Garcilaso de la Vega’s Defense and Criticism of his Inca Heritage and Culture to the Spanish

Why this book was written:
The author, Garcilaso de la Vega, wrote the Royal Commentaries to convince his European audience that traditional Inca culture was not savage and simple. He was in a position to represent the Incas to European audiences because he was the son of a Spanish Conquistador and an Inca mother of royal blood; a Mestizo with a Western education.

Thesis:
Because the Incas lacked a writing system when they were conquered by the Spanish, they were unable to record their own written accounts of the invasion until their Mestizo descendants began to write accounts in defense of Inca society.

Background and Explanation:
The author was raised in Peru among his mother’s family, but was given a classic Spanish education. When he was 20 he moved to Spain and attempted to claim his place as his father’s legitimate inheritor. He was denied by the courts and decided to devote his life to literature. Through his writing, he attempted to show that people of indigenous heritage were capable of intellectual thought and high culture. Eventually he wrote the Royal Commentaries as a more direct argument for the nobility of the Native Americans. The Spanish original was first printed at Lisbon in 1609, during the last decade of his life. In it, he used the Inca’s natural resource management practices and their religious beliefs and practices as evidence of their stewardship and virtue.

Land and Wildlife Management:
A complex and highly organized management system existed before Spanish contact. Each year 20-30 thousand Native hunters were recruited to collectively scour an area of 20-30 leagues. The game was then divided among the populace according to family size, and portioned to last a full year. Special provisions ensured that the elderly, sick, and disabled received their share too. The whole empire was divided into four provinces, with the annual hunt rotating between provinces each year. This way the animal population in each area had been given three years to be naturally replenished. Each family received a plot of land for raising crops that was proportional to the family size. The plots, called tupu were of a set measurement, and each family received an additional plot for every son, and ½ plot for every daughter. In years of scarce rainfall the irrigation was rationed so each family received equal time to water their crops.

Sacrifices and Religion:
The Inca empire included many different ethnic groups which all held their own beliefs and had their own gods. The Spanish portrayed these beliefs as primitive, but in reality a complex moral and belief system existed. A common belief among many of these groups was that the gods demanded sacrifices, though what they sacrificed varied. Sacrifices included many different meats and skins of beasts, feathers of birds, and various drinks. Some groups even sacrificed their own blood or offered living sacrifices of war captives. The author points out that the Incas had banned human sacrifices and cannibalism by the time the Spanish arrived. He also includes passages about the Inca belief in immortal souls and a divine creator of the Earth, in an effort to show similarities between indigenous beliefs and Christianity.

Writing and How the Inca Viewed it
Native Incas viewed writing with awe as it represented an alternative to speaking. By placing knowledge outside of the human body it could be preserved far longer than human minds. Native leaders were swift to realize the close connections between writing and power. They also realized that Europeans notions of truth were tied to the written word. As such, native leaders saw writing as a weapon against the invaders.

In the early years of European contact writing appeared almost divine in nature to many of the native population. Because the Spanish used writing in their administration it became necessary for many natives to learn both written and verbal Spanish to avoid being scammed and tricked by those Spaniards who manipulated the language barrier. This book is significant because Vega was one of the first people of Inca descent to become well enough versed in Spanish rhetoric to act as a intermediary between the two cultures.

Bibliography
Vega, Garcilaso de La. The royal commentaries of Peru, in two parts. The first part. Tracing of the origin of their Inca or kings, of their identity of their laws and government both in peace and war of the reigns and conquests of the Incas. London: Miles Flesher, 1688.


