# GENIUS LOCI

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ARCHAEOLINGUA

# Crossing the Abyss: The Apurímac Canyon at the Time of the Spanish Invasion of Peru (1533)

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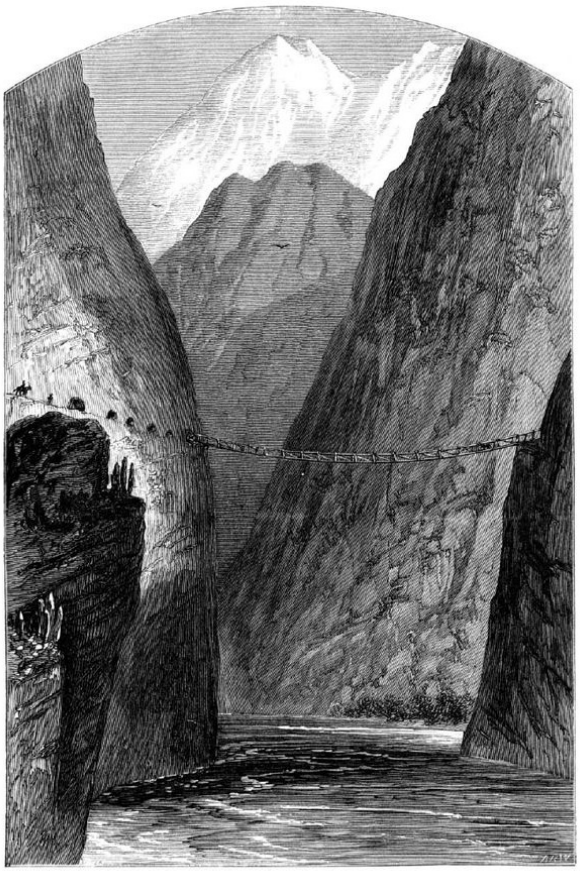
To Spaniards passing through the Andean region and Inka Empire in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, it was unforgettable. To Friar Martín de Murúa—writing in the early seventeenth century—the bridge over the Apurímac River was "the most celebrated and even feared" of the "famous bridges of this realm."[1] Made of plant fibers woven together by skilled Andean craftsmanship, the bridge stretched across a gap 45 m wide while dangling about the same distance above the river below. The river itself was equally impressive. It runs from the slopes of Mt. Misti (5,597 m) all the way down to the Amazon (400 m). At its most pronounced, it cuts a ravine over 3,000 m deep, making it one of the deepest gorges in the world.

In a region with no navigable rivers, all people, goods, and information traveled on the Inkas' sophisticated road system that connected even the most remote of the Inka Empire's provinces. In the longest mountain range in the world, fast-flowing turbulent rivers and deep ravines presented the greatest obstacle for Andean road-builders. Andeans built stone and log bridges across small rivers and creeks and tied together balsa rafts to form floating bridges across calm waters.[2] But, for the deepest ravines, widest gaps, and most turbulent rivers, they constructed one of the marvels of Peru: fiber suspension bridges. These bridges, of which the Apurímac was only the most celebrated and feared, once dangled over ravines and rivers across the Andes.

Yet, when the Spanish conquistadors wrote about their invasion of Inka Peru in 1533, they barely acknowledged passing over the Apurímac and mention almost nothing of the landscape of this canyon or others which inspired so much awe in later authors. They do describe the retreating Inka resistance burning bridges in the face of their advance. However, they give no heed to the challenge of crossing this bridgeless expanse nor do they describe the Apurímac's impressive geography. Pedro Sancho, Francisco Pizarro's secretary and the author of the most detailed account of this journey, simply states: "[We] arrived at the river which [we] crossed in balsas, swimming the horses, because the bridge was burned down." Sancho mentions nothing of the steep decline into the canyon, the construction of this balsa bridge, and the fear this cross-




► **Fig. 1.** *The famous suspension bridge of the Apurímac. Drawing by Ephraim George Squier (1877). Source: Ephraim George Squier, Peru: Incidents of Travel and Exploration in the Land of the Incas (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1877).*

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► **Fig. 2.** *The author at Saywite Rock in September 2014. (photo by J. M. Mikecz)*

ing likely inspired in human and horse. However, he does add some context: "And the river being full, [we] delayed in crossing it the rest of that day and the next one until the hour of siesta when the Governor, smiling [determined] to set out without waiting for the Indian allies to cross."[3] While failing to sufficiently explain their delay, he provides a curious admission: in the nine chapters and seventy-nine pages he devotes to describing the march from Cajamarca to Cusco, this marks only the second reference to "indios amigos." Indeed, Sancho's narration of this invasion scarcely mentions either Andean geography or Andean allies at all, two omissions that are deeply interconnected.

Since leaving Cajamarca three months earlier, the conquistadors had traveled nearly 1400 km. This journey took them over five mountain passes 4500 m (14,760 ft) or more above sea level and seven times into and out of canyons as deep as or deeper than the famous Grand Canyon of the United States. The Apurimac was merely the last and greatest of these canyons. Following the Inka Royal Road (*Qhapaq Ñan*) along the ridge of the Andes—the longest mountain range in the world—these foreigners experienced over 200,000 m of elevation change and for one stretch remained above 4000 m (13,123 ft) for almost 150 km straight.

Why did this crossing, and the dramatic topography of the Andes, receive so little attention from these first eyewitnesses-authors? What did they likely see and feel in places like the Apurímac while their pens fell silent?

The chronicler Pedro de Cieza de León offers more detail in describing a terrifying crossing some fifteen years after the conquistadors. He describes the Inka road dropping precipitously into the canyon. Approaching the river from the east, Cieza traveled with a unit of soldiers that had just defeated the rebel Gonzalo Pizarro. As was common in times of war, Cieza and his companions found the bridge destroyed. Thus, one by one, the men climbed into baskets and were pulled across the Apurímac by ropes, all the while dangling in the air dozens of meters over the turbulent waters below.[4] These were *oroyas*, which—in many ways—resemble the ziplines adventure tourists ride for amusement today. In his study of the Inka road system, John Hyslop describes the *oroya*s this way:

> "The oroya was perhaps the most frightening manner of crossing a river in the days of the Inka Empire. It usually consisted of a basket suspended from one cable connected to both sides of the river. The basket was pulled from one side to the other by people on one bank who hauled a rope attached to the basket."[5]

Left unsaid in Cieza's account were the people who pulled his basket across the abyss. It was Andean people, of course, just as they designed, built, repaired, and operated all Andean bridges well into the colonial period. While Cieza was silent about Andean labor here, he repeatedly found Andean geography and engineering awe-inspiring. For the Apurímac, he marveled at the "great work" done to break rock and level the road on the descent. Still, the road was "so rough and difficult" that horses, loaded with gold and silver, frequently fell off the road and tumbled into the river, never to be seen again.[6]

Foreigners always marveled at the canyon and the bridge. George Ephraim Squier, an American journalist and archaeology pioneer, visited Peru in the 1860s. Like Murúa nearly three centuries before, the experience was unforgettable. He writes:

> "Every one we met who had crossed it [the Apurímac Bridge] was full of frightful reminiscences of his passage: how the frail structure swayed at a dizzy height between gigan-

► **Fig. 3.** *The view of the Apurímac from the Mirador Capitan Rumí (photo by J. M. Mikecz, Sept 2014)*

> tic cliffs over a dark abyss, filled with the deep, hoarse roar of the river, and how his eyes grew dim, his heart grew faint, and his feet unsteady as he struggled across it, not daring to cast a look on either hand."[7]

It was Squier, or an artist in his employ, who produced the sketch of the hanging bridge on Fig. 1. Unfortunately, after Squier's visit the bridge fell into disrepair and was completely abandoned by the beginning of the twentieth century.

If the canyon and its crossing inspired so much awe and fear among foreigners, what exactly did the Apurímac mean for Andean people? Garcilaso de la Vega Inca, son of a Spanish conquistador and an Inka noblewoman, once remarked that Andean groups "were reduced voluntarily to submission to the Inka Empire merely on sight of such a bridge."[8] According to Murúa, who relied on native informants to write his history of Peru, "Apurímac" means "the lord that speaks" for the noise its turbulent waters made.[9] This spiritual dimension was made manifest in 1555 when a large landslide from the mountains above completely blocked the river. Andeans living downstream suddenly saw the great river run dry for three days; they naturally concluded the world was ending.[10]

I thought about the meaning this river may have held for Andeans as I passed through the region in September 2014. I also wondered what exactly the conquistadors saw—but left unsaid—as they approached the Apurímac and the final ascent to Cusco. On the way to the river and Cusco itself, I stopped to visit Saywite Rock, a three-dimensional stone models the size of a car (Fig. 2). This carved boulder model Inka irrigation technology while also representing the three principal environments of Peru: the coast, the highlands, and the rainforest. Did the conquistadors see it? It was not far from the main Inka road.

After staying overnight in a nearby town, I paid a local tour guide to take me to a *mirador* or viewpoint that overlooks the Apurímac Canyon (Fig. 3). This *mirador* afforded impressive views of the canyon and its river as it descended toward the Amazon. Yet, it was not just the bridge and canyon that had histories. Other stories were inscribed into the landscape, ready to be recalled by locals who had passed down these stories for generations. Before arriving at the *mirador*, the guide took me to a large rock that dominated this ridge. Locals call it *El Capitán Rumi*, which, in a mix of Spanish and Quechua, means "The Captain Rock." The Captain lords over the region from his commanding perch (Fig. 4).[11]

Did the conquistadors see *El Capitán* when they crossed the river below? Would its presence

► **Fig. 4.** *The Capitán Rumi rock as it overlooks the Apurímac (photo by J. M. Mikecz, Sept 2014)*

have mattered to them without the story? As the first group of conquistadors climbed out of the Apurímac Canyon towards Cusco in November 1533, Inka armies suddenly ambushed them. After the first difficult day of battle, the conquistadors believed themselves lost. According to Spanish accounts, this vanguard was only saved by the sudden and miraculous arrival of thirty of their compatriots riding hard through the night out of the Apurímac. In contrast, indigenous allies later described guiding, escorting, and defending the foreigners on their approach to Cusco.[12] According to another indigenous account, a faction of Inkas also came to their assistance with 100,000 warriors.[13]

Conquistadors wrote their indigenous allies out of their narratives just like the formidable geography of the Andes. Why? They wrote their accounts to justify their actions and seek reward from the Crown for their service. Thus, it was in their interest to exaggerate their accomplishments while downplaying the assistance and sophistication of the people who helped them. As the geographer Heidi Scott has argued, indigenous communities served as a "protective buffer" between the Spaniards and the difficult topography of Peru.[14] They only described the difficulties of Andean geography when the sudden absence or unavailability of native labor meant they had to endure it without a buffer. Without this assistance, the journey would have ended in disaster, just as initial European invasions of the New World so often did in places like Colombia, Patagonia, the Amazon, and Florida. Thus, recognizing the long-hidden importance of native allies to Europeans' American invasions requires attention to the indigenous humanized geographies of place: that is how indigenous ingenuity and labor made seemingly unhospitable landscapes hospitable. The conquest of Peru was a brutally violent endeavor. But, it was one made possible by diplomacy as much as violence.[15] Only with the help of bridge-builders could one cross the abyss.

## Notes

1 Martín de Murúa, *Historia general del Perú*, ed. Manuel Ballesteros Gaibrois (Madrid: Historia 16, 1987), chap. 87.

2 According to the priest José de Acosta, "the Indians use a thousand ways to cross rivers." John Hyslop, *The Inka Road System* (Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1984), 317.

3 Pedro Sancho, *An Account of the Conquest of Peru* (New York: The Cortes Society, 1917), chap. 10.

4 Pedro Cieza de León, *La crónica del Perú (1553)* (Madrid: Calpe, 1922), chap. XCI.

5 Hyslop, *The Inka Road System*, 327.

6 Cieza de León, *La crónica del Perú (1553)*, chap. XCI.

7 Ephraim George Squier, *Peru: Incidents of Travel and Exploration in the Land of the Incas* (New York: Henry Holt & co., 1877), 546.

8 Hyslop, *The Inka Road System*, 323.

9 Murúa, *Historia general del Perú*, chap. 87.

10 Garcilaso de la Vega, *Los comentarios reales de los incas* (Lima: Sanmartí, 1918), pt. 1, Vol. 2, Book 8, Ch. 22.

11 According to this story, The Captain was the original rock and had dispersed all its smaller counterparts which surround it.

12 Don Juan Guachaca, "Información: En el pueblo de Guaquirca de los Aymaraes en 17 de Octubre de 1668" (expediente, October 17, 1668), Intendencia, Legajo 203, Real Hazienda 1796., Archivo Regional del Cuzco; Juan de Santa Cruz Pachacuti Yamqui Salcamayhua, *Relación de antigüedades deste reyno del Piru*, ed. Pierre Duviols and César Itier (Lima-Cusco: Institut français d'études andines; Centro de Estudios Regionales Andinos "Bartolomé de Las Casas," 1993).

13 Titu Cusi Yupanqui, *History of How the Spaniards Arrived in Peru / Relasçion de como los españoles entraron en el Peru*, ed. Catherine J. Julien (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Comp., 2006).

14 Heidi V. Scott, *Contested Territory: Mapping Peru in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 1st Edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 34–35.

15 I make the case for the role of diplomacy in facilitating the Spanish invasion and occupation of Peru in my doctoral dissertation. This work follows decades of ethnohistorical research documenting how indigenous / Inka factionalism and an ongoing Inka civil war made the Spanish advance possible. However, I identify specific examples of this diplomacy while using data and geovisualizations to systematically show the magnitude and ubiquity of indigenous assistance at every important juncture of the so-called "conquest" of Peru. Jeremy Mikecz, "Mapping Conquest: A Spatial History of Indigenous Peru during the Spanish Invasion (ca. 1528-1537)," Ph.D. Dissertation (University of California, Davis, 2017).