I first met Sydney Brenner at a Symposium in the USA at the beginning of the 1950s. Short and broad of back, this character seldom went unnoticed. His squarish head, his blue eyes beneath blond brows, enormous, hirsute, shaggy, he resembled certain Dutch portraits – a real Franz Hals! But behind his slightly sarcastic manner and even devilish aspect, his smile revealed a child’s face. Born in South Africa, he had settled in Cambridge University’s Laboratory of Molecular Biology, already home of Fred Sanger, Max Perutz, John Kendrew and Francis Crick. A beautiful string of prima donnas into which Sydney fitted perfectly.

As soon as he appeared on the scene, Sydney took part in almost every advance in molecular biology. He was involved in the establishment of colinearity between gene and protein, in the demonstrations of the triplet nature of the genetic code, in the discovery of messenger RNA. And when he decided to switch from bacteria to metazoa, his intellect of its leading figure.

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**Time, History and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico**

*by Ross Hassig*

University of Texas Press, Austin, 2001. US$ 18.95 pbk (xviii + 220 pages)

Scientific discoveries and innovations in the ancient world have frequently occurred in the service of religion. Historians and archaeologists have shown that, from China to Peru, early breakthroughs in mathematics, astronomy, engineering and other fields were initially put to use for ceremonial rather than utilitarian purposes. One major intellectual achievement of the ancient peoples of Mesoamerica (the Mayas, Olmecs, Aztecs and other groups living in what is now Mexico and northern Central America) was the development of a series of calendars. Although some were ritual almanacs with little connection to the real world, other calendars were wonders of early empirical science. The Mesoamericans calculated the length of the solar year and the cycles of the moon, Venus and other planets with great accuracy. Scholars in the 19th and 20th centuries deciphered the workings of these calendars and showed how they were used to track rituals and cosmic time. In this book, ethnohistorian Ross Hassig argues that scholarly emphasis on the ritual aspects of the Aztec calendar and conceptions of time has obscured a more utilitarian function: imperial rulers manipulated the calendar for political purposes.

The Aztec year count, which recorded historical events, is the most significant calendar for Hassig’s argument. Each year is designated by a number (between one and thirteen) paired with one of four symbols (rabbit, reed, flint-knife and house). He describes the relationship of this 52-year cycle to other major Aztec calendars (the 260-day ritual cycle and the 365-day annual calendar) and compares it to the Maya long-count (a continuous, non-repeating, count of days). The Aztec year count starts again every 52 years, an event celebrated by the New Fire ceremony. Whereas past interpretations have stressed the cyclical nature of the year count (any given year – for example, 2-reed – recurs every 52 years), Hassig emphasizes its linear dimension. Aztec pictorial histories (for example, section one of the Codex Mendocino) depict the year signs laid out in linear fashion, often running for hundreds of years. However, Hassig views the New Fire ceremony more as a device that linked successive 52-year periods into a chain than as a ritual of cyclical completion, the traditional interpretation.

Each city-state dynasty in central Mexico maintained its own 52-year count to record the deeds of its rulers, and individual calendars were not necessarily synchronized. Hassig argues that as the Aztec kings forged their tributary empire they deliberately manipulated the year count for political purposes. They moved the New Fire celebration from its traditional date of 1-rabbit to 2-reed and forced their subjects to adopt a common year count and annual calendar, presumably to coordinate imperial tribute payment. The change in date of the New Fire ceremony is well documented but the timing and reasons for the switch have been much debated. Hassig states his views on
Of Aztec historical thought (in her 2000 book, she has published detailed analyses of the linear nature of calendars and conceptions of time and history, and that the notion of linear – as opposed to cyclical – history has been "ignored" by scholars. Contrary to this assertion, however, art historian Elizabeth Boone has published an alternative approach based on political economy, 'ideology-as-action,' in which religion and ideology determine behavior, and calendrical scholarship should focus on the internal workings of calendars and their symbolic aspects. Hassig proposes an alternative approach based on political economy, 'ideology-as-action,' in which religion and ideology justify, but do not determine, behavior. Studies of calendars should focus on their social and political uses, not their symbolic aspects. Hassig argues that this approach has not been applied to studies of Aztec calendars and conceptions of time and history, and that the notion of linear – as opposed to cyclical – history has been 'ignored' by scholars. Contrary to this assertion, however, art historian Elizabeth Boone has published detailed analyses of the linear nature of Aztec historical thought (in her 2000 book, Stories in Red and Black, and in articles back to 1992). As a materialist I am in wholehearted agreement with Hassig's overall goals and approach. This type of revisionist history, in which political explanations are applied to phenomena previously interpreted in particularistic and ideological terms, is welcome. Nevertheless, I am uncomfortable with many of Hassig's specific arguments, largely because I am unable to assess their strengths and weaknesses. In part this is owing to his style of scholarship. Hassig identifies an important and unresolved issue, summarizes what the primary historical sources say, discusses the pros and cons of alternative interpretations of the data, and then states his preference. His exposition sounds logical and convincing but because he does not cite the relevant secondary literature, one would never know that a given topic (e.g., leap years and calendar synchronization) is the subject of considerable published scholarship and debate among specialists, many of whom draw on data and methods not presented by Hassig. Michel Graulich and Anthony Aveni, for example, have made fundamental contributions to the topics covered by Hassig, but he does not cite the relevant publications. This failure does not make Hassig's arguments wrong, but the reader is prevented from evaluating them within the context of contemporary scholarship.

I am also disappointed by Hassig's treatment of archaeological data. He presents incorrect dates (which support his interpretations) for several key buildings, including the New Fire temple on Mount Huixachtocatl and the twin-temple pyramids of Tenayuca and Teopanzolco. Contrary to Hassig's assertions, these latter temples are dated quite firmly to the Early Aztec period (several centuries before the Aztec empire) and thus cannot possibly have had the imperial significance attributed to them by his model.

Time, History and Belief in Aztec and Colonial Mexico is an intriguing study with a fresh theoretical approach and many promising interpretations of Aztec history, time and calendars. However, to be assessed properly, Hassig's interpretations must be debated within the community of scholars working on these issues so that the strength of his arguments can be evaluated.

Michael E. Smith

Scourge: The Once and Future Threat of Smallpox

by Jonathan B. Tucker

Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001

The smallpox vaccine I received as a child left a small scar on my upper left biceps. Eventually, the scar faded away. So did my immunity to smallpox. Therein lies a serious problem.

Routine vaccinations against the smallpox virus ended two decades ago. The horrible disease had been eradicated worldwide, so why continue to vaccinate people? Today, there are 6 billion people on Earth, and all of us are susceptible to the smallpox virus. The natural disease is gone, but the virus lives on, locked away in freezers in the U.S. and Russia. What if it got out? What if someone let it out?

Jonathan Tucker, director of the Chemical and Biological Weapons Nonproliferation Program at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in California, lays out the history of smallpox and humanity in his latest book, Scourge: The Once and Future Threat of Smallpox. He recounts the battle to eliminate every single case of smallpox infection on earth, and the uncertain future of that vicious virus. By the time readers finish this book, they will likely be as worried as Tucker is. Smallpox is the viral sword of Damocles hanging over all our heads.

Some diseases are simple nuisances. Others are slow and insidious. Smallpox is acutely apocalyptic. The virus is highly contagious and highly lethal. Those who fail to kill outright are left disfigured or blind. And the bodies of the dead are as infectious as the dying. Centuries ago, this massive (for a virus), dumbbell-shaped microbe cut a genocidal swath through the New World when the conquistadors landed. Between 1492 and 1800, writes Tucker, the estimated native population of the Americas plunged from 72 million to 600,000. The Native Americans who had never been exposed to smallpox or measles or, later, to the yellow fever virus that arrived with African slaves. Primitive firearms and cheap whiskey may have helped Europeans to enter the Americas, but smallpox broke down the door.

The accidental discovery of a primitive form of smallpox vaccination (called variolation) in the late 18th century gave people a glimmer of hope that the disease could someday be controlled. Widespread vaccination began in the 19th century, and compulsory vaccination programs in the 20th century rid the Western world of regular outbreaks and deaths. In 1958, then Soviet deputy minister of health Viktor Zhdanov made the first formal proposal to eradicate smallpox. It was a reasonable plan. There were only a few remaining endemic countries, but smallpox-free countries were still spending time and money to vaccinate their citizens and guard their borders against infected travelers.

D.A. Henderson, a physician in the U.S. Public Health Service, was handed the assignment. ‘Suppose I refuse?’ he asked his boss. His only choices were to resign or move to Geneva, Switzerland, and run the Smallpox Eradication Unit. Fortunately, he chose Geneva.

Scourge is good history because it can be read as the history of one man and the forces