

# Chachapoya & Kuelap Fortress



There are countless pre-Columbian civilizations in Central and South America. After the legendary ruins of Tiahuanaco on the Altiplano near Lake Titicaca and the vast Inca Empire spanning over 12,000 kilometres, we now turn our attention to the Chachapoya one of the great unknown cultures in South America.

### *Cloud People*

They are often referred to as one of the least explored and understood cultures in South America. Perhaps you have already seen a documentary about the so-called Cloud People or Mist Warriors.

### *Chachapoya Name*

By the way, these names were given to them by the Inca. The Chachapoya themselves did not leave any records so we do not know how they called themselves. This is not surprising, considering that even the Inca, 1,500 years after Christ, did not yet have a writing system, despite writing was invented over 5,000 years ago in Mesopotamia.

### *Late Discovery*

It is not surprising that many of the great ruins in the Andes were only discovered in recent times. Why is that? Like Machu Picchu, it is due to the extreme altitude, hidden in a rugged region, situated on a mountain ridge.

### *Mountain Fortress*

Thus, the capital of the Chachapoya, designed as a mountain fortress in northern Peru, over 1,000 kilometres from Lima, was only discovered in 1864 by the Peruvian Juan Crisostomo Nieto. Scientists believe that the region has the highest density of yet-unexplored archaeological sites.

### *Capital Kuelap*

This isolated, large fortress is located at an altitude of over 3,000 meters above the Utcubamba River on the eastern slopes of the Andes and about five kilometres from the town of Tingo. The Utcubamba flows 230 kilometres northward parallel to the great Marañon River, into which it eventually merges.

### *Huge Fortress*

The well-constructed plateau on a mountain ridge measures 600 by 100 meters and covers an area of six hectares. The first stone buildings were likely built around 400 AD. It is not



known whether there were perhaps wooden huts here before.

### *Kuelap Complex*

The associated terraced fields, nearby farming settlements and graves covering over 400 hectares include more than twelve other archaeological sites. One of these villages, called Malcapampa, consisted of approximately 50 round stone huts.

### *Various Sites*

La Jalca another township seems to have been one of the first Chachapoya settlements here. All these sites are visible from the mountain fortress. It was found that the fortress was abandoned around 1570 AD, shortly after the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors.

### *Different Andean Climate*

The eastern slopes of the Andes, up to an altitude of 3,500 meters, are covered with tropical trees and plants. It is a rainy and sufficiently fertile region. The climate here is quite different from that in the European Alps. The snowline in the Andes is just under 5,000 meters. Just for reference, the northern tip of Peru reaches the equator, meaning that the difference between summer and winter is greatly reduced.

### *Sophisticated Fortress*

The enormous citadel-like fortress consisted of walls up to 20 meters high and had only three small entrances two in the east and one in the west. The main entrance was very narrow, allowing only one person to pass through at a time. After the entrance, there was an equally narrow 60-meter-long open passage. Here, any attacker could easily be killed from above with stone throws. The other two entrances were constructed in a similar manner.

### *First Excavations*

Due to the isolated location and the many other famous Inca sites in Peru that bring significant foreign exchange earnings to the state through tourism, interest in new expensive excavations of additional archaeological sites is low. Thus, it was only in 1999 that excavations in Kuelap began in a limited manner. Archaeologists counted the remains and foundations of over 420 round



stone huts. Two towers and four rectangular and one square building caught their attention. One tower was unique as it became narrower in diameter from top to bottom.

### ***Significant Damage***

Unfortunately, in 2022 two sections of the high city wall collapsed in quick succession. This has shown archaeologists that these structures need better protection and restoration. We hope that these activities will now be intensified, and the unique Kuelap fortress as well as the Chachapoya culture will be further explored.

### ***Specific Construction***

On average, the round huts had a diameter of seven to nine meters. The largest stone huts were up to twelve meters wide. The walls were only 50 centimetres thick but reached up to four meters in height. They had sharp angled roofs made of wooden beams and covered with straw.

### ***Adopted to Heavy Rainfalls***

Due to the frequent rains on the eastern slopes of the Andes, the roofs were steeper and higher than elsewhere. Also, the bases of the huts were reinforced and protected against water damage with slanting plates. The distinctive friezes with rhombuses and zigzag patterns made of protruding stone slabs are striking.

### ***Organized Urban Plan***

Even if it is not visible in the photos, there was an organized urban plan. The huts were densely built along paved paths, and their only entrance was from these paths. Some huts even had a walled courtyard, or shared one. Kuelap was built on three levels.

### ***Three Levels***

Perhaps it all started on the higher plateau with the so-called Upper Town, and later two expansions were added. One can also see the diminishing quality and simpler huts on the last level. Was there possibly a social difference between inhabitants?

### ***Start with the Upper Town***

The smaller Upper Town was separated from the rest of the complex by a protective wall with two entrances. A seven-meter-high round tower was likely the first building of all here. Up to 3,000 Chachapoyas are said to have lived in the entire fortress. Channels were built for their water supply, fed from a spring on the mountain. Burials were discovered under the floors



of huts and in walls during excavations. This burial practice is also known from other ancient cultures even in Europe. Some of the huts even had basements. Perhaps these were storage rooms or workshops?

### *Special Buildings*

Noticeable is a square building in the middle of the complex. It was built during the Inca period. Thus, it could have been built for the frequently traveling Inca ruler in his realm or served as a central assembly room.

### *Unique Tower*

The tower construction is unique to the region and interesting. It widens upwards in diameter. The theories about its use range from an observatory to a prison or an enclosure for captured wild animals. The latter assumption is based on the predatory animal bones discovered inside.

### *Prehistory of the Region*

The first traces of settlements in the region are about 12,000 years old. The first dwellings near Kuelap were built around 4,000 years ago. Looking at the various ruins attributed to the Chachapoya culture, we estimate a population of over 500,000. We will talk about various Chachapoya sites later. There are various theories about the origins of the Chachapoya. These include a possible immigration from the Atlantic coast across the Amazonas basin. We do not share these theories.

### *Chachapoya Origin*

It is difficult to deduce an origin without secure archaeological facts. A Spanish chronicler with Inca descent reported that the Chachapoya were fair-skinned and good-looking. From this, some authors inferred that they were immigrants from the Atlantic coast. Unfortunately, there are still no DNA analyses done using the latest technology that could prove or disprove this. Therefore, we still follow the ceramic theory.

### *Early Long-Distance Trade*

One thing is certain, the Chachapoya



lived not only from agriculture but also from the early long-distance trade between the Amazon and the Andean regions.

#### *Ethnic Mix*

The Chachapoya were not a homogeneous ethnic group but a mixed culture of traders including many tribes focused on trade. This is also how their defensiveness arose. After all, those engaged in trade possessed valuable goods and needed to be able to defend themselves. Simple farmers were less defensive.

#### *Chachapoya Agriculture*

Like all mountain peoples in the Andes, they had to provide for themselves with food. They cultivated various grains on terraced fields, mainly potatoes, corn, quinoa, and cotton, as well as coca. Livestock farming, along with hunting, met their meat needs. Fish were caught in the lakes and rivers. Fruits were also available in the partly tropical valleys. Thus, the food supply was sufficient and may have even produced a surplus for trade.

#### *Textile Production*

The Chachapoya also produced fine textiles using llama and alpaca wool as well as cotton. Their textiles were even mentioned by the Inca. The colours used were mainly red, brown, and beige, derived from plant and mineral substances.

#### *Typical Andean Motives*

The motifs depicted abstract human figures and birds resembling condors. This is not surprising, as the condor was a sacred bird and served as a judge in some Andean cultures. People were bound to a pole on mountain tops. If the condor attacked them, they were guilty, if not they were innocent.

#### *Ceramics as Time Reference*

When did the Chachapoya culture emerge? Excavators in Kuelap estimate the start of building stone huts around 400 AD. However, their typical ceramics originated much earlier, around 1400 BC, which is 1,800 years before the first settlements attributed to the Chachapoya.

#### *How can this be explained?*

Did they first build degradable wooden huts



before? Furthermore, the style of Chachapoya typical ceramics remained almost the same over this long period.

### *Extensive Investigations*

Scientists examined over 100,000 ceramic pieces and an equal number of stone tools. They found that the pottery-making technique came from the north and was likely imported through long-distance trade. Nevertheless, the quality of their pottery did not reach the level of the Moche and Nazca ceramics.

### *Largo de las Condors*

The Chachapoya also became famous for the unique form of their graves, positioned almost unreachable high on vertical cliffs. These graves can be vertical anthropomorphic sarcophagi with faces, where mummy bundles were placed within, or special small tomb houses built on narrow ledges.

### *Rare Tombs*

A good example is a group of six small houses built in a row in a vertical cliff above Lake Condor at a height of 100 meters above ground. These were discovered relatively late in 1965. These burial huts are three meters high and painted in red and white. Despite their low height, they consist of two floors because a greater height is not needed for mummy bundles in a squatting position. The small tombs have doors on the side and small square openings in front for the important view of the ancestors over the landscape.

### *Modern Grave Robbery*

On the slopes around the small lake, there are 18 more locations with burial sites. The lake is located at an altitude of 2,900 meters, approximately 70 kilometres southeast of the town of Chachapoya. The town of Leymebamba is only 20 kilometres from the lake or a day's march away. In this town, there is a small museum with relicts of the Chachapoya culture. Unfortunately, in the past, almost all graves were subject to pilferage by local farmers for artifacts and unfortunately destroyed. But there were already interventions in history even earlier.

### *Inca Power Demonstration*

Over 200 mummies were saved and brought to the museum in April 2022 to protect them from weathering and further damage. It was



found that many mummies were reburied in Inca style probably by the Incas. Was this an act of intimidation in the power struggle for submission? Or simply the eradication of an old culture and a demonstration that now even the Chachapoya ancestors follow Inca culture?

### *Conquest by Incas*

As always in history, a fortress on a hilltop is a perfect defensive position. But against whom? In any case, we know that the Inca, under Tupac Yupanqui, were able to defeat and subjugate the Chachapoya in 1475 before the arrival of the Spaniards in South America. Initially, the Incas approached other cultures peacefully, offering submission in exchange for participation in the Inca system of equitable distribution of goods and protection.

### *On the outer Edge*

The Chachapoya area lay at the eastern edge of the northern part of the Inca Empire, which mainly extended along the Pacific coast and the Andes to southern Colombia. So they could have ignored them, but their long-distance trading activities were of great interest to the Incas.

### *Resistance & Rebellion*

It is also known that they were very defensive and even rebelled under Huayna Capac. Resistance was harshly punished with the killing of elites and soldiers and almost complete deportation to various locations in the vast Inca Empire.

### *Cooperation with Spanish Invaders*

This was probably the reason why the remaining Chachapoya quickly allied themselves with the arriving Spaniards against the Incas. However, they paid for this contact with the Spaniards with a slow death. Due to imported measles and smallpox, 90 percent died within just twenty years.

### *Gran Saposoa Complex*

This is a cluster of at least six fortified settlement sites on a hill chain along Rio Huabayacu. The settlements were connected by paved stone paths. The remains of over 20,000 buildings are scattered over 50 square kilometres. Unfortunately, they are not properly researched yet. Today, remnants of city





walls with watchtowers and about 100 round huts still stand.

### *Gran Pajatén Fortress*

Gran Pajatén is another large fortress in the Chachapoya area, built around 800 AD and discovered in 1965. It was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999. The last huts were also built here during the Inca period. Due to its fragile state, it has unfortunately been closed to visitors. It is located on a hilltop along Rio Montecristo.

### *Enormous Size*

The 20,000 square meter complex extends over several terraces with connecting stairs. So far, remains of almost 30 round huts have been discovered. They are also decorated with the typical Chachapoya protruding stone mosaics. The motifs here include human figures, birds, and geometric symbols.

### *Question of Age*

It is astonishing that the oldest pottery shards here have been dated to 200 years BC. We know that the Chachapoya regularly renewed their huts and entire cities. Thus, the question arises, how old are the first traces of construction. Since detailed excavations have not yet taken place at Gran Pajatén, this is not certain.

### *Other Chachapoya Sites*

Detailed investigations into other mentioned Chachapoya sites such as Cerro Olan, Pulum Lacta, Machu Pirqa, and Huepon would also be interesting. And these are certainly not the only settlements, as the Chachapoya cultural area was probably larger than so far assumed.

### *Additional Burial Sites*

The sarcophagi are usually arranged in small groups of up to 30 standing figures, placed in precarious heights, unreachable in small niches embedded in vertical rock walls. How did the Chachapoya manage to place them there?

### *Tomb Erection Method?*

Climbing the fragile and unsteady cliff walls is challenging. Descending via ropes from above is partially possible. However, it is suspected that simple ladders were used, utilizing existing rock overhangs and niches



or creating them by hand.

### ***Kajia Burial Site***

In Kajia, three-meter-tall anthropomorphic wooden or mud coffins were deposited standing on small ledges in cliffs. The conically shaped sarcophagi, crowned with flat faces and painted in a reddish hue, are located on a vertical cliff above the Utcubamba River north of Kuelap.

### ***Revash Mortuary Houses***

In Revash, we can admire the mortuary houses. The burial site is near the town of Santo Tomas de Quillay. These are plastered stone-built houses with roofs, painted in shades of red and cream. Some motifs such as pumas, llamas, and humans can be discerned. Notably, there are two levels for burials of mummy bundles arranged in a squatting position.

### ***New Cable Car***

In 2017, a cable car was built near the town of Tingo. This eliminates the strenuous day march. Nevertheless, reaching Chachapoya is time-consuming, but one is rewarded with a Machu Picchu like site. It remains a hidden gem for enthusiasts of ancient cultures.

### ***Now Temporarily Closed***

When parts of the high city wall collapsed in 2022, Kuelap was closed. The fragile walls have been considerably affected by the climate, as evidenced by the numerous support beams on walls.

### ***Machu Picchu & Comparison with Inca***

Both mountain ridges are almost the same size, but Kuelap had twice the number of buildings. In Machu Picchu about 1,000 people lived, while Kuelap housed up to 3,000. The Chachapoya were an egalitarian society without palaces. Their adorned stone huts were round, not rectangular. Chachapoya thrived on trade between the Amazon and the Andean region, possibly extending to the Pacific coastal region. That's why Kuelap was protected by very high city walls all around, a feature lacking in settlements in the Inca Empire.

### ***Translation Note***

*The german original was translated with the help of OpenAI.*

### ***Picture Credits***

*We thank the museum, institutions and photographers for making available some of their pictures.*

