



- ◀ The city of Machu Picchu was a religious center of the Inca Empire.

# The Incas

## 26.1 Introduction

In Chapter 25, you learned about daily life in the Aztec Empire of Mexico. Now you will learn about the **Inca Empire**, a great society that developed in the Andes Mountains of South America. The Inca Empire arose in the 1400s C.E. It lasted until 1532, when the Incas were conquered by Spanish explorers.

From north to south, the Inca Empire stretched more than 2,500 miles. To communicate across this vast distance, the Incas used runners called *chasquis* to relay messages from one place to another.

Imagine that you are a young *chasqui*. From your messenger station along the Royal Road, you see another *chasqui* racing toward you. You know he carries an important message from the emperor. You dart out of the messenger station and run alongside the other runner while he hands you a set of strings called a *quipu*. Knots tied at different places in the strings stand for numbers. They will help you remember the message. The other *chasqui* also gives you a verbal message. Once he is certain that you have both parts of the message, he stops running. His work is over. Now it is up to you to get the message to the next station as quickly as possible.

This remarkable relay system helped the Incas manage their far-flung empire. In this chapter, you will explore how the Inca Empire was built and maintained. You'll also learn about the Incas' **class structure, family life, religion, and relations with other peoples**.



Use this illustration as a graphic organizer to help you understand more about the Inca Empire.

## The Inca Empire, About 1500 c.e.



## 26.2 The Rise of the Inca Empire

At the height of their power in the early 1500s C.E., the Incas ruled over a vast, well-organized empire. From north to south, the Inca Empire stretched almost the length of the Andes mountain range, a distance of 2,500 miles. It reached from the Pacific Coast in the west to the Amazon River Basin in the east. Today this territory includes most of Peru and Ecuador, as well as parts of Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. Perhaps 10 million people lived under Inca rule.

How did the Incas build and manage such a huge empire? In part, the Incas adopted ideas and institutions that had been pioneered by earlier cultures. Two peoples who had an especially strong influence on the Incas were the Moche and the Chimú.

The Moche lived along the northern coast of Peru from about 100 B.C.E. to 700 C.E. They built cities, dug irrigation canals, and developed special classes of workers.

The Chimú kingdom in northern Peru flourished during the 1300s and 1400s. Like the Moche, the Chimú built well-planned cities and used elaborate irrigation methods. They preserved the artistic traditions of the Moche and passed them on to the Incas. They also built good roads and created a message system using runners. The Incas adopted and improved upon all of these achievements.

**The Beginnings of the Empire** The center of the Inca Empire was the capital city of Cuzco, which was located in a valley high in the mountains of southern Peru. The Incas first settled in this area around 1200 C.E. Apart from this fact, their early history is cloaked in myth.

According to one Inca legend, the people were descended from Inti, the sun god. Inti commanded his son, Manco Capac, to rise out of the waters of Lake Titicaca. Manco Capac then founded the Inca tribe.

In another legend, Inti appeared before a later Inca ruler. He said the Incas must become a great power and educate the people they met. But for more than 200 years, the Incas increased their territory by only about a dozen miles around Cuzco.

The Incas began expanding their empire in 1438, when they were attacked by the neighboring Chancas. The Inca emperor and many

citizens fled Cuzco. But one of his sons, Yupanqui, stayed behind and led his army against the Chancas. Inca legend says that the stones on the battlefield turned into powerful warriors. Yupanqui's victory made his people the strongest group in the area.

After driving off the Chancas, Yupanqui took the name Pachacuti, which means "earthshaker." He also seized the throne. Pachacuti and his son Topa Inca then launched a series of conquests against nearby tribes. With each victory, the Inca army became larger and more skilled.

Soon the Incas subdued almost every major group in the central Andes. In 1470, they conquered the Chimu. By the 1500s, their empire covered about 350,000 square miles.

**Roads and Messengers** To manage their far-flung holdings, Inca leaders came to rely on a system of roads. The two main routes were the coastal road and the inland road, which was called the Royal Road. Smaller roads connected them.

Some historians have said that the Incas' system of roads was as impressive as that of ancient Rome. About 15,000 miles of road linked all corners of the empire. The roads crossed tropical jungles, high mountains, and raging rivers. Inca officials used the roads to travel throughout the empire. Shelters were placed every 15 to 30 miles to give travelers places to rest.

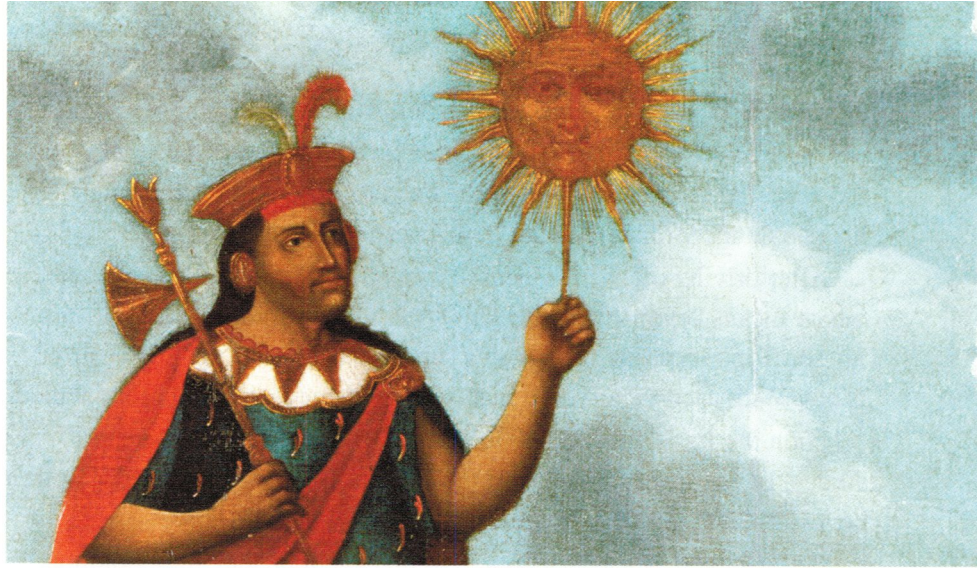
The roads also allowed the emperor at Cuzco to communicate with officials in distant places. The Incas sent messages by an elaborate relay system. They built messenger stations every couple of miles along the main roads. Chasquis, or messengers, carried the messages from one station to the next. Using this system, messages could travel more than 250 miles a day.

A message consisted of memorized words, and sets of strings called *quipus*. The quipus served as memory aids. Knots tied at various places and on strings of different colors stood for numbers. The Incas had no system of writing, but the quipus helped them keep track of populations, troops, and tribute, as well as information about their legends and achievements. The oral comments that accompanied a quipu helped a trained expert decipher the message. For the Inca government, quipus proved to be an effective substitute for written language.

Chasquis counted the knots and strings on quipus to relay messages about various things, such as the number of people in a military troop or the amount of goods given in tribute to an Inca leader.



Inca legend says that the emperor was descended from Inti, the sun god. He was thus the “son of the sun.”



## 26.3 Class Structure

Inca society was based on a strictly organized class structure. There were three broad classes: the emperor and his immediate family, nobles, and commoners. Throughout Inca society, people who were “Inca by blood”—those whose families were originally from Cuzco—held higher status than non-Incas.

As the Inca Empire grew, its class structure became more complex. Let’s look at the roles and responsibilities of each social class in the empire.

**The Emperor** At the top of Inca society was the emperor, called the Sapa Inca. The Incas believed that the Sapa Inca was descended from Inti, the sun god. For this reason, the Sapa Inca ruled with complete authority.

Everything in the empire belonged to the Sapa Inca. He lived in great splendor. When the Spanish came to Cuzco in the 1500s, they were dazzled to see fine gardens, golden statues, and jars made of gold and silver studded with emeralds. Servants carried the Sapa Inca everywhere on a golden **litter**. His subjects dared not look him directly in the eye.

The Sapa Inca could have many wives and hundreds of children. But he had one “primary” wife, who was called the Coya. Traditionally, to ensure the purity of the royal blood, the Coya was the Sapa Inca’s full sister. The Sapa Inca chose his heir from their children.

**Nobles** Below the Sapa Inca were the nobles. The Inca nobility was made up of leaders who helped administer the vast empire.

All nobles enjoyed certain privileges. They received gifts of land, servants, llamas, and fine clothing. They did not pay taxes, and men had the right to marry more than one wife. However, nobles were not all of equal rank. There were three main classes of nobles: Capac Incas, who were considered relatives of the emperor; Hahua Incas, who did not share the royal blood; and *curacas*, who were leaders of people conquered by the Incas.

**litter** a seat or chair on which a person is carried; a kind of carriage for high-ranking people

The highest-ranking nobles were the Capac Incas. Like the emperor himself, they were believed to be descended from Manco Capac, the legendary founder of the Inca dynasty.

Capac Incas controlled the empire's land as well as its valuable resources, such as llamas, coca leaves, and gold. They held the most important posts in the government, army, and priesthood. The *apus*, or governors, of the four quarters of the empire came from this group.

As the empire grew, the Incas needed more nobles to staff the government's complex bureaucracy. As a result, some people who were not true Incas also gained entry into the noble class. Called Hahua Incas, they were considered "Incas by privilege." Often leaders from around Cuzco became Hahua Incas. Sometimes people of common birth gained this status as well.

Additional conquests created a need for the third class of nobles, the curacas. The curacas were local leaders of conquered peoples. Curacas carried out various jobs. Many collected taxes. Others worked as inspectors, making sure everyone followed Inca laws and customs, such as wearing proper clothing and keeping clean homes. Curacas were required to spend time in Cuzco learning these laws and customs. They were allowed to rule their people only if they followed Inca ways.

**Commoners** Most of the people in the Inca Empire were commoners who worked as farmers and herders. The Incas did not practice slavery in the usual sense of the word. However, they did require commoners to support the government, both through the products of their labor and by working on government-sponsored projects. Men did jobs like building roads, while women might weave cloth.

Inca farmers grew a variety of crops, including squash, peppers, beans, peanuts, more than 20 types of corn, and more than 200 types of potato. The most important crop was the potato, which could survive heavy frosts at altitudes as high as 15,000 feet above sea level. Corn could be grown at altitudes nearly as high. The Incas enjoyed corn fresh, fried, and popped.

Inca farmers were required to give most of their crops to the government. The government placed the crops it collected in storehouses throughout the empire. The food was then distributed to warriors, temple priests, and people in need. For example, the government gave food to people who could no longer work, particularly the aged, the sick, and the disabled.



In this illustration, dating from about 1565, Inca farmers harvest potatoes.

**ayllu** an Inca clan (group of related families), the basic unit of Inca society

**communal** shared by a community or group

In this Inca coming-of-age ceremony, a boy receives the weapons of an Inca warrior.

## 26.4 Family Life

Families in the Inca Empire belonged to larger clans called **ayllus**. The ayllu was the basis of Inca society. Everyone was born into an ayllu, and most people lived their entire lives within the borders of its land. So to understand family life in the Inca Empire, we need to begin with the ayllu.

**Life in the Ayllu** Groups of families made up the ayllus, which ranged in size from small villages to large towns. Each ayllu had its own farming land and homes, but the ayllu did not own the land. As you have read, everything in the empire belonged to the emperor. The government loaned land to the ayllus for living and for farming. The people of an ayllu then worked this **communal** land cooperatively to grow crops and produce goods.

Everyone had responsibilities to the ayllu and to the government. All members of the ayllu had to work, except for the very young and the very old. The leaders of the ayllu made sure all the work got done. For instance, a leader might assign some men to clear the fields and others to dig irrigation ditches.

The households of the ayllu came under the authority of a series of curacas. One head of household ruled every 10 households. Fifty of these heads of household came under the supervision of a higher-level curaca. At still higher levels, curacas managed groupings of 100, 500, 1,000, 5,000, and 10,000 households.

One of the functions of the curacas was to make sure ayllus paid their taxes. The Incas had no currency, so taxes were paid in the form of goods and labor. The Sapa Inca claimed one third of everything an ayllu produced. Another third supported the Inca temple system. Commoners kept the remaining third for themselves.

In addition, men had to pay the *mit'a*, or public duty tax. Men paid the *mit'a* by contributing labor to government projects each year. In response to the government's need, the leaders of an ayllu assigned work to its members. For example, men might repair roads, build storehouses, or work in the mines.

**Childhood** Most Incas were born into ayllus of hardworking commoners. The children of commoners learned about their responsibilities early in life. Young children performed simple tasks around



the home. As they grew older, girls took care of the babies, fetched water, cooked, made clothing, and learned to weave. Boys looked after the animals and helped in the fields.

The children of most commoners did not receive any formal education. Instead, they learned the skills they needed, as well as Inca customs, from their elders. Some especially talented boys were trained in crafts or record keeping so they could serve the emperor.

Unlike boys from commoner families, the sons of nobles had special *amautas*, or tutors. Amautas taught religion, geometry, history, military strategy, public speaking, and physical training.

Around the age of 15, all boys received a loincloth, a strip of cloth worn around the waist. The sons of nobles underwent a much more elaborate ritual. These boys had to pass month-long tests of courage, strength, and discipline. After passing these tests, the boys swore loyalty to the Sapa Inca and received the weapons of an Inca warrior.

**Marriage** Young men and women remained at home until they married. Unlike the emperor and the nobility, male commoners married only one wife. Young men married in their early 20s, while girls could marry at 16.

People usually married within their ayllu. Some marriages were arranged by families or by the young people themselves. In some cases, the local curaca chose a wife for a young man who was not yet married. Every year, the curaca also held a “marriage market” where young men chose brides. When a couple agreed to marry, they held hands and exchanged sandals.

Once they were married, couples established their own homes. Commoners typically lived in one-room houses made of adobe brick or stone. Noble families had fancier houses with several rooms. While nobles enjoyed the help of servants, commoners worked hard to produce their own food and clothing and to fulfill their responsibilities to the ayllu.



Inca couples agreed to marry by holding hands and exchanging sandals.



## 26.5 Religion

Religion was an important part of Inca life. Like other groups in the Americas, the Incas believed that the gods influenced their daily lives. Consequently, they showed their devotion to the gods through a number of practices. Let's look first at the Incas' basic beliefs about the gods, and then at their rituals and other religious practices.

**Religious Beliefs** The Incas believed in many gods who controlled various aspects of nature. For example, Illapu was the weather god and rain giver. Pacha Mama was the Earth Mother, and Mama Cocha was the goddess of the sea. The Incas believed that all these gods had received their power from a supreme god, Viracocha, the creator of the world.

But to the Incas, the most important god was Inti, the sun god. Inti was important for two reasons. First, Incas believed that the emperor's family was descended from Inti. Second, Inti was also the god of agriculture, which was the basis of Inca life.

In this Inca festival held in honor of the sun god, Inti, men in traditional dress carry skeletons on platforms.



The Incas also believed that spirits dwelled in certain sacred objects and places, called *huacas*. Huacas included temples, charms, and places in nature such as springs and rocks. Because the Incas believed in an afterlife, the tombs and bodies of the dead were also considered huacas. People often prayed and made offerings to all these huacas.

**Religious Practices** The Inca religion was highly formal and required a large number of priests to conduct rituals and ceremonies. Priests worked at temples and shrines devoted to the gods. The most important temples were those dedicated to Inti. The high priest, a close relative of the Sapa Inca, presided over the Sun Temple in Cuzco. Priests who worked in the sun temples in the countryside came from the families of curacas.

Like the Maya and the Aztecs, the Incas offered sacrifices to the gods. Some sacrifices took place

regularly. For example, each day priests threw corn on a fire to encourage the sun to appear. "Eat this, Lord Sun," the priests said, "so that you will know we are your children." In many rituals, the Incas sacrificed live animals, usually llamas or guinea pigs.

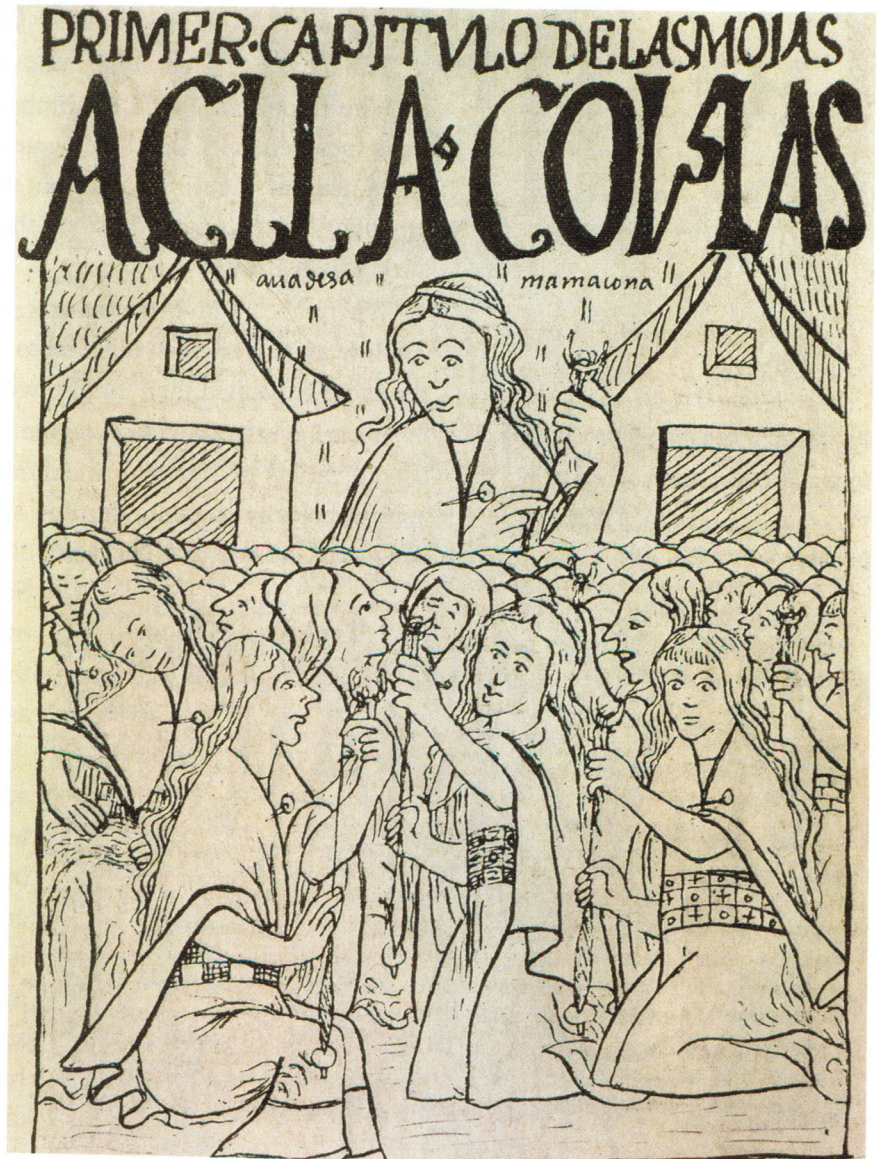
The Incas also practiced human sacrifice, but only on the most sacred occasions or in times of a natural disaster. At such times children might be sacrificed, because the Incas believed that their purity honored the gods.

In addition to performing rituals and sacrifices, priests practiced **divination** to try to predict the future. Divination helped the Incas decide what course of action to take. For example, a priest might ask an **oracle** when the army should attack another tribe.

**Chosen Women** A unique aspect of Inca religion was the role played by the Chosen Women. Each year, government officials visited all the towns in the empire to search for the most beautiful, graceful, and talented girls between the ages of 8 and 10. Selected girls were honored as Chosen Women and taken to live in convents. There they studied Inca religion, learned how to prepare special food and drink for religious ceremonies, and wove garments for the Sapa Inca and the Coya.

Around the age of 15, many Chosen Women left their convents. Some went to work in temples or shrines. Others became convent teachers, called *mamaconas*. Still others went to Cuzco and became wives of nobles or secondary wives of the Sapa Inca himself.

A few Chosen Women were sacrificed at important religious ceremonies. The rest spent almost their whole lives either serving Inti or fulfilling their roles as wives of nobles or the emperor. Only in old age were they sometimes allowed to return to the homes and families they had left so many years earlier.



The Chosen Women in Inca society were honored as servants of Inti.

**divination** the art of telling the future or finding hidden knowledge through religious means  
**oracle** a person through whom a god or spirit is believed to speak

## 26.6 Relations with Other Peoples

The Incas had several methods of bringing other groups of people into the empire. They did not immediately resort to war. Instead, the Sapa Inca generally sent a delegate to meet with a tribe. The delegate explained that the tribe could join the Inca Empire and enjoy peace and prosperity. Everyone understood that the alternative was war against the strong Inca army.

When faced with these options, many tribes chose to join the empire. Their leaders were then allowed to retain some local power. In this way, the Incas expanded their empire without always having to fight.

If a tribe resisted, however, the two sides met in battle. The Incas used a variety of weapons, including spears, axes, and clubs. They were especially skilled at hurling stones with a sling. The fighting often cost the enemy tribe many of its men. Usually the Incas won.

Sometimes the Incas moved a defeated tribe to other parts of the empire, so that its people lost their native lands as well.

Becoming part of the empire meant adopting the ways of the Incas. The leaders of a conquered tribe had to build a sun temple. While the tribe could go on worshiping its own gods, it had to accept the Inca gods as the most powerful. Local leaders and their sons were brought to Cuzco to study Inca laws as well as Quechua, the official language. Then they returned to their people as curacas.

As the new territory accepted Inca ways, teachers arrived to create Inca-style villages. When necessary, they organized ayllus and taught the people how to build storehouses, irrigation systems, and terraced farming fields.

Meanwhile, the Incas took an important religious object belonging to the tribe and kept it in Cuzco. The Incas claimed they acted out of respect for the local religion. In reality, the object was held “hostage” in the capital. If the tribe ever rebelled, the government could destroy the sacred object.

As the Inca expanded their empire, foreign tribes could choose to join the empire or face Inca warriors in battle.



Despite these efforts, sometimes the Incas failed to bring a tribe fully into their empire. In such cases they might remove—and usually kill—the local leader. Some rebellious tribes were forced to move far away. The government then settled loyal members of the empire in their place. In this way, the Incas reduced the chance of resistance to their rule.

Many historians have wondered what drove the Incas to conquer such a huge empire. Part of the answer may lie in a unique Inca belief. The Incas thought that even after death, the Sapa Inca continued to rule the lands he had conquered. In order for the new emperor to establish his own source of power and wealth, he had to take new lands. Only then would he have land that belonged to him alone.



Inca soldiers lead captive people away from their homelands to be resettled elsewhere in the empire.

## 26.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about life in the Inca Empire. In the 1400s, the Incas began rapidly expanding their power from their base in Cuzco. Eventually they created a huge empire that extended almost the length of the Andes Mountains. An impressive system of roads and messengers helped the emperor manage his vast holdings.

The strict Inca class structure had three main levels: the emperor and his family, the nobility, and the commoners. All Incas belong to *ayllus*, which provided the empire with crops, goods, and labor. Like other peoples in the Americas, the Incas engaged in many religious practices to maintain a proper relationship with their gods. As empire builders, they used a variety of means to bring other groups under their control.

You have now learned about three great empires in the Americas: those of the Maya, the Aztecs, and the Incas. In the next chapter, you'll explore the achievements of these three peoples in greater depth.