The Oldest Book in America

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Printing was introduced into the Americas by the Italian Giovanni Paoli, better known as Juan Pablos. The first book issued from his press in Mexico City was *Doctrina breve,* a Spanish handbook of Christian doctrine, written by Juan de Zumárraga, Mexico's first bishop, and printed in 1539 – making it the Western Hemisphere's first printed book. But almost a century would pass before Stephen Daye, in Cambridge Massachusetts, printed his Puritan translation of the Psalms in 1640, commonly known as the Bay Psalm Book. In 2013, one of the surviving eleven copies was sold at auction for $14.2 million.

Left: *Doctrina breve*, edition of 1544, printed in Mexico City. Image from Houghton Library, Uni of Harvard; **right**: The Bay Psalm Book printed in Cambridge Massachusetts, 1640. Image from Sotheby's.

American Books Before Print

The above books are the first typographic or printed books in the Americas, but how about books before print? To discover the very first book of any kind made in the Americas, we must travel farther south and back in time to the twelfth century, during a time that archaeologists call the Early Postclassic period (AD 900–1200) in Mesoamerica.

Discovered in the 1960s in Southwest Mexico, the earliest surviving book in the Americas, was first exhibited at the Grolier Club in Manhattan, in 1971. For decades its authenticity was questioned, but recent expert analysis from paleographers, anthropologists and archaeologists, has confirmed that it was composed some time between 1021 and 1152, making it the oldest surviving book in the Americas.

Pages from the Maya Codex of Mexico (c. early 12th century). **Left**: (Page 8), an eagle-legged Toltec warrior; **right**: (page 4), the long-nosed God K, dressed as a Toltec warrior.

The 11-page manuscript, on amate or bark paper, is now known as the Maya Codex of Mexico. It charts the cycles or movements of the planet Venus. Why Venus? Well, after the sun and moon, it was the brightest object in the sky and for the ancient Mesoamericans, Venus was the most dangerous and feared of the celestial objects, and thus it was imperative that this 'death-ray star' be tracked and appeased.

Header image: Detail from Toltec carved stone panel, 10th–13th century. Source: The Met.

So, the next time you see the bright wandering star Venus, remember that it inspired the earliest books of Mesoamerica, made by people who, just like us, looked up at the stars in awe.