

The Voynich Manuscript

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Published by Orion

Extract

•INTRODUCTION•

This is a book about a book. More bizarrely, this is a book about a book no one can read or understand. A book that has puzzled, frustrated and ultimately confounded scholars, intellectuals and cryptologists for the last ninety years, and probably for many years before that. A book whose illustrations and cryptographic originality set it far apart from other medieval manuscripts, and whose impregnability makes it unique. The story of the book stretches back through time and across continents, and is interwoven with the lives of many astonishing characters, and generations of would-be solvers, over the last eight hundred years. This book attempts to tell that story; not just of the inscrutable manuscript, but of some of those people through whose hands it has passed. Inevitably, this story throws up more questions than the answers it provides.

One of the few incontrovertible facts about the manuscript is that it was first brought to the world's attention by the man whose name it still bears, Wilfrid Michael Voynich. Like a pebble dropped into a still pond, Voynich's discovery in 1912 sent ripples of interest in all directions. Since then, the manuscript has attracted the attention of academics, military and secret service cryptanalysts, and a vast swathe of keen amateur cipher breakers and puzzle solvers. Yet this most enduring of enigmas remains largely unknown to the average lay person, and the manuscript itself lies hidden from general view in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. Gerry Kennedy, one of the authors of this book, was no different from so many others in his ignorance of the manuscript's existence, or of his very personal connection with its discovery, until a chance

comment at a family gathering set in motion the three years of research that culminated in the writing of this book.

Sometimes, the benevolent aspect of a sad occasion like a funeral is the tribal coming together of an immediate family with its more distant kin, often far-flung both in terms of geography and familiarity. This was certainly true of the gathering to mark the passing of my aunt Doreen in November 2000. Her funeral in Staffordshire was an almost pleasant affair in the strange way that loss and a reminder of collective mortality can be soothed by the polite warmth of the following reception. Back at the house where she had lived I saw my two cousins and met their grown-up sons. I was chatting, teacup in hand, to Laurie, one of the latter, when he asked me whether I knew about a much further-flung relative of ours, Wilfrid Voynich. Did I know about the famous manuscript that Voynich had discovered?

The exotic name rang no bells at all. Our family was unequivocally English as far as I knew, and from working-class stock not given to literary discoveries. I vaguely remembered, however, some probably fusty Victorian antecedents named Boole (my maternal grandmother's maiden name), who were apparently a cut above the ordinary. My brother knew little of this ancestral line, but he did turn up a well-thumbed family tree, once owned by another aunt. On this yard-wide banner the descendants of John and Mary Boole, who both died around the time of the 1851 Great Exhibition, were hung like an elaborate mobile, a paper registry of names previously unknown to me but connected by a genealogical thread.

There were three main strands pendant from their sons, Charles, William and George. I dangled eventually from William; Charles, though prolific, did not seem to have spawned anyone exotic. It was George who provided the connection. I remembered then the talk of the famous mathematician, George Boole, who had invented the modern algebra of logic – not so fusty after all! He died in 1864, the same year that his wife Mary gave birth to the youngest of his five daughters, Ethel. It was she who had married Wilfrid

Voynich. At the time this previously unknown family history seemed giddy stuff. A passing comment had offered a Lion, Witch and Wardrobe glimpse into unsuspected territory peopled with rare creatures.

Later I logged on the internet. 'Voynich' revealed over two thousand sites. I scrolled enthusiastically through the information that came tumbling on to the screen, and glimpsed the manuscript that my distant relative Wilfrid had discovered. The tantalising, undeciphered script nuzzled up to the most extraordinary illustrations of herb-like plants, zodiac wheels and a whole bevy of plump little naked women holding stars aloft like toy balloons, or parading arm in arm whilst dipping their toes in baths of green liquid. It was at one and the same time fantastic yet down-to-earth, promising great secrets that could be unlocked with the right key to hand. Here was a sexy mystery-puzzle with which anyone could play detective.

In July 2001, while visiting my daughter in New York, I borrowed a car to drive the 120 miles north to New Haven, Connecticut, the home of Yale University. With similar buildings and pseudo-gothic towers, the place is a little like Oxford or Cambridge in so far as the university is its main industry, and 'gown' merges physically with 'town'. The occasional gilded dome reminded me presciently of the cathedrals within the Kremlin, but the Beinecke Library itself was ultra-modern, looking rather like a pile of black waffles stacked into a cube, the whole resting on four obelisk legs.

I boldly lunged through the revolving doors, feeling somewhat nervous, as if on a blind date. I had read and heard so much about the manuscript and its allure that I was not sure what to expect from a meeting in the flesh; an immediate falling-in-love or a limp disappointment? I was reminded of a description of the manuscript by Mary D'Imperio that I had recently read in preparation for my visit.

The impression made upon the modern viewer...is one of extreme oddity, quaintness, and foreignness – one might almost say unearthliness. To the reader who has seen pictures

of more typical illuminated medieval manuscripts, these pages look very different indeed from what one expects to find in such a book ... the manuscript seems to stand totally apart from all other even remotely comparable documents. No one, to my knowledge, has so far discovered anything else at all like it.¹

Having shown my passport at reception, Head of Public Services Ellen Cordes chaperoned me to a large classroom pushing a trolley-load of Voynichobilia. After showing me exactly where to sit, she extracted the Voynich manuscript from its protective packaging and laid it on a slab of extruded foam, ready for inspection. With rubber-gloved hands she opened the volume and began to turn the yellowish vellum pages. Their ancient creak and crackle lent an added satisfaction to the delights that unfolded. I was in love.

Gerry Kennedy
London
2003

• 1 •

THE UGLY DUCKLING

Just as with the provenance of his manuscript, a certain murkiness surrounds Wilfrid Voynich's origins. Anne Fremantle, who wrote about Voynich's wife Ethel, gives 31 October 1865 as his date of birth, and Kovno as his birth-place, an important polyglot town in Lithuania. Voynich himself, more precisely, on several documents gave Telschi, a town within the province of Kovno. According to Voynich scholar Rafal Prinke, his name was originally Michal Wojnics – later, understandably, anglicised – to which he added 'Wilfrid', used, perhaps, as a codename during his early political activities, and later adopted permanently. Fremantle states that his father was a 'petty official', but Wilfrid denotes 'barrister' on his marriage certificate. This sits better with one of his middle names, 'Habdank', indicating a connection to one of the old Polish clans, and helps explain the occasional reference to him as 'Count'. Certainly a former employee of Voynich, Millicent Sowerby, in her book *Rare Books and Rare People*,¹ elevates him to the nobility. Voynich often used the prefixes 'de' and 'von' before his surname when travelling on the continent in his later years, an affectation presumably designed to impress prospective clients of his rare-book business.

We know almost nothing about his early life, but he evidently secured a good enough education to allow him to attend Moscow University from where he graduated in chemistry and became a licensed pharmacist. According to E. Taratuta, biographer of Ethel, Voynich became engaged with the Polish Nationalist movement in Warsaw, which aimed to free Poland from oppressive Russian rule. Involved in a failed plot to free two of their number who had been condemned to

death, Voynich was captured and imprisoned in 1885, suffering two years in isolation without trial in a tiny cell in the Warsaw Citadel. This physical ordeal was to have two lasting effects on his life: a slight, though permanent deformity – one shoulder raised higher than the other – and generally weakened health.

Ethel Boole, born in 1864, the youngest of the five brilliant daughters of mathematical genius George Boole, had been brought up in relative poverty in Cork and Lancashire, before capitalising on a small legacy to study music in Berlin from 1882 to 1885. Here she fell under the influence of the writings of Sergei 'Stepniak' Kravchinsky, which vividly depicted the horrors of Tsarist rule. Stepniak had fled to London following the assassination of General Mezentsev in St Petersburg in 1879, and so on her return to England, Ethel sought him out. Having learnt Russian, and fired with revolutionary zeal, Ethel set out for St Petersburg to visit one of Stepniak's relatives. En route she stopped off in Warsaw, and some time during Easter week in 1887 came to stand below the Citadel fortress, where Voynich glimpsed her from his cell window.

Just before his later transportation to Siberia, Voynich met Stepniak's banished relatives. On learning of his determination to escape to London, he was given Ethel's name and Stepniak's address. Somehow Voynich managed to escape and so began the arduous journey that Ethel once described as 'five months of adventures and hairbreadth escapes'. It was perhaps on this odyssey that he received the scars that he later indicated to Sowerby in his pidgin English, 'Here I have sword, here I have bullet.'² Winifred Gaye, Ethel's adopted daughter, reported Voynich offering up the maxim of a true swashbuckler: 'However frightened you are you must never show it.' Putting it to the test during his escape to England, he would apparently court danger on trains by deliberately sitting next to railway officials.

When Voynich reached Hamburg docks he was penniless, having sold his waistcoat and glasses. He hid in a pile of lumber until managing to hitch a ride on a fruit-boat to England, even surviving shipwreck off the Scandinavian



Wilfrid Voynich



Ethel Voynich

coast. Exhausted and dishevelled, he eventually disembarked in London and made his way to Stepniak's house in fashionable Chiswick. There, at last, on 5 October 1890, just as Ethel and company were sitting down to tea, he arrived and met her face to face, recognising her unmistakably as the woman he had seen outside the Warsaw fortress dressed completely in black (a characteristically earnest homage to her Italian revolutionary hero Mazzini, and a reminder of the sad state of the world).

Ethel was now a key figure in Stepniak's influential 'Society of Friends of Russian Freedom', patronised by leading left-thinkers of the day such as Eleanor Marx and William Morris, and had become co-editor of the society's publication, *Free Russia*. Voynich wasted no time in establishing himself with his new circle of friends. He took a bundle of copies the very next day to sell on the streets, and seems to have become as equally immersed as Ethel in the fight against the Tsar. But more importantly, around this time, Voynich began his enduring involvement in the world of books when he became the business manager of a bookshop selling revolutionary works to the British public.

Voynich had now adopted the name Ivan Klecevski as a cover in case of reprisals to his family in Europe. (Meanwhile Ethel seems to have taken the surname 'Voynich', although

they were not in fact married until September 1902, allowing his British naturalisation in April 1904.) Together, as part of the League of Book Carriers, they smuggled proscribed literature into Russia, including copies of Marx, Engels and Plekhanov. The more conventional account of Voynich's book-dealing history is made by Millicent Sowerby. It begins, she avers, Dick Whittington style, with his borrowing half a crown from Stepniak – not a lot even in the 1890s – in order to set up his own business; however, she perhaps wisely adds, 'at least that is the story we are told'.³

In 1895 Ethel set off on her own for Lvov to help organise the book-smuggling network, but a dramatic event back home was to bring an abrupt end to their revolutionary activities. Stepniak, their mentor and colleague, was knocked down and killed by a train at a level-crossing near his home. Perhaps in response to the change in leadership, they both appeared to withdraw from the movement. Letters show that 1895 was a year of bad health for Voynich and hardship for both of them. It marked a definite end to the chapter of their lives that had thrown them together.

We do not know the exact date on which Wilfrid started his antiquarian book business, but what is certain is that 'in a remarkably short time he had managed to acquire a large number of "unknown and lost" books, of which there were no copies in the British Museum'. H. P. Kraus, the book dealer who would eventually acquire the Voynich manuscript, similarly endorses Voynich's success. 'He rose like a meteor in the antiquarian sky and his catalogues testify to his ability.'⁴ Voynich's first list was published in 1898, and by 1902 he had published a further eight. His success also allowed him rapidly to expand his business from the original premises in Soho Square to 68–70 Shaftesbury Avenue, and later to Piccadilly, as well as setting up offices abroad in Paris, Florence and Warsaw.

It is rather difficult to account for his achievement, especially since there is little evidence of his dealings. Sowerby, who worked at Shaftesbury Avenue between 1912 and 1914, puts it down to his instinct to 'hunt' for books in out-of-the-way places. Perhaps the enterprise and resourcefulness

necessary while 'on the run' meant that he was well suited to the more congenial role reversal of sniffing out literary quarry. The gentle world of the auction house was clearly not for him; Voynich seems to have been a big-game hunter, described by Sowerby as 'forceful and inspiring', useful qualities on a bibliographic safari. Her strong attachment to Voynich (who inspired other women too) appears to go somewhat over the top, estimating him as '...immortal as any human being can be'. We can settle perhaps for her love of his 'sense of excitement and fun'.⁵

Some of this jollity was perhaps clouded by the legacy of his connection with Polish nationalism. Sowerby gives a number of anecdotes about 'spies' appearing in his bookshop and his hosting and helping Polish refugees. Voynich seemed to exhibit a gallant generosity in his dealings with both his compatriots and his staff. This did not preclude, however, his continued business shrewdness, put to work in his forays abroad looking for rare books and incunabula (books printed before 1500). Details of this period of their lives are few and sketchy. We have more solid evidence, provided by Voynich, relating to the episode that perhaps justifies Sowerby's intimations of his immortality.

In 1912, during one of my periodic visits to the Continent of Europe, I came across a most remarkable collection of precious illuminated manuscripts. For many decades these volumes had laid buried in the chest in which I had found them in an ancient castle in Southern Europe. While examining the manuscripts, with a view to the acquisition of at least part of the collection, my attention was especially drawn by one volume. It was such an ugly duckling compared with the others that my interest was aroused at once. I found that it was entirely written in cipher. Even a necessarily brief examination of the vellum upon which it was written, the calligraphy, the drawings and the pigments suggested to me as the date of its origin the latter part of the thirteenth century.⁶

So what was Wilfrid Voynich's strange find? What set it apart from all the other rare books in his collection? And what is it

about the Voynich manuscript that still has the power to ensnare and entrance so many?

The Voynich manuscript is a small quarto, the leaves of which vary in size but average about nine inches by six. They are numbered in a sixteenth-century hand; the last bears the number 116, but eight leaves are missing. Several leaves are folded, thus being made equivalent to two or more, and one is a large folding sheet equivalent to six leaves. The manuscript contains at present the equivalent of 246 quarto pages; if the eight missing leaves be reckoned at two pages each it must originally have contained not less than 262 pages. The last page contains the Key only, and f.57v bears a diagram, not yet deciphered, which is probably a Key; of the remaining 244 pages, 33 contain text only, while 211 contain drawings, usually touched up with watercolour, and nearly always accompanied with some text... It is, on the whole, in an excellent state of preservation, although a few pages have suffered somewhat from abrasion.⁷

More detail, and a greater sense of the mystery that pervades the manuscript, comes from the following catalogue entry from the Beinecke Library:

Almost every page contains botanical and scientific drawings, many full-page, of a provincial but lively character, in ink with washes in various shades of green, brown, yellow, blue and red. Based on the subject matter of the drawings, the contents of the manuscript falls into six sections:

Part I

Folios 11r-66v Botanical sections containing drawings of 113 unidentified plant species. Special care is taken in the representation of the flowers, leaves and the root systems of the individual plants. Drawings accompanied by text.

Part II

Folios 67r-73v Astronomical or astrological section containing 25 astral diagrams in the form of circles,

concentric or with radiating segments, some with the sun or the moon in the center; the segments filled with stars and inscriptions, some with the signs of the zodiac and concentric circles of nude females, some free-standing, other(s) emerging from objects similar to cans or tubes. Little continuous text.

Part III

Folios 75r-84v 'Biological' section containing drawings of small-scale female nudes, most with bulging abdomens and exaggerated hips, immersed or emerging from fluids, or interconnecting tubes and capsules. These drawings are the most enigmatic in the manuscript and it has been suggested that they symbolically represent the process of human reproduction and the procedure by which the soul becomes united with the body...

Part IV

Folios 85r-86v This sextuple-folio folding leaf contains an elaborate array of nine medallions, filled with stars and cell-like shapes, with fibrous structures linking the circles. Some medallions with petal-like arrangements of rays filled with stars, some with structures resembling bundles of pipes.

Part V

Folios 87r-102v Pharmaceutical section containing drawings of over 100 different species of medicinal herbs and roots, all with identifying inscriptions. On almost every page drawings of pharmaceutical jars, resembling vases, in red, green and yellow, or blue and green. Accompanied by some continuous text.

Part VI

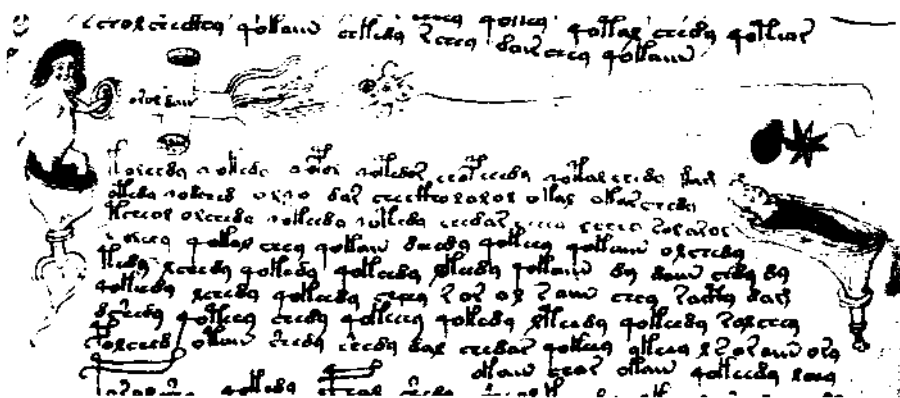
Folios 103r-117v Continuous text, with stars in inner margin on recto and outer margins verso. Folio 117v [sic] includes a 3-line presumed 'key' opening with a reference to Roger Bacon in anagram and cipher.

These descriptions do not begin to convey the sheer *weirdness* of the Voynich manuscript. On page after page one is

confronted by images of exquisite uniqueness: here a plant drawn with such simplicity, almost naivety, that it produces a bold, striking image; there an interlocking set of 'medallions' or 'rosettes', mandala-like in its almost surreal complexity. Where the drawings lack representational felicity or artistic merit, it is the scale (over two hundred images) and dynamism of the creativity that impresses and fascinates. Certainly the illustrations are crude, at times childish, but the manuscript conveys a unity of style and visionary conviction.

Taking the 'Botanical' (or *Herbal*) section as an example, in well over a hundred drawings, which range from straightforward to highly intricate, there is not one *positively* identifiable plant. In a number of illustrations there is a passing, and sometimes quite close, resemblance to real plants from the natural world; but these are in the minority, and the identification is never without a degree of uncertainty. Furthermore, in many cases elements of the plants, in some examples the flowers or leaves, in others the roots, seem exaggerated, distorted or even expressionistic, but for what purpose remains unclear. Occasionally a plant seems to have mutated halfway through its growth, or undergone some form of grafting, with a root or stem ending abruptly, only to sprout again, sometimes in multiple branches, suggestive of an entirely different plant.

But if the plants leave one baffled, this is as nothing compared to the sense of vertiginous wonder when confronted by the 'Biological' (or *Balneological*) section. Myriad plump 'nymphs', often with headdresses, but otherwise completely naked, dance or recline in pools of limpid green liquid; the pools or baths themselves connected by streams, channels or 'plumbing' that appears more organic than architectural. Other individual figures stand alone in urns or tubs, arms upraised, either dispatching or receiving something from the interconnecting tubing. On one page (f82r), a figure with dark hair or headdress stands in a vessel, her left arm placed into a cruciform junction of pipes, from the other end of which issue flames, which themselves produce a star. Another star appears, leaving a trail from the original as it passes across



Detail from folio 82r

the page to rest above another female figure, this one wrapped in a shroud, lying, either dead or asleep, on a tapering plinth. Above these figures two other women, one crowned, the other with long flowing blond hair, gesture towards two arching pipes that join and flow into a decorated vase; below, eleven nymphs, six of whom sport elaborate hats or crowns, stand around, and in, yet another green bath with ornate, curlicued edges. And this image is far from the exception: page after page is filled with equally strange scenes. There is something clearly sexual about these illustrations; not in the sense that they are designed to arouse (though of course they might), but that there is an underlying impression of fecundity, reproduction, birth and death. Streams of seeds or pollen issue from tubes, grape-like clusters of eggs produce flowing rivers which feed the pools in which the nymphs bathe and from which animals drink. Some images even bring to mind modern diagrams of human ovaries and fallopian tubes.

The overriding sense is that the creator of the manuscript had a purpose *other* than to create something of 'beauty', and was driven rather by a desire to convey meaning. The illustrations are therefore precisely that – illustrations or elucidations of the author's intent for the manuscript as a whole, and never designed to stand alone on their perceived artistic qualities. That is not to say, however, that the manuscript is

without its own aesthetic appeal, which is bound up with a vivid and surprising use of colour. One American scholar of the 1940s takes considerable care in detailing the individual pigments he finds in the manuscript:

Some of the colors appear to be colored ink or watercolor, some a kind of crayon, and some an opaque kind of paint like poster paint. There are many colors; the ink is good strong brown; there is an amber-like ink, like British-tan leather goods; a bright, not quite brilliant blue ink or watercolor; an opaque aquamarine; a good strong red, carmine rather than scarlet or vermillion; a dirty yellow... a red that looks like a bloodstain about a week old; a dirty green; an opaque green; a kind of green crayon; and several other greens of various hues, intensity, value, and texture; a red that looks like face rouge in color and texture; a thick red that makes dots of color that you could scrape with your fingernail; a red ink just like ordinary red ink today; [and] a blue that sparkles with tiny fragments.⁸

But the most mysterious and tantalising quality of the manuscript that continues to draw experts back time and again is the unreadable text. Mary D'Imperio believes, 'However complex and interesting the drawings are, the script in which the bulk of the manuscript is written is undoubtedly the most intriguing part of the elegant enigma... a tour de force of artistry and ingenuity.'⁹ For all the compelling nature of the illustrations, it is the seductive quality of the text, and the intellectual challenge of 'breaking the code' that has led would-be solvers to concentrate their considerable and diverse talents on the manuscript.

For most of us, whose acquaintance with medieval manuscripts is limited to the odd page reproduced in books or the occasional glimpse on a television documentary, the 'Voynichese' hand looks little different from the other examples we may have seen. At first glance, the Voynich manuscript could be just another archaic text. It is therefore strange, yet oddly pleasing, to discover that this is exactly the same response that the Voynich manuscript generates in those people who are more familiar with texts from the

Middle Ages. As cryptography expert David Kahn puts it: 'It looks like ordinary late medieval handwriting. The symbols preserve the general form of letters of their time, which they are not.'¹⁰

The first and most obvious statement to make is that the Voynich manuscript is not written in the Latin alphabet, or any other known script such as Cyrillic. The most common observation is that it appears to relate to what is known as the 'humanist hand'. This style of writing appeared just before 1400 in Florence as a conscious change of design, venerating antique styles rather than the angular Gothic of the Middle Ages, producing a more flowing style with a greater clarity and legibility. As this new style spread across Europe, the more slanted book and manuscript version became known as *italic* in recognition of its Florentine origins. From the similar characteristics seen in the Voynich script, which also displays a uniformity and balance in proportion, it has been suggested that the manuscript must date from the fifteenth century or later.

D'Imperio also draws comparisons with certain Latin abbreviations that were in use during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, a version of which is still used in doctors' prescriptions today. The Voynichese symbol  is the same as the Latin abbreviation used to represent 'ra', 'ci' or 'cri';  is close to the shorthand , representing '-termini', and  a compound of  ('qu') and  ('is' or 's'), amongst more than a dozen or so likenesses. D'Imperio goes on to suggest that the 'inspiration' for the Voynich script comes at least in part from these shorthand signs, plus 'early forms of Arabic numerals and some common alchemical or astrological symbols'.¹¹ There are Voynichese characters that appear very similar to the numerals 0, 4, 8 and 9, but it is assumed they do not represent numbers as they do in current usage.

It is not even clear exactly how many different characters make up the Voynichese alphabet. Estimates range between twenty-three and forty, but many of the basic shapes can be joined together to create compound symbols, whilst others reoccur with the addition of 'hooks', 'tails' or 'commas', and still more are 'ligatured', joined together by a stroke bridging

the top of two upright characters. The basic symbol $\vee$ exists in thirteen added forms such as ω and ω^2 , and the η character combines with ϵ to produce $\eta\epsilon$.

The symbols seem to form words, and the script apparently runs from left to right, but beyond these facts, little that is certain can be ascertained. No one is even sure whether the text which accompanies each illustration is actually related to it. It does appear as if the drawings were produced first, as the lines of script end irregularly, running up to the edges of the illustrations; but whether the images refer to the text or are a decoy to lead the would-be reader on a false trail is unknown. The script flows smoothly, without any apparent corrections in the whole manuscript, and does seem to suggest an underlying meaning or sense, not just a stream of gibberish. Does the Voynichese alphabet represent an attempt to convey an unknown language? Or is it perhaps a code or cipher?

From the moment he acquired the codex, Wilfrid Voynich had been trying to trace its previous owners, its movements, and ultimately discover the identity of the author. Voynich believed the manuscript to be the work of the thirteenth-century English Franciscan friar Roger Bacon, and some of Voynich's surviving correspondence shows that he carried out his own research in an attempt to construct a viable history for the manuscript, a trail that crisscrossed Europe from England to Bohemia, and a list of previous owners that included emperors, scholars and charlatans. But however plausible his theory might be, gleaned as it was from the scant evidence he had uncovered, it was still essentially conjecture; only decipherment of the unrecognisable script could establish the author's identity. His only hope of achieving this was to enlist the help of experts in the fields of medieval texts and ciphers.

Returning to London in 1912, Voynich apparently lost no time in letting others know of his strange find. Millicent Sowerby recalled, 'Another treasure that he had found in some ancient castle in Southern Europe was... the cause of great excitement and a large number of scholarly visitors -

botanists and astronomers as well as medieval experts. This was the famous Roger Bacon cypher...'¹² Voynich also seems to have taken the manuscript with him to Paris, where it was displayed to French scholars that same year. Yet despite obvious curiosity, no one came forward to venture an explanation of the document, or, more importantly for Voynich, to make a firm offer to purchase it.

By 1914 it must have been clear to him, as it was to many, that the military muscle-flexing of the great powers would sooner or later lead to war in Europe. Millicent Sowerby implies that Voynich's departure from England was caused by the likely curtailment of his book-foraging trips to the continent, and certainly the staff at Shaftesbury Avenue were cut, including Sowerby. In November 1914, Voynich sailed for America aboard the SS *Lusitania*, carrying many of his most valuable books and manuscripts with him.

Voynich's main concern upon arrival in New York seems to have been to set up his new shop at 33 West 42nd Street, and build a network of wealthy clients just like the one he had left behind in London. To this end he set about attracting favourable publicity for his collection. The catalogue of the Chicago Institute of Art records between 7 October and 3 November 1915 an 'Exhibition of Manuscripts and Books from the collection of W. M. Voynich, London', and the exhibition generated enough interest for it to be reported in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* of 9 October 1915, under the headline 'Art Works Worth \$1,500,000 Arrive to Escape War'. Included among the exhibits was Voynich's 1912 discovery.

In early 1919 Voynich made photostatic copies of what he considered to be some of the more interesting pages and sent them to many 'distinguished American and European scholars'. From surviving correspondence we know a few of the people he contacted: Professor A. G. Little, an authority on Bacon; palaeographer H. Omort from the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; and even Cardinal Gasquet, Prefect of the Vatican Archives. Only one of these experts, however, claimed to have made some headway in understanding the process of encryption, Professor William Romaine Newbold, whose partial decipherment of the manuscript seemed to

confirm Voynich's belief that Bacon was the author. By 1921, Voynich and Newbold were confident enough to present their Bacon hypothesis at a meeting of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

Voynich espoused his belief that it was the work of Bacon soon after he had obtained the manuscript. But his statement, quoted earlier in this chapter, that simply a 'brief examination of the vellum upon which it was written, the calligraphy, the drawings and the pigments suggested to me as the date of its origin the latter part of the thirteenth century', may have been somewhat disingenuous, because Voynich had been in possession of another piece of evidence all along. Luckily for him, and for all those who have subsequently taken up the investigative challenge, the few clues provided by the manuscript itself are augmented by an intriguing letter that was attached to its cover when it was found in 1912.