

What endures from the ancient civilizations that ruled the Andes?

By Smithsonian Institution, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.20.17

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

Huayna Capac was the ruler of the ancient Inca Empire in South America. The empire had control of many lands and peoples. Its capital, which was its most important city, was Cusco in the Andes mountains. Today, Cusco is in the country of Peru.

Huayna did not like this city because it was very cold. He ordered his people to build him a second capital in a warmer place. The chosen place was Quito, in today's country of Ecuador. The new palace was bigger and nicer than the one in Cusco, and the weather was nearly perfect.

Still, Cusco and Quito were more than a thousand miles apart, with steep mountains between them. Huayna Capac ordered his subjects to build a highway that connected Cusco and Quito. He was happy with the result, and ordered a second highway along the coast.

The Great Inca Highway



The Inca highway system was one of the biggest construction projects ever made. It ran for thousands of miles, and connected the countries of Chile and Ecuador. It was as long as the distance between New York and Paris. It also went through just about every type of environment. It ran from icy mountains to hot jungles, from dry deserts to wet forests.

These roads surprised Spanish explorers. One explorer, Pedro de Cieza de León, wrote in the 1540s that no one had seen highways like this. He described a road called the Qhapaq Ñan, which means “Road of the Lord.” Parts of this road still remain today.

Huayna Capac died around 1527. Spanish explorers arrived in 1532, searching for new riches. They brought diseases that the Incas had never faced before. More than half of the Incas died from these European diseases. For the next 300 years, Spain tried to wipe out the native culture. Yet, the native peoples held on to their culture and beliefs.

Ancient Cultures From Around The World

Today, most people learn about four ancient cultures. They learn about Mesopotamia in the Middle East and Egypt in Africa. They also learn about the Indus Valley in India and the Yellow River in China. Recently, experts have added the Andean people to this list.

The Andes area includes parts of Ecuador, Bolivia and most of Peru. The ancient people who lived here built pyramids and temples that are as old as the ones in Egypt. They had irrigation systems that were as good as those in Mesopotamia. These systems allowed them to water the fields and grow crops. People in the Andes also made art that lasted hundreds of years.

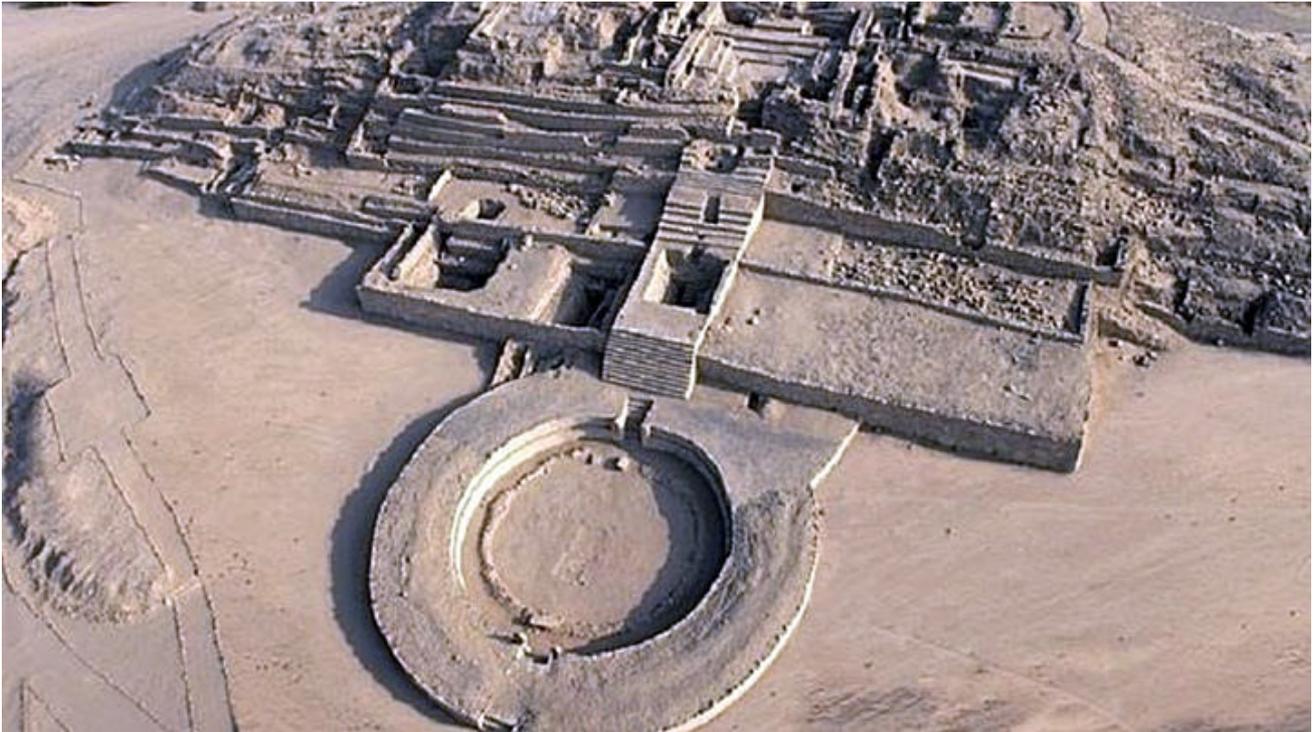
Andean People Thrived Despite Tough Conditions

It is strange that the Andean people were able to have such a rich culture. The area they lived in did not have stable weather. The coast of Peru and Chile is very dry. The Atacama Desert in Chile is the driest place on Earth. In some places, it never rains at all.

The area can have dangerous rain and floods that last for years. Floods destroy crops and wash away fields. There are also many volcanoes and earthquakes in the area. Still, people were able to settle and survive.

North of the Atacama is Lima, the capital of today's Peru. Further north, there are 30 or more ancient cities. One of these is Sechín Bajo, which is 5,500 years old.

A Peaceful Way Of Life



The early people in the Andes, who came before the Inca, were quite peaceful. Early cities in Peru did not have to defend themselves often. They did not have strong walls to keep out invaders. One of the most famous cities is named Caral, where the Andean people built large pyramids. The buildings in Caral are about 5,000 years old. People lived in this city for 1,200 years in total peace.

People in cities like Caral ate fish. In the mountains, the main food was tubers and roots, such as potatoes.

Textiles were very important in the central Andes. Andean peoples grew cotton to make tools for fishing. They also built their temples from stones stuffed into bags, to make enormous building blocks.

Wrote Messages Using Rope

In Caral, Ruth Shady Solis studies old objects to understand how ancient people lived. She came across a strange invention. It is called the quipu, and is a long rope with strings dangling from it. Incas tied knots into the strings, and the way they tied these knots had a certain meaning. People could read the messages by running their hands along the knots.

The quipu were confusing for Spanish explorers, who ordered that they all be destroyed. About 750 survived, but no one has learned how to read them yet.

The culture of the Andes is ancient, and very different from the rest of the world. If history had been different, maybe we would be reading and writing with quipu strings today.

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Andean People Thrived Despite Tough Conditions."
Which sentence from the section BEST shows WHY farming would have been challenging for the Incas?
 - (A) It is strange that the Andean people were able to have such a rich culture.
 - (B) Floods destroy crops and wash away fields.
 - (C) There are also many volcanoes and earthquakes in the area.
 - (D) Still, people were able to settle and survive.

- 2 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-3].
Select the paragraph from the section that shows the difference between Cusco and Quito.

- 3 Use the map and information from the article to select the TRUE statement.
 - (A) The roads that the Incas built were mainly used for moving supplies from one city to another.
 - (B) The roads that the Incas built did not last very long because of the harsh weather in the region.
 - (C) Huayna ordered his people to build a road to connect the capitals, because the road on the coast was successful.
 - (D) Huayna ordered his people to make a road to connect the capitals, but the road extended beyond the capitals.

- 4 Examine the two photographs within the article.
What do the photographs show about the Inca civilization?
 - (A) they show that the Incas built large structures that have survived for thousands of years
 - (B) they show that the Incas were interested in displaying their power by constructing large structures
 - (C) they show examples of the famous roads that were built for Huayna Capac
 - (D) they show why their civilization did not survive the conquests of the Spanish explorers

Answer Key

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- 2 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-3].
Select the paragraph from the section that shows the difference between Cusco and Quito.
- Paragraph 1:**
Huayna did not like this city because it was very cold. He ordered his people to build him a second capital in a warmer place. The chosen place was Quito, in today's country of Ecuador. The new palace was bigger and nicer than the one in Cusco, and the weather was nearly perfect.
- 3 Use the map and information from the article to select the TRUE statement.
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