

The Florentine Codex

Duration

Two or three class sessions of approximately 40 minutes each

Resources

1. Teacher Commentary



2. Student Handout



3. Homework



Objectives of Lesson

- To identify and explain Native American and European perspectives of others using the Florentine Codex
- To read a historical source with speaker, audience, and context in mind

College Board Objectives from the 2020–21 CED

- **Topic 1.6:** Cultural Interactions Between Europeans, Native Americans, and Africans (p. 43)
- **Learning Objective 1.F:** “Explain how and why European and Native American perspectives of others developed and changed in the period.”
- **Key Concept 1.2.III.B:** “As European encroachments on Native Americans’ lands and demands on their labor increased, native peoples sought to defend and maintain their political sovereignty, economic prosperity, religious beliefs, and concepts of gender relations through diplomatic negotiations and military resistance.”

Student Activities

- Class reading of the Florentine Codex and discussion of the role of perspective in historical narratives
- Comparison of the Native American perspectives recorded in the Florentine Codex and the perspectives of Spanish colonizers

NOTES

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How to Use This Lesson

The goal of this lesson is to use the Florentine Codex to provide depth to the discussion of Native American and European perspectives of each other in the period from 1491 to 1607. The Florentine Codex, produced by Nahua speakers as an aid to Spanish colonization in Mesoamerica, provides a counterpoint to the European-dominated narrative of exploration that is often taught in U.S. history. By examining the documents included in this lesson and the different perspectives that they represent, students will be able to develop a stronger understanding of how Native Americans understood European encroachment on their land and demands on their labor.

The best way to begin this lesson is to provide a brief overview of The Florentine Codex before assigning the worksheet to the class using the notes we have included below. Depending on how your students have covered Native American communities in the past, this document and the community who wrote it may be entirely new information. If that is the case, we encourage you to devote a significant portion of class time toward filling in the historical gaps around the Nahua speakers of Mesoamerica. Understanding this group will help students develop a more nuanced understanding of European and Native American contact.

The worksheet asks students to engage a translated excerpt from The Florentine Codex that describes Spanish interactions with Montezuma and the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan. For this document, they are asked to complete a HAPPY analysis of the document. Based on the needs of your class, you can work through the excerpt as a class, in small groups, or as individuals. The teacher’s commentary includes teaching tips, background information, and discussion questions.

This lesson also includes a homework assignment that uses the content from Topic 1.6. It builds on the class exercises by comparing the Native American perspective in The Florentine Codex to the European perspective as recorded in Cortez’s diary.

Historical Context

The Florentine Codex, formally titled *La Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*, was produced by a Spanish Franciscan friar named Bernardino de Sahagún and a team of Nahua speakers from 1545 to 1590 to help Spanish colonial efforts in Mesoamerica. Sahagún was in a unique position to report on conditions in the Americas because, in addition to being a religious missionary, he held an academic position at the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco.

NOTES

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Sahagún's academic background strongly influenced the text because he used a scholarly style that recorded Native American culture as it was understood by its community. Unlike other guidebooks produced by Spanish colonial leaders, the Florentine Codex strives to accurately reflect the indigenous perspective. Sahagún is often credited as being one of the first European scholars to practice ethnography, which is an academic approach that asks the observer to suspend his/her own cultural beliefs and to accept the worldview of the culture he/she are studying. To facilitate this kind of verisimilitude, Sahagún interviewed his subjects using their own native language of Nahuatl, spoke to people acknowledged as leaders within Aztec society, and had his notes reviewed by Nahuatl native speakers for cultural accuracy.

Structurally, the Florentine Codex is a compiled text that includes a range of different perspectives presented in two columns of text in Spanish and Nahuatl. Most of the books use an anthropological perspective to describe the culture, society, and practices of the Aztecs. Book 12, which records the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish, is the exception to this practice because it uses a historical framework.

The Florentine Codex is further notable for its use of imagery. The text includes over 2000 illustrations spread out over its 2,400 pages. The images in the codex support the written text by providing detail. In some cases, such as in its depiction of maize, the codex provides the first known images of American agricultural products or animals. Historians now think that the images were produced by artists trained as Nahua *tlacuilo* (scribe painters).

Despite Sahagún's clear intent to produce an accurate recording of Native American culture, the Florentine Codex still partially reflects the colonial perspective. A large portion of the codex is devoted to explaining the religious practices of the Aztec culture in the belief that, by knowing more about these religious practices, Spanish missionaries would be able to convert the native populations to Christianity more easily. His vivid descriptions of religious practices, as well as his detailed discussions of Nahuatl vocabulary, need to be understood in the context of a colonizer who wanted to develop an accurate understanding of indigenous cultures in order to change it.

NOTES

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Aztec warriors in the Florentine Codex

The Florentine Codex

Source: *The Florentine Codex (La Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España)*, compiled by Bernardino de Sahagún, 1545–1590

Thereupon they went to Moctezuma's own storehouse, where was kept Moctezuma's own property, a place called Totocalco. It was as if they each worked tirelessly; each was content, each clapped the other on the back, each one's heart was brightened. And when they came to arrive, when they entered the storehouse, it was as if there was a dispersal; they quickly entered everywhere, as if they were lustful, greedy. Thereupon was brought forth [Moctezuma's] own property, that which was indeed his personally, his very own lot, precious things all; the necklaces with pendants, the arm bands with tufts of quetzal feathers, the golden arm bands, and the bracelets, the golden bands with shells, to fasten at the ankle, and the turquoise diadem, the attribute of the ruler, and the turquoise nose rods, and the rest of his goods without number. They took it all. They possessed themselves of all, they appropriated all to themselves, they took all to themselves as their lot.

And when they had detached all the gold, when it had been detached, thereupon in the courtyard, in the middle of the courtyard, they brought together all the precious feathers. And when it had come to pass that all the gold was gathered together, thereupon Marina summoned hither, ordered summoned hither, all the noblemen. She went upon a roof terrace, upon a terrace parapet. She said: "Mexicans, come hither! The Spaniards have suffered great fatigue. Bring food here, fresh water, and all that is required. For they already suffer fatigue; they suffer weariness for it, they suffer fatigue for it; they are wearied, they are fatigued. Why do you not wish to come? It therefore appeareth that you are angered."

But the Mexicans dared not at all to go there. They were in great terror; they could not control themselves for fear; they were astounded. Fear prevailed; fear was widespread. No one dared do anything. It was as if a fierce beast were there; it was as the deep of night. Yet not because of this did they stop; not for this was there hesitation in leaving what [the Spaniards] required, but they left it in fear. They went only in great fear, they only ran in fear as they left it. And when they came to scatter it over the ground, there was running back; they shot back. There was panting, there was trembling...

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Commentary

The excerpt chosen for this lesson plan is from Book 12, the only historical book in the Florentine Codex. In this section, Spanish conquistadors enter the city of Tenochtitlan, marvel at the wealth accumulated by the emperor, and attack the Aztec people during the Feast of Toxcatl.

- ① The Spanish troops had been originally welcomed into Tenochtitlan by Montezuma (the emperor of the Aztec Empire) because it was thought that they represented the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy.
- ② The Spanish conquistadors are represented as motivated by material wealth. In the Florentine Codex, written from the Aztec perspective, this desire for wealth is linked to the Massacre in the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan described below. Spanish accounts of the same event describe the motivations for the attack very differently by claiming that Spanish military intervention was actually a humanitarian effort to prevent human sacrifice as part of the religious ritual.
- ③ Marina, sometimes called Malintzin or La Malinche, was a Nahuatl woman who acted as an interpreter for Hernán Cortés. Her historical reputation is complicated. Historical records indicate that she was enslaved and given to the Spanish as tribute after Cortés' troops conquered Tabasco. She was impregnated by Cortés and gave birth to a son, Martín Cortés.
- ④ This passage provides an interesting opportunity to discuss tone with your students. What is the tone of Marina toward the indigenous Mexicans? How could the conquistadors feel justified adopting this tone?
- ⑤ Explore the idea of fear with your students. One possible reading would be fear in the sense of feeling in danger from the conquistadors. Another, more likely option, would be that the Aztec were closer to a sense of awe or trepidation since they understood the Spanish to be religious figures.

And when dawn broke, when it was already the feast day...

⑥

And all the men, the young seasoned warriors, were each as if diligently engaged, as if content, in proceeding with the feast, in observing the feast, in order to make the Spaniards see it, to make them wonder at it, to show it to them.

⑦

There was hastening, there was running, there was going to the temple courtyard, in order that the winding dance be danced.

⑧

And when the assembling had taken place, thereupon was the beginning; already began the singing, the winding dance. And those who had fasted twenty days and those who had fasted a year went facing the others; they detained the people [with] their pine staves. Whosoever tried to leave they menaced with the pine staves... And one who was completely disobedient, who did not consider himself rejected, who was impudent, they soundly beat his back therefor, they beat his thighs, they beat his shoulders; they thrust him outside, they put him out by force, they threw him face down; he went falling face down. He went out on his ear. No one in the hands [of those who kept order] answered back...

And when this was happening, when already the feast was being observed, when already there was dancing, when already there was singing, when already there was song with dance, the singing resounded like waves breaking.

When it was already time, when the moment was opportune for the Spaniards to slay them, thereupon they came forth. They were arrayed for battle. They came everywhere to block each of the ways leading out [and] leading in Quauhquiauac, Tecpantzinco, Acatl yiacapan, Tezcacoac. And when they had blocked them, they also remained everywhere. No one could go out. .

⑨

And when this had been done, thereupon they entered the temple courtyard to slay them. Those whose task it was to slay them went only afoot, each with his leather shield, some, each one, with his iron-studded shield, and each with his iron sword. Thereupon they surrounded the dancers. Thereupon they went among the drums.

⑩

Then they struck the drummer's arms; they severed both his hands; then they struck his neck. Far off did his neck [and head] go to fall. Then they all pierced the people with iron lances and they struck them each with iron swords. Of some they slashed open their backs: then their entrails gushed out. Of some they cut their heads to pieces; they absolutely pulverized their heads; their heads were absolutely pulverized. And some they struck on the shoulder; they split openings, they broke openings in their bodies. Of some they struck repeatedly the shanks; of some they struck repeatedly the thighs; of some they struck the belly; then their entrails gushed forth. And when in vain one would run, he would only drag his intestines like something raw as he tried to escape. Nowhere could he go. And him who tried to go out they there struck; they stabbed him.

⑥ The Feast of Toxcatl is dedicated to the god Tezcatlipoca, an important god in the Aztec pantheon.

⑦ The Feast of Toxcatl was celebrated with the ritual sacrifice of a young man (often a war captive) who had spent the year pretending to be Tezcatlipoca by dressing like the god, being honored like the god, and living at the temple. The ritual sacrifice included the young man (ixiptlatli) voluntarily ascending the pyramid, where he was sacrificed, his heart removed, and his flesh consumed in ritual cannibalism. His body was also flayed and worn by the next captive chosen as a sacrifice.

Some Spanish sources record that they attacked the temple to prevent the sacrifice of the Tezcatlipoca impersonator. This interpretation of events is not widely accepted by historians because they would have undoubtedly been briefed about the ritual's contents before the feast day.

⑧ The feast included several ritual dances. Participating in these dances was considered an honor (much like it was considered an honor to be the main sacrifice). The dance participants were ritually scarred during the festivities.

⑨ These were neighboring communities that resented the Aztec tribute system. Under this system, they were required to pay taxes to the Aztec emperor to avoid being attacked. While this expanded the Aztec empire, it led to considerable resentment. The Spanish conquistadors took advantage of this resentment to increase their military force and local knowledge by allying with neighboring communities.

⑩ This section includes several mentions of the Spanish weaponry. As you explore this paragraph with your students, use this as a starting point to talk about technological change. The European explorers had more durable and deadly weaponry, which gave them an immediate advantage. Ask students to think about how technological change has changed the course of U.S. history.

Historical Situation:

Write or type your response in this area.

Check your response: *Did you use all the information in the caption to determine the historical circumstances of this text? What can you infer about the historical event depicted? Why does the date of this text matter?*

Audience:

Write or type your response in this area.

Check your response: *Who was the audience of this document? How do you know? What groups would be less receptive of this type of account? What groups would be more receptive? Why do these factors about audience matter?*

Point of View:

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Check your response: *This document clearly has a distinct point of view. What was it? Why would its point of view matter?*

Purpose:

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The Florentine Codex

1. “And when dawn broke, when it was already the feast day. . . . And all the men, the young seasoned warriors, were each as if diligently engaged, as if content, in proceeding with the feast, in observing the feast, in order to make the Spaniards see it, to make them wonder at it, to show it to them. . . .

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“At this feast, more than 600 gentlemen and several lords joined together in the great temple; some said there were more than a thousand people of great reputation there. At night they made a lot of noise with their drums, shells, bugles, and hendidos, which sounded like a loud whistle. Preparing their festival, they were naked, but covered with precious stones, pearls, necklaces, belts, bracelets, many jewels of gold, silver, and mother-of-pearl, wearing very rich feathers on their heads. They performed a dance called the mazeualiztli, which is called that because it comes from the word for farmer. . . . They danced in circles, holding hands, to the music of the singers, singing back and forth, songs in honor and praise of the god, whose feast it is, in hopes of the god’s favor for rain, corn, health, victory, peace, healthy children, or any other thing they may wish for or desire.

While the Mexica gentlemen were dancing in the temple yard of Vitcilopuchtli, Pedro de Alvarado went there to see what they were doing. . . . Seeing how rich they were and wanting the gold the Indians were wearing, Alvarado covered each of the entrances with ten or twelve Spaniards and went inside with more than fifty Spaniards, and without remorse and lacking any Christian piety, they brutally stabbed and killed the Indians, and took what they were wearing.”

—*The pleasant historie of the conquest of West India, now called new Spayne achieved by the worthy Prince Hernando Cortes*, Francisco López de Gómara, 1553

Using the excerpts above, answer (a), (b), and (c).

- (A) Briefly describe ONE important difference between Sahagún’s and Gómara’s interpretations of the causes for the Massacre in the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan.
- (B) Briefly describe how ONE specific historical event, development, or circumstance from the period 1491–1607 that is not specifically mentioned in the excerpt could be used to support Sahagún’s interpretation.
- (C) Briefly describe how ONE specific historical event, development, or circumstance from the period 1491–1607 that is not specifically mentioned in the excerpt could be used to support Gómara’s interpretation.

(A)

Write or type your response in this area.

(B)

Write or type your response in this area.

(C)

Write or type your response in this area.

WORKSHEET

Historical Situation: The Florentine Codex is one of the few historical documents from the period of the first contact between the Americans and the Europeans that records the indigenous perspective. The historical situation informs the value of the text for historians because it shows a narrative that may contradict the more widely available European narratives.

Audience: The audience of the Florentine Codex consisted of both Spanish speakers and Nahua speakers. This is significant because, unlike other European accounts of contact with the Americans, this attempted to record a history that would be accepted by both sides of the encounter. The use of Nahua in the text demonstrates a respect for indigenous cultures and their practices not seen in other texts.

Point of View: This text, although compiled by a European, strives to represent the Aztec point of view as much as possible.

Purpose: This text has a historical purpose by recording the Spanish massacre of indigenous people. More broadly, the text fulfills a purpose of making sure that indigenous voices are heard in the historical record and that the conflicts that resulted from contact between the Europeans and the Americans are not only recorded from the European perspective.

Y: This text represents a remarkable historical document in which the experiences of Americans are told from their own point of view. Unlike other documents of the era that privilege the European perspective, this text demonstrates how contact was experienced by native communities as a violent, sometimes capricious, and often economically-driven series of encounters.

HOMEWORK

- (A) *The two texts utilize different perspectives, which results in them having different interpretations of the causes of the Massacre in the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan. Sahagún's text focuses on how the Americans felt that there was no cause for the attack. He notes that the attack was a surprise attack that seemed to violate the sanctity of the holiday and the détente between the Spanish and the Mexica in which the Mexica were eager to show the ritual to the conquistadors. Gómara's text argues that the Spanish attacked the Mexica out of greed and economic motivations.*
- (B) *Sahagún's interpretation of the massacre as an unmerited and unexpected occurrence could be supported by other incidents in which the Spanish attacked the Americans without cause. For example, Cortés's military advances to Tenochtitlan were accompanied by bloodshed at almost every city he encountered.*
- (C) *Gómara's description of the economic motivations of the Spanish could be supported by examples in which the Spanish forced the native people to perform labor in search of natural resources, such as the brutal conditions of gold mining under the encomienda system.*