

Inka Human Sacrifice and Mountain Worship: Strategies for Empire Unification. Thomas Besom. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013. ISBN: 9780826353078

The consolidation of the Inka Empire in only 90 years, for Thomas Besom, is one of the most exceptional events in South American history. Most scholars in the field, however, focus on the initial military conquest and then the implementation of the *mit'a*, a tax typically paid through corvée labor. Conversely, Besom convincingly demonstrates that the Cuzqueños attempted to dominate subjugated populations by fixing Andean ideology for their own benefit. More specifically, Besom argues that in the austral regions of the empire (modern-day Iquique and Santiago, Chile), where an institutional presence was weaker, the Cuzqueños influenced the local populace by manipulating the Andean concept of reciprocity through mountain veneration and human immolation.

Besom's theoretical framework follows Terence D'Altroy's characterization of empire unification; namely, polities gain control through military, economic, political, and ideological means. While the Cuzqueños undoubtedly used all four methods, Besom believes that it largely depended upon location. The Inkas asserted more direct control near the capital, characterized as a *territorial* approach. In distant locales, however, the Inkas relied on *kurakas* (local leaders) and a manipulation of ideology to assert dominance, referred to as a *hegemonic* approach. The ideology that the Inkas manipulated, the notion of reciprocity, informed Andean society economically, politically and culturally. Thus, through human sacrifice—the most revered of oblations—on prominent mountain *waqas* (deities), Besom concludes that the Cuzqueños could then justify the extraction of natural resources, labor, and continued political subjugation of provincial populations.

The author uses ethnographic works from Andean and Spanish sources, archaeological evidence from two immolation sites, Cerro El Plomo and Cerro Esmeralda, and secondary scholarship on other sacrificial sites to support his thesis. Besom primarily employs the images from Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala's *nueva corónica* to establish the type and design of clothing accorded to Inka leaders, provincial rulers, imperial administrators, and the common folk. In addition, the images also provide evidence of mountain worship, human sacrifice, the oblations involved in each ritual, and the veneration of *Qhapaq huchas*, specially chosen young women and boys who were sacrificed by the state. Moreover, the author also uses descriptive works from missionaries and chroniclers that discuss the various types of worship that existed in Andean society. Besom's analysis and comfort with the ethnographic works is well done, though there are a few moments when the author may overlook potential missionary bias when discussing religious rituals.

Following the discussion on ethnographic sources, Besom uses the archaeological remains at Cerro Esmeralda (near Iquique) and Cerro El Plomo (near Santiago) to corroborate the primary literature. Besom clearly shines when discussing the materials and their significance, which comprises the bulk of the work. The immolation site at Esmeralda contained the remains of two young women (nine and 20, respectively), who were ritually strangled. Accompanying the bodies were *Spondylus* shells, vessels for drinking, female figurines, garments adorned in an imperial style, and a few provincial ceramics. At El Plomo, an eight- or nine- year old boy was interned alive in an underground stone structure. The Inkas erected several *pircas* (walls) and prominent stone structures near the site. Oblations similar to Esmeralda were entombed in the vicinity of the body, but there also were llama statuettes and male figurines made from *Spondylus*, silver, or gold.

Besom successfully ties the economic, political, and ideological importance of the oblations offered. For instance, Spondylus shells only appeared during El Niño, so Andean societies viewed their appearance as a promise of water for agriculture. The vessels, which were primarily in imperial style, typically contained *chicha*, a maize brew that also promoted water and fertility. The llama statuette made from gold may have been a plea for success in mining. Moreover, the statuettes and figurines displayed prominent genitalia, indicating fecundity for both herds and humans. In addition, since the corpses were so well-preserved, Besom suggests that they might have been revered as *malkis*, ancestral “mummies” that were deified at shrines and waqa sites for their link to water, fertility and agriculture.

While the oblations represented several economic, political and cultural functions, Besom believes that the immolations on the peaks primarily served a political purpose. The author persuasively argues that the Esmeralda victims were *aqlla-kuna*, chosen women, who were sacrificed as Qhapaq huchas. Their adornments match those in ethnographic sources, and the older woman’s hair is braided like an *aqlla-kuna*. Since Andean societies viewed human sacrifice as the greatest gift to the waqas, a victim provided directly from the state obligated provincial populations to repay the debt through submission, resources and labor. Furthermore, the *aqlla-kunas* were chosen from the children and relatives of provincial leaders. Through reciprocity (though unequal), the kurakas gained esteem from the state for their offering, the local groups benefited from the sacrifice and concomitant oblations, and the state received closer allegiances from provincial leaders and groups.

Besom furthers the political argument by suggesting that the Inkas specifically chose prominent local peaks to carry out their rituals. Andean peoples venerated mountains for a multiplicity of reasons, including their imposing size, water production, and as the birthplace of

the gods and ancestors. Consequently, Besom believes the Cuzqueños assimilated the mountains into the Inka pantheon, thereby limiting the local significance of the site. As an example, the author shows that the stone structures built on the summit of Cerro El Plomo can be seen from Santiago. Since the Cuzqueños most prominent deity was Inti, the sun god, the local populace who looked up at the peak would see the permanence of the stone structures and conclude that Inti was of a higher status than the mountain. Besom concludes that the common folk would be reminded of the supremacy of both Inti and their Inka overlords. In addition, the Inkas erected the structures for astrological observation, which provided calendrical information for major festivals and the agricultural seasons. Again, the populace would see the power derived from the structures and believe in the hierarchy of Inti and the Inkas over provincial populations.

While the author offers cogent rationales for the economic, ideological, and cultural implications of human sacrifice and mountain veneration, some of the political claims are not as convincing. Specifically, Besom attempts to show that the sacrifice of boys at El Plomo and other sites glorified the state's efficient bureaucratic system. Besom relies on the tunics, which are imperial in design, indicative of a mid-level official, and are oversized for the sacrificed boys. Another adornment is the *llawt'u*, a headdress that was only given to imperial men. He also draws upon the artifacts buried with the victim, including a male figurine dressed in a similar manner. This reader wonders if these may be examples of substitute sacrifices, a topic about which Besom admits there is little information. It is plausible that these sacrifices may have occurred when a respected official or kuraka had taken ill and a sacrifice was made to save his life. This would potentially explain the oversized, yet similarly designed tunics. The sacrifice would bolster Besom's political argument because the population governed by the ill

ruler would be grateful for the offerings and, thus, would provide labor, resources, and a stronger political allegiance in return.

Lastly, while Besom admits that the work promotes a completely top-down perspective, the author's terminology gives the reader the impression that the conquest was a *fait accompli*. The author contends not to overestimate the ability for the dominant class to assert its power, but the work is almost devoid of any room for negotiation. This is despite the fact that Besom admits that the majority of the provincial populations would have little knowledge as to what the Cuzqueños buried with the victims. In one particularly troublesome moment, the author tries to reason that the *aqllas* and *qhapaq huchas* could enjoy their role, since they would avoid a hard life in the provinces, enjoy heightened status in the capital and, if sacrificed, would be venerated. While this reader has no doubt that there were some who bought into imperial ideology, there is likewise no doubt that some suffered severe psychological and physical trauma. Nevertheless, this reader looks forward to Besom's promise of future research that delves into ideas of resistance.

Despite the quibbles over relatively small portions of the work, Besom offers a convincing argument on the role ideology played in the Inka's hegemonic approach to the austral parts of the empire. Besom has provided anthropologists, archaeologists and historians a useful work on how the Cuzqueños attempted to solidify their nascent empire.

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