

Review of “In Quest of Our Linguistic Ancestors: The Elusive Origins of the Indo-Europeans”

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John V. Day, author of *Indo-European Origins : the Anthropological Evidence* (ISBN 0-941694-75-5) has recently written an article titled “In Quest of Our Linguistic Ancestors The Elusive Origins of the Indo-Europeans” which appears in the *Occidental Quarterly*, vol. 2, No.3.

Day comes as the latest in a long list of authors, mostly from the 19th century and pre-World War II who propose that the Indo-Europeans were of “northern European physical type.” Unlike his pre-WWII predecessors though, Day is rather vague about what he means by this, except, as it appears from his article to distinguish it as possessing a light pigmentation of the hair and eyes. Long gone are the days when the tall, blond, blue-eyed, narrow-faced, narrow-nosed and long-headed *Homo Europaeus* or “Nordic” man was believed to be the Aryan type par excellence. To his credit, Day, does not reiterate this abandoned doctrine, but makes a more modest claim, i.e., that the Proto-Indo-Europeans had mostly light hair and eyes.

Day urges us to avoid political correctness and consider the question on its own merits. I will certainly agree that the question of Proto-Indo-European physical type is primarily a biological one, and not a political one. This should not make us forget the fact though, that much of the research “establishing” this fact was traditionally done by people of “northern European physical type” and of Germanic speech (Penka [1], Günther [2], Childe [3] among many others), or their admirers abroad (e.g., de Lapouge [4], Chamberlain [5], Gobineau [6]). We should, of course, examine the facts, but in an area of research as inexact as linguistic prehistory, it is important that we should bear in mind that interpretation is a function of both the facts and the interpreter. Finally, it is telling that Day closes his article with a parallel between the decline of the Roman upper class of “northern European physical type” [according to him] and modern Western societies. Such a parallel carries obvious political implications and does not really belong in an article proclaiming impartiality.

Before we begin our detailed review and critique of Day’s work, it is

important to make a note with regard to his use of citations, twenty-six out of a total of forty-two being of Day's own more detailed book. It surely would not have taken much effort by the author to replace these which original citations from primary or specialist authorities. The reader would then feel more inclined to accept the claims presented in the text, or at least be able to cross-reference them against the cited works. This is now impossible, unless one purchases Day's book.

Day begins his article by lamenting the fact that so little attention has been paid to the Indo-Europeans. It is understandable that a researcher should sing the praises of his own field of research, but is this claim valid? Certainly, the days in which national honor of the French and German nations depended on the question of Aryan origins [29] is long past. Additionally, the discovery of the splendid civilizations of Crete, the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia, none of which were founded by Indo-Europeans has diminished the importance once ascribed to the Aryans as bringers of civilization. Presently, as noted by Mallory [7], no significant invention, except perhaps for the domestication of the horse can be ascribed to the Proto-Indo-Europeans. Moreover, when Indo-European groups appear in history, they have decidedly differing physique and culture, irrespective of the common elements. Hence, the Proto-Indo-Europeans are important as linguistic ancestors, but not as much as Day thinks. After all, few Romance speakers think long about their more immediate Roman linguistic ancestors; less still for their Italic ones. Why should they think more about the postulated Proto-Indo-Europeans?

Day proceeds to give a fairly stock explanation of the Indo-European hypothesis, namely that the commonalities in grammar and lexical terms imply the presence of a population that spoke an ancestral form of that language, namely hypothetical Proto-Indo-European. While it is true that the tree model of language evolution may be inferred from these commonalities, it is by no means the only explanation. Certainly, lateral borrowing of lexical terms, especially for inventions (modern telephone, ancient rota may explain their co-occurrence in many language. Certainly, there has not been an invasion of Americans to account for the presence of the telephone, named "telephone" in slightly different ways in many languages of the world. Yet, this is precisely what some Indo-Europeanists base their entire homeland arguments on. Similarly, linguistic contact may partly explain structural similarities. This is not to imply that there was not a Proto-Indo-European homeland, language and people, simply that the methodology for finding it based on linguistics is still rather crude.

Day makes an unfortunate comment with respect to the very large num-

ber of inflected forms in PIE. He finds this to be evidence that the PIEs did not lack a high IQ. That type of argument is no longer current and reminds us of discarded theories of “primitive” languages such as Chinese, which lacks inflections, semi-advanced agglutinative languages such as Finnish or Turkish and advanced Indo-European languages. One has to wonder what the position of modern English speakers would be if we accept such interpretations, for English has lost most of its inflectional variety.

Day also oversimplifies the problem of language replacement, when he states that:

When natives have new rulers who speak an alien language, it must be in the natives’ interest to start learning it.

History supplies examples in which the native language was replaced by that of “new rulers,” as in Hungary with the Magyars, or Anatolia with the Seljuk Turks. But, it also supplies examples of the opposite type, when the “new rulers” were linguistically converted, adopting the language of the ruled: Normans adopting French; earlier Franks adopting Romance speech; Germanic Visigoths in Spain adopting Romance speech; Germanic Lombards in Italy adopting Romance speech; Turkic Bulgars adopting Slavic speech, etc.

Indeed, it is in the interest of both “rulers” and “natives” to communicate and this can be done if the language of either group is adopted, usually borrowing elements from the other language in the process. Therefore, one cannot assume that Indo-European languages were spread by the elite-dominance process described by Day. It is just as likely (if not more) that the rulers -assuming that such migrations took place, a completely separate issue- adopted the languages of their subjects.

In discussing the problem of Race, Day proposes that the Indo-Europeans were usually small in number, but dominated large populations. If two populations A and B meet, then A may impose its language on B, if A has larger numbers, or superior technology/organization. Day seems to believe that the Proto-Indo-Europeans’ advantage lay in their possession of horse-related technology. But, this argument fails if we examine the terrain, much of it unsuitable for wheeled vehicles that the Indo-Europeans supposedly conquered. In our days, technology (gunpowder and rifles) may be an ally to a numerically small people (e.g., the British) in dominating a large one (e.g., the Indians). As we move back to prehistory, the technological differential between peoples diminishes. It seems unlikely that any people could maintain rule of a numerically very superior people in e.g., the 3rd millennium BC.

In considering the genetic evidence, Day fails to mention that while both autosomal [8] and Y-chromosome [9] markers may lend some credence to the notion of expansion from the steppe, these do not correlate with appearance. Because most of the genes influencing appearance have not been studied, one cannot determine today (scientifically) how ancient populations might have looked like. But, if we accept the Pontic steppe hypothesis of Mallory [7] then we can at least postulate that they may have looked like the populations of that region today, which show high values for the genes showing a cline centered in that area. These do not belong to a northern European physical type, rather, they belong to an Eastern European one [10].

Day also considers Greeks and Yugoslavs, claiming that they are least “European,” thus supposedly invalidating the scenario of an expansion either from (D’iakonov [11]), or through (Renfrew [12]) the Balkan region. But what does that have to do with prehistoric “Indo-Europeans” who by all accounts seem to have come from an eastern source and are not expected to be genetically close to Europeans who are largely of indigenous Paleolithic derivation? [25]

But, the process of Indo-Europeanization may have resembled a “passing of the torch,” during which groups may be Indo-Europeanized by a small nucleus of Indo-European speakers (see D’iakonov [11]). We certainly don’t expect to find the original Indo-European biological types where Indo-European languages are spoken, and from an analysis of skeletal remains Schwidetzky [13] has conclusively demonstrated that Indo-Europeanization of northern Europe was not effected by groups sharing biological affinities with the Pontic steppe population. Similarly, while Angel [27] finds skeletal elements in Greece of possible steppe origin, he unambiguously rejects notions of racial stratification in no uncertain terms [28]:

Both evidence and speculation contradict Nilsson’s hypothesis that Graeco-Roman decline resulted from production of vacillating individuals by unlimiting bastardizing and from elimination of a racially pure upper class, by lowered birthrate, after this capable group inbred during the Geometric period had created Classic Greek culture!

Moreover, the intrusion of Balkan elements of ultimate Near Eastern origin, signalling the arrival of the Neolithic, postulated by Renfrew [12], finds support both from physical anthropology [13] and from a modern study on the concurrent distribution of Neolithic pottery and certain Y-chromosomal lineages [14]. In fact the Eu9 Y-chromosomal lineage was deemed in [14] as

the “best predictor” of the appearance of early Neolithic pottery. The latter study may not however have been available at the time of writing of Day’s article.

Day’s next argument considers the percentage of words in present-day Indo-European languages, finding them to be high, e.g., in Germanic. But, a percentage does not consider the total number of words in a language. Clearly, Germanic would have a higher percentage than Greek, because the levels of sophistication of the two languages at the time when they are first recorded is not comparable: peasants and herders maintain the language in greater purity, while urban civilizations adopt foreign terms to describe the greater complexity of “things” and “concepts” with which they have to deal. Moreover, we note that the Germanic group bordered (historically) only with Indo-European peoples, with the exception of the Finnic speakers. In contrast, Greek bordered with numerous non-IE populations, other geographically, or due to trade contacts. Hence, the opportunity for the introduction of non-IE words into the Greek vocabulary was quite high, as opposed to German. Nonetheless, according to the researches of Kalevi Wiik [15], Germanic has a strong Finno-Ugric substratum, which might perhaps mean that the Germans spoke Finno-Ugrian before they adopted Indo-European from their southern neighbors.

Day’s next argument, on the retention of mythological motifs at the periphery of the Indo-European world fails for much the same reasons. The periphery could maintain these, while the center of dispersion could gradually evolve culturally, either on its own, or with interaction with non-IE people. Day’s argument assumes the center to have been “shielded” from innovation; and his argument fails for this simple reason.

The next section in Day’s paper deals with literary and artistic remains from antiquity. None of this will seem new to one who has read the old German Nordacist authors, such as Guenther [2], or Sieglin [15]. I will not comment on the evidence for the Celts, who, as expected, were of the fair type in their descriptions. But, I cannot fail to comment on the evidence adduced for the other Indo-European peoples.

The population sample of the Roman Emperors is a useful one. Day believes that it lends evidence to the Romans being of “northern European physical type.” But, before we accept such a theory, we might just as well examine the simpler alternative: that the Romans were not very different from modern Italians who are the group of people most likely descended from them. Day fails to make such a comparison. We know that blond hair runs as high as 10-15

Moreover, while pigmentation is frequent in northern Europe and less so

in southern Europe, it does not suffice to assign an individual to a northern race (see [17] for a number of expert opinions on this subject). Moreover, adjectives are often erroneously translated as “blond,” e.g., subflavus which like its Greek counterpart hypoxanthos is given as light, or yellowish brown [18] while in the context of the color spectrum of the ancient Mediterranean world did not in all likelihood denote “blond” as understood by northern Europeans. Moreover, we know that Julius Caesar had black eyes [19], and Malalas records that Tiberius Caesar, Augustus’ successor was curly-haired and dark [20]. In fact, the chronicle of the Byzantine writer Malalas [20] is the only source for the descriptions of many of the Roman Emperors, and should be taken with a grain of salt, especially since it was written centuries after their reign.

Finally, we note that “physical type” is not a matter only of pigmentation, but also of metrical and morphological traits. The examination of Roman portraiture reveals a broad-headed type with a low forehead (Coon [21]), and Italian anthropologist Raffaello Battaglia [16] found that the Julia gens and other patrician families belonged primarily to the planoccipital brachycephalic type, usually termed “Dinaric” (after Deniker [22]). Romans also had the well-known beaky Roman nose. The “Armenoid” type which appears in Hittite monuments [23] is also a planoccipital brachycephalic type with a convex nose, while the “Iranian-Plateau Race” [24] possesses to this day both brunet pigmentation and the much-admired (according to Sextus Empiricus) beaky nose of the Ancient Persians. Thus, we find in ancient Indo-European groups and assortment of features typical of non-northern Europeans. There is no compelling reason to assign primacy to part of the evidence as Day does, and disregard the rest which points to different explanations.

Thus, Day fails to demonstrate (i) that the upper Roman classes were of “northern European physical type” in the sense that they were different from modern Italians in pigmentation, (ii) that they were of “northern European physical type” in all aspects of their phenotype, including morphology. His next statement, that they were distinguished from the “dark masses” carries no more conviction, for there is no evidence provided to support a different racial type in different strata of Roman society.

With respect to the Greeks, Day offers a standard treatment which could be found in his pre-WWII ideological antecedents. One gets the impression from reading him that the Greek physiognomists admired the “northern European physical type,” which they considered to be an ideal. But the Greeks clearly distinguished themselves from both northern and southern barbarians [17] and the evidence from the Greek physiognomists cannot

be used to postulate preference for a “northern European physical type,” especially when we read that (Polemon, Physiognomica, 8.11-13):

Blond (ξανθή) and whitish (ὕπόλευκος) hair, like that of Scythians signifies stupidity (σκαιότητα), evilness (κακότητα), savagery (ἀγριότητα)

And when we read (Pseudo-Aristotle, Physiognomica):

The people whose eyes are light blue-grey (γλαυκοί) or white (λευκοί) are cowards (δειλοί)

Then it becomes apparent that the Greek physiognomists did not favor what we would describe as a “northern European physical type.”

Moving on to the Indo-Iranians, we see that the steppe groups may have been described as fair-headed, while the creators of civilization in Persia and India were indubitably brunet. Day himself admits this much when he correctly points out that most of Darius’ bodyguards from the Archer Frieze are brunet. Bertil Lundman who also believed Indo-Europeans to be “skeletal Nordic” attributed brunet pigmentation to the Indo-Iranian branch [26].

Day makes a naive observation with respect to Darius’ supposedly fair skin in the Archer Frieze. But fair skin is found throughout the Caucasoid range, in varying proportions and is not indicative in itself of a “northern European physical type.” But, more importantly, Darius was an oriental despot who probably spent his life in the shade, served by slaves and attendants as anyone who has read Herodotus’ histories’ will confirm. Finally, the Vedic texts reveal that the Indo-Aryans did in fact have black hair:

May thy hairs grow as reeds, may they cluster, black, about thy head! (Atharva Veda 6.137.2)

Brahmins have strong black hair (Atharva Veda 6.137.3)

Let him [the Brahmin Priest] kindle the sacrificial fire while his hair is still black. (Dharma-Sutra 1:2)

And in the Avesta we read:

O Zarathushtra! let not that spell be shown to any one, except by the father to his son, or by the brother to his brother from the same womb, or by the Athravan to his pupil in black hair, devoted to the good law, who, devoted to the good law, holy and brave, stills all the Drujes. (Khordha Avesta.Yashts.4.10)

Day's next argument is based on the identification of light-pigmented individuals in all the historical Indo-European groups. This represents to him a "common thread" binding all these civilizations. But, there has never been a people with predominantly fair hair, which is a recessive characteristic. In northern Europe, even the most depigmented groups are only partially so [21, 31], while blondism occurs throughout the Caucasoid range [21]. And, if the Indo-Europeans were really a small group dominating large populations (as Day alleges), then they could just as well have been brunet; since irrespective of their pigmentation, they would not have affected the populations which they conquered one way or another.

Day is correct in realizing that the skeletal remains of northern Europe cannot be reconciled with a steppe origin [13]. This clearly indicates that Indo-Europeanization of northern Europe was not carried out by steppe elements. And, the fair elements among the Celts, Germans and Balts are best sought in the indigenous European populations of northern Europe who probably developed a marked blondism on their own due to their geographical location. Moreover, the suggestion that the Indo-European urheimat included both northern Europe and the steppe is contradicted by linguistic concerns (see Mallory [7]) which make it highly probable that Proto-Indo-European developed in a relatively constrained (geographical) region.

Moreover, Day claims that there were "steppe elements" in the Grave Circle of Mycenae. But, the authority which he presumably follows [31] did not assign the robust elements to mysterious steppe intruders, but rather to the heterogeneous mix of peoples of the latter half of the 3rd millennium BC, noting that the buried princes at Mycenae had the same morphological types as the general population, and their increased stature was not the result of racial difference, but of a princely diet rich in protein, and partial social selection for warfare - an altogether reasonable suggestion.

The problem of the origins and biological affinities of the speakers of Proto-Indo-European is an interesting and difficult one. The fact that great minds in linguistics and archaeology have dealt with it for more than two hundred years, with no consensus as yet in sight, is evidence enough for this. But, the solution cannot be arrived at if instead of moving forward, we replay the old and tired arguments which have justly been abandoned by modern science.

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