The Fall of the Incas

In 1532, the Inca Empire fell to a Spanish force of only 168 men and 62 horses. Francisco Pizarro and his conquistadors crushed one of the world’s mightiest empires without a single Spanish casualty. Pizarro had cannons, gunpowder and armor, but the Incas vastly outnumbered his small army. Pizarro’s good fortune was to arrive in the Andes at the exact moment when the Incas were wracked by a great sickness and divided leadership.

Huáscar capac was the last of three great Inca rulers. In 1520, he marched an army north to capture land that is now part of Ecuador. The Inca ruler sent his son, Atahualpa (at-a-WHAL-pa), to lead an expedition into enemy territory, but the younger man was ambushed and forced to retreat.

Huáscar capac took command of his army to avenge the humiliation of his son. After many long and bloody battles, Huáscar capac subdued his foes. Enjoying the climate of his newly conquered territory, the Inca ruler ordered that a new palace be constructed for himself and his son.

The Sapa Inca (“Sole Ruler”) ruled from his northern palace for five years, until a great sickness passed through his empire. Modern evidence suggests that the sickness was smallpox, a European disease carried south by traders long before the first European arrived in Inca territory. Smallpox spread throughout the trade routes of the empire and may have taken the lives of more than 200,000 people.

Atahualpa had not distinguished himself, so when Huáscar capac became ill, he passed over Atahualpa and named another son to replace him. Before the ruler died, though, the illness also killed his heir.

When the Inca nobles in Cusco, the Inca capital, learned of Huáscar capac’s death, they named another son, Huáscar, to be Sapa Inca. Atahualpa, who had been living with his father in the northern capital, declared himself to be ruler. Both brothers had powerful armies. Huáscar commanded the royal army in Cusco, while Atahualpa commanded the northern army used to expand the empire. The two sons of Huáscar capac plunged the empire into a brutal civil war.

Atahualpa and Huáscar called on the mummified bodies of past Sapa Incas to assist them. The Incas believed their rulers were living descendants of Inti, the sun god. When the Sapa Inca died, his body was preserved and treated as if it were still living. Mummies were carried into battle to advise the generals.

The civil war seemed to end in 1532 when Atahualpa’s army captured Huáscar. Huáscar watched as his wives, children, and relatives were executed in front of his eyes. Then, as Atahualpa made his triumphant return to Cusco as Sapa Inca, word spread of the arrival of bearded pale men riding atop huge animals.

The Inca did not know of writing, horses, or metal weapons, so what happened next took the empire by surprise. A priest appeared before Atahualpa and the Incas as Pizarro kept his horses and cannon hidden from view. The priest presented Atahualpa with a holy book, telling the ruler that it was the word of God. The Sapa Inca did not understand writing, so he tossed the book on the ground. When the book dropped, Pizarro waved a white scarf to signal the attack to begin.

Spanish soldiers on horseback began to charge as others pulled the cannon from hiding and fired into the crowd. The terrified Incas trampled one another as they attempted to flee. Pizarro grabbed Atahualpa and dragged the Sapa Inca through the crowd as a hostage.

Learning the Spanish valued silver and gold, Atahualpa promised to fill a room bigger than his prison with gold and silver in exchange for his freedom. The Inca ruler sent word to his generals first to kill Huáscar, then to strip Cusco of gold and silver metals and turn it over to his captors as ransom. The Sapa Inca had not lived in the city for many years, so he had little attachment to Cusco or the people who lived there. For the next six months, precious metals were carted away from Cusco to Pizarro’s small camp. The Spaniards melted the gold and silver down to bricks and shipped the precious metals to Spain.

Having kept his promise, Atahualpa expected to be freed. But Pizarro feared that his conquest
would be in danger if the Sapa Inca lived, so he put Atahualpa on trial for killing Huáscar. A court of Pizarro’s soldiers found the Sapa Inca guilty. When Atahualpa was strangled, his body was left to remind the Incas that their empire had been conquered.

Fill in the Blanks

The mighty Incas fell to a small band of S_a_i_h conquistadors in 15___. The great military victory for Francisco P__z_r_o and his men was achieved at a time when the Incas were weakened by d_s_e and a *v_l war. *T_w_ e years earlier, the last great leader of the Incas, H_a_Capac, died. Two of his sons, A_u_l_a and H_a_c_r, declared themselves to be Sapa Inca, or r_l_r. A civil war broke out in 1532 when Atahualpa’s army c_u_ed and k_l_ed Huáscar and his m_l_y.

Upon the arrival of the Spanish c_n_u_s_a_s in the *A_d_s, Pizarro arranged for a p_i_t to present Atahualpa with a holy book. When the Sapa Inca dismissed the book, Pizarro s_g_a_ed for an a_k. The terrified Incas had never before seen h_r_es or c_n_o_s. So as they t_a_p_ed over one another to e_c_pe, Pizarro seized A_u_l_a and made the Inca ruler his c_p_i_e.

To gain his f_e_d_m, Atahualpa promised to his *p_o_s enough g__ and s_l_er to fill the *j____ where the Spanish held him prisoner. Once the conquistadors stripped the Inca capital of C_s_o of its precious metals, Pizarro put A_u_l_a on trial and later had him e_e_u_ed.

Answer in Complete Sentences

*1. Explain how smallpox reached the Andes before the arrival of the Europeans.

*2. Why did both Atahualpa and Huáscar bring the mummified bodies of past Incas rulers into battle with their armies?

3. Explain why Atahualpa did not value the holy book handed to him by a Spanish priest in 1532.

4. According to the text, why did Pizarro put Atahualpa on trial for the killing of Huáscar?

*A higher order learning question. Any reasonable answer will be accepted.