

**Talking Knots of the Inka**      Volume 49 Number 6, November/December 1996  
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The controversial Naples Manuscript (Viviano Domenici) [\[LARGER IMAGE, 40K\]](#)

An Inka accounting system that used knotted strings called quipus to record numerical data has long been known to scholars. The complexity and number of knots indicated the contents of warehouses, the number of taxpayers in a given province, and census figures. Were quipus also used to record calendars, astronomical observations, accounts of battles and dynastic successions, and literature? If so, all knowledge of such use has been lost--or has it?

At conference of Andean scholars this past June, Laura Laurencich Minelli, a professor of Precolumbian studies at the University of Bologna, described what she believes to be a seventeenth-century Jesuit manuscript that contains detailed information on literary quipus. Surfacing at a time when the decipherment of these string documents is at a standstill, the manuscript, if authentic, could be a Rosetta Stone for Andean scholarship.

Found in the family papers of Neapolitan historian Clara Miccinelli, the manuscript consists of nine folios measuring eight by 11 inches with Spanish, Latin, and ciphered Italian texts. Included in the document are three half-pages of drawings signed "Blas Valera" and an envelope containing a wool quipu fragment. The manuscript, folded in eighths, had been bound in a chestnut-colored cover bearing the title *Historia et Rudimenta Linguae Piruanorum*, or *History and Rudiments of the Language of the Peruvians*.

Miccinelli believes the text was written by two Italian Jesuit missionaries, Joan Antonio Cumis and Joan Anello Oliva, between 1610 and 1638, and that the three half-folios were written by Valera, a mestizo Jesuit, sometime before 1618. An inscription and the manuscript's cover were apparently added in the mid-eighteenth century by another Jesuit, Pedro de Illanes. A short dedication on the last page bears the name of an Italian duke, Amedeo di Savoia-Aosta, who is said to have given the manuscript as a wedding gift to a fellow army officer in 1927.

In addition to details about reading literary quipus, the document discusses events and people associated with the Spanish conquest of Peru. It includes the incredible claims that Francisco Pizarro conquered the region after poisoning Inka generals with arsenic-tainted wine and that the chronicler Guamán Poma de Ayala, author of one of the most important works on Inka Peru, the *Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno* (*New Chronicle and Good Government*), merely lent his name to a work actually written by Valera. Of particular interest is the text's abundant biographical information on Valera, about whom little is known and whose writings are known only from the works of others.

According to Cumis there were quipus that differed from the ones used for accounting. These so-called royal quipus had elaborate woven symbols, which hung down from a main string. Cumis tells us that few existed by his time since so many had been burned by the Spaniards out of ignorance. In discussing how Quechua, the language of the Inka, was recorded on the knotted strings, Cumis writes that "The scarceness of the words and the possibility of changing the same term using particles and suffixes to obtain different meanings allow them to realize a spelling book with neither paper, nor ink, nor pens.... [The] curaca emphasized that this quipu is based by its nature on the scarceness of words, and its composition key and its reading key lie in its syllabic division....[The]

curaca explained, "If you divide the word *Pachacamac* [the Inka deity of earth and time] into syllables *Pa-cha-ca-mac*, you have four syllables. If you...want to indicate the word 'time,' *pacha* in Quechua, it will be necessary to make two symbols [in the quipu] representing *Pachacamac*--one of them with a little knot to indicate the first syllable, the other with two knots to indicate the second syllable.... [The curaca] listed the main key words with an explanation of how to realize them in quipus. " Following this section of the text, the author provides a vocabulary list along with illustrations of the symbols used to indicate the words on quipus.

Most of the historical information contained in the manuscript is in conflict with our current understanding of the Spanish conquest of Peru, which is based on the writings of Garcilaso de la Vega, the Spanish Jesuit Bernabé Cobo, Guamán Poma de Ayala, and numerous official communications between Spain and its New World colony. Few scholars have had access to the Naples document, and what was presented by Laurencich Minelli has met with mixed reactions as academics cautiously evaluate the manuscript's authenticity and the reliability of its contents.

According to Laurencich Minelli's preliminary examination, signatures on the Naples manuscript appear to match those on authentic documents by the same authors. Moreover, the watermarks on some of the sheets are similar to late sixteenth-century European watermarks, and the substance of the pigments used in the drawings attributed to Valera appears to be South American. "The ink binder in the main text of the manuscript itself has crystallized over the years and in some places has perforated the paper, which is in need of conservation," says Laurencich Minelli. "Our biochemical laboratory at the University of Bologna would like to run a battery of nondestructive, noninvasive tests on the document. We are hoping that Clara Miccinelli will release the manuscript for analysis."

According to Bruce Mannheim, director of the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Michigan, "From its sound, scribal practice, and grammatical forms, however, the Quechua itself is likely of northern, probably Ecuadorean, origin and resembles that used by Jesuits in the mid- to late seventeenth century--no earlier." Colgate University's Gary Urton, a specialist in quipus, is skeptical about the manuscript's authenticity. He cites its extravagant claims about Pizarro and Valera and wonders why this method of quipu decipherment has not surfaced in other chronicles. John H. Rowe, a professor emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley, has little doubt about the manuscript's authenticity, but questions the reliability of its contents.

If much of the historical content is suspect, what about the document's information about quipus? "If, in fact, it does offer a method for reading the quipus, this would represent a tremendous advance in the study of Andean societies," says Urton. "We need to have the results of the tests that Laura Laurencich Minelli wants to run on the document, tests analyzing the inks, paints, and paper that were used. We also need a group of scholars well versed in the study of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish and Italian documents from the New World to look very closely at the language to give us some assurance that it is of the period that it purports to be. Until then I think we simply have to withhold judgement. If we admit into the literature a document that was written in recent decades, we risk diverting ourselves from the serious study of Inka writing."

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[www.archaeology.org/9611/abstracts/inka.html](http://www.archaeology.org/9611/abstracts/inka.html)

- Fuente: <http://www.archaeology.org/9611/abstracts/inka.html>



(Italia - Bologna) *Exsul Immeritus Blas Valera Populo Svo e Historia et Rudimenta Linguae Piruanorum. Indios, Jesuitas y españoles en dos documentos secretos sobre el Perú del siglo XVII*, CLUEB, Bologna 2007, 590 p.

Transcripción integral y traducción bilingüe, italiano y castellano de los documentos Miccinelli con introducción de Laura Laurencich Minelli y análisis del quechua de Vito Bongiorno.

A menudo se dice, quizás al azar, que la realidad – en nuestro caso la Historia – supera la ficción, pero los documentos *Exsul Immeritus Blas Valera Populo Svo e Historia et Rudimenta Linguae Piruanorum* son un ejemplo de la veracidad de este conocido dicho. (...)

[Más información](#)

- Fuente: [http://www.red-redial.net/libreria-americanista.php?pais\\_ed=Italia](http://www.red-redial.net/libreria-americanista.php?pais_ed=Italia)