

Winding Roads and Twisting Cords: The Tangled World of Inca Khipu

What is a khipu?

Inca khipus are twisted cords with knots that were used as a recording and communication system in the Inca Empire. Khipus are made with a primary cord where pendant cords that are plied and knotted are attached. Recent research has suggested that khipus are a logosyllabic system, which means that each separate symbol stands for a sound, such as “p” in “put.” Formerly, khipus were found to represent mostly numerical values for accounting and calendrical purposes. New discoveries, however, are quickly expanding our knowledge of this captivating recording system.

The Inca Empire: ~1,100 to 1532

The Inca Empire began in the capitol city of Cuzco, Peru and expanded north to present day Ecuador and south to present day Chile and Argentina. The empire expanded through military conquest and eventually ruled over 12 million people. The government constructed an extensive road system that stretched over 40,000 kilometers up, down, and across the Andean coast.



Photo taken by Gary Urton. Retrieved from: <<http://khipukamayuk.fas.harvard.edu/KGChachaCalendar.html>>

Top: This is one of the largest extant khipus, and is thought to be a calendrical record. It contains 762 pendant strings, most of which are organized into 24 groups of about 30 pendants. If this khipu is a calendrical record, it probably represents a two-year period.

Bottom:

Left: One of two khipus from the Peruvian village of Collata near Lima. This is one of two khipus that led researchers to believe that khipus could represent a logosyllabic system.

Right: A Close up of colored pendant cords on one of two Collata khipus.



Photo by Sabine Hyland. Retrieved from: <<https://www.sapiens.org/language/khipu-andean-writing/>>



Photo by Sabine Hyland. Retrieved from: <<https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/04/inca-khipus-code-discovery-peru/>>