NO PREP

Inca Child Sacrifice

Capacocha and the Mountain Mummies

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Inca Child Sacrifice: Capacocha and the Mountain Mummies

Children on the Mountain Peaks

In 1999, archaeologists climbing Llullaillaco, a volcanic mountain on the Argentina-Chile border at 6,739 meters above sea level — one of the highest active volcanoes in the world — found three children buried near the summit. They had been there for approximately 500 years. The cold, dry conditions at extreme altitude had preserved them with extraordinary completeness: their skin, hair, clothing, and the food in their stomachs were all intact. One of the children, a girl of about 13 who became known as the Maiden, showed such preservation that her blood still contained preserved red blood cells — a fact confirmed by subsequent laboratory analysis. The three Llullaillaco children — the Maiden, a boy of about 7, and a younger

Name: Period: Date:

Inca Child Sacrifice: Capacocha and the Mountain Mummies

Children on the Mountain Peaks

In 1999, archaeologists climbing Llullaillaco, a volcanic mountain on the Argentina-Chile border at 6,739 meters above sea level (one of the highest active volcanoes in the world), found three children buried near the summit. They had been there for approximately 500 years. The cold, dry conditions at extreme altitude had preserved them with extraordinary completeness: their skin, hair, clothing, and the food in their stomachs were all intact. One of the children, a girl of about 13 who became known as the Maiden, showed such preservation that her blood still contained preserved red blood cells, a fact confirmed by subsequent laboratory analysis. The three Llullaillaco children (the Maiden, a boy of about 7, and a younger girl of about 6) were participants in the Inca ritual of capacocha, the sacrifice of children at important moments: the death of an emperor, the installation of a new one, natural disasters, or important military victories. Capacocha was not a common practice (it was reserved for moments of supreme state importance), but it was one of the most revealing archaeological windows into Inca religious life and the relationship between the state, the mountains, and the divine.

What the Forensic Analysis Revealed

Forensic analysis of the Llullaillaco children has produced an extraordinarily detailed picture of their final year of life. Chemical analysis of their hair, which grows at a known rate and encodes diet and stress in its structure over time, revealed a timeline of preparation for the ritual. In the months leading up to the sacrifice, the children's diet shifted dramatically: they began consuming significant quantities of coca leaves and chicha (fermented maize beer), both of which were sacred substances in Inca religion. The coca and chicha levels increased sharply in the final weeks of life, indicating sedation: the children were almost certainly unconscious or

in an altered state when they died. The children's clothing and burial goods were of the highest quality in the Inca world. The Maiden wore a fine alpaca wool dress with feathered ornaments; all three were accompanied by miniature figurines in gold, silver, and spondylus shell. Spondylus, a thorny oyster shell from the Ecuadorian coast, was one of the most valuable ritual substances in the Inca world, associated with rain, fertility, and the sea. The quality of the offerings confirms that these children were treated as extraordinarily important, possibly as divine messengers or intermediaries between the human world and the mountain deities (apus).

Capacocha: The Ritual in Context

The capacocha ritual, as described in Spanish colonial sources and partially reconstructed from archaeological evidence, involved a complex process. Children chosen for capacocha were selected across the empire, typically from noble families, and were considered a form of living tribute (the highest possible gift) from the provinces to the Inca state and to the mountains. They traveled to Cusco to be presented to the Sapa Inca, then began a journey to their sacrificial site, often months long. Communities along the route provided food and ceremony. The journey to the summit of Llullaillaco from Cusco would have taken weeks of travel across the altiplano and up into extreme altitude. The fact that the children were still alive at the summit, and that they died there, confirms that the Inca had developed enough physiological understanding of altitude to manage the ascent. The children were placed in rock-cut chambers near the summit, provided with their burial goods, and left. They likely died of exposure after the sedating effects of the coca and chicha rendered them insensible. Archaeological evidence from dozens of other Andean peak sites shows that this practice occurred across the empire, not just at Llullaillaco.

The Ethics of Display: A Modern Debate

After excavation, the Llullaillaco children were transported to the Museo de Arqueologia de Alta Montana (MAAM) in Salta, Argentina. The museum was built specifically to house and display them. Each child is preserved in a climate-controlled rotating display case, maintained at the temperature and humidity conditions of the summit where they were found. Visitors can view them individually on a rotating schedule. The decision to display the children has been deeply controversial. Indigenous rights organizations, including representatives of Quechua and Kolla

communities in northern Argentina and Bolivia, have argued that the display is disrespectful to ancestors who were placed in their burial location deliberately and permanently. The children, they argue, were not meant to be moved, displayed, or subjected to scientific analysis. They deserve the same dignity we extend to any human remains in a recognized burial context. Museum authorities and many archaeologists counter that the children are at extreme risk of deterioration from climate change — the permafrost and ice conditions that preserved them are less stable than they were 500 years ago — and that controlled museum conditions actually protect them better than the mountaintop would. They also argue that the research conducted on the children has produced valuable knowledge about Inca life that would otherwise have been impossible to obtain. The debate remains unresolved.

Key Information: Capacocha and the Llullaillaco Children

Detail	Information
Discovery	1999; three children found near summit of Llullaillaco volcano, Argentina-Chile border
Altitude	6,739 meters above sea level — one of the world's highest active volcanoes
Preservation	Extraordinary; red blood cells preserved in the Maiden, clothing and food intact on all three
The Children	The Maiden (~13), the Boy (~7), the Younger Girl (~6); identified by modern nicknames
Capacocha	Inca ritual sacrifice of children at supreme state occasions; rare but documented practice
Hair Analysis	Shows diet shift to coca and chicha in final months; sharp increase in final weeks = sedation
Burial Goods	Gold, silver, spondylus shell figurines; alpaca wool clothing of highest quality
Spondylus	Thorny oyster from Ecuador coast; most valued Inca ritual substance, associated with rain

Detail	Information
Current Location	Museo de Arqueologia de Alta Montana (MAAM), Salta, Argentina
Display Controversy	Indigenous groups object; museum argues scientific value and preservation necessity

Case Study: The Director's Decision

Dr. Ana Farfan is the director of a high-altitude archaeology museum in Salta. The question she gets asked most often — by journalists, by visiting scholars, by the occasional angry protester outside — is: should the children be displayed? She has given many versions of the answer. The scientific version: the children's remains are deteriorating on the mountain due to changing climate conditions, and controlled preservation in the museum extends their survival and allows research that would otherwise be impossible. The cultural version: the museum's educational mission has changed public understanding of Inca civilization more than any textbook could. The practical version: the museum is the primary economic driver for Salta's heritage tourism, and the children are the reason anyone comes. What she does not say in public, though she thinks about it: she has met with representatives of the Kolla community three times. Each time, they have said clearly that the children should be returned to the mountain. Each time, she has explained the preservation situation. Each time, there has been a silence that she cannot fill with scientific data. The children are not hers. But the mountain is not theirs either — it belongs to Argentina. Nobody, in these conversations, is really talking about the children.

1. Dr. Farfan gives three different justifications for the display — scientific, cultural, and economic. Rank these in order of ethical strength and explain your reasoning. Are any of them sufficient to override the Indigenous communities' objections?

---

2. The case study ends with 'Nobody, in these conversations, is really talking about the children.' What does this observation suggest about how heritage disputes are often conducted, and what might it mean to actually center the children in this debate?

Multiple Choice

1. What did chemical analysis of the Llullaillaco children's hair reveal about their final months?

a) Their diet shifted to include increasing amounts of coca and chicha, suggesting ritual sedation

b) They had been malnourished and showed signs of illness before the ritual

c) The hair showed evidence of forced labor in the mines before being later selected for sacrifice

d) They had traveled from distant coastal regions based on their seafood diet

2. Why were spondylus shells so significant as burial offerings for the Llullaillaco children?

a) They were the most common material used in Inca everyday jewelry

b) They were extremely rare, associated with rain and fertility, and considered the highest Inca offering

c) They were used exclusively by the Sapa Inca and indicated the children were of the pure royal bloodline

d) They came from Peru and were the standard currency throughout the Inca Empire

3. What is the core ethical argument made by Indigenous communities against displaying the Llullaillaco children?

a) The museum is profiting unfairly from Inca heritage without sharing revenue with descendants

b) Indigenous groups own the mountain and therefore have legal rights to the remains

c) The children's remains are too fragile to survive public display

d) The children were placed permanently in a specific location and should be respected as such

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Capacocha	A) A mountain deity in Andean religion; high peaks were believed to be divine beings requiring offerings
2. ___ Spondylus	B) Fermented maize beer, a sacred substance consumed in increasing quantities by the Llullaillaco children before death
3. ___ Chicha	C) The high-altitude plateau of the Andes, the central terrain of the Inca Empire
4. ___ Apu	D) The Inca ritual of child sacrifice at moments of supreme state importance such as the death of an emperor
5. ___ Altiplano	E) A thorny oyster shell from the Ecuadorian coast, one of the most valued Inca ritual substances

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The three children found on Llullaillaco in 1999 are known by the nicknames the Maiden, the _____, and the Younger Girl, based on their estimated ages at death.

2. Hair analysis of the Llullaillaco children showed a dramatic increase in coca and chicha consumption in the final _____ of life, consistent with intentional sedation before the ritual.

3. The debate over displaying the Llullaillaco children reflects a broader tension in archaeology between scientific preservation goals and the rights of _____ communities over their ancestors.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. How did the forensic analysis of the Llullaillaco children's remains produce historical knowledge that written records alone could not have provided?

2. Describe the capacocha ritual as reconstructed from both archaeological and documentary evidence. Why was it considered a supreme form of tribute to the Inca state and to the mountain deities?

3. The museum argues that climate change makes the mountain a worse preservation environment than the museum. Does this scientific argument fully resolve the ethical concerns raised by Indigenous communities? Explain your reasoning.