

*“Serpent comes from the Latin serpens, meaning a creeping thing or snake. The symbol is one of the oldest and most commonly used across ancient cultures symbolizing wisdom, death, rebirth, fertility, protection, and procreation.”*

Serpent and Dragon lore exists the world over, from the Americas and Britannic mythology to Asian and Islander cultures. Serpents, dragons, and those that exist within the realm under other names have traditionally been seen as fierce and powerful, and unwise to anger. Alongside this however, they’ve also been known to bestow gifts of wisdom and knowledge, and sometimes spiritual power, to those who wholeheartedly seek it. Creator gods, war gods, representations and incarnations of knowledge in both academia and spiritual affairs, and even weather gods, serpents and dragons are revered for their many qualities. With such a vast spread of abilities and responsibilities, it’s easy to see how they were considered supreme beings of pantheons of many of the cultures they appeared in.

Within lore of the Americas exist the Horned Serpent of North America and the Feathered Serpent of Central and South America, both interpreted through many lenses from fierce and destructive to being a creation god, bringing knowledge and wisdom as well.

In North America, the Great Serpent and Horned serpent (associated mainly with the Eastern United States and Canada) had an incarnation for everything from spiritual enlightenment and wisdom, to weather, destruction and strength in war.

The Horned Serpent was seen to be more benevolent and bringers of knowledge and wisdom, while the Great Serpent was considered the more malevolent and aimed in destruction and war, though this was not always the case.

Sint-Holo, also known as Sitagliptin the Choctaw horned serpent, source of inspiration that taught agriculture, languages, and other gifts of knowledge to the people. Although not all versions of the Horned Serpent minor differences in the lore for each tribe, the horned serpent remains a deity of knowledge and wisdom for all of them. With none of them exclusively mentioning writing, it’s easy to think there wasn’t one. The truth of this is that the system wasn’t conventional, as it didn’t involve written words, but oral communication, and specifically patterned beadwork on wampum belts served as memory cues and was very efficient. There were

South American civilizations with similarly unconventional communication systems.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much more than this mentioned a lot of sources. Moving from the Horned Serpent to the Plumed Serpent, who has some influence in the North American tribes but, resides chiefly in Mesoamerica, we see more overlap of deities, and some interesting differences.

In Mesoamerica, a lot of cross-culture interactions went into how the three mentioned incarnations of the great feathered serpent came about. The Mayans whose civilization venerated Kukulan in the Yucatec people, and Gukumatz for the K'iche people, documented the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl, in the temple of the Mayan metropolis Teotihuacan (200-900CE). Civilizations of Mesoamerica interacted with each other in a variety of ways during this time where the early Nahua (pre-Aztec) were.

Kukulan and Gukumatz as Mayan equivalents of Quetzalcoatl, who aside from descriptions of color of plumage and scales, are depicted as feathered, flying, serpents, with patronages of knowledge, wisdom, the arts, and learning. Despite their similarities in knowledge, and learning, unlike the Aztec Quetzalcoatl, the Mayan Kukulan and Gukumatz did not bring a writing system to their people. The Maya deity Ataman, was credited with the Mayan writing system- glyphs, and other knowledge they obtained, and was described differently, and was not a serpent deity.

Quetzalcoatl was regarded as the god of winds and rain, spiritual connection, and the creator god of the world and mankind. Around 1200CE he gained the mantle of a god of knowledge, patron god of priests and merchants, and the god of learning, science, agriculture, crafts, the arts, and was credited with the invention of the calendar and writing in Aztec civilization. The writing system combined glyphs, Nahuatl specific symbol cues for phonetics and syllables.

Kukulan/Gukumatz as a supreme but merciful god depicted similarly to Quetzalcoatl, was a robed Caucasian man with blonde hair, blue eyes and a beard. shared his knowledge with the Maya people, teaching them the arts in civilization, mathematics, medicine, and astronomy, though writing was not part of the teachings.

Both Aztec and Mayan deities were usually depicted as a feathered, flying serpent, and a Caucasian male with blond or white hair and blue eyes, of ambiguous age when in human form. The Mayan deity Itzamna's description was much more descriptive, and had less similarities to the traditional Feather Serpent.

The Mayan god Itzamna, was credited with culture, inventing writing and books and was sometimes addressed as *Yaxkokahmut* meaning 'lord of knowledge'. Made a national god by the Maya, Itzamna founded the Maya city of Chichen Itza and was a wealth of knowledge. His priests teaching the use of herbs and medicine to the people. Itzamna was often portrayed as either the supreme monarch, a writer, an old man with square eyes, a hooked nose and the symbols of planets and astronomical signs on his skin. Sometimes he was depicted as a two-headed dragon. His depiction as a dragon, was very fitting considering he was also called the 'lord of the east and west', and believed to have come from the east accompanied by a group of "Atlantean culture-bearers". While the Atlantean part is up for debate, culture-bearer meant a person recognized for their proficiency in the skills and techniques of a particular traditional art or craft. They were responsible for teaching them to those wanting to learn, regardless of differences in society or culture and this is what the mythos credits Itzamna with.

Almost all of North and Meso-American tribes have a shared element of involving the East, and a connection of their deities embodying a connection to the spiritual or traversing the worlds literally. Many in North America are simply tribes in the east, and place high importance on spiritual connection. The Aztec and Mayans have a consistent description of their deities coming from the east, something that would be interesting in itself to explore and get the background on. The Horned Serpent, Feather Serpents, and two-headed Dragon offered important pieces to grow the cultures in their time, and for those civilizations that are no longer around, insight through the arts and writing systems created to who they were. Unfortunately, the Aztec system has been lost through time, and destructive means, but the Mayan system survives to an extent due to the practice of carving glyphs in stone, as has the North American tribes

### Interesting Facts:

- Teotihuacan is actually the Aztec name for the city and means “**Place of the Gods**”. The actual Mayan name hasn’t been translated from surviving name glyphs.
- All three cultures of Maya, Aztec, and Inca civilizations described their deities as having come from the East, and having returned there, with a promise to return at some undetermined time. Most of them were considered a supreme being within their pantheon as well.
- Sint-holo is described as both dragon-like and snake spirit, while Itzamna is described as a two headed dragon, resembling a caiman, or combination of human and caiman. The lines of difference between serpent and dragon deities seem to be very thin in general.
- The Mayans disappeared from the metropolis in 950CE, but didn’t actually fall to history until 1524CE during battle.
- Mayans were very centered on the arts and depicting their religious themes through it. They painted, sculpted, and made ceramics venerating the gods, kings, and queens.
- The Aztecs civilization was born from a triple alliance between the three Nahua city-states of Tenochtitlan, Texcoco, and Tlacopan. They migrated to Lake Texcoco, consecrated a temple on an island there, and founded Tenochtitlan, their capital. Quetzalcoatl is the Nahua word meaning feathered/plumed serpent.
- Quetzalcoatl is a combination of Nahuatl words; Quetzal is a bright green bird native to the Guatemalan highlands. Coatl means snake.
- The Aztec description of Quetzalcoatl’s human form and prophecy of his return, is what brought their civilization down when Cortes arrived.
- The Spanish were in awe of the technological and architectural advancements, as well as the population of almost 200,00, compared to Seville, Spain at almost 30.00. The splendor was compared to Venice, Italy.

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