

## The Oxford Handbook of the Incas. Sonia Alconini & R. Alan Covey, editors [book review]

By: [Donna J. Nash](#)

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### **Abstract:**

In *The Oxford Handbook of the Incas*, Alconini and Covey bring together perspectives from archaeologists, art historians, and historians to present current understandings of the Inca Empire and its long-term legacy. The volume is divided into eight sections, each with a capstone chapter by the editors. The first six parts are devoted to the Inca era or preceding developments. The last two examine the colonial transition and the roles current concepts about the Inca play in recent sociopolitics. Unfortunately, I cannot review all the chapters, but I highlight the novel information presented in the volume, especially the importance of ritual and mytho-history as an imperial strategy.

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### **Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

For example, the southern part of the city may have been occupied by wealthier households, including Ajaw Kan Ek's palace. Pottery making and butchering may have occurred in the northern sections of the island. The city was dominated by a radial main temple or *castillo* similar in plan to, but much smaller than, the main temples at Chich'en Itza and Mayapán. The final chapter is devoted to the styles and motifs of the decorated pottery of the Central Peten Lakes region, where the distinction between the Itzas and Kowoj is again made evident in that the Itzas preferred a banded decorative style, while the Kowoj developed a distributive (or allover) style.

The volume concludes with a chapter in part VI summarizing the main thrust of the book, that the Itza as an ethnief took form in the troubled times of the Epiclassic in Petén, then migrated north, and later returned to the Central Petén Lakes. The Itza ethnief was not monolithic, but factionalized into at least two major groups, the Itza and the Kowoj. Both of these groups can now be recognized archaeologically through their material signatures. I cannot overstate the important contributions made by this volume based on almost five decades of investigations carried out by the authors. Before the 1990s, the Petén Itzas were a poorly known group dominating the Central Petén Lakes region. Now, we can speak about factionalism, ethnies/identities, migrations, and even what Nojpeten/Tayza looked like.

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*The Oxford Handbook of the Incas.* Sonia Alconini and R. Alan Covey, eds.  
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In *The Oxford Handbook of the Incas*, Alconini and Covey bring together perspectives from archaeologists, art historians, and historians to present current understandings of the Inca Empire and its long-term legacy. The volume is divided into eight sections, each with a capstone chapter by the editors. The first six parts are devoted to the Inca era or preceding developments. The last two examine the colonial transition and the roles current concepts about the Inca play in recent sociopolitics. Unfortunately, I cannot review all the chapters, but I highlight the novel information presented in the volume, especially the importance of ritual and mytho-history as an imperial strategy.

The *Handbook* does not present a single vision of the Inca polity. Some downplay the extent of Inca control over resistant subaltern communities, while most describe dramatic transformations and major impacts on subjects and how these varied depending on the province, the imperial institutions brought to bear, or the degree of local cooperation. The latter perspective is accompanied by multiple lines of archaeological

evidence, which is now overwhelming in some regions (e.g., Acuto and Leibowicz; Alconini; Gyarmati and Condarco; Santoro and Uribe) but still being collected in others (Bray and Echeverría; Lee; Ogburn; Schjellerup). Regionalized provincial data are bolstered by evidence of the widespread infiltration of Inca institutions, such as the quipu as an administrative device (Urton), the imposition of sumptuary rules controlling the production of precious metals (Zori) and their use (Ziółkowski), and as many authors discuss, the imposition of new rituals and revised mytho-histories.

Material remains often substantiate elements of ethnohistory with regard to economic developments, but growing evidence suggests Inca mytho-history was refashioned through time. The Inca may have composed “histories” that legitimated their control over subject groups. Ceremonial centers could be designed to perform rituals that enacted these stories before imperial subjects. Coben’s study discusses the importance of “other Cuscos,” ceremonial centers that recreated the salient features of the mythical landscape of the empire’s capital. Sites were selected with similar topography and renamed accordingly. Built in several provinces of the empire, these complexes allowed Inca rituals to be performed in a suitable setting. In Coben’s view, these provincial ceremonial centers permitted conquered, cooperating elites to participate in some Inca ritual without exposing them to the core’s fractious factional politics.

Mytho-history also ascribed local origins to shrines of Inca origin. This appears to have been the case at Pachacamac, which was transformed under the Inca and may have been dedicated to Ychma, a regional superhuman, not Pachacamac as it was when the Europeans arrived (Eeckhout and López-Hurtado). Chase includes Pachacamac as an example in his description of the process by which a local cosmo-topography is overlaid with an imperial vision to create a “local-imperial landscape.” He suggests that “magnification” may occur where smaller, regional shrines took on a grander profile under the Inca. Also, new cults were introduced as ancestor shrines to provide migrants with an “invented history.” This latter phenomenon seems to have taken place at the site of Pueblo Viejo Pucara in the Lurin Valley and at Llacsatambo, presumably occupied by a group whose rituals and beliefs are described in the Huarochiri Manuscript. Chase also connects this imperial strategy with the Inka heartland, where Kosiba’s research at Huanacauri (in *Perspectives on the Inca*, edited by Monica Barnes et al., Tribus: Jarbuch des Linden-Museums, pp. 178–205, 2015) suggests it was not a pre-imperial site as Inca origin myths describe, but a later addition dating to the imperial phase. Coopting and embellishing preexisting sacred sites (Mignone; Troncoso; Yaeger and López Bejarano) and inventing mytho-history to narrate “local-imperial” landscapes were also widespread strategies in the Inca Empire.

The invention of “tradition” was not confined to the Inca era; Wernke’s (p. 703) narrative of the coproduction of ritual and “syncretized Catholic doctrine” in the early colonial era echoes the processes described by Chase. Salazar and Burger provide more recent examples with the development of the reenactment of Inti Raymi at Sacsayhuaman and the “reinvention of Machu Picchu” as an internationally recognized “wonder of the world.” Their story and Chase’s description of Llacsatambo

is applicable to what I have witnessed at Cerro Baúl, a Wari site in the department of Moquegua, which has been coopted by highland Aymara migrants for their winter solstice celebration, “Aymara New Year.” These reinventions and reenactments are becoming more prevalent throughout the Andes as communities assert their connection to particular locales or to an illustrious native heritage. These phenomena seem to have a deep history in the Andes and probably have correlates in other empires where mytho-history and ritual that enacts those narratives were an essential strategy for imperial expansion and colonial endeavors.

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*The Archaic Southwest: Foragers in an Arid Land.* Bradley J. Vierra, ed.  
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Vierra and colleagues deliver a must-have book for scholars of North American prehistory and of hunter-gatherer/early agricultural societies. This edited volume provides an up-to-date synthesis of research on the Archaic in the American Southwest and northern Mexico. The chapters focus on description of population sizes, subsistence, technology, settlement patterns, social organization, and the beliefs of prehistoric inhabitants in the Southwest. The volume accomplishes its goal, providing a synthesis of the what, when, and where of hunter-gatherer/early agricultural prehistory. A useful way to summarize the contributions of *The Archaic Southwest* is in terms of a hierarchy of three levels of abstraction. At the base of the hierarchy lies the synthesis of archaeological data: bones, stones, macrobotanical remains, etc. The second level consists of concepts such as “farmager,” and the third level consists of overarching explanatory models for understanding subregional similarities and differences. At the first and second levels *The Southwest Archaic* shines and sets up scholars interested in applying broader explanatory models.

*Level One: Synthesis.* By synthesizing the primary literature, *The Archaic Southwest* points the way for future field research. MacWilliams’s chapter 8 title says it all: “Archaic Chihuahua: Many Points, Few Sites.” Chihuahua is the most dramatic example, but almost every chapter notes a gap in the empirical record of a given subregion (e.g., the Phoenix Basin Middle Archaic; chapter 4). Similarly, many of the chapters use large radiocarbon datasets to infer changes in population (chapters 1, 7, 12, 13). Miller arrays summed probability distributions of different features, material types, and contexts to build time series of changes in multiple dimensions of human lifeways. These time series point the way for archaeological data synthesis. Such time series developed