

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

Introduction

What happens when a culture encounters a new and deadly disease, or comes face to face with a series of new, deadly diseases that strike one after another? What happens? How many will die? How does the society's infrastructure — the interconnected institutions of government and economy — hold up against a foe as small as a virus or bacteria? How do people treat their families and neighbors? How well does the society's medical system and religious ideology adjust to and account for the previously unknown plague? How do those who survive change?

Historians have asked similar questions again and again throughout history as human beings confront enemies in the form of tiny, unfamiliar viruses and bacteria. The answers have much to tell us about the coherence of the community, the strength of its beliefs, and the power of its rulers, as well as the disease's demographic impact.

Thucydides, the Greek scribe, recounted the deadly plague that struck Athens during the Peloponnesian War. The "Black Plague," spread by fleas, decimated the European population in the fourteenth century. In 1918, an influenza pandemic swept the world killing millions. Then, in 1981, epidemiologists identified a new and deadly combination of illnesses that we now know as AIDS, and most recently the possibility of human-to-human transmission of the "bird flu" has once again raised fears of a deadly and widespread epidemic.

In the past, confrontation with disease led to changes in political and economic structures, in medical and public health efforts, and in social interaction. Consequences were specific to the time and place of the epidemic. It is now evident that disease can be an important agent of historical change; understanding the historic impact of disease can help us respond more effectively to disease today and in the future.

This module examines cultural confrontation with disease in the "age of exploration" when, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Europeans began to roam the globe, encountering new cultures and extending their political and economic control over vast territories in North, Central, and South America. Along with their plants, animals, religion, and political structures, the explorers also brought their diseases. In the wake of the voyages of discovery and exploration by

Christopher Columbus, the native peoples of the Caribbean Islands and Meso-America first encountered the diseases common to Europe, but unknown in the Western Hemisphere.

What were the consequences of this encounter? How did European diseases affect new world peoples like the Aztecs of central Mexico? The documents in this module ask you to evaluate the role of disease in the Spaniards' "conquest" of the New World.