

Maya Writing

The Maya were one of the five ancient civilisations to have independently developed a fully-fledged writing system. The earliest examples of Maya writing were found in San Bartolo, Guatemala and date to as far back as 300 BC.

The Maya people used a hieroglyphic writing system. Hieroglyphic writing consisted of signs or symbols called hieroglyphs or glyphs for short. The glyphs in Maya writing were either logograms (which represent words), or syllabograms (which represent a unit of sound). The Maya often had several syllabograms to represent the same sound so people could vary how they spelled words. Maya writing was written in paired columns and then read left to right down the page in a zig-zag fashion like this:



Different Maya cities and villages had their own customs, clothing and language. This meant that there was not one single Mayan language. There are over 800 Maya glyphs, but we can only decipher around 400 of them at the moment.

Examples of Maya writing have been found carved in wood, on pottery, on stone monuments and in codices (books). Writing has also been found on temples.

Codices were Maya books written by priests and scholars. They contained information about history, astronomy, religion and gods. However, only four known copies have survived to date. In 1562, a Catholic priest called Diego de Landa ordered the mass burning of a number of Maya codices, as he believed that they were the work of the devil. The Spanish also burned hundreds of other documents as well.

Fortunately, Landa's records on Maya writing were very useful in helping us to understand their writing system. He wrote a guide to some of the glyphs which became known as Landa's alphabet. However, it wasn't until the 1950s that a Russian linguist called Yuri Valentinovich Knorosov suggested that at least part of the Maya writing system was phonetic. This proved to be a massive breakthrough in understanding Maya writing. However, even today there are a number of glyphs that scholars are still unable to decipher.





Codices

The codices that remain were probably housed in private collections after being smuggled out of the Maya area sometime after the arrival of the Spanish. There are four known codices, but some historians question if the Grolier Codex is real for a number of reasons. The other three codices are named after the places in which they are kept today: Madrid, Paris and Dresden.

The Madrid Codex

The Madrid Codex is the longest of the surviving codices measuring 22 feet. It is painted on both sides and contains information about religious beliefs and rituals. The codex was found in two separate halves in Spain in the 19th century and it is now housed in the Museo de America in Madrid, where a perfect copy of the document is on display for visitors to see.



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The Paris Codex

The Paris Codex was found in a private collection in Paris in the 19th century. It contains information about the Maya astronomical signs (similar to zodiac signs) in the form of constellations, mostly in the shapes of animals and birds. The Paris Codex is housed in the National Library of Paris, in France.

The Dresden Codex

The Dresden Codex was bought from a private collector in Vienna, Austria in 1759 by the Royal Library of Dresden, Germany, where it is still housed today. It is the most complete of the three codices and contains information about planetary movements and lunar and solar eclipses in the form of astronomical tables.

The Grolier Codex

The Grolier Codex was reportedly found in a cave in Mexico in the 1960s and was later housed and displayed at the Grolier Club in New York. Its authenticity continues to be debated to this day, although it has been proved that the fig bark paper on which it is written dates back to around AD 1250. The Grolier Codex is now housed in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico, but it is not on display.



Maya Writing Comprehension Questions

1. Where were the earliest examples of Maya writing found?

2. What is the difference between a logogram and a syllabogram?

3. Why do you think the Maya people often used different syllabograms to represent the same sound?

4. How do you read Maya writing?

5. Who was Diego de Landa and why did he order a mass burning of Maya books?

6. How did Diego de Landa help people to understand Maya writing?

7. Where do Maya Codices get their names from?

8. Which is the longest codex and which is the most complete?

9. What can the codices help us to learn about the Maya people?

10. Which codex do you think sounds the most interesting? Why?

Extension: Now can you think of three of your own questions to ask a friend? Make sure you know the answers too!