

Inland Hunters of the Extreme South of Chile

12,000 BCE – 1600 CE

(Early Hunter, Late Hunter, and Historic periods)

Environment and geography

These groups occupied the Andean valleys of Chilean and Argentinean Patagonia, a rugged, forest-covered land that served as a natural boundary of the western sea channels, but they mainly occupied the adjoining high tableland that slopes gradually towards the Atlantic (in Eastern Patagonia). This region of steppes covered with hardy grasses and bushes has a semi-arid climate with low temperatures and little rainfall. These inland hunters also inhabited the steppes and woodlands of the Isla Grande on Tierra del Fuego, situated south of the Strait of Magellan. In historic times, the inland hunter tradition continued in continental Patagonia amongst the Aonikenk or Tehuelche tribe, while across the Strait of Magellan on Tierra del Fuego the last survivors of this way of life were the Selk`nam or Ona people, and the virtually unknown Haush.

Economy

The economy of these inland hunters was based mainly on a highly mobile way of life sustained by hunting of guanaco and, to a lesser extent, of deer, foxes, birds, and rodents. Towards the beginning of our era their diet diversified to include more wild fruit and even some shellfish, but the guanaco remained the staple food source. Early hunters relied on stone-tipped spears and bolas, with the bow and arrow entering into use around the year 500 CE.

Art

The earliest cave paintings in the region were the work of the ancient Paleo-Indian groups, and the hunter peoples continued the tradition, producing both positive and relief images of hands, as well as patterns of lines and crosshatching, concentric circles, animal tracks, guanaco figures, and negatives of *placas*, rectangular template objects with rounded edges. As the reasons for producing rock art changed over time, so did the colors used. The groups used pigments similar to those used by the earliest Paleo-Indian groups (reds, blacks, and whites), with greens and yellows as later additions. Pigments were applied directly onto the rocks or blown over template objects in the case of the relief images. These pigments may have also been used from early times in body painting, a practice that was common at the time of first contact with Europeans.

Social Organization

These inland hunters were organized as nomadic family groups, with labor divided by sex and by age. They began to occupy more permanent encampments at the start of the Christian era, forming larger family groups in which certain individuals with special skills probably enjoyed an enhanced social status. Thus, around the time of contact with Europeans—and largely through the influence of the Mapuche peoples of Northern Patagonia—a tribal type of social organization became prevalent, with high status individuals capable of organizing people into groups. Body painting played an important role in social differentiation, particularly during rituals, with different designs used to denote an individual's sex and age.

Beliefs and funeral rites

These southern inland hunters buried their dead in a variety of ways. The most common type of burial is that of the steppe peoples of historic times, who placed stones over the body to form cairns (or *chenques*) that tended to be located at important geographical points such as hilltops or at the foot of rock walls. Less common practices included cremation and cave burials. In terms of religious beliefs, at the time of first contact with Europeans the inland hunters worshipped a pantheon that included a founding god, intermediate spirits, and mythical ancestors. Their most important ceremonies at that time included complex rites of passage, such as adult initiation in which symbolic body painting played a central role.

Settlement patterns

For thousands of years these people made largely opportunistic use of rock shelters and open air sites, living a highly mobile way of life in the steppe regions of Patagonia. Around the turn of the first millennium, certain changes in the groups' settlement patterns can be seen, possibly influenced by warmer temperatures and a relatively drier local climate. Relatively stable residential camps began to emerge in the most advantageous steppe locations, and the use of tents in open air sites became more common. Meanwhile, the wooded areas of the foothills and the coast saw sporadic and seasonal use of tents, linked to the exploitation of specific resources. More burial sites, particularly of the *chenque* type, are found in and around these semi-permanent encampments.

History

After arriving in these regions during the Paleo-Indian period, the inland hunters of Chile's far southern regions adapted to the steppe environment in ways that allowed their continuing habitation of these rugged lands for thousands of years. The limitations of a nomadic way of life, the immense size of the territory, and the many natural barriers gradually led to the separation of cultural traditions, with different group identities developing as the groups maintained social

relations and entered into marriage alliances with neighboring tribes. At the time of the first contact with Europeans, the steppes of Eastern Patagonia were inhabited by the *Aónikenk* people, while the southern steppes and woodlands of Tierra del Fuego were home to the *Selk'nam*.