

# Maya Writing

The Maya were one of the five ancient civilisations to develop a writing script. The earliest Maya writing was found in Guatemala and dates to as far back as 300 BC.

The Maya people used signs or symbols called hieroglyphs or glyphs for short. Maya writing was written in columns and then read in a zig-zag way, like this:



## Codices

There are four known codices left today; Grolier, Madrid, Paris and Dresden.

**The Paris Codex:** The Paris Codex was found in Paris and contains important information about the Maya astronomical signs (similar to zodiac signs). The Paris Codex is kept at the National Library of Paris in France.

**The Dresden Codex:** The Dresden Codex was found in Vienna, Austria, in 1759. It is the most complete of the three codices.

**The Grolier Codex:** The Grolier Codex was displayed at the Grolier Club in New York. Some historians argue that it is fake, although the fig bark paper it is written on is real.

There was not one single Mayan language and there are over 800 Maya glyphs.

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

Codices were Maya books written by priests and clever people. In 1562, Diego de Landa (a priest - religious man) ordered the burning of many Maya codices as he believed they were a work of the devil. The Spanish also burned hundreds of other documents as well.

Landa's records on Maya writing were 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. In the 1950's, a Russian man called Yuri Valentinovich Knorosov discovered that a lot of the Maya writing was based on sounds. This has really helped us to understand the Maya writing a lot better.



## The Madrid Codex

The Madrid Codex measures 22 feet in length. It is painted on both sides and contains information about religious beliefs and rituals. It is now kept in the Museo de America in Madrid.



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