

NGCSU E-Text for History 1112

Essay Module

New World Empires: The Inca

The Inca Empire - Introduction

The Inca Empire covered a vast area of highland and coastal South America in 1532, including millions of subject peoples conquered in less than a hundred years by a short succession of powerful military rulers. It was a theocracy headed by an absolute monarch with noble advisors, who built an impressive road system of over 24,000 miles. The roads served to move troops and settlers on foot, foods and other materials by llama and human carriers into the capital of Cuzco and the regional sub-capitals, on a daily and seasonal basis.



Inca Fortress City of Machu Picchu, built circa 1450.



Map of Andean Inca Empire in 1532, showing expansion by successive Inca emperors, known as *Sapa Inca*.

Unit Goals

After reading this essay you should be able to:

- 1) Describe the origins and early development of the Inca civilization and the formation of the empire.
- 2) Identify important features of the Inca political, military, and religious structures.
- 3) Explain and discuss features of different Inca socioeconomic groups and gender roles.
- 4) Understand and explain the significance of *quipu* knots within Inca culture.
- 5) Understand the foundations and important features of the Inca economy.

Climate and Geography

The Andean home of the Incas is made up of three horizontal zones and at least six vertical zones. West to east, first there is the coastal desert, crossed by more than 60 rivers, creating green strips through the tan sands. The Andes Mountains, rising above the coastal zone, are actually two parallel north-south chains, the *Cordillera Negra (Occidental)* on the west, and the *Cordillera Blanca (Oriental)* on the east. The eastern range is higher (by 1,000 m), and broader than the western range. Periodic earthquakes change the shape of the terrain and society all along the Andes as the Nazca Plate slides slowly underneath the Andes on the South American continent. Both chains are climatic barriers to eastern winds which drop rain onto the Amazonian slopes and jungles, leaving the western slopes dry and cold in the higher altitudes. The warm, wet Amazonian area is the third horizontal zone.

Vertical zones are culturally more important, as they affect the daily lives of more of the inhabitants. On the Western slopes, the following chart shows the vertical zones.

Altitude, Meters	Zone Name *	Description and Cultural Contents
6000+	<i>Janca</i>	Origins of the spirits; snowcaps, glacial lakes; minerals
5000+	<i>Puna</i>	Alpine tundra; cold and damp; herding and hunting camelids; tubers, like potatoes
4000+	<i>Suni</i>	Cold hills, ridges, steep valleys; deer hunting; 470 kinds of potatoes, other tubers; <i>quinoa</i> , <i>talwi</i> (legume)
3500-3000	<i>Quechua</i>	Valley bottoms, dry farming, most livable and productive; maize, beans, vegetables, grains: <i>quinoa</i> and <i>cañihua</i> ; tubers: potatoes, <i>ulluca</i> , <i>oca</i> , <i>mashwa</i> , legume <i>talwi</i>
2300-300	<i>Yungas</i>	Warm zone, livable, farming area; maize, coca, pepper(<i>aji</i>), warm-zone fruits: avocado, <i>lúcuma</i> , <i>cherimoya</i> , <i>guayabo</i> .

0-300	<i>Costa (chala)</i>	Desert with rivers flowing across, providing level lands for irrigated fields; maize, cucurbits, gourds, cotton, <i>algarroba</i> , fruits: <i>cherimoya</i> and <i>lúcuma</i> ; fish, shellfish, sea mammals, sea birds, amphibians, kelp.
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Source: D'Altroy 2003, pp. 28-32.

On the eastern slopes, there are three major vertical zones: the *montaña*, or upper Amazonian jungles; the *selva*, or lowland jungles; and the “eyebrow of the jungle,” or *seja de selva*, which lies between the other two. These areas were economically very important in Inca and pre-Inca times, but very sparsely populated. The *montaña* produced maize, coca, fruits, *aji*, and other warm-weather crops. The *selva*'s principal crop was a tuber called manioc. From the jungles, the Incas garnered tropical woods, gold, and fantastic colored feathers.

The northern intermountain basins of modern Ecuador had comfortable climates and were agriculturally productive. Atahualpa's northern Inca capital of Tumipampa was sited there. The central high grasslands of Peru were called the *paramo*, and they supported vast herds of camelids (llamas, alpacas, *vicuñas*, and *guanucos*), as did the *altiplano* of Bolivia around Lake Titicaca, the highest navigable lake in the world. Farmers there grew potatoes and chenopods, and herders raised thousands of llamas and alpacas.

Tawantinsuyu, called the “land of the four quarters,” or “the four parts together,” was sub-divided into at least eighty provinces, made up of hundreds of ethnic city-states and communities. Of the four *suyus*, *Cuntisuyu* on the southwest was the smallest, while *Chinchasuyu* on the northwest was the second largest, and had the most provinces. *Antisuyu* (northeast) spread into the Amazonian area, and *Collasuyu* (southeast), the largest area, covered Lake Titicaca and the Atacama Desert (Moseley pp. 32, 41-43). Together these four covered over 4,000 km (2,500 miles) of Andean landscape, from modern Ecuador through Peru and Bolivia into northern Chile and Argentina, and the Incas ruled more than ten million inhabitants.

Beginning around five thousand years ago with a complex, cotton-farming society identified at Caral in the Supe River drainage on the north Pacific coast, the Andean area has been home to a very long series of city-states and empires, covering various amounts of terrain and peoples. Some of the best-known are the **Chavin** (900-100 B.C.), in the northern highlands; the **Moche**, 100-700 A.D.), then the **Chimu** Empire (900-1500) on the northern coast; the **Nazca** (c.1-700), on the south coast; the **Wari** Empire (500-750) in the southern mountains; and **Tiahuanaco** (375 B.C.-1000 A.D.), around Lake Titicaca, on the modern Peru-Bolivian border. So the Incas, despite their recent arrival on the Andean political scene, were truly building their empire on the “shoulders of giants.”

Reports of the Inca Empire were strongly influenced by sixteenth century Spanish Catholicism, and most of the conquistadores did not write. However, the best descriptions of Andean life before 1532 appear to be from such authors as Pedro Pizarro, younger cousin of conqueror Francisco Pizarro, who published his memoirs in 1571; Juan de Betanzos, whose narrative of the Incas was available by 1557; Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala's report with many drawings came out in 1613; Garcilasco de la Vega, whose *Royal Commentaries of the Inca* were published in 1609; and Bernabe Cobo, whose work was available by 1653.

Until recently, most Peruvian archaeology has either accepted early written descriptions at face value or disregarded them. Recent careful comparison of archaeological research results with early

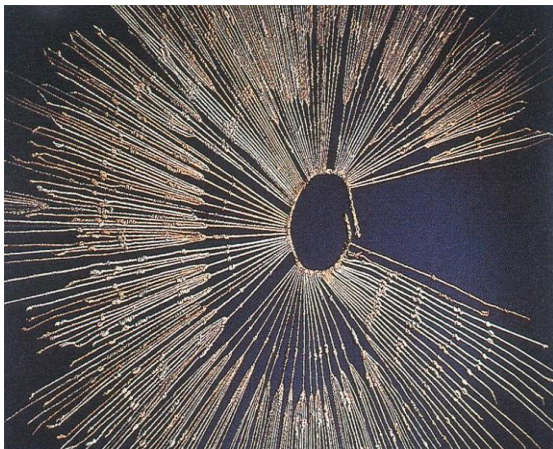
documents has begun untangling the oral histories presented by the early writers. Ongoing archaeology has produced dramatic discoveries at all levels of Inca and pre-Inca society.

Following our definition of empire in the Aztecs essay, the Inca Empire seems more like a very large, very advanced mega-chiefdom, since it lacked many of the hallmarks of an empire. The Incas did, however, over-achieve in many other areas, as we will see.

Despite the lack of a standing army, the Incas conquered a vast territory and population in a relatively short time (1438-1533) under only four successive Inca kings.

Without employing either the invention of money or establishing a long-distance trade or local market system, they established an economic system that provided for the daily needs of the huge populace and the ceremonial needs of the nobility.

Without a writing system, they managed the far-flung economic system with a sophisticated record-keeping device called the *quipu*, a knotted-string mnemonic device that helped professional accountants to keep track of complex data streams on a regular basis. (It was based on the idea of tying a string around your finger to remember to buy bread at the grocery store.)



Inca Quipu, a String Memory Device



Poma de Ayala's Accountant with Quipu

Without a large standing army, the Incas' military strategy called for a relatively small command staff of nobles who drafted farmers, herders, and others as troops when needed. They used these troops to overwhelm their enemies with a massive show of force by which to conquer new terrain and its defenders.

Without metal weapons, they fought with bows and arrows (recently adopted from the Amazonian lowlands), sling stones, spears, wooden clubs shaped like swords, and the Inca favorite, the stone star mace on a yard-long wooden handle. (Skulls have been found with holes matching these maces.) Most combat was hand-to-hand. Soldiers wore quilted cotton armor, and the nobility had plate metal body armor on their chests and backs.

The draft or *mit'a* technique provided troops as needed, and then allowed them to return home to tend their crops. The farmers could provide surpluses to feed everyone, and the Inca leaders put masses of goods in hundreds of storage buildings on slopes above the towns. These were used to feed the Inca

bureaucrats and armies on the move, and as emergency supplies in times of shortages: droughts, earthquakes, floods, and landslides.

The troops, as well as the communities, were organized on a decimal system: one man was head of a group of 10, and other head of a group of 50, then another of 100, then 500, 1,000, 5,000, and 10,000. This served to organize troops, and also aid the regular census, so the Incas knew where tribute and labor would come from. Socially, it looked like an intensively stratified society. Militarily, it looked like they had invented non-commissioned officers, but they seem not to have trained them as small-group leaders. There was little faith in Inca leadership. Military officers apparently did little delegation, so that when the commanders were killed or captured, the remaining forces left the field, sometimes with thousands of men deserting overnight.

The heaviest demands the Inca nobility made on the people was for tribute or taxes in the form of manual labor. Men were to contribute three or four months of service each year to the army, or for dramatic construction projects, such as the 24,000 miles (40,000 kilometers) of roadways, bridges, and canals. They built impressive agricultural terrace systems that seemed to flow down the steep Andean slopes, grand temples, and massive fitted stone walls in Cuzco and other cities.



Inca stonework in modern Cuzco walls and streets

Inca Fortress of Sacsahuaman above Cuzco

These were all done with conscripted labor, as each peasant took his turn (*mit'a*) to work for the Inca. The commoners also did several months of farm work each year on the Inca's fields, some for the

government, and others for the Inca as Son of the Sun. The remaining time could be spent on their own fields, to feed their families.



Poma de Ayala's Potato Harvest



Inca Shrine, "Anchor of the Sun," at Machu Picchu

As the head of the economic system, the Inca himself simply owned everything. He required production of vast surpluses to support armies in the field. Storage warehouses (*qollqas*) were scattered all over the empire. Money was not needed, as trade was only with outside entities beyond the Empire. Within the boundaries, kin groups, the Inca's llama trains, or human bearers moved goods from place to place on demand. Taxes were paid in labor, cloth, and foodstuffs.

Kin groups (*ayllu*) within communities allocated fields to families, and often there would be *ayllu* members in several different ecological zones, at different altitudes, which contributed to the support of all of the *ayllu*. Some members herded llamas and alpacas on the *puna* grasslands above the tree lines, and others farmed different crops at different altitudes and climates (See chart above).

Whole communities might be dedicated to the production of a single craft: metallurgy, textiles, pottery, woodworking, fishing, mining, farming, or herding. Their surplus production was sent to Inca storehouses, then sent by llama or human caravans to where they were needed. These communities were expected also to raise sufficient food for themselves in their spare time.

Conquered peoples who resisted Inca control of their lands were sometimes moved *en masse* from their homes to another part of the empire as *mitmaq* to prevent trouble in their own lands, and avoid trouble in the lands to which they were moved. The local lords would be "invited" to live in Cuzco, where Inca bureaucrats could keep an eye on them, and prevent their home communities from revolting. By 1532, nearly one-quarter of the Empire's people had been relocated. This increased the control from the top down. It also forced the adaptation of *Quechua* as the national language, since so many communities had languages different from the people who were moved into their territories.

Inca religion involved the worship of various gods, chief of them the Creator, called *Viracocha*, the Sun, *Inti*, and Thunder, *Inti-Illapa*. These were all male figures, but Mother Moon, *Mama-Kilya*, Earth Mother, *Pachamama*, and Mother Sea, *Mamacocha*, were also high on the list of deities (D'Altroy, 2003). The principal Inca ruler "The Inca" was worshiped as a god, as were his immediate ancestors. Ancestor

worship was so important that the mummies of preceding Inca rulers were almost as powerful in death as in life. They had their own palaces, temples and retainers who fed, spoke, and cared for them. They were consulted on major political, military and religious decisions, and the history of the empire was often “adjusted” to glorify them and the current deity-rulers. Much of the Andean sense of time is cyclical, rather than linear. This lack of concern with a European concept of a lineal stream of events in time has made reconstruction of Inca history difficult. However, Garcilasco de la Vega, son of an Inca and a Spaniard, made a major attempt as an old man in 1600 (de la Vega, 1961).

While human sacrifices were occasionally made to the ancestors and other gods, most sacrifices were of llamas and *chicha* (corn beer). These sacrifices were made for centuries before the Inca times began. *Chicha* was made and consumed in prodigious quantities for Inca ceremonial and daily uses. Important oracles at Chavín in the highlands and Pachacamac on the coast were consulted on special occasions for thousands of years.

The religious calendars were based on detailed knowledge of the solar, lunar, and Venusian cycles. Observation points for the sun, moon, and certain stars were constructed in various parts of the empire, and particularly around the capital city of Cuzco. Shrines were found on mountaintops all over the empire as well (photo above). Southern-hemisphere constellations were also under close scrutiny.

Inca social stratification was, as in most state-level societies, a complex business. Nobles and commoners were the principal divisions. Within these two divisions were various social levels. Ten noble houses were closely related to the Inca and another ten were less so. Certain “Incas by Privilege” were descended from pre-Inca peoples and others were appointed to the rank, for services to the Inca. Certain other families were high in the decimal statuses who distinguished themselves by military performance, wealth, lineage, or political activity.

Over ninety percent of the Andean peoples were commoners, in hundreds of large and small communities. These communities were generally organized into *ayllu*, which might contain several lineages and hundreds of households. Each community was led by local lords (*kuraka*). When conquered by the Incas, the *kuraka* were displaced downward by Inca nobility appointed to local posts, creating a three- or four-tier status system. Gender equality seemed to be at the heart of local systems, a fact that appeared invisible to the male-oriented early Spanish reporters. The only potentially eligible spouse for a demi-god was another demi-god, so Inca rulers chose their sisters as principal wives, and had mortal wives as well.

Within individual communities, from grand Cuzco to tiny hamlets, the *ayllu* were sorted into five or ten Hanan (upper) and Hurin (lower) segments, with three or four *ayllu* in each segment. Greater Cuzco is estimated to have had between 100,000 and 150,000 people in 1532 (Agurto Calvo 1980:122-8, D’Altroy 2003:114). This was an impressive city by any means, containing representatives of all the conquered peoples of the empire, either as guests or hostages for good behavior back home. Such large cities were present, but few in number, so the vast majority of the Inca population was rural.

Public works in the Inca Empire were impressive, despite the lack of wheeled vehicles or draft animals to pull, push, or lift large loads. The road system has already been mentioned. Other impressive public structures were the stone walls of Cuzco and other cities, and the Sacsahuaman fortress above Cuzco. They consisted of dressed stones fitted so tightly that a knife blade would not slide between them. Some were massive, weighing several tons each. Well-engineered terraces, each with an elaborate drainage system, lined the slopes. They provided thousands of long, narrow agricultural plots to cover acres of very steep mountains, to feed the populace.



Archaeologists study Inca agricultural terraces.



Qollqas on windy slopes above Inca city.

Surplus foods were stored in thousands of *qollqas*, or storehouses, often on steep slopes above the cities, to take advantage of near-constant winds to keep stored foods dry. City planning and landscaping shaped the cities and countryside to the demands of the Incas. Large open plazas and broad stone-paved avenues divided segments of the cities, and smaller paved streets carried drainage ditches down their centers. Religious sites were marked by carved stone monuments.

Technology in the Inca Empire included metallurgy, in fabricating elaborate figures and other items of hammered and cast gold, silver, and bronze, but very few practical or common uses were made of the metals. No bronze weapons were available, though breast and back guards for noble warriors were of metal. Architectural “staples” or double wedges (><) of bronze were used to align stones in walls. Only the Inca’s ceremonial foot-plow for the first planting of each season in the royal garden was pointed with gold, and bronze was not used in common tools. Textiles [photo-Vilma] were made in nearly every household, at all levels of society, as textiles were used to pay taxes every quarter.



Modern Weaver Demonstrating Back-strap Loom.



Poma de Ayala's Inca Weaver.

Textile arts were complex, made of cotton and wool, with interwoven feathers, beads of shell, gold, and silver. Very elaborate textiles had interwoven strands of gold or silver. Embroidery allowed for colorful, complex patterns representing human, animal, and fantastical figures in them. Bridges over the many rivers and streams along the thousands of miles of royal roads were made of woven grasses, reeds, wool, and other fibers, and might cross 50-100 foot wide spans, carrying a few persons at a time. They were occasionally built as two-lane, double spans for twice the traffic. *Chicha* was also brewed nearly everywhere, as prodigious quantities were consumed at every festival, and at all levels of society. Ceramic arts built upon a thousand years of technological developments, using standard styles of vessel forms and distinctive decorative designs in slips and mineral paints showing human and non-human images. Wood carving was a basic Inca-era craft, when the standard drinking vessel was a wooden cup called a *kero*, also done in ceramics. The *kero shape* was also made in gold or silver when prepared for the nobility. Stone work included elaborate work in precious stones, often worked into elite items of precious metals and shell beads. Red *spondylus* ("thorny oyster") shells from the Ecuadorian coast were highly prized for such uses.

Two special foods were invented and produced in the high altitudes. They were provided to the *mit'a* laborers, army, and *mitmaq* settlers for the first season after relocation. *Char'ki* is freeze-dried llama meat, now copied elsewhere and called beef "jerky" in English. *Chuñu* is freeze-dried potatoes. Both are light-weight, nutritious, and reasonably tasty foods for troops on the move. Yes, they really were Inca MREs!

Summary: Inca Empire

Despite the many "withouts" mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the Inca Empire was impressive. There were huge territories and populations, a powerful military and political system, a rich society with was expanding dramatically with each generation of rulers. Coordinated, top-down leadership from the top assured internal stability and diversity through the *mitmac* system, a complex road network, and a single Quechua language used for all official activities. This society was much larger, and certainly richer than the invading Spaniards ever imagined.

The success of the Spanish conquest cannot be laid to a single cause, but in a complex of co-occurring events in 1532-33. The Inca had died of plague, and his sons, Huascar and Atahualpa, were engaged in civil war for his throne. Atahualpa was victorious, trying to consolidate his control and the empire was still in turmoil, when the small troop of Spaniards arrived. Diseases were spreading south from Colombia, taking out whole villages. Most commands came from the Inca himself, with little delegation. If he were not present to decide, things didn't happen. At the death of the commanders, the army melted away. Constant threats of resettlement and *mit'a* labor taxes left mistrust and anger towards the Incas across the Empire, and there was little interest in defending the Incas against the Spanish outsiders.

The Spaniards brought steel swords, guns, horses, and a determination to conquer and loot wherever they went. Spanish greed for wealth and power overrode every other consideration. They used brutality and a small-force tactic of surprise attacks on Inca leadership so the Incas' large-force strategy had little effect on them. Mounted Spanish cavalry in armor, wielding long steel swords could decapitate and dismember warriors using lances, slings, and clubs, and protected by cotton and some bronze armor. The conquest was not a case of European determinism, but a total breakdown in the imperial defensive system at the death of the Inca himself.

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