Tlaloc (Aztec deity)

In Aztec religion, god of the mountains and of rain water, to whom sacrifices of children and babies were made.

Summary Article: TLALOC

Tlaloc was worshiped by the Aztecs as a god of rain and fertility. He could bring drought, floods, and disease, as well as new life. Tlaloc was an ancient god of Mesoamerica (Mexico and Central America) whom the Aztecs incorporated into their pantheon to add legitimacy to their empire.

In Aztec myth, Tlaloc belonged to the second generation of gods. The first generation—which comprised Xipe Totec, god of agriculture; Tezcatlipoca, the malevolent creator god; Quetzalcoatl, the feathered-serpent deity; and Huitzilopochtli, protector of the Aztec people—was created by the supreme being Ometeotl. These gods, in turn, created fire, the first man and woman, and the gods of rain and water. Tlaloc, the chief of these water deities, was an immensely powerful divinity. He controlled rain, clouds, thunder, lightning, hurricanes, and mountain springs, as well as a host of lesser deities, known as the Tlaloques, who served as his attendants. Some accounts describe many Tlaloques, while others mention only four or five such beings. Each was responsible for a different type of rain; beneficial rain; fungus rain; windy rain; fiery rain, which may have symbolized drought; and flint-blade rain, which may have symbolized hailstorms.

Tlaloc's control over water meant that he acquired other roles as well. He could help or hinder agriculture by sending the right amount of rain, too much, or too little. This power connected him with fertility, as well as with drought and hunger. Tlaloc and his Tlaloques were also thought to bring diseases that the Aztecs associated with rain and cold winds, including dropsy, leprosy, and rheumatism. Tlaloc's importance was directly linked to the extremes of the Mexican climate, which has long seasons of torrential rain followed by intensely dry seasons. These conditions could inspire uncertainty in the minds of farmers and other people, and increase their desire to appease the rain god. Yet there was another, gentler aspect of Tlaloc. The Aztecs believed that people killed as a result of his power—whether struck dead by lightning, stricken by illness, or drowned—went to the god's paradise of Tlalocan, where they lived in eternal bliss.

Tlaloc had a distinctive appearance and set of sacred symbols. Carved figurines, and written descriptions in Aztec sources, depict him with round, saucerlike eyes and a pronounced upper lip with jaguarlike teeth. Some scholars believe that the jaguar connection derived from the idea that the animal's snarl resembled the rumble of thunder. Tlaloc's possessions were a jade tomahawk, which symbolized a thunderbolt; a writhing serpent, which symbolized lightning; and a jug, from which he poured the rain. The god was also closely associated with mountains: clouds that settled on mountaintops were regarded as a sign of his presence. The Aztecs believed that Tlaloc lived on a mountain to the east of their city of Tenochtitlán (modern Mexico City), which to this day is known as

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Mount Tlaloc.

## Ruler of the third age

Tlaloc's most important role in Aztec myth was as ruler of the third age of the world. The Aztecs believed that the age in which they lived, presided over by the sun god Tonatiuh, was the fifth; before it four different gods had ruled four different races of people, all of whom had been destroyed either because of their own failings or because of wars between the gods, notably battles between Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl. Tezcatlipoca ruled the first age, when the world was populated by giants. Quetzalcoatl destroyed this age, however, and presided over the next, whose simple people survived by eating seeds of the mesquite tree. Tezcatlipoca, in turn, ended this age by sending an immense wind, the survivors of which were transformed into monkeys. The third age was that of Tlaloc, under whose rule people discovered farming and began to cultivate grain. Quetzalcoatl brought this era to a violent close: he sent a rain of fire, which reduced the world to ash and turned people into turkeys. Tlaloc's wife, the water goddess Chalchiuhtlicue, presided over the fourth age, before she destroyed it with a great flood. This flood again transformed the people of the world. This time they became fish.

### Aztec Worship

Aztec people incorporated Tlaloc into their own pantheon to legitimize their empire. The Aztecs are thought to have come from the north and settled in the Valley of Mexico, where they built the city of Tenochtitlán in 1325. The city's most important temple, the Teocalli (Great Temple), contained two sanctuaries, the northern one dedicated to Tlaloc and the southern one honoring Huitzilopochtli. Situating both gods in a single temple, which the Aztecs held to be the center of the universe, was a highly symbolic act. It connected the Aztecs and their own protector god Huitzilopochtli to the history and cultures of Mesoamerica through the ancient figure of Tlaloc. The two gods also represented the two primary means by which the Aztecs acquired and maintained their power: warfare, the preserve of Huitzilopochtli, and agriculture, indelibly linked to Tlaloc.

Worship of Tlaloc was a major part of Aztec religion. Five months out of the Aztecs' 18-month ritual year were devoted to Tlaloc and other deities of aquatic life and plants, including his wife Chalchiuhtlicue, the Tlaloques, and salt goddess Uixtocihuatl. These divinities—and, especially, Tlaloc—were commemorated in festivals and rituals such as ceremonial bathing and child sacrifice. Blood and life sacrifices were at the core of Aztec beliefs, stemming from the idea that humans owed blood and lives to the gods, who had sacrificed their own blood when creating the world. This give-and-take relationship with the gods can be seen directly with Tlaloc—people understood that the price for his life-enhancing waters, which provided crops and thus nourishment, was death, in the form of child sacrifice. Remarkable evidence of child sacrifice to the rain god was discovered during excavations of the Teocalli in Mexico City between 1978 and 1982. Among statues of Tlaloc, archaeologists discovered 42 child skeletons, which have been dated to 1454, the year of a great drought in Mexico. Scholars have suggested that these sacrifices were an attempt by the Aztecs to appease Tlaloc, whose rains they beseeched to fall on the parched earth.

### Attendant Tlaloques

Tlaloc's attendants, the Tlaloques, played an important part in the myth of how the people of the fifth
world obtained corn. Quetzalcoatl discovered corn from the ants and, transforming himself into a black ant, found an enormous store of it in a chamber deep inside a mountain called Tonacatepetl. The other gods decided that humans would need all the food in the mountain if they were to become healthy and strong. Quetzalcoatl tried to move the mountain on his own, but it was too heavy. The other gods then agreed that the diseased god Nanauatzin should split the mountain open. Once this was done, the Tlaloques had the task of gathering up all the corn and scattering it over the four corners of the earth. Consequently, the Aztecs honored Tlaloc's helpers as the deities who had brought corn to humankind.

It is possible that Tlaloc is also the central figure in the legend of how Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl created the fifth world by ripping the sea monster Tlaltecuhtli in two. Half of Tlaltecuhtli’s body formed the sky, while the other half became the earth. Its shoulders became mountains, its hair plants and trees, and its eyes caves and wells. Despite the traditional depiction of this monster as female, some scholars have suggested that it was none other than Tlaloc. These scholars point to Tlaltecuhtli’s goggling eyes as a link with caves and wells, and to his fanged mouth as a further connection with Tlaloc. Underpinning the theory is the idea that Tlaloc was an earth deity, as well as the god of rain and water. Translations of his name may well reinforce this view: while one meaning of Tlaloc is "He Who Makes Things Sprout," others include "One Who Lies on Earth" and "He Who is the Embodiment of the Earth."

Carved from volcanic rock, this Aztec sculpture from the 13th century CE is an effigy either of Tlaloc himself or of a closely related Mesoamerican deity.

Worship of Tlaloc predated the Aztecs by many hundreds of years. Some scholars believe that the god was originally part of the pantheon of the Olmecs, the people who developed the first major civilization.
in Mesoamerica between about 1500 and 500 BCE. Evidence to support this view comes in the form of the abundance of Olmec statues and figurines with protruding mouths and jaguarlike teeth. Tlaloc was also an important god for Teotihuacanos, inhabitants of the powerful city of Teotihuacán that flourished between about 300 and 600 CE. One of the city's sacred monuments was a courtyard dedicated to Tlaloc. Several buildings were adorned with murals of the god's paradise, Tlalocan, depicting it as a place of lush plants and plentiful water; its inhabitants spent their time playing and relaxing. Teotihuacanos traded with another Mesoamerican people, the Maya (who flourished between about 200 and 900 CE), and both cultures seem to have influenced the other in a variety of ways. Tlaloc images have been discovered on carvings and inscriptions at Tikal, the Maya capital in present-day Guatemala.

**Links with other deities**

Tlaloc was linked to several other deities worshiped by Mesoamerican peoples, including Cocijo of the Zapotecs, Tzahui of the Mixtecs, and Tajin of the Totonac. In particular Chac, the Mayan rain god, possessed very similar characteristics to Tlaloc. Chac, too, had fanglike teeth and was sometimes worshiped not as a single deity but as four gods, the Chacs, who were associated with the four points of the compass. It is not hard to draw a parallel between these beings and the Tlaloques. In part, the connection between Tlaloc and other Mesoamerican deities was inevitable: all peoples in the region prayed to a rain god to secure good crops. However, the similarity of these rain gods cannot be explained by need alone—it suggests that Tlaloc was an ancient, pan-Mesoamerican deity.

**See also:** AZTECS; BLOOD; CREATION MYTHS; FERTILITY; FLOOD MYTHS; MAYA; NATURAL FORCES; OLMECS; QUETZALCOATL; SACRIFICE.

**Further reading**


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