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Inka Human Sacrifice and Mountain Worship: Strategies for Empire Unification

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Thomas Besom, *Inka Human Sacrifice and Mountain Worship: Strategies for Empire Unification* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 309 pp., \$65 (hardcover).

The Inka Empire of western South America was the largest pre-Colombian polity ever formed in the New World. At the height of its power in the sixteenth century CE it stretched over most of Ecuador, western Peru, northern and central Chile, western Bolivia, and north-western Argentina. That the Cuzqueños (inhabitants of Cuzco in Peru, the capital of the Inka Empire) were able to incorporate a large number of ethnic groups spread over a vast area into a unified state within a time span of about ninety years was a remarkable achievement. One of the ways in which the Inka legitimized their power was through ritual. This study examines the ritual of human sacrifice and the worship of mountains within the southern quadrant of the Inka Empire. Using ethnohistoric texts written by European and indigenous authors after the Spanish conquest of 1532 and archaeological remains from mountain sites, the author shows how the Cuzqueños manipulated ideology through ritual in order to integrate subjugated groups, rationalize the appropriation of their lands, and justify the extraction of their resources.

The Inka performed several types of human sacrifice: *runas*, male citizens of the state; captive warriors; *necropampa* victims buried with a deceased ruler; and substitutes offered so that a sick individual might live. The type focused upon in this study is the *Qhapaq Hucha* (*Capacucha*) sacrifice of especially chosen children and young women known as *aqllas*, virgins who served the imperial gods and the Cuzqueño state. These victims came from elite families in the conquered provinces and were selected for their unblemished beauty. Once chosen by an imperial official, they were separated from their natal communities, taken to Cuzco where they were honored and feasted, and then sent to important *waqas* (holy sites, shrines, idols, and objects) where they were sacrificed. *Qhapaq Huchas* then became *waqas* themselves and were worshipped and consulted as oracles. The family that had provided a *Qhapaq Hucha* victim gained increased prestige and status and were incorporated more tightly into the Inka state structure.

Over the last century or so, the corpses of at least twenty-eight *Qhapaq Hucha* victims have been discovered on mountains in Peru, Argentina, and Chile. Besom closely examines this phenomenon through two case studies: the sacrifice of a girl and a young woman from the Pica, a territory in northern Chile, on Cerro Esmeralda, a prominent mountain peak located to the east of the present day coastal city of Iquique; and a boy from the Pechunche in Central Chile sacrificed on El Plomo. These particular examples exemplify the two types of *Qhapaq Hucha* sacrifice evident in the ethnohistoric texts: the immolation of boys and of specially selected girls and young women, and probably represent offerings to mountain deities. Cult sites dedicated to mountain gods are the most ubiquitous types of Inka sites and around two hundred have been discovered on peaks in the southern Andes.

The book's introduction provides useful background on the Inka Empire, and in the eight subsequent chapters the author examines human sacrifice and mountain worship from various perspectives. Chapter One explains the manner in which the Cuzqueños were able to ritually manipulate common Andean symbolism at the cult sites on Esmeralda and El Plomo in order to promote their authority over the subjugated regions. Chapter Two focuses on ethnohistorical texts by Hispanic sources such as administrators, judges reporting to the Spanish crown, Catholic priests, mercenary soldiers, and members of elite Andean families deprived of their power under colonial rule.

Besom identifies the five types of Inka human sacrifice, the purposes thereof, and the material correlates that could be expected to be found in the archaeological record. The ethnohistoric texts also describe the reasons for and nature of the Andean veneration of mountain peaks and the types of mountain cult site. The ensuing chapters focus on the case studies. Chapter Three analyses the archaeological remains from Esmeralda while Chapter Four interprets the material in the light of the ethnohistoric sources. Chapter Five discusses the remains from El Plomo, Chapter Six analyses the assemblage, and Chapter Seven focuses on the anthropomorphic figurines from El Plomo and elsewhere in light of the ethnohistoric texts. Chapter 8 summarises the major arguments of the book.

This book is fascinating from a number of angles. My main interest in this study is in its focus upon mountain worship and its occurrence within a wider sacred – animate – landscape. I cannot help but compare it with the phenomenon of mountain cult sites in Late Bronze Age Crete, and their takeover by rising elites in order to naturalize their authority, with which I am more familiar. Minoan Crete has no translated texts, however, so I rather envy Besom's ability to refer to ethnohistoric texts in his study on Andean mountain worship. The texts provide information about the beliefs concerning Andean mountain deities, the reasons why mountains were venerated, the rituals enacted upon them, the characteristics of cult sites, and provide contemporary eye-witness accounts of sacrificial locations.

The use of contemporary texts in this study confirms that while to a certain extent archaeological remains can be read, the additional presence of texts is immensely helpful – even though they are not unproblematic in themselves. The texts tell us things that archaeology does not, for example, that in addition to the material offerings given to the mountain deities, the Cuzqueños also made non-material contributions by sending out priests to carry out rituals for mountain deities, by establishing llama herds in the names of mountain deities, granting mountains the use of fields and pastures, and by assigning workers to serve them. Through the combination of both archaeology and texts we get a good idea of the animate nature of the Andean landscape. The description of *aqllas*, the “chosen women,” also provides food for thought in regards to the ubiquitous presence of female figures in Minoan art. Traditionally interpreted in Aegean archaeology as depicting powerful women, the ethnohistorical texts utilised in this study remind us that important women are not necessarily powerful.

Interestingly perhaps for a modern Pagan audience to whom human (and often animal) sacrifice is abhorrent, is that the *Qhapaq Hucha* victims and their families apparently perceived their deaths as positive – despite the fact that they might be killed by being strangled by hand, by a cord, a blow to the head, having their cut throat, heart removed, or being buried alive. Tanta Carhua was a 10-year old girl who was offered by her father as a *Qhapaq Hucha* sacrifice. Described as “beautiful beyond exaggeration” by the Spanish chronicler Rodrigue Hernández Principe, she was taken to Cuzco to meet the emperor and on her journey to the mountain where she was to be sacrificed the royal procession passed through her home village where she allegedly said “You can finish with me now because I could not be more honored than by the feasts which they celebrated for me in Cuzco”. She was subsequently buried alive atop a mountain, in a small space at the bottom of a five-meter-deep shaft, curled up in foetal position and wearing fine clothes. After Tanta Carhua was put to death she was deified and turned into an ancestral figure, her father became the governor of his province, and her worship was perpetuated by the descendants of her younger brothers.

Illustrated with historical line drawings by disenfranchised local elite, Felipe Guaman Poma, from his famous work, *El primer nueva corónica [sic] y buen gobierno* (The first new chronicle and good government, 1600–1615 CE), and contemporary photographs of the well-preserved remains of sacrificial victims; offerings such as anthropomorphic and zoomorphic statuettes, vessels, feathers and textiles; and cult locations, this book will be of interest to archaeologists, anthropologists and religious studies scholars. It can serve as an introduction to the topic of Inka human sacrifice for the general reader, and will also be of interest to specialists in South American archaeology.

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