The Incas

If YOU lived there...
You live in the Andes Mountains, where you raise llamas. You weave their wool into warm cloth. Last year, soldiers from the powerful Inca Empire took over your village. They brought in new leaders, who say you must all learn a new language and send much of your woven cloth to the Inca ruler. They also promise that the government will provide for you in times of trouble.

How do you feel about living in the Inca Empire?

Building Background  The Incas built their huge empire by taking over village after village in South America. They brought many changes to the people they conquered before they were themselves conquered by the Spanish.

The Incas Create an Empire
While the Aztecs were ruling Mexico, the Inca Empire arose in South America. The Incas began as a small tribe in the Andes. Their capital was Cuzco (kuh-skoh) in what is now Peru.

In the mid-1400s a ruler named Pachacuti (pah-chah-koo-tee) began to expand Inca territory. Later leaders followed his example, and by the early 1500s the Inca Empire was huge. It stretched from what is now Ecuador south to central Chile. It included coastal deserts, snowy mountains, fertile valleys, and thick forests. About 12 million people lived in the empire. To rule effectively, the Incas formed a strong central government.

The Incas lived in a region of high plains and mountains.
Central Rule

Pachacuti did not want the people he conquered to have too much power. He began a policy of removing local leaders and replacing them with new officials whom he trusted. He also made the children of conquered leaders travel to Cuzco to learn about Inca government and religion. When the children were grown, they were sent back to govern their villages, where they taught their people about the Incas’ history, traditions, and way of life.

As another way of unifying the empire, the Incas used an official Inca language, Quechua (KE-chuh-wuh). Although people spoke many other languages, all official business had to be done in Quechua. Even today, many people in Peru and the other former Inca lands still speak Quechua.

A Well-Organized Economy

The Inca government strictly controlled the economy and told each household what work to do. Most Incas had to spend time working for the government as well as themselves. Farmers tended government land in addition to their own. Villagers made cloth and other goods for the army. Some Incas served as soldiers, worked in mines, or built roads and bridges. In this way the people paid taxes in the form of labor rather than money. This labor tax system was called the mita (MEE-tah).

Another feature of the Inca economy was that there were no merchants or markets. Instead, government officials would distribute goods collected through the mita. Leftover goods were stored in the capital for emergencies. If a natural disaster struck, or if people simply could not care for themselves, the government provided supplies to help them.

Reading Check Summarizing How did the Incas control their empire?
Life in the Inca Empire

Because the rulers controlled Inca society so closely, the common people had little personal freedom. At the same time, the government protected the general welfare of all in the empire. But that did not mean everyone was treated equally.

Social Divisions

Inca society had two main social classes. The emperor, government officials, and priests made up the upper class. Members of this class lived in stone houses in Cuzco and wore the best clothes. They did not have to pay the labor tax, and they enjoyed many other privileges. The Inca rulers, for example, could relax in luxury at Machu Picchu (mah-choo peek-choo). This royal retreat lay nestled high in the Andes.

The people of the lower class in Inca society included farmers, artisans, and servants. There were no slaves, however, because the Incas did not practice slavery. Most Incas were farmers. In the warmer valleys they grew crops such as maize and peanuts. In the cooler mountains they carved terraces into the hillsides and grew potatoes. High in the Andes, people raised llamas—South American animals related to camels—for wool and meat.

Lower-class Incas dressed in plain clothes and lived simply. By law, they could not own more goods than just what they needed to survive. Most of what they made went to the mita and the upper class.

Religion

The Inca social structure was partly related to religion. For example, the Incas thought that their rulers were related to the sun god and never really died. As a result, priests brought mummies of former kings to many ceremonies. People gave these royal mummies food and gifts.

Inca ceremonies included sacrifices. But unlike the Maya and the Aztecs, the Incas rarely sacrificed humans. They sacrificed llamas, cloth, or food instead.

In addition to practicing the official religion, people outside Cuzco worshipped other gods at local sacred places. The Incas believed certain mountaintops, rocks, and springs had magical powers. Many Incas performed sacrifices at these places as well as at the temple in Cuzco.

Achievements

Inca temples were grand buildings. The Incas were master builders, known for their expert masonry, or stonework. They cut stone blocks so precisely that they did not need cement to hold them together. The Incas also built a major network of roads.

The Incas produced works of art as well. Artisans made pottery as well as gold and silver jewelry. They even created a life-sized cornfield of gold and silver, crafting each cob, leaf, and stalk individually. Inca weavers also made some of the finest textiles in the Americas.
Inca Arts

Inca arts included beautiful textiles and gold and silver objects.

Inca artisans made many silver offerings to the gods.

The Incas are famous for their textiles. Inca weavers made cloth from cotton and from the wool of llamas.

Inca artisans also made many gold objects, such as this mask.

While such artifacts tell us much about the Incas, nothing was written about their empire until the Spanish arrived. Indeed, the Incas had no writing system. Instead, they kept records with knotted cords called quipus (KEE-pooz). Knots in the cords stood for numbers. Different colors represented information about crops, land, and other important topics.

The Incas also passed down their stories and history orally. People sang songs and told stories about daily life and military victories. Official “memorizers” learned long poems about Inca legends and history. When the conquistadors arrived, the Inca records were written in Spanish and Quechua. We know about the Incas from these records and from the stories that survive in the songs and religious practices of the people in the region today.

READING CHECK  Contrasting  How did daily life differ for upper- and lower-class Incas?

Pizarro Conquers the Incas

The arrival of conquistadors changed more than how the Incas recorded history. In the late 1520s a civil war began in the Inca Empire after the death of the ruler. Two of the ruler’s sons, Atahualpa (ah-tah-WAHL-pah) and Huáscar (WAH-sahr), fought to claim the throne. Atahualpa won the war in 1532, but fierce fighting had weakened the Inca army.

On his way to be crowned as king, Atahualpa got news that a band of about 180 Spanish soldiers had arrived in the Inca Empire. They were conquistadors led by Francisco Pizarro. When Atahualpa came to meet the group, the Spanish attacked. They were greatly outnumbered, but they caught the unarmed Incas by surprise. They quickly captured Atahualpa and killed thousands of Inca soldiers.

To win his freedom, Atahualpa asked his people to fill a room with gold and silver for Pizarro. Incas brought jewelry,
statues, and other valuable items from all parts of the empire. Melted down, the gold and silver may have totaled 24 tons. The precious metals would have been worth millions of dollars today. Despite this huge payment, the Spanish killed Atahualpa. They knew that if they let the Inca ruler live, he might rally his people and defeat the smaller Spanish forces.

Some Incas did fight back after the emperor's death. In 1537, though, Pizarro defeated the last of the Incas. Spain took control over the entire Inca Empire and ruled the region for the next 300 years.

**REVIEW CHECK**

**Identifying Cause and Effect** What events ended the Inca Empire?

**SUMMARY AND PREVIEW** The Incas built a huge empire in South America. But even with a strong central government, they could not withstand the Spanish conquest in 1537. In the next chapters you will learn about how the Americas have changed since the great civilizations of the Maya, Aztecs, and Incas and what these places are like today.

**SECTION 3 ASSESSMENT**

**Reviewing Ideas, Terms, and Places**

1. a. **Identify** Where was the Inca Empire located?
   
   What kinds of terrain did it include?
   
   b. **Evaluate** Do you think the *mita* system was a good government policy? Why or why not?
   
2. a. **Describe** What was a unique feature of Inca masonry?
   
   b. **Make Inferences** How might the Inca road system have helped strengthen the empire?
   
3. a. **Recall** When did the Spanish defeat the last of the Incas?
   
   b. **Analyze** Why do you think Pizarro was able to defeat the much larger forces of the Incas? Name at least two possible reasons.

**Critical Thinking**

4. **Analyzing** Draw a diagram like the one below. Using your notes, write a sentence in each box about how that topic influenced the next topic.

   ![Diagram](image)

   **Geography**
   
   **Government**
   
   **Society**
   
   **Achievements**

5. **Adding Information about the Inca Empire** Your article would also describe the Inca Empire. Include some comments about how the Incas' building activities related to their environment. Also, note what happened when the Spanish arrived.