The Inca civilization flourished in ancient Peru between 1400 and 1533. Its empire eventually extended across western South America, making it the largest ever seen in the Americas and the largest in the world at that time.

Famed for their unique art and architecture, the Incas constructed finely built and imposing buildings in every place they conquered. They were undaunted by the often harsh Andean environment. Their spectacular adaptation of natural environment with terracing, highways and mountaintop settlements continues to impress modern visitors at sites like Machu Picchu.
Historical overview

According to legend, in the beginning, the creator god Viracocha came out of the Pacific Ocean and created the sun and all people. These first people were buried by the god and only later emerged from sacred springs and rocks back into the world. The Incas, specifically, were brought into existence from the sun god Inti. They regarded themselves as the chosen few, the "Children of the Sun," and the Inca ruler was Inti’s representative and embodiment on Earth.

More concrete archaeological evidence has revealed that the first settlements in the Cuzco Valley actually date to 4500 B.C. when hunter-gatherer communities occupied the area. However, Cuzco only became a significant center sometime about A.D. 1000. In 1438, the Incas began to expand, eventually building an empire that stretched across the Andes.
The rise of the Inca empire was spectacularly quick. First, all speakers of the Inca language Quechua were given privileged status, and this noble class then dominated all the important roles within the empire. The Incas themselves called their empire Tawantinsuyo (or Tahuantinsuyu) meaning "Land of the Four Quarters" or "The Four Parts Together." The empire spread across ancient Ecuador, Peru, northern Chile, Bolivia, upland Argentina and southern Colombia. About 40,000 Incas governed a huge territory with some 10 million subjects speaking more than 30 different languages.

**Government and administration**

The Sapa Inca was the absolute ruler of the empire. His life was one of great opulence, drinking from gold and silver cups, wearing silver shoes and living in a palace furnished with the finest textiles. He was even looked after following his death, as the Inca mummified their rulers. Stored in the Coricancha temple in Cuzco, the mummies were regularly brought outside in elaborate ceremonies wearing their finest regalia. They were given offerings of food and drink, and "consulted" for their opinion on pressing state affairs.

At the top was the ruler and 10 families of nobles called panaqa. Next in line came 10 more groups, more distantly related to the king, and then a third group of nobles were not of Inca blood but were made Incas as a privilege. At the bottom were locally recruited administrators who oversaw settlements and the ayllu, which was a collection of households.
A regular census was taken and populations divided up into groups based on multiples of 10. Inca mathematics was almost identical to the system we use today. There was no currency in the Inca world, so taxes were usually paid in food, precious metals, textiles, exotic feathers, dyes and shells, but also in labor. Local communities were expected to help build and maintain
such projects as the road system that stretched across the empire. To keep track of all these statistics, the Inca used the quipu, a writing system of knots and strings, which was also highly transportable and could record decimals up to 10,000.

The Incas imposed their religion and administration on conquered peoples and extracted tribute. In exchange, they gave them food in times of environmental disaster and better storage facilities for foodstuffs. They also offered work via state-sponsored projects, state-sponsored religious feasts, roads and military protection.

**Cuzco**

The Inca capital was called Cuzco, from qosqo, meaning "dried-up lake bed," or perhaps derived from cozco, a particular stone marker in the city. It was the religious and administrative center of the empire and had a population of up to 150,000 at its peak. It was dominated by the sacred gold and emerald Coricancha complex, or Temple of the Sun. The whole capital was laid out in the form of a puma. Incorporating vast plazas, parkland, shrines, fountains and canals, the splendor of Inca Cuzco, unfortunately, survives only in the eyewitness accounts of the first Europeans who marveled at its architecture and riches.

**Inca religion**

The Inca religion was preoccupied with controlling the natural world and avoiding such disasters as earthquakes, floods and drought. These catastrophes brought about the natural cycle of change involving death and renewal, which the Inca called pachakuti.

Sacred sites were also established on mountaintops, caves and springs. These huacas could be used to make astronomical observations at specific times of the year. Religious ceremonies took place according to the astronomical calendar, especially the movements of the sun, moon and Milky Way. Shamans were another important part of Inca religion and were active in every settlement.

Inca religious rituals also involved ancestor worship and making offerings to the gods in the form of food, drink and precious materials. Sacrifices – both animals and humans, including children – were also made to pacify and honor the gods and ensure the good health of the king. All these beliefs were imposed on the populations that the Incas conquered.

**Inca architecture and roads**

Master stone masons, the Incas constructed large buildings, walls and fortifications using finely worked blocks. These fitted together so precisely that no mortar was needed to hold them together.
Terracing, or creating flat areas to maximize land for agriculture, was another Inca practice. These terraces often included canals, as the Incas were expert at diverting water. They carried the water across great distances, channeled it underground and used it to create spectacular fountains.
Goods were transported across the empire along roads using llamas and porters. The Inca road network covered more than 40,000 km (24,900 miles). It facilitated the easy movement of armies, administrators and trade goods, and was a very powerful visual symbol of Inca authority over their empire.

**Inca art**

Inca art is best seen in highly polished metalwork ceramics and textiles, which were considered the most prestigious by the Incas. Designs often used geometrical shapes. Just as today coins and stamps reflect a nation's history, Andean artwork offered recognizable motifs. These represented either the specific communities making them or the designs of the ruling Inca class ordering them.

Artworks using precious metals were made exclusively for Inca nobles. Even some textiles were restricted for their use alone. Goods made using the super-soft vicuña wool were similarly restricted to nobles, and only the Inca ruler could own vicuña herds. It is notable that the pottery decoration, textiles, and architectural sculpture of the Incas did not usually include representations of themselves or their rituals.
Collapse

The Inca Empire was founded on and maintained by force. The ruling Incas were very often unpopular with their subjects. The Spanish conquistadors, led by Francisco Pizarro, took full advantage of this in the mid-16th century.

Rebellions were rife, and the Incas were engaged in a war in Ecuador where a second Inca capital had been established at Quito. The Incas were also hit by an epidemic of European diseases, such as smallpox, which killed a staggering 65 to 90 percent of the population. It was a perfect storm of rebellion, disease and invasion that brought the downfall of the mighty Inca Empire.

The Inca language Quechua lives on today and is still spoken by some 8 million people. There are also a good number of buildings, artifacts and written accounts that have survived the ravages of conquerors, looters and time. They remain indisputable witnesses to the wealth, ingenuity and high cultural achievements of this great, but short-lived civilization.