Lake Titicaca: The Cauldron of Incan Creationism

Lake Titicaca has long been the center of various socio-political cultures in South America. The lake has seen many cultures along its shores, such as the Pucará (400BC-100AD) and the Tiwanaku (200BC-1000AD), and still remains a place of value and livelihood for the Uru peoples of the famed Floating Islands. Yet it is the Incas who encapsulated the essence of the great lake around which they built their own civilization. Lake Titicaca was enveloped into their mythological and religious beliefs as the center of the cosmos.

The Incan Creation Story
According to Inca tradition, their creator god (called either Viracocha or Wiracocha) created the world as it is now through trial and error; creation and destruction. As seen in other creation myths, such as those of the Norse and the Greeks, the first beings were created both by and from the creator himself, later meeting an unfortunate end at the hands of a great flood sent by the creator.

- The Ancient Ruins On and Beneath the Sacred Lake Titicaca
- Viracocha’s Astronomical Creation Engine
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In the Incan worldview, Viracocha's first attempt at creating life came in the form of stone giants. Due to the giants' size and physical makeup, it is not surprising that they were so difficult to control that Viracocha traded them in for the smaller, more "pliable" race of humans (forged from clay or stones) which he supposedly crafted in Tiwanaku. For a time, Viracocha let humanity thrive until their greed and pride—two factors that have been humanity's downfall across cultures—led to Viracocha's decision to start again. Thus he sent the Incan version of the Great Flood. The deluge eventually subsided into Lake Titicaca, leaving three humans alive (or two, depending on which narrative one reads), just as Lífs and Lífsandir were the only survivors of the Norse Ragnarök, and Deucalion and his wife were among the few to survive the second ancient Greek flood. These humans would go on to create the humans from which all current people are descended. It is also said that either from Lake Titicaca or before the creation of the lake, Viracocha forged the sun, the moon and the stars. Lake Titicaca, therefore, is quite literally the cauldron from which life as the Incas knew it sprung.
Verbal Legend

Among the most valued sources discussing Incan religion and Viracocha's creation myth comes from a Spaniard named Juan Diaz de Betanzos. De Betanzos' source is unique in its respect as a "firsthand account" by scholars because de Betanzos' book, *Narrative of the Incas*, is based solely on statements of his Incan wife, Dona Angelina. Angelina was originally named Cuxirimay Osilo Yupancuy, and was a young wife of Incan ruler Atahualpa (one of many wives of the leader). Atahualpa was in power when the Spanish came to the Empire, and was deposed and executed by conquistador Francisco Pizarro. Cuxirimay Osilo Yupancuy was taken prisoner, renamed Dona Angelina and eventually married to Juan de Betanzos, with whom she shared the Incan worldview. Thus the account by de Betanzos has been considered the closest thing to an indigenous written record.

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Amantani (in the distance) viewed from Taquile (in the foreground) on Lake Titicaca, Peru. (Public Domain)

However, as with most interpretations of ancient traditions through Christian eyes, de Betanzos' own religious upbringing cannot be overlooked as a possible influence in the writing of his narrative. The Inca creation myth survives in great detail because of Dona Angelina, yet the monothestic worldview of the Spanish may have subtly influenced the stories. For instance, the Spanish appear to have attempted to transform Viracocha—as the god of creation and the highest of the Incan pantheon—into an Incan name for the Christian god, with an emphasis of Viracocha's creation placed on rigid perceptions of light and dark (i.e., good and evil) rather than the Incan values of duality and reincarnation. (This theory is grounded in the codification of other polytheistic religions by Christians—such as the Norse sagas—and has not been proven by this author.) On the other hand, it can also be argued that naming Viracocha as the "primary god" was not an intention, but a mere misinterpretation by the Christian writers.

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A New Ancient Source

When discussing Lake Titicaca, the traditions and faith of the Incas survive history best for a variety of reasons. Contrarily, its position as the focal point of life and religion stems back long before the Incas conquered the previous civilizations. How much these previous cultures influenced the Incan beliefs is uncertain, but researchers have not ceased attempting to uncover Incan records. Scholar Gary Urton believes that the Inca might have recorded their own stories in "knotted string records", a unique way of storytelling that drew on their textile art forms. Urton's work regarding the understanding of these knotted khipus is ongoing, however it will be interesting to see if they might be comparable to the various Spanish narratives. It is possible that if Urton's theory is proven accurate, the world might one day know the extent to which these cultures impacted the Incas and the extent to which the Spanish dictated their mythology accurately.

Top image: Lake Titicaca and Floating island in Peru (Public Domain)

By Riley Winters

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OUR MISSION

At Ancient Origins, we believe that one of the most important fields of knowledge we can pursue as human beings is our beginnings. And while some people may seem content with the story as it stands, our view is that there exists countless mysteries, scientific anomalies and surprising artifacts that have yet to be discovered and explained.

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ANCIENT IMAGE GALLERIES
For this reason, Lake Titicaca can be easily accessed from two countries. The most popular entry point from the Peruvian side is Puno, while the city of Copacabana is a convenient choice when travelling in Bolivia. Lake Titicaca is a place filled with history, legends and uncovered mysteries. According to Incan mythology, it’s the birthplace of the first Inca king, Manco Capac. Another myth says that the creator god emerged from Lake Titicaca before creating the Sun, Moon and stars. Hence, the romantic nickname ‘the birthplace of the Sun’. The mysterious lake has also received its own version of the Atlantis legend – rumor has it, that there is a lost city under the face of the water. Lake Titicaca was the cradle for Peru's ancient civilizations. The Puraka culture settled in this fertile land around 200BC and a millennium later the Tiwanaku culture emerged and spread throughout the Altiplano and into Bolivia. Warlike tribes like the Aymaras and the Collas emerged only to be absorbed by the Incas. It was the Inca civilization that unified the many cultures and spread into this land forming the Inca Empire. The current local population is the Uros people who have populated this territory for hundreds of years, they come from the Aymara and the Quechua populations and they s The Titicaca Lake : The Mount of the Puma . The name Titicaca comes from the two Quechua words Titi which means Puma and Caca which means mount, this name is a reminder of the felines that lived many centuries ago in the vicinity of the territory. One peculiar thing is that according to the natives who lives near the lake, said that if you put the map of the lake upside-down has the shape of a puma eating a hare, trying to search a relation between the names of the lake. This theory has a strong Lake Titicaca is a large, deep, freshwater lake in the Andes on the border of Bolivia and Peru, often called the "highest navigable lake" in the world. By volume of water and by surface area, it is the largest lake in South America. (Lake Maracaibo has a larger surface area, but it is a tidal bay, not a lake.) Lake Titicaca has a surface elevation of 3,812 m (12,507 ft). The "highest navigable lake" claim is generally considered to refer to commercial craft. Numerous smaller bodies of water around the Bordered by Peru and Bolivia, Lake Titicaca is the highest lake in the Americas and the cradle of Incan civilization. You get to Lake Titicaca on the Peruvian side from Puno, the capital of Peru's altiplano which is the folkloric center of Peru and gateway to Lake Titicaca. Puno itself is not attractive but the schedule of dances including the Devil Dance performed during the feast of the Virgen De Candelaria and other festivals attract visitors year round. Check flights from your area to Lima or La Paz to make connections to the lake. History. According to Incan mythology, Manco Capac and Mama Occllo, also known as Mama Huaca, emerged from the depths of Lake Titicaca on the sacred rock gate on Isla Del S