6-12 Social Studies Asynchronous Activities

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Teotihuacan

7th Grade Social Studies - World History

These lessons were adapted from the Stanford History Education Group Reading Like a Historian materials.
In this three-day lesson, you will examine classic Maya art and monumental inscriptions, as well as an excerpt from an Aztec encyclopedia, to explore how the ancient Mexican city of Teotihuacan influenced other Mesoamerican societies. On day three you will write a summary about your learning.
Mesoamerica on the map

The geographic location of Mesoamerica includes 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.
Maya and Aztec on the Mesoamerica map

The geographic locations of Teotihuacan, Aztec and classic Maya societies within Mesoamerica.
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.
Today, Teotihuacán 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.
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.
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 over the next three days. The art and writing that we will look at 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. For our lessons, though, we’re going to focus on Teotihuacan’s influence on just two of them: the Maya and the Aztecs.
Central Historical Question

What was Teotihuacan’s influence on other Mesoamerican societies?
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.
Student Materials

- You can choose to print the “Teotihuacan Student Materials” PDF file, or
- You can read the Documents on the next slides and answer the questions on a separate piece of paper.
**Document A: Maya Vessel**

*This ceramic vessel was made by an artist in the Maya lowlands around 600-900 CE. The Maya lowlands are located in the northern part of present-day Guatemala, about 700 miles southeast of Teotihuacan.*

Professor Marc Zender, an anthropologist who studies classic Maya society, said the following about this vessel:

> The central **icon** is a large bird, with feather fans and other **icons** that indicate that it's an **import** from central Mexico, from the great city of Teotihuacan. . . . When we roll out this image, we see not only this great foreign bird but also . . . foreign snakes. This was . . . the Maya's attempt to use their own writing and art to come to terms with **elements** far outside of their own region.

**Source:** Ceramic vessel by unknown Maya artist, 600-900 CE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
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<tr>
<td>icon: symbol</td>
<td>import: something brought from a foreign place</td>
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<td></td>
<td>elements: members of a group</td>
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Teotihuacan Guiding Questions

Document A: Maya Vessel
1. (Sourcing) Who made this vessel?

2. (Sourcing) When was this vessel made?

3. (Sourcing) Where was this vessel made?

4. (Sourcing) Why might this vessel be a reliable source for learning about Teotihuacan’s influence on classic Maya society?

5. (Sourcing) Who is Marc Zender? Do you think he is a reliable source for learning about this vessel? Explain.

6. Based on this vessel, what can we say about the influence that Teotihuacan had on classic Maya society?

7. What is one question this vessel does not answer about the influence that Teotihuacan had on classic Maya society?
End of Day 1
Begin Day 2
Welcome Back!

- Be sure to review yesterday’s slides before you begin your work today.
Central Historical Question

What was Teotihuacan’s influence on other Mesoamerican societies?
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.
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.
Document B
Student Materials

• You can choose to print the “Teotihuacan Student Materials” PDF file, or
• You can read the Documents on the next slides and answer the questions on a separate piece of paper.
Document B: Maya Monuments

Below are translations of writings that come from some Maya monuments created 379-504 CE in the classic Maya cities of Tikal and Uaxactún. The writings were translated by David Stuart, a professor of archaeology at the University of Texas at Austin, who studies classic Maya society. After reading the Maya writings, you will then read David Stuart’s ideas about what these monument writings mean.

In 374 CE, Spearthrower Owl became king of an unnamed place.

Someone named Siyah K'ak' arrived in the Maya city of Tikal on January 14, 378 CE, with the approval of Spearthrower Owl.

Siyah K’ak’ came from the west.

On the very same day of Siyah K'ak's arrival, the Tikal ruler Jaguar Paw died.

Within a year of Siyah K'ak’s arrival in Tikal, Spearthrower Owl’s son Nun Yax Ayin became the ruler of Tikal instead of Jaguar Paw’s son. [A picture of Nun Yax Ayin is carved in the style of Teotihuacan art, not in the usual Maya style.]

Source: Unknown Maya authors, monuments from classic Maya cities of Tikal and Uaxactún, created 379-504 CE, translated by David Stuart

David Stuart’s ideas about what the monuments' writing means:

I conclude that Siyah K'ak' was a foreigner and may have started Teotihuacan's presence in Tikal. I would speculate that Siyah K'ak’ was the leader of a military force that overthrew Tikal's dynasty in 378 CE, killing the ruler Jaguar Paw and installing a new ruler, Nun Yax Ayin, in his place.
Document B: Maya Monuments

1. (Sourcing) Who wrote the texts of these monuments?

2. (Sourcing) When were these monuments made?

3. (Sourcing) Where were these monuments made?

4. (Sourcing) Why might these writings be reliable sources for learning about Teotihuacan’s influence on classic Maya society?

5. (Close reading) The writings state that “Siyak K’ak’ came from the west.” Which direction was Teotihuacan from Tikal?

6. (Close reading) The picture of Nun Yax Ayin, the new king of Tikal, was carved in the style of Teotihuacan art, not the usual Maya style. Why might the artist have portrayed a Maya leader in a style from another society? What could this mean about Teotihuacan’s influence on classic Maya society?

7. Based on these writings, is there anything we can say for sure about the influence that Teotihuacan had on classic Maya society? Explain.

8. (Sourcing) Who is David Stuart? Do you think he is a reliable source for learning about these monuments? Explain.

9. (Close reading) Many scholars disagree about what these writings mean. What does David Stuart believe they mean?
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.
Document C: Aztec Encyclopedia

The Florentine Codex is an encyclopedia of Aztec history and culture. It was first drafted around 1555 in Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital.

The Spanish priest Bernardino de Sahagún was in charge of the project to make the encyclopedia. He wanted to write a detailed record of Aztec culture. With some of his former students, who were Aztec men, Sahagún took down the statements of Aztec elders, and his students drafted the books in the Aztec language.

Book 3, Chapter 1
How and where the gods began is not well known. But this is clear: at Teotihuacan, long ago, when there was still darkness, all the gods gathered together and debated who would become the sun. . . . Then all the gods died so that the sun might come into being.

Book 10, Chapter 29
Long ago, the Aztecs moved from the northern desert lands to the Valley of Mexico. Behold the story which the ancients told. On their long journey, the Aztecs made offerings at a place named Teotihuacan. There they raised pyramids for the sun and for the moon. Then they made many small pyramids, where offerings were made.

At Teotihuacan, their leaders were elected. And when the rulers died, the Aztecs buried them there and built a pyramid over them. The pyramids now stand like small mountains, though they were made by hand.

And so they named it Teotihuacan, because it was the burial place for the rulers. For so it was said: “When we die, it is not true that we die, for still we live. We are resurrected. We awaken.” . . .

Thus, the ancients said, the ruler who died became a god . . . so that those who were rulers would be obeyed. All were worshipped as gods when they died; some became the sun, some the moon, etc.

Source: Florentine Codex, first drafted around 1555 by Bernardino de Sahagún and his research assistants.
Document C: Aztec Encyclopedia

1. (Sourcing) Who wrote the Florentine Codex?

2. (Sourcing) When was it written?

3. (Sourcing) Where was it written?

4. (Sourcing) Why might the Florentine Codex be a reliable source for learning about Teotihuacan’s influence on Aztec society?

5. (Close reading) Where did the Aztecs believe the sun was created?

6. (Close reading) According to this document, who built the pyramids at Teotihuacan?

7. Scholars agree that the Aztecs were not the group of people who built the pyramids of Teotihuacan. The Aztecs did not even arrive in the Valley of Mexico until the 1200s, long after the collapse of Teotihuacan. But the Aztecs did become the most powerful group in the Valley of Mexico in the 1400s. Why do you think the Aztecs might have claimed that their ancestors built the pyramids of Teotihuacan?

8. Based on these passages, what can we say about the influence that Teotihuacan had on Aztec society?
End of Day 2
Begin Day 3
Welcome Back!

• Be sure to review the slides from Day 1 and Day 2 before you begin your work today.
Central Historical Question

What was Teotihuacan’s influence on other Mesoamerican societies?
Over the last two days you have examined classic Maya art and monumental inscriptions, as well as an excerpt from an Aztec encyclopedia, to explore how the ancient Mexican city of Teotihuacan influenced other Mesoamerican societies.

Based on all three of these documents, what was Teotihuacan’s influence on other Mesoamerican societies? How confident do you feel about your conclusion?

In your response, be sure to include:
✓ evidence from all three documents you examined and
✓ ideas from your answers to the guiding questions