

Visitor address

Book Museum
Saxon State and University Library
Zellescher Weg 18, 01069 Dresden, 2nd floor

Postal address

01054 Dresden

Opening hours

Monday to Friday 10 AM – 6 PM
Saturday 2 PM – 6 PM

Contact us

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Ancient goddess
Chak Chel

**MAYA MANUSCRIPT'S
JOURNEY TO DRESDEN**

The Electoral Saxon court chaplain and chief library inspector Johann Christian Götze acquired the manuscript (known in the academic community as the *Codex Dresdensis*) in Vienna in 1739 "as an unknown object quite easily for free" from a "private person" for the Electoral Library, a predecessor institution of the SLUB Dresden. The identity of this person is still unknown, as is how the Codex came to be in his possession. It was likely taken to Emperor Charles V in Spain and at an unknown later date moved to the Habsburg royal capital of Vienna.

**CONDITION - PRESERVATION -
RESPONSIBILITY**

After arriving in Dresden, the Maya manuscript was initially kept in the Zwinger, the former seat of the Electoral Library. In 1786, the library moved to the Japanese Palace, where the manuscript was on public display from 1835, divided into two strips between glass panels. Following the destruction of the palace at the end of the Second World War in 1945, the manuscript suffered serious water damage, with the sensitive writing and painting layer being particularly affected. Thanks to the optimally adapted special display case, the manuscript has been on public display again since 1952 despite its fragile condition. Today it can be seen in the book museum of the SLUB Dresden. The SLUB Dresden is fully committed to the preservation and conservation of the Maya manuscript.

BRIEF NOTES

- Ritual and divination calendar of the Maya culture
- Leporello (fold-out book), 39 panels (78 pages) made of bark bast paper, today two strips, originally one continuous strip (3.56 m long in total)
- created on the Yucatán Peninsula in the late Post-Classic period of the Maya culture (ca. 1300 – 1521)
- contains astronomical, meteorological and complex mathematical calculations, ritual calendar cycles, hieroglyphic texts, numerical signs and depictions of gods and supernatural beings
- considered a masterpiece of pre-Columbian America

„What makes [the Dresden manuscript] particularly remarkable, is the arrangement of the simple hieroglyphs ... like a genuine symbolic script.“
(Translated from French)
Alexander von Humboldt in the explanatory text to the earliest reproductions from the manuscript in his work on the monuments of the indigenous people of America (1810/13)

***PLAIN LANGUAGE*
THE SPECIAL NATURE
OF THE MAYA MANUSCRIPT**

In the past, people couldn't print books. They wrote books by hand. Originally, the Maya manuscript in the SLUB Dresden was folded in a zigzag shape. This is known as a folded book. There are still four known Maya manuscripts in the world. In an advanced civilisation like the Maya culture, science and art were highly developed. The bark fibres of a tree were used as a writing material. The Maya manuscript in the SLUB Dresden is over 500 years old. It was very important for the people of the Maya culture. Today there are around 9 million descendants of the Maya. They speak various Maya languages. Most of them live in Guatemala and southern Mexico.

FURTHER INFORMATION



Comprehensive and up-to-date information about the manuscript can be found on our website www.slubdd.de/mayaen



**The Maya manuscript
in the SLUB Dresden**

BOOK MUSEUM

MAYA CULTURE

The Maya settlement area was roughly the size of Germany and once extended to what is now southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador. The Maya civilisation developed from the 2nd millennium BC and reached its heyday during the Classic Period (250 – 900 AD). It was characterised by a complex social system, impressive buildings, a sophisticated system of numbers and writing as well as outstanding achievements in art, literature, astronomy, mathematics and medicine.

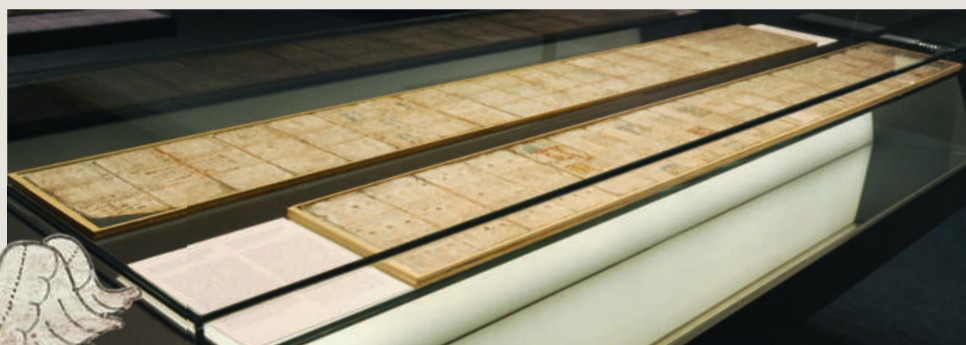
The arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century was accompanied by the systematic destruction of cultural legacies. Today, there are still around nine million descendants of the Maya.

THE MAYA MANUSCRIPT IN THE SLUB DRESDEN: COLONIAL HERITAGE

Recognising that the Maya manuscript is a cultural artefact originating from a colonial context, the SLUB Dresden endeavours to research the provenance of the object itself and to support related research. This includes comprehensive access to the object – both analogue and digital.

The Maya manuscript in its current form

The original order of the plates can't be restored for conservation reasons.

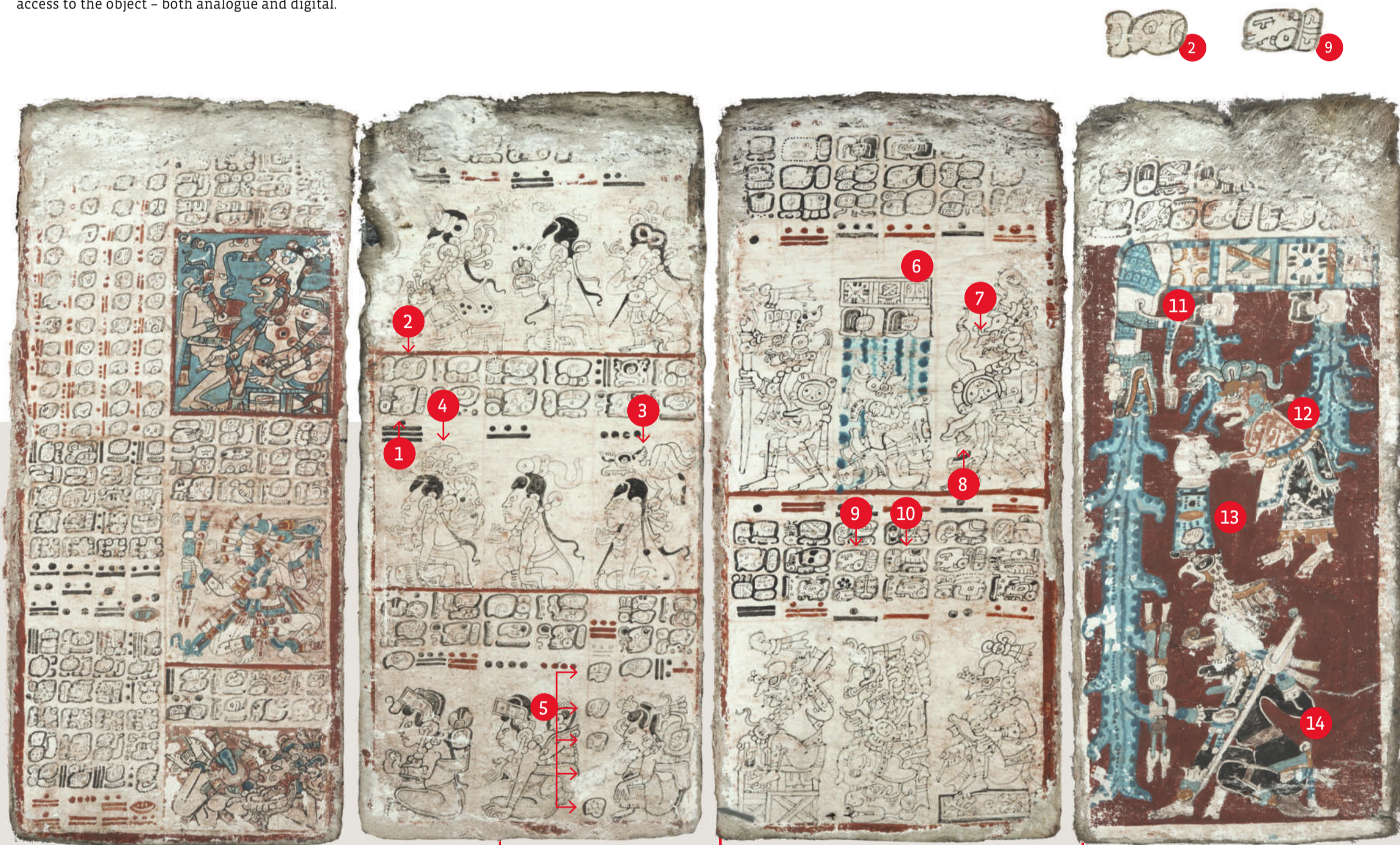


RESEARCH AND RECEPTION

At the end of the 19th century, the head librarian of the Royal Public Library in Dresden, a predecessor institution of the SLUB Dresden, Ernst Wilhelm Förstemann, initiated research into deciphering of the Maya manuscript with the publication of an annotated facsimile (colour collotype). Since then, numerous scholarly works have been devoted to it. Additionally, a series of artistic, spiritual, and popular scientific analyses of the manuscript have been conducted.

OTHER PRESERVED MAYA MANUSCRIPTS

- Codex in Madrid, Museo de América, ca. 1500
- Codex in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Fonds Mexicain, No. 386, 14th – 15th century
- Codex „Grolier“ (now called „Códice Maya de México“) in Mexico City, Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia, between 1021 and 1154 AD (possibly also only from the late Post-Classic period)



Venus table

Thanks to the Venus tables, the orbit of Venus could be calculated. The Maya and Mesoamerican peoples believed that the planet appearing as a morning star would bring misfortune. Above, the maize god and a malevolent aspect of *Juun Ajaw* are depicted as embodiments of the planet. In the middle, the foreign god of war *Kak-Tūnal* is shown, and below the Maya god *P* is depicted as a pierced victim.



Depictions of the moon goddess as the bringer of illness and healing

- 1 Hieroglyph for the moon goddess as the „white lady“
- 2 Hieroglyph for the god of death
- 3 Screaming owl of the underworld
- 4 God of death as a burden
- 5 Five of a total of 20 day signs of the 260-day ritual calendar (*Tzolk'in*)

Regions of the rain god

The rain god *Chaak* played a particularly important role for the Maya farmers.

- 6 The rain god sits in the rain, which falls from the symbols for solar and lunar eclipse under the sky band.
- 7 Long nose as a characteristic of the rain god
- 8 Axe with which the rain god can produce lightning and thunder
- 9 Hieroglyph for the rain god
- 10 Hieroglyph for heavy rain

The great flood

- 11 Celestial alligator, from whose mouth, as well as from the symbols for solar and lunar eclipse, streams of water pour out
- 12 Ancient goddess *Chak Chel*
- 13 Maya number 5.1.0 (twenty system)

5 = line
1 = dot
0 = shell

and hieroglyph of the day *Eb*, on which the Maya expected a major flood every five years in the rainy season

- 14 Black god of the underworld with a screaming owl on his head

