

MOCTEZUMA AND CORTÉS

CENTRAL HISTORICAL QUESTION

- ❓ What happened when Moctezuma met Cortés?

MATERIALS

- 📖 Textbook Passage - Moctezuma and Cortés
- 📖 Historical Document A - Cortés's Account
- 📖 Historical Document B - The Florentine Codex
- 📖 Historical Document C - Historian Matthew Restall
- 📖 Student Handout - Guiding Questions

COMMON CORE ALIGNMENT

- ☰ Page 61 - #1 (Gr. 6-12), #2 (Gr. 6-8), #4 (Gr. 6-10), #6 (Gr. 6-12), #8 (Gr. 6-12), #9 (Gr. 6-12), and #10 (Gr. 6-8)

PLAN OF INSTRUCTION

- 1 Hand out the textbook passage. Tell students to read it and answer the questions individually.

Quickly review answers as a class.

(a) Who was Hernán Cortés?
(*Answer: Spanish conquistador*)

(b) Who was Moctezuma?
(*Answer: Aztec emperor*)

(c) What happened when Cortés met Moctezuma in 1519?
(*Answer: Moctezuma thought Cortés was the god Quetzalcoatl and welcomed him.*)

- 2 Then ask: How do we know that this account is true?

Ask students:

(a) Who most likely wrote the accounts of the interaction between Cortés and Moctezuma?

(b) Why might we trust these accounts? Why might we doubt them?

(c) In what language would Moctezuma's account likely have been recorded? Why does this matter?

These questions are intended to get students to think about who writes historical sources. Ask students: *How do we learn about civilizations? Whose written records no longer exist? The Spanish destroyed nearly all of the Aztecs' records during the conquest, so much of what we know about the Aztecs was written by the conquerors. Why might this fact raise questions about reliability of accounts of the meeting between Cortés and Moctezuma?*

3 Hand out Document A and the Guiding Questions.

Have students read Document A and complete the corresponding section of the Guiding Questions.

Explain to students that they will read and corroborate two documents about what Moctezuma actually said to Cortés when they first met.

4 Discuss student answers as a class.

Begin with sourcing:

- (a) Who wrote the document?
- (b) When did he write it?

Remind students that sourcing is a big part of corroboration because we want to make sure that we're dealing with reliable sources.

This may be a good opportunity to refresh students' memory about reliability—*what issues do we want to consider when evaluating the reliability of a source?*

Students should know that reliability is connected to the author's authority, knowledge, motivation, purpose, as well as distance (geographic and temporal) from the event. No source is perfectly objective, so we interrogate documents to determine whether we can trust the information in them.

Ask students if they think Cortés is a reliable source for the encounter. It is important that they recognize that Cortés is not entirely reliable because:

- (a) he is writing to the King (his boss) and might be motivated to inflate his achievements, and
- (b) he could have easily misunderstood Moctezuma, given the language and cultural barriers.

Ask a student to summarize what Cortés claimed Moctezuma said.

Example student answer: Moctezuma welcomed Cortés as the messenger of the king, whom they called their natural leader. He said that the ancestors had foretold their leader's descendants would return to conquer the land, and offered Cortés obedience.

Finally, discuss whether the document corroborates the textbook account. Students should see that the account does not support the textbook's claim that Moctezuma believed that Cortés was a god. The document says that Moctezuma believed that Cortés came from the same distant land as the Aztec ancestors.

5 Hand out Document B.

Have students read the document and complete the corresponding section of the Guiding Questions.

6 Discuss student answers for Document B as a class.

Begin with sourcing:

- (a) Who wrote the document and why?
- (b) Is it reliable?

The source of Document B is tricky. It was written by Aztecs under the supervision of a Spanish friar. This raises the question about what they were and were not permitted to write. Also the account was written long after the actual encounter.

Ask students to argue different sides in response to the question of whether or not the document is reliable. In the end, students should conclude that it cannot be considered entirely representative of the Aztec point of view.

Ask a student to summarize what Document B says about the encounter between Cortés and Moctezuma:

Example student answer: Moctezuma welcomed Cortés as a returning leader. He said that the ancestors had foretold their leader would return to sit upon his throne, and welcomed the Spaniards into the palace.

Then ask students whether Document B corroborates the textbook account. Again, the account does not support the textbook's claim that Moctezuma believed Cortés was a god.

7 Hand out Document C.

Have students read it and answer the corresponding section of the Guiding Questions.

8 Discuss student answers for Document C as a class.

Begin with sourcing:

- (a) Who wrote the document? When?
- (b) Is it reliable?

Given the author's background as a leading expert on colonial Latin American history, students should conclude that this is generally a reliable source for understanding what happened when Moctezuma met Cortés.

Ask students to how Document C compares to Documents A and B.

Students should note that Document C provides very different explanations for why Moctezuma told Cortés that the Aztecs had been expecting him and for why Spanish missionaries said that Moctezuma believed Cortés was Quetzalcoatl.

Ask students why Document C might differ so much from Documents A and B.

They should point out that Document C was written by a historian who has been able to do a great deal of research about this period of history to understand this particular episode.

9 Discuss student answers as a class.

Ask students:

- (a) *What is one reason why you might believe that Moctezuma welcomed Cortés into the Aztec capital?*

Answer: Document A and Document B agree on this point. Even Document C indicates that Moctezuma welcomed Cortés, just not necessarily as a returning ruler.

Have students practice using the word ‘corroborate’—in other words, encourage them to say “The story is believable because Document B corroborates the account in Document A.”

- (b) *What is one reason why you might NOT believe that Moctezuma welcomed Cortés?*
- Here students should discuss the fact that neither Document A or Document B is particularly reliable.
 - Moreover, Document C provides evidence to suggest that the meeting was very different than what the textbook or Document A or Document B present.
- (c) Finally, ask students how confident they are about about what really happened when Cortés met Moctezuma.
- Students should express reservations about what they know.
 - They should recognize that the documents do not support the textbook account. They should also see that the primary documents themselves are not highly reliable sources of information.
 - In the end, students should conclude that they don’t have a simple, definitive answer about what happened. It is understandable if some students are uncomfortable with this. Many students have been taught that history is a single, true story about what happened in the past. This lesson asks them to consider who writes history and how history is written—which requires a tolerance for uncertainty that many students haven’t yet learned.

You can finish the discussion by asking students what other documents might be good sources of evidence about the encounter and by returning to the fact that there may not be many documents from the perspective of the Aztecs due to the conquest.

REFERENCES

Textbook Passage

Burstein, S. M., & Shek, R. (2006). *World history: Medieval to early modern times*. San Diego, CA: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

Document A

Cortés, H. (1843). Second letter to Charles V. In G. Folsom (Ed. & Trans.), *The despatches of Hernando Cortes, the conqueror of Mexico, addressed to the Emperor Charles V. written during the conquest, and containing a narrative of its events* (pp. 37-170). New York: Wiley & Putnam. Retrieved from http://books.google.com/books/about/The_despatches_of_Hernando_Cort%C3%A9s.html?id=xUsTAAAYAAJ

Document B

Sahagún, B. (n.d.). *The Florentine codex, book 12* (N. Fitch, Trans.). (Original work published ca. 1570-1585). Retrieved from <http://faculty.fullerton.edu/nfitch/nehaha/aztec10.html>

Document C

Restall, M. (2003). *Seven myths of the Spanish conquest*. New York: Oxford University Press.

TEXTBOOK PASSAGE - CORTÉS AND MOCTEZUMA

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

DIRECTIONS

Please read the textbook passage below and answer the following questions.

A small group of conquistadors led by Hernán Cortés reached Mexico in 1519. They were looking for gold. Hearing of this arrival, the Aztec emperor, Moctezuma II, believed Cortés to be a god. According to an Aztec legend, the god **Quetzalcoatl** was to return to Mexico in 1519. Cortés resembled the god's description from the legend.

Thinking that the god had returned, Moctezuma sent Cortés gifts, including gold. With getting more gold his motive, Cortés marched to the Aztec capital. When he got there, Moctezuma welcomed him, but Cortés took the emperor prisoner.

Source: A 2006 history textbook titled World History: Medieval to Early Modern Times.

GLOSSARY

Quetzalcoatl
the Aztec feathered serpent god; as the god of life, learning, and wisdom, he is one of the most important deities in Aztec mythology

QUESTIONS

(1) Who was Hernán Cortés?

(2) Who was Moctezuma?

(3) What happened when Cortés met Moctezuma in 1519?

DOCUMENT A - CORTÉS'S ACCOUNT (MODIFIED)

In his letter to King Charles, Cortés describes meeting Moctezuma and claims that Moctezuma told the following story about the origins of the Aztec people:

After being seated Moctezuma spoke as follows:

“We learned from our ancestors that those of us who inhabit this region descend from strangers who came here from a very distant land. We have also learned that a prince brought our people into these parts, and then returned to his native land.

“Much later, the prince returned to this region and found that his people had intermarried with the native inhabitants. When he asked them to return with him, they were unwilling to go, nor were they willing to see him as their leader, so he left. We have always heard that his descendants would come to conquer this land.

“From what you say of the great king who sent you here, we believe that your king is our natural leader. Especially because of the direction from which you say you have come, and because you say that you first learned of us a long time ago.

“Therefore be assured that we will obey you. And you have the power in all this land to command what is your pleasure, and it shall be done in obedience, and all that we have is at your disposal. And since you are in your own proper land and your own house, rest and refresh yourselves after your journey.”

Source: Letter by Hernán Cortés to King Charles V, written in 1520.

DOCUMENT B - THE FLORENTINE CODEX

Moctezuma addressed Cortés in these words: “Our lord, you are very welcome in your arrival in this land. You have come to satisfy your curiosity about your noble city of Mexico. You have come here to sit on your throne, which I have kept for you. . . . For I am not just dreaming, not just sleepwalking, not seeing you in my dreams. I have been worried for a long time, looking toward the unknown place from which you have come. Our ancestors said that you would come to your city and sit upon your throne. And now it has been fulfilled, you have returned. Go enjoy your palace, rest your body. Welcome our lords to this land.”

Source: Excerpt from the Florentine Codex, an account of Aztec life originally written by Mexican natives between 1570-1585 under the supervision of Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún, whose primary goal was to convert the natives of Mexico to Christianity.

DOCUMENT C - HISTORIAN MATTHEW RESTALL

These two excerpts come from historian Matthew Restall's book *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*. Restall is a professor of history at Penn State University and is considered to be one of the world's leading scholars of colonial Latin American history. In Excerpt 1, Restall offers a possible explanation for why Moctezuma told Cortés that he had been expecting him.

Excerpt 1

[In royal Aztec culture], to be polite and courteous one must avoid speaking **bluntly** or directly, which requires saying the opposite of what one means. Thus Moctezuma's assertion that he and his **predecessors** were just safeguarding the rulership of the **Mexica** empire in anticipation of Cortés's arrival is not to be taken literally. It is . . . meant to convey the opposite — Moctezuma's stature . . . — and to function as a courteous welcome to an important guest.

Source: Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest, written by Matthew Restall in 2003.

GLOSSARY

bluntly
abruptly or straight to the point

predecessors
those who came before

Mexica
Aztec

In Excerpt 2, Restall offers a possible explanation for why Spanish priests said that Moctezuma believed Cortés was Quetzacoatl.

Excerpt 2

[The **Franciscans**'] concerns were more religious than political, and [their] emphasis was on the **legitimacy** and divine approval of Christianization campaigns. . . . [**Motolinía** seized upon the idea] that Mexico's natives somehow anticipated the arrival of the Spaniards — an anticipation that proved the Conquest was part of God's plan for the Americas. For this reason, Franciscans such as Motolinía appear to have invented the Cortés-Quetzalcoatl identification after Conquest.

Source: Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest, written by Matthew Restall in 2003.

GLOSSARY

Franciscans
Catholic missionaries

legitimacy
justification

Motolinía
a Spanish missionary who wrote books on Aztec history

MOCTEZUMA & CORTÉS - GUIDING QUESTIONS

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

QUESTIONS - DOCUMENT A

(1) Who wrote Document A? _____

When? _____

(2) Who was the recipient of Document A? _____

How might this influence the content of Document A?

(3) According to Document A, what did Moctezuma say to Cortés?

(4) Does Document A corroborate the textbook account?

(5) What is one reason Document A would be a reliable source to understand what happened when Moctezuma met Cortés?

(6) What is one reason Document A would not be a reliable source to understand what happened when Moctezuma met Cortés?

CONTINUE 

QUESTIONS - DOCUMENT B

(1) Who wrote Document B? _____

When? _____

(2) Who supervised the writing of Document B? _____

How might this influence the content of Document B?

(3) According to Document B, what did Moctezuma say to Cortés?

(4) Does Document B corroborate the textbook account?

(5) What is one reason Document B would be a reliable source to understand what happened when Moctezuma met Cortés?

(6) What is one reason Document B would not be a reliable source to understand what happened when Moctezuma met Cortés?



(7) How does Document A compare to Document B?

QUESTIONS - DOCUMENT C

(1) Who wrote Document C? _____

When? _____

Based on this information, do you think this is a reliable account of what happened when Moctezuma met Cortés? Why or why not?

(2) According to Document C, why did Moctezuma tell Cortés that the Aztecs had been expecting him?

(3) According to Document C, why did Spanish missionaries claim that Moctezuma believed Cortés was Quetzacoatl?

(4) How does Document C's account of what happened when Moctezuma met Cortés compare to Document A and Document B?



QUESTIONS

(1) What is one reason why you might believe that Moctezuma welcomed Cortés into the Aztec capital?

(2) What is one reason why you might **NOT** believe that Moctezuma welcomed Cortés?

(3) Based on these three documents, how confident are you in knowing what happened during their first meeting? Explain.
