II. Mesoamerican Civilizations

Farmers, imperial officials, and the army also used the roads. The army used the roads to march quickly from one area to another to quiet unrest among the Inca's subjects.

Farming was the main economic activity of the Inca. Farmers built terraces on the sides of mountains and used irrigation to put more land under cultivation. One of the most important crops was the potato, of which the Inca grew many varieties. Europeans did not know about potatoes until the Spanish conquered the Inca Empire and took potatoes back to Europe. The Inca also raised llamas and alpacas. They made clothing of the animals' wool, ate the meat, and used the animals as beasts of burden.

As has been noted, the Inca did not have a writing system, but they developed a record-keeping system using quipu [kwee-pu]. A quipu was a rope with 40 or so strings attached. The Inca would tie knots in various places on the string to represent groups of 1, 10, and 100. Quipus were very important record-keeping devices, recording everything from tribute contributions, economic reports, war information, and ceremonial details. Civil servants, village leaders, and important heads of households could communicate with each other and keep records using these quipu.

The Inca were also known for their stone work. They built elaborate walls with gigantic pieces of stone carefully cut and fitted together. Some of these walls are still standing today.

Like the word Maya, the word Inca is used as a singular and a plural noun, as well as an adjective. You may also encounter "Incas" as the plural and "Incan" as an adjective.

Machu Picchu and Cuzco

Like the Maya and Aztec, the Inca had urban settlement. A fine example of an Inca site is Machu Picchu, with its terraced fields, palaces, fort, fountains, temples, and stonework staircases. Machu Picchu's exact use is unknown, but it may have been a city, fortress, or one of the many country retreats the Inca emperors built throughout the Andes. Located high in the Andes, the city was never found by the conquering Spanish, and thus was not destroyed.

As all roads in Europe led to Rome, so all roads in the Inca Empire led to Cuzco, its capital. According to one Inca creation myth, two Inca heroes emerged from caves and founded the city of Cuzco. A large fort guarded the city of huge palaces and temple compounds.

C. Spanish Conquerors

Background

Beginning in the 1400s, Europeans set forth in a great wave of exploration. (See Section III, "European Exploration, Trade, and the Clash of Cultures," pp. 139–163.) The Portuguese led the way. Later, they were followed by the Spanish, the French, the Dutch, and the English.

Christopher Columbus was funded by the Spanish rulers Ferdinand and Isabella. Columbus landed in the Caribbean, but he incorrectly thought that he was in India. This is why people started calling native peoples “Indians.” The Spanish monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, sent soldiers, administrators, and colonists to settle these islands. They also sent Catholic missionaries to convert the native people to Christianity.
Another set of men who traveled to the Americas after the initial discoveries of Columbus are known to history as the conquistadors. The word conquistador is Spanish for “conqueror.” It refers to a Spanish military leader who took part in the conquest of the Americas in the 16th century. The conquistadors were intent on finding and taking the riches of the Indies. They came from many different occupations and were generally not professional soldiers. They sought glory by finding riches, new land, and subjects for the king.

The leader of a group of conquistadors typically signed an agreement with the Spanish government. Spain agreed to recognize the authority of the expedition in exchange for one-fifth of all treasure found. In addition, there was an expectation that any conquered lands would become Spanish colonies. Each member of the expedition would get a share of whatever the expedition took. These shares might consist of gold and silver, or possibly captured native people whom the Spanish seized, in addition to those precious metals.

By 1520, the Spanish had given up their pursuit of treasure on the Caribbean islands and began looking to the mainland. The conquistadors set out from the Caribbean to explore what is present-day Mexico, Central America, and South America. They launched expeditions against the Aztec and Inca empires, and ultimately brought both empires down.

The conquistadors were successful for several reasons. They were brave and daring men driven by a powerful desire for wealth. In some cases they were very clever. In addition, they had horses, guns, and steel weapons, none of which the native people had. There were no horses in the Americas until the Spanish brought them. Also, native populations were decimated by diseases the Spanish brought, diseases for which the natives had no immunity.

The conquistadors gained large amounts of silver and gold by conquering the Aztec and Inca empires, and even more by setting up mines to dig out the huge deposits of silver discovered in Mexico and Peru between 1545 and 1595. The Spanish mine owners made fortunes, as did the Spanish government, because the monarchy received one-fifth of all the silver mined. Silver mining became the basis of the Spanish colonial economy and established the colonies’ role as an importer of goods rather than an exporter.

Hernán Cortés and the Aztec

One of the most famous of the conquistadors was Hernán Cortés (also spelled Cortez). Cortés was born in Spain and studied briefly at the University of Salamanca before dropping out. He sailed for the New World in 1504 and took part in the Spanish conquest of Hispaniola (the island which today includes Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and in 1511 helped conquer Cuba. For his services he was given land and a house, along with native slaves for workers. In 1517 and 1518, expeditions returned to Hispaniola with small amounts of gold and big stories about where more was to be found. Cortés decided to go for the gold. He sold or mortgaged all his property and organized an expedition.

In 1519, Cortés left Cuba with 11 ships, about 600 men, and 16 horses. The expedition landed on the coast of the Yucatán Peninsula near what is now Veracruz. Cortés sought to gain control of the wealth of the mighty Aztec Empire (see pp. 129–130). To do this, he made friends with the people along the coast and learned from them of the faraway capital, Tenochtitlán. With the help of an
Aztec woman named Malinche who had been sold as a slave and served as a translator, Cortés persuaded various groups of Aztec subjects to support the Spanish. Gaining allies was not difficult because of the tribute system of the Aztec and because of their cruelty to their subjects. Many city-states welcomed Cortés and his men in the hopes that he would free them from Aztec domination.

Cortés was determined to march to Tenochtitlán and find the gold he sought. When some of his men wavered and wanted to return to Hispaniola, he burned his ships to show them that there would be no going back. Then he turned and marched on Tenochtitlán, fighting battles, enlisting allies, and crossing mountains along the way. Moctezuma was waiting for him. News of the white men, albeit somewhat exaggerated, had traveled quickly. Moctezuma received news of the approach of hundreds of godly creatures whose “magic sticks” (cannons) spit smoke and fire and whose enormous “dogs” (horses) had flat ears and long tongues.

Moctezuma sent gifts of gold, which he hoped would appease the strange white-skinned visitors and make them go away. But the gold only whetted the appetite of Cortés and his men.

Cortés arrived in Tenochtitlán in November of 1519. Moctezuma welcomed him and escorted the Spanish into the city. Cortés asked for gold on behalf of Spanish king. He also demanded that the Aztec remove idols from their pyramids and set up shrines to the Virgin Mary and install Christian images on the pyramids. Moctezuma complied with these requests. Still, Cortés was nervous. After some time, he had his men arrest Moctezuma. Cortés began to rule the city, and reduced Moctezuma to little more than a puppet. Some time later the Spanish massacred some Aztec priests during a festival. This led to increased hostility among the Aztec. They revolted and besieged the Spanish in the palace.

During the siege, Cortés ordered Moctezuma to address his people from a palace balcony. The rebellious Aztec jeered and threw stones at their one-time ruler. Moctezuma died a few days later. The Spanish said that he was killed by a stone thrown by the crowd, but Aztec observers claimed that he was murdered by the Spanish; we may never know the truth.

On the night of July 1, 1520, Cortés decided to try to break out of the city. He and his men were detected and heavy fighting ensued. Over 400 Spaniards and roughly 2,000 of their native American allies were killed, but Cortés and some other leaders managed to escape. This nighttime battle is sometimes referred to as “La Noche Triste,” or “the Sorrowful Night.”

Instead of retreating, Cortés prepared for a counter-offensive. He ordered his men to build 12 boats for a siege of the city. He also secured more support from the groups that had long been subjects of the Aztec. Then he besieged Tenochtitlán. The fighting lasted for three months, but Cortés ultimately defeated the Aztec. The last Aztec emperor surrendered on August 13, 1521.

Cortés established Mexico City where Tenochtitlán had stood. Mexico City became the center of the Spanish province of New Spain. Cortés went on to conquer central Mexico and the northern area of Central America, but his last years were unhappy. Cortés never received the recognition that he believed he deserved from the Spanish king. He died in Spain in 1547.
Francisco Pizarro and the Inca

After the conquest of Mexico, the conquistadors soon turned their attention to the Inca Empire to the south. The expedition against the Inca civilization was led by Francisco Pizarro. Pizarro was born in Spain and came to the New World in 1502, joining an expedition to Colombia in 1509. He accompanied Balboa on the famous expedition that culminated in the discovery of the Pacific Ocean. Pizarro later lived in Panama, and heard of areas to the south that were rich in gold. He began to think about an expedition to South America, and after brief expeditions to Peru in which he saw gold and met some Inca, he soon received Spain’s permission to conquer and rule Peru.

Pizarro and his forces sailed to Peru and located the Inca emperor in 1531. A civil war had just been fought over who would lead the empire. Two half-brothers, Atahualpa [a-ta-WAL-pa] and Huascar, had each ruled a part of the empire and had tried to seize the other part. Atahualpa, who had governed the northern region, had won, but the empire had been weakened by the bloody civil war. Pizarro arranged a meeting with the emperor in the town of Cajamarca. Then he prepared an ambush. Pizarro stationed his men in the buildings around the square. Atahualpa came with a large entourage, but his men were unarmed. A Spanish priest stepped forward and asked the Sapa Inca to become a Christian. When he refused, the Spaniards charged out of hiding and began mowing down the unarmed Inca attendants. The Spanish took Atahualpa prisoner and demanded that his followers bring enough gold and silver to fill a room. The Inca people brought the gold and silver, but Atahualpa was executed anyway.

Pizarro captured Cuzco and, with its downfall, the empire began to collapse. Pizarro established a new capital at Lima, near the coast. In 1536, a new Inca emperor, Manco Capac, tried to retake Cuzco but was unsuccessful and retreated to the mountains. Pizarro was later assassinated by friends of a man he had killed. The last Inca emperor, Tupac Amaru, was finally killed by the Spanish in 1572.

Native Populations Devastated by Disease

The Spanish were able to defeat the Aztec and the Inca not only because they had horses, dogs, guns, and swords, but also because they brought with them germs that made many native Americans sick. Diseases like smallpox and measles were unknown among the natives; therefore, they had no immunity to them.

The first to fall ill from European diseases were the native peoples of the Caribbean islands, who had the initial contact with the Spanish. Between disease and the forced labor policies of the Spanish, the native population on some islands disappeared completely. Some experts believe that in the 1500s and 1600s, anywhere from 50 to 80 percent of the native American population across North and South America died.

In the Caribbean, this meant that there was no longer a cheap supply of forced labor to work the mines and farms that the Spanish established. This
need for a new source of labor was the impetus to the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade. A few Africans had been brought to work the mines on Hispaniola, but the need for large numbers of workers spurred the African slave trade.

II. Mesoamerican Civilizations

The Big Idea in Review

The Maya, Aztec, and Inca had developed large, complex civilizations prior to the arrival of the Spanish.

Review

Below are some ideas for ongoing assessment and review activities. These are not meant to constitute a comprehensive list. Teachers may also refer to the Pearson Learning/Core Knowledge History & Geography series for additional information and teaching ideas.

• Since students in Grade 1 also study the Maya, Aztec, and Inca civilizations, have students in Grade 5 create coloring books for the younger students. To make the coloring books, ask students to write one fact about each group at the bottom of large pieces of white paper and to draw an illustration to accompany each fact. Then, arrange a book buddy day where the two classes read together and the younger students color the pages to illustrate the fact about each group. Instruct students to avoid the discussion of human sacrifice with the younger students.

• This section provides an opportunity for students to complete short research reports on any of the three early civilizations. Using the guidelines found in the Language Arts section, provide the class with topics for short reports to write in formal style. Each day of a week, provide a mini-lesson on different aspects of report writing, such as correct paragraph form or bibliographies. Have students share these reports when completed.

• Have students write papers from the point of view of one of the early American civilizations studied in this section. Students should describe what life was like in this civilization and how the members most likely reacted to the European explorers. Students may also turn these papers into interviews between an interviewer and a member of a Maya, Aztec, or Inca civilization.

• Have students work in groups to write a short script demonstrating some aspect of life in one of these groups or an interaction between a group and European explorers. Each group should perform their skits for the class.

• Plan a culminating day for this section and incorporate different subject areas for the students to demonstrate what they have learned about the Maya, Aztec, and Inca civilizations. You may include the physical education teacher so that students can play games from each group, or practice the Inca message-passing system. You can also have students demonstrate what they have learned from these groups, such as math concepts, art and architecture styles, etc. Invite parents and administrators to attend the event.

• You may also ask the following questions after completion of this unit of study.

1. Use the following pairs of words in sentences: Andes Mountains–Argentina, Brazil–Amazon River.

Possible sentences: The Andes Mountains form the border between Argentina and Chile. The Amazon River drains a large part of the country of Brazil.