

The Voynich Manuscript...

... in the eye of Sylvia Witt.

A somewhat different view of a supposedly great mystery.

Based on the scans at www.jasondavies.com/voynich

September 2015

The *Voynich Manuscript* is an ancient, as yet undeciphered handwritten document around which great myths are entwined. Neither the writing nor the language is known. Even the origin of the document is unclear.

A number of researchers have so far tackled the object, arriving at completely contradictory results. Everyone always believed that they had discovered the Egg of Columbus, sometimes in adventurously abstract ways, with and without technology, with and without mathematics. Above all, the manuscript always stimulated the imagination of writers. In horror circles, one draws a connection to the fictional grimoire *Necronomicon*. In the ninth novel of the *Indiana Jones* book series, it points the way to the Tomb of Hermes and thus to the Philosopher's Stone. In *Unter Schwalbenzinnen*, the author duo Achim Engstler & Astrid Dehe tell the story of its creation.

A contribution in an older P.M., let me in September 2015 the manuscript on the side of Jason Davies look more closely and quickly guess that the common interpretations actually leave some important sources of interpretation completely out of account. For someone who has dealt through training, study and profession with disciplines such as art history, typography, calligraphy and material science, which represent the nuts and bolts especially in the field of books and paper, as well as with psychology and graphology, these are unmistakable!

Time, then, to lift the often rapturous fog of mystery surrounding the ancient artifact a bit with more rational considerations....

Please judge this book by its cover!

It is speculated that the *Voynich manuscript* is a secret document that holds great world secrets, or at least tells of a foreign culture. The painted plants are located in the Near East, in Europe or in South America, depending on the interpretation. The writing is sometimes a submerged and sometimes a secret writing, the language sometimes a submerged, sometimes a secret language and sometimes a kind of Esperanto. Drawings in the middle of the book are interpreted as transmigration of souls. In any case, it is believed that something really significant has been documented here.

The analysts almost all pounce on the unknown writing and the consequently unknown content, but mercilessly ignore the obvious or at best consider it marginally and only in the broadest terms. No one interprets it as important. Many believe they have found the alleged solution in the text, but it is often no longer coherent a few pages later.

In principle, this procedure is quite correct in research: thesis, investigation, falsification, next thesis. Until nothing remains which is falsifiable and thus may be considered as truth. Often, however, the pure overall inventory is lost in this way.

There is no doubt that it is very exciting to decipher the writing. And each of us knows the saying that one should not judge a book by its cover. That would be unserious. In this case, however, that is exactly the serious way. To interpret the content of the Voynich manuscript without considering its material form creates sources of error without end.

Great importance = Perfect production

Handwritten books containing really valuable information or important texts were meticulously produced, carefully described and precisely painted. If a text was bound, i.e. if it was in book form, the book covers were made absolutely high-quality, thick and weatherproof. In this regard, from the Middle Ages we have in mind books covered with heavy, dyed, perfect leather, sometimes decorated with embossed letters, sometimes with ornaments. Certainly, such things did not exist in all cultures and at all times, but if something seemed really important, it was treated accordingly and preserved for posterity as optimally as possible.

Parchment (i.e., a very thin, hard animal skin) or paper (handmade) were very costly to produce, but the pages in such books were as flawless as humanly possible. There were no major holes, no stitching, no crooked edges, and no discoloration that was there to begin with, before the books were even written on. They were simply perfect, depending on the culture and time.

If you can see flaws in such old books today, even a layman can see that these flaws have occurred over time. Yellowing, faded colors, tears, pages glued back in, loose pages, caked or crumbled edges, water damage, mold and similar damage.

But in its original state, everything was as perfect as can be. Nothing was even remotely sloppily made. Even the binding of the parchment or paper was absolutely perfect: straight, firm, as if made for eternity. Likewise the book cover. The ink or color used was brilliant and among the best of the best by the standards of the time. Likewise the nibs, brushes or other writing tools.

The lack of perfection

But above all, writing and painting were precise. The originals, which were intended to convey important content in these handwritten times of book art, were and are so perfectly written that you have to look very closely to see that every single letter was written and not printed.

Often, it is only the smallest differences in the upstrokes and downstrokes, in the print thickness, or in the color intensity of the half-faded ink that tell you whether it is a print or handwriting.

In addition, the spacing between the edges of the paper and the text blocks was meticulously maintained. The lines were decidedly straight and accurate - and not only the horizontal ones, but all the vertical ones as well. Almost always, such a precious book was written by only one person, to avoid inconsistencies that would enter the text through different handwritings, even if the scribes used seemingly absolutely identical scripts. And when it was a matter of having an image flow around with text, there, too, the spacing between text and image was kept as perfect as possible. The pictures are just as meticulously painted. In them, too, nothing was left to chance and the drawing was usually finished long before it found its way into the respective book.

The drawings were also only ever done by one person, unless a type of mass production was already being produced here. Then there were defined work steps that one person completed at a time before the drawing went to the next person to complete the next work step.

For example, it is documented that there were divisions of labor for the initials (beginning of chapter letters), the outlines, the various colorings, and for the application of gold leaf.

This way of working did not exist in all cultures and at all times, but one thing definitely always existed: the striving for the respective possible perfection.
And such perfection was practiced by the writers and draftsmen to the smallest detail.

Exactly this is conspicuously lacking in the *Voynich manuscript*!

Poor material quality

According to radiocarbon dating, the text of the *Voynich manuscript* dates from between 1404 and 1438 for the parchment and a little later in terms of the order of the ink.

Based on the figures and clothing depicted and the drawing style, the origin of the document has always been estimated to be between 1450 and 1520, which is quite close to the radiocarbon analysis.

At that time, the making of writing and painting utensils, papers, parchments and the production of bound books had long ceased to be witchcraft.

The parchment on which this manuscript is written is rough and perforated from the front. In some cases, the larger holes were even sewn and the threads were pulled after drying.

The individual sheets are crooked and skewed. Sure they can warp a bit with time, but you can see that the warp was already there from the start, as well as the holes, because it was painted and written around all that. This only succeeds if it is already there before the text.

Such poor quality would never be the background for an important text.

A culture that was capable of producing this quality was also capable of producing a better quality.

However, one must not assume today's customs. Everything that was elaborately manufactured until a few years ago was also used in some way. There was no large-scale throwaway culture. Nowhere. Because working or production time is life time and that was important at all times and in all cultures - and thus also the products that were created from it. But if a product can be created, imperfect specimens are also inevitably created.

Partly there are very large parchments in the manuscript that were folded to fit inside the book. Possibly they were added later, during a new binding. However, they certainly date from the same era.

The ink and the nibs seem to have been of quite passable quality, but again, one can assume that someone who could achieve this quality would have had a better one available. It is possible, therefore, that this manuscript used pens that were no longer precise enough to achieve perfection in the typeface for the really good and important work. Perhaps they were also rejects from the outset.

Various skilled authors and draftsmen

In the further one sees clearly that it did not only act around different scribes, but recognizes also still the development of the scribes within the progress.

The texts turn out to be quite crooked and skewed, the margin spacing is nowhere respected. In the middle of the book there are the famous pages with the women's drawings and some more, which are more detailed and completely different in motif from the plant drawings.

Either a few more pages were inserted here later and then described, or these pages were simply overwritten by the first scribes and draftsmen.

This could certainly be judged by the binding, if it were examined more closely. But even the scribe who wrote around these drawings did not write perfectly: too narrow, too small, too crooked and too much placed on one page.

In addition, some of the drawings still contain words in Latin, as well as a pagination. For these two aspects, we can say that they must have been entered in a time when it was common to optimize important documents in all possible aspects.

Undoubtedly by another scribe, with a completely different ink composition, in a script readable today and, as said, in a language we understand, or in the so-called Arabic numerals still in use today. This is all definitely written later than the rest of the book, since on one page the pagination was placed in a different position because something was already written in the usual position. So with these words and numbers, the manuscript can certainly not be deciphered or anything of its content can be determined more closely.

It can therefore be assumed that the actual manuscript was produced well before these entries - and, above all, that it was not considered particularly important when the additions were made. Otherwise, no one would have allowed themselves these additions.

In terms of accuracy, the pictures are similar to the rest of the manuscript. The contours of the plant were painted by someone who did not have to follow nature, had a lot of imagination, but was also already somewhat skilled.

Someone clearly untrained painted the plants more badly than well. He tried hard, but was clearly unskilled.

Someone who was clearly more skilled and imaginative, but above all someone who looked very closely at the plump life, painted the drawings in the middle of the book.

Really finished in the training, however, this person was not, only from already somewhat safer hand. Someone fourth eventually colored these drawings only marginally more skillfully than the one who colored the plants, but in a very different way.

Throughout, all drawings were made first and only then written around or painted into.

Different age of the authors and draftsmen

The skills needed to write calligraphy and to develop a formal drawing language do not fall from the sky. They have to be learned and that takes a lot, a lot of time and even more practice.

This book, you can see very clearly, has been used by people of different ages. The youngest was certainly the one who colored the plants. Even with only a little imagination, one can see a young person in front of him, guiding the brushes with his tongue in the corner of his mouth, trying not to paint over the lines... In any case, the draftsman really put a lot of effort, although his motor skills were still underdeveloped.

The person who painted the plant outlines was a bit older. He has a strange idea of what plants look like from the inside, but tries to paint cut surfaces to show that stems grow from roots, for example. He strives to explain the world to himself, but still has too little information. His ways of painting the plants so that they are clearly identifiable are also more like his imagination and his task of drawing.

The texts around the plants have been written by some scribes. All older than the draftsman.

Whenever one of the scribes had significantly improved his motor skills of writing, another took over the baton and continued writing in the book.

After all, despite similar writing, it would be completely inconceivable for someone to develop and then drop off precipitously to have to start their development all over again.

If someone writes all day, the muscles naturally become stiff in the course of the day and the handwriting becomes worse. Nevertheless, he trains his motor skills and starts the next day with a better writing pattern than days before. But as I said, things are different here.

The draftsman of the women and other drawings was either a bit older again, but still young and in training, or the same age, but much more talented.

All of the participants were talented either way. But this one was obviously above all others in his abilities and, judging by the interplay of image and text, could have painted as well as written. For once, pictures and texts appear as if they were cast from one mold. Although still too crowded, but harmonious in itself.

The animals and the women

There are also zodiac drawings in the *Voynich manuscript*. Two are drawn twice and two are missing, but here also a page is missing on which the missing drawings could have been.

The animal drawings turn out quite differently overall. Some are true to life, some look as if the illustrator had never seen the animals before.

On the other hand, there is a large drawing that shows oriental buildings in the center and castles and churches on the edge.

These look as if a Central European writer/drawer had heard stories of onion domes, lions, and scorpions with long spiked tails, but then rather oriented himself to his own worlds of experience. He certainly had the imagination of what a dragon should look like, because a few pages earlier, on one of the pages with plants, he drew a mini dragon nibbling on the plant.

There are still a few rosette drawings, which are relatively inaccurate, but certainly testify to the fact that the draftsman saw them himself on churches or similar buildings.

In any case, the women's drawings indicate a very high level of observation. Especially since they are all different. Not only in the figures (some even visibly pregnant, some not), hair, hoods and transparent bathing costumes, but also in their interaction.

Some of the women are talking to each other, some are smiling at each other, some are facing each other, some are arguing, two women are even fighting. They are either holding stars or bathing or both.

Just the visible interaction of the women is also completely ignored in the *Voynich research*. One rather speculates about whether the bathing lakes and bathing tubs could possibly represent reproductive organs or transmigration of souls.

But why the women in the drawings bathe, talk, argue, use violence, or hold stars can only be guessed at speculatively.

Possibly there is also an exciting story written in the area of the women's drawings. Due to the richness of detail of the drawings, this speculation suggests itself, but it remains just a speculation.

Plant fantasy

The texts next to the plant drawings could of course contain a description of the plants, but they do not have to. Especially since even important plant descriptions would have been preserved in a significantly more carefully produced and written book.

The herbaria from this period are either filled with dried plants or with drawings of the highest accuracy. True, there were also in the Middle Ages in other plant and recipe books drawings of plants that are difficult to identify. Difficult, but not, as in this case, impossible.

The plant drawings in the *Voynich manuscript* are basically indecipherable.

Botanists Arthur O. Tucker and Rexford H. Talbert claim to have identified a few of the plants as Central American, but this thesis is not really tenable, as simply far too much interpretation and imagination must be used to see the correspondences.

The obvious is again disregarded here: Whoever, as a draftsman of that time, did not have sufficient information or whose abilities were not sufficient to transfer this information graphically, just used his possibilities and sometimes his imagination to create a drawing.

The font

The script itself is reminiscent of the Carolingian minuscule, but often with unknown letters. Perhaps a kind of special training script.

These types of practice writing, sometimes also only the practice letters, exists in the most different forms up to the today's time. Already in old Sütterlin exercise books one can see well how the letters develop from the beginning of learning from pure hand exercises to perfect writing. In the seventies, an S was first taught inverted in some schools, in the association to a meat hook... still in the eighties, one had to type to a given rhythm when learning to type, which was more important than hitting the letters correctly. During the same period, shorthand was still being taught. Because the printing of the characters there was as important as the characters themselves, they were divided into practice characters.

Today, we still learn letters in strange swirls and letter parts, instead of directly in whole letters. Today, such practice steps even affect spelling itself, where children are first asked to write after hearing, instead of directly acquiring the correct spelling.

This aspect of the pure practice book for the *Voynich manuscript* is not quite likely, since there were no absolute novice writers at work here.

But since researchers like Gerard Cheshire have already noticed that in the *Voynich manuscript* there are letters that were written several times in a row, another conclusion can be drawn: Even if these people see this as an indication of a completely unknown language or coding, it can be said from experience with practicing calligraphic writing that a failed or not yet perfectly fitting letter is simply repeated until it works better. This is practiced within the word that one is writing, in order to be able to check the overall writing afterwards.

More importantly, there is no punctuation in the text (except on the very last page - where there are several isosceles crosses). This would not be done in a practice font for any of the languages known so far. No matter how different the characters would be for practicing, the end and intermediate characters would have to be learned and fit.

Therefore, despite the quite significant partial repetition of letters, it cannot be excluded that it is a language and a script that was real and in principle decipherable.

That, in turn, would be the really interesting thing about the text.

But the decoders had better not assume that they can decode great secrets, because everything around speaks a very clear language.

The texts

Something can also be said about the content of the texts by sheer sight.

If meaningful sections of text had been copied here, the flow of writing would have been interrupted much more frequently to do justice to the given text. The likelihood of spelling errors would have been greater, or that the errors would have been noticed by the scribes and they would have made an effort to correct them again. Whether by crossing out and starting over, whether by scratching

away the ink and writing over the then vacant space, which would always have resulted in a slightly thicker or more frayed letter... whether by overwriting the letter in question or by whatever technique - direct error correction would be much more common than it actually is in this manuscript.

Also nonsensical texts are rather to be excluded, because also these must be either first learned and/or copied, whereby the straight described would still strengthen and beyond that always same text sections would result.

But writing exercises are boring. Especially if they are texts that have to be copied or are empty of content or trivial.

But calligraphy and drawing enthusiasts are creative people who find it easy to use the imagination, as is already unmistakable in all drawings, from the most clumsy to the most detailed.

So, if one speculation is allowed about the texts, it is that they are also products of fantasy.

Maybe even ones that are hardly possible in the later professional life of the obvious novice writers: A common story invented one after the other by different authors, which should sweeten the exercise work and in turn fire the imagination of the next writers and drafters.

Provided with the advantage that in such a continuous, made-up story, writing and drawing are not interrupted by direct self-correction, and at the same time learning and practice diligence is stimulated.

Conclusion

These logical conclusions, which can be made on the basis of the mere sight of physical conditions and available information in comparison with similar objects and similar processes, probably do not reveal any insanely great secret in the text.

Other, different details that the scans hint at, but which fall more into the speculative realm without a direct look at the manuscript stored at Yale University, support the sobering verdict:

The *Voynich manuscript* is an exercise book in which the handwriting and drawing talent of various learners can be found, and possibly one day a collaborative text of an imaginative story from the minds of the young students.

PS:

Interestingly, the manuscript's discoverer, Willfried Michael Voynich, who found the manuscript with others in a box in an "old southern European castle," also described the book even then as an "ugly duckling" that, along with the others in the boxes of the lost collection, directly caught the eye because of its inconspicuousness and poor workmanship. But his conclusion from this was that *precisely because of this, it must be something particularly valuable and mysterious...*



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