

Inca Notes

1300 – 1541

A. Inca Timeline (4000 BCE - 1541 CE)

- 4000 BCE - 400 BCE: Titicaca culture (Upper Peru and Bolivian highlands)
- 1800 BCE - 400 BCE: Chavín culture
- 400 BCE - 700 CE: Tiahuanaco culture
- 400 BCE - 800 CE: Nazca culture
- 200 CE - 800: Mochica culture
- 800 - 1100: Huari culture
- 1100 - 1400: Chimú culture, Cajamarca culture, Ica culture
- 1200: Manco Cápac organizes the kernel of the Inca people
- 1438 – 1533 (1541): Inca culture and empire (Tawantinsuyu)

I. General

Regarding the geographical context of the Andean civilizations—from the pre-Incas to the Incas themselves—Charles C. Mann says the following in his major work titled *1493* (Knopf, 2011):

The altiplano (average altitude: about twelve thousand feet) holds most of the region's arable land: it's as if Europe had to support itself by farming the Alps. The sheer eastern face of the Andes catches the warm, humid winds from the Amazon, and consequently is beset by rain; the western, ocean-facing side, shrouded by the "rain shadow" of the peaks, contains some of the earth's driest lands. The altiplano between has a dry season and a wet season, with most of the rain coming between November and March. Left to its own devices, it would be covered by grasses in the classic plains pattern.

From this unpromising terrain sprang, remarkably, one of the world's great cultural traditions—one that by 1492 had reached, according to the University of Vermont geographer Daniel W. Gade, "a higher level of sophistication" than any of the world's other mountain cultures. Even as Egyptian kingdoms built the pyramids, Andean societies were erecting their own monumental temples and ceremonial plazas. Contentious imperia jostled for power from Ecuador to northern Chile. Nasca, with its famous stone lines and depictions of animals; Chavín, with its grand temples at Chavín de Huántar; Wari, landscape engineers par excellence; Moche, renowned for ceramics depicting every aspect of life from war and work to sleeping and sex; Tiwanaku, the highest urban complex ever built (it was centered on Lake Titicaca, the highest navigable lake on the planet); Chimor, successor to Moche, with its sprawling capital of Chan Chan—the tally is enormous. Most famous today are the Inka, who seized much of the Andes in a violent flash, built great highways and cities spendid

with gold, then fell to Spanish disease and Spanish soldiers (201).

As you see in the timeline above, a variety of Andean civilizations succeeded one another for about 5,500 years until, finally, one tribe organized itself with such cultural, economic, military, and political strength that it was able to expand to become the largest empire ever in the pre-Columbian Americas, including its contemporary, the Aztec empire in Mesoamerica. It should be noted in particular that the Inca Empire was concentrated between 3,000 and 14,000 feet above sea level in the Andes mountain chain on the western edge of South America. This empire originated among a small tribe located near Cuzco (Qosqo or Kuskum in Quechua; or Cusco in Spanish), Perú, about the year 1200 C.E. The leader of this early group was Manco Cápac. Beginning in 1438, the Incas, who by that year had formed an empire (known in Quechua as *Tawantinsuyu*), began expanding dramatically. Huayna Cápac was the emperor in 1527 to 1528, he died from a disease spread among the native peoples by the Spaniards who had been exploring the Peruvian coast from 1524 to 1527. After Huayna Cápac's death, there ensued a brutal civil war that divided the empire between Huayna Cápac's legitimate heir, emperor Huáscar Inca, who was centered in the empire's principal capital at Cuzco, and his brother, Huayna Cápac's favorite son, Atahualpa, who was centered in the empire's northern capital at Quito in Ecuador. In 1532, just as Spanish conquistadors led by Francisco Pizarro (1475-1541: => **Pizarro**) were arriving. Atahualpa won the civil war. The same year, however, Pizarro began a swift conquest of the entire Inca empire, executing Atahualpa in 1533. The same year Pizarro made Manco Inca a puppet emperor, and from 1533 to 1541 Pizarro distributed *encomiendas* among the conquistadors. The pre-Columbian historian Alfred Métraux says this (as translated by George Ordish) about this "swift conquest":

On the evening of November 16, 1532, the Inca Atahualpa was pulled from his litter, though it was surrounded by his guards, and made prisoner by Francisco Pizarro. His army, cut to pieces by a handful of horsemen, was lost in the night. In scarcely three hours the power of the most powerful state of pre-Columbian America was broken forever. The fall of the Inca empire preceded the death of a civilization regarded as remarkable even by the rough adventurers who destroyed it (1970, p. 3).

In 1535 Pizarro laid out the city of Lima (see: <= **Lima**) as the new Spanish colonial capital, and in 1542, Spain created the Viceroyalty of Perú, which would control all of South America until the 18th century when two other viceroyalties (Nueva Granada and Río de la Plata) were organized. In 1536 Manco Inca rebelled against Pizarro's forces, but Diego de Almagro, the conquistador of Chile, retook Cuzco. Manco Inca then fled to the new Inca capital of Vilcabamba (roughly 100 miles west of Cuzco). Pizarro has Almagro executed in 1538, but Almagro's followers return the favor by assassinating Pizarro in 1541. The last uninterrupted political unit of Incas was ended with the fall of the Inca city of Vilcabamba (100 miles west of Cuzco) in 1572 when the last legitimate emperor of the Incas, Tupac Amaru, was captured and executed. The Viceroyalty of Perú was authorized in 1542, but it did not actually function until the first Viceroy, Andrés Hurtado de Mendoza, arrived in Lima in 1555.



As in many areas of the Americas, however, the language and some of the culture of the pre-Columbian Incas was not destroyed completely by the Spanish conquest, but rather lives on in various ethnic groups of the Quechuas and Aymaras in Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia. In fact, the more or less final submission of the Incas occurred two hundred years later during the revolt against Spanish colonial power by Tupac Amaru, supposedly the last royal descendant of the Inca emperors (see: [<= Túpac Amaru](#)).

For a superb map of the expansion of the Inca empire from 1438 onward, study the following map:



II. Language

The Inca language was Quechua (*quechua*) or *Qhichwa simi* or *Runa simi*, “people’s language”), a language still spoken in the Andean mountains centered around Peru and extending from southern Colombia through the Andean regions of Chile and Argentina. The Incas called their language *runa-simi* (language of men), but the Spanish missionaries called their language *quechua*. According to the last moderately accurate census (2007) there were about 8,910,000 speakers of the three main branches of the Quechua language in seven South American countries. Contemporary Quechua has, of course, many loan words from Spanish, while a number of Quechua words are now in standard English including coca, cocaine, guano, jerky, llama, pampa, and quinine. One of the most famous of all Quechua words is *soroche* (> *suruqch'i*), which is Spanish for elevation sickness. For more information on Quechua see the notes on the language page of this website: [Languages of Latin America](#).

III. Religion and Cosmology

The Incas' religion was polytheistic. The main god was the sun god, who was known as Inti. The Incas believed that their emperor was directly descended from the Sun. Therefore, their political system was derived from their religion, for the emperors ruled by divine right, and sons would inherit the emperorship from their fathers. When the Inca Empire expanded, the Incas constructed sacred sites

(*huacas*) throughout the empire. It was believed that godlike presences dwelled in natural phenomena such as mountains (hence, the seemingly sacred quality of Machu Picchu), rocks, fields, rivers (including the so-called sacred river of the Incas, the Urubamba), and all places touched by the Inca emperor. Priests surrounded by the people would offer prayers and make sacrifices (children or slaves) at these sites. Like the Aztecs and Mayas, the Inca people believed that it was an honor to die (or be sacrificed) as a sacred offering. Priests acted as shamans, confessors, and *curanderos* (healers). Also, young noble virgins could become *acllas*: These *acllas* were in charge of brewing the strong alcoholic beverage known as *chicha*; also, they wove the cloth used by the emperor and the priests. If they showed special aptitude some *acllas* could become *mamaconas*, who were the virgins who swore an oath to maintain chastity and to serve Inti, the sun god. They could also become one of the emperor's wives.

The main Inca gods in the Inca pantheon were:

- Viracocha (shortened interpretation of various legends): the Inca's primary god, who rose out of Lake Titicaca (border between Peru and Bolivia); god of civilization; father to Inti; creator of the entire universe and everything on the Earth, all of which came from the ocean;
- Inti (shortened interpretation of various legends): sun god; patron deity of the Inca empire; giver of life; Inca emperors claimed they were direct descendants of Inti, who married the Inca moon goddess (Mama Quilla); she gave birth to the Earth; the Incas believed that Inti ordered his children to found and build Cuzco.

IV. Inca History

In the European year of 1200, the Inca tribe discovered and settled near the Peruvian city of Cuzco, which is northwest of Lake Titicaca high in the Bolivian Andes. However, the major period of Inca glory and imperial independence was short-lived, lasting only from 1438 to 1531. In 1438, Pachacuti Inca, the first of the great Inca emperors of the historical but pre-Columbian period, turned the small kingdom of Cuzco into a federal system empire. The Inca (i.e., emperor) was the head of government and the embodiment of the Inca's principal divinity, the sun. There were four provincial districts (Tawantinsuyu means "four corners") each ruled by its own leader. In addition, Pachacuti Inca built Machu Picchu (=> Machu Picchu) probably as a hidden retreat and worship center. The method by which the empire expanded was by means of public relations attraction campaigns and various kinds of incentives for neighboring tribes and regions to ally with the political system, the military power, and the economic wealth of the Incas. These tribes were offered rich presents of cloth, jewelry, ropes, and other luxury items. Many regions accepted the offer either because they liked what they were being offered or because they realized that the Inca's military might was so strong that

resistance would be futile. Then the local rulers' children were taken to Cuzco where they were given an education in the Inca administrative operation. After their education in the capital, these provincial children would be returned to their home region. Often intermarriage between the ruling houses in the central capital and the outlying regions would occur.

By the end of his reign Pachacuti Inca's territory covered from what is today's southern boundary and Lake Titicaca through the middle of the Peruvian Andes. Pachacuti's son, Túpac Inca, ruled from 1471 to 1493. He made major conquests to the north of Cuzco through the rest of Peru, across present-day Ecuador, and into southern Colombia. The next emperor and son of the previous emperor, Huayna Cápac, made extensive expansions through coastal Peru, all of western Bolivia, all of the north half of Chile, northwestern Argentina. The result of all these peaceful expansions and military conquests is an empire made up of many tribes and small kingdoms each with their own local languages and customs. Although there were many local variations and degrees of either adherence or semi-independence throughout the empire, nevertheless, the common bond was the empire's economy, which was based on exchange, barter, and taxation of both goods and labor.

V. Inca Society and Economy

The Inca capital was called Cuzco, located in [Perú](#). The Incas called their empire Tawantinsuyu (Four Quarters). Its government could be said to have been socialist in nature. The empire's population numbered about 7,000,000 at its height, the most populated indigenous empire in the pre-Columbian Americas. The empire was led by its chief of state (i.e., Quechua: Inca). In the 15th century of the Common Era, towns and cities were developing all along the length and breadth of the Andean mountain chain. The Incas stand out in this regard as expert builders of cities. Cuzco, for example, was a true metropolis of about 300,000 people, which was therefore both one of the largest cities in the world at that time and comparable to Tenochtitlán, the Aztec's capital in Mesoamerica. The Incas laid out their cities in quadrilateral squares. The town centers or city centers contained the major public buildings while the lower classes lived in huts, which have disappeared entirely.

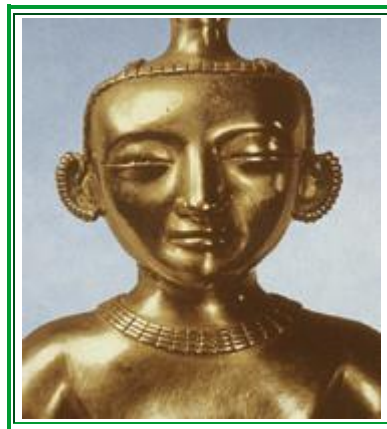
Prior to the Spanish conquest by Francisco Pizarro and his soldiers, Cuzco was dominated by well-to-do Inca nobles, artists, artisans, priests, soldiers, virgins, and merchants. The Incas used the famous quipu (Quechua: knotted strings), for accounting, counting, taking the census, and, according to recent discoveries, perhaps many other functions. Surviving quipus generally contained numeric information, but they also were used as mnemonic devices based on colors, spacing, thickness, etc. The Incas relied on oral transmission for preserving all facets of their culture including religion, history, myths, literature, music, etc. The Incas had a two-tiered educational system: vocational training for normal citizens of the empire and advanced education for the nobility.

VI. Inca Art

The most significant art form for the Incas was architecture, and in the case of Incan civilization carved out of the solid rock of the Andes, that means that the primary building material was stone. Other important art forms were pottery, bottles, and textiles (for an example of traditional Inca clothing see: [<= Cuzco #16](#)). Indeed, Inca architecture was, like Aztec and Mayan architecture, monumental, and like these latter two civilizations, Inca construction were made for beauty, stability, and permanence. Hence, it can be said that stone was the principal lasting product of their civilizations and art.¹ A major characteristic of Inca architecture is the trapezoid shape of the doors, windows, and alcoves. The best examples of Inca architecture can be seen in Cuzco ([<= Cuzco](#)) and Machu Picchu ([<= Machu Picchu](#)), where trapezoid shapes are featured. As mentioned before, the massive stones were cut by incision and steam, and they were placed together without mortar so perfectly that a knife blade cannot fit between them. The Incas first discovered this method of construction at sites made by earlier residents in the region, from the Pucara people who lived in Lake Titicaca (300 BCE to 300 CE), to the people of Tiwanaku (400 CE to 1100 CE), to the builders of Sacsayhuaman ([<= Sacsayhuaman](#)), which is a fortress overlooking the city of Cuzco.

Inca ceramics produced beautiful polychrome pieces featuring motifs of birds, waves, cats, and various geometric patterns.

For a photo tour of highlights of Inca art, click on the following image:



¹ A major book about the Incas and stone is: Carolyn Dean. *A Culture of Stone; Inka Perspectives on Rock*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010.

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