

# Live parrots were carried across the Andes before the Incas' rise

Ancient DNA and other clues from feathers found in modern Peru hint that the ancient Ychsma culture imported birds from the distant Amazon.



Feathers from the red-and-green macaw, native to the Amazon rainforest, have been found hundreds of kilometres away at the ancient site of Pachamac. Credit: Balazs Tisza

Feather-fancying ancient Peruvians imported live parrots from the other side of the Andes mountain range, hundreds of kilometres away<sup>1</sup>.

Members of the pre-Inca Ychsma culture, which flourished in what is now Peru from roughly 1000 to 1470, used vibrantly coloured parrot feathers to make ornaments and other items.

George Olah at the Australian National University in Canberra and his colleagues analysed DNA from feathers discovered in an Ychsma tomb in the religious site of Pachamac. All of the colourful feathers came from four large parrot species native to the Amazon rainforest, including the red-and-green macaw (*Ara chloropterus*), which can grow to nearly one metre in length.

The researchers think that the birds were transported alive over the Andes from the Amazon, a journey of hundreds of kilometres. Chemical isotopes in the feathers suggest that the parrots were reared on maize and other foods typical of coastal Peru. The genetic diversity observed in the feather DNA was similar to that of wild populations, indicating that the birds were not bred in captivity.

The authors say that such long-range transport or trade of live birds, through territory associated with distinct cultures, challenges the notion that pre-Incan cultures from this period did not interact much except during frequent regional conflicts.

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## References

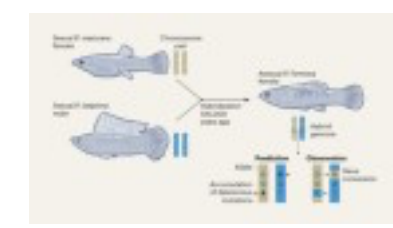
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