

## Tattoo History : South America

Contributed by WaterTattoos.Net  
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When Cortez and his conquistadors arrived on the coast of Mexico in 1519 they were horrified to discover that the natives not only worshipped devils in the form of statues and idols, but had somehow managed to imprint indelible images of these idols on their skin. The Spaniards, who had never heard of tattooing, recognized it at once as the work of Satan.

The sixteenth century Spanish historians who chronicled the adventures of Cortez and his conquistadors reported that tattooing was widely practiced by the natives of Central America. Oviedo, who wrote the first and most complete account of the conquest of Mexico, tells us that the natives "imprinted on their bodies the images of their demons, held and perpetuated in black color for as long as they live, by piercing the flesh and the skin, and fixing in it the cursed figure." The Jesuit missionary Jean Baptiste le Pers wrote: "They called their idols zemes and the imprinted their image on their own bodies. So it is not astonishing if, having them without ceasing before their eyes and fearing them much, they saw them often in dreams. They were all hideous - as toads, tortoises, snakes, alligators, etc." And the historian Cogulludo reported that warriors were tattooed to commemorate their achievements in battle, "so the bodies of old heroes were completely covered with hieroglyphics."

As far as we know, only one Spaniard was ever tattooed by the Mayas. His name was Gonzalo Guerrero, and he is mentioned in several early histories of Mexico. The reports of his activities are fragmentary but intriguing. Guerrero was one of 20 sailors who survived a shipwreck off the coast of Jamaica in 1511. He and his companions managed to crowd into a small lifeboat and drifted at sea for two weeks without food or water, during which time several of them died of exposure and starvation.

The survivors finally reached coast of Yucatan, where they were captured by Mayas who kept them in cages and stuffed them with food. Several weeks after their capture the Mayas sacrificed three of the Spaniards during a religious served as served them up as the main course at a ceremonial dinner while Guerrero and his horrified companions watched from their cages.

That night, Geurrero and four others managed to escape and make their way through the jungle to Chetumal, a nearby Mayan city-state. The ruler of Chetumal, who was an enemy of their former captors, allowed them to live but made slaves of them. During the next two years three of the Spaniards succumbed to hunger, hard work, and disease. The only survivors were Guerrero and a Catholic priest, Geronimo de Aguilar.

Somehow de Aguilar had managed to hang onto his breviary during all these adventures. He kept track of the days on a Christian calendar, said his prayers, and resolutely maintained his chastity in spite of many provocations and temptations. The Mayas were properly impressed with this display of self control and the ruler of Chetumal promoted de Aguilar to the official post of Guardian of the Royal Wives.

Guerrero demonstrated more talent for warfare than he did for celibacy, and because of his knowledge of Spanish military methods he was able to improve his lot by making himself useful to the Mayas in their wars against the invaders. After proposing and organizing a successful attack on Spanish ships of the Cordoba expedition he was made Chief Military Commander. He married the daughter of a noble, by whom he had several children, and became a convert to the Mayan religion. As evidence of the sincerity of his conversion he had himself completely covered with Mayan tattooing, as was the custom for one of his social position.

When Cortez launched his invasion of Mexico in 1519 he first stopped on the coast of Yucatan, where he learned from the natives of Cozumel that two Spaniards were living in the with the Mayas on the mainland. Cortez immediately sent a ship and messengers with ransom to rescue the Spaniards. De Aguilar returned with the messenger, but Geurrero did not. When de Aguilar saw the Spaniards he thanked God, wept, fell to his knees, and asked if the day was Wednesday. It was. He had managed the count the days on a Christian calendar for over eight years.

Because de Aguilar had mastered the Mayan language and knew much of Mayan culture, Cortez used him as an interpreter and advisor. De Aguilar accompanied Cortez throughout his invasion of Mexico and proved to be an invaluable asset when Cortez conducted his negotiations with Montezuma. In contrast to de Aguilar, Guerrero disdainfully refused to rejoin his countrymen and continued to help the Mayas in their resistance against the Spanish for over two decades. This was the cause of much distressed and embarrassment to the Spanish, who could not understand how a Christian could be converted to the Mayan religion.

A second attempt to induce Guerrero to rejoin his countrymen was made by Francisco de Montejo, a military adventurer who hoped to conquer the Mayas as Cortez had conquered the Aztecs. In 1529 Montejo anchored his ship in the bay of

Chetumal and captured several natives who told him that Guerrero was serving the Lord of Chetumal as Chief Military Commander. Montejo imagined that Guerrero could be of service to him in the same way de Aguilar had been of service to Cortez, and sent one of the captured natives with a message in which he offered Guerrero "a great opportunity to serve God and the Emperor, our Lord, in the pacification and baptism of these people, and more than this, to leave your sins behind you. I beseech you not to let the Devil influence you... so that he will not possess himself you forever."

Guerrero answered by directing an attack on Montejo's ship. Montejo and his crew were defeated and sailed away in search of easier loot, while Guerrero remained to play a leading role in the Mayan resistance for another decade.

In 1535 a group of Spaniards on the coast of Honduras were approached and attacked by a Mayan war party in canoes. After a bitter struggle the Mayas were defeated, and the Spanish were amazed to find that among their slain enemies was the body of an ornately tattooed white man. It was Gonzalo Guerrero's last battle.

The most complete account of Mayan tattooing is found in *An Account of the Affairs of Yucatan* by Diego de Landa, a Franciscan Friar who traveled throughout much of Central America between 1549 and 1562. De Landa was a zealous preacher who labored earnestly to eradicate idolatry, sorcery, tattooing and other diabolical practices. But after 12 years of missionary work he was horrified to discover that many of his converts to Christianity were still secretly being tattooed and worshipping their ancient idols. His superior authorized him to conduct an inquisition, and de Landa, who maintained that "nothing could be extracted from a Maya without torture," had his Christian converts tortured until they saw the light.

A Spanish eyewitness reported that de Landa "ordered great stones attached to [the Maya's] feet, and so they were left to hang ... and if they still did not admit to a greater quantity of idols they were flogged as they hung there, and had burning wax splashed on their bodies."

In all, de Landa ordered the torture of over 4,500 suspected idolaters. Thirty committed suicide in order to avoid torture, and countless others were crippled for life. The few who survived the torture but refused to confess were tried by a court of the inquisition and publicly burned. De Landa observed with satisfaction that "in general, they all showed sincere repentance and a willingness to be good Christians."

The Mayas were then forced to ransack their ancient temples and tombs and to deliver up to the inquisition the bones of their idolatrous ancestors together with all available idols and demonic statues. These were smashed and destroyed in a solemn ceremony presided over by de Landa. De Landa also confiscated and burned thousands of manuscripts in which the Maya had recorded their history, art, mythology, science, astronomy and medicine. In all this he detected nothing but the work of Satan. He wrote " [The Mayas] used certain glyphs or letters in which they wrote down their ancient history and sciences in the books ... We found a great number of these books in Indian characters and because they contained nothing but superstition and the Devil's falsehoods we burned them all; and this they felt most bitterly and it caused them great grief."

As the Spanish continued their invasion of Central and South America the same pattern of destruction and genocide was repeated. Wherever missionaries encountered tattooing they eradicated it. The only surviving record of pre-Columbian tattooing is found on sculptures in which tattoos are represented by engraved lines on the bodies of human figures. These tattoos had great significance within the context of the cultures of Central and South America, but what that significance was, we will never know.