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>> INFORMATION

CODEX DRESDENSIS
The Dresden Codex - Mayan Manuscript
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 Etienne 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 in spite 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.

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.

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.

References
- Codex Digital: http://slubdd.de/maya
- 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