

Ancient Mexico: The Legacy of the Plumed Serpent

*The greatness of Mexico is that its past is always alive . . . Mexico exists in the present, its dawn is occurring right now, because it carries with it the wealth of a living past, an unburied memory.*¹

— Carlos Fuentes

MUCH OF THE HISTORY AND TRADITIONS OF MESOAMERICA, a cultural region encompassing most of Mexico and northern Central America, can be traced through a pictorial language, or writing system, that was introduced around AD 950. By 1300 it had been widely adopted throughout Southern Mexico. This shared art style and writing system was used to record and preserve the history, genealogy, and mythology of the region. It documents systems of trade and migration, royal marriage, wars, and records epic stories that continue to be passed on through a pictorial and oral tradition today.

This pictorial language was composed of highly conventionalized symbols characterized by an almost geometric precision of line. It was manifested in polychrome (brightly painted) ceramic objects, codices (illustrated manuscripts), and other small-scale, portable works of art in bone, wood, shell, precious metal, and stone. Artisans used vivid colors, and the imagery on artworks shared many attributes of contemporary cartoons, particularly an exaggerated emphasis on the head and hands. Often depicting figures and animals, the style was employed primarily to convey historical or ritual narrative. Certain symbols were reduced to simple icons that could signify either an idea or a spoken word and facilitated communication for a multi-lingual population.

The system of pictographic communication and its accompanying shared art style was an ingenious response to the needs of communities whose leaders spoke as many as twelve different languages. Beginning in the tenth century, Southern Mexico was dominated by a confederacy of city-states (autonomous states consisting of a city and surrounding territories). Largely controlled by the nobility of the Nahua, Mixtec, and Zapotec peoples, these city-states claimed a common heritage. They believed that their kingdoms had been founded by the hero Quetzalcoatl, the human incarnation of the Plumed Serpent. They shared a culture, worldview, and some religious practices but operated independently. Residents of these city-states called themselves the Children of the Plumed Serpent. More than fifteen distinct ethnic groups, including the Mixtecs and Zapotecs, lived (and still thrive today) in what are now the Mexican states of Oaxaca, Puebla, and Tlaxcala. These communities transformed Mesoamerica with their innovative system of social and economic exchange. This curriculum and the corresponding exhibition, *Children of the Plumed Serpent: The Legacy of Quetzalcoatl in Ancient Mexico*, examine the shared art style and pictographic writing system that served to unite the broad network of elites across the region.

As you explore these curriculum materials, consider the following:

- Why do people record and preserve their history and belief systems? What are the ways in which they do so?
- How do we use stories (oral, written, and pictorial) to communicate our identity and beliefs?
- How do we record our family histories and rituals?
- How do beliefs and ideas circulate today? What are the systems that support the exchange of goods and ideas?

Origins of Quetzalcoatl: The World of Tula and Chichen Itza

Who is Quetzalcoatl, or the Plumed Serpent? He is the human incarnation of the ancient spirit force of wind and rain that combined the attributes of a serpent with those of the quetzal, a bird in Mesoamerica that was prized for its green plumage. He is also an epic hero, a Mesoamerican god whose story and veneration have influenced generations.

According to legend, Tollan (or present-day Tula) in Central Mexico was founded by Quetzalcoatl. Tula, or Tollan, translates as the Place of Reeds in Nahuatl, an indigenous language spoken in Central Mexico. The city was considered an ancestral place of origin for many of the civilizations of Mexico. The Toltecs (the people who lived in Tula) were revered for their sophisticated culture, wisdom, and skilled artistry—attributes associated with the city’s legendary founder and ruler. Tula became an important religious center, attracting pilgrims from across Mesoamerica and emerging as a dynamic marketplace and international center between AD 900 and 1200.

Like Tula, the Maya city of Chichen Itza on the Yucatan Peninsula claimed an important relationship to the Plumed Serpent (who was known to the Maya as Kukulcan). Its art and architecture include numerous depictions of him. As hubs of an extensive web of exchange networks, Tula and Chichen Itza drew merchants and traders from across the Americas.

For over two centuries, both cities flourished, until their decline in AD 1200. The archaeological records of both cities reflect their cosmopolitan nature. Ceramic vessels and gold from Central America, along with turquoise from the American Southwest (used on the shield featured in this resource), are among the rare materials found at each site.

The New Tollan: The Rise of Cholula and the Birth of the International Style

The city of Tula fell in AD 1200. According to legendary accounts, Quetzalcoatl was corrupted by a rival and banished. Another cause could be the arrival in Tula of semi-nomadic tribes that undermined local alliances. The reasons for the city’s destruction are unclear, but many Toltecs migrated south to Cholula (in the modern state of Puebla), where they built a new Tollan. They dedicated the city to Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent and god of wind, in whose honor they erected a conical-roofed temple. Cholula soon emerged as the center of religious authority in Mesoamerica, and confederations of kingdoms throughout Southern and Central Mexico referred to themselves as the Children of the Plumed Serpent. Cholula was considered the holiest of cities, according to the sixteenth-century Spanish chronicler Gabriel de Rojas, and could be compared to Rome for Christians or Mecca for the Moors.

As the most important pilgrimage destination in the region, Cholula became a crossroads for people and goods. The constant flow of exotic materials fostered the development of one of the most significant marketplaces in the Americas, an achievement befitting the city’s deity, Quetzalcoatl, who was also known as the patron of merchants. By the fourteenth century, a new art style had emerged alongside a pictographic system of communication. Known as the International Style, it was characterized by a vivid palette and bold symbols that reduced ideas and spoken words to simple icons in order to promote the exchange of ideas across ethnic and linguistic boundaries.



Feasting, Trade, and the Spread of the International Style

The performance of religious stories as depicted in masterful works of art was an integral part of royal feasts among the Children of the Plumed Serpent. Poets used codices (illustrated manuscripts) like storyboards to recite royal genealogies and heroic histories. Nobles even donned costumes and enacted specific roles, dancing and singing their parts to musical accompaniment.

Feasting was an essential part of alliance building and elite economic exchange. For example, finely crafted polychrome drinking vessels were not only props for the drama of ancestor rituals, but also promoted political alliances when given as prized gifts that could later be buried with their owners. Other luxury goods, such as works of precious stone and metal, the feathers of tropical birds, and exquisitely woven and embroidered textiles, served as currency in the buying and selling of prestige and political power. These goods moved along strategic alliance corridors through bridewealth, dowry, and other forms of gift exchange.

The Aztec Conquest of Oaxaca and the Spanish Incursion

The Children of the Plumed Serpent were the dominant cultural, political, and economic force in Southern Mexico for three hundred years until the arrival of the Aztecs in the fifteenth century. The Aztec Empire forced the Mixtec and Zapotec kingdoms to produce luxury goods for their own system of exchange as tribute. The confederacies' military expertise and deft negotiating skills enabled them to retain some of their trading networks, however, and prevented the Aztecs from fully subjugating them.

Spaniards arrived in 1519, further derailing Aztec attempts to gain more power and territory. The Aztecs' imperialism had engendered hostility from surrounding communities, who readily forged alliances with the Spaniards and soon brought down the Aztec Empire. Native ruling lords, or *caciques*, allied themselves with Spanish clergy and acted as intermediaries between the indigenous past and colonial present. Today, descendants of the Children of the Plumed Serpent continue to thrive in Southern Mexico.

Turquoise-mosaic Shield

MEXICO, PUEBLA, ACATLAN, MIXTEC, AD 1100–1521

INTRICATELY COMPOSED OF TINY PIECES OF TURQUOISE tesserae, or tiles, this ceremonial shield portrays an origin story important to the Mixtec, a group of people who occupied the rugged mountains of what is today the Mexican state of Oaxaca. A visually stunning object, it reveals much about the values of the Mixtec nobility from the exotic materials used, the fineness of its construction, and its depiction of pictorial language to its function as a symbol of wealth and status.

Origin Stories

The scene at the center of the shield depicts a hero descending from the sun to a mountain with a curved peak, where two priests are making offerings. Legends like these appear in historical codices originating from the Oaxaca-Puebla border region that depict the founding of the first kingdoms by sacred ancestors who were miraculously born from trees, rivers, stones, the earth, and the sky.

Turquoise

This shield was carved of wood and inlaid with more than ten thousand pieces of turquoise mosaic. Feathers were once attached to the holes in the rim. Turquoise does not occur naturally in Mesoamerica. Traders known as *pochteca* had to import the stone from the American Southwest through extensive, long-distance trade routes. Desired for its color and rarity, it became a highly prized material. This turquoise was mined in the Cerillos Hills of New Mexico, transformed into tiny tesserae (tiles), and exchanged for hides and parrot feathers across Mesoamerica's northern frontier.

Wealth and Status

Made of exotic material and rich in color, this shield would have been a part of a military costume intended to demonstrate wealth and power. During the tenth century, Toltec artisans fashioned smaller disks out of turquoise mosaic. Known as *tetzcuapilli*, these small objects formed part of Toltec military costume and were unearthed from ritual offerings in Chichen Itza's Great Pyramid and Tula's Burned Palace.

In scenes from painted manuscripts like the Codex Nuttall on the following page, epic heroes are portrayed in elaborate costumes carrying armor, including shields. Evidence of other military costumes appears in the form of shell tunics made of spiny oyster, or *Spondylus*. See the enclosed CD for examples.

Clothing and personal adornment like this shield were more than just symbols of prestige. By possessing a shield on which an origin story is depicted the carrier would have aligned himself as protector and defender of the lineage represented.



TURQUOISE-MOSAIC SHIELD

Mexico, Puebla, Acatlan, Mixtec, AD 1100–1521

Wood, stone, tree resin, and turquoise

12¹³/₁₆ x 12³/₄ x ¹³/₁₆ in.

National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (108708.000)

Photo © National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution

Codex Nuttall

MEXICO, WESTERN OAXACA, MIXTEC, 15TH–16TH CENTURY

THE ANCIENT MEXICAN PICTORIAL LANGUAGE APPEARS most prominently in painted books called codices. The Mixtec codices, like the Codex Nuttall, are some of the greatest chronicles of tenth- to sixteenth-century Mesoamerica, providing the longest continuous record of an indigenous civilization in the Americas. The codices record heroic stories and royal genealogies. The screenfold manuscripts were made of animal hide or bark paper, which were covered with a plaster-like foundation upon which artisans painted figures. The manuscripts folded so that they could be stored compactly or displayed fully on the walls of royal palaces, where they created a storyboard for court poets to use in the recitation of religious stories, histories, and genealogies at royal feasts. Episodes in the codices are divided by red vertical lines that direct the reader in an up-and-down pattern from right to left.

The Epic of Lord Eight Deer

This manuscript recounts in detail the epic of Lord Eight Deer, a Mixtec conqueror and hero who lived nearly a thousand years ago, between AD 1063 and 1115. The Mixtec people, over whom Lord Eight Deer ruled, occupied the mountains of what is today the Mexican state of Oaxaca. During Mesoamerica's Postclassic period (AD 950–1521), the Mixtecs and their allies the Zapotecs, were organized into numerous small royal estates, each ruled by kings and queens who lived in palaces and formed alliances with each other through intermarriage. Lord Eight Deer emerged as a cult hero for the Mixtec people after he united a number of independent kingdoms under the protection of his community, Tilantongo, and elevated their status within the regional hierarchy. Eight Deer's biography was part of an *Iliad*-like epic poem containing tales of marriage, war, murder, adventure, and political intrigue. This page illustrates one of the final events in Eight Deer's epic.

He travels with his companion Four Jaguar to seek the counsel of Lord One Death, the Mixtec sun god. After this meeting, they embark on the long journey home. The three travelers re-cross a body of water they had traversed in an earlier page, but the artist indicates that the second crossing is plagued by rough waters (see waves). The scene below the water crossing illustrates Eight Deer (on right) and one of his companions making an offering at a ballcourt upon their return home.

- Who are some of the epic/mythical heroes that you know about? Make a list of heroes and their deeds. What are the sources of these stories? Greek and Roman history? Mesoamerican history? What are the means by which these stories have passed and will continue to pass from one generation to the next?

The Mixtec, Zapotec, and Nahuatl peoples used a sacred calendar of 260 days. People portrayed in the codices were named after their birthdays; each name was represented by a combination of numerals and day signs. For example, Lord Eight Deer can often be identified by the image of a deer's head, the seventh day sign, and eight colored dots. In this pictorial form, the symbols could be understood by speakers of different language groups.

- Imagine yourself as the hero of a twenty-first-century epic. What choices will you make in your life to bring change to your people, school, or community? Document your historical contribution in a codex that recounts important events in your life. Consider how you will depict yourself and other important characters as well as how you will represent the passage of time from one scene to the next in a storyboard narrative.



CODEX NUTTALL (detail)

Mexico, Western Oaxaca, Mixtec, 15th–16th century

Deerskin, gesso, and pigments, 44¹¹/₁₆ x 7¹/₂ x 9¹/₄ in.

Trustees of the British Museum, London (MSS 39671)

Photo © Trustees of the British Museum / Art Resource, NY

Family Trees

Arranged marriages enabled Mixtec and Zapotec elites to improve their economic status, control their people, and link their communities politically. The Mixtecs thus were especially concerned with recording the genealogies, or family trees, of their historic and divine ancestors in their codices. By 1521, every noble house claimed descent from the epic hero Lord Eight Deer and other heroic figures like Lady Six Monkey and Lord Eleven Wind.²

- *Record your Family Tree* – What important memories do you have of your parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents? If you never had a chance to meet these people, interview family members or family friends about your ancestors. Make a chronological list of names and events, then find a picture of a tree that you can use as a template. (See the CD for an example.) Record your familial history starting with the roots. Document successive generations as you move up the trunk. Use branches and leaves to draw scenes of special people, places, and events.

Vessel

NAYARIT, MEXICO, AD 1350–1521

THIS VESSEL IS PAINTED LIKE A CODEX, WITH RADIANT colors, intricate geometric designs, and delicate figurative imagery. It depicts more than thirty figures, both human and supernatural, engaged in mythic and historic actions. The scenes resemble those found in painted books (like the Codex Nuttall on the previous page), which recorded dynastic and mythological events of importance to the Children of the Plumed Serpent. This style of painted ceramic was prevalent throughout Oaxaca and Puebla in the fourteenth century.

Codex-style Vessels

This vessel depicts an origin story whose protagonist wears the red buccal (mouth) mask associated with Quetzalcoatl. The narrative begins with an event in which two birds descend from the neck of the vessel through a red vertical band to a small structure. The protagonist is born, baptized in a water ritual, named, and raised. Thirty-six individuals enact a series of mythic rituals related to the establishment of water blessings for children.

Vessels ornamented with scenes taken from the historical codices indicate a close connection between royal feasting and the recounting of creation stories and historical sagas.

This vessel was hand built from clay. Once the clay had dried to a leatherlike consistency, its surface was polished to prepare it for treatment with a fine slip, a mix of clay and water, called *terra sigilatta* (literally “sealed earth”) that resembles a glaze. Designs were painted in narrow dark lines and colors were created by adding mineral-based pigments to *terra sigilatta*. Each application of the color had to be smoothed and burnished. It then would undergo at least two firings.³

This vessel comes from the state of Nayarit, on the northwest coast of Mexico, several hundred miles from the Southern Mexican sites of Oaxaca and Cholula where similar vessels were made. The prominence of the red buccal-masked character suggests a West Mexican narrative associated with Quetzalcoatl.



VESSEL

Nayarit, Mexico, AD 1350–1521

Slip-painted ceramic, 13¼ x 7½ in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Purchased with funds provided by Camilla Chandler Frost (M.2000.86)

Photo © 2012 Museum Associates/LACMA

Relación Geográfica Mapa de Teozacoalco

MEXICO, OAXACA, AD 1580

THIS MAP FROM 1580 WAS PRODUCED BY THE inhabitants of the community of Teozacoalco, in the modern state of Oaxaca, Mexico. Spanish officials in 1560 had asked town leaders to describe who they were and where they were from. This drawing is how the community chose to answer the survey. It serves as a map, identifying the community's boundaries and providing the dynastic history of the community with an emphasis on the importance of marriages. It also reveals the longevity of the pictographic system of communication and shared art style, which extended into the colonial period.

Cultural Continuity

The map represents a fusion of Mesoamerican and European styles; Nahua-Mixteca figures wearing jaguar helmets are juxtaposed with Romanesque Gothic churches. On the right, the map illustrates the township of Teozacoalco drawn in a circular format and dotted with rivers and hills, features of the town's topography. Visible at the very top of the town is a Catholic church. On the left, two columns of paired figures record the lineages and the significant marriages of the ruling families of Teozacoalco and Tilantongo. Tilantongo's royal line traced its origins to the eleventh-century ruler Lord Eight Deer, immortalized in the Codex Nuttall; Teozacoalco came to control Tilantongo through interdynastic marriage. The map illustrations emphasize that place and royal lineage remained unchanged from the epics recorded in the painted codices of the fourteenth century. The images of the church steeples, however, speak to the processes of negotiation and adaptation to colonial rule that were undertaken by local elites in order to maintain continuity with their past.

- Draw a map of your neighborhood using your school as a point of reference. What kinds of symbols will you use to illustrate the boundaries that surround your school? What other important locations, such as your home, local library, or park, will you include in your map? Create an accompanying legend that defines the symbols that you used so that others are able to decipher the map. Compare your map with those of your classmates. Notice where the maps overlap and intersect.

In the colonial period, some indigenous pictorial documents remained important, especially practical documents such as legal accounts, land records, tribute lists, and genealogies. Documents like this map validated a community's lineage and land claims. Many of these histories were painted based on memory or shared memory rather than on measurements, helping to configure community identity by recording how things came to be.

- Combine all of the students' neighborhood maps and make a list of the most commonly referenced landmarks. Use these landmarks as the boundaries for creating a three-dimensional map of the community, using the school as the central reference point. Lay a grid of local streets on the floor using colored or masking tape. Ask each student to create a structure out of construction paper or cardboard that signifies their place on the map. The structure can represent an existing site or a dream for a site that fulfills a community need. Ask students to reflect on their choice by writing a description of the site's importance and/or what it contributes to the history or legacy of the community.



RELACION GEOGRAFICA MAPA DE TEOZACOALCO

Mexico, Oaxaca, AD 1580

Paper, 56 x 69¹¹/₁₆ in.

Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries (JGI xxv-3)

Photo © Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin

Notes

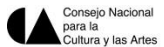
- ¹ Carlos Fuentes, "A New Time for Mexico," in *Legends of the Plumed Serpent: Biography of a Mexican God*, ed. Neil Baldwin (New York: Public Affairs, 1998).
- ² John M. D. Pohl, *The Legend of Lord Eight Deer: An Epic of Ancient Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- ³ John M. D. Pohl, *Narrative Mixtec Ceramics of Ancient Mexico* (Princeton, NJ: The Princeton University Program in Latin American Studies, 2007).

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