

Chapter 8

READING 2

SECTION 2

Civilizations in the Americas

The Inca: Worshippers of the Sun

Although the most important of the Inca gods was the creator, known as Viracocha and Pachayachachic—meaning “lord” and “instructor of the world”—the Inca reserved their most impressive rituals for the sun. In fact, the Inca royal family claimed the sun as an ancestor—the word Inca means “children of the sun.” In the excerpt below, Bernabe Cobo (1582–1657), a Jesuit priest, records how the Inca felt about the sun god. As you read the excerpt, consider whether Cobo respected the religion of the Inca.

The god most respected by them after Viracocha was that most excellent of material creations, the sun; and the Inca, who boasted that they were the Children of the Sun, bent all their efforts toward exalting its authority and endowing it with a magnificent ritual, numerous priests, and frequent offerings and sacrifices. Not that much had to be done to inspire esteem for the sun among their people; they respected the objects of Nature in accord with the benefits that they obtained from them, and since the beneficial effects produced by this planet were so manifest [apparent] and excellent, they held it in great regard. The authority and example of the Inca only served to make the external displays of worship more costly and elaborate. They believed that the Pachayachachic had given the sun power to create all the foods, together with the earth, whence came their regard for it as the greatest guaca [deity] of all after the Viracocha; and so they called it *Apu-Inti*, which means “My Lord Sun”: they visualized it in the likeness of a man, and consequently they used to say that the moon was his wife and the stars their children.

They held the sun in such reverence throughout this kingdom of the Inca that I question whether in

any other part of the world there ever prevailed [existed] a cult so respected and well served. This may be seen from the fact that to no other god did they dedicate so many and such magnificent temples; for there was not an important town where the sun did not have a temple with numerous priests and . . . ample revenues for its maintenance. And the wealthiest and most sumptuous [luxurious] temple of all was that which the Inca kings had erected to the sun in their court, the temple called Coricancha, where they kept their principal and most venerated [revered] idol. It was an impressive image, called *Punchau*, which means “the day,” all worked in finest gold with a wealth of precious stones, in the likeness of a human face, surrounded by rays, as we depict the sun; they placed it so that it faced the east, and when the sun rose its rays fell on it; and since it was a sheet of finest metal the rays were reflected from it so brightly that it actually seemed to be the sun. The Indians were wont [tended] to say that the sun lent this image both its light and its power. From the spoils which the Spaniards obtained in the beautiful temple of Coricancha there fell to the lot of a soldier this splendid sheet of gold, and since at that time gambling was the popular pastime he lost it one night at play; from this came the saying used in Peru about heavy gamblers: “He gambles the sun away before it rises.” . . .

They regarded the eclipse of the sun as a grave matter, and when it occurred they consulted the diviners [prophets] about its meaning; and having been told what it denoted [indicated], they made great and costly sacrifices, offering up various gold and silver figures, and killing a large number of sheep as well as many boys and girls. The sorcerers commonly asserted that the eclipse portended [predicted] the death of some prince, and that the sun

Chapter 8, Reading 2, continued ►

had gone into mourning for the loss that the world would suffer; when this happened all the women dedicated to the sun fasted for many days, wore mourning garments, and offered frequent sacrifices. The Inca retired to a secret spot, and there, having dealings with none, he fasted many days; during all this time no fire was lighted in the whole city.

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1. According to Cobo, why did Inca priests not have to do much to inspire esteem for the sun god among the Inca people?

2. According to Inca sorcerers, what did an eclipse of the sun mean?

3. How do you think Cobo felt about the Inca worship of the sun? Explain your answer.
