

## “May We Not Perish”: The Incas and Spain

Three great Indian civilizations dominate the early history of Latin America—the Mayas of Central America (1500 B.C.–A.D. 1200), the Aztecs of central Mexico (A.D. 1200–1519), and the Inca empire that spread from central Peru around 1200 to most of western South America before its demise at the hands of the invading Spanish *conquistadores* in 1532. Numerous contemporary European accounts of the conquest of the Incas exist. But there is only one from the pen of a pure-blooded Inca. In a massive “letter” to the Spanish monarch, probably written between 1583 and 1613, an elderly Inca nobleman, Don Felipe Huamán Poma de Ayala, chronicled the rise and fall of his people’s civilization. He proposed a plan for its revival. Here, Sara Castro-Klarén, a specialist in Latin American culture, tells the tale of this bitter, but hopeful, Christian convert.

---

*by Sara Castro-Klarén*

In 1908, a German librarian discovered an extraordinary document while leafing through manuscripts at the Royal Copenhagen Library.

How *El Primer Nueva Crónica y Buen Gobierno* (The First New Chronicle and Good Government) came to rest in Denmark, no one knows. The 1,400-page history/memorandum had been written over a 30-year period, to Kings Philip II and III of Spain by an elderly Inca Indian. In it, he gave posterity a unique, flavorful portrait of Inca society before and after the Spanish

conquest. He also dared to chastize his Spanish overlords and to seek a bargain—cleverly, proudly—for the autonomy of his fellow South American Indians.

Perhaps Don Felipe Huamán Poma de Ayala had entrusted his richly illustrated letter to friendly Jesuits for safe passage to Spain, and the missionaries, deciding that it was too impudent for a king’s eyes, hid it safely away.

In any event, the German librarian had stumbled on a 17th-century treasure—“the most remarkable



Don Felipe Huamán Poma de Ayala never got his audience with Philip III of Spain. But in his illustrative drawings, the Inca nobleman clearly envisioned an encounter with His Majesty.

presenta personal men el autor Caco xonica asunmáð sacra

The Royal Library of Copenhagen.

production of native genius that has come down to our time," according to British historian Sir Clements Markham.

Huamán Poma's epistle marked the first written native history\* of pre-

\*Prior to the early 16th-century arrival of the Spaniards, the Incas had not conceived of a written language. Oral traditions were strong, however. The Indians had a separate caste for historians, and limited messages could be recorded on *quipus*, knotted loops of string that were also used for mathematical calculation.

Inca and Inca civilization. But it was more than this. The letter chronicled, step by step, the disappearance of a culture and the threat to an entire race under the impact of European conquest.

The Inca dynasty was founded in the mountain city of Cuzco, in what is now Peru, around A.D. 1200, the era of the Europeans' great Crusades in the eastern Mediterranean. By the time Francisco Pizarro of Spain began his

first expedition to South America in 1524, the Inca empire extended for 3,000 miles from what is now the southern edge of Colombia to central Chile.

Scattered in thatched-roof villages often having no more than four houses, the Inca population (about 10 million) subsisted mainly by farming. Maize, potatoes, and cassava were grown on terraces, carved from the mountainsides and irrigated by an elaborate system of aqueducts. Extensive reserves of food were maintained as a hedge against crop failure or as rations for Inca soldiers.

#### Plague, War, Conquest

A strict caste system governed the division of labor. Every six months, a census was taken throughout the empire dividing the citizens into 10 age groups. Each group had its own assigned tasks for boys and girls, men and women. Even the handicapped worked; the Indians' remarkable coil pottery was largely their responsibility.

The Incas also had a fairly stable political regime. Heading the government was the king. Ranking immediately beneath him was the royal house—relatives who aided him in governing. Advising them was the Council of the Realm, noblemen from the various regions of the empire who often represented tribes that the Incas had conquered. The *varayoc* (or mayors) were appointed to rule over individual towns or provinces.

As luck would have it, however, the *conquistadores*, led by Pizarro and Diego de Almagro, arrived in the

Andes in 1532, just as the Inca nation was fighting a bitter civil war over succession to the throne. "These struggles," related Huamán Poma, "cost the country a great deal."

Between 1525 and 1527, he wrote, the Incas had been stricken by a fierce "plague" (possibly the smallpox that raged through vulnerable Indian populations ahead of the Spanish, who brought the disease with them to the Caribbean). The reigning monarch, Huayna Capac, had died of it.

Inca law could not dictate in this case which of Huayna Capac's sons would succeed him, since he had split the empire between two of them. One son, Huascar, had been installed in the capital city of Cuzco; according to Inca law, he was the legitimate heir since he had been born of a union between Huayna Capac and Huayna Capac's own sister. However, ruling the northern portion of the empire was a second son, Atahualpa, a favorite sired through Huayna Capac's marriage to a princess of the Kingdom of Quito, a tribe conquered by the Incas. Neither Huascar nor Atahualpa was satisfied with half a kingdom, so each fought for sole control.

By the time Pizarro's forces reached Inca territory in 1532 from what is now Colombia, Huascar's forces had been defeated; Atahualpa was on his way south to Cuzco to claim the throne. As Huamán Poma told it, Pizarro, with fewer than 200 *conquistadores*, encountered the new king and his army of perhaps 80,000 men at Cajamarca, 500 miles south

---

*Sara Castro-Klarén, 37, is professor of Latin American literature at Dartmouth College. Born in Sabandia, Peru, she received her B.A. (1962), M.A. (1965), and Ph.D. (1968) from the University of California, Los Angeles. She was a Fellow at the Wilson Center in 1977-78 and is the author of El Mundo Magico de Jose Maria Arguedas (1973).*

school. Martín studied under a Christian friar, and it was probably he who taught his half-brother to read and write.

As an adult, Huamán Poma seems to have spent considerable time with the conquerors, although he felt that his noble birth made him vastly superior to the greedy Spanish "rabble." He apparently worked for a while in the Spanish itinerant courts as a public defender of poor Indians. In that job, he must have made a pest of himself. The presiding Spanish *corregidor* (royal administrator) banished him from his native village of Chinchaycocha around 1580.

One obsession—"May God grant that we shall not perish forever"—permeated the *Nueva Crónica*. The style of the epistle to Philip II and Philip III was an incongruous mixture of Spanish pulpit rhetoric and the salty dialect of any 16th-century Castilian commoner:

Our Indians ought not to be thought of as a backward people who yielded easily to superior force. Just imagine, Your Majesty, being an Indian in your own country and being loaded up as if you were a horse, or driven along with a succession of blows from a stick. Imagine being called a dirty dog or a pig or a goat. . . . What would you and your Spanish compatriots do in these circumstances? My own belief is that you would eat your tormentors alive and thoroughly enjoy the experience.

Only too aware of censorship and the Inquisition, Huamán Poma worried about possible criticism: "What I have written . . . is not malicious," he maintained, "but intended for the improvement of bad Christians."

As he shrewdly noted, the *conquistadores* had taken Peru for God as well as for Spain. With either naive sincerity or great cunning, one can-

not tell, Huamán Poma turned the tables on the Spanish by portraying *them* as the bad Christians. The Spanish colonists, he noted, lived off the labors of others and could not be controlled by their own monarch in faraway Madrid. The Indians, by contrast, were capable of hard work and had created a highly organized society, two of the highest human values.

Catholic missionaries to the New World took the brunt of Huamán Poma's criticism. A convert to Christianity himself, he admired the Jesuits for their asceticism, but he clearly had no use for the arrogant Mercedarians or Dominicans who behaved "as if they had forgotten that Our Lord was poor and humble and the friend of sinners."

#### Who Will Lead?

The Church, Huamán Poma argued, would be better served if the Spanish priests restricted their efforts to saving other Spaniards. The Indians could produce their own priests, theologians, and religious artists—all just as capable of serving Christ as the Spanish clerics. After all, as pagans, the Incas had achieved a civilization distinguished for its social order, economic plenty, and technological ingenuity. As Christians, he said, they could only do better.

Huamán Poma was certain that God intended each race to reign in its land of origin:

The first [Indians] were brought by God to this country. They were descended from those who survived the Flood in Noah's Ark. . . . Spaniards do not have a right to come into these lands, for the Inca was the legitimate owner and king.

Whatever Huamán Poma *wanted*, he knew in his heart that the Euro-

### THE SPANISH COLONISTS: A NATIVE'S VIEW

*In the eyes of Don Felipe Huamán Poma de Ayala, there were "more thieves in Peru than even in Castile." He carefully listed what he saw as the crimes of each type of Spaniard in the New World:*

**Royal administrators:**

The so-called *corregidores* or royal administrators . . . collect Indians into groups and send them to forced labour without wages, while they themselves receive the payment for the work. During their term of office, the royal administrators make all sorts of contracts and deals, embezzle public funds and even lay their hands on the royal fifth [a 20 percent tax on anything bought or sold in the colonies].

**Deputies:**

The purpose in life of deputies is to imitate their masters, the royal administrators, and find similar opportunities for robbery and oppression. They usually have some 20 or 30 Indians at their beck and call, whom they find fault with for the slightest thing, including even scratching their buttocks.

**Innkeepers:**

The innkeepers . . . sometimes employ as many as 20 Indians, who receive no pay whatever. It is quite usual for them to keep half a dozen whores on the premises, under the pretence that they are the wives of the Indian servants. In reality, of course, they are hired out to travellers who spend the night there.

**Priests:**

The priesthood began with Jesus Christ and his Apostles, but their successors in the various religious orders established in Peru do not follow this holy example. On the contrary, they show an unholy greed for worldly wealth and the sins of the flesh and a good example would be set to everyone if they were punished by the Holy Inquisition.

From Letter to a King: A Peruvian Chief's Account of Life Under the Incas and Under Spanish Rule by Huamán Poma. © 1978 by the translator, Christopher Dilke. Reprinted by permission of the publishers, E. P. Dutton and George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

peans and their black slaves from Africa were in the Andes to stay. And so he promised that the Incas would remain the devoted subjects of the Spanish king.

However, the colonialists, who by 1628 numbered over 14,000 in the area that is now Peru, should be limited, he said, to living in the cities that they had established (Lima,

Bogotá, Puerto Viejo). Social contacts between Indians and Europeans should be forbidden. Traditional Indian communities (Cuzco, Huánuco, Potosí) should be reserved for natives. (Any "newcomers" who disagreed, he noted, could "easily escape from their predicament by leaving Peru.")

And what would be the role of an

**Supervisors of mines:**

At the mercury mines of Huancavelica the Indian workers are punished and ill-treated to such an extent that they die like flies and our whole race is threatened with extermination. Even the chiefs are tortured by being suspended by their feet. . . . The managers and supervisors, who are either Spaniards or half-castes, have virtually absolute power. There is no reason for them to fear justice, since they are never brought before the courts.

**Tramps and vagabonds:**

A large number of Spanish tramps and vagabonds are continually on the move along our highways and in and out of our inns and villages. Their refrain is always "Give me a servant" or "Give me a present." . . . Every day of their lives they eat about twelve pesos' worth of food and ride off without paying, but still give themselves the airs of gentlemen.



The Royal Library of Copenhagen.



The Royal Library of Copenhagen.

Corregidor engaged in a bribe (left); priest kicking an Indian (right)

Indian state in the Spanish empire? Who would assure the Spanish king that the Indians would mine more gold and silver for his coffers, produce crop surpluses for export to Spain, and obey newfound Christian moral doctrines? Huamán Poma considered these questions.

He advised the king that heading the new native regime in the Andes

should be men like Huamán Poma himself: the old and wise survivors of Indian nobility. Men of his age, he wrote, no longer harbored a desire for personal pleasure or the acquisition of power, nor did they burn with the lusts of younger men. God forbid the follies and the experimental desires of youth!

Under this government of vener-

able chiefs, the old Inca social order would be restored. Local Indian authorities would once again decide which women would be lifelong virgins and which would marry. Once married, women would devote their lives to serving their husbands and producing offspring.

Children over five years old would go back to collecting firewood, sweeping the family homes, and gathering seeds, eggs, and greens. As they grew older, they would hunt for small birds and rodents and learn to work the feathers and skins into the bountiful clothing the Spaniards so greatly admired. Later on, they would look after the herds of llama and wanakus.

All boys and girls would learn to read and write Spanish. But great potters and weavers would once again be the pride of their villages. With proper care, the land would produce bountiful crops of maize and potatoes, as it had in the old days.

Work would fill Indians' lives from the cradle to the grave. Theft and pilfering would vanish. There would be peace and order.

Huamán Poma was offering Spain's king a new Inca society: a blend of a few helpful features from European civilization (writing and Christianity) with ancient tribal values, an Inca state loyal to the Spanish throne. His pleas had an ethnocentric purpose—to preserve the Indian race and its culture from a growing population of *mestizos*.

Huamán Poma never disguised his distaste for *mestizos* (despite the half-brother he held dear). In his most generous statement, he conceded that "they are capable of turning into good Christians and obedient citizens," but he quickly added that "many of them are simply hangers-on of the Spaniards, always



The Royal Library of Copenhagen.

*Huamán Poma hoped to save the traditional Inca family structure, with one change—Christianity.*

ready to commit some act of treachery with the aid of a knife or dagger, a noose . . . , or a stone."

He likened the spread of *mestizos* to "the mixture of *vicuña* and *taruga*, two kinds of Peruvian sheep, which produces an offspring resembling neither the mother nor the father."

Only the *zambos* (black-Indian half-breeds) came in for equal loathing. Huamán Poma preferred the pure black man and even felt pity for the Negro—so long as he stayed in the city with his Spanish master. A little education and Christianity, he wrote, made a black man worth two *mestizos*.

Huamán Poma feared *mestizos* because their spread threatened the traditional bonds within Indian families. Among other things, *mestizos*, like the Spaniards, had no

communal work obligations and were allowed to use Indians as unpaid forced labor.

To make matters worse, Indian women increasingly ran off to Lima and Bogotá, the new Spanish-built cities, for the wealth they could gain as concubines. Wailed Huamán Poma: "The Indians are disappearing because they have no women."

The women may have had less baneful motives for their behavior than mere greed, however. As Huamán Poma recorded, life for a woman under Inca law meant endless toil and complete submission to male authority:

The principal chiefs shall be entitled to 50 women each for service in their households and for the procreation of children. Lesser chiefs, according to their rank, shall be entitled to 30, 20, 15, 10 or only a few women. Indians of humble position . . . shall be entitled to two women each.

If Spanish men and Indian women continued to mate, the royal colonies would suffer economic disaster, Huamán Poma informed the king. There would be no pure-blooded natives left to do the king's labor. *Mestizos* were lazy; they would not mine gold or silver.

In all likelihood, Huamán Poma's letter never reached the king. Even if it had, Philip III would probably have ignored its pleas. He had enough trouble controlling his distant countrymen in the New World without proposing economic and

political autonomy for the Indians.

Eventually, of course, freedom from Spanish rule returned to the New World. Colombia became independent in 1819; Peru in 1824; Bolivia in 1825. But power did not go to the descendants of the great pre-Colombian civilization. Instead, political control stayed in the hands of whites and *mestizos*, where it still remains.

Arguments over the status of Indians persist in Latin America to this day. The Peruvian population of nearly 17 million people is 46 percent Indian, 43 percent *mestizo*, and 11 percent Caucasian. Similar ratios exist in Ecuador and Bolivia. In Chile and Colombia, a majority of the population is *mestizo*; only 5 percent and 1 percent, respectively, are full-blooded Indians.

The Indians tell a story that Atahualpa's head, severed from his body since 1534, remains alive, buried some place near Cuzco. The head has been growing a new body for the last 450 years, and, when it is complete, says the legend, the Inca realm will be restored.

But Huamán Poma, writing his letter to the king, knew that he was fighting the currents of history; he realized from his own long years of reflection that the destructive aftermath of the Spanish conquest—*mestizos*, serfdom, imperial bureaucracy, repression—could not be altered by a king, much less by a pleading, powerless old man.

---

EDITOR'S NOTE: Readers may be interested in consulting British historian Christopher Dilke's abridged English translation of Huamán Poma's manuscript (Letter to a King: A Peruvian Chief's Account of Life Under the Incas and Under Spanish Rule, New York: Dutton, 1978). Some of the quotations in this essay are taken from Dilke's work; other translations of passages not found in Letter to a King are the author's.