

## Moctezuma's Zoo Lesson Plan

**Central Historical Question:**  
*Did Moctezuma have a zoo?*

### Materials:

- Moctezuma PowerPoint
- Copies of Student Materials

**Note:** This lesson is designed to be delivered digitally. Viewing the documents online enables students to zoom in high resolution and see important details of the documents. It also provides them the opportunity to access documents using a digital archive, which is one of the objectives of the lesson. We recommend familiarizing yourself with the webpages, specifically the World Digital Library viewing tool, before teaching this lesson.

### Plan of Instruction:

- 1) Use the PowerPoint slides to provide background information and introduce the Central Historical Question. Depending on your students' existing knowledge of the Triple Alliance (often called the Aztec Empire), you may wish to shorten or skip the mini-lecture.
  - a. Slide 1: Title Slide
  - b. Slide 2: Map of the Triple Alliance Territory, 1519. *In the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, three city-states in the Valley of Mexico – Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan – formed an alliance. Together, these city-states waged wars across central Mexico to expand their power and wealth. Their territory is often called the Aztec Empire. This map shows the expanse of the Triple Alliance at its peak.*
  - c. Slide 3: Moctezuma Xocoyotzin. *Moctezuma Xocoyotzin was the ninth king of Tenochtitlan, the city-state at the heart of the Triple Alliance. Moctezuma was born around 1466 and reigned from 1502 until 1520. The Triple Alliance was at the height of its size and power during Moctezuma's reign.*
  - d. Slide 4: Tenochtitlan. *Tenochtitlan, one of the three allied city-states, emerged as the capital of the empire. It was located in present-day Mexico City and was home to at least 200,000 or 300,000 people, placing it among the world's largest cities at the time. Most Tenochca-Mexica (residents of Tenochtitlan) were commoners who farmed communal lands, served as soldiers, or worked as artisans or traders. Above them in social status were private landowners, or nobles, and below the commoners*

*were serfs who worked for the nobles. A small class of workers were traveling merchants. Laws in Tenochtitlan were harsh, and the king was an absolute ruler. Tenochtitlan was also home to institutions of learning, religion, and art.*

- e. Slide 5: Tributes. *The city-states and kingdoms defeated by the Triple Alliance were allowed to keep their local governments and cultures. However, they were forced to pay very heavy tributes to the empire. In this way, the Triple Alliance can best be understood as an economic empire. In one year, Tenochtitlan alone would receive seven tons of corn, four tons each of beans, chia seeds, and amaranth grains, two million cotton cloaks, and countless luxury items as tribute. As you might imagine, many subjects resented the warring Triple Alliance and the heavy tributes it demanded.*
- f. Slide 6: Spanish Colonization. *After twenty-five years of colonizing the West Indies, the Spanish began to explore the Gulf Coast of Mexico. Hernán Cortés was a Spanish official in Cuba. After hearing stories of the great wealth of Mexico, he gathered a few hundred men and set sail. Once in Mexico, the Spanish heard about the wealth of Moctezuma and Tenochtitlan and wanted to conquer the city. Before reaching Tenochtitlan, Cortés and his men committed massacres in Cholula and Otumba (other cities in present-day Mexico). The locals were astonished by the deadliness of the Spanish weapons and horses, as well as by their brutality. Cortés made alliances with some of Tenochtitlan's rivals and unhappy tributaries.*
- g. Slide 7: Conquest of Tenochtitlan. *In 1519, Spanish soldiers and their Native allies arrived in Tenochtitlan. To demonstrate his power and wealth, Moctezuma housed Cortés and his company in a palace. After six weeks, Cortés took Moctezuma prisoner. The details of Moctezuma's death are unknown, but in 1520 he died following a Spanish massacre of Mexica nobles at the Main Temple in Tenochtitlan. Outraged by the massacre and the death of Moctezuma, the Mexica attacked the Spanish and their Native allies and forced them out of the city on June 30, 1520. For one year, the Spanish cut off Tenochtitlan's supply routes and destroyed its aqueducts, causing mass famine in the city. At the same time, many Mexica died from European diseases. The Spanish returned in August 1521 to a weakened Tenochtitlan, which they overtook by burning much of the city, killing many Mexica, and capturing the new emperor.*
- h. Slide 8: Tenochtitlan. *Today, we're going to examine four sources related to Moctezuma Xocoyotzin, his palace, and Tenochtitlan.*

- 2) Direct students to the Blog Post and the corresponding Guiding Questions. Students read the Blog Post and complete corresponding Guiding Questions. They should not move on to Document A.

If Tumblr is blocked on your school's network, students can view a screenshot of the blog post at the following URL:

<https://sheg.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/mystoriology%20tumblr.png>

Share out.

- a. Who wrote this? When?

Students should recognize that they have no way of knowing who wrote this blog post.

- b. What claims does the author make?

Students should identify that the author makes two principal claims. One is that the popular narrative about Indigenous societies before European contact is that they were primitive and that this narrative is a tool for subjugating Native people. The second claim is that Moctezuma had a zoo. The zoo's existence, in the author's view, disproves the narrative of Indigenous societies as primitive or less advanced than European societies.

- c. Is this a trustworthy source for learning about Moctezuma? Explain.

Students should note that we don't know who authored this post and that it's hosted on a platform where anyone can post content. For these reasons, we cannot assume the source is trustworthy.

- d. What evidence does the author provide to support her claims? How strong is this evidence?

Students should recognize that, although the author provides details about the zoo, she does not provide evidence to support her claims. Students may have different opinions about how plausible the claims are. Regardless, they should note that the author hasn't said what she's basing her claims on.

- e. Why does the blogger think it matters whether Moctezuma had a zoo?

The author believes that Moctezuma had a zoo and argues that the existence of a zoo refutes popular misconceptions about Indigenous societies before European arrival.

- f. Are there additional reasons why we should care whether Moctezuma had a zoo?

Support students to think about what the existence of a zoo could tell us about Mexica society at the time. Help them consider what creating and maintaining a zoo might involve and ask them how such a project could help us learn about the way the society was organized, as well as its priorities, technology, and economy.

- 3) Transition to the next round of inquiry. Say to students: *Let's focus for now on the blog post's claim that Moctezuma had a zoo. How could we investigate whether this claim is true?*

Have students share some ideas for how they could try to verify these claims. If students suggest using primary sources, ask them how specifically they would do so. If students don't suggest this possibility, raise it with them. Then explain that today they are going to use a digital archive to review three primary sources to try to answer the question: Did Moctezuma have a zoo?

- 4) Direct students to Documents A-C and the corresponding Guiding Questions. Students examine the documents and answer the corresponding Guiding Questions.

#### Document A notes

- This document was produced decades after the conquest of Tenochtitlan, which may limit its usefulness as a source of evidence. However, it's possible that some of the Mexica students who contributed to the manuscript had direct knowledge of Moctezuma's collection of animals, which makes this a useful source. Their familiarity with Mexica society also is a strength of the source. (You may wish to circle back to this last point after students read Document D, a source by Hernán Cortés.)
- The illustration depicts a human with a variety of birds and two great cats.
- The illustration and its accompanying text corroborate certain aspects of the blog post, such as the existence of a building that housed many animals and where artists and artisans worked. However, the document does not corroborate all of the blog post's claims, such as the claim that the zoo "far surpassed anything the Spanish invaders had ever seen."

### Document B notes

- We don't know exactly who created this map or what they based it on, which may limit the usefulness of the document as a source of evidence. However, given the date of its creation, this may be a trustworthy and useful source. Additionally, it's likely that the mapmaker(s) was familiar with Tenochtitlan or based the map on the account(s) of people who were.
- The map depicts Tenochtitlan. Students should locate and identify the detail of the map that depicts rooms of birds, cats, and possibly other creatures. These rooms are located very close to Moctezuma's palace and the Main Temple.
- This map corroborates certain aspects of Documents A and B. It shows birds, cats, and people in various rooms in a building located near the palace. However, it doesn't necessarily corroborate other aspects of the first two documents, such as Document A's claims that the building contained crocodiles and bears or Document B's claims about goldsmiths.

### Document C notes

- This might be a trustworthy source because Hernán Cortés visited Tenochtitlan's Main Temple and palaces himself. However, Cortés may have had ulterior motives in writing this letter. Students may reason that he could have embellished his description of the wealth of Tenochtitlan so that Charles V would support Cortés's expedition since conquering such a city would result in enormous plunder. Alternatively, students may reason that given Cortés's brutality and motives for marching to Tenochtitlan, he may have believed the Mexica were inferior and this perception may have affected his description of the city in ways that make his account less trustworthy.
- This document corroborates many of the blog post's claims, like those of the aquariums, garden, animal caretakers, and the strong impression the building had on the Spanish. It also corroborates some aspects of Documents B and C, like the birds, cats, and proximity to Moctezuma's palace. The document may not corroborate other claims, like the artisan workrooms. Cortés wrote that some people were also housed in this building, which Documents B and C do not corroborate.

Note: Cortés's claim that Moctezuma held people with disabilities in a zoo may surprise and trouble students. They should note that the other documents do not corroborate this claim. You might also tell them that other relevant accounts that students didn't read today (such as those authored by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Diego Durán and Francisco López de Gómara) challenge this claim.

## 5) Class Discussion

- a. *Return to the claim made in the blog post that Moctezuma had a zoo. Based on the evidence we examined, do we think this claim is true?*

Students should realize that the three historical documents we reviewed today all provide evidence that Moctezuma had a large collection of wild animals.

The documents disagree about the purpose of housing the animals or who had access to viewing them. While Cortés in his letter to Charles V (Document C) wrote that this collection was for Moctezuma's amusement, the Florentine Codex (Document A) suggests the purpose of the animal collection was to provide space and supplies for artists and artisans.

*What other sources would you want to examine to help you further investigate and answer the question?*

If students struggle to name types of sources, encourage them to consider how archaeological and secondary sources could be helpful. Also support them in considering how the historical record may be limited due to the subsequent conquest of Tenochtitlan, in which the Spanish and their Indigenous allies burned the city, including Moctezuma's collection of animals. Cortés wrote in his third letter to Charles V, dated October 30, 1520:

Although it grieved me much, I determined, as it grieved them even more, to burn these great buildings. This seemed to cause the enemies immense sorrow, as well as to their allies in the cities about the lake, for none of them ever thought our force would be sufficient to penetrate so far into the city; and they were greatly dismayed.

- b. *Now that you've looked at three historical documents, return to the other claim made in the blog post. What are your thoughts on if it matters whether Moctezuma had a zoo? Should the answer influence our understanding of Mexica society in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century? Why or why not? Should the answer influence our understanding of other Indigenous societies before European arrival? Why or why not?*
- c. *How did today's exercise compare to how you usually evaluate information online?*

Students should reflect on the ways that they evaluated the blog post: First, they raised questions about who was behind the information and what evidence was presented—they were wary of the source because they didn't know anything about the author and the blog post didn't provide any evidence or sources where the information come from. In order to corroborate the claims, students investigated more sources. Point out that even if students don't have time to do this extended corroboration with every claim they encounter online, they should still always ask the questions about the source and strength of evidence that they asked with the blog post.

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## Sources

### Blog Post

"Moctezuma's Zoo." *Mystoriology* (web log), July 11, 2017.  
<https://mystoriology.tumblr.com/>.

### Document A

Bernardino de Sahagún, *General History of the Things of New Spain* (Mexico City, 1577), accessed July 27, 2017, <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10619/view/1/64/>.

### Document B

*Nuremberg map of Tenochtitlan and the Gulf Coast*, 1524, accessed July 27, 2017, <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/2831/view/1/58/>.

### Document C

Cortés's letter - Hernán Cortés, *Narrative Letter by Hernán Cortés*, 1522, accessed July 27, 2017, <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/7335/view/1/32/>.

Translation – Hernán Cortés, *Letters of Cortés: Five Letters of Relation to the Emperor Charles V*, trans. Francis Augustus MacNutt (New York: Putnam, 1908), 265, accessed July 27, 2017, <https://archive.org/stream/lettersofcorts01cortuoft#page/264/mode/2up>