Andrew James Hamilton

**Scale and the Incas**


Andrew James Hamilton’s new book, *Scale and the Incas,* begins by situating scale—and assumptions concerning its interpretation—as not only inevitably relational but also socially constructed. This process is made more precarious by a move from the ancient past to the present, as in the case of the opening discussion, which ranges from the Andes to Harvard’s Peabody Museum. Hamilton focuses in particular on the creation of reduced-scale objects as a persistent practice throughout the Andean world but notes that scale was not necessarily manipulated or understood in the same ways throughout that world. Scale was what he terms a “recursive mode of expression” (6), one that linked diverse objects, people, places, and practices.

Hamilton opens with a detailed discussion of the challenges involved in characterizing the concept of scale among Andean cultures. For the Inca, the situation is made especially acute by the lack of any word for “scale” in the Quechua language, despite the fact that Quechua does have words for “small” and “large.” Notwithstanding these difficulties, Hamilton carefully contextualizes Inca understandings of scale on its own terms, rather than extrapolating these meanings through the legacy of European intellectual traditions. Yet he is also cognizant, in the face of a colonial past, of the dangers of scaled relationships becoming lost in translation and becoming victims of the vagaries of time and conquest. With scale, Hamilton insists, one must always understand the referent in order to determine whether an object has been reduced, enlarged, or presented at a commensurate scale. If the referent goes unrecognized, so does the message. Hamilton’s goal is not to isolate “what scale symbolized” for the Incas but rather to demonstrate that scale represented, in and of itself, a “cognitive orientation and recurring mode of expression” (50).

Hamilton’s analysis extends beyond the Inca, however, and he prudently, and very helpfully, situates his study vis-à-vis various disciplines engaged with analogous questions of scale, from art history to cartography, archaeology, and architecture. He argues that all of these disciplines, although deeply concerned with the presentation of objects, structures, and spaces, invariably employ conventions of illustration that manipulate and distort. He is also aware of the perils related to presenting and illustrating concepts of Inca scale. As he explains, it is in response to these issues that he has chosen to produce a series of drawings of objects, artifacts, architectural structures, terraces, and elements of the natural world. These drawings, painstakingly rendered in ink, pencil, gouache, and watercolor, appear throughout the text. All the drawings are rendered as architectural elevations accompanied by scale markers, an element usually (and regrettably) absent from art historical illustrations. Other drawings are accompanied by silhouettes of human hands or bodies in order “to conjure haptic and phenomenological understandings” of the objects’ dimensions (17). Hamilton’s drawings are all marvelous; they invoke the illustrated journals and travelogues of previous eras and remind us of the value in looking closely at objects, in lingering on subtle details of pattern, coloration, and texture. Here, however, they are both timeless and utterly modern, seamlessly integrated with vanguard scholarship and engaging prose, and accompanied by a detailed index and notes for those figures and plates based on previous publications.

Hamilton’s chapters explore an array of objects, textiles, structures, and contexts to illustrate the ways that scale conveyed meaning to Inca audiences of all sorts. Chapter 2, “Scale and Material Culture,” examines conopas, small objects of carved stone that were meant to ensure the prosperity of their referents, which included livestock such as llamas but also agricultural commodities. For the Inca, conopas were supernaturally endowed whether they closely resembled their referents or not. According to Hamilton, the Inca neither categorically rejected mimesis nor demanded it. In fact, it was the inherent qualities of the stone from which the objects were crafted that empowered them, not the skills of the stoneworker. The reduced scale of conopas likely accommodated the ability to hold them in one’s hands, to curl one’s fingers around them. But even this explanation, Hamilton notes, is too simplistic: it loses sight of how the scale of the conopas structured the relationships and conceptual meanings among objects, entities, humans, the natural world, and the supernatural realm.

Other reduced-scale objects played vital roles in Inca culture, especially with reference to the built environment. Hamilton argues that theoretical engagements with scale as revealed in the construction of the built environment set the Inca apart from other cultures. In examining and experiencing the

103
built environment, modern viewers can more fully appreciate the ways in which scaled relationships structured space for the Incas and imbued it with meaning. Myths record how the deity Viracocha, before creating the world, carved a reduced-scale model of it out of stone. Such godly acts were mirrored in the actions of emperors, who utilized clay models to visualize and assess the built environments of newly conquered territories and redistribute conquered peoples. Spanish conquerors were greeted by emissaries of the Inca emperor bearing “earthenware fortresses,” or architectural models, signifying the actual built structures that stretched throughout the Inca Empire. Other marvels, such as the famous Sayhuite Stone—an enormous carved boulder teeming with figures, animals, structures, and channels—represent a reduced-scale landscape that showcased the Incas’ hydraulic and agricultural achievements. The stone sat at the apex of the site of Sayhuite, where, according to Hamilton, it encapsulated not only the surrounding topography but also its ecosystem of mountains, glaciers, natural springs, and inhabitants.

Even Cuzco itself, as described by Garcilaso de la Vega in his 1609 Comentarios reales de los Incas, was laid out in a scaled relationship to the larger Inca Empire. Pedestrians walking through the city, Hamilton explains, “could come to know the shape and structure of the vast empire, its farthest reaches, places they may never experience firsthand” (191). Cuzco, the most important city in the empire, was—quite curiously, Hamilton emphasizes—associated with the concept of reduced scale rather than enlarged scale, as if through this scalar reduction the city’s potency might be concentrated and intensified. Further, Hamilton adds, settlements throughout the empire replicated Cuzco at a reduced scale, creating a complex hierarchy of scaled relationships throughout the landscape.

At Machu Picchu, by contrast, massive masonry walls at times imitate rugged bedrock and replicate, through closely fitted joints and fine craftsmanship, nature at its own scale. Such walls served as a transition from the countryside to the built environment and the imperial estate of the emperor Pachacuti. At Cuper Bajo, another royal estate, polygonal sandstone blocks, each measuring only a few centimeters wide, were used to construct a 13-meter-long reduced-scale terrace wall. The Cuper Bajo wall is both large and reduced scale, Hamilton asserts, and counters assumptions that reduced scale equates to smallness. Nevertheless, both walls—whether commensurate as at Machu Picchu or conceived in reduced scale as at Cuper Bajo—served to signal entrance into the emperor’s realm. Moreover, these walls were always in dialogue with other objects, from cosquillas to figurines and even textiles. All of these artifacts likewise utilized scalar references and relationships to forge links connecting the natural landscape with the built environment, the estates of emperors, the homes and agricultural lands of Inca subjects, and the people that moved within and between these spaces. Emphasis was not on scalar disjunction, according to Hamilton, but on the materialization of continuities, intersections, and collective relationships.

Hamilton’s book is an innovative and compelling contribution to the ongoing process of recovering intellectual traditions that were, as he laments, devastated by the Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire. To use his words, he has not only liberated Inca scale from engagement with “Euro-American epistemological and ontological preconceptions” (241) but also situated it as a powerful vehicle through which connections among places, nature, the cosmos, animals, and people were structured and given social, ritual, and political meaning. Hamilton reminds us, too, that Inca scaled relationships operated in a nonverbal realm, in a society without a common language or a script tradition. Yet the scaled relationships were “immediately and universally intelligible” (242).

Through his unique, aesthetically compelling, and erudite presentation, Hamilton makes Inca scale more accessible and intelligible to modern audiences. His sophisticated study reveals the webs of meaning that scale inspired and sustained for the Incas. Perhaps just as important, it presents these webs of meaning in a way that allows them to be put into conversation with other cultures at other times and in other places around the globe.