Kole de Peralta on Lane, 'Pandemic in Potosí: Fear, Loathing, and Public Piety in a Colonial Mining Metropolis'

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Developed from a teaching module on disease in colonial Latin America, *Pandemic in Potosí: Fear, Loathing, and Public Piety in a Colonial Mining Metropolis* brings to life English translations of Spanish-language primary sources discussing the pandemic that raged through South America from 1717 to 1722. Potosí, then part of the viceroyalty of Peru (part of present-day Bolivia) witnessed devastating fatality rates that affected residents from all backgrounds and ethnicities, though not necessarily equally. Kris Lane introduces each primary source, noting the ecclesiastical, administrative, and medical responses to this event within the context of Enlightenment science and disease causation theories. Most of the featured colonial authors, as was typical for the era, combine religious and experiential evidence to examine the disease, its spread, and its victims.

*Pandemic in Potosí* is a recent addition to the Latin American Originals series published by Pennsylvania State University Press. The series is known for publishing high-caliber and extensively footnoted translations of novel primary sources related to the Spanish invasion and colonization of the Americas. This edition by Lane is organized into five chapters that cover the epidemic with five different primary sources from distinct geographical vantage points.

Chapter 1, “Pandemic in Potosí,” features the account by Bartolomé Arzáns de Orsúa y Vela from the hefty annal *History of the Imperial Villa of Potosí*. Arzáns captured Potosí at a critical moment of tension and precarity. The city faced economic decline owing in part to stagnating silver production and rising labor costs. In his account, Arzáns attributed the pandemic to sin and dedicated significant space to describing the moral failings of merchants and dishonorable women. Chapter 2, “Catastrophe in Cuzco,” highlights the work of the priest Diego de Esquivel y Navia who wrote a shorter but similar chronological history of Cuzco. His text chronicles how the plague spread from Buenos Aires to Cuzco, turning residents toward religion to curtail its wrath. Like in Potosí, city leaders and clergy members in Cuzco held processions and masses, hoping to “appease the Lord” (p. 94). The chapter captures several themes, including the application of the humoral and miasma theories and arrested funeral practices.

The last three chapters are notably shorter, comprising just a few pages from each selected author. Chapter 3, “Apocalypse in Arequipa,” recounts the writings of the priest Ventura Travada y Córdova
who saw the outbreak as one event in a series of tragedies and divine punishment. In particular, this excerpt details the physical ramifications of the disease, discussing how it afflicted individuals and the fraught road to recovery or to one’s final rest. Chapter 4, “Signs and Symptoms,” contains the writings of viceregal court physician Federick Bottoni, who wrote about the plague alongside other medical topics. He noted widespread sickness, stating that “the famous plague, which with equal tyranny has run a thousand and more leagues from Buenos Aires to the outskirts of Lima without letting up with its fatal cruelty but rather more furious, not only against the lives of the greater part of Indians, but also no longer spares the Spaniard, the mestizo, nor the Black, laying waste to the whole country” (p. 107). Finally, chapter 5, “The Cure,” captures a plague remedy sent by an anonymous physician from Cuzco to Lima. The letter promotes the use of lupine seed and contextualizes its effectiveness within contemporary medical theories.

The study builds on Lane’s earlier work, Potosí: The Silver City That Changed the World (2019), a study that captures the rise and decline of a silver boom town within a larger global context. Similarly, in Pandemic in Potosí, Lane connects the outbreak in South America to a pandemic in Marseille, France. The supposition is compelling, and the wider pandemic has also garnered recent scholarly interest.[1]

This is a collection that should be used in undergraduate and graduate classrooms but not without establishing a few parameters. For example, one could encourage students to read each source with specific questions in mind, such as: What were the identified causes of disease? Or what are some ideas about disease transmission in this period? Alternatively, students could select a research topic that interests them, such as social class, gender, religion, race, or medical theories, and read each source closely to analyze how it illuminates this issue. The results of either approach would work well in an (a)synchronous discussion or reflection paper. Lane’s work makes a significant contribution to the study of colonial Latin America for its timeliness with the COVID-19 pandemic and for the research opportunities it provides students who lack the language and paleographic skills needed to otherwise traverse these sources.

Note


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