Hernando Cortés was born in Spain. Historians aren’t sure the exact date of his birth, but most agree it was in 1485. He was the only boy in a family of four children. At the age of 14, Hernando’s parents sent him to school at one of Spain’s best universities. They hoped he would study Latin and become a lawyer. After only two years, Hernando returned home. Sixteen year old Hernando wasn’t interested in studying anymore. He had heard about Christopher Columbus’s discoveries. Hernando dreamed of sailing to the West Indies to search for gold and conquer new land.

Conquering Cuba

In 1503, eighteen year old Hernando Cortés arrived in Santo Domingo, the capital of Hispaniola (his\-pan\-i\-OH\-luh). As a new citizen, he was given a piece of land for building a home and planting crops. In 1506, Cortés joined the Spanish military and helped take control of Cuba for Spain. For his bravery, he was rewarded with a large piece of land and many slaves.

In 1519, Hernando Cortés was sent from Cuba to the Gulf of Mexico. He was told to explore the area known as Mexico, trade with the natives found there, and bring slaves back to Cuba. He took horses, a few weapons, and 600 soldiers for his journey.

When his ship landed in Mexico, Hernando Cortés disobeyed the instructions of Cuba’s leaders. He didn’t plan to explore, trade, or take slaves back to Cuba. Instead, he claimed the land for Spain. He wanted to take control of Mexico and set up an empire for himself. The Aztec Empire stood in Hernando Cortés’s way.
THE AZTEC EMPIRE

The Aztec people lived along the Gulf of Mexico. The Aztecs were fearless warriors who had created a huge empire that included many cities and towns. They built this empire by defeating other groups of people. The Aztecs would take control of their land and make them pay yearly taxes.

Warfare was considered a religious duty by the Aztecs. Prisoners taken during war were sacrificed to the gods.

The Aztecs designed their own calendar, built large temples for religious ceremonies, and created beautiful sculptures.

AZTEC FARMERS

The Aztecs were farmers who practiced slash-and-burn agriculture. They chopped down trees and burned a section of the forest, then planted crops in the clearing.

The ashes from the burned trees fertilized the soil. Aztec farmers also dug canals to irrigate their crops. They turned shallow lakes into farmland by scooping up mud from the lake bottoms to form islands. They planted seeds in the islands and regularly added mud to water the crops.

DEFEATING THE AZTECS

Hernando Cortés was able to easily recruit people who had been defeated by the Aztecs and were being forced to pay yearly taxes to them. It took three months for Cortés and his small army of volunteers to travel 300 miles to the capital of the Aztec Empire.

Hernando Cortés was greeted warmly by the Aztec emperor. He was given expensive gifts and even welcomed into the emperor’s home. The emperor had no idea what Hernando Cortés had planned. Cortés immediately took the emperor prisoner and demanded that the Aztecs pay a ransom of gold and jewels for his safe return. The Aztecs began gathering treasures to pay the ransom. Cortés’s plan fell apart after the emperor was accidentally struck in the head with a rock and died.

After the death of their emperor, the Aztecs attacked Cortés and his army. Cortés left the city for a short time but returned and formed a blockade around the entire city. The Aztecs were unable to get food or water. Thousands starved to death or died from disease. After the defeat, Hernando Cortés and his army destroyed the Aztec buildings and built Mexico City right on top of the ruins.
GOVERNOR CORTÉS

King Charles V appointed Hernando Cortés as governor of New Spain. Since the king didn’t completely trust Hernando Cortés, four royal officials were also appointed to help Cortés. Governor Cortés founded more cities in New Spain. He appointed men to explore and conquer new land for Spain. Governor Cortés wanted Native Americans to give up their native customs and religious ceremonies and accept Christianity. Cortés was one of the first Spaniards to grow sugar cane in Spain. He was also the first to import black slaves from Africa into New Spain.

Governor Cortés was a very wealthy and powerful man. He used his power to lead an expedition to Honduras where he took control and had the governor arrested. The leaders in Spain became very worried about how powerful Governor Cortés had become. Several men were sent from Spain to remove Governor Cortés from power. In 1528, Hernando Cortés was exiled from New Spain.

FINAL EXPLORATIONS AND DEATH

Hernando Cortés returned to Spain. King Charles V rewarded him for expanding Spain’s empire in New Spain. Cortés was given permission to return to New Spain and continue conquering new land. The king also gave Cortés land in one of the wealthiest areas of New Spain. He was not, however, permitted to return to power as governor of New Spain.

In 1530, Hernando Cortés returned to New Spain. He focused his time and energy on building his palace. In 1536, he explored the northwestern and Pacific coasts of Mexico and discovered present-day Baja or Lower California. He returned to Spain in 1541, and joined a military expedition to the Barbary Coast. During the voyage, he almost drowned in a storm.

After his last voyage, Hernando Cortés found himself deeply in debt. He had borrowed and spent most of his own money to pay for his expeditions. In 1547, Cortés planned to return to his palace in New Spain. He never made it back to his home. On December 2, 1547, Hernando Cortés died in Spain of pleurisy (PLEW•ruh•see).
1 After reading the first paragraph about Hernando Cortés, you can conclude that—
A his parents were disappointed in his choices
B he was an only child
C he wanted to go back to school, but his parents wouldn’t let him
D he wasn’t really interested in sailing

2 In 1503, what was the capital of Hispaniola?
F Santa María
G Cuba
H Mexico City
J Santo Domingo

3 Which statement about Hernando Cortés is true?
A He refused to join the Spanish military.
B He had difficulty taking orders from others.
C He was always interested in doing the right thing.
D He cared about other people more than he cared about himself.

4 What can you learn from reading about the Aztec Empire?
F They were shy and quiet.
G They were warriors who sacrificed prisoners to the gods.
H They didn’t practice a religion of their own.
J They survived by hunting and gathering roots and berries.

5 How did Hernando Cortés get into the Aztec emperor’s home?
A He crawled in through an open window.
B He pretended that he was delivering flowers to the emperor.
C He was invited in by the emperor.
D He broke down the front door.

6 How did Aztec emperor die?
F He was struck in the head with a rock.
G He was shot with a bow and arrow.
H He fell down a flight of stairs.
J He became ill with malaria.

7 Which phrase tells you that the king of Spain didn’t completely trust Hernando Cortés?
A ...appointed Hernando Cortés as governor of New Spain...
B ...used his power to lead an expedition to Honduras...
C ...sent four royal officials to help Hernando Cortés...
D ...gave him land in one of the wealthiest areas of New Spain...

Name ____________________________

Directions: Read each question carefully. Darken the circle for the correct answer.

Answers
1 A B C D 5 A B C D
2 F G H J 6 F G H J
3 A B C D 7 A B C D
4 F G H J

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