

Francisco Pizarro

Spanish adventurer, explorer, conqueror

Born: c. 1475

Died: 1541

The conquest of Peru by an obscure adventurer is one of the most dramatic episodes in the history of the New World. Until he was nearly 50 years old, Francisco Pizarro, serving as a minor Spanish official on the Isthmus of Panama, had nothing to show for years of toil and peril but a small holding of land. Little more than a decade later, he had conquered the fabulously wealthy empire of the Incas and had bestowed on Spain the richest of its American possessions. He also founded the city of Lima, now the capital of Peru.

Pizarro was born in about 1475 in Trujillo, a small town near Caceres, Spain. The illegitimate son of a Spanish captain, he spent his childhood with his grandparents in one of Spain's poorest regions. He apparently never learned to read or write.

Pizarro traveled to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola in 1502 with the governor of that Spanish colony. He took part in an expedition to Colombia in 1510, and three years later, he accompanied Vasco Nunez de Balboa in a journey that ended in the discovery of the Pacific Ocean. From 1519 to 1523 he served as mayor of the town of Panama.

In 1523, hearing of a vast and wealthy Indian empire to the south, Pizarro enlisted the help of two friends to form an expedition to explore and conquer the land. A soldier named Diego de Almagro provided the equipment, and the vicar of Panama, Hernando de Luque, furnished the funds.

A first expedition resulted in disaster after two years of suffering and hardship. When a second expedition in 1526 fared little better, Pizarro sent Almagro back to Panama for reinforcements. He and part of the group remained on an island.

Instead of sending help, the governor of Panama sent vessels to bring back the expedition. Pizarro refused to return. Drawing a line on the sand, he asked all who wanted a share in his enterprise to join him. Thirteen men crossed the line. Pizarro's friends persuaded the governor to send one vessel. Pizarro used it to explore the coast of Peru. He then sailed to Spain to ask authority to conquer Peru. This was granted. He left Spain on Jan. 19, 1530, and sailed from Panama the following year. He had three vessels, which contained fewer than 200 men and about 40 horses.

Thus, after seven years of hardship and disappointment, the adventurers started the conquest of Peru. Pizarro spent a year conquering the coastal settlements. Then he marched inland to the city of Cajamarca. There he met with emissaries of Atahualpa, the Inca emperor. Atahualpa accepted an invitation to visit the Spanish commander and arrived attended by crowds of unarmed Incas. Pizarro's followers were armed and waiting. Atahualpa was to regret trusting Pizarro. When he refused to convert to Christianity or to accept the Spanish king as his sovereign, Pizarro and his men seized the Inca emperor, and the Spaniards slaughtered 2,000 Indians.

Atahualpa offered as ransom to fill with gold a room 17 by 22 feet (5 by 7 meters) to a point as high as a man could reach and to fill it

twice over with silver. Pizarro accepted the ransom. Soon afterward, however, he had Atahualpa executed.

Pizarro then marched to Cuzco and set up Manco, Atahualpa's brother, as nominal sovereign. In 1535 he founded Ciudad de los Reyes (City of the Kings), which is now Lima. The city was the seat of his new government. Manco escaped and headed an unsuccessful uprising. Two or three years later Pizarro and Almagro quarreled about the territory each was to govern. This contest soon assumed the proportions of a civil war. Pizarro's supporters captured and executed Almagro. The embittered and discontented followers of Almagro then conspired against Pizarro. They assassinated him in Lima on June 26, 1541.