



Rethinking imperial infrastructure: A bottom-up perspective on the Inca Road



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ABSTRACT

The Inca road has been the iconic example of imperial infrastructure in the prehispanic Andes. However, scholarly attention to its role in expanding and consolidating the Inca domain has overshadowed analysis of how locals may have appropriated the Inca road for their own private benefit. Based on a full-coverage survey and excavations, this article presents the case of small mining communities along the Inca road and the use they made of it. I argue that they most likely leveraged on emerging imperial infrastructure, in order to expand their existing lapidary and pigment production and exchange in the Atacama desert. The Inca Road may thus have served as an unintended stimuli for local economic activities, since it improved transportation logistics, and served as a linear exchange nexus. I further demonstrate how the Inca Road was, to some extent, appropriated to serve local economic purposes. This provides a unique “bottom-up” perspective of how the Inca infrastructure could not be fully controlled by the elites. Thus, the “imperial landscape” created by the Inca Road was more permeable than what the Incas expected and scholars have assumed, despite the physical or ideological coercion elites may have enforced.

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1. Introduction

The famous Qhapaq Ñan or Inca Road is commonly viewed as a “vast network for the acquisition, management, movement, and protection of labor” (Hyslop, 1984: 247), becoming “the omnipresent symbol of the empire throughout the Andes” (Hyslop, 1990: xiii). Despite its major role in consolidating political control for the growing empire, we know little about local and non-imperial uses of the Road in the past. Considering the far-flung multi-ethnic landscape that the road traversed, this article presents evidence to argue that it is very likely that independent individuals used the Inca Road for their private purposes in ways that were unknown to, and unintended by, state authorities. People living in the imperial provinces may have interacted with the Inca Road autonomously, appropriating this infrastructure for themselves, in ways that did not contribute to consolidating the expansion of the empire. Thus, the main argument of this article is that the Atacama Inca Road did not only serve as a highway servicing Inca imperial needs, as in the standard current understanding of the Inca Road’s function. Instead, I contend that the Inca Road also

served non-state purposes, such as a linear exchange nexus for surrounding local populations.

This view challenges an implicit assumption in many studies of the effects of Inca conquest, where subject households or communities are presented as economically passive. In cases such as the classic Upper Mantaro Valley Project, the Inca conquest effectively produced intensification of production in textile and agriculture of local populations, where previous domestic patterns of production remained basically unchanged (D’Altroy, 2002a; Earle, 2002). Instead, this article provides evidence for other possibilities, where households or small corporate units can act as independent economic agents in their own right, taking advantage of shifts in an overarching economic setting that arise from political conquest (Douglass, 2002; Gonlin, 2012; Falconer, 1995; Hendon, 1996; Hirth, 2009; Netting, 1993; Wilk, 1989). These changes, then, are autochthonous or ‘grass roots’, dictated more by possibilities in local domestic economy than by imperial political economy. Such changes, however, may still be stimulated, or shaped, by the overarching imperial system, perhaps in unanticipated ways. A wealth of studies of households in ancient Mesoamerica document precisely these behaviors (Clark and Blake, 1994; Earle and Smith, 2012; Feinman and Nicholas, 2004; Feinman et al., 1984; Marcus, 2006; Smith and Heath-Smith, 1994; Smith et al., 2003; Hirth, 1998, 2010). The lack of interest in entrepreneurial-type household economic change is due chiefly to the long-standing conviction

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that there was “no market” in the prehispanic Andes (cf. Mayer, 2013). In contrast to this classic view of the Inca conquest, new perspectives point to the diversity of household economies in the Inca empire. For example, scholars have shown that the lack of modern market behavior practices in the late prehispanic Andes did not preclude forms of barter at the household level (Gallardo, 2013; Murra, 1980, 1995; Stanish, 2010; Stanish and Coben, 2013; Stark and Garraty, 2010). Additionally, a few Inca scholars have been willing to recognize “entrepreneurial” activity at the margins of the empire (Martin, 2010; Murra, 1980, 1995; Salomon, 1986; Rostworowski, 1989). Consequently, this article’s example of small scale mining in the Atacama desert has the heuristic value of showing such local entrepreneurial response to change in economic conditions resulting from the Inca conquest. This can serve as a complementary and alternative interpretation to the traditional top-down labor taxation model. Together, these suggest a different scenario for bottom level provisioning for Inca subjects.

To support this “bottom-up” perspective, I explore the relationship between the Inca Road and a recently discovered, non-Inca but contemporaneous system of mining camps, isolated deep in the Atacama Desert, northern Chile. The core of the archaeological analysis is based on an empirical and contextual assessment of the materials actually moving along a section of the Inca Road. This article examines how non-Inca mining camps oriented to the production of greenstone beads and red pigment production, which had already existed prior to the Late Horizon, took advantage of new opportunities offered by the Inca Road. The data generated on domestic and craft activities, and on local and long distance exchange, contributes to our understanding of the scope of how local people responded to imperial hegemony. Local interaction with the Inca Road may represent “bottom-up” responses to contact with the new institutions and infrastructure of the overarching imperial system. While less prominent than centrally-directed economic enterprises, these responses constitute and significantly shape collective trends of economic strategies at the local household and community levels.

2. Current view of the Inca Road

Spread across more than 30,000 km from Colombia to Central Chile, the Inca Road was the most extensive infrastructure for the administration of Inca empire. It consisted of multiple routes that were connected by a series of nodal sites, for the control of traffic and provisioning of food, water, and lodging for official travelers. For Julien (2012: 147), the Inca Road was an “important structuring feature of an initial form of imperial administration”. Other scholars have observed how it also served to support the army (D’Altroy, 1992, 2015; Earle, 2009), enabled the management of staple and wealth finance (Jenkins, 2001), and facilitated the promotion of state ideology and ritual (Astuhamán, 2004; Castro et al., 2004; Vitry, 2007; Stehberg, 1995). These examples point to the predominant perspective on the Inca Road, where its relevance is largely viewed in terms of the intentions of Inca authorities. This perspective overlooks the actual consequences and effects that the Road may have had over the empire’s subordinate subjects in conquered territories.

Hyslop’s (1984) landmark monograph remains the interpretive and methodological touchstone for archaeological approaches to the Inca Road system. Subsequent research has extended his point-to-point tracing of segments of the road while producing an inventory of the kinds of features (apachetas), sites (tampu, chaskiwasi), and structures (kallanka, colcas, corrals) along it (Berenguer et al., 2005; Castro et al., 2004; INC, 2005–2009, volumes 1–8; Stehberg, 1995; Vitry, 2000). Hyslop’s discussion of

the variety of traffic on the road was limited to a single paragraph (1984: 254), and his emphasis on the Inca Road’s use for state-related business continues to inform current scholarship: “Soldiers, porters, and llama caravans were prime users, as were the nobility and other individuals on official duty... Other subjects were allowed to walk along the roads only with permission...” (D’Altroy, 2002b: 243). But Hyslop himself recognized the importance of investigating other dimensions of road usage, noting that, “there was also an undetermined amount of private traffic... about which little is known” (Hyslop, 1984: 254). A ubiquitous feature of the Inca Road system is the informal (non-Inca) roadside structures that may or may not be associated with official tambos or tampu. These can be seen in the Hyslop plan of Ranchillos, where over 80 small circular or comma shaped structures occur alongside and behind formal Inca canchas (1984: 198). In a survey of the Inca Road from Morohuasi to Salta, Vitry (2000) recorded such structures at 7 of 15 roadside sites, including El Cardonal (with 45 such structures). These structures are sometimes viewed as “overflow” housing for travelers when tambo and other official facilities are full, or as storage spaces to support tambos and similar installations. Archaeologically, however, these buildings have received much less empirical and theoretical attention than formal tambos.

To summarize, most of the archaeological evidence related to local activities or non-Inca infrastructure on the Inca Road has generally been regarded as irrelevant to describing the road’s administrative functions. Beyond the description of the primary functions of the road, there has not been specific studies in relation to the effects of the Inca Road on roadside populations and settlements. Such a study can illuminate the nature and extent of changes in local economic patterns and behavior. Despite general assumptions that local and dispersed populations were completely integrated into the Inca empire due to its impressive administrative and organizational capacities, there are still no empirical examples of how the presence of the Inca Road may have affected by local agents and their economic activities, or vice versa.

2.1. Ethnohistorical narratives about the Inca Road infrastructure and usage

Ethnohistorical accounts have been highly influential in shaping the current archaeological perspective of the official uses and top-down control of the Inca Road. These tend to emphasize the authority of the Inca rulers and their power to oversee everything under their domains. Guaman Poma de Ayala (1980), Martín de Murúa (2001), and Garcilaso de la Vega (1991) emphasize the presence of imperial infrastructure on the Inca royal roads where lodging posts for state officials and chasqui messengers were ubiquitous across the empire. Royal officials such as the “*tocricoc*” would have been in charge of the cleanliness and maintenance of the roads. They also mention that the Incas took special care to build roads with a standard width, and locals expressed respect and admiration for them, especially when bridges had to be built.

The imperial ubiquitous lodging posts were evenly spaced out and well-provisioned. These would have kept food, clothes, and weapons ready for the Inca armies that marched across the empire (de la Vega, 1991). These posts are also reflected in the hierarchy of “*mesones*”, “*tambos*” and “*tambillos*” that Poma de Ayala used to describe the official infrastructure present along the imperial roads. Garcilaso explicitly stated that commoners were not permitted to walk on the road, except unless they were sent by the Inca rulers or their local chiefs or curacas (de la Vega, 1991: 231–232). For these walkers on duty, there were special lodging posts called “*corpahuaci*”, which would have had a different function from the aforementioned tambos. Beyond the organization and grandiosity of the Inca road, the only factor disrupting official traf-

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