

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

Evidence 11: "Cocoliztli"

A

Introduction

As you saw in the excerpt from *The Annals of the Cakchiquels*, smallpox was not the only epidemic to strike the New World after the arrival of the Spaniards. Below is a compilation of information about a disease the native peoples called *cocoliztli*. *Cocoliztli* is the Nahuatl word for pestilence and both word and concept appeared in the native language only after the arrival of the Spaniards. *Cocoliztli* probably describes a form of hemorrhagic fever that was new to central Mexico after the conquest, though the exact diagnosis remains unknown.

Questions to Consider

- How does the history of cocoliztli epidemics add to your understanding of the demographic catastrophe?
- According to the eyewitness accounts, how did the disease affect the population?
- Compare the burial procedures described here to those from the anonymous conquistador. What do you think happens to society when the usual cultural traditions cannot be followed because of a catastrophic event?

Documents and Data

Known dates of cocoliztli epidemics (in the first century after contact with Spaniards): 1545, 1555, 1566, 1576, 1587-1588, 1592-1593, 1601-1602, 1604-1607, 1613.

Population Impact:

Year of Epidemic	Estimated Pre-Epidemic Population of Mexico	Estimated Mortality
1545	6.4 million	80%
1576	4.4 million	45%

Characteristics of cocoliztli (drawn from numerous accounts of the epidemics left by government officials, priests, physicians, and independent writers):

Characteristics	1545	1576
Month First Reported	August	June
Duration	4 years	2 years
Affected Indians; Spaniards Seemed Resistant	Yes	Yes
Affected Mainly Young Adults	Not Described (N.D.)	Yes
Affected Both Men and Women	Yes	Yes
Death Within 7 days	Yes	Yes
Acute Onset	Yes	Yes
Recurrences	N.D.	Yes
High Fever	Yes	Yes
Intense Headache	N.D.	Yes
Bleeding From Nose, Mouth, Ears	Yes	Yes
Jaundice	Yes	Yes
Survivors Thin and Weak	N.D.	Yes

Two Descriptions of the 1576 Epidemic:

[Fray Juan de Torquemada's account below of the situation in Mexico City in 1576 describes some of the social consequences of the disease.]

In the year 1576 a great mortality and pestilence that lasted for more than a year overcame the Indians. It was so big that it ruined and destroyed almost the entire land. The place we know as New Spain was left almost empty. It was a thing of great bewilderment to see the people die. Many were dead and others almost dead, and nobody had the health or strength to help the diseases or bury the dead. In the cities and large towns, big ditches were dug, and from morning to sunset the priests did nothing else but carry the dead bodies and throw them into the ditches without any of the solemnity usually reserved for the dead, because the time did not allow otherwise. At night they covered the ditches with dirt . . . It lasted for one and a half years, and with great excess in the number of deaths. After the murderous epidemic, the viceroy Martin Enriquez wanted to know the number of missing people in New Spain. After searching in towns and neighborhoods it was found that the number of deaths was more than two million.

[Based on autopsies he performed on the dead, Dr. Francisco Hernández, Physician-in Chief of New Spain, rendered this description of cocoliztli.]

The fevers were contagious, burning, and continuous, all of them pestilential, in most part lethal. The tongue was dry and black. Enormous thirst. Urine of the colors sea-green, vegetal-green, and black, sometimes passing from the greenish color to the pale. Pulse was frequent, fast, small, and weak — sometimes even null. The eyes and the whole body were yellow. This stage was followed by delirium and seizures. Then, hard and painful nodules appeared behind one or both ears along with heartache, chest pain, abdominal pain, tremor, great anxiety, and dysentery [diarrhea]. The blood that flowed when cutting a vein had a green color or was very pale [and] dry. . . . In some cases gangrene. . .invaded their lips, pudendal [genital] regions, and other regions of the body with putrefact members. Blood flowed from the ears and in many cases blood truly gushed from the nose. Of those with recurring disease, almost none was saved. Many were saved if the flux of blood through the nose was stopped in time; the rest died. Those attacked by dysentery were usually saved if they complied with the medication. The abscesses behind the ears were not lethal. If somehow their size was reduced either by spontaneous maturation or given exit by perforation with cauteries [heated instruments], the liquid part of the blood flowed or the pus was eliminated; and with it the cause of the disease was also eliminated, as was the case of those with abundant

and pale urine. At autopsy, the liver was greatly enlarged. The heart was black, first draining a yellowish liquid and then black blood. The spleen and lungs were black and semi-putrefacted. . .the abdomen dry. The rest of the body, anywhere it was cut, was extremely pale. This epidemic attacked mainly young people and seldom the elder ones. Even if old people were affected they were able to overcome the disease and save their lives. The epidemic started in June 1576 and is not over in December, when I am writing these lines. Of all New Spain, the disease invaded cold lands (highlands) in a perimeter of 400 miles, and had a lesser effect on the lowlands. The disease attacked primarily regions populated by Indians. . . . Vital energy was consumed quickly.

Source:

Abstracted from Rodolfo Acuna-Soto, Leticia Calderon Romero, and James H. Maguire, "Large Epidemics of Hemorrhagic Fevers in Mexico, 1545-1815," *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 62 (2000): 733-739.