

Caleb Enloe

Professor O' Donnell

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The Voynich Manuscript: an Overview of a Major Linguistic Mystery

The Voynich Manuscript is a codex, or group of handwritten pages bound together, possibly originating from the early 1400s. The manuscript remains one of the most enigmatic pieces of linguistic history as it is written in an alleged yet-to-be deciphered language. The manuscript's interior is extensive in content with either text, images, or a combination of the two covering each page. The variety of bizarre illustrations is an apt supplement to the equally strange and unidentified language. This artwork ranges in subject matter from depictions of unfamiliar botanicals to vague astronomical diagrams. The most unsettling attribute of the book's contents is that, though the entirety of the language and images are alien in nature, they possess an eerie quality of familiarity. Thus, it seems highly likely that much of the manuscript's contents have real-world inspirations. Numerous specialists including cryptographers, linguists, and botanists have made attempts to decipher the meaning behind the manuscript's otherworldly passages. Because of this, several theories have been proposed on the codex's purpose, history, and authenticity. However, there exists too little evidence to be able to draw a concrete conclusion.

The manuscript, despite being around six centuries old, only came to modern attention in 1912. The codex was ultimately purchased from the Villa Mondragone, a patrician villa in the Italian community of Frascati, by antique book dealer Wilfrid Voynich in 1912. Early in the 20th century, it was a common suspicion that Voynich himself had fabricated the codex in its entirety. However, the discovery of a 1666 letter from the alchemist Georg Baresch to Athanasius Kircher coupled with the expert carbon-dating performed by University of Arizona has quelled some these theories. An article by Daniel Stolte in University of Arizona's online news service, UANews, states "Using radiocarbon dating, a team led by Greg Hodgins in the UA's department of physics has found the manuscript's parchment pages date back to the early 15th century, making the book a century older than scholars had previously thought." (Stolt) However, considering that Daniel Stolte's work is not found in peer-reviewed academic journals, the credibility of the University of Arizona's dating is highly questionable. Following Voynich's death in 1930, the manuscript was left to Voynich's widow, Ethel Lilian Voynich. The book was subsequently given to Mrs. Voynich's close friend, Anne Nill. Nill proceeded to sell the manuscript to another purveyor of antique books, Hans P. Kraus. Donated by Kraus, the Voynich Manuscript can today be found in Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

The known history of the Voynich Manuscript following its creation is quite disjointed. There is no known existing information on the codex's author or where it was in the two centuries following its allegedly antique conception. One of the older known reference to the manuscript is in a 1666 letter from Johannes Marcus, former rector of Prague's Charles University, to scholar and polymath Athanasius Kircher. The letter, found inside the cover of the manuscript, claims that the codex was at one time in the possession of Emperor Rudolf II. In the

introduction of *The Most Mysterious Manuscript: The Voynich "Roger Bacon" Manuscript*, a collection of articles tracing the manuscript's history, editor Robert S. Brumbaugh states "Rudolph II had a keen interest in magic and science; botanists, alchemists, astrologers, doctors were supported at his court. And no doubt he paid six hundred gold ducats confident that his experts could identify the drawings, read the cipher, and synthesize the youth-prolonging magic formula." (x) The book was then likely gifted to Rudolf's head botanical gardener, Jacobus Horcicky de Topenecz. Following Topenecz, the codex fell in to the hands of a Prague-based alchemist named Georg Baresch. Proceeding Baresch's death, the codex was left to Baresch's companion Jan Mark Marci. Marci, after owning the manuscript for a few years, sent it to his aforementioned correspondent Athanasius Kircher. In his aforementioned article, John M. Manly writes: "Doctor Kircher was a scholar of well-nigh universal attainments-physicist, mathematician, geologist, geographer, philosopher, linguist, and archaeologist..." (3) The two centuries following Kircher's attainment of the manuscript are as much a mystery as the manuscript's contents. It was possibly kept in the archives of Collegio Romano during this period until the annexation of the Papal States in 1870. As unclear as the Voynich Manuscript's history is its contents.

The interior of the manuscript is, at first glance, entirely alien. John M. Manly states in his article "The Most Mysterious Manuscript": "Originally it consisted of two hundred and seventy-two pages; but six seem to have been lost...Throughout the volume runs a mysterious writing...Experts in language say it's not in any known alphabet; experts in cryptology say it is clearly some otherwise unknown system of cipher." (3) This fantastical, unknown language is one of the most studied characteristics of the manuscript's contents. Despite its furtive origins, the Voynich language shares traits with some languages rooted in Europe. The most immediately

obvious of the writing's European traits is that the entirety of the text is written left to right. There is also a paragraph format present that are often marked by bullets. Approximately 170,000 characters are found throughout the manuscript's 270 pages. Numerous alphabets have been constructed from the codex's glyphs by scholars. The first notable Voynich alphabet was introduced in the 1940's by renowned cryptographer William F. Friedman. Despite the previously mentioned similarities, the majority of the Voynich language's qualities are notably different from European languages. The characters used throughout the text appear sporadically and scholars have had difficulties discerning a linguistic pattern. Also, the text is highly repetitive and, unlike any Indo-European languages, contains instances of the one word being used multiple times in succession. Comparably puzzling are the manuscript's numerous graphs and illustrations.

Because of the language's indecipherable nature, the Voynich Manuscript's illustrations are the greatest clue to its elusive purpose. The images appear to segment the manuscript in to six distinct categories. The only exception is a selection of pages at the manuscript's end which contain only text. The categories are ordered as follows: herbs and botanicals, astronomy, biology, cosmology, pharmacology, and recipes. The herbal section is comprised of drawings of plants, with each page containing one or two images. The plants shown throughout the section have few identifiable real-world counterparts and, because of the indecipherable language, their descriptions provide little insight. Despite this, some successful attempts have been made by to identify the various botanicals. In Hugh O' Neill's essay "Botanical Observations on the Voynich Manuscript", O' Neill states "While some of the drawings appear to be conventionalized or otherwise altered (perhaps designedly) beyond recognition, other drawings can easily be assigned to one of several species and sometimes to only one species." (79)

Over the last century, cryptologists have taken a keen interest in attempting to decipher the Voynich Manuscript's unusual glyphs. There currently exist many theories on the nature and construction of the Voynich language. The most common belief is that the language is actually a letter-based cipher, or a text that is written in a commonly known language and then obscured by using a cipher to guise the contents. This is done by constructing an entirely new alphabet of symbols and then using an algorithm to translate the writing in to the constructed alphabet. Another proposed theory is that the Voynich script is actually a naturally occurring language, written in plain through an invented alphabet. The text bears similar word structure to Eastern natural languages like Sino-Tibetan and Tai. This theory would explain the exclusion of most European syntactic patterns. A less common theory is that the manuscript is actually a medieval case of glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. This would mean that the unknown author was compelled for unknown reasons, likely psychological, to write their stream-of-consciousness in an invented tongue. However, the extreme detail and length of the text contributes to the unlikelihood of this theory. Ultimately, no theory on the origins of the Voynich language exists that can be proven in its entirety.

While there exists no conclusive purpose for the Voynich Manuscript, scholars have used the codex's contents to make educated guesses. The book's emphasis on botanicals and herbal recipes suggests that it was likely a pharmacopeia, or selection of medicinal compounds. Unfortunately, because the plants lack any definitive identification, it is impossible to know their medicinal potential. The inclusion of sections on astronomy, cosmology and other topics may diminish the likelihood of the manuscript being a pharmacopeia. However, Manly writes in "The Most Mysterious Manuscript": "The drawings of plants, roots, and leaves might well accompany a discussion of their medicinal properties...the astronomical or astrological diagrams point to a

time when every well informed physician thought it necessary to consult the stars for propitious times to treat patients...” (6) Other theories on the book’s purpose have stemmed from its highly varied subject matter. Due to the manuscript’s relation with Roger Bacon, who was faithful in the abilities of alchemy, and the scholar Athanasius Kircher, some speculate that the manuscript may have been written for alchemic purposes. On Roger Bacon and alchemy, Manly writes “That Roger Bacon believed in alchemy and in astrology has, however, been enough in the minds of many modern writers to cast discredit or suspicion upon the clear and unmistakable evidences of his scientific attainments and brand him as a visionary and a charlatan.” (13) It is likely that, barring some incredible breakthrough in cryptology, the true purpose of the Voynich Manuscript will never be revealed. This leaves room for the possibility of the manuscript being a complete fabrication.

A common opinion among scholars is that there exists a strong possibility that the manuscript is a hoax. An element of this belief is that relatively few scholarly articles or books focused on the manuscript have been published. Several prevailing theories on this possibility have been brought forward. The first was the aforementioned theory that Voynich, the antique book vendor who bought the manuscript in 1916, constructed the text himself. However, the potential disproval of this belief didn’t stop further hoax-theories from arising. One claimed that 17th century cryptologist Raphael Mnishovsky, who once invented what he claimed to be an unbreakable cipher, may have constructed the text as a testament to his cipher’s complex nature. However, should the University of Arizona’s dating be accurate, the idea of Mnishovsky creating the codex is disproven. The most commonly used foil to the hoax argument is that the manuscript’s cipher is far too intricate to simply be a farce. In his *The Most Mysterious Manuscript* article, “A Review of the Problem”, David Khan says “Is it, then, just a gigantic

hoax...Nobody involved with it seems to think so...The work is too well organized, too extensive, too homogenous...Even if it were a hoax, there seems to be no point to having made it so long.” (92) Despite potentially conclusive carbon-dating and historical evidence of the codex, the concept of the manuscript being a hoax will likely continue to be put forward by various academics until, and if, the text is deciphered.

The Voynich Manuscript, in its infinite mystery, is undoubtedly one of the most confounding pieces of linguistic history. The codex’s origins are unknown and little evidence exists to suggest any currently known author as the manuscript’s creator. Its bizarre language and varied assortment of illustrations have intrigues scholars for nearly a century. The manuscript has been handled by a number of notable historic figures including Rudolf II, Holy Roman Emperor. The manuscript’s language, which contains both hints of European language and entirely unique qualities, has yet to be deciphered. This is in spite of many attempts made by cryptologists since World War I to decode the script. The variety of recipes and illustrations of flora suggest the possibility that the manuscript was used for medicinal, pharmacological purposes. It is doubtless that cryptologists and historians will continue to attempt unraveling the mystery of the codex and perhaps, eventually, one will succeed.

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