

Quetzalcoatl

For thousands of years, Quetzalcoatl was one of the most important figures in the traditional mythologies of **Mesoamerica**. As **deity**, **culture hero**, or legendary ruler, Quetzalcoatl appeared in some of the region's most powerful and enduring stories. He represented life, motion, laughter, health, sexuality, and the arts and crafts of civilization, such as farming, cooking, and music.

The name *Quetzalcoatl* means "Feathered Serpent." It brings together the magnificent green-plumed quetzal bird, symbolizing the heavens and the wind, and the snake, symbolizing the earth and fertility. Quetzalcoatl's name can also be translated as "precious twin," and in some myths, he had a twin brother named Xolotl, who had a human body and the head of a dog or of an ocelot, a spotted wildcat.

Mesoamerica cultural region consisting of southern Mexico and northern regions of Central America **deity** god or goddess **culture hero** mythical figure who gives people the tools of civilization, such as language and fire **pantheon** all the gods of a particular culture

Historical Background. Quetzalcoatl occupied a central place in the **pantheon** of the Aztec people of central Mexico, but he dates back to a time long before the Aztecs. Images of the Feathered Serpent appear on a temple building in Teotihuacán, a Mexican archaeological site from the A . D . 200S. These images are found with images of rain and water, suggesting close ties between Quetzalcoatl and the god of rain and vegetation.



Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec god also known as the Feathered Serpent, appears on structures in the ancient city of Teotihuacán in Mexico.

To the Toltecs, who flourished in the region from the 800s to the 1100s, Quetzalcoatl was the deity of the morning and evening stars and the wind. When the Aztecs rose to power in the 1400s, they brought Quetzalcoatl into their pantheon and made him a culture hero, a bringer not just of life but also of civilization. These old myths merged with legends about a priest-king named Quetzalcoatl, possibly a real historical figure. Later as groups from central Mexico migrated into southern Mexico and the Yucatán peninsula, blending with the local Maya

population, the Feathered Serpent took his place in the Mayan pantheon under the name Kukulcan.

The God. Quetzalcoatl was portrayed in two ways. As the Feathered Serpent, he was a snake with wings or covered with feathers. He could also appear in human form as a warrior wearing a tall, cone-shaped crown or cap made of ocelot skin and a pendant fashioned of jade or a conch shell. The pendant, known as the "wind jewel," symbolized one of Quetzalcoatl's other roles, that of Ehecatl, god of wind and movement. Buildings dedicated to this god were circular or cylindrical in shape to minimize their resistance to the wind.

According to some accounts, Quetzalcoatl was the son of the sun and of the earth goddess Coatlicue. He and three brother gods created the sun, the heavens, and the earth. In the Aztec creation myth, Quetzalcoatl's **cosmic** conflicts with the god Tezcatlipoca brought about the creation and destruction of a series of four suns and earths, leading to the fifth sun and today's earth.

At first there were no people under the fifth sun. The inhabitants of the earlier worlds had died, and their bones littered Mictlan, the **underworld**. Quetzalcoatl and his twin, Xolotl, journeyed to Mictlan to find the bones, arousing the fury of the Death Lord. As he fled from the underworld, Quetzalcoatl dropped the bones, and they broke into pieces. He gathered up the pieces and took them to the earth goddess Cihuacoatl (Snake Woman), who ground them into flour. Quetzalcoatl moistened the flour with his own blood, which gave it life. Then he and Xolotl shaped the mixture into human forms and taught the new creatures how to reproduce themselves.

cosmic large or universal in scale; having to do with the universe

underworld land of the dead

patron special guardian, protector, or supporter

The Hero. Besides creating humans, Quetzalcoatl also protected and helped them. Some myths say that he introduced the cultivation of maize, or corn, the staple food of Mexico. He did this by disguising himself as a black ant and stealing the precious grain from the red ants. He also taught people astronomy, calendar making, and various crafts and was the **patron** of merchants. Carlos Fuentes, one of modern Mexico's leading writers, compares Quetzalcoatl with the mythic figures Prometheus*, Odysseus*, and Moses. All three had to leave their cultures but obtained gifts or wisdom that renewed those cultures. Stories about a Toltec king named Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, famed as an enlightened and good ruler, may have contributed to the image of Quetzalcoatl as a culture hero.

pyre pile of wood on which a dead body is burned in a funeral ceremony

Quetzalcoatl's departure from his people was the work of his old enemy, Tezcatlipoca, who wanted people to make bloodier sacrifices than the flowers, jade, and butterflies they offered to Quetzalcoatl. Tezcatlipoca tricked Quetzalcoatl by getting him drunk and then holding up a mirror that showed Tezcatlipoca's cruel face. Believing that he was looking at his own imperfect

image, Quetzalcoatl decided to leave the world and threw himself onto a funeral **pyre**. As his body burned, birds flew forth from the flames, and his heart went up into the heavens to become Venus, the morning and evening star. Another version of the myth says that Quetzalcoatl sailed east into the sea on a raft of serpents. Many Aztecs believed that he would come back to his people one day after a period of 52 years. In the early 1500s, the Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés took advantage of this belief by encouraging the people of Mexico to view him as the return of the hero-god Quetzalcoatl.

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