

Module 01: Demographic Catastrophe — What Happened to the Native Population After 1492?

Evidence 3: Native American Herbal Remedies and Medical Rituals

A

Introduction

To determine the diseases common, or endemic, to a particular population, historians can sometimes work backwards from the kinds of medicines used by the people. When the Spaniards invaded the New World, they came with a set of medical beliefs, one of which stipulated that, for diseases specific to different parts of the world, God had provided local "treatments" in the form of healing herbs indigenous to the area. Spanish chroniclers therefore often made a point of recording the herbal remedies used by the native peoples. In doing so, they also listed the particular ailments for which the herbs were prescribed.

In 1570, the Spanish monarch Felipe II dispatched one of the most esteemed court physicians, Francisco Hernández, to New Spain to catalog all the plants and animals. Hernández spent seven years traveling around Meso-America, asking about the medicinal properties of the local plants, talking to physicians, and sometimes trying remedies on himself. In 1577, he produced the first New World pharmacopoeia, the eleven-volume *Historia natural de la Nueva España*, listing 3,076 plants, many of which had medicinal uses.

The Spaniards esteemed the medical knowledge of Aztec physicians. Hernando Cortés reportedly told the Spanish monarch that the Aztec physicians were superior to those in Spain, so superior, in fact, that the king need not bother sending Spanish physicians to the New World. Fray Toribio Motolinía thought that the Indian doctors were "so experienced that they have cured many old and serious infirmities which the Spaniards have suffered many days without finding a remedy" (1). Aztec physicians were especially skilled in treating battle wounds and setting bones, and unlike their European counterparts, Aztec physicians had an array of narcotic plants that could be used as anesthetics.

The items in the document below illustrate the Spaniards' regard for Aztec

medical knowledge and give historians hints about Aztec health prior to the encounter with Europeans. Part A consists of Cortés's account of items for sale in the great marketplace of Tenochtitlán. His account is taken from one of several "letters" to the Spanish monarch intended to describe his discoveries and justify his behavior in Mexico.

Part B includes a table created from research undertaken by the historian Sherburne Cook. Cook examined the *Florentine Codex* for comments about specific herbs used by the Aztecs to treat different types of ailments. Composed years after the battle for Tenochtitlán and the establishment of New Spain, the *Codex* was transcribed in the Aztec native language, Nahuatl, by a Franciscan friar, Bernardino de Sahagún. According to Cook, the *Florentine Codex* mentioned 202 different herbal remedies. He catalogued both the remedies and the symptoms these treatments were meant to address.

Part C reproduces an account of Aztec burial rituals as described by one of the conquistadors who accompanied Cortés on the expedition to Tenochtitlán. It first appeared in Spain in the mid-sixteenth century, but the author has remained anonymous.

Questions to Consider

- What can you deduce about the pre-contact health of the Aztecs from the document below?
- Based on the numbers of remedies, which diseases do you think might have been most troublesome before the arrival of the Spaniards?
- What can you deduce about health and disease from the anonymous conquistador's description of burial customs?

Document

Part A: The Marketplace in Tenochtitlán

Most Powerful Lord, in order to give an account to Your Royal Excellency of the magnificence, the strange and marvelous things of this great city of Temixtitlan [Tenochtitlán] and of the dominion and wealth of this Mutezuma, its ruler, and of the rites and customs of the people, and of the order there is in the government of the capital as well as in the other cities

of Mutezuma's dominions, I would need much time and many expert narrators. I cannot describe one hundredth part of all the things which could be mentioned, but, as best as I can, I will describe some of those I have seen which, although badly described, will, I well know, be so remarkable as not to be believed, for we who saw them with our own eyes could not grasp them with our understanding. . . .

This great city of Temixtitan is built on the salt lake, and no matter by what road you travel there are two leagues from the main body of the city to the mainland. There are four artificial causeways leading to it, and each is as wide as two cavalry lances. The city itself is as big as Seville or Córdoba [major cities in Spain]. The main streets are very wide and very straight. . . .

This city has many squares where trading is done and markets are held continuously. There is also one square twice as big as that of Salamanca, with arcades all around, where more than sixty thousand people come each day to buy and sell, and where every kind of merchandise produced in these lands is found; provisions as well as ornaments of gold and silver, lead, brass, copper, tin, stones, shells, bones, and feathers. They also sell lime, hewn and unhewn stone, adobe bricks, tiles, and cut and uncut woods of various kinds. There is a street where they sell game and birds of every species found in this land. . . .

There are streets of herbalists where all the medicinal herbs and roots found in the land are sold. There are shops like apothecaries', where they sell ready-made medicines as well as liquid ointments and plasters. There are shops like barbers' where they have their hair washed and shaved, and shops where they sell food and drink. . . . There is every sort of vegetable, especially onions, leeks, garlic, common cress and watercress, borage, sorrel, teasels and artichokes; and there are many sorts of fruit, among which are cherries and plums like those in Spain.

They sell honey, wax, and a syrup made from maize canes, which is as sweet and syrupy as that made from the sugar cane. They also make syrup from a plant which in the islands is called *maguey*, which is much better than most syrups, and from this plant they also make sugar and wine, which they likewise sell. . . .

Finally, besides those things which I have already mentioned, they sell in

the market everything else to be found in this land. . . . Each kind of merchandise is sold in its own street without any mixture whatever; they are very particular in this.

Source:

Hernan Cortés, *Letters from Mexico* (Anthony Pagden, ed. and trans., rev. ed., Yale University Press, 1986), 101-104.

Part B: Herbal Remedies in the *Florentine Codex*

Type of ailment	Percentage of the 202 remedies mentioned in the <i>Codex</i> that Aztecs used to treat a specific set of the ailments*	Number of remedies Sahagún found for each ailment
Animal parasites, internal and external (e.g. intestinal worms)	1.2%	2
Wounds, burns, fractures, bruises	5.6%	11
Female complaints	3.7%	7
Non-infectious organic symptoms and minor non-infectious complaints	22.8%	46
Skin diseases (bacterial)	19.8%	40
Infectious diseases (e.g. inflammatory, venereal)	40.2%	81
Respiratory infections (nose, throat, lungs)	9.3%	19
Diarrhea, dysentery	13%	26
Fevers of all types	13%	26
Unidentifiable diseases	6.8%	14

*Some herbs used to treat more than one type of ailment.

Source:

Compiled from figures in Sherburne F. Cook, "The Incidence and Significance of Disease among the Aztecs and Related Tribes," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 26 (1946): 320-335.

Part C: Aztec Burial Customs Described by the Anonymous Conquistador

They make a grave lined with stonemasonry and put the deceased seated on a chair, with his sword and shield to one side, and some gold jewelry. Once I helped remove from a tomb three thousand *castellanos* worth, more or less.

They also put in enough food and drink to last several days, to sustain the dead person on his journey. If the deceased was a woman they left by her side her spindle and distaff and all her working instruments, for they said that where she was going she had to occupy herself at something. Often they burned the dead and buried their ashes.

Source:

Patricia de Fuentes, ed. and trans, "The Chronicle of the Anonymous Conquistador," *The Conquistadors; First-Person Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, (Normon: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 181.

(1) Motolinía quoted in Joie Davidow, *Infusions of Healing; A Treasury of Mexican-American Herbal Remedies* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 31.