The Hill That Rose with the Water

The Cañari · the southern highlands of Ecuador

Where It Comes From

The Cañari lived in the highlands of what is now southern Ecuador before the Inca conquered them. Their flood story was written down in the 1570s by two Spanish writers, the priest Cristóbal de Molina and Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, from Cañari people then living within the Inca lands. The two disagree in places.

What Happens

A great flood comes. Two brothers escape to a high hill called Huacayñán.

As the water rises, the hill rises with it, always staying above the flood. The brothers are saved.

When the waters go down, they have nothing to eat. But every day, when they come back to their hut, they find food and drink waiting for them.

They hide to see who is bringing it. In Molina's telling, two macaws come, birds with the faces of women. In Sarmiento's, two women come, flee when they are seen, and later return.

One brother marries one of them, and from them come the Cañari people.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. The sources do not give one.

Who was saved, and how. Two brothers.

The boat or the refuge. A hill that grows taller as the water rises.

What came after. Food from an unknown giver, a marriage, and a new people. The Cañari honoured the hill and the macaw as sacred.

Here the land itself rescues the survivors, and they are kept alive by gifts from someone they cannot see. The rising mountain appears again in a Mapuche story further south.

THINK IT THROUGH

The brothers were fed every day by someone they had not met. Has anyone ever cared for you before you even knew who they were?

Sources

Cristóbal de Molina (c. 1575) and Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa (1572), as compared in Kerstin Nowack, *Geschichten vom Ende der Welt in den Anden* (2017).

Sarmiento, *History of the Incas*, trans. Clements Markham (Hakluyt Society, 1907).

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.