The Mysterious Voynich Manuscript: Collaboration Yields New Insights

ABSTRACT

One hundred years ago, a book dealer named Wilfred Voynich acquired a mysterious vellum manuscript, apparently written in an unknown language. He developed an intense interest in the manuscript and eventually traced its history back to the 17th century court of Rudolf II of Bohemia. Surviving documents show that the meaning and origins of the manuscript were unclear to scholars at that time. Some speculated it was written by the 13th century English natural philosopher Roger Bacon, a theory that Wilfred Voynich ultimately favored. Many scholars have studied the volume over the last four centuries, including 20th and 21st century cryptanalysts who have grappled with the question of whether the book is an encoded text based on a known language, a previously unknown language, or nonsense.

The Voynich Manuscript, as it has become known, was donated to Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library in 1969. In late 2008 an Austrian film crew approached the Beinecke with a proposal to conduct materials testing on the Voynich Manuscript and make a film about it. This prompted an exciting collaboration between curators; scientists from McCrone Associates in Westmont, Illinois, who characterized the inks and paints; the NSF-Arizona AMS Facility at the University of Arizona, which carbon-dated the parchment; conservators from Yale, who performed conservation treatments and oversaw the materials testing; historians; Voynich experts from around the world; and filmmakers. The collaboration resulted in significant advances in understanding this extraordinary object. This paper summarizes those findings, outlining the history of the Voynich Manuscript, some of the theories about this extraordinary manuscript's origins, its conservation treatment, materials testing, and parchment radiocarbon dating. The advances, though significant, are humble: the Voynich Manuscript's authorship and meaning remain a complete mystery.

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