

Despite their practice of human sacrifice, Blavatsky points out the fact that, “the Aztecs appeared in more than one way to have resembled the ancient Egyptians in civilization and refinement. Among both peoples magic or the arcane natural philosophy was cultivated to the highest degree” (*IU* 1:560). As for “natural philosophy,” they, like other cultures which preceded them in Mexico and Central America, had a considerable knowledge of astronomy and a more accurate calendar (both solar, based on 365 days, and ceremonial, based on 260 days divided into 20 weeks of 13 days each) than their Spanish conquerors (cf. *IU* 1:11). As for “magic,” the only indication of that in scholarly sources is the claim that the priests received frequent instructions in their dreams from Huitzilopochtli. Aztec priests enjoyed considerable social status, practically on a par with the nobility; the ruler himself was, in fact, of the priestly class. In addition to conducting rites, priests were educators and also warriors. One of their functions was to march at the head of the regular troops, carrying images of their gods on their backs, and blow shell horns to signal the attack (Davies, p. 187).

The Aztecs (along with other Mesoamericans), as can be seen in their iconography, conceived of their gods in anthropomorphic (as well as zoomorphic) ways, thus when the Spanish conquistadores arrived on the shores of Mexico in 1519 they were greeted as gods. Some even considered Cortés to be Quetzalcoatl returned from the sea (cf. Davies, pp. 237, 239-40) and reported such to the Aztec ruler Mohtecuzomatzin or Moctezuma (usually anglicized “Montezuma”). Although ambivalent that this white-faced man at the head of his small white-faced army was really Quetzalcoatl, when Cortés finally entered the capital city Tenochtitlán, Moctezuma, dressed in regal splendor, greeted him as if he were the god returning to his “own land” (Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Bernal Díaz Chronicles*, p. 138; cited in Davies, p. 255). Whether he really believed that, however, is doubtful (cf. Davies, pp. 258-261). In any event, Moctezuma could hardly have foreseen that the Aztecs and their neighbors were soon to be conquered by the Spanish, the images of their gods destroyed, and their people converted, often forcibly, to Catholicism (Davies, pp. 300-1). Nevertheless, priests called “daykeepers” (*ajq'ij*) still maintain some of the old religious traditions, though without human sacrifice.

End of part one, to be continued.