

Examiners' report

GCSE

HISTORY B

(SCHOOLS HISTORY PROJECT)

OCR Level 1/Level 2 GCSE (9-1) in
History B (Schools History Project)

J411

For first teaching in 2016

Aztecs and the Spanish Conquest, 1519–1535

J411/32, J411/35 and J411/38

Summer 2025 series

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate responses is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

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Aztecs and the Spanish Conquest, 1519–1535 overview

Aztecs and the Spanish Conquest, 1519–1535 is one of three World Depth Study units in the Component Group 3 World History GCSE paper. The focus of assessment for the World Depth Study is knowledge and understanding, using sources and understanding interpretations.

The questions in the World Depth Study test all four Assessment Objectives. To do well in the World Depth Study, candidates are required to make relevant inferences from three sources and one interpretation. The extent to which the sources and interpretation were the focus of candidates' answers to Questions 6 and 7 were the main driver of the overall level awarded. Furthermore, candidates need to recall and apply their knowledge to support and challenge a statement in an essay-style question.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
- made an inference or inferences from Source A and supported this with evidence from the content of the source (Question 6) - made two supported inferences from Source B, Source C and/or Interpretation D to explain how useful they were for a historian studying the Spanish flight from Tenochtitlán (Question 7) - effectively deployed a range of knowledge in their choice of essay questions, using precise evidence to support their answers. They then explained this evidence thoroughly in reference to the question (Questions 8 and 9).	- used lots of own knowledge about the Aztecs rather than focusing their response on the analysis of Source A (Question 6) - based responses around analysis of undeveloped provenance (Question 7) - described surface features of Source B, Source C and/or Interpretation D rather than trying to make inferences about why the sources and interpretations were useful for a historian studying the Spanish flight from Tenochtitlán (Question 7) - described or identified the knowledge they had used for the essay-style questions rather than explaining the evidence they used in reference to the question (Questions 8 and 9).

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Question 6

6 What can **Source A** tell us about the Aztecs and/or the Spanish Conquest?

Use the source and your own knowledge to support your answer.

[7]

The aim of this question is to encourage candidates to make inferences from the content of Source A.

The vast majority of the candidates understood that the source showed that Aztec society had sophisticated engineering or that Aztec society was advanced. Candidates who then supported their inference with source support, for example: *'Source A tells us that the Aztecs were skilled and sophisticated engineers because Diaz describes how the cities and villages were 'built in the water' and there was a 'straight and level causeway' leading to Tenochtitlán'* achieved Level 2, 4-5 marks. The Aztecs being skilled or advanced was the most common inference that candidates explained within their response. You can see an example of this in **Exemplar 1**.

The most successful candidates made a sophisticated or higher-level inference such as explaining what the source tells us about Spanish preconceptions/ prejudices about the Aztecs. For example: *'Source A reveals the preconceptions that the Spanish had about the Aztecs and their culture. Diaz describes how the Spanish were 'astounded' to discover the 'straight and level causeway' the Aztecs had built over the water. His surprise suggests that the Spanish were not expecting this level of sophistication and civilization outside of Europe.'* Additionally, candidates could have analysed the source's regretful tone to infer what Source A tells us about the extent of change or devastation under the Spanish by utilising the destruction in the content of the source to support their inference.

Candidates who focused their response solely on own knowledge about the Aztecs rather than focusing on the source achieved zero.

Exemplar 1

6		The source tells us that the Aztecs were extremely developed, he describes Tenochtitlan as an 'enchanted vision' which connotes to be Aztecs brilliance in creating things and skill. Bernal also the continues to describe the 'villages built in in the water' which to our understanding is not common and extremely difficult. This shows us that Tenochtitlan is developed and the Aztecs were skilled and intelligent. We are assured this is accurate through provenance that Bernal Díaz saw this himself and he cannot have been mistaken although his judgment may be subjective. It also states tells us that the Spanish conquest was destructive and cruel, saying that 'nothing is left standing' which shows that the Spanish were merciless because it has been made clear that what was built at Tenochtitlan was intricate and perfect and the image of the Spanish destroying it in the conquest highlights the ulterior and selfish motives that destroyed the Aztecs lives and home. Bernal Díaz himself travelled with Cortés and worked with the Spanish so the selfishness of the conquest is more believable as it is very unlikely someone part of it would admit they are at fault for completely no reason.
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In Exemplar 1 the candidate makes two clear supported inferences from the content of Source A. They infer that the Aztecs were developed, skilled and intelligent; without source support this would remain at Level 2, 3 marks. However, the candidate provides support for their inference of '*villages built in the water*'. At this point, the candidate moves to Level 2, 4 marks for one supported inference. They then make a second inference that the Spanish Conquest was 'destructive and cruel' and use the content of Source A to support this: '*nothing is left standing*'. The candidate has two clear supported inferences and so achieves Level 2, 5 marks. To enhance their mark further, the candidate would need to make a sophisticated or higher-level inference as outlined in the Question 6 analysis above.

Question 7

- 7 How useful are **Interpretation B**, **Source C** and **Interpretation D** for a historian studying the Spanish flight from Tenochtitlán?

In your answer, refer to the two interpretations and the source as well as your own knowledge.

[15]

The aim of this question is to encourage candidates to make inferences from the content of Sources B, C and Interpretation D.

Candidates who performed well on this question were able to make supported inference(s) from the content of B, C and/or D. Two supported inferences enables a candidate to achieve 15 marks. High performing candidates were able to make an inference from the source(s) and/or interpretation and explain why they are useful for a historian studying the Spanish flight from Tenochtitlán. They then supported their inference(s) with evidence from the content of B, C and/or D. For example, '*Interpretation B is useful for showing how valuable translators like Dona Marina were to the Spanish at this point. She is right in the centre of the group with Cortés and under the protection of the Spanish and their allies as they flee the city. This shows they really need her to escape alive with them indicating her significance.*' This example highlights an inference made from Interpretation B which is then supported from the content of the interpretation which would enable the candidate to achieve Level 4, between 10 and 12 marks. The candidate would then need to make an additional supported inference from C or D to enable them to access Level 5.

Candidates who performed less well on this question tended to use surface features of B, C and/or D to explain why they were useful evidence, e.g., '*D is useful because it tells us about how Cortés himself was nearly killed when he fell into the water and was only pulled out 'just in time*'. Alternatively, many candidates were still explaining that the provenance of B, C and/or D made them not useful due to their bias or explaining that their provenance indicates that they are trustworthy as they would have known what was happening or that the author would have completed research. These comments are not credited at higher than Level 2, 4 marks. Additionally, many candidates explained what the source(s)/interpretation didn't tell us, this keeps candidates at Level 1.

Assessment for learning



Candidates should be encouraged to analyse B, C and/or D individually. They should aim to make a supported inference in reference to the demands of the question for each source/interpretation. Candidates should not be encouraged to base their response around undeveloped provenance, e.g., '*This book is from historian Michael Wood and published in 2000 so it will be reliable as he will have completed lots of research.*' Candidates who base their analysis solely on undeveloped provenance cannot achieve more than Level 2, 4 marks.

Question 8*

8* 'Religion was the most important aspect of Aztec society.'

How far do you agree?

Give reasons for your answer.

[18]

Candidates have the option of answering either Question 8 or Question 9, this was the more popular of the two optional essay questions. Both questions have the same rationale for awarding levels and marks. Candidates who offer valid material in support or in opposition of the statement are credited in Level 2, with candidates who can then explain why this material proves that religion was or wasn't the most important aspect of Aztec society being able to access Level 3 and beyond. Level 3 is awarded to candidates who offer one explained reason for either side of the argument. Level 4 credits candidates who offer two explained reasons which could be on the same side of the argument, or one on each side. Level 5 credits candidates who offer three explanations providing there is some balance (e.g. explaining why religion was the most important aspect but also explaining why another aspect was important for example, the role of agriculture or tribute) while Level 6 is reserved for candidates who offer four explained points covering both sides of the argument. The final mark – 18 – is reserved for candidates who in addition to reaching Level 6 combine or interact the factors in their answer to offer a supported judgement (or 'clinching argument') about whether the candidate agrees with the statement in the question.

Candidates who successfully attempted this question were able to showcase a wide range of knowledge and explain how this proves the significance of religion to the Aztecs. The vast majority of candidates who opted for this question attempted to clearly explain how sacrifice and religious ceremonies proved the significance of religion to Aztec society. High performing candidates went on to explain the significance of alternate aspects of society such as: craftworking, agriculture, tribute, warfare, trade and hierarchy using specific contextual knowledge to illustrate their arguments. Candidates who achieved the highest level for their response to this question explained four clear points in reference to the question and had an element of balance, for example two explained points to support the view that religion was the most important aspect of Aztec society and two explained points to dispute the view and claim an alternative factor was more important such as agriculture.

Candidates who simply described elements of religious practice such as human sacrifice without explaining why this proves religion was the most important element of Aztec society or described an alternate factor such as agriculture remained in Level 2 for a response based around description rather than explanation.

Question 9*

9* 'The fall of the Aztec Empire changed everything for the people of Mexico'.

How far do you agree with this view of **the impact of Spanish rule between 1521 and 1535?**

Give reasons for your answer.

[18]

This question was less popular with candidates. Candidates who successfully attempted this question were able to explain reasons for why the fall of the Aztec Empire changed everything for the people of Mexico, utilising specific examples such as religion with the forced conversion to Christianity or the introduction of the encomienda system and explaining why this proves everything changed for the people of Mexico. High performing candidates were also able to disagree with the statement to enable their response to have the element of balance required for Levels 5 and 6 and provide specific explained evidence that – contrastingly, some things remained similar for the people of Mexico; for example, that the vast majority of the population continued to work on the land. Candidates who answered this question tended to perform less well when providing their counter argument to the given statement resulting in many candidates remaining in Level 4 due to their response lacking an element of balance.

Candidates who simply described what the Aztec Empire was like following its fall for example with the encomienda system but didn't explain how this changed things for the people of Mexico remained in Level 2 for a response based around description rather than explanation.

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