

The Coming of Pizarro As Seen by the Incas

The Traditional Version

In order to head off a war between Spain and Portugal over discoveries in the New World, Pope Alexander VI divided the territory with an imaginary "line of demarcation" in 1493. The land to the east of the line -- which ran north to south several hundred miles west of the Azores and Cape Verdes -- "belonged" (!) to Portugal, while that to the west was "given" (!) to Spain. Almost 40 years after this papal decree, soldier of fortune Francisco Pizarro set out for Peru to secure the pagan kingdom of the Incas for Charles V of Spain and the Catholic Church.

Accompanied by 168 soldiers, Pizarro disembarked confidently. As the conquistadores, wearing shining armor and mounted on horses, rode inland from the sea toward the Inca city of Cajamarca, they were greeted along the way by awestruck natives. In Cajamarca, Pizarro was to meet with Atahualpa, the tyrannical Inca ruler. However, once inside the city, the Spaniards saw that they were surrounded by thousands of Inca warriors, and the prepared to fight the heathen for the glory of God and Spain. Despite their lesser numbers, Pizarro's men had superior arms and easily routed the primitive Inca army. They took Atahualpa prisoner and later executed him because Pizarro feared the possibility of reprisal. Without their leader, the Incas readily accepted Christianity and Spanish rule.

The Other Side

In many ways Inca civilization was more advanced than that of Western Europe. Inca physicians were performing successful brain surgery while their European counterparts still prescribed leeches for just about every ailment. Inca architecture, agriculture, and astronomy had progressed amazingly, too, but perhaps the most remarkable Inca achievement concerned social order. In their society there were no poor people. Widows, orphans, and invalids were cared for by the state, and workers retired at age 50 on pensions of food and clothing. There was little crime because every basic need was met. At the head of this benevolent system was the ruler, or Inca, who demanded in exchange the obedience of his subjects.

When Pizarro landed in Peru in 1532, all he knew of the Incas was that, according to legend, they possessed fabulous wealth. His twin objectives were to loot the empire and to subjugate its people to not only Christianity but also to Spanish rule. The conquistadores had arrived at a most opportune time. Both Atahualpa and his half-brother Huascar had claimed the throne after their father, Huayna Capac, died in 1525 without formally naming his successor. Although Capac's priest designated Huascar the ruler, a civil war erupted between the two brothers and lasted until 1532, when Atahualpa's forces captured and imprisoned Huascar. Huascar was forced to witness the slaughter of the royal family; hundreds of women, men, and children were killed so Atahualpa could reign without further challenge. Atahualpa's bloody power play disrupted the ordered Inca society, and the natives hailed Pizarro as a son of their white-skinned God Viracocha, sent, they believed, to avenge Huascar and his family. The Spaniard did not abuse them. The sound of his cannon added credence to this false identity, since Viracocha controlled the thunder. As the conquistadores plundered their way cross-country, they met with no

resistance from the thoroughly intimidated and demoralized Incas.

However, when word of the Spaniards' conduct during their trek to Cajamarca reached Atahualpa, he demanded that the thieves return the goods they had stolen. Instead, they sent him a priest, Brother Vicente, who proceeded to instruct Atahualpa in Western religion. The catechism lesson ended abruptly when Atahualpa hurled a bible on the ground. At this, the offended Spaniards -- who the night before had been whipped into a religious frenzy by Pizarro -- attacked and slaughtered the unarmed natives. The Inca warriors stationed outside the city scattered before the onslaught of the Spanish artillery. Atahualpa was taken captive and held for ransom. When he learned that Huascar was promising the Spanish more gold for his own release, the ruthless Atahualpa secretly ordered his brother's death. During the next nine months, a roomful of gold and silver was delivered to Pizarro to secure Atahualpa's safe return to the throne, but the Spaniard had no intention of releasing his prisoner. Pizarro knew that, in order to disrupt and conquer this well-run society, he must kill the Inca leader. After a mock trial at which Atahualpa was found guilty of trumped-up charges, Pizarro offered him a choice: He could elect to be burned alive as a heathen or to be strangled as a Christian. When the Inca ruler chose the latter, he was baptized Juan de Atahualpa in honor of St. John the Baptist. Then he was tied to a stake and garroted. Pizarro and his men gave the Inca a full-scale Catholic funeral.

Eyewitness Account

"Friar Vicente... came forward holding a crucifix in his right hand and a breviary in his left and introduced himself as another envoy of the Spanish ruler, who according to his account was a friend of God, and who often worshiped before the cross and believed in the Gospel. Friar Vicente called upon the Inca to renounce all other gods as being a mockery of the truth.

"Atahualpa's reply was that he could not change his belief in the Sun, who was immortal, and in the other Inca divinities. He asked Friar Vicente what authority he had for his own belief, and the friar told him it was all written in the book which he held. The Inca then said, 'Give me the book so that it can speak to me.' The book was handed up to him, and he began to eye it carefully and to listen to it page by page. At last he asked, 'Why doesn't the book say anything to me?' Still sitting on his throne, he threw it on the ground with a haughty and petulant gesture.

"Friar Vicente found his voice and called out that the Indians were against the Christian faith. Thereupon Pizarro and Almagro (his lieutenant) began to shout orders to their men, telling them to attack these Indians who rejected God and the Emperor. The Spaniards began to fire their muskets and charged upon the Indians, killing them like ants. At the sound of the explosions and the jingle of bells on the horses' harness, the shock of arms and the whole amazing novelty of their attackers' appearance, the Indians were terror-stricken. The pressure of their numbers caused the walls of the square to crumble and fall. They were desperate to escape from being trampled by the horses, and in their headlong flight a lot of them were crushed to death. So many Indians were killed that it was impracticable to count them. As for the Spaniards, only five of them lost their lives, and these few casualties were not caused by the Indians, who had at no time dared to attack the formidable strangers. The Spaniards' corpses were found clasped together with their Indian victims, and it was assumed that they had been mistakenly trampled to death by their own cavalry."

From: "The People's Almanac #3" by David Wallechinsky and Irving Wallace

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