NO PREP

Machu Picchu

The Lost City That Was Never Lost

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

Name: Period: Date:

Machu Picchu: The Lost City That Was Never Lost

The Story We Were Taught

The standard story of Machu Picchu goes like this: in 1911, an American explorer named Hiram Bingham III heroically discovered a mysterious 'lost city' hidden in the Peruvian jungle, unknown to the outside world for centuries. It is a great story — dramatic, romantic, and satisfying. It is also substantially wrong in almost every important detail. Machu Picchu was not lost. It was not unknown. It was not even particularly hard to find. And Bingham did not discover it. What Bingham did was bring the site to the attention of the academic and popular audiences of the English-speaking world, which is a different thing. Peruvian farmers had been living on the slopes below Machu Picchu for generations. Several families were actively farming the Inca

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Who Built Machu Picchu and Why?

Machu Picchu was constructed in the mid-fifteenth century, almost certainly during the reign of the Inca emperor Pachacuti (ruled 1438-1471), who transformed the Inca from a regional power into the largest empire in the Americas. The site sits at approximately 2,430 meters above sea level on a ridge between two mountain peaks in the Cusco region of Peru, overlooking the Urubamba River below. Its location is both strategically defensible and astronomically aligned: windows and doorways in the main structures are precisely oriented to capture the rising sun at the summer solstice and other significant calendar moments. For much of the twentieth century, Machu Picchu was described as a 'lost city' or 'mountain citadel,' with various theories about its function: a refuge for the Inca nobility, a military outpost, a

religious center, a women's convent for the Chosen Women (acllacuna). Careful archaeological analysis, particularly work by archaeologist John Rowe and later by Johan Reinhard and others, has produced a more specific answer: Machu Picchu was almost certainly the royal estate of Pachacuti. The estate was a private country retreat for the emperor and his household, similar in concept to a European king's hunting lodge, though vastly grander in scale.

The Architecture: No Mortar, No Margin for Error

The most immediately striking feature of Machu Picchu to any visitor is the quality of its stone construction. The Inca used a technique called ashlar masonry: precisely cutting and fitting stones together without any mortar, relying entirely on the exact shape of each block to create a stable fit. The stones are fitted so tightly that in many places a knife blade cannot be inserted between them. This is particularly remarkable given that the Inca had no iron tools: all cutting was done with stone, bone, and bronze implements, and the stones were shaped by abrasion and patient refinement rather than by sharp-edged cutting. The engineering of Machu Picchu goes far beyond the visible structures. About 60% of the construction effort went into underground and invisible infrastructure: drainage channels, retaining walls, and a sophisticated foundation system that allows the site to survive the heavy rainfall and periodic earthquakes of the Andean environment. The agricultural terraces (andenes) that step down the mountain on multiple sides were not decorative: they prevented erosion, managed water runoff, and produced food for the site's estimated 500-1,000 permanent residents. Modern engineers studying the site have described the drainage system as more sophisticated than many contemporary systems.

Bingham, Yale, and the Repatriation Fight

When Hiram Bingham conducted excavations at Machu Picchu beginning in 1912 — funded by Yale University and the National Geographic Society — he shipped approximately 46,000 objects back to Yale University in Connecticut, USA. These included ceramics, bronze tools, jewelry, and human skeletal remains. For nearly a century, these artifacts remained at Yale, with Peru repeatedly requesting their return and Yale repeatedly declining. The dispute became a major test case for the growing international movement around repatriation of archaeological material to source countries. In 2010 and 2012, after years of negotiation and significant public

pressure, Yale finally agreed to return the collection to Peru. The objects are now housed in the Museo Machu Picchu in Cusco. The case set an important precedent and is often cited in discussions about the Elgin Marbles, the Benin Bronzes, and other contested collections held by major Western institutions.

What Archaeology Has Revealed

Systematic archaeology at Machu Picchu, particularly from the 1980s onward, has produced a detailed picture of who lived there and what they did. Analysis of skeletal remains recovered from the site's burial caves revealed that the population was diverse: individuals from many different regions of the Inca Empire, suggesting that Machu Picchu's permanent residents included retainer populations brought from across the realm to serve the royal estate. Isotope analysis of bones and teeth has confirmed this regional diversity. Ceramic analysis shows that pottery at Machu Picchu came from many regions of the empire, further confirming its role as a node in a broad imperial network rather than a purely local site. Plant remains indicate a sophisticated agricultural operation: over 100 varieties of food plants have been identified, including multiple varieties of potato, maize, quinoa, and medicinal herbs. The site appears to have been abandoned relatively quickly after the Spanish conquest, perhaps around 1572, and the forest regrew over it — which is why it was not on the Spanish colonial map, though local Indigenous memory of the site never completely faded.

Key Information: Machu Picchu

Detail	Information
Location	Cusco region, Peru; 2,430 meters above sea level on a ridge above the Urubamba River
Built By	Inca Emperor Pachacuti, mid-15th century (c. 1450-1460 CE)
Likely Function	Royal estate of Pachacuti; not a military fortress or women's convent
Construction	Ashlar masonry — no mortar, precisely fitted stones cut with stone and bronze tools

Detail	Information
Infrastructure	~60% underground: drainage, retaining walls, earthquake-resistant foundations
Population	Estimated 500-1,000 permanent residents; diverse regional origins per skeletal analysis
'Discovery'	Bingham reached the site in 1911, guided by local farmer's son Pablito Richarte
Artifacts Removed	~46,000 objects shipped to Yale University 1912; returned to Peru 2010-2012
Abandonment	Probably around 1572 CE following Spanish conquest; local memory of site persisted
UNESCO Status	World Heritage Site since 1983; one of Peru's most visited tourist destinations

Case Study: Agustin Knows the Way Up

Agustin Richarte is seventy-three years old and has been telling this story his whole life, though fewer people believe the important parts. In July 1911, his grandfather Pablito was eleven years old. A tall American man with round glasses arrived at the farm on the lower terraces, asking about ruins up the mountain. Pablito's father, Anacleto, was busy with the maize and sent the boy. Pablito took the American up, showed him the walls and the temples, and accepted his few coins. The American took notes and photographs for two days and then went back down. Pablito came home for dinner. Agustin has a photograph of his grandfather as an old man, standing in front of what became the most photographed archaeological site in the Western Hemisphere. Pablito is not in the famous National Geographic photographs from 1912. Hiram Bingham's published accounts mention 'local guides' and 'Indian farmers' without names. 'He knew the place,' Agustin says. 'My grandfather knew the place. The Quechua people in this valley always knew the place. There was no discovery. There was just a man from America who wrote a book about it.'

1. What does Agustin's account of his grandfather reveal about the difference between academic or international 'discovery' and local Indigenous knowledge? Why does this distinction matter for how we credit and tell historical narratives?

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2. The reading describes Bingham's 1912 removal of 46,000 artifacts to Yale as a 'major test case for repatriation.' Using details from both the case study and the reading, explain why repatriation matters beyond just the return of objects.

Multiple Choice

1. What is the current scholarly consensus about Machu Picchu's primary function?

    a) A military fortress defending the Cusco region from outside attack

    b) An emergency refuge for the Inca nobility during the Spanish conquest

    c) The royal estate and country retreat of the Inca emperor Pachacuti

    d) A religious center housing the Chosen Women dedicated to the sun god

2. What makes Inca ashlar masonry at Machu Picchu particularly remarkable?

    a) Stones are precisely fitted without mortar, cut using only stone and bronze tools

    b) The stones were quarried from a single location 200 miles away and transported by rope

    c) It uses a unique type of volcanic cement that has never been replicated

    d) The construction required a workforce of more than 100,000 laborers working over a century

3. According to the reading, why was Machu Picchu not on Spanish colonial maps despite being occupied until around 1572?

a) The site was too remote for Spanish administrators to include in official surveys

b) Inca workers deliberately concealed it from the Spanish conquistadors during the conquest

c) The forest regrew over it after abandonment, but local Indigenous memory of it persisted

d) The Spanish actively kept it secret because they were using it as a military base

Matching

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

Term	Definition
1. ___ Ashlar masonry	A) The Inca emperor who built Machu Picchu, ruling from 1438-1471 and transforming the Inca into an empire
2. ___ Pachacuti	B) Agricultural terraces stepping down the mountainside at Machu Picchu, managing water and preventing erosion
3. ___ Andenes	C) A construction technique using precisely fitted stones without mortar, used throughout Machu Picchu
4. ___ Repatriation	D) The Chosen Women — a class of Inca women dedicated to religious service, once theorized to be the residents of Machu Picchu
5. ___ Acllacuna	E) The return of cultural artifacts or human remains to the country or community from which they were taken

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Hiram Bingham was guided up to Machu Picchu in 1911 by a local farmer's son named Pablito _____, who accepted a few coins for the trip.

2. Approximately _____ of the construction effort at Machu Picchu went into invisible underground infrastructure including drainage, retaining walls, and earthquake-resistant foundations.

3. After years of dispute, Yale University returned approximately 46,000 artifacts to Peru in _____ and 2012; they are now housed in a museum in Cusco.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why is it inaccurate to say Hiram Bingham 'discovered' Machu Picchu in 1911? Who actually knew about the site, and what does this error reveal about how exploration history is often written?

_____

_____

_____

2. Describe how archaeological evidence — skeletal analysis, isotope data, and ceramic analysis — has helped determine who actually lived at Machu Picchu and what their daily lives involved.

_____

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3. The Yale repatriation case is described as setting 'an important precedent.' What is a precedent, and how might the Machu Picchu case influence future disputes over archaeological collections?