The Qhapaq Ñan: The Andean Development Road

Nuria Sanz
General Coordinator for the Nomination Process of Qhapaq Ñan or Andean Road System to the UNESCO World Heritage List. Head of the Latin American and Caribbean Division, UNESCO World Heritage Center, Paris.

Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru share a world heritage of exceptional value in their territories: the Qhapaq Ñan or Andean Road System.

For seven years now, the UNESCO World Heritage Center has been helping these countries in a pioneer project: the preparation of a joint candidature to include the Qhapaq Ñan in the World Heritage List, through an original and innovative regional cooperation process.

The Qhapaq Ñan, the main communication axis of the Inca Empire, was the backbone of a vast network of roads covering thousands of kilometers. Built in one of the most hostile natural environment in the planet, this road system is one of the hugest works of human inventiveness.

The Incas managed to articulate all the Andean knowledge and skillfully connect regional road networks that had began to form two thousand years back, succeeding in making them functionally coherent --at the service of an Empire-- and marked by production centers, businesses and worship sites. This exceptional territorial unification at continental level was done in less than a century, without the help of the wheel and the drive power of man and the Andean camels alone.

Thanks to an extremely effective relay system, goods circulated quickly and the Chasquis, the Inca’s messengers, would tour on foot deserts, valleys and jungles, from North to South and from the snow-capped mountain tops to the Pacific Coast, ensuring the administration of the most far off places in the Empire. The Qhapaq Ñan holds the treasure of the Incas technological innovations to level out lands, cultivate extremely arid areas, transport food and build drainage and water supply systems covering incredible distances, with an impressive ingenuity and tenacity, and
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overcoming the obstacles posed by temperature and wind variation.

With the construction of the Qhapaq Ñan, the Andean Road System, an extraordinary well planned and everlasting road network was built, cutting across one of the most irregular and extreme geography of the planet, home to the widest biological diversity in the world together with a vast cultural diversity. The distances covered by the huge road system, the outstanding magnitude of the work and its quality made possible to link the snow-capped tops of the Andean Mountain Range—over 6,000 feet high—with the sea level, cutting across balmy and humid jungles, fertile valleys and plain deserts.

All territories were linked to the longitudinal viability axis of the Andean Mountain Range, making possible to interconnect villages and landscapes within one sole road matrix, providing exceptional technological examples of, architecture and engineering.

The road network was the expression of a political project led by the Cusco Incas, linking villages, production centers and worship sites, within an economic, social, and cultural program at the service of a State.

On December 4, 2010, the Presidents of the six countries signed a Joint Declaration in Mar del Plata (Argentina) ratifying their commitment to preserve collectively that shared heritage and submit a single candidature for inclusion in UNESCO’s World Heritage List. The international community has found in this declaration a referent at the highest political, institutional and scientific level that ensures a collective commitment: the conclusion of the nomination process and the responsibility to preserve for future generations a cultural continental phenomenon through...
dialogue, connectivity and understanding among peoples and culture.

The signing of this agreement at the highest level was a transcendental political act, worthy of the greatness and exceptional universal value of the Qhapaq Ñan. Thus, the last stage of an extremely ambitious seven-year long project began. The technical cooperation of hundreds of experts has been required in order to make the inventory of the elements of such an extraordinary cultural heritage, harmonize preservation techniques and reach a common interpretation of a shared history. This huge task, coordinated by UNESCO World Heritage Center at the request of the six concerned States, is in itself a testimony of the power of culture as a peace-building factor.

The cooperation message, expressed in the different multilateral agreements signed by the concerned States, is ever more powerful as it refers to a network of routes that, no doubt, is a clear symbol of a rapprochement of cultures, human beings, and territories. Therefore, it is also an endless source of teachings.

The region has quite a few sites already included in the World Heritage List. However, for the first time now, a comprehensive management plan of all these sites will be put in place in order to safeguard both a natural heritage—with one of the richest biodiversity in the planet—and a cultural one that will include native and local traditions. Therefore, the issue is to protect the system in a comprehensive manner thus promoting cooperation that all in all will include a cultural agenda of a continental dimension.

Due to its huge cultural, technical, and symbolic ramifications, the project fits perfectly into UNESCO’s ambitions and represents a strong message for all nations of the world. It could be said that thanks to this project, the Convention on World Heritage fully and effectively enters the 21st Century. Moreover, it will not only encourage research work for several generations to come, but will also constitute a methodological model for cultural cooperation worldwide aimed
at implementing other projects at a continental level, such as the Silk Route or the Roman Roads. Finally, the project clearly illustrates the spirit of the Convention, the objective of which is to serve as a tool for international cooperation and development.

Globalization poses common challenges that must be faced collectively. We must promote intelligent networks and share knowledge and skills not only among nations but also among the societies that make them up. We must use every opportunity to extol whatever unites us. The Qhapaq Ñan is a living cultural phenomenon in Andean America and serves as an institutional architecture at the service of mutual regional understanding.

The Qhapaq Ñan was compared by the Europeans to the Roman roads, pointing out that, according to them, the Andean road technology was even more advanced than the European one at the time. However, the exceptional feature of this extraordinary work is that its legacy is still physically, functionally and symbolically valid among current Andean populations.

UNESCO cultural programs provide a framework for cooperation among experts worldwide. The will of Argentina, Bolivia, Chili, Colombia, and Ecuador to jointly preserve a common heritage, increases such cooperation at a level rarely achieved.

The nomination process of this huge continental heritage is an exploit that matches in greatness and scale the effort of its building as a result of a thousand-year-old Andean cultural epic.

Now that we approach the consolidation of a single nomination file, we understand that the inclusion in the World Heritage List, no matter how long it may be, is only the beginning of an adventure shared by the entire international community. The countries involved in this nomination process are undertaking a long-term venture, thus creating a reference for all nations in the world.