

Journey to Three Empires

Early Civilizations of the Americas: Summarize the rise, decline, and cultural achievements of ancient civilizations in Mesoamerica and South America; describe their beliefs and the development of their political, social, and economic systems; and analyze the voyages of discovery and conquest that changed the Americas.

Learning target: I can compare the Maya, Aztec, and Inca and explain how geography shaped their achievements.

Success looks like: Students use the vocabulary correctly, complete the virtual field trip, and score 80% or higher on the evidence-based exit ticket.

Materials: Student devices, the printed lesson worksheet (one per student), projector for the mini-lesson presenter.

LESSON AT A GLANCE

60 minutes

Time	Part	Teacher does	Students do
0:00-0:08	Warm-up	Project the warm-up. Circulate, then call on 2-3 students. Save question 3 for the debrief.	Answer Part 2 of the lesson worksheet; share with a partner.
0:08-0:20	Mini-lesson	Teach with the 4-step presenter. Run each quick check with the whole class.	Complete worksheet Parts 4-11 as each slide appears; answer checks with fingers.
0:20-0:48	Virtual Field Trip	Launch Journey to Three Empires. Assign mission levels; circulate with the answer key.	Play solo or in pairs; record code pieces; complete any written evidence task.
0:48-0:52	Debrief	Ask 2 debrief questions and revisit warm-up question 3.	Finish worksheet Part 13 (prediction check + one thing learned).
0:52-1:00	Exit ticket	Hand out the exit ticket. Collect and sort with the mastery guide.	Answer with evidence independently.

Key vocabulary

Word	Student-friendly definition
Civilization	A complex society with cities, government, specialized jobs, and a system of writing or records.
Chinampa	An Aztec floating garden built in a shallow lake.
Terrace farming	Cutting flat steps into mountainsides to farm (Inca).
Quipu	Knotted strings the Inca used to keep records.
Conquistador	A Spanish conqueror of the Americas, such as Cortés or Pizarro.

1. WARM-UP

0:00–0:08 · 8 min

Warm-up expectations (post these): Answer in Part 2 of the lesson worksheet (or on this sheet). Number each answer to match the question. Answer in complete sentences. For math, show your work. Work silently for 5 minutes, then share with a partner for 2 minutes. Be ready to share one answer with the class.

#	Question	Look for
1	What does a group of people need to build a large city?	Examples: food supply/farming, water, leaders/government, workers, trade.
2	How could people farm on a steep mountain or in a swampy lake?	Build flat steps (terraces) on mountains; build raised garden beds in lakes.
3	How can we learn about people who lived 1,000 years ago?	Artifacts, ruins, writings, codices, and descendants' traditions.

2. MINI-LESSON

0:08–0:20 · 12 min

Project the Lesson presenter from the room page. It runs the whole hour: target and agenda, warm-up with timer, hook vote, 4 teaching steps (key idea, interactive tool, turn and talk, check for understanding), I do / we do / you do, a work-time screen with a timer and expectations, debrief, and the exit ticket. Press N for teacher notes, T to pause the timer, and P to pick a student.

Hook (1 min): How would you grow food on a steep mountain? Class vote: Cut flat steps into it / Move somewhere else / Only hunt and fish

Step 1 (3 min): The Maya

Teach	The Maya flourished about 250-900 CE in the Yucatán rainforests. City-states with kings, stone pyramids, a 365-day calendar, glyph writing, and the concept of zero.
Interactive tool	Visual: Maya numerals: a dot = 1, a bar = 5
Students do	Draw the number 13 with Maya symbols (2 bars and 3 dots).
Turn and talk	Why might a civilization with a calendar and writing be able to grow large?
Worksheet Part 5A	The Maya built CITY-STATES, used GLYPHS to write, and understood the concept of ZERO.
Check for understanding	What number is 2 bars and 3 dots? Answer: 13

Step 2 (3 min): The Aztec

Teach	The Aztec built Tenochtitlan on an island in Lake Texcoco (today Mexico City). They farmed floating gardens called chinampas and collected tribute from conquered peoples.
Interactive tool	Board and notes

Students do	Sketch a chinampa (a garden bed built up in a lake).
Turn and talk	Why was building a city in a lake both smart and risky?
Worksheet Part 6A	The Aztec capital was TENOCHTITLAN. They farmed on CHINAMPAS in the lake.
Check for understanding	How did the Aztec grow food in a lake? Answer: (C) Chinampas (floating gardens)

Step 3 (3 min): The Inca

Teach	The Inca ruled the Andes Mountains. They carved terraces, built 14,000+ miles of roads and rope bridges, and kept records on knotted cords called quipus.
Interactive tool	Visual: A quipu cord
Students do	Read the quipu cord: count the tens knots, then the ones knots.
Turn and talk	How would roads and quipus help the Inca rule a huge empire?
Worksheet Part 7A	The Inca farmed on TERRACES and kept records on QUIPUS.
Check for understanding	What number does the quipu cord show? Answer: 24

Step 4 (3 min): Encounter and conquest

Teach	Spanish conquistadors (Cortés vs. the Aztec, 1519-1521; Pizarro vs. the Inca, 1532) had horses, steel weapons, and Native allies, but diseases like smallpox killed the most people.
Interactive tool	Board and notes
Students do	Rank the causes of the conquest: disease, horses, steel, allies.
Turn and talk	Why did disease have such a huge effect on Native populations?
Worksheet Part 8A	Conquistadors had horses and steel, but DISEASES like SMALLPOX killed millions.
Check for understanding	Which factor killed the most Native people? Answer: (A) Disease

I do: worked example (shown one step at a time)

1. Venn diagram: Maya | Aztec | Inca.
2. Maya and Aztec: stone pyramids and temples.
3. Inca only: roads, rope bridges, and quipus.
4. All three (center): farming adapted to geography, and a strong ruler tied to religion.

What to say on every slide is in the presenter script PDF.

We do: guided practice

Compare how the Aztec and Inca solved the problem of farming difficult land.

1. The Aztec lived on a lake with little dry land.
2. They built chinampas: floating garden beds made from mud and reeds.
3. The Inca lived on steep mountains.
4. They carved terraces: flat steps that held soil and water. Both changed the land to grow food.

Answer: Chinampas (Aztec) and terraces (Inca)

You do: independent check (2 min)

Which achievement shows the Inca had a highly organized government? (A) A 365-day calendar (B) Pyramids in the rainforest (C) Quipus used to record census counts and tribute (D) Floating gardens

Answer: (C) Quipus used to record census counts and tribute. Students who miss it: 3-minute reteach at the teacher table, then start the room at the Explorer level.

Misconception: "The Maya, Aztec, and Inca lived at the same time and place." They were centuries and thousands of miles apart.

Misconception: "The Maya disappeared." Millions of Maya people live in Mexico and Central America today.

Misconception: "The Spanish won only because of weapons." Disease and alliances with other Native groups mattered most.

3. VIRTUAL FIELD TRIP: JOURNEY TO THREE EMPIRES

0:20–0:48 · 28 min

Launch: project the start screen, read the story aloud, and assign mission levels (Explorer = extra support, Agent = on level, Legend = challenge). Students can open Supports any time for read-aloud, bigger text, a word bank, and a scratch pad.

- Frame it as a real trip: "Buses leave in 1 minute!" Project the start screen and read the story together.
- Stops go in order along the route. Remind students that each stop's info card is their "tour guide," so they should read it first.
- Ask early finishers to write a postcard (3 sentences) home describing the most interesting stop.

Students turn in: the completion code plus their copied "turn in your work" block (Canvas Text Entry).

4. DEBRIEF

0:48–0:52 · 4 min

1. Which civilization's achievement impressed you most, and why?
2. How did each civilization adapt to its geography?
3. Why were diseases so devastating to these civilizations?

Close the loop: return to warm-up question 3. Answer: Artifacts, ruins, writings, codices, and descendants' traditions.

5. EXIT TICKET

0:52–1:00 · 8 min

Print the exit ticket PDF (page 2 is the key and mastery guide). Every item requires evidence: Part A asks students to justify each choice, Part B asks for an explanation, and Part C applies the standard to a new

situation using Historian's Claim (Claim, Evidence, Source, Explain). Sort results into Mastered, Approaching, and Beginning to plan tomorrow's groups.

LESSON RESOURCES

Resource	How it fits the lesson
Warm-up worksheet (PDF)	Optional standalone warm-up (also Part 2 of the lesson worksheet), with a key.
Mini-lesson presenter	Projectable, step-by-step interactive lesson with tools and quick checks (room page).
Lesson worksheet (PDF + key)	One printable packet students complete during the whole lesson: short fill-ins and quick checks in 13 small parts that match the presenter slides.
Journey to Three Empires (.html)	The virtual field trip for Canvas, with differentiated levels, supports, and a turn-in.
Exit ticket (PDF + key)	Evidence-based check with a rubric and a mastery sorting guide.
Google Arts & Culture (extra)	Search "Machu Picchu" or "Chichén Itzá" for 360° tours and artifact collections. https://artsandculture.google.com/
World History Encyclopedia (extra)	Reliable articles and images on the Maya, Aztec, and Inca. https://www.worldhistory.org/
Smithsonian NMAI: Native Knowledge 360° (extra)	Inka Road lessons and more. https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/
National Geographic Education (extra)	Encyclopedia entries and maps. https://education.nationalgeographic.org/

ANSWER KEY: JOURNEY TO THREE EMPIRES

Stop 1: Tikal, Guatemala (Maya) (code piece: Q)

1. How was Maya government organized? -> Independent city-states, each with its own king
2. Which achievements belong to the Maya? -> Maya achievement: Glyph writing system, 365-day calendar, Using the concept of zero | Not Maya: Machu Picchu, Quipu knotted strings
3. True or false: The Maya people disappeared completely. -> False
4. You are standing on a temple at Tikal. Tap the homeland of the Maya on the map. -> Tap Yucatán and Guatemala (Maya)

Stop 2: Tenochtitlan (Aztec) (code piece: U)

1. How did the Aztec grow food in a lake? -> They built chinampas, floating gardens
2. What is tribute? -> Payments of goods demanded from conquered peoples
3. What modern city stands where Tenochtitlan once was? -> Mexico City
4. Place the founding of Tenochtitlan (about 1325) on the timeline. -> Point at 1325

Stop 3: The Andes Mountains (Inca) (code piece: I)

1. How did the Inca farm on steep mountains? -> Terrace farming
2. What was a quipu used for? -> Keeping records with knotted strings
3. Why was the Inca road system important? -> It connected the huge empire for armies, messengers, and trade
4. Tap the region where the Inca built their empire. -> Tap Andes Mountains (Inca)

Stop 4: Machu Picchu (code piece: P)

1. What skill do Machu Picchu's walls show? -> Precise stonework that fits together without mortar

2. Match each civilization to its homeland. -> Maya = Rainforests of southern Mexico and Central America; Aztec = Valley of Mexico (Lake Texcoco); Inca = Andes Mountains of South America

3. Tap the TWO details that show Inca engineering skill. -> "Its cut stones fit together so tightly that no mortar was needed." + "Stone terraces and drains kept the soil from washing away in heavy rain."

Stop 5: Encounter and Conquest (code piece: U)

1. Which factors helped the Spanish conquer the Aztec and Inca? -> Helped the Spanish: Diseases like smallpox, Native allies who opposed the Aztec, Steel weapons and horses, An Inca civil war | Did not help: Chinampas, Quipus

2. Put the events in order. -> Tenochtitlan is founded -> Pachacuti expands the Inca Empire -> Cortés arrives in Mexico -> Tenochtitlan falls to the Spanish -> Pizarro captures Atahualpa

3. Cortés arrived in Mexico in 1519. Place Pizarro's capture of the Inca ruler Atahualpa (1532) on the timeline. -> Point at 1532

Final code: QUIPU