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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.

Huayna Capac was the last of three great Inca rulers. In 1520, he marched an army north to capture land 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.

Huayna Capac took command of his army to avenge his son's humiliation. After many long and bloody battles, Huayna 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 terrible sickness passed through his empire. Modern evidence suggests that the illness was smallpox, a European disease carried south by traders long before Europeans 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 Huayna 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 Huayna Capac's death, they named another son, Huáscar, Sapa Inca. Atahualpa, who had been living with his father in the northern capital, declared himself to be the 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 Huayna 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 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. As Atahualpa made his triumphant return to Cusco as Sapa Inca, word spread of the arrival of bearded pale men riding atop giant 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 that 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 and its people. For six months, precious metals were carted from Cusco to Pizarro's small camp. The Spaniards melted the gold and silver into 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.

Name: _____

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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 Juan P__z__r__o and his men was achieved at a time when the Incas were weakened by *d__s__a__e and a *c__v__l war. *Tw__l__e years earlier, the last great leader of the Incas, H__a__na Capac, died. Two of his sons, A__a__u__l__a and H__á__c__r, declared themselves to be Sapa Inca, or s_____ r__l__r. A civil war broke out in 1532 when Atahualpa's army c__p__u__ed and k__l__ed Huáscar and his f__m__ly.

Upon the arrival of the Spanish c__n__u__s__a__o__s in the *A__d__s, Pizarro arranged for a p__ie__t to present Atahualpa with a holy book. When the Sapa Inca dismissed the book, Pizarro s__g__a__ed for an a__ta__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__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 *c__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__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.