

# Alchemy and Rudolf II

Exploring the Secrets of Nature in Central Europe  
in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries

EDITORS

Ivo Purš and Vladimír Karpenko

artefactum

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# The Voynich MS in Rudolfine Prague

*René Zandbergen and Rafał T. Prinke*

## Introduction

The Voynich MS is a parchment codex, probably written in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>1</sup> originally composed of 116 folios. It entered modern history in 1912 when the Polish-born antiquarian book dealer Wilfrid M. Voynich (Michał Wojnicz, 1865—1930) acquired it. The manuscript is written entirely in an unknown script and an unidentifiable language or code. Owing to the fact that it has resisted all attempts of decryption, it has become known as the “*most mysterious manuscript in the world*.”<sup>2</sup>

Two independent facts link the manuscript with Rudolfine Prague, but other than these, very little is known about the manuscript during this time. The manuscript does not include any of the standard alchemical symbols, but it was owned by alchemists and almost certainly attracted their attention.

This article will first provide a general description of the Voynich MS, and then address the history of the manuscript, concentrating on the period of Rudolf II’s rule and shortly thereafter. It concludes with a few words about the progress in the study of this mysterious manuscript.

## Description of the manuscript

The Voynich MS is a parchment codex in octavo, measuring 22.5 × 16.0 cm. Its thickness is about 5 cm. It has a limp vellum cover without any indication of its origin (year, title or author). This cover was probably added in the 18<sup>th</sup> cen-

tury or even later.<sup>3</sup> Some annotations on the inside cover have been made by later owners. The manuscript consists of 20 gatherings or quires which are bound to tawed thongs; 14 of the 116 folios are now lost.

Several unusual features of the manuscript appear immediately when opening it. First, the pages are filled with an elegant but otherwise unknown script. The writing is minute and well executed. Some of the characters have familiar forms, looking like Latin characters and numerals, but others are not found in any other script. The writing can be clearly recognized in Figs. 290—298 below.

Second, the manuscript is profusely illustrated. What is unusual is, that, while many illustrations look familiar (there are plants, astronomical diagrams), they are quite original if not unique.

Third, the manuscript includes a considerable number of “foldout” folios. These are folios two, three or even six times a normal folio size, and have been folded once or several times to fit into the book.

As the writing still cannot be deciphered, it is not certain what the subject matter of the manuscript is, but based on the illustrations it appears to be a work on herbs, astronomy, and medicine. It can be tentatively subdivided into several sections, as follows:

### *Herbal section*

More than half the manuscript is laid out as an herbal, with mostly page-filling plant drawings, with additional text written around it, in short

1 This period, sometimes questioned by earlier researchers, has been confirmed by the recent investigation using Carbon-14 dating technology (see below).

2 John Mathews Manly first used the phrase in 1921 in the title of his article.

3 Almost all MSs in the Collegium Romanum that have been preserved until today were rebound in a similar manner after 1773.

paragraphs. Figs. 291—292 show typical examples. Only very few plants can be identified with reasonable certainty, and in some other cases parts of plant drawings (flowers, leaves) resemble existing plants. The most unusual aspect is that the drawings in this manuscript are unique and original, while during this period, herbal books were essentially copied from each other following a few standard patterns. All the same, the layout of the herbal pages closely resembles that of many standard herbal manuscripts.

#### *Cosmological / astronomical section*

The next section contains mostly circular diagrams, including drawings of sun, moon, stars and other elements like pipes and lozenges. The drawings do not appear to be related to any known philosophy. Included in this part is a set of zodiac diagrams, where 10 of 12 zodiac signs are included, in the right sequence, but oddly enough starting with Pisces, and with Aries and Taurus represented by two separate circular images. Every sign includes 30 feminine figures each holding a star and accompanied by a “word” in the mysterious script. While it seems likely that these are related to the 30 degrees of each zodiac sign, again this representation appears to be unique. Figs. 293 and 294 show examples of a zodiac pages in the manuscript. None of the drawings appears to be related to the planetary theories that were so much in the minds of philosophers from the days of Copernicus onwards.

#### *Biological / balneological section*

The most enigmatic part of the manuscript is the section which includes drawings of small nude feminine figures (similar to those in the zodiac drawings), which are either bathing in a green liquid, or are part of intricate systems of pipes or ducts, sometimes rather similar to internal human organs (see Fig. 296). Thus this section, comprising one quire of 10 folios, is sometimes called biological, sometimes balneological.

#### *Rosettes page (foldout)*

Following this is a single sheet six times the size of a normal folio, which, when folded out, shows

a complex drawing composed of nine large circles similar to those in the cosmological section. The meaning of this drawing is not clear. There are some indications of “flows” in the drawing, though overall it does not appear to represent a “process.” Fig. 295 shows this composite drawing at reduced size.

#### *Pharmaceutical section*

Then there are a number of pages showing small parts of plants, sometimes just leaves, sometimes just roots, aligned horizontally, with, to the left, vertical tubes which most probably represent containers of some sort, but which have also been likened to early 17<sup>th</sup>-century microscopes. Because these pages appear to show methods for combining herbs into potions, this section is usually called the pharmaceutical section. Figs. 297 and 298 show examples of a pharmaceutical pages.

Also included in this section are a number of additional herbal drawings, which seem to have



290. Voynich manuscript, Yale University, Beinecke Library Ms. 408, fol. 35v, a page from the so-called section of herbs.



291. Voynich manuscript, Yale University, Beinecke Library Ms. 408, fol. 40r, a page from the so-called section of herbs.



292. Voynich manuscript, Yale University, Beinecke Library Ms. 408, fol. 50r, a page from the so-called section of herbs

become misplaced in the manuscript. This is one of the reasons why some people believe that the current arrangement of the manuscript does not correspond with the original intention of the author.

### *“Recipes” section*

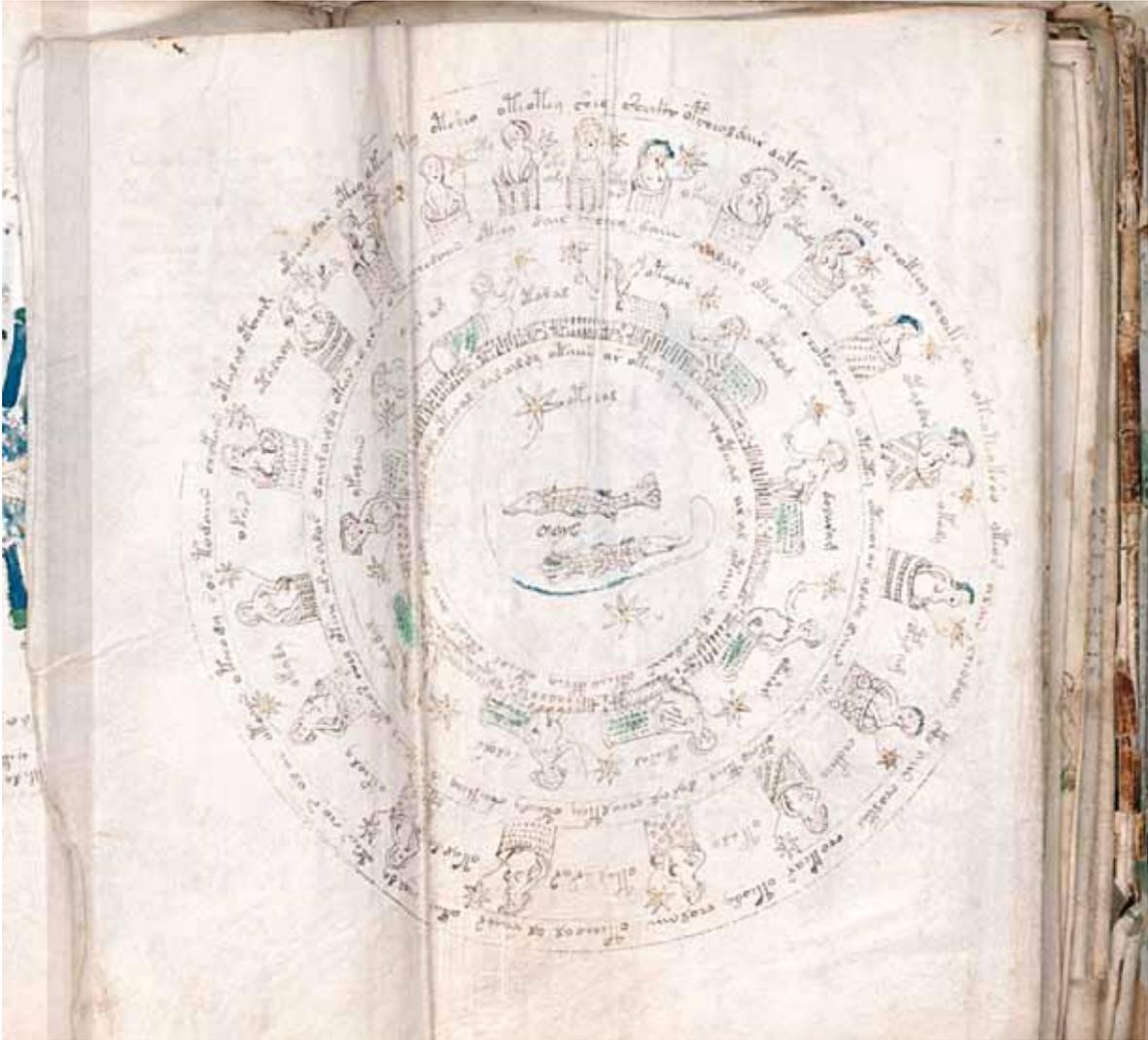
The final quire of the manuscript consists essentially of text only. Each page has a number (typically 15) of short paragraphs, and each paragraph has a small star drawing in the margin. This section has been dubbed the recipes section, which is occasionally confusing.

Of the 20 quires in the MS, two are lost. Of the remaining 18, each quire has been numbered at the bottom of (usually) the last page in the quire, in a 15<sup>th</sup> century writing style. In addition, the folios have been numbered in the upper right corner of each verso side (when the folio is completely folded in), in a later hand (16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century).

### Brief overview of the history of the manuscript

Wilfrid Voynich bought the manuscript in 1912 in the Villa Mondragone in Frascati (Italy). Inside the manuscript, he discovered a letter written in 1665 by the Prague doctor and philosopher Joannes Marcus Marci,<sup>4</sup> sending the book to his good friend Athanasius Kircher in Rome. The letter indicates that the manuscript was once owned by Emperor Rudolf II who paid an unidentified person 600 ducats for it. Marci also writes that it was believed that Roger Bacon wrote the manuscript. Voynich quickly concluded that the seller to Rudolf II should have been

4 Joannes Marcus Marci of Kronland (1595—1667) studied in Prague and Olomouc. In 1619, he became a medical doctor; from 1622, he was active at the newly established medical faculty of the University of Prague. From 1658, he was the personal physician of the emperor. See the chapter by J. Smolka “Joannes Marcus Marci and his Circle.”



293. Voynich manuscript, Yale University, Beinecke Library Ms. 408, fol. 70v, a page from the so-called section of astrology.

the English scientist and magus John Dee, but there are no facts to confirm this. Indeed, there is no certain information about the earlier history of the manuscript, and it is assumed to have originated in Central Europe, possibly northern Italy.

Before Marci, the Voynich MS was owned by his long-standing friend and alchemist Jiří Boreš (Latin: Georgius Barschius), who already asked Kircher for advice on this manuscript in 1637. He probably died in the 1650's and he

left the manuscript to Marci in his will. Marci kept it for several years before sending it to Kircher in Rome. After the death of Kircher, it was probably kept in the library of the Jesuit university in Rome: the Collegium Romanum, part of which was moved to Frascati in or around 1873. Voynich kept the manuscript until his death, and eventually another rare book dealer Hans P. Kraus donated it to the current owner: the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University.



294. Voynich manuscript, Yale University, Beinecke Library Ms. 408, fol. 71r, a page from the so-called section of astrology.

This general description of the manuscript is only brief; the interested reader is referred to the available literature for more information.<sup>5</sup> We will now concentrate on the time that the manuscript was at Rudolf's court and the time shortly after.

**The manuscript in Rudolfine Prague**  
The letter from Joannes Marcus Marci, which Voynich found inside the manuscript, provided

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. D'Imperio (1978), Kennedy and Churchill (2004), Barthélemy (2005).

the first clues about the manuscript's history. In this letter (see Fig. 299), Joannes Marcus Marci writes that he heard from a certain Dr. Raphael that the manuscript was once bought by Emperor Rudolf II for 600 ducats from a "bearer" who is not further identified. Dr. Raphael is also the source for the suggestion that the manuscript was written by Roger Bacon. The latter is no longer seriously believed by anyone, but Voynich was certainly convinced of this.



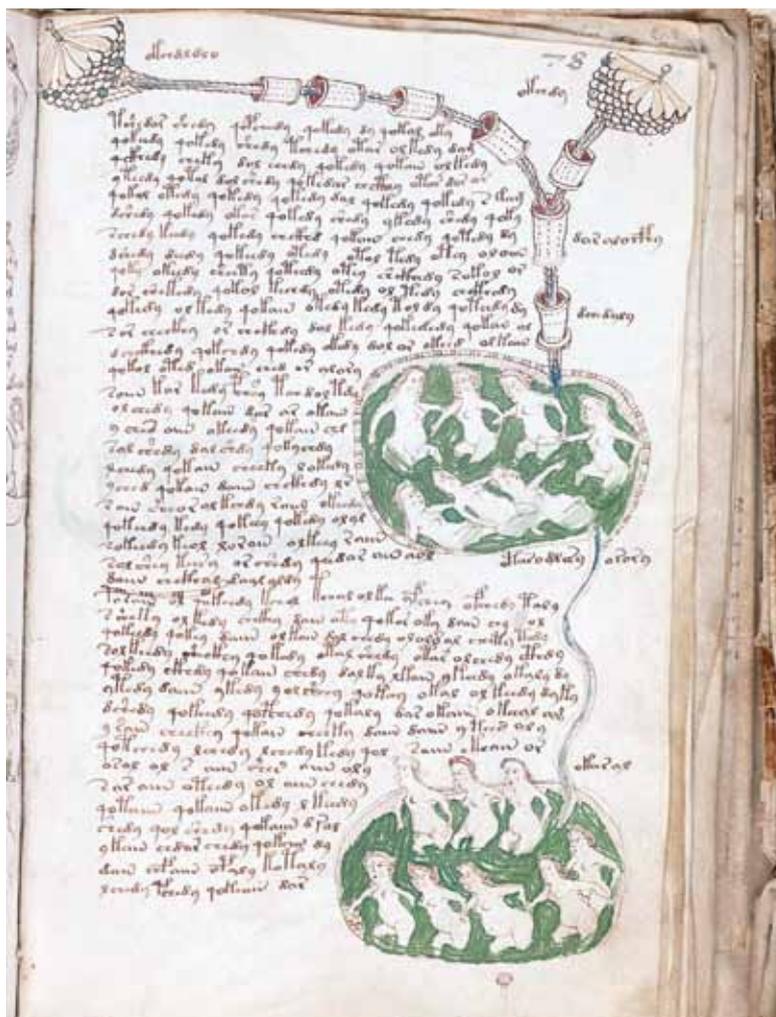
295. Voynich manuscript, Yale University, Beinecke Library Ms. 408, fol. 85 and 86, a page comprised of sixtimes the normal size with complex illustration.

A second link with Rudolfine Prague was discovered when Voynich was making reproductions of the manuscript. By accident, a partially erased Ex Libris was found on the first folio, which could be identified as belonging to Jakub Horčický of Tepenec. Nowadays, this is only visible in ultraviolet light (Fig. 303). Fig. 302 shows the Ex Libris, where it is compared with another very similar one of Tepenec in a copy of Aris-

totle's *Dialectica*, now preserved in the National Library in the Clementinum in Prague.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Raphael could be identified as the lawyer Raphael Mnišovský of Sebzuzín. His statement quoted in Marci's letter and the signature of Horčický are the only concrete pieces of information we have about this part of the history of the

<sup>6</sup> *Dialectica Aristotelis, Boethio Severino Interprete, Lugduni, Apud Antonium Vincentium, 1553.*



296. Voynich manuscript, Yale University, Beinecke Library Ms. 408, fol. 78r, a page from the so-called section of biology/balneology.

Voynich MS. In addition to that, there has been a significant amount of speculation. The reconstruction of this past is very much work still in progress.

### Jakub Horčický of Tepenec (alias Sinapius)

Earlier versions of the biography of Horčický by Schmidl (1754), Pelzel (1773), and in a reprint of his own *Confessio* (1782) essentially only cover the time until Rudolf's death. Modern biographies were written by Josef Vávra (1895), based mostly on Schmidl, and by Anton Podlaha (1896), who

also used the earliest sketch of Horčický's life printed in *Domus pietatis et litterarum sive seminarium s. Wenceslai juventutis studiosae sub cura Societatis Jesu* (Pragae 1680) with his portrait engraved by Samuel Dvořák. It is worth summarizing his life in some detail here.

Jakub Horčický was born around 1575 in or near Český Krumlov and raised as though he was an orphan at the Jesuit College there. He started as a helper in the kitchen in 1588 and in 1590 was accepted into the seminary and the gymnasium where he studied for six years. Stay-



297. Voynich manuscript, Yale University, Beinecke Library Ms. 408, fol. 88r, a page from the so-called section of pharmaceuticals.

ing at the College for another two years, through his intelligence and industry he acquired great knowledge of herbs and medicine from Martin Schaffner, a monk and herbalist, originally from Olomouc, who was 11 years his senior. In the autumn of 1598, Horčický was sent (with letters of recommendation from Jakub Geran, the rector of the Krumlov College) to study philosophy and logic at the Clementinum.

To earn his living, he also worked at the College kitchen and took care of two gardens in Prague which belonged to the Clementinum.

Growing various herbs there, he started making money by selling healing waters that became very popular as "*aquae Sinapiane*." With the consent of the rector, he became the administrator of the village Kopanina which belonged to the Clementinum and produced food for its needs. In 1600, having learned how to run a large farm and after graduating, he was sent to Jindřichův Hradec to manage a similar Jesuit College farm there, with fields, forests and fishponds.

Horčický's work was appreciated by Vilém Slavata and his wife Lucie Ottilie of Hradec,



298. Voynich manuscript, Yale University, Beinecke Library Ms. 408, fol. 99v, a page from the so-called section of pharmacetics.

the owners of the estate, who were probably instrumental in arranging a new and much more prestigious job for him: shortly before 1606 he became the administrator of all the estates of the St. George Benedictine nunnery at Prague Castle in Hradčany. They were located in the areas of Prague, Mělník and Lovosice where he had to travel to supervise them.<sup>7</sup> Emperor Ru-

<sup>7</sup> Two books of vineyard records kept by him have been preserved. They are from the vineyard in the town of Třebenic and one in a village nearby, and contain his painted portrait and coat of arms.

dolf II probably heard about his “*aquae*” from some alchemists with whom Sinapius was in contact in Prague. When he apparently cured Rudolf from a grave disease in the winter of 1608, after other doctors had given up the hope, the emperor nobilitated him and made him his courtier on June 1, 1608 with a monthly salary of 20 florins.<sup>8</sup> Horčický still remained the administrator of the St. George nunnery estates, however, and in 1609 used both titles together.

<sup>8</sup> Hausenblasová (2002b), p. 267; Staudinger (2008).

With substantial income from his court salary, running the Benedictine estates and selling his “*aquae*,” Jakub became quite wealthy and helped young students from poor families, repaying what he had received from the Jesuits. He was so well off that he was even reported to help Rudolf II himself financially, when the emperor had no funds for alchemical experiments. In 1609, Horčický published his only book *Konfessy Katholicka*, aimed against religious reformers, and paid for the printing of the nearly 400-page volume himself. Among other things, he lamented how “pseudo-reformers” burnt old books and manuscripts in monasteries.

When Rudolf II died in 1612, Emperor Matthias took over his debts, but had problems paying them. Horčický demanded the *Kammer* to cover what Rudolf owed him, probably including the courtier salary and the sums he had lent the late emperor. In 1615, he eventually accepted the offer that instead of ready coin he would have the royal town of Mělník and the estates belonging to it leased to him (as its governor) for six years, receiving all the income from it in lieu of Rudolf's debt. The burghers of Mělník were anti-Catholic and he became involved in continuous conflicts with them.

When the uprising broke out in Prague on April 23, 1618, the evangelical burghers arrested Horčický and sent him to the capital, where he was tried by the Directors and sent back to the Mělník prison. In December of the same year he was set free in exchange for Johann Jesenský (Jessenius) imprisoned in Vienna. Horčický left the country but was back soon after the battle at White Mountain, already greeting the returning Clementinum Jesuits on December 3, 1620, whom he gave 100 thalers for food. He also took over the Mělník estates again and Emperor Ferdinand II prolonged the lease for another six years. In September 1621, he fell off a horse, suffered for a whole year, and died on September 25, 1622 after having been transported to the Clementinum a few days earlier. He made his main heir the Clementinum and its seminary for poor students, later called St. Wenceslaus seminary.

His nobilitation in 1608 is well documented,<sup>9</sup> and since he used his noble predicate in his Ex Libris in the Voynich MS, it may be assumed that he owned the Voynich MS in or after 1608. In Fig. 302, we see the same Ex Libris, and the year 1604, but an analysis of the colors of the digital images<sup>10</sup> indicates that this year almost certainly belongs to the previous owner (*Wroblicius*), whose name has been crossed out. The “No 4” on the other hand appears in the same ink as the name of Jakub of Tepenec. Unfortunately, no year inscription can be found on the Voynich MS.

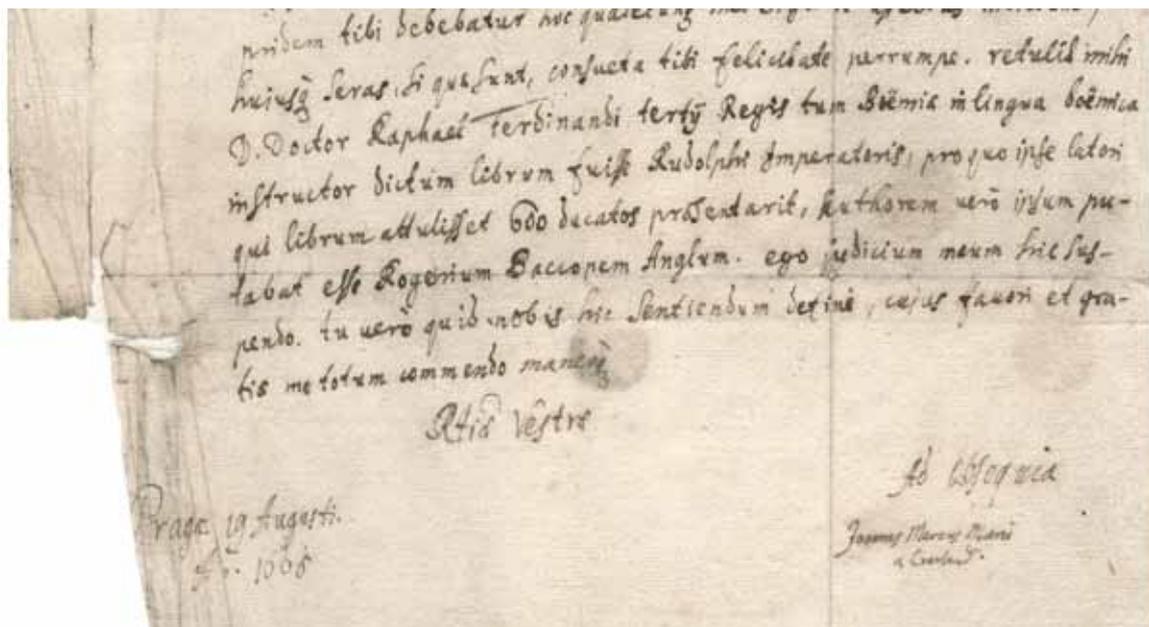
One common feature of the books owned and inscribed by Tepenec is that they are numbered. Five such books have been identified until now, with numbers 4, 7, 18, 19 and 40. Number 19 is a probable reading and refers to the Voynich MS (Fig. 303). It is not entirely clear whether he inscribed these numbers himself, or someone else, for example when making a catalogue of his books after his death, added them. As already mentioned, he left all his belongings to the Jesuits, and indeed three of the above books (Nrs. 4, 7 and 18) belong, or once belonged, to the Clementinum. Nr. 40 is now in the Charles University library, and Nr. 19, the Voynich MS seems to have “escaped” from the hands of the Jesuits. It would be of great interest to find the testament of Tepenec, to know more about his collection of books.

It is not clear how Jakub of Tepenec became the owner of the Voynich MS after Rudolf II. To investigate this, it would be necessary to understand the relation between Jakub of Tepenec and the emperor better. Of his spectacular healing of the emperor there are no records whatsoever, and he certainly was not one of Rudolf's private physicians. Instead, he is listed in the court archives now kept in Vienna as *Hofdiener auf zwei Pferden* (courtier with two horses) as of June 1, 1608 (one of over 120 such servants)<sup>11</sup>. According to Manfred

<sup>9</sup> See in particular: Smolka–Purš (2014)

<sup>10</sup> We are grateful to Gabriel Landini for this digital image analysis.

<sup>11</sup> Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Wien, Sammlung von Handschriften und alten Drucken, Cod. 14724, pp. 41–52; Hausenblasová (2002b).



299. Fragment of the letter of Marcus Marci to Athanasius Kircher from 1665.

Staudinger (priv. comm.) a donation of the book from the emperor to anyone should have been recorded in the accounts, but such record has not yet been found. It would have been extremely dangerous for anyone to be found in the unofficial possession of any item belonging to the emperor, after the emperor just died, as many people at the court discovered the hard way. Still, it is also possible that Jakub obtained it as part of Rudolf's debt to him or from quite a different source.

Raphael Soběhrd Mnišovský of Sebusín Marci recorded the information about Rudolf's purchase of the manuscript in 1665, some 60 or more years after the event. How reliable is this information? Marci introduces "Dr. Raphael" to Kircher as if the latter would not know him, and describes him as the former teacher of the Czech language to Ferdinand III, who is of course the emperor at the time, and to whom Kircher dedicated several of his books.

Mnišovský (originally surnamed Soběhrd) was born in 1580 to a burgher family at Horšovský Týn and received his early educa-

tion in Prague. He became acquainted with a Polish emigrant and author of important genealogical compendia Bartosz Paprocki (known in Bohemia as Bartoloměj Paprocký of Hloholy and Paprocká Vůle), for whose major work *Diadochus* (Prague 1602) he wrote two Latin epigrams and probably polished up the Czech language.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, Paprocki was at the time in close contact with the famous Polish alchemist Michael Sendivogius (1566—1636),<sup>13</sup> whom Mnišovský met (again?) thirty years later.

After a period of studies in Paris and Rome, he returned to Prague as a doctor of law in 1611 and the then ruling emperor Matthias made him a secretary to the all-powerful cardinal Melchior Klesl (1552—1630), bishop of Vienna and the imperial chancellor. He was involved in peace negotiations between Venice and Styria, and when they proved successful, Duke Ferdinand

<sup>12</sup> His authorship of the catalogue of bishops and archbishops of Prague at the end of *Diadochus* is a matter of controversy.

<sup>13</sup> See the chapter by R. T. Prinke "Nolite de me inquirere [Do not seek to ask about me]. Michael Sendivogius."

(later Emperor Ferdinand II) made him his court counsellor and tutor of his son, later Emperor Ferdinand III,<sup>14</sup> whom he taught the Czech language. Mnišovský also served him after he was elected king of Bohemia in 1617 and in 1621 was actively involved as an attorney in the execution of 27 leaders of the Czech Uprising.

The following year he was ennobled (with the predicate “of Sebužín and Horštejn”) and became a counsellor of the court of appeal. His career continued in 1622—1626 when he was a member of the reform commission for Moravia and Kladsko, in 1628 became a secretary of the royal court chancellery, in 1635 a royal attorney, and in 1640 vice-chamberlain in charge of land records. For his services, he received a land estate in Moravia and a house in Prague from the emperor, soon buying other houses, estates and vineyards.

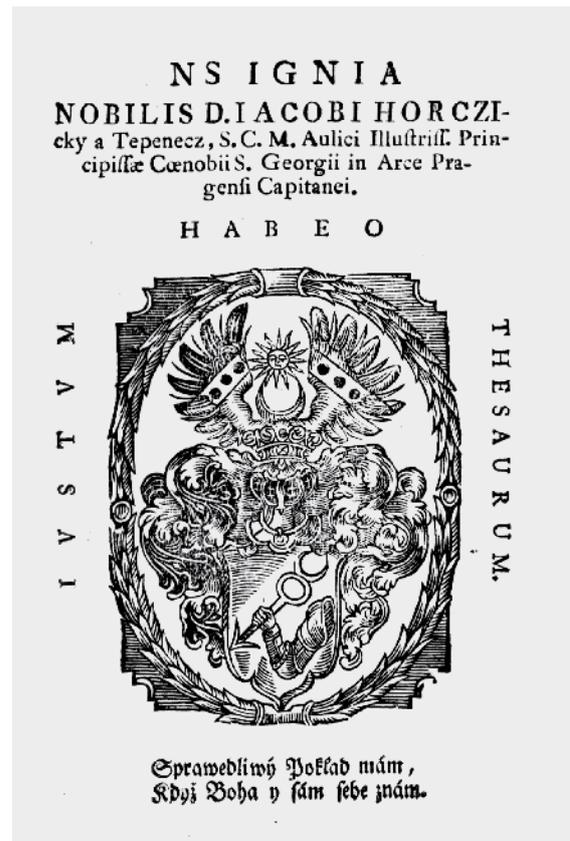
He wrote Latin poems throughout his life and at its end he composed 540 funeral epigrams which were published posthumously as *Funebria Raphaelis Mnischofsky de Sebužina et in Lochkow, s. c. Majestatis appellationum consiliarii et in regno Bobemiae Vice Camerarii* (Prague 1644). Besides Latin, he knew German so well that it was his duty to translate imperial decrees arriving from Vienna into Czech before they were printed. Most certainly, he also spoke several other languages and loved learning them, as he himself wrote with pride “*Lingua polyglossa mihi*” [My language is multilingual].<sup>15</sup>

Mnišovský died in 1644, so Marci’s information is more than 20 years old, but since it concerns a book that had clearly interested Marci since the 1630s, and involves the already legendary Emperor Rudolf II, it is quite credible that Marci would have remembered this accurately.

Intriguingly, Mnišovský was interested both in secret writing and in alchemy. He is the author of a book about steganography in the style of Johannes Trithemius, but using the Czech language, which is now preserved in the library

14 Ferdinand III of Habsburg (1608—1657), from 1627 King of Bohemia, from 1637 Holy Roman Emperor.

15 Quoted by Podlaha (1903), p. 15.



300. The coat of arms of Jakub Horčický with the device “*lustum habeo thesaurum*”.

of Uppsala.<sup>16</sup> As concerns alchemy, he was a great supporter of the Polish alchemist Michael Sendivogius. Specifically, he writes in a 1630 letter to Emperor Ferdinand III on the subject of alchemy (see Fig. 304):<sup>17</sup>

“*Since my youth I have spent much effort and time on all this, over thirty years, seriously [?] consulted all authors that ever became available, also read much in manuscripts, in characters and in cipher, of Emperor Rudolf, and also found many such ones in the libraries of monasteries, especially the abbey of Braunau and Kremsmünster.*”

16 Uppsala MS Slav.60. See: Davidsson (1959).

17 Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Wien, Habsburgisch-Lothringisches Hausarchiv, Familien-Korrespondenz A, Karton 8, ff. 279—284.



301. Depiction of Jakub Horčický from the work by F. M. Pelzl *Abbildungen böhmischer und mährischer Gelehrten und Künstler nebst kurzen Nachrichten von ihrem Leben und Wirken*, Prag 1773–1782.

Here we see that the Voynich MS is precisely the type of artefact that would attract Mnišovský's attention, and therefore his accurate recollection is not incredible. His visits to Braunau and Kremsmünster must have been undertaken in his Styrian period or even earlier, during his *peregrinatio academica*. One is allowed to be skeptical about the precise amount Rudolf II paid for the book, especially as he was not at Rudolf's court and may have seen the manuscripts from his collection only after 1621. While 600 ducats is not exceptional in comparison to some of his other acquisitions, this figure may well have been exaggerated by either Mnišovský or Marci, or even be entirely invented.

Unfortunately, no other evidence that the emperor ever owned the manuscript has been found so far. One possibility is provided by the catalogue of his *Kunstammer*, which lists a considerable number of books kept in his art collection.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, the descriptions in this catalogue are usually not clear enough to allow obvious identification of specific books, and there is no entry that clearly refers to the Voynich MS. One tantalizing entry may be mentioned here:<sup>19</sup>

*“In folio, a philosophical old handwritten book (or written in old style) with illustrations, and a copy on parchment written by Mathes Dörrer, unbound, and not fully collated, and of which Mr. Haydn has removed a few leaves by order of his majesty.”*<sup>20</sup>

The Voynich MS is clearly not in folio, but the above entry says that this book was not bound, and some of the folios of the Voynich MS are certainly large enough to be called “in folio.” As already suggested by several investigators, the pages of the Voynich MS appear to be in the wrong order, it could be that it was only bound much after it was written. In addition, the folio numbers appear to be in a hand fitting the Rudolfine timeframe. Furthermore, the Voynich MS is missing some leaves and it is of course profusely illustrated. The difficult part of the above entry is the copy on parchment by a certain Mathes Dörrer, who has not been identified yet. It is clear that this is a highly speculative possibility, but we consider it worth following up further. In any case, there are several reasons why the manuscript might not figure in the *Kunstammer* catalogue. It may have already been given to Jakub of Tepenec, or it may not have been considered a work of art. None of Rudolf's alchemical books now preserved in Leiden is listed in this catalogue.

<sup>18</sup> See Bauer and Haupt (1976), pp. XX–XXI.

<sup>19</sup> *“In folio: ein philosophisch alt geschriben buch mit figurñ und ein copeny uff pergamen geschriben vom Mathes Dörrer, ungebunden, welchs nit gantz beysamen und Herr Hayden auß bevelch I. Mt: etliche bletter davon genommen.”* Nr. 2585 in Bauer – Haupt (1976).

<sup>20</sup> See the chapter by A. Richterová “Alchemical manuscripts in the Collections of Rudolf II.”

### The manuscript's road to Prague

Tracing back the history of the Voynich MS stops at the time when it appears at the court of Rudolf II. Could the seller be identified, there would be further leads to investigate its origin. Wilfrid Voynich himself took up this task between 1912 and 1922, and, looking for candidates at the court of Rudolf II, he concluded that the seller most probably was John Dee. Voynich firmly believed that the Voynich MS was from Roger Bacon, and he was specifically looking for someone who could have sold a Bacon manuscript to Rudolf II. He does, however, present no evidence whatsoever for this identification. Later, some additional pieces of circumstantial evidence were found<sup>21</sup>, apparently supporting this claim, and as a result, the suggestion that Dee was the seller of the Voynich MS to Rudolf II is now treated in almost all textbooks about the Voynich MS as ranging from very likely to it being a fact. It is now time to examine this theory critically.

John Dee was indeed in Bohemia from 1584 until 1588 (with some periods also in Cracow, Poland) and his associate Edward Kelly stayed there until his death in 1597, making a spectacular but short career. It is also true that Dee had only one brief interview with the emperor, which was not particularly successful for him. He was actually expelled from the kingdom by Rudolf and was able to stay only thanks to the intervention of Vilém of Rožmberk, at whose castle in Trebona (Třeboň) he spent most of the time<sup>22</sup>. The “evidence,” which is often quoted in literature, consists of three points:

#### 1. *The foliation numbers in the Voynich MS are supposedly in Dee's hand*

While it seems a challenging proposal to identify an author based on the handwriting of a set of numbers, this suggestion needs to be taken seriously, as Dee's handwriting was identified for the Yale library by Andrew G. Watson. He is an authority on medieval and early modern

manuscripts and co-author of a book on Dee's library,<sup>23</sup> in which the identification of Dee's hand in VMS foliation was also confirmed.

However, significant differences are apparent in the way individual characters are drawn in the Voynich MS and in known samples of Dee's (and Kelley's) handwriting. Without going into details, the crucial example is that of how number 8 was formed in both cases: the VMS foliator started drawing it from the bottom, while in numerous checked samples of numbers written by Dee (both quick notes and calligraphic dedications) the 8 was always started at the top. Forming letters and numbers as learned in one's youth becomes so habitual and unconscious that it is practically impossible John Dee may have been the author of the VMS folio numbers.

#### 2. *Dee had an illegible book written in hieroglyphics while in Bohemia*

In a letter written by Sir Thomas Browne to Elias Ashmole in 1675, he writes about reminiscences of John Dee's son Arthur:<sup>24</sup>

*“I was very well acquainted with Dr. Arthur Dee, and at one time or another he has given me some account of the whole course of his life. I have heard the doctor say that he lived in Bohemia with his father, both at Prague and in other parts. That Prince or Count Rosenberg was their great patron, who delighted much in alchemie. I have often heard him affirme, and sometimes with oaths, that he had seen projection made, and transmutation of pewter dishes and flaggons into silver, which the goldsmiths at Prague bought of them. And that Count Rosenberg played at quoits with silver quoits made by projection as before. That this transmutation was made by a powder they had, which was found in some old place, and a book lying by it containing nothing but heiroglyphicks; which book his father bestowed much time upon, but I could not bear that he could make it out.”*

The supposed selling of the Voynich MS to Rudolf II is usually dated to late summer of 1586 when Arthur was just seven years old. When they left Bohemia, he was nine. The statement that

21 First presented in Roberts – Watson (1990)

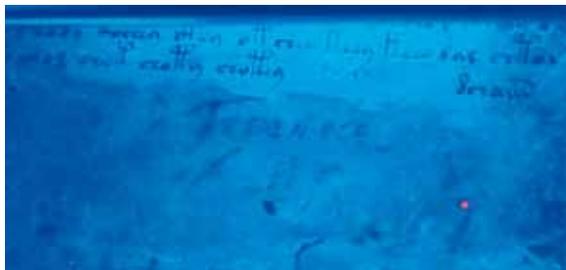
22 See Halliwell (1842) and Casaubon (1659).

23 See note 21.

24 Wilkin (ed.) (1852), pp. 530–531.



302. Signature of Jakub Horčický on the title page of the book *Dialectica Aristotelis Boethio Severino interprete*, Lugduni 1553, NL of the CR.



303. Signature of Jakub Horčický on fol. 1r of the Voynich manuscript, visible in ultraviolet light.

the book contained “nothing but hieroglyphics” means that it cannot refer to the Voynich MS for one obvious reason: to a 7–9-year-old boy the Voynich MS would surely be more interesting for its colorful pictures than rather dull strings of letter-like characters. It is also important to note that the term “hieroglyphics” should be understood as “ideograms” rather than “unknown script” or “cipher.”

Can the book remembered by Arthur Dee be identified? There is actually a very good candidate. John Dee himself mentions in his diary a book containing nothing but hieroglyphics – not a cipher, however, but alchemical images, which are more consistent with Arthur Dee’s relation. The book was *Angelicum Opus* – “all in pictures of the work from the beginning to the end.”<sup>25</sup> The young Arthur remembered the book of pictures (which must have appealed to his imagination) and his father’s and Kelly’s conversations about an alchemical book found “in an old place” together with the powder they used for transmutations. After half a century, when he talked about it with Browne, those two books became one – or after another 30 years Browne confused the two.

### 3. Dee had 630 ducats in October 1586 and Rudolf II paid 600 for the Voynich MS

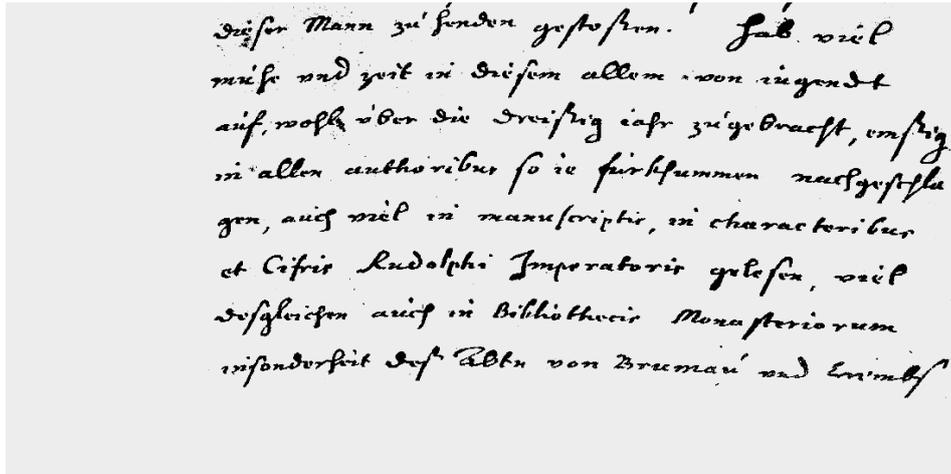
John Dee mentions<sup>26</sup> having 630 ducats on October 17, 1586 and this has been taken as evidence that he probably received the 600 ducats which Rudolf II paid for the Voynich MS shortly before. This would, however, mean that the transaction would have taken place at the most unlikely time, when Dee was banished from Prague (late May 1586), went to Erfurt and Kassel, and then returned to Třeboň (late August 1586). It is simply impossible that Dee would have any audience granted by Rudolf at that time, especially as the Pope and the Inquisition were involved.

In reality, the memorandum by Dee explains<sup>27</sup> that Dee’s adversary Francesco Pucci desires the

<sup>25</sup> 12 December 1587; see Halliwell (1842).

<sup>26</sup> Casaubon (1659), pp. 447–448.

<sup>27</sup> We are indebted to Philip Neal for the English translation



304. Part of the letter of Raphael Mnišovský to Emperor Ferdinand II from 1630.

amount of 800 florins from him, for reasons, which are not entirely obvious. Dee writes that he once already offered Pucci 630 ducats (roughly the equivalent of 800 florins)<sup>28</sup>. On this occasion, Dee wants to settle this issue with Pucci in front of reliable witnesses, and produces bags with 2,000 ducats and 400 thalers, from which the 800 florins are then formally handed over to Pucci. It is clear that the 600 ducats for the Voynich MS and the 630 ducats recorded by Dee have nothing to do with each other.

What is more, large parts of the account ledgers of Rudolf II have survived and are now preserved in the Austrian state archive in Vienna. These reflect only Rudolf's court accounts, not his private expenditure. Part of these have been transcribed and are now available in electronic form<sup>29</sup>. Around 22,000 entries between 1576 and 1614 have been searched by the present authors for a possible reference to the purchase of the Voynich MS, but without success. In any case, if the acquisition was a private one of Rudolf II, it would not have been recorded anyway. Interestingly, there are quite a number of records of book acquisitions by Rudolf II, for amounts

ranging from 20 florins to 2,500 ducats, involving at least 18 different named sellers. These acquisitions represent only a small fraction of the books listed in the *Kunstammer* catalogue, to the extent that they can be identified at all.

One particularly interesting example is recorded on August 9, 1593.<sup>30</sup> For 310 thalers,<sup>31</sup> Rudolf II acquired four herbal books<sup>32</sup> of Leonhard Rauwolf, brought to him by Richard Strein of Schwarzenau. Rauwolf was a medical man who travelled extensively in Europe and the Near Orient, and collected herbs during these travels, which he dried and glued into books. These books are listed in the *Kunstammer* inventory, and are currently preserved in Leiden, where they were taken by Isaac Vossius after a short stay in Stockholm<sup>33</sup>.

30 Österreichisches Staatsarchiv Wien, Allgemeines Verwaltungs-, Finanz- und Hofkammerarchiv, Alte Hofkammer, Hofffinanz, Band 469-R [1593], fol. 242r.

31 Approximately 360 florins or 270 ducats, exchange rates varying.

32 The record says four books, the *Kunstammer* catalogue has five, the Leiden library lists four books by Rauwolf plus one (the so-called "en tibi" herbal) not created by Rauwolf.

33 In literature about these herbals, it is usually assumed that they were bought from Rauwolf by the Bavarian elector Maximilian I, but the above evidence, not available to those authors, shows otherwise.

28 Both florins and ducats are gold pieces, but their value is not the same. A typical ratio for the time of Rudolf is 3 ducats = 4 florins

29 See Staudinger (2006).

The conclusion is that a large number of people sold books to Rudolf II for amounts similar to what has been claimed for the Voynich MS, only a fraction of which has been recorded, and the identification of John Dee as the seller is based entirely on speculation.

### After the death of Rudolf II

The history of the manuscript becomes better documented after the deaths of Rudolf II and Jakub of Tepenec. By 1637 it is in the hands of the Prague judicial official alchemist Jiří Bareš, who was probably born shortly after 1580. He studied in the Clementinum until 1603, about the same time that Jakub Horčický was there, and in 1605 in the Sapiientia in Rome. In 1624 he became a citizen of Prague and probably at about the same time was employed as a scribe at the Highest Burggrave Court of Justice, where he was advanced to the prestigious office of relator in or before 1630. He held it until at least 1646.<sup>34</sup> Around 1622 he met Joannes Marci and became a close friend of him until his death, some time before 1655.<sup>35</sup>

In a surviving letter from Bareš to Kircher,<sup>36</sup> Bareš expresses his opinion that the book probably contains medical science from the Near East (specifically mentioning Egypt, one of Kircher's favorite subjects), collected by a traveler who went there and took this information back with him. Unfortunately, we do not know if this is simply a hypothesis of Bareš, or if it was based on some knowledge he had about the manuscript. It certainly contradicts the opinion of his contemporary Raphael Mnišovský, and Marci prefers not to support one opinion or the other in his 1665 letter to Kircher.

Both Tepenec and Bareš were interested in pharmacy and medicine, and Bareš is described by Marci as a man well versed in alchemy<sup>37</sup>. He

was the person who convinced Marci of the usefulness of alchemy in the preparation of drugs and medicine.<sup>38</sup> It is clear that the Voynich MS must have attracted the attention of alchemists also before and during Rudolf's time.<sup>39</sup>

### Voynich manuscript research

Even now, almost 100 years after its discovery, unanswered questions still surround the manuscript. Research into the script and language of the manuscript has resulted in a partial understanding of some of its statistical properties, but these only emphasize the unusual nature of the writing. Still not a single word can be translated. It can almost certainly be excluded that the manuscript contains a plaintext encrypted using the techniques of the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century.

On the other hand, it is not even clear whether the manuscript has any meaningful content at all. The hypothesis that the Voynich MS contains meaningless strings of text gives rise, however, to questions about how it was done, which are very difficult to answer. Such a proposal was made in 2004 by the English scientist Gordon Rugg, but this proposal, while ingenious, has so far failed to produce a text which is more than superficially similar to the Voynich MS text.

Many dozens of theories about the possible origin and authorship of the Voynich MS have been proposed. None of these is particularly convincing. At least on the date of its creation there is now some new information. Forensic investigations performed in 2009 revealed that the inks and pigments are all original, and there is no trace of any modern constituent. The parchment, of which four independent samples were taken, was established to date from between 1404 and 1438 with 95% probability. The manuscript was probably written not long thereafter.

### Closing remarks

Key information about the Voynich MS is still missing: what was its purpose and what does it

34 Vacek (1923), p. 18; Teige (1883), p. 133.

35 See Smolka – Zandbergen (2010) for more details. See the chapter by J. Smolka "Joannes Marcus Marci and his Circle."

36 Archives of the Pontificia Università Gregoriana, vol. 557, fol. 353.

37 Letter from Marci to Kircher, September 12, 1640,

Archives of the Pontificia Università Gregoriana, vol. 557, fol. 124, see also Garber (2002) for a discussion.

38 See also Garber (2002).

39 Also pointed out by Mönnich (2008).

say? Who wrote it and where? Its presence in Rudolfiné Prague marks the transition between the unknown and the relatively better-known parts of its history, but we still do not know who saw this MS besides Jakub of Tepenec, and what they made of it.

New information about this period has surfaced in recent years, and there is still hope for more to surface. Certainly, the most important persons connected with the earliest history of the Voynich MS are Jakub Horčický (Sinapius) and Jiří Bareš (Georgius Barschius). While the latter is still quite enigmatic and it would be interesting to discover more details about his life, his role seems to be relatively unimportant as he was just a transitory owner. As we know, however, he corresponded with Athanasius Kircher, so he may have also written letters to others and if these survive, they may contain crucial hints about the earlier story of the manuscript.

Horčický, on the other hand, is the key link to the unknown past. Locating more of the books he owned and signed, inspecting the

archival material that may survive from his official duties, or discovering any letters written by him or to him, could shed much light on the mystery. It is, obviously, a gigantic work and does not guarantee positive results but without undertaking it, the explanation of the enigma of that “*most mysterious manuscript in the world*” will not be possible.

### Acknowledgments

All illustrations of the Voynich MS and the Marci letter are courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

Fig. 302 is courtesy of the National Library of the Czech Republic in Prague and Mr. Ivo Purš. Mr. Andreas Sulzer of ProOmnia kindly made available the illustrations of the Tepenec signature. We are indebted to Manfred Staudinger for information related to the Rudolfiné court records kept in Prague, to Paula Zyats of Yale University Library for information related to the physical state of the Voynich MS and to Philip Neal for translations of material related to John Dee.

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