forests, nearby rivers, the coastline and offshore islands. They maintained extensive, complex settlements where they carried out many different activities, but still moved around to perform specific tasks. Their small cemeteries are located close to their settlements, which could indicate that they lived in family groups that were relatively independent of each other.

History

In the last few centuries before the Spanish conquest, the Araucania Region was part of a larger sphere of interaction that extended beyond its boundaries and interacted with a local tradition that had lasted for thousands of years—the Agro-Ceramic Pitrén culture (100 – 1100 CE). With the emergence of the El Vergel culture, these relations were expressed in material culture through the emulation of Andean esthetics in ceramic and metal crafts, as well as through the presence of Andean crops such as potatoes, maize, quinoa, and others. While this development was occurring in the valleys and on the coast, the last of the Pitrén groups continued to inhabit the lakes region in the foothills. It is possible that both societies were living in the Araucania region when the Spanish conquistadors arrived, and that their collective response to the Hispanic arrival led to the emergence of what we know today as the Mapuche People. In the southern part of the region, the El Vergel ceramic tradition developed into what would later be known as the Valdivia style, which maintained but reorganized the same decorative elements. This seems to have occurred during colonial times and in response to Spanish influences.