tracking the Voynich

Nearly everything about the Voynich manuscript is a mystery—including a large part of its history. Here's what we do know.



1404–1438

According to carbon dating, the calf whose skin was used to make the manuscript's vellum pages is killed during this period.



1600

The book enters the historical record around this time, popping up in Bohemia after it is allegedly bought by Rudolph II of Habsburg, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, for 600 ducats. Who brought the manuscript to Prague is lost to history.



1608

Jacobus Horcicky, a pharmacist in Rudolph's court, allegedly cures the Emperor of a grave sickness. Shortly after, he is granted minor nobility and becomes Jacobus de Tepenec, which is found written on one of the manuscript's pages; some believe Rudolph may have given the book to de Tepenec as a gift for saving his life.





1646–1662

Sometime in this period, Barschius dies, bequeathing the Voynich to Johannes Marcus Marci de Kronland, a professor at Charles University in Prague.



1665

Marci sends the manuscript to his friend Athanasius Kircher, a Jesuit polymath, professor, and curator of a museum of curiosities at the Roman College in Rome. "I was convinced [this book] could be read by no one except yourself," he writes in a letter found inside the manuscript. "[S]uch Sphinxes as these obey no one but their master, Kircher." Marci says he'd been told the book had belonged to Rudolph, who believed it was written by scientist friar Roger Bacon.



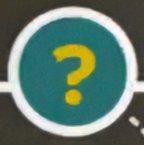
1622

De Tepenec dies, leaving his belongings to the Jesuits—but somehow, the Voynich Manuscript ends up in the hands of antique dealer Georgius Barschius.



1773

The Jesuits are suppressed for the first time; many of their belongings are confiscated.



1680

Kircher dies; another Jesuit takes over the museum's collections—which likely include the Voynich manuscript—and it moves floors several times. It's generally in disarray, and few records of its contents are kept.

1873

Vittorio Emanuele II, the new King of Italy, suppresses the Jesuits again. To avoid having their things confiscated, they transfer 4000 books from the Collegium Romanum libraries to the Casa Professa, where they are sold to belong to the "private library of P. Beckx," a Belgian Jesuit priest (pictured). At some point, many of the books—including the Voynich manuscript—are hidden. No one knows exactly where.

1911–1912

The Jesuits put 380 manuscripts from P. Beckx's library up for sale. Many are sold to the Vatican, but a London-based book dealer named Wilfrid Voynich, working through a Jesuit intermediary, is able to purchase 30 manuscripts—including the Voynich—on the promise that he will never reveal where, or from whom, he'd gotten them. He immediately begins trying to sell the odd manuscript he has acquired.





1914

Voynich moves to New York and continues to try to sell his strange manuscript.



1930

Voynich dies; his wife, Ethel, puts the manuscript in a safe deposit box and pens a letter with some of the details of how her husband acquired it. When she dies, in 1960, the book passes to the Voynichs' secretary, Anne M. Nill.



1961

Nill sells the manuscript to book dealer H.P. Kraus. He spends eight years trying to find a buyer before donating it to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University in 1969. It becomes MS 408.