

An Introduction to the Inca Empire

THE INCAS

by Craig Morris and Adriana von Hagan

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In 1532, Spanish conquistadores encountered—and defeated—the largest empire ever to have existed in the New World. The quadripartite Inca Empire, known as Tawantinsuyu (the “Four Parts Together”), has captured the attention and imagination of the Western public like little else. Yet for all this attention, most people

know little about the Inca aside from Machu Picchu. *The Incas*, by the late Craig Morris and Adriana von Hagan, is in some sense an effort to correct that.

Written as an introduction to the society and culture of the Incas, the book is accessible to a lay audience, yet also interesting to more advanced scholars. Morris and von Hagan mobilize a combination of archaeological evidence and ethnohistorical documents, adding context and detail with the generous use of quotations from chronicles written by 16th and 17th century Spanish soldiers, clergymen, and administrators.

Of course, heavy reliance on the chronicles has its own set of hazards, as the authors point out in the introduction: these early chronicles were written by Europeans who generally made little or no attempt to overcome the vast cultural divide that separated them from Andean people. Yet much of our information about the Inca, until recently, comes from these sometimes contradictory accounts, which has resulted in modern analyses that cast the Inca in a very European light. *The Incas* represents a conscious attempt to diverge from this tendency and to understand the Inca Empire on its own terms.

This endeavor is evident in the overall organization of the book, which, after sections on Inca material culture, political formation, and religion, is divided into chapters that follow the Inca configuration of their empire into four geographic and ideological parts. These chapters—in which the major sites and areas of Tawantinsuyu are described as part of a written tour, beginning in Cuzco (to which a detailed chapter is dedicated) and ending at the far reaches of the empire—is one of the distinguishing features of this book and, I believe, one of its great strengths. The writing is scholarly yet in most cases quite evocative, and does not slip into overly romanticized narrative. Morris and von Hagan also make an effort to explain and contextualize historical or archaeologically evident behavior in terms of Andean culture and social structure, rather than resorting to a Western theoretical construct as many works over the past few decades have done. The result is an informative and succinct explanation that is more enlightening in many ways than other introductory books about the Inca.

This is not to suggest that the book is completely without flaws. Morris and von Hagan generally shy away from discussing scholarly disagreements or controversies, particularly regarding the origins of the Inca polity. Similarly, while the writing is clear and generally expressive, at times the descriptions are somewhat brief and generalized, leaving the reader with only a tantalizing glimpse of what appears to be a deeper, more complex, and fascinating subject. While brevity is often required in books of this nature, these omissions create a less nuanced presentation of the Inca.

Yet this tendency is offset by well-chosen, high-quality images, photos, and maps. The illustrations bring the world of Tawantinsuyu to life in a way that very few books could. If the old adage is true, and a picture really is worth a thousand words, then Morris and von Hagan have somehow managed to pack a multi-volume work into a clear and accessible book that is engaging for students and advanced scholars alike.

Reviewed by Thomas J. Hardy, Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania. Hardy specializes in Andean archaeology.