

Archaeology: From Map to Museum

LD7: Cultural Resources Assessment

Description: As with all forms of material culture and creative expression, the generation and representation of themes, and thematic content, is a primary form of communicating social concerns, values, codes, territorial and political signs and symbols, preoccupations, and critical ideas. The Aztec (AD 1325-1521), who invested considerable resources in the elaboration of their primary ceremonial and religious centers also invested heavily in the creation of histories, religious almanacs, and related sources of recorded communications. In fact, Emperor Moctezuma Ilhuicamina's tribute list included some one million sheets of paper per year used for the preparation of books and documents, and ceremonial paraphernalia. Today's exercise will afford you the opportunity to explore firsthand the imagery of an alien material culture...your task will be to interpret that culture with little or no basis for doing so.

Instructions: This deliverable is intended to introduce you to the interpretation of the primary themes and concerns of an alien civilization as expressed by way of material culture and its assessment. Using both screen-fold books and examples of Aztec poetry, please answer the following questions and reflect upon their attendant themes. As a strategy, please break up into smaller groups of five to six persons each, and select portions of the codices that your respective group can study in depth.

Part I: Themes from the Codices

1. What is the primary social, religious, or other cultural theme represented by the individual manuscript or manuscripts that you had the opportunity to study this day?
2. Does the manuscript present only one primary narrative or discourse or are there several sub-themes represented?
3. What literary details or symbolic devices or graphic content presented in the codices provide evidence of (a) the primary theme, and (b) sub-themes?
4. How much of the content can you identify from close visual inspection alone?
5. Do you feel that without further background in the study of the codices or cultures in question that you would be prepared to identify at least one dozen individual items of content from the world of animals, plants, people, and things portrayed?
6. Given the contexts within which particular images – such as felines or specific plants – are repeated, please attempt to interpret or provide an explanation for what such individual images may represent based on contextual representations alone. Can you identify the context specific symbolism of at least three animals, plants, people or things?

Part II: Themes from Aztec Poetry

1. What are the primary themes represented in at least five of the thirteen poems provided by way of the handouts or texts distributed this day?
2. What do you believe was the Aztec view of life and fate given the analysis of at least three narratives or poems?
3. What do you believe any one or more of those poems presented have to say about the Aztec as a people and as a culture?
4. Given your interpretations, how might you use selected examples of American material culture or poetry or related literary forms to interpret the American people and their respective culture?
5. If you were to select three items of material culture, and any three literary works in order to represent American society, which three examples of material culture, and which three literary works would you choose?