Directions: Use this reading to identify the following details: Agriculture, Trade, Social Class, Culture, and the Demise of the Civilization. You should label the appropriate sections of reading with these labels.

Geography of the Inca Empire

Where was the Inca Empire located?

The Inca were a large South American empire that rose to power in the 1400s. The empire began in the 1100s with a small group of people living in a city called Cuzco, in the southern highlands of what is now Peru. Eventually, the Inca Empire would stretch over much of the South American continent, covering parts of modern-day Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru.

The Inca lived in the Andes Mountains. The Andes stretch the length of the western coast of South America, which is bordered by the Pacific Ocean. The Andes are the highest mountains in the Americas, and they are separated by plateaus that are also at very high altitudes.

The climate of the Andes region varies greatly depending on a number of factors such as altitude and latitude. Although the region’s average temperature does not change much over the course of a year, temperatures in a single day may vary by as much as 40 degrees between the high and low. Rainfall in the region is seasonal, with the highest amount of precipitation occurring between December and March.

The geography of the Andes had a large effect on the Inca Empire. The climate of the region and the mountainous terrain presented many challenges. The Inca were forced to adapt their lifestyles to meet many of these challenges.

Farming in the Andes

How did the physical geography of their empire impact Incan agriculture?

Life in the Andes was challenging in many ways. Agriculture in particular was extremely difficult. The steep slopes of the mountains limited the amount of fertile land that could be used for farming. It was also difficult to find water for the crops.

To solve this problem, the Inca used a system known as terrace farming. They built walls on hillsides and filled them with soil to make terraces. Terraces are wide steps on the side of mountains. Without the terraces, the mountainous landscape would have been too steep for farmers to water, plow, and harvest. The terrace system increased the amount of land that the Inca could use for agriculture. It also kept the topsoil from washing away down the hillside in heavy rains.

Although rain falls in the Andes regularly from December to March, the rest of the year sometimes brings extended periods with no rainfall at all. In order to ensure that they had the water they needed for their farms, the Inca built large canal systems to irrigate, or bring water to, their fields. The canals also brought water to the cities. Many streets had supplies of fresh water running through a canal. This made daily chores, such as washing clothes, much easier. To fertilize the land and improve crop production, Incan farmers in the coastal areas used bird droppings, or guano; in the highland areas, they used the remains of dead local animals, such as llamas.

Maize, squash, beans, and potatoes were the staple crops of the empire. Farmers also grew coca for its leaves, which they chewed to reduce fatigue and hunger. The farmers were taxed on all the crops they grew and gave most of their crops to the government. The government controlled how farmers used the crops that they harvested and kept a large store of food in reserve in case of prolonged drought. This system, called the mita,
was a way of redistributing wealth to promote the power of the emperor. Controlling the food supply also helped the emperor keep the empire united.

Highways and Byways

How did geography impact travel throughout the Inca Empire?

In addition to the challenges it created for Incan agriculture, the extreme mountain terrain of the Andes also presented many obstacles to travel and trade. The Inca created a network of roads throughout the empire. In order to create this network, a labor tax was enforced. The labor tax forced peasants to provide free labor for public works projects such as roads, forts, and bridges. Peasants were also forced to work mining precious metals.

Mountain Highways

The transportation network consisted of two main roads linking the north and the south, and a complex web of crossroads that reached nearly every village in the empire. This system of roads was essential for maintaining communication among the geographically widespread empire. Runners were needed because many of the roads were too steep for carts. Relay runners used a 10,000-mile-long network of roads to carry messages between government officials. These runners worked in teams to cover up to 250 miles each day. The roads were also used by the military, which could travel quickly to any region to protect the empire from invasion or to stop rebellions.

The mountainous roads caused problems for traders in the region. Llamas were common in the Andes; the Inca used them as pack animals, because llamas are capable of carrying heavy loads over the mountainous roadways. The llamas also provided a source of wool that was used to make cloth. Yarn was spun and boiled in dye. The dyed yarn was turned into fabric. Incan women paid their labor tax by spinning and dying wool. Llamas were also a food source for the Inca.

Bridges

The deep river valleys, called gorges, in the Andes provided another unique challenge for the Inca. Roads were often interrupted by these gorges, which meant that some Incan cities were separated from each other. The Incas used ropes made from twined plant fibers to create suspension bridges that could reach across these gorges. Some of the bridges were over 300 feet long. One bridge, constructed in 1350 CE, lasted over 500 years. These rope-suspension bridges were similar to today’s modern suspension bridges.

The roads and bridges of the Inca helped to unify the empire by enabling travel and trade. The road system made communication between the four regions of the empire easier. It also allowed the army to move quickly to wherever they might be needed. This all helped the emperor keep the sprawling Inca Empire united, even as it continued to expand.

Building the Empire

How did the Inca Empire expand its holdings?

The Inca Empire was centered in the territory that is modern-day Peru. However, through expansion it grew over time to include parts of present-day Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina.

Pachacuti, who ruled from 1438 to 1471 CE, greatly expanded the Inca Empire. Under his leadership, the Inca pushed northward, conquering new territories and spreading the boundaries of the emperor Topa Inca,
Pachacuti’s son, expanded the empire into Chile, Bolivia, Argentina, and Ecuador. Under Huayna Capac, thought by many historians to be the final Incan emperor, the empire added lands in northern Peru, coastal Ecuador, and Guayaquil.

The Inca conquered some regions through the use of their strong army. Incan soldiers remained in the conquered lands to help collect tribute and to keep order among the citizens. Local governments offered tributes of gold and silver to the central Inca government.

Force was not always required, however. Sometimes, regions were invited to join the empire before conquest. The emperor sent spies to the regions he wanted to conquer, in order to learn about their strengths and weaknesses. Then, the emperor sent messages to the leaders of these lands convincing them of the wisdom of joining the Inca Empire. Promises of safety and riches were often enough to persuade local rulers to join the empire. The local ruler’s children would be brought to Cuzco to train to be Inca administrators. There, they would learn about the structure of the Incan government.

The Political Structure of the Inca

What was the structure of the Incan government?

The society of the Inca Empire was built on order. At the head of the society and the government was the emperor, who was also known as Inca and was believed to have a divine origin from the sun god Inti. As a god-king, the emperor had absolute authority and ruled over the land, its people, and all that they owned. The Incan emperor lived in luxury, eating off gold plates and dressing in the finest clothes.

The royal family of the emperor was just below the emperor in the social structure of the empire. The royal family was followed in importance by the upper aristocracy, which was comprised of all the relatives and descendants of the royal family.

Those who had two Incan parents and were not previous members of one of the conquered regions could hold the highest government, religious, and military positions. The emperor’s sons took the most important administrative posts, but the emperor also gave important jobs to the nobles of the lands the Inca had conquered. This helped to promote unity within the empire.

The next level of power was the imperial administrators. The Inca Empire was divided into four regions, with the capital city of Cuzco at its center. There was an administrator, or governor, for each quarter. The quarters were divided into smaller governmental units known as districts. District governors supervised about 10,000 peasants each. Village leaders were in charge of smaller groups of perhaps 1,000 people. Below them, 10 foremen were responsible for overseeing 100 peasants each.

It was the duty of the noble class to supervise the government officials who ran the kingdom. This expansive system of administration and organization of the government helped the Inca Empire maintain power across a vast and challenging expanse of land.

An Organized Empire

How did the Inca organize their growing empire?

As the empire expanded, the structure of the government and the organization of the empire became more important in order to maintain control. The Inca had a central capital in Cuzco and regional capitals in four other cities.
The empire as a whole was known as Tahuantinsuyu, a Quechua word which means “Land of the Four Quarters.” Quechua is the native language of the Inca. Each of the four quarters was called a suyu. The Antisuyu quarter was made of deep, heavily forested valleys east of Cuzco. The Cuntisuyu was west of Cuzco. South of Cuzco was Collasuyu, the largest of quarters, which touched present-day Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. The Chincasuyu was comprised of the land north of Cuzco. Each quarter was further divided into smaller provinces. Placing the capital at the center of the four regions helped the emperor keep control of the vast Inca Empire.

The empire was at its largest during the reign of Huayna Capac. At that time, the empire spread over 2,500 miles from north to south, and about 500 miles from east to west. Somewhere between 3.5 million and 16 million people from several different tribal backgrounds lived in a region about as big as the present-day Atlantic Coast states in the United States.

The physical distance made communication across the empire difficult. Communication was also hampered by the fact that there was not a shared language throughout the empire. Although no written Incan language has been discovered, historians believe that the Inca used a system of knotted ropes of different colors, known as quipu, to record information. Many historians believe that this was a numerical system that was only used for accounting and record keeping. Others believe it was a binary code (similar to that of modern computers) that also could be used as a form of written language. However, few examples of quipu exist and they have never been successfully translated.

The geography of the large Inca Empire made governing the empire a challenge. However, the Inca succeeded and created a great society. As great as the Inca Empire was, however, it was not powerful enough to last forever. In 1532 CE, Spanish explorers, including Francisco Pizarro, arrived in Peru and made contact with the Inca. This contact with European explorers would ultimately lead to the end of a great civilization.

The Mystery of Machu Picchu

What does the Inca city Machu Picchu reveal about Incan architecture and engineering?

One Incan city still mystifies historians and archaeologists. Known as the “City in the Clouds” and the “Lost City of the Inca,” it is perhaps the best-known archaeological ruin in the Americas. This city is proof of the power and architectural ability of the ancient Inca.

City in the Clouds

Machu Picchu lies in the middle of a dense mountain forest, rising 8,000 feet above sea level. Machu Picchu is surrounded by mountains that are holy to the Quechua Indians, the descendants of the Inca, who still occupy the land today. City walls were made out of white granite. The land was terraced to aid in farming, and ramps were used to make walking up and down the steep mountain terrain easier. These elements helped to make Machu Picchu the premiere city of the Inca Empire.

Historians still debate why the Inca would perch a great city like this on a mountain ridge in the Peruvian Andes. Some historians think that Machu Picchu was a royal estate for Pachacuti, a famous Incan ruler and warrior who conquered much of the land that made up the Inca Empire in the 1400s.

Engineering Machu Picchu

The Inca built the great city in less than 100 years. A nearby mountain spring provided fresh water. The Inca built an elaborate system of canals and fountains to process drinking water and prevent flooding. To help the city get rid of water from rainfall, Incan engineers used chunks of white granite left over from construction of
the city walls to build an underground drainage system. There are approximately 700 terraces at Machu Picchu. Water can flow easily through the soil in the terraces, so it seeps through the ground and is safely carried away from the city. Engineers also included over 100 drainage holes to help drain rainwater from the city.

**The Decline of Machu Picchu**

Machu Picchu declined as smallpox and civil war weakened the Inca Empire. Just 60 years after the death of Pachacuti, the Inca Empire collapsed. As much as historians and archaeologists have learned about Machu Picchu, it still remains a source of intrigue and wonder for many. Even today, many aspects of Incan culture are still common in societies throughout the Andes Mountains. Quechua, spoken by the ancient Inca, is still the dominant language of many peasants in Peru and Bolivia. Religion, family life, and farming techniques used today still mirror those used by the ancient Inca.

Much of the wonder of Machu Picchu was created as a response to the challenges imposed by the environment of the Inca Empire. The geography of the Inca Empire affected all aspects of life. The links between the past and present that can be seen in Machu Picchu demonstrate how important the geography of the region continues to be.