Incan Documents (1500s)

The documents below were all composed after the Spanish conquest of the Incan Empire; the Incans were non-literate peoples, although they did record some information without exactly writing it down, as you'll see below. So keep in mind that these are "doubly-translated" visions of the Incan Empire. The first document is basically a list of taxes, the second a Spaniard's description of how the empire worked, and the third a series of sketches by a South American subject (of the Spanish Empire).

The area where the Chupaychu (Incan then Spanish subjects) lived had been taken by the Spaniards (from the Incas) in 1542, and the Spaniards wrote down the old taxation orders that Incas had stored (not quite written) on quipu (see de Leon below). Some Spaniards observed that the "Indians" were generally happy with the tributary rules of the Incan Empire. These writers generally were critics of Spanish colonial rule, and might have overstated the harmony that existed prior to the Spanish arrival.

What do the tributary rules tell us about how the Incas ran their empire?

Why do you think subjects went along with these taxes (think of taxation in broad terms: labor [corvee] and stuff [in kind])? What sort of hints are in the documents about keeping subjects happy? What were the more coercive enforcements of these rules?

Why do you think the Incas assigned each of these particular taxes? (Troops are obvious, but guards of corpses and pepper planters?)


Inspection of the Chupaychu, 1549

1. They were asked what [full-time] services did [the Chupaychu] give to the Inca in Cuzco [the capital of the Incan Empire] and they said that 400 Indian [i.e., Chupaychu] men and women remained in Cuzco [full time] to build walls and if one died they gave another.

2. They also gave 400 Indians to plant the fields in Cuzco so people could eat

3. They also gave 150 Indians [as personal noble attendants] of Guayna Capac [the Incan emperor who died in 1527].

4. 150 more to guard the body of [emperor] Topa Ynga Yupanqui after he died

5. 10 more [of these] to guard his weapons

6. 200 Indians more to guard the Chachapoya [a frontier zone at the northeastern edge of the Empire].

7. 200 Indians more to guard [the city of] Quito

8. 20 Indians more to guard the body of Guayna Capac after his death

9. 120 Indians more to make feathers

10. 60 more to extract honey

11. 400 Indians to weave fine cloth

12. 40 Indians to make more dyes and colors
13. 240 Indians to guard the sheep [what the Spaniards called alpacas and llamas]

14. 40 Indians to guard the fields which they had throughout this valley; the maize grown was mostly taken to Cuzco and the rest of the warehouses

15. 40 additional Indians to plant hot peppers which were taken to Cuzco

16. and they also gave 60 Indians and sometimes 45 to make salt

17. 60 Indians to make [grow] the coca leaf [source of cocaine today] which they took to the warehouses ...and sometimes they hauled 200 sacks and at others 40

18. 40 Indians to accompany the Inca in person to hunt deer

19. and 40 Indians more to make soles and they took them to Cuzco and to the storehouses

20. 40 more carpenters to make plates and bowls and other things for the Inca and they took them to Cuzco

21. 40 more potters to make pots and they took them to [warehouses two days away]

22. and 68 more Indians to guard the tampu [a way station along the Incan stone highways] at Huanuco

23. 80 more to carry loads form the tampu to Pumpu [five days away] and from Sutun Cancha to Tambo [another day away]

24. 40 more Indians to guard the women of the Inca

25. 500 to go with the person of the Inca to war, to carry him to hammocks...

26. 500 more Indians, to plant and other things without leaving their [home] territory


Pedro de Cieza de Leon, Cronicas (1553)

...not a single village of the highlands or the plains failed to pay the tribute levied on it... There were even provinces where, when the natives alleged that they were unable to pay their tribute, the Inca ordered that each ...turn in every four months a large quill full of live lice, which was the Inca's way of teaching and accustoming them to pay tribute. [They did this] until, after they had been given flocks and had raised them, and made clothing, they were able to pay tribute henceforth.

On these visits of the envoys [the gov't officials] of the Incas to the provinces, as soon as they arrived they could tell from the quipus the number of people, men and women, old folks and children, and gold or silver mines, and they ordered that so many thousands Indians be put to work in the mines.... And as during the time the Indians appointed to work the mines were doing this they could not cultivate their fields, the Incas ordered those from other provinces to come and plant the crops at the proper season in lieu of tribute, so that [the fields] would not lie fallow [unused]. ...none of [the miners] died from overwork. Besides, they were permitted to stop work several days in the month for their feasts and recreation; and the same Indians were not continuously in the mines, but every so often they were sent away and others came in their place.

...Other regions paid as many thousand loads of corn as there were houses in it, which was done every harvest, and was credited to the province. In other areas they similarly supplied as many loads of chunyo [freeze-dried potatoes].... Others were obliged to supply so many thousand loads of lances ...slings and ayllos [bolas], and the other arms they use. ...

[In] each of the many provinces there were many storehouses filled with supplies and other needful things; thus, in times of war, whenever the armies went they drew upon the contents of these warehouses without ever...laying a finger on what they [the subjects] had in thier settlements. When there was no war, most
[supplies were] eaten and consumed by the poor.... And there was such order in these tributes which the natives paid and the Incas were so powerful that they never had a war break out again. To know how and in what way the tributes were paid and other taxes collected, each huata [year], they sent out certain ... supervisory magistrates, for they had no authority beyond visiting the provinces and notifying the inhabitants that if any of them had a complaint, he should state it, so that the one who had done him wrong could be punished. ... from time to time the headmen [leaders of subject groups] appeared on the day appointed for each "nation" to speak to bring to the knowledge of the Inca the state of the province and the shortage or abundance that existed in it, and whether the tribute was too large or too small, and whether they could pay it or not. ... Of the women given by the provinces, some of them were brought to Cuzco to become the possession of the Lord-Incas, and some of them were sent to the temple of the sun [to become nun-like religious center attendants]. ....

...[The Incas] had representatives in the capitals of all the provinces, ... for in all these places were larger and finer lodgings than in most of the other cities of this great kingdom, and many storehouses. ... large garrisons were stationed there .... if there were any disorder or disturbance, [the representative/governor] had authority to punish it, especially if it were in the nature of a conspiracy or a rebellion.... And if the Incas had not had the foresight to appoint them and to establish the mitimaes [the practice of relocating the people of recently captured territories, to places distant from their original home], the natives would have often revolted and shaken off the royal rule....

Realizing how difficult it would be to ravel the great distances of their land where every league and at every turn a different language was spoken and how bothersome it would be to have to [always] employ interpreters...these rulers ...ordered and decreed, with severe punishment for failure to obey, that all the natives of their empire should know and understand the language of Cuzco [Quechua], both they and their women. ...an infant that had not yet left its mother's breast before they began to teach it the language it had to know....

In the capital of each province there were accountants whom they called quipu-camayocs, and by these knots they kept the account of the tribute to be paid by the natives of that district in silver, gold, clothing, flocks, down to wood and other more significant things... the account so exact that not even a pair of sandals was missing.... [E]ach province at the end of the year had a list by the knots of the quipus of all the people who had died there during the year, as well as those who had been born.

Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala was an Andean noble, who was probably born just as the Spanish were invading the Incan empire. In the late 16th century he composed a very long chronicle [the source] about the history of the region both ancient and recent--including hundreds of the pictures you see drawn below--that was basically a complaint to the Spanish king Philip II (who never received it) about how the Spanish colonial government was not a good institution.

The pictures below depict Inca-era rule: What can you discern about the empire from these drawings? Do they indicate why the Incan Empire was successful?

From Nueva corónica y buen gobierno [New Chronicle and Good Government]
La primera his de las reinas
Mamavacocha

Return to Calendar