



- AZTECS HOME
- TEACHERS' PAGE
- KIDS HOME
- ASK THE EXPERTS
- ASK US
- TEC A GOOD LOOK ...
- YOU CONTRIBUTE
- CAN YOU HELP?
- MOCTEZUMA
- AZTEC GODS
- AZTEC HEALTH
- AZTEC MUSIC
- AZTEC WRITING
- AZTEC CALENDAR
- FLORA AND FAUNA
- AZTEC ARTEFACTS
- PLACES TO VISIT
- RESOURCES
- RESOURCE REVIEWS
- AZTEFACTS
- AZTEC LIFE
- SPANISH CONQUEST
- AZTEC STORIES
- AZTEC INSPIRATION
- AZTEC LANGUAGE
- SCHOOL DISPLAYS
- AZTEC LINKS
- GALLERIES
- GETTING INVOLVED
- AZTEC QUIZZES
- FEEDBACK
- CREDITS

SUITABLE FOR TOP JUNIORS AND ABOVE FIND OUT MORE

Search the Site (type in white box):

Custom Search

RESOURCE for younger students: the stories of Doña Marina and Pocahontas

We're most grateful to Professor Camilla Townsend (a member of our Panel of Experts) for this thought-provoking and sympathetic comparison of two young women who played key roles in the 16th century as dramatic events unfolded in the Americas - events that would have a devastating effect on their native peoples...



Pic 1: Cortés is offered a group of Maya women servants; illustration by Miguel Covarrubias (Click on image to enlarge)

In the rainy season, white egrets gather near the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in great noisy flocks, alighting by the hundreds on the trees at sunset. The twelve-year-old girl who would one day be called Malinche would have seen them there when she was a slave among the Maya. She had not been born a slave. She had been born further up the coast in about the year 1500, and when she was young, her village was threatened with attack by the Aztec empire. In a desperate effort to prevent being conquered, her people had offered tribute to the Aztecs, including a group of young girls who could work as servants. The Aztecs sold them to the Maya, and so it was among the Maya that the girl grew to womanhood. Later, the Spanish explorer named Hernando Cortés arrived and attacked the Maya towns. In an effort to make peace,

the Maya used the same tactic that Malinche had already experienced: they offered tribute to their enemies, including a group of slave girls. So it was that one April day in 1519 she found herself among the bearded strangers from across the sea. She had no choice but to wrestle with her fear and face her future among the Europeans.

Many other young Native American women found themselves in similar situations when the European colonizers began to arrive in the Americas. Almost exactly one hundred years later, in about the year 1600, another baby girl was born to one of the minor wives of the high chief of the Powhatan Indians, in today's Virginia. She would later be given the name Pocahontas. When she grew older, she, too, became a prisoner of the frightening newcomers. At first, as a little girl, she had been curious about them. When in 1607 the English established a fort at the place they called "Jamestown", she visited the settlement and impressed the strangers by doing cartwheels; when Captain John Smith spent some time with her people, she taught him some Powhatan words. But later, in March of 1613, the English kidnapped her, demanding that her father supply them with food and provide whatever other aid they might need. Her father refused to play into the hands of those he viewed as treacherous kidnappers, and so Pocahontas was left as a prisoner among the English for over a year, facing her future alone.



Pic 2: Engraving by Johann Theodor de Bry (1618) 'The Abduction of Pocahontas' (Click on image to enlarge)

While they were in the power of the strangers, both Malinche and Pocahontas survived by making themselves useful. Both had been taught by their people that it was a captured woman's duty to try to survive, to have children, and to teach their children their people's values. So the girls learned the language of their captors and soon became expert translators. Malinche told the Spaniards about the Aztec empire, hated by all the other Indians whom they had conquered (including her own people), and she agreed to lead them to their capital and even offered useful advice as to how to defeat them. Pocahontas told the English, whose colony was struggling, about a plant called "tobacco" that could be smoked and sold for a profit. The girls grew into beautiful young women, and men were interested in them. They had to figure out how to handle the situation in which



Pic 3: Malinche interprets for Cortés as Aztec envoys send him gifts from the emperor Moctezuma; illustration by Miguel Covarrubias (Click on image to enlarge)

they found themselves. Malinche entered into a relationship with Hernando Cortés and bore him a son named Martín. She could not marry Cortés, for he already had a wife at home.

- The Spanish 'Conquest'
- Aztec Hell - Christian Mictlan
- IN THE NEWS: gender pay gap
- The fate of the wise *tlamatque*
- RESOURCE: Doña Marina and Pocahontas
- Expert opinions (1)
- Expert opinions (2)
- Aztec art was considered 'razor-sharp' in Europe
- Expert opinions (3)
- The Aztecs and the Spanish Conquest for GCSE (I)
- The Aztecs and the Spanish Conquest for GCSE (II)
- The Aztecs and the Spanish Conquest for GCSE (III)
- New terms, new resources, 'New Conquest History'...
- Communication and Conquest (1)
- Communication and Conquest (2)
- The burning of [Maya] books
- 'The Aztecs are back...!'
- What if the Aztecs had defeated the Spanish?
- Privateers, Pirates and Aztec Gold
- Syncretism: Aztec Christians
- The 'Stranger Effect'
- 'Manuscript of a Dogging'
- Did pre-Columbian dances survive the Conquest?
- The road Cortés followed to reach Tenochtitlán
- Just how DID the Aztecs see the Conquistadors?
- Doña Marina (Part 1)
- Doña Marina (Part 2)
- What happened to the Aztec gods after the Conquest? (2) Part 1
- What happened to the Aztec gods after the Conquest? (2) Conclusion
- Bad omens!

Follow @Mexicolore



Today's Maya date is: 13.0.6.2.10 - 2211 days into the new cycle!



Click to find out how we can help you!

Pocahontas ended her captivity by accepting a marriage proposal from an English colonist named John Rolfe, who was one of her language teachers while she was a prisoner. She had a son named Thomas. When Hernando Cortés decided to go home to Spain for a while, Malinche sent their young son with him, and Pocahontas herself traveled to England with her husband and son at the invitation of the Virginia Company. Both young women understood that their children had to learn not only Native American ways, but also European ones, if they were going to survive in the New World that was being forged.



Pic 4: The Marriage of Pocahontas to John Rolfe: vintage colonial era US postcard (Click on image to enlarge)



Pic 5: Portrait of Pocahontas as Rebecca Rolfe and commemorative stamp (Click on image to enlarge)

Sadly, both Pocahontas and Malinche died in their 20s of the diseases brought by the Europeans. Native Americans could not fight off the germs as well as Europeans could, because they had not been exposed to them before, and thus had not built up any immunities. Of course, people did not understand the situation back then; nobody knew about microscopic organisms until much later. The young women's peoples simply mourned their losses. Pocahontas's father said he was glad that young Thomas "yet lived," and Malinche was remembered in stories and songs written down by Mexican Indians. At the time, no one in their communities blamed them or praised them for cooperating with the Europeans. Everyone understood that they had simply been doing their best to survive.

Later, however, people's memories of the two young women changed. In Mexico, most people were either Native American or *mestizo*, meaning mixed European and Native American. They did not identify with Europeans, but rather with the defeated Aztecs. Thus many generations later, when nobody remembered that the Aztecs had forced Malinche people to turn her over to them, and that they had then sold her as a slave, people began to blame Malinche for siding against the Aztecs and with the Spaniards. The word "Malinchista" is still used as an insult in Mexico.



Pic 6: The influence of 'malinchismo' is clear in this depiction of La Malinche in Diego Rivera's mural of Mexican history (Click on image to enlarge)



Pic 7: Statues to Malinche (monument to 'mestizaje', Mexico City, L) and to Pocahontas (statue outside St. George's Church, Gravesend, Kent, R) (Click on image to enlarge)

In the United States, on the other hand, so many settlers came that the Native America population was dwarfed, and then

those Indians who remained were attacked and nearly destroyed. Soon most of the people in Virginia and the other colonies were not Native American or *mestizo*, but rather European. Their descendants identified with John Smith and John Rolfe, and they were pleased and flattered that a pretty and clever young Indian woman had

worked cooperatively with their forebears. They remembered Pocahontas as "good Indian" and wrote many imaginary stories about her. Disney made a movie about her life, but changing it so that most of the pain and confusion she suffered would not be visible. Both the people of Mexico and the people of the United States do Native Americans a disservice by failing to understand what their lives were really like at the time of the conquest. They lived in a time of a great crisis, and they did their best to make their way through it successfully. They helped prevent the violence from spinning out of control, and their strength became a part of the future nation of Mexico and the future United States.

Picture sources:-

- Main: (L) Model of Malinche by George Stuart, photo by Mary Harrsch; courtesy Historic Figures Collection; (R) line drawing of Pocahontas from Clarke, Mary Cowden (1883) *World Noted Women* New York: D. Appleton and Company (Wikipedia: Pocahontas)
- Pix 1 & 3: images scanned from our own copy of *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico 1517-1521* (Bernal Díaz de Castillo), illustrations by Miguel Covarrubias, Limited Editions Club, 1942
- Pic 2: engraving from Plate no. 7 in book *America* (Part 10, translation of 'A True Discourse of the Present State of Virginia' by Ralph Hamor): Wikipedia (Pocahontas)
- Pic 4: postcard on an internet buying forum
- Pic 5 (below): portrait downloaded from <https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/history/genealogy/true-story-pocahontas-historical-myths-versus-sad-reality/>; (above): from our own collection
- Pic 6: photo of Diego Rivera mural by Sean Sprague/Mexicolore
- Pic 7: (L) photo from Wikipedia; (R) photo downloaded from <http://www.churches-uk-ireland.org/towns/g/gravesend.html>.

This article was uploaded to the Mexicolore website on Aug 14th 2017

[The True Story of Pocahontas: Historical Myths Versus Sad Reality' - Indian Country Today website](#)

[ADD A COMMENT TO THIS PAGE](#)