



World History (High School) Lesson 3

The Early Americas

Lesson 3



MAIN IDEAS

1. The Aztecs built an empire through warfare and trade, and created an impressive capital city in Mesoamerica.
2. Aztec society was divided by social roles and by class.
3. Aztec religion required human sacrifice for keeping the gods happy.
4. The Aztecs had many achievements in science, art, and language.
5. Hernán Cortés conquered the Aztec Empire.

Key Terms and People

causeways raised roads across water or wet ground

codex a written historical record

conquistadors Spanish soldiers and explorers

Hernán Cortés Spanish conquistador leader who conquered the Aztec Empire

Moctezuma II Aztec ruler who mistook Cortés for a god, leading to the Aztec’s downfall

Lesson Summary

THE AZTECS BUILD AN EMPIRE

By the early 1500s, the Aztecs ruled the most powerful empire in Mesoamerica. War was key to the Aztecs. They also controlled a huge trade network. The capital city Tenochtitlán (tay-NAWCH-teet-LAHN) featured a stunning array of Aztec power and wealth. It had temples, palaces, and a busy market. Three wide **causeways** connected Tenochtitlán’s island location to the shore.

Where was Tenochtitlán located?

In Aztec society, what did young nobles learn to be?

What often happened to captives?

AZTEC SOCIETY

The king was the most important person in Aztec society. He was in charge of law, trade and tribute, and warfare. Young nobles learned to be government officials, military leaders, or priests. Just below the king and his nobles were priests and warriors. Merchants and artisans were just below them. Farmers, pawns, slaves, and captives were in the lower class. Most slaves were sold as laborers. Captives were often sacrificed to the Aztec gods.

Lesson 3, *continued***AZTEC RELIGION**

Like other Mesoamericans, the Aztecs always tried to please their gods. They believed sacrifice was necessary to keep the gods happy, and that the gods literally fed on human blood. Aztec priests led bloody ceremonies and sacrificed as many as 10,000 human victims a year.

SCIENCE, ART, AND LANGUAGE

The Aztecs sometimes borrowed scientific advances from the tribes they conquered. They also studied astronomy and created a calendar much like the Maya calendar. The Aztecs kept written history records in a kind of book called a **codex**. They also had strong oral and artistic traditions.

From whom did the Aztecs sometimes borrow scientific advances?

CORTÉS CONQUERS THE AZTECS

Hernán Cortés (er-NAHN kohr-TAYS) led **conquistadors** into Mexico in 1519. The ruler of the Aztecs, **Moctezuma II** (MAWK-tay-SOO-mah), thought Cortés was a god. Moctezuma's motive was to welcome him, but Cortés took the emperor prisoner. Enraged, the Aztecs attacked the Spanish, and Moctezuma was killed. The conquistadors used guns and rode horses. Their attack terrified the Aztecs. The Spanish also carried diseases like smallpox that weakened and killed many Aztecs.

How did Cortés respond to Moctezuma's welcome?

Circle the name of a disease that weakened and killed many Aztecs.

CHALLENGE ACTIVITY

Critical Thinking: Form Opinions What do you think about Hernán Cortés and his actions? Write a one-page opinion paper defending your point of view. Give at least three examples to support your opinion.

Lesson 3, *continued*

DIRECTIONS On the line before each statement, write **T** if the statement is true and **F** if the statement is false. If the statement is false, change the underlined term to make the sentence true. Then write the correct term on the line after the sentence.

_____ 1. Conquistadors are raised roads across water or wet ground.

_____ 2. The Spanish leader who conquered the Aztec Empire was Hernán Cortés.

_____ 3. The Aztecs kept their written history in a book called a codex.

_____ 4. Spanish causeways used guns and rode horses when they attacked the Aztecs.

_____ 5. Moctezuma II was the Aztec ruler who thought a Spanish explorer was a god.
