The ancient civilizations of South America are fascinating to study. They had many advances that we often think were only found in Europe at that time. However, along with the technical and artistic advances came a darkness to their religion and society as they tried to appease false gods that were made from their own imaginations. Human sacrifices were an everyday part of life and tens of thousands of people were slaughtered. Human knowledge and achievement is not enough.
Reading and Assignments

In this unit, students will:

- Complete six lessons in which they will learn about ancient civilizations in Central and South America, journaling and answering discussion questions as they read.
- Define vocabulary words.
- Complete literature assignments including adding details to their research paper outline.
- Visit www.ArtiosHCS.com for additional resources.

Leading Ideas

*Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*

— John 14:6

*And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.*

— Hebrews 9:27

*For God shows no partiality.*

— Romans 2:11

Vocabulary


Key People, Places, and Events

Frederick Catherwood | Incas | Montezuma
John Lloyd Stephens | Machu Picchu | Hernan Cortez
Maya | Cuzco |
Aztec | Tenochtitlán |

Additional Material for Parent or Teacher:

- Use the websites here to enhance your student’s knowledge of the Americas. Do your research at these sites and make your choices based on your child’s interest.
  - Video – Ancient Civilizations of South and Central America
    [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtEwOjcoIds](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtEwOjcoIds)
  - Narrated Video – Ancient Civilizations of South and Central America
    [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvjLkpRmxL4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvjLkpRmxL4)
  - The Incredible Incas:
  - The Mysterious Mayas:
    [http://mayas.mrdonn.org/index.html](http://mayas.mrdonn.org/index.html)
  - The Awesome Aztecs
    [http://aztecs.mrdonn.org/index.html](http://aztecs.mrdonn.org/index.html)
Lesson One

History Overview and Assignments

South of the Border

Reading and Assignments

- Review the discussion questions and vocabulary, then read the article: Central and South American Empires.
- Narrate about today’s reading using the appropriate notebook page. Be sure to answer the discussion questions and include key people, events, and dates within the narration.
- Define the vocabulary word in the context of the reading and put the word and its definition in the vocabulary section of your history notebook.
- Be sure to visit www.ArtiosHCS.com for additional resources.

Vocabulary

glyph
**Discourse Questions**

1. Who were Frederick Catherwood and John Lloyd Stephens?
2. What country in South America did they explore?
3. What civilization did they discover?
4. What various civilizations does this article discuss?
5. List some similarities of these cultures.
6. List some of the accomplishments of these cultures.

**Key People, Places, and Events**

Frederick Catherwood  
John Lloyd Stephens  
Maya  
Aztec  
Inca

Adapted for Middle School from the book:  
Ancient Civilizations  
*source: ushistory.org*

Central and South American Empires

“In the romance of the world’s history nothing ever impressed me more forcibly than the spectacle of this once great and lovely city overturned, desolate and lost; discovered by accident, overgrown by trees, it did not even have a name to distinguish it.”

~John Lloyd Stephens, 1839, on first seeing Copan

In 1839, lawyer and writer John Lloyd Stephens plunged into the jungle of Guatemala in search of a lost city. With him he took his English friend, Frederick Catherwood, an artist and architect who could draw ancient ruins with unparalleled precision and grace. Fanciful reports of ruined cities, buildings encrusted with carvings, and stone sculptures of mythical creatures had circulated for years. Catherwood and Stephens came to check if such marvels really existed.

They did. In *Incidents of Travel in Central America*, published in 1841, Stephens gave a delightful, touching account of their journey to the ruined sites. Catherwood’s engravings provided peerless views of their astonishing discoveries. The book became an immediate bestseller, bringing worldwide attention to the existence of sophisticated civilizations in Central America.

The Inca civilization had a great abundance of gold and silver, even by today’s standards. They used this precious metal for art and decoration rather than for coins.
Ancient: Middle School
Unit 18: The Americas

The Maya civilization is renowned for its splendid architecture. Cities and ceremonial centers like the Great Plaza at Tikal are filled with pyramids and ceremonial platforms that required precise planning and sophisticated engineering skills.

Stephens bought Copan, the first ruined city he encountered, for $50 from a man on whose land the ruined city stood. “I think he was not more surprised than if I had asked to buy his poor old wife,” remarked Stephens.

Aztec sunstones were used to calculate the date of an Aztec calendar. The face of Tonatiuh, the Aztec sun god, is depicted in the center of the sunstone.

With considerable insight, Stephens grasped that all the sites belonged to a single civilization. Those people were the Mayas, ancestors of the people still living in the Yucatan. And he understood that the strange “glyphs”—boxy images—engraved everywhere, were a form of writing. It took 150 years before experts fully accepted Stephens’ ideas and began deciphering what the Mayas had written.

Long Before the Europeans

Today, thousands of ancient sites have been uncovered in Central and South America. Beginning thousands of years ago, small bands of hunter-gatherers inhabited much of Mexico. By 2000 B.C., they had learned to farm corn, beans, squash, and other foodstuffs.

Along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico between 1200 B.C. and 400 A.D., the Olmecs flourished. The first to build ceremonial pyramids, the Olmecs carved portraits of their kings in colossal boulders 6 feet across. By 500 A.D., the people of Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico, built the massive Temple of the Sun. Rising 200 feet, its base of 600 feet equaled that of the pyramid of Khufu in Egypt—although it was only half Khufu’s height.

The ancient ruins of the Maya Empire are scattered throughout modern-day Central America, from Mexico to Honduras.

These and dozens of others cultures flourished in the centuries before the arrival
of Europeans. Although there were differences, all were united by common cultural traits—sun worship, twin calendars of 260 and 365 days, and ritual murder to a pantheon of blood-thirsty gods. And all built their palaces and pyramids using the labor of their people. None had domesticated animals or the use of the wheel.

In the 1500s, when Spanish conquistadors appeared, two vast empires, those of the Aztecs and the Incas, dominated Central and South America. Both claimed divine kings, were fractured by internal dissent, and quickly succumbed to the Spanish onslaught. The physical remains of all these cultures lay dormant for centuries, until science and curiosity demanded their exploration.

This map shows the major sites of the Olmec and Maya civilizations in Mesoamerica and the modern countries in which they lie.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MESOAMERICAN EMPIRE</th>
<th>TIME PERIOD</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maya</strong></td>
<td>200-900 A.D.</td>
<td>The Yucatan Peninsula, present-day Mexico, Belize, Guatemala</td>
<td>hieroglyphic writing, astronomy, calendar, mathematics, team sports, step pyramids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inca</strong></td>
<td>1200-1532</td>
<td>The Andean region, present-day Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Andes Mountains</td>
<td>Machu Picchu, highway system, Temple of the Sun, efficient central government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aztec (Mexicas)</strong></td>
<td>1345-1521</td>
<td>The central Mexican basin, the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán is present-day Mexico City</td>
<td>historical codices, monetary system, surgical advances, Great Temple of Tenochtitlán</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lesson Two

History Overview and Assignments

Mysterious Mayas

Mayan Ruins of Tazumal in Santa Ana, El Salvador: Courtesy Daniel Robey

Reading and Assignments

- Review the discussion questions and vocabulary, then read the article: Blood of Kings: World of the Maya.
- Narrate about today’s reading using the appropriate notebook page. Be sure to answer the discussion questions and include key people, events, and dates within the narration.
- Define the vocabulary words in the context of the reading and put the word and its definition in the vocabulary section of your history notebook.
- Be sure to visit www.ArtiosHCS.com for additional resources.
**Vocabulary**
ethnographer
linguist

**Key People, Places, and Events**
Maya

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**Discussion Questions**

1. This article describes the Maya civilization as a mighty civilization. Why?
2. How was the Maya civilization organized for government?
3. What kept them united? Describe this idea?
4. How was the Maya religious implications tied to leisure activities?
5. How was the Maya form of math different than ours is today?
6. Describe your average Maya?
7. How do historians believe the Maya civilization fell?

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**Adapted for Middle School from the book:**

*Blood of Kings: World of the Maya*

Maya ballplayers were often depicted in the artwork of vases. Courtesy Justin Kerr

One day in the final century B.C., the people of Cerros made a momentous decision. Cerros was a tiny settlement at the edge of Chetumal Bay in what is now Belize. Its inhabitants were traders, fishermen, and farmers. Two thousand years ago, they decided to become a kingdom.

They demolished houses and smashed pottery and other possessions, scattering flowers over them. Amid the ruins they built a brand new city—a sparkling ceremonial center with pyramids, plazas, temples, ornamented stairways and ball courts, presided over by a king and royal court. On the temple terrace they mounted snarling masks of the Jaguar Sun God.

Cerros did not last long. But other great Maya cities soon flourished all across the Yucatan Peninsula. For 700 years—from 900 to 200 B.C.—a mighty civilization generated great art, as well as the most brilliant architecture, astronomy, and mathematics the Americas had ever seen.

Maya? Mayan? Mayas? Which term(s) should be used? Ethnographers and linguists agree that “Maya” is the best translation from the Spanish and Maya languages, and can be used as either a noun or an adjective.
For example: “Ritual sacrifice was a part of Maya religion,” and “Maya temples are masterpieces of ancient architecture.”

There’s just one exception to the rule. When discussing more than one Maya, use the plural form “Mayas,” as in: “There were five Mayas on each team.”

We now return you to your regularly scheduled lesson, already in progress.

The Maya were a collection of people clustered in city-states. What united them was an idea. For the Maya the world of ordinary living and the Otherworld populated by gods, ancestors, and monstrous things, were equally real. There existed three regions, intricately bound together: the heavens, the earth, and the waters of the Underworld.

At particular places, the power to influence the Otherworld was concentrated. Here the Maya built temples and “mystic mountains” or pyramids at Tikal, Uaxactun, Palenque, Calakmul, Caracol, and Chichén Itzá. At each the Tree of Life sprouted, its roots buried in the dreaded Underworld, its leaves reaching to the gods. Blood of kings or captives provided the sap. In rites performed atop pyramids—those at Tikal reach over 250 feet into the sky—kings spilled their own blood, dragging stingray spines through their tongues to cement their relationship with the powers above. War captives were strapped to altars, their hearts torn from their breasts and offered up as sacrifices.

Even their leisure activities had religious implications. In U-shaped arenas with sloping walls, the Maya played ball. These, too, were religious rites. The ball—one foot across and made of solid rubber—apparently could not be handled. Murals show players wearing protective head- and waistbands, bouncing the ball with bodies and feet across the court. This was no mere sport, but ritualized battle. Losers stood to forfeit more than the lucrative contracts of today’s athletes. Often they were destined for the sacrificial altar.

**It’s About Time**

Time obsessed the Maya. They recorded
the cycles of Venus, which repeats its “wanderings” across the heavens every 584 days. They measured the length of the solar year to 365.242000 days, very close to the true value of 365.242198 days. This they called the Vague Year.

The Maya calendar consisted of two intersecting spoked wheels, the Haab or astronomical year, and the Tzolkin, a 260-day cycle that helped priests know the appropriate times for farming and religious ceremonies.

Alongside ran their Sacred Round of 260 days—13 months of 20 days each. Their solar year consisted of 18 of these months, totaling 360 days. The five days remaining were considered times of extreme bad luck.

Most modern math uses the base 10 decimal system, one digit for each finger and thumb. The Maya used a base 20, employing both fingers and toes. Unial, the word for their 20-day month, is derived from unic, which meant “human being.” To measure longer time periods, Maya mathematicians invented the Long Count, which they expressed as a series of five numbers. For example, 13.0.0.0.0 represented August 13, 3114 B.C. This was ‘zero day,’ when, they believed, the world began.

**Your Average Maya**

Such matters preoccupied the kings, scribes, and noble elite. But what of the ordinary people? What manner of lives did they lead? They lived in oval-shaped houses thatched with palm leaves—an efficient design that served to keep out both torrential rain and the summer heat. They farmed the land, raising crops of corn, beans, tomatoes, and squash. Dog, deer, rabbit, and hot peppers rounded out their diet.

By the time the first European explorers arrived in the 1500s, Maya civilization had largely run its course. Most major sites had vanished, reclaimed by the forest’s enveloping arms. Why? Historians can only speculate. But the story of Copan may hold one answer.

By 700 B.C., Copan was entering its greatest period of political and artistic expansion. Building proceeded at such a great pace that precious farmland was consumed. Farmers were forced to grow crops in terraced fields on the surrounding hills. Copan’s king conquered nearby Quiriguá and installed a Copan lord there. This lord turned on his king and launched a rebellion.

On May 3, 738 B.C., the Copan king was captured in battle and sacrificed at Quiriguá. Copan never recovered. The building of monuments soon ceased. The land was so badly ravaged that only in the 20th century—1300 years later—have population levels grown back to their former levels.

Too much destruction, too much neglect of the environment, and too much blood.
Lesson Three

History Overview and Assignments

Words Take Shape

Maya stucco glyphs displayed in the museum at Palenque, Mexico

Reading and Assignments

- Review the discussion questions and vocabulary, then read the article: Deciphering Maya Glyphs.
- Narrate about today’s reading using the appropriate notebook page. Be sure to answer the discussion questions and include key people, events, and dates within the narration.
- Define the vocabulary words in the context of the reading and put the word and its definition in the vocabulary section of your history notebook.
- Be sure to visit www.ArtiosHCS.com for additional resources.

Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sarcophagus</th>
<th>hieroglyphics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>codices</td>
<td>contemplate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion Questions

1. What was the name for Maya books?
2. How were the Maya glyphs translated?
The Maya ruins at Palenque are both mysterious and beautiful. Examples of Maya glyphs are found throughout the temples. One building on the site is in fact named the Temple of the Inscriptions.

Taken by Peter Andersen 14. February 2005

On June 15, 1952, Mexican archaeologists broke through a passageway within the Temple of the Inscriptions at Palenque. They stumbled into an underground crypt holding a limestone sarcophagus. Inside lay the bejeweled body of a ruler of Palenque, his face covered by a haunting jade mask. Who was this great leader? No one knew. They could not read the hieroglyphics carved on the sarcophagus.

In the past few decades archaeologists have learned to read what the Mayas wrote. Today we know the names of kings and queens, how they lived, and when they died, transforming our view of Maya culture.

The Mayas covered their buildings and monuments with fascinating signs called glyphs. They also wrote books. Known as codices, they constructed them from fig tree bark, hammered thin. They coated the surface with lime, then folded it back and forth like an accordion. Some codices stretched for more than 20 feet. In 1562, at Mani, Bishop Landa destroyed 5000 Maya idols and burned every book he could find. Only a handful have survived.

Glyphs found on the pages of Maya codices, such as the Madrid Codex, help researchers piece together the culture and history of the Mayas.

While destroying Maya culture, Landa also recorded it. He even wrote down their alphabet—27 Maya glyphs accompanied by their equivalent letters in 16th-century Spanish:

A, A, A, B, B, C, T, E, H, I,
CA, K, L, M, N, O, O, P,
PP, CU, KU, X, X, U, U, Z

Three As, two Bs, two Xs—it is a curious collection. In the early 1950s a Russian researcher, Yuri Valentinovich Knorosov, figured it out. Bishop Landa had given the
name of each Spanish letter and asked his Maya informant to draw its sign.

**Breaking the Codex**

No one took much notice. It was the height of the Cold War and Knorosov was a Communist. Besides, the view in the West was that glyphs represented ideas directly. They were “memory-joggers,” not words.

The next breakthrough came from another Russian, Tania Proskouriakoff, who grew up in the United States. At Piedras Niegas she studied *stelae*—carved stone slabs—which the Mayas placed at the foot of important buildings. Each showed a figure, presumably a god, seated in a niche. Proskouriakoff noticed a curious pattern of numbers on them: a date, another date accompanied by a frog glyph, and a third date with a toothache glyph. Proskouriakoff grasped their significance.

And a bloody history it has turned out to be. There are tales of artfully plotted wars, of battles and the capture of prisoners, of kings dying at their enemies’ hands in ritual sacrifice. They have altered our idea of the Mayas from a peace-loving people, ruled by contemplative kings and astronomer-priests, to a collection of fiercely warring city-states.

Maya words can be written as a single glyph representing the word, a set of glyphs for each syllable, or a combination of the two. *Pakal* is the Maya word for shield. The figures in the niches were kings—not gods. These were real people, real places, and real events. The Mayas were recording their past. This was their history.
Lesson Four

History Overview and Assignments

Children of the Sun

The Inca Empire ranged 2,500 miles from Ecuador to southern Chile before its destruction at the hands of Spanish conquistadors in 1532.

Reading and Assignments

- Review the discussion questions and vocabulary, then read the article: The Inca Empire: Children of the Sun.
- Narrate about today's reading using the appropriate notebook page. Be sure to answer the discussion questions and include key people, events, and dates within the narration.
- Define the vocabulary words in the context of the reading and put the word and its definition in the vocabulary section of your history notebook.
- Be sure to visit www.ArtiosHCS.com for additional resources.

Vocabulary

- conquistador
- reciprocity

Key People, Places, and Events

Incas Machu Picchu Cuzco

Discussion Questions

1. What legend is told of the beginning of the Incan empire?
2. What city was the center of the Incan empire?
3. Explain how the Incan rulers transferred their power from one generation to the next.
4. What is Machu Picchu?
5. What aided the Incan rulers in controlling their empire?
6. How did the Inca keep track of things?
When Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro landed in Peru in 1532, he found unimaginable riches. The Inca Empire was in full bloom. The streets may not have been paved with gold—but their temples were.

The Coricancha, or Temple of Gold, boasted an ornamental garden where the clods of earth and maize plants, complete with leaves and corn cobs, were fashioned from silver and gold. Nearby grazed a flock of 20 golden llamas and their lambs, watched over by solid gold shepherds. Inca nobles strolled around on sandals with silver soles protecting their feet from the hard streets of Cuzco.

The Inca called their empire Tahuantinsuyu, or Land of the Four Quarters. It stretched 2,500 miles from Quito, Ecuador, to beyond Santiago, Chile. Within its domain were rich coastal settlements, high mountain valleys, rain-drenched tropical forests, and the driest of deserts. The Inca controlled perhaps 10 million people, speaking a hundred different tongues. It was the largest empire on earth at the time. Yet when Pizarro executed its last emperor, Atahualpa, the Inca Empire was only 50 years old.

The true history of the Inca is still being written. According to one story, four brothers emerged from Lake Titicaca. During a long journey, all but one disappeared. Manco Capac survived to plunge a golden staff into the ground where the Rios Tullamayo and Huantanay meet. He founded the sacred city of Cuzco.

The Inca Empire: Children of the Sun

This mummified girl was discovered in 1995 on Mount Ampato in the Andes Mountains of Peru at an altitude of over 20,000 feet. She was sacrificed by Inca priests nearly 500 years ago.

The Sacred City of Cuzco

Cuzco is nestled in a mountain valley 10,000 feet above sea level. It formed the center of the Inca world. The first emperor, Pachacuti, transformed it from a modest village to a great city laid out in the shape of a puma. He also installed Inti, the Sun God, as the Incas’ official patron, building him a wondrous temple.

And he did something else—which may explain the Inca’s sudden rise to power. He expanded the cult of ancestor worship. When a ruler died, his son received all his
earthly powers—but none of his earthly possessions. All his land, buildings, and servants went to his panaqa, or other male relatives. The relatives used it to preserve his mummy and sustain his political influence. In this way, dead emperors maintained a living presence.

A new ruler had to create his own income. The only way to do that was to grab new lands, subdue more people, and expand the Empire of the Sun.

From the heights of Machu Picchu, the entire Urabamba Valley in the Andes Mountains can be seen.

How was this done? Life in traditional Andean villages was fragile. One married couple would help another planting or harvesting crops. They would receive help in their own fields in return. The Inca tailored this practice of reciprocity—give-and-take—to their own needs.

Their cities centered on great plazas where they threw vast parties for neighboring chiefs. Festivities continued for days on end, sometimes lasting a month. Dignitaries were fed and given gifts of gold, jewels, and textiles. Only then would the Inca make their requests for labor, to increase food production, to build irrigation schemes, to terrace hillsides, or to extend the limits of the empire.

Machu Picchu and Empire

The Inca were great builders. They loved stone—almost as much as they revered gold. At magical Machu Picchu, a frontier fortress and a sacred site, a mystic column, the hitching post of the Sun, is carved from the living rock. Another slab is shaped to echo the mountain beyond.

Spanish leader Francisco Pizarro captured and ransomed the last Inca emperor, Atahualpa, for 24 tons of gold—worth $267 million today. After receiving the ransom from the Inca people, the conquistadors strangled Atahualpa anyway.

Temples and fortifications at Machu Picchu were constructed from vast, pillowy boulders, some weighing 100 tons or more. Constructed without mortar, the joins between them are so tight as to deny a knife blade entry. A vast labor force was required. There are records of 20 men working on a single stone, chipping away, hoisting and lowering, polishing it with sand, hour-by-hour, for an entire year.

A network of highways allowed Inca emperors to control their sprawling empire. One ran down the spine of the Andes, another along the coast. Inca builders could craft anything the treacherous terrain required—steep paths cut along mountain sides, rope suspension bridges thrown across steep ravines, or treacherous
causeways traversing floodplains. Every mile and a half they built way stations as resting points. Bands of official runners raced between them, covering 150 miles a day. A message could be sent 1,200 miles from Cuzco to Quito in under a week.

Everyone was expected to contribute to the empire. Land was divided in three. One third was worked for the emperor, one third was reserved for the gods, and one third the people kept for themselves. All were required to pay taxes as tribute.

The Inca could not write. Tax collectors and bureaucrats kept track of things with quipu, knotted strings. Varying lengths, colors, knot-types, and positions enabled them to store enormous quantities of information.

Despite its glory, the Inca was a brittle empire, held together by promises and threats. When Pizarro executed the last emperor, it rapidly collapsed. Catholic priests demanding allegiance to a new Christian god soon replaced the Children of the Sun. As they had for thousands of years, the hardy peoples of the Andes adapted. They took what they must from their new masters and held onto as many of their old ways as they could.
Aztec cosmogram in the pre-Hispanic Codex Fejérváry-Mayer—the fire god Xiuhtecuhtli is in the center.

**Reading and Assignments**

- Review the discussion questions and vocabulary, then read the article: *The Aztec World*.
- Narrate about today’s reading using the appropriate notebook page. Be sure to answer the discussion questions and include key people, events, and dates within the narration.
Define the vocabulary words in the context of the reading and put the word and its definition in the vocabulary section of your history notebook.

Be sure to visit www.ArtiosHCS.com for additional resources.

**Vocabulary**

insatiable

tenacious

**Key People, Places, and Events**

Aztec

Tenochtitlán

**Discussion Questions**

1. Where was the capital of the Aztec civilization located?
2. What is the legend of the origin of the Aztecs?

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Adapted for Middle School from the book:

*Ancient Civilizations*

*source: ushistory.org*

*The Aztec World*

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The Aztec empire of 1519, shown in orange, ruled over vast expanses of central Mexico.

**A Kingdom of Blood**

In 1978, while digging in the basement of a bookstore, workers for Mexico City’s power company hit a huge stone disk. Almost 11 feet across, engraved on its surface was the dismembered body of Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec moon goddess. In the center lay her torso, naked but for a belt of snakes. Around the edges were scattered her severed arms, legs and head. According to legend, she had been slain and cut to pieces by her brother Huitzilopochtli moments after his birth.

**Tenochtitlán: A Legendary City**

The Aztecs dominated the Valley of Mexico for 100 years, until their downfall at the hands of Hernan Cortez and his conquistadors in 1521. They built their capital in the most unlikely of places—the center of a lake. Tenochtitlán was a city surrounded by water, with temples and pyramids—sparkling white monuments and ceremonial squares gleaming in the tropical sun. It sat in Lake Texcoco, crisscrossed by canals and connected by three broad causeways to the shore. Along the lake edge the Aztec people created *chinampas*, or raised fields of rotting vegetation and lake-mud. Extraordinarily fertile, they yielded many crops per year.
One story central to the Aztec belief system was the tale of their origins. Aztecs believed that one day while doing housework, the ancient Earth goddess Coatlicue (Serpent Skirt) was impregnated by a ball of feathers. Coyolxauhqui and the 400 stars of the southern sky, her children of the night, grew jealous and determined to kill her. They sliced off her head.

Her unborn child, Huitzilopochtli, learned of the plot. He leapt from her body fully grown. In his hand he brandished a club lined with slivers of razor-sharp black volcanic glass called obsidian. He chopped up Coyolxauhqui and her brothers—a metaphor for the way the sun overwhelms the moon and stars when it rises at dawn each morning.

Huitzilopochtli commanded the Aztecs to travel south until they found a cactus with an eagle nesting in its branches. After many adventures and much misery, in the year 1 Flint (1324 A.D.) they discovered an island with a prickly pear cactus. Sitting upon it was an eagle with outstretched wings and a snake held tightly in its talons. This became the site of Tenochtitlán, now Mexico City. The Aztecs believed the oval red fruit of the cactus symbolized the human heart. Today an eagle, cactus, and snake are the national emblems of the Republic of Mexico.

**Rise and Fall of an Empire**

Within 50 years of founding Tenochtitlán, the Aztec had extended their rule all across the valley. They formed political alliances with other states, skillfully intermarried with their nobles, and fought tenaciously in battle. Their empire was created by a culture of war. Boys were taught from an early age to be warriors. A warrior who captured four or more prisoners could become a Jaguar or Eagle Knight, and wear brightly colored body-suits of feathers. Girls were prepared for the battle of childbirth. Women who died in labor became goddesses, accompanying the sun across the sky each day from noon until sunset.

By 1519 the Aztec cycle of conquest and exploitation was at its peak. More and more conquered peoples provided tribute, the basis of the Aztecs’ immense wealth. More and more prisoners were captured for human sacrifice. Conquistadors were astonished by Aztec marketplaces. They found dealers in gold, silver, and precious stones. They saw embroidered clothing, cotton goods, and cacao beans for chocolate drinks. Jaguar pelts and deerskins, as well as the brilliant blue plumes of the cotinga bird lined the marketplace. Food included vegetables and fruits, turkeys, young dogs, wild game, and many kinds of honey. There
were sellers of tobacco, liquid amber, and herbs. All this and more poured into Tenochtitlán. At the same time, the conquistadors heard tales of the day 20,000 captives, some roped together through their noses, wound through the streets to be sacrificed at the top of the Great Temple steps.

Within two years, the Aztec culture was destroyed by the Spanish. Tenochtitlán lay in ruins. There would be no more human sacrifices. And, as the Aztec feared, without life-sustaining blood their gods seemed to desert them, and darkness descended on their world.

Quetzalcoatl was the most influential god of the Aztec religion. Called the “Feathered Serpent of Ancient Mexico,” he was claimed to have invented fire and discovered maize, the staple food of the Aztec people. Created, produced by Katherine Guardado and David Shindle.
Lesson Six

History Overview and Assignments

Two Worlds Collide

The route of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire in central Mexico. Courtesy of Yavidaxiu

Reading and Assignments

- Review the discussion questions and vocabulary, then read the article: Clash of Cultures: Two Worlds Collide.
- Narrate about today’s reading using the appropriate notebook page. Be sure to answer the discussion questions and include key people, events, and dates within the narration.
- Define the vocabulary word in the context of the reading and put the word and its definition in the vocabulary section of your history notebook.
- Be sure to visit www.ArtiosHCS.com for additional resources.

Vocabulary

prominent

Key People, Places, and Events

Montezuma
Hernan Cortez

Discussion Questions

1. How did the Spaniards view the Aztecs? Why?
2. Why was there dissension among the states of the Aztecs?
3. How did disease come to South America?
4. What were the differences in the leaders Montezuma and Cortez?
Montezuma was the unluckiest of kings. History elected him to oversee the ruin of the last great Central American empire. Other Aztec rulers had encountered setbacks in their conquests. For Montezuma, it was different. He confronted an alien empire from across the sea. In its leader, the Spaniard Hernan Cortez, he faced an opponent as astute and skillful as himself. In the end, Cortez proved the more determined of the two.

In the wake of Columbus' historic voyage in 1492, expeditions, especially from imperial Spain, swarmed into Aztec territory. They came in search of gold and souls—gold to enrich the coffers of the Spanish king (and their own) and heathen souls to rescue for Christianity. Within a generation, America’s ancient civilizations were crushed. Both the Aztec and Inca empires collapsed after campaigns lasting just a couple of years. How did they fall so fast? Historians suggest many causes.

**Cannons vs. Clubs**

The Spanish army was the most ruthless fighting force on earth. It had not suffered a single defeat for 150 years. The Spaniards possessed cannon and *arquebus* (early muskets), which terrified the American tribes. Horses, which the Aztecs had never encountered, gave the Spaniards greater mobility. Above all there was the Spanish sword. It could kill with a single lightning thrust. Against all this, the Aztec’s primary weapons were wooden clubs studded with obsidian glass.

Wars were religious rituals to the Aztecs. A prime objective was the capture of prisoners for sacrifice. During the siege of Tenochtitlán, conquistadors watched from a distance. They were horrified as Aztecs dragged captives up the steps of the Great Temple and ripped out their hearts. The Spanish viewed the Aztecs as savages.

Aztec warriors had several opportunities to kill Cortez. But each time, they tried to capture him alive—and each time he escaped. Spaniards killed Aztec leaders whenever they could. Prominent in their brightly feathered costumes, they often led the warrior ranks. At their deaths, ordinary soldiers became demoralized and fled.

Atahualpa was the last Inca king. He was captured by Francisco Pizarro, who received tons of gold and silver for Atahualpa’s safe release. After claiming a conversion to Christianity in order to prevent being burned alive, Atahualpa was strangled to death and then burned by Pizarro’s men.
Dissension and Disease

The Aztec Empire was a loose confederation of allies and subject states. Many deeply resented Aztec rule, their dreaded tax collectors, and the massive tributes they paid. In the Spanish, they saw their saviors. Cortez exploited this unrest with great skill. In his final assault on Tenochtitlán, his band of 900 Spanish soldiers was joined by perhaps 150,000 natives.

The Europeans brought with them diseases such as measles and smallpox, against which the American tribes had no natural immunity. They spread like wildfire, killing rulers of both the Aztecs and Incas, along with millions of other people.

Finally, the personalities of Montezuma and Hernan Cortez must be considered. Both were gifted generals and wily politicians. But while Cortez was a hardheaded realist, Montezuma was mired in magic and superstition.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Long before Cortez landed at Vera Cruz on Good Friday in the year 1519, portents of doom appeared. A comet “bright as to turn night into day” lit the sky. Dismayed soothsayers and astrologers maintained they did not see it. For this unhelpful approach, Montezuma cast them into cages where they starved to death. Then an important temple burned. Lastly, hunters brought Montezuma a bird with a mirror strapped to its head. In it he saw large numbers of people “advance as for war; they appeared to be half men half deer.”

How much of this is fact? How much is myth? By the time spies brought tales of mountains floating upon the sea (Spanish galleons) and men with “flesh very white ...a long beard and hair to their ears,” Montezuma’s nerves were shattered. Was this the legendary feathered serpent god, Quetzalcoatl, who having vanished into the eastern ocean, now returned?

Montezuma half-convinced himself Cortez was a god.

Hernan Cortez and conquistadors like him looted the land of the Aztecs. Cortez brought home gold, silver, and jewels from the New World, which inspired settlement in the Americas.

He sent Cortez the feathery costume of Quetzalcoatl with other gifts, including “twenty ducks made of gold, very natural looking.” Cortez took the bold move of marching on Tenochtitlán. With a force of 500 Spanish soldiers and whatever warriors he recruited along the way, he faced Montezuma on the city’s southern causeway on November 8, 1519. Montezuma invited him in.
The Ancient Civilizations Crumble

Was this a political blunder or a shrewd tactical move? Once inside the city, Cortez found himself isolated, at the mercy of the Aztec Empire. He quickly rectified matters. In another bold stroke, he kidnapped Montezuma. With 30 seasoned soldiers, he entered the royal palace and gave the emperor a stark choice—come with us, or die. Montezuma, fearful, puzzled, dejected, and bewildered by these men-gods, submitted.

Months later, while trying to calm a rebellion against the interlopers, Montezuma was killed in a firestorm of rocks and javelins. Cortez and his crew barely escaped with their lives.

Nine months later he returned with a huge army of Spaniards and native recruits. First they set siege to Tenochtitlán, denying it food and fresh water. On August 13, 1521, Tenochtitlán fell. A decade later the Incas, plagued by civil war and decimated by smallpox, faced Francisco Pizarro. They suffered a similar fate.

These great civilizations live on in their legends, their art and architecture, lovingly reclaimed by archaeologists and historians. Their foods transformed Europe—tomatoes, corn, and potatoes became staple foods of much of the Old World’s growing population. A new Atlantic World that incorporated elements of European, African, and American cultures was taking shape.