

Garcilaso de la Vega, El Inca

*Excerpts from Royal Commentaries of the
Incas and General History of Peru*

Reprinted from edition translated by Harold V. Livermore, 1966

**Originally published in two parts as *Comentarios reales de los Incas*,
Part One (1609); and *Historia general del Peru*, Part Two (1617)**

Garcilaso de la Vega (1539–1616), known as “El Inca,” has been called the first classic author of the Americas. The Peruvian writer and historian’s master work, *Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru* (two parts, 1609 and 1617), presents a vivid chronicle of the personalities, events, customs, rites, and royal lineage from the Inca civilization’s beginnings to the arrival of the Spaniards. The book is noted as great literature as well as useful—though somewhat romanticized—history.

Born in 1539 in Cuzco, Peru, shortly after the Spanish conquest of Peru (1533), Garcilaso’s family background connected him with both Inca and Spanish traditions. His father, Sebastian Garcilaso de la Vega, was a Spanish conquistador (Spanish word for “conqueror”) and military captain from a distinguished Spanish family. Garcilaso’s mother, Isabel Suarez Chimu Ocllo, was the niece of the last great Inca emperor, Huayna Capac (pronounced WHY-nah CAH-pahk), who ruled from 1493 to 1525.

After Garcilaso’s birth, his father married a Spanish woman and arranged for Isabel to marry a commoner, despite

“The Incas never made laws to frighten their subjects or to be mocked by them, but always with the intention of applying them to anyone who dared to break them.”



Garcilaso de la Vega, "El Inca." *The Library of Congress.*

her rank as a royal Inca. Both parents wanted Garcilaso to know the traditions of their respective cultures. From his mother, who reared him, Garcilaso learned Quechua (pronounced KECH-wah), the language of the Incas, as well as Inca customs, myths, and legends—stories handed down from earlier times, often believed to be historically true. His father made sure he was educated as a nobleman in the classical traditions of Spain. Along with Quechua and Spanish, Garcilaso learned Latin and the histories of ancient Rome and Greece. He was raised in the Catholic religion.

When Garcilaso was twenty-one years old his father died, leaving Garcilaso money for his education. The young man made his way to Spain where he got a chilly reception from his father's family and acquaintances who were suspicious of the half-Inca, half-conquistador *mestizo* (person of mixed European and Amerindian an-

cestry). Garcilaso eventually settled near Cordova in 1571, where he remained for the rest of his life.

In 1572 Garcilaso learned his mother had died. He also heard grim reports of the stern measures Spanish authorities in Peru had taken to suppress the Inca people. The Spanish had sacked the Inca rebel stronghold in Vilcabamba in 1572 and beheaded the Sapa Inca (supreme ruler of the Inca empire), Tupac Amarú (1544–1572; ruled 1571–1572). Garcilaso decided to write about the Inca civilization and defend its vanished greatness. Tireless and diligent, he assembled information on all aspects of Inca history and culture. In order to persuade the Spanish to change their policies, Garcilaso wanted to write in a language that would be accepted by the elite (people in socially superior positions who have more power and privileges than others). He therefore taught himself Castilian, the dominant Spanish dialect in Spain.

To write about the origins and rise of the Inca empire in *Royal Commentaries of the Incas*, Garcilaso relied on his

memory of the stories his Inca relatives told him in his youth. He also received helpful information from Inca friends who wrote to him from Peru. His background as a bilingual (speaking two languages) child trained in both the Inca and the Spanish worlds is evident in the book; Garcilaso often seems to attempt to fit the glories of the Inca empire into the realm of European literary tradition. His outlook was quite romantic; his account of the Incas casts them as wise rulers who were similar to the ancient, pre-Christian Romans. Garcilaso believed the Incas' major shortcoming, like that of the ancient Romans, was that they were ignorant of Christianity before the Spanish arrived. Though Garcilaso approved of Spanish attempts to convert the native Andean people to Catholicism, he did not approve of the abuses the Spanish were inflicting on them. His book was, in part, an attempt to change the Spanish policies.

Things to remember while reading the excerpts from *Royal Commentaries of the Incas* and *the General History of Peru*:

- In the following excerpts, Garcilaso describes the *acllahuaci* (pronounced ahk-lah-WAH-see) or “house of the chosen women” in Cuzco. His comparison of the Inca *acllahuaci* to a Roman Catholic convent, and particularly his focus on the purity and virginity of the *aclla*, or chosen women, seems to be an attempt to prove the worthiness and civility of the Inca people to a skeptical readership in Spain. According to historians, his description paints only a portion of the picture of the institution. He leaves out facts that may provide a less-idealized (making the subjects more perfect than they were) view. For example, when the young girls who had been trained in *acllahuacis* throughout the empire turned fourteen, they were sent to a festival in Cuzco. There, the Sapa Inca would select wives for himself from among them. He chose others to be given as gifts to noblemen he wished to reward. At various times of the year, young women trained at the *acllahuaci* were chosen to be sacrificed (killed as an offering) to the gods. A relatively small portion of the young women were married symbolically to the Inca sun god, Inti, or to other gods.

- If Garcilaso's writings seem idealized, many of the Spanish chroniclers writing about the Incas erred gravely in the other direction. Most of the missionaries (people who try to convert others, usually in a foreign land, to their religion) and soldiers were not sympathetic in their descriptions of the Incas or open to learning about their culture. For example, conquistador Hernando Pizarro (d. 1560; brother of expedition leader Francisco Pizarro) described the "chosen women" of the *acllahuaci* as "women of the devil." In the second paragraph of the first excerpt below, Garcilaso, however, counters the claims of Spanish historians that the "chosen women" mingled with males regularly and participated in human sacrifice rites in the Temple of the Sun.
- Garcilaso refers to the Incas burning the city of Cuzco. After the Spanish had occupied Cuzco, Inca leader Manco Inca (ruled 1533–1545) fled the city and set up camp. In 1536 he sent word throughout the empire that he would lead a rebellion against the Spanish, asking for help in the fight. Andean men rushed to the Cuzco area by the thousands to fight the hated Spanish. A force of about forty thousand Andean warriors joined together against the Spanish-held Cuzco. They began their attack on the Spanish by shooting red-hot stones from their slings, setting the capital on fire. In the siege, the Spanish were trapped for nearly a year in Sacsahuaman (pronounced sox-ah-wah-MAHN), the stone fortress perched on a hill just north of Cuzco. As Garcilaso mentions, out of respect the Andean warriors spared only a few buildings from the flames: the *acllahuaci* and the Temple of the Sun.

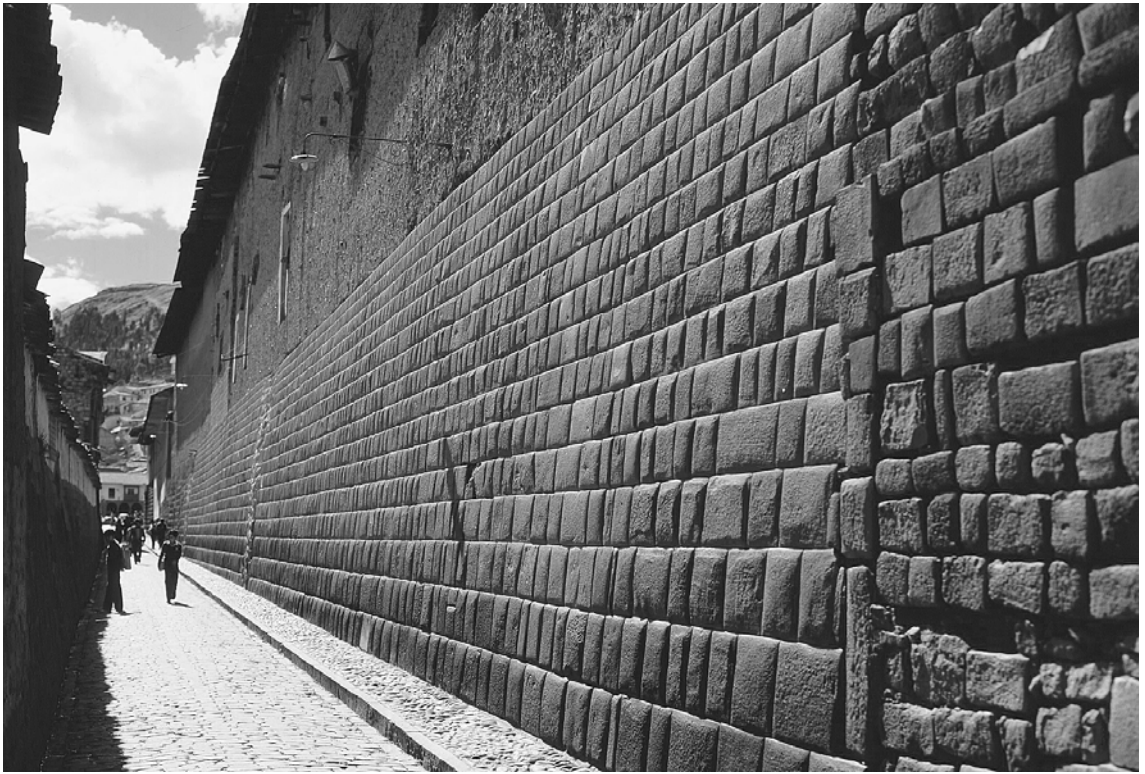


Excerpts from Royal Commentaries of the Incas and the General History of Peru

Chapter I: The House of the Virgins Dedicated to the Sun

*The Inca kings had in their vain and **heathen** religion some great things worthy of much consideration. One of these was the*

Heathen: Relating to people who do not accept the God of the Christian, Jewish, or Muslim religions.



profession of **perpetual** virginity observed by women in many **conventual** houses built for them in various parts of the empire.

A **quarter** of the city of Cuzco was called *Acllahuaci*, “house of the chosen women.” The quarter is between two streets that run from the main square to the convent of St. Dominic, which used to be the house of the Sun.... Between it and the temple of the Sun there was a large block of houses and a big square which is in front of the temple. This shows how far off the mark were these historians who say that the virgins were in the temple of the Sun, that they were priestesses and that they aided the priests in the sacrifices. In fact the house and the temple are a great distance apart, and the chief object of the Inca kings was that men should not enter the nunnery, or women the temple of the Sun. They called it “the house of the chosen” because the nuns were chosen for their rank or beauty; they must be virgins, and to ensure this, they were set apart at the age of eight years or under.

As the virgins of the house of Cuzco were dedicated to the Sun, they had to be of his own blood, or daughters of Incas, either of the king or of

This wall in Cuzco was once part of an *acllahuaci*, or “house of the chosen women.” *The Art Archive/Dagli Orti.*

Perpetual: Lasting forever.

Conventual: Relating to convents—the houses of Catholic nuns.

Quarter: District of a town.

members of his family, and legitimate and free from all foreign blood.... They reasoned that the Sun would have children and that they must not be bastards with a mixture of human with their divine blood. The women devoted to the Sun must therefore be of the legitimate royal blood, which was that of the Sun himself. They were usually more than fifteen hundred nuns, but there was no established limit of number.

Within the house there were senior women who had grown old in their vocation. If they had entered it long ago they were called *mamacuna* because of their age and of the office they performed. Superficially this word means "matron," but its real significance is a woman entrusted with the duties of a mother: it is composed of *mama*, "mother," and the particle *cuna*, with no fixed meaning....

Chapter II: Rules and Duties of the Chosen Virgins

They lived in perpetual **seclusion** to the end of their days and preserved their virginity. They had no **locutory** or hatch or any other place where they could see or speak to men or women except one another. As women of the Sun they were not to be made common by being seen by anyone. Their seclusion was so absolute that even the [Sapa] Inca never used the privilege he might have had as king of seeing or speaking to them, lest anyone else should have ventured to seek the same privilege. Only the *coya*, or queen, and her daughters had **leave** to enter the house and converse with the nuns, both young and old.

The [Sapa] Inca sent the queen and her daughters to visit them and ask how they were and what they needed. I saw this house intact, for only its quarter and that of the temple of the Sun, and four other buildings that had been royal palaces of the Incas were respected by the **Indians** in their general rebellion against the Spaniards. Because they [these buildings] had been the house of the Sun, their god, and of his women, and of their kings, they did not burn them down as they burnt the rest of the city. Among other notable features of this building there was a narrow passage wide enough for two persons that ran the whole length of the building. The passage had many cells on either side, which were used as offices where women worked. At each door were trusted **portresses**, and in the last apartment at the end of the passage where no one entered were the women of the Sun. The house had a main door as convents do in Spain, but it was only opened to admit the queen or to receive women who were going to be nuns.

At the beginning of the passage which was the service-door for the whole house, there were a score of **porters** to fetch and carry things needed in the house as far as the second door. The porters

Seclusion: Isolation.

Locutory: A room, usually in a monastery or convent, where conversation is permitted.

Leave: Permission.

Indians: The native Andeans.

Portresses: Female doorkeepers.

Porters: Male doorkeepers.

could not pass this second door under pain of death, even if they were called from within, and no one was allowed to call them in under the same penalty. The nuns and their house were served by five hundred girls, all maidens and daughters of **Incas by privilege**, those whom the first [Sapa] Incas had reduced to [their] service and not those of the royal blood. They did not enter the house as women of the Sun, but only as servants. Daughters of foreigners were not admitted for this service, but only those of Incas by privilege....

The various duties of the women of the Sun were spinning, weaving, and making all the clothes and headwear the [Sapa] Inca and the coya, his legitimate wife, wore on their persons. They also made the fine garments that were offered as sacrifices to the Sun. The [Sapa] Inca wore on his head a band, the llautu, which was as broad as the little finger and very thick, so as to be almost square, being passed four or five times around the head, and the scarlet fringe which stretched across his temples. His dress was a tunic falling to the knees, the uncu. The Spaniards call it cusma, but this is not in the general language but a word from some provincial dialect. He wore also a blanket two **piernas** square instead of a cloak, the yacolla. The nuns also made for the [Sapa] Inca a kind of pouch, about a quarter of a **vara** square. These pouches are carried under the arm on a highly embroidered band, two fingers in width and passed like a **bandolier** from the left shoulder to the right side. They are called chuspa....

Chapter III: The Veneration They Had for Things Made by the Virgins and the Law Against Those Who Might Violate Them

All these things were made by the nuns in great quantities for their bridegroom the Sun. As the Sun could not wear these garments, they were sent to the [Sapa] Inca as his legitimate son and legal heir that he might wear them. He received them as sacred things, and he and his whole empire held them in greater **veneration** than the Greeks and Romans would have done if the goddesses Juno, Venus, and Pallas had made them. For these **gentiles** of the New World, being simpler than those of antiquity, worshiped with extreme veneration and heartfelt affection everything they held sacred and divine in their false faith.... The [Sapa] Inca likewise could not give them to anyone not of his own blood and kin, for they held that divine things could not be put to human purposes without **sacrilege**, and it was therefore prohibited even to the king to offer them to **curacas** and captains, however well they had served him, unless they were of his blood....

In addition the nuns occupied themselves in due season in making the bread called cancu for the sacrifices they offered to the Sun at

Incas by privilege: A group of Inca nobility who were not Inca by birth, but who spoke the Quechua language and had lived in the Cuzco area for many generations; though they were given some of the powers and privileges of the elite, they were considered inferior to Incas by birth.

Piernas: Old Spanish units of measure.

Vara: A Spanish word for a measure of length of about one yard.

Bandolier: A military belt that has small pockets or loops for carrying cartridges and is worn over the shoulders and across the chest.

Veneration: Profound respect.

Gentiles: People of a tribe or clan.

Sacrilege: A violation of something sacred.

Curacas: Locals rulers of a conquered people who after the conquest continued to serve as officials of the Inca government in their regions.

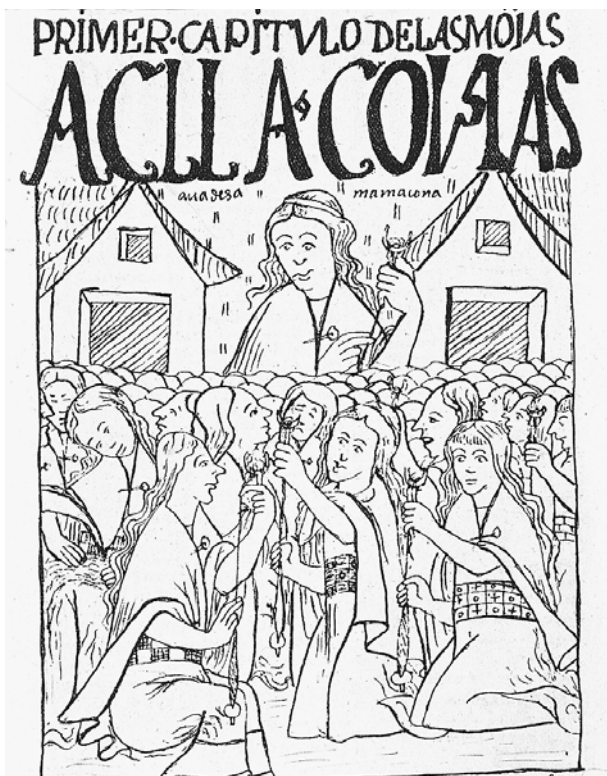


Illustration by Felipe Huaman Poma de Ayala, from *La primer nueva corónica y buen gobierno*. The Inca "chosen women," pictured in this illustration, spent many days weaving textiles for the Sapa Inca. *The Art Archive/Archaeological Museum Lima/Dagli Orti.*

Untrodden: Not walked upon.

Transgressed: Disobeyed.

Remission: Reduction in intensity.

the great festivals of Raimi and Citua. They also brewed the drink the Inca and his kinsfolk drank on the festivals, called in their language aca.... All the vessels of the house, even pots, pitchers, and vats, were of silver and gold, as in the house of the Sun, for they were his wives and were worthy of it by their rank. There was also a garden of trees and plants, herbs and flowers, birds and animals, done in gold and silver like those in temple of the Sun.

The things we have mentioned were the main occupations of the nuns of Cuzco. Otherwise they lived and conversed like women dedicated to perpetual seclusion and perpetual virginity. There was a law that a nun who forfeited her virginity should be buried alive and her accomplice hanged. As they thought it was a small punishment merely to kill a man for so grave an offence as venturing to violate a woman dedicated to the Sun, their god and father of their kings, the law provided that the guilty man's wife, children, and servants should

be slain too, together with his kinsmen, his neighbors, and fellow townsmen, and all his flocks, without leaving a babe or suckling, as the saying is. His village was destroyed and strewn with rocks, and the home and birthplace of so wicked a son left forsaken and desolate and the place accursed, to remain **untrodden** by the foot of man or beast, if possible.

This was the law. But it was never applied, for no one ever **transgressed** it. As we have said, the Peruvian Indians were very fearful of breaking the laws and extremely observant of them, especially those relating to their religion or their king. But if anyone did transgress, the law was applied literally without any **remission**, as if it were merely a matter of killing a puppy. The Incas never made laws to frighten their subjects or to be mocked by them, but always with the intention of applying them to anyone who dared to break them.



What happened next ...

Garcilaso went on to write a second volume of the *General History of Peru*, published a year after his death in 1616. The second volume depicts the Spanish reign as bloody and chaotic, a vivid contrast to the much more rational Inca authority he had described in the first volume. Garcilaso's book conveyed an unpopular position in Spain at the time: in order to rule the Andean people, the Spanish should learn the language and customs of this vastly different culture. The second volume of his book was ignored.

Between ill-treatment by the Spanish, disease, and lack of food and resources, the native population of the Andean region was reduced by as much as 75 to 90 percent during the century after the Spanish conquest. In 1780 Tupac Amarú II (c. 1740–1781), an Andean leader who claimed to be a grandson of the last Inca king, demanded the Spanish return the rule of the Andean highlands to its people. His call rallied tens of thousands of native and *mestizo* descendants to join him in an uprising. The Spanish, however, put down the rebellion, killing thousands.

Tupac Amarú II was captured and tortured to death in 1781. A few months later, the Spanish king sent a message to his viceroy (regional governor who represents the king of the ruling country) in Lima, the new capital of Peru, urgently requiring that he collect all existing volumes of Garcilaso's history of Peru. The viceroy felt that the book, with its noble vision of the ancient civilization, might incite the native Andean people against the Spanish. As requested, Peruvian officials confiscated all known copies of Garcilaso's books, which were then not read in Peru or Spain for many years.

Did you know ...

- After the siege of Cuzco, the Spanish built their own city on top of the remaining Inca buildings. A Roman Catholic convent was built on top of the Inca *acclahuaci*'s foundation. Tourists in Cuzco today are still able to view the bottom of the sturdy cut-stone walls of the Inca house of chosen women.

Consider the following ...

- Describe the life of a woman who lives in the “house of chosen women” as Garcilaso portrays it in these excerpts. If you were an Inca parent, would you want your daughter to be chosen for such a life? Why or why not?
- How do you think Garcilaso’s background—half Spanish, half Inca—might have affected his writing? Who do you think he was writing this book for? What was his purpose for writing it?
- Why does Garcilaso compare the women of the Inca *acclahuaci* to Catholic nuns?

For More Information

Books

Davies, Nigel. *The Ancient Kingdoms of Peru*. London and New York: Penguin Books, 1997.

Garcilaso de la Vega, El Inca. *Royal Commentaries of the Incas and General History of Peru: Part One*. Translated by Harold V. Livermore. Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1966.

Von Hagen, Adriana, and Craig Morris. *The Cities of the Ancient Andes*. London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998.

Web Sites

“Garcilaso Inca de la Vega.” *Selections from the Library of José Durand: University of Notre Dame Rare Books and Special Collections*. <http://www.rarebooks.nd.edu/exhibits/durand/biographies/garcilaso.html> (accessed on November 4, 2004).

Other Sources

Pizarro, Hernando. Letter to the Royal Audience of Santo Domingo, November, 1533. *Reports on the Discovery of Peru*. Edited and translated by Clements R. Markham. London: Hakluyt Society, 1872. This letter can also be found online at http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Pizarro.html (accessed on November 4, 2004).