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A History of Buenos Aires

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Introduction

Buenos Aires, a city whose very name evokes a sense of grandeur and vibrancy, holds an extraordinary place in the story of the Americas. From its earliest days as a precarious European foothold on the banks of the Río de la Plata, to its emergence as the cosmopolitan heart of Argentina, Buenos Aires has been shaped by cycles of conflict and convergence, expansion and reinvention. This book sets out to trace Buenos Aires' rich and often tumultuous history, exploring how a modest colonial outpost became one of the world's great cities.

The arc of Buenos Aires' development is inseparable from the continent's larger currents of empire, commerce, and migration. Its first founding, in 1536, was short-lived, beset by scarcity and indigenous resistance. But its second, in 1580, laid the groundwork for a settlement that would persevere and, over centuries, assert its autonomy not only from colonial masters but also from the landlocked capital of the Spanish viceroyalty in Lima. Buenos Aires' fortunes were tied to the river and the Atlantic world—a gateway for contraband, ideas, and ultimately revolutions. Its people, the porteños, became renowned for an entrepreneurial spirit forged in adversity.

This history, however, is not simply a chronology of rulers and events. Buenos Aires is a tapestry woven from myriad threads: indigenous peoples and Spanish conquerors, African slaves and Jesuit missionaries, landowners and laborers, immigrants from every corner of Europe and beyond. Each new wave left an indelible mark on the city's architecture, dialects, culinary traditions, and social hierarchies. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the city's streets teemed with Italian, Spanish, Russian, and Middle Eastern newcomers, all seeking opportunity. Their stories mingle in the tango's melancholy strains and the vivid slang of lunfardo.

The city's growth was punctuated by periods of crisis—wars for independence, civil conflicts, dictatorship, and economic upheaval. The Plaza de Mayo has served as both stage and battleground, from the revolutionary cries of 1810 to the mass demonstrations of workers and the anguished marches of the Mothers of the Disappeared. Each upheaval left scars and, just as often, new beginnings. Buenos Aires continually reinvented itself, from the Haussmannized boulevards of the 19th century to the bustling commercial and cultural hub of today.

As the twenty-first century unfolds, Buenos Aires remains a paradoxical city: rich in culture yet riven by inequality, proud of its heritage yet ceaselessly modernizing, South American in geography but deeply European in affect. Its challenges—urban sprawl, social polarization, infrastructure strains—are those of many global cities. Yet its resilience, creativity, and diversity continue to assure its place at the forefront of

national and regional life.

In tracing the sweeping story of Buenos Aires, this book invites readers to view the city not only as a backdrop to major events, but as a protagonist in its own right—a living, breathing entity shaped by its inhabitants and their dreams. The chapters that follow will explore the forces and figures that formed Buenos Aires, the neighborhoods and monuments that give it character, and the dynamism that propels it forward. This is the chronicle of a city forever in the making.

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CHAPTER ONE: Origins and the First Encounters: Indigenous Peoples and Early Explorers

Long before the glint of European caravels broke the monotony of the horizon, the vast estuary of the Río de la Plata, the "River of Silver," lay waiting, a seemingly endless expanse of brownish water meeting the Atlantic. This was no ordinary river mouth; it was a colossal aquatic realm, so wide that from its southern shore, the facing land of what would one day be Uruguay was often invisible. The lands that would cradle the future city of Buenos Aires were part of an immense, flat, and fertile plain known as the Pampa. This was a world shaped by slow-flowing rivers, intermittent lagoons, and grasslands that stretched as far as the eye could see, waving under a vast, open sky.

The air, often humid and carrying the scent of damp earth and river water, would later lend its name—*Buen Ayre*, or Good Air—to a fledgling European settlement, though the local climate could be anything but consistently benign, with scorching summers, damp winters, and the sudden, violent pampero winds sweeping in from the southwest. The native fauna was rich: herds of fleet-footed guanacos and pampas deer roamed the plains, while rheas, the South American ostrich, strutted through the tall grasses. Armadillos and vizcachas burrowed in the soft soil, and a myriad of bird species, from screeching parakeets to majestic eagles, filled the air. The rivers teemed with fish, providing a ready source of sustenance for those who knew how to harvest them.

Upon this ancient stage lived various groups of indigenous peoples, their presence stretching back millennia. In the specific area where Buenos Aires would eventually rise, the dominant group encountered by the first Europeans were the Querandí. The name itself, likely a Guaraní term meaning "people who eat fat or grease," hints at their diet, rich in animal products. The Querandí were a nomadic people, their lives dictated by the seasonal availability of resources. They were skilled hunters and fishers, their society finely tuned to the rhythms of the Pampa.

Their territory was not strictly defined by fixed borders but rather by familiar hunting grounds and temporary encampments that shifted with the movement of game and the changing seasons. They roamed the plains west of the great river, from the Carcarañá River in the north down to the Salado River in the south, an area encompassing the future site of Buenos Aires. They were a people of the open land, their settlements consisting of temporary huts made from branches and animal skins, easily dismantled and transported.

The Querandí were primarily hunter-gatherers. Their principal weapon was the *bola perdida*, or bolas, a throwing weapon made of stone weights attached to leather cords, which they used with remarkable skill to entangle the legs of guanacos and rheas. They also employed bows and arrows for hunting and, if necessary, for warfare. Fish were caught using nets or spears in the numerous rivers and lagoons. While largely nomadic, they also gathered wild plants, roots, and fruits to supplement their diet, demonstrating an intimate knowledge of the local flora.

Their social structure was likely organized into small, mobile bands, probably based on kinship. Leadership would have fallen to the most skilled hunters or warriors, but their society was far from the hierarchical structures common in Europe or even in the more settled agricultural empires of the Andes or Mesoamerica. The Querandí valued freedom and mobility, traits that would later make them formidable opponents to European encroachment.

Details about their belief systems and cultural practices are regrettably sparse, filtered as they are through the often biased and incomplete accounts of early European chroniclers or inferred from archaeological findings. What is known suggests a reverence for the natural world, with spiritual beliefs likely intertwined with the animals they hunted and the landscapes they inhabited. Their material culture included pottery, though not of a highly sophisticated nature, and tools fashioned from stone, bone, and wood. They dressed in animal skins, particularly those of nutrias and guanacos, to protect themselves against the elements.

Living in a region that served as a crossroads of sorts, the Querandí were not entirely isolated. To their north and east, along the great rivers, were the Guaraní, a more sedentary, agricultural people who cultivated maize, cassava, and squash. The Guaraní were also skilled canoeists and navigators of the extensive river systems. Across the wide estuary, in what is now Uruguay, lived the Charrúa, another group of nomadic hunters and fishers with a reputation for fierceness. To the south lay the vast territories of the Tehuelche (Patagonians). Interactions between these groups undoubtedly occurred, ranging from trade and occasional alliances to skirmishes over resources or territory. The Querandí, for instance, were known to trade skins and animal products with the Guaraní in exchange for agricultural goods or canoes.

Reconstructing the pre-Columbian world of the Río de la Plata estuary is an exercise in piecing together fragments. The Querandí, like many nomadic peoples, left a light footprint on the land. Their story is largely unwritten in the European sense, existing in the collective memory of their descendants, archaeological traces, and the often-unreliable observations of those who came to conquer and colonize. Yet, their presence was the established reality when the first European sails appeared, challenging their world in ways they could not have possibly imagined.

The early 16th century in Europe was a period of fervent maritime exploration, driven by a potent cocktail of ambition, greed, and religious zeal. The Ottoman Empire's control over traditional eastern trade routes spurred Atlantic nations like Spain and Portugal to seek alternative passages to the spice-rich markets of Asia. Columbus's voyages, beginning in 1492, had unveiled a "New World," igniting a race for territory, resources, and souls to convert. The 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas had, with papal blessing, audaciously divided the non-Christian world between Spain and Portugal along a meridian line, fueling further exploration to claim and define these newly allocated domains.

Legends of fabulous wealth—of golden cities and silver mountains—circulated wildly, enticing adventurers and investors alike. South America, in particular, became a focal point for these dreams. While the Caribbean provided the initial staging ground, explorers soon pushed south, probing the continent's vast coastline in search of a strait that would lead them to the Pacific and thence to the Orient, or hoping to stumble upon new empires as rich as those rumored to exist.

It was in this charged atmosphere that the Spanish navigator Juan Díaz de Solís, a seasoned mariner who had previously sailed with Vicente Yáñez Pinzón and Amerigo Vespucci, undertook the voyage that would bring him to the shores of the Río de la Plata. Commissioned by the Spanish Crown, Solís set sail from Sanlúcar de Barrameda in October 1515 with three small caravels and a crew of around sixty men. His official mission was to explore the southern part of the new continent, searching for a westward passage to the "Southern Sea" (the Pacific Ocean), which Vasco Núñez de Balboa had sighted just two years earlier from Panama.

After sailing south along the Brazilian coast, Solís's small fleet reached a massive indentation in the coastline in February 1516. As they cautiously navigated westward into the murky, fresh waters, the sheer breadth of the waterway led Solís to believe he had perhaps found the sought-after strait. He named it the *Mar Dulce*, or "Sweet Sea," due to its freshwater character. The vastness was deceptive; it was not a sea, nor truly a strait to another ocean, but the estuary of the Paraná and Uruguay Rivers.

Anxious to claim this significant discovery for Spain and to learn more about the land and its potential inhabitants, Solís decided to lead a small party ashore. The exact location of his landing is debated by historians but is generally believed to have been on the eastern bank of the estuary, near the confluence of the Uruguay and Paraná rivers, possibly in what is now Uruguayan territory, or perhaps on Martín García Island. Chronicles suggest he went ashore with a handful of men, including two officers and a few sailors, lured by the sight of indigenous people on the coast who appeared, at first, to be curious and perhaps even welcoming.

The encounter, however, quickly turned fatal. Accounts vary in their precise details, but the general narrative, primarily from surviving crew members who watched in

horror from the ships, is that Solís and his landing party were ambushed, killed, and, according to some lurid tales that electrified Europe, dismembered and cannibalized by the local natives. These indigenous people were most likely Charrúa or Guaraní. The shock and terror among the remaining crew were profound. Having lost their leader and several key men, and with no desire for further interaction with such apparently hostile inhabitants, the survivors hastily weighed anchor and set a course back to Spain.

Only one of the three ships, the caravel piloted by Solís's brother-in-law, Francisco de Torres, eventually made it back to Spain in September 1516, carrying the grim news of the expedition's tragic end. The story of Solís's violent demise sent shivers down the spines of European adventurers and served as a stark warning about the perils of the New World. It also, paradoxically, may have fueled the darker European perceptions of native peoples as savage and treacherous, thereby providing further justification in their minds for conquest and subjugation.

Despite the horrific outcome of Solís's expedition, the Mar Dulce, and the immense river system it fronted, remained an intriguing feature on the evolving maps of the South American continent. The search for a southern passage to the Pacific did not cease. Just a few years later, in 1520, the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan, sailing under the Spanish flag on his historic voyage to circumnavigate the globe, meticulously explored the estuary. He sailed south of Solís's entry point, confirming that the "Sweet Sea" was indeed the mouth of a very large river and not the desired strait. After spending some time charting its southern shores, Magellan named it Río de Solís in honor of his ill-fated predecessor, before continuing his voyage south to discover the strait that now bears his name.

The tales of Solís, combined with persistent rumors of silver and gold in the interior, continued to attract attention. The next significant European incursion into the region was led by Sebastian Cabot, an Italian-born explorer sailing for Spain, originally also tasked with finding a route to the Orient via Magellan's Strait. Cabot's expedition, which set sail in 1526, was plagued by internal dissent and navigational challenges. Upon reaching the coast of Brazil, he heard enticing stories from survivors of Solís's expedition and local natives about an "Empire of Silver" and a "White King" supposedly located deep in the interior, accessible via the great rivers Solís had found.

These glittering tales, perhaps embellished reports of the distant Inca Empire, proved irresistible. Abandoning his original orders—an act of considerable insubordination—Cabot decided to divert his expedition up the vast river system. He renamed the Río de Solís as the Río de la Plata, the "River of Silver," a name that stuck, reflecting the undying European hope for mineral wealth rather than any actual silver found near its mouth at that time.

Cabot and his men spent several years, from 1527 to 1529, exploring the Paraná and

Paraguay rivers. In 1527, near the confluence of the Carcarañá and Paraná rivers (in present-day Santa Fe province, well north of future Buenos Aires), Cabot established a small fort named Sancti Spiritu. This was the first European settlement in the territory of modern-day Argentina. It was here that Cabot's men had more sustained, though often tense, interactions with local indigenous groups, including the Guaraní and, further south, the Querandí from whom they obtained food.

The Querandí, encountered by expeditions venturing south from Sancti Spiritu or parties sent to explore the lands closer to the estuary, were described by chroniclers like Luis Ramírez, a member of Cabot's expedition. Ramírez noted their nomadic lifestyle, their skill with bolas, and their reliance on hunting deer and rheas. He observed that they lived in small groups and moved their tolderías (encampments of skin huts) according to the availability of game. The Europeans, desperate for provisions, often relied on trading trinkets for food with the Querandí, but relations were frequently strained by mutual suspicion and European demands.

Cabot's search for the "Sierra de la Plata" (Silver Mountain) proved fruitless. While he did obtain some silver trinkets, mostly through trade with indigenous peoples who had themselves acquired them from further inland, the fabled empire remained elusive. The Sancti Spiritu settlement struggled with dwindling supplies, internal strife, and increasing hostility from local indigenous populations, who eventually attacked and destroyed the fort in 1529, forcing Cabot to abandon his quest and return to Spain in 1530.

Cabot returned to Europe empty-handed in terms of the vast riches he had hoped for, but his expedition had significantly advanced European knowledge of the vast La Plata river basin. His maps and reports, along with a few silver objects he brought back, further fueled Spanish interest in the region. Despite the failures and tragedies, the Río de la Plata was now firmly on the mental map of European imperial ambition. The very name, "River of Silver," though aspirational at the time, acted as a powerful magnet.

Another less celebrated but contemporary expedition was that of Diego García de Moguer, who had sailed with Solís and arrived at the Río de la Plata shortly after Cabot in 1527. García also explored the river system, had his own encounters with Cabot (initially cooperative, then rivalrous), and eventually returned to Spain. His reports corroborated the existence of a massive navigable river system leading into the heart of the continent.

These initial voyages—Solís's tragic discovery, Magellan's charting, and Cabot's deeper exploration—were the overture to more concerted efforts at colonization. They painted a picture of a vast, fertile land, crisscrossed by mighty rivers, inhabited by diverse groups of indigenous peoples whose reactions to the newcomers ranged from cautious curiosity to deadly hostility. The dream of silver was potent, but so too was

the strategic desire of the Spanish Crown to secure its claims in this southern part of the continent against Portuguese ambitions and those of other European rivals.

The early explorers had lifted a corner of the veil on a world unknown to Europe. They had found not a quick passage to the East, nor immediately exploitable gold mines, but something perhaps more complex: a vast territory with potential for settlement, but one that would demand resilience, resources, and a willingness to confront the established inhabitants. The tales of Solís's death underscored the dangers, while Cabot's inland ventures hinted at the scale of the task. The stage was being set for a more determined attempt to plant a Spanish foothold on the banks of the "Sweet Sea," an endeavor that would prove to be far more arduous and bloody than perhaps anyone in Seville or Toledo could have anticipated. The "good airs" of the Pampa were yet to be truly tested by European lungs determined to stay.

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