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Mexican and Mayan Codices

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Abstract: A series of brief comments in which the author presents archaeological findings, architectural notes, and myths and legends that deal indirectly with the Book of Mormon. Dibble discusses the wheel, ancient irrigation methods, metals, Mexican and Mayan codices, Quetzalcoatl, ancient buildings, and numerous other related items. The first part covers Mexican and Mayan codices.

MEXICAN AND MAYAN CODICES

By C. E. DIBBLE

*Assistant Curator, Department
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of these codices which have survived to our day, pointing out the character of their content: their wealth of mythology, history, and religion. The writer has chosen from the better known and more accurately in-

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A native of Layton, Utah, Mr. Dibble labored in the German-Austrian Mission from 1930 to 1933 and was a member of the North Davis Sunday School Stake Board from 1933 to 1936.



DRESDEN CODEX, PAGE 74

SCATTERED among the numerous libraries of Mexico City are well over a hundred ancient Indian writings, most of them still awaiting interpretation by competent scholars. They represent what is left of a systematized destruction of Indian manuscripts by early Spanish missionaries and by the Indians themselves. The missionaries viewed the manuscripts as impediments to the process of conversion, and with religious zeal reduced the native paintings to ashes.

The first Archbishop of Mexico, Don Juan de Zumarraga, collected all the paintings he could find in the Indian archives only to toss these "tokens of bad spirits and the devil" into the flames. Bishop Diego de Landa supervised an even more thorough destruction of native Mayan writings in Yucatan. The less responsible missionaries and unlettered soldiers were not slow in imitating the work of their superiors. The indignant Indian, aware of the fate of his sacred writings, reluctantly destroyed them rather than see them fall into the wanton hands of the conquering Spaniards. Some few of these codices were hidden by the Indians, while others, falling into more appreciative hands, found their way to Europe to be carefully preserved in public and private libraries.

It is the aim of this article to present representative pages from some



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interpreted manuscripts that the reader may form an idea of the research yet to be realized on the uninterpreted codices.

DESCRIPTION OF CODICES

THE codices were written by a specially trained and highly respected group of native writers who were schooled in the symbolism and mythology of their people. Among the Aztecs they were known as the *Tlacuiloque* (writers or painters). The manuscripts were painted on skins, cotton cloth, or (in most cases) on a fabric made from the leaves of

the aloe (*agave Americana*) which the natives call *maguey*. The codex was usually a long sheet folded to spread out much as a scenic post card folder with the paintings sometimes on one side but more often on both. The ink was made from vegetable or mineral dyes and was usually red, blue-green, yellow, or black. The writings were essentially hieroglyphic; yet, some of the Aztec writings appear to have been approaching a phonetic system.

The content of the Indian manuscripts was historical, astronomical, mythological, geographical, genealogical, and religious. Due to their content, they were understood and read not by the layman but only by those belonging to the highly organ-

BORGIAN CODEX



ized and thoroughly trained military and religious units.

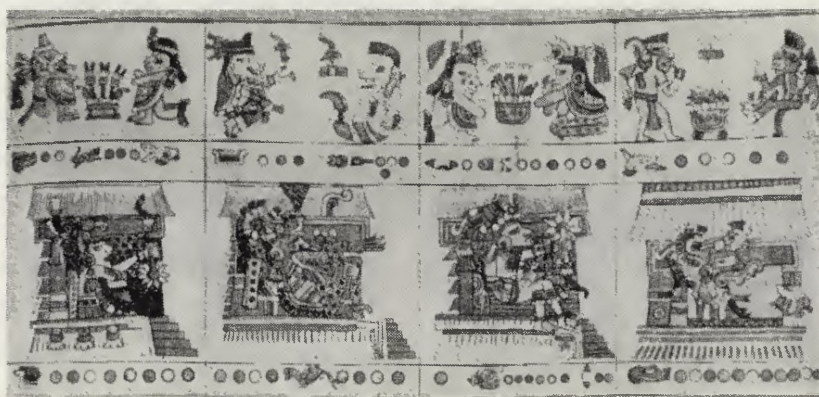
THE MAYAN CODICES

WE DEAL first with the Mayan codices, of which but three remain: the Dresden Codex, the Troano-Cortesianus, and the Peresianus Codex. The deciphering and interpreting thus far realized on these indicate that they deal principally with astronomy, chronology, and religion.

Dr. John Teeple, an American astronomer, has been the outstanding student of the codices in their relationship to astronomy and has demonstrated that all the astronomical recordings, deal directly or indirectly with the calendrical system. Those who deserve mention for our understanding of the chronological and calendrical part of the codices are: Ernst Forstermann, Charles P. Bowditch, and J. T. Goodman, all scholars of the past century and the early years of the present century. Of the living students, we should cite the works of Sylvanus G. Morley of Carnegie Institute and Herman Beyer of Tulane University.

MATHEMATICS AND ASTRONOMY

THE above-mentioned scholars have revealed to us a people whom we must acknowledge as the pioneers and leaders of their time in mathematics and calendrical astronomy. Long before the birth of Christ, when the Old World was fumbling with the cumbersome Roman numeral system, the "Maya of Yucatan had developed a method of writing numbers, of adding and subtracting. They had also invented a symbol for zero and given a value to their numbers according to position. The ascending values of digits in their



VATICAN B CODEX

writing are 20 for the first higher unit, 360 for the second, 7,200 for the third, 144,000 for the fourth. The numerals up to four are indicated by dots, each five by a bar. Thus the number 19 may be designated by three bars and four dots.¹



MENDOZA CODEX

On page twelve of the Dresden Codex we see several examples of



TLOTZIN MAP

the number 13, designated by two bars and three dots. We also recognize in the single-unit hieroglyphs bordered by a heavy black line the signs of the twenty days of their twenty-day month. The double column of day-hieroglyphs on the upper third of page 12 of the Dresden Codex, reading from left to right and downward are: Ahau, Oc, Men, Ik, Cimi, Lamat, and Eznab. Still other day signs are given on the remainder of the page.

MYTHOLOGY AND RELIGION

FOR a resume of the mythology and religion of the Maya I quote Dr. S. G. Morley, the patriarch of living Maya scholars.

In closing this introduction, nothing could be more appropriate than to call attention once more to the supreme importance of religion in the life of the ancient Maya. Religion was indeed the very fountainhead of their civilization, and on its rites and observances they lavished a devotion rarely equaled in the annals of man. To its great uplifting force was due the conception and evolution of the hieroglyphic writing and calendar, alike the invention and the exclusive property of the priesthood. To its need for sanctuary may be attributed the origin of Maya architecture; to its desire for expression, the rise of Maya sculpture. All activities reflected its powerful influence and all were more or less dominated by its need and teachings. In short, religion was the foundation upon which the structure of Maya civilization was reared.²

Dr. Paul Shellhaus is the one scholar who directed his research in the field of Mayan religion. He is chiefly responsible for the classification of the gods pictured in the three Mayan codices:

On page seventy-four of the codex we have Goddess K, or the Water Goddess. She is characterized by the knotted serpent on her head and claws in the place of feet. She is the personification of water in its

(Continued on page 504)

¹Franz Boaz, *Cultural Anthropology*.

²S. G. Morley, *An Introduction to the Study of Maya Hieroglyphs*.

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THE COMMON SOURCE OF RELIGIOUS TRUTH

(Concluded from page 467)

The Old Testament contains very little relative to a final judgment, but the later Jewish writings—dating near the advent of Jesus—picture such an occasion for each individual. A similar doctrine is taught in abundance in the New Testament, and it became one of the paramount teachings of Christianity. Six hundred years following the death of the Man of Galilee, Mohammed taught Islam the doctrine of "the weighing in a balance of each man's evil and good deeds." Dr. Moore thinks that Mohammed obtained that doctrine from Christianity.²⁰

Examples could be multiplied almost indefinitely of various important religions from one end of the

world to the other which taught the doctrine of a final judgment.²⁰ The universality of the concept bears witness to its truthfulness. God revealed the doctrine to his holy prophets from the time of Adam to that of Joseph Smith. He gave to all peoples and nations the amount of religious truth that they were capable and willing to receive.²⁰ Thus mankind knows that he is to be held accountable at the great Judgment Day for the life he lived and the thoughts that were his. This knowledge came from the "Common Source of Religious Truth"—Jesus the Christ, the Lord of the heavens and the earth.

²⁰Galus G. Atkins, *Procession of the Gods*, 1-575.

²⁰Book of Mormon, Alma 26:37; 39:8; 1 Nephi 17:34-40; 2 Nephi 28:26-30; 29:1-14.

²⁰Moore, *op. cit.*, 64, 387, 475.

MEXICAN AND MAYAN CODICES

(Continued from page 465)

quality of destroyer—a goddess of floods and cloudbursts. The page in its entirety depicts calamity and destruction of the world. The body of the water serpent stretches across the sky and from its mouth issues water. The hieroglyphs across his body represent sun, moon, and stars, and from them gush torrents of water; also the Old Water Goddess herself pours out the bowl of apparently destructive water. That she is the goddess of destruction is also implied by the crossbones on her skirt. Below is the Black God of death holding spear and arrows in his hands with a screeching vulture as a headdress.

A GALLERY OF GODS

TURNING to page twelve of the Dresden Codex, we can identify additional gods. The god to the left in the upper third is God E, the Maize God, otherwise known as Yum Kaax, lord of the harvest. This god occurs as the god of husbandry and he is recognized by his peculiar headdress and the corn plant he holds in his hands. Notice also his flattened forehead—a practice of the Mayas.

The god to his right is God K, or the God with the Ornamented Nose. We distinguish him by his proboscis-shaped nose and the peculiarly shaped vessel he carries in his hands.

The left figure of the middle group is God A, the god of death or Ah-puch. His characteristics are a bony spine, fleshless skull, fleshless lower jaw, truncated nose, grinning

teeth, a stiff feather collar, bells or rattles on his feet and hands, and spots on his body indicating putrefaction of his flesh. He always expresses the idea of death and is associated with "human sacrifice, suicide by hanging, death in childbirth, and the beheaded captive."

The second figure is God H, or the Chichaan god. He is associated in some way with the serpent. The third figure is a variation of the god of death.

On the left of the lower group we have God D, or Itzamna. He is father of the gods and creator of mankind. The aged face and sunken, toothless mouth are his distinguishing marks. The second god is problematic but the third and last is God G, or the Sun God, identified by the day sign he holds in his hands as well as by his headdress.

THE AZTECS

CORTEZ arrived in Yucatan to behold the lingering glory of the once mighty Maya, for dissension, jealousy, tribal and family feuds had reduced them to a few distrustful cities in northern Yucatan. Across the Bay of Campeche, in the Valley of Mexico, new blood from the north was engendering the dynamic Aztec Empire, extending its might of arms well beyond the borders of present-day Mexico. Powerful warriors and shrewd rulers were founding an empire which well merits to be styled "The Rome of the New World."

The Aztec codices are more numerous, and because of their greater

number there is greater variety of content. As is the case with Mayan writings, many of the Aztec manuscripts deal with mythology and religion, for religion played an equally important role among the Aztecs. I quote from Mexico's leading archeologist, Dr. Alfonso Caso, on the religion of the Aztecs:

At the time of the Spanish Conquest the Aztecs had a polytheistic religion, based on the worship of a number of personal gods, most of which had clearly defined traits. Nevertheless, magic and the idea of certain hidden and impersonal forces held an important place in the minds of the people. There was, too, among the common people, a tendency to exaggerate polytheism by worshipping many manifestations of the same god, instead of the single deity. The priest knew, though, that they were only manifestations or titles of the same god, just as at present the images of some saints are different and even antagonistic in spite of the explanation given by Catholic priests that the saintly images only represent different aspects of the same saint.^a

THE VATICAN B CODEX

The Vatican B Codex, interpreted by Eduard Seler, is a typical pre-Hispanic codex which records some of the Aztec gods, their characteristics and powers. Beginning at the upper left we have Xolotl, the god of twins. He has a dog's head, a cone-shaped hat, and a feather ornament on his back. He is the god of ball-playing, of twins, and monstrosities. He is related to the morning star, for the morning star is also a twin, appearing as morning star and evening star.

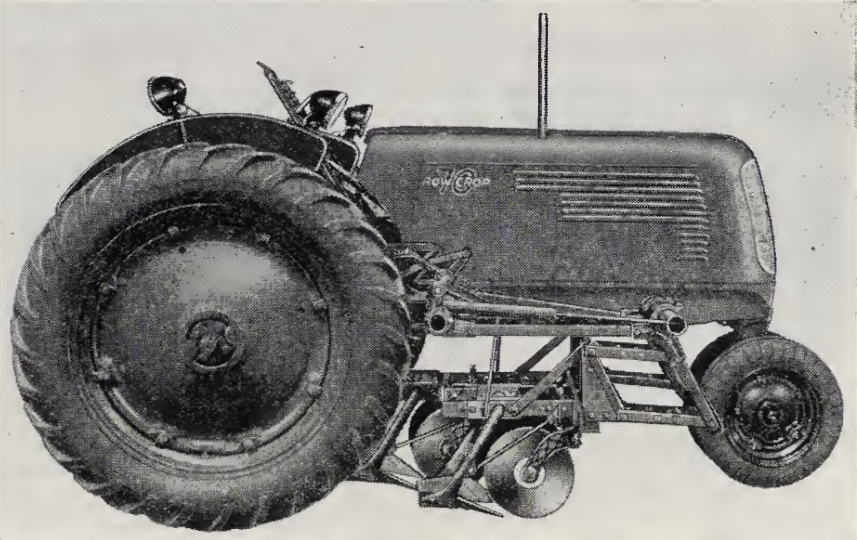
Facing Xolotl is the moon god, Tecciztecatl, recognizable by the shell ornament on the headdress. These two gods rule the East.

The third figure is Tlazolteotl, the Old Earth Goddess. The distinguishing feature is her nose plate. Facing her is Mictlantecuhltli, the Lord of Death (*mictlan*—place of death; *tecuhltli*—Lord). Here he is figured as a corpse with a fleshless jaw. This couple rule the North, for to the Mexicans the North was the place of death or darkness (*Mictlampa*).

The fifth god is Xochipilli, god of flowers (*Xochitl*—flower; *pilli*—prince). He is identifiable by his nose plug and headdress. Facing him is his companion, the flower goddess, Xochiquetzal (*Xochitl*—flower; *quetzalli*—feather). Together they rule the West, *Xochitlicacan*—literally, "where the flowers are."

The fourth group is formed by a dancing pair and represents Ueue-

^aAlfonso Caso, *The Religion of the Aztecs*.



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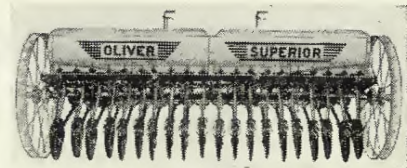
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MEXICAN AND MAYAN CODICES

(Concluded from page 505)

coyotl, the Old Coyote (*Ueue*—old; *coyotl*—coyote), ruler of the South.

Below, seated in the temples, are four gods. From left to right they are: Xochipilli, the flower god, ruler of the South; Tlaltecuhli (*tlalli*—earth; *tecuhli*—Lord) the Earth God and ruler of the lower region. Here he is seen as an animal-headed form. There follows Xochipilli as Sun God, ruler of the upper region; and finally, the Zapotecan god with the snake's jaws, ruler of the East.

The smaller hieroglyphs with numerical coefficients below each series of gods represent the Aztec day signs.

THE BORGIAN CODEX

THE BORGIAN Codex contains an example of the religious calendar known as the Tonalamatl (*tonalli*—sun or day; *amatl*—paper or book), book of days. This Tonalamatl consisting of 260 days was used by the priests to prognosticate the future of the newborn child as well as for setting the dates of the religious feasts. The five horizontal rows in the center give the days of the Aztec calendar. The days of the upper row are: flower, rain, flint, earthquake, vulture, and eagle. The figures at the top and bottom give the gods or forces which rule the days of their corresponding vertical column. Thus, the days of the sixth column from the left are ruled by the god of

flowers and by "One who has taken a captive."

THE MENDOZA CODEX

THE Mendoza Codex (so named after the man who ordered it painted) is especially valuable to us because it was made after the conquest by native Indians who were able to record the meaning of their paintings in the newly acquired Spanish language. In a qualified sense it served as a sort of "Rosetta Stone" for the early students of codices.

In this codex we observe three fundamentals of codex interpretation: First, man is distinguished from woman by his posture and hairdress. The woman kneels and her hairdress is shaped like a "Y." The man has his knees pulled up under his chin and his hairdress differs. Second, the question-mark-like hieroglyph issuing from a person's mouth signifies that he is talking or that he is a ruler (he who has the authority to speak). Third, footprints indicate travel, the direction of travel being indicated by the direction of the footprints.

The story recorded on the illustrated page is: A mother gives birth to a child. On the fourth day the nurse takes the child to where there is a tub of water on a mat of reeds. After she washes the baby, the three boys, who are eating a paste made from corn and beans, pronounce aloud the name of the child in accord with the wishes and choice of

the nurse. If it be a boy, the sword and shield (tokens of war which are shown above the straw mat) are buried where he is most likely to meet the enemy. If it be a girl, a broom, spindle, and mat (as shown below the straw mat) are buried in the house where she is likely to work. Below are the mother and father of the child. If the child, as shown in the center, is a boy he is presented either to the priest or warrior, as indicated to the right, with the understanding that when he is of age he will join that order.

THE TLOTZIN MAP

THE Tlotzin Map is an historical and genealogical codex which was painted before the conquest. It should be observed, however, that the notes written below the figures in the Aztec language were added after the conquest when the Indians were able to record their language with Spanish letters. The codex records the wanderings of the savage Chichimeca tribes in the region north of the Valley of Mexico just prior to their arrival in the valley. Arriving at the shores of the inland lakes they assimilated much of the more advanced Toltec culture to become what was later known as the Aztec nation. Their leader was the famous captain, Xolotl. The page shows their clothing, arms, manner of sustenance, as well as the fauna and flora. Notice that the couple in the upper left hand corner lived in a bat cave—*Tzinacanoztoc* (*tzinacan*—bat; *oztotl*—cave.) The bat can be clearly seen forming the roof of the cave.

The hieroglyph joined to the nape of the neck gives the name of the person. One need only pronounce the Aztec word for the object pictured to give the name of the individual. This page is also genealogical. By comparison with other codices covering the same historical period we know that three generations are here represented.

WE HAVE viewed a cross section of the codices of Central America. The Mayan codices are only partially interpreted; the uninterpreted Mexican codices are more numerous. Their interpretation alone will not suffice to solve the enigmas of Central America, but, working hand in hand with ethnology, physical anthropology, archeology, and linguistics the interpreter of codices can contribute his measure to a more basic knowledge and understanding of Ancient America.

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