The Marci Letter Reconsidered

A Codicological Reinterpretation of Its Relationship to the Voynich Manuscript

Andrew Steckley, PhD[1]

[1] *QuantumLynx Research, New Hampshire, USA*

Abstract

The letter written by Johannes Marcus Marci to Athanasius Kircher in 1665–often referred to as the Marci Letter–has been a cornerstone element in the putative provenance of the Voynich Manuscript. The letter, traditionally treated as a separate document found within the front cover of the manuscript, raises a number of unresolved questions regarding its physical characteristics and its relationship to the codex.

This study reinterprets the evidence to argue that the Marci Letter was not a loosely associated cover letter but was instead conceived, written, and sent by Marci as a tipped-in component of the manuscript itself, functioning as a flyleaf within the codex. The hypothesis requires minimal speculation and offers a plausible, evidence-based model consistent with observed facts. It is presented as a testable codicological hypothesis—not a definitive theory—aimed at resolving several of the manuscript's physical and historical anomalies. It makes no attempt to overturn the established historical framework, but seeks to clarify and unify it.

Keywords

Voynich Manuscript, Marci Letter, Codicology, Manuscript provenance, Tipped-in documents, Flyleaf, Binding structures, Fold analysis, Wax seal residue

1. Introduction

The Voynich Manuscript remains one of the most enigmatic artifacts in the history of written culture. Its undeciphered script, unusual iconography, and uncertain origins have generated sustained scholarly interest across multiple disciplines, including cryptology, codicology, paleography, linguistics, and manuscript studies. Despite its extensive scholarly attention, however, the manuscript's provenance rests heavily on a small number of documentary anchors. Among these, the letter written by Johannes Marcus Marci to Athanasius Kircher in 1665[1] holds particular significance. This letter, herein referred to as the Marci Letter, provides the principal documentary basis for reconstructing the manuscript's custodial history prior to its acquisition by its namesake, Wilfrid Voynich.

2. Historical Context and Provenance Overview

The evidentiary structure of the manuscript's custodial history is illustrated in the timeline presented in Figure 1.

Radiocarbon dating conducted in 2009 places the manuscript's parchment (with 95% confidence interval) between AD 1404 and 1438[2]. This firmly dates the production of the calfskin parchment, but not necessarily the creation of the manuscript, since the parchment could have been stored and used at a later time[2].

The radiocarbon dating provides a reliable boundary for the manuscript's earliest possible creation. Its subsequent history, up to Voynich's acquisition, is reconstructed primarily from references in the Marci

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andrew@quantumlynxresearch.com (A. S. PhD)

https://quantumlynxresearch.com/ (A. S. PhD)

0009-0000-1455-3835 (A. S. PhD)

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[1] The letter's dateline was written unclearly, but one written a few weeks later makes clear that it was meant to be 1665.

[2] A notable comparison is the Vinland Map, a 20th-century forgery whose calfskin parchment was radiocarbon dated to a closely similar range (with 95% confidence interval) of between AD 1423 and 1445 .

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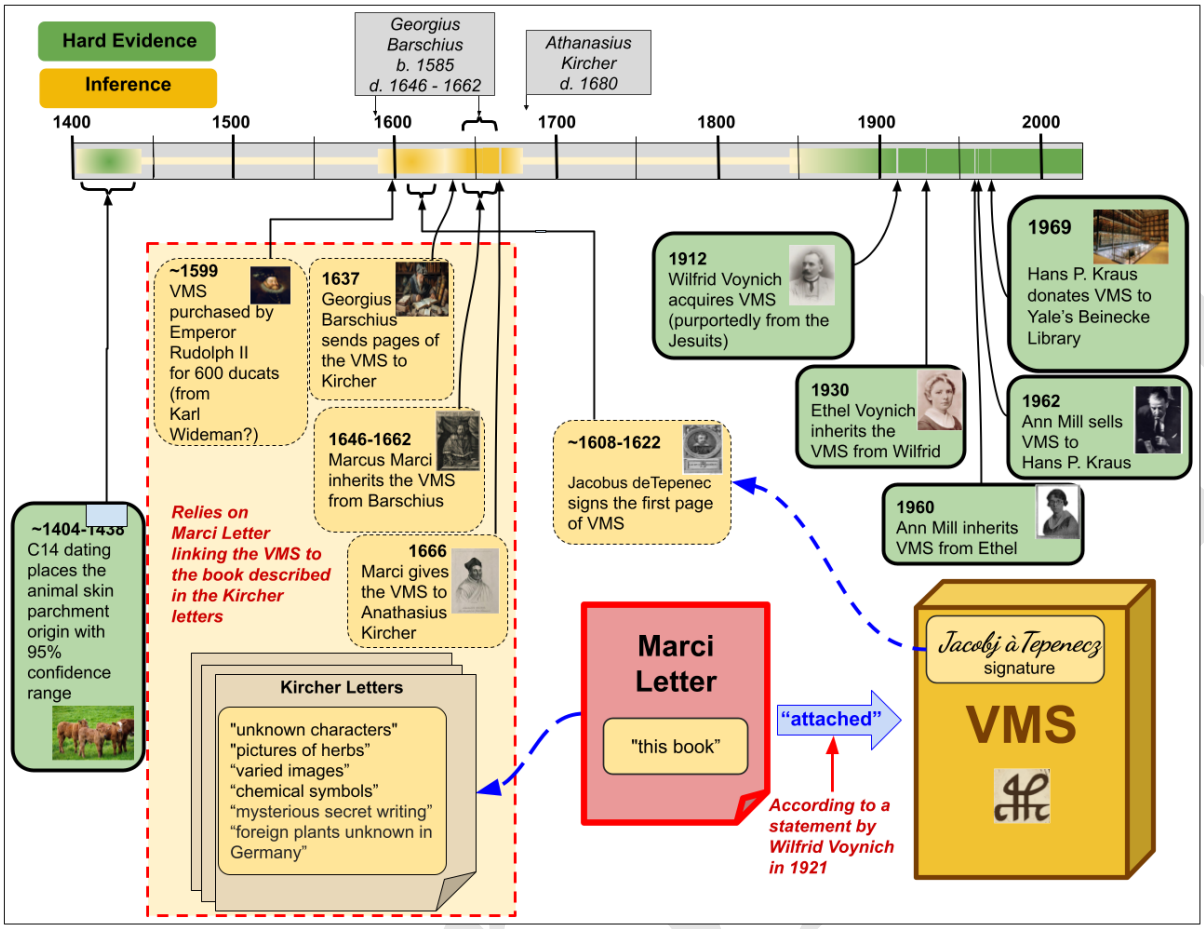


Figure 1: Voynich Manuscript Custodial Provenance Timeline

Letter, and earlier letters written to and from Kircher that were reliably linked to the Marci Letter by René Zandbergen[3]. According to the Marci Letter, the manuscript was purchased by Emperor Rudolf II for 600 ducats. It later passed through the hands of Georgius Barschius and Marcus Marci, both of whom were unable to decipher it. In 1665, Marci sent the manuscript to Athanasius Kircher in Rome, along with his letter and additional notes from earlier attempts to decipher it.

After this point, the manuscript disappears from the historical record until Wilfrid Voynich purchased it in 1911[3] from Jesuit sources associated with the Collegio Romano. The Marci Letter explicitly re-enters the narrative only in 1921, when Voynich publicly described it as "attached to the front cover"[1].

The letter opens with the statement:

> This book was left to me by a close friend in his will and ever since I first owned it I have destined it for you my dearest Athanasius, persuaded as I am that it can be read by none if not by you.[4]

While the letter implies that the text was enciphered or otherwise unreadable, it offers no other identifying information beyond the general reference to "this book". The related Kircher letters contain additional phrases consistent with the Voynich Manuscript, but none that can confidently distinguish it from other codices plausibly in circulation at the time or describable in similar terms.

Consequently, a substantial portion of the manuscript's commonly accepted provenance depends on whether Marci's opening words of "this book" were intended to reference the Voynich Manuscript and

[3]There is some uncertainty as to whether his acquisition was 1911 or 1912, but the preponderance of evidence points to 1911.
[4]This English translation, from the original Latin of the letter, is that of Thomas Conlin.

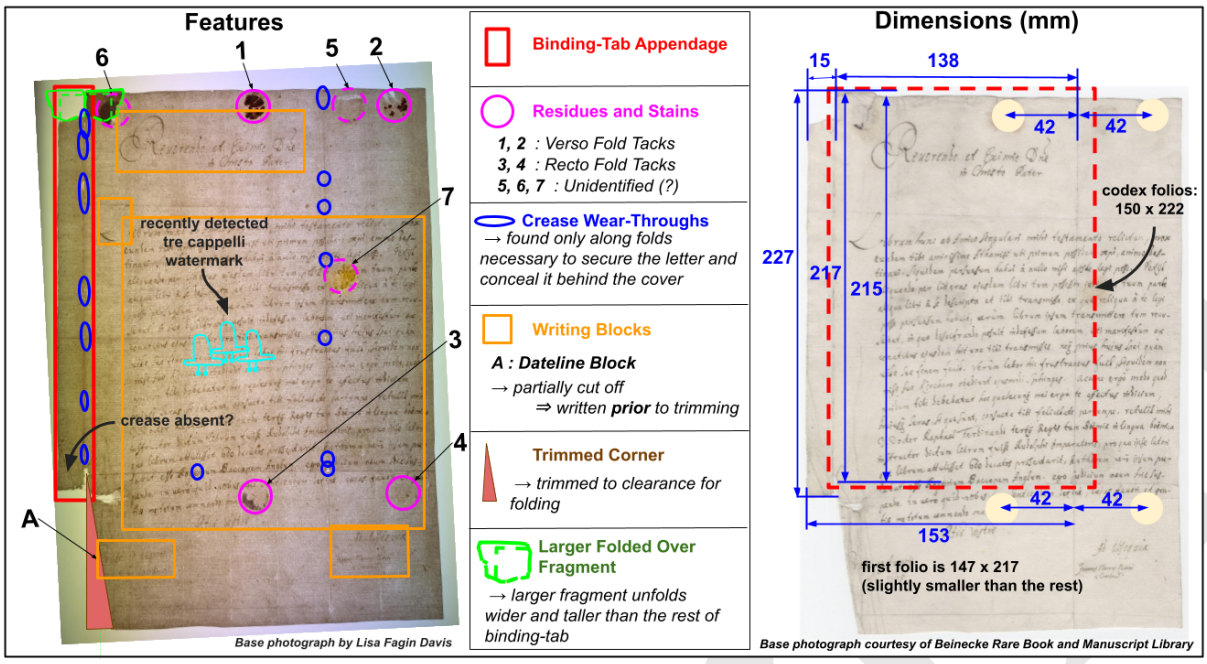


Figure 2: Codicological Features of the Marci Letter

not some other as-yet-unidentified codex. This possibility has been debated among Voynich researchers, prompted by various inconsistencies in the documentary record including anomalies in the archiving of Kircher's correspondence, the signature of de Tepenec found on the first folio of the manuscript, and Wilfrid Voynich's own account regarding the letter[5]. Despite these observations, the identification of "this book" is still widely taken for granted and, as such, it effectively functions as a linchpin in the provenance narrative. If the direct connection between the letter and the manuscript were found to be false, the manuscript's pre-1911 history would largely collapse: the links to Marci, Kircher, Barschius, and Rudolf II would all fall away. Only a tentative connection to Jacobus de Tepenec would remain, resting solely on an inscription on the first folio, which corresponds to a variant of his name used in only one of his known signature samples.

3. Proposed Hypothesis

This study proposes that the various anomalies in the historical record are best explained by reconsidering the Marci Letter not as an external accompaniment to the Voynich Manuscript, but as a component integrated into it, most likely by Marci himself. Specifically, it advances the hypothesis that:

> **The Marci Letter was originally written and intentionally constructed with a binding tab along one edge, allowing it to be bound or tipped into the manuscript, where it would function not as a separate or accompanying letter, but as a structurally integrated flyleaf, folded out of view behind the front cover when closed.**

Despite several decades of scrutiny, the codicological observations supporting this hypothesis do not appear to have been previously recognized, nor has it been considered as part of an explanatory framework that improves the alignment of the letter's history with both the physical and documentary evidence.

[5] See, for example, discussion threads on the Voynich Ninja forum[6] and The 1910 Voynich Theory blog[7]. The hypothetical alternative book has been referred to as the "Baresch Manuscript", "Document X" and "BookA." Jorge Stolfi has articulated a version of this line of reasoning as the "Book Switch Theory"[6]

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4. Codicological Evidence

The proposed physical relationship between the Marci Letter and the Voynich Manuscript can be inferred by considering the set of observations shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3 and described in further detail below. These observations[6] suggest that the letter was not merely stored within the manuscript, but was physically adapted for attachment, folding, and inclusion in the front matter of the codex.

Non-rectangular form. The Marci Letter has a non-rectangular profile with a narrow vertical appendage along the left-hand edge (Figure 2, red outline). This appendage appears to be a binding tab extending along part of the letter's height and closely matching the height of the manuscript folios, suggesting intentional dimensional alignment with the codex. The lower left edge of the letter is slanted through the dateline, indicating it was cut after the text was written—perhaps after realizing more clearance was needed to fold the bottom portion upwards once the binding tab was attached to the codex.

Fold architecture. The letter has six fold creases. Small holes are visible where the paper has worn through along crease lines (Figure 2, blue markers). These occur only along the folds needed to install the letter and make it fit fully behind the codex cover. The remaining creases show less wear and correspond to additional folds that would be needed to further compact the letter for insertion into an envelope or a pocket of fixed size (specifically one measuring no less than $3\frac{1}{8}$" by $5\frac{1}{2}$"). Notably, the horizontal crease associated with the initial folding does not extend through the binding tab, suggesting the fold was made only after the tab had been fully affixed to a surface. By contrast, the central crease—associated with folding for envelope insertion—extends uninterrupted across the binding tab. Together, this all implies the envelope stuffing came last, and likely after the letter had been bound in the codex for some time.

Surface residues and markings. Multiple residues of sealing wax and associated stains and other blemishes are visible on the front and back surfaces of the letter (Figure 2, pink circles). Some of these wax residues are consistent with their use as adhesive tacks to stabilize the folds and hold them in a closed position. Those labelled 1 through 4 are in the very locations required for this purpose. The sources of the additional residues labeled 5 through 7 remain uncertain, although it is plausible that residue 5 was applied for a more conventional purpose, as a wax seal spanning the edge of the binding tab.

Apparent foreign fragment. At the upper left of the letter, a larger folded-over portion is visible, distinct from the main sheet (Figure 2, green outline). This portion is irregular in shape, wider than the binding tab, and extends slightly above the top edge of the letter. It appears to be a separate piece of paper attached to the letter; it is otherwise difficult to imagine why its edges depart from the straight cuts forming the left and top edges of the sheet.

Correspondence with codex endpapers. Both the front and back interior covers of the manuscript (Figure 3) show remnants of pastedowns sheets made from laid paper that have since been removed[7]. There is a full size endleaf at the back of the codex between the back cover and the last folio, also made of laid paper. If there was a similar endleaf at the front of the codex to protect the first folio, it is now missing.

Dimensional compatibility. Dimensional analysis (Figure 2, right panel) shows that the folded letter, when tipped-in, fits within a width of approximately 138 mm, which aligns with the width of the codex. The manuscript folios measure approximately 150 × 222 mm, with the first folio slightly smaller than the

[6] All features and measurements are derived from the high-resolution digital images[4, 5] made available by the Beinecke Library and from premium facsimiles of the artifacts produced in close collaboration with the library by *Siloé, art and bibliophilia*.

[7] Laid paper can be distinguished from other types of paper by the presence of a visible pattern of closely spaced laid lines crossed by more widely spaced chain lines.

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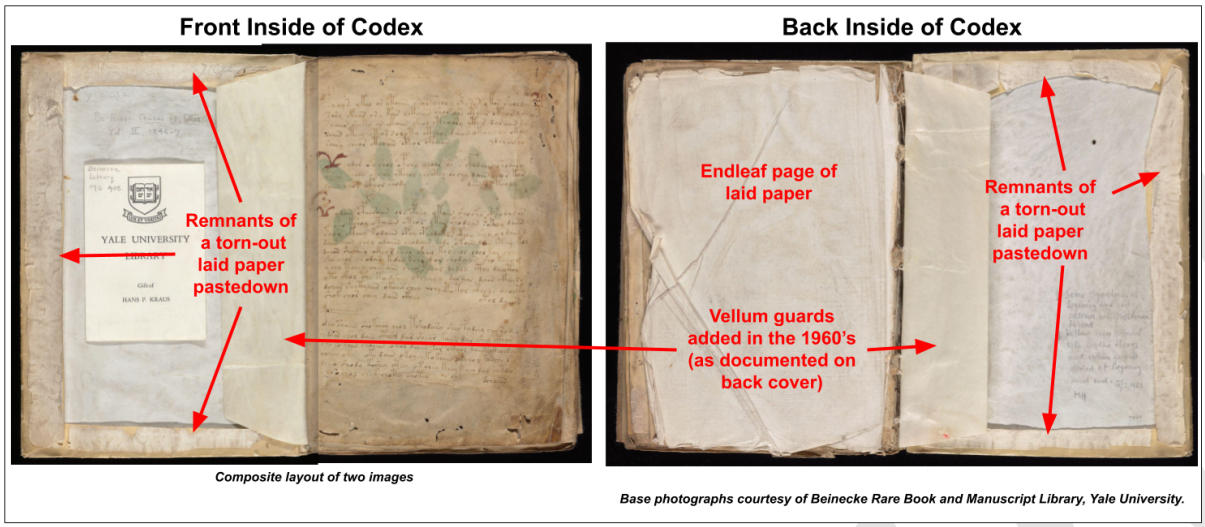


Figure 3: Codicological Features of the Voynich Manuscript

second and subsequent folios. And the height of the binding tab closely matches the vertical extent of the folios, reinforcing the interpretation that the letter was dimensioned with direct reference to the codex.

Taken together, these observations suggest that the Marci Letter was configured—possibly before as well as after the text was written—with a binding tab, a structured folding system, and features consistent with fastening and reinforcement. And that after removal from the codex, it was further folded to a compact size for insertion into an envelope or storage pocket. This combined codicological evidence supports the interpretation that the letter was designed for integration into the front matter of the codex, rather than as a conventional stand-alone letter.

5. Explanatory Narrative

As with a broader theory, an hypothesis concerning a repeatable phenomenon can be explored and clarified through the use of a "model", which helps organize assumptions, relate observations, and form predictions. In a more historically oriented or idiographic context, an analogous device is a "story" that serves as an explanatory narrative. Such a narrative is not typically claimed to be the only consistent explanation; it simply aims to bring the observations together into a plausible sequence of events, filling in gaps where evidence is absent, and suggesting details against which the hypothesis might be further tested.

Alternative narratives may differ in the details and remain consistent with the same evidence, but the following is one plausible reconstruction:

Johannes Marcus Marci inherited the Voynich Manuscript from Georgius Barschius, who was a mutual acquaintance of both Marci and Athanasius Kircher. Barschius had earlier written to Kircher seeking help in deciphering it, but had not provided the manuscript itself. Neither Barschius nor Marci had made progress on it themselves. In his later years, with his own hopes of deciphering the manuscript fading, Marci resolved to send it to Kircher as a gift.

Before doing so, Marci refurbished the codex. He likely repaired or replaced its deteriorating covers and added pastedowns to neaten the interior surfaces. He also added a paper endsheet at the back of the volume—and possibly one at the front as well—to separate the covers from the manuscript folios.

Marci then wrote a personal letter to Kircher on a separate sheet of paper which he trimmed to include a binding tab. Rather than sending the letter to simply accompany the book, he intended it to function as a presentation inscription within the book itself. In the letter, he included what limited information he

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had about the manuscript's origins. By integrating the letter into the codex, he not only personalized the gift but also secured a record of his own contribution toward uncovering the manuscript's history and possible meaning—positioning himself to share a little of the credit should Kircher succeed in deciphering it.

To secure the letter, Marci pasted it into the front of the codex using the binding tab. It was likely attached either to a now-missing endleaf (similar to the one still present at the back) or to the pastedown at the front of the codex. When folding the letter to fit within the volume, he found that the lower left corner required more clearance and so he trimmed it to allow proper closure of the book, cutting off part of his handwritten dateline in the process.

He then folded the bottom of the letter upward and the right side inward. To hold these folds in place, he applied two drops of sealing wax before making the second fold—one near the top on the front surface and one near the bottom on the exposed back. These were intended as temporary tacks to keep the folded sections in position. Finally, he placed a third drop of wax across the upper left edge of the binding tab, partly on the letter and partly on the underlying surface to which it was pasted, possibly impressing the drop with his personal seal.

When Kircher received the manuscript, he naturally did not treat Marci's letter as an independent item. Instead, he left it in place as part of the book. As a result, it was never included in the collected volumes of his correspondence from that same period.

After Kircher's death, the manuscript passed to the Jesuits along with his other possessions and papers. Over time, the codex may have undergone additional repairs or rebinding, but Marci's letter was retained in its attached configuration alongside the manuscript folios.

In 1911, Wilfrid Voynich acquired the manuscript as part of a collection of items in a somewhat secretive purchase. The letter clearly pointed to the fact that Kircher once owned the manuscript and that it therefore had likely passed through Jesuit hands. Although Voynich did not emphasize these implications publicly, he did not feel any need to conceal the letter either; he leveraged it as the primary support for his claim that the manuscript was a work of Roger Bacon, referring to it as the "Bacon Cipher".

Voynich exhibited the manuscript along with other items from the same purchase, even though some bindings shared stylistic features associated with Jesuit rebinding practices. Like the letter, this similarity could have served as a potential clue to Italian authorities that the materials had come, relatively recently, from Jesuit holdings that they had been confiscating. Nevertheless, Voynich does not appear to have been sufficiently concerned with secrecy to avoid publicly displaying them.

The manuscript, along with other items in his collection, were displayed in several exhibitions, including one at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1915. By 1918, newspaper accounts—such as one in the New York World—accurately described the letter as a flyleaf of the manuscript, a detail echoed in other publications.

Voynich was known to examine bindings for hidden materials, and he had likely, by this time, removed the manuscript's pastedowns at least in part. However, he initially left Marci's letter in place as a flyleaf and referred to its contents in discussions with potential buyers and with the press.

Voynich had moved his rare book business from London to New York in 1914, and had taken some time to acquire a staff and to promote himself and his collections through various exhibitions and dealings. By 1918, he had reestablished his business in the new location, and could then give more time and attention to researching the manuscript's history to better market and potentially sell it.

Sometime between 1918 and 1921, following the several public exhibitions, Voynich removed from the codex both the letter and the pastedowns—possibly along with a full front endleaf. In doing so, he broke the wax seal that spanned the upper left edge of the letter, tearing away a small fragment of the underlying paper to which it had been adhered; this fragment remained attached to the letter. At this stage, he may also have made copies of the letter for himself and his assistants to use in researching the individuals mentioned by Marci.

He then folded the letter into a smaller format to place it into an envelope for safekeeping–an envelope measuring very close to $3\frac{1}{8}$" by at least $5\frac{1}{2}$".

In 1921, Voynich delivered a lecture to the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, in which he discussed

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the letter and accurately described it as having been attached to the front cover of the codex when he first obtained it.

Voynich continued to promote the manuscript in hopes of profit until his death in 1930. Afterward, ownership passed jointly to Ethel Voynich and Anne Nill. The letter—possibly still stored in its envelope—and other materials relating to the manuscript may have been included in this inheritance or retained separately by Ethel.

Following Ethel's death in 1960, the care of the manuscript and other items transferred to Anne Nill. She soon sold it to Hans P. Kraus, who donated the materials to the Beinecke Library in 1969. At some point after Voynich's death, however, the letter was removed from its protective envelope, and the envelope itself was discarded.

6. Resolution of Historical Inconsistencies

The model proposed here offers a coherent account for several unresolved issues, while remaining consistent with both the codicological observations and the most widely accepted documentary evidence. Table 1 provides a summary of these issues, showing how they are addressed within a single explanatory framework that takes the documentary record at face value.

7. Counterarguments and Limitations

While the proposed hypothesis provides a scenario consistent with documented facts, potential counterarguments should be acknowledged:

1. The Kircher Carteggio includes many letters bound in volumes. The binding tab could have been for the purpose of binding the letter into one of them.

   All fourteen volumes of bound letters in the Kircher Carteggio are much larger in size than the 6"x9" Voynich codex. They contain over 2,000 letters, full size like the Marci Letter, but they have been bound without the need to fold them. And no similar trimming of letters to create a binding tab appendage on the letters is apparent.

2. t seems unlikely Marci attached the letter to the manuscript's current covers, since they are thought to date to the 18th–19th century; later removal and reattachment to different covers after 1665 should have left more readily detectable traces of handling and adhesive residue.

   Similar goat-skin limp vellum bindings with laid-paper end matter are attested from the 15th–17th centuries, so the current covers could plausibly date to Marci's time. Moreover, only a thin line of paste on the back of the binding tab is needed for tipping in. Residual paste on the binding tab may be visually undetectable until targeted testing is performed.

3. There are additional physical markings and stains that appear similar to the ‘‘temporary tacks’’ but which serve no functional purpose under the proposed hypothesis.

   These additional markings do remain unexplained, but they do not negate the interpretation of the rest of the physical evidence in support of the hypothesis.

8. Discussion and Implications

The physical evidence presented in this study provides strong support for the hypothesis that the Marci Letter was structurally integrated into the Voynich Manuscript as a bound or tipped-in flyleaf. Features such as the left-hand binding tab, the specific fold architecture optimized for enclosure within the front cover, and the functional use of sealing wax to form temporary tacks to hold the final fold, represent a cohesive and novel codicological framework.

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Issue	Description	Resolution
Absence from Kircher's Catalogs	Kircher's vast correspondence was bound into fourteen large volumes. The absence of the Marci Letter from this archive has been puzzling.	If the letter were bound into the Voynich Manuscript, it would not have been treated as a separate letter requiring cataloging with the rest of Kircher's correspondence.
Description as a "Flyleaf"	Early newspaper reports from 1918 explicitly refer to the letter's content as being conveyed in a "flyleaf". But by itself, it is clearly a "letter".	If originally bound into the manuscript, the description in the press was not metaphorical, but literal.
Voynich's Delayed Disclosure	Wilfrid Voynich did not publicly mention the letter until 1921, despite having claimed it was in the front cover when he first acquired the manuscript a decade earlier, and he knew of its contents at least as far back as 1915. This behavior appears suspicious and the inference has been that he was hiding its existence.	Wilfrid did not, in fact, delay mentioning it; he had always shared his understanding of its contents and displayed it publicly as an integral component of the manuscript. He just had no inclination to call it a "letter," since it presented just as readily as a flyleaf of the manuscript.
Ambiguous Description of "Attached"	In 1921, Voynich described the letter as "attached" to the front cover.	This was a candid and accurate description of its configuration.
Lack of Letter Attachment Evidence	No clear marks have been identified on the Voynich Manuscript to indicate the letter's former presence. Most recent attempts have focused on aligning wax residues on the letter to markings on the inside cover of the codex[8].	Most of the evidence of its attachment were removed when Voynich tore out the pastedowns along with the letter around 1918. Some evidence of its attachment may still remain on the letter and within the codex, but neither have yet been inspected with a focus on the relevant details.
Folding Inconsistent with Letter-Handling	The letter's physical form exhibits unusual features, including atypical folds, and wax residues inconsistent with standard letter handling practices.	It was never actually sent to anyone as a folded letter. And the combination of folds and sealing wax locations made for the purpose of concealing it within the codex and those for stowing it into an envelope have confounded attempts to make sense of it as a letter for transmission.

Table 1
Summary of evidentiary inconsistencies and their resolutions under the proposed hypothesis.

This proposed reinterpretation does not challenge the authenticity of the Marci Letter, nor does it diminish its evidentiary value regarding the manuscript's provenance. Instead, it offers a coherent model that parsimoniously resolves several longstanding historical and documentary anomalies and inconsistencies in a manner that fully aligns with known codicological and documentary evidence. The hypothesis, however, remains provisional and empirical testing through further material analysis is encouraged.

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9. Prospects for Further Evaluation of the Hypothesis

To advance this research, a formal proposal has been submitted to conduct non-invasive examinations of the original artifacts at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The proposed investigation employs high-resolution visible and raking-light imaging and, where feasible, multispectral analysis. These techniques are essential for identifying previously undetected markings, faint residues, watermarks, or microstructural features on the letter or manuscript that may corroborate the letter's historical integration and subsequent removal.

Below are several questions that could be addressed through a physical inspection of the artifacts:

1. Does the binding tab of the Marci Letter show any residual adhesive material (paste or glue) that would have been used to attach the tab to some part of the codex?
2. Is the small fragment in the letter's upper left corner indeed a separate shred of paper that has remains stuck to the letter or is it part of the original sheet?
3. Is either the letter or the fragment from the same stock of paper as the back endleaf?
4. If the fragment is an independent shred of paper, are the remains of the upper portion of the binding tab still hidden beneath it?
5. Is the wax residue seen beneath the fragment part of a seal that was applied across the edge of the binding tab, and does it show any remains of a stamped impression?
6. Is the full size endleaf at the back of the codex the same age as the Marci Letter?
7. Can a watermark be detected on the endleaf, and if so, does it resemble the one recently found[8] on the Marci Letter itself?

Declaration on Generative AI

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT-4 in order to: Paraphrase and reword.

Acknowledgments

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