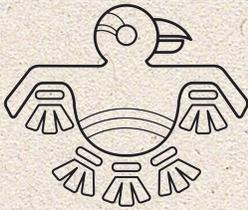


GET TO KNOW The Nahuas

with David Bowles, author of
"Secret of the Moon Conch"

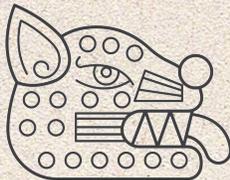
HUITZILIN
"the Hummingbird"



Pronounced:
weets EE leen

This little bird was very important to the Nahua peoples we now call Aztecs. They believed that their ancestors returned after death for four years in the form of hummingbirds and butterflies, accompanying the sun through the sky and visiting their living relatives on Earth. To see one nearby was considered very lucky! The Mexica, one of the main groups of Aztecs, believed that their main god Huitzilopochtli (which means "Young Hummingbird Guide") had been a high priest who returned in the form of a fluttering bird to guide them to the Isle of Mexico, where they founded the great city of Tenochtitlan.

OCELOTL
"the Jaguar"



Pronounced:
oh-SEH-loht

The Nahuas and other Native peoples of Mesoamerica (modern Mexico and Central America) considered the jaguar to be a powerful animal that warriors should try to imitate. Silent and strong, the jaguar easily blends into its surroundings and pounces on its prey only when the moment is right. The jaguar was also the spirit animal or nahual of Tezcatlipoca, the god of destruction, chaos, and the cold night wind. The Aztecs considered him to be a key part of the universe, because nothing new can be made without destroying something older and using its raw materials. His name means "Smoking Mirror."

QUETZALCOATL
"the Feathered Serpent"



Pronounced:
kets-ahl-KOH-aht

The Nahuas and other Mesoamerican peoples worshipped a god of creation, order, and the warm day wind. In his animal form, Quetzalcoatl looked like a big snake covered in the green, blue, and red feathers of the quetzal bird. Brother of Tezcatlipoca, the Feathered Serpent was also known as Ehecatl ("wind"), and in this image, we can see a burst of air coming from his mouth, looking a little like a tongue. That warm day wind cleared the way for Tlaloc, the rain god, to get to work providing the world with the water we need. Together with his brother, Quetzalcoatl created the Earth, the Nahuas believed. They each took time ruling as the god of the sun in the early days of the universe.

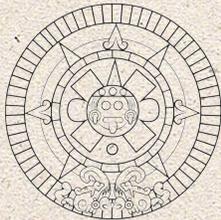
MEXIHCATL
"Mexico person"



Pronounced:
meh-SHEE-kaht

The Mexica were a group of Chichimecah-Nahuas who came out of northwestern Mesoamerica (an area now called el Bajío) into the Valley of Mexico (an area of lakes then known as Anahuac) about 800 years ago. They claimed that their god Huitzilopochtli had led them there, promising them a special home wherever they found an eagle perched on a cactus growing from stone. For a while, other groups didn't like the newcomers, who were proud and liked to fight a lot. But eventually the Mexica found themselves on a little island they would name Mexico. There they found the eagle on the cactus amid the stones, and they decided to build a city named Tenochtitlan: place of the cactus amid the stones. A hundred years later, with the help of two other kingdoms, the Mexica overthrew the tyrant Tezozomoc and established the Triple Alliance, which we call the Aztec Empire. They loved to wear feathers and big earrings, as we see in this image.

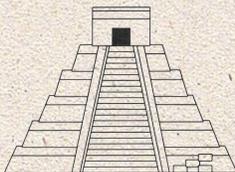
TONATIUH NAHUI OLIN
"the Fifth Sun"



Pronounced:
toh-NAH-teew NAH-wee OH-leen

The Nahuas believed that four different gods had become the sun, and that the fifth one was the son of Quetzalcoatl. He used to be named Nanahuatzin, but humans called him Tonatiuh: he who goes around spreading warmth. The age that he is ruling over, our time, is known as Nahui Olin (Four Movement), because that's the day the sun first started shining. His face is right in the middle of a huge monument known as the Aztec Sun Stone, which is 12 feet in diameter and 39 inches thick, weighing fifty-four thousand pounds. People often refer to the image carved into that rock the "Aztec Calendar," because it's decorated with glyphs of the various day-signs that make up the calendar. You can't actually use the sun stone, however, to keep track of time.

TLATEPETLALILLI
"the Pyramid"



Pronounced:
tlah-teh-peh-tlah-LEEL-lee

The Nahuas and other Mesoamerican peoples created pyramids to echo the shape of mountains, which they believed were holy places where life thrived. In fact, it was so common to build a community on a mountain or hill near a river, that the Nahuatl word for "city" was "altepetl"—"water-mountain." And the word for pyramid, "tlatepetlalilli," means "artificial mountain." At the very top of a pyramid, close to heaven, the Native peoples of Mesoamerica would build a teocalli or temple. The tall pyramid in Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City) actually had two temples at the top: one for Huitzilopochtli and one for Tlaloc, the rain god.