A Mysterious Manuscript

**DIRECTIONS:** Read the passage. Then answer the questions. Cite evidence from the text to support your answers.

The Voynich manuscript is a handwritten book that is 246 pages long; it contains many illustrations and about 170,000 unknown characters. It is of historical interest since the fact that its characters are unknown means that no one has ever been able to read it. Carbon dating puts its date of origin somewhere between 1404 and 1438. It was discovered in 1912 in an Italian Jesuit College by a book collector named Wilfried Voynich, who claims that there was a letter tucked inside the book dated 1666. This letter named previous owners of the book, giving it something of a pedigree. Based on this letter, Voynich believed the book to have been written by the English monk Roger Bacon (1214–1294), though that theory has now been discredited.

It remains unclear who wrote the book or why, but there have been many speculations. An analysis of the book itself shows that the author wrote from left to right. The lettering is inconspicuous, both in style and size. There are no punctuation marks, but this is not uncommon with extremely old manuscripts. All of these things suggest that it is of European origin. Of note is the fact that there are no corrections evident in the text, suggesting that the author got everything perfect the first time, a rather uncommon occurrence with very long, handwritten manuscripts. There are no chapters or subheadings.

Almost all of the pages are illustrated, and some of the pages are folded so that when opened the illustrations are several pages wide. Though the book itself is not divided into chapters or even sections, the illustrations are of six distinct subjects: botany, astronomical charts, nude female figures in tubs, circles and rosettes, the apparent pharmaceutical use of plants, and an unillustrated section the text of which suggests that it contains food recipes. It is impossible to attribute it to any particular school or thought or religion. Compounding its curiosity, none of the 126 plant illustrations can be identified, though certain conclusions could be drawn about the date of the manuscript based on these illustrations, even before the carbon dating, based on the artistic style.

Scientists have been unable to determine whether or not the text is an encrypted message, or a text written in unknown letters. Analysis of letter frequencies suggest that the text is written in a usual language, but with 15 – 25 different unknown letters. The average word length is four or five letters,
commensurate with European, Greek or Latin languages, but different in that the Voynich manuscript doesn’t contain any two-letter words, or any words with more than ten characters. Even more strange, some words are repeated up to five times in a row, and the frequency of recurring words is unusually low. This suggests that the manuscript is probably not a simple code based on letter substitution, and it’s unclear whether other encryption methods are at play.

For the time being the Voynich manuscript remains a mystery, the book that – to the best of knowledge – no one has ever read.

1. What origin do scientists attribute to the Voynich manuscript and why?

2. Is the Voynich manuscript written in some kind of code?

3. How have scientists assigned a date to the manuscript?

4. Why do scientists think that the book probably has six chapters or sections?