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 lightweight objects such as a khipu (an accounting system made up of hand-tied knots) and a shell trumpet. Sometimes the runners
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.
Chaskis were trained in tying and interpreting the khipu knots, but specialists known as khipucamayucs 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.
To Learn More About:

**Chaski**

CHASQI RUNNERS  
http://incaencyclopediac.pbworks.com/w/page/21051595/Chasqis%20Runners

THE CHASQUI – ATHLETE OF THE ANDES  
https://suite.io/brenda-ralph-lewis/2q6w22j

**Inka**

THE INCA ROAD SYSTEM  

PBS: NOVA – RISE OF THE INCA  
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/ancient/inca-empire.html

**Khipus**

KHIPU DATABASE PROJECT  
http://khipukamayuq.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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