

Andean exceptionalism and the new Inka scholarship

R. Alan Covey*

FRANK MEDDENS, KATIE WILLIS, COLIN MCEWAN & NICHOLAS BRANCH (ed.). *Inca sacred space: landscape, site, and symbol in the Andes*. vii+309 pages, numerous colour and b&w illustrations. 2014. London: Archetype; 978-1-909492-05-9 £65 & \$135.

TERENCE N. D'ALTROY. *The Incas*. xvii+547 pages, numerous b&w illustrations. 2015, second edition (first edition 2002). Chichester: Wiley Blackwell; 978-1-4443-3115-8 paperback £22.99.

ALAN L. KOLATA. *Ancient Inca*. xvii+298 pages, 80 b&w illustrations, 2 tables. 2013. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-0-521-68938-0 paperback £20.99 & \$32.99.



Grand theories of human social organisation have sometimes struggled to find a place for the Inka empire, which achieved an unprecedented degree of state power across the Andean region of western South America for a few generations in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries AD. This is in part because the Inka realm looked so different from the ancient empires of Eurasia. The axis of Inka power ran north–south through some of the most diverse and difficult terrain on the planet, and Inka material culture and institutions lacked many of the Western hallmarks of civilisation. In *Ancient society* (1877), Lewis Henry Morgan relegated the Inkas to a status of ‘middle barbarism’ for possessing only Bronze Age metallurgy, placing a realm of perhaps 10 million inhabitants in the company of the Puebloan

peoples of the American Southwest and the society that built Stonehenge. More than a century later, the sociologist Michael Mann (1986) offered the Inkas as an exception to his general model for wielding so much power without using writing, currency or low-cost forms of transportation.

The Inkas fail to conform to Western models, in part because Andean social evolution unfolded independently and in such an unfamiliar landscape. Nevertheless, much of Inka exceptionalism may be attributed to the equivocality of the colonial Spanish written corpus that emerged in the century following the European invasion. Within decades of the Spanish conquest, European writers began to fit Andean peoples and statecraft into comparative discussions of ancient politics and universal narratives of human history, which were integral to contemporary theological, political and moral debates over the expanding European sphere of influence. Depending on an author’s position, the Inkas were the most benevolent of monarchs or the basest of tyrants; defenders of marriage or concupiscent monsters who robbed common men of their wives and daughters; enlightened religious leaders who revered a single Creator, or feckless tricksters who engaged in public savagery to perpetuate their own power. Since the nineteenth century, the contradictions inherent to the ethnohistoric corpus have led scholars to reconstruct Inka society on the basis of multiple ideological frameworks, as socialists, totalitarians and theocrats.

The only label that scholars never seem to have attached to the Inkas is capitalist—after all, they had no money—and this aspect of the Inka theoretical exception became the basis for a species of Andean exceptionalism in the second half of the twentieth century. The *lo andino* approach drew on structuralist social analysis and substantivist economics to argue for deeply held and unique Andean social practices and values. Whereas the presumed continuity of Andean culture promoted an

* Department of Anthropology, University of Texas at Austin, SAC 4.102, 2201 Speedway Stop C3200, Austin, TX 78712, USA (Email: r.alan.covey@austin.utexas.edu)

Inka studies that blended the efforts of archaeologists, ethnohistorians and ethnographers, the singularity of the Andean world discouraged engagement in comparative theoretical analysis. As Alan Kolata argues in *Ancient Inca*, the *lo andino* approach has significant merit, but over time it has “been converted into a kind of procrustean bed that excludes alternative explanations” (p. 25). In recent years, many Inka scholars have focused critical attention on the *lo andino* framework, and the books reviewed here represent the ways that the contemporary scholarly literature on the Inkas has found interpretative value in maintaining or diverging from a stance of Andean exceptionalism.

In their edited volume *Inca sacred space*, FRANK MEDDENS and colleagues demonstrate continued commitment to the *lo andino* tradition in Inka scholarship, although in a way that admits multiple representations of core Andean concepts. The 24 chapters comprising this volume originated in a 2010 conference centred on the *ushnu*, an Inka ritual construction that serves as a touchstone for intersecting discussions of Inka religion, imperial administration and local Andean sacred landscapes. The international group of contributors include distinguished representatives of fields that have long been a part of the *lo andino* approach—ethnohistory, archaeology, art history, geography and ethnography—as well as contributions from climate science, geoarchaeology and musicology.

After a brief editorial introduction (Chapter 1), two long conceptual chapters set the stage for the shorter pieces that follow. First, Tom Zuidema, a leading voice from the *lo andino* tradition, recapitulates and expands upon several decades of his research on the *ushnu* (Chapter 2), which draws on late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century ethnohistory and contemporary ethnography. Colin McEwan follows with a complementary chapter (Chapter 3) on spatial classification of Andean landscapes, which discusses Inka sacred mountains and shrine systems, as well as the kinds of material remains that are found in such locations. Together, these chapters offer an overview of previous scholarship and an interpretative framework for discussing the dynamic roles of *ushnus* in Inka ideology and ceremony.

The authors of subsequent chapters explore a range of related themes pertaining to the broader context of Andean ritual action, as well as the ritual landscapes of particular Inka sites or regions. Contextual pieces discuss the risky and

fluctuating climate in the highland places where Inka ritual occurred (Staller, Chapter 16; Thompson & Davis, Chapter 23); the roles of elites in Andean ceremonial action (Ramírez, Chapter 4); the sensory properties of ritual performances (Stobart, Chapter 12; Moyano, Chapter 17); and the ethnographic persistence of cultural practices that link to the *ushnu* complex (Allen, Chapter 7; Arnold, Chapter 8; Francisco Ferreira, Chapter 12; Escalante Gutiérrez & Valderrama Fernández, Chapter 13).

The archaeological chapters cut across many of these themes, with a focus on platforms and offerings found within sites and across the regional landscape. Ian Farrington presents an overview of urban excavations at Cuzco (Chapter 18), the Inka capital, summarising the material evidence for *ushnu* platforms in the city, as well as the shrine networks connecting Cuzco to numinous places in the countryside. Lawrence Coben offers a counterpoint to this material vision from the capital in an overview of the diverse manifestation of *ushnu* platforms in Inka sites across the empire (Chapter 11). Coben’s observation of the varied constructions granted status as *ushnus* calls for site-level discussions from different parts of the Andes, and the chapters on the impressive Inka sites of Choqek’iraw (Lecoq & Saintenoy, Chapter 19) and Tambo Colorado (Protzen, Chapter 21) describe imperial outposts in the Pacific coast desert and on the eastern Amazonian escarpment. As a complement to the discussion of ritual platform constructions within Inka communities, Frank Meddens considers platforms built high in the mountains, and several authors take up the topic of Inka ritual investment in areas of high grassland (Joffré, Chapter 15) and on the snow-covered peaks of sacred mountains. Chapters on Inka ritual investment in the northern Peruvian highlands (Astuhumán, Chapter 20) and the Chanka and Condesuyo regions in the central highlands (Vivanco Pomacanchari, Chapter 14; and Ziolkowski, Chapter 22, respectively) round out the ecological presentation of Inka imperial ceremony.

Ultimately, as Tristan Platt summarises in the final chapter, the authors pursue disparate paths to delineate a hierarchy of lithic elements in Andean ritual that ranges from highly visible natural formations (mountains) to hidden features lying below the ground (caves). This helps to frame discussions of Inka practices that reproduced and ritualised the extremes of height and depth as part of the social life occurring in the in-between spaces of the Andean highlands. New archaeological fieldwork

demonstrates that the circulation of stones and soils was an important part of this mimetic work, as noted in chapters by Dennis Ogburn (Chapter 8) and Nicholas Branch and colleagues (Chapter 9). The interdisciplinary research in the volume speaks to the multifarious manifestation of key Andean concepts, and it enriches a discourse that was almost completely documentary and conceptual only a generation ago. Many of the chapters offer exciting applications of new methods in Andean archaeology, drawing attention to the interpretative power of GIS and the value of geoarchaeology and compositional analysis.

In the second edition of *The Incas*, TERENCE D'ALTROY heralds the kind of emerging and interdisciplinary scholarship that Meddens and colleagues present. The new edition is about one third longer than the 2002 edition, clear evidence of the heroic, possibly Sisyphean, effort required to keep current with the burgeoning international scholarship on the Inka. D'Altroy features the most recent results of work along key frontiers in Inka studies, including Inka origins, Andean language evolution, bioarchaeology and the persistence of Inka identity following the European invasions of the 1530s. The new edition presents maps and photographs that reflect the most recent decade of Inka research.

Although D'Altroy has contributed significantly to comparative studies of ancient empires in his other work, he developed *The Incas* as an ecumenical project, emphasising a comprehensive presentation of the literature over the discussion of the production of knowledge. The new edition stays true to its original purpose, although D'Altroy has expanded his theoretical discussion on the archaeology of empires, and he devotes more space to acknowledging the diversity of interpretative approaches in Inka studies over the years.

D'Altroy's new book is not simply updated and longer—it delves more deeply into the Inka world in an attempt to explain it in Andean (rather than European) terms. A new Chapter 5, called 'Thinking Inca', presents one of the best published attempts to capture aspects of Andean worldview and refract them through the practices of Inka statecraft. D'Altroy does not recapitulate the *lo andino* worldview—indeed, he does not mention the term in his text—but instead works through the primary evidence and the scholarly literature to pursue his own translation of an emic Andean world into Western words and ideas. His efforts in this chapter and elsewhere in the

book represent a successful effort to transcend the kind of encyclopaedic presentation that has been too common in introductory texts on the Inka, and which could easily creep into a book with such a lengthy bibliography.

In many ways, D'Altroy's success in assembling and presenting the growing array of facts about the Inkas creates a space for books like ALAN KOLATA's *Ancient Inca*, which uses a comparative theoretical framework to explore manifestations of Inka state hegemony. Intellectually, this is a fresh and satisfying approach to the Inkas, one that considers how states manufacture the consent of the governed. In doing so, Kolata accomplishes several important things that are of considerable value to Inka studies. His comparative theoretical approach presents Inka society as part of a broader Andean tradition, while engaging with classic theoretical works (such as Sir Henry Maine's *Ancient Law* (1861)) in which Inka practices do not easily fit. Kolata focuses on the changing relationships between states and their subjects or citizens, which allows him to bridge the gulf between the kin-orientated views of the *lo andino* tradition and the institutional focus of many theoretical approaches. By emphasising the different societal arenas where power and influence are constructed and distributed, Kolata is able to represent Inka statecraft as an extension and transformation of Andean social practices.

Although he expresses an affinity with the structuralist scholarship that has been influential in the *lo andino* tradition, Kolata does not draw strongly from Andean ethnography. His focus on hegemony leads him to emphasise Inka ethnohistory over archaeological evidence, and his secondary bibliography favours established works over the growing scholarship of the past decade or so. Although there are places where additional literature could be profitably cited, the emphasis on primary sources—especially early and detailed chronicles such as those by Juan de Betanzos and Pedro de Cieza de León—takes the author beyond some of the interpretative limitations that constrain less skilful Inka overviews. In many ways, Kolata reminds us that some of the frontiers in Inka studies lie in returning to the basics, including a careful reading of the sixteenth-century corpus and a critical reassessment of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century theoretical and interpretative literature.

Collectively, these three new books describe Inka studies at a crossroads. Paradigms that seemed to be veering towards orthodoxy a few decades ago have proved flexible enough to accommodate

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multiple voices and to attract new methodological collaborations. The Inka empire serves as more than a theoretical exception, as scholars recognise the potential to rethink fundamental precepts that have long seemed resolved in the Western canon. Interpretative interspaces will persist, particularly as one moves forward or backward from the time of the Inkas, but the new literature offers much reason for excitement over what will come next for Inka studies.

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