

God of the Month...Quetzalcoatl

Get acquainted with the Mesoamerican deity, Quetzalcoatl, whose incredible powers saw him create universe, earth, sea and sky, as well as our distant human ancestors.

Name of God: Quetzalcoatl or Feathered Serpent. His names outside the Aztec cultural area include Kukulcán, Gucumatz and Votan. His calendrical name was 9 Wind.

Parents: The dual creator Ometeotl (Two Lord), also known as Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl (Two Lord and Two Lady)

Siblings: Tezcatlipoca and Camaxtle.

Guises: Ehécatl (Wind) / Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli (Venus), Xolotl (the dog twin or and 'double' of Quetzalcoatl), and the mythical human priest, Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl.

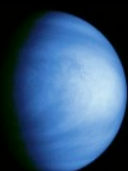
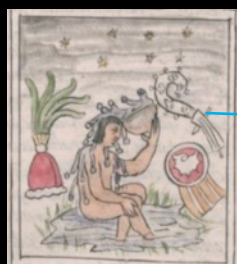
Emblem: A half-conch, symbol of creation.

Active: The Feathered Serpent was represented as a deity in Mesoamerica from the Pre-classic period until the conquest in 1521.

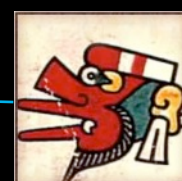
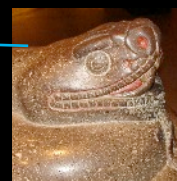
Favourite Colour: Blue and Black (Ehécatl) or Red and White pinstripe (Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli)!



Bird, Snake, Dog, Wind, Priest, Road-sweeper...even Planet! Why did Quetzalcoatl have so many guises?



Florentine Codex, Book I



We know him as the Plumed Serpent but Quetzalcoatl was so much more! Images of serpents have been represented in Mesoamerican art since Olmec times, and we know that they are related to fertility and the earth. Quetzalcoatl, however, had feathers and this made him an altogether different being. He first donned bird-like features in the Olmec period (1400-400 BC), becoming a Quetzal-feathered Serpent in the Classic period (200-900 AD), long before the Aztecs were around (1325-1521 AD). You can see from the mural pictured here (right) that he was



Feathered Serpent at Teotihuacan. Copyright imagesofanthropology.com

represented in Cacaxtla (east of Mexico City) around 600 AD, and Teotihuacan around 200 AD.

Early depictions of Quetzalcoatl are accompanied by raindrops and standing water, indicating that he was a rain deity. Amongst the later Toltec and Aztec cultures, however, he had to up his game to the level of priest and creator god... sounds like hard work!

Let's have a look at how Quetzalcoatl was represented during the Toltec and Aztec periods...



Re-creation of mural at Cacaxtla. Quetzalcoatl slithers along the border. Copyright: Museo Nacional de Antropología.



Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, the Priest

The Toltecs lived in the City of Tula (near Mexico City) in the early Postclassic period (900-1200 AD). They predated the Aztecs and perhaps even battled with them towards the end of Tula's cultural and economic dominance in Mesoamerica. They are widely perceived to have spread an active cult of Quetzalcoatl as far south as El Salvador.

Parallel to this historic account of Toltec civilization, the Aztecs recorded the myth that the Toltecs were led by a charismatic priest, Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (1 Reed Our Lord Quetzalcoatl). Entwined in the annals of history, both god and historical figure became one.

Legend says that Ce Acatl Topiltzin and the Toltecs left Tula after being tricked and shamed by Quetzalcoatl's brother, the deity Tezcatlipoca. They travelled past Cholula (in Puebla), into the Yucatan and Chichén Itzá, and may even have gone as far as El Salvador. Whether the historical figure of Ce Acatl Topiltzin did this, or whether it was the deity Feathered Serpent, we know that Quetzalcoatl was worshipped throughout Mesoamerica up until the conquest in 1521, and that the Aztecs appeared to combine Quetzalcoatl the priest with the deity.

Find out how Tezcatlipoca got the better of Topiltzin by following [this link](#).



The legendary priest, Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl in a blood-letting ceremony. Florentine Codex.

A Patron of Many...



Mexica doctors performing a ceremony in tribute to Quetzalcoatl (pictured). Codex Magliabechiano, fol.78r.

Magliabechiano, upper left), who would invoke the memory of this god when setting broken bones. This is because he dropped, but then saved, the bones of humankind as he tripped over a quail while escaping from the Mictlan (Graulich, 1996).

Quetzalcoatl-Ehécatl, the Roadsweeper

The Aztecs believed that Quetzalcoatl was one of four creators made by the divine dual couple, Omoteotl. Like the other three (Tezcatlipoca, Camaxtle and Huitzilopochtli) he was a tutelary god, responsible for more dramatic acts of creation than most of the characters in the Aztec pantheon!

Creation Myths

Quetzalcoatl-Ehécatl and his crafty brother Tezcatlipoca were in the business of creation. In some incredible escapades, they created the earth, sea and night sky and were regents of the first two 'suns', or world eras of the existing five. When the brothers separated the sky from the earth, they even turned into the trees that held the two apart, earning the names of Quetzalhuéxotl and Tezcacahuítl.



Quetzalcóatl-Ehécatl. Codex Magliabechiano, fol.61r.



Designs for Quechtin, or blankets. The bottom left-hand symbol is for wind. Codex Magliabechiano, fol.07v.

Quetzalcoatl's life-giving ability gave rise to many of the things around us. One a lone voyage, he went to find the bones of the dead in the underworld, known as Mictlan. After many trials and tribulations he was able to escape Mictlan and carry the bones to Tamoanchan, home of the gods. He ground the bones and mixed them with his blood, creating the first humans of the 5th (and current) sun.

In another act as creator, Quetzalcoatl threw his semen at a rock and from it grew a bat that approached the fertility goddess Xochiquetzal (Quetzal Flower), biting her between the legs. From her wound burst beautiful flowers that the bat took to the lord of

the underworld, Mictlantecuhtli, who bathed them in the water of his subterranean rivers and perfumed the blossoms.

Many other creation myths revolve around Quetzalcoatl, some including the creation of the maguey plant, and [the discovery of corn](#).

Quetzalcoatl was often represented as the life-giving wind, with a beak or mask protruding from his face. With this appendage he was able to sweep the roads clean before the arrival of the rain gods. Under the guise of wind, he was called Quetzalcoatl-Ehécatl and was considered

a great cultural hero.

This image from the sixteenth century Florentine Codex shows his

conical hat made from the fur of an Ocelot. A recurring feature in Quetzalcoatl-Ehécatl's iconography is a conch chest ornament. Called ehelaicacózcatl (wind jewel), the shell has been interpreted as an association with the womb and the generation of life. The conch shell is symbolic of the ancestral bones from which Quetzalcoatl created humankind as we know it. Click [here](#) to read more about [Quetzalcoatl-Ehécatl](#).



Quetzalcoatl (left) and Tezcatlipoca in one of a two-page binding together of the lunar and solar calendars. Codex Borbonicus, fol.22



Bust of Quetzalcoatl. The British Museum.

Quetzalcoatl-Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, the Morning Star

The legend of Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl goes on to tell us that after a long pilgrimage towards the east, our hero found himself so thoroughly defeated by his brother Tezcatlipoca that he threw himself on a burning pyre in an act of self-sacrifice. From the smoking remains rose the morning star, Venus, who is represented by Quetzalcoatl in his guise of Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli. He accompanies the sun across the sky during the day. This image from the Codex Borgia shows Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli displaying the quincunx: five circles associated with Venus. His hair is red and his body painted with red and white stripes. He is featured on the left in the upper and lower panels of the page. On the right hand side is Quetzalcoatl-Ehécatl.

Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli served as patron deity of astrological knowledge and was of profound importance in religious books in the Central Highlands and Oaxaca. Used for divination, these documents were called Tonalamame (*sing.* Tonalamatl), and displayed the portents of the 260 day lunar calendar known as the Tonalpoualli (Counting of the Days). Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli was considered patron of this calendar (Yólotl González-Torres, 1991).



Quetzalcoatl-Tlahuizpantecuhtli, god of Venus. He is chopping a tree on the upper left hand side, and on a decorated platform on the lower left hand side. Codex Borgia, fol.19.



Xolotl, the Evening Star

Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli could only guard the sun as it crossed the daytime sky. However, Quetzalcoatl had another invocation that would help Venus through the underworld as the Evening Star: Xolotl, the dog. Considered by some to be Quetzalcoatl's double, assistant or twin, Xolotl aided Quetzalcoatl when he descended to the Mictlan to recover the bones of humankind. In Náhuatl, the word Xolotl was often associated with the concept of twins and physical deformity, so statues of the deity often portray a dog with twin heads, or ragged ears and running sores.

Quetzalcoatl Fact File

Interests: Saving the world (or making it), preserving life, cultivating knowledge and recognising beauty.

Day Sign: Wind

Trecena (13 day week): 1 Jaguar. According to sixteenth century friar Bernadino de Sahagún and his native informants, he also presided over 1 Reed. This last period was considered to bring bad luck because it was represented by Quetzalcoatl in his forceful guise of Wind. The trecena was marked by the Aztec nobility who made offerings in Calmecacs, learning institutions for noble children. Children born during 1 Reed were thought to be ill-fortuned, and the calendar foretold that all they gained in life would be "taken by the wind" (Sahagún, book III, chapter VIII). To save children born during the worst phase of 1 Reed, the Aztecs held childrens' naming ceremonies on or after the 7th day of the week (7 Rain) as the following days were more auspicious.



Quetzalcoatl-Ehécatl (upper-right). Codex Féjervary Mayer, fol.35.

Powers: As we know from stories of old, Quetzalcoatl's physical powers and intelligence knew no bounds. But what were his monster-killing, sky-lifting and star-forming capacities in the face of his sneaky brother Tezcatlipoca? Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca were brothers in divine myths, where they worked together as creators, and against each other in acts of destruction. In the Legend of the Suns, their battles saw them topple each other as regents of individual worlds. As humans, Tezcatlipoca's trickery thwarted the priest Quetzalcoatl (myth of Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl). The cosmic battle between the two brothers has been interpreted as a dualistic opposition between creative and destructive forces (Taube, 1993, p82).



Maya Censer of Xolotl AD1200-1500. Copyright LACMA.



Quetzalcoatl (upper right) Codex Magliabechiano, fol.89r.

Place of devotion: Offerings were regularly presented to Quetzalcoatl in Tenochtitlan, but he was also celebrated in other cities like Cholula and Chichén Itzá. Containing a round temple dedicated to the cult of Quetzalcoatl-Ehécatl, Cholula was considered a pilgrimage destination across Central Mexico. Top-ranking priests from Tenochtitlan were awarded the name of Quetzalcoatl, and Aztec leaders, upon coming into power, were obliged to first worship at the temple at Cholula (Florescano 2001, p.237).

Did Motecuhzoma really think Cortés was a god?

The final twist in Quetzalcoatl's story came with the arrival of the Spanish conquerors, who claimed that Cortés was welcomed as the long-departed Ce Acatl Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl who, in another story, did not kill himself but left on a long voyage over the ocean, promising one day to return. No accounts written by the Aztecs agree with Cortés and his men, and Professor Felipe Fernández-Armesto tells us why...[click here.](#)



Sources

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