

5 The Incas: Lords of the Mountains



Here Comes the Sun It is the year 1500. You are standing along a road in South America in a crowd of people. You seem to be at some kind of parade. You look down the road and see a gleaming, golden litter carried on the shoulders of four men. Inside the litter is a man wearing furs and golden jewelry.

As the litter gets closer, the people around you go down on their knees and touch their foreheads to the ground. Soon you are the only one still standing. Suddenly you notice several people yelling at you, though you can't understand what they're saying. An angry soldier is running at you with a raised club. You begin to run, and all of a sudden you wake up and realize you were having a dream.

It's a good thing you woke up. The people in your dream were bowing because the king of the Inca people, the Sapa Inca, was approaching. The Incas believed that the Sapa Inca was the living son of Inti, the sun god. No one was allowed to look at this powerful king—and you were staring right at him! If you had not woken up just in time, you would almost certainly have been killed by the soldier for being so disrespectful to the Son of the Sun.

The Empire of the Sun

Who were the Incas? They were people who built a great civilization on the western coast of South America. The first Inca people lived in the area around Cuzco in modern-day Peru.

In the early 1400s these people began conquering neighboring lands and extending their empire.

They were so successful that by the time the Spanish **conquistadors** (kahn KEES tuh dorz) arrived in the 1530s, the Inca Empire was the largest in the Americas—larger even than the Aztec Empire had been.

The Sapa Inca gave orders to more than 12 million people. His territory stretched for more than 2,000 miles along the western coast of South America. The empire covered an area so large that today most of Peru and parts of Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina would lie inside its borders.

This is a region of great geographical diversity. Arid plains stretch along the western coastline. This coastal region

vocabulary
conquistador the Spanish word for "conqueror"



This drawing, by an Inca artist, shows an Inca emperor on his throne.

includes one of the driest deserts in the world—a place where not even a cactus can grow. Farther

east the twin ranges of the snow-capped Andes Mountains rise toward the skies. Between the ranges lies a high plateau, scorching by day, freezing by night. East of the Andes are thick jungles where heavy rains feed the mighty Amazon River. All these lands were ruled by the Sapa Inca.

Inca Life

The Incas were organized into tribal groups or clans. Every Inca family was part of a clan, and each clan was responsible for farming a piece of land. Families lived in windowless one-room stone huts with thatched roofs. Home, sweet home, probably didn't smell so sweet, since families sometimes burned dried animal waste as fuel. Parents and children slept together on animal skins spread on the bare floor. A few wall pegs were the only furnishings.

Boys followed their fathers' trades. Girls copied their mothers'. Farming was how most Incas supported themselves. They grew corn, squash, tomatoes, peanuts, cotton, and more than a hundred varieties of potatoes. The potato was an essential crop for the Incas because it could be grown at high altitudes, even on the slopes of the Andes Mountains.

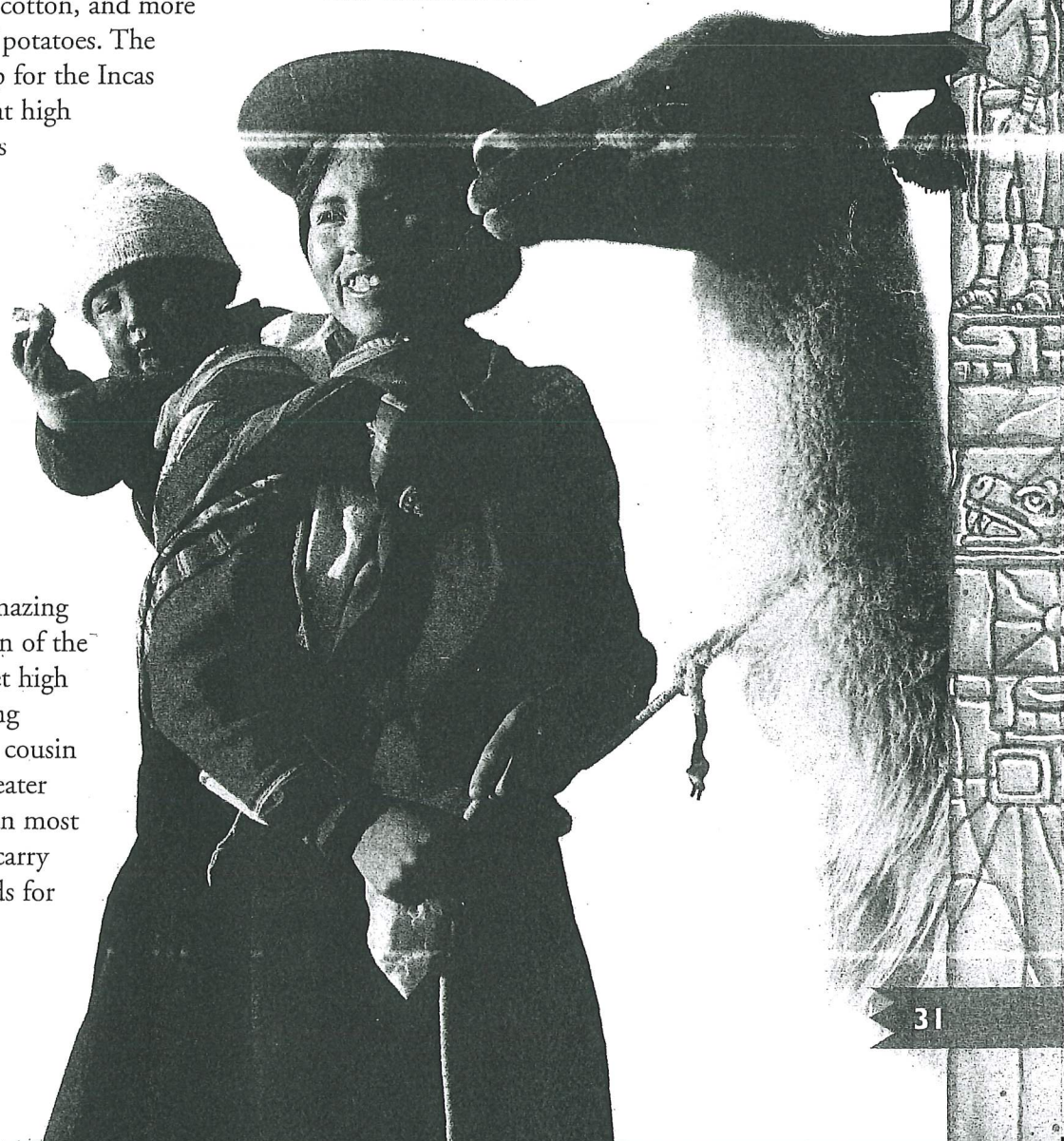
Inca farmers also raised livestock, including guinea pigs, **alpacas**, and **llamas**. The guinea pigs were used for food. The alpacas were an important source of wool. The llamas were used for all sorts of things, but especially as pack animals.


The llama is truly an amazing animal. It is a smaller cousin of the camel, standing about 4 feet high at the shoulder and weighing about 250 pounds. Like its cousin the camel, the llama has greater strength and endurance than most other animals. Llamas can carry a load of 100 to 125 pounds for

15 to 20 miles a day. They will eat just about anything and can go long periods without drinking. Llamas are gentle animals, but if they are mistreated or overloaded, they will let you know it. A llama may simply sit down and refuse to move, or it may hiss and spit to make its point. When llamas spit, they don't just spit saliva; they spit hard pellets of partially-digested food, which can cause pain if they hit you.

vocabulary
alpaca a South American mammal valued for its long, woolly coat
llama a South American mammal valued for its endurance and for its woolly coat and meat

Today, people of the highlands of Peru need llamas much as their ancestors did.





The Incas used llamas to transport goods, but they also used the llama's wool for cloth, its hide for rugs and coats, its waste for fuel and fertilizer, and its meat for food. When a llama died, the Incas cut the meat into strips and dried these strips in the sun. They called these strips *charqui* (CHAHHR kee), which is the source of our own word for dried meat, "jerky."

Inca women were master weavers. They made clothing from the cotton they grew and from the wool of their llamas and alpacas.

For the Good of the Empire

Inca families worked for themselves, but they were also required to spend part of their time working for the Sapa Inca and the empire. When they farmed, part of their time was spent raising crops for themselves and part was spent raising crops for the empire. Inca men also had to donate time by working on construction projects, building roads, or serving in the military.

For the most part, the Inca people seem to have worked willingly understanding that their labors were for the good of the empire. The Sapa Inca and the priests used only a small part of the goods produced. The rest was stored in warehouses and distributed to those who were too old or too sick to work. When crops failed and times were hard, food and goods were doled out to the working people, too. This system ensured that no one went hungry in the Inca Empire.

The rule of the Sapa Inca was absolute, and many government officials traveled throughout the empire to make sure his laws were obeyed. One of these officials was known as *He-Who-Sees-Everything*. He-Who-Sees-Everything was responsible for visiting Inca villages and making them pay their fair share of taxes. Oddly enough, he also served as a matchmaker.

He-Who-Sees-Everything would arrive in an Inca village every few years. When he arrived, he ordered the villagers to assemble in a plaza or field so that he could take a **census**. The more people in the village, the more the village would be required to pay in taxes.

Once the counting was over, He-Who-Sees-Everything asked all of the unmarried girls of marriageable age to step forward. The official interviewed each girl individually. If a girl was deemed especially worthy, she was sent to Cuzco to serve as one of the Sapa Inca's many wives.

Once these chosen few had been selected, He-Who-Sees-Everything called all the unmarried young men before him. He then proceeded to pair off young men and women, making dozens of marriages on the spot. No questions were asked. After all, He-Who-Sees-Everything was a servant of the Sapa Inca, and the marriages he was arranging were for the good of the empire.

vocabulary
census a count of the number of people living in a certain area

The Inca Empire lasted only a century, from the beginning of its expansion in 1438 to the Spanish conquest in 1532. But it was a century of towering achievement. The Incas did not just conquer people. To keep their empire unified, they changed every place they conquered. Read on to find out how the energetic Incas changed the face of South America.

Royal Road It's one thing to conquer many lands. It's another to keep everything together once you've finished conquering. How did the ancient Romans hold their empire together? They built a road across their empire.

able for government empire. They helped the empire possible. roads enabled the army territories to put the emperor's rule.

of ancient Rome. road builders. Their Royal Road, stretched from the northernthern. It was the until the 1800s.

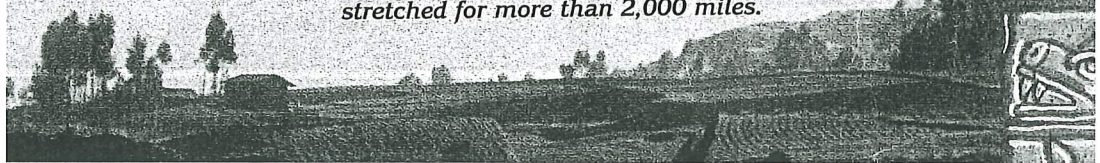
feet wide for most of ed mountains, valleys, stretches of the road larkers measured ees gave shade and ravelers. There were

even roadside storehouses where travelers could stop at the end of a day's travel and get food.

Parts of the Royal Road were made of packed dirt, and other parts were paved. Inca engineers fitted the paving stones together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Modern builders use mortar, a cement-like material, to keep stones together. But the Incas did not have any kind of mortar. Instead, they cut each paving stone so exactly that it fit snugly and stayed together without mortar.

The Royal Road is an impressive achievement of Inca engineering. We need to remember that the Incas had no earth-moving machinery. They did not have horses or oxen to pull wagons. They did not even have the wheel. Everything was done by hand. And yet the end result was a road so sturdy and well designed that not even torrential rainstorms and flash floods could destroy it.

This road is part of the ancient Royal Road that connected all parts of the Inca Empire. It stretched for more than 2,000 miles.



The Royal Road was the most important Inca road, but there were many others. At every valley, east-west roads crossed the Royal Road. The Royal Road was like the spine, and these secondary roads were like the nerves that branch out from the spine. This network of roads held the Inca Empire together.

Bridges Built for the Centuries

In order to build roads across the mountains, streams, and canyons of South America, the Incas had to build lots of bridges. Like the roads, these bridges are marvels of engineering. A bridge built over the Apurímac (ahp uh REE mahk) River in Peru is especially interesting. It was built over a steep river gorge by the Incas in 1350. The bridge was a hanging suspension bridge, held together by enormous strands of rope. The rope strands needed to be replaced every two years.

What is amazing is that the bridge was in service from 1350 until 1890! For more than 500 years, the bridge was maintained and used, first by the Incas, then by the Spanish, and finally by the independent people of Peru. It is one of the greatest achievements of the Inca engineers, and it gained additional fame when it was featured in a classic novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, by the American writer Thornton Wilder.

Mountain Staircases

The Incas also used their engineering know-how to help them farm in the mountainous Andes. Farming on a mountainside is almost impossible; the steep incline makes every task—plowing, planting, and harvesting—terribly difficult. Hillside farming is also bad for crops. In the heavy downpours, water runs downhill and washes out crops.

The challenge was to find a way to grow crops on the sides of the Andes. The solution was to cut **terraces** into the sides of the mountains, creating flat farm fields that could be planted and harvested just like valley fields.

The Incas also built irrigation systems to bring water to these terraced fields.

vocabulary

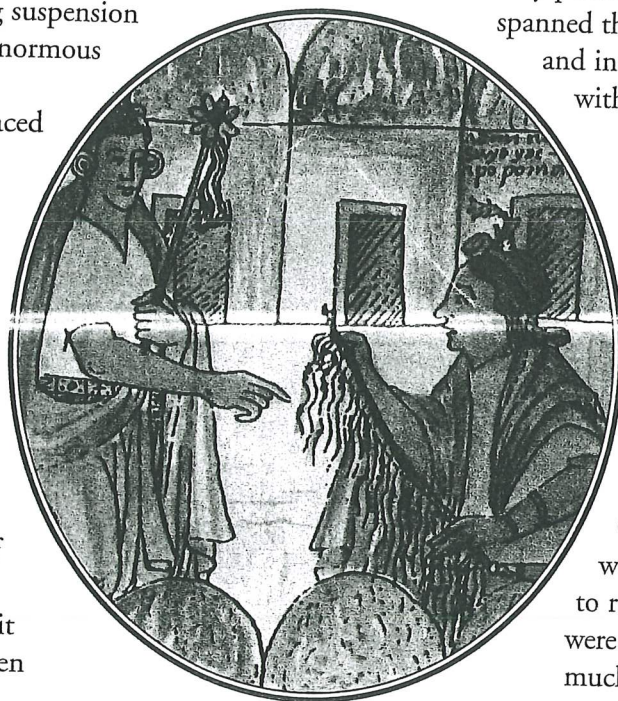
terrace a flat piece of land carved out of the side of a mountain or hill

Keeping It All Together

The Incas may have had an advanced road system, but they had no written language. How could they possibly run an empire that spanned the length of a continent and included 12 million people without writing?

The Incas came up with some clever strategies. For instance, they invented a device for counting and record-keeping called a *quipu* (KEE poo). A quipu was a piece of string from which dangled shorter strings of various colors. Government officials would tie knots on a quipu to record how many warriors were headed for a village or how much corn was in a storehouse.

The Incas also used messengers trained to run short distances at great speeds to carry news throughout the empire. Since the Incas had no written language, these messengers could not carry a written note. Instead, a runner memorized his message and sprinted to a rest station, a mile or so away, where the next runner was waiting. Without slowing the pace, the first runner recited the message, and, running alongside, the relief runner repeated it. Then the first runner dropped out, and the new messenger continued on.



An Inca noble receives a report from one of his officials who holds a quipu.

The system was fast! A message could travel 150 miles in a day, and all the way from Quito (KEE toh) to Cuzco in a little over a week, which was very fast for the time. In the 1860s the famous pony express riders of the American West were only able to cover about 200 miles a day—and they rode on horseback!

City in the Clouds

Another marvel of Inca engineering is the famous city of Machu Picchu (MAH choo PEEK choo). Machu Picchu is a mountain fortress located about 50 miles northwest of Cuzco. It sits in a high valley, between two peaks of the Andes.

In the center visitors can see ruins of an open plaza, a temple, and a palace where archaeologists discovered Inca skeletons. The surrounding hillside is terraced for farming.

Archaeologists estimate that Machu Picchu was built in the mid-1400s. For years it was a vacation spot for the Inca emperors. Today it is the leading tourist attraction in Peru.

Because Machu Picchu is more than 7,000 feet above sea level, it is not an easy place to visit. Tourists now take a railroad partway up the mountain and then follow a steep, twisting road to the top. Energetic hikers can walk on an old Inca trail that climbs up the steep slopes of the Andes.

Expanding the Empire

Like the Aztecs, the Incas built their empire by conquering other people. And, like the Aztecs, they are known to have sacrificed human beings for religious purposes. However, human sacrifice seems to have been less widespread in the Inca Empire. The Incas seem to have placed less emphasis on sacrificing conquered people and more emphasis on having those people become loyal Inca subjects.

When the conquered people in a particular region were cooperative, the Sapa Inca made few changes. Inca architects and managers came to the region to supervise the building of roads and temples. The Incas taught their language to the local people and asked them to worship the sun god Inti. However, the worship of local gods was allowed, and sometimes those gods were even made part of the Inca religion.

However, if the people were uncooperative, the Sapa Inca moved swiftly. He shipped trouble-makers out to villages where they were surrounded by loyal Inca citizens, and he shipped loyal Inca citizens in to live among the conquered people. In this way, in a short time, the Sapa Inca was able to build an empire that was enormous and yet unified. This empire would endure until the Spanish conquistadors made their fateful appearance.

The city of Machu Picchu is located high in the Andes Mountains, about 50 miles northwest of Cuzco.

