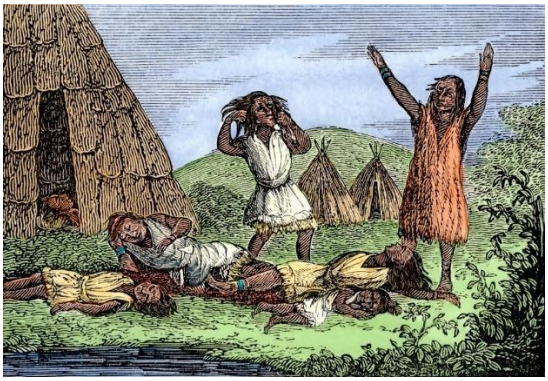
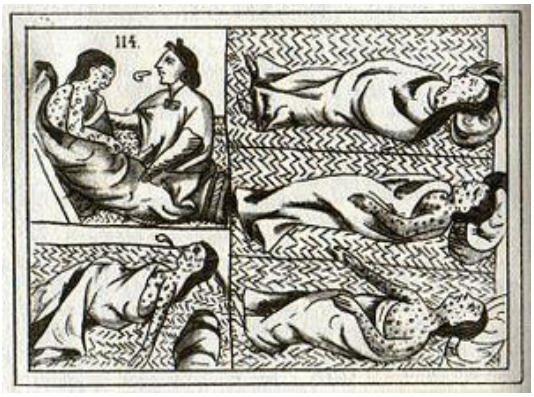
The Great Dying and the Little Ice Age

When the Western European nations, especially Spain were conquering the New World, they created a **demographic collapse** of Native American societies, namely the **Great Dying**. It is believed that the pre-Columbian population of the New World was between 60 to 80 million. The two largest areas of population were the Aztec and Incan empires. Due to these civilizations being isolated, their immune systems could not combat the Western European spread of diseases such as smallpox, measles, typhus, bubonic plague, and influenza. Later malaria and yellow fever, brought to the region because of the African slave trade, was going to also be deadly to the Native Americans.

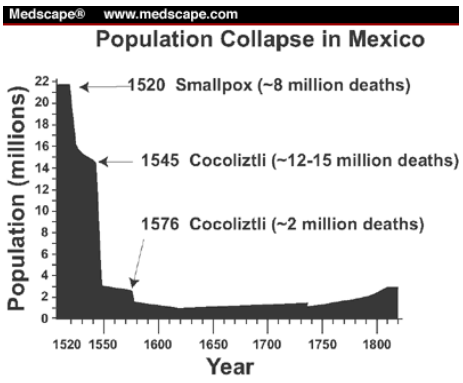




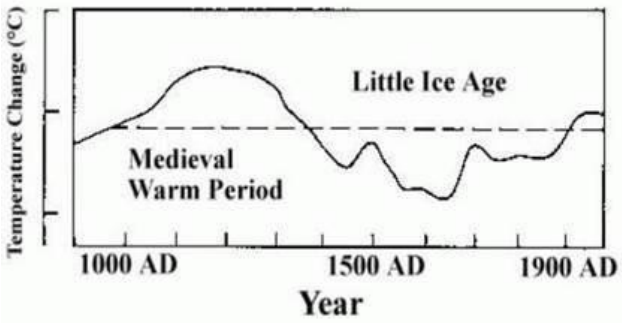
- Many areas lost 90% of their population.
- The people of the Caribbean Islands practically vanished within 50 years of Columbus's arrival.
- Central Mexico before Columbus had a population of 10 to 20 million.
- After the Spanish conquest, by 1650, it had decreased to 1 million.
- Many died of starvation as they were too weak to prepare and eat food.

Similar outbreaks were seen in North America but the numbers in this region were not as great. The Dutch, in New Amsterdam, reported an outbreak of smallpox in 1656. Farther north, in the Plymouth colony in New England, Governor William Bradford recorded that their outbreak was the "good hand of God" that was "sweeping away multitudes of the natives." It would take until the late 17th century for the populations of Native Americans to recover, but nowhere near the size as they were before.

The **cocoliztli** epidemic or the great pestilence is a term given to millions of deaths in the territory of New Spain in present-day Mexico in the 16th century attributed to one or more illnesses collectively called **cocoliztli**, a mysterious illness characterized by high fevers and bleeding.



The **Little Ice Age** was a period from the 13th to the 19th centuries. It was mostly seen in the Northern Hemisphere. It was a time of unusually low temperatures, the causes of which are not really known. Some scientists believe that there was little sunspot activity; some credit it to volcanic activity with ash and gases blanketing the sunlight. However, more recently, some scientists have linked the Little Ice Age to the demographic collapse in the Americas.



The Great Dying caused farmland and slash-and-burn farming to cease. This lead to wild plant life taking over these lands. These "weeds" took large amounts of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere, (a greenhouse gas), which created global cooling.

No matter what theory, the Little Ice Age led to shorter growing periods and harsh weather conditions that directly affected food production across the planet.

The peak of the Little Ice Age was in the 17th century and today scholars call this time period the **General Crisis**. China, Europe and North America saw record cold winters. Areas near the equator, the tropics and parts of the Southern Hemisphere, saw vast temperatures changes and irregular rainfall. It is believed that the Sahara Desert grew rapidly during this era. Wet, cold summers and severe droughts destroyed many of the crops in both Europe and China. The domino effect caused great amounts of stress on societies. Food prices skyrocketed due to shortages. Due to poor food intake, diseases quickly spread due to malnutrition. Warfare was common in Europe. The effects on the dynasty cycle of the Ming Dynasty caused its collapse and the Mughal Empire of India saw a civil war.

The Little Ice Age came to an end in the 18th century when more favorable weather patterns took hold.

Climate has played a major role in shaping human history. The Great Dying and the General Crisis were major events that could mean human activity could in fact be responsible for an ancient climate crisis.

Look carefully at the picture called
"The Great Frost" in London.

What famous location in London is this event taking place?

How does it depict the Little Ice Age?