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Social Studies

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Spanish Conquests in the Americas

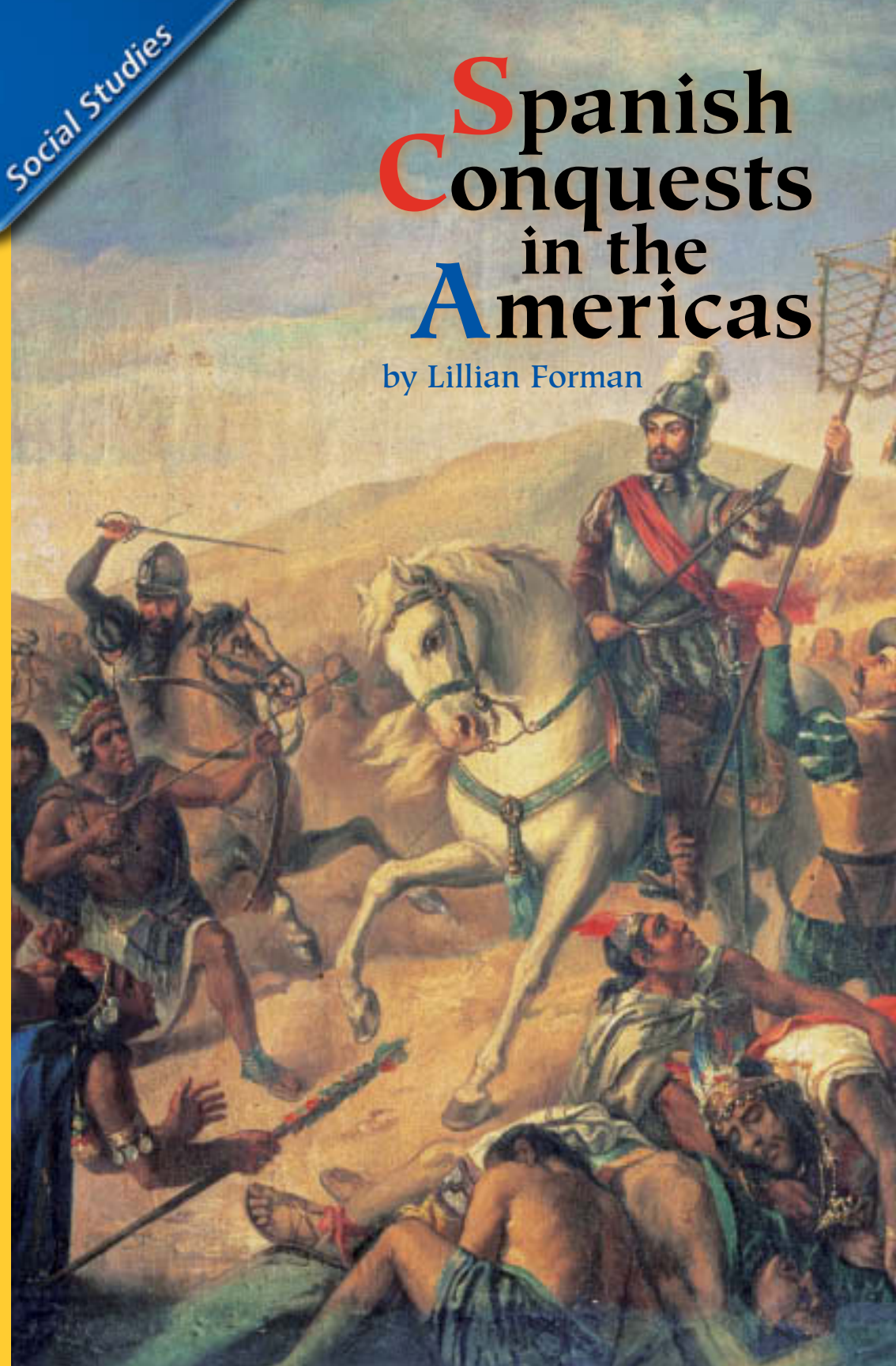
by Lillian Forman

Genre	Comprehension Skills and Strategy	Text Features
Expository nonfiction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Draw Conclusions• Main Idea and Details• Answer Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Captions• Heads• Maps• Table of Contents

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Vocabulary

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invaders

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Spanish Conquests in the Americas

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Note: The total word count includes words in the running text and headings only. Numerals and words in chapter titles, captions, labels, diagrams, charts, graphs, sidebars, and extra features are not included.

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Chapter 1

Two Worlds Meet

On October 12, 1492, a group of islanders watched in amazement as three strange ships approached their shores. These were the largest vessels they had ever seen, and they were interested to learn what manner of people might have such transport.

The islanders were Taíno, a group that inhabited several islands in the Caribbean. The Taíno were a peaceful people, though they had to defend themselves often from their violent, cannibalistic neighbors, the Carib. The Taíno were primarily farmers. They used slash-and-burn farming to grow cassava, sweet potatoes, maize, beans, squash, and chiles, and they were prepared to share these foods with the strangers who had just arrived.

The strangers who got out of the ships were pale and peculiarly dressed, but they looked happy to be on land. The Taíno could not know that Christopher Columbus and his crew had been sailing from Spain for more than two months.

Columbus had come for many reasons, but the most important was finding a route to India, the source of many of the world's most valuable spices. Spain had just rid itself of the Muslim **invaders** who had controlled their country for centuries, and now they needed to rebuild their finances. Ferdinand and Isabella, the king and queen of Spain, knew the spice trade could be the answer. Also, Muslim armies had just conquered Constantinople, the city through which spices traditionally reached Europe. Whichever country found a new route to the spice lands would be wealthy, and Spain had financed Columbus's expedition because they wanted to find that route.

Columbus felt certain he had reached the East Indies, so he called the Taíno “Indians.” Until the day he died, he believed he had seen Asia. He had instead stumbled on the threshold of lands no European had dreamed of, soon to be called the Americas.

Somehow, during that first meeting, the two groups communicated, and the Taíno invited the newcomers to dinner. Columbus wrote about the strange foods they were served and was particularly impressed with chiles, which he recognized as a new and possibly valuable spice.

The Taíno had some gold objects, and Columbus tried to learn where they had gotten them. He knew he needed to return soon to Spain, but he could not go back empty-handed. He found himself in a difficult spot. He tried to control his men, but it was only through their looting and kidnapping that he could carry home proof

of his success. On January 16, 1493, Columbus gathered the gold, plants, spices, parrots, and captive Taínos and headed back to Spain.

King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella sent Columbus on a second voyage within months of his return. They realized that Columbus was more interested in Christianity than commerce, but their priority was to **enrich** the kingdom, so this time they sent along investors and soldiers as well as a few missionaries.

Though he was not a great leader, Columbus was a brilliant navigator, and he easily found the island again—a remarkable feat at the time. On their arrival, everyone was shocked to find the small Spanish fort destroyed and the 39 men who were left to guard it dead. The Taíno had learned that the **foreigners** were not friends, but killing the sailors would not end their problems. This was just the beginning of the Spanish presence in the Americas. The Taíno were the first Indian group to encounter the Spanish, but they would not be the last.

Columbus reported his findings to Ferdinand and Isabella, who worried that other countries—especially rival Portugal—might learn of this important discovery.

The Indian People

Because of the Roman Empire and other shared influences, including Greek philosophy and Christianity, people across Europe had many ideas and customs in common, despite differences in language and culture. Their dress was similar, and their level of development was similar.

In contrast, the cultures of the Americas were dramatically different from one another. Even groups who lived close together often looked very different and had different customs, religions, and levels of development. Geography and history both contributed to the differences, though not with the consistency one might expect. Mountains in North America were home to hunters and gatherers, while mountains in South America gave rise to the highly advanced Inca civilization.

But geography did matter, as access to food and water, extremes of weather, and ease of transportation all had their effects on the cultures that developed. In densely wooded areas, from the forests of North America to the jungles of South America, hunting and gathering offered abundant food. People along the ocean relied on the clams, mussels, and oysters that thronged shallow waters. When food was so easily obtained, there was no need to create more complex ways of feeding a group.

In areas that were hot and dry, it was necessary to develop more complex agricultural techniques, such as irrigation. In Mesoamerica, that part of North America now known as Mexico and Central America, great civilizations arose. The people who built these civilizations developed advanced farming techniques. These people were warlike, and many of them sacrificed humans to their gods.

Beliefs made as much difference as geography. Some groups, such as the Taíno, tried to live in peace. Other groups were aggressive. Some Indian groups revered

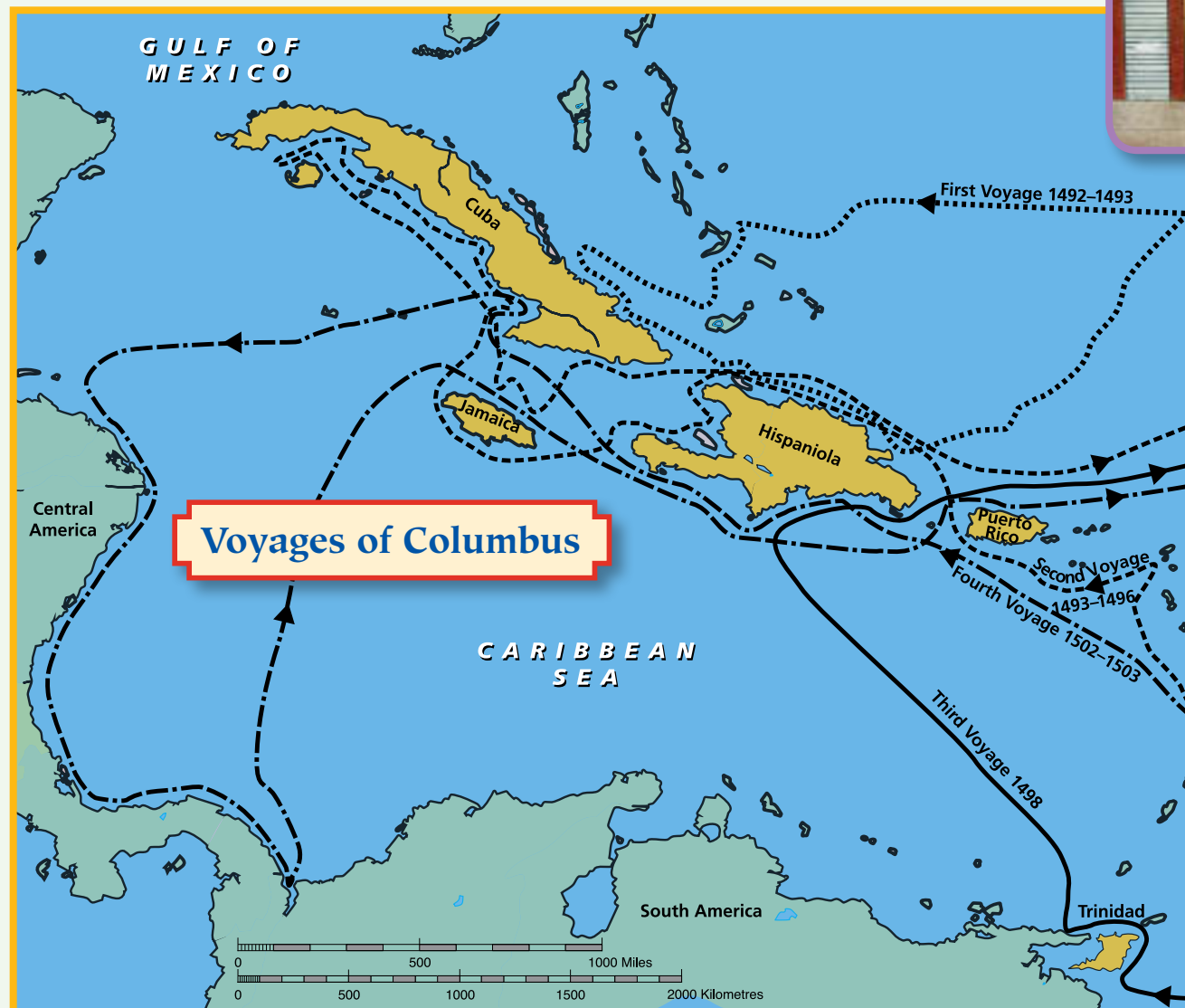


The Aztecs used complex pictographs to record their history. The painting above is of the Sun Stone, a famous Aztec history unearthed in 1790.

human life, and some were cannibals. Many groups had slaves, but some did not. Some groups had complex governments and valued justice, and some thought that strength was all that mattered. Some groups built empires, while others wandered from one hunting ground to the next. Beliefs affected appearances, too, with different groups having different types of ornamentation, body decoration, hairstyles, and clothing.

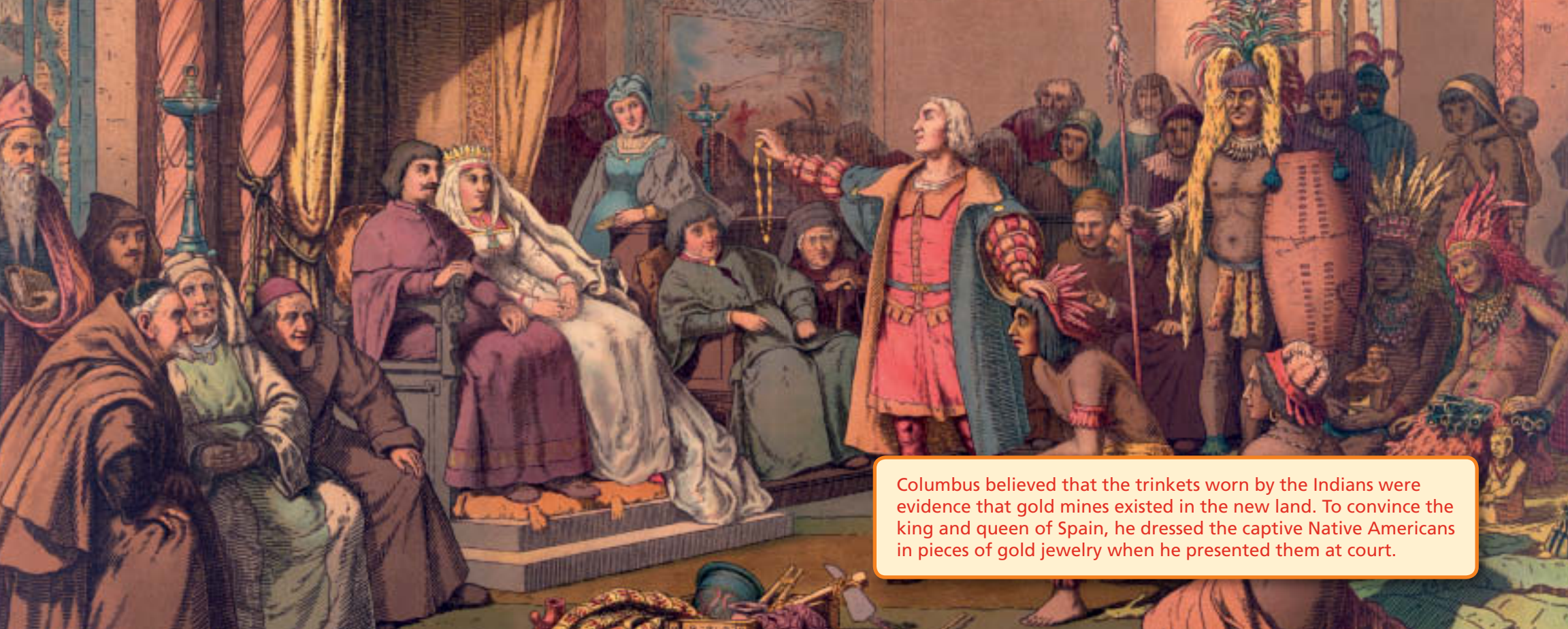
Some groups developed writing. The Aztecs created complex calendars to track seasons and religious holidays. They also created pictographs for recording events in their history and legends.

Indian groups did not use wheeled vehicles. In North America, some groups created sleds that could be dragged by dogs (horses were introduced by the Spanish, so none were available to pre-Columbian groups). In South America, llamas were sometimes used to bear burdens. However, throughout the Americas, most loads were carried by people.



The Aztecs and Inca had the New World's most advanced civilizations. They also ruled the largest empires and controlled the greatest wealth. Both groups had well-organized governments and large armies. They had farmer classes and slaves, but most of their food came in the form of tribute from conquered peoples. In addition to demanding food and gold, the Aztecs demanded humans for sacrifices. They sacrificed thousands of people every year to their many gods.

These are the people who possessed the huge stores of gold of which Europeans dreamed. During his four voyages of exploration, Columbus had come close to these two empires, but it would be left to other explorers to find and exploit their wealth.



Columbus believed that the trinkets worn by the Indians were evidence that gold mines existed in the new land. To convince the king and queen of Spain, he dressed the captive Native Americans in pieces of gold jewelry when he presented them at court.

Chapter 3

Gold Lures the Europeans

When Columbus returned from his final voyage, in 1500, people still thought the land on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean was Asia. However, the next year Amerigo Vespucci was to sail far enough south to establish that the land they were exploring was a “New World.” His name was to be given to the continent he had explored—America. (The name originally applied only to South America.)

During his explorations, Vespucci represented and sailed for two different countries, Spain and Portugal. These two countries were archrivals, however, and a race was soon on to conquer, settle, and acquire wealth.

There were many reasons European countries wanted gold. One was for trade. Gold was a universal currency that could be used to buy goods from Asia, Africa, and other European countries. Individuals wanted gold, but so did governments. Spain and Portugal had been involved for centuries in battling the Muslim Moors who had invaded their countries, and they needed to rebuild their economies. They also wanted to protect themselves from other potential invaders and enemies. And they wanted the kind of power that, in the world at that time, came only from being wealthier than anyone else around.

Most citizens wanted what their government wanted, both because a strong country offered them protection and because the wealthier the country was, the more likely they could get rich too.



During this time, most people of common background in Europe found it difficult to become wealthy by hard work alone. Although some commoners from the emerging merchant class made fortunes by trading in Asia, they needed large amounts of money to support their trips. Others became wealthy because they had succeeded in military **campaigns**.

The discovery of the Americas opened up new opportunities for poor nobles and ambitious soldiers. And because of the end of the conflicts with the Moors, there were a lot of young soldiers looking for other means of advancement.

Hernando Cortés was the son of poor but noble parents. They had sent him to a university to study law, and at first he did well. After about two years, he became bored and dropped out of law school. He sailed to Hispaniola, where his father's friend was governor. Hispaniola was one of the islands in the West Indies that Columbus had claimed for Spain nine years before Cortés's arrival.

Although the governor of Hispaniola gave Cortés land and slaves, Cortés was more interested in gold. After seven years, he joined an expedition to conquer the Indians who lived in nearby Cuba.

Cortés was a skillful fighter. In reward for his services, he was given a huge piece of land in Cuba and many slaves. With some good luck and smart management, he became a wealthy and powerful man.

Later, Cortés joined several exploratory expeditions. On one of these, he and his **comrades** happened on a city where the inhabitants lived in stone houses and wore gold jewelry. When asked where the gold came from, they pointed to the west and said "Mexico." Cortés longed to find the source of all this gold. He would soon meet the people who controlled the gold—the Aztecs.



This map shows present-day city and country names. Veracruz was founded by Hernando Cortés, and Mexico City was built on the site of Aztec Tenochtitlán.

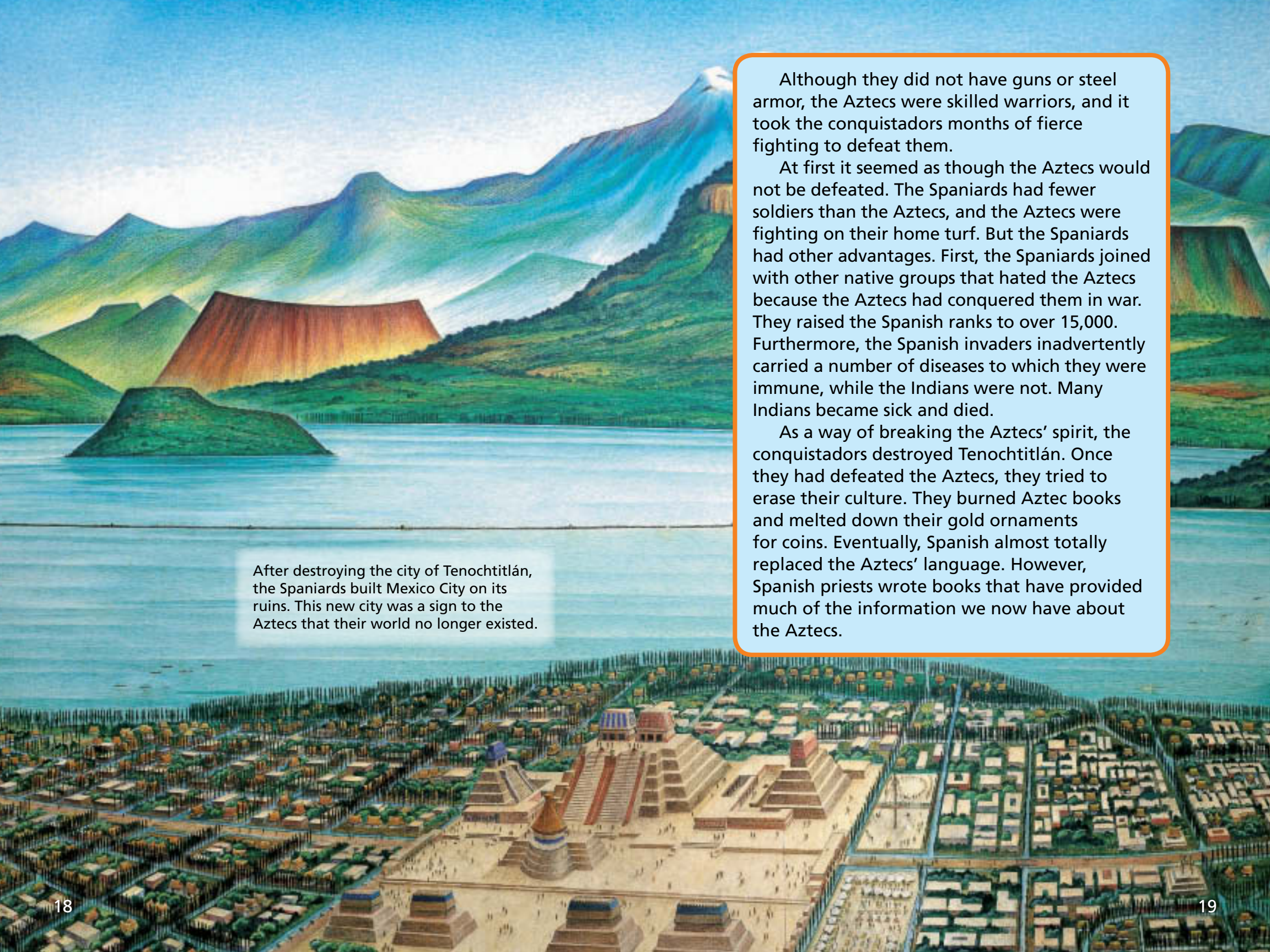
Cortés and the Aztec Empire

A powerful group of Indians called the Aztecs possessed a vast store of gold. They were extremely warlike and had acquired an empire due to their skill in fighting. They demanded slaves and treasure from the people they conquered. As a result, they were feared and hated by their neighbors. In 1519, when the Spanish soldiers called *conquistadors* arrived, the Aztec Empire consisted of 80,000 square miles of territory and more than 15,000,000 people.

The conquistadors met the powerful Aztecs upon landing in Mexico. Although they were fierce to outsiders, the Aztecs were cooperative among themselves. They loved their children and educated them well. They valued an orderly society. Their laws were few but harsh. Rich Aztecs owned slaves but treated them well. Mistreating a slave was punishable by death. Slaves could also save up property and buy their freedom.

The Aztecs had a very advanced culture. Their chief city, Tenochtitlán, was designed with lovely gardens and fine buildings, some of which were pyramids. They used a writing system to create poetry and myths and to record history. They understood many principles of medicine, astronomy, and arithmetic. Their knowledge of agriculture was also advanced.

When offered the command of an expedition to Mexico in 1519, Cortés poured his own money into it and hired his own soldiers—young men experienced in fighting Indians and eager for gold. The Spaniards called them *conquistadors*, which means “conquerors.”



After destroying the city of Tenochtitlán, the Spaniards built Mexico City on its ruins. This new city was a sign to the Aztecs that their world no longer existed.

Although they did not have guns or steel armor, the Aztecs were skilled warriors, and it took the conquistadors months of fierce fighting to defeat them.

At first it seemed as though the Aztecs would not be defeated. The Spaniards had fewer soldiers than the Aztecs, and the Aztecs were fighting on their home turf. But the Spaniards had other advantages. First, the Spaniards joined with other native groups that hated the Aztecs because the Aztecs had conquered them in war. They raised the Spanish ranks to over 15,000. Furthermore, the Spanish invaders inadvertently carried a number of diseases to which they were immune, while the Indians were not. Many Indians became sick and died.

As a way of breaking the Aztecs' spirit, the conquistadors destroyed Tenochtitlán. Once they had defeated the Aztecs, they tried to erase their culture. They burned Aztec books and melted down their gold ornaments for coins. Eventually, Spanish almost totally replaced the Aztecs' language. However, Spanish priests wrote books that have provided much of the information we now have about the Aztecs.

Chapter 5

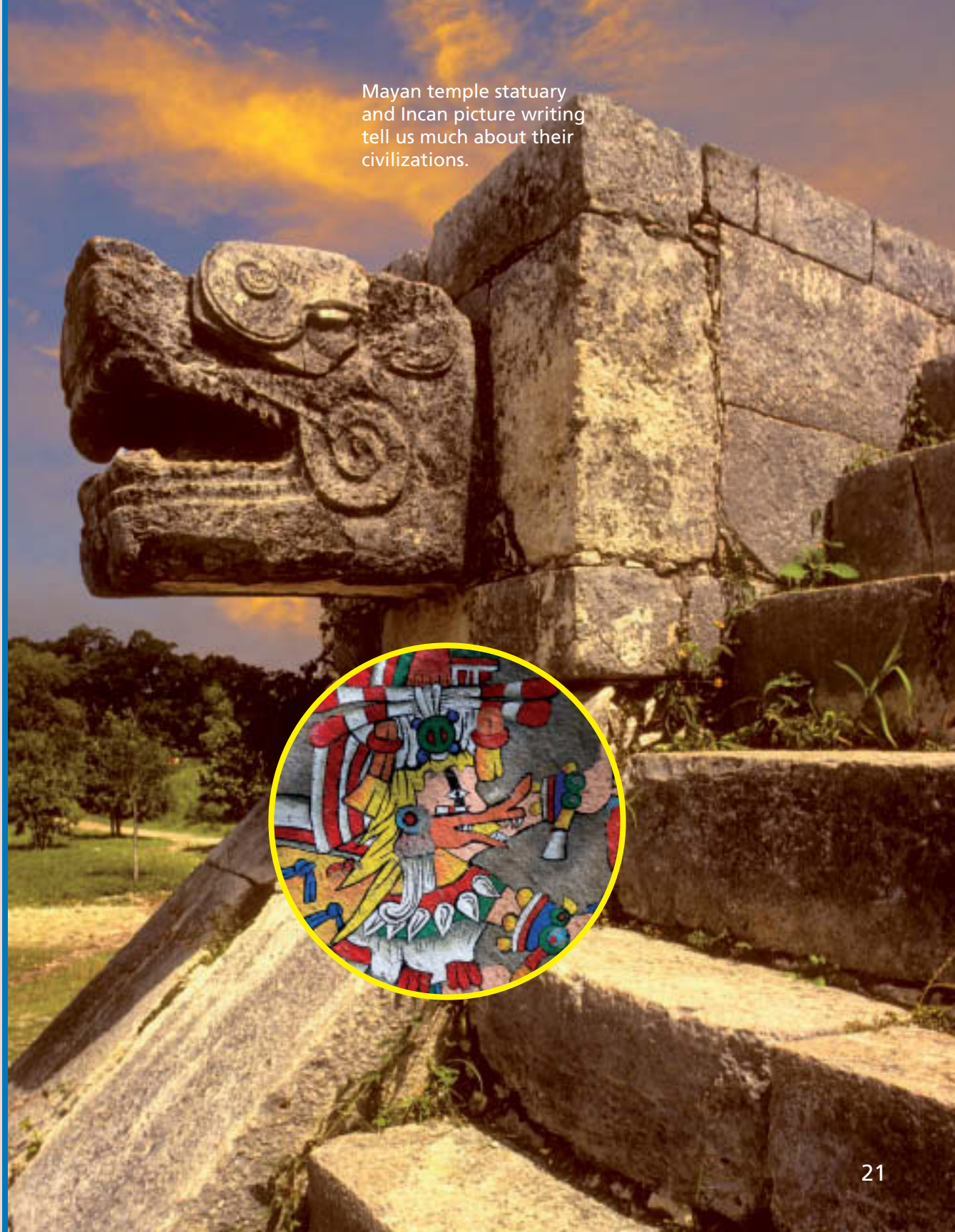
The Maya and the Inca

Like the Aztecs, the Maya had a highly developed culture. They had a writing system and many books about their history and religion. Like the Aztecs, they understood the principles of medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and agriculture. They were highly gifted artistically. They created murals and pottery figures that illustrated their daily activities. They built beautiful cities filled with temples and elaborate tombs, but their cities were almost exclusively used as religious and ceremonial centers. The Maya themselves lived in small farming villages in the rain forest. Even so, they had largely abandoned their cities long before the Spanish came, for reasons we still do not understand.

After conquering the Aztecs, the Spanish conquistadors turned their attention to the Yucatan Peninsula, where the Maya then lived. The Mayan civilization had weakened greatly by the time the conquistadors began to attack it; yet the Spaniards set out to destroy everything they could find that belonged to the Maya. They melted gold into solid bars to be sent to Spain. The Maya managed to resist the Spaniards for 20 years. One Mayan group in northern Guatemala was able to remain independent for another century and a half.

The Incas were next. The Incan Empire was still strong when the Spanish conquistadors arrived in 1533. Living high in the Andes, these hardy people enjoyed the **benefits** of successful agriculture. They trapped fertile soil by making terraces on the mountain slopes and built aqueducts to water their crops. This method not only gave them more land to cultivate, but it also prevented the wind and rain from washing away the soil.

Mayan temple statuary and Incan picture writing tell us much about their civilizations.



CÔTADOR MAIORITEZORERO
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One example of the highly developed culture of the Inca was their ability to communicate with each other using a system that allowed them to send messages from one end of their far-flung empire to another. They sent messengers who passed along information to other messengers in a relay system. Each messenger memorized the messages and carried strings called *quipus* that were knotted to show information and records of crops, taxes, and other business matters. These messengers did much to keep the Incan Empire together and enrich its people's lives.

The Inca built roads and footbridges to aid travel through the steep Andes. Their emperors were good administrators who ruled fairly.

The Incan Empire, with its gold and silver mines, was a rich prize for Spain. The Spaniards enslaved the Inca and robbed them of both material wealth and their cultural identity, treating the newly conquered land like a factory whose purpose was to turn out money for Spain.

There was a defined class system in the Spanish colonies. People who arrived from Spain were the ruling class. Spaniards who married Indians of noble birth were called *mestizos* and ranked just below them. The full-blooded Indians were regarded as the workforce and the lowest class.

This class structure caused many problems in the development of Latin America. In addition, the destruction of these great empires prevented the world from being able to properly appreciate the contributions they made.

Using a special messenger system and knotted strings, the Inca were able to communicate with one another.

Glossary

benefits *n.* advantages; things that cause well-being

campaigns *n.* connected series of military operations

comrades *n.* companions; fellow soldiers

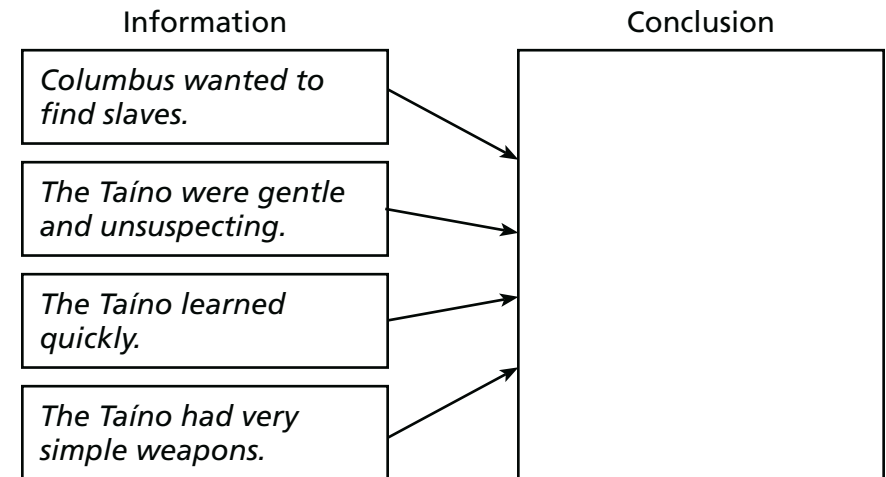
enrich *v.* to make wealthy

foreigners *n.* strangers; people or things not native to a country

invaders *n.* those who enter for conquest or plunder

Reader Response

1. When you learn connected bits of information, you can often put them together to form a conclusion. What conclusion can you draw from the following bits of information? Explain your conclusion.



2. Use the Think and Search strategy to answer the question below. Tell where in the book you found your answers.
What did you learn about the Maya and the Inca that you didn't know before?
3. Look in a dictionary to find at least two more meanings for the word *benefits*. Write a sentence for each meaning.
4. Read the caption on page 23. What information does the caption provide that is not in the illustration?