

Wilfrid Voynich's acquisition of the Voynich MS, not in Villa Mondragone

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12 September 2023

Abstract

A recent publication about a manuscript collection in the Vatican library sheds new light on Wilfrid Voynich's acquisition of his famous "Roger Bacon Cipher Manuscript" nowadays simply known as the "Voynich MS". The present paper has two main purposes:

1. To make the new information in this Italian paper accessible to a non-Italian speaking audience
2. To provide a single reference for this part of the history of the Voynich MS, superseding previous incomplete or even incorrect publications, in particular also by the author of the present paper.

This is not a translation of this publication, which deals with a wider topic. Furthermore, the material from the paper is complemented by material related more directly to Voynich, from numerous other sources.

As a result, we now have satisfactory answers to the questions where the Voynich MS had been preserved before Voynich acquired it, why Voynich was so secretive about it, and, to some extent, how much money was involved. It also provides a significantly improved timeline of events, and eliminates a few options on the open questions that still remain, and which are a consequence of the secrecy of this deal.

In particular, we can conclude that Wilfrid Voynich did not discover the collection himself, as he always claimed, but instead he was invited to acquire part of it by its owners, under promise of absolute secrecy. Furthermore, the Voynich MS was not kept in Villa Mondragone near Frascati, but in Villa Torlonia in Castel Gandolfo.

Introduction

The Voynich MS is a late Medieval illustrated codex that is most famous for the fact that its well over 200 pages of text cannot be translated or deciphered. It has been reliably dated to the early 15th century. A good printed introduction is the photo facsimile by Yale University library of 2016¹. An impression of the illustrations and text in this MS is provided in Figure 1.

The unreadable text is the main mystery of the MS, and this continues to attract people from all over the world, but it is not the only one. Even its relatively recent discovery by the person after whom it is named: the book dealer Wilfrid Voynich, is clouded in mystery. This may be exemplified by the following quote from a later owner of the MS: the book dealer Hans P. Kraus²:

In 1963 we were in Rome and I visited Monsignor Jose Ruyschaert at the Vatican library. I knew that he had published the catalogue of the Mondragone library and I hoped to get information about the Cipher manuscript. To my great surprise he thought that the manuscript was still in the library. I asked him: "Can you show it to me?" "Yes," he replied, and

¹ See Clemens (2016). In addition, the author of this paper maintains a web site with much more detailed information about the MS, see Zandbergen (2004-2023).

² From his autobiography, see Kraus (1978), p. 222.

headed for the stacks. Soon he returned without it. I had to tell him that I owned the codex, and how it came to me ³.



Figure 1: an example of the illustrations and the unintelligible writing of the Voynich MS

This confusion of Ruyschaert is very difficult to understand ⁴. Kraus was looking for information about his manuscript because Voynich himself had been very secretive about it. In his only presentation on the topic Voynich said the following ⁵:

In 1912 [...] I came across a most remarkable collection of precious illuminated manuscripts. For many decades these volumes had lain buried in the chests in which I found them in an ancient castle in Southern Europe. [...] As I hope some day to be able to acquire the remaining manuscripts in the collection, I refrain from giving details about the locality of the castle.

Kraus is the one who declared in the early 1960's that this "ancient castle in Southern Europe" was the Villa Mondragone mentioned in the earlier quote. We will see further down how, most probably, he came to that conclusion. At this point, we should get to know some of the people whose names will appear in the following.

Voynich was married to Ethel Lilian (Voynich) Boole, who preferred to call herself ELV, a habit we will also adopt here. From about 1915, after Voynich emigrated to the US, Anne Nill became his secretary, and when Voynich died in 1930, ELV and Anne Nill joined forces to continue Voynich's book business. Much later, Anne Nill became Kraus' secretary, and after the death of ELV in 1960 Kraus acquired the Voynich MS from Nill ⁶. On this occasion, Voynich's personal archive, including his correspondence and notes related to the Voynich MS, also became available to Kraus. He later donated both the

³ Kraus is mistaken about the year. His visit to the Vatican library took place on 22 May 1962, as documented in Austin (1963).

⁴ To add a personal note, reading this short piece of text in the late 1990's is what triggered my now 25-year long interest in this part of history.

⁵ A presentation held in Philadelphia on 21 April 1921, and published as Voynich (1921). In all quotes in the present paper, author's comments are contained between square brackets, and [...] means that some text has been skipped. Misspellings etc. are left uncommented.

⁶ For a detailed explanation of the ownership of the MS during this time, see Katz (2022).

Voynich MS and this archive to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University, New Haven (CT), where they are available for consultation ⁷.

One important item in this archive is a letter written by ELV, in an envelope that says “Concerning the Cipher MS. Not to be opened till after my death...”. In this letter, ELV explains that her late husband Wilfrid left her some information about the MS in confidence ⁸:

The Cipher MS. was bought [inserted: with other MSS] by W.M. Voynich, in or about 1911. It was the property of the Vatican, and was (in a castle ?) at Frascati. The intermediary through whom he approached the Vatican authorities was the English Jesuit Father Joseph (?) Strickland, who had, I believe, some connection with Malta. Father Strickland, who has since died, knew that the sale of certain MSS. had been decided upon, if a buyer could be found whose discretion could be trusted. Whether this [inserted: secrecy] was because of the strained relations with the Quirinal I do not know. Father Strickland gave his personal assurance that W.M.V. could be trusted, and on that assurance he was allowed to buy, after giving a promise of secrecy. He told me at the time, in confidence, feeling that someone should know, in case of his death. For the same reason I am leaving this statement in the safe, in case of my death.

This is quite different from what Wilfrid Voynich had presented in 1921 and it is clear that Kraus must have been eager to find out more.

The catalogue of Ruyschaert mentioned by Kraus appeared in 1959 and is a 700-page volume describing the Vatican Latin manuscripts: Vat.Lat.11414 – 11706 ⁹. In its 25-page introduction we read that the Vatican obtained these manuscripts in 1912, together with 50 Greek manuscripts and one Turkish manuscript, from a collection originating from the Jesuit Collegium Romanum. Approximately 200 items used to belong to the collection of the humanist Muretus, while another 100 items consist of autographs of the Jesuit professor Girolamo Lagomarsini ¹⁰. The first group has labels indicating that they were previously in the private library of P. Beckx, who was the Superior-General of the Society of Jesus from 1853 to 1884. Ruyschaert’s introduction does not say where this collection was preserved before the Vatican acquisition, and Villa Mondragone is not mentioned. It does mention, however, that not all manuscripts were acquired by the Vatican, but a small selection was bought by the book dealer Wilfrid Voynich. A footnote lists a few dozen items, including one MS that is further identified as MS 8 on page 1846 in tome 2 of “S. De Ricci, Censur...” ¹¹. This is Voynich’s cipher MS.

Voynich’s archive preserved in the Beinecke library also includes a few bibliographical slips that he must have removed from some of his manuscripts, and many of these equally show these labels ¹². An example is shown in Figure 2.

With these initial pieces of the puzzle, we may proceed with a description of the new evidence, which concerns events in 1912. Before going there we will highlight a few prior events that will help us trace some items of particular interest.

⁷ The manuscript has been digitised and can be browsed in its entirety at the Beinecke online digital library. Other selected material from Voynich’s archive is also published there – see Annex.

⁸ The letter and envelope are reproduced in Clemens (2016). See also Annex.

⁹ See Ruyschaert (1959).

¹⁰ Girolamo Lagomarsini (1698-1773) was a professor at the Collegium Romanum, who was preparing a major edition of Cicero, which was never completed. The autographs mentioned here are related to its preparation.

¹¹ See De Ricci (1937).

¹² Several of these can be seen at the Beinecke digital library, see also Annex.

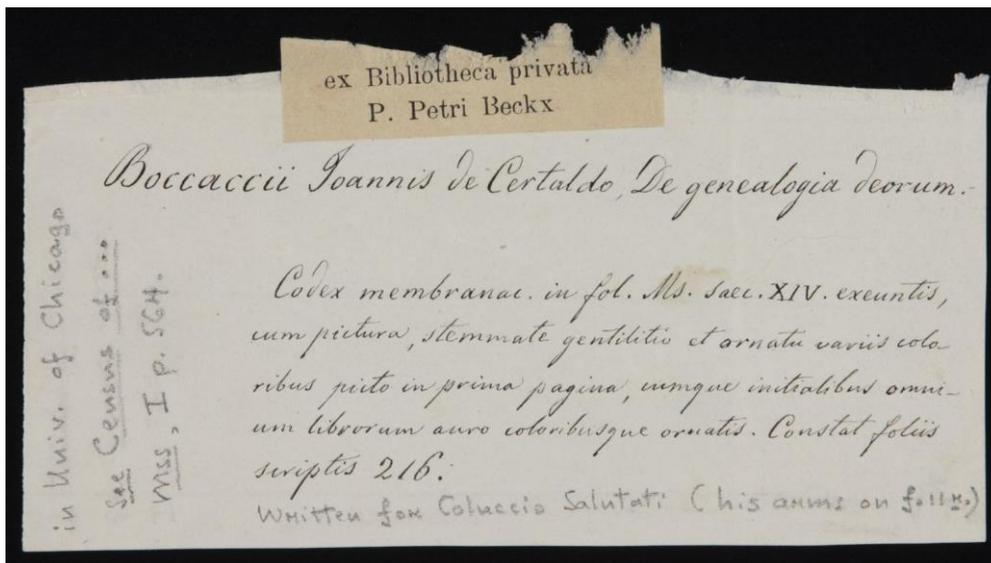


Figure 2: item in Voynich's archive referring to the private library of P. Beckx

The Voynich MS goes into hiding

That the Voynich MS surfaced in a selection of books from the Society of Jesus in Rome is consistent with a letter that Voynich found inside the MS. This letter, dated 19 August 1665, was sent by the Prague scientist Johannes Marcus Marci to the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher in Rome, presenting him the MS as a gift ¹³.

Kircher was a professor at the Collegium Romanum, who became famous through his publication of books on many different topics, and through a small museum he curated within the walls of the same college. He also maintained an extensive correspondence with other Jesuits worldwide, with scientists, high-ranking clergy and royalty.

Unfortunately, we have no trace of what Kircher did with the MS. A catalogue of his museum of 1678 lists a number of his books ¹⁴. This list starts with a detailed list of Kircher's own published books, and then mentions twelve bound volumes of letters collected over 40 years, and books in many languages, but not specifically the Voynich MS. It also does not mention several other manuscripts known to have been in Kircher's possession, which are still preserved today. This is clearly not a representative catalogue of his library, but rather a list intended to highlight a number of items. Kircher died two years after the publication of this catalogue.

A second reference to Kircher's books is found in a manuscript by one of his successors, the Jesuit Bonanni, written sometime after 1702. This describes one room in Kircher's museum as follows (translated from Latin) ¹⁵:

A room full of manuscripts, in part old and on parchment, books in various languages, [...]

¹³ This letter is preserved in the Beinecke Library as MS 408A. See also Annex.

¹⁴ See De Sepi (1678), chapter 8.

¹⁵ Filippo Bonanni was curator of Kircher's museum from 1698 to 1723. The document he wrote is preserved in the historical archives of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, as APUG 35 VII (g), and has been described in detail in Garrucci (1879) and Bartòla (2004). Garrucci gives the year 1716 for the note by Bonanni.

Old manuscripts on parchment were not mentioned in De Sepi, but unfortunately we have no further details about them. Kircher's collection of books, that should have included the Voynich MS, must have been moved to the main Collegium Romanum library sometime between 1705 and 1870. The volumes of correspondence listed in De Sepi (1678) are usually referred to as the Carteggio Kircheriano. This conspicuous collection, which is still preserved, will help us in tracing the moves of books and manuscripts in the following years ¹⁶.

In 1853, the Belgian father P. Beckx S.J. was elected as the new Superior-General of the Society of Jesus. We had seen his name attached to the manuscripts acquired by the Vatican and by Voynich.

In 1855, Louise Charlotte de Bourbon, Duchess of Sachsen, donated the library of her late husband Giovanni Francesco de Rossi to the Jesuits ¹⁷. This was done to fulfil her husband's wish that this library would never be dispersed. A formal donation contract was signed by the Duchess and by Beckx, stating (among others) that, in case the Jesuit order is ever dissolved, the next rightful owner of the library will be the Emperor of Austria (at the time: Franz Josef I). This collection of nearly 10,000 volumes was stored in the Jesuit administrative centre in Rome: the Casa Professa. The Duchess died in 1857.

In 1867, a librarian of the Casa Professa wrote to the Hungarian priest Vilmos Fraknói that his library contained a collection of books of the Duchess of Sachsen that should be sent to the emperor of Austria, and this collection included a MS originating from king Mathias Corvinus ¹⁸. The famous humanist library of King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary, and its destruction and the dispersion of its books in the first half of the 16th century, had been a topic of great historical interest for Hungarian researchers. This message prompted the historian Flóris Rómer to travel to Rome in 1869 and take photographs of a set of four Corvinus manuscripts in Rome. This concerned the aforementioned MS (a missal) in the library of the Duchess, a breviarium preserved in the Vatican library and two manuscripts in the Jesuit library in the Collegium Romanum: a Cicero MS and a MS of Didymus Alexandrinus and other texts ¹⁹.

The publication (in Hungarian) of these photos became well known among historians in Hungary, but appears to have been hardly known outside. The missal in the library of the Duchess included the oldest known portrait of the king, while the "Didymus" in the Collegium Romanum contained what was judged to be the most life-like existing portraits of the King and his wife, Queen Beatrix. Rómer remarks that this manuscript was previously unknown.

He also gives the shelf mark of this manuscript as "4 f 45". In his notes, now preserved in the Hungarian national library "Széchény", he transcribed the bibliographical descriptions that were attached to the two manuscripts ²⁰. The one that used to be attached to the Cicero MS is still preserved today, in Voynich's archive in the Beinecke library, as we shall see below.

Just one year earlier, the city of Rome had been taken by force and Italy was united under the new king Vittorio Emanuele II, who made Rome its capital. The new government was intent on reducing the influence of the religious orders in the city, and issued a series of laws to confiscate their possessions. It was decided in particular that the city needed a library that could rival with those of

¹⁶ See also Zandbergen (2004-2023) - (a) and (b).

¹⁷ All details related to this library are from Grafinger (1997).

¹⁸ These events are described in Rómer (1871).

¹⁹ Presently, the breviarium and missal are preserved in the Vatican library as Urb.Lat.112, and Ross.1164 respectively, and the other two in the Morgan library in New York, as MS M 496 and MS M 497.

²⁰ See Pócs (2017). The notes of Rómer are preserved as Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, Fol. Hung. 1110/I, fol. 316r.

London and Paris, and this would be achieved by confiscating some of their libraries. Carini Dainotti (1956) describes documentation showing that the government planned how confiscating 14 libraries would immediately result in a collection of 167,000 books²¹. In particular the Society of Jesus suffered from this, not only by losing 57,000 books, but also the palace hosting the Collegium Romanum, which was converted into the new national library "Vittorio Emanuele II". Carini Dainotti explains how many of the religious orders started removing items from their libraries in order to avoid them being taken away from them.

The confiscation of Jesuit possessions took place in October 1873. The events in the Casa Professa were witnessed by the Jesuit Paul Pierling²². He described how the library of the Duchess of Sachsen was not confiscated, as it was protected by the contract. Also personal items of Jesuits would not be confiscated. Beckx appealed to the King, and as a result was allowed to keep approximately 4000 volumes from the Jesuit libraries²³.

The new national library was opened in the Collegium Romanum building. In the end, collections from about 70 religious houses were included. A collection hidden by the Jesuits inside the building, in a secret room behind a trap door, was discovered in 1877 and added to the Jesuit collection ("fondo gesuitico"). This included some Kircher autographs.

Hungarian publications continued to refer to the two Corvinates from the Collegium Romanum, and in 1886, one of these publications stated that they should be in an "unknown Jesuit library"²⁴.

The Library of the Duchess was moved to a temporary location in Vienna in 1887, and in 1895 it arrived at its more permanent destination in the Jesuit library of Vienna's 13th district (Wien Lainz), where the collection became accessible to scholars. From this time it was better known as the Bibliotheca Rossiana.

In an overview of known Corvinates published in 1908, its author wrote that the two manuscripts from the Collegium Romanum should have been transferred to the Vittorio Emanuele library, but they were not there, and were considered lost²⁵. He confirmed that the missal from the library of the Duchess had been moved to the Jesuit house in Vienna.

Events in 1911 – 1912

Our knowledge of subsequent events has benefitted greatly from a recent publication by Francesca Potenza of the University of Palermo²⁶. In or before early 1912, the Jesuits created two catalogues of books and manuscripts, that are now preserved in the historical archives of the Gregorian Pontifical University in Rome²⁷. The first (with shelf mark APUG 3225) bears the comment: "Catalogo dei MMSS. dell'Archivio della casa di Castel Gandolfo appartenente all'Università Gregoriana" or: "Catalogue of manuscripts of the archive of the house at Castel Gandolfo belonging to the Gregorian

²¹ For all details see Carini Dainotti (1956).

²² P. Pierling's letter is preserved in the Archivio della curia generalizia della Compagnia di Gesù, ARSI, Rom.35.VIII.6. It has been published in Martina (1973). I am grateful to Xavier Ceccaldi for this reference, which I have not seen myself.

²³ See Carini Dainotti (1956), pp.61-62.

²⁴ See Csontos (1886).

²⁵ Weinberger (1908).

²⁶ See Potenza (2022). Her work benefitted in turn from information provided by Lorenzo Mancini, then at the historical Archives of the Pontifical Gregorian University (APUG).

²⁷ Events described by Potenza concern the year 1912, but 1911 is also mentioned in sources related to Voynich's acquisition of manuscripts. Further thoughts on this question are presented in the following.

University"²⁸. This catalogue lists manuscripts that are presently preserved in the Gregorian Historical Archives (Fondo APUG)²⁹. Many if not most of these volumes also have a sticker referring to the private library of P.Beckx.

The second (APUG 3289) is the original of a document held in photographic copy in the Vatican library: Arch.Bibl.109. The latter photographic copy was already mentioned in the introduction to Ruyschaert (1959)³⁰. This document lists both the books acquired by the Vatican and by Voynich. The original was already described briefly by Kristeller, decades ago, but was rediscovered only recently by Lorenzo Mancini³¹. The title page of this catalogue says: "Catalogo di codici e stampe acquistate dalla Biblioteca vaticana nel 1903" or: "catalogue of manuscripts and prints acquired by the Vatican Library in 1903", whereas Kristeller quotes the year 1913. Potenza explains that the original MS still has remains of a pencil emendation from 1903 to 1913, which was subsequently erased. This is not visible on the photographic copy Arch.Bibl.109. This issue of the year will be addressed further below.

This second catalogue has a total of 294 entries. Of these, 259 are of MS codices, 32 are prints, and 3 are clearly duplications of other entries. Out of the 259 MS codices, 187 are identified (in the right margin) with an entry in Vat.Lat.11414 - 11615, 36 with an entry in Vat.Gr. 2431-2490, and one with Vat.Turco 80. The remaining 35 items are either not commented on, or traced to an entry in De Ricci's Census or to "De Marinis", who was also mentioned in Ruyschaert's introduction.

This catalogue only covers the MS collection that Ruyschaert described as "from Muretus", while items Vat.Lat.11616 - 11709, i.e. the manuscripts of Lagomarsini, are not included in it³².

Both catalogues use the same layout and the same material, and they were evidently created at the same time, describing books and manuscripts, the first certainly preserved at the Villa Torlonia in Castel Gandolfo. We will see below that the same is true for the second catalogue.

Jesuit House diaries

All Jesuit houses maintained year books and house diaries, where these house diaries record day to day events. The diaries of interest for us, namely those of Villa Mondragone, Villa Torlonia and the house in Florence are preserved in the "Archivio storico della Provincia Euro-Mediterranea della Compagnia di Gesù" (AEMSI) in Rome³³.

From the Florence diary we learn that Joseph Strickland, who was based in Florence from 1903 to 1911, permanently returned to Rome on 7 January 1912. While in Florence, he had also travelled to Rome reasonably frequently, for example staying there from 2 October to 7 December 1911³⁴. He

²⁸ This MS was long known to scholars, but was first described in the present context by Potenza.

²⁹ With some exceptions, which were also sold to the Vatican library.

³⁰ For more information about this document, see also Zandbergen (2004-2023) – (a).

³¹ See Kristeller (1998). The discovery by Lorenzo Mancini occurred in July 2019 (priv.comm.).

³² This point will be clarified further below.

³³ The diary of the "Casa del Collegio di Mondragone" has call sign 586-31-2 and that of the "Casa del Noviziato a Castel Gandolfo e Villa Carpegna" has call sign 589-2-G. Both have been consulted by Lorenzo Mancini, Francesca Potenza and myself. I am grateful for the very helpful support from Maria Macchi when visiting the AEMSI archive in October 2021.

³⁴ These dates are my own observations from the Florence house diary in October 2021. Unfortunately, I did not record the call sign of this "Residenza di Firenze Diario Domestico".

visited the Villa Torlonia twice, on 25 and 29 April 1912, but there is no record of Voynich visiting either site ³⁵.

Famous Corvinus manuscripts

The first news we have of any MS from the Jesuit collection re-surfacing appears in a Hungarian publication of June 1912 ³⁶. This describes a lecture held on 26 June 1912 by the Hungarian statesman and historian Albert de Berzeviczy, in front of an audience in the National Museum in Budapest. He declared that an antiquarian book dealer named De Marinis had come to Budapest, offering two Corvinates for sale, namely those two that were photographed in the Collegium Romanum by Flóris Rómer, and which he had been searching for ever since. He is advocating that these two books should be acquired by Hungary.

These two books later appear in a 1913 sales catalogue of De Marinis, with photographs, where they are reported as having been sold already ³⁷. The bibliographical description of one of the two, the Cicero MS, is now preserved in the Beinecke library, demonstrating that Voynich owned this MS before De Marinis (see Figure 3).

The Hungarians were outbid by the wealthy New York banker John Pierpont Morgan, and the two manuscripts are now preserved in the Morgan Library & Museum in New York, where their most impressive illustrations can be viewed online ³⁸.

The Morgan library also preserves additional material related to the sale, including a letter sent by De Marinis' business associate Vittorio Forti, in which he writes ³⁹:

To mR. Morgan, I remember now, I sold two splendid folio Mss. that I had bought from Mr. Voynich in Florence for about Lire 300,000. written and illuminated by Gherardo and Monte di Giovanni, with the coat of arms of the King of Hungaria (I had been one month in Budapest as the Archbishop hoped to collect the necessary money to buy the books) ⁴⁰.

The archbishop was Vilem Fraknói, the same person who had been contacted by the librarian of the Casa Professa in 1867, 45 years earlier.

The invoice to Morgan, with accompanying letter, came from the antiquities dealer Alexandre Imbert and was dated 29 July 1912 ⁴¹. This tells us that these two manuscripts were obtained from the Jesuits by Voynich, then passed on to De Marinis who travelled to Budapest to sell them to the

³⁵ The two dates are reported in Potenza (2022). The lack of any mention of Voynich was checked by Lorenzo Mancini and myself.

³⁶ De Berzeviczy (1912). This reference was found in a publication of Daniel Pócs (2020). Both sources are not readily accessible as they are written in Hungarian. I have had to rely on Google translate for their interpretation.

³⁷ See De Marinis (1913).

³⁸ For the Didymus MS see: <http://corsair.themorgan.org/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=337055> . For the Cicero see: <http://corsair.themorgan.org/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=328327> .

³⁹ This typewritten letter was addressed to Hans P. Kraus, and is in response to Kraus' birthday wishes.

⁴⁰ The tone of the entire letter is one of self-aggrandization by Forti, and criticism of his partner De Marinis. There are later pencilled annotations on it near the amount (Lire 300,000) saying "10,000 Pounds" and 1 Pound = 25 Lire. As this is not fully consistent, and this letter was always in the US, so a reference to Pounds would not be expected, this might be an independent information about the amount that Voynich received.

⁴¹ I am grateful to William Voelke of the Morgan Library for this information. In the invoice, the price for the two manuscripts combined with a third one is listed as US \$ 101,549 , which is at least qualitatively consistent with Forti's number.

Archbishop, but were eventually sold through Imbert to J.P. Morgan. Voynich must have had these manuscripts sometime before 26 June 1912, but we do not have any more precise date.

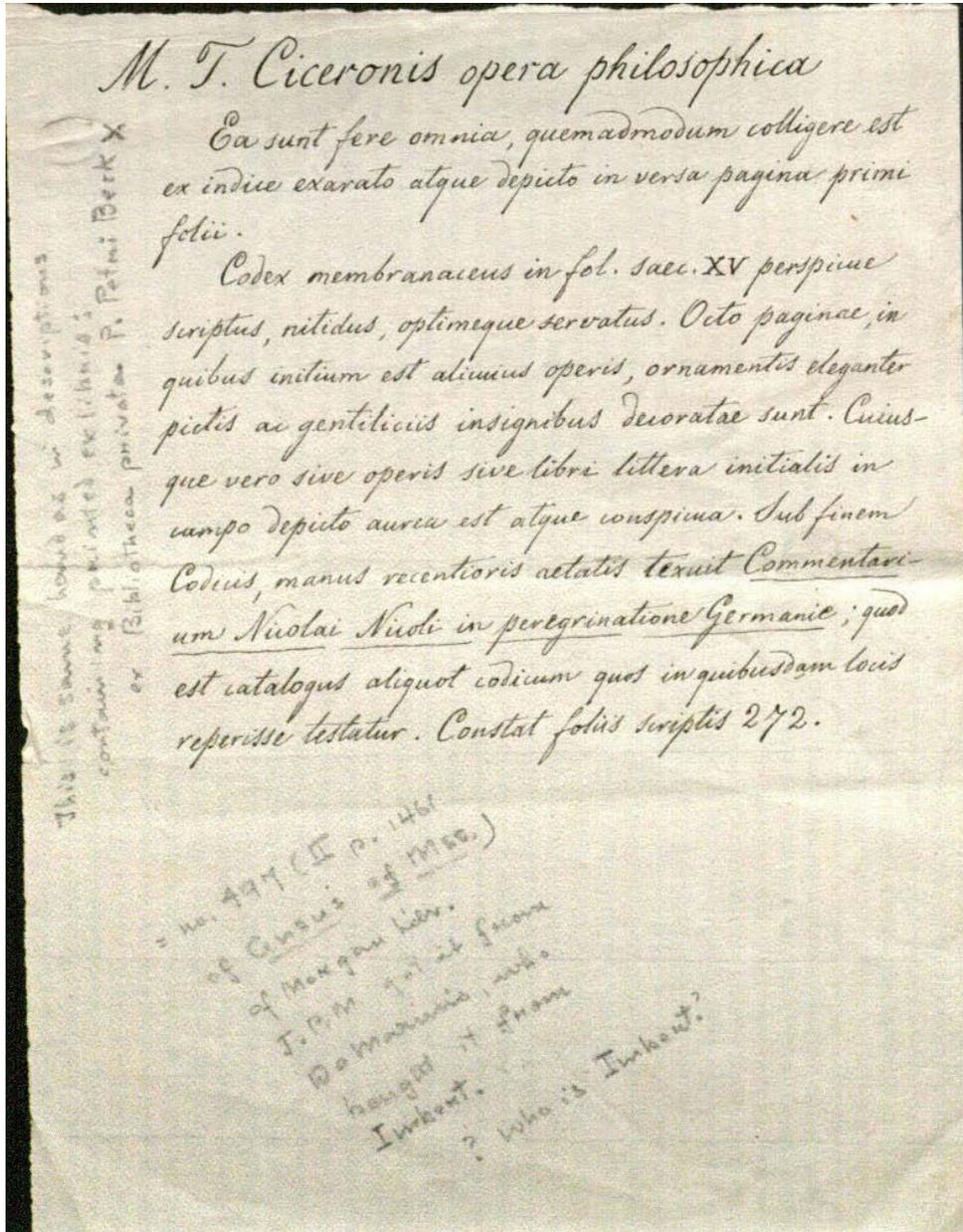


Figure 3: The bibliographical slip once attached to the Cicero MS originating from the Corvinus library. Annotations in pencil are from the hand of Anne Nill and must have been added in or shortly after 1937.

It appears as if De Marinis would have been advised (through Voynich) by the Jesuits to contact the Hungarians, as the Jesuits would have known about the great interest they have always shown for this MS. The handwritten notes on the bibliographical description made by Anne Nill (see Figure 3) suggest that she had no prior information about this MS.

Previously unknown letters preserved in the Vatican archives

The publication by Potenza cited before also introduces and describes newly found letters that explain how and when the collection of Vat.Lat.11414-11707 entered the Vatican library⁴². A first archival document includes three letters from the Jesuit Augusto Spinetti, who was the Provincial of Rome from 1909 to 1912⁴³.

Spinetti's first letter, written from Rome, is addressed to the prefect of the Vatican Library Franz Ehrle S.J., and is dated 12 June 1912. The text of this letter (in Italian) is quoted by Potenza, and its translation in English is as follows⁴⁴:

I have proposed to the holy father the project of the Vatican Library acquiring the mentioned manuscripts. I also told him the primary reason, namely to cover urgent needs with the proceeds etc. He agreed in his great kindness, and pressed me to talk about it with your reverence, while formally including these words: "tell father Ehrle that he makes an estimate, but not judge them from the viewpoint of a Jesuit or a religious person..."⁴⁵.

Potenza then writes that Spinetti asks Ehrle how he intends to proceed, and that Spinetti adds in a post scriptum: "for the manuscripts in question we have been offered with certainty 500 Lire per volume" .

A second letter, also from Spinetti to Ehrle, is dated 17 June 1912 and this is reproduced in Potenza (2022). Translated to English:

Very well: at the same time I am writing to fr. Tacchi Venturi for the reason given to me by your reverence. At Castel G. nobody knows anything: it is therefore up to them to hide with some pretext the real reason of this activity and your work. I am writing in the same vein to fr. Tacchi, whom I will tell to advise from my side fr. Turchi.

The letter to Tacchi Venturi is included in the same volume, also has the date 17 June 1912, and says:

As father Ehrle wrote to me today, he wishes to make the estimate on Tuesday or Wednesday this week. He wishes to have someone from the prov[ince] with him, and I delegate this to your reverence; therefore I ask you to agree with him on this as soon as possible. The holy father told me: tell fr. Ehrle to make an estimate, not from the viewpoint of a jesuit or a religious person. Elsewhere, for these same things [above the line: the collect. Mur.] we could get with certainty a hundred thousand Lire. I recommend you to proceed such that at Cast. G. nobody will know what this is about. Except, naturally, it will be necessary that your reverence indicate this to fr. Turchi in discretion.

The "holy father" is, of course, the pope: Pius X. The Jesuit Pietro Tacchi Venturi was an important advisor to the Roman province of the Society of Jesus, while father Ottavio Turchi was the rector of the Jesuit novitiate at Castel Gandolfo. Spinetti's second letter was in response to a positive answer from Ehrle on his first letter. Potenza has searched for this response in the archives, but was not able to find it.

These letters tell us that the sale was made under the cover of secrecy, that the collection was preserved in Castel Gandolfo, and that it concerned a collection referred to (in Italian) as: "collez. Mur.", which undoubtedly means "Mureti". This is a clear reference to the collection from the

⁴² Potenza (2022).

⁴³ This first document is Arch.Bibl.192.

⁴⁴ Translations have been kept as literal as possible.

⁴⁵ The underlines have been added where they appear in the letters, as indicated by Potenza.

Collegium Romanum library. Furthermore, the reason for the sale is given as the need for money, which Potenza ascribes to the long-lasting consequences of the laws of 1873 and the inability of the Jesuits to profit from their main institutions, which had been taken from them.

Furthermore, two things must have happened already before Spinetti wrote his first letter: he had already communicated with the pope about the sale of this collection, and he also already had another offer for the collection, namely 500 Lire per volume, or 100,000 Lire in total, showing that the collection under discussion at this point was of approximately 200 volumes. We also saw above that, just a few days later (on 26 June) two Corvinates from the Collegium Romanum collection would be in Budapest, having passed through the hands of Voynich, so Voynich must have been involved already, and he is the obvious candidate for having made this offer.

The Beinecke library preserves a few short letters from Joseph Strickland to Voynich, and the earliest that has been preserved is dated 26 June 1912. It says:

My dear Mr Voynich, As I will not have the pleasure of seeing you in Florence I have asked Father Aloizi my successor of the Club to pay his respects to you in my name, He and Fr. Rector know that you have so generously helped us to pay our creditors and join me in praying God to reward you in this world and in the next. F. Spinetti thinks it is better to send the 1000 books you have put by for him to the house in Florence so that he may see them before sending them to Rome, when he comes here at the end of next week. For everything else we will settle what is to be done when I return to Rome. It is better not to say anything even to our Holy Rector for the present. Miss Howe told me you would not arrive till Thursday and therefore I am leaving for Paris.

Yours gratefully, J.Strickland

Wednesday morning – 26 June 12

*P.S. F. Rector has a letter for you From F. Spinetti*⁴⁶

In the top left corner of the letter, a pencilled remark, most probably by Voynich himself, says: “Safe to keep” (see Figure 4). This clearly suggests that other letters must have been destroyed, and the letter itself includes further remarks of secrecy. The letter includes two communications from the Roman Provincial Spinetti to Voynich, just days after Spinetti wrote to Ehrle related to the sale of the manuscripts of Castel Gandolfo, and literally coinciding with subsequent events as described below. Unfortunately, the letter from Spinetti to Voynich has not been preserved in Voynich’s personal archive.

⁴⁶ This post-scriptum has multiple underlines in pencil, presumably from Voynich.

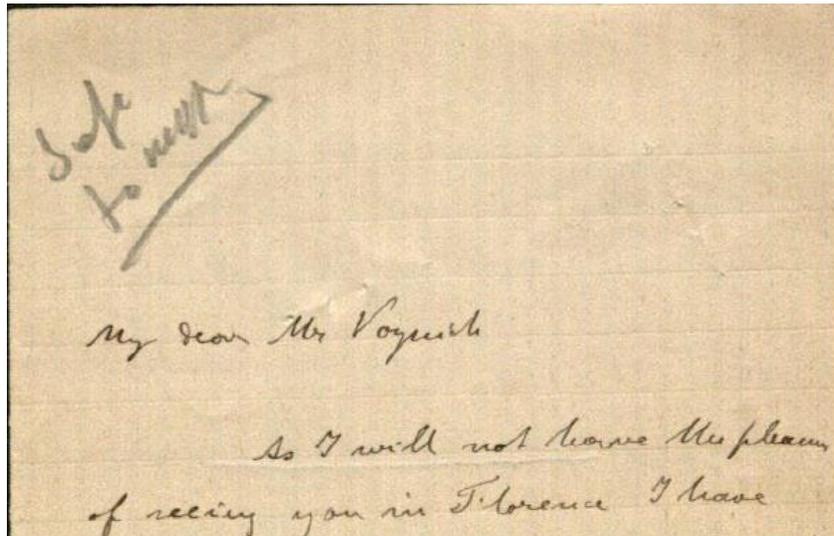


Figure 4: heading of a letter from Joseph Strickland to Voynich, dated 26 June 1912

Conclusion of the sale to the Vatican

Ehrle initially proposed to make the estimate on Tuesday or Wednesday of the following week, which would have been 25 or 26 June. In fact, Potenza found in the house diary of Castel Gandolfo that a visit by fathers Ehrle and Tacchi Venturi took place on Monday 24 June, where they came “for lunch”⁴⁷.

The second archival document studied by Potenza includes additional letters of interest for us. The first, dated 8 July 1912, is from father Ehrle to Mgr. Bressan⁴⁸. The part she quotes is, translated to English:

I add that I have made a summary inventory of all volumes in question, in a way to be able to accurately control the delivery. I allow myself to note that the most rigorous silence shall be necessary also after the delivery (which will need to be made with great caution), as the provenience of the volumes must remain unknown, even in our library, to avoid possible protests against the holy see.

The next folio continues in Ehrle’s hand and, as cited by Potenza, starts with a direct address to the Pope, and followed by a list, while nothing is said about the origin of the volumes⁴⁹:

Your Holiness has ordered me a few weeks ago to make an estimate of certain manuscripts and printed books

Then there are some interesting considerations from Ehrle about the market for manuscripts, which are reminiscent of his 1916 publication addressing among others the same topic⁵⁰. This is followed by the estimate:

⁴⁷ Potenza (2022), p.322, footnote 15.

⁴⁸ This document is preserved as AAV, Arch.Part.Pio X, b.127. Mgr. Giovanni Bressan was one of the private secretaries of Pope Pius X.

⁴⁹ Potenza (2022), pp.324-325 and footnote 21.

⁵⁰ Ehrle (1916).

1) Seventy manuscripts of Latin classics	L.	10,000
2) One hundred and twenty-seven other Latin manuscripts		13,000
3) Fifty-one Greek manuscripts and two Arabic		10,000
4) One hundred manuscripts of Lagomarsini and of Muretus		5,000
5) Twenty incunables and four prints of the 16th century		2,000
6) The collection of Aldini prints (approx. 300)		8,200
	L.	48,200

It would therefore not appear correct to pay much less than L. 50,000.

On the other hand, I cannot deny that the seller, if he wouldn't be too worried about the dangers [... references to laws ...] could probably obtain 10 and 20,000 Lire more. [...] In any case the entire sale is for the seller a pure act of charity by the Holy Father, not being able to obtain any other advantage from his property without the gravest dangers.

The pope answers in his own hand to proceed prudently and silently ⁵¹. A few days later, on 13 July, father Ehrle writes that the 50,000 Lire have been paid to the Jesuits, and that 12 or 13 cases ("casse o cassette") have arrived from Villa Torlonia.

Comparing the above table with Ruyschaert's catalogue shows the following:

- The first two lines comprise 197 manuscripts, some classics, some other, which nearly matches with his entries for Vat.Lat.11414-11615, i.e. the manuscript collection of Muretus
- Line 3 are manuscripts not included in the catalogue, but mentioned in its introduction
- The 100 manuscripts of Lagomarsini and Muretus should primarily refer to Vat.Lat 11617-11707, which are 91 autographs of Lagomarsini
- Lines 5 and 6 do not appear in Ruyschaert's introduction

As Potenza also points out, there are minor discrepancies in these numbers.

It is equally interesting to compare this information with APUG 3289 / Arch.Bibl.109 ⁵². This includes the items of lines 1-3 and line 5, though the list of Greek manuscripts has only 36 of 50 volumes ⁵³. The collection of Lagomarsini, which is included in Ruyschaert, is missing. However, Potenza reports that this is included in APUG 3225. This demonstrates that the two collections described in these two catalogues were preserved together, and Ehrle could inspect both in the Villa Torlonia in Castel Gandolfo.

There is, however, another much more significant discrepancy, and this is related to money. Spinetti stated that they had an offer of 100,000 Lire for approximately 200 manuscripts, and now they received 50,000 Lire for 350 manuscripts and over 300 prints. Going back to APUG 3289 / Arch.Bibl.109, this includes 259 manuscript entries, of which Voynich acquired an estimated 35-40 ⁵⁴. The remaining 220-225 are quite probably the ones for which this offer had been made. For these, Ehrle estimated a price of 33,000 Lire (items 1-3) which is only one third ⁵⁵.

⁵¹ This response is included in the same volume.

⁵² See also the author's web page: Zandbergen (2004-2023) - (a).

⁵³ Potenza has further researched these discrepancies and was able to explain the majority of them.

⁵⁴ The catalogue does not include all items acquired by the Vatican.

⁵⁵ To put this into some perspective: in 1912 five Lire equalled one US dollar, and 5 dollars equalled one GB Pound (both approximate). The dollar inflation rate from then to now is roughly a factor 30. This means that 50,000 Lire is about US\$ 300,000 in present times. Voynich's 300,000 Lire would be \$ 1,8 Million and Morgan's 100,000 dollars: \$ 3 Million.

We may only speculate what caused this, but the following observations related to this are undoubtedly relevant:

- The few manuscripts that Voynich obtained were the most valuable in the collection, all on parchment, and illustrated or at least illuminated ⁵⁶
- Ehrle clearly wrote in his 1916 publication that foreign book dealers were the strongest competition to the Vatican library, as they could usually offer much higher prices ⁵⁷
- From Ehrle's report to the pope it is clear that the Jesuits considered that selling the entire collection to a private book dealer (rather than just a few items) would be too dangerous

As the Jesuits were in need of the money we may speculate that they decided to sell some of the most valuable items to someone who could provide a high price, and the remaining majority of items to a safe customer.

An additional point worthy of note is that perhaps the two most valuable manuscripts in the entire collection are not listed in APUG 3289 / Arch.Bibl.109 ⁵⁸. These are on the one hand the Didymus MS mentioned further above, with its sought-after portraits of Matthias and Beatrix, and on the other hand a copy of Marcanova's "Antiquitates" ⁵⁹. In the case of the Didymus this omission is particularly strange, as its companion MS, the Cicero MS, is not missing in the list. It is again a matter of speculation that, when the catalogue was composed, these two manuscripts may have already been foreseen for a higher bidder (Voynich), and he subsequently managed to convince the sellers to acquire a few more ⁶⁰. Whereas nowadays the "Voynich MS" should be considered quite valuable, as a result of its uniqueness and fame, at the time of this sale this would not have been the case.

We are on more solid ground when we try to interpret the last letter from Joseph Strickland that has been preserved. This was written on 25 November 1913 (see Figure 5). The main topic of this letter was to inform Voynich of the laws related to export of antiquities, referring to Pargagliolo and sending him a copy of this book ⁶¹. The letter does not need to be quoted in whole ⁶²:

Convitto di Mondragone

Frascati 25 Nov 1913

My Dear Mr. Voynich

[...]

My letter to you, which is waiting for you in London, does not need an answer. It was written to draw your attention to a book upon the new Italian laws on the export of artistic treasures,

⁵⁶ The overall collection was split evenly between manuscripts on parchment and on paper.

⁵⁷ Ehrle (1916).

⁵⁸ The only other MS acquired by Voynich that is not listed in the catalogue is an Aristotle MS with a complicated history. This MS would have been of great interest to Ruyschaert for a later publication (Ruyschaert 1960) but he overlooked it. This will deserve further attention.

⁵⁹ This MS was sold by Voynich in 1924, and is now preserved in the Princeton library as Garrett MS 158. It had been consulted and described several times while it was still in the Collegium Romanum library, as described in detail in van Mater Dennis (1927).

⁶⁰ We lack sufficient evidence to be more confident about this.

⁶¹ See Pargagliolo (1913).

⁶² It is quoted completely in Zandbergen (2004 – 2023).

which I have sent to your London address. Certain chapters of the book are sure to interest you and deserve careful study.

For various reasons, the 200 items you heard of, are no more at the disposal of our friends. Something else may turn up later on, but not for the present. [...]

It seems difficult to conclude anything other than that these 200 items are the same 200 items for which the Jesuits had received an offer of 100,000 Lire, but in the mean time they had been sold to the Vatican. This is the most direct evidence of Strickland's mediation in this sale, as mentioned in ELV's letter.

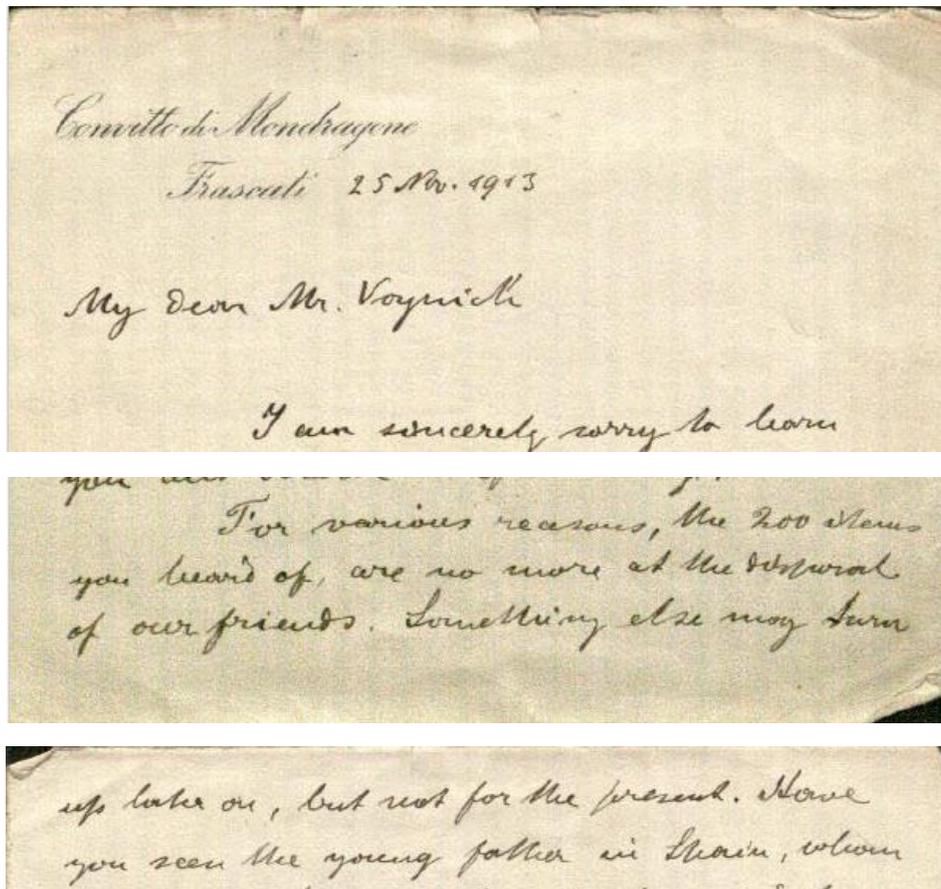


Figure 5: parts of a letter from Strickland

It also seems reasonably safe to conclude that it was the combination of this letter from Strickland with a Mondragone / Frascati letterhead, and ELV's letter referring to Frascati and father Strickand, that convinced H.P. Kraus in the early 1960's that his MS had been preserved in Villa Mondragone⁶³. Even if it appears that he announced this after he had spoken with Mgr. Ruyschaert, all evidence indicates that Ruyschaert himself either did not know the place of hiding, or knew that this had to be kept in strict confidence.

⁶³ Nowadays, Villa Mondragone is not considered to be in Frascati, but in Monte Porzio Catone.

So was the Voynich MS ever in Frascati, and more precisely, in Villa Mondragone? The only evidence seems to be the letter of ELV mentioning Frascati. When the two catalogues were written, before Voynich's acquisition, all manuscripts were together in Castel Gandolfo. When Ehrle came to inspect the collection, after Voynich's acquisition, they were still in Castel Gandolfo. Did Voynich talk to his wife about Frascati in order to avoid giving away the complete secret? Did she misremember or mix up some details ⁶⁴? Did Voynich himself not know exactly? Did Strickland take the selected manuscripts to Villa Mondragone, so that Voynich could obtain them there ⁶⁵? All are possible, but we simply do not know, and more speculation will not take us any further ⁶⁶.

The vast majority of items in the other catalogue (APUG 3225) were returned to Rome in 1919, and are now preserved in the historical Archives as the Fondo APUG ⁶⁷. This includes the notorious Carteggio Kircheriano, which thus appears to have been close to the "Voynich MS" from the time they were in Kircher's library, through the hiding in the Villa Torlonia in Castel Gandolfo, until the time that Voynich was allowed to include the cipher MS in the small collection he acquired from the Jesuits.

Secrecy

The need for secrecy about this manuscript sale, which ELV highlighted in her letter, is strongly reflected in the correspondence discussed above ⁶⁸. For one thing, the Italian state considered this collection their property after issuing the various laws of confiscation in 1873. The effect of the words of caution of Ehrle are still visible through the erasure of the name of P. Beckx in the stickers attached to the Vatican Latin manuscripts, and the removal of the stamps referring to pope Pius X in the Vatican Greek manuscripts ⁶⁹. Voynich removed the bibliographical slips with the Beckx stickers from his manuscripts before selling them, but fortunately some have been preserved.

In addition to that, Strickland informed Voynich about restrictive Italian laws related to the sale and exportation of art treasures ⁷⁰. Also Ehrle discussed this problem in his letter to the Pope, referring to a so-called "Pacca edict" and related laws, which Potenza clarifies to be related to exportation of antiquities ⁷¹. This is mainly brought up here as it clarifies one mystery: the dating of APUG 3289. Its title refers to a sale to the Vatican in 1903, which we know for certain to have taken place in 1912. Potenza clarifies that this must have been done to safeguard against suspicions in case this catalogue was found. An important law changed in 1903, so a sale before that year would have been legal.

⁶⁴ In her letter she indicates that her husband told her "at the time", so around 1912, which is 18 years before she wrote the letter.

⁶⁵ This is presented as an option by Potenza.

⁶⁶ Some additional considerations are presented in Zandbergen (2004-2023) - (b).

⁶⁷ Potenza (page 341 and note 61) and Mancini (personal communication).

⁶⁸ The need for secrecy also appears in some communications of Voynich, for which see Zandbergen (2004-2023) - (b).

⁶⁹ This removal of the stamps of Pius X is mentioned by Potenza on page 349, who considers this very unusual. As none of the Greek manuscripts visible on the Vatican digital library have the bibliographical slips seen on the Latin manuscripts, it is possible that these existed, but were removed at the same time as deleting the stamps.

⁷⁰ Voynich clearly took this advice to heart, as he claimed in 1915 that his manuscripts, which had earlier Italian owners, were discovered by him in Austria, where they had been taken more than a hundred years earlier for fear of Napoleon, see Zandbergen (2004-2023) - (b).

⁷¹ See Potenza (2022) p. 325, note 22.

Tentative reconstruction

Sometime in 1911 or early 1912, the Jesuits decided to sell part of their MS collection, in order to cover financial needs. This concerned a selection of the manuscripts from the Collegium Romanum, which they had hidden in the Villa Torlonia in Castel Gandolfo, in order to avoid confiscation by the state in 1873.

They created two summary catalogues of their collection, one of items not to be sold (at least initially), and one of items to be sold. This sale had to be done in great secrecy, for fear of intervention by the state.

The earliest sequence of events is unknown, but both the Vatican library and a private bookdealer became involved as potential buyers⁷². The only known private bookdealer who definitely acquired some of these manuscripts is Wilfrid Voynich, then based in London and Florence⁷³. One of the two catalogues refers to manuscripts sold to the Vatican, without mentioning Voynich, and that sale was completed in July 1912. By this time, Voynich had already obtained at least some of his manuscripts. The manuscripts acquired by Voynich are included in this catalogue, except for two of the most valuable manuscripts in the entire collection, which he both obtained⁷⁴.

The close to 40 manuscripts acquired by Voynich appear generally to have been the more valuable ones, and the price the Jesuits obtained may well have exceeded 100,000 Lire⁷⁵. The majority of the manuscripts were sold to the Vatican library, including some that were initially not planned to be sold, for 50,000 Lire.

The entire sale was understood by all parties to be a matter of complete secrecy, and both Voynich and the Vatican library took all steps necessary to guard this secret. As a result, much of this transaction has remained unknown until now, and significant parts still remain a mystery.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to several researchers of these events and this period of time, first and foremost Lorenzo Mancini, now at the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (CNR), but also Maria Macchi of AEMSI, Irene Pedretti of APUG and Francesca Potenza now at the University of Palermo. I am grateful to William Voelkle of the Morgan Library in New York and Christine Grafinger of the Vatican library (now retired) for their helpful provision of information related to material discussed here. I thank Francesca Potenza and Lorenzo Mancini for their careful review of the text. All remaining mistakes are mine.

⁷² Voynich had a book store in Florence, where Strickland was based in 1911, and it is most likely that they got to know each other there and then. The earliest involvement of the Vatican remains unknown.

⁷³ Even though Tamaro de Marinis was involved from the very beginning, all manuscripts he is known to have sold passed through the hands of Voynich first.

⁷⁴ The list of manuscripts acquired by Voynich cannot yet be reconstructed definitely, but for details see Zandbergen (2004-2023) - (a).

⁷⁵ We cannot be certain, but this is an estimate in relation to the sum that Voynich obtained for these manuscripts.

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Some specific pages relevant for the present topic:

(a): http://www.voynich.nu/extra/coll_rom_mss.html (reconstruction of the items acquired by Voynich)

(b): <http://www.voynich.nu/extra/mondragone.html> (extended discussion of the topic of the present paper)

Annex

Items in the Beinecke digital library relevant for this publication:

The Voynich MS itself: <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2002046>

The Marci letter: <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2041454>

The letter from ELV: <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2041525>

(this also includes several of the Jesuit bibliographical descriptions)

Some portraits of Wilfrid: <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2014917>