**Demographic Catastrophe — What Happened to the Native Population After 1492?**

Elements of the Columbian Exchange enriched both sides of the Atlantic; in other ways, however, the exchange proved catastrophic. The transplanting of endemic childhood diseases, such as smallpox and measles, to the "virgin soil" of the New World remains one of the most devastating consequences of the Columbian Exchange. The demographic catastrophe in Central and South America was not due entirely to disease, although disease certainly played a role in the dramatic decline in the Indian population. Disease epidemics disrupted native societies, brought about changes in political dynasties, and gave the Christian religion a foothold among native populations decimated by disease and so questioning the power of their gods.

The pattern of European-induced disease epidemics repeated itself in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the French and English began establishing colonies in North America. Indians in the area of Hudson's Bay in northern Canada slaughtered the local beaver population in part because their religious beliefs led them to blame beaver for a spate of new illnesses. The Indians of Massachusetts Bay suffered from a smallpox epidemic that decimated the population in 1618, just two years before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock. (Trading ships were most likely responsible for spreading the disease before the English established a permanent settlement.)

Europeans brought their diseases to the New World, but the Spaniards also returned with a new disease of their own, along with gold, silver, and exotic plants. Although some debate still surrounds the origins of syphilis, evidence exists to suggest that syphilis remained unknown in Europe before 1493, when Columbus returned from his first trip across the Atlantic. Syphilis, a venereal disease, spreads through sexual intercourse. Ulrich von Hutten wrote one of the first descriptions of syphilis to appear in a European medical text. His account described the sharp, dark green (no doubt a sign of infection) boils, similar to acorns, covering the body. The odor of the boils was so putrid that those who smelled them thought they had been infected. Von Hutton also reported that the pain from the pustules was so great that patients believed they were lying in fire. Unlike the disease we know today, sixteenth-century syphilis did not lie dormant for many years, only to reemerge as a killer. In the sixteenth-century, those who contracted syphilis died quickly.

SOURCE: Digital History Reader http://www.dhr.history.vt.edu/modules/us/mod01\_pop/conclusion.html