

Conquest and its Impact (Prescribed Subject 2)

IB SL Study Guide

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How to Use This Guide

- **Prescribed Subject 2** covers two case studies from different regions: the **Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire** (Americas) and the **Mongol conquest of the Abbasid Caliphate / Baghdad** (Asia/Middle East)
- **Paper 1** tests source analysis skills — you will analyse **4–5 historical sources** and answer **4 structured questions** testing comprehension, comparison, evaluation, and synthesis
- This is a **1-hour exam worth 24 marks** (20% of your total grade)
- **Exam Alerts** flag the traps that cost marks in source questions
- **IB Tips** highlight what examiners reward when analysing conquest and its long-term effects
- **Practice Questions** mirror real Paper 1 structure, with model answers

Aligned to IB History SL Prescribed Subject 2 — current syllabus

Section 1: Paper 1 Exam Strategy

1.1 Paper 1 Format

Paper 1 presents you with **4–5 primary and secondary sources** (text extracts, images, maps, data) on a specific aspect of one or both case studies. You answer **4 compulsory questions** of increasing complexity.

Mark allocation:

Question	Task	Marks	Suggested time
Q1	Comprehension — what does one source say or show?	3	5 minutes
Q2	Comparison — compare and contrast two sources	4	10 minutes
Q3	Evaluation — assess the value and limitations of two sources	6	15 minutes
Q4	Synthesis — using the sources AND your own knowledge, evaluate a statement or question	9 + 2 (structure)	25 minutes

Total: 24 marks in 60 minutes

EXAM ALERT

Exam Alert: Q4 carries **11 marks** (nearly half the paper). Students who run out of time on Q4 because they over-wrote Q1–Q3 lose far more marks than those who keep early answers concise. Budget your time strictly.

1.2 Time Management

- **First 5 minutes:** Read all sources carefully. Annotate key phrases, note the origin and date of each source
- **Minutes 5–10:** Answer Q1 (comprehension). Keep it brief — 3 marks means 3 clear points
- **Minutes 10–20:** Answer Q2 (comparison). Identify both similarities AND differences
- **Minutes 20–35:** Answer Q3 (evaluation). Use OPVL for two sources
- **Minutes 35–60:** Answer Q4 (synthesis). This is your mini-essay — integrate sources with own knowledge

IB TIP

IB Tip: In Q4, examiners award up to **2 marks for structure**. Use a brief introduction (state your argument), body paragraphs (integrate sources with own knowledge), and a brief conclusion. Even under time pressure, these structural marks are easy to earn.

1.3 The OPVL Method

OPVL (Origin, Purpose, Value, Limitation) is the standard framework for evaluating historical sources in Paper 1.

Element	What to identify	Example question to ask yourself
Origin	Who created it? When? Where? What type of source?	Is this a Spanish chronicle written decades after the conquest, or a near-contemporary account?
Purpose	Why was it created? For whom?	Was this written to justify conquest to the Spanish Crown, or to record events for posterity?
Value	What makes this source useful for a historian studying this topic?	Does it provide eyewitness detail? Official policy? An indigenous perspective?
Limitation	What reduces its reliability or usefulness?	Is the author biased? Is information missing? Was it written long after events?

EXAM ALERT

Exam Alert: Never state a limitation as simply “the source is biased.” **All** sources have a perspective — examiners want you to explain **how** the bias affects the content. For example: “As a Spanish conquistador writing to justify his actions to the Crown, Cortés minimises the role of indigenous allies, making the source less reliable for understanding Tlaxcalan motivations.”

1.4 Question-by-Question Strategy

Q1 — Comprehension (3 marks):

- Identify **3 distinct points** from the source

- Use brief quotations or close paraphrase
- Do not add your own knowledge — this question tests whether you can read the source accurately

Q2 — Comparison (4 marks):

- Structure: similarities first, then differences (or vice versa)
- Reference **both** sources explicitly (“Source A states... while Source B argues...”)
- Aim for **2 similarities and 2 differences**, or a balanced mix

Q3 — Evaluation (6 marks):

- Apply OPVL to **each** of the two specified sources
- For each source, state **one value** and **one limitation** with supporting explanation
- Connect value/limitation to the specific question being asked — do not write a generic OPVL paragraph

Q4 — Synthesis (9 + 2 marks):

- Take a clear position on the question
- Use **at least 3 sources** as evidence
- Add **your own knowledge** — facts, context, and analysis not found in the sources
- Evaluate the sources critically (do not just repeat what they say)
- Structure with introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion (2 marks for structure)

IB TIP

IB Tip: The strongest Q4 answers **integrate** sources and own knowledge within the same paragraph rather than treating them separately. For example: “Source C’s claim that disease was the primary factor is supported by demographic evidence not mentioned in the sources — historians estimate that up to 90% of the indigenous population died within a century of contact, largely from smallpox and measles.”

Section 2: Case Study 1 — Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire (1519–1521)

2.1 Context: The Aztec Empire Before Contact

The Aztec (Mexico) Empire was the dominant power in Mesoamerica by the early 16th century. Understanding its structure is essential — the empire’s internal tensions directly enabled the Spanish conquest.

Political structure:

- The Aztec Empire was a **Triple Alliance** of three city-states: **Tenochtitlan**, **Texcoco**, and **Tlacopan**, formed in 1428
- By 1500, Tenochtitlan dominated the alliance; the **tlatoani** (ruler) wielded supreme political, military, and religious authority
- **Moctezuma II** (r. 1502–1520) was the ninth tlatoani — an experienced military commander and high priest
- The empire was **tributary**, not territorial: conquered peoples paid tribute (goods, labour, sacrificial victims) but retained local rulers and customs
- This tributary system created **resentment** among subject peoples, especially the **Tlaxcalans**, **Totonacs**, and **Cholulans**, who were forced to provide tribute and sacrificial victims

Economy and society:

- Tenochtitlan had a population of approximately **200,000–300,000** — larger than any contemporary European city except Constantinople
- The city was built on an island in Lake Texcoco, connected to the mainland by causeways, with sophisticated aqueducts, markets, and agricultural chinampas (floating gardens)
- The great market at **Tlatelolco** was described by Bernal Díaz del Castillo as larger and more orderly than any market in Spain
- A warrior aristocracy dominated society; military achievement determined social rank

Religion and worldview:

- The Aztec religious calendar demanded regular human sacrifice to sustain the cosmos — particularly to the sun god **Huitzilopochtli**
- This practice horrified and motivated the Spanish, who used it to justify conquest as a civilising and Christianising mission
- Some scholars argue that Moctezuma’s initial response to Cortés was shaped by religious uncertainty — though the popular myth that he believed Cortés was the returning god **Quetzalcoatl** is disputed by modern historians

IB TIP

IB Tip: Examiners reward nuance. Do not present the Aztec Empire as a monolithic state that simply “fell” to the Spanish. Emphasise the **internal divisions** — particularly the role of indigenous allies — that made conquest possible.

2.2 Context: Spain and the Drive to Conquer

The Spanish context:

- Spain had completed the **Reconquista** in 1492 (the expulsion of the Moors from Granada), creating a warrior culture seeking new frontiers
- Columbus reached the Caribbean in 1492; by 1519, Spain had established colonies in Hispaniola, Cuba, and the Central American coast

- **Conquistadors** were typically minor nobility (hidalgos) with limited prospects in Spain — conquest offered wealth, land, and social advancement
- The legal framework of **encomienda** granted conquistadors the right to extract labour and tribute from indigenous peoples in exchange for Christianisation
- Spanish colonisation was driven by the “threeGs”: **God, Gold, and Glory**

Hernán Cortés:

- Born in 1485 in Medellín, Extremadura — minor nobility, legally trained
- Arrived in Hispaniola in 1504; participated in the conquest of Cuba (1511)
- In 1519, the governor of Cuba, Diego Velázquez, appointed Cortés to lead an expedition to the Mexican coast — then revoked the order. Cortés departed anyway, making his expedition technically unauthorised
- This unauthorised status was significant: Cortés needed a dramatic success to avoid punishment, which shaped his aggressive and risk-taking approach

2.3 Key Events: The Conquest (1519–1521)

February–August 1519: Landing and Alliance-Building

- Cortés landed on the Gulf Coast near modern Veracruz with approximately **500 soldiers, 16 horses, and a few small cannons**
- He founded the settlement of **Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz** and had his men elect him captain-general, creating a legal basis for his authority independent of Velázquez
- He famously **scuttled his ships** (or disabled them), preventing retreat and forcing his men to commit to the campaign
- Crucially, Cortés acquired two interpreters: **Gerónimo de Aguilar** (a shipwrecked Spaniard who spoke Maya) and **Malintzin (La Malinche/Doña Marina)**, a Nahuatl woman who spoke both Maya and Nahuatl. Malintzin became Cortés’s primary translator, advisor, and intermediary

EXAM ALERT

Exam Alert: La Malinche is a frequently tested figure. Be prepared to evaluate sources about her role — was she a traitor to her people, a victim of circumstance, or a skilled political actor? Different sources present radically different interpretations. This is excellent material for OPVL analysis.

- Cortés formed a military alliance with the **Totonacs** of Cempoala, who resented Aztec tributary demands
- After a series of battles, Cortés also allied with the **Tlaxcalans** — the Aztecs’ fiercest enemies, who had resisted incorporation into the empire for decades. The Tlaxcalan alliance was arguably the single most important factor in the conquest

October 1519: The Massacre at Cholula

- En route to Tenochtitlan, Cortés entered **Cholula**, an important Aztec-allied city
- Cortés claimed to have discovered a plot to ambush his forces and ordered a **pre-emptive massacre** — killing between **3,000 and 6,000** Cholulans (estimates vary widely between sources)
- Spanish sources present this as self-defence; indigenous and modern accounts suggest it was a deliberate act of terror designed to intimidate other cities into submission
- The massacre had its intended effect: many cities along the route to Tenochtitlan submitted without resistance

November 1519: Meeting Moctezuma

- On **8 November 1519**, Cortés and his forces (now augmented by thousands of Tlaxcalan warriors) entered Tenochtitlan along a causeway
- Moctezuma received Cortés peacefully — a decision that remains debated. Possible explanations:
 - Religious uncertainty (the Quetzalcoatl theory — now largely discredited as a post-conquest rationalisation)
 - Diplomatic calculation — Moctezuma may have planned to assess and then neutralise the Spanish within the city
 - Intelligence-gathering — reports of Spanish military technology and the Cholula massacre may have counselled caution
- Within days, Cortés took Moctezuma **hostage** in his own palace, ruling through him as a puppet — a dramatic political gamble

June 1520: La Noche Triste

- While Cortés was away from Tenochtitlan dealing with a Spanish force sent by Velázquez to arrest him, his deputy **Pedro de Alvarado** ordered a massacre of Aztec nobles during a religious festival (the **Massacre at the Great Temple / Toxcatl Massacre**)
- This provoked a massive uprising. Moctezuma was killed — whether by Spanish hands or stoned by his own people is disputed
- Cortés returned and attempted to flee Tenochtitlan on the night of **30 June 1520** (**La Noche Triste** — “the Sad Night”). The Spanish and their allies were attacked on the causeways and suffered devastating losses: approximately **600 Spanish soldiers** and **several thousand Tlaxcalan allies** died
- The surviving Spanish retreated to Tlaxcala to regroup

May–August 1521: The Siege of Tenochtitlan

- Cortés rebuilt his forces, constructed **13 brigantines** (small warships) to control Lake Texcoco, and recruited additional indigenous allies — the coalition now

numbered approximately **200,000** indigenous warriors alongside fewer than 1,000 Spanish soldiers

- The siege of Tenochtitlan lasted **75 days** (May–August 1521)
- The Spanish cut off freshwater and food supplies to the island city
- **Smallpox**, which had arrived with the Spanish, devastated the defenders — the new tlatoani **Cuitláhuac** died of smallpox after just 80 days in power, followed by **Cuauhtémoc**, who led the final resistance
- On **13 August 1521**, Cuauhtémoc was captured and Tenochtitlan fell. The city was largely destroyed during the siege

2.4 Factors Explaining the Conquest

Factor	Explanation	Significance
Indigenous alliances	Tlaxcalans, Totonacs, and others provided the vast majority of soldiers	Without indigenous allies, the conquest would have been impossible — Spanish forces alone were too small
Disease	Smallpox arrived in 1520; the indigenous population had no immunity	Killed Cuitláhuac and weakened defenders during the siege; long-term demographic collapse
Military technology	Steel weapons, armour, horses, cannons, crossbows	Gave the Spanish tactical advantages in open battle, though less decisive in urban warfare
Political exploitation	Cortés exploited divisions within the Aztec tributary system	Turned resentment of Aztec rule into a military coalition against Tenochtitlan
Spanish determination	Scuttled ships, unauthorised expedition, religious zeal	Cortés and his men had no option of retreat; failure meant death or punishment
Aztec strategic errors	Moctezuma's initial indecision; failure to mobilise full military strength early	Allowed the Spanish to establish alliances and build momentum before the Aztecs responded in force

⚠ EXAM ALERT

Exam Alert: Do not present the conquest as simply a story of Spanish military superiority. Examiners expect **multi-causal analysis**. The strongest answers weigh the relative importance of different factors — and indigenous alliances and disease are consistently ranked by historians as more significant than technology.

2.5 Impact of the Spanish Conquest

Demographic Collapse

- The indigenous population of central Mexico was approximately **25 million** in 1519
- By 1600, it had fallen to approximately **1 million** — a decline of over **95%**

- The primary cause was **epidemic disease**: smallpox (1520), measles (1531), typhus (1545), and subsequent waves
- This was one of the greatest demographic catastrophes in human history

The Encomienda System

- The Spanish Crown granted **encomiendas** — the right to demand labour and tribute from indigenous communities in a specified area
- In theory, encomenderos were required to protect and Christianise the indigenous population
- In practice, the system was exploitative forced labour that contributed to demographic decline
- The Dominican friar **Bartolomé de las Casas** documented abuses in his *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552), which influenced the Spanish Crown to reform (but not abolish) the system

Cultural Destruction and Syncretism

- The Spanish systematically destroyed Aztec temples, religious texts (codices), and cultural institutions
- The **Franciscan friars** led mass conversion campaigns; indigenous religious practices were suppressed
- However, **syncretism** occurred: indigenous beliefs blended with Catholicism. The Virgin of Guadalupe (appearing in 1531 to the indigenous convert Juan Diego) became a central symbol of this cultural fusion
- The Nahuatl language survived and influenced Mexican Spanish; many place names, foods, and cultural practices endured

Colonial Administration

- Tenochtitlan was rebuilt as **Mexico City**, the capital of the Viceroyalty of **New Spain** (established 1535)
- Spanish colonial administration imposed a racial hierarchy (**sistema de castas**) with peninsulares (Spanish-born) at the top and indigenous peoples and Africans at the bottom
- Indigenous communities retained some self-governance at the local level (the **república de indios**) but were subordinated to Spanish authority in all significant matters

IB TIP

IB Tip: When discussing impact, distinguish between **short-term** (immediate destruction, looting, political collapse) and **long-term** (demographic change, cultural transformation, colonial systems that lasted 300 years). Examiners reward this kind of analytical distinction.

Section 3: Case Study 2 — Mongol Conquest of Baghdad (1258)

3.1 Context: The Abbasid Caliphate in Decline

The Abbasid Caliphate, once the centre of the Islamic world, was in serious decline by the mid-13th century. Understanding this weakness is essential to explaining why Baghdad fell so rapidly.

The Abbasid golden age and its decline:

- The Abbasid Caliphate was established in **750 CE** after overthrowing the Umayyads
- Baghdad, founded in **762 CE** by Caliph al-Mansur, became the largest and wealthiest city in the world — a centre of trade, learning, and culture
- The **House of Wisdom** (Bayt al-Hikma) was a major intellectual centre where scholars translated and built upon Greek, Persian, and Indian texts in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and philosophy
- By the 10th century, the Caliphate had fragmented: real power shifted to **Buyid** and later **Seljuk** Turkish military commanders, while the Caliph retained only religious and symbolic authority
- By 1258, Caliph **al-Musta'sim** (r. 1242–1258) controlled little territory beyond Baghdad itself and relied on an inadequate military force

Political fragmentation of the Islamic world:

- The Islamic world was deeply divided: rival caliphates (Fatimids in Egypt until 1171), independent sultanates, and competing Turkish and Kurdish military leaders
- The Crusades (1095–1291) had diverted military resources and attention
- No unified Islamic military response to the Mongol threat was organised — partly due to rivalries, partly due to underestimation of the Mongol danger
- Some Muslim rulers, including the **Ismaili Assassins** and certain Sunni leaders, had made alliances with or submitted to the Mongols, further fragmenting resistance

EXAM ALERT

Exam Alert: Do not present the Abbasid Caliphate as still a great power in 1258 — it was a shadow of its former self. The real question for analysis is why there was no coordinated Muslim response to the Mongol advance, not why the weakened Caliphate fell.

3.2 Context: The Mongol Empire and Its Expansion

The Mongol war machine:

- **Genghis Khan** (r. 1206–1227) united the Mongol tribes and created the largest contiguous land empire in history
- The Mongol military was organised in **decimal units** (arbans of 10, zuuns of 100, mingghans of 1,000, tumens of 10,000) — a highly flexible system of command
- Mongol armies were primarily **mounted archers** with extraordinary mobility, discipline, and coordination
- Mongol strategy combined rapid movement, intelligence-gathering, psychological warfare (terror), and sophisticated **siege warfare** — including the use of engineers and siege weapons captured or recruited from conquered peoples (Chinese, Persian, Central Asian)
- The Mongols offered a standard ultimatum: **surrender and be spared, or resist and be destroyed**. This was not a bluff — cities that resisted were systematically devastated

Expansion toward the Islamic world:

- Genghis Khan's **Khwarezmian campaign** (1219–1221) had already devastated Central Asia and eastern Persia, destroying major cities (Bukhara, Samarkand, Merv, Nishapur) and killing millions
- After Genghis Khan's death (1227), the empire was divided among his sons and grandsons
- **Möngke Khan** (r. 1251–1259), Great Khan of the Mongol Empire, ordered his brother **Hulagu Khan** to consolidate Mongol control over Persia, destroy the Ismaili Assassins, and subdue the Abbasid Caliphate
- Hulagu assembled a massive army — estimates range from **120,000 to 300,000** — including Mongol cavalry, Chinese siege engineers, Christian Georgian and Armenian allies, and troops from already-subjugated Muslim regions

3.3 Key Events: The Fall of Baghdad (1258)

1256: Destruction of the Assassins

- Before advancing on Baghdad, Hulagu destroyed the **Ismaili Assassin** fortresses in Persia, including their stronghold at **Alamut** (1256)
- This eliminated a potential threat to his rear and demonstrated Mongol siege capabilities to the watching Islamic world

Late 1257: Advance on Baghdad

- Hulagu sent envoys to Caliph al-Musta'sim demanding submission: dismantle the city walls, fill in the moat, and appear in person before Hulagu
- Al-Musta'sim refused, reportedly influenced by his **vizier Ibn al-Alqami** (a Shia Muslim whose advice has been debated by historians — some accuse him of treachery, others argue he counselled negotiation) and by the **commander Dawatdar**, who urged military resistance

- The Caliph's army numbered only approximately **50,000** — poorly equipped, underfunded, and no match for the Mongol forces
- The Caliph made no serious attempt to seek outside military help, despite the existential threat

January–February 1258: The Siege

- The Mongol army surrounded Baghdad from multiple directions, cutting off escape routes
- Mongol engineers **diverted the Tigris River**, flooding the Caliph's military camp and trapping his forces
- The siege lasted approximately **two weeks** — Baghdad's walls were breached by **29 January 1258**
- On **10 February 1258**, the city fell. Al-Musta'sim surrendered on **13 February**

The Sack of Baghdad

- The Mongols sacked Baghdad for a period traditionally reported as **40 days** (though the exact duration is debated)
- Estimates of the death toll vary enormously: from **tens of thousands** to the **hundreds of thousands** (some medieval sources claim up to a million or more, though these figures are almost certainly exaggerated)
- The **House of Wisdom** was destroyed — libraries were burned or thrown into the Tigris, which reportedly ran black with ink from the dissolved books
- Mosques, palaces, and hospitals were destroyed
- Caliph al-Musta'sim was executed — according to tradition, he was **rolled in a carpet and trampled by horses**, as the Mongols believed it was taboo to spill royal blood on the ground
- The Abbasid Caliphate, which had existed for **508 years**, came to an end

IB TIP

IB Tip: When evaluating sources about the sack of Baghdad, note that many accounts were written by Muslim historians with a motive to emphasise the scale of destruction, while Mongol/Chinese sources often downplay it. This is excellent material for OPVL analysis in Paper 1.

3.4 Factors Explaining the Mongol Conquest

Factor	Explanation	Significance
Military organisation	Decimal system, discipline, mobility, and combined arms (cavalry + siege warfare)	The Mongol army was the most effective military force in the 13th-century world
Siege warfare expertise	Use of Chinese and Persian engineers, diversion of rivers, battering rams, catapults	Allowed the Mongols to take fortified cities that would have resisted purely cavalry-based armies
Psychological warfare	Reputation for total destruction of resisting cities; deliberate use of terror	Many cities surrendered without fighting; those that resisted served as examples
Political fragmentation	The Islamic world was divided; no coordinated resistance was organised	Al-Musta'sim fought alone because rival Muslim rulers would not or could not assist
Abbasid military weakness	The Caliphate's army was small, underfunded, and poorly prepared	Years of decline had left Baghdad unable to defend itself
Strategic overconfidence	Al-Musta'sim rejected negotiations and failed to prepare adequately	The Caliph underestimated the Mongol threat until it was too late

3.5 Impact of the Mongol Conquest

End of the Abbasid Caliphate

- The fall of Baghdad ended the **Abbasid Caliphate** as a functioning political institution — a devastating symbolic blow to the Sunni Muslim world
- A surviving Abbasid prince was later installed as a **figurehead caliph** in Mamluk Cairo, but this was a purely ceremonial role with no political power
- The destruction of the caliphate removed the last symbol of political unity in the Sunni Islamic world

Destruction of Infrastructure and Knowledge

- Baghdad's irrigation systems, which had sustained agriculture in Mesopotamia for centuries, were destroyed — the agricultural collapse that followed was never fully reversed in the medieval period
- The loss of the **House of Wisdom** and Baghdad's libraries represented an incalculable destruction of intellectual heritage — manuscripts in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, philosophy, and literature were lost
- Modern historians debate the scale of intellectual loss, but the destruction marked the end of Baghdad as the Islamic world's intellectual capital

The Ilkhanate

- Hulagu established the **Ilkhanate** — a Mongol successor state covering Persia, Iraq, and parts of Central Asia and the Caucasus
- The Ilkhanate initially persecuted Muslims and favoured Christians and Buddhists (Hulagu’s wife was a Nestorian Christian, and he was sympathetic to Buddhism)
- However, in **1295**, the Ilkhan **Ghazan** converted to **Islam**, and the Ilkhanate became an Islamic state
- Under Ghazan and his successor **Öljaitü**, the Ilkhanate patronised Islamic art, architecture, and scholarship — including the great historian **Rashid al-Din**, who wrote a world history (*Jami al-Tawarikh*)

Long-Term Effects on Islamic Civilisation

- The destruction of Baghdad is often cited as a turning point: the end of the Islamic “Golden Age” and the beginning of a long period of political fragmentation and cultural recovery
- However, historians caution against oversimplification — Islamic civilisation continued to thrive in Egypt (under the Mamluks), in Anatolia (under the emerging Ottoman state), and in South Asia (the Delhi Sultanate)
- The **Mamluk Sultanate** of Egypt defeated the Mongols at the **Battle of Ain Jalut** (1260) — the first major Mongol defeat, which halted Mongol expansion into Africa and preserved Egypt and the Levant from Mongol rule
- The Mongol conversion to Islam and the cultural exchange it produced (the “Pax Mongolica” facilitating trade across Eurasia) are often overlooked in accounts that focus exclusively on destruction

EXAM ALERT

Exam Alert: Avoid presenting the fall of Baghdad as the “death” of Islamic civilisation. Examiners reward answers that recognise **continuity** alongside destruction — Islamic learning, political power, and cultural production continued in other centres. The strongest answers distinguish between the destruction of **one centre** and the health of a **civilisation**.

Section 4: Comparative Analysis

4.1 Common Themes Across Both Conquests

Despite occurring in different regions, centuries, and contexts, the Spanish and Mongol conquests share significant structural similarities. Paper 1 questions frequently ask you to draw comparisons.

Theme	Spanish Conquest of Aztec Empire	Mongol Conquest of Baghdad
Exploiting internal divisions	Cortés allied with Tlaxcalans and other peoples resentful of Aztec tribute demands	Hulagu exploited rivalries between Muslim rulers; some Muslims allied with or submitted to the Mongols
Military technology advantage	Steel weapons, horses, cannons — unfamiliar to the Aztecs	Sophisticated siege warfare, engineering, and combined arms tactics
Psychological warfare	Cholula massacre terrorised other cities into submission	Mongol reputation for total destruction induced surrender without resistance
Weak or divided leadership	Moctezuma's indecision allowed the Spanish to establish themselves	Al-Musta'sim's failure to prepare, negotiate, or seek allies left Baghdad isolated
Demographic/physical destruction	95% population decline (primarily disease); destruction of Tenochtitlan	Massive civilian casualties; destruction of infrastructure, libraries, irrigation systems
Cultural transformation	Forced Christianisation, encomienda, syncretism	Ilkhanate initially favoured non-Muslims, then converted to Islam; cultural exchange
Long-term colonial structures	Viceroyalty of New Spain lasted 300 years	Ilkhanate lasted ~80 years but reshaped the region's political and cultural landscape

4.2 Key Differences

Aspect	Spanish Conquest	Mongol Conquest
Scale of conquering force	~500 Spanish soldiers (augmented by ~200,000 indigenous allies)	~120,000–300,000 Mongol and allied troops
Role of indigenous allies	Essential — the conquest was largely fought by indigenous peoples against the Aztec Empire	Limited — some Muslim rulers submitted, but the Mongol army was the primary fighting force
Disease	Decisive factor in both the siege and long-term demographic collapse	Not a significant factor
Motivation	Religious conversion, personal wealth, imperial expansion	Imperial expansion, strategic dominance, punishment for defiance
Post-conquest governance	Colonial administration (viceroyalty) with racial hierarchy; lasted 300 years	Mongol successor state (Ilkhanate) that adopted local religion and culture within decades
Conquered civilisation's recovery	Indigenous population and political independence not restored until Mexican independence (1821)	Islamic civilisation continued to thrive in other centres; Baghdad eventually recovered (slowly)

IB Tip: In Paper 1, you are often asked to compare the sources or to use both case studies. The strongest answers do not simply list similarities — they **analyse why** similar patterns occurred in different contexts. For example: both conquests succeeded partly because the conquered states' political systems were already weakened, which suggests that internal vulnerability matters more than the conqueror's strength.

4.3 Using Both Case Studies in Paper 1

Paper 1 questions on Prescribed Subject 2 may focus on one case study or require comparison. Strategies for using both:

- **Q4 (synthesis):** Use your second case study as “own knowledge” to support or challenge the sources. If the sources focus on the Spanish conquest, bring in the Mongol conquest as a point of comparison
- **Q3 (evaluation):** If sources from both case studies are presented, compare the perspectives — a Spanish chronicler and a Muslim historian will have very different biases and purposes
- **Q2 (comparison):** When comparing two sources from different case studies, focus on how different contexts shape different perspectives on conquest

Section 5: Source Analysis Practice

5.1 Practice Question Set

The following practice questions mirror the format and difficulty of a real Paper 1 exam. The “sources” are described rather than reproduced in full, as you will encounter in your study materials and past papers.

Source A: An extract from **Bernal Díaz del Castillo**, *The True History of the Conquest of New Spain* (written c. 1568, published 1632). Díaz was a soldier in Cortés's expedition. In this extract, he describes the first sight of Tenochtitlan, expressing awe at its size, beauty, and the sophistication of its markets and causeways. He compares it to the enchanted cities in the romance novel *Amadís de Gaula*.

Source B: An extract from the **Florentine Codex** (compiled c. 1545–1590 by Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún with Nahuatl informants). This extract describes the same arrival from the Aztec perspective, focusing on Moctezuma's anxiety, the omens that had preceded the Spanish arrival, and the gifts Moctezuma sent to Cortés.

Source C: An extract from **Rashid al-Din**, *Jami al-Tawarikh* (c. 1307). Rashid al-Din was a Persian Jewish convert to Islam serving as vizier to the Ilkhan Ghazan. In this extract, he describes the fall of Baghdad and the execution of al-Musta'sim, presenting it as the inevitable consequence of the Caliph's refusal to submit to Mongol authority.

Source D: An extract from **Ibn al-Athir**, *The Complete History* (written in the 1230s, before the fall of Baghdad, but documenting earlier Mongol campaigns). Ibn al-Athir describes the terror of Mongol invasion, comparing it to the worst catastrophe since the creation of Adam. He emphasises civilian suffering and the destruction of cities and libraries.

Q1 (3 marks): According to Source A, what impression did Tenochtitlan make on the Spanish soldiers?

 WORKED EXAMPLE

Model Answer — Q1:

According to Source A, the Spanish soldiers were overwhelmed by the scale and sophistication of Tenochtitlan. First, Díaz describes the city as appearing like the “enchanted” cities of romance novels, suggesting it exceeded anything the soldiers had previously experienced. Second, he notes the size and orderliness of its markets, which he compares favourably to those in Spain. Third, the causeways and infrastructure connecting the island city to the mainland impressed the soldiers as feats of engineering. [3 clear points from the source — 3/3 marks]

Q2 (4 marks): Compare and contrast Sources A and B regarding the encounter between the Spanish and the Aztecs.

 WORKED EXAMPLE

Model Answer — Q2:

Sources A and B both describe the first encounter between the Spanish and the Aztecs, but they present very different perspectives. **In terms of similarities**, both sources acknowledge the dramatic nature of the encounter — Díaz (Source A) describes wonder, while the Florentine Codex (Source B) describes anxiety. Both sources also suggest that the arrival of the Spanish was perceived as extraordinary and unprecedented.

In terms of differences, Source A presents the encounter from a position of admiration and confidence — the Spanish are impressed but not threatened. Source B, by contrast, presents the encounter from a position of fear and uncertainty — Moctezuma is anxious and sends gifts, suggesting appeasement or caution rather than welcome. Additionally, Source A focuses on the physical city (markets, causeways), while Source B focuses on the psychological and religious dimensions (omens, anxiety), reflecting the different concerns of the two cultures. [2 similarities + 2 differences, referencing both sources — 4/4 marks]

Q3 (6 marks): With reference to their origin, purpose, and content, evaluate the value and limitations of Sources C and D for a historian studying the Mongol conquests.

 WORKED EXAMPLE

Model Answer — Q3:

Source C (Rashid al-Din): Value: Rashid al-Din was a senior official in the Ilkhanate government with access to Mongol administrative records and oral histories. His position gave him access to details about Mongol decision-making that external observers would not have had. The account provides insight into how the Mongols justified the destruction of Baghdad — as the consequence of defiance rather than unprovoked aggression. **Limitation:** As vizier to the Ilkhan Ghazan, Rashid al-Din had a political incentive to present the Mongol conquest as legitimate and justified. His account may minimise civilian suffering or Mongol aggression to serve his patron. Additionally, he was writing approximately 50 years after the events, relying on second-hand accounts rather than direct observation.

Source D (Ibn al-Athir): Value: Ibn al-Athir was a contemporary of the Mongol invasions, writing during the campaigns themselves. His emotional description of civilian suffering provides a perspective from within the communities being attacked, which official Mongol sources do not capture. His comparison of the Mongol invasion to the greatest catastrophe since creation conveys the scale of the psychological impact on the Islamic world. **Limitation:** Ibn al-Athir's intense emotional language suggests a purpose of documenting injustice and appealing to Muslim solidarity, which may lead to exaggeration of Mongol atrocities or casualty figures. He was also writing about campaigns he did not personally witness (he was based in Mosul), relying on refugee accounts and rumour, which may compromise accuracy. [Value + limitation for each source, connected to origin and purpose — 6/6 marks]

Q4 (9 + 2 marks): “The most significant impact of conquest was the destruction of existing civilisations.” Using the sources and your own knowledge, evaluate this statement with reference to the case studies you have studied.

 WORKED EXAMPLE

Model Answer — Q4 (outline):

Introduction: The statement is partially valid — both the Spanish and Mongol conquests caused enormous destruction — but it oversimplifies the impact by ignoring continuity, adaptation, and the creation of new hybrid cultures.

Body paragraph 1 — Evidence for destruction: Use Sources C and D to demonstrate the scale of destruction at Baghdad (libraries, infrastructure, the Caliphate itself). Add own knowledge of Tenochtitlan’s destruction, demographic collapse (25 million to 1 million), and the systematic destruction of codices and temples. This supports the claim that destruction was a major impact.

Body paragraph 2 — Limitations of the “destruction” argument: Use Source B to show that Aztec knowledge and perspectives survived through post-conquest compilations like the Florentine Codex. Add own knowledge: syncretism (Virgin of Guadalupe), survival of Nahuatl, and the persistence of indigenous cultural practices alongside Spanish colonial culture. In Baghdad’s case, the Ilkhanate eventually became Islamic (Ghazan’s conversion, 1295), and Mongol patronage under Rashid al-Din (Source C) revived scholarly activity.

Body paragraph 3 — Alternative significant impacts: Own knowledge: long-term colonial structures (New Spain lasted 300 years; the racial *casta* system shaped Latin American society for centuries); the Mamluk defeat of the Mongols at Ain Jalut (1260) redirected Islamic political power to Egypt; the Pax Mongolica facilitated trans-Eurasian trade and cultural exchange. These structural changes arguably had more lasting significance than the initial destruction.

Conclusion: While destruction was the most dramatic immediate impact, the most historically significant long-term impacts were the creation of new political, social, and cultural structures — colonial systems in the Americas, the Ilkhanate’s transformation into an Islamic state, and the redistribution of power across the Islamic world. [Clear argument, integrates sources and own knowledge, structured — 9/9 + 2/2 marks]

Section 6: Key Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Aztec / Mexica	The dominant people of the Triple Alliance in central Mexico; “Aztec” is a modern term — the people called themselves Mexica
Tlatoani	The supreme ruler of the Aztec Empire; literally “he who speaks”
Triple Alliance	The political confederation of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan that formed the core of the Aztec Empire (1428)
Tributary system	The Aztec method of imperial control: conquered peoples paid tribute but retained local governance
Conquistador	Spanish soldiers and explorers who conquered indigenous peoples in the Americas
Encomienda	A Spanish colonial system granting settlers the right to extract labour and tribute from indigenous communities
Syncretism	The blending of different religious or cultural traditions — e.g., Aztec and Catholic practices in colonial Mexico
La Malinche / Malintzin / Doña Marina	Nahua woman who served as interpreter, advisor, and intermediary for Cortés; a contested figure in Mexican history
La Noche Triste	”The Sad Night” — 30 June 1520, when the Spanish were driven from Tenochtitlan with heavy losses
Chinampas	”Floating gardens” — the Aztec agricultural system built on Lake Texcoco
Abbasid Caliphate	The Islamic caliphate centred on Baghdad (750–1258); the Abbasids claimed descent from Abbas, uncle of the Prophet Muhammad
House of Wisdom (Bayt al-Hikma)	A major centre of learning in Baghdad where scholars translated and built upon Greek, Persian, and Indian texts
Hulagu Khan	Mongol commander, grandson of Genghis Khan, who led the conquest of Baghdad in 1258 and founded the Ilkhanate
Ilkhanate	The Mongol successor state covering Persia, Iraq, and surrounding regions (1256–1335)
Tumen	A Mongol military unit of 10,000 soldiers; the basic strategic unit of the Mongol army
Kurultai	A Mongol assembly of leaders convened to make major political and military decisions
OPVL	Origin, Purpose, Value, Limitation — the standard framework for source evaluation in IB History Paper 1
Pax Mongolica	The period of relative peace and stability across Eurasia under Mongol rule, facilitating trade and cultural exchange
Ain Jalut	Battle in 1260 where the Mamluk Sultanate defeated the Mongols — the first major Mongol military defeat

Term	Definition
Bartolomé de las Casas	Dominican friar who documented Spanish abuses of indigenous peoples; his writings influenced reform efforts
Rashid al-Din	Persian historian and vizier to the Ilkhan Ghazan; author of <i>Jami al-Tawarikh</i> , a world history
Sistema de castas	The racial hierarchy imposed by Spanish colonial administration in the Americas

Quick Revision: Key Dates

Date	Event
1428	Formation of the Aztec Triple Alliance
1492	Spanish completion of the Reconquista; Columbus reaches the Caribbean
1519 (Feb)	Cortés lands on the Gulf Coast of Mexico
1519 (Nov)	Cortés enters Tenochtitlan and meets Moctezuma
1520 (Jun)	Toxcatl Massacre; La Noche Triste — Spanish driven from Tenochtitlan
1521 (Aug)	Fall of Tenochtitlan after 75-day siege
1535	Viceroyalty of New Spain established
750	Abbasid Caliphate established
1206	Genghis Khan proclaimed supreme ruler at kurultai
1219–1221	Mongol invasion of Khwarezm — devastation of Central Asia
1256	Hulagu destroys the Assassin fortress at Alamut
1258 (Feb)	Fall of Baghdad; end of the Abbasid Caliphate
1260	Battle of Ain Jalut — Mamluks defeat the Mongols
1295	Ilkhan Ghazan converts to Islam