

THE SKEPTICAL INTELLIGENCER

The Quarterly Magazine of ASKE
THE ASSOCIATION FOR SKEPTICAL ENQUIRY
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ANNOUNCING!

The 20th European Skeptics Congress
May 30, 2024 – June 2, 2024, Lyon, France

See [The European Scene](#) inside or go to:

<https://www.ecso.org/esc2024/>

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If you are an ASKE member in the UK and would like a paper copy, please email the Editor, Michael Heap
mheap712@gmail.com



FROM THE ASKE CHAIR

Michael Heap

The Future of ASKE

Summary

- As from January 2024, ASKE will stop collecting membership subscriptions. Members who have subscribed in advance should now have had their advance subscriptions returned (if requested).
- The *Skeptical Intelligence* ceases publication in December 2023. Back copies of the *Skeptical Intelligence* and the *Skeptical Adversaria* are now publicly available for reading on the ASKE website.
- The longstanding ASKE website (<https://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk/>) will continue largely unchanged (though without the members' section and the ASKE Paranormal Challenge), but new material will be added, and will be welcome. Donations to support the cost of maintaining the website are invited.
- The ASKE Facebook is currently under construction. Anyone may join the group and contribute (posts will be moderated).

Details

This is the final issue of the *Skeptical Intelligence* (*SI*), the quarterly magazine of ASKE, the Association for Skeptical Enquiry. The *Intelligence* first appeared in very basic form in 1997 around the time that ASKE was established. It was the brainchild of Wayne Spencer, who devoted much energy over the following two years to transforming it into a more substantial and academic quarterly journal. I took over as editor in 2001 and from 2002 to 2012 it appeared annually. Around the beginning of this period, Tony Youens began editing a newsletter, the *Skeptical Adversaria*, which, like the *SI*, was delivered to all ASKE members. I took over editorship in 2004 when it began appearing quarterly. From 2013 onwards the *Adversaria* was absorbed into the *Intelligence*, which then

appeared quarterly. Eventually, this was circulated electronically, rather than by post, to members (with the option of also receiving a paper copy as well). It has also been circulated electronically to many skeptical societies and groups around the world, and to certain individuals prominent in skepticism.

Back copies of the *Intelligence* and the *Adversaria* have been accessible to ASKE members on the ASKE website (behind a username and password). As from the time of writing this, these will be available to any visitor to the site.

As noted above, ASKE itself was established in 1997 by a steering committee of several people, including Anne Corden, Michael Heap, Mark O'Leary, Wayne Spencer, Tony Youens and Dave Unsworth. The purpose was to establish a national skeptical organisation in the UK that people could join on payment of a subscription, and which promoted the aims of skepticism by communicating with the media, advising the public on issues such as unorthodox medicine and paranormal claims, distributing newsletters and other publications, holding public meetings, and so on. There were already several such societies around the world, including in the US, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Italy, and Australia. These were, and still are, the most substantial skeptical groups, with memberships in the hundreds or thousands. However, ASKE in its early years attracted a little over 100 members, and over the years the membership has dwindled to less than thirty. Perhaps in the UK people prefer to promote skepticism as individuals (with their own website) or in small local groups (e.g. Skeptics in the Pub). Nevertheless ASKE, as with many of the European skeptical organisations, has enjoyed the privilege of affiliate membership of the European Council of Skeptical Organisations (ECSO) and has been twice involved in hosting the

bi-annual European Skeptics Congress in London under the auspices of ECSO.

As from 2024, ASKE will cease collecting membership subscriptions and will rely on donations to help keep the website going. This website now serves the following purposes:

- An archive of articles and essays on skeptical topics that accumulated on the website, including back copies of the *Skeptical Intelligence* and *Skeptical Adversaria*.
- A source of information on the nature and scope of skepticism
- A resource providing guidance to people wishing to further their interest in skepticism through materials such as books and other publications and the digital media, websites of relevant groups and individuals, meetings (in person and virtual) where topics of concern to skeptics are presented and discussed, and so on
- A bulletin board of announcements in the media, the academic literature, and other sources that are of relevance to skepticism
- A means whereby people may publish their ideas and contributions on matters relating to skepticism where these are consistent with ASKE's aims and principles.

Thus we welcome the participation of anyone who wishes to contribute material for this website, such as essays, book reviews, opinions and announcements, and more ambitious projects such as a regular column (e.g. Mark Newbrook will continue his 'Language on the Fringe' series), videos and even podcasts, so long as these contributions are consistent with ASKE's aims and principles. If you would like to be involved in any of these ways, please get in touch using the email mheap712@gmail.com.

The ASKE Facebook is up and running but not yet complete. Its purpose is for people to provide news,

announce upcoming meetings, share ideas, discuss current events and other topics, and so on, consistent with the aims and principles of ASKE. At:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/881486716621055>

More on Unsinkable Rubber Ducks

In the previous issue of the *Intelligencer*, I talked about ‘the unsinkable rubber duck’, much publicized by James Randi, whereby ‘apparently mysterious occurrences or phenomena which, despite the availability of rational explanations or refuting evidence, continue to be treated as unsolved mysteries.’ I cited the Loch Ness Monster as one example, others being the Bermuda Triangle, the Turin Shroud, UFO sightings, crop circles, and so on. ASKE has received the following from Ray Ward:

I too was saddened to hear of yet another attempt to find the Loch Ness monster, apparently on the assumption there is something to be found.

‘I know exactly what Randi meant by the unsinkable rubber duck. No matter how thoroughly settled a matter may seem, it will very often refuse to lie down (or stay sunk, to follow the analogy), and your examples of the Loch Ness monster, the Turin Shroud etc. are very apposite. I too was saddened to hear of yet another attempt to find the Loch Ness monster, apparently on the assumption there is something to be found. When nothing emerges (and, of course, nothing will), many will still refuse to accept that it proves there is no monster. The Turin Shroud “mystery” was settled long ago, with the finding that it is nowhere near as old as it would have to be if authentic, but, inevitably, many refuse to believe that.

‘The problem is that people commit a fundamental logical error. They say of astrology, for instance, that maybe

it’s some unknown power or force. Maybe WHAT is caused by such things? Astrological effects and influences? But no such things have been shown to exist, and all claimed manifestations of them are explicable in ways which do not require such assumptions. People say, in effect: We have a mystery: how can we solve it? That is not the first question to ask. The first thing to ask is: is there a mystery? Is there anything requiring explanation? Very often, the answer is No. I call it the Bermuda Triangle approach, after another matter you mention which is, I think, the classic example of a manufactured mystery. The answer to the question: Why do ships and aircraft vanish mysteriously in that part of the North Atlantic is simple: they don’t. Many reported incidents are entirely fictitious, with no evidence that any such thing ever happened. Others are basically real, but distorted and embellished and exaggerated almost beyond recognition - or, on the contrary, omitting details which might provide an explanation, such as a violent storm, or a vessel in very poor condition, or carrying hazardous substances. Some happened outside the usually delineated borders of the Triangle (which sometimes seem very elastic! - the Mary Celeste has been mentioned, for example, though it was found on the other side of the Atlantic); and some, indeed, didn’t happen in the Atlantic at all.

‘Long ago I saw a television programme about the Triangle which gave an enquiry number which I was curious enough to ring. I found myself talking to a woman who said that the man in the programme had apparently solved the Bermuda Triangle mystery. I tried, without success, to convey to her that there is no Bermuda Triangle mystery!

‘Anyway, I have flown through the Triangle several times, and I’m still here - I think!’

In the days when ASKE and the *Skeptical Intelligencer* were established, these topics provided much

material for the skeptical literature (and similar ideas and practices such as alternative medicines, astrology and mediumship). None of these has disappeared under the bathwater for ever, despite all the efforts of the skeptical movement. However, I do believe that nowadays the mainstream media are much more likely to adopt a skeptical stance (or at least provide the opinions of skeptical experts) when these and similar topics are aired. What has also happened is that over time, other matters of concern have come to the fore and are now demanding much attention in the skeptical literature and at talks and conferences. Notable are the spread of misinformation (particularly on the internet), conspiracy theories, the anti-vaccination movement, and unfounded claims and poor research in mainstream science and medicine, religious, the need to teach critical thinking in schools, and the importance of the adoption of evidence-based policies by whoever is in government.

I do believe that nowadays the mainstream media are much more likely to adopt a skeptical stance (or at least provide the opinions of skeptical experts).

And almost finally

And finally, an apology to Ray Ward for the mistake in the ISBN number of *The Reliability of UFO Witness Testimony*, the book he reviewed in the last issue of the *Intelligencer*. This should be ISBN 9791281441002 (not 978.....).

Stop press

Most readers will have read about King Charles’s appointment of Michael Dixon, a GP who promotes ‘complementary’ medicines such as homeopathy, as head of the royal medical household. A letter on this subject, in the *Times*, 12.12.23 from pharmacist Peter Halford, proposes that ‘complementary’ medicine should change its name to ‘contradictory’ medicine (for reasons obvious to any sensible person). What a good idea!



LOGIC AND INTUITION

Where's the father?

If you can still remember the basic algebra that you learnt at school, you should be able to solve this little puzzle.

Sue is 21 years older than her son, who in 6 years will be one-fifth of her age. Where's his father?

How much profit?

Omar buys a second-hand bike for £50, then sells it to his friend for £60. After realising that the bike is worth much more than this, he persuades his friend to sell it back to him for £70. He then

sells it to another person for £80. How much profit has he made?

(You may find this puzzle too simple to even bother with. But have you missed anything? Think carefully!)
Answer on page 18.



THE EUROPEAN SCENE

European Council for Skeptics Organisations

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany

Website: <http://www.ecso.org/> (which has an email contact facility)

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/skeptics.eu/>

ECSCO also has a Twitter handle, @SkepticsEurope.

The ECSCO website now has a comprehensive calendar of skeptical events taking place across Europe, replicated at the ESP website (below).

The ESP - European Skeptics Podcast



Building a bridge for skeptics

<http://theesp.eu/>

Find out what is happening on the skeptical scene throughout Europe by visiting this site. Listen to their latest podcast, which as usual covers a multitude of diverse topics. Also check the Events Calendar for Europe at:

https://theesp.eu/events_in_europe

The 20th European Skeptics Congress

SAVE THE DATE!

May 30, 2024 – June 2, 2024, Lyon, France

‘Join us for an event with skeptics across Europe in Lyon, France, with exciting talks on science, skepticism and critical thinking with expert speakers

‘The enchanting city of Lyon in France is a rich cultural experience. Nestled along the banks of the Rhône and Saône rivers, Lyon seamlessly blends its historical heritage with a vibrant modern ambience. Renowned for its UNESCO-listed Old Town, Lyon boasts a tapestry of cobblestone streets, medieval architecture, and Renaissance mansions.’

For more information go to:

<https://www.ecso.org/esc2024/>



MEDICINE ON THE FRINGE

Déjà vu and skepticism

The present and previous ‘From the ASKE Chair’ both contain discussion of ‘the unsinkable rubber duck’ analogy. It would not take long for anyone new to skepticism to become thoroughly acquainted with this phenomenon. However, it might take longer to become aware of a related and more general effect, namely the experience of

déjà vu or ‘Haven’t we been here before?’ This happened to me quite recently when I read a BBC news announcement entitled ‘Clampdown on unproven fertility treatment add-ons’ (*note 1*). According to this report:

‘Fertility treatment “add-ons” offered to patients in the UK do not always improve their chances of having a baby, according to a new ratings

system from the fertility regulator. It follows concerns clinics are offering unproven treatments costing hundreds or thousands of pounds. Clinics must give clear information on costs and success rates, experts say. Support groups hope the ratings will improve the stressful process of buying private fertility treatment. Add-ons are optional, non-essential treatments that

may be offered in addition to proven fertility treatments, such as IVF (in-vitro fertilisation), in private clinics. Support group Fertility Network UK welcomed the new HFEA ratings system, which uses five colours—ranging from green to red—to indicate the amount of evidence an add-on is effective at improving the chances of having a baby.’

‘Haven’t we been here before?’ I heard my inner voice ask. A quick search of past issues of the *Skeptical Intelligencer* revealed (volume 19(4), 2016) that seven years ago, in a study published in the online journal *BMJ Open*, many claims made by UK fertility clinics about the benefits of treatments that are offered in addition to standard IVF procedures are not backed up by evidence. The findings were featured in a Panorama undercover investigation broadcast on 28.11.16 on BBC1 television. According to the 2016 study (note 2):

‘A total of 74 fertility centre websites, incorporating 1401 web pages were examined for claims. The team found 276 claims of benefit relating to 41 different fertility interventions made by 60 of the 74 centres. 79 (29%) of the claims included numbers to explain the chances of improved fertility outcomes, but the team identified only 13 websites where any references were included, which referred to just 16 published references. Of these 16 references, only five were high level systematic review evidence.’

I wonder if anything will have changed in another seven years.

On being a patient

So this is the last Medicine on the Fringe, unless any of you are interested in contributing a regular blog on the ASKE website from January 2024. Most of these pieces been contributed by me but the disadvantage is, of course, that I am not a medically qualified person (we have had excellent contributions from medical doctors who have kindly responded to my invitation). Indeed, until the summer of 2022 I had little experience of being a

patient, having enjoyed good health throughout my life. However around that time, at the age of 73, I was diagnosed with advanced prostate cancer which had spread up my pelvis and back and to my ribs and lymph nodes. Despite this, I had no symptoms of cancer, being in good health and very fit for my age.

I then began having hormone suppressant injections every three months. The rationale behind this treatment is that it impedes the spread of prostate cancer cells, which bind with testosterone. While I experienced no side effects, consultation with our local cancer hospital led me to opt for daily oral medication of another hormone suppressant in addition to the injections.

Naturally, there are side effects of this medication but at 73 I was OK about accepting these and experienced no discomfort or pain. There was one notable exception: if I engaged in any serious strenuous activity, notably running, I would quickly lose my stamina and occasionally would experience pressure across my chest. This quickly disappeared once I had rested and I was able to continue with what I was doing, sometimes with no further chest discomfort. Eventually however, these symptoms became more frequent and when I went swimming they started to happen soon after I had set off. Before all this I was running once or twice a week for about an hour and swimming weekly for over half a mile. I also did a little weight training, which was not affected.

In retrospect I should have made more of this problem and I intended to do so at my next telephone appointment with the oncology nurse. However I woke up one night with pressure on my chest, prompting me to ring the emergency services. The result was a diagnosis of a mild heart attack, though the symptoms had disappeared by the time the paramedics arrived. I was admitted to the inpatient cardiac unit of one of our general hospitals, and angiogram revealed narrowing of two arteries to my heart. The consultant recommended a double bypass heart operation over stent insertion owing to

the risk of a serious and possibly fatal heart attack.

On September 26th, I underwent this operation, involving sternum breakage for artery access, long incisions in both legs, with vein removal for grafting to redirect the blood flow. While feeling well leading up to the surgery, the post-operative period left me spending a few days in intensive care feeling pretty helpless. Remarkably, I was discharged after a week, although recovery spans several months with gradual re-engagement in activities, adherence to an exercise routine, dietary considerations, and so on.

The disability and suffering that I have endured since I went to my GP with very minor symptoms have been entirely caused by the treatment subsequently received.

A major downside of this is that I can no longer take the oral medication that, in medical terms, had proved so successful (my antigen blood count fell from a high of 337 to less than one). I still have the quarterly injections, but there is nothing else the oncologist can offer me yet.

So now I ask myself, ‘Has it all been worth it?’ The disability and suffering that I have endured since I went to my GP with very minor symptoms (and otherwise feeling ‘on top of the world’) have been entirely caused by the treatment subsequently received. I have had no symptoms of cancer at all. This has left me wondering what would have happened had I just ignored those symptoms and not been to the doctor at all. I was informed by the urologists that if I didn’t have any treatment, maybe in six months or a year I would be in a bad way. However I have still been in a bad way because of the treatments I’ve been having.

The bottom line is that sometimes for a patient with a serious illness there are various ways of living and dying and medical treatment offers one such way.

But living isn't just 'surviving'. At the moment in the UK (and in the Isle of Man and Jersey) there are strong pressures to legalise what is called 'assisted dying', i.e. allowing terminally ill patients who are enduring what *for them* is unbearable suffering the choice of taking medication which will bring forward the moment when their ordeal is over and they can 'rest in peace'. I am a member of Humanists UK and I'm aware that they have been very active in campaigning for this choice to be legally available in this country. I rarely participate in campaigns such as this and if I did I

would first want to research the issue in greater depth and have more experience of the issues involved. However, I can say that I would like to know *now* that, should the time ever come when *my* days are numbered and I am having to endure considerable mental and physical anguish, I shall have the choice to continue to 'survive' in this manner or to take medication, of my own free will, and bring my final period of suffering to an end. I cannot say which of these options I would choose, but I want to know that I will be allowed this choice. I believe this is what most people would want.

I know that there are very many people considerably worse off than I am. But telling myself this brings me little solace. What is hardest to bear is knowing that the person I am now is significantly worse off than the person I was in 2022. I suspect that most people think in this way. But I am getting better by the day and, having previously been so fortunate with my health, maybe I shall be sticking around for a good number of years. Who knows?

Notes

1. <https://tinyurl.com/4sputm9v>
2. <http://tinyurl.com/zsjpg5o>



LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

This will be the final instalment of Language On The Fringe in this 'hybrid' format. I hope to continue with the series in online mode and also to present more reviews and articles on skeptical linguistics and associated areas of interest.

Recently there has been something of a spate of amateur/maverick proposals involving issues concerning ancient languages and scripts. These proposals are often presented as if the 'solutions' proposed are clearly correct; they have simply not been noticed until now. This view of the matter is often overtly signalled by the tendentious use of unmodified expressions such as *deciphered* (the writer does not say anything like 'I present a **proposed** decipherment') and/or of 'factive' verbs such as *realise* (if someone says that they themselves or someone else has 'realised' that something is the case, this wording implies that it definitely **is** the case; in English, you cannot 'realise' that something is the case if it is only possibly the case, still less if it is **not** the case, so it is self-confounding to say 'X realised that Y was the case but (s)he was wrong').

Linear A

The British forensic accountant Mark Cook has claimed in this vein (*note 1*) that the texts inscribed in the Cretan Linear A script represent accounting

and are in a form of originally Egyptian shorthand.

Now it is true that much of the later Linear B material (archaic Greek) represents inventories of goods (as in accounting); but given that Linear A has so far resisted decipherment any comparison between the two systems is speculative. And, even if Cook is essentially correct, the Linear A material is presumably not entirely numerical, and the identification of the non-Hellenic and quite probably non-Indo-European **linguistic** elements of the Linear A texts (often labelled 'Minoan' as a place-holder) is quite another matter. (The average length of the texts is too long to encourage cross-linguistic **semiotic** interpretations such as have been offered in the case of the Indus Valley Script.)

Cook is not a linguist, and although he has modelled his approach in a general sense on those adopted by qualified linguists who have worked on the linear scripts (notably Alice Kober) he is, in places, inexpertly 're-inventing wheels' and not fully grasping the gist of scholarly discourse on the subject.

His proposal regarding Egyptian connections is based on wholly indecisive evidence such as the similarity of form between one Linear A character and one Egyptian hieroglyph which appear to share a meaning ('zero'). Any linguist will object that such isolated pairs of characters can demonstrate nothing. Cook also suggests that Crete in the period in question was under Egyptian administration, for which there is no persuasive evidence (only some relatively limited evidence of trading links).

Cook also suggests that Crete in the period in question was under Egyptian administration, for which there is no persuasive evidence.

And the whole idea of an Egyptian shorthand system is essentially unsupported. Cook proposes that later Greek and Roman shorthand (known as stenography or tachygraphy) were derived from such an Egyptian system;

but the origins of these systems are seriously disputed and no Egyptian element has been reliably identified (nor would its presence appear likely)

Cook's bibliography also omits some key recent texts, including the crucial work of Ester Salgarella. And although his expertise in accountancy might enable him to perceive interpretations of the Linear A material which others might miss, it could also induce him to favour such interpretations when the evidence for them is inadequate.

If Cook wants his proposal to be taken seriously, he should recruit a sympathetic linguist to assist him.

If Cook wants his proposal to be taken seriously, he should recruit a sympathetic linguist to assist him. There **are** some guardedly positive reviews of his work, for instance one by the Egyptologist Zeta Xekalaki (*note 2*); but, inevitably, serious issues remain to be addressed.

Alphabetical order

Judith Dillon is a writer with a relevant undergraduate background (a degree in Near Eastern languages and anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley) who has become interested in the 'Mystery Traditions' and has arrived at a dramatically non-standard interpretation of her subject-matter: the ordering of letters in the group of historically-related alphabets and near-alphabets which includes our own Roman alphabet (*note 3*). (She is not the first to go this way; the maverick James Churchward held that the Greek alphabet, as normally recited, is really a poem in Mayan (*note 4*), and even today some fringe writers naively regard this as true.) I will review Dillon's forthcoming book (*note 5*) in due course. But under the circumstances I deem it reasonable to comment briefly now.

I first became aware of Dillon's ideas in the context of her highly non-mainstream online account (*note 6*) of

the symbols X, + and 0, in which X in its sense 'times' (as in $3 \times 2 = 6$) and + are treated as 'variants' referring to increase, with X used to symbolise a kiss also invoked; further meanings and uses of these symbols are then implicated and a wide-ranging metaphysical-cum-mythological semi-otic system is developed on this basis. Of course, very simple symbols such as these can easily come to have a range of unconnected uses in different languages; and unconnected symbols may have identical or very similar forms, as Roman capital O and 0 (zero) (in English, often read off as 'oh' in numerical expressions such as 1902). There is also much speculation here, some reliance on secondary sources not fully understood, and some plain error. Much stronger evidence and much tighter argumentation would be required for Dillon's ideas on this front to be accepted.

Dillon's material as discussed here is linked with other material by other hands, much of which involves the idea that the ancestor of the Hebrew and Phoenician abjads (alphabets representing only consonant phonemes, which in turn were the ancestors of the Greek and Roman alphabets) arose in Egypt. This is quite possible, but the relevant Egyptian forms are not themselves at all extensively or systematically evidenced and the details remain very speculative.

Dillon herself is now going much further than this. In the 'blurb' for her upcoming book she claims that she can 'reveal[s] the secrets hidden in the symbols chosen to represent early alphabet letters and how their order, a pattern inherited by numerous traditions, is an alchemical spell to return the sun from the dark and guide the soul toward enlightenment'. She continues, drawing on various mythical and mystical traditions to claim that 'each letter represented a specific stage on the alchemical path toward enlightenment' and dividing 'the alphabet' as ordered into three parts, respectively representing Earth and the natural year, the Underworld and the 'hero's journey' and lastly the

'Heavens' and astronomical cycles (*note 7*). Given that the history of the alphabets since Phoenician times is well documented, these novel 'findings' presumably apply largely to the more remote past, and serious evidence needs to be rehearsed. From a linguistic point of view, it will be interesting to see what Dillon has to say about the shifting membership of 'the alphabet' and its varied ordering. More generally, she needs to do better than most academically trained or half-trained authors whose ideas have moved in such directions (some of whom I have discussed in the past in this forum).

Stone Age signing?

It has been suggested that stencils of 'mutilated' hands (minus some fingers) found amongst bodies of cave paintings could represent an upper Palaeolithic 'sign language' (*note 8*). Such images are reported from around the world, but the key location involved here is the French Pyrenees (*note 9*). The term *sign language* is adopted because of supposed parallelisms with modern human sign languages such as those used by the deaf. It is argued that only handshapes that are articulable in the air are found in the data and that the absent fingers were not actually missing but were deliberately selected to be taken out of play so as to vary the messages.

It would need to be argued that the messages supposedly being communicated here are complex enough and highly enough differentiated to warrant the term *language*. And unless the variations in the stencils can be correlated with other information (difficult!) the suggestion appears speculative to say the least. There is a further, more obviously speculative suggestion that what is involved here is an 'alternate' or 'non-primary' sign language used by people whose main language was spoken. But the authors of the main relevant paper (published in 2021) have informed themselves in some depth about the sign-language literature and their claim must be taken seriously, although it would be premature to come to a firm

judgment that their hypothesis is correct.

Early ‘feminist language’

The artist Bridget Wilkinson started from the concept that the first genuine human being was female (a contentious but not unscientific notion; compare the work of anthropologists such as Elaine Morgan, whom I have discussed in this forum) and went on from that point to speculate about feminist language and to arrive at ‘fabulations’ about the past, the present and a possible ‘utopian’ future. I myself viewed her (impressive) artistic material on 27/5/23 in her exhibition ‘Nomansland’ at Warrington Museum & Art Gallery (*note 10*). Wilkinson proclaims the now standard and justified objections to terms such as *mankind* but goes on to develop a presumably fictional feminist account of humans evolving from the original mother into ‘dunkwonhami’ inhabiting a fantasy realm full of varied abstract and concrete entities, including linguistic categories such as words and their references & meanings, interacting intensively. Predictably, distinctions of gender are salient here. I remain unsure as to how much of Wilkinson’s material is intended as making veridical or at least arguable factual claims. It would perhaps not be in the interests of those who are mainly artists to be explicit on this front.

Some people wish that there were only one language for the whole of humanity.

Only one language?

Some people wish that there were only one language for the whole of humanity; they regard the perceived advantages of such a situation as vastly outweighing any disadvantages of which they are aware. Some feel so strongly about this that they start or join movements aimed at developing a universal language and installing it as a central feature of human life across the world. The case of Esperanto is well known but it is far from the only such case.

Even today, some thinkers propose that having a single language, or at least a single 2nd language, would solve many of the problems of humanity. One recent proposal along these lines is due to Baba Alexander (*note 11*), who has also worked on improving methods for the teaching of English. He says: ‘One World One Language is the medicine that can unite mankind over region, country, religion, cast and creed. If we translate all the religion and other philosophies in the world into a common language, all will understand it and there will be unity and friendship in the world.’ Realistically given the current situation, he seems to regard English, not an invented language, as the best candidate for this status.

Other thinkers, notably sociolinguists, emphasise the advantages of having a range of diverse languages associated with diverse ways of thinking and of understanding the world. They also stress the difficulty, to say the least, of establishing a single world language, even as a universal 2nd language – a status which even English has not achieved. Translating culturally significant and abstract ideas between languages is notoriously fraught; some would say that it is (near-)impossible. (I recently met someone – with a science PhD – from a Muslim background who rehearsed the traditional view that the original Arabic text of the Qur’an cannot be meaningfully translated into any other language.)

Another position, one which some linguists would accept as at least possibly correct and which is naively assumed to be correct by some thinkers such as Baba Alexander, is that all known human languages (whether still used or not) – or indeed all the human languages which have ever existed, whether known of today or not – are descended from one common ancestor, often dubbed Proto-World. On this account, human beings developed language only once. This probably indemonstrable theory is known as ‘monogenesis’. (There are more complex versions of this theory but they are not relevant here.) A single

universal ancestor language, if one ever existed, would have been used at a very early date when the population of the world was much smaller. It would almost certainly be impossible for us to discover any details about it (although some mavericks, most of them quixotically assigning a much more recent date to Proto-World, have thought otherwise).

The Old Testament revisited

I have remarked before in this forum on issues with the text of the Old Testament, which comes down to us in a very largely Hebrew version (presumably it was originally composed in Hebrew) and in a Greek translation of Hellenistic date known as the Septuagint. One feature of the Septuagint of which many readers of the OT are unaware is that it contains various inserted passages, perhaps to be read as footnotes but not marked as such in the text. A while ago I discussed here a theologically important clause in the Septuagint version of the Book of Isaiah which is simply not found in the Hebrew.

As Biblical Hebrew became less familiar to Jewish believers during the Common Era (after the time of Jesus) it became necessary to embellish the text of the OT...

Another issue involves the fact that as Biblical Hebrew became less familiar to Jewish believers during the Common Era (after the time of Jesus) it became necessary to embellish the text of the OT, written in the Hebrew abjad (see above) which displayed only the consonants. Accent-marks were added to represent the vowels of Hebrew, which readers had previously been assumed to be able to supply from their native-speaker knowledge of the language. (By way of analogy, native speakers of English can readily supply the vowels of texts such as *Ths s jst pssbl n Nglsh* from which they have been omitted, even though English vowels are less predictable than Hebrew

vowels.) The scholars responsible for the ‘pointing’ of Hebrew are known as the Masoretes; they lived in Judaea in C7 CE. (They also added many marginal explanatory notes.) The Masoretes were concerned to avoid changing the much respected consonantal text itself but to clarify it for contemporary users.

Dogmatism about the interpretation of the Hebrew OT (as reflected in the Septuagint or in later translations into other languages) is not to be recommended.

Various writers have challenged the specific decisions arrived at by the Masoretes, in some cases suggesting that the text and its meaning were distorted thereby. In 2013 David Marcus and James A. Sanders reminded Jewish and Christian Bible students of the continuing need to refer to critical editions of the Bible and to be aware that various controversies remain (*note 12*). Even for non-Hebraicists – perhaps especially for non-Hebraicists who cannot read the original – authoritative comments such as these should serve as a reminder that dogmatism about the interpretation of the Hebrew OT (as reflected in the Septuagint or in later translations into other languages) is not to be recommended.

Readers of longer standing may remember my comments in this forum on David Leonardi, who presented a complicated but superficially plausible case for grosser and perhaps tendentious errors made by the

Masoretes, altogether transforming the messages in the text of the OT and indeed misrepresenting the structures of the Hebrew language itself. The fact that Leonardi is clearly mistaken would not be apparent to most Christians, even to those who know some Hebrew.

And a cryptozoological coda!

What is the focus of interest when skeptics examine cryptozoological claims? Presumably, it is on the question of whether or not unidentified, supposedly extinct or otherwise very mysterious animal species really exist today as flesh-&-blood creatures, as most identifying cryptozoology enthusiasts hold. But much recent discussion by ‘trendy’ commentators on the subject treats this focus as off-target and of little if any interest. Instead, writers such as Chelsea Frisbie (*note 13*) proclaim, one should regard cryptids as important features of the traditional cultures of the indigenous peoples who inhabit the areas where they are reported – often features of their mythology. No such animals will be found by applying scientific methods. Indigenous spokespersons are in fact quoted as discouraging such research – and sometimes as decrying the entire ‘western’ focus upon science, perceived as scientific.

Now there is obviously a point to be made here about the origins of local beliefs and reports concerning cryptids – although it is not clear how such stipulations would apply to those reported only **within** ‘western’ societies such as those ‘seen’ in the modern British Isles. But surely neither non-indigenous enthusiasts nor skeptics will be persuaded by these statements to change their focus. If we really become

convinced that some cryptid is **only** mythological in character, yes, we will abandon the search for it (and leave the matter to mythologists – who could indeed be ourselves under other hats). But whether or not a cryptid is a real animal, and what it is like if it is one, will clearly remain our chief concern.

I hope to continue with the series, if less regularly and only online.

Envoi

I thank my readers for taking an interest in my column and my other scribings in this forum over the last sixteen years. I hope to continue with the series, if less regularly and only online.

Notes

1. Mark Cook, *Rewriting History: The Decipherment of Linear A and a History of Egypto-Cretan Relations in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages* (Sydney, 2022); <https://tinyurl.com/464u68ex>.
2. <https://tinyurl.com/yeyw9c63>.
3. See <https://tinyurl.com/mvhyjf8d>.
4. James Churchward, *The Lost Continent of Mu*. London, 1959, pp 102-105.
5. Judith Dillon, *Alphabets and the Mystery Traditions* (forthcoming). Rochester VT: Inner Traditions.
6. <https://tinyurl.com/2r59p597>.
7. <https://tinyurl.com/4sshu79e>.
8. <https://tinyurl.com/yfvva634>.
9. <https://tinyurl.com/h3f6c6hh>.
10. <https://tinyurl.com/4nj2yd65>.
11. <https://tinyurl.com/4f5taasu>.
12. <https://tinyurl.com/2pberu5r>.
13. <https://tinyurl.com/2uhr2h2h>.

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARIES



The Voyage of Aeneas of Troy Bernard Jones. Trojan History Press, 2023, pp ix + 254 + 56.

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

The book under review here is an example of how some writers with inadequate knowledge of the relevant disciplines develop detailed revisionist interpretations of bodies of material which they themselves regard as representing discovered truth but which in fact do not hold up at all.

Various non-mainstream theories involve the Greek legends regarding the Siege of Troy (normally thought to be represented by one layer of the ruins at what is now Hisarlik, on the Aegean coast of Anatolia) and its aftermath (the victorious Greek leaders returning home). These legends are recounted in the long epic poems attributed to the (himself possibly legendary) poet Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which were originally oral works and very probably pre-date, in their earliest (lost) forms, the revival of Greek literacy arising from the introduction of the alphabet.

In 2019 the amateur historian Bernard Jones published a book entitled *The Discovery of Troy and its Lost History*, in which he emulated some earlier non-mainstream authors (notably Iman Wilkens, *note 1*) in re-locating the events of the Trojan Cycle from the Aegean to North-Western Europe and more specifically to the British Isles; Troy itself, he maintained, was on the coast of East Anglia, and the various Homeric Greek peoples were located in Scotland (and indeed were the ancestors of the Scots and the Irish).

Jones describes himself as ‘a historian of some 40 years who completed his post graduate research in ancient philosophy/mythology and ancient history’. As far as I can see, Jones provides no details of his post-graduate studies, which is hardly

encouraging if one is supposed to acknowledge his expertise.

I reviewed Jones’ 2019 book in *The Skeptical Intelligencer* 22:3 (2019) (pp 11-14). Writing as a skeptical linguist and secondarily as a general skeptic with an undergraduate background and an ongoing interest in ancient history, I observed that the linguistic aspect of Jones’ case, specifically, was of no account. If he were to make out a case for his claims, it would have to be on other grounds. But these other grounds were themselves weak, to say the least. I concluded that Jones’ book should not be taken seriously by non-expert readers.

My highly negative review, omitted by Jones, remains the only known professional academic review of the book.

I do not know whether Jones ever saw my review. At the time of writing there are 13 links to other reviews of the 2019 book on his website (*note 2*). All of these are strongly positive, although one of them, by way of a specific query, not unreasonably questions Jones’ failure to identify any archaeological remains of the ‘real Troy’ – and wonders as to the actual identity of the ruined Anatolian city normally identified as Troy. (I have not found any rejoinder to these points in Jones’ material.) But none of the reviewers can be identified as academically qualified in the relevant subjects. My highly negative review, omitted by Jones, remains the only known professional academic review of the book.

Out of the Homeric epic tradition there grew a tradition of literary epic

poems dealing with other Greek legendary sequences, notably Apollonius Rhodius’ *Argonautica* (a version of the story of Jason) and Quintus Smyrnaeus’ account of the Trojan War from the last actions of the *Iliad* to the Sack of Troy. In the Roman world, this tradition is mainly found represented in Virgil’s C1-BCE Latin epic the *Aeneid*, a literary re-telling of the story of the escape of the Trojan prince Aeneas – who, like the other Trojan War heroes, is a legendary figure not encountered in any historical record – from the destruction of Troy, and his voyage westwards to found a new city which centuries later would become Rome itself.

The narrative in the *Aeneid* is in fact highly politicised, in that it emphasises the alleged right to power of the Emperor Augustus – who was ruling at the time of writing – by way of the supposed descent from Aeneas of his adoptive father Julius Caesar, and treats Aeneas’ romantic interlude with the legendary Dido as a quickly corrected deviation from his destiny. Dido (on whom see further below) is portrayed as the Queen of the predecessor of the Carthaginian Empire which had been Rome’s main rival for dominance in the Western Mediterranean until its destruction in 146 BCE. Virgil clearly drew selectively on his disconnected and piecemeal (and often obscure) sources and modified the storyline in order to foreground these various notions; if we had earlier versions of the full story of Aeneas they might tell a rather different tale.

But Jones here reinterprets Virgil’s account as straightforwardly historical in character. Of course, it is not clear how Virgil himself could have

accurately obtained so many specific details of a poorly documented event which occurred so long before his time, just after the Trojan War – traditionally dated as around 1200 BCE. Jones concludes, dramatically, that the poem was in fact originally composed soon after this date and was revised by Virgil over a millennium later and presented as his own finished product. Even more dramatically: in parallel with the content of his earlier book, Jones specifically interprets Virgil's narrative as referring to the Atlantic rather than to the Mediterranean; and he actually believes that the *Aeneid* itself was composed in Britain – originally as an oral poem after the manner of Homer, although he reveals in making this suggestion that he has too little understanding of the contrasting features of oral and literary epic poetry.

Like Jones' theories of the entire Trojan Cycle as presented in his earlier book, this viewpoint appears astounding; it involves an enormous reinterpretation of the origins and content of a text which to all appearances comfortably fits in with the orthodox, well-supported understanding of the ancient world (and indeed, as we shall see, reinterpretation of much of the early history of the ancient world itself). One must ask how this huge revision to our understanding of the *Aeneid* could possibly be correct. The onus is clearly very much upon Jones to argue his case, and obviously he does attempt this (in his own amateur way) in this book. But he leaves many questions unanswered or inadequately answered. And unless Jones can defend his viewpoint in strong terms, this book (again like the earlier book) must be regarded as pseudo-historical in character, and thus as of no interest to professional historians who are not also committed skeptics.

As a linguist I question, first of all, how the poem could have been composed at such an early date in any language which Virgil would have been able to read – wherever it was composed, but especially if it emanated from the Atlantic world. Classical Greek and Virgil's own Classical Latin

did not exist at that date, and Virgil would not have been familiar with the archaic forms of these languages or, especially, with Celtic languages (see below on Welsh). This theory seems to imply the existence of a series of intermediate versions of the text in various languages and language-stages. (But see below on Jones' amazing attempted revision to the history of Latin.)

Unless Jones can defend his viewpoint in strong terms, this book (again like the earlier book) must be regarded as pseudo-historical in character.

Of course, if the *Aeneid* is instead legendary and literary in character – as is normally held – and not really historical, these problems do not arise at all. Virgil composed the poem from scratch and invented whatever details he needed that were not found in his piecemeal Greek (or Latin) classical-era sources. Jones' theory generates here a major issue which simply does not arise on the standard interpretation. We shall come upon other such issues later.

I turn here to more general issues. As in the earlier book, Jones appears very committed indeed to his analysis, seeing it in terms of the 'discovery' of facts rather than as presenting a novel theory for discussion and assessment. He sought advance reviews of this present book on the condition that his conclusions should not be revealed; he held that this would 'spoil' the book for later readers, as if it were a work of fiction. (I for one would not accept Jones' condition; this procedure is rightly contrary to scholarly practice. I ended up buying my own copy of the book.). In his Introduction here he summarises the earlier book using 'factive' expressions such as 'the **discovery** of the actual location of the Trojan War' and referring to 'vast migrations' from that area (for which there is no adequate documentation; see below) which gave rise to new nations

in Western Europe – implying that all this is simply veridical.

In the same section, Jones states that Aeneas 'holds a place of prominence at the head of the British dynasty of ancient kings'. This claim is false. Jones gives no reference for the claim other than an impossibly vague attribution of the story to 'British chronicles'. The purported link between Aeneas and Britain mainly involves the story of Aeneas' great-grandson Brutus settling there. This story, accepted as largely correct by Jones, appears first in the speculative, anonymous C9 *Historia Brittonum* but is best known from Geoffrey of Monmouth's C12 *Historia Regum Britanniae*, which has no authoritative sources and is for the most part clearly pseudo-historical and fanciful. And the idea that Aeneas himself came to Britain is Jones' own, relating to his general reinterpretation of the Trojan Cycle in the earlier book.

The consensus among mainstream historians is that this Brutus very probably never existed, and that given the absence of corroborative evidence there is no good reason to accept Aeneas himself as a historical figure, still less as associated with early Britain.

Jones continues throughout with the practice of impossibly thin and weak referencing. For example, of his six notes/references for Chapter 1 four are to the text of the *Aeneid* itself and the other two are to his own earlier book, in one case only to an entire chapter rather than specific pages. At the end of the book there is a one-page bibliography of early-modern and modern works, but a reader is entitled to be told **where** each of these sources is being drawn upon (and which pages). Furthermore, like the larger bibliography of secondary sources in the earlier book, this present bibliography is egregiously short on relevant mainstream-scholarly historical works but instead includes various pre-modern and/or pseudo-historical works. One of these works is actually disguised as a C20 book (1967) when in fact that volume is a re-print of a work originally published in 1577.

These referencing practices alone would excuse professional scholars

from reviewing the book (which may be one reason why none have reviewed it; a cursory look for references would have made it clear that it could not be taken seriously). I myself am reviewing it only because I am a committed skeptic. Even if Jones is occasionally correct on some point where he challenges the mainstream, he has not earned the right to a serious, well-informed review.

As he proceeds, Jones dramatically reassigns the various Virgilian place-names to new locations far away from the Aegean/ Mediterranean – in the Atlantic.

In Chapters 1-19, Jones goes through the text of the *Aeneid*, using two C20 translations. He refers to the original Latin only very sparingly, and he does not make it clear whether or not he has read (or indeed can read) Virgil's actual text. This is very bad practice. If Jones does not read Latin, he should have recruited a co-author who does. As things are, a reader is forced to rely on Jones' interpretations of possibly contentious translations.

As he proceeds, Jones dramatically reassigns the various Virgilian place-names to new locations far away from the Aegean/ Mediterranean – in the Atlantic. Many of these specific geographical claims involve the theory (repeated from the earlier book) that sea-levels at the various locations have materially changed since the date attributed to the Trojan War. According to Jones, the episodes recounted by Virgil make much more sense in their new locations as these were in 'Trojan' times.

Sea-levels in Western Europe have, of course, varied over this period. But if Jones is to be taken seriously he must refer to scientific publications **at each point** where specific changes of this kind are involved as elucidating Virgil's text – **in this book**; he cannot assume that readers know the earlier book, and he states in his Preface that he does not

make any such assumption. (In any event, many of the specific cases are not shared between the two books.). Since Jones does not refer to the scientific literature, each such reinterpretation of Virgil's text amounts to special pleading. Even if it should turn out that some such cases are valid, Jones has not done the work which would be required if readers are to be persuaded.

Jones' other arguments for re-assigning the references of place-names – speculative discussions of currents and sailing times, Virgil's accounts of the supposedly un-Mediterranean weather at various stages in his narrative, Virgil's failure to mention certain islands along Aeneas' conventionally understood route, etc. – are also inadequately supported. Many of them already **assume** Jones' novel maps based on his ideas about changes to sea-level, or his relocations of other place-names.

And, whatever the situation with respect to each geographical claim involving altered sea-levels or other matters, there is a more basic issue regarding the place-names in the *Aeneid*. Jones is interpreting each of these place-names as referring to a location quite other than that which mainstream scholarship identifies as relevant. This commences with Troy itself, which Greek authors held to have been in roughly the area where it was eventually more precisely identified in C19. But Troy was a matter of legend in ancient times, giving some leeway for reinterpretation (if not as much as Jones and Wilkens need!). The case is worse where we are dealing with the familiar place-names in the Aegean to which Aeneas voyages first on fleeing from Troy. The first such place is Thrace, which Jones locates on the coast of what is now Lincolnshire in England, not far from his re-located Troy. But to all appearances the place-name *Thrace* has been used consistently from classical times to the present day to refer to the area stretching from modern Greek Macedonia to the border between Greece and European Turkey, and northwards into what is now Bulgaria. It is not as if the *Aeneid* is the only ancient

text that refers to Thrace, or any of the other places mentioned – far from it! Thus, if Jones is correct about the *Aeneid*, the use of *Thrace* and other geographical terms in the poem conflicts with that found in all other ancient texts (even if Virgil himself wrongly thought that the reference was the same; see below).

And what would Virgil's motive be for confusingly applying familiar Greek place-names to altogether different locations?

As in Jones' first book, this generates an entire series of pairs of **rival** locations – one in the Aegean or elsewhere in the Mediterranean, one in the Atlantic – with the same names. Ancient and later readers would obviously need to be aware of the poem's idiosyncratic usage if they were to understand it correctly. But of course there is no known ancient text containing this information. Did ancient readers therefore consistently **misunderstand** the references to places in the *Aeneid*? As have all readers since, until Jones discovered the truth?

And what would Virgil's **motive** be for confusingly applying familiar Greek place-names to altogether different locations? Was he deliberately using these names with the same references that Jones ascribes to them in his reinterpretations of Homer (the 'back story' to the *Aeneid*) in the earlier book? In that case, both Virgil **and** Homer were in conflict with the rest of the classical world in their use of these names. Again, how would this be tolerated? And if it **were** somehow tolerated, why does no ancient commentator on Homer mention these discrepancies? ('When Homer refers to X, he means a place quite other than what we Greeks normally call X'.)

Or could it be that (for example) **all** ancient Greek and Roman texts are referring to Lincolnshire when they talk of Thrace? Even if Troy itself really was by the North Sea, this would locate Thrace and other such places in

completely the wrong positions relative to Greece and Rome. So perhaps the entire early classical civilisation was located in the Atlantic! But in that case what is represented by the extensive early ruins in Greece and Italy with their extensive inscriptions in Greek, Latin and other relevant languages, and the continuous cultural, linguistic and other traditions in these countries which can be traced back from the present day to classical times?

Occasionally Jones does acknowledge the mainstream position as valid alongside his own analysis, thereby creating a ‘doublet’.

Slightly less implausibly: maybe Virgil (also Homer?) was misinterpreting a key, much earlier source or sources (written in some language which Virgil somehow could read; see above), wrongly assuming that the place-names had their familiar references. **This**, in fact, seems to be what Jones envisages. Such a view would leave unanswered the question of **how** the wholesale discrepancies between this source and other texts came about (maybe sheer error; but see below on putative later conspiracies), but it would at least confine the discrepancies to these two key authors with their stories set in ‘Trojan’ times. But no such source is known or is mentioned by the authors or in other ancient texts. If it were in Greek, which both Virgil and Homer could understand, it would presumably be an oral source, since Homer stands at the very beginning of the revived tradition of writing in Greek. But there is no evidence of such a source (oral or written) for Virgil – or for Homer.

Occasionally Jones does acknowledge the mainstream position as valid alongside his own analysis, thereby creating a ‘doublet’. For instance: speculatively interpreting mythological material, he believes that Dido, Queen of Carthage, was in fact a real person (which is far from certain;

references to her date back only to c 300 BCE and are all Greek or Roman), but lived long after the time of Aeneas, in the city conventionally identified by Roman historians as Carthage (which she is reported as having founded). According to Jones, Aeneas’ ‘Carthage’, like most of the locations in the *Aeneid*, is to be altogether relocated – to Looe in Cornwall (which, if it really were correct, **might** relate to the voyages to Cornwall reportedly made by Phoenician traders, whose civilisation founded Dido’s Carthage). In the specific cases where Jones adopts views of this kind, he is obviously relieved of the need to ‘square’ his interpretation of the *Aeneid* with other information about the ancient Mediterranean. But this does not imply that his interpretation of the *Aeneid* is **correct** at these points, any more than it is elsewhere.

And, when considering Jones’ overall stance in the light of the problems outlined here, one can be forgiven for invoking ‘Ockham’s Razor’. The chance that Jones might be correct appears overwhelmingly smaller than the chance that he has been misled by his desire to re-locate the Trojan Cycle to the Atlantic (especially the ancient Welsh world; see below) and is simply completely mistaken.

Given the above, there is little to be gained from further detailed discussion of Chapters 2-19. But some points can usefully be added to the overall assessment of Jones’ book. In particular: as in the earlier book, the linguistic aspect of Jones’ case, specifically, is of no account, and his familiarity with the Welsh language is of little help here. For instance, he dogmatically claims that the Dutch city-name *Appoldro* (now superseded by *Apeldoorn*) is a compound of the Greek god-name *Apollo* and the P-Celtic (Welsh) form *tro* (‘walk’), supposedly mutated here to *dro*. Celtic words are often mutated in this way, but these mutations follow principles of grammar and phonology, and any such claim requires argumentation. And Welsh *tro* has a wide range of associated meanings, furnishing Jones with

considerable freedom in interpreting its supposed sense here. Neither is it clear why a Welsh form should appear in a Netherlands place-name at the date in question (C8 CE); nor why a Greek god-name should be found here; nor how the internal grammar of this compound word is supposed to work. The standard – and wholly plausible – etymology for *Appoldro* involves derivation from **apuldrō* (Proto-West-Germanic: ‘settlement by the apple trees’). Jones does not even mention this etymology in order to reject it.

Later Jones provides some highly speculative etymologies for Cornish place-names, again with no acknowledgment that in the absence of professional linguistic endorsement – or at least recognition of his derivations as possible and not in conflict with well-established evidence – his ideas on this front must be deemed speculative at best. There are other quasi-linguistic excursions of this kind where Jones deals with Aeneas’ descent into the underworld, with the etymology of the Welsh place-name *Llandaff*, etc., etc. All in all, Jones seems to imagine that there is no scholarly tradition in this area and that an amateur therefore has a free rein simply to invent etymologies that suit his case.

Later, in his Closing Remarks, Jones proclaims that the Trojans and their allies were Welsh/speakers of Welsh.

Later, in his Closing Remarks, Jones proclaims that the Trojans and their allies were Welsh/speakers of Welsh. His initial evidence for this claim is the C12 statement of Gerald of Wales that all Welsh words are cognate (as we would now say) with Greek or Latin words. This claim is exaggerated, but to the extent that it is true it involves the very ancient common Indo-European origin of all three languages (which was not known of in Gerald’s day) and demonstrates no later link between these languages. Of course, this claim would be astounding if the conventional

Anatolian location for Troy were accepted. Actually, we do not know what language Homer's Trojans spoke, but if we accept the conventional location it was assuredly not Greek, still less Latin or Welsh! The only hard evidence is a very short text in the Anatolian language Luwian discovered at the site. Luwian is itself Indo-European but from a quite separate sub-family. Documents in Luwian were not known in Gerald's time and would have been unreadable if they had been known. Gerald's comment would be irrelevant here. But on Jones' view the Anatolian site is not the true Troy and is irrelevant. Troy was in a different area, where Celtic was current; though see below.

Actually, we do not know what language Homer's Trojans spoke, but if we accept the conventional location it was assuredly not Greek, still less Latin or Welsh!

Jones also cites a statement made by both Gerald and Geoffrey of Monmouth to the effect that Brutus' language, identified as 'Trojan', came to be called 'British', which in context would probably refer to early Welsh. But, given that there is no worthwhile evidence that Brutus himself existed, this report made by authors living some 2,000 years later demonstrates nothing.

Furthermore: wherever it may have been used, Welsh, or rather the P-Celtic ancestor of Welsh, would have been very different in 'Trojan' times from current Welsh or even pre-medieval 'Old Welsh' (which is not very fully documented and is known only to specialists). Any specific claims about P-Celtic at such an early date are speculative and must be grounded in

very considerable philological expertise.

But Jones is himself Welsh, and one cannot help thinking that his focus upon Welsh aka British is another example of an author unreasonably regarding his own ancestral language as of special significance.

In any event, Jones goes on to proclaim that, because the territory of Latium (the area normally taken to be that surrounding the later Rome), as described in the *Aeneid*, was really in Britain, the Latin language itself was current ('indigenous', indeed) in Britain in 'Trojan' times (this extreme idea is new to this present book) and was probably the original language of the *Aeneid* (Welsh falls out of view in this section). He links these notions with a complex and altogether unsupported story involving the eponymous Trojan hero Dardanus who supposedly moved between Britain and Anatolia six generations before Aeneas. By this stage Jones' account conflicts with so much well-established linguistic and historical information that it is no longer worthwhile to consider it in detail. Among the many obvious objections, there is, as noted above, no evidence that Latin as we know it existed anywhere in 'Trojan' times. Jones adduces contact between his early Latin, Greek and Gaelic as supposedly spoken by Greeks living in early Britain; and offers a brief, wholly vague/speculative account of how the poem came much later into Virgil's hands, including the very strange idea that it may have remained oral in mode until his day (if it were conceivable, this would be convenient as an explanation for the lack of earlier versions!). But by now we are in the realms of fantasy.

In Chapter 20 Jones begins by summarising his claims in his usual dogmatic manner, presenting them as undeniably factual (discoveries, not

mere proposals) and identifying mainstream interpretations (some of them now rather dated or 'popular') as near-conspiratorial fallacies. This even includes the familiar historical links between Virgil's Latium and the Rome of Virgil's own day. Jones goes on to describe Aeneas' voyage as part of a much larger post-war exodus from Troy, selectively re-interpreting secondary legends such as that of Helenus (a son of the Trojan king Priam) and fancifully identifying this Trojan diaspora population with various European elites known from much later dates – providing no authoritative references and relying in large part on the pseudo-historian Herman Hoch (*note 3*). The Italian city which has been known as Rome since early classical times is thus to be seen as a colony of pre-classical Trojan Britain.

In Chapter 21 Jones continues in this vein, now citing the pre-medieval and medieval British authors 'Nennius' and Geoffrey of Monmouth as mentioned above – and also 'Tysilio', whose book in Welsh has been proposed as the otherwise obscure (and quite probably invented) source document mentioned by Geoffrey but in fact appears to be a later derivative of Geoffrey's work and is thus not an independent source. While of great interest, **none** of these sources can be regarded as historically reliable.

To sum up: as I said four years ago about Jones' earlier book, it is a pity that an educated person has engaged in so much study, only to arrive at an altogether untenable conclusion.

Notes

1. Iman Wilkens, *Where Troy Once Stood: The Mystery of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey Revealed*, 2nd edn. New York: St Martin's Press, 1991.
2. <https://tinyurl.com/5n6d9vjn>.
3. <https://earth-history.com/>.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OF INTEREST

SKEPTICISM, SCIENCE AND RATIONALITY (GENERAL)

Sense About Science

<http://www.senseaboutscience.org/>

Keep visiting the Sense About Science website for their latest projects including the Ask for Evidence campaign.

‘We’re thrilled to announce that Nancy Olivieri, a senior scientist at Toronto General Hospital, has been awarded the 2023 John Maddox Prize for courageously advancing public discourse with sound science, despite challenges or hostility. The judges commended Nancy for communicating the importance of being open with patients about medical research whilst withstanding great personal cost. The 2023 Early Career Award goes to Chelsea Polis, a senior scientist of epidemiology at the Population Council’s Center for Biomedical Research, New York, for her courage in challenging false marketing claims made by medical device manufacturers.’

<https://tinyurl.com/mry7b26a>

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Skepticism generally

‘What Is Skepticism? (A Philosophical Approach). In this article we’ll briefly trace the history of skepticism, outline two popular varieties, and then see reasons why someone might be a skeptic.’

<https://www.thecollector.com/what-is-skepticism/>

‘Junk science’

‘Today’s social media platforms are saturated with health hacks and

wellness products — from sea moss smoothies and dry scooping protein powder to using lemon juice to cure heartworms in dogs and castor oil compresses to break up tumors. The claims of wonder drugs, “alternative care” options and easy cures have people investing their time and money into products and solutions that often are based on misinformation, are supported by research that is later disproven or have no scientific basis at all. This phenomenon is the main focus of a Creative Inquiry (CI) project led by Elliot Ennis, a senior lecturer in the Department of Chemistry at Clemson University. The goal of “Science and Pseudoscience in Popular Media” is to help students and the general public tell the difference between science and pseudoscience and to be able to evaluate health claims seen on social media sites such as Facebook, TikTok and YouTube.’

<https://tinyurl.com/4d3uwmrp>

Scientists under siege

‘Scientists under siege — from big pharma, zealots and even their bosses: Doing their jobs and defending the truth left Nancy Olivieri and Chelsea Polis exposed to lawsuits and potential ruin. Their disturbing experiences chime with my own at the hands of an anti-science cancel mob, writes Helen Joyce.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3cewfmju>

David Berglas

From the *Times* obituary of magician David Berglas, who died on November 3, 2023, aged 97: ‘It is known as the “holy grail” of magic card tricks, and named “The Berglas Effect” after the magician who invented it. David Berglas would ask you to name a playing card, any playing card, and someone else to choose a number between one and 52. Then he would ask

a third person to pick up the pack and stop at the chosen number, which would invariably be the card that had been named. How did he do it? He never said, of course, but explained: “It’s a mentality, it’s a pattern, it’s an influence, it’s verbal misdirection, it’s body language, it’s gestures, it’s looks, it’s building the atmosphere.” Moreover, he added, “I have never failed.” ... “The Berglas Effect” remains one of the most puzzling and talked about tricks in the history of magic.’

<https://tinyurl.com/5ffpxwn4>

Conspiracy theories

‘The death of Friends star Matthew Perry has led MAGA influencers to push conspiracy theories, without providing evidence, that the COVID-19 vaccine was possibly to blame for his passing.’

<https://tinyurl.com/m5a7z9yc>

Paranormal general

‘Halloween horrors DEBUNKED: Scientists reveal the simple explanations for paranormal activity - from flickering lights to green goo.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/3jvxckr4>

And: ‘In the 1870s, a group of gay college friends started a paranormal club... & then sh*t got weird.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/42hnwdbp>

Meanwhile, from Chris French: ‘I recently had a very enjoyable and wide-ranging chat about Weird Science with Uyi Agbontaen for his Point of U podcast. You might enjoy it too.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/szumkaku>

Also: ‘31 Convincing Paranormal Photos That Make Us Think Ghosts Are Real.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/4ahtnrbf>

Cloud seeding

‘Since its inception in the 1940s, cloud seeding has evolved into a potential

solution to droughts, a tool for firefighting, and a catalyst for weather modification. As we navigate through the promises and perils, this journey unfolds the different dimensions of cloud seeding, where advocates champion its efficacy, skeptics raise cautionary flags, and the environment holds its secrets.'

<https://tinyurl.com/2f2rv8y3>

MEDICINE

HealthSense

See the latest HealthSense Newsletter at:

<https://tinyurl.com/4vndxj74>

Public health

'Most adults in the UK should be receiving treatment for high cholesterol but are not, while a quarter have untreated high blood pressure, the country's biggest medical-research project suggests. Funded by government and industry, Our Future Health analyses people's genes and lifestyle to prevent disease. The millionth volunteer of a hoped for five million adults has just enrolled.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4f3wwb5w>

Covid

'Top science journal faced secret attacks from Covid conspiracy theory group: A conspiratorial group of extreme Brexit lobbyists mounted an extraordinary campaign against one of the world's most prestigious science journals – part of a series of joint investigations between *Byline Times* and *Computer Weekly*. ... The group attempted to have *Nature* and its staff put under surveillance and investigated by MI5, MI6, the CIA, Mossad, and Japanese and Australian intelligence agencies. They met Cabinet minister Michael Gove and later asked him to arrange phone taps and electronic surveillance. One member of the group led intrusive investigations into the intimate personal life and background circumstances of senior *Nature* staff the group suspected of "extreme Sinophile views".' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/38e7tzds>

and

<https://tinyurl.com/mv95n3fw>

And: Oxford AstraZeneca Covid jab was 'defective', claims landmark legal case: Victims of VITT - a new condition identified by specialists - question the Government's monitoring of the vaccine's rollout and its efficacy.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5dk9jvsv>

Meanwhile: 'We Want Them Infected: The integration of pseudoscience into the US pandemic response.' This book by Dr. Jonathan Howard 'is a significant stand against efforts to rewrite the history of the COVID-19 pandemic and promote the deadly pseudoscience of the anti-vaccine movement. The book opens with the titular quotation from Dr. Paul Alexander, who was an official in the US Department of Health and Human Services during the Trump administration: *Infants, kids, teens, young people, young adults, middle aged with no conditions etc. have zero to little risk... so we use them to develop herd... we want them infected...*'

<https://tinyurl.com/yvkychyv>

The NHS and AI

'The NHS spent millions of pounds on a flawed AI chatbot whose creator used aggressive sales techniques and overpromised what it could do, former staff have claimed. Babylon Health, a tech start-up championed by Matt Hancock and advised by Dominic Cummings, promised that its AI chatbot could keep patients who didn't need to be seen by a health professional out of the overstretched NHS. But the technology was not as sophisticated as the company claimed ...'

<https://tinyurl.com/y4twuvh6>

Vaccination

From The New York Times: 'Disruptions to health systems during the Covid-19 pandemic have left more than 60 million children worldwide without a single dose of standard childhood vaccines, in turn resulting in large outbreaks of diseases that primarily kill children. Many who missed their shots have now aged out of routine immunization programs. Protecting them will require a costly vaccination blitz. By the numbers: By the midpoint of this year, 47 countries

were reporting serious and deadly measles outbreaks, compared with 16 countries in June 2020. Twelve countries reported the polio virus was circulating. Nigeria is facing a major outbreak of diphtheria, with nearly 600 deaths so far.'

And: 'Why anti-vaxxers are pretending a flawed study on vaccine deaths has been vindicated. At:

<https://tinyurl.com/y5v68tzj>

Also: 'A lack of confidence in vaccines and health misinformation continues to grow following the pandemic. That's according to a new survey of more than 1,500 adults in Oct. from the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania.' At:

<https://tinyurl.com/53hj5265>

Homeopathy

'It doesn't come up often, per se, but I've mentioned homeopathy several times in the past month or two and each time I have to mention that it's complete pseudoscience, and each time I just don't have time to go into the details of why it's pseudoscience. So a few of you viewers have asked if I could do a video going into the details, and I've put it off because there's just no newsworthy reason to do it. But this week I was researching another video topic and realized I would be mentioning it again, and I thought, wouldn't it be nice to have another video I could point to and say "if you wanna know more about that, just go watch this"? Well. Here we go.'

<https://tinyurl.com/47z772ax>

Wellness

'A Bengaluru court on Thursday passed an ex-parte injunction order to social media company X (formerly Twitter) to suspend the account of a doctor known for busting pseudoscience through his regular posts. The Bengaluru Civil Court passed the order in a suit filed by Himalaya Wellness Corporation, which alleged that Dr Cyriac Abby Philips, a hepatologist who goes by the name of The Liver Doc on X, made defamatory allegations against the company, according to Live Law.'

<https://tinyurl.com/4mdnmahp>

Placebo

‘Placebos may minimise pain by decreasing activity in systems of the brain that regulate emotions, a discovery that could help us to harness the placebo effect to ease discomfort.’

<https://tinyurl.com/4kh792tm>

Traditional Chinese Medicine

‘Students and practitioners have called on the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology RMIT to reverse its decision to drop its undergraduate program in Chinese medicine. The program will stop taking new students from next year, according to RMIT, but enrolled students will be able to finish their degrees.’

<https://tinyurl.com/2s3t8wrz>

Slapping therapy

‘Man charged over death at slapping therapy workshop.’

<https://tinyurl.com/p2zbrxpd>

Cannabidiol

‘Millions of Britons consume cannabidiol (CBD) every day, whether to boost their concentration or manage conditions such as anxiety, depression and joint pain, or just because it is fashionable. It is so commonplace you can buy “gummies” in Tesco or a fizzy drink in a Waitrose meal deal. Driven by the consumer craze for wellness and healthy lifestyles, the popularity of CBD products has exploded in recent years, but the burgeoning industry is now under a cloud after UK food regulators slashed the recommended daily intake for adults to just 10mg.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3hj598fj>

Fake doctor

In Australia: ‘A woman who pretended to be a doctor on social media site TikTok and dispensed health advice while wearing scrubs and a stethoscope

has been convicted and ordered to pay more than \$13,000 after a magistrate said her offences were “extensive, prolific and pervasive”. Dalya Karezi, 30, made videos between February and September 2021 on topics including paracetamol toxicity, HIV, ovarian cancer, fibroids, testosterone, and foods people should feed their toddlers. Some of her posts attracted 15.5 million views and 1.5 million likes. She also posted on Instagram, applied for jobs while claiming to have a medical degree, and sent emails alluding to medical qualifications.’

<https://tinyurl.com/wks4xx2f>

PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHIATRY

Personality and colour preference tests

‘In today’s fast-paced digital age, we’re constantly seeking shortcuts to understand ourselves and the world around us. Enter color-based personality tests, which promise deep insights based on something as simple as our favorite shade. But is this method reliable, or just another example of pseudoscience?’

<https://tinyurl.com/32r6zszn>

Antidepressants

‘Politicians, experts, and patient representatives call for the UK government to reverse the rate of antidepressant prescribing. ... Over the past decade, antidepressant prescriptions have almost doubled in England, rising from 47.3 million in 2011 to 85.6 million in 2022-23. Over 8.6 million adults in England are now prescribed them annually (nearly 20% of adults), with prescriptions set to rise over the next decade. In addition, the

average duration of time for which a person takes an antidepressant has doubled between the mid-2000s and 2017, with around half of patients now classed as long term users. Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have similar rates of antidepressant prescribing. ... Rising antidepressant prescribing is not associated with an improvement in mental health outcomes at the population level, which, according to some measures, have worsened as antidepressant prescribing has risen.’

<https://tinyurl.com/5n944de8>

MISCELLANEOUS UNUSUAL CLAIMS

Ghosts

‘Is your home haunted or needing repairs?’ US Survey finds 1 in 6 think their house is haunted.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/5h3phuvp>

Meanwhile: ‘The haunting of modern China. In Nanjing, Hong Kong and other Chinese cities, rapid urbanisation is multiplying a fear of death and belief in ghosts.’ At:

<https://tinyurl.com/mr3adhzc>

Telepathy

‘5 Totally Documented, Totally Earnest Attempts to Prove Telepathy Is Real.’

<https://tinyurl.com/3uawrcac>

Weeping statue

‘Church-goers in Mexico claimed to have witnessed a miracle after spotting a statue of the Virgin Mary that appeared to have real tears rolling down her cheeks.’

<https://tinyurl.com/mr2eaadr>

and

<https://tinyurl.com/45v2cbda>

UPCOMING EVENTS

A comprehensive calendar of skeptical events in Europe may be found at the website of the **European Skeptics Podcast**. Click on the tab 'Events in Europe' on the ESP website at:

<https://theesp.eu/>

Skeptics in the Pub

Events of interest to skeptics are again being presented live (in some cases with the option of viewing online). Active venues are listed at:

<https://sitp.online/sitp/>

Skeptics in the Pub Online itself still has an excellent programme of online talks on alternate Thursday evenings. See:

<https://sitp.online/>

Conway Hall

Conway Hall in central London hosts live and online presentations of general

interest that often have a skeptical flavour. So keep an eye on their website:

<https://tinyurl.com/y7dmgk1l>

Pint of Science

'Pint of Science is a grassroots non-profit organisation that has grown astronomically over the few years since two people decided to share their research in the pub.' A full list of Pint of Science cities and countries can be accessed at:

<https://pintofscience.co.uk/about/>

Belief in Dialogue

Online Interfaith Forum

'Honest Questions and Frank Answers: Discussions among Britain's religious and nonreligious communities.'

Sunday January 21, 7.00-8.30pm: Creation, Science and Faith. Free.

Program

7:00: Welcome and introduction by Ryan Comins, Moderator

7:05: Are creation and science conflicting or complementary?

7.25: Q&A and broader discussion around the theme of 'Creation, Science and Faith'

8:15: Brief closing comments and reflections from each panellist

8:25: Conclusion by Ryan Comins, Moderator

8:30: Adjourn, with the option to stay in the meeting for further informal conversation

<https://tinyurl.com/9tdzhs2b>

LOGIC AND INTUITION: ANSWERS

Where's the father?

Let the son's age = x and his mother's age = y .

Hence $x + 21 = y$.

In 6 years he will be one-fifth of his mother's age.

Hence $5(x + 6) = y + 6$.

From this, $y = 5x + 24$.

We can now replace y in the first equation thus:

$$x + 21 = 5x + 24.$$

$$\text{Hence } 4x = -3.$$

Therefore x , the son's age, is minus $3/4$ years; i.e. minus 9 months.

So the father must be very close to the mother!

How much profit?

Sorry, I was teasing you—it *is* as simple as you think!

Omar spends a total of £120 (£50 plus £70) and receives back a total of £140 (£60 plus £80). So his profit is £20.

ASKE

email: aske1@talktalk.net

website: <<http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk>>

ASKE was founded in 1997 as an association of people from all walks of life who wish to promote rational thinking and enquiry, particularly concerning unusual phenomena, and who are opposed to the proliferation and misuse of irrational and unscientific ideas and practices. To find out more, visit the ASKE website (address above).