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A History of Chile

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Introduction

Chile, a long, narrow country stretching along the western edge of South America, possesses a unique and dramatic history shaped by its distinctive geography, rich natural resources, and resilient people. From its pre-Columbian indigenous cultures to its turbulent political and economic transformations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Chile's past is a compelling narrative of conflict, adaptation, and the enduring pursuit of identity and progress. Its complex history is as much a tale of fierce resistance as of momentous change, with each generation leaving an indelible mark on the fabric of the nation.

From the earliest human settlements in the Atacama Desert and the frozen south, Chile’s diverse landscapes nurtured a spectacular array of indigenous cultures. The ingenious agriculturalists of the arid north, the fiercely independent Mapuche of the central valleys, and the seafaring peoples of Patagonia each adapted to their habitats, developing sophisticated societies long before the arrival of Europeans. The Inca Empire cast its shadow briefly over the north, yet much of Chile would remain outside imperial control, especially the lands defended by the Mapuche, whose resistance became legend.

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The arrival of the Spanish in the sixteenth century brought violent upheaval. Conquest, colonization, and the establishment of new cities led to centuries of war, particularly with the Mapuche, as well as the forging of a new, mestizo society. Spanish colonial rule imposed rigid hierarchies, exploited indigenous and African labor, but also fostered creole identity and periodic reform. Over time, local elites developed a distinct sense of self, setting the stage for the dramatic struggle for independence that would reshape the continent.

Modern Chile was forged through alternating eras of experimentation, stability, and conflict. The young republic oscillated between liberal and conservative forces, weathering civil wars, foreign conflicts such as the War of the Pacific, and integrating new territories. Economic fortunes soared on the back of wheat, copper, and nitrates, but boom times were followed by periods of crisis and hardship. The social question—the dire conditions of urban workers and miners—became the defining challenge of the early twentieth century, prompting new political movements and demands for reform.

The latter half of Chilean history has been marked by extremes of hope and tragedy. The election of Salvador Allende and the Unidad Popular promised a peaceful road to socialism but was cut short by the military coup of 1973, ushering in almost two decades of dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet. This era saw widespread human

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rights abuses and radical economic transformation, the legacy of which Chile still grapples with today. The return to democracy in 1990 did not erase these wounds but opened a new chapter focused on reconciliation, growth, and persistent efforts to tackle deep-seated inequalities.

Today, Chile stands at a crossroads. The story of this nation is far from finished, as the struggles of the past echo into debates over constitutional reform, social justice, and the meaning of democracy itself. In tracing Chile's history from prehistory to the present, this book seeks to understand not only the events that have shaped this land but also the enduring spirit of its people—the resilience, creativity, and determination that have defined Chile's remarkable journey through time.

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CHAPTER ONE: Dawn of the Andean South: Prehistoric Chile

The story of human presence in Chile begins not with a bang, but with the faintest of footprints left on a landmass still reverberating from the colossal forces of its creation. To understand the first Chileans, one must first appreciate the stage upon which their ancient drama unfolded: a territory sculpted by volcanic fire, tectonic upheaval, and the relentless advance and retreat of ice. This long, slender ribbon of earth, clinging precariously to the western flank of South America, presented both formidable barriers and unique corridors for life. Its very existence is a geological marvel, a consequence of the colossal grinding of the Nazca oceanic plate beneath the South American continental plate, a process that thrust up the towering Andes and continues to shake the land with unnerving regularity.

Imagine this nascent Chile, thousands of years before any city or even a permanent village stood. The Andes, younger and perhaps even more volatile than today, loomed as a near-impassable spine, their snowy peaks feeding glaciers that crept far down into the valleys. To the west, the Pacific Ocean crashed against a coastline that was not always where we find it now; sea levels fluctuated dramatically with the waxing and waning of global ice sheets. Between the mountains and the sea lay a mosaic of environments: the hyper-arid Atacama Desert in the north, already ancient but perhaps subtly different in its margins; a central zone that would one day prove fertile, but then experienced climatic shifts that altered its vegetation; and a southern realm of dense forests, fjords, and ice fields, a truly challenging frontier for any newcomer.

The earth itself was restless. Volcanic eruptions would have been a common spectacle, spewing ash and lava, reshaping landscapes, and undoubtedly influencing the movements of both animals and the first humans who ventured into these territories. Earthquakes, then as now, were a fact of life, a constant reminder of the immense subterranean powers at play. This dynamic geology created a land of dramatic contrasts, from searing desert plains to frigid Patagonian expanses, all within a relatively narrow band of longitude. This inherent diversity would, in time, foster an array of distinct human adaptations, but for the very first arrivals, it simply presented a complex puzzle of survival.

The climate of prehistoric Chile was far from static. During the Late Pleistocene, the period when humans are thought to have first entered South America, the planet was in the grip of the last major Ice Age. Massive ice sheets covered large parts of the globe, and in Chile, Patagonian glaciers extended much further than they do today, carving out deep valleys and fjords. The Atacama was arid, but perhaps not as

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uniformly desiccated as it appears now, with certain areas potentially supporting more vegetation and, consequently, animal life. The Central Valley, too, experienced cooler and sometimes wetter conditions than in the present, influencing the types of plants and animals that thrived there.

As the Pleistocene drew to a close, around 11,700 years ago, the Earth entered the Holocene epoch, a period of general warming. This transition was not smooth; it involved fluctuations, sometimes abrupt, in temperature and precipitation. Glaciers retreated, sea levels rose (drowning former coastlines and creating new ones), and vegetation patterns shifted. Vast grasslands might have given way to forests in some areas, while in others, lakes dried up. For the animals of the time, these changes were profound. Many of the giant mammals of the Pleistocene – the megafauna such as ground sloths, mastodons, and sabertooth cats – gradually disappeared, whether due to climate change, human hunting, or a combination of factors.

These environmental transformations were critical for the first human inhabitants. They dictated where resources could be found, which routes were passable, and what kind of shelter and tools were necessary for survival. The opening of ice-free corridors, the emergence of new coastlines rich in marine life, and the changing distribution of game animals all played a part in how and where people settled and moved across the Chilean landscape. The early Chileans were, by necessity, masters of adaptation, keenly aware of their surroundings and capable of adjusting their lifestyles to the shifting conditions of their world.

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The question of how and when the first humans arrived in the Americas is a sprawling, often contentious, academic saga. For much of the twentieth century, the "Clovis-first" model held sway, suggesting that specialized big-game hunters, identifiable by their distinctive fluted spear points, crossed the Bering Land Bridge from Siberia into Alaska around 13,500 years ago and rapidly spread south. Chile, at the very tip of South America, was often seen as one of the last places to be populated in this grand continental sweep. However, discoveries over recent decades have dramatically reshaped this narrative, pushing back the timeline for human presence and suggesting more complex migration patterns.

One of the most significant sites to challenge the Clovis-first orthodoxy lies in southern Chile: Monte Verde. Its implications are so profound that they sent ripples throughout the archaeological world, forcing a re-evaluation of the entire story of American settlement. While the Bering Land Bridge remains a likely primary route, alternative or supplementary pathways, such as coastal migration by boat along the Pacific rim, have gained increasing traction, partly thanks to the early dates emerging from sites like Monte Verde. If people were present in southern Chile 14,500 years ago, or perhaps even earlier, they must have entered the Americas well before the Clovis horizon.

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This makes Chile not just a recipient of late-arriving migrants but potentially a region reached by some of the earliest waves of people venturing into the vast, unknown territories of the New World. These pioneers would have faced a continent devoid of other humans but teeming with unfamiliar flora and fauna, including formidable megafauna. Their journey south, whether down an Andean corridor, along the coast, or through a combination of routes, would have been an epic of exploration and endurance, undertaken over countless generations.

The archaeological site of Monte Verde, located near Puerto Montt in Chile's southern lake district, is arguably one of the most important prehistoric sites in the Americas. Its discovery and meticulous excavation, spearheaded by American archaeologist Tom Dillehay from the 1970s onwards, provided what is now widely accepted as irrefutable evidence of human occupation dating back at least 14,500 years, and potentially as far back as 18,500 years for an older, more enigmatic level known as MV-I. This predates the Clovis culture of North America by at least a millennium, effectively dismantling the long-held "Clovis-first" consensus.

The preservation at Monte Verde is extraordinary. Situated on the banks of Chinchihuapi Creek, a small tributary of the Maullín River, the site was rapidly buried by a rising water table and a peat bog, creating an anaerobic (oxygen-free) environment. This led to the remarkable preservation of organic materials rarely found in sites of such antiquity: fragments of wooden tools, remnants of hide that may have covered dwellings, pieces of edible and medicinal plants, and even three human footprints. This rich organic record provides an unusually detailed snapshot of life in the Late Pleistocene.

The inhabitants of Monte Verde were not just passing through; they had established a settlement. Archaeologists unearthed the foundations of about a dozen small, tent-like dwellings, constructed with wooden frames and draped with animal hides. These huts were arranged in a rough C-shape along the creek bank. A larger, wishbone-shaped structure nearby, with a clay-lined hearth, seems to have served a communal or ceremonial purpose. The sophistication of the settlement plan suggests a degree of social organization and a longer-term occupation than previously imagined for such early groups.

Stone tools found at Monte Verde are also illuminating. They are simpler than the elegant Clovis points, consisting mainly of utilized pebbles and minimally flaked stones, perfectly adequate for butchering animals, processing plants, and working wood. This finding challenged the idea that the first Americans were exclusively big-game hunters defined by a single, sophisticated lithic technology. The Monte Verdeans clearly had a diverse toolkit adapted to a forest and riverine environment. Evidence of mastodon bones, some with cut marks, indicates they did hunt or scavenge these large animals, but their diet was far broader.

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Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of Monte Verde is the sheer variety of plant remains, many of which had edible or medicinal uses. Over seventy different plant species were identified, some originating from as far as 240 kilometers away on the coast or high in the Andes, suggesting that these people had an extensive knowledge of their regional environment and possibly engaged in some form of exchange or long-distance foraging trips. This diverse subsistence strategy, exploiting a wide range of resources from big game to small seeds and nuts, paints a picture of a people highly adapted to their local ecosystem.

The implications of Monte Verde are far-reaching. It confirmed that humans were in the Southern Cone of South America much earlier than previously thought, supporting theories of a pre-Clovis peopling of the Americas. It also demonstrated that early American lifeways were more diverse than the singular focus on big-game hunting implied by the Clovis model. The people of Monte Verde were sophisticated foragers, with a deep understanding of their environment, capable of constructing substantial dwellings and exploiting a wide array of resources. Their existence fundamentally changed our understanding of the "dawn" of human history in the Americas.

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While Monte Verde offers a glimpse into early life in the temperate southern forests, other significant Paleoindian sites in Chile reveal adaptations to different, often harsher, environments. Further south, in Chilean Patagonia, near the Strait of Magellan, lie Fell's Cave (Cueva Fell) and Pali Aike Cave. These sites, first excavated by Junius Bird in the 1930s, provided some of the earliest well-dated evidence of Paleoindian hunters in South America, with occupations dating back to around 11,000 years ago.

The Patagonian environment at that time was a cold, windswept steppe-like landscape, quite different from the forested setting of Monte Verde. The inhabitants of Fell's Cave and Pali Aike were clearly skilled hunters, preying on now-extinct megafauna such as the native American horse (Equus neogeus) and giant ground sloths (Mylodon darwini), as well as guanaco, which still roam the region today. The defining artifact of these southern hunters is the "fishtail" projectile point, a beautifully crafted spearhead with a distinctive stemmed base resembling a fish's tail. These points are found across southern South America and are considered a hallmark of Paleoindian big-game hunting traditions in the region.

The faunal remains within these caves, alongside hearths and stone tools, paint a vivid picture of ancient hunting camps. Butchered animal bones, some charred from cooking, attest to successful hunts and the processing of large carcasses. The stone toolkits included not only projectile points but also scrapers for working hides, knives for cutting, and engraving tools. These sites show a clear focus on the pursuit of large herbivores, a classic Paleoindian adaptation to open grassland environments, contrasting with the broader spectrum foraging seen at Monte Verde.

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The discoveries in Patagonia demonstrated that even the harsh, subantarctic environments at the very tip of the continent were colonized relatively early in the human story of the Americas. These early Patagonians were a hardy and resourceful people, capable of thriving in a challenging landscape dominated by wind and cold. Their presence so far south, so early, further underscores the rapidity and adaptability of the first human groups to spread across the Americas.

Beyond the forested south and the windswept plains of Patagonia, early Chileans also began to explore and adapt to the country's extensive coastline. The Pacific Ocean offered a rich bounty of resources – fish, shellfish, marine mammals, and seabirds – that would have been an attractive alternative or supplement to terrestrial hunting and gathering. Archaeological evidence for early coastal adaptations is gradually accumulating, suggesting that maritime lifeways may have developed very early in Chile, perhaps even playing a role in the initial peopling of the continent if a coastal migration route was used.

Sites like Quebrada Jaguay and Quebrada Tacahuay in southern Peru, just north of the Chilean border, show maritime exploitation dating back as far as 12,500 to 13,000 years ago. While directly comparable sites of this antiquity are still being sought and investigated on the Chilean coast itself, it is highly probable that similar adaptations occurred. The Huentelauquén Complex, found along the semi-arid coast of north-central Chile (Norte Chico), represents one of the earliest recognized coastal cultures in the country, dating from roughly 10,000 to 8,000 years ago.

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The people of Huentelauquén left behind shell middens – large accumulations of discarded shells from mollusks like limpets, mussels, and abalone – which attest to their reliance on seafood. They also hunted sea lions and fished. Intriguingly, they produced distinctive, geometrically shaped polished stones of unknown function, perhaps ritual objects or specialized tools. While their settlements appear to have been largely seasonal or temporary camps, they demonstrate a clear and early commitment to exploiting the rich resources of the Pacific littoral.

Further north, in the Atacama Desert, the hyper-arid conditions have led to exceptional preservation of organic materials. While famous for the later Chinchorro culture and its mummies (a topic for the next chapter), the Atacama coast also holds clues to even earlier human presence. Sites like Acha, near Arica, show evidence of human groups around 9,000 years ago who were adapting to this extremely dry environment by focusing on marine resources from the nearby ocean and the limited resources of coastal river valleys. These early coastal dwellers were laying the groundwork for more specialized maritime traditions that would flourish in the millennia to come.

As the Pleistocene megafauna disappeared and the climate of the Holocene began to

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stabilize, the lifeways of Chile's earliest inhabitants gradually transformed. This transition, generally occurring between about 10,000 and 7,000 years ago, marks the shift from the Paleoindian period, often characterized by mobile big-game hunting, to the Archaic period. The Archaic was a long era defined by a broadening of the subsistence base, increased regional diversification, and, in some areas, a trend towards greater sedentism and population growth.

In the far north, the Atacama Desert saw the development of cultures increasingly focused on the intensive exploitation of coastal resources, supplemented by hunting and gathering in inland oases and quebradas (ravines). Fishing techniques became more sophisticated, with the use of nets, hooks, and harpoons. The collection of shellfish remained a dietary staple. This adaptation to one ofthe world's driest deserts, made possible by the rich marine ecosystem fueled by the cold Humboldt Current, was a remarkable human achievement.

In the Central Valley and the Norte Chico, Archaic peoples continued to hunt animals like guanaco and huemul deer, but also increasingly relied on a wider variety of plant foods, including seeds, nuts, and roots. They developed new tool technologies for processing these resources, such as grinding stones (manos and metates). Seasonal movements between different ecological zones – from the coast to the Andean foothills – likely characterized their settlement patterns, allowing them to take advantage of resources as they became available.

Further south, in the forested regions and the Patagonian archipelagoes, Archaic groups adapted to the post-glacial environments. In the forests, hunting and gathering remained central, but with a focus on smaller game and the rich plant life of the temperate rainforests. Along the southern coasts, maritime adaptations became highly specialized, with groups like the ancestors of the later canoe peoples (Chono, Alacalufe, Yaghan) developing sophisticated watercraft and techniques for exploiting the complex fjordlands and island chains. Terrestrial hunters continued to roam the Patagonian plains, adapting their strategies to the surviving fauna.

This Archaic period, spanning several millennia, was a time of innovation and regional divergence. It was during this long span that the distinct cultural traditions of Chile's various indigenous groups began to take shape, building upon the foundations laid by the very first Paleoindian pioneers. The profound understanding of local environments, the diverse toolkits, and the flexible subsistence strategies developed during the Archaic would provide the basis for the more complex societies that Europeans would encounter thousands of years later. The dawn had truly broken, and the long day of pre-Columbian cultural development in Chile was underway.

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