

Eclipse in Mexico: a magic meeting

Mexico was privileged to have witnessed a total eclipse last July. The lunar shadow was first seen in the Pacific, southeast of Hawaii. It travelled fifteen thousand kilometers (9,322 miles), in three and a half hours, to the west coast of Mexico and then on to Brazil.

People in thirteen states and in the densely populated Federal District stopped their activities to look at the longest eclipse in our century: almost seven minutes over the central path in the State of Nayarit.

In Mexico City, the sky opened a window of sunshine in the midst of the rainy season so that the full beauty of the event could be appreciated. Meteorologists at the National Observatory had previously mapped out a detailed analysis of the last ten years so they could forecast the weather.

Thousands of people travelled to areas with projected optimum viewing

More people than ever before experienced the total solar eclipse last July. The path of the eclipse took it over densely populated areas, and through wide media coverage.

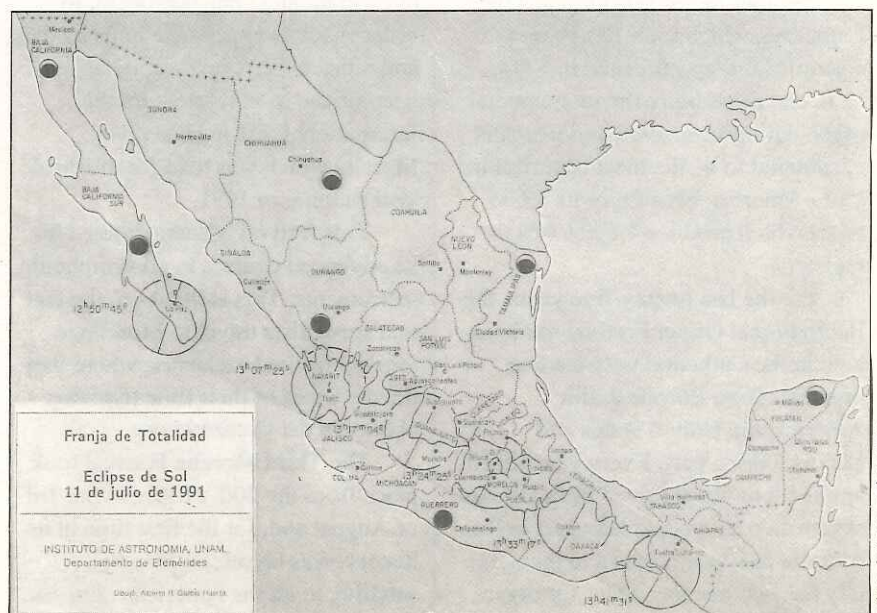
conditions to see the eclipse. Scientists from all over the world gathered to collaborate on biological and astronomical research; for some, an international first.

The eclipse was more than an opportunity for scientific activity. Musicians, poets and dancers gathered at many pre-Columbian sites, observatories and pyramids throughout the country to renew their pre-Hispanic roots. Spiritual meditation and ancient rituals accompanied the ceremonies in honor of the God of the Sun and the Goddess of the Moon.

Pre-Columbian beliefs in Mesoamerica

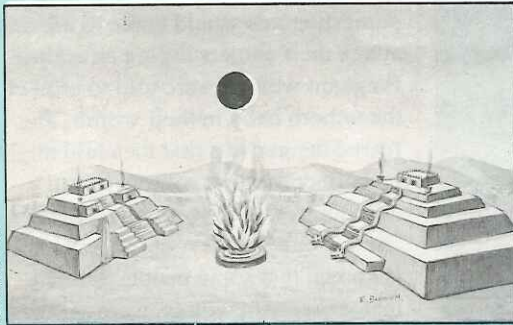
The people of Mesoamerica were aware and concerned with their relationship to the universe. They developed a sophisticated body of knowledge in mathematics and astronomy. Their goal was to predict the changes on earth generated by moving planets and events such as solar eclipses.

Planets were said to control time and order life in general. The combination of symbolism and astronomy led them to deify the Sun, Moon and other planets. It was



The path of the eclipse.

The Sun and the Moon (Aztec legend)



Ricardo Barrio

The first Sun, the Sun of Water, was taken by a flood.

All who were in the world became fish.

The second Sun was eaten by tigers.

The third was swept by a curtain of fire that burned the people.

The fourth Sun, the Sun of Wind, was taken by a storm.

The people became monkeys and scattered in the hills.

Thoughtful, the Gods met in Teotihuacán.

Who will usher dawn in?

The Lord of the Snails, Known for his power and beauty stepped forward.

"I will be the Sun," he said.

"Anyone else?"

Silence.

But they all turned to look at another, the small deformed Lord, the most forsaken and ugly of them all, and they decided:

"You."

The Lord of the Snail and the small Lord went off to the hills that are today the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon. There, fasting, they meditated.

Later, the Gods gathered wood, built a huge bonfire and called them.

The small God gathered his strength and jumped into the flame.

He appeared immediately, radiant, in the heavens.

The Lord of the Snails looked at the bonfire, wrinkling his brow.

He went forward, backward, withdrew, stopped, turned a few times. Since he wouldn't decide, they had to push him. It took along time for him to rise in the heavens. The Gods were angry, so angry they beat him. They hit his face with a rabbit, once and then again, until the brilliance was gone. Thus, the arrogant Lord of the Snails became the Moon. The blotches on the Moon are the scars from is punishment.

The brilliant Sun, however, did not move.

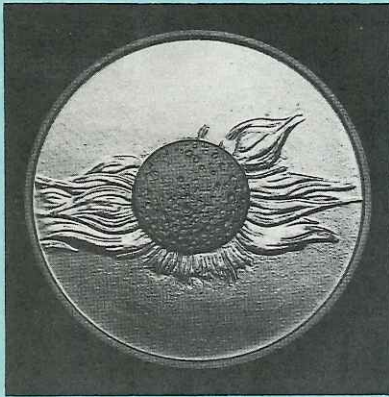
The obsidian hawk flew to the small Lord.

"Why don't you move?"

And the crippled, disdained, hunchback said:

"Because I want the kingdom and blood."

That fifth Sun, the Sun of Movement, lit the Toltecs and lights the Aztecs. It has claws and feeds on human hearts.



Medallion commemorating the total eclipse of the Sun issued by the UNAM.

important to have precise information on the activities of the Sun and Moon. It was also important to chart the movement of planets and stars, in order to maintain normal life cycles. Celestial activity ruled crop planning, harvesting, and ritual community celebrations.


An eclipse was thought to be a cosmic error affecting the cycle. There are many myths and beliefs among the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican peoples. Some believed that an eclipse was an attack on the Sun or the Moon. Others, that it

was an evil being, such as a jaguar, an ant or an iguana, trying to consume the planets and thereby threaten the natural cosmic order of life on earth.

If the monster was allowed to succeed in devouring the "master planet" during a solar eclipse, the world would be left without light, in a permanent shadow and the evil being could come down and destroy the people. Everything possible had to be done to keep the monster at a distance. Thus, some pre-Hispanic peoples believed that producing a loud racket would achieve their goal.

So, some people tried to help with drums. Others, took up arms: knives and machetes, either to help the Sun or protect themselves from evil. And there were those who built huge bonfires to provide the light that the Sun lost.

There was also the belief that domestic tools would come to life and attack their owners during an eclipse. Pregnant women were told to protect the unborn baby in their womb. The feared danger was that the child might be born deformed, without lips or a nose, or even of becoming a monster, like the one that devoured the Sun. It is known that some people thought that if pregnant women were exposed to a solar or lunar eclipse, they risked giving birth to a child with black (in solar eclipse) or red (lunar) spots. Women were told that they should place an obsidian blade in their mouth, on their chest or on their bellies to defend the fetus from negative influences.

We have known for at least two hundred years that eclipses are normal cyclical events. However, fear and superstition of the unknown withdraw slowly. Scientific information gathered for centuries is contributing to dispel magic-laden thought patterns. The media bombarded the Mexican population with information on viewing safety, and while it frightened many, it reassured others who were treated to one of nature's eeriest phenomenon: a total eclipse of the Sun 

Elsie L. Montiel
Assistant Editor.