

At the time of its greatest expansion, by AD 1530, the Inca Empire, known as Tahuantinsuyu, extended across the Andes mountain chain in South America, over a territory of more than one million square kilometers, with a population of 10 to 14 million inhabitants (Szemiński and Ziółkowski, 2018). This was the largest state in the Precolumbian Americas.

The Incas did not leave us written documents, anterior to the Spanish Conquest (in 1532 – 1540), related to their history, comparable for example to the Mayan stelae or Aztec codices.

The interpretation of the history, chronology, and phases of expansion of Tahuantinsuyu, rests then principally on Spanish documents written during the Colonial period (c. 16 and 17) and, in a minor amount, in the archaeological data. The available informations indicate that the future Inca Empire had its origin in a small chiefdom in the Cusco valley (Peru) and that the process that turned it into Empire was very quick. However, the question remains: when did it start?

According to a chronological scheme, based mainly on Spanish chronicles, the imperial phase of the Inca State was rather short and began around AD 1438 when Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui gain the power as the ninth sovereign according to the so-called traditional list of Inca rulers. He and his successors, extended the State first to the North-West of the capital city of Cusco to present-day Ecuador and then to the south-east to the territories of what is now Bolivia, Argentina and Chile. According to this model, the Inca Empire lasted ca. 100 years (Rowe 1945).

Although the historical chronology is the most accepted version of events it does not mean there are no contradictory models. Some authors have questioned the historical validity of the whole Inca dynastic list (Zuidema 1982), or, at least, the duration and chronological place of the reigns of the sovereigns in the list and the actions that were attributed to them.

Until relatively recently, the radiocarbon dating method was not used to answer the question of the chronology of expansion of the Tahuantinsuyu. This circumstances was the result of the preconceived notion that the imperial period of the existence of the Inca State was so short, that the best precise radiocarbon dates available in the 1980s or 1990s lacked the precision to solve this problem. However, even with these limitations, a 1996 text of two Polish scholars pointed to the expansion of the Inca state beginning several decades before the AD 1438 date commonly accepted as the starting point of the Imperial phase (Adamska and Michczyński 1996). This hypothesis was recently confirmed by other studies on the Inca presence in Ecuador, Argentina and Chile based on radiocarbon dates and the Bayesian analysis of the latter (Covey 2006, Ogburn 2012, Cornejo 2014).

The chronology of the development of the Inca State and its occupation of different territories remains to be re-interpreted, but this time mainly with high precision radiocarbon datings.

The principal goal of the proposed project is to attempt to reconstruct the Inca conquest of Cordillera Vilcabamba. This area, which extends over three provinces of the Cusco region - Anta, La Convención and Urubamba, and to a small extent in the Apurímac region - became slightly mythical due to historical events during the Spanish Conquest and particularly with the fall of the last capital of the Inca State, namely Vilcabamba (corresponding to the present day site of Espiritu Pampa).

The research hypothesis is that the acquisition of individual estates by the Inca rulers within the Cordillera Vilcabamba took place along the Vilcanota River (Urubamba) from the height of the Ollantaytambo towards Machu Picchu. Next areas occupied by the Incas would be the Vitcos region (Rosaspata) as well as Choquequirao and Espiritu Pampa. The second possible hypothesis is that the expansion into these areas could have occurred through the valley of the Apurímac River, therefore it could have taken place in parallel or even earlier than in the Machu Picchu region.

It is planned to prepare a total of about 100 samples for radiocarbon analysis. Samples will be adequately prepared for measurement with accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS).

The Polish institutions in charge of the Project will be the Gliwice Radiocarbon Laboratory at Silesian University of Technology and the Center of Andean studies of the University of Warsaw in Cusco. This last entity will ensure cooperation with the Peruvian institutions: the Regional branch of the Ministry of Culture of Peru in Cusco and the Machu Picchu National Archeological Park.