One: WESTWARD THE COURSE (1492–1607)

I. COLUMBUS: “THE CHRIST BEARER”

Slavery was an inescapable part of African life. Mansa Musa, a devout Muslim, was the king of Mali (currently part of Niger). He sold fourteen thousand female slaves to finance his journey to Cairo in 1324. The Arabs were always “seizing our people as merchandise,” complained the black king of Bornu (in present-day Nigeria) to the sultan of Egypt in the 1390s. With the extension of Islam into West Africa’s “Gold Coast” came an increasingly vigorous trade in black slaves. The Christian Portuguese emulated this practice. Three hundred years before adoption of the U.S. Constitution, decisions made in Europe and Africa would have great and terrible consequences for a nation as yet unimagined and a people still unnamed.

On an island he would name La Isla Española—The Spanish Island (or Hispaniola), Columbus found more Indians eager to trade. Importantly, these Indians seemed to have plenty of gold.

So willing, so easily plied with cheap trinkets—like little brass hawk’s bells worth only pennies in Spain—these Indians were vulnerable to the Spaniards in many ways. They could be dominated as slaves and put to work mining gold. What’s more, the native women seemed sexually open. To sailors who had had no contact with the opposite sex for months at a time and who had little fear of venereal disease, the sensual enticements proved irresistible. Syphilis has been traced to this first encounter of Columbus’s men and the aboriginal peoples of the Caribbean. A contemporary of Columbus, Bishop Las Casas, thinks Indians who came back to Barcelona from the first voyage gave the disease to “women of the town,” a euphemism for prostitutes, who then gave it to Spanish soldiers. From there, it spread throughout Europe and the world. The Indians, on the other hand, contracted smallpox and measles from the Spaniards; these diseases devastated populations with no previous exposure and built-up immunity.

To the modern complaint that Columbus brought slavery to the New World and that the Europeans’ diseases wiped out indigenous peoples, a response is due. Slavery was a pervasive fact of life among the Europeans, but also particularly among the Arabs, the Africans, and the Indians themselves. In Asia, slavery had always existed. It seems hard to credit an attack on Columbus that singles him out for what was then a fairly
universal practice. As much as we deplore slavery today, we cannot ignore the moral development of the West from our present vantage point outside the context of history. It was from the very experience of administering a far-flung empire that Spanish scholars began to elaborate universal doctrines of human rights that led, eventually, to the abolition of slavery in the West. A counter-challenge might be offered: Who, in Columbus’s time, did not practice slavery? One might conclude that far from being slavery’s worst practitioners, westerners led the world to end the practice.


The treatment of criminals and heretics at the time gives some idea of the level of public sensibility. In most of the kingdoms of Europe, a convicted traitor would be sentenced to be hanged, drawn, and quartered. This process involved hanging the unfortunate man until he was nearly unconscious. Pulled down, the victim would be disemboweled and his entrails burned before him. Finally, his body would then be pulled apart by four horses hitched to his extremities. Heretics fared little better. Burned at the stake, a slow and excruciating process of execution, they could consider themselves blessed if friends had secreted bags of gunpowder beneath their death robes to hasten their tortured end.


II. THE SCRAMBLE FOR EMPIRE

Magellan planned to find a strait at the extreme southern tip of South America. But soon, he was in danger. Wintering over on the coast of Argentina, the men began to grumble. Three of his ships mutinied in Port San Julian. He had received word warning him that the Spanish captains, who hated him, planned to kill him. Captains Cartagena, Mendoza, and Quesada accused Magellan of violating royal instructions in taking them so far south. Magellan had told them he would rather die than turn back. He sent his man Espinosa to the Victoria with a message to Captain Mendoza ordering him to cease his defiance and obey orders. Mendoza laughed when he read the letter, which proved a mistake. Espinosa immediately grabbed Mendoza by the beard and stabbed him to death—exactly as Magellan had commanded him. Magellan then subdued another mutinous ship, the Concepcion, with naval gunfire and boarded her, taking Captain Quesada as prisoner. The revolt soon collapsed.

Magellan had Mendoza’s body quartered—gruesomely cut into four parts—and “cried” (exhibited) through the fleet as a warning to everyone against mutiny. Quesada was hanged and Cartagena was spared—for the moment. Soon, however, Captain
Cartagena was found to be stirring up new discontent, along with a priest. Magellan had the two men tried and marooned. Abandoned on the shores of Argentina, they would die of exposure, starvation, or Indian attack. They were last seen “kneeling at the water’s edge, bawling for mercy.”

Pressing on, after the loss of one of his ships, Magellan finally entered “the strait that shall forever bear his name.” In October and November of 1520, Magellan carefully made his way through the hazards of these uncharted waters. Strong currents and sudden storms make it one of the most dangerous passages on earth, even today. The Strait is anything but straight; it is a maze of treacherous waters and dangerous rocks. Magellan’s task was like the threading of a dozen needles. Magellan had to retrace his steps, searching in vain for one of his four remaining ships. He did not know that the San Antonio had headed back to Spain.

His fleet now reduced to three ships, Magellan headed out into the sea he named Pacific. Ahead of him lay open waters. Magellan and his men prayed regularly and well they might. Though they did not realize it, they faced a journey more than twice the distance faced by Columbus. Here, Magellan proved his mettle. Antonio Pigafetta, an Italian member of the crew, kept a detailed journal and wrote of him: “He endured hunger better than all the rest . . . and more accurately than any man in the world, he understood dead reckoning and celestial navigation.”

Pigafetta explained the privations of the voyage to Guam:
We were three months and twenty days without any kind of fresh food. We ate biscuit which was no longer biscuit but powder of biscuit swarming with worms. It stank strongly of the urine of rats. We also ate some ox hides that covered the top of the mainyard to prevent the yard from chafing the shrouds. Rats were sold for one-half ducado [about $1.16 in gold] apiece and even then we could not get them.

The expedition would not have survived at all had Magellan not first hugged the coast of Chile before striking out across the Pacific. Pigafetta realized this: “Had not God and his blessed mother given us so good weather, we would all have died of hunger.” The trip was three times longer than anyone could have expected. No reliable charts or maps existed.

Finally landing on Guam 6 March 1521, Magellan found his three ships overwhelmed by swarms of natives who, though friendly, carried off much of the cargo of trade. The ships stayed only long enough to resupply and then made for the Spice Islands. Within a week, Magellan had reached the Philippines in the region of Leyte Gulf. The king of Cebu persuaded Magellan that he had converted from Islam to Christianity and sought the aid of the Spaniards in a battle with a neighboring island of Mactan. Magellan’s men pleaded with him not to go, but he felt a duty to aid a fellow Christian. When he came ashore, he left his three ships anchored too far out to give him assistance. He and a small, loyal party, including Pigafetta, were soon overwhelmed by
Mactanese warriors using poisoned arrows and scimitars. Magellan covered the retreat of his men but was cut down, pitching facedown in the sand. Pigafetta faithfully recorded:

When they wounded him, he turned back many times to see whether we were all in the boats. Then, seeing him dead, we wounded made the best of our way to the boats, which were already pulling away. But for him, not one of us . . . would have been saved.

Magellan was mourned by Pigafetta as “our mirror, our light, our comfort and our true guide.” But his mission had not ended. Captain Juan Sebastian del Cano took command of the Victoria, abandoning both the Concepcion and the Trinidad. Sailing ever westward, del Cano cleared the Cape of Good Hope, only to face on the homeward leg the imprisonment of nearly half his crew by the Portuguese at the Cape Verde Islands. Limping back into Seville on 8 September 1522, Captain del Cano commanded only eighteen sea-weary men of the Victoria. As they had promised, the men immediately walked barefoot to the cathedral, clad only in long shirts and each one bearing a candle to do penance and to give thanks for their survival. Thus ended, nearly three years after they set sail, the first voyage of circumnavigation of the earth. Spain was unchallenged as the leading sea power of the world. Magellan’s historic voyage coincided with, even as it symbolized, Spain’s new command of the seas. Her ability to exercise control over her American empire depended entirely on admiralty—the ability to control the sea.


The Aztec practice of human sacrifice stunned the conquerors. Each year, thousands of victims would be taken to the top of magnificent pyramids and their hearts would be cut out and offered up to the Aztec gods.