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## The Birth of Huitzilopochtli, Patron God of the Aztecs

*This is a teocuitatl, "divine song," a sort of epic poem in which the birth of Huitzilopochtli is recalled. The portentous patron god of the Aztecs was the son of Coatlicue, "she of the skirt of serpents," a title of the Mother goddess. This text has been the object of various forms of interpretation. According to some researchers, the myth has to do with an astral primeval confrontation. Huitzilopochtli is the Sun who is born from Cuatlicue, the earth. His sister, Coyolxauhqui, the moon incites her four hundred brothers, the innumerable stars, to attack the Sun. In the astral struggle the moon and the four hundred stars are defeated. The triumph of the Sun, the patron god of the Aztecs, anticipates the destiny of the latter. This idea leads to a different or complementary interpretation. If the destiny of Huitzilopochtli has been to defeat his enemies and to deprive them of their possessions, the Aztec people, by siding with their patron God, will become "the people of the Sun," those chosen to impose their rule on many other nations in the four quadrants of the universe.*

The Aztecs greatly revered Huitzilopochtli;  
they knew his origin, his beginning,  
was in this manner:

In Coatepec, on the way to Tula,  
there was living,  
there dwelt a woman  
by the name of Coatlicue.  
She was mother of the four hundred gods of the south  
and their sister  
by name Coyolxauhqui.

And this Coatlicue did penance there,  
she swept, it was her task to sweep,  
thus she did penance  
in Coatepec, the Mountain of the Serpent.  
And one day,  
when Coatlicue was sweeping,  
there fell on her some plumage,  
a ball of fine feathers.  
Immediately Coatlicue picked them up  
and put them in her bosom.  
When she finished sweeping,  
she looked for the feathers  
she had put in her bosom,  
but she found nothing there.  
At that moment Coatlicue was with child.

The four hundred gods of the south,  
seeing their mother was with child,  
were very annoyed and said:  
"Who has done this to you?  
Who has made you with child?  
This insults us, dishonors us."  
And their sister Coyolxauhqui  
said to them:  
"My brothers, she has dishonored us,  
we must kill our mother,  
the wicked woman who is now with child.  
Who gave her what she carries in her womb?"

When Coatlicue learned of this,  
she was very frightened,  
she was very sad.  
But her son Huitzilopochtli, in her womb,  
comforted her, said to her:  
"Do not be afraid,  
I know what I must do."  
Coatlicue, having heard  
the words of her son,  
was consoled,  
her heart was quiet,  
she felt at peace.

But meanwhile the four hundred gods of the south  
came together to take a decision,  
and together they decided  
to kill their mother,  
because she had disgraced them.  
They were very angry,  
they were very agitated,  
as if the heart had gone out of them.  
Coyolxauhqui incited them,  
she inflamed the anger of her brothers,  
so that they should kill her mother.  
And the four hundred gods  
made ready,  
they attired themselves as for war.

And those four hundred gods of the south  
were like captains;  
they twisted and bound up their hair  
as warriors arrange their long hair.

But one of them called Cuahuitlicac  
 broke his word.  
 What the four hundred said,  
 he went immediately to tell,  
 he went and revealed it to Huitzilopochtli.  
 And Huitzilopochtli replied to him:  
 "Take care, be watchful,  
 my uncle, for I know well what I must do."

And when finally they came to an agreement,  
 the four hundred gods were determined to kill,  
     to do away with their mother;  
 then they began to prepare,  
 Coyolxauhqui directing them.  
 They were very robust, well equipped,  
 adorned as for war ,  
 they distributed among themselves their paper garb,  
 the *anecuyotl* [the girdle], the nettles,  
 the streamers of colored paper;  
 they tied little bells on the calves of their legs,  
 the bells called *oyohualli*.  
 Their arrows had barbed points.

Then they began to move,  
 they went in order, in line,  
 in orderly squadrons,  
 Coyolxauhqui led them.  
 But Cuahuitlicac went immediately up onto the mountain,  
 so as to speak from there to Huitzilopochtli;  
 he said to him:  
 "Now they are coming."  
 Huitzilopochtli replied to him:  
 "Look carefully which way they are coming."  
 Then Cuahuitlicac said:  
 "Now they are coming through Tzompantitlan."  
 And again Huitzilopochtli said to him:  
 "Where are they coming now?"  
 Cuahuitlicac replied to him:  
 "Now they are coming through Coaxalpan."  
 And once more Huitzilopochtli asked Cuahuitlicac:  
 "Look carefully which way they are coming."  
 Immediately Cuahuitlicac answered him:  
 "Now they are coming up the side of the mountain."  
 And yet again Huitzilopochtli said to him:  
 "Look carefully which way they are coming."  
 Then Cuahuitlicac said to him:  
 "Now they are on the top, they are here,  
 Coyolxauhqui is leading them."

At that moment Huitzilopochtli was born,  
he put on his gear,  
his shield of eagle feathers,  
his darts, his blue dart-thrower.  
He painted his face  
with diagonal stripes,  
in the color called "child's paint."  
On his head he arranged fine plumage,  
he put on his earplugs.  
And on his left foot, which was withered,  
he wore a sandal covered with feathers,  
and his legs and his arms  
were painted blue.

And the so-called Tochancalqui  
set fire to the serpent of candlewood,  
the one called Xiuhcoatl  
that obeyed Huitzilopochtli.  
With the serpent of fire he struck Coyolxauhqui,  
he cut off her head,  
and left it lying there  
on the slope of Coatepetl.  
The body of Coyolxauhqui  
went rolling down the hill,  
it fell to pieces,  
in different places fell her hands,  
her legs, her body.

Then Huitzilopochtli was proud,  
he pursued the four hundred gods of the south,  
he chased them, drove them off  
the top of Coatepetl, the mountain of the snake.  
And when he followed them  
down to the foot of the mountain,  
he pursued them, he chased them like rabbits,  
all around the mountain.  
He made them run around it four times.  
In vain they tried to rally against him,  
in vain they turned to attack him,  
rattling their bells  
and clashing their shields.  
Nothing could they do,  
nothing could they gain,  
with nothing could they defend themselves.  
Huitzilopochtli chased them, he drove them away,  
he humbled them, he destroyed them, he annihilated them.

Even then he did not leave them,  
 but continued to pursue them,  
 and they begged him repeatedly, they said to him:  
 "It is enough!"

But Huitzilopochtli was not satisfied,  
 with force he pushed against them,  
 he pursued them.  
 Only a very few were able to escape him,  
 escape from his reach.  
 They went toward the south,  
 and because they went toward the south,  
 they are called gods of the south.  
 And when Huitzilopochtli had killed them,  
 when he had given vent to his wrath,  
 he stripped off their gear ,  
 their ornaments, their *anecuyotl*;  
 he put them on, he took possession of them,  
 he introduced them into his destiny,  
 he made them his own insignia.<sup>1</sup>

And this Huitzilopochtli, as they say,  
 was a prodigy,  
 because only from fine plumage,  
 which fell into the womb of his mother, Coatlicue,  
 was he conceived,  
 he never had any father.  
 The Aztecs venerated him,  
 they made sacrifices to him,  
 honored and served him.  
 And Huitzilopochtli rewarded  
 those who did this.  
 And his cult came from there,  
 from Coatepec, the Mountain of the Serpent,  
 as it was practiced from most ancient times.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The meaning of these last lines is particularly eloquent. When Huitzilopochtli defeated and killed his brothers, he took possession of their insignia and attributes and he introduced them into his own destiny. For the Aztecs this was an anticipation of their own future. They too had to take possession of the riches of others to introduce them into their own destiny.

<sup>2</sup> *Florentine Codex*, book 3, chapter I. Translation by M. Leon-Portilla.

### Reading Assignment Part THREE:

**TULA: TOLTEC** The colonnaded Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itza resembles buildings excavated at Tula, the Toltec capital north of Mexico City. Detailed resemblances between the sculptures of the two sites support the inference that the builders of Tula worked for the same Toltec masters as those who ruled the Maya at Chichen Itza.

The name Toltec, which signifies "makers of things," generally is applied to a powerful tribe of invaders from the north, whose arrival in south-central Mexico coincided with the great disturbances that, as we have seen, must have

contributed to the fall of the Classic civilizations. The Toltec capital at Tula flourished from about 900 to 1200. The Toltecs were great political organizers and military strategists and came to dominate large parts of north and central Mexico, Yucatan, and the highlands of Guatemala. They were respected as the masters of all that came to hand, and later peoples looked back on them admiringly, proud to claim descent from them.



17-16 Colossal atlantids, Pyramid B, Toltec, Tula, Hidalgo, Mexico, Early Postclassic, ca 1050. Stone, 16'

Legend and history recount that in the city of Tula civil strife between the forces of peace and those of war and bloodletting resulted in the victory of the militarists. The grim, warlike regime that followed is personified in four colossal atlantids that portray armed warriors (**FIG. 17-16**). Built up of four stone drums each, these sculptures loom above Pyramid B at Tula. They wear stylized feathered headdresses and, as breastplates, stylized butterflies, heraldic symbols of the Toltecs. In one hand they clutch a bundle of darts, in the other, an *atlatl* (throw-stick). The architectural function of these support figures (they originally were designed to support a now missing temple roof) requires rigidity of pose, compactness, and strict simplicity of contour; where possible, all projecting details are suppressed. The unity and regularity of architectural mass and silhouette here combine perfectly with abstraction of form. The effect is that of

overwhelming presence. These images of brutal and implacable authority, with "gaze blank and pitiless as the sun," stand eternally at attention, warding off all hostile threats to sovereign power, good or evil.

By 1180, the last Toltec ruler abandoned Tula and was followed by most of his people. Some years later, the city was catastrophically destroyed, its ceremonial buildings burnt to their foundations, its walls thrown down, and the stragglers scattered throughout Mexico.

**TENOCHTITLAN: AZTEC** The destruction of Tula and the disintegration of the Toltec Empire in central Mexico made for a century of anarchy in the Valley of Mexico. Barbaric Northern invaders, who again must have wrought the destruction, gradually organized into small, warring city-states. Nevertheless, they civilized themselves on the cultural remains and traditions of the Toltecs. When the last wave of northern invaders appeared, they were regarded as detestable savages.

These "savages" were the Aztecs, the "people whose face nobody knows." With astonishing rapidity, they were transformed within a few generations from migratory outcasts and serfs to mercenaries of the Tepanec imperialists, and then masters in their own right of the petty kingdoms of the Valley of Mexico. In the process, they acquired, like their neighbors, the culture of the Toltecs. They had begun to call themselves *Mexica*, and, following a legendary prophecy that they would build a city where they saw an eagle perched on a cactus with a serpent in its mouth, they settled on an island in the great Lake Texcoco (Lake of the Moon). Their settlement grew into the magnificent city of Tenochtitlan, which in 1519 so astonished the Spanish conqueror Cortes and his men.

The Aztecs were known by those they subdued as fierce in war and cruel in peace. Indeed, they gloried in warfare and in military prowess. They radically changed the social and political situation in Mexico. The cults of bloodletting and human sacrifice, though still practiced, had been waning in central Mexico since Toltec times. The Aztecs revived the rituals with a vengeance—and a difference. In the older civilizations, like the Classic Maya, the purposes of religion and statecraft were in balance. With the Aztec, the purpose of religion was to serve the policy of the state. The Aztecs believed that they had a divine mission to propagate the cult of their tribal god, Huitzilopochtli (pronounced weet-zeel-O-POCH-tee), the hummingbird god of war. This goal meant forcing conformity on all peoples conquered by them. Subservient groups had not only to submit to Aztec military power

but also were forced to accept the cult of Huitzilopochtli and to provide victims for sacrifices to him. Thus, Aztec statecraft used the god to achieve and maintain its ruthless political dominion. Human sacrifice was vastly increased in a reign of terror designed to keep the Aztec Empire under control. To this end, tribute of sacrificial victims was regularly levied on unwilling subjects. It is no wonder that Cortes, in his conquest of the Aztec state, found ready allies among the peoples the Aztecs had subjugated.

The ruins of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, lie directly beneath the center of Mexico City. The exact location of many of the most important structures within the Aztec "sacred precinct" was discovered in the late 1970s, and extensive excavations near the cathedral in Mexico City are ongoing. The principal building is the Great Temple (Templo Mayor), a double temple-pyramid honoring the gods Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc, the rain god. Two great staircases sweep upward from the plaza level to the double sanctuaries at the summit. The Great Temple is a remarkable example of superimposition, a common trait in Mesoamerica. The excavated structure is composed of five shells, the earlier walls nested within the later. The sacred precinct also contained palaces, the temples of other deities (the Aztec pantheon was as crowded as that of the Maya), a ball court, and a skull rack for the exhibition of thousands of the heads of victims killed in sacrificial rites.

Tenochtitlan was a city laid out on a grid plan in quarters and wards. Its location on an island in Lake Texcoco caused communication and transport to be conducted by canals and waterways; many of the Spaniards thought of Venice when they saw the city rising from the waters like a radiant vision. It was crowded with buildings, plazas, and courtyards, and was equipped with a vast and ever-busy marketplace. The city proper had a population of more than one hundred thousand people; the total population of the area of Mexico dominated by the Aztecs at the time of the conquest has been estimated at eleven million.

The Temple of Huitzilopochtli commemorates his victory over his brothers and sister; since he is a sun god, the nature myth reflects the sun's conquest of the stars and the moon. Revenging the death of his mother, Coatlicue (pronounced kwah-TLEE-kway), at the hands of his siblings, he kills them and dismembers the body of his evil sister, Coyolxauhqui (pronounced ko-yoI-SHOW-kee.) The macabre event is depicted in a work of sculpture, whose discovery in 1978 set off the ongoing archeological investigations near the main plaza in Mexico City. The huge stone disk (**FIG. 17-17**), about 11 feet in diameter, was placed at the foot of the staircase leading up to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli. Carved on it is an image of the segmented body of Coyolxauhqui. The horror of the theme should not distract us from its artistic merit; the disk has a kind of dreadful, yet formal, beauty. At the same time, it is an unforgettable expression of Aztec temperament and taste, and the cruelty inculcated by ceremonies of blood. The image proclaimed the power of the god over his enemies and the inevitable fate that must befall them. As such, it was an awful reminder to sacrificial victims, as they were ritually halted beside it preparatory to mounting the stairs that led to the temples above and to death.

The sculpture is marvelously composed. Within the circular space, the carefully enumerated, richly detailed components of the design are so adroitly placed that they seem to have a slow, turning rhythm, like some revolving constellation. (This presentation would be appropriate for a goddess of the sky, no matter her decrepitude!) The carving is confined to a single level, a smoothly even, flat surface raised from a flat ground. We have seen this kind of relief in the Bird-Jaguar lintel from Yaxchilan (**FIG. 17 - 10**). It is the sculptural equivalent of the line and flat tone, figure and neutral ground, characteristic of Mesoamerican painting.





17-18 Coatlicue (Lady of the Skirt of Serpents), Aztec, 15<sup>th</sup> century. Andesite, approx. 8'6" high. National Archeological Museum, Mexico City.

In addition to relief carving, the Aztecs, unlike the Maya, produced sculpture unbound to architecture, freestanding and in the round. The colossal monster statue of Coatlicue (Lady of the Skirt of Serpents), ancient earth mother of the gods Huitzilopochtli and Coyolxauhqui, is a massive apparition of dread congealed into stone (FIG. 17-18).

Sufficiently expressive of the Aztec taste for the terrible, the beheaded goddess is composed of an inventory of macabre and repulsive objects. Up from her headless neck writhe two serpents whose heads meet to form a tusked mask. The goddess wears a necklace of severed human hands and excised human

hearts. The pendant of the necklace is a skull. Her skirt is formed of

17-17 Coyolxauhqui, from the Great Temple at Tenochtitlan, Aztec, Mexico City, Late Postclassic, ca 1400-1500. Stone, diameter approx. 11'.

entwined snakes. Her hands and feet have great claws, with which she tears the human flesh she consumes. All of her loathsome attributes symbolize sacrificial death. Yet, in Aztec thought, this mother of the gods combines savagery and tenderness, for out of destruction arises new life.

The main forms are carved in high relief; the details are executed either in low relief or by incising. The overall aspect is of an enormous, blocky mass, the ponderous weight of which is in itself a threat to the awed

viewer. In its original setting, where it may have functioned in the visual drama of sacrificial rites, it must have had a terrifying effect on victims.

It was impossible for the Spanish conquerors to reconcile the beauty of the great city of Tenochtitlan with its hideous cults. They wonderingly admired its splendid buildings, ablaze with color; its luxuriant and

spacious gardens, sparkling waterways, teeming markets, and vivacious populace; its grandees resplendent in the feathers of exotic birds. But when Moctezuma, king of the Aztecs, brought Cortes and his entourage into the shrine of Huitzilopochtli's temple, the newcomers started back in horror and disgust from the huge statues clotted with dried blood. One of Cortes's party, Bernal Diaz del Castillo recorded: "There was on the walls such a crust of blood, and the whole floor bathed in it, that even in the slaughter houses of Castile there is not such a stench." Cortes was furious. Denouncing Huitzilopochtli as a devil, he proposed to put a high cross above the pyramid and a statue of the Virgin in the sanctuary to exorcise its evil.

This proposal would come to symbolize the avowed purpose and the historic result of the Spanish conquest of Mesoamerica. The cross and the Virgin, triumphant, would be venerated in new shrines raised upon the ruins of the plundered temples of the Indian gods, and the banner of the Most Catholic Kings of Spain would wave over new atrocities of a European kind.