FINDING THE LOST CITY

This month marks the 100th anniversary of Hiram Bingham’s ‘discovery’ of Machu Picchu. Hugh Thomson tells the tale of how a US explorer and academic came to uncover one of the greatest architectural achievements of pre-Columbian civilisation.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HIRAM BINGHAM
iven that it has become such an icon of the pre-Columbian world that the Spanish destroyed, it seems extraordinary that we have only known of Machu Picchu for 100 years.

When the US explorer and Yale academic Hiram Bingham arrived in the Peruvian Andes in July 1911, he was ready for what was to be the climactic achievement of his life: the exploration of the remote hinterland to the west of Cusco, the old Inca capital. He had every advantage on his side, with his charisma, opportunism, knowledge of bibliographical sources and driving, restless energy. Above all, he had what every explorer needs – luck and the ability to exploit it.

Bingham had already done a preliminary reconnaissance a few years before, in 1909, when he had made the mistake of coming during the wet season. This time, he would be on dry ground, and he had prepared meticulously for it, both with a well-provisioned Yale team and with the invaluable research he had been given by a Peruvian academic, Carlos Romero, and by Sir Clements Markham, the former president of the Royal Geographical Society, who had just published his groundbreaking *The Incas of Peru*. Both Romero and Markham had recently discovered chronicles from the time of the Spanish Conquest that pointed to the existence of hitherto unsuspected Inca ruins.

Despite all of this, Bingham could never have anticipated quite what lay ahead. In the space of just a few short months, he was to discover Machu Picchu, by any standards one of the greatest architectural achievements of pre-Columbian civilisation, and also two other major sites: Vitcos, where the last Incas retreated after the Spanish had conquered the rest of their empire and which was to become their capital in exile for a further 35 years; and another mysterious site down below in the jungle, whose significance evaded Bingham at the time, in an area he called the Plain of Ghosts.

**NEW ROUTE**

Cusco, the ancient capital of the Incas, lies on a high plateau on the edge of the Andes at an elevation of more than 3,000 metres. Bingham’s plan was to descend from this plateau along the valley of the Urubamba. This river weaves a
ABOVE: Hiram Bingham poses outside his tent during his follow-up expedition to Machu Picchu in 1912. OPPOSITE: A view of the Sacred Plaza taken with the expedition’s Kodak Panoram camera.
circuitous route west, north and finally east of Cusco to reach
the Amazon, passing through the quadrant of dramatically
plunging canyons and broken mountain ranges known
as the Vilcabamba.

When Bingham and his team set off down the Urubamba
in 1911, they had an advantage over travellers who had
preceded them: a mule trail had recently been blasted down
the valley canyon to enable rubber to be brought up more
easily from the jungle. Almost all previous travellers had
left the river at Ollantaytambo and taken a high pass across
the mountains by Mount Veronica to rejoin the river lower
down, thereby cutting a substantial corner but also therefore
never visiting the area around Machu Picchu. This was as
much for convenience as for the difficulties of negotiating
the river descent before the road was built, which Bingham
exaggerates: Pachacuti, the renowned warrior and Inca
emperor of the 15th century, had led whole armies down
the Urubamba easily enough.

The Picchu valley was little visited in Bingham’s time; the
effects of recession caused by Peru’s disastrous War of the
Pacific with Chile were still being felt and local activities
such as mining had fallen away. Bingham seems to have been
unaware of this and thought that the valley he had stumbled
on was a timeless version of pastoral life, rather than a min-
ing community forced into farming by bad times (although
this also suited his telling of the subsequent events).

UNBELIEVABLE DREAM
There’s a disarming moment when Bingham turns to the reader,
in his best bar-story manner, to begin his tale: ‘People often
say to me: “How did you happen to discover Machu Picchu?”
The answer is, I was looking for the last Inca capital.’

Bingham already knew that the ‘last Inca capital’, Vitcos,
lay well beyond the Picchu valley. So when his small expedi-
tion passed through the valley, only a few days out from
Cusco, they were still at idling speed, playing themselves in.

A memoir, Portrait of an Explorer, by one of Bingham’s seven
sons, Alfred, includes some revealing journal entries that
Bingham made at the time. The day of 24 July began quietly,
with Bingham trying to arrange sufficient mules for the next
stage of the journey, a constant headache on such expedi-
tions. Of his six companions, four were elsewhere in the val-
ley; the two with Bingham, Harry Foote and William Erving,
showed no interest in accompanying him up the nearby hill
to see some ruins that a local farmer, Melchor Arteaga, had
told them about the night before. A drizzle of dawn rain had
doubtless dampened their enthusiasm.

Bingham also seems to have been less than ardent in his
mission. He left camp only after ten o’clock, so committing
himself to a midday climb of several thousand feet as the sun
bent off the cloud. Nor did he bother to take any lunch, a
decision he later regretted. In Lost City of the Incas, he vividly
relates that he made the ascent without having the least
expectation that he would find anything at the top.

Bingham describes the approach in a style worthy of his
contemporaries Arthur Conan Doyle or H. Rider Haggard.
First, as he climbs up the hill, there is the ever-present pos-
sibility of lethal snakes ‘capable of making considerable springs
when in pursuit of their prey’; not that he sees any. Then
there’s a sense of mounting discovery as he comes across
great sweeps of terraces, then a mausoleum, followed by
monumental staircases and, finally, the grand ceremonial
buildings that make him realise that he has come to some of
the greatest ruins in South America: ‘It seemed like an un-
believable dream... the sight held me spellbound.’
Photographing Machu Picchu

'Would anyone believe what I had found? Fortunately, in this land where accuracy of reporting what one has seen is not a prevailing characteristic of travellers, I had a good camera and the sun was shining.' Hiram Bingham, Lost City of the Incas

When Hiram Bingham climbed up from the Urubamba valley on 24 July, 1911, and found the ruins of Machu Picchu awaiting him, he had a Kodak 3A Special camera with him.

Confronted by a set of previously unreported Inca buildings, which he immediately recognised as being of the finest possible construction, the US explorer's first action wasn't to describe them in his pocket notebook or to draw a detailed plan, as might have been expected: that came later. The first entry in his notebook shows that he immediately set about taking a series of photographs. Even though he took only one roll of film, the camera's long love affair with Machu Picchu had begun.

On seeing these first exploratory shots, National Geographic offered to fund a far larger expedition in the summer of the following year. Bingham was to write a 7,000-word article on Machu Picchu, which would be illustrated with a substantial number of photographs.

Bingham wrote to George Eastman of Eastman Kodak, requesting 'at least three Kodaks as good as the 3A Special' that he had used on the previous expedition. He also asked for a Panoram Kodak, strong leather cases for all the cameras, 3,500 negatives, ten folding wooden tripods and five developing units for use in the field. An inveterate opportunist, Bingham asked Eastman Kodak to donate the above equipment for free, on the basis that it could prove an invaluable test of how well it would stand up to tropical conditions. George Eastman agreed.

This was to be a South American expedition fuelled by the need for more photographic material, just as previous centuries had seen explorers driven by quests for El Dorado, mineral concessions or colonial occupation.

Bingham took the main burden of the photographic work upon himself. He became almost his chief occupation during the long season that the expedition spent at Machu Picchu in 1912. In truth, as he had no professional qualifications as an archaeologist, he needed a role to supplement that of just being 'director' of the expedition. It was a task that he set about with considerable enthusiasm.

On looking through the complete set of contact prints held in the archives of the Peabody Museum at Yale, the overwhelming impression is of how thorough Bingham was. As his workmen stripped the ruins bare, he photographed almost every corner of Machu Picchu, often with great skill and using the cumbersome Panoram camera to impressive wide-screen effect.

On his return from Peru at the end of 1912, Bingham wrote to Eastman Kodak asking for prints from 2,000 negatives. No less than 250 of these were used in the specially expanded edition of National Geographic that appeared in April 1913.

The editor, Gilbert Grosvenor, wrote to tell Bingham that 'you have brought back full value for the subscription we made to your last expedition. Your photos of Machu Picchu are wonderful.'

Eastman Kodak's sponsorship of Bingham's 1912 expedition has also proved to be a worthwhile long-term investment. A century later, it's estimated that millions of rolls of film have been shot at Machu Picchu: the silver recovered from the processing alone must be worth an Inca's ransom.

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No amount of tourists milling about or picture postcards can take away from that first breathtaking view.

He tells the story as a series of coup de théâtres in which his guide, a young local boy, presents each succeeding revelation with a flourish: 'Suddenly, without any warning, under a huge overhanging ledge the boy showed me a cave beautifully lined with the finest cut stone.'

**SENSE OF WONDER**

For travellers arriving today, whether by bus or by the Inca Trail, the site still has all the same qualities of dramatic revelation. No amount of tourists milling about or picture postcards can take away from that first breathtaking view of a city almost casually draped over the shoulder of a mountain ridge, with the peak of Huayna Picchu dominating behind.

Yet in reading Bingham's description of his sense of wonder when he found Machu Picchu, we should remember that *Lost City of the Incas* is a work of hindsight, written in 1948, almost 40 years after the events it describes, when Bingham was an old man. His journal entries of the time reveal a much more gradual appreciation of his achievement. He spent the afternoon at the ruins jotting down the dimensions of some of the buildings, then descended and rejoined his companions, to whom he seems to have said little about his discovery.

His colleague, Harry Foote, didn't even mention it in his journal; he just noted 'an interesting time' collecting butterflies near the river. The very next day, they all continued down the valley as if nothing had happened - an extraordinary thing to do when you have just discovered an unknown Inca city. But at this stage, Bingham didn't realise the extent of the site, nor had he realised what use he could make of the discovery. The fact that he hadn't expected to find anything had left him unprepared.

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However, as Bingham slowly began to realise, no-one had publicised Machu Picchu. The archaeological authorities in Cusco, let alone in Lima or the USA, were ignorant of it. So while he wasn’t the first person to have been to the ruins, he was the first to realise their importance and make them known to the world. To use the helpful euphemism devised by later Machu Picchu authorities, he was their ‘scientific discoverer’.

BIG THEORY

Almost as soon as Bingham saw Machu Picchu, he began the ceaseless stream of hypotheses that has flowed ever since about its origins. The sheer audacity of the site encourages free-wheeling speculation. When he came to write the long article for National Geographic that broke the story to the world in April 1913 – with accompanying pictures – he knew he had to produce a big theory to explain what he had already dubbed the ‘lost city of the Incas’.

Bingham wondered whether this could have been the birthplace of the very first Inca, Manco the Great, who, according to legend, had ordered a building with three windows to be built at the place of his birth; there is just such a prominent building at the centre of Machu Picchu. He also wondered if it was what some chroniclers had described as ‘Old Vilcabamba’, the ‘last city of the Incas’, to which they had retreated while on the run from the Spanish, and he proceeded with some tortuous theorising to try to confirm this. As late as 1948, in Lost City of the Incas, he was still asserting, with revealing overemphasis, that ‘no-one now disputes that this was the site of ancient Vilcabamba’.

Today, no-one would dispute that he was wrong. Sadly, his vision of the site as both the cradle and the grave of the Inca civilisation, while a magnificent one, doesn’t hold up. We now know that Old Vilcabamba actually lies 65 kilometres away in the depths of the jungle. Every available architectural indicator shows that Machu Picchu was built at the time of the greatest of all the Incas, the emperor Pachacuti (c. 1438–71), during the expansion of the empire, and so at the midpoint of its brief history.

One question that has perplexed visitors, historians and archaeologists alike ever since Bingham, is why the site seems to have been abandoned before the Spanish Conquest. (The overused joke among visitors is that it must have been due to the midges.) There are no references to it by any of the Spanish chroniclers – and if they had known of its existence so close to Cusco they would certainly have come in search of gold, if not architectural appreciation.

GRAND SCALE

An explanation that has grown in currency over the past few years is that Machu Picchu was a moya, a country estate built by an Inca emperor to escape the winter cold of Cusco, where the elite could indulge themselves with appropriately monumental architecture and spectacular views.

A document discovered in 1983 suggests that it was probably built by Pachacuti, who began the explosive expansion of the empire during the mid-15th century. By custom, his descendants built other similar estates for their own use, and so Machu Picchu would have been abandoned after Pachacuti’s death, some 50 years before the Spanish Conquest.

Machu Picchu may have been the Biarritz or Brighton of its day, a pleasure resort built on the grand scale at the height of the empire and then left to fade away as royal tastes changed and fashion moved on.

An exhibition of Hiram Bingham’s original photographs of Machu Picchu will be held at the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) from 7 to 30 September. For details, visit www.rgs.org/events

The White Rock: An Exploration of the Inca Heartland by Hugh Thomson, published by Phoenix (RRP £10.99), is available to readers at the special price of £8.99 (including free p&p in the UK; overseas add £1.60). Please call 01903 828 503 and quote reference PB059. Offer ends 31 July, 2011, subject to availability. For further details, visit www.orionbooks.co.uk