

Monumenta Mexicana

This section of Cabrera's epic poem Monumenta Mexicana is included because of the great influence of the Quetzalcoatl legend. Quetzalcoatl is the most ubiquitous and mysterious figure in pre-Columbian Mexico and the entire southern portion of the Western Hemisphere. His name, which comes from the Nahuatl language, literally means feathered serpent. In Mayan lands he is roughly equivalent to Kukulcan, whose name also means feathered serpent. Quetzalcoatl and his worship are first documented in the period 400–600 CE in the great city of Teotihuacan, a religious center in the Mexican highlands, which was generally believed to have originated around the time of Christ. After the Spanish conquest a number of writings describe the god "Quetzalcoatl" and relate him to a ruler of the mytho-historic Toltec city of Tula, or Tollan, and give him the names "Ce Acatl," "Topiltzin," "Nacxitl," or "Quetzal." Cabrera uses both "Quetzalcoatl" and "Quetzal" when referring to the legendary ruler. Historians differ on the question whether narratives about this ruler describe actual events. According to the stories, Tula or Tollan was a great stone city that became dominant around 1050 after the decline of Teotihuacan. Quetzalcoatl was king of Tollan; his defeat, at the hands of people more brutal than he, led to his departure as the Feathered Serpent, who vowed to return. This departure in a boat with a promise to return was central to the mythology of the region. While some modern scholars question whether this legend had a great bearing on the Mayan and Aztec reluctance to make short work of the Spaniards, it is worth noting that Columbus was amused, and then annoyed, by the Indians he encountered, all of whom seemed to have announced, even after some time spent living among Columbus's men, that the Europeans had descended from the skies. That belief about Europeans does not seem to have occurred among the Indians of North America.

Quetzalcoatl the King

Mexīcae longaeua canō primordia gentis

Ēgrediā quae stirpe fluēns Toltēca superbit,

Nūminis afflātū dīvinōs nacta triumphōs

Rex dum iūra dabat Quetzāl cognōminē Cōātl,

5 Multa diū bellō passus longōque labōre

Pāce super, dīvīs nōtās dum conderet artēs,

Quinque ferē regnō lustrīs lābentibus almō

Sceptra tulit mīrōque genus dītāvit honōre,

Parcere subiectīs superāns ratiōne furōrem.

VOCABULARY

afflatus afflatus *m* breath

cognom•en –inis *n* surname, last name

con•do –dere –didi –ditum to establish, found, build

dit•o (1) to enrich

fere *adv* almost, nearly

flu•o –ere –xi –xum to flow, spring from, rise

labor labi lapsus to glide, slide, pass

longaev•us –a –um *adj* ancient, aged

lustr•um –i *n* a period of five years, period of years

nanciscor nancisci nactus to gain, get

num•en –inis *n* divinity, god, divine will

Num•en –inis *n* (*personal name*) Power, Great Spirit, God

parc•o –ere peperci *w dat* to spare

pat•er –ris *m* father, elder

patior pati passus *dep* to suffer, endure

primordi•um –i *n* origin, beginning

sub•igo –igere –egi –actum to overcome, conquer

superb•io –ire –ivi –itum to be splendid, shine forth

super *adv* besides, in addition

NEOLOGISMS

Mexic•a –ōrum *n pl* race including Aztecs and possibly others; the city Tenochtitlán

Mexic•us –a –um *adj* Mexican, Aztec

Toltec•us –a –um *adj* Toltec; of the Toltec race