

Pilgrims past and present: the ritual landscape of Raqchi, southern Peru

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In 1533 the Spanish overthrew the Inka¹ empire that then dominated the Andean region and much of the west coast of South America. Most tourists going to Peru visit Cuzco and Machu Pichu, but few see any of the other spectacular Inka ruins, such as the mythical and ritual site at Raqchi. There research is focusing on the site itself and on the long-term history of the Vilcanota Valley, including the changes wrought by the Spanish invasion. The project is also working with the local community to promote sustainable tourism.

At 3480m above sea level, the Inka site and modern village of Raqchi, 100km southeast of Cuzco, lies at the base of a small volcano called Kin-sach'ata just above the floodplain of the Vilcanota River (Fig. 1). The modern village of Raqchi was known to the Inka as Cacha and here they constructed a major ritual centre and pilgrimage site dedicated to their creator god, Viracocha.

Viracocha and the volcano: the legendary origins of Raqchi

For the Inka, the legend of Viracocha started at Lake Titicaca (Fig. 1), where they believed that the deity created people and then sent them underground. As Viracocha walked over the land, he instructed each of the ethnic groups to emerge out of their individual pacarina, or places of origin. These were usually mountains, hills, springs, lakes or caves, which people later venerated. Writing in about 1557, the Spanish chronicler Juan de Betanzos provides the best descriptions of Viracocha's exploits at Raqchi:

Viracocha came to a province that the Inka call Cacha, which belongs to the Canas Indians. When he called the Indians in this area into being they came out armed, and because they did not know who Viracocha was they came at him with their weapons ready to kill him. When he saw that

these Indians were coming to attack him, Viracocha instantly caused fire to fall from heaven, burning a range of mountains near the Indians. When the Canas Indians saw the fire, they feared they would be burned. Throwing their weapons to the ground, they went straight to Viracocha and prostrated themselves before him. When Viracocha saw them thus, he took a staff in his hand and went to where the fire was. He gave it two or three blows with his staff, which put it completely out, whereupon he told the Indians that he was their maker. The Canas Indians built a sumptuous "huaca", which means a shrine or idol, at the place where Viracocha stood when he called the fire from heaven and from which he went to put it out. In this huaca they and their descendants offered a great quantity of gold and silver. In memory of Viracocha, and of what had taken place there, the Canas Indians set a stone statue up in the huaca.

When the Inka Huayna Capac passed by the province of Cacha he saw the huaca shrine of Viracocha in the midst of the plain and he asked why it was there. The people of the province told him of the miracle that Viracocha had performed and of the fire that fell from the sky and burned the hill. When he heard this and saw the burned area, Huayna Capac decided that the remembrance of this event should be greater and ordered the erection, near the burned hill, of a large building (frequently described since as a temple, although "temple" is a European rather than an Andean concept). This was done and it was so large that there is no larger building in all the land of the Inkas. Thus it was finished and they held fiestas and sacrifices there to Viracocha. They also built many other houses around this building, in which were placed many mamacona (women working within religious institutions) together with many yanacona (labourers and civil servants) and all their services.²

The Raqchi project

The central aim of the Raqchi project is to investigate the long-term development of human occupation through the past 4000 years, along 30km of the Vilcanota Valley, by linking archaeological, ethnographic, archival and environmental research. The project, which includes Peruvian, British and North American personnel,³ is working with the local community and the Peruvian Institute of Culture to preserve the ruins and present them to visitors.

In 1998, Emily Dean directed the first stage of a regional survey of the Vilcanota Valley. Walking in small groups approximately 30m apart and assisted by a local guide, archaeologists traversed the valley bottoms, hill slopes and mountain crests of the survey area. They recorded architectural remains, terraces and other features such as burial caves and pictographs, sampling any scatters of artefacts they encountered (mainly pot sherds and debris from stone-tool manufacture). So far they have undertaken 25 weeks of survey and have registered 226 archaeological sites, ranging from small concentrations of artefacts to large complexes with the remains of hundreds of structures.⁴ Analysis of the artefacts has only just begun, but we (the project team) hope that eventually it will allow us to identify the changing social, economic and ritual organization of the landscape. Two substantial sites of the Wari period (c. AD 600–1000) within 1km of Raqchi have been mapped and extensively fieldwalked. We plan to excavate within them to study how the area was used during this period of state-level social organization and to compare this with the subsequent Inka and Spanish interventions in the region. Approximately half the sites found date to the immediately pre-Inka period (c. AD 1000–1480). At this time, people moved to hilltops and other relatively inaccessible locations, including Pukara Uhu, a settlement with over 200 round structures within the volcanic rubble surrounding Raqchi. Did people choose to live in these remote places because of wide-scale conflict or do these locations reflect a change in attitude to landscape use?

Inka architecture at Raqchi

The Inka site at Raqchi was a primary control point on a road system that originated in Cuzco and expanded as the Inka empire grew. Most of the Inka structures are enclosed by a 4km-long perimeter wall, but just outside it, on the Inka road that entered Raqchi from Cuzco, an enclosure with eight rectangular buildings around a large courtyard was probably a tambo (a lodging house for travellers) (Fig. 2).

The central Inka complex (Fig. 2) includes, in addition to the so-called temple, an artificial lake or cocha fed by a spring through two sets of finely constructed stone fountains with a raised platform beside one of them; a group of



Figure 1 The location of Raqchi in the Department of Cuzco, Peru.

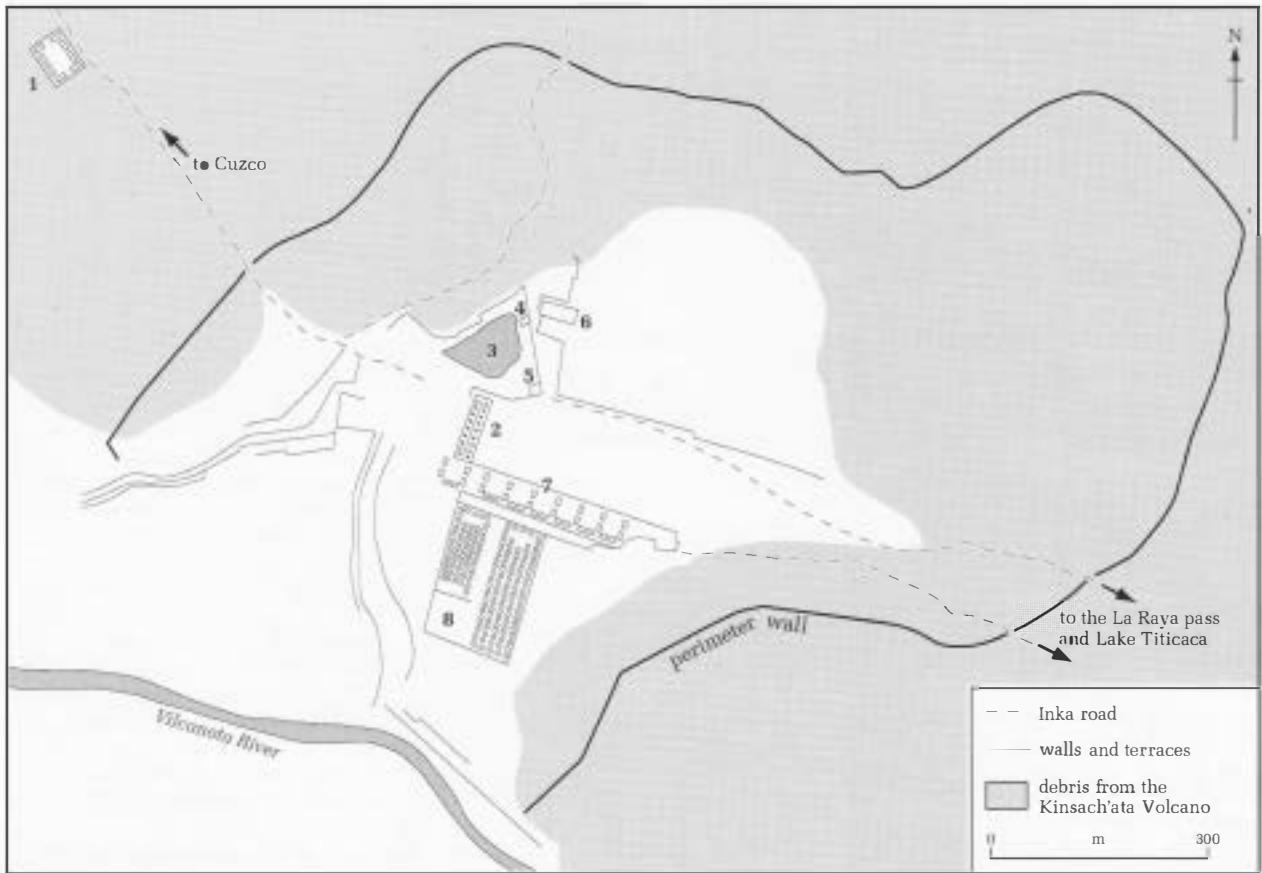


Figure 2 A schematic plan of the Inka site at Raqchi in relation to the Inka road system and the Vilcanota River, showing the main features mentioned in the text: (1) probable tambo, (2) temple, (3) cocha (artificial lake), (4) north fountain, (5) south fountain, (6) platform, (7) yanacancha, (8) collcas.

buildings on a terrace, each arranged around three sides of a courtyard and known today as Yanacancha (possibly housing the mamacona or the yanacona, or both, mentioned by Betanzos); and an installation of 152 circular structures that were probably collcas used to store crops as well as pottery, woven cloth and military equipment for use by the Inka state.⁵ The quality and scale of the Inka architecture reflect the site's religious and administrative importance, as well as its strategic position in the Vilcanota Valley.

One of the most significant results of Emily Dean's survey has been the absence of any other examples of Inka architecture or sites with a notable amount of Inka-style pottery. This may indicate that some of the earlier hilltop settlements remained in use and that the major Inka site at Raqchi was an administrative centre, beyond which the local people's life continued largely unchanged – a contrast with the Spanish colonial period when, in the 1580s, many communities, including those living in Raqchi, were relocated into new planned towns (*reducciones*) on the floodplain of the Vilcanota.

Inka Raqchi: restructuring a sacred space

Today, many Andean mountains, hills, springs, lakes, rocks, fields, trees and view-

ing points are considered sacred, and their spiritual importance is expressed through ritual activities such as pilgrimage, dance, the making of libations, the offering of coca



Figure 3 The temple at Raqchi, from an engraving in George Squier's *Peru: incidents of travel and exploration in the land of the Incas*, 407 (New York: Harper, 1877).



Figure 4 The Inka road along which pilgrims and state officials probably entered Raqchi when coming from the Lake Titicaca area.

leaves, or ritual incantations. But the archaeological recognition of ancient sacred sites remains difficult and contentious. For this we require that some form of physical engagement took place, such as making an offering or constructing a shrine, which is what we can recognize at Raqchi.

The new monumental complex that the Inka constructed at Cacha (Raqchi) included a massive structure using stonework of the highest quality at its base (normally reserved for very high-status, particularly religious, buildings) and topped by a wall of mud bricks that still reaches a height of almost 12 m (Fig. 3). This is probably the “large building” or temple that Betanzos described as being constructed by the Inka Huayna Capac.⁶

The cocha is a central feature of the site that is overlooked by both the temple and the raised platform, and is fed by the two fountains, which are of a type that the Inka used in cleansing rituals and as a place to make offerings. In 1977, when a Spanish project excavated a small rectangular structure between the northern fountain and the raised platform, it was found to contain a deep layer of ash that may have been the remains of burnt offerings made on or near the raised platform.⁷ This ash was possibly being stored prior to depositing it in the cocha and letting it wash into the Vilcanota River (a similar ceremony is reported for Inka Cuzco). In Inka cosmology, springs were often regarded as sacred,

and the association with the temple and the volcano may suggest that the spring at Raqchi, with its fountains, was conceived of as the place of origin of the Canas Indians mentioned in the legend of Viracocha.

The Spanish chronicler, Padre Cristobal de Molina, described how Raqchi was visited during a pilgrimage associated with the June solstice.⁸ It started in Cuzco and went over the mountains to La Raya, the highest pass on the road to Lake Titicaca, which was another revered Inka sacred site. The pilgrims visited Raqchi when they walked along the Inka road (Fig. 4) at the bottom of the Vilcanota Valley on their return to Cuzco. Another Spanish chronicler, Garcilaso de la Vega, provides an interesting description of how people processed inside the temple through what he describes as a series of passages:

On entering the temple by the main gate, they turned right down the first passage until they came to the wall at the right-hand side of the temple; they then turned left down the second passage and went on till they came to the opposite wall. There they turned right again down the third passage, and by following the series of passages in the plan, . . . they came to the twelfth and last, where there was a staircase up to the upper floor.⁹

Garcilaso is often regarded as a rather unreliable source for Inka culture, and his

description of Raqchi is not wholly accurate, but this is the only Inka building for which we have an account of how people should walk through it. It is highly significant that the design of the building means that, on entering its two known doorways, progress of visitors is immediately blocked by a series of tall pillars that they are forced to walk around (Fig. 5). If devotees took this as a suggestion as to how to proceed through the building, they would have begun to trace a path similar to Garcilaso’s description of a carefully choreographed zig-zag motion. My view is that the layout of the temple was deliberately designed in this way to express aspects of Inka cosmology, particularly their relationship with Viracocha. In processing through the temple, the devotees would have wound their way towards the statue of Viracocha, the volcano and the spring.

The procession through the temple was designed to communicate with the mythical past, to interact with Viracocha, the miracle of his volcano, and the spring that was the *pacarina* or place of origin of the Canas. If this interpretation is correct, I believe we should find in the cocha evidence of ritual activities (such as small pieces of *Spondylus* (thorny oyster) shells from the Ecuadorian coast, the preferred offering at sacred springs). We hope to excavate the space in front of the temple to assess this interpretation.

The Inka appropriated many sites that had been the focus of ritual activity in earlier periods and they incorporated them within their own myths. Inka expansion and conquest may even have been legitimized through this religious commitment, a process not unlike the “recuperation” of the “Holy Lands” during the European crusades to the Levant. The new ritual and administrative centre built at Raqchi, in a



Figure 5 The doorway to the temple at Raqchi showing how the path followed by devotees is blocked by a tall pillar in front of the entrance.

highly recognizable Inka style, helped pilgrims experience a greater awareness of religious concepts and imperial power. One of the major questions this raises is how the local Canas population understood the Inka intervention at this site. Were they involved in the re-modelling, perhaps inhabiting some of the new buildings, or was the site effectively usurped by the Inka, who removed the Canas from their pacarina and appropriated their prestigious ritual centre?

Modern pilgrims and the present-day village of Raqchi

Today, Raqchi is a small village of approximately 80 households, where the residents maintain a precarious living by making pottery during the dry season and undertaking agricultural work on their limited land during the wet season. The Inka ruins are a source of pride, but many villagers also feel aggrieved because their fields were appropriated by the Peruvian state in an effort to preserve the ruin complex and present it to visitors (modern pilgrims). This loss of agricultural land is particularly significant, because sales of domestic wares by the potters of Raqchi (Fig. 6) have declined, partly because of the increasing availability of other products such as metal cooking pots and plastic bowls. The potters have also suffered a decline in the sale of their water jars, because recent development projects have supplied piped water to urban and rural households. Many of the potters have already begun to re-orientate their production towards the urban and tourist markets by making reproduction Inka vessels, plates, flowerpots and other ornamental wares, but these items are often sold at cheap wholesale prices away from the community.

Like ancient pilgrims, many modern tourists visiting Peru are looking for exotic, emotional and spiritual experiences. Much of this tourism focuses on major Prehispanic sites, such as Machu Pichu, Sipan or Chan Chan, and the income it generates tends to flow back to the cities, so that rural communities rarely benefit. The Raqchi project is working with the local community, which has been influencing the design and execution of the research project. We have begun to work with them and Peru's Institute of Culture to design a longer-term initiative to preserve the archaeological site while presenting it to tourists in an exciting and informative way.¹⁰ We plan to install signposted walks and information panels to guide visitors through the mythical origins of Raqchi and the spectacular Inka architecture. We also aim to inform them about the abundant wildlife of the area, the production of modern pottery, and other aspects of life in the Andes today. We are also working with the community to provide facilities for tourists visiting the site, which will generate much-needed income for the local people. In 1999 the Raqchi community set up its



Figure 6 Potters from Raqchi trading modern wares at the annual fair of Oropesa, 30 km southeast of Cuzco; the large jars, which are used primarily for brewing beer and also for storing crops, are bartered for maize.

own artisan association, the Inka Llaqta (Inka Village), which promotes the sale of high-quality pottery and runs a daily market for tourists in the village square.

There are always difficult ethical questions to be considered when a project intervenes in the preservation of an archaeological site, and they become even more complicated when the social life and future of a living community are also affected. We hope that by being open about our plans and promoting a dialogue with the various interest groups involved, our interventions will benefit the community of Raqchi as well as academic research.

Notes

1. "Inka" is now used rather than "Inca" by many Andean scholars because the former spelling more accurately reflects the pronunciation of the word in the Quechua language spoken by the Inka people.
2. Abbreviated by the author from part 1, chapters 2 and 45, in R. Hamilton's & D. Buchanan's English translation of Juan de Betanzos' *Narrative of the Incas*, originally written in 1557 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996).
3. Bill Sillar of the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, is the director of the project, which is funded by a Leverhulme Special Research Fellowship. Emily Dean, co-director, is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, and is funded by a Fulbright award. Amelia Pérez, Universidad de San Antonio Abad del Cuzco, is the finds supervisor and project administrator. Chris Hudson, of Chris Hudson Designs, is designing the tourist circuit. We would like to acknowledge financial support from UCL, the University of Wales at Lampeter, the University of California at Berkeley, and the Anglo-Peruvian Society.
4. E. Dean, A. Pérez Trujillo, W. Sillar, *Proyecto Arqueológico Raqchi: informe*

preliminar sobre las prospecciones, unpublished report presented to the Instituto Nacional de Cultura, Cuzco, January 1999.

5. A more detailed description of the Inka site at Raqchi can be found in G. Gasparini & L. Margolies, *Inca architecture*, translated by P. J. Lyon, 234–55 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).
6. In a recent study of Huayna Capac and his architectural works, Susan Niles also ascribes the main Inka structures at Raqchi, including the temple, to his reign and suggests that it was constructed in the first decade of the sixteenth century AD (less than 30 years before the Spanish conquest); see S. Niles, *The shape of Inca history: narrative and architecture in an Andean Empire*, 236–53 (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999).
7. L. E. Lopez y Sebastián, "Rajchi en la arqueología de la Sierra Sur del Perú. Informe preliminar", *Revista Española de Antropología Americana*, 9, 137–60, 1981. The Spanish project was directed from 1983 to 1985 by Manuel Ballesteros Gaibrois and various parts of the site have also been excavated under the directorship of Manuel Chavez Ballon (1964–66), Luis A. Pardo (1983–85), Pedro Taca (1994–95) and Alicia Quiorita Huarocha (1996).
8. Cristobal de Molina, *Ritos y fábulas de los Incas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Futuro, 1947 [1572]).
9. Garcilaso de la Vega, *Royal commentaries of the Incas and general history of Peru*, translated by H. V. Livermore, 290 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989 [1612]).
10. In 1999 David Bethell, a postgraduate student in geography from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, interviewed 500 tourists in Cuzco and Raqchi to gain a better understanding of how they select sites to visit. This research will help us to provide relevant information and facilities.