

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

Evidence 12: Epidemics in Mexico and Central America, 1520-1595

A

Introduction

The smallpox epidemic of 1517-1521 was not the only epidemic to strike Mexico and Central America during the sixteenth century. Below is a record of disease experiences among the Indians, composed by reading Spanish accounts of the conquest and colonization and noting each mention of disease. The chart most certainly does not represent every epidemic that swept through the land in the sixteenth century, but it does give an idea of how often during those years populations in Meso-America experienced attacks of unusual diseases, unknown prior to the arrival of the Spaniards.

The "Mortality" column in the table contains blank spaces since not every observer estimated the mortality of the epidemics. The chart reveals that more than one disease often struck a population at the same time, an event that epidemiologists, or specialists in the study of disease transfer, refer to as "cluster epidemics."

Questions to Consider

- What can a compilation such as the one below tell us about the New World experience with European diseases in the first century after the arrival of the Spaniards?
- How might a "cluster epidemic" affect a population differently from the experience of a single disease epidemic?

Data

Epidemics in Mexico and Central America, 1520-1595:

Location	Date	Disease	Mortality
Mexico, Guatemala	1520- 1521	Smallpox (1)	"more than one-fourth died," "one-third to one-half or more" (Mexico)
Panama	1527	Smallpox	
Nicaragua	1529	Smallpox (?)	
Mexico	1531- 1532	Measles and/or Smallpox	60-90%
Honduras, Nicaragua	1531	Bubonic or Pneumonic Plague?	
Guatemala	1532	Measles	
Honduras, Nicaragua	1533	Measles	
Guatemala	1545	Gucumatz-Typhus (2) or Pneumonic Plague	"three-quarters died"
Mexico	1545	Cocolitzli	80%
Guatemala	1558- 1562	Measles and Influenza (3)	
Mexico	1576- 1581	Cocolitzli	45%
Guatemala	1576- 1577	Smallpox, Measles, and Typhus	"many children died"
Nicaragua	1578	?	
Mexico	1587- 1588	Cocolitzli	
Mexico	1595	Measles	

(1) In a smallpox epidemic, approximately 25 to 30 percent of an unvaccinated population will die from the disease.

(2) Typhus, measles, and smallpox were all accompanied by a rash; a rash was not a symptom of cocoliztli.

(3) Respiratory infections (pneumonia, not influenza) were common accompaniments of measles, smallpox, and typhus.

Source:

Suzanne Austin Alchon, *A Pest in the Land; New World Epidemics in a Global Perspective* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 69, 73. Alchon combined information from several sixteenth-century Spanish sources.