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Francisco Pizarro
(ca. 1475-1541)
Spanish Conqueror

Spanish explorer and conqueror Francisco Pizarro defeated the Inca Empire and claimed most of South America for Spain. Pizarro also established the city of Lima, Peru, and opened the way for Spanish culture and religion to dominate South America. In doing so, Pizarro conquered the largest amount of territory of any military leader and delivered the most riches to his country with the smallest expenditure of men and resources.

Pizarro was born the illegitimate son of a professional Spanish soldier. According to some accounts, he worked as a swine farmer before joining the military while in his early teens. There is no evidence that he received formal academic or military schooling, most likely remaining illiterate, or that he had much experience as a soldier before sailing for Hispaniola in 1502. Upon arriving in the New World, Pizarro served as a member of the governor's military detachment on the island and in 1513 participated in the Vasco Nunez de Balboa expedition to Panama that discovered the Pacific Ocean.

Pizarro remained in Panama as a colonizer and from 1519 to 1523 served as the mayor and magistrate of Panama City. He accumulated a small fortune during this period, but reports of the vast riches captured by Hernando Cortes in Mexico encouraged Pizarro to seek further wealth. In 1524-25 and again in 1526-28, Pizarro sailed south along the Pacific coast of Colombia following rumor of a huge Indian civilization that possessed incalculable riches.

Both journeys produced extreme hardship. When Pizarro sent a subordinate back to Panama for reinforcements late in the second expedition, the governor refused to continue support of the costly venture and ordered Pizarro to return home. According to legend, Pizarro drew a line in the sand with his sword, inviting those who desired "wealth and glory" to step across and join him in the continued quest. Thirteen adventurers did so, and after the rest sailed back to Panama, Pizarro and his small band continued south to find the Inca Empire.

Pizarro returned to Panama with gold, llamas, and a few Incas to confirm his discovery. Despite the evidence, the governor decided that another expedition would be too costly and refused to support Pizarro's plans. Pizarro immediately sailed for Spain, where he convinced Emperor Charles V to finance the project. The soldier returned to Panama with an authorized coat

of arms, the new rank of captain general, and the governorship of all lands more than six hundred miles south of Panama.

In January 1531, Pizarro set sail for Peru with almost two hundred soldiers and about sixty-five horses. Most of the soldiers carried spears or swords. Three carried primitive firearms known as arquebuses, and another twenty carried crossbows. Four of Pizarro's brothers joined the expedition, as did his original thirteen supporters, including fellow soldier Diego de Almagro and a priest, Hernando de Luque.

By June 1532, Pizarro had established a base of operations at San Miguel de Pirua, on the plain south of Tumbes, when he learned that the Incas now had a thirty-thousand-man army under the leadership Atahualpa. Undaunted by these overwhelming numbers, Pizarro and his few followers pushed inland and crossed the Andes Mountains, a feat in itself. Pizarro's small army occupied Cajamarca and invited Atahualpa to a meeting. The Inca leader, who believe he was a semideity, arrived with three or four thousand lightly armed bodyguards, little impressed with or concerned about the Spaniards.

Rather than talk, Pizarro attacked. Using arquebuses and leading with the cavalry, the Spaniards, in less then a half hour, slaughtered the Inca warriors and took Atahualpa prisoner. The only Spanish casualty was Pizarro, who was slightly wounded while personally capturing the Inca chieftain. Pizarro demanded a ransom for Atahualpa and received gold and silver worth millions of dollars at the time. The well-paid Spanish conqueror did not release Atahualpa; instead, he executed him and installed his own puppet leader as chief of the Incas. In November 1533, Pizarro marched unopposed into the Inca capital of Cuzco. The Inca Empire never regained its power.

The Spanish conquerors, especially the original thirteen, greatly profited from their victory, as did Spain. With less than two hundred men, Pizarro acquired most of present-day Peru and Ecuador as well as the northern half of Chile and part of Bolivia - more territory that all the rest of South America combined. Within the borders of the new territory were 6 million Incas and other native people - the majority of South America's population.

After his great victory, Pizarro returned to the coast and established the port city of Lima from which to exploit his gains. It was here that Pizarro, now in his sixties, met with his death, not from the Indians but from within his own ranks. In 1537 former partner Diego de Almagro turned against Pizarro because he believed he was not receiving his rightful share of the Inca riches. Pizarro captured and killed his adversary; in retaliation, on June 26, 1541, Almagro's followers broke into Pizarro's palace and executed him.

Pizarro's amazing accomplishments established Spanish control over most of South America. It would remain that way for more than three centuries until the liberation movement of Jose de San Martin and Simon Bolivar. Spanish customs, language, and religion prevail to this day throughout most of the continent.

Audacious, ruthless, cruel, and unscrupulous are but a few of the adjectives that accurately describe Pizarro. Luck, too, proved a factor in his success in that the Incas made no effort to destroy his army during their vulnerable crossing of the Andes, nor did they ever make any specific military effort to defend their empire. Pizarro had the advantage of a few firearms and crossbows, but logically, his two hundred men should not have been able to defeat an army of more than thirty thousand. Yet they did, and Pizarro joins the few whose military influence literally changed the course of history and the future of a continent and its peoples.

The careers and successes of Pizarro and Hernando Cortes are extremely similar. However, Pizarro faced an enemy at a much greater distance from the Spanish Caribbean outposts that could support him and therefore ranks slightly ahead of his fellow Spaniard.

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