



Pre-Rudolfine History of the MS

R. Zandbergen

Villa Mondragone, 11 May 2012

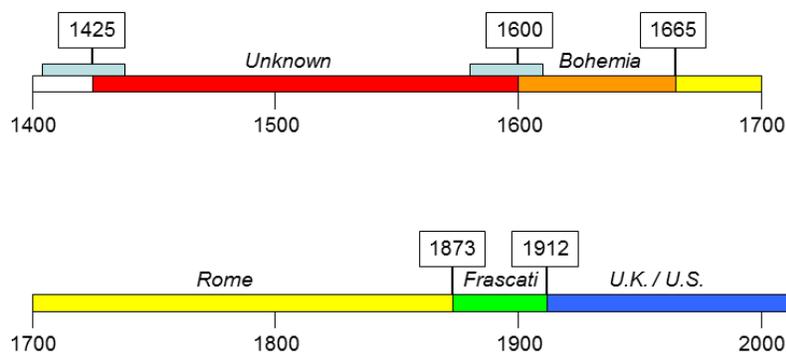
Overview

1. Introduction
2. Rudolf's Kunstkammer
3. Book acquisitions of Rudolf
4. Evidence on the MS of earlier owners
5. Evidence about the author(s) of the MS
 - Scribe and colour annotations
 - Scribe/author: herbal drawings

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Introduction: timeline

- The period of interest for this presentation is indicated in red



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Looking for evidence...

- All details in Marci's letter that could be verified until now have proven to be accurate, now that we know the identity of the previous owner:
 - Inheritance of Barschius' alchemical library
 - Barschius writing to Kircher
- We should trust his record of Mnisowski's remarks, but do these reflect the truth?
- Search for evidence of Rudolf's possession of the MS in:
 - The catalogue(s) of his collections
 - His accounts
- The amount paid may or may not have been 600 ducats...

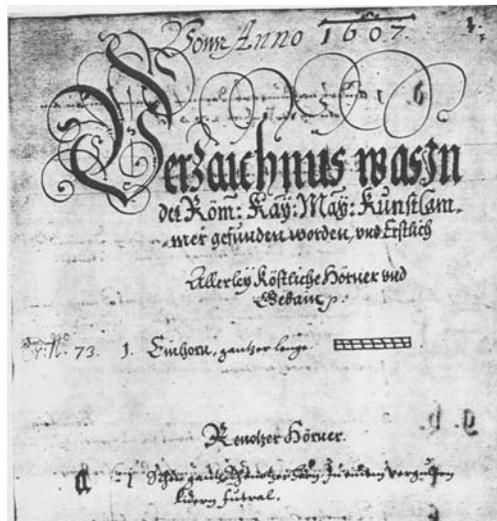
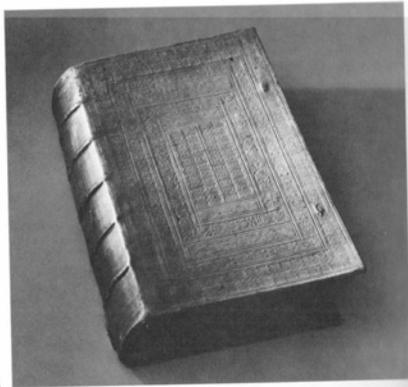
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Rudolf's Kunstkammer

- Rudolf accumulated a significant collection of items from nature, art, science and the obscure, including books
- These were collected in his 'Kunstkammer'
- This was a set of items for display, and not for perusal
- Three catalogues are known, the most detailed one discovered in Liechtenstein in 1966
- It was composed (in German) by Daniel Fröschl in the time frame 1607-1611. (He was later imprisoned shortly after Rudolf's death)
- Can the Voynich MS be identified in this catalogue?

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Rudolf's Kunstkammer catalogue



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Books in the Kunstkammer

- Listed books (distributed over 5 chests) cover all known areas of Rudolf's interest
 - Including botanical books
- Many books known to be owned by Rudolf are not listed in it
 - Many were in the imperial library in Vienna
 - Others in Rudolf's personal collection
- Some descriptions allow identification of the books, but many do not (a point I will come back to later)
- The language of a book is not always listed
- There is no book mentioned to be in code or an unreadable language, but...

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One intriguing candidate...

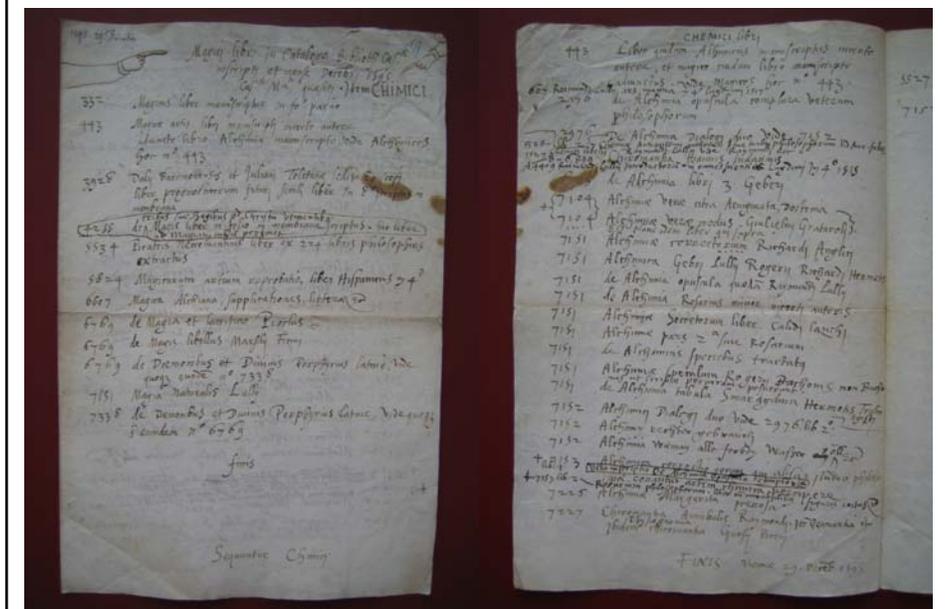
In folio: ein philosophisch alt geschriben buch mit figurn und ein copley uff pergamen geschriben vom Mathes Dörrer, ungebunden, welchs nit gantz beysamen und Herr Hayden auß bevelch I. Mt: etliche bletter davon genommen

In folio: a philosophical old handwritten book with figures and a copy on parchment written by Mathes Dörrer, unbound, and not fully kept together. Mr Hayden has taken some leaves out on order of his Majesty

- Many figures, not properly bound, some leaves taken out...
- Still, 'in folio' appears incorrect
- Impossible to decide whether this refers to the Voynich MS (and a copy made of it)... or (probably) not

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Magical MSS in the Vienna Library...



Rudolf's court accounts

- The so-called 'Hoffinanz' (court finance) is still preserved and kept in the Austrian State Archives (Österreichisches Staatsarchiv) in Vienna
- The ledgers contain summary entries, while the sales acts are lost
- A large part of it has been transcribed by a team of Austrian historians, and was on-line for some time (now seems to have disappeared). This also included material from other sources.
- I had a chance to visit the archive (thanks to Manfred Staudinger), and have searched of the order of 20,000 transcribed entries
- There are quite a number of entries for books, none obviously mentioning the Voynich MS, but again the entries are not specific enough

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Monetary units used in the accounts

- Thaler, standard silver coin usually worth 70 'Kreuzer' in Rudolf's time
 - Was severely affected by (deliberate) depreciation during and after the thirty years war
- Florin, standard gold coin worth 60 'Kreuzer'
- Ducat, gold coin of variable value (60 - 80+ 'Kreuzer')
- Crown, gold coin of variable value (60 - 80+ 'Kreuzer')

- Rates were changing all the time !

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Books bought by Rudolf

- I found 15 very clear examples of book acquisitions, and a number of less clear examples
- Prices of the 15 examples range from 20 Florins to 2500 Ducats
- I found no entry for 600 Ducats, but one for 600 Thaler
 - This refers to six printed books (of Jacopo Strada), so is not concerned with the Voynich MS
- In many cases, Rudolf paid a good price just for one book dedicated to him
 - Well-known example is 300 Thaler to Giordano Bruno for his book dedicated to the emperor
 - This took place in November 1588
 - The amount is not listed in the accounts in this case

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Bingo?

- Two entries were found referring to a payment of 310 Thaler for herbal books of Leonhart Rauwolf, brought to the emperor by Richard Strein von Schwarzenau (the 'bearer')

Alte Hofkammer, Hoffinanz, Band 467-E [1593], fol. 161v.
1593 August, Prag
 Hans Poppen erinderung umb verordnung der bezallung 310 taller fuer die durch herrn Reichardten Strein erkhauffte püecher von doctor Rauwolff fuer ier mt. ligt da ex.
- Rauwolf studied medicine and botany in Montpellier, and travelled through Europe and near Asia, collecting herbs, which he glued into several 'herbaria viva'.
- Did he acquire the Voynich MS during his travels and is this the Egyptian science that Barschius mentions in his letter?
- The books are listed in the Kunstkammer catalogue...

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Other herbal entries

- In 1609 Rudolf 'pays' 1350 Thaler for a book with flowers, and some 'Indian' flower bulbs (estimated value: 2400 Thaler)
 - This is almost certainly a catalogue of exotic plants as sold by Emanuel Sweerts (Amsterdam flower bulb trader)
 - Rudolf complained about the price, saying that for this amount one could travel to India oneself. Whether he ever paid is not clear. There are several reminders from Sweerts.
- In 1583 Clusius presents two herbal books to Rudolf for dedication
 - Rudolf asks what is the usefulness of these books
 - In another entry Clusius is 'paid' 200 Thaler for two herbal books

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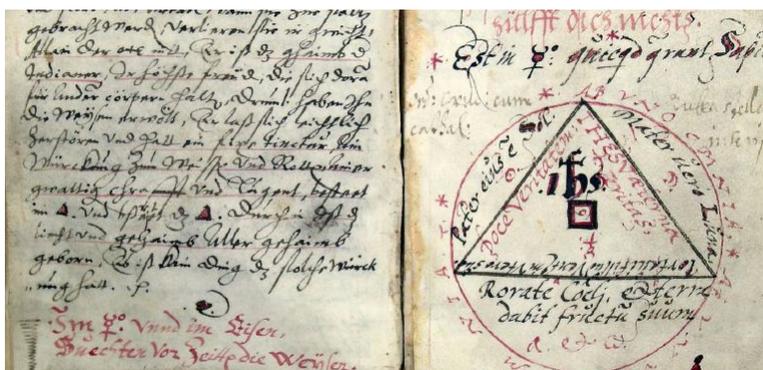
The most promising case found...

- In March 1599 Rudolf 'pays' 500 Thaler for some books from a Dr. Carl Widemann of Augsburg
- 500 Thaler is approximately 600 florins, and in the 1630's it would not make sense to express amounts in Thaler because of its deprecation
- Who was he, and which books did he sell?

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Carl Widemann

- Widemann (1555-1637) studied in Leipzig, Padua and Dole, and after completing his studies worked in Prague (for Rudolf and later for Rosenberg) in 1587 and 1588
- A manuscript with recipes in his hand, including material from Kelly's assistant Johann Grueber, strongly suggests that he worked with Kelly for some time (source: C.Gilly)



Carl Widemann

- He was one of the early Rosicrucians, and collector of their work
- He was a very active collector of medical and alchemical manuscripts, including many from Paracelsus
- After leaving Prague for Augsburg, he started copying paracelsan MSS, which he did for more than 30 years. His copies are in many cases the sole surviving copies of the vast unprinted work of Paracelsus
- At least one such MS, now in Leiden (Vossianus Chemicus Q56a) belonged to Rudolf, and bears a dedication from Widemann. There are several more that probably belonged to the same sale
- He accurately recorded the books he owned or saw in several catalogues
- These catalogues are kept in Kassel and should be consulted for possible reference to the Voynich MS

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Conclusions at this point

- No definitive record of the sale of the Voynich MS to Rudolf could be identified in the transcribed part (~50% ??) of the records
- The case of Carl Widemann is interesting enough to warrant a search through his book catalogues
- There is nothing controversial or unusual about the idea that Rudolf bought a MS like the Voynich MS
- The price of 600 ducats is well within the range of prices he paid for books
- More often than not, Rudolf bought several books at once, so the 600 ducats may well have been for a set of books rather than the Voynich MS alone

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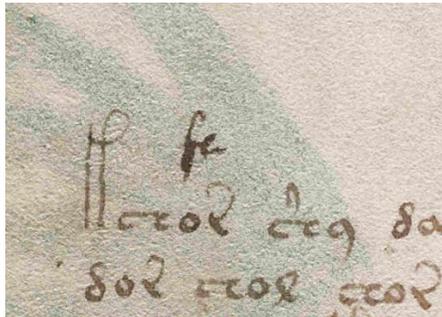
Evidence about earlier owners of the MS

- The signature of Tepenec firmly places the MS in/near Prague before 1622
- Since the cover is of a later date, there is no useful evidence on it
- Not much discussed: scribble on f2v (“fo”) similar to MS Fir. 106

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MS Firenze 106

- MS 106 of the Bibl. Dip. Di Botanica dell'Università, Firenze
- Folio 1 has a cipher alphabet...



MS Firenze 106

- Written in N.Italy in the 1st half of the 15th Century
- Parchment, 24 x 17 cm (Voynich MS is 23.5 x 16)
- One of the “alchemical herbals”, with partly imaginary plants
- Plant drawings have been painted in a very sloppy manner
- Previous owners (written on inside cover):
 - Jean Ruel, born in Soissons in 1474, died in Paris 1537. Private Physician of Francesco I. Author of several important botanical books, collector of MSS.
 - On 29 May 1544 someone calling himself ‘Bontius antiquarius’ purchased the MS from ‘quodam homine’
- Especially Ruel should be investigated further
- Ref: Ragazzini (1983) and Segre Rutz (2000) (see www.voynich.nu/refs.html)

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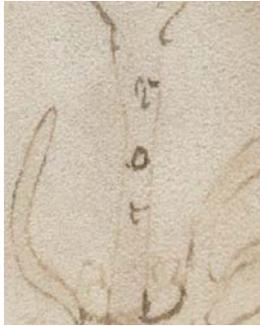
About the scribe(s) of the MS

- The person(s) writing the text, drawing the illustration outlines and adding the colours (painting) may have been one or more persons
- He / they may not have been the same who conceived / composed the MS
- It is generally assumed that the drawings were made before the text was written
- It is certain that the painting was done after the outline drawings
- More will be said about the quality of the drawings later
- When the high-quality scans became available, characters written inside the drawings were noticed in several places
- Through a comparison with other MSS, we will see that these are colour annotations, of which at least one is in German

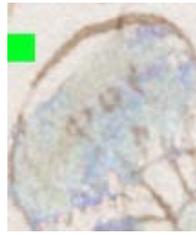
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Vicenza MS 362

- MS 362 of the Biblioteca Civica Bertoliana in Vicenza is another “alchemical herbal”
- It is from the 2nd half of the 15th Century and is listed as ‘Italian and German’



Voynich MS f4r



Voynich MS f29r
(blue attenuated)



MS 362 f34r

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Vicenza MS 362 (cont'd)



Voynich MS f1v



Voynich MS f29r



MS 362 f34r

- There are many more such annotations on MS 362 but only few on the Voynich MS
- Conclusion: these are colour annotations and the scribe was using German language

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The herbal illustrations in the Voynich MS

- The herbal illustrations in the Voynich MS have invariably been described as being of low-quality (ugly), not representing real herbs and not found in other MSs
- With this last section, I will try to show that the MS scribe was most probably familiar with herbals of his time and used these as example(s) or inspiration
- The 'ugly' appearance is essentially due to the sloppy painting
- This comparison is based on my own visual comparisons and should be confirmed by someone with relevant expertise
- The following summary introduction based on Minta Collins (2000)

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Herbal traditions

- [Dioscurides](#), most famous copies from 6th to 10th C, subsequent copies (Greek, Arab, later Latin) much simplified and smaller drawings
- [Pseudo-Apuleius](#), 6th to 13th C with gradual 'degradation' over time
- [Tractatus de Herbis](#), new tradition from ca. 1330 onwards, S.Italy, then N. Italy and France ([Livres des Simples](#))
 - First recognised by Pächt in 1950, confirmed by Baumann in 1974
- Smaller traditions: [alchemical herbals](#), [De Herbis Femininis](#), [Curae Herbarum](#)
- In the 15th C many more (new) herbals were composed
 - Toresella counts 193 surviving MSS from the 15th C compared to 136 from all preceding centuries combined

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Alchemical herbals

- Voynich MS compared to alchemical herbals by Toresella (1999)
- Seven original MSs in two styles, showing the same series of 98 herbs (Segre Rutz, 2000), common origin now lost
- Written in the 14th and 15th C
- Herbs are partly imaginary though a number of them can be traced to herbs in existing herbal traditions
- Typically one herb per page, with recipes either on same page or collected on separate pages (two styles mentioned above)
- Most MSs also have a selection of herbs from the Tractatus de Herbis
- Later MSs copied into the late 16th C

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Acknowledgment

I gratefully acknowledge the permission to use illustrations of manuscripts from the following libraries:

Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

MS Arab 4947
MS Gr 2179
MS Lat 6823
MS Lat 6862
MS Lat 17844
MS Hebr 1199

British Library, London

MS Harley 5294
MS Egerton 747
MS Sloane 4016

Biblioteca Dip. Di Botanica dell'Università, Firenze

MS 106

Beinecke Rare Book and MS Library, Yale Univ. New Haven
MS 408

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Some Voynich MS herbal drawings



f2r



f6v



f65v

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Dioscorides (examples)



Vienna Dioscorides
6th C



BN Paris, MS
Gr 2179, 8th C



BN Paris, MS
Ar 4947, 13th C

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Herbarius / pseudo-Apuleius (examples)



BN Paris, MS
Lat. 6862, 9th C

British Library, MS
Harley 5294, 12th C

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Tractatus de Herbis (examples)



British Library, MS
Egerton 747, ~1330

BN Paris, MS
Lat. 6823, ~1350

British Library, MS
Sloane 4019, ~1440

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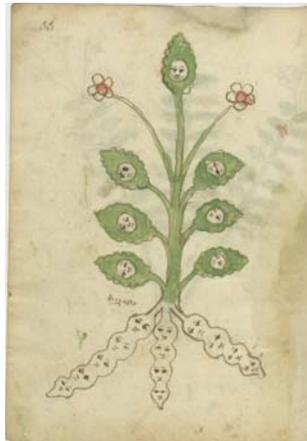
Alchemical herbals (examples)



BN Paris, MS
Lat. 17844, 15th C



BN Paris, MS
Lat. 17844, 15th C



BN Paris, MS
Hebr. 1199, 15th C

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Well-painted drawings in Herbal MSs



f18v



f56v

British Library, MS
Sloane 4019

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Sloppy painting in Voynich MS (and in alchemical herbal)



Voynich MS, f36r



BN Paris, MS
Lat. 17844, f78v

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Outline drawings in Voynich MS



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Similarities – blue dots on leaves



Voynich MS, f7v

BN Paris, MS
Lat. 6823, f81v



British Library, MS
Sloane 4019, f46r



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Coincidental similarities?



Voynich MS, f31v



Voynich MS, f41v



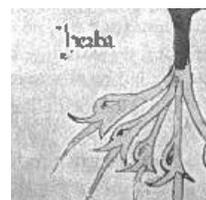
Voynich MS, f41v



BN Lat 6823 f56r



Oxford MS



Alch. herb #74

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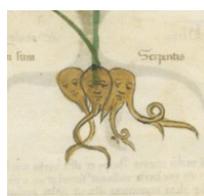
More similarities...



Voynich MS, f33r



Alch. herb #32



Alch. herb #38

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Some sort of vegetable...



Voynich MS, f41v



BN Lat 6823
f125r
"Pastinaca"



BN Lat 6823
f99r
"Meu"



BL MS Sloane
4019, f70v
"Pastinaca"

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Nenufar (waterlily) in Tractatus...



British Library, MS Egerton 747, f67r

BN Paris, MS Lat. 6823, f109r

British Library, MS Sloane 4019, f64v

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Nenufar (waterlily) in the Voynich MS



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What herb is this?

- Roots and leaves at the top suggest a tree, in particular an oak tree
- The fruit-like objects do not fit
- Mrs Voynich's notebooks suggest "uva quercina" (Grolier club) or 'the fabulous grapes of oak' (Beinecke)
- The Manfredus herbal (BN Lat 6823) has an interesting reference illustration of "edera nigra"...

Voynich MS, f35v

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Voynich MS, f35v

Paris BN Lat 6823, f60r

My conclusions on the herbal drawings (1)

- The ‘ugly’ appearance of the drawings is primarily due to the sloppy painting, but the outline drawings are in many cases quite elaborate
 - Sloppy painting is also observed in some alchemical herbals
 - Drawings are often more elaborate than in some celebrated herbals like the Manfredus (BN Lat 6823) and the Wenzel herbal (Casanatense 459, not shown here)
- Some plant drawings resemble known plants
- The majority appear like composite drawings or ‘fantasy plants’
 - A mixture of realistic and fantasy plants is also found in the alchemical herbals

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My conclusions on the herbal drawings (2)

- No complete herbal drawing in the Voynich MS has been found to be a copy of any of the 50 herbals I have looked at
- Many details of herbal drawings are very similar to details in other herbals
 - Particularly from Tractatus de Herbis and alchemical herbals, which were available since about 50 years before the composition of the Voynich MS
 - I cannot believe that the person drawing the plant outlines could have come up with such details by himself, without having seen other herbals
- The overall composition of the Voynich MS herbal pages is most similar to that of the alchemical herbals

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Thank you for your attention

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