



High in the Peruvian Andes, in the remote village of San Juan de Collata, sits a wooden box that's sacred to the locals who keep close guard over it. It contains 487 cords of twisted and dyed animal fibers that, according to its caretakers, encode messages planning an 18th-century rebellion.

Anthropologist Sabine Hyland was invited by community members to study the strings — the first outsider permitted to view them — but only for 48 hours and under constant supervision.

Although no one alive today can decipher the cords, their general message and significance has been passed down orally for generations. Hyland was told by a village elder, "If we could read what is in here, we would know for the first time who we truly are."

The strings are khipus, devices invented by indigenous Andeans to store information. Khipus are mostly known by archaeologists as the records of the Inka civilization, the vast multiethnic empire that encompassed as many as 18 million people and nearly 3,000 miles along the Andes and the Pacific coast of South America. Builders of the spectacular mountain fortress of Machu Picchu, the Inka ruled from the early 1400s until the Spanish conquest began in 1532.

According to Spanish chroniclers, the Inka did not write; instead, they tied information into khipus, which documented all matters of affairs: tributes, censuses, calendars, laws, rituals and narrative histories. But no Spaniards bothered to chronicle how information was encoded into strings, and so

the records of the Inka lay unread, tied up in some 950 surviving khipus, scattered around the world in museums and other collections.

This could change, thanks to insights gleaned from the Collata khipus and several others recently discovered in villages and through archaeological excavations.

"I very much believe that within my lifetime, we'll be able to interpret khipus," says Hyland, who is based at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. "I don't think it's going to be easy."

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The traditional khipu system was fairly standard. There is a primary top cord, to which pendant cords are tied. The pendant cords may be tied with subsidiary cords, which may be tied with more subsidiary cords, and so on. The most elaborate khipus, which could be census records of annual tributes owed to Inka lords, contain upward of 1,500 pendants dangling from the primary cord and six levels of subsidiaries branching from the pendants. Other khipus are just a few strings, made by herders to keep stock of grazing animals.

Knotted pendants hang from the primary cord of a cotton khipu of unknown age.



Anthropologist Sabine Hyland (left) studies the complex language of khipu knots, fibers and cords to uncover their meaning. Hyland was the first outsider allowed to view an 18th-century khipu (above) in the remote village of San Juan de Collata in the Peruvian Andes.

EDITOR'S NOTE

What happened to the Inca Empire? Most scholars now prefer *Inka*, a spelling that better reflects its roots in the indigenous Quechua language.