

Early History of Peruvian Mining

Peru is a mineral rich country with one of the world's richest mining traditions. The use of gold and silver for jewellery during the Inca era was discovered by the Spanish, who in the sixteenth century quickly settled in Peru to exploit the vast mineral wealth. Even today, some of the original Inca and Spanish mines are still being profitably worked.

The Inca culture, which started around the twelfth century and collapsed with the onset of the Spanish Conquest, gave a prominent position to mining and metallurgical development, working gold, silver and copper on a large scale. The Incas knew how to use mercury and produced alloys such as bronze and others, using lead, zinc and platinum.

The wealth found by the Spaniards in Peru halted development of the mining industry during the early colonial years - it was undoubtedly easier to sack temples and palaces. Additional reasons for the stagnation of mining were power struggles, lack of administrative organization and possibly the passive resistance of the Incas, who removed traces of the veins they had worked.

The chronology of colonial mining operations begins in 1537 with gold and silver being worked in Lucanas and Parinacochas, followed by Jauja and Huancaayo in 1539. Gold was exploited in Jaen and Carabaya from the 1540's, and later in Sandia. It is said that Charles V received as a present from Peru a gold nugget found in San Gaban, which weighed more than 46 kilos and was in the shape of a horse's head.

The expansion of the country's railway network in the late 19th century facilitated access to potential mining operations. By 1978 there were 1512 mines in operation, 870 of which were silver mines, 176 coal and 118 copper, and 53 oil deposits. The copper industry, so active in the Inca period and then almost non-existent in the Colonial period, began to recover during Republican times. The Pacific War of 1879 to 1883, fought by Peru and Bolivia against Chile, left the country in financial bankruptcy. Mining played a key role in the reconstruction process.

In 1919 the Cerro de Pasco Copper Corporation began construction of a large and modern smelter in La Oroya. Cerro, as it was known, continued to prosper and grow in Peru until the early 1970's, when it was expropriated by the state and renamed Centromin. In the decades following the 1929 to 1932 economic crisis, Peru established itself as a leading world producer of copper, lead, zinc, vanadium, bismuth, gold, silver and iron.