WHO WERE THE INCAS?

THOUSANDS of years ago, people, probably of Asiatic origin, crossed from Asia to Alaska and migrated to the Americas, where some of them settled as hunters and fishermen in the northern and northeastern parts of North America, while others moved down into the tropical and subtropical zones of Central and South America.

It was at the dawn of the twelfth century that a comparatively small Indian tribe, belonging to the Quechuan race, migrated from the Bolivian highlands into a smiling, sunny valley in which nestled an insignificant settlement called Cuzco. The immigrants, steeled and strengthened by their strenuous mountain life, quickly crushed the resistance put up by the farming inhabitants of the Cuzco valley and established themselves as masters of the town and surrounding land.

As to the earliest events, we can only guess at them, for no historical records have been preserved (for all their ingenuity the Incas had no writing system except an inadequate device of knotted cords called "quipu"). The numerous contradictory legends only present a picture strongly tinged by fairy-tale-like features. The present-day descendants of the Incas themselves have preserved a story about Manco Capac and his wife Mama Oello, who was also his sister, the custom of marriage between brother and sister being common with the later Incan emperors. These two are said to have originated the worship of the sun among their people, a worship which was later to become the uniting force among the many different peoples of the Inca Empire.

THE CONQUERORS

From now on the new rulers of Cuzco, who called themselves "ynca" (prince of the ruling caste), expanded their territory in all directions until, in the first half of the fifteenth century, the Incan Empire extended from southern Colombia through Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia to Southern Chile, and its influence reached even further. A vast region composed of the most diversified forms of land, wild tracts with foaming rivers, large steppes where an icy wind chills the very marrow of one's bones, steaming jungles where the air hangs unstimmed for months on end, and fertile coastal plains where ripe maize colors the pleasant verdure. A territory peopled by different tribes speaking different tongues or dialects and worshiping different deities. The unification of such an empire was a gigantic task. It seemed well-nigh impossible to smelt such dissimilar fragments into a homogenous mass, but the Incas accomplished a master stroke and
succeeded in uniting this welter into a solid, loyal bloc.

Although originally a simple, hardy mountain tribe, the Incas possessed that talent for organization so vital for the creation of an empire. Moreover, their minds were always open to new impressions; and they understood and appreciated those social or cultural improvements met with among the conquered peoples which might be of advantage to themselves, carefully sifting these improvements and adopting what they judged beneficial while stamping out those less convenient traits which might lead to friction between conqueror and conquered or at least deprive the conqueror’s civilization of part of its vigor. The Incas also greatly enhanced their own strength by learning from their predecessors, who had long been extinct or trekked southeastwards but whose megalithic structures had been preserved. To this very day a lonely gateway at Tiahuanaco on the southern edge of Lake Titicaca raises its intricately carved portals as an imposing relic of pre-Inca days.

This structure, more than a thousand years old and one of South America’s oldest remains of prehistoric times, inspired an Inca emperor in the beginning of the thirteenth century to erect grand palaces for himself and temples for the worship of the solar disk. His buildings, which are still standing, show a striking accuracy in the construction of the walls: it is said that the blade of an ordinary pocketknife cannot be thrust between two of the blocks of which the walls consist.

**INCA COLONIAL POLICY**

Thus by studying and learning from past empires and contemporary subjugated peoples the Incas swiftly grew in power and extent, and the reigns of the first eight emperors were spent in enlarging the empire and consolidating their newly acquired lands. In the course of time they gradually assumed the character of a ruling caste rather than a conqueror people, as their name also suggests. Much of the speed with which the Inca Empire grew can be explained by their wise and generous policy toward the conquered peoples. It is, of course, possible that this policy was motivated by sheer selfishness and shrewd reasoning, but at any rate the subjugated peoples benefited enormously from the procedure. Although constantly at war with the barbarians lurking along the frontiers of their empire, the Incas usually tried to include them in their empire through peaceful channels. The one thing they demanded of any conquered or about-to-be-conquered tribe was its submission to the worship of the Sun and to the Inca monarch, whom they regarded as the earthly representative of the sun. If this peaceful inclusion could not be achieved by diplomacy, war was inevitable. But during most of the wars the Inca rulers were willing to negotiate a peace, as their policy seems to have been faith in peaceful understanding for reciprocal benefit instead of a military threat overshadowing the progress and prosperity of the subdued peoples. One of the early Spanish chroniclers cites the words of an Incan prince: “We must spare our enemies, or it will be our loss, since they and all that belongs to them must soon be ours.”

Some of the policies employed by the Incas were quite remarkable. As soon as the imperial armies had entered a new territory, part of the population was evacuated to another, long-settled region which bore physical traits corresponding to those of the evacuees’ original home, while a group of inhabitants of this older province was moved to the new territory. By means of such skillful exchanges, the Incas secured the rapid adaptation of the new subjects to their status within the empire, because they were tutored by old, loyal subjects of the imperial crown.
LAND OF THE INCAS

A street in Cuzco. The lower part of the wall, of cunningly fitted stones, was reared by the Incas. The upper part is of later (Spanish) construction.

Cuzco, Peru, ancient capital of the Incas. It is the oldest city in South America.

Gateway at Tiuhuanaco near Lake Titicaca, a monument of pre-Inca days. The Incas greatly improved their own architectural methods after a study of the skillful stonework of this ruin.

Modern son of the Incas, blowing a cow horn.
The ruins of Machu Picchu, magnificent border citadel of the Incas. On the eminence on the right stands the temple of the sun. The roofs are gone because they were made of thatch.

INCA

BASTIONS

These well-preserved terraces fed the Inca city of Pisac, the ruins of which lie at the upper right. Similar irrigated hanging gardens supplied food for other cities, including Machu Picchu. The modern town of Pisac lies at the upper left, on the level floor of the Valley.

The native and his llama. Both are burden bearers, but the man often has the heavier load, as his proud companion refuses to carry more than just so much.
The Incas themselves, being an almost deified caste, never participated directly in the colonization but left this to their older subjects and, with the exception of a provincial governor, they did not take any hand in the local affairs of the provinces, which were ruled by the curacas. These latter who, before the annexation to the Incan Empire had been tribal chiefs, were immediately sent to Cuzco, the glamorous capital, where they received an education based on the Incan conception of government policy, after which they returned to their own lands. By thus honoring the chiefs and giving them a position of the same rank as they had held before, the emperors wisely secured for themselves the gratitude and loyalty of the conquered tribal chiefs.

The large-scale evacuations were also effected in the case of uprisings which, however, seldom occurred; then the rebels would be moved to another geographically similar region to cool down among the faithful subjects of that area. The spreading of epidemics could also be checked to a certain extent by such measures. The Incas acquired an amazing knowledge of geographical factors and knew every detail of the topography of any tract within the empire, which was reproduced in plastic maps of colored clay.

COMMON LANGUAGE AND RELIGION

The conquerors did not interfere with local customs and usages, but upon capture of a territory they proceeded to establish their religion and language among the new afflux. These two measures were the most ingenious devices ever thought of by the Incas in their colonization policy. With noteworthy foresight they reasoned that nothing unites different peoples so closely as a common language and a common religion. No other conquering nations had so clearly understood the importance of this. In the ancient world, the Egyptian, Babylonian, or Persian languages had, each within its sphere of interest, concerned mostly the learned and the court circles; the subjugated nations of all these empires continued as a whole to speak their own tongues, thus preventing any approach—material or spiritual—to their conquerors from taking place. The Incas foresaw such an alienation, which might grow into a strong disruptive force of great danger to their sovereignty, and found the common language to be the convenient binding factor for the heterogeneous elements of which the empire was composed. The population of newly conquered regions was instructed in the Inca language—Quechua, the richest of the South American Indian dialects—by the older subjects of the empire; while the curaca, his sons, and other high-ranking personalities were invited to stay in the capital for a lengthy period till they mastered Quechua.

Simultaneously, temples of the sun were erected everywhere for the proper execution of sacrifices and rituals; for the Incas also realized the unifying force procured by a common religion. The ability of religion to amalgamate different peoples into an entity has been exploited by the Mohammedans, whose civilization was spread over vast territories stretching from Spain to northern India by the cohesive qualities of religion, and even today Islam is a mighty factor in the political life of North Africa and the Levant. But the Incas knew no civilization but their own, probably not even that of the contemporary Aztecs, and it is therefore all the more admirable that, uninfluenced, they visualized the importance of common language and religion. Although the worship of the sun was declared compulsory for all tribes within the empire, the various local deity images were not demolished or even scorned but were transferred to Cuzco, where they adorned the Incan pantheon in company with the minor gods of other conquered peoples. This merciful procedure is in striking contrast to the fierce methods of the Moors, for example.

EXCELLENT NATIONAL DEFENSE SYSTEM

The larger the empire grew, the safer did its center feel. Cuzco lay secure in
a fertile valley walled in on all sides by steep mountains, and the prosperity of the nucleus of the empire, i.e., Peru, increased with every year. But, in order to ensure this, the frontiers had to be constantly guarded against invasion attempts or looting raids staged by barbarian mountain or jungle tribes, who were eagerly on the lookout for the least slackening of the Incan defense system. The army of the Incas, which at the zenith of the empire totaled 250,000 men, was levied from each province but in various proportions, those tribes who led a strenuous mountain life and were thus physically stronger being tapped more than the less hardy coastal people. In the military school the candidates underwent a thorough physical and mental examination, whereupon they were admitted to the gymnastic exercises. After a long training in boxing, wrestling, running, etc., the new soldiers were sent out to fight: there was always need of them at some frontier or other.

The army could be moved and different sections quickly joined along magnificent paved roads which wound their way serpentlike through the mountains or, when conditions required, were converted into staircases crawling up the towering Andes. The news that barbarians had broken through the defense ring around the empire was brought to the capital by swift-footed messengers whose allotted running distance was of such a length as to allow them to move at top speed all the time; at the end of each lap was a relaying post where the quipu containing the dreaded news was immediately picked up by a fresh runner, thus saving considerable time. In the case of war it was very common to convey the news still faster by means of fire signals from one mountain peak to another.

In addition to these relaying posts, also used by marching troops for short rests, the roads were edged by silos and storehouses for food and equipment for the army on the march—an ingenious idea of the Incas, who thought that, since the clothes, arms, and food of the soldiers were produced by the peasantry, it was no more than natural that an army on the march should cross the countryside without in the least molesting the daily routine of the civilian population. This is yet another instance of the government's tact, understanding, and appreciation of the peasant's contributions to the imperial machinery.

If consideration was shown the peasants, measures were also taken to ease the life of the soldiers. As in the case of the couriers, each étape of the march was short enough to prevent the soldiers from becoming exhausted, and refreshment awaited the thirsty warriors at every resting place. Another means of relieving the soldiers stationed in the torrid coastal areas was to have a division posted at the coast for only a short period, after which it would be sent back to the mountains to recuperate while another took up the garrison in the lowlands. Mountaineers have very large lungs because of the thin air in the highlands and easily get out of breath in zones where the atmospheric pressure is greater. While some of the soldiers garrisoned in the lowlands were levied from the local people accustomed to the climate, the greater part of them—as of the whole army—consisted of mountain folk, as these usually make better soldiers.

RULERS AND RULED

The population of the Incan Empire could be divided into two camps: the subjugated peoples and their Incan rulers. The Incas were originally a mountain tribe with but little agriculture. They possessed herds of llamas which gave them wool for clothes, milk, and meat. Outwardly they were not in the least different from any other South American Andes tribe, but their higher intelligence and unique talent for organization were destined to secure them a dominant position.

Passing from the status of a people to that of a caste, they seized the power and held it, all Incas occupying high posts as governors, army leaders, priests, or courtiers. As only the Incas were accorded the right to polygamy, the royal
families grew enormously: but so did the
empire, and there was no Inca without
an office. No Inca occupied a small
post. and no Inca paid taxes. The sub-
jugated peoples were the taxpayers but,
as money was unknown to the Peruvian
civilization, all trade was carried on and
all taxes were paid by barter. (Even
today market women may be seen in
remote villages bartering potatoes for
llama haunches.) If the taxpayer was
unable to pay in the form of field prod-
duce, he was consigned to a fixed period
of manual labor on roads or irrigation
terraces (which sheltered much of the
cultivated patches of land) and in this
way paid off his taxes.

INTRICATE ADMINISTRATION

An unusual feature of the system was
that of dividing up the whole hetero-
genous community into large and small
units. The name of “Peru,” for instance,
is an application used by the first Span-
iards to visit that country, while the Inca
Empire was known to the different
Indian tribes populating it as “Taxantin-
suyu” (four quarters of the world). This
name originated from the idea of partitioning the empire into four provinces,
each of which had its subdesignation and
was intersected by one of the four roads
that led to Cuzco, which city likewise
consisted of four sections. Here, al-
though different tribes from remote re-
gions thronged the bustling streets or
crowded temple yards, it was always
easy to distinguish between them, be-
cause each tribe maintained its national
costume—another consideration on the
part of the subjugators—to smooth the
abrupt transfer from wild mountainous
freedom to tamed city confinement.

The supreme administrator of each of
these four provinces was a viceroy, re-
recruited from the Inca caste. He ruled
jointly with a council composed of men from the various tribes in-
habiting the province who were familiar
with conditions within the different sec-
tions whence they hailed. The various
departments of the council supervised
the different sections of the administra-
tion like any other council: the Health
Department, Food Department, Police
Department, etc. It conducted all affairs
pertaining to the province as a whole.
The viceroy spent a large part of the
year in Cuzco where, together with his
three colleagues, he formed a sort of
council of state to the monarch.

Next the empire was portioned out
into bodies of 10,000 inhabitants each.
Each of these bodies was ruled by a
 governor, also of Inca stock, whose
office—like those of all Incas—was hered-
itary. Each governor was supreme in
his sphere of activity but responsible to
the emperor. The latter, however, de-
\picted most of his time to religious cer-
emonies and to the army, whose com-
mander in chief he was. Under the
governor’s supervision stood the curaca,
the former tribal chief, who had bene-
\ided from a thorough education in the
capital, where his ability and loyalty had
been tested.

Finally the nation was split up into
bodies of 1,000, 500, 100, 50, and 10;
each of these units was governed in small
matters by a local person of authority
whose duty it was to see to it that all
the rest performed their daily tasks satis-
factorily and that they prospered indi-
vidually. The heads enjoyed certain
privileges, for example lower taxes, but
were, on the other hand, subject to
severe punishment if they failed in their
duties. Thus if a man stole some valu-
able out of sheer greed, he was, of
course, punished; had he, however, stolen
food because he was hungry, the super-
visor of the unit to which the thief be-
longed was duly chastised because he
was held responsible for the conditions
which had forced the man to commit his
theft.

Slight offenses were sentenced by the
magistrates of each body, while the
more serious criminal cases were turned
over to the governor of the department
or to the royal judges in Cuzco who, by
royal decree, had to pass sentence within
five days of the day on which the crime
had been committed. To inquire into
the welfare of the common people as
well as the conduct of officials, a committee traveled from time to time through the empire, recording the results of its investigations in quipu—the knotted-string system.

**OWNERSHIP OF LAND**

A people living in subjugation, even if a beneficial one, with neither trade nor money, the Incan imperial bloc had few laws except those pertaining to crime and property—the latter in the sense of land. From an economic standpoint the empire was divided into three parts of property: one belonging to the sun, one to the emperor, and one to the people. The lands of the sun supported the priesthood and temples with everything pertaining to the services, while the emperor’s property furnished him with his court pomp and the salaries for his high officials and military leaders. On the property of the common folk, each family was allotted its own land, on which its members labored for their own benefit, but they were also obliged to attend to the lands of the sun and the emperor. The size of the allotted area varied in proportion to the size of the family: when a child was born, the family’s area was enlarged, twice as much in the case of a boy as in that of a girl. At the end of the year a revision of the area would take place, and the lands were re-allotted for the coming year with due consideration for the family’s increase or decrease.

The llama herds of the Andes belonged exclusively to the sun and the emperor, whose officials supplied each family with wool—according to the number of household members—from which they made their clothes. Minerals and mines were the emperor’s private property and were supervised by local people familiar with the output of the mines within their district. At intervals, reports were made and statistics compiled to show the surplus of mine yields and agriculture. This surplus was then stored up in huge silos for preservation until adverse periods, when it was rationed out to the people.

**SOCIAL CONDITIONS**

Owing to the Incan colonial policy, the social and economic structure of the community prevented the individual from enriching himself by endurance and diligence or from ascending the social ladder. This fact in itself harbored the danger of indifference or sheer laziness permeating the mind. Why toil and sweat when you have nothing to gain by it? The more so a nobody suffered from any lack of essential commodities, thanks to the government’s foresight, which had the silos filled up to the roof in good years. The government adopted a patriarchal attitude toward the people which resulted in a far-reaching interference in the private sphere. The family, the community, the state, in other words the plurality, formed the essential unit in the Incan policy. Marriage was obligatory, for example, but nobody was allowed to marry or settle outside his district.

Eventually the Incan Empire reached a state of maturity and equilibrium which caused it to lose its earlier youthful strength. In the middle of the sixteenth century it succumbed to the onslaught of the dynamic, ambitious, and ruthless Spanish conquistadors. The empire of the Incas vanished, leaving to the world a material heritage of potatoes, maize, cocoa, and tobacco. But the ruins of its temples and palaces still testify to its glory, and in the pages of history it lives on as an example of wise and enlightened empire-building.