

the Mixtecs nor Zapotecs are mentioned in theosophical literature. The religious pantheon of the Zapotecs was headed by the rain god Cosijo who is represented iconographically by a combination of an earth-jaguar and a sky-serpent, symbols common to many of the Mesoamerican cultures. Possibly they have an esoteric significance, the jaguar, a stealthy predator, representing the impermanence of the physical world and the serpent, often associated with the occult force known in Sanskrit as kundalinī (literally “serpentine”), representing the permanence of the spiritual.

The Nahuatl-speaking Toltecs, whose name means “master builders,” flourished in central Mexico and the Yucatan between the 10th and 13th centuries. Their early history is obscure, but they seem to have had links with the Mixtecs and Zapotecs. Their religion centered around Quetzalcoatl (lit. “serpent with feathers of the quetzal bird”), who was a god of civilization identified with the planet Venus and wind. He is depicted in iconography with what appear to be rattles on his tail, so must have been considered a feathered rattlesnake. He represented forces of goodness and light and was pitted against Tezcatlipoca (“Smoking Mirror”), a deity associated with the night sky, moon, and stars, and who represented the forces of darkness, evil, and destruction. One myth has Tezcatlipoca driving Quetzalcoatl out of the Toltec capital city of Tula (in central Mexico), whereupon the latter wandered for many years until he reached his homeland on the east coast of the country. According to one version of the myth he was consumed by fire there, rising in the sky to become the planet Venus; according to another version he sailed off to a mythical land with a promise to return. Blavatsky notes that it was common among ancient cultures to represent “wisdom and immortality” as a serpent (*IU* I:553), which would indicate that there is an esoteric interpretation of the Quetzalcoatl myth. Since the snake was, as noted above, mythologically associated with the sky (symbolizing a heavenly or spiritual state of consciousness), it was depicted as bird-like, i.e., feathered. What his association with a rattlesnake might indicate, however, is not at all clear.

Toltec ceremonies included a sacred ball game (tlatchli), which the Mayans and Aztecs also played, sun worship, and human sacrifice. It is believed by anthropologists that the name Quetzalcoatl was originally the name of a Toltec ruler, but Blavatsky suggests that the influence is the reverse, rulers and priests often taking the name of their deity (*IU* I:550). C. A. Burland