

Inca ushnus: landscape, site and symbol in the Andes

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 Landscape & Environment



This project examines how the Inca Empire (c. AD 1400 – 1532) met the challenge of appropriating and modifying the Andean landscape to enhance its productive capacity and political power to create the largest native state in the Americas. To address the relationship between landscape, site and symbol in the Andes the project will undertake a trans-disciplinary study of a specific kind of Inca architectural construction known as the ushnu. Ushnu is a Quechua term that encompasses the idea of a restricted, sanctified space reserved for use by the Inca king and Incas-by-privilege.

Ushnus ranged from conspicuous, stone-faced stepped pyramids and platforms located in the central plazas of regional administrative centres, to smaller constructions placed at prominent visible points in the landscape. When the Inca (or a provincial lord as his representative) stood on this platform with his retinue, he affirmed the supremacy of the Inca state and its divine authority to rule. The platforms were used as public stages to conduct ceremonies announcing the timing of planting and harvest within the agricultural calendar using prestigious objects such as qeros (drinking vessels made in metal, pottery and wood for toasting and libations). They were also used for redistributive rituals enacted as shows of public generosity to bind the people to their rulers and occasionally to make offerings of sets of miniature pottery vessels and metal figurines.

The aim of this project is to understand the practical and symbolic principles underlying the construction of ushnus, the rationale for their placement and function within the landscape, the activities that took place on them together with their associated artefact assemblages. The project is a partnership between the Department of Geography, Royal Holloway University of London (Drs N.P. Branch, F. Meddens and K. Willis, and Prof R. Kemp), the British Museum (Dr C. McEwan) and the National University of San Cristóbal of Huamanga (Dr C. Vivanco). It will undertake survey, mapping, soil analysis and excavation of selected ushnus along two stretches of the highway and in the adjacent hinterland. It will assess site locations in relation to site catchment resources such as agricultural potential, springs, irrigation, and also to other cultural features including the main arterial highway and tambos (way stations) and storage facilities as well as ancillary roads and paths. Ethnographic work with local communities and ethno-historical research will provide key insights into the ways in which ushnus were and are used and understood. The fieldwork and laboratory analysis will proceed in parallel to a study of the British Museum's Andean collections and together will contribute to innovative ways of contextualising and understanding the Inca collections, culminating in the new gallery devoted to Andean civilisation and opening in 2009.