
Book Review: *The Inka Empire: A Multidisciplinary Approach*

Izumi Shimada, ed. *The Inka Empire: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. Pp. 392. \$75.00; ISBN: 978-0-292-76079-0.

The Inka Empire or *Tawantinsuyu* (the Quechua name for the “realm of four parts”) was the largest political system to develop in the New World. *Tawantinsuyu* extended over 2,000,000 square kilometers and encompassed at least 86 ethnic groups from Argentina and Chile to the current border between Ecuador and Colombia. Intriguingly, the Inka ruled their empire without wheeled technologies, markets, money, or phonetic writing systems. Instead, they kept the records of the empire in a complex system of knotted strings called *quipus*. For that reason, much of what we know of this interesting polity comes from post-conquest sources.

This breathtaking collaborative volume, edited by Izumi Shimada, seeks to offer a holistic vision of the Inka empire, placing different disciplines, methods, sources, and perspectives in dialogue. It includes 19 chapters by 23 authors that consider linguistic and genetic evidence along with material culture and historical documents to study Inka origins, imperial infrastructure, administrative strategies, agricultural technology, accounting, architecture and landscape intervention, and political organization, among other aspects.

The volume is divided into five parts, prefaced by a useful introductory chapter by Shimada that lays out the book’s aims and structure. The first part is concerned with the written sources and discusses the origins and formation of the Inka empire. It opens with an insightful historiographical essay by anthropologist Frank Salomon that maps the early textual evidence of the Inka empire. The following two chapters examine linguistic evidence (Rodolfo Cerrón-Palomino) and DNA analysis (Ken-Ichi Shinoda). Cerrón-Palomino argues that the Inka originally spoke Puquina language and migrated north from the Lake Titicaca region (along the modern Peru-Bolivia border), while Shinoda posits that genetic evidence also supports a movement from the Titicaca region to Cuzco. In chapter five, however, Brian S. Bauer and Douglas K. Smit take issue with Cerrón-Palomino and Shinoda’s approaches, claiming they “read these origin myths as historically accurate” (pg. 68). Rather than seeing the expansion of the Inka as a migration of a single people, they suggest, archaeologists should take a broader view on the development of state-level sociopolitical complexity. In this way, they present archaeological data to argue that by 1300 C.E. the Inka had consolidated and unified a large heartland in the Cuzco basin, decades before the time of their expansion in the 15th century.

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The second part examines the infrastructure and administrative strategies that enabled that expansion. R. Alan Covey considers how the Inka provincial administration impacted previous forms of political organization. Terence D’Altroy cogently presents the economic and political principles, institutions, infrastructure, and practices of the Inka empire. D’Altroy’s essay will prove especially useful for those looking for a synthesis of Inka economics and political principles.

Part three, the volume’s strongest section, focuses on Inka culture and includes essays on astronomy and agriculture (by John C. Earls and Gabriela Cervantes), *khipus* (Gary Urton), art (Thomas B. F. Cummins), textiles (Elena Phipps), architecture (Stella Nair, Jean-Pierre Protzen, and Susan A. Niles), and conceptions of life and death (Peter Kaulicke). Earls and Cervantes analyze the evidence of Moray, a laboratory for astronomical observation, hydraulic and agricultural experimentation, and pilgrimage center. Urton addresses the recording of information in knotted-cords, suggesting that they functioned through an “accounting hierarchy” that represented the administrative partitions of the empire. Cummins tackles the systematic, abstract, and schematic geometric forms present in Inka art. Phipps presents the remarkable diversity and great value of Inka garments. Nair and Protzen examine the standardized architectural languages of the Inka, including roads, waterworks, agricultural terraces, buildings, and settlements. Niles examines the role that royal estates such as Machu Pichu played in the expansion of the Inkas. Finally, Kaulicke explores Inka conceptions of life and death. Together, these essays highlight the visual uniformity of the Inka empire and highlight the abstract geometric designs and recording systems that related the individual to the whole.

The fourth part, strongly centered on archaeological studies, examines the imperial administration in the ecologically and ethnically diverse edges of the empire. Martti Pärssinen examines the south or *Collasuyu*, Frances M. Hayashida and Natalia Guzmán the north coast of Peru, Inge Schjellerup the lowland jungles of *Ceja de Selva*, and Tamara L. Bray the northern frontier of Ecuador and Colombia. These chapters show the Inka strategies to extend their rule and the ways they penetrated different cultural areas and ecosystems.

Part five, “Impacts of the Spanish Conquest,” consists of a single essay by Tetsuya Amino that examines the changing representations of the Inka after the Spanish conquest, showing how the image of the Inkas was appropriated by post-conquest indigenous peoples and even by people who had never had any relationship with the Inka. In this process, Amino posits, the Inka eventually became de-historicized and came “to be seen as a kind of pure energy” (pg. 357). While Amino’s essay is rich in scope, the last section is the weakest of the volume, since it does not give a sense of the ways in which the Spanish conquest built upon and impacted the political, economic, and social formations of the Inka—a topic that has been widely explored by historians and ethnohistorians of the Andes.

In sum, this multidisciplinary approach is a valuable resource to learn and teach about the Inka empire. It addresses a wide range of subjects, and sets the ground for multidisciplinary discussions based on a variety of sources. The chapters can be read

separately, which makes it very useful for the classroom (if, conversely, creating some repetition for those reading the volume as a whole). Plus, it is a beautifully illustrated book with pictures, maps, and graphs to help readers make sense of the material.

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