

1

00:00:00,000 --> 00:00:10,400

Tonight, a mysterious, mid-evil book written in a secret language so complex that even

2

00:00:10,400 --> 00:00:14,460

the world's best code burgers can't crack it.

3

00:00:14,460 --> 00:00:21,320

No one has been able to translate or read a single word, a single letter.

4

00:00:21,320 --> 00:00:28,680

Known as the Voynich Manuscript, it's obsessed everyone from scholars to conspiracy theorists.

5

00:00:28,680 --> 00:00:33,760

They sincerely believe that this book has something monumental to share.

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00:00:33,760 --> 00:00:40,040

Now we'll uncover the top theories surrounding the origins of this cryptic text.

7

00:00:40,040 --> 00:00:44,880

Voynich thinks this is some sort of secret manual for the practice of alchemy.

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00:00:44,880 --> 00:00:52,200

The Voynich manuscript is written in Glossolalia, which is the language of tongues.

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00:00:52,200 --> 00:00:56,120

Has he pulled off one of the greatest hoaxes in history?

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00:00:56,120 --> 00:01:01,080

Modern technology finally unlock its impenetrable code?

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00:01:01,080 --> 00:01:05,920

It's the first definitive answer we have about this book in 400 years.

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00:01:05,920 --> 00:01:08,320

What is the Voynich manuscript?

13

00:01:26,120 --> 00:01:50,080

Voynich operates what is probably the world's largest rare books business at the time.

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00:01:50,080 --> 00:01:56,840

He's got this incredible knack for digging up the most valuable and the most sought after

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00:01:56,840 --> 00:01:58,880

manuscripts on the planet.

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00:01:58,880 --> 00:02:02,880

His collection is worth millions.

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00:02:02,880 --> 00:02:05,600

Voynich hopes his next great find is here.

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00:02:05,600 --> 00:02:10,240

The Jesuits need funds to support their college, so what they decide to do is they decide to

19

00:02:10,240 --> 00:02:15,800

sell some of their most ancient texts very discreetly.

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00:02:15,800 --> 00:02:21,640

Voynich negotiates a shrewd deal as always and he adds 30 more books to his collection,

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00:02:21,640 --> 00:02:27,680

which he will try to sell for a significant profit back at his shop in London.

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00:02:27,680 --> 00:02:31,160

One book in particular stands out.

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00:02:31,160 --> 00:02:39,320

As with all of his purchases, Voynich looks for elaborate bindings, beautiful books, heavily

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00:02:39,320 --> 00:02:47,000

illustrated, illuminated manuscripts, early printed books, really things luxurious objects,

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00:02:47,000 --> 00:02:53,280

but among them his eye is caught by what he later called an ugly ducklet.

26

00:02:53,280 --> 00:02:55,080

This particular manuscript is small.

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00:02:55,080 --> 00:02:59,880

It's only about nine and a half by six and a half inches and it's bound in goat skin.

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00:02:59,880 --> 00:03:04,680

It's about 230 pages long, but there is some evidence that some of the pages are missing.

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00:03:04,680 --> 00:03:08,000

Also some pages are foldable sheets of varying size.

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00:03:08,000 --> 00:03:13,960

This book is filled with lines upon lines of neatly handwritten text and elaborate drawings,

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00:03:13,960 --> 00:03:22,480

but here's the thing, none of it makes any sense.

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00:03:22,480 --> 00:03:29,680

There are a couple hundred detailed drawings of plant species, none of which can be identified.

33

00:03:29,680 --> 00:03:34,960

There are astrological drawings of constellations that don't even exist.

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00:03:34,960 --> 00:03:43,160

There's a section where nude pregnant women are engaging in these baths and rituals with

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00:03:43,160 --> 00:03:47,040

these seemingly interconnected tubes.

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00:03:47,040 --> 00:03:52,960

And then there are these strange hybrids, these plants with human organs.

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00:03:52,960 --> 00:03:55,680

And some of these plants even sprout disembodied heads.

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00:03:55,680 --> 00:04:01,040

It's needless to say, it's wild, but it's also indecipherable.

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00:04:01,120 --> 00:04:08,960

As for that lovely handwritten text, the entire thing is written in a language that no one has ever seen before.

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00:04:08,960 --> 00:04:13,600

There are very clear and obvious words and letters, but they're totally unrecognizable.

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00:04:13,600 --> 00:04:17,120

So Voynich assumes that this is some type of code.

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00:04:17,120 --> 00:04:23,320

In addition to experience with codes, Voynich speaks Polish, Russian and English fluently

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00:04:23,320 --> 00:04:27,320

and has a working knowledge of 15 other languages.

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00:04:27,320 --> 00:04:30,400

He was born to a noble family in the Russian Empire.

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00:04:30,400 --> 00:04:33,720

He was educated at three of the top universities.

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00:04:33,720 --> 00:04:37,640

And then he basically becomes an anti-Zarist revolutionary.

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00:04:37,640 --> 00:04:44,440

He's arrested, he's sent to a Siberian prison, he escapes the prison, and then he heads to London,

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00:04:44,440 --> 00:04:50,200

where he continues his revolutionary activities for a while before a friend of his at the British Museum

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00:04:50,200 --> 00:04:54,000

suggested he get into the rare book trade.

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00:04:54,000 --> 00:04:57,960

Voynich knows everything there is to know about rare books.

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00:04:57,960 --> 00:05:00,840

He's connected to all the top literary scholars.

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00:05:00,840 --> 00:05:03,040

He knows multiple languages.

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00:05:03,040 --> 00:05:08,240

He knows all about codes and code breaking from his years as a Russian revolutionary.

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00:05:08,240 --> 00:05:13,720

Point is, if anyone is going to be able to make sense out of this manuscript,

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00:05:13,720 --> 00:05:16,360

it's going to be Wilfred Voynich.

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00:05:16,360 --> 00:05:20,800

Voynich spent years trying to decipher the code, really the rest of his life.

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00:05:20,800 --> 00:05:26,720

And he reaches out to all of the top code breakers at the time to help, and none of them can crack it.

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00:05:26,720 --> 00:05:32,680

He sticks with it, because he has a hunch that this might be the most valuable book he's ever encountered.

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00:05:32,680 --> 00:05:37,960

And if he could figure this out, it could be worth millions.

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00:05:37,960 --> 00:05:43,480

Based on the materials used to create the book, the parchment, the style of ink,

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00:05:43,480 --> 00:05:47,240

Voynich thinks it's going to date to the 13th century.

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00:05:47,240 --> 00:05:53,720

So while he can't decipher the words, the images of plants and other sorts of natural phenomena

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00:05:53,720 --> 00:06:01,200

lead him to conclude that it's probably some sort of guide to a field that used to be called natural philosophy.

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00:06:01,200 --> 00:06:06,720

And before there were modern scientists, this is how people describe the study of nature in the physical universe.

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00:06:06,720 --> 00:06:13,200

From Aristotle to Isaac Newton, all of these early scientists were actually natural philosophers.

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00:06:13,200 --> 00:06:17,080

So because of that date and the contents of the actual manuscript,

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00:06:17,080 --> 00:06:22,960

Voynich thinks this is some sort of secret manual for the practice of alchemy.

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00:06:22,960 --> 00:06:31,760

Alchemy is this philosophical part science, part magic practice that emerged in medieval Europe in the 12th century.

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00:06:31,760 --> 00:06:39,760

And its practitioners tried to purify certain materials, so turn lead into gold and to cure diseases.

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00:06:39,760 --> 00:06:46,880

Now, none of this stuff actually worked, but it was strongly believed in and it was written about for centuries.

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00:06:46,880 --> 00:06:50,320

Alchemist's real objective is perfection of the soul.

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00:06:50,320 --> 00:06:57,400

And they'll do this by creating something called the magnum opus or great work, which was the philosopher's stone,

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00:06:57,400 --> 00:07:02,680

a mythical substance that was said to be able to grant immortality among other things.

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00:07:02,680 --> 00:07:10,840

According to Voynich, there is only one early alchemist brilliant enough to have produced this book.

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00:07:10,840 --> 00:07:14,600

Almost no one in Europe was creating alchemy textbooks at the time.

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00:07:14,600 --> 00:07:16,880

They were just translating older works.

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00:07:16,880 --> 00:07:19,200

So Voynich thinks this is Roger Bacon.

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00:07:21,160 --> 00:07:30,200

Voynich believes the book is written in code because he believes that whoever wrote it needed to keep something secret.

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00:07:30,200 --> 00:07:34,080

Roger Bacon, today he's incredibly well respected.

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00:07:34,080 --> 00:07:37,480

He's known as one of the early pioneers of the scientific method.

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00:07:37,480 --> 00:07:41,680

He was the first person in Europe to record the formula for gunpowder.

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00:07:41,680 --> 00:07:43,080

But here's the problem.

83

00:07:43,080 --> 00:07:46,760

He's also a monk and a modest member of the clergy.

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00:07:47,000 --> 00:07:52,920

The church doesn't take too kindly to some of his more out-there alchemy practices.

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00:07:52,920 --> 00:07:59,440

In fact, some of Bacon's contemporaries accuse him of being a wizard.

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00:07:59,440 --> 00:08:06,320

He has an automated mechanical clockwork head that he talks to and consults with.

87

00:08:06,320 --> 00:08:13,560

And like all alchemists, he's also obsessed with forging the philosopher's stone and granting immortality.

88

00:08:13,640 --> 00:08:17,040

But in the church, only God can grant eternal life.

89

00:08:17,040 --> 00:08:21,560

So these are some very dangerous, heretical ideas that Bacon is toying with

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00:08:21,560 --> 00:08:25,240

right under the watchful eye of his Franciscan superiors.

91

00:08:25,240 --> 00:08:27,400

But Bacon's not entirely a crackpot.

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00:08:28,680 --> 00:08:35,080

He thinks that there's a way to bring the church and science together.

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00:08:35,080 --> 00:08:37,240

Not everyone agrees with him.

94

00:08:37,240 --> 00:08:40,080

He thinks these ideas can complement each other.

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00:08:40,080 --> 00:08:42,880

They don't have to be antagonists.

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00:08:42,880 --> 00:08:49,480

It's very fortunate for Bacon that he has the protection of a very high-placed patron

97

00:08:49,480 --> 00:08:52,520

and intellectual correspondent.

98

00:08:52,520 --> 00:08:54,760

The Pope, Clement IV.

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00:08:54,760 --> 00:09:01,400

But when Pope Clement dies in 1268, Roger Bacon's protection is gone.

100

00:09:01,400 --> 00:09:03,880

And within a decade, he's arrested.

101

00:09:03,880 --> 00:09:06,560

Bacon is eventually allowed to return to his studies.

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00:09:06,560 --> 00:09:10,160

But he never puts forth any more of these so-called heretical texts.

103

00:09:10,160 --> 00:09:12,160

He mostly sticks to theological writing.

104

00:09:13,840 --> 00:09:17,840

Unless, of course, he continued his alchemy research in secret

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00:09:17,840 --> 00:09:19,840

and wrote it all into a coded book.

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00:09:21,120 --> 00:09:29,120

So if Voynich is right, and this manuscript can be definitively affiliated with Roger Bacon,

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00:09:29,120 --> 00:09:35,400

suddenly the manuscript itself would be worth untold amounts of money.

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00:09:35,400 --> 00:09:40,240

First, Voynich must prove Bacon truly authored the manuscript.

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00:09:40,320 --> 00:09:45,120

Even though Voynich can't crack the code, he does find a letter dated back to 1665

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00:09:45,120 --> 00:09:50,600

that's written by a very important Czech scientist and doctor named Jan Merrick Marci.

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00:09:50,600 --> 00:09:54,120

He says he has a coded book that fits precisely this description,

112

00:09:54,120 --> 00:09:59,760

and he's giving it to his friend, a renowned code breaker at the Nassius Kircher.

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00:09:59,760 --> 00:10:02,520

Marci also gives a little bit of history on the book.

114

00:10:02,520 --> 00:10:06,200

He says it was bought by the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II of Germany

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00:10:06,200 --> 00:10:11,240

about a hundred years prior, sometime in the late 1500s, for a large sum of gold.

116

00:10:11,240 --> 00:10:17,160

The letter mentions Roger Bacon by name as the potential author in the late 1200s.

117

00:10:17,160 --> 00:10:20,920

How did the book go from Bacon to Emperor Rudolph?

118

00:10:20,920 --> 00:10:23,960

Wilfred Voynich thinks the connection is Dr. John Dee.

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00:10:24,680 --> 00:10:27,320

Dr. Dee was born in 1527.

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00:10:27,320 --> 00:10:30,440

He's a member of the Court of Queen Elizabeth I,

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00:10:30,440 --> 00:10:35,160

and he's an avid astrologer and an occult scientist who studies cipher.

122

00:10:35,240 --> 00:10:40,360

And from a young age, he has access to a lot of Roger Bacon manuscripts.

123

00:10:40,360 --> 00:10:43,080

An accomplished cryptologist himself,

124

00:10:43,080 --> 00:10:46,360

Dee tries to decode the manuscript, but fails.

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00:10:48,040 --> 00:10:50,680

Eventually, John Dee brings the manuscript to Prague,

126

00:10:50,680 --> 00:10:56,600

where Emperor Rudolph would buy it from him for 600 dukats, or roughly \$100,000 today.

127

00:10:56,600 --> 00:11:00,520

So Voynich has this fervent belief that Roger Bacon wrote this book,

128

00:11:00,520 --> 00:11:02,760

but all the evidence is circumstantial at this point.

129

00:11:03,160 --> 00:11:08,920

If Voynich wants the world to believe that this is a Bacon original and make a fortune,

130

00:11:08,920 --> 00:11:11,400

he's got to decode this thing once and for all.

131

00:11:15,480 --> 00:11:19,400

A mysterious manuscript, dating back centuries,

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00:11:19,400 --> 00:11:22,040

one with a seemingly unbreakable cipher.

133

00:11:22,920 --> 00:11:25,720

When collector Wilfred Voynich finds this book,

134

00:11:25,720 --> 00:11:29,480

he spends years trying to prove who wrote it and why.

135

00:11:30,120 --> 00:11:33,560

Voynich showcases the book at exhibitions and lecture tours,

136

00:11:33,560 --> 00:11:35,800

with the hope that somebody can figure it out.

137

00:11:36,520 --> 00:11:38,840

And of course, he's getting fame and publicity all the while,

138

00:11:39,560 --> 00:11:40,600

and hoping to make a sale.

139

00:11:41,400 --> 00:11:44,120

He's trying to sell it for \$100,000,

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00:11:44,120 --> 00:11:50,360

which would be the most anyone had ever gotten for an old manuscript ever in history.

141

00:11:52,360 --> 00:11:55,000

Other top code breakers are trying to decipher the book as well.

142

00:11:55,000 --> 00:11:56,520

For example, you've got William Friedman,

143

00:11:56,520 --> 00:12:01,000

the man who's responsible for breaking the Japanese code purple during World War II.

144

00:12:01,000 --> 00:12:04,600

He's also one of the founders of the NSA, one of its chief cryptologists.

145

00:12:04,600 --> 00:12:09,800

He spent 30 years trying before declaring that cracking the manuscript's code was impossible.

146

00:12:11,000 --> 00:12:17,160

Unfortunately, Voynich dies in 1930, before he can solve the mystery.

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00:12:17,160 --> 00:12:21,400

When Voynich dies, he leaves the book to his wife Ethel, who lives until 1960.

148

00:12:21,400 --> 00:12:23,480

And then after a couple of short-term owners,

149

00:12:23,480 --> 00:12:27,640

the book ends up at the Yale Library in 1969, where it remains today.

150

00:12:29,000 --> 00:12:32,680

It's an artifact that, to this day, captures the public's imagination,

151

00:12:32,680 --> 00:12:35,880

because it's both intriguing and infuriating.

152

00:12:36,760 --> 00:12:38,920

I mean, we can see it. We can touch it.

153

00:12:38,920 --> 00:12:40,120

We know this thing exists.

154

00:12:40,120 --> 00:12:42,200

It's not a figment of anyone's imagination,

155

00:12:42,200 --> 00:12:44,520

except no one knows exactly what it is.

156

00:12:45,160 --> 00:12:46,760

It remains pure mystery.

157

00:12:46,760 --> 00:12:51,560

And once we have the advent of the Internet, that mystery explodes.

158

00:12:53,880 --> 00:13:02,200

When Yale's Beinecke Rare Book Library posts scanned pages of the manuscript online in 2004,

159

00:13:02,920 --> 00:13:05,000

the book gains even more attention.

160

00:13:06,280 --> 00:13:09,320

Suddenly, the Voynich manuscript is world-famous.

161

00:13:09,320 --> 00:13:12,600

It's attracting millions more people who want to figure it out.

162

00:13:12,600 --> 00:13:16,520

Every year brings multiple major news stories about potential breakthroughs.

163

00:13:17,240 --> 00:13:23,080

One of the biggest breakthroughs occurs in 2009 at the University of Arizona.

164

00:13:23,640 --> 00:13:27,560

Researchers realize that while the language of the book might be a possible to understand,

165

00:13:28,200 --> 00:13:30,440

the book's physical materials aren't.

166

00:13:31,080 --> 00:13:32,360

They can be analyzed.

167

00:13:33,560 --> 00:13:37,720

The 234 pages of the book are made up of calf-skinned parchment,

168

00:13:37,720 --> 00:13:41,320

and because they are organic in nature, they can be radiocarbon dated.

169

00:13:42,200 --> 00:13:43,880

This is obviously a big deal.

170

00:13:43,880 --> 00:13:48,680

This is a chance to finally get some answers that have eluded scholars for generations.

171

00:13:48,680 --> 00:13:51,800

They take samples from several sections of the book, just to be sure.

172

00:13:52,440 --> 00:13:55,640

But the results aren't what anyone anticipated.

173

00:13:56,200 --> 00:14:00,600

Remember, Wilfred Voynich thought this was a 13th-century text by Roger Bacon.

174

00:14:01,480 --> 00:14:04,760

But the pages date back to the early 15th century,

175

00:14:05,320 --> 00:14:08,600

so about 140 years after Roger Bacon's death.

176

00:14:09,240 --> 00:14:14,280

And just like that, the primary theory behind this strange book is shot down.

177

00:14:15,000 --> 00:14:17,240

But this is still fantastic news.

178

00:14:17,240 --> 00:14:21,960

It's probably the first definitive answer we have about this book in over 400 years.

179

00:14:22,600 --> 00:14:27,080

So now that the parchment's been dated, scholars want to keep the momentum going.

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00:14:27,880 --> 00:14:31,960

So Voynich's hypothesis that this was a 13th-century book

181

00:14:32,600 --> 00:14:36,920

led him to research what possible authors there could have been in the 13th century

182

00:14:36,920 --> 00:14:38,680

to write an alchemical text.

183

00:14:38,680 --> 00:14:40,120

And that led him to Roger Bacon.

184

00:14:41,880 --> 00:14:45,960

With this new dating of the manuscript, scholars do the same thing again.

185

00:14:46,040 --> 00:14:50,280

They wonder, in the 1400s, who's known to be an author and illustrator?

186

00:14:50,840 --> 00:14:51,960

Who's writing in code?

187

00:14:52,600 --> 00:14:54,760

Who has an interest in science and alchemy?

188

00:14:55,560 --> 00:14:57,640

And they think, who could have written the book?

189

00:14:59,240 --> 00:15:04,680

In 2017, one researcher announces, she might know the answer.

190

00:15:05,640 --> 00:15:10,760

Could this book actually have been written by none other than Leonardo da Vinci?

191

00:15:11,080 --> 00:15:18,360

Dr. Edith Sherwood is a retired biomedical scientist.

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00:15:18,360 --> 00:15:21,720

In these days, she's fascinated by the Voynich manuscript,

193

00:15:21,720 --> 00:15:23,880

and she's spent countless hours studying it.

194

00:15:24,440 --> 00:15:29,800

And according to her, there's only one European author in the 1400s that fits the bill.

195

00:15:30,840 --> 00:15:35,400

In 2002, she publishes an article comparing the manuscript to the notebooks

196

00:15:35,400 --> 00:15:37,080

and other works of Leonardo da Vinci.

197

00:15:38,040 --> 00:15:42,360

So then, all of a sudden, she has this new evidence of the carbon dating.

198

00:15:42,360 --> 00:15:44,760

So now she really is convinced she's onto something,

199

00:15:44,760 --> 00:15:47,240

and she spends more time researching the manuscript.

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00:15:48,520 --> 00:15:52,520

15 years later, she publishes a new article in much greater detail.

201

00:15:53,160 --> 00:15:56,520

And the evidence she finds is actually pretty compelling.

202

00:15:57,240 --> 00:16:00,680

Sherwood starts with a detailed handwriting analysis.

203

00:16:01,640 --> 00:16:05,480

Both the anonymous author of the Voynich manuscript and Leonardo da Vinci

204

00:16:05,480 --> 00:16:08,840

use a type of writing that's called humanist minuscule script.

205

00:16:09,400 --> 00:16:12,520

It's a style that was developed in Italy in the early 1400s.

206

00:16:13,080 --> 00:16:15,880

It's different than a lot of what was being written at the time.

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00:16:15,880 --> 00:16:19,960

Most scholarly texts were written in something called gothic script, or black letter.

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00:16:21,000 --> 00:16:24,680

And it's a pretty obvious difference when you look at them side by side.

209

00:16:24,680 --> 00:16:26,600

And not a lot of people were writing like this.

210

00:16:27,240 --> 00:16:29,080

But Leonardo da Vinci was.

211

00:16:29,880 --> 00:16:34,120

Not only that, but Leonardo da Vinci and the author of the Voynich manuscript

212

00:16:34,120 --> 00:16:35,960

have a lot of features that are very similar.

213

00:16:36,520 --> 00:16:39,960

Neither writes with capital letters, neither punctuates.

214

00:16:39,960 --> 00:16:42,840

There are no line breaks or paragraph breaks.

215

00:16:42,840 --> 00:16:45,080

And also they never connect their letters.

216

00:16:46,200 --> 00:16:50,680

Dr. Sherwood then turns her attention to the manuscript's drawings.

217

00:16:50,680 --> 00:16:52,520

So we all know that Leonardo da Vinci was.

218

00:16:53,640 --> 00:16:56,040

He's an okay artist to put it mildly.

219

00:16:56,040 --> 00:16:57,240

No, obviously he's great.

220

00:16:57,240 --> 00:16:59,800

All you have to do is look at his works like the Mona Lisa

221

00:16:59,800 --> 00:17:01,560

would show off his otherworldly talent.

222

00:17:01,560 --> 00:17:07,400

But in his notebooks, they're just full of these crude drawings and studies.

223

00:17:08,440 --> 00:17:12,280

Of course, no one would suggest that the illustrations in the Voynich manuscript

224

00:17:12,840 --> 00:17:17,720

rise to the level of da Vinci's greatest works or mature works.

225

00:17:17,720 --> 00:17:19,560

Nevertheless, there are some similarities.

226

00:17:20,280 --> 00:17:23,320

But one thing that was very hard to do in the 15th century

227

00:17:23,320 --> 00:17:26,760

when drawing and writing was to create perfect circles.

228

00:17:26,760 --> 00:17:31,320

Without modern drafting equipment, only really, really talented artists.

229

00:17:31,640 --> 00:17:34,440

Could create a perfect circle only using pen and ink.

230

00:17:35,320 --> 00:17:36,280

But da Vinci could.

231

00:17:37,080 --> 00:17:39,640

And so could the author of the Voynich manuscript.

232

00:17:39,640 --> 00:17:43,320

Dr. Sherwood believes one page of circular drawings

233

00:17:43,320 --> 00:17:45,880

provides the best clue of all.

234

00:17:45,880 --> 00:17:49,080

There's an astrological chart representing the sign of Aries

235

00:17:49,800 --> 00:17:53,160

with 15 nude women sitting in birthing tubs.

236

00:17:54,200 --> 00:17:55,960

The women appear to be pregnant.

237

00:17:55,960 --> 00:17:58,200

And in one of the tubs, there's a baby.

238

00:17:58,920 --> 00:18:01,400

And that mother no longer appears to be pregnant.

239

00:18:01,960 --> 00:18:05,480

The woman is holding a striped string with a star on the end.

240

00:18:06,120 --> 00:18:08,520

But all the other women are holding plane strings.

241

00:18:09,240 --> 00:18:13,000

According to Dr. Sherwood, this page is a birth record.

242

00:18:14,200 --> 00:18:16,280

Aries the ram represents the month of April.

243

00:18:16,280 --> 00:18:20,920

And because of the 15 women, she believes that this birth took place on April 15th.

244

00:18:21,880 --> 00:18:25,560

And the woman holding the baby is positioned roughly at 10 o'clock.

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00:18:25,560 --> 00:18:26,600

And guess what?

246

00:18:26,600 --> 00:18:33,240

Leonardo da Vinci was born just around 10 p.m. on April 15, 1452.

247

00:18:33,880 --> 00:18:37,160

And of course, the final clue is that the manuscript is written in code.

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00:18:37,160 --> 00:18:41,640

And Leonardo da Vinci famously wrote his notebooks in code throughout his adult life.

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00:18:41,640 --> 00:18:47,720

He typically used a mirror image code that also sometimes combined or separated certain words.

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00:18:48,760 --> 00:18:53,160

Could the Voynich manuscript be da Vinci's first coded notebook?

251

00:18:53,160 --> 00:18:54,840

The mystery might be even bigger than that.

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00:18:55,480 --> 00:19:01,000

I mean, was Leonardo da Vinci writing in code to hide some great secrets of alchemy that he had

253

00:19:01,000 --> 00:19:08,920

discovered or medical cures? Is the legacy of history's greatest genius even greater than we thought?

254

00:19:10,200 --> 00:19:12,600

Until it's deciphered, we just won't know.

255

00:19:17,880 --> 00:19:24,680

For over 100 years, people have speculated on what the Voynich manuscript is and who created it.

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00:19:25,480 --> 00:19:29,960

After successfully carbon dating the book's parchment to the 15th century,

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00:19:29,960 --> 00:19:33,400

researchers seek other technology to help understand it.

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00:19:35,480 --> 00:19:40,760

Dating the book is a huge breakthrough. But of course, that still can't help us determine

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00:19:40,760 --> 00:19:46,280

what it is. We know the approximate date of its creation, but that's really about it.

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00:19:48,040 --> 00:19:51,880

There's really only one way to fully understand this book, and that's to decode the writing.

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00:19:52,280 --> 00:19:57,800

To figure out what language this is, what cipher they used, and start to translate it.

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00:19:59,080 --> 00:20:06,840

Unfortunately, it's a code no human has ever been able to crack. But could there be another way?

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00:20:09,960 --> 00:20:14,920

In 2016, some computing scientists at the University of Alberta in Canada

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00:20:14,920 --> 00:20:17,880

start doing something incredible with the Voynich manuscript.

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00:20:18,840 --> 00:20:25,080

They work with artificial intelligence, and they realize, hey, maybe our AI computer

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00:20:25,080 --> 00:20:28,520

can finally decipher this text where others have failed.

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00:20:33,320 --> 00:20:37,000

Their exact field of study is called natural language processing.

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00:20:37,560 --> 00:20:41,560

So it combines computer science and linguistics and artificial intelligence.

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00:20:42,120 --> 00:20:47,400

And the goal is to improve interactions between computers and human language.

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00:20:47,880 --> 00:20:54,600

Basically, their ultimate goal is to create a computer that you could give any document in

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00:20:54,600 --> 00:20:59,640

any language in the history of mankind. And that computer would be able to recognize it

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00:20:59,640 --> 00:21:05,880

and understand and analyze it. With the right inputs, the computer might even be able to decipher

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00:21:05,880 --> 00:21:13,160

a complicated code in an unidentified language. It is a challenge, but the computer is programmed

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00:21:13,160 --> 00:21:16,600

to recognize any and all patterns and compare them with known languages.

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00:21:17,240 --> 00:21:23,640

And it can do this thousands and thousands of times faster than a human can. So it's worth a shot.

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00:21:24,440 --> 00:21:28,840

Contract starts by entering samples of 400 different languages.

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00:21:29,640 --> 00:21:35,880

The AI goes to work comparing the Voynich manuscript to other languages. It looks at

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00:21:35,880 --> 00:21:41,400

individual characters. It looks at groups of words. It looks at how often they're repeated

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00:21:41,400 --> 00:21:47,080

and in what combinations. All the little nuances that could determine what language this was written in.

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00:21:47,720 --> 00:21:53,080

They honestly don't know if this is going to work because this computer is not designed to read

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00:21:53,080 --> 00:21:57,320

the Voynich manuscript. However, they work on it for weeks and weeks. And after a while,

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00:21:57,880 --> 00:22:04,200

lo and behold, the computer gives them an answer. According to the artificial intelligence at the

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00:22:04,200 --> 00:22:09,080

University of Alberta in Canada, the Voynich manuscript is in Hebrew.

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00:22:12,840 --> 00:22:17,960

There had been speculation for quite some time that the Voynich manuscript wasn't written in a European

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00:22:17,960 --> 00:22:24,440

language because had it been written in Italian or Greek or Latin, somebody more than likely would

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00:22:24,440 --> 00:22:30,360

have figured it out by now. And the researchers actually went into this thinking, maybe the

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00:22:30,360 --> 00:22:36,200

manuscript was written in Arabic, but Hebrew presents an intriguing possibility.

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00:22:36,840 --> 00:22:41,960

Even if they've discovered the language of origin, the book may take years to translate.

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00:22:42,840 --> 00:22:48,360

The team thinks that not only was it written in Hebrew, it was written as an alfagram. An alfagram

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00:22:48,360 --> 00:22:53,320

is a way of coding language in which you present the letters of a word in alphabetical order.

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00:22:53,960 --> 00:23:01,400

So for instance, the alfagram of the word cat would be ACT. The problem of course is that ACT

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00:23:01,400 --> 00:23:08,200

also is the alfagram for the word act. So you can see the challenges here. Compounding those

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00:23:08,200 --> 00:23:13,560

challenges is the fact that Hebrew isn't typically written with vowels. So researchers are left with

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00:23:13,560 --> 00:23:19,320

the painstaking task of going word by word, swapping in the Hebrew letters and then rearranging those

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00:23:19,320 --> 00:23:25,160

letters for it to make some sort of sense. Slowly the team makes progress. Once you think you've

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00:23:25,160 --> 00:23:30,280

figured out a word, you move on to the next word. But if those two words don't make sense together,

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00:23:30,840 --> 00:23:35,640

then you have to go back to the first word and try again. So far they think they've come up with

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00:23:35,640 --> 00:23:45,800

three grammatical phrases. She made recommendations to the priest, man of the house, and me and people.

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00:23:46,760 --> 00:23:53,640

Unfortunately, this AI was never designed to spend its existence studying the mysteries of the

300

00:23:53,640 --> 00:24:00,520

Voynich manuscript. So the University of Alberta team only brings its research so far. All they know

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00:24:00,520 --> 00:24:04,680

is they think the book was written in Hebrew, but we still don't know what it says.

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00:24:05,400 --> 00:24:10,920

Then in 2017, another researcher picks up where the Canadians left off.

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00:24:11,720 --> 00:24:17,560

There's a German Egyptologist named Rainer Hannig, and he also thinks the book is in Hebrew.

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00:24:18,120 --> 00:24:23,080

And he spends three years studying it, and he makes some progress in translating it,

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00:24:23,080 --> 00:24:29,320

and he publishes his findings in 2020. Hannig manages to translate a number of paragraphs on

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00:24:29,320 --> 00:24:36,520

multiple pages, and according to his findings, it looks like the Voynich manuscript might be a book of prophecy.

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00:24:41,480 --> 00:24:45,720

On one particular page, according to Hannig, it says,

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00:24:46,280 --> 00:24:52,760

Drink carefully an elixir that delivers the mind. The elixir allows you to speak prophecy

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00:24:52,760 --> 00:24:57,400

and counteract false prophets, but do not speak about the elixir.

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00:24:58,120 --> 00:25:03,320

Is the Voynich manuscript a Hebrew manual for predicting the future?

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00:25:03,320 --> 00:25:08,520

For quite a while now, there have been two separate schools of thought about the Voynich manuscript.

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00:25:09,160 --> 00:25:16,040

The first one, which is also the most popular, is what if it's an encoded version of a known language?

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00:25:17,000 --> 00:25:21,080

There are a growing number of people who think that could be entirely wrong.

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00:25:23,880 --> 00:25:31,960

For many decades, countless code breakers and scholars have tried and failed to decipher the mysterious Voynich manuscript.

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00:25:32,840 --> 00:25:35,880

Then in 2009, researchers pose a radical new question.

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00:25:36,840 --> 00:25:39,000

What if the book isn't written encoded at all?

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00:25:41,080 --> 00:25:44,840

Since at least the 1500s, people have assumed the Voynich manuscript

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00:25:46,040 --> 00:25:50,600

is encoded, but recently a new question has been introduced.

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00:25:52,680 --> 00:25:58,120

What if the reason no one's been able to crack the code is because it isn't a code at all?

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00:25:58,680 --> 00:26:03,720

What if it's an actual language, but a language that's not human?

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00:26:04,440 --> 00:26:11,160

Think about what it takes to create a code, especially one so complex that it defies translation

for centuries.

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00:26:11,800 --> 00:26:19,160

So first you have to think about what you want to write, and then you have to convert it into code, letter by letter, word by word.

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00:26:19,880 --> 00:26:24,040

If you look at the case of another famous code, the Zodiac Killer,

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00:26:25,240 --> 00:26:29,800

look at how the symbols are arranged, spaced out and separate from each other.

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00:26:30,280 --> 00:26:33,320

Because Zodiac had to stop and think every step of the way,

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00:26:34,120 --> 00:26:36,120

each letter sits on its own.

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00:26:36,600 --> 00:26:41,560

But in the Voynich manuscript, it really looks like the author was writing continuously.

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00:26:41,800 --> 00:26:45,720

The writing is tightly formed, it flows evenly from letter to letter,

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00:26:46,280 --> 00:26:51,080

it's a swift and continuous movement of the pen. They didn't have to stop and think about anything.

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00:26:52,040 --> 00:26:58,840

So some say even the most ingenious human couldn't have pulled this off while coming up with an unsolvable code.

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00:27:00,120 --> 00:27:06,360

If someone is writing in this continuous style, it's obviously a language they understood,

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00:27:06,840 --> 00:27:11,640

and that has some theorists thinking, what if that language is extraterrestrial?

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00:27:17,000 --> 00:27:22,360

Did an alien create the Voynich manuscript? There are some exciting precedents for this.

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00:27:22,760 --> 00:27:30,760

Eric Von Daniken, well known for his book, Chariots of the Gods, puts this theory forward in his book in 1968.

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00:27:31,160 --> 00:27:37,960

And in that book, Von Daniken asserts that many of our ancient technologies were created by aliens,

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00:27:38,360 --> 00:27:47,160

such as Stonehenge, Punta Puku, all of these other places, Easter Island, that we did not have the technology to create, so it needed alien assistance.

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00:27:47,560 --> 00:27:50,760

He also cites a bunch of literary examples.

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00:27:51,560 --> 00:27:59,560

There's an early world map known as the Piri Rees map, and Von Daniken describes it as showing the Earth as it would be seen from space,

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00:28:00,360 --> 00:28:05,560

which of course is an impossible viewpoint in 1513 when the map was made.

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00:28:06,360 --> 00:28:13,960

When Von Daniken applies the same logic to the Voynich manuscript, he believes he's finally unlocked its mysterious origin.

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00:28:14,760 --> 00:28:24,760

In his 2009 book, *History is Wrong*, Von Daniken goes into great detail about his theory about the Voynich manuscript.

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00:28:24,760 --> 00:28:32,760

He believes that it was written by an alien astronaut who was stranded on Earth in the 1400s

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00:28:32,760 --> 00:28:40,760

and spent the rest of his life on planet Earth recording his observations in the Voynich manuscript.

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00:28:41,560 --> 00:28:51,560

Even though we don't understand the written language, the illustrations seem to indicate that there was a crude understanding, perhaps riddled with inaccuracies.

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00:28:51,560 --> 00:28:59,560

Could it be that this alien astronaut in cataloguing these things was writing about things, drawing pictures of things he didn't know anything about?

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00:28:59,560 --> 00:29:05,560

Are we being observed and studied by somebody else out there?

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00:29:06,360 --> 00:29:16,360

The alien theory is obviously pretty out there, but the concept that the book is written in its own language instead of a code, that definitely could be possible.

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00:29:16,360 --> 00:29:20,360

And in fact, there's another really well-documented phenomenon that this could be.

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00:29:20,360 --> 00:29:28,360

In 2004, the British researchers Jerry Kennedy and Rob Churchill published a book on the Voynich manuscript.

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00:29:29,160 --> 00:29:39,160

The theory they put forth is that the Voynich manuscript is written in glasolalia, which is the speaking of tongues or the language of tongues, in this case the writing in tongues.

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00:29:39,160 --> 00:29:47,160

There are thousands of examples of this, catalogued from antiquity to the present, and it typically presents the same way.

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00:29:47,160 --> 00:29:55,160

A person generates unintelligible words that appear to be a language but can't be understood.

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00:29:55,160 --> 00:30:01,960

In many cases, this is thought to happen while the person is possessed. Could that be what's happening in Voynich?

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00:30:07,960 --> 00:30:17,960

Kennedy and Churchill are the first to notice a potential parallel between the Voynich manuscript and the work of the 12th century German saint Hildegard von Bynchen.

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00:30:18,760 --> 00:30:24,760

She wrote hundreds of pages in a language known as lingua ignota or the unknown language.

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00:30:24,760 --> 00:30:36,760

She had her own script, she had her own vocabulary. Both manuscripts contain perplexing illustrations, so you can see why the comparison suggests itself.

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00:30:36,760 --> 00:30:42,760

Hildegard claims she was recording visions that she was receiving, thought to be from the divine.

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00:30:43,560 --> 00:30:52,560

Kennedy and Churchill suggest the same phenomenon could have afflicted the Voynich author, causing what is known as automatic or possessed writing.

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00:30:52,560 --> 00:31:01,560

Historically, Judeo-Christianity expresses possession as being a real thing, from demonic to angelic possessions.

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00:31:01,560 --> 00:31:05,560

Jesus had many examples of him driving out demons.

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00:31:05,560 --> 00:31:14,560

For many years, the Catholic Church tried to downplay possession, but now, in current times especially, they admit that it exists, that it is out there.

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00:31:14,560 --> 00:31:20,560

And there are dozens, if not hundreds, of exorcisms performed every month.

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00:31:21,560 --> 00:31:30,560

Of course, there will probably never be any way to prove this theory, but it just goes to show how the Voynich manuscript has captured everybody's imagination.

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00:31:30,560 --> 00:31:33,560

The possibilities are literally endless.

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00:31:33,560 --> 00:31:45,560

If it turns out the book wasn't written in code, it wasn't written by an alien, it wasn't written by an angel, a demon, it wasn't written by someone suffering from mental illness, we may never be able to find out what it says.

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00:31:45,560 --> 00:31:48,560

Maybe this mystery is truly unsolvable.

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00:31:52,560 --> 00:32:02,560

One of history's most infamous books is a manuscript that no one can understand. But that hasn't stopped people from trying.

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00:32:02,560 --> 00:32:07,560

After all this time, no one can read it, no one can understand it.

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00:32:07,560 --> 00:32:12,560

We all want to believe that the manuscript has meaning.

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00:32:12,560 --> 00:32:20,560

Someone spent a lot of time, a lot of effort, and a lot of resources writing it, drawing on it.

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00:32:20,560 --> 00:32:25,560

The Voynich manuscript must have a purpose. How could it not?

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00:32:25,560 --> 00:32:36,560

And that's why so many people have dedicated their lives trying to solve this so-called Voynich code, because they sincerely and firmly believe that this book has something monumental to share.

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00:32:36,560 --> 00:32:40,560

There's got to be some sort of amazing secret it wants to let us know.

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00:32:40,560 --> 00:32:44,560

But what if the answer is something much more surprising?

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00:32:45,560 --> 00:32:58,560

As researchers have hit dead end after dead end after dead end, trying to find patterns, substitutions, translations, languages of origin, there's this one burning question that's just sitting in the back of their minds.

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00:32:58,560 --> 00:33:05,560

No one wants to admit it out loud, but what if they're just wasting their time?

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00:33:05,560 --> 00:33:13,560

In April 2007, Austrian researcher Andres Schinner completes his own computer analysis of the Voynich manuscript.

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00:33:13,560 --> 00:33:17,560

Like everyone else, he's been looking for patterns that might crack the code.

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00:33:17,560 --> 00:33:26,560

But instead, his findings show that the statistical properties of the text are most consistent with meaningless gibberish.

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00:33:26,560 --> 00:33:33,560

If Schinner is correct, then a lot of people have spent a lot of time on a wild goose chase.

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00:33:34,560 --> 00:33:45,560

In some ways, hoax might be the easiest explanation, but if so, I mean, wow, what a hoax.

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00:33:45,560 --> 00:33:51,560

Still, hoax or not, we're still trying to find proof of what this book is, not just more speculation.

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00:33:51,560 --> 00:33:57,560

So, is there any way to prove that this book could have been faked?

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00:33:58,560 --> 00:34:05,560

The material, the parchment on which the manuscript has been written, is carbon dated to the early 15th century.

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00:34:05,560 --> 00:34:09,560

You can't fake that. The parchment is 600 years old.

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00:34:09,560 --> 00:34:15,560

Somebody in the early 15th century created the manuscript just gibberish.

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00:34:15,560 --> 00:34:19,560

It will be extremely difficult to identify who that was.

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00:34:19,560 --> 00:34:23,560

But there is one person with a possible motive.

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00:34:23,560 --> 00:34:28,560

We're talking about none other than Wilfred Voynich himself.

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00:34:31,560 --> 00:34:33,560

For starters, Voynich has a financial motive.

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00:34:33,560 --> 00:34:42,560

Think about this. Remember, he was going around the world trying to convince everybody that he's found a long-lost encoded alchemy guide written by Roger Bacon.

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00:34:42,560 --> 00:34:45,560

Which, of course, he wants to sell for quite a lot of money.

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00:34:45,560 --> 00:34:51,560

Supporters of the hoax theory also cite the book's complete lack of provenance.

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00:34:51,560 --> 00:35:02,560

People begin to realize, wait, there's actually no written evidence that proves the existence of the Voynich manuscript before Wilfred Voynich.

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00:35:02,560 --> 00:35:07,560

Remember, Voynich offers proof in the form of a 17th century letter that he's found.

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00:35:07,560 --> 00:35:18,560

But if you actually read the letter, all it really says is that there's this mysterious book that we can't seem to figure out and that it was written by Roger Bacon.

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00:35:19,560 --> 00:35:27,560

It doesn't mention any details specific to the Voynich manuscript. There's no proof that they're even talking about the same book.

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00:35:27,560 --> 00:35:37,560

In fact, some say maybe Voynich found the letter. And then he made the book so that he could claim it was the lost Bacon manuscript they're referring to.

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00:35:37,560 --> 00:35:42,560

Additionally, Voynich's story seems to change over the years.

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00:35:42,560 --> 00:35:49,560

In 1912, he says he got it in a castle in southern Europe. In 1915, he says that the castle was in Austria.

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00:35:49,560 --> 00:36:01,560

When Voynich's wife Ethel dies in 1960, the letter is discovered only to be opened posthumously that says that he actually found the manuscript in the Jesuit order in Friscati, Italy.

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00:36:02,560 --> 00:36:20,560

It all adds up to suspicious behavior. And one has to ask, is Wilfred Voynich just this celebrated and respected antiquities dealer, or has he pulled off one of the single greatest hoaxes in history?

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00:36:23,560 --> 00:36:30,560

Is it possible that the centuries-old mystery of the Voynich manuscript is a hoax?

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00:36:30,560 --> 00:36:40,560

If it's a fake, it's an incredible fake. For starters, it uses materials from the 1400s. It's got all of these writings and drawings and charts and diagrams.

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00:36:40,560 --> 00:36:49,560

It has different size pages that fold out in every which way. It would take a genius-level expert in antique books to pull this off.

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00:36:49,560 --> 00:36:55,560

And some think that genius is none other than Wilfred Voynich himself.

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00:36:55,560 --> 00:37:03,560

To some, it's not a question of how could it be Voynich. It's more a question of how could it not be Voynich?

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00:37:03,560 --> 00:37:13,560

At some point between 1908 and 1911, Voynich finds a letter by Jan Merrick Marchi that talks about an encoded Roger Bacon manuscript.

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00:37:13,560 --> 00:37:18,560

Then, perhaps, he sets about forging a fake one.

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00:37:19,560 --> 00:37:33,560

The problem with this hoax theory, and it's the one that a lot of people cite, is that it's nearly impossible for anyone in the modern day to have access to a lot of these ancient parchment and inks and other materials to create such a thing.

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00:37:33,560 --> 00:37:36,560

But is it possible Voynich did?

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00:37:36,560 --> 00:37:45,560

Shortly before the appearance of the manuscript, Voynich purchases the entire collection of the Libreria Francescini in Italy.

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00:37:45,560 --> 00:37:52,560

It's a private collection that consists of over half a million books, pamphlets, maps, and other manuscripts.

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00:37:52,560 --> 00:38:05,560

And we can't say for sure, but it is likely that among that treasure trove of materials that he purchased was a large amount of blank 15th century parchment.

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00:38:05,560 --> 00:38:19,560

In any ancient library, you're going to find blank parchment, whether it's sewn into a complete book or some kind of a blank notebook, or empty parchment that just happens to be sitting around.

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00:38:19,560 --> 00:38:28,560

Many books and manuscripts have blank pages at the beginning or at the end, another place where you can find ancient blank parchment.

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00:38:28,560 --> 00:38:35,560

This would have been a jackpot for Voynich, and from that moment on, he probably had everything he needed to pull this off.

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00:38:35,560 --> 00:38:37,560

What about the ink?

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00:38:37,560 --> 00:38:51,560

In addition to being a Polish revolutionary, a Siberian prison escapee, and one of the world's premier rare book dealers, Voynich also has a training in chemistry from when he was a student at the University of Moscow.

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00:38:51,560 --> 00:39:01,560

In his restoration work on his own collections, he sometimes uses that work to create inks and pigments to restore books and manuscripts.

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00:39:01,560 --> 00:39:12,560

He may have also had some help, because it turns out he had a covert friendship with a famous British secret agent by the name of Sidney Riley, who's also known as the Ace of Spies.

422

00:39:12,560 --> 00:39:20,560

Riley allegedly goes into the British Museum Library and takes out a book that's called Some Observations on Ancient Inks.

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00:39:20,560 --> 00:39:32,560

So according to this theory, Voynich finds the letter, buys the parchment, creates the inks and the pigments, forges the book, and there you have it.

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00:39:32,560 --> 00:39:38,560

If the manuscript is a forgery, it didn't turn out the way Voynich hoped.

425

00:39:38,560 --> 00:39:48,560

The crazy thing is, if Voynich was trying to create a Roger Bacon masterpiece to sell, he fails. Voynich was never able to sell the book.

426

00:39:48,560 --> 00:40:04,560

The problem is, he created too good of a puzzle. Everyone got so wrapped up in the story, in cracking the code and deciphering it, that they started finding patterns that Voynich never intended, clues that weren't there.

427

00:40:04,560 --> 00:40:08,560

People didn't want to buy the thing. They wanted to solve it.

428

00:40:08,560 --> 00:40:15,560

But Wilford Voynich did successfully sell at least one forgery that we know of. It's called the Columbus Miniature.

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00:40:15,560 --> 00:40:23,560

It's a painting of Columbus landing in the New World, which was made by an anonymous Spanish forger

in the 1800s, and he sold it to the British Museum.

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00:40:23,560 --> 00:40:29,560

Whether he did this knowingly, we're not entirely sure, but at least there is some precedent for Voynich selling a fake.

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00:40:29,560 --> 00:40:35,560

Despite this evidence, most scholars still believe the Voynich manuscript is a genuine 15th century article.

432

00:40:35,560 --> 00:40:45,560

The book has been tested and retested. It's been studied using some of the most advanced scientific techniques, none of which even existed when Voynich was alive.

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00:40:45,560 --> 00:40:55,560

So could he have made a forgery that good in the 1910s? Maybe. Is it likely? Probably not.

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00:40:55,560 --> 00:41:05,560

Besides, where's the fun in that? Where's the mystery? Where's the history? We're not all clamoring over this book and studying it piece by piece because we want it to be a fake.

435

00:41:05,560 --> 00:41:16,560

We want it to be a revelation, the greatest code of all time, which when unlocked will reveal the greatest secrets of the universe.

436

00:41:17,560 --> 00:41:36,560

In 2016, Yale University's Beinecke Library scanned all 234 pages of the Voynich manuscript, making it easily available to anyone who wants to take a crack at solving the 600-year-old puzzle.

437

00:41:36,560 --> 00:41:42,560

I'm Lawrence Fishburne. Thank you for watching History's Greatest Mysteries.