

Colonial Latin American Historical Review

Volume 5
Issue 4 *Volume 5, Issue 4 (Fall 1996)*

Article 9

9-1-1996

Nigel Davies, *The Incas*

David Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr>

Recommended Citation

Johnson, David. "Nigel Davies, *The Incas*." *Colonial Latin American Historical Review* 5, 4 (1996): 483.
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/clahr/vol5/iss4/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colonial Latin American Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

The Incas. By Nigel Davies. (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1995. x + 259 pp. Maps, tables, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.)

Nigel Davies, whose solid Mesoamerican reputation is based on books like *The Aztecs* and *The Toltecs*, undertook in *The Incas* the enormous task of sorting and sifting the complex and oftentimes contradictory spectrum of articles and books about Inca history and culture; in fact, the resulting book should have a subtitle like *A Review of the Scholarship*. Davies' task was not unlike the one that Venus presented to Psyche in the tale by Apuleius; Psyche was to sort a large heap of corn, barley, millet, poppy seeds, chick peas, and lentils into their respective piles. Overwhelmed, Psyche was eventually aided by a friendly colony of ants, who attacked the heap grain by grain and accomplished the task.

The confusing heaps of Inca information are many. The oral traditions of post-conquest Inca survivors exhibit minimal interest in chronology and are biased towards various Incan households (*panacas*), which were dedicated not only to preserving ancestral reputations but the mummified remains of previous rulers. The Incas used knotted cords (*quipus*) to keep quantifiable records involving the military and the economy, but most of the information was lost with the death of the *quipocamayos*—the knot-keepers themselves. Songs were used to commemorate rulers, but each new dynasty recreated their glories and rewrote or obliterated the past. Most primary documents by Spanish chroniclers in the sixteenth century—like Pedro de Cieza de León, Huaman Poma de Ayala, Damián de la Bandera, and Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa—are often contradictory, exaggerated, and Eurocentric. Spanish documents from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can be ambiguous mixtures of history, myth, and legend. In addition, the modern historian must reconcile written records with archeological findings, the foundation of which was laid by Max Uhle at the turn of this century.

Although the general outlines of Inca history might feel secure, the details are tenuous: the particulars of Inca mythology; the pre-Inca inhabitants of the Cuzco region; the origin of the Incas; their accession to power; and their succession of rulers. Scholarship about Pachacutec's remarkable creation

of empire is plentiful but conflicted. Basic chronologies about the pre-conquest rulers, Tupac Inca and Huayna Capac, vary in particulars. Larger questions arise as well: how did the Incas develop basic social and economic structures capable of administering a two-thousand mile, mountainous empire without the assistance of writing? What was the nature of the Incas' spiritual or psychological hegemony that radiated to the very frontiers of their empire? And in the cases of the Aztec ruler Moctezuma and the Inca ruler Atahualpa there are unanswered—and probably unanswerable—questions about their almost passive dealings with the Spanish conquerors.

Davies' book, which in its chosen format exemplifies the historical conundrums surrounding Inca studies, is not for the general reader who probably would find it extremely frustrating, like a novice attempting to decipher the ticker tape in the New York Stock Exchange. Many paragraphs read like a series of footnotes, that is, a bewildering mixture of sources, commentary, ideas, agreements, and disagreements. Each of the major chapters could use a summary in which some kind of synthesis is attempted. One is reminded of Anatole France's rather arch comment: "History is not a science, it is an art and a man succeeds in it only by imagination." Nevertheless, this book should be a valuable introduction and review of scholarship for both the student of Inca history and the aspiring Americanist.

David Johnson
Department of English Language and Literature
University of New Mexico