Primary Source Activity

Spanish Colonial Texas

Letters About Native American Culture

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Franciscan friars wrote letters to the viceroy of New Spain about the Native Americans in present-day Texas. These letters often discussed efforts to convert the Native Americans to the Catholic religion. They also summarized the friars’ views of Native American culture, including religion, government, war, and daily life.

Directions: Read the two excerpts from letters written to the viceroy of New Spain. Then answer the questions.

Reading 1 Letter from Francisco Casanas de Jesús María to the Viceroy, August 15, 1691

I notice that this name Tejas includes all the friendly tribes. The name is common to all of them, even though their language may be different. . . . These allied tribes do not have one person to govern them (as with us a kingdom is accustomed to have a ruler whom we call a king). They have only a xinesi [priest]. He usually has a subordinate who gathers together four or five tribes who consent to live together and to form a province or kingdom as it might be called . . .


Reading 2 Letter from Francisco Hidalgo to the Viceroy, November 4, 1716.

[The Hasinai] houses are made of grass, some of them quite large and tall. Others are medium sized and others still smaller like half an orange. They keep their corn in lofts and garrets and in big reed baskets. They put their corn away shelled. They keep their beans, acorns, and nuts in still other reed baskets. They make large pots in which to keep water, make atole [a beverage made from corn], and to preserve other things they need to carry. . . . They build their houses by community labor and have axes of different kinds which they secure from the French. . . .

Primary Source Activity  cont.

Spanish Colonial Texas

Analyzing Primary Sources

Directions: Answer the following questions.

1. **Identifying** What is the general topic of the first excerpt?

2. **Explaining** In the first excerpt, what was one difference between the Spanish and the Native Americans?

3. **Drawing Conclusions** According to the second excerpt, which crop may have been the most important for the Native Americans?

4. **Making Connections** Which fact in the second excerpt might have worried the viceroy of New Spain, and why?

Critical Thinking

5. **Comparing and Contrasting** Compare and contrast the way the two excerpts describe the culture of the Native American peoples.