

## ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE AZTECS AND THE INCAS

**Learning Target:** I can cite several pieces of textual evidence to support the analysis of Mesoamerican achievements.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The civilizations of Mesoamerica were advanced in many ways. In fact, the accomplishments of the Maya, Aztec, and Inca empires rivaled the advances of European civilizations. Their achievements in math, science, government, and record-keeping left a mark on their world. Historians, archeologists, and anthropologists studying these civilizations have taught us even more about these cultures by analyzing the clues left by these peoples. However, there are many things still left to discover.

### PART A

Directions: Use the documents below to answer the questions that follow each one. You will use the documents and your answers to complete an essay question for Part B, so make sure to be thorough in your responses.

#### Document 1: Hernando Cortés: Second Letter to Charles V, 1520

When he arrived in 1519, the Spanish conquistador, Cortés, described the magnificent Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan with these words to his king:

“The city has many squares where markets are held and trading is carried on. There is one square . . . where there are more than 60,000 souls, buying and selling . . . all kinds of merchandise . . . including food products, jewels of gold and silver, lead, brass, copper, zinc, bones, shells, and feathers. . . . Every kind of merchandise is sold in a particular street or quarter assigned to it exclusively, and thus the best order is preserved. They sell everything by number or measure. . . . There is a building in the great square that is used as an audience house, where ten or twelve persons, who are magistrates, sit and decide all controversies that arise in the market, and order delinquents to be punished. In the same square there are other persons who go constantly about among the people observing what is sold, and the measures used in selling.”

1. Why was Cortes so impressed when he arrived at Tenochtitlan?
2. Imagine that you are a young man or woman in Spain who aspires (wants) to be a conquistador. How could you use this letter to persuade the king to allow you to attack a different section of the Aztec Empire?

#### Document 2: Farming in the Incan Empire, 1539

This description of farming in the Incan Empire was provided by Garciasco de la Vega, a son of an Incan princess and a Spanish explorer.

“As soon as the Incan ruler had conquered any kingdom and set up his government, he ordered that the farmland used to grow corn be extended. For this purpose, he ordered irrigation channels to be constructed. The engineers showed great cleverness and skill in supplying water for the crops, since only scattered sections of the land could grow corn. For this reason, they endeavored to increase its fertility as much as possible.”

1. Why is irrigation an important achievement?

2. Do you think an Incan would have described this achievement as “clever”? Explain.

### Document 3: Terrace Farming in the Incan Empire



The Inca lived in the Andes Mountains, which stretch down the west coast of South America. Flat areas for people to farm were very hard to find. Instead the Inca dug terraces on mountain sides to grow crops. 2,471,053 acres of farmland covered much of the Incan Empire. (This figure includes both terraced and flat farms.) Interestingly, the stones used to support terrace farming would gather heat throughout the day and during the night would distribute the heat to the plants... [These stones also meant that] erosion was virtually impossible.

1. What are the pros and cons that terrace farming offers to the Incan people?

### Document 4: Human Sacrifice in the Aztec Empire

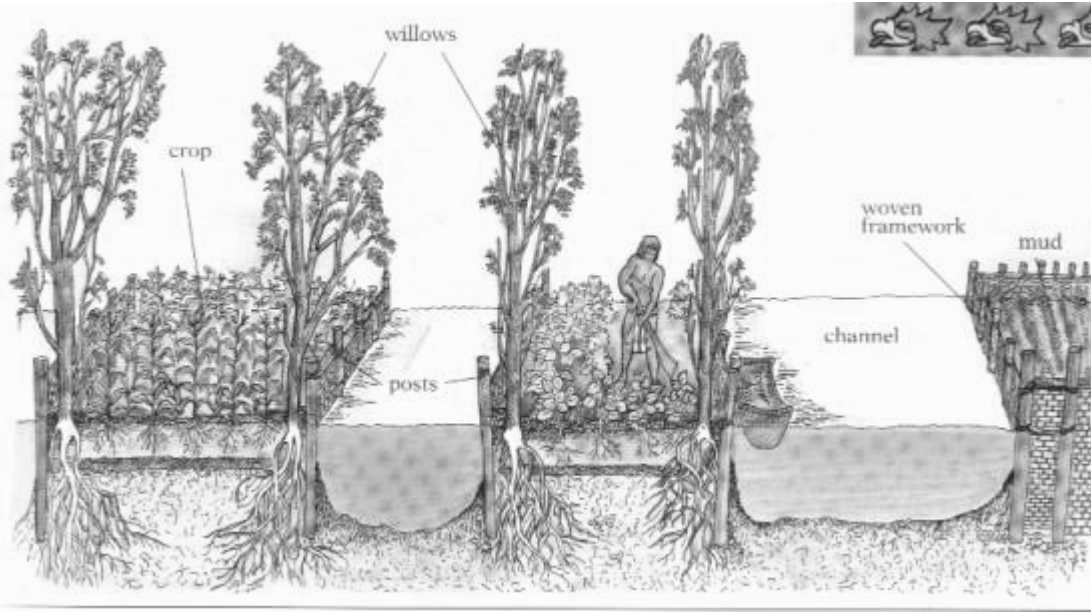
Spanish descriptions of Aztec society contain long discussions of human sacrifice, and the practice is well represented in the codices (written history of the Aztecs). The Spanish sources, however, are heavily biased. The need to put an end to this custom was one of the prime rationalizations (reasons) for the conquest of the Aztecs, and for this reason the Spanish writers almost certainly overstated how often human sacrifices occurred. Archaeological findings demonstrate (show) beyond a doubt that the Aztecs, like most ancient Mesoamerican cultures, did indeed sacrifice people. This practice was ancient and widespread in central Mexico.

Rites of human sacrifice were part of a complex tapestry of myths and beliefs that have been extensively analyzed and debated... Key concepts include the sacredness of human blood [and] the idea that people owe a debt to the gods [which] . . . must be repaid with blood and human lives.



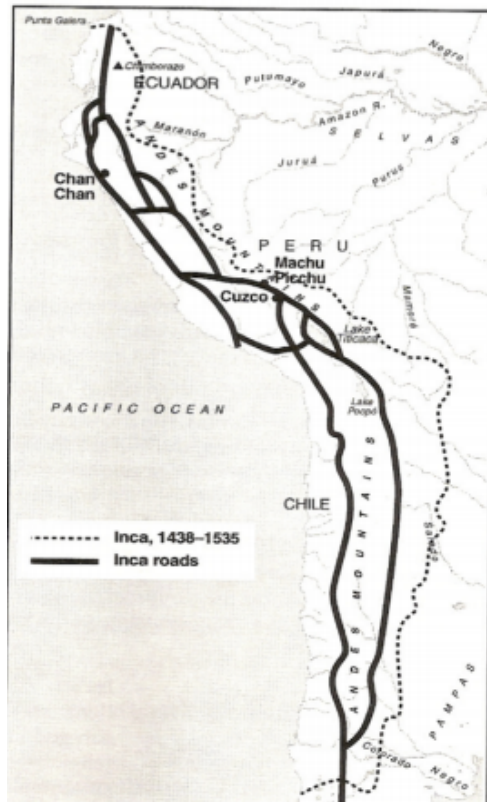
1. How do historians know about human sacrifices that took place in during the reign of the Aztecs?
2. What does the author mean when they state that “the Spanish writers almost certainly overstated how often human sacrifices occurred”?

**Document 5: Chinampas Farming in the Aztec Empire**



1. Explain whether you think that this sort of farming could have been performed in the Incan empire located in the Andes Mountains. Why or why not?

**Document 6: Incan Roads**



1. How did the Incan government unite its empire in the Andes Mountains?
2. How do these sources show human/environment interaction?

## Document 7: Aztec Astronomy



To predict planting and harvesting times, early peoples studied movements of the sun, stars, and planets. They used this information to make calendars. The Aztecs created two calendars – one for farming and one for religion. The farming calendar let them know when to plant and when to harvest crops. The religious calendar was used to plan religious ceremonies. An Aztec calendar stone dug up in Mexico City in 1790 includes information about the months of the year and pictures the sun god at the center.

1. How did the Aztecs contribute to the study of astronomy?
2. Why did the Aztecs create two different calendars?

## Document 8: Mayan Advancements in Learning

The Maya developed a complex writing system that used glyphs. The Maya carved glyphs on buildings and wrote them on bark paper. This paper was screen-folded to form a type of book called a **codex**. Few of these books still exist.

The Maya developed a mathematical system based on the number 20. The Maya did not represent numbers in the same way as we do today. They used a dot to represent 1 and a bar to represent 5. The Maya combined these symbols to show other numbers. Also, the Maya were one of the first people to use the zero.

By using their math system, the Maya made great advances in astronomy. For example, they accurately predicted eclipses of the sun and charted the orbit of the planet Venus. The Maya also used mathematics to produce a very accurate calendar system. This system helped the Maya identify the best times to plant seeds and harvest crops. It also helped Mayan kings make important political decisions, such as when to go to war. Finally, the calendar system enabled the Maya to keep very precise records of events.

1. Explain three main accomplishments of the Maya.
2. How was the Maya number system different than the one we use today?
3. How did the Maya use their calendar?

## **PART B**

On your own paper, answer the following question in paragraph form. You must cite evidence from at least four of the documents in this DBQ to earn full credit.

**How did achievements of the Inca, Aztec, and Maya civilizations impact society?**