

Jacek Palkiewicz with Andrzej Kaplanek

E L D O R A D O

HUNTING THE LEGEND

Translated by Dena R. Gurgul

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Front cover: an enigmatic map of the Paititi region from the 18th century

Back cover: a golden mask found in a crypt in Sipan

**Inside covers: a 16th- century manuscript confirming Paititi's existence,
found in 2002 in the Archive of the Jesuit Society**

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El Dorado – one of the most fascinating myths in the history of mankind – continues to intrigue masses of researchers and adventurers. In their quasi-documentary story, J. Palkiewicz and A. Kaplanek attempt to solve one of the greatest secrets of the Inca – the location of the legendary city of Paititi, hidden in the Amazon jungle. This is the final resting place of Incan treasure and cultural heritage, all that remains of a people exterminated mercilessly by Francisco Pizarro, who, together with a handful of 170 soldiers, brought about the unprecedented defeat of one of the largest empires of those times.

Phantasmagoric El Dorado is a symbol of the eternal human dream of fame and fortune, the projection of a certain mystery that beguiles and tempts. In pursuit of this mystery, the authors of the book "El Dorado – Hunting the Legend," set out to find the historic truth. First they must conquer the inhospitable and primitive Amazon jungle, hostile native tribes, a deadly climate and their own weaknesses.

J. Palkiewicz is convinced that Paititi, the Amazonian El Dorado, is not just a myth. The supporting evidence is astounding and includes a 16th-century sensational handwritten manuscript from the Roman Jesuit archives. However, despite backing from the Peruvian government and equipment representing the latest achievements in technology, success does not come easy. Nature has no pity and refuses to give up without a fight.

A chance to introduce a great legend to the world of science. This is confirmation of the sensational Jesuit manuscript.

Komsomolskaya Pravda, 27 January 2005

The Jesuit manuscript may be the key to El Dorado.

The Times, 12 February 2002

Palkiewicz the explorer searches for the mythical El Dorado.

Associated Press, 20 November 2001

A myth revealed. The legendary city of El Dorado exists.

Discovery Channel News, 25 February 2002

An expedition sponsored by the Peruvian government has found traces of the mythical city Paititi.

EFE Press Agency (Lima), 26 July 2002

This manuscript should show the way to El Dorado.

Der Spiegel, 15 February 2002

The path to El Dorado's gold has been discovered.

Corriere della Sera, 2 August 2002

El Dorado intrigues, fires the imagination and awakens human passions with its cocktail of explosive elements: unexplored secrets, untold wealth, the dramatic fate of explorers, the sensational Jesuit document, the exoticism of the virgin jungle and romanticism of expedition adventures.

The New York Times

It is even better that Palkiewicz has not yet found Paititi. At the same time, he has not deprived us of dreams that awaken the imagination. When there are no more secrets, the world will be a poor place.

El Pais

Great legends, which have been embedded for generations in the universal consciousness, are not always fictional departures from reality. Archeology has proven more than once that the fine line between fact and fiction is often blurred.

National Geographic Magazine

Jacek Palkiewicz - reporter and explorer, founder of the art of survival in Europe. The leader of many ambitious international expeditions in all geographic latitudes of the world. He has seen the entirety of Siberia, the largest jungles and deserts of our planet. In 1975 Palkiewicz crossed the Atlantic alone in a 5-meter lifeboat: 44 days without a radio or sextant. He also trains top counter-terrorist troops in extreme conditions in various climatic zones. More than once Palkiewicz has taken up the fight against man's destruction of nature. In 1996 his scientific expedition located the source of the Amazon, a discovery officially recognized by the Lima's Geographic Society.

Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in London. The author of 20 books, Palkiewicz also publishes his reportages on the pages of in many prestigious European magazines.

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Andrew Kaplanek – engineer, publicist, traveler and sailor. After graduating from the AGH University of Science and Technology in Cracow, he worked in a number of prestigious positions in industry, combining professional interests with a passion for learning about the world and people around him. In the search for traces of ancient

cultures and lost civilizations, Kaplanek has traveled the width and breadth of Asia, Africa and America, pursuing archeological mysteries that awaken the imagination and provoke the creation of hypotheses and conflict. His travels have born fruit in the publication of three books: *Tajemnicze Andy* (The Mysterious Andes), *Śladami Pierzastego Węża* (In the Footsteps of the Feathered Snake), *Tropami Synów Słońca* (In Pursuit of the Sons of the Sun). They introduce readers to the world of pre-Colombian cultures, whose accomplishments at the same time amaze as well as terrify with a stubborn silence that seems to mock failed attempts to solve their myriad secrets.

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Review

El Dorado intrigues like a mysterious treasure island, fires the imagination and with unstoppable power continues to awaken human passions with its explosive cocktail of unplumbed secrets, piles of gold, dramatic accounts of explorers and romantic adventures. One of the most fascinating myths in the history of mankind has never lost its appeal and is still a tempting enigma. In May 1952 a group of 171 Spanish invaders subdued the Inca Empire, famed for its enormous gold resources, in a mere three weeks. Some members of the hierarchy took refuge from the merciless massacre carried out by the conquistadors deep in the Amazonian *selva*, where they also hid the empire's fabled wealth that slipped through the fingers of the invaders.

This quasi-documentary account of adventure of literary fact by Jacek Palkiewicz and Andrew Kaplanek, presents a colorful and passionate search for an answer to the riddle of the "sons of the Sun" against the background of tangled and mist-shrouded events in

Peru. It reveals the ruthless massacre of Spanish desperados, led by former swineherd Francisco Pizarro, who in spectacular style accomplished the unprecedented by conquering what was one of the greatest empires in the world at that time. Moreover, it details the horrible anathema, similar to the curse of the pharaohs, imposed by the absolute ruler Atahualpa on the gold-thirsty hordes of fearless daredevils, troublemakers and adventurers who were wiped out by a deadly climate, wild nature, poisonous snakes, malaria and hostile local Indian tribes.

The reader will be immersed in the impenetrable wilderness of the mountainous equatorial forest in the Alto Madre de Dios river basin in Peru, frequently represented on topographical maps in white with the inscription *Datos insuficientes* – insufficient data. There, with the support of the government of Peru, Palkiewicz's international expedition embarked on the search for a solution to the eternal mystery of the *ciudad perdida* Paititi, the lost Incan city and a synonym for El Dorado.

Jacek Palkiewicz, a member of the British Royal Geographical Society, thanks to his determined search for historical truth, superb organization and the most modern achievements of technology, has gathered stunning proof, including a sensational Jesuit manuscript from the 16th century, in support of the thesis that El Dorado is not just a fairy-tale myth.

The optimism of this Polish Indiana Jones is reinforced by *National Geographic Magazine*, which wrote: "Great legends, which have become entrenched over many generations in the universal consciousness, are not always fictions detached from reality. Archeology has lent credence more than once to the idea that the thin line between fact and fiction is frequently hazy."

The book, containing fast-paced action, exoticism, secrets of the past, dramatic scenes and a mixture of historical and archeological fact with contemporary reality, is a truly

fascinating read. "It is incredibly interesting and wonderfully written," said Wojciech Gielzynski. "A hit!" added Wojciech Cejrowski. One bookstore owner commented: "I am impressed by this fascinating book." The story has met with considerable interest from publishers in the United States, Japan, South America and Europe.

El Dorado-Hunting the Legend is published by Zysk i S-ka (442 pp., more than 100 pictures, also in color, format 14x20 cm, price 29 zł).

In the Jungle

The heat beating down from the sky is overpowering and paralyzing. Shirts stick to backs and sweat mingles with insect repellent, irritating the eyes. The heavy air is swollen with humidity, filled with the odor of decaying plant life – a stifling smell that makes breathing difficult. We are plastered with wet, warm cotton, although the fabric smothers and weights us down. Our heads are filled with only one thought – to rest – and exhaustion is easily channeled into aggression.

“Oh, fuck! Fuck!” Serguey curses energetically after a painful brush with the thorny stem of the *chonta* palm. The thorn he pulls gingerly from his palm is a few centimeters long. After a moment the silence is broken again by a string of curses, this time from the second Serguey in the group – nicknamed Hyper. He has trodden recklessly on a fallen tree that lies draped across our path and is now trapped to the knees in its rotten insides.

“Job twaju mać!”¹ he pants, trying to free his trapped feet. “Scheiße! Du fiese Ratte!”² he curses again at himself. Hyper is our linguist, able to curse and converse in six languages.

“Get out of there or you’ll be crawling with scolopendra or ants. Do you want help?” Leo asks.

“Fuck off!” His hard, masculine retort extinguishes any Samaritan gestures.

These brutal interludes are worrying. This is only the beginning of the expedition and already nerves are slipping. Not a good sign. How will they react to serious problems?

¹ Fuck your mother!

² Shit! You dirty rat!

No one feels like talking on the march. It disrupts your rhythm and steals much needed air away from your lungs. Behind me I can hear Serguey's heavy breathing and ahead the swish-swish of the machete wielded by the *machetero* at the front of the column, who cuts a narrow passage through the wall of dense greenery. We trudge along like geese, one after another, working hard to free our feet from the sucking mud. Our soggy boots are constantly getting caught in the undergrowth and each step is won with titanic effort. Thick tree trunks block the way ahead, forbidding entry into the wilderness beyond. Prickly branches snatch at our clothing and sharp-edged leaves break the skin. In this climate every abrasion weeps and refuses to heal.

Clouds of pesky insects give us not a moment's worth of peace. The stings they inflict, even through our clothing, cause itching and minor infections. Merciless red ants deliver painful bites and for some strange reason always manage to fall from the branches above directly onto our collars. The nature and climate around us seem to have conspired to keep white intruders from penetrating deeper into one of the most unexplored regions of our planet.

We are surrounded by an entire ecosystem of violence. Liana and rubber plants are wrapped in a deadly embrace around the trees, pushing up towards the sunlight, and the old trunks that lie prone on the forest floor are covered in mushrooms one meter in diameter.

Perhaps Alexander von Humboldt was right when he wrote, "danger enriches the poetry of life," but the prose of life in the jungle brings every traveler whose mind wanders crashing back to the ground. Cut off from the world in an unbelievably immense primeval landscape, our fascination is impossible to describe, but this is also a world filled with threats and countless deadly traps that expose every visitor to a tough test of character. Someone once said that the man who ventures into the heart of a tropical forest

in the spirit of anticipation experiences two moments of happiness. The first coincides with that moment when fortune smiles, allowing him to fulfill his dreams and penetrate the wilderness, whose very power enchants. Later, exhausted by the tiresome monotony of plant life and the confrontation with both real and imagined dangers and on the edge of human endurance, the second moment comes when the explorer escapes the abyss and returns to civilization. That is why the locals say, “The gods are mighty, but even more powerful and cruel is the jungle.”

Each person interprets the wilderness using their own senses and even the experts are hard pressed to agree on this issue.

“Inconceivable beauty when seen from the outside; depressingly savage from the inside.”

This was the extent of a comment by famous 20th century explorer Herbert H. Smith. Another perspective on the *selva*, an eternally green and humid tropical forest, was provided by Alejo Carpentier:

A silent war raged in the depths of bristling thorns and hooks, in a place when everything seemed to be a revolting tangle of snakes.

How will we react and what will we say after our return to civilization?

Although the sun is shining in a cloudless sky, here – beneath the dense green canopy – it seems as if we are walking through a dark cathedral. If we stumble across a sun-drenched clearing, I have to shade my eyes, which are no longer accustomed to the light. Someone tries to drink water from the stream, but immediately spits it out after getting a mouthful of liquid that tastes like rotten swill. In this terrain, crisscrossed with steep ravines that push man to his physical limits, thirst is a constant companion.

Selva alta – a mountainous equatorial forest – drains our energy as we lug baggage up steep inclines covered with slippery tree roots and carefully lower them on the other side. One false move could bring our expedition to a premature halt.

The day before an Indian porter tripped and slid with a scream of terror through the moss several dozen meters, hitting and tripping over roots on the way. His fall could have ended in a broken neck. We called out but he didn't answer and the dense bushes carpeting the ravine hide him from view. Before I was able to tie myself into a harness and descend, the man had regained consciousness and climbed back up on his own. The incident left him with a few scratches and some bruises, torn pants and regret for the knife lost in the thicket.

The tens of thousands of square kilometers of “green hell,” mountainous gorges in the eastern foothills of the Peruvian Andes, and the basin through which we are struggling, were christened with the name of the Madonna, the Mother of God – Madre de Dios. This is a perverse name for an inhospitable land that God has certainly long forgotten. The jungle harbors countless traps, illnesses, wild animals and dangerous insects, although the well-prepared traveler, equipped with the right materials and familiar with survival techniques, can handle the dangers if he knows which liana plants contain drinking water, which wild fruits can be eaten and how to maintain a sense of direction, build shelter or make a fire using damp wood.

We submerged ourselves in this “hell” a few days ago, like so many of our predecessors, in an attempt to discover the mysterious *ciudad perdida Paititi*, associated with the legendary El Dorado. All of the information and facts I have compiled indicate that this is precisely the place to which the Inca fled to escape repression and extermination at the hands of Spanish invaders. It is also likely to be the same place where their wealth, gods and cultural heritage were hidden. One of the most amazing

myths in the history of mankind, El Dorado has provoked fascination for nearly five centuries and remains unsolved. The mystery also intrigues me, which is why I am struggling through this forest, sweating profusely and allowing myself to be eaten alive by a variety of pests.

“*Estar parado!*”³ With a muted yell and his arm raised, the head of our escort brings our straggling column to a halt. “*Señor Palki! Señor Palki!*”

I approach the leader of security, who is peering intently into the wall of foliage. He is unsettled. I can hear it in his voice.

“Indians!” he says. “On the other side of the stream.” His head indicates the direction.

“*Madre de Dios!*” exhales Maria Carmen. Will an appeal to heavenly authorities help us? We have stopped in an open clearing 10 meters from the edge of the jungle. The word “Indians” activates our police security.

“Don’t panic or make any sudden moves,” I say to calm them, although adrenaline is already pulsing through my veins.

This is an ideal spot for an ambush. We make an easy target in the clearing and three escorts carrying *katachy*⁴ will be no defense against an assault from invisible attackers hidden by dense green leaves. I focus on the point the Sergueyant has indicated. I see very little – some kind of shadow, swaying branches. From the left a frightened bird explodes into the open and a moment later a flock of parrots take flight on the other side of the clearing. Have we been surrounded? The rustle of movement in the foliage intensifies, but after a tense moment only Yanek emerges. A few minutes earlier he fell behind.

³ Hide!

⁴ Kalashnikov assault rifles.

“Did you see anyone behind us?” I ask.

“No. What’s going on? Why are you all standing here like statues?”

I make no reply and instead try to analyze the situation calmly. Since the start of the expedition we have counted on such an encounter. We are, after all, on the territory of the Cuapacoris Indians – the mysterious guardians of El Dorado and its Incan treasures. If they are lurking in the thicket, they might be drawing back bowstrings or taking in the deep breathes that will send a wave of poisoned darts in our direction from their blowpipes. At a signal from their leader, we will be buried under a hail of missiles and spears.

“Sit down!” I order. “We’ll simulate a rest stop.”

My objective is to buy time and avoid provoking a potential attack. Hidden in the semi-darkness, the Indians stand motionless. With my eyes I tell Juan to follow me. He is one of the porters accompanying our group in whose veins flows the blood of the Machiguengas tribe. Step by step we approach the overgrowth where a mysterious figure is concealed. Now I can see clearly. This native is almost naked and in his hand is a half-drawn bow, although he is not aiming at us. This is some comfort. In encounters with these isolated tribes, the first contact is crucial. Usually, Indians assume the role of an expectant enemy, ready to attack any moment.

“Cuapacoris,” Juan whispers.

Cocapaquoris, Kogapakoris, Huapakores and Cuapacoris – all are words that describe the most aggressive and isolated tribe in the Amazon jungle. Some anthropologists believe that these Indians are ethnically related to the more numerous Machiguengas tribe. Supposedly, the origins of both date back to an ancient civilization, which bloomed centuries ago in the depths of the jungle and was later decimated by a mysterious cataclysm. It is hard to say now whether this civilization really existed.

Nothing of it remains aside from a legend that the Cuapacoris are the guardians of Paititi's fabled wealth, a duty passed from one generation to the next.

These are the Cuapacoris. A headband of black feathers and the glint of a delicate gold ornament under the nose clear up any doubt. The half-naked native, a tall man with light skin who may never have seen a white man before, looks us over searchingly. I can feel the tension in my body rising. My words and actions in the next few seconds will determine the fate of the expedition and perhaps my life and the lives of those who travel with me. We come to a stop a few meters from the Indian and I wave my open palms as a sign of friendship. I hope he reads this gesture correctly.

Juan begins to speak but fall silent under the penetrating gaze of the Indian's coal black eyes. Still motionless as a rock, he shifts focus to take in the other members of the group. They are sitting on their backpacks and are just as tense as I am. I hope that the armed escort escapes this native's notice. If frightened, he might react unpredictably.

Just a few years ago an entire group from the Texaco concern disappeared under similar circumstances while searching for crude oil deposits on the Cononaco River in Ecuador. Indians from the Tagaeri tribe – like those of the Cuapacoris – who avoid all contact with modern civilization, treated the technicians like intruders and cut them down to a man – and only for entering their territory. If this Indian believes that we have violated the tribe's territory...

Juan, wanting to fill the terrifying silence, repeats the welcome formula like a mantra in the Machiguengas dialect – to no effect.

"Maybe he doesn't understand?" Juan shakes his head helplessly. "I said we are travelers and friends of all who live in the *selva*."

I would give a great deal to know what thoughts are hidden in that skull, covered by a thin mane of brittle hair. I have to do something! But what, for God's sake? This is

one of those moments when a leader should take responsibility and make a decision, one for which he is solely responsible. I struggle alone with doubt and fear for my friends and companions. Slowly, ever so slowly, I lower one hand and unfasten a large survival knife. Holding it between the tips of my fingers, I hand it to the Indian. A tense moment ensues. Finally, his face relaxes and a smile appears. He extends a hand for this offering and begins to examine the knife with curiosity. I wipe the sweat from my forehead and hear a ripple of relieved sighs over my shoulder. We pat each other on the back. Everything is OK. The native motions for us to follow him.

We start moving. I look to the left and right discreetly, surveying the overgrowth. I can't shake the impression that the Indian is not alone and that we are being escorted by other members of his tribe – with good reason, as it turns out. After a few minutes two more Cuapacoris, armed with bows, join the end of the column. This discovery is a relief. Not a trap then, but a chance encounter. It bodes well for further contact. The Indians, although barefoot, move quickly and agilely. We can barely keep up, weary after our several-day trek through the jungle, a place that makes great demands on whoever dares to plumb its mysteries.

“Green hell” – this is how the Amazonian *selva* was described by those who suffered its cruelty. Plunging into its interior, everything must be treated with caution. Moments after touching a branch, a hand can be covered with painful blisters and one thorn prick can easily become a pus-filled wound that takes weeks to heal. Even an innocent-looking puddle may expose the unwary to a paralyzing shock from the Torpedo fish or blood-thirsty leeches. A thousand of these unpleasant surprises await explorers at every step. Survival can be threatened by the accidental bite of a seemingly unthreatening insect or the touch of a plant whose poison clouds the mind and weakens the will to go on.

There is no tropical forest greater than this one, home to an explosion of greenery and millions of trees over an area of millions of square meters. The forest represents nearly two-thirds of Europe. Only a few steps off of the beaten path and you are enveloped by a wall of green, just like the heavy curtain that falls in the theater. In the Amazon wilderness everything is dripping with life and multiplies with wild abandon. Trees, liana plants and epiphytes⁵ – an overwhelming exuberance of shapes and colors. Monstrous *sumaubas*, measuring 20 to 30 meters in diameter, support a green canopy with massive branches extending from the main trunk, *assai* palms propel their many-metered plumes towards the sun. Exotic orchids, beautiful and headily fragrant, lend the thicket irresistible charm. Not to mention the liana plants – some as thin as string, others displaying an impressive thickness. They are everywhere: tangled beneath our feet, twined around tree trunks, dangling from branches, reaching from tree to tree and dying among the foliage. These plants hinder movement, creating a dense weave that is impenetrable without a machete.

Indians are a part of the jungle. Raised within it, they have become accustomed to the forest's unforgiving laws, while the jungle tolerates them in turn, allowing them to live. Whoever wants to live in the jungle must learn how to fight. The struggle to survive is waged in this place at every level of vegetation: from the micro-organisms spread over the forest floor up to the tree tops, thrust towards the sun. Life gives birth to death and death creates life – this is the basic law of the tropical forest, creating a level playing field for all the creatures that call it home.

This enormous expanse is also inhabited by human beings who have never seen a white man. The needs of civilization and change are foreign to them. Perhaps they have simply avoided contact with the white man out of a subconscious awareness that it could

⁵ Plants growing on the trunks or branches of trees that are not parasites.

end tragically for their people. Everyone has heard of travelers who, upon finding a completely unknown tribe, joyfully try to befriend it. Unfortunately, a second expedition may discover that the tribe no longer exists, exterminated by a common infection against which the white man has long built up an immunity, but for which the Indians have no antibodies...

Among groups that have isolated themselves from white civilization is the Cuapacoris tribe. Cuapacoris means “guardians of gold” in the Quechua language: *Guapo* is a warrior and *cori* – gold. This is how the Machiguengas Indians refer to this isolated tribe. Kogapakoris is also a term that means “wild creature.” The ways of the Machiguengas and Cuapacoris parted long ago. The former submitted to the influence of white civilization and with an estimated population of 9,000, the tribe does not avoid contact with white people. The Cuapacoris, by contrast, remain people of the forest and the guardians of Paititi.

After several minutes of walking the greenery thins and we enter a small patch of banana trees and cassava plants, followed by a clearing cut by a small stream and home to a few primitive huts. Women bustle around the campfire. Only the children, seeing foreign faces, take shelter under their mothers’ wings with a shriek. However, in this respect they are similar to children around the world. Men and women wear tattered strips of material around their hips, while strings of dried seeds hang around their necks. Every adult tribe member’s upper lip is adorned by a golden ornament. The men are tall and wide-shouldered, while the women have protruding stomachs and the wide hips ideally suited to childbearing. Only children run naked and their emaciated legs and distended stomachs attest to slight malnourishment or perhaps disease. The water sources in this area are filled with hordes of parasitic creatures, which can flourish within the human body. They attack the intestines, liver, kidneys and bladder – living at the cost of their

human hosts. That is why smiles are so rare among the Indians, why diseases reap a large harvest and why the faces of children are sad – they are the most frequent fatalities.

Our arrival becomes an important social event in the life of this miniature society. Nonetheless, we are still unable to discern whether their behavior indicates a friendly approach or whether this camouflage will transform into hostility at any moment. I am comforted only by the fact that there are fewer Indians than men in our group.

“That’s no guarantee. Maybe some of the natives are hunting or gathering reinforcements from neighboring villages.” Sergueyant, as befits a policeman, is wary.

So far things are going well. A wrinkled old man starts to pull Jurek’s beard, an attraction on the same scale as women with beards in Europe for the Indians, who themselves are smooth-cheeked. The women do not hide their interest in our blue eyes and light hair. Two of them could be considered pretty by our standards: rounded bodies and bared, shapely breasts move alluringly with every step. They have evidently made an impression on Hyper Serguey. First he tries to make friends with the children, who flee to the protection of one girl and together hide in a hut. For Serguey this is pretext enough to pay the girl a visit in her “apartment.” He is preparing to enter the hut when, out of the corner of his eye, he spots one of the Indians reaching for a spear, ready to defend his property.

“Serguey! What are you doing, you prick?!” It sounds harsh but there’s no time to mince words. Hearing my yell he turns around and, noticing the Indian who is prepared to strike, demonstrates amazing reflexes and with a whistle, begins to examine the structure of the hut. I breathe a sign of relief for the second time that afternoon. We could have gotten ourselves into quite a predicament. Sergueyant, ever on guard, was already reaching for his gun. Only seconds separated us from the declaration of the Third World War in the Amazon river basin.

Cuapakoris Indians are particularly sensitive when it comes to their personal property. One traveler wrote:

Ask an Indian for food, he will give you everything he has. Take even a bite without asking and he will kill you for it.

Ignorance of the ways of people living in the jungle has been the downfall of more than one explorer. I prefer not to think about whether the girl's partner would have used that spear, seeing Serguey enter the hut. It is possible that Serge Debru, the son of a minister in de Gaulle's government and leader of a French-American expedition, fell victim to a similar misunderstanding. His group disappeared without a trace in 1970 in the Madre de Dios river basin, not far from where we are standing.

Fortunately, no one pays attention to this incident because the Indian to whom I gave my knife brings a handful of dried leaves from a hut and invites us to the campfire. This is *coca*, a plant known for generations to the inhabitants of the Amazon. It plays an important role in the cultures of all South American Indian tribes. Ancestors of the Incas left behind proof of the plant's usefulness via their rock paintings. *Coca* drains exhaustion, increases a sense of well-being, banishes hunger and is an excellent antidote for *soroche* – an Andean elevation sickness. The Indians consider *coca* to be a gift from the gods although it has a slightly more tarnished reputation in the civilized world. After all, this is the main ingredient used in the production of cocaine.

"Thank you for the *coca* leaves. I hope my knife pleases you," I say, asking Juan to translate.

Our host turns out to be a talkative fellow. He explodes in a sudden flood of words and gestures animatedly. Unfortunately, his vocabulary is extremely poor. He is able to count to four, but everything beyond that number is referred to as "many."

Concepts like “thank you” or “tomorrow” are unknown to him. At one moment Juan and the Indian erupt in laughter, obviously amused by something.

“He said that his children believe us to be demons and now he will use us to frighten them,” Juan explains, seeing our inquisitive expressions.

The ice has been broken. This native probably harbors no ill will towards us. Otherwise, he would not invite us to his campfire or offer us *coca* and tell jokes, while preparing some kind of trick. Tension also melts among my companions, although the policemen still refuse to holster their weapons. Their leader keeps his eyes locked on the Indian, while the other two watch the foliage for potential danger. They are probably mistrustful of friendly gestures from these natives and perhaps they are right. They have taken part in more than one rescue attempt to save a mission that did not end successfully and police files describe a number of accounts that are enough to make your hair stand on end.

Juan is still absorbed in conversation and tosses us only the most interesting bits of information. It seems that the group of Indians we have encountered indeed belong to the Cuapacoris. They were born and raised in the tribe, hunt, catch fish, gather fruit and exchange this produce for simple tools, everyday use items and salt, which is more valuable in the jungle than gold – probably because it is harder to come by. Their diet provides only a meager existence.

“He claims that he has met white people before, near the river,” Juan tells us. “But for his family this is a first encounter with ‘pale faces.’”

These people live just as their ancestors did thousands of years ago, condemned to poverty and a monotonous existence in a primitive world. We feel as if we have touched prehistory, the dawning of human civilization. Even their language, although pleasing to

the ear, is barely enough to communicate on simple, everyday matters. More complicated subjects must be backed up with gestures and pictures drawn in the dirt.

“He says that in this area we may meet a few other families of the Cuapacoris,” says Juan. “They live in groups of few to over a dozen individuals; one or two families. Sometimes they meet, but only after many days of traveling through the forest or on the river.”

This information has little significance for us, since the word “many” can mean five, 30, 50...The Indian doesn’t appear to be lying. We have apparently met the most harmless representative of the most dangerous tribe in the Amazon jungle. Will he and his family guard the entrance to the golden city against intruders? Will those small children with tiny pot bellies grow into threatening guardians of Paititi?

“*Kamandir*, maybe we should camp here? Everyone is a little tired after our march through the jungle and today’s dose of excitement.” Serguey is the good spirit of our expedition. Intelligent and level-headed, his ideas are always worth listening to. In all honesty, I am reluctant to waste even the few hours remaining until sunset, but human energy must also be parceled out carefully. Ahead of us is the great unknown.

“OK. Let’s set up camp.” Several happy faces convince me that this was the decision they were hoping for.

The Indians make no protest when we begin to prepare our camp for the night and I, taking advantage of the translator’s services, invite myself into one of the native huts. There is obviously no treasure inside and the furnishings turn out to be more than modest. A few mats from palm bark and clay bowls, pots with fermenting cassava and a basket with a few bunches of bananas bring me to the end of a quick inventory. In their midst is a meticulously ornamented, wooden pipe. Catching sight of this, I am aware that even among people who fight so hard for survival, there is a drive to satisfy needs of a higher

order. Nonetheless, the pot of cassava testifies to the Cuapacoris' sedentary way of life and a deep knowledge of botany. This plant, originally from Antilla and with a root resembling a beet, is the main source of nourishment for inhabitants of the Amazon basin. In order to reach the edible meal stored in the delicate bulb, the peel must be removed, the root crushed into a paste and the poisonous juice squeezed out. Woe to the traveler consumed with hunger. Omitting any of these steps can mean death.

In the corner of the hut I see a true "armory" – a bow, blow pipe, a few spears and arrows. The points vary depending on the prey. Some are for birds, others for small and large animals and a third variety for fish. Indians use various fishing techniques involving the harpoon, a wooden fishing rod and their bare hands. I don't want to think about how our encounter would have progressed had the Indians used their knowledge of the terrain and the element of surprise.

In the jungle, the *pukana* or blow pipe make a more effective weapon than the bow or shotgun. It can be fired quietly and from cover, which under local conditions is of no small significance since one shot would spook every animal within a several-kilometer radius. This weapon's range is good enough for the jungle. An adult man can launch a dart to a distance of 50 meters, bringing nearly every bird in the tree canopy within the hunter's reach. In order to increase hunting efficiency, the pipe's small, light darts are tipped with *kurara*.⁶ The poison paralyzes muscles located between the ribs, killing birds instantaneously and larger animals such as monkeys within a few minutes. The substance spreads through the animal's organism and, after consumption, into the human body. Fortunately, it has no effect on the digestive system. The dose of poison carried by one dart poses no threat to the life of a grown man, although the danger increases if he is hit with a number of missiles.

⁶ *Kurara* is a mixture of ingredients found in the *selva*, primarily liana plants. One of these substances is *Strychnos toxifera* – a plant that contains strychnine.

This knowledge is used practically by some tribes. For the Jibaro Indians, the hunt for human heads has long been part of magical rituals. These ceremonies stem from a belief that the power and soul of a human being are housed in the head. The head of a warrior, hung, dried and eventually shrunken to the size of a human fist – called a *tsansa* – is nothing less than a medal of honor. It increases prestige, guarantees a long life and successful hunting.

Those who see the *tsansa* for the first time always ask how a human head can be shrunken to the size of an orange. There is no trick to these macabre rituals. The head of the defeated enemy is separated from his shoulders and transported as soon as possible to camp. There an incision is made and the entire scalp is removed, exposing the skull. This skin is then boiled to remove fats and microbes and then resealed. This trophy is later filled with hot sand, which shrinks the skin. After a number of treatments, facial restructuring and application of black dye using wood coals, the *tsansa* is ready. This ghastly tradition has not been practiced for more than a decade and thankfully we are quite far from Jibaro hunting grounds, which means no one in our expedition is threatened by decapitation.

After leaving the hut, I watch the expedition team scurrying around to set up camp, which is accomplished in orderly fashion. During the first days of our excursion, we made quite a smoothly functioning team, despite the fact that its members represented a few nationalities with different characters and ways of perceiving the world. Much depends, of course, on the leader. In organizing an expedition, a leader must choose his companions carefully and then control them effectively, forcing them to cooperate harmoniously and expend a maximum of effort. Even the most well-prepared and properly trained expedition still travels at the speed of its slowest member. Although formally everything is prepared down to the last detail, much depends on each individual.

We have to use our time and strengths as effectively as possible to avoid the fate of our predecessors. I believe that everyone can be counted on. A few individuals in the team have already traveled with me to various corners of the globe – they are a sure thing. And the rest? Before leaving I tried to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each member of the expedition, but experience has taught me that the mask only comes off in the hour of need. When rain is pouring down your collar, when we have to sleep in wet sleeping bags, suffer hunger and attacks from insects – then a person shows his or her real face.

The composition of our group includes scientists, assistance personnel, security and two film teams. Director Yanek Kolski, cameraman Vitek Chominski and Chris Rzepecki, responsible for sound, are doing a report for Polish Television, while Russians Leo Kruglov and Oleg Kudachkin make a film for The Discovery Channel. We also have a photographer and reporter from *Komsomolskaya Pravda* – Anatoli Zhdanov, a master in his profession and a truly hard worker. I can always count on the filmmakers. Leo has accompanied me through probably all of South America. I met Yanek Kolski in the early 1980s. He had just arrived to make a documentary about the survival school I established in Italy. It was the first initiative of its kind in Europe, so interest in the project was enormous. I made good contact with Yanek right from the start and since that time we have crossed the globe together. I remember one day when he called to say that he had been sitting in one place for too long and needed to move a little. At the time I was preparing an expedition down the Mekong, the legendary Mother of All Rivers, to immerse myself in the atmosphere of 19th century Asia, a country so close to the hearts of Joseph Conrad and Rudyard Kipling and an Asia that seemed to exist no longer. Yanek couldn't afford to miss an opportunity like this. In two days he was ready to go.

A good film crew on a difficult expedition is a gift from above. A fussy documentary filmmaker would have forced us to cross the same stream or jump over one

cleft many times just to capture the best light or the most effective shot. Leo and Yanek's team works discreetly and professionally, without sacrificing the quality of the final product.

Professor Volodia Glazunov, a 50-year-old geophysicist from the Polytechnic University in St. Petersburg, is in charge of the georadar – a cumbersome and insanely expensive piece of equipment that has an increasingly wider application in archeological research. This instrument works by “X-raying” the ground with electromagnetic impulses, providing an analysis of return signals on a monitor, created with the help of a special computer program. The georadar allows us to see underneath the earth's surface to a depth of several dozen meters, see an outline of objects underground as well as pinpoint their location and recognize grottos and tunnels. It is an excellent support system for our expedition, increasing our hopes for success.

The Professor was recommended to me by Dr. Serguey Ushnurtzev, a glacierologist by profession and a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Unfortunately, in Russia's new economic realities, scientific work is no longer enough to guarantee a family the minimum standard of living. This is the reason behind the professor's involvement in business – he now successfully runs his own import firm. In 1996 he was a member of my expedition to the source of the Amazon, over the course of which I recognized his amicable nature, intelligence and imagination. Reluctant to express emotion, Ushnurtzev is able to establish authority with the group and his blunt reasoning is enough to persuade even the most stubborn antagonists. He is my right hand as an excellent organizer and ensures law and order in the group. We sometimes laugh at him, calling him Sergueyant. It is a good thing that he is with us because a trip to the jungle is like being on the ocean: the captain gives an order, but the boatswain keeps it.

When Serguey called me with the news that he had secured a georadar, he informed me that we would have to take someone along who could not only operate the complicated machine but also read its print outs. “You know,” he said at the time, “this professor is a real city mouse, but he’ll definitely come in handy.” I was sure that the professor, unused to hard work and discipline, would tolerate our difficult traveling conditions poorly. It seemed like trouble. Fortunately, the professor was a positive disappointment. I can see him trying to keep pace with the others and being responsible for the georadar only adds to his determination. “It’s a question of good boots,” Volodia confides. “I’ve never had more comfortable footwear.”

Indeed, travel through a tropical forest demands the right clothing. Shorts and a T-shirt simply won’t cut it, a mistake made frequently by less-experienced travelers. Penetrating the dense overgrowth makes covering the body from head to toe an absolute necessity. Pants and shirts made from a strong yet light material protect the skin from insect bites and thorny creepers. A hat without a wide brim exposes the eyes to torrential rains and the slap of branches. Clothing in the tropic is a constant source of discomfort because everything on a person’s back is wet – or damp at the very least. The damp even gets into your boots, although my team is equipped with footwear tested by American soldiers in the jungles of Vietnam. Nylon uppers allow water to drain through special openings. Moreover, grooves in the soles are wider and deeper, guaranteeing better traction on muddy ground.

Maria del Carmen Rodriguez del Solar handles the team’s logistics. Intelligent, straightforward and graced with a strong character that emanates warmth and infectious optimism. She is a symbol of Latino femininity with shiny, raven black hair pulled back softly from her face, bright brown eyes, a shapely nose, beautiful face, outstanding figure, lovely legs and a bundle of intriguing curves – the dream of more than one *macho*.

Padre Juan Carlos Polentini Wester, one of the pillars of our expedition, referred me to Maria. This 75-year-old Salesian is originally Argentinean, but has lived in Peru since 1962. As an electrical engineer, he taught classes for six years in the department of mechanics at the Salesian Polytechnic University in Lima. In 1969 he was transferred to mission work in Cuzco, serving as parish priest in Colca, La Convencion and Paucartambo. It was during this period of his life that the priest became fascinated with the legend of Paititi and collected an impressive archive. I believe him to be the foremost expert in this subject worldwide. He currently lives and works as a chaplain in a home for the elderly in Lima.

When I met him two years earlier in Lima, he said: “There’s a woman I’d like you to meet.” He used the word *señora*, leading me to suspect that the woman in question was an older, respectable housewife. “This is a fine start,” I thought to myself. “It’s bad enough that Serguey recommended some professor, not to mention a priest. Now Polentini is saddling me with a housewife.” Imagine my surprise to be greeted by a clever, energetic and enchanting girl who – it later turned out – was no stranger to the jungle, but had been raised there from early childhood. Her father was a lumberjack and little Maria became accustomed to the forest while accompanying her father to work. Her familiarity with the jungle and ability to identify possible dangers would serve us well at critical moments during the expedition.

Medical matters were attended to by Rimma Khayrutdinova. If I hadn’t known Rimma and heard that a clerk from a Moscow municipal office was being floated as a candidate for an expedition to the Amazon, I would have laughed in pity. Nonetheless, I know clerks are unpredictable and Rimma is no exception. I saw her for the first time in the mid-1990s during an expedition to the source of the Amazon. Her determination was impressive. When necessary, she grits her teeth and keeps moving forward without a

word of complaint. In difficult terrain she proves to be of much stronger mettle than many men. She also possesses one of the most valuable resources an expedition can have – the talent for smoothing over even the sharpest conflict. Rimma is ambitious – never one to avoid confrontation or lose her cool. These are the qualities I value in her.

The group's safety is also ensured by an armed escort – three policemen assigned to us by Colonel Domingo Carrillo Rengifo, head of the 10th Police District in Cuzco. Senior Sergeant Hermogenes Figuerra Lucana and his two subordinates – Lucio and Marcial – take their duties very seriously. Rarely are they seen with a smile and the AK-47s they carry are never out of their hands, even during meals. These men certainly know more about the people of the *selva* than we. That knowledge means that we feel more secure in their company, although if an actual attack takes place, they have only my order to fire warning shots into the air.

We are accompanied by eight Indian porters, all young, strong and with endurance equal to that of the Himalayan Sherps. Their task is unusually difficult given the rough terrain. I thought transporting the electrical generator would pose a problem. It is large, encased in an inconvenient steel frame and weighs a solid forty kilograms. Endowed with the strength of an ox, Genos handles it alone, crossing rivers where granite pebbles make footing slippery with the generator strapped to his back, pulling it unaided up muddy banks.

After camp is pitched and our stomachs full, we finally have time to relax. I pull some maps out of my backpack to pinpoint our camp site. We are using military maps of the Madre de Dios region, compiled by the National Geographic Institute in Lima in cooperation with the Military Agency of Cartography. Unfortunately, during the rainy season and even after heavier downpours, the course of some streams is altered, making

cartographic information inaccurate. Maps of the region are peculiar for one other reason – these are the only maps in the modern world that still feature white spots denoting uncharted areas. The inscription *Datos insuficientes*, or “insufficient data” adds to the confusion. These are areas in which a cartographer has yet to set foot

I enjoy the thrill of venturing into unknown regions. Today we have crossed into one of those white spots, which Joseph Conrad called a “delicious mystery.” The awareness that we are the first is exciting. This is same feeling experienced by the explorers of old who set out in search of new lands or made a first step into newly discovered terrain. Under these circumstances, a person hopes to see something that has been waiting centuries to be discovered just around the next hill. One or two hundred years ago, maps were littered with white spots. Virgin lands and jungles awaited daring explorers with a readiness to break barriers and cross the borders of human capabilities. I envy Franklin, Hillar, Nansen, Amundsen, and entire ranks of great and anonymous discoverers.

We are left with the crumbs – and the experience of discovering yourself and what lies within. Instead of lofty triumph and elation, we are making inroads into marshes and seeing fallen tree trunks that have never before been seen by the human eye – not to mention an incomprehensible number of ravenous mosquitoes. Professor Glazunow jokes that he will memorize our route and make a fortune after returning to Russia by publishing a map of the Madre de Dios region that is free of white blotches. It is puzzling that in an era of digital satellite photography, there are still unexplored expanses on the earth’s surface. Obviously, the eternally green and humid tropical Amazon forests are adept at guarding their secrets.

Every meter that passes underfoot is watered by our sweat. Yesterday we covered two kilometers, although once our progress was a mere 500 meters. Two squares on the

map and an entire day of struggle. Even so, this is not a bad result. In 1925 American Hamilton Rice, the leader of an 80-member expedition headed for Sierra Parima, Brazil's equivalent of El Dorado, was only able to cover a distance of 50 kilometers in the span of one year. We knew it wouldn't be easy and no one is complaining loudly – so far! Perhaps they know how intolerant I am of disheartening groaning. Nevertheless, exhaustion gradually wears down the psyche. Today we also manage to come a significant distance. With the help of GPS, I locate our position. The bad news is that we have deviated slightly from the course.

“How did we do?” Serguey asks, taking a seat next to me with a cup of coffee in hand.

“Not bad. Three kilometers. Unfortunately, we are a little off course, but we can make up ground by going this way.” My pencil points out this route on the map. “However, we will have to do some climbing.”

“Is it worthwhile to push our way through there? Look, by marching along this contour, we'll make an arch around the hill and get back on course in two days at the latest. We're tired. A climb isn't a good idea.” Serguey shakes his head, rubbing his forehead.

“How do you know what's going to happen over two days. I prefer to pick up the pace. In the past few days we've been ahead of schedule and it makes sense to maintain that pace. If we take a longer route, we'll lose that excess time.”

“But we may save at least some of our strength,” he interrupts.

“I know it's difficult and I'm tired too. I'd like nothing better than to stay here a few days and get rested up, but listen Serguey,” I lean towards him and lower my voice conspiratorially, “I would prefer to leave this area as soon as possible. This place is not entirely safe.”

“OK, do as you see fit,” he says, nodding his head. “*Ty kamandir...*”⁷

Serguey values discipline and is even able to enforce order upon himself, but at the same time he has no inhibitions when it comes to talking openly about something that bothers him. Two days ago when I pushed the team to the edge of their endurance, he said:

“*Kamandir*, you’re like a *matapau*!”

“What sort of devil is that?” I inquired with a smile.

“It’s a parasite that grows in the jungle that can encircle a tree trunk and suck it dry.”

After folding the map I approach Juan, who is chatting away with a man that is likely this small group’s oldest member. This is a good occasion to ask about the road ahead, but how will he react when he learns what we are searching for? I won’t know unless I try.

“Where is Paititi?” I ask and Juan fires off a quick translation of my question. The man falls silent and looks me in the eye, nodding his head and mumbling under his breath.

“Paititi...Paititi,” he repeats, as if he didn’t know what I was talking about. Maybe the native is combing his memory or just trying to decide what he can tell me. Finally a clever smile breaks on his face. He stands and indicates with his hand...the direction from which we came. Strange. Does he not know or is he showing us the wrong road on purpose?

“Ask him how far to Paititi and if he is certain that is the right way,” I instruct Juan. The Indian refuses to say any more.

⁷ You’re the commander.

He does, however, display a growing interest in our filmmakers – Vitek and Yanek – who are attempting to turn on the camera as unobtrusively as possible. Leo Kruglow also makes his move, taking up his photo camera and heading into the trees. The Indian peers into the camera cases and removes the equipment, turning Anatolii's camera over in his hands in an obvious attempt to discover the purpose of such a peculiar object. Finally, he returns the camera to its owner in defeat.

“He says we have a strange weapon,” Juan explains.

“Tell him this is not a weapon,” replies the photographer, who proceeds to show the native a few of the last pictures taken on the display panel. This gesture provokes shouts of amazement from our local. When Anatolii aims the camera at me, I smile widely. Seeing my face appear on the display, the Indian also begins to laugh and slap the photographer on the back. He is also eager to model and begins to pose after retrieving his bow from the hut. Vitek and Leo capture the man on film.

In the evening next to the campfire, I extract a bottle of whisky reserved for a special occasion from my backpack. I promised myself that we would open it after finding Paititi. We are still a few days away from the legendary city, but today we survived a rather stressful situation with the Cuapacoris. Doesn't that count as a special occasion? That's why I proceed to open it now. There's no telling what tomorrow will bring.

Later we exchange our impressions on the lives of these Indians, which differs so diametrically from ours even though they live just over 100 kilometers from the nearest city. Maria Carmen tells us about the nomadic Amazon tribes.

“Actually, they possess nothing. They don't produce any ceramics or build boats or homes. A slanted roof that keeps the rain off their heads is all they need. Ten-year-old girls are married and 11-year-olds have babies. My father told me about a situation he

witnessed during one of his trips to the Orinoko basin. Their arrival coincided with the death of the local leader and the entire expedition was invited to a funeral ceremony lasting a few days, which concluded with the ritual consumption of the corpse.

Everyone is silent, imagining this morbid scene. The story makes an impression, but for those people this ritual was the only tradition passed from generation to generation. At the core of many cannibalistic behaviors was the conviction that by eating the heart of an enemy, one could consume his strength. Silence interrupts the professor.

“You feel pity for ‘our’ Cuapacoris and my wish is for their existence to remain the same as it has always been for a long time to come. Look at the civilized Indians who have been torn from their roots and live on the border between two cultures: between animism and magic and the 21st century. It is better to respect their traditions and leave them in peace. Our civilization is too aggressive and it’s no wonder that every contact with this culture leaves deep scars. This ‘syphilisation’ brings them only venereal diseases, alcoholism, epidemics and exploitation.”

“I can’t entirely agree with you Volodia. Civilization is not to blame. Many people, starting with rubber collectors, logging companies and missionaries, through large corporations have contributed to the decay of primitive and archaic cultures in these communities by imposing an entirely different way of life. Today a return to the old, simple way of life is impossible no matter how much we deplore what has happened. This is no problem for smaller tribes sequestered away in the jungle that have never made contact with the outside world. They live in a natural environment, unchanged for hundreds if not thousands of years, according to their traditions and are happy because they don’t know any other life. The situation is worse in those places where the outside world has come in to realize its own goals, which will always conflict with the interests of

the local populations. The world tramples everything with its heavy boots, destroys, exploits and offers nothing in return. It sparks hunger but does not satisfy it.”

Serguey is right. We wanted to give the Amazon tribes progress by force and throughout the years our morality of consumption has hit them hard. We cannot leave them halfway. It would be better to assimilate them into civilization and help them adjust to modern living. This is the lesser evil.

Unfortunately, the approach of night is accompanied by another plague of the equatorial forests – clouds of mosquitoes. The bites they inflict cause not only itching but many serious illnesses. These tiny creatures are extremely dangerous for travelers in the tropics and the blood thirsty beasts are immune to most of the insect repellants produced by well-known firms that have been tested on their European counterparts. The best protection is homemade, a mixture of ammonia and baby oil. The only drawback is the smell, which is less than pleasant.

To protect ourselves from a mass attack by this airborne affliction, we wrap up a fascinating discussion and retreat to our sleeping bags. Despite exhaustion, I have trouble sleeping, which is also due in part to the concert now playing the tropical forest. Echoes that are barely audible during the day transform into a cacophony of sounds in the dark. Some time passes before the listener can make any sense of this audio chaos. Croaking, groaning, buzzing, chirping, squawking – what do these sounds represent? Joy or suffering? Are they the first or perhaps the last sound of life? Understanding the mysteries of this jungle language is too difficult a task for the civilized human being. The rules of this mad struggle for existence are unknown to us.

Within the orchestra of anonymous soloists, the modulated and piercing song of the cicada stands out. It is the one sound I am able to isolate from the chaotic symphony of noises we hear every night. The decibel level to which the ear is exposed is

considerably more than that of a moderately noisy dance club. How can a person sleep with all that racket? A gust of wind carries a strange but pleasant smell from the forest wall. The Northern Cross shimmers in the sky and it seems impossible that satellites are circling somewhere above our heads. A myriad pulsing lights fill the space between our shelter and the forest – these are the local “Midsummer Eve fireflies” but much larger, like everything else in the jungle.

Sleep is still a long way off. I allow my thoughts to drift towards those famous predecessors who were fascinated with the legend of El Dorado and went in search of the Seven Cities of Cíbola, the fountain of Eternal Youth, the Lost Mine of Muribeca or the mysterious city of Akakor. They became the embodiment of adventures which inspired others to attempt to solve the secrets of the past. Few realized their dream and some even lost their lives, never to return from a last expedition. My imagination is most occupied with British colonel Percy Fawcett, whose life could be used to write screenplays for several adventure movies. In preparation for this trip, I compiled many of these tales of unusual people, events and tragedies. All are within reach in my backpack.

Notes

In 1925 under mysterious circumstances a colonel of the British army, Percy Harrison Fawcett, disappeared in the Brazilian jungle. This respected traveler, a prototype for Indiana Jones, was consumed with a wild passion that compelled him to search for the secret city inhabited by a white-skinned tribe. The colonel never named this city, nor did he ever stop believing in its existence. Is it only a fantasy?

Implementing international agreements is a task not entrusted to the emotionally unstable, but that was the nature of the task involved in establishing the border between Bolivia and Brazil as well as Peru and Ecuador. Eight expeditions led by Fawcett in the years 1906-1922 to the border regions of these countries allowed him to accumulate an immense body of observations and experiences – not all of which were accepted by science. The colonel made friends in other circles. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, captivated by Fawcett's accounts of the traces left by gigantic animals he had encountered in the Amazon forests, was inspired to write *The Lost World*. H. Rider Haggard, author of *King Solomon's Mines*, gifted him with a figurine made of black basalt, a present to Haggard from the British consul O'Sullivan Beare. The diplomat maintained that the object had been found in the upper Rio Xingú river, one of the Amazon's tributaries. Fawcett, believing in the existence of Atlantis, concluded from the inscriptions on the figurine that its origin was the Brazilian colony of Atlantis.

Even though scientists pinpointed the object's origins to 400 B.C. and the Anatolian Coast in the region of Halikarnas, Fawcett's supporters interpreted this information as proof of a civilization deep in the jungle which had active trade contacts with other, well-known ancient civilizations.

Fawcett found confirmation for his theses in drawings and maps created by Francisco Raposo, an 18th century treasure hunter. Raposo's expedition combed the Rio Xingú river region for the legendary mines of Muribeca. Unexpectedly, the group stumbled across a stone "cyclopean" city. Overgrown with tropical foliage, the ruins were an impressive sight. Its streets were well paved, the buildings adorned with columns, frescos and sculptures and a central square contained the statue of a man whose extended arm pointed to the North.

This was not the end of the adventure for Raposo's expedition. Later they met an Indian with white skin. Among many later accounts like this one, the most credible comes from French ethnologist Professor Marcel Homet. He recalls that in the 1970s during the construction of a trans-Amazon road, an unknown Indian tribe with white skin and red hair was discovered near the Rio Bacaya river. This is a good place to quote the observations penned by Pedro Pizarro, cousin to the man who conquered Peru:

The ruling class in the kingdom of Peru was light skinned and had dark blonde hair, more or less the color of ripening wheat. Great lords and ladies were mostly white like the Spaniards. In this country I met an Indian woman and child, both light skinned, who differed not at all from light-haired, white people. There, it is said that these are the children of the gods.

Did Incan rulers maintain the purity of their blood through marriages between siblings? Returning to Fawcett, in one letter to his son Brian, the colonel wrote:

The Indians have told me about clusters of 'stone houses' and clothed Indians who worship the sun and defend the borders of their cities with grim determination. Notations in various mission and government archives also mention periodic encounters with clothed, white Indians, although no closer contact is established, and lost cities in the Brazilian forests built with more panache than the cities belonging to the Incan empire. My own investigation has convinced me that the two ancient cities, which I intend to examine, are inhabited by the descendents of the same race which built them. They have since fallen into

decline as a result of total isolation, but traces of an earlier culture are still recognizable.

These are not the words of a possessed madman, but one who collected materials and information over the space of many years. Fawcett's last expedition was launched in 1925 and included his son and friend. He was likely aware of the dangers, as evidenced by these notes made before the group set out:

Whether we are able to make it out and return to the world or not, one thing is certain. A solution to the mysteries of ancient South America – and perhaps of the entire prehistory world – is possible only when these lost cities have been found and scientifically examined. They exist – of that I am certain.

On May 29, 1925 during a rest stop in the Mato Grosso region, Fawcett penned a final letter to his wife in which he stressed the expedition's proximity to its goal. "We have no reason to fear failure" were his last words before he vanished without a whisper. News of the explorer's disappearance circled the globe. A rescue expedition was immediately organized, which...also evaporated into thin air as well as the next few to follow. News from the jungle concerning Fawcett was increasingly mysterious and frequently contradictory.

Two years after the colonel vanished, French engineer Roger Courtrville claimed to have met an old man who gave his name as Fawcett, dressed in rags in a deserted region of the Minas Gerais province. Courtrville knew nothing of the British explorer's fate and was highly surprised to be able to converse with the man. In 1932 traveler Miguel Tucchi testified that he had come across Fawcett

nearby Rio das Mortes, although the colonel stated that personal reasons prevented his return. Three years later brothers Gordon and Patrick Ulyatt recounted tales of Indian rubber harvesters in the Mato Grosso region who claimed to have heard of the colonel and even know of his whereabouts. In 1939 explorer Tom Roth met two white men with the last name Fawcett in the region of Mato Grosso, who told him they had been gathering stones for five years. Only one year later a Swiss citizen by the name of Rattin returned from jungle claiming to have met “some British colonel” held hostage by the Indians on one of the tributaries of the São Manoel river. The prisoner refused to give his name.

Was this colonel Fawcett? What happened to him and other members of the expedition? How do these accounts relate to the findings of American missionary Martha Moennich, who was able to establish after many conversations with the Indians, that Percy Fawcett and his son Jack had been captured by the Kurikuros Indians and Jack forced to marry the leader’s daughter. Their union supposedly resulted in a white boy named Dulipe. The Kurikuros told Moennich that one day both Fawcetts left to find the Kalapalos tribe in an attempt to find the lost city. The missionary writes in her book, entitled *Pioneering for Christ in Xingu Jungles*, that the Kalapalos advised the travelers to give up their search in fear of the cruel Cayapos Indians, who tortured and even ate intruders. Moennich noted:

Despite this warning, the colonel was able to persuade eight Kalapalos to accompany him, at least at the beginning, and the entire group set out. After four days of grueling travel through Kuluene, towards the east and the Rio das Mortes, their supplies ran out and the group had no way to replenish them.

Everyone was too exhausted to press on and the Kalapalos, sensing danger, begged the white men to return with them to the village. When the white men decided to go farther and turned their backs on the Indians, three of the locals followed them, shooting them in the back with arrows.

We got the impression that the murderers were guided by a feeling of mercy because by inflicting instant death on the colonel and Jack with their bows, they had saved father and son from long and painful suffering..

It cannot be ruled out that Hugh McCarthy, a teacher from New Zealand possessed with the dream of legendary treasures hidden in the Amazon jungles, reached the lost city in 1947. He believed the accounts left behind by colonel Fawcett as well as those written earlier by Portuguese *bandeirantes*,⁸ who combed the interior looking for gold. How determined the man must have been to embark alone into the Brazilian jungle without a thought for the dangers awaiting him or the poison arrows of hostile tribes. Perhaps his searches of the archives revealed information which justified this act of madness?

Hugh McCarthy was seen for the last time in 1947 in the small village of Peixoto on the eastern frontiers of Mato Grosso. Sent off by a friend, missionary Jonathan Wells, McCarthy boarded an Indian canoe and disappeared into the jungle. McCarthy promised to send word of his whereabouts by messenger pigeon. Only three of seven birds returned. The most sensational news was carried by the last:

⁸ Portuguese colonists, who participated in military expeditions in order to discover gold and take slaves.

I hope that my map arrived in one piece with the sixth pigeon so that everyone in the world is able to discover the location of the Golden City. It is fantastic and even unbelievable, with golden pyramids and wonderful temples. With God's help you will soon be able to conduct an archeological expedition to the most amazing city since the dawning of time, so that its treasures can be preserved for future generations. My time is near and I die happily, knowing that my faith in Fawcett and his lost Golden City was not sought in vain.

Unfortunately, the sixth pigeon carrying McCarthy's map never reached the missionary. Jonathan Wells pressured the authorities of Rio de Janeiro to organize a rescue mission, but they refused, believing that McCarthy had lost his mind before dying and had described merely his own hallucinations.

What if they weren't hallucinations? The archives of our expedition contain an interesting fragment from the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*. The information, published December 13, 1983, was an instant sensation:

The fabled land of gold, once sought unsuccessfully by the Spanish conquistadors, has been located north-east of the ancient Incan city Cuzco. Traces of the city were discovered in the heart of the Peruvian selva near the Madre de Dios river basin by an expedition from the Peruvian National Institute of Culture. This sensational discovery, considered by experts to be the most important find of the century, will certainly contribute to a fuller understanding of the relatively unknown Incan past.

Members of the expedition could not visit the citadel because the hostile Machiguengas Indians who inhabit the region forced them to make a hasty

retreat. Convincing proof of this find is provided by five golden statues with a collective weight of 1,500 kilograms. This information was released to a correspondent for the La Prensa daily in Cuzco by a scientist from the National Institute of Culture.

Machiguengas, or more likely Cuapacoris. It is entirely likely that we are close to Paititi, a city of legend and the dream of many. This is also my dream and one that has fed on my imagination for many long years. My Paititi...

The Legend of Paititi

The second day of our expedition is coming to a close. We rest, sitting with Father Carlos Polentini on the bank of the river that we have traveled on all day. Can we actually describe it as traveling? Most of the day was spent pushing, pulling and protecting the boat from capsizing on the rocks. Rimma figures that we were forced to jump into the water about 56 times. It's no surprise that waves of exhaustion emanate from our battered bodies.

Padre Polentini – a man with a mellow voice, a calmly composed face and a friendly gaze, who is deceptively unemotional. His lively hazel eyes reveal a strong individuality. The priest may be tired, but he is also 70 years old!

“For 30 years you have tried to solve the puzzle of Paititi,” I say to him. “What is the source of this name?”

“In the Quechua language, the word *paikikin* means only ‘just like’ or ‘similar to.’ In this case the name probably refers to a similarity to the city of Cuzco – ‘the belly-button of the world.’ The word ‘Paikikin,’ twisted by Spanish conquistadors, became associated with the legend of a lost treasure and a synonym for a city hidden in the jungle, where, retreating before the Spanish, the Inca probably took shelter. They certainly didn't flee blindly. After all, they were familiar with the terrain and knew where they would feel safe and be able to return to the privileges and comforts they had enjoyed before the Spanish invasion. We can assume, therefore, that Paititi was home to palaces, temples and baths as well as crops cultivated on man-made, irrigated terraces.”

I met Father Carlos Polentini for the first time one year ago. At the time I inquired about the circumstances in which he first heard about Paititi. He answered at length:

“Many years ago when I was a parish priest in Lares, I was approached by an Indian whose last name was Pachaco.

I've been in Paititi,

he told me. I gave him a puzzled look, since the name didn't mean anything to me then.

When Vilcabamba fell and the entire country was overrun by the Spanish, the Inca took refuge there with their treasures, he explained. Then Pachaco described the way to the city, as revealed to him by a member of the Campa tribe. 'From the settlement of Baranca you must reach the hut of the guardians of the Vilcabamba ruins and from there a waterfall and lake. The lake can be crossed by a series of pillars sticking out of the water, the remnants of an old bridge. Later you will come to a flat area on which a stone altar once stood. Nearby is the entrance to a tunnel leading to the city. The city itself was enormous and many of its rooms contained gold and precious stones.' I asked him why he was telling me this secret. Then Pachaco said, *'The Inca placed a curse on all of the city's treasure. It falls on every Indian who tries to take the gold. Only the white man is immune. That is why I will take you to a place where you will find so much gold that there will be enough for both of us. We will divide the spoils after we return. You are an honest man and I know you will not trick me.'*

The story he told me seemed too fantastic at the time and I didn't take it seriously. I lost contact with Pachaco and only realized my mistake after a few years. To my surprise, while traveling through my gigantic parish, *Paititi* was on the lips of the oldest Indians everywhere."

Later Father Carlos told me about his search efforts. Following the course of well-known Incan roads from the Holy Valley – from Calca, Pisac, Ollantaytambo – he proved that they reached Cuoquacancha. There, during a final battle with the Spanish, an Incan leader named Manco remained for three months, sending caravans loaded down with gold

towards the tropical forests. From there a road was extended farther to the East, where the jungle already begins. Why? During our first conversation, many puzzles were left unanswered. That is why today, although one year has passed, we return stubbornly to the same questions.

“Why do the offshoots of the road end blindly in the jungle?” Padre asks and then answers himself. “Because they were meant to mislead outsiders and lead them on a wild goose chase. Why are the local Machiguengas Indians the only ones who still use an archaic dialect of Quechua? Don’t the series of stone ruins and agricultural terraces discovered in Amalia, Materia and Toporaque testify to this province’s once populous nature, a province that grew outwards from a large power center?”

“What is your opinion concerning various theories about Paititi’s past?” I ask Padre Carlos.

“The city was most likely inherited by the Inca from an earlier civilization, whose language is still used by the Indians in the area. A growing number of discoveries confirm this hypothesis. A few hundred kilometers east of the Andes in the Bolivian province of Beni, an Incan city and a number of small fortresses built to defend the roads which led to these structures were discovered.”

After consulting the materials compiled in my own archives, I am able to provide even more proof for Padre’s argumentation – and father afield. Three thousand kilometers from Cuzco, in the wildest parts of the Brazil’s Bahia province, archeologist Aurelio Abreu stumbled across a stone city in 1984. A description of the materials from which the city was built reads that:

...the precision with which the hewn stones were fit together, without mortar and in the style employed by Incan architects from Peru (...) in no way

resembles the structures built by the Indians who lived in Brazil in pre-Columbian times.

To which civilization, then, can these building be attributed? Is this only an isolated find or the first in a series of discoveries that would emerge in the wake of a thorough exploration of the Brazilian interior. Have the fanatical beliefs of Lieutenant Fawcett in the existence of such cities been confirmed? One thing is certain. Abreu's discovery has shaken the very foundations of Brazilian archeology, which previously attributed the peoples living in the area with a much longer history.

Padre Polentini tried to reach Paititi seven times on foot and a few times by helicopter. Once – it seemed to him at the time – he was mere kilometers away from his goal. Each time the expedition succumbed to the jungle: insects, poisonous snakes, tangled liana plants and bushes that hindered every step forward. Moreover, some areas of the forest are overgrown with *pacal* – a fast growing thorny bamboo that is impossible to break through with only a machete. In this terrain, cut by vast ravines, strength melts away in the face of humidity and stuffy air.

“One of my excursions was particularly dramatic,” recalls Polentini. “I wanted to find the Indians discovered by Alonso Cartagena, who traded with them, exchanging iron axes for...golden hatchets. Unfortunately, during the course of the expedition the son of my guide was devoured by a jaguar. His devastated father blamed me for this incident, while his fellow tribe members considered the tragedy to be a warning from the gods and no one wanted to cooperate with me. Several years later four Americans, lured by news of golden hatchets followed in my footsteps by entering the jungle and were wiped out by the Machiguengas.

In the course of his search, Polentini identified a few of the topographical details related to him by Pacheco. The first milestone was the Incacajada waterfall, with a height of more than 20 meters, and the lake associated with the legendary Parrime. He also found Apukatinti⁹ Mountain...a strange peak that attracts lightning like a lighting rod. In its vicinity compasses go mad, just like in the Bermuda Triangle. The city is situated on one of its slopes.

“You speak with a great deal of conviction. What does the official archeologist say about all this?” I inquire.

“The official archeologist,” he repeats, his voice laced with anger. “The National Institute of Culture stubbornly ignores all of these discoveries and pieces of information. Not to mention that in this region, between the Callanga and Sinkibenia rivers, the National Manu Reserve has been created to hamstring efforts by those like ourselves to penetrate the forest. After all, Peru has significantly more natural attractions, but they’re not creating parks. Maybe some influential people are counting on Paititi staying lost. Can you imagine the chaos on global stock markets if the market were flooded unexpectedly by so much gold? Paititi is the myth of El Dorado.”

My initial meeting with Father Carlos Polentini in Lima confirmed my suspicions that Paititi is not just a pipe dream or greed fueled by the imaginations of adventurers. His story largely agreed with other tales that have accumulated and intermingled over the years, feeding the dream smoldering within me – to take on the jungle and pin down the secrets of Paititi. I hoped to have more luck than my predecessors, which were numerous. The fame of hidden Incan treasure lured explorers, adventurers and travelers, who tended to view the world with a great deal more rationalism.

⁹ In the Quechua language – Lord of the Sun.

The search for Paititi began in the 16th century with Juan Alvarez Maldonado. His failed expeditions were mentioned in 1590 by Miguel Caballo de Balboa. In 1654 Dominican Thomas de Chavez embarked on a 30-day journey at the invitation of the Gran Paititi, in order to cure the leader's wife. Another man of the cloth, Jesuit Fray Lucero, wrote in 1681 that according to the stories related to him by natives, the lost city was to be found: "beyond forests and mountains to the East of Cuzco" and was inhabited by "bearded, white Indians." A few years later that information was confirmed in a book written by another missionary, Manuel Rodriguez, entitled *Amazonia and Marañon*.

The next expeditions were launched in the 18th and 19th centuries by Apolinary Dias de Fuente, Sir Robert Hermann Schomburg, Teodor Koch-Grunberg and Hamilton Rice. A fascinating account of the lost city was left behind by rubber collector Angelino Bordo. At the start of the last century, he was kidnapped by the Machiguengas Indians and remained their captive for the next three years. During this time he began to notice that the Indians were avoiding a certain part of the jungle. When asked why, they explained that the area in question contained the ruins of a city inhabited by the spirits of their ancestors. The living were forbidden to disturb their rest. On the basis of that information, Bordo devised his escape and hid in these ruins, certain the Machiguengas would not dare to enter the city. The idea was a sound one. Bordo spent a few days in this immense city, hidden in the jungle, while waiting for the Indians to give up the pursuit and then successfully found his way out of the jungle.

In the late 1960s, Bordo met with Dr. Carlos Neuenschwander Landa. The doctor, born in Arequipa in 1916, set out in search of Paititi 22 times. Today he is one of the few individuals with such extensive knowledge on the legendary city. Bordo was already an old man, but agile enough to accompany Neuenschwander on a helicopter flight over the jungle. They attempted to identify the topographical features which Bordo had outlined,

including a rectangular lake in the vicinity of the stone city. Unfortunately, the expedition was an utter fiasco. Although the old man's slipping memory might have been to blame, its failure was most likely sealed by the fact that little is visible to the naked eye from a helicopter. Everything is covered by the green carpet of the jungle, making a deeper visual reconnaissance impossible. Nonetheless, in time Neuenschwander was able to locate, examine and photograph the lake from the air during future expeditions.

I met with Dr. Neuenschwander in preparation for an expedition to Paititi in 2002. Despite his advanced age, the doctor has retained the range of movement and energy of a young man – complete with bright blue eyes and the look of an aristocrat. He presides over an organization of his own creation, the Pantiacolla Association, a private and non-profit affiliation of passionate seekers of antiquities. He prefers to call Paititi Pantiacolla, since this was the name used by his informer, a subject to which I will soon turn. We sat in an office overflowing with various distinctions, among them diplomas for his accomplishments in medicine and commemorating his creation of the department of medicine at the University of San Agostin in Arequipa. My notes from that meeting contain a shorthand account by this elder seeker of Paititi.

Notes

It is my belief that in ancient times, deep within the interior, a civilization might have existed, whose reach extended to the eastern section of the Andes. We can suppose that the descendents of the progenitors of Amazon culture, after establishing their settlement in this place, intermingled with the ethnic groups living in the Cordillera and that, during the rule of the Incan empire, they

explored low-lying regions in which their roots could be found. The traces of settlements discovered in this region outline the borders of the Kingdom of Paititi.

You ask where Paititi is located? My successive expeditions would seem to indicate that the city can be found on the Pantiacolla plateau, between the Paucartambo, Alto Rio Madre de Dios and Manu rivers. My convictions were confirmed by the story related to me half a century ago by Captain Felipe Garcia. His task was to supervise the extraction of rubber. To reach that distant place, he crossed the valleys of La Convencion, Lares and Palma Redl on foot and then traveled by boat for 12 days before arriving at the camp. At that time he stopped briefly at the Dominican mission in Coribeni, where he acquired two Machiguengas Indians. Along the way they quarreled and the women fled after murdering her companion.

The captain sent a military policeman and two young Machiguengas, Celestino and Gregorio, in pursuit. After two weeks the threesome returned empty-handed, but with a sensational yet convincing story of their exploits. Every individual's story was identical, down to the last detail.

One day they encountered the laguna negra, or black lake, from which a paved stone road led through Cordiliera Paucartambo to the peak of Toporaque and farther – through tropical forest, a high mountain plateau with “five toothy peaks.” Finally, it led them to laguna cuadrata – a rectangular lake where they saw the amazing ruins of a city. Captain Garcia wanted to set off for this site, but the rubber enterprise summoned him back to Cuzco.

A few years later, I decided to ascertain the veracity of this story. I attempted to find the three Machiguengas, but two of them turned out to be dead and the third, Celestino, had disappeared. After a long search, I was able to trace

him to the river Yavero. He was old and largely incapacitated due to elephantiasis of the legs, so he was unable to accompany me. His account indicated that I should travel three or four days up the Yavero River, where I would find an old and partially overgrown Incan stone road leading to Paititi.

I searched unsuccessfully for local guides – none dared to go with me because everyone was intensely afraid of monsters. Deep-seated traditional beliefs warn of the dangers of venturing into a region that is known for its plagues of poisonous snakes as well as the evil spirits who rule there and the supernatural powers that guard the area. It is said that anyone foolhardy enough to reveal the secrets of this mysterious land will be struck down by a horrible curse, which fills Indian hearts with superstitious fear and trepidation.

I returned to Arequipa in order to prepare carefully for the journey. Unfortunately, we were forced to halt the expedition because some of our companions died in the selva. In 1958 I embarked again for Paititi, initially heading for the source of the Chunchosmayo River and then towards laguna negra, whose waters have a dark blue tint. There we also came upon a paved stone road. We were unbelievably excited. It seemed that we were on the right trail, that this time our objective would not elude us. After 30 kilometers the road ended unexpectedly and we stood in front of a wall of greenery. We tried to hack our way through, but our strength soon failed and we turned back heartbroken.

In later years I returned seven times to the region. In 1978 we headed out on yet another reconnaissance mission aboard a helicopter. While skimming over the “five-toothed peak” plateau, among plunging cliffs and canyons I spotted the legendary waterfall, which confirmed Celestino’s story. To our dismay, at one moment a front of thick clouds rolled in, limiting visibility to zero, and the pilot

decided to return to base in Salvacion. During the return flight, I caught a glimpse through a hole in the clouds of an almost entirely overgrown lake in the shape of a rectangle for just a few seconds. That is where Paititi must have been! This expedition also turned out to be unsuccessful. Perhaps a curse really does hang over this place?

The information provided by Carlos Polentini and Dr. Neunschwander was intriguing. In preparing the expedition, we needed to bring as much material concerning the location of the lost city as possible. Like my colleagues, I dug through mountains of chronicles and histories, dozens of accounts written during the Spanish conquest and gleaned information from administrative reports sent from Peru to Spanish rulers. Not the easiest job since it requires an ability to find a grain of truth in endless chaff. How do you find a needle of truth in a haystack of material?

As an example take *The Chronicles of Akakor* by Karl Brugger, a German television reporter and South American expert who worked in Argentina as a correspondent for ARD¹⁰ starting in 1974. Two years later an Indian named Tatunia Nara whom he met in Manaus told him a strange story about a people that lived for 15,000 years in the isolated jungle city of Akakor. This story is the perfect material for a film in the science fiction genre, complete with mysterious cities, underground tunnels, an end-of-the-world cataclysm, Great Masters whose architectural know-how incorporate laws of physics that are still unknown to modern man and even Nazis, who found refuge there after the war. The setting for this tale is the deep *selva* on the border of Peru and Brazil. With that being said, we should actually conclude this topic so that rational readers are

¹⁰ Allgemeiner Deutscher Rundfunk.

not confused or, even worse, discouraged from further reading. However, bear with me one moment longer.

Karl Brugger, as befits a professional, decided to verify at least some of this odd information. The results of his journalistic research undermined his earlier skepticism towards the revelations of Tatunia Nara – the prince and leader of the Ugha Mongulala people. A friend of Brugger's from the Brazilian secret service confirmed that Nara had saved the lives of 12 passengers from a plane that crashed in the jungle and that the Yaminaua Indians looked to Nara as their leader, although he was not a member of their tribe. The veracity of skirmishes that took place in 1969 between Indians and government forces in the Peruvian province of Madre de Dios was also established. The reporter also managed to ferret out that shortly before the German capitulation, two U-boats left ports in Germany and were found three months later in Argentina. Did they use this time to follow Amazon waters to reach the deep interior of Brazil with a secret cargo, following the same route taken by the German freighter Carlino, a ship which was bombed in 1943 along with its cargo, a weapon, by the Brazilian air force?

Every sensational tale needs a dramatic epilogue. The story I have just recounted fits the bill. Karl Brugger was shot in 1984 in Manaus by an unknown assailant, while preparing for an expedition to Akakor. Was he killed because his knowledge concerning a city belonging to the Great Mages posed a threat?

As a supplement to this history, I would add two additional pieces of information. In December 1975 the Landsat II satellite transmitted a series of photographs of the jungle in south-east Peru. On the basis of these photos, eight pyramid-like constructions of considerable size were identified. Other pictures taken in 1979 from the deck of a plane flying over the region confirmed this. Attempts to reach them by land ended in failure and therefore we still do not know whether these were the pyramids of Akakor or

of another city in the Gran Paititi empire. One final question remains: which parts of this story are grain and which chaff? Coming back from the edge of fantasy and planting our feet firmly on the ground, let us examine the expedition organized by American anthropologist Gregory Deyermenjian. In the years 1984-1986 he made three excursions to an area neighboring Apukatinti mountain, whose peak he conquered on the third attempt. Deyermenjian found only disappointment. Neither Paititi nor any other buildings of which Fr. Polentini's informer spoke were anywhere to be seen.

Who is right? Where is the grain and where chaff? In attempting to separate legend from fact, I delved into libraries and archives and spent many days poring over documents yellowed with age. The bulk of this time was spent in Seville.

A Jesuit Clue

Seville – the Golden City and Gate to America, the pearl of Andalusia, capital of bullfighting, the *flamenco* and carefree fairs. All of these descriptions are used to refer to this unusual city, although the first two are only distant recollections of a time when Guadalquivir was still navigable. Dubbed the Golden City because of the Spanish galleons that called to port here, loaded down with gold and silver from the Americas as well as Aztec and Incan treasure. Called the Gate to America after Amerigo Vespucci set sail from the city for an expedition to the West Indies. His name was bestowed upon an entire continent. Seville was a staging point for flotillas embarking to the colonies, filled with thrill-seekers who fantasized the shimmering color of yellow gold: to Veracruz in the spring and in August to Panama. Hence the location of *Casa de Contratación* in Seville – an institution that played the role of ministry for the colonies, distributing licenses, controlling the flow of goods and colonists and even monitoring and censoring books sent to the American colonies. From 1779 Seville was also the site of a central archive for documents concerning the New World.

Across from the cathedral in which the ashes of Christopher Columbus supposedly rest, in the former, monumental Merchants' Meeting House, or *Lonja de los Mercaderes* within the very heart of the city, the General Archive of the Indies were founded. Among its forty thousand documents (a total of seventeen million handwritten pages) are the journals of Columbus and the complete history of the conquest. For this reason the archives have become a Mecca for hobbyists and treasure hunters as well as scientists who specialize in the history of the Americas. Here they probe multi-volume registries of departures, returning and missing ships for information. I am also after information, but instead of feasting my eyes on the beauty of Alcazar, La Giralda and the charms of Spanish dancers, I must leaf through decaying manuscripts for word of Gran Paititi.

Patiently, I made my way through piles of scribbled chronicles and administrative reports from Peru sent for the benefit of Spanish authorities, immersed in the work of historians who debate the details of the Peruvian conquest.

The days are passing and the heading “Gran Paititi” written in my notebook is still empty. It is curious that I have yet to find even the smallest trace of Machu Picchu, Gran Vilaya, Cuelap, Gran Pajatèn and many other sites that were recently uncovered on the eastern slopes of the Andes. Why weren’t the cities which we know to have flourished under the Incan empire ever described in a scrupulous Spanish inventory? Were the Spanish uninterested in the region? On the contrary, intensive search efforts were expended to find the famous El Dorado in the east, including several expeditions. Why then are all the documents silent?

One logical explanation involved an effective smokescreen operation conducted after the execution of Atahualpa by his successors and priests. The documents salvaged from that period indicate that many transports of gold and other valuables were seen moving in the direction of Cajamarca, where they never arrived. These treasures were never found, despite the best efforts of a number of eager discoverers. Instead rumors began to circulate of an Incan treasure and the guardians who were tasked with protecting it. Every rumor contains a grain of truth says the old adage. How much truth lay in these stories? I asked myself these questions in the course of discouraging and fruitless searches of the archives.

Then I heard some unusual news. February 4, 2002 press services worldwide issued a sensational report concerning the discovery of a document finally able to crack one of the most important mysteries of all time – a document confirming the existence of Paititi. A few days later Richard Owen a correspondent with *The Times* in Rome, published an article entitled “Jesuit manuscript may hold key to El Dorado quest.” This

news was echoed in the same tone by *Die Zeit*, *El Pais*, *Le Monde*, *The New York Times* and others.

This electrifying information was revealed by Italian archeologist Mario Polia in a piece published in the specialist monthly *Archeo*. Dr. Polia has worked in Peru for 30 years and is currently supervising a scientific mission from the Centro Studi e Ricerche Ligabue in Venice. His arrival in Rome was connected with the need to collect additional materials for a scientific paper written at the Pontifical Catholic University in Lima. For this purpose he paid a visit to the Roman archives of the Jesuit Order, selecting seven thousand pages of documents and accounts sent by Jesuit missionaries from Peru during the Spanish conquest. The order, whose establishment was confirmed in a Bull by Pope Paul III in 1540, was charged with spreading the principles of the Catholic faith, first and foremost papal interests, since the greater glory of God was understood as the victory of the true Catholic faith over heresy. The organization of the order and its brand of asceticism created a one-of-a-kind religious institution with a structure approaching that of the military. In addition to the effective conduct of religious propaganda and modern evangelical activities, the order was renowned for its mission and educational work.

Reports dispatched by Jesuits to their headquarters in Rome provide excellent research material for contemporary historians. Browsing through the first volume of *Peruana Historia*, a collection of manuscripts from the years 1567-1625 (*Divisione Archivio de la Antigua Compañia*, 1540-1773), Polia ran across a letter on page 38, which soon had his blood pumping. The text of this missive indicated that Claudio Aquaviva, the fifth general of the Jesuit Order from 1581-1615, or his successor Muzio Vitelleschi, had been informed by one Father Andre Lopez, rector of the Jesuit college in Cuzco, of the priest's unusual visit to the residents of the mysterious *Payititi*. The manuscript goes on to express the pope's approval of the evangelization of the people living in these lands.

The scientific clamor was understandable. Here for the first time was a credible document proving the existence of Paititi!

Fr. Lopez's adventure with the people of Paititi began with the baptism of several natives who, unable to accept the harsh treatment of the Spanish, fled to their city of origin, a place tucked away in the jungle, taking with them a wooden cross given them by a missionary. These new Christian converts labored to tell their compatriots about the sacrifice made by the crucified Christ, the power of the pope and might of the Spanish monarchy, the Spanish conquest to save souls, the tortures of hell and eternal bliss of the Christian heaven. Their attempt must have been quite inept, since they were subsequently ridiculed.

"What kind of god allows himself to be crucified and cannot be seen?" they were questioned. "The god of our forefathers, Inti – the god of the Sun, remains by our side throughout the day. We also feel the constant benevolence of the mighty Pachacamac."

Only just converted, the Indians were called before the ruler of the city.

"How can you urge us to abandon the old gods if you murdered yours in the first place?" Failing to receive a satisfactory answer to this inquiry, these leaders invited Father Lopez to visit Paititi.

Farther on the document contains information about the civilizational accomplishments of the legendary city's population. They were familiar with metallurgy and erected monumental buildings using hewn stone as well as possessed administrative structures similar to those of the Inca. The manuscript described sacred architecture and temples whose walls were plaited with gold. From this information alone we can surmise that these were not the peoples of the Amazonian lowlands, who had no knowledge of metallurgy despite valuing metal instruments. Other documents mentioned attacks launched by primitive Indians on an Incan fortress in order to obtain hatchets and other

copper tools. This information lends credibility to the hypothesis concerning Indians ensconced in the Amazon jungle following the definitive collapse of their empire, which coincided with the death of King Tupac Amaru and the Spanish capture of Vilcabamba in 1572.

The notes in the manuscript's upper left corner suggest that Lopez was born in 1544. With the release of these tidings, Polia launched his church career. In *A Catalog of Castilla (1553-1576)* on page 36 he discovered a few biographical notes. Lopez hailed from Villagarcia, entering the order January 8, 1565 following earlier studies in theology and courses in the fine arts. In 1592 he assumed the position of rector of the Jesuit College in Potosi, a Bolivian site famous for its silver mines. His date of death is missing. These dates create a convincing picture of Fr. Lopez and give the documents uncovered by Dr. Polia historic value, making him immune to charges of a lack of authenticity. After all it is hard to believe that the general of one of the most influential orders in the Catholic Church and the head of the Catholic Church could have been enmeshed in the creation of pure fiction.

The next day I board the first flight to Rome. I have to see this revolutionary document with my own eyes. The Roman Jesuit Archives, located at via Borgo Santo Spirito 8, are across the street from The Vatican. I am welcomed by the facility's friendly director, Fr. De Kok. He expresses understanding for my passion and in no time at all I am seated in a special room, along with a thick volume of documents written 50 years ago during the conquest of Peru. I hope to find clues that were meaningless to Mario Polia, but may have crucial significance for my research and future expedition. The lengthy text contains a great deal of information referring to a secret and puzzling city of "people as white as Germans," blue-eyed, blond and tall. This confirmation of the sensational

accounts of travelers and adventurers who have ventured into the heart of the Amazon jungle mentions nothing about the focus of my attention – the location of Paititi.

Someone might ask: how, despite meticulous care in gathering even the smallest piece of information from mission territories for the archives, was such serious neglect possible? It is possible that the Jesuits, whose primary goals were to preach the teachings of the Catholic faith to pagan peoples, educate, help the poor and first and foremost defend the interests of the papacy, intended to keep that particular detail shrouded in secrecy in order to prevent a kind of “gold rush” that would certainly have catastrophic consequences for the people of the region. Perhaps with time they realized the value of avoiding the fatal mistakes committed by Pizarro and his gold-hungry soldiers.

A visit to the Jesuit archives has shown me just how much is hidden from the researcher’s eye in South America. The colorful, tangled and chaotic times of the Incan empire, which lasted just under four centuries, are a labyrinth of true and legend, fact and fabrication. Some of these fairy tales were created by the Indians themselves, who masterly erased all knowledge of the deeds of their ancestors and manipulated history in order to lend their own rule even more radiance. Just as in Central America everything was hidden in the shadow of the Aztecs, so have convictions of Incan genius survived the collapse of their empire to the present day and successive generations of chroniclers and researches surpassed one another in boasting about the accomplishments of a small but ambitious tribe that appeared on the scene a mere 300 years before Pizarro.

The impression that the Inca were omnipresent in South America can be attributed to chronicles of the conquest. Garcilaso Inka de la Vega, Pedro Pizarro, Pedro de León Cieza and Francisco Jerez kept detailed accounts of the facts accumulated during their lifetimes. Nonetheless, these men were only soldiers who felt no obligation to plumb the

depths of the continent's past. A few centuries after the conquest it was already too late. The awe-inspiring cities and their temples lay in ruins. The new religion brutally condemned any remnants of the old beliefs and gods. In 1583 all copies of the *kipu*¹¹ that were found were burned and as a result the Inca archives went up in smoke, cutting future researchers off from historical truth.

A similar policy was followed in the land of the Aztecs, where bonfires consumed statues of gods as well as Indian codices.

These books contain nothing more than superstitions and Satanic lies, announced Bishop Diego de Landa in judgment and to encourage the destruction of "Satan's tomes" in the name of the cross. His words were heeded. On July 12, 1562 in the city of Mani the greatest *auto de fe*¹² went up in smoke on newly conquered lands. These practices were meant to let the victorious light of the faith shine on the Americas and *de facto* plunged the entire past of the continent into the darkness of ignorance. It was accomplished to such a degree that only four codices have survived to the present day.

However, the blame for this vandalism must also be laid at the doorstep of the Inca themselves. Records of the epidemic which struck the land at the beginning of its history remain. When the prayers of priests failed to end the plague and death continued to reap a plentiful harvest, the Incan ruler turned to the prophetess of the god Viracocha with the question, "How can the epidemic be stopped?" "The use of the written word must be forbidden!!!" was the answer he heard. Her advise was followed and since that time the only written text in the kingdom was kept in the Temple of the Sun in Cuzco. Only the Supreme Inca and chosen *amanca* were given access to the document. Unfortunately, it was framed in gold, which suggests a convincing end for the text after

¹¹ An ancient Incan rolled manuscript.

¹² The inquisition carried out public executions on the condemned as well as public burning of heretic books (Portuguese term for an act of faith).

the city fell into Spanish hands. Only four of these chronicles, written on cloth, had a chance of survival after they were sent as a gift to Philip II. Even they were lost during transport over the Atlantic, during a storm or captured as booty by pirates, which eliminated any chance for science to learn about the beginnings of the last country to exist on both Americas leading up to the Spanish invasion. Archeologists wielding shovels accomplished the third discovery of America. The first people in these areas were representatives of primitive Asiatic tribes who crossed what we now know as the Bering straights in search of new territory. The second and accidental explorer of the Americas was Columbus. The finds made by archeologist, however, dated back to before the Incas and unearthed dozens of civilizations hidden by equatorial forest. The wondrous cultures of the Olmecs, Toltecs, Zapotecs, Mayans, Chavin and the people of Huari, Tiahuanaco and Chimú, dredged up from the mists of oblivion, fascinated the world not only thanks to the technical and artistic value of the items they left behind, but first and foremost because of their origins.

The history of Peru is still riddled with gaps, in spite of efforts by top researchers, and many questions remain unanswered. The illumination of these shadows from the past is a slow-going process. The farther back we delve into the centuries, the harder it becomes to establish facts, dates and links between various events. Also of note in this respect is the fact that many new discoveries create entirely new puzzles, which science is in no position to solve. This is particularly true of the mysterious civilization in the Antisuya region, the eastern section of the Incan empire. Its existence and later collapse are confirmed in the manuscripts of chroniclers, in the rich mythology of the Incas and in legends passed orally through a succession of generations. They speak of a fantastic civilization in the East and of a race which precedes the Inca people. Bronze and ceramic objects as well as settlements, both large and small administrative units – mostly looted

by *huaqueros* – found by archeologists testify to the existence of this people. Stone fortresses, temples and palaces, after years of neglect, slowly melted back into the jungle.

Talented Peruvian archeologist Federico Kauffmann Doig addressed this issue in his impressive work, *Peru*, published by Venetian art merchant Giancarlo Ligabue. In support of the theory positing a strong cultural relationship between the Amazon peoples, Prof. Doig offers the discovery of strikingly similar cave drawings in locations separated by thousands of kilometers. Examples of this can be found on the Calami river in Colombia, on the Napo in Ecuador, in northern Brazil and the forest of the Peruvian *montany*. Did the ancestors of the Inca raise monumental testimonies to their might in Machu Picchu, Vilcabamba, Ollantaytambo and Choquecancha? Were the great rivers – the Ukajali, Marañon, Urubamba and Madre de Dios – their main transportation arteries, connecting distant tribes like modern expressways?

My visit to Rome is further proof. Paititi is more than a folk tale and the account given by Fr. Andrea Lopez is tangible fact. No one in their right mind could suggest that this is a case of manipulation, hallucination or fantasy. The Spanish monk not only saw the city's stone walls and crossed its cobbled streets, but talked and interacted with the inhabitants of a metropolis deep in the jungle. Its ruins must still lie in the Amazon *selva*. Only someone who has luck on their side, who isn't afraid of the jungle, who knows and understands the laws that govern within and who finds the necessary determination will find it.

However, enthusiasm is not enough. The organizer of an expedition is saddled with the responsibility of finding a route and defining the objective. I must sift out the most credible information from a wealth of stories and accounts. The examples mentioned above illustrate the scale of difficulty in verifying information and making the

right decision, particularly when poring over a desk overflowing with documents. That is why I finally decide to board a plane and cross the ocean to Peru and our future testing ground in the jungle to find confirmation for my coalescing ideas.

In the Land of the Incas

For several hours the enormous Boeing has hung over the endless stretch of the Atlantic, covering nearly one thousand kilometers every 60 minutes. Every time I sit within this machine, which soars with such grace over the expanses, I bow my head before human genius. Man has always envied birds their wings and the gods their ability to rise above the earth. This was the feature which set them apart from mankind. Now, as we glide through the sky, are we not becoming like our idols? The airplane transformed the globe, on which any point can be reached within the space of a day or less. Does this mean we have become closer to one another as human beings?

In the growing light of a new day, a thin, dark line forms where the heavens and steel-gray water meet. This is America. It comes out to meet the plane, growing larger and revealing increasing details: the white foamy tide, the mouth of a river, houses, roads, trees and colors. Later we fly a considerable distance over a sea of green on the Eastern Plains, which contains the tributaries of two of South America's most powerful rivers: the Amazon and Orinoko. This is the *selva* – a tropical forest that is at the same time terrifying and bewitching. How many human tragedies, dreams and ambitions are buried beneath this uniform carpet of greenery? How much despair, disillusionment and triumph, gained at a terrible price? Soon I will be immersed in this sea once again, fighting to reclaim the jungle's secrets.

A second layer in this natural edifice is the *sierra*. In Spanish this word means saw, an apt description for the imposing, ragged Andes range. The enormity and beauty of these mountains can only be appreciated from a height of 10,000 meters. This gigantic spine extending across the South American continent runs uninterruptedly from the Ring of Fire to the Panama Canal. Its peaks are drenched in blinding sunlight, an endless,

empty desert of rock with a few signs of life confined to the river valleys and high mountain plateaus.

In this unusual landscape, suddenly, at the turn of the first and second century, a civilizational center appeared, which until today has troubled us with puzzles and inspired us with its accomplishments. The cultures of Tiahuanaco, Chavin, Nazca, Mochica are names known only to archeologists, although no one has uncovered enough of these peoples to silence a myriad doubts and questions. It is also curious that there are no traces of a gradual evolution from primitive societies to highly advanced communities. Peru's greatest attractions are its colors and atmosphere, the kind we find in sensational novels and crime stories, not to mention its spectacular mountains. The country emanates adventure like a perfume. Peru – the great pyramid of the Andes, blocked on one side by the ocean and on the other by jungle, where landscape and legend form an inseparable whole, a land of myth and mystery, fantasy and dreams. The lowlands in the West, dry as a bone, coexist alongside the swollen humidity of the Amazon to the East, which sends its winding tentacles toward the Andean slopes – the Amazon tributaries.

The inhabitants of Peru are proud of their mountains, thanks to which the country has found its way repeatedly into the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Peru's mountains boast the deepest canyon in the world, Colca, the highest railway carved through the Andes and the highest navigable lake – Titicaca. For some time, until the discovery of the Himalayan 8,000-meter peaks in the 19th century, the volcano of Chimborazo was believed to be the highest peak on our planet. Actually, the record still stands if the peaks are measured from the center of the Earth. According to this measurement, the Peruvian volcano, located on the equator, would supersede Mt. Everest, situated on the 27th parallel.

The Andes descend towards the eastern plains in a series of increasingly milder peaks, cloaked in eternally green *montany*. The western reaches are another story. Here the peaks thrust up from the very waves of the Pacific Ocean, giving testimony to the supernatural power of the shifting American continent as it flees from Africa at a rate of six centimeters per year. Only the narrow strip of *costy* are inhabitable, located near the rare river mouths in this desert-like landscape. Lima reclines along one of these green valleys.

The plane makes its landing approach from the Pacific. Below the wings the coastal port of Callao flashes by, followed by some low-storied buildings and finally the concrete landing strip. Just beyond the plane's lights, I can make out signs that read "Bienvenido a Lima!"¹³

Finally. This is Peru – the land of myths and mysteries, a sanctuary for nature and unexplored secrets.

The capital of the republic was erected on the ruins of the famous *Tawantinsuyu* – "the land of the four quarters," which at first glance is not very impressive with ubiquitous dirt and buildings covered in patches of plaster and peeling paint. Box-shaped monstrosities that double as homes, with reinforced rods jutting from the corners, indicate a clever owner. Buildings under construction are tax-free. Clouds of smog drape over the city, expelled from thousands of rumbling and constantly honking cars, which spit out billows of foul-smelling fumes. Half of them would win awards at a rally of junkers – shabby, dented and frequently without lights.

¹³ Welcome to Lima!

In terms of age as well this city is no giant. In 1535 at the initiative of Francisco Pizarro, the daring conquistador and discoverer of the Incas, a founding charter was ceremoniously signed in the valley of the Rimac river. The city quickly gained wealth and importance as the headquarters of the viceroy and the religious orders that converted the Americas and a point of departure for transports of silver and gold extracted from Peruvian mines as well as a port for arriving boats loaded with goods from Europe. We know the early history of Lima only from secondhand accounts. A large earthquake in 1746 left piles of rubble in its wake, so the cities oldest “monuments” date back to the 18th century.

Despite these natural hindrances, the small settlement grew into a great metropolis. Officially, Lima has nine million residents, but in reality no one is able to quote a real figure. Everyday a fresh wave of the needy descend from the mountains, among them women with eternally rounded stomachs, for whom Lima is nothing less than an oasis of wealth. Unfortunately, this is only an illusion although the urban El Dorado myth continues to function. The city is swarming with *barriady* – monstrous urban structures, plywood huts and discarded metal sheeting. This is more than just poverty – something much more misshapen and degenerate. It’s amazing to consider this people’s dogged persistence and survival instinct.

Lima’s city streets, clogged with poverty, are dangerous despite a large number of police patrols in tourist areas. Local thieves are treacherous for three reasons: their deviousness, numbers and enormous bravura. Thankfully, they are still outnumbered by tourists. This rather disquieting picture of the Lima reality, provided by a friendly hotel receptionist, does not dissuade me from taking a first walk through the city. This is not my first experience in a place like this and I am certainly not one of the naïve *gringos*.

No more than a few intersections separate my hotel from Plaza de Armas – Weapons Square, the city’s most centrally located and important square. The Spanish always gave this name to such places in the cities they founded, where drills were organized and combat-able men were mustered in emergency situations. The time of pirate attacks and rebellious Indians is long gone, replaced today by an atmosphere of stiff formality provided by the city’s cathedrals, city hall, not to mention the archiepiscopal and presidential palaces. This last was built on the site of Francisco Pizarro’s residence, which even earlier was home to the palace of Tauli Chusco – a local big-wig who ruled the Rimac valley.

On the corner from his pedestal, Francisco Pizarro – The Conqueror – looks down upon the square. It is curious that throughout Lima there is not one monument to Atahualpa, the last Incan ruler, while the ruthless conquistador has never been forgotten. The monument in question is connected with a peculiar story. Namely, in the 19th century Mexico City decided to honor Hernando Cortez by commissioning his bust from American sculptor Charles Cary Rumsey. A significant amount of time passed between the commission and its realization and the city authorities began to shy away from paying tribute to an invader who pacified their ancestors. In the meantime, the widow of the now deceased sculptor, without much reflection christened the Cortez bust as that of Pizarro and offered it to Lima. How different are the two men after all? Both were cruel and possessed a strikingly similar thirst for fame and wealth. Why does the conquistador’s monument stand in the heart of Lima? Because – as was explained to me – the Peruvians have the Spaniards to thank for everything from language, religion and science to literature and traditions. Moreover, Pizarro created Peru, uniting endlessly warring tribes under one umbrella of nationhood.

In reality it is difficult to speak of a Peruvian nation. Residents of the *Selva*, *Costa* and *Sierra* share only a language, the one imposed by Spanish conquistadors. Of course this doesn't apply to all of Peru's inhabitants. There are tribes, and even entire regions, which still communicate in their own languages. In the Andes this is Quechua – the old language of the Incas. In the Amazon approximately 100 language families alone can be identified. Some smaller tribes of only a few hundred members are encountered who are unable to communicate with neighbors living only a few hundred kilometers away. This diversity is unheard of – how did it come about? Who took on the mind-shattering task of creating so many language variants, differing in vocabulary, inflection and grammar? We are able to accept this from a community numbering in the millions, whose groups tried in this way to demonstrate their individuality, but a tribe of less than a hundred souls living on the edge of existence? One underlying cause in this respect was certainly the difficulties of transport in the *selva* and a lack of roads. Moreover, residents of the city were unwilling to be associated with those living in the Amazon forest or Andean plateaus. Between these groups existed and continue to exist deep social divisions and antagonisms.

My friend, admiral Guillermo Faura Gaiga, gave me the following explanation:

“You see, most South American countries were initially colonies of European empires. Only later did individual states form, but this was an evolutionary process which did not arise from the needs of people on the American continent. It was rather the outcome of an economic-political rivalry between two powers: England and Spain. Later various interest groups coalesced within these countries. The official version of history is silent concerning the links between South America's liberators – by which I mean Bolivar or San Martin – and the interests of the British crown. After all, to this day decisions concerning border changes and international wars have been made and are still made

behind the closed doors of offices belonging to the most powerful supranational corporations.”

It is unbelievable how rapidly the cruel methods used in the “discovery” and civilization of new lands by the Spanish were simply forgotten. On October 12 Columbus Day or Day of the Race is officially observed throughout the Americas, commemorating the day the sailor on duty in the crow’s nest of the Santa Maria shouted: “Land ho!” For Columbus this was a day of triumph, but for more than 15 million natives that yell was akin to a death knell. That was the price paid by inhabitants of newly discovered lands in the first few years of colonization, the price of allowing themselves to be found. What did they receive in return for their treasures? Smallpox and influenza for syphilis, bread for potatoes, horses for turkeys, vodka for tobacco. The wheel was the only object for which Europe received nothing in exchange. In terms of cruelty, there were no improvements – in the Old World people were burned at the stake, while in the New – their still beating hearts were cut out.

Today, from his perch, a bronze Pizarro observes the doors of the cathedral where his mortal remains now rest. One of the frescos that decorates the walls of the burial chamber depicts a critical moment during the first expedition when its members were thoroughly discouraged with fruitless attempts to reach the legendary El Dorado. Instead of the promised wealth, these explorers were forced to endure hunger, sickness and suffering. To a man they dreamt only of returning to Panama – everyone, that is, except for Pizarro. The artist captured the conqueror at a moment when, after drawing a line in the sand, Pizarro delivered his now famous line:

Friends, on one side of this line is poverty, hunger and hard work, a river of tears and humiliation. On the other a wealth of pleasures. From there we can return to Panama and abject poverty or travel to Piru¹⁴ and riches and fame.

Pizarro crossed his Rubicon and history immortalized the protagonists of this event as the Thirteen from Rooster Island. They became the core of an expedition, which would soon subjugate all of South America. Today, Pizarro's skeleton, sheathed in its shrunken, wrinkled skin, is on display in a crystal coffin. The sarcophagus is guarded by lions – a symbol of strength. The man who slew the Inca was strong, brave and determined, traits that have ensured his immortality even though his remains haven't always enjoyed the respect they deserve.

Murdered by the vengeful Almagros, he was buried quickly by his servants, wrapped only in a sheet because – according to chronicler Pedro Cieza de León:

They feared the arrival of the young Almagro, who wanted to cut off Pizarro's head, just as Francisco and Hernando Pizarro had done to his father – Diego de Almagro Viejo. In light of this threat, they buried Pizarro in the most expedient way possible, without a coffin or gravestone.

The most powerful man in America of that time was laid to rest in a shallow ditch under the palace's defensive wall, dusted with lime and covered with soil. What was Pizarro's ultimate fate? Again we consult the chronicles:

¹⁴ The name given by Spaniards to the land of the Incas, borrowed from a river flowing in northern Peru.

When time had healed all wounds and memory diminished his mistakes and crimes in the face of his great merits (...) the bones of Pizarro were transferred to the cathedral and buried next to the remains of Viceroy Mendoza.

Nevertheless, he was not allowed to rest in peace. An earthquake in 1746 left the cathedral in ruins and after its reconstruction, the bones of Peru's greatest figures, including those belonging to Pizarro, were reburied in a crypt underneath the main altar. The fourth relocation took place in 1928, when the famous conquistador's remains were committed to a glass coffin within the current chapel.

Notes

Francisco Pizarro – the bastard son of a peasant woman and a Spanish colonel – needed only two years to accomplish the impossible, with the help of 180 soldiers: to defeat a well-organized and populous country several times larger than his home country of Spain, crushing one of the most amazing civilizations of the world into dust.

His success can be attributed to an iron will and leadership skills as well as a total lack of scruples. On the day he first set foot onto Peruvian soil, its last ruler, Atahualpa, governed tens of millions of subjects. Several decades later the population of these Andean lands had fallen to just a few million. Such was the price of the gold and other riches seized by a handful of ferocious conquerors, a wealth which failed to bring them happiness. Before Atahualpa drew his last breath, the leader pronounced a terrible curse on his murderers. It was fulfilled unexpectedly quickly and all who were in any way involved in the Inca's murder

were soon dead themselves – of unnatural causes. Is it any wonder that the following saying began to circulate among the conquistadors: *El vencido vencido y el vencedor perdido!*¹⁵

The first to die were the thirteen companions who had executed Atahualpa. The Indians tracked them down and killed them relentlessly. The next victim of the goddess of revenge was Almagro,¹⁶ strangled at an order from Hernando, the cruelest of Pizarro's band. Fr. Vicente Valverde, a man of the cloth who gave his blessing to the murder died at the hands of Indians on the island of Puna. Power-hungry Hernando Pizarro was forced to sail to Spain and stand trial before the king, accused by followers of the slain Almagro. He ended up behind bars, despite attempts to curry favor with the judges using valuable gifts.

Even Francisco Pizarro himself only enjoyed six years of accumulated wealth and honors. On June 26, 1541 the son of Almagro broke into his home in Lima along with several conspirators, killing Pizarro after a short struggle in vengeance for the string of humiliations his family had suffered from the Pizarro clan. The only Pizarro left alive was Gonzalo. After initial successes in subduing the entire Western region of South America, luck also abandoned him. Beaten by the royal army, Gonzalo was sentenced to death and his head displayed in a wooden cage along with a scornful inscription on the main square in Lima.

On the following day I am up at the crack of dawn to begin preparation for our expedition to Paititi 2002. In Lima I have located two other kindred spirits who are ready to offer their aid. Italian Ambassador Sergio Busetto and his Polish colleague Wojciech Tomaszewski assured me right away that they are men to be counted on – both were as

¹⁵ The enemy is defeated, the victor is vanquished!

¹⁶ A partner of F. Pizarro in a venture created to defeat the Inca empire.

good as their word. Thanks to these men, I was received by Peru's Vice President, Raula Diez Canseco Terry, who is also minister of tourism. It didn't take much to persuade the leader to lend his support to the endeavor. The expedition has already attracted some media attention and could do a great deal to increase interest in his country around the world.

After meeting the vice president, I visit the office of Miguel Antonio Zamorra, director of the tourism department, whose doors have always been open to me. This is an important moment because in Latino countries only backing from the right officials in a hierarchy of clerks can make such a difficult project possible and break through bureaucratic red tape, although this is not always the case. Whoever has never visited South America will never understand the might and ambiguity of the tiny and sonorous word *mañana*.

For Latinos the word can just as easily mean "never" as "in a week" or "tomorrow." Generally, the first interpretation is the norm. Europeans perceive the concept of time as something objective, something that exists externally to ourselves. We feel that time rules our lives. In order to exist and function we have to observe the rules and inviolable laws that time imposes on us. Time flows at a different speed for Latinos. Ryszard Kapuscinski wrote:

For them time is a category much looser, more open, elastic and subjective. Man influences how time is shaped, how it flows and in what rhythm (of course, the man who acts in accordance with the will of the gods and his ancestors). Time is even something that man can create, since for example the existence of time is expressed through a series of events and whether a certain event took place or not depends on man.

Nothing more, nothing less! Not to mention the damned bribery that takes place on every rung of the ladder – from the policeman on the street to the highest state official – and only the sums passed under the table are different. Wojtek Tomaszewski tells me that this practice has led to the emergence of a new word – *coimision*. This is a combination of the word *comision* – or “commission” and the popular Peruvian expression for a bribe – *coima*.

For the foreigner who tries to get something arranged in the public offices of a tropical city, the expressions *posible mañana*¹⁷ and *coimision* become something akin to instruments of hellish torture. Even despite the support I have received, I frequently hear these hated words. Full of European determination, every day I dive into the clouds of humid and wet morning fog coughed out by the Pacific and the furious noise of the city, languishing in a growing number of offices in an attempt to obtain the needed permits and signatures. The bureaucratic machine finally began to accelerate.

Nonetheless, there are moments of pleasant surprise. In the Institute of Geology and Metallurgy I was promised a free bundle of publications regarding the geomorphology and hydrology of the region. These materials supplement various aerial photos, topographical and thematic maps. Every source of information is valuable. My greatest hopes lie with the satellite maps. The era of space exploration has also brought about a revolution in this domain. Experts claim that intelligence satellites can register objects of even a few centimeters. American *Life* magazine once published photographs of a man playing poker on which even the value of the cards he was holding was discernible. This would be nothing special if not for the fact that the pictures were taken

¹⁷ Maybe tomorrow.

from outer space. Unfortunately, this technology – for the time being anyway – is relatively inaccessible and analysis of the photos is complicated and labor-intensive. Besides, not much is visible under the green canopy of plant life unless the photos are taken in infrared or with the use of radio signals that can penetrate clouds, fog and even the first layer of topsoil.

When a young engineer working for Spot Image in Toulouse introduced me to the secrets of teledetection, a remote exploration of the Earth's surface, I am shocked by the progress that has been made in this field. The multitude of specialist equipment orbiting the planet is impressive: telecommunications satellites, synchronized with the planet's orbit; topographic satellites, designed to examine the Earth's surface, pollution levels, the distribution of arable land; meteorological satellites, monitoring changes in the atmosphere; radio navigational satellites, which aid anyone who is forced to travel around the globe.

Once the following question was directed to me at a meeting with readers: "Why do you wander through the wildernesses of the world, embarking on costly and risky expeditions to solve geographic mysteries since this can all be done just as well from outer space?" This is true. The amazing resolution of these photographs represent valuable comparative material and can inspire further research, however in themselves these pictures are rarely responsible for new discoveries. Even now – just as hundreds of years ago – man is still central to this search – man and his talents, passion, patience, enterprising nature and stamina.

Since the dawn of time human beings have been infected with a stubborn curiosity, a need to delve the mysteries hidden just over the horizon. Mankind is driven to seek adventure and sometimes fame, although some astounding feats are accomplished without much commotion and tragic accidents are frequently a free pass into the pantheon

of fame. The hero of one dramatic odyssey, Cossack Semen Dezhnev, who discovered the Bering Strait, a passageway from the Arctic to the Pacific Ocean, should be as well known as Vasco da Gama and Magellan. However, reports of his exploits were buried on the desks of public officials, hence fame passed Dezhnev over and instead fell eighty years later on Bering, whose name was given to the sea and straight dividing Alaska from Siberia. Columbus was wronged when the continent he discovered was named after a man who followed him – Amerigo Vespucci. Columbus himself, who stubbornly claimed that he had reached India, gave his opponents an excellent counterargument.

A meeting in the Lima Geographic Society, in which I am a member, passes pleasantly. The organization's president, Admiral Raul Parra Maza, greets me with exuberance typical of the continent:

"I am pleased to receive a visit by our honored colleague from far off Europe." After a few perfunctory complements, he gets down to business. "The society's board has been discussing the proposal to participate in your project. We thank you for the gesture – it gives us great pleasure to join in efforts to organize the expedition."

The headquarters of the society sits on a narrow street of the Old City. Enchanted by its unique atmosphere, I return to the hotel *per pedes*.¹⁸ I slip through the streets, admiring palaces and churches built during colonial times. Just beyond a delightful Baroque gate, I discover a shady courtyard with a fountain, walls festooned with flowered creepers and wooden, aged balconies perched overhead, intertwined with azure ornamentation. At one time those darkened curtains hid beautiful *señoritas* as they watched the streets below and waited, unseen, for a fairy-tale prince, the product of

¹⁸ On foot.

girlish dreams. How beautiful it all is. Too beautiful, in fact, for just a cursory look. A myriad of perfectly shaped objects dulls our sensitivity to yet another enchanting view.

Today's Lima, although lacking much of its former grandeur, still revels in the past. No guide fails to recount with pride that the city was the headquarters of the viceroy after 1544 or that the oldest American university opened in the city in 1551. The list of unrivaled accomplishments is long – the oldest bullfighting arena, the oldest theater...Liman *prosperity* didn't last very long after all. When the stream of Incan gold dried up and locals could no longer be used as slaves, the problems started. Behind the shuttered windows of the palace the memory of a former opulence are still alive and deeply rooted in the mentality of those who inherited this aristocratic legacy.

Evening finds me in the hotel bar. Weary from another exhausting day, I sip whisky lazily, observing the other guests who are generally occupied with nothing in particular and explode frequently into noisy laughter. The night doesn't promise to be spectacular and is getting more boring by the minute. The sound of Polish conversation coming from a neighboring table pulls me out of my lethargy. The grey-haired man sitting nearby speaks Polish, while his younger female companion uses a mix of Spanish and pidgin Polish.

“Ja matka Polka.”¹⁹ I listen amazed. Her childlike beauty and appearance are nothing like that of a Polish woman nor a matronly housewife. She can't be more than a few years over twenty. Dark hair falls softly around her face, adding to what is already an attractive view.

The man bursts into laughter.

“Why you laugh, *señor*?”

¹⁹ Loosely translated, I am a Polish mother.

“How many children do you have?”

“No! I have *mami*, who... *nacic*²⁰ in Poland.” Catching onto her mistake, the girl also begins to laugh. Both look friendly and I decide to join them.

“I am also a bored Pole and if you permit me, I will take a seat at your table.”

They agree. I change tables and introduced myself.

“It’s nice to meet a famous person. Juana, let me introduce you to the greatest Polish traveler. I am Andrew...Andrew Kaplanek and this beautiful lady of Polish origin is Juana.” We exchange a handshake.

“Kaplanek? Not too long ago I held a book by an author of the same name. “In the Footsteps of the Feathered Snake”. Perhaps...you are that explorer?” Looking at the man, we seem to be the same age which encourages me to ask this direct question.

“What a coincidence! I read your books and you read mine.” We pat one another on the back.

Judging by his next few sentences, I glean that the Pole I have just met, much like myself, has roamed the globe for many years. Operating on the fringes of archeology, he is attempting to break the secret code left by our ancestors in myths and ancient buildings, hidden for centuries in the forgotten sands of deserts and jungles. He has reached many unusual and mysterious places, discovering landscapes, wild nature and magic words engraved on ancient stones and using these excursions as inspiration for his books.

“Just don’t think,” he said, after a brief summary of his exploration resume, “that I want to oppose the myth of archeology. I only believe that it can be an interesting and valuable point of departure for scientific answers.”

“I understand your passion. I am also chasing the myth of Paititi – one of many myths born on the American continent.”

²⁰ Was born.

“In the course of many expeditions around the world, I have become convinced that myths cannot be treated like stories which depart completely from reality. Many proud scientists with a condescending approach to myth have been forced to acknowledge their factual value. Troy, the biblical city of Erech and the Tower of Babel existed for centuries only in mythic tales and nonetheless many scientific outsiders achieved success with only legend as a guide. Schliemann found Priam’s fortress, Bott – Nineveh, Woolley the city of Ur and traces of the great flood, and Robert Koldewey was able to uncover the foundations of an enormous ziggurat. These cities were recovered long after they had disappeared from the face of the earth. At a certain point in time, the knowledge of their existence was transformed into belief. This is how reality becomes legend.”

“Talking with you is like a soothing balm for a doubting soul. More than once in the face of *ex catedra* mockery, I asked myself whether I was just chasing after a mirage.”

“I have no intention of comforting anyone. As an engineer by education, I normally stick pretty firmly to the facts. That’s why we are talking about facts. In America the existence of the largest legends in these parts was also proven. Legends concerning *hombre dorado* – the Gilded Man. This myth manifested in Columbia in the form of Guatavita Lake, filled with valuable objects. Who until recently ever heard of large stone cities hidden in the jungle in the eastern reaches of the Andes and Brazilian *selva*? Today we know the location of more than a dozen. Don’t lose heart. You will find your Paititi!”

Andrew’s voice contains a rare passion, the kind that belongs to people who are deeply convinced of the truth in their words. In this we are similar and I recognize him as a kindred soul.

“Both of us, Jacek, grew up at a time when schools instilled in us the idea that the source of our culture should be sought in Greece. I believed my teachers for a long time.

Later I discovered the Sumers, Khmers, civilizations in the Indus valley, Olmecs, the world of the Sons of the Sun connected to our greatest figures. These things changed the way I see the world and kindled a dangerous consternation that even the greatest authorities are fallible.” Our conversation drifts over a range of unusual and enchanted places, while Juana grows slightly bored. Her stock of Polish words is few and it is difficult for her to follow Andrew, whose arguments are fired with the speed of a machine gun. I am interested in the history of her mother, thrown by fate in a distant and exotic country. Her story is like many others. A young Goral woman from a place near Nowy Targ arrived in Chicago to visit relatives and wanted to make a few bucks at the same time. There she met a young Peruvian, fell in love and when Juana was born, the couple moved to Lima. Unfortunately, Juana and Andrew already have an evening planned and I cannot accompany them any longer. We say our goodbyes and agree to meet the next day.

Malgosia, the exceedingly friendly wife of the Polish ambassador, recommended the Herrera Museum to me a few days ago. It houses the world’s largest collection of erotic ceramics. Coming from such a delicate creature, this obviously makes me inclined to visit the collection, but I have only three hours of free time and after arriving I discover that the museum has 60,000 exhibits. This collection is a product of the passion of Rafael Larco Herrera, owner of an enormous hacienda in northern Peru, in a region where the Mochica Indians created a variety of ceramic pieces in the 10th century. Endless rows of black, brown and red *huacos* – clay vessels in many different forms and designed for a range of purposes – fill the museum shelves and display cases. Captured in the clay are couples enjoying the act of love as well as a host of erect phalluses used as tray handles, the legs of vases and other ornamental decorations. Does this artistic conglomeration of

shaped ceramic, whose guiding themes are the phallus and vagina and a variety of sexual configurations and acts, a sign of perversion or lasciviousness? It is rather tribute to the wonders of biology, a nod towards intimacy, whose beauty we – hypocritical Europeans – have buried more successfully than the zealous men sent to these lands by Spanish rulers.

The honesty expressed in clay by pre-Incan artists has nothing to do with pornography, first and foremost because the world of the Mochica Indians cannot be judged according to our ethical norms. Were they able to predict that the items they used on a daily basis would find their way to the shelves of a museum, shocking even more timid tourists? Artists of all times have sought inspiration in eroticism. Everywhere *homo sapiens* appeared, we find figures representing the goddess of fertility and ceramics with equally lascivious drawings. These themes are present on Greek vases, treasures found on the Euphrates, Nile and Indus rivers, on the sculpted walls of Khajuraho temple and even today in the villages of the Kingdom of Bhutan lost in the Himalayan peaks.

We try to read into these signs from the past in the form and pose of clay figures, we pass judgment on ancient artists without realizing that our minds have been shaped in a different world than that of the pre-Incan creator. Is it significant that most of these ceramics were found at burial sites? Were these vessels only a part of ritual or were they intended to remind the souls of the dead that Eros or love is so close to Thanatos – death. Perhaps that thought was inspiration for the ancient artist?

In a slightly erotic and intensely philosophical mood, I set out for a meeting with Andrew. I hope that he brings Juana because my inherent taste for beauty is in need of aesthetic stimulation. Unfortunately, the streets of Lima do not foster an excess of beauty and Juana is a good mix of Slavic curves and Latin temperament. My hopes are fulfilled 200 percent. Andrew, in addition to Juana, is accompanied by a girl, one glimpse of

whom would give old Nabokov a thrill. The face of an innocent Lolita and below the neck perfect *Playboy* material. This guy gets around.

The girl moves gracefully and casually with shapely legs but there is no sign of flirtation in her step. There is no one in this restaurant who could fail to notice her and, having done so, stop themselves from starting. She is one of those few women born with a sensual aura and men, even the most effeminate, can sense it and react immediately. This is class – something that natural selection has nurtured over the course of many generations – and this girl makes every effort not to let nature’s work go to waste.

“I brought Karin because I thought you might be interested in her contacts. The girl’s uncle is an antique dealer,” Andrew’s voice falls to a hush. “And he has contacts among the *huaqueros*.²¹ I can arrange a meeting if you’re interested.”

“If I’m interested? You’ve read my mind – for a few days I’ve been after a contact like this. I understand that they may have more information about Paititi than I can find in all the libraries of Lima. Are you trying to tell me that this beauty can give me an in like this?”

The “knockout” is smiling at us as if she understood the gist of the conversation. Of course, she doesn’t speak Polish but her English is flawless – thanks to her British mother.

“Andrew has told me a little about you. I also read about your expedition to Paititi in *El Comercio*. You have a fascinating resume. Do you really know Ursula Andress, the Holy Father and...Walesa?”

Actually, my network extends a little farther than that but the fact that this girl is interested in my person is quite pleasing.

“And did you cross the ocean alone?”

²¹ In the Quechua language the word means a person who digs up *huaca* – cult-related sites and burial grounds.

“Many people cross the Atlantic these days in a boat alone. I accomplished it in a five-meter lifeboat in order to prove that the properly motivated castaway can save himself thanks to spirit and determination. What do you do?” I ask, interrupting an attempt to rummage through my biography.

“I’m a novice journalist, but in two years I intend to receive the Pulitzer Prize.”

“It must be stressful to realize such ambitious plans.”

She shrugs her shoulders, breasts shifting temptingly under a silk blouse, and her lips hover between a frown and smile.

“Please don’t feel sorry for me. Women don’t want pity, we want to be taken seriously and from time to time...fucked.”

*Porca miseria!*²² What a girl. I don’t know if she’s making fun, provoking me or just trying to be cruel.

“Jacek, my friend is famous for crude language and judgmental character. Please be careful, she’s a dangerous conversationalist,” Juana interjects.

“I appreciate your honesty and will remember it.”

“Always at your service,” Karin retorts.

Bang! A knockout in the first minute of conversation. And she looks so innocent with that face. Only now do I notice that under the surface appearance of control is a volcanic fire.

“This is the point at which a real *macho* would give his room number.”

“Is it possible some *machos* haven’t yet discovered that you can’t trust the words of a woman?”

The situation is approaching a mutual stalemate. Continuing the dialogue might be risky. Thankfully, Andrew jumps in to help.

²² A mild, common Italian curse.

“That’s the end of the match! I declare a tie. You’re both sharp as razors. I knew you’d hit it off. Jacek, be aware that Karin is also a contemporary suffragette. She doesn’t give the boys an easy time.”

I snap my fingers at the waiter and order four cognacs to seal our understanding.

“Jacek, who are you really: a journalist, explorer, adventurer?” Her incredible green eyes bore into me. The cold glint that I saw in them just a moment ago is missing. She is an innocent, sweet Lolita again.

“I believe I’m a typical nomad who knows how to combine two passions: journalism with adventure. At the root of both things is my obsessive and all-absorbing curiosity in the world. Life gives each man what he has the courage to take and I don’t want to miss anything.

“Adventure...so much has been said about it. Can you define adventure?”

“Adventure is in each one of us. That’s why there can be no universal definition. For me adventure is the chance to tread virgin paths in search of something that inflames the imagination and leaves a deep impression. Life itself is an adventure as long as we live intensively. Only then can we discover the size of our own fears and face our weaknesses. Adventure is also a risk and dose of adrenaline. Whoever fears risk will never know the taste of a real adventure.”

“Your greatest adventure?”

“The one that is about to start.”

“Does this constant pursuit of adventure make you happy?”

“Happiness...this is very subjective. Several years ago I was in the Tessalit oasis in Mali, dug into the sands of the Sahara. Sitting under a palm tree an old Bedouin asked me where I was from. I said I was from Poland. ‘I don’t know where your country is, but tell me does it rain there?’ I confirmed this, adding that the rains in my homeland sometimes

fall for weeks. ‘Then you must be happy,’ he concluded with a hint of jealousy in his voice. In his country it hadn’t rained for a few years. So, does traveling make me happy? Andrew, you’ve been globetrotting for years. Why do *you* do it?”

My friend smiles.

“Actually, I couldn’t say what drives me out into the world, what makes me act and take risks. There are those who risk their lives for a shot of adrenaline. These frustrated souls are depressed by the everyday routine, evenings spent in front of the television and a properly organized, predictable resume. I travel in order to learn more about life, people and myself. I am hungry for new experiences and I need to be amazed and enchanted. If a person can’t be passionate about anything, if his heart remains cold – then he stops living.”

“Why, Jacek, do so few women participate in your expeditions?”

“Karin, I don’t think you will like my answer. It’s true. I’m not a fan of women on difficult expeditions. There are situations when intelligence, passion and baring your claws are not enough. Sometimes you have to demonstrate brutal power and men are usually better at it. You also have to realize that a woman needs a bare minimum of modesty and this is problematic during difficult excursions.”

“How else do you spend time – other than in organizing and taking part in fascinating expeditions?”

“For the sake of balance, I have a few other interests.”

“Beautiful women, elegant parties?” she enumerates.

“You are unnecessarily cruel. What if I told you that I study the reproductive life of fleas or play the English horn?”

“Well, I would have to admit that one can learn a great deal from such a man. However, I doubt we’ll waste much time talking about our experiences with fleas.”

“This is not a question of time, but...”

“There is always a ‘but.’ Every interesting man I come across has to be mixed up with some kind of trouble in the form of a ‘but...’”

“You didn’t let me finish. I wanted to say that women of a certain age are probably interested in studying the reproduction of creatures slightly larger than the flea.”

“But girls of a certain age certainly enjoy playing on different horns...not necessarily of the English variety.”

Time passes quickly during these kinds of frivolous discussions. The only problem are the pompous sir and madam forms of address.

“Let’s get rid of this formality. It’s terribly stiff and being on a first-name basis is easier for conversation. Don’t you agree?”

“It is an honor for us,” Karin laughs impishly.

“Well, that’s behind us.”

“*Salud!*” The tinkle of our glasses as we toast seals the deal.

After an hour of pleasant chatter, the girls take their leave and we are left alone.

“Karin is a real princess,” Andrew shakes his head. “Let’s have a drink because we are only a side show for beautiful bodies. All the rest is illusion.”

“All women are a little nuts, but they act all modest and emotional. If you try to get under the skirt of a girl like that, you’re a jerk and leech for endangering her virtue. If you don’t, you’re a naïve idiot who insults her femininity and none of them will forgive you for it.” I echo his claim, happy to have found a kindred spirit.

“Tomorrow I am going to the Pachacomac sanctuary. Would you like to keep me company?” Andrew offers.

“Good idea. I’ve tried to get there a few times already. Something always seems to come up.”

“See you tomorrow then.”

In the morning we spend a significant slice of time enmeshed in the traffic jams that plague the lives of the capital’s residents. After escaping from the insanely congested central district, we drive through the green neighborhood of Miraflores, a large and exclusive garden for the Lima elite. The street names alone – Los Ficus, Los Eucaliptos, Los Cedres – are enough to make a man dizzy, not to mention the scent of flowers coming in waves from behind the fence. These gardens boast an impressive array of long avenues overgrown with royal palms, whose shapely trunks are crowned with plumes of green. The road is framed on both sides with glassed-in villas, extremely ornate yet balanced by elegance.

We leave behind the city outskirts and begin to pick up speed, unexpectedly coming across a sign on the side of the road bearing the inscription PACHACOMAC. An exit off the highway, running next to a foul-smelling refinery, leads us into a desert-like landscape in ironic contrast to the name of our destination: Pachacomac – Land of Fertility. A few hundred years ago the name was well-deserved. The entire Rio Lurin river valley, thanks to a well-developed irrigation system, consisted of one huge garden. Now outside our windows not even a bird in flight is visible – only the ocean breeze sweeping in from the West kicks up clouds of sand. This landscape has for centuries been the traditional home of the most holy of seers in the Americas, whom few others around the world could rival. The holy gates of Pachacomac drew pilgrims from throughout Peru, who came to bow their heads before a wooden statue of god. Just as in Dodon and Delphi in Greece, advice and support during the most difficult periods of a man’s life were sought here.

The temple of the god, who “created the Earth from nothing and was the spirit of the world,” stands on the hill. He protects a triple wall and the steep steps leading through three gates and an equal number of courtyards to the holiest chamber where, in the half-light of the small grotto and surrounded by votive offerings, the god’s wooden likeness stood, carved from one tree trunk. The exterior temple walls, plated in polished sheets of gold and silver, shimmered in the sun, testifying to the power of Pachacamac and his priests. Even greater was the wealth demonstrated by ritual instruments, votive offerings and precious stones covering the recesses of the temple treasure since every petitioner who visited the seer was first required to fast for twenty days and then buy the god’s favor with expensive gifts.

The stream of gold intensified after the conquest of this coastal land by the Inca. Clever as foxes, they combined their own beliefs with those of the conquered peoples and linked Pachacamac with Virakocha to create the supreme god Tawantinsuyu. The Inca did not forget about the remaining tribal gods either. In the vicinity of Pachacamac’s shrine, an ornamental temple was built to the god Inti and his wife – the goddess of the moon. The entire temple complex was encircled by the homes of priests, servants and a number of monasteries since both the gods themselves and the pilgrims who came to worship them demanded just the right care to ensure that the flow of offerings continued without interruption.

Every Peruvian dreamed of laying his mortal remains to rest near the temple of Pachacamac, hence over the centuries an enormous burial ground spread outwards from it. Professor Chris Makowski, an archeologist at the Catholic University of Lima, estimates that in the Tablada de Lurin alone there may be as many as eighty thousand graves. Today’s residents probably give no thought to the fact that their homes were built on the graves of their ancestors, although this eerie coexistence does bring them

measurable benefits. Entire families make a living by exploiting the graves, which are hidden away from the prying eyes of archeology teams. In this respect the people of Lurin have become members of Peru's middle class.

While the mummies preserved in their graves have survived in relatively good form, the buildings on the surface are unfortunately one big ruin. Sand carried by the wind eats away at the clay walls, raising a silent burial shroud over the helpless structures. Stubbornly and patiently the sand encases everything built by man in tribute to the gods of the earth and sun in a gritty skin. Now only the sun rules over this place, mercilessly burning up every shred of life.

Notes

The fall of this Incan site began in 1533, when Hernando Pizarro was ordered to Pachacomac with the task of speeding up the delivery of gold being gathered in Cajamarca as a ransom for Atahualpa. Local priests, in the midst of a civil war, joined sides with Huascar believing Atahualpa, the son of a concubine, to be a usurper. They decided to tuck the temple's treasures away in safe hiding places, the locations of which no amount of imaginative torture could induce them to reveal. The treasure literally disappeared underground and no trace of it has been found until today. By tearing out the golden nails in wooden elements of the temple, the Spanish were able to accumulate only 625 kilograms of this precious metal. The heaviest items were the golden steps taken from the temple on which the god himself was rumored to have sat.

No gold was found even in the sanctuary of Pachacomac. After the doors, decorated with ornamental crystal, turquoise and coral were forced open, Pizarro's

soldiers barged into the gloomy interior, but instead of piles of gold and precious stones, the darkened chamber was filled with the fetid smell of blood offerings. Only a few forgotten emeralds littered the floor. In the farthest corner stood a wooden, phallic sculpture of the cruel god. His proud eyes stared down at the intruders from two heads.

The rage of the Spanish was enormous and the sacred statue was dragged out of the temple and thrown in a random corner where it lay awaiting the shovel of an archeologist for several hundred years. In his place a great cross was raised, thus putting an end to the ancient sanctuary. Abandoned by pilgrims and priests, the dams and channels stopped watering the fields and gardens. The city and entire valley wilted and wandering sand dunes slowly reclaimed its streets, palaces and temples under a smothering cloak of monotonous waves.

We climb to the peak of natural hills where ruins of a temple dedicated to the god Inti still stand. Here the destructive hand of time is clearly visible. Only the narrow ribbon of the Lurin river, framed on both sides by a thin strip of green, breaks the monotony of the golden brown desert.

“Look, Jacek. Isn’t this a view associated with landscapes in the Nile river valley? It is hard to believe that just five hundred years ago this desert was able to feed thousands of people.”

“Here in this place, irrespective of the wishes of the conquistadors and the priests who accompanied them, the stamp of the sun’s rule is as strong as always. Here the sun is still god.”

The desert ends at the horizon in a mountain range, although to the west there is nothing to break a person’s line of sight. Far off in the distance the eye can just make out

a motionless, smooth sheet of water. From this height neither the crash of the waves, nor the tide is visible. This ocean certainly deserves the name pacific – at least today.

The Temple of the Moon Goddess, the honorable wife of the sun god Inti, along with the neighboring Convent of the Sun Virgins, is located in a small valley dotted with trees. The monastery was renovated in 1963, although not with much diligence, but we are able to walk through its winding corridors and courtyards and glimpse the swimming pools occupied by water plants instead of bathing virgins. Entering a small cell, we speculate concerning the feelings of the girls who lived here, separated from their families from childhood and dedicated to the god Inti.

“The only asset these girls had was beauty. If they had remained in their villages, years of hard work would have ruined them. Here they gained an education and refinement. The question is whether this life of plenty and luxury, considering their obligations in the royal bed, was adequate compensation?”

“Probably not. If you’ve ever known a woman, you know how hard she is to please. The fate of these girls, shut away within the monastery was particularly cruel.” Andrew rummages through his notes. “Some were sacrificed on the alter as an offering to Inti and that’s not just a sick fairy tale. Max Uhle found proof after unearthing a nearby necropolis in 1897 – an entire quarter of the graves of young girls who were strangled. They laid down their lives during times of crisis or sickness for the Inca. Life for life. Young women were suffocated, buried alive or put under an obsidian knife to remove the heart as an offering to Inti.

“They say that the Inca, in contrast to other pre-Columbian peoples, avoided human sacrifice on the alter of their sun deity.”

“That’s not true, Jacek. I could give you many examples. Just off the top of my head there was the famous “Juanita,” a nickname given to the mummy of a 15-year-old

girl who was offered to the mountain deities of Amputo after being drugged. In the 1980s American mountain climber and archeologist Johan Reinhardt, uncovered many similar discoveries above an elevation of 6,000 m in the Peruvian Andes. These particular sacrifices were made to the *apus* – mountain deities.

“Why would they sacrifice children on a high mountain glacier?”

“Opinions are divided on the issue. Some believe the ritual was intended to gain the favor of the gods, while others maintain that the mummies were supposed to scare off intruders and guard something very valuable – perhaps Incan treasure? Even today, on Andean plateaus in villages cut off from civilization, bloody rituals are still practiced to guarantee a good harvest or a plentiful water supply. Faith in the old, bloodthirsty gods was only superficially replaced by a Christian staffage.

“Old Pachacomac and its forests of gold are definitely more to my taste.”

“But it was here that the gold was transported, out of the reach of greed Spanish invaders. Their presence had a tragic ending for Incan gods. You saw what remained of the temple: a few walls of sun-dried adobe²³ brick, traces of an entrance ramp and the outline of courtyards. Only archeologists have been lucky because among the ruins a statue of Pachacamac was found.”

Today it stands in a glass case in the tiny local museum. Slim, with an evidently phallic form and created in one piece from the trunk of a local *lucomo* tree, its two faces stare in opposite directions. Once they possessed the mysterious gift of fortune telling and delving into the past. I walk slowly around the case protecting the deity’s statue and wonder which of his faces looked into the past. Who wouldn’t want to see this city in all of its glory, filled with crowds of petitioners and priests going about the business of secret rituals? Unfortunately, all that remains is a piece of wood, not a time machine. The past

²³ A mixture of clay and straw formed into bricks that were left in the sun to dry.

refuses to open before me, despite my intensive efforts to gaze into the eyes of the god. News of my expedition to Paititi is slow in coming. Perhaps this is because I didn't bring any golden offerings? Ignored by the god, I can only bid farewell to this unusual and colorful place. Goodbye to old and proud Pachacamac.

We return to Lima hurriedly to make a late-afternoon appointment with Professor Chris Makowski, an archeologist married to a Peruvian woman who has lived in Lima for thirty years. The dean of the local Pontifical University invites us into his office. Valuing our host's time, we get straight to the point and ask:

“Why is it so difficult to get permission in Peru for archeological missions?”

“Peru is an archeological paradise, which explains why there is so much illegal digging going on. As early as the 16th century, the Spanish issued permits for the excavation of ancient cemeteries. Of course, no one was interested in securing the traces of the country's rich past. Everyone, including the royal authorities, was interested exclusively in the gold. As a result, even those many sites have been irreversibly destroyed, the ground continued to reveal new discoveries. It is estimated that on the coast alone there are close to six hundred thousand sites of various sizes, from one square meter to five hundred hectares. This is also why the *huaquero* profession is so popular. I know of entire villages that make their living from this illegal activity. In order to protect the heritage of the past, restrictive legal regulations were introduced and harsh punishments, including imprisonment, were set out for those who violate archeological sites and sell or keep valuable pre-historic objects. Permits for excavation are subject to complicated bureaucratic procedures and the Peruvian official has a special talent for making what is already difficult more complicated. If we add intrigue and feuds between

archeologists – Peruvians against Americans, researches from Cuzco against the rest, please do not be amazed that acquiring the appropriate documentation is not simple.”

“Let’s assume that I receive the necessary paperwork. What am I not allowed to do?”

“It is essential that you accept the overriding principle that in gaining information about our archeological heritage, it is not destroyed beyond what is required for the purposes of protection or scientific research,” explains the professor patiently. “The permit does not allow you to dig, remove historic objects from the ground, make drawings of the terrain, remove plants or do anything that might harm the site. Even making low-level passes overhead in a helicopter is forbidden.

“Professor,” Andrew interrupts in a voice that is both amused and serious, “if all those restrictions had been enforced just one hundred years ago, then the greatest international archeologists would be behind bars - Schliemann, Bott, Layard, Stephens, Thompson...and the permits for excavation of Troy, Nineveh, Copan and Chichen Itza would still be laying on an official’s desk.”

The professor laughs, but his expression becomes somber immediately.

“You have mentioned a painful problem for contemporary archeology. There are many formal and informal barriers that are difficult to overcome for someone from the outside. In Peru permission for excavation work is granted by the Instituto Nacional de Cultura de Peru (INC).²⁴ All applications and excavation projects must be submitted there, along with financial guarantees for the entire project, which is particularly difficult for a project lasting many years, and even all this doesn’t necessarily guarantee a license. Then your team needs to include the right big names, authority figures for those who are handing out the necessary stamps of approval. It just goes on and on...I don’t want to

²⁴ National Institute of Culture.

scare you. In the meantime, *huaqueros* aren't asking anyone for permission to dig up further sites.

“What do you think about the theory that tries to identify a common civilization for all pre-Columbian cultures in the Americas?”

“The search for a civilizational first mother – the Madre Culture – has gone on for a long time. No civilization is born without solid roots. The problem is where to look for those roots.”

“Are the jungles of the Eastern Cordillera a good place to look for the source of Peruvian civilizational cultures? In the places where in recent years there have been an increasing number of discoveries of stone ‘forgotten cities?’” Andrew is relentless.

“It is hard to say.” The professor takes a moment to collect his thoughts. “Have ancient ruins really been ‘discovered’ there? After all, the secrets of Machu Picchu were known to local Indians even before Bingham. It was the same with Gran Pajatén in the Cordillera you mentioned. What discoveries are we talking about?” he laughs, visibly amused by this tricky answer.

It is understandable why a university professor has to demonstrate reserve when it comes to evaluating risky and as yet unproven theses. Nonetheless, our thoughts are speeding ahead. We are only scientific outsiders.

“*Adios* professor!”

Huaqueros

Beautiful beaches, a turquoise ocean and a pleasantly cool breeze are blessings for Lima, a city choking under waves of stifling smog. We recline on a wide expanse of powdery sand separated from the city infrastructure by a steep escarpment. I watch an assortment of shapely, tanned bodies and muscled men surfing the long ocean waves. They balance on bent knees with arms extended out to the side. Along the waterline a girl jogs, dressed only in a tight shirt bearing the blood red sign: I am a virgin – unfortunately! Her large breasts move playfully with each step and spark the male imagination. All this scene needs to be perfect is a few fluffy clouds in the sky to block out the sun, if only for a moment. Unfortunately, only ragged strips of shade provided by umbrellas of woven palm fronds stand between us and the nearly vertical rays of sunlight.

Our fair European skin pales against the bronze complexions of Juana and Karin. A moment ago they emerged from the water, shaking drops of water from long hair and then laid their heavenly bodies down next to us. Now they lay motionless like Greek statues, hips bent like an ancient amphora, with long, perfectly smooth thighs and wide shoulders. This is a sight to make even an impotent man uncomfortable since the strips of material used in these bathing suits expose everything. I'm impressed.

"They should sell tickets for something like this," murmurs Andrew, obviously moved by the scene unfolding before our eyes.

We rest as the warm sand drains away the exhaustion of last night's wild festivities. It was Karin who came up with the idea of going to a night club. Supposedly it was the best in the city, but that didn't matter much since the room was unbearably stuffy and a noisy band made conversation impossible. We order double daiquiris and the girls asked for Cuba libres. A good daiquiri is slightly sweet and mildly sour. Get the proportions wrong and the drink is as sour as vinegar. The mix I received in this club is

tasty, but it is obvious that there is still too little alcoholic content because the room was still too stuffy and noisy. We ordered again and things started to get better. I couldn't hear the band, but I could definitely feel Karin's warm glow nearby. The soloist, dressed in a white sequined dress, sang an up-tempo hit in a childlike alto voice.

"Shall we dance?" The girl pulls me out onto the dance floor.

She is a good dancer and I could sense that Karin was in her element on the dance floor. Her movements seemed to be musical. Every gesture, her entire person radiated joy. After a fast rumba the band shifted seamlessly into a tango. Karin threw her arms around my neck and nestled her body against mine. We swayed to the slow rhythm of the melody.

"I can't remember when dancing was so much fun. You glide across the floor like haze over a flame."

"Do you usually bullshit your girlfriends like this?"

"In lonely dreams on the ocean and in the jungle."

"And when you call to port?"

"Oh, then I become more picky."

She snuggled closer. Her skin smelled like something exotic. The proximity of a young woman, arousing and pleasing, considerably hampered my usual grace on the dance floor and distracted me. Actually, any man holding a girl like that in his arms would have problems concentrating. It was pleasant. I could smell her hair and warm, exciting body and felt a pang of sorrow when the dance was over.

Andrew and I were both quite tipsy when, long after midnight, we caught a taxi and saw the two girls home. At this hour the streets were empty. Karin fell asleep with her head propped on my shoulder...or maybe she was pretending to be drunk? We pulled up in front of her house.

“Forgive me for not inviting you inside for a last drink, but my parents are really conservative. A man’s first visit to a girl’s home and in the middle of the night no less is something they just wouldn’t approve of. Thanks for a lovely evening.” She kissed me on the cheek and was gone.

I couldn’t say whether I was reliving last night in a daydream or whether I was dozing, but the latter is a more likely explanation given the heat. Andrew has to jostle my shoulder to bring me back to the beach.

“Do you hear that Jacek? Karin very nearly forgot to tell us about our meeting with the *huaquero*.”

“Sorry guys, but after a night in the company of such macho men I think I have the right to be a little unconscious. Don’t panic. You have two more hours and it isn’t far from your hotel to the El Dorado cafe.

We arrive punctually for the meeting, but we still have a problem – and not because the discrete semi-darkness of the cafe makes faces hard to distinguish. We have no idea how “our” *huaquero* looks, but he is supposed to be carrying a *Newsweek* magazine in his hand for easy identification. Unfortunately, there are two elegant gentlemen engrossed in the magazine and neither fits our mental image of a person who makes a living from plundering graves and archeological sites, always one step ahead of the scientists and two ahead of the police. In resignation we start to leave when one of the men approaches us, pronounces our names and invites us to his table.

“I am Ruben,” he begins. “That is what you can call me, although this is not my real name – a fact that surely doesn’t surprise you.”

It doesn't but we still have a hard time believing that this nearly 60-year-old man, with the look of a businessman and a friendly smile that reveals a row of healthy teeth, is one of the most active grave robbers. Ruben reads our minds.

"Yes, I am a *huaquero*, or more precisely I was a *huaquero*. My whole life was spent learning this profession in pre-Colombian cemeteries. With a shovel and pickax in hand, I have spent many nights there." His furrowed, weather face corroborates these words. "I have searched many sites, which were later 'discovered' with great pomp by archeologists, although we were there first. If it is said that in Peru alone there is an enormous number of sites awaiting inventory, then to a large extent it is thanks to our efforts. We left behind some worthless shards, dishes and rags. We are only interested in gold because it is the easiest to sell."

He breaks off when the waiter appears with our drink orders.

"I have heard, *señor*, that you intend to search for El Dorado."

"A search won't be necessary, I'm already sitting there," I quip with the name of the locale in mind. Ruben, however, has no feel for jokes.

"Don't play me for a fool, *señor*. I know much about you. Before our meeting, I checked you out with some of my acquaintances – people I trust – who vouched for you. You want to reach Paititi. You're collecting information on the subject. Unfortunately, I am unable to satisfy your curiosity since I stopped looking for money in graveyards long ago. Now I do business as a middleman, mainly the sale of valuable items," he adds. "Often I can even offer a certificate of authenticity. I used to trade with *gringos*, but now I have clientele in Europe – and not just any kind," he boasts, not bothering to hide his pride. "More refined. Real connoisseurs. They want original pieces and pay good money for them."

We are disappointed. This is a pointless waste of time. After all, I'm not interested in doing business with a grave robber. Ruben notices the disappointment painted on our faces and smiles for the first time during the course of our conversation.

"However, I am able to help. I can arrange contact with active *huaqueros* if you are ready to devote a few days to a trip in the North to the Leymebamba region."

We nod our assent.

"There is only one condition," he adds. "After your return you must meet with me again."

"That seems like something we can agree to," I say, looking at Andrew.

"A meeting like that doesn't commit us to anything," he replies. We are in agreement.

"We accept your condition, *señor* Ruben."

"In that case a man with a car will come to your hotel the day after tomorrow at 6 a.m."

"Leymebamba – it's pretty far away. I have another proposal. We will take a plane to Trujillo and someone will pick us up at the hotel there. Of course, we would pay for the travel costs. I don't want to expose you to higher costs just to satisfy our whims."

"I don't incur any extra costs," he says. "My man travels, let's say on business, but you must follow his instructions on the spot. So, three days from now...perhaps in the Rosalia hotel. Get a room at the hotel and then it will be easy to find you, OK?" He smiles again and raises his glass in a toast. We drink to seal the agreement.

I avoid traveling on Peruvian roads and not only because of their extremely poor condition. The greatest threat here are the local drivers, who seem to have an inborn aversion to obeying traffic regulations, which combined with the South American temperament, often ends tragically. Moreover, the northern route has a bad reputation

with drivers. A constant shower of sand is blown from the slopes above, while the ocean waves await unfortunate travelers at the foot of steep cliffs. Over long expanses the Andes thrust several kilometers up from the abyss all the way to the coast, leaving precious little room for the Carratera Panamericana.²⁵ That's why I prefer to fly. It's saves us time and stress – and there have been far too many of the latter in my life lately.

We fly on the border of earth, water and sky. The solitude of the desert landscape is broken from time to time by small towns and villages, usually located at the mouths of the few rivers that exist here. These are all that remains of thousands of years of cultivation on the continent, leaving behind ruined cities, fortress temples and enormous necropoleis. The Great Wall of Peru was built for the same purpose as the considerably larger and more well-known Great Wall of China, although it is still just as visible from the air. Like a scar this 80-kilometer structure stretches from the coast through the San valley and on into the mountainous wilderness. It was originally five meters high, with the same measurement at the base, and its defensive advantages were reinforced by the construction of several dozen stone forts. On this local Marginot Line the rulers of Chimú managed to resist the gigantic Incan army of Tupac Yupanqui. To this day researchers have been unable to determine which pre-Columbian civilization began erecting these fortifications.

Notes

We know little of pre-Columbian cultures. To a large degree the “blame” for this state of affairs can be laid on the Inca – the last rulers of these lands before the Spanish invasion. The Inca, convinced of their divine origins, consciously

²⁵ Pan-American Highway.

wiped out the traditions of their predecessors. This information was blotted out with such precision that even the names of these peoples did not survive until our times. For this reason pre-Incan Andean cultures are identified with the names of places and rivers where traces of their habitations were found. Hence the cultures in question are the Chavin, Tiahuanaco, Moche, Paracas and Nazca – only in the case of the Chimú are we on somewhat firmer ground.

In approximately 600 on the banks of the Moche river, a warlike and enterprising peoples appeared and soon conquered several nearby valleys. This group built an irrigation system that extended for kilometers into the desert, which created the right conditions for crops such as beans, corn, peanuts and pepper. They set out in search of lapis lazuli as far as Chile and traveled to Ecuador for the exotic *spondylusa* snail. Talented sculptors and artists, this people perfected a method of galvanization, used to plate copper objects with gold and their sculptures and drawings provide a nearly photographic image of their daily lives and behaviors. At some point in the 8th century they suffered a catastrophe and the Moche culture sank back into the mists of oblivion.

They were reborn two hundred years later in the Chimú culture. The Chimú kingdom, which spanned nine hundred kilometers of the Pacific Ocean coast, in the north reached all the way to the Tumbes and to the Chillón valley in the south. Their history began with the legendary ruler Naymlap, who arrived from the north on a balsa raft and founded the city of Chan-Chan after landing. His successors, thanks to conquest and a well-oiled administration, shifted those borders even farther to the north and south, creating the kingdom of Chimú. Its residents must have been famed for their artistic skills as well as craftsmanship and feats of engineering considering the objects recovered from numerous graves.

Particularly astounding is the masterly craftsmanship of Chimú in processing metal, which they welded, forged, cast, stretched and even gilded and plated with silver. Some of the objects discovered were even plated in such thin layers of gold and silver with an effect that today is only possible using galvanization. Specialists have yet to decipher the mysteries of those workshops since it is difficult to imagine that they had knowledge of electricity.

In the 14th century near the borders of Chimú, the imperial Incas developed and soon the mighty kingdom became a vassal state to the kings of Tawantinsuyu. The civilizational and cultural achievements of this people so impressed the Inca that they quickly assimilated their former enemies' accomplishments in the management and organization of the state, courier services and road construction. The Inca, by erasing all traces of their opponents in conquered lands, were however not barbarians. This approach ensured the survival of ancient necropoleis, cities, fortresses and a historic awareness of the past that is a constant companion of any traveler on the Lima – Trujillo route.

The road leading from the airport to Trujillo cuts through the impressive ruins of Chan-Chan, the capital of the once mighty Chimú kingdom, hidden under drifts of desert sand. Oval domes rise above the wilderness like natural sarcophagi, sealing the remaining palaces and temples tightly. A stifling, indifferent silence has enveloped what was at one time a populous city. Within these walls, over an area of fifteen thousand square meters, an estimated hundred thousand residents resided.

Although the builders used sun-dried clay bricks mixed with grit and cactus juice, Chan-Chan has weathered the centuries relatively well. Only recent downpours, which fall with increasing frequency, have put extra strain on the structure, damaging first and

foremost sculptured reliefs decorating the outer walls. This creates a true dilemma for archeologists: dig and expose the site to further damage or halt excavation and condemn it to oblivion.

“If the needed funds were available, the most valuable fragments of the great tent-roof could be covered,” I propose.

“You want to conserve the ruins and take away the natural beauty that the desert scenery lends? I’ve seen the effect of a similar experiment in Bassa in the Grecian Peloponnesia. A beautiful Doric *peripteros* from the 5th century was covered by a large protective tent. Without a view of the blue sky, the whistle of the wind and the shadows cast by the sun, the temple lost its spirit.

The dead city sleeps in the scorching afternoon heat. No one moves to stop us as we slip between the rows of shrines buried under mounds of sand. At the height of its glory, the capital of Chimú impressed visitors with its size. Built according to a well-thought out plan, it consisted of a complex housing the royal residence, residential areas where the palaces of the wealthy were concentrated and residential quarters for artisans and specialists in various fields, without whom no urban center can function. Only one gate leads to the royal residence – the *cidudela*, surrounded by clay walls with a height of nine meters.

There is no one to forbid us from entering so we delve into a labyrinth of corridors leading towards a huge ceremonial courtyard – the site of parades and theatrical productions as indicated by the stage and excellent acoustics. Wall reliefs sing the praises of the ocean, worshiped by the people of Chimú as the most important deity NI. The ocean is the source of most motifs: stylized waves roll across the walls in a monotonous rhythm, streamlined ships with pointed prows, wreathes of fish and marine birds. Only the funeral platform for the royal family, shaped like a decapitated pyramid, has a more

realistic physical form. Ten of these complexes have been found, one for each of the kings in Chimú history, although not all were entombed beneath the sands. Archeologists believe that the *cidudela* became each ruler's mausoleum in death.

We wander through the maze of ruined walls. Monotonous gray corridors are broken from time to time by an interesting relief that sparks the imagination, creating visions of proudly ornamented courtyards and reception halls. Gaps in the wall reveal the ocean, ever the same and unchanged through the millennia. On the sands lie reed nets, abandoned by fishermen, the same used one thousand years ago. Greenish waves break rhythmically on the deserted coast, which centuries ago witnessed the landing of Prince Naymlap – the founder and architect of Chimú might. The kingdom he built lasted eight centuries until the time of the Inca, signifying an end for the masters of clay *huacos* and the death of a powerful state that extended for thousands of kilometers. *Sic transit gloria mundi...*²⁶

In this slightly philosophical mood we leave the Tschudi palace complex, named after the archeologist-explorer, and stop briefly before *Huaca Arco Iris*. This is the most well-preserved temple in Chan-Chan, the entrance protected by a high defensive wall that keeps unwanted intruders out of its two-story sanctuary of nearly eight hundred square meters. We climb a slanted ramp into the interior in order to take a closer look at the ideally-preserved zoomorphic reliefs that decorate the walls: fish, octopi and crabs. This marine zodiac is concrete proof of the links between the distant past and the present. The harvest that nourished the people of Chimú is the same one that fills the nets of contemporary fishermen.

A few kilometers farther among the sands looms *Huaca del Dragon*. On top of this smallish cult pyramid a large quantity of child-sized bones were found. Were these

²⁶ Thus passes away the glory of the world.

victims sacrificed to unknown deities? Were these gods similar to those engraved on the walls and in frequently repeated reliefs of two dragons, their tongues intertwined in a kind of sophisticated kiss? Below are the same creatures locked in dramatic acts of battle or mating. These dragons – *dragones* – are an unsettling and unearthly phenomenon and would probably be most at home in a science fiction flick.

Exhausted, we pile into the air-conditioned interior of a taxi with a sigh of relief. After a moment we pass the outskirts of Trujillo, a typical colonial city with an even grid of streets and monotonous storefronts. Only Plaza des Armas square provides a respite from this architectural boredom. Dripping with splendor, colonial Baroque facades hide flowered patios sheltered in the shade of marble and majolica. Although clean and well-kept, the city has few attractions for the demanding tourists. After arranging all necessary hotel formalities, we decide to immerse ourselves in times dominated by the Chimú culture a full seven hundred years ago. Two tiered pyramids – in tribute to the Sun and Moon – heavily eroded from the passage of time, still testify to the accomplishments of one of the oldest civilizations on the American continent. Other impressive structures were accredited to the Moche culture, known by the same name as a nearby river.

The Mochica Indians never felt the need to found large cities, but they did erect an unusual cult center. Its most important structure was the enormous Pyramid of the Sun, which undoubtedly deserves the title of the largest structure in the New World erected using adobe bricks. Its contemporary dimensions, while slightly reduced, are still food for the imagination – and this is only a fragment of the original building. Supposedly the construction involved one hundred forty million bricks.

“Look at those marks imprinted in the clay, Jacek,” Andrew points to a few bricks engraved with stars, circles and crescents. “These symbols are the handiwork of the Mochica who produced bricks. Archeologists have supposedly found one hundred

varieties of these symbols. Imagine one hundred brickyards operating at full steam to satisfy the architectural ambitions of its rulers.”

Huaca del Sol was built in the shape of a deformed cross and the longest arms were rectangles with dimensions of 345 by 160 meters and a height of 45 meters. On this platform of a few kilometers a tiered pyramid and the ruler’s palace was erected. From this height we stare at the Pyramid of the Moon across from where we stand and a bare, colorless desert surrounding these two artificial mountains on all sides. A searing, dry wind plays among the ruins, raising whirlwinds of sand.

“Did the priests who performed the rituals in the temples on the top of the pyramids see the same depressing view? What else do the interiors of these gigantic, eroded structures hide?”

In posing this question, I wasn’t counting on an answer. It is difficult to reconstruct the ancient past without documentation or chronicles. On the other hand, I have underestimated Andrew and the accumulated knowledge stored in his brain.

“A similar question was put forward by a certain Spanish conquistador – Montalva. Like the man of action he was, Montalva decided to explore the Pyramid of the Sun. For the search he ‘harnessed’ the nearby Moche river, changing its course so that the water flowed over one of the pyramid’s clay walls. The effect surpassed his wildest expectations. The corridor subsequently revealed led the treasure hunters to a chamber containing booty worth eight hundred thousand ducats for the taking – this was the value of all the silver and gold vessels, ornaments and statues found and then melted down. Another Spaniard, colonel La Rosa, discovered in one of the burial chambers five thousand golden butterflies designed in such details that they seemed on the brink of flying away. Unfortunately, only a description of them remains

because the find was melted into gold bars whose worth was evaluated by bankers instead of art historians.”

“An astounding amount of gold was accumulated by pre-Columbian cultures. Supposedly we have only recovered a small percentage of what is still hidden in Peruvian soil. That explains why the *huaquero* profession is so popular and passed on from father to son – the demand is enormous. The treasures found at these sites find buyers immediately. Inca jewelry has become particularly fashionable. Instead of finding their way into the well-armored shelves of collectors, these priceless objects frequently ornament elegant women, causing a sensation in elite circles.

“I doubt these women have any idea,” Andrew began “that the necklaces draped around their throats were once worn exclusively by men. In the Inca kingdom this privilege was only granted to upper level dignitaries and rulers. Their women had to be satisfied with much more modest ornamentation.”

The next day we go stir crazy from waiting a few hours for Ruben’s man in the hotel. He shows up in the afternoon.

“I am Pedro,” he offers, touching a finger to the brim of a large hat. Without ceremony he loads us into a heavily used and mud-splattered Land Rover parked in front of the hotel. He launches the car into motion like a Formula 1 driver and we discover after leaving the city that our lives are in the hands of a man who is a cross between a crazy race car driver and a road warrior. Occasionally, he reinforces this impression with a selection of dramatic stories.

“In this spot a large rock hit a bus carrying twenty passengers and fell over the cliff. There were no survivors...On this turn a truck filled with workers left the road.” The river winds its way one hundred meters below and we can well imagine the tragic scenes

he is painting. "I was there when they pulled the bodies out. Horrible. The driver was drunk and as if that wasn't enough he had just learned to drive."

One story later we've had enough and fire up a conversation. That should discourage our determined storyteller. There are plenty of topics since one after another we pass through river valleys that were occupied for thousands of years by pre-Columbian civilizations. There are many more undiscovered ruins and burial sites here than in any other region of Peru and proportionally to this figure a literal army of grave robbers operates. Luck plays a significant role in the search, just like in the casinos of Monte Carlo. The unlucky ones find the remains of the poor with *kalebas*²⁷ filled only with peanuts, corn, stone ornaments and shells. More fortunate treasure hunters have a shot at unearthing the mummy of a "gold-ear" as the Spanish called the Incan dignitaries who wore golden covers over their ears.

The Indians believed that a man's life energy was not extinguished in death, but that the dead gathered in the afterworld to drink and eat, as long as their mortal remains were left undisturbed. Therefore they treated the *mallqui* – the bodily remains of their ancestors – with great respect since it was to these spirits that the Indians turned to for help in ensuring a good harvest, among other things. This practice was encouraged by the Peruvian climate, which preserved human remains from the usual decay that take place after a few decades in other regions of the world. Ongoing natural processes of mummification conserved the corpse for hundreds of years. It was enough to place the deceased in dry sand and the nitrous salts it contained protected the body from decay, along with beautiful cloth, delicate crowns, coats made from bird feathers and everyday use items, whose worth was proportional to the degree of wealth garnered by the deceased in life. The mummies of rulers, great leaders and dignitaries received more

²⁷ A bag used to carry the items that accompanied the deceased to the grave.

special treatment. After the entrails were removed, the body was saturated with tar and dried using the same method used for conserving meat and potatoes. Over many days the body was left out, alternatively, to freeze overnight and dry out in the sun. Forced into a fetal position, the mummy was then dressed in costly fabrics and wrapped in rolls of material, lending it a shape that was easy to carry in a bundle.

The graves of rulers are few and far between, although archeologists learn of them most often when the black market is flooded with a large number of valuable ceramic objects and antique jewelry. This kind of sensation unfolded near the tiny village of Sipan in the Lambayueque river valley. The drama played out in this place can be measured by the books and screenplay that focused on the discovery. Everything began on the night of February 23, 1987 when Walter Alva, director of the Brunning Museum in Lambayueque, received a call from the chief of police in Sipan, requesting that he report to the latter's office. After arriving on the scene, he was shown the golden and silver masks, jaguars, ornaments, jewelry and everyday use items recovered from a newly looted grave. The objects were seized during a police raid in the neighboring village of Sipan thanks to a tip from an anonymous thief, obviously one who was unhappy with the division of spoils.

News of the find spread quickly in the area. When Alva, accompanied by the police, appeared in nearby *Huaca Rajada*, a complex of pyramids made from adobe bricks, they found the structures swarming with a host of frantically digging boys, women, children and even the elderly. Three policemen and an archeologist against a hostile crowd, which retreated only after a few warning shots were fired. Alva, who led the excavation work, felt as if he were trapped in a besieged fortress. Nights were the worst. A lack of supplies made the site impossible to secure and professional *huaqueros* from across the country took advantage of the cover of darkness to continue the looting.

As a result, the pyramids increasingly resembled a craterous war zone and the locals began buying new cars.

Archeologists never had any reason to complain. In the course of four excavation seasons they discovered a few treasure-filled graves belonging to dignitaries and local rulers. The sumptuousness accompanying the dead had its genesis in a tradition widely practiced in Peru, which required that all the objects surrounding the deceased individual be placed alongside the body in the grave. In addition to symbols of authority, valuables, ceramics and animals, they were also accompanied by wives and bodyguards. It is hard to say whether these last deaths were the result of free will, a sign of loyalty to one's master, or dealt with a blow at the hand of another.

The richest burial chamber, dating back to 290 AD, contained the remains of a 35-year-old man. He lay within a wooden coffin, the first and oldest encountered by archeologists in South America. His face was covered by a golden mask, his feet encased in copper ceremonial sandals as a sign that they had never tread the dust of the earth. Also placed within the coffin were pure gold breastplates, bracelets, rattles, diadems adorned with turquoise and colored shells as well as fans made from feathers and cotton coats sewn with gold-plaited copper discs. The tomb also housed more than 1,300 ceramic vessels decorated with figural scenes, augmenting our knowledge of these peoples, their lives and habits. Some discoveries made in the grave were earth-shattering. A total of eight individuals crossed into the afterlife at their ruler's side. At his feet and head lay a child and three young women. Among the men who were buried, one was equipped with a gold-plaited helmet and a copper shield, his amputated feet obviously removed to ensure that he wouldn't abandon his master even in death. Archeologists named him the guardian of the tomb.

The *Huaca Rajada* complex consists of three pyramidal platforms erected in several phases between 100 and 700 AD. Lashed over the centuries by the catastrophic storms generated by *El Niño*, the pyramids no longer resemble manmade objects. Perhaps that is how they managed to keep their secrets for so long. Nonetheless, this subtle camouflage was not enough to fool the *huaqueros*. Exhibiting a combination of cleverness, experience and daring, they managed to plunder yet another grave during the course of an archeological excavation. Logic dictates that its contents did not surpass the treasures found in neighboring chambers. This was confirmed by a subsequent police raid in the village, which resulted in the partial recovery of these valuables. Where were the rest?

The trail led all the way to the United States. A joint action was successfully staged by Peruvian police and the FBI involving undercover policemen posing as millionaires who were tasked with contacting the dealers and regaining some of the illegally transported goods. Among other items, the agents were offered a hip-guard of pure gold weighing nearly one and a half kilograms and with an estimated value of \$1.5 million. As it later turned out, the objects were transported out of Peru in the diplomatic luggage of the consul of Panama. An investigation uncovered that the trade in ancient objects also involved many prominent individuals. Among them was a high-ranking official in the Peruvian police force, while one American buyer was a Nobel Prize winner. The resulting scandal was monumental, but did nothing to curb a profitable business.

Pedro is still making a mad dash through the countryside, the car racing in high gear. The highway corridor narrows periodically, becoming a curvy mountain canyon only to emerge precariously onto a thin rock shelf. Occasionally, fragments of rock,

gathering speed in their fall down the slope, catapult across the road and break into pieces only meters below. Turn, straight, tunnel and another turn...with the drone of the road in his head, the driver carefully rubs his eyes. They will determine whether we survive this wild ride. I turn my attention to the shoulder of the road, littered with wooden crosses. At every turn their number increases diametrically – a true way of the cross. They commemorate every fatality and are a constant reminder of danger. At the foot of the cliffs the twisted metal carcasses of crashed cars rust under a constant rain of stony avalanches.

“We travel around the world. Something is always driving us on. The pictures that flit across the television screen aren’t enough. Tell me why do you continue to risk your life by venturing into the craziest places?”

Andrew’s question gets me thinking. I’ve never thought about it in this way. I indulged in a moment of consideration.

“I want to find the truth of people, the world and myself...”

“And have you?”

“Unfortunately, this truth is subjective. It couldn’t be any other way because I see the world through my own eyes. That’s why I stopped believing in the existence of an absolute truth.”

“And what is your truth?”

“Bitter!” I say with a warm smile.

The road cuts through a desolate and hilly landscape. The red-hot ribbon of highway stretches out ahead like stream of water. Every so often a three-meter prickly pear grows on the side of road, adorned with red flowers, its thick plate-shaped leaves covered in frighteningly long thorns and a few egg-like fruits. The rare gas station and restaurant appears like an oasis of rest for people and vehicles. Dusty, sweaty and

smearred with oil, truck drivers descend from their steaming cabins and drown their heads under a stream of cold water. Then, calling for a cold beer, they head for large meat spits encircled by clouds of hungry flies. Cigarette smoke hangs lazily over the tables as the patrons take a breather for tormented muscles and minds. A few minutes later the bar shrinks to a small black dot as the road twists haphazardly. We pass a few small settlements of clay homes, glued to one another in a huddle, and traces of the damage left behind by avalanches of mud and stone that crawl their way down the slopes nearby. The valleys are dotted with thick groves of stunted bushes, interspersed with wax palms, shooting straight towards the sky, gigantic *ceiba* and the increasingly rare Guaiacum – the iron tree valued so highly by the Spanish as a medicine for syphilis.

In the evening we leave for Leymebamba. Pedro, while chauffeuring us to the hotel, passes on instructions from Ruben.

“*Señores!* Register in the hotel under false names like the Americans. No one will ask to see your passport if you agree to pay in advance. I will pick you up first thing in the morning and take you to the meeting that *señor* Ruben promised to arrange.”

At dinner, Andrew expresses amazement at all the safety precautions we are being asked to follow.

“All this cloak and dagger business is exaggerated. All we’re after is information.”

“Maybe that’s why. These are professionals. They’re not used to sharing knowledge with outsiders. We’ll probably be introduced as potential clients. Who would believe that there are rich collectors living in a poor country like Poland?”

In the morning after leaving the town, we drive onto a dirt road that immediately gets rough. Now the 4-wheel drive with which our land rover is equipped comes in handy. Pedro drives in circles for an hour, probably just to make us disoriented. Finally, we park

next to a small stone house set in the middle of vast stretches of pasture, currently occupied by a few horses and a herd of llamas. The house is solid, every beam of the exposed terrace rests on a base with decorative Incan engravings. A graying, middle-aged man waits for us inside. He is tall and lean, slightly stooped and sports teeth encased in gold caps.

“Americanos?” he asks by way of an introduction. His hands are knarled, probably from some kind of manual labor.

We concur and Pedro explains the reasons for our visit.

“Don Cipriano! The friends of *señor* Ruben are interested in cities hidden in the jungle near Rio Madre de Dios, as well as the Chachapoya ruins.”

“Madre de Dios!” He examines us with intelligent, searching eyes. “Many have searched for the way to Paititi for years. I also spent nine years in the jungle in the company of other explorers... *huaqueros* – that is how we are called. We are hated by archeologists, targeted by government legislation, hunted by the army and police and imprisoned. We also take our profession seriously. We study old chronicles and maps and then risk our lives, ruining our health and wasting time in the process. Sometimes we get lucky. When we do manage to discover ruins, the remains of a graveyard, some *huacas*, we exploit them as long as possible – we have families to support too. In the end archeologists always come to us and with our help they make great finds. Men like Hiram Bingham, Alva, Max Uhle and Julio Tello are indebted to us...”

“Am I to understand *señor* that it was not Bingham who discovered Machu Picchu?” My amazement is obvious.

“Before he was there the site was found by a local boy and a *huaquero* – Victor Arteaga. They are the reason your compatriot reached the ruins, which he proceeded to strip of everything with any value. The contents of the countless cases he carried out

enriched private collections. No museum in Peru boasts an exhibit that was found in Machu Picchu. Wasn't Bingham the greatest *huaquero* of all time?" He falls silent as if waiting for our approval to go on. "It was the same story with the discoveries made by royal grave robbers in Sipan," he continues. "The first man there was Bernal Diaz, not Alva. If you want to verify my words *señor*, visit the private museum owned by Enrique Poli in Lima after your return. Diaz worked for him. Poli has the largest collection of Sipan gold worldwide, many times more than what was acquired by the museum in Lambayeque."

"What about Paititi and the other cities hidden in the *selva*?"

"Many have tried to gain access to the wealth they harbor but the humid equatorial forest in the region of Madre de Dios – the *selva alta* – is demanding. Frequent rains, rolling terrain, steep cliffs, a deadly climate, snakes, hostile Indians. Only the toughest and most accustomed to extreme conditions are able to survive for longer periods there. A *Gringo* has no chance. You need experience and strong powers of observation. For example, take the *pacal* plant – a fast-growing thorny variety of bamboo that can be found in clearings, which signal traces of human activity. If you know this...dense, wet undergrowth covers everything. You walk on a thick damp layer of green like a soft carpet. In just a few years this green blanket will conceal walls and paths. Only luck can help the explorer. It was luck that led to the discovery of Gran Pajatén – the city of the Chachapoyas on the eastern side of the Cordilleras near still operating gold mines in Patáz. At the beginning of the 1960s, our people accidentally stumbled across the Incan road which led us to the overgrown *selva* ruins."

"The American Gene Savoy, who explored heavily forested slopes of the eastern Andes in the 1960s, is credited with the discovery of Gran Pajatén," Andrew interjects.

“Savoy heard about Gran Pajatén from Carlos Torrealvy, the guide of his first expedition and the mayor of Patáz. Actually, Gran Pajatén was ‘discovered’ many times. The third, more publicized find by a Peruvian expedition was accomplished with great pomp by Victor Gurmendi. Several objects were recovered from the overgrowth and then silence descended once more over the ruins. It was a good period for our people. We were given a free hand in conducting our searches. Only in the 80s did the Chachapoyas become fashionable and recently a nature reserve was established there.”

“Supposedly a project exists for the development of the Utcubamba valley and the stone city-fortress of Cuelap is to become a tourist attraction on the same scale as the famous Machu Picchu.”

“I have heard of this. A road is to be built from Leymebambay and a cable car to transport tourists to the fortress, situated at an elevation of 3,100 meters. This will require enormous sums of money.”

“*Señor* mentioned hostile Indians living in the Rio Madre de Dios region. Is there any way to befriend them?” I steer the conversation back to the subject that interests me most.

“It is difficult to befriend the Machiguengas, particularly the brave and cruel Cuapacoris. They can only be tamed. Under no circumstances should you enter their territory without an invitation. If you hope to convince them of your peaceful intentions, prepare some presents: knives, machetes, needles, blankets. It is better to travel in a mixed group because the presence of women will assure the Indians that you are not leading a hostile expedition.”

“How do they react to questions about Paititi?”

“The subject is taboo. Just like gold and the burial ground of the *niaupas* – ‘those who lived here before.’”

“Do you make frequent trips to the jungles ruins you have discovered?” asks Andrew.

“If we have a concrete order or come across a new lead. However, this is a very burdensome and costly enterprise.”

“Don Cipriano! If I were to cover the costs, would you participate in such an expedition?”

Our host laughs and shakes his head.

“You don’t kill the hen that lays golden eggs. Besides, *amigo*, that kind of cooperation always ends badly for us. Forty years ago my father worked for Alonsa Cartageny, who supervised the excavation work in the Toporaque region. They found many golden objects: jewelry, golden hatchets...Cartagena became a very wealthy man and my father died of malaria contracted in the jungle. I am an old man and for ten years I haven’t taken part in an expedition to the South. There is even less reason to do so, since I have enough work for quite a long time.” He slaps the table and laughs heartily.

“So how do these cities in the jungle look?”

“They are made of stone – neatly hewn blocks of it. Statues, votives and dishes found within the temples have a different shape and other designs than the items we have found on the coast. The temples are perched on the peak of terraced pyramids. Supposedly, at night they are filled with light and sit astride a series of tunnels...I have not seen them myself. These are the stories told by other *huaqueros*.”

“Don Cipriano, in what region have you found the most objects which differ from the relics of Chimú and Mochiks?”

“Probably in the South. In the jungles that border Peru and Bolivia. But I don’t recommend that you go there. In my region....it would be better if you didn’t let slip what

you know. My colleagues wouldn't take kindly to the spread of these secrets. I can show you the Chachapoyas graveyard. Do you want to see it?"

We nod. Who wouldn't want to see it?

"Then please come back tomorrow first thing in the morning. You will travel in the company of my son." He rises and shakes our hands. This visit has come to an end and there are so many questions I'd still like to ask!

Given the perspective of a free afternoon, we decide to pay a visit to the museum in Leymebamba, a decision we do not regret. Without shedding a drop of sweat, we have an opportunity to take an in-depth look at all the discoveries of note made within the nearest fifty kilometers and compare the differences between the artistic accomplishments of the Mochiks, Chachapoyas and Inca Indians. The greater part of the exposition is devoted to mummies and objects removed from the secret graves of the Chachapoyas – known as the Cloud People, the slightly distorted name given them by the Spanish from a translation of the Quechua language. We know very little about them. From an anthropological standpoint, they differed considerably from neighboring tribes. Tall and light-skinned, they appeared in the area two thousand years ago.

Notes

The Chachapoyas initially settled between two Cordillera, in the valley of Utcubamba, overgrown with tropical forest and eternally beneath a heavy blanket of clouds. These tall, blue-eyed, light-skinned people were easily distinguishable from other tribes in the area and represent a separate anthropological category. Exploiting their location, they dominated trade between Amazonia and the coast.

A people of farmers and merchants, this people began to build stone settlements sometime between the 6th and 7th centuries. In inaccessible regions of the high Andes on the slopes which descend towards the equatorial jungle, a federation of tribes created one of the most fascinating cultures in pre-Columbian America. The first Chacapoyas city was encountered in 1843, but only in the 1960s were more than a dozen ruins of ancient settlements, located high in the mountains, uncovered by an expedition headed by Gene Savoy: La Petach, Gran Vilaya, La Congona, Cuelap, Ollape, Gran Pajatèn, Levanto and finally Gran Saposoa.

Residential structures were built on a circular design, set on tall platforms and covered with conical thatch roofs. Within their temples, this people paid tribute to a deity whose representation was the snake. The walls were decorated with geometric friezes, human figures and animals. Later explorers were amazed at the scale of these cities. Gene Savoy – the discoverer of Gran Vilaya – reported an astonishing metropolis covering 310 square kilometers and containing nearly twenty-four thousand buildings! This kingdom thrived for eight hundred years, succumbing to the Inca, their more powerful southern neighbors, in the 15th century. Nonetheless, the Chachapoyas refused to admit defeat and staged a series of rebellions. Later, the arrival of the Spanish coincided with the spread of new diseases. Today, there are no living representatives of this people.

Waiting in front of don Cipriano's home in the morning is his son Gabriel, who has already saddled the horses. The boy is barely over sixteen years old and represents the third generation to practice the *huaquero* profession in this family. The sky is overcast, but without precipitation. Our horses have a hard time climbing the steep and muddy trail. After three hours of trekking through the forest, we see an enormous wall. From a

distance it appears to be smooth and untouched. As we approach, detailed stonework on the entryways to the digging chambers becomes visible. There are quite a few – some high and requiring a fair amount of climbing ability to scale these imaginative mausoleums. In rougher spots chains have been hung to aid in the ascent. Andrew draws my attention to the unusually dry soil.

“In this climate, dripping with humid, a microscopic ecosystem was found that ensures the preservation of mummies. Look at these leaves – they crumble in your hands as if just taken out of the oven.”

At the foot of the cliff the shards of skulls, their teeth fixed in deathly grins, lay scattered alongside fragments of the cloth used to wrap the mummies and pieces of dishes. These are the traces left behind in the search for valuables and ceramics and cloth that are worthy of sale. This last category, displaying an amazing variety of patterns and unbelievably thin yarn, are particularly sought after on the antique market. Gabriel encourages us to enter the easily accessible tombs.

“There are some interesting pictures.”

Indeed, some of the walls still bear traces of color and the outline of figures. Here the grinning teeth of a puma, there figures locked in combat. In one vault we come across a mummy whose shrouds have long rotted away. Leaned against the wall, his mouth is open in a permanent scream. Dried skin stretches painfully over deformed joints and long locks of hair fall across his eyes.

“I’m curious about the mummification process. Hundreds of years have passed and the mummies are still preserved in excellent condition.”

“We have a little knowledge about it. Local specialists were no less talented than Egyptian priests,” Andrew explained to my surprise. “First the entrails were removed using natural openings to avoid damaging the body. These spaces were then filled with a

mixture of herbs and minerals and dried via temperature differences in the day and night. Perhaps they were transported into higher parts of the mountains where freezing temperatures are constant and kept until the drying process was complete. Finally, the bodies were wrapped in many layers of cloth, creating a bundle that was easy to carry, which was subsequently placed in the tomb. In terms of the local materials, despite their quality, they certainly cannot compare with those I saw in Paracas. The coats made in that region surpassed even contemporary machine-made silk used in the production of parachutes in terms of weave density. Not to mention the endless colors. Twenty-two have been counted and each in a few shades.”

I fall into a reverie gazing into the currently empty burial chambers, imagining this place before it was plundered. Even rows of fetal mummies, looking out at the world through eyes sewn into the external coil of fabric. These bodies are like time capsules – a nest of human cocoons waiting patiently for rebirth. Unfortunately, greed and destructive instincts interrupted this cosmic vigil.

Gabriel is amazed that we refuse to take a souvenir figurine or a fragment of the colored cloth and mentions this after our return to don Cipriano. We make excuses about airport control. In fact we have no wish to become two more grave robbers disturbing the rest of the dead. This is an argument unlikely to be understood by a professional *huaquero*.

“Perhaps you would consent to something better?” Cipriano motions to his son, who after a moment lays a rather heavy bundle in front of his father. “I trust you because you are friends of *señor* Ruben.

Like a magician his hand disappears inside the rags and reappears a moment later with a heavy gold necklace. We gasp from the excitement. The necklace is soon joined by two earrings featuring two large, central stones of turquoise and then a burial mask.

“Did you find this in the tombs we saw today with Gabriel?
I ask.

“That spot was ‘exhausted’ long ago,” Cipriano waves a hand dismissively. “Half a year ago we found this in the jungle, quite far away in an old ruin. As you can see, our new find seems to be rather promising. Both we and many collectors are pleased.”

“Am I to understand that you have already found a buyer for these items?”

“Well, yes...For some time we have not been able to keep pace with demand.” He calls his son and orders him to return the gold to its hiding place. “Now we will eat something because after such a trip you are certainly hungry. While we eat we can talk about Paititi...”

I was only inches away from grasping the great emerald perched temptingly on a pile of gold when the sound of knocking brings me crashing back to reality. Still half asleep I rise from the bed. Pedro stands in the corridor with Andrew. I move aside to let them in.

“*Señor!* Finally. Don Cipriano has been murdered.” Pedro is visibly frightened. My mouth goes dry.

“*Porca miseria!* When? Why?” I ask without thinking.

“I found out one hour ago. The gold he showed you is gone too.”

We are silent, digesting the tragic news and its consequences. We are the last foreigners to see the gold and the victim. Moreover, we are *gringos* registered under false names – the perfect murder suspects. Andrew is thinking the same thing.

“*Kurwa,*”²⁸ he growls. “We’re in over our heads. And we wanted to enjoy the company of *huaqueros.*”

²⁸ Fuck!

“I called *señor* Ruben just a moment ago. He recommended that we return to Lima. Tomorrow it might be too hot here for you. He also asked me to tell you not to worry. He will take care of everything.”

I pack without a word and Pedro wipes down the door knobs, sinks and every other place where we might have left a fingerprint. Andrew is instructed to do the same in his room. Like ghosts we creep silently by the unwary reception desk and climb into the car.

The trip is a true nightmare. Pedro takes the turns at full speed, while I try to keep my stomach from leaping into my throat. We stop twice to buy something to eat and drink.

“You know, it just occurred to me that evil is Friday’s child. Columbus first laid eyes on American on a Friday, Pizarro reached Cajamarca on Friday, Hitler launched World War II on a Friday and October 13, 1307 Pope Clement V ordered the literal liquidation of the Knights Templar. Today is a Friday,” Andrew tries to bring some levity to the situation, but I fend off his efforts with a grim smile.

We talk little during the drive, overwhelmed by this unfortunate turn of events. Suddenly, we realize that by making a quick escape we have tightened the noose of suspicion around our own necks. After all, that’s what this really is – an escape – but from what? We aren’t criminals. We curse our rashness but it is too late to mend the situation. After fifteen hours we are relieved to take refuge in the hotel. Getting into bed, I want nothing more than to erase the past four days from my life and forget them as soon as possible. As luck would have it, this is only the start of our problems.

Cursed Gold

The telephone ring is shrill and persistent, but I have no desire to open my eyes and leave the world of dreams. It feels like this is going to be a good day.

“Hello?” I hear Ruben’s voice on the other end. “We should meet. I’ll meet you in two hours at El Dorado.”

This is the last thing I want to do on this particular morning, but there is no way I can refuse. I call Andrew and we set off for the meeting. Ruben drinks wine while he waits. In contrast to us, it seems as if recent events have made little impression on him and he gives us a wide smile as we approach. In the stream of words he offers as a greeting, the most important are that the police in Leymebamba have not connected us with the death of Cipriano.

“My people have shifted suspicion towards Cipriano’s associates. The old man had a bone to pick with them for a long time. He wasn’t always honest with his accounts and it ended badly for him. It’s too bad. He was the best in the trade. Let’s drink to him.”

I drink without pleasure and not because I don’t like wine. My grandfather used to say that it is a drink that should be enjoyed in good company. Ruben’s presence is stressful. He has pulled me into some dramatic events that I am eager to forget and at the same time I am sure this is not the end of our problems.

“I’ve gotten you two out of some serious trouble. I hope you will be willing to repay the favor. You could help me in my business.”

My face shows pure amazement, but I say nothing. Let him put all the cards on the table.

“Ever since the world discovered pre-Columbian cultures and the market for Andean antiquities developed, we have taken advantage of the boom. Nevertheless, demand exceeds supply. That’s why I have an agreement with a certain forger of pre-

Columbian art. This guy is a real master. He knows his work. There are those who produce worthless crap and want to make big money for it. My expert models his work on original items. Without going into details, I'll say only that he uses the ancient methods of the Inca. Using the lost-wax method, he first makes a copy out of wax and then dips it many times in a clay solution. When the layering is thick enough it is heated and the object is removed through remaining openings in the melting wax. The resulting form is then filled with melted gold. After it dries and the shell is broken, all that is left is a little work on the patina and...it's ready for the client. I'm telling you – it's a beauty. A few of his works can be seen in the local Museum of Gold, stored in cases behind protective glass. I was even fooled once myself. I believed I was buying a 10th-century statue. Later I found out it had come from the laboratory of my friend. He's a perfectionist." Ruben runs a hand through his greasy hair.

"Why are you telling me all this?" I pretend I have no idea what he is about to propose.

He sighs, perhaps suspecting that his intentions are all too clear.

"*Señor Palkicz,*" he mispronounces my name. "Why are you playing dumb? OK. I will say in clearly. We need new originals in order to increase our trade offer. Your expedition can deliver them."

"If I understand your proposal correctly, you are offering me the following deal: everything I find goes first through your friend's workshop or the police will find out about our meeting with Cipriano and the night escape from Leymebamba. Is that right?"

He closes his eyes and wets his lips in the wine.

"*Señor Ruben,* the answer is 'no' twice," I reply. "The first 'no' because I respect the laws of every country that welcomes me and the second 'no' because the concession that I have applied for does not allow me to remove any objects."

“I did not believe it when I heard that the burial sites you visited were not missing so much as a shard,” said Ruben. “You are truly honest idiots, but that’s your problem. I won’t be left on the ice. You’ll have big problems.” His eyes burned with anger.

“No *señor* Ruben, you are the one who is going to have trouble.” Andrew, who until this point hasn’t said a word, now removes his hand from underneath the table and waves a tiny dictaphone under Ruben’s nose. “Should I play back the part where you admit to manipulating witnesses to a murder? Would you like to hear again about your revolutionary forgeries and collaboration with a forger of relics?”

If a look could kill, Andrew would already be laying under the table. His gaze is pure venom.

“I trusted you. Supposedly, you guys are reliable.”

“Honest people can count on us, but never a blackmailer.” I get up from the table. “*Adiòs!* And stay away from us if you want to stay out of trouble.”

On the street I take a deep breath. Now we’ve dealt our cards. I look at Andrew’s amused face.

“Just when did you come up with the idea to record our conversation?” I inquire.

“I always carry this little useful tool. I record my impressions when I can’t write: during a bumpy bus ride, at night. When I realized that Ruben was threatening us and that we weren’t holding any of the cards, I pulled an ace out of my pocket. You witnessed how it worked.”

“You mean....um...,” I say around the lump in my throat. “You mean you didn’t record anything?”

“Not a word. I bluffed.” We roar with laughter.

“You’re a good pal.” I give him a bear hug. “If it weren’t for your reflexes, we’d be in deep trouble trying to get away from that bloodsucker. Nonetheless, the shadow of

Cipriano still hangs over us and we have no idea what the humiliated king of the *huaqueros* will think up next. It might be a good idea to disappear for a while from Lima...I have an idea. In a few days I'm going on a reconnaissance trip to the Rio de Dios river basin. Maybe you would like to go with me?"

"I don't have a choice. Someone has to keep you out of trouble."

I join in his carefree laughter. The company of this easy going and humorous man makes me feel at ease.

Ruben's suggestions concerning forgeries in the Museum of Gold remind me that I have so far avoided visiting one of Lima's greatest tourist attractions. I decide to make the trip out of purely scientific curiosity. Since we intend to discover Paititi's treasures, I'd like to be familiar with the capabilities of pre-Columbian goldsmiths and their techniques. In the Museum de Oro del Peru, despite the obvious suggestion in its name, only a miniscule part of Peru's gold is on display. However, it is still enough for didactic purposes as well as to amaze those whose everyday contact with this precious material is measured in grams.

Notes

The Museum of Gold is the manifestation of one man's passion for collecting – Miguel Mujica Galo. Most of his collection comes from one source, the monumental Batan Grande hacienda with an area of thirty thousand hectares, located in the north in the state of Lambayeque. There, purely by accident, one of the largest necropoleis of the Chimú people was uncovered. Established in 1935, this private venture exhumed the graves with the permission of successive national presidents. Excavation lasted until 1968, when, as a result of the reforms

initiated by Velesca Alvorada, large estates were parceled out. However, in line with a relevant contract, for thirty years half of these finds found their way to the National Museum of Archeology in Lima, while the remaining items were sold by shareholders to Miguel Galo, creating the core of his collection.

The exposition consists of eight thousand gold and silver objects. This is only a fraction of what was saved from conquistador greed and contemporary grave robbers. Galo's collection allows the public to witness the artistry of ancient Peruvian goldsmiths. They used a variety of techniques: hammering, trimming, filigree and polishing. They were also able to combine gold and platinum. From poor quality alloys they knew how to bring gold to the surface by polishing an object with a special variety of acidic grass. These abilities resulted in the creation of dishes, ritual objects and jewelry. The last was worn first and foremost by rulers, priests and warriors, for whom necklaces of gold and precious stones, golden belts adorned with pendants as well as earrings of often considerable weight were intended.

The museum is located in the outskirts of Lima, tucked away in a beautiful park of eucalyptus. The ground and first floors house a huge collection of deadly guns of all shapes and sizes. This is another of Miguel Galo's passions. The real treasures can be found instead in a heavily guarded underground bunker. The amount of gold and precious stones gathered in one place is truly breathtaking – these objects are priceless from the perspective of art, archeology and history, not to mention in terms of their market value. The wondrous delicacy of coats made from feathers, gold burial masks, crowns, earpieces, armlets, ritual *tumi* knives and ceramics from the Chavin, Huari and Moche cultures. How much work has gone into making the *uncu* – tunics ornamented with

sixteen thousand gold disks. The patterns decorating the sedan chair of Chan-Chan rulers, covered in gold and silver, is extremely subtle. Each of these exhibits represents the individual story of the artists who created these wonders; the adventures of anonymous explorers penetrating the ancient necropoleis and settlements squirreled away in the Andean *selva*.

The quantity of objects in tens of variations and shapes fills the cases and shelves almost to overflowing. Kilograms of golden sheeting, coils of necklaces, crowns and scepters sprinkled with priceless stones, chalices and cups. For many of them it is hard to imagine a practical use. What possible use, for example, could a human skull fitted with lilac-colored teeth made from mountain crystal have? The information sheets attached to each exhibit are also somewhat misleading and general. The most frequent phrase is “ritual object,” sometimes modified with the comment “most likely.” This is a helpless admission of ignorance despite years of research by an army of educated experts.

Andrew and I sit in the outdoor patio of a cafe. Rum and cola with ice is just the thing to cool us down and clear the museum dust from our throats. We still haven't recovered from the impression made by the hundreds of kilograms of this precious metal collected in the underground bunker and wonder where man's constant and obsessive fascination with gold comes from. To possess it men have embarked on the craziest expeditions and committed the most repulsive acts.

“Gold is a treasure! He who has gold makes and accomplishes whatever he wishes in the world and finally uses it to send souls to paradise,” I quote Columbus from memory.

“I found the exactly opposite opinion in the writings of Pindar: Gold is the child of Zeus. Neither moth nor rust devour it but the mind of man is devoured by it, wrote the 5th

century Greek poet. Obviously two thousand years have diametrically changed peoples' opinions. In those times Jason set sail in search of the Golden Fleece, poor Midas suffered from his ability to turn everything to gold with just one touch and Croesus destroyed his country as a result of his belief in the power of gold. Then the myth of El Dorado was born – a land of gold and precious stones as well as the fantastically wealthy Seven Cities of Cibola...”

Andrew falls silent for a moment and glances at two long-legged women dressed in clothing that has been reduced to a minimum. Shapely buns sway enticingly under a thin layer of dress.

“These damn fashions don't leave anything to the male imagination. Then women complain about being molested. Anyway, coming back to the gold...only the pre-Columbian peoples of America were immune to its charms. For the Inca it had only practical value and next to copper and silver was the only metal known to them. In the form of artistic handicrafts gold was frequently offered to tribal deities since it was known as ‘the tears of Inti.’ The wealth collected in their temples sealed their fate at the hands of gold-hungry conquistadors, who used the cruelest methods in order to obtain it.”

“We always pick on the conquistadors for their insensitivity to the fate of the Indians. I remember my visit to the gold mine in Rinconada, situated in the snow-capped Andes mountains at an elevation of 5,400 meters above sea level, and I can say that until today not a great deal has changed in the methods we use to exploit the Indians. The place itself is enough to create an unusually depressing atmosphere. More than twenty thousand people living in abject poverty, primitive huts glued any which way. No electricity, no sewage system, trash strewn all over the ground, rotting fruit picked over by hungry dogs and pigs. The entire year is dominated by a piercing cold and in addition the air pressure is twice that of sea level. Rarified air causes a lack of oxygen and makes every effort

exhausting. A degenerated world in which people who have accepted their fate still believe that fate may smile on them. They use the same work methods as during the times of the Inca, using pickaxes and chisels to climb rock and transporting their output on trays. Even children work in places where the vein of golden rock is narrow. Instead of payment, the *cachorro* system formulated by the Inca is still used. Once a month the directors allow the workers to mine for themselves. If they are lucky enough gold will be found to make in through the next month. It's no wonder that obtaining one gram costs less than \$4.50, the highest profitability worldwide. Using similar methods throughout Peru 140 tones of gold are mined annually.

“Not a bad figure if the market price of gold hovers at around \$40 per ounce,” Andrew comments. “Obtaining gold at one time was even easier. Alluvial deposits were collected in river basins. In the Chimú kingdom six thousand people were involved in this operation every day. That gives you an idea just how much treasure is still hidden in Peruvian necropoleis and how much gold remains in Andean caves.”

“Not only Peruvian soil is full of treasure and exploitation. The same is true of Ecuador, Columbia, Venezuela...In Bogotá, in the basements of the Central Bank of Columbia, I visited a considerably larger Museum of Gold than the one in Lima,” I add.

Scenes of a few years ago awaken in my memory from a few days I stayed in Bogotá as a guest of Mr. and Mrs. Arango. My kind host, a retired director of Banco de la República, was not only an expert in investing money but also an excellent guide in the Museum of Gold and an authority on pre-Columbian history.

“Everything started with a chance discovery of a treasure representative of the Quimbaya culture in 1939. The explorers proposed the purchase of the find by the bank, which gave rise to an unusual collection. Later the bank bought out even more valuable

private collections from Medellín, Antioqui and Bogotá. Today the museum shelves hold thirty thousand exhibits handmade by artists of Muisca, Tairona, Sinu, Quimbaya and many others,” he explains as we make our way through the crowded streets.

Finally, we enter. I am struck by the presentation concept used to display these masterpieces, just as simple as it is effective. A group of more than a dozen individuals is allowed to enter the expansive armored case, the doors close behind them and...the light goes off. After a moment, the golden shimmer of the items kept behind a great glass wall surrounding the hall appears. The light grows stronger, illuminating elaborate miters, crowns and sculptures – an orgy of burning gold in sharp contrast against the background of black and red velvet. What expression!

What doesn't this exhibition have! Golden funeral masks with slitted eyes, children's toys and a huge collection of jewelry: diadems, breastplates, necklaces and *narigueras* – dangling ornaments worn on the nose. Sealed tightly behind the bulletproof glass are golden conches, cups, vases, idols and censers. The variation of technique and golden artistry of the peoples of old force us to ponder times past and take a more modest look at our contemporary accomplishments.

“Often the entire blame for the fall of ancient civilizations is laid the door of the Spanish, but this is a great simplification. Much was lost even earlier,” *Señor Arango* stops in front of a case holding some terrifying masks. “These are the crafts of the Calima, whose culture disappeared in approximately 1000 AD after the invasion of barbarian tribes from Amazonia. Their specialty was repoussé²⁹ sculpture.

“And this jug?” I look away from the frightening faces which resemble the stone monsters of San Augustin, to intriguingly shaped dishes decorated with a pair of female breasts.

²⁹ Repoussé – a technique involving the shaping of thin gold sheets from the reverse side using small hammers. The sheets are then placed on a wooden or stone model until an exact relief is achieved.

“Not a jug but an urn made from 21-carat gold. It’s from the Quimbaya culture. These ornamental peaks spark passionate debate among specialists. For some these are symbols of a matriarchy, while others think them to be some kind of hallucinogenic mushrooms!”

I have no time to consider the special gift some archeologists have for association because *señor* Arango is already directing my attention to another culture.

“These beautiful anthropomorphic figurines are the work of Cauca goldsmiths. They were made from 18-carat gold using a special technique and the shine was achieved after being polished with a kind of grass. The acids secreted by this grass reacted with copper, bringing pure gold to the surface. An effective fake.”

My head is spinning and *señor* Arango, like an express time machine, by taking just a few steps moves from one culture to another.

“Here is a presentation of the Muisca culture, belonging to the great Chibcha family. They were farmers, but the greatest esteem was enjoyed by warriors thanks to the neighboring Karaiba. In their mythology, particular significance was given to a tall, blue-eyed, light-haired and bearded priest Bochica. He came from the east and taught them about agriculture, creating ceramics, fabric as well as how to live honestly, with justice and morality.”

“Just like the Mexican Quetzacoatl and Peruvian Virakocha.”

“Exactly! Like those men, he left after passing on these abilities to the Muisca.”

The collection of precious Chibcha treasures was gigantic. A historic association came to mind. Were these delicate *nariqueras* worn by the warring leaders Zipa of Bacatá and Zaque of Tuja? Whose breasts were adorned by this fantastic breastplate? And these golden *tejuelo* disks? Were they coins as the chroniclers claim or just a way of storing gold?

“Please consider these anthropomorphic idols – *tunjos*, finished with sharp pins. They were placed in the dead victim, pushed into the body. This is a real mine of knowledge for ethnography and art history. Look at the precision with which people of various professions are presented, with weapons and arms. They are depicted at work as well as,” he points to a pair in an act of copulation, “in intimate situations.”

My *cicerone* was unusually meticulous and talkative, willing to explain and show everything...After a few hours spent in his company, I have no trouble distinguishing the Calima and Tolima cultures from the Quimbaya sub-style, represented by the golden handicrafts of the Cauca.

I drifted far in time and space. That visit to Bogotá made such an impression on me and left a strong imprint on my memory because it was my first contact with the cultural achievements of pre-Columbian peoples. Andrew’s voice interrupts my reverie.

“You mentioned the Museum of Gold in Bogotá. I don’t know whether you noticed the simple and yet easy to overlook tiny plane models!”

“Man, are you kidding! Planes in the times of the Chibcha?”

“Officially, they’re called bees, butterflies and winged crocodiles, but specialist research in the New York Institute of Aeronautics have proven that these historical artifacts are golden models of planes. Experiments in the air tunnel confirmed their ideally streamlined shapes and modern construction concepts: classical wings extending from the bottom of the fuselage, two horizontal stabilizers and farthest to the rear a rudder. These are characteristics that cannot be found in any living organism that is able to fly because they don’t exist in nature. No bird is equipped with a rudder or wings underneath their bodies, which at slower speeds result in lower maneuverability. Nature has also failed to develop the delta construction type, since its benefits are felt only at

supersonic speeds, while turns require considerable engine power. For this reason both gliders and birds have long wings.”

“Andrew! Slow down. In a minute you’ll turn the accepted archeological chronology upside down. You’ll give yourself a headache.”

“Friend, logic suggests the following possibilities: two thousand years ago the American continent was inhabited by creatures with an illogical and non-ergonomical build; ancient goldsmiths possessed a rudimentary understanding of the future course of aeronautics or...pre-Columbian goldsmiths, in casting these models, witnessed their flying precursors.”

I prefer not to think about the last possibility considering the traps it implies, although I admit the argument is original. Among the countless exhibits in the Bogotá Museum, I have picked out a raft made with precision from a gold wire, filled with human figures and mounted on a glass surface imitating a lake. One of the figures was a dignitary, twice the size of the rest. The raft, with a length of twenty centimeters and weighing a mere 280 grams, was found in 1969 by two Columbian boys who were looking for a lost dog. The scene reminds me instantly of certain rituals performed by the Chibcha Indians, which were a manifestation of the myth of El Dorado. This myth absorbed the bravest of the brave and accelerated exploration of the South American continent, its inaccessible mountains and deadly equatorial forests. It also led explorers to the lake of Guatavita.

Notes

At one time for the Chibcha who lived here, the lake was a holy place. It was connected with the legend of the goddess Bachué, who emerged from its

waters holding a small boy. She built a small house and began to grow corn and potatoes. When the boy was grown, he took Bachué as his wife and from their loins the human race was born. Over the span of their long lives, the couple taught their children everything until, having passed on all of their knowledge, they returned to the lake after transforming into water snakes. There they remain until the present day.

For that reason mysterious coronation ceremonies were held on its banks for the new king. The candidate was undressed, rubbed down with resin and sprinkled with golden sand. Later, on the raft filled with costly goods, he was taken to the center of the lake, where he washed off the gold and committed the raft's load to the water, securing the favor of the gods living in its depths during his rule.

The thought of accumulated valuables resting on the bottom of the lake has inflamed the imaginations of not only the Spanish throughout the centuries. Many have gone in search of El Dorado's priceless wealth. The first unsuccessful attempt to recover the treasure deposited in Guatavita lake was made in 1545. Unfazed by this failure, thirty years later Bogotá merchant Antonio de Sepulveda tried to drain the lake. Eight thousand Indians were employed to carry out the plan, but Sepulveda was only able to carve a deep furrow on the bank, which is still visible today. The outflow lowered the water level by more or less eighteen meters, causing the banks of the ditch to collapse and killing many workers. Sepulveda did achieve partial success and the king of Spain was presented a gift of the gems found in the lake: a gold breastplate, scepter and emerald the size of a hen's egg. In 1912 another attempt to drain the lake was made steam-powered pumps. The water level dropped twelve meters and an incredible amount of

jewelry was collected from the mud. Once again the gods defended their treasures. Under the heat of the sun, the mud became as hard as concrete and the team was forced to surrender.

Guatavita Lake is located just fifty kilometers from Bogotá. I took advantage of a visit to the Columbian capital to see this place, so crucial for the legend of El Dorado, with my own eyes. Dark water fills a meteoric crater and steep banks are overgrown with thick greenery, which provides shelter for many water birds. One of the walls is cut by a narrow cleft as if split by a powerful impact. I didn't think the lake would be so small. The diameter looks to be less than half a kilometer. I try to guess what about this place made such a strong impression on the Chibcha that they connected it with so many legends and beliefs. Until today there are rumors of glowing spheres that hover above the water and fly away into the night sky. People watch them from a distance because none are brave enough to approach its banks after dusk. For five hundred years it has successfully resisted the insistent curiosity of the white man, who aspires to conquer the universe but is still unable to solve the mysteries of his own planet. It's a good thing there are still places that teach us humility.

Andrew reads my mind.

“You said once that you always wanted to see the mysterious pre-Incan drawings on the *pampa* but never had enough time to fly to Nazca. I can show you similar drawings here, on the outskirts of Lima.”

I can't hide my amazement. I have heard, of course, about the famous drawings in Nazca on the desert of Atacama and a few places in the Ecuador *costy*, but I have never heard a whisper about this Lima site. We make plans to visit the following day.

In the hotel my thoughts return to my conversation with Andrew. Gold has brought man a great deal of suffering, not only in South America and not only due to the conquistadors. Nevertheless, the modern man makes his own decision to work under these horrible conditions. He is forced to do so by poverty and a lack of other job opportunities. Until recently, there was a place that still used slaves to mine gold, a place where a human being had no value and the price of a kilogram of gold was equal to that of a life. That place was Kolyma.

Notes

Gold was discovered in Kolyma at the beginning of the 20th century by none other than Vasily Torysko, on a hunting trip with his friends in the Czerski mountain range not far from Oymyakon, the Cool Pole, where temperatures of minus seventy degrees are common. Word of the legendary vault in Kolyma did indeed reach Moscow, but unsettling, revolutionary times did not give government institutions a free hand to deal with the issue. Only in 1928 did a geological expedition led by Yuri Bilibin arrive in Kolyma, confirming the existence of real veins of gold. “From one cubic meter of sand we recovered two hundred grams of gold!” Bilibin wrote enthusiastically to headquarters.

Four years later the gold-enriched province was overflowing with thousands of slave workers – or zeks. A zek is a criminal sentenced in court as well as an enemy of the nation, a kulak,³⁰ someone who tells political jokes, a dissident writer, a prisoner of war. In Russia the great terror was launched at an order from Stalin. A monstrous trust operated by NKWD assassins, Dalstroy, was opened. For the colonization and industrial organization of the undeveloped

³⁰ Wealthy farmer.

Kolyma region, rich in deposits of gold, tin, silver, uranium, coal and other minerals, a constant and massive stream of slave labor was secured. Hundreds of thousands of exiles built ports, cities, roads and bridges, labored in the mines and leveling forests. This was the birth of an archipelago of several hundred ill-reputed labor camps, which a few million zeks passed through in the course of two decades.

There were no gas chambers here, but death still reaped a plentiful harvest. The prisoners were decimated by meager food rations, freezing temperatures, disease and exhausting manual labor. Some of the most desperate attempted to escape, but their efforts were doomed to failure. In a territory of 2,600,000 square kilometers cut off entirely from the outside world, escapees could count only on death in the freezing snows, starvation or attack from starving wolves.

The tragic chapter of Soviet history ended with the death of the Great Leader. In 1953 Dalstroy was closed but memories of the Soviet system of slavery will always remain part of Russia's history. Nothing from the past can be compared with the scale of extermination carried out and no nation on earth has experienced such a severe form of repression at the hands of its leaders.

Not much remains of the cursed Gulag archipelago. Time has erased all traces of the atrocities committed in the Siberian wilderness. The taiga reclaims the wooden buildings and now neglected forest roads. I visited the death camp a few years ago alongside Giorgio Fornoni, who was making a documentary for the Italian television station RAI 3.

I saw the barracks disintegrating under the ravages of time and winter gales. Part of the steam engine that generated the camp's energy has survived as well as ominous barbed wire entanglements and rotting guard towers. Among the

various pieces of kitchen equipment that lay abandoned in the ruins, we stumbled across an iron stove in guards' station and primitive work tools: a wheelbarrow, crowbar, a pickaxe and shovels. Far from the barracks, stone isolation cells of a few square meters were situated, decorated only with barred windows. Prisoners were fed their miniscule rations through tiny openings in the iron doors. Clearly a cursed and godforsaken place.

How does gold mining look today? We drove through half-deserted settlements, plunged in lethargy, who illustrate the realities of the Russian far north all too well. The economic situation has dropped to rock bottom, with extreme poverty and moral degradation on all sides. Anyone who was able returned to the *matierik* – the continent. The Russian driver sang quietly, “*Kolyma, Kolyma, czudiesnaja płanieta, dwienadcat miesiacow zima, ostalnoje tolko lieto i lieto.*”³¹ He was exaggerating. Winter doesn't last all year, but summer is short and capricious.

We enter Susuman, the Russian Klondike. Neglected towns in the Russian province with shoddiness and waste visible at every step. Surrounding it are a few dozen *priskow*, opencast mines belonging to private ventures since the state has decided renounced any monopoly over gold mining.

What was once a beautiful valley with a picturesque river now resembles the surface of the moon. Man reclaimed his treasure from the earth, but without a care for maintaining ecological equilibrium. Poles and floating mines traveled countless kilometers, devastating river corridors and leaving in their wake stone slag heaps and enormous water-filled craters. Climatic conditions slow down the

³¹ Kolyma, Kolyma, wonderful planet, twelve months of winter and then only summer, summer.

healing process and it will be a few hundred years before these scarred terrains return to their original state.

“It’s bad,” said the director of the Neptune mine. “Production is dropping. Easily available alluvial deposits that were accumulated in river gravel and sand were exhausted long ago, which forces us to exploit much poorer regions. Once the gold was recovered on the surface without special investments of time or money. If we didn’t glean one gram of gold from one cubic meter, the terrain was abandoned. Today we are even working where that proportion is five times worse. The situation is exacerbated by the fall of gold prices on the world market. In 1980 one ounce of the precious metal cost one thousand dollars, today the figure is one-third of that sum.”

Once the USSR was the second producer of gold worldwide and currently, with a production figure of 120 tones annually, it does not even qualify for the top five. Kolyma alone provides only twenty-eight tones. At one time those employed in the gold mining industry belonged to the highest paid elite. Today they barely make ends meet. In the summer they work more than a dozen hours per day and their wages must last through the long winter.

Cursed gold! How many times have I heard those words in various places around the world. Not many who pursue the shine of golden ore can boast of success. More frequently they find the bitter taste of defeat, paying with their health if not life. Yet the ore continues to tempt, swelling the ranks of explorers in search of El Dorado. It’s a good thing I don’t feel that greed, the desire to possess at any price. What a relief I’m not a slave to gold.

From the center of Lima we turn onto the impressive Balta bridge, named in honor of one of Peru's former presidents. It spans the banks of the Rimac, which at this time of year channel barely a stream of muddy sludge. And to think that this lazy current determines the fate of millions. In a few weeks when heavy rains fall in the mountains, the corridor will fill and slake the insatiable thirst of the dried earth. Now the Rimac is only a dirty, foul-smelling sewer. After leaving the suburban neighborhood of San Rafael, we drive along the broad Rimac river valley. One of its branches is the Canto Grande, a sandy, gently rolling plain covering an area of three hundred square kilometers. This is the place where some pre-Columbian civilization created its intriguing drawings – the objective of this trip.

We approach a rather small, but steep hill – a good vantage point. From there we can see the entire expanse of the plateau, framed both from the east and west by mountains. Below the hill a few lines are also discernable. One of them boasts impressive size: a length of six kilometers and width of twenty. From our observation point it looks like a strip of highway or an airport runway outlined by an egocentric engineer. Just a bit further three identical triangles sit in a row. Since 1957 sixty-seven of these lines and various figures have been identified: trapezoids, circles, triangles and even more elaborate forms in the shape of “dragonfly” and “gad-fly” drawings. Fifty of them were oriented astronomically with an incline of thirty-five degrees from the north and remaining sides that run perpendicular to the pampas.

The sandy pampas are carpeted by a layer of dark rocky gravel. The lines were executed using a similar technique to the one in Nazca. It was enough to sweep away the top layer of rock to create a light-yellow line accentuated by a dark outline by discarded pebbles. The lines survived because the pampas are one of the driest places on the Earth. Only the fog that develops frequently in these regions is a small source of humidity,

which condensing on the rocks, combines with the considerable gypsum deposits within them. This desert plain is nothing less than an enormous canvas on which every artist can immortalize his or her vision. Each work is sprinkled with sand because the occasional winds that blow across the area lose momentum over the sun baked pampa and fall quiet over an elastic bowl of warm air.

These unknown artists, whoever they were, aside from diligence, must have possessed great knowledge. After the project was designed, it was transferred to the ground. Of course, the ability to outline long straight lines, curves, circles and astronomic symbols was absolutely necessary. Finally, it took a great deal of effort to mark out the lines to be created. A society that takes on these challenges has to achieve a certain level of organization and technical knowledge. Unfortunately, we know little of the artists responsible for the drawings at Canto Grande. Researchers estimate that they were executed at various periods. The oldest date back four to five thousand years, while the newest were carried out approximately one-thousand four hundred years ago. Soon, however, not a trace of them will be left if the ongoing progress of devastation is not halted. The drawings are at the mercy of random construction and traffic from dozens of footpaths and roads.

“How is it possible that the drawings in Nazca are protected and surrounded by an archeological park, while these ancient specimens are shown complete indifference?” I speak with the voice of an ecologist with years of experience in the fight against human stupidity that is destroying our planet.

“Because here, Jacek, there was no guardian spirit like Maria Reiche in Nazca.”

Notes

Maria Reiche came to Peru in the 1930s as a nanny for the children of a certain wealthy German family living in Cuzco. In Peru she learned fluent Spanish and English and finished a degree in mathematics at the university. Working as a translator, she met American researcher Paul Kosok in 1939, who was studying the Incan irrigation system. In the course of his research they found Pampa Colorada after receiving a tip about ancient irrigation canals built in the middle of a bone-dry desert.

The canals had been known for many years. Spanish chronicler Cieza de Leon wrote about them as early as 1548, describing the structures as “signs indicating the way to travelers.” The next piece of information concerns contemporary times. In 1920 one Peruvian pilot noticed a mysterious maze of lines over a uniformly reddish expanse of ground during a chance flight over Pampa Colorada. However, the pilot’s report was filed away in a drawer. Slightly more than a decade later, Paul Kosok flew a plane over the region and was able to make out the outlines of geometric figures and drawings of people and animals. Soon after Kosok had to travel to the United States and Reiche remained alone in the desert. Unfortunately, her first reports of the discoveries made there were made light of and even dismissed by the world of science. What sort of archeological discoveries could be made by a...nursemaid?

As it turned out, quite a bit! All of her life was dedicated to solving the puzzles of the desert drawings. For years she measured the width and depth of the stone desert, first on foot and at the end of her life on a specially constructed electronic wheelchair, fighting for acceptance from the scientific community of her finds. Fifty years of isolation and unbelievable sacrifice in the name of realizing her life’s greatest objective, alone with the labyrinth of grooves, for

which Reiche thought up the name *grabado*.³² Only towards the end of her life was she awarded and honored. President Alberto Fujimori granted her the highest national honor – the Order Manco Capac and the honorary citizenship of Peru. Her name was given to streets, a school, the museum of Maria Reiche, the Maria Reiche viewing tower and even an airport.

Half a century of intensive research conducted by Maria Reiche and other scientists and the *grabados* still protect their mysteries. Difficulties in interpretation resulting from the quantity of comparative material and even the incorporation of computer analysis were unhelpful. We are still turning in the same circle of more or less likely hypotheses, some of the latter even qualify as fantastic. For some these drawings are part of an original astronomic calendar, while others consider it to be a map of the sky. A third group see in these lines the ancient past of an unknown civilization and the infamous Erich von Däniken – notabene an honorary citizen of the city of Nazca – is attempting to prove that they are “road signs” for aliens from outer space.

According to Prof. Maria Rostworowska of the Institute of Peruvian Studies in Lima, the lines are a certain kind of open air sanctuary. In northern Peru pyramids were erected, in the Nazca region drawings were created on the pampa to facilitate communication with ancestral spirits or even the gods, protoplasts of the first natives of Peru. This explanation seems rational because the realization of such a large-scale work must have served someone important.

For pre-Columbian peoples one essential element of belief was contact with the world of the dead. The deceased were a constant presence in the lives of ancient Peruvians and continued to intervene in the affairs of the living. The spirits of ancestors

³² Grabado – a Spanish name for ground drawings that comes from the word *grabar* – to dig.

were responsible for drought and disease, hence the people appealed to them for mercy, talked to them and persuaded them of the respect with which their memories were treated. Messages directed towards deceased ancestors and those who lived in the beyond were engraved on a gigantic tablet – the pampa near Nazca. These inscriptions therefore had to be large enough for the gods living in the sky to read. Moreover, ancient inhabitants of Peru had no magazines or books. Their thoughts and feelings were expressed in fabrics, ceramics, hieroglyphics and these field drawings. The tradition of pampa drawings is still alive in Peru today. Bare peaks in the outskirts of Lima or Cuzco are filled with contemporary signs and drawings made using the same technique as the lines at Nazca – removal of the stones covering the peak to reveal the lighter ground beneath. Only the motivation is different. Some are part of an advertising campaign, while others are designed to awaken national patriotism.

In the evening I sit nursing a glass of wine, while musing on the creations of Peruvian *grabados*. If these great drawings, so complicated – particularly in Nazca – in form and content, are only visible from the air, and since people developed their own wings only one hundred years ago, who were they intended for? The gods? Perhaps Andrew was right in focusing my attention on the airplane models in the Museum of Gold in Bogotá? It is said that wine clears the mind. Not even a few glasses are able to help on this night.

In Pursuit of El Dorado

It is difficult to say now who first heard and then spread rumors of El Dorado – the land of the Gilded Man. Actually, this fact has no importance. Stories of the city would not have found an ear if not for their basis in fact. These particular facts were established by the conquistadors, participants in two mad expeditions led by Cortez and Pizarro to defeat a large and populous kingdom filled with gold and precious stones. The story was lent credibility by the most fantastic rumors. The existence of the silver city of Manoa, the source of eternal youth and kingdom of the Amazons, was questioned by none. The legend that was born inflamed the imagination of not only adventurers, travelers and troublemakers, but also pulled a number of individuals into the magic circle who seemed to have both legs quite firmly on the ground. They abandoned families, property and promising careers to embark for the New World. The words El Dorado operated like a spur in the side of a pureblood stallion, commanding those in its grasp to wander, conquer the swampy and cruel forests through extreme hunger and climb the imposing mountain pass.

The first were, of course, the Spanish. Leading the procession of those who dreamed of sinking a hand into the golden sands was Jimenez de Quesada. This proud conquistador, at the head of 875 soldiers, set off on an expedition in 1536 along the Magdalena river in search of the land of the Gilded Man. A march through the hellish jungle and Andean passes in the Cordillera claimed a significant portion of his small army. When they reached the land of the Chibcha in what is now Columbia, the group numbered a mere twenty individuals. Nonetheless, this was enough strength to dissuade the Indians, who wielded only slingshots and spears, from resisting. On a plateau enclosed within imposing peaks, the Spaniards came across two well-organized states,

Bogotá and Tuja, as well as an emerald mine, a temple with walls of gold and locals sporting earrings, diadems and necklaces. Had they found El Dorado?

Confirmation can be found in a mysterious ritual which I witnessed on Guatavita lake and connected predictably with an old legend. According to this legend, one Chibcha leader impaled his wife's lover and then forced her to eat his body. In despair and humiliated, the girl threw herself into the lake, but she was cared for by a "feathered snake" living in its depths who did not allow her to drown. Since that time she has lived at his side and subsequent kings have practiced ritual baths every year, rubbed in golden sand and serenaded by flutes and singers. The priests and dignitaries accompanying him threw the golden adornments and jewels hanging around their necks into the water.

This discovery sharpened the Spanish appetite for gold. For two years they combed the country until hearing of the expedition led by Sebastian de Belalcázar, whose group of murderers conquered the Middle Cordillera and accessed the land of the Chibcha from the south. A daring adventurer and companion of Pizarro, Belalcázar was also drawn by the fame of the Gilded Man but allowed himself to be sidetracked in Queseda. When two tiny armies began preparing for battle, the unbelievable took place when another contender for the Chibcha treasure emerged from the jungle. Nicolas Federmann – a German in the service of the Welser banking house – for three years trekked through the jungle and passes of the Eastern Cordillera, becoming the third to reach this Andean plateau. The Welsers supported Charles V in his financial tribulations, receiving in return the right to use lands on the territory of today's western Venezuela. For more than a decade later the harsh sounds of German were heard in the area and their governors delved deeper and deeper into the jungle in search of gold. One of these was Federmann.

A near stalemate – equal in strength, the soldiers on either side differed only in appearance. Federmann's soldiers looked decidedly worse off – emaciated, half-naked

and covered only in animal skins. Quesada's army, already entrenched on the plateau, was outfitted in cotton *manty* woven by Chibcha women. Without a doubt the best dressed on the field were soldiers belonging to Belalcázar, decked out in chain mail and riding impressive mounts. Three armies faced each other in a stand-off while their commanders argued heatedly in an attempt to prove a claim to the territory. After a long conflict, they called a truce and tasked Charles V with resolving the problem. The king obviously ruled in favor of the Spanish and Federmann received four thousand pesos from Quesada's personal loot to for his trouble, a verdict that did nothing to improve the lot of the Indians. They were divested of their valuables and forced into slave labor, exterminated so effectively that in three hundred years there was not a single Indian who spoke the Chibcha language in Columbia.

Quesada, although he brought back huge treasures to Spain and proved the existence of the lands of the Gilded Man, still dreamt of finding the real El Dorado. Quesada attempted to force his way into the Guyanan jungle several times, possibly the worst equatorial forest in the world. The Spaniard made his last excursion at the age of seventy years, only to suffer yet another disappointment and lose all of the wealth he had amassed from the Chibcha in the process. Manoa – a city shimmering with gold and other treasures – remained an untouchable mirage. Quesada died an impoverished, diseased man (after contracting leprosy during the last expedition), leaving behind the title governor of El Dorado and the unfulfilled dream of infinite wealth somewhere in the tropical jungle.

No sacrifice was too great for successive explorers, particularly given the constant stream of increasingly tempting information. Then came Juan Martinez, the only soldier who survived an expedition led by Pedro de Silva. Friendly Indians saved his life, leading him blindfolded to an unusual city, containing an island in the center of a lake where a

marble, fragrant ebony and cedar palace was erected. The bottom of the lake, even the city streets were dusted with gold and the palace encrusted with precious stones. This was the Parmie lake and the city was Manoa. Two silver towers guarded the entrance to the castle. At the end of each pure gold chain tied to these towers were wild cougars. The ruler of this fortress treated Juan well and gave him several gourds of golden sand in farewell. Unfortunately, during the return trip he was attacked and robbed by the Karaiba.

Who would question the brave soldier? His revelations found an ear. A new series of expeditions was launched by Antonia de Barria – the husband of Quesada's niece, Alonso Herrero and Philipp von Hutten. The fate of the last was especially tragic. His youth was spent in the court of King Charles V and there was no indication that the last years of his life would be spent in the pursuit of mythic treasure in far off America. In 1535, together with a group of rabble-rousers led by George Hohermuth, he arrived in Venezuela. The vision of nearby El Dorado was impossible to resist. Almost immediately, without lengthy preparations or the chance to acclimatize, they plunged into the maze of the jungle. They entered on the Rio Meta, an inflow of the upper Orinoko. According to Indian tales, it was home to a great deal of wealth. After a long and fruitless search von Hutten wrote:

Only we and God know the difficulties, suffering, hunger and desire that we experienced in the course of three years. Personally, I am full of admiration for the human spirit, which allows man to survive for such a length of time and under such horrible conditions. We were forced to eat insects, snakes, frogs, larva, herbs and roots as well as to devour human flesh in opposition to the law of nature...

Oviedo, a Spanish chronicler of the epoch, after hearing the accounts of the people who barely survived this dramatic expedition, commented:

I believe that those who took part would not have expended so much effort even to secure themselves a place in heaven.

But Oviedo was wrong. The thought of unclaimed Incan gold in the jungle was eating Hutten alive. Although Hohermuth was named governor of Venezuela in December 1540 after Hutten's death, he did not intend to be just another bureaucrat. The specter of death that floated before his eyes during the first encounter with the jungle was not enough to deter him from mounting another risky expedition.

He set out from Coro in August 1541 with a team of more than one and a half thousand. In Nuestra Senora de la Fragua Hohermuth set up winter camp. There information reached him concerning the Spanish expedition of Hernan Perez de Quesada. Von Hutten was immediately on his trail. For the next year he wandered through the jungle in a deadly climate. In the humid equatorial forests men died of malaria and pneumonia. Soon their supplies ran out and the member of the expedition began to die of hunger.

This experience, much like those that had come before, did not discourage von Hutten. When he finally returned to La Fragua, an Indian informed him that the kingdom of El Dorado and its capital city of Macatoa could be found to the south-east of the Vaupes region. Hutten selected forty of his strongest, most desperate companions and arrived in Macatoa after a long march. There he found none of the golden houses described in Indian stories and the locals, eager to get rid of their troublesome guests, showed them the way to the capital of the neighboring Omagua tribe.

The city Hutten saw made a huge impression on him and his team. It was enormous, with straight, wide and well-repaired streets and solid buildings. On a central square stood a tall, richly ornamented palace. Possessed by gold fever, Von Hutten firmly

believed that he had found the walls of El Dorado and decided to take the city by storm. Local residents refused to back down and answered with their own attack, injuring Hutten and many of his companions. His next move was to return to La Fragua for reinforcements, but he was greeted by unfortunate news. Rule of the capital had passed to Spaniard Juan de Carvajal, a fervent enemy of von Hutten. An encounter between the two antagonists ended tragically for this seeker of El Dorado. In April 1546, at the order of the new administrator of Venezuela, he was eliminated. The chronicles say that the executioner cut his throat with the same rusty machete von Hutten had used to slash his way through the dense forest. A fascination with legend cost the traveler his life as well as the lives of many others. They died by the hundreds from poisoned arrows fired by Indians and tropical illnesses spread by blood thirsty insects. Through it all, El Dorado appeared to be worth this heavy price.

The fame of El Dorado rapidly spread to Europe and the court of Elizabeth – the ambitious English queen who dreamed of breaking the Spanish colonial monopoly. She listened with interest to the account of Spaniard Pedro Sarmiento, who was taken captive by the English in 1586. He claimed to have spent seven months in Guyana in the golden city of Manoa and offered as proof...a map presenting three mountain ranges that supposedly encircled this territory: the Golden, Silver and Salt Mountains.

These intriguing accounts captured the imagination of Sir Walter Raleigh, a fascinating figure who cannot be fit into any boxes or conventions. His biography was full of scenes fit for a movie screenplay. An unruly troublemaker, writer and poet ended his days on an executioner's chopping block. During his first visit to South America, Raleigh colonized the coast, naming it Virginia in honor of the virgin queen. From the colony he brought back tobacco and potatoes. Both plants soon conquered Europe, the first becoming a curse and the second a blessing. Handsome and intelligent, Raleigh was

welcomed to the royal court and quickly became the queen's favorite. His mistake was to marry one of Elizabeth's ladies-in-waiting. The offended monarch imprisoned him in the dungeons of the Tower. In time her heart softened towards him, perhaps as a result of the verses Raleigh penned in his cell:

*Then do not hurt sweet empress of the heart,
The virtues of my love,
Believing that I should wrap my pain in words
And use it to beg for mercy.*³³

He might also have regained the queen's favor thanks to the memorandum in which he promised to find and conquer El Dorado for the crown.

The queen needed gold to fill an empty treasury, so the monarch pardoned a former favorite and put a few ships at his disposal. In 1695 Raleigh crossed the ocean and began combing the length of the Orinoko in the thirst for fame. Initially the trip was successful. The English traveled upriver without incident and their leader, who had nothing in common with the cruel conquistadors, won the favor of the Indians. They sailed the Rio Caroni, expecting to reach Manoa and the frontiers of El Dorado at any moment. Raleigh sent an enthusiastic report to the queen, calling Manoa "an imperial and wondrous city." Its leader was reputed to reside in a palace "whose splendor exceeds everything we know about the centers of the great Peruvians." Raleigh informed the queen that her portrait made an unusual impression on the savages and claimed that the locals were ready to "give up their imperial rule on behalf of the English." Soon catastrophe struck. The river was no longer navigable and an attempt to pass through the

³³ Paraphrase.

jungle towards the already visible mountains where the legendary land was said to lie was unsuccessful. Exhausted, half-starved and ravaged by disease, they decided to turn back.

One year after his departure from England, Raleigh set sail once more for Plymouth. Instead of gold, his ships carried only samples of gold-veined rock, which also turned out to be worthless. His reception was not positive. In hopes of improving his image, Raleigh wrote an account of his expedition in the book *The Discovery of Guiana, and the Journal of the Second Voyage Thereto*. In it he described incredible scenes: cities made from porphyry and alabaster, mountains of gold and pearls, mysterious tribes of bare-breasted Amazon warriors, fairy-tale monsters without heads and people with eyes in their shoulders.

The man who conquers Guyana will possess more gold and subjugate more peoples than that of the Spanish king and Turkish emperor,

Raleigh claimed. His relations were certainly taken from stories he had heard, stories he seemed to believe considering the following statement:

Whether rightly or wrongly (...), I believe that it is impossible for so many people to conspire and spread similar rumors.

Translated into many languages, the book was a sensation throughout Europe and returned its author to the grace of the aging queen. After her death, however, he was imprisoned again, accused by his enemies of plotting against the queen.

Raleigh was released from the Tower as a sixty-year-old man and immediately began whirlwind preparations for another expedition. Nothing could kill his lingering

dreams of El Dorado. Raleigh received the support of the king in exchange for part of the expected gains. Once again they were unable to defeat the jungle. Moreover, at the mouth of the Caroni river he and his men met with resistance from a Spanish post. They subdued the fort and leveled it to the ground – as it turned out, unnecessarily. James I, fearing the wrath of the Spanish, declared the expedition illegal and decided to use Raleigh's head to ward off the threat of war. This eternally romantic adventurer, for who El Dorado was both an overriding passion and the cause of his downfall, lost his head to an executioner October 29, 1618.

Thirty-five years later Raleigh search for El Dorado in Guyana was proven well-founded. In the mid-19th century sensational news spread concerning the discovery of sizeable gold nuggets in a nearby jungle. Electrifying news for explorers, large mining companies and as always...common troublemakers. The deposits were not insignificant. At the start of the 20th century, a total of five tones of gold were mined there annually. In the 1940s when the supply of the resource began to shrink to several hundred grams, it seemed that the fairy tale had come to an end.

The hopes of gold seekers were revived forty years later. In the south-west of the country on the border with Suriname, or more precisely in the Haut Maroni region, a certain *bonis* – the descendent of African slaves – found a few lumps of gold in the tropical forest. Rumors of this sort spread like wildfire. The terrain was soon overrun by adventurers who hoped to rapidly accumulate a fortune. In this murderous climate, these men used the most brutal of methods to flush gold out of the river sand. According to official statistics, in 1998 three tones were mined, although part of the gold was certainly sold on the black market.

At the time I was in French Guyana. A boat trip to Maripasoula, the administrative seat of Haut Maroni, took me a full five days. Despite the existence of administration and gendarmerie, this town of three thousand inhabitants lives on the edge of legality. The mafia boss who rules the gold trade has a division of guards who are armed to the teeth at his disposal. They frequently impose their own laws, counting on immunity since Paris is one thousand kilometers away.

“The gendarmerie is practically helpless in the face of mafia thugs,” explained Raymond, a Paris teacher who has worked in a local school for one year. “In our country there are strict regulations protecting the natural environment. Mining associations can count on obtaining licenses only if they comply with the endless limitations forbidding the use of toxic substances or the obligation to afforest cleared areas. Who executes the law? The authorities are helpless because they don’t want to exacerbate an already tense situation with thousands of gold miners, who are desperate enough to resort to extreme measures. It could have an impact, for example, the functioning of the cosmodome built in 1964 in Kourou and that is something Paris does not want. A rocket launcher on the equator is a big handicap that would facilitate the launch of the Ariane rocket, the hope of European aeronautics. So, why aggravate the situation?” Raymond finishes his lecture.

This formerly colonial land, so far from the mother country, and since 1946 the overseas French department, is ruled by its own laws. The best businessmen are those who have nothing to do with gold extraction, but know something about commerce. In Maripasoula everything is expensive except for beer and prostitutes, probably because both – supposedly basic – needs enjoy the greatest popularity. A centrally located establishment, open twenty-four hours a day and illuminated by the glow of red lights, has many functions, including that of a bar, dance club and whorehouse. Those who have no franks can pay in gold.

The gold itself is mined not far away, two short steps from the town. A Spanish traveler from the 16th century wrote:

The Muisca Indians were waiting for the flooded waters of the river to recede, which had carried and deposited lumps of gold on the river bed wrested from its steep banks.

Here is the same situation. Water from the river washed flakes of gold out of the weathered veins and deposited them in the river valley beneath layers of sand and gravel. Then man divided the land into tiny plots outlined in poles and began to exploit it. Today the area looks like a Dantean hell on earth. Where a majestic tropical forest once grew are ugly trenches made by bulldozers and filled with foul-smelling water, huge piles of trash and scrap metal, rotting wooden shacks, stacks of empty fuel containers and coils of cable. The air is dense with humidity. Hundreds of thin-faced, sweaty people, massacred by mosquitoes and drowning in mud, rummage through the soil and wash piles of sand from dawn to dusk. Using shovels they fill large bowls with gold-bearing gravel and then stand in the water to wash the half submerged tray in a circular motion. Centrifugal force throws the stones and sand to the edges, while heavier gold contents drift to the center. Those who can afford to invest install gravitational launders. On an artificial river gradient a wooden channel is built, through which shovels of gravel are passed. The current washes through the soil, leaving deposits of shimmering gold flecks and sometimes larger lumps at the bottom of the trays. This is backbreaking work that offers little hope for a prosperous future. Frequently the output of several weeks is consumed in a bar or stolen. In this world might makes right and the fist and colt pistol normally replace a judge.

The most serious threat to the entire region is the mercury used in the technological process. It is estimated that since 1855, the year in which the first gold lump was discovered in Guyana, more than three hundred tones of this “liquid death” have found their way into local rivers, poisoning the water and fish – the latter of which account for ninety percent of the diet of local Indians. The degree of mercury pollution in the natural environment exceeds limits set by the World Health Organization several times over, which is reflected in high mortality rates among children, birth defects, eye disorders and other serious physical defects. Locals remember the promises of President Francois Mitterrand, who announced the creation of the largest national park in the equatorial zone in 1992 – a project that was never carried out.

Standing on a high escarpment, I look down at this gigantic molehill and the ant-like swarm of people possessed with the deceptive gleam of gold. Where is the romance of the great Adventure? Is this how Sir Walter Raleigh imagined El Dorado? The day before his execution, Raleigh wrote the following words:

This is an odd time, which as a deposit takes

Our joys, youth and benefits.

In land our payment measured.

And when all roads we have traveled

Will it in grave dark and mud-covered

Close the story of our life...³⁴

Many of those who were driven to search for the land of the Gilded Man could not even count on the peace of the afterlife in their own graves. They were literally consumed

³⁴ Paraphrase.

by the jungle along with unfulfilled dreams and hopes. Their bleached skeletons adorn Andean plateaus and rot in tropical forests. Such a fate awaited nearly every participant in an expedition organized by Gonzalo Pizarro, the youngest of three brothers who conquered Peru.

In 1540 he set out from Quito at the head of 350 Spaniards and four thousand natives to find and subdue the legendary land of cinnamon and gold. It was one of those dreams that set the mind aflame and drove men to the American continent. In the 16th century the supply of spices so highly valued in Europe was monopolized by the Portuguese, who discovered the route to India around the tip of Africa. The Spanish hoped to find the cinnamon trees in the jungle covering the eastern slopes of the Andes. Unfortunately, dreams rarely come true. Two years later eighty starved and staggering shadows stumbled back to Quito.

Gonzalo's expedition was encumbered by difficulties from the start. The first victims fell during a trek across deep canyons and high passes in the Eastern Cordillera. William Prescott provided a colorful description in *History of the Conquest of Peru*:

However, when they reached the upper reaches of the mountains, icy winds sweeping down the slopes of the Cordillera froze their limbs and many of their compatriots were buried in those empty expanses. While overcoming that horrible barrier, they were surprised by an earthquake, which in those volcanic areas frequently shook the very foundations of the mountain. In one place the earth was ripped apart by the violent forces of nature. From the crevice issued tendrils of sulphuric vapors and an entire village of a few hundred homes vanished into the horrific chasm.

After many days they reached the Napo river that flows through a low-lying plain overgrown with dense equatorial forest. Using their hachets to clear a path, the Spanish

were the first to enter the Amazon Basin. There they discovered trees with bark, as it later turned out, that only resembled cinnamon. However, they were moved by the information provided by locals concerning a “golden land” located only a few days march away. The Spanish now had a new goal and were willing to do almost anything for gold. Nonetheless, their food supplies had run out and the merciless jungle sapped their strength. Pizarro ordered a stop to allow his men to rest and also decided to send a scouting party down the river. For that purpose a primitive brigantine was constructed, although the mission’s chances for success were limited due to a lack of pitch for sealing the hull. Indians came to their aid by pointing out trees from which they were able to obtain *cahuchu*, an elastic, white substance. This is how the Amazon’s famous rubber was discovered, a resource that would turn the Amazon river basin into a true El Dorado just two hundred years later.

The Spanish, completely unaware of the future significance of this discovery, were pleased to be able to finish the boat. Soon the first vessel set sail on Amazon waters without ceremony or fanfare, although the name of the boat – Victoria – was bestowed by Pizarro himself. The craft carried fifty-seven soldiers, dominican Gaspar de Carvajal and its leader – the young, energetic and outrageously daring Francisco de Orellana. Their task was to find the nearest settlement, obtain food and return to their starving companions, but things didn’t go as planned. In vain the men waited for the scouting party to return, beginning a tragic retreat after a few weeks that only few survived.

What was the fate of Orellana and his soldiers? Why did they desert their friends? Some chroniclers believe that he wanted “to gain fame and probably benefits from any discoveries for the price of betrayal.” The version laid down by Dominican Carvajal is different. A strong current rendered their return impossible and within a few days of their departure they had neither found supplies nor any trace of the gold-bearing

lands. On February 12, 1542 the party reach the place where the Napo flowed into a gigantic river. The opposite bank was nothing more than a faint smudge on the horizon.

“*Mar dulce!*” – Fresh water! – this was the exclamation uttered by the Spanish on seeing this view.

“*Amassona!*” murmured the Indians in awe, a word which in their language means “boat breaker.”

It is only coincidence that this Indian name resembles the later title – Rio de las Amazonas – found on maps thanks to Carvajal, chaplain and chronicler of the expedition. It was a direct result of his detailed description of a skirmish fought by the group at the mouth of the river Trombates, one of the most difficult and dramatic moments during the long months of the Spanish odyssey. The Indians fought bravely, supported by mysterious and warlike Amazons.

They [Amazons] are tall, white-skinned and wear their long hair braided around their heads. Strong and completely naked – just like on the day they were born – only their most intimates places are covered. They carry bows and arrows – in battle each is worth ten Indians (...) They fight with such passion that the Indians are afraid to turn their backs to these warriors since the Amazons would spear them on the spot.

This is how Carvajal saw them and it is hard to say why he associated them with the Amazons since his description indicates that they were not lacking any body parts like the daring warrior women of Greek legend who cut off a breast to facilitate shooting a bow. This was also the source of their name – “a” means “not” or “without” in Greek, while “mazos” signifies “breast.” Hence the Greeks associated the Amazon with women without breasts. The warrior women encountered by Orellana showed no signs of self-mutilation. Nevertheless, their remaining features resembled this ancient precursor. They

did not marry and used men exclusively for the purposes of procreation. Their partners were white-skinned and hairless. The male children born of these unions were killed or sent to their fathers. This was the description provided by the Spanish concerning these mysterious women the Indians came across a few days later.

Carvajal is a credible and conscientious chronicler of the expedition in many particulars – in this respect historians are in agreement. Was his description of the Amazons embellished? Was he carried away by imagination? This is unlikely since the same events were experienced by fifty other men whose mouths were impossible to seal with any vow of silence. The account of Orellana's chronicler was also confirmed by later travelers. The last was Brazilian Eduardo Barros Prado, a millionaire belonging to Brazil's high-life. In 1954 he traveled to a village located at the source of the Nhamunda river, inhabited only by white-skinned women living according to the traditions attributed to the Amazons. The pictures of his expedition are further proof and remain the only – to date – evidence of this unique phenomenon, named after the largest river in the world. A warrior tribe from far-off Greece and not Orellana, its discover, was immortalized on the map.

The encounter with the war-like Amazons took place in the seven month of the expedition. There, at the mouth of the Napo, Orellana was forced to make an unusually difficult decision. He could return by land and join Pizarro's division, but the tales of Indians tempted him with a vision of a land of gold nestled in the lower stretches of the Great River. He risked it all for this vision, putting his life and fame as a soldier on the same card. He decided to sail with the current to its mouth, which marked the beginning of one of the most daring explorations in the history of mankind. They were the first Europeans to ply these waters and, knowing nothing about the local geography, embarked with only one hope – that the Great River would flow into the ocean, allowing them to

reach an already colonized island and then Spain where fame and rewards awaited. Fame, wealth and a great Adventure – three ideas that were always close to the Spanish *hidalgo*'s heart. Would they have made the same decision knowing that the river on which they sailed was the longest in the world, stretching ahead in a few thousand dangerous kilometers?

Notes

The Amazon has long placed among the largest rivers in terms of the size of its river basin – with approximately seven million square kilometers – and current, which flows at a top speed of 365,000 cubic meters per second. With more than a thousand tributaries, fourteen thousand of its navigable channels are open to small ships. The river's mouth stretches out four hundred kilometers and has a depth of one hundred meters near the ocean, which deepens another twenty meters in the vicinity of Iquitos 4,600 kilometers farther. These statistics were measured during the dry season, however during the rainy months of May and June, the river rises by a full fifteen meters. Each year the waters of the Amazon carry around one billion tones of inorganic material, mainly loam and clay particles. If European rivers contain one hundred and fifty species of fish, the Amazon river is home to more than two thousands. The Nile only recently exceeded the Amazon in terms of length. In 1996 scientists from the Brazilian National Institute for Space Research in Sao Jose dos Campos established that its length amounted for a total seven thousand kilometers, about three hundred more than the Nile. In light of a distance measured with the precision of nanomillimeters, the word "about" is somewhat disturbing. However, there are no

measurements of greater precision for the Amazon because the river current is constantly creating new bends and curves of many kilometers in length. Some are cut off with time, losing contact with the river. That is why the Amazon, meandering over a wide alluvial plain, has no permanent corridor and frequently flows through several branches – hence the word “about.”

These facts are common knowledge and have been so for some time so what is the source of these divergences? Until recently even scientists had no exact maps of difficult to reach regions. Only in the era of satellite maps was this gap finally filled. In the case of the Amazon, there was one additional problem. And to think that long after man had landed on the moon, we still did not know the exact source of the largest river in the world. The most prestigious of works – *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, although it devotes an entire five pages to the river, sums up the Amazon’s origins with the following succinct statement: “The river begins high in the Andes at a distance of one hundred miles from the Pacific Ocean and flows into the Atlantic.”

The history of how the Amazon’s source was discovered is a long one. For some time the Marañon was believed to be its mother river. In 1934 Peruvian Gerardo Dianderas made the argument that the source should be sought in the Ukajali valley, a thesis accepted by the Geographic Society in Lima, which emphasized that while it carries less water than the Marañon, the traditions immortalized in the history and culture of this region speak in its favor. Later many expeditions were sent to the area. This is the reason for deviations in the source location. First there was talk of the Vilafro lake, then the side of the Huagra mountain. In 1971 another expedition, this time organized by National

Geographic Magazine, pointed to a thirty square meter lake in the Mismi massif from which the Carhuasant stream flows.

In order to put these academic debates to rest, I organized the international expedition Amazon Source '96 in cooperation with the Lima Geographic Society, the Pontifical University of Lima and the Department of Hydrography and Marine Navigation. Participants include, among others, glacierologist Siergie Ushnurtzev from the Russian Academy of Sciences, Peruvia hydrologist Raul Rojas and admiral Guillermo Faura Gaig, author of a wide monograph on the Amazon. Our research incorporated a hydrometric method acknowledge by most hydrologists and after measuring the flow intensity in all of the currents where its course begins on the slopes of Nevado Quehuisha, the Apacheta was determined the winner. Its source is found several dozen meters before the mountain ridge. This island of green stands in sharp contrast to its gray, barren surroundings. From a marsh camouflaged by clumps of bushes, a crystal clear stream of cold water can clearly be seen bubbling cheerfully to the surface.

The great river is born in rather ordinary surroundings. A delicate stream disappears into the rocky ground, emerging again several dozen meters below and then with regularity, like a snake slithering its way down the incline with growing vitality. The geographic coordinates of the source were pinpointed at: 15°31'05" latitude South and 71°45'55" longitude West, at a height of 5,170 meters above sea level. One more white space disappeared from the map.

Orellana, sailing on the wide expanses of the Amazon, cut off his only return path. The river swelled and intensified with every passing day, sowing doubt among the Spanish that they would ever reach the ocean and fears that the group would become lost

in the endless and hostile jungle pressing in on every side. Soon they passed into densely populated regions where warning drums started to pulse rhythmically on both sides of the river, a dull beat that accompanied the travelers day and night. They came across villages which allowed them to obtain food, but were vulnerable to sometimes hostile Indians. In June 1542 the expedition was overcome with euphoria at seeing the mouth of a large river opening to the left. Its black waters clearly stood out against the golden tone of the Amazon.

“*Rio Negro!*” they screamed with elation, finally believing that their dream of sailing to the gates of El Dorado, fueled by stories from Indians they had met over the course of weeks of travel, was about to come true.

Success was within their grasp when they unexpectedly met with stiff resistance from local Indians, who fought with zeal and determination and prevented the men from landing to rest, obtain food or heal their wounds. From their agile canoes, the Indians attacked the Spanish on all sides, burying them under a hail of arrows. Their bravery convinced Orellana in the belief that they were defending the path of the treasures of Manoa, so he decided to return to the same location with a larger force. However, the group first needed to reach the ocean, which was not far if the ebb and flow of the water was to be believed. On August 2, 1542, after nine months of wandering, the boat sailed into the Atlantic. These were the first white men to delve into the green hell of the Amazon wilderness who lived to tell about it, a victory that was even achieved with only minor losses. Only eight Spaniards died of wounds and disease.

Orellana's winning streak didn't last long. In fact he managed to return to Spain and was granted the crown's permission to organize a new expedition, departing for the New World in four ships carrying four hundred people for a reconnaissance mission upriver, but this is where his luck ended. After reaching the mouth of the Amazon,

Orellana built a heavily fortified settlement and then led one hundred of his crew upriver, disappearing without a trace. Somewhere in the musty air of the jungle his dream of the land of bliss evaporated. No traces of this expedition or the men who accompanied him were ever found.

A century later the bubble that was the myth of El Dorado on the Rio Negro and the courageous Amazons burst. In 1667 an expedition set out from the port of Parà under the leadership of Captain Pedro Teixeira, who was tasked with repeating Orellana's voyage in the opposite direction and finding Quito. Teixeira had at his disposal forty-six great boats, 1,200 Indian rowers, seventy soldiers and a few hundred people to provide assistance in various functions. After six months the group had arrived at the mouth of the Napo without seeing a single Amazon or fabled land of gold. Teixeira ordered that camp be struck on the spot and selected a small group of soldiers to continue the march upriver, which found its way to Quito in another eight months.

In the years that followed many, increasingly daring attempts were made to penetrate the Amazon basin. However, the first excursion of a scientific nature took place in the years 1743 – 1744 and was organized by French mathematician Charles-Maria de La Condamine, who had earlier taken measurements on the equator in Ecuador that paved the way for a more precise map of the river. He was also the first man who realized the potential of rubber extracted from the sap of the *havea* tree.

Only much later did people realize that there was no need to chase blindly after the mirage of El Dorado where gold was growing on the trees themselves. In order to make this wealth exploitable, Ford had to launch his revolutionary production line, which began to roll out massive numbers of cars. Instead of gold fever, the Amazon was possessed by rubber fever, a dream that brought decidedly greater, although brief, wealth to the region. The boom ended thanks to one refined Englishman, Henry Wikham, who

managed to smuggle several thousand *hewea brasiliensis* seeds stuffed into a crocodile hide. Rubber tree plantations were established by the British in subsequent years in Malaysia and the later discovery of synthetic rubber broke the Amazon's monopoly on the material and put an end to the dreams of eldorado wealth built on rubber.

Recently, it was established that Orellana and his companions died chasing a delusion. Their prize was a mention in the history books and a place in the pantheon of the most daring explorers. The myth of El Dorado, however, is still very much alive. In the years 1637-38 Jesuits Acano and Fritz plunged into the jungle in search of Manoa lake and the abandoned city of Logroño, reputedly made from bricks of gold, on the Macas uplands. In 1775 the king of Spain issued his last order in the search for El Dorado to two sailors: Nicolas Rodriguez and Antoni Santos. After many adventures, the two men reached Rio Branco. In the waters of the river they found golden mica, which they believed to be gold. Driven by their imaginations, Rodriguez and Santos searched everywhere for gold – from mountain peaks shimmering in the setting sun to the bottom of many lakes. They fell victim to illusive greed and ignorance.

They were not alone. The phantasmagorical El Dorado represents man's eternal dream of and fascination with wealth, gold and precious jewels, a projection of a certain mystery that borders on a conviction in the existence of a Supernatural World. That is how the myth of these legendary lands was passed down, in modified form, to our times. The myth of the Gilded Man – *hombre dorado*, was replaced by a no less mysterious stone city hidden in the Amazon jungle, the last refuge of the Inca and the final resting place of treasure deposits. They became the next challenge for the bravest of the brave, whose sense of Adventure is part of their genetic code.

Today, just like in times past, human beings escape into the world of fantasy and the dream of buried treasure, a dream that inflames the imagination and awakens human passions regardless of age, skin color or educational background. People still probe the jungle and another wave of expeditions fail, lose their way, starve and, in turn, are eaten alive by blood-thirsty insects. The chronicles mention great and famous expeditions but no one has ever compiled a list of all the poor souls who have sacrificed their lives for this myth. Their bones have long turned to dust, used as fertilizer for liana plants and trees that thrive in the insatiably eternal wilderness. Although the mirage of El Dorado still lives, beguiles and tempts, it also keeps the contemporary explorer up nights. Can mythological information be taken seriously?

For the orthodox scientist, a myth is just the opposite of truth. It is associated with illusion, fable, fantasy and fabrication because that is the very substance of its official definition. This point of view was reinforced by theologians of the Middle Ages, who used euphemistic and epicurean tradition to grant the gods of our fathers the status of mere second-class demons. By contrast, 19th century science was more tolerant of myth. The forces surrounding pagan priests and shaman were freed of accusations concerning their imaginary nature, since these interpretations were accepted as naive attempts to explain incomprehensible phenomenon. They were treated condescendingly and put on a shelf to gather dust.

However, by an ironic twist of fate, despite science's decidedly condescending approach, it was frequently forced to bow before myth. Priam's Troy, the palace of Minos on Crete, the biblical city of Ur, Erech and Nineveh existed for centuries in mythical tales alone. Nonetheless, many passionate adventurers believed in these legendary places. Schliemann located the Trojan city, Botta uncovered Nineveh, Stephens and Catherwood found the city of the Mayans, Woolley unearthed the city of Ur along with traces of the

great flood and Robert Koldewey managed to reveal the foundations of the Tower of Babel, an enormous zikkurat described in the pages of the Old Testament. Following the example of L'Anse aux Meadows in New Zealand, 11th-century Viking ruins were uncovered, confirming information contained in *The Saga of Eric the Red* and proving that Viking exploration of the American continent was historical fact and not the stuff of myths.

These spectacular archeological successes give us much to consider. When Troy, Knossos, Ur, Tikal and Copan were still pulsing with life, they were known throughout the developed world. The stories spread by merchant caravans were certainly spiced with a good measure of exaggeration, although Babylon, Sodom and Gomorrah and Tiahuanaco are known to have existed. They were spoken of long after they had been wiped from the face of the earth. However, at some point, although no one still living had seen these cities firsthand, their existence began to be *believed*. In this way the fact of their existence was transformed into legend. Later a bit of luck and a mind free of prejudice was enough to rehabilitate and reinstate mythical legends. This also applied to the discoveries made in South America. There as well the exhilarating information concerning the land of Piru,³⁵ the mythical El Dorado and *hombre dorado* first existed in the awareness of the conquistadors, later replaced by a legend concerning the discovery of an amazing civilization, populous cities and a great and well-organized state. The discoverer of these wonders was no other than Francisco Pizarro.

³⁵ A distorted name for Peru, taken from the river Biru that flows north of Panama.

Return to the Past

It was the year 1511. Vasco Nuñez de Balboa – one of the conquistadors who traversed the Panama Canal in the search for slaves and gold – realized that the three hundred men under his command were too few to tame a country overgrown with jungles and defended by hostile Indians. With this in mind, he crafted a clever plan that involved exploiting the mutual hatred existing between certain tribes by making tactical alliances with local bigwigs. One of these friendly chiefs, amazed at the greed for gold displayed by the Spanish, passed on two crucial pieces of information to Nuñez.

“Since you are so set on obtaining this metal that you are ready to leave your homeland and expose yourself to danger, I can show you a land whose homes are made from gold-plated walls, where men eat from golden plates, adorn their bodies and offer the metal as an offering to the gods. This country is situated to the south of the great Blue Sea.”

The news was exciting, but Balboa finally decided to launch an expedition after two years. Following a particularly exhausting march through the swampy and murderous jungle, he crossed the canal that divided two oceans and reached the Blue Sea. With sword unsheathed and the Castilian flag in hand, Balboa walked into the waves September 29, 1513, claiming the new ocean and all of the countries it bordered on behalf of the rulers of Spain. People of those times were rather fond of great words and gestures.

“Long live the great kings of Castille. I hereby lay claim to the entire Southern Seas, this unknown ocean – together with all that surrounds it – in the name of the king of Castille. I will defend it against all those who dispute this claim” – this was Balboa’s historic vow as recorded by chroniclers. A great deal of pride is contained within those words – Balboa must have realized that this was a day that would add a page to history.

However, he was not to reap the fruits of that discovery. Balboa counted on receiving the position of governor over these newly discovered lands. He forgot that in this world connections are worth more than merit. In the race for honors, he was out run by Don Pedro Arias de Avila, an influential man at the court in Madrid more commonly known as Pedrarias. When the newly nominated royal viceroy arrived in America, he suddenly realized that it would be a rather difficult task to reign in his rather deserving rival. With this awareness, Pedrarias resorted to a clever plan. First he offered Balboa the hand of his daughter Izabella in marriage and then accused him of treason and sentenced him to death during a show trial. Exploration of the “lands of gold” to the south moved along at a rather sluggish pace. In 1552 Pascual de Andagoya brought back the first credible information to Panama concerning a great empire where the sun ruled as god and gold more rare. His news coincided with word of Cortez’s successes and the treasure he had garnered in Mexico. This sharpened the appetites of conquistadors for fame and gold. Nevertheless, exploration requires not only courage but sizable financial resources, hence the development of a strange joint venture between the rich and influential Prince Hernando de Luque and two daring but illiterate *caballeros* – Francisco Pizarro and Diego de Almagra. Both were bastards of immeasurable courage and pride. They had nothing to lose in accepting what seemed to be a hopeless endeavor with the meager funds at their disposal.

The first reconnaissance excursions produced victims and disappointment rather than success. In 1524 the partners were able to go only as far as the San Juan river delta in the midst of a humid and dangerous tropical forest. Hunger, exhaustion and injury forced them to turn back. The second and third attempts, undertaken respectively in 1526 and 1527, crossed the equator, but with profits too disproportionate to justify further deaths, sacrifices and costs. The land they explored became increasingly populated and

better organized, a succession of villages and cities grew in wealth. It seemed to confirm all the accounts of a legendary treasure in the land of Biru, whose might was still one big unknown. Another source of uncertainty was also the dogged determination of Indian warriors, requiring larger outlays and commitments than were allotted to the explorers. As a last resort, an appeal was made to the king. In the spring of 1528 Pizarro boarded a ship and set out for Seville, taking along a few Indians, llamas, Peruvian cloth and many other handicrafts made from gold and silver. This must have been enough to persuade the king and Council of India to consent to the organization of another expedition – for the glory of Christ and Castille.

Finally, success. July 26, 1529 Queen Juana signed her name to the famous *Capitulacion* agreement defining the precise obligations and privileges of each side. The new Spanish possessions were christened New Castille and Francisco Pizarro named their governor for life. He was also granted the title of marquis and a coat of arms bearing the symbols of the country he had discovered, the order of St. James, a perpetual salary and the privileges befitting a viceroy. The kings of Spain, in exchange for their help in funding the expedition, were supposed to receive one-fifth of the booty and authority of the new lands subject to the crown. The honors showered on Pizarro missed his companions and were at the root of future conflicts. Both received adequate pensions and privileges but considerably lower than those negotiated by their leader.

For the time being, these profits existed only on paper. In January 1531 Pizarro left Panama in the company of his three brothers: Hernando, Gonzago and Juan. Their three ships carried around 180 soldiers – a number that cannot be verified with total certainty because of imprecise data left by chroniclers. Accounts most often mention sixty-two riders, one hundred and six infantrymen and more than a dozen bowmen as well as musketeers. This small unit accomplished unprecedented feats, conquering a country

inhabited by ten million people, a country with a highly-developed culture and social order, a country that could have sent an army of two hundred thousand against the handful of soldiers at any moment. It was accomplished by a group of desperados driven on by hope in the discovery of El Dorado, the fabled land of gold. They never found El Dorado, but the Tawantinsuyu kingdom was so rich in gold that each man could have become rich many times over. There are few examples of such spectacular feats in the history of the world. Pizarro and his soldiers never suspected that fate had sent them to take part in the last act of a play featuring a civilization whose origins fade into the mists of oblivion and which decided to commit an act of self-annihilation at the height of its glory.

It is hard to imagine the emotions that the conquistadors experienced as they lost themselves in a beautiful but deadly landscape. The group had entered a world of which it knew little. Everything was mysterious and frightening. In truth they came across temples and monasteries, ceremonies resembling baptism and confession, but these discoveries also included cannibals and the practice of headhunting, not to mention the crafting of drums from human skin. The Spanish were astonished by monumental architecture and well-kept roads as well as impressed by the well-oiled state. On the other hand, they were shocked by the barbarous traditions, bloody rituals, primitive tools and weapons. Perhaps this is where the source of the difficulties conquistadors had in acknowledging the Indians as rightful human beings.

The history of mankind is no idyll and contains numerous moments of drama, cruelty and horror. In the ten thousand years of man's ongoing attempt to subjugate the other, there is no way to establish where the border between "gold" and "evil." Even God promised Jews the world, which they had to take by force from previous inhabitants. In discovering the New World, the Spanish also came across brutal conquerors. The Aztec

and Inca empires were engineered by force. Some tribes even welcomed the Spanish as liberators. None of this diminishes Pizarro's success, achieved in the face of a courageous opponent with four hundred years of experience in battle and conquest.

Notes

The history of the Inca began in the Cuzco valley with the legendary leader Manco Capaca and his wife Mama Oklio, a history filled with too many missing pages. That is why historians have such difficulty outlining later periods of the civilization's growth: from a tribal confederation to the mighty Tawantinsuyu kingdom – “the four corners of the world.” It was a symbolic name connected with the administrative division that was implemented, creating four districts ruled by royal viceroys. Most were close relatives and all carried the title *tukujrikuk*, which means, loosely translated, “the man who sees everything.”

The hierarchy of power in the Inca state resembled a pyramid. At the apex was *Sapan Inca*, the master of life and death, an absolute ruler who was worshiped as a god. No one dared to make direct eye contact with him, even the most famous chiefs were only allowed to approach him if barefoot and carrying a heavy load on their backs. Everything this foremost Inca touched became holy, from leftover food to fingernail trimmings. In administering rule he was aided by the high priest *Vilac Umu*, the Council of the Long Ears and Council of Apus – the administrators of the four districts of *Tawantinsuyu*.

The first eight rulers were undistinguishable and we are uncertain whether they actually existed or were a fragment of Incan mythology. The ruler who gave the state its organizational framework in the 15th century was Pachacutec – The

One Who Shook the World, ninth in a series of Inca and believed to be the first historic leader. Pachacutec was widely-known as an excellent lawmaker, strategist and builder. He was also a wise and judicious ruler. After conquering new lands, he allowed defeated tribes to practice many of their traditions and pray to their own gods and did not destroy their temples – constructing only a new and more impressive temple to the Incan deity nearby. At the same time, he willingly exploited the accomplishments of older Andean cultures, adapting the technical, social and communal achievements of the Tiahuanaco, Huari and Chimú cultures.

However, the genius of the Inca was not so much a question of wise and selective assimilation of their predecessors' accomplishments as their political organization in gradually subjugated areas. It was no easy task to managed disparate, often hostile ethnic communities. In order to cement the empire, governments were based on three pillars. Firstly, central rule was in Cuzco, its highest representative was an Inca acknowledged to be the Son of the Sun. As in ancient Egypt, this Inca was believed to be a god and similarly to the pharaohs he married his own sister so that the holy blood would not be tainted by the blood of another line. Secondly, all administrative positions in defeated provinces were overseen exclusively by long ears. Finally, throughout the empire use of the Quechua language was forbidden.

Unification was not an entirely smooth process, but the rebellions and uprisings were pacified with complete ruthlessness and the unruly tribes split into small groups and sent to all corners of the empire. Well maintained roads allowed the army to be reformed into a particularly effective offensive machine. Thanks to their military victories, within a short time the Inca assumed control over an enormous swath of territory. It included what is now Peru, Ecuador and the

greater part of Bolivia, Chile and Argentina. Less than one hundred years after the death of Pachacutec the Spanish appeared on the borders of the Tawantinsuyu kingdom. At that time the twelfth ruler of the Inca was Huayna Capac – a ruthless king, who dealt with the slightest sign of disobedience with iron cruelty. This was the fate of the Cara people who resided in the northern territories. Even the cruel fall victim to *amore*. Huayna Capac fell in love in the beautiful Tozto Palla, the daughter of the conquered ruler. Atahualpa was born of this union, which tied the aging king even more to the beautiful concubine. Familial bliss allowed him to put aside the kingdom's growing problems, if only for a moment.

In Cuzco Huayna Capac's spouse Coya Rava Runtu and firstborn son Huascar grew impatient with his extended absence and parts of the priesthood that were hostile towards the leader also reactivated, issuing reports of bad omens appearing in the sky. One day the inhabitants of Cuzco saw a large eagle chased by a few hawks, flying desparately over the city to escape. After a short pursuit, the hawks caught and tore the eagle to pieces. The priests read this as a sign of the Inca line's impending end. Huayna Capac's interpretation of the event was similar. There were other disturbing signs: comets crossed the night sky, the moon was encircled by a triple ring of fire, some parts of the empire were struck by earthquakes and one Inca palace burned to the ground after being struck by lightning. Then messengers brought news of bearded, white-skinned people, sailing in winged boats. Was this the fulfillment of an old prediction that the emissaries of Virakocha would return to destroy his kingdom?

Virakocha – the great mystery of the Inca – the myth of a white, bearded old man who preceded the Spanish by one century and brought the inhabitants of the New World the sparks of civilization along with the sign of the cross, baptism

in water, the ritual of confession and the forgiveness of sins that function in the Incan religion, an order that follows a host of strict rules. Who were these holy hermits imitating, musing in the Andean wilderness and mortifying their sinful bodies? The palaces were inhabited by the Sons of the Sun, who cared for their white skin and blond hair, evidence of their divine heritage. How many centuries did the Mystery precede History? When was Mystery transformed into Myth? No one can provide a true account of Virakocha's last moments on Peruvian soil – the moment when set off towards the setting sun, walking across the ocean waves. His testament, however, was passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth like a generational game of telephone. It concerned his predicted return, preceded by the arrival of bearded white men.

The Incas' suspicions were soon confirmed. Huayna Capac died in 1525, leaving behind this message to his people:

Soon after my departure a strong people will appear to fulfill the prophecy of our father, the Sun, conquering and subjugating our country. I command you to be obedient and serve them since they will exceed you in everything, their laws are better than our own and their weapons more powerful and unbeatable.

What an amazing coincidence considering what happened just a few years earlier in Mexico. Montezuma, the last ruler of the Aztecs, using similar words called upon the white, bearded god Quetzalcoatl and submitted to the white invaders. Both were guided by a fatalistic prophecy to which they succumbed with passive resignation, convinced that the time of their peoples had passed irreversibly.

Huayna Capac left his kingdom in the hands of his sons – Quito was claimed by Atahualpa and the rest of the empire fell to Huascar. The brothers did not keep the peace for long. Shortly after the death of his father, Huascar sent a message to Quito demanding his brother's homage. Most likely he was afraid of the ambitions of his younger and more impetuous brother, but the demand infuriated Atahualpa. The armies of both princes prepared for battle.

Atahualpa had no mercy for those who sympathized with his brother. The chroniclers say that he ordered their cities razed to the ground and all the inhabitants were wiped out. The deciding battle was fought on the Quipaypampa plain not far from Cuzco. Huascar was captured after an entire day of fighting, but Atahualpa did not intend to stop there. He ordered the capture of all the women of the royal line – aunts, nieces and cousins as well as the wives and sisters of Huascar – and sentenced them to a martyr's death. Even pregnant women were tied to the stake, their fetuses cut out and hung over the unfortunate mother's shoulders. According to the account, some of these executions were carried out in front of the imprisoned Huascar. He and another younger brother – Manco – were spared by some strange whim of Atahualpa's.

When the victorious Inca tied the royal *borla* around his forehead – a purple tasseled headband, the sign and symbol of unlimited rule – probably had no idea that at the same time at the borders of his empire another deadly threat was developing. His army and its success made Atahualpa overconfident. The white, bearded men did match the prophecy passed down through the generations from the god Virakocha, but they were only a handful of men. The coming months would show just how wrong he was.

Meanwhile Pizarro realized that a destructive civil war was just what he needed. Stifled by the Inca, tribes on the outskirts of the empire welcomed “the emissaries of Virakocha” as liberators and were more than willing to support the Spanish. Pizarro also noticed that the horses and boom of weapons filled the Indians with insane fear. An attack by more than a dozen men on horseback caused an army of a few thousand men to run in panic. At first it was believed that the horse and its rider were two parts of one beast. These “tanks of the Spanish conquest” shifted the balance of battles and skirmishes in favor of the invaders more than once, boosting their confidence even farther. When news reached them of Atahualpa’s presence in Cajamarca, where he was accompanied by his court and guarded by only a few thousand soldiers, they understood that fate had smiled upon them. The rest was just a mix of cunning, cheek and courage – three qualities the conquistadors didn’t lack.

Atahualpa’s tendency to underestimate them was an extra point in their favor. He knew that these were not Virakocha’s emissaries, an impression confirmed by the fighting, stealing and rapes that Pizarro’s men had committed during their march. They spared neither the temples nor monasteries of the Sun Virgins if they contained gold or a chance for unbridled fun. Atahualpa could have destroyed the Spanish with one command where the narrow trails led through mountain passes and deep canyons, but he didn’t, a mistake he paid for with his life and the loss of his kingdom.

What was he counting on by forbidding his men to attack the Spanish when they robbed villages and cities and then sending messengers bearing gifts and invitations to Cajamarca? It certainly had something to do with his curiosity with the habits and military equipment, since Atahualpa banished any thoughts

that they might represent a threat to his authority. He was the master of their fate now. All were slated for death with the exception of the barber, who was able to return man to the appearance of youth, and the smith, whose talents in creating weapons and shoeing horses were invaluable. When the divine luster had worn off the Spanish, revealing them to be common thieves and rapists, Atahualpa eliminated his fear but was still interested in gaining control of their horses, equipment and perhaps to exploit them as mercenaries in the fight with his imprisoned brother's supporters. He lured them deep into the country, cutting off every path of return.

Atahualpa severely underestimated the determination and cunning of his opponent. Pizarro had no intention of adhering to Europe's canons of chivalrous honor, particularly since his opponents were "savages" who he was supposed to civilize and convert to the one true faith. On November 15, 1532 the dull thud of horse hooves rang through the abandoned streets of Cajamarca. Unsettled Spanish soldiers stared at the thousands of Inca soldiers camped around the city. Perhaps at that moment they had some inkling of the madness of their plans but there was no turning back. The world's second highest mountain chain stood between them and the ships waiting for them on the coast. They had a choice: prevail or die. In open battle there was no chance of success. At that point Pizarro came up with a risky and even crazy plan. After all, hadn't everything they had done so far been one crazy adventure anyway?

He decided to lure the Inca into a trap, sending his brother Hernando and Hernando de Soto to Atahualpa with a request for a meeting. The discipline of the soldiers, the respect shown their ruler and the wealth surrounding Atahualpa made an impression on the messengers. The Indians also examined their unusual guests

with curiosity. After exchanging courtesies, Atahualpa announced his visit on the following day. This was good news for Pizarro, although the approaching night would be an unsettling one for his soldiers. They were caught in a trap and their fate would be decided on the next day. The tension was so great that – as Pedro Pizarro wrote in his memoirs – “some of us trembled in fear and pissed our pants.” Atahualpa spent the night preceding the meeting in prayer, confession and writing his testament.

In the meantime Pizarro started his own preparations for the “meeting” that morning, hiding soldiers in the homes surrounding the large square in the center of the city who were instructed to wait for the order to attack. The signal was a shot fired from a falconet on the walls rising above the roofs of the fortress. Atahualpa was evidently in no hurry to pay his visit. A horde of Indians began spilling through the city gates in the evening. A few thousand soldiers, bodyguards, bureaucrats and Incan dignitaries filled the square. Finally, heralded by servants who swept the ground with bird feathers, Atahualpa made his appearance in glittering gold and a litter covered in precious stones, carried by eight porters with Herculean builds. The sound of horns and conch shells was somber and threatening, creating a background for the events that were about to take place. In a tension filled moment the words of the expedition’s chaplain, Fr. Vincente Valverde, sounded harsh as he proceeded to read the royal decree or *Requerimiento* – demanding recognition of the authority of Castilian kings. Then, with the help of a translator, he gave a long speech in an attempt to convert the ruler of the Inca.

“Who is your God? What are his commands?” asked Atahualpa impatiently.

“This is God!” called out a chaplain, raising the cross. “And in this book his commandments are written.”

He pressed a breviary into the hand of the Inca, who immediately threw it to the ground.

“*Santiago y a ellos!*”³⁶ The scream of the chaplain was lost in the roar of cannon and harquebus.

The helpless and stunned Indians fell under the onslaught of the soldiers, experienced in the practice of cruelty, who began to cut, slash and kill. A living wall of dignitaries formed around a shocked Atahualpa, making no attempt to defend themselves and inexplicably accepting the blows they were given in silence, sliding one by one to the ground. Horses trampled and crushed bones, cutting open the stomachs of those lying on the ground. In the space of one hour a few thousand prone Indians lined the square and the great Inca became a Spanish prisoner. The conquistadors suffered not a single casualty and the only injured Spaniard was Pizarro, who attempted to protect Atahualpa from harm. The events of that one hour were unbelievable, bordering on a dream. A kingdom of millions defended by tens of thousands of trained warriors submitted to a handful of desperate Spaniards.

The leader Rumiñahui, who stood nearby with an army of thousands, did not come to the aid of his ruler. He was not given the order to attack and after news of the defeat the warriors dispersed. Encountering no resistance, the Spanish plundered the royal camp and Atahualpa’s harem. Such were the consequences of the Incan system of governance, according to which everything from crops in the fields to war depended on the will of the Inca. To his people he was a father and a

³⁶ St. James, aim for them!

god in one person. After he was gone, the kingdom fell under the paralyzing thrall of apathy.

Despite the passage of hundreds of years, historians are still puzzled by the phenomenon that ended in the collapse of the Incan empire and by how easily Pizarro handled what would seem to be an impossible task. What influence did the tragic prophecy hanging over the dynasty have on the course of events? Perhaps differences in the mentality of the great king and former swineherd were at work. Atahualpa, convinced of his divine origins, lived from birth in a world in which his followers could not even look upon his face or approach his person unless it was on their knees. Questioning the ruler was equated with disregard for the Sun God and punished by a cruel death. Could he then have imagined that a treacherous attack on the descendent of the gods was even possible? We will never understand the motives that drove the Inca because, as Ryszard Kapuscinski wrote:

Reaching the past as it really was is impossible. We have access only to different variants, more or less credible and which today suit us to a greater or lesser degree. The past does not exist - only unfinished versions of it.

The convergence of events in Peru and those more than a decade earlier in Central America, according to a screenplay written by another mad conquistador – Cortez – is curious. During his last visit to Spain, Pizarro met the already famous Aztec slayer. He must have been a good listener and a model student since the knowledge he gleaned from that meeting was implemented effectively in subduing the gigantic empire. Just like Cortez, he began by dulling the vigilance

of the Incan ruler and later captured him by deceit, ensuring his safety and the obedience of a great nation.

In captivity the Spanish guaranteed Atahualpa the standard of living to which he was accustomed. They also left the attributes and appearance of authority in his hands. He and his court lived in one of Cajamarca's palaces and was allowed to receive guests and send messengers. Atahualpa bore his fate with a philosophic pensiveness and stoic calm. *A la guerre comme à la guerre.*³⁷ However, the news coming in was more than ominous: his brother Huascar had offered the Spanish a ransom of gold for his release. Atahualpa's reaction was immediate. He ordered the death of his rival for the throne and also offered Pizarro gold – a lot of gold. To this day in Cajamarca visitors are shown the Casa de Rescate – or House of Ransom, which the Inca leader commanded to be filled with treasure. The room's dimensions were six by seven meters and Atahualpa's hand, two and a half meters above the floor, indicated the height of the looted to be deposited here – one hundred and five cubic meters of gold.

“In addition, I will throw twice that amount in silver,” Atahualpa tempted a dumbfounded Pizarro.

At this moment the Inca made a double mistake. First: by alerting the conquistadors to the scale of the country's wealth, he awakened hopes in the immediate fulfillment of their greatest desire. His person was a guarantee of the realization of these dreams and could therefore be sure that he would never be freed since no player ever gets rid of his highest ace. Second: the ransom he offered was too high. He was, after all, only a bastard son of the royal concubine. The defeat of Huascar did not ensure the automatic support of the priesthood or

³⁷ All's fair in love and war.

respect from the chiefs and magnates. Recent events in Cajamarca also did nothing to increase his authority, therefore the Inca's orders were sabotaged, a fact the priests who cared for the temples in Cuzco, Pachacomac and the holy lake of Titicaca exploited. Instead of the promised four hundred thousand kilograms of gold, after two months only a mere five tones was sent. In order to accelerate further supplies, Pizarro sent his men out throughout the kingdom. Martin de Mogues, in addition to gold, brought a special captive from Cuzco – the sister of Atahualpa. This exceptional beauty made an impression on the more than fifty-year-old head of the conquistadors. His decision to marry was not only a tribute to her beauty but also a refined political move. Pizarro counted on his connection with the royal line to make ruling the country easier. Soon Doña Inez – the name with which she was christened – gained the acceptance of her royal brother and stood on the marriage alter.

Atahualpa deluded himself into believing that his new brother-in-law would show him greater favor after the wedding. The reality was quite different thanks to a deceitful intrigue hatched by Filipillo – a young Indian translator. Once again it became clear that love and death are close cousins and the conclusion of various alliances can determine the fate of not only individuals but entire nations. The boy was caught *in flagranti* with one of the royal concubines and in accordance with Inca custom the lovers were sentenced to death. The execution order was carried out only on the girl, since Filipillo was under Spanish protection. Nonetheless, he vowed to have his revenge on the king. Soon after he informed the Spanish of Atahualpa's supposed plotting with leaders who were gathering a massive army in the vicinity of Cajamarca. In panic the soldiers forced Pizarro to call for a temporary military tribunal to pass judgment on Atahualpa.

The ruler was accused of slaying his brother Huascar, illegally assuming the throne, polygamy and plotting against the Spanish. No one saw fit to familiarize the accused with these charges. In fact he was not even admitted to the trial and Filipillo translated and loosely interpreted the testimonies of witnesses. There was only one possible verdict given such a parody of a trial – death by burning at the stake.

It would be hard to imagine a crueller verdict. The Indians were terrified by the disintegration of the body during cremation. They believed that their dead would return to earth as long as the body was preserved. That is why Atahualpa agreed to be baptized at the last moment as long as the Spanish agreed to his death by garrote³⁸ instead of fire. Dominican Fr. Valverde, pleased to be able to pluck one more soul from Satan's grip, baptized the ruler with the Christian name Juan since the execution was scheduled to take place on the feast day of St. John the Baptist. Then the executioner tightened a rope around the great Inca. On August 29, 1533 the god Inti turned his back on his chosen nation.

Where was the other God, the patron to which the Indians were “converted,” and to which the conquistadors prayed in times of trial and forgot in moments of triumph? Why did the Spanish feel free to act with such impunity in treating Atahualpa with such baseness and cruelty? Perhaps they believed that their God was so far away that his hand could not reach from the Old World to the one that lie across the Great Water. The dramatic fate of the Incan ruler was only an overture in a series of terrible events that would affect the great nation – and not only in Peru. The entire history of South America is full of cruel and shameful scenes, much like the history of mankind. Was man really created in the image of

³⁸ Death by suffocation using a rope twisted around the condemned's neck.

his God? What laws of nature encoded such wickedness and murderousness in human genes? How did the most loyal servants of the Catholic monarchs – Ferdinand and Izabella – transform into ruthless beasts blinded by gold after setting foot on the new continent? I pose these questions to make myself and others aware of the fact that there are some limits to human behavior, whose violation is impossible to justify.

Atahualpa – the ruler of a mighty empire – was dead, despite a fantastic ransom of gold, silver and precious stones offered for his life. With the death of its king, the kingdom of Tawantinsuyu ceased to exist, although the conquest of Peru ended only on June 24, 1572 when the Spanish entered the last capital of the Inca – Vilcabamba. Nearly all of the *Orejones* – or long ears were killed as representatives of the royal line. High born princesses became the wives or mistresses of the conquerors and the children born of these mixed unions marked the beginning of a new race. Particularly condemned were all traces of the tribal tradition and knowledge accumulated over the ages. Not even stone structures were spared. Temple walls and palaces became building materials for other temples erected for the glory of a new god that would soon rule the New World. Although the Indians put up token resistance a few times in the coming years, they could not change the march of history – and it was a cruel one.

Gold of the Incas

After the death of Atahualpa, transports of goods to Cajamarca intended for his ransom halted. Aware of Spanish intentions, the priests conspired to hide the treasures accumulated in their temples over the centuries. The campaign was carried out quite effectively and their location was known only to a small group of the highest ranking priests. One chronicler of those times, Pedro Pizarro – a cousin of Francisco acted as page and chronicler for the expedition – wrote the following in his *Accounts of the discovery and conquest of the Kingdom of Peru*:

The Orejones commanded that [the treasure] be delivered to a nearby hiding place. There, other Indians replaced the porters. They buried all the objects and then, at an order from their masters, either hung themselves or threw themselves over a cliff without protest. The country contains countless treasures but only a miracle would allow us to find them.

This marked the birth of legends concerning the treasure of the Inca hidden in inaccessible recesses of the Andes. The Spanish became convinced of the truth in these imaginative tales soon after their arrival in Cuzco, where tortured priests were pressed to give up their secrets. In a few cases the wall of silence was broken and a search of nearby caves indicated by their informers revealed numerous pure gold, elaborately crafted vases and life-size statues of people and animals made from gold and silver. Despite their fevered searches, no trace was found of the famous chain commissioned by Huayna Capac and fashioned from ten tones of gold in honor of his firstborn son's birth. After the conclusion of the related ceremonies, the chain was given to the priests of Coricancha for

safekeeping. The Spanish unearthed only empty treasuries and the fabled chain became the dream of many treasure hunters. Unfortunately, dreams rarely come true.

The ransom collected in Cajamarca consisted of countless unwieldy yet valuable objects. The Spanish, driven mad with greed, stared entranced by the golden disks that porters pulled out of saddlebags slung across the backs of llamas and set out in the courtyard. Their eyes estimated the value of beautifully ornamented objects – plates, statues, ornaments and jewelry. Handmade crafts by Incan goldsmiths landed in the dust of the square at Cajamarca. But the Spanish did not desire the intricately designed, costly objects so much as the raw material from which they were made. For this reason and also to avoid conflicts in dividing the loot, everything was melted down into gold bars of equal weight. It turned out that the total value of gold awaiting distribution was 1,326,539 *pesos de oro* (6,155 kilograms)³⁹ and 51,610 silver marks (11,870 kilograms).⁴⁰ The value of the gold alone in today's prices would amount to more than ninety million dollars. After one-fifth of the haul was set aside for the king, each of the conquistadors who participated in Pizarro's mad expedition received a share in proportion to rank and merits in battle. If the chroniclers are to be believed, the lowest foot soldier was awarded twenty kilograms of gold and forty kilograms of silver and each member of the cavalry twice as much. Francisco Pizarro estimated his own merits at 265 kilograms of gold and 541 kilograms of silver and also appropriated Atahualpa's throne, worth an estimated twenty-five thousand *peso de oro*. He enjoyed this luxury for five years. Finding himself in financial difficulty, Pizarro ordered the throne melted down into bars and sent the emeralds adorning it to the king, who used them to decorate the famous monstrance in Toledo made from gold obtained by Columbus during his first expedition. Only Diego de

³⁹ one *peso de oro* = 4.64 g.

⁴⁰ One Spanish mark (*marco*) = 230 g.

Almagro and the soldiers who accompanied him after the capture of Atahualpa felt slighted, since each received a paltry twenty thousand *pesos* in gold. It had a fatal significance for future relations between these former partners.

The loot garnered in Cuzco was no less than that plundered in Cajamarca – five hundred and eighty thousand marks in gold and two hundred and fifteen pounds in silver were divided according to the same system. Each cavalryman received six thousand marks in gold, twice the sum allotted to each foot soldier. This sudden inflow of wealth dumbfounded the Spanish. Releasing the pent-up stress built up over many months, the soldiers squandered their wealth in drunkenness and gambling. More than one lost it all in one toss of the dice, the source of the Spanish saying: “to lose the sun before the sun rises.”

A golden disk found its way into the possession of a certain *caballero*, who was infatuated with a beautiful Indian princess. The girl convinced her lover that the valuable relic should be returned to the priests of the Temple of the Sun on the lake of Titicaca, where Spanish troops had not yet arrived. What won't we do for passionate love? They set out towards the south, followed unfortunately by spies. When the escapees reached the lake, they were surrounded by soldiers. In desperation the lovers threw the gold disk into the lake, embraced and then jumped in after it, choosing death in the watery depths. A moving story, but is it true?

This was not the only treasure submerged in the cold waters of the lake. A similar fate met the gold gathered on the Island of the Sun, the seat of the god Inti. Each Inca was obliged to make a pilgrimage to the local temple once in his lifetime and leave the appropriate offering. Certain provinces in the empire also sent valuable gifts. One of the Ayullus – the holy protectors of the island – when interrogated by the Spanish, claimed that the gold and silver accumulated on the island was enough to erect the walls for

another temple. This treasure was also committed to the lake. The invaders were left with naked walls and hope that the gold could be recovered from the bottom of the lake, as unrealistic as it seems.

From a technical standpoint, the recovery of other treasures would seem less complicated. Their existence is confirmed by the story of Ruiz Diaz, a messenger sent to Pizarro from Manco, the last Incan ruler who hid in one of the Andean valleys. During the conversation Manco ordered that a bushel of corn be brought and strewn across the floor. Then, picking up one grain, he said:

“This is how little you have plucked of Incan gold. The rest,” he gestured to the corn, “I can give you if you agree to leave our country once and for all.”

Pizarro could not agree to such a condition since officially his mission was to convert Indian sheep and not seek gold. Therefore, an attempt to get at the Incan gold had to be made through other channels. However, it was perfectly hidden. Until this day it lies in caves, mountain passes and the jungle, although its shine continues to tempt. New information, to a greater or lesser degree fantastic, continues to raise man’s hopes. A whispered rumor tells of two boys who were playing in a cave near Cuzco and found a few golden plates. Earlier two children had gotten lost in one of the numerous underground corridors in the vicinity of Cuzco. After three days they emerged near the church of San Domingo. Each was holding a golden corn cob.

One hundred years later the story of Indian don Carlos, a descendent of the royal line, was told in Cuzco. Enchanted with his historic splendor, the beautiful Donna Mariade Esquivel married him. Quickly it turned out that not only was Carlos short and repulsive, but also poor. Her hopes dashed, the new wife raged day and night. One day Carlos’ patience ran out and he exclaimed:

“Woman, I’ll prove to you that there is no king on earth who has more treasure!”

He led his wife blindfolded through winding corridors to an enormous gallery carved into the rock. Donna Mariade was dumbstruck at one glimpse of the treasure she beheld. Unfortunately, Carlos would not allow her to take so much as one jewel, fearing the vengeance of the god Inti. Again she was blindfolded and led home. Carlos was unable to stop his wife's tongue from wagging, however, and she proceeded to trumpet her husband's secret far and wide. The treasure remained undiscovered only because she did not know the way to the underground vault.

A similar account was recorded in the memoirs of a famous 18th century traveler and researcher of American cultures – Baron Alexander von Humboldt. During one of his scientific excursions, he reached Cajamarca, where at that time many constructions built by the Inca were still standing. He was given a tour by Astorpilca, the son of the local *curaca* – a descendent of Atahualpa, the last Inca ruler, out of wedlock. Standing on the ruins of one palace, he explained that many years before one of his great grandfathers had taken his spouse into the secret corridors to show her an underground Incan garden.

There she saw elaborately crafted gold trees complete with leaves and fruit, birds perched on the branches and the widely sought litter (una de las andas) of Atahualpa. Her husband forbid her to touch any of these wonders because the appointed time had not yet come to pass (the resurrection of the Incan empire). Whoever steals anything must die on that same night, (...) young Astorpilca maintained that below me slightly to the right of where I was standing, was a datura tree or 'guanto' with large flowers, made from golden wire and sheets whose branches revealed the final resting place of the Inca.

The existence of the underground labyrinth below Cuzco was confirmed by a credible account provided by Spanish chroniclers, who saw them with their own eyes. These *chincanas*, which cross and re-cross one another, running in all directions, are now

inaccessible. They collapsed as a result of many earthquakes in the region or thanks to deliberate cave-ins caused by the Inca themselves.

Information concerning the discovery of entrances to the secret tunnels has also come from other regions of Peru. Real stories are also circulating: about the treasures squirreled away within them, the adventures of those who search for the Inca's hiding places and the treasure chambers they uncovered, knowledge passed from generation to generation. One of the men supposedly initiated into these secrets is an Argentinean of Hungarian descent, Juan Moricz. During research work conducted in 1965 on the Santiago river in south-east Ecuador, he stumbled across one of the entrances to the tunnels. After four years of research and certain of his find, Moricz informed the president of Ecuador. Special services took an interest in his revelation and from that moment an embargo was declared on all information concerning the progress of work. As a result, the sensational information that is released to the public is incomplete, not credible and sounds like a fantastic bedtime story for adults.

The trail connected to the Inca's treasure even lead to...Nidzica, a castle located near the border of southern Poland. It would be just another story with all the elements of a good legend: romance, hidden treasure and a deadly curse – if not for the facts. Under the castle stairs near the main gate, in the presence of many witnesses, a lead tube was found in 1946 that contained a bundle of decaying leather straps tied in a variety of knots. Each strap was finished in a thin lamina of eight-carat gold and the inscriptions: Dunajec, Vigo and Titicaca. Their discoverer was Andrew Benez, inspired by the mysterious family testament hidden in the cover of an old missal in the parish of the Holy Cross in Cracow.

The genealogy of the Benez family is rooted in the history of the Berzeviczow line, a family of Hungarian magnates and the owners of the castle in Niedzica since the

18th century. In the 18th century Sebastian Berzevicz, driven by a thirst for adventure, traveled to Peru, where he married a Incan princess. The couple had a daughter name Umina. Sebastian must have liked Peru because he did not object to her marriage. There the history becomes clouded. We are unable to establish definitively who her husband was. Later events assure us that he was related to Josè Gabriel Tupak Amaru II – the leader of an uprising that broke out November 4, 1780 against the Spanish oppressors. After putting down the rebellion and putting its leader and his entire family to death, Umina's husband became the legal heir of the Incan crown and treasure. However, life in Peru was too dangerous for them. The Spanish decided to wipe out all possible contenders to the Inca crown. Old Berzevicz, his daughter and son-in-law (along with part of the treasure) decided to flee to Europe. For ten years they raised their son Antonio in peace, but were eventually traced by Spanish intelligence. The first to die was Umina's husband, who was stabbed, shortly followed by Umina. In despair the grandfather fled with his grandson to the Dunajec river. To erase all traces of their escape he arranged for the boy's adoption by a cousin – Vaclav Benesz Berzevicz.

Antonio married a Polish woman after reaching maturity, Barbara Rubinowska, but he knew that he had to be careful. Passing on the family documents to his oldest son Ernest from his death bed in 1877, Antonio forbade him from digging up the events of the past to avoid reactivating the curse hanging over the family. Andrew Benesz was the grandson of Ernest. He decided not to heed his grandfather's warning and retraced the family saga, inspired by a visit paid to his parents by two mysterious travelers. They had traced the power of attorney of distant relatives still living in Peru and expressed an interest in buying the family archive. He launched a search, rummaged through the archives, contacted the family in Ecuador and tried to find someone who could interpret the Incan knots. In 1976 on the day before his son's sixteenth birthday when, according to

family tradition, he would inherit the family's four-generation secret...Antonio died in a car accident. Was this the curse placed on the treasure at work again? If so, it started to function much earlier.

The first to die were Border Guard Troops (WOP) soldiers – witnesses to the excavation of the *kipu* from under the Niedzica castle. The castle's caretaker drowned in the river after conducting his own investigation into the fate of the Incan treasure. Two members of the Hungarian Salomon family, to which the castle belonged before the war, died in a catastrophic train accident as they traveled to Poland, intrigued by stories surrounding their former family headquarters. Did the curse frighten the castle's current owner of a castle in Tropsztyn – Andrew Witkowicz, well-known rally racecar driver and businessman – into flooding the castle's foundation with three hundred tones of cement, thereby blocking access to the entrance?

Andrew and I discuss the dismal fate of the Benesz line and strange Peruvian connotations in the hotel bar.

“The curses of Inca priests is a serious matter and can't be dismissed, Jacek. Those with the most horrible effects were spoken at the moment when the sun disappeared behind the horizon. No one was able to remove or reverse such a curse. Atahualpa, sentenced to die that very night, put such a curse on his oppressors. Within a short time all of the judges who were in favor of the guilty verdict died. Pizarro's three brothers died under tragic circumstances. Only Hernando, away from Cajamarca at the time, was spared because he spoke out loudly against the execution of the sentence. Perhaps such a curse was also put on the Inca treasure by priests?”

“In my mind the most puzzling aspect are the knotted leather straps found by Benesz. If they were made of cotton, we would be speaking of the *kipu* that the Inca used.”

“Are you trying to say,” Andrew breaks in “that this is some kind of trick or fake? Maybe you are right and maybe you are just repeating widely-voiced opinions. In fact few of the original Inca kipu remain. The Spanish were very methodical in destroying all traces of the Indian cultural heritage. Seeing Satan in those works of knotted straps, the Spanish burned all of the examples they could get their hands on in 1583 on the authority of a council in Lima. It’s a shame because the method of notation used by the Inca is reputed to be quite old. According to legend it was taught to them by the bearded, white god Virakocha. Because of the paltry number that has survived, we are not unable to read the *kipu*, nor do we know if information of particular importance was written on the leather straps, which are more resistant.”

“It is widely said that this notation facilitated communication only in economic and administrative matters, while it was unable to convey emotions and moods.”

“Such theses are disproven by an experiment conducted by Lope Garcia de Castro, acting governor of Peru in 1564. Wanting to gain a familiarity with Incan history, he ordered a search for Indian chroniclers able to read the *kipu*. Unfortunately, only four were found. Each came from a different region of the vast country and despite this the information they read on the kipu did not differ in content. It was therefore proven that the knotted straps were legible for anyone who could break the code.

“You believe the *kipu* was a numbered code?” I ask, slightly amazed.

“That is what specialists believe. We use similar postal and telephone codes. You look at the area code and think: Paris, Moscow, Berlin...The problem is that in order to read the encoded text, you have to have the key. Moreover, in one private library in Italy a 17th-century treatise describing two kinds of *kipu* were discovered, penned by two monks – Joana Antonia Cumisa and Joana Anella Olivy. The first was designed for number-statistical notations and was more complicated, based on a syllabic division

known only to a few and used for recording religious and caste secrets. The evidence that something like this is possible may be discoveries in...Korea, where identical notations were found.”

“What was simple for the Incan *quipu camayoca* is a series of puzzles and mysteries for contemporary linguists. How then can we interpret the information left by the Inca, assuming that we are able to find an example of the *kipu* found by Andrew Benesz?”

“Purely a rhetorical question. If we know that the Inca commanded certain Amazon tribes to guard their secrets, then perhaps there is also a secret group of *quipu camayocas*, who pass their abilities from generation to generation. There are still a number of secrets in this world. Regurgitating this to you is a pure truism because you deal with this all the time during your travels.”

Andrew is right. How often during my trips have I wrestled with the Secret accompanying human history? He failed to mention only that it is inordinately difficult to reveal even a seam of the curtains that cover it in oblivion. The more I travel, the longer my list of questions – the answers to which I am still searching – becomes.

Inca gold has never brought anyone happiness. The tragic end of the Pizarro clan, Diego Almagra and Vicente Valverde – the main heroes in this Peruvian drama – have already been outlined above.⁴¹ The curse of Atahualpa had a longer reach. Its last victim was Spain, which died in a similar fashion as the legendary king Midas, choked on its own wealth. According to reports compiled by the Royal Treasury in Toledo, between the years 1500 –1600 alone, 754 tones of gold and 22,836 tones of silver were transported to Spain. The gold itself would have a current value (as of September 2004) of more than

⁴¹ Chapter: In the Land of the Inca.

\$7,540,000,000 dollars. If the estimated one hundred tones of gold stolen by pirates and two hundred tones lost in the Atlantic are included, we obtain a total 1,054 tones – the total amount of the precious metal that was taken out of South America. This doesn't seem like a lot if we compare it with today's gold resources of 125,000 tones. However, we should be aware of the situation on the gold market in 1500. If all of the gold deposited in Europe at that time in the form of coins, a variety of ornaments and savings, were melted down – a cube would be created with sides of two meters and weighing 153 tones. However, the annual output in the 15th century did not exceed five tones. It is no surprise that what happened appeared to be the work of the devil: bread became more expensive and gold cheapened. At the time, of course, there were no academic definitions of the laws of supply and demand.

The Peruvian Coast

The reception hall of the embassy is full of people and cigarette smoke. A male bass laugh is drowned out in a choir of sopranos, the intensity of which could be measured in the number of drinks consumed. Every evening in countless locations around the world, similar parties are taking place, flooded with alcohol, where friends and strangers meet, insult and fawn over one another and construct their intrigues. I am staring at a sea of unfamiliar faces when I am spotted by Vidal, an important official in one of Peru's departments.

"Come, I will introduce you to a wonderful girl," he says, his breath laced with alcohol filling my ear.

Until today I still do not know what he really does, but judging by the frequency with which he appears on television, he must be someone outstanding. Questioned by journalists, he babble away with skill and the sombrous tenor of his voice made a person want to change the channel after just a few minutes. Privately, however, he was a great buddy, full of energy and overflowing with jokes, particularly after a few drinks.

Now he takes me towards a girl surrounded by a ring of tuxedoed men. All I can see is her shapely back revealed by an absurdly low-cut dress. I recognize Karin when she turns her head. She sees me too and extends a hand in welcome.

"Welcome, Jacek, how nice to see you again."

"Do you two know each other?" Vidal is unable to mask his surprise. "You haven't wasted any time in Lima."

Karin smiles in apology, takes me by the arm and leads me away from her adoring fans. She looks appetizing and the exciting elevations below her long neck awaken my desire to strike up a friendship with the curves filling her tight-fitting dress.

“Well, you’ve finally given me a chance to get away from those boring, titled assholes, who start salivating at the sight of my breasts.” She moves like a natural born model, shaking her rear end sensually.

“I can understand their interest since your appealing curves, which defy commonly accepted rules of gravity, would be objects of interest for many researchers.”

“I am not accustomed to parties like these. Moreover, in these people and their conversations I sense such artificiality, pose and the need to impress. Listen to them for a moment...its all nonsense. So much heated discussion, so many attempts to impose their own views at any price. Mankind has so many more serious problems on its head these days.”

“Just like a diplomatic reception. Tell me, what stroke of luck brings you to this noble company?”

“Today I’m accompanying someone. I came with my boss.”

“You climb the ladder fast. I’m starting to believe that you will receive that Pulitzer you’re after.”

“Are you trying to be mean? I assure you that in the editorial office my professional skills are also appreciated. For example, recently I was asked to write a large report on the destruction caused by new archeological finds that are unsecured due to a lack of funds and robbed by *huaqueros*. I have a car at my disposal and am leaving tomorrow for Ica. If you are interested in the subject, have free time and can stand my company for three days, then you are welcome to come along.”

Only an idiot could reject a proposal like this. Watching the Peruvian landscape in the company of an enchanting girl is an opportunity for an uncommon experience.

“Could I bring a companion?”

Karin bristles.

“I’m talking about Andrew,” I add. “He knows a lot about the region.”

She nods her head and I see both relief and satisfaction in her smile.

Built with the spark of American planning, the Pan-American Expressway links north and south like an asphalt clasp. Construction on the gigantic structure was started in 1923 and ended in the creation of a three-thousand kilometer road connecting Alaska to Patagonia with a break of two hundred kilometers on the Panama-Columbia border. The wilderness covering the Darien Channel that divides the two Americas is one of the few places on earth where the white man’s civilization did not find fertile soil. The only access is provided by an Indian foot path. In some regions of South America, however, the Panamericana is the only connection with the civilized world. In Peru it runs along the Pacific and the gray-brown *costa*, a monotonous desert-like landscape broken only by the rare clumps of green surrounding the few rivers in the area. Far from the river basins, there is only sky, wind and water. Yellow, orange and bronze tones of the desert contrast sharply with the neon blue sky, while the white breakers outline the border between sand and turquoise water. It is captivatingly beautiful in this barren wilderness.

We leave Lima early before the swollen sun climbs over the desert hills. Empty. Only after a few hours does Peru’s main artery of transportation begin to pulse with life. We are surrounded by ragged rock and dunes. Among prevailing tones of gray and beige, from time to time the glow of red iron dripstone or black basalt is visible. The car glides along a rocky shelf that clings to the steep slope. Above us is crumbling scree, while below only air extends to the steel grey plain of the Pacific. The waves breaking against the coastal cliffs must have traveled nine thousand miles over the ocean. Its enormity paralyzes the imagination.

We plunge into the darkness of a tunnel – the sporty roar of the engine, the screech of tires on another turn. The forest of roadside crosses registers more deaths and the rusting bodies of vehicles lay twisted in heaps of rubble – these are common scenes on this route. I watch the driver’s face screwed in concentration. Everything depends on his agility and reflexes and the road is a tough opponent. Glued to the rocky wall it rises to an elevation of one hundred to two hundred meters above sea level and then drops to the level of the waves. It is hard to imagine how man traveled in this area before the construction of this route. How did the traveler feel in this desert environment, where the only forms of life are cacti and black, depressing vultures circling in search of another victim. Sometimes they find the carcasses of animals run over by vehicles and start into a meal without paying attention to approaching cars. At the last moment, they rise angrily out of the vehicle’s reach, bloody scraps hanging from their beaks.

This narrow, coastal lane of barren soil is really an unusually fertile, but dried out bog. If watered, these desert lands would be transformed into an oasis of grain, vegetables and orchards.

“The Inca understood this well. They cultivated around three million hectares, of which two-thirds were artificially watered. Contemporary Peru has only 1.8 million hectares of arable land.” Andrew demonstrates the power of his gray matter, pulling us out of our morning stupor.

“But the Inca possessed unlimited resources of free labor. Today huge outlays are needed to recreate the irrigation systems destroyed during the Spanish conquest,” Karin replies. “There is hope in the discovery of less costly technologies for the desalination of salt water. For the time being these are only plans which no one can afford to implement.”

We fall silent, wearied by the heat. The car returns to a delicate balance on the edge of an abyss and we attempt to avoid falling rocks as the graveyard of sun baked desert passes by. A few times we can make out the outline of a few huts squeezed in between the rocks and white-crested tide.

Fishing villages make a living off of the Humboldt Current flowing along the Peruvian coast. Its cool, mineral rich waters originate on the coast of Antarctica and migrating north along the entire South American continent. The current inflow causes the tropical sea to seethe with a range of life forms. Their abundance would probably be hard to compare with any other place on earth. Its foremost star is an inconspicuous fish of less than seventeen centimeters in length – the anchovy. It matures rapidly, producing nine thousand spawn after nine months and three times after two years! With a life of only three years, this little creature is in a bit of a rush when it comes to reproduction. Anchovies are capricious fish that like cool, well oxygenated water with a large amount of plankton – all things that the Humboldt provides. Billions of these fish make these waters the most fecund worldwide.

Unfortunately, from time to time the life-giving current changes direction, pushed away from the coast of Peru by an inflow of warm water from a northern river, known by fishermen as El Niño – the baby. For a century the appearance of this natural phenomenon was limited to the tropical regions of the Pacific, where for an entire year the so-called trade winds blow. They generate a rather simple mechanism: heated air rises above the equator, cools in the upper layers of the atmosphere and – more or less over both tropics – falls again towards the surface of the earth. Since during this time the Earth continues to turn, trade winds blow to the north-east in the northern hemisphere and south-west on the other side of the equator.

Due to this phenomenon surface currents form, bringing warm water from the Pacific from the coast of South America towards South-East Asia. However, it pushes the Humboldt current's cool, plankton filled waters along the coasts of Chile and Peru from the region of Antarctica. Occasionally, this precise climatic phenomenon shifts. Sometime during the Christmas season – hence the Spanish name El Niño – trade winds die in the center of the Pacific because of a break in the transport of warm water towards the north and the interrupted Humboldt current. As a result South-East Asia and Australia have a dry season, while Ecuador and Peru are flooded with rain.

This is how the system operated for one hundred years. In the last decade the disturbances caused by El Niño assumed catastrophic proportions. For the first time the trade winds not only died but turned back towards the center of the Pacific. In 1982 six hundred people died as a result of hurricanes, torrential rains washing fertile soil out of the mountains and clearing clay homes before it. Damages were estimated at five billion dollars. Even greater destruction was recorded in late 1997 and early 1998 when streams of water created mud flows on the slopes of the Andes that wiped out villages, energy lines, roads and bridges. A real apocalypse, but the few degrees by which temperatures increased in Peru's coastal waters also sparked a ecological catastrophe. Cold water fauna died out and rich streams of fish moved on to other regions because El Niño is a surface current and anchovies swim no deeper than one and a half meters. The result is a true disaster for fishermen in Peru.

Suddenly, the torturous monotony of bronzes intersected by a steel-blue ribbon of highway is broken by an oasis of intense green growing along the river bank like a magic spell cast by a witch's wand. This is one of the rare streams that flows from Andean slopes and cuts across the *costa*. The river flows towards the ocean, washing out into its

glassy blue waters. In the shallows between shoals and clumps of reeds pink flamingos wade. These islands of greenery, like a colorful landscape painting, concentrate the costa's organic life. The Inca understood the significance of this fact and built a network of canals, reclaiming tens of thousands of hectares from the desert. The wheels on the car rattle over the boards of the bridge. Nearby the foundation of a very old construction is visible, a trace of an Incan hanging bridge.

“It may seem unbelievable to you but the road we are driving on was marked out by Inca engineers. The contemporary Panamericana only duplicates its route.” Karin's voice is full of pride in the accomplishments of her nation's ancestors.

She has reason to be proud. If I close my eyes and travel in my mind to the pre-Columbian Biru, I can see a line of foot soldiers with backpacks, herds of heavily laden llamas and porters lugging the litter of an Incan dignitary marching in a military column – the perfection of the ancient empire, which knew neither the horse nor the wheel, entangled within a network of road arteries. The coastal route was eight meters wide and shielded from attacks of desert sand by earthen embankments. Today asphalt has replaced a surface of packed clay, time has eroded the protective barriers and *tambos* – roadside inns and warehouses are now gas stations and taverns.

Another tunnel spits us out onto a rocky escarpment rising upwards sharply. We move away from the ocean and enter a moderately rolling sandy plain. Pampa de Villacuri is situated between the Pisco and Ica river valleys. In some places the wind has deposited gigantic sand dunes, supposedly the largest in the world. They are a colorful interlude, curiously rounded, which the lascivious male imagination immediately associates with the curves of a beautiful woman. This woman would be a giant with one serious flaw – no chance of a caress. Each attempt to walk on the baked sand resembles a dance on red-hot coals.

As in every classic desert, here total precipitation is measured in millimeters, which would obviously erase every trace of life if not for underground water sources. In the dry and hot climate, rivers flowing from Andean slopes soak into the sand and maintain a rather high level of groundwater.

“These underground deposits of life-giving water were used even before the times of the Inca by farmers. They drilled into the depths of the desert until reaching water-bearing layers, piling certain sections of land into tall mounds against hot winds and airborne sand. In the humid valleys created as a result of this method they cultivated plantations. Archeological research has indicated the existence of these crops as early as two thousand years ago and the modern desert was pulsing with life during that period. That is why this plain is sown with the burial sites from the Incan age, as well as the cemeteries of much older cultures.”

From Karin’s account we learn that the destination of her trip is a plantation reactivated using the knowledge and methods of the ancient Indians. After two hundred and sixty kilometers on the Panamericana, we turn onto a rural road, barely visible among the sandy hills. This is a rough ride compared to the smooth expanse of highway. Karin continues her story.

These trenches were used to cultivate corn, beans, peanuts as well as dates, figs and vineyards after the conquest. As early as the 17th century we read in the chronicles of Bernabè Cobo about the special methods used by the Indians who established desert plantations and Vasquez de Spinoza praised *vino de hoyos* – or “the wine of the dales” for its wonderful quality, comparable to the best Spanish wines.

After several minutes of driving across the desert, the landscape starts to turn green. Oases of trees, bushes and grass dot the sand and in front of a modest house plantation owner Alejandro Reyes greets his guests. With pride he gives us a tour of his

trenches where date palms, vineyards, corn and *algarrobo* trees grow. The fruits grown on the *algarrobo* are used to feed cattle or ground to make flour for baking. *Señor* modified the old Indian cultivation techniques slightly, pumping water from deeper levels and distributing it through a network of canals.

“The local climate, arid and dry, means that grape clusters contain large amounts of sugar and crops are not sickly as in a humid climate.” Alejandro is not only a pioneer, but also a fan of the desert plantation.

We sit on a shaded veranda and sample the host’s produce. The wine is truly superb, strong and aromatic.

“Three hundred years ago in the vicinity of my farm was some Jesuit property. They also cultivated vineyards with annual production of one thousand five hundred barrels of *pisco* and wine. After the monastery was liquidated everything went to the dogs. Large swaths of the *algarrobo* trees, ideally suited to an arid climate, were cut down. Their roots reach deep into the earth all the way to water-bearing layers. All life was erased with the destruction of these forests and the desert returned.”

“At one time not only groundwater was exploited. Water was also transported from the nearby Andes via a system of underground canals – *puquios*,” Andrew interjects. “Some were a few kilometers in length, buried at a considerable depth, and are still in operation today despite the lack of conservation work. I’ve seen it with my own eyes. Imagine a complication network of hydrological equipment constructed two thousand years ago. One question: how did supposedly primitive Indian tribes managed to carry out a project that is still a problem for contemporary Peruvians?”

Señor Alejandro confirms Andrew’s revelations. More than a decade ago the underground aqueducts were used to build a pipe system in the neighboring city of Nasco.

“But the use of groundwater to make the desert green again, just like our ancestors did, is much simpler and doesn’t require large investments. If the state helped us by granting tax breaks or offering cheap credit...”

“My newspaper can help you. We are preparing a special series of reports,” Karin declares. “I’ve heard that in the area old burial sites have also been found. Could we see them?”

“Of course!” Our host fires off a few orders.

A few moments later we are sitting in a rickety jeep rumbling over the trackless pampa. The vehicle passes the stumps of withered palms, partially buried in the sand. We stop for a moment in the vicinity of crumbling adobe homes to examine a strangely constructed furnaces. Andrew claims they were able to create temperatures hot enough to melt copper and silver, but the thought of a foundry or mill in the middle of the desert seems like a complete abstraction. Again we jolt over the desert in the hope that this improvized safari won’t end in a forced stopover. Around us, only sand and rock stretch out towards the horizon. Finally, the engine shuts off. No one has to tell us that we’ve arrived. Everywhere we look are strewn about pieces of cloth, fragments of dishes, shinbones, ribs, skulls – some of which even have hair. The scenery is incredible – there are no guards, fences or paths. Only a sign disturbs the peace of the dead and bears the inscription: *Zona arqueologica. Entrada prohibita!*⁴²

“For violating these prohibitions there is a fine of up to one million dollars and up to five years in prison. You can see for yourselves that no one pays attention to the warnings and *huaqueros* do all the work for archeologists.” Karin is obviously upset.

“I wouldn’t recommend coming here at night. That’s when the grave robbers work. They were the ones who discovered the burial site, archeologists came later and

⁴² Archeological zone. No admittance!

erected the signs. But nothing changed. Grave robbers are still active and they have their work cut out for them.” Alejandro points to a row of mounds sticking up from the plain. “These are all graves waiting to be discovered or plundered.”

“As long as there is a demand for Incan artifacts, the huaqueros will continue to dig up graves in hopes of unearthing a mummy of one of the long ears. That was how the Spanish called the Inca dignitaries whose ears were covered by golden earpieces. The tradition dates back to the times of Pachacuteca. One of his sons lost an ear in battle and to cover the mutilation, covered his ears in ornamental flaps made of gold. His example was followed by other Incan princes and in time the adornment became a permanent symbol of royal dignity.” I can always count on Andrew. He never fails to pull some piece of interesting information out of his memory.

With a certain feeling of discomfort we move among these profaned human remains. After all, for the people who lived here centuries ago this was a holy place. Plundered graves, testimony of the sacrilegious activities of *huaqueros*, fills the heart with sadness. I lean over a shaft covered by a glass shield. It is empty because everything that could fetch a price was removed. Useless remains were thrown randomly around the *huacos*. A dark brown rock bearing the traces of a drawing attracts my attention. I examine it up close. A human figure and some animal, outlined thinly in white chalk, are clearly discernable. I show Andrew the rock.

“That’s what you call luck. Such ‘painted’ rocks are not only one of many archeological puzzles but also a valuable souvenir. It’s no surprise that there are workshops that deal only in reproductions. The rock you’ve found is undoubtedly an original – be happy. If you want to see more of those rocks, there is a whole collection of them in Ica that belongs to Dr. Cabrera.”

During the return trip Andrew tells me about the strange and turbulent events surrounding the “rocks of Ica.”

The agent of subsequent sensations was the Ica River. First it supplied ancient artists with material for sculpture in the form of pebbles and then in 1961 the river changed course, washing over a nearby hill. Between these desert knolls a old cemetery was discovered, long exploited by local treasure hunters. Nevertheless, the digging was difficult and time consuming and financial success depended to a certain degree on luck. Suddenly and without warning a black and bronze rock, covered with fantastic drawings, was noticed in the river bed. There were many more – of varying sizes, from small to those weighing a few hundred kilograms. It looked as if the water had washed over an underground warehouse or archive containing the works of pre-Columbian artists. In a short time the antique market was flooded by a large number of the rocks, causing a sensation in the community.

Rocks from Ica were known much earlier. Archeologists and Peruvian collectors stumbled across them while penetrating local sites. It was confirmed by Dr. Julio Tello, famed for his many discoveries, as well as Carloc Belli, who accepted the help of *huaqueros* in 1909 in conducting surveys here. Contemporary carved rocks were found by: Prof. Herman Buse, Dr. Cesar Almeida and first and foremost the Soldi brothers. They accumulated an impressive collection on their farm. Equally interesting was the collection belonging to Prof. Pezzia Assereta – an archeologist and the director of the Regional Museum in Ica – and the one housed in the National Museum of Peruvian Armed Forces, directed by colonel Omar Chioin.

The real bomb went off in 1966 when Augusto Calvo, rector of the National University of Engineering in Lima, while conducting an excavation in the so-called Max Uhle Hill, commissioned the Institute of Mining at the National Technical University to

analyze the painted rocks. The scent of sensation was in the air. Tests revealed that the delicate coating of oxides that evenly covered the grooves themselves as well as the spaces between them, dated the find at no fewer than twelve thousand years.

The expert opinion shocked archeologists. Twelve thousand years ago, according to the chronology accepted at the time, hordes of Asian hunters had just barely arrived to the American continent and could not have displayed such refined knowledge. Hence reactions in the learned community differed considerably: from spontaneous interest to uncompromising rejection. Some refused to even acknowledge the find, not to mention engage in any scientific discussion. The whole affair might have remained just a local sensation if not for Robert Charraux. With six international bestsellers already under his belt, Charraux visited Peru in 1973 in search of material for another book. During his stay in Nazca, Dr. Xavier Cabrera Darquea – a practicing surgeon and amateur archeologist – invited the author to visit his home near Ica. There the writer heard and saw things which he certainly couldn't remain indifferent to. Describing these scenes in his next book, Charraux promoted the rocks to worldwide fame.

In 1966 Dr. Cabrera, instead of payment for his services, received a black rock covered in strange lines from a patient. For a long time the rock lay on his desk as a paperweight. One day Cabrera made out a strange bird in the tangle of lines. After reaching for his specialist albums, the doctor discovered to his amazement that the bird was strikingly similar to a reconstruction of a pterosaur, a flying lizard that lived eighty million years ago. That was the beginning of a fascinating adventure, one to which he dedicated his entire life. Cabrera became one of the most controversial figures in the Andean community. The adventure led him to the discovery of: “a stone library of a forgotten human race, which must have inhabited our globe.” Those are his words and the private museum he owns is home to more than eleven thousand rocks displaying the same

grooved lines, from the small and unassuming to “works of art” weighing nearly two hundred kilograms.

These pebbles, eroded by water, are andesites.⁴³ The drawings executed on them bear no resemblance to any known or researched cultures. Human figures, completely unlike the Indians who lived here, have a different anatomical form while the animals accompanying them disappeared from the earth millions of years ago. A moderate sensation if the drawings were limited to a presentation of human figures riding horses or even elephants. However, the understanding of paleontologists only goes so far. When it turned out that many rocks displayed figures of dinosaurs, brontosaurus, pterosaurs and the men that hunted them – the scientific world didn’t even attempt a discussion and shut itself away in contemptful silence. No one should have expected any different considering that brontosaurus lived one hundred and fifty million years ago and dinosaurs died out at the end of the Cretaceous period, making room for the placental mammals just about to debut on the Earth.

Andrew is forced to interrupt his story when we arrive at the home of *señora* Alejandra. Saying goodbye to the friendly plantation owner, we wish him luck in the fight with the desert. We can’t accept his invitation for a glass of wine in farewell because evening is approaching and we don’t want to be stuck blundering through the desert in the dark. After driving for a dozen or so minutes we welcome the sight of an asphalt road with sighs of relief, soon followed by cotton fields, vineyards and avenues decorated with long rows of trees – a city oasis and a bouquet of green in the middle of the somber pampa. This is Ica, a small, slightly dusty place established four hundred years ago by don Jeronim Cabrera. We meet his great-great-grandson the following day.

⁴³ A light rock of volcanic origins that appears frequently in the Andes.

The home of Dr. Xavier Cabrera in Plaza de Armas is contained within the ground floor of his private museum – a collection of eleven thousand ancient rocks. Scientists are rare visitors here, convinced that Ica rocks are humbug, fakes created by money-hungry Indians. The collector himself is treated at best as a naïve, slightly crazy eccentric. He is known as the *loco de Ica*.⁴⁴ Can the nickname be interpreted as something like an epithet? Similar names have been used since unrecorded time for anyone with enough daring to voice opinions that contradict conventional wisdom. However, it is not the bankers, officials and store owners that push our civilization ahead. Wasn't Copernicus, who halted the sun and put the Earth into motion, a little *loco* according to his contemporaries? It's a good thing that such maniacs exist, people who fearlessly look beyond the horizon. Every civilization that wants to grow needs people who think unconventionally.

After many years struggling to gain acceptance for his collections, Cabrera became a bitter and distrustful man. For friends, however, he opens up without reservation. What man, after all, could resist a girl like Karin? In her presence a burnt out old man would straighten his spine and become a tireless storyteller.

“I had no way of knowing that the rock I received as a present would become my gateway to a new, entirely foreign world. For the past thirty years these eroded ‘painted rocks’ have passed through my hands, all of them telling the story of men who lived in far-off times in the next door neighborhood of extinct creatures.” When he starts talking I can see the fire in his eyes, the kind of light that you see in enthusiasts entirely given to their passions. “At the beginning even I was tormented by doubts. Even as I dealt with one question, the next appeared. It's the same today. One man is hard pressed to decode all of the secrets hidden in those rocks. In my opinion man has existed on Earth for much longer than suggested by the official chronology supported by science. He survived as a

⁴⁴ A crazy man from Ica (Spanish).

species when he reached a certain level of intelligence. Other creatures died out. Catastrophic events and other external influences have returned man to square one more than once. Many times mankind has started from zero. In the history of the Earth many kinds of people have lived and experienced ups and downs, reappearing in different places in the long halls of time. *Homo sapiens* is just the last link in a multi-generational chain. One of his predecessors might be the 'Gliptolithic' man, the creator of my painted stones. The world they present is not the same but only resembles ours. We are linked solely by the mutual *conditio humana* of the human race."

A strong statement. But Cabrera's brave, even revolutionary theories did not meet with acceptance in the eyes of outstanding figures in science. Interest in them is expressed only by young scientists who have yet to make a name for themselves. This is understandable. Each one of us has only one life and a short one at that. It is easier not to waste that life on something that is still hard to comprehend, something that offers no guarantee of success. It would be a shame to squander one's scientific authority on the scorn of colleagues. So, spare no thought for them, doctor Cabrera!

For those reasons all of the finds that in some way rock the boat in official chronology go uncommented. This was the case with a fossilized dinosaur skeleton unearthed in Columbia in 1971 by anthropologist Henao Martin. Next to the reptile's remains lay a completely mineralized human skull. For the first time the skeletons of dinosaurs and men were found side by side. Until that time only manmade stone tools had been found alongside fossil remains of instinct animals. Here I am referring to the discovery of South American anthropologist Mac Neisha in the basin of the Rio Montayo, one of the Amazon's tributaries. The tools rested in the ground, mixed with the bones of animals such as horses, giant bears, camels and prehistoric cats. In the meantime paleontologists claimed that these animals died out more than ten million years ago. It

would seem that these sensational finds would provoke at the very least interest within the scientific community. Unfortunately, this was not the case and the discoveries of Henao Martin and Mac Neisha were ignored like many other unbelievable finds in the past.

The view that the creatures who lived during the Mesozoic period could have survived to our times was until recently a true heresy for paleontologists. Meanwhile the list of newly discovered animals previously believed to exist only as ancient fossils is growing. One of these creatures is the latimeria, a fish that supposedly became extinct twenty million years ago. Imagine the shock of scientists when the first live specimen was caught off the southern coast of Africa in 1938. Since that time fishermen have netted one hundred fish of this species. It is possible that more prehistoric species live in the marine depths. Fishermen and sailors have provided many accounts of encounters with strange creatures and even pictures that fit the descriptions of plesiosaur that lived sixty-four million years ago.

A similar trend has been observed among land animals. One example is the tuatara – a primitive reptile with three eyes. It disappeared from the earth at the end of the Cretaceous period when a gigantic cataclysm ended the rule of the dinosaurs. Surprise also accompanied the discovery of the animals on isolated islands in the vicinity of New Zealand and within the archipelago of the Cook Islands. In the swampy forests of the African Congo on the equator lives a mysterious animal that the locals call mokele-mbembe. Zoologist Roy Mackal identified them as the Mesozoic stegosaur during an expedition organized in 1980. In the light of finds made in the recent decade, the hypotheses put forward by doctor Cabrera seem rather less sensational. If a few representatives of Mesozoic fauna have managed to survive the densely populated 20th-century world, then a few thousand years ago when there were no more than a few

million people living on the earth, the sight of grazing herbivorous dinosaurs was probably nothing unusual.

“When I first saw the drawings of strange animals on the rocks, I believed them to be legendary, mythological creatures. However, after perusing a few paleontological maps, I realized that they were identical to extinct prehistoric species such as megacerops – enormous deer, dinosaurs, mammoths, five-toed horses and llamas. These last supposedly became extinct forty million years ago. How, then, can we explain their images on ceramics from the Tiahuanaco period discovered by none other than Julio Tello? It has been attributed to the imagination of pre-Incan artists, who supposedly wanted to assimilate the llama to man (!). These voices were silenced in chastisement when Tello found fossilized five-toed llamas in the same layer – and they remain silent until this day.”

We sit amazed by Cabrera’s conclusions. Inborn skepticism uses all the resources at its disposal to defend against attack from his arguments. Cabrera comes to them like a conjuror pulling a series of rabbits out of an old hat. We watch him in dismay because the logic of his argument forces us to accept that we come from an unidentified evolutionary line of human-like species. However, this is not the end of his fascinating speech.

Wealth and diversity in the drawings suggested to Cabrera that the grooves in the rocks were some form of early writing before the phase of abstractionism, similar to the writings of other civilizations from the Mediterranean basin, China and Japan as well as the Maya living on the American continent.

“In examining my rocks I felt a strange uneasiness. Gradually, I became convinced that the grooves were made for another reason than just the need to immortalize some scene. Now I am certain that the figures symbolize objects, events of

the past. What we are dealing with is a certain ‘litholibrary.’⁴⁵ That’s why I collected the rocks with such passion. Each of them represented a page from a book for me. Indeed, I do not possess the key to reading the inscriptions but each groove was a reminder that the previous canons we were taught at school are not the end all be all.”

Cabrera walks in restless circles around shelves filled with books. Despite advanced age, he displays a youthful passion, energy and strength. We planned to stay an hour in this unusual museum and nearly half the day has already passed. The enormity of the original collection and its special nature make it impossible to break away from this place. It seems to me that every rock hides grooves of even greater fascination – such a climate of intellectual adventure, the chance to immerse oneself in another world, less rational but more honest. Understanding the world that is only possible in a departure from well-trodden paths of thought. Only then does one feel that wonderful emotion man experiences in meeting the unknown and its secrets. Unfortunately, a few thousand of the rocks have been gathered and we are running out of time. I have the impression that we are taking part in a strange spectacle in which the two main roles have been cast by a naive doctor, an infallible learned man who guards the irrefutable foundations of science and fights with determination for acceptance of his “litholibrary.” The only parts we can play in this production are bit roles, unless we are ready to become passive viewers.

Against my will I am reminded of other events bordering on grotesque, which took place at the beginning of the 20th century. Professor Simon Newcomb of John Hopkins University claimed in the pages of *The Independent* on October 22, 1903 that no object made with human hands would ever leave the ground! At the same time two bicycle mechanics – the Wright brothers – who hadn’t read this obviously respected newspaper, lifted themselves into the air using a machine of their own construction, one

⁴⁵ From the greek work *lithos* which means rock.

visibly heavier than air. The funniest thing is that no one believed their first-hand witnesses and as late as 1906 commentators in well-known scientific publications called the event journalistic hype and rubbish. At the end of the 19th century, men, shocked by a number of new inventions, had no idea how rapid the development of science and technology would be in the future. Well-known physicist Phillip Jolly warned his best student, Max Planck, against a career in physics because only a few puzzles remained to be solved, problems with which science would deal in short order.

Scientists rather frequently suffer from a peculiar form of amnesia and forget these curious events. They prefer to perform the role of the infallible genius, presenting the history of science as a string of constant successes, while the battles fought before the revolutionary breakthroughs, the dramas that involved authors of controversial theories, are covered in shameful silence. These historical examples are a good illustration of how fast scientific doctrine can be broken, even with support from the highest authorities. Today as well, at the turn of the 20th and 21st century, we are dealing with a similar situation as the one following the 1863 discovery of a paleontological painting in the grottos of Altamira. New observations are flowing in that cannot be reconciled with the interpretation preached from scientific pulpits. None are yet willing to verify the prevailing chronology.

“What do you make of this?” I ask Andrew after we say farewell to the venerable doctor and leave Ica.

“The scientific value of Cabrera’s collection has been questioned many times. The most publicized testimonies were given before the investigation committee by Basilio Uchuy, a peasant from the Ica region. This illiterate man admitted that he had supplied doctor Cabrera with a few thousand rocks bearing drawings made with a blade and patterns taken from...magazines. This was fuel to the fire for many of Cabrera’s

opponents. If Basilio's testimony is true – his supporters argued, he should be a diligent artist with comprehensive knowledge. Moreover, the man would have to be a genius of deception and hard-working since the 'production' of the entire collection would have taken sixty years. The truth is that Basilio is an uneducated, poor peasant employed in the illegal plunder of ancient graves. When questioned by the police, he had no other choice but to confess to the fabrication of the rocks. Cabrera was in a similar situation. He couldn't prove that Uchuy's testimony was false and coerced since – as his employer in these illegal searches – Cabrera would also have been subject to similar repression."

"You said yourself yesterday that forgeries exist."

"Whenever there is demand, a supply develops. That's an economic truth. The fame of Ica rocks has increased the demand for authentic pieces to a level that all the *huaqueros* as a whole are unable to satisfy. That's why forgers got into the game. The requisite raw materials are pebbles from the Ica river, the same ones used by ancient artists. The latter used obsidian tools to make the incisions, which are therefore uneven, in contrast to contemporary 'masterpieces' created with steel bits and even dentistry drills. Only a high-powered magnifying glass reveals the difference. In order to give the drawings the right aged patina, forgers impregnate them with fat or wax. This camouflage can also be rather easily detected with the help of spirits or acetone.

"Am I to understand that the authenticity of the drawings on the rock found yesterday cannot be established without those 'scientific aids?'" I ask.

"In this case it seems to me that, taking into account the circumstances, it is highly likely that we are dealing with an authentic object. I have heard that some forgers plant some of their own rocks in an old grave and then lead adventure-hungry tourists to the spot at night, who then make a 'discovery' of the grave, providing the artist with easy money. Whenever I want to buy an antique, I conduct a very simple test. Years of

wandering the globe have taught me that every owner of a truly valuable object is sensitive to the ignorance of a potential buyer. It is enough to lower the going price and observe their reaction. If the seller waves a dismissive hand and turns his back or offers me a well or undeserved epithet, I can almost certainly believe in the object's authenticity. If he starts raising the price, then you are dealing with a fake."

I watch the pampa passing by outside the window. How many mysteries still lie hidden in these sands? Do the strangely painted rocks found here, assuming they are authentic, deserve the title of the first library on earth?

"In that case, why haven't we found similar signs of an intriguing past in other reaches of the globe?" I voice my doubts aloud and Andrew replies immediately.

"If you traveled to Central Mexico, you would see an unusual gallery that surpasses the 'stone library' of Ica in terms of sensational value and size. A humble buyer from the town of Acambaro amassed a collection of more than thirty thousand clay figures in the course of seven years following an accidental discovery in 1945, creating an entire gallery of human and animal likenesses. The latter are particularly intriguing because among faithful reproductions of animals that still walk the earth today, there are also less realistic images of gigantic lizards: dinosaurs, plesiosaurs and brontosaurus, all reptiles that lived sixty-five million years ago. The find provoked heated discussion that closely resembled the one surrounding events in Ica. The discovery of several dozen figures underneath a home inhabited without interruption since 1930 by the family of the chief of police in Acambaro did nothing to quench the controversy. Defenders of the collection called upon arguments of reason, proving that the large-scale falsification is unlikely given a lack of possible benefits for the supposed forger. Julsrud paid his supplies an even three hundred dollars for the figures, although a simple calculation was enough to realize that producing such an enormous collection would take three people a

full three hundred years. Not to mention that these individuals would need in-depth and comprehensive knowledge and the Indians helping Julsrud in amassing his collection were clearly illiterate. Only in the 1960s did American scholar Hapgood take an interest in the discovery.

“Are you talking about Charles Hapgood, known for research into the mysterious maps made by Turkish admiral Piri Reis and the controversial theory of the ‘earth crust displacement’ you mentioned in your book?”⁴⁶

“Exactly. Hapgood made sure the figurines were examined for radioactive carbon content and using the thermo luminescent method. Each repetition of the tests confirmed the same sensational result – the figurines were made four and a half thousand years ago! On the surface it would seem that in the face of such arguments, consensus would make more sense than further conflict. Unfortunately, it has been fifty years since the figurines were found and the subject is still treated in the same way as the rocks in Ica – with one difference. Instead of claiming that the statuettes are fakes, they are completely ignored, like a daughter that has endangered the family’s good name and has been led astray.”

Karin also has something to say on the subject.

“Recently I read a media piece on a discovery in the Columbian provinces of Cundinamarca and Boyaca of stone tiles engraved with human and animal figures. The owner of the tablets is not just some buyer or ‘crazy’ doctor, but archeologist Jaime Gutierrez Lega.”

How complicated the truth can be. How many faces it has. In my hand I hold a tiny pebble. I don’t know whether it is authentic, but for me this is a valuable souvenir. It represents a memory of a stay in a place so unbelievable, one requiring an active

⁴⁶ Andrew Kaplanek, *Śladami Pierzastego Węża*, Uraeus, 2000, pp. 45–46.

imagination without which no trip is possible and in the absence of which man is nothing out of the ordinary.

Two hours later we are flying over the ocean again. The bronze shades of the desert stand out in sharp contrast to the blue sky and the foamy surf outlines where sand and endless turquoise water meet. This is emptiness. Only a large flock of birds detract from the impression of terrifying isolation. Pelicans, cormorants, seagulls of all sizes and small sandpipers flit through the waves in search of food, not a particularly difficult task. The Humboldt current supplies an abundance of anchovies, of which people consume only a small percentage. The rest are snapped up by birds living in the coastal cliffs.

This is a one-of-a-kind view: rising above the avalanche of fish are clouds of birds so large and dense that they block the light of sun, now hanging low over the ocean. One by one birds emerge from these flocks and dive, wings folded at their sides, like living drops of water that make the water a boiling cauldron. The great hunt. A fantastic view of a large-scale feeding frenzy. A display of nature's prodigality and cruelty.

After many hours of furious attacks, consisting entirely of swallowing and digestion, the birds fly off to their nests. Soon the cliffs begin to steam and flow with fresh excrement. The production of bird fertilizer – or guano – has begun. This is the most valuable and effective fertilizer in the world, whose utility was known to the Inca. They understood that soil fertilized with guano would become wonderfully fertile, providing an abundant harvest. They also knew how important it was to protect the birds that produced guano and disturbing the peace of these colonies during the breeding season was punishable by death. The Spanish had no experience with guano; hence the coastal peninsulas were covered in tens of meters of the fertilizer. Only in the 19th century, when German chemist Liebig proved that guano is a fertilizer three times richer

in nitrogen than manure, was the intensive and even wasteful exploitation of the islands re-launched. Thirty-two million tones were exported, exhausting the islands' supplies and causing serious damage to bird populations.

“Then it became clear how much journalists could accomplish. An aggressive media campaign led to the creation of the *Compañía Administradora del Guano*, which rationalized exploitation of the islands and took action to protect the nests they harbored. Exports were also limited and preference given to Peruvian agriculture. In a short time we gained increased productivity. For example, cotton farmers on the Peruvian coast harvest 320 kilograms per hectare and their counterparts in Egypt reap barely seventy.”

We sit on the terrace of a restaurant with a beautiful view of the setting sun on the ocean, sipping from a bottle of the local wine, while Karin proves to us that she is more than just a pretty girl but also a competent journalist.

“Journalist also saved our exports in fish processing from collapse and a buy-out from foreign capital. Everything began in the 1960s, when the world's needs for protein and fish meal increased rapidly. At the time a few of our young businessmen, grouped around Luis Baucherro, brought about a new age for Peru; after centuries of gold fever, fish meal was the newest sensation. Within the space of a few years we were one of the leading producers and profits from the sale of this rather unpleasantly smelling product accounted for twenty-five percent of Peru's total exports. Nonetheless, the purchase of modern fishing equipment and technologies required large capital outlays and loans that had to be paid back. A few large processing firms, employing hundreds of thousands of people, were one step away from bankruptcy and foreclosure by foreign banks. Once again journalists stepped in and investors were exempted from paying export taxes, saving our national industry.”

“You know, Karin, I’ve only known you a short time but I never imagined that such a beautiful woman could speak with such passion about such a smelly business,” Andrew teases.

“That’s because according to your way of thinking, women are objects with more or less attractive figures below the neck.” Her eyes are filled with dangerous green light.

“You didn’t let me finish. I wanted to say that looking in your eyes, instead of at your cleavage, I feel like a real idiot. If you knew just how much that costs me.”

Karin laughs openly. The comment obviously took her by surprise with its clever complement.

“Poor baby! I can’t leave you for the night feeling so frustrated. Get a good look! Go ahead.” She opens two buttons on her shirt.

Andrew smiles and barely keeps his eyes from sinking to the two rounded curves she has just completely exposed.

“Is that all? You’ll be sorry that you didn’t take advantage of the entire time.”

“Could I...can I save a little time for later when I’m in a worse mood?”

Karin explodes into laughter once again.

“I like you both for your sense of humor. You’re such normal, great guys. I feel good in your company.”

The next morning Karin left for an interview with the director of a nearby factory of fish meal and we sailed off to visit *Islas Ballestas*. A group of islands more than a dozen kilometers off the coast, they have been called Peru’s Baby Galapagos. It is estimated that the islands, sown along the entire Peruvian coast, are home to more than three hundred million birds. Most are Peruvian cormorants, boobies and American pelicans. Another species living on the islands is the impressive Inca tern, whose head is

adorned with white feathers that resemble Incan earrings. The birds consume around five and half million tones of fish annually. The ideal guano “machine” is the cormorant. In the course of a ten-year lifespan, each cormorant is able to produce sixty kilograms of dry excrement. Only part of this “production” is deposited on the islands, the rest falls into the ocean, fertilizing the algae eaten by anchovies. Man is a parasite in this biological cycle and gains immeasurable benefits from it. The profits are quite foul-smelling but since Roman times we are aware that *pecunia non olet*.⁴⁷

A speedboat carries visitors to the guano “production line” in just over ten minutes. Large flocks of seagulls, frigates, boobies, black pelicans, tiny chaffinches and cormorants live on the spectacularly formed cliffs in perfect harmony, alongside sea lions, seals and Humboldt penguins. Not the slightest bit timid, they allow us to come quite close, as if aware of the comprehensive and special care that protects them. The islands are also home to special centers that defend the peace of the colonies from both men and natural enemies such as condors, vultures and eagles. In the vicinity of the islands fishing and the use of sirens is forbidden nor are planes allowed to fly over them. Nothing is allowed to disturb the “production process.” The islands look just like a giant cream cake, but this “cream” forms hardened deposits a few meters thick and the smell rising into the air is enough to make a person truly nauseous.

Not only the skies are pulsing with life. Our free floating boat is surrounded by enormous, gelatinous medusa jellyfish. Lazily they succumb to the ocean current, their long and innocuous-looking tentacles trailing through the water. This is a dangerous deception. A fish swims too close and is paralyzed, quickly surrounded by a burning death.

⁴⁷ Money doesn't smell (Latin).

We sail into a large cave where large black rocks lie on the golden sand. At that moment the “rocks” throw themselves into the water with a loud splash, announcing their displeasure at this siesta disruption. These are sea lions. In the nearby bay the colony of a few hundred animals does not react at all to our rudeness. The males guard their territory, females bask in the sun or play with their young and other young sea lions frolic in the water – a family idyll. What a shame we have to leave.

During the return trip we sail along the Paracas Peninsula. “Paracas” is an old Indian word meaning “sandy rain.” The name is an ideal fit for the peninsula, wind-lashed and sand covered. At first glance it seems to be a place forsaken by both god and man. Not a single sign of life is visible. The peninsula gained worldwide fame thanks to archeological finds. In 1927 Peruvian archeologist Julio Tello discovered three cemeteries on the sandy slopes of Cerro Colorado – the Painted Mountains. Due the unique nature of the find, dated between 600-400 BC, it was accredited to a separate civilization named the Paracas culture.

The deceased were placed in small burial chambers with walls made of mud bricks. Chambers were linked by a series of long corridors, creating a real underground city. Their bodies were laid to rest in a fetal position, their mouths containing gold plates and a gourd filled with sacrificial dishes placed between the chest and legs. Next to the bodies were a variety of objects and painted ceramics. Everything was wrapped in a cotton burial cloth, placed into a box and covered in a long, three-meter embroidered coat. The graves were so well prepared that better dressed corpses were never found in all of South America.

The coats in which the dead were sent on their long journey to the other side of time is acknowledge to be one of the best examples of weaving talent in the ancient world. In terms of weave density, the cloth exceeds even the modern silk produced for

parachutes! They feature a wealth of colors – twenty-two have been counted and each in a few shades. The dye quality is confirmed by the fact that the colors are still fresh, even after three thousand years. Scientists are also intrigued by the drawings that adorn the coats. The most common motifs are figures and images of deities. Their diversity reveals a considerably developed pantheon among the Paracas Indians. Peruvian researcher Victoria de la Jarra supposes that the drawings are symbols in some old written language. She is convinced that:

...this writing could have been based on an entirely different system or thinking patterns than writing styles of the Old World. Signs found on coats at Paracas may be part of an ancient library, the remains of a forgotten, old knowledge.

These words are so close to the ones were heard recently from the mouth of Dr. Cabrera.

Her hypothesis found support in 1970 from a talented German ethnologist, Prof. Thomas Barthel. He announced at a congress in Lima that thanks to Victoria de la Jarra's material he was able to identify and read a few hundred symbols in a previously unknown language used by the Inca. Most are religious formulas and related to astronomy or the calendar. To this day no one has been willing to follow this line of research.

The peninsula is now an archeological reserve, on which the average mortal hasn't a chance of exploring. This leads us to another intriguing puzzle – the mysterious geoglyph called Candelabra, which can only be seen from the ocean. This is also the best view – probably the intention of its creators. The driver tries to get as close as possible to

the rocky, eroded bank on which an intriguing drawing was engraved into the sandy slope. In order to be seen from this distance, it was drawn in larger proportions: 128 meters high and two symmetrical wings with a span of 74 meters.

The mystery of this huge work is not a question of dimension. Although made in the open air on a sandy incline exposed to the winds that blow over the Pacific, the drawing has not been washed away and has maintained the same form since recorded time. Even if the lashing wind fills the furrows with sand, the drawing regenerates itself quickly as if tapping into some power to continue a mysterious mission. No one is able to explain why this happens. Pictures taken at long intervals show that traces of horse hooves and deep ruts left by cars prior to the creation of the reserve gradually disappear. The Candelabra itself has existed unchanged for a century, avoiding every attempt at a uniform interpretation. We are still missing the right key. For the time being each visitor is free to interpret the message from the past in his own way.

I stand in the gently swaying boat, trying to connect the picture with the information stored in my memory. It's not easy. I can't see the candlestick or the candelabra, cactus, trident or three crosses as other viewers do. The drawing reminds me most of a tree! A stylized tree like the one that symbolizes life and which has appeared in nearly every culture. In Mesopotamia and Palestine, the Tree of Life was transformed into a tree of seven lights, manifested as a menorah with its seven arms. According to Melanesian mythology, man was fashioned from a tree trunk. The national tree of Tibetan Buddhism grows from an ocean of awareness in the center of the world, thrusting up all the way into the regions reserved for the gods. In the mythologies of northern peoples, the Tree of Life appears in the form of the gigantic ash tree Yggdrasil, which supports the world and whose branches protect our globe. Holy Trees appear among the Scythians,

Slavic, Siberian and Indonesian peoples as well as in ancient Chinese mythology. Ottoman Turks imagine the Tree of Life with a million leaves – on each is written the fate of one man. When a person dies, his leaf falls. The Aztec Tree of Life is quite intricate – surrounded by fire, a snake and six fruits of eternal life. The Toltecs believed that before man was allowed to begin his new afterlife, he had to wander through seven divine caves found in the interior of the Tree of Life. The rich symbolism of the Tree of Life is practically inexhaustible. Some claim that mankind's oldest symbol is a call to reflect on the meaning of life. Perhaps within this last claim is an answer to the meaning of the furrows engraved on the cliff – a way of forcing us to think!

I don't know whether these were the intentions of the authors of the geoglyph, but I can't get it out of my mind. It nags at me like a splinter. Is it just coincidence that a line drawn through the branches of this stylized Tree of Life passes through the Ocucaje desert, where rocks ornamented with strange drawings are still found, and on to the equally fascinating drawings on the Nazca pampa? Is it only an accident that in the shade of these branches the ancient predecessors of today's Peruvians located three of their cemeteries? The thought of a mysterious message contained in the candelabra *vel* Tree of Life refuses to leave me when we cross the threshold of the local museum. Here are a few more mysteries connected with the Paracas Peninsula.

Of particular interest to researchers were artificially deformed skulls among the sands. The process of deformation began at birth, when the child's head was squeezed between two boards. After four years of this torture the skull was irreversibly changed. Because deformed skulls account for only a small percentage of those found, it is believed that this process was only used with the children of a specific social class. Similar practices have been identified in other parts of the world. The priests of Itzamna, a Mayan god worshiped in the Yucatan and personified in Ahau Can, "the great snake-

rule,” practiced modification of infant skulls. The objective of the operation was to give the skull a shape similar to that of the *polcan* – a stretched, snake-like head. In the same way the heads of children were deformed in 6th century BC in the Neolithic cultures of Eastern Anatolia, located in what is now Iraq.

Just as much excitement was caused by traces of repeated trepanation on remnants of skulls. These operations were performed from the forehead, rear or side of the skull and left behind circular signs of incisions – all took place while the patient was still alive. It may seem too fantastic because surgical intervention in the skull is even now a dangerous procedure for the life of a patient. It requires enormous knowledge and specialist tools. However, most of those buried in the Paracan necropolis survived the operation – of this we have no doubt. Proof of this is provided by characteristic thickened areas on the bones where the wounds were grafted. These could only have developed after a successful convalescence.

I look inquisitively at Andrew, but he says nothing, overwhelmed with disbelief in the scene unfolding before our eyes – not to mention our visit yesterday to Cabrera’s museum. Until now he has always had something to say, some surprising reflection or association. He shares his thoughts with me only after we return to the hotel and stretch out comfortably in our chairs to wait for Karin, still dawdling over her interview.

“Look, Jacek. We Europeans, in talking about countries such as Peru, India and Iraq, sometimes use the phrases: third world, developing countries. Two and half thousand years ago their scholars possessed knowledge and used technologies and methods that people in Europe were barely aware of. After all, in the 17th century the belief in autogenesis was universal and the great Schopenhauer was convinced that lice were created from human sweat. If the Hindus were able to diagnose 1,100 diseases and

possessed a vaccine for smallpox 3,500 years ago, where do we search for the source of their knowledge?"

I look at the clearly visible tall cliffs of the peninsula. What other secrets are buried in the sands deposited there? In the 20th century we believed in human genius and the rational nature of the phenomenon around us. Thrown overboard like ballast were the codes of our predecessors and without them we are unable to understand many of the symbols programmed centuries ago. My catalog of questions, in proportion to a growing number of expeditions, is worryingly long. I watch the ocean waves lapping at the sand on the coast, wanting so much to travel back to an age when Incan buyers landed here on balsam rafts, before Spanish ships appeared on the horizon. Perhaps we should reach back to an even more distant past? How far back? One thousand, five...or maybe ten thousand years?

Center of the World

In the middle of the night I wake up with a strange feeling of uneasiness. In the darkness creaks and bangs can be heard, then something drops in the bathroom. In a moment all is quiet again. I turn over and fall asleep. At breakfast Andrew asks me how I survived the night's earthquake and I stare in amazement.

"It shook a bit. When the room started to sway, I started to think about how much alcohol I had consumed. When the mirror shifted to the side and back – I considered the symptoms of *delirium tremens*. A moment later the mirror fell off the wall and then I realized that this was mother earth raging," he says, drinking a glass of milk.

For a European who rarely leaves the continent, the earth seems to be something solid and stable. This is not the case in the Andes, which are young mountains in constant movement and an interior that still boils. They were formed in the wake of tectonic uplifts that tore apart the western coast. The Avenue of Volcanoes – this is the name Humboldt bestowed upon this mountain chain, whose peaks are arranged in a row and christened after an ancient pantheon of deities with forbidding names – Cotopaxi, Chimborazo, Sangay, Misti... No one knows when they might awaken from an often long sleep. These volcanoes number more than fifty.

Tectonic anomalies make earthquakes of various intensities a common occurrence here. It could be a *temblor*, a delicate tremor that moves the walls only slightly. It lasts just a fraction of a second, but leaves a feeling of uneasiness in the subconscious. The more dangerous *terremoto* swallows entire villages and turns cities into ruins or puts a rocky avalanche in motion that threatens the mountain valleys. Most deadly of all is the *maremoto*, born at the bottom of the ocean, which hits the coast in a terrible *tsunami*. To this day Peruvians remember May 31, 1970 with horror. Eighty thousand people died that day and hundreds of thousands were left homeless. Death

reaped its most terrible harvest in the small mountain town Yungay where tremors of rather less force damaged the moraine dike of a nearby lake, unleashing a fast-moving mudslide that covered the entire settlement.

“Damn! I slept through my first earthquake!” I exclaim.

“There are worse things in life. Ruben, for example.”

“You’re right. He is like a hemorrhoid.”

“Fortunately, we will soon be able to forget him. How are the preparations going for the reconnaissance in the Madre de Dios basin?”

“Fine. Tomorrow we fly to Cuzco. We will stay there a few days to get acclimatized before Fr. Polentini and Maria Carmen join up with us.”

Indeed, I am able to tie up all the loose strings. We have arranged a full set of satellite maps in the region where the search will take place, transport by helicopter and cooperation with competent people. September 13, 2001, on the day before our departure for Cuzco, the Instituto Italiano di Cultura in Lima organized a press conference during which a spokesman for the ministry of tourism handed me the official Resolucion Ministerial – a ministerial decree signed by the vice president of the republic asking the relevant institutions and government departments to offer their support and aid to an international expedition led by Jacek Palkiewicz, schedule for June 2002 in the Madre de Dios river basin.

In the evening I receive a dinner invitation to the home of Guillermo Faura Gaiga. Now an eighty-two-year-old retired admiral, in 1996 Gaiga was a member of my expedition that pinpointed the source of the greatest river in the world. A former navy minister and the author of a sizeable bulk of work on the Amazon, he turned out to be a heroic example of perseverance. Despite advanced age, he reached the impressive elevation of 4,800 meters above sea level, amazing everyone, including himself. Dinner

was also attended by Zaniel Novoa, a lecturer of geography at the Catholic University and the director of a scientific expedition to the source of the Amazon. I value my friendship with this precise, discerning man of mild temperament. Zaniel has already received the news from the Geographic Society and read the article in *El Comercio*. He is thrilled with the project and is pleased to offer help towards its realization.

At dinner, drinking *pisco*, Guillermo throws out, as if a joke:

“Does your new expedition have any free places?”

Zaniel saves me from an uncomfortable situation.

“Admiral, this will be an extremely exhausting expedition, even for a young and strong person.”

“I was only trying to sound out the situation,” our host explains. I amaze at his vitality and undiminished readiness for another adventure.

I respect and value my relationship with Guillermo, which is why I wouldn't say right out that there are biological limits for the participants in this expedition. It might hurt his feelings. I select my companions with particular care. One person can ruin the chances of the entire group, poison the atmosphere and cause tension, particularly when threats, fear or bad weather appear and weaken the psyche. Every participant of a difficult expedition must fulfill a number of criteria: trekking experience and a sense of humor as well as a cheerful and tolerant disposition. Also appreciated are: independence, a character free of prejudice, perceptiveness, knowledge of first-aid, strong will, curiosity and lack of bad habits. The candidate should be in perfect health and have an iron stomach that can digest even the strangest meals. I always emphasize that we work as a team, in which there is no room for individualists. Everyone has to observe the principles that allow a group to live in the spirit of cooperation and harmony. All individual interests must be sacrificed for the good of the defined goal. I demand and maintain strict

discipline. Guillermo would be a fantastic companion if not for the nearly nine decades hanging around his neck.

I return to the hotel room fairly early, wanting to rest up for the next day. As I open the door, I can hear the buzz of an impatient telephone. I lift the receiver.

“Finally, you’re there. Where have you been? For two days I’ve been trying to get a hold of you. I even called your embassy.” It’s Karin.

“What would make such a beautiful girl miss an old man?”

“Primo: exchange the word “old” for “interesting.” Secundo: you were going to leave Lima without saying goodbye, you horrible man.”

“I’m only leaving for a few weeks,” I protest. “I’ll definitely call you before the flight.”

“I want to see you! I’m not far from your hotel.”

“I heard recently that you have very conservative parents. What would they say if they heard their beloved daughter had paid a visit to a man’s hotel room in the middle of the night?”

“Such a big boy and he still doesn’t know that a woman’s words aren’t always to be trusted.”

“Now I know. Can I invite you for a drink?”

I wait barely a few minutes. She enters the room, ravishingly beautiful, radiant and emanating amazing scents. Her clothing is simple but refined. She takes a seat, revealing round, tanned and provocatively parted knees. My eyes nearly pop out of my head. She picks up a glass and takes a solid drink.

“I brought you *bendita Piedra de Zamuro*,” she said, opening a small silver box. In it is a light, shimmery round stone.

“What is that? I ask.

“The blessed Samuro Stone. It grows in the stomach of a vulture around a swallowed seed. This is a powerful amulet. It protects against bad people and ensures wealth. Carry it with you when you go to search for Paititi.”

“So why isn’t everyone in Peru happy and rich?”

“Because this is a rare and hard to find stone – even more difficult than a pearl.”

“You went to all that trouble just for me?”

“Since I met you I can’t stop thinking about you. I’m your secret admirer and am honored that you could devote me some of your time. Unfortunately, you don’t have too much time for me.”

“You know...I’ve had some problems lately. That *huaquero* you set me up with turned out to be a scoundrel. Actually, he is the reason I moved my departure from Lima forward.”

“Did Don Cipriana’s accident bother you that much?”

“How do you know?” I can’t hide my amazement.

“I’m a journalist after all.” She laughs. “A good journalist. Don’t worry. Tomorrow’s newspapers won’t contain any mention of the events in Leymebamba. They won’t write about it at all. I came to explain. My uncle, you know – the antique dealer – asked me to apologize to you for the stress you experienced. Ruben is quite a scoundrel. He wanted to link you to him using fear and made up the whole intrigue.”

“Do you mean that Don Cipriano is alive?”

“He is in perfect health and has no idea that Ruben orchestrated his death.”

“*Porca troia!*”⁴⁸ The words escape my mouth at the sound of the *huaquero*’s name. Fortunately, Karin doesn’t know Italian. “How could he be so low?”

⁴⁸ Italian curse: Motherfucker!

“You know that for gold people are ready to do anything.”

The tension of recent days melts away. The night escape from Leymebamba, our conversation with Ruben – now I can forget about all of it. Erase it from my memory. An enormous weight has lifted from my shoulders and all is alright with the world again.

“I look at you and you seem just as beautiful as Matterhorn. I just don’t know if you’ll find an explanation for the barbarous instincts emerging within me.”

“You’re sweet. Keep talking. I like to listen to you. Men generally talk to me with their hands and you are so restrained...” Karin sighs.

She stands up and stands so close that I can feel the brush of her eyelashes.

“Well, a woman’s beauty can be acknowledged just as well with words and sight. Actually, I am also constantly tempted to touch you to make sure this isn’t a dream; that such a beautiful girl is still near me.”

“So why don’t you, silly?” Her breathing is fast as if labored. “It’s so hot in here.” One by one she begins to unbutton her blouse...

We are barely off the ground when the plane suddenly starts to climb. After a few minutes, we rise above the clouds. Below us glimpses of Lima are visible through a dark gray fog; above us blue skies and blinding sun. Moments later the cotton tangle hanging over the *costa* reveals the Andes. Only from the air can their true size and beauty be appreciated. As far as the eye can see a string of cordilleras extends, terrifyingly bare peaks with almost unreal dimensions. Emptiness, one great stone wilderness, dangerous and lifeless. Golden red slopes shoot up one by one to a height far beyond six thousand meters, peaks dusted year round in white snow. The dominant color of the landscape sliding by under the wings of the Boeing is the color of the setting sun, lending the mountain slopes a copper gleam, a shade only broken by the sporadic strips of green fed

by a few rivers and streams. Sometimes a tiny dotting of huts appears, glued to the steep slopes, or part of a path leading nowhere.

In these mountains, despite their seeming barrenness, live sixty percent of Peru's inhabitants. The population is decidedly of Indian origin, descended from distant ancestors who created unique and interesting cultures. In contrast to the Old World, they arose far from water routes, on high plateaus and surrounded by snow topped mountains. Here, in a mild and healthy climate, are ideal conditions for agricultural development and the mountains were a natural barrier against the threat of invasion from less civilized peoples. The inaccessibility of mountain valleys and plateaus allowed these Indian communities to develop in a kind of cultural isolation. One common trait of these civilizations was the surprising lack of domesticated animals. No cows or bulls aided man in his work in the fields, neither horse, with its speed and strength, nor camel facilitated the exchange of trade over large, waterless areas. Peruvians had it the best in this respect, although their midget Andean camels – llamas and alpacas – could never rival their afro-Asian relatives.

When we fly over Ayacucho, it is a sign that we are halfway there. The current capital of the province has made history three times in the last few hundred years. The first incident took place in the mid-15th century, when Pachacutec routed the army of Chancas at a site named *ayacucho* – or corner of death. In the times of Pizarro, the only construction here was a fortified camp but only three hundred years later an uprising led by marshal Sucre engaged in a victorious battle December 9, 1824 on the outskirts of the city, freeing Peru from Spanish domination. The third time dates back to the 1980s when the area became the cradle of the Shining Path or *Sendero Luminoso*, a Maoist grouping that terrorized Peru for more than a dozen years, whose guiding idea was born in

Ayacucho. Its leaders, Abimael Guzman, a philosophy lecturer at the local university, formulated the thesis that a demoralized political system must be fought with force. At its peak, Shining Path conducted a few thousand bombing attacks per year. In Lima alone one thousand charges of dynamite exploded in 1985, causing numerous, mainly accidental victims. In the course of a twenty-year civil war, twenty-five thousands people lost their lives.

Ayacucho disappears behind us, while under the wings the familiar emptiness of light brown slopes reappears. A growing number of giants poking uncomfortably against the sky are the only thing visible on the horizon. Among them is the tangled winding Apurimacu – the great Andean river.

We land in a narrow valley enclosed within steep slopes. The landing strip is “only” 3,400 meters above sea level, but in the Andes this is a respectable elevation. I discover this in short order during an attempt to hail down a taxi when a group of dwarfs turn on the jackhammers in my skull. The pain lessens only in the evening even though I have consumed liters of *mate de coca* – a local specialty brewed on the basis of coca leaves, supposedly the perfect antidote for Andean elevation sickness. Here it is known as *soroche* and is more aggressive than in any other region of the world thanks to a special microclimate, dry air, and first and foremost dense air and the concentration of air proportional to an increase in elevation. At a height of 1,900 meters above sea level the pressure falls by twenty percent and at three thousand meters by forty. In the Andes *soroche* can afflict anyone starting at an elevation of two thousand meters and is a generally universal condition. It affects both the young and fit and the heavy set old man. A person suffering from elevation sickness is afflicted with apathy, exhaustion, headaches, vomiting, insomnia and reduced reaction time. These symptoms are

accompanied by auditory hallucinations and breathing difficulties – a person is forced to fight for every breath because the lungs are constantly empty. The only protection from these sensations is gradually acclimatization to higher elevations, ideally four hundred meters per day. Unfortunately, we have jumped three and a half kilometers in the course of an hour, which is why we sit dejectedly and without appetites at dinner.

“We are so proud of our civilizational expansion and yet we are still at the mercy of nature.” Andrew is in a philosophical mood tonight. “Until the day I die, I will never forget the night I spent at 4,700 meters. Spurred by approaching deadlines and forecasts of a break in the weather, we decided to attack Mont Blanc right away. After arriving in Chamonix, I left my car on the parking lot, through a backpack over my shoulder and started up. A storm front caught me anyway during the ascent on the Bosses Ridge – I barely made it to a metal shelter in Vallot. A blizzard and hurricane winds trapped me there for twenty-four hours. I sat there cursing my own stupidity and trying to keep the natural reactions of my stomach and pickled brain under control. Anyone who has gone through it once never wants to go through it again.”

Fortunately, in the morning there were no traces of the symptoms I’d suffered the night before. We grab our backpacks and plunge into the labyrinth of city streets.

Notes

With a current population of four hundred thousand, Cuzco is said to be the oldest consistently inhabited city in the western hemisphere. The city is linked directly with the history of the Inca, which according to legend began on lake Titicaca. One day the god Inti, who lived on one of the islands of the lake, took pity on man and decided to lead mankind out of their barbaric state. In

Pakiratambu cave he brought four sons and four daughters into the world, joining them in marriage once the children had grown. Giving them a wedge of pure gold, Inti sent his children out into the world, saying:

Go forth until you find a place where the wedge sinks easily into the ground. There you will found your center and teach men farming and good traditions, showing them how to build homes and temples. Later you will create a kingdom in which people will live in happiness.

After a long journey the siblings reached a valley where the wedge their father had given them slipped effortlessly into the earth. They named the site Cuzco – which in the Quechua language means “navel of the world.” Unfortunately, arguments and strife divided the siblings. Angered, Inti punished three of his sons severely by turning them into stones. This left power in the hands of his youngest progeny – Manco Capaca and his wife Mama Oklio – the first legendary leaders of the Inca and founders of the dynasty.

All day we wandered through the corridors of cobbled streets in a labyrinth of walls made from tiles crafted by Incan artisans. Church spires rise into the sky above the city. They serve other gods but the rock remains the same, although the walls no longer bear the golden disk of the sun – the symbol of the Inca – or statues of Virakocha. On the foundations of Incan palaces, a monumental cathedral and Franciscan monastery were built – the final resting place of both Almagros, father and son, as well as their fervent opponent, Gonzalo Pizarro. In Amarucancha, the former Courtyard of Serpents, what is perhaps the most beautiful Jesuit church in the New World was erected, the Compañía. Its

interior, illuminated by a shining silver column, golden plated caps and alters, supposedly fascinated the Indians whose souls were so eagerly sought by Christian religious. Two lofty church towers dominate the huge square, which – like all representational squares in Peruvian cities – is known as Plaza de Armas. In the collective consciousness of the Indian community, however, it is still called Huacay Pata – the Square of Sobs. Since the time of Pachacuteca this is the site of large religious ceremonies and sacrifices, making it the undisputed heart of the capital – the navel of the world.

“So why the name – Square of Sobs?” The question interrupts my train of thought and Andrew, led by my discourse, is already running with the story.

“This is the most popular interpretation of the Incan name because since the era of Pachacuteca public executions of the condemned by carried out there. Incan justice was harsh, but fair. The severity of punishments passed down was connected with the social position held by the perpetrator. Membership in the establishment resulted in a harsher sentence. By contrast in cases of theft caused by hunger, the law punished not the thief but the official responsible for leaving the accused without the means to living. Death was the sentence for thievery, murder, debauchery and heresy against king and the gods. Executions were carried out in a variety of ways: birching, stoning, hanging by the hair over a precipice. The corpses of criminals were left to the vultures, their skins used for drums and skulls fashioned into cups. In the kingdom of the Inca nothing was wasted!

Towards perpetrators whose guilt was not entirely proven, a kind of “trial of the gods” was applied. Not far from Cuzco was a cave named Sancay, full of wild animals, vipers and scorpions. If the unfortunate soul was able to spend two days in this dungeon, it was interpreted as a sign of innocence. The accused was subsequently freed and his troubles amended with gifts and honors. Memory of Incan law has survived until the

present in some regions of the Andes, where an old greeting-admonition is still in use: *Ama Kella, Ama Sua, Ama Llulla!* – ‘Do not laze about, do not steal, do not lie!’”

“Dammit! Don’t you ever have enough?” I cry as we stand in the center of the square while the sun beats down on our heads. “If you’re going to keep moaning, let’s find a place to sit in the shade.”

We take a seat under the shaded arcades with glasses of beer in hand, but Andrew has no intention of letting this go.

“Huacay Pata is obviously a Spanish transcription of an ancient Incan name. The Inca as you know never had a written language, or at least none we’ve been able to identify. However, in the Quechua language there are two phonetically similar words: *huacay* – crying and *aucay* – enemy. So Aucay Pata might also mean the Square of Enemies. That interpretation would make particular sense during the times of Spanish domination. Inca leaders were murdered here as were the leaders of successive uprisings launched against their oppressors. In 1572 Tupak Amaru I, the last ruler of Vilcabamba, and two hundred years later the leader of one of the greatest Incan rebellions, Tupak Amaru II, were put to death at Spanish hands. The bonfires of the Holy Inquisition burned bright on the square and its headquarters was located in a gloomy building built on the ruins of an Incan temple next to the cathedral. The victors themselves fell into discord and took up arms against one another. In 1538 the sword of the executioner removed the head of Almagro, one of Pizarro’s old companions at arms. Three years later his son met the same fate and in 1548 the last of the Pizarros – Gonzalo – laid his head on the chopping block.”

It seemed to be the end of a rather long discourse, but my friend took a healthy gulp of beer and continued.

“Most likely the closest to the truth is an interpretation of Aucay Pata as Plac Auci – taken from the name of one of four legendary Ayar brothers, the founders of Cuzco. Turned to stone by an infuriated Inti, he resided in the center of the city that was subsequently built. The Inca framed the tribal relic in gold, on which warriors vowed loyalty and obedience before setting out for war...”

“Andrew, you’re exhausting me and yourself in this heat. I swear that’s the last question I ask you today.”

The beer relaxes us pleasantly, but it is not our fate to enjoy the comfort of shade because the sidewalk table is no protection from persistent street sellers. When the next tramp tries to sell us another *very old* piece of junk, we make a hasty retreat.

The ancient street of Loreto leads between the walls of *Amarucancha* and *Aclla Huasi* – The House of the Chosen Women to the district of temples and priests. In this house lived *aklle* – the spouses of the Sun God, who were subject to the earthly authority of the Incan ruler. Each district was obliged to offer their ruler the most beautiful girls as a sign of fealty and serfdom. Separated from their families at the age of twelve, these girls lived in monasteries under the care of *mamaconas*, older matrons employed in the god’s service. They were taught religious duties, weaving and sewing of robes for the ruling Inca and his dignitaries, brewed the royal court’s *chichi* and watched over the holy fire in the Temple of the Sun. The monastery was decorated ostentatiously and sumptuously in order to prepare the girls for duties of a less religious nature. As Sun Virgins they were candidates for the Inca’s wives or concubines and at a ripe age for defloration were sent to the royal bed.

None were allowed to enter the monastery grounds aside from the Inca himself. *Aklla* were untouchable. Violation of this taboo by a man was punished with a merciless

death. The same fate awaited any girl who was caught in a romantic affair. A harsh law sentenced her even to being buried alive, while her lover was burned at the stake. His entire family suffered from reprisals as did the entire community – sparing not even animals. The settlement's homes were leveled and salted, making the ground barren and infertile.

Could the Sun Virgins count on a single touch from the Inca? It is doubtful. In the central House of Chosen Women alone were one thousand five hundred *acalla* during the times of the last ruler and how many of these monasteries were scattered across the enormous kingdom? Even Huana Capac, known for lusty and polygamous tendencies, fathered “only” two hundred children.

The remains of walls built by the Inca are easily distinguishable from later structures erected during the conquest. In the former rocks were shaped with precision and connected without mortar. Here and there characteristic trapezoidal door frames are discernable. The same constructions are found in the church of San Domingo. A tall fragment of the wall is known as Torreon Incaica – the Tower of the Inca, now hides a chancel. This is all that remains of the famous Coricancha – the Temple of the Sun. The wall looks gray and dull. Five hundred years earlier the whole structure was a blinding mass of gold, silver and precious stones. The stone walls were encased in polished sheets, each weighing from two to five kilograms. Gold for the Inca was the “tears of the sun,” which explains why the interior was afire in this shimmery metal.

The huge dimensions of the golden sun disk, centered around a sculpted face of the tribal Incan god, was mounted opposite the main entrance so that the light pouring through the doors would reflect off of its polished surface, blinding all those who entered and forcing them by the same token to bow before divine majesty. Before the walls the dignified mummies of Incan kings rested in full regale on golden thrones. Their shriveled

visages are hidden behind gold masks whose eye sockets are embedded with precious stones. Each of the deceased had at his disposal an entire host of servants that attended to his clothing, food and comfort. They were not treated like corpses of the departed but old men caught in temporary slumber. From time to time ceremonies were held in their honor, during which courtesy visits were paid to their embalmed wives, preserved with equal care in neighboring chapels. Temples dedicated to Inti were erected alongside just as extravagantly decorated temples erected to honor the god of rainbows – Chujchu and the frightening god of lightning – Iliapy, linked to a cult that worshiped the planet Venus. Special care was given to the silver-plated temple of Mama Killia, the wife of Inti and the goddess of the moon. The mummies of Incan wives were also buried here and no woman of a lower station was permitted to cross its threshold.

A credible description of royal mummies was recorded in the chronicles of Garcilaso de la Vega published in 1609:

The bodies were so well preserved that they still retained their hair, eyebrows and eyelashes...I remember touching the finger of Huayna Capaca. It was hard and stiff, like on a wooden statue. The body was so light that any Indian could carry it in his arms or on his shoulders from house to house. They carried the bodies through the streets and squares wrapped in white shrouds and the Indians fell to their knees, paying tribute to their memory with moaning and tears.

The conquistadors suddenly understood what a large role mummies played in cementing Incan society. In pursuit of even greater domination, they ordered the burial of mummified ancestors, sparking protests and terror. Local argued that they would suffer hunger and thirst underground.

“So you see,” said Andrew, “their concept of life and death was diametrically opposed to our own. I understand the Incan attachment to the dead. After all, man lives within a network of emotional ties. After death the relationships maintained during life do not disintegrate. In other words we live in the hearts and minds of those dear to us, in those who love us. In life there is death and in death rebirth. Many of our ancestors possessed this knowledge and the Incan also understood it. The mummies of one’s ancestors were a link between the real world and the supernatural, blurring the borders between life and death.”

For centuries Coricancha existed only in folk stories and would still be forgotten if not for a tragic earthquake that hit the city in 1950. A wall shifted at the monastery of St. Dominique revealed an Incan sanctuary under the Spanish-built construction. This incident, combined with the diligent work of archeologists allows us to imagine how the central temple dedicated to Inti and other deities might have looked, despite the fact that only foundations and a few internal chapels in this crucial Incan building. However, a number of unsolved mysteries still lurk in the architectural details and imagination is not always enough for a feasible interpretation.

“Jacek, look at this masterpiece of Incan artistry.” Andrew points to a recess constructed with great precision of basalt. “I wonder how a contemporary engineer would manage a complicated project with such hard stone without circular saws, grinders and drills and only simple copper tools at his disposal. Aside from silver, platinum and gold that was the only metal known to the Inca.”

“One question: why did they go to all that trouble? What purpose was fulfilled by dozens of protruding shelves, polished grooves and deep openings drilled with precision?”

“Jacek, wandering through Peru you have to be ready for such technological surprises. Only here, in the vicinity of Cuzco, I could show you many places where the imagination of a 21st century man is helpless in the face of what he sees, but the list of questions to which answers will never be found is alarmingly long.”

We have no trouble decoding the source of the name Coricancha, a combination of two words: *curi* and *canch*. In the Quechua language they mean “gold” and “fence,” or in other words “golden enclosure.” The Inca believed that on this site Manco Capac built his hut after settling in the valley. The point where he thrust the golden wedge from his father the sun into the ground is called Cuzco Cara Rumi – “the uncovered stone of the navel of the world.” It was symbolically commemorated with a pure gold box weighing fifty-five kilograms. Below the Temple of the Sun, on a weed-covered slope descending gently towards the small Huantaray River, was a temple garden. It was a strange garden, as if enchanted by a magical spell that turns grass, flowers and animals into gold and silver – even the fountains spewed forth silver water. However, this was only the work of Incan artists, who with skilled hands:

(...) forged in gold and silver many realistic trees and small shrubs with leaves, flowers and fruit, some just budding, others ripening and still others at the peak of maturity. Among these and other wonders they crafted cornfields with leaves, cobs, stalks, roots and flowers. The silk draped from the cobs was gold and the rest silver, one soldered to the other. The same contrast was introduced to all the flowers, with the flower or another yellowish element imitated in gold and the rest in silver.

There were also animals, both large and small, forged and cast in gold and silver, namely rabbits, mice, lizards, vipers, butterflies, foxes and wild cats, since they had no domestic cats. Birds of all kinds filled the garden, some perched as if singing in

*the trees and others seemingly in flight or drinking nectar from the flowers. Deer and fallow deer, lions, tigers and all of the other animals and birds native to the country, each in its place in the perfect imitation of nature.*⁴⁹

Aside from Coricancha, the Inca built three hundred other temples in Cuzco and spared no silver or gold on their ornamentation. The Peruvian capital was the headquarters of all the gods who ruled the land and had the status of a holy place. Only Virakocha's temple exemplified simplicity in contrast to universal splendor. The oldest god of the Peruvian peoples was worshiped by the Aymara before they were subjugated by the Inca. Virakocha – “sea foam” – was depicted as a bearded, light-skinned man dressed in a long coat and sandals. He appeared in the vicinity of Titicaca lake and taught people how to live. Human sins filled him with such sorrow that he shed a constant stream of tears, hence the nickname “the crying god.” One day he left humanity behind, angered by the spread of evil and corruption. He vanished in the ocean waves but predicted his own return. His image, immortalized in legend, caused to Indians to believe that the Spanish who had just landed marked the return of Virakocha and his entourage.

The god, however, did not live to experience the appreciation of the conquistadors. When they entered Cuzco November 15, 1533, they stripped its temples and palaces of all their valuables. In place of pagan temples, they raised churches and palaces for new rulers, driving the Indians to perform life-threatening, slave labor. To ensure peace throughout the country, Pizarro decided to reactivate the royal house in order to counteract the spread of anarchy that was increasing throughout the country. The great Inca was the link that connected all of these ancient structures. Without him the

⁴⁹ Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, *O Inkach uwagi prawdziwe (Commentarios Reales de los Incas)*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 327-8.

kingdom would die. He chose young Manco, the last living son of Huayna Capac, who was intended as a puppet leader but turned out to have the same proud character as his ancestors. Manco watched for three years as the Spanish destroyed and plundered the achievements of his people and suffered many humiliations at the hands of arrogant conquistadors himself. When Gonzalo Pizarro raped one of his favorite wives, Capac fled and initiated a rebellion. In 1536 he amassed a gigantic army of two thousand men, but did not maintain the element of surprise and instead of taking Cuzco immediately, he dug in for a siege. In a dramatic battle the first of the Pizarros died, Juan. At this point the rainy season began, forcing Manco to dissolve his army and retreat to the fortress in Ollantaytambo.

The Spanish watched this turnabout in amazement. For them it was nothing short of a miracle. Recent events had impressed upon them how dangerous it could be to distance oneself from the coast. Moreover, Cuzco, initially a city of one hundred thousand inhabitants, was now heavily depopulated. The capital was therefore moved to a newly constructed Lima, a decision that thankfully was not a death sentence for Cuzco, a city nestled in the heart of lofty peaks. It survived and lives on, cashing in today on a rich and fascinating history. It has become a Mecca for adventure seekers, archeologists and artists. The Inca's stone walls now enclose banks, hotels, stores and travel agencies in a unique *mélange* of capitalism and an ancient past.

Does anything remain from those days of enlightenment? Fragments of walls, land, people and Inca legends – today these are also harnessed into money making endeavors. Omnipresent advertisements encourage consumers to buy Inca-Cigarettes and Inca-Cola, while the Incas Country Club promises the party of a lifetime. At the end of the day, instead of questionable attractions in a smoky and noisy club, we visit Plaza de

Armas. The square changes greatly as the hours pass. In the evening shadows, the walls encircling this particularly charming courtyard take on an entirely different character. Rising up under the roof of the Andes, they also gain a violet tone. The bustle of the day fades away as one by one the lights in store windows are extinguished. Somewhere in the distance a single bell rings, followed by a succession of others. For a moment the entire city sways in time with the evening melody.

The sounds spilling out of smoky bars and cafes is muted. We go in for one last drink. At the next table, a group of young people are enjoying themselves. An Indian boy with hair cascading down to his back strums a guitar. He holds a cigarette balanced in the corner of his mouth and is dressed in a stylish coat, jeans and fashionable shoes. His companions are a couple of Americans, both looking rather sloppy and ragged in dirty ponchos and torn linen shorts. How quickly the world changes, devolving what until recently were time-honored attitudes and patterns. Who here is with whom? Who is imitating whom?

We go out for fresh air under the starry sky. The gigantic figure of Jesus, perched on one of the nearby hills, extends a protective arm over the sleepy city. In the sky the Milky Way – what the Indians called the Blue River – is a broad stream of white. The great lantern of the Moon – the wife of Inti – sends out rays of light that turn to silver, helping us find our way back to the hotel.

I caress the cool, rough granite, an emotional gesture linked to my irrational hope that the dead stone will transmit the scenes recorded in the past to me like a fluid transfusion: the moans of laborers forced to perform the backbreaking task of raising these walls, the screams of wounded defenders and the tumult of battle, the voices of rulers celebrating ritual ceremonies. But the rock keeps its silence. Perhaps civilizational

refinement dulls our sensitivity to such intimate contact? I have no rational explanation for the surge of emotion that accompanies me on a walk among the stone debris. Sitting low in the sky, the sun casts long, wispy shadows. In these dark recesses a great Mystery slumbers, a fairy tale represented by the hand of nature in shaping the land. This is one of those places on earth where man seems nothing more than a dwarf entering a giant's cave – small and helpless against the rocky monstrosity.

We stand on the summit of Sacsayhuamán, a name that means satisfied falcon. This plateau towers three hundred meters above the red roofs of Cuzco and is brimming with mysterious sites and ruins. These are not ruins in the common understanding of the word. No piles of crumbled stone or indecipherable historic fragments are visible. However, at first sight, visitors are impressed with the scale of this super construction and super techniques used in its design. A Cyclopean, zigzag maze of walls has a total length of 540 meters and the combined height of its three monumental terraces is eighteen meters. Cut and fitted with precision, the many-sided stone blocks create a pattern resembling a jigsaw puzzle. Each piece of this “puzzle,” however, weighs a few tones and the largest measures 9 x 5 x 4 meters and weighs in at 360 tons. These stone giants, despite their irregular shapes, fit one another perfectly and required no mortar to be joined. This system of interlocking makes the stones resistant to frequent tectonic shocks in the region. In contrast, the cathedral built by the Spanish in Cuzco has been destroyed twice.

Sacsayhuamán Fortress is the description provided by local guides. From accounts we know that the structure was used for military purposes at least once, during a rebellion launched by the son of Huascar – Manco Capac. It was a desperate attempt to break free of the Spanish invaders. Overrun in Cuzco, the Spanish were in a difficult position. Nevertheless, the Inca were unable to take advantage of their enormous numbers. *Ilia*

*tici*⁵⁰ – thanks to tactical discipline and an already demonstrated flair for mad bravery, the Spanish tipped the scales of victory in their direction. In a daring attack they captured Sacsayhuamán and Manco retreated with what was left of his army to the Vilcabamba massif, from which for many years he conducted a partisan war. From that moment the walls of Sacsayhuamán became a “quarry” for a rapidly expanding Cuzco.

The fortifications are transformed into a gigantic open-air theater once a year. June 24, against the background of megalithic walls, the extravagant and colorful Festival of the Sun or Inti Raymi, is held here. The festival is a reconstruction of more than five hundred-year-old rituals, during which Incan rulers, their retinues and priests prayed to the Sun for his providence over the empire and rich harvests. Thousands of tourists from around the world have a chance to watch this colorful event, a testament to tradition and the cultural heritage of the Inca.

Was Sacsayhuamán only a fortress? This is a question that has stumped archeologists for a long time. One hypothesis states that this incredible structure, comparable to the Egyptian pyramids in terms of labor intensity, was initially a cult-related site, the largest Temple of the Sun throughout the kingdom. The decision to commence construction was made in the 15th century by Inca Pachacutec, who employed approximately twenty thousand Indians for ten years to erect its walls. Supposedly, the task was made easier through the incorporation of already existing megalithic walls at the site, left by some mysterious civilization that knew how to fit massive boulders together like Lego blocks.

⁵⁰ The gods of lightning was the name Indians used to describe the Spanish who fired harquebus and falconets.

“That lead doesn’t seem very logical,” I say. “After all, during the time of the Inca the only offensive weapons in their possession were bows, spears and slingshots that hurled river pebbles. Was it really necessary to erect massive fortifications that would intimidate a contemporary artilleryman to repel those kinds of missiles?”

“Jacek, in the kingdom of the Inca there are a few places where logic is completely dumbfounded. Sacsayhuamán, Ollantaytambo, Machu Picchu, Tiahuanaco on Titicaca lake... in each of these places you can find two distinct building styles. Incan technology can be identified by characteristically treated, rectangular stone blocks weighing more than half a ton. Lower sections of the walls consist of megalithic constructions with precisely fashioned boulders of a few hundred tones. That’s why I find the hypothesis about two civilizations so convincing. It is one thing to fashion, transport and fit together rocks weighing a few hundred kilograms and quite another to do the same with hundred-ton giants. The Inca didn’t know the wheel, not to mention the machinery that would lift heavy, multifaceted blocks and fit them together with such precision. This feat amazed chroniclers as early as in the 16th century. One of them – Inca Garcillas de la Vega – writes about Sacsayhuamán fortress:

(...) its dimensions lead one to imagine, and even believe, that the construction was built using the spells of demons and not men. The great number of boulders, so many and so monumental (...) is astounding if we imagine that they had to have been mined in a quarry, (...) because after all the Indians did not know iron or steel for cutting or hewing, (...) they possessed no oxen and did not know how to make carts, not to mention that there is no cart which could carry such a weight, nor an ox that would be able to pull it.

He goes on to describe the well-known historic fact that one of the Incan kings, out of a desire to rival his ancestors, ordered the transport of a huge quantity of boulders from a quarry more than a dozen kilometers away in order to expand the existing fortifications.

(...) the rock was transported by over twenty thousand Indians (...) Half pulled on ropes to the front, while the other half followed behind to support the rock. (...) On one of its sides the weight of the rock was greater than the force supporting it and it rolled to the side, killing three or four thousand Indians.

Reading Garcillas, we can conclude that the Inca had neither the experience nor the knowledge needed to construct Cyclopean buildings and that's why their attempts ended in catastrophe. Even today, guides show visitors rock debris called *saycusca*, meaning "tired" or "bloody stones," because their exhausted carriers fell and were buried under them along the way. Of course, the tragic accident mentioned by Garcillas still doesn't prove anything. It does make the hypothesis that attributes Sacsayhuamán to an older and more technically advanced civilization preceding the Inca more credible."

"Imagine that you received an order to transport this 'little beauty.'" Andrew leads me to a many-sided rock with dimensions of nine by five meters. "The experience of English scientists at Stonehenge shows that in order to move a stone block weighing one ton on wheels over a slightly rolling terrain requires sixteen people. Our rock weighs approximately three hundred tons, so divide three hundred by sixteen and you will understand that this type of transport would demand a crew of four thousand eight hundred. If we arrange them into ten lines, each line will be manned by four hundred and eighty people. A man needs at least one and a half meters of operating space, adding up to

a line with a length of seven hundred and twenty meters! This is just to bring the stone close to the wall! Who brought it closer? Four thousand eight hundred people pushing the rock from behind would never be able to fit their hands on its longest, nine-meter face.”

“What you are saying awakens the imagination,” I interject.

“But this is not the last problem with transporting large stone elements. How was the work of so many people coordinated? After all natural fibers have a tendency to stretch under a load. If a work team of a few hundred people attempted to pull one line, then the last in the row would have to move farther than the first before the line could achieve maximum tension. Each reduction in tension would force them to exert a substantial and unproductive effort. Synchronization of the activities of so many people seems very doubtful.”

“The logic of your argument is paralyzing. The same wall could be erected using smaller stones that would not be quite so technically and organizationally problematic.”

“Exactly. We might also ask if granite could be effectively worked with copper tools...The attempts I made provided a negative answer. If we listen to engineering logic, there are two possible conclusions: either the Inca wielded an archeological technology or tools unknown to us today, or the megalithic walls of Sacsayhuamán were built by an even more advanced pre-Incan civilization.

“Unfortunately, science does not yet have the research tools that would allow us to date the treated rock. No known archeological method, including radiocarbon, thermoluminescence, potassium-argon, electron spin resonance dating and a few others, can be applied to this case. We can only make inferences based on suppositions and subjective assumptions – for example, when analyzing organic remains encased within a seamless rock. In the walls of Sacsayhuamán, due to their precise conservation, no filler

was used. That is why we will be forced to formulate both more and less likely hypotheses for some time to come.

“I agree with you Jacek because the idea that the Inca used Sacsayhuamán as a cult site or a kind of fortress leads to nowhere. In the history of the world, conquerors have frequently benefited from the civilizational accomplishments of conquered peoples. The Inca could just as well have left the structure in good condition and moved in or adapted the space for their own needs.”

However, if we accept the hypothesis that it was not the Inca who erected walls worthy of giants, then the questions remain: who, when and why? These questions are a permanent aspect of our visit to the rock complex. Our doubts are not the product of natural discontent, but a cold, unemotional logic. In the vicinity of the zigzagged “fortress” walls we examine a place known as Muyuc Marca, presented to tourists as the “calendar of the Inca.” Three stone circles, one on top of the other, are intersected by “spokes” that could be more closely associated with the face of an enormous watch or the foundations of an equally large tower. If we were to believe in the official version, it would be nice if someone could explain the principles according to which the calendar worked or what purpose was fulfilled by grooves made in the “spokes” that resemble irrigation channels.

On the other side of vast fields, *vis-à-vis* the Cyclopean walls, stands a cylindrical rock, on which unusually talented and precise artisans engraved “thrones,” shelves, seats and niches. The rock was fashioned with geometrical shapes, cut from dozens of intersecting surfaces with an unknown purpose. Hence, today’s names are an expression of interpretation-related helplessness. *Rodadero* – or the “skating rink” provided an ideal surface for children to slide on; *Piedra Lisa* – or “smooth rock,” executed with such precision that it appears to be made from clay and then hardened using some mysterious

technology. In a nearby precipice we stumble across a labyrinth of corridors, small chambers, recesses and artificially widened crevasses. We try to go deeper into one of them using a steeply descending staircase, which initially reveals the sky above. After a few meters the crevasse transforms into a corridor and narrows suddenly. Beyond there is not even room for a human head, but the stairs continue below! They are clearly visible in the floodlight. Who tread these stairs and where do they lead? How were they carved? One more question without an answer.

We get yet another dose of mystery in a place called Quenco Grande and nearby Cusieluchauoc. “*Quenco*” means more or less the same thing as “full of niches” and this is indeed the impression created by the rocky monstrosity: a tangled web of corridors, platforms, clefts, recesses and artificial grottos. It is hard to find a rock that hasn’t been tampered with in some way. Walls intersect at a variety of angles, forming razor-sharp corners. Their smooth and even polished surfaces look as if someone had just removed the shoring, but this is rock and not concrete. The structure has no order, sense or logic. The smooth surfaces end at the stairs that run along the ceiling. Both long-legged insects and men could tread this path if boots could be replaced by suckers. Is this a joke or the result of a gigantic cataclysm that turned everything – literally – upside down?

This world of rock creates an assortment of things that escape rational comprehension. These are the products of a mad, giant stonemason who had no concept of logic or economy. When the Spanish asked the Inca about these oddly shaped rocks, they were told that the structures dated back to a time when the gods walked the earth. In the accounts of peoples living in the shade of the Andes, we find many stories links to the age of the gods. It was their act of creation that brought earth and sky into being, followed by man-giants who are an ideal match for the Cyclopean walls of Quenco.

“How simple and transparent human history would become if the myths and legends passed from generation to generation could be interpreted as accounts of real events,” I mumble under my breath.

“Don’t you wonder about the similarities in the accounts left by peoples who lived thousands of kilometers apart, separated by seas and oceans? There are so many common threads...Even in the Book of Numbers in the Old Testament it was written: ‘And in those days giants walked the earth...’ The motif of pre-flood giants doesn’t only appear in pre-Incan legends. Maybe giants are not only a figment of the human imagination?”

Legend dogs our steps at every turn. Covered in a delicate layer of moss, a phallic boulder – the symbol of fertility – stands in attention before an empty amphitheater. No mortal carved this structure. According to legend, this is one of the three petrified brothers, the son of the great Inti. This is a magical place, the axle of the world and one of the places where the sacred allows art and faith to meet; where the whispered secrets of the Great Mystery materialize. After many years, in the darkness of a rocky precursor, a place was prepared for the eternal rest for the great ruler Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui. Despite the passage of centuries, the rock retains its magical power. Supposedly, under the cover of night, young women come before it to beg for fertility and men whisper before it magical curses, trusting that the Inca resting within will return lost potency. Quenco Grande is one of those places located at the source of myth, like the wooden phallic god in Pachacamac and numerous sites of Bacchanalia scattered throughout the Mediterranean world.

Legend also accompanies us as we crawl on all fours into the cave that contains the bones of Ayar Kaci, one of four twins sired by Inti who refused to subordinate to the will of their great father. As punishment he was trapped in an underground cave and to this day shakes the ground in helpless fury. A narrow corridor suddenly widens and a

shaft of light falls on a flat sacrificial stone. How many times was human blood shed in this place? Water drips from the walls of the corridor, while the lantern light illuminates their smooth polished finish and carved niches. Here and there stairs were built to aid in climbing a rock threshold. Was the corridor dug by a single man? Perhaps in the distant past only the walls of a natural rock crevasse were expanded? After one hundred meters a pile of rubble blocks the path ahead. Is this the result of one of many earthquakes that affect the region or the work of man, an attempt to forbid entry to a mystery beyond?

In a moment we are baking again in the rays of a now low sitting sun. An evening chill seeps into my body as I rest at the peak of Quenco Grande in one of the stone chairs whose function is still shrouded in mystery. I listen to the tales of an all-knowing guide telling Japanese tourists that in days of yore the chairs were used to perform gynecological exams on young girls since only virgins could participate in the rituals celebrated in the Sun cult. The tittering of excited girls brings a smile of satisfaction to his face as he prods their imaginations.

Near the “gynecological chairs” is a grooved rock bearing a zigzag pattern. These grooves were connected to rituals practiced here as an Incan site with a similar function as the Greek center at Delphi. The blood of llamas dripped slowly through the manmade channels, allowing the priest to answer any question posed by the petitioner offering the sacrifice.

Unfortunately, there are no Incan mages or priests who have the ability to see the past or future. It’s a shame. Perhaps with their skills, I could gain a brief glimpse behind the curtain of oblivion that has fallen over Sacsayhuamán, Quenco and Cusieluchayoc.

The Valley of Urubamba

A warm and comfortable bed makes a man lazy. Just the thought of exposing the body to the morning chill is unbearable.

“But today is Sunday,” protests my lazy *alter ego*. “It isn’t befitting to work on a holy day.”

“What work? Walking in the fresh air and admiring beautiful landscapes,” interjects my second, more ambitious “I.”

The argument hangs by a thread. I have to subject the matter to some serious meditation.

“This discussion is over! Get dressed! Shave!” I order, while stoppering my ears to shut out the voices of my now united opponents. Thanks to this display of resolute behavior, in fifteen minutes we are sitting at the breakfast table and thirty minutes later enter the city outskirts.

Cuzco is accessible by plane or one of four roads, which run in all directions just like during Incan times when the city was the capital of Tawantinsuyu – a country covering four thousand kilometers of ocean coast and spanning a width of one thousand five hundred kilometers. Fortunately, contemporary routes differ from those tread by the Inca since five centuries ago the car didn’t exist and the Inca generally traveled on foot in the company of llama, carrying smallish loads on their backs.

The modern asphalt road leading to Pisac climbs laboriously up a steep slope. The arch of a rainbow hangs over the nearest Cordillera, recently showered with rain. Groups of Indians plod alongside the road wearing *chullos*⁵¹ and striped ponchos. The men bend under the weight of bulky sacks, while women carry crying children in makeshift carriers made from woolen handkerchiefs. A herd of llama munches on meager clumps of grass

⁵¹ Wool hats with ear flaps.

on the side of the road. These beautiful, woolly creatures with lean necks and eyes shaded by long, velvet lashes, are certainly the fruit of a strange union between a giraffe and a sheep. Farther on a goat herd nibbles on small bundles of sickly-looking, thorny grass. This is a landscape like the one that existed centuries ago. Then as now, the glaciers of the Cordillera's highest elevations glitter.

The road crosses the Inca path not far from Pucapucara – a fortified guardhouse and part of a chain of watchtowers surround Cuzco. We examine a cobbled, heavily damaged path with interest. This is a fragment of the famous Royal Way.

Notes

The Great Royal Way, also known as Capac Nan, began in the north in what is today Columbia, more or less on the equator, and cuts across the territory of Ecuador and Peru before reaching Cuzco. From there it continued on to the southern coast of Titicaca Lake, then through Bolivia, Argentina and finally Chile. In those times it was the longest manmade road in existence, measuring five thousand three hundred kilometers and exceeded the Roman road from Hadrian's Wall in Northern Britain to Jerusalem in length. Parallel, but slightly shorter was the Coastal Road of "only" four thousand five hundred kilometers. The Coastal Road served five hundred years later as an outlined for the Pan-American Highway. Both main arteries are linked by a number of perpendicular and secondary roads, each leading to large human settlements. These roads functions as the nerves of a giant organism, allowing distant lands to be managed from a central point. They also enabled Pizarro to cover astronomical distances and attack the brain of the great kingdom.

The Inca roads were an amazing achievement of engineering, built of incredibly solid stone blocks, cobble stone and bitumous cement. Attention was also devoted to their irrigation and essential drainage canals. Steeper sections were handled with the aid of stairs, while in the vicinity of marshy lands, the road was directed across a causeway reinforced by a solid stone frame. Construction also involved four tunnels, the longest of which has a length of thirty meters. The standard road width ranged from five to eight meters and narrowed in a few rare spots where the road had to carve through solid rock. It would not be off the topic to mention that the roads built long before the Inca by the rulers of Chimú measured as many as thirty meters across. This is larger than the size of modern highways. Sometime Capac Nun passed through elevations considerably higher than the timber line. In the area of Salcantay it reached a height of five thousand seven hundred meters above sea level. Local trails are marked similarly to those of Rome; instead of mileposts, granite *topas* poles were placed every league.⁵² For the comfort of royal officials traveling the roads, shelters were erected every twenty kilometers – called *tambos* – along with magazines of food for the army.

This infrastructure was supplemented by bridges, shockingly simple and creative in their use of applied technological solutions. Calm rivers were spanned by pontoon bridges, which rested on reed rafts or boats. One of these, on the Desequadero River nearby Titicaca Lake, survived until 1890. Another astonishing element were hanging bridges, which were constructed across deep ravines and raging mountain rivers. Support lines were woven from agava fibers,

⁵² League (Spanish: legua) – a measurement of length that has been define variously as: the *legua comun* – 5,556 m, *legua de camino* – 6,620 m, *legua juridica* – 4,175 m and *legua legal* – 6,958 m. A league was typically divided into eight thousand stakes or *varas*.

known locally as *pita*. This is a universal plant, used in American for not only lines but clothing and plaiting. The juice of the plant was also the main ingredient in the alcoholic drink *pulque*.

Lines with a thickness approaching forty centimeters were stretched across the barrier to be crossed and anchored around rock abutments. Just a few of these blocks, covered in boards, was enough to create a bridge that allowed every traveler safe passage. The greatest fame was earned by the bridge over the Apurimac, ninety meters long and hung in a deep curve around one hundred meters above the glassy mirror of the water below. The bridge could only be used in the morning since afternoon winds rocked the construction like a hammock. It was constructed sometime around 1350 during the rule of Inca Roca and fell out of use five centuries later.

Supposedly the sight of this historic crossing, immortalized in a drawing by American traveler Ephraim George Squier, inspired archeologist Hiram Bingham to explore the puzzles of South America. Bingham later gained fame as the romantic discoverer of Machu Picchu, one of the lost cities of the Inca, and the bridge even found itself in a book written by Thornton Niven Wilder in 1927, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, for which he received the Pulitzer Prize.

The plot unfold in the first half of the 18th century and tells the story of a bridge that fastened together two sides of a mountain valley and collapses one day, killing five people. For Wilder it became a point of departure for contemplating the human condition, fate and death. The book also spawned four film adaptations. In 1929 Charles Brabin shot a silent film about a bridge and in 1944 Wilder's tale was directed by Rowland V. Lee. A film for television was

released in 1962 and a Spanish production filmed by Mary McGuckian opened in cinemas in 2004.

The Great Royal Way was part of an extensive road system, with a length of more than twenty-four kilometers, which formed a spider web across the entire Incan kingdom and facilitated its efficient management. Constructed across the deserts of the Peruvian *costa* as well as over the lofty passes located at the farthest reaches of man's ability to travel, the roads provided access to every administrative center in the Inca state.

Pucapucara's role as a watchtower was particularly important. It guarded the Incan baths at Tambomachay a few hundred meters away. We find a parking place. Waterfall cascades murmured on balconies and terraces, falling into stone basins designated for ritual ablution. Chronicles speak of walls inlaid with gold and silver, although for obvious reasons nothing remains of that splendor. The source of the water bubbling forth from openings in the wall is a mystery since none were discovered in the area. Water which flowed during the times of the Inca continues to flow today, always in a constant stream, unchanged by draught or heavy rains. At one time it purified the bodies of high-ranking Incas, today it serves as an...ingredient in the making of an excellent local beer.

Watchtowers, similar to the one in Pucapucara, were erected along the roads belonging to the Inca at intervals of sixty kilometers. Within their walls were barracks, an arsenal and magazines of food, while from the observation towers important messages were passed by way of smoke signals, an efficient and fast form of communication. For example: a message sent from Quito, two thousand kilometers away, reached Cuzco in only a few hours. Special reports and packages were sent by courier, for whom stations were established, depending on

the degree of difficulty on the road, from half a kilometer to eight kilometers apart. Couriers – *chasquis* – were talented runners. They had to be strong and healthy, follow a special diet and observe sexual abstinence. Imagine if these are the condition expected from modern sports champions. Thanks to their agility, a package from Quito was delivered to the royal palace after five days, indicating that couriers were able to cover an average of four hundred kilometers per day. Taking into account the difficulty of the road, which crossed passes at an elevation of five thousand meters, this was a fantastic result – twice the speed of the Roman postal system.

From Pucapucara the road rises towards a pass. The car whines in a low gear. Every so often we pass small clusters of homes and lonely huts jutting out of the slope. The walls are made from rocks piled one on top of another and thatch roofs covered under a layer of moss. In front of the huts sit women in bulky, layered red skirts, holding ubiquitous spindles in their hands on which wool yarn is combed from the backs of fluffy llamas and vicuña. Dark-skinned children romp around the houses. Under the surface of bronze soil the swells of potatoes are visible. This is real wealth in the Andes. Supposedly, there are as many as two hundred varieties of the plant, differing in size, color and taste – from tiny and sweet to the most ordinary *chuño*, which even grows at an elevation of four thousand meters. Potatoes are saving millions of people from hunger around the globe today. Annual production of this vegetable is worth more than all the wealth Pizarro amassed in Peru.

We have arrived at the pass. Below are green fields, but here the landscape is limited to reddish rock, whistling wind and sun. On the other side we descend towards Urubamba – the holy valley of the Inca. It sprawls out over an area of more than one

hundred kilometers, at both ends guarded by a city: Pisac and Machu Picchu. In light of the climate, water supply and fertile soil, the valley was the granary that also supplied the “holy city” of Cuzco. It was home to the country’s most beautiful corn, displaying exceptionally large grains, designated for temples and use during religious rituals.

Above the Holy Valley nature spreads a roof of twinkling stars. On a clear night, the Blue River or *Mayu* is visible, known in Europe as the Milky Way. It hangs over the valley and during the winter solstice meets the horizon in precisely the spot where the setting sun sank out of sight. Every year on this day Incan priests took part in a procession from the source of Vilcanota River, which flows through the center of the valley. Following its path, they visited the holy sites of Pisac and Ollantaytambo. These sites were the female equivalents of constellations scattered across the sky. To remove any doubts, objects on the ground were arranged into the shape of heavenly patterns, star constellations and dark dust nebulas, in which the outlines of mainly animals and plants can be discerned: llamas, condors and trees. Incan cosmological myths are nothing more than a collection of encoded astronomical knowledge. Most of their holy sites can be interpreted similarly.

Among yawning walls and nestled between the Rio Vilcanota and Chongo stream lies Pisac, one of the oldest settlements in Cuzco province. The road falls toward the river in a few sharp turns, ending on a crowded and bustling square. This tiny village is centered on an equally small church that bursts at the seams every Sunday with Indian families from neighboring settlements. They visit the church to fulfill a religious obligation but also for purely practical reasons. From the crack of dawn the village hosts a large market – *mercado de los indios*. Stalls crowd thickly onto the church square and nearby streets. Those without a stall simply lay out their wares on sheets of plastic,

blankets and anything else at hand. Traders sell goods that were grown on terraced plots: vegetables, fruits, dozens of corn strains, potatoes and coca leaves as well as beautiful ceramics used in households, wooden masks, delicate fabrics and llama and vicuna wool. The great-grandmothers of these sellers wove clothing for the Son of the Sun. Today they do their best to please tourists.

For their part, the tourists gather in crowds in search of folklore still untainted by commercialism. Women in colorful, multilayered skirts, imaginative hats and long, raven black hair satisfy the foreign need for exoticism. Their head coverings are adorned with ribbons and embroidery and resemble the bowler hats of our grandfathers in shape. Black is worn by Indians, while the clothing of Mestizos is white. What a unique type of beauty! It literally begs to be immortalized on film. Unfortunately! These Indian women believe that photographs steal away the soul. Not even the whisper of dollars changes their minds. Whenever I direct the lens in their direction, they turn their backs on me, muttering angrily.

The cause of their aversion to cameras may be completely different. It seems to me that the Indians are not as afraid for their souls as they are annoyed by the curiosity of nosy *gringos* who have descended on their land for five hundred years, bringing death, suffering and starvation. During the times of the Inca in this country no one went hungry, while today millions live in poverty. Before the land was enriched from generation to generation, today the reverse is true. The first conquerors boasted proudly that there was no begging here, now it is the only way for many to obtain a piece of bread. Under Inca rule there were no locks and the absence of a host was marked by a symbolic cross made from two branches. Theft committed out of hunger resulted in the punishment of the official supervising the village. Today, robbery is a plague on Peruvian streets. This is

what the white man brought to these lands. What should they be thankful for? Why should they respect us? Is any wonder that they turn their backs?

They long to live in their own world, cultivate their own language, clothing and even their own religious rituals in secret. The collective cultural awareness passed from one generation to the next includes memories of a kingdom that lived according to the principle “live as if you will die tomorrow, but plan as if you will live forever.” Land belonged to the people, whose responsibility it was to work, while the natural riches in its depths were the property of the divine Inca. There was no monetary system since the only individual with precious stones and metal was the ruler, who put them at the disposal of stonemasons for the purposes of art and ornamentation. Gold was the “tears of the sun” and belonged exclusively to god.

In the land of the Inca there was, of course, an aristocratic line, but it could not own property in the strict understanding of the word as we know it, particularly in the case of land. The elite was entitled only to certain privileges: the right to concubines, costly clothing and residences. There was no division between rich and poor. The highest Inca himself was not spared from hard labor and when August came, bringing the sowing season, he personally cultivated the holy patch using the golden *tacli*,⁵³ a signal marking the beginning of the planting season throughout the empire. It is no wonder that leftist ideas are so dear to their descendents, since the ideals committed to paper by Marx were put into practice by the Inca long before he was born.

Suddenly, the sound of monotonous base notes can be heard over the hum of the market. The crowd divides and three boys appear, blowing into shells that produce sounds similar to the mooing of a cow. Behind them is a real Inca in a ceremonial, patterned

⁵³ Tacla – a primitive plough with which Peruvian peasant cultivate the land until this day.

poncho and a black hat with a rolled brim. He holds the symbol of his power – a rod heavily adorned with silver, topped with a knob. This is the chief of a nearby village headed for a religious ceremony. His modest dignity, so different from the splendor that surrounding the ancient Inca, is also a symptom of the changes sweeping this land.

Around the town, all of the slopes in sight are shaped into cultivation terraces like giant steps. The steepest sections of these miniature plots are no wider than two or three meters. Just the thought of the climb to these heights takes your breath away. Terraces are cultivated using the same methods used during the time of the Incas. Soil is still plowed with the primitive *taclli* and seeds are carried to the terraces by the farmers themselves. Perhaps that is why the heavily wrinkled faces of the villagers in the market look so tired. Their eyes express total helplessness in the face of the rules of life, which offer no chance for change.

Three hundred meters above the valley floor is the Inca sanctuary. It can be reached riding on the back of mules or *per pedes*. The trail winds among terraced fields, old buildings, ruined watchtowers and cemeteries completely “exploited” by *huaqueros*. From time to time it crosses a platform jutting out of the vertical rock and disappears into the darkness of a narrow tunnel, emerging unexpectedly near the pass, from which the goal is already visible – a fortified temple. The Inca were consistent in their search for temple locations, built as high as possible and hence nearer to the sun god.

We must remember that Pisac was a fragment of the Milky Way. That is why we could see the condor overhead on starry nights and by day, flying for example by helicopter over the slopes of Huaca de Conur Orco – a faithful replica of the Inca’s holy bird was clearly visible on the steep slopes. The construction incorporates the natural shape of the terrain, supplemented by artificial terraces. The condor, one of the largest birds in the world, held a special place in the beliefs of people living in the Andean

mountains. It lived on inaccessible mountain peaks alongside the gods and rulers of the mountains – the *apus*. These birds live on carrion, making them spiritual guards of the dead and holy places as well as the agents that ensure the peaceful passage of *mallqui*⁵⁴ to eternity.

Homes belonging to priests, the complex of sacred bathhouses and some warehouses were built of black and excellently processed basalt. Here there are no megalithic monoliths; the constructional elements can be measured in centimeters. In the cylindrical tower *intihuatana* – a slightly damaged granite obelisk marked the “place where the sun is tied.” No sensation, everything is clear and easily understood, but the Spanish described the site as: *e cosa de ver* – a must see.

After soaking in the beautiful views, we wander on to the picturesque Vilcanota river, known farther downriver as the Urubamba and finally as the Ucayali – creating the longest tributary of the Amazon. Along the way are a number of traditional Indian stone huts with thatched roofs, a red rag hung from a long pole outside. For the uninitiated this is the signal for fresh *chicha*. This incredibly popular Andean drink is made from sugar cane or fermented corn. The Inca loved corn, believing it and its byproducts as food worthy of the gods. Their holy days and rituals literally swam with *chicha*. The slightly alcoholic drink was also consumed daily since the production process was quite simple. In the first step the corn was chewed in order to accelerate the fermentation process and the paste spit into a collective pot. Considering the amount of holy days in the Inca tradition, we could certainly describe pre-Columbian Peru as a society of chewers. In his memoirs, one conquistador mentioned that in the Temple of the Sun on one of the islands

⁵⁴ Incan mummies and their wives.

on Titicaca Lake as many as “one thousand women were constantly occupied with the production of *chicha* to be poured out as an offering to god.”

Today, wooden rollers are used to prepare material for fermentation and the pulp obtained heated over a fire. The mash is then poured into a vat with leftover *chicha* from the previous batch to further speed up fermentation. After just one day, the drink is ready for consumption. However, it must be drunk at the right moment. One day later and Montezuma’s revenge – in other words diarrhea – is certain.

A visit to a *chicha* “producer” is the perfect pretext to get a glimpse into the life of the modern Incan family. The dark interior of the one-room hut, approximately six by five meters, is full of unusual, hard to tolerate smells. The smoke drifting up from the fire on the dirt floor brings tears to the eyes. My curiosity overcomes a first instinct to escape out the door. There is not much to see: bare, unplastered stone walls, instead of a ceiling the roof is woven from grass. I spy the long threads of a spider’s web that have trapped tiny fragments of smoke from the fire, creating long stalactite-like shapes. Three pieces of equipment take up most of the hut: an enormous pallet stretches along one wall, an equally large table and a television, its blinking picture barely visible. Through the center of the room a long pole functions as a closet, on which clothing, blankets and cloth rags are hung. Seven adults and ten children at various ages sit in an interior of thirty square meters. Guinea pigs, raised a source of meat, scramble around their legs. The adults are interested exclusively in the transmission of the match, while the children watch us with large eyes and hold out their hands for candy. At the sight of a jug filled with *chicha* and a dirty cup, I lose my appetite for exoticism.

“Hey, what are you worried about. Look at those toothless old women. Drinking the *chicha* here you don’t have to worry whether they brushed their teeth before the chewing process.”

Jokes aside Andrew still isn't able to bring himself to drink a single sip. I retreat to the fresh air where normal breathing returns and my eyes stop watering. We are surrounded by stone houses with grass roofs. If not for the television antennas on the roofs, we might easily get the impression that time and history stopped in place hundreds of years ago. I indulge in a drink of *chicha maruda* in a nearby bar – a drink made from dried violet corn seasoned with lime juice and sugar.

At the place where Marcacocha descends towards Urubamba, Ollantaytambo stretched out – one of many settlements established in this section of the valley by the Inca. The name of the town was always connected to the romantic story of young leader Ollantay and his love for the daughter of the Great Inca. There are a few versions of this legend. In one love conquers all. After the death of the ruler, his son showed mercy on the lovesick leader, allowing him to be reunited with the princess and their daughter Yma Sumac, raised in the “house of virgins.” The conclusion of the story is tragic. The infuriated ruler imprisoned his disobedient daughter in the dungeon and sentenced her lover to death. Caught red-handed in his crime, Ollantay died a horrible death, strung up by his hair from the walls of the fortress. The memory of these events has survived in folk tales and the place where the leader, surrounded by the armies of the Great Inca, staged his resistance for many months and where the final scene in the tragic drama played out, was called Ollantaytambo.

Hernando Pizarro himself found out for himself just how hard it was to seize the fortress at Ollantaytambo. In an attempt to put down an Indian rebellion led by Manco, the son of Huascar, Pizarro attacked the fortress believing in the superiority of Spanish military strategies and weapons, but he miscalculated. Manco used a clever stratagem by commanding his men to flood the plain at the foot of the cliff, which made maneuvering,

not to mention an attack by cavalry or heavy infantry impossible. Surrounded on every side by the daring Indians, Hernando fled in panic to Cuzco. This was, however, the last Incan victory. From that time on, driven into inaccessible mountain valleys, the Indians conducted a partisan war for thirty-five years from the impenetrable jungle of Vilcabamba. After Manco's death the struggle was continued by his sons. The last note in this cruel fight sounded in 1575 with the public execution of Manco's last son – Tupak Amaru – on the square in Cuzco.

Seen from the square at the foot of the cliff, the fortress does not look very formidable. The highest stories, size diminished by distance, seem inconspicuous in the shadow of the mountain giants towering above. The most noticeable element are cultivation terraces, cut by steep stairs, allowing man to climb to the highest peak of the cliff. Driven on by curiosity, we conquer a few hundred steps at a rapid pace and, out of breath and sweating profusely, are quick to claim that the rest of the construction is disappointing. There isn't much else to see thanks to time and the Spanish, for whom the fortress became a cheap source of building materials.

The greatest impression is made by the gigantic monoliths that were left unmolested because of their weight. This was too much even for the transportation capabilities of Spanish "rock hunters." How then did the Inca, who drug these giant granite boulders to the peak of a steep slope with an incline exceeding fifty degrees, handle their transport? The closest granite quarry is six kilometers away and also lies on the opposite side of the Urubamba.

I stare at the walls of this enigmatic construction, christened the Temple of the Sun by later researchers who couldn't get over their amazement at the diligence, devotion and first and foremost technical capabilities of the Inca. Modern man feels so small next

to these huge, well-planned rock forms. In front of the “temple” are six rock giants with a height of four hundred meters, undoubtedly fragments of a older wall. Its construction, however, differs from everything I have seen in Peru to date. Instead of precision-cut, multifaceted edges, certain cuboidal elements are combined with unusual joints made from narrow stone disks, fit perfectly into the crevice. Most intriguing is the lack of a logical justification for the effort that went into the treatment and transport of the megaliths. The rock ridge is too narrow to have any strategic significance.

“Look.” Andrew points to a stairwell cut into one of the boulders. “I saw an identical pattern at Puma Point in Bolivia on Titicaca Lake and another precision cut groove on a metal brace climbing two blocks. Both in Ollantaytambo and Tiahuanaco more rock complexes of this kind have been found featuring copper braces fitted with incredible precision, which dumbfound archeologists and engineers. Why was soft copper used to stabilize the great rock boulders? If an external force was exerted on the many-toned blocks, reinforcements like that would be as effective as cardboard inserts.”

Andrew’s analysis is precise. It figures for an engineer.

“Can we assume, as some scientists have suggested, that the braces were cast by pouring liquid copper into specially prepared grooves?” he asks and then immediately disagrees, showering me with arguments. “The upper surface of the braces would have had demonstrated a characteristic protuberance around the edges as a result of surface tension during the casting process. In addition, on the bottom all of the uneven shapes created after the metal was cast would have been retained, together with the plastic reproduction of the crevice between the stone blocks. We haven’t observed anything like that on the braces that survived. Both surfaces are perfectly smooth. This effect could only be achieved by pressing the braces into some sort of malleable material, but granite is not clay. Is there a technique for alternatively softening and hardening rock? Science

has answered that question definitively. It breaks the covalent bonds connecting individual atoms. This is how ice becomes water and steam or vice versa. In the face of this rock we are helpless. Could the Inca and their precursors have possessed such a technology?"

It is unlikely that anyone could answer the questions Andrew and I are asking. After all, at every step we come across examples of the application of the unusual skills demonstrated by Inca stonemasons. This "miniscule" rock was placed on a terrace. It probably weighs seventy tons and was hewn from red porphyry, a rock no softer than granite. We can find an explanation for the precision achieved from all six sides, but I don't understand why masochistic stonemasons carved additional two-sided recesses, giving it the appearance of a solid I-beam. From the technical point of view, even though we have mechanical chainsaws for cutting stone and diamond polishing saws and drills, this type of activity doesn't make any sense. We have to doubt the sanity of an expert who accepts such a commission armed with only simple tools of stone and copper. According to our most recent information, those were the only instruments at the disposal of Incan stonemasons. To be honest, we're can't even be completely sure that these are the works of the Inca. How can we doubt, though, when every guide mentioning the ruins of Ollantaytambo claims unambiguously: a fortified temple complex from the 14th century.

"Jacek, look at the 'bumps' on practically every rock, both the larger and smaller kinds." Andrew points out six-sided figures as well as pyramid protrusions on the rock face.

"I saw similar ones on stone panels on the pyramid of Mykerinos in Giza and perhaps in a temple in southern India."

“Intriguing associations: India, Peru, Egypt...” Andrew stares silently at the decorated rock. “The amount of work that went into removing a few centimeters of hard rock just to obtain these unusual protrusions, which have no technical function, contradicts common sense. If I were charged with determining whether these strange effects were achievable using primitive tools, I would make a simulation of the work given the technologies available to the Inca. In this way I could clearly verify the truth of these theories. As an Incan builder and knowing what poor tools are at my disposal, I wouldn’t even lift a hand to the hardest expanse of rock if I had access to much softer sedimentary rocks – but that’s just my reasoning.”

“Obviously, the logic of ancient construction operates takes a different path. It is true that modern engineers are overwhelmed at the thought of this level of productivity, labor intensity and effectiveness. Perhaps in times when human life and effort were not so highly valued, it was insignificant how long and how many people were crushed by an ill-fated rock.”

Our conversation reminds me of experiments I read about somewhere that were conducted by Prof. R.J.C. Atkinson, an English researcher into pre-historic megaliths. He decided to conduct a practical test on the capabilities related to the making and transport of enormous boulders from a quarry located thirty kilometers away with the help of wooden sleighs. His experience enabled the researcher to calculate the labor intensity needed to erect megalithic constructions in the famous circle at Stonehenge in England. It turned out that the transport of eighty-one blocks of sarsen weighing an average of twenty-six tones each, their treatment and placement, would have required thirty-five million hours. Implementation of a project of this scale would have involved one thousand people working six hours a day, three hundred days a year, for twenty years. Sarsen – a sandstone that is easy to work with – in terms of hardness can be compared to

andesite or granite like an apple to a coconut, but the megaliths in Stonehenge, compared to the Incan constructions, were merely hewn stone.

I don't want to come to any illogical conclusions from these simple calculations, but if we accept that every Incan stonemason had two arms and was the model of diligence, could the empire, in the course of three hundred years, have accomplished everything it has been credited with by archeological research: astonishing fortress, cultural centers, cities, thousands of kilometers of roads, an incredible number of cultivation terraces and irrigation systems. Moreover, the Inca fought a constant battle for new territories, lands they had to consolidate, manage and administer. How much can one accomplish without knowledge of the wheel and transporting heavy loads on the backs of llamas and frail human beings? After all, available man power was certainly less than we have access to today and the terraces and irrigation systems, deprived of their original caretakers, are deteriorating.

Unfortunately, in the kingdom of the Inca there are too many things that escape our 20th century logic. This impression will return to me many times during this trip wherever I see the gigantic stone constructions. You can touch them, take pictures and despite all this still have difficulty believing in their existence. The stone "Inca buildings" defy logic. Were the men who commissioned and built them so different from us in their thinking and priorities? Have we overlooked some link in the chain of human development? Questions, questions...but that after all is why we began this Peruvian adventure.

Sitting on the wall not far from the Temple of the Sun, I stare at the vast cliffs looming from the other side of the valley. Galleries and artificial grottos are carved out of its upper regions. For the brave souls that want to reach these heights, a challenging climb of approximately three hundred meters awaits. Our guide claims that these are Inca

storehouses and provides a colorful description of the advantages of storing food at this elevation. I hope that this isn't information he has come up with on his own, but something with scientific underpinnings.

"I'm curious," I turn to Andrew. "Would our eloquent guide voice the same revelations if he had to carry a backpack weighing several dozen kilograms over a distance of three hundred kilometers to those hypothetical magazines and then was forced to do it a second and maybe a third time? I, at any rate, would abandon my theses on the spot if threatened by such a masochistic task."

"If I lived in Incan times and Pachacutec himself ordered me to build magazines on the spot, I wouldn't be able to stop myself from showing him the universal gesture for insanity." Andrew is also doubtful of these scientific revelations.

Urubamba River, seen from the highest point of the fortress, resembles a vast ribbon embedded in green fields. In one of them, according to the latest research, the Inca buried the mummies of their rulers, carried out of Coricancha to save them from profanation at the hands of conquistadorial desire for gold and jewels. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, the earthly remains of six Inca leaders have not been found. Four other mummies were unearthed in 1559 by Juan Polo de Ondegardo in a secret chamber of one of the homes in Cuzco. They survived in excellent condition, dressed in ceremonial costumes with royal bands around their heads and gold plates over their eyes. Relieved of all of their valuables, they were taken to Lima and were buried in the courtyard of St. Andrew's Hospital in a series of public ceremonies.

Ollantaytambo and its surrounding areas create the largest concentration of holy sites in the valley, correlating to their counterparts in the Milky Way. The darkest spot in the shape of a llama and its baby – *Catachillay and Yacana* – can be found in the Centaurus constellation and its two brightest stars, Alpha and Beta, symbolize the llama's

eyes. The constellation dominates the Milky Way and is reflected on the slopes of Tamboquhasa Mountain. A sculpture of the llama and its young was recreated – just like in Pisco – using a system of terraces. In the place of the llama’s head was the Temple of the Sun, built of gigantic stone blocks. This cosmologic myth had significant meaning for the Inca. In October the llama’s head touched the horizon to the north, “drinking water from the sea to pass on to the earth.” The phenomenon culminated October 28 when the Centaurus constellation disappeared behind the horizon. This marked the start of the rainy season, read by Inca priests as the llama’s awakening.

The black clouds that gathered suddenly over the valley release an increasingly dense curtain of rain. We retreat to the car and return to Cuzco – just in time it turns out because the drizzle transforms into a torrential downpour. It still hasn’t stopped raining in the evening as we get out of the car in front of the hotel. We are lured into a nearby bar by the sounds of music. The interior is full of decibels, people and a mix of strange smells. We push our way slowly towards the bar, maneuvering between tangled pairs of dancers moving energetically to the rhythm. I lose my balance after someone bumps into me and land on a small table. The girl sitting next to it jumps up but the drink from an overturned glass is faster and spills across her tight dress, taut against her body like a second skin.

“Sorry,” stammer.

“It’s not your fault,” she replies, wiping off traces of my clumsiness with a tissue. I instinctively lower my gaze to the front of her overalls. She catches me gazing lustfully.

“Do you like them?” Her mouth stretches into a smile, revealing flawlessly white teeth. “I have a few other interesting things.”

“Really. What might they be?” I mumble, intimidated by her directness.

“A shapely ass, a firm, long-legged body that reacts to well-built boys.”

“Too bad I’m not one of them.”

“Don’t be so modest.” She laughs and measures me up in a glance.

“Would you let me buy you a drink as compensation for the damages I’ve caused?”

She agrees. I observe her lean body with pleasure. She moves with grace that can’t be learned. We sit on tall bar stools. Andrew signals his approval with a thumbs-up.

“What do you do when you’re not hitting on single women and knocking over tables?”

“I travel, write. And you?”

“I pursue life and in my spare time I perfect my skills in the art of seduction.”

“English?”

She nods in confirmation. She seemed like one of those women who are free from inhibitions, sexually liberated and easy.

“Who are you showering with your charms this evening?” I inquire.

“I’m on vacation this evening.”

“Does that mean...you’re free?”

“Free? What sort of archaic term is that? Don’t you know that slavery was eradicated a few centuries ago?”

“You misunderstand me...I wanted to ask if you have time for a few drinks.”

“There is always enough time for that,” she laughs and flutters her eyelashes. “I’m Susanna for friends of Zula. And they call you...?”

“Jacek.”

The barman serves strong drinks. After the third both of us are in the mood to dance. We sway to a slow melody as her taut breasts rest against my own. It is thrilling to think that with one move I could unzip her overalls and...

“I don’t have any experience with English girls, so I don’t know if I can be honest since I’ve only known you for barely twenty minutes.”

“In my company it’s absolutely essential. You are smart enough and I am pretty enough to skip the social pleasantries.” Her green eyes are mocking.

“I wanted to say that it’s good to be with you. You contradict popular opinions about cold and haughty English women.”

“You’ve got something special too. You are different from the arrogant young upstarts that roam the world in large numbers.”

It’s warm, comfortable, fantastic – not a bad end to the day...

Higher Than the Condors

The sonorous ring announces – unheard of in South America – the timely departure of the *tren de turismo*⁵⁵ from the modest train station in San Pedro for Machu Picchu. The train climbs sluggishly higher, conquering the steep incline in a series of zigzags: first forward then backward. Our unusual journey up the slope ends at the pass at an elevation of three thousand six hundred meters, where we are greeted by a view of the setting sun. From here the tracks will descend towards the Urubamba, which cuts a deep ravine in the middle of the Andean cordillera.

The train stops briefly at the station in Ollanta, located not far from the fortress we visited yesterday. The local Indian women run to the windows and try to sell *rocoto*,⁵⁶ *choclos* – hot corn cobs, freshly baked *anticuchos* – or shishkabobs made from pork hearts, hats, ponchos, rugs and blankets, among other trinkets. An Incan orchestra plays in the background on traditional instruments: *La antara* – clay panpipes, *la quena* – a flute with a warm tone, *la charango* – an instrument resembling a guitar and the percussion section consisting of the *bombo leguero* – massive, wooden drums of stretched goat hide.

Our next stop is at a site known as “kilometer 88,” a place the locals call Qoriwayrachina – “the one who washes gold from the stream.” Here begins the famous El Camino de Inca – The Inca Trail, tread for eight centuries during the rule of Inca Roca. We get off the train. Ahead of us is a trek across fifty-three kilometers of Incan paths used by couriers, located at heights exceeding four thousand meters.

A thread of train tracks and the wooden barrack housing the station are perched on the bank of the roaring Urubamba. Swollen after yesterday’s rains, the muddy river

⁵⁵ Tourist train.

⁵⁶ A spicy pepper filled with meat.

carries tree trunks, dashing them against rocks on the banks. The air is thick with scents from the jungle, humid and muggy. We cross the water on a bridge hung with steel cables. This is the last sign of civilization, the border between today and yesterday. Here we pay the toll of one dollar for the right to exhaust ourselves and sweat on the lofty paths. This is the price for access to the National Archeological Park, opened in 1968.

“*Sumag punchey!*”⁵⁷ exclaims the Indian woman in greeting. Wearing her hat at a jaunty angle, the woman tries to pawn off some of her wooden amulets on us; supposedly they will protect us on the trail.

An old man in a patched poncho grinds something between his toothless gums. He pulls a handful of yellowish leaves out of a sack.

“*Coca, señor. Mucho buena...*”

The leaves of the narcotic “bush of joy” – as the Indians called the plant – suppress hunger, increase resistance to cold, stimulate the nervous system, eliminate exhaustion, returns vigor and allows man to survive in lofty mountain elevations.

“Let’s take a little,” Andrew suggests. “They’ll come in handy in a few hours.”

We make an encouraging start. An almost flat path winds between the bushes, bristling with cacti and expansive eucalyptus. Scattered among the bushes are the ruins of the Incan settlement Llacta Pata – High Place. The low walls are made from roughly hewn rocks and punctuated with trapezoidal openings, recesses and terraces. A huge, partly polished rock once served as an altar. After crossing the Cusichaca stream, the slope inclines sharply and the hard part starts. We climb a series of stone stairs which, considering their size, must have been built by giants. I’ve looked at that thin red line outlining the Way of the Inca on the map so many times – the symbol of a great empire – and now it is under my feet. Rocky, exhausting and challenging, but completely real.

⁵⁷ A greeting in the Quechua language, equivalent to our “good day.”

We surmount endless twists and turns, gaining no more than a meter each time. The backpacks are progressively heavier, although we only packed the most necessary items, deciding against canned food for more expensive but lighter freeze-dried meals. On one of these turns Andrew cuts his hand on a sharp rock.

“Now I understand why the Indians named this road *Ywar Nan* – Road of Blood – he murmurs, when I help him to bind the wound.

Actually, no one has explored the genesis of the name. It was widely reported in 1915 after Hiram Bingham, the lucky discoverer of Machu Picchu, traveled the path. Complete documentation was compiled by the Peruvian expedition of Dr. Victor Anglez in 1968. At the time El Camino Inca was enclosed within the borders of a National Park, while the road itself enjoys deserved fame as one of the most amazing treks around the world, a trail of overgrown ruins whose beauty is indescribable for even the most expressive pen. The trail takes four to five days to cover. We have decided to shorten our hike to the bare minimum, treating it like a test of fitness before our reconnaissance into the humid tropical forests of Madre de Dios.

We propel ourselves ever higher, clinging to the rocks. Our movements are slow, but rhythmic and take few rest stops. Air whistles in my chest, the result of breathing thin mountain air as well as a night spent in the company of the “cold” English woman.

“Well, well! Despite the gray hairs, you’re picking up increasingly younger girls,” Andrew declared at breakfast following my performance. “How do you do it? You were both drinking as if prohibition was going to be declared today.”

“Life is too short to waste. No matter what you do, you can’t stop time. In the blink of an eye you are a sixty-year-old old man and in another you hit eighty. The destructive effects of time, the blindness of instincts that guide our lives – this is a vicious

circle that is hard to break free of. We have a choice: either give up or rebel. Fortunately, thanks to an evolution in traditions, even dinosaurs like us can benefit.”

Now I regret forgetting about this little mountain marathon yesterday in the company of the girl I met. The excess alcohol I consumed is now expelled through my pores. Fortunately, we aren't lacking water. I can drink without worrying about infections because there are few human settlements in the area. The only, tiny village of Huayllabamba – or Grassy Plain, is situated at the intersection of two streams: Cusichaca and Llulucha. We arrive in the village after an intense three-hour march. Its modest huts are built on old Incan foundations, windowless walls of adobe and trails of smoke issuing from hay roofs. The terraces are neglected, but its aqueduct is still operational – the village is easily sized up in one glance. The crossroads of three ancient roads are located here: on the forever snow-covered, holy peak of Salgantay, *Ywar Nan* – a fragment of the Royal Way leading to Machu Picchu and a side branch of the way in Urubamba valley.

The prospect of “luxury” accommodations under a roof is tempting, but the sun still stands high in the sky, giving us a chance to scale the trail's highest pass – Warmiwanusqa – Dead Woman's Pass. We make a brief stop to eat, drinking our meal down with freshly squeezed mango juice, and then turn to the west. The trail becomes rockier still. The straps on my backpack pinch both sore shoulders and its weight pins me firmly to the ground. The time has come for a little “boost.” I remove a few coca leaves from the bag and a piece of charcoal, known locally as *llipta*. Wrapped in the leaves, the charcoal forms a small bundle that I position behind my right cheek. I hope it will bring some vitality back to my muscles, put spring back in my step and relax the man who is once again wielding a hammer in my head. First, I taste tea leaves and then the back of my esophagus goes numb. A few minutes later, the little worker lays down his instrument of torture. This therapy is truly effective!

For a moment we are blinded by passing white clouds. We pass by the field of Three White Rocks (although obviously there is no trace of the three rocks) and cross the Llulucha Pampa fields that at once time contained terraces and aqueducts. We push ourselves hard, passing turn after turn. How many more are there? The sun burns my neck and sweat drips from my nose as my breathing shortens progressively. During the ascent a caravan of porters catches up to us and finally passes us by, the quantity and weight of the load they are carrying is impressive. Not a single drop of sweat is visible on their bronze faces. Short legs and wide shoulders – natural selection has adapted residents of the Andean mountains for life at high elevations. Moreover, their blood contains more hemoglobin and their hearts are twenty percent larger than the average inhabitant of the lowlands.

At last the pass is visible ahead – our altimeter indicates an elevation of four thousand two hundred meters above the Pacific. We are surrounded by snowcapped six-thousand-meter peaks; in the valleys the first evening mists appear.

“Look, we’re higher than the condors.” Andrew points out two black shadows circling below where we stand.

These are amazing birds with wingspans of up to three meters to lift their bodies, weighing in at eleven kilograms, off the ground. Resistant to low temperatures and low oxygen content in the air, they are even able to glide at six thousand meters. In flight they are graceful and light, as if the air currents were able to counteract gravity. They have a lifespan of fifty years and achieve maturity at more or less eight years. Unfortunately, the world’s largest vultures are on the edge of extinction because females only lay eggs every other year. Man has also had a hand in their extermination. The powdered bones of the condor are reputed to treat rheumatism and paralysis, its dried heart supposedly helps to alleviate epilepsy, the eyes, once fried, improve sight and condor blood prolongs life. It is

no wonder that for the Indians this bird is a valuable asset, which demanded strict protection.

The condor is inseparably linked with Indian mythology and beliefs. It is associated with the Andean love of freedom. To this day, on holidays in some villages *condorachi* ceremonies are still held. A bull is released into the arena, bearing a condor tied to its back. The animal becomes crazed under repeated assaults from the bird's sharp beak, bucking and twisting in an attempt to dislodge its prickly companion while the audience applauds in approval. The bull is a symbol of the Spanish conquest, while the condor manifests Indian freedom. Having defeated the bull, the bird is freed and glides off into the wide expanses.

Meanwhile, the two birds supported by the thermal currents rise and then fall. This heavenly dance is fascinating and we quickly forget all thought of the quickly approaching night. Another performance begins in the sky, directed by the sun, which is sinking behind the western horizon and setting the heavens on fire. Fluffy clouds, saturated in purple, glide high across the sky as shadows creep progressively higher from the valley below. A gust of wind leaves a chill in our bones, shaking us loose from a kind of lethargy. We descend the steep, scree covered slope hurriedly, constantly aware that this section of the path is infamous as a leg breaker. In the ruins of two Incan buildings we set up a bivouac. This is an Indian *tambo* – an inn for travelers and the perfect place for used up and dog-tired wanderers like ourselves. Oh, the pleasure of a soft foam mattress. For the moment we can stop moving and indulge in a few hours of much needed rest. We've come quite a long way – not bad for the first day. There is no sign of the hangover that tormented me this morning.

We awaken in a cold, gray, fogging morning. The temperature likely fell beneath freezing during the night. We force ourselves to eat a little bread and a bite of cheese. After washing our breakfast down with cups of *mate de coca*, we set off on the path. We warm up almost immediately, during the ascent to another pass – Runturacay – Ostrich Feather Hat. We watch the sun banish the shadows from rocky peaks and cast red light on the clouds. From here the first of three “lost cities” on the trail is visible. Sayacmarca – At the Peak, the literal translation of this name. It is a natural *pucara* – fortified by nature, surrounded by inaccessible slopes and deep canyons. The first to reach it was Bingham in 1915, but neither Bingham nor the expeditions that followed devoted much attention to this place. That is why the city has been reclaimed by liana vines and grass, while the intricate labyrinth of narrow streets, gardens, squares and aqueducts is less discernable, gradually transformed into a ruin, abandoned and deserted. Its only inhabitants today are flocks of bats.

Beyond Sayacmarca, the climate and landscape changes. The *selva* and its flowers reappear: enormous and in all shapes and colors like butterflies. The undergrowth becomes increasingly thorny and tugs at our cloths. The humidity is stifling and accompanied by the murmur of trickling streams. Insects buzz to our annoyance; a salamander warms himself on a rock. This is warning of what lies ahead. We have entered the land of snakes, poisonous spiders and a host of insect pests, which stretches all the way to Phuyupatamarca – the City In the Clouds. The water in these clouds condenses on slopes in the area and is collected by six stone channels to a large basin – Incan hot springs at an elevation of 3,650 meters.

At the end of the day, as our legs ache from the kilometers we’ve covered, the trail suddenly changes. The stairs of the Inca. Hundreds of stone steps, a challenge for even the toughest travelers. Our reward is an encounter with the last “lost city” – Wiñay

Wayna – Forever Young. The name unfortunately hasn't protected the structure from the destructive influence of time. Gradually, it is falling into ruin, but the enchantment remains. It is difficult for us to break away from the complex once we begin walking down its deserted streets, climbing stairs and examining the interiors of roofless homes. What purpose did they serve? Was this a prison, as one prominent theory would have us believe, or a place of reflection for Incan scholars? We will never know because the stones cannot be forced to speak. Only they know the truth of those faded times – along with the myriad stars that have shone down on men, unchanged through the centuries.

This is a starry sky that the inhabitants of a European city will never see. The terrifying enormity of its endless lights creates the impression that the entire sky is one second away from crashing down upon our heads. One thousand years ago mankind had no idea of the nature of stars. These twinkling pinpoints of light, observed by shepherds forced to watch over their flocks by night, sailors and madmen tormented by sleepless nights who later became tribal seers, seemed to appear from nowhere and for no reason. The brightest among them were named and strange stories about them fabricated around campfires, but none held one iota of the truth concerning their unimaginable mass, unquenchable fire, huge distance from Earth. None told the story of life in atomic chaos, the transformation of a ball of hydrogen into a mixture of helium, iron, oxygen and other compounds.

“When I look at the starry sky, I can't help being amazed at the incredible precision with which someone or something fashioned this fiery mechanism.” I get lost in a daydream.

“Indeed. If the speed of exploding space in the instant after the Big Boom had been one trillionth of a second slower, the gravitational pull would have slowed down the

expansion of the universe would have contracted to its original state in only ten years. If, however, it had been slightly faster, the material would have moved too fast for the galaxy and the stars you've been admiring to form. Just as precisely fashioned were the gravitational pull and the masses of electrons, protons and neutrons."

"Andrew, don't you ever rest? Talking with you is like reading an encyclopedia."

"What you're hearing now, you won't find in any encyclopedia. The energy of the universe and the pace of its expansion must have been synchronized perfectly from the very beginning. In other words, for a value comparable to those observed today, the quotient should be between 0.1 to 2.0. On the surface that's a large range. In practice it means that in order to maintain today's values, the density of energy at the moment of the Big Boom must have equaled the coefficient of expansion, amounting to one over 10^{55} . Imagine a ten with fifty-five zeros! If that isn't a miracle, then what is?"

"Buddy! You can certainly stir things up. How do you keep your gray matter in such good shape? I'm getting into my sleeping bag because it's getting cold."

The next day starts early. We are in a hurry to reach Machu Picchu before the first train unloads its daily cargo of adventure-hungry tourists. Still sleepy and gritting our teeth against the morning chill, we reach Intipuku – the Gates of the Sun. This is the entrance to a stone town built in the saddle of two peaks. The soaring cone of Machu Picchu towers over a lofty city by the same name. We will never know its true name, the one used by its builders, which died along with the city's last inhabitants. The old peak thrusts up from a deep valley cut by ribbons of mist. Far below on the valley floor is the winding Urubamba. From a height of a few hundred meters, it looks no bigger than a brown thread in a tangle of liana vines and undergrowth as if desperately looking for an

escape from the rocky trap, its serpentine twists slipping out of the rocky cauldron and disappearing in the distance into the jungle.

If there are places on earth that cause jaws to drop, then Machu Picchu is certainly in the top ten. I feel like the entire enchanting landscape – consisting entirely of mountains, trees, flowers, stone walls, terraces and river – is some kind of gigantic sculpture. The beauty before our eyes is enough to make a person dizzy. In just a few moments, I will touch its walls and explore its mysteries. Machu Picchu – the city of my dreams – for hundreds of years has rested on this forgotten saddle.

Forgotten City

“Conquer the city discovered by Pizarro!” is the tempting message printed on travel brochures. It’s obviously a catchy phrase because every day for a few hours in the afternoon, a host of people fills the city with noise, the click of cameras and flashes. Wave after wave, herded by guides, they walk along the streets, climb steep stairs, pose, film and, after eating a lunch included in admission, return to Cuzco with a feeling of satisfaction that their duty as tourists has been fulfilled. Now I have been to the legendary Machu Picchu!

We arrive before the first tourist-filled minibus, after surmounting a narrow path carved into the right side of a vertical cliff, is able to register in the parking lot located six hundred meters above the valley floor. Glued to the rock, the trail leads us after a few curves to a grassy terrace and there...I stand dumbfounded. The view is captivating, like the set of fantasy film. It is difficult to describe the unearthliness of the view: the morning clouds, rosy from the rays of the setting sun, hang as if caught on the peaks around us; bright light brings each rock, every building, into sharp detail. And those colors! Rich green grass is bathed in shades of violet where the shadows deepen and the rocks recede into blue and black. Facing away from the sun, the slope of the highest peak – Huayana Picchu – is dark and forbidding. Where it is touched by the sun, the peak takes on a spectrum of red hues due to flowers that are impossible to identify from this distance. Cultivation terraces and buildings scale ever higher on what appears to be an inaccessible height. This site testifies to the skills and imagination of the unknown builders, who were able to handle every technical challenge.

The silence is unbroken, the hush of rocks conquered by time. We are completely alone, face to face with a mystery that rests both on knowledge and imagination, a

mystery similar to the ones that hide behind the names Tiahuanaco, Sacsayhuamán, Nazca, Paracas, Angkor, Giza, Paititi...The terraces imitate the natural shape of the mountains which shelter them, as if trying to melt into the peaks and disappear before the eyes of intruders. This place has the solemnity of the Egyptian sarcophagi, desecrated by human curiosity, and emanates calm, dignity and secrecy. The view is simply unreal, like a phantom that may vanish by the same magic that called it into being.

Fortunately, however, the city is not an apparition. It truly exists, although for a few centuries Machu Picchu guarded its secrets from human eyes. To be convinced of its existence, it is enough to descend a several dozen meters, enter a narrow street between the delicate houses on cultivation terraces linked by hundreds of stairs and stand on the edge of a dizzying view. There, at the bottom, at the foot of the mountain is the holy river of the Inca, the Urubamba. From this height it resembles a watering string twisting – like a moat – around three sides of the gigantic castle. This fortress, for one, doesn't need any defensive walls. Mother Nature has taken care of that, helped by men, who built a settlement on a site that has nothing in common with logic or common sense.

That evening we sit in a hotel lobby and order a few beers. A large black and white picture, depicting a tired young man posing in front of a tent, hangs on the wall. In 1911 it was published on the first page of newspapers in a sensational report on an archeological discovery. The find was made by young Yale professor Hiram Bingham. For three years he wandered through mountainous wilderness driven by the vision of discovering Vilcabamba, the last capital of the Inca and – according to widespread beliefs – the hiding place of their treasure. When the expedition had become discouraged by a fruitless search and decided to turn back, an Indian Bingham met told him of some ruins located beneath the peak of Maccu Picchu. Reluctantly, he set off to explore the none-too-promising steep slope. After a three-hour climb, he set foot on its cultivation terraces

and stone stairs and euphorically began to examine the stone complex buried under a carpet of tropical plant life.

Surprise followed surprise at lightning speed (...). It seemed to be an incredible dream,

wrote Bingham in the fascinating book *Lost City of the Incas*.

These were the circumstances surrounding one of the largest archeological finds of the 20th century. In many respects it was similar to the earlier discovery of the city of Troy by Henry Schliemann. Both Bingham and his European colleague gained worldwide fame for their finds, although with time their claims were revised. The Troy found by Schliemann was not the one described by Homer and Bingham's Machu Picchu was not the Incan Vilcabamba.

I can imagine the thrill and excitement of the American explorer at the moment he first laid eyes on the fabled citadel, wreathed in cloud. I experienced similar feelings twenty-five years ago when I located Angkor using my own resources, the cradle of one of the most advanced civilizations in all of South-East Asia, a legendary city in the jungle long sought by men and a majestic stone temples in the claws of ravenous greenery.

But contrary to the well-known legend, Bingham was not the first white man to set foot here. Documentation exists that proves he was preceded by at least a few gentlemen. The first news of Machu Picchu emerged in 1875 and concerned Charles Wiener, who was traveling through Peru on a commission from the Ministry of Education. He stumbled across traces of the obscure city and marked it on a map. However, credit for the first real discovery of the city must be given to Don Martin de Concha. He inherited the site from his father-in-law and the legal certificate proving the receipt of the inheritance, prepared by notary Ambrosia de Lira, has been preserved in the archives. Earlier explorers also left evidence of their presence. Awaiting Bingham as he entered

Maccu Picchu was an engraved inscription with the unmistakable message: “Augustin Lizarraga, Enrique Palma and Gabino Sanchez – 1901.” However, it was the young American discoverer who garnered credit for locating the site and it was his accomplishment that was commemorated with a plaque.

“There are many more such ‘lost cities’ in Peru.” Half-dead from the climb just one hour ago, after a bath and beer Andrew is revived. “Every year new reports emerge concerning new finds in the Amazonian selva, always accompanied by the same dilemma: are the true discoverers locals living in the area who have always known of the site’s existence or the white adventurers who lead them. For locals who are raised, live and die in their shadow, ancient ruins are a natural feature of the landscape. Every discovery becomes an archeological sensation for the white man, bringing measurable benefits in the form of fame and wealth. If not for Bingham, who first ‘discovered’ Maccu Picchu and then amassed a rather large sum of money for research and reconstruction purposes, what would the world know about the ruins? If would still lie entangled in liana vines, just like Winaywyna – and that’s just an hour hike from here.”

“You’re right. Once I witnessed a serious argument between archeologists concerning the role Frank Calver, the American consul in Turkey, played in the discovery of Troy. Some participants in the discussion were even ready to acknowledge him as the true discoverer of Priam’s city. After all, he was only the owner of Hisarlik Hill and uncovered antique shards and sculptures as an amateur archeologist. Only Schliemann, committed his wealth and a few years of his life, took an interest and convinced the cynical world of science,” I add.

“I don’t think we can discredit the role of romanticized, passionate discoverers. When you are in the midst of a search for Paititi, Jacek, and benefit from the knowledge

of a local guide in the jungle and Indian porters, who will deserve the credit for your success? You, of course, and no one can be offended. It's a good thing that dreamers belong to the immortal race."

"In my youth I read books by London, Stevenson, Curwood and Conrad, envying the exciting adventures of their heroes. Today, I myself am constantly traveling, but I'm still not satisfied. Globe trotting has become so childishly simple these days. You board a plane, then an all-terrain vehicle and if there isn't a road, you can rent a helicopter. As a result we don't even come close to the great explorers such as David Livingstone, Mikolaj Przewalski or Pawel Strzelecki.

"Well, we arrived at least half a century too late. The romanticism of great adventure is ending, the world has shrunk and, thanks to the Internet, we are now living in practically a global village. It's rare to find a map today with the inscription 'Relief Data Incomplete'- denoting a region that hasn't been completely explored. Sextants on sailboats are shown as museum exhibits. The unavoidable end of romantic journeys of discovery is ending and we can only envy Bingham."

Hiram Bingham belonged to that rare breed of adventurers and dreamers, but his feet were firmly planted on the ground. When he realized the significance of the discovery, taking advantage of the right of precedence, he pounced 'like a vulture to prey.' This quote came from one of the guides at Machu Picchu. They are not overly fond of Bingham here, which has nothing to do with the fact that he is generally unliked in South America. This judgment was formed on the basis of documented facts. Journalist Ana de Cabrera, from the daily *La Nacion*, wrote:

Bingham's expedition removed an enormous quantity of chests out of Peru, each containing a chapter in the one-thousand-year history of the local peoples of South America. When the convoy arrived in Mollendo-Puerto on the border of Peru with its loot, an angered populace tried to prevent the load from reaching the ship, but without success.

As a consequence of Bingham's "exploration" activities, neither Machu Picchu nor any other museum in Peru possesses a single object found in the ruins. Nor was an official list of the find ever published. What the Spanish did not manage to do was therefore accomplished by the North Americans. To the present day Peruvians do not remember Bingham's archeological work in their country fondly. This is not an isolated incident either. A number of great names were mixed up in similar affairs. Turkey, Greece and Egypt are still unable to secure the return of works of art plundered on their territories.

These thoughts accompany me in the course of the evening, which I spend alone in a hotel among the clouds. As a result, I stare at the picture of Hiram Bingham hanging in front of me with decidedly less affection. Bingham was a historian, professor, governor of the state of Connecticut and senator in the Congress of the United States.

First thing in the morning, as rays of sunlight evaporate the last drops of last night's rain, we enter the mystic city. Nothing and no one stands in the way of would-be explorers. No paths have been marked out and no areas are off limits for visitors. We can roam streets of indeterminable age and tread the luscious lawns planted in a solid carpet on each undeveloped plot of land, traveling from level to level on thousands of carved stone stairs. We can return many times to the same place, examining it from various perspectives and in different light.

You don't have to be an archeologist to recognize the presence of two diametrically different building styles, presented here side by side. Part of the wall is constructed of a solid, precisely hewn blocks, transported from distant quarries. They are deceptively similar to the walls in Sacsahuamán and Tambomachay. A thorough search reveals the record-breaking stone with 302 edges, matched perfectly to neighboring joints. The second style is represented by the walls erected uses small stones taken from the structures in the immediate vicinity, put together rather haphazardly. Archeology has an official and very simple explanation for this phenomenon: the first are megalithic walls, mainly located in the so-called Royal District, which housed the residences of dignitaries. Remaining buildings were used by commoners – a straightforward and seemingly logical explanation.

In that case how can we classify buildings whose fundamentals and lower sections were built using larger stone blocks, while higher elements were put together from whatever was at hand? Has this fact escaped the notice of respected experts, or is it a conscious omission? Logically, there is something missing. Did the builders run out of patience or skill? In fact there was always surplus labor in the Incan empire. Perhaps George Squier was right in suggesting the existence of two technologically different civilizations. The younger Incan technology is easily identified by its rectangular blocks of small size and weight. The lower sections of the structures erected at Machu Picchu, Sacsayhuamán and Kenko contain megalithic constructions of precision-cut stone blocks with many sides and a weight of up to a few hundred tons. Some researchers estimate their age at a few thousand years. Are these the remains of an anonymous “pre-flood” civilization?

“Let's add a little logic to these scientific discussions.” Andrew likes to use his brain power. “From the descriptions of cities and villages that have survived from the

times of the conquest, we know that the Spanish knew nothing of Machu Picchu and other ‘forgotten cities’ hidden in the Peruvian *selva*. The conquistadors benefited from information passed on by the *yanacona*,⁵⁸ who hated their new rulers and eagerly revealed their secrets. A great deal of sensitive information was obtained from the Indian princesses who married Spanish men. It would seem then that the cities were already abandoned and forgotten during the final years of the Incan empire because otherwise news of their existence would have certainly reached Spanish ears.”

“That fits logically with other pieces of information we’ve gathered in recent days,” I add. “Was there some kind of ‘forgotten’ megalithic empire? That might be a fascinating theme for my next expeditions.”

“Squier was convinced of the existence of two distinct cultures in South America. One was technically advanced and lived in a distant and imprecise time period, while the other, represented by the Inca and the nations incorporated into the empire, demonstrated a civilizational advancement that differed considerably from that of their predecessors. Despite the passage of years since the death of Squier, science is still relatively ignorant when it comes to the creators of those earlier cultures that bloomed in the shadow of the Andes.”

“In that case why did the Inca, the last link in that civilizational chain, only assimilate a fraction of the knowledge encountered in subjugated territories?” I ask.

“It is interesting to wonder how long ago and why that megalithic civilization collapsed. Perhaps there was a horrible epidemic or a meteorite impacted the earth. It had to be a sudden catastrophe, making a break in the cultural continuity and so far back in time that the memories of those events are the subject of legend and myth for the human tribes who were reborn anew. Their priests stopped understanding the ritual and

⁵⁸ Servants of Incan leaders and nobility. They came from subjugated tribes.

allegorical character of their beliefs, or began to interpret them too literally. This mistake, like the one committed by the Aztecs, brought them to the last level of hell in terms of magic and bloody human sacrifice; it caused them to abandon the teachings of the ‘sun father’ concerning a life of justice and one full of charity for other human beings. That is why the Incan empire was stagnating in spiritual degeneration a few decades before the Spanish conquest.”

Who are we to solve the puzzles of learned men? The sooner we turn off our thinking machines and put away these rebellious thoughts, the better. A row of homes build in a variety of sizes attracts our attention. Tiny windows and small doors, through which a normal person couldn’t squeeze. Is this the Lilliputian district? That is actually the official interpretation. Midgets and hunchbacks supposedly enjoyed considerable esteem in the land of the Incas. Why were so many gathered in this city?

Leaving aside other unanswered questions, we move to the District of the Priests and Nobility. Moss and grass underfoot mute the steps of the next wave of tourists driven on by their noisy guides. Sacred Square is home to two great buildings: The Central Temple and Temple of the Three Windows. The openings left in the latter’s massive walls allow us to look down over the valley, mountain slopes on the opposite side and the shimmering glaciers of Vilcabamba. Like aerial bay windows, they create an atmosphere of inspiration and contemplation high above the valley in the proximity of the gods. Below is the semicircular Temple of the Sun, named so because of its striking similarity to the well-known temple in Cuzco. All of these names have nothing in common with their true function. Bestowed by Bingham on the basis of chance associations, they have survive until today, proving how little progress has been achieved by researchers despite the passing of more than eighty years.

The walls of the Temple of the Sun create an enclosed space around the peak of a sacred rock favored with particular honor. Signs of a ritual fire allow us to conclude that the site was used for sacrifices. At the base of the rock is an artificially enlarged grotto decorated with precise carvings of geometric shapes resembling benches, stairs and poles. Bingham associated it with the legendary Tampu-Tocco, a cave from which the progenitors of the Incas emerged – Manco Capac and his three brothers. This version did not stand for long because a detailed interpretation of the myths brought about a shift in the localization to the pyramid of Pakaritampu in Ollantaytambo.

We have to climb sixty-four razor thin stairs and a path on the edge of open air to reach a small platform where the next puzzle awaits – the rock of Intihuatana. In the Quechua language the name means “the hitching post of the sun.” At first glance the stone gnomon appears to be an avant-garde sculpture by Moore carved into granite. The geometry of the fantastically shaped rock creates an ingenious play of light and shadows, the meaning of which we are not entirely able to comprehend. Intihuatana is believed to be a kind of sundial, enabling man to determine the time of the winter solstice. At that time, when it seemed that the sun wanted to abandon mortals living on the earth’s surface, the priest conducted a ritual in which star was tied by a golden chain to a special protrusion. It is uncertain whether this simple explanation, related to the name of the site, resolves all of the puzzles surrounding the rock. Perhaps we are dealing with another kind of symbol related to the interaction between light and shadow. There is an Indian saying that says: “If you want to see your light, observe your shadow.” In all religions, even the most primitive, light has always been an attribute of the divine, while in the Incan religion, the sun headed up the pantheon of deities and the Indians called themselves the sons of the sun.

In the 1930s Prof. Rolf Muller from the Institute of Astrophysics in Potsdam conducted the first official measurements of the “sacred” rock. They revealed that the slanted surface of Intihuatana was designed in order to indicate the moment of sunset on the winter and summer solstices as well as during both equinoxes. The astronomical orientation of Intihuatana is correlated with the earth’s axis of twenty-four degrees, which corresponds with the location of the Earth around 2300–2100 BC. Later expeditions discovered astronomical correlations in the nearby Temple of the Sun.

Elevated just beneath the clouds, this sanctuary allows us to interpret Machu Picchu as a site saturated in astral and cosmic knowledge, as well as how it influences human affairs. Ray White, an archeologist and astronomer in one, found engravings on the stone of Intihuatana presenting four constellations that are visible in the sky over the Andes: the Southern Cross, the Pleiades, the Summer Triangle and the “starry eyes” of the Llama, one of the black cloud constellations in the Milky Way. The Incas believed that these constellations influence the fates of the four parts of their empire and that the souls of sacrificial victims rose straight to heaven, becoming points of light in the heavenly firmament.

“Jacek, consider the dualism of Incan mythology expressed in the brotherly symmetry of the Milky Way and the Sacred Valley,” Andrew speaks up. “As a supplemental concept to physical symmetry, the Inca created the idea of *yanatin* – a collection of opposing forms such as: woman – man, good – evil, white – black...”

“That reminds me of the modern Chinese philosophy involving the principles of Yin-Yang, understood as the sum of sexual contradictions, the supplement of cosmic forces and a formula that ensures the proper flow of energy and functioning of the world.”

“Andean philosophers went even farther. As a complement to *yanatin* they came up with the concept of unrepeatable unity; together these ideas represented order in the universe and space in which vital energy passed from the divine to man. In pre-Columbian civilizations, in contrast to the Old World, there is no distinction between mythology, beliefs and astronomy. All three elements create an inseparable whole.”

“This is all so terribly complicated,” I observe. “Is the magic of this place that forces us to try and wrap our minds around these ideas?”

“It it’s esoteric experiences you’re after, join those young people over there.” Andrew points to a circle of boys and girls sitting on the grassy Central Square. “According to Peruvian shamans, this is one of those unique places – which the Indians called the ‘navels of the world’ – and known to Eastern science as *chakra* – where the flow of life-giving energy springs to the surface of the planet. One of those mysterious places where rocks thrown by the generous hand of Shiva fell.”

“It doesn’t work on me,” I protest. “I tried in Delphi and Jerusalem – no incredible sensations.”

“Well, obviously, you just don’t have enough faith. Do you know that one of the *chakra* stones is located in Cracow on Wawel Hill? The local Institute of Nuclear Physics has conducted research on the site, indicating that at a depth of 1,200 meters there is a strong source of energy being emanated. Researchers also pinpointed a source of radiation coming from a shallower depth of around 250 meters, which magnifies the first radiation.”

“I guess I’m just thick skinned like a hippopotamus.”

“Let me quote you a fragment of a verse you are probably familiar with:

Feelings and faith speak stronger to me

than a scholar's [magnifying] glass and eye.

You know dead truths, unknown to the people,

You can see the world in the dust, in every spark of every star;

You don't know living truths, you won't see a miracle!

Have heart and look into the heart!

“A scholar friend of mine says: ‘You don’t debate a myth, you tell it.’”

“I’ve been lucky enough to be touched by the Unknown a few times,” says Andrew, unwilling to give up. “Something happened that was impossible to explain on the basis of logic and physics. I’ll tell you some other time when it’s convenient. Right now, it would be a waste of time. I propose a walk on Huayna Picchu.”

The mountain hangs literally a few hundred meters over the city, puncturing clouds around the peak at 2,700 meters. We register at the entrance gates and have two hours for a round-trip on the trail. After that search parties will be sent out after us. To date only twenty casualties have been reported; people who fell off of a precipice or died from exertion...of a heart attack.

“Maybe we should try the timed ascent? Whoever doesn’t do it under twenty minutes treats everyone to beer!” Andrew proposes.

I nod my assent. The trail, although prominent and exhausting, is not one of those I consider to be the most difficult. At the most, it would qualify as a level three in the six-level Alpine Grading Scale. Key spots on the trail are equipped with lines and chains. During the climb, we are followed by a few lizards, bony protrusions between their smoldering eyes and the intense honey scent of goblet-shaped flowers growing abundantly on the slope. The race ends in a general round of panting but as a result we have more time to admire the view. From here the guiding idea that motivated Incan builders is evident. Buildings and terraces form the shape of a condor, wings spread wide.

On the north-west side is the Temple of the Moon. In its construction a natural cave was incorporated. The opening faces the direction from which night descends and the moon shines brightest. Fragments of walls on a platform around its peak suggest that it was an astronomy observation point or a watchtower – a type of early warning site.

“Who came up with this idea? How was it watered?” I wonder aloud, because there is no common sense answer. In Machu Picchu everything is at odds with logic.

Only the “genius” guides have an explanation for everything. Exhausted and confused from a lack of oxygen, tourists allow themselves to be convinced that the broad, polished incline of rock was used to scrape leather in the production of shoes for the divine Inca; that the rocks, monolithic beds were designated for his games with the Sacred Virgins. They are told that two smallish bowls carved into the stone floors of one of the courtyards, once filled with water, helped the priests observe the stars without craning their necks towards the sky. However, the guide is unable to offer the foundations on which his knowledge rests and is similarly helpless in the face of other questions. What was the function of stone doors that led to nowhere? Where did the stone stairs carved into the monolith lead? How were “irrigation” canals carved into granite with bamboo?! The idiot who came up with this nonsense should have a monument erected in his honor. I have no idea what to think about the audience who hears these revelations and nod their heads in amazement. What about the edge of a triangular rock? Was it really designed to help predict the future from the blood of sacrifices? People listen with fear in their eyes, but stories like these keep business moving.

There shouldn't be any doubt concerning the terraces of a few kilometers in width extending outwards from the steep slopes or the houses and warehouses built nearby. Coca, corn and potatoes were grown on the terraces and climate conditions ensures good harvests a few times a year. The houses were inhabited by workers who

tended to and monitored the cultivation. Terraces were established at every point where the slopes were sufficiently inclined from a ninety-degree angle. The Incas were masters in making use of every inch of land for this purpose. Coca bushes need just the right temperature, humidity and care to grow. The conditions prevailing in the Urubamba valley are ideal, hence numerous settlements have been established here, inhabited by seasonal workers, mostly female, who are still the primary labor force on coca plantations. Two other facts support this hypothesis. Firstly – most of the buildings in Machu Picchu are simple constructions, modest homes and warehouses. Secondly – a majority of the skeletons, 120 out of 134, found in the local cemetery belonged to women.

This last discovery led to the formation of another hypothesis, attributing Machu Picchu the role of a “sacred city,” in which the *accha* or Sacred Virgins were prepared for their future duties. The thesis concerning the “city of Sacred Virgins” was considered even more likely following the discovery of the Aguas Calientes baths at the foot of Machu Picchu. In these healing waters, both the great Inca and his court could “purify” themselves before entering the Holy City. This is certainly not the only hypothesis that attempts to resolve the secrets enshrouded in the fortress in the sky. The possibilities in that respect are endless, as they are when any civilization leaves behind no written records.

With that in mind, what was Machu Picchu? Answers to that question have been sought and are still sought out by many researchers. As a result we have enriched the discussion with additional hypotheses, although we still have no answers to the fundamental questions. There is still no agreement concerning the time period when the complex was erected and the mysteries surrounding its stone blocks, the method by which they were transported from quarries located on the opposite side of the valley and then

lifted to the lofty pass are still unplumbed. Moreover, we have no idea how long the city was inhabited.

One day the city was deserted. The jungle reclaimed the buildings, offering them peace and oblivion. No one can't say with any certainty why this occurred, although many authorities are involved in the search for answers. The stone ruins are still silent, which piques our curiosity even further. Chilean poet and Noble Prize winner Pablo Neruda wrote the following about Machu Picchu:

Nowhere on earth outside of the Andes have extinguished cultures so impressed us with evidence of their personality. This city, hidden in its own lofty forest, fell silent. What did its inhabitants experience? Its builders? What have we inherited aside from the solemnity of the rocks to teach us about their plans, lives and, finally, collapse? (...) Nonetheless, there, in the Peruvian uplands, an architecture has survived that leaves a deep impression – in the deepest silence of the Andean peaks. Only the sky surrounds these sacred remains. Small clouds pass quickly over the green forest, bestowing a kiss in passing on a shining work of that which is immortal in man...

The “green forest” Neruda refers to is the jungle, unfathomable and cruel. Its secrets have always drawn men in search of adventure and discovers counting on fame. They immersed themselves in a green hell, entering regions where not even a single ray of contemporary civilization has gained access. Not all were fortunate enough to return. Gene Savoy was one of the lucky ones who delved into that green hell repeatedly and lived to talk about his successes. He was able to write with pride:

*Our El Dorado Expeditions have so far uncovered forty cities and temples from the forested slopes of the eastern Andes. From an explorer's point of view, the work has only just begun – with more than three million square miles of tropical Amazon forest still to be archaeologically explored, one hardly knows where to begin. I believe that tropical Amazonia holds the vestige of ancient cultures of which we know nothing (...) This culture might prove to be the forerunner of other known cultures.*⁵⁹

And what about Vilcabamba? Initially, it was located on Apurimac River, where, at an elevation of 3,030 meters above sea level, the ruins of an impressive fortress – Choquequirao or the Golden Cradle – were discovered. From the beginning this name has inspired treasure hunters, but rough terrain has kept them at bay. Only at the beginning of the 20th century was attention shifted to other sites. Vilcabamba was the inspiration for the expedition led by Bingham, who even located Incan ruins in the vicinity of Espiritu Pampa, but he considered them too primitive to be the last capital of the Incas. In 1964 American Gene Savoy reached the site, proving that Espiritu Pampa was not just a few neglected buildings but a vast city that could have fulfilled the role of Vilcabamba. Twelve years later the “i” was dotted by Peruvian historian Edmundo Guillen. On the basis of archival documents, he recreated the route of a Spanish penal expedition, which set foot in Vilcabamba in 1572. Following this path, he found the last capital of the Inca kings.

With time some archeologists questioned the discovery, claiming that it was not the last Incan capital. A lack of interest in a find unprecedented on a global scale, leaving the site without any sort of police protection or supervision, exposed the ruins to the

⁵⁹ Gene Savoy, *Antisuyo*, Simon & Schuster, New York (1970), p. 200.

mighty embrace of nature. The true, last capital of the Incan empire is still hidden and awaits discovery.

The history of the search for Vilcabamba makes us cognizant of how difficult expeditions to the mountainous jungle really are. Explorers can pass within a few steps of a ruin without noticing their existence because of a dense cover of decaying plant life. Proper organization, scientific equipment and intuition are not enough. What is critical is steadfast determination and a bit of luck, the luck that Bingham was blessed with.

Puente Ruinas. A tiny station dangling over the raging waters of the Urubamba a few meters below. Soon we will board the train and return to Cuzco. I look towards the peaks and precipices towering over our heads, where we spent five magical days walking the paths of the Incas, exploring the City in the Clouds, the Eternally Young City and the most beautiful of all – the Forgotten City. Among the ancient ruins we submitted to the charm of isolation, allowing our imaginations to call up visions from the past, conversing with the stone walls and touching a history intermingled with legend. Farewell to Machu Picchu. The train trundles between the rock cliffs like a green tunnel, whipped by liana vines and garlands of orchids. Glimpses of snowy peaks are provided by gaps in the rock, while the river winds in increasingly sharp twists as if attempting to lose itself in the tangle of green. I soak in the thrilling beauty of these views, taking it in not only with my eyes but my whole being. I wouldn't have any objections if the ride went on and on...Unfortunately, the lights of a great city appear on the horizon.

At this geographic latitude there are only two times: day and night. The gray mists of dusk and the lazy haze of dawn are only a dream. When we arrived in Cuzco it is already dark. Wandering through the narrow streets, I find the bazaar. Here, among the stands are the remains of a vanishing Peru, a world without a folklore destined for tourist

consumption. The Indians still speak the language of their ancestors and have retained their love of llamas and the old beliefs. Women sit at the foot of the wall selling piles of products made using alpaca and vicuña wool. They look like old drawings. The women waste no time, weaving on portable spindles and talking to the children riding piggy-back in large scarves.

Heaps of exotic fruits in a dazzle of colors and smells tempt consumers. *Pitahaja* – an ovoid-shaped, yellow fruit with excrescences and bulges covering white pulp with tiny seeds – is my favorite because it drips with sweetness. The small *lulo*, resembling a golden orange plum, produces an acidic, but refreshing juice. The yellow-green and aromatic *guava* resembles the apple in smell and size. The size of a melon, the *guanabara* is encased in a prickly, thorny skin. It is impossible to remember all of these tastes and names.

Everything has remained the same as it was five hundred and more years ago. Only some habits have evolved. In the land of the Incas, hunger and begging were unknown. Today, it is impossible to escape the crowds of beggars and hunger forces many into lives of thievery. When entering the market, every person immediately becomes a hunted animal. That is why it is imperative to hold purses closely and keep track of your wallet. If a valuable camera is stolen, you'll be able to buy it for one-fourth of the price in the same spot – and that's if you're lucky. It's a thrilling feeling to play the game of unwritten rules against a crowd of anonymous thieves and a brutal and corrupt police force.

“*Mister! Girl – for you? First class. My sister,*” says a ten-year-old urchin, tugging at my sleeve, his lisp deforming the words. This was certainly not part of the Incan empire.

We still have no desire to return to the hotel. Wandering aimlessly through the dark streets allows us to hope we might still encounter something new. First, a wooden balcony hanging over the heads of pedestrians with an astonishingly artistic carved frame. Later we come across an intriguing store display. A friendly old man invites us inside. *Como no* – as the Latinos say. Why not? I’ve always enjoyed rummaging through old things and this antique shop is filled to bursting with cracked jugs, sculptures, beautifully decorated dishes, scraps of colorful fabric and intricate ear flaps. In the corner is a collection of looms, while shelves hold yellowed crowns, knives for skull trepanation, toy cymbals and drums...I look over these trinkets – dusty, chipped and nibbled by the teeth of time. I catch sight of a display case of truly ancient items and my mouth waters after seeing a cup in the shape of a stylized jaguar head, covered in colorful, crude paintings. Beautiful! The dealer notices the gleam of desire in my eyes and without a word places the cup before me. In no time at all, the cup is joined by some clay amulets and statuettes of deities.

“Mama Kilia,”⁶⁰ she says, pointing to a tiny figurine. “Found in Piquillacta, from the Huari culture.”

I motion towards a sign hanging over the case: *Not for sale*.

“No problem!” the old man says with a clever smile and a wink.

Sure, the only problem is the price, but the beauty of the cup is tempting. To complement my find I select Mama Kilia, ensuring that my souvenirs from this trip are not only memories, but fragments of a time when the first members of the Piast dynasty in Poland were fighting mice. Now I can bring the evening to a conclusion.

⁶⁰ Goddess of the Moon, the wife of the god Inti.

Recent days have provided me some incredible impressions among Andean landscapes. I have seen incomprehensible things that escape logical explanation and go against common sense. Many times I have asked: Who? Why? How? Our civilization has accustomed us to asking questions. Before lifting a finger, we ask: What for? Will it pay off? Perhaps in this respect the Inca had no doubts...They were ready to move mountains if it was the will of the Great Inca. They believed in his divinity and infallibility and faith makes the impossible a reality. There are many questions for which I still have no answers and perhaps I will never find them during my lifetime. It's something I've gotten used to.

In church, the priest hides behind dogma, preventing discussion of difficult topics. In school, I was punished for questioning the reality of geometric principles. Even now I still don't understand why. "A point has no dimensions," I was told. "So it doesn't exist," was my childlike logic. Both lines and planes are collections of points and therefore cannot exist. The world made of planes, lines and points is only an abstract creation. But it does exist, which I can prove by pinching myself. This dilemma is a real Gordian knot, a famous form that tempts us to solve. Some attempted to do so with the sword; others, like my teacher, combined the stick with the explanation: "so you don't ask stupid questions." Perhaps that is why I continue to ask "stupid" questions and travel to places where these puzzles grow into enormous rocks, megalithic walls, astounding buildings and pyramids...

Among Queros Indians

The day is off to a bad start. Fr. Polentini called to inform us that his arrival will be postponed one week. He apologizes, but important duties keep him in Lima. This complicates my schedule and timetable of activities. Andrew, for one, isn't at all worried about the change in our plans.

“This is good news. There are still so many places to see near Cuzco. Get your map out and we'll plan our route.”

This time we decide to head for a place that is rarely visited by tourists, the home of Queros Indians, primitive inhabitants of the western Andes and believed to be the impoverished heirs of ancient Amazon cultures. We divide the labor: Andrew is responsible for arranging our all-terrain vehicle and a driver, while I stock our backpacks with food and presents. The next day we wake up when the local roosters begin to crow. A Toyota all-terrain vehicle is waiting in front of the hotel. It's doesn't look impressive. The car's glory days are long gone and, as befits a veteran of the local roads, the vehicle is heavily beat up. Miguel, our driver, projects a very solid character – wide shoulders, a large pot belly and excellent knowledge of the nearby terrain. His mother lives in Paucartambo and is as talkative as he is overweight. Before we leave Cuzco he is already outlining the history of his life and immediately shifts gears to examine our biographies. Fortunately, the poor condition of the road forces him to concentrate on driving the car.

We stop in Piquillacta, barely forty kilometers from Cuzco. Our rickety Toyota transports us like a time machines. We get in surrounded by buildings erected by the hands of the Inca and one hour later find ourselves at a site built more than one thousand years earlier by the Huari people. Our knowledge of the culture is fragmented and like many other cultures, was named after the city whose rulers, by way of successive conquests, created an empire stretching from the Urubamba valley all the way to

Cajamarca. It appeared in the 6th century of our era, but didn't manage to survive long in the civilizational arena. Around 800 AD the empire collapsed, torn apart by rebellions in subjugated provinces.

The hour is early and the parking lot at the foot of the hill is completely empty. That's good. Nothing and no one can ruin our meeting with the past. The hill, overgrown with scraggly bushes, appears rather inconspicuous. However, within its interiors is the City of Fleas – Piquillacta. Once it was one of the peripheral cities in the Huari kingdom, today it is a vast archeological site. Diligent work conducted by numerous international teams have uncovered only a fraction of the secrets locked away in this eighty-hectare city.

The city's caretaker, a walking chronicle and the good spirit of many teams that dig here is nearly eighty-year-old Leonidas Wilson. He adopted the name Leonidas to document his informed link to the culture of ancient Greece. The surname Wilson was bestowed upon him by American archeologists, who he accompanied over many archeological seasons. Grandfather Leonidas is an excellent guide and skillfully metes out suspense. Before setting foot within the ancient walls, we have to listen to the old legends and an explanation of the city's name.

Many centuries ago, the local ruler had a daughter whom he named Beautiful Flower. The name referred to the girl's beauty, which obviously attracted a number of suitors for her hand. The main contenders were princes from Cuzco and Puno. At that time Piquillacta suffered from serious water deficiencies. The king exploited the rivalry between the two young men, promising his daughter's hand in marriage to the one who connected the city to nearby water sources using

a viaduct. The victor in the construction race was Cuzco's prince, who was soon wed to Beautiful Flower. Generally, such legends have a happy ending, everyone drinks wine and honey and the young couple lives happily ever after. Unfortunately, the story Grandpa Wilson tells us ends tragically. The young prince became infected with syphilis, which frightened the girl's father. At the same time, he was reluctant to break the promise he had made so publicly. Instead, he made sure that the prince was never able to be alone with his daughter, locked away in a luxuriously furnished chamber in the company of...thousands of hungry fleas. The legend says nothing of the later fates of the unfortunate young man nor whether the fleas contracted syphilis, although it furnish an apt explanation for the genesis of the city's name.

Today the city is completely safe to walk in because the fleas have long since died, together with its last inhabitants. We slip through the narrow, cobbled streets, framed by kilometers of walls surrounding two-story houses. We examine the remains of what archeologists have identified as the royal palace, the temple, the market square... The stone buildings at first glance seem to differ from the walls erected during the times of the Incas. Instead of large blocks hewn and fit together with precision, the smaller stones used here were treated only to a degree that ensured a relatively smooth wall face. Plaster was used to mortar the stones together as well as to cover the interior walls and floors. On the edges of the former market, strange pepper plants grow today, producing a spicy pepper called *aji*, also called Spanish pepper. It is the most important local seasoning in soups and an ingredient in many other dishes.

Piquillacta stands out from other Incan cities in the Urubamba valley. There are no crowds, nothing of Machu Picchu's grandeur or Ollantaytambo's size. The wind blowing

between the walls is the only sound that breaks the silence that fell centuries ago over the city, now buried under layers of sod. Nothing interferes with the imagination in recreating a vision of the lives of the city's former inhabitants, their habits, clothing and speech. Imagination substitutes for knowledge. We know so little about them...

Andrew warms up during a walk among the ancient walls and pushes me to visit Andahyllillas, situated just a few kilometers from Piquillacta. Sunk in the midst of green trees, the tiny market square is enclosed in intricate homes with blinding white walls and door and window frames of blue. The settlement seems deserted. Even a dog reclining in the shade of an enormous fig tree doesn't react to the sound of strange voices. The owner of a store in the distance obviously trusts in the efficiency of Incan laws because he vanishes, leaving his wares to the mercy of fate and potential thieves.

The village gained fame thanks to a church built by the Jesuits in the 17th century. The exterior walls are nothing special and resemble the many churches scattered throughout local towns and villages. What causes our jaws to drop, however, is the view we are afforded after throwing wide the doors to the church, finally located with great difficulty. The river of light spills inside, revealing the treasures hiding in the darkness. Frescos of unusual beauty adorn every inch of the walls and ceiling. Now I understand why this divine temple was christened the Peruvian Sistine Chapel. It certainly deserves the name, although the drawings were made by neither Michelangelo or Boticelli. These are works by local artists, inspired by Indian tradition and culture. Created in the 16th century, the Cuzco art school they established radiated throughout South America. One of the greatest finds was the paintings of Diego Quispetito. Taken to Europe by the Spanish as a youth, Quispetito remained faithful to Indian decorative traditions after returning to the New World, although his palette was enriched with elements characteristic of European painting. The combination resulted in shocking effects, which we observe in

the few pictures mounted on the walls of the cathedral in Cuzco. In *Last Supper*, painted by another representative of the school – Marcosa Zapata – the apostles wear *chullos*, the tables is laden with baked guinea pigs and Jesus himself is changing water into *chicha*.

This is nothing new. Indians everywhere, from Mexico to Chile, cleverly smuggled their customs and beliefs into Catholic temples. When spiritual leaders began to mete out harsh punishments for this idolatry, locals listened to the urging of their former priests in identifying Christ with the god of the sun and the Divine Mother with the goddess of the moon. Similar associations were drawn between the saints and Incan deities of nature and Catholic indulgences were connected with the fiestas once held in honor of ancient deities.

“I remember my amazement,” Andrew says, “when I entered a church in the tiny Mexican town of San Juan Chamula. I doubt there is another church like it anywhere in the world. Groups of Indians sat on hay padding that lined the stone floor. The atmosphere was absolutely casual. Women breastfed their children. A family gathered around a sick girl, watching her closely for the presence of enchantments. In the corner a rather happy band belted out Indian songs. During the breaks they drank to one another from large glasses filled with *pooshem* – a local moonshine made from sugar cane. Before figures of the saints a host of candles were lit, but most of the statuettes were naked, forced to “earn” their clothes by answering the prayers of petitioners. If collections are meager, saints are treated quite brutally, sliced contemptfully into pieces with machetes.”

Miguel doesn't give us a chance to linger in amazement of continue our conversation. We have many kilometers to cover, over roads in rather poor condition. On the other side of Paucartambo, when we enter the Macocho river valley, the road becomes a mountain path which we surmount only thanks to four-wheel drive. The car climbs

higher and higher into cooler regions, but even this scrap of road ends after a few hours in a village perched in the mountains. We can't go any farther and night is falling. There is no other choice but to knock on the door of one of these huts and ask for shelter.

In the morning we find a guide, two riding mounts and a mule to transport our baggage. We plunge into the barren landscape of the Andean *puna*. It is disturbingly wild, but also enchantingly beautiful – a world unchanged since the time of creation. Mountains lashed by the wind, on which few signs of plant life are visible, create the impression of an empty and dead landscape. It is precisely this harsh climate and rocky soil that limit forms of life. The name bestowed upon the mountain plateaus, surrounded by the white peaks of the cordilleras, says it all. In the Quechua language, *puna* means “deserted.”

A narrow trail carved into the rock rises in sharp twists along the edge of the precipice. It is slippery and steep, forcing us more than once to dismount our horses and lead them by the reins. We have to control our fear so that it doesn't infect the animals. Crystal clean air contributes to the illusion that the distant peaks are nearly within reach. The altimeter display indicates almost four thousand meters. We are riding through the clouds, then the sun comes out and the temperature rises briefly before we are enclosed in fog whose moisture penetrates all the way to our bones. We cross a swollen stream, fed by last night's rain, wading through the icy water. Not long after we see a lonely homestead in which there are no traces of inhabitation, although there are two gigantic and aggressive dogs. The road gets even worse. The horses stumble on scree. At last, we reach the pass.

As evening deepens we arrive in a small village. It is cold. Around us are snowy peaks and treeless green fields where sheep and alpacas graze. The only crop is potatoes since no other vegetable can grow at this elevation. Homes are build from unhewn stone

and are not equipped with windows or chimneys. Roofs are constructed from a strain of long grass, laid out over a wooden frame. Inside these structures, semi-darkness prevails. There are no tools, chairs or beds. People live side by side with pigs, chickens and mules. A campfire is the only source of heat and light as well as where food is prepared. The fire is fed with dried animal excrement since the nearest trees grow one day away. This village is forgotten by time itself. Its inhabitants want nothing from no one and give nothing in return, living only for themselves. No one speaks Spanish. Only Quechua is used here and we have problems making ourselves understood.

Living in the village is an elderly high priest, Queros, nearly ninety years old. We stay with his son, Nasaria. Unfortunately, the father of our host is ill and no longer takes in guests. We are fed a soup with chunks of meat and share our supplies in return. I have never seen a bit of sugar, tea, fruit and pasta make someone so happy. They are overflowing with thanks. After darkness falls, we lay down to sleep on a makeshift bed of sheepskin. This is the rhythm of life in the village. When the sun and fire are extinguished, life halts. We are accustomed to another tempo, however, and continue our conversation in the dark.

“The longer I travel in Peru,” I say in a hushed voice, “the more I recognize differences in mentality between the Indians in the Andes and residents of the Amazon. The former laid down their weapons long ago and seem to have lost their identity. Maybe they never had one because they were slaves for too long. First oppressed by the Inca and later by the Spanish, Peru’s independence changed nothing. Andean Indians are still second-class citizens.”

“That’s probably why they display such a strange mixture of submissiveness, sentimentality and resignation. It’s a demoralizing combination.”

“The Indians of the Amazon forest are entirely another story. They have a sense of belonging to a tribe and are able to defend their territory against intruders. Amazon Indians have always lived free and continue to do so today. They exhibit no sentimental tendencies or servility.”

“I read somewhere that the differences in character are most evident in folk songs. In the Andes, people sing that unrequited or betrayed love ends in bloody vengeance or suicide...In the *selva* the same songs are sung, but with a different message: ‘you betrayed me, your loss.’ The boys prepare an enormous fiesta with lots of beautiful and willing women.” Andrew laughs quietly. “This joyful, yet carefree approach to life is more appealing to me. If I had to choose, I’d prefer life in the *selva*.”

“In schools Indian children have it drummed into them that they are direct descendents of the Incas,” I round out my line of thought. “But genetic research is glossed over. This research indicates that most are descendents of Inca slaves, who had no rights or possessions. Isn’t that just out and out manipulation? Fabricating such a legend might make sense from the point of view of nation building, but is morally ambiguous. Let’s get to sleep though because we are bothering our hosts.”

Early in the morning we are back on the road. We meet a boy who speaks a little Spanish and I ask how far it is to the nearest village.

“It’s very close. Only four hours, maybe more,” he answers with a smile.

“Four hours isn’t a lot for that Indian,” Andrew comments. “Even in the lofty Andes we can test the theory of relativity proven by Einstein. For me four hours of exhausting travel in the cold and rain is exactly the opposite – really far.”

It takes us considerably longer than four hours to reach Queros Grande. The village, incidentally the largest in the area, is nothing more than a cluster of poor stone huts. Here, in complete isolation from the rest of the world, lives the Queros colony. Life

here is harsh and difficult due to a lack of oxygenated air and capricious weather, sentencing these people to a pathetic existence. The most isolated Andean group scratches out a living from subsistence farming and by raising sheep and llamas. The wool is sold and meat from these animals diversifies their modest diets.

The Queros are reserved and slightly distrustful when it comes to outsiders. Their features are the same as those captured on the ceramics of the pre-Incan age: hawkish noses, smooth black hair and dark complexions. Their slanted eyes emanate sadness and resignation. Dulled by poverty, they stare straight ahead at a point only they can see, able to sit motionless as if immune to every emotion or curiosity. They are a tall, strong, durable and patient people. In order to combat hunger, cold and exhaustion, the Queros are constantly chewing coca leaves, just like their ancestors. The average attire includes sandals on bare feet, slightly shortened pants, wool ponchos and felt hats.

That evening the village shaman takes us to a nearby hill. Although old, wrinkled and toothless, with gray stringy hair spilling down his back, the shaman's eyes are lively and his gaze sharp. Among authentic Incan ruins, he conducts the *pago ala pachamama y a los apus* ceremony for our success. We light a fire, chew coca and drink *caniazo* (a very strong drink with approximately sixty-percent alcohol content), while the shaman plays a pipe, pronounces curses and prays over our heads to the gods of the mountains and Mother Earth. In conclusion we burn an offering in the bonfire: a few clumps of wool and some coca leaves.

Notes

Shamanism is a phenomenon that existed in the Andes long before the Incas and the conquistadors. It is not a religion, but only a way of interpreting the

world in which everything – people, animals, plants, mountains, lakes and rivers – have a soul, which joins nature and man in unity. Everywhere, from Siberia to Africa, from Mongolia to the Andes, shamans speak of the Tree of Life or the Axis of the Earth. The roots of this tree reach deep into the earth, its branches extend all the way to the heavens and its trunk is visible on our physical plane. Long ago, when people still lived in groups of hunter-gatherers and fought for survival by hunting, fishing and gathering fruit and roots, this link with nature and concept of mutual harmony was perceived strongly. Plants provided sustenance for people and animals, which in turn became food for plants in death. In this way the circle of life continued and still continues, although we no longer recognize its progress, our perception dulled by civilization.

That is why we treat Shaman practices superficially. We see the gestures and witness some rituals and do not comprehend the essence of things. We do not realize that shamen unite with the forces of nature, which manifest in him as strong bodily experiences. The shaman is a master of ecstasy, a state he invokes consciously to achieve supernatural perception. It makes him wise. This exalted transcendence is true knowledge, gained in a state of heightened emotion.

The word “shaman” means literally “wanderer between worlds” or “spiritual wanderer.” That is indeed his role – that of a mediator between the natural world of the physical realm and the supernatural world of spirits. His senses heightened by hallucinogens, the shaman makes contact with the world of spirits to find the right diagnosis. In the Indian community the shaman enjoys great respect and his activities are quite universal. He is able to cure, place a curse on the healthy, awaken love or hate and bring the rain or stop it. The profession is usually passed from father to son, who learns the tricks of the trade as an

apprentice. Indians most often choose to trust the medical expertise of their shamans, believing that sickness is caused by the presence of a foreign body in the human organism that the shaman is able to remove.

We earn the trust of a local shaman in exchange for a flashlight, a knife with a few blades and tins of tea. In return we are allowed to watch him work. The first patient is an old Indian woman, twisted horribly by rheumatism. The diagnosis is key. Candles, rubbed against the patient's body, aid the shaman in establishing the source of her suffering. He examines the candles intently, as if they were x-rays.

"You have weak lungs...stiff knees and fingers...stabbing pain in your heart...in the morning you cough up phlegm...you have incontinence."

The woman nods, while the shaman smiles in satisfaction at her confirmation of his diagnosis.

He lays the patient out on the floor, rubs aromatic herbs into her arms and legs and then bends her body, concentrating her afflictions in one place. Now he is able to remove this "something" – the source of her pain. The treatment is accomplished with ease. He makes a sucking noise next to the old woman's neck and...pulls something resembling a beetle from his mouth, presenting it to the amazed patient. Supplied with cream and herbs for drinking she leaves walking upright and with a spring in her step.

The next patient is an opportunity to witness another method of therapy. The man complains of persistent headaches and stomach aches.

"Do you eat like a horse, but have the strength of a fly? Have problems with urination? Suffer from diarrhea?"

After each question, the Indian nods affirmatively.

"Don't be afraid. I can cure your sickness," the shaman claims.

The man is fed a hallucinogenic drink and his eyes immediately start to shine. After the shaman incenses his body with oxygen-rich herbs, he begins to smile. The final step is an egg rubbed onto the head. They have the ability to absorb disease. Indeed, after a moment the shell blackens. This is a good sign. One more patient is healed.

Before falling asleep, laying in the dark, we share our impressions from the day.

“What happened today with the diagnosis using candles is nothing compared to my experiences with a certain well-known Ecuadorian *curandero*. I agreed to a medical exam and cleansing treatment using a *cuy* – or a guinea pig. The healer pulled the little hairy animal out of a bucket and started hitting it against my back, arms and legs and all the while the guinea pig is squealing. When he hit me a few times in the head, my screams joined those of the guinea pig. When he picked up a knife in preparation to cut open the animal, I protested.

‘But that’s just normal procedure,’ claimed the *curandero*. ‘Anyway, the guinea pig is dead because it absorbed all of your afflictions.’

He cut the creature open from chin to tale, removed the skin and examined the muscles and internal organs. The diagnosis was fantastic. He said I had a strong heart and lungs, the liver of a young man and made a few noises over the stomach. The picture of health.”

“One look at you is enough to form a diagnosis without torturing a poor animal,” Andrew responds to my story. “I also have experience with a shaman. It was on Huatajata Island on Titicaca Lake. Someone proposed that I visit the local *kallawaya*. The Bolivians believe strongly in the effectiveness of the advice provided by these healers, who treat exclusively with herbs and minerals. Their faith is proven by the success of the cures he applies. There are stories of helpless cases in hospitals in the capital La Paz, which were

successfully treated by the *kallawaya*, but their abilities don't end with healing. They are able to wield magic to bring misfortune on someone or protect a person from bad luck. They can delve into the past and future! I became a believer that evening."

"We sat in a large circle; the group includes more than a dozen people. A fire, the only source of light in the room, burns in the fireplace, helping to set the mood. An old, wrinkled *kallawaya* in a woolen hat provided us with a long introduction into the secrets of his profession. Then the time comes for fortune telling. At one point strange questions begin to surface:

'Will someone else from our group get sick?' The man making the inquiry is a chubby, good-natured German, who flew to La Paz in the company of friends. The group had a hard time acclimatizing at high elevations, poorly treated by the *soroche*.

The old man mumbled something under his breath, threw some scented herbs into the fire and a few coca leaves onto the ground, starting at them long and hard.

'Five more!' he muttered, spreading fear among the Germans.

'Don't worry. He's talking nonsense. After all, we've already been here a few days and the worst is behind us.' A young blond woman tried to comfort her companions, but the *kallawaya* muttered something again after the girl's doubts were translated.

'Six,' he whispered.

'What do you mean six?' the translator asked.

'Six more will fall ill,' repeated the man and directed a penetrating stare at the blond.

Silence falls and the atmosphere chills. The next day the breakfast hall is partially empty. Only three people sit at the German table.

'What's going on with your group?' I asked the friendly tour guide.

‘They’re sick!’ The boy shows me why with one eloquent gesture, moving his palm as if cutting his neck. ‘They tried to conquer the hotel bar and fell on the field of battle.’

‘How many are sick?’

‘Six. The worst case is Inga, the blond.’

We exchanged looks. “I don’t know what the guide was thinking,” Andrew concludes, “but I’ll never start an argument with a shaman.”

In the morning we start our return. The descent never requires as much effort, but we are tormented by a constant drizzle and blustery wind. Rain slashes our faces and floods our vision. Hands grow numb with cold. Chilled and wet to the bone, we finally locate the village where Miguel is waiting with the car. After a few hours we are in Cuzco again, in a reality so different from the one in which Queros Indians live. Is it a better world?

Reconnaissance

The team is now complete. Yesterday, Fr. Carlos Polentini flew in with Maria del Carmen Rodriguez del Solar, known to friends as Maria Carmen. This is her debut as head of logistics. Her presence frees me from handling many tiny and annoying responsibilities connected with supplying and equipment the expedition. In the jungle you have to be prepared for every eventuality because there are no corner stores that would allow us to fill in any gaps. My duty is still transport. I discuss the detailed concerning the flight with a pilot from Helicusco company. The day and time will depend on meteorological forecasts for the region. Over the Madre de Dios area is a special microclimate, ensuring favorable flying conditions only during the morning hours – and even then not every day. Clouds sometimes roll in from nowhere, completely unexpectedly, and flying with low visibility over a mountainous terrain is too dangerous. I want to be sure that our tools, people and camping equipment are deployed as calmly and stress-free as possible.

Finally, the group is ready and forecasts are also in our favor. We abandon the comfort of the Ruina hotel and say farewell to its charming manager, Marcia Cuba de Valasquez. The team is headed for an encounter with myth, in opposition to the Great Mystery contained in the word Paititi. Under a clear sky we pass over Cordillera de Vilcanota, spotting the first woolen tufts of cloud over Cordillera de Carabaya, and become submerged in milky whiteness over Pilcopata. Unfortunately, our luck doesn't hold and we are forced to return to Cuzco. We fly for half an hour using only the instruments. It's unsettling to know that somewhere closeby are rocky cliffs rising four thousand meters into the air. Our pilot keeps his cool and in two hours we land at the airport in Cuzco, effectively wasting one day in what seemed to be a perfectly planned operation.

During the next day, the gods seem to favor our expedition from the very start. From the air, the mountains look wild and threatening. I'm glad we don't have to push our way through by car. When we touch down in Pilcopata to pick up a crowd of porters and police protection, the sky is still pure blue. The air is laden with stuffiness, making breathing a chore and wrapping us in its tentacles like an invisible snake until we are sweating in streams. Thankfully, the beer in the airport store is blissfully cold. We drink up since this is the last stop on our trip with a refrigerator. For the next two weeks, we'll only be able to dream about something cold. The helicopter – a worn-down Russian M-16 – although carrying extra weight, lifts easily from the landing apron.

The chopper flies low over a uniform green carpet that stretches all the way to the misty horizon. This ocean of plantlife, a madness unleashed by nature, leads me subconsciously to ask whether the wilderness is hiding great, still unexplored secrets. The question has nothing of exalted naivety. In recent years, increasingly better equipped and prepared expeditions have traveled Amazon paths, finding many signs that justify this suspicion. Every so often aerial photographs confirm the existence of some object in the jungle and sometimes pilots catch the shine of stone ruins in the dense undergrowth. Nonetheless, the region is still largely explored and has not yet been subjected to thorough archeological research. To date a large complex of ruined cities have been located near the Callanga River in Mameria, Amalia and Toporaque, roads emerging from the Paucartambo valley and leading straight into the *selva*. Obscure petroglyphs were found in Mantto and on the Pantiacolla River, sometimes called Palatoa or Sinkibenia, a tributary of Alto Madre de Dios.

These last seem particularly interesting. The large calcium rock looks as if it were covered in enigmatic symbols after receiving a thorough polishing. During the rainy season, the lower section is immersed in the water, which is evident in the signs of

erosion. The petroglyphs themselves take up a rectangular surface measuring eleven by two meters. The iconographic symbols of deities engraved in the rock display anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features and are difficult to interpret because we lack the key. In practice we know almost nothing about this ancient civilization. A tangle of animal and human shapes mixes with abstract and geometric patterns, referring to the period between drawing and writing. The degree of erosion allows us to conclude only that these were here long before the Incas appeared in the area. According to Dr. Carlos Neuenschwander, they were made using tools harder than copper, which might prove the existence of a technologically advanced civilization in this region during the distant past. Given the harsh conditions, few have seen these drawings. The first news of its existence dates back to 1909 and was provided by rubber hunters. Rumors concerning a large number of “Gothic” signs engraved into the rocks were only confirmed twelve years later by three Dominican missionaries. Jesus Broca, Vicente de Cenitagoya and Jose Rodriguez found petroglyphs above the dangerous cataracts of Pongo de Mercante, which they attempted to interpret, rather naively, according to messages contained in the Bible as the creation of the world, Adam and Eve’s exile from the Garden of Eden and the Holy Mother with the Baby Jesus.

The Pantiacolla region conceals more than one puzzle. On satellite photos of the plateau made in 1976 for the use of the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), eight symmetrically spaced pyramids are clearly visible within the wild tangle of jungle. They occupy a greater area than Machu Picchu. In interpreting the photographs, specialists are divided. Some believe that the objects discovered on the plateau are geological structures, others claim the constructions are artificial. No one has dared to check for themselves. In 1977 twenty-nine-year-old Sekino Yoshiharu from Japan attempted to reach the region captured by the satellite. After returning, he claimed

that the objects have a natural origin. Herb Sawinsky and Philip Miller, employees of the Museum of Archeology and Natural History in Florida, are of the opposite opinion. They photographed the pyramids again from the deck of a light aircraft, circling above them at a height of about fifty meters. Both agreed that the color of plant life surrounding the overgrown objects, as well as other characteristic features, suggest that they can only be artificial in nature.

There at the site can also be found two perplexing formations – currently hidden by tree – and two others that appear to be circular. They do not rival the great pyramids. We located them far to the south, but it is only a fragment of the complex. Oval edges intersect at each end of the complex. This may be the remains of a wall.

Herb Sawinsky explained that the symmetrically placed objects are reminiscent of a city overgrown by jungle, but scientists are in no hurry to organize an expedition. This is understandable considering the constant lack of money and the fact that thousands of intriguing sites on less challenging terrain still haven't been explored. If they turned out to be material remains of ancient pre-Incan cultures, proving that an Amazonian Empire existed in the jungle thousands of years ago in different hydrogeological and climatic conditions, then our accepted theories would have to be revised and academic textbooks rewritten. It would cause a true revolution and, in science, revolutions are never welcomed. That is why no one has set foot in most objects hidden in the jungle.

In the sea of green it is hard to find a landmark. Our guide is initially the Piñi Piñi River corridor and then the Rio Nistrón. Water sparkles with a multitude of colors, from golden brown to silver. In the dense wall of trees the lighter stretches of the jungle stand out. It appears as if the artist ran out of dark paint to cover some sections of the work.

This rain forest displays plant life that is considerably less lush, due to a system of karst formations and scorched areas. Amazon tribes traditionally cut down trees and burned them to enrich the soil with ash. After a few seasons the earth became barren and the locals moved on in search of new lands for cultivation. The scorched plot, however, was reclaimed by the jungle, although the young forest that grew in its place never achieved its earlier development. Traces of secondary tree stands may be the only evidence of a mighty pre-Incan empire, whose structure included these “roaming” settlements. This opinion is supported by many anthropologists searching for proof to support the thesis that suggests a cultural connection between Amazon tribes.

“Look, there to the left of Apukatini.” Fr. Polentini doesn’t bother to hide his excitement. The characteristic, forest covered mountain is an important topographical detail that appears in accounts by those who have sought Paititi.

“Why don’t we land on the peak?” Andrew asks. “We’d save ourselves the trouble of trudging through the jungle.”

“I’ve flown a few times over that mountain looking for a clearing to land in. Unfortunately, the entire surface is covered in dense forest. We would have to send in a commando unit to prepared a landing site first, but no one will agree to that because its part of a National Park.”

We land without incident on patches of sand near the Choritiari stream. We are surrounded by a solid wall of greenery, a wild world untouched by man. Palms, bamboo, liana vines and epiphytes create a variety of forms, colors and smells, the most luxuriously green forest in the world. We unload a few hundred kilograms of baggage that will allow us a few weeks of autonomy. The pilot and I agree on a return date and methods for contact in case of an emergency and the helicopter lifts into the air. We are alone, face to face with the jungle.

I have been in the wilderness many times, but always experience the first day with joy. I look around the glade that for the next few days will be our home. From here we will set out every morning and return in exhaustion every evening. The camp is set up on an escarpment raised slightly above the water level – for safety. During the rains, the river can rise rapidly and take all of the unwary traveler’s worldly possessions. The forbidding and humid forest on all sides is home to gigantic trees that form a green canopy, blocking out the sky. Huge bouquets of orchids, in enchanting colors and emanating perfect beauty, are in sharp contrast to the overwhelmingly green landscape. Tangles of liana vines hang from the bank and dangle in the river.

The humid equatorial forest was my first childhood dream. Green, exotic and dripping with life, the forest called to me, invading my dreams at night and tempting me with its mystical enchantments. My first association with the word “adventure” was always a picture of the jungle, full of danger, a place where only supernatural strength and skill ensures survival and offers the perseverant the highest prize – satisfaction.

Setting up the camp takes the rest of the day. I devote my attention to the details to assure us the greatest comfort possible. Sergeant Hermogenes, who is responsible for our safety, organizes guard duty. No one has mentioned fears of an encounter with the Cuapacoris Indians, but everyone is aware of the threat. After all, we are on their territory.

I wash off the day’s dirt and sweat in the river, in water that is pleasingly cool. We immerse our bodies in the river up to the neck. Two bright blue macaws fly overhead. Is this what heaven looks like?

“We have to watch out for *rurao*,” warns Victor, our guide. Seeing my inquisitive look, he explains.

“It’s a kind of ray and resembles a dark plate with lighter spots. It lies buried in the silt but when threatened, stings the attacker with a poisonous stinger in its tail. When you feel that paralyzing pain, you can be certain that there is no hope.”

Suddenly, our bath loses its charm. I walk to the bank, lifting my legs high, while Victor laughs.

“That’s exactly the way you shouldn’t walk. When wading, you have to drag your feet. If you touch the edge of a *rurao* it will flee immediately.”

Victor has the calm and quiet nature characteristic of a man of the forest. For him the jungle hides nothing metaphysical. He knows it inside out so nothing can amaze him. However, it is difficult for him to believe that someone would decide to travel halfway around the world and willingly subject themselves to the *selva*. In warning us about the ray, he hasn’t mentioned many other threats in Amazon rivers. He certainly doesn’t want to spark our imaginations.

During some months, these waters are teeming with flies that cause a dangerous condition called river blindness. They lay large numbers of larvae under the skin, which travel through the body, causing intense itching. The disease damages skin tissue and also attacks the organs of sight.

Our body, with its multitude of recesses and crevices, is an ideal environment for parasites. The small and seemingly harmless *candiru* fish, for example, makes the piranha seem good-natured. It normally target fish larger than itself, swimming under the gill flaps and eating them slowly from within. If it encounters a person in the water, the fish, unable to find gills, enters the body through other openings whose linings are well supplied with blood. In men, the fish normally takes up residence in the penis. After gaining entry, the fish extends its hooked spines, anchoring itself to the body. That is why the fish cannot simply be removed. We do not know why the fish has such selective

admiration for our nether regions, but removal of the pest requires medical intervention. If there are no scalpels at hand, a machete can be used...but after an operation like that, you can abandon any hope of offspring.

In the evening the glow of the fire keeps the dark at bay within a circumference of a few meters. Fr. Polentini tells us about the dangers of life in the forests of Madre de Dios, which include not only wild Indians and the constant threats of nature. For some time *garimpeiros* – men searching for gold and precious stones – have also constituted a threat.

“There is a lot of gold in the river bends of the Chinchiba, Santiago, Madre de Dios, Marañon, Numpacata...” Padre lists the names as if saying a litany, demonstrating his excellent knowledge of this terrain. “We just need a bit of luck to find a sandbar enriched with gold or, even better, a vein of gold. Gold, in turn, attracts troublemakers who are prepared to solve every problem with a knife or pistol. Their victims are most frequently innocent Indians, but do not exclude lost travelers.”

Peruvian gold fever was sparked in 1978 when the government issued a decree that made life easier for gold seekers by exempting them from taxes on their gains. Something similar to the situation in the Sacramento valley of 1848 began as hundreds of thousands of gold-hungry adventurers flocked to the country from around the world.

“Obviously, it was worth it. Within a few years, they had dug up and washed out gold with a total value of two billion dollars,” Andrew interjects.

“The local deposits are not so rich, but just more widely distributed. The kind of criminal excesses that took place in Sacramento haven’t appeared here, but you have to be careful because mining the metal is hard work and not everyone wants to exert themselves to get it.”

Lying in our hammocks, we share some final impressions from our first day. Words slowly transform into mumbles and whispers. The night encourages strange thoughts. The longing for home and nostalgia intensifies. We feel the absence of favorite books, everyday activities and cold beer...Soon sleep will bring our first day in the jungle to a close.

The next morning is pleasantly cool. Drops of dew condense on our sleeping bags and the *selva* still sleeps under a haze of white. Clouds of fog rise from the river corridor and slip among the trees. Shimmering dew covers the leaves of bushes and grass in a million minute drops – cold and wet. I am not eager to leave the comfort of my sleeping bag. Am I really in the tropics? It is hard to believe that in a moment the temperature will jump to forty 104 degrees Fahrenheit. Dawn. This is the only time of day when the humid equatorial forest is silent. Soon the first trilling bird solos will awaken a unique choir of sound.

Sunrise in the jungle does not offer as many thrills or display so many enchanting colors as the considerably more beautiful sunsets, but is still welcomed with joy. It awakens the atavistic instincts of our ancestors, for whom the sun's first rays meant an end to night fears, liberation from phantoms and predatory shadows as well as the frightening screams and suspicious rustling. Man is transformed from a creature shrunken by fear into a proud master of his world and all the creatures within it.

The brisk river water quickly washes away the night's indolence. Our morning toilet is accompanied by the squawks of two toucans. Might this be a good morning argument between spouses? The camp comes to life. We have to take advantage of the cool morning and accomplish as much of our plan for today as possible before the heat wave kills any desire to act.

The sun casts golden light on the tips of the palms. Flowers open, while tiny pests gain vigor. After a morning coffee, verve also returns to our bodies. The objective of our reconnaissance is to comb the southern bank of Choritiari stream, test out the equipment and special clothing and establish a strategy for exploring the jungle. Concerning this last task, there are two schools: some prefer routes along streams and brooks, while others direct their search efforts cross country, following the compass and cutting a path with machetes. In the mountainous selva, both methods are inconvenient. Our first day on the trail proves that it won't be easy.

The rushing Choritiari gradually subsides into a deep shaded crevice camouflaged by a haze of humidity. We wade up to our knees in the water, searching for the best place to cross. Slippery stones, worn smooth over millions of years by running water, make walking difficult. Every so often we stumble, earning ourselves a quick succession of bruises and scrapes. There is no movement of air and we are soaked through. The water squelches in our boots and sweat runs down our backs. On top of it all, we hear the rumble of an approaching storm. Those who have never seen a tropical rain have no idea how much rain can fall in the space of just a few minutes. It is a solid wall of rain that hurtles to the ground in a deafening roar. We shiver from the penetrating cold. In another moment the sun comes out again, water begins to evaporate from every surface and we are soon covered in sweat – a real jungle baptism. In the afternoon we stop near a few unfurled palms. Porters Genos and Edgar cut down one of them, tearing off the leaves, peeling the bark and thus obtaining a stick a few centimeters in diameter. This is *palmito* – the core of the palm, made of overlapping fibers and, as we discover during an impromptu meal, a mild taste.

After an hour of rest, marching is even more difficult and we barely reach the camp before dusk. Hot tea and a tasty soup raise moral in the exhausted team. Padre

inquires about every topographical detail and expresses his wish to join us tomorrow. Unfortunately, I don't think it will be possible. He has enormous determination and ambition, but age must be respected.

I wake up aching all over. My muscles are accustomed to heavy exertion by years of training, but not to repeated bruising on rocks. Instead of traveling through the river corridor, we decide to adopt another strategy by entering the *selva* itself, testing the second variant of moving through the equatorial forest in practice. It is slow going as we maneuver carefully between prickly undergrowth. In the jungle it doesn't pay to rush. For someone who is unaccustomed this is tiring. Only after some time are the necessary instincts learned. The path cut by the *macheteros* is narrow, barely wide enough for one person carrying a backpack.

In the tropical forest it is hard to travel according the compass. This is first and foremost a question of a lack of space in which to determine a direction and also because of the need to avoid quagmires, fallen trees, dense clusters of trees and bushes. Moreover, the *selva alta* makes other demands on the traveler than the flat Amazon jungle. Forest covers steep, plunging slopes and rifts that are tricky to cross. It is better to go around them without losing time and expending energy. Unfortunately, there are places where the only way forward is a climb with the aid of safety lines. Constant changes in direction increase the risk of getting lost. The only sure road is the one behind us, marked by the slashing machetes and our footsteps. In the jungle it is easy to lose one's orientation. There are no landmarks and the sun is nearly always hidden behind clouds or trees. The person who gets lost may never find their way out again. That is why I check our position every so often using GPS. This small, ingenious instrument uses the signals of three satellites to give us an instant geographic coordinates and, with a fourth satellite, our

elevation above sea level. The position is calculated with a precision of a few dozen meters – or less in military systems. Aside from our position, the display also includes measurements of our speed and the direction in which we are heading as well as how far we are off the programmed route. My admiration for those who traveled in the pre-satellite age is immense. How did they establish direction without the help of the stars? How many fears did they have to stifle when, fed by thoughts of catastrophe, the nights were full of terrifying monsters?

“The Indians believe in the demonic Kurupira,” Victor says, when we make a quick rest stop. “It is an extremely cruel monster with one human leg and the second of a jaguar. This creature wanders through the jungle, making terrifying noises and scaring men with its fearsome appearance. As a result the jungle becomes even more frightening. The demon’s greatest pleasure is watching men die in fear.”

Recently in *El Mercado*, I read the story of a 17th-century German woman who not only survived a plane crash here, in the Madre de Dios valley, but also lived through several days in the jungle before reaching the first human settlement. The crash took place in the midst of a lightning storm. The girl remembers flashes of light and the roar of the engine as it broke into pieces and then gliding through the air together with a piece of the wing, torn from the fuselage, and the chair in which she was strapped. She came to, tangled in the branches of some trees – what luck. However, that was not the end of a quick succession of fortunate coincidences. Her father, a botany professor, talked to her a great deal about his excursions in the jungle, ways to avoid danger and how to survive in extreme conditions. The girl must have been a good listener and, more importantly, didn’t lose her head. She decided to follow the course of the first stream she stumbled across. In narrow gorges, she boarded floating tree trunks and drifted. After a few days, in a state of

complete exhaustion, she met other people and was saved. The reporter wrote of her determination, courage and providence from above, making no mention of her panic, fear, despair and hunger. He would probably never survive even one lonely night in the jungle, full of hair-raising cries, echoes reverberating through the greenery, crashes and screaming. Not to mention the feeling of complete helplessness when most insects, animals and snakes set out to hunt after dark. At night the weak and unlucky die from poison and in the jaws of the strongest. They die so others can live on. Death is a universal presence and its steps can be heard in the clicks of the cicada.

Under these conditions only someone who is determined and motivated can survive. This is what I teach at my survival school since 1983. I believe I am a good teacher because I have been tested in so many extreme situations. Eight years ago I crossed the Atlantic Ocean alone in a life raft without a radio or sextant. I completed a survival course in Arizona and a training course in the famous Israeli anti-terrorist school of Leo Gleser. In Japan I observed training methods for managers that develop the character traits and spirit needed in a leader: go-getter energy, faith in one's abilities, the ability to work in a group and conscious risk acceptance. Extreme physical exertion, pain and suffering were our daily bread in this unusual school, but these were the things that strengthened mental resistance and ensured greater determination in life.

My initiative was an instant hit. Week-long courses attracted representatives of freelance professions, officials, students, military pilots and even missionaries – all wanting to learn the reactions needed in critical situations. *Si vis pacem, para bellum* — prepare for war if you want peace, is a device I frequently repeat to my students. In order to prevent evil, we have to know and predict its negative effects. That is why the school teaches people to recognize the reactions and capabilities of the body, instinctual behaviors when threatened, survival in extreme conditions and controlling fear. We prove

that every person has the ability to adjust to every situation. “In order to know and learn about oneself,” wrote *Corriere della Sera*, “one needs only to shed hectoliters of sweat and tears at Palkiewicz’s school.”

After the first hour of hiking, my shirt is soaked through with sweat. It is increasingly tempting to take it off and allow my maltreated body to rest. Woe to the person who succumbs to this impulse and exposes his skin to the bites of thousands of tiny vampires. Several hours of itching and swelling are guaranteed, not counting the chance of contracting a gamut of parasitic diseases. Most repellants available on the market are no help – they evaporate within a few minutes. The most effective are substances with a high concentration of DEET, but they hard to find and can be dangerous. When in contact with mucous membranes, they produce a toxic reaction and also discolor clothing and hair. It is more advisable to avoid chemicals of this caliber.

Victor has his own way of dealing with these bloodthirsty beasts, smearing all the exposed parts of his body with the pulp of the white fruit and is protected for at least one week. The catch is that this improvised cream turns the skin pitch black. Another option uses the properties of the bark on the tall and enormous *ajo-ajo* tree. It works well, except for... the stink of garlic at its most concentrated.

Victor is a true mine of knowledge on the tropical forest. It’s no surprise since this is where he spent his childhood and youth and his father was a well-known *curandero*.⁶¹ After a few days in his company, we know that the jungle can nourish and provide medicine that is just as effective as the most well-stocked pharmacy.

“This is the *bibosi* tree, whose sap can cure an infection caused by amoeba and other parasites.” He points to a stream of milk white resin. “That red resin from the

⁶¹ An Indian who cures human illnesses with the aid of herbs.

sangre del drago tree is excellent for disinfecting wounds and scraps. There is the *che* – a tree with a poisonous sap. One drop in the eye and it is sightless. If a drop falls on the skin, it causes the body to swell. This is *soliman* – also poisonous – whose sap is used to make curare poison. But curare can also be helpful if a small amount is applied with the end of a small stick, you can prick an infected wound and the curare will disinfect it, accelerating the healing process.” Within the space of an hour hike, Victor is able to find a few interesting plant species that can bring a person relief from suffering.

“This is a plant worth remembering.” He pulls a small, inconspicuous bush from the ground. “The leaves of this *anestesi*, prickly and bitter tasting, have a numbing and soporific effect. If someone gets bitten by a snake, we can rub the wound with the leaves of this bush and, once numb, make an incision and suck out the poison.”

Soon after, he stops to show us a path made by a jaguar, the largest predator on the American continent. A few paw prints made by *el tigre*, trampled grass and a whiff of musk are all the great cat has left behind.

“Not long ago he rested here after hunting,” Victor claims matter-of-fact, while we start looking around nervously.

After returning to the camp, we are treated to a true feast. One of the policemen left behind by Sergeant Hermogenes to guard our things has caught a few large and delicious fish.

“There’s no trick to it.” He plays down the accomplishment. “There are so many fish in these waters that you could put your dick in the water and pull out a fish.”

The fish are baked in hot coals, served with the delicate vegetables from the leaves of the *assai* palm, taste incredible.

“Ah, if we just had a bottle of dry white wine,” Andrew says dreamily.

Unfortunately, neither myself nor Maria Carmen, in supplying the expedition, foresaw such refined needs. Our bellies full, we are sated and eager to talk.

“Victor, you said that your father is a *curandero*. What exactly is the basis of Indian medicine,” Andrew inquires. “How much is classical herb therapy and how much magic?”

“For the *Curandero*, treatment begins by looking into the patient’s body. He makes an ‘x-ray’ with...a guinea pig, for example, which helps to establish the physical affliction. He also peers into the soul because the spirit and body are always taken as a complex whole. You can’t cure the body and neglect the soul. Amazonian healers discovered the significance of the psyche in treatment long ago. For curing the symptoms or effects of an illness, a *curandero* uses herbs, but the underlying cause of the affliction is treated via mental energy and magic. Herbs and magic in the Shaman practice always create a unified whole, just like spirit and matter.”

“Do they use hallucinogenic plants like the *ayahuasca*?”⁶²

“*Ayahuasca* is used universally in the *selva* from Venezuela to Brazil. In Peru there is a drink prepared from the plant in combination with another herb called *chacrana*, which acts as a catalyst. Drinking *ayahuasca* without it has no effect aside from vomiting. An experienced *curandero* uses *ayahuasca* for various practical applications: preparing for battle, helping the spirit leave the body, or so-called flight, in an attempt to bring health back to the patient’s spirit or during magical rituals. In making a diagnosis, *ayahuasca* assists the shaman in contacting the spirit world. In addition, it is also used to facilitate paranormal phenomenon: clairvoyance, fortune telling, seeing objects located at a distance and distinguishing clearly between good and evil. For

⁶² A Liana vine that grows in equatorial forests. It is used to prepare a hallucinogenic drink used by *curanderos* in the Amazon basin. In the Quechua language the name means “vine of the soul,” which can be symbolically interpreted as the umbilical cord linking the visible world with the world of the unseen.

centuries *Ayahuasca* was a guide for local healers to the curative properties of plants. The Amazonian equatorial forest is an enormous pharmacy that allows man to cure many illnesses, even those which medical science is unable to treat. After all, people have been living for millennia in this humid and unhealthy climate, which breeds bacteria, virulent viruses and parasitic insects. *Ayahuasca* allows them to survive.”

“If I understand you correctly, Victor, *ayahuasca* is not used exclusively to bring about hallucinations. Actually, it activates man’s hidden abilities, blocked by civilizational influences and other causes, and brings about effects that we call miracles.” Andrew, as always inquisitive, allows nothing to remain unsaid.

“When I saw my father treating people, who were sentenced to death by medical doctors, it always seemed to me that I was witnessing a miracle.”

“But the same *ayahuasca* is used by *brujos* – evil shamen who practice black magic and in Brazil a few churches were established that use the drink as a mystical sacrament. What’s the real story on *ayahuasca*?”

“Just like in life – there are good and bad people.” Victor takes a long drag on a cigarette. “*Curanderos* help people, but *brujos* also operate, using *ayahuasca* for magical practices. Their séances are just like taking a trip to hell. Is the plant itself guilty? The problem of Brazilian churches...I don’t know too much about that, but there are lost and naïve people everywhere. Maybe there is some kind of business in it?”

“Speaking of business, I read somewhere that connected with the growing trend of “*ayahuasca*-induced highs” was also an increasing number of fake *curanderos*.”

“You have to be careful. Peruvians are masters at tricking tourists. Pseudo-shamen feed naïve clients a mixture of *ayahuasca* and traces of amphetamines – the rest is the work of emotion, suggestion and exaltation. It might be dangerous, but *ayahuasca* is not additive or toxic. The danger is connected with permanent changes in the psyche because

it is a powerful substance and can only be used under the supervision of someone who has completed a certain phase in the shaman initiation.”

“Padre,” I begin. “Have you ever been tempted to try *ayahuasca*?”

“Subjecting the mind to hallucinations is against the principles I profess. I try to achieve the same effects through meditation and prayer. In reality, I also refer to other states of being that guard over man, but in another cultural context.”

“Maybe *ayahuasca* has played the role of cinema or television in the jungle, which lacks any other form of entertainment?” Andrew is probably fed up with serious conversation because his infamous imagination is at work again. “An infusion from *ayahuasca* was consumed to fill the long nights and induce fantastic visions, opening the gates to knowledge that is normally inaccessible.”

“That’s something for us. Instead of wasting all this time falling asleep, I would rather put myself in the hands of a *curandero*.”

“I can arrange it,” Victor laughs. “Under the condition that we fly to Pilcopata.”

The proposal is an interesting one, but no one we can indulge in tonight. However, we can make a stop there on the return trip. I make a mental note. In the meantime, the campfire burns out and clouds of mosquitoes leap immediately into action, attacking every inch of exposed flesh. We have no choice but to escape into our sleeping bags, unroll our mosquito nets and relax as the jungle’s symphony orchestra strikes up the first notes in a composition that has been played unchanged for millions of years.

The following day we change tactics by traveling through the jungle, taking along enough food for three or four days and some light camping equipment. Putting my experience into practice, I decide to make a circle, wading through one of the streams that flows into the Choritiari, then trudging through the forest and via another tributary to the

river on which we are camped. Freed from the necessity of returning every day to camp, we can penetrate deeper into the forest and comb through a larger area.

It is hot. The jungle forces the sweat out of us in streams. In the afternoon, our canteens are already empty. I warn everyone about drinking from the streams and pools we come across, which are teeming with bacteria. Only Victor and the porters accompanying us are able to drink from these water sources without incident.

“We were raised in the jungle. Our bodies and stomachs are used to this water,” they say.

A resident of the wilderness has a sixth sense that is always able to distinguish which stream of water is potable – or suitable for drinking – and which are only nailable, fit for washing and bathing. An unexperienced *gringo* is risking immediate diarrhea or contraction of a dangerous strain of cholera. When filling our canteens, it is imperative that we do not forget to add iodine tablets or drops that disinfect the water. These substances lend water a more yellowish tinge than that of the source, but this practice helps reduce our risk of ingesting some kind of nasty bug. It tastes horrible, but who would pay attention to details like that when the entire organism is screaming with every pore: drink!

Before nightfall we set up camp, quickly erecting the tent sheet. Victor is assisted by the porters in building a pallet raised half a meter above the ground. It is important not to sleep on the damp ground. The pallet will protect us from insects and possible flooding in case of a heavier rain, which fall constantly – particularly at night. The makeshift bed, constructed using thick branches and covered in a layer of leaves, seems just like a mattress. Victor uses only flexible liana vines to tie the structure together. A parasite that targets trees, the vine appears in hundreds of variations and has nearly as many uses and shapes. Liana can be flexible and thin or thick and woody. Some trunks secrete poisonous

sap, others a pure water that can be drunk without being disinfected. Some liana form monstrous shapes, strangling a tree just like a snake, killing its host and itself.

Over the campfire we cook dinner and dry our clothing. After an entire day of tramping through the forest, everything is sweaty and dirty. Dirt is the perfect breeding ground for infection and the damp encourages the growth of fungus. Fortunately, we have a large supply of water and washing is no problem. Drying is another matter. In the humid air, nothing dries easily. Even worse, a shirt hung out to dry is covered in ants, flies or some other pest in just a few minutes. Victor warns us about the *tornillo* – the screw-worm fly, that likes to lay its eggs in damp clothing. When the eggs make contact with human skin, the parasite drills under the surface and starts to grow. In truth the process is not really life-threatening – the insect lives under the skin and after about forty days breaks out and flies away.

Our one chance to dry clothes without a stressful insect extirmination process is the fire, but there are too many people trying to accomplish the same feat, which often ends in burned clothing. Anyway, who would worry about something like that considering the pleasure of putting on a dry shirt in the morning?

In the jungle it is dangerous to stand or sit motionless for any period of time to indulge in a daydream. Aside from waves of attacks by flying bloodsuckers, there are a wide variety of ants: from black to red, tiny to two centimeter in size. This last has immense pincers delivering a bite that can cause many days of fever. They crawl everywhere and only fear fire. A fire brand, waved around the body close to the ground, buys you a few minutes of peace. There have been cases when the ants forced people to evacuate entire cities. Aveyros, on the Tapajoz River, fell into ruin and sunk back into the jungle after an invasion of ants. I myself witnessed a parade by such an ant column. Several steps long, this black river kills everything in its path, tearing apart grubs both

large and small and lizards nearly one meter in length. They work with lightning speed. In just over ten minutes, when the last ant columns reach the reptile, its bones have already been picked clean.

The evenings are slightly cooler. We sit around the campfire. The flickering flames give us a sense of security. Not only ants but larger animals are afraid of fire. Andrew sits close to Victor and take advantage of his knowledge of the jungle, pestering him with questions.

“Tell me, what is the most dangerous threat to man in the jungle?”

Victor thinks for a moment.

“That is a difficult question, *señor*. Everything is equally dangerous if you wander through the forest alone. Trees can be particularly dangerous. Their foundations, saturated with water, don’t have a lot of support and are easily pushed over. That is why it is best to avoid wandering on windy days. Fallen trees, held upright by liana vines and the branches of neighboring trees, are also a threat. The wind can cause them to collapse without warning. You don’t have enough time to jump out of the way and the enormous weight crushes you instantly. Snakes are dangerous too. If someone gets bitten in the torso or head, there is nothing to be done because access to serum is poor. Anyway, there isn’t a universal serum that can counteract the effects of bites inflicting by every snake species – and there are a lot here. The worst are culebra negra, kapukarara, loro... these are our names. Their poisons are like miniature atom bombs. Emerging at night to hunt, when it is cold they sense the heat of a human body and can slither under the mosquito net to take refuge from the cold if it is not properly sealed under the bed. Then you can wake up with a snake against your skin. Most people panic in a situation like that and get bitten in

trying to throw the snake off. Ten minutes after being bitten, the muscles are paralyzed. Death follows a day later.

Victor can keep these stories going forever, scaring us all witless. In his career as a professional guide, he has certainly witnessed a number of chilling situations. After hearing even of fraction of them, no one can close their eyes all night so I interrupt.

“In the jungle the most dangerous thing is too much imagination,” I say to Andrew. “It can kill. If you unleash the fear within, it is everywhere. You will see danger in every rustle and never sleep. After a few nights like that, you can fall to pieces like an old shoe.”

Just before dawn we are awakened by the sound of rain drumming against the tarpaulin. The downpour doesn't last long. We get up and begin to pack. After the rain, the forest is even wetter than usual, but the air is brisk and breathing is easier. Humidity in the jungle is just something that a person has to get used to because there is no way to avoid it.

A person has to adjust to a lot of things: to a body that is sticky and smelly since sweat cannot evaporate in one hundred percent humidity, not to mention that the *selva* does not like human beings and treats their presence as an intrusion. Set against us are rocks, thorny bushes and undergrowth entangled with liana vines. Inactivity or moments of lethargy are like an invitation to thousands of tiny flies and other mosquito-like insects, just waiting for a free meal. If you are unlucky, the mosquito that bites you will carry malaria or yellow fever, or the sand flea will pass on a pathenogenic *Leishmania*⁶³ protozoan. Another insect will do even worse by laying larva of the gadfly under the skin.

⁶³ A parasite that feeds off both human and animal organisms, causing a troublesome skin disease.

The host itself only becomes aware of the freeloader after a few weeks when the body of the parasite grows to a few centimeters.

For the past few hours, the only sounds we have heard are the regular whistle of the machete and labored breathing, accompanied from time to time by the odd exclamation *shit* or *coño*.⁶⁴ We are traveling across a slope with a slight incline, wading through the mud or rotting vegetation, forging yet another stream in our path. They are shallow and muddy. I have visited the wilderness many times and still I am amazed by the variation in forms shaped by nature. Take leaves, for example. There are so many sizes, shapes and textures: smooth, fuzzy, thorny, shiny, rough, thin like tissue paper and thick as a man's thumb. For Victor every tree, liana and bush has a Spanish or Indian name and – frequently – use. This tree is good for building boats, that one burns a long time in a campfire and another gives off smoke when burned that repels mosquitoes.

“How old are the oldest trees in the Amazon jungle?” I ask.

“I have heard of a tree that lived one thousand years and more. It is called *mapacho*, but is rare and hard to find. A slightly shorter-lived species – *amendrillo* – appears with more frequency and lives about six hundred or seven hundred years.”

What an incredible world. Trees that grow for one thousand years and insects that die after just a few hours – and those demented orchids. Not content with merely being beautiful, these flowers cloud the air with a multitude of smells and seem to be endowed with dumbfounding charm. Perhaps that is why so many people have sacrificed their lives in an attempt to solve the mystery of the flowers. The biology of orchids is unusually complicated. Each flower contains a myriad tiny seeds, which budded and quickly died when sown in an experimental plot. For many years, botanists sought the answer to this

⁶⁴ A Spanish curse.

puzzle, until they finally discovered that the plant lives in close symbiosis with a certain mushroom that serves as nourishment during the first few days of life. This news mobilized growers. At the beginning of the 19th century, there were only one hundred known orchid varieties, while today the figure has risen to more than ten thousand and continues to grow because the plants are so easily crossed.

In the midst of all these wonders, we have attempted to reach the source of yet another jungle mystery for a few days. Luck is not on our side. So far we haven't found any trace of ancient or contemporary human settlements. The only signs of life we do see are the trampled paths of the peccary – animals that resemble the Polish wild boar. Evidently, they like to travel their favorite trails. We complete a circle of many kilometers and stumble into camp on the fourth day after our departure. We are happy to be back in a zone of minimal comfort and, first and foremost, to eat normal food. Everyone is fed up with canned and freeze-dried food.

For a full two weeks we search neighboring regions and every day grows more difficult. After days of rain, an unusually high amount of precipitation for this time of year, the streams swell and make traveling difficult. Our general level of exhaustion grows and even the *macheteros* don't have the same energy. Every five hundred meters requires at least one hour to cover, one hour of enormous effort. We continue at this tempo for two days and then return over the next two. The monotony and routine of everyday gestures and duties is getting to us. I only feel a jolt of adrenaline once, when we come across a sign of human habitation.

“*Señor Palki, señor Palki,*” the porter's voice is excited. He points to a few branches cut by a machete and footprints preserved in the soft clay. “It is Cuapacoris! They came this way two days ago.”

The group is all worked up, but were they really Cuapacoris? Logic suggests that they were since we are on their territory. We try to follow the trail, but lose it soon after. The jungle regenerates very quickly.

Only Fr. Polentini is still overflowing with optimism. After our every return he asks for details concerning almost every rock or change in the density of the *selva*. He marks everything carefully on our map and colors in the areas we have already covered. Unfortunately, we still haven't made a serious dent in the white spots on the map. After so many years of searching...The enormity of the task that awaits us is depressing and discouraging. If we wanted to search the jungle systematically square by square, we would have to organize a large number of costly expeditions. Where would we find sponsors?

Health problems are starting to crop up. Carlo has a slight temperature and complains of general fatigue. I live in the hope that it is not malaria. One of the other porters has difficulties moving due to painful boils in his armpits. The entire team seems glum. Even those who have lived in the jungle have become accustomed to life in the city and the comforts of civilization. They all want to return as soon as possible and greet the arriving helicopter with an energetic ovation. For them this is the end of backbreaking work, while for me it means disappointment. The jungle didn't even give up a small fraction of its mysteries. I should have expected it, but man is always plagued by hope...On the other hand, I now have better knowledge of the terrain where we are to search and have amassed a wealth of new experiences that will help me in organizing future expeditions. In one year, I will return. Fr. Polentini and I have already agreed that we will use boats to sail into the heart of the jungle and embark on a long strenuous hike.

In Pilcopata we say farewell to Maria Carmen and Padre. Both are flying to Cuzco, while we remain two more days to take advantage of Victor's contacts and fit in an evening of *ayahuasca*. Andrew talks me into it.

"Buddy, I've tried almost everything. In Mexico I tried *peyotl*, in Morocco *kif* and hashish and in Indochina I smoked opium. I've gotten high on amphetamines and marijuana, vomited after taking LSD, treated my insomnia with cocaine and depression with ecstasy. None of it is satisfying. I don't know why so many people enjoy them. I know a few other ways of stroking your ego without the risk of addiction. They say *ayahuasca* is a really interesting experience. Let's not waste our chance."

All my life has been spent in pursuit of excitement so I know exactly what emotions are guiding Andrew. In the evening, after an entire day of fasting, we leave Pilcopata by car. A standard session requires several days of fasting and calming meditation as well as sexual abstinence. Unfortunately, we are overqualified in terms of the last criteria. In the course of the past few weeks in the jungle, the only temptation was Maria Carmen. We stop in front of a lonely hut hidden in the trees.

The *curandero* is waiting for us within the dark interior. We sit at his silent invitation without a word. Somewhere in the nearby *selva*, monkeys are screeching, along with everything else that lives and breathes...The song of the cicada adds to the atmosphere. The shaman smokes *puro*, which looks like a fat cigar, and blows the smoke in our direction. After a moment he reaches for a dish filled with liquid and encourages us to drink. I consume the second portion. The taste is disgusting and the urge to vomit rises inside. We are still silent, taking in the atmosphere. The clouds of tobacco smoke around us continue to grow. The lump is now dangerously close to my throat. Now I understand why there is a plastic bucket placed close to us. I throw up, followed soon after by Andrew and Victor. Someone extinguishes the candles. The sounds of the forest are

increasingly audible and small lights are appearing in greater numbers, all connected by glowing threads that intertwine, creating abstract pictures...The sound of humming comes out of the dark. This is the *icaros*, a magical song that aids concentration but also scares away evils spirits. The melody rises and falls but at no time is silent. The darkened interior of the hut comes alive, filled with light and human-like figures. I hear voices talking to me. Time stands still, stops existing, and I soar high like a bird above my body...Those people, far below, stand in the midst of stone buildings, dressed in strange feathered robes, their ears adorned with gold ornaments, wearing breastplates...I recognize them – these are the Inca. They yell to me, covering their eyes with their hands...They are trying to tell me something. I descend lower in order to hear them better, but I fall too quickly...below me is a dense forest...I fall into the open mouth of a jaguar... aa...aaa...aaa!

I wake up covered in sweat. It is dawn. The *curandero* is leaning over Andrew, blowing into his face and bringing him out of the trance, then moves on and does the same for Victor. We sit motionless for some time, still lost in thoughts of our visions and slightly drugged and stiff. No one wants to talk and we maintain our silence during the entire return trip. We share our impressions at breakfast.

“You know,” Andrew begins, “It was horrible. I was wrapped in the coils of a gigantic snake. I looked inside its open mouth and its teeth were centimeters from my face. After I died of pure fear, it seemed that I was the snake, inside its body and seeing through its eyes. I saw myself and my entire life, the people around me, the misery of my existence, the futility of action...Then my father rescued me from ‘that world.’ We talked for a long time...it was very personal. I don’t really want to talk about it.”

Indeed, he says nothing more. Even during the hours of our trip to Cuzco, his words are few and far between. He is going through some kind of internal struggle. This

eternally smiling, talkative, open man is no longer recognizable. In Cuzco we have to split up. He is returning to Poland, but I have a few affairs to wrap up. When we say goodbye at the airport he says:

“Jacek, you shouldn’t dismiss those visions. It may be a message that we don’t know how to decipher yet. Their wisdom is hidden in a wealth of symbols and enveloped in metaphors. That is why it is so difficult to put together the pieces of information that are within our reach, which one day will be made clear.”

“I will remember that. See you, friend.”

I am also unable to get rid of the visions. The terrifying picture of an Incan priest, his face twisted into a mask of hate, haunts my dreams. “You shouldn’t dismiss those visions” – the warning still echoes in my ears. Only after many other events have taken place, over the course of many months of fevered preparations, am I able to push the pictures to the margins of my memory.

Back to Lima

The South American continent is laid out beneath me again as I place my life into the hands of the Lufthansa pilots. I enjoy flying with this airline carrier and feel safe onboard. The friendly smile of the stewardess makes it a little easier to spend a few hours of forced immobility in my seat. The past year has been extremely arduous: negotiations with sponsors, the struggle for expedition funding, coordinating deadlines, acquiring specialist equipment and building a team. Selecting participants is crucial to the expedition's success. More than one has failed because its members lacked character, tolerance, a sense of humor, strong will and the ability to adjust to new situations. I roamed through Europe from Moscow to Seville, fighting against time and hindered by matter and human unfriendliness, but all this is just a memory now. Before me is another great Adventure.

Every time I look down upon the gigantic continent, unresolved questions from previous trips come crowding back. Even science is unable to unravel the secrets of the tribes that once inhabited these lands. Who discovered America and when? Perhaps it was discovered repeatedly? The inquisitive traveler has to be satisfied with hypotheses and – even worse – despite their number, approach each one with a certain amount of trust. In South America the foundations upholding the edifice of local archeology are quite rickety and every single find has the potential to demolish already existing structures. That is why the American studies community is so firmly at odds. The dividing line runs between those who are fighting fiercely for isolationism and the diffusionists.

The former claim that the American continent was settled at the peak of the Pleistocene epoch from the Bering Strait. Today this body of water is only eighty kilometers wide and forty-five meters deep. Thousands of years ago, this might have been dry land. Sudden climatic cooling handcuffed vast swaths of Europe, Asia and America in

fetters of ice, trapping significantly more of the planet's water in continental glaciers. As a result the level of seas and oceans lowered and the Bering Strait became a land bridge. According to geologists, there are two periods when conditions were particularly favorable for the colonization of America: forty and twelve thousand years ago. Groups of mongoidal hunters could have crossed the land bridge to the American continent, chased by or in pursuit of wild animals or forced out by more expansive tribes on a higher rung of the evolutionary ladder. The new world, teeming with herds of mastodons, mammoths, camels, moose, deer and bison, was a true eldorado for these early peoples. They did not realize that they had become the first Americans.

No one knows when exactly this event took place. The *Homo sapiens* who set foot on American soil was not familiar with methods for calculating time, had no calendar and did not know how to write. We suppose the newcomer was a hunter dressed in the skins of wild animals, who fashioned weapons and tools from their bones and rocks. Migrating ever to the south, after a few millennia, human hordes reached the Land of Fire. The slow rhythm of their migratory patterns was dictated by the capabilities of children, pregnant women and the elderly, while their direction was determined by the trails of potential prey and instincts of the primordial man. Some abandoned the nomad life to establish farms and settle permanently in chosen regions, but a more advanced civilization was never established in the north. Development found fertile soil in the Central American and Andean highlands. Why there exactly? Did the settlement of America progress according to a planned scenario? These are the first in my exceedingly long list of questions.

However, not everyone agrees with these positions. Some American specialists linked to the diffusionist camp have adopted a third view. Emilio Romero, a professor at

the University of San Marcos in Lima and the president of the Peruvian Geographic Society, wrote in his *Biography of the Andes*:

The battle fought by prehistoric man to escape the boiling tropics, the sadness of the steppes or coastal wilderness lasted many centuries and we will never know anything about what took place during this period. But the man who conquered the Andes was without a doubt a truly modern specimen, with a certain amount of experience and ideas that were revolutionary in comparison to the mentalities of primitive peoples.

This new wave of migration probably came from somewhere in the south. There are traces that indicate the progress of new cultures from the Argentinean foothills of the Andes and the deserts of Atacama through the great centers of Tiahuanaco (Bolivia), which runs along the edge of Titicaca to Cuzco, the peak of pre-Hispanic civilization in South America.

His words were prophetic. With time traces of men were discovered in South America dating back to a much earlier time period than those in the north and even throughout eastern Siberia. During excavation work in Toca de Esperanca in the Brazilian state of Bahia, Maria Beltrao found stone tools, whose age, established using the uranium dating method, was determined to be between 200,000 and 295,000 years. Well-known French archeologist Henry de Lumley linked this find with other equally sensational discoveries in Calico:

The evidence discovered seems to indicate that man appeared on the American continent considerably earlier than it was previously believed. (...) In light of discoveries in Toca de Esperanca, it is much easier to interpret the stone ingenuity at the Calico site, located in the Mojave Desert in California, dated at 150,000 years.

The person responsible for unearthing artifacts at Calico was Louis Leakey, a man who achieved earlier fame for his anthropological finds in the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. At the end of his life, Leakey returned to his previous research into the early population of America, hence his interest in the find at Calico. In the course of eighteen years of excavation, a total of 11,400 eoliths were unearthed, including axes, hammers and scrapers made of chalcedony and jasper. The age of the oldest items was estimated at two hundred thousand years.

During the 1980s, the discovery of Mato Grosso on the edge of the jungle in central-eastern Brazil was declared the archeological sensation of the century. The site at Pedra Furada was home to many generations of settlers and its oldest layers of human bones and tools have been dated to nearly fifty thousand years. Moreover, cave drawings found at the same site are comparable in terms of artistic style and age with those made in the grottos of southern France. This information sets the entire structure of American chronology on its head.

On July 28, 1996 in the vicinity of the town of Kennewick in the state of Washington, two students stumbled across the skeleton of man with a projectile point embedded in his hip. The skeleton was sent to the laboratory, where a bone analysis using the radiocarbon dating method revealed the man's age to be 9,300 years, making this the oldest complete skeleton remains recovered on the American continent. Professor Grover Krantz sparked even greater controversy by defining the skeletons features as characteristic of both the Caucasian and American Indian races. If the man buried near Kennewick was also the bearer of European blood, it raises intriguing questions about the route his ancestors took over the American continent. Ten thousand years earlier, the landmass was covered by a thick continental glacier that extended all the way to a longitude that corresponds to present day New York. Dennis Stanford of the National

Museum of Natural History – Smithsonian Institution, also recognized the significance of the find:

This is an exciting discovery and I believe that we will witness a real revolution in views concerning the settlement of America.

The next finds followed on the heels of the one made in Washington. Near Belo Horizonte not far from Rio de Janeiro, at a site dated to the 14th century BC, a skull was unearthed belonging to a woman whose features did not resemble that of an American Indian. According to Brazilian scientist Walter Neves, in shape the skull resembled those belonging to inhabitants of Africa or the South Pacific. The stone tools found on the eastern coast of South America, in turn, initially accredited to the Clovis culture that lived in the area thirteen thousand years ago, had more in common with the artifacts of southwest Europe, fashioned twenty thousand years before by the Solutrean culture. These discoveries enabled Denis Stanford to formulate an intriguing interpretation on the settlement theory of America. In it, the two men suggested that the Solutrean people might have sailed to South America twenty thousand years ago using hide boats similar to those that are still employed by the Eskimos.

I have no intention of resolving the aforementioned dispute concerning whether these finds testify to the presence of human beings on the American continent in ancient times or are instead phantoms conjured up by pre-historians in the pursuit of scientific ambition. Undoubtedly, they provide strong backing for proponents of diffusion theory, which acknowledges, in sharp contrast to isolationists, the possibility of travel during pre-Columbian times between America and the Asian, European and African continents. The heroes of these excursions brought knowledge and technology to the Americas considerably more advanced than that achieved by local populations.

Suddenly, at the turn of the 1st and 2nd centuries BC, hotbeds of civilization developed in the uplands of Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia among tribes at a relatively low level of evolution. Traces of these cultures are a source of amazement to this day. The Olmecs, Tiahuanaco, Chavin, Nazca and Mochica cultures are names known not only to archeologists. However, no one has been able to research these cultures to an extent that would allow us to answer the host of questions and doubts that is growing with every successive discovery. Despite concerted archeological and stratigraphical research, no traces of a gradual evolution process from primitive cultures to advanced civilizations have been found. The doubts expressed by diffusionists seem legitimate. After all, we cannot ignore the long list of parallels they have constructed between pre-Columbian cultures and the entire Mediterraneanⁱ world and the cultures of Asia. The similarities are so striking and appear in such quantities that they cannot simply be attributed to coincidence.

Who then was the first to discover America and when? These are questions for which we will never have definitive answers, but it was certainly not Columbus. Convinced that he had reached India, Columbus named the people he encountered *indios*, while the continent's succulent bird was christened "turka" or turkey, which the discoverer believed to be a member of the peacock family. His most vehement critics might say that Columbus didn't know where he was going; when he arrived had no idea where he was; and when he returned, had no idea what he had discovered. He was not even the first European to reach America, preceded in this respect by the Vikings. They set sail from Scandinavian in their long boats five hundred years before Columbus, reaching the Labrador Coast via Greenland. Today we have amassed considerable material evidence of their presence on the American continent. The Vikings themselves also left behind accounts of those difficult years when they attempted to put down roots in

the new land. That is how we know that the first European born on American soil was a boy name Snarri. Why then aren't the Vikings celebrated? Unfortunately, during the return trip, the group landed in Greenland to repair their battered ships. The wood they needed was unavailable, leaving them stranded in a deadly trap while the discovery of America was forced to wait for another five hundred years.

Diffusionists have amassed considerably more evidence suggesting that the title discoverer of American is one that Columbus does not deserve. The first Portuguese to set foot in Brazil were amazed by the cryptic inscriptions engraved into the rocks on the coast. Not knowing how to decipher them, the explorers did not realize the significance of the find. In the 19th century, similar inscriptions were uncovered in virgin jungles, sometimes at a relatively large distance from the ocean. A few were decoded, revealing a fantastic message. The symbols suggested that Phoenician sailors had reached the continent in the 1st century AD.

Professor Bernardo da Silva Ramos, president of the Institute of Historic and Geographic Studies in Manaus, Brazil, devoted his entire life to explaining the mysteries of the Amazon interior. For twenty years he lived in the hell of the jungle, organizing a series of expeditions in the search for rock inscriptions and finding nearly three thousand. Some were partially eroded by time and the tropical climate, while others were completely legible. Most – according to the professor – were written in Phoenician and proved definitively that ocean travel was practiced by Phoenician and Carthaganean merchants in pre-Columbian times. Unfortunately, the opinions expressed by Ramos, much like those of a few other researchers concerning a “Phoenician” interpretation of the discoveries, were dismissed by the scientific community.

However, the issue is neither simple nor obvious. It is difficult to accept the idea that such a serious researcher could fall victim to such a hoax. Supposedly, some experts

are convinced of the need for another verification of the evidence gathered to date. Semiologists, in contrast, admit that in light of the latest research on the Phoenician language, the label of falsification should be removed from certain inscriptions. This applies first and foremost to the so-called inscription from Parahyba, found in 1874. It read that in the nineteenth year of the rule of King Hiram (approx. 600 BC), a Phoenician ship was driven onto the coast of Brazil by a storm. For thirty years the inscription was recognized as credible and later discredited as a fake. Then in 1968, American epigraphic, Professor Cyrus Gordon proved that the Brazilian inscription was indeed not a hoax. His conclusion was based on similarities between the message recorded at Parahyba and newly discovered Phoenician texts in the Old World.

It is hard to understand how science can swing so easily from one extreme position to another, changing opinions like a pair of gloves. Moreover, the ensuing situation suggests a few logical questions. Who took on the enormous task of creating fake inscriptions over a vast and relatively inaccessible area of the Amazon? Where were forgers with the requisite knowledge in the disciplines of epigraphy, archeology and the Phoenician language recruited? How can we explain the fact that these inscriptions were found over the course of a four hundred-year period? Does this indicate the existence of a forgery conspiracy spanning many generations? Many scientists cannot fathom the idea that Phoenician ships could have crossed the Atlantic, although in terms of navigational skill the Phoenicians and Carthageans superseded those of the Middle Ages. They built huge ships and knew how to sail against the wind. From a navigational perspective their supposed oceanic expeditions were entirely realistic.

In a book entitled *America B.C.: Ancient Settlers in the New World* and published in 1976, Professor Barry Fell of Harvard University, an expert in the field of epigraphy, collected a sizeable body of evidence confirming the thesis that inhabitants of the Old and

New World had repeated contact long before Columbus. Roman amphoras found in Guanabara Bay on the Brazilian coast, punic amphoras unearthed on the Honduran coast and a collection of coins dug up on Beverly beach in the state of Massachusetts...these are only a few of the examples highlighted by Prof. Fell. Obviously, his book raised objections from certain experts who, guided by a particular concept of patriotism, refused to accept its obvious and verifiable facts.

The evidence is piling up, and from a range of other disciplines. In 1976, during conservation work on the Egyptian mummy of Pharaoh Ramses II, dried tobacco leaves were found between the bandages wrapped around the embalmed remains – a sensation that was hard for science to swallow. Supposedly, tobacco made its way to the Old Continent from America only after expeditions led by Columbus, in other words 2,800 years after the death of Ramses. How did such an exotic plant get to Egypt? More intriguing questions without answers.

A similarly controversial reception met the discoveries accompanying research on the body of the Egyptian priest He-Nut Tauui, who died three thousand years ago. In 1994 the Munich Museum hired Dr. Svetle Balabanova of the Institute of Anthropology and Genetics to conduct a chemical analysis on the presence of narcotics in the priest's body. Imagine the surprise when, alongside mandrake root and Indian hemp, the analysis revealed the presence of tobacco and...cocaine! Initial reactions were predictable as the credibility of the results was questioned. Balabanova is recognized as an expert in her field and her method for detecting narcotics in the human body has been tested in criminology. Moreover, independent analyses conducted in Great Britain have also confirmed the accuracy of her conclusions.

One more point for the diffusionist concept of the growth of human civilization, which assumes mutual influences between cultures separated by thousands of kilometers.

Their case is strengthened by the fact that the isolationists, despite comprehensive search efforts from Mexico to Peru and Bolivia, are still unable to demonstrate a model of gradual evolution from primitive society to fully developed civilization. So, the exchange of blows continues and observation of the discussion itself is a fascinating experience.

I have plenty to think about during the long flight over the American continent. However, even the longest journey must eventually come to an end. Mine is on the Pacific, a great ocean that is only calm in name. Again I find myself in Lima. The next few weeks will represent a crowning moment in many years of preparation and fascination with the myth of Paititi. In a few days we will begin the hunt for a legend accompanying the last moments of the Incas – by taking on the myth of the lost jungle city.

Gray, dirty and sticky fog hangs in the air. This is the *garua* – a specialty of the Peruvian capital. Theoretically, it isn't raining but everything is sticky and humid. The guilty party is the cold Humboldt current. Effectively chilling this part of the coast, it stops huge clouds swollen with rain, divesting them of precipitation before they reach the dry coast.

Garua also refers to a misty drizzle that stays in the air, too light to fall to the ground. In Lima, rain is a rather unusual phenomenon, saving the city money on a drainage system, the lack of which doesn't worry anyone in the city. Every few decades the excess humidity accumulated in the sky pour from the heavens – a tragic day for city residents. Nature's fury washes away the homes of the poor on the hills surrounding the city, pieced together from a mish-mash of materials, along with a thin layer of soil.

There are no indications that Lima will suffer from some kind of catastrophe in the next few days, but the specter of failure still hangs over my expedition. We still

haven't received the last few documents that will allow the group to move freely through the jungle and all I hear is *posible mañana*. At the sound of those hated words, I feel like screaming and committing murder.

"Calm down, Jacek," says Malgosia, the wife of Polish Ambassador Wojtek Tomaszewski, in an attempt to rein in my more aggressive tendencies. "You need a lot of patience to deal with the local clerks or you'll die of stomach ulcers."

No doubt she is right, but I can't sit calmly as each day trickles by and stamp-wielding authorities cast a black shadow over the expedition with a smile. So, I crawl out of bed in the wee hours of the morning, before the insatiable walls absorb the fog draped over the city, and set out from my hotel filled with good will. I am greeted on the street by an alpaca, a cousin of the llama, and a friendly animal with silky white fur and a long neck. It stands in the doorway of a neighboring store of souvenirs, an irresistible lure for tourists. Every day I pass by, running a hand through the fur on its back, while it watches me with black, wise eyes. Perhaps it is only my imagination, but it seems to be looking at me with sympathy for the entire day I am about to waste, beating my head against the walls of bureaucratic indifference.

I have a late morning appointment at noon with Fr. Edmund Szeliga, a Salesian who gives hope to terminal sufferers of cancer and AIDS. The ninety-year-old Polish religious has been linked with Peru for seventy-three years. Most of his time is spent among the Pira on the upper Urubamba and the Machiguengas of the Madre de Dios. There, among the Amazon Indians, the priest has deepened his knowledge of their medicinal practices, fitotherapy and knowledge of herbs, discovering among others the special properties of the *vilcacora* and other plants growing in the jungle.

Fr. Szeliga receives me in the Miraflores district within a small building overgrown with flowers, the home of the Peruvian Institute of Andean Fitotherapy Research of which he is co-founder. The office is modestly furnished with a couch, a portrait of John Paul II over a desk and shelves filled with Polish books. The cheerful face of Fr. Szeliga is pleasing to look at and radiates warmth, calm and wisdom. I listen with the same enjoyment to his native Polish speech, free from foreign inflections, as he speaks words full of compassion for human pain, injustice and suffering. Only a man such as this could earn the trust of Indians, who until recently provoked fear by killing intruders who dared to enter their territory. For many years he had breathed the same air, shared the same food and taught Indians ways to ease the harshness of life in the jungle. They repay him by passing on tribal secrets, revealing the forest's secrets.

Among others, they showed him plants with phenomenal healing properties and unusual animals: the *cotomachaco* – a snake with two heads and the giant anaconda *sacha-mama*. They told him of great man-like apes, the *sacharuna*, who live in the depths of the wilderness and tribes of white Indians as well as of mysterious stone cities hidden under the cloak of the jungle. That is why I am here: to gain information from the source concerning a topic that has intrigued me for years. The stone cities of Madre de Dios! We sit together, chatting and slating our thirst with *Tyskie* Polish beer from a carton I brought to the priest, anticipating his nostalgia for our homeland and memories of youth.

“How does beer from your hometown taste?” I ask.

“Although today's beer, similarly to the city of Tychy, has acquired a certain air of distinction, nothing beats the taste of youth. That's why there is no competing with the beer I drank there seventy years ago. You can't compete with memories.”

“In a few days, I leave on an expedition to the Madre de Dios region to search for the legendary Paititi. Every piece of information concerning the area is valuable for me. How did you become interested in cities hidden in the jungle?”

“I received the first information from Juan Quispe – an Indian from the Pira tribe. While hunting he came across the stone ruins of a great city surrounded by defensive walls. I had no reason to doubt the truth of his account because the Indian was in my debt for saving the life of his wife. The city was situated near the Maestron River in what is now the Manu reservation and a small river with a waterfall. He gave me a golden *hacha* – an ax found in the ruins. I will show you.”

Fr. Szeliga reaches into his desk drawer and pulls out an object slightly smaller than a palm.

“I’m impressed. This is the first concrete proof of Paititi’s existence and the Incan treasures hidden within it.”

“Judging by the degree of oxidation on the surface, the gold content of the ax is small. Was it found in Paititi? Fifty years after its discovery, it is hard to make this unambiguous claim. It certainly hails from one of the cities lost in the jungle.”

“Are you familiar with the story of Alonso Cartagena, who found similar axes while working on an excavation site in the vicinity of Toporaque?”

“Cartagena got them from the Machiguengas Indians, who supposedly unearthed hatchets between large decorated stones. Cartagena conducted excavation work in the 1960s without the necessary permits and ran into trouble because of it. It is said that he also found jewelry and coins, but no one has confirmed this officially. When the fuss surrounding the find and his person quieted, the news surfaced that Cartagena was a wealthy man. However, I can say that my ax was found ten years before Cartagena’s discoveries.”

“Were the lake and waterfall Quispe mentioned ever found?”

“I have a little information concerning that from Dr. Carlos Neunschwander and my friend, also a Salesian, Fr. Carlos Polentini. My efforts have only uncovered popular local legends of the rulers of a city who practiced ritual bathing in the lake, covering their bodies in gold dust beforehand.”

“This is just like the legend of El Dorado concerning the gilded man from Guatavita Lake, the ruler of the Chibcha,” I interrupt.

“I can’t tell you which of the two legends is a spin-off. Perhaps the ritual developed independently because the Chibcha lived quite a distance from the Madre de Dios region, didn’t they?”

“Coming back to the location of Paititi...Do you have any maps that identify the city’s location?”

The sun spilling through the window gives the venerable man’s gray hair a golden cast as he shuffles through the massive desk. With shaky hands he unrolls a large map, bends over it and search for points of orientation known only to him. At last, with one confident stroke he marks a small circle on the map.

“Here is Paititi. I regret that I can only indicate the region where you should search instead of marking an X where the city lies, but the terrain is rough and hasn’t been explored fully by cartographers.”

We are silent for a moment. For me the information passed on by the Polish priest has special value. It confirms my suspicions that Paititi is not a pipe dream, the product of an overactive imagination.

“You have worked among the Machiguengas for a long time,” I state. “What do we know of the Indians living in the Maestron River region?”

“North of the Callanga River, a tributary of the Maestron, live more than a dozen Machiguengas families. They are considered to be the descendents of the Incas and use the Quechua language, although they also have their own. They have adopted Incan styles of dress, wearing traditionally golden ornaments, in addition to many other traditions. Perhaps more interesting, but also dangerous, is the Cuapacoris tribe, which has cut itself off from any contact with the white man. Those Indians, according to rumors passed by word of mouth, are supposedly the guards of Paititi. They are responsible for the disappearance of a few explorers, who violated the tribe’s territory. I am not saying this to frighten you, but I want to alert you to the danger. It can be reduced to a minimum if you stick to the principles followed by the Cuapacoris. They will not tolerate disrespect or violation of property and love presents. The price is high, but it is worth paying. I wish you success.”

“Thank you. Maybe it will be work out. I would like to ask you a few questions, taking advantage of your extensive knowledge of the jungle. How should we handle ourselves in the jungle; how should we react to a sudden illness or snake bite? You are an acknowledged expert in the world of the white man in the field of fitotherapy, the discoverer of *vilcacora*.”

“Yes, *vilcacora* is the queen of Amazon plants. As many as sixty species of this unusual vine grow throughout the Amazon. However, only one has very powerful healing properties. It appears in the jungle on mountain slopes, most frequently in the Peruvian Montaña, at a height of one thousand meters above sea level as a vine that reaches a length of sixty meters. Young creepers make their way slowly up the trees, secured by sharp spines that resemble claws. Hence the Spanish name for the plant – *uña de gato* – cat’s claws. The *vilcacora* lianas store a life-giving juice which the Indians call *agua savia*, or ‘wise water.’ ‘Wise water’ quenches thirst and is also used universally in the

selva to treat many health conditions as well as during the period of recovery. *Vilcacora* is a powerful substance with anti-inflammatory and antioxidative properties, which counteracts the aging process and stimulates and strengthens the immunological system, protecting the cells from mutation and curing malignant tumors and cancers. I know of no other substance that has such a wide application which works at the same time with such selectivity – by eliminating diseased cells and strengthening healthy ones. In the jungle there are many other plants that are helpful in treating human illnesses. Some kinds of cancers are treated with *yuanali*, *sangre de drago* – the blood of bulls and *huaca blanco*. An extract of *micania cordifolia* counteracts the effects of venom. If you suffer from joint pain, relief is available from a preparation made of the basis of an *chuchuhuasi* extract. The liana *clavel de dolor* acts as a painkiller. In turn the sap of the *maibo* tree disinfects more effectively than iodine. If you fall victim to malaria, you don't have to find a doctor or pharmacy – help will come from the bark of the *gabetillo* tree, in other places known as the Chinchona tree.”

“Let's concentrate for a minute on the Chinchona, since this is a classic example of adaptation of an Incan medicine to fight a sickness that has tormented mankind for thousands of years,” I say. “You could say that the drug market the beginning of chemotherapy and the rapid development of synthetic chemistry.”

“Quinine first gained popularity in Europe in 1638 when the wife of the viceroy of Peru, countess Cinchon, fell ill with malaria. A series of serious attacks lefts the countess with no chance of survival. In desperation, her doctor decided to try a cure used by the Indian *curanderos*. Bark indicated by the Indians was brought from where it grew in the upper reaches of the cordillera and the countess recovered. After its transport to Europe, the market for the Andean plants, which Linneus called *cinchona officinalis* in honor of the countess, experienced a boom. The extract made from its bark, called quinine,

changed the face of many countries, paving the way for the colonization of many lands that were previously inaccessible to white settlers. The cultivation of *cinchona* occupied a significant percentage of cultivated fields in tropical countries for decades.”

“Why did quinine find a niche in the medical world, while so many other curative plants used by *curanderos* met with resistance from doctors?”

“Perhaps because the first patient was such a well-connected individual. I don’t know...If I were mean, I’d say that in those days there were no large pharmaceutical concerns to make a fortune on them.”

“You certainly know of many examples of effective medicines from God’s pharmacy...”

“I could go on and on, but this is superfluous knowledge for you because you have to be able to recognize these plants among tens of thousands of species and know how to find them in the jungle. That is why it is best to include a local in your expedition who has been familiar with the *selva* since childhood. There is also the issue of nomenclature. For example, the well-known *ayahuasca* is also known as *ayac*, *huasca*, *capi*, *punga*, *nape*, *pinde*...”

“Exactly. You haven’t mentioned *ayahuasca*.”

“Because it would be a long story since this particular plant has incredible potential. The Indians are convinced that after drinking an *ayahuasca* extract, their brains begin to function differently, enabling contact with the spirit of the plant and gaining access to unused areas of our brains and surrounding reality. This is an animistic interpretation but the *curanderos*, irrespective of the magical aspect, acquire important information in this way that can be successfully put into practice.”

“Have you ever spoken to some of these *curanderos*? How do they explain the skills they receive under the influence of *ayahuasca*?”

“They claim that the ‘spirit of *ayahuasca*’ dictates the type of cure and suggests which decoctions should be given to the sick. Although this contradicts our rational understanding of the world, these cures are for the most part effective. They also say that the spirit of *ayahuasca* helps them to become friends with the spirits of curative plants. To put it in a more civilized language, we can imagine that the hallucinogenic trance caused by the plant allows one to feel the vibrations emitted by certain plants and then concentrates the user’s thoughts, who is then able to generate a healing frequency if for some reason the necessary plant is not at their disposal. It is unbelievable, but I myself have become convinced of the effectiveness of these practices. Well, the human organism still hides many secrets despite our undoubtedly numerous medical achievements. Just like the reality that surrounds us.”

“Does the *curandero*, or rather *ayahuasquero*, in gaining access to the subconscious, have an influence on our personality?” I dig.

“A friend of mine who is a *curandero* claims that the place where *ayahuasca* is used and the people who submit to its power act like magnets in attracting spirits. Among them are good spirits that help people as well as harmful demons from the tropical forest, including astral look-alikes and the souls of dead *brujos* – evil magicians who hurt others in the pursuit of their own interests. The dangers of using *ayahuasca* under the supervision of a poorly trained *ayahuasquero* involve their inability to control these dark forces.”

“I wonder why fitotherapy has such difficulty in breaking through the prejudices of the medical community.”

“That’s a good question because before the age of medicines produced by chemical companies, fitotherapy was an important part of a doctor’s knowledge. This is still true in some countries, for example in China. There every pharmacy is in essence an

herbal store. Meanwhile contemporary medicine has rejected our God given natural medicinal substances. Fascinated by the chemical revolution, doctors administer to their charges without remembering the synthetics which were previously extracted from plants recognized as curative. They are backed by a media advertising campaign on which large companies spend just as much as on scientific research and implementing new drugs.”

“For example, antibiotics...” I offer.

“Antibiotics have become a medical sensation, but at the same time they are a great medical deception. They are a two-edged sword. By eliminating micro-organisms, they also weaken the immune system, encouraging the growth of mycosis and causing the development of virulent strains that are resistant to antibiotics.”

“So there interest of patients and the benefits of pharmaceutical concerns are two different things?”

“Take, for example, what happens to a patient who is diagnosed with cancer, usually in an advanced stage, because cancer prevention is generally inaccessible to the general public. Doctors use surgery, radio or chemotherapy to treat such a patient, who dies anyway after a statistically predictable period of time. The patient dies because chemotherapy damages the heart, liver and kidneys, destroys the immune system and causes anemia and depression...New drugs are needed to counteract the side effects, which in turn generate side effects of their own – and so on and so on until death occurs. The pharmaceutical industry is obviously pleased because of the colossal fortune it makes. Of course, we cannot repudiate all of the medical accomplishments over the past decades, but a doctor should adopt a more holistic approach to the patient. Instead of thoughtless use of synthetics, they should also incorporate fitotherapy in the treatment process. It is cheap, effective and has no side effects.”

“In other words, let’s learn from the *curanderos*?”

“Well, Amazon medicine, local herbs and their proper application is the most valuable knowledge the Amazon Indians can give us, white people, who in a whirlwind of media propaganda that serves large companies are poisoning themselves with chemicals. Nature has created a gigantic pharmacy under the open sky that is equipped to treat nearly every disease. Local Amazon tribes benefit from about 1,800 species of curative plants. Many medicaments used in modern treatment contain ingredients isolated precisely from tropical plants. So far ethnobotanists have examined a mere one percent of plants for possible medical uses. Moreover, intensive deforestation is leading steadily to the extinction of many species with unknown medical applications, which could be used to save human lives. Thanks to the Amazon Indians we have a chance to return to Slavic knowledge...to return to the source, to our roots and learn from the Indians, since our witches no longer exist...Let’s get back to the primordial synthesis of the body and spirit – every *curandero* who examines a patient has this awareness...Do our doctors have a chance?”

Unfortunately, the end of our fascination is fast approaching. Ania, a Polish woman who works in the institute, interrupts us to remind the priest about his waiting patients. Fr. Edmund smiles apologetically.

“The sick cannot be made to wait. In the institute, we have already cured over thirty thousand patients. Many came to us in an extremely poor state,” he says, saying goodbye to me. “It gives me strength and the will to work.”

On June 20, 2002 a courier from the government palace in Lima delivers a document to the hotel, reporting that “President Alejandro Toledo assumes protectorate over the expedition Paititi 2002.” As a justification the paper states that “the president is greatly pleased to lend his moral support in light of the scientific value of the enterprise,

its organization and program as well as the stature of its director, a universally known explorer. The search for the legendary Paititi has brought about positive results, not only in the field of qualified tourism, but also in the areas of science and culture.”

In a few days I receive similar documents from Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and Polish President Alexander Kwasniewski. Their backing marks an important milestone in the fight with local bureaucracy. Everyone declares their good will, but that doesn't always translate into action. The paper and stamp of the president give the process miraculous impetus. In the course of two days, I break through all the barriers and obstacles, collecting all the necessary documents. Just in time, because in two days the entire team will arrive.

Karin calls. She is disappointed that I've already been in Lima for a few days and haven't contacted her. I start to explain about my incredibly busy schedule and organizational difficulties...

“You're lying,” she says, interrupting me unceremoniously. “I saw your interview on television with that simpering slut. If you don't have time for me, maybe you'd like to meet with that reporter from *El Mercado*?”

“I would rather meet you and the reporter. That might be exciting.” I'm trying to make a joke, but Karin is still steaming. We set a time and place to meet.

Karin is late several minutes, but her beauty is captivating. She is more beautiful and confident than ever, presenting an enchantingly white set of teeth in an even more splendid smile. Fortunately, most beautiful women have no idea of their ability to paralyze and intoxicate men, which is how I feel as I take a seat at our table.

“Congratulations on your new job in such a prestigious daily,” I offer in an attempt to stroke her vanity.

“Save your congratulations for the editor-in-chief for his ability to convince me to work for him.” Her riposte is quick and demonstrates her well developed self-confidence. “But let’s get to work so we don’t waste your incredibly valuable time.”

She’s a cruel beast, but an amazingly enchanting one. With every passing minute I am more impressed.

“This is going to be hard. You are so breathtakingly beautiful that I can’t seem to gather my thoughts in your presence.”

“This coming from a man whose life is spent in the company of beautiful women. Should I list them? Ursula Andress, Vickie from the Parisian Crazy Horse, Julia Kuroczkina – then Miss World...”

“You’re well-prepared for this conversation.”

“I’m a professional – did you have any doubts? Getting back to the interview...Can I record?”

I shrug, having no intention of being stubborn about the authorization of the interview.

“Thank you. I won’t ask you or write about your expedition to Paititi. Other magazines have already covered that. I want to show my readers Jacek Palkiewicz as a person. Your life is a constant series of risky trips and adventures. Tell me, do you see yourself as a kind of Rambo or Indiana Jones?”

“You don’t need to be superman to cross the Atlantic alone, wander through Siberia, roam the Taklamakan Desert or trudge through the jungles of Borneo. What are needed are professionalism, physical preparation, perfect organization and imagination. I’m not after easy success and that’s why nothing gets out of control. Then you have to display a little will to survive and the determination that enables you to realize the objective despite all the obstacles arrayed against you. In Yakutia, known now as Sacha,

in temperatures of minus fifty-eight degrees Fahrenheit during a river crossing, the ice broke beneath our reindeer caravan. In a murderous race with time, wading up to our knees in icy slush, we fought to free the animals tied together in the harnesses and bring the entire cargo to the bank. We had to act quickly since the water froze with lightning speed. Our soaked, felt boots were soon transformed into blocks of ice. We won that race against time. After fifteen minutes, we were warming ourselves and drying out in front of a large campfire. I survived even more harrowing moments on the Atlantic, sailing alone in a raft without a radio, sextant or autopilot and unable to call for help. After many days of storms, I was approached by a ship that offered safety, a warm bunk and assistance. It was so hard to say ‘no thank you,’ when every survival instinct in your body wants to say just the opposite.”

I stop there so as not to bore her potential readers but I could continue to provide arguments proving that my idol is not some fictitious Indiana Jones. Instead, my model is the hero of older myths, frequently a common man who is forced to set out on a journey under extraordinary circumstances. These mythological figures share one common trait – they travel to unknown lands, many of which have never been visited by man. Often they cross the borders of human endurance but never retreat, which makes them heroes.

“Don’t you ever feel fear?”

“That’s a common question. It is hard not to be afraid when confronted with the might of nature’s fury. Heroes like that don’t exist and if someone claims that they aren’t afraid, then they are lying. Fear is a topic that is always slightly embarrassing. I remember sweating with fear as a beginning sailor on the stormy sea and being too embarrassed to talk to friends about it. I got rid of that insecurity after meeting Eric Tabarly, the famous French sailing captain, who assured me that he is afraid every time a

storm cloud appears on the horizon. Fear is a reaction of self-preservation by our bodies in critical situations. The trick is to keep your cool and find a way out.”

“When things get really bad, what do you think about?”

“I have stared death in the face a few times, as they say, and every time I thought it was the end. In those moments I was revisited by memories of the events that gave my life meaning: girls, family and many wonderful experiences connected with my travels and obsessive curiosity about the world. This will certainly come as a disappointment because my answer is nothing original. But that is how most people react in similar situations, as long as they have something to remember. For me it was a long retrospective because I’ve lived to the fullest.”

“How does one control fear?”

“We are afraid of the unknown. Exploration strips away our fear, which is only a psychological defense mechanism, a natural reaction, an alarm that mobilizes the body’s reserves and increases its physical abilities. It can be conquered simply by faith in one’s strengths, strong will and determination. Fear cannot paralyze our minds or muscles. This is a question of training. Believe me, a person can learn to control their fear. I would go even further and say that for me one of the most amazing feelings that a person can experience is conquered fear.”

I am reminded of the fear I saw in the eyes of Somalians, inhabitants of a phantom country where long years of chaos have given birth to complete anarchy and where daily life is a test of survival. The senseless barbarity of war combined with a terrible drought of biblical proportions has left behind irreparable wounds. Travel in these parts of the world involves a constant balancing act on a thin line. Muffled shots or the sharp exchange of gunfire, which rip through surreal moments of silence, are a constant reminder. Not a moment goes by without a murder, theft, rape or kidnapping being

committed.

I prepared extensively for the trip, attending to anything that could offend the radical muslims. I avoided discussions and commentary related to religious matters, ambiguous statements concerning women, abstained from alcohol, left my boots at every door, refrained from wearing a cross around my neck and giving a firm handshake in greeting others. I didn't tell obscene jokes, observed the Friday holy days and so on and so on. Despite all this, my thirteen guards were unable to guarantee me a minimum level of security.

Before the trip I was a guest of Italian television station RAI. At the end of the recording, the host asked about my plans for the near future. My answer provoked the rather undiplomatic reply: "There are different kinds of deaths, but it seems you have chosen one of the worst." It is therefore no surprise that my worried wife, Linda, emailed to ask me how the trip to Somalia was going. What was I supposed to say? That it was dangerous? So, I wrote as always that everything was OK because it couldn't have been any other way.

"Jacek, you are the founder of the first survival school in Europe. Do you have any practical advice for threatening situations?"

"There are no universal suggestions. First and foremost, we need to be aware of the potential within ourselves. That knowledge cannot be mastered without the proper training in conditions that simulate various types of danger. The ideal situation is when a person has achieved such an advanced level of training that their reactions are automatic. There is not always time to analyze the situation. That is what I teach in the school. However, personality traits are also important. By force of will a person can defeat the greatest enemies – exhaustion, pain, thirst and loneliness. The will to survive activates immense reserves of energy of which we are often not even aware."

“They say you are a tyrant during an expedition; that you demand a lot and cannot tolerate opposition.”

“Karin, in difficult moments there is no time for parliamentary democracy. Imagine the leader of an expedition stopping to take a vote at crucial points in the trip or wasting time and effort on discussion with a malcontent, because there is always one in moments like these.”

“Reports and accounts by writers who have visited exotic places are full of blood-chilling scenes...”

“Those descriptions are largely exaggerated. One hundred and fifty years have passed since the pioneering expeditions of Livingston or Stanley and we live in a different world. Our endeavors are supported by technological gadgets such as mobile phones and GPS, but since the development of jet aircraft distance is no longer an issue. In the course of twenty-five years of voyages, I have only landed in a few dangerous situations. I was more afraid of the Khmer Rouge and their Kalashnikovs, partisans from the Shining Path insurgency and Columbian cocaine smugglers than the possibility of meeting a wild Indian or jaguar. When I unexpectedly encountered a puma in the Amazon, an animal as black as night, it ignored me completely, disappearing so suddenly that I had no time to reach for my camera.”

“Do you ever entertain thoughts of failure or defeat?”

“When planning an expedition in a difficult region, I always count on bad weather, human weakness, illnesses and injuries. I fight to the end, but the shadow of failure hangs over every risky enterprise. Failure doesn’t mean we have to give up – you can always return later and make another attempt.”

“Jacek! You are involved in large-scale crusades in defense of the natural environment, which does honor to your sensitivity, but at the same time you enjoy the

corrida and have somewhat of an expert reputation in the sport. You have been photographed with many of the best matadors. How do you reconcile these contradictory interests?”

“What does environmental protection have to do with killing bulls? After all, these animals are raised to provide someone with a steak at some point in the future. The *fiesta taurina*, aside from its colorful and picturesque folklore aspects, also has a symbolic meaning for the hot-tempered. This art, unchanged throughout the centuries, has long been immersed in the culture of Spain, where the drama of the *corrida* represents an honorable fight in which man must demonstrate his domination of the wild animal. The arena is a sanctuary in which the tragedy, much like a pagan offering, is entirely dedicated to viewers. Traditionally, the Spanish also believe that the bull prefers to die in battle than be chopped up for its meat in some slaughterhouse. If we call the *corrida* cruel, then what can we say about one person’s cruelty towards a fellow human being? Each day brings a fresh batch of evidence...”

A woman carrying a child on her back approaches us with a huge bucket of flowers.

“Perhaps you would like to buy a bouquet for the beautiful lady?”

I give her a few sols,⁶⁵ choose a bunch of red, fragrant roses from the bucket and place them in front of Karin.

“These roses remind me of you. They are so beautiful and, also like you, so prickly.”

“Don’t complain! When it comes to you I’m as sweet as honey and I shouldn’t be because you neglect me. I haven’t heard a word from you in a year.”

⁶⁵ The Peruvian currency.

I quickly change the subject since she certainly has no interest in hearing my excuses. Young women cannot understand that work and responsibilities can block out other pleasures in a man's life.

"We still haven't celebrated your promotion. Will you have a drink with me?"

I order myself a dry martini and Karin asks for a martella. We clink glasses. The alcohol reactivates Karin.

"I propose a toast to the success of your expedition."

I have no intention of protesting. These kinds of toasts are drunk in one swig, to the dregs. So, we drink.

"Now you have to watch out for me because after the third glass I become dangerous." The shine of playful lights is back in her eyes.

"A real man likes a challenge. That's why I propose a third toast to a girl, who enchanted me from the first moment I met her."

Karin directs a slanted look at me and reaches for her glass without a word. She drinks slowly, looking into my eyes. That look is stronger than the alcohol.

"Now you better take me home." She puts her arm around mine and leads me towards the exit.

The taxi, with the capacity of a small room, transports us through the noisy streets and then turns into a quieter neighborhood, stopping finally in a rather darkened corner. We get out. Karin doesn't say goodbye like she did one year ago. Instead, opening the gate, she asks me to be quiet. A set of marble stairs leads us to the first floor.

"And what will your conventional parents say about my late-night visit?"

"You have a good memory. And you still believe the words of a woman like an inexperienced whelp."

In front of the door to the apartment, she embraces me and I brush a light kiss against her cheek. The scent of her perfume is heady and I feel the impatience of my body. Karin opens the door. I find myself in a tasteful, although slightly urban interior. The room is sparsely furnished; a few of the items are recognizable antiques. My host invites me in and then vanishes for a moment into the bathroom, while I stand deep in philosophical amazement at the unpredictability of women and the surprises fate tosses on our doorstep...

On the day before our departure for Cuzco I receive an invitation to dinner from an old friend, Ricardo Marquez Flores, who until recently was the vice-president of Peru. We sit on the terrace of his elegant villa in the Miraflores district, surrounded by clusters of tropical bushes frosted with bunches of flowers. They give off a sticky, suffocating odor. In front of me *Señora* Flores places a plate of *cebiche* – pieces of raw fish seasoned liberally with hot *rocoto* peppers and slices of onion, marinated for a few hours in lemon juice and chili. The spiciness of the dish is muted by sweet *camote* potatoes and cooked corn on the cob. As an aid to digestion, the meal also includes *pisco sour*, a vodka made from grapes, with lemon juice, whipped egg whites, sugar and the aromatic essence of *rutacee* bark. The drink goes down pleasantly, but one has to be careful since it can really cloud the head.

Ricardo has a present for me – a golden miniature *tumi*. My friend assures me that it will serve me as a talisman. In the Quechua language *tumi* means knife and was an ancient ritual instrument, like a cross between a knife and a hatchet with a crescent blade. The handle is finished with a likeness of the mythical Namla, a supernatural being in richly adorned robes. The object is linked to the Chimú culture and was used in sacrifices.

Incredibly popular around the world, it became the favorite with craftsmen who artistry is channeled into supplying tourists with ancient objects.

This is my next to last evening in Lima so I have a chance to drink to the success of our expedition. Ricardo, holding a full glass, follows the local toasting principles. Raising the glass, he says: *arriba*, lowering the glass with the word: *abajo*, extends his hand forward with the words: *al centro* and adds: *adentro* – then pours its contents into his mouth.

“In Poland you can’t stop at just one toast because a person has two legs. A second toast is just the thing to balance everything out,” I say, a piece of constructive criticism for the local traditions.

Ricardo doesn’t object and the ritual begins again: up, down, to the middle, to the inside. *Arriba, abajo, al centro, adentro.*⁶⁶ We repeat the commands like a mantra and toast several times to make the moment a memorable one. As a result, I return to the hotel in a singing mood.

There are so many affairs to arrange on our last day in Lima. I call a tourist agency in Cuzco that has cooperated with us on the organization of the expedition to ask if the necessary bivouac and climbing equipment, as well as an all-terrain vehicle, have been acquired. The friendly man on the other end of the line can’t tell me much because he knows that his boss will be in the next day, but he thinks everything should be OK. The word “should” gets an immediate rise out of me, but I stifle my anger because it won’t help in the current situation. *Mañana!* Oh, that Latin temperament. I call Karin.

“Remember, you promised me exclusivity when you return from the jungle after discovering Paititi. And don’t forget me,” I hear in farewell.

⁶⁶ Up, down, to the center, down.

“A person doesn’t forget a girl like you. I promise you’ll be the first journalist I meet after my return.”

As I put down the receiver the telephone rings again. It’s Maria Carmen, who informs me that all of the team members have arrived in Cuzco and are waiting only on me.

“Unfortunately, I have some bad news. The guards at Manu National Park have taken a serious interest in our expedition. Someone told them that the expedition is only a cover for an attempt to plunder a few archeological sites. I can try to deal with the situation. For a few thousand dollars we can buy their favor and agreement to look the other way. That’s the price set by a previous expedition.”

“Just what exactly are the guards meant to look the other way from? We are not *huaqueros*. We have permission and are under the protection of the president of Peru himself. Tell them not to count on a *coimision*. I’m not giving them a dollar.”

This time I throw down the phone. Who is spreading these wicked rumors? I can understand hostility from professional archeologists towards initiatives that are launched without their blessing and this could also be part of a conflict between researchers from Lima and Cuzco. However, I am certain that the attempt to discredit our expedition is Ruben’s work. I had already forgotten about that little unpleasant Peruvian episode and hoped that the Lyman antique dealer had also forgotten about me. I was wrong. Slight to pride and ambition are cause enough for revenge with Latin peoples. I have to be careful and stay on my toes at all times.

Green Hell

Traveling Peruvian roads certainly provides a wealth of experiences: breathtaking views and constant stress. Only after returning from my first visit to the land of the Incas did I understand the words of one of my Peruvian friends who, when I had told him of my plans, commented:

“I don’t ride the bus. I have a wife and children.”

At first I thought he was referring to a busy schedule, but this man is simply familiar with the realities of his own countries. In Peru a driver needs to be a virtuoso behind the wheel, able to balance on the edge of precipices on narrow shelves protruding from the vertical walls, slip beneath rock overhangs and make the jumps in just a few hours from a tropical to an arctic climate. A driver never knows whether the road will be blocked by a rock or mud slide. The forest of crosses at the side of the road is a reminder of that danger. Each one marks some human tragedy. Displays of equilibrium, when centimeters can make the difference between life and death, play games with fate and the word “destiny” gains a whole new dimension. The locals are used to this and have a different concept of danger than that of the average tourist.

Once, on the hellish road from Casma to Huaraz, where one of our wheels hung over the drop as we tried to avoid hitting a truck traveling in the opposite direction, an Indian attempted to entertain me with conversation.

“How did you get to Peru?” he inquired.

“By plane.”

“That’s dangerous. Weren’t you afraid?”

How do you explain to such a person that the journey underway at the time was one of the most harrowing in my life. He wouldn’t understand me. This nightmarish road

is no novelty because all of them are the same. “What is there to fear,” he would probably say, “the ground is so close you can reach it with your legs. But in a plane...”

We leave Cuzco behind. Ahead are at least sixteen tiring hours and two hundred kilometers of muddy, bumpy mountain roads – a moment of truth for both cars and passengers. The width of the road will not accommodate two cars traveling in opposite directions, so the rule is that departures from Cuzco are on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, allotting the remaining days of the week to incoming traffic. Landscapes are a fine way to forget the numerous twists and turns and tragic scenes produced by the imagination. Large herds of llamas, grotesque animals that carry unusually long necks with grace and elegance, graze in green valleys. For centuries these patient and strong animals have played an important role in the lives of local peoples, supplying skins, wool, meat and milk. They are also used for transport on mountain paths. Peasant women dressed in typical black bowler hats, children tied to their backs with colorful shawls, appear from no where on the side of the road.

Paucartambo is only the halfway point on our road. We stop to get our and stretch. Life in the settlement is centered on the crowded and bustling square located next to the over two hundred-year-old bridge over the Mapacho River. Each year in mid-July, thousands of people flock to the market for three days to take part in one of the most well-known folklore holidays in South America. The local festival is filled with dancing and processions of Indians in fantastic clothing. Feasting is accompanied by large amounts of *chicha* and *pisco* and the night sky is illuminated with fireworks. Neither the burning sun nor rain can stop this explosion of joy. Throughout the day the town resonates with the beat of drums, the plaintive cries of flutes and the strumming of guitars. Nights are a time for singing and the thud of petards. On a night like this people

drink together, mourning old sadness, taking refuge in brotherhood, immersing themselves in the chaos and universal freedom.

Again we take our seats in the car. The speedometer adds up the kilometers slowly and the sight of a roadside bar reminds us of the responsibility we have to our stomachs. We get out. A few unshaven trucks drivers sit scattered among the tables, chasing away exhaustion with coffee. Cigarette smoke rises lazily in the air. The buzz of quiet conversation is in the air. An entourage of roadside taverns is spread out over the roads, similar to the ancient *tambos* of the Incas, where a traveler could also find food and rest. Who knows what the fate of the conquistadors would have been if not for the full larders of these Incan rest stops, not to mention their roads. These encouraged Pizarro to penetrate deep into the country and the clever foresight of Tawantinsuju's rulers led straight to their downfall.

The walls sport Playboy models in their negligees, obviously an attempt to cater to the tired truck drivers who stop here, taking their minds off the long, twisting road ahead, if only for a few minutes. Among the models is a slightly dusty picture of a curious plant that grows in the upper parts of the Andes. The gigantic *puya* is related to the pineapple, with long, razor-sharp leaves. It is the largest graminaceous plant in the world. For a hundred years the plant develops its amazingly large lower part, blooming suddenly by forming eight-meter cones whose ends are adorned in thousands of flowers. After releasing its seeds, the *puya* dies.

We demolish servings of *ocopa* – potatoes with pepper, eggs and corn cakes, washing the meal down with cold beer and the returning to our vehicle. The clutch engages and then the accelerator. In a moment the bar has disappeared behind us, becoming just a shrinking speck on the horizon. Again we balance on the edge of life and death. We have to hurry if we want to spend the night in Pilcopata. The road ascends into

the heights in increasingly tighter hairpin turns. After two hours of arduous climbing, the car enters a foggy pass. Not far from here is Tres Cruces,⁶⁷ an important milestone on the ancient Incan road leading to the Amazon lowlands. There, during the summer solstice, the famous natural terrace of *miradores*, at an elevation of 3,800 meters above sea level, provides an excellent view of the symmetrical picture and strange colors of the setting sun. This phenomenon, difficult to explain without some basic knowledge of optics, was for the Inca – followers of the sun god Inti – something akin to a magical event.

From the pass we descend by more than three thousand meters. This road is even worse than the one we climbed during the ascent. Unpaved, curvy and cut by streams, the terrain rocks our minibus. It's a good thing the mountains are cloaked in mist, giving the imagination less material to work with and saving us the stressful views. The climate changes at an amazingly rapid pace. In the pass we trembled with cold and in an hour we start to remove our sweaters. Through the open window blows humid and stifling air. The driver accelerates to breakneck speed, whistling under his breath. He doesn't even slow when a brief downpour reduces visibility to a minimum. This race with death ends fortunately in a few hours as the road straightens out and passes through a mossy forest. Late in the evening we arrive in Pilcopata. Finally, we can relax our tired muscles and straighten tortured spines.

“Gentlemen, a bit of alcohol will help you to calm your nerves.” Maria Carmen teaches us how to prepare the local cocktail. One part *aguardiente de caña* – the local spirit, one part aromatic juice from an unfamiliar fruit and one part *miel de abeja*⁶⁸. I would never think that the thick, greenish liquid would become like honey, in appearance similar to the flowers from which it was made. Maria Carmen mixes the cocktails, samples the drink and then pours all of us a glass.

⁶⁷ The Three Crosses.

⁶⁸ Honey.

“*Señores!* For a successful start to our expedition! Cheers!”

“Cheers! *Prosit!*” roar a few thirsty male throats. The taste is delightful. We can’t stop amazing at the generosity of the jungle, which is able to satisfy every human need.

Pilcopata, a tiny settlement at the jungle’s edge, has no more than five hundred residents, who make a living from cultivating bananas, corn and jute. We check into a Spartan, but clean and cozy hotel belonging to Maria Carmen and managed by her parents. In the middle of the night I am awakened by a chorus of frogs. In Europe I would call these sounds croaking, but here I have no idea what word to use for the unearthly racket I’m hearing. Horrible sounds torture the ears and keep sleep at bay. It takes a while to get used to this incredible “sound track.” From this point on, it will accompany us every day, to a greater or lesser degree. Rustling, crunching, buzzing, hissing, whistling, crashing and screaming will sound out against a background of bird song. Sometimes it is relatively quiet, but a moment later the voices escalate as if taking orders from the baton of a mysterious conductor.

The forest begins on the other side of the settlement and belongs to Manu National Park, the largest nature preserve in the world and a veritably untouched collection of tropic flora and fauna. Over an area of 2.7 million square miles are three main ecosystems: the puna or tundra plateau at an elevation of four thousand meters, subtropical forests that cover the lower slopes and humid equatorial forests in the river valley. Declared to be a Biosphere Reserve in 1997, Manu has been included on UNESCO’s world heritage list since 1987. This is no surprise considering Peru’s incredible diversity of ecosystems. It would be hard to find another country with such a rich mosaic of landscapes and climatic zones. Desert terrain in the west, year-round snows and glaciers in the high Andes and subtropical forests on their western slopes.

Clear-cut vertical zones, in which a few climatic levels are always present, mean that every valley, plateau and peak creates a world of its own. Considering the number of diverse ecosystems, it is no wonder we encounter such a large population of exotic animals. The park is home to species such as the Andean bear, jaguar, caiman, sloth, tapir, anteater, otter, condor, tucan, countless parrots, hawks and tiny hummingbirds. As many as eight hundred and fifty bird species and two thousand animal species have been catalogued, while every hectare [2.5 acres] is home to two hundred and fifty different tree species.

The next day we start the day with the rising sun. There is a lot of work to be done. For the last time, we check our equipment and pack everything into watertight containers. When the porters arrive, we load a sizeable cargo into the boat: kitchen equipment, canned food, packaged food, dry provisions, fruit, vitamins, fishing equipment, a generator, fuel canisters, boxes containing the georadar, an enormous tent, sleeping bags, mosquito nets, machetes, whetstones, presents for the Indians, signal flares, pharmaceutical supplies and filming equipment. We will only take the bare necessities. Every additional thirty kilograms [66 pounds] means another porter and another mouth to feed, extra rations and even more porters...It's a vicious circle.

"Jacek, don't forget about *aguardiente de caña*. We have to use something to disinfect our bodies," Volodia reminds me. He must have enjoyed yesterday's cocktails.

After breakfast, we go over a brief set of instructions on the principles that should govern our behavior in the jungle, the canons of tropical hygiene.

"Documents should be kept in sealed plastic bags along with one set of dry clothes. These we will put on immediately before sleeping. In the morning, everyone will put on their damp clothing again because it certainly won't have time to dry during the

night. This is unpleasant but otherwise we will end up with two sets of wet clothing and none of you will sleep properly. A sleep-deprived traveler in the jungle spells catastrophe. Remember to fasten your mosquito net tightly before falling asleep since the anti-malarial pills only give us thirty percent protection. In the morning, everyone should dust their body with talc powder in order to reduce the risk of scrapes, sores, infection and fungus. Soak your socks in insect repellent to prevent leeches from getting into your shoes. Don't shave too much because even the smallest scratch will begin to seep. You have to get used to the idea that in the jungle, the only part of the body that we will be able to keep clean are your teeth. Also, don't forget to drink a lot of fluid to guard against heat stroke."

In order to make everyone aware of the weight of this problem, I add a few sentences of theory.

"When the temperature of the air is higher than that of the body, the only effective way to cool down the organism is intense sweating. The body uses almost six hundred calories to expel one liter of sweat, hence the logical conclusion that sweat evaporating from the surface of the skin gets rid of excess heat. That is why Arabs sometimes asking in greeting: 'How do you sweat?'

Equipment for Expedition Paititi 2002

Clothing

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| - windbreaker w/ pockets | - leather boots w/ canvas shoe |
| - hat with a wide brim | uppers |
| - pants (made from strong but lightweight cotton) | - sport shoes (for leisure) |
| - water-proof belt | - wool and cotton socks |
| - one shirt (light, cotton, with long sleeves) | - handkerchief |

- cotton undershirt
- a light sweater
- sweatshirt and pants
- boxer shorts
- a swimsuit
- gloves
- water-resistant poncho
- sunglasses
- plastic clothing bags

Documents

- passport
- visa
- copy of passport, including blood type
- insurance
- credit card
- currency
- international health document

Toiletries

- shaving equipment
- soap
- towel
- toilet paper
- items for teeth cleaning
- sunscreen with UV filter
- protective lip balm
- facial tissue

Personal Equipment

- water-proof packet for documents
- machete with sheath and whetstone

- travel bag with string ties
- small backpack
- lighter
- sleeping bag (w/ full length zipper)
- tarpaulin sheet
- air mattress
- mess tin
- canteen
- silverware
- spirit stove
- water-proof matches
- medical kit (basic tropical set)
- candle
- freeze-dried rations
- mineral salts
- water purification tablets
- tweezers
- insect repellent
- mosquito net for the face
- money belt
- multifunctional knife
- flashlight (small, water-proof)
- map
- compass
- GPS
- whistle
- roll of thin wire
- string, cord
- bandages of various sizes
- anti-malarial substance
- plastic bags
- pen
- notebook
- sewing kit
- safety pins
- small padlock
- photo camera, film

Communal Equipment

- watertight water bottles
- set of maps in a water-proof

- presents plastic
- travel bags - GPS
- containers - large tarpaulin
- food (calorie-rich products, dry and canned food) - climbing rope
- kitchen equipment - smoke candles
- machetes, whetstones - fishing equipment
- generator - binoculars
- fuel - first-aid kit

A positive answer means that the person feels good. In the jungle, the humidity in the air is always above seventy-five percent. Here the skin produces large quantities of sweat that does not evaporate off the skin, but rolls off of it. So, we cannot count on the body's natural system of thermoregulation, particularly since sweating is the cause of severe dehydration. From there it is just one step to hyperthermia, or overheating, and if the body's fluids are not replaced – to heat stroke. Is that clear?"

"*My wsio paniali kamandir,*"⁶⁹ my listeners yell with one voice, reaching for bottles of cold beer. That is how they receive my words.

It is some time before the long, ten-meter boat powered by a rumbling motor, leaves behind the last shred of civilization. We are forced to stop almost immediately. A man standing on the bank, gesturing wildly, is calling us.

"That's a park ranger," says the steersman, bringing the boat to the primitive jetty.

The man's behavior and facial expression suggest trouble. After some introductory banter we heard the dreadful words:

⁶⁹ Understood, commendant!

“You are sailing on the territory of the National Park without the permission of my chiefs in Cuzco. In their name I can grant you that permission to continue this expedition, but only in the company of a park ranger who will monitor compliance with the reserve’s regulations. However, that will cost you three thousand dollars.”

The proposal is unambiguous and direct. I try to keep my cool and take out the document sent by the president’s office.

“It seems to me that this document, signed by your president, should be enough for your bosses in Cuzco and to salve your conscience. I have nothing against taking on a ranger as long as he will have his own boat, equipment and enough food for several weeks. But I won’t pay thousands of dollars...”

“...because the ranger is paid by the Ministry of Tourism,” finishes Fr. Polentini.

“Please stay out of this, Mr. Polentini. You have entered the territory of the park illegally many times and I do not intent to tolerate it,” threatens the ranger.

“Not Mr. Polentini,” the priest protests with dignity, “but *sacerdote*⁷⁰ Juan Carlos Polentini, *por favor*. I have helped the inhabitants of these forests by bringing supplies of medicine and food when no park existed and I will continue to help because neither you nor your bosses in Cuzco will do so. I also have no intention of tolerating behavior that disrespects the president’s signature. Goodbye, sir.”

We sail away, leaving behind the ranger, jaw agape. I look at Padre in amazement. I’ve never seen him so outraged. But the affair doesn’t end with a witty retort. A few weeks after my departure from Peru, the ranger sued reporters for damages supposedly inflicted on the park terrain by Palkiewicz’s expedition. According to the man’s account, we were ruthless thieves as well as a threat to the health of the Indians. The attack was

⁷⁰ priest

likely at reaction to my statement for the ETE press agency, in which I described the incident.

We continue on. From the deck little is visible aside from trees, bushes, lianas and bamboos. The wall of green obscures both banks; from time to time caimans can be seen sunning themselves on the sandbars and napping, enormous bodies stretched out in full sun. They resemble large tree trunks. Of reptiles, I like these animals the least. There is something frightening, disgusting and treacherous about these creatures. Here, on park territory, they are protected, but in other regions people hunt them down ruthlessly – not only because of man's inborn aversion to reptiles but also for their skins.

The waters of Piñi Piñi, the color of coffee with milk, beats against the rocks, creating both large and small rock steps. Trapped between the banks, the swirl and rush in fury around the rocks, escaping a moment later to lap gently at the deposits of sand. As we sail upriver, the tropical sun torments every inch of exposed skin mercilessly. There is not even a shred of wind – the silence and scorching heat put us in a state of incredible sluggishness. As long as we keep moving, a cool wind refreshes us and makes breathing easier. When we stop, the heat zeros in and we start to sweat.

The forest is increasingly dense, without a single crack, in a palisade of trunks and leaves. Initially far apart, the banks approach one another as the days pass. Now the scents of the forest are distinguishable, as are details in the chaotic tangle of lianas and bushes.

“The forest is so beautiful and enormous, but ecologists are always issuing warnings about deforestation. Are the Amazon forests really shrinking?” Looking at the sea of green arrayed before us, I have my doubts.

Fr. Polentini scoots closer to overcome the noise of the engine.

“It is truly bad. The problem is uncontrolled timbering and burning in tropical forests. Both animals and Indians are dying. This is happening first and foremost in the Brazilian Amazon. Destruction of the *selva* is proportional to the proximity of roads. Trees are replaced by *pampa*, or thick, scrubby undergrowth. Fortunately, in Peru large swaths of jungle have retained their virgin character. In terms of Indians, right now no one is murdering them, but the problem is abject poverty and a lack of future perspectives. Indians are stuck between the civilized world and the one in which they have lived until now. Tribes that avoid contact with the white man also sidestep this problem, but few tribes of this kind exist. Cuapacoris live in the nearby forests...A Jesuit friend of mine told me that at the beginning of the 1980s, he arrived in their village. Gifts were exchanged, but in farewell the chief informed him that the group does not appreciate interference in their lives and will kill anyone who disturbs them.”

“That doesn’t sound encouraging. After all, we are going to be traveling through their territory. What can we do to minimalize the risk?”

“Observe their laws. We have already spoken of this. However, this is not universally understood. Even our president is guilty of this.”

“The president went roaming through the jungle?” I ask in amazement. “That’s unbelievable.”

“It was a big story in 1983. The president at that time – Fernando Belaunde Terry – had a plan to integrate the interior with the rest of the country. Part of the plan involved activating the overgrown roads over Fitzcarrald pass to the Madre de Dios *selva*. Helicopters brought in commandos, who set up camp and got busy cutting down the jungle. A few days later the soldiers were attacked unexpectedly by a host of red-painted Yaminahua Indians, armed with bows and spears. In the fever of battle, no one noticed the landing of a government helicopter, which carried the president and television crews.

The spontaneous visit was designed as propaganda to illustrate his commitment to serving the country.”

“So the Indians treated him to a surprise!”

“Exactly. The president was greeted by arrows. One of his bodyguards was wounded, but the collective fire of machine guns wielded by the commandos and guards forced the Indians to flee. A few men from each side fell wounded on the battlefield. Soon peace was declared with the president’s representatives and the road building continued. The incident shows just how many surprises the jungle hides.”

But the jungle is first and foremost the animals that live on nearly every inch of tropical soil. Small bloodthirsty insects hunt side by side with wild predators. For the time being, the jungles denizens are invisible, although we are the target of myriad mosquito offensives. Able to inflict bites through our clothing, the mosquitoes give rise to itching and minor infections. Their annoying presence is immediately noticeable when we stop to camp for the evening. Our only hope is a campfire. As we bask in its warmth, one of the porters coaxes a wistful tune out of his harmonica and Fr. Polentini, probably inspired by the gurgling of the stream in the darkness, begins a story of another *entrada*,⁷¹ launched in 1560 on the Huallaga River. The story concerns one Lope de Aguirre, the greatest madman in the history of the Spanish conquest and self-styled king of the Amazon. Chroniclers describe him with one voice as a man “more bestial and wild than a maddened tiger.”

In the course of twenty years in Peru, Aguirre was involved in various activities. He took care of horses, assisted the executioner and was constantly

⁷¹ Entrada (Spanish) – military conquest.

mixed up in some affair. One he was even sentenced to death for participating in a rebellion, but escape the noose thanks to amnesty. The man's appearance seemed to suggest trustworthiness. He was lean and short with pronounced features and wistful eyes. With a face reminiscent of an eagle, his menacing gaze rested eternally his interlocutors and with one look was able to provoke a fight.

By a twist of fate, Aguirre was one of the men recruited by Pedro de Ursua for an expedition in search of El Dorado. The Spanish realized the danger posed by rapid colonization of the Brazilian coast by the Portuguese. The next step might be a repeat of Orellana's exploration and that meant an utter loss of control over the immense country and its wealth. That is why Philip II agreed to Ursua's daring plan to sail to the land of gold at the head of a well-equipped and numerous expedition. Ursua was also granted the right to establish Spanish strongholds and had the authority to reward his men with any treasure they obtained. Aside from the powers of persuasion, Ursua must have possessed of many other talents to merit such benevolence from the monarchy. Chroniclers described him as brave and noble, a man who put honor before everything else. These traits were valued by his unruly and proud officers. Despite his youth, he enjoyed considerable authority.

In 1559 preparations were finally nearing an end. Three hundred soldiers, two thousand Indians and five hundred horses were readied to sail the Huallaga River on twenty barkentines and rafts. The people Ursua gathered together represented the crème de la crème of scum and hellions from the farthest reaches of Peru. "All are distinguished by a flexible conscience," wrote a missionary of the time. Ursua made two mistakes, the first in deciding to ease the troubles of the excursion in the company of the beautiful Donna Inez de Atienza. The officers

warned him against bringing the young, carefree and comely woman, explaining justifiably that her presence would contribute to lax discipline and conflicts. Ursua, enchanted by the young mulato woman and her sexual promiscuity, turned a deaf ear to their appeals...

His second blunder was including Lope de Aguirre in the expedition, whose head, in turn hatched a devilish plan. Aguirre plotted to get rid of the group's leaders, take control of the expedition and possess Donna Inez, using Incan gold to establish his own country. The first step was bringing the soldiers over to his side, which did not prove difficult. The rogues of Aguirre's cut were only waiting on a pretext to cause trouble. Ursua was also aware of this. After the murder of one of his officers, he did not hesitate in sentencing the men responsible to death. This manifestation of strength, however, only brought about a temporary improvement in morale. Difficulties in traversing the Marañon River, frequent clashes with locals and a growing incidence of illness among the crew sharpened tensions among the soldiers. There were no indications that the expedition would soon encounter the mythical land of gold.

From the get go, Aguirre laid a range of accusations at the leader's doorstep, complained and spread dissent within the ranks: that he was too harsh and demanding, that he was too rarely in the company of his soldiers, preferring the company of Donna Inez, that everyone would die before Ursua decided to turn back. Exploiting hostility towards Ursua, Aguirre won over Fernando de Guzman – a good-mannered young noble, whose valors ended there. Although unbalanced, greedy for approval and lacking courage of any kind, Guzman had a high opinion of himself. Aguirre – a skilled player – promised to help him lead a rebellion and

assume control of the state after their return to Peru. First, the conspirators still had to eliminate the group's commander.

On New Year's Eve in 1560, the men carried out their plan, stabbing Ursua to death in his sleep. The conspirators quickly subdued the camp, entering every shelter and murdering everyone they deemed to be a foe. Only Donna Inez was spared.

The new leaders decided to reach the Atlantic with all possible speed and then travel along the coasts of Guyana, Venezuela and finally return to Peru through Panama. Don Fernando was nominated as his new governor, while Aguirre became commander. Both introduced a brand of harsh discipline, eliminating all who were suspected of involvement in a conspiracy against them. He did not hesitate to prepare a document expressing his oaths of fealty to King Philip II, a paper which all the soldiers signed. From that moment Guzman believed himself to be the ruler of Peru and the king of South America. Aguirre dulled Guzman's vigilance with a constant stream of praise and servility – both of which the would-be ruler craved. During one of the group's stops, Aguirre's men boarded the "royal" barkentine and ended the leader's rule. Aguirre finally had everything he wanted – in one fell swoop he gained command of the largest group of butchers and murderers and soon proclaimed himself the ruler of the Amazon. One of Aguirre's megalomaniac impulses even led him to send a letter to the king of Spain informing the latter of his decision.

On July 1, 1561, nine months after the expedition's launch, a flotilla of rafts sailed into the Atlantic. Soon after, the ships berthed on Margarita Island, requesting that its governor grant them a few days of rest. The island leader took them in out of sympathy for their losses and supplied food and medicines. He paid

for this naivety and recklessness with his life. After setting foot on dry land, Aguirre's band took control of the fortress and city, plundering a deposit of gold and pearls destined for the Spanish court. Afterwards, they proceeded to loot private homes and terror reigned. The island remained under the madman's rule for forty days and nights. Aguirre consented to the murder of priests, judges and officials from the Spanish administration as well as, in a fit of devilish fury, all men of noble blood.

Aguirre finally abandoned Margarita Island and led his gang to Barburata, from which, via Venezuela, he planned to reach Peru. Nonetheless, he was preceded by news of the group's destructive campaign and Aguirre arrived in a deserted city. The murderous band was then driven on to Valencia, whose walls were also empty. A few days later, in Barquisimento, Aguirre was surrounded by a strong division of Spanish soldiers. The pack of thieves and murderers had no chance against a regular military unit, particularly since some of Aguirre's men had deserted him at seeing the approaching army.

The "king's" madness had finally turned against him. Soon before his capture by the Spanish, Aguirre burst into the chamber where his daughter Elvira was staying with a bloody sword in hand and yelled: "Deliver yourself into the hands of God, my daughter, for I have to come to kill you so that no one can insult you by saying that you are the daughter of a traitor." A frightened servant was unable to stop the killer, but she was to be his last victim. He was taken into custody and shot, his head displayed in an iron cage for public viewing. In historical chronicles, Aguirre's last prayer has been immortalized: "God, if you must pardon me, then do it right away. When it comes to fame, you can save this for your saints."

“Such was the end of this unusual expedition, led by an archknave.” Padre finishes his story and we sit silently, staring into the fire. Professor Glazunow breaks the silence.

“The history of the conquest is full of cruel episodes. Officers betrayed their leaders, rape and murder were everyday occurrences. Avarice mixed with pride and insatiable ambition were the moral norms of those times, but for the court in Madrid, Aguirre was not only a madman with murderous tendencies but also a dangerous revolutionary. The ideas he espoused – an American free from the king and his officials and without black slaves – were the first rumbles of a storm that would end Spain’s colonial dictate in the New World two centuries later.”

“The account the professor has just outlined for us inspired German director Werner Herzog to film *Aguirre, The Wrath of God*.” Yanek Kolski shifts the subject of conversation to one that more closely matches his professional interests. “The inside story behind his production was particularly interesting. Herzog cast the demonic Klaus Kinski in the leading role and shot on location in the Amazon jungle. A crew of five hundred, including actors and filmmakers, experienced some rough moments, delving deeper and deeper into the tropical forest and forced to tolerate all of the subsequent discomforts as well as dangers. Herzog, consumed with the idea of shooting a faithful documentary, repeatedly risked the lives of his people to lend scenes authenticity in relation to the chronicles. The actor-soldiers of Aguirre sloshed around in the men, carried their own boats through the mountains and sailed down the Amazon River on primitive rafts, which were always one step away from capsizing in the dangerous currents. In addition, a sharp conflict broke out between the director and Kinski, who tried to impose his own conception of the role, wanted to direct work on the set and constantly questioned

Herzog's decisions. The actor identified so closely with Aguirre's role that he was able to transform into the hunchback and limping handicap without any characterization."

"Herzog is known for his attention to detail." Leo is also part of the film community. "A few years later he made the film *Fitzcarraldo*, which takes place not far from where we are now. It is the story of a troublemaker and rubber harvester, but also a man with a powerful imagination. In 1896 he transported a brigantine through the mountains and jungle in order to open a new communication route on the Cashpajali River. Imagine that the director, in the name of historical accuracy, ordered hundreds of Indians to pull a real steam ship through the mountain pass. In the film Klaus Kinski also plays the main protagonist. Obviously prior conflicts between the men were not quite so serious, or Herzog was able to rise above his prejudice, placing priority on the authenticity of his message and not wanting to bore audiences with cheap effects."

"Today only authentic involvement, and in the case of Herzog, involvement bordering on obsession, can achieve success," Yanek comments, continuing Leo's interrupted chain of thought. "That is why the public was so thrilled with this paradoxical picture and Kinski's role was recognized as a classic in the art of acting. Herzog allowed viewers to participate in the evolution of Aguirre, who, dripping with evil, gradually descends into madness. He compares himself to God and usurps divine authority over life and death. 'If I, Aguirre, wish the birds to fall dead from the trees, then birds will fall from the trees. I am divine wrath, the earth I tread sees me and trembles.' I remember one of those crazy lines among many in the film. I take my hat off to the director who is able to tease so much emotion out of his actors. Thanks to this ability, a great film was made – like all films made under difficult circumstances. For example, the one I'm making during the expedition," he says with a modest smile.

“Gentlemen, enough chatting for now. We need to get some sleep because we have a long and tiring road ahead tomorrow.”

The sun is still struggling to lift itself above the treetops and we are already in the water. As the burning orb slips higher into the sky, a thin haze of heat covers the river and the green wall of the canyon. A sluggish and overwhelming scorching heat steals over us, while the dead silence is torn apart by the roar of three engines. From time to time a fish leaps out of the glassy brown water. A floating tree trunk in the river forces us to maneuver. In an hour the river narrows considerably and the opposite banks grow closer and the once uniform foliage has become an endless row of trees strung together with liana creepers.

The forest takes on various forms, creating a series of continually metamorphosing landscapes and impressing a vision of the virgin world upon the mind. The jungle seems to be adorned by a multilayered decoration, climbing a series of stairs made from increasingly taller trees. A short distance farther, a tangle of branches and lianas create the deception of an eye in the water, while rotting tree trunks drown lazily in the current. Sometimes an oblong, overgrown island divides the river into two branches. The impression is overwhelming and seems to have no beginning or end and represents a perfect example of the fight for survival, but one that is visibly a fight to the death. The struggle for sun and light. Instead of the delicate elbowing that takes place in European forests, this clash is furious. The weak die, becoming nourishment for the strong.

The river turns sharply as the water washes out the few-meter-high bank. Trees growing on the edges lean at a dangerous angle, fighting desperately to stay upright. They are held back by liana vines, pulled tight like guitar strings, extending from nearby trees. The forest maintains its hopeless display of solidarity against a common enemy – the

hungry river, who never ceases to topple new victims. The river and jungle are intertwined in a mutual embrace and it is impossible to say whether this is the hug of friendship or the death-hold of bitter enemies. A sudden movement among the trees attracts our attention. A family of howler monkeys is traveling along the river, headed by a large plodding male. Seeing us he turns in warning and vanishes into the greenery, followed by a few females whose young clutch tightly to their mothers' coats.

The river picks up patches of earth and deposits them on the outside rim of each bend, creating a bridgehead for the insatiable jungle. Half-submerged shoal is a perch for a flock of multicolored butterflies, a true orgy of colors, mainly gold and orange. How many of them are there – one hundred, two hundred thousand? The rumble of the motors startles them into frenzied flight and they rise, glittering with all the colors of the rainbow. What a scene from paradise! Where does reality end and the fairy tale begin in this wilderness?

Butterflies are the most graceful element of the jungle and the most beautiful species seems to be the blue *morpho*. The insects dance against a green background like jagged pieces of the sky. Maybe my decision in this natural beauty contest was too hasty, I think, as a cloud of *heliocnis* appears. Shimmering in shades of bronze, red and gold, they flutter slowly and with dignity. They have no natural enemies. All birds know that their bodies are bitter and foul-smelling and avoid them with so many other tasty creatures at hand.

“Some species,” begins Victor, our guide, “envy *heliocnis* their immunity and imitate their colored wings. Others frighten predators away with patterns: huge eyes and other strange symbols designed to keep potential enemies at bay. Still others, as large as crows, use size to discourage hungry predators.

The mysteries of mimicry are an incredible part of the forest. Another butterfly, invisible while sitting motionless on tree bark, lets us know of its presence with a series of loud pops. This is the only butterfly species worldwide that makes noise and with such a seemingly inconspicuous body, another puzzle that bothers entomologists to this day. What a strange land – scolding butterflies and singing fish...

It provokes amazement and terror at the same time, this ubiquitous mimicry, which often hides a cruel reality. Lurking motionless in the water, the caiman appears to be a harmless tree trunk, lianas imitate snakes and vice versa. Water plants create a green carpet and seem to be deeply rooted in the ground even though they hide the watery depths below. A tree decorated with flowers has leaves in various stages of growth and decay. In the jungle there is so much deceit, so many traps and a game of appearances. Plants and animals wear masks and pretend to be something else to avoid being eaten or hunt more effectively. Only the birds are real, clothed in enchantingly hued feathers. The howler monkeys playing in the maze of liana are what they really seem.

Our boat drifts through a school of fish so dense that the water is a cauldron of fins and tails. Some jump above the river current as if forced out by overcrowding in the bustling mass. A flock of nagging parrots flies over our heads and higher – herons looking for an obvious target.

“In the jungle, it is best to be a fish or a bird. They are really the only ones that are free. They don’t have to work hard to survive and can go anywhere,” says Victor. The screech of birds from somewhere in the forest seems to echo his words.

The current picks up suddenly and we admire the steersman’s agility in winding a path through the rocks and finding deep passages over the cataracts. An Indian standing on the prow is armed with a long pole to protect the sides of the ship against sharp, nearly

invisible rocks in the water. The skill and reflexes of this pair will determine the fate of our expedition. Behold the charm of travel on Amazon rivers. For a long time we float calmly, accelerating with a surge of the engine in high gear to make a dangerous slalom through the boulders in a ten-meter boat that is poorly crafted for these kinds of feats.

During intensive downpours, the river carries more water, making the trip an easier one despite the more risky currents. In the dry season, the water level sinks to just a few meters and boats have no other choice but to drag their way through the shallows. Time after time the river is partitioned by small drops. We abandon ship for waist-high water and carry the two-ton boat over the rocks, drenched in sweat. Feet slide over the polished river bed and the current tugs at our legs and weakening our footing. It is significantly more dangerous for a boot to become wedged between two rocks or caught up in a weave of branches that frequently lie unseen under the surface. I am constantly afraid of ending up with a serious injury.

Then it happens. Serguey trips, loses his balance and grip on the side of the boat, which at this very moment is gaining speed in deeper water. The current turns him over and his head reappears a moment later, bobbing in the foamy surf. We rush to the bank to lend assistance. Serguey stays calm.

“*Wsio normalno*,” he mumbles, dismissing the incident. For Russians *normalno* has a wide range of meanings. It can mean “very good,” “OK” or “bad” as well as – most frequently – “leave me in peace.”

The next day during a morning wash, it certainly appears to be *normalno*. Serguey’s skin is covered with bruises, his knees are swollen and his spine is sore.

After passing the Callanga tributary, the map shows that river on which we are traveling has become the Maestron. For us it means more expending effort. With growing frequency, we hear the thunderous words: “Hey, to-get-her! *Amigos*, one... two!”

Submerged to our waists, we push and pull or, in extreme cases where the corridor is fenced off by a waterfall, unload the boat and transport all of its contents along the bank. By the third day, the river bottom can be heard in a regular scrape against the boat until the water becomes so low that further travel by boat is impossible. We stop at the mouth of an almost dried up stream that isn't even marked on the map. It's no surprise – we are aliens in a region that cartographers describe with the words “Datos insuficientes” – insufficient data. Here the boat will wait for our return. A welcoming committee of screeching parrots greets us, hopping from branch to branch and flapping blue wings around their orange bellies.

Rimma is thrilled with the hummingbirds.

She is right. If fertile and creative Mother Nature is responsible for the wonders all around us, then these miniature birds are among her masterpieces. Words are not enough to capture this creature's perfection. Everything about them is astonishing: size – a few centimeters, weight – not quite two grams, a heart that beats 1,400 times every minute while in flight, 450 times while at rest and 36 times during sleep. In the air, the hummingbird flutters its wings seventy times per minute and is the only bird able to fly backwards. I dare not describe the plumage. This is something that needs to be seen – the bird appears out of nowhere and hangs flickering over a flower, wings working so fast that they are a mere blur of motion. With grace they extend long beaks into the flower goblets in search of nectar. In the blink of an eye, they are back in motion like emerald rockets and on to the next bloom.

Our march through the stream corridor is not among the easiest. Mossy rocks carried by the water tumble under our feet. In a few hours the enthusiasm, with which we entered the jungle, after days of relative inactivity, is gone. Heavy backpacks and bags of supplies

pull us ever firmly to the ground. What about those who are carrying the team's luggage? Carrying in turns, they cover every inch of ground twice. They are young and strong. I thought there would be trouble with the generator, which is unwieldy and cannot be taken apart into smaller pieces. Genos, in a demonstration of his strength, carries it without any assistance. Our porters, moving backward and forward of the line, slow our progress. Moreover, in the afternoon the corridor diverges considerably from our intended path, which signals the necessity of cutting a path through the forest undergrowth. After consulting with the porters, we change our tactics. Near the stream, we set up a permanent base, where Fr. Polentini will remain. Today has been hard on him and it will only get harder from here. Seventy years is burden enough.

A horrifying, screech tears through the air and puts the camp on its feet. The parrots have arrived.

*“Que te part un rayo, desgraciados papagaios!”*⁷² curse the sleepy porters.

“Silencio!” reprimands Maria Carmen. Every day she is the first one up, preparing breakfast and the day's rations during the hike.

These morning parrot-induced wake-up calls are similar to the frenzied chirping of our sparrows at the sight of the sun in the morning sky. Parrots are the sparrows of the tropical forest. They are everywhere and the sounds they make echo throughout the day. Parrots differ from sparrow in beauty and elegance only and soar like arrows. It is hard to believe that these are the same birds that are held in captivity, which soon grow infirm and feeble. They turn in flight as if to scare enemies. According to a well-known stereotype, parrots are faithful partners that stay together until death. They can also be

⁷² Damn you, cursed parrot!

seen showing one another affection, even beyond the mating season, which distinguishes them in the animal world.

The camp comes to life as the aroma of brewing coffee rises from the hammocks of our greatest sleepyheads. After breakfast, Fr. Polentini says mass in the surreal atmosphere created by fog rising from the ground and wishes us luck. He will stay at camp with the porters whose task is carrying food supplies to the “assault team.” In a moment the wall of green will close around us, ceasing to be that simple, mild and friendly landscape. See you in a few days Padre. I hope your well-wishes have the power to become reality.

Bad Luck or the Curse of the Incas?

The group pushes its way into the dense greenery. I don't like the change of footing. It seemed to be easier going over the rocky channel of the stream, but this is just an illusion. We still have to think carefully and place every step with caution. No one knows what we will tread on next and not even the leaves clear away by the machete helps. The day before around the campfire our Russian cameraman joked that wandering through the jungle is like marching through an Afghan mine field – there is no telling if the next step will be your last.

His quip sums up the situation neatly. As if it weren't enough that one has to watch the wet trail for lurking danger from reptiles and insects, at any moment our legs can be caught or tripped up on a twisted root. I find out for myself when my shoe gets caught in some kind of trap and – helplessly waving my arms – I topple over onto the undergrowth. It might look comic because the weighty backpack presses me to the ground, but I didn't find it funny. Against my cheek is a burning sensation and it turns out that barely avoided stabbing my eye out on a sharp shoot thrusting out of the moss. Rimma washes the wound and disinfects my slashed cheek, while I curse my carelessness.

The terrain waves in the wind around us as we climb and slip over the humid ground. Ahead is a vast marsh which sludge through up to our waists. To keep my balance, I grab hold of a low hanging branch with leaves whose edges slice the skin like blades. If not for the leather gloves, my hand would be cut open. Everyone is muddy and thoroughly worn out. In front of me are the *macheteros*, who fight the maze of lianas and entangled foliage. Painstakingly, meter by meter, they carve out a narrow corridor so faint that it seems to close immediately behind us. The rhythmic echo of swishing machetes against branches rings out. The corridor extends to form a tight cage without windows

and doors, a dark, humid cell cut out of a uniform wall of green. Overhead, a ceiling of leaves blocks out the sun. It is wet and stifling. I reach for my canteen only to find just a few precious drops of water.

“*Agua?*” the Indian inquires. I nod.

“*Momento!*” He looks around in concentration and then moves towards a large tree wrapped in creepers as thick as a man’s arm, where he makes a quick cut with the machete.

“*Por favor. Muy buena agua.*”⁷³

I take a piece of the liana and raise it above my lips. From the inside a stream of cold, refreshing water flows. The drops fall over my face to my chin, cooling the skin and bringing relief.

The Indian returns to cutting the path. People of the forest are gifted with an unbelievable sense of direction and a feel for the topography of the terrain. They are able to pick out many details of the landscape that are invisible for *gringos*. The greenery thins out briefly and we emerge onto the ridge of a rocky elevation. The panorama laid out before us is vast. As far as the eye can see, there is only tropical forest, an intriguing and enigmatic *terra incognita*.

Another stop. I decide to check if we are on course and in the meantime give my people time to rest and free themselves for a few moments from the weight of their backpacks, stretch sore backs and moisten dry throats. A few hours of fast paced hiking takes its toll. Rimma massages her stiff knees, while Professor Glazunow runs a handkerchief over his face. Juan helps Genos remove the generator from his back. The porters do not complain, but I can see how much difficulty the trip is inflicting on them.

⁷³ Please. Very good water.

The filmmakers take this opportunity to start up the cameras, but no one feels like posing for a picture. No one, that is, except for Misha, who lies across the trail and pretends to sleep.

“Get up before something crawls into your ass,” barks Serguey Usznurcew, wrinkling his eyebrows threateningly. “Get up already! I don’t intend to carry you on my back.”

Misha gets up reluctantly and brushes off his pants. Those two have been on each other’s nerves since the first day.

“Asshole,” murmurs Misha. Fortunately, the comment is too low for Serguey’s ears to register.

Maria Carmen hands out high-calorie energy bars. I swallow the snack quickly and drink it down with bitter coffee, then pull out the map. GPS confirms my fears. We have wandered off course, but thankfully not by much. In such a forest it isn’t difficult to lose one’s sense of direction, but we don’t have to be afraid of getting lost. Equipped with a satellite connection, we are able to pinpoint our position to within a few meters. This fact obviously does nothing to eliminate other dangers. More than once, I have wondered how long it would take a rescue team to reach us if something went wrong. There are days when the clouds become impaled on the tree tops, the valleys are cloaked in fog and rain falls for many hours. This kind of weather makes helicopter navigation impossible and without them, despite the best intentions, rescuers would only arrive on the scene in three to four days.

In the afternoon for the first time in a few days we see a patch of blue sky, which is why we decide to set up camp a little earlier in order to prepare an experiment planned by the Russian Academy of Sciences in cooperation with the Energia rocket-space corporation. We have to light three smoking fires to allow the orbiting station to locate us.

Cosmonauts Valery Korzun and Serguey Trieszczew will film and photograph the region which our expedition is exploring.

The central module of the International Space Station, built jointly by the United States, Russia, the European Space Agency, Japan, Brazil and Canada, was put into orbit less than four years ago, but the first team to inhabit the station, later replaced by MIR, arrived at the post in November 2000. The Russians, accompanied by American Peggy Whitson, have been there since the first days of June and will remain for half a year.

Neither making good satellite photos nor their interpretation via computer analysis is a simple process and requires considerable knowledge. The crew of the International Space Station will conduct research and number of scientific experiments, including those that serve our purposes. Black and white photographs of perfect resolution, down to one meter, could add valuable information to our search. So far we have been unsuccessful because weather conditions rule out observation. The station orbits the Earth in the space of ninety-two minutes, but in connection with its twenty-four-hour revolution, the angle of observation changes, which means that in the course of one day, they are directly overhead only seven times. Moscow has supplied us with the orbiting schedule, which indicates that today is practically the last day that we can send the smoke signals. Starting tomorrow, the station will be in the correct line of sight only after sunset. After a week, they will pass over us at dawn. The next passes at a favorable time of day will not take place until one month from now. Our hope to benefit from the accomplishments of space technologies is all for naught. I am bitterly disappointed that such a precise plan could fail.

The fire also creates the ideal moment for a rest. Smoke keeps insects away and ants of all species are sensitive to the heat of the flames. In the proximity of the fire, we

are able to escape their irritating presence and dry out the equipment. This is important. After just a few days, mold begins to form in the backpacks. In the evening, our social gatherings focus around the fire. Juan quietly plays the harmonica and everyone else has a chance to shake off the day's stress. Today, we have gathered to hear the confidences of Serguey Hyper.

“You know, these few days in the jungle have made me realize just what the ‘jungle hell’ that Maufrais described in his journal is.”

Raymond Maufrais, a French journalist and traveler, came to French Guyana in 1949 with the objective of conquering the massif of Tumu Hamac and reaching the Brazilian city of Belem, lands inhabited by the Emerillon tribe and the wildest and most inaccessible jungle of the world. Along part of the road he was accompanied by Indians, but for unknown reasons they abandoned him and Maufrais, left to his own devices, was forced to kill and eat his own dog to stave off hunger. In a state of complete exhaustion, he found the Tamouri River, where the rescue expedition found traces of a campsite and his personal journal. Maufrais himself vanished like a rock in water. We can only guess at his last tragic moments of life. He left behind the book *Green Hell* and a street named after him in Toulon.

“I was fascinated by the story. A month of lonely struggle for survival – and what determination and will the man possessed,” Serguey continues. “I will read you a fragment of his diary, quoted in *Green Hell*.”

He pulls a book out of a pocket and huddles closer to the fire, beginning to read the shocking confessions of a lonely, desperate man in agony:

It is raining and raining without stop. Everything is soaked. I have bandaged my legs, covered in ulcerations; my wounded feet and in pathetic condition. I am exhausted to the limit. This evening I went without food again; no matter how much it will cost me, I will sacrifice Bobby, who is suffering and going wild. It is either that or my death. Thunder rolls overhead. Here and there withered trees around the camp are toppling.

I thought for a moment that I would die the most horrible death – that of hunger – but my subconscious senses and I am convinced that I will find my way out, that this adventure will end. Nonetheless, it will always be the most beautiful of adventures that I have experienced. Anyway, without all of these minor worries, what value would my expedition have?

Oh God, give me strength and courage! Mother, if you only knew what a source of will and hope I receive from thoughts of you, thoughts of you both, my loved ones, because I promised you I would return and so I shall return for sure.

Deep, nightmarish night. Through a haze I see that the fire is burning, but I am consumed by cold, even though I am covered! This is certainly a sign of weakness. I have a fever, diarrhea and recurrent attacks of latent Yellow Fever.

The wilderness looks surreal and hostile, filled with a dense fog and cut only by thick lianas. My strength has deserted me. While fighting with the ants and flies that are attracted to my wounds, I write in this journal...

I imagine that someday I will enjoy reading it again and remembering, hour after hour, everything that has taken place since I joined this expedition. I will smile to my memories of breakdown and feel happy that I survived them.

To reach my destination or die – there is no other choice...I will survive! Without any means for life aside from my agility and strength, without a firearm, half-naked and without shelter...

How cold it is! I have decided to leave a letter for my parents in case I...

No. I will make it, but what for? Their love and my faith will create this miracle because if I died they would suffer greatly and that I do not want. Hence my trust.

He stops reading. I don't know what the others are thinking. I wonder if I would be able to eat my favorite dog, but Raymond had been a member of a commando unit for a few years. Commando training is based on, among other principles, eliminating every concept of mercy from the mind. Does that mean friendship too? The lengthy silence is broken by Anatoli.

"I keep wondering why Maufrais decided to risk his life. Was it just a desire to take on the jungle? Why did he send the guides away? Supposedly, he came up with the idea behind the crazy expedition after finding an old Spanish map, on which a lake on the border of Guyana and Brazil was marked as the location of a hidden treasure. We will probably never know the truth..."

He breaks off, jumping up to save a shirt drying in front of the fire that is starting to smoke. When the hail of "shits" and "fucks" directed at the spirit responsible for the flames dies down, Leo continues where Anatoli left off.

"Then Maufrais was yet another victim of gold fever. I'm curious if anyone has ever tried to approximate how many thousands of people have succumbed to the disease. Perhaps this would turn out to be the greatest epidemic in the history of humankind."

"For a change of pace, let me tell you an incredible story that also took place in the jungle. It lacks the "golden" subtext, but takes place against the background of a great love story." Professor Glazunow feeds us new fascinating tidbits every night. None object because he accomplishes it in unusually fascinating style.

“The hero of my story is a modest surveyor, Jean Godin de Odonais, a member of the expedition organized by the French Academy of Sciences to collect measurements related to estimations of the shape and size of the Earth. The decision was the outcome of an argument that had consumed the world of science at the time. Physicists and geographers were determined to find out whether the Earth was a perfect sphere or – as Isaac Newton believed – “flattened” at the poles and “bulging” around the equator. Led by Charles-Marie de Condamine, the expedition arrived in Quito in 1736. Originally planned to last two years, for various reasons the team was held up for an additional five years. During this time Jean Godin managed to meet the charming Donna Isabella, marry her and have a few children.

In 1743 the couple was separated because Jean had to follow his principal when the latter decided on an attempt to reach the Atlantic by way of the Amazon river system. Isabella, who at this time was pregnant, remained in Rio Bamba not far from Quito. The group traveled to the ocean without incident and after a year Godin sailed to Cayenne in French Guyana. There he fell victim to a diplomatic war fought between France and Spain. The latter, in order to secure its influence in the New World, closed the borders to foreigners; hence Spanish officials would not allow him to return to the arms of his family. No requests, arguments that he was a scientist or pressure applied to high-ranking friends in the government were effective in solving the situation. In desperation, Godin decided to bring his wife to him, writing a letter to his wife and sending it with a trusted messenger in a pouch of money. The missive detailing his difficulties reached Godin’s wife.

In the meanwhile, the twentieth anniversary of their parting passed and the impatient Isabella decided to act. Together with her now adult children, two brothers and a younger niece as well as three other French travelers, a few servants and thirty porters, Isabella ventured into the jungle. They conquered the Andes and on the Pastaza River, one of the Amazon's tributaries, rented boats from the Indians. Unfortunately, guides deserted them after the group stumbled across a deserted village ravaged by a smallpox epidemic, leaving the travelers in the middle of the jungle. Isabella was a courageous and enterprising woman. She urged the men to build a raft on which they loaded their provisions and used to sail downriver. In a stroke of bad luck, the raft capsized and the water claimed all of their possessions. Without weapons and the necessary experience, they had been delivered a sentence of death. On top of all this, the group was struck down by malaria.

A few of the men decided to build a lighter raft, allowing them to travel quickly to the nearest settlement and organize help for those who remained behind. Eight persons, including Ms. Godin, were left on the bank. After twenty-five days, help still had not arrived. Finally, they dismantled the camp and traveled down the Amazon with the hope of encountering other people. Fate, however, was not kind to this brave woman. One of the porters died from a snake bite, her nineteen-year-old son succumbed to malaria and her remaining children to total exhaustion. Ms. Godin herself, also barely alive, wandered for nine days through the jungle before coming across an Indian settlement. The locals took her in, providing food and clothing and transporting her by boat to Manaus. From there she sailed to Cayenne, where her faithful husband waited.

Both returned to France in 1773. News of their separation and Isabella's journey through the jungle arrived in the Old World ahead of them and they disembarked on the European coast as famous people. Nevertheless, the memory of her harsh experiences weighed heavy on Ms. Godin. Together, they died in 1792 on their property, one hundred and fifty kilometers from Paris. Unfortunately, history doesn't say whether they died happy, whether they rekindled their relationship after twenty years apart or whether they were able to forget the cruelty of a jungle that had taken their children."

No one attempts to answer the questions the professor has posed, but I can say with certainty that neither forgot the jungle. It is impossible to forget. Whoever has lived in its embrace for at least a few days can never remain indifferent again. The jungle leaves a mark on all who enter, like a brand. Maria Carmen sits down next to Volodia and kisses his cheek.

"Thank you, professor, for that wonderful story. I like love stories. Tonight I will dream of Isabella.

Well, it seems women of every geographic latitude are slaves to instinct and continue to dream of great romance. The fire dies out, signaling that it is time we took cover under the mosquito nets before the bloodsuckers lurking in the darkness can exploit the window of opportunity. Instead of the cicadas, we are put to sleep that night by the voice of Anatoli, who stays up late sending correspondence and using satellite hookups to transfer pictures to his editorial office.

Dawn is an unbelievable play of contrasts. The rising sun turns tree tops to gold as shadows and a delicate mist sink ever lower. Still slightly groggy, I reach for my camera

since I have a chance to take some interesting photographs. My nostrils are invaded by the aroma of freshly brewed coffee, the best way to pull even the sleepest members of the group out of their hammocks. Maria Carmen gives me a report on the state of our provisions. The news is not good. More physical exertion translates into larger appetites. The porters are unable to keep us supplied and both canned meat and fish stores are running out. We have to start a rationing system that rests more heavily on beans and rice. Right now it occurs to me that the group needs an obsessive vegetarian or two, but it seems that the expedition consists exclusively of meat-eaters. The plateau is still a two-day hike away. It would be good to hunt down a tapir, but we are on the territory of a park.

Two hours after we set out from the camp, I hear a yell coming from the foremost *machetero*:

“*Señor Palki! Piedras.*” Excitedly, he shows me a fragment of stone wall.

Clearly visible are neatly hewn elements that fit tightly to one another. The wall is heavily eroded, tree roots have broken apart some fragments and water damages has taken care of the rest. The jungle doesn't take long to deal with the work of human hands. Machetes are put into action and we are able to free a larger section from strangle hold of the forest, but only find a few individual hewn stone blocks. On this basis it is hard to conclude anything. The find is too insignificant, but a beginning has been made. In the middle of the equatorial wilderness, we have found evidence of man's presence. Only this, because the bitter soils of the Amazon are quick to disintegrate every other sign of human activity. A chill of excitement passes through the team and it's a good thing too. Some of the less determined souls have already started to spread discouragement and doubt.

On one of the rocks, I spot a severely damaged drawing or geometric pattern. I take a closer look with the irrational hope that some magical power will resurrect a picture from a bygone world and give me a glimpse of its landscapes and people, their lives buried in the jungle for thousands of years.

“*Señor*, I can show you a few such painted rocks that I have found in the jungle. They have better preserved drawings. However, we would have to travel to the Toporaque region,” says Victor, noticing my interest. It sounds exciting but I know that I won’t accept the proposal. There is still too little time in my life.

The unexpected discovery of human habitation in the middle of the inhospitable and downright hostile *selva* leads me to entertain a few reflections. Our discovery, though modest, is now joined to a long chain of finds accomplished over the last thirty years of rather half-hearted search efforts. In spite of this, a few dozen large cities centers have been identified on the slopes of the western *montaña*, along with traces of a significant population that left behind impressive works of architecture, perhaps exceeding all of those executed by civilizations of the coastal or *sierra* regions. This claim in and of itself is meaningful. It proves that this unwelcoming terrain was home to a thriving civilization thousands of years ago. Perhaps in the past the Peruvian *montaña* had a climate that was friendlier to man. If so, it cannot be ruled out that this was the source of the civilizational impulse and, by implication, the best place to look for the cradle of Peruvian cultures.

The following day our euphoria is gone without a trace. Clouds gather in the sky and everyone seems extinguished, angry and argumentative. Rimma is screaming because she found a scolopendra with a length of a few centimeters in her boot. She curses with such passion that the fabled sailor could learn a great deal in her presence. She is lucky to have avoided the painful sting. On the other end of the camp, Maria Carmen is also causing a fuss. Someone was careless in securing the bag of rice and now it is infested

with enormous ants. I attempt to comfort her by pointing out that their presence can only mean more protein, but my comment only exacerbates her frustration. Insects are the biggest problem. They are literally everywhere. We chase them out of the provisions, dump them out of our sleeping bags and shake them loose from clothing. Left unattended on the ground, food is almost instantly buried under a siege of hungry ants. We fight the good fight, but with an awareness that this is a losing battle.

Maria Carmen has reason for worry. After breakfast today, everyone was up in arms. After she followed my instructions, a person would need a magnifying glass to find the meat in our servings of beans. I have explained the necessity of tightening our belts in light of the overextended supply route, but that doesn't seem to convince the whole team. They have become accustomed to high-calorie meals based on meat. I also eat without an appetite. I feel bad and don't really know what could be wrong with me. Perhaps that is why I execute the schedule for the day with decidedly less firmness and we take down the camp with a one-hour delay. Nonetheless, we are moving faster than on previous days. The slopes are covered in more sparse vegetation, which makes the work of the *machetereos* easier.

Late in the afternoon, we finally arrive at the edge of the plateau to which Fr. Polentini attaches so much hope. Almost immediately we discover a small lake with a clearly defined bank, although little water remains. Could this be the legendary Parrime Lake mentioned by Pachaco, Fr. Polentini's source? Is this the *laguna negra* seen from the deck of a helicopter by Dr. Carlos Neuenschwander? Its waters are dark and the bank is laced with sparse vegetation. Only one topographical detail doesn't fit. Neuenschwander spoke of a "rectangular lake" and this one is clearly oval in shape. We should explore the area surrounding the flood plain as thoroughly as possible and so I

give the order to pitch camp. With a sigh of relief I set down my backpack and suddenly hear a scream from the rear of the column. Turning, I see Genos fall to the ground. This is no ordinary fall. The boy is writhing on the ground, screaming and calling for help. Miguel runs to him and helps to disentangle the boy from the equipment, facilitating the transport of the generator.

“What happened?” I call out worriedly.

“*Patrón!* Señor Palki, shushuya,” Miguel yells in reply. “Genos says he was bitten by a shushuya.”

I run over to the moaning porter. This is bad. If Genos is right, he may be in for a rough time. I raise the cuff of his pant leg, searching for bite marks, and find two puncture wounds and a small amount of blood. The boy has incredibly bad luck. The trail of people tramping through the dense undergrowth has probably irritated the reptile, who attacked those in the rear. The shushuya is a very venomous snake and likely the only species in the world that will chase a victim. Attempts to escape are almost always unsuccessful because even in dense moss the snake is faster than an arrow in flight.

“Lie still,” I yell, staring into his eyes from just a few centimeters away. “You’ll only make the situation worse. Let us help you.”

The frightened boy refuses to calm down and that is where we have to start. His violent movements and fear accelerate his heartbeat and raise blood pressure, spreading the venom more quickly through the body. Our pharmacy has no serum to counteract snake bites, not because it was overlooked but because of common sense. There are dozens of snake species and just as many antidotes. It just wouldn’t be possible to pack them all. Even if we had, by some miracle of management, been able to bring a range of serums along, we would still have a problem. After inflicting a bite, the snake slips away in a few seconds and only an experienced herpetologist could recognize what species we

were dealing with, even assuming he were able to overcome the initial shock and pain. The only relatively effective intervention involves an incision on the wound from which the poisoned blood can be sucked out. Some medical handbooks warn against this method because it can harm the rescuer. One tiny scrape in the mouth cavity will allow the venom to enter the bloodstream. Moreover, in high temperatures and humidity, stopping the bleeding is not always easy and the risk of infection is greater. But what choice do I have? By doing nothing, I would sentence Genos to certain death, but in attempting to save the boy I am risking my own life. My choice, of course, is the latter.

The boy slowly calms down, but his breath is labored, his face is pale and his pulse is racy. These are the classic symptoms of shock. I apply a tourniquet above the wound, pull a lighter from my pocket and begin to sanitize a sharp knife.

“Stay calm, Genos. I have to inflict a little pain, but it will save your life.” I try to muster a smile, but nothing about this situation is funny. Many years ago, in Borneo, I participated in a similar procedure, but in that case we were dealing with a less dangerous snake. I sliced through his skin to make a cross and begin to suck the wound. The incision has to be deep so that I can withdraw enough of the poisoned blood, but at the same time shallow enough that we are able to stop the bleeding. Speed is key in preventing the poison from spreading through the body. I suck blood into my mouth and spit it out. Rimma brings water so I can wash my mouth out. Genos has calmed down, but is starting to complain of pain around the wound. It is understandable – I have pressed the edges of the cut together, perhaps even brutally, but that is the only way to keep as much poison as possible in place. However, the boy is also suffering from dizziness, nausea or chills, which is a bad sign. These symptoms seem to indicate that the snake was very venomous. Everything depends on the amount of venom that has been released into his body. If the snake was fresh from hunting and had used up its temporary supply of poison, there is

still hope. Rimma makes a sterile bandage and administers a painkiller. The labored breathing of Genos and whispers of his friends bending over the body are clearly audible. Miguel claps his friend on the shoulder.

Victor appears, holding a branch in his hand. He orders the porters to light a fire and put water on to boil.

“What’s this? What do you want to do with it?” I ask.

“This is *huaco blanco*. We need to make an infusion and feed it to the victim.”

Victor is the son of a *curandero* and has lived in the jungle many years, so we can trust his knowledge.

We pitch camp and attempt to save Genos. I wonder what else can be done for the boy. Should we call for help using the satellite phone? Before the rescue attempt is in full swing, before the serum is acquired, it will be dark and no helicopter will be able to reach us. It wouldn’t be able to land here anyway. I am overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness. I feel a moral responsibility for the lives of my team members and am unable to salve my conscience with the thought that exploration is always connected with risk and danger. It is the duty of the expedition leader to foresee and minimize risk.

I begin to understand where people get their atavistic hatred, fear and repulsion to all amphibians and slimy reptiles. Herpetologists try to comfort us with the information that among 2,700 species of snakes around the world, only five hundred are venomous. In South America the rattlesnake earns the most respect, while in Africa the black mamba has gained the colorful nickname “relentless death” because its victim collapses after taking just a few steps. On the island of Borneo, the name that sows fear is the bungaro and in Australia – the taipan, a rust-colored snake with an exotic name, believed to be the most dangerous in the world. Its venom is six times as potent as that of the Indian cobra.

When it comes to snake-related threats, Europe is at the bottom of the list. No more than a few dozen people die on the continent of bites inflicted by the viper, mostly the elderly and children. In India the cobra kills ten thousand in one year and three times as many victims in South America because the latter has an abundance of snakes and provides poor access to help. Two reptiles in particular strike fear into the hearts of South Americans: the shushuya or Bushmaster and the Fer-De-Lance.

The first belongs to the rattlesnake family and is named for the region in which it lives: shushupe, chimucu or surucucu. It can grow up to three and a half meters, which ranks the snake first in terms of length among venomous species on the continent. The Bushmaster has a very large head, a bronze body and a chestnut-colored rhomb pattern. When threatened, it emits a sound that can be loosely described as a scream, which may be repeated for a few minutes. It hunts both day and night, attacks with the speed of lightning and likes to visit human encampments – hence the large number of victims. However, the Bushmaster, much like a majority of snakes, attacks men out of fear whenever it feels threatened.

Just as dangerous is the Fer-De-Lance, which displays an ash or dark green body and two parallel spots in the shape of rhombs down its back outlined in chalky white. The snake's head is characteristically flat and shaped like an arrowhead. This animal is a master of camouflage and ambush. Coiled up among the leaves, it is nearly invisible and therefore easy to step on. Incredibly aggressive, it attacks without warning. The victim is treated to a full dose of venom and usually dies within forty-eight hours although in some cases the poison needs only a few minutes to spread throughout the body and induce death. Everything depends on the site of the wound and the quantity of injected venom. The danger is compounded when the creature punctures the skin near a blood vessel and

even greater when it finds a vein or bites near the head. In the latter cases, the poison moves through the body like a freight train.

Constrictors belong to an entirely different species. In the Amazon jungle, the anaconda achieves the largest dimensions. It lives in water, marshes and swamps and has a slick body reminiscent of a smooth motorcycle tire. In the water, this creature moves fast and with great agility, wrapping around its victim with lightning speed and squeezing out its life with increasing pressure until the prey is suffocated. Then it breaks the spine and ribs. Opening an incredibly wide and elastic maw, the snake swallows even larger animals, such as the tapir and capybara, whole. Just a short time later digestive juices start to break down muscles and bone. Reports of anacondas that reach a length of more than a dozen meters are frequent, but no one has actually seen such a specimen in person.

Victor finishes preparing an infusion and begins feeding it to Genos. The victim's calf swells and his body is wracked by chills. He writhes in pain with a loud moaning and begins to rave. His body is burning up, his breathing labored and thick beads of sweat roll down the boy's forehead. What else can I do for him? I remember the stun-gun. The instrument delivers a high-voltage shock to the muscles, but at a lower setting it has two applications. In darkened corners, it is effective in frightening away bandits and in the jungle, can aid the victim of a snake bite. Doctors discovered that the tissues of a human body are more resistant to toxins if administered a high-voltage dose of electricity. That is why I include the tool in our medicine kit.

I warn Genos that in a moment I will administer an electric shock. The boy is so worn out and confused that he doesn't protest. I hope that I have helped him at least a little.

"If he lives through the next three hours, he'll be OK," Victor claims.

Everything depends on the dose of venom he received. Shushuya are able to regulate the position of their teeth along with the quantity of injected poison. It is rare for the snake to use up the entire contents of its venom glands. One bite does not necessarily justify fears of poisoning.

I leave Genos in Victor's capable hands and attend to myself. This morning the pain began to spread through my bones and muscles, accompanied by nausea. Now I am hit with a fever that comes and goes, interspersed with chills so intense that my whole body shakes. This is an attack of malaria – of this I am certain, since I have already fallen victim once to the anopheline mosquito despite taking the necessary precautions. In the absence of a blood smear, it is difficult to state with any certainty which strain of malaria I have contracted, so I give myself a massive dose of Fansidar, which fights every known strain of the *plasmodium* parasite, turn the camp over to Serguey and retreat to my sleeping bag.

Malaria, or the chills, typically associated with exotic jungles, attacks approximately 300 million people around the world yearly, according to estimates by the World Health Organization. Of those who are infected, about 1-1.5 million will die of the disease. For centuries this plague, whose initial symptoms often deceptively resemble those of the flu, has been widespread in the tropics and is the torment of discoverers, missionaries and adventurous travelers. It is believed that malaria first appeared in African forests during the distant Neolithic period, from which it later spread to other continents. The disease has been known to decimate whole armies and caused the deaths of Alexander the Great, Dante Alighieri and Fausto Coppi... Until the 20th century, it was also reported in moderate climates, when young doctor Ronald Ross discovered the path by which the disease was transmitted, and hence the *anopheles* mosquito. He received the

Nobel Prize in 1902 for this breakthrough contribution to medicine, which gave mankind hope of eliminating this frightening plague. A new, stronger medicine called chloroquine, created on the basis of old-fashioned quinine extracted from the bark of the Peruvian Cinchona tree, as well as insecticides and the drainage of wetlands led to the eradication of malaria outside of tropical zones, although people continue to die of it in areas near the equator.

During the night I begin to sweat profusely, indicating a drastic drop in temperature. The pain tears through my head and also makes itself known in the vicinity of the lower back. Lost in a fog and literally drenched in sweat, I do not remember falling back to sleep. When I wake again, the pain in my muscles remains but the fever is gone. The sun has already climbed above the trees. The camp is buzzing with morning activity. Perched on a nearby branch are urube vultures. These large black, disgusting birds have bald necks and dangerous looking beaks. They are not afraid of people, but provoke superstitious fear. They live exclusively on carrion and appear at the site of every tragedy before the victim even has a chance to exhale its last breath. The sight of these jungle gravediggers, circling high in the sky, is the last thing many dying animals and human beings, who have conquered the jungle, see. Obviously, this is why their presence is always interpreted as an evil omen. Did things really go so poorly for Genos?

Fortunately, Serguey appears with a cup of coffee and a report. It brings us good news. Genos, plied intermittently throughout the night with a plant extract brewed by Victor, is already feeling better and will emerge unscathed by this little adventure. I sigh with relief. This is the only piece of positive news – the rest is less than encouraging. There is grumbling about the food and porters are encouraging anyone who will listen to abandon camp. They say *shushuya* will have its vengeance if the victim doesn't die. Right

now it is probably lurking near the camp, making them fearful of leaving the camp. Without additional supplies we won't last long.

“How are you *kamandir*?” Serguey inquires with concern.

“As you can see I'm still alive but weakened and I'll have to rest a little longer. The rest of you should continue to research the plateau. The calcium deposits look promising. This type of terrain frequently exhibits karst landforms – labyrinths of corridors, caves and underground kingdoms cut out of the rock by flowing water. It is high time we activated the georadar and discovered what is hiding under our feet. Divide up the work so we can cover as large an area in one day as possible. In the evening we'll consider what to do next.”

I am left alone. For a moment I hear Serguey's low voice giving out instructions, showing the group a map of operational regions and assigning each subgroup its tasks. Later these noises give way to total silence. The vultures are still observing patiently from their original perch in the tree, wings extended to dry in the waxing sunlight and voicing the occasional raucous squawk. They bother me but my thoughts are with the teams that are even now working in the field. Everything depends on the creativity and observations of the group – not to mention the georadar. This clever instrument, using high-frequency electromagnetic impulses is able to “see” into the ground to a depth of 60 meters. These signals are dispersed, reflected and broken on various objects and the antenna registers the echo of the returning signal. The rapid reception of impulses allows us to sweep the area like an infantryman. In the course of one day, we are able to examine a considerable swath of territory. If Fr. Polentini's suspicions are correct, we will soon possess a map of an underground labyrinth.

Maria Carmen, her morning duties discharged, comes to keep me company. She serves me tea spiked with an aromatic and delicious additive. After feeling my forehead

with one cool palm to check my fever and inquiring into my well-being, she tells me about the superstitious of Indians related to snakes.

“*Shushuya* don’t like tobacco so it is better to smoke a cigar or chew the tobacco plug. The snake must be killed and its brain placed on the wound if someone has been bitten because the poison will spread more slowly through the body. *Shushuya* live in pairs so caution is needed since the second is usually close by. The Indians believe that if a pregnant woman is in the vicinity, the victim will die.”

“Now I understand why Genos was so unsettled when Rimma made his bandage.”

In the afternoon the research teams return to camp but without much success. Professor Glazunow is the gloomiest member of the group. His beloved georadar refused to perform. One more point for the jungle.

“It beeped after activation, then something sparked and we smelled something burning – that was it,” he laments despairingly. “All that effort during transport and for nothing.”

This is the taste of failure. I had been counting on the georadar experiment, but I can’t say it aloud and exacerbate Volodia’s depression. We have arrived at a stalemate. Soon a decision must be made and no one can make it for me. I call Victor.

“What’s going on with the porters? They’ve been so brave until now.”

“*Señor*, they fell apart after Genos’ accident. See, there they sit white with fear and won’t leave the camp. Neither threats nor bribes will help. Their fear of *shushuya* is greater.” Before making a final decision, I want to talk to Serguey. He arrives and settles himself onto a box, energy extinguished.

“Why so down, doctor?”

“It’s not good *kamandir*. Our food supplies will run out in two or three days, the porters are striking and we still face a difficult return trip to the boats left on the river.

After today's defeat most people have stopped believing in success. Some are experiencing a personal crisis, all are irritated. They are at each other's throats given the slightest pretext. You're barely alive. The next bout of malaria could immobilize you for good." He stops talking and hangs his head.

"Alright. It isn't easy to win with the jungle. *Nec Hecules contra plures*.⁷⁴ Tell the group that the expedition is finished. We leave tomorrow."

I pronounce the last words quietly, and then lower my head in silence. So often in these tussles with man the jungle is triumphant. With inexplicable hunger it consumes successive victims, both lone travelers and entire armies of daring men. Von Hutten, Herrera, sir Raleigh, colonel Fawcett...In 1990 two Germans vanished without a trace in the inaccessible alpine land of Ecuador known as Llanganati and seven years later they were followed into the void by forty-one-year-old Norwegian Larsen Hafskjold, traveling in the Rio Colorado region. These are certainly not the last in a long list of victims because the jungle continues to lure others with its secrets. The words written by Fawcett before his last expedition ring in my ears:

If we do not return, I do not want anyone to search for us; the risk is too great. If, with my experience, we are not successful, then almost no one can achieve it. Whether we go and return or whether our bones remain in the jungle, one thing is certain: those old cities – obviously when they are found and made accessible to researchers – may reveal the secrets of ancient mankind in South America and who knows, perhaps even the world before the flood. That these cities exist – of this I have no doubt.

Sleep eludes me. My sight wanders aimlessly among the myriads of stars winking down upon us. I pick out the characteristic figure of the Southern Cross, which guides the

⁷⁴ Even Hercules is no help against a large number of foes.

heroes of children's books. Years ago, when I saw it for the first time, I was disappointed. The constellation was so inconspicuous looking, so small in comparison to the far-flung Big Dipper that accompanied me during late night walks in the Northern hemisphere. At the time I lacked the imagination of Magellan, Cook, Drake and many others who were led by this seemingly inconsequential constellation across the ocean to new lands, discovery, fame, adventure and sometimes death. The centuries pass and generations rise and fall, but this formation is a constant feature in the night sky. It sends a steady stream of cool starlight that reaches our tiny revolving home – Earth – after 543 light-years. Two shining patches below signify the Clouds of Magellan. Forty years ago, when I read a description of space exploration towards the mystifying nebula written by Stanislaw Lem, I could not even dream that one day I would see them for myself. Those were the days when travel was limited to a perusal of the map and an expedition to the border zone with Czechoslovakia was an exciting experience that placed me quite high in the playground hierarchy. "He was abroad," said my friends enviously, as if I had reached one of the poles. The closely guarded borders of our childhood seemed to be something secretive, mystical and transcendental hiding enchanted lands of fairy tales.

Now I am truly a nomad. I have been everywhere, well, almost everywhere – or at least to those places where something interesting is happening. I have ridden camels, elephants, reindeer and yaks as well as traveled on foot and by canoe. I have left the comforts of home for the open road and the unknown in an attempt to prove something to myself and others. Sometimes these journeys symbolize the search for freedom from stifling routines, memories, painful words and repetition. At some point man is overwhelmed by things, papers, trinkets, pictures and habits. They enslave us and tie us down with bonds more onerous than handcuffs. That is why I go out into the world,

backpack slung over my shoulder – to leave behind the suffocating baggage of the past and the roots of the homeland. A man can grow his own roots.

Since the dawn of time, mankind has led a nomadic existence and this is written into our genetic code. The heritage of my progenitors opens vast expanses before me and space makes man free, transforming me into a bird. I am the master of my own fate; I decide who I am and where I will be. Only I can limit my freedoms. The God of the Old Testament made a tribe of nomads his chosen people. His first temple was a tent; the first alter the ark they carried. Nothing permanent, nothing infinite. These nomads were searching for the Promised Land and later, before the discovery of America, mankind dreamed of the legendary land of the Seven Cities, Cibola. Searches were launched for the source of Eternal Youth and the fabled Ophir. I was consumed with the legend of lost cities. Is Paititi only a mirage? No...after all, I have found so many leads, I know, I feel I am so close...but my bad luck holds...this last day brought us so many unpleasant surprises...

I wake up with a feeling of unease. The sky is lightening as the shadows of night are banished by the approaching day. The first birds begin to trill. Somewhere not far from here a large animal lurks. A few hisses and a growl signify a jaguar. I struggle to shake off the cobwebs of slumber. A jaguar visited me in my dreams as well. I saw his shiny, spotted fur clearly, his half-open mouth armed with protruding fangs. He was accompanied by an old, wrinkled Inca. The man's ears, weighed down with golden hoops, hung to his knee. A long-ear. Behind him I glimpsed stone buildings and statues. He approached me slowly, coming so close that I could feel the jaguar's breath.

"It is not yet time," he said quietly. "It is too early to free the secret. Go away and leave us in peace."

* *

“The Inca entered one of the stone buildings and I awakened with a feeling similar to the one left by last year’s *ayahuasca* séance. The line between reality and illusion seems blurred. After a few moments, I finally realize where I am. A huge cat is stalking somewhere in the vicinity and another unhappy day has begun. Today we return, bringing the expedition to a close and dashing my hopes of success. Then I remember your words as we said goodbye at the airport: ‘You shouldn’t dismissed these visions. It may be a message that we don’t know how to decipher yet – a piece of information that our lives will one day make sense of.’”

Andrew and I are sitting in my Warsaw apartment enjoying cups of tea, while I share my impressions from the last days of the expedition. I outlined the unbelievable shower of unlucky events, including Genos’s accident, which frightened the porters, my sudden illness and the georadar’s failure.

“And then, lying in the hammock, I put all of my dream phantoms, the *ayahuasca* visions and your words into a cohesive whole. Perhaps it really isn’t time to unearth Paititi’s secrets.”

Outside the window the sun was shining as we sat in the center of a great city and I felt strange about these confessions. In the 21st century who attaches significance to their dreams? Andrew was silent for a moment, toying with his cup.

“You see, when we said goodbye at the airport in Cuzco, I didn’t tell you everything. I was afraid that you, as a man that looks at the world pragmatically, would make fun of my visions in Pilcopata. Analyzing that jumble of confusing vision on the

next day, I realized that I shouldn't go back to the jungle. My enthusiasm in finding Paititi had dissipated. I've been touched by the Unknown a few times and even escaped death because I listened to my instincts. So, when you asked me to participate in the expedition, I refused, claiming to be sick. At the time, I don't think you could have understood the motivations driving me, but I comprehend perfectly your later experiences."

"But why is it 'not yet time?' When is the right time?"

"Jacek, we don't always have answers to all the questions. We can only guess and wonder at the imperfection of the world and human beings around us. Except our musings will still be just hypotheses."

We stop talking for a while, each lost in his own thoughts. I have much to ponder. Since the last expedition my catalogued, rational world has been turned upside down. How was I to react to these new and irrational experiences, tough to accept from a materialistic point of view? But trying to escape them or hiding my head in the sand won't do any good. Everything really happened and my pursuit of Paititi has consumed a few years of my life. Should I push those experiences deep into the back of my mind to rot? Suddenly, a thought occurs to me and I speak it aloud.

"Andrew, let's write about all this in a book. About the days spent trying to decipher the puzzles of South America's stone city in the midst of an often hostile jungle..."

"...about the trip that allowed us to climb the weathered steps of time and follow in the footsteps of our ancestors, who live in an ancient age. A journey that led us to the land of silence; a place where questions bounce off the stone walls, while the answers suggested by logic seem incomprehensible because we do not have the key. Is that what you wanted to say, Jacek?"

I nod.

That is how this book came about. To this day in Peru, even in an era of flaunted technology, man still encounters the unexpected, which escapes the inquisitive human mind. On the Andean plateaus in the Amazon jungle, mankind, so proud of its accomplishments, must humble itself before many enigmas based on rational thought. There we learn to swallow the bitter taste of failure, although one that does not represent our defeat. It is an element of self-exploration, one step towards understanding the Unknown. Because Paititi exists...nestled somewhere beneath the jungle canopy, it waits for a discoverer. We will continue to dream of the city, a dying generation of nomads. We will follow every lead and organize new expeditions until mystery ceases to be mysterious, until the last white stain on maps of the Amazon wilderness are erased, until we touch our Paititi.

Lima- Rybnik-Bassano del Grappa, March 2005

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