

Accounts of Tenochtitlan

Aztec Empire | Mexican History | Close Reading | Visual Literacy

High School

Overview & Instructional Use

In this teacher-guided lesson, students will compare two depictions of Tenochtitlan from a letter by Hernán Cortés—a woodcut map and written descriptions—to consider how different types of sources overlap in some ways and diverge in others.

Flexible Implementation Options

- Focus on just the woodcut map or add in one or both written excerpts
- Break students into groups or discuss all material as a class
- Explore the illustrations in the [entire letter](#) to discuss its publication context and the Spanish Empire
- Use the student worksheet if you want students to work independently or in small groups

Materials – Download [here](#)

- Computer and projector for displaying documents
- Accounts of Tenochtitlan Lesson teacher guide
- Primary sources (download print-friendly versions [here](#))
 - [High-resolution image of the map of Tenochtitlan](#)
 - [High-resolution images of Cortés' letter in English](#)
- [Student worksheet](#) or other place for students to record observations

Procedure

1. **Map Analysis:** Display the map of Tenochtitlan, and give students time to observe and discuss.
2. **Close Reading:** Distribute [translated excerpts](#) of Cortés' descriptions of the city, and give students time to read and generate questions.
3. **Compare:** Prompt students to compare the visual and textual descriptions.
4. Bring in the **background information** below when it is most relevant to students.
5. **Optional Extensions:** Analyze the [entire bound collection of Cortés' letters](#), including the coat of arms of Charles V and a portrait of Pope Clement VII, to discuss the European context of the book.

Introduction

You and your students will look at parts of a letter addressed to the Spanish King Charles V from the explorer Hernán Cortés. Among other things, the letter describes one of the most significant events of the sixteenth century: the Spanish encounter with the Aztec Empire in the territory now known as Mexico.

Its contents are also well known because it has an unusual form; it is an extended text illustrated with several important woodcuts, including a map of Tenochtitlan. The letter's form and style might be a surprise to your students.

Note on Terminology: Many distinctive Indigenous populations inhabited the lands we now know as Mexico at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The most dominant of these groups was the Mexica, from which the name of the country would later be derived. The Mexica are more widely known today as the Aztecs, the term that will be used here.

Step 1: Map Analysis

1. Display or distribute the map print.
2. Explain to students that after Spanish troops invaded the Aztec Empire, Cortés wrote a letter to the King of Spain, published with this printed map, describing what they encountered in the land we today know as Mexico. While the land was new to Europeans, it was well-settled by Indigenous peoples. Reference the **background information** below as needed.
3. Have students look closely at the woodcut print and describe what they see.
4. Discuss their observations, using the **discussion questions** below as desired.
5. If desired, have students record their observations on the student worksheet.

Details

Start with the letter's most famous element: the earliest surviving depiction of the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan. It offers an alluring glimpse of something otherwise buried by conquest, environmental change, and time. Sometimes the map is described as the Nuremberg map (for its place of production, now part of Germany) or the Cortés Map.

A close examination of the print will allow you and your students to talk about Tenochtitlan and consider what it might have looked and felt like before the European invasion.

The smaller map on the left shows labeled places, including rivers, along the coastline. The larger map on the right gives the name to this print, since it represents the city of Tenochtitlan, as seen through Spanish eyes. The space between the two maps on this single page is not intended to show the accurate distance between the coastline and the landlocked Tenochtitlan, which is approximately 423 kilometers (or 263 miles) inland.

Discussion Questions

- This print shows two different kinds of maps, one on the left, and one on the right. Describe how the two maps are different, not just in their size and shape, but the kinds of things that they depict.
- Look carefully at the writing in different places on the print. Can you recognize any words? Does this help identify what is being mapped?
- The map on the right is larger and shows a birds-eye view of Tenochtitlan. Judging from the image, what are some of the city's main characteristics?
- A map of a city is not the city itself, but instead someone's idea of what the city might look like. Do you think that this map could be an accurate depiction of the city? Why or why not? How would we know?
- Given that the map of Tenochtitlan is pictured from above, how would the artist have made this map five hundred years ago, before air travel?
- How is this map like other maps that you are familiar with? What stands out as distinctive or unusual in this view of the city?
- The actual city represented in this print was designed and built by Aztec people. What kinds of choices and challenges can we imagine they faced as they developed this city?
- What do you think it might feel like to live in and move around a city like this?
- What are some reasons that could explain why the map was made? What are some reasons that explain why the map might have been published in Europe?
- This map is a woodcut print. Does anyone know what a woodcut is? Can you imagine how you would make a woodcut and turn it into an image like this? What steps would be taken? What is the benefit of using a woodcut to make a print, instead of just painting or drawing an image? (The original woodcut was executed in simple black ink, but the one in the Newberry's collection was also painted with various colors, which makes it particularly special.)
- What else do you want to know about the map? What new questions does it raise for you?

Step 2: Close Reading

1. Distribute the excerpts and give the students enough time to read them carefully. The class could work on these excerpts individually, together and sequentially, or groups. The student worksheet has close reading questions for each excerpt.
2. Come together as a class or in small groups to share observations, using the **discussion questions** below as desired. If students worked in groups, they could take turns presenting their findings to other groups or the entire class.

Details

Next, students will read [translated excerpts](#) from the letter to the Spanish king, in which Cortés describes with wonder what he encounters upon entering the city.

This text is a translation of Cortés' description of Tenochtitlan, which he calls "Temixtitlan," and portrays a vibrant capital city. He mentions the name of the emperor in power at the time, Moctezuma, which he spells "Mutezczuma."

These excerpts begin by addressing the Spanish king. Then the first focuses on general descriptions of the city, while the second describes the enormous market where commerce and social lives are intertwined in public view.

Discussion Questions for Excerpt 1: Cortés' Description of the City

- Identify some of the details mentioned in the above excerpt that we can see represented in the map of Tenochtitlan that you have already looked at.
- Cortés mentions several Spanish cities—Seville, Granada, and then Salamanca in the next excerpt. In a different section, he recalls the Italian city of Venice. Why do you think he compares Tenochtitlan to these European cities?
- What comments suggest that Cortés was impressed by what he saw?
- This description emphasizes the water that surrounds the island; what are some advantages to building a city in the middle of a lake? What are some possible disadvantages?
- Do you think Cortés' description of the city is accurate? Is there anything you think he might have left out?
- Does this excerpt answer any of your questions about the map? Does it raise any new questions?

Discussion Questions for Excerpt 2: Cortés' Description of the Marketplace

- Discuss the description of the market, which Aztecs called *tianquiztli* in Nahuatl (is anyone familiar with the word *tianguis*, which is still used today? Tell the class!). From the description of goods for sale there, what can we understand about the way people ate and otherwise lived?
- What items described are you familiar with from your own diet?
- What other things happen in or around the market? What kinds of people and activities are described besides the selling of goods?
- Do you think Cortés' description of the market is accurate? Is there anything you think he might have left out?
- Did anything in this description surprise you?

- What are some of the indications in this excerpt and the previous that Tenochtitlan was a highly organized and structured city?
- What else would you like to know about Tenochtitlan?

Step 3: Comparison

Now, the students should be able to compare the visual information offered by the map with the textual descriptions, demonstrating how different forms of documentation can overlap in some ways and diverge in others. The class might also discuss the sophistication of Aztec culture and its distinctive attributes.

1. Ask students to put the maps and the excerpts side-by-side and compare the kinds of information they pulled out of each.
2. Discuss how different kinds of sources provide information in different ways. This could also be a good time to bring in the **background information below**, other information about the scale and sophistication of the Aztec Empire, or students' prior knowledge, if appropriate.

Comparison Discussion Questions

- Can you identify things described in the excerpts on the maps?
- What kind of information did the maps give you? What kinds of information did the excerpts give you?
- Which source, the map or the description, do you think was most informative? Why?
- What are some of the indications in the map and the excerpts that Tenochtitlan was a highly organized and structured city?
- What would you like to know about Tenochtitlan that isn't depicted in the map or the excerpts? Why do you think these things were left out of both sources?

Background

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the lands that we now know as Mexico were inhabited by various Indigenous populations. The most dominant of these groups was the Mexica, from which the name of the country would later be derived. The Mexica are more widely known today as the Aztecs, the term that will be used here. The Aztecs were imperialists who controlled territories stretching from Central Mexico into Central America. There were, however, pockets of resistance where distinctive Native populations fought to maintain their sovereignty against the dominant Aztecs. This included the areas of Michoacan, home to the massive kingdom of the Purépecha (also known as Tarascans), second in size to the Aztec Empire, and Tlaxcala, a republic that was engaged in a perpetual war with the Aztecs.

For two hundred years, from approximately 1325 to 1521, the Aztec Empire was led by a succession of kings who worked to continuously expand their vast control of territory. Those kings developed and ruled from their capital city called Tenochtitlan, which translates from their language of Nahuatl into “place of the nopal cactus.” The place sign for Tenochtitlan is still visible in the center of Mexico’s national flag. Tenochtitlan was located where Mexico City sits today, in the highland valley in the center of the country. In contrast to the present geography, however, the valley was dominated by a set of interlocking lakes. Tenochtitlan was an island situated in the middle of the largest one, Lake Texcoco. One of the most remarkable aspects of the Aztec capital was its engineering, since its designers developed not only a dam to keep salty water away from the island, but also causeways to allow passage to the mainland. Most importantly, the Aztecs innovated a form of raised agricultural plots, called chinampas, which expanded Tenochtitlan’s farmable lands. By the early sixteenth century, the population is estimated to have been between 150,000 to 200,000 people, a size that surpassed most European cities at the time.

In 1519, European ships arrived on the Mexican coastline in a place they called Veracruz, or “True Cross,” since they sailed under the banner of Christianity. These were Spaniards whose religious identity as Roman Catholics fueled and justified their desire to capture and convert the people they encountered. These soldiers were led by a man named Hernán Cortés (sometimes written as Hernando or Fernando Cortés). Their unexpected and unwelcome arrival spelled the beginning of a devastating new era for Native populations in the territory, and the beginning of the end of Aztec dominance. Cortés and his men made their way inland towards the Aztec capital, building alliances with other Indigenous people who both regarded the Aztecs as enemies and felt safer siding with the Spanish. After the long trek inland, Cortés and his soldiers first glimpsed the capital city of Tenochtitlan, which surprised and impressed them.

In 1520, Cortés wrote an extended letter to the Spanish King Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, to detail his findings. The letter was published in Europe as a book in 1524, where it became a best-seller. Today the most famous element of this carefully bound letter is the print that presents us with the earliest known depiction of the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan. Additional prints include an intricate depiction of Spanish heraldry and a profile portrait of the Pope.

These were some of Cortés’ first steps in laying claim to the lands which were rich in both people and material goods. Often referred to as the Spanish Conquest, but also described as the Spanish-Aztec War, the two-year invasion and siege resulted in the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521. By the time Cortés’ letter was published in Latin in 1524, Spaniards were actively building a new European-style capital in Tenochtitlan’s place. Seated directly on top of the remains of Tenochtitlan, Mexico City was now the center of what the Spaniards called New Spain (1521-1821).

Extension Activities

The map and letter were bound together in a [1524 book](#), one of the first ways Cortés' observations circulated to the European public.

You could encourage your students to begin or end the lesson by [leafing through at least the first few pages](#) to see how the text and images are presented together. The letter's form and style might be a surprise to your students.

Exploring other illustrations in the book will help students understand the Spanish Empire and the context of the letter's publication.

Heraldry of Charles V

This print is the first image in the book through which Cortés' letter circulated to the European public in the 1520s. It shows the [heraldry, or family coat of arms, of the king of Spain, who had recently been crowned the Holy Roman Emperor](#). Becoming emperor meant that his domain extended well beyond Spain to include Germany, Austria, northern Italy, as well as the Southern Italian kingdoms of Naples, Sicily, and Sardinia.

In some ways the heraldry is like a portrait of the king but made from significant political and religious symbols instead of an image of his face. It includes imagery related to the Order of the Golden Fleece, a group of knights identified with chivalric or polite society, since the king belonged to that order. The symbol for the Order of the Golden Fleece is the dangling lamb at the bottom of the image. [Explore more of the symbols in the heraldry here.](#)

Consider the fact that Cortés' letter was written in 1520, while the prints for the book were made in 1524.

Discussion Questions

- This print is all about the king. But why not use a simple portrait of the king, instead? How is this different or maybe even better than an actual depiction of the man himself?
- Why do you think that for the publication of the letter, they added this image that refers to the Spanish king? What does the letter have to do with the king? Why would the king want to be associated with the letter?
- What forms and symbols do you see in the print?
- Which details might refer to the king's power?
- What details would you include in your own heraldic print?

Portrait of Pope Clement VII

[This print shows a profile view of the pope](#), the head of the Catholic church. His portrait is based on an engraving by the Italian artist Marcantonio Raimondi. Pope Clement VII (in office 1523-1534) had just become pope at the time of the publication of Cortés'

letter in 1524. In addition to his name referenced in the round frame (roundel), we see the letters P and M, referring to “Pontifex Maximus,” or ‘supreme pope’ in Latin, the language of the church at this time. The shape of this portrait reminds us of commemorative medals that were popular at the time.

The horizontal inscription at the base of the portrait reads: “Super Aspidum/et basiliscum ambulabis” (“You will walk above the asp and basilisk”). This refers to Christ’s victory over Satan, and in this case, extends to the idea that under the pope’s guidance, Catholicism will battle New World idolatry. The same year that Cortés’ letter was published with all of these prints, Pope Clement VII approved the dispatch of the first twelve Franciscan missionaries to Mexico.

Discussion Questions

- We often see profile portraits like this one on stamps and coins. Describe the features of this portrait. (Figure in profile, faces left, elaborate cloak, jeweled fastener, plain background, round frame, inscriptions). Why do think this form is so common? What advantages does it have?
- Like the map and the heraldic print, this is another woodcut. What parts would have been carved away from the wood block to create this image?
- Why do you think that this portrait of the pope was included in the publication of Cortés letter? What does the letter have to do with the pope?
- What did the Spanish entry into Mexico and control of the people who lived there have to do with the Pope or with the Catholic church? How was religion related to Spanish colonial expansion?