

What endures from the ancient civilizations that ruled the Andes?

By Smithsonian Institution, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.19.17

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Archaeological site in Moray, Peru, where the ancient Incas lived. Photo from Wikimedia.

Cusco, the capital city of the Inca Empire, was high in the mountains of today's Peru. These mountains extend down to all of South America, and are called the Andes. Huayna Capac was the ruler the empire, and he didn't like his chilly mountain capital. Huayna Capac ordered his people to build him a new, warmer capital in what is today Quito, Ecuador. The new palace was bigger and more luxurious than the first, and the weather was nearly perfect.

Still, more than a thousand miles of steep, rugged mountains separated Quito and Cusco. The king ordered his subjects to build a highway between the two cities, so royals could easily move between them. Pleased, the king ordered the construction of a second highway, this time along the coast.

The Great Inca Highway



The Inca highway network may have been humanity's biggest, most complex construction project ever undertaken. Running for 3,700 miles between Chile and Ecuador, about the distance from New York to Paris, it cut through every type of landscape. It ran from icy mountain peaks to tropical lowlands, from the world's driest desert to its wettest forests. The road through the Andes astounded the Spaniards who saw it. "In the memory of people I

doubt there is record of another highway comparable to this,” conquistador Pedro de Cieza de León wrote in the 1540s. The road was called the Qhapaq Ñan, which means “Road of the Lord” in Quechua. This is the language of native groups in Peru and surrounding countries. Hundreds of miles of the highway still remain today.

Huayna Capac died around 1527. Spanish conquerors arrived in 1532, bringing European diseases that killed more than half the population of the Andean realm. For the next three centuries, Spaniards tried to wipe out the histories and traditions that remained, but failed to do so. Native peoples strongly held on to their beliefs and practices.

The Cradles Of Civilization

For decades, people have learned that civilization began in four areas of the world: Mesopotamia in the Middle East, Egypt in North Africa, the Indus Valley in India and the Yellow River in China. Yet, scholars have added the central Andes to this list. This region includes southern Ecuador, northwestern Bolivia and most of Peru. The civilizations that lived there built pyramids and temples as old as or older than those in Egypt. They were experts at irrigation, or systems for watering crops, just like the peoples of ancient Mesopotamia. Religions flourished, works of art endured for centuries, and armies fought large battles.

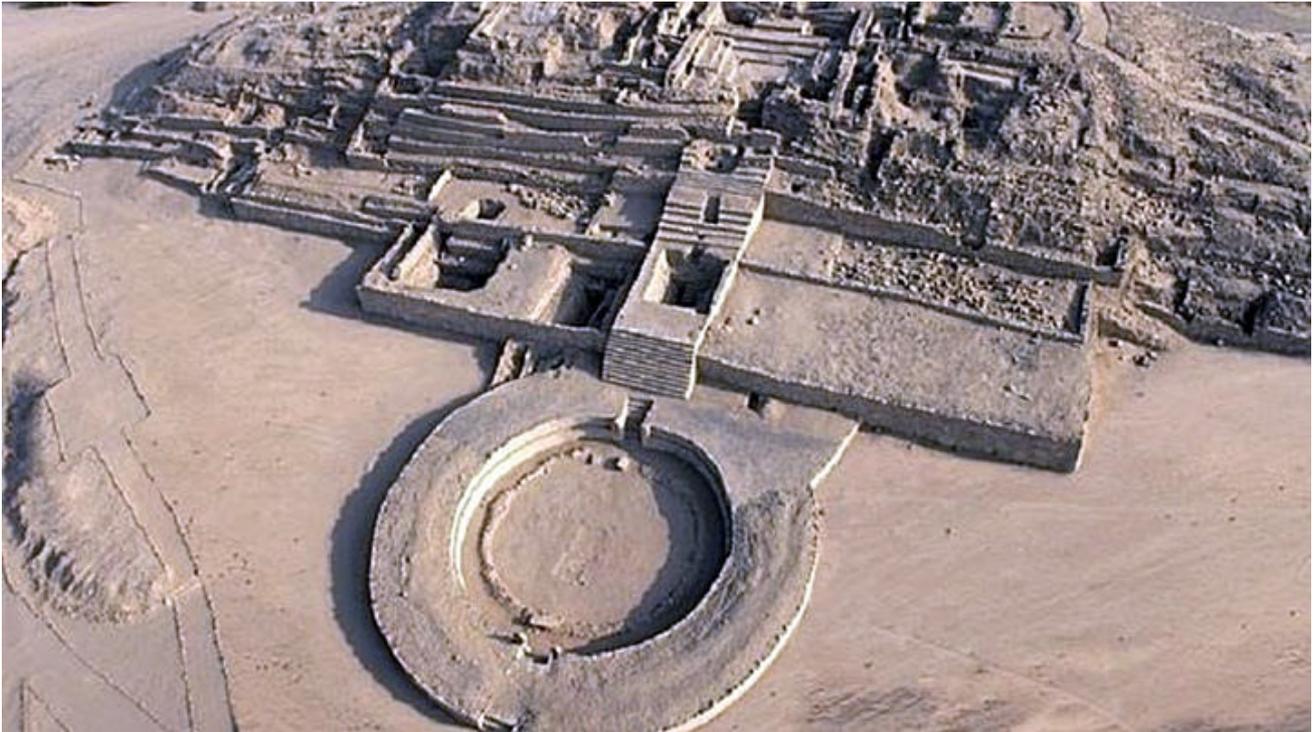
It is surprising that such a rich civilization could grow in an unstable environment. The shoreline of Peru and Chile an incredibly dry, narrow desert that runs for more than a thousand miles. The Atacama Desert, in Chile, is the driest place on Earth. In some places, there is no record of rainfall. Scientists and astronauts go there to experience conditions that are closest to those on Mars.

Old Architectural Complexes

North of the Atacama is Lima, the capital of modern Peru. North of Lima is a 300-mile stretch of coastline with 30 or more ancient monumental centers. They are among the world’s oldest architectural complexes. Sechín Bajo, probably the earliest known, dates to about 3500 B.C. It was built about a thousand years before the Great Pyramid of Giza, in Egypt.

Pressure from the atmosphere over the Pacific sometimes causes blasts of warm air to hit the coast. In turn, this can lead to years-long bouts of severe rain and floods, a weather pattern which is now famous as El Niño. These unpredictable, violent El Niño floods destroy crops and wash away fields. There are also more than 100 active volcanoes in the area. Between floods, the region is often hit by earthquakes.

Lived A Peaceful Existence



Despite all this, a civilization was able to settle and grow. Early cities in Peru do not show evidence that their residents ever had to worry about defending themselves. These peoples existed before the Inca, whose history was more violent. Caral, today the most well-known site, has a large central plaza surrounded by grand pyramids. These, in turn, are surrounded by residences, probably homes for the rich. To the south is a spectacular circular amphitheater, a space for performances or ceremonies. Caral's buildings date from around 3000 B.C., about 5,000 years ago. The city was inhabited for the next 1,200 years, and in all that time there was no sign of violence on a large scale.

Main Food Sources

Cities like Caral had access to huge quantities of fish. Archeologist Michael E. Moseley has argued that seafood was the foundation of Andean civilization, rather than agriculture. This would be the only early civilization in the world where this was true.

Still, one of the main agricultural products, was the cotton used to make nets and fishing lines. Cotton was grown by irrigation from the mountain streams.

In the mountains, the main food was neither fish nor grain, but tubers and roots, such as potatoes. Along with the potato, there are many other local roots and tubers, including the oca, ulluco, yacon and achira.

Compared to other civilizations, pottery developed later in the central Andes. From the beginning, textiles seemed to be more important. Not only did the native peoples grow cotton to make fishing lines and nets, they also built their temples from stones stuffed into fiber bags to create enormous building blocks.

The Quipu Message Rope

Textiles were also used to communicate. In Caral, Peruvian archaeologist Ruth Shady Solis found what she believes to be an early version of one of the region's most unusual invention, the quipu. This is a long horizontal rope with vertical strings dangling from it. The quipu had patterns of knots tied into the vertical strings. These patterns had specific meanings, and quipu scribes could "read" the messages by running their hands along the knots. The quipu confused and alarmed the Spaniards, who ordered that all quipus be destroyed. Only about 750 are known to have survived; today, scholars know how quipus were used to express numbers, but they have not been able to crack the code for every word.

It is clear that the coastal Andes took a different path compared to any other society. The culture was just as old as the ones from the Middle East or Asia, but Peru is a reminder that human history can take many different turns. If we somehow started all over again, we too could be running our fingers along quipus.

Quiz

- 1 Which section highlights the idea that the Andean people should be grouped with the world's first societies?
 - (A) "The Great Inca Highway"
 - (B) "The Cradles Of Civilization"
 - (C) "Lived A Peaceful Existence"
 - (D) "The Quipu Message Rope"

- 2 Select the paragraph from the section "Main Food Sources" that explains HOW the Andean people differed from all other early groups of people.

- 3 Which sentence from the article is BEST supported by the image in the section "Lived A Peaceful Existence"?
 - (A) Pleased, the king ordered the construction of a second highway, this time along the coast.
 - (B) It ran from icy mountain peaks to tropical lowlands, from the world's driest desert to its wettest forests.
 - (C) North of Lima is a 300-mile stretch of coastline with 30 or more ancient monumental centers.
 - (D) The quipu confused and alarmed the Spaniards, who ordered that all quipus be destroyed.

- 4 Examine the map in the section "The Great Inca Highway."
HOW does the map contribute to the reader's understanding of Huayna Capac's character?
 - (A) It shows that he was a very ambitious king to order the construction of such long highways.
 - (B) It shows that he was a cruel leader to make his workers build such long highways in such tough conditions.
 - (C) It tells us that he had plans to continue the highway into the areas north of the capital and inland.
 - (D) It tells us that he was confident in his workers' abilities to complete the highway before he passed on his power to the next king.

Answer Key

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 - (B) "The Cradles Of Civilization"**
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 - (D) "The Quipu Message Rope"

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Paragraph 11:

Cities like Caral had access to huge quantities of fish. Archeologist Michael E. Moseley has argued that seafood was the foundation of Andean civilization, rather than agriculture. This would be the only early civilization in the world where this was true.

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