

SERGIO VILLALOBOS R.

A Short History of Chile



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INTRODUCTION

Interest in the history of Chile has recently reawakened. Scholars are engaged in detailed research, and essayists are proposing interpretations that make the past meaningful. But, above all, it is the anxieties of the present that drive Chileans to seek in their history an explanation of their current problems. What were our people really like? How has this nation been shaped? What is the most precious legacy of our past?

This *Short History of Chile* has no great pretensions. Its purpose is to provide a simple outline containing basic information intelligible to all. No complicated elaboration and no difficult terminology are therefore to be found here, although all the necessary facts are supplied for an understanding of the historical course of our country.

This book, then, offers a small but complete picture that makes it possible to learn, rather painlessly about the key events in the history of Chile.

THE INDIGENOUS CULTURES

The First Ethnic Groups

ORIGIN OF THE AMERICANS

The earliest inhabitants of America arrived from Asia in various waves and groups.

Anthropologists who have researched this topic offer different explanations.

The most accepted theory is that Mongol and Eskimo groups crossed the Bering Strait on their way to Alaska. In very remote times, between 10,000 and 40,000 years ago, there were glacial periods during which the ice masses increased in high latitude areas and high elevation areas. As a result, the level of the sea waters dropped considerably. When the waters fell, a strip of land that united Asia to America surfaced at the Bering Strait.

Groups from Asia could thus cross to America and fan out over the continent.

It is also possible that at the end of the glacial periods other groups might have crossed the Bering Strait in small craft.

Another theory, which supplements the previous one, suggests that America may have been populated by Malay and Polynesian groups that sailed from island to island across the Pacific Ocean. These groups might have landed in various regions, and be the ancestors of Indians with different physical and cultural characteristics.

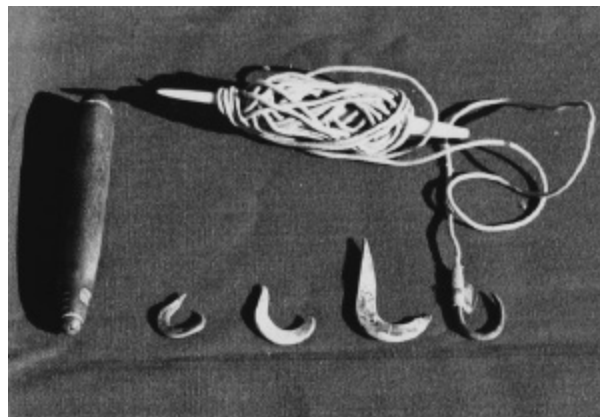
In our times, successful voyages by explorers on crudely constructed rafts have shown that vast expanses of the

ocean can be crossed in primitive craft.

The people who migrated to America were hunters and gatherers whose diet consisted of wild growths and the meat of whatever animals and birds they could kill. Over thousands of years these migrants evolved into the distinct indigenous peoples of the Americas. Some of these peoples, the Aztecs of Mexico, the Mayas of Central America, and the Incas of Peru developed sophisticated civilizations; other groups remained at a primitive cultural level.

THE ANCIENT INHABITANTS OF CHILE

The first inhabitants of Chile came from the north. These bands of hunters and gatherers apparently settled at the foot of the *altiplano andino* (Andean highlands), where rivers and streams made life possible. In the vicinity of San Pedro de Atacama, archeological remains from 11,000 years ago have been found. Remains just as ancient have been unearthed at Los Vilos and Taguatagua, where at one time there was a lake. Groups also reached the Magallanes region, from Patagonia, and engaged in hunting and fishing.



Shell and thorn fishhooks and sinker.

Some of these groups settled on the northern coast. The humidity permitted the growth of a sparse vegetation, and

the availability of fish and shellfish created advantageous living conditions. The hunting of guanacos supplied them with meat.

Coves offered shelter for these groups, and the inhabitants left an unmistakable mark of their residence: huge shellmounds, several meters deep, the result of long periods of accumulation of shells discarded after meals.

Items found in these kitchen middens include shell and bone fishhooks and a variety of stones coarsely hammered into arrowheads and spearpoints, scrapers, and mortars.

With the passing of time, the shell-mound people engaged in some agricultural tasks, including the cultivation of squash and maize. They also made pottery, which consisted mainly of very coarse vessels.

The Natives at the Arrival of the Spaniards in Chile

DIFFERENT ETHNIC GROUPS

At the time of the arrival of the Spaniards, the natives who populated the present territory of Chile represented a great variety of cultures.

There were groups at a very primitive stage, nomadic bands of hunters and gatherers who moved from place to place in search of food.

Other groups had become farmers, although they had not quite abandoned hunting and gathering. They had settled permanently on the land and engaged in the breeding of llama herds; they also made pottery and textiles. Their houses were built of sturdy materials, and they lived in small, compact villages.

One civilization, that of the Incas, had spread through the north and center of the country and superimposed itself on the other groups. The Incas were part of a huge empire with an excellent material culture and a superior degree of organization.

The most important groups, according to their cultural level, were the *Changos*, *Chonos*, *Fueguinos*, and *Pehuenches*.

CHANGOS, CHONOS, FUEGUINOS AND PEHUENCHES

The Changos were the descendants of the shell-mound people, and lived in the coves, and along the shores, of northern and central Chile. Contact with other cultures had enriched their material goods. They manufactured different kinds of pottery vessels, plantfiber baskets, leather goods, and some metal objects.

The ocean, however, continued to be the Changos' main source of sustenance. Using inflated rafts made from sealskins, they were able to harvest the sea.

The Chonos inhabited the islands south of Chiloé, and also lived mainly on seafood. In fragile craft, they traveled around the coasts of the islands.

The Fueguinos, who inhabited the archipelagos south of the Strait of Magellan, were culturally the most primitive.

They consisted of three tribes -the *Onas*, the *Yaganes*, and the *Alacalufes*- with more or less similar characteristics.

The Onas lived on the island of Tierra de Fuego and hardly ever ventured into the sea. The Yaganes and the Alacalufes constantly navigated their small canoes through the Magellan channels.



Chango on a sealskin raft.

The Fueguinos were fishermen and hunters. Their diet included fish, shellfish, seal, and the remains of dead whales washed ashore. Their housing consisted of a small framework of sticks, covered with guanaco hides or sealskins, which they easily assembled and dismantled.

Their scarce clothing consisted of fur skins and hides, although they also bore the hardships of the climate, even the snow completely naked.



Chiloé canoe.

Different were the characteristics of the Pehuenches, a nomadic people who inhabited the cordillera opposite the Araucanía. Their bands raided the Patagonian pampa. They hunted the guanaco and covered themselves with its skin, and they lived under shelters made of branches and hides. Their main food was the *pehuén* (pine nut) from the *araucaria* tree; indeed, their name means the pine-nut people. The customs of the Pehuenches were strongly influenced by those of the Araucanians.

THE ARAUCANIANS

The Araucanians lived in the region between the Itata and the Toltén rivers.



Pehuenches.

They were primitive farmers who grew maize and potatoes. They also gathered wild growths and hunted animals and birds. They possessed llama herds and hunted pumas and guanacos. They used clay and wooden utensils of very rough manufacture.

In contrast, their *ponchos* and blankets, woven from llama and guanaco wool, had beautiful colors and designs.

They lived in *rucas*, spacious huts made of wooden poles and branches that protected them from the cold and rain.

Their hunting and fighting implements included bows and arrows, slings, spears, and *macanas* (long, hard sticks with one curved end).

The Araucanians thought that the natural world was animated by spirits. These spirits expressed themselves in the wind, the rain, the crackling of a board, or the fluttering of an insect.

They believed that diseases were caused by evil spells. A *machi*, or witch, was called upon to perform a *machitún*, a kind of magical ceremony that allowed her to discover the cause of the illness or the person responsible for it. The *machi* would pretend to extract an insect from the patient's body or she would name a culprit, on whom the patient's relatives would later take vengeance.



Araucanians.

The dead, according to the Araucanians, dwelled beyond the sea or the *cordillera*. In the next life they needed the same things as in this life, and for this reason the dead were buried with their weapons and utensils, food and jars of *chicha*, an alcoholic beverage of fermented grape or apple juice.



Valdivia pottery.

Each tribe had a kind of god, el *Pillán*, who represented the spirit of their ancestors. There was also a higher *Pillán*, a god of good and evil.

Some small groups recognized the authority of the *caciques* (chieftains), and together they formed *rehues* (clans) that had a common ancestor.

There was no central government, but the arrival of the Spaniards led the clans on occasion to join forces to fight against their common enemy. They then elected a *toqui*, and a number of *rehues*, or all of them, put themselves under his command. Once the campaign was over, the *caciques* and their men disbanded.

Other peoples, with similar traits, lived in the vicinity of the Araucanians. Immediately to the north were the *Picunches* and, to the south, the *Huilliches*.

ATACAMEÑOS AND DIAGUITAS

The Atacameños and the Diaguitas were peoples who had developed beyond a primitive level of culture.

The Atacameños lived in groups in oases in the Atacama Desert. The group that has been most studied by archeologists is that of San Pedro de Atacama.

The harsh climate, the arid lands, and the scarcity of resources forced the Atacameños to use their intelligence to overcome the hardships of nature.

By means of irrigation canals they carried the scarce waters of the brooks to narrow terraces, spaced at regular intervals on the slopes of ravines, where they grew their crops. They also had herds of llamas, vicuñas, and alpacas.



Diaguita Culture: Duck-shaped jar.

Their textiles and clothes were quite remarkable. They made multicolored blankets, shirts, and ponchos and embroidered them with stylized animals and geometric designs.

They were acquainted with the metallurgy of copper and bronze and, to a lesser degree, with that of silver and gold. The beauty of their pottery and baskets was outstanding.

Their houses, very compact in appearance, were built of crudely worked stones; the roofs were made of poles and reeds. The houses were closely grouped in little, stepped villages, full of rugged paths. Some of these villages resembled strongholds, and were called *pucarás* (forts).



Atacameña mummy from San Pedro de Atacama.

The Diaguitas lived further south. They had settled in the valleys between the Copiapó and Choapa rivers.

Their cultural level was slightly below that of the Atacameños.



Snuff inhalation boards of the Atacameños.

The Diaguitas' pottery very delicate and imaginative, was their most remarkable cultural achievement. Bowls, vessels, plates, and jars featured geometric decorations in white, red, and black. Some vessels imitated human faces, and others the shape of a swimming duck.

Both the Atacameños and Diaguitas were rather few in number.

THE INCA EMPIRE

Seventy years before the arrival of the Spaniards in Chile, the Incas expanded their dominion over our land.

Centered in Cuzco, the empire included the regions of what is now Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and the Argentine northwest.

The Incas' social organization relied on strict compliance with obligations to the community. The state, headed by an absolute monarch called Inca, was highly developed. The Incas' cities, houses, and temples reflected an advanced