symbol in sunlight, this undulating sequence of triangles transforms the north balus-
e of the main pyramid, or Castillo, at Chichén Itzá into the body of a serpent during
last hour before equinox sunset. (Robin Rector Krupp)

pent heads argue well that the alignment and effect were intended. It seems rea-
able that the display played a dramatic part in a ceremony timed by the equinox.
s serpent of sunlight matches the markings of the indigenous rattlesnake of Yuca-
and the many sculptured feathered serpents of Chichén Itzá can be identified, by
rattles, as rattlesnakes, too. This links the equinox serpent to rattlesnake symbol-
that involves the year, the passage of time, and the idea of renewal. These same
ociations were embedded in the ceremonies of the Aztec god Xipe Totec, whose
festival was celebrated in Tenochtitlán at the vernal equinox. We can’t be sure
the rituals of the Toltec-Maya at Chichén Itzá paralleled what the Aztec inheri-
t in central Mexico, but the Castillo draws a cosmic symbol in celestial light that
as like something the Aztec would have understood.

richard Fraser Townsend has studied the cosmological symbolism of ancient Mex-
and concludes the east-to-west motion of the sun makes the top of the Aztec
endar Stone—and the serpent’s tails—east, and the bottom—by their heads—
t. He offers a good case for the proposition that the Calendar Stone never occu-
l a wall or was even displayed upright. Instead, he argues convincingly that the
it disk lay flat with its “top” pointing east.