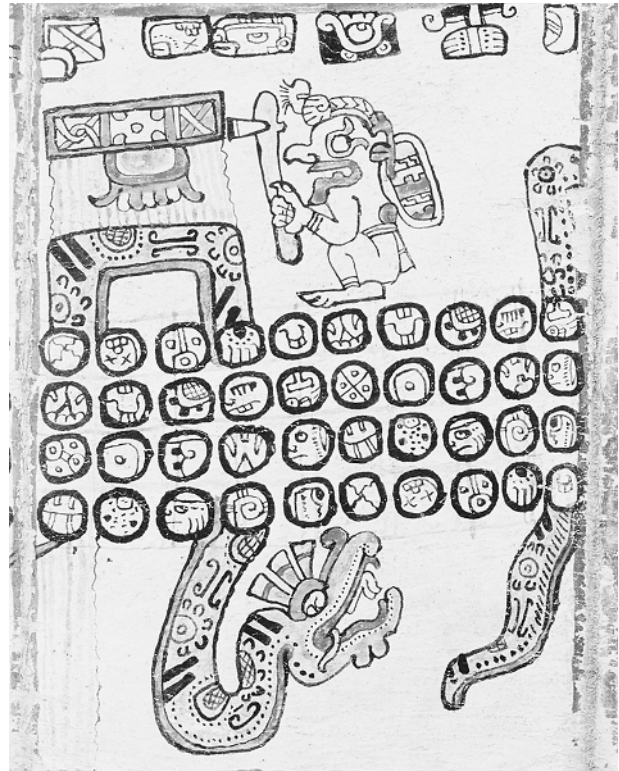


QUETZALCOATL. Quetzalcoatl, the name of one of the most important Mesoamerican deities, also borne as a title by a semilegendary Toltec ruler. Although at the time of the Conquest the two Quetzalcoats were to some degree merged, it is convenient to distinguish them by designating the former as Ehecatl Quetzalcoatl and the latter as Topiltzín Quetzalcoatl of Tollán. “Quetzalcoatl,” in Nahuatl, literally means “quetzal-feather (*quetzalli*) snake (*coatl*),” and the icon that symbolized the god consisted of a rattlesnake with scales covered by the long green feathers of the quetzal bird. The usual interpretation of this fusion of avian and reptilian features is a contrastive dualism signifying the union of sky and earth, embodying a creative concept. Quetzalcoatl does play a major demiurgic role in the central Mexican cosmogonies and, when additionally designated as Ehecatl (wind), expressed the fundamental fertility theme with particular emphasis on the fructifying aspect of the wind (in the sense of breath).

The feathered-serpent icon is quite ancient in Mesoamerica. It is strikingly manifested in Early Classic Teotihuacán in the sculptured friezes of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, datable to the beginning of our era, and in related painted images. It evolves through the subsequent Xochicalco, Cacaxtla, and Toltec iconographic traditions, particularly flowering in that of the Aztecs, where it frequently was depicted in relief and three-dimensional stone sculpture. When conceived as Ehecatl Quetzalcoatl, the deity wears a projecting mask covering the lower face through which he was believed to blow the wind. Quetzalcoatl was the special patron deity of the great mercantile and religious pilgrimage center of Cholollan (modern Cholula, Puebla). Deities analogous to Quetzalcoatl were present in the Mixteca of western Oaxaca (9 Wind), highland Guatemala (Gucumatz), and northern Yucatán (Kukulcan).

Topiltzín (Our Esteemed Lord) Quetzalcoatl of Tollán was featured prominently in the native histories of central Mexico. Ruling at Tollán (modern Tula, Hidalgo) during a golden age of Toltec power and dominance, he seems to have espoused the cult of the ancient fertility/wind/creator deity, Quetzalcoatl, whose name he bore as a title. He introduced various sacerdotal rituals, especially sanguinary auto-sacrifice, and was considered the



Quetzalcoatl depicted as a feathered serpent. From a pre-Conquest Mayan codex, early 15th century. THE ART ARCHIVE/MUSEO DE AMERICA MADRID/DAGLI ORTI. REPRODUCED BY PERMISSION OF THE PICTURE DESK INC.

archetype of the post-Toltec priesthood. Due to circumstances that are somewhat obscure but may have involved opposition to his religious doctrines, he was forced to abandon Tollán. He traveled east, to the Gulf Coast, where he either disappeared or died, his soul ascending to heaven, transformed into the planet Venus.

Topiltzín Quetzalcoatl was also considered to have established the basis for legitimate political power in western Mesoamerica—and, to some extent, in eastern Mesoamerica (highland Guatemala, northern Yucatán) as well. Nearly all of the ruling dynasts of the leading city-states of Late Postclassic central Mexico claimed political legitimacy through their connections with the royal house of Tollán. Motecuhzoma II, ninth member of the ruling dynasty of Mexico Tenochtitlán—master, with its allies, Tetzcoco and Tlacopán, of the most extensive polity in North America—claimed direct dynastic descent from Topiltzín Quetzalcoatl. The evidence for a widespread belief in Topiltzín Quetzalcoatl’s eventual return to reclaim his royal dignity, which significantly

influenced Motecuhzoma in his initial dealings with Hernán Cortés, is very strong.

See also Cortés, Hernán; Quetzal; Toltecs.

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H. B. NICHOLSON

QUETZALTENANGO. Quetzaltenango, second largest city of Guatemala (2002 est. pop. 127,569) and the most important of Los Altos, the western highlands region. It occupies a wide and fertile valley at 7,654 feet above sea level, surrounded

by a group of high mountains and volcanoes, one of which, the Santa María, destroyed the city in 1902.

In pre-Columbian times, Quetzaltenango was an important Maya-K'iche' center, known as Xelajú; it still has a sizable Indian population. It is near the site of the battle in which the Spanish army under Pedro de Alvarado defeated the legendary Tecún-umán and his Quiché warriors in 1524. This encounter marked the beginning of the Spanish conquest of the area. A backwater of the Kingdom of Guatemala for most of the colonial period, Quetzaltenango finally obtained the rank of city in 1825. As early as the latter half of the eighteenth century, however, the city had developed into the chief commercial center of Los Altos, home to a sizable Spanish and ladino population.

In the early nineteenth century its principal citizens led Los Altos in a determined campaign to win greater economic and political autonomy from the capital, Guatemala City. This regionalist movement bore fruit for a brief period (1838–1840) when Quetzaltenango became the capital of the state of Los Altos, the sixth of the Central American Federation. The federation collapsed, however, and the region was forcefully reincorporated into Guatemala by the Conservative dictator Rafael Carrera in 1840.

Under the Liberal regimes (1873–1944), Quetzaltenango quickly developed into the financial and marketing center of the expanding coffee industry. The inauguration of the electric railway in 1930 and its dismantling shortly afterward signaled the end of the coffee boom and the onset of less prosperous times for the city. Today Quetzaltenango is a marketing and manufacturing center and the seat of two university faculties.

See also Guatemala.

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