

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

Evidence 9: Smallpox in Mexico: A Spaniard's Account of Political Succession

A

Introduction

Bernal Díaz del Castillo was a young member of Cortés's army who had come to Cuba, like Cortés, to seek his fortune. He joined Cortés in the expedition to Tenochtitlán. He wrote *The True History of the Conquest of Mexico* in the 1560s as a corrective to a very flattering biography of Cortés published in the preceding decade. This chronicle represents the perspective of a foot soldier; perhaps Bernal Díaz intended to valorize the men who explored and fought alongside Cortés. Although written earlier, *The True History* was not published until 1632 (decades after the death of the author).

The first excerpt from *The True History* tells the same tale as does Sahagún, but from the perspective of the Spaniards. The second and third excerpts below discuss how the smallpox epidemic disrupted Indian society, again, from the Spaniards' perspective.

Questions to Consider

- How does the record written by Bernal Díaz compare to that of the Aztec account of smallpox? How significant did the presence of disease seem to this author? Why do you think Díaz was so nonchalant about the epidemic?
- What did the native peoples do after the death of a ruler during the disease epidemic?
- In what ways might the social effects of disease described by Díaz help historians understand the conquest of Mexico?

Document

[A short excerpt from Díaz's account of the situation before the battle for Tenochtitlán (García 328).]

At that time, in Mexico, they had raised up [to the throne] another Prince, because the Prince who had driven us out of Mexico had died of smallpox. He whom they now made Lord over them was a nephew or very near relation of Montezuma, named Guatemoc, a young man of about twenty-five years, very much of a gentleman for an Indian, and very valiant, and he made himself so feared that all his people trembled before him, and he was married to a daughter of Montezuma, a very handsome woman for an Indian. When this Guatemoc, Prince of Mexico, learned that we had defeated the Mexican squadrons stationed in Tepeaca, and that the people of Tepeaca had given their fealty to His Majesty, and served us and gave us food, and that we had settled there, he feared that we should overrun Oaxaca and other provinces and bring them all into our alliance; so he sent messengers through all the towns and told them to be on the alert with all their arms, and he gave golden jewels to some caciques [an Indian term used by the Spaniards to refer to any local ruler], and to others he remitted their tribute, and above all he dispatched great companies and garrisons of warriors to see that we did not enter his territory, and charged them to fight very fiercely against us, so that it should not happen again, as it did at Tepeaca and Quecholac.

[An account of a change of leadership due to deaths from smallpox (García 335-336).]

Now as all the towns in the neighbourhood of Tepeaca were at peace, Cortés settled that one Francisco de Orozco should stay in our town of Segura de la Frontera as captain, with a batch of twenty soldiers who were wounded or ill, and that all the rest of the army should go to Tlaxcala. . . [the Tlaxcalans had allied with the Spaniards to defeat the Aztecs in Tenochtitlán].

When we arrived at Tlaxcala our great friend Mase Escasi had died of smallpox. We all grieved over his death very much and Cortés said he felt it as though it were the death of his own father, and he put on mourning of black cloth, and so did many of our Captains and soldiers. Cortés and all of us paid much honour to their children and relations of Mase Escasi. As there were disputes in Tlaxcala about the Cacique-ship and command, Cortés ordered and decreed that it should go to a legitimate son of Mase Escasi,

for so his father had ordered before he died, and he had also said to his sons and relations, that they should take care always to obey the commands of Malinche [the interpreter who accompanied Cortés] and his brethren, for we were certainly those who were destined to govern the country, and he gave them other good advice.

Xicotenga the elder and Chichimecatecle and nearly all the other caciques of Tlaxcala offered their services to Cortés, both in the matter of cutting wood for the launches [to be used in the siege of Tenochtitlán] and anything else he might order for the war against Mexico. Cortés embraced them with much affection and thanked them for it, especially Xicotenga the elder and Chichimecatecle, and soon persuaded them to become Christians and the good old Xicotenga with much willingness said that he wished to be a Christian, and he was baptized by the Padre de la Merced with the greatest ceremony that at that time it was possible to arrange in Tlaxcala, and was given the name of Don Lorenzo Vargas.

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[Here, Díaz describes part of the strategy for subduing towns surrounding Tenochtitlán before attacking the capital city. When Díaz refers to the "Mexicans" he means the Aztec inhabitants of Tenochtitlán, not the entire population of the region we know today as Mexico (García 347-349).]

When Cortés found that to succour some of those towns that clamoured for help and to give assistance to the people of Chalco as well would make it impossible to give security to either one or the other, he decided to put aside all other matters and first of all to go to Chalco and Tlamanalco. For that purpose he sent Gonzalo de Sandoval and Francisco de Lugo with fifteen horsemen and two hundred soldiers and musketeers and crossbowmen and our Tlaxcalan allies, with orders by all means to break up and disperse the Mexican garrisons and to drive them out of Chalco and Tlamanalco, and leave the road to Tlaxcala quite clear, so that one could come and go to Villa Rica without any molestation from the Mexican warriors. As soon as this was arranged he sent some Texococan Indians very secretly to Chalco to advise the people about it, so that they might be fully prepared to fall on the Mexican garrison either by day or night. As they wished for nothing better, the people of Chalco kept thoroughly prepared.

When Gonzalo de Sandoval marched with his army he left a rearguard of

five horsemen and as many crossbowmen to protect the large number of the Tlaxcalans, who were laden with the spoil that they had seized. The Mexicans knew that our people were marching on Chalco, and had got together many squadrons of warriors, who fell on the rearguard where the Tlaxcalans were marching with their spoil, and punished them severely, and our five horsemen and the crossbowmen could not hold out against them, for two of the crossbowmen were killed and the others were wounded, and although Gonzalo de Sandoval promptly turned round on the enemy and defeated them, and killed ten Mexicans, the lake was so near by that the enemy managed to take refuge in the canoes in which they had come.

When the enemy had been put to flight and Sandoval saw that the five horsemen, in the rearguard with the musketeers and crossbowmen, were wounded both they and their horses, and that two crossbowmen were dead and the others wounded, although, I repeat, he saw all this, he did not fail to say to them that they were not worth much for not having been able to resist the enemy and defend themselves and our allies, and that he was very angry with them; they were from among those who had lately come from Spain, and he told them that it was very clear that they did not know what fighting was like. Then he placed in safety all the Tlaxcalan Indians with their spoil, and he also dispatched some letters which Cortés was sending to Villa Rica. In these Cortés told the Captain, who had remained in command there, that if there were any soldiers who were disposed to take part in the fighting, that he should send to Tlaxcala, but that they should not go beyond that town until the roads were safer, for they would run great risk.

When the messengers had been dispatched and the Tlaxcalans sent off to their homes, Sandoval turned towards Chalco. As he marched on he saw many squadrons of Mexicans coming against him, and on a level plain, where there were large plantations of maize and magueys, they attacked him fiercely with darts, arrows, and stones from slings, and long lances with which to kill the horses. When Sandoval saw such a host of warriors opposed to him, he cheered on his men and twice broke through the ranks of the enemy, and with the aid of the muskets and crossbows, and the few allies who had stayed with him, he defeated them, although they wounded five soldiers and six horses, and many of our allies. However, he had fallen on them so quickly and with such fury that he made them pay well for the damage they had first done. When the people of Chalco knew that Sandoval

was near, they went out to receive him on the road with much honour and rejoicing. In that defeat eight Mexicans were taken prisoner, three of them chieftains of importance.

When all this had been done, Sandoval said that on the following day he wished to return to Texcoco, and the people of Chalco said they wanted to go with him to see and speak to Malinche and take with them the two sons of the Lord of that province who had died of small-pox a few days before, and before dying had charged all of his chieftains and elders to take his sons to see the Captain, so that by his hand they might be installed Lords of Chalco, and that all should endeavour to become subjects of the Great King of the Teules, for it was quite true that his ancestors had told him that men with beards who came from the direction of the sunrise would govern these lands, and from what he had seen, we were those men.

Sandoval soon returned with all his army to Texcoco and took in his company the sons of the Lord of Chalco and the other chieftains, and the eight Mexican prisoners and Cortés was overjoyed at his arrival. The Caciques presented themselves at once before Cortés, and, after having paid him every sign of respect, they told him of the willingness with which they would become vassals of His Majesty, as their father had commanded them to do, and begged that they might receive the chieftainship from his hands. When they had made their speeches, they presented Cortés with rich jewels worth about two hundred pesos de oro. When Cortés thoroughly understood what they had said, he showed them much kindness and embraced them, and under his hand gave the Lordship of Chalco to the elder brother with more than the half of the subject pueblos, and those of Tlamanalco and Chimal he gave to the younger brother together with Ayotzingo and other subject pueblos.

Cortés begged the chieftains to wait in Texcoco for two days, as he was about to send a Captain to Tlaxcala, for the timber and planking, who would take them in his company, and conduct them to their country, so that the Mexicans should not attack them on the road; for this they thanked him greatly and went away well contented.

Source:

Genaro Garcia, ed., *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico: 1517-1521*, by Bernal Díaz del Castillo (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1956).