Viracocha and the Water That Overturned the Land

The Inca (as recorded by the Spanish) · the Andes of Peru and Bolivia

Where It Comes From

The Inca ruled a great empire along the Andes until the Spanish conquest in the 1530s. They did not write in letters, so what we know of their stories was written down by Spanish chroniclers, often with the help of Andean informants.

This telling is from Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa's *History of the Incas*, written in 1572 for the Spanish viceroy. Other chroniclers of the same time tell it quite differently, and the German scholar Kerstin Nowack, who has studied all of them, concludes that there is no clear Inca flood tradition at all, only a set of stories that the Spanish were eager to match to Noah.

What Happens

In the beginning Viracocha, the maker, creates a world without light, and a race of people to live in it.

Those people grow proud and disobey him. Some are turned to stone; others are swallowed by the earth or the sea.

Then he sends a flood the people call *uñu pachacuti*, “water that overturns the land”. It rains for sixty days and sixty nights, and everything is covered.

In Sarmiento’s telling, the people of Cuzco said that no one escaped. So Viracocha makes the world again. At Lake Titicaca he calls the sun, the moon and the stars into the sky. At Tiwanaku he shapes the peoples of the land and calls them out of lakes, caves and springs.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. The pride and disobedience of an earlier people.

Who was saved, and how. No one, in this telling. Other chroniclers have a pair saved in a drum, six people on a raft, or ancestors sealed in a cave.

The boat or the refuge. None in this telling.

What came after. A new creation: light in the sky, and the peoples called up out of the earth.

Sarmiento himself called these stories fables. That is a reminder that the person writing down a story may not believe it, or may shape it to fit what they already think.

THINK IT THROUGH

When the only written record of a story comes from people who did not share its faith, how would you go about listening for the original voice?

Sources

Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, *History of the Incas* (1572), trans. Clements Markham (Hakluyt Society, 1907).

Kerstin Nowack, *Geschichten vom Ende der Welt in den Anden* (Bonn University Press, 2017), on all the chroniclers' versions.

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