What Happened to the Incas?

Like many other ancient civilizations, the Incas developed a sophisticated way of life that included great cities, good roads, government and culture. The Incas had increased their wealth and territory by conquering their neighbors and the Inca Empire was ruled by an Emperor. When an emperor died, his oldest son was destined to become the new emperor. That was the way succession, selecting the next ruler of the Incas, was done until 1528 CE.

The eleventh Inca emperor was Huayna Capac and he had two sons. He wanted his younger son to be emperor after he died. When Huayna Capac died his two sons fought a civil war, fighting to become the next emperor. This war, called the War of Two Brothers, weakened the empire. The younger brother, Atahualpa, did become the next emperor and was the ruler when Spanish forces left Spain to conquer the Incas in 1531.

Francisco Pizzaro, who was born in Spain, was the person who approached King Charles of Spain with the idea of conquering the Incas of Peru. The king financed Pizzaro’s expedition. The Spanish had already conquered the Aztecs of Mexico beginning in 1519 and brought back to Spain great treasures of gold. They wanted to seize similar treasures from the Incas.

In November, 1532 Pizzaro and his small army of about 200 men arrived at the Inca city of Cajamarca. Atahualpa had been fighting a war with his brother and had an army of 40,000 soldiers with him. When Atahualpa’s procession entered the city square to meet Pizzaro for a banquet, the Spanish forces ambushed the procession, killed three thousand Inca warriors with cannon fire and took the emperor prisoner. It took eight months for the Incas to gather the gold and silver that Pizzaro demanded as the ransom for Atahualpa’s freedom. Even though the ransom was paid, Pizzaro ordered Atahualpa’s execution.

The Inca Empire was now without a ruler. Eventually Pizzaro crowned Manco Inca as the new emperor. Meanwhile, Spanish forces looted gold and silver from Inca temples and government buildings. In 1535 Pizzaro created a new city and it became Lima, the current capital city of Peru. Eventually the Inca people were enslaved by the Spanish. About half the Incas died as slaves and the Inca civilization was ultimately destroyed.