Samples from Exploring History
Through Primary Sources: Mayas, Incas, & Aztecs

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Rediscovering the Mayas

**Standard/Objective**

- Identify and use processes important to reconstructing and reinterpreting the past, such as using a variety of sources, providing, validating, and weighing evidence for claims, checking credibility of sources, and searching for causality. (NCSS)
- Students will create stelae and then sketch them as if reporting about ancient ruins to the modern generation.

**Materials**

Copies of both sides of the *Mayan Stela* photograph card; Copies of the historical background information (page 16); Butcher paper, poster board sheets, or cardboard; Packing tape

**Discussion Questions**

- In what ways are these two pictures different?
- Why do you think this statue was erected?
- What details do you notice on this statue?
- This statue has information recorded on the back of it. What kinds of information do you think are on it?
- What is a *stela*?

**Using the Primary Source**

Place your students into groups of four or five. Make copies of the photograph card and allow the groups a few moments to study it. Then, ask the questions above and allow the groups to discuss possible answers. Distribute copies of the historical background information (page 16) to your students and let them read it in their groups.

Distribute building materials (packing tape and butcher paper, cardboard, or poster board) to each group. Tell each group that it will be building a stela dedicated to a fictitious ruler from the past. They must give the ruler a name and on the stela, show all sorts of interesting facts about his life and empire. Each group should use the materials you give it to build this stela.

When all the groups have finished creating their stelae, have pairs of students go on archaeological expeditions. Students should find partners and then examine a stela made by a different group. One of the students should take notes on what they see on the stela and the other person should sketch the stela just like John Stephens and Frederick Catherwood did on their 1839 expedition. Have students answer the following questions: Where did the ruler live? What interesting events took place during his or her reign? Let students share their sketches and writings with others in their small groups.

Finally, assign various activities from the back of the photograph card.

**Extension Idea**

- Have students find and look at other pictures that Catherwood sketched while in Copan. They can compare these drawings and see if they can find modern-day photographs of the places.
Rediscovering the Mayas  
(cont.)

**Historical Background Information**

No one knows for sure why the Mayan civilization disappeared. The ruins of their mysterious cities lay untouched by the modern world until 1839. Around that time, a New York lawyer named John Stephens became very interested in the lost cities of Central America. He had heard many stories but wondered if they were true. Stephens had previously traveled to Europe and to Egypt. He had written two books about his travels. The old architecture amazed him. Upon hearing that the diplomat to Central America died, he applied for the position. Stephens got the job and began looking for someone to accompany him on this expedition. Stephens knew an artist named Frederick Catherwood who had traveled around the world, too. Catherwood joined Stephens and they set out for Central America in 1839.

These two explorers hoped to find old ruins. It was the rainy season. They hired local guides who walked them on mules through the muddy jungle. The narrow paths were slippery with rocks, and roots bulged from the ground. At times they had to wade through swamps. Machetes were used to cut through the thick vines. Mosquitoes bit them, too. After six days of this they arrived at a place with some ruins. They walked through the tall brush until they saw an amazing sight. Spread before them was the Mayan city of Copan (koh-PAN).

Stephens liked Copan so much that he decided to buy it. A worker stepped forward and told Stephens that he owned this part of the jungle. Stephens happily paid $50 for the ruins of Copan. He and Catherwood went to work recording and drawing everything they saw there. They hired workers to clear away the jungle vines so they could see the city. Soon they discovered ball courts, temples, pyramids, and all sorts of carved symbols on the backs of statues and tall staircases.

From there they traveled to many other ruins all over Honduras, Guatemala, and the Yucatán. After three years they returned home and published their book *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and the Yucatán*. Catherwood’s drawings were as accurate as photographs. Stephens and Catherwood later returned to Central America to study more Mayan ruins.

While in Copan, Catherwood saw the stela that is shown on the photograph card and copied it for their book. This stela was built for one of the most powerful rulers of Copan. His name was 18 Rabbit. It was built in A.D. 782. 18 Rabbit commissioned more stelae and architecture than any other ruler in Copan. For many years Copan was the cultural center of the Mayan civilization.

Mayan stelae tell many important details about the rulers. Sometimes the information is inflated to make the ruler look good. The dates that he ruled, the other tribes that he defeated, and his accomplishments are all written in glyphs on the stela. The Maya excelled in astronomy, sculpture, and glyph writing.
Mayan Stela

Background Information
In 1839, John Stephens and Frederick Catherwood traveled to cities where the Mayas once lived. Stephens was a lawyer who had traveled and written about his voyages. Catherwood was an artist who drew pictures of the places they visited. While in Copan (koh-PAN), Catherwood saw this stela and copied it for their book. The stela was built for one of the most powerful rulers of Copan. His name was 18 Rabbit. It was built in A.D. 782. This ruler commissioned more stelae and architecture than any other ruler in Copan. Mayan stelae tell many important details about the rulers, warring tribes, and accomplishments of an empire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analyzing History</th>
<th>Historical Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge</strong></td>
<td><strong>Fiction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What five words would you use to describe this stela to someone who has never seen it?</td>
<td>Imagine that Stephens and Catherwood hosted a reality television show. What would it be called? Write a one-paragraph description for a television guide that tells about this new show.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comprehension</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nonfiction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretend you live during the time that Catherwood drew this picture. Write a caption for the local newspaper that tells about this picture and the journey.</td>
<td>Write the script that would be on the back of your personal stela. It should be at least 10 sentences long.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Application</strong></td>
<td><strong>History Challenge</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you were a Mayan leader, how would you inform the world about your reign?</td>
<td>Find out why Stephens and Catherwood never traveled together after their second trip.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analysis</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If this stela could talk, what would it say? Create a cartoon showing this scene.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Synthesis</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you were 18 Rabbit, what kinds of things would you have written about on your stela? Make a list of five new things.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on what you know, what kind of personality did 18 Rabbit have?</td>
<td></td>
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The Promised Land

Standard/Objective

- Describe how people create places that reflect cultural values and ideals as they build neighborhoods, parks, shopping centers, and the like. (NCSS)
- Students will work in small groups to present commercials that tell about the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan.

Materials

Copy of the facsimile Map of Tenochtitlan; Copies of the historical background information (page 44); Copies of the student activity sheet, The History Travel Channel Features Tenochtitlan (page 45); Copies of Through the Eyes of Hernan Cortés (page 46)

Discussion Questions

- What do you notice about the layout of this city?
- What is the most interesting part of this map?
- According to this map, what is the most important part of the city?
- How many dry paths could someone take from the center of the city to the land surrounding it?
- In what way does the map differ from what Hernan Cortés described?

Using the Primary Source

Begin by distributing copies of Through the Eyes of Hernan Cortés (page 46) to your students. Have a student read it aloud. Then, tell your students to use the space at the bottom of the page to sketch maps of the city based on the text. Give them a few minutes to do this.

After students have completed their sketches, pass the facsimile Map of Tenochtitlan around the classroom so that students can see it. Let them compare their drawings with this map that was drawn in the 1500s. How are they alike and how are they different? Ask the discussion questions above.

Distribute copies of the historical background information (page 44) and let your students read it silently.

Tell your students that they will be working in groups of four to create one-minute television commercials for a travel show about Tenochtitlan. Distribute copies of the student activity sheet, The History Travel Channel Features Tenochtitlan (page 45) to your students. Let your students work in their small groups to create commercials for the show. At the end of class or the following day, allow your students present their commercials to the class.

Extension Idea

- Have your students create real-estate advertisements for the town of Tenochtitlan. They can list houses and other important buildings found in the city that are for sale.
The Promised Land (cont.)

Historical Background Information

The Aztec god of war and god of sun was named Huitzilopochtli (wee-tzee-lo-POCH-tlee). The Aztec’s believed that unless Huitzilopochtli received sacrifices, the world would end every 52 years. Statues show Huitzilopochtli as a hummingbird with a black face, holding a mirror and a snake. He encouraged the Aztecs to fight their enemies and form an empire of their own. If they did this, he would give them a homeland.

The Aztecs had been living in the northwest part of Mexico and parts of the southwestern United States. Huitzilopochtli promised the leader of the Aztecs that he would guide them south to their new land. This land was an island surrounded by Lake Texcoco, one of five lakes in the Valley of Mexico. Upon arriving at this island, they were to search for an eagle perched on a cactus, eating a snake. This location was the exact place that they should build their capital. The Aztecs arrived around A.D. 1325 and began building their capital, Tenochtitlan (tay-noch-teet-LAHN).

Tenochtitlan soon became the largest city in Mesoamerica. The island was only five square miles (12.9 square km), but the population grew to more than 200,000 people. In no time the island became too small, so the Aztecs moved to other areas around the lake. In some places, they began to build more land in the lake by growing crops in floating gardens. They created these floating gardens by bunching twigs together and stacking mud on the top. The gardens could be transported until the roots took anchor in the floor of the lake. Once the ground was hard enough, they built buildings on top of them and gradually increased the land. The citizens of Tenochtitlan lived in houses made from twigs, mud, and thatched grass. They were built around patios. The noble classes lived in stone homes that were painted either red or white.

The city was broken into wards called calpulli. Each calpulli had its own school, temple, and government council. The Aztecs used leaders from each calpulli to create a council. This council elected four chief officials. One of these chief officials was elected to be the emperor, or tlatoani (TLA T-oh-ah-nee), over the entire empire.

The construction of Tenochtitlan was amazing. The Aztecs built grand palaces, temple pyramids, ball courts, and fountains. The Aztec ruler lived in a palace at the center of the city square. His palace had hundreds of rooms. Beautiful fresco paintings covered the walls for decoration. A pyramid was topped with two temples dedicated to the rain god and the sun god. Markets were filled with people buying and selling. They even built a royal zoo that employed 300 workers. Sewage was collected on barges and used for fertilizing their crops. Stone aqueducts brought fresh water to the city. Three causeways connected the island to the main land. If invasion was ever a threat, these causeways could be quickly removed. Dams kept the fresh water of Lake Texcoco from mixing with the salty water around it. Dams also protected the city against flooding. Canals were a part of their defense system and allowed them to travel to other places in the city by canoe.

Today the ruins of this city lie beneath what is now Mexico City. Most of Lake Texcoco has been drained and the rest has dried up.
The History Travel Channel Features Tenochtitlán

Background Information
Tenochtitlán (tay-nohch-teet-LAHN) was settled in 1325 by the Aztecs in the middle of Lake Texcoco, Mexico. The city was surrounded by water but had three causeways leading to the land around it. People traveled throughout their city on the canals using canoes. They created floating gardens in the shallow water and produced all the food their city needed. The Spanish created this woodcut map of Tenochtitlán in 1556.

Activity
Directions: You have been hired by the History Travel Channel to produce a one-minute commercial about Tenochtitlán. This station wants to take its viewers back in time to visit the city. Answer the questions below to help you prepare for your commercial.

1. What will you say about Tenochtitlán’s location?

2. What important things should you tell the viewers about the layout of Tenochtitlán?

3. What will viewers hope to see while visiting Tenochtitlán?

4. What is the history of Tenochtitlán’s beginnings?

5. On another sheet of paper, create a brief outline of your skit.

Challenge
Find out what happened to Tenochtitlán and why it is difficult to see its ruins today.
“This great city of Tenochtitlán (tay-nohch-teet-LAHN) is built on the salt lake, and no matter by what road you travel there are two leagues from the main body of the city to the mainland. There are four artificial causeways leading to it, and each is as wide as two cavalry lances. The main streets are very wide and very straight; some of these are on the land, but the rest and all the smaller ones are half on land, half canals where they paddle their canoes. All the streets have openings in places so that the water may pass from one canal to another. Over all these openings, and some of them are very wide, there are bridges.

“There are, in all districts of this great city, many temples or houses for their idols. They are all very beautiful buildings. Amongst these temples there is one, the principal one, whose great size and magnificence no human tongue could describe, for it is so large that within the precincts, which are surrounded by very high wall, a town of some five hundred inhabitants could easily be built. All round inside this wall there are very elegant quarters with very large rooms and corridors where their priests live. There are as many as forty towers, all of which are so high that in the case of the largest there are fifty steps leading up to the main part of it and the most important of these towers is higher than that of the cathedral of Seville.”

—Hernan Cortés
The March of Cortés

Directions: Answer the questions below about the expedition of Cortés.

1. When he arrived in the land of the Aztecs, where did Cortés first land?

2. How many cities did he visit before arriving at the city of Tenochtitlan?

3. What type of land terrain did Cortés travel through to get to Tenochtitlan?