

# The Illness of Don Tristan de Luna: Leader of the First Settlements in Florida

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(excerpt from a more extensive study)

One of the main factors in the problems experienced by the 1559 Luna Settlement Expedition to Pensacola Bay and southwest Alabama concerned episodes of illness experienced by Don Tristán de Luna. He was Governor and Captain General of the expedition, and for over two years his illness came and went.

The first episode of the illness was experienced at the initial settlement at Pensacola Bay having occurred after a long voyage with many problems compounded by a hurricane that devastated the settlement and destroyed most of the food supply.

Luna's first bout with fevers and hallucinations appears to have been relatively overlooked by the members of the settlement as they rallied around their governor. Luna recovered and followed up with commands of decisiveness and leadership.

However, the symptoms of his illness continued to return on occasion during trying times for the expedition, especially when food was in short supply and expedition members were dying. There were calls for others to assume command, but Luna always seemed to make a timely recovery and assume control once more. But with each episode, Luna's physical recovery took longer and his mental abilities and decision making were more readily questioned by his subordinates, the religious, and eventually the settlers themselves. When Luna was eventually relieved of his command in April of 1561 by a new governor, it was said that Luna left the bay of Pensacola unusually "happy and content," perhaps during a period of regression of the disease?

It is certainly a stretch for a archeologist and a historian to attempt to diagnose an illness of a historic person from centuries ago. However, it is interesting to speculate on at least one possibility of the source of the malady that afflicted Don Tristan de Luna and directly affected the attempt to establish the first European colony in the interior in the current United States.

To build some semblance of a medical case for an explanation, we hypothesize that the disease might have been malaria. Both authors have known peoples afflicted by this malady and are very cognizant of its symptoms and long-term effects; but we consulted our internet medical mentors to test the hypothesis:

*Malaria is a disease caused by a parasite, transmitted by the bite of infected mosquitoes. Malaria produces recurrent attacks of chills and fever. Malaria kills an estimated 660,000 people each year. While the disease is uncommon in temperate climates, malaria is still prevalent in tropical and subtropical countries (Mayo Clinic) (<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/malaria/symptoms-causes/syc-20351184>).*

*With malaria, the patient develops a high fever, which comes and goes (E-Medicine Health) (<https://www.goodbyemalaria.com/news/things-you-need-to-know-about-malaria>).*

*Following the infective bite by the [Anopheles mosquito](#), a period of time (the "incubation period") goes by before the first symptoms appear. The incubation period in most cases varies from 7 to 30 days (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) (<https://www.cdc.gov/malaria/about/disease.html>).*

*These reports (on malaria) described a common prodrome of hallucinations, anxiety, crying, violence, agitation, and a dreamy and confusional state (Bio-Med Malarial Journal) (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4918116/>).*

Don Tristan de Luna made his New World home in the elevated Oaxaca Valley south of Mexico City. His military ventures took him to other areas of the highlands of Mexico and to what is today's American Southwest on the 1540 Coronado Expedition. These areas were, for the most part, free of mosquitoes, therefore, very little risk of malarial infection.

This mosquito-free environment of the highlands changed dramatically when Luna went on his fateful expedition to la Florida. The expedition marched from the highlands of central Mexico to the lowlands of the area of Vera Cruz. Much of the eastern coast of Mexico is comprised of lowland areas full of breeding environments for malaria carrying mosquitoes. The voyage to Pensacola Bay took many weeks through the Gulf of Mexico, until it reached the lowlands of the northwest Florida coast. Could it be that Luna contracted malaria along his extended voyage to or in Pensacola Bay?

The fact that the voyage of the Luna fleet to Pensacola Bay occurred in the hot and humid months of June, July and August, the height of the mosquito season, increases the likelihood of the "diagnosis" of the malady.

We will likely never know if Don Tristan de Luna's illness was due to a mosquito bite containing malarial bacteria but the possibility is intriguing. If malaria was the cause of Luna's, it would explain a lot of his behavior.

It would also be quite something that a mosquito changed the course of history.

