

1438 – 1533

Inca Empire Timeline

The Inca Empire was the largest empire in the pre-Columbian Americas, stretching along the western coast of South America from Colombia to Chile, governed from the mountain capital of Cusco.

~1200 Inca Settle in Cusco

According to Inca tradition, Manco Capac and Mama Ocllo, children of the sun god Inti, lead the Inca people to the valley of Cusco in the Andes of present-day Peru.

> **Why it mattered:** *Cusco, which the Inca saw as the center of their world, became the sacred heart of an empire that would eventually stretch more than two thousand miles along South America.*

1438 Pachacuti Begins Conquest

Pachacuti defeats an invasion by the rival Chanka people and transforms the Inca from a small regional kingdom into an expansionist empire.

> **Why it mattered:** *Pachacuti is considered the true founder of the Inca Empire — he reorganized government, redesigned Cusco, began building Machu Picchu, and launched the conquests that made the Inca the dominant power in South America.*

~1450 ○ **Machu Picchu Built**

The Inca construct a royal estate and religious site at Machu Picchu, high in the Andes at nearly 8,000 feet above sea level.

> **Why it mattered:** *Machu Picchu was built without wheels or iron tools, and its finest stone blocks fit so tightly that no mortar was needed; still standing today, they show the extraordinary engineering mastery of Inca builders.*

~1460 ○ **The Inca Road Network**

The Inca expand and link older roads into a network of nearly 25,000 miles connecting Cusco to the far corners of the empire, including rope bridges across Andean gorges.

> **Why it mattered:** *The road network was one of the great engineering achievements of its time, allowing armies, officials, goods, and relay runners carrying messages to move rapidly across some of the most difficult terrain on Earth.*

~1470 ○ **Conquest of the Chimu**

The Inca conquer the powerful Chimu Kingdom on the Pacific coast, adding thousands of skilled artisans and a sophisticated irrigation system to the empire.

> **Why it mattered:** *Absorbing the Chimu gave the Inca access to advanced goldsmithing, textile weaving, and administrative knowledge that strengthened and enriched the empire.*

~1500 ○ **Empire at Its Height**

The Tawantinsuyu — the Four Quarters of the World — stretches from modern-day Colombia to central Chile, containing an estimated 10 to 12 million people.

> **Why it mattered:** *The Inca governed this vast empire without an alphabet, using knotted strings called quipus to record census data, tribute payments, and possibly historical accounts.*

~1527

Smallpox and Civil War

An epidemic, probably smallpox, spreads ahead of the Spanish and kills the Inca emperor Huayna Capac; his sons Huascar and Atahualpa later fight a devastating civil war for control.

> **Why it mattered:** *The civil war killed thousands and left the empire bitterly divided — a catastrophic weakening at precisely the moment when outside threats were arriving.*

1532

Pizarro Captures Atahualpa

Francisco Pizarro meets Atahualpa at Cajamarca with 168 soldiers and ambushes him; thousands of Atahualpa's mostly unarmed followers are killed and Atahualpa is captured.

> **Why it mattered:** *Pizarro's ambush — using guns, horses, and steel against people who had never faced any of them in battle — was one of the most decisive military surprises in history.*

1533

Execution of Atahualpa

After the Inca fill a room with gold and silver as ransom, Pizarro executes Atahualpa anyway and moves to occupy the capital Cusco.

> **Why it mattered:** *With the emperor dead and the capital occupied, the Inca Empire lost its organizing center — though Inca resistance continued for decades in remote mountain strongholds.*

1533

Fall of the Inca Empire

Spanish forces seize Cusco; the Inca Empire effectively ends, though the last Inca resistance holds out in the mountains until 1572.

> **Why it mattered:** *An epidemic had already swept through the empire before Pizarro arrived. The combination of disease, civil war, and Spanish conquest destroyed one of the world's most remarkable empires in less than a decade.*