



For All of Humanity: Mesoamerican and Colonial Medicine in Enlightenment Guatemala

Martha Few

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Smallpox, measles, and typhus. The scourges of lethal disease—as threatening in colonial Mesoamerica as in other parts of the world—called for widespread efforts and enlightened attitudes to battle the centuries-old killers of children and adults. Even before edicts from Spain crossed the Atlantic, colonial elites oftentimes embraced medical experimentation and reform in the name of the public good, believing it was their moral responsibility to apply medical innovations to cure and prevent disease. Their efforts included the first inoculations and vaccinations against smallpox, new strategies to protect families and communities from typhus and measles, and medical interventions into pregnancy and childbirth.

For All of Humanity examines the first public health campaigns in Guatemala, southern Mexico, and Central America in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Martha Few pays close attention to Indigenous Mesoamerican medical cultures, which not only influenced the shape and scope of those regional campaigns but also affected the broader New World medical cultures. The author reconstructs a rich and complex picture of the ways colonial doctors, surgeons, Indigenous healers, midwives, priests, government officials, and ordinary people engaged in efforts to prevent and control epidemic disease.

Few's analysis weaves medical history and ethnohistory with social, cultural, and intellectual history. She uses prescriptive texts, medical correspondence, and legal documents to provide rich ethnographic descriptions of Mesoamerican medical cultures, their practitioners, and regional pharmacopeia that came into contact with colonial medicine, at times violently, during public health campaigns.

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