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# Kinship and the Inca imperial core: Multiscalar archaeological patterns in the Sacred Valley (Cuzco, Peru)



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## ABSTRACT

Archaeological interpretations of the capital region of ancient empires often rely on documentary sources and assume the existence of a highly integrated and institutionalized state polity.

A multiscalar archaeological study of the imperial heartland of the Inca empire (c. 1400–1530s) reveals variable manifestations in Inca power from the period of local expansion until the European invasions of the 1530s. Large-scale patterning from numerous regional surveys identifies variations in pre-Inca and Inca settlement patterns and the distribution of Inca architecture and pottery. More intensive analyses from the Sacred Valley, a study region lying immediately to the north of the Inca capital, reveal additional patterns of interaction that contrast early Inca expansion practices with later generations of royal estate development. Excavations from domestic and public buildings at the large upland village of Pukara Pantillijilla indicate limited Inca efforts to incorporate local horticulturalists and herders within their existing villages. The variability of Inca power in the Sacred Valley and the kin-based nature of the institutional forces transforming valley-bottom farming areas draw attention to the prevalent role of Inca elite kinship practices for state formation and institutional development.

These observations raise important questions about the role of kinship in other non-Western states and empires.

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## 1. Introduction

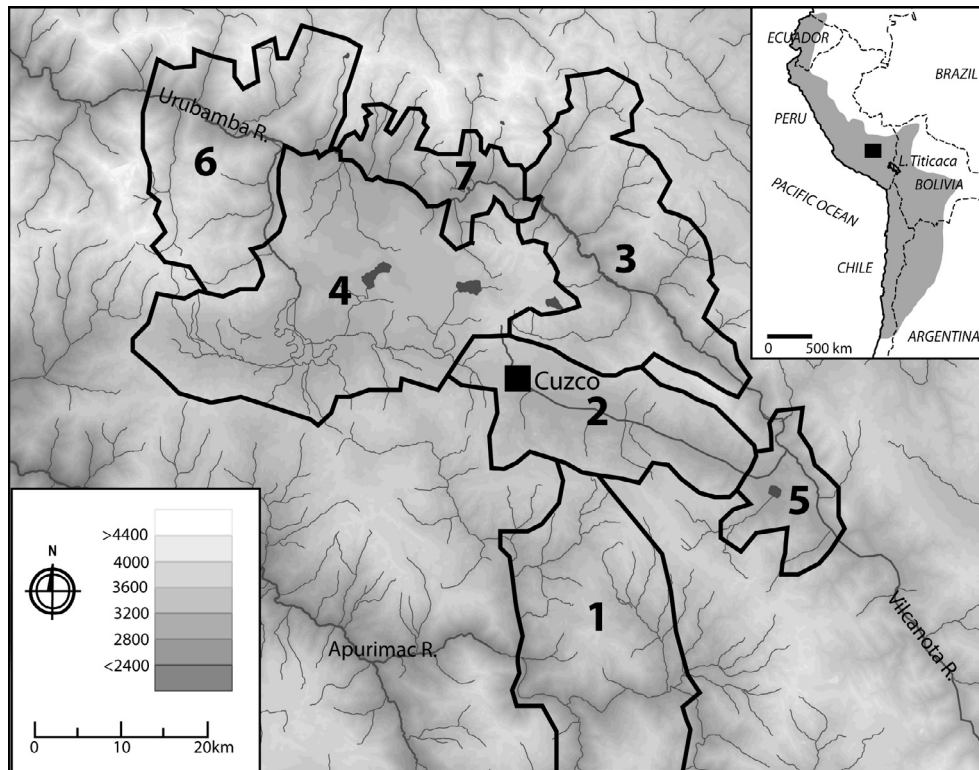
Most archaeological definitions of empire focus on the exercise of state power over a periphery, emphasizing the ethnic diversity and variable administrative practices of large expansionist states. As archaeological data accumulate for provincial and frontier regions, the organization of the imperial core holds unfulfilled potential for theoretical reconsideration. Studies focused on the provinces rarely problematize the development of the capital region, and with few exceptions (e.g., [Sinopoli and Morrison, 2007](#)), the archaeology of imperial capitals and their rural hinterlands is so patchy that scholars must lean heavily on the documentary record to reconstruct the core. In the absence of a clear set of theoretical expectations regarding the development of statecraft in the imperial center, many archaeologists seem content to treat the core state as more politically integrated, militarily powerful, and ethnically unified than the areas that it is able to dominate. Such expectations seem reasonable—especially when refracted through conceptual models developed in other disciplines to study historical empires and the emergence of modern nation-states—but

without reference to independent material evidence, they limit the interpretive power of the archaeological record.

This paper presents multiscalar archaeological data from the Cuzco region of highland Peru, to discuss the transformation of the Inca heartland during a period of early state expansion (c. 1200–1400 CE) and imperial growth and consolidation (c. 1400–1535 CE) ([Fig. 1](#)).

Like many former imperial capitals, Cuzco's modern urban occupation constrains archaeological investigation, although architectural studies and test excavations offer some important information about the Inca city ([Farrington, 2013](#)). Almost 30 years of survey research have employed consistent field methods to generate settlement pattern data from a large region (nearly 2500 km<sup>2</sup>) that includes Cuzco, its metropolitan region, and a wide range of farming and herding landscapes surrounding the capital (e.g., [Bauer, 1992, 2004](#); [Covey, 2006](#); [Covey et al., 2008](#); [Kosiba, 2010](#); cf. [Kendall, 1985](#)). These surveys registered approximately 1000 sites dating from the period of Inca state formation, as well as more than 1500 sites with Inca imperial pottery. Regional survey work in the Sacred Valley to the north of Cuzco led to horizontal excavations in local households and public buildings at the site of Pukara Pantillijilla in 2000. Archaeological data from multiple scales of analysis reveal patterns in the distribution of Inca-style

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**Fig. 1.** Systematic archaeological surveys in the Cuzco region include (1) Bauer's Paruro survey (1984–1987), (2) Bauer's Cuzco Valley survey (1997–1999), (3) Covey and Yépez's Sacred Valley survey (2000), (4) Covey and Yépez's Xaquixaguana survey (2004–2006), (5) Bauer and Araóz Silva's Oropesa-Andahuailillas survey (2006), (6) Kosiba and Galiano Blanco's Wat'a survey (2005–2006), and (7) Covey et al.'s Calca-Yanahuara survey (2007). All projects used the same basic field methods.

architecture and artifacts that challenge theoretical expectations of a highly unified and institutionalized state apparatus in the Inca heartland. Building on the data presented in this paper, it is possible to consider how particular kinship practices of Inca elites served as the basis for the institutional organization of the empire, raising the question of how kin groups interacted with institutions and offices in other ancient states and empires.

## 2. Inca ethnohistory and archaeological study of imperial canons

Oral histories given by Inca nobles shortly after the European invasion discuss networks of Inca power in the Cuzco region (e.g., Betanzos, 1999 [1550s]; Cieza de León, 1988 [c. 1553]),<sup>1</sup> and later sources describe an ethnic heartland surrounding the capital that can be treated as roughly analogous to an imperial core (e.g., Covey, 2006: 208–212). Independent archaeological data are needed to evaluate the Colonial chronicles, which offer conflicting accounts of the antiquity of the Inca heartland, as well as the degree to which Inca rulers maintained consistent practices of state administration across the capital region. According to the earliest detailed accounts, Inca rule at the local level was explicitly linked to political and ritual encounters occurring in the city of Cuzco, which possessed public spaces and structures necessary for performing interactions that perpetuated state ideological and economic power. Inca rulers had the power to summon their subjects to the capital, where they received orders and celebrated royal reciprocity in the form of public festivals and gifts of fine cloth and other craft goods. Inca elites also

articulated different kinds of power into Cuzco's rural hinterland, and the remains of architecture and pottery offer different perspectives on the processes whereby this occurred.

### 2.1. Architectural elements

Early chroniclers describe several Inca institutions and elite architecture in Cuzco (Table 1), as well as their expected distributions within the Inca heartland. Although ideal Inca forms presume specific construction materials, aesthetic features, and compound layouts (e.g., Gasparini and Margolies, 1980; Hyslop, 1990), deviation from these templates is to be expected, which provides a relative measure of state affiliation during construction and refurbishment of a structure (Fig. 2).

According to Colonial writers, the city of Cuzco contained large public spaces used for political functions, which local towns and villages apparently lacked. Inca plazas, especially the Awkaypata plaza in the center of Cuzco, also served as spaces for festive and ritual performances that integrated with activities in the sun temple and *aqllawasi* (a cloister for female ritual specialists), complexes that were reportedly not built elsewhere in the capital region. Inca political and ideological power emphasized centripetal forces drawing subjects to Cuzco, rather than the replication of particular spaces and structures at lower-order administrative sites or local population centers. A state-developed road network linking Cuzco to provincial areas traversed some rural areas of the imperial core (e.g., Covey, 2013). Although Inca roads and way stations (*tampu*) helped to convey provincial people and resources to the capital, they were not the basis for administering most local populations. In the case of supernatural entities that were situated in local landscapes, Inca rulers sometimes summoned their portable avatars to Cuzco or dispatched gifts and offerings that they had accumulated in Cuzco; but they also shaped

<sup>1</sup> This article uses Mann's (1986) designation of multiple sources of social power as the basis for a network-based approach that identifies multiple kinds of power distributed regionally in ways that do not expect monopolization by state institutions or individuals.

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