

# CRADLE OF GOLD

THE STORY OF HIRAM BINGHAM, A REAL-LIFE  
INDIANA JONES, AND THE SEARCH FOR  
MACHU PICCHU

CHRISTOPHER HEANEY



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The Spaniards execute the last Inca emperor, Tupac Amaru, in Cuzco in 1572, as depicted by Guaman Poma de Ayala, an Inca noble and scribe, to appeal to the Spanish King in the early seventeenth century. Tupac Amaru's death was preceded by the loss of Vilcabamba, the Inca city that disappeared into the jungle until the twentieth century. (The Royal Library, Denmark)

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The Story of Hiram Bingham,  
a Real-Life Indiana Jones,  
*and the Search for Machu Picchu*

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*For my parents,  
and for JVD*

*All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their mind wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dreams with open eyes, to make it possible.*

—T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*

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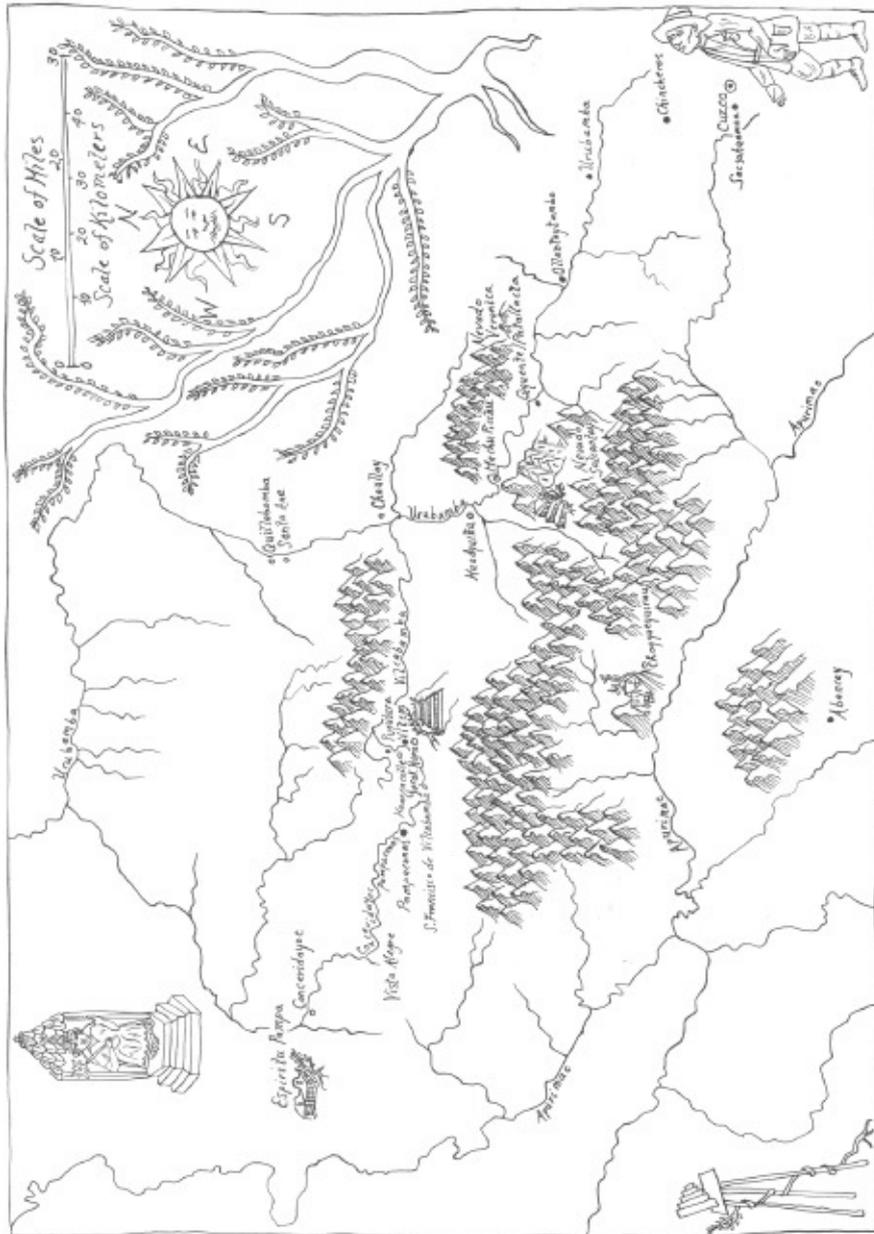
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Map of the Vilcabamba, the region in which Hiram Bingham searched for the last cities of the Incas between 1909 and 1915. (Map by Emily Davis Adams)



South America, 1909, the scene of Hiram Bingham's great successes and failures. (Map by Emily Davis Adams)

## Preface

# *Beneath the Hat*

South America, 1936. A mountain looms in the distance. A small group of men carve their way through the thick jungle. A wide hat hides the face of their leader, save for his handsome, unshaven chin. His Peruvian guides are hesitant, but he is determined. He pauses, gently unfolds a disintegrating map from the pocket of his leather jacket and studies it in the dim light breaking through the canopy. A guide behind him pulls a gun, but the leader spins around and cracks his whip, knocking the weapon away. The guide runs, and our hero, an American archaeologist, steps into the light.

The party continues its march into the jungle. Behind a wall of vines they find what they've been looking for: a temple built by a people lost long before Columbus. Bats explode from its black and forbidding entry, and the Indian porters run away in fright. The archaeologist and the remaining guide enter. There are traps to swing over and the corpse of a previous treasure hunter who failed. It is all prelude to the temple's center, where a small gold statue sits on a stone pedestal. The guide holds his breath, and the archaeologist replaces the artifact with a bag of sand. They breathe easy for a moment; but then, with a rumble and snap, the ruins come tumbling down.

*This, of course,* is the opening scene of the 1981 movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and the debonair American archaeologist is Henry "Indiana" Jones Jr., played by Harrison Ford. Nearly three decades and three sequels later, we've seen Indy fight Nazis, Thuggee murder cults, and Communist clairvoyants for some of the most fantastic artifacts imaginable. But if there was an iconic moment to the series, then this is it: Indiana Jones running from a massive rolling boulder, walls falling around him, all without losing his hat. It is one of the most exciting introductions in movie history, and by the time Indy escapes an angry jungle tribe by swinging on a vine, he has lost the gold icon but captured our hearts.

I idolized him for most of my childhood. By the time I reached high school, I knew I wanted to become an archaeologist. I applied to Yale University, wrote my college essay on Indiana Jones, and was lucky enough to be admitted. But before I headed to New Haven, my father gave me a present that took me a little closer to reality. It was a t-shirt he had bought from Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History, where I had spent many hours staring at dinosaurs when I was seven. The shirt featured another star from the museum's history: Machu Picchu, the beautiful "lost city of the Incas," hidden in the Andes Mountains of the South American country of Peru. And on its

back was the image of the tall historian who had made it famous: Hiram Bingham III.

Born in 1875, over his 81 years he was variously a professor, writer, pilot, and U.S. senator. Hiram uncovered the ruins of Machu Picchu in 1911; in 1912, he exported its skulls, bones, beautiful ceramics, and precious metal artifacts to Yale. The cotton-and-ink face staring out at me gave no indication as to the roots of his restless ambition, but I saw something of Indy in him: the jaunty stance, the cocked hat, the sandy hair, and defiant gaze, teetering between interest and impatience. He could shout, as Ford did in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, “That belongs in a museum!” I was unsurprised when I later learned that in crafting the look of Indiana Jones, the crew of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* may have drawn from a little-known Charlton Heston movie named *Secret of the Incas*, which in turn drew from Bingham’s life and work at Machu Picchu.<sup>1</sup> These two icons of archaeology shared the same DNA—though at the time, I thought that Indiana Jones was the exciting, full-color version and Hiram Bingham was the sepia-toned, boring reality.

At Yale I learned how wrong I was. In 2002, when I was a senior and a Latin American Studies major, I began research in Bingham’s papers, archived at Yale. There, I made my own discoveries. Most accounts of Machu Picchu’s revelation—a word preferable to discovery, in many ways—began with Bingham’s quest to find the last cities of the Incas, the jungle-clad settlements where the most impressive pre-Columbian empire in the Americas took refuge from the Spanish in the sixteenth century. These accounts climaxed with Bingham’s arrival at Machu Picchu. Only epilogues suggested what he unearthed in his excavations. Left unexplored was a full explanation of how he did it and why he quit exploring altogether in 1915. From Bingham’s journals, manuscripts, and previously unexamined letters in Spanish, a far more dramatic story emerged, one full of betrayals, deaths, political intrigues, smuggling, and angry locals. It only seemed like a story of simple, heroic exploration from a distance. Beneath the hat, it was nothing less than a lost history of the Spanish conquest of Peru and its recovery through exploration; a descent into a forgotten chapter of America’s often colonial, sometimes imperial relationship with the other peoples and countries of the hemisphere; and, most pressingly, a question as thorny as the vines that held Machu Picchu together: Who can own and interpret the indigenous past?

This last question is a timely one. In 2008, Peru sued Yale for the return of the artifacts and human remains that Bingham excavated from Machu Picchu. Peru claimed it had loaned Yale the collection of silver jewelry, ceramic jars, potsherds, skulls and bones and was now demanding its return. Yale called Peru’s claim “stale and meritless” and asserted that now it owned the collection.<sup>2</sup> Peru said Yale had 46,000 pieces; Yale said it had 5,415.

Between these two distant poles, I have attempted to find the truth. After I graduated from college, I received a Fulbright Fellowship to research the story using archives and sources in Peru. In the year or so that I lived in Cuzco, the former capital of the Incas, I discussed the controversy with historians, archaeologists, tour guides, and taxi drivers of all ethnicities, who thoroughly challenged my notions of what Bingham’s “discovery” meant. When I told one guide where I had gone to school, he said, “So maybe you can tell us where the gold is,” echoing the legend that Bingham

had stripped Machu Picchu not only of its graves but its supposed Inca treasure as well.

This book is my reply. Like the *kipu*—the Inca recording device, a long cord hanging with colorful strings whose every knot represented a different event or number—this book ties together several stories. The first is the oldest and explains why sixteenth-century Spaniards chased the heir to a once-mighty empire into the jungles of Peru and what was lost when the Spanish finished him off. The second thread explains why a twentieth-century missionary’s son fell in love with an Inca ruin named the “Cradle of Gold” and then spent his career as an explorer trying to resurrect ruins whose secrets told the lost history of the Incas. His story closes with the monumental fight that ended his career as an explorer and changed how Peruvians viewed their material past and cultural heritage. The final thread pulls us to the present, asking what Hiram Bingham’s revelation means today and how Machu Picchu’s artifacts—and their ownership—continue to challenge the Americas’ understanding of history and archaeology. When is a dig a political statement? When is a trowel a sword?

This story is also deeply personal, for reasons that will become clear. Any mistakes in the text that follow are thus my own, but I am indebted to others for almost everything else. I owe my greatest debt, however, to the two figures that fight for the heart of this story. First is the explorer Hiram Bingham, whose best self, the part that sought to understand another culture, was inextricably linked to the part of him that needed to possess. And second is a Peruvian anthropologist and public intellectual named Luis E. Valcárcel, who was first inspired by Bingham’s explorations, then grew more critical of the North American’s actions.

To say why—and whether his suspicions were justified—would ruin the story that follows, full of snakes, heroism, moral dilemmas, broken hearts, looting, shipwrecks, a treasure, skulls and bones, and perhaps even a curse. And unlike the adventures of Indiana Jones, it’s all too true.

#### A NOTE ON IMAGES

In crafting this book, I was also inspired by the great Inca scribe Guaman Poma de Ayala, whose illustrated seventeenth-century manuscript *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno* has become an icon of indigenous resistance and adaptation in colonial Peru. This book begins with one of his images and I include another in the book’s photo insert, but I also asked an artist and friend, Emily Davis Adams, to create images that depict Bingham’s travails in a manner in keeping with Guaman Poma’s aesthetic, if not his sharp political commentary. These images preface this book’s four parts and, hopefully, amplify the echoes between Bingham’s story and the conquest he tried to uncover.

# *Cradle of Gold*

## Introduction

# *The Last City of the Incas*

## The Sixteenth-Century Conquest

Dawn broke over South America, rolling from east to west, sliding up beaches and rivers, pushing through the treetops and vines of the Amazon jungle until it hit the Andes, the soaring mountains that chain the continent together. Soon the sun would spill over its peaks and rush toward the beaches of the Pacific. But for a few precious minutes the light lingered on the Andes' eastern slopes, and in one steep valley, in a land called Peru, it woke two thousand Spanish and Indian nobles, soldiers, and slaves. With curses and prayers, they strapped on their armor and prepared for battle. It was June 24, 1572, the feast of St. John the Baptist, but the expedition hoped that it would soon be known as the day that the nightmarish conquest of the Incas finally ended.

It had been forty years since Francisco Pizarro and his 168 conquistadors left Central America and sailed down the western coast of the southern continent. When they landed in Peru, they faced the largest, wealthiest, most powerful indigenous empire of the Americas—the Incas. Their domain stretched from modern-day Chile to Colombia, from the Pacific to the Amazon, tied together with roads, canals, fortresses, and temples. Through force of arms and savvy alliances, the Spaniards captured and executed their emperor, Atahualpa, and conquered their capital, the gold-covered city of Cuzco.<sup>1</sup> But Atahualpa's successor, his fierce brother named Manco, rebelled against Spanish rule, centered in the new colonial capital of Lima, on the coast. In 1536, Manco retreated to this remote kingdom north of Cuzco. By 1539 he had built a new Inca capital—a place to worship their deity, the sun, and their ancestors in peace. Its name was Vilcabamba, “The Plain of the Sun.”<sup>2</sup>

But it was not to be. Manco died, and his sons kept up the fight, arguing that the Spanish conquest was illegitimate and that their family had been wronged. After years of negotiations and skirmishes, the Spaniards had enough of the resistance. In April 1572, the viceroy, the Spanish king's representative, declared a “war of fire and blood.” He organized an expedition led by Spaniards, but supported by indigenous allies and Inca mestizos—people born of Inca and Spanish unions, consensual or not—who sought survival and recognition within colonial Cuzco rather than independence.

The expedition had three objectives: to reach and raze Vilcabamba; to confiscate its

treasure and end the Incas' sun worship; and to carry Manco's son, the Incas' eighteen-year-old emperor and leader of their religion, back to Cuzco for judgment. His name was Tupac Amaru, Quechua for "Royal Serpent," referring to the great two-headed snake that brought rain and world-shattering change. To capture him would be difficult. To get this far the Spaniards had fended off ambushes of spears, poisoned spines, and falling boulders. The landscape had grown terrifying. Here, the Andes met the Amazon: massive mountains gave way to precipitous cliffs and ravines, forest-choked valleys, and rivers that drowned the unwary. Jaguars and vipers lurked; vines and thorns ripped at clothes half-rotting from the rain and mist. The expedition had abandoned their horses and crawled along cliffs. The bravest strapped cannons to their backs, hoping for a greater share of the loot to come. The trees hid colonies of ferocious biting ants.<sup>3</sup> And then there were the waiting Incas and their hidden allies, the fierce jungle peoples who fought with poison arrows and, the Incas claimed, feasted on their victims. The Incas sacrificed guinea pigs to tell the future and left their disemboweled remains along the path, unnerving the Spaniards. Only through luck and an opportune defection among the Incas' captains had the expedition gotten this far. Vilcabamba would be the Incas' last stand, and the Spaniards were sure they would fight.

It was time. The sun cleared the ridge, and the men began to sweat. The general ordered the Europeans and Indians who had allied with the colonizers into columns led by captains and flag-bearers. The priests blessed the soldiers, and they began to march. The path rose, widened, and yielded a view of the river on their right. A massive Inca staircase led to an *usnu*, a ceremonial platform on which the Incas' priests paid tribute to the sun. It was midmorning, and the sun spilled over the expeditionaries' shoulders, illuminating the forbidden jungle refuge below.

But Vilcabamba was not a glittering imperial capital teeming with soldiers. It was sacked, abandoned, and burning. The Spaniards could smell the smoke.

They were shocked. Had another army beat them to the prize? They followed a long, wide staircase down into the city. Some four hundred stone houses surrounded them, eerily silent save for the last crackles of settling fires. They walked past fountains still gurgling and climbed a short staircase into the main square. After planting the royal standard and taking possession of the city for Spain, they explored, poking through the ashes of the palace and sun temple with their swords. They realized that Tupac Amaru and his Incas had destroyed the city themselves, "so effectively that if the Spaniards and their Indian allies had done it, it could not have been worse."<sup>4</sup> The Incas had fled into the jungle and mountains, carrying all they could, hoping that the Spaniards, deprived of their quarry, would return to Cuzco. The temple's golden icons—idols, the Spanish called them—and all of the Incas' treasures had gone with them.<sup>5</sup>

A few Spaniards, however, were moved by what remained. The Incas had built Vilcabamba to resemble Cuzco: a mile and a half wide but sprawling lengthwise. They had lived well in this second capital. They raised bees and gathered the honey; the warm and wet climate allowed for maize to be harvested three times a year along with sugar cane, yucca, sweet potato, and cotton. They grew the sacred coca leaf, chewed to attain strength and a mild narcotic high. "They raised parrots, hens, duck, native

rabbits, turkeys, pheasants,” one chronicler continued,

curassows, macaws, and a thousand other birds of diverse, vivid colors. The houses and huts were covered in good thatch, and attractive to the eyes. There are a great number of guavas, pecans, peanuts, lucumas [a sweet, dry Andean fruit], papayas, pineapples, cherimoyas and other diverse fruit trees of the jungle. The Inca [emperor]’s house had two floors and was covered in roof tiles. The entire palace was painted with murals, all varying in style, which was quite a sight to see. There was a plaza where many people gathered to celebrate and even race horses. The palace doors were of very fragrant cedar, which there was much of in that land, and the rafters and floors were of the same material. Altogether, the Incas hardly lacked any of the gifts, greatness, and splendor of Cuzco in this distant or, better said, exiled land because whatever they wanted of the outside, the Indians brought them. It brought them contentment and joy, and they lived there with pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

Compared to the New World’s still-ramshackle Spanish cities stinking with pig manure, it was paradise.

It was a paradise now lost for good, however; the Spaniards would not return to Cuzco empty-handed. They formed parties to search for Tupac Amaru, his heirs, and his treasure. The first party, led by mestizo nobles, returned after a week with Tupac Amaru’s nephew, who was next in line to wear the red-fringed *mascapaycha*, the symbol of the Inca’s rule. The second party, mostly of Spaniards, found the Inca’s chief general and a fabulous treasure of emeralds, silver, and gold, including the *Punchao*, the golden sun icon once worshipped in Cuzco’s Temple of the Sun. It was filled with the ground-up hearts of deceased emperors and was the golden berth of the history and religious heritage of the Incas, their ark. Worse yet, a third party returned with the *mallquis*, or mummies, of Manco Inca and his eldest son, Titu Cusi Yupanqui. The Incas mummified their imperial dead and carried and worshipped them as they had when they were alive.<sup>7</sup> Their capture was a disaster: the Spanish had already burned other such “idols.”

The Incas could only hope that the Spaniards’ true quarry could remain at large. If Tupac Amaru stayed free, the insurgency could limp along for years, a thorn in the side of Spanish rule. Nevertheless, the Spaniards had a clue that he had fled downriver, toward the Amazon, with his pregnant wife. The Spanish commander sent forty men after them, led by an ambitious young captain named Martín García de Loyola, whose great-uncle had founded the Jesuits, the religious order that was converting many indigenous people in this New World.

They found and interrogated the chief of the Incas’ jungle allies until he revealed that Tupac Amaru had left him only five days before, paddling by canoe to the sea. He was delayed because his “wife was frightened and sad because she was only a few days from giving birth. . . . Because he loved her so much, Tupac Amaru himself was helping her carry her burden and protecting her, walking very slowly.” The chief refused the reward García de Loyola offered, “saying that it was a great betrayal he had done to his lord.”<sup>8</sup>

García de Loyola and his men marched for fifty miles, day and night by torchlight. They fell over waterfalls and swam for their lives. All the insects of the Amazon bit, stung, and laid eggs in their skin. Had they rested, they would have failed. As they approached, Tupac Amaru begged his wife to flee with him by canoe. Had she agreed, they might have escaped down the Amazon. The Spanish chroniclers claimed that she was terrified of the open water, however, and Tupac Amaru refused to abandon her. The Spaniards found the couple warming themselves at a campfire, staving off the dark. Deep in the jungle, the last emperor of the Andes surrendered, and Loyola marched him back to the city of Vilcabamba, up the grand staircase, and out of the valley. Whether the young Inca looked back at his city, his father's refuge, or whether he faced forward, girding himself for the future, is lost to history.

On September 21, the expedition returned to Cuzco. García de Loyola paraded Tupac Amaru around the plaza, leading him with a golden chain around his neck. The *mascapaycha* still lay on the young emperor's head. When they passed the window of the viceroy Francisco de Toledo, the Spanish king's colonial representative, the Inca refused to remove his royal fringe and Loyola struck him twice.<sup>9</sup>

The indignities continued. The viceroy wanted Tupac Amaru gone. In a sham trial, Toledo's officials charged the emperor with the murder of Spaniards in his realm and sentenced him to death. Inca and Spanish nobles alike protested the harsh punishment, but Toledo was implacable. Tupac Amaru was hoisted onto a mule and led to a black-draped scaffold in Cuzco's main square. His relatives and former subjects mobbed the streets and packed the balconies, wailing and sobbing. When the fallen emperor ascended the scaffold, he raised his hand, and the plaza went silent as he made his final declaration.

Speaking in Quechua, the Incas' imperial language, he told his people that he had converted to Christianity: "All that I and my ancestors the Incas have told you up to now—that you should worship the sun *Punchao* and the *huacas* [sacred icons], idols, stones, rivers, mountains and *vilcas* [the sacred things]—is completely false. When we told you that we were entering in to speak to the sun, this was false. It did not speak, we alone did: for it is an object of gold and cannot speak."<sup>10</sup> The Spaniards had broken his faith in his divinity; or perhaps he mouthed their script at the end to save his people. He laid his head on the block. An Indian executioner took his hair with one hand and with a cutlass decapitated the Inca. He raised Tupac Amaru's severed head to the sky.

The independent dynasty of Vilcabamba ended. Its treasure was divided; according to the Spanish law of the *quinto royal*, a fifth of the wealth went to the court of Philip II. The golden sun icon, the *Punchao*, disappeared into Europe. The Spaniards built Cuzco's cathedral over one of the Incas' grandest palaces and the Dominican priory atop the Temple of the Sun. Toledo tried to break up the Incas' property and fortunes by marrying off the daughters of Inca lords to Spaniards, and he secretly burned the mummies of Manco Inca and Titu Cusi.

The Incas' subjects, now the Indian wards of the Spanish royalty, were subjected to harsh tributary laws. They died at horrific rates in mines and on haciendas. While the Spanish king got one-fifth of the Incas' wealth, by the early eighteenth century the

Andean population was reduced to one-fifth of its former number, scholars estimate, by violence, disease, malnutrition, and exploitation.<sup>11</sup> Many Spaniards saw and lamented the abuse, but it was hard to divert the flood of policies and social assumptions that caused the disaster.

Despite these calamities, the Inca nobility survived, and in a few cases thrived, allying themselves with sympathetic Spaniards. Manco's kin claimed land and tribute and met as a body in Cuzco; the male with the greatest claim of descent from the original Incas wore the royal fringe.<sup>12</sup> They told their stories to chroniclers or wrote them down themselves. And as time went by, even their most resentful former subjects idealized the age of Inca rule and hoped they might return to power.<sup>13</sup> In 1780, that wish became flesh when José Gabriel Condorcanqui, a rural noble from the highlands south of Cuzco, took the name Tupac Amaru II and rebelled against the colonial authorities.

The reprisal was swift and terrible and had lasting consequences for the Incas' existence in Peruvian society. Condorcanqui was also executed in Cuzco's main square, but in a far more brutal manner than his predecessor. After forcing him to watch the execution of his wife and family, the Spaniards bound his arms and legs to horses, which were then driven in four directions. When he did not die, the Spaniards cut off his head, dismembered his body, and sent its parts to the towns that had supported him. "For those who viewed Tupac Amaru as an Inca, the body was not that of a prisoner," writes one historian. "Rather, it stood for the Indian nation."<sup>14</sup> To punish the surviving Inca nobles—even those who had supported the crown—the Spanish tried to strip them of their titles and dress. Increasingly, the only indigenous identity available for public life was as an *indio*, an Indian of low birth. When Peru won its independence from Spain in the 1820s, the Incas lost even that. Coastal elites actively scorned indigenous nobles. Inca leadership held on longer in Cuzco, but by the 1840s the coastal state so eroded the value of indigenous identities that former Incas found it preferable to inter-marry with Europeans. Gradually, they lost track of the lines that linked them to one of the world's great civilizations, the most sprawling indigenous empire South America had ever known.<sup>15</sup>

In some quarters, however, their memory lived on. Long-suffering Indians, mestizos, and Peruvians of European descent alike found hope in the tales of their wealth and independent spirit, of what had been lost but might yet be found.

Some dreamt of their treasure. The impious traded swords for shovels and dug into the Inca temples and pre-Columbian mounds of other cultures in search of gold and silver. One of the most sadly evocative words that emerged from the Spanish colonization of Peru was *huaquear*, the transformation of the Quechua word *huaca*—a sacred site or object—into a verb meaning to dig into temples and graves in search of treasure. To some native Andeans, however, the Incas' treasure was patrimony, their inheritance. In 1802, the Prussian naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt visited Cajamarca, where the Spanish killed the emperor Atahualpa. There, he met the seventeen-year-old son of a poor local *cacique* [indigenous noble] who claimed Inca descent, despite the purges of the 1780s. The son told the Prussian that the town's ruins hid a vast treasure of golden trees and litters that awaited the Incas' return; he and his parents would never dig for these treasures, which would be a sin. Humboldt