

BOTANY

Botanical Clue

Evidence has been produced indicating Roger Bacon could not have written the Voynich manuscript. Composed in cipher, it has never been read.

► BOTANICAL evidence has been produced against the supposed authorship of the Voynich manuscript, one of the most famous unsolved ciphers in the world. At least two of the plants depicted in its illustrations were unknown in Europe until after Columbus' return from the New World in 1493; and the supposed author, the famous scientist-monk Roger Bacon, died in 1294, almost an even two centuries before that date.

This piece of evidence, which appears to get at least one end of a bracket on the date of the much-debated but never-read document, has been turned up by Prof. Hugh O'Neill, botanist at the Catholic University of America in Washington.

The Voynich manuscript, so called after its most recent owner, a well-to-do and scholarly Philadelphia business man, lately deceased, first turned up in European learned circles in early modern times. Kings and great nobles vied for its possession. Students and cryptographers racked their brains trying to read it, but no one ever succeeded. The manuscript consists of about 120 pages bound in book form. The hand-written text is in a fine, clear, vertical script that at first glance looks as if it might be a modified Latin or Greek—but any amount of the closest scrutiny still leaves it maddeningly meaningless.

How the legend grew that its author was Roger Bacon nobody seems to know now; but that is the repute which the mysterious manuscript has carried for several centuries.

There are many drawings on the pages, a considerable proportion of them being pictures of plants. It occurred to Prof. O'Neill that these might furnish some clue to the origin of the manuscript.

Most of the drawings are more or less stylized, after the fashion of such art in late medieval and early modern times, and many of the plants cannot be identified. Most of those to which Prof. O'Neill was able to give names proved to be native to Europe. However, he found two that seem to be definitely American—though even these would hardly be accepted as illustrations

for a modern textbook of botany.

One of these appears to be a picture of a sunflower. Not wishing to rely on his own judgment entirely, Prof. O'Neill submitted the picture to six other botanists, and they all agreed it was meant to be a sunflower. The other, a smaller sketch, shows the pointed pods of a plant that looks like nothing European but does have a strong resemblance to capsicum or red pepper.

It is definitely known that the first sunflower seeds were carried to Europe by Columbus in 1493. Capsicum came either then or shortly thereafter. But neither plant could have been known to Roger Bacon.

Prof. O'Neill concludes: "Inasmuch as the pages of the manuscript on which these drawings appear have the drawings and accompanying text in a handwrit-

ing not obviously different than the other pages it seems necessary to consider this manuscript as having been written after 1493."

Science News Letter, July 29, 1944

ORDNANCE

Light Artillery May Have New Recoil Apparatus

► THE GOVERNMENT acquires royalty-free rights to patent 2,352,233, issued to William Summerbell of Washington, D. C., and Richard H. Mason of Havre de Grace, Md., on a recoil-absorbing apparatus especially adapted for use on small-caliber automatic anti-aircraft cannon.

The barrel of the gun is surrounded, near the breech, with a helical spring that takes up most of the backward thrust of the recoil, and also serves to check the return motion into firing position. There is, in addition, a buffer cylinder beneath the barrel which absorbs much of the jar.

The inventors state that their gun has a relatively short motion in recoil, with a correspondingly enhanced rate of fire.

Science News Letter, July 29, 1944



LABORATORY TOOLS—Sturdy funnels and graduates, seen in this Celanese Celluloid Corporation photograph, are light in weight, transparent, non-shatterable, and resistant to body and food acids. The Lumarith plastic is easy to clean; the names and quantity markings are part of the mold and will not rub or chip off at any time.