

All About the Incas

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Who were the Incas?

The Incas were a great civilization between 1400 and 1533. They built the largest empire of the native South American people.

The Incas built roads and bridges, developed a postal service, performed brain surgeries, created their own calendar and spoke their own language, Quechua.



How did the Incas build an empire?

Tribes of people already lived in South America for many thousands of years.

The Incas started as a small tribe in Cusco, Peru.

In 1400, the Incas took over a neighbor tribe, forcing them to become Incas. Then, they continued to take over more and more tribes to the north and south. As the Inca Empire took more tribes and land, they forced the people to work for them.



What was life like in the Inca Empire?

Life was very different depending on who you were in the Inca Empire.

Most people were [commoners](#) and farmers. Commoners were forced to work very hard and give food and items to the Inca Empire.

A smaller number of people were [royals](#). Royals lived a luxurious lifestyle and may or may not work. They wore special hairstyles and jewelry to make themselves stand apart from the peasants.

But, the most important of all was the [Sapa Inca](#), or emperor. All the people in the empire had to listen to him.

Click on the links to learn more!



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Commoners

Most people in the Inca Empire were commoners and had almost no freedom. They were only given a little time each day to bath, eat and sleep. The rest of the time they were required to work.

Commoners worked for the Inca Empire by farming, building or fixing the roads (though Inca law did not allow them to walk on the road). They were able to keep enough of the food they grew to feed themselves and their families, but the rest of the food was given to the royal families and the emperor.

Sometimes, commoners would work as servants for the royal families or in the temples but usually, they were farmers.



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Royals

The royals, or nobles, lived a life of luxury. They owned the land but made the peasants farm the land for them.

Royals might spend their time doing government jobs, like collecting taxes, but they did not always have to work.

The men in a royal family would all wear the same hairstyle to show their importance. Each noble family had a different hairstyle. Men also wore heavy earrings to make their earlobes stretch out - this was considered high fashion.



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The Sapa Inca

The Sapa Inca was not just emperor – he was also believed to be a god. Sapa Inca means ‘son of the sun.’ Everything he said, did and touched was considered sacred. The Sapa Inca owned everything in the empire and made all the laws.

When the Sapa Inca died, his body was mummified and returned back to the palace. His family and servants continued living in the palace with his mummy.

The Sapa Inca’s chosen son would then become the next king and move into a new palace built just for him and his family.



Click on the image to learn more about the emperors' clothes.

What did the King wear?

The Sapa Inca wore an incredible hat made from real gold and feathers. His clothes were covered with jewels and embroidery. Because everything he touched was considered sacred, he only wore an outfit once. His clothes were then burned in a special ceremony!

Whenever the Sapa Inca left his palace, he was carried by servants in a reclining chair.

As king, he was also considered too special to be looked at directly. So, his face was covered with a translucent cloth.



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Schools

As the Inca Empire grew, the government needed more people to run villages and collect taxes. So, the Incas created schools to teach these skills.

Only the children of royal families were allowed to go to school. The Incas even created an IQ test to decide which royal children were allowed to go to school.

However, most people in the Inca empire were peasants. Children of commoners did not go to school but learned how to farm, clean, cook and sew from their parents.

Religion

The Incas worshipped many gods and goddesses. The Inca people prayed to these gods every day and held festivals and celebrations in their honor.

The Incas' most important festival was held every June in honor of the sun god, Inti. This festival lasted nine days. During the festival, the people of the empire danced and prayed to the sun, offering up food and animal sacrifices in his honor.

Some historians even believe that, on the fourth day of the festival, everyone in the empire would stretch out their arms to the sun and make a kissing sound to show the sun how grateful they were for his warmth and energy.

The Sapa Inca, or emperor, was believed to be the son of Inti, the sun god.

Food

Because the Incas lived in the mountains, it was difficult to find flat land to grow food. So, they created terrace farming.

The Incas built steps of land on the sides of the mountain. They also created pipes, or aqueducts, to save and carry water to different areas.

The Incas also dried and stored their food so that everyone would have enough to eat during the cold winters.

The three most common foods were corn, potatoes and quinoa. But the Incas also grew bananas, tomatoes and avocados.



Inventions

The Incas built many roads to connect their empire and developed terrace farming to grow food in the mountains. They also invented many other useful things.



When the Incas conquered a tribe, they took all of the tribe's food and possessions. They needed a way to count these items, so they invented the **quipus**. The quipus was made from different colored strings. A trained quipus reader used the color of the strings and different distances between the knots to keep a record of many things.

The Incas also created a calendar. They called their calendar a 'time watcher!' The calendar was important because it helped the Incas know when their religious festivals occurred.

The Incas created many musical instruments too, like the flute and panpipe.



What happened to the Inca Empire?

In 1528, the Inca empire was split by a civil war over who would be crowned the next Sapa Inca. This war lasted for 5 years and when the fighting finally stopped, many people had died and those who survived were exhausted.

At the same time, the Spanish explorer Francisco Pizarro arrived in Cusco. He and his soldiers saw all the gold and jewels and wanted them. Over the next 50 years, the Spanish explorers captured all the Incan cities. They also spread diseases, like smallpox, which killed almost all the people in the Inca Empire.

In 1572, the Spanish conquerors killed the last Inca emperor.



Are the Incas left today?

While the Inca civilization no longer survives, there are still people with long-ago Inca relatives. Many descendants can be found in modern day Peru, where about eight million people continue to speak the Inca language of Quechua.

Buildings and objects still remain from the Inca times, like the incredible settlement of [Machu Picchu](#).



Machu Picchu, the Inca city found in modern day Peru.



Interesting Inca Facts

- The Incas built over **18,000** miles of roads!
- Though the Incas spoke **Quechua**, it was not a written language. The Incas did not write anything down but used knots in the **quipas** to record thoughts, numbers and stories.
- Because they didn't write, the Inca postal system used a system of telling one person the message and relaying it to the next (like the game Broken Telephone).
- The Incas built their buildings using tightly fit stones that could withstand earthquakes.
- The Incas considered pointy skulls beautiful. The royal families wrapped bandages and boards to the heads of their children to make them grow in one direction.





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