

Mesoamerica: The History of Central America

Teacher's Guide

Grade Level: 9–12

Curriculum Focus: World History

Lesson Duration: Two class periods

Program Description

The clash of civilizations in this episode features the history and culture of Mesoamerica. Discover the Aztec empire and its city Tenochtitlan. Learn what prompted Europeans to look outward, and explore the Spanish conquests of the Americas.

Lesson Summary

Students select one of three women highlighted in the segment “Red Queen: Mysterious Maya Queen” and write an essay, in her voice, describing what it was like to be a powerful woman in Maya society. Students do additional research, learning more about the women and the role of other women in Maya society. The lesson concludes with a discussion of how powerful women in Maya civilization compare to powerful women in our own time.

Onscreen Questions

Part 1, “Tenochtitlan, Aztec City” and “Europe Looks Westward”

- What advantages helped Spain conquer the Aztecs?
- What dangers did European explorers face in the New World?

Part 2, “Spanish Conquest of the Americas” and “Red Queen: Mysterious Maya Queen”

- Why was Francisco Pizarro able to conquer the Inca Empire with little effort?
- How did the Maya culture resemble European and ancient Egyptian cultures?

Lesson Plan

Student Objectives

- Identify three powerful women of the Maya empire.
- Research the life of one of these women and describe what her life was probably like.
- Analyze the role of women in Maya society.

- Discuss similarities and differences between powerful women in Maya society and powerful women of today.

Materials

- *Mesoamerica: The History of Central America* program
- Computer with Internet access
- Newsprint and markers

Procedures

1. Begin the lesson by asking students to watch the segment entitled “Red Queen: Mysterious Maya Queen,” which is found in the program *Mesoamerica: The History of Central America*. Ask students to pay close attention to the three women mentioned in the program as contenders for the title of the “Red Queen.”
2. After students have finished watching the program, make a class list on a sheet of newsprint of the three women discussed in the program. Include their names and the role they played in Maya society. For your information, key facts about these women are listed below.
 - Yol Ik Nal. She was the only woman to rule the Maya city-state of Palenque. Her rule lasted from A.D. 583 to 604. She was a strong ruler, but during her reign, the city-state was under siege. It was a tumultuous time for Palenque.
 - Zak Kuk. The mother of Pakal, Palenque’s strongest ruler. Zak Kuk had a great deal of power; archaeologists suspect that her behind-the-scenes maneuvering ensured that her son was selected as the next king. Although he became king when he was 12 years old, she continued to be very involved in the ruling of the kingdom until her death.
 - Tzakbu Ajaw. The wife of Pakal. She came from a neighboring city-state and was married to Pakal as a teenager. She produced three sons; the first was born nine years after their marriage; the second, nine years later; and the third; four years later. Two of her three sons eventually ruled Palenque.
3. These woman played important roles in Maya society. Ask students to try to imagine what their lives were like. Then have each student select one of these three women to focus on. Ask students to write an essay in the voice of that woman, explaining what it was like to live during that time and be in a position of power in a male-dominated society. As students work on their essays, have them consider the following questions.
 - What role did each of these women play in Maya society? How did their roles differ from the roles of most women in Maya society?
 - How did each of these women exert her influence?
 - Did each of these women make a difference in Maya society? If so, how?
4. The program includes much information, but students will need to do additional research to complete this assignment. The following Web sites have information about these three

women and about Maya women in general. Encourage students to find additional Web sites on their own.

Overview

<http://www.civilization.ca/civil/maya/mmp09eng.html>

<http://www.archaeology.org/online/features/siteq2/>

<http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/CIVAMRCA/AZTECS.HTM>

http://www.mesoweb.com/palenque/features/red_queen/RedQueen.pdf

<http://www.mesoweb.com/reports/discovery2.html#>

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian/issues04/jul04/pdf/maya.pdf>

Yol Ik Nal

<http://www.ancientsites.com/aw/Places/Place/445757>

<http://www.guide2womenleaders.com/womeninpower/Womeninpower02.htm>

Zak Kuk

<http://www.jaguar-sun.com/charctrs.html>

http://mayaruins.com/palenque/a1_200.html

Lady Tzakbu Ajaw

<http://www.jaguar-sun.com/charctrs.html>

5. Give students time in class to do their research and to work on their essays. If students don't finish the assignment during class, ask them to complete their essays for homework. Encourage students to be creative and to try to put themselves into the shoes of these women.
6. During the next class, ask for volunteers to read their essays. Make sure that essays on all three women are represented. Try to have several students read their essays to hear how different students interpreted the lives of these women.
7. Conclude the lesson by having a final class discussion about the role of women in Maya culture. Do students think they played an important role in the society? Do students see any similarities between these women and powerful women of our time? What differences do students see between the powerful women of Maya culture and powerful women of today?

Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- 3 points: Students researched one powerful woman from Maya society and wrote a creative, accurate essay describing what her life was like; demonstrated a deep understanding of the similarities and differences between powerful women of Maya culture and powerful women living today.
- 2 points: Students researched one powerful woman from Maya society and wrote a satisfactory essay describing what her life was like; demonstrated an adequate understanding of the similarities and differences between powerful women in Maya culture and powerful women living today.

- 1 point: Students did not research one powerful woman from Maya society and did not complete the essay describing what her life was like; demonstrated a poor understanding of the similarities and differences between powerful women in Maya culture and powerful women living today.

Vocabulary

city-state

Definition: A political system in several cultures, including Maya society, in which each city had its own ruler and government that functioned in much the same way as our states do today

Context: Maya civilization never formed a central government; an individual city-state ruled only itself or several small cities.

Maya civilization

Definition: A sophisticated culture of American Indian people who lived in Central America and the southern part of Mexico, flourishing between A.D. 250 and the mid-1500s, when the Spanish conquered the Maya

Context: The accomplishments of Maya civilization include the invention of a sophisticated system of writing and the development of a yearly calendar.

Pakal

Definition: The most powerful ruler of the city-state of Palenque; he ruled for 70 years

Context: The discovery of Pakal's sarcophagus in the 1950s revealed much about Maya religion and the people's attitude toward their rulers.

Red Queen

Definition: The sarcophagus of a woman covered in cinnabar, which gave her a reddish color and hence the name she has been known by; the tomb was found next to Pakal's in the 1990s

Context: Figuring out the identity of the Red Queen has taken the expertise of many different kinds of scientists, including those who can interpret DNA that is thousands of years old.

Tzakbu Ajaw

Definition: The wife of Pakal, who came from another city-state as a teenager to marry him; she bore him three sons, two of whom eventually ruled Palenque

Context: Based on DNA evidence, which proved that the Red Queen was not related to Pakal, scientists think that Tzakbu Ajaw is probably the mystery queen.

Yol Ik Nal

Definition: The only woman ever to have ruled the city-state of Palenque

Context: At one time, scientists thought that Yol Ik Nal might be the Red Queen, but carbon dating of the remains revealed that the time of her death did not match the date that the Red Queen was buried.

Zak Kuk

Definition: The mother of Pakal, who made sure that her son became king of Palenque

Context: Because DNA evidence revealed that the Red Queen was not related to Pakal, scientists realized that Zak Kuk could not have been the Red Queen.

Academic Standards

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit <http://www.mcrel.org/>.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- World History: Understands the rise of centers of civilization in Mesoamerica and Andean South America in the 1st millennium CE
- Language Arts – Writing: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process
- Language Arts – Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)

NCSS has developed national guidelines for teaching social studies. To become a member of NCSS, or to view the standards online, go to <http://www.socialstudies.org>.

This lesson plan addresses the following thematic standards:

- Culture
- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Support Materials

Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the Discoveryschool.com Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- <http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html>
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DVD Content

This program is available in an interactive DVD format. The following information and activities are specific to the DVD version.

How To Use the DVD

The DVD starting screen has the following options:

Play Video—This plays the video from start to finish. There are no programmed stops, except by using a remote control. With a computer, depending on the particular software player, a pause button is included with the other video controls.

Video Index—Here the video is divided into sections indicated by video thumbnail icons; brief descriptions are noted for each one. Watching all parts in sequence is similar to watching the video from start to finish. Brief descriptions and total running times are noted for each part. To play a particular segment, press Enter on the remote for TV playback; on a computer, click once to highlight a thumbnail and read the accompanying text description and click again to start the video.

Curriculum Units—These are specially edited video segments pulled from different sections of the video (see below). These nonlinear segments align with key ideas in the unit of instruction. They include onscreen pre- and post-viewing questions, reproduced below in this Teacher's Guide. Total running times for these segments are noted. To play a particular segment, press Enter on the TV remote or click once on the Curriculum Unit title on a computer.

Standards Link—Selecting this option displays a single screen that lists the national academic standards the video addresses.

Teacher Resources—This screen gives the technical support number and Web site address.

Video Index

I. Tenochtitlán, Aztec City

With Tenochtitlán as its capital, the Aztec Empire was the largest and most powerful civilization in Mesoamerica before the conquistadors arrived.

II. Europe Looks Westward

Spain was the first European country to claim lands in the Americas, but Britain, France, and the Netherlands followed it shortly thereafter. Discover how European exploration affected the New World.

III. Spanish Conquest of the Americas

By the mid-16th century, Spanish conquistadors had successfully destroyed the Aztec and Inca Empires in Mesoamerica.



IV. Red Queen: Mysterious Maya Queen

In 1994 archaeologists discovered the Red Queen, an unidentified ancient Maya mummy. Examine the information experts have pieced together about her mysterious identity.

Curriculum Units

1. The Aztec Empire

Pre-viewing question

Q: What early civilizations do you know something about?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: What purpose did human sacrifice serve in Aztec society?

A: The Aztecs believed that sacrificing humans was a necessary part of life because their lives depended on the goodwill of the gods, so the surest way to keep them happy was to make daily human offerings. The Aztec priests believed these would guarantee that the sun would rise the next day. The sacrifices also instilled fear in the enemies of the Aztec empire because most human sacrifices were prisoners captured in war.

2. Europeans Explore the Americas

Pre-viewing question

Q: What did Christopher Columbus accomplish in his journey to the New World?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: What did European explorers bring to the Americas?

A: European explorers brought new foods and plants (wheat, carrots, rice) and animals (cows, horses, and chickens). They also introduced illnesses that Native Americans had no immunity to fight, and millions died. This made it easier for the conquistadors to defeat the local empires and take their riches.

3. Claiming Land in the New World

Pre-viewing question

Q: For what reasons might a person move to a new city or country?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: Why did Britain and the Netherlands want land in the Americas?

A: Britain, France, and the Netherlands wanted a share of the riches that Spain had discovered to increase the wealth and power of their own governments. Also, Britain and the Netherlands had broken from the Catholic Church to join the Reformation. This movement caused deep divisions and the countries that joined it became bitter rivals of Spain and other Catholic countries in Europe.

4. Cortés and Pizarro

Pre-viewing question

Q: What do you know about the Aztec and Inca civilizations?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: How did Cortés' defeat of the Aztecs compare to Pizarro's defeat of the Inca?

A: Students may mention that Cortés and Pizarro captured the leaders of the empires. Pizarro strategically used the fighting among the Inca to help him take down the empire, while Cortés relied on enemies of the Aztecs. Both men unwittingly benefited from the diseases they brought that weakened their enemies, and they had better use of technology and weapons than their native enemies.

5. Establishing a Family Bond

Pre-viewing question

Q: How are deceased ancestors honored in your family or culture?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: How were the burials of Pakal and the Red Queen similar?

A: Pakal and the Red Queen were buried with a covering of cinnabar, a red metallic powder, used to adorn the body. Each was buried inside a sarcophagus at the heart of a temple.

6. Yol Ik Nal: The Red Queen?

Pre-viewing question

Q: What might be the most difficult aspects of being a female ruler in a male-dominated society?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: Who was Yol Ik Nal?

A: Yol Ik Nal ruled from A.D. 583 to 604, the first and only woman to rule Palenque in her own name. She is considered to have been a skilled leader; under her reign Palenque grew into a large kingdom.

7. Clues from the Tomb

Pre-viewing question

Q: How do we learn information about the past?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: What did archaeologists learn when they excavated the temple of the Red Queen?

A: Archaeologists found that several phases of construction had taken place over the period from A.D. 500 to 700. The style of ceramics found alongside her sarcophagus confirmed that the Red Queen had been buried in the seventh century. This suggested that the tomb was built some fifty to a hundred years after the death of Yol Ik Nal. If Yol Ik Nal were the Red Queen, she would have had to be moved to her tomb posthumously.

8. Zak Kuk, a Possible Red Queen

Pre-viewing question

Q: What does it take to be a good leader during a crisis?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: Who was Zak Kuk?

A: All evidence suggests that Zak Kuk was the queen mother of Pakal, who would become Palenque's greatest king. She was also the regent and conducted the political affairs of the kingdom. She healed a court that was reeling from war and a dynastic struggle and she appears to have held power during this time of crisis. In 603 she gave birth to Pakal, and she handed him the reins of power when he was 12. When Pakal was king, Zak Kuk appears to have remained the center of power.

9. Tzakbu Ajaw: The Most Likely Red Queen

Pre-viewing question

Q: How does your family or culture celebrate the birth of a new baby?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: How did scientists determine that the Red Queen was not from Palenque?

A: Trace elements were extracted from the Red Queen's teeth and compared with Palenque's geological profile. The results indicated differences in the levels of the same elements extracted from Pakal's teeth. This suggested that the Red Queen probably came from outside Palenque and supported the theory that Tzakbu Ajaw may have been the Red Queen.

10. The Art of Palenque

Pre-viewing question

Q: Who are some powerful historical kings and leaders?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: What made the art of Palenque remarkable?

A: The art of Palenque is the only known example in the Maya world where people are recognizable by their portraits. The artists in Palenque carved images of kings and nobles in stone.

11. Forensic Portraits and DNA Identifies the Red Queen

Pre-viewing question

Q: Why is it important to learn about ancient cultures and societies?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: What did the DNA research tell scientists about the Red Queen's identity?

A: The DNA of the Red Queen and Pakal showed that the two were not related maternally. So

scientists concluded that the Red Queen would not have been Pakal's grandmother, mother, or any sister, which would make it impossible for Zak Kuk, Pakal's mother, to be the Red Queen.

12. The Era of the Red Queen

Pre-viewing question

Q: What do you know about the decline of the Maya civilization?

A: Answers will vary.

Post-viewing question

Q: Do you think it will ever be possible to confirm the identity of the Red Queen?

A: Answers will vary.

Credit

Marilyn Fenichel is a writer, editor, and educational consultant.