Early History of Latin America Reading CLASS SET

***Aztec***

The Aztec Empire was located in Central America. The Aztec were mostly in Mexico. The main ruler of the Aztec was Montezuma II, who was the king. The Aztec government was made up of city-states which were governed by local chiefs. Each city-state paid tribute and taxes to Montezuma II in the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan. The Aztec are known for many achievements. These achievements include floating gardens, the use of gold, the construction of canals, a writing system, irrigation, poetry, and systems for farming corn. The Aztec economy was based mostly on farming and trade between the city-states. The Aztec were divided into two main classes: nobles and commoners. The largest group of commoners were farmers, but also included groups such as artisans and merchants. At the lowest level were slaves who worked for the noble families. The Aztec believed in many gods and were therefore polytheistic. The Aztec believed that their gods required human sacrifice as payment. The Aztec sacrificed slaves as well as noble volunteers to the gods.

Montezuma II was the leader of the Aztec during the Spanish invasions. Montezuma did not attack the Spanish when they arrived in Mexico because he thought they were gods. He even gifted the Spanish with gold and other valuable things. Montezuma was held hostage by Cortes within his own palace. Montezuma was later killed when a battle broke out between his Aztec warriors and the Spanish troops.

Unfortunately, the Aztec were influenced greatly by the Spanish invasion of the New World in 1519. The Spanish had killed the Aztec leaders, enslaved the people, destroyed their cities, and stolen all of the Aztec gold by 1521. The Spanish were able to defeat the Aztec so quickly and easily due to the introduction of diseases like smallpox. The Aztec had no immunity to the diseases and died quickly once infected.

***Inca***

The Inca Empire was located along the Western coast of South America within the Andes Mountains. The Inca Empire was located in what is now Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, and Argentina. The main ruler of the Inca was Atahualpa, the emperor. The Incan Empire was divided with separate rulers for each division. Everybody worked for the state, and in return the state looked after everybody. Punishment was harsh and swift, so almost no one broke the law. Like the Aztec, the Incan economy was based on farming and trade. All Inca owed taxes to the Sapa Inca. Tax collectors ran hundreds of miles through the mountains to collect these taxes. The Inca were also known for many achievements. Their achievements include terraced farming, irrigation systems, the creation of roads with tunnels and bridges, the use of stairs, and their masterful masonry work. Masonry is the building of structures from individual stones laid and bound together with mortar and clay. There were three ranks of nobles: nobles by birth, appointed nobles, and Non-Inca Chiefs. Commoners were divided into categories based on age and gender. The Inca were polytheistic and believed that the gods were responsible for everything from the rise of the sun in the morning to the growth of the crops.

Atahualpa was the Sapa Inca, the “Only Inca”, when the Spanish arrived in South America. Atahualpa was captured and held for ransom by the Spanish leader Francisco Pizarro. Pizarro wanted the Incas gold, lots of it. Pizarro was willing to give the Incan leader back his people for twenty-four tons of gold and silver. This ransom is said to be the largest in history. Once Pizarro got his gold and silver he betrayed his word and kept Atahualpa. The Spanish leader then ordered the death of Atahualpa by burning. The Inca believed the soul would not live if burned so he converted to Catholicism and was strangled to death instead. Atahualpa’s death was the Inca Empire’s end.

The Spanish also destroyed the Incan cities, art, temples, language, customs and culture in 1531. The Incan people were enslaved and their religion was abandoned. Once again, diseases like smallpox killed many of the Inca.

***Spanish***

Hernan Cortes was a rich and powerful Spanish explorer and soldier. He was a conquistador sent by Spain to find gold in the New World. Cortes conquered the Aztecs. Cortes was a sneaky man and made sure his men followed his orders. In order to prevent them from leaving the New World, upon arrival he set his ships on fire. He wanted success or death to be the only options. Cortes was responsible for the death of Montezuma II and the destruction of Tenochtitlan, the capital city of the Aztec. Cortes built Mexico City in the same location as the destroyed Tenochtitlan.

Francisco Pizarro was the Spanish explorer and soldier who conquered the Incas. He was also a conquistador but Pizarro headed south upon arriving in the New World. Pizarro was responsible for the death of Atahualpa. Pizarro grew extremely wealthy by taking gold and silver from the Incas. Pizarro was later killed in an attack when men tried to take over his palace in Peru.

***Columbian Exchange***

The Columbian Exchange was the exchange of animals, plants, diseases, weapons, religions, customs, cultures, and people between the Old World and the New World. The Old World is comprised of Europe, Africa, and Asia. The New World is comprised of North and South America.

Before this exchange, llamas were the only domesticated animals in Latin America. Europeans introduced horses, pigs, cows, and sheep. These animals changed the use of the land in the New World. People now had to provide land to feed the animals as well as for farming. Europeans also introduced cash crops to Latin America and the New World. These cash crops included sugar, rice, wheat, coffee, bananas, and grapes. These crops flourished in the fertile soil of the Americas. The natives of the New World introduced many crops to the Europeans as well. Crops like maize (a relative a corn), tomatoes, potatoes, tobacco, cacao, beans and cotton became vital to the well-being and health of Europeans.

The introduction of new diseases played a major role in the exchange. Nearly all of the European diseases were communicable by air and touch. Smallpox, measles, whooping cough, chicken pox, bubonic plague, scarlet fever, and influenza were the most common diseases exchanged. In Europe, illness was considered to be the consequence of sin. This meant that if you were ill, God was punishing you for your unfaithful actions. Natives in the Americas (like the Aztec and Inca) were not Christian and were therefor regarded at heathens. In the eyes of the Europeans, like Cortes and Pizarro, the natives were getting ill as a punishment for their sins against God. It didn’t help that the natives were polytheistic. These natives had no natural resistance or immunity to these diseases and their population continued to decline for centuries before their bloodlines adapted to the diseases. The Inca Empire decreased from thirteen million people in 1492 to two million in 1600. The North American native population fell from two million in 1492 to five hundred thousand in 1900. Smallpox alone devastated the native populations. In Central America, roughly twenty-four million people died of smallpox in just 85 years. In North America 90% of the Native Americans were gone due to smallpox within one hundred years of the Plymouth landing. The effects of the diseases were drastic on the native populations, dramatically deceasing their numbers. The Europeans still needed labor to cultivate new crops in the Americas, so they turned to Africa for their labor. This was the start of the Atlantic slave trade.

The impact of the Columbian Exchange is still felt today. The exchange of foods and animals had a drastic impact on later societies. Over time, crops native to the Americas became staples in the diets of Europeans. Foods provided nutrition, which helped people live longer. Until contact with the Americas, Europeans had never tried tomatoes. By 1600, tomatoes were included in Italian cookbooks, before 1600, Italians had no pasta sauce!! Activities like cattle ranching and coffee growing were not possible without the Columbian Exchange. Traditional cuisines and foods changed and adapted because of the Columbian Exchange. The Exchange also impacted China. The arrival of easy-to-grow, nutritious corn helped the population grow tremendously. In Africa, corn and peanuts are the top grown crops. These are both crops from the Americas. Scholars estimate that one-third of all food crops grown in the world are of American origin.