

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

### Evidence 10: Mayan Experience With Smallpox

# A

#### Introduction

*The Annals of the Cakchiquels* tells the history of a branch of the Mayan Indians that lived in the area of modern-day Guatemala. The book was written piecemeal in Spanish at the end of the sixteenth century by several different Indian authors. (Their own names and references to their family members appear occasionally in the manuscript.) The document chronicles time from 1493, when a revolt by a subject tribe against the Cakchiquel kings was thwarted. The excerpt below begins in 1518, prior to the arrival of the Spaniards in the Cakchiquel capital city in April of 1524. After the Spaniards arrived, the initial friendly relations quickly deteriorated. An uprising against the Spaniards lasted for four years, after which the Spaniards, led by Pedro de Alvarado, a lieutenant of Hernando Cortés, initiated a reign of terror, with forced labor, execution of the chiefs, and destruction of the Mayan capital city.

The authors of the *Annals* described a "plague" that began before the arrival of the Spaniards. It arrived in the Aztec capital city in the fall of 1520 and may have been smallpox, which struck the people of Santo Domingo in 1517. The *Annals* also contain an account of a second epidemic that began in 1559 as well as two other brief references to diseases.

#### Questions to Consider

- Did the authors offer an explanation for the arrival of the "plague?" What does this suggest about their understanding of disease in general?
- What words did the authors use to describe the disease, and what do these words tell you about the epidemic's impact? For example, based on the accounts below, do you think the "plague" affected the political structure of the Cakchiquel?
- How do the accounts of disease change from the first to the last described in the excerpt below? How might you explain the change?

in terms of different authors? different experiences with diseases?  
fatalism? immunity?

## Document

On the day 7 Ah [July 26, 1518] ended the twenty-third year after the revolution.

On the day 4 Ah [August 20, 1519] ended the twenty-fourth year after the revolution.

It happened that during the twenty-fifth year the plague began, oh, my sons! First they became ill of a cough, they suffered from nosebleeds and illness of the bladder. It was truly terrible, the number of dead there in that period. The prince *Vakaki Ahmak* died then. Little by little heavy shadows and black night enveloped our fathers and grandfathers and us also, oh, my sons! when the plague raged.

On the day 1 Ah [October 3, 1520] ended one cycle and five years after the revolution, while the plague spread.

During this year when the epidemic broke out, our father and grandfather died, *Diego Juan*.

On the day 5 Ah [March 12, 1521] our grandfathers started a war against *Panatacat* [a town on the Pacific coast of Guatemala], when the plague began to spread. It was in truth terrible, the number of dead among the people. The people could not in any way control the sickness.

Forty days after the epidemic began, our father and grandfather died; on the day 12 Camey [April 14, 1521] the king Hunyug, your great-grandfather, died.

Two days later also died our father, the Ahpop Achí Balam, your grandfather, oh, my sons! Our grandfathers and fathers died together.

Great was the stench of the dead. After our fathers and grandfathers succumbed, half of the people fled to the fields. The dogs and vultures devoured the bodies. The mortality was terrible. Your grandfathers died, and with them died the son of the king and his brothers and kinsmen. So it was that we became orphans, oh, my sons! So we became when we were

young. All of us were thus. We were born to die!

*The names of our forefathers, sons of kings.*

The *Ahpop Achí Balam*, as he was called, eldest son of King Hunyg, was already invested with authority among the chiefs when the great and mortal epidemic arrived.

The second son was called *Ahmak*: his son is don Pedro Solís. Our father Francisco, the *Ahpop Achí Tzián*, was the fourth son. The fifth son was *Balam*, who left no descendents.

*Ahtzalam Hunanhpú* was the sixth son. He and three others of our grandfathers escaped the epidemic. As for all of us, we were children, and we survived and we witnessed all the plague, oh, my sons!

This is the name of our grandmother, the first wife of King Hunyg, she was a lady called *Chuvy Tuzt*; she had three sons: our father, the father of don Pedro Solís, and Tohín, who had no sons. And the Lady Chuvy Tuzt having died, her place was taken by the Lady *Ixgekaquch*, an Ahtziquinahay [Zutuhil] woman, mother of the Ahpop Achí Tzián and of Balam. They had two sons.

One hundred days after the death of the kings Hunyg and Lahuh Noh, *CahíYmox* and *Belehé Qat* were elected king; on the day I Can [August 11, 1521] they were elected but only the one Belehé Qat, who had been spared [by the plague], came to rule. We were children and we were alone; none of our fathers had been spared. Tzián and Balam also were small, and we were all descendants of King Hunyg. For this reason Belehé Qat governed, but it was announced that he was only to rule for a year as Galel Qamahay, because the lord Atzih Vinak Baqahol did not wish Belehé Qat to govern. What the lord Atzih Vinak Baqahol desired was that our father, Ahpop Achí Tzián, should take over the government. Thus was his entrance into the government.

[The chronicler goes on to describe the arrival of the Spaniards, the attempts to meet Alvarado's demands for tribute, warriors, and women, and the eventual rebellion against the Spaniards and final defeat with the imprisonment of the kings. The account below begins in 1559, with the

arrival of one of these men and the arrival of a new plague.]

On the day 13 Ah [February 3, 1559] ended the third cycle [sixty years] after the revolution.

During the eleventh month of this year we are in now, a Lord Royal President came. On the day 3 Qat [September 2, 1559] by our system of counting time, the lord came to Pangán.

On the day 1 Akbal [April 8, 1560] the Governor Pedro Ramirez transferred tenure to the Governor don Diego Pérez.

In the sixth month after the arrival of the Lord President in Pangán, the plague which had lashed the people long ago began here. Little by little it arrived here. In truth a fearful death fell on our heads by the will of our powerful God. Many families [succumbed] to the plague. Now the people were overcome by intense cold and fever, blood came out of their noses, then came a cough growing worse and worse, the neck was twisted, and small and large sores broke out on them. The disease attacked everyone here. On the day of Circumcision [January 1, 1560], a Monday, while I was writing, I was attacked by the epidemic.

Diego Hernández Xahil and Francisco Hernández *Galel Baqahol*, mayors.  
The year 1559.

The sixty-first year after the revolution ended on the day 10 Ah [March 9, 1560] . . . .

One month and five days after Christmas my mother died, and a little later death took my father. We buried my mother and six days later we buried my father. At the same time, on the day 11 Akbal, doña Catalina, the wife of don Jorge, died.

Seven days after Christmas the epidemic broke out. Truly it was impossible to count the number of men, women, and children who died this year. My mother, my father, my younger brother, and my sister, all died. Everyone suffered nosebleeds.

On the day 7 Ah [April 13, 1561] the sixty-second year of the revolution was completed. Mayors don Pedro Solís and Francisco Ernantez.

The sixty-third year of the revolution began the day 4 Ah [May 18, 1562]. Andrés Chuc and Juan Pérez *Lolmay Qoraxón*, mayors. 1561.

Sickness and death were still rampant at the end of the sixty-third year after the revolution [May 18, 1562].

Don Jorge, the Ahpozotzil, was married here on August 14.

The sixty-fourth year of the revolution began here on the day I Ah. 1562. Francisco Hernández and Juan López *Mama Zimah*, mayors. 1562.

My other son Rafael was born. The sixty-fourth year of the revolution was completed [June 22, 1563].

During this year the city lots were surveyed and the streets marked out here in Tzololá.

In this year the Bishop Don Francisco Marroquín also died.

The sixty-fifth year after the revolution was completed [July 16, 1564].

Many people died of smallpox, which was then prevalent.

[The *Annals* continue as a record of arrival and departure of Spanish authorities and clergy, notes of earthquakes and eclipses, accounts of lawsuits, and a description of the purchase of an organ. Diseases are mentioned twice more in the *Annals*, first on p. 148 (1576) and later on p. 156 (1588).]

The year 1576

On September 17 the President Doctor don Pedro Villalobos, accompanied by Licenciado Palacio, Cristóbal Axcueta, and Pablo Escobar, secretary, went to make the assessment.

Also in September there was an epidemic of buboes which attacked and killed the people. Everyone suffered from the illness. [A bubo is a swollen lymph node, which can occur as a result of an infection such as gonorrhoea or bubonic plague.]

The year 1588

According to the calculation of time, the ninetieth year after the revolution fell on the day 3 Ah.

An epidemic of smallpox [possibly measles?] broke out among the children, but no adults died of it.

Source:

*Adrián Recinos and Delia Goetz, trans., The Annals of the Cakchiquels* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), 115-117, 142-145, 148, 156.