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Document-Based Activities on Pre-Columbian American Empires: The Maya, Aztec, and Inca

Using Primary Sources and the Internet

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DOCUMENT-BASED ACTIVITIES ON PRE-COLUMBIAN EMPIRES IN THE AMERICAS: THE MAYA, AZTEC, AND INCA TEACHER INTRODUCTION

Description:

This unit addresses the culture, politics, and achievements of pre-Columbian Empires in the Americas. Through study of ancient ruins and descriptions of daily life and politics, students will gain an understanding of how native peoples of the Americas lived in the period before the arrival of the Europeans. For example, students will study the complexity of Maya, Aztec, and Incan urban culture, and the sophisticated organization of Aztec and Incan economics. They will also read primary sources that describe contact between Native Americans and Europeans, and the betrayal by Europeans of Native American trust.

Unit Objectives:

Knowledge: students will

- summarize and describe characteristics of Maya, Aztec, and Incan civilizations
- explain why these societies may have developed distinctive forms of organization, including occupational specialization and political structures
- compare and contrast aspects of Maya, Aztec, and Incan civilization, including urban development and religious beliefs

Skills: students will

- read and summarize primary sources, including images of ancient ruins, mythological texts, and correspondence
- analyze historical evidence in order to draw conclusions about the organization and achievements of ancient civilizations
- form hypotheses and substantiate opinions about historical events and processes, supporting their work with evidence drawn from primary sources.

Prior Knowledge Required:

Students should be familiar with the basic geography of Mexico, Central America, and South America, including climate and the locations of lowlands and highlands. They should have studied a basic history of native peoples of pre-Columbian America, including a chronology of the rise of the Maya, Aztec, and Incan civilizations and the geography of their civilizations (on the Yucatan Peninsula, in central Mexico, and Peru/Andean South America, respectively). They should be aware of the fact that when Europeans arrived in the Americas, they brought new technologies (guns and horses), a particular set of cultural beliefs (the superiority of European civilization and Christianity), and they were motivated to conquer the natives in order to acquire territory and wealth.

Lesson Format:

Each lesson consists of two parts: a teacher's page and a student handout or worksheet. The teacher's page contains an overview, objectives, materials (including Web addresses), directions, discussion questions, and one or more extension activities. Each student handout contains an introduction, directions, Web addresses, and questions to be answered about the source.

Assessment:

Most of the questions on the student worksheets require short-answer responses of one to three sentences; some will require longer responses of a paragraph or two. You may wish to grade the culminating activity either with a rubric or with normal letter grades. A suggested rubric is included in the Appendix.

Additional Sources:

The Appendix contains answer keys, evaluation rubrics, an annotated list of Web sites on Pre-Columbian American empires, and supplementary materials available from www.socialstudies.com.

Architecture and Urban Development Teacher Page

Overview:

The Maya, Aztec, and Inca all accomplished extraordinary feats of architecture and engineering. Despite the fact that they did not utilize the wheel or metal tools, these pre-Columbian peoples created monumental architecture that rivals that of the Old World. At Tikal, a Mayan site in the heart of the Yucatan peninsula, hundreds of gigantic buildings and plazas rise up out of the jungle. At Tenochtitlàn, the site of modern-day Mexico City, the Aztec built an island city connected to the mainland through complex networks of causeways and canals. At Machu Picchu, the Incas built a mountaintop complex whose purpose remains a mystery today. In this lesson students will study images of these sites and form hypotheses about how and why the Maya, Aztec, and Incas accomplished these feats of engineering.

Objectives:

Students will:

- examine and describe images of Maya, Aztec, and Inca ruins
- form hypotheses about how the Maya, Aztec, and Incas might have built these sites
- draw conclusions about the architectural and engineering skills of pre-Columbian American peoples

Web Sites Used in this Lesson:

Tikal: North and Central Acropolis

http://mayaruins.com/tikal/Tikal_InnerMap.html

The Alonso Map of Tenochtitlàn

<http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/graphics/tenuxtltitan.jpg>

http://geoimages.berkeley.edu/geoimages/Alonso_Map/NaviAlonso/alonso.html

Foundation of Tenochtitlàn

<http://web.archive.org/web/20041114080055/www.umich.edu/~proflame/texts/mirror/fundaron.html>

Images of Machu Picchu

<http://www.sfu.ca/archaeology/museum/laarch/tour/machu/mp1a.jpg>

<http://www.sfu.ca/archaeology/museum/laarch/tour/machu/mp2a.jpg>

<http://www.sfu.ca/archaeology/museum/laarch/tour/machu/mp3a.jpg>

<http://www.sfu.ca/archaeology/museum/laarch/tour/machu/mp3b.jpg>

<http://www.sfu.ca/archaeology/museum/laarch/tour/machu/mp5.jpg>

<http://www.sfu.ca/archaeology/museum/laarch/tour/machu/mp4a.jpg>

Strategies:

Introduce the lesson with a discussion of the significance of cities to both ancient and modern civilizations. Throughout history, cities have been centers of political power, religious power, and trade. They represent concentrations of population, and sophisticated levels of political, social, and economic organization that are the foundation of any civilization. Finally, when people concentrate in cities, there are common problems that all civilizations must overcome, including the provision of food and fresh water, and the maintenance of the social order.

Inform students that they will be studying images of ancient American cities. As they look at the images and answer the questions, they should reflect on how these archaeological ruins illustrate the level of urban development achieved by ancient Americans.

Wrap-Up:

Have students compare and contrast the Maya, Aztec, and Incan cities they studied in the lesson. A Venn diagram, T-chart, or other graphic organizer could be used to structure their observations. Students might observe that the cities are similar in the types of building materials, in the complexity of the overall structures, and in particular features such as pyramid or stepped design. They differ in that Tikal is a large, jungle city, Tenochtitlàn was an island city, and Machu Picchu is a mountain complex. Students should question whether or not Machu Picchu was a city like Tikal or Tenochtitlàn, in that it seems to lack both ordinary residences and market plazas. In fact, the actual function of Machu Picchu is still a historical mystery.

Extension Activities:

1. Students can gain more detailed knowledge of Aztec urban design through study of the Cortés letter at: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1520cortes.html>. They should scroll down to the paragraphs beginning “This great city of Temixtitlan [Tenochtitlàn]...” and “This noble city contains many fine and magnificent houses...” to read additional information about details of the city’s design and function. Have students summarize strategies the Aztecs used to overcome problems in urban living, including transportation and the provision of fresh water.
2. Students can learn about the construction of Incan roads by reading the text by Pedro de Cieza de Leon at <http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/deLeon.html>. Have students review the geography of the empire (elongated), and form a hypothesis about the importance of the Incan road system to governance and trade.
3. Invite students to compare and contrast prehistoric monuments in the Americas to those of ancient Egypt. They may also identify and evaluate hypotheses that attempt to explain similarities in pyramid design, namely independent invention, diffusion, or (some speculate) supernatural influence!

Architecture and Urban Development Student Page

Introduction:

The Maya, Aztec, and Inca civilizations rose at different times in history; however, all built extraordinary cities and ritual (religious) complexes. They did this without the use of the wheel or metal tools. Rather, through careful planning and the use of locally available materials, these peoples accomplished feats of engineering and architecture that rival those of civilizations in the Old World. In this lesson you will examine images of Maya, Aztec, and Inca ruins that provide evidence of this achievement.

Note: All sites in this lesson can be found at
<http://www.socialstudies.com/ancientlinks.html>.

Directions:

Tikal: North and Central Acropolis

Go to http://mayaruins.com/tikal/Tikal_InnerMap.html

Click on the red arrows to view images of the buildings in the square.

1. What do the buildings appear to be made out of?

2. How tall does Temple II appear to be? (You can estimate that the people in the image are 5–6 feet tall).

3. Think about how the Mayans might have built Tikal. Does it appear that someone took care to plan the site? Would someone have had to be in charge? Why or why not? Explain your reasoning.

4. Ordinary Mayan men and women might have worked for pay to build Tikal, except that the Mayans did not use money in their culture. If they did not get paid, why might ordinary Mayan men or women have worked so hard to build this city? Come up with at least two reasons.

The Alonso Map of Tenochtitlàn

Go to <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/graphics/tenuxtlitan.jpg>

Go to http://geoimages.berkeley.edu/geoimages/Alonso_Map/NaviAlonso/alonso.html

At the second site you can click on specific areas of the map to study them more closely. Continue to select areas to achieve more detailed views of particular sections.

Study the map of Tenochtitlàn made by Alonso in about 1550–1560.

5. What areas of the map are water? What areas are land? How can you tell?

6. Identify the kinds of buildings you can see on the map.

7. Some of the lines crossing the map are brown, while others are blue. What does this suggest about the kinds of transportation networks the Aztecs built in Tenochtitlàn?

8. What are people illustrated on the map doing? What does this suggest about how people sustained themselves (lived) in Tenochtitlàn?

9. Based on your study of the map, write a 3–4 sentence description of Tenochtitlàn.

Foundation of Tenochtitlàn

Go to <http://web.archive.org/web/20041114080055/www.umich.edu/~proflame/texts/mirror/fundaron.html>

Read the text and answer the following questions:

10. According to the text, who appeared in the dream? Who was killed?

11. Where did his heart fall? What grew there? What is there now?

12. What should the person having the dream do? What does “Tenochtitlàn” mean?

13. Based on your study of this short text, form a hypothesis about the importance of Tenochtitlàn to the Aztecs.

Images of Machu Picchu

Go to <http://www.sfu.ca/archaeology/museum/laarch/tour/machu/mp1a.jpg>

Study the image on this page.

14. Does Machu Picchu seem to be at a low or a high altitude? Explain your reasoning.

Go to <http://www.sfu.ca/archaeology/museum/laarch/tour/machu/mp2a.jpg>.

15. What materials did the Inca use in building this temple? Describe its form (shape).

Study these images:

- <http://www.sfu.ca/archaeology/museum/laarch/tour/machu/mp3a.jpg>
- <http://www.sfu.ca/archaeology/museum/laarch/tour/machu/mp3b.jpg>
- <http://www.sfu.ca/archaeology/museum/laarch/tour/machu/mp5.jpg>

16. Describe the way the Incas built on and around the natural rock.

Go to <http://www.sfu.ca/archaeology/museum/laarch/tour/machu/mp4a.jpg>.

17. Estimate the number of residences (houses) in this area of Machu Picchu. Based on your estimate, does Machu Picchu seem to be a large, bustling city like Tenochtitlàn? Why or why not?

18. Based on your study of these images, explain whether you would agree or disagree with the following statement: “The Inca were master engineers and craftsmen.”