Pachacuti: Inca Emperor

Pachacuti was the founder of the Inca Empire. He ruled a large area of South America and unified the many peoples under his control.

Pachacuti was the ninth ruler of the Inca. According to legend, his ancestors originated in a cave not far from what is now Cuzco, Peru. There were four brothers and four sisters. Their father was the Sun God. One of the sons, Manco Capac, managed to wall up one of his brothers in the cave. His other two brothers turned to stone. This left Manco to become the first Incan ruler. He led ten family groups to the fertile Cuzco Valley, where they drove out the people living there. For the next 200 years, the Inca often fought with neighboring peoples. Yet, their expansion was barely noticeable. The area they controlled extended no farther than about 25 miles from Cuzco.

Like Manco Capac, Pachacuti took control of matters in order to become a ruler. According to custom, his older brother, Urcon, was to be the next emperor. But Cuzco was attacked by the Chancas during the reign of their father, Viracocha. The Chancas were a people from the west.
Because the Chancas appeared to be winning, Viracocha and Urcon fled to the mountains. Pachacuti stayed to fight. He rallied Incan troops and defeated the invaders. Then he saw his opportunity. While Viracocha and Urcon were still in hiding, Pachacuti seized the throne. The year was 1438.

**Building an Empire**
Pachacuti set out to build an empire. He developed a careful plan to unite the many peoples of the region under his rule. First, he defeated small independent areas. Next, he turned his attention to the larger areas. His military campaigns ranged from the Amazon forests to the northern highlands. He conquered tribes in the valleys and on the plateaus. Eventually, Pachacuti controlled about one-third of South America. Force was actually Pachacuti’s last resort. Diplomacy was his first. Before sending soldiers to subdue a state, Pachacuti sent ambassadors. Their job was to present the advantages of joining the Inca empire. Under the empire’s guidance, local rulers would continue to rule. Their people would have religious freedom, as long as they caused no trouble. All citizens, rich and poor, would enjoy the protection and prosperity of the empire. The ambassadors also pointed out that refusing to join would lead to death or imprisonment. Many chose to join rather than resist.

**Creating Unity**
Pachacuti was a brilliant statesman who unified many different peoples. He imposed a common language—Quechua, the Incan language. Quechua was first spread by Pachacuti’s armies. Then it was taught to chiefs and to
young people throughout the empire. Another unifying policy was the *mitima*. In areas taken by force, groups of hostile people were moved to another part of the empire. Loyal Incan citizens replaced them. Although hostile groups were uprooted, they often had better irrigation systems and other improved living conditions in their new home.

The Inca, like the Romans, were skilled engineers. Under Pachacuti, they improved and expanded the existing road system. They built roads to suit the landscape. In swampy areas, roads were built on viaducts. Tunnels were sometimes cut through mountains. Suspension bridges allowed travelers to cross ravines. Way stations offered accommodations for soldiers and officials of the empire. Roads were often narrow, since everyone traveled on foot. The wheel was unknown to the Inca people.

The Incan communication system also helped to unify the Empire. The Inca had no written language. Messengers called *chasquis* were trained to memorize messages. They were stationed along major roads about one to two miles apart. A *chasqui* would run to a relay station, where a second *chasqui* would run with him long enough to memorize the message. Then he would run to the next station, where the process would be repeated. This network covered the entire empire. Messages traveled at an estimated 140 miles per day, often over difficult terrain. The system was especially useful for letting the military know of possible uprisings or attacks.

**Cuzco and Machu Picchu**
Pachacuti was a builder at heart. Toward the end of his reign, he worked to turn Cuzco into a grand capital city. He was largely responsible for laying out the city’s plan. A visitor to Pachacuti’s Cuzco described it as being “grand and stately . . . with fine streets . . . and houses . . . built of solid stones, beautifully joined.” Temples and public buildings were arranged around a large central square. Some temples and royal buildings were covered with sheets of gold. Small clusters of homes surrounded the city.

Machu Picchu also shows Pachacuti’s passion for building. Since its discovery by archaeologists in 1911, scholars have tried to figure out how Machu Picchu was used. Machu Picchu was built high in the Andes Mountains and is difficult to reach. This would seem to rule out its use as a military, governmental, or business center.

One recent theory suggests that Machu Picchu was Pachacuti’s summer retreat. The journey from Cuzco, the Inca capital and home of the emperor, to Machu Picchu would have taken about three days. Craftspeople, servants, and state administrators would most certainly have journeyed with the emperor. Present day researcher Richard Burger suggests that “Pachacuti may well have picked out the site simply because it was so beautiful.” Located 2000 feet above the Urubamba River Valley, Machu Picchu offers spectacular views. According to Burger, the Inca had a special appreciation for mountain scenery. Machu Picchu was built on 100 acres between 1460 and 1470. Some buildings appear to have been shrines. A series
of upright stones may have marked "resting places" for the sun as it crossed the sky. This would be in keeping with Inca worship of the sun. Machu Picchu is the most completely preserved of the Inca cities that remain.

a. How did Pachacuti become emperor?
b. What methods did Pachacuti use to establish his empire?
c. According to a recent theory, why was Machu Picchu was built?
d. How did Pachacuti's policy of mitima serve to strengthen the empire?
e. What means did Pachacuti use to unify the empire?
f. Why is Machu Picchu important to archaeologists?