

Quetzalcoatl and a Sacred Grain Bin

In many areas of rural Mexico there survive elements of the ancient, pre-christian religion. For Farmers - people of the earth - the changes of seasons, the forces of sun, wind and rain were and still are seen as manifestations of ancient divine power. Small shrines, carefully hidden in local caves and ravines and often containing fragments of pre-hispanic sculpture and pottery, are visited at important times of the year for the purposes of insuring good harvests and the well-being of the community.

I have reconstructed my own version one of these secret shrines using a sculpture from the Gentling collection. The piece in question, an early Aztec stone carving of a rattlesnake with a man's face emerging from the serpent's mouth, represents the god Quetzalcoatl, the fabled deity whose predicted return to rule Mexico exactly coincided with the arrival of Cortes in 1519.

I have surrounded the sculpture, ^{as} and the indians would, with symbolic flowers and corn cobs which recall the legend of Quetzalcoatl's mythical descent into the underworld of the Rain God's kingdom to retrieve corn for the benefit of mankind. There are seven corn cobs depicted here which allude to the goddess of foodstuffs, especially corn, who was known as Chicomecoatl "Seven Serpent."

The serpent "coatl" was a very complex symbol to ancient Mexicans, but essentially the snake stands for the life force, the procreative and destructive powers of the earth. Of all snakes the rattlesnake was a particularly powerful example among the Aztecs, since it was extremely fertile, lived much of its time in ~~huge~~ colonies in caves and was deadly poisonous. In the Aztec mind the power of life always carried with it the power of death, since new life inevitably emerged from previous life.

The rattlesnake, like other snakes, uniquely shed its skin at various times of the year - with the effect on the observer that an entirely new snake emerged from the dead skin of the old - a potent symbol for death and rebirth. We also know that in the ancient myths Quetzalcoatl also descended into the underworld to retrieve the bones of humans who had all been exterminated at the end of the fourth epoch. He ground the bones to make a bone meal (an allusion here to corn meal) and then watered them with his own blood to make a dough out of which he created the present generation of human beings for the fifth and present age. Hardened kernels of corn are still thought of as the "bones" of the corn of the previous season.

The god's face seen here emerging from the open mouth of the snake sculpture symbolizes his re-emergence from the interior of the earth, from the underworld to insure new life. The sacred seeds from these seven corn cobs, stored all year in this holy "grain bin" of a cave shrine would have been given to local farmers to scatter in their fields to insure the presence of the god and the health of the new crop.

To most Mexicans Quetzalcoatl's name means "Plumed Serpent",

but few today know that the ancients also translated his name as "Precious Twin." Scott and I have used Quetzalcoatl's symbol of the One Reed Year as our logo for our publishing ventures. My friends in Mexico who are familiar with our researches and paintings of ancient Mexico refer to us only half jokingly as the returned "Quetzalcoates. " Quetzalcoatl was highly regarded as an essentially benign deity, the patron of priests and of scholars and of the arts in general. His name is synonymous with culture and civilization as well as with fertility and good health.