The Hero God

Quetzalcoatl meaning 'Feathered Serpent' was the patron god of learning, the arts, and priests.

The Aztecs also thought Quetzalcoatl was the legendary king of the Toltec city of Tula. In the Aztec legend this was a place of the arts and enlightenment until the city was attacked by the war god, Tezcatlipoca. There was a great battle and Quetzalcoatl lost, escaping to the east, leaving the more war-like Tezcatlipoca in power.

The Aztecs also believed Quetzalcoatl was a god of creation. All the gods met in Teotihuacán to create a new world. When finished, they needed humans to populate it, so the gods sent Quetzalcoatl to Mictlan, the land of the dead where the precious bones of human beings were kept. After many adventures, Quetzalcoatl finally brought the bones safely to the paradise of the gods. Here they were ground up and sprinkled with Quetzalcoatl's own blood to make them grow. A new race of humans appeared.

Quetzalcoatl is shown as Ehcatl-Quetzalcoatl, the god of wind - the wind that brings the life-giving rain clouds. He wears a mask like a beak and he is also wearing a cut conch shell or 'wind jewel' on his chest - a symbol of Ehcatl. (Codex Muzelatecohtli, 16th century)

Monadic mask of a god - possibly Quetzalcoatl or the rain god, Tláloc. The turquoise mosaics are fixed to a cedar base and the mask has shell teeth. Two images of serpents encircle the eyes and interweave along the bridge of the nose. The eyebrows are formed by the tails ending in rattles which were once gilded. H.17.3 cm. BM/Mexican Gallery

It is very similar to a mask that was part of the costume of Quetzalcoatl, sent by Moctezuma to Cortés: 'A mask worked in mosaic of turquoise; this mask has a double and twisted snake worked in the same stones whose fold was on the projection of the nose, then the tail was parted from the head and the head with part of the body went above one of the eyes so that it formed an eyebrow and the tail with part of body went over the other eye to form the other eyebrow ...' (Florentine Codex, 1579)
Symbols and Writing

Aztec pictorial signs present a challenge for us to interpret. The artists have used a body of symbols which have specific and often more than one meaning. In order for us to begin to understand a work, we need to be able to identify, decipher and interpret these symbols, as well as looking at the whole context in which the symbols were used. In many cases this is only partially possible.

Clues on a box
This is a fragment of an Aztec stone box in the British Museum. On one side, the rain-god Tiahuanaco, shown with typical goggled eyes and fanged mouth, pours maize and water from a jar. The figure is also wearing a gold pendant. The symbol of jade, associated with water, and also meaning 'precious', is on the jar. Water is shown as stylised droplets with circles at the end. l. 33cm. BM/Mexican Gallery

Offering water to a sleeping man. (adapted from the Florentine Codex, 1579)

Symbols in codex: stars, shell, stone, maize
Clues on a box (cont'd):  
Inside the box is the carved image of a mythical animal called an **ahuizotl** thought to live in Lake Texcoco. This animal is also the symbol for the ruler Ahuitzotl who had constructed one of the aqueducts bringing fresh water to **Tenochtitlan**. Its inauguration coincided with a flood which caused terrible damage and loss of life. 
This box fragment belongs with a lid now in Berlin which has an ahuizotl carved in relief on top. On the inside of the lid is the glyph for the Aztec date '7 Reed', the year of Ahuitzotl's reign when the aqueduct was commissioned. BM/Mexican Gallery

Did this box belong to the ruler himself? What was it used for? Some scholars think such boxes might have contained tools for **sacrifice** or personal **bloodletting**. Some show scenes of people piercing their ears, a common form of self-sacrifice to the gods in Mesoamerica. On the remains of the bottom of the box, there is part of the image of the earth goddess, who was thought to receive the blood that was shed.

**Numbers**

Mesoamerican number systems were based on units of twenty rather than tens. The Aztecs wrote one to twenty as dots, twenty as a flag, four hundred (20 x 20) as a feather, 8000 (400x20) as a pouch.

![Number symbols](image)

*A variety of tribute goods and quantities: 8,000 magueys of paper, 400 bundles of feathers and 20 jaguar skins.*

**Aztec day signs**

![Day signs](image)
Time and calendars

According to the Aztecs the world (or ‘sun’) had been destroyed four times before - the first time by jaguars, the second by wind, the third by a rain of fire, the fourth by a flood. They are represented by the date glyphs - 4 jaguar, 4 wind (Ehecatl), 4 rain (Tlaloc, the rain god), 4 water (Chalchiuhtlicue, the water goddess). The fifth and present earth will be destroyed by an earthquake, represented by the glyph for movement. The famous Aztec ‘calendar stone’ in Mexico City symbolically represents these five ‘worlds’.

Aztec years

Based on observations of the agricultural cycle, the natural environment and astronomical observations, the Aztec regarded time as cyclical constantly repeating, constantly being reborn. They had two calendars. One was a 365-day solar calendar of 18 periods of 20 days each and five unlucky days. The agricultural year was based on this. The second was a 260 day calendar of 20 days and 13 numbers. This probably related to the nine months of human pregnancy and was used for predicting the future.

Like two interlocking cogged wheels, the two calendars intermeshed. There are only four possible days of the ritual calendar that could land on the first day of the 365 day calendar each year - ‘reed’, ‘flintknife’, ‘rabbit’ or ‘house’. One of these combined with the appropriate number became the name of a solar year. For instance the Spaniards arrived in Mexico in the year ‘1 reed’ (1519).

Every fifty-two solar years (18,980 days) the two calendars coincided. For example the year ‘1 reed’ would only repeat every 52 years. In this way the cycle was like our century. To say ‘1 reed’ is like giving the year as ‘19’ but not saying if it is 1519 or 1919.

The end of a 52 year period was a sacred time. All the fires throughout the Aztec territory were extinguished and people waited to see if their world would continue or be destroyed. It was as if the world held its breath watching to see if the star known as ‘fire drill’ would rise over the horizon and life would continue. As soon as it was seen, a sacrifice was made, and a ritual fire was created that was taken by torches to kindle other fires in temples and homes.
Aztec writing

The Aztecs and their neighbours used a form of picture-writing. To interpret it, people had to know the meaning of the images, symbols and colours. Only priests and possibly educated nobles could fully understand it.

Some pictographs represent things, e.g. mountain 🌪.

Some represent ideas, e.g. a person being grabbed by the hair shows he has been captured (see below).

Some represent sounds, e.g. ‘tlantli’ is ‘teeth’ in nahuatl and is represented by 🥤. ‘Tlan’ also means place of. ‘Mazatl’ is nahuatl for ‘deer’; therefore the city Mazatlan, meaning the ‘place of the deer’ is therefore represented by the symbol for deer and teeth.

Before the Spaniards came there were thousands of books written by Aztecs and other Mesoamerican peoples. Moctezuma II was said to have a whole library of his own. The books included information about religious beliefs and ritual, historical events, and administrative lists. Most were made of sheets of deer skin or bark paper folded accordion fashion and painted on both sides.
War and sacrifice

Warriors

A warrior stood to gain fame and fortune. His status related to the number of captives he had taken. Each captive earned him the right to certain clothes and ornaments increasing in richness as the number of captives grew. Four captives and he became a seasoned warrior with the right to wear a long lip-plug, eagle feather tassels in his hair and finely woven and decorated clothing. More captives and he entered the ranks of the elite. Two of the most prestigious orders of warriors were the jaguar and eagle knights, dedicated to serving the god Huitzilopochtli.

A young man had only two or three chances to take his first captive. If he failed he lost all chance of advancement and was reduced to doing menial jobs.

Aztecs thought a warrior had a glorious death if he died in battle or on the sacrificial stone. For the next four years he accompanied the sun on its journey, and then returned to earth as a butterfly or hummingbird. Ordinary people who had died spent years enduring many perils to end up in the Land of Death, a cold and dark place.

Weapons and equipment.

The Aztecs used slings for throwing stones, and spear-throwers to hurl spears or darts before fighting at close range. The main hand-to-hand weapon was a wooden club embedded along the edges with blades of razor sharp obsidian. To protect themselves they wore padded cotton shirts. High-ranking warriors wore brightly coloured costumes, carried shields and some wore standards of feathers and cloth strapped to their backs. Men went into battle accompanied by the sounds of conch shell trumpets, and battle cries. The effect of this colourful, screaming mass bearing down on the enemy must have been terrifying.
Sacrifice

Aztec legend said that the gods met in the ancient city of Teotihuacan. One of them hurled himself into the flames of a fire and emerged as the sun, and the others followed suit to start the sun on its movement across the sky.

Humans repaid the gods by making offerings. The most precious offering was human blood. In Aztec religion blood was often synonymous with water. Like water, human blood was a life-giving force which gave the sun energy to continue its journey, and helped ensure fertility.

The Aztecs believed sacrifice was needed for their society to survive and human sacrifice affected everyone. Almost everyone took some part in their local festivals and many were spectators at the major religious ceremonies involving human sacrifices. The warrior captors frequently took major roles in the ceremonies. Their families and calpullis also gained prestige by the sacrifice. And for all Aztecs there was also the threat that they or their family would end up on an enemy’s sacrificial stone.

There is some dispute about the extent of Aztec human sacrifice. Pre-Hispanic images and manuscripts illustrate that the Aztecs and other Mesoamerican cultures did practice it, and some early post-conquest writers recount that thousands of victims were sometimes killed for one ceremony. Some scholars are more cautious about accepting such high estimates for the number of victims.
1 30.5 cm, BM/Mexican Gallery
covered in turquoise, malachite and shell.
The blade is chiseled and the handle is wood
with a handle in the form of an eagle head.
Knife, like sacrificial knives shown in codices.
What they said at the time

What the Spanish said:
'this horrible and abominable thing, truly worthy of punishment, that we have never seen anywhere else: every time they want to ask something of their idols, they take little girls and boys, and even adult men and women, and cut open their chests to pull out heart and entrails' (Hernan Cortes)

The Dominican friar, Bartolome de las Casas had some admiration for people who were willing to sacrifice their most precious possessions to their gods - human life. He said, perhaps ironically, 'Our Spanish nation does not seem to be wanting, for it has collectively sacrificed men by the hundreds'. (as quoted in S. Gruzinzki, Painting the Conquest, 1992)

What the Aztecs said:
'From them [the gods] we inherited our pattern of life which in truth did they hold; ...
Thus before them, do we prostrate ourselves; in their names we bleed ourselves; our oaths we keep, incense we burn, and sacrifices we offer.
It was the doctrine of the leaders that there is life because of the gods; with their sacrifice, they gave us life.'
(Aztec priests' speech to Spanish Franciscans, 1524)
Women as warriors

The women of Tlatelolco joined in the fighting. They struck at the enemy and shot arrows at them; they tucked up their skirts and dressed in the regalia of war. The Story of the Conquest as told by the Anonymous Authors of Tlatelolco (1528)

This was a rare event in a moment of desperation during the last attack by the Spanish. The writers may have exaggerated to show the seriousness of the situation; but other accounts also cast Aztec women in a different light as not always staying quietly at home. They describe gangs of women going into the streets to taunt unproven warriors or those not prepared to fight.

Women were also considered warriors during the act of childbirth. When a woman gave birth, she was described as having taken a captive.

This stone figure represents one of the Chiahuetes, spirits of women who had died in childbirth. If she died, she was considered to be a brave warrior who died in battle. And like male warriors she would spend the first four years accompanying the sun on its journey. But unlike male warriors, she then returned as a frightening figure, haunting the crossroads, seizing children and causing insanity. H. 72 cm. BM
Trade and Empire

Tenochtitlán was an island city with a scarcity of fertile land. As its population steadily grew there was need for more food and more agricultural land. One solution was to create chinampas - land reclaimed from the lake by filling enclosed areas with mud and debris.

The city population also acquired farm land on the mainland - taking it by force or by making alliances with their neighbours.

Boats brought goods and people to and from the island and along the many canals in the city itself. The Aztecs also constructed causeways connecting the city to the lake shore. Some of these were 8 horses wide (according to the Spaniards) with occasional bridges to allow the flow of water in the lakes. They built aqueducts to bring fresh water and an embankment (16 km. in length) separated the brackish waters of Lake Texcoco from the freshwaters surrounding Tenochtitlán.

A polished and painted bowl from Chetumal. A highly sought after trade item. h. 13.2cm. BM/ Mexican Gallery

An early Spanish illustration of Tenochtitlán showing the causeways and embankment (first published in 1524)
Tenochtitlán: A centre of power and commerce

It is estimated that more than 50% of the people in the Aztec empire lived in towns and cities rather than dispersed in the countryside. Tenochtitlán, the largest city and the capital, had a huge population of artisans, tradespeople, administrators and the governing elite. It was also the major religious centre with large numbers of priests and officials. So there was substantial demand for food, basic materials and luxury items. Goods flowed into Tenochtitlán and other cities in the form of tribute including services provided by subject peoples and trade goods. The Aztec were continually on the look-out for new territories to tap by conquest or trade.

Tlatelolco market

'It is where every kind of merchandise produced in these lands is found' (Hernán Cortés). 'Some of the soldiers among us who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, all over Italy and in Rome, said that so large a market place and so full of people, ... they never beheld before.' (the conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo)

It is estimated over 25,000 people used this huge market every day. The market was strictly run by its own officials and judges. Most goods were bartered but some commodities had become measures of exchange such as cacao beans and quills filled with gold dust.
Networks of tribute

Subject cities had to pay tribute in raw materials and manufactured goods and sometimes in direct labour. Most of this went to the rulers of Tenochtitlán or its allied cities. Major towns in each region were also centres of their own networks, demanding tribute from their surrounding regions. There was a constant stream of goods, people and information travelling to and from the capital, major cities and outlying areas, helping to keep the empire united and the rulers aware of developments even in the most far-flung areas.

Long Distance Trade

Professional merchants (pochteca) travelled all over the empire and beyond, trading in luxury goods such as jade, turquoise, feathers, and cacao beans. These merchants lived in special areas of the city, and had their own customs and laws. Whole families were involved and there is evidence that as well as men, there were also women merchants who did not travel but financed expeditions and controlled warehouses of goods in the city.

Merchants went on foot accompanied by porters (slaves or hired men) to carry the goods. There were no draught animals in Mesoamerica. Several accounts describe dangerous journeys into unknown or enemy territory. The information about these regions which they sometimes brought back was as valuable to the Aztec rulers as the trade goods.
The story of Turquoise

Value and use
One of the most precious materials was turquoise. The Aztec ruler's crown was made of turquoise. Words of wisdom were described as turquoise. It was often a metaphor for the blue of water. It was a luxury item and status symbol for wealthy nobles.

Turquoise was used in mosaics. Small pieces were individually cut, and smoothed and then fixed onto a base of wood, shell or bone with a resin. There were mosaic masks, headdresses, shields, sacrificial knives, figurines and pendants. Many of these adorned images of gods, or were worn by their impersonators during ceremonies. The serpent ornament on the front cover of this pack was probably worn as a chest ornament or as part of a headdress.

The artists
The most renowned workers in turquoise were Mixtec. The mosaics in the British Museum were probably made by Mixtec artists, either in Tenochtitlan or were made in the Mixtec province, possibly as tribute for the Aztecs.

The turquoise trade
Although there were some turquoise mines in Mesoamerica, turquoise was also imported from as far away as southwestern USA. Miners worked in cramped, hot and dusty conditions in mines often full of guano and insects. The work was brutal, the miners chipping out the turquoise with stone tools. From the mines, the stone was shipped to local centres such as Casas Grandes just south of the modern New Mexico border. Here it was used locally or traded south to the Aztec region in raw or worked form. Conch shells, the bones of tropical forest macaws and copper bells have been found in the Casas Grandes area - perhaps traded from Mesoamerica in exchange. The trading routes were long and difficult, crossing through hostile territories and desert regions.
Art and artists

Aztec artists and craftspeople were organised into groups similar to guilds with children following their parents' occupation. People in different districts specialised in different arts, and certain regions of the empire were also well-known for particular types of arts and crafts.

 Aztec stone image of the fire-serpent, Xiuhtecalli. Three-dimensional sculptures like this decorated the walls and steps of temples. The fire-serpent refers to the burning rays of the sun. It is usually depicted as a reptile with a conical, segmented body and tail in the form of a cobra's head. Legend has it that Huitzilopochtli welded a xiuhtecalli to defeat the moon and stars, his sister and brothers. h. 75.5 cm. BM, Mexican Gallery.

Whatever the artist makes is an image of reality he seeks its true appearance. If he makes a turtle the carbon is fashioned thus: its shell as if it were moving, its head thrust out, seeming to move, its neck and feet as if it were stretching them out. (Florentine Codex, 1579)

Paper banners (Codex Magliabechiano, 16th century)
Architecture

Most people's homes were small, simple constructions of reed, wood or adobe (dried mud) with thatched roofs. Important public buildings and homes of the nobility were more substantial, built of volcanic stone and adobe, with walls plastered with lime and often brightly painted.

‘How spacious and well built they were, of beautiful stone work and cedar wood, and the wood of other sweet scented trees, with great rooms and courts, wonderful to behold, covered with awnings of cotton cloth.’ (the conquistador, Bernal Díaz del Castillo)

The focal point of all cities was the ceremonial precinct. The central plaza in Tenochtitlan contained many different temples. Most were in the form of a stepped square pyramid with a small one room sanctuary for the god or gods on top covered by an ornamental roof. Public ceremonies took place in the open with the public looking on from below. The Great Temple dominated all the rest. It had two sanctuaries on top for the gods, Tlaloc, the rain god, and the sun god, Huitzilopochtli, with two steep stairways leading to them. Like all the temples it was painted, a brilliant white with coloured decoration - blue and white for Tlaloc and white and red for Huitzilopochtli.

The Great Temple was the symbolic centre of the Aztec world. It was the place where the four cardinal directions intersected and where a vertical axis connected the celestial world of the gods with the human world of earth and the underworld below. Some archaeologists believe the platform of the temple might symbolise the earth, while the tiers represent the layers of the ‘heavens,’ offerings buried beneath the temple may relate to the underworld. The temple was also a man-made representation of two sacred mountains - Tlancatenilhualt, where Tlaloc resided, and Coatepec, the place where Huitzilopochtli defeated his enemies.

A reconstructed Temple Pyramid, Sacta
Cecilia Acatlan
Sculpture

'A good stone cutter... is of skilled hands, he ... quarries, breaks [the rocks]; pecks, smooths them; places, fits the stones well; abrades them; pounds, hammers them; splits them with a wedge ...; forms curved stone - cuts it. He... sculpts in stone,... forms works of artifice, of skill...:' (Florentine Codex 1579).

Stoneworkers used simple but effective tools, such as flint knives, obsidian cutting and scraping tools, and drills and abrasives made from perishable material such as reeds, cords, sand and water. Metal was almost exclusively used for luxury items such as jewellery rather than tools. Larger sculpture was usually in volcanic stone, smaller objects in greenstone, porphyry, onyx or rock crystal. Some pieces still have traces of the brightly coloured paint that originally covered them.

Aztec sculpture has a sense of the monumental no matter what its actual size with a tremendous feeling of vitality. The snake below looks very much alive and alert.

This rattlesnake is carved of bone. It still has remnants of red pigment, especially on the carved underside. The Aztec believed snakes had spiritual/magical associations. Their serpentine movement was a metaphor for the movement of water and lightning and was often used to symbolise water and fertility. Since they shed their skin they also symbolised renewal.

h. 22cm. Aztec: BM/Mexican Gallery
Pottery

'The good potter takes great pains with his work; he teaches the clay to lie,' 
'Good pots are hard-fired which ring, which are well-tempered'.
(Florentine Codex, 1579)

Clay was used to make a variety of everyday and ceremonial objects, such as dishes, griddles, jars, sculptures, spindle whorls, containers for burning incense, and stamps for decorating materials such as paper.

Aztec and other pre-Hispanic potters built and coiled pots by hand or sometimes used clay moulds to make details or figurines. (The potter's wheel was introduced by the Spaniards after the conquest.) Most of the pottery was coloured and decorated with clay slips. No glazes were used but potters achieved a glossy shine on some wares by burnishing before firing.

Most of the pieces that have survived were made for the Aztec elite or for ritual purposes and are of good quality. One distinctive type of pottery is a red ware covered in white slip and painted with simple but often elegant black patterns. The Aztecs valued most of all imported pottery from the Cholula and Mixtec areas. Only the ruling class and very rich could afford it. It was highly burnished, multi-coloured and painted with ornate patterns and images.

A Mixtec incense burner used for burning copal, a scented resin, for ritual purposes. This one has legs so it can stand freely. Others were carried in ceremonies by priests as shown by this manuscript detail. 156cm. BM/Mexican Gallery
Metalwork

'They designed, created, sketched it with charcoal and wax, in order to cast the precious metal, the yellow or the white [gold and silver]; thus they began their works.' (Florentine Codex, 1579)

Metalworking came late to Mesoamerica (about AD800), the technology having been introduced from South America. Gold, silver and copper was worked and there was also some bronze manufacturing. Smiths used the lost-wax method of casting to produce the finest works.

Huge numbers of Aztec period pieces were melted down by the Spaniards. The few that have survived show the high quality of work produced. The most accomplished metalworkers were Mixtec who are said to have brought the technology to Tenochtitlan.

An indigenous writer's description of the Spanish reaction to gold:
'They picked up the gold and fingered it like monkeys...Their bodies swelled with greed and their hunger was ravenous; they hungered like pigs for that gold.' (Anonymous Authors of Tistatolco, 1528)
Textiles

"Although they had no silk in this country, there were clothes made of worked and painted cotton, of great curiosity and beauty, made with great care and elegance." (Diego Durán, 1581)

Weaving and embroidery were done exclusively by women and finely worked textiles were very highly valued. Both the pre-Hispanic and early Colonial manuscripts are full of illustrations of beautifully patterned costumes and textiles. By the time of Moctezuma II, only nobles could wear the soft white or brown cotton fabrics decorated with woven or embroidered patterns. Commoners had to make do with clothing woven of brown ixtle, a type of vegetable fibre. The dyes for the luxury cloths came from a variety of vegetable and mineral sources. Red dyes came from the insect, cochinilla. A beautiful purple dye came from a species of mollusc.

Featherwork

The Aztecs considered featherwork to be as precious as gold, jade or turquoise. Guilds of featherworkers specialised in this complex art. Mosaics of feathers were glued on to shields and banners, and sewn on to cotton textiles.

The feathers came from a variety of tropical birds, such as parrots, red spoonbill, blue cottinga, hummingbirds and most sought after of all, the sacred quetzal (now almost extinct). The Aztecs prized its long brilliant green feathers.

Weaving on a backstrap loom and making feather mosaics (Florentine Codex, 1579)

Designs for ceremonial capes (Codex Magliabechiano, 16th.)