**CHAPTER ONE “The City on the Hill” (1492–1707)-The Age of European Discovery**

...A native of Genoa, Columbus embodied the best of the new generation of navigators: resilient, courageous, and confident. To be sure, Columbus wanted glory, and a motivation born of desperation fueled his vision. At the same time, Columbus was “earnestly desirous of taking Christianity to heathen lands.”

He did not, as is popularly believed, originate the idea that the earth is round. As early as 1480, for example, he read works proclaiming the sphericity of the planet. But knowing intellectually that the earth is round and demonstrating it physically are two different things. Columbus’s fleet consisted of only three vessels, the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa María, and a crew of ninety men. Leaving port in August 1492, the expedition eventually passed the point where the sailors expected to find Japan, generating no small degree of anxiety, whereupon Columbus used every managerial skill he possessed to maintain discipline and encourage hope. The voyage had stretched to ten weeks when the crew bordered on mutiny, and only the captain’s reassurance and exhortations persuaded the sailors to continue a few more days. Finally, on October 11, 1492, they started to see signs of land: pieces of wood loaded with barnacles, green bulrushes, and other vegetation. A lookout spotted land, and on October 12, 1492, the courageous band waded ashore on Watling Island in the Bahamas, where his men begged his pardon for doubting him…Columbus returned to Spain confident he had found an ocean passage to the Orient.

…Historian Samuel Eliot Morison, a worthy seaman in his own right who reenacted the Columbian voyages in 1939 and 1940, described Columbus as “the sign and symbol [of the] new age of hope, glory and accomplishment.” Once Columbus blazed the trail, other Spanish explorers had less trouble obtaining financial backing for expeditions. Vasco Núñez de Balboa (1513) crossed the Isthmus of Panama to the Pacific Ocean (as he named it). Ferdinand Magellan (1519–22) circumnavigated the globe, lending his name to the Strait of Magellan. Other expeditions explored the interior of the newly discovered lands. Juan Ponce de León, traversing an area along Florida’s coast, attempted unsuccessfully to plant a colony there. ..

Spaniards traversed modern-day Mexico, probing interior areas under Hernando Cortés, who in 1518 led a force of 1,000 soldiers to Tenochtitlán, the site of present-day Mexico City. Cortés encountered powerful Indians called Aztecs, led by their emperor Montezuma. The Aztecs had established a brutal regime that oppressed other natives of the region, capturing large numbers of them for ritual sacrifices in which Aztec priests cut out the beating hearts of living victims. Such barbarity enabled the Spanish to easily enlist other tribes, especially the Tlaxcalans, in their efforts to defeat the Aztecs. Tenochtitlán sat on an island in the middle of a lake, connected to the outlying areas by three huge causeways. It was a monstrously large city (for the time) of at least 200,000, rigidly divided into nobles and commoner groups. Aztec culture created impressive pyramid-shaped temple structures, but Aztec science lacked the simple wheel and the wide range of pulleys and gears that it enabled.

But it was sacrifice, not science, that defined Aztec society, whose pyramids, after all, were execution sites. A four-day sacrifice in 1487 by the Aztec king Ahuitzotl involved the butchery of 80,400 prisoners by shifts of priests working four at a time at convex killing tables who kicked lifeless, heartless bodies down the side of the pyramid temple. This worked out to a “killing rate of fourteen victims a minute over the ninety-six-hour bloodbath.”

…More intriguing to the Spanish than the buildings, or even the sacrifices, however, were the legends of gold, silver, and other riches Tenochtitlán contained, protected by the powerful Aztec army. Cortés first attempted a direct assault on the city and fell back with heavy losses, narrowly escaping extermination. .. In 1521 Cortés returned with a new Spanish army, supported by more than 75,000 Indian allies. This time, he found a weakened enemy who had been ravaged by smallpox, or as the Aztecs called it, “the great leprosy.” Starvation killed those Aztecs whom the disease did not: “They died in heaps, like bedbugs,” wrote one historian. Even so, neither disease nor starvation accounted for the Spaniards’ stunning victory over the vastly larger Aztec forces, which can be credited to the Spanish use of Europeanstyle disciplined shock combat and the employment of modern firepower. Severing the causeways, stationing huge units to guard each, Cortés assaulted the city walls from thirteen brigantines the Spaniards had hauled overland, sealing off the city. These brigantines proved “far more ingeniously engineered for fighting on the Aztecs’ native waters than any boat constructed in Mexico during the entire history of its civilization.” When it came to the final battle, it was not the brigantines, but Cortés’s use of cannons, muskets, harquebuses, crossbows, and pikes in deadly discipline, firing in order, and standing en masse against a murderous mass of Aztecs who fought as individuals rather than a cohesive force that proved decisive.

…If Europeans resembled other cultures in their attitude toward conquest, they differed substantially in their practice and effectiveness. The Spanish, especially, proved adept at defeating native peoples for three reasons. First, they were mobile. Horses and ships endowed the Spanish with vast advantages in mobility over the natives. Second, the burgeoning economic power of Europe enabled quantum leaps over Middle Eastern, Asian, and Mesoamerican cultures. This economic wealth made possible the shipping and equipping of large, trained, well-armed forces. Nonmilitary technological advances such as the iron-tipped plow, the windmill, and the waterwheel all had spread through Europe and allowed monarchs to employ fewer resources in the farming sector and more in science, engineering, writing, and the military. A natural outgrowth of this economic wealth was improved military technology, including guns, which made any single Spanish soldier the equal of several poorly armed natives, offsetting the latter’s numerical advantage. But these two factors were magnified by a third element—the glue that held it all together—which was a western way of combat that emphasized group cohesion of free citizens…

Did Columbus Kill Most of the Indians? The five-hundred-year anniversary of Columbus’s discovery was marked by unusual and strident controversy. Rising up to challenge the intrepid voyager’s courage and vision—as well as the establishment of European civilization in the New World—was a crescendo of damnation, which posited that the Genoese navigator was a mass murderer akin to Adolf Hitler. ..Although this division of interpretations no doubt confused and dampened many a Columbian festival in 1992, it also elicited a most intriguing historical debate: did the esteemed Admiral of the Ocean Sea kill almost all the Indians? A number of recent scholarly studies have dispelled or at least substantially modified many of the numbers generated by the anti-Columbus groups, although other new research has actually increased them. Why the sharp inconsistencies…?

1. Pre-Columbian native population numbers are much smaller than critics have maintained. For example, one author claims “Approximately 56 million people died as a result of European exploration in the New World.” For that to have occurred, however, one must start with early estimates for the population of the Western Hemisphere at nearly 100 million. Recent research suggests that that number is vastly inflated, and that the most reliable figure is nearer 53 million, and even that estimate falls with each new publication. Since 1976 alone, experts have lowered their estimates by 4 million. Some scholars have even seen those figures as wildly inflated, and several studies put the native population of North America alone within a range of 8.5 million (the highest) to a low estimate of 1.8 million. If the latter number is true, it means that the “holocaust” or “depopulation” that occurred was one fiftieth of the original estimates, or 800,000 Indians who died from disease and firearms…

2. Native populations had epidemics long before Europeans arrived. A recent study of more than 12,500 skeletons from sixty-five sites found that native health was on a “downward trajectory long before Columbus arrived.” Some suggest that Indians may have had a nonvenereal form of syphilis, and almost all agree that a variety of infections were widespread. Tuberculosis existed in Central and North America long before the Spanish appeared, as did herpes, polio, tick-borne fevers, giardiasis, and amebic dysentery. One admittedly controversial study by Henry Dobyns in Current Anthropology in 1966 later fleshed out over the years into his book, argued that extensive epidemics swept North America before Europeans arrived. As one authority summed up the research, “Though the Old World was to contribute to its diseases, the New World certainly was not the Garden of Eden some have depicted…”

3. There is little evidence available for estimating the numbers of people lost in warfare prior to the Europeans because in general natives did not keep written records. Later, when whites could document oral histories during the Indian wars on the western frontier, they found that different tribes exaggerated their accounts of battles in totally different ways, depending on tribal custom. Some, who preferred to emphasize bravery over brains, inflated casualty numbers. Others, viewing large body counts as a sign of weakness, deemphasized their losses. What is certain is that vast numbers of natives were killed by other natives, and that only technological backwardness—the absence of guns, for example—prevented the numbers of natives killed by other natives from growing even higher.

4. Large areas of Mexico and the Southwest were depopulated more than a hundred years before the arrival of Columbus. According to a recent source, “The majority of Southwesternists…believe that many areas of the Greater Southwest were abandoned or largely depopulated over a century before Columbus’s fateful discovery, as a result of climatic shifts, warfare, resource mismanagement, and other causes.” Indeed, a new generation of scholars puts more credence in early Spanish explorers’ observations of widespread ruins and decaying “great houses” that they contended had been abandoned for years.