

The Collision at Cajamarca



Francisco Pizarro

Setting the Scene

THE BIGGEST SHIFT OF POPULATION IN MODERN TIMES has been the colonization of the New World by Europeans, and the resulting conquest, numerical reduction, or complete disappearance of most groups of Native Americans (American Indians)... The New World was initially colonized around or before 11,000 B.C. by way of Alaska, the Bering Strait, and Siberia. Complex agricultural societies gradually arose in the Americas far to the south of that entry route, developing in complete isolation from the emerging complex societies of the Old World. After that initial colonization from Asia, the sole well-attested further contacts between the New World and Asia involved only hunter-gatherers living on opposite sides of the Bering Strait. The most dramatic moment in subsequent European–Native American relations was the first encounter between the Inca emperor Atahualpa and the Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro at the Peruvian highland town of Cajamarca on November 16, 1532.

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 "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. After a cultural misunderstanding, Pizarro's men charged a numerically superior army of Incas. Despite their lesser numbers, Pizarro's men had superior arms and easily routed the primitive Inca army. Horses proved to be the tanks of day, mowing over the Inca warriors like grass. Several Inca accounts refer to the Spaniards akin to the mythical centaur. Pizarro proceeded to hold his prisoner for eight months, while extracting history's largest ransom in return for a promise to free him. After the ransom—enough gold to fill a room 22 feet long by 17 feet wide to a height of over 8 feet—was delivered, Pizarro reneged on his promise and executed Atahualpa. Without their leader, the Incas readily accepted Christianity and Spanish rule. Pizarro's success proved to be only the beginning of the Spanish domination of South America.

In many ways the Inca civilization was more advanced than that of Western Europe. Inca physicians were performing successful brain surgery while their European counterparts chiseled out pieces of skull to reduce migraines, and 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 virtually 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, 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 died in 1525. A bloody civil war erupted between the two brothers and lasted until 1532, when Huascar was captured and imprisoned by Atahualpa's forces. 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 divided Inca society, and many of the natives hailed Pizarro as a son of their white-skinned God Viracocha, sent, they believed, to avenge Huascar and his family. 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. Had Pizarro tried to invade Peru earlier, he would have been met by a united empire; but now the Incas were split, giving him an advantage he did not initially count on.

The Collision

WHAT UNFOLDED THAT day at Cajamarca is well known, because it was recorded in writing by many of the Spanish participants. To get a flavor of those events, let us relive them by weaving together excerpts from eyewitness accounts by six of Pizarro's companions, including his brothers Hernando and Pedro:

"Governor Pizarro wished to obtain intelligence from some Indians who had come from Cajamarca, so he had them tortured. They confessed that they had heard that Atahualpa was waiting for the Governor at Cajamarca. The Governor then ordered us to advance. On reaching the entrance to Cajamarca, we saw the camp of Atahualpa at a distance of a league, in the skirts of the mountains. The Indians' camp looked like a very beautiful city. They had so many tents that we were all filled with great apprehension. Until then, we had never seen anything like this in the Indies. It filled all our Spaniards with fear and confusion. But we could not show any fear or turn back, for if the Indians

had sensed any weakness in us, even the Indians that we were bringing with us as guides would have killed *us*. So we made a show of good spirits, and after carefully observing the town and the tents, we descended into the valley and entered Cajamarca.

“We talked a lot among ourselves about what to do. All of us were full of fear, because we were so few in number and we had penetrated so far into a land where we could not hope to receive reinforcements. We all met with the Governor to debate what we should undertake the next day. Few of us slept that night, and we kept watch in the square of Cajamarca, looking at the campfires of the Indian army. It was a frightening sight. Most of the campfires were on a hillside and so close to each other that it looked like the sky brightly studded with stars. There was no distinction that night between the mighty and the lowly, or between foot soldiers and horsemen. Everyone carried out sentry duty fully armed. So too did the good old Governor, who went about encouraging his men. The Governor’s brother Hernando Pizarro estimated the number of Indian soldiers there at 40,000, but he was telling a lie just to encourage us, for there were actually more than 80,000 Indians.

“On the next morning a messenger from Atahualpa arrived, and the Governor said to him, ‘Tell your lord to come when and how he pleases, and that, in what way soever he may come I will receive him as a friend and brother. I pray that he may come quickly, for I desire to see him. No harm or insult will befall him.’ “At noon Atahualpa began to draw up his men and to approach. Soon we saw the entire plain full of Indians, halting periodically to wait for more Indians who kept filing out of the camp behind them. They kept filling out in separate detachments into the afternoon. The front detachments were now close to our camp, and still more troops kept issuing from the camp of the Indians. In front of Atahualpa went 2,000 Indians who swept the road ahead of him, and these were followed by the warriors, half of whom were marching in the fields on one side of him and half on the other side.

“First came a squadron of Indians dressed in clothes of different colors, like a chessboard. They advanced, removing the straws from the ground and sweeping the road. Next came three squadrons in different dresses, dancing and singing. Then came a number of men with armor, large metal plates, and crowns of gold and silver. So great was the amount of furniture of gold and silver which they bore, that it was a marvel to observe how the sun glinted upon it. Among them came the figure of Atahualpa in a very fine litter with the ends of its timbers covered in silver. Eighty lords carried him on their shoulders, all wearing a very rich blue livery. Atahualpa himself was very richly dressed, with his crown on his head and a collar of large emeralds around his neck. He sat on a small stool with a rich saddle cushion resting on his litter. The litter was lined with parrot feathers of many colors and decorated with plates of gold and silver.

“Behind Atahualpa came two other litters and two hammocks, in which were some high chiefs, then several squadrons of Indians with crowns of gold and silver. These

Indian squadrons began to enter the plaza to the accompaniment of great songs, and thus entering they occupied every part of the plaza. In the meantime all of us Spaniards were waiting ready, hidden in a courtyard, full of fear. Many of us urinated without noticing it, out of sheer terror. On reaching the center of the plaza, Atahualpa remained in his litter on high, while his troops continued to file in behind him.

“Governor Pizarro now sent Friar Vicente de Valverde to go speak to Atahualpa, and to require Atahualpa in the name of God and of the King of Spain that Atahualpa subject himself to the law of our Lord Jesus Christ and to the service of His Majesty the King of Spain. Advancing with a cross in one hand and the Bible in the other hand, and going among the Indian troops up to the place where Atahualpa was, the Friar thus addressed him: ‘I am a Priest of God, and I teach Christians the things of God, and in like manner I come to teach you. What I teach is that which God says to us in this Book. Therefore, on the part of God and of the Christians, I beseech you to be their friend, for such is God’s will, and it will be for your good.’

“Atahualpa asked for the Book, that he might look at it, and the Friar gave it to him closed. Atahualpa did not know how to open the Book, and the Friar was extending his arm to do so, when Atahualpa, in great anger, gave him a blow on the arm, not wishing that it should be opened. Then he opened it himself, and, without any astonishment at the letters and paper he threw it away from him five or six paces, his face a deep crimson.

“The Friar returned to Pizarro, shouting, ‘Come out! Come out, Christians! Come at these enemy dogs who reject the things of God. That tyrant has thrown my book of holy law to the ground! Did you not see what happened? Why remain polite and servile toward this over-proud dog when the plains are full of Indians? March out against him, for I absolve you!’

“The governor then gave the signal to Candia, who began to fire off the guns. At the same time the trumpets were sounded, and the armored Spanish troops, both cavalry and infantry, sallied forth out of their hiding places straight into the mass of unarmed Indians crowding the square, giving the Spanish battle cry, ‘Santiago!’ We had placed rattles on the horses to terrify the Indians. The booming of the guns, the blowing of the trumpets, and the rattles on the horses threw the Indians into panicked confusion. The Spaniards fell upon them and began to cut them to pieces. The Indians were so filled with fear that they climbed on top of one another, formed mounds, and suffocated each other. Since they were unarmed, they were attacked without danger to any Christian. The cavalry rode them down, killing and wounding, and following in pursuit. The infantry made so good an assault that most of those who remained in a short time were put to the sword.

“The Governor himself took his sword and dagger, entered the thick of the Indians with the Spaniards who were with him, and with great bravery reached Atahuallpa’s litter. He fearlessly grabbed Atahuallpa’s left arm and shouted ‘Santiago!’ but he could not pull Atahuallpa out of his litter because it was held up high. Although we killed the Indians who held the litter, others at once took their places and held it aloft, and in this manner we spent a long time in overcoming and killing Indians. Finally seven or eight Spaniards on horseback spurred on their horses, rushed upon the litter from one side, and with great effort they heaved it over on its side. In that way Atahuallpa was captured, and the Governor took Atahuallpa to his lodging. The Indians carrying the litter, and those escorting Atahuallpa, never abandoned him: all died around him.

“The panic-stricken Indians remaining in the square, terrified at the firing of the guns and at the horses – something they had never seen – tried to flee from the square by knocking down a stretch of wall and running out onto the plain outside. Our cavalry jumped the broken wall and charged into the plain, shouting, ‘Chase those with the fancy clothes! Don’t let any escape! Spear them!’ All of the other Indian soldiers whom Atahuallpa had brought were a mile from Cajamarca ready for battle, but not one made a move, and during all this not one Indian raised a weapon against a Spaniard. When the squadrons of Indians who had remained in the plain outside the town saw the other Indians fleeing and shouting, most of them too panicked and fled. It was an astonishing sight, for the whole valley for 15 or 20 miles was completely filled with Indians. Night had already fallen, and our cavalry were continuing to spear Indians in the fields, when we heard a trumpet calling for us to reassemble at camp.

“If night had not come on, few out of the more than 40,000 Indian troops would have been left alive. Six or seven thousand Indians lay dead, and many more had their arms cut off and other wounds. Atahuallpa himself admitted that we had killed 7,000 of his men in that battle... All those Indians who bore Atahuallpa’s litter appeared to be high chiefs and councillors. They were all killed, as well as those Indians who were carried in the other litters and hammocks. The lord of Cajamarca was also killed, and others, but their numbers were so great that they could not be counted, for all who came in attendance on Atahuallpa were great lords. It was extraordinary to see so powerful a ruler captured in so short a time, when he had come with such a mighty army. Truly, it was not accomplished by our own forces, for there were so few of us. It was by the grace of God, which is great.



“Atahuallpa’s robes had been torn off when the Spaniards pulled him out of his litter. The Governor ordered clothes to be brought to him, and when Atahuallpa was

dressed, the Governor ordered Atahualpa to sit near him and soothed his rage and agitation at finding himself so quickly fallen from his high estate. The Governor said to Atahualpa, 'Do not take it as an insult that you have been defeated and taken prisoner, for with the Christians who come with me, though so few in number, I have conquered greater kingdoms than yours, and have defeated other more powerful lords than you, imposing upon them the dominion of the Emperor, whose vassal I am, and who is King of Spain and of the universal world. We come to conquer this land by his command, that all may come to a knowledge of God and of His Holy Catholic Faith; and by reason of our good mission, God, the Creator of heaven and earth and of all things in them, permits this, in order that you may know Him and come out from the bestial and diabolical life that you lead. It is for this reason that we, being so few in number, subjugate that vast host. When you have seen the errors in which you live, you will understand the good that we have done you by coming to your land by order of his Majesty the King of Spain. Our Lord permitted that your pride should be brought low and that no Indian should be able to offend a Christian.'

(Guns, Germs, and Steel by Jared Diamond, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999, pp. 67-74)

Discussion Questions (*not* to be turned in):

- Under whose authority did Francisco Pizarro set out to secure the Inca Empire?
- What technologies and/or tactics enabled the Spaniards to conquer the Incas so convincingly?
- What events had transpired in the Inca Empire that weakened them before Pizarro arrived?
- What Incan beliefs gave Pizarro a decided advantage even before he reached Cajamarca?
- How successful do you suspect Pizarro would have been had he and his men arrived at Cajamarca ten years earlier?