

Coropuna

Lost Mountain Temple of the Incas

Johan Reinhard



In 1989, the Peruvian archaeologist José Antonio Chávez and I teamed up to look for the lost temple of Coropuna. Coropuna (21,079/6,425m) is the highest peak in southwestern Peru. Not surprisingly, it was one of the most sacred mountains of the Inca empire. Cieza del León, the renowned chronicler of Inca customs, wrote in 1553 that there was once a temple on Coropuna. This temple was the Inca's fifth most important shrine. Alas, no descriptions of the temple survive, and even its location has been a mystery for centuries.

Background

According to Cieza de León, the revered temple of Coropuna received as many visitors as the four other Inca temples of Coricancha, Huanacauri, Vilcanota and Ancocagua. He describes the pilgrimages of Inca emperors and other important officials to Coropuna, where they sacrificed livestock, birds, and humans, and offered up gold, silver, and other riches. Guaman Poma noted

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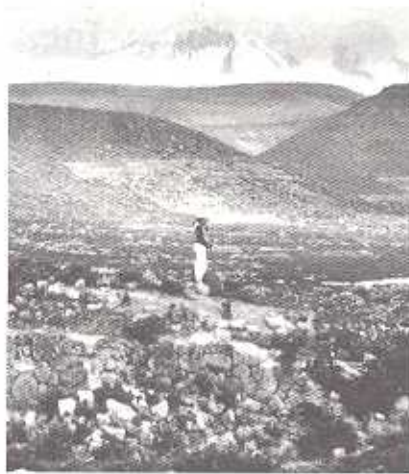
the sacrifices of twelve year old children and lists in detail the ceremonial offerings of goose and flamingo feathers, coca leaves, seashells (*mullo*, the rare *Spondylus* seashell), guinea pigs, raw meat, and *sanco*, llama blood mixed with corn meal. According to Hiram Bingham, villagers were still offering "idols" on the slopes of the mountain in 1865.

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Guaman Poma wrote that the many priests attending the temple included those high in the Inca hierarchy. Others performing temple services included *mamaconas*, women specially selected for this purpose. The temple did not lack for offerings of livestock and the harvest of whole fields were dedicated to it. The temple attracted pilgrims from all over the empire. The Coropuna deity spoke through an oracle, and, unlike the deities at other temples, would make pronouncements at any time of the year.

Journey to Achaymarca.

During the 1980s, I had climbed a number of Andean peaks looking for archaeological sites. Reading up on Coropuna, I found only brief summaries of archaeological surveys for the area around Coropuna. Maucallacta was the only Inca site on the slopes of Coropuna higher than 4,000m, and no archaeological work had been done on an Inca site anywhere near the mountain. In 1988, José briefly visited



Achaymarca, a site at 4,030m near the western base of Coropuna. From what he saw of the ruins and their location near the mountain, he believed it quite likely the site was the temple of Coropuna.

In 1989, Jose and I set out for Achaymarca to test this hypothesis. Shining Path guerrillas had been seen in the area, so we didn't dawdle. Photographing the ruins, we sketched a rough plan of the area, then climbed up the Inca trail on the western slope of the mountain to 5,500 m, where it disappeared beneath the glacier.

About 12 km before Achaymarca, Jose and I came across some ruins we named Ajocancha after a nearby gully. Here we found a plaza approximately 17 x 48 m with a half-dozen structures built near its western wall. Rough boulders bordered both the eastern and southern sides. Steps cut into one of the boulders led up to the plaza, where shards lay scattered about on the surface. Close to the mountain, Ajocancha does not appear to have been a major site—possibly only a place for small groups to perform rituals.

High on the western side of Lake Pallacocha (4,730 m), we found more ruins—stone structures overlooking the lake. From here, we had a fine view of Coropuna, reflected in the water below. Alas, we found no shards to date the

**COROPUNA
Astronomy and Cosmology**

Is Achaymarca's location on the western side of Coropuna evidence of Incan astronomy or cosmology? Certainly, an observer in Achaymarca would see the sun rise behind Coropuna for most of the year. At the September equinox, the sun would rise behind the northernmost tip of the mountain.

Coropuna's two main summits are nearly the same height. From the September equinox to the December solstice, the sun moves in an arc over the mountain. This period, a time of planting and harvesting before the rainy season, was, and still is, of vital importance to Andean peoples and is a time of many fertility rituals and festivals. Although the importance of the equinox in Inca beliefs is still debated, solstices played a key role in Inca religion. It's perhaps no coincidence that the December solstice line (114° as seen from Achaymarca), leads directly to Ajocancha.

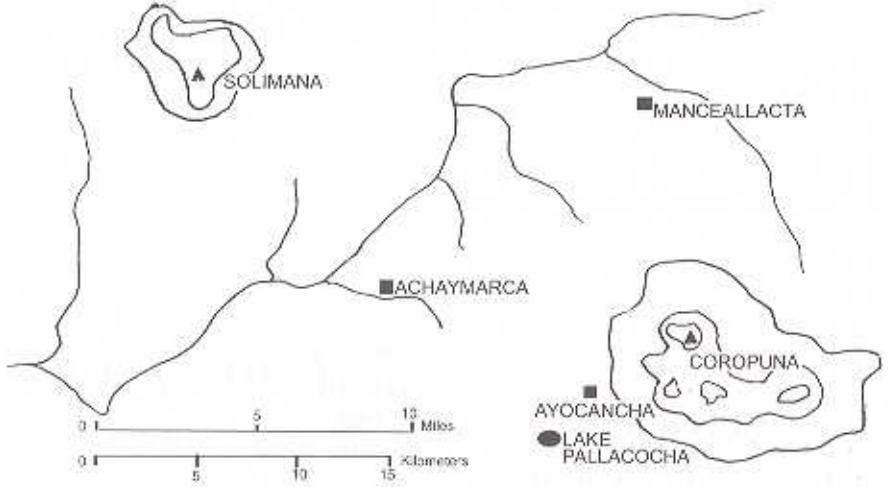
The sacred mountain Solimana is also visible from Achaymarca. In 1583, Albornoz wrote of the colonists at Solimana and that livestock was dedicated to its service. Pre-Incan people living nearby believed the mountain to be their creator. Today, many view Solimana as a place where souls reside, a mountain rich in gold and silver. Those who live on Coropuna's slopes at the present time look upon Solimana as female, one of the most venerated of deities, a goddess of plant and animal fertility.

ruins. Still, since the structures were close to the trail to Ajocancha and resembled the structures we'd seen there, we deemed it likely they were Incan. (Interestingly, in Quechua, "palla" means "noble woman" and "cocha," "lake." To the Incas, lakes were often seen as female—consorts of mountain gods. This belief persists in the Andes to this day.)

The ruins of Achaymarca lie between the mountains of Solimana and Coropuna. The main complex is a central walled plaza approximately 160 x 110 m with an artificial raised platform (*ushnu*). Over two hundred structures surround the plaza, and we found shards of Incan pottery lying about. I could discern no astronomical alignments of the plaza walls, although the southern wall, at 110° east, is close to the December solstice sunrise. Another section of wall on the

The 9 x 6 m and 2.5 m high *ushnu*, built in part of worked stone, is found on the southern side of the plaza. The remains of a stairway are still visible on the platform's northern side. Major ceremonies took place on such platforms, which played a key role in Inca worship. Because of this, the Spanish made a point of destroying them as they obliterated the indigenous religion. To find a relatively intact platform such as this is rare in the Andes.

Several well-built structures, including a few with worked stone, lie near the south wall of the plaza—presumably buildings used by the Inca elite. More than 200 structures were built outside the central plaza. These rough-stone buildings may have housed those lower in the social hierarchy. A walled compound lies some 70 m east of the plaza, and 100 m beyond this one finds a large group of



north side of the plaza, at ca. 95° (i.e. oriented to the east), is aligned with the northern summit of Coropuna. It's unclear if these were intentional alignments or mere coincidence.

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ruins. We found other structures 150 m north of the plaza and 50 m or so to the west, but none to the east or north-east to the Coropuna massif.

South, west, and east of the main complex, we came across nearly a dozen *chullpas*—funerary towers. Some were in good condition and contained bones, and in one measuring 2 x 3 x 2 m, we found four skeletons.

Inca ruins have been found in other areas near Coropuna, but all these sites are small and lack the fine

COROPUNA, SPIRIT WORLD

From Inca times to the present, Coropuna has been linked with the dead. Nearly 500 years ago, Guaman Poma wrote of the spirits gathering at Coropuna. Both Valderrama and Escalante write about people living today in the province of Cotabambas. Here, many believe that Saint Peter holds the key to a door on Coropuna. Through this door pass the souls of the dead. The door faces east and is reputedly surrounded by twelve lower mountains which guard it. At Puquio, northwest of Coropuna, people also believe Coropuna to be the abode of the dead.

There are variations on Coropuna's role. Some believe the mountain to be a kind of purgatory. For example, Ossio was told that souls reaching Coropuna are freed of impurities before they pass on to heaven. Roel wrote of others who believe that souls pass through Coropuna en route to other volcanoes, finally ending up in Solimana. Bingham was told there was a warm paradise atop Coropuna where souls dallied on their way to heaven. The belief that the dead reside in mountains is widespread throughout the Andes and may come from the once widely held view that some people were descended from mountain deities.

As we have seen, funerary towers were built near Coropuna in pre-Hispanic times. In 1965, a villager discovered two funerary bundles on Coropuna. Some suspected they had been sacrificed on the summit. José later learned that the bodies were found on the lower slopes. There is nothing about the bodies to indicate human sacrifice, although its likely such sacrifices did occur.



masonry and other significant religious characteristics of Achaymarca. Furthermore, the mountain is not visible from many of these lesser ruins, and visibility would seem rather important in a temple complex dedicated to Coropuna. The ruins Bingham described finding on the slopes of Coropuna are minor and clearly not those we found in Achaymarca. There is scant evidence to support Bingham's claim that the ruins he describes are the temple of Coropuna.

Our detailed on-site examination convinced both José and myself that the ruins at Achaymarca are the remains of the Inca temple of Coropuna mentioned in the chronicles. We believe the evidence supporting this conclusion is compelling.

For one, Achaymarca meets all the obvious requirements for a shrine. Of all the sites on the slopes of Coropuna dating to the Inca period, Achaymarca is the most significant, possessing structures both for an elite and for religious ceremonial purposes. Certainly the complex could easily have accom-

modated the numerous visitors pouring in from distant areas, as described by Cieza de León. The site furthermore provides views of Coropuna (and to the rising sun behind it), as well as mountain Solimana. Both mountains were sacred deities to the Incas when the Spanish arrived. Achaymarca's position between the two mountains would surely enhance its religious significance.

Near the year-round Inca settlements in the Arma Valley, the Incas harvested bountiful crops from a 10 km section of the valley where crops are grown to this day. From the fields came grain to feed the priests and *mamaconas* dedicated to the service the temple at

Achaymarca as well as the many local servants and pilgrims who traveled there from many regions. It would have been difficult to maintain such a temple complex at a higher elevation or in a more remote area. Indeed, it would be hard to find a place better situated for religious purposes close to the resources needed to support it.

Why did the chroniclers say so little about Coropuna?

In short, the evidence supporting Achaymarca as the temple of Coropuna is substantial. Given the above, it is fairly certain that we have established the location of the temple of Coropuna, which has been unknown for centuries.

The question remains: Why did the chroniclers say so little about Coropuna? This is puzzling, considering that Cieza de León stresses the temple's importance. However Coro-

puna is not alone in this respect. Both Vilcanota and Ancocagua, third and fourth on Cieza de León's list of the five most important Inca temples, are similarly not described in any detail in the chronicles. Built in relatively isolated areas and their whereabouts eventually forgotten, all three temples were largely overlooked by a later generation of historians and archaeologists. Cieza de León was among the earliest chroniclers of Inca religion after the Spanish conquest of 1532. When other chroniclers began writing in the late 1500's, Coropuna would have been a distant memory.

There remains much to learn about the temple of Coropuna. Among other things, excavation will shed more light on the temple's function, its relationship with other Inca sites in the region, and the origins of its pilgrims. Further study of this important temple is certain to broaden our knowledge of Inca religion and practice in one of the least known regions of the Inca empire.



COROPUNA

Mountain God of the Andes

Unfortunately, there's little information in the chronicles about what Coropuna meant to the Incas. But there are clues.

In 1583, Albornoiz wrote that the Incas venerated the mountains that "faced the ocean" over other mountains because from these peaks flowed water that allowed the desert to bloom. Ulloa Mogollon does not specifically mention Coropuna, but in 1586, he wrote that the Incas worshiped snow-capped peaks as the source of water they used to irrigate their fields. Indeed, glacial melt from Coropuna is the main source of water for miles around. To the Incas, Coropuna was surely a mountain god they looked to for water, good weather, and bountiful crops. Even today, those who live on its slopes worship Coropuna for its life-giving waters above all other mountains in the area.

It's also likely that Coropuna was revered for its distinctive powers over livestock as well as crops. There is mention in 1583 of an increase in llama and alpaca herds near Sara Sara, another mountain worshiped by the Incas not far to the west of Coropuna. People living there still make offerings to the mountain god Coropuna to increase their herds. Coropuna is likewise worshiped by herders of wool-bearing animals in the Arequipa region.

In Quechua, "coro" (or "koro") means "cut off". "Puna" refers to "the cold highlands". "Coropuna" thus describes the mountain's truncated summit. How the summit of Coropuna got lopped off is recounted in a legend from the province of Chumbivilcas. In this legend a great battle took place between Coropuna and the deity known as Inca. After creating Alqa Victoria, a valley at the headwaters of the Velille River, Inca built a canal that wound down the slopes of Coropuna to the south. When he was finished, Coropuna urinated. Then Inca urinated on top of Coropuna, and the mountain became pregnant. A child was born. When Inca refused to recognize it as his, Coropuna attacked him with fire. In fighting back, Inca broke off Coropuna's summit with stones from his sling. Then, to escape the fire, Inca dove into the lake at Vilcanota to resurface in Alqa Victoria in Chumbivilcas. From here, he dispatched carved stones for the construction of Cuzco.

It would be impossible to build a canal from Coropuna to Chumbivilcas and Cuzco, 100 kms to the southwest and in a different watershed. Still, the legend serves to symbolically link these regions. The legend further connects Coropuna to the Incas, who indeed built temples on Coropuna's slopes.

East of Coropuna, the Collagua people inhabited the Colca Valley. Interestingly, in the chronicles we see that in 1586 they spoke of their ancestors who came from Collaguata, a volcano near Alqa Victoria. This suggests

that the colonists Albornoiz mentions as coming to Coropuna may well have been from the Chumbivilcas region.

Yet another Andean legend, first recorded in the 1980s, recounts a battle between Coropuna and Hualca Hualca, a mountain that towers above the Colca Valley. In this legend, Hualca Hualca blocked the sun's rays in the morning. This angered Coropuna. The gods fought with slings, and Hualca Hualca struck Coropuna in the head with a boulder. From this wound, blood flowed out to form a lake. Boulders said to have been thrown by Coropuna can still be seen on the slopes of Hualca Hualca.

Until recent times, Cabanaconde villagers, who believed themselves descended from the Hualca Hualca deity, kept this legend alive with staged battles, slinging apples and fruit instead of stones. These ceremonial clashes took place in February, a month of agricultural festivals when offerings are made to Pachamama and the mountain deities for a successful harvest. Just as in other parts of the Andes, villagers looked upon the blood shed in battle as an offering to local deities to increase fertility.

There are modern-day myths about Coropuna. In one, the mountain god Sara Sara gave all of its riches to Coropuna. This accounts for why Sara Sara lacks the minerals and water that Coropuna has in abundance.

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