



Inca Empire

The Inca Empire started off as the Kingdom of Cusco. Under the leader Pachacuti, the Inca brought other groups under their control and under their collected tribute system called the mita (Mit'a) system. This system helped the Inca build its famous monuments and grow into a sophisticated empire with ten million residents.



00:01

*Timeline shows empires
between 2000 BCE and
2000 CE*

What we're going to do in this video is think about the significant empires that formed shortly before the European colonization of the Americas. In particular, we're going to focus on the Inca Empire. In other videos, we have talked about the Aztecs. But what's interesting is this period of time in the 15th and early 16th centuries, when these empires form, but then shortly thereafter—about 100 years after they form—they are conquered by the Spanish conquistadors. So let's focus on the Inca Empire, but keep it in comparison to some of the other significant empires and civilizations we know about.

00:41

*Map shows Cusco; a photo
of Machu Picchu*

A drawing of Pachacuti

So, as we enter into the 15th century, we have the kingdom of Cusco. What we now call the Inca Empire did not exist yet. The ninth ruler of the kingdom of Cusco, a gentleman by the name of Pachacuti, he decides to go on a fairly aggressive effort of expansion. And it is Pachacuti that takes the Incas from the kingdom of Cusco and creates an empire. Now, as I mentioned, they did not call themselves the Incas. "Inca" was actually their word for ruler. So this was Pachacuti Inca. Their name for the empire that gets started by Pachacuti was Tawantinsuyu. And what it's really referring to is the four regions. And you can see the four regions here that were conquered, with Cusco at the center.

01:36

Now, one of the interesting things is that right around the same time—we talk about it in another video—you have the Aztec Empire forming. The Aztec civilization exists well before that, as does the pre-Inca Empire civilizations. But in the 15th century is also when you have the Aztec Empire form. The Mayan civilization, by this point, is in its post-classical period. Its classical period is in bold right over here. But there are still many independent Mayan city-states in the Yucatan Peninsula. But the two notable empires here are the Aztecs and the Incas, which form in the 15th century.

02:17

*Modern-day photo of
Machu Picchu*

What makes them an empire is that you have one group—in the case of the Incas, the kingdom of Cusco—conquering other peoples and taking tribute from them. Now, what was interesting about the Incas is that they were able to form this large empire, the largest empire in the Americas at the time of the European conquest. This empire had ten million people in it. And what's amazing is, is that you have this large, powerful empire with significant building projects. This is a picture of Machu Picchu. Historians believe that it was built as an estate for Pachacuti. So they were able to do this sophisticated construction despite not having a written system as we know it. They had a system of knots for some forms of record keeping. But despite that, they were able to have a sophisticated society. Their way of taxing people was not through formal coinage. They didn't have a monetary system as we know it. Members of their society had to dedicate a proportion of their labor to the empire, to the emperor.

03:22

*Portrait of Francisco
Pizarro*

And this might seem different than what we do, but if you think about it, if my income is taxed at 30% or 35% in, say, the U.S., essentially what I'm giving to the government is 35% of the work of my labor. I'm just doing it through a monetary system. They did it directly. A certain percentage of my labor would directly have to be for the empire. And that's how things like Machu Picchu actually got built. This was called the Mit'a system.

*Portrait of Francisco
Pizarro*

Well, like the case with the Aztec Empire, the Inca Empire lasts for about 100 years until the conquistadors come into the picture. And Francisco Pizarro in particular, on his third expedition, is able to conquer this powerful Inca Empire. And he does this with only several hundred men. But they were far better armed than the Incas. But many historians believe it was also complacency on the part of the Inca ruler at the time. He didn't believe that these conquistadors would be able to overtake his army that numbered in the tens of thousands.