EXpedition REPORT

The 2011 Paititi/Pantayqoyya Expedition: Seeking the Furthest Known Reach of the Incas

September 2011

The Explorers Club Flag #75

Province of Calca, Department (State) of Cusco, Southeastern Peru

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Beginning in 1984 my expedition party has been finding and documenting Incan sites spread over the most remote highland and selva alta—high-altitude jungle—areas to the northeast and north of the Incan capital of Cusco. We have been brought ever further in this exploration by our following an unmapped Incan camino de piedra, a road of stone, which traverses the ridge of the Paucartambo range from southeast to northwest, and continues on, beyond, ever northward. In 1989 we reached the Plateau of Toporake, documenting there its ancient structures appearing to have been Incan barracks, guarding a lone road from there to the north. In 1993, expedition member Paulino Mamani FI’96 and I followed the northernmost extension of this trunk road a short distance into the cloud-forests lining the hillsides above the uppermost cabeceras, the headwaters, of the Río Timpía. In 1999 we followed it much farther, past various stone retaining walls as far north as we could, until the vast distances ahead in the increasingly more difficult river valley necessitated our returning to the Andean highlands from whence we had descended.
From there, however, we headed northwest along the vast high plateau known as the Meseta de Pantiacolla, where branches of the trunk road led us to a large “8-shaped” lake which has come to be known as the “Lago de Ángel.” Astride the lake we found the remains of low ceremonial platforms and other indications of ancient Incan habitation, the furthest up to that point known to exist in that direction.

In 2004 we followed a continuation of those Incan trails farther to the northwest, beyond the Lago de Ángel to the outer reaches of the Meseta, to find there, atop a peak now known as “Último Punto,” larger and more complex ceremonial platforms that would take over as the furthest documented Incan archaeological site directly to the north of Cusco.

In 2006 we approached the area of the Lago de Ángel, “Último Punto,” and the “Camino de Piedra” from the far west, climbing up from the sub-tropical areas of the Río Yavero nearer to its mouth on the Río Urubamba, climbing ever eastward, ascending the wild Río Taperachi, in the direction of “las alturas,” the highlands of the Meseta de Pantiacolla. We documented that directly to the west of the Lago de Ángel and “Último Punto” area, between there and the Río Urubamba, there lay only the most rudimentary Incan ruins—terraces, three-sided structures, and platforms—that represented the Incans’ furthest attempt to establish their agriculture between the highlands of the Meseta de Pantiacolla and the low-altitude jungles of the Urubamba.

In 2008 we investigated an area of the Camino de Piedra that that lay between the observation post called Tres Cruces de Oro, and the entrances to the jungles of Callanga within the Paucartambo Range. And in 2009, on a documentary film project, we identified a well-made stretch of Camino de Piedra, with a multitude of flat slate paving stones, further north along that same stretch of mountains.

The 2011 Expedition

The goal of The 2011 PAITITI/PANTAYQOYA EXPEDITION would be, then, to again enter these areas of precipitous topography, climatic extremes, and bothersome insects, and to continue to explore for and to uncover archaeological sites in these most remote areas to the north of the Incan heartland of Cusco, especially as they may be related to the Incan road of stone, the “Camino de Piedra,” and the legends of the Incan refuge or lost realm of “Paititi.”

The expedition was funded by a Scott Pearlman Field Award, and a grant from the Explorers Club/Eddie Bauer Grant for Expeditions. The expedition was awarded and carried The Explorers Club Flag #75.

Members of the 2011 expedition were as follows:

-Ignacio Mamani, 43 years of age, primary machetero/trailblazer and primary
navigator, from Calca, PERU;
-Luis Alberto Huillca Mamani, 28 years of age, assistant to Ignacio, cook, machetero, from Calca, PERU;
-Yuri Leveratto, 42 years of age, Italian explorer and author, resident of Cali, Colombia;
-Javier Zardoya, 34 years of age, Spanish explorer and journalist, from Zaragoza, Spain;
-Gregory Deyermenjian FN’88, 62 years of age, expedition organizer/leader and chronicler, from Wakefield, Massachusetts, USA.

Our exploration/navigation strategy this year would be to head by vehicle as far as we could in the direction taking us ever more directly north of Cusco. We would head for the sprawling frontier town of Quebrada Honda, along the Río Yanatile, and then head towards the Cordillera de Paucartambo, as far as the dirt road would allow our vehicle to progress. We would look then to attain mules and pack horses from local campesinos, and head off toward the Río Paucartambo, which we knew we would be able to cross by way of an old bridge, and head from there up towards the Paucartambo Range, upon which would lie the Camino de Piedra, documenting whatever Incan ruins we might find along what we hoped would be a new route that would take us not only towards the Road of Stone, but that would allow us to explore for an archaeological complex that might lie in the area of the Río Ch’unchosmayu, an area near to which Paulino Mamani and I had passed on our descent from Toporake in 1989, where we found an isolated ruin that could indicate that further into the forested hills of that area would lie some archaeological complex that would provide a link between the Incan heartland to the southwest, and the Camino de Piedra, the “Road of Stone” and the portals to lands associated with a Peruvian “Paititi” further into the Pantiacolla.

And so, in the silent darkness of a very early September morning, Yuri Leveratto, Javier Zardoya, and the author of this expedition report left Cusco with vehicle rented from our friend, “Pepe Valdivia,” and driven by Pepe’s son, “Pepe Jr.” We had planned our route using past experience in adjacent areas, as well as the excellent map provided by Peru’s Instituto Geográfico Nacional and the U.S.A.’s Defense Mapping Agency, made according to data provided by satellite photograph and aerial photographs, this particular map being identified as Edition 1-IGN, Series J631, Sheet 2445, QUEBRADA HONDA.

Heading north, we passed through Pisac—an Incan town with ruins high above that rival in detail and style even those of the more celebrated Machu Picchu—via asphalted road, and then the town of Calca in the Cusco region’s “Sacred Valley,” this place having briefly served as the capital of Manco Inca’s rebellion against the Spaniards in 1536. There we picked up the two other expedition members, Ignacio Mamani, and his nephew, Luis Alberto Huillca Mamani, and continued on. Soon the asphalt road ended, and we ascended to and over the 4,385 meter-high snowy pass of Amparaes before descending toward the lush valley of the Río Yanatile.

The dirt road followed the twists and turns of the valley of the Yanatile, below, and after a time we lumbered in to the backwoods capital hereabouts, the town of Quebrada Honda, last stop for last minute items like more bread or fruit, and the last “restaurant” meal we would have for a time,. From here we journeyed by increasingly narrow and
precipitous dirt roads hacked and bulldozed out of the hillsides of the Cordillera de Lares-Lacco, the Lares-Lacco Range, winding and wending our way to the northeast. The territory to the north and northeast of Quebrada is so precipitous and difficult that although the eventual destination of the dirt road lies far to the northeast, it is first necessary to follow its course far to the northwest, so as to be able to gradually circumvent the steepest areas and turn toward the desired direction.

We bumped inexorably along, and reached a point beyond which the vehicle could advance no further, a place known as “Punto Carretera,” meaning “last point along the ‘highway’.” Here were some ramshackle structures, made of sheets of corrugated metal held aloft by a stick or wooden pole at each of the four corners, which provided some semblance of protection from the elements to those campesinos, peasants of the far flung surrounding areas who might wait there days or longer for a vehicle to come to that point, bringing returning locals, or produce to trade, and returning to Quebrada Honda with passengers. There would likely be trade fairs here, as well, as there were implements like old metal exhaust pipes blowing through which could help to keep burning the fires for warming its temporary inhabitants and for their cooking.

From this point, from “Punto Carretera,” the primary pathfinder of our team, Ignacio Mamani, set off on foot down the valley of the Río Mapacho, which is a continuation of the Río Paucartambo (which further yet downstream in the direction of the Urubamba and the Meseta de Pantiacolla becomes the Río Yavero), to seek settlements of campesinos and there attain the rental of pack animals and the services of carrieros, muleteers.

After a time spent encamped in tents set up under the extra protection provided by the rickety and frequently punctured yet very welcomed metal roofs, Ignacio returned accompanied by Santiago Molina, a resident of the valley on the far side of the river, and the animals.

After a time, we were all loaded up, and on we all went, on foot, headed east-northeast, to the valley of the Mapacho and beyond. Descending, we came closer to the river, and there an antique bridge, the Puente Bolognesi, at 12° 38.739’ latitude south by 72° 08.120’ longitude west, at an altitude of 1,222 meters above sea level, swaying back and forth as we stepped along it, transported us across the deep and raging river, and from the Lares-Lacco Range on to that of Paucartambo.

The climb up and away from the river was like all such climbs, a seemingly endless ascent, round and round, as the trail twisted and turned one way and another yet always upward, through dust and the stifling heat of a searing Andean sun. We finally arrived at an inhabited area, known as Naranjayoc, along the hills known locally as the Cerro de Naranjayoc.

After a time spent in this sub-tropical area, we left, climbing up to the northeast. Within a relatively short period of time, at a spot overlooking the Mapacho far below, we came to an unnamed petroglyph site, featuring a large rock covered in parts with indecipherable
angular straight-line designs from some time in the distant past. Further on we came to a
the stone ruins of a large seemingly Incan structure in the form of a *kallanka*, or large
rectangular hall, with various stone niches or “windows,” this site being known to locals
as “*Tambocasa,*” a word which mimes Quechus—the language of the Incas—and
Spanish, meaning “rest-house house.” The ruin was found to be located at 12° 37’ 10”
latitude south by 72° 06’ 56” longitude west.

We continued on further to the east-northeast, with an affluent of the Mapacho, the Río
Ch’unchosmayu now ever below us, down to our north. We viewed the valley of
Mestizamayu, known as the *Quebrada Mestizamayu,* entered the Ch’unchosmayu from
the north, this *quebrada,* ravine, appearing particularly steep-sided and covered in dense
forest as far as one could view into its more upstream darkness. Over the next few days
we passed abandoned frontier settlers’ huts and eventually the last semi-inhabited
settlement.

Here, in an area known as “Mesada” or “Llactapata,” was a ramshackle hut with various
storage buildings of rough wooden planks and rotting-away thatch roofs. The owner of
the area, we were told by the *cuidante,* Gavino, the impoverished man whose job it was
to care for the place, was absent, and this same man insisted with many vociferous
exclamations of “Manan!” (“No!”) and “Manan kanchu unu!” (“There is no water!”) that
we could not stay, and should leave. But, in typical Andean style, with our Quechua-
speaking member Ignacio leading the conversational way, the conversation turned
eventually more pleasant, and we soon found ourselves sharing meals, and strong drink,
and coca leaves in the shadowy dark recesses of the typically primitive yet cozy hut, a
great luxury compared to meals taken in the cold outdoors, sitting on rocks.

After a time we found ourselves again headed along the crests and sides of the peaks
shadowing the Ch’unchosmayu below to the north. Way on the other side of the
Ch’unchosmayu lay the next mysterious *quebrada,* leading off in to no-one-yet-knows-
what, the *Quebrada Tunquimayu.* Here, directly across from and far above the
Tunquimayu’s mouth where it merged with the Ch’unchosmayu, we came to another
well-made, apparently Incan, stone ruin, known as *Llactapata* (meaning “city above”), at
12° 37.025’ latitude south by 72° 05.75’ longitude west, and at 1,935 meters altitude.
The 12 meter long wall of this ruined structure, being a full two meters high, contained
eight small niches or well-made indented stone “windows” lining the level just a foot
from the top, a sign that here was another structure of some importance other than that of
having functioned as merely an antique dwelling. Its side walls were five meters in
length. The structure appeared to be of the *masma* style frequently found in warmer areas
of Incan influence, such as we had found in previous years in the jungles of *Mameria,*
and some of which are to be found at Machu Picchu, which (structures) are open on one
side, with a built-up area to support a low sloping roof situated in the middle of the long
fourth (open) side, which would have been supported by the rectangular stone “column”
which stood in the middle of where the fourth wall would have been. There was also
nearby a smaller ancient stone structure with rounded corners, a sign that it would have
functioned as a storgehouse, or perhaps been non-Incan (pre-Incan) in origin (as the Incans
always built strictly rectangular structures, except occasionally for storehouses).
More directly we then headed northeast. At some points high above the valley of the Ch’unchosmayu below we had to unload the mules and lead them across by their bridles, since protruding rocks from the hillside could cause to tumble into the abyss any pack animal that were to bump against it with its wide load along the narrow trail. Then one or two of our group would manhandle the load across the narrow “strait,” and after re-loading of the animals, on we went. We began a winding descent toward the river, finally reaching bottom where a rickety antique bridge of rotted planks that swayed with the momentum of beings walking gingerly along it brought us to the side upon which was the huge massif that lay between the Quebrada Tunquimayu to the northwest and the Quebrada Miraflores to our northeast.

As with all areas closer to the rivers that swiftly snake around the plethora of hills and peaks that would make backwoods Peru one of the most vast expanses on earth if flattened out, our climb now, like the descent we had just concluded, brought us through many pockets of damp jungle vegetation, especially wherever the trail twisted to the left or the right, for there would invariably be a cascade of water from above, making the trail a muddy miasma, but greatly welcomed, it seemed, by the thirsty animals.

As we ascended the continued steep trail, the area became that of drier forest, with many patches open to the sunlight. We came to what appeared to be an antigue stone muro de retención, a retention wall, which may not have been or Incan origin given its relative proximity to the river (the Incan way being to build structures only high above rivers; although perhaps this was the exception in that its purpose would not be to provide habitation, but merely to fortify what had been an Incan way).

The trail we followed led on and on, upward. Finally, at 2,470 meters altitude we spied a large stone retaining wall, 1.5 meters high, of pirqa, fieldstone, that appeared to be of rústico Incan style—“rough” or unpolished, and not tightly fit together as is more classic or “fine” Incan construction—but with curved corners that would indicate pre-Incan. Its eight meter length was holding back part of the hillside, and its curved corners extended into four meter long sides, forming a sort of roofless structure that faced the river, to the northwest, out of sight and out of earshot far below. We were at 12° 36’ 16.1” latitude south by 72° 03’ 13.92” longitude west.

Here we constructed what would be our base camp. A tree limb placed from the middle of one perpendicular side of the wall to the other, and a large sheet of blue plastic draped over that, made for a covered area within which we would be able to cook and eat.

Over the next many days what became a major problem was the same as that which had been encountered on my parties’ ascents of other tropical peaks, such as that of Apu Catinti in 1986 and the Llactapata of Callanga in 1995: a lack of water for cooking and drinking (in the form of tea and coffee, as it is not in the habit of these areas to drink agua cruda, water that is not in the form of a beverage). The massif, just like the subtropical others, while covered in exuberant vegetation, are devoid of streams, with
rainfall simply dripping down from the leaves of the tree cover, and being absorbed into
the moss and undergrowth that everything.

Our developing predicament reminded us that we had neglected to make the traditionally
required offering to Pacha Mama, the Andean earth mother, before setting out. We then
and there tried to make amends by each imploring good wishes from that deity with the
dark rum that we used to toast her, dripping a portion of each cupful onto the ground, as
well as making the customary offering to the apus—lords and spirits of the natural
features around us—by making a phukuy, a ritual blowing on a kintu, an arrangement of
four or five neatly arranged and well-shaped coca leaves, as we shook each bundle of
leaves to the heavens and to the four compass directions.

Although Ignacio and Luis Alberto had lugged up from the river far below a decent
quantity of water in the thick plastic garbage bags that we normally used to encase our
supplies and packs as added protection against sudden rains, we were now without any.
The pack animals had had enough of this privation, as well, and were getting very restless
and increasingly trying to escape. Just then the skies opened, and filled the sheets of
plastic that we had laid out to form small shallow ponds on our right side, as well as the
large thick sheet we placed into the ground just downhill at the edge of our translucent
plastic-roofed shelter, such that the large pools of rainwater that collected in the roof
could then be manipulated from beneath into mini-torrents that flowed down and off the
lower edge into our larger manmade pond. An orgy of drinking tea and coffee,
sometimes laced with a shot or two of dark rum, filled at least part of the next days and
nights. The pack animals now at least did not have to suffer extreme thirst as well as the
boredom of waiting around while we explored the area.

This area, we believed, being adjacent to that through which Paulino Mamani and I must
have descended in 1989, and as we could see on our satellite- and aerial photo-generated
topo maps, should also lead up to the Meseta de Toporake, that mysterious tableland at
the furthest northern extension of the Cordillera de Paucartambo. And this Toporake
Plateau, with its camino de piedra, Incan road of stone, led on to the Meseta de
Pantiacolla, and its unexplored furthest reaches. We were now in an area where there
should be evidence of the connections we sought, and the slight indications of which we
had seen back then, between the Incan heartland we had left weeks before, and the
furthest expanse of the Incas into the Pantiacolla.

We made an initial exploration of our immediate area, setting off to the west of our
shelter. After a time we finally came to one ruin, another retaining wall. It seemed like
small recompense for our efforts. We returned to camp.

Next, to see if we could catch a glimpse of Toporake, and to investigate this gateway to
that tableland and beyond, we undertook a trek up to the north-northeast, without the
pack animals, attempting to cover a lot of territory in very light, mobile fashion. Before
long, however, at an altitude of 3,045 meters, with the upper reaches of the Quebrada
Tunquimayu far below us to the northwest, at 12° 35’ 29.59” latitude south by 72° 02’
46.97” longitude west, we realized that this higher area of stunted trees, bogs, bushes and
brambles and high grass, went on and on, seemingly forever, with one rise after another, and that it would entail a longer journey to access the Toporake that we had first reached by quite another route—having climbed up to it in 1989 from the jungles of Mameria in Manu, far to its southeast—by this present route. And so, without finding any sign of Incan or other ruins along our way, we returned to base camp.

Back at camp, the nights were not as bitterly cold, since the skies were now clouded. But with a less frigid evening cloud forest environment, the insect bites that I had inexplicably acquired all around my waist, buttocks, and groin area began to itch in an almost maddening fashion. The vast quantity of bites was a bit mysterious to me, in that, as opposed to other areas, the insects in this area were not many to be seen during an entire day.

Now would begin a more thorough and systematic exploration of the densely vegetated cloud-forest area around us, an area that, because of the relative dearth of archaeological remains found thus far, caused suffer doubts that it would in fact provide an important link between what lay below and to the southwest, and what lay above, to the north and east. I kept my doubts to myself, though, as we headed off, Ignacio leading, in steep descent from base camp, slicing with machetes and pushing our way through thick and enveloping undergrowth of the kind that wraps around and clings to a person, and impedes quick passage. Amazingly, just 20 meters below the site at which we had been camped, things began to happen. The steep hillside began to reveal what had lain unseen beneath the layers of fallen tree limbs, moss, vines, and leaves—another stone wall. And then, alongside that, another, and another…

At an elevation of 2,450 meters above sea level we found ourselves within which had been a vivienda, a living quarters of stone, at 12° 36.507’ latitude south by 72° 03.715’ longitude west. A mad scramble began to seek here and there what may as well be hiding. Javier found an exceptionally fine ruin, with its wall that faced higher ground being in the form of a retaining wall, built into the hillside, of well-fitted stone, and with four well-made distinct niches or “windows” lining its top level, one of which was in the typical Incan trapezoidal shape, but the others square and rectangular in shape. The relative importance of the structure was indicated, as well, by the substantial lintel stones that topped some niches. A covering of brightly colored moss coated much of the stone. The edifice had side walls that extended away from the ten meter long retaining wall, and then curved in toward each other a few feet. In the middle of where the two stopped was what would have been a stone platform to provide support for what would have been a thatch and wood-pole roof sloped downward on that side, which would have had two entrances, one on each side of the center platform.

What we had uncovered was being revealed as, in fact, una llacta, a ciudadela, a small “city” or archaeological complex of a number of buildings with niches, and replete with andenes, or terraces, and various retaining walls. There was even, at its periphery, what appeared to have been una tumba, a tomb, with very large flat tapa stones, like sheetrock, lying on the ground nearby, and a very anomalous appearing white soapstone or crystal-stone placed inside what would have been the tomb.
The site—which appeared to cover an expanse of perhaps a full hectare—was built onto various levels, with most of what would have been doorways facing a small level area before the land dipped down to a lower level, with most of the longer walls of the buildings being in the form of retaining walls holding back the earth of the next highest level. Some of the shorter walls, especially those used just as retaining walls rather than as parts of structures, were very curved, a distinctly non-Incan characteristic. Most of the openings or doorways faced west or southwest, which concurred with the lay of the land heading downward, while retaining walls faced anywhere from west to west-northwest, with some of the twists and turns of topography in broken territory such as this, on the massif between the Quebrada Tunquimayu and Quebrada Miraflores, and with the Río Ch’unchosmayu very far below to our south and southwest.

After doing all we could to film and photograph and diagram the site, and get ourselves photographed at the primary ruin holding aloft The Explorers Club Flag #75, we were again at the end of our water supplies. The skies had provided some brief drizzle, but no more exuberant cloudbursts. Awhile before, Ignacio and Luis Alberto had again made the ridiculously long trudge all the way down to the river, and then climbed back up, to bring plastic bags full of water, but even the fruits of that herculean effort were now but a faint memory. Even the pack animals—which in the Andean world may at times be surly but always, in the end, respectful and deferential of their sometimes harsh Spanish- and Quechua-speaking masters—had mustered the temerity to attempt a break, the three of them in concourse leaving the area above where they were to stay and graze within the forest, and running right past us, giving but a sideways glance at the humans gazing in wide-eyed amazement at their rebellion, and rushing down the trail up which we had come before their being impeded by a barrier of logs that Ignacio and Luis Alberto had constructed far below for just this purpose, such that the two Quechua-speakers among us could run down and retrieve them just before they would have figured a way around or through what prevented their successful escape.

But, it was obvious that it was time to leave.

We had identified what looked to have been an area that could have, via the terraces, provided agricultural produce, to be brought up to the Incan sentries that would have been in the barracks-like structures that we had found at Toporake long before, guarding the routes to there, such as this one we had just taken, as well as guarding the one lone Road of Stone that heads off from there toward the Pantiacolla. This “Ciudadela de Miraflores,” as we came to call the site we had just identified, did not appear to have an easy water supply; but, perhaps in the past, when it was inhabited by ancient Andeans, the area would have been more cleared of vegetation, more ordered, perhaps revealing a spring or stream thereabouts, and easier access to various adjacent areas. It was, obviously, yet more evidence that the Road of Stone, above, and the accesses to the road, had been important, and must lead on to something yet more significant.

We packed up, and began our descent. The pack-mules and horses needed no encouragement to perform their duties. We soon came to that retaining wall relatively near the river, and here made camp. An exploration of that area the next day revealed
many small structures that appeared to have functioned as ovens, constructed with many sheets of slate. The idiosyncratic type of construction, as well as the absence of any nearby ruins indicating living areas, led us to believe that these ovens could have been built of stone taken from other actually ancient structures or retaining walls in more recent centuries or decades, by relatively local campesinos, who may have traveled into this area seeking new agricultural lands, or seeking tombs and ruins to plunder for artifacts to sell to outsiders in faraway places such as Quebrada, Amparaes, Calca, or Cusco.

A long, seemingly endless trudge brought us inexorably again across the Río Chunchosmayu, through the Llactapata area. There were unique moments, such as walking along the narrow trail overlooking the Ch’unchosmayu far below to the north, when we were hit by an anomalous wind so strong and steady that it would ordinarily be accompanied by a fierce thunder-lightning-rainstorm, yet the skies remained bright, sunny, and with only a few beautifully luminous cumulus clouds floating along high above. It was only after subsequently passing through the area of Tambocasa, and just as we entered the relative luxury of Santiago Molina’s campesino settlement at Naranjayoc, that the skies opened and the storm hit.

In this, with its most fortunate timing, as well as in everything that had transpired along the course of this expedition, Pacha Mama and the Apus had favored us, in spite of the tardiness of our offering to them. And, yet another day later, as we stood in the darkness of our last evening camped at Punto Carretera, that spot on the Quebrada side of the Río Mapacho that is accessible by vehicle, where we hoped we would in fact be met by the vehicle with which we had arranged our pick-up some weeks hence, I was again favored by a sight that I, in spite of my 31 years of making well over a dozen such journeys through remote areas in the southern world, had never noticed: that the quarter or third moon as seen from here, south of the equator, formed a perfect illuminated grinning mouth, facing “upward,” rather than, as do such moons as seen from the northern world, facing either right or left.

It seemed to me fraught with the smiling joy of fruition, of things once lost now found, of good companionship, of gratefulness to our supporters, and of further explorations to come...