



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1994 Volume III: Understanding the Ancient Americas: Foundation, Flourishing, and Survival

Introduction

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At every turn in Mexico, Central America, or the Andes, the Precolumbian past is present, whether as great pyramids that loom up ahead in the distance or as broken pottery fragments that turn up in the scuffed earth. In both pueblos and cities, ancient languages and customs live on, giving the Precolumbian past continuity and vibrancy. In other words, the indigenous past of Latin America is more than archaeological.

But how to understand the archaeological past, the cataclysm of conquest, and the complexity of survival? In this seminar, participants considered the alternative strategies of the New World that led to high civilizations, particularly in the Andes and Mesoamerica, with attention to foods, conflict, and water management. The complexity of Maya art and thought was addressed through both writing and systems of numeration. The two great civilizations encountered by the Spanish, the Aztecs and the Incas, were considered comparatively: were there New World Empires?

Religions received careful attention, especially the problematic cult of sacrifice in Mesoamerica: what does it mean to give a god such a gift? As the course developed, extensive discussion in seminar focused on the difficulty of dealing with religion in any fashion in public schools today. Are other peoples religious stories “myths”? We worked to develop language that did not demean or promote religion, no easy task! We patiently read Aztec poetry and helped one another cast ancient auguries for the days of our birth. During the seminar, we devoted two sessions to also exploring resources at the Peabody Museum and Yale University Art Gallery.

Some seminar Fellows took these topics as direct points of departure for their own work. Eva de Lourdes Diaz studied worldwide food origins, with a particular emphasis on foods now considered staples of the basic diet of Latin America, from the African banana to the Arab coffee bean to native beans and maize. From her studies of foods she developed a curriculum designed for introductory Spanish language courses, but obviously not limited to them. One of Joan Zamore’s lesson plans walks children through Mesoamerican systems of numeration and the concept of base 20, and then includes a project in which they make the Maya signs for numbers; one of her other projects introduces archaeological time to students by having them create pyramids with small caches and offerings. In one of her lesson plans, Diane Platt deals specifically with the issue of mass production and the ability to disseminate a message—even a religious one. Lorna Dils weaves Aztec history, religion, and economy together through a series of imaginative stories in which a young boy learns about the beliefs of his people while he and his mother prepare goods for market. Diana Doyle underscores the comparative endeavor, with work on both Aztec and Maya origin accounts and particular religious and legendary accounts of heroes and gods. And, in the one unit that left the ancient Americas to one side in its particulars, Joyce Patron took the opportunity of this seminar to examine the six most important

living world religions and to consider their shared and disparate facets.

Only Eva de Lourdes Diaz wrote a unit specifically designed for Spanish education, but in fact, every unit for this seminar could be adapted for Spanish or bilingual use. Diane Platt's unit, with its carefully planned trip to Mexico, offers particularly good opportunities for a Spanish class, with the intricacies of local travel that she spells out for Mexico City. Her travels by bus, subway, and taxi, as well as management of local currency, all would make sense in a Spanish class. Lorna Dils' short and easily read fictions might also be translated into Spanish for class use, and an art class might work on developing appropriate illustrations for these stories as well. With its broad comparative consideration of Latin American religious roots, Diana Doyle's unit offers a solid grounding for students from Latin America or of Latin American origin, who are particularly eager to understand a distant past. Because of its breadth, Joyce Patton's unit might make a good curriculum unit to introduce in social studies classes at the high school level: for example, in dealing with the former Soviet Union, one could find that all six of her religious traditions are represented there.

Because Joan Zamore has designed an art curriculum for elementary school children, it could be used by elementary teachers without art teacher support in their schools, or by elementary teachers as enrichment. With some obvious simplifications, other units could be adapted for younger grades-and Eva de Lourdes Diaz's unit might be developed into a good geography game for younger children, with world food origins developed as the motive for identifying countries and regions on the globe. I can even imagine a playing board with a world and food cards to place at both origin and place of adoption. Playing tokens could be made in the shapes of small fruits and vegetables. The various lesson plans devised in this seminar for use at the Yale University Art Gallery or the Peabody Museum would all make sense with high school students as well.

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