INCA BY PRIVILEGE

"Incas by privilege" were indigenous non-Inca people of the Cuzco region to whom the Incas awarded special, hereditary status. Incas by privilege held an intermediate status position between provincial commoners and Incas of royal blood, who claimed to be direct descendants of the first Inca sovereign. The Inca ruling class conferred this privileged status by marrying Inca noblewomen to local lords or headmen (curacas) from Cuzco region ethnic polities. Consequently, the Incas considered the Incas by privilege to be secondary relatives and referred to them as huaracha Inca, which meant "poor Inca" and signified a seminoble status. Incas by privilege administered the lands of Cuzco and the provinces, participated in exclusive ceremonies that affirmed Inca authority, and served as loyal subjects who colonized new terrain or fought alongside Inca royalty in military engagements.

Spanish and indigenous chronicles state that the Inca by privilege status was as old as the Inca Empire itself. Some chronicles claim that the Incas by privilege accompanied the mythic Inca ancestors as they journeyed toward Cuzco on their divine mission to civilize and rule the Andes (see Myths, Origin). Others hold that Manco Capac, the first Inca ruler, created the Inca by privilege status when he established the city of Cuzco. Still others contend that Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui, the ninth Inca ruler, granted this special status to the lords who aided him in the defense of Cuzco and then helped him to rebuild the city as a monumental, imperial capital. Though these chronicles are not literal histories of the empire, the stories that they contain often reflect Inca ideas of hierarchy and social difference. Despite their discrepancies, then, the stories of Incas by privilege suggest that the Incas sought to naturalize the social differences of their realm by declaring that they had existed since time immemorial.

By creating the Incas by privilege status, the Incas crafted a hierarchical social landscape that they envisioned as a vast kin network. During the height of Inca rule, kinship with the Inca ruler and status within the imperial hierarchy decreased with distance from Cuzco. While Inca royalty lived in the center of the city, the Incas by privilege inhabited the edges of the Cuzco region. Marriage bonds served to connect these inner and outer areas. The curacas of the Cuzco region’s ethnic groups took the Inca ruler’s actual and nominal sisters as their wives and, in so doing, became secondary kin of the Inca. These curacas contributed their sisters and wives (iñacas) to the Inca ruler, and these women then
became mothers of his lower status children (huaccha concha). Because the Incas by privilege were socially and geographically close, and by implication loyal, to the royal families in Cuzco, the Incas often asked them to settle and govern newly appropriated territory.

Though select curacas became Incas by privilege, they could never become Inca. Their subordinate status was permanent—it was marked on their bodies, renewed in major ceremonies, and gouged into the land. Cuzco’s ritual pathways (ceques) and shrines (huacas) normalized differences between Inca and Incas by privilege. The ceques demarcated the boundaries between the land of the Incas and Incas by privilege, while the segregation of huacas and their attendant ritual practices worked to distinguish the essential spaces and rites of Cuzco’s royal houses (panacas) from those of the Incas by privilege. During Cuzco’s cleansing ceremony (cinta), Incas of royal blood demonstrated their centrality to Inca society as they ran from Cuzco’s center to its margins, and from these places, Incas by privilege performed their subordinate roles as they continued the ceremony by running to the farthest reaches of the Cuzco region. During the Capac Raymi initiation ceremony, the Incas forced some of the Incas by privilege to leave Cuzco. And at Inca Raymi Quilla, the Incas pierced the ears of the Incas by privilege with earspoons that were smaller than the ones the Incas wore and therefore accentuated the semi–noble role of the Incas by privilege. Similarly, the Incas adorned the Incas by privilege with clothes and insignia that both mirrored the high elite and denoted a lesser status.

Historians and archaeologists have long defined the Incas by privilege according to information gleaned from the chronicles. But knowledge of the Incas by privilege remains limited because so few chroniclers mention them, and those who do, cast them as passive subjects or vanquished foes. Current research, however, is beginning to look beyond the chronicles and investigate how Cuzco’s ethnic groups helped to forge the Inca state and extend its power. Archaeologists have demonstrated that ethnic groups, such as the Quilliscachi, became Inca authorities and subjects as they labored to convert their own ancestral ceremonial centers into places that manifested Inca ideals of order. Ethnohistorians have revealed that, during early Spanish colonization, Incas by privilege, such as the Mascas, sought to assume a noble status and avoid taxation by reinventing Inca mythic histories. Such studies, which concentrate on local actors and histories rather than Inca visions of imperial order, indicate that the Incas by privilege actively sought to bolster their status and negotiate their authority during and after the Inca reign.

Further Reading

INVASION, SPANISH

The seemingly unlikely “conqueror” of the Inca Empire was an unschooled, illegitimate son of a lower-level noble from Extremadura, Spain. Without much of a future in Spain, Francisco Pizarro emigrated to America, where he spent time in the Caribbean and joined Vasco Núñez de Balboa’s 1513 march across the isthmus of Panama. Thereafter, he was present at the founding of the city of Panama and was rewarded for his aid in the wars with the Natives and other services to the king with an encomienda (grant of Native labor and tribute), making him a well-to-do settler.

After Captain Pascual de Andagoya explored the south of Panama, rumors circulated about a distant Native kingdom. Pizarro formed a partnership with Diego de Almagro and the priest Hernando de Luque to reconnoiter the coast. With capital supplied by Luque, Pizarro led a small expedition south in 1524, but returned after experiencing considerable challenges from the hostile Natives, starvation, and other hardships. A second expedition in 1526 encountered similar difficulties. Landing on the Island of Gallo in the