In preparation for the symposium on *Plagues, Pandemics, and Outbreaks of Disease in History*, we invite participants to read these summaries to facilitate questions, discussions, and exchange of ideas.

**Times of Plague**  
**Hannah Marcus, Harvard University**

As I have been writing about past and present epidemics I have noticed that I repeatedly use the phrase “times of plague.” In one sense, this choice is minor, a reflexive translation from the Italian expression *tempi di peste*, often found in my primary sources. But I have begun to wonder if this phrase itself contains an important lesson that historians can offer during this extended pandemic moment: the importance of understanding individual events within long timescales.

In medieval and early modern Europe, outbreaks of plague predictably triggered economic catastrophes. Public health measures, such as maintaining hospitals or quarantine houses, entailed huge expenses. Quarantines— as we have recently relearned first-hand— halted commerce and travel, leading to the local collapse of entire industries. There were also huge profit losses when trade goods from infected regions were burned. We know now that textiles themselves did not spread plague, but the fleas and rats traveling with these goods certainly did. Some cities, like Venice, were unable to provide sufficient food for their populations without trade, and quarantines led to mass starvation in addition to deaths from disease. A tragic account of Venice’s 1576 plague by the poet Borgaruccio Borgarucci claimed that as many people died of hunger in that year as from disease. The death totals for Venice in 1576-77 were greater than 50,000—a third of the city’s total population. As always, the working class and poor suffered the economic consequences of disease most severely.

Some economic historians have pointed out that the portion of European society that survived the Black Death did end up enjoying an improved standard of living. Wages increased, as did social mobility. However, we also know that whole towns disappeared after the Black Death, and new research has shown that the ecology along the Nile Delta was fundamentally altered when the plague killed vast numbers of the agricultural laborers who had maintained the region’s irrigation systems for millennia.

These changes were epochal. Over the course of centuries the Mediterranean world had to adjust to new patterns of life, travel, and commerce, which in some areas included small outbreaks of plague every few years and devastating epidemics every few decades. In our current era of global transit and ever-increasing population, it seems likely that regular outbreaks of new diseases will become a feature of our human experience. As in the past, we know that this current crisis will take a disproportionate toll on the health and economic standing of the poor, the marginalized, the disabled, and the elderly members of our communities. Clearly, it already has.

As a historian, it strikes me that through this pandemic, the world is entering a new era. We are living in a moment of rapid transition framed by a global crisis, and we need to bring the historian’s sense of time—decades or even centuries, not days—to the decisions we make now for our collective future. This moment of transition is an opportunity to face the past and the future. We are living in a time of plague. And COVID-19 has shown us categorically that we no longer have the luxury of indulging in thinking about our political and economic systems solely in the short term.

**Chaos and Order in Times of Plague**  
**Colin Rose, Brock University**

Historians are obviously interested in epidemics and pandemics. As disruptions to societies’ ordinary processes, episodes of mass illness and other natural, or human, disasters offer the chance to test the stability and weaknesses of communities, organizations and institutions. For much of the last few generations of historiography, historical focus has been on “collapsology,” to borrow a term from Lee Mordechai and Merle Eisenberg. In their recent piece in *Past and Present* they note that academic
consensus around the Justinianic plagues is driven by interest in the momentous and catastrophic, paralleling a broader cultural moment in which disaster and apocalypticism loom large in film and fiction.\textsuperscript{1} The result, not just for the Justinianic plagues but for the early modern bubonic plagues and smallpox, is a wide knowledge of their disordering and destructive impact and assumptions that these were momentous events in the history of societies. Indeed, I made the 1630-31 outbreak of bubonic plague the central character in my recent book about a rise in homicide rates in north Italy in the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{2}

That a plague disrupts and incurs major shifts is doubtless true. Ruth Mackay has also pointed out recently that plague was part and parcel of early modern life, and that societies expected it, had practiced protocols for it, and didn’t dwell on it overly in their collective memories.\textsuperscript{3} Despite mounting death tolls, mass starvation and a breakdown of commercial and communication networks, life went on. Taxes still needed collecting, even if at reduced rates; walls needed to be maintained; people needed to be fed; families needed comfort and the dead needed burying. Even as the world turned upside down people worked hard to stay on their feet.

It’s easy to read historical parallels between past outbreaks of disease and their reverberations, and our modern pandemic and its effects on our lives. That’s not necessarily a bad path to follow. We are historians in order to understand the present through the past. But, in many ways, in our understanding of both past and present we see what we seek. If we generally understand our world to be well-ordered, stable, and just, we will see stabilizing elements at work during unstable moments. If we see chaos lurking beneath superficial order, we will watch its eruptions with fear and uncertainty. Both these perspectives may be defensible. It is, perhaps, in the eye, mind and heart of the beholder.

I think what is true is that pandemics emphasize the general conditions of a society and lay bare their strengths and deficiencies. The historian’s gaze can only shape the object to a certain extent. Comparing the COVID-19 experiences of, say, Germany and the United States demonstrates fundamental differences in the social and political cultures in those places. Places where collectivism is the basis of political culture have, broadly, been more successful at “flattening the curve” than areas where individualism reigns. In pandemic times, we see the best and worst of societies in sharper focus than we normally would. Chaos and order clammer for our attention, and where we bestow it reveals much about our own perspectives and priorities as historians.


In the 1570s, a Nahua artist depicted the first smallpox epidemic that swept central Mexico in 1520, shortly after the arrival of Spaniards to the region. The image shows a female healer, or tiçitl, surrounded by five victims whose bodies are ravaged by pox. Most of her patients lie motionless, but the speech scroll in front of one person’s mouth conveys that s/he cries out in agony, and corresponds to the memory recorded in the text that “when they made a motion, they called out loudly.” A speech scroll in front of the tiçitl’s mouth shows that she consoles the sick people in her care, or perhaps she recites a healing incantation in an attempt to alleviate their pain and suffering. It is estimated that this first epidemic resulted in the death of half of the indigenous population of central Mexico. And it was not the last. Between 1519 and 1620, approximately ninety percent of the population died from newly introduced diseases to which the native population had no immunities; warfare, displacement, famine, and excessive labor demands further contributed to the devastating population loss.

Images and texts produced by indigenous artists and writers in the sixteenth century reveal social memories of disease and death in the first century of colonial rule. These sources used in conjunction with Spanish accounts shed light on the extent of the epidemics, the specific diseases that spread, and the ways that indigenous people and Europeans explained widespread illness. The study of disease, healing, and survival in cross-cultural contexts allows historians to consider a number of important issues, including how different societies understood the sources and spread of disease, who cared for the sick, and how. The topic illuminates other related themes, such as how cultural conceptions of the body and gender shaped healing practices, as well as connections between illness, death, and spirituality.

While many people died during these disease outbreaks, many others survived. In fact, indigenous people were still the significant majority of the population (approximately 60%) in Mexico when colonial rule ended in 1821. Thus the study of epidemics and other destructive conditions also

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provide an opportunity to examine survival and cultural resilience, themes that are particularly important in Native American and Indigenous studies.

In my own work, I have found that the flexible nature of the indigenous family and household, a sense of shared responsibility, and collective efforts were central to survival. As we adjust to the new realities of our own Covid-19 crisis, studying how people in other times, places, and cultures have coped with high mortality rates and social disruptions reveal ways of living through upheaval.

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