

Quito ★ Pasto

The Chaski



Official Messengers of
the Inka Empire



The Great Inka Road: Engineering an Empire

A Guide for Teachers | Grades 4-12

Santiago ★

NATIONAL
MUSEUM
OF THE
AMERICAN
INDIAN


EDUCATION OFFICE



Above: A paved stretch of Inka road through the upper Amazon. Near Chachapoyas, Peru, 2014. Photo by Inge Schjellerup

Left: A llama caravan carrying salt from the altiplano to exchange for maize in Bolivia's Tarija Valley. Altiplano de Sama, Tarija, Bolivia, 1995. Photo by Axel E. Nielsen

Map by Daniel G. Cole, Smithsonian Institution, and Nancy Bratton Design with core data from ESRI and NaturalEarth. © 2015 Smithsonian Institution



Why would the Inka build such a large road system?

The Inka controlled a huge empire that ran from Colombia to Chile. The road system stretched through the Inka Empire for a total of 40,000 kilometers, or 25,000 miles. Not only was it the longest road system of the 1500s, but it was the best organized.

The road was essential in order to move people, food, armies, and information across Inka lands. The Inka expanded the roads of previous indigenous cultures and engineered them into the complex and sophisticated system that we know today as the Great Inka Road.

The Inka Road connected the four *suyus*, or regions, of the empire. The road linked people in these regions to new and unique environments and resources. As the empire expanded, the road provided

security, goods, and services to the people, who in turn gave the empire the labor it needed. This reciprocity, a core value of the Andean people, is known as *ayni*.

Ayni, or the act of giving back, was also practiced through a kind of taxation (*mit'a*) of the people by requiring them to build roads, construct buildings, make textiles and pottery, and farm. In reciprocity for their service to the state they received access to a wide range of goods, such as food and raw materials.

The road was used only for official state business. Runners, or *chaskis*, carrying official messages; llama caravans moving corn, potatoes, and cotton; soldiers on military duty; and even the ruler—all traveled on the Inka Road.



What is a chaski?

Chaskis were short-distance relay runners who delivered official messages and sometimes small parcels throughout the empire. Young men, especially those with superior running skills, were chosen for this occupation. Because the Inka had no written language, messages were memorized and repeated to the next runner during the relay. It was essential that messages be delivered accurately.

Runners were selected through the *mit'a* system. Chaskis began training at an early age under strict living conditions. Their job was considered so important that they were exempt from other *mit'a*, or work-based “taxes,” such as farming or mining.

Runners traveled 10 to 15 kilometers (6 to 9 miles) until they reached a *chaskiwasi*, a small house where another chaski was waiting to run the next segment of the relay. Each chaski carried a small personal bag with light-weight objects such as a *kipu* (an accounting system made up of hand-tied knots) and a shell trumpet. Sometimes the runners



A chaski. Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala (Quechua, 1535–1616). Pen and ink drawing published in *The First New Chronical and Good Government* (1615). Royal Library, Copenhagen GKS 2232 4°

carried special goods in their bags for Inka royalty, such as fresh fish or *mullu* (spiny oyster).

As a runner approached a chaskiwasi, he sounded his shell trumpet to alert the next runner that he was close. When the runners met, goods, khipu, and other verbal messages were exchanged before the next runner left. In this way, 25 runners could cover about 240 kilometers (150 miles) in one day. They could travel the distance between Quito and Cusco, about 2,000 kilometers (1,250 miles), in a week. This communication system was vital in keeping the government linked to the entire empire.



Focused Looking Activity

Examine the Sandals



Ask your students “how do they compare to your sandals?”

Every chaski wore sandals. How are they made? What are they made from? Why are they made this way? Are there any designs? How were they worn? Why would you need sandals? How did they fasten? Look for other sandals like this in the exhibit. Do they look the same? Different?

*Inka sandals, ca.
AD 1450–1532
Cusco Region, Peru
Plant fiber
11/363
Photo by Ernest
Amoroso, NMAI, 2014*



What is a khipu?

The Inka developed a system of record-keeping called khipu. Khipus consisted of knotted cotton and alpaca fiber twisted into strings, which hung vertically from a single horizontal string or wooden bar. Inka administrators tied knots in the strings to keep track of activities needed to run the empire. The khipus served as records of this information. This sophisticated system allowed the Inka to keep accurate records for the entire empire.

Khipu knots had other uses as well. They recorded historical information, ceremonies, stories, and may have served as calendars, too.

The best-known use of khipus was for accounting purposes. A series of knots tied at different places along the vertical strings represented numbers into the thousands. They recorded such things as the amount of corn in a *colca* (a storage house), the number of households in a village, and how many llamas were traveling on the Inka Road. Some khipus were very complex and included hundreds of cords and knots.



A khipucamayuc. Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala (Quechua, 1535–1616). Pen and ink drawing published in *The First New Chronical and Good Government* (1615). Royal Library, Copenhagen GKS 2232 4°

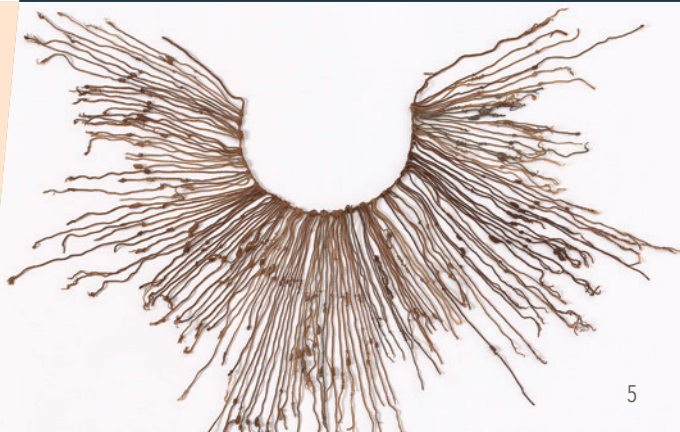
Chaskis were trained in tying and interpreting the khipu knots, but specialists known as *kipucamayucs* had a much fuller understanding of the system. Khipucamayucs received four years of training to learn to tie the knots, read and interpret khipus, and maintain a khipu archive.

These administrators were placed in every community in proportion to the population. However, even the smallest community had at least four khipucamayucs.



We invite you to stop by the **Run The Chaski Relay** game and the **Read a Khipu!** interactive during your visit to **The Great Inka Road: Engineering an Empire.** Have fun learning more about the important role the chaskis and khipus played in the Inka Empire.

*Inka khipu, ca. AD
1400–1600
Nazca Region, Peru
Cotton, alpaca fiber
17/8825
Photo by Ernest
Amoroso, NMAL, 2014*



To Learn More About:



Chaski

CHASQI RUNNERS

<http://incaencyclopediac.pbworks.com/w/page/21051595/Chasqi%20Runners>

THE CHASQUI - ATHLETE OF THE ANDES

<https://suite.io/brenda-ralph-lewis/2q6w22j>

Inka

THE INCA ROAD SYSTEM

<http://www.historyofinformation.com/expanded.php?id=2639>

PBS: NOVA - RISE OF THE INCA

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/ancient/inca-empire.html>

Khipus

KHIPU DATABASE PROJECT

<http://khipukamayuc.fas.harvard.edu/>

CRACKING THE KHIPU CODE

<http://www.charlesmann.org/articles/Khipu-Science.pdf>

KHIPUS: A UNIQUE HUAROCHIRI LEGACY

<http://www.anthropology.wisc.edu/salomon/chaysimire/khipus.php>

STRING, AND KNOT, THEORY OF INCA WRITING

<http://www.ee.ryerson.ca/~elf/abacus/inca-khipu.html>

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