Incan Mummies

For the Inca, death was an important part of life. The Inca worshiped the spirits and the bodies of their ancestors. They believed in an afterlife, and tombs and the mummies they held were considered holy.

Like the Egyptians, the Inca embalmed their dead to preserve the body. The mummies were bundled with offerings of food, tools, and precious items to help them in the afterlife. These “mummy bundles” were then buried or put in an aboveground tomb to be worshiped. Mummies have been found from many different social classes, and, as you will read, not all of them died natural deaths.

Royal Treatment

The mummies of Incan rulers were among the holiest objects of Incan religion. The mummies were actually treated as if they were still alive. They had servants, maintained ownership of their property, were consulted as oracles, and were taken to major festivals or to visit other mummies. The mummy shown at right in a 16th-century Spanish codex is being transported in the same manner as the living royalty.

Human Sacrifice

Some Incan mummies have been found on high mountain peaks in the Andes. These mummies were human sacrifices. Frozen for hundreds of years, the mummies allow researchers to examine the clothes, health, and sometimes even the internal organs of ancient humans. Scientists determined that this mummy was killed by a sharp blow to the head.
**Mummy Bundles**

At a site known as Puruchuco, just outside of Lima, Peru, archaeologists discovered a huge Incan cemetery. Some of the mummies unearthed were wrapped in layers of cotton. The outside of the bundle might have a false head made of cloth like the one shown at right. Inside the bundle were the mummy, religious offerings, and personal items. The illustration below re-creates the inside of an actual bundle that archaeologists unwrapped.

**Gifts for the Dead**

The Inca sometimes placed mummies in aboveground tombs called *chullpas*. Descendants of the mummy would bring offerings of food and precious goods to honor their ancestor. This mummy is shown as it might have appeared in its tomb.

**DATA FILE**

**AN INCAN GRAVEYARD**

The Puruchuco graveyard lies beneath a shantytown in Peru called Tupac Amaru. In 1999, when archaeologists discovered the extent of the site, it was about to be bulldozed. Archaeologists began an emergency recovery effort.

- The remains of over 2,000 men, women, and children were recovered.
- The site may contain as many as 10,000 individuals.
- Some bundles contained up to 7 bodies and weighed as much as 400 pounds.
- Between 50,000 and 60,000 artifacts were recovered.
- One of the mummy bundles became known as the "Cotton King." The mummy was wrapped in about 300 pounds of raw cotton.
- The Cotton King’s bundle contained 70 artifacts, including food, pottery, animal skins, and sandals. Footwear was not common among the Inca, and sandals were a status symbol.

**Connect to Today**

1. **Making Inferences** What do Incan mummification practices suggest about Incan culture?


2. **Forming and Supporting Opinions**

   Why do you think mummification is not a common practice in the United States today?