

# The History of Swimming In Pre-Columbian Mexico



The El Mirador limestone panel depicting the swimmers of the Mayan creation myth.

## Introduction

Swimming is universal to all races and cultures. However, in these times we see very few representatives from the indigenous populations of Africa, the Americas or Oceania competing in Aquatics at the Olympic Games. This fact has led some to question the physical capabilities of these people as swimmers. There is no truth to these racist stereotypes. In fact, prior to the destruction of their native aquatic cultures by Western colonization, the indigenous people of what ethnic Europeans called “the uncivilized world,” were universally regarded, by those who saw them, as being **the best swimmers and divers in the world**. The purpose of this series is to educate people about the universal history of swimming in the hope that these stories may inspire more people, of every race, religion and ethnicity, to swim.

## The Maya

Much of what is known about the swimming abilities of the indigenous population of Mexico and Central America comes to us from observations made by the early conquistadors and archeological evidence.

In 2009, archeologists uncovered two massive carved stucco panels in the Mirador Basin of Guatemala's northern rain forest. They are the earliest known representation of the Mayan creation myth, predating other such artifacts by a millennium. According to re-



searchers, the panels—26 feet long and 20 feet high—with images of monsters, gods, and swimming heroes—date to 300 B.C. They formed the sides of a channel that carried rainwater into a complex system of stepped pools, where it was stored for drinking and agriculture.

The carved images of swimmers, which have an uncanny similarity to the modern “wave breaststroke,” depict an important scene from the Popol Vuh, the centerpiece of Maya beliefs for well more than a millennium and which stands as one of the world's enduring religious stories. A text of the Mayan myth was first recorded and transcribed in the 16th century by a Dominican monk.

The saga's two main characters are the Hero Twins, named Hunahpu and Xbanlanque, who were like a double dose of Hercules. They were the sons and nephews of another set of twins Hun Hunahpu and Vucub Hunahpu, who were passionate ball players. They were so good,



A Mayan Swimmer bowl found in El Salvador, ca. 550 - 800 AD

that they came to the attention of the Lords of the dead in underworld, Xibalba, which was at the bottom of the sea. There the two men were defeated, sacrificed and decapitated. The sons were born predestined to avenge their father and uncle, and the El Mirador and the images that appear on pottery found throughout the Mayan lands, shows them swimming down to Xibalba to defeat the Lords of the Dead, which they did.

But it's not just Mayan gods who swam. Archeologists have discovered the remains of Mayan villages all along the Yucatan and Central American coastlines with piles of shells, proving the Mayan's were skilled watermen who harvested food from the sea, like all other

indigenous tribes throughout the Americas.

Today – inland Maya are not good watermen and few can swim and many are drowned in lakes. It is strange that in Guatemala, along the shores of Lake Atitlan – one of the most beautiful lakes in the world, cannot swim and do not bathe in it.

## The Aztecs

In the 1940s, archeologists discovered a series of murals in the homes of wealthy or powerful citizens of Teotihuacan, one of the most remarkable cities of the ancient world. These murals date from 100 to 650 A.D., when the city was abandoned. Many depict a “Great Goddess” who is thought to have been responsible for creation. In one scene, water drips from the hands of the Goddess, creating the mountain streams of Tlalocan, the heavenly paradise, ruled over by the rain god Tlaloc, where mortals are seen swimming and playing joyfully in the water.



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## The Art of Swimming



Figurines and plate based on images of the Teptantitla Mountain Stream Mural. Created for ISHOF by artist Jean Ermann Desimots.

The decline of Teotihuacan has been correlated to lengthy droughts and uprisings against the ruling classes.

Another important archeological artifact is a Totonac stone carving of swimmer dating to 600 - 800 A.D, and found near Veracruz, Mexico. The Totonacs are one of many pre-Aztec tribes who may have built or inhabited a multi-ethnic Teotihuacan.



Reproduction of the stone carving of the Totonac Swimmer, created by ISHOF artist Jean Ermann Desimots.

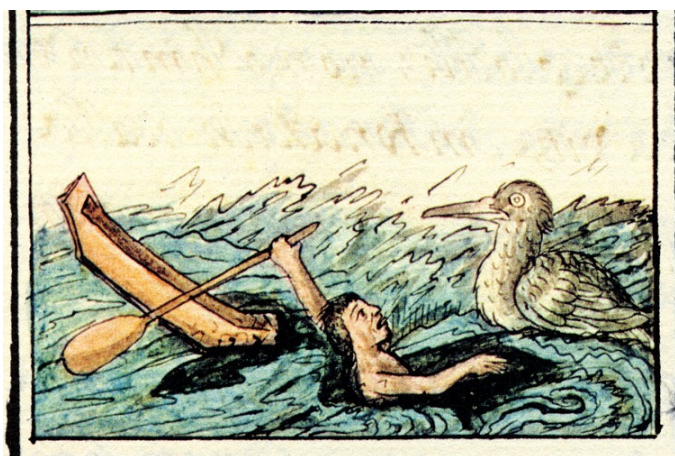
When Cortez and his men began their approach to the Aztec capital, they landed in Veracruz where Cortez' chronicler, Bernal Diaz, observed that the Indians of both sexes were excellent swimmers who "*were as much at home in the water as on land.*" When the Spanish horsemen attacked the Aztecs on the causeways of Diaz wrote that "*the barbarians (Indians) threw themselves quickly into the water, -- for like crocodiles or seals, they swim as easily as they walk on land.*"

According to the Aztecs, if you drowned, it wasn't by chance. Whoever died a watery death did so for one of two reasons: either they were such devout subjects that the Tlaloque gods, assistants to Tlaloc, selected them as worthy inhabitants of their heavenly paradise of Tlalocan, or they had hoarded precious jade stones, an action which angered the Tlaloque

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gods enough to kill them with one of the afflictions related to water.



Images from the Florentine Codex, Book XI.