

## Chapter 10 Excerpt

When Christopher Columbus landed in Jamaica on May 5, 1494, the island was populated by 100,000 healthy and happy Arawak Indians. The Arawaks, who had migrated from their ancestral home on the South American mainland, had been in Jamaica for more than 800 years when the Spanish arrived. But by 1611, only 117 years later, a mere seventy-four of them remained.

Like the other Amerindian peoples, the Arawaks became victims, on a mass scale, of the common childhood diseases of Europe and Africa. Nor were they able to cope with the physical rigors of plantation slavery. To replace them, the Spaniards imported Africans, a race they described as “robust for labor.” Despite extraordinarily brutal treatment, inadequate diet, and protracted exposure to the same diseases that had decimated the Amerindian populations, the Africans not only survived slavery but multiplied.

The story of why men and women from the isolated and disease-infested rain forests of West Africa became the “strength and sinews” of the Western world and the world’s greatest athletes is a fascinating and little-understood one. In some ways, the West African story is part of a larger one about the extraordinary but little-known role disease has played in man’s historical development. In other ways, the West African story is unique because it transformed critical physiological processes in at least some West African populations and created one of the preconditions for slavery in the New World, and, therefore, for the Industrial Revolution.

The historian William H. McNeill has convincingly argued that European diseases were far more lethal to the Amerindians than the horses and gunpowder of the Spaniards. As McNeill points out in *Plagues and Peoples*, Hernando Cortez, the leader of the Spanish forces, starting with fewer than six hundred men, conquered the Aztec empire, then a great civilization of some six million people spread over 80,000 square miles. In searching for an adequate explanation for the extraordinary triumph of the Spaniards, McNeill discarded as inadequate the conventional wisdom that Spanish gunpowder and horseflesh simply overwhelmed a primitive people who thought they were being assaulted by gods. “If Montezuma and his friends first thought the Spaniards were gods, experience soon showed otherwise,” McNeill wrote. “If horses and gunpowder were amazing and terrible on first encounter, armed clashes soon revealed the limitations of horseflesh and the very primitive guns the Spaniards had at their disposal.” Instead, the acclaimed historian looked to an incident that had been overlooked by conventional history for a more satisfactory explanation.

On the very night the Aztecs drove the Spaniards out of Mexico City, killing many of them, McNeill noted that a smallpox epidemic was raging in the city, and that the man who had organized the assault on the Spaniards was among those who died on that *noche trista*, as the Spaniards later called it. McNeill would come to believe that it was the paralyzing effect of the lethal epidemic that was primarily responsible for the failure of the Aztecs to pursue the badly beaten Spaniards. That failure would give them time and opportunity not only to rest and regroup, but also gather Indian allies, set siege to the city, and eventually achieve victory.

As McNeill pondered the psychological implications of a disease that killed only Indians and left Spaniards unharmed, he became convinced that the lopsided impact of infectious diseases upon Amerindian populations offered a key to understanding the ease with which the Spanish conquered America, both militarily and culturally. To the Indians, McNeill believes, such partiality could only be explained supernaturally, and there could be no doubt about which side of the struggle enjoyed divine

favor: “The religions, priesthoods, and way of life built around the old Indian gods could not survive such a demonstration of the superior power of the God the Spaniards worshipped.”

This bold hypothesis, McNeill quickly realized, raised other questions. Not only how and when did the Spaniards acquire the disease experience that served them so well in the New World, but also, why did the Amerindians not have diseases of their own with which to repel the invading Spaniards? His attempt to answer those questions, he wrote, soon began “to uncover a dimension of the past that historians have not hitherto recognized: the history of humanity’s encounters with infectious diseases, and the far-reaching consequences that ensued whenever contacts across disease boundaries allowed a new infection to invade a population that lacked any acquired immunity to its ravages.”