

Swimming without cork: swimming lessons in ancient Rome and in early modern West Africa

Several Roman authors describe the way upper-class Italian children learned to swim in the Late Republic and Early Empire. Young children took lessons, either from (enslaved) professionals or from their parents or grandparents. As suggested by the proverb cited by Plato and repeated by Aelius Aristides, in which ignoramuses ‘can neither read nor swim,’ Roman aristocrats apparently associated learning to read and learning to swim, and started lessons in both around the same age (Carr 2019).

For their swimming lessons, Roman children used a variety of flotation devices. According to Horace, they sometimes were supported by chunks of cork wood. Plautus shows us beginning swimmers supported on a raft of woven wicker that they paddle with their hands. These wicker rafts find a parallel in similar swimming aids described by early European slave-dealers visiting the West African coast of Guinea, as has been laid out by Kevin Dawson (2018). Here, at least according to Jean Barbot, children learned to swim in the late 1600s ‘on bits of boards, or small bundles of rushes, fasten’d under their stomachs.’ Dawson sees these boards as surfboards, and perhaps they also served that purpose, but the Roman parallel suggests that they also served as flotation devices.

If, as has been argued elsewhere (Carr 2021), the Romans (along with the Greeks and the Etruscans) learned to swim from their Carthaginian trade partners, perhaps they also learned from them to use these simple rafts. But the Roman attitude towards swimming was very different from the West African approach. In West Africa, Barbot tells us, African boys and girls learned to swim informally, in large groups, ‘sporting together’ in the surf at the beach. This is

more or less the way children today learn to run, or to jump rope: by watching their friends and imitating them. In Rome, on the other hand, Cato the Elder taught his son Sertorius ‘how to stand heat and cold and force his way through the eddies and roughness of the river.’ Here swimming appears as a difficult skill learned as a precaution against the danger of drowning, or perhaps for military reasons (Chaline 2017). The informality of the African method, in which swimming is a social activity enjoyed with one’s friends, reflects a different and more successful approach to swimming, and indeed seventeenth-century West Africans were much more skilled swimmers than the people of ancient Rome.

Bibliography

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