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978-0-521-63759-6 - History of the Inca Realm: Maria Rostworowski de Diez Canseco

Harry B. Iceland

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History of the Inca Realm

History of the Inca Realm, by María Rostworowski de Diez Canseco, is a classic work of ethnohistorical research that has been both influential and provocative in the field of Andean prehistory. Now the product of forty years of innovative archival research by one of Peru's most distinguished scholars, a wide-ranging critique of established interpretations of Inca history, is available to an English-reading audience.

The book begins with the mythical origins of the Incas and the formation of the great lineages, or *panaca*. It relates the creation and expansion of the Inca state, including the methods of conquest of the Inca rulers, especially the use of the ancient Andean tradition of reciprocity, along with the threat of military annihilation, to co-opt local rulers. It proposes that competition for rulership among the “most able,” supported by royal lineages often mobilized by the mothers of the pretenders, became an inherently fragile political system. Inca social and political organization is shown to have been based on ancient Andean practices modified to meet the needs of the expanding state. Although rarely treated explicitly by the colonial chroniclers, who often used inaccurate analogies with European institutions, ancient political traditions such as dual rulership and the quadripartite division of space dominated Inca political organization. Economic organization is also treated in detail: the roles of elite administrators, commoners who provided labor for agriculture and public works, and specialists such as artisans, fishermen, women recruited to weave and to prepare beverages for public feasts, long-distance maritime traders, and camelid herders, among others. Finally, the book deals with the spectacular collapse of the Inca state as a result of civil war, Spanish military tactics and technology, the absence of a sense of national unity among the various ethnic groups, and unrest on the part of provincial lords, who saw their wealth and power reduced by the policies of the Inca rulers.

The author uses a great variety of published and unpublished documents and secondary works by Latin American, North American, and European scholars in fields including history, ethnology, archaeology, and ecology to examine topics such as the mythical origins of the Incas, the expansion of the Inca state, the organization of Inca society – including the political role of women – the vast trading networks of the coastal merchants, and the causes of the disintegration of the Inca state in the face of a small force of Spaniards. At each step, Dr. Rostworowski presents her own often original views clearly and forcefully, along with those of other scholars, providing her readers with varied evidence from which to draw their own conclusions.

María Rostworowski de Diez Canseco, Peruvian ethnohistorian, began her publications with *Pachacutec Inca Yupanqui*. Since then she has continued her indefatigable research in Peruvian and foreign archives in search of new sources for understanding the history of ancient Peru. She has published many books and articles in specialized journals. Dr. Rostworowski is a founding member of the Institute of Peruvian Studies and a member of Peru's National Academy of History.

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Preface

Two serious difficulties are encountered in conducting research on the history of the Incas. One is related to the Andean mode of remembering and communicating events; the other, to the Spanish perspective in recording and interpreting the information left to us in what became known as the chronicles. This combination of difficulties is reflected in all the written information on Inca history that has come down to us from the sixteenth century. Although I have dealt with this subject in previous studies, the importance of these difficulties for ethnohistorical work on the Incas is such that I shall reexamine here some of the forms they have taken.

The study of the written sources is difficult, owing to their often contradictory and confusing contents. For example, evaluating the traditional native chronology of the Inca rulers has been an arduous task because of the uncertain data, with the same facts and events often attributed to more than one ruler. For this reason, it is necessary to carry out a critical analysis of such events as they appear in the traditional sources.

Several questions can be raised in connection with this problem. Was there some systematic means of transmitting memories of these events from one generation to another? We know that the pre-Hispanic cultures of Peru possessed no writing system, but this did not prevent them from remembering and evoking events, which they accomplished in various ways.

There is a consensus among the chroniclers that the natives possessed special songs in which each *ayllu* (a lineage group or kinship-based community) or *panaca* (a royal *ayllu*) narrated the principal events of its past during certain ceremonies held in the presence of the ruler. Those of the *hanan*, or upper, moiety would go first, followed by those of the *hurin*, or lower, moiety. Individuals were specially selected to praise the achievements and feats of the ancestors of their group. In this way, a kind of collective memory was retained.

Another way of recording the succession of local lords and the principal

events of their reigns was by depicting them in paintings or on panels. Many of these were preserved, according to the chroniclers, in a place called Poquen Cancha (Acosta, 1940, book 6, chap. 8; Molina, 1943; RAHM A-92, folio 17v; Santillán, 1927:91). We know that Viceroy Toledo sent Philip II four tapestries illustrating Inca life. In a letter sent to the emperor from Cusco dated March 1, 1571, the viceroy wrote that these tapestries were painted by “the officials of that land,” adding that although “the Indian painters did not have the curiosity of those over there [in Spain],” they were nevertheless worthy of being hung in one of the Spanish royal palaces (AGI, Lima 28b; Rostworowski, 1977:239; 1983:100).

A third way in which the Incas recorded events was by means of the *quipu*, small knotted cords of various colors, which could be used for accounting and for recording historic events (Cieza de León, *Señorio*, 1943: 81).

There were various means of preserving the native memories of pre-Conquest events: paintings, songs, and a mnemonic tool, the *quipu*; the absence of writing was not an insurmountable obstacle to the Inca people’s keeping and commemorating their past. We cannot help but ask ourselves, Why, then, are there so many contradictions in the Inca narratives, if they possessed empirical methods for remembering the facts? To what can we attribute the many inconsistencies in the Andean record of the past?

The apparent confusion in the indigenous tradition concerning the Inca past cannot, however, be attributed to ignorance of the facts. Rather, answers must be sought in the interpretation of Andean sociopolitical structures by sixteenth-century Spaniards whose mentality prevented them from understanding a society with organizational and recording traditions radically different from their own. For this reason, I will examine briefly the Andean record and then the Spanish perspective in interpreting it.

THE ANDEAN RECORD

It is obvious that the natives did not share many of the concerns of the Europeans. The facts they wished to remember did not necessarily correspond to the demands of other latitudes. Assuredly, in the Andean context, there existed no historical sense of events as we traditionally understand it. Neither veracity, in the European sense, nor an exact chronology of events was required, or considered desirable.

The Inca custom of intentionally omitting an episode that might annoy the current ruler typifies the Andean approach to history. There are several instances of ignoring certain Inca rulers in order not to displease the sover-

eign in power. Oversights affected events as well as persons (Cieza de León, *Señorío*, 1943:77–79). In such cases, only members of the *ayllus* or the *panaca* adversely affected by such omissions kept alive, if hidden, their traditions. This intentional distortion of events and memories, combined with the absence of a native writing system and a lack of understanding of the native tradition on the part of the Spanish, explains the contradictory narratives of the chronicles.

Despite this obvious confusion, Inca history should not be classified as purely mythical, as claimed by many researchers. The documents, narratives, and many testimonies in which the natives claim to have known and seen the last Incas are irrefutable proof of the existence of the Inca state. Human beings, without the help of writing, can remember two and even three generations back.

THE SPANISH PERSPECTIVE

The Europeans who arrived on South American shores in the sixteenth century were concerned with conquering new lands, and few had sufficient preparation to understand the challenge represented by the Andean world. Their central intellectual concern was finding new justifications for their invasion. That they were less than eager to understand is explained by their desire to demonstrate that the Incas did not have the right to territory they had taken by violence. The mentality of the time and the interest in proving the rights of the king of Spain over the “provinces” of the Inca state made it difficult for the Spanish to comprehend the Andean reality.

One chronicler, Polo de Ondegardo (1917:47), assures us that “in the Inca record we frequently find all kinds of memories, with each province also having its records of the victories or wars and punishments affecting its lands. If for some reason it were important, we could easily specify the time in which each one became pacified under Inca rule, *but this is not important for the purpose at hand*, since it is enough to have found out the time at which they began their conquest here” (my italics).

The chroniclers, in the face of the inconsistencies of Inca history, tried to adjust and accommodate the various versions according to their own perspective, further distorting them in the process. In addition, they were too much imbued with the principles of primogeniture, legitimacy, and royal succession, according to European models, to understand Andean customs such as the right of the election of the “most able” to the offices of Inca and local lord. The Europeans could not conceive of the power of royal mummies who retained their servants, rights, and lands as they had pos-

sessed them in life. Equally incomprehensible were the moiety divisions, the Andean forms of kinship and reciprocity, and the complex system of symmetrical and asymmetrical obligations.

The Andean world was unique and too different to be understood by people come from overseas, preoccupied with enriching themselves, securing honors, and evangelizing the natives by force. An abyss must have formed between the Andean way of thinking and the Spanish perspective, an abyss that to the present day has continued to divide citizens of the same nation.

A PRELIMINARY CLARIFICATION

In this book, the reader will note the omission of the word “empire” with reference to the Inca. This is a deliberate omission based on the many Old World connotations of the term.

The originality of Inca culture is a result, in the first instance, of its isolation from other continents. The natives of the Andean region did not enjoy the advantages of the diffusion and cultural loans that permitted the development of the peoples of European classical antiquity. Their contacts with Mesoamerica were indirect and sporadic. The pre-Hispanic Andean world was forced to seek its own forms of development, to find solutions to its problems and its needs by going deep into its own roots. Andeans succeeded in dominating a harsh environment by joining forces and inventing methods to overcome unfavorable conditions. Their communal and organizational spirit enabled them to cope with disadvantages and adverse circumstances.

This spirit, this gathering into oneself, promoted and gave as fruit a creative and innovative force that enabled the Andean to find solutions to anguishing problems. Nothing was easy for the inhabitants of pre-Hispanic Peru. Their lands were situated in an environment tortured by inhospitable *punas*, craggy gorges, wide deserts, and tangled jungles.

This indigenous desire for unity is expressed in the term “Tahuantinsuyu,” which means “the four united regions,” referring to the regions of Chinchay, Antisuyu, Cuntisuyu, and Colla, roughly corresponding to the four cardinal directions. The term appears to reflect an impulse, possibly subconscious, toward an integration that was unfortunately never attained, cut short as it was by the appearance of Pizarro’s forces. The Incas lacked sufficient time to consolidate their plans.

For these reasons, I am inclined to employ the term “Tahuantinsuyu” in place of “empire,” since the cultural meaning of the latter term does not interpret or correspond to the Andean reality but is relevant to situations on other continents.