THE INCAS

The early history of the Incas is a mystery. Since the Incas never developed a system of writing, we must rely on the writings of their Spanish conquerors for any Incan history that we know. We can also study artifacts of the ancient cities for clues to the early Incas' story.

We do know some Incan myths. One early story is that the sun god created the first Incan, Manco Capac, and his sister. The god told them to go and teach other Indians. They went into the wilderness to establish a city. They named their city Cuzco, and it became the capital of the Incan empire.

The Incas probably began as one of many small tribes in the Andes Mountains. The small tribe continued to grow as it conquered other peoples. At its peak, the Incan empire spread through parts of what are now Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina. The Incan land included desert, fertile valleys, some rain forests, and the Andes Mountains.

The Incas conquered most of their territory under the leadership of Pachacuti, who ruled from 1438 to 1471. The Incas crushed most of the other tribes during brutal fighting.

The Incan empire was so large that they built a system of roads that stretched over 14,000 miles. The Incas did not use wheeled vehicles on their roads. The great road system was for pedestrians. Only the road system of the ancient Romans was equal to that of the Incas.

The Incas also developed terrace farming. They cut terraces (steps) into the steep sides of the mountains to create more farm land. They also dug irrigation systems to bring water from the mountain streams to the terraces. Many of the Incan roads, terraces, and irrigation ditches are still in use today.

The llama was an important animal for the Incas. They tamed the llama and used it for transportation of men and materials. The llama also provided the Incas with wool and food. The Incas developed a counting system that used a base of ten. They used a quipus (KEE-POO) to remember numbers. The quipus had a main cord about two feet long. They tied many colored strings to the main cord. Each string had knots tied in it. The color of the strings and the distance between the knots had special meanings.

The Incan civilization was at its peak when the Spanish arrived. Francisco Pizarro led the Spanish invaders against the Incas. After a series of fierce battles, the Spanish defeated the Incan king, Atahualpa, and in 1533 he was killed. The descendants of the Incas, like those of the Mayas and Aztecs, continued to live under the rule of the Spanish.
INCAN RELIGION

Like the other Indian tribes, the Incas worshipped many gods and goddesses. The major Incan god was the god of nature, Viracocha, the creator.

Another Incan god was Inti, the sun god. Gold was the symbol of Inti. The Sun God Temple is the most important structure in Cuzco, the major city of the Incas. The Incas believed Inti was the father of Incan rulers. They worshipped the ruler as a living god.

Major Incan goddesses included those of the earth and the sea. The Incas also worshipped many lesser gods and goddesses. These included gods of thunder, the Moon, stars, rainbows, and others.

The Incas believed they could learn the will of the gods by divining. Divining is studying objects to find magic signs. Priests would look at things such as animal organs, flames of a fire, or movements of animals, and from these they would try to discover if it was a good day for planting crops, going to war, or making other important decisions.

In addition to the gods and goddesses, the Incas worshipped huacas. A huaca was a sacred place or thing. Huacas included mummies of the dead, temples, holy places, and things of nature such as mountains, springs, and stones. Each Incan family had small statues in their homes of huacas. The statues were sacred to that family.

Religious ceremonies were an important part of Incan life. Each family had daily prayers to their huacas. The priests performed daily ceremonies at the various temples. The high priest was a favorite relative of the ruler.

The Incas held a major religious festival during each of the 12 months of their calendar. The Incan year began in December with the Capac Raimi. This means "the magnificent festival." This was the most important and elaborate of all celebrations. Pauca Huaray, in March, celebrated the ripening of the earth. The June ceremony of Inti Raimi was the festival of the Sun. Uma Raimi, the festival of the water, occurred in October.

Some rituals happened inside the temples. The great monthly festivals occurred outdoors. All of the people could take part in them. The celebrations included dancing, feasts, games, songs, and parades. The ceremonies also included sacrifices and offerings. Incas sacrificed animals such as the llama and guinea pigs. At times human sacrifices, including child sacrifices, were part of the rituals.
INCAN AGRICULTURE

Many of the foods we use today were also part of the Incan diet. Incan farmers grew a greater variety of crops than any other ancient American tribe. They grew potatoes, corn, tomatoes, avocados, peppers, strawberries, peanuts, cashews, squash, beans, pineapples, chocolate, and other crops.

The potato was the most important food of the Incas. They called it papa. The Incas had many varieties and colors of potatoes, and today we know of 40 of those varieties. The potato became the main source of food for the Incas since they could plant it at great heights in the Andes Mountains. Some of the varieties of potato would also resist the frosts of the region.

The Incas used the first known freeze-dried process. They left the potatoes outside to freeze. Then the Incas trampled the potatoes by foot to squeeze the water out of them. Next they left them in the sunlight to dry. The Incas called these dried potatoes chunu. The Incas preserved chunu either whole or ground into flour. Chunu would last for years without spoiling and was easy to store. The Incas were able to eat it throughout the year.

Corn was another important Incan crop. The Incas planted over 2,000 varieties of corn. Corn is called maize by many Indian tribes. The Incas named it sara. Corn was grown only in the lower regions.

The mountains presented farmers with special challenges. To create enough flat land for the crops, the Incas carved flat step-like terraces into the mountain sides. The terraces also helped to keep the soil from being eroded. Modern Andes farmers still use many of the ancient Incan terraces.

Planting the crops was a group effort. The men would break up the soil with planting sticks. The women then followed, putting the seeds into the earth. The children often worked in the fields to scare away birds and animals that might eat the crops before the harvest.

The Incas also developed a system to carry the water of the mountain streams to the terraces. They dug canals and tunnels and built raised aqueducts to carry the water. The Incan water system is still in use today.

Farming was the subject of many Incan religious ceremonies. After the planting season, the Incas made sacrifices to the rain god. At another major festival, the Incas thanked the gods for a good harvest.
INCAN ARTS AND CRAFTS

The Incas are most famous for their weaving, but they also developed wonderful skills in metalwork. They used gold, silver, copper, and tin. They discovered how to make bronze by melting copper and tin together. Incan men mined the precious metals. They did not use slaves to work in the mines. Instead, the Incas did this work as part of their "work tax." The Incas had to give a certain amount of their labor to the government.

All of the gold became the property of the ruler. Metal workers pounded much of the gold into thin sheets to cover the walls of the palaces. They also made statues and other decorations for the ruler. The ruler and nobles also used silver for decoration. They believed that silver was the metal of the Moon. Craftsmen also used gold and silver to make masks, plates, and jewelry.

Spanish invaders reported seeing life-size statues made of bronze and covered in gold. After the conquests of the Incas, the Spaniards melted down most of the Incan gold and shipped it to Spain. Very few Incan artworks made of gold still exist.

Copper, tin, and bronze were also used to make artistic, as well as useful, items. Archaeologists have found many examples of Incan metal items such as knives, weapons, pins for garments, and tools.

The Incas also created a variety of pottery. Examples survive of three-legged pots, plates, and drinking cups. The most unusual Incan pottery was the aryballuses. This was a jar with a pointed bottom. It balanced itself upright when filled. It rested on its side when empty. Much of Incan pottery had knobs attached to it to which ropes could be tied for carrying it.

The Incas made most of their pottery for use rather than art. Even so, it was beautiful. Their pottery is known for its elaborate yet small geometric patterns.

The Incas also had a special method of applying colors to the pottery. However, the secret of the ancient Incan method of coloring pottery is lost. Most Incan pottery was red, white, and black. At times they also used yellow and orange.

The crafts of weaving, metal work, and pottery are still being done by the descendants of the ancient Incas. They still use many of the same methods and designs of their ancestors.
The Incas were master builders. They had the best planned cities in the ancient Americas. Planners laid out the cities in a grid. Each city had a central plaza, with the major temples and public buildings surrounding it. The center of each city included temples, a palace for the visiting Inca, and housing for the priests and nobles. Houses for the common people surrounded the central area.

A wall that was 50 feet high encircled the city of Chimu. However, most Incan cities did not have walls around them. The Incas built large stone fortresses near the city. The citizens would gather inside the fortress in time of danger.

Incan architects used trapezoidal openings for the doors and windows in their buildings. The buildings were made of huge, cut and polished stones set perfectly in place.

Incan buildings remain among the most amazing ever built. The Incas used huge blocks of stone. One stone measured 36 x 18 x 6 feet! They cut and polished each stone with small stone tools and then moved each stone into the proper place. The stones fit together perfectly, so the builders did not need to use cement to keep them in place. Even today, a knife blade cannot fit into the cracks between the stones of many of the ancient buildings.

The Incas used trapezoidal openings for all of their doors and windows. The four-sided openings were smaller at the top than at the bottom. The Incas did not decorate the outside of their buildings, but they made beautiful decorations for the insides of the palaces and temples. They often used solid gold for these decorations.

The two most famous Incan cities are Cuzco and Machu Picchu. Incan legend says that the first Incan ruler founded Cuzco. This happened in about 1100CE. Cuzco soon became capital of the entire empire. It is in a mountain valley about 11,000 feet above sea level. Two rivers flowed into the valley to supply water.

Wars and invaders destroyed the ancient city, but in 1400 Cuzco was rebuilt. The new city had two large plazas, the Inca’s palace, the Sun Temple, and other temples and government buildings.

The best preserved Incan city is Machu Picchu. Explorers rediscovered it in 1911. Its ruins include temples, palaces, military buildings, and common houses. The Incas of Machu Picchu built terraces for farming. They also had a stone aqueduct to bring in water from a mile away.