

2-2 The Inca civilisation: rise and fall

The Inca civilisation has left us a rich heritage: food such as potatoes, maize and quinoa; drugs such as quinine; and an amazing network of paved trails punctuated by superb ruins. Quechua, the official Inca language (see page 61), is still spoken by 10 million people to this day. 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 an 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 fit together with amazing precision. Not a blade of grass can grow in the gaps, yet the Incas had no knowledge of iron or steel to make axes, and no machinery. They worked with natural fracture lines in the rocks, taken from quarries that were mostly natural rock falls. They used hard hammerstones as shaping tools, nibbling away to achieve a perfect fit. They patiently dressed the surfaces by sanding and polishing.

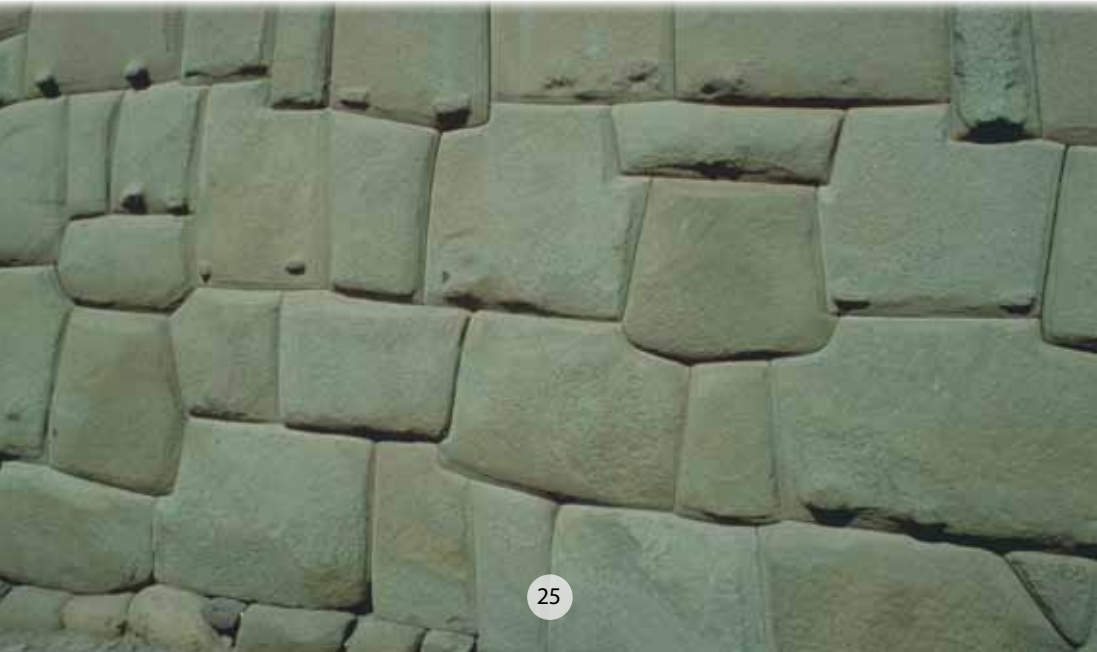
Moving the huge stones into place needed massive manpower. They may have used rollers or dragged the stones over hard gravel. The chronicles mention hundreds of men hauling stones with cables of hemp or leather. Stones were lifted into place using ramps.



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: see page 59. Their pointer stones were accurately shaped and aligned with sacred mountains, compass points or constellations.

Superb stonework in the wall of a former Inca palace, Cusco



The Incas lived very close to nature. They worshipped mother earth, water and sacred crops including quinoa and coca leaves. Inca descendants still make offerings to Pachamama (mother earth). The three levels of the Andean world were symbolised by three animals: the **serpent** (wisdom and the underworld), the **puma** (power and the surface of the earth) and the **condor** (the messenger of the skies). These levels are embodied in sacred stones with three steps.

Although we refer loosely to the Incas in general, at any one time there was only one Inca (the *Sapa Inca*), son of the sun, who acted as god, king and general combined. He ruled the empire through a sophisticated system of government, with taxes, controlled movement of population and a system of knotted cords, called *quipus*, for keeping records. At its zenith in the 15th century, the empire was over 5000 km from north to south, covered by a vast network of fine roads. Fleet-footed messengers called *chasquis* ran barefoot in relays, bearing messages and goods. The Inca in Cusco could even enjoy fresh seafood brought 300 km from the coast.

Despite its high degree of organisation, the Inca empire was surprisingly short-lived, and ended brutally in an infamous episode. On his third voyage into Peru in 1532, Francisco Pizarro, an illiterate Spanish peasant turned soldier, led a tiny company of 60-odd horsemen and 100 or so infantry, seeking gold and other treasure. By a combination of shock tactics, treachery and lucky timing, this tiny force of Conquistadors overcame the greatest empire of the day.

The Inca Atahualpa was told of the Spanish arrival by his *chasquis*. At the time, he was near Cajamarca with an army of thousands of fit, trained soldiers. Surprisingly, despite being told about the Spaniards raping and stealing, he agreed to meet them in the



Red quinoa has nutritious, gluten-free seeds; cultivated since 3000 BC, it was held sacred by the Incas

main square of Cajamarca. Atahualpa arrived borne high on a gilded litter, dressed in great splendour but unarmed, followed by a procession of courtiers, nobility and soldiers. The Spanish attack began by firing a cannon from the *ushnu* (stepped platform), at which signal their soldiers and cavalry rushed out of their hiding places (the halls where they had been billeted overnight). The Peruvians were terrified and confused by the combined impact of horses and gunfire. Thus 7000 unarmed Incas were butchered within a few hours by a force of under 200 Spaniards.

Atahualpa was captured alive; in exchange for his life, he offered to fill one room with gold and two more rooms with silver. Misguidedly believing that the Spaniards would stick to the bargain, he told his leaderless army to disband. After the treasure had been brought from all corners of the empire by llama trains, the Spaniards treacherously murdered Atahualpa on 26 July 1533. He was to be burned at the stake, but after he converted to Christianity he was baptised and then garroted instead.

Shortly before the Spanish arrived, civil war had broken out after the death of Huayna Capac from smallpox; Atahualpa had defeated his half-brother Huascar. The Conquistadors took full advantage, and installed another of Huascar's brothers, the 17 year-old Manco, as a puppet Inca. They received support not only from Huascar's faction but also from other native peoples who imagined that the Spanish would release them from Inca domination. Nevertheless Inca resistance continued in various ways until the last Inca, Tupac Amaru, was captured in 1572 and executed in Cusco's Plaza de Armas. This was followed by centuries of exploitation and persecution, the destruction of monuments and the outlawing of their religion and the Quechua language: see also page 61.

To this day, the tension between Hispanic colonial intrusion and Inca legacy is almost palpable. You feel it in the dual systems of naming and spelling. You hear it on the Trail where the porters speak Quechua, but the guides speak Spanish or English to the visitors. You see it in Cusco, where the Spanish convent of Santo Domingo was crudely imposed on top of the Koricancha, the Incas' most holy 'temple of the sun'.

Even the Museo Inka is housed in a 17th century colonial mansion. This building stands on ancient Inca foundations, and survived many earthquakes. Its collection of ceramics, textiles, jewelry and painted wooden goblets (*queros*) illustrate Inca medicine and fine arts. Its unusual attractions include a collection of mummies and of curiously deformed skulls. It was Inca practice to bandage the heads of children, especially those of the nobility, to create fashionably shaped skulls.

This short account can only scratch the surface of Inca history and civilisation. Please see page 62 for suggested reading and other recommended visits.