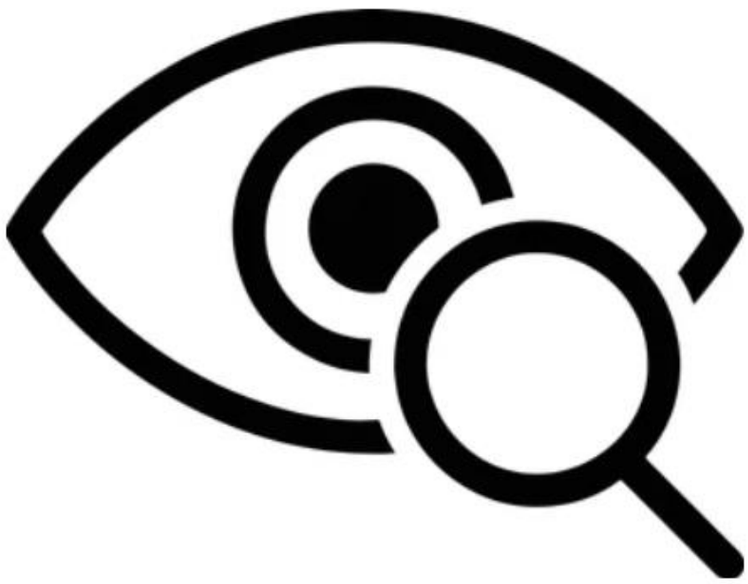
ROOM GUIDE · LARGE PRINT

Room 3

Early History

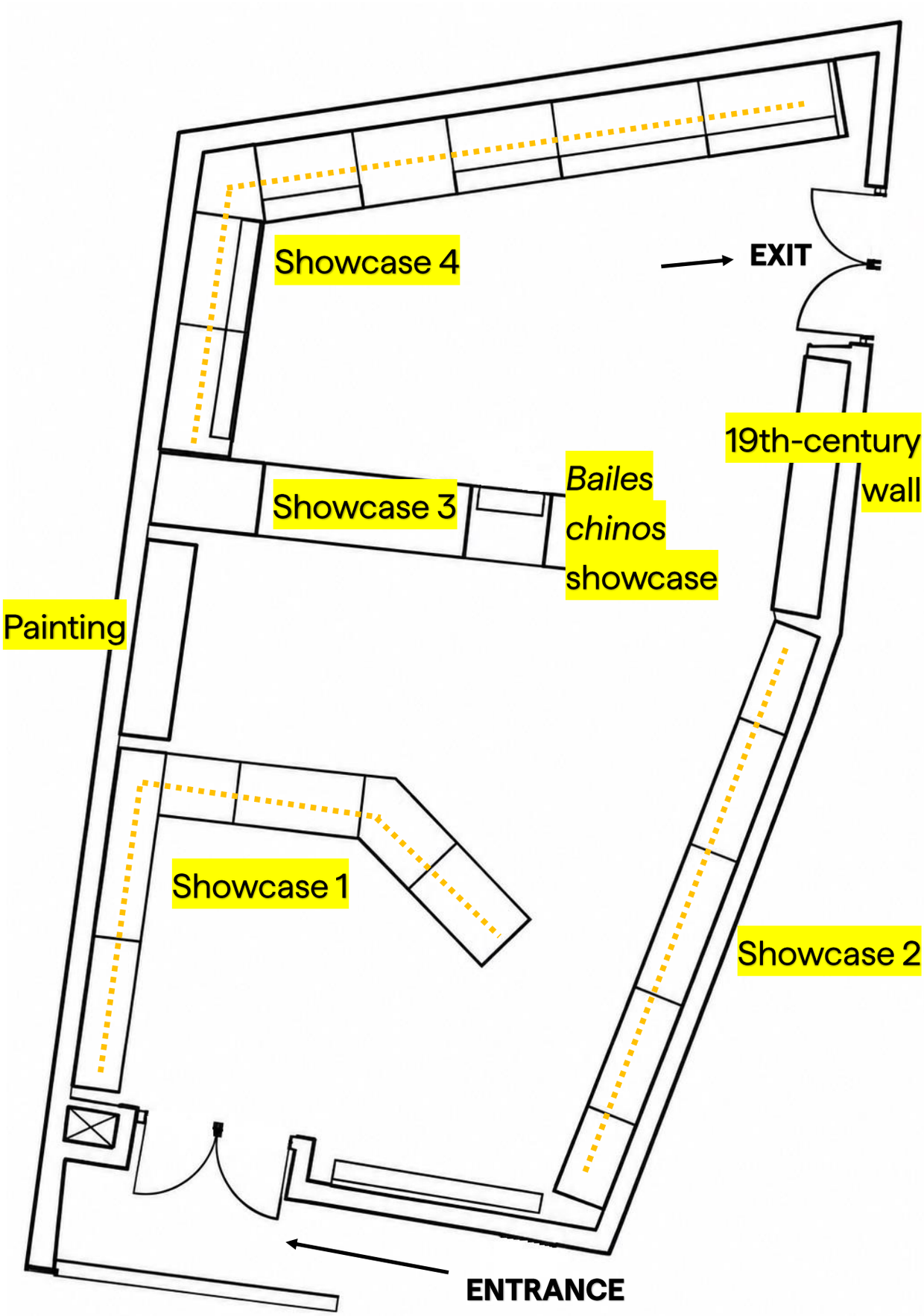


Human footsteps

Living and shaping a territory

More than 13,000 years ago, hunter-gatherer communities settled in Atacama. Their objects reveal how they lived and what they believed. Inka expansion brought new forms of organisation, while the Spanish invasion imposed a different political, religious and economic order. In the 19th century, major silver discoveries placed Atacama at the centre of Chilean history.

Room 3 plan


Showcase 4
EXIT
19th-century wall
Showcase 3
Bailes chinos showcase
Painting
Showcase 1
Showcase 2
ENTRANCE

Showcase 1

(11000 BC-100 BC)

Pioneers of Atacama

Life in motion

More than 10,000 years ago, people settled in what is now the Atacama Region. They hunted, fished and gathered wild foods, moving across the territory and leaving traces that help us understand how they lived.

One territory, many stories

By identifying and dating traces of past activity, archaeology has outlined a chronology of human life in the Atacama Region, while discoveries in each valley reveal different local developments.

- The northern area is more desertic, with few water sources and sporadic human occupation.

- Further south, the fertile Copiapó and Huasco valleys allowed more permanent settlements and ways of life closely tied to the land.

- Communities had regular contact with areas to the north and south, as well as across the Andes in northwestern Argentina.

Surviving extremes

Human traces in the Andes

For decades, the coast and valleys were thought to hold the Region's earliest settlements. Recent discoveries reveal older mountain sites dating back 13,000 years. These communities worked stone, knew the territory well and lived with intense sunlight, low oxygen and changing temperatures.

Living in the Andes

Although the landscape was similar to today, there was more rainfall, water and vegetation. Vicuña —an Andean camelid— was a major food source, while llareta —a type of plant— was used as fuel. Red pigment was also used.

Finding the trace

The cuts and angles on these stones are not natural. They were shaped into tools for hunting, butchering prey and

working animal skins and wood. They were found at Salar de Infieles, near a rock shelter that protected people from rain, cold and wind.

- The image shows part of a vicuña vertebra with several marks. Irregular marks may have been made by rodents, while precise, symmetrical cuts suggest human activity with a knife.

Living on the coast

Skills shaped by the sea

Ten thousand years ago, hunting, fishing and gathering communities lived along the Atacama coast, moving beyond today's regional boundaries. Their objects reveal how they lived and understood their environment, including evidence of journeys to the mountains.

Many needs, many tools

- They may look like ordinary stones, but each had a specific function, used for hunting, fishing, textile work, leatherworking and more

- **Projectile point**. Used on spears or arrows for hunting.
- **Net weight.** Kept fishing nets submerged.
- **Fishing-line weight**. Helped sink the hook.
- **Awl.** Fine-pointed tool used to make holes.
- **Scraper.** Used to prepare animal skins and work wood.
- **Polisher**. Stone used to smooth or sharpen other tools.

Huentelauquén communities

These groups lived in the Region during the Archaic period, gathering shellfish, fishing from the shore and hunting land mammals and birds. They are distinguished by geometric stone forms known as liths, whose meaning remains unknown.

- Huentelauquén groups lived along the coast from Antofagasta to the Norte Chico between 6,000 and 10,000 years ago.

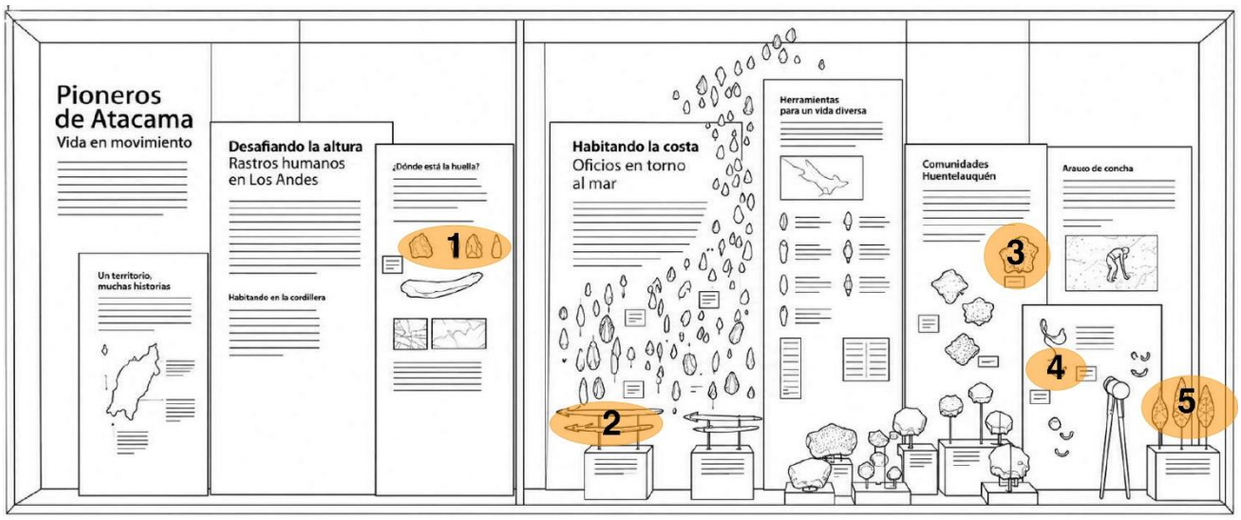
Shell fishhook

Around 5000 BC, shell fishhooks were an important innovation, allowing people to fish in deeper waters and

broaden their diet. All examples from this period found in the Region were made from giant mussel shells *(Choromytilus chorus)*.

Current archaeological research involves fishing communities in the practical study of these objects, helping to enrich their analysis.

Featured collections



1	**Stone flakes** Quartz | Black basalt Salar Los Infieles site, Diego de Almagro | 126.2 | 126.1
2	**Harpoons** Wood and stone Unknown provenance | 15.11 | 15.12

	These harpoons, used to hunt marine animals, appeared around 4000 BC and remained in use throughout the pre-Hispanic period. Made from different materials, they are still used at sea today.
3	**Geometric lith** Stone Obispito site, Chañaral | 01.127
4	**Fishhook** *Choromytilus chorus* shell Unknown site, Atacama Region | 18.98
5	**Taltaloid stone blades** Stone Caldera | 1563.2 | 15.60 | 18.96 On loan from the Museo de Historia Natural de Valparaíso The shape of these stones shows careful workmanship, but their purpose is unknown. They are called taltaloids after Taltal, north of Atacama, where the first example was found.

(100 BC–AD 1200)

Welcome, pottery

A revolutionary technology

Around 2,000 years ago, pottery arrived in the Region, bringing new ways of life. Clay vessels allowed people to

cook, transport and store food, supporting more settled communities, where burying ancestors became common and new ritual practices developed.

- Pottery arrived through contact with other populations across the southern Andes, including present-day southern Peru, Bolivia, north-western Argentina and northern Chile.

Villages take shape

Molle communities

The Molle were the first pottery-making communities in the Region. They settled mainly in the valleys, where they gradually adopted a more permanent way of life. They built circular homes, developed early agriculture and also practised pipe smoking and wore body ornaments.

- The name Molle comes from the El Molle area in Coquimbo, where their cemeteries were first identified. It is also used for the earliest ceramists in that Region.

El Torín

In the upper Copiapó River basin, this settlement was inhabited between AD 500 and 800. Its residents farmed the land and buried their dead beneath large stone mounds that marked the landscape.

Eternal rest

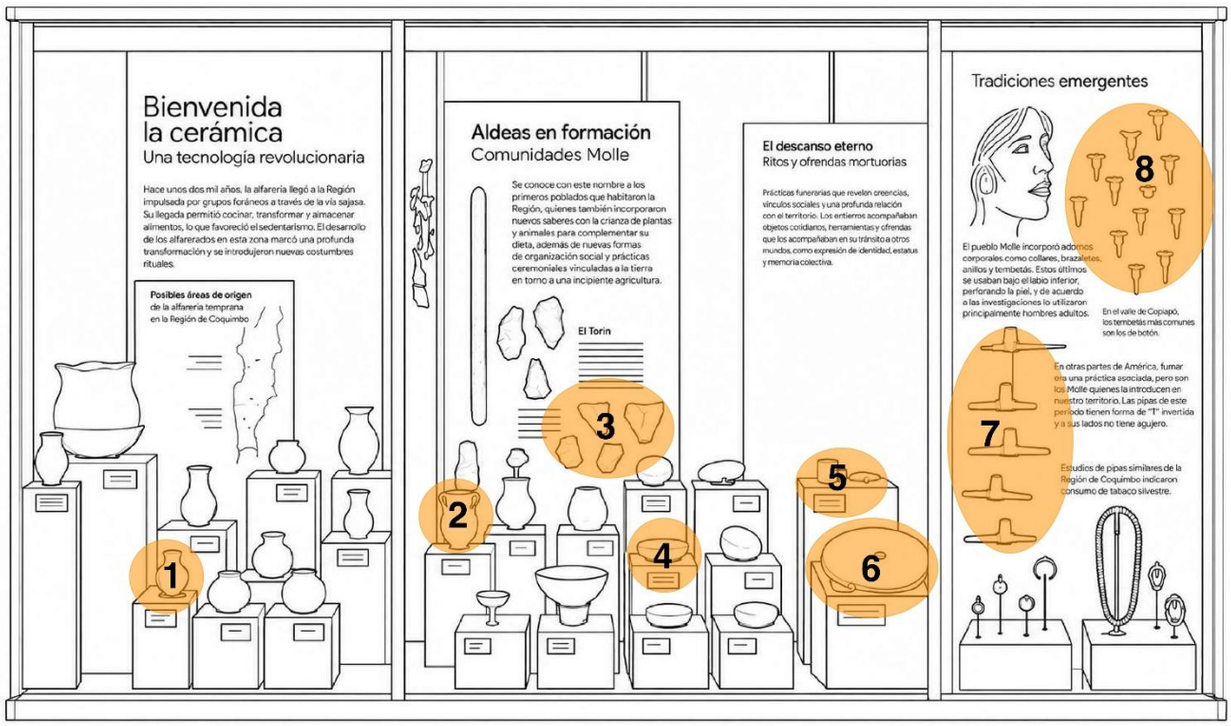
Funerary rites and offerings

The Molle buried their ancestors near their homes, beneath mounds of earth and stone called tumuli. Offerings suggest beliefs in an afterlife, while infant burials included special items such as pigments, metals and necklaces.

Emerging traditions

The Molle wore ornaments such as necklaces, bracelets, rings and tembetás, inserted through the skin below the lower lip and worn mainly by adult men.

Featured collections



1	**Vessel** Ceramic Cabra Atada site, Pulido ❙ 299 Although pottery was an imported technique locally made pieces developed their own style, with long necks and polished brown or black surfaces.
2	**Anthropomorphic vessel** Ceramic Río Jorquera site, Jorquera ❙ 76.22 This pottery was found at a site from this period, but its colour and shape differ from local styles, suggesting it was imported.
3	**Set of hoes** Stone El Torín site, Carrizalillo Chico

	These are stone hoes, evidence of agricultural work. Sites from this period also contain maize and bean seeds.
4	**Grinding stone** Stone El Torín site, Carrizalillo Chico | 02.194 Grinding stones were used to crush pigments, grains and seeds into powder or paste on a base stone or mortar.
5	**Pigment cake and red pigment** Mineral El Torín site, Pulido | 02.59 | 02.104 Pigment rocks were used as offerings and in rock art. Ground and mixed with natural binders, they formed a paste whose colours can still be seen today.
6	**Necklace and earrings** Mineral Carrizalillo Chico site, Ramadillas | 01.62 The necklace on display is 40 metres long, twice the length of this room. Made of thousands of handmade beads, it was found in an infant's grave at Carrizalillo Chico.
7	**Set of pipes** Stone Various locations, Atacama Region

	The Molle introduced smoking to Atacama. Their inverted T-shaped pipes have also been found in Coquimbo, where studies show traces of wild tobacco.
8	**Set of tembetás** Stone Various locations, Atacama Region

New dynamics

Traces of communal life

Around AD 1000, the production of larger vessels suggests shared use, while bigger funerary mounds reflect collective effort involved in their construction. The greater diversity and wider use of stone and metal ornaments may reflect social differences.

- Communities from this period are traditionally called Ánimas, although those in Atacama may have belonged to a different group from those in Coquimbo.

La Puerta

The valley Gateway

At the narrowest point of the Copiapó Valley, more than 100 funerary mounds dating from AD 1000–1200 mark a natural passage between the mountains and the coast. Some reach 20 metres in diameter and 2 metres in height, reflecting the collective effort involved in sacralising the landscape.

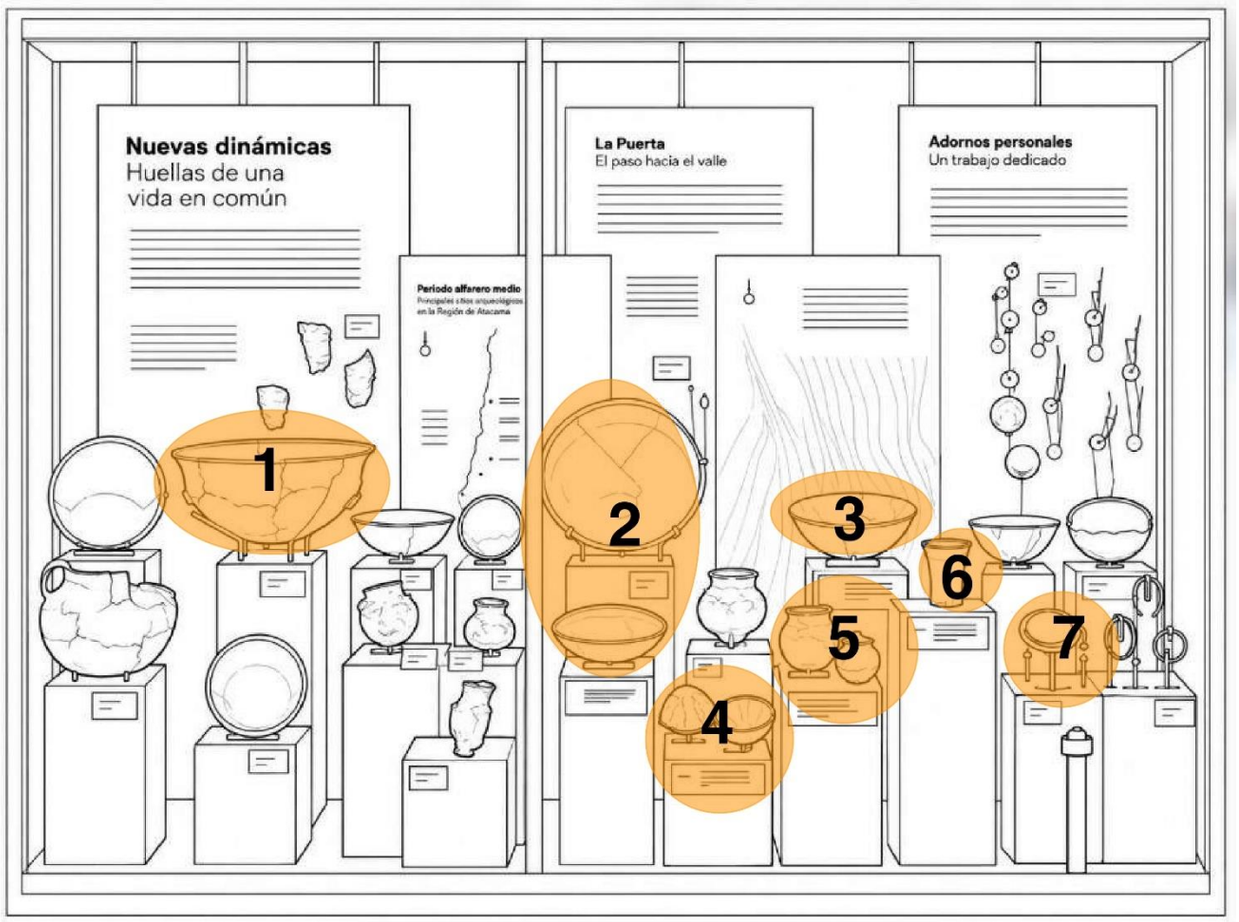
- La Puerta served as a cemetery for 200 years before being abandoned around AD 1200 for unknown reasons. Its distinctive pottery also disappeared.

Personal ornaments

Skilled craftsmanship

Lapidary work —the carving and polishing of stone— was important during this period, especially in the north. Stone beads with birds, foxes and human figures show great skill.

Featured collections



1	**Vessel** Ceramic La Puerta site, Los Loros | 01.40
2	**Vessels** Ceramic La Puerta site, Los Loros | 01.36 | 08.50 This La Puerta pottery style is unique to the Region during this period. Its distinctive rim breaks the vessel's conical shape.
3	**Puco bowl** Ceramic La Puerta site, Los Loros | 01.31

	The holes in this puco show it was repaired, probably with leather or fibre ties. This was a common way to extend the life of ceramic vessels.
4	**Puco bowls** Ceramic Unknown provenance | 83-76-23 | 01.118 During this period, pottery was decorated with painted lines and abstract figures, or with designs made by cutting or scoring the surface.
5	**Shoe-shaped vessels** Ceramic La Puerta site, Los Loros | 01.35 | 01.08 This vessel form is common across northern Chile.
6	**Kero** Silver La Puerta site, Los Loros | 01.75 This Andean ceremonial cup is made of silver and was probably brought from a different area of the Andes. It was found in an infant's grave, likely from an important family in the community.
7	**Set of beads** Stone La Puerta site, Los Loros These small animal-shaped beads were found as funerary offerings.

An artisanal miner at Las Turquesas

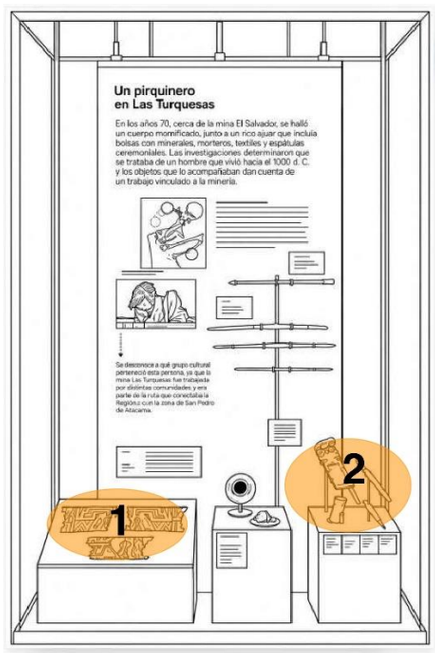
In the 1970s, a mummified man was found near El Salvador with grave goods including mineral bags, mortars, textiles and ceremonial spatulas. He lived around AD 1000, and these objects suggest he worked in mining.

A fatal accident

A scan revealed fractures in his spine, ribs and legs. He likely died after being struck by a large rock inside a mine tunnel. His body was recovered and buried with offerings related to his work and cultural practices.

- It is unclear which cultural group he belonged to, as Las Turquesas was worked by different communities and lay along a route linking the Region with the San Pedro de Atacama area.

Featured collections



1	**Sash** Animal fibre Cerro Indio Muerto, El Salvador | 34-1-83 These textile fragments were part of a sash, probably made as a funerary offering, as they show no signs of use. Their weaving technique, shapes and colours resemble textiles from the southern Andes.
2	**Snuff set (tablet, mortar, spatula, and grinding stem)** Wood | Bone Cerro Indio Muerto, El Salvador | 2-1-83 | 4-1-83 | 26-1-83 | 5-1-83

Showcase 2

(AD 1200-1536)

In the Copiapó Valley

A world of design and colour

Around AD 1200, local pottery introduced new shapes and decorations, including human faces and black lines on red backgrounds. Their makers, known as the Copiapó Society, lived mainly in this valley, with remains also found in other parts of the Region. Their pottery often features camelids and triangular faces with headdresses or hairstyles.

A varied way of life

Farming, weaving, and other crafts

Copiapó groups built irrigation systems and terraces to improve farming, as well as fortifications to protect strategic areas such as watercourses. Everyday objects also survive, including spindles, spindle whorls, spoons and baskets.

Mining

Between tradition and innovation

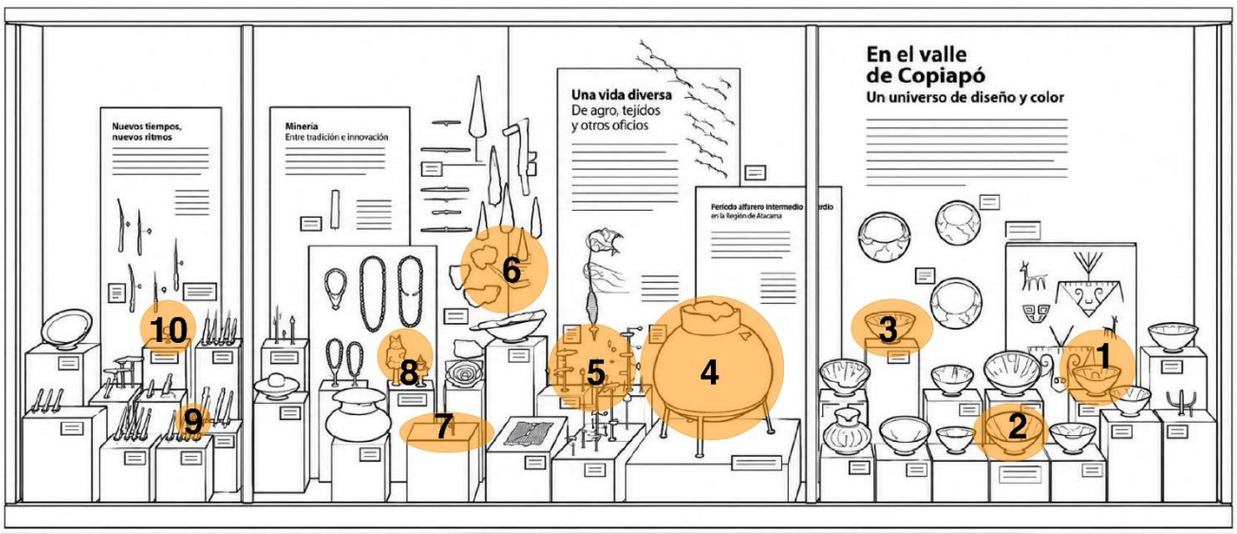
Metalworking expanded during this period, with new techniques and more copper and bronze objects, including fishhooks, ornaments and hand guards. The Viña del Cerro smelting site also began operating and remained in use for centuries.

New times, new rites

Copiapó communities stopped using funerary mounds and buried their dead in shared spaces with little social distinction. Numerous spatulas, tablets and tubes point to new ritual practices.

- Spatulas, tubes and containers for consuming psychoactive substances appear only in some graves, suggesting their use was limited to certain people.

Featured collections



1	***Puco* bowl** Ceramic Iglesia Colorada site, Iglesia Colorada | 03.4 A distinctive feature of Copiapó pottery is its depictions of camelids and triangular faces, often with headdresses or hairstyles.
2	***Puco* bowl** Ceramic Iglesia Colorada site, Iglesia Colorada | 76-26 Some pottery from this period introduced white decoration, which continued to be used over time.
3	***Puco* bowl** Ceramic San Fernando site, Copiapó | 0.125.39 Copiapó communities lived in the same areas we inhabit today. This *puco* was found while digging a

	well in the city and was later donated to the Museum for safekeeping.
4	**Vessel** Ceramic Copiapó Valley On loan from the Museo Arqueológico de La Serena | 5067 This large vessel belongs to the style known as Punta Brava.
5	**Set of spindle whorls** Bone | Stone Various provenances, Atacama Region
6	**Set of spoons** Wood Various provenances, Atacama Region
7	**Capacho** Sea lion hide Cerro Indio Muerto, El Salvador | 83.2.77.210 This object was found as a funerary offering, sewn with human hair. The dry conditions preserved both the container and the two types of chilli peppers inside.
8	**Hand guards** Copper Caldera | 85 On loan from the Museo de Historia Natural de Valparaíso 2123 | 1037 These objects are known as hand guards, though their function is unknown. They have only been found in the

	Region from the period before the arrival of the Inka Empire.
9	**Spatula** Bone Iglesia Colorada | 76-715 Geometric and stepped designs on spatulas are common across the Andes. Similar artefacts show traces of wild tobacco *(Nicotiana solanifolia)* and cebil *(Anadenanthera colubrina)*, a plant from north-western Argentina.
10	**Ceramic** Ceramic Unknown provenance | 0.125.36 This fragment depicts a snake's head, an animal with ritual significance across the Andes.

The Inka invasion

The arrival of the Empire of Inti

Around AD 1400, representatives of the Inka state -with their own beliefs and traditions- settled in the Region, making use of existing settlements. Despite local resistance, they imposed their rule and introduced sun worship, new forms of labour and tribute, and new artistic traditions.

- A key feature of the Inka worldview was four-part division, reflected in designs that divide objects into four. They also introduced chequered patterns and mirrored repetitions of the distinctive faces found on Copiapó-style pottery.

Overlapping histories

The case of Iglesia Colorada

This site shows how the Inka Empire settled in already inhabited areas. Copiapó, Diaguita-Inka and Inka pottery, along with many everyday objects, have been found there. Skulls showing signs of violence also reveal tensions with local communities.

Imperial art

A tool of conquest

The Inka brought new pottery forms and designs, as well as Tawantinsuyu symbols, which blended with local styles.

- *Aríbalos* were introduced during this period and used to store and transport liquids such as maize *chicha*, a drink consumed during ceremonies or communal work. Their conical bases allowed them to be set into the ground for stability.

Changes and continuities

Despite the new labour systems and beliefs imposed, everyday life changed little. Communities continued farming, herding camelids, making pottery and developing more refined copperworking techniques.

The mining trade

A new paradigm

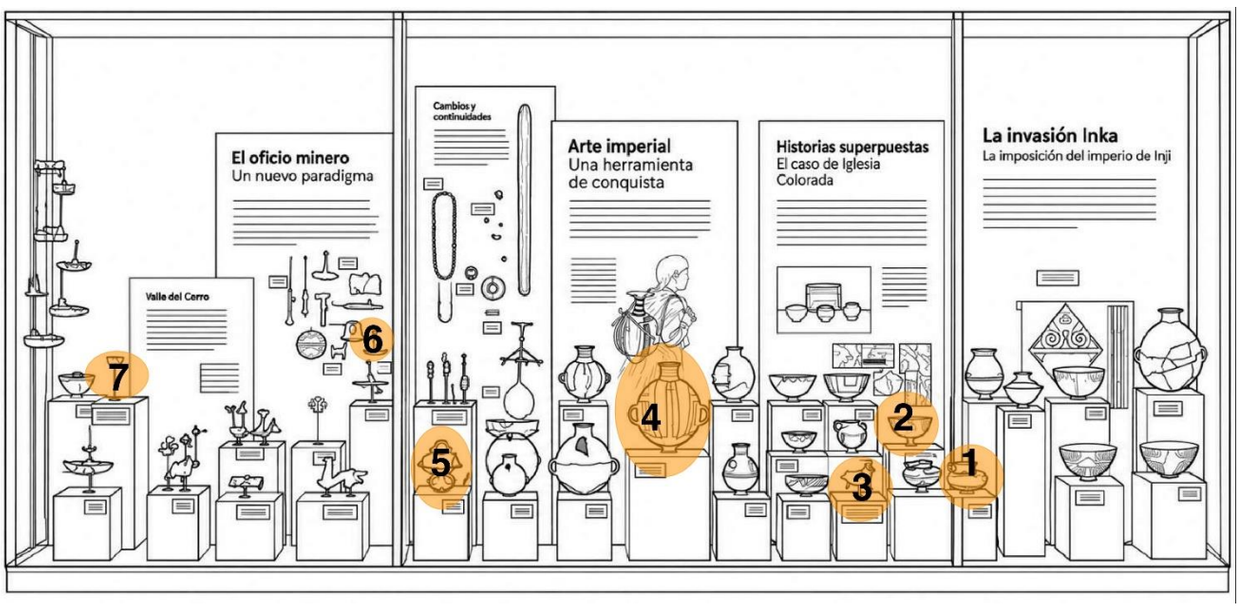
Under the Inka, metals took on a new role. Tumis, bracelets and pectoral plaques helped seal alliances with local leaders, while the mita system of communal, rotational labour introduced by the Empire increased copper extraction.

Viña del Cerro

A local smelting centre

This metallurgical centre was used before the Inka, but production increased significantly under their rule. Its 26 furnaces used wind for smelting. The site also preserves living quarters and a large plaza for public ceremonies.

Featured collections



1	***Jarro zapato*** Ceramic Iglesia Colorada site, Iglesia Colorada | 04.39 This vessel was found beside the body of a man around 50 years old, an advanced age for the time. It stands out for its explicit female figure, showing breasts and a vulva.

2	***Puco* bowl** Ceramic Iglesia Colorada site, Iglesia Colorado	01.16 Pottery with Diaguita-style decoration, such as this piece, reveals contact between different communities.
3	**Vessel** Ceramic Iglesia Colorada site, Iglesia Colorada	01.10 This ceramic depicts a three-legged animal and probably had a ritual use. Its body and face show Diaguita-style designs, while the chest features Diaguita-Inka decoration.
4	***Aríbalo*** Ceramic Copiapó site, Copiapó	01.76 The *aríbalo* on this plinth has local colours and decoration, while the one to the left is in the Imperial Cuzco style. It was probably brought from the centre of Tawantinsuyu as a form of conquest through art.
5	**Bird-shaped bowl** Ceramic Copiapó Valley, Copiapó	06.08 Low bowls or dishes shaped like birds or animals were among the ceramic forms introduced by the Inka into

	conquered territories, along with aríbalos, aysanas and others.
6	***Tumi*** Copper Copiapó site, Copiapó | 4 *Tumis* arrived in the Region with the Inka. They had symbolic value and were probably used in ceremonies.
7	**Rectangular plaque** Copper Viña El Cerro site, Los Loros | 1

The Inka Road

The organising axis

This map shows only the sections of the Inka Road identified or currently being studied in the Atacama Region. The route continues beyond the Region to the north and south.

The Qhapaq Ñan was a road network of more than 30,000 km linking Cuzco with the Empire. In northern Atacama, a straight route crossed the desert to Copiapó, with *tambos* for administration and supplies. South of the valley, the route is less studied and only a few sites are known.

A new architecture

Another way of living

Circular or elliptical homes, common in the Region for centuries, gradually gave way to rectangular buildings and new construction techniques. Public spaces were also introduced, bringing communities together and hosting symbolic acts that strengthened diplomatic ties.

Sacralising space

At the summit of Atacama

Inka occupation was also symbolic. They climbed high peaks to leave offerings and build ceremonial platforms, as if hoping to bring sky and earth closer together. These practices had religious and political meanings, helping impose Inka beliefs and strengthen control over the territory.

More than 10 shrine-like sites have been identified in the Region, from the coast to the Andes, including Copiapó and Jotabeche volcanoes. Unlike similar sites elsewhere in Chile, none contains human offerings.

- Human and camelid figurines appear as offerings throughout Tawantinsuyu. Their almost identical forms suggest they were mass-produced.

A strange sight to the eye

The Spanish invasion

In 1536, Atacama changed forever. Spanish explorers arrived from Peru on horseback —animals never seen there before— in search of gold. Their arrival marked a major break for local communities, transforming their economy, society, territory and beliefs.

Painting

The taking of the Copiapó Valley

"In the name of God and the Crown"

On 26 October 1540, following a months-long journey from Cusco, Pedro de Valdivia arrived in the Copiapó Valley. As documented by chronicler Jerónimo de Vivar, Valdivia staged a ceremony of possession here, initiating the Spanish conquest of Chile. The painting on display shows this moment.

One representation, many perspectives

What shines in the scene

A gleaming helmet, clean clothes, and swords. In this feature, different voices discuss the symbols of power in the painting.

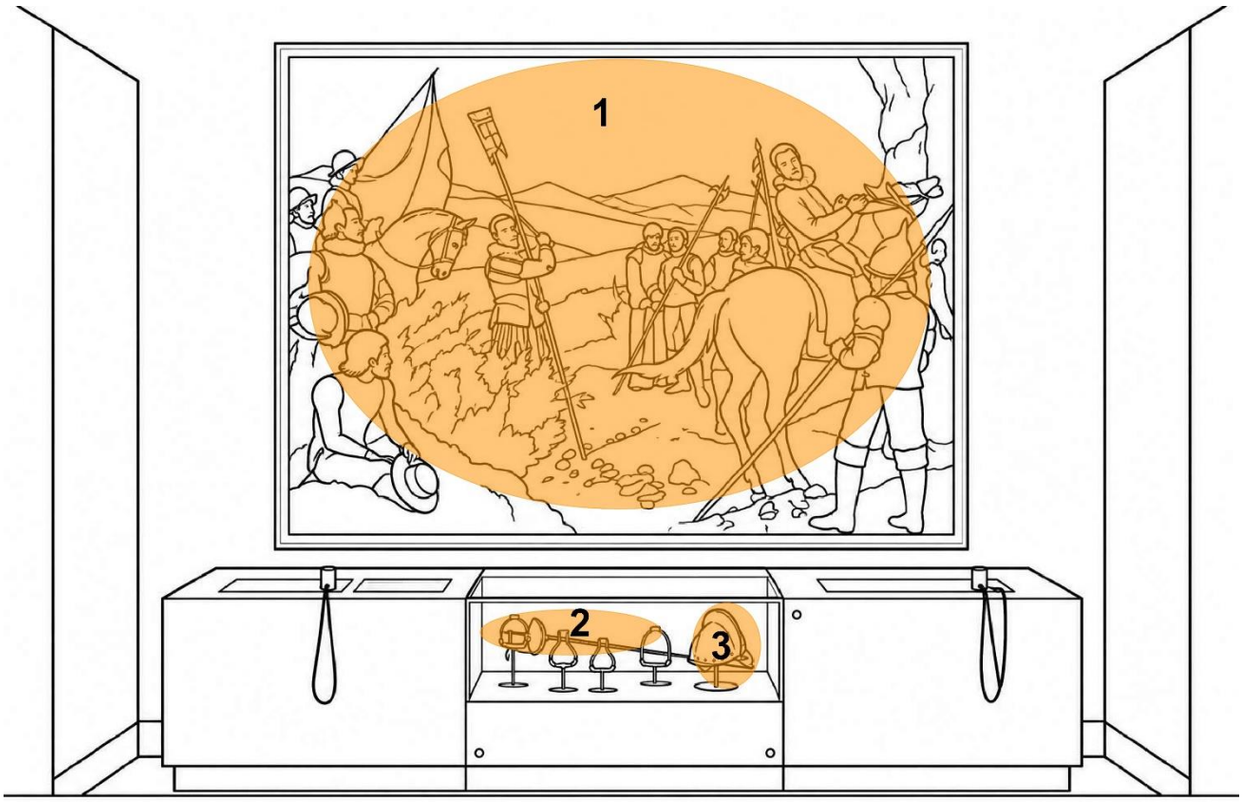
Questions that remain

A ceremony, a flag, a territory... but where did the act take place, and where is the official record? Questions about this milestone remain open.

In the shadow of power

There are no women, no Indigenous people and, curiously, no signs of exhaustion either! In this feature, we explore these absences.

Featured collections



1	**The Taking Possession of Chile** Guillermo Lorca García-Huidobro Oil on canvas 2010
2	**Foil** Steel Finca Chañaral site, Inca de Oro | 01.138
3	**Morion helmet** Metal | 15.07

Showcase 3

From resistance to coexistence

Centuries of adaptation

After the initial conflict, the Spanish Crown took control of the Copiapó Valley by 1549 under Francisco de Aguirre. Because of its strategic location as a gateway to the desert, local communities received special treatment to avoid uprisings and were exempted from forced labour in mining, a unique case in colonial Chile.

One hundred years of shared life

From ancestral trades to royal tribute

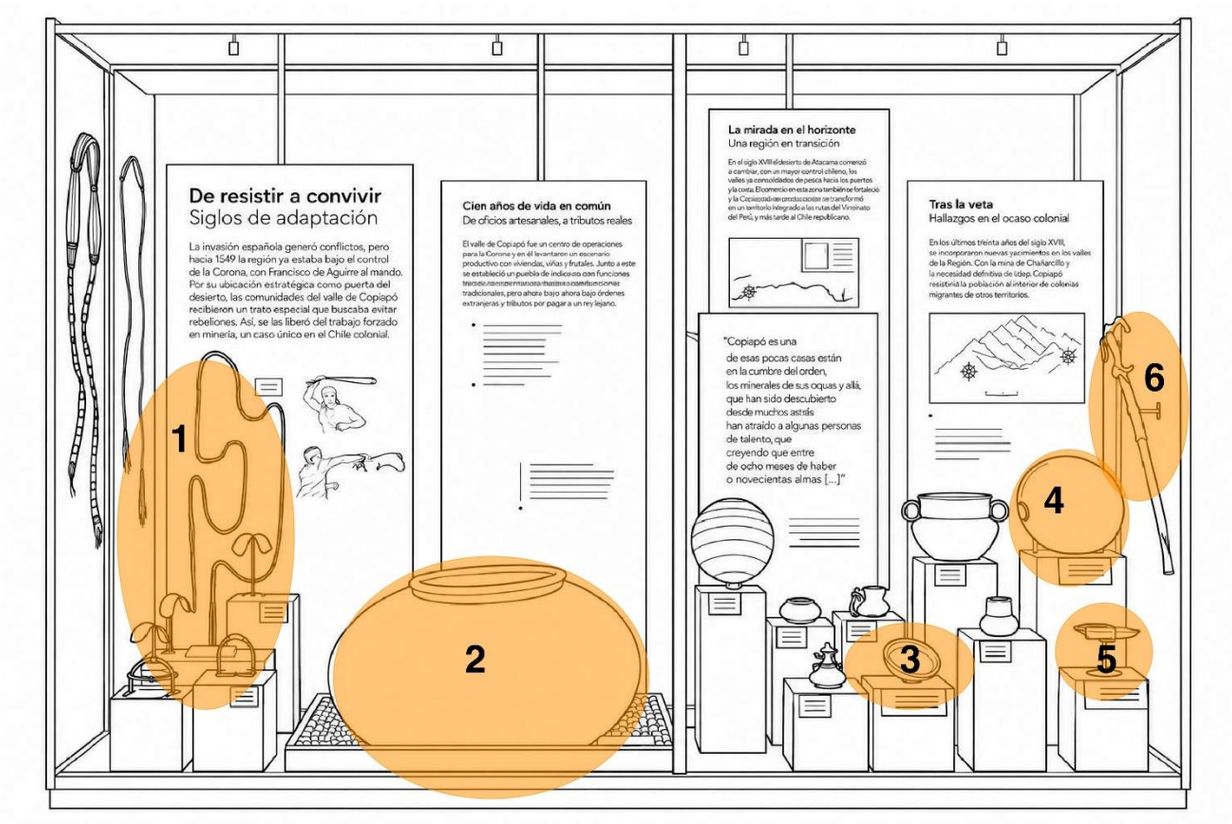
The Copiapó Valley became a base for the Crown, with a small settlement of homes, vineyards and orchards. Nearby, the Indigenous town of San Fernando was established, where local communities continued their traditional trades —now under foreign rule and obligated to pay tribute to a distant king.

Mining on the horizon

A region in transition

In the 18th century, Atacama began to change. Agriculture — already well established in the Copiapó and Huasco valleys— gradually gave way to mining. As the population grew, the Spanish Crown reorganised the territory, founding San Francisco de la Selva de Copiapó in 1744 and Vallenar in 1789.

Featured collections



1	**Set of *guaracas*** Animal fibre Various provenances, Atacama Region

2	**Large storage jar** Ceramic Unknown provenance | 01.135 Foods such as wheat, dried fish, wine, and aguardiente were exported from Atacama. This jar bears an inscription dated 1666 and was probably used in the wine-making process.
3	**Puco bowl** Ceramic Unknown provenance | 0.123.2 These ceramics combine pre-Hispanic and Spanish forms and decoration, representing the meeting of two cultures through art.
4	***Chaya*** Metal | 01.214 This container is used in artisanal mining to wash and separate mineral from sand. With gentle movement in water, lighter materials rise while heavier ones -such as silver and gold- remain at the bottom.
5	***Poruña*** Ox horn | 01.222 This tool is used to identify gold in rocks. The rocks are finely ground and mixed with water in the container.

	Mineral particles sink to the bottom, revealing its presence.
6	**Candle holder** Wood and wax 16.01 In colonial times, this type of object was used to light a mine shaft. The wooden handle holds a tallow candle and includes a drip guard to prevent burns or wax running down the handle.

***Bailes chinos* showcase**

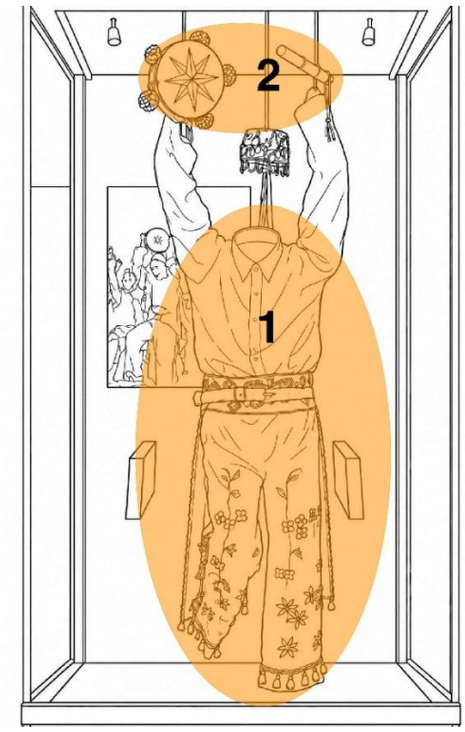
Bailes chinos

A tradition of colonial origin

The Spanish invasion introduced Catholicism, which became intertwined with local beliefs and practices. The festivals of the Virgin of Candelaria and the Virgin of El Tránsito date from the late colonial period and are still celebrated in the Region today. Groups of dancer-musicians known as *Bailes Chinos* are central to these celebrations. They play repetitive melodies on flutes and drums, accompanied by jumps, bends and synchronised movements to express devotion to “la chinita”.

According to oral tradition, devotion to the Virgin of Candelaria began in 1778, when muleteer Mariano Caro Inca found a small image of the Virgin in the hills and believed she had saved his life during a violent storm.

Featured collections



1	***Bailes Chinos*** Traditional costume Morion helmet, shirt, scarf, trousers, leather apron, and sash
2	**Instruments** Drum and mallet

19th-century wall

Atacama in the 19th century

One hundred years of change

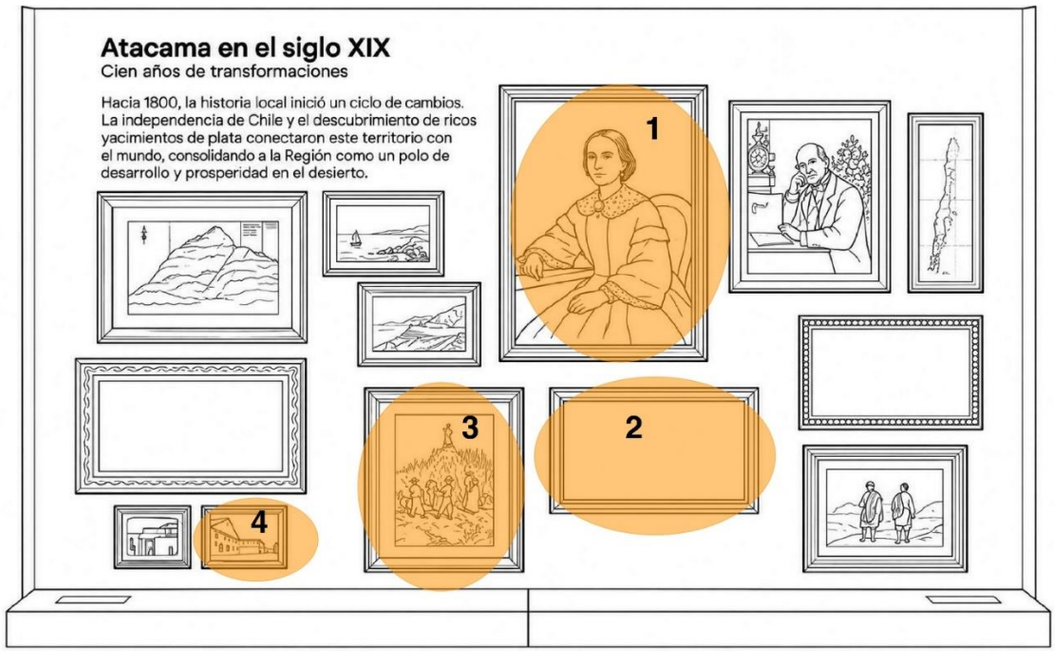
Around 1800, Atacama entered a period of transformation. Chilean independence and the discovery of rich silver deposits connected the Region with the world, drove urban growth and established Atacama as a centre of development and prosperity in the desert.

Drawings of the territory

Mapping to conquer

From the first decades of the Spanish invasion, Europeans sought to understand and depict the Americas. The Crown commissioned maps, while rival nations interested in the continent—such as the Netherlands and France—produced their own records. Though imprecise by modern standards, these maps contained strategic information for territorial control.

Featured collections



1	**Portrait of Candelaria Goyenechea** Oil on canvas Artist unknown Museo Regional de Atacama Collection | 98.118
2	**Children in Bordos** Jorge Fergie Peck Facsimile reproduction Museo Regional de Atacama Collection | 98.22
3	**Copiapó Municipal Theatre** Facsimile reproduction Museo Regional de Atacama Collection | 98.405
4	**Audiovisual created from the photograph "Chañarcillo Ore Stockyard"** Museo Regional de Atacama Collection | 17.14

Showcase 3

The "century of silver"

A milestone in mining history

During the first half of the 19th century, major silver deposits were discovered, including Agua Amarga (1811), Chañarcillo (1832), and Tres Puntas (1848). These discoveries gave economic stability to the young Republic of Chile and attracted thousands of people to the Region dreaming of making their fortune.

The *Cateador*

Practical mineralogist

The dream of rich deposits drove men and women deep into the hills. Known as *cateadores*, *buscones* or *pirquineros*, these prospectors were self-taught geologists who used simple tools, expert eyes and deep knowledge of the territory to trace rock formations, hills and other clues in search of mineral veins.

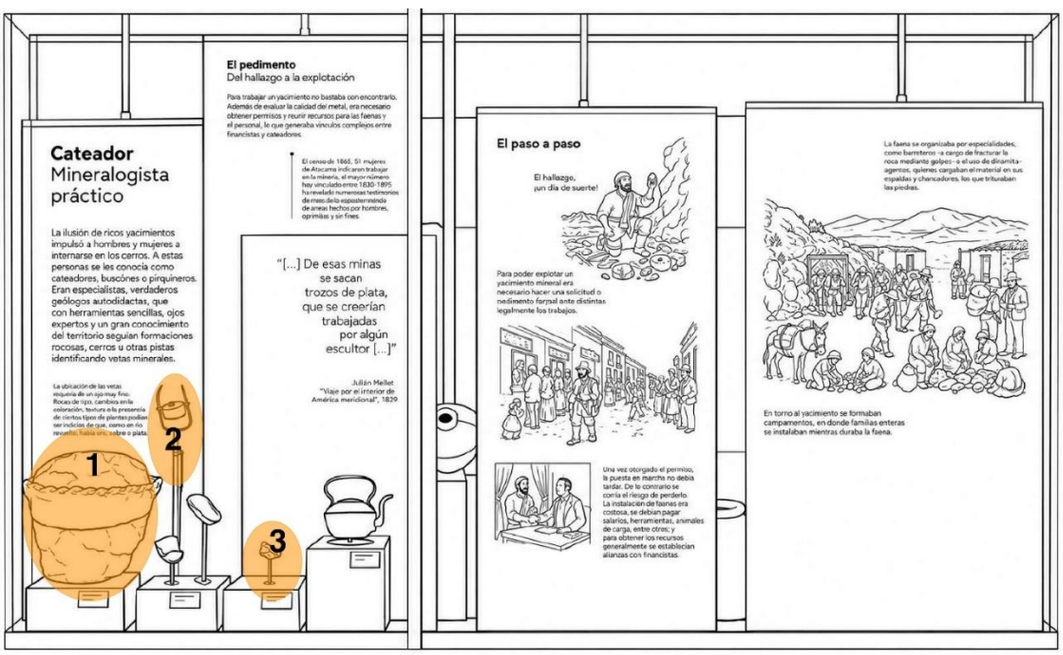
The mining claim

From discovery to extraction

Finding a deposit was only the first step. Miners also had to assess the metal, obtain permits and secure resources for the operation and its workers, creating complex ties between prospectors and financiers.

The 1865 census recorded 51 women working in mining in Atacama, the highest number in the country. Between 1830 and 1895, women of Chilean, Argentine and French nationality filed nearly 500 mining claims.

Featured collections



1	***Capacho*** Leather | 01.225

2	**Oil lamp** MetaL | 01.224
3	**Juangodoyite** Na2Cu(CO3)2 Tarapacá Region

Showcase 4

Chañarcillo

From a solitary vein to a global enclave

On 16 May 1832, muleteer Juan Godoy Normilla discovered the richest and most important silver vein in Chilean history. News spread quickly, and a camp soon grew into a bustling settlement with homes, shops and services. The scale of the deposit drove Copiapó's development, consolidating it as a financial and commercial centre on the country's northern frontier, with influence reaching as far as Europe for around 30 years.

- Tradition holds that Flora Normilla, Juan's mother, knew of the vein and gave him instructions to find it.

Mining operations

Among mountains of silver

The vein discovered by Godoy was named "La Descubridora" (The Discovery). It was the first of hundreds worked in the area, shifting the scale of mining. The boom brought a large

workforce, including immigrants from other regions and countries. New extraction and processing technologies were introduced, work became more specialised, and new transport and communication links connected the Region with the world.

From rock to ingot

Extraction was only the first step. At stamp mills around Copiapó, the rock was crushed and treated through amalgamation, a chemical process that used mercury to separate silver from other minerals. The silver was then melted and cast into ingots.

Beyond the mine

From the desert to the world

Silver wealth placed Atacama at the forefront of progress. Banks and entrepreneurs settled in Copiapó, helping shape an emerging capitalist system. Chile’s first railway transformed the territory, linking mining operations with Caldera, where a port was developed to ship silver ingots to Europe.

Caldera-Copiapó Railway

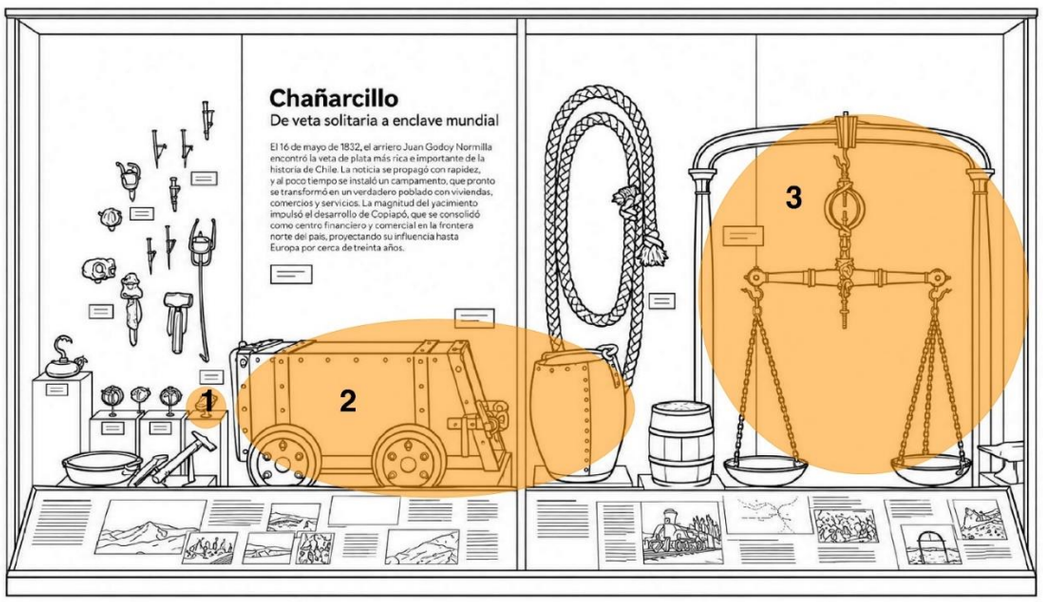
Modernity on rails

In 1851, the Copiapó locomotive inaugurated Chile’s first railway and the third in South America. The original 41 km line linked Caldera with Monte Amargo and was later extended to Copiapó. Promoted by William Wheelwright to support the Chañarcillo mining industry, the railway transformed the Region, driving Caldera’s growth, urban expansion and new technologies such as water distillation plants and gas lighting.

Organising the "No man's lands"

Silver prosperity attracted more people and made territorial control more urgent. As the State was still developing, many functions remained in private hands. The Mining Board, created during the colonial period, controlled the police at the mines and set trade prices and taxes.

Featured collections



1	***Cangalla*** Mineral | 98.209 This object, known as a *cangalla*, was used by labourers to hide pieces of mineral-bearing rock during work and later sell them on the informal market.
2	**Ore cart and bucket** Iron | 01.238 | 01.239 These carts carried ore out of the mine along rails, moved by hand or draught animals.
3	**Equal-arm balance** Iron and wood | 01.276 / X-36 This balance belonged to the Gallo family, owners of Chañarcillo.

Copiapó

Capital of the north

The mining boom turned this small city into one of Chile’s most important. Thousands settled in the growing urban centre, improving infrastructure, housing and public spaces. In 1843, the State created the Province of Atacama and began establishing its institutions there. Copiapó became a centre of development and a place of leisure and rest for workers returning from the hills after long days of work.

Cosmopolitan Atacama

"The California of the South"

The silver rush attracted people from as far away as England, Germany, France, Italy, and the United States, as well as neighbouring Peru and Bolivia. By 1854, Atacama had the highest proportion of foreign residents in the country: more than 9,500 out of 41,000 inhabitants, or one in five. Their cultures, beliefs and traditions mixed, shaping a multicultural and progressive society.

Mansions, salons, and lights

Wealth transformed life in Copiapó. Some families built luxurious homes centres of political, business and cultural life. In 1848, the mining elite funded the opening of Teatro El Rojo, which remained active until a powerful earthquake destroyed it in 1922.

- Luxury prevailed in the homes of Copiapó's elite, while people in the urban outskirts and around the mines lived in precarious conditions marked by overcrowding, poor sanitation, and child labour.

Classrooms for progress

The mining boom increased the need for trained professionals. The School of Mines (1857) and Copiapó Lyceum (1864) were founded to meet this demand, with laboratories that became important centres for mineralogical research. These private institutions also promoted Enlightenment and secular ideas, considered progressive in Chile at the time.

- In 1877, the Copiapó Girls' Lyceum opened as one of Chile's first schools for women.

The desert in revolution

The uprising of 1859

At the height of the mining boom, Chile was still a young independent nation under the centralised system of the 1833 Constitution. Discontent outside the capital led to a rebellion in Copiapó, led by Pedro León Gallo and Manuel Antonio Matta, strengthening demands for greater autonomy.

From economic power

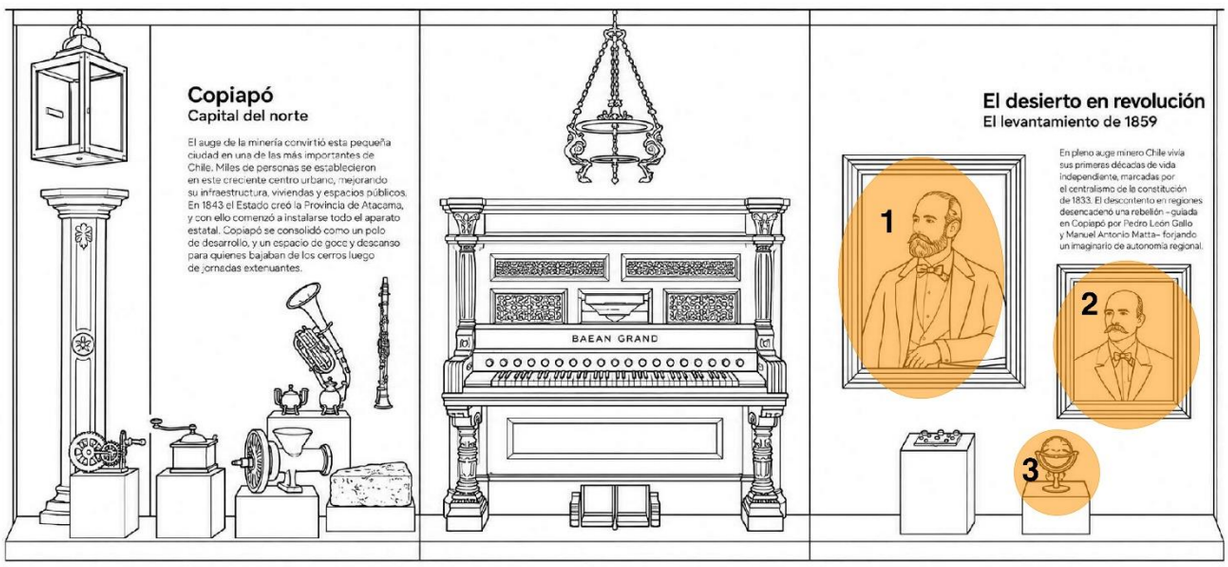
To political uprising

Mining wealth strengthened the local elite and expanded its influence in national politics. Pedro León Gallo, heir to one of Chile's largest fortunes, led a liberal uprising against Manuel Montt's government. It began in Copiapó in January 1859, with an armed militia marching south towards Santiago. After some early victories, the movement was defeated in April and the rebellion ended.

A brief but symbolic revolution

The Constituent Army brought together entrepreneurs, miners, artisans and other groups. Although it lasted only four months, it created its own symbols, including a flag, an anthem and a currency.

Featured collections



1	**Portrait of Pedro León Gallo** Oil on canvas Artist unknown | D-209
2	**Portrait of Manuel Antonio Matta** Oil on canvas Manuel Gormaz, 1894 | D-213
3	**Constituent coins of 1 peso and 50 cents** Metal | 17.16 | 17.15

The close of the 19th century

Searching for new horizons

By around 1870, Atacama's major silver and copper mines were in decline amid a global economic crisis. Chañarcillo was running out of silver and repeated flooding eventually halted operations. Meanwhile, nitrate deposits farther north, in Peruvian and Bolivian territory, created a new industrial centre and attracted thousands of workers seeking opportunities.

War of the Pacific

A conflict that changed Chile

By the late 19th century, nitrate mining was driving growth in the Bolivian territory of Antofagasta. In 1878, higher taxes on Chilean companies contributed to a five-year war (1879–1884) involving Chile, Bolivia and Peru. After the conflict, Chile incorporated Antofagasta, Tarapacá and Arica, reshaping the country's borders.

The Atacama Battalion

Chile was poorly prepared for war, so civilians were recruited. On 22 February 1879, Atacama newspapers called for volunteers, and within a week 300 people had enlisted, including miners, artisans and merchants. In the following months, the Atacama Battalions No. 1 and 2 grew to 1,200 men.

- Students from the Girls' Lyceum made an elaborate banner for the first battalion, with a large central star embroidered in gold and silver thread. A second was later commissioned from Tránsito Palacios. Both have been restored and are now displayed in rotation to protect them.

Cantineras

Women on the battlefield

Women played a key role during the War of the Pacific. Some fought alongside soldiers, while others worked as nurses or provided food and other supplies to troops. Records also

mention women organising theatre performances and cultural events.

The heroic return

A welcome with honours

In 1881, the Chilean army achieved a historic victory: the occupation of Lima, the Peruvian capital. Members of the Atacama Battalion played an active role and returned to a celebratory welcome in Copiapó. Triumphal arches, floats and flags decorated the city, with the celebrations organised by the railway company, fire brigades and immigrant communities, including the Anglo-French, Spanish and Italian.

Wounded bodies

Records for science and history

After the war, a commission of surgeons examined soldiers' injuries. Each man was photographed and recorded on a form listing personal details, the type of wound or amputation, the prosthesis assigned and its cost. The photographs, taken by the renowned studios Díaz y Spencer

and Leblanc y Adaro, combine scientific documentation with a carefully composed visual style that contrasts with the injuries and expressions of the men portrayed.

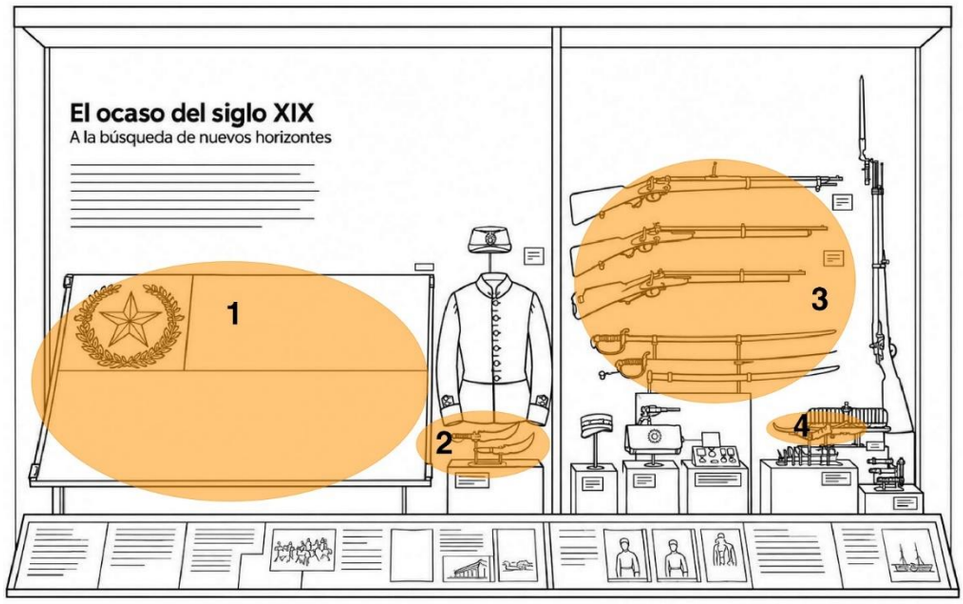
- Lack of military training and experience with firearms was a major cause of war injuries, many of which resulted in mutilation.

A new Chile

The end of a cycle for Atacama

After the War of the Pacific, Chile's borders changed and new economic opportunities emerged. The growing nitrate industry in the north increased demand for food and supplies, boosting agriculture and livestock farming in the Copiapó and Huasco valleys. New mining exploration also began, expanding in the early 20th century and transforming local life.

Featured collections



1	**Atacama Battalion No. 1 Banner** Silk | Metal | 98.761
2	***Corvos*** Metal | MR.2019.01 | MR.2019.02 The *corvo* -traditionally used in mining work- was an emblematic weapon of the Atacama Battalions during this war, used in hand-to-hand combat. Today it remains an infantry weapon of the Chilean Army.
3	**Set of weapons (shotgun, rifle, and bayonet)** Metal
4	**Ammunition mould** Metal | 98.755

Script, curation, and coordination

Exhibitions Department

Subdirección Nacional de Museos

Museo Regional de Atacama

Atacama Region,

January 2026.

MUSEO
REGIONAL
DE
ATACAMA