

Disentangling an Ethnographic Study of the Imagined Inca: How the Yale-Peruvian Expedition of 1911 Created an Inca Heritage

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Abstract : Yale University Professor Hiram Bingham's discovery of Machu Picchu in 1911 spurred an international interest in the Inca Empire, and with it, a dispute with the Peruvian government over who had rightful jurisdiction and curatorship over Inca history. By 2011, the Peruvian government initiated a legal battle for the return of artifacts that Bingham had removed from Machu Picchu, successfully returning them not to the site of Machu Picchu, but to Cusco, employing the rationale that the ancient Inca capital housed descendants of the Inca empire. This conflation of the past and present can be traced to a largely unanalyzed study that accompanied Bingham's expedition: an ethnographic analysis of Inca descendants, which at the time portrayed indigenous Peruvian Andean peoples as remnants of a lost civilization, using Cusco as an assumed repository for people with 'Inca' characteristics. This study draws from the original Yale Peruvian Expedition archives, the Cusco Library archives, and in-depth interviews with curators of the Inca Museum and Machu Picchu Museum to analyze both the political conflict that emerged as a reaction to the ethnographic study, and how the study articulated with an inflating tourism market attempting to define what it meant to be Inca to an international public. The construction of the modern Inca as both directors of tourism management and purveyors of their archaeological material culture points to a unique case in which modern Peruvian citizens could claim heritage to an Inca past despite a lack of recognition as a legally defined group. The result has far-reaching implications, since Bingham's artifacts returned not necessarily to a traditional nation-state, but to an imagined one, broadening the conditions under which informal repatriations can occur.

Keywords : archaeology of memory, imagined communities, Incanismo, repatriation

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