



# WARLORDS OF ANCIENT MEXICO

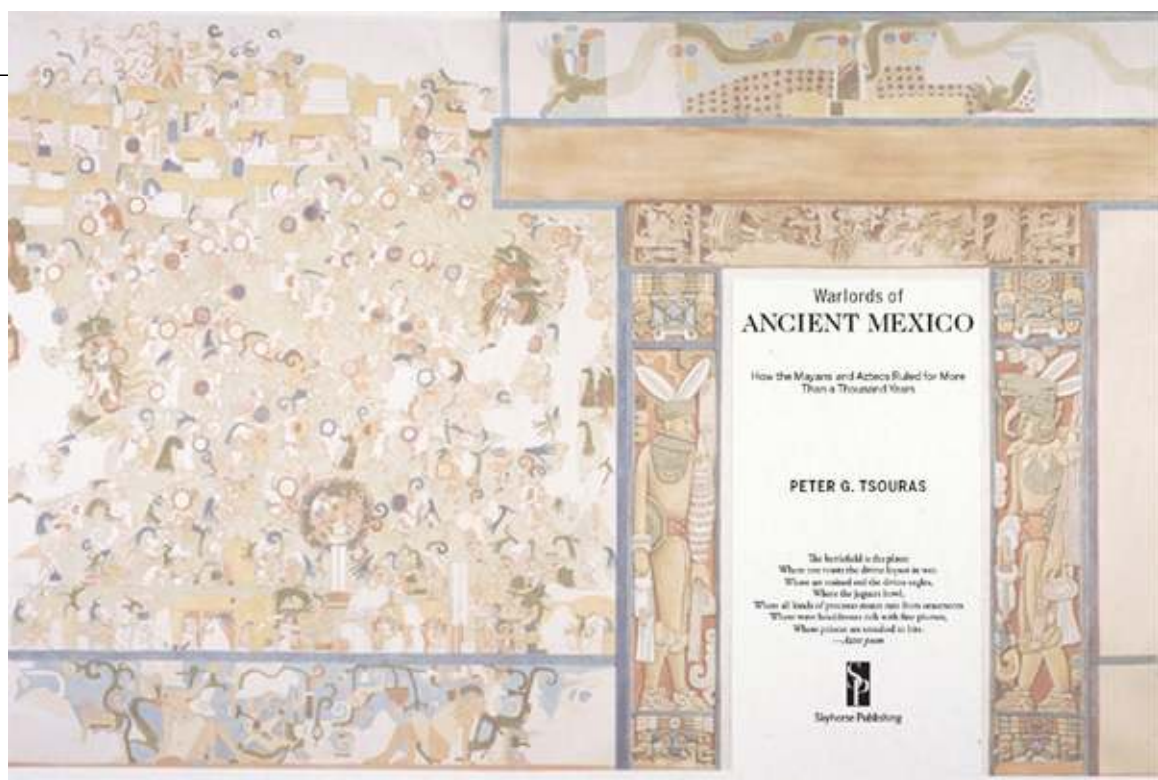
HOW THE MAYANS AND AZTECS RULED  
FOR MORE THAN A THOUSAND YEARS

PETER G. TSOURAS

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Warlords of  
**ANCIENT MEXICO**





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How the Mayans and Aztecs Ruled for More  
Than a Thousand Years

**PETER G. TSOURAS**

The battlefield is the place  
Where you reach the divine light in war.  
Where an eagle and the dove unite,  
Where the jaguars howl.  
Where all kinds of precious stones are from mountains  
Where men hold their talk with the planets,  
Where priests are venerated as kings.  
—*ancient poem*



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# Dedication

When Odysseus wanted to commune with the spirits of the dead, he poured a blood offering into a p to summon their shades from Hades. That was myth. Scott and Stuart Gentling have surpassed him reality. As their brushes touched canvas, a magical vision breathed life back into a vanished civilisation of a mighty and terrible splendour. Nezahualcoyotl, the Poet King of Texcoco, rightly described such a as a ‘tribute of beauty,’ and a long-dead Náhuatl poet unknowingly spoke of them in this poem:

‘The artist: a Toltec, disciple, resourceful, diverse, restless.

The true artist, capable, well trained, expert; he converses with his heart, finds things with his mind.

The true artist draws from his heart; he works with delight;

does things calmly, with feeling; works like a Toltec;

invents things, works skilfully, creates; he arranges things; adorns them; reconciles them.’

This book is happily dedicated to Scott and Stuart Gentling, the ‘Toltec’ brothers from Fort Worth Texas.

# Acknowledgements

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# Preface

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The history of the Old World resounds with the deeds of men of war—conquerors and warlords, the founders and breakers of empires. The history of the original inhabitants of the New World, especially Mesoamerica, does not—but not for the lack of such men. These histories in English consistently emphasise either the culture and history in general or the Spanish Conquest. Native Americans, and the tramp of whose feet worlds trembled, are submerged in the broader histories or are secondary characters in the story of the Spanish Conquest. Biographies are almost nonexistent, except, of course, that of Cortés, and the two splendid histories of Nezahualcoyotl and Motecuhzoma I by Francis Gillmor in the early 1960s. Almost nothing has been written in which these Native American conquerors and warlords are centre stage.

*Warlords of Ancient Mexico* is a history of these men. The story stretches from Tikal of 378 AD to the death of the last Mexica emperor in 1525. In the 1147 intervening years, war scoured as bloody a country as it did anywhere else on this planet. And as elsewhere, civilisation was pushed along new paths, both destructive and creative. These men were the agents of great change and compelling individuals in their own rights. The reader of Mesoamerican history is constantly reminded of parallels with the counterparts of the Old World. In the histories of which we are familiar, the year 378 AD is recognised for the defeat of the Roman Army and the death of the Roman Emperor Valens at the Battle of Adrianople, a pivot of history. History also pivoted in that same year as the warlord of Tikal of Guatemala employed the techniques and cult of the new Venus-Tlaloc warfare now called Star Wars, to conquer the neighbouring kingdom of Uaxactún and kill its king. He set a fire in the Maya lands that would burn for four hundred years and then travel north to scorch the central Mexican source of the culture, the great city of Teotihuacán.

The Tepanec king, Tezozomoc, is often referred to as the Mexican Machiavelli; Nezahualcoyotl relives many of the episodes in the life of King David of Israel; and the Mexica emperor Ahuitzotl is likened to Alexander the Great. Had the New World discovered the Old, perhaps we might have heard of Machiavelli, the Italian Tezozomoc! Then there is the blood-soaked Tlacaélel, the Mexica Cihuacoatl or Snake Woman, the warrior-priest genius, who is utterly unique in the annals of world history, the man who conceived and fathered the imperial idea that sustained the growth of the Mexica empire. If a match were to be found in the Old World, surely it would have to include at least the First Emperor of China and Cromwell and many in between. Cuitláhuac, the ninth emperor or tlatoani of the Mexica, inflicted the greatest single defeat on European arms in the entire conquest of the Americas when he drove Cortés and his combined Spanish and native army out of Tenochtitlan in 1520, killing over 1,200 Spaniards and 4,000-5,000 Indian allies.

The most prominent place in this book is taken by the Mexica tlatoani. They are commonly referred to as Aztecs, a name they never called themselves. Aztec means ‘Man of Aztlan,’ and refers to the people that undertook the great migration that led to the founding of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco, two settlements of the Mexica on islands in Lake Texcoco. Most sources use the term ‘Aztecs’ where ‘Mexica’ would be more precise. I have retained ‘Aztec’ in those cases where I have quoted these sources and have risked a bit of confusion on the part of the reader rather than tamper with the original source. In every other case, I use the ‘Mexica’; it is what they called themselves and was the source of the name of modern Mexico. Indeed, it was their very battle cry, ‘O Mexica, Courage!’ Tenochtitlan means ‘City by the Prickly Pear Cactus’ and Tlatelolco ‘Place of Many Mounds.’ Inhabitants of Tenochtitlan were called Tenoch-



and those of Tlatelolco were Tlatelolca. Both cities were often referred to with the term 'Mexico,' such as in Mexico-Tenochtitlan and Mexico-Tlatelolco. The ancient world of the Valley of Mexico, centred around its lakes, was called appropriately Anahuac (Near the Water). Wherever possible I have retained the spelling that most closely approximates the original personal or place names.

I have relied heavily on quotation of the surviving words of the main characters in order to let them speak for themselves and to give the reader a sense of the rhythm and poetry of Indian oratory. I have also attempted to match the prose style to the colour and drama of these vanished civilisations, whose sense of 'the other,' that fundamental difference from our Old World perspectives, is so mesmerising.

The language spoken in Central Mexico from at least Toltec times was Náhuatl, which continues in use to this day. Durán refers to it as a language of poetry, infinite metaphors, and great subtlety. All words in Náhuatl are accented on the second to the last syllable. The **x** is pronounced as **sh**; the **h** is spoken with a soft aspiration as in English. The **tl** and **tz** represent single sounds. The **u** used before **a**, **i**, and **o** is pronounced like the English **w**. **Cu** before vowels is pronounced **kw**. Mexico—may-SHEE-ka and Huitzilopochtli—weets-eel-oh-POHCH-tee; Tenochtitlan—tay-nohch-TEE-tlahn; Cuitlahuac—Kwee-TLAH-hwac. Many place names were hispanised, simply because Spanish tongues could not pronounce Náhuatl words. Cortés consistently mangled names. Cuauhnahuac (Near the Trees) became Cuenavaca. Tollan became Tula. I have tried to use the spelling that most closely corresponds to the original name, hence Huexotzinco instead of Huexotzingo and Tlaxcallan instead of Tlaxcalla.

I owe a special thanks to the long-dead Spanish friars Diego Durán and Bernardino de Sahagún, and to their anonymous Indian informants, whose labours of love in capturing the passing Mesoamerican world preserved irreplaceable insights into the characters of the ten Mexica rulers and a record of their words. The modern interpreters of Mesoamerican history, Nigel Davies and Ross Hassig, have provided invaluable interpretation of often highly complicated events. The works of Miguel León-Portilla and Inga Clendinnen have provided similar explanation of the cultural and religious context of Mexica society. David Freidel and Linda Scheie's work on deciphering the history of once-hidden events in the Maya glyphs allowed the deeds of Smoking-Frog to emerge from their silence. John B. Carlson's work on the Venus-Tlaloc 'Star Wars' warfare cult has been equally illuminating, and I thank him for providing several of his papers on this subject. I must also thank my colleagues, Terence A. Gardner, for his insights into military techniques, and Vincent Mikolainis for his insights into Native American culture and for his patient editing. To Christopher P. Tsouras, I am indebted for his superb photographic work.

I owe a special thanks to my agent, Fritz Heinzen, for working with Skyhorse Publications to breathe new life into this book, which has been a child of my heart. Not least I want to acknowledge the splendid job done by the editor, Jon Arlan. It is often forgotten how much an editor, especially an editor of a heavily illustrated work, brings to its creation. He has refashioned the original edition with perceptive skill and fine touch that has only increased for the reader the wonder of that vanished world of Mesoamerica.

To Scott Gentling and Stuart Gentling, to whom I have dedicated this book, I owe my heartfelt thanks for making the past come alive with their encyclopaedic and masterful knowledge of the Mexica and for their breathtaking paintings of that lost world. Even more, I appreciate the enthusiasm and selflessness of their help. I have tried to do with prose what they have done with their paintings, so that, in Scott's words . . . 'it just might be possible in a very real sense to accompany Bernal Diaz del Castillo when he enters this strange land and be there too when at last he sets foot on the Ixtlapalapan causeway and turns his vision northward to where, dazzling white and green in the distance, out in the vastness of the lake, frightening and grand, the capital comes into view.'

Peter G. Tsouras

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Alexandria, Virginia

# THE FIRST CONQUERORS

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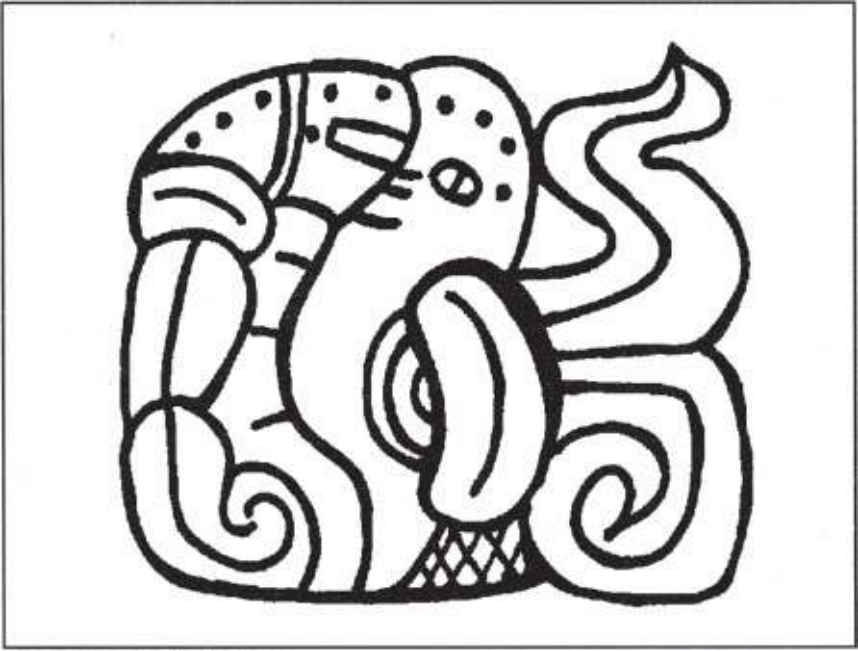


# Smoking-Frog and the Maya Wars (Fourth Century)

## An Import from Teotihuacán

The world changed for the Maya on the day that the Mexicans came to Tikal in Guatemala. Tikal's subsequent conquest of its neighbour Uaxactún in 378 AD was to knock Maya civilisation into another lane of history. The story of the conquest was the stuff of legend that resounded down succeeding generations.

The names of these warriors and merchants from Teotihuacán in central Mexico are lost. No inscription names them, but their arrival was chronicled on a vase painting, a delegation of turbaned strangers armed with handfuls of atlatl (spearthrower) darts. Undoubtedly, they brought gifts to the king of Tikal, jewel of Maya cities in the southern lowlands of the Petén. Perhaps it was the much-prized dark green obsidian, the razor-sharp edge for tool and weapon. The obsidian deposits near Teotihuacán were one of the foundation piers of empire. 350 obsidian workshops chipped the immense numbers of dart and spear points and the sharp blades for war clubs that were in unquenchable demand everywhere. This monopoly on obsidian and the city's position as the most powerful religious shrine in central Mexico drew power and wealth there like a magnet. By this time, the great construction programme had filled the city centre with immense temples, including what is known today as the Temple of the Sun, an immense stone-faced rubble-cored pyramid greater in volume (1,175,000 cubic metres) than the Great Pyramid in Egypt. Teotihuacán boasted a population estimated at 150,000 in vast single-story apartment-building complexes that included many foreign colonies of merchants and craftsmen. Even the Maya were represented.

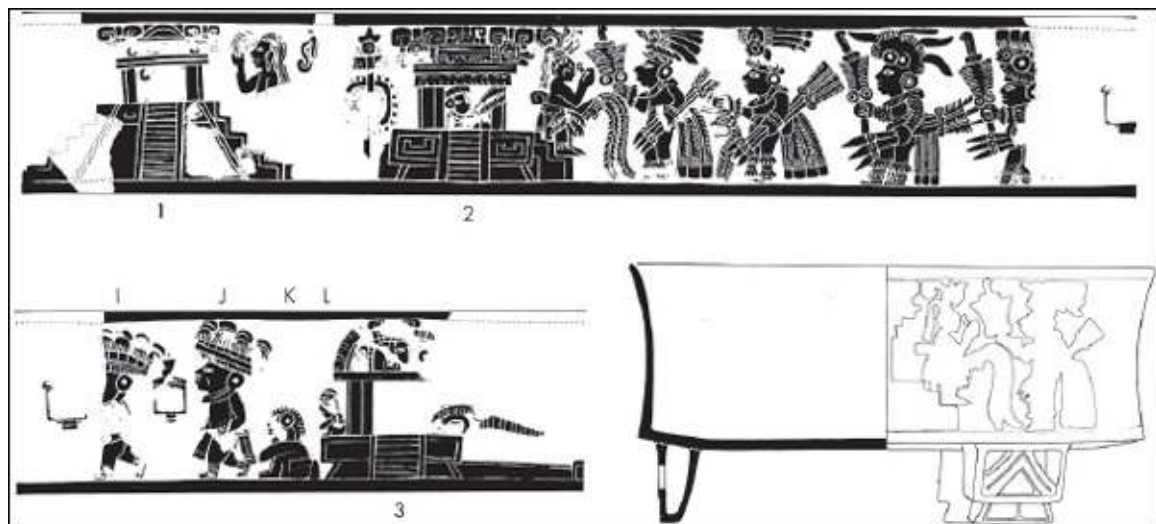


*Smoking-Frog name glyph*

About 150 AD a final burst of monumental building in Teotihuacán added the Temple of the

Feathered Serpent and its vast Ciudadela complex, containing two-thirds the amount of material in the Temple of the Sun. On this temple, four-ton figures of the goggle-eyed Storm god, Tlaloc, and the Feathered Serpent alternate in ascending bands up the structure. They represent the largest sculptural effort in the entire 800-year history of the city. The entire complex was built, as René Millon speculated, when 'an ambitious new ruler with a passion for immortality wished to build a colossal new seat of power and authority . . . The core of the newly emphasized ritual was a cult of sacred-war-and-sacrifice ("Star Wars") associated with the Feathered Serpent deity, the Storm God, and the planet Venus and its cyclical motions.'

The Mexican and Maya worlds had been in steadily increasing contact since the first century, but the fourth century was to see the beginning of a flood of highland Mexican influence. In the southern Mayan highlands shortly after 400 AD, the Teotihuacáanos conquered the Mayan city of Kaminaljuyu and rebuilt it as their Mexican capital in miniature. It was no accident that deposits of grey obsidian were located in the vicinity of this new outpost. Monopoly is not only a modern economic term. From their Teotihuacáno influences in culture, art, and warfare diffused rapidly to the Maya heartland to the north through the agency of a hardy merchant-warrior (*pochteca*) class. Already a quarter century before, the influence at Tikal was immense. Perhaps the Teotihuacáanos had chosen Tikal as the funnel of their trade into the rich Maya lowlands and had found willing allies in the kings of that city.



*Toltec visitors to a Maya city, found on a bowl at Tikal.*





*Temple of the Sun, Teotihuacán.*

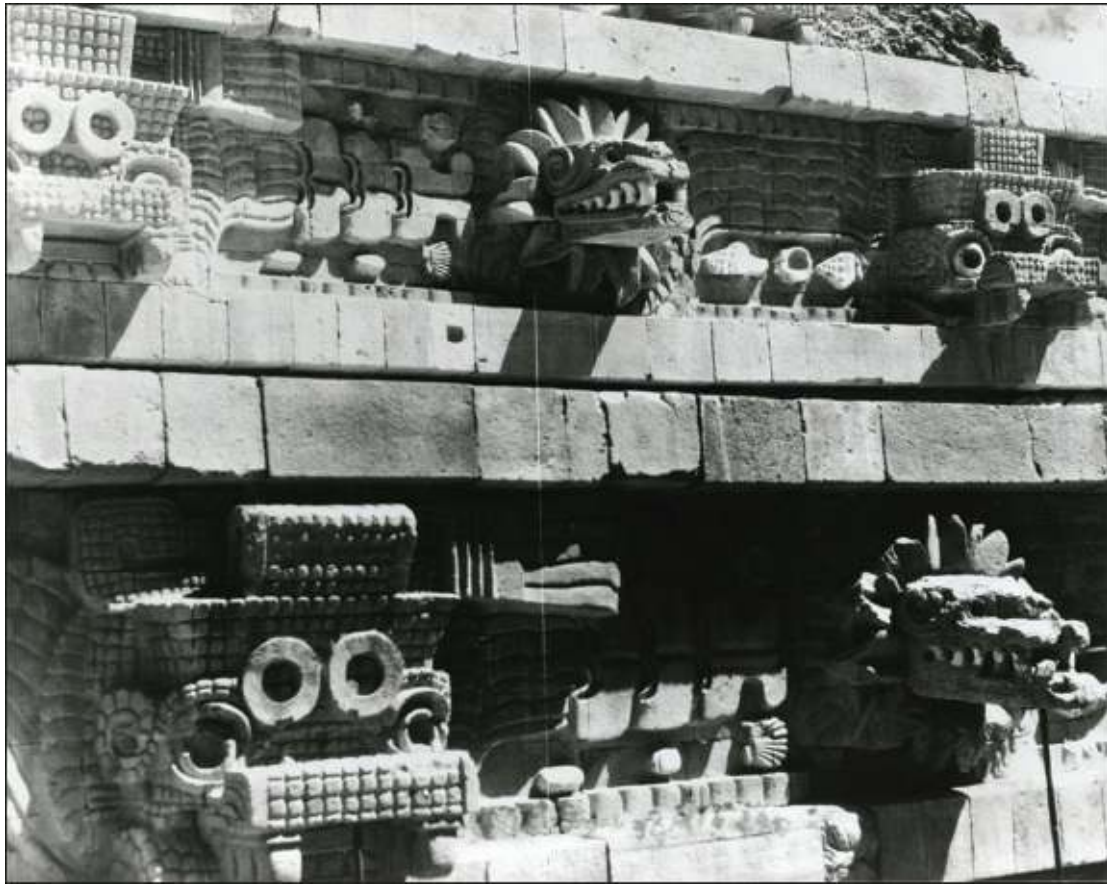
The Teotihuacáños bore the emblems of new gods to the Maya lands, the goggle-eyed Tlaloc and the Feathered Serpent, patrons of their great imperial city over 1,100 kilometres to the north. Tlaloc and the Feathered Serpent were fitting twin deities for a city that specialised in weapons exports. They were the imperial essence of Teotihuacán, gods of war, with a complex and compelling theology for waging war under the aegis of the Great Goddess, chief of the city's pantheon. According to John Carlson, specialist in Mesoamerican Venus lore, 'Teotihuacán Feathered Serpent was a representation of Venus, god of warfare and blood sacrifice, as well as of water and fertility. The goggle-eyed Storm God has also been linked with both warfare and water.'<sup>2</sup> Both gods 'embodied . . . paired attributes of creation and destruction, water and fertility, and warfare and blood sacrifice. These dual aspects of Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc, together with the unifying Mother Earth embodiment in the Great Goddess, form the heart of the present interpretation of the Teotihuacán cult of Venus-Tlaloc warfare.'<sup>3</sup> Carlson identifies the role of Venus-Tlaloc warfare:

' . . . the fundamental archetype involves the transformation of human blood into water and fertility shed under the auspices of these deities through Venus-regulated warfare and ritual sacrifice. This is part and parcel, literally, of the essential Teotihuacán ascendancy in warfare, conquest, and long-distance *pochteca*-style trade and tribute.'<sup>4</sup>

Attempts to strictly identify the sixteenth century Mexica (Aztec) Tlaloc, Feathered Serpent, and Great Goddess of a millennium earlier are difficult. Mesoamerican deities often shared attributes, and over time they merged with each other or assumed new attributes. However, the Mexica would have recognised Quetzalcoatl, Tlaloc, and Chalchuihtlicue (Great Goddess) in their own religion.

Venus-Tlaloc warfare (Star Wars) as described by David Freidel, 'involved the conquest of territory and the taking of captives for sacrifice. Most of all, decisions about when and where to do battle became tied to the cycles of Venus and Jupiter. It was a kind of holy war timed by the stars,'<sup>5</sup> recently dubbed 'Star Wars.' Venus, the star of strife and ill-omen, became the symbol of war throughout Mesoamerica and the representative emblem of its cult. As a battle standard, the Teotihuacáños carried the War

Serpent, which the Maya would call Waxak-lahun-Ubah-Kan. A feather-rimmed disc on a wooden shaft, the War Serpent brought forth the war god when carried into battle. Infinitely more than the symbol of a modern flag, it was the soul of the state or a noble lineage when called forth for battle. 'They saw their great standards of war not only as the representation of the state, but as an embodiment of a potent spiritual being whose presence and performance were critical to their success.' The Teotihuacáns also carried a related iconographic device on their persons, a medallion emblazoned with an owl-javelin shield device repeatedly intertwined with war imagery and sacrifice.



*Temple of Quetzalcoatl, Teotihuacán. Feathered Serpent and Tlaloc carvings.*

## **Fire Is Born and the Conquest of Uaxactún**

The Maya had been no stranger to war, but customary Maya warfare, though deadly, was child's play compared to the new arrival from Mexico. Each Maya city possessed a ruling lineage whose ancestors watched over and cared for their descendants and city. These otherworldly ancestors and the gods could be summoned to advise the Maya and receive their petitions only through mystical portals into the other-world. The summoning of these spirits was through a bloody process of auto-sacrifice by the Maya lords. Stingray spines or thorns on knotted strings were pulled through tongues or genitals to produce an ecstasy of pain needed to summon the spirits. Their blood dripped upon paper which was then burnt on the portal's altar, the smoke summoning the ancestors. The blood of captives taken in war was also prized in these ceremonies, and for these captives Maya war was waged. Not just any peasant would do either. It was only the blood of kings and nobles that was fit for opening the portals. Maya war was essentially a series of duels among the royal lineages and nobilities of the Maya kingdoms. The level of destructive-ness for the common man and his family cannot have been great.

The arrival of the Teotihuacáns would change that. Star Wars had built an empire for them in

Mexico, whose outposts reached even to Guatemala. Star Wars were for conquest, and conquest demanded armies, sustained operations, and war to the hilt. That was the message the Teotihuacanos brought.

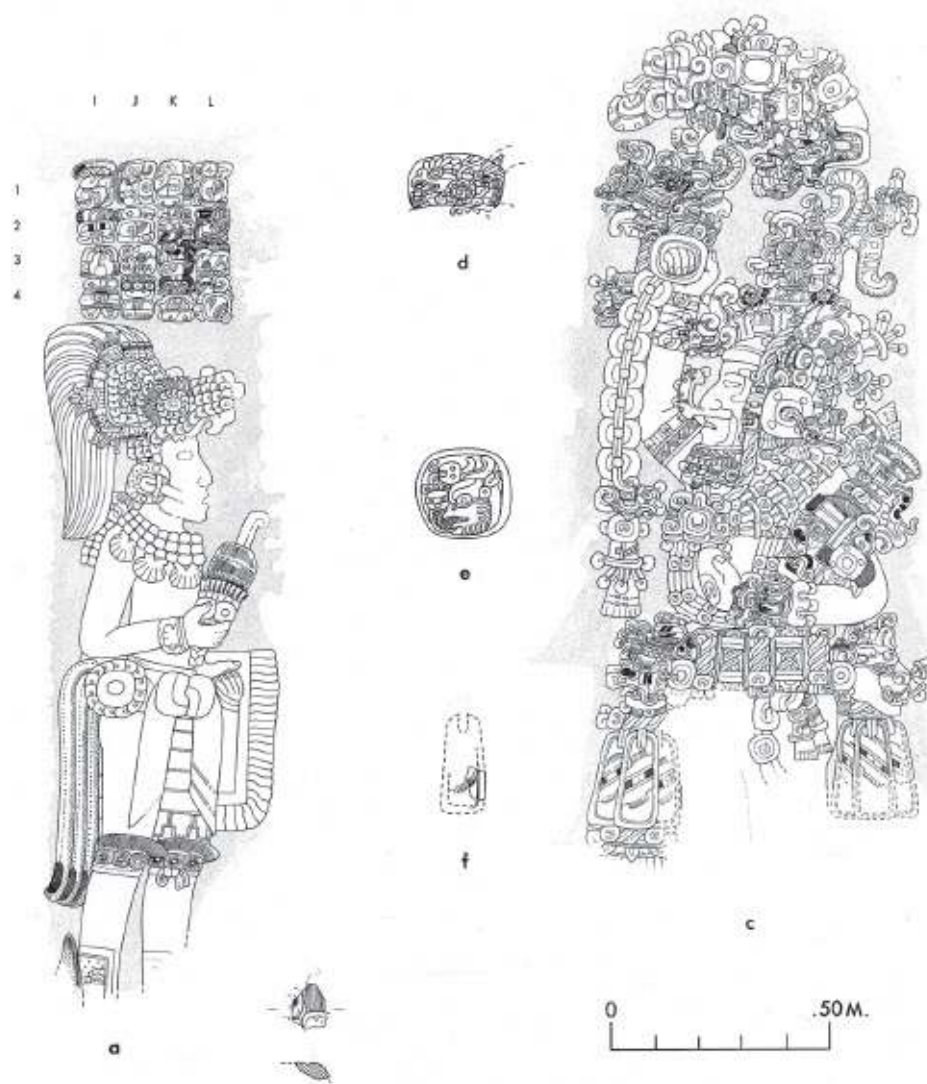


*Fire Born also known as Smoking Frog, Uaxactún Stela 5.*

It came by way of direct conquest. The ruler of Teotihuacan, Spearthrower Owl, planned it carefully after his ascension to power in AD 374. He dispatched an army led by the warlord, Siyaj K'ak' (Fire Born) also known as K'ak' Sih (Smoking Frog) on the 1,000 kilometer march to the Maya lands. He appears in an inscription on 8 January AD 378 only 49 miles (78 km) to the west of Tikal in the city of El Perú. On 14 January, at the head of his atlatl-armed Mexican army, he stormed Tikal in a sudden rush and made its aged king, Chak Tok Ich'aak (Great Jaguar Paw) and his royal line "enter the water," the artful construction meaning sudden death. He may have been aided by factions within Tikal itself for there was a section of the city inhabited by Teotihuacano natives, probably merchants, whom the Aztecs would later call *pochteca*, the perfect fifth column. He subsequently had his image cut into Stela 31. It is a jarring change from the traditional Maya stela depictions of war and sacrifice. He is shown not as a Maya lord but is replete in the Tlaloc-Venus war costume of his native Teotihuacán with its balloon-shaped headdress surmounted by a bird, perhaps the War Emblem Owl associated with Venus. He grips a spear-thrower in his right hand and an obsidian-edged club in his left. He is called Lord of the West.



All the monuments to previous kings were later broken up and used as fill in later construction dispersed to outlying areas.



Left, Curl-Snout, Stela 31, Tikal. Right, Stormy-Sky.

The new master of Tikal wasted no time but immediately marched on the next object of his ambition, the nearby city of Uaxactun. The Teotihuacáanos were about to introduce the Maya to a thoroughly modern process in the art of war. In a modern term coined by Soviet military theorists, the Maya were about to undergo a 'revolution in military affairs,' where new ideas mixed with the old to bring about entirely new and superior concepts and methods that would overpower the old. It was not just the throwing spear as an agent of firepower with which the traditional Maya fighting man could not deal, but also the discipline that focused the potential of the new weapon under the guidance of a superior strategy. An analogy is the introduction of the assegai, the short stabbing spear, by the Zulu Shaka over 1,400 years later in Natal. Shaka replaced the light Bantu throwing spear with a stabbing weapon. On the surface, it was the opposite of the Teotihuacáno replacement of the Maya stabbing spear with the atlatl dart. However, the essential element that bound the two events was the enhancing force of discipline and strategy over primitive and less bloody forms of warfare.

The two armies that marched from Uaxactun and Tikal could not have been more different. The men of Uaxactun marched out in the traditional way, their king leading the fighting men of his royal lineage and those of the noble lineages that formed the pillars of his kingdom. With them would be the limited number of full-time warriors that formed bands around the king and his nobles. They probably

numbered only in the hundreds and were armed with the traditional stabbing spear and hand-held weapons.

Somewhere between the two cities, their armies met on 16 January 378 AD. The king of Uaxactún had heard of the sudden overthrow of his ancient rival and perhaps of the execution of Tikal's king and lineage. Fire Born had already filled him with confusion and dread as to the nature of these strangers. So, he was already defeated. The new style of war was to strike him like a thunderclap. The men of Uaxactún certainly were aware of this, too.

The armies arrayed themselves in the stretch of savannah that parted the jungle. It was clear that they faced something entirely new. The battle may have begun in the traditional way, with challenges to single combat issued by the men of Uaxactún. David Freidel conjures up a vivid picture of when the surprise was sprung. "[F]rom the forest came hundreds of hidden warriors. In eerie silence, never on an issuing challenge, they hurled a cloud of spears into the thick ranks of the Uaxactún warriors. Shocked and horrified, the king realized the enemy was using spearthrowers, the hunter's weapon, killing people like food animals gathered for slaughter."<sup>6</sup>

The introduction of discipline and firepower to the Maya battlefield was crushing. The survivors fled to the safety of their unwallled city, thinking the war ended with their defeat. But Teotihuacáanos were on their heels and followed them among their homes and temples, killing all who resisted. Their king, if he survived the battle, was hunted down by Fire Born as the greatest prize of the war, to be dragged back to Tikal for sacrifice. How much Uaxactún suffered in its conquest is unknown, but since Fire Born made himself king, it could not have been much beyond the expected sack and the extirpation of its lineage. The war chief of Tikal would have seen little value in a dead city. More important was a living city whose portal to the other-world he now commanded, for to him the capture of the portal was the culmination of the capture of the city.

'Under the code of this new, foreign battle strategy, Fire Born would be able to bring his own ancestors to the portal of Uaxactún. He and his descendants would rule not only the people of the city but their venerated ancestors as well. It was an act of audacity beyond imagination: war to take not only the king but also his portal—and if possible to hold that portal captive. For as long as Fire Born and his kin reigned, the people of Uaxactún would be cut off from the loving guidance of their ancestors, people stripped of their very gods.'<sup>7</sup>

Fire Born promptly extended his control to the surrounding cities, dominating the Mayan heartland of the northern and eastern Peten. In the next year, he installed the son of Spearthrower Owl, Yax Nuun Ayiin I (First Crocodile or Curl Snout) on the throne of Tikal. Since Curl Snout was still a minor, Fire Born acted as regent. Curl Snout continued to recognize Fire Born as his overlord until the latter's death some almost twenty years later. He himself continued to rule until his death in 404. He married a royal woman of the previous dynasty, thus cementing his legitimacy and that of his son, Stormy Sky. Spearthrower Owl outlived his son to die in AD 439, a reign equivalent to Ramses II.

Curl-Snout is vividly depicted on the stela of his son in the full war regalia of the Tlaloc-Venus cult, so powerful was the propaganda value and symbolism of Tikal's glory. He was in every respect a Teotihuacáno warrior, bearing Teotihuacáno weapons, the spear-thrower, and wearing 'shell plate headdresses, a pyrite hip disk, a whole shell collar, and coyote tails. His . . . shield portrayed a figure with goggles, whole shell earspools, a nosebar, and the "tassel headdress" that identifies the highest ranking Teotihuacános abroad.'<sup>9</sup>





*The Realm of Star Wars: from Teotihuacán to Tikal.*

The goggle-eyed figure was surely Tlaloc, and the disk appears to be the same sort of mirror found on the remains of warriors sacrificed at the dedication of the Temple of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacán. Not only the royal lineage exulted in the memory of the conquest. The nonroyal noble lineages as well gloried in the participation of their ancestors in what was to become legend, much as the ancient Greeks proudly claimed descent from the heroes who fought on the plains of Troy.

A striking example was found in the compound of one of the great noble lineages in Tikal. There a ballcourt marker in the shape of an effigy battle standard was erected on 24 January 414 AD by Ch'amak, lineage patriarch, celebrating the participation of the lineage's ancestor in the overthrow of Uaxactún 36 years before. The ballgame had been a feature of Maya culture for centuries by this time, signifying war and sacrifice, but the Maya lord who erected this battle standard marker ordered it built in a thoroughly Teotihuacáno style.

In the dedication ritual, Ch'amak planted the effigy standard on its platform altar, then called for the Waxaklahun-Ubah-Kan to serve as the path along which the companion spirits of important warriors and lineage heads travelled when they came to participate in rituals. But this same standard could also be used as an instrument for bringing forth the Teotihuacán god of war that these Maya had adopted as their own.<sup>10</sup>

The burials of Curl-Snout and his son, Stormy-Sky, are also replete with Teotihuacáno imports. A contemporary burial may even have been that of a high-ranking Teotihuacáno, another indication that a Mexican colony existed at Tikal. It would not be too long, though, before the Mexican imagery faded and their descendants were slowly Mayanized. As with so many other conquerors, the Mexicans had not brought their women. It is Mayan mothers who raised their children, and it is women who are ultimately the bearers of culture.

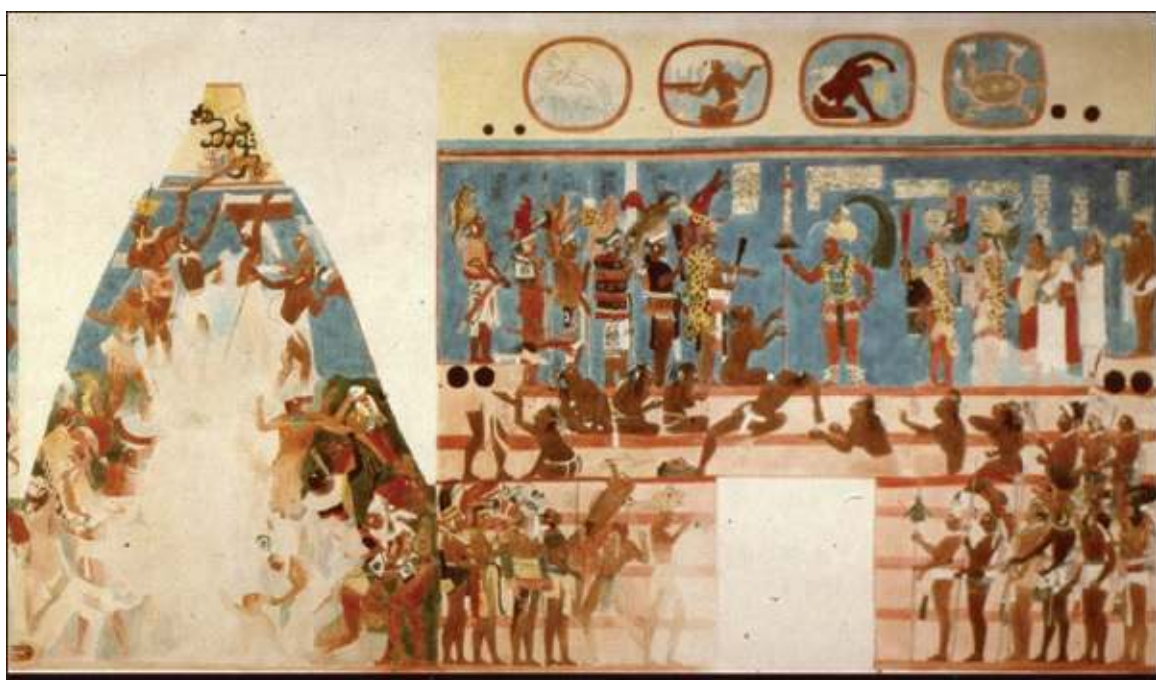
## Star Wars Comes Full Circle

Smoking-Frog himself ruled at least another eighteen and possibly 26 years before his death. One hundred and twenty-six years later, his descendants in Uaxactún were still erecting monuments to celebrate his victory and bask in its reflected glory. For 180 years Tikal would dominate the center

Petén, the Maya heartland. Surely its kings must have exploited their new style of war and their lucrative arrangements with Teotihuacán to capitalise on this prestige. So stupendous was the conquest of Uaxactún that Star Wars spread rapidly through all the Maya kingdoms until it had been thoroughly absorbed as a common element of their civilisation, much as the blitzkrieg in 1940 made all armies instant adherents of mobile warfare. One of the last great masterpieces of Maya art, the murals of Bonampak, celebrated an event in another Star War dated at 792 AD.<sup>11</sup> In one of history's ironies, the Mayanised version of Tlaloc travelled back to Mexico and is found in late Classic sites at Cacaxtla and Xochicalco 500 miles away in central Mexico. At Cacaxtla, eighty miles to the east of Teotihuacán, extraordinarily well-preserved murals painted in a magnificent Maya late Classic style adorn the walls of the city's acropolis.

The jaguar warriors are the obvious winners in the violent encounter with the soldiers dressed as birds. Clothed in tailored pelts arrayed with lavish insignia of rank, grimacing with exertion, they drive flint-sharp lances into the bodies of the bird men, who are unarmed. Many of the vanquished already sprawl in grotesque poses of abject disarray, their blood falling in vivid droplets from hideous wounds. Some, disemboweled in the action, clutch in vain at their exposed entrails.<sup>12</sup>





Above: Maya Star Wars shown on the murals at Bonampak. Below: Prisoners abase themselves before the King of Bonampak, having already been tortured and bled as shown by their mutilated, dripping fingers. Both illustrations Room 2; watercolour copies by Antonio Tejada, 1940. Photos courtesy Peabody Museum.

Carlson pointed out that, ‘The place is crawling with Venus symbols.’ Art historian, Breatriz de la Fuente, in awe of the mass of superb artistry, had no doubt, ‘The people who made the paintings were Maya.’ The people who commissioned them have been identified as the Olmeca-Xicalanca, who originated on the Gulf Coast and seized the Teotihuacán corridor linking the trade of the Mexican highlands and rich coast. The Olmeca-Xicalanca were a warrior-merchant’s people, the very name Cacaxtla means ‘merchant’s backpack,’ and they were most probably seafaring Putun or Chontal Maya, referred to as the ‘Phoenicians of the New World.’ Their heyday between 650 and about 790 AD, when the latest murals were painted, overlapped the decline and fiery fall of Teotihuacán itself around 700 AD. Occupying the rich trade route that had fed Teotihuacán’s rise can only have brought Cacaxtla into conflict with the ancient metropolis. The simultaneous rise of the Maya-influenced polity around Xochicalco to the south of Teotihuacán may also have had a hand in the collapse. We know that the religious heart of Teotihuacán, its mile-and-a-half-long avenue of temples, the Street of the Dead, was consumed in fire, and the Cacaxtla culture centred nearby in Cholollan (Cholulla) flourished until destroyed by the Toltecs hundreds of years later. On one of the Cacaxtla murals depicting emaciated captives prepared for sacrifice, there are seven burning temples, the symbols of fallen cities, two in the Teotihuacán style. Can the defeated bird men of the Cacaxtla murals be the lords of Teotihuacán? Was one of the offshoots of the Maya who burnt the numberless temples of Teotihuacán, and is just such an event painted on the walls of Cacaxtla?<sup>13</sup> If so, the gift of Star Wars to Smoking-Frog 400 years before had come full circle.

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2. John B. Carlson, ‘Rise and Fall of the City of the Gods,’ *Archaeology*, November/December 1993, pp. 61, 64.
3. Carlson, ‘Venus-Regulated Warfare and Ritual Sacrifice in Mesoamerica,’ *Astronomies and Cultures*, ed. Clive L. N. Ruggles and Nicholas J. Saunders, University of Colorado Press, Boulder, 1993, p. 211.
4. Carlson, ‘Venus-regulated Warfare and Ritual Sacrifice in Mesoamerica: Teotihuacán and the Cacaxtla “Star Wars” Connection,’ *Center for Archaeoastronomy Technical Publication No. 7*, 1991, College Park, Maryland, p. 7.
5. David Freidel, Linda Scheie, Joy Parker; *The Maya Cosmos*, William Morrow and Company, New York, 1993, p. 296.
6. Linda Scheie and David Freidel, *A Forest of Kings*, William Morrow, New York, 1990, p. 152.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

8. Clemency Chase Coggins, 'The Age of Teotihuacán and Its Mission Abroad,' *Teotihuacán: Art From the City of the Gods*, eds. Kathleen Berrin and Esther Pasztory, Thames and Hudson, London, 1994, pp. 147-148.

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9. Coggins, *ibid.*, p. 147.
10. Freidel et al, *The Maya Cosmos*, *ibid.*, pp. 299-300.
11. Carlson, 'Venus-Regulated Warfare and Ritual Sacrifice in Mesoamerica,' *ibid.*, p. 206.
12. George E. Stuart, 'Mural Masterpieces of Ancient Cacaxtla,' *National Geographic*, September 1992, pp. 122, 130.
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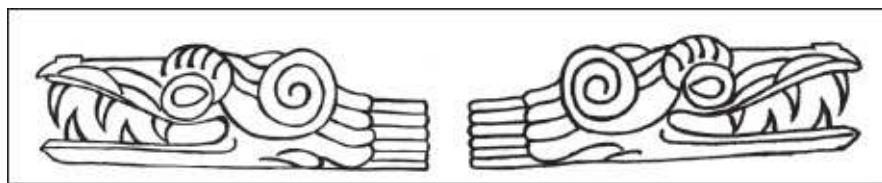


# Topiltzin Quezalcoatl, Our Lord the Feathered Serpent (Tenth Century)

A few hardy conquerors have overthrown kingdoms. Fewer still have overthrown empires—men like Cyrus, Alexander, and Genghis Khan. However, history records only one empire destroyed by a man 500 years in the grave. Such was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (Our Lord the Feathered Serpent), the first recognisable personality in ancient Mexican history.

The reality of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl is dimmed through layers of compounded history and legend. The destruction of the Indian books and the massive die-off of the knowledge keepers from disease only deepened the confusion. One thing is certain. For the Indians of Central Mexico, his achievements were of such a stupendous nature as to make him the progenitor of a golden age of men, a time of greatness. The centre of this Eden was the city of great Tollan and its people the Toltecs. The very name Toltec came to signify perfection in all creative things—the exquisite gem, the supreme artist, and the finest poetry. Driven by the conspiracy of evil men from his throne, he marched east with his followers and sailed across the fearsome ocean to return to his native land, vowing to return some day to regain his dominion. In the year 1 Reed, the year of his birth in the repeating 52-year native calendar cycle.

The collapse of the Toltec empire, with the burning of Tollan about 1168 AD, resounded through Mexican history. The fleeing nobility found refuge in many cities in the Valley of Mexico and nearby, especially in Culhuacán, meaning in Náhuatl The Place of ‘Those Who Have Ancestors.’ Dead though the Toltec state was, the refugees carried within themselves a priceless treasure. In their blood, they bore the very legitimacy of this time of perfection. So when a miserable nomadic people, the Mexica, entered the Valley of Mexico in the thirteenth century, craving a place among the civilised peoples they found there, they were careful to acquire, through marriage and adoption, local royalty of the Toltec bloodline. From this shrewd policy, a philosophy of empire was born. The Mexica boldly appropriated the entire Toltec legacy, proclaiming themselves the heirs and regenerators of the Toltec patrimony in a magnificent exercise of imperial propaganda. They had even appropriated the name of the greatest of the Toltec lineages and called themselves the Culhua-Mexica.



*Images of the Feathered Serpent.*

Arcane but powerful symbols of the Toltec patrimony were the turquoise diadem and imperial blue mantle of the Mexica emperors. The diadem worn by the Mexica emperors was the exact replica of those carved on royal figures in the ruins of Tollan. The mantle, a simple, tie-dyed pattern of diamonds and dots, stood out in its stark simplicity amid the splendours of the Mexica court. Only eleven of the 36 Mexica provinces provided these imperial cloaks as tribute. At least eight of them were known to have



been provinces of the preceding two empires, which both claimed descent from the Toltec lineages of Culhuacán—the thirteenth century Acolhua and fourteenth century Tepanec empires.<sup>1</sup>

Having appropriated the Toltec patrimony with great success, the Mexica did not realise that it contained the seed of their own destruction. Prominent within the Quetzalcoatl legend was the prophecy of his return to reclaim the patrimony. For almost a hundred years, that remained merely one of the finer and more esoteric points of theology for the Mexica, like the Second Coming of Christ, something unquestioned but so safely distant as to be irrelevant. Then in 1519 the prophecy was seemingly fulfilled with the arrival of Cortés, in the very year in legend that Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl had announced for his return, 1 Reed by the Mesoamerican calendar. The preceding years had been filled with premonitions of doom—strange apparitions, natural disasters, a crushing famine, and sobering lost wars. The moment messengers from the coast brought word of the arrival of Cortés' expedition, the Mexica emperor Motecuhzoma II, was beaten psychologically. A superstitious and rigid man, he was utterly convinced that the prophecy had been fulfilled. At that moment, he was no longer the sovereign of a great empire but merely a caretaker of the dominion of the returned Quetzalcoatl. Cortés was allowed to enter the imperial city, Tenochtitlan, where Motecuhzoma formally abdicated and made submission to the Spanish crown. Despite the incredible blunders by Cortés' subordinates and the subsequent replacement of Motecuhzoma by a less credulous monarch, the Mexica never recovered from this first surrender, which helped Cortés break their imperial grip on their subjects. Even after driving Cortés from their city, the Mexica were doomed. Smallpox, Cortés' military genius, and his skill at rallying allies from former Mexica subjects were crushing. When he returned to lay siege to Tenochtitlan, he came not with just a handful of surviving Spaniards but with scores of thousands of Indian allies. In the ensuing siege, Tenochtitlan did indeed become a second Tollan, not the Tollan of the golden age but Tollan of the great fall.



*The god Ehécatl. (Drawing by Keith Henderson)*

## The Man Within the Myth

Who, then, was this flesh-and-blood man who could bring down empires from the grave? That question is one of the greatest mysteries of Mesoamerican history, made more confusing by the fact that the name Quetzalcoatl was both that of a major deity and apparently a title. Ehécatl Quetzalcoatl, with whom one historical figure is associated, was the Wind God as well as a creator god and God of the Morning Star and Venus. The later attribute was closely associated with war in Mesoamerica, and, in fact, was the basis of a war cult that had spread from Teotihuacán to the Maya lands in the preceding Classic era. H

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