

Art and Vision in the Inca Empire

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Review By Charlotte Booth

When I received this book, I was intrigued as I am fascinated by the art and architecture of the Inca culture and was keen to find out more. The Introduction introduces the premise behind the book which focuses on one event; the arrival of the Spanish in Peru, at the site of Cajamarca on 15th November 1582. Francisco Pizarro led 168 soldiers to the city which ended in a massacre of the Inca royal entourage. The chapters of the book follow the events of the 24 hours between 15th and 16th November starting with the arrival of the Spanish at Cajamarca, and ending with the Inca defeat in the royal chamber of Atawallpa, the Inca king. Largely drawing on the reports of Pizarro and his crew, although as they were written decades later cannot be considered entirely reliable, the author presents the ritual elements of the events as well as how this relates to Inca artwork and visualisation.

The first chapter 'Llamas and the logic of gaze' was interesting and had two main themes; the first was the abundance of llamas on the landscape and their importance for Inca society. They were viewed as a sign of Inca power and when the Spanish arrived at Cajamarca there may have been 50,000 or more grazing in the vicinity. For the Spanish such a number of llamas simply emphasised the 'uncivilised' pastoral lifestyle of the Inca, reiterating their views that the Andean people were 'backward'. However this was the largest and most successful agricultural region in northern Peru.

Llamas were the property of the state and were loaned or gifted as payment of labour or tribute. For the Inca they were a symbol of political power and should a meal of llama meat be offered, whoever accepts the food was under obligation to the providers of the feast. The Spanish had been warned not to accept the meat when offered for this very reason. Additionally the sheer numbers of llamas emphasised the Inca ability to provide for and feed their own and an enemy army, and demonstrated the confidence they felt in front of the enemy.

Whilst llamas have good eyesight the Incas believed only people and gods had the 'capacity for vision', and therefore animals and subsequently the Spanish did not. This concern with sight and visuals was the second theme throughout this chapter with a discussion on the view and lines of sight which were essential for the Inca landscape both for religious purposes and those of political power. Size was considered important and when the Spanish arrived they were taken by the size of Cajamarca which had a plaza "bigger than any in Spain" (p19). The size of the Inca army scattered around the hillsides in white tents were also a focus of admiration following the Spanish journey to Cajamarca along roads between four and ten meters wide paved with stones and gravel. Many of the processional routes (*zeq'es*) provided lines of sight to important and sacred aspects of the landscape. These were thought to be planned views where important things fall into and out of view or can be glimpsed through gaps in rocks or hills.

This idea of controlled visuals carries on into the second chapter entitled 'Under Atawallpa's Eyes' which uses the first meeting between the Spanish and the Inca king Atawallpa as a case study. When the Spanish leader approached the king he was seated behind a piece of material which "completely concealed him" as recorded by one of the Spanish invaders. This screening fabric was a traditional way of Incas meeting their enemies.

Atawallpa was seated in what was described as a fortress with three concentric walls common to Inca elite residential architecture. He was in the furthest part of the building and the Spanish invaders moved through a series of courtyards before being admitted into the presence of the king. Atawallpa sat behind the screen, surrounded by his courtiers and two servants framing him as they held up the fabric. The concealed image of the king and these two courtiers were symbolic of woven panels showing a deity facing forward; connecting the Inca king with the god.

This also provided visual similarities with the statues of gods placed in niches around the walls of temples. When the sun shone on them the metal statues lit up to such a degree they were rendered 'invisible'. This idea of being invisible in plain view was particularly powerful, and the king adopted this stance. Eye contact was considered an element of equality between two people and the transparent sheet made it possible for the king to observe the Spanish without them being able to make eye contact back. This placed him into a superior position by emphasising his divinity but also being a subtle sign of aggression.

A bolder sign of aggression was the Inca army camped outside the town of Cajamarca, which were all decked out in a striking uniform creating a 'Chessboard Landscape' which is the title for the next chapter. These uniforms comprised a black and white checked tunic with a dark red triangle at the throat. When the army were standing in the hills surrounding Cajamarca the checks and the red triangles represented the sacred stepped pyramid shape, an ancient and powerful motif which connected kingship with divinity, agriculture and a regenerative landscape. These uniforms were called *unku* and were designed to be viewed not in isolation but as a group. The entire battle plan of Atawallpa was one of intimidation.

On November 16 1532 the Inca army camped in the hills surrounding the city giving them freedom of movement and enabled them to control where and when the battle would take place. The Spanish were within the city walls and the Inca king believed them to be trapped here. He felt confident in processing into town to claim a victory without having to fight. However the Spanish viewed their position as advantageous as they wanted the Inca to march towards the town square confining them making it easier to fight against them.

The Inca believed their position as elevated above the town connected the army, and more specifically the king with the mountain peaks which were considered dominant male entities in the landscape and spoke of prestige and leadership to those being observed. Elevated position as one of leadership was further emphasised by the king being carried into battle in a brightly coloured and decorated palanquin, placing him above the soldiers.

In battle such a palanquin was a positive morale boost for the soldiers but was to prove to be Atawallpa's downfall. When he descended with his army into the city square, the Spanish focused on his palanquin and pulled him from it and took him prisoner. The slow procession into the Cajamarca plaza enabled the Spanish to see they had superior weapons to the Inca soldiers. The Incas, so

confident in their victory had in fact put their weapons under their tunics and the Spanish could see how few of the army were in fact in attendance. The strategy was, if the Spanish should attack the Inca would retreat bringing the battle into the open, and the Spanish were under orders not to attack until the Inca had entered the square. The Inca army marched effectively unarmed and peaceably into Cajamarca, to their death.

The final chapter 'Quri: A Place in the Sun' discusses the procession of the Inca army into the town of Cajamarca. Quri is identified as gold and the power and brilliance it embodies which was witnessed by the Spanish in the approaching Inca army. Gold represented the sun and the masculine. People wearing gold in procession were often accompanied by those wearing silver representative of the female aspect and the moon. Gold featured greatly not only in the ceremonial dress of the Incas but also in their material culture and architecture. It was so important that the Inca ruler is recorded as saying "speak no evil against the sun, the moon, nor shining objects ... nor against me as I will surely kill you" (p.155).

Many of the Inca processions took place in the central plaza of the cities which were viewed almost as sacred places and this was why Atawallpa chose the square as the final location to meet with the enemy.

The procession was accompanied by musicians and loud military singing and studies have shown that the central plaza was constructed in such a way as to magnify the sound striking fear into the heart of the enemy within as well as spiritually providing the solar deity with energy meaning there were religious connotations to such an event. The procession was a visual representation of the sound of sunlight.

Following the procession into the town and into the central plaza, Atawallpa stood on his palanquin in the centre of the square in order to make a speech. The idea behind this ceremonial procession into the town was to assert the masculine nature of the Inca state through the display of military might. Once the enemy (in this case the Spanish) surrendered in the face of this might, they would then owe fealty to the Incas. The Incas would then drop the masculine behaviour, serve the new allies food and present gifts in the manner of feminine hospitality.

However, this was not how the situation unfolded and following Atawallpa's speech the Spanish attacked resulting in the slaughter of as many as six thousand Incas. Unfortunately the town of Cajamarca no longer exists as following the massacre the Inca's former residents pulled down the monumental buildings but the author puts together a description of the central plaza and ceremonial gateways using other Inca settlements still in existence, using historical records of the period providing the reader with a visualisation of the architecture.

The conclusion follows this theme and focuses on the 'pleasure palace', the name given to the Inca palaces by the Spanish, which referred in general to a country retreat and the interaction between Atawallpa and his women; wives, concubines and servants. The most striking scenario is that should Atawallpa need to spit he would do so in a female servant's hand and she would then consume it. Should loose hairs be on his tunic the female servants removed them and eat them too. It is clear that the essence of the human was present in all bodily fluids and excretions and was potentially too dangerous to discard. Some statues of gods were made using the hair or skin of an Inca king

emphasising their divinity. The perceived divinity of Atawallpa is clearly being emphasised here, although in the long run it did not prevent his death.

The book has some potentially fascinating themes all focussed on the one battle which took place at Cajamarca which is an interesting approach to describing religious and ideological themes. However the writing style is rather verbose, and some of the sentence structures are overly complicated at times rendering the overall sense unfathomable.

Some of the structure was also a little odd. For example in chapter 3 the author starts an interesting discussion on rainbows which appears to go nowhere. However, ten pages later it is made apparent what the significance with rainbows was, by which point it was necessary to turn back and read the section again. Add to this the typos peppered through the text which is more a comment on the publisher's editing process (which for a book in this price-range should be excellent) than the author's writing, and it was at times a struggle to get through.

However, once the reader adapts to the difficult writing style there are some fascinating insights into this little-known subject with some interesting illustrations, and it makes one look at the local environment with different eyes.