

12.4 Cortes, the conquistadors and the Aztecs

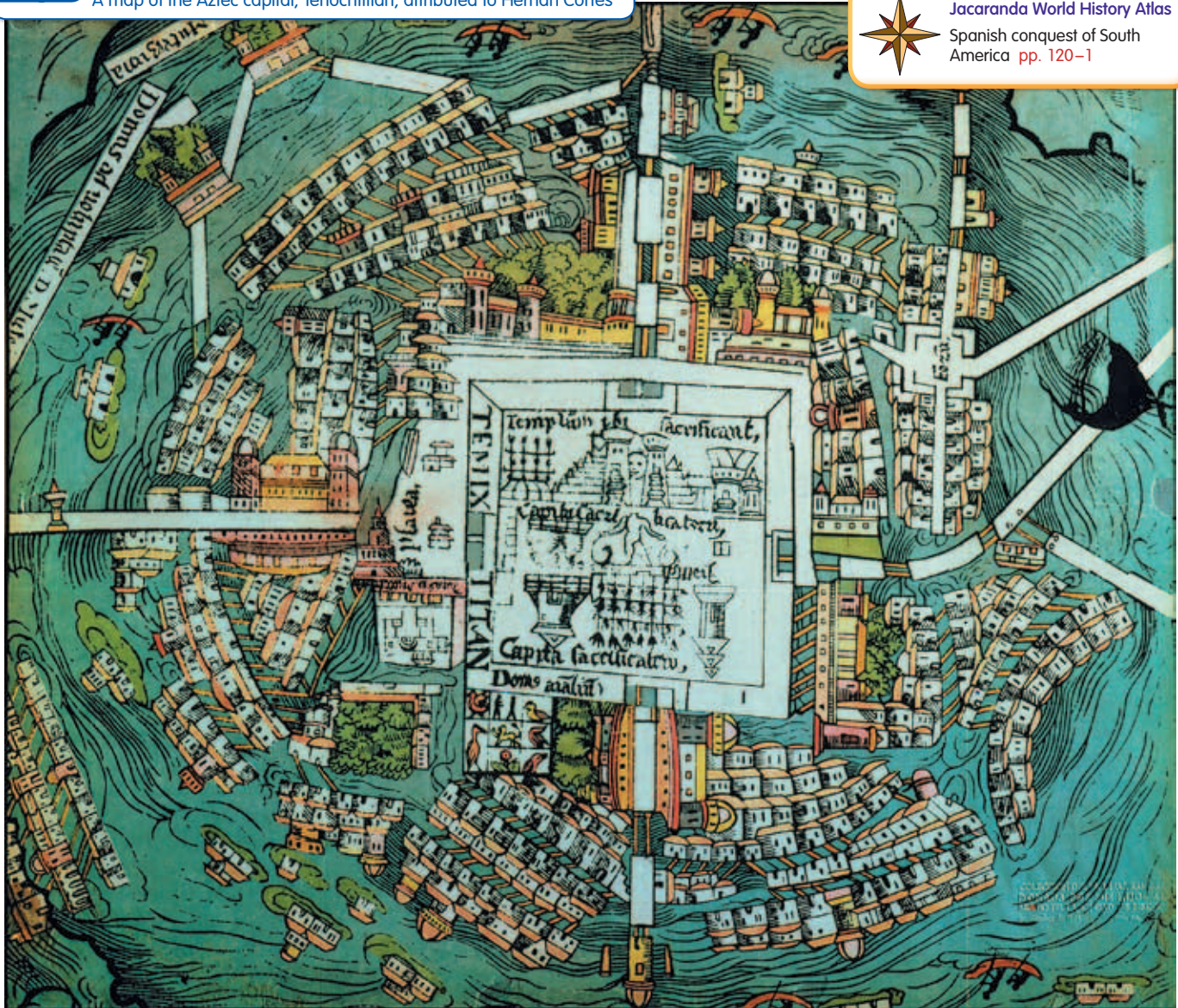
History is full of tales about conquest and colonisation. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw a rapid expansion of European colonies throughout the world, particularly in the Americas. The Europeans clashed, often violently, with the indigenous inhabitants they encountered. In most cases, the two cultures could not **coexist** peacefully — one would dominate the other. The most well-known example is arguably that of Hernan Cortes and the Aztecs.

Ambition and conquest

Born in 1485, Hernan Cortes was the son of a Spanish nobleman. He attended university at Salamanca but had a reputation for not working very hard. When he was 19, he moved to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, which was then a growing Spanish settlement. About six years later, he took part in the conquest of Cuba under the command of Diego de Velasquez.

Cortes came to believe that the Aztecs in Mexico had much to offer the Spanish conquistadors. At this

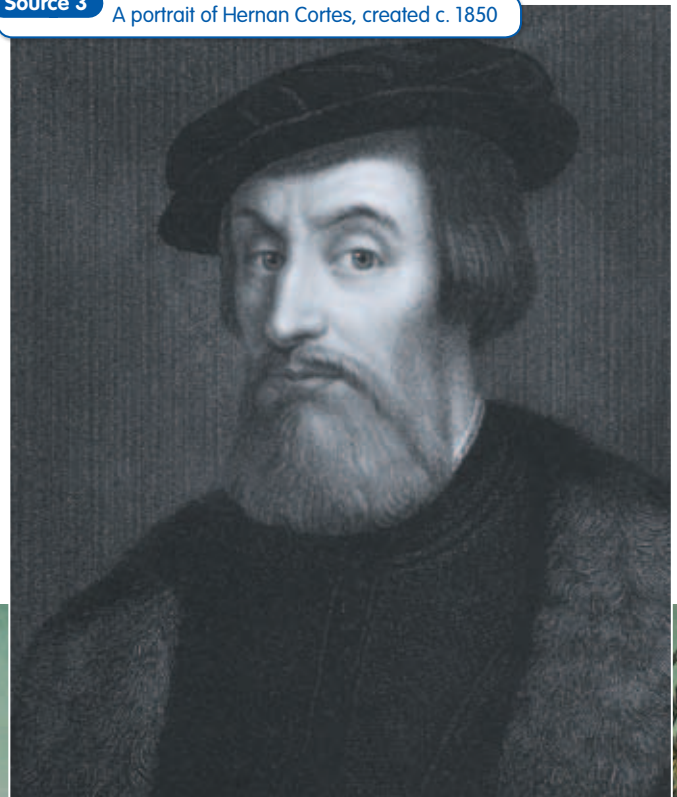
Source 1 A map of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, attributed to Hernan Cortes



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time the Spanish were interested in two things: gold and converting the Aztecs to Christianity. As a career explorer, Hernan Cortes was ambitious and greedy. He was obsessed with claiming land for Spain and glory for himself. He was also looking for gold and had heard rumours that the Aztecs had lots of it. In February 1519 Cortes set sail for Mexico. Upon reaching the coast in March, Cortes burned his ships to ensure his men did not have any thoughts about desertion. He fought a battle against the indigenous people at a town called Tabasco before founding the town of Veracruz. He then began marching inland to the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan. On the way, Cortes made contact with Tlaxcala, which was a kingdom that resisted the rule of the Aztecs. The Tlaxcalans initially resisted the Spanish and soon they were fighting.

Source 3 A portrait of Hernan Cortes, created c. 1850



Source 2 A colour lithograph, created in 1892, showing Montezuma greeting Cortes in Tenochtitlan



The Spanish found themselves in trouble because the ground was broken and uneven, so they could not effectively use their horses and cannons. But as they fought their way to level ground the balance shifted in their favour. After the early violent encounters, the Tlaxcalans permitted the Spanish to enter their territory — no doubt they were terrified by the Spanish firearms and horses, neither of which they had ever seen before. For their part, the Spanish granted them a truce in return for their support against the Aztecs.

As he moved further inland, Cortes avoided the well-travelled route to Tenochtitlan to minimise the possibility of ambush. He was also trying to recruit more allies against the Aztecs. For three months the conquistadors made their way through a variety of terrain, from arid mountains to fertile valleys. They were forced to adapt to the daytime heat as their armour was not practical for a climate that was much hotter than what the Spanish were used to. On the journey they saw strange plants and animals that were completely different to what they knew in Europe.

Upon arrival at Tenochtitlan in November 1519, the Spaniards discovered a thriving, highly organised city. Built on the islands in the middle of Lake Texcoco, the city would have appeared to the approaching Spaniards as almost floating on an inland sea. The city had a population of about 250 000 people, and it controlled much of the surrounding countryside. It was from these lands that the city drew its wealth in the form of gold, jewels and crops.

Cortes was welcomed by Montezuma II, emperor of the Aztecs. One theory suggests that Montezuma thought Cortes was the god Quetzalcoatl, who was said to have fair skin and a beard, just like Cortes. After establishing a headquarters in Tenochtitlan, Cortes attempted to strengthen his position by taking Montezuma hostage. This was a common tactic in Europe but was seen as unacceptable to the Aztecs, who attacked and drove the Spanish from the city. During this uprising Montezuma himself was killed,

Did you know?



Iron was a key factor behind the successful Spanish conquest of the Aztecs. The indigenous people of the New World did not use iron; they still used old technologies for weapons. Iron was so important because it formed the principal component in swords, daggers, lances and knives, and was a crucial element in the workings of crossbows. It was central to cannons and other firearms, and it also contributed to the effectiveness of armour, helmets and shields. Iron gave the Spanish an important advantage that helped ensure the defeat of the Aztecs.

Source 4 An Aztec illustration of the Spanish conquest



Source 5 *Lament on the Fall of Tenochtitlan*, a poem by an anonymous Aztec poet

How can we save our homes, my people?
 The Aztecs are deserting the city
 The city is in flames and all
 is darkness and destruction
 Weep my people
 Know that with these disasters
 We have lost the Mexican nation
 The water has turned bitter
 Our food is bitter
 These are the acts of the Giver of Life

possibly by his own people who thought him weak in the face of the Spanish. Cortes returned in 1521 and laid siege to the city before attacking. The battle lasted for two months and the Spanish were forced to fight fiercely for every street. Tenochtitlan was reduced to rubble and many thousands of Aztecs were killed. On 13 August 1521 Cortes was able to claim the city for Spain.

End of a civilisation

It took about two years for the Spaniards to destroy the indigenous civilisation of the Aztecs. Many Aztecs died directly at the hands of the conquistadors. But thousands of others died not from violence but from famine and diseases that were introduced by the Europeans. Those who survived lost their dignity. Their wealth was stolen and their temples were destroyed. Because the Spaniards believed it was their duty to convert the Aztecs to Christianity, the Aztecs also lost much of their culture.

The success of Cortes over the Aztecs led to an unprecedented period of European expansion in the Americas. The following two centuries saw the Spanish consolidate their rule over many Native American societies, including the Inca and Maya civilisations.

The Inca civilisation occupied roughly the area of present-day Peru and Chile, which is one of the most mountainous regions in the world. The Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro first made contact with the Inca in 1526, but it took longer to conquer them than the Aztec Empire, largely because of the harsh geographical features. The tropical jungle and mountainous terrain hampered the progress of the conquistadors, who found their armour torturous in such a hot and humid climate. Ultimately though, the combination of superior Spanish weaponry, and the longer term effect of introduced diseases, meant that the Inca could not resist indefinitely. The city of Lima was founded by Pizarro in 1535 and the Viceroyalty of Peru, which was the name given to the region of South America ruled by Spain, was created in 1542.

The Maya proved more of a challenge for the Spanish, despite the fact that they were located in a less harsh geographical region. Occupying much of the Yucatan Peninsula in what is now southern Mexico, the Maya civilisation consisted of a number of independent city-states. There was no single capital city like the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan so the individual states had to be overpowered one by one, making the conquest a long and arduous one for the Spanish. It took more than 150 years before the last Maya city was conquered.



EXPLANATION AND COMMUNICATION

- 1 What were the two main reasons for Spanish settlements in the New World?
- 2 How old was Cortes when he claimed Tenochtitlan for Spain?
- 3 Identify three effects the arrival of the Spanish had on the Aztec people.
- 4 Why did Cortes follow an indirect route from the coast to Tenochtitlan?
- 5 How was the climate and landscape in Mexico different to that which the conquistadors were accustomed to in Europe?
- 6 In what ways did geographical features influence the Spanish conquest of the Aztec, Inca and Maya civilisations?

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

- 7 Study **Source 1**. What might have been the advantages and disadvantages of the layout of Tenochtitlan if the city was under attack?
- 8 What impression do you get about the initial meeting between Cortes and Montezuma shown in **Source 2**?
- 9 What aspect of Aztec culture did the Spaniards use to their own advantage when preparing for the battle of Tenochtitlan? Explain.
- 10 Why was iron so important in the conquest of the Aztecs?
- 11 Study **Source 4**. You will see one of the conquistadors, possibly Cortes himself, embracing two Aztec warriors. Who could these people be? Why are they not fighting against Cortes?
- 12 Read **Source 5** and then look up the word 'lament' in a dictionary. Do you think it is an appropriate term to use for this poem?

PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS

- 13 Why do you think that most people who live in Mexico and surrounding areas today speak Spanish?
- 14 How would you describe the battle for Tenochtitlan as portrayed in **Source 5**? Do you think you would show the battle differently if it had been portrayed in the art style used in **Source 2**?
- 15 Discuss these issues as a class:
 - a Is it right for one country or group of people to take control of another? Are there any situations in which such action might be justified?
 - b How do you think indigenous people would feel about people from another country or culture invading their lands?
 - c Based on your general knowledge, can you see any similarities between what happened to the Aztecs and what happened to Indigenous Australians?
 - d Do you think it is possible for two cultures — that of an invading people and that of a conquered people — to exist together peacefully? If so, how could this be achieved?

coexist live together at the same time in the same place