

THE GREATEST CITY IN THE WORLD?

A TEACHING RESOURCE FOR THE OCR B WORLD DEPTH STUDY: 'Aztecs and the Spanish Conquest, 1519–1535'

This resource focuses upon the arrival of Cortés and his men at Tenochtitlan in November 1519. Tenochtitlan was the capital of the Aztec Empire and, with a population of about 200,000, was one of the biggest cities in the world (the population of London at the time was about 50,000). These materials can be used either as an introduction to this World Depth Study or to the sections 'Moctezuma's Empire' or 'Encounters'. They aim to :

- introduce students to the nature of the Aztec Empire and help them draw initial conclusions about it
- help students 'enter the minds' of Cortés and his men as they saw the Aztec capital for the first time
- help them to find out about the main features of the city
- develop their skills in analysing and evaluating sources

They consist of a short introductory activity and then a three-part investigation into Tenochtitlan in 1519; each part will add a further layer of detail to the investigation.

NOTE: The Aztecs are also known as the Mexica (which they called themselves)

SETTING THE SCENE:

Students need to know about the arrival of Cortés in Mexico :

In the early 16th century the Spanish had occupied Cuba and Hispaniola in the Caribbean and briefly landed on the coast of Central America. They soon heard rumours of great riches on the mainland.

Hernán Cortés, a Spanish adventurer, landed on the coast of Mexico in April 1519 with 11 ships, about 500 men (equipped with armour, steel swords, guns and several cannon) and 16 horses. They met representatives from the Aztec emperor



INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY :

The US Library of Congress website contains a remarkable set of 17th century Spanish paintings of the conquest :

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/exploring-the-early-americas/conquest-of-mexico-paintings.html>

Show your students the second painting 'The Arrival of Cortés in Vera Cruz'. It shows Cortés and his men meeting representatives sent by Moctezuma in April 1519. Ask students to compare :

- the weapons and equipment of the Spanish soldiers
- with the appearance of Moctezuma's representatives (shown on the left)

What initial conclusions can they reach about the two peoples ?

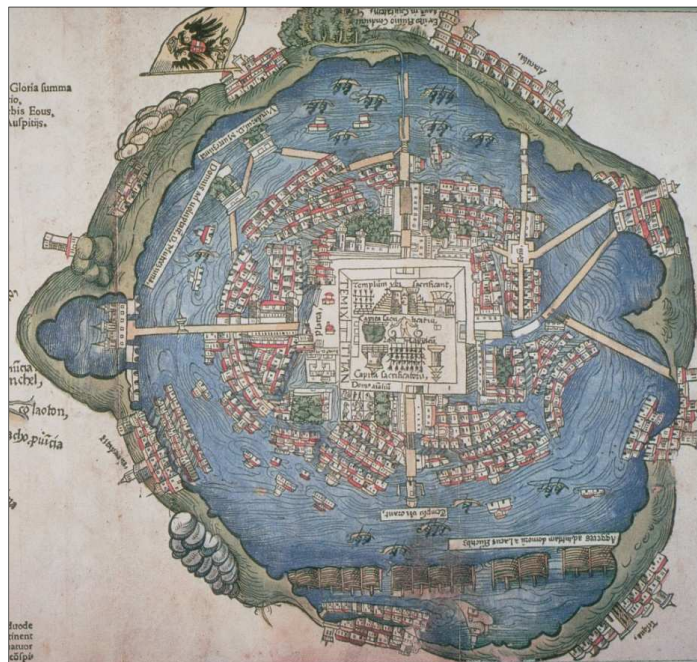
Moctezuma (the ruler of 10 million people) and decided to march towards the Aztec capital. Before heading inland Cortés scuttled all of his ships – there was to be no turning back.

The journey lasted three months. During the march inland there was fighting against some native tribes but Cortés was also able to make important alliances with other tribes which resented Aztec control. They reached Tenochtitlan on 8 November 1519. What must they have thought when they saw the city for the first time? This is your students’ first task:

NB : They will need to investigate these events in greater detail in the ‘Encounters’ section of the specification, especially Cortés’ relations with other native tribes during the march on Tenochtitlan.

ACTIVITY 1 : The “CORTÉS MAP”

Ask your students to put themselves in the position of Cortés and his men as they approached Tenochtitlan for the first time. What kind of city were they expecting? Then show them this (the only) contemporary drawing of the city:



You can download a high resolution version of this map, which enables you to ‘zoom in’ to see individual buildings, from : https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Tenochtitlan,_1524.jpg Note that the map is orientated so that west is at the top ; also that the map which you will download also shows (on the left) a contemporary map of the Gulf of Mexico.

What is your students’ initial reaction? Is it what they were expecting?

Give them some time to examine the map. They will be able to identify some features by themselves, but will need help with others. Expect them to ask plenty of questions ...

Here is a checklist of the main features it shows:

- Tenochtitlan was built in the middle of a lake (Lake Texcoco)

- It was connected to the mainland by a series of causeways and bridges
- Inside the city there were roads, canals, many houses and trees
- An aqueduct brought fresh water into the city (shown at the top)
- People travelled around the city on foot or by canoe (rather like modern Venice)
- There was a large central square (which actually contained 70 public buildings). The main temple is shown as a stepped pyramid with two towers. The face of the sun is shown between them. The temple is labelled '*templum ubi sacrificant*' (temple of sacrifice). Also shown are three smaller temples and two racks of skulls ('*capita sacrificatorum*' – sacrificed heads). The headless figure in the centre (labelled '*idol lapideum*' or stone idol) probably represents a statue of the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui. These features should help students reach some initial conclusions about the Aztecs' religious beliefs and practices
- '*Domus Don Mutezuma*' was Moctezuma's palace
- '*Domus animalium*' was Moctezuma's zoo
- The '*forum*' was the main market
- The arms of the Hapsburg Empire are also shown (top left)

You could give your students their own copy of the map; leave plenty of space around it for them to label the main features of the city – and make further annotations later on.

Hopefully your students will already have raised some questions about the origins of the map. If not, ask them if there are any further questions they would like to ask about it as a historical source:

We know that the map was produced by a printer in Nuremburg, Germany in 1524 (at a time when Tenochtitlan was already in ruins). It was based on a map Cortés sent to the Emperor Charles V, together with a letter, in 1520. There our certainty about it ends because the original map no longer survives. It has often been called 'Cortés' map' and it used to be assumed that it was drawn either by Cortés himself or his men. Recently, however, several scholars have suggested that it was an indigenous Aztec map to which the Spanish added the Latin captions.

Ask your students to discuss what difference, if any, this information makes to their initial conclusions about Tenochtitlan.

ACTIVITY 2: WRITTEN DESCRIPTIONS OF TENOCHTITLAN

So far students have studied just one source about Tenochtitlan. They should know that historians should never base their conclusions on just one source. Ask them to discuss what other kinds of sources might survive today about the Aztec capital. This activity focuses on written accounts; the next one focuses on archaeological remains.

This activity contains two eye-witness descriptions of Tenochtitlan, both of them Spanish.

They are quite lengthy so, at this stage, you may, only wish to use the first parts of them. Many of the details they contain are assumed to be broadly correct by modern historians but they are clearly written from a Spanish point of view. Both writers were clearly amazed at what they were seeing but in places they clearly show misunderstanding and revulsion, especially in Diaz's description of Aztec religious beliefs and practices which were totally alien to Europeans.

Students should compare the accounts with the map in Activity 1:

- What did the writers think when they saw the city for the first time?
- Which features in the map are confirmed by the written descriptions? They could highlight confirmed features on their copy of the map.
- Are there any major differences between the map and the written descriptions?
- Do the written descriptions refer to anything about Tenochtitlan which is **not** shown in the map – and if so why?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the written descriptions as historical sources?

SOURCE 1 : This description of Tenochtitlan was written by Hernán Cortés himself. He wrote a series of letters to the Emperor Charles V during the Spanish Conquest both to justify his actions and to impress the Emperor with his achievements. This extract is taken from his second letter, which the above map accompanied, which was written in 1519 soon after his arrival in the city. The full text of Cortés' letter can be found at <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1520cortes.asp>

“This great city of Temixtitlan [Mexico] is situated in a salt lake, and from the main land to the denser parts of it, by whichever route one chooses to enter, the distance is two leagues (3 miles or 5km). There are four avenues or entrances to the city, all of which are formed by artificial causeways, two spears' length in width. The city is as large as Seville or Cordova; its streets, I speak of the principal ones, are very wide and straight; some of these, and all the inferior ones, are half land and half water, and are navigated by canoes. All the streets at intervals have openings, through which the water flows, crossing from one street to another; and at these openings, some of which are very wide, there are also very wide bridges, composed of large pieces of timber, of great strength and well put together; on many of these bridges ten horses can go abreast.

This city has many public squares, in which are situated the markets and other places for buying and selling. There is one square twice as large as that of the city of Salamanca, surrounded by porticoes, where are daily assembled more than sixty thousand souls, engaged

in buying and selling; and where are found all kinds of merchandise, embracing the necessaries of life, as for instance articles of food, as well as jewels of gold and silver, lead, brass, copper, tin, precious stones, bones, shells, snails, and feathers.

This great city contains a large number of temples, or houses, for their idols, very handsome buildings, which are situated in the different districts and the suburbs; in the principal ones religious persons live, for whose use, besides the houses containing the idols, there are other convenient habitations. All these persons dress in black, and never cut or comb their hair from the time they enter the priesthood until they leave it. The priests are debarred from female society, nor is any woman permitted to enter the religious houses. They also abstain from eating certain kinds of food, more at some seasons of the year than others. Among these temples there is one which far surpasses all the rest, whose grandeur of architectural details no human tongue is able to describe; for within its precincts, surrounded by a lofty wall, there is room enough for a town of five hundred families. Around the interior of the enclosure there are handsome buildings, containing large halls and corridors, in which the religious persons attached to the temple live. There are fully forty towers, which are lofty and well built, the largest of which has fifty steps leading to its main body, and is higher than the tower of the principal tower of the church at Seville. They are well built of stone and wood ; the interior of the chapels consist of curious imagery, wrought in stone, with plaster ceilings, and wood-work carved in relief, and painted with figures of monsters and other objects. All these towers are the burial places of the nobles, and every chapel in them is dedicated to a particular idol, to which they pay their devotions.”

SOURCE 2 : The second description is taken from ‘The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico 1517–1521’, the memoirs of Bernal Diaz del Castillo. He was a foot soldier in Cortés’ army and wrote his account in the 1560s. He disliked accounts of the Spanish Conquest which glorified Cortes’ role and wanted to show the contribution of the whole Spanish army. The full text of the book can be found here : <http://www.jrbooksonline.com/diaz/diaz.htm>

“And when we saw all those cities and villages built in the water, and other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico [i.e. Tenochtitlán], we were astounded. These great towns and temples and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision. Indeed, some of our soldiers asked whether it was

not all a dream. It was all so wonderful that I do not know how to describe this first glimpse of things never heard of, seen or dreamed of before. . . .

The moment we arrived in the immense market of the city, we were perfectly astonished at the vast numbers of people, the profusion of merchandise, which was for sale, and at the good order that reigned throughout.... Every type of merchandise had a separate spot for its sale. We first of all visited those parts of the market where gold and silver wares were sold. Of jewels, of cloths interwoven with feathers, and of other manufactured goods; beside slaves of both sexes. This slave market was upon as great a scale as the Portuguese market for negro slaves at Guinea. Next to these came the dealers in coarser wares — cotton, twisted thread, and cacao (chocolate). In short, every type of goods which New Spain produces were here to be found. ... And yet I have not mentioned the paper, which in this country is called amatl; the tubes filled with liquid amber and tobacco, the various sweet-scented salves (ointments), and similar things; nor the various seeds which were on sale in the porticoes of this market, nor the medicinal herbs.

In this market-place there were also courts of justice, to which three judges and several constables were appointed, who inspected the goods exposed for sale. I had almost forgotten to mention the salt, and those who made the flint knives. Further, instruments of brass, copper, and tin; cups, and painted pitches of wood; The variety was so great that it would occupy more space than I can well spare to note them down in. Besides which the market was so crowded with people that it was quite impossible to see everything in one day ...

... Before we mounted the steps of the great temple, Motecusuma (Moctezuma), who was sacrificing on the top to his idols, sent six priests and two of his principal officers to conduct Cortes up the steps. There were 114 steps to the summit ... Indeed, this infernal temple, from its great height, commanded a view of the whole surrounding neighbourhood. From this place we could likewise see the three causeways which led into the city... We also observed the aqueduct which ran from Chapultepec, and provided the whole town with sweet water. We could also distinctly see the bridges across the openings, which intersected these causeways , and through which the waters of the lake ebbed and, flowed. The lake itself was crowded with canoes, which were bringing provisions and other merchandise to the city. From here we also discovered that the only communication to the houses in this city, and of all the other towns

built in the lake, was by means of drawbridges or canoes. In all these towns the beautiful white plastered temples rose above the smaller ones, like so many towers and castles in our Spanish towns, and this, it may be imagined, was a splendid sight....

On each altar was a giant figure, very tall and very fat. They said that the one on the right was Huichilobos [i.e. Huitzilopochtli], their war-god. He had a very broad face and huge terrible eyes. And there were so many precious stones, so much gold, so many pearls and seed-pearls stuck to him with a paste which the natives made from a sort of root, that his body and head were covered with them. . . .

There were some smoking braziers (heaters) of their incense, which they call copal, in which they were burning the hearts of three Indians whom they had sacrificed that day; and all the walls of that shrine were so splashed and caked with blood that they and the floor too were black. Indeed, the whole place stank abominably. We then looked to the left and saw another great image of the same height as Huichilobos, with a face like a bear and eyes that glittered, being made of their mirror-glass, which they call tezcac. Its body, like that of Huichilobos, was encrusted with precious stones, for they said that the two were brothers. This Tezcatlipoca, the god of hell, had charge of the Mexicans' souls, and his body was surrounded by figures of little devils with snakes' tails. The walls of this shrine also were so caked with blood and the floor so bathed in it that the stench was worse than that of any slaughter-house in Spain. They had offered that idol five hearts from the day's sacrifices."

ACTIVITY 3: ARCHAEOLOGY

No traces of Tenochtitlan survive today above ground. The city was almost completely destroyed by the Spanish in 1521. In its place they built their own capital city, Mexico City, often using stone from the ruined Aztec buildings.

In recent years, however, archaeologists have found the remains of Aztec buildings which have shed new light both on the city itself and on Aztec society. In 1978, for example, they began excavating the site of the Templo Mayor (the main temple – shown on the map as '*templum ubi sacrificant*') in the centre of the modern city. They found the remains of the Templo Mayor above the remains of six earlier temples. The temple was not just at the centre of the Aztec city, it was believed to be the center of the universe. They also found a

monumental stone disk (over 3m in diameter) dating from about 1400, depicting the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui. Over 7,000 objects were found in the temple, mostly offerings to the gods. Nearby, in 1987, they discovered 1,789 human bones (of children, teenagers and adults) dating from the 1480s. Many of the bones had been cut. They may be the remains of a mass sacrifice following a ruler's death to accompany him to the next life.

Finds such as these have enabled archaeologists to produce detailed reconstruction drawings and models of the central precinct. Here are two high resolution images to show your students:

- A reconstruction drawing of the Templo Mayor by the artist Kevin Lazorik : <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/aztecs/tenochtitlan-1.jpg>
- A model of the central precinct in the National Anthropological Museum, Mexico City : https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Model_of_Tenochtitlan-2.jpg

They should help students to understand the size and grandeur of the central precinct and, therefore, of the surrounding city, which do not come across clearly in the stylised 'Cortés map'. In the model you can clearly see among the temples and other buildings:

- the Templo Mayor with its twin staircases
- a circular temple dedicated to Quetzalcoatl
- behind Quetzalcoatl's temple is a rectangular ball court (where ritual ball games were played)
- the large rectangular building on the left was a school for the sons of nobles
- the wall which surrounded the precinct, separating it from the rest of the city

Ask your students to discuss what more they can tell about Tenochtitlan from these sources and make further annotations on their copy of the map. Finally ask them to record their initial conclusions about the Aztecs, based upon their study of all the sources; you could record their key words in a spider diagram and return to it later in the unit when they have found out more about Aztec society.

A note about reconstruction drawings:

Students will come across many reconstruction drawings during their study of the Aztecs. Hundreds are available on the internet, for example:

<http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/templo-mayor.htm>

<http://bcr-8history.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/images-of-tenochtitlan.html>

<https://uk.pinterest.com/1dqukze5ou01wrg/tenochtitlan/>

They were produced for a variety of purposes ranging from museum displays to computer games. Some of them are based on meticulous historical research – like the model which is

based on both archaeological evidence and 16th century accounts – while others are largely imaginary. Encourage your students to treat them critically, like any other historical source.

Enjoy the rest of your study of this fascinating and dramatic period!