Definition: **Inca** from *Philip’s Encyclopedia*

South American people who migrated from the Peruvian highlands into the Cuzco area in c.AD 1250. They consolidated their empire steadily until the reigns of Pachacuti (r.1438-71) and his son, Topa (r.1471-93), when Inca dominance extended over most of the continent W of the Andes. Although highly organized on bureaucratic lines, the Empire collapsed when the Spanish invasion (1532), led by Pizarro, coincided with a civil war between Atahualpa and Huáscar. See also Central and South American mythology; Machu Picchu.

Image from: **The ruins of the Inca city Machu Picchu are...** in *Gods, Goddesses, and Mythology*

Summary Article: **Incas**

From *Encyclopedia of Global Religions*

The ancient South American religion of the Incas encompasses both political and spiritual elements as an integral part of the largest empire in the Americas, historically beginning in 1438 with the rise to power of Emperor Pachacuti Yupanqui. Governing more than 906,000 square miles of South America by the time of the Spanish conquest in 1532, the Inca Empire, or *Tawantinsuyu*, held a general belief system and series of religious practices that intertwined with the ideology of the ruling elite. While this ruling class called themselves *Incas*, the term was not a widespread cultural denotation; instead, individual descent groups retained the names that tied them to their region of origins. The religious beliefs and practices discussed here were spread by the Incas but without the need for active evangelization as the Incaic religion grew out of and accommodated the long-standing religious culture of the South American peoples they conquered.

Western South America was home to complex civilizations since at least 3000 BCE, referred to as Andean cultures. None of these cultures, including that of the Incas, developed a writing system, necessitating the scholar to seek information from extant material culture, archaeological investigations, the writings of Spanish missionaries and other chroniclers of the Colonial Period, and contemporary ethnographic comparisons. Ancient Andean societies were agriculture based, despite the environmental difficulties of life in the harsh coastal desert, the thin air of the mountains, and the recurring El Niño weather events.

With their capital in the central Peruvian highland Cuzco, the Incas developed systems to control, supervise, and organize their massive empire, much of which centered on management of religious symbols and rituals. Water scarcity was a consistent problem in the ancient Andean world, and water gods and goddesses were worshipped, mythologized, and given sacrifices in the hope of ensuring human survival. With elaborate canal systems, the Incas managed this crucial resource and the religious import it carried. A number of imperial holidays publicly placed the Inca emperor as the regulator of agricultural life, who ritually planted and harvested the first ears of corn every year.

The Inca emperor was more than just the singular man who controlled the vast empire and its subjects. The emperor embodied complementary spiritual and physical presences that were widely accepted as part of the Andean worldview. Male and female forces were one major aspect of the duality central to Andean understanding. The Inca emperor was balanced in this way by his wife, connected spiritually through ceremony and physically as his full-blooded sister. Furthermore, the Inca emperor’s tacitly understood supernatural descent allowed him to embody the complementary corporeal and divine.

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/inca
realms. With parentage claimed to be from the sun deity *Inti*, the Incas emphasized his role in agricultural welfare.

*Inti* was the patron deity of the Incas but was only one of the forces that made up the complex Incaic supernatural realm. The supernatural was a constant and very real presence in Andean life, consisting of two main categories: deities and animistic forces taking physical form or *huacas*. Notions of duality and complementarity were central to religious beliefs. All things, whether supernatural, mundane, political, or social, existed in a crucial balance of forces such as male and female, good and bad, civilization and disorder, upper and lower, dry and wet, highlands and lowlands. Maintenance of this balance was essential to life and the prevention of chaos. Each deity had a complement that checked his or her power. The principal deity of the Incas was *Viracocha*, a creator god who initiated life, according to differing accounts, on an island in Lake Titicaca in Bolivia or nearby. After creating life and instituting human civilization, Viracocha played a passive role in everyday occurrences and was worshipped for his act of origins. When conquering a new territory, the Incas established Viracocha as a central deity, requiring reverence to this symbolic presence of the Inca Empire. Other deities played a significantly active role in the lives of Inca subjects, wielding both destructive and beneficial powers over the agriculture-based society. The earth-mother goddess, *Pachamama*, was an active counterpart to Viracocha, receiving constant praise and gifts to ensure her beneficence. *Mamaquilla*, the moon, was the sister-wife of *Inti*, marking agricultural time as a necessary complement to the sun. A dualistic set of deities had jurisdiction over water: the male thunder and rain, *Illapa*, and the female ocean and streams, *Mamacocha*. These and other deities were added to the pantheons of conquered territories. If a particular region already worshipped gods similar to the Incaic deities, they would be renamed to comply with imperial consistency.

Perhaps the most complex aspect of the Incaic religion was the *huaca*, which, although physically and spiritually present, active, and having individual personalities, was not a deity. This term characterizes a spiritual essence that may inhabit a wide variety of inanimate objects or deceased beings. Elements of the landscape, particularly those that have unusual markings or physical developments, including specific mountains, streams, and rocks, among others, could be designated a *huaca*. Huacas were an important part of the complementary Incaic worldview, with many considered to be siblings of individuals in political power. As indelible parts of the natural landscape, the uprooting of huacas by Inca military forces, often as part of the conquest process, brought the land and the people of a specific territory under Inca rule, literally and metaphorically. The deliberate mistreatment of a huaca was a particularly harsh punishment. Huacas most likely existed in Andean religious belief and practice for thousands of years, as archaeological sites are often arranged around natural objects.

The deceased could also be a huaca, either as a mummy or as a part of an existing sacred place. Although there was an Incaic afterlife, the dead participated fully in life as mummies, huacas, or entombed individuals. Death was not an ending but a point of transition between life and residence with the ancestors. The Incaic spiritual realm was divided into the upper, lower, and living worlds, but the spirits of the dead never left the Earth. Ancestors were provided food, corn beer (*chicha*), utensils, and sacrifices. Mummies of past Incas took part in rituals, festivals, and feasts and were even brought on visits to other mummies and huacas. Incas held their lands after death, forcing each newly ascended Inca to gain new land tribute.

Deities and huacas were worshipped in similar manners, with prayer, sacrifice, and ritual taking place at the location of their residence. Deities and mummies resided in specially built temples, cared for by
Religious specialists. Religious specialists consisted of priests and priestesses, sorcerers, and the Inca themselves. Sorcerers, often the elderly or disabled, were sought by the public for all major life decisions. These individuals cast lots or performed other methods of divining to determine outcomes and omens of specific actions. A class of priests and cloistered women cared for deities and huacas, ensuring that they were properly fed and clothed, received adequate sacrifices, and honored with appropriate prayers. Sacrifices of food and chicha beer were shared between the religious specialists and the supernatural.

Sacrifice took a number of forms in Incaic religious practice. Frequent offerings to huacas and deities involved the provision of food, alcohol, coca leaves, domesticated animals, or people. Such provisions were set aside in all territories controlled by the Incas, consisting of approximately two thirds of a region's agricultural production. Each of these sacrificial items was integral to survival, and their donation to the spiritual realm was an act of surrender, sharing life with the supernatural to create a cyclical balance between worlds.

Equilibrium and order defined the Incaic worldview, since ages of time were ended by cataclysmic events, or pachakuti. The need for organization extended to space and time, exemplified by the ceque system, which emphasized the connection between politics, religion, and space. Ceques, or sight lines, originated at Cuzco and stretched to the limits of the empire. These lines related directly to the ritual calendar as each ceque had a huaca associated with it and a day of the year on which this huaca was honored. Other viewing points in Cuzco determined the solar calendar on which the agricultural cycle and associated rituals were based. A lunar calendar of 12 months determined annual celebrations, many of which related to the Incas' political and social role within the mundane and supernatural worlds.

Following the Spanish conquest, the Incas and their subjects retained a considerable degree of their indigenous religious beliefs and practices. The deep-rooted ties to ancestors, origins, and place continued to play a significant role in the agrarian lifestyle of the Andean peoples, who actively celebrated their land and history and both ancient and historic ancestors.

See also
Ancestors, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Indigenous Religions, Latin America, Peru, Sacred Places

Further Readings

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA