

V. Lesson Plans

Handout 6: Can You Solve the Mystery of Machu Picchu?

Hiram Bingham was a young professor of history at Yale University when he decided to go to Peru to search for the legendary “last refuge of the Incas.” He knew from historical documents that Manco Inca, one of the last Inca emperors, built a city in a remote spot in the region of Vilcabamba in an attempt to escape Spanish rule. He had heard about remains of a settlement high in the eastern slopes of the Andes called “Matcho Picchu,” but to his knowledge, no European or American had ever seen the site. It was not mentioned by early Spanish observers.

Bingham set out in 1911 with a small band of Americans and Peruvians to explore the Urubamba River Valley, where he thought the last refuge of the Incas might be located. He got Melchor Arteaga, a local resident, to take him to some ruins, which lay high on a rocky ridge. The Urubamba River flowed around three sides of the mountain more than 1,500 feet below. Bingham was amazed when, after a hard two-hour climb up a steep mountain path, he came upon “a jungle-covered maze of small and large walls, the ruins of buildings made of blocks of white granite, most carefully cut and beautifully fitted together without cement.”*

Bingham took a careful inventory of the buildings and other structures that made up the settlement. He returned a year later to excavate the site, taking thousands of photographs both before and after excavation and removing hundreds of objects, including stone tools, pottery and metal jewelry. After he left the site, he asked himself if this could indeed be “the last refuge of the Inca.”

Below are the clues Bingham had to work with. Your mission is to think carefully about each clue. Then brainstorm as a class: What does each clue suggest about Machu Picchu’s original purpose? Do you think Bingham *had* found the last refuge of the Incas?

Clues

1. Machu Picchu was built on an extremely remote site, surrounded on three sides by a river that has carved out a deep valley. Towering mountains make access to the site very difficult.
2. The site appears to be built in a single architectural style similar to the Inca capital of Cuzco.
3. The site contains many buildings carefully constructed out of huge stones that fit together so tightly that no mortar is required.
4. The site was surrounded by only a small number of terraces—not enough to produce food for a large population.
5. The site contained many simple tombs, but Bingham did not find elaborate tombs containing precious gold objects and rich textiles that would have been included in the grave of an Inca emperor or members of his family.
6. Excavation of the site revealed many everyday objects such as tools and pottery.
7. The main portion of the site shows little evidence of glass, tiles, nails or other artifacts introduced by the Spanish.
8. Machu Picchu is fairly close to Cuzco, the Inca capital—about a three-day journey on foot.
9. Because it is at a lower altitude and on the slopes above the Amazonian basin, Machu Picchu’s climate is moister and warmer in the cold Andean winter than Cuzco’s.

* Bingham, Hiram, 1913. The Discovery of Machu Picchu. *Harper’s Magazine*, vol. 126.