

**Sächsische Landesbibliothek –
Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden**

Visitor adress
Zellescher Weg 18, 01069 Dresden

Treasure Room – permanent exhibition
Monday to Friday 10 a.m. – 6 p.m.
Saturday 2 p.m. – 6 p.m.

Guided tours
please register via tour@slub-dresden.de

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> INFORMATION

CODEX DRESDENSIS

The Dresden Codex - Mayan Manuscript

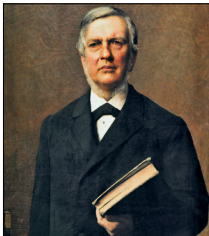
HISTORY OF TRADITION

In 1739, librarian Johann Christian Goetze purchased numerous manuscripts in Vienna for the Dresden Electoral Library, among them a “Mexican book with hieroglyphic figures.”

Alexander von Humboldt asked to have several pages of this remarkable treasure copied. He later published them in his “Monumens des peuples indigènes de l’Amérique” (Paris, 1813). Only after forty years Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg identified the Dresden Codex as a Mayan manuscript in the “Revue archéologique” (1853).

Another ten years later, in 1863, Brasseur de Bourbourg discovered the records of the Bishop of Yucatán, Diego de Landa (1524–1579), in Madrid. As inquisitor of Yucatán and Guatemala, he had enforced the Christianization of the Mayans. In his “Relación de las cosas de Yucatán” he describes the burning of the Mayan codices of July 12, 1561: “We found they had a large number of books written in these characters and, as none of them [i.e. the books] was free of superstition and devilish delusion, we burned them all, which the Indians deeply deplored and bemoaned.”

How three of the manuscripts reached Europe inspite of the fire has not been ascertained. Today they are kept by the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Museo de América in Madrid and the Saxon State and University Library Dresden (SLUB). Only the Dresden manuscript is displayed publicly.



Ernst W. Förstemann,
painting by Julius Scholtz

Diego de Landa had tried to reconstruct the Mayan writing in his records of 1566. It is still known as the Landa alphabet. Insofar his notes mark the beginning of the process to decode the complicated system of syllabic glyphs. Between 1880 and 1900, the Dresden librarian Ernst Wilhelm Förstemann succeeded in deciphering the calendar section.

CODEX DESCRIPTION

“Codex Dresdensis” consists of 39 leaves, inscribed on both sides, with an overall length of 140 inches. Originally, the manuscript had been folded in leporello-like manner. Since 1835 it has been presented in two parts, each of them preserved between glass panes. The chalk coated writing material, amate, is a paper-like matter produced from fig tree bast fibers by means of soaking and beating.



The codex, showing hieroglyphs, numerals and figures, contains ritual and divination calendars, calculations of the Venus phases, sun and moon eclipses, instructions of new-year ceremonies, as well as descriptions of the Rain God’s locations.

Upon analysis of the astronomical information, the origin of the Dresden manuscript was dated to around 1250. Thus the codex could have come from northern Yucatán where between 1200 and 1450 the Mayans’ last major communities survived.

TREASURE ROOM

Near the end of World War II, the library building, Dresden’s Japanese Palace, was heavily damaged. The codex, too, suffered from moisture. The surface of the approximately eight-century-old manuscript partially adhered to the 170-year-old glass panes so that any jarring or moving of the codex is to be strictly avoided.

The codex is permanently supervised by restoration experts. The facsimile editions of 1880, 1962 and 1975 as well as internet publications allow for academic work with the manuscript.

The treasure Room of the SLUB exhibits 50 treasures from the past 4000 years. The Codex Dresdensis is displayed in its center.



References

- **Codex Digital:** <http://slubdd.de/maya>
- **Codex Dresdensis:** Vollständige Faksimile-Ausgabe des Codex im Originalformat. Mit Kommentaren von Helmut Deckert und Ferdinand Anders. Graz 1975
- **Michael Coe:** Das Geheimnis der Maya-Schrift. Reinbeck 1995.
- **Diego de Landa:** Bericht aus Yucatán. Leipzig 1990
- **Nikolai Grube; Thomas Bürger:** Der Dresdner Maya-Kalender: der vollständige Codex. Freiburg im Breisgau u.a. 2012