

## The Inca

### The Origins of the Inca

Between 1200 and 1535 AD, the Inca population lived in the part of South America extending from the Equator to the Pacific coast of Chile. The Inca were warriors with a strong and powerful army. Because of the fierceness of their army and their hierarchical organization, they became the largest society in Central America.

Their cities and fortresses were mostly built on highlands and on the steep slopes of the Andes Mountains. The architecture of the Inca cities still amazes and puzzles most scientists. Stone steps lead up to the top of the cities, which consist of stone houses and religious buildings. The blocks of stones weigh several tons and they are fit together so tightly that not even a razor blade can fit through them. The central city was mainly used for government purposes, while the citizens occupied surrounding areas. Their homes were made from the same stone material and had grass rooftops. They built enormous fortresses on top of steep mountains that enabled them to see their enemies and defend themselves. Even though the Inca never had access to the wheel, they built a sophisticated road system to connect the villages. The roads were paved with flat stones and barriers to protect the messengers from falling down the cliff.

The Inca society was arranged by a strict hierarchical structure. There were many different levels with the Sapa, high priest or ruler, and the army commander at the top. Family members were councilors to the Sapa and even women had authority in the Inca hierarchy. The temple priests, architects and regional army commanders were next. The two lowest classes consisted of artisans, army captains, farmers, and herders. Farmers provided most of the subsistence for the rest of the population.

They developed drainage systems and canals to expand their crop resources and create irrigation. Potatoes, tomatoes, cotton, peanuts and coca were among the many crops grown by the Inca. Llamas were used for meat and transportation. Increased food levels led to a growth in the Inca population.

The highest point in an Inca village was reserved for religious purposes. This point was the closest to the sun, which represented their major god, Inti, the Sun God. The Sun Temple, located in Machu Picchu, Peru, was a religious calendar that marked the winter and summer solstices.

The Inca were not only fierce conquerors but they also had a violent punishment system. If someone stole, murdered, or had sex with a Sapa wife or a Sun Virgin, they were thrown off a cliff, hands cut off or eyes cut out, or hung up to starve to death. Prisons were of no use because punishment usually consisted of death.

1. Describe the Incan social hierarchy.
2. Describe Incan architecture. Why did the Inca's build roads?

### Incan Government and Society

The Incas had a highly organized government based in Cuzco. The emperor lived there and was regarded to as the main supreme the ruler and was deemed a descendant of the Sun. He was married to his sister, who was referred to as the moon. Underneath him were the nobles. They were talented and gifted and their skills provided for all of the Inca civilization. Under the nobles there were the warriors, merchants, traders and farmers.

The tax requirements were high. Women were expected to weave a certain amount of cloth, while men had to mine or serve in the army. Taxes were expected to be paid by commoners. If the commoners didn't have money, they'd pay with service on state projects or make items to sell. People could also pay the government by giving a portion of their yearly crop to the collectors instead.

Cuzco was the center of Inca life, and the home of its leaders. The riches that were gathered in the city of Cuzco alone, as capital and court of the Empire were incredible. Inca kings and nobles amassed stupendous riches which accompanied them, in death, in their tombs.

Law in the Incan society was also different than most early civilizations. Because everyone had everything they needed, people rarely stole things. As a result, there were no prisons. The worst crimes in the Inca Empire were murder, insulting the Sapa Inca and saying bad things about gods. The punishment for the crimes was being thrown off of a cliff. The punishment for adultery was also harsh. The couple was tied up by their hands and feet to a wall and left to starve to death. Smaller crimes were punished by the chopping off of the hands and feet or the gouging of the eyes.

The Incas required communities to participate in public building projects, and in mining or working the land. These shifts of required workers were called *mita*. Within Incan communities, small groups of *ayllu* were formed. These are clans of families who lived and worked together on projects in order to keep the community self-sufficient. While most men were herders, women occupied themselves by weaving cloth, caring for the household, and working in the fields. Although labor was divided by gender lines, the roles of both male and female were equally respected. Inheritance progressed through parallel descent, the daughters inheriting from the mothers and sons from the fathers.

This cooperation required of the Incan society helped to ensure the food supply in times of scarcity. They expanded irrigation systems in case of drought, and developed a way to freeze-dry potatoes to store them for future use.

1. How did the Incan government punish most crimes?
2. Describe roles of men and women.
3. Define ayllu and mita.

### Incan Achievement

The Incas controlled a vast territory that encompassed extremely rugged terrain and different climates, inhabited by perhaps over six million people. Those lands were home to people of dozens of different ethnic groups, representing numerous different languages. The Incas used two main methods to subjugate the people of these lands. The first was military conquest, facilitated by their huge well-equipped army. The second was diplomacy, in which the Incas offered the elites of the region the choice of submitting peacefully and gaining favor, backed by the threat of armed conquest.

The Incas are perhaps best known for their engineering works and architecture. They constructed an extensive system of well-built and constantly maintained roads, covering at least 23,000 km. The road network facilitated communications and the movement of people (especially the armies) and goods. To cross the many steep ravines found in the Andes, they built impressive suspension bridges. On the mountainsides in many regions, they built elaborate terraces to increase food production.

Inca architecture is well-known for its finely worked stones which, as the cliché goes, are fitted together so well, without the use of mortar, that you cannot fit a knife blade between the stones. In reality, the fine Inca stone work was reserved for the more important buildings erected by the state, and the Incas actually created more buildings of less exacting methods. The highest concentration of high quality Inca stonework is, of course, found in Cuzco and the surrounding region, in sites such as Machu Picchu. Other examples of fine Inca masonry are found scattered throughout the realm, but mostly in the highlands.

The Incas had no formal writing system, but relied instead on *quipus*, which were record-keeping devices based on a complicated system of knots. They had no wheeled vehicles, and transported all goods manually or with the use of llamas. The impressive engineering and architectural works were not produced using elaborate technology or secret techniques, but through the deployment of huge amounts of labor. Ultimately, the Inca achievement was the product of the highly developed organizational skills of the Inca elite, which enabled them to direct the people and resources.

1. How did the Inca suppress its neighboring peoples?
2. Describe Incan architecture.
3. What are quipus?

### Inca's Decline

There are a few reasons the Incan Empire declined. Before the Spanish conquered the Inca's, they went through a massive civil war that weakened their military. This made it easy for Pizarro and the Spanish to destroy them. Another reason they were doomed was because of their great wealth. The Spaniards, upon reaching the New World, learned of the abundance of gold in Inca society and soon set out to conquer it at all costs.

Pizarro had taken Atahualpa, the Incan leader, captive. The Incas bribed Pizarro with a room filled with gold for Atahualpa, however once Pizarro received it he still ordered that Atahualpa to be killed. The Inca had an army which consisted of 40,000 people. The Spanish army in the Americas, which was commanded by Francisco Pizarro, had only 180 people.

There are three main reasons the Incan army lost to the Spanish.

- 1) Much of the Incan army died as a result of smallpox, which was carried to them via the Spanish Conquistadors.
- 2) The Spanish Conquistadors were able to convince other tribes, already under Incan rule, to side with them and overthrow the Incan Empire.
- 3) The weapons used by Incan warriors, though effective in tribal warfare, were no match for the Spanish arms.

By 1535, the Inca society was completely overthrown, and Pizzaro moved the capital from Cuzco to Lima. It took Pizarro approximately 40 more years until the last Inca was killed, his name was Tupac Amaru, Pizarro ordered that his body be dismembered to stop any further Inca resistance. The plundering of Inca riches continues today with the pillaging of sacred sites and blasting of burial tombs by grave robbers in search of precious Inca gold.

1. What weakened the Incan military?
2. Why did Pizzaro want to destroy the Inca?
3. What are the reasons the Inca lost to the Spanish?

Pedro de Cieza de León: *Chronicles of the Incas*, 1540

The Inca were so well-organized that there was not a village that did not know where it was to send its tribute. In all these capitals the Incas had temples of the Sun and many silversmiths who did nothing but work rich pieces of gold or silver; large garrisons were stationed there, and a steward who was in command of them all, to whom an accounting of everything that was brought in was made, and who, in turn, had to give one of all that was issued. ...The tribute paid by each of these provinces, whether gold, silver, clothing, arms and all else they gave, was entered in the accounts of those who kept the *quipus* and did everything ordered by the governor in the matter of finding the soldiers or supplying whomever the Inca ordered, or making delivery to Cuzco; but when they came from the city of Cuzco to go over the accounts, or they were ordered to go to Cuzco to give an accounting, the accountants themselves gave it by the *quipus*, or went to give it where there could be no fraud, but everything had to come out right. Few years went by in which an accounting was not made....

At the beginning of the New Year the rulers of each village came to Cuzco, bringing their *quipus*, which told how many births there had been during the year, and how many deaths. In this way the Inca and the governors knew which were poor, the newly widowed, were able to pay their taxes, and how many men they could use in the event of war, and many other things they considered highly important. The Incas took care to see that justice was meted out, so much so that nobody ventured to commit a felony or theft. This was to deal with thieves, rapists, or conspirators against the Inca.

In each of the many provinces there were many storehouses filled with supplies and other needful things; thus, in times of war, wherever the armies went they used the contents of the storehouses, without ever touching the supplies of their confederates or laying a finger on what they had in their settlements....Then the storehouses were filled up once more with the tributes paid the Inca. If there came a lean year, the storehouses were opened and the provinces were lent what they needed in the way of supplies; then, in a year of abundance, they paid back all they had received. No one who was lazy or tried to live by the work of others was tolerated; everyone had to work. Thus on certain days each lord went to his lands and took the plow in hand and cultivated the earth. Even the Incas themselves did this to set an example. And under their system there was none such in all the kingdom, for, if he had his health, he worked and lacked for nothing; and if he was ill, he received what he needed from the storehouses. And no rich man could deck himself out in more finery than the poor, or wear different clothing, except the rulers and the headmen, who, to maintain their dignity, were allowed great freedom and privilege.

1. What does this conquistador think about the Incan civilization?
2. What was the purpose of the quipus?
3. How does this document allow us to understand Incan society?