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DISEASE AND DEPOPULATION IN EARLY COLONIAL GUATEMALA

W. George Lovell



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In discussions of Latin American historiography, few debates generate such persistent controversy as that concerning the magnitude and intensity of native population decline following contact with, and conquest by, imperial Spain. That the central issue in this debate may no longer be "How many Indians were there?" but "What caused so many to perish so quickly?" represents an important step forward. We will, it seems safe to assert, continue to count differently, some higher, some lower than others. Of late, however, our scholarly energies appear to be channelled more towards clarification of historical determinants than involvement in academic arithmetic, crucial though the latter enterprise

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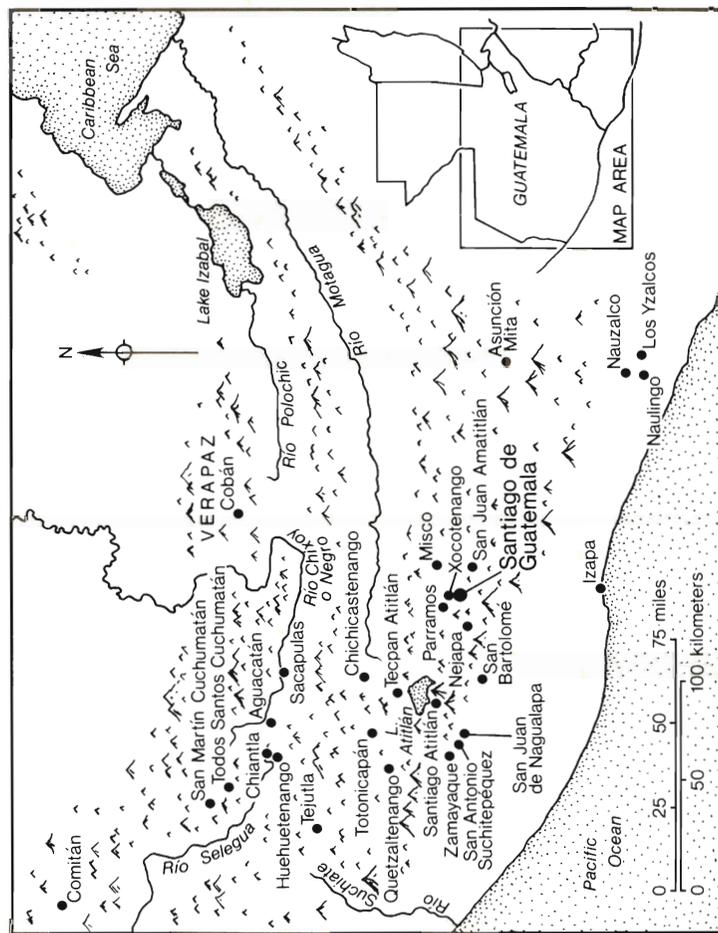


Figure 2.1. COLONIAL GUATEMALA

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This intellectual shift may be discerned in the contribution of numerous scholars, but it seems appropriate to illustrate the point with reference to work in the two languages most resorted to for purposes of discourse. A recent essay by Linda Newson (1985) reflects the progress made in English-language scholarship since publication of the collection edited by William Denevan (1976) and the bibliographic synthesis undertaken by Henry Dobyns (1976^b). With a specific focus on the colonial Maya, Cristina García Bernal (1978) and Elías Zamora Acosta (1985) exemplify the more balanced and insightful direction Spanish-language scholarship has taken since the time of Francisco de Solano (1974). Much remains to be done, but advances have been made. Even though the bickering continues, we walk across more common ground than before.

What, then, do we think caused widespread and precipitous depopulation among Native Americans in the wake of European penetration of the New World? The reasons, not surprisingly, are ones that require careful explanation, but the disease factor (without in any way failing to observe that warfare, disruption, exploitation, and culture shock must also be reckoned with) now emerges in most discussions as a key demographic variable. Old World diseases introduced by European invaders and their African slaves brought dreadful destruction to indigenous New World populations, whose immune systems never before had to deal with such a virulent range of infections (Crosby 1976^a; Joralemon 1982). If the role disease played in native population decline is to be given prominence, if its lethal passage is to be used to persuade champions of lower estimates of aboriginal numbers to think higher, links obviously must be made between reports of epidemic outbreaks and accounts of Indian depopulation. It is to the forging

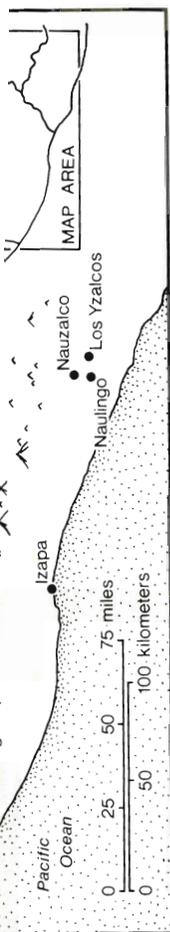


Figure 2.1. COLONIAL GUATEMALA

of such a link, in the context of early colonial Guatemala, that this chapter is directed.

The Sources

The sources upon which a case may be built connecting depopulation in early colonial Guatemala with sickness and death are not nearly as rich as those that exist for Mexico (Gibson 1964:448-51; Cook and Borah 1971, 1974, 1979; Florescano and Malvido 1980). They are, however, considerably more abundant than the few shreds of evidence available for sixteenth-century America north of the Rio Grande (Sauer 1971:302-4; Snow and Lanphear 1988:15-20). Given the intense scrutiny David Henige (1985-86; 1986; 1989) has afforded the work of Henry Dobyns (1983; 1989^a), it is imperative that interpretation of the sources be tight, measured, and properly contextualized, that little be asserted without a grounded, documentary basis. Inaccuracies and imperfections, of course, are inevitable, but these may be minimized by keeping as close to first-hand, contemporary testimony as the act of interpretation permits.

Reports of native depopulation in Guatemala from 1539 to 1617 are summarized in Table 2.1. All of these reports come from unpublished manuscripts housed in the Archivo General de Indias (AGI) in Seville, a more complete source of sixteenth-century materials than the Archivo General de Centroamérica (AGCA) in Guatemala City. A range of estimates of the Indian population in the sixteenth century is presented in Table 2.2. Table 2.3 outlines widespread (pandemic) outbreaks of disease, while Table 2.4 documents more localized (epidemic) occurrences. A brief discussion of native depopulation will be followed by a more detailed analysis of disease outbreaks, especially those which can be considered more pandemic than epidemic in nature.

Native Depopulation

In the documents is repeated mention of the state of accelerated depopulation, ever, to the primary underlying cause. Accusations lodged against the Indians has convinced them that they rightly could not expect of those who were in *encomienda* (Indian land grant) was declared a crime because "many persons, in 1568 participated in irregularities that were worse than in *encomienda*." Aceituno grunio hualapa "does not on account of the amount of tribute pay which one could expect to receive each year."³

Other cases of *encomenderos*, people who had been granted land but to the moral detriment of the state. Thus on the subject of tribute to the king to

¹ Archivo General de Indias, Seville. Spanish text reads "...

² AGI, Patronato de Indias, "Decreto en cada un año 400 de la disminución de los tributos..."

³ AGI, Patronato de Indias, "no se puede sustentarse..."

Native Depopulation

In the documentation summarized in Table 2.1, there is repeated mention that the native population is in a state of accelerated decline. No reference is made, however, to the presence of sickness or disease as an underlying cause. About half of these episodes deal with petitions lodged by privileged Spaniards who complain that revenues generated by the tribute paid to them by Indians has dropped considerably. A fall in income, they rightly conclude, is related to a fall in the number of those who are supposed to pay tribute. The *encomienda* (Indian tributary grant) of Mita, for example, was declared around 1562 to be worth "almost nothing" because "many Indians have died."¹ For similar reasons, in 1568 Alonso Páez (AGI, Patronato 68-2-3) anticipated an income of less than 100 pesos from towns that were worth much more when his father held them in *encomienda* some thirty years previously. Cristóbal Aceituno grumbled that his share of San Juan de Nahuallapa "does not amount, in each year, to 400 *tostones*, on account of the losses incurred by the great decrease of tribute payers."² He bemoaned the fact that all he could expect were "eight *cargas* (loads) of cacao, from which one cannot support oneself two months of the year."³

Other cases relate not to the private concerns of *encomenderos*, people who held Indian towns in *encomienda*, but to the more collective preoccupations of church and state. Thus on March 8, 1575, a Franciscan cleric wrote to the king to "let Your Majesty know about what is go-

¹ Archivo General de las Indias (hereafter AGI), Patronato 65-1-15. The Spanish text reads "por averse muerto muchos indios no rentan casi nada."

² AGI, Patronato 57-3-1. The Spanish text reads "no me vale ni me renta en cada un año 400 tostones por las bajas que se an hecho respeto a la gran diminución de los tributarios."

³ AGI, Patronato 57-3-1. The Spanish text reads "ocho cargas de cacao que no se puede sustentar dos meses del año."

Table 2.1. Reports of native depopulation in early colonial Guatemala, 1539–1617

Year	Place	Summary	Source
Ca. 1539	Towns held in <i>encomienda</i> by Diego Díaz in Totonicapán and Huehuetenango	"se an muerto o despoblado"	AGI, AG 110
Ca. 1546	San Juan de Nagualpa	"gran disminución de los tributarios"; "a venido a tanta baja y disminución"	AGI, Patronato 57-3-1
Ca. 1552	Aguacatán, Comitán, Los Anaucos, Xicalapa, Xocotenango	"gran descrecimiento y disminución"	AGI, Justicia 286
Ca. 1555	Santiago Atitlán and subject towns	"enferman y mueren gran parte"	AGI, Justicia 283
Ca. 1555	Numerous towns	"los pobres indios se an muerto en gran cantidad y otros se an despoblado y se an ido a meter a tierras de guerra"	AGI, AG 41
Ca. 1556	Yzalcos and surrounding towns	"que se an muerto y mueren de mil personas arriba en ellos"	AGI, AG 52
Ca. 1557–59	Santiago Atitlán	"por ser muy poca la gente y averse muerto muchos vecinos no tienen bienes ni haciendas"	AGI, Justicia 302
Ca. 1558	Tacuscalco and other towns held in <i>encomienda</i> by Francisco de Calderón	"los indios han venido en mucha disminución"	AGI, Patronato 61-2-8
Ca. 1562	(Asunción) Mita	"por averse muerto muchos indios han venido en tanta disminución"; "mucha disminución a causa de muertes de indios"	AGI, Patronato 65-1-15
Ca. 1568	Aguacatán, Istapalatenango, Miahuatlán, and Sacapulas	"aber venido los indios en disminución"	AGI, Patronato 68-2-3
Ca. 1573	Throughout Guatemala	"an fallecido muchas personas"	AGI, AG 169

Ca. 1557-59	Santiago Atitlán	ellos" "por ser muy poca la gente y averse muerto muchos vecinos no tienen bienes ni haciendas"	AGI, Justicia 302
Ca. 1558	Tacusalco and other towns held in <i>encomienda</i> by Francisco de Calderón	"los indios han venido en mucha disminución"	AGI, Patronato 61-2-8
Ca. 1562	(Asunción) Mita	"por averse muerto muchos indios han venido en tanta disminución"; "mucha disminución a causa de muertes de indios"	AGI, Patronato 65-1-15
Ca. 1568	Aguacatán, Istapalatenango, Miahuatlán, and Sacapulas	"aber venido los indios en disminución"	AGI, Patronato 68-2-3
Ca. 1573	Throughout Guatemala	"an fallecido muchas personas"	AGI, AG 169
Ca. 1575	Throughout Guatemala	"los naturales son cada día menos, los españoles cada día más y así hay grandísimas necesidades"	AGI, AG 169
Ca. 1577	Throughout Guatemala	"los naturales cada día vienen a ser menos y se van acabando"	AGI, AG 170
Ca. 1580	Tecpán Yzalco	"tanta disminución"	AGI, AG 170
Ca. 1581	Verapaz	"más de 13,000 tributarios ayan venido a tanta disminución"	AGI, AG 163
Ca. 1582	Chiantla and Huehuetenango	"los indios a venido en disminución, a venido a menos"	AGI, Patronato 61-2-4
Ca. 1583	Nauzalco	"mucha disminución"	AGI, Patronato 77-2-2

that its native subjects there were fast dying off and had in certain instances (Sauer 1966) already disappeared. How to redress the situation, to legislate successfully against the human factors that helped propel it, was something never to be resolved.

Depopulation and the Role of Disease

The contemporary testimony discussed above indicates quite unequivocally that the native population of Guatemala declined sharply in the course of the sixteenth century. Estimates of the numbers involved in this process of decline vary markedly, as Table 2.2 illustrates. All those whose work is reflected in this table, however, concur that a decline did take place, a decline of major dimensions. Even Francisco de Solano, whose figures are the lowest of the group, acknowledges that his estimates deal with a "massive collapse," although he goes on to kindle the flame of the Black Legend by

Table 2.2. Estimates of Maya depopulation in early colonial Guatemala, 1520–1600 (in thousands)

Year	Denevan (1976) ^a	Lovell, Lutz, and Swezey (1984) ^b	Sanders and Murdy (1982) ^c	Solano (1974) ^d	Zamora Acosta (1985) ^e
Ca. 1520	2,000	2,000	500–800	300	315
Ca. 1550		427.85		157	121
Ca. 1575				148	75
Ca. 1600				195	64

Sources: See Bibliography.

^aEstimate is for the territory of the present-day republic of Guatemala.

^bEstimate is for southern Guatemala, defined as the area of the present-day republic of Guatemala excluding the northern department of El Petén, with some overspill west into the Mexican state of Chiapas and east into the republic of El Salvador.

^cEstimate is for highland Guatemala only.

^dSpatial basis of estimate unclear.

^eEstimate is for western Guatemala, specifically the colonial jurisdiction known as the *alcaldía mayor* of Zapotitlán y Suchitepéquez. Neither eastern Guatemala nor the northern Petén district is included in these estimates.

Table 2.3. Widespread (pandemic) outbreaks of disease in early colonial Guatemala, 1519–1632

Year	Place	Sickness or Symptoms	Source
1519–21	Among the Cakchiquel and Tzutuhil Maya	Smallpox, measles, influenza, or pulmonary plague; "tos, sangre de narices y de mal de orina"	Recinos (1950:119–20); <i>Descripción de San Bartolomé</i> (1965:216)
1533	Throughout Guatemala	"Sarampión" and "viruelas"	AGI, AG 9A, 50; Fuentes y Guzmán

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1533	Throughout Guatemala	"Sarampión" and "viruelas"	AGI, AG 9A, 50; Fuentes y Guzmán (1932–33, 1:338)
1545	Throughout Guatemala	"Gucumatz"; "tabardillo"; "fríos y calenturas"; "enfermedades y pestes." Pulmonary plague (?)	Fuentes y Guzmán (1932–33, 3:425–26); <i>Isagoge Histórica</i> (1934:290)
1558–63	Throughout Guatemala	"Sarampión"; "viruela"; "tabardillo"; frío intenso y fiebre"; "sangre de la nariz"; "tos"; "les brotaban llagas pequeñas y grandes"	Vázquez (1937–44, 1:154); AGI, AG 9; Recinos (1950:146–47)
1576–78	Throughout Guatemala	"Viruela"; "tabardete"; "sarampión"; "sangre de narices"; "bubas"; "catarros"; "enfermedades y pestes"	AGI, AG 10, 156; <i>Isagoge Histórica</i> (1934:290)
1607–8	Throughout Guatemala	"Tabardillo"; "sangre de narices"; "enfermedad general"	AGI, AG 12, 419
1620s	Throughout Guatemala	"Viruela"; "peste general"	AGI, AG 867
1631–32	Throughout Guatemala	"Tabardillo"	Gage (1928:201); Molina (1943:24–25)

declaring members of the Berkeley School to be driven by "a secret passion," the objective of which is "to blame Spanish action as the direct cause" of native depopulation (Solano 1974:61). Disease, not "Spanish action" in the form of slaughter or slavery, most scholars now accept was the critical factor, the allegations of Solano notwithstanding. That said, care must be taken not to focus exclusively on the disease factor, for in so doing we eliminate other nonbiological variables from the analysis, variables which played an important role in shaping the colonial Indian experience (Newson 1985). Thus we can concur with Zamora Acosta (1985:131) that disease must be considered "the fundamental cause" but express reservation at its being designated the "almost single" reason behind native population decline.

These observations aside, reconstruction of pandemic or epidemic chronologies remains a vital task if the link between disease and depopulation is to be effectively and convincingly made. Table 2.3 lists eight disease outbreaks, which, in all likelihood, constitute pandemic occurrences. Table 2.4 may be considered a record of twenty-five episodes relating to more local, epidemic outbreaks of disease. Because of their greater impact, the pandemic outbreaks will now be looked at one by one, with the epidemic occurrences treated jointly afterwards in more summary fashion.

The Sickness of 1519-21

A well-known passage from the *Annals of the Cakchiquels* (Recinos and Goetz 1953:115-16) provides us with the following description of a "great and mortal epidemic," which appeared in Guatemala some five years before the *entrada* led by Pedro de Alvarado in 1524:

It happened that during the twenty-fifth year [1519] 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 were in that period. The prince Vakaki Ahmak died then. Little by little

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heavy shadows and black night enveloped our fathers and grandfathers and us also, oh, my sons!

It was in truth terrible, the number of dead among the people. The people could not in any way control the sickness.

Great was the stench of the dead. After our fathers and grandfathers succumbed, half of the people fled to the fields. The dogs and the 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!

Controversy, however, exists over identification of this sickness. It is therefore important to observe that an earlier English translation (Brinton 1885:171) renders the Cakchiquel text as follows:

In the course of the fifth year the pestilence began, O my children. First there was a cough, then the blood was corrupted, and the urine became yellow. The number of deaths at this time was truly terrible. The Chief Vakaki Ahmak died, and we ourselves were plunged in great darkness and great grief, our fathers and ancestors having contracted the plague, O my children.

Truly the number of deaths among the people was terrible, nor did the people escape from the pestilence.

The ancients and the fathers died alike, and the stench was such that men died of it alone. Then perished our fathers and ancestors. Half the people threw themselves into the ravines, and the dogs and foxes lived on the bodies of the men. The fear of death destroyed the old people, and the oldest son of the king at the same time as his young brother. Thus did we become poor, O my children, and thus did we survive, being but a little child—and we were all that remained.

While we must be thankful that such a poignant and graphic description has survived, problems exist, for medical and nonmedical opinion is divided as to what this disease might have been. Most commentators, among them Recinos and Goetz (1953:115), Solano (1974:70), Veblen (1977:490), and Zamora Acosta (1985:

Table 2.4. Local (epidemic) outbreaks of disease in early colonial Guatemala, 1555–1618

Year	Place	Summary	Source
Ca. 1555	Zamayaque	"muertes y enfermedades"	AGI, AG 111
Ca. 1562	Chichicastenango	"grandes enfermedades y pestilencias"; "gran mortandad"; "muchas diminución y muertes"	AGI, Patronato 59-3-2
Ca. 1562	Zalquitlán and Yzalcos	"pestilencias y enfermedades"; "tributo en disminución"; "han muerto muchos indios"	AGI, Patronato 75-1-2
1564	Cakchiquel communities	"Se propagó la enfermedad de la viruela, de la cual murió mucha gente"	Recinos (1950:149)
Ca. 1571	Towns in Chiapas close to Guatemala	"grandes enfermedades y muertes"	AGI, Patronato 76-2-2
1572	Numerous "pueblos de indios"	"pestes"	AGCA, A1, 1512:f 416
1576	Cakchiquel communities	"También en el mes de septiembre hubo una peste de bubas que atacó y mató a la gente. Todos los pueblos sufrieron la enfermedad"	Recinos (1950:155)
Ca. 1578	Verapaz	"muchos de los naturales se an muerto de enfermedad"	AGI, AG 51
Before 1585	Santiago Atitlán	"muchas disminución"; "viruelas y sarampión e tabardete e sangre que les salía de las narizes"; "otras pestilencias"	<i>Relación de Santiago Atitlán</i> (1964:85)
1585	Quezaltenango	"grande enfermedad"	AGI, Contaduría 968
1588	Cakchiquel communities	"Comenzó entonces una epidemia de erupciones entre los niños, de la que no morían los viejos"	Recinos (1950:171)

Ca. 1578	Verapaz	peste de bubas que atacó y mató a la gente. Todos los pueblos sufrieron la enfermedad" "muchos de los naturales se an muerto de enfermedad"	AGI, AG 51
Before 1585	Santiago Atitlán	"mucha disminución"; "viruelas y sarampión e tabardete e sangre que les salía de las narizes"; "otras pestilencias"	<i>Relación de Santiago Atitlán</i> (1964:85)
1585	Quezaltenango	"grande enfermedad"	AGI, Contaduría 968
1588	Cakchiquel communities	"Comenzó entonces una epidemia de erupciones entre los niños, de la que no morían los viejos"	Recinos (1950:171)
1590	Cakchiquel communities	"El día 3 de enero comenzó una enfermedad de tos, fríos y calenturas de que moría la gente"	Recinos (1950:174)
1600	Towns in Chiapas	"enfermedades prolixas y largas que an llevada mucha gente"; "los pobres naturales son muchos los que se an muerto"; "a esta causa a habido hambres"	AGI, AG 161
1601	Cakchiquel communities	"En el mes de octubre comenzó la mortandad a causa de una epidemia que atacaba la garganta de mujeres y hombres [que morían] en dos días"	Recinos (1950:193)

Table 2.4. continued

Year	Place	Summary	Source
Before 1604	Towns held in <i>encomienda</i> by Juan de Aguilar	"ha muchos años que con enfermedades y pestilencias se an consumido los naturales"	AGI, Patronato 64-1-1
1607-8	Ysguatán and Coylpitán, in Chiapas	"los indios se habían muerto de pestilencia"	AGI, Patronato 64-1-1
Ca. 1608	San Juan Amatitlán	"se an muerto en una peste mucha cantidad de indios"	AGI, AG 111
Ca. 1610	Mixco, Nejapa, Parramos, and Tejutla, held in <i>encomienda</i> by Alvaro de Paz	"los indios se an disminuido y muerto con las pestes que a avido"	AGI, Patronato 85-3-3
Ca. 1610	Valley of Guatemala	"pestes"; "mortandad entre los indios"	AGI, AG 13
1612	Numerous towns	"peste"; "para que los indios no mueren en tiempo de hambre"	AGI, AG 13
Ca. 1613	Todos Santos Cuchumatán	"falta de tributarios"; "indios viejos y enfermos"	AGI, Patronato 58-1-4
1614	Santiago de Guatemala	"peste general"	AGCA, A1, 1772, 11766
1617	San Martín Cuchumatán	"indios enfermos"	AGI, Patronato 58-1-4
1618	Towns in Chiapas	"diminuciones por enfermedades y muertes de los naturales"; "falta de indios"	AGI, AG 161

Disease in Early Colonial Guatemala (126), believe the Cakchiquel physician as well as a description of the Cakchiquel physician's diagnosis of the disease. Brinton is supported by the recent work of Villacorta, a Guatemalan doctor whose *Enfermedades de Guatemala* (1955, Figueroa Marín) convincingly argues that the disease was typhus, *maltaizán* (George Shattuck, *Journal of the Harvard School of Public Health*), the epidemic to be the vagueness of the term "peste." He suggests, however, that it is typhus, a disease which came from the Americas, possibly "more than once." MacLeod (1941) suggests that smallpox but concludes that it is more likely typhus, specifically, typhus, which was found in the Guatemala of pulmonary plague (44), professor of the Universidad de San Carlos, Guatemala, who categorically designates the disease as typhus or exanthematic typhus, that the disease occurred in the Cakchiquel chronicle, then, as for an outbreak, played the term (1941:69) correlate typhus, *chaac*, with typhus, *maltaizán*, Brasseur de Bourbourg

1614	Santiago de Guatemala	"peste general"	AGCA, AI, 1772-11766
1617	San Martín Cuchumatán	"indios enfermos"	AGI, Patronato 58-1-4
1618	Towns in Chiapas	"diminuciones por enfermedades y muertes de los naturales"; "falta de indios"	AGI, AG 161

126), believe the Cakchiquel account to refer to smallpox. On the other hand, Daniel Brinton (1885:207), a physician as well as the first person to translate the *Annals of the Cakchiquels* into English, considered the description diagnostic of a malignant outbreak of measles. Brinton is supported in this assessment by the more recent work of Villacorta Cifuentes (1976:50-57), also a physician. Villacorta derives much of his evidence for designation as measles from the earlier study of another Guatemalan doctor, Horacio Figueroa Marroquín (1983), whose *Enfermedades de los conquistadores* first appeared in 1955. Figueroa Marroquín (1983:45-61) provides a fairly convincing argument in favor of measles.

George Shattuck (1938:41), who taught at the Harvard School of Public Health, considered the identity of the epidemic to be "not certainly known because of the vagueness of the terms used by the annalist to describe it." He suggests, however, that "probably it was smallpox which came from Mexico," adding that quite possibly "more than one disease was epidemic at about that time." MacLeod (1973:19) also regards the outbreak as smallpox but concurs with Shattuck's suggestion that likely more than one disease was involved. He contends, specifically, that "the descriptions of the disease found in the Guatemalan Indian annals resemble those of pulmonary plague." Carlos Martínez Durán (1941:44), professor of the history of medicine at the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, shied away from categorical designation, but suggested influenza, measles, or exanthematic typhus. He was adamant, however, that the disease could not have been smallpox, for the Cakchiquel chronicler (Diego Hernández Xahil) would then, as for an outbreak of sickness in 1564, have employed the term *viruela* or *viruelas*. Martínez Durán (1941:69) correlates the Cakchiquel word for the pestilence, *chaac*, with the Nahuatl term for exanthematic typhus, *matlatzáhuatl*. Brinton (1885:207) tells us that Brasseur de Bourbourg erroneously translated *chaac* as

"la maladie syphilitique" and states that the word "applied to any eruptive disease, to the whole class of exanthemata."

Felix Webster McBryde (1940:296–97), observing that influenza was widespread in Europe during the early sixteenth century, advanced the notion that the symptoms best fit "those of the great pandemic of influenza in 1918–19," a notion MacLeod (1973:399) considers an "unconvincing argument." Sherburne F. Cook, well trained in the natural and medical sciences before embarking on pioneering studies of historical demography in Mexico and California, seems not to have been as dismissive as MacLeod of the influenza designation, for he is acknowledged by McBryde (1946:301) "for critically reading the manuscript of this article." Crosby (1972:58) thinks that, indeed, the disease "may have been influenza" because it "was apparently not smallpox, for the accounts do not mention pustules." Orellana (1987:141) points out that while the Spanish word *viruelas* almost always is translated as smallpox, the term in fact refers to the "pimpled pustuled appearance" of the disease, and not to the illness itself. *Viruelas* as a manifestation or symptom may have been employed by contemporary Spaniards to apply also to "measles, chicken pox, or even typhus," although the designation (Crosby 1967:43) usually did mean smallpox. Orellana (1987:142) suggests that the sickness might have been a malignant form of smallpox. The balance of commentary thus may favor smallpox, but not unanimously so. What seems worthy of observation is that medical doctors who analyze the native text are more inclined to diagnose measles than smallpox.

What would help determine more accurate diagnosis, obviously, are other descriptive sources relating to disease outbreaks at this time. Unfortunately, very little is available. Later on in the *Annals of the Cakchiquels* (Recinos and Goetz 1953:143) there is reference to an out-

break in 1560 of "people long ago," "large sores broke out in pustules, and the 1560 epidemic which occurred in 1560 could be strengthened by a native document (MacLeod 1973:11–79) can be mentioned. In the *Descripción gráfica* compiled in 1560, Spaniards arrived in the outbreak of smallpox, indeed Zamora Acosta the smallpox referred to as *lomé* with the outbreak of the *Cakchiquels*.

Diagnosis, then, however, is the clear disruption, fear, and the Cakchiquel (MacLeod 1953:115) also described the plague raged, and spread." Even if the records of the sickened their Tzutuh referring to the outbreak of rado's arrival as "MacLeod (1973:40) consequences of the

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break in 1560 of "the plague which had lashed the people long ago," with the observation that "small and large sores broke out on them." If the sores were pustules, and the 1560 outbreak the same disease as that which occurred in 1519–21, then the case for smallpox could be strengthened. It is disappointing that no other native document of the many available (Carmack 1973:11–79) can be turned to for assistance or corroboration. In the *Descripción de San Bartolomé, a relación geográfica* compiled in 1585, it is stated that "before the Spaniards arrived in this land there was an incurable outbreak of smallpox."⁷ It may therefore be possible, as indeed Zamora Acosta (1985:126) has done, to correlate the smallpox reference in the *Descripción de San Bartolomé* with the outbreak recorded for 1519–21 in the *Annals of the Cakchiquels*.

Diagnosis, then, is problematical. Decidedly not, however, is the clear reference to high mortality, social disruption, fear, and panic that this sickness brought to the Cakchiquel Maya. The source (Recinos and Goetz 1953:115) also distinguishes between 1519, when "the plague raged," and 1520 and 1521, when "the plague spread." Even if the Cakchiquel were the sole diligent recorders of the sickness, it surely must also have affected their Tzutuhil, Quiché, and Mam neighbors. Referring to the outbreaks of sickness that preceded Alvarado's arrival as "the shock troops of the conquest," MacLeod (1973:40–41) is in no doubt as to the profound consequences of this disease:

Given present-day knowledge of the impact of smallpox or plague on people without previous immunities, it is safe, indeed conservative, to say that a third of the Guatemalan highland populations died during this holocaust. Knowledge of past epidemics in Europe and of the aftermath of smallpox

⁷*Descripción de San Bartolomé*, p. 267. The Spanish text reads "antes que los españoles viniesen a esta tierra les subcedió una pestilencia de viruelas incurables."

and plague can also lead us to assert that those who survived were left at least for a year or so in a weakened condition, with greatly lowered resistance to the minor ills, colds, bronchitis, pneumonia, and influenza which carry off so many invalids.

When, in 1524, Pedro de Alvarado led the first Spanish *entrada* into Guatemala, he was therefore confronted in battle by native warriors whose peoples had already been weakened by the presence among them of a new strain, or strains, of disease.

The Sickness of 1533

Citing three contemporary sources, MacLeod (1973: 98) records measles as having had a "general" pandemic presence in Central America between 1532 and 1534. That measles devastated Honduras and Nicaragua around this time seems fairly certain, for in addition to MacLeod's sources we have those consulted by Linda Newson (1986: 128–29; 1987: 120). We also have the first-hand testimony of Pedro de los Ríos, a royal treasurer who resided in León. Writing to the king on June 22, 1533, Ríos observed that the shortage of Indians in Nicaragua to pan for gold was related directly to "many sicknesses which have struck them, especially one recently of *sarampión*."⁸ The extent to which this outbreak of measles also affected Guatemala is less clear, for our sources are again rather scant. Fuentes y Guzmán (1932–33, 1:338) mentions an early but undated outbreak, one he describes as arriving in Guatemala, along with smallpox, from neighboring Mexico. Measles and smallpox, the chronicler asserts, spread "like fire in dry grass, laying waste to entire towns of several thousand inhabitants."⁹ Asturias (1958:87), citing the Do-

⁸AGI, Guatemala 50. The Spanish text reads "muchas enfermedades que les a dado especialmente una que nuevamente les a dado de sarampión." Another letter (AGI, Guatemala 9A) dated May 1, 1533, written to the king by Licenciado Francisco Castañeda, also mentions *sarampión*, which he says has killed "más de seis mil indios."

⁹The Spanish text reads "como el activo y cebado fuego de los campos secos, pueblos enteros de innumerables y crecidos millares de habitantes."

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¹⁰The Spanish text reads "los indios, mando que le de ellos, pena de perdin y curen sin ocuparlos en que con otras semejante

minican chronicler Antonio de Remesal, also refers to smallpox in Guatemala at this time. Of measles specifically, Fuentes y Guzmán (1932–33, 1:338) quotes Pedro de Alvarado as having declared: “Because measles has struck the Indians I order those who hold *encomiendas* and *repartimientos*, on punishment of forfeiting them lest they not comply, to care for and cure their charges without engaging them in any activity, for experience has shown in other similar epidemics that much territory has been depopulated.”¹⁰

Fuentes y Guzmán may not always be a reliable source (Carmack 1973:183–187) but his credibility on this occasion is enhanced when he makes it clear that he is quoting directly from Pedro de Alvarado, someone not widely regarded as a responsible overseer of Indian welfare (Sherman 1983:173–75). If the rapacious Alvarado thought it prudent to desist, albeit temporarily, from enforcement of *encomienda* and *repartimiento* obligations, then he likely had good reason for doing so. Fuentes y Guzmán (1932–33, 1:339) goes on to point out, directly after quoting Alvarado, that by overlooking or ignoring the presence of disease, the connection Las Casas insisted on making between Indian population decline and Spanish cruelty is inaccurate and misplaced.

Confidence in using Fuentes y Guzmán as a source for this outbreak of sickness was bolstered when an examination of early colonial correspondence (AGI, Guatemala 9A) disclosed the existence of an important letter. Writing to King Charles V on September 1, 1532, from Santiago de Guatemala, Pedro de Alvarado concludes a detailed report about various affairs of state with the following remark:

¹⁰The Spanish text reads “por quanto ha caido peste de sarampión sobre los indios, mando que los que los tuviesen encomendados, y repartimiento de ellos, pena de perdimiento de los tales indios encomendados, los cuiden y curen sin ocuparlos en servicio alguno; porque se ha visto por experiencia que con otras semejantes pestilencias se han despoblado muchas tierras.”

All that remains for me to tell Your Majesty is that, throughout New Spain, there passed a sickness that they say is *sarampión*, one which struck the Indians and swept the land, leaving it totally empty. It arrived in this province some three months ago and, on my instructions, arrangements were made so that the Indians would be better cared for, so that they would not die in such great numbers as in all other parts. It was not possible to act before many died, so in these parts also there has been a very great loss, for many indeed are dead.¹¹

Alvarado goes on to state, as Fuentes y Guzmán claimed, that he ordered restrictions to be placed on the use of Indian labor. In an effort to reduce mortality, specific mention is made of "slaves who were taken from the mines" being "treated and cured," as well as "other Indians who were relieved of their duties."¹² Alvarado, never one to lose an opportunity to make himself look good, hoped that the king understood and agreed with his actions. Because of the emergency, Alvarado mentions also that "gold was not melted down in as great a quantity as we had hoped" and so takes care to warn the king that, in consequence, "Your Majesty's share is diminished."¹³

While Spaniards in the sixteenth century appear to have employed the term *sarampión* quite freely, Shattuck (1938:42-43) remarks rather skeptically that using the word as "evidence for the occurrence of epidemics of measles is unsatisfactory," not least because "measles

¹¹AGI, Guatemala 9A. The Spanish text reads "solamente me queda de decir que en toda la Nueva España vino una pestilencia por los naturales que dicen sarampión, la qual acalado toda la tierra sin dejar cosa ninguna en ella y llegó a esta provincia abra tres meses y puesto que por mi parte fueron hechas muchas diligencias para que los naturales fueron mejor curados y no se diese lugar a que muriessen en tanta cantidad como en todas las otras partes no pudo tanto preservarse que no haber muerto muchas y haber sido en estas partes muy gran pérdida a si por los muchos que son muertos."

¹²AGI, Guatemala 9A. The Spanish text reads "mandé luego que todos los esclavos que fueron sacados de las minas y tratados y curados . . . y que los otros naturales en sus servicios fueron relevados."

¹³AGI, Guatemala 9A. The Spanish text reads "no se fundió oro en tanta cantidad como esperabamos y Vuestra Majestad perdió de su parte."

was not recognized before the eighteenth century (48) makes the same point. I await further evidence to be reached.

The Sickness of 15

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was not recognized in Europe as a separate entity before the eighteenth century." Figueroa Marroquín (1983: 48) makes the same simple point. We must therefore await further evidence before a final conclusion can be reached.

The Sickness of 1545–1548

Indians in Mexico suffered dreadfully between 1545 and 1548 from a disease that native chroniclers referred to as *cocoliztli* or *hueycocoliztli* (Gibson 1964:448; Gerhard 1972:23–24; Malvido and Viesca 1985:27). The term *cocoliztli* translates simply as "sickness" or "pestilence," *hueycocoliztli* as "great sickness" or "great pestilence" (Alonso de Molina 1970:235, 155r). That *cocoliztli* spread south from Mexico and infected Guatemala, where it was known as *gucumatz* (MacLeod 1973:19), is evident from a number of sources. Explicit mention is made in the *Isagoge Histórica* (1935:290) that in 1545 and again in 1576 "great plagues and heavy Indian mortality" occurred throughout "all the provinces of Guatemala."¹⁴ Many "populous and famous towns," it is stated, were "destroyed totally" by diseases that "reached these provinces from Mexico."¹⁵ Around the time of the earlier outbreak, testimony from the *encomendero* Gonzalo de Ortíz mentions that "God sent down such sickness upon the Indians that three out of every four of them perished."¹⁶ Ortíz stated bluntly that "because of this, all is now lost in Mexico, and here also."¹⁷

Contrary to the above observations, the Audiencia of Guatemala wrote to the king on December 31, 1545,

¹⁴The Spanish text reads "debe entenderse también de todas estas provincias del reino de Guatemala . . . hubo grandísimas pestes y mortandades de indios."

¹⁵The Spanish text reads "las enfermedades y pestes se extienden muchísimos pueblos de los más numerosos y famosos se han destruido totalmente."

¹⁶AGI, Justicia 299. The Spanish text reads "envió Dios tal enfermedad sobre ellos que de quatro partes de indios que avia se llevó las tres."

¹⁷AGI, Justicia 299. The Spanish text reads "a esta causa está todo perdido lo de México y lo de aquí."

when it was based at Gracias a Dios and not Santiago, alleging that "the pestilence that has afflicted Indians in New Spain has not reached Guatemala."¹⁸ This statement appears to have been more wishful than responsible thinking on the *audiencia's* part, possibly because a capital base in western Honduras meant that Crown officials were somewhat removed from events and circumstances in Guatemala itself. The *audiencia*, however, offered "prayers to God" that the sickness "not reach here" and that, if it did, "many fewer die than have died in Mexico."¹⁹

The supplication of the *audiencia* notwithstanding, *gucumatz* must be recognized as having been present in Guatemala between 1545 and 1548, with disastrous results. What exactly the sickness was once again is more problematical. Fuentes y Guzmán (1932–33, 3:426) makes reference around this time to "typhus or colds and fevers, a common epidemic of coastal parts."²⁰ MacLeod (1973:19) concludes that "while awaiting more evidence," *gucumatz* "was none other than the old enemy, pulmonary plague," an extremely fatal contagion that develops when bubonic plague attacks the lungs and respiratory system. Orellana (1987:143, 146) concurs with MacLeod that the Quiché term *k'ucumatz* correlates with the pneumonic form of plague, an illness marked by great lassitude, fever, thirst, and the swelling of glands.

The Sickness of 1558–1562

The years between 1558 and 1562 saw Guatemala struck by a wave of sickness that left many dead and their survivors hungry. Several sources facilitate a re-

¹⁸AGI, Guatemala 69. The Spanish text reads "la pestilencia que ha avido entre los indios en la Nueva España no ha llegado en Guatemala."

¹⁹AGI, Guatemala 69. The Spanish text reads "plega a Dios que no llegue por acá que a morir muchos menos que ha muerto en México."

²⁰The Spanish text reads "tabardillo o fríos y calenturas, epidemia ordinaria de la costa."

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audencia notwithstanding, having been present 548, with disastrous was once again is nán (1932–33, 3:426) to "typhus or colds of coastal parts."²⁰ at "while awaiting ne other than the old tremely fatal conta- : plague attacks the lana (1987:143, 146) iché term *k'ucumatz* m of plague, an ill- ever, thirst, and the

562 saw Guatemala left many dead and rces facilitate a re-

construction. The chronicler Francisco Vázquez (1937–44, 1:154) recorded that in 1558 "the kingdom was almost destroyed" by a disease from which "a great number of people died because there was no cure."²¹ He described the sickness as one in which the afflicted suffered nosebleeds. On June 30, 1560, and again on February 7, 1561, the *audiencia* informed King Philip II that all over Guatemala "everyone is sick and ridden with pestilence" and "a very great number of Indians have perished."²² Arrangements were made to help those in need, for if disease did not kill them, hunger would. Furthermore, the *audiencia* pointed out, if Indians died because of a lack of assistance, then tribute would decline, and Spanish recipients would soon become impoverished (AGI, Guatemala 9). It seems likely that the sickness the *audiencia* and Vázquez wrote about was the same one recorded in the *Annals of the Cakchiquels* (Recinos and Goetz 1953:143–44):

In the sixth month after the arrival [1560] of the Lord President [Juan Núñez de Valdecho] in Pangan, 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.

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 II Akbal, doña Catalina, the wife of don Jorge, died.

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²¹The Spanish text reads "fue señaladísima la sangre de narices que hubo el año 1558, en que murieron sin que nadie pudiese hallar remedio, muchísimas gentes . . . casi destruyó el reino."

²²AGI, Guatemala 9. The Spanish text reads "toda está enferma y con pestilencia . . . se han muerto muy gran cantidad de indios."

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

Once again, because of differences in how the Cakchiquel original is rendered into English, it is important to note how Brinton (1885:194) translated this passage:

Six months after the arrival of the President at Pangan, began here again the pestilence which had formerly raged among the people. It came from a distance. It was truly terrible when this death was sent among us by the great God. Many families bowed their heads before it. The people were seized with a chill and then a fever; blood issued from the nose; there was a cough, and the throat and nose were swollen, both in the lesser and the greater pestilence. All here were soon attacked. These maladies began, O my children, on the day of the Circumcision, a Monday, and as I was writing, we also were attacked with the disease.

Identification in this case, because the Cakchiquel text clearly associates this sickness with an earlier one, might on first appearance benefit from comparative analysis. But if, as seems likely, the "greater pestilence" of Brinton's translation is the sickness of 1519-21, then diagnosis of this "lesser" one is riddled with the same difficulties as before. Designation as smallpox is perhaps best supported by mention in the Recinos and Goetz translation of "small and large sores." Brinton, however, makes no references to such eruptions, nor do two other Spanish translations (Villacorta Calderón 1934:281; Reynaud, Asturias, and González de Mendoza 1946:160-61). What all versions speak of is an illness that saw people come down with fever, suffer nosebleeds, and develop a cough. These symptoms, according to Figueroa Marroquín (1983:58), are complications that may exacerbate an outbreak of smallpox but in fact form part of the clinical diagnosis of measles. Fi-

gueroa Marroquín (1983:58) is scrutinizing three descriptions of the disease: Villacorta Calderón 1934:281; Reynaud, Asturias, and González de Mendoza 1946:160-61; and Recinos and Goetz 1940:160-61. He concludes that the descriptions of the disease were measles. Villacorta Calderón's argument made by the titles for measles, as cited by Durán (1941:69) suggests that he did not rule measles out. Recinos and Goetz, a combination of descriptions of the disease in popular Spanish rhyme, suggest that light-heartedly revealed

Sarampión toca la puerta
Viruela dice: Quién
y Escarlatina contestó
Aquí estamos los tres

By 1563, crisis continued to lingered (Batres 1923:192). Shortages, brought on by neither wheat, nor bananas and roots" (Recinos and Goetz 1940:160-61). A break of smallpox and suffering.

The Sickness of 1576

During 1576 and 1577 a wave of pestilence swept the region. A recent study by Malvicini (1935:290) the *cocoliztli* mentioned at this time as an epidemic. Recinos and Goetz also refer to this sickness. Recinos and Goetz (1940:321). Documentation related with the *cocoliztli* (1935:290), but refer

broke out. Truly men, women, and my father, my everyone suffered rampant at the end [May 18, 1562].

how the Cakchiquel, it is important and this passage:

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the Cakchiquel an earlier one, in comparative "water pestilence" (1519-21, then with the same smallpox is perceived Recinos and others." Brinton, eruptions, nor Villacorta Calderón González de Mendoza break of is an illness fever, suffer symptoms, are complicated smallpox but of measles. Fi-

gueroa Marroquín (1983:52) goes so far as to state, after scrutinizing three different Spanish translations (Villacorta Calderón 1934; Reynaud, Asturias, and González de Mendoza 1946; Recinos 1950) of the Cakchiquel text, that the descriptions "leave no doubt" that the sickness was measles. Villacorta Cifuentes (1976:53-54) accepts the argument made by Figueroa Marroquín and also settles for measles, as does Orellana (1987:146). Martínez Durán (1941:69) suggests exanthematic typhus but does not rule measles out. That the sickness might have been a combination of diseases is again quite possible, as a popular Spanish rhyme (Figueroa Marroquín 1983:45) light-heartedly reveals:

Sarampión toca la puerta,	Measles knocks the door
Viruela dice: Quién es?	Smallpox asks: Who's there?
y Escarlatina contesta:	And Scarlet Fever replies:
Aquí estamos los tres!	All three of us are here!

By 1563, crisis conditions still prevailed, for sickness lingered (Batres 1920, 2:318), and "hunger and food shortages, brought on by drought, meant that there was neither wheat, nor corn, nor even recourse to eating bananas and roots" (Vázquez 1937-44, 1:154). An outbreak of smallpox among the Cakchiquel a year later (Recinos and Goetz 1953:145) only added to their suffering.

The Sickness of 1576-1577

During 1576 and 1577, Guatemala was hit by another wave of pestilence sweeping south from Mexico. A recent study by Malvido and Viesca (1985) has diagnosed the *cocoliztli* mentioned in Mexican sources around this time as an epidemic of plague. The Mexican sources also refer to this sickness as *matlazáhuatl*, which may have been typhus exanthematicus (S. F. Cook 1946:321). Documentation for Guatemala certainly can be correlated with the *cocoliztli* of Mexico (*Isagoge Histórica* 1935:290), but reference is made also to smallpox, ty-

phus, colds, and other unspecified sicknesses. To these, Martínez Durán (1941:71) adds "bubas, sarampión y peste de flujo de narices."

Writing to the king on March 15, 1577, President Pedro de Villalobos stated that "from Mexico has entered, to this country, a plague of smallpox and typhus, from which have died, and die daily still, a great many Indians, especially young children."²³ Two days previously, a royal accountant had notified the king that "the outbreak of smallpox among the Indians has been contagious and widespread."²⁴ The same accountant, Eugenio de Salazar, one year later informed the king that, owing to the impact of the epidemic, tribute payments were considerably in arrears. He argued that it made sense to "relieve from the responsibility of paying tribute those Indians who have been sick and who are still in great hardship."²⁵ President Villalobos, in another letter to the king dated March 17, 1578, stated further that "at present there is a shortage of corn" because the sick had been unable to tend to their fields.²⁶

By the time Villalobos handed over the presidency of the *audiencia* to Diego García de Valverde in November 1578, the epidemic had run the worst of its course. Documents relating to Valverde's presidency, however, are littered with references to the sickness of 1576-77 because it was during the years of his *audiencia* (1578-89) that many of the social and economic consequences of the epidemic had to be dealt with. Foremost of all, Valverde attempted to compile new tribute assessments (MacLeod 1973:130-31) that would reflect the demo-

²³ AGI, Guatemala 10. The Spanish text reads "de México vino a esta tierra una pestilencia de viruela y tabardete de que han muerto y de cada día mueren mucha cantidad de yndios en especial niños de poca edad."

²⁴ AGI, Guatemala 10. The Spanish text reads "la enfermedad de las viruelas entre los yndios ha sido contagiosa y general."

²⁵ AGI, Guatemala 10. The letter is dated March 15, 1578, and the Spanish text reads "ha sido justo descargarse las deste cargo por los yndios con las enfermedades . . . han estado y están tan necesitados."

²⁶ AGI, Guatemala 10. The Spanish text reads "hay de presente falta de maíz por no haber podido sembrar los indios."

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graphic reality of the 1580s, not more populous times
a decade or two earlier.²⁷ Legitimate, long-overdue re-
assessment, Valverde must have thought, was at last
being carried out when a sharply worded command
reached Guatemala. In it (Simpson 1950:154) Valverde
was ordered by the Crown to undertake the following:

To investigate and correct the abuses reportedly committed
by *encomenderos*, *corregidores*, and *alcaldes mayores* against the
Indians, [among them]: (1) collecting tributes on ancient
population counts, when the actual number of Indians had
diminished by as much as two-thirds; (2) collecting tributes
for dead or absent Indians; (3) selling *encomienda* Indians to
one another; (4) using Indians as slaves; (5) beating them;
(6) loading them excessively; (7) making them sleep in the
fields, where they died from the bites of poisonous reptiles;
(8) mistreating them so badly that mothers killed their chil-
dren rather than have them serve the Spaniards; (9) causing
the Indians to starve themselves to death, or to hang them-
selves, for the same reason; (10) causing them generally to
hate the name of Christian.

Valverde was astounded by these allegations and
moved quickly to defend himself. What he was accused
of tolerating, Valverde insisted, were precisely the kinds
of things he had encountered upon arrival in Guatemala
and had set out immediately to redress. The president
had heard that the king and the Council of the Indies
had been deliberately misinformed by a Dominican
friar, one Bernardo de Almarsa, with whom Valverde
apparently had clashed and who was known to harbor
a personal grudge (AGI, Guatemala 10). Valverde called
upon several prominent citizens and clergymen to put
the record straight. Among them, the testimony of Pe-
dro de Liévano attributes Indian depopulation morally
to "secret judgments of God beyond the reach of man"
before turning to "three or four pestilences that came

²⁷ AGI, Guatemala 10, *Razón de las tasaciones que se han hecho después que el presidente vino a esta audiencia, de pueblos de su distrito con lo que antes tributaban.*

from Mexico" as decidedly more worldly, objective explanations of divine retribution.²⁸

The Sickness of 1607–1608

On November 30, 1608, the president of the Audiencia of Guatemala, Alonso Criado de Castilla, informed the king that "Indians in this country have been afflicted by a general sickness for more than a year."²⁹ He went on to describe how, "with great abruptness, in two or three days, and sometimes even sooner, these miserable Indians die without any cure or remedy," and observed that the sick experienced "a flow of blood running from their noses, which one is seldom able to stop."³⁰ Criado de Castilla mentioned specifically that the above symptoms "occur, among some people, along with typhus."³¹ The *audiencia* used certain funds at its disposal to help those communities most severely affected. This course of action, however, was done without beforehand obtaining formal permission from the Council of the Indies. In a retroactive order of 1613, the king bestowed his approval on the *audiencia's* decision to assist the Indians. The "great sickness and pestilence of 1607 and 1608," the king commented, obviously called for some form of government intervention, but he instructed the *audiencia* not to behave in the future with such disregard for proper administrative procedure.³²

²⁸ AGI, Guatemala 10. The Spanish text reads "en lo que toca a morirse los indios e ir en dimunición son juicios secretos de Dios que los hombres no los ascanzan y lo que este testigo ha visto en el tiempo que ha estado en estas provincias es que desde la provincia de México han venido tres o quatro pestilencias con las cuales ha venido la tierra en grandísima disminución . . ."

²⁹ AGI, Guatemala 12. The Spanish text reads "la enfermedad general que los naturales desta tierra an tenido de mas de un año."

³⁰ AGI, Guatemala 12. The Spanish text reads "con mucha brevedad en dos o tres días y algunas veces de repente morían estos yndios miseros sin que admitiese remedios ni se pudiese entender la cura della . . . dándoles un flujo de sangre de narizes que pocas veces se podía restanar."

³¹ AGI, Guatemala 12. The Spanish text reads "y en algunos con mezcla de tabardillo."

³² AGI, Guatemala 419. The Spanish text reads "los años de 1607 y 1608 que hubo grandes enfermedades de peste en esa provincia."

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The Sickness of the 1620s

For some time before 1623, but apparently after the typhus outbreaks of 1607 and 1608, Guatemala was again infected by a pestilence that may have been small-pox. Our most precise source for this outbreak is a letter written by the city council of Santiago on October 9, 1623, in which the king was informed that "since the beginning of August the sickness that hitherto had been general throughout the country has ceased."³³ The city council wished expressly to assure the king that tribute payments ought not to be affected "because those who died in greatest number were children and young people," not adults.³⁴ In Santiago itself, this sickness may have been the same that contaminated the capital in 1614. On August 2 of that year the city council agreed to ask the Mercedarian convent to organize a procession through the streets of Santiago, a procession in which images of the Virgin would be carried in the hope of convincing her to intervene and help stop "the general sickness."³⁵

The Sickness of 1631–32

Yet another outbreak of typhus devastated Guatemala in the years 1631 and 1632. Antonio de Molina (1943:24–25), a Dominican friar and seventeenth-century chronicler, recorded that "in 1631 there was, in this city [Santiago], a very great sickness that carried off a great number of people," a sickness that also prevailed "in surrounding towns and in all the provinces."³⁶ Mor-

³³AGI, Guatemala 967. The Spanish text reads "desde principio de agosto [de este] año cesó la peste general que hubo en este reyno."

³⁴AGI, Guatemala 967. The Spanish text reads "según la noticia que esta tiene en los pueblos de indios ay poca diminución de tributarios porque los que fallecieron en mayor numero eran niños y muchachos."

³⁵AGCA, A1, legajo 1772, expediente 11766. The reference to sickness reads "la peste general."

³⁶The Spanish text reads "el año de 1631 hubo en esta ciudad de Guatemala una peste muy grande en que murió muchísima gente y en los pueblos de la comarca y en todas las provincias de Guatemala."

tality in the capital, Molina wrote, "was terrible."³⁷ On April 27 the following year, the city council of Santiago again requested that a religious procession be organized to entice divine or saintly intervention that would bid the sickness cease (AGCA, A1, legajo 1772, expediente 11766). Neither Molina nor the city's council mention precisely what contagion was at large, but the observant Thomas Gage (1928:291) provides us with a fairly definitive diagnosis of typhus:

The next year following, all that country was generally infected with a kind of contagious sickness, almost as infectious as the plague, which they call *tabardillo*, and was a fever in the very inward parts and bowels, which scarce continued to the seventh day but commonly took them away from the world to a grave the third or fifth day. The filthy smell and stench which came from them which lay sick of this disease was enough to infect the rest of the house, and all that came to see them. It rotted their mouths and tongues, and made them as black as coal before they died. Very few Spaniards were infected with this contagion; but the Indians generally were taken with it. It was reported to have begun about Mexico, and to have spread from town to town, till it came to Guatemala, and went on forwards; and so likewise did the locusts the year before, marching as it were from Mexico over all the country. I visited many that died of this infection, using no other antidote against it save only a handkerchief dipped in vinegar to smell into, and I thank God I escaped where many died. In Mixco I buried ninety young and old, and in Pinola above a hundred; and for all these that were eight years old, or upwards, I received two crowns for a Mass for their soul's delivery out of Purgatory. But think not that because so many died, therefore the towns growing less my offerings for the future were lessened. The *encomenderos* or lords of the two towns took care for that, who, that they might not lose any part of that tribute which was formerly paid unto them, presently after the sickness was ceased,

³⁷The Spanish text reads "fue terrible la mortandad que hubo en la ciudad."

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Gage (1928:292) a case, crisis conditions weather:

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Local Epidemic Outbreak

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Gage (1928:292) also recorded that, as was often the case, crisis conditions were exacerbated by inclement weather:

The judgements ceased not here in that country in my time; but after this contagion there was such an inundation of rain that the husbandmen feared again the loss of all their corn. At noon time the dark clouds for a month together began to thicken and cover the face of the heavens, pouring down such stormy showers as swept away much corn, and many poor cottages of Indians; besides the rain, the fiery thunderbolts breaking through the clouds threatened a doleful judgement to all the country.

Along with smallpox, typhus was to be a scourge for Indians in Guatemala for the remainder of the colonial period and well into the nineteenth century (Lovell 1988).

Local Epidemic Outbreaks, 1555–1618

If the eight disease outbreaks discussed above, because of their extensive treatment in the sources, can be considered pandemic in scope and impact, then the documentation referred to in Table 2.4 collectively relates to more localized bouts of sickness. Disease must have broken out at the local level far more often than the twenty-five occurrences here tabulated, but only further archival foraging and systematic integration of the findings of community and regional studies will elaborate the record.

Several of the episodes referred to in Table 2.4 undoubtedly concern the manifestation, at one town or in a handful of settlements comprising a parish or *encomienda*, of a contagion that prevailed more generally. Thus the "gran mortandad" listed for Chichicastenango around 1562, and the "pestilencias y enfermedades" re-

corded for Zalquitlán at this same time, likely represent the occurrence in these places of the pandemic that may have been measles, smallpox, or typhus. Similarly, the "epidemic of buboes which attacked and killed the people" living in Cakchiquel communities in 1576, and the sickness that had carried off "many of the natives" in the Verapaz by 1578, can be correlated with the second of the two waves of *cocoliztli* that swept across Guatemala from Mexico. In the same fashion, the typhus pandemic of 1607 and 1608 seems the most probable explanation of disease-related death recorded during these years for the towns of Ysguatán, Coypitán, San Juan Amatitlán, and those held in *encomienda* by Álvaro de Paz.

Other disease outbreaks, conversely, are difficult to link to a pandemic occurrence and are thus best interpreted as sickness that apparently had only a limited radius of infection. The epidemics of 1588, 1590, and 1601 among the Cakchiquel illustrate this local dynamic quite well, as does the "grande enfermedad" in 1585 in Quezaltenango and ten or so other instances summarized in Table 2.4. As later evidence for the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes suggests (Lovell 1985:170-71; 1990:167-194), the spatial impact of sickness could be highly localized, with disease occurring in some communities without necessarily reaching and infecting adjacent or surrounding ones.

Conclusion

On the basis of evidence presented here, much of it drawn from archival material complementing better-known and more readily available printed sources, an argument has been made that draws a direct connection between disease outbreaks and Indian depopulation in early colonial Guatemala. Contemporary testimony between 1539 and 1617 of ongoing diminution among native inhabitants (Table 2.1) may be related to general (Table 2.3) or local (Table 2.4) outbreaks of sickness. As

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many as eight pandemics swept across Guatemala between 1519 and 1632, and localized episodes of sickness occurred even more frequently over the same period of time. The documents we have at hand, it must be remembered, are written records that survived, down through the years, flood, fire, earthquake, negligence, and theft, whether they remained in Guatemala or were shipped off to the king and the Council of the Indies in Spain. Furthermore, not all disease outbreaks necessarily would have been chronicled. If anything, the historical record downplays rather than accentuates the tragic consequence of empire that claimed, long ago, countless thousands of Maya lives.