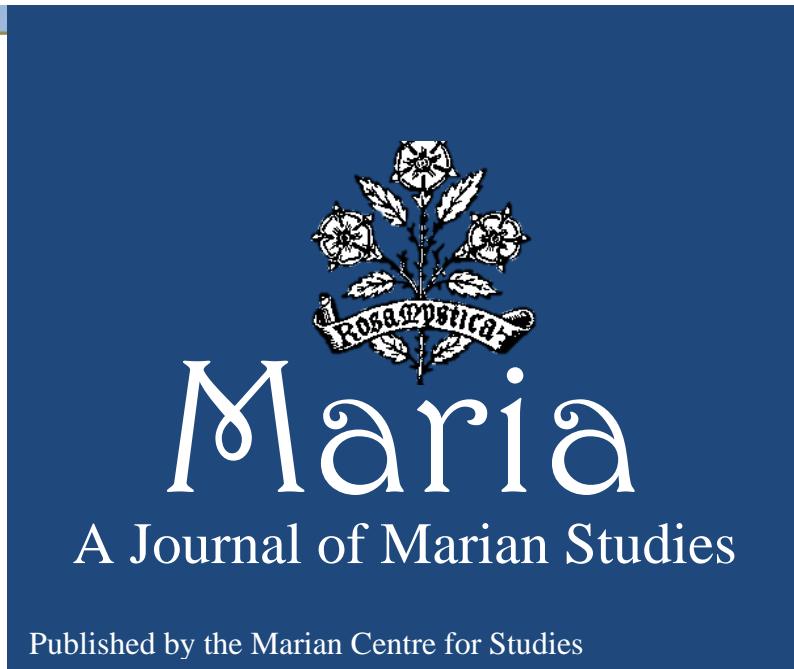


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Abstract

This article will consider how European missionaries responded to the popularity of goddesses in new conquered lands in Central America. An analysis will be made of the multiple models of representation and belief in the divine feminine during pre-colonial and colonial times, and their association with the devil and monstrous creatures in Europe and the Americas. These creatures have different associations in the Mesoamerican context.

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Mary, Eve, and the Serpent: Gender and Religion in Europe and New Spain

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In colonial Mexico and the Americas, Mary, the image of Catholic religion as opposed to the indigenous pre-Hispanic religion, was always represented crushing beneath her feet the devil in the shape of a dragon or a serpent, which frequently has a woman’s head. This artistic tradition starts in Europe during the Renaissance when the serpent mentioned in Genesis takes on a female head, either Eve’s own likeness, or the head of the mythical non-Biblical figure of Lilith, styled to be Adam’s first wife.

Thus, before discussing the image and meaning of the Virgin Mary and reptiles in Mexico, we should consider the European conception and representation of the diabolic during the medieval and Renaissance periods. In Christian belief, Satan was a fallen angel, the enemy of God and active promoter of evil. The image of Satan embodies dragon-like features. He has claws for hands and feet and sometimes wings as a reminder of his angelic origin.

The famous passage in Genesis (Gen. 3.1-7) describing the original sin is essential in order to understand the concept of evil in the Old Testament. In this passage, the principal characters are Adam, Eve, the serpent (Satan), and Yahveh (God). God warned Adam on pain of death not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil standing in the garden of Eden. But the serpent persuaded Eve who ate the fruit and gave some to Adam, who ate it too.

The earliest visual representations of the Temptation are late Roman, or early Romanesque. In these images the man and woman are portrayed on either side of the tree, usually with a snake coiled around its trunk. The snake, if standing, has four legs and feet like a lizard. It was only afterwards that God cursed it: ‘On your belly you shall crawl’ (Gen. 3.14). The source of the imagery in the Temptation paintings is Genesis, but over time bits were added from other places, none authorized by the actual words in the Bible. The Bible, for instance, does not say the serpent is Satan; it does not name the fruit as an apple. But, starting in the twelfth century, the serpent takes on a female head and torso. This trend pervades all



sacred iconography and medieval literature.¹ The work of Hugo Van der Goes, *The Temptation* (1473-1475), represents Adam and Eve near the tempting snake, a large standing four-legged lizard with a female head. Sometimes this hybrid woman-snake with an elongated anguilliform lower body and woman's torso has a pair of extended wings, as in a relief at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. In these works of art, the snake has been transformed into a four-legged dragon or reptilian female. The Latin word *draco* signifies both snake and dragon; both represent evil in Christian art. Christian artists continued to depict this serpentine woman in paintings, woodcuts, and sculptures in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Michelangelo's Renaissance version is viewed on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City (Fig. 1 – see below). The artistic tradition of the snake woman was carried on in the nineteenth century when Eve became the archetype of *la femme fatale*.

The Christian tradition from the very beginning incorporated ancient suspicions regarding women's association with evil and the devil. The Fathers of the Church debated whether all sin entered the world through Eve or whether the demons originally fell because they lusted after the daughters of men. Tertullian called women 'the devil's gateway', and even went so far as to attribute greater powers of evil to women than to the devil, since it took a woman (Eve) to persuade Adam 'who even the devil was not strong enough to attack to turn away from God and bring sin into the world'.² An interesting fresco by Italian painter Buonamico Buffalmacco clearly illustrates this Christian belief. A monk who practises religious ascetism in a cave receives the visit of a woman. He does not notice, however, the diabolic temptation hidden under her pleasant image. The painter warns the viewer by showing the long claws of the tempting devil under the woman's dress.³

In elevating the masculine aspect of divinity, Jewish and Christian traditions began to despiritualize the earthy, sensual side of human nature as unclean and unholy, and thus devalued the goddess associated with earth and the senses. Generally, the dragon and the serpent, that in the Americas were beneficent celestial and earthly powers, in Christian

¹ Warner Marina, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*, New York: Vintage Books, 1983, 59-60.

² Tertullian, *Disciplinary, Moral and Ascetical Works*, New York: Father of the Church, 1959, quoted in Warner Marina, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 58.

³ Buanamico Buffalmacco, *Il diavolo tentatore in vesti femminili*, detail of the *Tebaide*, 1340-1350, at the Pisa Camposanto.

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Europe became chthonic, destructive, evil and associated to Eve (and women) who caused humanity's Fall.

Medieval misogyny went as far as associating the Beast of the Apocalypse (Rev. 17.4) with a lustful woman. In medieval illustrated manuscripts she is depicted as a beautiful, elegant woman, often wearing a red dress, on top of a dragon and holding the golden cup. The dragon as symbol of Satan is described in the Apocalypse (Rev. 12, 17) as a ferocious seven-headed beast with ten horns and a long tail. In Christian iconography, subduers of dragons represent victory over the powers of evil and heresy. Images of saints fighting or taming dragons abound in Christian art. Among these images we find that of Mary.⁴

From the patristic era onwards, Mary's virginity was envisioned as a great cosmic victory over the forces of darkness and evil; while Eve brought death to the world, Mary brought life. According to Jerome: 'Now that a virgin has conceived in the womb and borne to us a child...now the chain of the curse is broken. Death came through Eve, but life has come through Mary. And the gift of virginity has been bestowed most richly upon women, seeing that it has had its beginning from a woman.'⁵

Snakes, Dragons, and Mary as New Eve

The understanding of Mary as a courageous woman who enters into battle with the forces of the devil inspired a tradition of images portraying Mary attacking Satan. Mary is usually armed with a stick, a wooden club, or even arrows and with these weapons she menaces the devil. In the North transept portal of Notre Dame, there is an early representation of this armed Virgin. The tympanum narrates the apocryphal story of

⁴ The dragon is the attribute of St Margaret and St Martha, both of whom are said to have fought and vanquished a dragon. It is also the attribute of a number of other saints including St George of Cappadocia, who slew the dragon. The dragon appears with the apostles Philip and Matthew, St Sylvester, and the Archangel Michael, who is often shown with a dragon under his foot as a token of his victory over the powers of darkness.

⁵ St Jerome, Letter 22, in *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, trans. and annotated by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Vol. 6, 1890, 30.



Theophilus. Theophilus (lover of God) sold his soul to the devil, but he regretted this pledge later in his life and prayed for help. The Virgin heard his prayers and threatened the devil with a sword.⁶

In the fourteenth century, Italian Renaissance painters created the image of *La Vergine del Soccorso* (Virgin of Secours) a very interesting depiction of an armed Virgin holding a club (made of wood?) and threatening the devil who is trying to catch a child. On the left is a woman praying. The motif of the child stolen by the devil and rescued by the Virgin is a typical theme of medieval Italian and French literature. Popular legends tell stories of sinful mothers who desperately curse their children to hell, and of the Virgin who fights the devil and returns the child to its mother.⁷

Since medieval times then, Mary was not only represented as the humble and obedient servant of the Lord. Like Eve, who played a crucial role in the expulsion of Adam from paradise, Mary would take an active role in her son's triumph over sin and death. In this process, Mary became the *mulier fortis* praised in the Book of Proverbs (Prov. 31:10). Mary was the one who faced the devil, as the first Eve had already done, but since the Virgin was *fortis*, she managed to conquer the conqueror. This *mulier fortis* was also represented crushing the devil in his reptilian form. Usually in these depictions, the snake at her feet has naked, prosperous female breasts, long black hair, horns, or animal ears. The snake woman is holding an apple, a reminder of the Fall. Sometimes this Eve-demon has claws instead of hands or a complete reptilian body. The theme became popular especially in France. In Brittany there are many interesting variations. In images of the Jesse Tree, the Virgin is depicted with Jesse and a snake-Eve at her feet (Fig. 2).

This image of the woman crushing the head of a serpent reinforces the Mariological understanding of Genesis (Gen. 3.15): 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he will bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel'. The pronoun 'he', which refers to the collective offspring or seed, was wrongly translated as 'she' and given a literal Marian sense. Church priests adopted this dubious interpretation of Jerome and saw in this passage a prophecy of the Virgin's victory over Satan. This role of the Virgin as

⁶ Meagan Katherine Decker, *Asserting Authority: The Canons' Use of the Theophilus Legend and Marian Imagery at Notre Dame de Paris*, Master's Thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 2013.

⁷ Ezio Levi, 'I Miracoli Della Vergine nell'Arte del Medioevo' in *Bollettino d'Arte* 12, 1918, 1-32.

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a militant and defender continued during the period of the crusades in medieval Europe, when Mary (along with other holy warriors such as Saint Michael, Saint George, and Saint James), was invoked by soldiers in battle against anyone perceived as an enemy of the Christian faith. In Spain in particular, the image of the Virgin Mary became a symbol of the Reconquest, appearing to the Spanish monarchs during battles that were carried out to expel the Moors from Spain.⁸

In medieval and Renaissance Europe, evil creatures like snakes and dragons stood for the heretical Muslims while in Baroque times they symbolized the heretical Protestants. In the church of Our Lady of Victory in Rome, painter Cerrini depicted the Virgin Mary triumphant over heresy with armed angels attacking a seven-headed dragon representing Protestantism. When in the sixteenth century Luther criticized the cult of the Virgin Mary, considering it a form of idolatry, all Catholic countries and especially Spain came to the defense of the cult of Mary and put to an end medieval doubt about Mary's Immaculate Conception.⁹ Counter-Reformation art was dedicated to exalting the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, and Mary came to be seen as the glorious defender of the Catholic faith against the new Protestant heresy in Europe and victorious over the indigenous religions of the newly colonized territories.

The representation of the Immaculate Conception combines iconographic elements taken from the woman of the Apocalypse (Rev. 12.1), from passages of the *Song of Songs*, and from *Ecclesiasticus*, as well as others taken from different writings, all of which allude to the spotlessness of the Virgin depicted as the rose without thorns, the walled garden, the

⁸ Luis Weckmann, *La herencia medieval de México*, Mexico City: El Colegio de México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994, 157-62.

⁹ In 1644 the feast of the Immaculate Conception was declared *de preecepto* in Spain. It was among the most important and obligatory Catholic celebrations. Many confraternities and brotherhoods choose as advocate Mary under the title of her Immaculate Conception. Powerful military religious orders like the Order of Calatrava, the Order of Alcantara, and the Order of Santiago of Compostela committed themselves to defend the dogma. In the eighteenth century, during the reign of Charles III, Pope Clement XIII with the pledge of the Spanish king proclaimed the Immaculate Conception patron saint of Spain and the Spanish Empire. Francisco Javier Campo and Fernández de Sevilla, 'La devoción a la Inmaculada Concepción en las « Relaciones Topográficas »' in Francisco Javier Campo y Fernández de Sevilla (eds.), *La Inmaculada Concepción en España: religiosidad, historia y arte*, Madrid: Ediciones Escurialenses, Vol. 1, 2005, 7-28.



sealed fountain, the Lily of the Valley, the Cedar of Lebanon, and the Tower of David. However, it was the Woman of the Apocalypse described by Saint John who became the main model for the artistic representation of the Immaculate Virgin, 'a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars' (Rev. 12.1). Spanish artists were responsible for creating the definitive iconography of the doctrine. Zurbaran, Ribera, and Murillo painted many times a triumphant figure of Mary standing? on a crescent moon, framed by angels and sun rays, and with the head of a dragon displayed beneath her feet (Fig. 3).¹⁰

Along with this official iconography of the Immaculate Conception, another type of iconography began to spread in Europe and the Americas during the seventeenth century, especially thanks to the work of the Franciscan and Jesuit orders.¹¹ This new image of the Immaculate Conception portrayed the Virgin carrying a spear with which she tried to kill the serpent or the dragon. This militant Immaculate Virgin was particularly popular throughout Spain, a country whose attitudes and values were shaped by a centuries-long process of warfare and confrontation with Islam.

Reptiles and the Virgin Mary in New Spain

In Mexico, the same political and spiritual energies that had been devoted to the just completed conquest of the Moors would now be deployed in conquest of the indigenous people. Indeed, the Conquest, was viewed, like the Reconquest of the Moors, as the direct work of the Mother of God. And, as the mission was carried out under the powerful support and protection of Mary, the Mother of God, one generally finds the Virgin appearing alongside the warrior saint in battle. As Mexican historian Luis Weckmann notes: 'The Virgin Mary and Santiago . . . appear everywhere in America to aid the conquistadores: the apostle always with

¹⁰ The painter Francisco Pacheco (d. 1654), Velasquez's father-in-law, was invested with considerable authority as inspector of sacred pictures under the Inquisition and set forth the criteria for the orthodox iconography of the Immaculate Conception in his book *The Art of Painting* (*Arte de la Pintura*), 1614.

¹¹ Manuel Trens, *Maria: Iconografía de la Virgen en el arte Español*, Madrid: Editorial Plus Ultra, 1946, 182-7.

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his flaming sword and mounted on a white horse . . . and the Virgin scattering dust (or, on occasion, dew) in the natives' eyes to blind them momentarily.¹²

During his voyage to Mexico, Cortés brought a generous supply of pictures and statues of the Virgin Mary, which he presented to the natives as a representation of the divine mission and Spanish rule, placing them on indigenous altars whenever he could. This Spanish habit of handing out Marian images wherever they passed, made Nahua people fail to differentiate between Mary and God. As the Franciscan friar Toribio de Benavente Motolinia reports: '...they would call all the images they saw Saint Mary'.¹³

The Immaculate Conception occupied a central place in the religious life of New Spain. Mary Immaculate was the most widely venerated image of Mary in the Americas. The duel between Mary and the serpent and her identification with the Woman of the Apocalypse appears in every colonial register, biblical reference, apologetic reasoning, and especially in colonial paintings. Countless pictures of Mary Immaculate were placed in hospital chapels and churches founded by Franciscans in indigenous villages. In many of these works, the Archangel Saint Michael helps her in the battle with Satan.¹⁴ Christian missionaries relied heavily upon the expressive power of sacred images. Since indigenous people did not know Spanish and the friars sent to evangelize them did not know Nahuatl when they arrived, images became the primary means for communicating the teachings of Christianity.

The transfer of Europe's visual culture to New Spain was complex and efficient. Between 1623 and 1648 well over six thousand works were sent to America via Seville. One of these paintings by Marten de Vos the Elder (Antwerp, 1532-1603) shows Saint Michael crushing a winged female with a sinuous? fish tail. Her wings are a reminder of Satan and his angelic origin. Another painting of *La Purissima* that circulated in Latin America, apparently

¹² Luis Weckmann, *La herencia medieval de México*, 157.

¹³ Toribio de Benavente Motolinia, *Historia de los Indios de la Nueva España*, Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1979, 24.

¹⁴ Joseph Kröger and Patrizia Granziera, *Aztec Goddesses and Christian Madonnas: The Image of the Divine Feminine in Mexico*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, 102-7.



inspired by a drawing by Martin de Vos, depicts the Immaculate Conception crushing a snake woman?¹⁵

These images were used to indoctrinate people native to the New World in the new Catholic faith. In Mesoamerican cosmovision, however, reptilians were associated with water, earth, fertility, and the divine feminine. Mesoamerican people pictured the earth's surface as a floating crocodile. A famous Aztec myth relates how the heavens and the earth were fashioned by dismembering the mother goddess *Tlaltecuhtli* (Earth lord/lady) who was a monstrous crocodile or *cipactli* in the Nahuatl language, floating on the primeval sea.¹⁶ Like *Tlaltecuhtli*, many other fertility goddesses were associated with reptiles and were represented with reptilian bodies like *Cihuacoatl* (snake woman), *Chicomecoatl* (seven snakes), and *Coatlicue* (snake skirt).

Cihuacoatl (snake woman) was a major Aztec goddess who watched over fields of agriculture and helped to create human beings. She took on many guises but in sculpture she is always represented with the body of a snake (Fig. 4). Her image was very similar to the female demon that was crushed by Mary or Saint Michael in European works of art. No wonder that Franciscan missionary friar Bernadino de Sahagún, describing this goddess, compared her to Eve and said that the Aztecs worshipped a devil in the guise of a woman:

...this goddess is called Cihuacoatl, which means snake woman; and it is also called Tonantzin, which means our mother. In these two things it seems that this goddess is our mother Eve, who was deceived by the snake, and that they had news of the dealing that happened between our mother Eve and the snake....¹⁷

Sahagún thought that the indigenous people of central Mexico knew about the story of Temptation, and they worshipped Eve (*Cihuacoatl*) mother of humanity. So, images like that of the Immaculate Conception killing her antagonist serpentine Eve were a powerful tool of conversion which illustrated how Mary, the new goddess who landed on Mexican soil, would

¹⁵ Jonathan Brown, 'From Spanish to New Spanish Painting, 1700-1785' in Luisa Elena Alcalá and Jonathan Brown (eds.), *Painting in Latin America 1550-1820*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014, 104-5.

¹⁶ Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia General de las cosas de la Nueva España*, ed. Angel María Garibay, Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1965, 91-120.

¹⁷ Sahagún, *Historia General de las cosas de la Nueva España*, Libro 1, Cap VI, 46. Quote translated by the author.

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help the natives vanquish and subdue the Eve-devil, that they were wrongly worshipping from the Christian perspective.

Another interesting version of *La Purissima* that circulated in Spanish colonies depicts Mary with the infernal serpent at the bottom of the painting, but which has a female seductive face and a fish-shaped body.¹⁸ The emblematic presence in some colonial paintings of the mermaid as a substitute for the serpent is a visual license among Latin American painters. The mermaid that takes the place of the serpent should be seen as a war trophy of the Virgin. Sebastián de Covarrubia in his *Emblemas Morales* (1610) had already explicitly identified mermaids as the antipode of Mary and personifications of the ‘vices of the flesh’.¹⁹

The mermaid was a European fantastic creature completely new to the indigenous people of central Mexico, but her fishy winding tail was similar to that of their goddess *Cihuacoatl* (snake woman), who was both a benevolent and malevolent deity. Spanish friars, however, presented mermaids as evil and associated them with the biblical snake. In Christian iconography, mermaids distracted man from his true goal, luring him to temporal attraction and spiritual death. The Franciscan missionary Juan de Torquemada attributed to the goddess *Cihuacoatl* the same traits of the seductive woman who can change from beautiful to dangerous. He believed that the Aztec goddess was a powerful witch who could change into a beautiful woman, a warrior, an infernal monster, or a snake.²⁰ These misogynistic ideas certainly influenced the indigenous people’s attitude towards women and sexuality, and promoted the circulation of many folktales all over Latin America that tell stories of ambivalent supernatural female entities who allure and capture men (their spirit or body) in order to copulate with them and then kill them with their *vagina dentada*.²¹

¹⁸ Baltasar Echave Ibía, *Virgin of the Immaculate Conception (Virgen de la Sirena)*. Museo Nacional de Arte INBA, Mexico City.

¹⁹ Sebastián de Covarrubia Orozco, *Emblemas Morales*, ed. Carmen Bravo Villasante, Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1978, Emblem 94.

²⁰ Fray Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquia Indiana*, Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1975, Vol. 1, 80-85.

²¹ Félix Baez-Jorge, ‘Imágenes numinosas de la sexualidad femenina en Mesoamerica’, *La Palabra y el Hombre* 73, enero-marzo 1990, 5-28.



Nevertheless, in Mexico, we find a number of folktales where snake women and mermaids are benign beings. In the central area of Mexico, these female beings are called *Clanchana* or *Tlanchana*. Their name in Nahuatl means: *atl*, water; *tonan*, mother; *chane*, being or magical spirit. They live in lakes, lagoons and other bodies of water. Usually, they share their sacred space with the Virgin Mary, as in Coatetelco and the basin of the River Lerma. Here, in pre-Hispanic times, the nine lagoons that formed the river were populated by native Otomi and Matlazincas people. In all the riverside villages of this area, the Virgin of Candlemas is associated with the fertility of the land and the lagoons. She also shares her benign maternal qualities with the *Tlanchana*.²²

In Hispanic America, Mary of the Immaculate Conception acquired a new iconography. She was represented with wings, exactly like the woman of the Apocalypse. In Mexico, painter Miguel Cabrera and his school were responsible for the popularity of this iconography. This image became so popular that the Virgin was represented attacking the seven-headed dragon of the Apocalypse even under her other titles. In the Museum of the Basilica of Guadalupe, a painting by Andrés López, *Allegory of Our Lady of Mount Carmel* (1791), portrays Our Lady, patroness of the Carmelite Order, with wings and striking the seven-headed dragon with the help of her son Jesus and Saint Michael.

Spanish friars tried their best to demonize serpents and reptiles in Hispanic America, not only with images like those discussed above, but also with sermons and other doctrinal texts. Sometimes, they used the names of real snakes to translate the word dragon. In the book *Confesionario en lengua mexicana y castellana. Con muchas advertencia muy necesarias para los confesores* (1599), a work written by Fray Juan Baptista to help friars carry out good confessions among the indigenous peoples, the author relates extensive *exempla* where two friars had the vision of a woman tormented by reptilian creatures (snakes, lizards, toads) because she did not confess a sin of incest. In this vision, the woman appears riding on a *mazacoatl* (which means (deer-snake in Nahuatl language), and it is one of many snakes that populated Mesoamerican territories:

²² María Isabel Hernández González, 'La culebra, la sirena y la virgen en la región lacustre del alto Lerma' in Beatriz de Pina Chán (ed.), *Iconografía mexicana II, El cielo, la tierra y el inframundo: águila, serpiente y jaguar*, Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2000, 197-207.

The perverse woman who rides on a big *mazacohuatl*, [...] the one that scares people [...]. The one that made her suffer a lot, that killed her with fatigue. Everywhere on her head were many lizards of fire or weasels of fire, [...] very poisonous, slimy, slippery, those who kill people. They roasted her, bit her and cut her with their teeth.²³

In the original Christian text of this *exempla* the woman appears mounting a dragon. The author chose to translate dragon with the Nahuatl word *mazacoatl*, because this snake has deer antlers on its head, which makes it similar to a horned dragon. Therefore, the *mazacoatl* is described as the incarnation of the devil by the friar. In *Codex Florentino*, Sahagún's informants list three different types of *mazacoatl* and the third, a small variety, was used in an aphrodisiacal potion to enhance male virility, thus reinforcing its association with fertility.²⁴ Most likely Fray Ioan Baptista knew of this association of *mazacoatl* with sexuality, and for this reason he assigned to this specific snake the task of torturing a woman whose sin was lust. In this way the *mazacoatl*, a snake linked to the powers of reproduction and fertility, was transformed into a diabolical executioner. Friars were obliged to accommodate their teaching to native thought categories and, in doing so, a significant portion of Christian theology was lost in translation. As a consequence, the *mazacoatl* was never really assimilated as an equivalent to the Apocalyptic Beast.

To this day for the people of Cuetzalan, a village on the mountains of Puebla, the snake *mazacuata* (*mazacoatl*) is a benevolent animal that takes care of the maize crops and frees them from plagues/pests. All over Mexico and Central America, there are many legends where similar horned serpents are important entities associated with water and wealth. They bring money, a good harvest, hunting prey, and supernatural power. Contemporary Zoques tribes of Oaxaca (Mexico) believe that mountain spirits are capable of transforming into

²³Quote translated by the author : 'La mujer perversa que anda estando sobre una gran *mazacohuatl*, [...] la que mucho espanta la gente [...] la que mucho la hacía padecer, la mataba de cansancio. En toda parte de su cabeza muchas lagartijas de fuego o comadreja de fuego, [...] muy venenoso, babosos, resbaladizos y que matan a la gente, la asaban, la mordían y la cortaban con los dientes.' Berenice Alcantara Rojas, 'El Dragon y la Mazacoatl criaturas del infierno en un exemplum en Nahuatl de Fray Ioan Baptista', *Estudios de cultura Nahuatl* 36, 2005, 383–420.

²⁴ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, trans. by Arthur J.O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble, Santa Fe NM: School of American Research and University of Utah, 2nd. rev. edn., Book 11, 1963, 80.



horned snakes shortly before the rainy season.²⁵ Among the Maya Chorties of Guatemala, the *chiccans* are gigantic snakes (*chan* means snake in Chorti) who can be both celestial and terrestrial, the former provoke atmospheric phenomena and the latter are associated to lakes and rivers. Storms are caused by a *chiccan* female.²⁶

Therefore, for many contemporary indigenous tribes of America, the horned serpent is not considered a symbol of Satan; rather, it is a sacred animal closely linked to water both as giver of life and as carrier of catastrophic death, two aspects that characterize the earth goddess.

In the same way, it seems that many Immaculate Virgins, after reaching New Spain, became friends with their mortal enemy: the snake. In Mexico, reptilian creatures sometimes watch over the Virgin's sanctuary and help Mary by protecting her sacred space from non-believers. The Virgin of Hool (Campeche) appeared in a lagoon located in the village and people from Hool warn the new arrivals of the dangers of approaching the lagoon due to the supposed presence of a crocodile, whom nobody had seen so far except people from the village.²⁷ Another interesting Mayan legend tells the story of a mysterious donkey who lives in a cave near a small archeological site in the municipality of Cansahcab. The cave is known as the 'Cave of the Virgin' and people can see the donkey only when the Virgin appears in the cave. Our Lady always appears accompanied by two enormous snakes which guard and protect her space: the cave.²⁸

In addition to legends like this, there exist a number of colonial paintings of the Immaculate Conception crushing the apocalyptic dragon which could convey a double message to the viewer.

In one of these paintings, the Immaculate Virgin is portrayed attacking a dragon and seven different individuals seem to come out from the dragon's mouths (Fig. 5). According to

²⁵ Roberto Martínez G., Ramón Viñas V., 'Palabras e imágenes de la vieja serpiente cornuda: una mirada desde Mesoamérica' in *Arqueología: Revista de la Coordinación Nacional de Arqueología* 36, 2007, 135-158.

²⁶ J. Eric Thompson, *Historia y religión de los mayas*, 6th edn., Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1984, 319-323.

²⁷ Martha Medina Un, Teresa Quiñones Vega, 'Peregrinando por los santuarios de la península de Yucatán' in *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 27, México City: Centro de Estudios Maya, 2006, 165-180.

²⁸ Carlos Augusto Evía Cervantes, *Selección de mitos*, Mérida: Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Yucatán, 2006, 59-64.

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Christian belief, these people should represent the tormented souls in Hell, since the dragon is the incarnation of the Evil one. In European art, however, we never find the image of the Immaculate with the seven-headed dragon expelling or swallowing up souls. The apocalyptic dragon simply lies at her feet. Yet, in Mesoamerican art, it is quite common to see human beings coming out of crocodiles or snakes. Being born from the jaws of a snake or reptilian creature gave the individual a special importance (Fig. 6). Many Mayan rulers are represented descending into the jaws of a reptile (when they die) or coming out from the mouth of dragon-like creatures when they are enthroned.

Considering the above, these colonial paintings of the Virgin could bear a double interpretation. Mary, the new goddess imposed on the indigenous peoples, is represented with the earth at her feet, as it should be, since divine females in Mesoamerica were always related to fertility and the earth. As a divine female, she is also associated with the natural cycle of death and rebirth. Human beings depend on her and thus they are represented as emerging from her mouth or returning to her entrails as part of the eternal cycle of life-death and rebirth. We will never know whether this double meaning was intentional or whether this unusual image of the Apocalyptic dragon was employed by the friars to elucidate the torments of Hell. In any case, the result was a very “exotic” representation of the militant Immaculate Conception.

Stories of snakes and mermaids as malevolent beings and counter-reformation images of Mary of the Immaculate Conception were probably propagated with more emphasis in New Spain because the friars understood that reptiles were sacred animals in the Mesoamerican worldview and they were associated with many gods and goddesses. However, despite all the evangelical work carried out by the friars to persuade the natives that reptiles were symbols of evil and antagonists of Mary, crocodiles and snakes kept the ambivalent role of a Mesoamerican deity and they still protect lagoons, rivers, agricultural fields, and even the sacred sanctuaries of the Virgin Mary.

Fig. 1 Michelangelo, *Fall and expulsion from the garden of Eden*, Sistine Chapel 1509-10.
Michelangelo, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



Mary, Eve, and the Serpent: Gender and Religion in Europe and New Spain

Fig. 2 Church of Our Lady of Brennilis. Bretagne, 16th century. The Virgin is depicted with a snake-Eve at her feet. Photo credit: Lavieb Aile.

<https://www.lavieb-aile.com/2016/09/notre-dame-de-breac-ellis-en-l-eglise-de-brennilis-une-vierge-a-la-demone.html>



Fig. 3 Peter Paul Rubens, *Immaculate Conception*, Prado Museum, 1628-9. Peter Paul Rubens, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons. Photo credit: Jean-Paul Grandmont.



Fig. 4 Aztec goddess Cihuacoatl, 'woman snake', 15th or early 16th century. National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City. Photo credit: Patrizia Granziera.



Fig. 5 Anonymous, *Refugium Pecatorum or Our Lady of Refuge*, Museo del Carmen, Mexico City, 18th century. Photo credit: Patrizia Granziera.



Fig. 6 Maya Lintel Structure 23 at Yaxchilan, CE 725. Yat-Balam, founding ancestor of the dynasty of Yaxchilan, emerges from the gaping jaws of a serpent.

