



# Un-Knotting the Past: a New Khipu Archive at Inkawasi, Peru

(Courtesy Gary Urton) Inca khipu

Archaeologists excavating an Inca storehouse at the site of Inkawasi on Peru's south coast have unearthed 34 *khipus*, the knotted-string devices once used by the Andean people for keeping records. Some khipus encode purely numerical data, while others contain deeper forms of information, such as records of historical events—but these remain undeciphered. Many of the Inkawasi khipus were found with or covered by the remains of produce, such as peanuts, black beans, and chili peppers, and it's likely they were used to keep track of those crops when they were brought to storage. Analysis of the khipus shows that some subtract a fixed value from tallies at regular intervals, and could possibly represent a state tax. Harvard archaeologist Gary Urton, who has studied the Inkawaski khipus, is hopeful that understanding the archive may eventually contribute to reading more elaborate examples. "Our income tax forms and our novels use the same alphabet. If we can learn how to read a chili pepper khipu or a peanut khipu," says Urton, "it might help us in the long run to read the khipus that record historical events."

Dr. Alejandro Chu (left) removing khipu from storage facility floor (photo by Gary Urton).

"Let me make this clear, that we cannot read *khipus*," Dumbarton Oaks Visiting Professor Gary Urton told a crowd of

assembled Fellows, staff, and Pre-Columbian scholars as he began to present his findings on a cache of *kipus* recently uncovered at Inkawasi, an archaeological site located on the south coast of Peru.

Urton, Dumbarton Oaks Professor of Pre-Columbian Studies at Harvard and Anthropology Department Chair, has spent much of the last two decades studying *kipus*, the knotted-string devices that the Inca used for record-keeping across the vast Andean empire. While neither Urton nor anyone else can read *kipus*, twentieth-century anthropologists were able to decode the numeric significance of the knots in *kipus*, and Urton has done much to delineate their structural elements.

Although the Spanish conquistadores were also unable to read *kipus*, Urton explained, when they arrived in Peru they understood the value of the *kipu* and the *kipukamayuc*—or *kipu*-keeper, who both created and read *kipus*—in providing them with the data they would need to establish their colonial state in the lands of the Inca empire. “They systematically called in the *kipu*-keepers and had them read their *kipus* out, and they copied down the information, and that became the basis of our earliest records,” Urton said.

The Spaniards, he continued, also knew about the *casas publicas*, or public houses, the term used by chroniclers for the archives full of the knotted cords that were maintained by the *kipukamayucs*. Working with Carrie Brezine, a PhD student, Urton was able in the past to identify twelve different archives of *kipus*, which helped provide provenances for about 220 of the 845 *kipus* that are known to archaeologists.

A new *kipu* archive, the subject of Urton’s lecture, has recently been discovered at the site of Inkawasi, an Inca storehouse and administrative center in the dry Cañete Valley on the south coast of Peru. “The site was apparently built when the Incas moved down from Cusco to the south coast to begin conquering the people” there, Urton said. Spanish

accounts of the city, he continued, suggest that it was built exactly like Cusco, with each structure and hill named after those that existed in the Inca capital.

In Inkawasi, archaeologists uncovered a storehouse comprised of open sorting areas, large rectangular *callancas* (storage buildings), and smaller storage bins that surrounded the central sorting areas and *callancas*. In this storehouse, beginning in 2013, excavators working under the direction of archaeologist Alejandro Chu found several *kipus* buried under collections of produce, including chili peppers, peanuts, and black beans. "We have, for the first time ever, an archaeologically attested-to association between *kipus* and products that they presumably were being used to account for," Urton noted. Among these *kipus* were several pairs that displayed "linking" or "matching" tendencies. Linked *kipus* are two or more *kipus* tied together, "like stapling documents together or putting them in a file," while matched *kipus* record similar or identical data, "maybe even like a double-entry bookkeeping system," Urton suggested.

Further evidence of administrative organization came when excavators found that the floors of the storage areas in Inkawasi were covered with damp mud, into which ropes were pressed to impose a grid structure across the floor. Urton's colleague, Alejandro Chu, hypothesized that the grid was probably used for counting small items of produce. "You don't count peanuts, you don't count beans," Urton explained. "The squares produced on the grid-like floor surface . . . became the accounting units," he said.

The question that the discovery of the *kipu* and these accounting units begin to answer, Urton suggested, is, "How, in one of these ancient states in the pre-electronic era, or pre-automobile era, or pre-any kind of automatic movement or sending messages, do you effect control at a distance?"

Recognizing the role that the Inca troops played in providing

much of the muscle for Inca rulers as they consolidated power across the Andes, Urton underscored the key role of the *kipukamayus* in exerting control over subjects by naming, counting, recording, and maintaining information. Furthermore, Urton suggested, the findings at Inkawasi—evidence of accounting units and archaeological circumstances that directly link *kipus* to the physical remnants that they may have described—provide real data that will assist in creating historical accounts rooted in demographics and statistics instead of only “great-man” narrative accounts.

“Not only do we learn more about administration, but we use it as a gateway into writing history in a new way,” Urton concluded.

Source:

- Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection
- <http://www.archaeology.org/>



## **Ponen en valor Incahuasi para impulsar el turismo, Huancavelica, Perú**

Seis distritos de Huaytará y Castrovirreyna fueron elegidos por el Gobierno Regional para promover la actividad turística. Destaca el rescate del sitio arqueológico.

El Gobierno Regional de Huancavelica busca poner en valor el sitio arqueológico de Incahuasi, una ciudadela que alberga

vestigios de las culturas Chanca e Inca, a través de un presupuesto de S/.483.284, informó el gerente de Desarrollo Económico, Wilfredo Cavero Altamirano.

Incahuasi (en castellano Casa del Inca), está a 20 kilómetros al sur del distrito de Huaytará, en ruta hacia Ayacucho, y es considerado el núcleo más importante de ruinas arqueológicas similares a Machu Picchu. Alrededor tiene al menos 20 zonas donde se pueden ver construcciones de piedras que reciben pocas visitas por falta de atención de parte de las autoridades.

El gobierno regional busca poner en valor la zona con el presupuesto, el cual estará destinado principalmente en mejorar la carretera de acceso al sitio arqueológico y así incentivar el turismo en las provincias Huaytará yCastrovirreyna.

El circuito, que incluye a Incahuasi, se llama “de los espejo” por la gran cantidad de lagunas que hay, entre las que destaca la laguna Choclococha, la más grande del país.

El proyecto tiene un alcance de seis distritos: Santa Ana, Ticrapo, Castrovirreyna, San Antonio de Cusicancha, Pilpichaca y Huaytará, en las dos provincias mencionadas. En Castrovirreyna específicamente se puede apreciar la belleza natural de los Andes.

Fuente: El Comercio