



Francisco Pizarro hoped to find great riches in the land of the Inca when he set off on his third voyage to the New World in 1527. Travel back in time with Michael Wood and learn how Pizarro ransomed the life of a king for a room full of gold and silver. Through letters and drawings from the 16th century and film from modern-day South America, discover this remarkable story of greed, faith, dishonor and valor.

November 1524-27 A Land of Wonders

Francisco Pizarro made his first voyage to the New World in November 1524. After much hardship and skirmishes with natives in Panama, he returned to Spain with empty hands. Pizarro's second voyage (November 1526 to late 1527) was much larger, with 160 men and several horses carried in two ships. After some initial probing, Pizarro's expedition split with Bartolomé Ruiz, the pilot, taking half the command.

While sailing off the coast of what is now Ecuador, Ruiz made first contact with the Incas. Aboard a balsa trading raft with a huge triangular cotton sail were 20 Inca crew and passengers. The Spanish boarded the vessel and, to their delight, saw many pieces of silver and gold, precious stones and intricately woven fabrics. Ruiz kept three of the Inca to be trained as interpreters. Through sign language, the captives told him that their gold came from a land far to the south, a land of wonders. Meanwhile unaware of Ruiz's auspicious encounter, Pizarro and his men camped on an uninhabited island just off the steamy mangrove coast of Colombia. Mutiny was in the air. Pizarro's men had grown sick of the promises of their craggy leader.

Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (Letter to a King)

Frustrated by the Spanish mistreatment of the Inca people in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, Don Felipe Wamán Poma de Ayala — himself of both Inca and Spanish descent — sent an illustrated letter to King Phillip III of Spain that documented Inca culture and history. A facsimile edition of his letter was published by the Institute of Ethnology in Paris in 1936. These reproductions of his drawings appear throughout this section of the site.

April 1528 Puerto Pizarro

After spending seven months on Gorgon Island, Pizarro and his men set sail for Colombia and Ecuador. Accompanied by Ruiz and his Indian interpreters, he traveled down the mangrove coast. Here, they encountered more balsa rafts. They sailed on until the Indians recognized the coast of their hometown, Tumbes. The Spanish anchored near the little port known today as Puerto Pizarro.

"When the indigenous people saw the ship coming on the sea they were amazed, as this was something they had never seen before," says Cieza de Leon, who had talked to Inca eye-witnesses. They prepared food for the Spaniards and sailed out to the ship to greet them with joy and wonder.

The local governor told the Spanish that they were "welcome to come ashore and provision themselves with water and whatever they needed without fear of harm." Nonetheless, the governor sent an official report about the strangers to his king, the great Wayna Capac.

Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (Letter to a King)

Wamán Poma wrote: "The Kings of an earlier dynasty of Peru, the last of whom was called Tocay Capac Pinahua Capac, had their own coat-of-arms specially drawn to illustrate their legitimate descent from the Sun. These rulers were called Intip churin, which means 'children of the Sun.' The founder of the Inca dynasty declared that his father was the Sun, his mother the Moon, and his brother the Day-Star

Spring 1528 Death of the Inca

The Inca governor at Tumbes sent his runners with all speed to the Inca Wayna Capac who was near Quito resting after battle. No doubt, too, he was weighing up the sinister news of the outbreak of pestilence in the heart of his empire. But he had only moved a short way south when the disease struck his camp. The incubation period of smallpox is only a few days and, in no time, it swept through the army. Many of his trusted generals died; and then the Inca himself caught it.

As Wayna Capac's health rapidly worsened, he was asked to name a successor to be ratified by his council of wise men. Sources disagreed on his choice: some said it was his 25-year-old son Atahualpa and others said it was 21-year-old Huascar — Atahualpa's younger brother by a different queen. Fate could not have played the Inca a worse card. The empire plunged into a bloody civil war.

Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (Letter to a King)

Although the title of Inca was hereditary, primogeniture was not a factor in the Inca royal succession. The dying Inca could choose the son he felt was best suited to succeed him. Atahualpa and his younger brother, Huascar became entrenched in a bloody civil war for power after their father Wayna Capac succumbed to smallpox

Summer 1529 Audience With the King

Pizarro returned elated to Panama and, there, the partners formulated their plan of conquest. He then took a ship to Spain, seeking backers and royal approval. In mid-1529, he was well received at court by Charles V and showed the king Peruvian pottery, metal vessels, fine clothing, embroideries, and small worked pieces of gold, winning "the applause of all the city of Toledo."

The king and his advisers were convinced of the need to sign a deal with such experienced conquistadors as Pizarro and Almagro. At Toledo, on 26 July 1529, the queen granted Pizarro a license "to discover and conquer Peru," which is described as "a rich and fertile land, inhabited by people more reasonable than any other which has so far been discovered." The terms of the grant gave Pizarro the governorship of Peru, with the rights to explore and exploit the land on behalf of the Crown; and, in addition, a salary, to keep troops and to pay "a mayor, a doctor and an apothecary."

Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (Letter to a King)

Pizarro, in his ambition to become the sole ruler of all of Peru, later had a falling out with his partner Almagro. The two became involved in their own civil war and Almagro was killed by Pizarro's brothers. In 1541, Diego de Almagro's supporters avenged his death by killing Pizarro.

1532

March to Cajamarca

A year later, Pizarro returned to Tumbes to find it in ruins — a burned-out, ransacked victim of the civil war raging in the empire. Pizarro and his small army marched into the interior.

All the way, "every day, every hour" almost, Atahualpa received reports about their progress, but the war with his brother Huascar occupied all his attention. Although he debated with his leaders whether they should divert to attack the foreigners, all judged Huascar the greater threat. The Spaniards, after all, were only 160 men.

It is, indeed, astonishing to think how small Pizarro's army was: 62 horsemen and 102 infantry, to attack an empire of at least five million. But he had deadly weapons — the latest technology: guns and mechanical crossbows. Along the way, like Cortés, Pizarro recruited Indians hostile to Atahualpa.

Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (Letter to a King)

According to Wamán Poma, Atahualpa sent gifts to the Spanish when he heard of their arrival in Tumbes. He writes, "The presents consisted of male servants and sacred virgins. Some of the virgins were also offered to the Spaniards' horses, because, seeing them eating maize, the Peruvians took them for a kind of human being. Until that time, horses were unknown to our people and it seemed advisable to treat them with respect."

November 1532 Andean Diplomacy

According to the Inca account, dictated later by the King's nephew, Titu Cusi, there was an immediate failure of communication over the traditional guest rituals of Andean diplomacy: "My uncle received them well according to our custom," said Titu Cusi. "He offered them the customary welcome of chicha, maize beer, in gold cups. But they poured it away on the floor. Which much angered my uncle."

Atahualpa told the Spanish to wait for him in Cajamarca, where they would be given lodging in one of the royal enclosures facing the square. The Spanish spent a nervous night waiting for Atahualpa and his army to meet them the next day.

Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (Letter to a King)

The Spanish noted that many of the Inca's entourage were frightened of their horses. Hernando de Soto rode right up, spurring his horse so close to Atahualpa's face that its breath tousled the crimson tassels on the Inca's royal headband. Atahualpa, however, was unmoved and unblinking, and ordered the killing of those who had panicked. That was demeaning behavior for the staff of a great king.

November 1532 The Slaughter

Atahualpa arrived in great state surrounded by his officers. Great crowds of people crammed into the square. Pizarro sent one of his priests, Friar Vicente Valverde, to speak to Atahualpa. He said he was an ambassador from a great king overseas.

Friar Vicente explained that the Spanish ruler was a friend of God and called upon the Inca to renounce their gods. Atahualpa asked Friar Vicente what authority he had for his belief, and the friar told him it was all written in the book he was holding. The Inca then said: "Give me the book so that it can speak to me."

Atahualpa held the book next to his ear trying to listen to its pages. At last he asked: "Why doesn't the book say anything to me?" And he threw it on to the ground with a haughty and disdainful gesture. Father Vicente shouted that

the Indians were against the Christian faith and gave the order to attack. The Spanish emerged with their guns from the porticoes around the square and fired in to the massed crowds of unarmed people.

Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (Letter to a King)

Wamán Poma says that the Inca and his men were amazed at what they had heard of the Spaniards from their messengers. "Instead of sleeping, these strangers mounted guard at night. They and their horses were supposed to nourish themselves on gold and silver. Above all, it was said that all day and all night the Spaniards talked to their books and papers, which were called quilca."

Winter 1533-4 Prisoner King

The Spanish visited the traumatized Atahualpa in his cell, gave him food, and allowed his women to come to him. It was then that Atahualpa — now understanding that the Spanish wanted gold — came up with his plan to ransom himself for it.

Atahualpa's motive says Waman Poma "was to free himself by paying them gold." If he paid up, he believed they would go away. It never seems to have occurred to him that these few — fewer than 200 — might be the precursors of thousands, who would come to settle permanently in his land, and that one payment of gold would not be enough.

Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (Letter to a King)

For the Incas, the Spanish desire for gold was both curious and fascinating. For them, gold had an aesthetic rather than a monetary value. They used it for decorating their shrines, for the images of their gods, but not for bartering. They found the Spanish obsession with gold as a commodity uncouth and even uncivilized. Waman Poma included a cartoon in his book of the Inca asking the Spaniard (in Quechua): "Do you actually eat this gold, then?" and the Spaniard replying, "Yes, we certainly do!"

Spring 1534 Death of the Inca

When it came time for Pizarro to fulfill his side of the bargain and release Atahualpa, news came from Quito that one of the Inca's generals had assassinated Huascar. Pizarro accused Atahualpa of plotting against him, and put him on trial for treason. Atahualpa was found guilty and executed. Pizarro marched on to Cuzco and appointed Manco — a young son of Wayna Capac and half-brother of Atahualpa — the new Inca.

The Inca revolt of 1536-37 — along with the Aztec's defense of Tenochtitlán were among of the greatest wars of resistance waged by natives against colonial powers in the Americas.

Unfortunately for the Inca, they had too few European weapons, and too few warriors who could use them effectively. Although they were at a disadvantage, they resisted with a heroic tenacity.

Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno (Letter to a King)

The Inca cult of the ancestors required the mummy to be carefully preserved in the house of its lineage, to be brought out at festivals, paraded in the streets and cosseted like a living person. To be burned was to be denied an afterlife. And, so in the end, fearing the loss of his soul, Atahualpa agreed to be baptised in exchange for death by garrotting — the death that Montezuma had suffered.