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## Ancient Imperial Frontiers and the Inka

This book explains how the Inka empire exercised control over vast expanses of land and people in the southeastern frontier, a territory located over 1,000 km away from the capital city of Cuzco. This frontier region was the setting for the fascinating encounter between the Inka, the largest empire in the pre-Columbian world, and the fierce Guaraní tribes from the *tropical montaña* and beyond (Figure 1.1). This singular encounter also occasioned radical shifts in the political economy of many indigenous frontier populations. Despite this situation, these native groups were successful in accommodating their own interests to the new social order. Based on extensive field research, this book explores these changes. This work also provides a unique opportunity to explore the Inka strategies used to exercise control over these contested spaces and the ways in which state institutions were adapted to emerging needs.

As it is with the Inka, ancient empires constitute one of the most multifaceted political organizations that differed in magnitude, scale, and diversity from other formations, such as states. The Inka maintained hierarchical government organizations both in the core and the provinces, and were highly resource extractive. Backed up by standing armies, ancient empires also developed effective transportation and recording systems, and a lingua franca to ease communication and administration (Alcock 1989; Alcock et al. 2001; Doyle 1986; Parker 2003; Parker 2002; Woolf 1992). Often, ancient empires were outward-looking polities that reached subcontinental scales, thriving in the diversity of their constituents. As a result, they encompassed a variety of ecologies and peoples with different cultural traditions and degrees of complexity. Such a situation made them champions in the international arena, and, as a result, their frontiers channeled the flow of resources through different means. Like Cuzco, empires

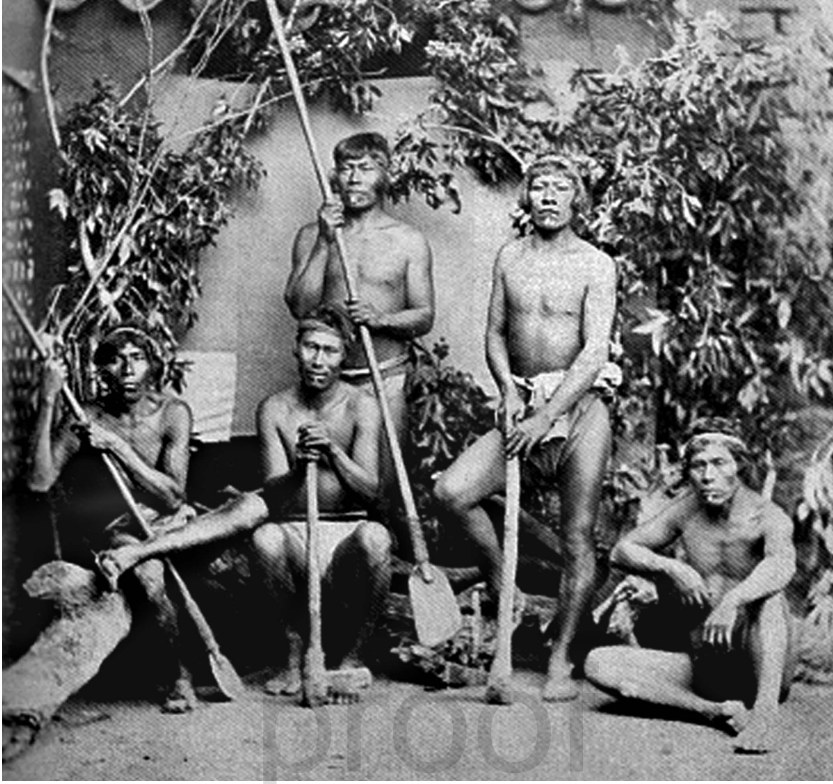


Figure 1.1. Guarani-Chiriguano in Tarija, Bolivia. Photo taken by Doroteo Giannecchini in 1882, Franciscan Archive in Tarija.

had cosmopolitan capitals and developed broad civilization projects that provided everyone with a sense of cultural cohesion (Barfield 2001; Parker 2002; Schreiber 2001). To contextualize my research on the Southeastern Inka frontier, this chapter examines the importance of ancient frontier research in the study of preindustrial empires, including a discussion of the conceptual framework that guided this study.

### **Toward a Frontier-Centered Perspective of Empires**

Imperial frontiers were dynamic and vibrant zones of interaction, exchange, and confrontation, where the power of the empire was constantly challenged, asserted, and negotiated. Consequently, the study of ancient imperial frontiers provides a unique opportunity to understand the ways in which empires affirmed their presence in the regional and global arenas,

and to appreciate the agency of frontier communities in the localities confronted with imperial expansion. A frontier-centered perspective is useful for the analysis of the configuration of ancient empires. Since these spaces were the critical interface between an empire's territory and that outside of it, they were the nexus for the multidirectional transfer of resources, information, and technology. Thus, the study of ancient imperial frontiers privileges an assessment of the basis of imperial power and the mechanics of control in remote and unstable locales. This approach calls for the interrogation and analysis of the ways in which ancient empires maintained control despite social, ecological, and political challenges. In addition, frontier-focused research allows for a more in-depth analysis of native and transborder populations' responses to imperial state policies—ranging from conflict, rebellion, and acculturation to ethnogenesis. Furthermore, it allows us to understand how, in this process, ancient empires, in this case the Inka, were also transformed.

Before delving into the discussion of the variability of imperial frontiers, let us briefly turn our attention to the terms “frontier” and “boundary.” Although the term “frontier” is used to define the limits or boundaries of different systems, objects, and even social organizations, boundaries and frontiers are heuristically different concepts. Distinguishing between these two terms is crucial for exploring the kinds of processes involved in the dynamics of ancient frontiers. Overall, the term “boundary” is used to define the limits of a bounded entity or system. Because sociopolitical organizations are not simple objects, they are often formed by a set of overlapping boundaries of various natures (ethnic, economic, political, military, religious, and/or linguistic), which may or may not coincide in space. In short, a boundary may be formed by a sharply defined space, or, alternatively, it may be formed by broader spatial areas with overlapping features.

Similar to boundaries, frontiers can be conceived as the limits of a sociopolitical system. Yet an important distinction between the two terms is that, unlike boundaries, frontiers are places of encounter, confrontation, and interaction. Viewed in this way, frontiers are the interfaces from which a system can engage with its surrounding social, political, or ecological environment (Luttwak 1976; Rice 1998). In other words, whereas the terms “boundary” and “border” highlight the circumscribed nature of a system, frontier is a concept that underscores the ways in which the system actually interacts with its respective social and natural environments.

Moreover, the location of an imperial frontier is a strategic decision. Usually, imperial frontiers have been established across important corridors of communication intersected by natural or political barriers. This deliberate location can be certainly useful in minimizing state expenditures, while also maximizing the display of control. Often, frontier segments stretched along high-peaked mountains, deep rivers, turbulent rapids, arid deserts, dense jungles, or any kind of impassable geography that could be used as a natural buffer.

### **Imperial Frontier Processes**

State ideologies were based on the notion that empires have no limits in their domination. However, imperial expansion often ended when a set of socioeconomic or geographic constraints were reached along the frontiers (Lattimore 1940; Whittaker 1994). Paradoxically, such frontiers also became the nexus of different forms of sociopolitical interaction that varied in magnitude and direction.

#### **Military Control**

Ancient imperial frontiers were generally maintained through military force. However, maintaining a solid defensive front with large standing garrisons is often expensive. When sustained conflict was irregular and confrontations took the form of sporadic raids, the borders were efficiently protected with defense nodes at key locales (D'Altroy 1992; Hassig 1992; Luttwak 1976). With a minimum deployment of state investment, defense was more likely delegated to indigenous allies backed up by the promise of imperial support. In situations of marked peer polity competition, a common frontier policy was to pit the groups against one another to maintain control. This situation was also beneficial for competing factions as it provided them with the means to confront their own rivals while forming broader coalitions, and, ultimately, to challenge the empire (Barfield 2001; Bronson 1988; Hall 1991; Hassig 1988, 1992).

#### **Surplus Extraction and Heightened Social Stratification**

Economic extraction from peripheral and transborder areas is a well-recognized attribute of imperial systems (Hassing 1992; Luttwak 1976). Empires were highly extractive polities, and frontier regions provided them with the means to tap resources in the form of taxes, and beyond,

as asymmetric exchange, diplomatic gifts, and forced tribute backed by punitive threat (Paynter 1985). In situations where transportation costs were high, military and frontier administrative infrastructure was erected to enhance agrarian and craft production. This provided the means to finance the frontier state activities. For example, indigenous populations in the Roman or Aztec frontiers were incorporated as tribute payers, and their work ranged from agriculturalists to specialized craft producers (Hassing 1992; D'Altroy 1992; Luttwak 1976). In the absence of state markets or standard monetary systems, the Inka exempted privileged ethnicities from paying tribute in exchange for their military service (Espinoza Soriano 2006 [1600]; Wachtel 1982).

### Long-distance Trade

The appropriation of resources beyond the borders often took the form of asymmetric exchange. Craft goods were regularly traded in the frontier for exotic and valuable raw materials (Cooter 1977; Paynter 1985; Wallerstein 1976). These activities often occurred in frontier trading depots, and beyond, in advance posts (Algaze 1993; Gorenstein 1985; Gorenstein and Perlstein 1983; Redmond 1983). In the New World, the Zapotecs, in the Cuicuitlán Cañada, instituted neutral ports of trade to channel valuable materials after blocking existing commercial routes (Redmond 1983). Likewise, in the frontier region of Acambaro between the Tarascan and Aztec states, the military installations also served as nodes of exchange and diplomatic negotiation (Gorenstein 1985:104).

Ancient frontiers also witnessed the formation of prestige-good economies, and competing elite segments used imperial goods to display emergent social affiliations and political allegiances (Kristiansen 1991). This in turn promoted sharp status differentiation and competition (Helms 1992; Kristiansen 1991; Schortman and Urban 1987). This was the case of the steppe Mongols of the thirteenth century, who recurrently formed alliances with—or against—the Chinese empire to force more favorable trading conditions. These coalitions disintegrated and reorganized periodically, and raids against the Chinese frontier often correlated with changing trading circumstances (Barfield 2001; Hall 1991).

### Frontier Colonization or Abandonment

The establishment of ancient imperial frontiers was also accompanied by marked settlement shifts to accommodate the state requirements. Often,

ancient empires promoted frontier population aggregation with colonies of soldiers, administrators, or craft producers (Drummond and Nelson 1994; Eadie 1977; Lewis 1977, 1984; Smith 1991; Steffen 1980). Regardless of their origins, these colonies were more likely to participate in the state economy and therefore become progressively assimilated (Eadie 1977; Cooter 1977). In ancient Rome, the frontier facilities encouraged the establishment of new villages, mobile camps, and broad market areas. Beyond the frontier, adjacent Germanic tribes also settled along the frontier gates and trading stations to have privileged access to Roman goods (Drummond and Nelson 1994). It is also likely that some empires organized the massive mobilization of frontier colonies, rather than constituting a civilian effort.

The Inka are well known for the movement of sizable *mitmaqkuna* colonies for state economic, political, and defensive purposes (Patterson 1992; Rostworowski 1988; Rowe 1946, 1982). In Incallajta, an Inka center in the Southern Andes, the Chiu and Cota were brought as soldiers, whereas the state farms in the adjacent Cochabamba valley were attended by 14,000 colonists of diverse origins (Patterson 1992; Wachtel 1982:201). Likewise, in the Inka border of Tucumán in what is presently Argentina, the Chicha became privileged *mitmaqkuna* frontier soldiers (del Río and Presta 1995; Espinoza Soriano 2006 [1600]; Williams et al. 2009).

More hostile frontiers could also encourage depopulation and the formation of buffer zones as protective shields (Cooter 1977; DeBoer 1981; Myers 1976; Parker 1998; Prescott 1965; Upham 1986). Typically, buffer zones were in ecologically marginal areas like deserts or impassable mountains, and were inhabited by small populations (Parker 1998:382; Prescott 1965). In situations of rivalry between neighboring empires like Assyria and Urartu, smaller polities acted as effective buffers (Parker 1998:393).

### Acculturation and Ethnogenesis

As ethnic identity is often structured by political interaction (Barth 1969; Brumfiel 1994; Brumfiel and Fox 1994), ancient imperial frontiers became the catalysts for varying degrees of mutual acculturation and ethnogenesis. Empires often justified these actions as efforts to impart civilization, although deeper economic reasons were at play (Drummond and Nelson 1994). Whereas some borderlanders actively accepted, manipulated, and adopted imperial institutions and cultural practices for their own ends,