

MS 408, The Voynich Manuscript

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This is a story about a strange and mysterious book. It is over 200 pages long and made of vellum, in other words, animal skin. It has no title, no author, no date, no subject, an unknown language, and no explanation. Although it is very small, [measures 9.3 by 6.4 inches and it is 2 inches thick] it has many illustrations, in color. Pictures of plants, and almost 200 naked nymphs, some sitting in birthing tubs and others frolicking around in a green liquid. There are zodiacal signs, and 170,000 characters. Apparently the text could have been intended to be some kind of instruction manual or encyclopedia. The contents of this odd book are neatly written from left to right and well-preserved. There are no mistakes or corrections anywhere in the document. It is fascinating and has been studied by code breakers of all ages and from every part of the world. Many books have been written about the manuscript and a few people claim to have successfully translated part of the contents. In spite these of the efforts from code breakers on both sides of the Atlantic nobody has really succeeded.

A good place to start our research is to watch the recent BBC National Geographic show on Youtube. It is very informative and gives details of the carbon dating, done four times, which places the original document at 1420 CE.

Although little is known of the Voynich Manuscript until 1914 it has been hinted at during the course of history. For example, during the reign of Rudolph II the Holy Roman Emperor of Bohemia. [1575-1608] This Emperor was known for sponsoring all kinds of superstitious nonsense in his Court. He was especially interested in Alchemy, and there are paintings of his court witnessing a demonstration of Alchemy by a man like David Dee the Mathematician. Dee was known for his large collection of rare books. He also had a crystal ball but not much success in using it. What he needed was a Skryer or assistant who could put him in touch with the angels . Such a man was Edward Kelley, an Englishman with a long beard and a criminal record although this was not known to King Rudolph II. The two men were very popular in the court and there is good evidence that they sold a book with pictures and cipher to the King for 600 ducats. Wars devastated the empire and it was 300 years before the book showed up again, this time in the Jesuit monastery.

Let me go back to the beginning. The actual document was rediscovered in 1912 by an unusual man who was an antique art book dealer. He claimed to be of Polish nobility. His original name was Michael Wojnics. He later changed his name to Wilfrid Voynich. Sometimes he used the names “De” or “Von” before his surname and referred to himself as “Count”. Maybe this was done to impress his customers. He was born in 1865 in Kovno, now known as Kaunas in Lithuania. He lived in many countries including England. He attended Warsaw and Moscow University, graduated with a chemistry degree, and became a licensed pharmacist. He became active in the revolutionary anarchist movement and worked with Lenin’s older brother, Alexander, in the Polish

Nationalist movement in Warsaw. It was their aim was to free Poland from oppressive Russian rule. Voynich was involved in a plot to free two of their number who had been condemned to death, but he was captured and imprisoned without trial in 1885. He suffered greatly for two years in isolation in a Warsaw prison where he developed Tuberculosis.

The two years' imprisonment left him ill and weak but he managed to escape and rejoin his comrades. After that he was involved in another murderous attack on the Russians and this time he was caught and sent to Siberia. I don't know how he managed to escape but he did and he went back to live in England with his fellow anarchists. The story goes that he borrowed some money and obtained a few special books, which he sold to the British Museum. In a short time Voynich had enough money to open a small and expensive book shop on Shaftsbury Avenue in London that specialized in rare religious books. Soon he had branches in Warsaw, Paris, and Florence. He would regularly travel through the monasteries of Europe and get acquainted with those monks who took care of the books. Most of the monasteries had visiting clergy who would come through looking for old texts, either to copy them or to sell them. As a point of interest, the church had a name for this practice; it was called "simony", selling church property for money. The big market in Voynich's day was to acquire illuminated manuscripts, that is, those that had an elaborate page or two somewhere in the text. These he took back to his London office where he found a very lucrative market.

In 1912, while making a business trip through Frascati in northern Italy, when he came across a trunk full of books belonging to a Jesuit priest who had died 25 years earlier. With them was a strange volume, which he nicknamed the "Ugly Duckling". No one knew how old it was, its origin, or even what it said. He was told it might have been completely written in cipher and hence be unreadable.

Voynich took his new acquisition home and started to study it. He suspected that he owned some ancient treasure. Surely it had some special meaning? Perhaps some secret to divulge or some exciting message from past or the future? He was convinced of the idea that the manuscript had been written originally in the 13th century by a Franciscan monk named Roger Bacon.

In the mean time, Voynich was trying to figure out the provenance of the book itself. He concluded that there were only two men in the world who could have written it. One was the German Dominican monk Albertus Magnus (Albert the Great) known to his followers as "Doctor Universalis" because of his encyclopedic scholarship. He was a traditional Christian. He believed in the primacy of Scripture.

St. Augustine, Commentary on the Book of Genesis, as quoted by A.D. White, Vol. 1, p. 25, "Nothing is to be accepted save on the authority of Scripture, since greater is that authority than all the powers of the human mind".

The second was equally famous and had earned the title Doctor Mirabilis, "Wonderful

Teacher". He was an English monk, the Franciscan Roger Bacon, and he was non-traditional. He believed in the scientific method. Said Bacon,

“The strongest arguments prove nothing so long as the conclusions are not verified by experience. Experimental science is the queen of sciences and the goal of all speculation.”

Bacon was an expert on mathematics, astronomy, optics and languages. He was said to have described the workings of the telescope and the microscope 400 years before Newton and Leeuwenhoek. Bacon wrote about flying machines, motorized ships, horseless carriages, and submarines. He was the first man in Europe to describe in detail the procedure for making gunpowder. Although I did read that a member of his order had been doing missionary work in China at this time. As a skeptical man it makes me wonder where Bacon got the ideas about gunpowder.

Voynich managed to convince a lot of people that he was right about Bacon being the author of the manuscript! He knew a lot of intellectuals, especially in academia. One of his main protégées was William Romaine Newbold, distinguished professor of philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. Newbold was an expert in philology and crypto analysis. He soon became deeply involved in the "secret" of the Manuscript. After two years of intense scrutiny Newbold was ready to proclaim to the elite members of the American Philosophical Society in April, 1921 that he had cracked the Voynich code! Newbold said that Roger Bacon's name had actually appeared in the document and that Bacon had actually built a microscope and telescope and used them! The public was thrilled. The New York Times headline said, "Bacon 700 years ahead of Science".

In 1923 Lynn Thorndike brought out a two-volume work "A History of Magic and Experimental Science" He was a history professor at Western Reserve University and his publication reflected 20 years of study. Later, he added six more volumes that came out in 1958. He dismissed Roger Bacon as a minor figure, "vastly overrated" In 1929 he wrote "There's hardly one chance in 50 that Roger Bacon had any connection with the Voynich Manuscript." Nevertheless, most scholars still thought that Newbold was brilliant and ingenious. This was especially true of John Manly who was second in command of MI-8, British Military Intelligence, Section 8. He wrote in Harper's Magazine that Newbold had compelling arguments for the manuscript authenticity. With Manly on his side, Newbold was not worried about Thorndike. Professor Newbold continued to work on the Voynich Manuscript and the legacy of Roger Bacon when he was struck with acute indigestion and died in 1926. Newbold's colleague took all his notes and papers and published them in 1928 as, "The Cipher of Roger Bacon".

Voynich died in March, 1930. In his will, he designated five people to sell the manuscript to an appropriate public institution. In 1931, a 47-page article appeared in *Speculum, The Medieval Academy of America Journal*, "Roger Bacon and the Voynich Manuscript", by John Matthews Manly. Manly demolished the work of his friend and colleague Dr. Newbold, writing that, "The Newbold claims are entirely baseless and should be definitely and absolutely rejected." He had heard that some group or Government agency

was about to spend a million dollars to acquire the document. Manly washed his hands of the whole affair.

After the Newbold debacle and the Manly confession, the once famous Voynich “treasure” was no longer the prize it had been. Now it had become an ugly duckling again. People were starting to say that it was a forgery and a hoax. Maybe Voynich, being the authority he undoubtedly was, had cooked up the whole story in a convincing manner? And yet in spite of everything the manuscript still had some kind of magical appeal. Many experts wanted to test their skills. People like Michael and Elizabeth Friedman of the NSA in the US, famous for their code cracking ability, had put it on punch cards. They theorized that it was done with “Pasigraphy” . That is making up a universal language. They sent a part of the text to England to share with Brigadier John Tiltman at the British GCHQ, the most famous code breaker at the time. He had broken the Japanese code and most of the Communist codes later the German High Command but with the Voynich Manuscript he was said to have reached a dead end.

Although I have tried to give you an idea of the current state of affairs regarding the Voynich Manuscript and its origin, I must not omit the valiant efforts of the Dr. Edith Sherwood, a retired chemistry professor, who has an original theory. She claims that the Voynich Manuscript might have been written by Leonardo Da Vinci when he was a young child! It would explain why one the nymphs was celebrating his birthday! [April 15]

That’s all that I have to tell you for this evening. I hope I have aroused your curiosity. The Voynich Manuscript is now safely in the hands of the Beinecke rare book and manuscript library of Yale University. “MS 408” is frequently requested by researchers of all kinds. Even in the last month, February 2014, BBC News announced that a totally new method has been described to decipher it. May I refer you to the interesting ideas of Dr Stephen Bax who is an expert on applied Linguistics from Bedfordshire University in England? He is an expert on Semitic languages, including Arabic. He claims to have identified several of the plants and their names. He has written a 50 page paper in the American Botanical Council disclosing the method he uses and challenging others to do likewise.

A conference is being planned for an international symposium next month to compare notes from all over the world. If you ever hear the sound of distant rumbling in the distance it is probably being caused by Wilfrid Voynich turning over in his grave.