

Encounter at Cajamarca

(Or how 168 Conquistadors destroyed 12 million Incans)

On 16 Nov 1532, after months of diplomacy, espionage and planning, 168 Spanish conquistadores led by Francisco Pizarro attacked an unarmed group of Incan warriors numbering over 80,000. The so-called "Battle of Cajamarca" quickly turned into a massacre. By the end of the day, thousands of Incans lay dead. Another 5000 were taken as prisoners, including Atahualpa, the Incan chief. Within a few months, much of the massive Incan empire was under Spanish control, Atahualpa was executed (by strangulation), but only after he had accepted Christianity, and the Spanish had begun to colonize and exploit their newly conquered territory. As elsewhere in the New World, the long-term effect on the Incan population was devastating. By the early 17th century, most of the native population in the Central Andes had died from disease (mostly smallpox, but measles as well). Those that survived often ended up in some form of economic servitude.

Read the following eyewitness account and then answer the questions at the end of the reading using COMPLETE SENTENCES and thoughtful answers.

Eyewitness Account:

"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 (the Incan Emperor) 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 mountains. The Indians' camp looked like a very beautiful city. They had so many tents ... 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. 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...

"On the next morning a messenger from Atahualpa arrived, and the Governor said & 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.'

"The Governor concealed his troops around the square at Cajamarca, dividing the cavalry into two portions of which he gave the command of one to his brother Hernando Pizarro and the command of the other to Hernando de Soto. In like manner he divided the infantry. At the same time, he ordered Pedro de Candia with two or three infantrymen to go with trumpets to a small fort in the plaza and to station themselves there with a small piece of artillery. When all the Indians, and Atahualpa with them, had entered the Plaza, the Governor would give a signal to Candia and his men, after which they should start firing the gun, and the trumpets should sound, and at the sound of the trumpets the cavalry should dash out of the large court where they were waiting hidden.

"At noon Atahualpa began to draw up his men and to approach. 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.

"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 to the place where Atahualpa was, the Friar thus addressed him: 'I am a Priest of God, and I teach the things of God, and in like manner I come to teach you. What I teach is that God says to use 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 when Atahualpa, in great anger, 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?'

"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. 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 on those that remained that in a short time most of them 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 Atahualpa's litter. He fearlessly grabbed Atahualpa's left arm and shouted 'Santiago!' but he could not pull Atahualpa 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 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 its side. In that way Atahualpa was captured, and the Governor took Atahualpa to his lodging. The Indians carrying the litter 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!' When the squadrons of Indian soldiers 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.

"If night had not come on, few out of the Indian troops would have been left alive. Thousands of Indians lay dead, and many more had their arms cut off and other wounds. All those Indians who bore Atahualpa's litter appeared to be high chiefs and councilors [sic]. They were all killed, as well as those Indians who were carried in the other litters and hammocks. 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.

"Atahualpa'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 Atahualpa 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 though so few in number, I have conquered greater kingdoms than yours, and have defeated other more powerful lords than you... God, the Creator of heaven and earth and of all things in them, permits this.'

. . . Atahualpa feared that the Spaniards would kill him, so he told the Governor that he would give his captors a great quantity of gold and silver. The Governor asked him: "How much can you give, and in what time?" Atahualpa said: "I will give gold enough to fill a room to a man's stature and a half. He said that, up to that mark, he would fill the room with different kinds of golden vessels, such as jars, pots, vases, besides lumps and other pieces. As for silver, he said he would fill the whole chamber with it twice over. Thus on some days twenty thousand, on others thirty thousand, on others fifty thousand or sixty thousand pesos of gold arrived, in vases, great pots, and other vessels.

Then the Governor, with the concurrence of the officers of his Majesty, and of the captains and persons of experience, sentenced Atahualpa to death. His sentence was that, for the treason he had committed, he should die by burning, unless he became a Christian . . .

They brought out Atahualpa to execution; and, when he came into the square, he said he would become a Christian. The Governor was informed, and ordered him to be baptized. The ceremony was performed by the very reverend Father Friar Vicente de Valverde.

Then Pizarro ordered that he should not be burned, but that he should be fastened to a pole in the open space and strangled. This was done, and the body was left until the morning of the next day, when the monks, and the Governor with the other Spaniards, conveyed it into the church, where it was interred with much solemnity, and with all the honors that could be shown it. Such was the end of this man, who had been so cruel. He died with great fortitude, and without showing any feeling . . .

From Hernando Pizarro (brother of Francisco Pizarro) "Conquest of the Indians", Reports on the Discovery of Peru, Clements R. Markham, tr. and ed. London: Hakluyt Society, 1872

Historian Comments: When Pizarro and Atahualpa met at Calamarca, why did Pizarro capture Atahualpa and kill so many of his followers. Instead of Atahualpa's vastly more numerous forces capturing and killing

Pizarro? After all, Pizarro had only 62 soldiers mounted on horses, along with 106 foot soldiers, while Atahualpa commanded an army of about 80,000. As for the antecedents of those events, how did Atahualpa come to be at Cajamarca at all? How did Pizarro come to be there to capture him, instead of Atahualpa's coming to Spain to capture King Charles I? Why did Atahualpa walk into what seems to us, with the gift of hindsight, to have been such a transparent trap? Did the factors acting in the encounter of Atahualpa and Pizarro also play a broader role in encounters between Old World and New World peoples and between other peoples?

Why did Pizarro defeat Atahualpa? Pizarro's military advantages lay in the Spaniards' steel swords and other weapons, steel armor, guns, and horses. To those weapons, Atahualpa's troops, without animals on which to ride into battle, could oppose only stone, bronze, or wooden clubs, maces, and hand axes, plus slingshots and quilted armor. Such imbalances of equipment were decisive in innumerable other confrontations of Europeans with Native Americans and other peoples.

The sole Native Americans able to resist European conquest for many centuries were those tribes that reduced the military disparity by acquiring and mastering both horses and guns. To the average white American, the word "Indian" conjures up an image of a mounted Plains Indian brandishing a rifle, like the Sioux warriors who annihilated General George Custer's U.S. Army battalion at the famous battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876. We easily forget that horses and rifles were originally unknown to Native Americans. They were brought by Europeans and proceeded to transform the societies of Indian tribes that acquired them. Thanks to their mastery of horses and rifles, the Plains Indians of North America, the Araucanian Indians of southern Chile, and the Pampas Indians of Argentina fought off invading whites longer than did any other Native Americans, succumbing only to massive army operations by white governments in the 1870s and 1880s.

Today, it is hard for us to grasp the enormous numerical odds against which the Spaniards' military equipment prevailed. At the battle of Cajamarca recounted above, 168 Spaniards crushed a Native American army 500 times more numerous, killing thousands of natives while not losing a single Spaniard. Time and again, accounts of Pizarro's subsequent battles with the Incas, Cortez' conquest of the Aztecs, and other early European campaigns against Native Americans describe encounters in which a few dozen European horsemen routed thousands of Indians with great slaughter. During Pizarro's march from Cajamarca to the Inca capital of Cuzco after Atahualpa's death, there were four such battles: at Jauja, Vilcashuaman, Vilcaonga, and Cuzco. Those four battles involved a mere 80, 30, 110, and 40 Spanish horsemen, respectively, in each case ranged against thousands of Indians.

These Spanish victories cannot be written off as due merely to the help of Native American allies, to the psychological novelty of Spanish weapons and horses, or (as is often claimed) to the Incas' mistaking Spaniards for their returning god Viracocha. The initial successes of both Pizarro and Cortez did attract native allies. However, many of them would not have become allies if they had not already been persuaded, by earlier devastating successes of unassisted Spaniards, that resistance was futile and that they should side with the likely winners. The novelty of horses, steel weapons, and guns undoubtedly paralyzed the Incas at Cajamarca, but the battles after Cajamarca were fought against determined resistance by Inca armies that had already seen Spanish weapons and horses. Within half a dozen years of the initial conquest, Incas mounted two desperate, large-scale, well-prepared rebellions against the Spaniards. All those efforts failed because of the Spaniards' far superior armament.

By the 1700s, guns had replaced swords as the main weapon favoring European invaders over Native Americans and other native peoples. However in the Spanish conquest of the Incas, guns played only a minor role. The guns of those times (so-called *harquebusiers*) were difficult to load and fire, and Pizarro had only a dozen of them. They did produce a big psychological effect

when they managed to fire. Far more important were the Spaniards' steel swords, lances, and daggers, strong sharp weapons that slaughtered thinly armored Indians. In contrast, Indian blunt clubs, while capable of

battering and wounding Spaniards and their horses, rarely succeeded in killing them. The Spaniards' steel or chain mail armor and, above all, their steel helmets usually provided an effective defense against club blows, while the Indians' quilted armor offered no protection against steel weapons.

The tremendous advantage that the Spaniards gained from their horses leaps out of the eyewitness accounts. Horsemen could easily outride Indian sentries before the sentries had time to warn Indian troops behind them, and could ride down and kill Indians on foot. The shock of a horse's charge, its maneuverability, the speed of attack that it permitted, and the raised and protected fighting platform that it provided left foot soldiers nearly helpless in the open. Nor was the effect of horses due only to the terror that they inspired in soldiers fighting against them for the first time. By the time of the great Inca rebellion of 1536, the Incas had learned how best to defend themselves against cavalry, by ambushing and annihilating Spanish horsemen in narrow passes. But the Incas, like all other foot soldiers, were never able to defeat cavalry in the open.

Comprehension Questions:

1. What was Pizarro's military strategy?
2. Based on what was said, why did the Spanish come to the Incas at Cajamarca?
3. What advantages did the Spanish have over the Incas which allowed them succeed?
4. Why do you think Atahualpa ignored the threat posed by Pizarro and 168 Spanish men?
5. What were Pizarro's tactics and do you believe they were necessary to accomplish his goals?
6. What was the result of the encounter and how has it affected our history even today?