

Foreward

The 'Voynich' manuscript is one of history's most mysterious and has been the subject of scholarly debate for centuries since its discovery in 1912. The book, a work of 240 pages of vellum, is now digitally available through the Beinecke, has been carbon dated to the 1400s, and appears to be a treatise on medically important herbs, with a focus on female health.(1) Its text, however, in a neat, well organized but novel lettering system, is of a completely unknown and possibly even encrypted language. Hundreds of theories by generations of linguists, historians, and sleuths have failed to decipher the codex, has generated an academic community of veritable 'Voynichists', and was even the basis of an international conference held in Malta in 2022.(2) Professional historians have relied on computational statistics, probability mechanics, and machine learning to develop what is essentially a new lexicon, the original intent of which remains unknown, and which still precludes anyone from 'reading' the book, or, as has been said, "making any sense out of it at all".(3) One interpretation is that authors' hope was to protect the somewhat sensitive gynecologic subject matter, the role of bathing, devices, herbs, and the zodiac.(4) Our own interpretation was that at least one of the ornate 'baths' in the text may have invoked a bladder and a colon (see Figure below) in a discussion of their health.

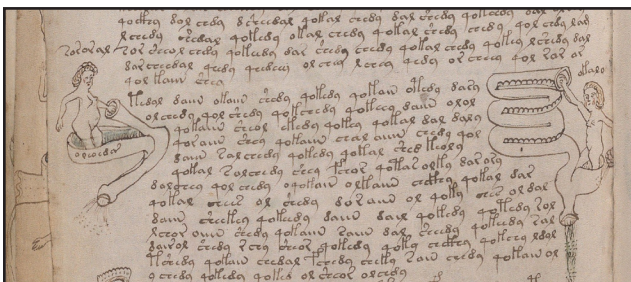


Figure 1. Selection of the 'Voynich' manuscript, Beineke Ms. 408, f77(L), depicting what are likely homages to the bladder (left) and colon (right) in a section on pelvic gynecologic health in a medieval but unknown and undecipherable language.

History is only for the brave and its puzzles may remain maddingly distant even with the most sophisticated of tools. Thus, this issue of *IJUH* presents five articles which share the unenviable task of elucidating some of the important stories that shape our modern era. Rubano et al. provide details of the botanical medications North

American peoples used to treat urinary disorders, not dissimilar to what was probably intended by the 'Voynich' for a medieval European population.(5) Jungano et al. introduce the innovative surgeons who used the rectum for urinary diversion 100 years before the invention of durable urinary stoma appliances.(6) Smith et al. peel back the mysteries surrounding the first modern so-called Brown-Buerger cystoscope and Gudell et al. reveal to us that the development of urology as a separate specialty was a veritable battle of wills and wits.(7,8) Cultural mysteries, including the practice of Taqaandan described by Parmar et al., seem strange, even injurious, yet deserve the same open-minded framing required by the consummate historian.(9)

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