

# THE VOYNICH MANUSCRIPT: FIRST BOOK OF THE AMERICAS

By Morten St. George

The Voynich manuscript, carbon-dated from 1404 to 1438 CE, is largely known for use of an encryption system that no one has been able to decode, but it also has lots of drawings of interest. The vast majority of these drawings are of plants that no one has been able to identify to universal satisfaction. Some of the drawings depict naked women swimming in green water, and a few depict people dressed in medieval clothing. This is one of the latter:



The ram in the middle suggests an April meeting or reunion of people of the artisan class. No clerics or royalty can be distinguished, and it looks like a debate among peers sitting around in a circle. A more-or-less equal distribution of men and women is surprising for medieval times when women were severely subordinated. Only in a protestant religion called Catharism did women have equal rights with men, even to the level of administrating rites.



In view of the plausible pointer to Catharism that we just saw, it seems reasonable to suspect that this fortress, depicted in the Voynich manuscript, is Montségur, the last stronghold of the Cathars, destroyed by a French army in 1244 CE. Montségur was built on top of a limestone mountain with steep slopes, and steep slopes are precisely what we see depicted in the manuscript.



This is an independent medieval depiction of the bonfire at Montségur using a handful to symbolize two hundred. In the top right, note the steep winding path going up to the fortress. Note the French soldiers to the left. Above all, note on top a single coned tower with balcony and one window, but sight of lower windows might be cut off by the mountain. Compare this with the Voynich drawing displaying a single coned tower with balcony and windows below. Very likely, the authors of the Voynich manuscript were Cathars.

The Cathars were a Christian sect and the Voynich manuscript leaves no doubt about this.



Note that she is holding a cross in her left hand.



Catharism had a single sacrament called *consolamentum*. Essentially, this was a type of baptism administered by the lay clergy (male or female) without water, by placing the right hand on the recipient's forehead. That is what we see in this Voynich drawing.

A hundred and seventy years separate the fall of Montségur and the redaction of the Voynich manuscript so we must assume that the manuscript was written by descendants of Cathars who lived in the 13th century. A few Cathars were indeed reported to have escaped the siege of Montségur by making a daring descent down the steep slopes. A wide search was undertaken to find them but they were never found. Where did they go?



This is one of the exotic plants depicted in the Voynich manuscript. Neither this plant nor any of more than one hundred other plants depicted in the manuscript have ever been unambiguously identified with any European plant, leading many scholars to conclude that the Voynich plants are pure fantasy.



This here is a modern photograph – licensed from Ivan Mikolji – of an underwater plant found in the Morichal district of Venezuela. It's a blob without branches or leaves and has the same color and shape as the Voynich depiction. On the plant in the rear, we see a stem similar to the stem depicted in the manuscript.

The only major distinction is that the Voynich manuscript depicts a white flower growing on the upper right side of the plant.



Now let's look at a closeup of the upper right side of the plant in the front. Notice that there's a little green bud that offers every potential of blossoming into a flower.



The Voynich gives us many drawings depicting life and survival in the swamps. Here the gals are walking through plant-infested water and that's why the it's colored green. Although the water is only a couple of feet deep, the gals cannot see through it. Note the gal holding a stick with a stretched-out arm; that is not a support stick but a measuring stick, to measure the depth of the water before advancing. She cannot see the bottom. Now look at the girl up front: she's relaxing, literally floating on her back. The plant growth is so dense that it gives buoyancy to the water, making it easy for her to float on her back.



Swamp water was surely dirty. Here we see the gals lined up to wash off the silt with clean rainwater, colored blue.



The Voynich manuscript also depicts the dangers of life in the swamps. Note the hybrid depiction of a spotted jaguar with crocodilian head, representing two of the most dangerous predators of the swamps. They depict themselves as a hybrid of woman and fish (mermaid) given that they spend half their life in the trees and half in the water below.



Besides exploring and cataloging the plants, the gals spend their days collecting herbs and grinding them together in vials to make medicines.



This funny-looking animal is a South American tapir, a large mammal never seen in Europe during medieval times.

It is depicted at the very end of the section on herbal medicine. We must therefore assume that the gals used the thick skin of this animal to make the vials used for mixing and crushing the herbs.

## **THE VOYNICH MANUSCRIPT: FIRST BOOK OF THE AMERICAS – Q & A**

*You said the tapir was used to make the vials for mixing the herbs. What animal was used to make the parchment on which the Voynich manuscript was written?*

Similarly to how the tapir was depicted at the end of the section on herbal medicine, the animal used for parchment can be found on the last page of the manuscript. This is it:



It's a marsh deer, distinguishable by virtue of the black coloring of the lower legs. They inhabited Venezuela during medieval times and today they are still extant further south.

The Cathars were vegetarians, which makes me reluctant to suggest that they hunted the deer for food. However, finding themselves unable to farm land in the swamps, they may have made an exception to the rule. Of course, if they ate venison, it would become easy to explain how they managed to accumulate enough hides to produce more than a hundred sheets of parchment.



Another possibility would be that they sold their herbal medicines and painted vials to the indigenous peoples in exchange for hides, but it looks like the gals were not shy about skinning animals:



I'm guessing, but I think she is holding the hide of a spotted jaguar, and her right is raised as an expression of triumph over the predator animal.

The process of making parchment was complex, so at least one of the Cathars who made the transatlantic crossing had to have had the needed skills.

Medieval techniques called for elements like lime and chalk, often hard to find in the Amazon region, but apparently available on the Caribbean coast of Venezuela (not far from the Morichal swamps), site of large sea-shell deposits.

***You say they depicted the marsh deer to indicate that this was the animal used for parchment. Do they also depict the manuscript's authors?***

Yes, of course. This is the proud author here:



She is depicted directly below the deer and is the last thing we see in the Voynich manuscript.

***Why are all the women naked?***

That's a silly question. In the rainforest we still see people running around naked today. With high heat, high humidity and frequent rainfall, clothing can be more of an annoyance than a necessity.

Indeed, the fact that these gals are naked is another reason for believing that the Voynich manuscript was compiled in a rainforest and not in Europe. As far as I know, there were no nudist camps in medieval Europe.

But at night, the temperature in the tropics can drop considerably and it can feel even colder due to all the dampness.



Here we see one of the gals wrapped in a blanket, peacefully asleep in her tree hut under the stars.

***With such strong evidence for the tropics, why do scholars think the Voynich manuscript was written in northern Italy which is hardly tropical?***

Let's have another look at the Montségur depiction:



Note those frontal defenses known as M-shaped merlons. Such merlons have been found on castles in northern Italy. I checked them out myself: only two of them predate the fall of Montségur in 1244, but at one point or another those castles were destroyed and rebuilt or construction was expanded later on. In brief, so far, I have found no proof that any Italian M-shaped merlon predates the fall of Montségur.

The Cathars lived in both southern France and northern Italy. Catharism in France came to an abrupt end in the 13th century but continued to live on in northern Italy until the early 14th century. I suspect that the Italian Cathars introduced the M-shaped merlons into Italy in remembrance of those who died at Montségur.

In any case, please note that the Voynich drawing also displays a coned-shaped tower, which copies the tower design of the Carcassonne fortress in France (another place where the Cathars lived) and those medieval cones can still be seen today:



As you can see, tower cones are the product of French, not Italian, architecture. Scholars tend to consider the evidence that supports their theories and ignore all contradictory evidence. Moreover, unlike Montségur, most of the Italian castles have survived to this day intact, and none of them look like what we see depicted in the Voynich manuscript.

***Why did the Cathars decide to go to Venezuela and not somewhere else?***

I don't think they planned to go anywhere special. I think they headed south, reaching east of Africa where they got picked up by the north equatorial current, and this current carried them to Venezuela.

They may have planned to die at sea, in peace, praying, and then woke up one day to see land.

***Have you identified any of the Voynich plants other than the green blob that you showed us?***

I have found several candidates, but many plant species have similar looking leaves, similar looking red berries or whatever, and not being a botanist I do not want to stick my neck out with claims in this regard. I am, however, confident about the green blob as it has no branches or leaves that can confuse the issue.



It has been pointed out that the Voynich manuscript depicts sunflowers which are native to the Americas and were unknown in Europe until Columbus brought them back.

I've heard that botanists have associated some of the plants with plants found in Central America but I do not know if they also checked out Venezuela.

In any case, I believe that most of the plants depicted in the manuscript are now extinct and hence will never be identified. In a rainforest environment, plant species can appear and disappear every year. It's a miracle that our underwater blob managed to survive across all those centuries. The fact that this plant lived protected by the surrounding water probably accounts for its long-term survival.

***The Voynich manuscript is dated to the early 15th century and then appears in Europe in the 17th century. How did it get from A to B?***

First of all, let's note that there appears to be no historical record of the Voynich manuscript, or of any similar manuscript, anywhere in Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries. It would not be unreasonable to suspect that, during those centuries, the manuscript resided elsewhere.

I do not know the answer to your question, but parchment manuscripts are fairly durable and it seems plausible that a Spanish profiteer of the 16th century could have encountered the manuscript and brought it back to Europe for personal gain or other motive. Transactions of this type may not be recorded in the history books.

Curiously, the Incas claim to have been in possession of a book. Wikipedia cites the historian Sarmiento on the creator-god Viracocha: "a man of medium height, white and dressed in a white robe like an alb secured round the waist, and that he carried a staff and a book in his hands."

It seems a bit incredulous that the pre-Columbian Incas, a people who did not know how to read or write, could have imagined a "book" for their mythology. Perhaps that line was meant to pertain to Viracocha Inca, who ruled from 1410 to 1438 CE, dates that correspond quite well with the radiocarbon range given for the Voynich manuscript: 1404 to 1438 CE.

***What ever happened to the Cathars in Venezuela? Why didn't the Spanish find them when they arrived there?***

Wikipedia states the following about the Cathars:

"... reproduction was viewed by them as a moral evil to be avoided—as it continued the chain of reincarnation and suffering in the material world. It was claimed by their opponents that, given this loathing for procreation, they generally resorted to sodomy."

This aversion to procreation is symbolically depicted in the Voynich manuscript:



It is easy to see what this youth (no beard) wants, but notice that the gal is literally running away from him.

Other than this youth, no men are depicted in the manuscript. Possibly they went off exploring or hunting and never returned, leaving the gals to fend for themselves. Another possibility would be that the depicted gals are very old and the men had already passed away.

The notion that those women are old (other than the one we just saw who perhaps became the virgin author of the manuscript) is reinforced by depictions of the sacrament of *consolamentum*, which was intended to be administered as close to death as possible so that the recipient would remain cleansed upon passing into the afterlife.

Above all, notice that no infants or young children are depicted in the Voynich manuscript.

Hence, there is no need to speculate on extinction from disease, headhunters, or mass suicide. It looks like they perished from natural causes: the lack of offspring.

If there really was a young male among them, one can only wonder if he grew up to become the white man who carried a book to the Incas.

***Can your theory that the Voynich manuscript was written in Venezuela and not in Europe be proven?***

I do not like calling it a "theory" because that word is often used to refer to ideas based on flimsy evidence.

The Voynich manuscript has 112 folios that depict plants that have never been identified with any plant seen in Europe; there are 20 folios depicting every aspect of life and survival in swamps that are nowhere to be found in Europe; there are 34 folios related to herbs (roots and leaves) none of which, as far as I know, have been identified with herbs used in Europe; and there are depictions of animals like the tapir and the marsh deer that are nowhere to be found in Europe.

Unlike other claims of a pre-Columbian discovery of America, by the Romans or Chinese or whoever, this one is supported by good evidence: the Voynich manuscript is, in and of itself, very strong evidence of a European settlement in the Americas during the late Middle Ages.

Anyway, as I was saying, they used the marsh deer to make the parchment. In medieval Europe, people used calves (cows), sheep and goats to make parchment.

It is my understanding that a dermatology expert with a magnification device should be able to determine, without in any way damaging the manuscript, if the parchment is made from deer or from one of the European animals. For sure, that would settle the issue.

Besides establishing the Voynich manuscript as the First Book of the Americas, dermatological inspection can be worthwhile for another reason: determination of where and by whom the manuscript was written is an important first step for deciphering its encrypted text. For example, if known that the manuscript was compiled by descendants of Cathars who escaped the siege of Montségur in 1244, it immediately becomes easy to spot that the manuscript makes use of accent marks and abbreviation markings that were employed in the *Homilies d'Organyà*, a work written in the Old Catalan language.

But none of this is to say that an examination of the parchment will be immediately forthcoming. Cooperation from the current proprietors of the manuscript – Yale University – is somewhat doubtful given that it took years of pressure just to convince them to allow radiocarbon testing of the manuscript.

But we can remain hopeful: with an intriguing story behind the First Book of the Americas, a film producer could decide to apply pressure on Yale, along with financing for the dermatology expert!

Or perhaps UNESCO can be convinced to declare the Voynich manuscript a World Heritage Document, which is what it deserves to be.