

State Building in the Americas

Duration

One or two class sessions of approximately 40 minutes each

Resources

1. Teacher Commentary



2. Student Handout



3. Homework



Objectives of Lesson

- To describe general trends in state building in the Americas from c. 1200 to 1450
- To practice incorporating specific and relevant details into LEQ responses

College Board Objectives from the 2020–21 CED

- **Topic 1.4:** State Building in the Americas (p. 43)
- **Learning Objective 1.I:** “Explain how and why states in the Americas developed and changed over time.”
- **Key Concept 3.2.I.D.I:** “In the Americas, as in Afro-Eurasia, state systems demonstrated continuity, innovation, and diversity, and expanded in scope and reach.”

Student Activities

- Class outlining and brainstorming exercise on state building in the Americas
- Practice evaluating information, identifying specific and relevant details, and outlining an LEQ response

How to Use This Lesson

This lesson is primarily designed as a skill building lesson that introduces students to the idea of “specific and relevant” evidence in a way that is appropriate to the beginning of the school year. According to College Board, students can earn up to 2 points on the LEQ by supporting their argument using “specific and relevant examples of evidence.” This lesson helps students develop a sense of what rises to that standard by working through a series of examples related to a sample LEQ prompt. The prompt and the pieces of evidence are all related to state building in the Americas from c. 1200 to 1450, allowing students the opportunity to review the content for Topic 1.4 while practicing their free-response writing techniques.

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We recommend that you begin this lesson with a brief explanation about the grading rubric used to assess LEQ responses on the AP World History Modern Exam. Students often struggle to understand what constitutes the appropriate level of specificity in terms of grading. How specific is too specific? How broad is too broad? Likewise, students often struggle to understand relevancy. What does the example need to be relevant to? How closely does it need to be connected? The exercises in this lesson allow students to explore these concepts using examples, but it is helpful to have a higher-level discussion about these concepts before jumping into the exercises on the worksheet.

Because the exercises are focused on state building in the Americas, it may also be helpful for students to have some background context about how states in the Americas developed and changed over time. The exercises will be easier for students if they have at least a passing level of familiarity with the content. We have provided some brief notes below that you can use to set the stage for your discussion.

The worksheet included in this lesson features a practice LEQ and outline along with a series of sample pieces of evidence. For each body paragraph, students are asked to choose from the available pieces of evidence to select one that is “specific and relevant” in order to support the thesis and topic sentence. The worksheet helps students familiarize themselves with making judgment calls about what kind of evidence to use to support their claims. We recommend that you work through the exercises as a class, using the teacher’s commentary to provide historical background, context, and analysis.

This lesson also includes a homework assignment that builds on the class exercises.

Historical Context

The period from c. 1200 to 1450 was characterized by the emergence of complex civilizations in the Americas that demonstrated strong continuities with the cultures and states that had preceded them. The American civilizations that thrived during this time featured robust agricultural systems (often rooted around staple crops like potatoes), scientifically advanced irrigation, and hierarchical societies. During this time of remarkable state building, three states emerged that were particularly notable for their complexity and geographic scope: the Aztecs in modern-day Mexico, the Mayans in the Yucatan peninsula, and the Inca along the western coast of South America.

The Aztec Empire in was a Nahuatl-speaking culture, centered in Tenochtitlan, that exercised dominance over its neighbors through an elaborate tribute system. Aztec society was sharply divided, with a clear distinction between nobility and commoners.

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The priestly class played an important role in Aztec society, coordinating large religious rituals to appease the pantheon of Mesoamerican gods. Religious festivities and other important events were tracked using an elaborate calendar system. Many of these features of Aztec society were holdovers from previous civilizations in the same area, such as religious practices and deities that were brought from the Mexica culture. Although it is not possible to trace every aspect of Aztec culture due to the lack of written records, historians have reached a general consensus that the Aztec were not native to the central Mexico, so their culture was inevitably represented by a continuation of previous local cultures.

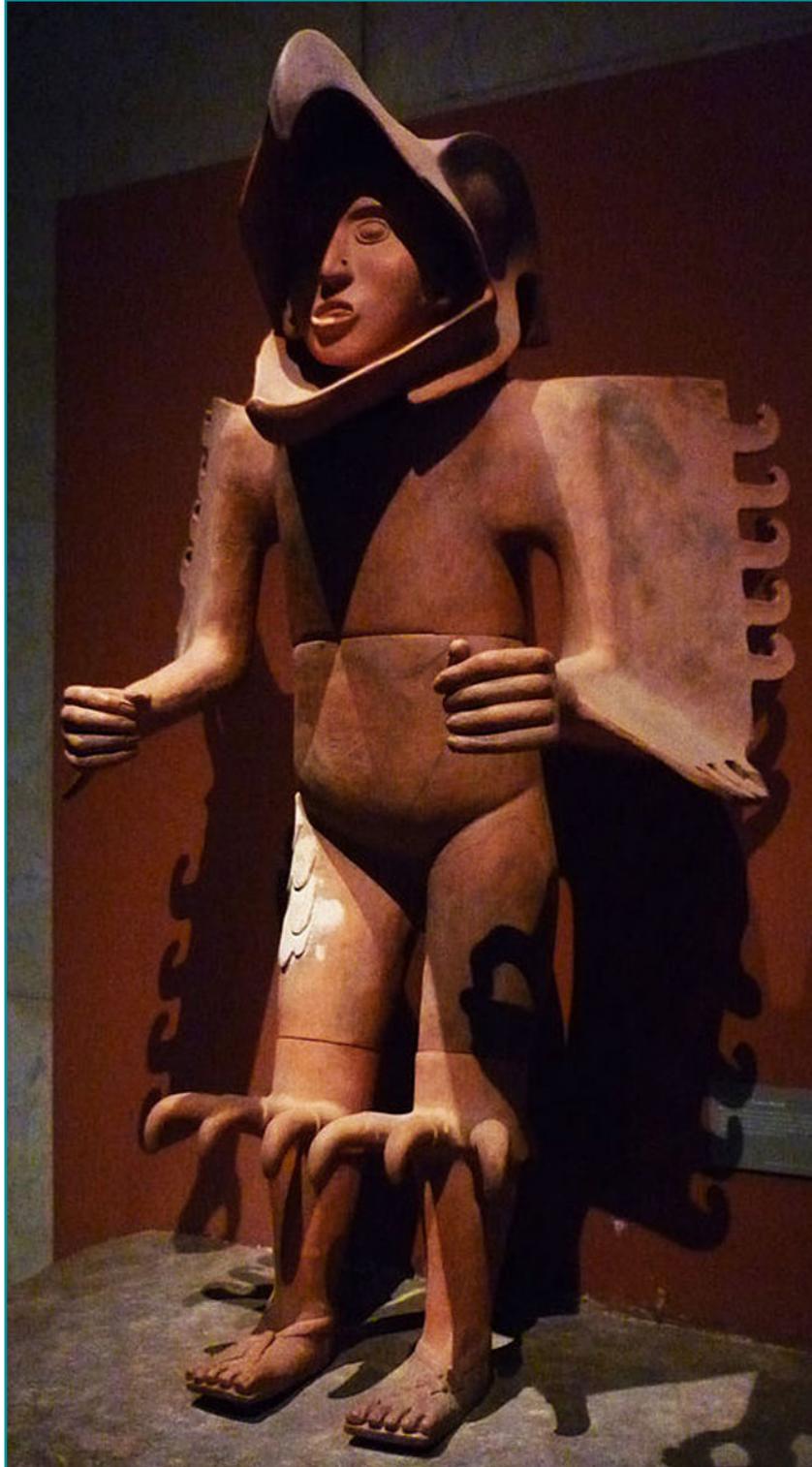
The Mayans were distinguished by their use of hieroglyphic writing, the presence of “divine kingship,” and a society characterized by patronage networks. The Maya had a robust political system that worked through a system of interlinked administrative units and districts, connected to one another through causeways. There was a strong monumental architecture that was traditional among the Maya, which led to the creation of imposing palaces, pyramid-temples, and large stone ceremonial ballcourts. The majority of these constructed structures were aligned based on astronomical observations and religious principles. Like the Aztec, the Maya had an elaborate calendar system that demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of astronomy.

The Inca Empire, which stretched along the west coast of South America along the Andean Mountains, was the largest empire in pre-Columbian America. Unlike both the Maya and the Aztec, they did not use a written language. Records were kept using string, which was knotted in different ways and colors to denote certain things. Life in the Andean Mountains required several unique adaptations, such as robust networks of roads and bridges to transport goods through the mountains. While the Inca emperor personally led the worship practices for Inti, the Sun god, the people were largely allowed to follow other religious practices as they chose.

Taken together, the Aztec Empire, the Maya Empire, and the Inca Empire demonstrate how the civilizations that developed in the Americas from c. 1200 to 1450 were robust entities that represented both continuity and change with previous empires in the region.

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Large ceramic Aztec eagle warrior