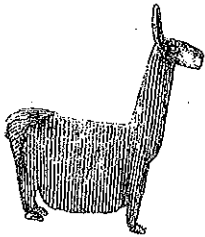


23 Ponce de León, Pizarro, and Spanish Colonies



The Incas valued the alpaca's fur too much to eat its meat. This model of an alpaca is silver.

Juan Ponce de León (hwahn PON-say day lay-OWN) heard the stories of Cortés and his great success. He believed he, too, could find kingdoms of gold, and he thought he knew just where to look.

Ponce de León had come to the New World with Columbus, but he was different from Columbus: he was tougher. Some say he was bloodthirsty and cruel, but he was also brave and generous. He gave most of his money to charity.

Ponce de León was related to Spanish kings. He was a page in the royal court of Spain when he set out to find adventure in the New World. On the island of Puerto Rico he found more than adventure; he found gold. He conquered Puerto Rico, became its governor, and made a fortune in gold, slaves, and land. But Ponce de León wasn't finished exploring. He heard tales from the Indians of a magical spring that cured illnesses and made old men and women young again. He set out to find that Fountain of Youth.

He failed to find it. Instead, in 1513, Ponce de León discovered a new land. The new land, which was North America, was filled with beautiful flowers. Ponce de León called it La Florida. In Spanish, *florida* means "flowery."

But Ponce de León still wasn't satisfied. He wanted to surpass Cortés. He wanted to find something even greater than Moctezuma's kingdom of gold, and he was convinced he would find it in Florida. In 1521 the king commissioned him to conquer and colonize "the island of Florida." (No one knew it was more than an island.) Ponce de León set out from Puerto Rico with two ships, 200 men, and 50 horses. Unfortunately for him, all he found in Florida were Indians who shot poisoned arrows. One arrow entered

El Dorado—in Spanish it means "the golden one"—was a long-lived legend among the Europeans who first reached the New World. The Spaniards believed that somewhere in the Americas was a place where gold was as common as sand. For years explorers sought it fervently. Sometimes *El Dorado* meant the king of this mythical land; sometimes it was the place itself. Many died looking for it.



Ponce de León, the "brave lion."



Even on foot, messengers traveled fast on the excellent Inca roads. This one blows a conch shell to proclaim his arrival.

Land of Gold

The words of 16th-century German artist Albrecht Dürer, on seeing gold objects from the Incas:

Then I saw the things which were brought to the king out of the new Land of Gold...all sorts of marvelous objects for human use which are more beautiful to behold than things spoken of in fairy tales...and I marveled over the subtle genius of those men in strange countries.

Ponce de León's thigh, and the poison began to work. When that happened his men fled from Florida back to Cuba, where the tough explorer died. He was buried under a stone that says, "Here lie the bones of the brave lion." (In Spanish, *león* means "lion.")

However, Ponce de León was right. There was another kingdom of gold—it just didn't happen to be in Florida. Francisco Pizarro (remember the name?) headed down the west coast of South America and found golden treasures beyond anything anyone had ever imagined. He found them in Peru.

Pizarro's capture of Peru, in 1532, was perhaps the most daring and terrible of all the Spanish conquests. With just 180 men, 67 horses, and 3 big, noisy guns, Pizarro defeated the powerful Inca empire.

When Pizarro arrived in the Inca capital, Cuzco, he captured the ruler, who was known as the Grand Inca.



The Incas fought to save their city from Pizarro (above) and his men. But they were beaten by guns and greed.



Pizarro promised to release the Inca, whose real name was Atahualpa (at-tah-WAL-pah), if his followers would fill a huge room with gold. They did, but Pizarro killed Atahualpa anyway.

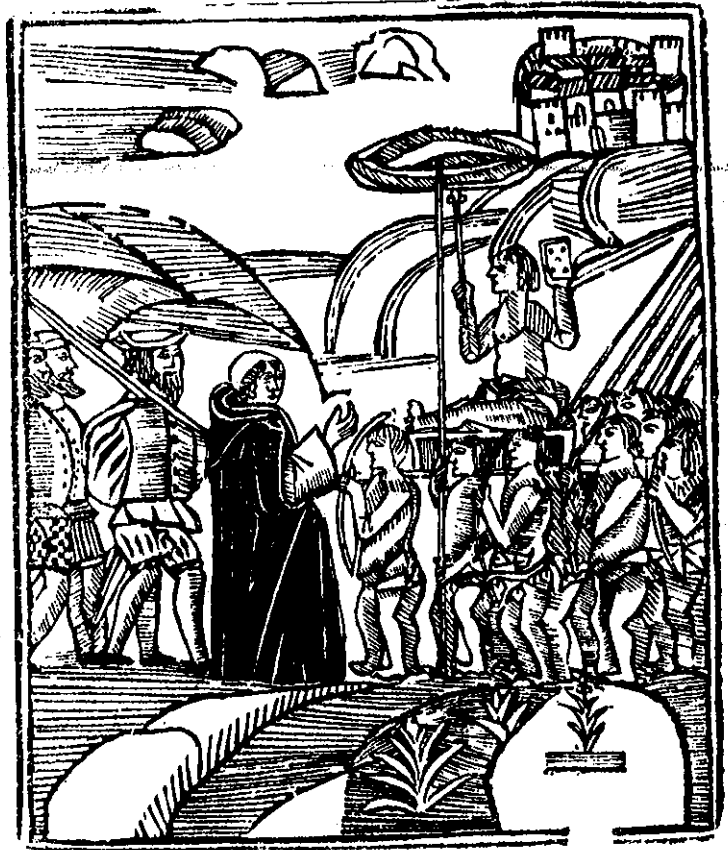
As you can see, Pizarro and his men were not exactly honorable. In fact, they were deceitful and treacherous. Soon they were fighting among themselves for gold and power. They ended up killing each other. Pizarro was killed, too. Some say Atahualpa's ghost got revenge on Pizarro. Things got so bloody that finally the king of Spain took over. He didn't mind at all. Spain was going to grow rich on the gold and silver from the mines in Peru.

Sometimes historians say they want to cry when they think of Pizarro's conquest. Remember that room the Incas filled with gold? Well, it wasn't just gold; it included silver, too, fashioned into beautiful jewels, carvings of animals and birds, and gorgeous household items. It was the artwork of a civilization. Almost all of it would be destroyed. (The silver alpaca pictured at the beginning of this chapter was one of the few treasures saved.) Pizarro melted all the gold and silver into bars. It was lost to history forever.

The Spaniards did that kind of thing many times over. Their religion told them the Indian civilizations were pagan and therefore false, and that its symbols should be destroyed. Because they believed their religion was the only true religion, they thought they were doing the right thing when they forced it on others.

Spain and the other European nations had guns, powerful crossbows, ships that could sail into the wind, and printing presses that made the exchange of ideas easy. Sometimes they acted as if that strength gave them the right to bully other peoples. Some Europeans said, "might makes right." Many Spaniards believed that their nation was best because it was strongest.

A few people questioned those ideas, but most did not. When leaders say something is all right, most people agree, without thinking for themselves.



In this 16th-century illustration, Pizarro encounters the Inca emperor Atahualpa. Conquistadores, livestock, and disease had been brought to Mexico; they now came to South America.

A **pagan** (PAY-gun), in Pizarro's time and until very recently, was anyone who was not a Christian, Muslim, or Jew.