

The Explorers

The Ancient Civilizations

of Mexico: The Maya and the Aztec

Teacher's Guide



Grade Level: 6–8

Curriculum Focus: Social Studies

Lesson Duration: 3 class periods

Program Description

The Ancient Civilizations of Mexico: The Maya and the Aztec (17 min.) – Long before European explorers arrived in the New World, several great civilizations had already flourished there. The most advanced of these cultures, the Maya and Aztec empires, built great cities and developed agriculture, art, written language, trade networks, religion, astronomy, and other sciences. Their prominence ended with the Spanish conquests of their lands, but their cultural legacies endure today.

Discussion Questions

- Do you think the native people of Mexico and Central America had advanced civilizations before the arrival of European explorers?
 - Do you think they built cities or lived in temporary, nomadic camps?
 - Do you think they practiced agriculture – or did they hunt and gather their food?
 - Do you think they developed forms of mathematics, writing, or science?
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Lesson Plan

Student Objectives

- Identify the Maya and Aztec civilizations and examine the characteristics of their cultures.
- Analyze the Spanish influence on the survival of the Maya and Aztec cultures.
- Locate the ancient Maya and Aztec empires on the map and compare their borders with current national borders in the same region.
- Determine the periods during which the Maya and Aztec empires thrived and analyze their chronology in terms of what they achieved in culture, art, science, and technology compared with what other world civilizations had achieved by the same period of time.

Materials

- *The Ancient Civilizations of Mexico: The Maya and the Aztec* video
- Computer with Internet access
- Print resources about world geography, particularly about North America, Central America, and South America; print resources about the Aztec, the Maya, other pre-Columbian cultures, and the consequences on these cultures of the Spanish conquest; print resources about other ancient civilizations around the world
- A large world map
- Preprinted blank maps of Mexico and Central America (downloadable from the Internet); clear plastic overlay material of the same dimensions as the blank maps
- Paper, markers – including some suitable for use on the plastic overlays – pens, and other supplies for creating reports, maps, and time lines

Procedures

1. Before viewing the video, ask the students if they think the native people of Mexico and Central America had advanced civilizations before the arrival of European explorers. Do they think the native people built cities? Practiced agriculture? Created forms of mathematics, writing, or science? Why, or why not? Also ask students why they think the people of present-day Mexico speak Spanish instead of a Native American language.
2. View the video.
3. After viewing the video, lead a discussion about important issues covered in the presentation. Where is Mesoamerica? (Southern Mexico and northern Central America.) Where was the Maya empire? (The areas we now call southern Mexico, Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, Guatemala, Belize, and parts of Honduras and El Salvador.) Where was the Aztec empire? (Parts of Mexico and Central America.) Ask students to volunteer their answers and to indicate the areas on a large map or globe. What achievements of Maya and Aztec culture and technology were as advanced or even more advanced than those of Europe and other parts of the world at that time? (Agriculture, architecture, art, written language, trade networks, religion, astronomy, and other sciences.) How did the Aztec live before the arrival of European explorers? How did their lives change after the Europeans arrived?
4. Ask students to create a map of present-day Mexico and Central America (including current national borders) with a transparent overlay that illustrates the geography and borders of ancient Mesoamerica. The overlay should define the borders of the Maya and Aztec empires and include places of historical significance to each civilization. Lining up the overlay with the present-day map, the finished project should illustrate how the borders of the Maya and Aztec empires compare with modern national borders.

Students may begin their project research with the Web sites below, but encourage them to visit additional sites, as well as the library.



Blank and Outline Maps of Mexico and Central America

<http://geography.about.com/library/blank/blxcamerica.htm>

www.mapsofworld.com/mexico/mexico-outline-map.html

Maps of Present-Day Mexico and Central America

www.public.iastate.edu/~rjsalvad/scmfaq/images/map.gif

www.only-maps.com/mexico-central-america-map.jpg

<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~pyoung/imageESN.JPG>

Maps of the Maya and Aztec Empires

<http://dd058.k12.sd.us/maya.h2.gif>

www.caribbeanedu.com/Resources%5CMedia%5CPhotos%5CRegular%5CMiscellaneous%5Cmayans10.gif

www.ancientmexico.com/content/map/index.html

www.fsmitha.com/h3/map16-az.html

www-rohan.sdsu.edu/dept/sdsutrio/Aztec-Empire-Map.gif

www.freeinfosociety.com/images/history/aztecepire.jpg

5. Ask students to research and write a report about the effects of the Spanish conquest and colonization on the lives of the Aztec and other native people of Mesoamerica. Ask them to choose which facets of life their report will explore, but request that they consider some of these issues: everyday life, native culture, identity, language, religion, art, the physical form of their city, their system of trade, and their agriculture. How did the native people handle these facets of life before the Spanish arrived? In what ways were they forced to change these aspects of life under Spanish rule? What short-term and long-term consequences do they think these enforced changes had on the native people and their descendants?

Students may begin their project research with the Web sites below, but encourage them to visit additional sites, as well as the library.

Spanish Conquest

www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/prehistory/latinamerica/topics/spanish_conquest.html

History of the Aztec

www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?historyid=aa12

The Mexicas/Aztec

www.wsu.edu/~dee/CIVAMRCA/AZTECS.HTM

History of Mexico

www.jsri.msu.edu/museum/pubs/MexAmHist/chapter3.html



Spanish Conquest of Mexico

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_conquest_of_Mexico

6. Later in the week, have students create a comparative time line chart to show Mesoamerican cultural and scientific achievements compared to those of at least three other tribes or civilizations in other parts of the world during the same period of time. For example, the chart might show that, during a particular time period, the Maya developed their system of mathematics. It would also show what the ancient Romans, Chinese, and tribes of Britain (or other civilizations) achieved during that same time frame. Students will make a presentation to the class, highlighting what they consider the two most interesting time period comparisons in their time line project.

Students may begin their project research with the Web sites below, but encourage them to visit additional sites, as well as the library.

Various Cultural and National Timelines

www.google.com/search?hl=en&lr=&as_qdr=all&q=timeline+history+rome+OR+egypt+OR+greece+OR+britain+OR+renaissance+OR+medieval+OR+china+OR+chinese+OR+india+OR+spain+OR+roman+OR+japan&btnG=Search

Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- 3 points: Students clearly identified the Maya and Aztec civilizations and made a detailed examination of their characteristics and cultures; thoughtfully researched and analyzed the Spanish influence on the Maya and Aztec cultures and wrote a comprehensive report about the effects of Spanish conquest and colonization upon native people in Mesoamerica; accurately located the ancient Maya and Aztec empires on the map and created a map and overlay which insightfully compared their borders with current national borders in the region; determined the time periods during which the Maya and Aztec empires thrived and created a time line chart that correctly compared their achievements with those of other world civilizations during the same period of time; made an engaging presentation to the class, highlighting the two most interesting time period comparisons in their time line project.
- 2 points: Students adequately identified the Maya and Aztec civilizations and examined their characteristics and cultures; researched and analyzed the Spanish influence on the Maya and Aztec cultures and wrote an acceptable report about the effects of Spanish conquest and colonization upon native people in Mesoamerica; adequately located the ancient Maya and Aztec empires on the map and created a map and overlay which compared their borders with current national borders in the region; determined the time periods during which the Maya and Aztec empires thrived and created a time line chart that compared their achievements with those of other world civilizations during the same period of time; made an adequate presentation to the class, highlighting at least one interesting time period comparison in their time line project.
- 1 point: Students did not accurately identify the Maya and Aztec civilizations, nor did they adequately examine their characteristics and cultures; did not sufficiently research or analyze



the Spanish influence on the Maya and Aztec cultures and did not write an acceptable report about the effects of Spanish conquest and colonization upon native people in Mesoamerica; did not accurately locate the ancient Maya and Aztec empires on the map and created an unacceptable map and overlay comparing their borders with current national borders in the region; did not determine the time periods during which the Maya and Aztec empires thrived and created an inaccurate time line chart comparing their achievements with those of other world civilizations during the same period of time; made an inadequate presentation to the class and did not highlight any interesting time period comparison in their time line project.

Vocabulary

chinampas

Definition: Artificial islands in Lake Texcoco

Context: The Aztec grew food in lush gardens on the chinampas.

conquistadors

Definition: Conquerors, especially the 16th-century Spanish explorers who fought and defeated Native American civilizations of Mexico, Central America, or Peru

Context: The conquistadors established Mexico City, the capital of the huge colony of New Spain, on the ruins of Tenochtitlán.

maize

Definition: A grain domesticated from wild grasses in southern Mexico seven thousand years ago, which evolved into modern-day corn

Context: Ancient Mesoamericans ground maize into flour and used it to make tortillas, a mainstay of their diet.

Mesoamerica

Definition: The region of southern Mexico and northern Central America

Context: The advanced Maya and Aztec cultures thrived in Mesoamerica.

Quetzalcoatl

Definition: The plumed serpent god of the Aztecs

Context: The Aztec emperor feared that Cortés was actually Quetzalcoatl in disguise, coming to destroy the Aztec empire as a punishment for its practice of human sacrifice.

smallpox

Definition: A deadly disease of humans caused by a highly contagious virus

Context: In 1547, a massive epidemic of smallpox, brought to the New World by the Spaniards, swept across the Aztec empire.



Tenochtitlán

Definition: The capital city of Mexico's powerful Aztec Empire, located where Mexico City now stands

Context: Canals crisscrossed Tenochtitlán, providing the residents with transportation and irrigation.

Teotihuacáanos

Definition: A tribe of people who lived in the city-state of Teotihuacán located near today's Mexico City

Context: The Teotihuacáanos' culture greatly influenced the Maya.

Toltec

Definition: A militaristic tribe that established an empire in Mexico's central highlands in the 10th century

Context: The Toltec replaced the Maya as the dominant civilization in Mesoamerica.

voladores

Definition: Mexican performers of an ancient ceremony consisting of an airborne dance

Context: The voladores' airborne ritual originated during a period when severe drought gripped the Aztec empire.

Zapotec

Definition: An early Mesoamerican culture whose capital city, Monte Albán, lies in the present day Mexican state of Oaxaca

Context: Mayan writing and calendars show a strong Zapotec influence.

Academic Standards

National Council for the Social Studies

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching social studies. To view the standards online, go to <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/>.

This lesson plan addresses the following thematic standards:

- Culture
- Time, Continuity, and Change
- People, Places, and Environment
- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- Power, Authority, and Governance
- Production, Distribution, and Consumption

- Global Connections

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>.

This program addresses the following national standards:

- Geography – The World in Spatial Terms: Understands the characteristics and uses of maps, globes, and other geographic tools and technologies; Knows the location of places, geographic features, and patterns of the environment; Understands the characteristics and uses of spatial organization of Earth's surface.
- Geography – Places and Regions: Understands the physical and human characteristics of place; Understands the concept of regions; Understands that culture and experience influence people's perceptions of places and regions.
- Geography – Human Systems: Understands the nature, distribution and migration of human populations on Earth's surface; Understands the nature and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics; Understands the patterns and networks of economic interdependence on Earth's surface; Understands the patterns of human settlement and their causes; Understands the forces of cooperation and conflict that shape the divisions of Earth's surface.
- Geography – Uses of Geography: Understands how geography is used to interpret the past; Understands global development and environmental issues.
- History – World History: Era 1 – The Beginnings of Human Society: Understands the biological and cultural processes that shaped the earliest human communities; Understands the processes that contributed to the emergence of agricultural societies around the world.
- History – World History: Era 3 – Classical Traditions, Major Religions, and Giant Empires, 1000 BCE–300 CE: Understands technological and cultural innovation and change from 1000 to 600 BCE; Understands how early agrarian civilizations arose in Mesoamerica; Understands major global trends from 1000 BCE to 300 CE.
- History – World History: Era 4 – Expanding Zones of Exchange and Encounter, 300–1000 CE: Understands the rise of centers of civilization in Mesoamerica and Andean South America in the 1st millennium CE; Understands major global trends from 300 to 1000 CE.
- History – World History: Era 5 – Intensified Hemispheric Interactions C.E. 1000–1500: Understands the expansion of states and civilizations in the Americas between 1000 and 1500; Understands major global trends from C.E. 1000 to 1500.
- History – World History: Era 6 – Global Expansion and Encounter, 1450–1770: Understands how the transoceanic interlinking of all major regions of the world between 1450 and 1600 led to global transformations; Understands the economic, political, and cultural interrelations among peoples of Africa, Europe, and the Americas between 1500 and 1750; Understands major global trends from 1450 to 1770.

- Language Arts – Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.