

Mama Sarpay

(extract from 'Intrepid Dudettes of the Inca Empire')

By Helen Pugh

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Front cover photo by Jeff Hanc on Pixabay.

Mama Sarpay

Respected Priestess

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Profile</u></p> <p>Name: Sarpay, pronounced SAR-pai</p> <p>A.k.a: Asarpay</p> <p>Born and died: 1500s</p> <p>Occupation: priestess</p> <p>Family: Daughter of Kushirimay and Huayna Capac, No children (see above).</p> <p>Life affirmation: I use my gifts to fight oppression.</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">(Image by Jeff Hanc on Pixabay)</p>
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Sarpay, or Mama Sarpay, was a noblewoman and high priestess, who was linked to the Apurimac River (pictured above). You know what, noblewoman is an understatement: she was as royal as they come! The only child born to Huayna Capac and his principal wife, **Kushirimay**, she was the most royal of them all. Born of two generations of brother-sister incest (Mama Ocllo married to Tupac Inca, then Kushirimay married to Huayna Capac), there's a good chance Mama Sarpay didn't have an amazingly robust constitution.

I believe Mama Sarpay was born between 1493 and 1499. And given that Kushirimay moved to Quito with Huayna, it's possible that Sarpay was born in that city or somewhere nearby. Depending on the exact timings of Mama Sarpay's birth and Kushirimay's death, it could be that she barely knew her mother or that her mother raised her until she reached the age of six or seven.

Whether or not her mother got the chance to build a bond with her child and pass down wisdom and advice, she certainly passed on her blue blood. For instance, though she wasn't a coya, people tended to refer to the princess as

Mama Sarpay rather than just Sarpay to show their respect for her and because her father chose for her to become a distinguished priestess.

Priestesses and priests were very important in Inca society. For example, each town had storehouses of food together with textiles which housed 1/3 of the town's produce to be used in times of famine or war. Another 1/3 of the produce was for daily consumption and the last 1/3 was used as taxes for religious use. That meant plenty of wealth was going towards priestesses, priests, acllakuna (whom we saw in the section about Ima Sumac) and the upkeep of spiritual buildings.

For the Incas, female priestesses were just as vital as male ones. The difference was that in general, **women led the worship of goddesses** (except for acllakuna who paid homage to Inti) while men led the worship of gods and everyone worshipped the intersex deity, Wiracocha. A female leader of the moon temple was just as respected as a male leader of the sun temple. One of the cults led autonomously by womankind was for the goddess **Apurimac** (pronounced a puu REE mac), and Mama Sarpay was high priestess for the famous temple dedicated to the Apurimac River together with the Apurimac goddess who lived in the river. The temple was built on a cliff near the river's edge.

The Apurimac River

All water was in some way sacred to the Incas and, what is more, they were very reverential towards landscapes. A Spanish priest and chronicler called Bernabé Cobo remarked that "there was not a shrine, large or small, whether it be a stream, a spring, a hill, or any other place of veneration, for which attendants and caretakers were not designated."

Two rivers were particularly sacred to the Incas - the Apurimac and the Urubamba. They run one either side of Cusco and both eventually flow into

the mighty Amazon River. Nowadays, there's a region in Peru called Apurimac after the majestic river that runs through it.

The Apurimac is a pretty cool river to be linked to. Its alternative name is Capac Mayu or mighty river. Noisy, gushing and fed by melting glaciers, the river is 430 miles long (which is almost the distance from Newcastle-upon-Tyne to Penzance in Cornwall, practically the whole length of England!). Besides that, it has gorges twice as deep as the Grand Canyon and is one of the longest rivers in what we now call Peru. The water rushes through an array of landscapes- from craggy, desolate mountains that are perpetually covered in snow to lush cloud forests- and parts of the river are rated as class 5+ out of 6 for white-water rafting, with fierce rapids brushing against jagged rocks.

The Incas built a bridge over the river so they could access the west and called it Huaca Chaca, meaning huaca bridge. Stretching over two cliff edges between the river, the bridge was made of thick plaited straw. It is even still maintained to this day and I really mean to this day! It has to be maintained on a daily basis, because little by little the straw needs to be continuously replaced. It is the last of its kind in the world.

The river underneath the bridge was considered a powerful **oracle**, which is an object, person or place through which a god or goddess speaks. Indeed, the word Apurimac signifies oracle or divine talker and the Apurimac goddess was said to speak through the river. The tall mountains surrounding the river were also oracles, the highest of which was Salkantay at over 6000 metres above sea level. #Don'tLookDown!

The goddess spoke through Mama Sarpay, too. The priestess appointed to lead the worship of Apurimac and to be the goddess' spokeswoman had to be a sister or close relative of the emperor seeing as how the oracle was extremely important. Emperors would ask the oracle to give them advice on matters of great consequence. As the only daughter of Huayna's principal wife Kushirimay, Mama Sarpay was a first-class **ñusta** (princess).

The fact is that this temple looking over such an impressive river was an immensely valuable, sacred location and it was overseen by women all those years ago. That's pretty cool in my opinion! See Map 5 in the map book to visualise the course of the Apurimac River.

The Apurimac Temple

Despite the chronicles being unclear as to the temple's exact location, several researchers have declared that it was in the Curahuasi Valley, some 77 miles to the **west of Cusco**. The valley's name translates as 'herb house'. This may indicate that medicinal plants were grown in the vicinity.

Furthermore, we know what it looked like inside and out. The enclosure was colourfully painted and inside there was a thick life-size post driven into the ground in the form of a woman covered in blood from sacrificed llamas. Around its waist, the figure had a gold belt about 9cm in width and above the belt were two gold breasts. It was also covered in very delicate gold clothing fastened together with pins. Near the central statue, there were several other smaller figures dressed similarly but without belts. And what was the name of the central figure? You guessed it: Apurimac, the river goddess.

Then there was the temple. Inca temples would have **incense** burning in them accompanied by **music** playing from puma skin drums, trumpets, flutes and pipes. Temple priestesses issued invitations to the men to come and worship, plus they took leading roles in the entertainment.

Mama Sarpay would've had other roles too. Interestingly, the Incas even had a form of **confession**, which was heard by priests and priestesses in charge of huacas, just like Mama Sarpay. Incas believed illnesses to be divine retribution or the consequence of an evil shaman cursing you, therefore they tended to confess their sins when they- or someone in their family- got ill. Sins included murder, stealing, not attending festivals and lying. Confessing would

remove the disease, as would seeking help from a benevolent shaman, performing sacrifices and taking medicine from healers.

After confession, the person would take a bath in a river to cleanse themselves of the sin and- as maintained by the Spanish priest Bernabé Cobo- the person had to say: "I have confessed my sins to Inti and since I was raised by Wiracocha, he has forgiven me. River, you receive my sins; take them to the sea where they will never reappear." The long River Apurimac could certainly take sins far away from the sinner.

The priestess or priest wasn't allowed to tell anyone the sin. On the other hand, the individual who had confessed was honour-bound to go out and tell people about their sin, plus they also had to fast as punishment.

An additional role entrusted to Sarpay was probably during the annual **Fiesta de Situa**. The Apurimac River, and therefore probably the temple too, was an important stop along the way during the celebrations. The festival's purpose was to mark the start of the rainy season and pay tribute to Mama Cocha, as well as to drive out evil spirits from Cusco by throwing them into the main rivers of the area. The deep and fast-flowing waters of the Apurimac were ideal for this task.

Mama Sarpay's Foresight

During the civil war between Huascar and Atahualpa in the early 1530s, which will be analysed in depth in the next chapter, Mama Sarpay would've been part of Huascar's faction. As a son of Rawa Ocllo and Huayna Capac, this guy was her half-brother and also, through her mother, her first cousin. Yet, as far as we know, her remote temple was removed from the bitter fighting.

Mama Sarpay was still working there in **1532-3** when the Spanish were conquering the Inca Empire. At an estimated age of 33 to 39, she was an experienced priestess. A justified fury surged in her soul towards the Spanish

for destroying Inca temples and artefacts, raping women, murdering innocent people and seizing power away from the royal family.

It was said she had the gift of prophecy and could tell when the Spanish would arrive somewhere. Mama Sarpay used this gift to advise the Inca noblemen at each place to gather together and use up all their food supplies. That way, the Spanish wouldn't be able to steal them. Pretty neat, I think!

As a side note, Mama Sarpay was not the only religious person to prophesy. Years before during Huayna Capac's reign, three coloured rings were seen to encircle Killa in the sky. A priest saw this as a bad omen, a message from the moon goddess. Consequently, he predicted that disaster would fall on the Emperor. He declared that there would be a bloody war between Huayna's descendants, which would put an end to Inca religion and laws. As we know, this prediction came true.

It is said that Mama Sarpay's predictions came true, as well. This ability to prophesy meant that she knew when the Spanish were on their way to her temple...

Continued in 'Intrepid Dudettes of the Inca Empire'

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If you enjoyed this book, I'd love to hear from you and hope that you could take some time to post a review on the website you bought it from.

Thanks, or rather *yupaychani* as an Inca would say!

Helen Pugh

About the Author

Helen Pugh has long believed that it's important to rescue historical women from obscurity and make sure that "herstory" is taught alongside "history"!

Her interest in South America and the Incas began in 2006, when she first went to Ecuador. Then, from 2011 she lived there for 7 continuous years, 6 in the Amazon Region and 1 in Quito. She experienced domestic violence and very long and traumatic legal battles there so can relate to some of the Inca women in the book on that front.

Helen studied Spanish and Italian at university and has a lifelong passion for history, especially that of historical women who made history but have been sidelined.



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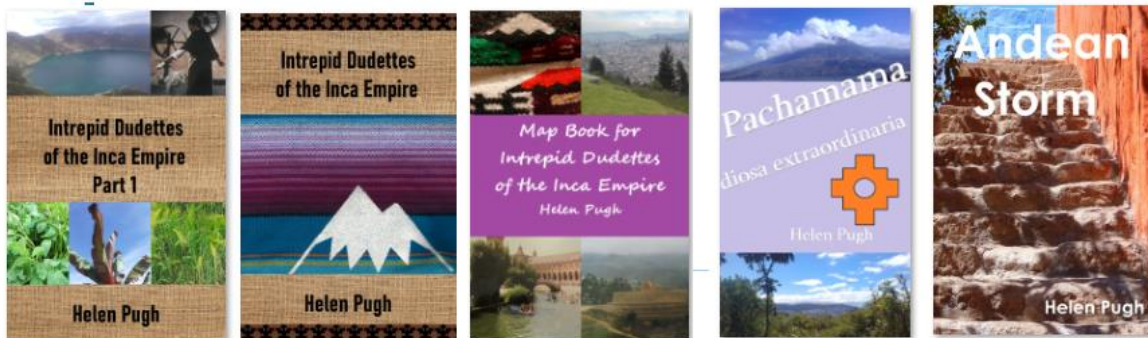
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