

# The Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire

Lesson Map: <http://esriaustralia.com.au/education/SpatialActivity70>

## Note to teachers

This learning material (StoryMap and lesson plan) contains a large amount of content and a variety of primary sources and source questions.

It is aimed at a Year 8 History audience and may constitute 1 to 2 lessons depending on your class's ability level.

## Engage

### Historical context - Spanish motives and Hernan Cortes

- ➔ Click on the URL above to open the Story Map (with built-in interactive maps). An immersive narrative on the *The Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire* will open. Scroll down to get started.
- ➔ Read through the section titled *More glory, more gold*. Take notes if required and stop to discuss as necessary.
- ➔ Read through the section titled *Hernan Cortes*. Take notes if required and stop to discuss as necessary.
- View the map titled *Cortes' journey from Cuba to the Yucutan Peninsula and beyond*. It is interactive. You can change the scale with the + and – icons and pan the map by clicking and dragging.
- ? Why do you think Cortes' party travelled along the coastlines on their journey to Mexico? [*Answers will vary but may include: (1) Staying in sight of coastlines would make navigation easier, (2) Cortes was originally charged with an exploratory mission, meaning that he may have stopped to explore regions of Central America, (3) To make stops to re-provision along the way.*]
- ➔ Read through the source titled a *Spanish account of the siege of Tenochtitlan*. Respond to the questions below:
- ? What motives may Cortes have had in inspecting his army and its resources? [*By inspecting his army and resources, Cortes could assess his ability to pursue the*

Download student worksheet [here](#).

### Time

1 – 2 lessons.

### Activity

Investigate the Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire.

### Learning Outcome

Students will be able to:

- Identify the causes of the Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire
- Examine the role of key Spanish and Aztec individuals
- Investigate contributing factors that led to the conquest of the Aztec Empire
- Examine and analyse sources
- Develop historical arguments in response to a question

### ACARA Curriculum Link

Year 8 History: Expanding Contacts – The Spanish conquest of the Americas (c.1492 – c. 1572)

ACDSEH016 | ACDSEH073 |  
ACHHS074 | ACHHS075 |  
ACHHS148 | ACHHS149 |  
ACHHS153 | ACHHS156

### Teacher Feedback:

To share your feedback on this, or any Spatial Activity, please contact [education@esriaustralia.com.au](mailto:education@esriaustralia.com.au)

*conquest of native American groups in Mexico.]*

- ? Identify Spanish technology that was at Cortes' disposal in Mexico. [*Spanish technology that was available to Cortes included: ships and vessels, crossbows, muskets, brass guns, falconets, gunpowder, and cannon balls.*]

## Explore

### *Forging a way through to the heart of the Aztec Empire: Tenochtitlan*

- Scroll down to the section titled *Cortes reaches Central America* and read the information. Take notes if required and stop to discuss as necessary.
- ? Upon arriving at Veracruz, Cortes immediately claims the land for the Spanish Crown. What motives may Cortes have had in doing so? [*Cortes had decided to disobey his superior's orders and pursue his own aspirations of obtaining glory and riches. By claiming the land for Spain and the Spanish Crown, he may be attempting to demonstrate his continued loyalty to Spain, despite his disobedience to Velazquez, to avoid possible punishment or retaliation. In addition, by claiming the land for Spain, he may have won over the soldiers under his command who had misgivings about departing from Velazquez's orders.*]
- ? Cortes' was given a young indigenous woman – Malinche – who could speak local languages and Spanish. Why do you think this would be a valuable asset to Cortes' plans? [*Not only would Malinche be valuable to Cortes' plans of conquest as an interpreter but it would likely put the indigenous peoples they came across at ease as she was of their ethnicity. This would likely mean that they would trust her, and by extension Cortes, more.*]
- Scroll down to the section titled *Word reaches the Aztec Emperor* and read the information. Take notes if required and stop to discuss as necessary.
- Scroll down to the section titled *The Conquest begins* and read the information. Take notes if required and stop to discuss as necessary.
- As you read through the timeline, click on each stage of the journey to follow along on the map, which will help you to visualise Cortes' progress. It is interactive. You can change the scale with the + and – icons and pan the map by clicking and dragging.
- Scroll down to the section titled *Cortes reaches Tenochtitlan*. This section presents a map of Tenochtitlan and the surrounding lakes region. It is interactive. You can change the scale with the + and – icons and pan the map by clicking and dragging.

## Explain

### *The First Crusade*

- ➔ Scroll down to the section titled *Cortes and Montezuma meet* and read the information. Take notes if required and stop to discuss as necessary.
- Read the source in this section titled *Aztec account of Montezuma and Cortes' first meeting*. Answer the questions below:
- ? Who did Montezuma think Cortes was? Support your response by using direct evidence from the source. *[According to the source, Montezuma appeared to believe that Cortes was Quetzalcoatl – a white, bearded god – who had returned to rule over the Empire. These beliefs are clearly echoed in his words when Montezuma states, "...you now have arrived on the earth. You have come to your city...to sit on your throne."]*
- ? How does Montezuma interact with Cortes? Support your response by using direct evidence from the source. *[Montezuma treats Cortes with respect and a reverence stemming from his religious beliefs. Respect is displayed when Montezuma exchanges necklaces with Cortes and bows to him. His reverence is made clear in the way he addresses Cortes as "lord." This reverence is further displayed in the joy Montezuma has at meeting 'Quetzalcoatl': "I am not seeing you in my dreams...I have seen you at last! I have met you face to face!"]*
- ? What evidence in the source exists to support the fact that this is an Aztec account of events? *[Although the Spaniard Miguel Leon Portilla may have recorded the Aztec accounts, it is evident that this account is of an Aztec perspective as he refers to Cortes' tongue (language) as "strange and savage," suggesting that the Spanish language was unfamiliar to the Aztec and sounded peculiar to him.]*
- ➔ Scroll down to the section titled *Taking Tenochtitlan...again* and read the information. Take notes if required and stop to discuss as necessary.
- Read the source in this section titled *Aztec account of the siege of Tenochtitlan*. Answer the questions below:
- ? What events occurred in Cortes' absence from Tenochtitlan? Why may this have occurred? *[The slaughter that occurred in the Sacred Patio – resulting in the deaths of musicians, spectators and servants – occurred whilst Cortes was away from the city, dealing with Velazquez's punitive party. The Spanish contingent left behind in Tenochtitlan may have attacked for several reasons. Firstly, they simply lacked Cortes' skills at diplomacy, felt threatened and attempted to remind the Aztecs of their position. Alternatively, they may have over-indulged in their comforts and*

*looked at this as a means of entertainment.]*

- ? Hypothesise as to why the Aztecs allowed Cortes to return to the city in peace? *[The Aztecs appeared to allow Cortes to return to the city in peace so that they could plan a surprise attack of their own, in retaliation for the slaughter of Aztec chiefs and innocent citizens. Cortes may have lowered his guard after the Aztecs feigned peace upon his return.]*
- Scroll down to read *The Night of Sorrows*. Take notes if required and stop to discuss as necessary.
- Scroll down to the section titled *Smallpox strikes and technology triumphs* and read the information. Take notes if required and stop to discuss as necessary.
- Scroll down to the section titled *Fall of the Aztec Empire* and read the information. Take notes if required and stop to discuss as necessary.

## Extend

### *Constructing a historical argument*

- Scroll down to the section titled *Conquest and complete domination follows* and read the information. Take notes if required and stop to discuss as necessary.
- ? Make a list of contributing factors that led to the successful conquest of the Aztec Empire by completing the table below. Cortes has been completed for you as an example.

Factor	Explanation
Cortes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Single-minded and determined to achieve his aspirations (evident in the destruction of his ships after arriving at Mexico)</li> <li>Shrewd political awareness and diplomacy skills allowed him to form alliances and to make calculated decisions e.g. holding Montezuma as hostage</li> </ul>
Montezuma II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Influenced by his beliefs to the extent that they blinded the ruler to the threat of Cortes and his forces</li> <li>Believed Cortes to be Quetzalcoatl and refused to act against him, even after he was captured as hostage</li> </ul>
Weapons / technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Spanish weapons/technology included: steel swords, steel armour, guns and gunpowder, falconets and cannon balls, cavalry, large ships to transport goods and weapons</li> <li>Aztec weapons/technology included: wooden clubs, wooden spears, wooden shields, no armour</li> </ul>
Diseases / epidemics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Smallpox epidemic affected large percentages of the Aztec civilization and other indigenous groups, limiting the effectiveness of their resistance as people were too ill to fight or died</li> <li>Smallpox epidemic did not significantly impact Spanish forces as they had developed antibodies to the disease in generations past</li> </ul>

Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cortes' made excellent use of Malinche's language and interpretation skills</li> <li>Cortes won over a number of indigenous people groups who were dissatisfied with Aztec rule (Totanac and Tlaxcaltec peoples)</li> </ul>
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? Respond to the following statement by putting forward a clear argument in paragraph form:

*How did the Cortes and his Spanish forces conquer the much larger Aztec Empire so quickly and successfully? In your response refer to evidence from one of the primary sources in the StoryMap.*

*[Answers will vary. Students may choose to focus on one contributing factor or multiple. Model response below.]*

*The Spanish were able to defeat the Aztecs quickly and successfully, largely due to the Cortes' shrewd diplomatic skills and the crippling effects of the smallpox epidemic. Cortes' aspirations – glory and gold – in conquering the Aztecs was clear from the start but he clearly understood that he would need greater support and resources than the 500 soldiers at his disposal. As a result, he exploited the political grievances that groups like the Totanac and Tlaxcaltec peoples had with being subject to Aztec rule, and turned potential enemies into future allies that could contribute warriors to his cause. His diplomatic skills were put to further use upon meeting Montezuma II in Tenochtitlan. Instead of rashly launching into a war with the much larger Aztec Empire, he peacefully entered the city, exchanged gifts with the emperor and charged Malinche to deliver the following words via translation to Montezuma II: "Tell Motecuhzoma that we are his friends. There is nothing to fear...Tell him that we love him well and that our hearts are contented" (Aztec account of Montezuma's and Cortes' first meeting). By delivering this message, Cortes disarmed any potential misgivings or doubts that Montezuma may have still harboured, which would allow him to capture the ruler as hostage and avoid large amounts of bloodshed in a battle that the Spanish otherwise would have likely lost due to lesser numbers. Although the relationship deteriorated between the two sides, Cortes and his Spanish forces were able to regain control of Tenochtitlan after a smallpox epidemic severely affected the Aztecs. Having never been exposed to the European disease, huge numbers of Aztecs were incapacitated by illness and fever, whilst others succumbed to the disease and died. This subsequently crippled the Aztec ability to resist Spanish forces as many were left bedridden, which is evident in images of the Florentine Codex (16<sup>th</sup> century). All in all, a combination of factors – including Cortes' leadership and diplomatic skills, and the smallpox epidemic – led to the rapid and successful conquest of the Aztecs.*

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## Next Steps:

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