

Inca legend says that the emperor was descended from Inti, the sun god. He was thus the “son of the sun.”



26.3 Class Structure

Inca society was based on a strictly organized class structure. There were three broad classes: the emperor and his immediate family, nobles, and commoners. Throughout Inca society, people who were “Inca by blood”—those whose families were originally from Cuzco—held higher status than non-Incas.

As the Inca Empire grew, its class structure became more complex. Let’s look at the roles and responsibilities of each social class in the empire.

The Emperor At the top of Inca society was the emperor, called the Sapa Inca. The Incas believed that the Sapa Inca was descended from Inti, the sun god. For this reason, the Sapa Inca ruled with complete authority.

Everything in the empire belonged to the Sapa Inca. He lived in great splendor. When the Spanish came to Cuzco in the 1500s, they were dazzled to see fine gardens, golden statues, and jars made of gold and silver studded with emeralds. Servants carried the Sapa Inca everywhere on a golden **litter**. His subjects dared not look him directly in the eye.

The Sapa Inca could have many wives and hundreds of children. But he had one “primary” wife, who was called the Coya. Traditionally, to ensure the purity of the royal blood, the Coya was the Sapa Inca’s full sister. The Sapa Inca chose his heir from their children.

Nobles Below the Sapa Inca were the nobles. The Inca nobility was made up of leaders who helped administer the vast empire.

All nobles enjoyed certain privileges. They received gifts of land, servants, llamas, and fine clothing. They did not pay taxes, and men had the right to marry more than one wife. However, nobles were not all of equal rank. There were three main classes of nobles: *Capac Incas*, who were considered relatives of the emperor; *Hahua Incas*, who did not share the royal blood; and *curacas*, who were leaders of people conquered by the Incas.

litter a seat or chair on which a person is carried; a kind of carriage for high-ranking people

The highest-ranking nobles were the Capac Incas. Like the emperor himself, they were believed to be descended from Manco Capac, the legendary founder of the Inca dynasty.

Capac Incas controlled the empire's land as well as its valuable resources, such as llamas, coca leaves, and gold. They held the most important posts in the government, army, and priesthood. The *apus*, or governors, of the four quarters of the empire came from this group.

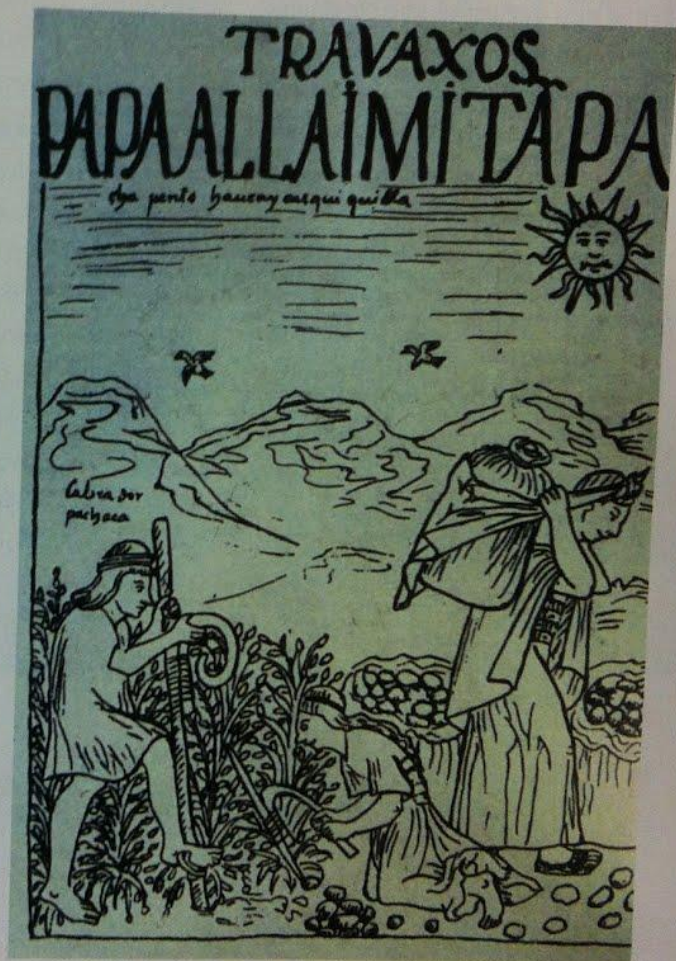
As the empire grew, the Incas needed more nobles to staff the government's complex bureaucracy. As a result, some people who were not true Incas also gained entry into the noble class. Called Hahua Incas, they were considered "Incas by privilege." Often leaders from around Cuzco became Hahua Incas. Sometimes people of common birth gained this status as well.

Additional conquests created a need for the third class of nobles, the curacas. The curacas were local leaders of conquered peoples. Curacas carried out various jobs. Many collected taxes. Others worked as inspectors, making sure everyone followed Inca laws and customs, such as wearing proper clothing and keeping clean homes. Curacas were required to spend time in Cuzco learning these laws and customs. They were allowed to rule their people only if they followed Inca ways.

Commoners Most of the people in the Inca Empire were commoners who worked as farmers and herders. The Incas did not practice slavery in the usual sense of the word. However, they did require commoners to support the government, both through the products of their labor and by working on government-sponsored projects. Men did jobs like building roads, while women might weave cloth.

Inca farmers grew a variety of crops, including squash, peppers, beans, peanuts, more than 20 types of corn, and more than 200 types of potato. The most important crop was the potato, which could survive heavy frosts at altitudes as high as 15,000 feet above sea level. Corn could be grown at altitudes nearly as high. The Incas enjoyed corn fresh, fried, and popped.

Inca farmers were required to give most of their crops to the government. The government placed the crops it collected in storehouses throughout the empire. The food was then distributed to warriors, temple priests, and people in need. For example, the government gave food to people who could no longer work, particularly the aged, the sick, and the disabled.



In this illustration, dating from about 1565, Inca farmers harvest potatoes.