



WAYNE STATE
UNIVERSITY

Pandemic Perspectives

Department of History, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences



Pandemic Perspectives

Historical accounts of
pandemics and epidemics

With support from:

Cohn-Haddow

Center for Judaic Studies

SMALLPOX AND EPIDEMICS AMONG INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF NORTH AMERICA

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OVERVIEW

- Indigenous societies in the Americas before the arrival of Europeans
- How European plants, animals, and diseases made colonization and settlement possible
- Devastating impact of European diseases (smallpox, measles, influenza) on Indigenous communities of the Americas beginning in the 15th century
- Testimonials by Indigenous peoples and comments by European colonists on the ravages of smallpox among Native Americans
- How the smallpox epidemic of 1732-33 effected Indigenous peoples at Detroit and in the Great Lakes



Indigenous Societies of the Americas before European arrival

- An estimated 70 million people lived on the continents of North and South America in 1492
- North American Cultures
 - Around 1200 B.C.E., a series of complex, literate, and urban cultures emerged in Mesoamerica.
 - The Mayans flourished between about C.E.150 and 900 in southern Yucatan, creating written language, mathematics, and calendrical systems.
 - The Aztecs created a vast empire in Mesoamerica based on their capital at Teotihuacan (present-day Mexico City), a large city that dominated central Mexico between the first and eighth century B.C.E. with a population much larger than European cities such as London and Paris
 - Introduction of maize around 400 B.C.E. led to spread of agriculture and the rise of farming cultures.
 - The Anasazi settled in the Southwest, adopting agriculture, and developing villages with large communal dwellings.
 - Indigenous peoples of the North American Plains adopted a nomadic lifestyle that combined farming and hunting.
 - Adena-Hopewell and Mississippian mound-building arose in the eastern Woodlands and Great Lakes based on large earthworks and agriculture that supported large urban populations, including Cahokia (present-day southern Illinois)





North American Indigenous Nations, c. 1500

Over the course of centuries, Indigenous peoples in North America developed distinctive cultures suited to the environments in which they lived. Most, but not all, Indigenous peoples combined farming with hunting and gathering.



How European plants, animals, and diseases impacted Native Americans

- The introduction of European domesticated animals and European diseases in the fifteenth century brought momentous consequences to North American Indigenous communities, radically altering their lives and landscapes
- Cattle, sheep, pigs, and goats were new sources of food; horses were quickly and effectively adapted by Native Americans; rats, cats, honey bees and clover were also of European origin and changed Indigenous ecosystems
- European wheat, melons, and fruit trees spread throughout the Americas while Native American corn, potatoes, and beans enriched the European diet
- The most catastrophic result of this exchange was the exposure of Native Americans to European diseases that resulted in the massive decline of Native American populations.



- In 1519, Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortez conquered the Aztec city of Tenochitlan with only 600 Spanish soldiers
- 200,000 Indigenous warriors from tribes opposed to the Aztec who joined Cortez's attack and the use of mounted Spanish soldiers with guns contributed to Cortez's success, but equally if not more lethal in helping the Spanish were the diseases they carried, including *variolus major* (smallpox) which spread through the saliva droplets of an infected individual
- 40% of the Indigenous population in Mexico died of smallpox within a year; other European diseases followed, including typhus, measles and influenza



Impact of European diseases, cont.

- These diseases had been unknown to Native Americans because North America had been biologically isolated from Europe until Europeans crossed the Atlantic Ocean
- Diseases like smallpox had been circulating for centuries in Europe; many of those who weren't killed by the disease developed antibodies to it which helped them survive subsequent outbreaks; smallpox became endemic (occurred frequently) in densely-populated European cities like London, where it reappeared frequently between 1675 and 1740; Europeans continued to die of it but not at the high rate experienced by Native Americans
- Lacking smallpox antibodies, Indigenous peoples of the Americas died in great numbers; historians have estimated that as many as 90% of those infected perished from the disease throughout the Americas; entire families and villages were killed, along with their leaders, which weakened social structures and brought trade and political life to a standstill

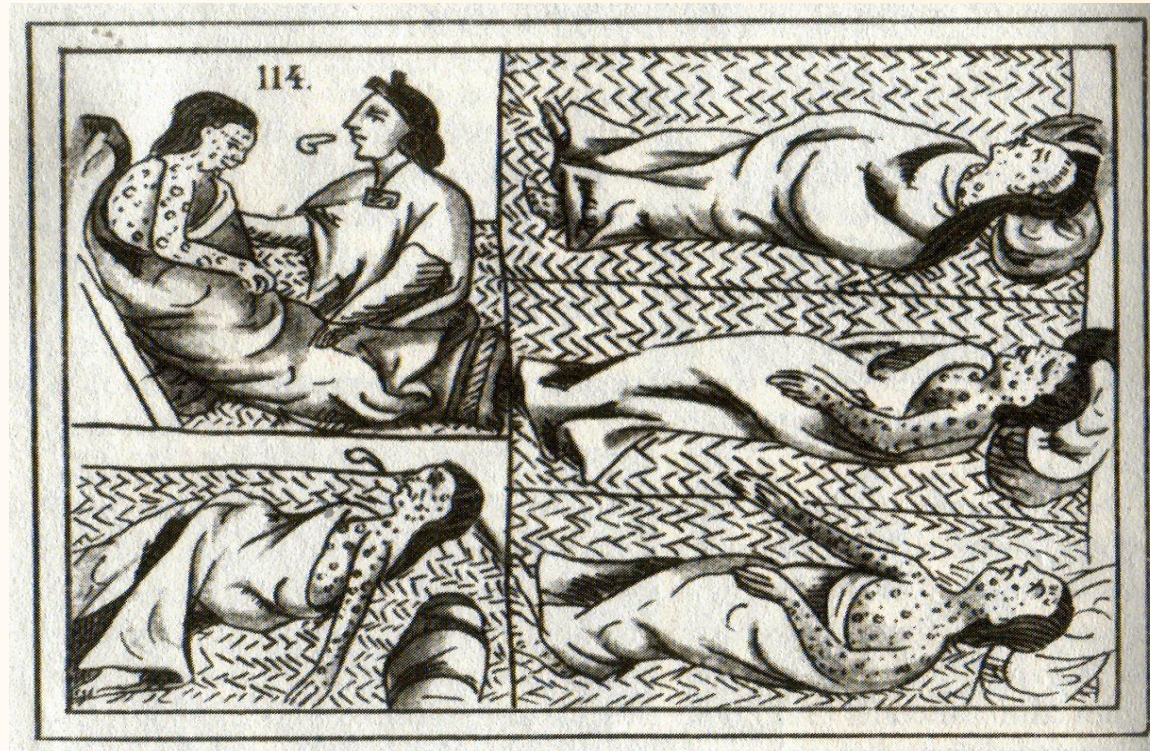


Indigenous and European observations on the ravages of smallpox

- “We were covered with agonizing sores from head to foot. The illness was so dreadful that no one could walk or move. The sick were so utterly helpless that they could only lie on their beds like corpses, unable to move their limbs or even their heads.” (Aztec observer, early 16th century)
- “The condition of this people was so lamentable and they fell down so generally of this disease as they were in the end not able to help one another, nor not to make a fire nor to fetch a little water to drink, nor any to bury the dead.” (William Bradford, Plymouth colony, New England, 1634)



Smallpox among the Aztec, from *General History of the Things of New Spain* (Florentine Codex), Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, 1577



Observations of early Europeans and Indigenous peoples on smallpox

- In Roanoke, Virginia in the late sixteenth century, Thomas Hariot recorded that local Indigenous peoples believed smallpox “was the work of God through our (European) means, and that we by him might kill and slay whom we would without weapons.”
- The Wendat living in Quebec were convinced the French were the cause of the disease, calling them the “greatest sorcerers on earth,” because everywhere the Jesuits (French Roman Catholic missionaries) went, Wendat died in droves while the Jesuit managed to survive.



Indigenous observations on smallpox, cont.

- “The great Indian doctors themselves were taken sick and died. Lodge after lodge was totally vacated—nothing but the dead bodies lying here and there in their lodges—entire families being swept off with the ravages of this terrible disease. . . . It is generally believed among the Indians of Arbre Croche (Harbor Springs, Michigan) that this wholesale murder of the Ottawas by this terrible disease sent by the British people was actuated through hatred” (tribal oral history of smallpox in the eighteenth century, Andrew Blackbird, Odawa leader, 1887)



Observations of early Europeans on the impact of smallpox on Indigenous peoples

- 17th century New England colonists believed God was punishing Indigenous people for being non-Christians with disease while at the same time clearing them from the land so Europeans (who perceived themselves to be morally superior) could take over
- In New England in 1633, William Bradford wrote that “It pleased God to visit these Indians with a great sickness” and that because of this, “God hath hereby cleared our title to this place.”
- Over a hundred years later at Fort Pitt (Pittsburgh) in 1763, the British would attempt to break Native American resistance during Pontiac’s War by infecting them with smallpox; unwashed blankets acquired by trader William Trent from the local smallpox hospital were given to Lenni Lenape (Delaware) leaders; Trent wrote that he hoped the blankets would “have the desired effect”; this incident and evidence of subsequent plans recorded in British imperial archives to deliberately infect Indigenous peoples with smallpox demonstrate that the British were engaging in biological warfare



European-Indigenous trade and the spread of smallpox

- Extensive trading networks that had linked ancient places like Cahokia to locations as far east as the Atlantic Ocean had been in existence before Europeans arrived
- Europeans used these networks to travel into the continental interior and conduct commerce as part of the fur trade, bringing diseases with them
- Several waves of smallpox throughout the eighteenth century spread into the interior from eastern locations such as Boston, Philadelphia and Montreal

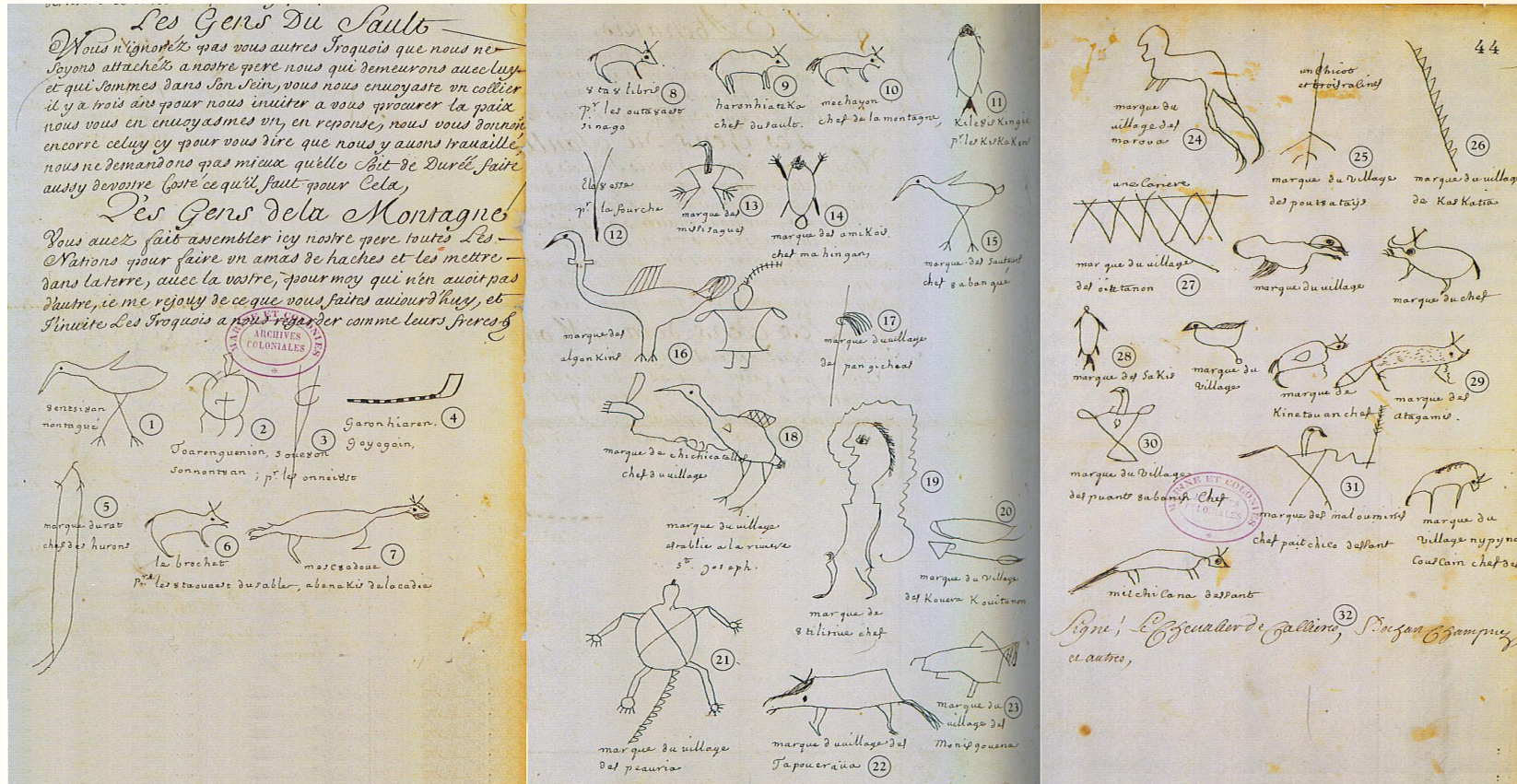


European-Indigenous trade and the spread of smallpox, cont.

- In the summer of 1701, Indigenous leaders representing hundreds of Great Lakes nations met with French government officials in Montreal to end largescale war and restore peace
- During the course of the meetings, a number of the Indigenous leaders fell ill from smallpox, some dying in Montreal, while others unknowingly transported the disease to their communities, perishing upon their return to their nations and infecting their communities
- Indigenous diplomats Kondiaronk (Wendat) and Chichicatalo (Myaamia) died in the course of or shortly after the 1701 meetings



Treaty of Peace of 1701, showing signatures (known as clan totems) of Great Lakes Indigenous diplomats (National Archives of Canada)



Treaty of Peace of 1701, showing signatures (known as clan totems) of Great Lakes Indigenous diplomats (National Archives of Canada)

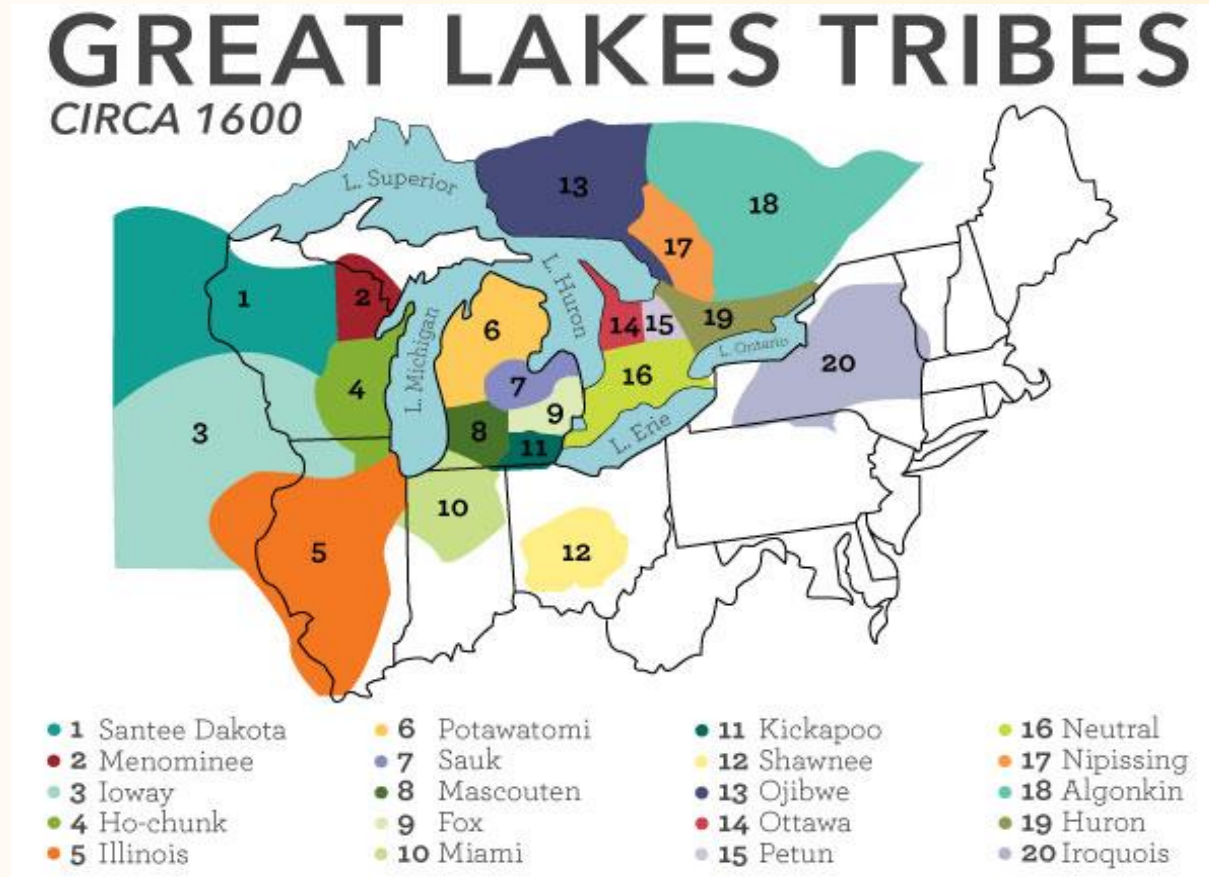
Signature (clan totem) of Myaamia leader Chichicatalo



Signature (clan totem) of Wendat leader Kondiaronk, called The Rat by the French



Great Lakes Tribes circa 1600, (Milwaukee Public Museum, <http://www.mpm.edu/content/wirp/ICW-21>)



European-Indigenous trade and the spread of smallpox, cont.

- Although difficult to pinpoint a point of origin, a subsequent wave of smallpox that would devastate the Great Lakes in 1732-1733 likely arrived in North America on the eastern seaboard in busy port cities such as Boston or Philadelphia in 1731
- From these seaboard towns, trade spread the disease west to other busy locations of commerce such as Albany and Oswego in New York
- There was a brisk and sometimes illegal trade between English Albany and French Canada (it was illegal if France and England happened to be at war) which caused smallpox to spread to Quebec and Montreal
- the disease took many French lives; 1,700 died and 2,000 were sick with smallpox at one time in the hospitals of Quebec during this outbreak; the number of Indigenous deaths in communities outside Montreal, including the Mohawk enclave of Kahnawake, would have been even higher



European-Indigenous trade and the spread of smallpox, cont.

- From Montreal, smallpox spread further inland to pivotal centers of trade and settlement like Detroit, which was located where the waters of the Great Lakes system narrowed
- At Detroit, the Roman Catholic church of Saint Anne recorded several burials of individuals who died of smallpox (called *picotte* in French) in October and November of 1732; Waapankihkwa (known to the French as Marguerite Ouabankikoué), a Myaamia woman married to a French trader died in October and one month later, her half French-half Myaamia daughter would also die, along with her Indigenous slave named Antoine



European-Indigenous trade and the spread of smallpox, cont.

- Smallpox was taken further inland along the series of rivers to Myaamionki, the Myaamia homelands, first at Kiihkayonki (present-day Fort Wayne, Indiana) and then further west and south
- 300 Myaamia and related Ojibwa and Piankeshaw persons were killed by this epidemic
- Local French officers erroneously attributed the deaths to poisoned brandy that had come from the English at New York; their remarks demonstrate instead the path of the pathogen from the east



European-Indigenous trade and the spread of smallpox, cont.

- Over the next two years, the disease spread to the Illinois Country and north to Lake Superior and Hudson Bay
- There would be subsequent waves of smallpox that devastated Great Lakes Indigenous communities throughout the eighteenth century, including during the years 1750-1752
- In 1752, another powerful Myaamia *akimaa* (leader) called Wisekaukautshe and known to the French as Pied Froid (Cold Foot) and his son died of smallpox; the death of this French-allied leader had a disastrous effect as the French imperial presence in the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley was increasingly threatened by the British



Additional Reading

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- Alfred W. Crosby. *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. Praeger Publishers (1972, 2003)
- Gregory Dowd. *Groundless : Rumors, Legends, and Hoaxes on the Early American Frontier*. Johns Hopkins UP (2015)
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Additional Reading, cont.

- John J. Heagerty. *Four Centuries of Medical History in Canada and a Sketch of the Medical History of Newfoundland*. MacMillan Co. (1928)
- Donald R. Hopkins. *The Greatest Killer: Smallpox in History*. University of Chicago Press (2002)
- Karen Marrero. *Detroit's Hidden Channels: The Power of French-Indigenous Families in the Eighteenth Century*. Michigan State University Press (2020)
- Christian W. McMillen. *Pandemics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press (2016)



Additional Reading, cont.

- Joseph L. Peyser. "It Was Not Smallpox: The Miami Deaths of 1732 Reexamined." *Indiana Magazine of History*. (June, 1985) LXXXI, 159-169.
- P. Ranlet. "The British, the Indians, and smallpox: what actually happened at Fort Pitt in 1763?". *Pennsylvania History*. (2000) 67:3, 427-41
- Ian Kenneth Steele. *The English Atlantic, 1675-1740: An Exploration of Communication and Community*. Oxford University Press (1986)



Additional Reading, cont.

- Richard White. *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. Cambridge University Press (1991, 2011)

