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# **From Wanders to Dynasts: Migration and the Legacy of Quetzalcoatl in Mesoamerica**

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## From Wanderers to Dynasts: Migration and the Legacy of Quetzalcoatl In Mesoamerica

### INTRODUCTION

This paper examines migration as a key legacy of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and the Toltecs, establishing a tradition that builds a bridge between contemporary, and past indigenous communities of Mexico and Central America. The Feathered Serpent, Quetzalcoatl, is a mythohistorical figure that appears in the traditions of diverse groups throughout the area known today as Mesoamerica. While Quetzalcoatl has been well researched, scholars have largely overlooked the unique tie between migration and Quetzalcoatl, particularly how variants of the same individual were able to diffuse and travel throughout numerous Mesoamerican societies over time.



Fig. 1. Quetzalcoatl performing penance. Illustration from the Florentine Codex, Book 3, fol. 10r, compiled by Bernardino de Sahagún.

Archaeologist Christopher Beekman, an expert in Mesoamerican migrations, defines it as “the term ‘migration’ should thus not evoke visions of faceless hordes but population movements structured around existing social groups following culturally relevant procedures for mobilization and incorporation” (Beekman 2). Building off this definition, this paper argues that the idea of the Feathered Serpent spread across Mesoamerica through the movement of Toltecs who carried

their narratives, beliefs, and authority with them, not by chance, but with the intention of keeping Quetzalcoatl's legacy alive. In this framework, migration becomes a key political process within Mesoamerican culture, through which authority and legitimacy were transmitted. While other scholars (Davies 367; Nicholson 125) interpret the departure of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl as an exile or shameful flight, this paper will instead interpret it as a form of political migration in which migrating Toltec dynasts carried authority and legitimacy across Mesoamerica. CONTEXT

Quetzalcoatl appears in many different contexts across different Mesoamerican societies. For instance, there is a "Human" and "God" version of Quetzalcoatl, and some scholars (Davies 24; Nicholson 26; Ringle 203) now use the terms Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl(TQ) when referring to the

human version and Ehecatl



Fig. 2. Lid carvings of the "Hackmack Stone Box" (*tepetlacalli*), Late Aztec style. Museum am Rothenbaum—Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK), Hamburg, Germany, inv. no. B 3767. The iconography depicts a descending plumed serpent (Quetzalcoatl) flanked by the calendrical signs One Reed and Seven Reed, the dates most closely associated with Ehecatl and Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (Nicholson).

Quetzalcoatl(EQ) when referring to the god version. For example, in the Book One (of twelve) of the the Florentine Codex (FC), a text written in Nahuatl and then translated into Spanish in the 16th

century, the Spanish translator

states, "Even though he was a man, they considered this

Quetzalcoatl a god and said that

he swept the road clear for the gods of water"(FC 1:2r). In this context, the FC is talking about the Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (human version), but at the same time, expanding that he is seen as a "god", although this section of the text refers only to the godly form in the original Nahuatl

text.

Not only are there Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl(TQ) and Ehecatl Quetzalcoatl(EQ), but in different Mesoamerican texts such as the FC, Popol Vuh and Dresden Codex, Quetzalcoatl is differently labeled as the Plumed Serpent, the Feathered Serpent, Nacxit/Nacxitl, Huracan, Kukulkan, as well as by other names in diverse Mesoamerican languages. Additionally, terms such as Ehecatl and Huracan can refer to atmospheric phenomena, and Plumed Serpent, Feathered Serpent, and Kukulkan can refer to animals (mythological, prehistoric, or living). As a result, it can become difficult to determine which of these figures refer to a human, a deity, a force of nature, or some other being or phenomena. When comparing and contrasting these titles across different Mesoamerican societies, it becomes evident that the issue intensifies when there are various iconographies that depict snakes with feathers across Mesoamerica. As there are various iconographies, it cannot be assumed that all of these relate back to Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl.

The Toltec civilization of Tollan is the first to document Quetzalcoatl as a historical human figure. Although some scholars believe the Olmecs, a collective term for some of the oldest Mesoamerican civilization we have records of, may also have had their own Quetzalcoatl. However, we know too little about the Olmecs to make these claims and can not assume all feathered serpent iconography across Mesoamerica relates back to the human figure of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl.

However, the Mesoamerican migration that occurred specifically Toltec movements have been analyzed with various methods (Beekman; Charnay; Davies 141-159; Nicholson 269-271). The migration tied to Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and the Toltecs were inherently political, as migrating elites carried systems of authority and legitimacy into new regions across

Mesoamerica. Although this authority was expressed through religious narratives; political and religious power were intertwined in Mesoamerican societies, with spiritual authority functioning as a basis for political legitimacy. For example, (Nicholson 148) “Again, enough evidence has been adduced to indicate that wandering Toltec dynasts, at least in some parts of the Mixteca, might have carried with them recollections of their great priest/ruler”. The “wandering” Toltec dynasts were key political agents of migration and played a major role in carrying and spreading the legacy of Quetzalcoatl. Understanding these “wandering” Toltec dynasts as politically driven migrants helps explain how Toltec migrations functioned as political processes and why dynasts across Mesoamerica claimed Toltec roots. This can help explain how migration was a key element to Mesoamerican culture broadly since various forms of Quetzalcoatl's political role spread throughout Mesoamerica. For example, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl was remembered not only as a religious figure but also as a political leader and “dispenser of all valid political authority” (Nicholson 291). This reveals that his authority extended beyond religion and was carried and reproduced across regions through migrating Toltec elites. Therefore, the movements of Quetzalcoatl and Toltecs were not random wandering movements or exiles of shame, but a political movement involving the migration of Toltec dynasts and elites who spread authority and legitimacy throughout Mesoamerica. Even though narratives of the departure of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl are framed as an exile, accounts of dynasts such as those described by Nicholson point to a political migration process of Toltecs carrying the authority and legitimization of the Quetzalcoatl.

*Spread of Toltecs in Tollan's Tale*

According to (Gingerich 369-371; FC 118v), the human historical figure Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl (TQ) loved his people of Tollan, also known as the Tolteca or Toltecs. Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's love for his Toltecs would eventually be his downfall. The Toltecs originally lived in

Tolantzinco, a diminutive and honorific version of the name Tollan. They then migrated to what was renamed Tollan and continued their migration from there. During the early 16th century, indigenous Nahuas of Mexica documented their own history, culture and beliefs with constraints under the Spanish in what is known as The Florentine Codex(FC). (FC 116r) states, "their traces are everywhere, because the Tolteca were dispersed all over". What this shows is that once the Toltecs migrated out of Tollan, they migrated not just to one singular location, but to far reaching places throughout Mesoamerica.

Narratives of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl(TQ) in Tollan (Gingerich 376) include a migration element, with some of the Toltecs accompanying him to Tlapallan. Something to note is within these narratives that Tollan was a rich and highly developed city where Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl experienced a comfortable life as a powerful leader. Despite the flourishing city, Quetzalcoatl (TQ) decided to migrate with some of his Toltec followers, and start anew when moving to Tlapallan. While Quetzalcoatl(TQ) is adoring his Toltecs, three entities are scheming against the Toltecs and Quetzalcoatl(TQ) to claim Tollan for themselves. These three entities are Tezcatlipoca, Huitzilopochtli, and Tlachahuepan known as Human Owls or sorcerers. The three plotted Quetzalcoatl(TQ) "death" because Quetzalcoatl(TQ) loved his Toltecs so much he refused to sacrifice them and would only sacrifice birds, serpents, and butterflies. According to the story of Quetzalcoatl's Hero Journey, from the Anales de Cuauhtitlan, (Gingerich 375), which was

originally written in Nahuatl, “Quetzalcoatl said to [some of his followers] there, 'Grandfather heralds, let it be finished. Let me abandon the city, let me go.’” This emphasizes that the Human Owls’ trick was successful, and Quetzalcoatl did abandon Tollan as he directly stated his intention to do so. The “abandonment” of Tollan is framed as an unfortunate and shameful tale of fleeing. However, it could also be looked at instead as an origin tale of migration where

the climax of the tale is the movement of Quetzalcoatl; that will later be carried as part of Quetzalcoatl's legacy. Quetzalcoatl left in the direction of Tlapallan, where he then lit himself on fire and burned to death. The narrative explains that many birds, serpents, and butterflies arose from the ashes of his body, and Quetzalcoatl became the planet Venus. This specific movement from Tollan (Central Mexico) to Tlapallan (Eastern Coast of Mexico), could begin to explain how Quetzalcoatl's legacy was shared throughout Mesoamerica.

*The effects of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's “death” on Toltec Migration*

This movement to Tlapallan marked a turning point, as after Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl’s departure from Tollan and transformation into a celestial body, his Toltec followers continued cementing his legacy across different linguistic groups throughout the broader region (Beekman 59-60; Nicholson 271). According to Nigel Davies (Davies 356), Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl reigned over Tollan from 1153-75 CE, during what is known as the Postclassic Period of Mesoamerican (900-1550 CE). (Beekman 12) But, these time periods can vary up to a century. The end date of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's reign corresponds roughly to around the time the mass migration of the Toltecs occurred, which would be after his death (1175 CE). This movement would be essential due to the Toltec followers spreading the migration tale, which would cement the lasting legacy

and later spread across Mesoamerica. The Florentine codex states, “And as [the Toltecs] had great faith in Quetzalcoatl, they made every effort to remove their women, their children, their sick. The old men, the old women departed; they moved. No one failed to obey; all moved when Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl went to enter into the water at Tlapallan, where he went to disappear.”(FC 119r). What this is trying to say is that the Toltecs who left Tlapallan and joined other Mesoamerican societies remained devoted to Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. This was a key element to

how the spread of Quetzalcoatl stories happened. As stated by Ringle(226), “Quetzalcoatl was[Human and Deity], and ‘he’ did find Tula, Cholula, Tilantongo, Chichén Itzá, and Mayapán, but in

the form of an aggressively expansionistic world religion”. The people who were expanding the world religion of Quetzalcoatl are the Toltec migrants sharing his story. The migrants awaited his

return, upholding the legacy (via migrating to Itza) where Quetzalcoatl was now named Kukulcan. This name change was due to the language difference of the Toltec migrants and the

Yucatec Maya. Tlapallan is likely not mentioned by Ringle because it serves as an endpoint for Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. Tlapallan was a place that they would have been able to observe his death themselves, therefore requiring little need for proselytizing. Independent of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, the Toltecs diffused into Tilantongo, Chichén Itzá, and Mayapán, distant areas where people spoke different languages (Mixtecan and Mayan languages) from the Nahuatl of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and the Toltecs of Tollan. Therefore, the resurfacing of Quetzalcoatl in



Fig. 3. Reconstruction drawing of the upper portion of Pyramid B, Tula, Hidalgo, by Ignacio Marquina (1964), as reproduced in Nicholson. Courtesy of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (Mexico).

different cities during the Postclassic Period (1575-1600 CE) was not caused by the Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl alone. The devout Toltecs migrated across Mesoamerica to continue the legacy of their leader Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl.

THE SPREAD OF QUETZALCOATL'S LEGACY VIA TOLTEC MIGRANTS After the Toltecs moved away from Tlapallan, the idea of Quetzalcoatl did not fade away, but instead evolved as it shifted to different cultural contexts throughout Mesoamerica. The spread of Quetzalcoatl between cultures from Toltec migrants was slow and steady, unfolding

over centuries eventually reaching the Yucatec Maya as K'uk'ulkan, the K'iche' Maya as Nacxit, and the Aztecs nearly 350 years after Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's departure to Tlapallan.

*The Spread of Kulkulkan in Toltec legacy*

According to (Davies 224; Nicholson 269-271), the first major resurfacing of Quetzalcoatl after his death was among the Yucatec Maya, and they called him K'uk'ulkan (which means feathered snake). Nicholson reveals:

Toltec descended rulers had evidently labored most successfully to perpetuate and record the proud dynastic traditions of their forebears, wherever Tollan connected émigrés had penetrated in strength, some reminiscences of their archetypical lord and priest might well have survived—together with characteristic Central Mexican sociopolitical patterns that were believed to have derived from his authority and legitimatization. This was clearly true, at any rate, for Highland Guatemala and northern Yucatan, where the Toltec eastern völkswanderung seems to

have achieved its greatest political success. (Nicholson 254)

This “völkswanderung” refers to the slow and steady migration period of the Toltecs after Tlapallan. Nicholson notes that the Toltec migrants carried sociopolitical patterns rooted in Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl authority and legitimization which traveled with the migrants to the Yucatan (Nicholson 254). According to Beekman (310) “Some[Toltec émigrés ] journeyed to Yucatan to participate in the founding of the Kukulcan dynasty at Chichén Itzá”. This demonstrates Toltec migrants' established political framework in the Yucatec Maya. It also highlights, the Maya living in Itzá welcomed the founding of their new political leader

Kukulcan. This implication of the Yucatec Maya welcoming their own version of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl which has culturally shifted to become Kukulcan illustrates that migration was a political influence and a mutual aspect of both the Toltec migrants and Yucatec Mayans cultures. This would later apply to the broader Mesoamerican culture which extends the validity of migration and the legacy tales of Quetzalcoatl. Moreover, Ralph Roys quoted Diego López de Cogolludo: “The people of Yucatan venerated and revered this God, Quetzalcoatl, and called him Kukulcan, and said he arrived there from the west”(Cogolludo qtd. in Roys 117). This is key when cross referencing a hypothesized Toltec migration map from 1887 by Désiré Charnay, since the migration map also depicts the general movement of Toltec migrants coming from the west into the Yucatec Mayan regions. More importantly, the west-to-east movement of Toltec migrants was key in order to create the political legacy, since the east regions had their own populace that could be influenced. This highlights these regions were not isolated, but influenced and specifically the Yucatan Maya welcomed and transformed Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl into

Kukulcan and carried his political framework. This wouldn't have been done without the migration of Toltecs bringing Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's political framework into the Yucatan, as well as Mesoamerica having a welcoming migration culture toward these Toltec Migrants. These sources all point to the Toltec migration being inherently a political form of migration, allowed by authority and legitimacy.

### *Nacxit role in Toltec legacy*

Soon after, the next major variant of Quetzalcoatl came from the K'iche' Maya, now referred to as Nacxit, which can also be traced back to the Highland Guatemala area. According to Nicholson (194), "Nacxit was also worshipped by the neighboring Pokomam and perhaps

other Highland Guatemala groups whose dynasties claimed a Toltec origin or had come under heavy Toltec influence" This clearly highlights, that the K'iche' also had Toltec influence, which helped the idea of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl to shift and emerge into Nacxit in this context. The K'iche' version of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl was carried by the Toltec migrants as well, but tailored to the K'iche's cultural traditions. This transformation is similar to the Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl into Kukulcan and shows how once more the region welcomed and reshaped Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl political and spiritual legacy. Now with Nacxit, all on the backs of Toltec migrants. Similarly, Nacxit was not Ehecatl, but rather also a political figure, just as Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl.

Moreover, in part five of the Popol Vuh it states " And then they came before the Lord named Nacxit, the great lord and sole judge over a populous domain"(Tedlock). The "populous domain" that Nacxit is the political Lord of is understood to be a population in the Yucatan that roots back to Toltec origins. This suggests the K'iche's political figure Nacxit was heavily influenced by the

Toltec political figure Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. It highlights that Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's framework was welcomed into the K'iche region and supported by elites who explicitly claimed Toltec roots. Which illustrates, how the political and spiritual legacy of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl has been maintained in Highland Guatemala. Both K'iche and Yucatec Maya do have their own different versions of Ehecatl Quetzalcoatl, but when it comes to Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, like political figure, they play highly similar roles. Beekem (311) elaborates "Also well known are the putative Toltec connections of the Kaqchikel and K'iche' highland Maya rulers (Braswell 2003; Carmack 1968, 1981; Fox 1978, 1980)". This reinforces the K'iche' rulers claiming Toltec lineage. However, it also reveals that both K'iche' and Yucatec Maya claim a common thread which is a political and spiritual legacy of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl. These repeated claims of Toltec lineage by elites demonstrate how Toltec migration was political and intensified the spread of the political framework of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and helped maintain his legacy across Mesoamerica.

*Mexica's role in finalizing the Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl Toltec legacy*

Eventually, the idea of Quetzalcoatl reached the Mexica (Aztecs), about 350 years after Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's departure to Tlapallan, the role of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl was modeled from the authority and status of the Toltecs. For example, during the reign of the Mexica, they went back to the now depopulated Tollan and, (Nicholson 7) emphasizes "The migrating Mexica reach Tollan, now inhabited by "Chichimeca," sacrifice all of its population, and become its lords, soon after continuing their wanderings". As stated earlier, these wandering people are actual migrants with political forces influencing their movements and locations and root back to the Toltec

migrants. The Mexica did not take over this land just for more territory; they took the land to reclaim their Toltec roots, and because the lord of the Toltecs was Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, they must also reclaim this political and spiritual model. This was achieved through the authority and legitimization of the Quetzalcoatl and migrants, similarly to how the Toltecs did in the K'iche' Maya and Yucatec Maya regions. This also highlights the Mexica are continuing the traditions of political migration even after multiple centuries. This reclaiming of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl is unique compared to the K'iche' and Yucatec Maya who culturally adapted the framework of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl without recorded force, while the Mexica have documented evidence of a forceful adaption of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, but overall the Mexica, K'iche' and Yucatec Maya leaders all share the common thread of claiming Toltec lineage which carried out by political migration. Moreover, the Florentine Codex Book 12 illustrates "And when they had drawn near to the Spaniards, then before them they performed the earth-eating ceremony at the

prows of the boats. They thought it was Quetzalcoatl Topiltzin who had come to arrive"(FC 4r). As mentioned earlier when Quetzalcoatl departed, the Toltec followers awaited his return which is why "they" (the Mexica) who consist of lineages that trace to being Toltec also awaited Quetzalcoatl Topiltzin due to the prophecy of his return. This reemphasizes that Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl's legacy was still alive even after multiple centuries, and this is due to the slow and steady diffusion of the Toltecs who carried the framework of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl throughout Mesoamerica over time.

## CONCLUSION

The legacy of Quetzalcoatl was able to be passed down from century to century because

of the devoted Toltec migrants. By examining the migration of Toltecs more closely, it becomes clear that the departure of Quetzalcoatl was not random wandering or exile, but rooted in the deep devotion of his Toltec followers. The turning point of this legacy was when Quetzalcoatl departed to Tlapallan and turned into a celestial body and this tale has been framed as a shameful tale of fleeing and exile. However, all sources point to this being a tale of migration and not wandering. This departure became the catalyst for the political migration that spread and maintained Quetzalcoatl legacy . After this event, the slow and steady diffusion of Toltecs began, spreading his spiritual and political framework across Mesoamerica.

As the Toltec migrants dispersed, spanning from the Mexica to the Maya, both claimed Toltec roots while maintaining a similar spiritual and political framework of Quetzalcoatl. Quetzalcoatl was able to spread across Mesoamerica because the Toltecs carried his legacy with them through political migration. Recognizing migration as an important cultural practice and key part to the legacy also raises a contemporary question: migration in Mesoamerica has

historically been a custom practice, why has the cultural act of migration now criminalizing descendants of this legacy, specifically indigenous communities in Mexico and Central America.

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