

Cultures of Latin America: Aztecs, Mayas, and Incas

In about A.D. 1325, the Aztec people of central Mexico began looking for a place to build a new capital city. Legend says that they asked Huitzilopochtli (hwits il uh PAWCH lee), their god of war, where they should build. He told them to build the city at the place where they saw an eagle perched on a cactus and holding a snake in its beak.

When the Aztecs found the sign their god had described, they were dismayed. It was such an unlikely setting for a city. The eagle was perched on a cactus growing on a rocky outcrop in a swamp. But their god had given them this sign. Therefore, they built Tenochtitlán (tay nawch tee TLAHN), the world's finest city of the time, on a swampy island at the center of Lake Texcoco.

The Geographic Setting

The Aztecs were not the first civilization or culture to develop in the Americas. Many Native American peoples had lived here for thousands of years. These various peoples developed ways of life that fit their geographic setting.

The land in the Americas has great variety. Rugged mountains and highland plateaus stretch from the icy north of North America all the way down the spine of South America to the tip of the continent. Other parts of the two continents are covered by vast plains or deserts.

▼ This carving shows the sign that told the Aztecs where to build their capital. Legend says that they were told to build where they saw an eagle perched on a cactus and holding a snake in its beak.



The Americas also have many different climates. North American climates range from extreme cold in the far north to hot, almost tropical, in the south. Central and South American climates also vary, but the most common climate is tropical.



Play Ball! The Mayas were enthusiastic ballplayers. On a court about the size of a football field, they played a game rather like soccer and basketball put together. The ball was a hard piece of rubber. The players could hit the ball with their elbows, wrists, shoulders, and hips but not with their hands or feet. And the ball could not touch the ground. To score, a player had to pass the ball through one of two stone hoops set high on walls.

The Mayas

It was in the tropical climate of southern Mexico and Central America that one important civilization, the Mayas, developed. The Mayan way of life, which was based on farming, flourished from about A.D. 300 to 900. Today, descendants of the early Mayas still live in Mexico and Central America. Many still practice some of their ancient traditions.

A Farming Culture Mayan farmers grew many different crops, such as beans, squash, peppers, avocados, and papayas. But **maize**, or corn, was their most important crop. They held maize in such high regard that they worshipped a god of corn.

To plant their corn, the Mayas first had to clear the land. They cut down the trees. Then they burned the tree stumps, later using the ash as fertilizer. Finally, they planted seeds. After a few years, the soil was worn out. The Mayas then chose a new area to clear and plant. This technique is called **slash-and-burn agriculture**.



Religion and Cities Crops need the sun and the rain to grow. It is not surprising then, that the Mayas worshipped the forces of nature as well as a corn god. To honor their gods, the Mayas held great festivals.

The Mayas conducted the most important of these festivals in large temples. The temples stood atop soaring pyramids in the centers of Mayan cities. Each Mayan city had one ruler, who governed the city and the area around it. Priests and nobles assisted him. These people of power and high position lived in large houses that surrounded the temples. The ordinary people lived on the outskirts of the city. Beyond the city limits lay the farms.

Mayan Achievements Mayan priests created a calendar to plan when to hold important religious festivals. The Mayas also developed a system of writing using signs and symbols called **hieroglyphs**.

About A.D. 900, the Mayas suddenly left their cities. No one knows why. Crop failures, war, disease, drought, or famine may have killed many Mayas. Or perhaps people rebelled against their leaders. When the Mayas left their cities, their civilization declined.

An Accurate Calendar

The Mayas were great astronomers. They watched the skies and plotted the movements of the sun, moon, and stars. Using their observations, they designed a calendar of 365 days. It had 18 "months," each of which was 20 days long. The extra five days fell at the end of the year. These were considered bad luck days.

Mayan Wall Paintings



This picture shows one of the murals, or wall paintings, found in a Mayan temple in Bonampak, Mexico. The murals were painted in the late A.D. 700s, probably to celebrate the birth of a prince. This mural portrays a battle scene. The

figure on the right is wearing a jaguar headdress. The jaguar was one of the Mayan gods of the underworld. **Critical Thinking** Why do you think the Mayas included battle scenes among pictures celebrating the birth of a prince?

The Aztecs

Another ancient civilization of Middle America was that of the Aztecs. They arrived in the Valley of Mexico in the A.D. 1100s. Within 100 years, they controlled all the land in central Mexico between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. In the center of their empire was Tenochtitlán, the capital they had built on Lake Texcoco.



Visualize Picture the city of Tenochtitlán. How would this city built in a lake look unusual?

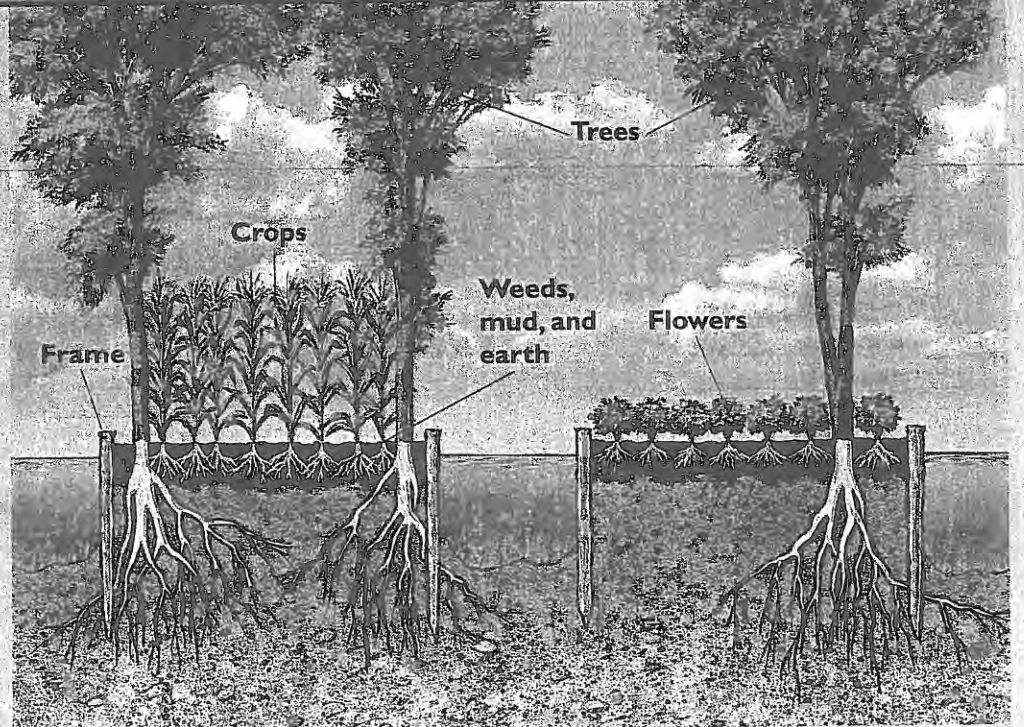
Tenochtitlán: City in the Lake You have already read about how the Aztecs chose a spot for their capital. In spite of its swampy location, Tenochtitlán was a magnificent city. At the center was a huge square. All around it stood pyramid-temples, palaces, and large stone houses. Canals crisscrossed the city. People used the canals to transport goods and to move about the city. Causeways, or raised streets of hard earth, connected the city to the mainland.

As the city grew, the Aztecs realized that they needed more farmland. Their answer to the problem was to build “floating gardens.” These were islands the size of football fields. The Aztecs made them by piling rich earth from the bottom of Lake Texcoco onto rafts made of wood. After a while, the roots of plants and trees grew down to the lake bottom, anchoring the rafts.

In addition, the Aztecs built aqueducts, pipes or channels designed to carry water from distant sources. These carried fresh springwater from the mainland to storage areas in the city.

Floating Gardens

The Aztecs began building a floating garden by driving a wooden frame into the lake bed. Next, they placed a raft of reeds or wood inside the frame. Then, they piled layers of weeds, mud from the lake bottom, and earth on the raft. They planted trees to root the raft to the lake bed and to provide shade for the garden. Over time, mud and earth fell through the raft filling the space underneath. **Critical Thinking** Why did the Aztecs need to build floating gardens?



The Aztec Way of War



This modern painting of a battle between the Tlaxcaltecs and Aztecs illustrates an almost constant part of Aztec life—war. Most Aztec men were expected to serve as soldiers. They were well trained and well equipped. They had armor of quilted cotton, swords, and bows and arrows. After military training, young men's heads were shaved, except for a strand of hair at the nape of their necks. Only after a soldier took a captive in war could the strand be cut. **Critical Thinking** How did the Aztecs treat the people they defeated in war?

A Warlike Way of Life Although Tenochtitlán was a peaceful place, the Aztecs themselves were a warlike people. In the 1400s, Aztec warriors began conquering the other people in the region. Soon, the Aztecs controlled a huge empire. One ruler, the emperor, ruled over all the Aztec lands.

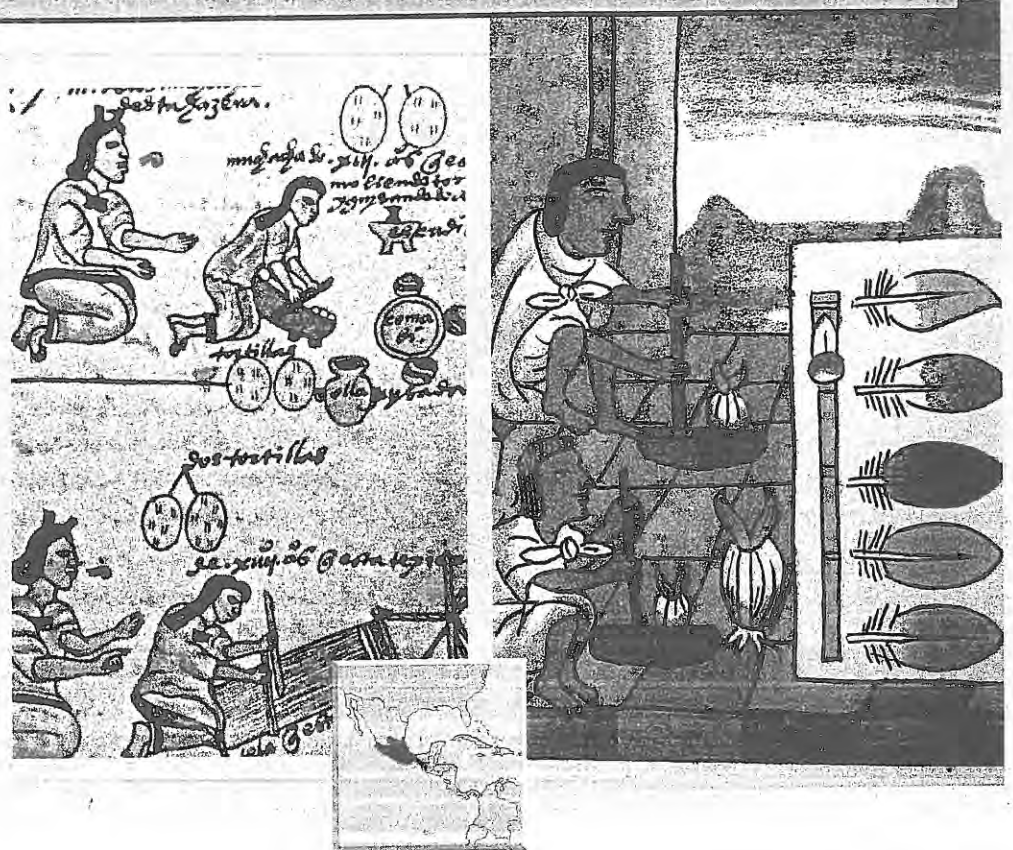
The Aztecs forced the people they conquered to pay tributes, or taxes, in the form of food, gold, or slaves. They also took thousands of prisoners of war to serve as human sacrifices. The Aztecs believed that they had to sacrifice humans so that the sun would have enough strength to rise every day. Human blood was what gave the sun strength. If the sun did not rise, crops could not grow, and the people would starve. Priests made the offerings daily. In very bad times, members of noble Aztec families were sometimes sacrificed to please the sun god.

Because of their respect for war, it is not surprising that the upper class of Aztec society was made up of military leaders as well as members of the royal family, priests, and nobles. The next class of

The Role of Aztec Women

In these paintings, made during the 1500s, Aztec mothers teach their daughters to grind corn into flour (right and far right) and to weave cloth (right). In Aztec society, girls of 13 were expected to grind flour, make tortillas, and cook meals. By the time they became adults, they had to be skilled at weaving. Some of the cloth they wove was made into capes and used for trade. Some was used to decorate temples. The finest cloth went to make clothes for the nobles to wear.

Critical Thinking How did the skills required of Aztec men and Aztec women differ?



society was made up of warriors. Below them came artisans and traders. Artisans, or skilled workers who practice a trade, created jewelry, garments, pottery, sculptures, and other goods. Most people, however, were farmers. Slaves—most of whom were prisoners captured in battle—were at the bottom of Aztec society.

Aztecs spent much of their time in religious practices. Like the Mayas, they worshipped hundreds of gods and held many religious ceremonies. The main purpose of these ceremonies was to win the favor of the gods and bring about good crops or a victory in war.

The Incas

High in the mountains, a young boy races along a narrow stone highway. He breathes heavily, relieved that he has almost reached his goal. He lifts a conch-shell trumpet and blows. It is the signal telling the next runner to get ready.

The boy is a relay runner, chosen for his speed and endurance. The Incas depended on runners to carry messages to and from the capital at Cuzco. Like every other royal messenger, the boy knows his stretch of royal highway so well that he could run it on the darkest night.

As the runner reaches the end of his stretch of road, he passes the message to the next runner. He recites the message he memorized at the start of his run.

Securing the Empire

Incan relay runners covered a lot of territory, for the Incan empire was huge. It stretched some 2,500 miles (4,023 km) along the Andes Mountains from what is now the country of Ecuador through the

▼ An Incan relay runner announces his arrival by blowing a conch-shell trumpet.



countries of Peru, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. But this great empire had small beginnings. In about the year 1200, the Incas settled in Cuzco (KOOS koh), a small village high in the Andes. Through wars and conquests they extended their control practically the length of this mountain range, about 2,500 miles (4,023 km). Many different peoples lived within the borders of this huge empire.



An Official Census High government officials made sure that the Incan empire ran smoothly. They decided where people would live and what kind of work they would do. They used a census, or official count of the people, to keep track of everyone in the land. Such records helped officials make sure that the people paid taxes and registered to work on public projects.

The Rule of the Incas The Incas developed their own system of government to rule their empire. At its head was a ruler called “Sapa Inca,” or “the emperor.” People believed that he was descended from the sun god. He, and only he, owned the land and divided it among the people.

Incan rulers used interesting methods to unify the huge empire and its people. One ruler, for example, made the Incan language, Quechua (KECH wah), the official language of the empire. He sent people into newly conquered lands to teach Incan customs and laws and to set up schools that taught Incan religion and history.

All people were expected to pay taxes to the empire. Men had to work on public projects. They might farm land, mine gold, or build roads. Women wove cloth for government officials. Farmers and their families gave the government parts of the crops they raised. In return, the government took care of the poor, the sick, and the elderly.

Although the Incas did not have a written language, they did create an unusual system for keeping detailed records. Government officials noted information about births, deaths, taxes, and harvests on knotted strings called **quipus** (KEE POOS). Every quipu had a main cord with several colored strings attached. Each color represented a different item. Knots of varying sizes stood for numbers.

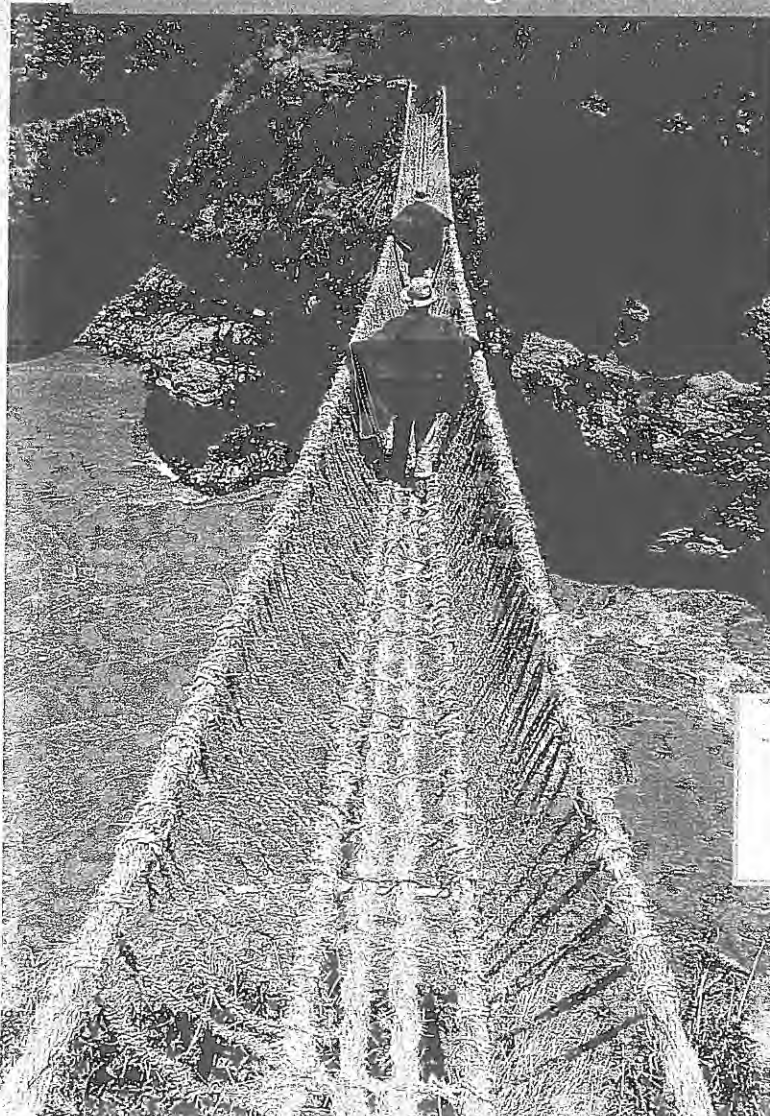
A System of Roads and Bridges To control the empire, the emperor and his officials had to know what was going on. To accomplish this, they needed a communication system—the runners. But these messengers needed roads to travel on. The Incas, therefore, built a large system of highways and bridges.

The roads served another purpose besides communication. In times of trouble, they allowed the army to travel quickly. As the soldiers traveled, they picked up supplies at stations along the way. Thus, the emperor could keep control of every part of the empire.



Connect Think of some ways in which you might communicate and keep records if your society had no written language.

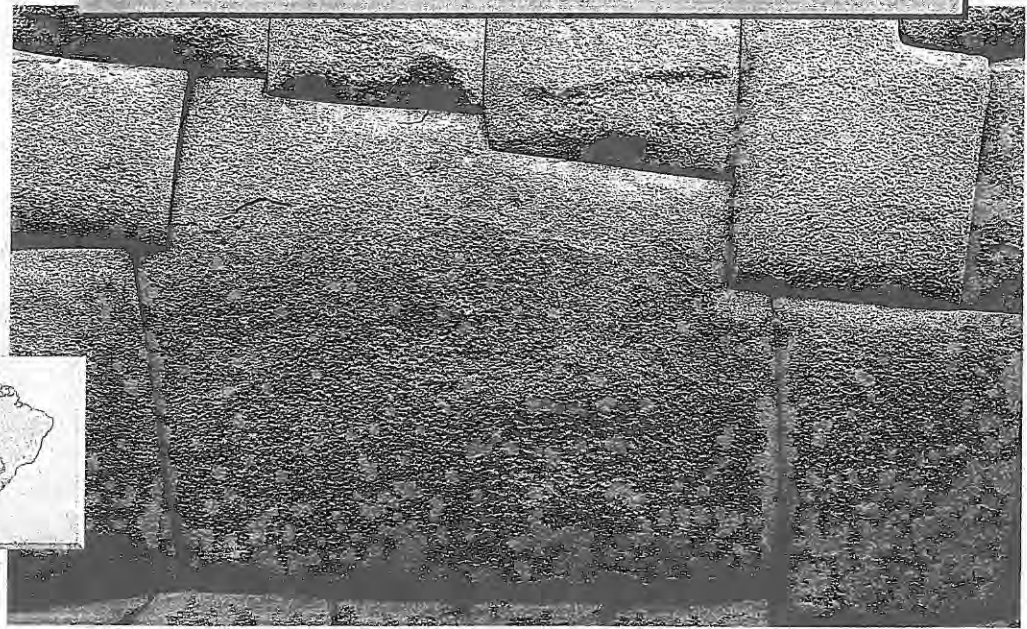
Bridges From the Past



This rope bridge, strung across a gorge in the Andes, is similar to those used by the Incas. Incan bridges were made with strong cords of braided vines and reeds. The bridges were part of the huge road network that linked every part of the empire. Only soldiers and government officials were allowed to use this system of roads and bridges. **Critical Thinking** Why were bridges important in controlling the Incan empire?



A Perfect Fit



These finely fitted granite stones are part of a building that still stands in the old Incan capital of Cuzco. Using hammers and chisels, skilled Incan stoneworkers carved 12 corners in the large stone. Then they fitted other stones around it to make a sturdy wall. If the stones of this wall were rocked by earthquakes, they simply moved, then settled back into place.

Incan Achievements

A network of roads was not the only Incan achievement. Incan engineering feats still amaze people today. For example, they changed the direction of rivers. And they were master builders.

Building With Stone Without any of our modern power tools, Incas built magnificent bridges and huge cities. They built fortresses on mountaintops. Much of what they built is still standing.

The Incas built these fortresses and cities mainly with stone. Sometimes they chose huge stones and used them just as they came from the mountains. Other times they broke the stones into smaller blocks. To break up the stone, they cut a long groove in the surface of the rock. Then they drove stone or wooden wedges into the groove until the rock split.

When the Incas made a wall, they made sure its large, many-sided stones fit together almost perfectly. After a wall was finished, the fit was so tight that not even a very thin knife blade could be slipped between two stones. They did all this with only hammers of stone and chisels of bronze.

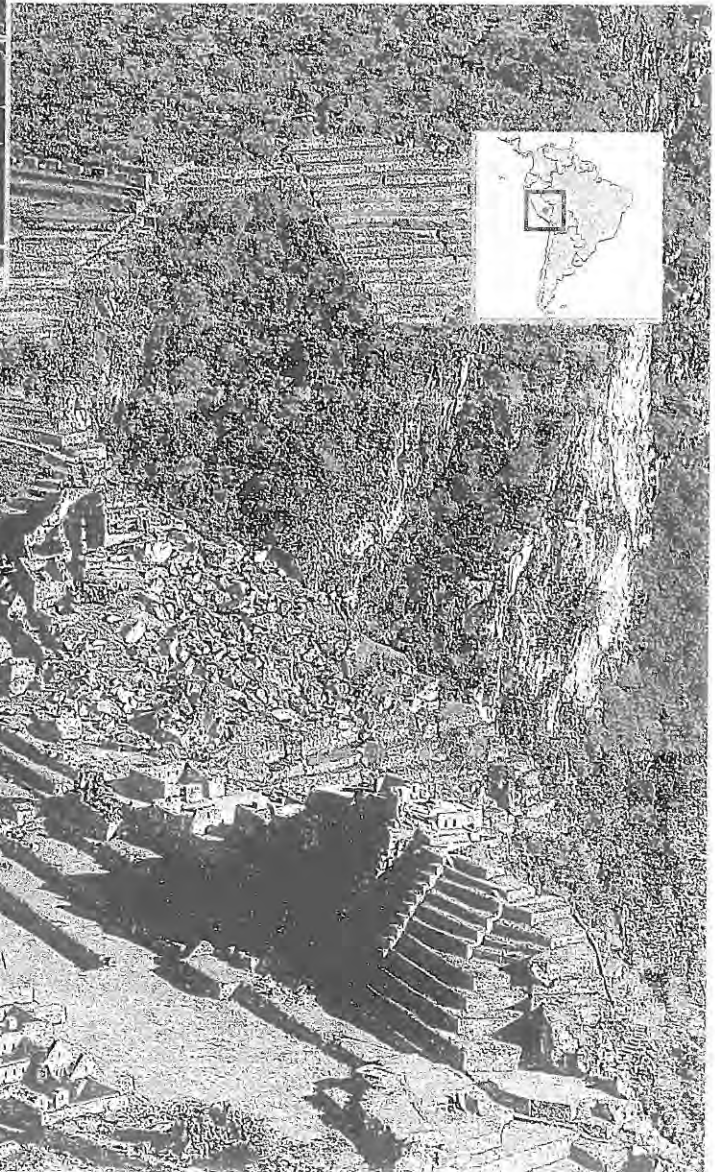
Many examples of Incan stonework can still be seen in the Peruvian city of Cuzco, once the capital of the Incan empire. Its ancient stone walls and buildings have withstood major storms and earthquakes for centuries.



Ask Questions Think of three questions you might ask about Incan building methods and achievements.

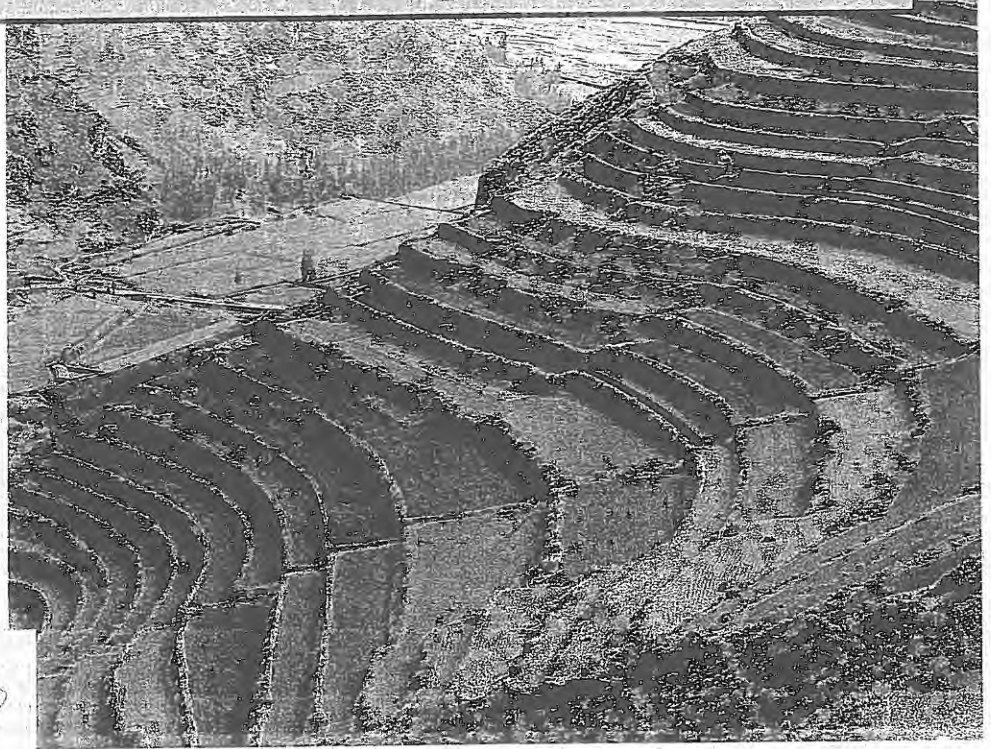
Machu Picchu (MAHCH oo PEEK choo), too, is a great example of Incan building and engineering. The Incas built this city on a high and narrow ridge between two peaks in the Andes Mountains. Using huge stone blocks from the mountaintops, they created acres and acres of buildings, walls, and plazas. They carved stairs into the face of the mountain to connect city buildings. They also cut roads into the bare rock. More than 500 years later, people still use these roads. In fact, the workers who built Machu Picchu did more than build a city. They changed the shape of the mountain landscape.

◀ ◀ The ancient city of Machu Picchu (below) is located high in the Andes about 54 miles (87 km) from Cuzco. It was home for several thousand people. It also served as a religious center. Some of the buildings located on higher ground (left) housed stones that the Incas considered holy.



Terrace Farming

The Incas built their terraces using stone walls. The area behind the wall was leveled out and lined with a layer of gravel to help with drainage. Then, earth was piled over the gravel. Finally, stone-lined channels were built to carry water to the terraces. These terraces in the mountains near Cuzco are still in use today. **Critical Thinking** How did the building of terraces help Incan farmers?



More Land for Farms Because they lived among steep, dry, and rugged mountains, the Incas had little natural farmland. They did two things to increase the amount of land available for farming.

First, they built a system of canals and aqueducts. The water that flowed through this system turned dry land into fertile fields.

To make use of the land on the slopes of the mountains, the Incas built terraces. These steplike ledges cut into the mountainside could then be used as fields for crops. The terraces also stopped soil from being washed away by rain. Incan farming techniques such as terracing are still used in the Andes today.