

THE TWISTED APOTHECARY

“Thirteen million dollars!” I spluttered in disbelief. The man stepped out of the shadows. “Ah, but *ars longa, vita brevis*, Droffig. Art lives long; life is so very short.”

Baghdad’s secret places had been fascinating – from the remains of the fabled House of Wisdom to the world’s first apothecary, opened in 754CE. Now I was far to the north, closer to the Pole than any major town, standing in a gloomy apothecary quite unlike its Arab cousin. Yes, there were medicinal potions, but also plague masks, stuffed extinct creatures and devices of torture. A fog of sweet incense and death hung over the room.

I counted out the vast sum for the ancient Egyptian scrolls ordered by the Librarian. “But this is what you really came for,” the Apothecarist whispered, handing me a battered metal disc punched with 13 holes. “*Den Dårilige Sirkelen* – the Bad Circle. The Book curses many, but it is less known that a curse exists upon itself. I know not its name or its words, only that their order will be found ‘in the bones’ using this disc.”

I had many questions, but he insisted that time was short. I asked what I could and took hasty notes, but our meeting was over far too soon.

Morbid Medicine

- The Mayans of Central America would place fly maggots in a wound to eat dead tissue, helping to clean damaged flesh. The process is still in use today.
- In 2002 Rafael Lanixante was refused treatment in Argentina because the hospital records stated that he had died 22 years earlier.
- Villagers in Henan, China, have been treating leg cramps, bone fractures and dizziness with dinosaur bones ground into a powder or drunk as a soup.
- Many ancient Romans would strap a live toad to their jaw to cure toothache.
- Surgeons in 18th-century Prussia often treated people who stuttered by removing parts of their tongue.

“If your intent is serious, you will need these.” The Apothecarist placed three Tarot cards into my hands – Death, the Fool, and the Wheel of Fortune. “Two will gain you entry at the end, one will not. I know not which.” Three vials of poison followed. “That beloved by Hecate can neutralize the Book’s touch,” he whispered.

As I left, my head was spinning from his cryptic words. Yet something he had said reminded me of a newspaper story I had read at the cave auction. In a flash, I knew precisely where the last page of the Almangeist lay!



STRANGE SCRIPTS : 12
 A string of symbols including a sun, a star, and various geometric shapes.

STRANGE SCRIPTS : 14
The Voynich Manuscript
 In 1912 a book dealer, Wilfrid M Voynich, acquired a book of more than 230 vellum pages (with others missing), richly illustrated with bizarre images. Believed to have been written between 1300 and 1520, it is divided into sections on herbs, alchemy, astronomy and many other topics. Its author, language, characters and symbols remain a mystery to this day.

STRANGE SCRIPTS : 12
Dongba Script
 Used by the Naxi peoples of southern China for more than 1,000 years, Dongba contains over 1,000 symbols. It was first used for reciting rituals and incantations and, later, for recording lists of goods and for important letters. Tens of thousands of Dongba scrolls and manuscripts were destroyed in the 1960s and '70s.

Curse...

In Viking times the **midstang** was a wooden pole with a real horse’s head stuck on the end. The pole was carved with the words and symbols of a curse and the horse’s head was pointed towards the enemy.

A **nkisi nkondi** was used in the Kongo empire of Africa to track down and curse a criminal. It was a small wooden statue filled with medicine or ‘magical’ herbs, into which the curse-maker would drive a nail while chanting an oath.

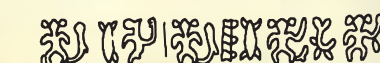
Witches in medieval Europe would curse a **wax figure** of a person, then throw it into a fire. According to King James I of England in his 1597 book *Daemonologie*: “By the roasting thereof, the persons that they bear the name of... may die away by continual sickness.”



Medieval scribes often wrote a curse in a book’s **colophon** (a panel at the end of the book, about how it was made). The curse was aimed at anyone who dared steal or damage a book, which may have taken years to complete. One example from a Bible read: “If anyone take away this book, let him die the death; let him be fried in a pan; let the falling sickness and fever seize him; let him be broken on the wheel and hanged.”

STRANGE SCRIPTS : 13

Rongorongo
 The Easter Island script of *kohau rongorongo* (“lines for chanting out”) is unique to the tiny Pacific island, one of the most isolated places in the world. Legend has it that the first settlers were led by a king, Hotu Matu’a, who arrived in a canoe with 67 wooden rongorongo tablets, carved using shark’s teeth. Only 24 still exist, and their meaning is yet to be fully deciphered.



...or Worse

In medieval times, horribly cruel punishments were given to people who committed even the smallest of crimes:



The **brank** was a punishment for medieval women accused of nagging their husbands or being a gossip. A metal mask was locked on to the woman’s head, often with a strap to hold the tongue still.

The **neck violin** was a punishment for people accused of fighting in medieval Austria and Germany. Two pieces of hinged wood – with holes for the head and both wrists – would be locked together, leaving the culprit in an embarrassing and painful position.

Men accused of bad behaviour in medieval England wore a **drunkard’s cloak** – a barrel with holes for their arms and legs, and scenes of their crimes painted on the outside. As they walked the streets in great discomfort, they would be jeered at by passers-by.



concertina stick down