

The Voynich Manuscript

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Gnosis

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The *Voynich Manuscript* has been called the most mysterious manuscript in the world. Dating at least to 1586, the manuscript is written in a language of which no other example is known to exist. It is an alphabetic script, but of an alphabet variously reckoned to have from 19 to 28 letters, none of which bear any relationship to any English or European letter system. The manuscript is small, seven by ten inches, but thick, nearly 170 pages. It is closely written in a free-running hand and copiously illustrated with bizarre line drawings that have been watercolored: drawings of plants, drawings of little naked ladies appearing to take showers in a strange system of plumbing (variously identified as organs of the body or a primitive set of fountains) and astrological drawings — or what have been interpreted as astrological drawings. Since the *Voynich Manuscript* is at the Beinecke Rare Book Room at Yale, it is accessible to any serious scholar. *The Most Mysterious Manuscript*, edited by Robert Brumbaugh, reproduces a number of the folios from the manuscript that readily convey the weirdness of it all. It is quite unearthly and does not fit into the context of late medieval alchemical manuscripts or late medieval manuscripts of any other kind.

The known facts about the manuscript are few. Historically, it first appears in 1586 at the court of Rudolf II of Bohemia, who was one of the most eccentric European monarchs of that or any other period. Rudolf collected dwarfs and had a regiment of giants in his army. He was surrounded by astrologers, and he was fascinated by games and codes and music. He was typical of the occult-oriented, Protestant noblemen of this period and epitomized the liberated Northern European prince. He was a patron of alchemy and supported the printing of alchemical literature. The Rosicrucian conspiracy (about which I will say more later) was being quietly fomented during this same period.

To Rudolf's court came an unknown person who sold this manuscript to the king for 600 gold ducats, which, translated into modern monetary units, is about \$14,000. This is an astonishing amount of money to have paid for a manuscript at that time, which indicates that the emperor must have been highly impressed by it. Accompanying the manuscript was a letter that stated that it was the

work of the Englishman Roger Bacon, who flourished in the 13th century and who was a noted pre-Copernican astronomer.

Prague, where Emperor Rudolf held his court, was a hotbed of alchemists who esteemed the reputation of Roger Bacon. Only two years before the appearance of the *Voynich Manuscript*, John Dee, the great English navigator, astrologer, magician, intelligence agent and occultist had lectured in Prague on Bacon. John Dee had an unexpectedly long stay in Prague because his companion, Edward Kelley, had publicly claimed to be able to perform the alchemical opus, and the emperor more or less placed the pair under house arrest and asked them to perform the opus for him as a favor for his generous patronage. When they were unable to produce, Dee was able to talk his way out of it since it was Kelley who had made the major claims. Kelley was detained and actually died when the slate roofing on a high parapet of the castle slid underneath his feet one moonlit night during a frantic bid for freedom, making him one of alchemy's rare martyrs. I shall demonstrate directly why the relationship between Dee, Kelley and Rudolf has direct bearing on the mystery of the *Voynich Manuscript*, for it is my opinion that Dee was involved in its sale.

Today the *Voynich Manuscript* is still accompanied by the letter that attributes it to Roger Bacon. Rudolf's best astrologers and cryptographers could make nothing out of the manuscript. It entered a vast collection of weird artifacts and curiosities that Rudolf had gathered together from all over the world that were dispersed to diverse people after his death. The *Voynich Manuscript*, because it contained botanical illustrations, passed to his botanist, a man named Hořický. He kept it for twenty years; then it passed to an unnamed party who had it for another twenty years, bringing its history up to the 1620s. It then passed to Athanasius Kircher, who was one of the great polymaths of the mid-17th century. He was a Catholic intellectual and alchemist and the first to systematically study artificial languages. We know of letters of his to various people asking about the *Voynich Manuscript*, written before he obtained it. He was even sent small portions of it, reproduced, that he struggled over; but once he actually had the manuscript in his possession, his diaries are silent about it. Five years after he acquired it he published *A Universal Study of Artificial Languages*, which nowhere mentions the *Voynich Manuscript*.

Kircher decided to become a Jesuit in about 1660 and had to give away all of his worldly goods. He gave his library to a Jesuit seminary south of Rome, and among his books was the *Voynich Manuscript*. It sat on a shelf in the seminary for over 250 years, until Wilfrid Voynich, a New York rare book dealer, bought the entire library on a trip to Europe in 1912. When Voynich got the library back to New York and sorted through it, he found among all the easily catalogued late-Renaissance Italian theological material a peculiar, totally anomalous book. Even as late as the period from which we have the first historical record of the *Voynich Manuscript*, the 1580s, the store of images in the European mind was very limited. There were only ten or fifteen herbals in circulation among the educated people of Europe at that time, and none of the *Voynich* images can be directly traced to any of these previously printed or circulated sources. Yet the biological sections of the *Voynich Manuscript* contain

over 120 drawings of plants. Likewise, the script itself has no antecedents and it spawned no imitators. Codes from the early 16th century onward in Europe were all derived from the *Steganographia* of Johannes Trithemius, Abbot of Sponheim, an alchemist who wrote on the encipherment of secret messages. He had a limited number of methods, and no military, alchemical, religious or political code was composed by any other means throughout a period that lasted well into the 17th century. Yet the *Voynich Manuscript* does not appear to have any relationship to the codes derivative of Johannes Trithemius, Abbot of Sponheim.

I shall now offer an explanation of why I think that John Dee is the obvious candidate for being the purveyor, if not the author, of the *Voynich Manuscript*. First of all, Trithemius' book, the *Steganographia*, didn't circulate as a printed book until the 1580s, but it circulated in manuscript from about 1530 onward. When Dee visited the continent as a fairly young man, he recorded in his diary that he spent three days hand-copying the relevant chapters of a manuscript copy of the *Steganographia* that he was shown in Paris, so from very early in his intellectual life he was in possession of the Trithemian codemaking machinery.

The next important event in his life with regard to the *Voynich Manuscript*, and one of the most puzzling events in the whole history of science, took place on an afternoon in July 1582. While in his study at Mortlake, John Dee was distracted by a brilliant light outside his window and stepped outside to receive from a creature he described as the Angel Gabriel a polished lens of New World obsidian, which he described in his diary thenceforward as "the Shew Stone." He was able, by meditating on this stone, to induce visions and dialogues with spirits, but this ability seemed to fade in the months after he received the stone until a strange personage came into his life in the spring of 1584. This was Edward Kelley.

Kelley was a much younger man than Dee, and Dee was married to a much younger woman, Jane. Kelley was of the rascal type; in one account, he is even described as being earless, having had his ears removed for some petty crime in the provinces. He arrived at Dee's place in Mortlake, pop-eyed and breathless, with a wild story about how he had fallen asleep in a ransacked tomb in a monastery in Wales. When he awakened, he found beneath him in the tomb a vial of red powder that was the transformative elixir and a book in an undecipherable language that he called the *Book of Saint Dunstan*. Kelley claimed that he had been told in the village nearby that this book was enciphered Welsh. We actually hear no more in anybody's diaries of the *Book of Saint Dunstan*; however, Arthur Dee, the son of John Dee, writing some thirty years later and reminiscing about his father, said that from the time John Dee met Kelley he spent a great deal of time trying to unravel a book "covered all over with hieroglyphiks." Perhaps this is the *Book of Saint Dunstan*, and perhaps the *Book of Saint Dunstan* and the *Voynich Manuscript* are one and the same.

In any case, Kelley's entree to Dee was the undecipherable manuscript and the alchemical potion. Kelley quickly learned from his conversations with Dee the story of the Shew Stone, and together they set up a seance during which Kelley proved himself to be a very adept scryer of the stone. From the very first

instance, he could describe vast theatrical undertakings and speak all the parts of the characters. (The Shew Stone is in the British Museum, where one can see it today.)

John Dee's meeting with Edward Kelley began a new period in Dee's diaries. They were published in 1659 by Méric Casaubon as *A True and Faithful Relation, etc.* In the series of entries that span the next ten years there are recorded hundreds of spirit conversations, including the delivery to Dee and Kelley of an angelic language called Enochian, composed of non-English letters, but which computer analysis has recently shown to have a curious grammatical relationship to English. Over 4,000 words are known in Enochian, transmitted by the ghostly apparitions that Kelley channeled to Dee. Some of the messages were theological or political in nature and came to the two as they traveled about Europe visiting such places as the court of Rudolf. They were responsible for spreading the fame of the alchemist Roger Bacon, which laid the public relations groundwork for sale of the *Voynich Manuscript* at a high premium.

The manuscript, which would have been written in the 13th century if it were by Roger Bacon, definitely shows all the physical signs of a 16th century origin. I estimate it was written sometime around 1540, indicating that Kelley obtained it somewhere. If Kelley wrote it himself, it would have to have been done later — as late as the early 1580s. If Dee actually wrote it, then it should be possible to determine this by comparing it to his other writings. The several groups that have studied the *Voynich Manuscript* have not been familiar with the large amounts of encrypted material in John Dee's diaries. There are over 92 pages of strings of numbers and letters. If the method of encryption utilized by Dee could be related in some way to the encoding of the *Voynich* material, the problem of its authorship would be solved.

During the height of his creativity, Dee wrote a strange book called the *Hieroglyphic Monad* (*Monas Hieroglyphica*), containing 36 quasi-geometric theorems. This book hints at some kind of mystical doctrine yet remains utterly obscure. In the early 1560s it circulated in manuscript form and it was printed a few years later.

In 1614, and again in 1615, the primary Rosicrucian documents, the *Fama* and the *Confessio*, were anonymously circulated in Europe. They came out of nowhere, broadsheets distributed in the middle of the night from street corners. They said, "We are a secret society and who we are ye may not know, but if you're ready you'll be contacted and asked to join." Robert Fludd, the heir of the Dee tradition in English occultism and science, practically put out an advertisement saying, "If I am not good enough, nobody's good enough. Why haven't you people contacted me?" The fact is that the Rosicrucians, meaning the authors of the *Fama* and the *Confessio*, never contacted anybody. Their claim was basically fraudulent: that the tomb of Christian Rosenkreuz, a great knight who had gone on the last Crusade in the 14th century, had been discovered. This was rather like harking back to Roger Bacon, invoking a mythical personage who had lived two centuries previously. Inside the tomb there were said to have been alchemical books with a quasi-political overtone, definitely favoring the court of Frederick the Fifth, the Elector Palatine. All this was

disseminated as gospel in a kind of alchemical Protestant revival.

Curiously, these texts, the *Fama* and the *Confessio*, had many doctrinal similarities to Dee's *Hieroglyphic Monad*, so that it appears that Dee's earlier work was used as the model for the Rosicrucian broadsheets by their authors. Though these authors were unnamed, I suspect the Bohemian alchemist Johannes Andreae. Andreae and fellow alchemist Michael Maier were old enough to have been involved in Dee's earlier visits to Prague and to have been at the peak of their intellectual powers when the episode of the Winter King and Queen occurred in 1620 and briefly brought Frederick the Elector and his wife to Prague as alchemical rulers.

Dee died an old and broken-hearted man under the reign of James the First in 1608, many years after the sale of the *Voynich Manuscript*. Dee had been the court astrologer of Elizabeth, a friend of Sir Philip Sidney, and the most educated man in England until James came to power. James had a horror of the whole magical side of the Elizabethan court. He didn't want astrologers around him. He was a rationalist, and his anti-Catholicism extended to a mistrust of the entire occult tradition.

Previously I mentioned that when Rudolf died and his court fell into disarray, the *Voynich Manuscript* passed to his botanist. The old emperor was dying at a great age and was unquestionably mad as a damned hatter. Meanwhile, to the west of Prague, in Heidelberg, Frederick the Elector wed Elizabeth, the daughter of Dee's nemesis, James the First of England. Frederick was everything a Protestant alchemical prince could hope to be: young, brilliant, scheming and totally in command of his lords. Frederick took the king's decision to give his daughter's hand in marriage as tacit approval for Frederick's plan to establish a Protestant alchemical kingdom in Central Europe. Actually, James — being the plotting conservative that he was — had a far more Machiavellian purpose in wedding his daughter to Frederick. He also had it in his mind to wed one of his sons to a Spanish Catholic Hapsburg princess and was trying to steer a neutral course. When he realized that Frederick and Elizabeth had gone off to their court in Heidelberg to patronize alchemists and astrologers like Michael Maier, Gerhard Dorn and Johannes Andreae, James was much alarmed, but by that time it was too late to reverse his decision and he realized that Frederick was a wild card. When Rudolf finally did die, the princes of the Northern League gathered to choose his successor by secret ballot. Frederick won, and so in the late fall of 1619 he and Elizabeth transferred their court to Prague and ruled for one winter, until May of 1620. To provide historical context, recall that the Mayflower was setting sail that same year. By May, the Hapsburgs had mounted an army and were able to crush the Winter Kingdom.

In a sense, that incident can be seen as the opening shot of the Thirty Years War. One of the young French soldiers in the Hapsburg army laying siege to the city was the 19-year-old René Descartes, who, under the influence of a dream he would have only a few months later, would mature into the great proponent of modern French materialism. Michael Maier, one of the last great synthesizers of the late medieval alchemical vision, died in the siege of the city. Frederick was killed and Elizabeth fled into exile in The Hague for many years. The *Voynich*

Manuscript was forgotten. Modern times overtook Europe and the secret of the manuscript drifted further and further into the past. The hope of establishing an alchemical political union in Central Europe was, in the context of what followed (the Thirty Years War and modern times), a channel where the river of history chose not to run. It was a path not taken, but had things turned out differently, for instance had the king of England been behind the union wholeheartedly, events might have unraveled somewhat differently.

My reconstruction of the unknown part of the story is this: when Dee and Kelley were entertaining Emperor Rudolf with tales of the alchemical prowess of Roger Bacon, they had the *Voynich Manuscript* in mind. Either they wrote it or they had it with them. If they had it with them, the story becomes more interesting, because then perhaps they are not its authors. If they *are* its authors, then it merely reveals the grammatical deep structure of the deranged minds of two Elizabethan magicians and would explain to some degree why it has defied decipherment. If Dee and Kelley didn't write it, if they only had it in their possession, then the mystery continues. Where did they get it and what was it?

It is true that Dee was under the patronage of the Earl of Northumberland, who, when Henry the Eighth broke with Rome, sacked English monasteries that had large repositories of Roger Bacon material. Dee's library at Mortlake was known to have 53 Baconian manuscripts, of which only 41 have survived into modern times. They now reside at the Bodleian Library at Oxford and at the British Museum. In the truly compendious *A True And Faithful Relation, etc.*, Dee recorded the day-by-day seances with spirits as he and Kelley traveled all over Europe. In the very month that the emperor paid the 600 gold ducats for a manuscript, Dee recorded in his diary that he and Kelley received 600 gold ducats from a mysterious source.

Some biographers have taken the position that Dee didn't believe in magic at all, and that he only posed as an occultist to conceal the fact that he was an intelligence agent for the British Crown. According to this interpretation, he was visiting the courts of Europe as an astrologer, necromancer and alchemist, while actually encrypting very succinct military, strategic and diplomatic information into letters, which he then sent home. Because he could cast the finest horoscope in Europe, he had an entree into the lives of nobility. Doubtless the truth lies somewhere in between. He was an agent of the British Crown, but he was also the finest flower of the medieval mind. He was used by Shakespeare as the model for Prospero in *The Tempest*, and was the model for Dr. Faustus in Christopher Marlowe's play of the same name.

Many careers have floundered on the basis of alleged decipherments of the *Voynich Manuscript*. Some scholars have come forward with very bold claims. In the 1920s, William Romaine Newbold, a classics scholar, a medievalist and by all accounts a very brilliant man, announced that he had a complete decipherment of the *Voynich Manuscript*. He claimed that the key was tiny shorthand strokes that were components of each letter in the manuscript, and he maintained that by staring through a magnifying loupe one could see that encoded into each character were the distorted remains of a Roman shorthand system

that had been lost for 600 years. He produced astonishing decipherments of Roger Bacon-related material. His decoded passages dealt with student uprisings at Oxford at Christmastime in 1291, when riots between the Blackfriars and the town would not have been uncommon. The problem with all of this was that no one else could extract the same plaintext using Professor Newbold's method. It involved so many choices from pools of letters at every given point along the way that one could demonstrate that hundreds of different messages could be extracted from the same passages. Newbold died a broken man, disgraced, his career shattered. He had gone too far, and the *Voynich Manuscript* had claimed its first victim.

The next person to propose a decipherment of the *Voynich Manuscript* was Robert S. Brumbaugh, also of Yale University, and his decipherment is, in some ways, almost as puzzling as the encryption. He would have us believe that the *Voynich Manuscript* says things like, "Liquid cerian matter, liquid matter, plus cerian Sicilian, plus cerian salt European Swedish Sicilian plus cerian, plus Russian Asian Sicilian salt, liquid liquid Asian Italian cerian salt, liquid Sicilian Italian plus Sicilian, plus salt," and so on. When his method was examined by others attempting to reproduce the same plaintext they got nowhere, and his effort has not been taken seriously.

Another effort at decipherment, which is minor, perhaps, in comparison to the other two, but which provides an interesting anecdote, was by a man named Strong at the University of California at San Diego. He claimed decipherment of certain of the labels of the *Voynich Manuscript's* illustrations. When Paul Lee formed a working group to look into the manuscript, Dr. Strong was one of the people they wanted to interview, and a member of the group who is a friend of mine, Ralph Abraham, a mathematician at the University of California at Santa Cruz, had photostats made of certain folios of the *Voynich Manuscript*. He sent these folios along with very detailed letters to Strong with questions such as, "It is alleged that on folio 9B you translated a certain word as "uterus." Here is a photostat of folio 9B; please circle the word you translated." Strong's secretary wrote Ralph back saying that Strong was very old, in his nineties, and he didn't feel he could compose a letter to address all these questions, but that if Ralph would come to San Diego he would satisfy him completely. That was a Thursday. Ralph got a reservation to fly down on the following Monday. Sunday night the secretary called to say that Dr. Strong had died of a heart attack that evening. The *Voynich Manuscript* has bedeviled people's careers, and people who have claimed to understand it have died with the secret untransmitted to the rest of us.

The United States government intelligence community has spent a fair bit of time looking into the *Voynich Manuscript*, simply because it is unheard of that a 16th century manuscript should resist decipherment by modern methods. The single most interesting writing about the *Voynich Manuscript* is a Department of Commerce publication called *The Voynich Manuscript: An Elegant Enigma*, by Mary D'Imperio. It is a collation of everything known about the manuscript, commissioned by the United States government.

Many interesting facts have been established, and there is hope that the

manuscript may eventually be deciphered. Computer analysis of the handwriting shows that two hands are involved. Does this mean it was written by Dee and Kelley? If so, can we get a better idea of their role in its creation by comparing the handwriting in the manuscript with that of Dee and Kelley? D'Imperio discusses many magical alphabets, many different forms of shorthand and specialized notekeeping scripts that were current in Europe throughout the Middle Ages. None of them look particularly like the *Voynich* script. Ralph Abraham made a suggestion that the *Voynich* script had some relation to early Brahmanic number systems. He thought perhaps that it was a string of numbers that would have to be decoded and the resulting string further deciphered to extract the literal message.

One possibility is that we moderns simply overrate the sophistication of our codebreaking machinery. Perhaps there are simple ways of encoding material that simply have not occurred to the CIA, and when the *Voynich* code is finally broken, the solution will prove trivial, but unexpected in some way. For instance, Ralph made the suggestion to me that grids with holes cut in them might have been used. When such a grid was laid over a page, it separated the message parts of the text from the nonsensical noise. If the grid changes from page to page and is completely irrational in the way that it changes, then no computer program imaginable could separate the plaintext from the noise. A recursive formula could not deduce an ever-changing variable based on whim, and this would preclude any machine-oriented effort to decipher the manuscript. This grid method is well known and represents a standard method of hiding a message, embedding it in great amounts of garbled material. It would have appealed to the alchemical imagination of Dee or Kelley or any of their educated occult contemporaries. If this notion is the key, it may mean that somewhere there exist either the grids or the instructions for building them.

In the summation of her book, D'Imperio suggests ideas for further research. The *Voynich Manuscript* has never been physically analyzed, which would settle once and for all at least the century of its origin. The libraries of the world should be searched for other examples of *Voynich* script. After all, are we really sure that there's no other extant example of this strange writing? Computer analysis, the approach of the Santa Cruz group, could settle on a standard alphabet for the manuscript and then catalog every character, the number of times it occurs and in what combinations it occurs with other characters. From this data a preliminary grammar might be deduced.

None of the illustrations have ever been satisfactorily interpreted. What are called the astrological illustrations are only nominally astrological. They seem to have stars and circles in them, but otherwise they are not particularly referent to the sky. The so-called pharmaceutical section, which depicts little canisters and strange little naked women bathing in curious, convoluted plumbing, could be anything — an obscure form of Central German hydrotherapy or the doodlings of a deranged imagination. When you only have one of something it is quite difficult to place it in the correct context of cultural history, especially since there was a lot of secrecy in this period, faking of manuscripts and spurious attributions, use of secret cover languages, communication in secret codes,

plotting of secret societies.

If my analysis of the *Voynich Manuscript* as the product of Dee and Kelley has seemed too facile, let me assure my reader that it is, and that not all the facts are covered by this theory. What fascinates me most about the *Voynich Manuscript*, above and beyond the historical puzzle and above and beyond how interesting it would be to know what it actually says, is the idea of an unreadable book. It is a kind of Borgesian concept that there must be, somewhere, an unreadable book, and perhaps this is it. The unreadable book hints at the idea that the world is information. We have cognizance of the world by ordering all the information we come upon in relation to information that we have already accumulated — through patterns. An unreadable book in a non-English script, with no dictionary attached, is very puzzling. We become like linguistic oysters, we secrete around it, we encyst it into our metaphysic; but we don't know what it says, which always carries with it the possibility that it says something that would unhinge our conceptions of things or that its real message is its unreadability. It points to the Otherness of the nature of information, and is what is called in structuralism a "limit text." Certainly the *Voynich Manuscript* is the limit text of Western occultism. It is truly an occult book — one that no one can read. It is a making literal of the mythical book in H. P. Lovecraft's work, the *Necronomicon*, the writings of the Mad Arab, Alhazred; in fact, Colin Wilson, in his book *The Philosopher's Stone*, connects the *Voynich Manuscript* to the *Necronomicon* and the Shew Stone used for scrying by Dee with the philosopher's stone.

And there the matter rested until 1987, and might have rested forever but for the questing curiosity of one man. Enter Dr. Leo Levitov, author of *Solution of the Voynich Manuscript*; a man who claims a complete understanding of the dynamics of *Voynich* and translation of the manuscript. He gives us the good news in his subtitle: *A Liturgical Manual for the Endura Rite of the Cathari Heresy, the Cult of Isis*. Levitov's thesis is that the *Voynich* is nothing less than the only surviving primary document of the Great Heresy that arose in Italy and flourished in Languedoc until ruthlessly exterminated by the Albigensian Crusade in the 1220s. Very little is known about the beliefs of the Cathar faith, and all the knowledge we do have of it is secondhand, obtained from the records of the Inquisition, whose task was the destruction of Cathar society. Levitov's translation, if substantiated, would throw new light on the puzzling rise and extermination of the greatest heretical challenge that the Roman Church ever faced.

There are a number of problems with Levitov's notions, but there are also triumphs. He makes several startling claims that he supports very well. The little women in the baths who puzzled so many are for Levitov a Cathar sacrament, the Endura, "or death by venesection [cutting a vein] in order to bleed to death in a warm bath." The plant drawings that refused to resolve themselves into botanically identifiable species are no problem for Levitov: "Actually, there is not a single so-called botanical illustration that does not contain some Cathari symbol or Isis symbol." The astrological drawings are likewise easy to deal with: "The innumerable stars are representative of the stars in Isis' mantle."

Levitov's strong hand is translation. He asserts that the reason it has been so difficult to decipher the *Voynich Manuscript* is that it is not encrypted at all, but merely written in a special script, and is "an adaptation of a polyglot oral tongue into a literary language which would be understandable to people who did not understand Latin and to whom this language could be read." Specifically, a highly polyglot form of medieval Flemish with a large number of Old French and Old High German loan words. Good. So now we know.

Where there is danger for Levitov is in the contents of the translated material. Levitov freely admits that he is convinced from his translation that Catharism is a religion of Isis, a religion of the great Goddess. Apparently he is alone in this belief, although A. E. Waite says in his discussion of the Cathars and the Holy Grail, "The Grail Mythos is... like the Veil of Isis, which no man can raise rather than tolerate the suggestion that these nightmare faiths are behind it." Save for Waite's lucky turn of phrase, no commentator, ancient or modern, has ever breathed a word concerning Isis in connection with the Cathars. At one point the Cathars became a focus of latter-day occultists, but not even their literature mentioned Isis.

Levitov is almost casual in his presentation of his work, questioning at one point whether now that he has figured out how to translate the manuscript it is worth actually doing. "A complete translation of the more than 200 pages waits in the wings — a long, arduous and possibly unrewarding task." For Levitov the problem seemed to be one of solving the language problem, but larger problems are now raised if in fact the *Voynich* is to be seen as a primary source showing the Cathars to be not at all as we have come to think of them. Students of Gnosticism, paganism and the Goddess will all have to digest this new slant on the role of the Cathars.

As for what the manuscript actually says, it is a gloomy and repetitive work, made partly so by Levitov's decision to present it in a rather raw state, as its sense requires scholarly interpretation. At its most lyrical the translation is quite interesting:

The person who is knowledgeable about aid, knows there is only one way to treat agonizing pain. He treats each one by putting them through the Endura. It is the one way that helps Death. Not everyone knows how to assist the one with pain. The one who is with death, and does not die will have pain. But those who have such pain of death, need his help. He understands the need. He is also aware that the person who needs help does not know that he needs it. We all know that every one of them needs help and each of us will be available to help.

The passage refers to the Cathar sacrament for the dying, a form of euthanasia in which pious Cathars were helped to die by specially trained Perfecti.

Levitov mentions extensive personal research into the Cathar material but cites none of it. I cannot tell if he was aware of H. J. Warner's *The Albigensian Heresy* or W. L. Wakefield's *Heresy, Crusade and Inquisition in Southern*

France. He states that the *Voynich Manuscript* is the only primary Cathar document in existence. However, A. E. Waite in his *Holy Grail* mentions, “There is fortunately one fragmentary record of Albigensian belief which has survived. . . I refer to the *Cathar Ritual of Lyons* which is now well known, having been published in 1898 by Mr. F. C. Conybeare.” Waite goes on to mention that part of the Lyons Codex contains “certain prayers for the dying.” The codex is in the *langue d’oc*. Does it resemble the *Voynich* material? We are not told.

If Levitov is right, we moderns simply overrated the sophistication of our codebreaking machinery and overlooked the possibility that the manuscript was not in code at all. Levitov fails to mention the physical manuscript. Yet it seems obvious that one of the first steps that should be taken would be to attempt to confirm the 13th century origin date for the manuscript. If the manuscript was written before 1250, then it is older than was claimed by even the adherents of the Roger Bacon theory of its authorship. Surely it should be possible to determine whether the manuscript was written in the 13th or the 16th century!

If it was a product of the 13th century, then my own efforts to see the hand of John Dee in its composition are immediately rendered futile, although it is still quite possible that Dee was involved in the manuscript’s finding its way to Rudolf’s court. Until Levitov, most scholars have been confident in placing the origin of the manuscript in the early 15th century. Therefore, Leo Levitov is to be congratulated. He has made a persuasive case and remained modest doing it. Now we need to hear from the experts, the medievalists, linguists and scholars of heresy, for it will be through the consensus and judgment of the community of scholars that Levitov’s claim to have translated the world’s most mysterious manuscript will stand or fall.