

CHAPTER TEN

Rumiñahui

1533

Atahualpa's lifeless body lay in the square of Cajamarca having been strangled a few minutes before on the evening of July 26, 1533. The Spaniards threw fire on his body so that his clothes and some of his flesh would be burned. As the smoke rose from his corpse a large Inca army under the general Rumiñahui was astride an Inca Road from what is today southern Ecuador. His intent was not known. The scribe Xerez reports:

Now I must mention a thing which should not be forgotten. A chief, who was Lord of Cajamarca, appeared before the Governor and said to him through the interpreters: 'I would have you to know that, after Atahualpa was taken prisoner, he sent to Quito, his native land, and to all the other provinces, with orders to collect troops to march against you and your followers, and to kill you all; and all these troops are coming under command of a great captain called Rumiñahui. This army is now very near to this place. It will come at night and attack the camp, setting fire in all directions, and the first they will try to kill will be yourself, and they will deliver Atahualpa out of his prison.'¹

At the time Rumiñahui was indeed very near Cajamarca, however whether he had planned an attack or been ordered to do so remains unclear. Perhaps through inadequate interpretation or even deceit there was also no mention that Rumiñahui and his army were transporting a purported 4,000 cargass of treasure for the ransom of Atahualpa.²

It's been documented by contemporary Spanish accounts that the Inca empire at this time contained more gold and silver than all the countries of Europe combined. The Incas prized gold and silver so highly that they mined it throughout their empire. Gold was washed from rivers and silver found in the mountains. Remains of Inca outdoor smelters have been found in the Andes into the present century. In *The Incas of Pedro Cieza de Leon* by Victor Wolfgang Von Hagen is a description of the great palaces and buildings of Cuzco:

These palaces were a grand thing; when one of the Lord-Incas died, his successor did not abandon or destroy them, but on the contrary, improved and added to them; for each built his own palace, leaving that of his predecessor adorned and standing as he had left it. Accumulating such a fortune, and with the heir being obliged to leave the possessions of his predecessor untouched, that is to say, his house, his household, and his statue, the treasure piled up over many years, so that all the service of the king's house, even water jars

and kitchen utensils, was of gold and silver; and not only a single place but in many, especially the capitals of the provinces. These famous lodgings were among the finest and richest to be found in all Peru.

As these Incas were so rich and powerful, some buildings were gilded, and others were adorned with plates of gold. The fronts of many of the buildings are beautiful and highly decorative, some of them set with precious stones and emeralds, and, inside, the walls of the temple of the sun and the palaces of the Lord-Incas were covered with sheets of the finest gold and incrustated with many statues, all of this metal. Inside the dwellings there were sheafs of golden straw, and on the walls carved figures of the same rich metal, and birds, and many other things.

In addition to this, it was said that there was a great sum of treasure in jugs, and pots and other receptacles, and many rich blankets covered with silver and beadwork. In their palaces and lodgings there were bars of these metals, and their garments were covered with ornaments of silver, and emeralds and turquoise, and other precious stones...and their litters were all encrusted with silver and gold and jewels. Aside from this, they had a vast quantity of ingots of gold, and unwrought silver, and tiny beads, and large vessels for drinking feasts and for their sacrifices still more of these treasures. Whatever I say, I cannot give an idea of the wealth the Incas possessed in these royal palaces...we can well believe that what the Incas were said to possess is true.³

Estimates based meticulous records of the Spanish conquest put the ransom paid by Atahualpa in 1533 to be 1,326,539 pesos of gold and 51,610 marcs of high-quality silver. This translates into 13,431 pounds of gold and 25,805 pounds of silver. The gold alone would be valued at roughly half a billion dollars in today's market (June of 2024).⁴

These estimates are just a fraction of the total gold on the way to the Spanish. It was known that many shipments estimated to far exceed those delivered never arrived in Cajamarca and were hidden by the natives. Oviedo writes in *Historia de las Indas*: "That which the Inca gave the Spaniards, said some of the Indian nobles to Benalcazar, the conqueror of Quito, was but a kernel of corn, compared with the heap before him."

It was common for Spaniards in this area to come across tombs of full of treasure buried with the bodies of the dead along with a cache of their personal possessions including their most beautiful and cherished women. Rich Incas mummified their dead. In *The Incas of Pedro Cieza de León* he mentions an incident involved Pizarro and his brother Hernando:

[Francisco Pizarro] sent Captain Hernando Pizarro, his brother, with a force of Spaniards, to this valley to remove all the gold from the cursed temple and return to Cajamarca. And although Captain Hernando Pizarro made his way to Pachacamac with all possible speed, it is common knowledge among the Indians that the headmen of priests of

Commented [NA1]: Need to find a translation copy of Oviedo's book

the temple carried away more than four hundred loads of gold which was never seen again. Now withstanding, Hernando Pizarro found considerable gold and silver.⁵

In *Lust for Gold* by Stephen Charbonneau Stephen describes what happened after Atahualpa's death:

Upon hearing news of Atahualpa's execution, his faithful stepbrother, the great General Rumiñahui, en route from Quito with purported four thousand cargas¹ of gold for the ransom ordered his men to withdraw with the treasure to the north of the Incan Empire, back to Quito, in the Andean Region of modern-day Ecuador. Rumiñahui reportedly remained behind and upon the Spaniards advance to Cuzco he entered Cajamarca and disinterred Atahualpa.

It is said that Rumiñahui embalmed Atahualpa as was custom and re-interred Atahualpa and the gold of Quito and Latacunga where the Spaniards would never find it, in the remote Llanganati Mountains. There exists a dispute among historians whether Atahualpa was embalmed in Cajamarca or Quito, either way Atahualpa was embalmed. Clearly through customs, legend and myth, Rumiñahui's intent was to recover the Inca and his gold after the Spanish departed. ⁶

Rumiñahui organized a resistance movement against the Spaniards. They fought a last battle on the plains of Riobamba and were routed by the Spaniards superior technology, tactics and cavalry. The battle was fought under a volcanic filled sky and on earthquake shaking ground. Rumiñahui's army retreated to the Province of Caranqui. This heavily populated part of the empire was supposed to be the richest with palaces and temples covered in gold built by Atahualpa's father Huayna Capac at the start of his reign. Frederick Hassuarek [1831-1885], United States Minister to the Republic of Ecuador wrote in his book *Four Years Among Spanish-Americans (1867)*:

On his arrival at Quito, Rumiñahui at once took the necessary measures to deprive the Spaniards of the great object of all their toils and hardships. Whatever treasures there were left, he sent out of the city; but where he hid them is a secret to the present day. It is possible that the treasures of Quito had already gone to swell the ransom of Atahualpa; it is possible that the rumors of their immensity were fabrications or exaggerations; but it is also possible, and even highly probable, that the Indians sought to snatch from the greedy grasp of the Spaniards the idol, for the possession of which so many innocent lives had been sacrificed. It was the last but most telling revenge of the conquered. Until the present day, traditions of the great treasures hidden in the mountains by Rumiñahui, are eagerly repeated and believed at Quito, giving probability to the story of Valverde.⁷

¹ A unit of measure used in Mexico and South America; approximately 300 lbs.

There is no Spanish firsthand accounts or witnesses to what Rumiñahui did with the gold and silver he must have had access to. Whether he ordered it destroyed as he retreated into the Llanganati Mountains or hid it all or part of it in lakes, caves or other inaccessible places is legend and conjecture. Reports from written Spanish accounts that survive to this day by Cieza, Herrera, Garilaso, Fernandez, Oviedo, and Velasco vary as to the size of Rumiñahui's convoy that he led to Cajamarca to pay Atahualpa's ransom. From 600 to 70,000 cargas have been proposed. He was eventually abandoned by his followers and captured by Benalcazar. After getting no information from him after many hours of torture he was burned alive. Other Inca officials such as Cozopangua and Quimbalumba, the Inca governors of Quito and Chillo suffered the same fate. Another noble, Albis had his feet burned over a slow fire but revealed nothing.⁸

The conquistadors eventually gave up looking for the hidden treasure. They were too busy subduing a growing Inca insurgency, melting gold and precious metals into pesos and bars and fighting among themselves. Pizarro and his successors put in place a series of "puppet" emperors over the next few decades. Manco Inca, another brother of Atahualpa was one such "dupe" who eventually turned on his Spanish benefactors and led a major rebellion. When he was captured and executed, his son Tupac Amaru carried on until finally defeated in September of 1572 almost 30 years after the battle of Cajamarca.

The legend states that Atahualpa's lost ransom remained somewhere in the Andes until a Spanish soldier married an Inca princess more than a generation later.

¹ Xerez, Francisco de, "Reports on the Discovery of Peru" Translated by Clements R. Markham, C.B, Burt Franklin originally published by the Hakluyt Society, p. 99 – 100, New York, NY, 1872

² Charbonneau, Steven J., *Lust for Inca Gold (Second Edition)*, Charbonneau, 2013

³ Von Hagen, Victor Wolfgang, *The Incas of Pedro Cieza de Leone 1518-1544*, p.69, University of Oklahoma Press, 1959, accessed from archive.org,
<https://archive.org/details/incasofpedrodecio0ciez/page/146/mode/2up?q=%22four+fingers%22>

⁴ Charbonneau, Steven J., *Lust for Inca Gold (Second Edition)*, p. 49, Charbonneau, 2013

⁵ Von Hagen, Victor Wolfgang, *The Incas of Pedro Cieza de Leone 1518-1544*, p. 336, University of Oklahoma Press, 1959, accessed from archive.org,
<https://archive.org/details/incasofpedrodecio0ciez/page/146/mode/2up?q=%22four+fingers%22>

⁶ Charbonneau, Steven J., *Lust for Inca Gold (Second Edition)*, p. 56 - 57, Charbonneau, 2013

⁷ Hassuarek, Frederich, *Four Years Among Spanish-Americans*, p. 391, Samson, Low, Son, and Marston, London, 1868

⁸ Charbonneau, Steven J., *Lust for Inca Gold (Second Edition)*, p. 60, Charbonneau, 2013