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The Settlement of the Chonos Archipelago, Western Patagonia, Chile

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Prologue

I am grateful for the opportunity to prologue this book. It is a demonstration of Omar Reyes Baez's perseverance and growth, which I have been fortunate enough to witness throughout our long friendship and more recently tutoring his doctoral research. Now, a wealth of new readers will have the chance of learning about his ideas and accessing new data on the maritime culture of the originary people of Western Patagonia.

In this new book, we can learn as to when, how and who peopled the Chonos Archipelago of the northern Patagonian channels of Chile, an area that until recently remained relatively unexplored from an archaeological point of view. These goals were accomplished based on the results obtained from a long-term field and lab project. This has allowed Omar Reyes to generate a large data set by integrating environmental and archaeological information. The archaeological patterns and trends identified, through years of sustained research, has triggered a series of renovated interpretations about the originary canoe people and their adaptation to maritime coastal settings.

A starting point in this book, is an overview of previous archaeological research through the thoughtful reading of the literature on past and present maritime hunter-gatherers. This is followed by the analyses on how changes in the environment and sea-level conditioned human occupations through time. Some issues addressed here are the effect of catastrophic events, isostatic and tectonic processes, as well as the action of tsunamis and great storms as recorded in coastal geomorphology and sediments.

Fieldwork did not prove easy in this region and this is addressed in the book. Collecting field data involved surmounting very challenging practical problems. One was dealing with the constraints imposed by accessibility to the rocky coast, and the other, was the low archaeological visibility due to the dense cover of evergreen forest that characterises the littoral and interior of the research area. Another issue was evaluating site representation by taking into consideration postdepositional agents and processes in their preservation. A multistage fieldwork strategy was designed for exploring and sampling different geomorphological, topographical and ecological zones.

This combined approach was crucial for successfully obtaining representative information of the archaeological temporal and spatial variability of the region. The research design unveiled an unsuspectedly wide diversity of sites. This allowed the identification of features associated with distinct procurement activities, collecting diverse categories of artefacts and animal bone samples during the excavation of different kinds of sites, and, in some cases, the recovery of human remains uncovered at special locations.

The chronological framework results from more than 80 radiocarbon dates that extend from circa 6200 years cal BP to the nineteenth century. The dating strategy focused on establishing both the temporality of cultural deposits as well as their association with the individual landforms considered relevant for archaeological landscape reconstruction. Dates were also useful for defining the chronology of stratigraphic sequences at certain sites and for dating special features or findings (e.g. hearths or burials).

Results are presented in a very detailed way for the whole region, area by area, and site by site, all supported by tables and figures that summarise primary and secondary data. Estimates of the frequency of sites per area were calculated to assess the variability in site distribution in the region. The way of life of the originary people that occupied this sea and landscape for millennia was undertaken by integrating several lines of analytical research. These included lithic technology and faunal analyses, complemented with the study of isotopes from human remains. The quality and quantity of the evidence produced is outstanding and is critically assessed in view of the models and frames of reference presented at the beginning of the book.

Lithic analysis revealed different categories of instruments and the provenance of raw materials used. The great diversity of marine invertebrates and sea and terrestrial vertebrates in the faunal record showed how they were used with different selectivity and intensity depending on the geographical site location and the duration of the occupations. Isotope analysis of food resources and human bones was the key to understanding changes in the types of food consumed through time, and also detected a contrast in diet between pre and post-contact individuals.

The narrative provided by Omar Reyes allows us to travel through time and space. Central to the discussion was to know if there was continuity in the occupation in the long run and if there were any significative changes in the overall cultural interaction with this environment. The questions made at the beginning of the book are all answered. I firmly believe this book will be a major contribution to our present knowledge of the way of life of early and recent inhabitants of these archipelagos. And, at the same time, it also reveals the impact that the contact period had on the originary people that lived in that region.

The ethnographic and historical literature analysed by Omar shows that when exploring the southern coastal region in the sixteenth century, the Europeans encountered the Chono, the name given to the indigenous people they met in the area. In the following centuries, this whole region was incorporated into the economic system of the national state of Chile, and the Chono people were made to move to other areas, were evangelized, and also used as forced labour.

As we all know, archaeologists reconstruct the past grounded in the present and that archaeology is a way of connecting the past with the present. But there is no present without history. This book will certainly be invaluable to other researchers worldwide interested in maritime adaptations and their cultural trajectories. But it also has a great anthropological potential by offering a history of the ancestors of indigenous people that seem to have officially vanished but, in real terms, have probably become invisible.

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Contents

1 Study Area	1
1.1 Geomorphological Aspects of the Chonos Archipelago	1
1.2 Changes in the Coastline	4
1.3 Tectonic Activity	4
1.4 Melting of the Ice, Rising Sea Levels and Rising Land Levels Due to Glacial Isostasy	5
1.5 History of Postglacial Vegetation	7
1.6 Present Climate and Vegetation	8
1.7 The Fauna in the Archipelago	10
References	11
2 Background	17
2.1 Historical Information on the Last Inhabitants of the Chonos Archipelago	17
2.2 The Archaeological Areas Adjacent to the Chonos	21
2.3 Discussion of Some Regional Issues	25
2.4 Meanwhile, in the Chonos Archipelago	27
References	32
3 Methodology	43
3.1 Office Work	43
3.2 Fieldwork	48
3.3 Laboratory Work	53
References	55

4	The Archaeological Record in the Chonos Archipelago (43°30'–47° SOUTH)—Western Patagonia	65
4.1	Northern Area—Guaitecas Archipelago at the Northern End of the Chonos Archipelago (43°46'–44°S)	65
4.1.1	GUA-010 Terraza	65
4.1.2	GUA-010 Conchal and Intertidal Zone	69
4.1.3	Gran Guaiteca 2 Terraza	74
4.1.4	Gran Guaiteca 2 Conchal	75
4.1.5	Gran Guaiteca 1	78
4.1.6	Gran Guaiteca 3	80
4.1.7	Isla Solitaria	81
4.1.8	Alero Low	82
4.1.9	Isla Marta 1	85
4.1.10	Isla Marta 2	87
4.1.11	Gran Guaiteca 4	88
4.1.12	Repollal Bajo 1	90
4.1.13	Repollal Bajo 2	90
4.1.14	Osamentas Repollal	92
4.1.15	Cholguero Puquitián 1	92
4.1.16	Cholguero Puquitián 2	93
4.1.17	Cholguero Puquitián 3	94
4.1.18	Cholguero Canal Cuervo 1	95
4.1.19	Cholguero Canal Cuervo 2	96
4.2	Mainland Coast area of the Chonos Archipelago (43°46'–44°S)	97
4.2.1	Yalac 1	97
4.2.2	Osario Melimoyu	99
4.2.3	Estero Sur, Gala Sound	100
4.3	Central Area of the Chonos Archipelago (44°23'–44°46'S)	104
4.3.1	Isla Benjamín 1	104
4.3.2	Isla Benjamín 2	108
4.3.3	Isla Benjamín 3	110
4.3.4	Isla Benjamín 4	111
4.3.5	Isla Benjamín 5	114
4.3.6	Cholguero Isla Level 1	118
4.3.7	Cholguero Isla Izaza 1	118
4.3.8	Cholguero Isla Izaza 2	119
4.4	South-Central Area of the Chonos Archipelago (44°15'–46°15'S)	120
4.4.1	Isla Elena 1	120
4.4.2	Nahuelquín 1	123
4.4.3	Canal Vicuña 3	128
4.4.4	Punta Cementerio	129

4.4.5	Acuao 2 Isolated Find and Acuao 3	130
4.4.6	Canquenes 2	131
4.4.7	Canquenes 8	132
4.4.8	Isla Prieto 1	133
4.4.9	Taitao 5	134
4.4.10	Corrientes Del Yates 5	135
4.4.11	Corrientes Del Yates 6	138
4.4.12	Isla Goñi 1	139
4.4.13	Isla Goñi 2	143
4.4.14	Cholguero Isla Goñi 3	144
4.4.15	Cholguero Isla Goñi 4	144
4.4.16	Cholguero Isla San José 1	146
4.4.17	Cholguero Estero Puelma 1	146
4.4.18	Cholguero Península Taitao 1	147
4.4.19	Cholguero Península Taitao 2	149
4.4.20	Cholguero Península Taitao 3	150
4.4.21	Península Taitao 4	151
4.4.22	Península Taitao 6	152
4.4.23	Península Taitao 7	153
4.4.24	Península Taitao 8	153
4.4.25	Cholguero Stewart 1	154
4.4.26	Cholguero Stewart 2	154
4.4.27	Cholguero Stewart 3	155
4.5	Offshore Islands and Pacific Border area of the Chonos Archipelago (43°31'–44°55'S)	157
4.5.1	Unpublished and Partly Reported Sites	158
4.5.2	Northern Area of the Archipelago. Repollal 02, Repollal Caverna and Puquitín 01 Sites	159
4.5.3	Mainland Coast Area of the Archipelago—Seno Gala 1 Site	160
4.5.4	Central Area of the Archipelago. Isla Harris, Seno Canalad and Cueva Benjamín 1	162
4.5.5	Central-South Area of the Archipelago	163
4.5.6	Nahuelquín 2	163
4.5.7	Nahuelquín 3	165
4.5.8	Nahuelquín 4	165
4.5.9	Posa Las Conchillas 1	166
4.5.10	Isla Acuao 1	168
4.5.11	Canal Cucho-1	169
4.5.12	Canal Darwin-2	169
4.5.13	Isla Victoria-2	170
4.5.14	Cholguero Canal Cucho-2	170
4.5.15	Cholguero Caniglia-1	171

4.5.16	Cholguero Canal Darwin-1	171
4.5.17	Cholguero Canal Darwin-3	172
4.5.18	Offshore Islands and Pacific Border Area of the Chonos Archipelago, Isla Ipún and Isla Sin Nombre Sites	173
4.5.19	Chiloé Archipelago	173
	References	179
5	Evaluation and Discussion of the Evidence	183
5.1	Types of Sites Recorded in the Chonos Archipelago	184
5.2	Visibility of the Archaeological Record	188
5.3	Preservation of the Archaeological Record	189
5.4	Site Location	191
5.5	Coastal Remodelling as an Agent of Change	192
5.6	Spatial Distribution of Archaeological Sites	196
5.7	Lithic Technology	202
5.8	Circulation of Obsidian Pieces	211
5.9	The Faunal Record	212
5.10	Human and Faunal Isotopes	218
5.11	Comparison with the Human Diet of the Patagonian Archipelago: The Supra-Regional Scale	229
5.12	Chronology of the Archaeological Record, Use of Space and Function of Sites	232
	References	244
6	Conclusions and Projections	259
6.1	Final Words	266
	References	267