Another civilization that grew powerful about the same time as the Aztec is the Inca. By 1525, the Inca had created a vast empire that stretched from what is today northern Ecuador through Peru and into parts of Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina. Their capital was Cuzco, Peru, the original homeland of the Inca in the Andes Mountains.

The Inca began their conquests around 1438. They had a labor tribute system to rule their conquered people. People had to work for the empire under the supervision of imperial bureaucrats and administrators. The Inca also used a complex resettlement policy to govern conquered people. Whole villages were split up and relocated to various villages closer to Cuzco; the conquered were settled among loyal subjects to ensure obedience. Loyal Inca took their place in the conquered villages. This strategy helped ensure that rebellions could not be easily organized and executed.

The leader of the empire was called the “Sapa Inca” and was considered the son of the sun god. Below the royal family came the noble class, which was made up of priests, military leaders, and the men who ran the government. When members of the noble class died, their wives and servants were buried with them. Kings were mummified, sometimes entombed in a seated position, and their bodies were preserved and worshipped in temples. For some ceremonies, commoners were mummified in bundles, their bodies set in the fetal position. A number of ice mummies of children have been found in the Andes. In 1995, a particularly well-preserved mummy of a twelve- to fourteen-year-old girl was found in the Andes. Nicknamed Juanita, her body was frozen intact, allowing for many scientific studies.

The Sapa Inca governed with the help of a complicated network of government employees and civil servants. Especially gifted boys were trained to be civil servants. They learned how to record information on a quipu (see p. 132). They also learned religion, governing skills, and math.

An important factor in keeping their vast empire together was the Inca’s ability to travel and communicate. The empire had more than 10,000 miles of roads. Suspension bridges made of woven fiber were built where the roads had to pass over river gorges and ravines in the mountains. Messengers, called chasquis [CHAWS-kees] or runners, ran in relays over these roads carrying light items, laws, and news of the empire to distant locations. Rest houses were built one day apart on the roads. People in nearby villages provided food for the messengers, as well as new runners to take up the messages.

Since the Inca had no written language, these messengers could not carry a written note, although they often carried quipus that contained important information. Instead, a runner memorized his message, then sprinted to a rest station, where the next runner was ready for his team member’s arrival. Without slowing the pace, the first runner recited the message, and, running alongside, the relief runner repeated it. Then the first runner dropped out, and the new messenger continued on. The system was fast! A message could travel 250 miles a day and the 1,250 miles from Quito to Cuzco, the capital, in five days. In an age of automobiles and airplanes, that may not seem especially fast, but it was very fast for the time. In the 1860s, the famous Pony Express riders of the American West were only able to cover about 200 miles a day—and they rode on horseback!
Farmers, imperial officials, and the army also used the roads. The army used the roads to march quickly from one area to another to quiet unrest among the Inca's subjects.

Farming was the main economic activity of the Inca. Farmers built terraces on the sides of mountains and used irrigation to put more land under cultivation. One of the most important crops was the potato, of which the Inca grew many varieties. Europeans did not know about potatoes until the Spanish conquered the Inca Empire and took potatoes back to Europe. The Inca also raised llamas and alpacas. They made clothing of the animals' wool, ate the meat, and used the animals as beasts of burden.

As has been noted, the Inca did not have a writing system, but they developed a record-keeping system using quipu [kwee-pu]. A quipu was a rope with 40 or so strings attached. The Inca would tie knots in various places on the string to represent groups of 1, 10, and 100. Quipus were very important record-keeping devices, recording everything from tribute contributions, economic reports, war information, and ceremonial details. Civil servants, village leaders, and important heads of households could communicate with each other and keep records using these quipu.

The Inca were also known for their stone work. They built elaborate walls with gigantic pieces of stone carefully cut and fitted together. Some of these walls are still standing today.

Like the word Maya, the word Inca is used as a singular and a plural noun, as well as an adjective. You may also encounter “Incas” as the plural and “Incan” as an adjective.

Machu Picchu and Cuzco

Like the Maya and Aztec, the Inca had urban settlement. A fine example of an Inca site is Machu Picchu, with its terraced fields, palaces, fort, fountains, temples, and stonework staircases. Machu Picchu's exact use is unknown, but it may have been a city, fortress, or one of the many country retreats the Inca emperors built throughout the Andes. Located high in the Andes, the city was never found by the conquering Spanish, and thus was not destroyed.

As all roads in Europe led to Rome, so all roads in the Inca Empire led to Cuzco, its capital. According to one Inca creation myth, two Inca heroes emerged from caves and founded the city of Cuzco. A large fort guarded the city of huge palaces and temple compounds.

C. Spanish Conquerors

Background

Beginning in the 1400s, Europeans set forth in a great wave of exploration. (See Section III, “European Exploration, Trade, and the Clash of Cultures,” pp. 139–163.) The Portuguese led the way. Later, they were followed by the Spanish, the French, the Dutch, and the English.

Christopher Columbus was funded by the Spanish rulers Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus landed in the Caribbean, but he incorrectly thought that he was in India. This is why people started calling native peoples “Indians.” The Spanish monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, sent soldiers, administrators, and colonists to settle these islands. They also sent Catholic missionaries to convert the native people to Christianity.