# The Fall of Tollan

## By Paul Category: Mesoamerica and South America

The Toltecs

### <u>Legend</u>

The mighty Teotihuacan lay dying. According to native legend, at Tamonchan a last gathering of survivors of Teotihuacan met before they divided and set off around Mexico in search of sanctuary. Legend tells further of one small group of devotees who sought refuge in the far north-west of Mexico, a great desert then home to the warlike Chichimec tribes. The Teotihuacans found sanctuary among them, the primitive nomads welcoming them and in turn benefiting from the trappings of civilisation the Teotihuacans brought with them, such as agriculture and advanced weaponry. Life in the desert was harsh, the soil arid and the Teotihuacans, yearned for the green and the fruitful soils to the south they had abandoned. So sometime in the 9th century AD the Teotihuacans joined by many Chichimecs, left their hunter-gatherer kin and migrated south in search of richer climes. There voyage ended at the hill of Xicotitlan, atop which sat the Otomi village of Mamemhi and beside flowed the rich river Tula. The Teotihuacan-Chichimecs quickly overcame the Otomis there founded a city.

The fertileness of the region, however, was not lost on other Meso-American peoples and to their surprise, as the Teotihuacan-Chichimecs encountered another nation entering the region with the same intentions as them. The people were the Nonoalcas from Tabasco in the south of Mexico, just to the north of Maya lands and culturally close to them. The Nonoalcas, highly civilised, had too amalgamated with ex-residents of Teotihuacan and like the Chichimecs been persuaded by the Teotihuacans from their homelands. They had resided for sometime in Huaxteca but now moved into Hidalgo. The common link of Teotihuacan bloodlines the two peoples carried was strong enough and rather than war over their new found home they decided to join together. The Nonoalcas brought advanced building techniques and the God Quetzalcoatl to the city.

And so the city of Tollan was born, boasting the name 'place of reeds' to tell all of its wealth. The dwellers of the city became known as Tenoch, people of Tollan, which was bastardised by the Spanish into Toltecs. Thus the legendary Toltecs were born fusing the ferocity of the Chichimec barbarians, the philosophy of Teotihuacan and the science and culture of the south and the local heritage of the Otomis.



#### <u>Realism</u>

The Toltecs were by no means alone in the region. After the great exodus of Teotihuacan much of the former Metropolitan Area, north of Texcoco had been settled by the nomadic Otomis, who integrated with those who refused the flight and stayed. The Otomi had established several cities and the great population centre of Otumba on the northern shores of the lake. The south of the lake was too not without powerful rivals. The Culhuas had created a tight kingdom centre around their capital of Culhuacan.

The Toltec settlement and integration period ended around 950 AD and their imperial phase began. How big the empire grew is still hotly debated by archaeologists and historians. The tantalising finds of Toltecs wares in far flung corners of Mexico coupled with native traditions lead some military historians rather romantically to believe it to be Mexico's third great empire on a par with Teotihuacan and the Aztecs. Opposing them a realist camp claim it only came to dominate an area smaller than the Teotihuacan states inner Metropolitan Area. The city of Tollan at most 30-60,000 people at its peak and a similar number living on the surrounding rural lands.

Evidence suggests that like the Aztecs and Tlaxcallans later the Toltecs formed a traditional Meso-American triple alliance with Otumba and Culhuacan. With each possessing roughly half the population of Tollan, the Toltecs could swell their numbers, but along with several more smaller Otomi and Toltec tributary cities established, the total number of both city and rural Toltecs still falls short of the 200,000 living in the city of Teotihuacan let alone the estimated 1.2 million of the Metropolitan Area or the 8 - 15 Million of the Aztec Empire. Hardly a recipe for Mexico's mightiest empire.

The Toltec Empire was it has been suggested a trading empire lacking the military strength for sizeable conquest and occupation. It mostly avoided conflict with areas with powerful civilisations and instead expanded into sparsely populated regions. The Empire was also a tributary empire. In other words, little more than a gangster protection racket, extorting protection money from the weaker cities within its turf by intimidation. No permanent garrisons were left and conquest kept in line only by threat of violent reprisals should their tribute falter. When a tributary empire is strong this can be a powerful incentive but if it's iron grip weakens tributaries can quickly melt away.

The Toltec empire was at its zenith towards the end of the 10th century, stretching far north of the Valley of Mexico, coming into contact with Chichimec lands in the northwest and Huaxtec territory in the northeast. Supposed also to have conquered substantial lands in the west but it's southern gains were more limited. In the east the empire hit the brick wall of the Cholula centred Puebla Valley, as did the Aztecs later.

The fame of the empire in disproportion to its size has endured in western minds for two of the great anomalies of history, the invasion of some Maya cities in the Yucatan and the fabled North American expedition. Though many still question if either of these really happened. If they did they support the arguments for the greater Toltec empire. The crux of the argument is the Toltec style architecture found in Chichen Itza shortly before its substantial conquest of Maya land suggesting a conquest and military invigoration of the city. Though Toltec style architecture has been found too in El Tajin predating it in Tollan and nobody is suggesting a Totonac conquest of Tollan.

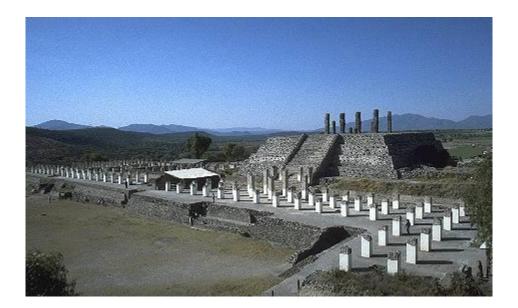
When the archaeological site of Tula was finally confirmed to be Tollan in the twentieth century, archaeologists were disappointed by what they found. The crudeness of the artwork, both in technique and subject, portraying crude militaristic scenes, compared the rich metaphor of both Teotihuacan and Mayan art. A comparison between Toltec buildings in Tollan and buildings in Maya cities such as Chichen Itza built in the Toltec style, shows the Maya were able to build the architecture of their conquerors to a much higher quality. The Aztecs recorded Toltec law and social customs. The

philosophy of the empire seems to have been a stoic one, similar to Sparta and Rome. Toltec society was also a prudish one, adultery was against the law and sex a taboo subject. Little sexuality is found within Mexican art, with a few exceptions, in fact on most nude statues the genitalia is deliberately left off. Governmentally the cities were ruled by a monarch and an aristocracy. Impenetrable barriers existed in crossing the classes.

#### The Fall of Tollan

It's not in the short lifetime of the Toltec Empire its greatness really occurred. Tollan was only to become Rome long after it burned. Tollan fell around 1168 AD and like a dozen great cities before should have passed into anonymity. But it was its final epic catastrophe that thrust it into the forefront of the Mexican psyche for an age to come. The strength of this can be demonstrated in the fact that for centuries, contrary to Indian denials, historians believed Teotihuacan had been Tollan, so great the legend of Tollan in the Meso-American mind that no other city fitted the bill.

Legendary Tollan's fall was one of decadence, flame and conquest, today the burn marks give visitors glimpses of its sacking. But what weakened the empire and prompted the sad demise?



#### The Quetzalcoatl Myth

Indian tales tell that around 1125 AD about the 175th year of the empire when already the empire had lost most of its western expanses, a division at the highest level emerged within the capital. The cultural differences between the Toltec-Chichimecs and the Nonoalcas were substantial and at least one section of the Nonoalcals population even after all this time had failed to integrate, they had become a culturally estranged ethnic minority and no-longer wanted to stay within the city.

For a solution it was to the Toltecs main rivals they looked, the independent city states of the neighbouring Puebla Valley. The Puebla Valley, naturally defensible and richer even in resources than the Valley of Mexico was the location a several independent city states. Like the Toltec's Valley, it had been part of the Teotihuacan Metropolitan Area and was now populated by a new invader. The Olmeca-Xicallancas had migrated there around the same time the Toltecs had moved into the Valley

of Mexico, but had not become an empire, more a collection a independent city states. The Puebla Valley also contained the 'eternal' city of Cholula. At that time Cholula was at a low in its yoyo history. It was decided that the unhappy Toltec-Nonoalcas would depart Tollan and seize Cholula. This would give them a new home as befits them and remove as an adversary the only city in the whole central highlands of Mexico to rival Tollan's glory not a Toltec tributary.

Initially the plan went well and the Toltec-Nonoalcas successfully stormed the city and took much Cholulan territory. But the Cholulans didn't lie down, instead retreated deep into their provinces, organised popular resistance aided by the other cities of the valley now fearing Toltec conquest too. After six years of withering guerrilla warfare the Cholulans made considerable gains and finally drove the Toltec-Nonoalcas out of the city. It was now the Toltec-Nonoalcas who were reduced to guerrilla war from the provinces they still controlled.

Reeling from the humiliation, now Tollan and the empire intervened, a mighty host was marched from the great city to the aid of the Toltec-Nonoalcas. But Cholula the yoyo city had now been sparked into resurgence and joined by the forces of the other cities the great Toltec Imperial Army suffered a crushing defeat. A defeat so cataclysmic it shook the empire to its foundations.

Now Mexican history enters a phase that almost mirrors the events of Vortigen and the history of dark age Britain. The defeated Toltecs, their tributary empire balancing on a razor's edge. desperately sent north to their kindred Chichimecs for mercenaries to fight for them. With tales of the riches of the south and the successes of the Toltecs-Chichimecs, the northern barbarians were impressed, too impressed. Instead of coming to save the Toltec-Nonoalcas, they overran the whole Puebla Valley and incurred so much into the Valley of Mexico itself they destabilised the empire itself. How badly they damaged the empire is illustrated by the case of one tribe of Chichimecs under a chief named Mixcoatl who conquered the city of Culhuacan, the empire suffering the indignity of losing its 2nd city.

However it was the conquest of Culhuacan that brought the Toltecs their brightest hope. The Toltec numbers were extremely depleted but taking on new blood had never been a problem for them. Mixcoatl was allowed to keep control of Culhuacan and given a Toltec princess Chimalman as his wife. From their marriage a son, Ce-Acatl, was born but tragedy strikes and she dies from childbirth and shortly after Mixcoatl was murdered by a jealous brother, any military threat to Tollan dying with him. Mixcoatl death proved only a delay though, and in 1150 AD the army marched out from Culhuacan lead by the now grown up Ce Acatl. Tollan easily succumbed to Ce Acatl and he was crowned king. At his coronation Ce Acatl was given the title Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, Topiltzin meaning prince and Quetzalcoatl after the God of Teotihuacan and the title of several prior Toltec kings, including the founder of the empire (the commonness of this title causing endless confusion in historical accounts). If his father was the Alaric of the Toltecs, Topiltzin was the Justinian. By now the empire was crumbling before the overwhelming hordes of Chichimecs, Topiltzin immediately went to work restoring the former glory of the empire. Legends talk of him as a Homeric hero who fought at the centre of troops in battle. It seems with the fall of any great state a moral collapse accompanies it. The years of lavish had taken its toll upon Tollan and its ruler found themselves in a terrible state of decadence and apathy. Prostitution, corruption and superstition were rife and the strict social order breaking down. Topiltzin lead by imposing the strictest code of behaviour upon himself as an example to all. Topiltzin full of hope and youthful vigour brought hope back to Tollan.

A list of conquests of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl that survived the Spanish book burning suggests that he not only saved the empire from the Chichimecs but expanded it far beyond its former frontiers. Most famous or surreal of all is his Mayan expedition, 1500 kilometres to the South. Conquering several Maya cities including the greatest prize of all, Chichen Itza. Whatever possessed an Empire 2-300 kilometres at its widest point, surrounded by enemies and dozens of other civilisations unconquered to send its army on a march so far away remains one of the great mysteries of history.

The final demise of the Toltecs came in 1168 or 1175 AD when like with its earlier troubles, internal divisions mixed with external events. The Chichimecs threat had not been destroyed, more tempered by a powerful Toltec king, but they now sat within the empire and many more at the borders in an uneasy ceasefire waiting to pounce as soon as Topiltzin's hand weakened. The Chichimecs though were not the only Northerners, in the Northeast resided the equally numerous and dangerous Huaxtecs, who at the time of the empire greatest division played their hand.

As the Huaxtecs spilt across the borders of the empire, Topiltzin was to fall victim to an act of treachery by one of the princes of Tollan. Huemac who came from an old noble family that could trace it lines back to a Nonoalcas king and was possibly the rightful heir to the throne of Tollan Topiltzin had usurped, was said to have sent a sorcerer before Topiltzin who tricked him through a magic mirror into believing he was ill. To cure him the sorcerer then gave him a potion, a sacred alcoholic beverage called 'Pulque' that caused drunkenness, a crime punishable by death for a noble in Toltec society, and Topiltzin innocently drank it. Shortly again a second similar incident too provoked by Huemac involving a women of ill-repute befell Topiltzin.

So weakened was he in the eyes of his people after these scandals he found himself unable even to assemble an army to oppose the Huaxtec invasion. Instead he resorted to Dane geld and tried to buy them off. Far from discouraging the Huaxtecs, they saw it as a sign of weakness and three Huaxtecs kingdoms encouraged by Topiltzin weakness formed a confederation and marched on Tollan itself. Under this threat Tollan had to act, even if it was under a disgraced king. Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl march out of the city at the head of the flower of its warriors, undefeated in 25 years and veterans of a hundred victorious battles under his leadership, organised into two great armies. But now Topiltzin was looking old, he seemed to trust nobody, be wary of his generals, his image of purity and self denial had faded in the eyes of his men. None the less for three years a see-saw struggle raged before the walls of Tollan. Until the whole campaign rested upon a single final battle. For one last time Topiltzin put on his armours, drew his sword and joined the front rank of his infantry. But it wasn't enough, he could sense the fear in his troops before the whooping barbarians, and could already feel the line begin to buckle before the barbarians closed. The battle turned into rout and rout into a massacre, but Topiltzin and loyal guard were able to hack their way back to Tollan.

As Topiltzin stood before his council of princes it became clear his position was untenable, while he was victorious the nobles of the city would tolerate him, but now he had lost he was just a usurper son of a Chichimec barbarian who dared to think himself a Toltec. There was only one option left for Topiltzin, exile. So in the year Reed-One Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl and a band of a few followers still loyal to him, marched out of the city and headed east. Legend has it to the coast where they sailed into the horizon with Topiltzin vowing to one day to return and reclaim his empire again. Where he really went nobody knows, but one legend has it he sailed north to the United States and reigned over the native Indians there. This theory has gained some credence over recent years with discoveries of a Mexican incursion into New Mexico about the same time, Anasazi, a city built far in advance of American Indian culture flourished. With Mexican style architecture, evidence of both human sacrifice and cannibalism abundant in the city. Both Mexican customs, quite alien to North American Indians a Mexican incursions has been surmised.

After Topiltzin's departure Huemac was made king of Tollan, but his reign was a short lived one. Not long after, Tollan was stormed by the Huaxtecs, the inhabitants put to the sword, sacrificed or enslaved. For miles and miles around Tollan fires could be seen jutting above the treetops, pillars of smoke brought early night, the sky turned blood red and Toltecs, Chichimecs and other nations stood in wonder as the centre of the world burned.

#### Poison Legacy

Tollan burned but unlike Teotihuacan, Monte Alban or Tikal before, its memory didn't fade to dust. Instead the legend of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl grew and grew, like the legend of the Once and Future King. By the time of the Aztecs the legend of Quetzalcoatl was at its height. The Aztecs were Chichimecs, who integrated with the surviving Toltec-Chichimecs of the Valley of Mexico. They settled at the centre of former Toltec lands and built their empire on top of the Toltec one. The Aztecs were Toltecs too, the blood was thinner, but they were still Toltecs and they were aware the Toltecs were in turn Chichimecs who migrated from the same northern desert as them.

For the Aztecs, the Toltec Empire came to dominate their psyche, becoming both their Eden and Jerusalem. 'Toltec' became the Aztec word for 'civilised'. Everything that was great and good in the world was referred to as 'Toltec'. Aztec chroniclers wrote that every deed the Toltecs did was greater than that of the Aztecs. When the Aztecs conquered a city they believed the Toltecs conquered it before and because the Toltecs conquered it before, the Aztecs being Toltecs, it was not just their right to conquer it, but their duty. As the Aztecs believed no-matter how large their grew the Toltec's had been larger. A viscous circle of conquest was created. But however much they conquered one fact always haunted the back of the psyche, the empire wasn't theirs, the Aztec emperor was just a steward minding for Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl what was his rightful empire until he returned.