

Primary Source Activity



Exploring the Americas

Lesson 3 *Spain in America*

The Conquest of Mexico

Bernal Díaz del Castillo was a soldier under Hernán Cortés during what Díaz described as the “discovering, conquering, pacifying, and colonizing” of New Spain. Díaz was born in 1492, the year Columbus made his first voyage to the Americas. He wrote this eyewitness account—The True Story of the Conquest of New Spain—nearly 80 years later. In the passage presented here, Díaz describes how Montezuma, the Aztec ruler, displayed the statues that the Aztec worshipped. As you read, focus on the writer’s vivid descriptions of the gods. Think how Cortés, a Christian, reacted. Think how this encounter may have affected his opinion of Aztec civilization.

Directions: Read the following description of Aztec objects of worship.

Conquistadors and the Aztec

On each altar there were two figures, like giants . . . and the first which stood on the right hand they said was the figure of Huichilobos their god of War; it had a very broad face and monstrous and terrible eyes, and the whole of his body was covered with precious stones, and gold and pearls. . . . [I]n one hand he held a bow and in the other some arrows. . . .

. . . [O]n the left hand there stood the other great image the same height as Huichilobos, and it had a face like a bear and eyes that shone, made of their mirrors which they call Tezcat, and the body plastered with precious stones like that of Huichilobos, for they say that the two are brothers; and this Tezcatepuca . . . had charge of the souls of the Mexicans. . . .

. . . In the highest part of the [Aztec temple] there was a recess of which the woodwork was very richly worked, and in it was another image half man and half lizard, with precious stones all over it, and half the body was covered with a mantle. They say that the body of this figure is full of all the seeds that there are in the world, and they say that it is the god of seed time and harvest. . . .

Our captain said to Montezuma . . . , “. . . I do not understand how such a great Prince and wise man as you are has not come to the conclusion, in your mind, that these idols of yours are not gods, but evil things . . .”

Montezuma replied half angrily, . . . “. . . if I had known that you would have said such defamatory things I would not have shown you my gods, we consider them to be very good, for they give us health and rains and good seed times and seasons and as many victories as we desire, and we are obliged to worship them and make sacrifices, and I pray you not to say another word to their dishonor.”

—From The Bernal Díaz Chronicles: The True Story of the Conquest of New Spain, 1581

Primary Source Activity *Cont.*



Exploring the Americas

Analyzing Primary Sources

Directions Answer the following questions.

1. Identifying According to Montezuma, how do these gods help the Aztec?

2. Describing What materials were used to make the figures of the gods?

3. Identifying Point of View What does Cortés think of the Aztec gods?

Critical Thinking

4. Speculating What do you think was Montezuma's reason for showing the statues to Cortés?

5. Evaluating Which god do you think Montezuma might have liked best? Which god do you think an Aztec farmer would like best? Explain your reasoning.
