NO PREP

The Aztec and Inca

Two Empires at the Edge of the World

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

The Aztec and Inca: Two Empires at the Edge of the World

Two Empires, One Fateful Century

In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, two of the most powerful empires in human history rose independently on opposite ends of the American continents. The Aztec Triple Alliance dominated central Mexico from its island capital of Tenochtitlan, a city larger than any in contemporary Europe. Across thousands of miles of jungle and mountain, the Inca Empire — known as Tawantinsuyu, or 'The Four Regions' — stretched along the western spine of South America from modern-day Colombia to Chile. Neither empire knew the other existed. Both would be destroyed within a single generation of European contact. These two civilizations are often lumped together in textbooks under 'Pre-Columbian Americas,' but they were as

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The Aztec World: Tribute, War, and the Sun

The Aztec, who called themselves the Mexica, rose from obscure origins in the early fourteenth century. According to their own tradition, they were a wandering people guided by their god Huitzilopochtli to an eagle perched on a cactus in the middle of Lake Texcoco, the spot where they would build Tenochtitlan. By the mid-1400s, the Mexica had formed the Triple Alliance with the city-states of Texcoco and Tlacopan and began systematically conquering neighboring peoples. By 1519, their empire stretched across most of central Mexico and extracted tribute from hundreds of subject peoples. The Aztec worldview centered on a cosmic bargain: the gods had

sacrificed themselves to create the current world, and humans owed a debt of blood that had to be repaid continuously through ritual offerings. This belief drove the institution of human sacrifice and the 'Flowery Wars', ritualized conflicts designed specifically to capture enemies for sacrifice rather than to kill them outright. Spanish accounts exaggerated the scale of sacrifice for political purposes, but archaeological evidence confirms it was a central feature of Aztec religious life. The Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan, excavated beneath Mexico City since 1978, has yielded thousands of offering deposits, ritual objects, and human remains that are slowly rewriting the narrative of what Aztec religion actually looked like.

The Inca World: Roads, Quipus, and the Son of the Sun

The Inca Empire was the largest in pre-Columbian America, covering approximately 770,000 square miles and a population estimated between 6 and 14 million people at its height. The Sapa Inca (the emperor) was considered literally divine, the son of the sun god Inti. Unlike the Aztec, who ruled through a tribute system that left subject peoples largely autonomous, the Inca imposed direct administrative control over conquered territories. They resettled populations, imposed a labor tax called mit'a, and tied the entire empire together with over 40,000 kilometers of roads: a feat accomplished without the wheel, without draft animals larger than the llama, and without iron tools. The Inca had no writing system in the conventional sense, but they developed an extraordinary recording technology called the quipu, bundles of knotted cords that could encode numerical information and, possibly, narrative content. Quipu keepers called quipucamayocs maintained these records for the state. When Spanish administrators burned the quipus as objects of devil worship, they destroyed an enormous archive of Andean history. Researchers are still working to decode surviving quipus and recover what was lost.

European Contact and the Collapse of Empires

The Spanish conquests of both empires were shockingly rapid by the standards of military history. Hernan Cortes arrived in Mexico in 1519 with roughly 500 men and had brought down the Aztec Empire by 1521 — a period of just two years. Francisco Pizarro captured the Inca emperor Atahualpa in 1532 with fewer than 200 soldiers. In both cases, Spanish military technology (firearms, steel, and horses) played a role, but the decisive factors were more complex: both empires were riven by internal political divisions that the Spanish exploited ruthlessly, and both were

devastated by European diseases — smallpox above all — that killed millions before formal conquest even began. Archaeology has transformed our understanding of the conquest period. Excavations of mass graves, burned layers in cities, and hybrid artifacts showing Spanish and Indigenous manufacturing techniques all reveal a more nuanced picture than the simple narrative of 'conquest.' The aftermath was not just military defeat but a profound demographic and cultural catastrophe. Historians estimate that the Indigenous population of the Americas fell by 50-90% in the century following European contact — the greatest demographic collapse in recorded human history.

Why This Unit Matters

The Aztec and Inca are not simply interesting historical curiosities. They represent the peak achievements of independent civilizations that developed complex political systems, monumental architecture, sophisticated agriculture, and rich artistic traditions entirely apart from the Old World. Studying them through the lens of archaeology — examining what the physical evidence actually shows rather than relying solely on Spanish accounts written by conquerors — is essential for understanding these civilizations on their own terms. The descendants of both empires are alive today: Nahua speakers in Mexico, Quechua speakers in Peru and Bolivia. Their heritage did not end with the conquest.

Key Information: Aztec and Inca Empires

Detail	Aztec Empire	Inca Empire
Capital City	Tenochtitlan (modern Mexico City)	Cusco (modern Peru)
Peak Territory	Central Mexico and surrounding regions	~770,000 sq miles along western South America
Population at Peak	Estimated 5-6 million in the Triple Alliance	Estimated 6-14 million
Founded	Triple Alliance formed c. 1428 CE	Inca expansion began c. 1438 CE under Pachacuti

Detail	Aztec Empire	Inca Empire
Record-Keeping	Codices (screenfold books) and oral tradition	Quipus (knotted cord records)
Labor System	Tribute from conquered peoples	Mit'a (labor tax) imposed on all subjects
Religious Focus	Huitzilopochtli (sun/war god), ritual sacrifice	Inti (sun god), emperor as divine son of the sun
Spanish Conquest	1519-1521 by Hernan Cortes	1532-1572; begun by Francisco Pizarro
Key Archaeological Site	Templo Mayor, Mexico City	Machu Picchu, Cusco region
Modern Descendants	Nahua people of Mexico	Quechua people of Peru and Bolivia

Case Study: Isabel's Fight at the Permit Office

Isabel Quispe is a 28-year-old Quechua archaeologist from Cusco, Peru. She has spent the last three years working on her doctoral dissertation on Inca agricultural terracing in the Sacred Valley, and she has just made what may be a significant discovery: a series of previously unrecorded storage structures near a major Inca road segment outside the town of Pisac. The problem is that a Canadian mining company has already filed for exploration permits on the same land, and the Peruvian Ministry of Culture's review timeline is, by Isabel's estimate, 'optimistic if you think optimistic means two years.' The mining company's Peruvian liaison has told her, not unkindly, that the land survey was done and the structures weren't noted. She suspects the survey was done by a subcontractor who didn't know what to look for. Her university advisor, a professor from Madrid, keeps suggesting she 'document thoroughly' and 'publish quickly' — advice that seems to assume the site will survive long enough to be published. Isabel's own grandmother grew up in the valley and has stories about those hills. Last week, Isabel submitted a formal objection to the permits and was told it would be reviewed. She is not sure by whom, or when, or what it will accomplish. She is also acutely aware that she is one Quechua woman arguing against a foreign corporation in a system that was not built with her in mind.

1. How does Isabel's situation reflect broader tensions between archaeological research, Indigenous heritage, and economic development? Use specific details from both the case study and the reading passage.

2. The reading notes that the descendants of both empires are alive today. How does this fact change the ethical stakes of how we study and protect Aztec and Inca sites?

Multiple Choice

1. What was the primary method the Inca used to maintain control over their vast empire?

a) Military garrisons stationed in every major city

b) Direct administrative control, road networks, and labor taxation

c) A shared writing system that unified diverse populations

d) A loose tribute system that left conquered peoples largely autonomous

2. According to the reading, what was the most decisive factor in the Spanish conquest of both empires?

a) Both empires lacked any form of organized military resistance

b) Superior Spanish military technology alone

c) The small size of both empires made them easy to defeat

d) Internal political divisions and devastating epidemic disease

3. What does the Templo Mayor excavation contribute to our understanding of Aztec civilization?

a) It showed that the Aztec had no contact with surrounding peoples

b) It proved that Spanish accounts of human sacrifice were entirely fabricated myths

c) It provides physical evidence that helps clarify and complicate written accounts

d) It confirmed that Tenochtitlan was smaller than previously believed

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Tawantinsuyu	A) The political union of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan that formed the Aztec Empire
2. ___ Mit'a	B) An Inca record-keeper who maintained and interpreted quipu cord records
3. ___ Quipucamayoc	C) The great pyramid-temple at the center of Tenochtitlan, excavated beneath Mexico City since 1978
4. ___ Triple Alliance	D) The Inca labor tax system requiring all subjects to contribute work to the state
5. ___ Templo Mayor	E) The Inca name for their empire, meaning 'The Four Regions'

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Aztec capital city of _____ was built on an island in Lake Texcoco and was larger than any city in contemporary Europe.

2. The Inca had no conventional writing system, but used knotted cord devices called _____ to record numerical and possibly narrative information.

3. European diseases, especially _____, killed millions of Indigenous people in the Americas before formal conquest was even complete.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Compare the ways the Aztec and Inca empires maintained control over their subjects. What were the key differences in their approaches?

2. Why do historians say that studying these empires through archaeology, rather than relying solely on Spanish written accounts, gives us a more accurate picture?

3. The reading describes the population collapse following European contact as 'the greatest demographic collapse in recorded human history.' What factors contributed to this collapse, and why does its scale matter for how we study this period?