NO PREP

The Spanish Conquest

Archaeology of Destruction and Transformation

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

Name: Period: Date:

The Spanish Conquest: Archaeology of Destruction and Transformation

What the Ground Remembers

The Spanish conquest of the Aztec and Inca empires in the sixteenth century is one of the most documented events in early modern history — from the Spanish side. We have letters from Cortes to the King of Spain, memoirs from soldiers, reports from priests, administrative records from colonial officials. What we have far less of is the Indigenous perspective on the conquest as it happened. The written record from the Aztec side was largely destroyed or suppressed; the Inca had no conventional writing. This is where archaeology becomes essential. The physical record of the conquest — burned layers, destroyed temples, changed pottery styles, disease evidence in burial populations, hybrid objects blending Indigenous

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Disease: The Invisible Conqueror

Before Spanish soldiers arrived in most parts of the Americas, European diseases arrived first. Smallpox, measles, typhus, and influenza spread through Indigenous populations with no prior immunity at catastrophic rates. The epidemic of smallpox that preceded Cortes's final assault on Tenochtitlan killed enormous numbers of

defenders, including the emperor Cuitlahuac, who died of smallpox in 1520. By the time Cortes entered the ruins of Tenochtitlan in 1521, a large portion of its population was already dead. Archaeological evidence of epidemic disease is found in burial populations of the period. Normal burial patterns in Aztec and Inca contexts involved individual or small group interments with careful placement and grave goods. During the conquest period, mass graves appear: large pits containing dozens or hundreds of individuals, often with minimal goods and disorganized skeletal arrangement, consistent with communities overwhelmed by mortality they had no capacity to manage through normal funerary practices. Stable isotope and ancient DNA analysis of individuals in these mass graves has in some cases confirmed the presence of disease pathogens, including Salmonella enterica, associated with an epidemic of enteric (paratyphoid) fever.

Destruction and Reuse: The Archaeology of Temples

The systematic destruction of Aztec and Inca religious architecture was not accidental. It was deliberate Spanish policy: part of the campaign to eliminate Indigenous religion and replace it with Christianity. The method was efficient and pragmatic: where possible, churches were built directly on top of existing temples, using their foundations and often their stone. This accomplished two things simultaneously: it gave the Spanish an instant supply of construction material, and it made a powerful symbolic statement about the replacement of one religion by another. The archaeological signature of this process is now well-studied. At Cholula in Mexico, a Spanish colonial church sits on top of what is still the largest pyramid by volume in the world, a structure that the Spanish may not have fully recognized as a pyramid because it had been overgrown to resemble a hill. At Cusco's central plaza (the Huacaypata), Spanish colonial buildings replaced Inca administrative structures while reusing Inca stone and even some Inca wall sections. At dozens of smaller sites across both empires, excavations reveal the characteristic pattern of Inca or Aztec construction below, colonial construction above, with a destruction or burning layer in between.

Hybrid Objects: Cultural Blending After Conquest

Not all of the material record from the conquest period is about destruction. A particularly fascinating category of archaeological evidence is hybrid objects — artifacts that combine Indigenous and European materials, techniques, or imagery in

ways that suggest complex cultural negotiation rather than simple replacement. Indigenous artisans trained in Aztec or Inca metalworking techniques began producing objects for the colonial market that incorporated European motifs while maintaining Indigenous craft traditions. Christian saints were depicted in featherwork — a specifically Mesoamerican art form. Inca-style pottery vessels were decorated with Spanish heraldic imagery. These hybrid objects tell a story of colonized people actively navigating their new situation — adopting enough of the dominant culture to survive while preserving elements of their own traditions where possible. They also reflect the economic realities of the early colonial period: Indigenous artisans with specialized skills were valuable to Spanish colonizers, and some degree of cultural continuity served colonial economic interests. The objects are also evidence of what was lost: the artisans who made them were working in a tradition that was being actively suppressed, and the next generation often did not receive the same training.

The Demographic Catastrophe in the Archaeological Record

Population collapse of the scale that occurred after European contact leaves archaeological signatures. Settlement pattern studies — mapping the size and location of communities across a region over time — show dramatic shrinkage in the decades following conquest. Large regional centers that had housed thousands of people show evidence of abandonment or drastic reduction in the early colonial period. Agricultural terraces that had been maintained for centuries were abandoned, visible in the archaeological record as disused systems lacking the maintenance deposits that functioning terraces accumulate. The total scale of population loss remains debated among historians and demographers. Estimates for pre-contact population in the Americas range widely, but the consensus is that the Indigenous population of the hemisphere fell by somewhere between 50% and 90% in the century following European contact. This was not primarily a consequence of military conquest — Spanish armies were never large enough to kill that many people. It was primarily disease, compounded by the collapse of the food and social systems that sustained large populations. The archaeology of this collapse — the abandoned terraces, the shrunken settlements, the mass graves — gives physical weight to numbers that are otherwise almost impossible to comprehend.

Key Information: Archaeology of the Spanish Conquest

Topic	Archaeological Evidence
Conquest Layer	Burned destruction layer in Tenochtitlan dateable to 1521; smashed pottery, trauma on human remains
Temple Destruction	Churches built over Aztec and Inca temples; Coricancha foundation visible under Santo Domingo church
Disease Evidence	Mass graves with disorganized burial patterns replacing normal individual interments
DNA Evidence	Ancient DNA from mass graves has confirmed Salmonella enterica (epidemic illness) in some cases
Cholula Pyramid	Largest pyramid by volume in the world; Spanish church built on top, mistaking it for a hill
Hybrid Objects	Christian imagery in featherwork; Inca pottery with Spanish heraldic motifs
Settlement Shrinkage	Dramatic reduction in occupied sites and site size in early colonial period survey data
Agricultural Abandonment	Maintained terracing systems show abandonment in conquest period — no maintenance deposits
Population Loss	Estimated 50-90% decline in Indigenous population in the century after contact
Key Method	Settlement pattern studies, stratigraphic analysis, ancient DNA, isotope analysis of conquest-era burials

Case Study: What Cuauhtli Made

Cuauhtli is a goldsmith. He was apprenticed at twelve to a master craftsman in the Aztec tradition, learning to work gold with the lost-wax technique that the Mexica had refined over generations. He is now thirty-one years old, and the world he trained for no longer exists. The temples are rubble. His master died of the spotted fever three years ago. The gold that once went to sacred objects now goes to bars for the Spanish treasury. He still has his skills, and skills can be sold. A Spanish merchant has commissioned him to make a crucifix — a cross with a figure on it — in the Aztec style, with the fine surface work that European goldsmiths cannot quite replicate. He finds the commission strange. The figure on the cross is a dead man, which feels familiar somehow. He makes the face in the manner of his own tradition, the eyes slightly elongated, the hands positioned in a way that is more Mexica than European. The merchant does not notice, or if he notices, does not object. Cuauhtli wonders if anyone looking at this object a hundred years from now will understand what they are seeing.

1. Cuauhtli's crucifix is exactly the kind of hybrid object the reading describes. What does his act of embedding Mexica stylistic elements into a Christian object suggest about how Indigenous artisans responded to conquest on a personal and cultural level?

2. The reading notes that hybrid objects 'tell a story of colonized people actively navigating their new situation.' How does Cuauhtli's situation illustrate both the survival strategies and the losses involved in this process?

Multiple Choice

1. What is the primary reason the population of the Americas fell so dramatically after European contact?

a) Mass enslavement in silver mines caused a severe population collapse across both empires

b) Disease, primarily smallpox and other epidemics, combined with collapse of food systems

c) Direct military conquest by Spanish armies was the main cause of death

d) Deliberate famine policies imposed by Spanish colonial administrators

2. What does the pattern of churches built directly over Aztec and Inca temples reveal about Spanish colonial strategy?

a) Spanish engineers preferred Indigenous foundations because they were more stable

b) The Spanish built only on top of temples which had already been abandoned before their arrival

c) It was both a practical construction strategy and a deliberate religious replacement statement

d) It was an accidental result of the abundance of stone at temple sites

3. What can archaeologists learn from the mass graves of the conquest period that individual burial analysis alone could not reveal?

a) Evidence of community-level mortality overwhelming normal burial practices and social systems

b) The exact identity and social status of every individual who died during the conquest in Mexico

c) The specific battle strategies used by Spanish forces against Indigenous defenders

d) The names of the specific diseases that were introduced by European contact

Matching

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

Term	Definition
1. ___ Coricancha	A) A disease pathogen identified through ancient DNA in conquest-era mass graves, associated with an epidemic of enteric (paratyphoid) fever
2. ___ Hybrid artifact	B) Archaeological analysis mapping the size and location of communities over time to detect population change
3. ___ Settlement pattern study	C) The Aztec emperor who succeeded Moctezuma II and died of smallpox in 1520 before the final Spanish assault
4. ___ Salmonella enterica	D) An object combining Indigenous and European materials or imagery, evidence of cultural negotiation after conquest
5. ___ Cuitlahuac	E) The Inca Temple of the Sun in Cusco, the holiest site in the empire; built over by the Spanish Church of Santo Domingo

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Excavations in Tenochtitlan have identified a distinct _____ layer dateable to 1521 — the year of the final Spanish siege — containing smashed pottery and human remains showing trauma.

2. The _____ at Cholula in Mexico is the largest pyramid by volume in the world; the Spanish built a colonial church on top of it, not fully realizing what lay beneath.

3. Indigenous artisans who survived the conquest created _____ objects that combined Christian imagery with Indigenous craft traditions, evidence of cultural negotiation under colonial rule.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why is the archaeological record of the conquest period important even though we have many written Spanish accounts of the same events?

2. Describe what settlement pattern archaeology can reveal about the population collapse following the conquest that individual burial analysis cannot.

3. The reading describes hybrid objects as evidence of 'colonized people actively navigating their new situation.' What does this suggest about how conquest changed but did not entirely eliminate Indigenous cultural traditions?