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Inca Empire

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Photo Gallery



Clark Photography

Photographer Robert Clark provides glimpses of the Inca past and present in this photo gallery.



Lofty Ambitions of the Inca

Rising from obscurity to the heights of power, a succession of Andean rulers subdued kingdoms, sculpted mountains, and forged a mighty empire.

By Heather Pringle

Photograph by Robert Clark

Interactive Map



The Inca Empire

See the extent of the Inca Empire and investigate the

On the remote Peruvian island of Taquile, in the middle of the great Lake Titicaca, hundreds of people stand in silence on the plaza as a local Roman Catholic priest recites a prayer. Descended in part from Inca colonists sent here more than 500 years ago, the inhabitants of Taquile keep the old ways. They weave brilliantly colored cloth, speak the traditional language of the Inca, and tend their fields as they have for centuries. On festival days they gather in the plaza to dance to the sound of wooden pipes and drums.

Today, on a fine summer afternoon, I watch from the sidelines as they celebrate the fiesta of Santiago, or St. James. In Inca times this would have been the festival of Illapa, the Inca god of lightning. As the prayers draw to a close, four men dressed in



Sacred Valley in this
interactive map.

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Video



Machu Picchu Flyover

Take a flight of fancy above
the ruins of Machu Picchu in
this 3-D, computer-generated
animation.

black raise a rustic wooden litter holding a painted statue of Santiago. Walking behind the priest in a small procession, the bearers carry the saint for all in the plaza to see, just as the Inca once shouldered the mummies of their revered kings.

The names of those Inca rulers still resonate with power and ambition centuries after their demise: Viracocha Inca (meaning Creator God Ruler), Huascar Inca (Golden Chain Ruler), and Pachacutec Inca Yupanqui (He Who Remakes the World). And remake the world they did. Rising from obscurity in Peru's Cusco Valley during the 13th century, a royal Inca dynasty charmed, bribed, intimidated, or conquered its rivals to create the largest pre-Columbian empire in the New World.

Scholars long possessed few clues about the lives of Inca kings, apart from flattering histories that Inca nobles told soon after the arrival of Spanish conquistadores. The Inca had no system of hieroglyphic writing, as the Maya did, and any portraits that Inca artists may have made of their rulers were lost. The royal palaces of Cusco, the Inca capital, fell swiftly to the European conquerors, and a new Spanish colonial city rose on their ruins, burying or obliterating the Inca past. In more recent times, civil unrest broke out in the Peruvian Andes in the early 1980s, and few archaeologists ventured into the Inca heartland for more than a decade.

Now archaeologists are making up for lost time. Combing rugged mountain slopes near Cusco, they are discovering thousands of previously unknown sites, shedding new light on the origins of the Inca dynasty. Gleaning clues from colonial documents, they are relocating the lost estates of Inca rulers and examining the complex upstairs-and-downstairs lives of imperial households. And on the frontiers of the lost empire, they are piecing together dramatic evidence of the wars Inca kings fought and the psychological battles they waged to forge dozens of fractious ethnic groups into a united realm. Their extraordinary ability to triumph on the battlefield and to build a civilization, brick by brick, sent a clear message, says Dennis Ogburn, an archaeologist at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte: "I think they were saying, We are the most powerful people in the world, so don't even think of messing with us."

On a sun-washed July afternoon, Brian Bauer, an archaeologist from the University of Illinois at Chicago, stands in the plaza of the sprawling Inca ceremonial site of Maukallacta, south of Cusco. He takes a swig of water, then points to a towering outcrop of gray rock just to the east. Carved into its craggy summit are massive steps, part of a major Inca shrine. Some 500 years ago, says Bauer, pilgrims journeyed here to worship at the steep outcrop, once regarded as one of the most sacred places in the empire: the birthplace of the Inca dynasty.

Bauer, a wiry 54-year-old in a battered ball cap and blue jeans, first came to Maukallacta in the early 1980s to uncover the origins of the Inca Empire. At the time most historians and archaeologists believed that a brilliant, young Andean Alexander the Great named Pachacutec became the first Inca king in the early 1400s, transforming a small collection of mud huts into a mighty empire in just one generation. Bauer didn't buy it. He believed the Inca dynasty had far deeper roots, and Maukallacta seemed the logical place to look for them. To his bewilderment, two field seasons of digging turned up no trace of primeval Inca lords.

So Bauer shifted north, to the Cusco Valley. With colleague R. Alan Covey, now an archaeologist at Southern Methodist University (SMU) in Dallas, and a team of Peruvian assistants, he marched up and down the steep mountain slopes in straight

transect lines for four field seasons, recording every scattering of pottery sherds or toppled stone wall he came across. Persistence paid off. Bauer and his colleagues eventually discovered thousands of previously unknown Inca sites, and the new evidence revealed for the first time how an Inca state had risen much earlier than previously believed—sometime between 1200 and 1300. The ancient rulers of the region, the mighty Wari (Huari) lords who reigned from a capital near modern Ayacucho, had fallen by 1100, in part due to a severe drought that afflicted the Andes for a century or more. In the ensuing turmoil, local chiefs across the Peruvian highlands battled over scarce water and led raiders into neighboring villages in search of food. Hordes of refugees fled to frigid, windswept hideouts above 13,000 feet.

But in the fertile, well-watered valley around Cusco, Inca farmers stood their ground. Instead of splintering apart and warring among themselves, Inca villages united into a small state capable of mounting an organized defense. And between 1150 and 1300, the Inca around Cusco began to capitalize on a major warming trend in the Andes.

As temperatures climbed, Inca farmers moved up the slopes by 800 to 1,000 feet, building tiers of agricultural terraces, irrigating their fields, and reaping record corn harvests. "These surpluses," says Alex Chepstow-Lusty, a paleoecologist at the French Institute for Andean Studies in Lima who has been studying the region's ancient climate, allowed the Inca to "free up many people for other roles, whether building roads or maintaining a large army." In time Inca rulers could call up more conscripts and supply a larger army than any neighboring chief.

With this big stick, Inca kings began eyeing the lands and resources of others. They struck marriage alliances with neighboring lords, taking their daughters as wives, and dispensed generous gifts to new allies. When a rival lord spurned their advances or stirred up trouble, they flexed their military might. In all the surrounding valleys, local lords succumbed one by one, until there was only one mighty state and one capital, the sacred city of Cusco.

Flush with success, Inca kings set their sights farther afield, on the wealthy lands surrounding Lake Titicaca. Sometime after 1400, one of the greatest Inca rulers, Pachacutec Inca Yupanqui, began planning his conquest of the south. It was the dawn of empire.

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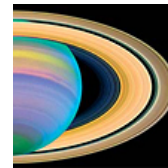
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