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Painting the Empire with Feathers

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PAINTING THE EMPIRE

WITH FEATHERS



Exotic Amazonian birds have been special to South Americans for thousands of years.

Feathers were incorporated into complex designs on clothing and buildings to add vibrant color.

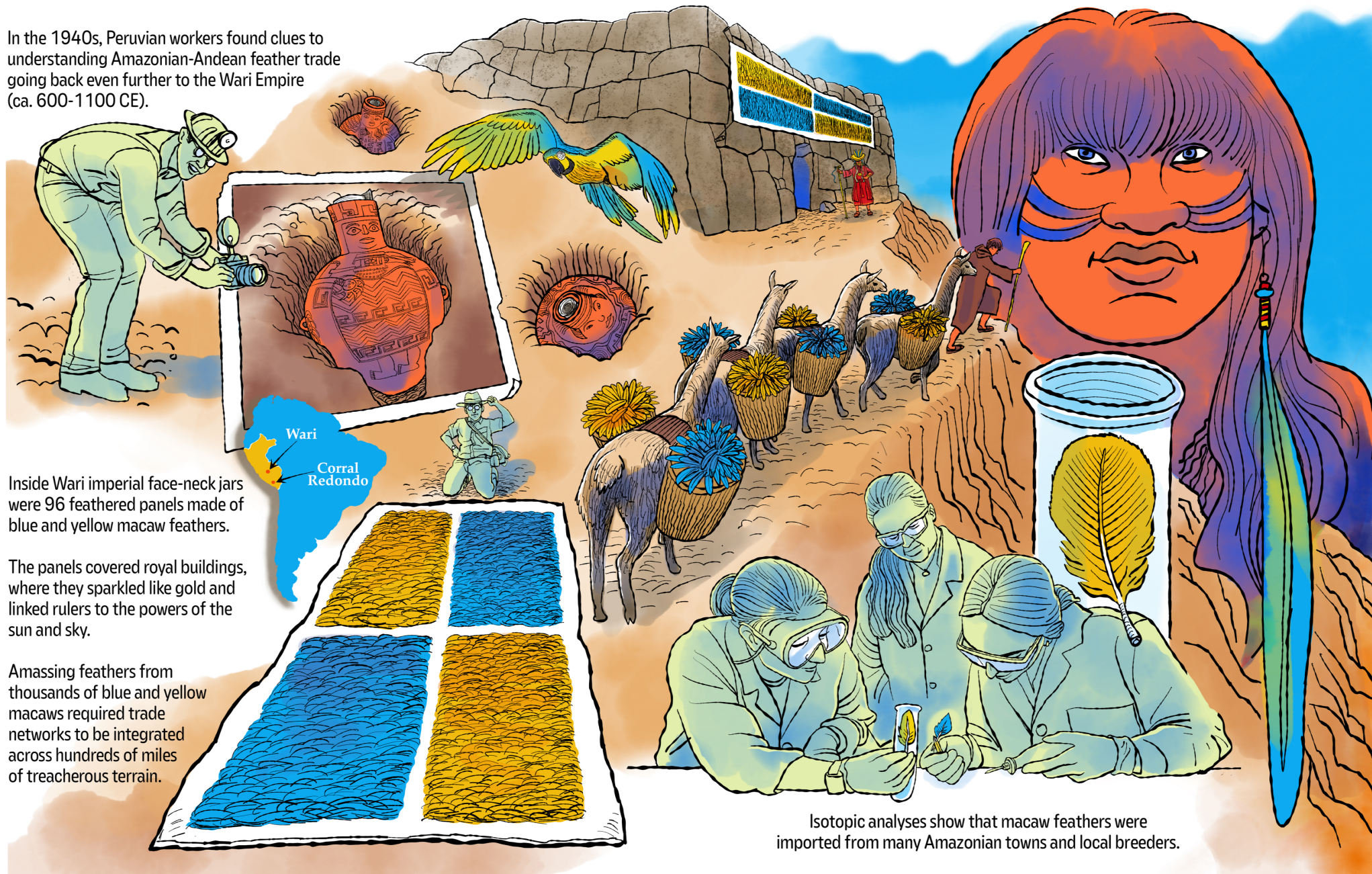
The Inca Empire (ca. 1438-1533 CE) imported millions of Amazonian birds and feathers and stored them in colcas along the Inca Road.

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In the 1940s, Peruvian workers found clues to understanding Amazonian-Andean feather trade going back even further to the Wari Empire (ca. 600-1100 CE).



Inside Wari imperial face-neck jars were 96 feathered panels made of blue and yellow macaw feathers.

The panels covered royal buildings, where they sparkled like gold and linked rulers to the powers of the sun and sky.

Amassing feathers from thousands of blue and yellow macaws required trade networks to be integrated across hundreds of miles of treacherous terrain.

Isotopic analyses show that macaw feathers were imported from many Amazonian towns and local breeders.



Radiocarbon (AMS) dating shows the panels were made at the height of the Wari Empire (ca. 850 CE), proving these feathers were essential instruments of statecraft that painted colors of the Amazon throughout the empire.