

# Lesson from the Hemisphere's Past

Book Review by Rudolph C. Ryser

## 1491

**New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus**

**Charles C. Mann**

**Vintage Books, NY**

**Pp. 538 (2005, 2006)**

The bow and arrow, and the spear were superior weapons to the musket. Pre-Columbian American cities were often populated with numbers of people far and away larger than the smaller cities of London and Paris in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Nations managed jungles and forests like massive gardens. But for the ravages of introduced disease and a few societies over-reaching in their efforts to manage the environment that broke the back of a hemispheric population of an estimated 110 million people, the western hemisphere could today be dominated by indigenous nations instead of the descendents of western European settlers.

This is a picture of the western hemisphere never truly reported in the literature of world and regional history. Fourth World nations and small segments of the conventional scientific community have known for at least a century the nations that peopled the western hemisphere lived in a world of little disease, prosperous societies in 9 or 10 regions of what is North America, Central America and South America. No, this isn't the New World of Rousseau's Noble Savage. There were wars of domination, human/ecological imbalances, occasional famines, political intrigues, social upheavals, greed and avarice, as well as music, dance, architecture, systems of mathematics and literature. The peoples of the western hemisphere shared many common human traits experienced the world over, yet there world was very different place with very different cultures from Europe, Africa and Asia. Remnants of the hemispheric past are tucked away into small societies retaining knowledge and consciousness that is little understood by peoples living in modern states.

Charles Mann, a correspondent for *Science* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, has written in reporter-like-fashion a story that a journalist is most likely to produce. His narrative in the first two chapters is interesting and holds the reader as Mann pulls together information about the path of disease devastating the Taino people who first met Columbus and how invisibly disease traveled to kill millions in advance of the arrival of Spanish conquistador arrivals on the mainland. He even points to the mysterious introduction of what appears to have been hepatitis in what is now New England in the United States before the arrival of the Jamestown settlement in 1607 – eventually rubbing out more than 80% of the indigenous population. The march of

disease followed the pathways of trade routes long used to build large and prosperous societies devastating the prosperous cities and closely related towns and villages by 50% to more than 90%.

The first smallpox epidemic struck Tawantinsuyu—the land of the Inkas—in 1533. Quoting an eyewitness Mann reports, “They died by scores and hundreds. \* \* \* Villages were depopulated. Corpses were scattered over the fields or piled up in the houses or huts.... The fields were uncultivated; the herds were untended [and] the price of food rose to such an extent that many persons found it beyond their reach. They escaped the foul disease, but only to be wasted by famine.” This scene was to be repeated thousands of times throughout the hemisphere with typhus, diphtheria, measles, malaria, influenza, tuberculosis, and other diseases known only in Europe and Asia before the earliest visits of European ships to hemispheric coasts. Mann (and Henry Dobyns) postulates a decline in population hemispheric wide from as many as 110 million to about 10 million in less than 100 years after Skanian, English, Spanish, French, Dutch and Portuguese ships touched the eastern shores.

Challenging the idea that guns and steel might have overwhelmed the warriors of the Zapotec or the warriors of Tawantisuyu Mann describes the range limitations of Spanish muskets bringing little or no harm to warriors with bows and arrows and spears. Muskets were accurate for only a score of yards while arrows could pierce the chest armor of Spanish soldiers at 100 yards. The accuracy and distance of which spears and arrows were capable rendered Spanish weapons nearly useless. When comparing the multi-layered, tightly woven cotton vests of Tawantisuyu warriors with the Spanish soldiers’ *chainmail* the warriors’ arrows won over musket balls. Only disease and the revenge interests of subject populations that joined with the Spaniards provided the means by which the millions of Tawantisuyu in the 1520s could be defeated and subjugated. So it was equally the case, Mann reports, that disease and vengeful vassal states joining the Spaniards reduced the Nahuatl speaking Aztecs who dominated Mexico for more than 100 years to willing subjects of Hernando Cortes and his 600 or so not so well trained soldiers.

Mann describes the advanced cultures of what is now the Mississippi River corridor and what is now southern Illinois, the peoples of eastern Canada and the US and of course the cultures of the US southwest. When combined with the more detailed discussions of Aztec, Mayan, Amazon and Tawantinsuyu civilizations one becomes consumed with admiration for what was and what could have been and may still become.

There are a few omissions from the list of hemispheric civilizations that seem glaring: The Salish of north coastal US and south coastal Canada, and the rich civilization of Haida Gui and the Tlingit; and the powerful culture of the Anishinabe of the Great Lakes region. Still, Mann’s narrative is none-the-less powerful and insightful.

At times Mann gets occupied with the tedious discussions of competing theories and speculations among anthropologists and archeologists from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward. One thing is certain, his description of competing views

prove that much of what had been popularly known about the peoples of the western hemisphere achieved prominence only because one researcher with the backing of his university or museum made more noise than another.

Despite this minor flaw, Charles Mann has written in his 1491 what will become an influential popular rendering of history extracted from archaeology. This is a book well worth reading and in many chapters, savoring.