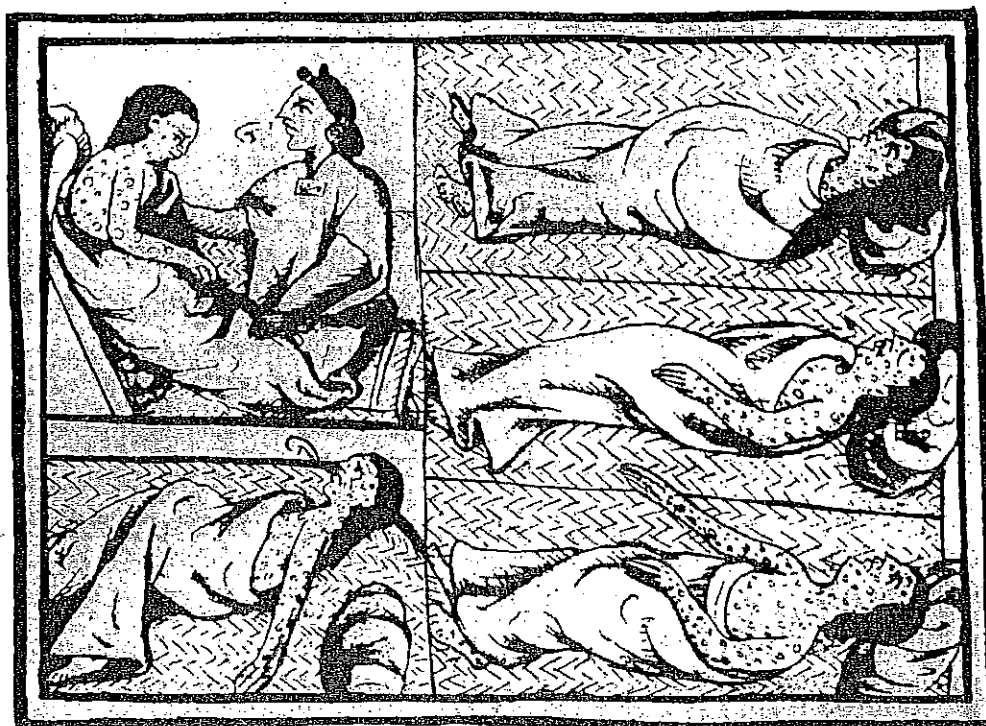


In 1617, just before the Pilgrims landed, the process started in southern New England. For decades, British and French fishermen had fished off the Massachusetts coast. After filling their hulls with cod, they would go ashore to lay in firewood and fresh water and perhaps capture a few Indians to sell into slavery in Europe. It is likely that these fishermen transmitted some illness to the people they met.²¹ The plague that ensued made the Black Death pale by comparison. Some historians think the disease was the bubonic plague; others suggest that it was viral hepatitis, smallpox, chicken pox, or influenza.

Within three years the plague wiped out between 90 percent and 96



Absent any illustrations of the epidemics in New England, these Aztec drawings depicting smallpox, coupled with the words of William Bradford, convey something of the horror. "A sorer disease cannot befall [the Indians], they fear it more than the plague. For usually they that have this disease have them in abundance, and for want of bedding and linen and other helps they fall into a lamentable condition as they lie on their hard mats, the pox breaking and mattering and running one into another, their skin cleaving by reason thereof to the mats they lie on. When they turn them, a whole side will flay off at once as it were, and they will be all of a gore blood, most fearful to behold. And then being very sore, what with cold and other distempers, they die like rotten sheep." (Quoted in Simpson, *Invisible Armies*, 8.) Textbooks never display such sympathy for the Indians; at best they give only the Tonto characters (here Squanto, later Sacagawea) individuality and agency.

percent of the inhabitants of coastal New England. The Indian societies lay devastated. Only "the twentieth person is scarce left alive," wrote Robert Cushman, a British eyewitness, recording a death rate unknown in all previous human experience.²² Unable to cope with so many corpses, the survivors abandoned their villages and fled, often to a neighboring tribe. Because they carried the infestation with them, Indians died who had never encountered a white person. Howard Simpson describes what the Pilgrims saw: "Villages lay in ruins because there was no one to tend them. The ground was strewn with the skulls and the bones of thousands of Indians who had died and none was left to bury them."²³

During the next fifteen years, additional epidemics, most of which we know to have been smallpox, struck repeatedly. European Americans also contracted smallpox and the other maladies, to be sure, but they usually recovered, including, in a later century, the "heavily pockmarked George Washington." Native Americans usually died. The impact of the epidemics on the two cultures was profound. The English Separatists, already seeing their lives as part of a divinely inspired morality play, found it easy to infer that God was on their side. John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, called the plague "miraculous." In 1634 he wrote to a friend in England: "But for the natives in these parts, God hath so pursued them, as for 300 miles space the greatest part of them are swept away by the smallpox which still continues among them. So as God hath thereby cleared our title to this place, those who remain in these parts, being in all not 50, have put themselves under our protection . . ." ²⁴ God the Original Real Estate Agent!

Many Indians likewise inferred that their god had abandoned them. Robert Cushman reported that "those that are left, have their courage much abated, and their countenance is dejected, and they seem as a people affrighted." After a smallpox epidemic the Cherokee "despaired so much that they lost confidence in their gods and the priests destroyed the sacred objects of the tribe."²⁵ After all, neither Indians nor Pilgrims had access to the germ theory of disease. Indian healers could supply no cure; their medicines and herbs offered no relief. Their religion provided no explanation. That of the whites did. Like the Europeans three centuries before them, many Indians surrendered to alcohol, converted to Christianity, or simply killed themselves.²⁶

These epidemics probably constituted the most important geopolitical event of the early seventeenth century. Their net result was that the British, for their first fifty years in New England, would face no real Indian challenge. Indeed, the plague helped prompt the legendarily warm reception Plymouth enjoyed from the Wampanoags. Massasoit,

he Wampanoag leader, was eager to ally with the Pilgrims because the plague had so weakened his villages that he feared the Narragansetts to the west.²⁷ When a land conflict did develop between new settlers and old at Saugus in 1631, "God ended the controversy by sending the small pox amongst the Indians," in the words of the Puritan minister Increase Mather. "Whole towns of them were swept away, in some of them not so much as one Soul escaping the Destruction."²⁸ By the time the Indian populations of New England had replenished themselves to some degree, it was too late to expel the intruders.