

The Origins of the Aztecs

Anonymous

Mesoamerican peoples believed that time moved cyclically. In contrast to the Western notion that time began at a certain moment and has developed in linear fashion ever since, for the Mesoamericans time was created and extinguished at regular intervals. The Aztecs believed themselves to be living in the epoch of the Fifth Sun, since four suns had existed and been extinguished prior to their appearance on earth. The belief that time could end gives insight into the seriousness with which Mesoamericans viewed their religious life: if either humans or gods failed to perform their functions faithfully and precisely, the light of day would be devoured and the world would cease to exist.

The following excerpt is a brief account of the legend of the five suns. It was translated by anthropologist Thelma D. Sullivan from the Anales de Cuauhtitlán, part of the Codex Chimalpopoca. This account was written by Aztec authors some forty to fifty years after the Spanish conquest, but was based on certain older texts and traditions. It gives a clear sense of the fatalism and pervasive pessimism that tended to characterize the Mesoamerican worldview.

... They had been wandering about shooting their arrows;
they had no houses, they had no land,
they had no woven capes as clothing;
only hides, only Spanish moss did they use to cover themselves.
And their children grew up in mesh bags,
in cagelike crates used for carrying things.

They ate the prickly pear, the barrel cactus,
the *tetzihoaactli*, and the bitter prickly pear.
They suffered great hardships for 364 years
until they arrived in the city, Quauhtitlan.
In that year it began, it originated
the rule of the Chichimeca,
the people of Quauhtitlan.

It must told, it must be understood. . .
that while on their way they gave themselves a king.

During these years, of the Chichimeca's wandering.
It is said, it is recounted
that it was still the time of darkness.
They say that it was still the time of darkness
because as yet no fame, no glory was theirs;
there was no joyousness.
They wandered from place to place. . . .

In the first age,
according to accounts, according to the recollections
of the ancients for they knew it . . .
the earth, the world,
came into existence, was established. . . .

It is recounted, it is said
that four kinds of life were created. . . .

The old men knew that in 1-Rabbit,
in that year the earth and heaven were established,
and they also knew that
when the earth and heaven were established
there were four kinds of beings,
four kinds of life were created.
They knew that each one was a Sun.
And they said that he created,
he fashioned their gods from ashes;
they attributed this to Quetzalcoatl. . . .

In the beginning was the first Sun,
4-Water was its sign;
it was called the Sun of Water.
In this Sun all was carried off by water,
the people were transformed
into dragonfly larvae and into fish.

The second Sun was established.
4-Jaguar was its sign;
it was called the Jaguar Sun.
In this Sun it happened that the heavens collapsed,
that the Sun did not move on its course from its zenith.

It began to darken, when all was dark,
then the people were devoured.

And Giants lived in this Sun.
The elders say that their greeting to each other was
"May you not fall,"
because everyone who fell,
fell forevermore.

The third Sun was established.
4-Rain was its sign;
it was called the Sun of Rain.
In this Sun it occurred that it rained fire
and the people were consumed by fire. . . .
It rained stones.

They now say that this was when the stones we now see fell,
and the lava rock boiled up.
And also, it was when the great rocks formed into masses,
and became red.

The fourth Sun:
4-Wind was its sign;
it was called the Sun of Wind.
In this Sun all was carried off by the wind,
the people turned into monkeys.
And afterward the monkey men
that lived there dispersed about the forests.

The fifth Sun:
its symbol is 4-Motion.
It was called the Sun of Motion
because it moves, it follows a course.
And say the ancients:
that in this Sun it shall come to pass
that the earth shall move,
that there shall be famine,
and that we all shall perish. . . .

In the year 13-Reed,
they say that the Sun that now exists was created.
At that time the Sun of Movement
arose at dawn, gave its light. . . .

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In this fifth Sun the earth shall move,
there shall be famine,
then we shall perish.