

SOURCING: SPANISH CONQUEST OF THE AZTEC EMPIRE

Purpose

In this activity, you'll continue to develop your sourcing skills by analyzing two primary source documents, each written from a different perspective, about the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. As you analyze the documents, you'll focus on the Historical Context, Purpose, and Importance rows of the Sourcing Tool. In doing so, you'll also learn how using multiple sources from different perspectives can give you a better understanding of a historical event.

Practices

Claim testing

Claim testing is an integral part of sourcing. In order to evaluate a source, we must use intuition, logic, authority, and evidence to analyze the document in order to understand the source's point of view and reason for writing.

Process

Since this activity is your introduction to using the Sourcing Tool for a historical document, your teacher will guide you through the process. In this activity, you'll read two primary source excerpts, complete the Sourcing Tool focusing on **historical context** and **purpose**, and write a response to a prompt. At the end of the activity, you'll work together in small groups to answer the **importance** row of the tool.

Before you get started, think about why you should even bother with sourcing. Sourcing helps us understand the past by analyzing the evidence that people or societies left behind. Sometimes, this evidence is limited and as a result, we have to draw conclusions by carefully evaluating sources and artifacts. Other times, there is a lot of evidence or there are sources to help us explain a historical event or process. But even if we have lots of source material, we still have to analyze the sources to understand their different points of view and perspectives. Sometimes people refer to different points of view as *author bias*. But we should remember that all primary source material has some bias—we all have lenses through which we view the world, and those viewpoints can help us better understand the point someone is trying to convey. In history, this can help us construct a clearer account of the past.

In this case, you're going to read two primary source documents as a class so you can answer these questions: *What were the motivations of the Spanish conquerors? And what were the responses of the Indigenous peoples to the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire?*

The idea here is to figure out the purpose and perspectives of those writing about the same historical event and how that shapes the sources. Your teacher will either hand out or have you download the Sourcing—Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire worksheet, which includes the Sourcing Tool and excerpts. You'll review the documents as a class, and then see if you can come up with an answer to the question based on what you've read. This may be hard to do—and that's OK! You're going to answer the same questions again later, but only after you've sourced the document like a historian would. Now, take out the Sourcing Tool and really focus on the Historical Context and Purpose rows. Go through the worksheet with your class, and then revisit the questions: *What were the motivations of the Spanish conquerors? And what were the responses of the Indigenous peoples to the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire?*

Think about how you might have read this text differently, or had a different perspective, after your first reading. Then, discuss the following questions with your class: Would you have a different perspective if you hadn't gone through this sourcing process? Would you have fully understood this text without knowing the historical context in which it was written? How does knowing about the purpose for the text give you a fuller picture of this text's significance?

Finally, your teacher will break the class up into small groups of three to four students. Work with your group to answer the questions in the Why? (Importance) row of the tool. Your teacher will collect your worksheets to evaluate your sourcing skills.

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Sourcing Tool

Directions: Answer each of the questions below. If you are sourcing more than one document, provide responses for each.

Name of document and/or source: _____

Author's name: _____

Location and date source was written: _____

Historical Context	1. What was happening in the author's location that might have influenced the document's creation (for example, the location's geography, demography, or the region's political situation, religious influences, or industry)? 2. What was happening at the time that might have influenced the document's creation? 3. What information that you've learned in this unit helps you understand this document?
Audience	1. Who was this created for (that is, was this written for anyone to read or was it private, for one specific person or group)? 2. What were the readers of this source supposed to do or think once they read it?

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Purpose	What was the author's goal, and what evidence supports your answer?
POV (Point of View)	Can you identify anything about the author that might explain why they wrote this? For example, their economic class, occupation, religion, nationality, political group, ethnic group, or gender?
Why (Importance)	1. What is the main idea of the source? 2. What parts of this document are most valuable and why? 3. What are the limitations of this document? In other words, where does it fall short?

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SOURCING EXCERPTS – SPANISH CONQUEST OF THE AZTEC EMPIRE

Source 1: Flowers and Songs of Sorrow

Aztec/Mexica poets wrote this “song of sorrow” after the conquest of Tenochtitlan by the Spanish. The collection, *Cantares Mexicanos*, housed in the National Library of Mexico, was written about 1523.

Source: Leon-Portilla, Miguel, ed. *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*. Translated by Angel Maria Garibay K. and Lysander Kemp. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1962 (p. 149).

Flowers and Songs of Sorrow

*Nothing but flowers and songs of sorrow
are left in Mexico and Tlatelolco,
where once we saw warriors and wise men.*

*We know it is true
that we must perish [die],
for we are mortal men.
You, the Giver of Life,
you have ordained [ordered] it. ...*

*We are crushed to the ground,
we lie in ruins.
There is nothing but grief and suffering
in Mexico and Tlatelolco,
where once we saw beauty and valor.*

*Have you grown weary [tired] of your servants?
Are you angry with your servants,
O Giver of Life?*

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Source 2: Third Letter of Cortes

Hernán Cortés (1485–1547), one of the most famous conquistadors of the sixteenth century, wrote an account of his travels and conquests in the Americas to inform the Spanish monarch, Charles V, of his victories in the New World. The letters, published in 1522 and 1523, became a popular read for those of the European upper classes.

Source: Cortés, Hernando. “Third Letter of Cortés.” *In The Conquistadors: First-Person Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, edited and translated by Patricia de Fuentes. New York: The Orion Press, Inc., 1963 (pp. 119-122).

Before leaving the camp, I had ordered that Gonzalo de Sandoval should proceed with the brigantines [ships] to the place where the Indians had fortified themselves in houses, thus holding them surrounded, but not attacking them until he should observe that we began to fight; in such manner that, holding them thus surrounded, they had no place to go except amongst the dead, and on the roofs which were left them. For this cause, they neither had, nor procured [obtained], arrows, nor darts, nor stones, with which to hurt us. Our friends accompanied us, armed with swords and shields, and such was the slaughter done that day on water and on land, that with prisoners taken they numbered in all more than forty thousand men; and such were the shrieks and the weeping of the women and children that there was none whose heart did not break; and we had more trouble in preventing our allies from killing and inflicting tortures than we had in fighting with the Indians, for no such inhuman cruelty as the natives of these parts practice was ever seen amongst any people. Our allies obtained very great plunder, which we could not prevent, because we were about nine hundred Spaniards, and they more than one hundred and fifty thousand men, and no attention or diligence [carefulness] was sufficient to prevent them from robbing, although we did everything possible to stop it. One of the reasons why I refused to go to extremes in those previous days was that, by taking them by assault [force], they would probably throw what they had into the lake, and if they did not do so our allies would steal everything they found; and, for this reason, I feared that but a small part of the great wealth existing in the city, as shown by what I had before obtained for Your Highness, would be secured for Your Majesty. As it was already late, and we could no longer endure [stand] the stench of the dead which had lain for many days in those streets (the most pestilential [plague-like] thing in the world), we returned to our camps.