

Teesdale u3a Monthly Meeting – August 2025

Inca and Pre-Hispanic Cultures in Peru

Jane Harrison, one of our own members, was the speaker at the August meeting. Her topic was 'Inca and Pre-Hispanic Cultures in Peru'.

Early archaeological records indicate that people had settled in Peru by 15,000 years ago. Humans had travelled from the Siberia area to North America when sea levels were lower and spread south. Settlements were beginning to be established from about 7,000 to 6,000 BCE. From about 3,500 BCE, animals such as llamas, alpacas and guinea pigs were being domesticated. Maize was being cultivated from about 3,000 BCE, indicating that people were becoming settled. With the growth of settlements, society became more hierarchical and ceremonial activities increased. Advanced engineering was used, particularly for terraced landscaping and for irrigation. Incas were amazing road and bridge builders, and it is estimated that they built 40,000 km of roads. Agricultural produce was very varied including a huge variety of potatoes. The study of astronomy provided a very precise agricultural calendar.

There were many deities, particularly the sun god, considered the father of the Sapa Inca, the divinely appointed ruler with absolute power. Royal rulers were mummified after death. Very fine textiles were produced with intricate designs and rich colours made from natural dyes. Music was important and Pan's pipes were a feature. Pottery was handmade as the potter's wheel had not been invented. Much of it was decorated e.g. with fish, animals, reed boats, and abstract work. Metalwork included the skilled use of gold and silver. Copper and bronze were available but not iron. Some earrings were very large and the Spanish called the Incas 'Big Ears'. Fine metalwork was also used for funereal purposes.

The Inca Empire grew to include what are now parts of Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia and Argentina. There was no written language but extensive use of quipus which was a sophisticated recording system made from fibre cord and knots and used for many purposes, including accounting. The primary language was Quechua which spread throughout the empire and is still spoken. Inca architecture could be on a grand scale e.g. Machu Picchu, using enormous stone blocks which fitted perfectly together and made without the use of iron tools.

The conquest by the Spanish in 1532/1533 brought an end to the Inca Empire although there is evidence that it was already in decline.

Jane gave an excellent presentation, full of fascinating details and we are all now booking our holidays to Peru.

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 25th September, when Susan Parry will be speaking on 'Forensics to Crime Fiction'.