

The Pizarro Family and the Conquest of Peru

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Known for his conquest of the Incan Empire in Peru, Francisco Pizarro (d. 1541) most likely had no idea what was waiting for him when he started out on his expedition in December of 1530. Little did he know that what was happening in the Incan Empire was in his favor. Setting out on his adventure, he probably thought he was in for fame and fortune, great wealth, and power, as Hernán Cortés (1485-1547) did almost a decade earlier. Because of many failed attempts at an expedition, Pizarro finally, with the help of his friend Diego de Almagro (1475-1538), was able to gain the funds for a quest into Peru. Because of the previous failures, he knew he had to deliver on profit to make his expedition successful, and to receive reinforcements. The huge success of Cortez in Mexico probably put a lot of pressure on Pizarro to succeed.

To join them, Pizarro brought along his four brothers and his cousin. This was a strategic move on his part. This would mean that instead of any profits and titles being shared two ways, it would be split between all seven giving the Pizarro family 86 percent of the rewards. Much of Pizzaro's first profits accompanied his brother Hernando back to Spain in the summer of 1533. A lot of the Pizarro wealth was distributed in land purchase in and around the town of Trujillo in Spain where the family was from, and in purchase of royal *juros*. Royal *juros* were the equivalent of today's government bonds. In the first decade after landing in Inca territory, the Pizarro family had invested almost 3.5 million *pesos* in real estate and almost 30 million in *juros*.¹

The Andean landscape is a very harsh one, with mountain ranges, deserts, rivers, and jungles. It was an environment to which the Spanish were not acclimated. This made the Spanish more vulnerable to native diseases. Working against them in this respect was also the lack of a steady stream of supplies. Unlike Cortez, who had the colonies in the Caribbean to get supplies and to send messages, Pizarro and his group were mostly alone. The fact the Incan civilization was not an urban one, rather

¹ Rafael Varon Gabai and Auke Pieter Jacobs, "Peruvian Wealth and Spanish Investments: The Pizarro Family during the Sixteenth Century," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 67, no. 4 (1987): 657.

one that was made up of small villages, probably confused the *conquistadors*. They most likely assumed the structure would be more like the known Aztec one in Mexico. There were a few large cities, Cuzco being the biggest and grandest of them.

A difference between Pizarro's conquest and Cortez's was the speed at which it happened. Pizarro's march south was hindered by his need for supplies. He had a much smaller band of men than Cortez, but because of the distance from established Iberian settlements, they needed to make frequent stops to gather food and other supplies. Along the way, he was able to gain a strong foothold in the villages of Peru. It is over 1,500 miles from Cuzco to Panama City. The Spanish needed to easily find villages to gain supplies. Helping the Spanish in their quest were the vast road systems. The Inca used these to transport food, military and livestock all over the kingdom. The roads spanned more than 30,000 miles.² They roads were impressive in construction:

The breadth of the road was approximately 20 feet, and stone pillars, in the manner of milestones, were placed along the route at intervals slightly exceeding a league. The road it-self was made of heavy flags of freestone, covered over in some instances with a bituminous cement which time made harder than the stone.³

An important factor to examine when it comes to how Pizarro was able to successfully conquer the Incan Empire was the Incan Civil war that was raging when Pizarro's group first landed. This was important to the conquest because it was a boon to Pizarro's advance south from San Miguel de Piura. He encountered much less resistance than he probably expected. Ever since Europeans came to the Americas, diseases ravaged the native populations. A measles-like disease, possibly smallpox, ran through the Incan people, including the nobility. Included in these deaths was the Incan emperor, Huayna Capac (1468-1524). When he died in 1524, he named one of his sons his successor, who then also perished in the epidemic. The next choice was his son Huáscar Inca (1491-1532). Huáscar was a rash youth and seized power with no regard to his father's previous advisors' experiences. He gave power to his friends

² Magda Von Der Heydt-Coca, "When Worlds Collide: The Incorporation of the Andean World into the Emerging World-Economy in the Colonial Period," *Dialectical Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (1999): 10.

³ Charles J. Merdinger, "Roads — through the Ages: I. Early Developments: Cumulative Index," *Military Engineer* 44, no. 302 (1952): 483-86.

and had anyone that resisted him killed.⁴ Eventually, this news reached another son of Huayna Capac, Atahualpa (1502-1533). Atahualpa's base was in northern Quito, and Huáscar was in Cuzco. When Huáscar refused to accept Atahualpa's customary gifts, war was declared between the brothers and over the course six months, Atahualpa was able to destroy his brother's armies and gain the throne.⁵ The significance of this victory was the sense of confidence Atahualpa gained. He was able to defeat a large army in a very short time. He had a military background and was a skilled tactician on the battlefield. Even after reinforcements came about a year after the landing, Pizarro's forces still numbered under 100 men.⁶ Atahualpa was also misled by his advisors, who underestimated Pizarro's forces, and told the ruler they could "take them prisoner with a few hundred men."⁷ As Cortez has years earlier, Pizarro was able to do his research because of the bonds he made during his journey south.

When it comes to Pizarro's tactics, we notice that they were unique in that it seemed he was much more interested in domination than destruction. When he came to a city, he would use tactics of fear and control. If he experienced any resistance, he would kill just enough people to strike fear in the people of the town or village, and then he would take control. This was a much different tactic from Cortés. He would go into a city and if he experienced any resistance, he would stamp out the whole city. Pizarro's tactics for taking control of the new Incan emperor was similar to Cortez. The point was to capture the emperor and use him as a puppet to control the population and to get as much profit as possible. Atahualpa's confidence was not unwarranted, as he outnumbered Pizarro by forces of nearly 40,000 men to Pizarro's 168.⁸ When he sent traditional "gifts" of greeting to the Spanish, he sent skinned ducks and a representation of a fortress. The ducks were a representation of what he and his forces planned to do to them, and the fortress was what they were to encounter should they proceed in their invasion.⁹ This is an interesting intimidation

⁴ John H. Rowe, "The Inca Civil War and the Establishment of Spanish Power in Peru," *Ñawpa Pacha*, 28, no. 1 (2006): 2.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ Gonzalo Lamana, "Beyond Exotization and Likeness: Alterity and the Production of Sense in a Colonial Encounter," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47, no. 1 (2005): 8.

⁷ Mark A. Burkholder and Lyman L. Johnson. "Colonial Latin America -" *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 27, no. 4 (2008): 610-611.

⁸ Gonzalo Lamana, "Beyond Exotization and Likeness," 23.

⁹ Ibid., 15.

technique. Part of this may have been because the Inca were a society based strongly on divination, and celestial prediction.¹⁰ This could have been a way to force a self-fulfilling prophecy. Perhaps he felt if he gave this “gift”, where he predicted the end of the invaders, it would come true. Atahualpa was also informed by his scouts that the Spanish could not be gods, because they acted like humans. They ate, drank, slept etc., and they did not seem to perform any miraculous events:

[They] do not make sierras or flatten them, nor make people, nor do they make rivers or water fountains flow on their way-if there is no water, they need to carry it. And if they are not gods, they are men of the worst kind: they take everything they see and desire- young women, gold and silver vessels, rich clothes-and force bound Indians to carry their things.¹¹

This perception of the Spanish begs the question: Who did this help more? While the first thought might be that it helped Atahualpa more, because he did not give everything hoping to satisfy the gods and earn their favor, one could argue that this perception was more helpful to Pizarro. Because Atahualpa realized the Spanish were just mortal men, he most likely assumed their technology was in the same level as his own. If this was the case, then he could easily destroy them if needed, as his numbers were so much greater. Had the Spanish indeed been on the same level of warcraft as the Inca, then yes, he would have been able to stem the tide of invasion.

Another factor to the success of Pizarro’s invasion was the city of Cajamarca itself. Atahualpa did not have his forces in the city when the Spanish arrived. Instead, he chose to keep his forces outside the city in a tambo, or inn-like complex.¹² This provided the Spanish an opportunity to hide around the plaza for an ambush without Atahualpa’s men knowing about it. Atahualpa arrived in the city with only a fraction of his forces, and Pizarro’s men were able to make short work of the capture. Approximately 1,500 natives were killed in the skirmish.¹³

When he was captured, Atahualpa had only been in direct power a short while. His capture decimated Incan morale. He was ransomed for vast sums. 11 tons

¹⁰ Rowe, “The Inca Civil War,” 2.

¹¹ Gonzalo Lamana, “Beyond Exotization and Likeness,” 17.

¹² Ibid., 23.

¹³ Mark A. Burkholder and Lyman L. Johnson. “Colonial Latin America,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 27, no. 4 (2008): 610-611.

of gold and 26,000 pounds of silver, granting each soldier 45 pounds of gold, and 90 pounds of silver.¹⁴ Pizarro kept Atahualpa alive for less than a year, after which he installed a puppet government. This caused all sorts of problems like a revolution, which is a subject for its own paper.

The conquest of Peru made the fortunes of the Pizarro family. The actions of the leaders of the Spanish and Incan forces as well as the native roads helped in the conquest. The large distances and the landscape hindered the advance of the Spanish. There really is no definitive answer as to what worked best and what was the greatest hinderance for the Spanish, or what was the deciding factor that put the nail in the coffin for the Incan empire.

¹⁴ Ibid., 61.