Painting a lost world. The red rock art of El Médano
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An intriguing corpus of red-painted rock art has been found in northern Chile. Benjamín Ballester, Francisco Gallardo, and their team have been working to record the art — and the lost world of the artists — as they explained to CWA.

The red rock art of El Médano

An example of a hunting scene from the el médano ravine. Note the size of the marine creature (49cm long in the original) in comparison to the tiny craft.

Digging deeper

In a bid to discover the lost world of the artists, we excavated three of the coastal rock shelters found to contain El Médano art, several coastal shell middens dumps, and hundreds of human graves.

All of the data points to a local society heavily reliant on the sea. Fishing-related items (including hooks) first appear on the coast from 5000 BC, while the excavated middens (which date from 4000 BC onwards) include the bones of large marine prey. Moreover, though a hunter-gatherer people, they left cemeteries (which date from 4000 BC to AD 500), and within the graves we often find offerings of marine creatures, again presumably reflecting the importance of such creatures. In addition, we have uncovered complex harpoon heads, complete harpoons, and relatively well-preserved hunting lines made of sea-lion skin, sometimes up to 70m long, plus entire sailing boats, and even a few poorly preserved sea craft.

With respect to understanding their sailing technology, the historical ethnographic accounts provide much useful information. It seems that their rafts were quite sophisticated, comprising two floats, each made from a complete sea-lion skin, with hundreds of cactus spines used one beside the other to join both skin pieces, and then sewn together.
with a cotton cord to carefully seal the junction. The sealed float would then have been caulked with a coat of sea-lion grease mixed with red fine powder to obtain impermeability and resistance.

The world of the fishers

Such craft continued to be used several centuries after European contact, at least until the beginning of the 20th century in some littoral locations. The first written reference to these rafts dates to 1558, by Jerónimo de Bilbá, a writer and historian who travelled with Pedro de Valdivia during the conquest of the territories that now make up Chile. But the 1616-1618 report by the friar Antonio Vásquez de Espinoza contains perhaps the best description not only of the inflated raft, but also of the whale-hunting activities using harpoon devices and skin lines. In his words,

"There is abundance of copper in that province, and with it they make prongs or spears... then they go out hunting whales... when the Indian has spied one asleep... he goes out to it on his sea-lion skin raft... [and] gives it a harpoon thrust under the fin, where its heart is, and immediately drops into the water to escape the whale's reaction; for when it feels the wound it is furious and bellows loudly and dashes the water high in the air in the wild and angry struggles which the pain causes; then it starts off bellowing toward deep water, until it yields to mortal fatigue. Meanwhile the Indian has recovered his raft and returned to shore to watch and locate the point off the coast where it is dying, and they remain on guard till they see it stop. Then all that clan and family group who have been carefully watching, go there at once together with all their friends and neighbours for the feast; they open it up on one side, and some stay inside gorging and others outside for six or eight days until they cannot stand it any longer for the stench."

This, then, was the value of sea hunting and seafarers in this littoral society. Aside from the significant economic benefits handed to the community by this activity in the form of big banquets and daily food, they also occupied a central role on their representational universe and visual imaginations, ideologically reinforcing the social position gained through their economic practice.

As to the thorny question of the date-range of the rock art, this remains unsolved. Representational correlations between paintings, technological devices (harpoons and some arrows), and marine animals only allow us to conclude that the art was left by these coastal people probably sometime between 5000 BC and AD 1500. With time and through working on new projects in the area, we may refine this chronology, but for now we have been using the art as a means to flesh out a wider archaeological picture, and to begin to ‘get inside the heads’ of the people who once lived on this formidable stretch of the coast – after all, their representational world is clearly very closely linked to the material needs of everyday life.

Our next step is to try to understand more about the harpoon and its chronology, and to learn more about the technological subtleties of the rafts. A marine biologist and ichthyologist are also currently helping us to identify all the individual species shown in the art, which is helping us to appreciate this people’s knowledge of the sea and its creatures.

Already we are beginning to understand more about the lost world of these artists – and what a world it was. Simply recording their art and archaeology, in this environment of extremes, has been hard physical work. Their art – painted a good 12km from their coastal camps – whispers to us about the vastness of their territory. And each year we discover more. It has been quite extraordinary to have the chance to record this large corpus of rock art, which is the most remarkable of its type in the South American Pacific watershed.

SOURCE Benjamin Ballester and Francisco Gallardo work at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Intercultural and Indigenous Studies (ICIS) of the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, in Santiago. Ballester is a specialist on coastal and marine archaeology, especially the economic and political issues of the Atacama Desert hunter-gatherers. Gallardo’s research focuses on material visual culture, economy, ideology, settlement patterns, and mobility from the Atacama Desert.