

# The Aztecs

To those not *au fait* with the programme in the mid-1960s, it may come as a surprise that **Doctor Who** was able to convey the cultivated suspense it was famous for in its heyday without the appearance of monsters such as the Daleks or the Zarbi. Episodes that have received wider coverage than *The Aztecs* appear to confirm this view: the last three episodes of the first story, admittedly more an 'anthropological' than a historical story, can be criticized for their laborious moralizing and the less than creditable performances of some of the cave dwellers. *The Aztecs*, the second story to be based in man's recorded past, and the oldest of those to exist in the BBC Archives, helps redeem their reputation.

Like many **Doctor Who** tales, particularly in the early years, the action as far as the travellers are concerned revolves around the problem of the way in which they are going to get back to the TARDIS. An uncharacteristic, but credible burst of kleptomania from Barbara, as she puts on the bracelet of the priest Yetaxa, provides protection for the four as they attempt to explain their materialization to the Aztec priests and warriors attendant on the tomb of the dead holy man in which the ship had landed, but also serves to embroil them further in Aztec culture. Thus the scene is set for four episodes of vintage **Who**.

One of the tasks that faced scriptwriters during the first two seasons was to dream up new perilous situations for Ian Chesterton to find himself in. John Lucarotti's story is full of them. Ian successively finds himself challenger to Ixta, the Chosen Warrior of the Aztec people, in the course of which he is nearly poisoned accidentally by the Doctor; he is imprisoned in a secret passage at the base of the Aztec temple; and immediately afterwards he is nearly drowned as it is revealed that the very passage is, in fact, a water conduit. Barbara helps Ian shoulder the danger burden, though, as the Priest of the Sun God, Tlotoxl, who suspects the divinity accorded her by his colleague Autloc, very nearly succeeds in poisoning her.

It has been said that one of the themes of the first two seasons was the humanizing of William Hartnell's Doctor. As those who have seen *An Unearthly Child* will know, the Doctor is initially, at least on the surface, often cynical, sometimes malevolent, and almost always manipulative. In *The Aztecs* he gets his comeuppance when he finds himself engaged to one of the best supporting characters in the series, the lovestruck Cameca, played with total obsession by the excellent Margot van den Burgh. William Hartnell's splutterings as she accepts his unwitting proposal (over a cup of coffee - not much has changed in six hundred years) are a joy to behold.

In an interview for *Doctor Who Monthly* in 1981 Dennis Spooner, the programme's second script editor, remembered how Sydney Newman, then BBC Head of Drama and co-creator of **Doctor Who**, always insisted that the Doctor should always stay as an observer in the historical situations he was involved in, and never be portrayed as the initiator of events. Here this dictum becomes part of the storyline as the Doctor rigidly enforces the doctrine of nonintervention. Barbara only causes herself embarrassment and her companions danger as she fails to appreciate the integral part that human sacrifice plays in Aztec culture. This point is stressed as the travellers successfully regain access to Yetaxa's tomb and the TARDIS at the close of the fourth episode, John Ringham's Tlotoxl proceeding with a sacrifice to reassert the stability of Aztec society that Barbara's intervention had imbalanced.

The acting in the early, studio-bound, seasons of **Doctor Who** is often stereotyped as theatrical and subsequently lacking credibility. The former may be the case; the latter is not so. John Ringham's performance is a prime example. The High Priest walks with a humped back and occasionally a dragging of the foot, but his characterization works because the other members of the cast believe in it. While accepting and to some degree welcoming that actors in recent years have enjoyed appearing in **Doctor Who** because it is fun to do, it is perhaps valuable to wonder whether or not a higher standard of suspension of disbelief from the cast was elicited in the weekly turnaround.

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