

Teotihuacan's Influence Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question

What was Teotihuacan's influence on other Mesoamerican societies?

Materials:

- Teotihuacan PowerPoint
- Copies of Documents A-C
- Copies of Guiding Questions

Note:

- This lesson assumes students know the geographic location of Mesoamerica (all of Mexico but the arid north, all of Guatemala, Belize, and El Salvador, western Honduras and Nicaragua, and the northwestern tip of Costa Rica). This lesson also assumes students know the geographic locations of Aztec and classic Maya societies within Mesoamerica.
- Teachers using this lesson with middle school students or struggling high school readers may wish to adapt this lesson. Rather than having students read the documents and answer the Guiding Questions independently, followed by a teacher debrief, you may wish to walk students through the documents together as a class, asking questions along the way to check for understanding and scaffold as necessary.

Plan of Instruction:

1. Introduction: Use the PowerPoint to establish background information.
 - a. Slide 2. *Teotihuacan was a city in the Valley of Mexico that was established around 100 BCE (over 2,000 years ago). People lived in Teotihuacan until about 700 CE, and the city's population was biggest from 250 to 550 CE. Perhaps 80,000 to 150,000 people lived in Teotihuacan at its height, making it one of the largest cities in the entire world and the very largest in the western hemisphere.*
 - b. Slide 3. *Today, Teotihuacan is the most visited archaeological site in Mexico. It is best known for the three enormous pyramids that line the main avenue of the city. The biggest is the Pyramid of the Sun, which is 760 feet wide and 216 feet tall. Around it are many smaller pyramids.*
 - c. Slide 4. *Teotihuacanos were skilled city planners. In addition to large and colorful murals, they created orderly roads, comfortable apartment complexes, ornate temples, and neighborhoods. The city was a busy trade center, and merchants came from near and far to sell their goods. Teotihuacan was home to people from many places and cultures throughout the region. Scholars believe the gap between the richest and the poorest Teotihuacanos was small, which could mean it was a society with a lot of equality. However, scholars are not sure about how*

Teotihuacanos governed themselves. They also disagree on what caused the collapse of the city.

- d. Slide 5: Central Historical Question. *Another big debate among scholars about Teotihuacan is what influence it had on other societies. Though there was a small amount of writing at Teotihuacan, it was not widespread. This means we cannot learn much about the society from what Teotihuacanos wrote. However, we can look at the art and writings from others to try answer the question: What was Teotihuacan's influence on other Mesoamerican societies? That's what we're going to do today.*

The art and writing that we will look at today covers a period of over one thousand years, from around 379 to 1555 CE. During this time period, there were dozens of different societies throughout Mesoamerica. Today, though, we're going to focus on Teotihuacan's influence on just two of them: the Maya and the Aztecs.

- e. Slide 6. *Maya society began around 2000 BCE and continues to this day. Since Maya history is four thousand years long, it can be helpful to divide it into periods—lengths of time—for closer study. Scholars have labeled Maya history from 250-900 CE the “classic” period. During the classic period, Maya made new advancements in science, art, math, and engineering. Also at this time, more Maya moved into city centers, and Maya lands were organized into a network of city-states.*

Note: You will return to the PowerPoint to provide students additional information about Maya monuments and writing before reading Document B.

2. Hand out Document A and have students complete the Guiding Questions.
- Support students in sourcing this vessel. This vessel was made by a Maya artist in 600-900 CE in the Maya lowlands. This could be a reliable source for learning about Teotihuacan's influence on classic Maya society because it was created by a member of Maya society.
 - Marc Zender could be a reliable source for learning about this vessel because he is a professor and anthropologist who studies classic Maya society, which means he has expertise on this topic.
 - Based on this vessel, we can say that Teotihuacan influenced Maya art. Maya artists adopted some of the artistic style and symbols of Teotihuacan art.
 - There are many questions this vessel does not answer about the influence Teotihuacan had on classic Maya society, including:

- i. How did Maya art become influenced by Teotihuacan? Were artists working together? Was it through trade?
 - ii. Did Teotihuacanos and Maya have a positive, neutral, or negative relationship?
3. Return to the PowerPoint to provide additional background information about Maya monuments and writing.
 - a. Slide 7. *A monument is a statue or structure that is created to make people remember and respect an important person or event. During the classic period, Maya created hundreds of monuments that were tall sculptures carved with pictures of people and writing.*
 - b. Slide 8. *The Maya writing system began in the 200s BCE. Maya used the same writing system until about the 1600s CE, after the Spanish invaded and took over Maya lands. Because Maya stopped using their original writing system in the 1600s, it is hard for scholars to understand it. It takes experts years of studying to learn to read it.*

Note: You will return to the PowerPoint to provide students additional information about Aztec society before reading Document C.

4. Hand out Document B and have students complete the Guiding Questions.
 - a. Support students in sourcing these writings. These texts were written by unknown Maya authors around 379-504 CE. They could be reliable sources for learning about Teotihuacan's influence on Maya society because they were written by members of classic Maya society.
 - b. Check for student understanding of Question 5. Students should identify that Teotihuacan was west of Tikal.
 - c. Support students in reasoning about Question 6. Students should reason that Nun Yax Ayin's picture appearing in the style of Teotihuacan art rather than the usual Maya style could mean that Nun Yax Ayin was from Teotihuacan. However, the artist may have chosen to portray Nun Yax Ayin in the Teotihuacano style for other reasons. Perhaps the new king had traveled to Teotihuacan or had increased trade with the city. Or maybe the king simply enjoyed the Teotihuacan artistic style.
 - d. For Question 7, guide students in reasoning about what these monument writings may suggest and what we don't know for sure. Students should note that there is nothing these writings definitively tell us about the influence Teotihuacan had on classic Maya society (with the exception that Maya adopted some Teotihuacano art styles in their monuments).

- e. Students should note that David Stuart could be a reliable source for learning about these monuments because he's a professor and archaeologist who studies classic Maya society, which means he has expertise on the topic.
 - f. Check for student understanding of Stuart's argument. He believes the writings on these monuments mean that Teotihuacan sent someone to assassinate a Maya king and install a new ruler in his place.
 - i. Explain to students, *Scholars all agree that there is a lot of evidence that Teotihuacan influenced Maya society. This is clear from Maya art. But scholars strongly disagree about whether the relationship between Teotihuacanos and Maya was peaceful or violent, beneficial to both or only beneficial to one group. For example, some scholars agree with David Stuart's argument, but others believe these writings from Maya monuments are talking about a conflict that happened among Maya groups, not with Teotihuacan at all.*
 - 1. Ask students, *How might these writings be evidence of a conflict within Maya groups rather than between Maya and Teotihuacan?*
 - 2. Tell students, *Scholars continue to research this topic to try to learn more and find more answers.*
5. Return to PowerPoint to provide students background information on Aztec society.
- a. Slide 9. *In the 1200s, a group of people known as the Aztecs migrated from the North into the Mexican Central Valley. In the 1400s, the Aztecs became the most powerful group in the region. The capital of the empire was Tenochtitlan, a city of about 200,000 to 300,000 people. Laws in Tenochtitlan were harsh, and the emperor was an absolute ruler. Tenochtitlan was also home to institutions of learning, religion, and art. Tenochtitlan was located just thirty miles from Teotihuacan, but it was founded roughly one thousand years after the height of Teotihuacan.*
6. Hand out Document C and have students complete the Guiding Questions.
- a. Support students in sourcing this document. The Florentine Codex is a tricky document to source. What we do know is that a Spanish priest named Bernardino de Sahagún and some of his former students (from the College of Santa Cruz at Tlatelolco), who were Aztec men, worked as research assistants and contributed to writing the encyclopedia in Tenochtitlan/Mexico City in the mid-16th century.
 - b. While it's unclear how and how much Sahagún may have influenced the content of the encyclopedia, it might be a reliable source for learning

about Teotihuacan's influence because it was informed by the statements of Aztec elders and drafted, in part, by Aztec writers.

- c. Check for student comprehension of the document with Questions 5 and 6. Students should identify that the Aztecs believed the sun was created at Teotihuacan and that Aztecs built the pyramids at Teotihuacan.
 - d. Support students in reasoning about Question 7. Help students consider what it could mean for a group to claim to be the descendants of a former major power. The Aztecs may have claimed to be the descendants of the people who built Teotihuacan in order to seem like the legitimate or rightful rulers of the Valley of Mexico. The passage also claims that Aztecs may have claimed that their early rulers were buried in the pyramids at Teotihuacan in order to convince others to obey them.
 - e. Based on these passages, we can say that Teotihuacan influenced Aztec religious beliefs. We can also say that the Aztecs seemed to be impressed by the pyramids at Teotihuacan and used the marvel of the pyramids as a way to claim authority as the rulers of the Valley of Mexico.
7. Final discussion. Ask students, *based on all three of these documents, what was Teotihuacan's influence on other Mesoamerican societies? How confident do you feel about your conclusion?*
- a. If students express doubts about how firmly they can draw conclusions about Teotihuacan's influence on other societies from the documents they read, use this as an opportunity to address the real challenges of studying the past in general and studying the history of Teotihuacan, a society without widespread writing that existed many centuries ago, in particular. These are the challenges that scholars of Teotihuacan grapple with, and many of the conclusions that can be drawn from artifacts and historical documents are not entirely clear.
 - b. Also support students in homing in on what we can confidently conclude from these documents. We can confidently conclude that Teotihuacan influenced classic Maya art and that to the Aztecs, Teotihuacan was a symbol of power.

Citations

Document A

Unknown Artist, Vessel with Teotihuacan-Maya War and Sacrifice Themes, BCE 600-900, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/exploring-the-early-americas/interactives/reading-pre-columbian-artifacts/items/item-8.html>

Document B

Translation and commentary adapted from David Stuart, “‘The Arrival of Strangers’: Teotihuacan and Tollan in Classic Maya History,” in David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones, and Scott Sessions, *Mesoamerica’s Classic Heritage: From Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*. (Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1999).

Document C

Florentine Codex, Book 3, Chapter 1, 202, <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10614/view/1/2/>.

Florentine Codex, Book 10, Chapter 29, 144-146,

<https://www.wdl.org/en/item/10621/view/1/286/>.

English Translations from Nahuatl

Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J.O. Anderson (trans.), *General History of the Things of New Spain: Florentine Codex* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1982).