

2·2 The Inca civilisation: rise and fall

The Inca civilisation has left us a rich heritage: food such as potatoes, maize and quinoa (pronounced keen-wah); drugs such as quinine; and an amazing network of paved trails punctuated by superb ruins. Quechua, the official Inca language, is still spoken by 10 million people to this day (page 61). Andean people maintain elements of the Inca religion, such as making offerings to apus, the spirits of sacred mountains, while also practising the Catholic religion. Above all, the Inca values of hard work and co-operation are obvious in the daily lives of their descendants.

The Incas and their predecessors developed fine arts to a high level, notably in textiles and weaving, ceramics and metalwork. They devised the 'lost wax' technique for making gold sculptures that is still used today by British dentists to shape gold fillings: during centrifuging, the heavier gold displaces the lighter wax. Sadly, the Spaniards melted down virtually all Inca gold and silver in an appalling display of greed and vandalism.

Inca architecture shows an almost religious commitment to suiting the design and choice of materials to the site. Time and again, you will see a interesting rock preserved in situ and skilfully worked into the structure. Inca stonemasons often expertly shaped huge rocks so as to echo and celebrate the silhouettes of sacred mountains. These are called 'image stones'.

Image stones representing the mountains Yanantin and Putucusi



Inca stonework is famous for its mortarless walls with large stones that fitted together with amazing precision. Not a blade of grass can grow in the gaps, yet the Incas had no knowledge of iron or steel and no machinery to move the stones. They worked with natural fracture lines in the rocks, sometimes drilling a line of holes which they plugged with wooden dowels; when dampened, these expanded and split the rock. Their shaping tools were made of bronze, silver and haematite, and they patiently sanded and polished the surfaces to finish them. Moving the huge stones into place needed great manpower. Although they used rollers of wood and stone, they never used wheels, perhaps because they had no metal strong enough to make an axle.



Pointer stone at Machu Picchu, aligned with the Southern Cross

Inca religion featured worship of the sun, moon and stars. Anyone who has felt the bone-chilling cold of a clear night in the Andes will understand why they revered the sun above all. They designed windows and markers to track and predict the winter solstice (page 59), and created pointer stones accurately aligned with the compass points or sacred mountains.

A young boy points out the puma's head in the pattern of stones in a Cusco wall

