

Teachers Notes

Empire of the Incas

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, in what is now Peru, a great empire existed, ruled by self appointed nobility known as the Incas. In less than a hundred years, these people, living in the Andes in and around their capital city of Cuzco, had imposed their will upon their surrounding neighbours. Their control spread north to the coastal swamps, jungles and the inland mountains of modern Ecuador, east into the dense jungles of the Amazon River basin, south to the Atacama Desert of modern Chile, and west to the deserts and fertile valleys of the Pacific Coast. The Inca Empire covered an area over 3000 kilometres in length.

The Incas adopted many of the skills of the conquered peoples, but imposed their own rigid order, designed to serve the sun god and his earthly representative the Sapa Inca. At its height the Inca civilisation was a model of social organisation. Everyone knew their place in society and the work they were expected to do. It was a period of great achievements. Splendid buildings and cities were constructed, many perched on remote mountainsides. A network of roads linked settlements throughout the empire. Despite a growing population, an efficient system of agriculture ensured that nobody went hungry. Craftsmen played an important part in Inca society. Skilled weavers made fine and distinctive textiles and metalworkers designed ornate articles in gold and silver. The Incas made no written record of their civilisation. It is largely through the writings of those who came with the Spanish conquerors, and through archaeological evidence, that we can piece together this great civilisation.

Understanding the Issues

1. Explanation of terms: Inca; Sapa Inca; Medieval Society.
2. Discussion: What makes a great civilisation? How does the Inca Empire fit into this classification?
3. Research: List some of the other former civilisations in the Americas.
4. Briefly outline how historians investigate the past? What problems did historians have in finding out about the Incas? Why is conservation of the past important?
5. Map study: On a map of South America, draw the boundaries of the Inca Empire. How many present day countries were parts of this empire?
6. Film study: What were some of the more distinctive features of this society?

EXPANDING THE EMPIRE

The Incas were descended from a people who had settled in the valley of Cuzco. Their society developed under the leadership of Manco Capac in the early twelfth century, but the Incas did not develop a distinctive culture until the end of the twelfth century. In 1438, Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui took the throne. Calling himself Earthshaker, he marched through the Andes conquering, negotiating, and forging a string of states into a single mighty empire. His defeat of the Chancas was a turning point for the Incas. Pachacuti rebuilt Cuzco into a city of enormous stone palaces and temples, and brought his numerous provinces under the direction of a single, well functioning governmental Bureaucracy. His son Tupac Inca succeeded him in 1471, and after defeating the Chimú, secured Inca sovereignty over the whole region, from Ecuador to the heart of Chile.

Tupac was succeeded by Huayna Capac in 1493 and was then followed by his son Huascar. However the question of succession led to a civil war between Huascar and another brother Atahualpa, ending in 1532 with Atahualpa the victor.

The Incas were skilled in diplomacy and used negotiators to explain to tribal leaders the advantages of joining the empire rather than going to war. Local rulers were usually allowed to rule under Inca guidance.

However if diplomacy failed, the Incas could muster a massive army, up to hundreds of thousands strong. They had the most formidable armed force in South America before the arrival of the Spaniards. All able bodied men between the ages of 25 and 50 were subject to be drafted for up to five years. Each province supplied both rank and file and officers. The highly organised force was backed by an efficient communications and supply system. The Incas could move soldiers over thousands of kilometres of roads, dotted with storehouses stocked with food, clothing, and a variety of bronze weapons. Of these weapons the sling or huaraca was usually the first employed. As the enemy drew closer the Incas used javelins. In hand to hand combat a spiked copper mace, a club or axe would be used. The Incas wore helmets of wood or plaited cane, used cane shields painted with the insignia of their group and wore quilted cotton jackets for body armour.

Understanding the issues

1. Draw a timeline of Inca rulers from Manco Capac to the last Inca ruler Tupa Amaru, who was executed by the Spaniards in 1572. Mark on the timeline significant events that took place.
2. Discussion: Why is Pachacuti regarded as the greatest Inca leader?
3. Research: The significance of Cuzco as the Inca capital and the remnants of Inca remains today.
4. Study Question: Describe the structure of the army and the weapons used by the Incas.
5. Film study: What other methods other than warfare were used by the Incas to expand their empire?

INCAN SOCIETY

The Incas had a very structured social organisation and the lives of the people were controlled. Incas knew their position in the social order and what was expected of them. At the top of the social order was the Sapa Inca or emperor. He was a god like figure and was an absolute ruler. He was carried around in a litter and ordinary people were not allowed to look at him. His primary wife was called the Coya or Queen, and was often his sister, following Inca tradition. Every Sapa Inca built his own palace in Cuzco, from where he ruled.

Below the Sapa Inca were members of the royal family, nobles, the high priest and the commander of the army. The four Apus, who were the governors of the four provinces of the Inca Empire followed next. They had great powers, including organising troops and tribute and keeping law and order. Below them were the Curacas or local officials, generals and temple priests. In the lower categories were lesser administrators and army officers, musicians and artisans. At the bottom of the social pyramid were farmers, herders, fishermen and conscripts.

For most of these people there was little chance of advancement through education. Children did not go to school but were taught all they needed to know by their parents. A few girls were selected to become Sun Virgins while boys conscripted into the army as teenagers, might stay on and become officers.

Schools were open only to the sons of the nobility, or those of leaders who joined the empire. They were taught skills useful for their place in the privileged levels of society. They were taught the Incan language Quechua, the laws, religion, warfare, and how to read information from quipus.

In return for these rules and regulations, the Inca people were well looked after.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Coya; Curacas; Apus.
2. Discussion: What would be the advantages and disadvantages of living in this highly structured Inca society? What freedoms did commoners have in this society? How were people punished for crimes in Inca society?
3. Research: The lifestyle of an Inca emperor.
4. Written report on how the Inca leadership was able to control all aspects of the lives of people in the empire.
5. Film Study: Draw a social pyramid and write a brief description of each group in Inca society.

ARCHITECTURE, BUILDING AND ENGINEERING

The Incas were brilliant road builders and engineers. To link the different parts of the empire and to more quickly move their armies, two main arteries linked by connecting roads coursed through the empire, one along the coast and the other through the highlands. Chasqui runners or royal couriers, ran from one relay station to the next, memorising a message to be passed on to the next runner.

Where possible, the roads were laid out with linear precision, many paved in stone and with culverts ensuring proper drainage. Boundary stones marked the distances. The Inca engineers seemed to prefer to surmount obstacles rather than to evade them and there was virtually no limit on the steepness of the gradient. There were switchbacks, flights of stairs and even ladders cut into bedrock. In places tunnels were also cut. To carry people and cargo across the mountain torrents, the Incas built suspension bridges. These rank among the outstanding triumphs of their engineering. Roadside shelters called tambos, provided accommodation for travellers and storehouses for the army.

Although the strengths of Inca architecture have been characterised as simplicity, symmetry and solidarity, there is a beauty and elegance about the design of their buildings. All the more remarkable is their ability to construct such sturdy monuments without the benefit of written blueprints, iron tools or the wheel. The Incas designed buildings that fitted into the landscape. In the highland towns buildings were made of well cut stones. Doorways and niches sloped inwards slightly towards the top. Most walls sloped inwards towards the roof. Many of the walls of fitted stone were assembled so carefully that a knife blade cannot be forced into their joints. By keying or locking stones together at the point of greatest strain they created walls that could withstand earthquakes.

At the site of Tiahuanaco near Lake Titicaca, some of the blocks are as big weigh over 100 tonnes. They were cut and fitted with such precision that mortar was not necessary. The roofs of buildings were made of grass thatch over a metre in thickness. The Incas adopted many of their techniques from peoples they had conquered. Getting the massive stones to the site called for enormous energy and ingenuity. Once they had been dragged to the construction site, the blocks were hauled in position up dirt ramps. It has been conservatively estimated that it would take at least 2400 men to move the heaviest stones to the top of a ramp.

One site that is a testament to the building and engineering skill of the Incas is Machu Picchu. This site was found by Hiram Bingham in 1911 and experts believe that it was a royal estate. When the Spaniards pillaged and razed other sites, this remote site survived, its buildings losing only their thatch roofs.

Construction began under the ruler Pachacuti in 1450. It took enormous skill to build this imperial outpost in such a rugged setting. Much of the construction effort involved site preparation, drainage and foundation work. Massive retaining walls and staircase terraces kept the city from washing off its hillside perch.

Machu Picchu may have housed as many as one thousand people in more than one hundred dwellings. One of the many features of this site was spring water carried by gravity down a twelve centimetre wide, rock lined canal to a series of stone fountains. From the first fountain, outside the Royal Residence, the drinking water descended 25 metres through 15 other fountains.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Chasqui; Tambos; Intiwatana.
2. Discussion: What solutions did the Incas use to improve communications within the empire? How do they compare with communication used today?
3. Research: How were the Incas able to quarry such large blocks, transport them to the building site, shape the blocks and fit them into place on a wall or building?
4. Site Study - Machu Picchu. Why did it survive largely intact? Why was it built in such a dramatic position? What does the site tell us about the skill of the builders?
On a site map indicate : The terraces; the South Gate; the large warehouse building; the Sacred Plaza; the Intiwatana; Canal and fountains; the Royal Residence; the Temple of the Sun; the Temple of the Condor.
5. Film Study: Make a list of the achievements of the Inca builders and engineers.

DAILY LIFE

In Inca times every available piece of land was cultivated to for the growing population. In the highlands the Incas not only cultivated the valleys but built irrigated terraces called andanes on the hillsides. Stone walls were built across the slopes and filled with soil so the mountain sides looked like giant staircases. Mountain streams were diverted to irrigate these terraces. The remains of massive stone terraces can be seen clearly at Machu Picchu and at Ollantaytambo, about seventy kilometres northwest of Cuzco. The Incas were an agricultural civilisation. Each family worked an individual piece of land, but at planting and harvesting times, the whole village would turn out to share the work. In return for their toil, the ordinary people enjoyed the benefits of a rudimentary

welfare state, which provided for them in time of need. People gave a proportion of the food they grew in taxes to the state. Another type of tax on the people was the mita. The mita might require some service in the army, time spent repairing local roads or time spent working in silver or copper mines.

Food was brought into the towns and cities by llama train from nearby sites and stored in warehouses. A wide variety of crops were grown for food and medicinal purposes. Farmers cultivated potatoes, pimentos, cassava, tomatoes, avocados, squashes, chilli peppers, beans, gourds, nuts, cotton, tobacco and a variety of medicinal herbs. The leaves of the coca plant were used as a stimulant, and maize was used for brewing alcoholic chicha. The Incas raised llamas and alpacas for their wool and meat and they were also used as beasts of burden.

Inca people ate two meals a day. Food was often cooked over a llama dung fire. The ordinary people often had vegetable stews flavoured with hot, spicy seasoning, bread and cakes made from maize flour, and drank chicha. Roasted guinea pig was eaten on special occasions. Fish was plentiful on the coast and around Lake Titicaca.

Most Incas lived near their farming land. The style and materials used in houses varied according to the region. Brick, turf sods or stone were used for the walls with thatching for the roof. Several houses were usually built around a courtyard. The whole family would work, cook, eat and sleep in a single room often lit only by the light coming through the open doorway. The houses had no chairs or beds and the occupants squatted on the floor and slept on mats. The homes of the nobles were larger, made of stone, many with bathrooms and running water and were surrounded by gardens.

Clothing was made from cotton grown on the coast and wool from alpacas and the shorthaired vicuna, which provided the finest wool. Nobles wore more elaborate and highly coloured clothes, often decorated with embroidery. Women wore long dresses with sashes. Men wore a loose tunic often with geometric patterns. Shawls and cloaks were fastened with a cloak pin or tupu made from bronze, silver or gold. Sandals and shoes were made of leather or plaited grass. Men often wore headbands with feathers to signify rank. Only members of the Inca family were allowed to wear gold ornaments.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Andanes; mita; pimentos; cassava; gourds; chicha; tupu.
2. Discussion: Why and how were terraces built for agriculture? How were they irrigated? What tools did the Incas use for agriculture?
3. Design a menu using Inca food. How would you prepare guinea pig?
4. List the items you might find inside the houses of a farmer and a noble.
5. Describe the type of clothing, footwear, headwear and ornaments worn by an Inca man or woman.
6. Film Study: What does the site of Machu Picchu reveal about the lifestyle of the Inca people?

ART, INDUSTRY AND TECHNOLOGY

In Inca times craftsmen were respected members of society. They worked full time at their craft and were exempt from the usual tribute payments. Specialist craftsmen made only the finest objects, not those in everyday use. Craftsmen working in gold and silver made religious objects and high quality goods for the Sapa Inca and the nobility. Very few of these objects remain, as most of the objects were melted down by the Spanish conquerors.

The potter's wheel was unknown to the Incas. All pottery was made by coiling strips of clay on top of one another to make the required shape. The pots and jars were fired in a furnace and then painted with repetitive geometric designs. The paint used was a liquid clay solution mixed with mineral pigments to make the most common colours, red, purple, cream and black.

From the fragments that remain we know that weavers and embroiderers in the Inca Empire made high quality textiles. The Incas textile tradition thrived because of the need for warm clothing, the availability of domesticated animals that produced wool, and the techniques to create and produce a variety of materials including brocades, tapestries and gauzes. Wool and cotton were spun, woven, and coloured with dyes from plants and minerals. The patterns were complex, geometric designs, often repeated over the entire fabric. Women did most of the domestic weaving, while professional weavers were men. The Incas developed a substitute for writing, the quipu, a unique invention and well suited to their needs. It consisted of knotted strings of cotton or wool, dyed in many colours and sometimes comprising hundreds of strands of varying lengths. It was a way to record the statistical information required by the administration. However to this day researchers remain unsure of the precise information recorded on quipus.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Quipus; geometric.
2. Discussion: Why do you think that such an advanced society as the Incas never used the wheel?
3. Research: In your library find examples of the type of articles made by Inca craftsmen.
4. Draw a geometric design of the type used by the Incas in their pottery and weaving.
5. Film Study: what does the film reveal about Inca medicine and surgery?

RELIGION

The main gods of the Incas were Inti the Sun God, and Quilla the Moon God. Viracocha the Creator reigned over these gods. He was both the father and mother of the Sun and Moon. The Incas believed many sites and strange objects were inhabited by supernatural powers. They worshipped these holy sites, which they called huacas. Huacas included temples, unusually shaped stones, tombs of ancestors, hills, springs and caves.

The High Priest in Cuzco was the head of all priests in the empire. He was generally a brother of the Inca. He had power over all the shrines and temples, appointing their priests. He also presided over the most important religious ceremonies. The High

Priestess was chosen from among the Sun Virgins. Sun Virgins spent their lives serving at a shrine or temple. Sorcerers were at the bottom of the religious hierarchy

The priests watched the stars and kept a complicated calendar which combined solar and lunar rhythms of time. It was used for calculating future good or bad fortune. The many Inca religious festivals also revolved around the rhythms of the Sun and the Moon. Every important Inca town had a great carved stone, called an Intihuatana, which marked the days on which the Sun passed overhead at noon. It was a time for great celebration. The High Priest poured out an offering of chicha while the people chanted a hymn to the Sun, thanking him for his warmth and light, and for his son Sapa Inca. The Inca celebrated a number of festivals. In September they celebrated Coya Raymi, the Festival of the Moon. In June the Incas celebrated Inti Raymi, the Feast of the Sun. Capac Raymi, the Magnificent Festival took place in December, where the Sapa Inca led the people in Sun worship. At the Pacha-puchuy or Earth Ripening Festival in March, the Incas sacrificed a black llama to atone for the sins of the people. Religious sacrifices were an important part of festivals. Usually the Incas sacrificed llamas or guinea pigs, although occasionally human victims were offered up in the most important temples. The Incas also practiced ancestor worship. Past emperors were mummified. These mummies played a ceremonial role during religious rites. Mummified relatives would be consulted on practical and moral issues.

Understanding the issues

1. Explanation of terms: Sun Virgins; huacas; sorcerers.
2. Discussion: Why did the Inca people make religious sacrifices? How superstitious were the Incas? Did they believe in an afterlife?
3. Research: The nature and operation of the Inca calendar.
4. Briefly outline the events of one Inca festival.
5. Film Study: From the film make a list of the ways in which religion had such an influence on the lives of the Inca people.

THE DEMISE OF THE INCA EMPIRE

The Spaniard Francisco Pizarro reached the coastline of the Inca Empire in 1532 at the time the civil war between Atahualpa and his brother Huascar was taking place. With fewer than 200 men, the conquistador took advantage of this situation, and the smallpox epidemic raging throughout the empire, to attack Inca troops, capture Atahualpa and execute him. Pizarro and his men reached Cuzco in 1533, and were overwhelmed by the city's beauty. The Spaniards made Atahualpa's half brother, Manco Inca, the new emperor, to rule as a Spanish puppet. Soon after, Manco Inca led his people in an unsuccessful revolt against the Spanish. He was forced to flee Cuzco to the jungle where he built the city of Vilcabamba. He was finally killed by the Spanish in 1545. Manco's son Tupac Amaru, the last Inca emperor held out until Vilcabamba was overrun by the Spaniards in 1572.

From conquistador to modern tourist, all who have seen Machu Picchu or other imposing ruins of the Incas have been amazed at the intricacy and precision of their work.

Today we have a lasting legacy in stone.