

No, the Voynich manuscript has not been deciphered

Artemij Keidan*

(2nd revision)

Introduction

A [paper](#) containing yet another amateurish and blatantly inconsistent “decipherment” of the Voynich manuscript has been recently published on a peer-reviewed journal by G. Cheshire, Visiting Research Associate at Bristol University, Dept. of Neuroscience (see Cheshire 2019). I am one of the very few linguists who actually read the paper in its entirety. Since I would not recommend this experience to anybody, I thought that sharing some detailed criticism might be a useful service for the community.

Two ways of being wrong

There are two kinds of errors: correctable and uncorrectable. Imagine that in a mathematical paper you read something like this:

$$4 + 3 = 1$$

You can effectively correct this formula, for example substituting “1” with “7”; or, alternatively, “+” with “−”; or “=” with “≠”. Discussing and correcting such errors is a fruitful activity that advances science. On the other hand, imagine you read something like the following “formula”:

$$\sqrt{\oplus \neq \} 42(\pi \cdot 6 \approx * \leq x_2}$$

Similar “statements” cannot be neither amended nor discussed. They are simply meaningless gibberish. Trying to guess how they could be fixed in order to make them appear, if not meaningful, at least readable, is just a waste of time.

Dr Cheshire’s “research” clearly belongs to the second type of error. My point is that we cannot seriously discuss it, as if it were a correctable theory. It is simply a sequence of nonsensical statements. The only reasonable thing to do is to show the lack of any scientific meaning in the whole paper. In what follows I first try to sketch a general characterization of the author and his “method”, and then I expose all the preposterous gibberish with which the paper is filled.

*Sapienza University of Rome (Italy), email: artemij.keidan@uniroma1.it. Special thanks to Lev Blumenfeld for proof-reading the text.

About the author

Dr Cheshire appears unfit to decipher anything, and to do philological research in general. His views on languages and linguistics are those of a teenager who just found out that the secret alphabets are so fun. Reading his “paper” the reader can infer that Ch. tacitly assumes the following:

- language is a bag of words;
- sounds, phonemes and letters are the same;
- all languages have the same sounds;
- phonology and spelling are the same;
- all languages have the same — basically, English — spelling.

Therefore, he does not even realize what kind of problems one can face while deciphering an unreadable script, and, in general, what *decipherment* means. Moreover, his “Proto-Romance” theory reveals that he also understands nothing in the field of Romance linguistics, and more generally in the study of genetic relationships between languages.

In a number of occasions he shows a profound ignorance also in other fields (like Medicine, History, etc.).

About the “methodology”

Ch. seems convinced that to decipher a script means simply to read it more carefully, so that the “strange letters” eventually appear less strange. Therefore, his way of proceeding is as follows.

- 1) Since the Voynich ms. contains images, Ch. claims that he understands what they depict (which is far from obvious since the pictures are frequently cryptic, symbolic and surrealistic).
- 2) Ch. then “reads” the script by arbitrarily assigning phonetic values to Voynich “letters” (in reality, we don’t know what kind of writing system it is: alphabetic, syllabic, something in-between, or even whether it is a script at all).
- 3) Then he arbitrarily assigns to each “reading” a parallel from some Romance language (including Latin, as well as Slavic borrowings in Romanian). We are given neither these parallel words themselves, nor the criteria used for retrieving them. As a consequence, although on a few occasions the reader could also guess what Romance word Ch. is referring to, usually it remains totally obscure. Moreover, when needed, he adds “missing” characters or deletes existing ones in order to obtain better similarities.
- 4) Then Ch. assigns the meaning of the parallel Romance words to the Voynich “words”.
- 5) Since the readings obtained in such way are still difficult to understand, he arbitrarily modifies the meanings again, with the excuse of the metaphoric interpretation, in order to fit them with the assumed content of the pictures.

I wish to highlight that at each step of this process Ch. gives no evidence in support of his interpretations. His presumed decipherment is, therefore, an arbitrary and unproved conjecture, mostly guided by his own confirmation bias.

Two words on the “Proto-Romance” and the “Italic writing system”

Ch. bases his analysis on a mythological “Proto-Romance” language, which is never defined formally, but instead receives contradictory characterizations in different passages of the paper. It is described as the proto-language of the Romance languages, but also as a Mediterranean *lingua franca*. Ch. does not understand that these two options are mutually exclusive. He refers to some preceding works, written by real linguists, that defend the idea of a Proto-Romance (see, e.g. Hall 1950). However, if he had also read them, he would discover that they contradict his own “findings” for simple chronological reasons. Indeed, no Romance linguist would ever claim that Proto-Romance survived until the 15th century, as Ch. supposes, since the earliest attestations of French and Italian go back as far as the first millennium A.D.

But the most ridiculous of Ch.’s ideas is the presumed “Italic writing system”. First, he ignores the meaning of the term *writing system*. Apparently he thinks that different writing systems are just different shapes of the same letters (in reality, a writing system is a set of rules that describe the correspondence between graphemes and some linguistic elements, from phonemes to syllables or words). Second, he ignores the meaning of the term *Italic*, which originally meant the cursive-styled printing types first used by Aldus Manutius at the end of the 15th cent. Therefore, the term *Italic* cannot, by definition, refer to a handwritten script. Third, Ch. has apparently mistaken the *Italic types* with the *Proto-Italic* script, i.e. the ancient alphabet of Greek origin from which a number of other ancient alphabets derive, such as Etruscan, Latin, Oscan, etc., all attested in the Ancient Italy. Therefore, the whole idea of an “Italic writing system”, taken for granted by Ch., is pure folly, an idea from the category of uncorrectable errors.

Line-by-line criticism

Below come some detailed comments on individual claims and statements made by Ch., whose writing style is annoyingly messy and inconsistent. I suspect that he simply does not know how to format a paper in linguistics (or in any other field, as far as one can judge). Thus, he knows nothing on how to graphically distinguish quoted forms from his own comments, letters from pronunciations and forms from meanings. Very often this makes his text very ambiguous, close to unintelligible. Below I quote his statements verbatim, as they are typeset in the original PDF (apparently, no editorial work has been done by the editorial board of *Romance Studies*), but then in my comments I turn to the normal linguistic typographic conventions: italics for the quoted linguistic expressions, single quotes for meanings, double quotes for the unproven assumptions.

Page 1

The writing system is rather more singular and less intuitive than modern systems

Ch. thinks that the only problem of Voynich ms. is that it is “less intuitive”. Not a good start for a decipherment.

One scholar even produced a transcription of the manuscript that is entirely incorrect (Reeds 1995)

Ch. does not understand the difference between transcription and transliteration. What Reeds (1995) proposes is a transliteration of the Voynich text in such a way that it can be manipulated more easily. It's not a transcription, nor a decipherment. It serves to the scopes it declares, and does so acceptably well.

Even algorithmic data mining for patterns with computers resulted in abject failure, because the computer scientists lacked a vital piece of information for their programming.

Despite the degree in Bio-informatics, Ch. speaks of science-related topics as someone who has barely any idea of what programming, computer, mathematical methods and statistics are. Yet, in a number of occasions (such as Timm & Schinner 2020, and Knight & Reddy 2011, available [here](#)) the statistical analysis of the Voynich ms. revealed many statistical oddities that no decipherer can ignore.

Furthermore, some of the manuscript text uses standard Latin phrasing

Ch. uses the term *phrasing* (or *phrase*) in a misleading and inconsistent way, ignoring that this is a technical term in Linguistics.

a language and writing system that were in normal and everyday use for their time and place

Ch. assumes as self-evident his own hypothesis that is yet to prove.

Incidentally, Maria was great-aunt to Catherine of Aragon (1485–1536), first wife of King Henry VIII (1491–1547) and mother of Queen Mary Tudor (1516–58)

Pseudo-erudite digression having nothing to do with the rest of the paper.

The manuscript has many images of naked women bathing in them, both recreationally and therapeutically

I can admit that the obscure representation Ch. refers to might be interpreted as a depiction of bathing, but the differentiation between recreational and therapeutic is entirely due to Ch.'s imagination.

By that period the language of neighbouring Naples was already well on its way to becoming early Italian, and the writing system was early Italic.

Simply false. In the 15th cent. Italian was a fully formed language with already a long history behind it.

So the language and writing system of Ischia
...
the separate languages and writing systems of their homeland, of Ischia and of Naples

Ridiculous. Ischia is a minor island a few kilometers away from Naples. While its dialectal position, with respect to Neapolitan, can be discussed (I am sure Ch. is not aware of this matter), it certainly had no script on its own in the 15th cent.

On the other hand, the writing system of the manuscript was evidently unique to Ischia, as it has insufficient similarity with Italics to be described as proto-Italic.

Totally meaningless, as explained earlier.

The manuscript uses a language that arose from a blend of spoken Latin, or Vulgar Latin, and other languages across the Mediterranean during the early Medieval period following the collapse of the Roman Empire and subsequently evolved into the many Romance languages, including Italian

Here comes the first definition of the presumed “Proto-Romance”. It has nothing to do with what other supporters of Proto-Romance had in mind.

For that reason it is known as proto-Romance (prototype-Romance)

The reader of a scholarly Journal focused on historical linguistics is supposed to know the meaning of the prefix “proto-”, which is, by the way, not an abbreviation of *prototype*.

Page 4

varying levels of linguistic meme flow between populations

No such terminology as “linguistic meme flow” is known in linguistics. The statement is thus meaningless.

Proto-Romance would always have been a spectrum of language variants across the entire Mediterranean, always in flux and evolving at different rates, depending on geographic contexts

Here, the Proto-Romance becomes something totally deprived of any identity. Very convenient notion, indeed.

The alphabet of [the Voynich ms.] runs from a to z, just as our modern Italic alphabet does

The Italic alphabet madness starts here. “Runs from a to z” is a childish definition of an alphabet. And, no such thing as “Modern Italic alphabet” exists. The statement is therefore meaningless.

a number of the symbols are unfamiliar, either because they have different graphic origins or because they are linear variants to indicate particular uses and phonetic accents

Dividing an unknown script into “familiar” and “unfamiliar” letters is the most nonsensical thing a decipherer could do. Saying that graphic variants indicate some “phonetic accents” is totally meaningless, unsubstantiated and, moreover, never used again in the paper.

a few of the familiar modern letter symbols are absent from the manuscript alphabet, either because they were silent in speech or because their pronunciation had overlap with other letter symbols that are used in their place

Apparently, according to Ch. all the alphabets have necessarily the same inventory of graphemes. Then, at school he learned that some letters can be “silent”, which is a rather childish term not very useful in linguistics. Anyway, in order to be “silent” a letter must be written, in the first place. It cannot be silent if it is simply missing. Basically, he does not understand the difference between being silent, missing from the text, and missing from the alphabet.

Note also that Ch. is totally unaware of all the real problems with the Voynich script that have been long time described by preceding researches. Thus, the total number of graphemes largely exceeds the average number of alphabetic graphemes; moreover, some of the graphemes appear only a few times in the whole manuscript, which is a very strange behavior that Ch. does not address.

combined letter symbols — diphthongs, triphthongs and so on — used to represent specific phonetic sounds

Ch. totally ignores the difference between sounds and graphemes. What he had in mind were, probably, the graphic ligatures, not the diphthongs etc.

the writing system of the manuscript can be apprehended once the grammatical rules are understood

Very good idea; unfortunately, no trace of such rules is to be found anywhere in the paper.

The manuscript uses only lowercase letters and there are no punctuation marks either, so punctuation is indicated by the use of symbol variants and spacing

First, all this exaggerated attention to the lack of the uppercase letters and to punctuation reveals quite a childish view that they are of any importance. Furthermore, it escapes me how spaces can indicate punctuation (neither does Ch. explain it in the paper). What he does not explain is his criteria of word division: sometimes he follows the spaces, sometimes he — tacitly! — does not.

conjoined, or portmanteau, phrases

Again, Ch. is unaware of the meaning of *phrase*, and also that of *portmanteau*, since putting these two terms together is meaningless. I suspect, all this speculation is a trick for hiding the fact that he ignores the word division by spaces and splits single words into smaller pieces.

Page 5

Figure 5 shows the diphthong 'æ', which was once commonplace in Latin derived words and is seen frequently in the manuscript. It is sometimes known by the name *æsc* (pronounced ash).

This unnecessary digression is probably aimed at those readers of *Romance Studies* who are not aware of the fact that *encyclopedia* was spelled *encyclopædia* some decades ago.

Page 6

Figure 6 shows the letter 'd' from the manuscript. It is derived from the Greek delta triangle, which is why it comprises three straight lines

The Greek δ also derives from the Greek delta triangle, yet it is not made of straight lines. Trying to establish the origin of a letter on the ground of the graphic similarity with some other letter in some other alphabet is a very naïve idea, which has been proven untenable already by J. Friedrich (1966).

They are used to denote phonetic differences that roughly correspond with the use of the single and double 'e' in modern language

Ch. is convinced that there exists only one language, one spelling and one phonology on earth. Therefore, it becomes obvious that every script must have a "double e", which indicates necessarily the same "phonetic difference".

letter 'd' ... nearly always followed by the letter 'o'

This is another statistical inconsistency that Ch. does not even notice. It is very unlikely that a language would have a certain phoneme in one context only.

Page 7

double short e ... corresponds with doubling of the modern e, with intonation (e'e)

What Ch. means by this, especially by "intonation", is totally obscure.

triphthongs and quadriphthongs

These are obviously graphical ligatures, also because no phonetic quadriphthong exists in nature (and honestly I am not convinced of diphthongs and triphthongs either, but this is debatable).

Page 9

letter *n* ... modeled on the Arabic *nuun* symbol: ن (*n*). In the modern Osmanya (Somali) and Kaddare conversion alphabets the letter *n* is modeled on the *nuun* in much the same way

Here, again, we are offered some unproven — and unconvincing! — graphic considerations on the form of a letter. The 20th cent. [Osmanya](#) and [Kaddare](#) alphabets have obviously nothing to do with the Voynich script. By the way, what does “conversion alphabets” mean?

The Arabic influence on the Romance languages is often neglected due to the Eurocentric historic view of linguistics

One can easily realize that this assumption is false simply reading any historical grammar of a Romance language (e.g. Tagliavini 1962: §59); Ch. clearly has not done that.

letter ‘o’ ... imitates the shape of the mouth when the phonetic sound is made

Totally unproven statement, which is, moreover, of no use for the author’s argumentation.

show the letter ‘p’ and the phoneme ‘qu’

Why *p* is a “letter”, while *qu* is a “phoneme”?

Page 10

letter *p* ... sometimes extended left or right ... to indicate possession of other letters in a word ... may be silent: *pt-*, *ps-*, *pn-*

The meaning of “possession of letters” is unclear to me. And the masterpiece: since the English spelling is the only spelling existing on earth, obviously the “silent” *p* has the same behavior also in Voynich ms.

Page 11

Although some Romance languages now contain *ene* and *enne* phrasing, there is no Latin root for those terms, which is why letter *l* was symbolically partnered with *m*, *p*, and *qu*, instead of letter *n* in the manuscript

This statement is beyond any reasonable limits of intelligibility. Apparently, Ch. assumes as an axiom that certain letters must have similar shape, and then tries to explain why some of them are excluded from this group in the Voynich script. Notice also the recurring misuse of *phrasing*.

As the Italian peninsula is proximate with North Africa it meant that the Arabic symbol for *n* would have been familiar at that time anyway, so its adoption also made practical sense for a working alphabet

Preposterous, naïve and unproven statement. If it were so, then all proximate nations would have similar letters, which is something ridiculous to say. And no, having one letter in common with a different alphabet is of no practical use.

The 'standing s' is used at the start of words or within words, while the 'sitting s' is used at the end of words. The two versions therefore serve as a form of punctuation

In Ch.'s reading some letters have positional variants, which is not impossible per se. But only in the case of *s* he postulates a "punctuation" use. Why not also with other varying letters? Obviously, he does not explain at all what this "punctuation" means.

Page 12

A variant of the *sitting s* can still be seen in the handwritten *s* as a suffix in modern languages.

Completely unintelligible statement.

Page 13

letter v ... corresponds with the letter *v*, but phonetically corresponds with *v*, *ph*, *f*, *th*, *w*, depending on pronunciation.

Completely unintelligible statement. What corresponds to what?

Page 14

The missing letters/phonemes *c*, *k*, *h*, *ch*, *sh*, *j*, *g*, *y* are not given symbols in the manuscript alphabet, either because they were not used in the manuscript language, or they were silent, or because they represent syllabic junctions that were pronounced anyway, and therefore required no symbols.

As usual, Ch. does not distinguish English spelling from universal phonetics. He presumes that all English writing elements, either single letters or digraphs, must be present in any script in the world. Only with this provision they could be considered "missing" in a script. The whole statement is, once more, barely intelligible.

The word *opát* survives to mean abbot in Polish, Czech and Slovak, demonstrating that proto-Romance reached as far as Eastern Europe. In Western Europe other variants survive: *abat* (Catalan), *abad* (Spanish), *abbé* (French), whilst the Latin is 'abbas'. This also demonstrates the phonetic overlap between the sounds 'p' and 'b' in the manuscript alphabet.

Both claims are wrong. Slavic languages borrowed *opat* from Latin, or, better, from some German variety, which, in turn, borrowed it from Latin, as we can see from the fact that voiced stops became voiceless. And no, this does not explain any "phonetic overlap between *p* and *b*", whatever it means.

Page 16

The words *orla la* describe the mood of the woman on the left and may well be the root of the French phrase 'oh là là', which has a very similar sentiment.

No, this is not the etymology of the said French exclamation (not phrase!). I strongly doubt that exclamations have etymologies.

or aus (golden bird: well behaved)

Ch. arbitrarily changes the meanings of two words just to make the whole sentence more meaningful and fitting with what he thinks the corresponding picture represents. Ch. tries to explain such semantic shifts as metaphors. However, metaphors have no rules, so these claims of his cannot be falsified. Ultimately, this means that, in his approach, whatever word can have whatever meaning. This leads the decipherment to failure.

Drosera contains substances known as flavonoids and quinones, which have an antibiotic, antiviral, antimicrobial and antifungal effect.

Either this Drosera is a panacea, or Ch. has misunderstood something while checking it on Wikipedia.

Page 16–17

The text words can still be found in various Romance languages and Latin: *panais-or* (French); *o'nauira* (Latin); *æo arna* (Galician); *o'péor* (Galician, Spanish); *omor* (Romanian); *or é'epe a* (Old Italian); *doméas* (Old French); *t* [terminus] (Latin).

This is an example of Ch.'s method of assuming phonetic similarity between Voynich "words" and some unnamed Romance forms. It is not even clear whether the forms that he lists here are those from Voynich ms. or the corresponding forms in Romance languages. Needless to say, the similarity is totally made up. There is nothing similar, in Old Italian, to *or é'epe a*; same for *æo arna* in Galician; etc. Romanian *omor* is a borrowing from Slavic *umoriti* 'to kill' and cannot be derived from Proto-Romance.

Each vignette includes a combination of naïvely drawn and somewhat stylized images

Yes, they are not photographs, they are medieval miniatures. Certainly too naïve for such an advanced specialist as Ch.

They read: o'péna (of rock: Old Spanish) o'qunas [cunas] asa (the cradle/birth it is: Spanish, Latin) amena sa (its lead/start: French) rolen æt (turning fire: Spanish, Latin) o'monas (of unity: Latin) amenaus (amazing/threatening: Spanish, Catalan) o'léna (of energy: Italian) formena (forming/shaping/create: Catalan, Spanish) o'péna sa (of rock it is: Old Spanish)

It is nice how Ch. tacitly assumes that Voynich's *o* corresponds to English *of*. Romance genitival preposition derives from Latin *de* and its phonetic shape in modern languages is not too far from that. The criteria of similarity are not explained, but I really cannot imagine how this *o* could be similar to anything like *de*. I suspect that Ch. instinctively read this *o* as a genitival preposition simply because of the approximate assonance with English *of*. And no, there is no *pena* meaning 'rock' in Spanish. And *rolen æt* does not mean 'turning fire' in Latin.

The illustration in Figure 42 shows a diagram of a nautical inclinometer

I wonder whether there was such a thing as nautical inclinometer in the 15th century. Has Ch. checked it in a book of Science history?

tas [tasse] (the hull/bowl: French, Adriatic)

Is Adriatic a language?

the annotation [d]oména omona (big man dominates: Portuguese, Italian)

Totally unsubstantiated. There is nothing, in the manuscript, that would suggest the restoration of a *d* in this context. More in the next comment.

The annotation reads: o'ména omor na (the direction of death's flight: French, Romanian, Latin) clearly demonstrating the Christian belief in a celestial afterlife.

First: what Christian belief does Ch. have in mind? I cannot remember of any “death flight” in the Gospels. Second, and most importantly: Ch.’s transliterations *o’ména* and *[d]oména* correspond to two identical strings of letters in the manuscript. Neither a *d*, or an apostrophe is there in the original text. This means that Ch. deliberately modified the transliteration in order to confirm his reading. This single fact represents a major logical error that makes the whole “decipherment” untenable. Indeed, once the alphabet is defined, the whole text must be readable in the same way. I doubt Ch. has even realized this issue, but, as a matter of fact, this claim is an auto-refutation of the entire hypothesis.

Page 24

words read: o quais aqua requi[ro] a (the quay/wharf, is required by water: Galician, French, Italian, Latin).

Here, a whole syllable is arbitrarily added to the text.

Page 25

This was the first month of the Roman calendar. The Gregorian calendar was introduced in 1582 by Pope Gregory VIII, which post-dates the manuscript by 140 years.

It escapes me how the Gregorian calendar would post-date anything by 140 years.

Page 28

Note that the Latin spelling is used, indicating that the words are contemporaneous with the manuscript.

Ch. spends some time presenting presumably Latin words that appear in some parts of the manuscripts as captions to some images. I have no opinion whether they are effectively Latin or not. However, the present statement lacks of any logic.

Page 30

its modern Italian name is ‘l’aragosta’, which is derived from a combination of the words ‘Aragonese’ and ‘locusta’ (Latin for lobster): i.e. the Aragonese-lobster.

I cannot even imagine where Ch. found this folk etymology of *aragosta*.

The word beneath the lion, written in conventional Italics, reads ‘aug’st’, which means the month of ‘August’ and survives in Latin as a contraction of ‘Augusta’.

What is meant by this “conventional Italics”? And, saying that something “survives” in Latin indicates the fact that such a thing is older than Latin. Is Ch. saying that his “proto-Romance” is even older than Latin?

Note the accent < over the letter m to indicate lower pitch, which was a Medieval device

Unclear what Ch. means by “lower pitch”.

Figure 56 shows ... the Zodiac sign Scorpio — scorpion (green lizard): In the Medieval period the term ‘scorpion’ was used colloquially for both lizards and scorpions, as they lived in similar terrain and both had long tails

I suspect Ch. has concocted this fairy tale about Medieval scorpions and lizards from scratch only to justify his reading of the manuscript.

proto-Romance survived by vestigial fragmentation of its lexicon into the languages we see today.

Because a language is just a lexicon.

a language that was once ubiquitous over the Mediterranean and subsequently became the foundation for southern European linguistics in the present day

Is Ch. speaking about languages or about linguistics? Does he know the difference?

The Greek sign of the holy cross ‘+’ is commonly used as a Latin text symbol to represent faith in God, Christ, Christianity

The cross is not Greek, the cross is a cross. And, no, it did not represent all those things in Latin manuscripts.

The circumflex accent ‘^’ beneath the final letter ‘o’ translates into a modern accented ‘ó’ making the word ‘mapeós’ a preterite indicative verb form: i.e. associated with a past event

Here the reader is offered with a long awaited glimpse on the grammar of the Voynich’s language. Totally unsubstantiated, as always. Note the kind explanation of the term *preterite*.

Here Ch. turns to consider an 15th cent. Italian manuscript, which seems to him relevant in the analysis of the Voynich ms. “because it has similarity in calligraphic style and similarly combined letterforms”.

The third image is the Roman numeric symbol for the century '1400 (MCCCC: M C × 4)

Ch. kindly explains Roman numbers to those readers of *Romance Studies* who are not aware of them.

the letter 'z', the phonemes 'con' and 'ch'

Are *con* and *ch* phonemes?

the second reads: 'contento conchisto [conquista] patto' (satisfactory conquest pact: Italian).

The reading is wrong. Ch. does not take into account the fact that the manuscript is written in the Neapolitan dialect. Therefore, *conchisto* corresponds to Italian *con questo* 'with this', rather than to *conquista* 'conquest'. The whole meaning is: 'satisfied with this pact'.

Page 35

Alfonsus dei gracia Rex Aragome (Alfonzo of the gracious, King of Aragon)

This is one of Ch.'s masterpieces. He reads a Latin sentence as if it were in Italian. Obviously, *dei* means 'of God' in Latin, and is not to be read as Italian *dei* 'of the'. The whole thing means 'Alfonsus, king of Aragon by the grace of God', not 'Alfonsus of the gracious' (what is this even supposed to mean?). What is peculiar is that only a badly educated Italian speaker trying to guess the meaning of a Latin text without effectively knowing Latin would have done such kind of error. Did Ch. rely on a similar informant? Also, Ch.'s — or his uneducated informant's — reading *Aragome* should be emended in *Aragonie* (Medieval Latin spelling for *Aragoniae*). Basically, Ch. is not even able to distinguish a *m* from a *ni* in a simple manuscript Latin formula. What to say about a whole manuscript in an unknown script...

Incidentally, note that Ch., as a British, must have certainly seen this same Latin formula appearing on the obverse of all British coins: [Elizabeth II Dei Gratia Regina](#). Apparently, he did not pay much attention to it.

Page 36

This flowing handwriting style is known as 'humanistic miniscule cursive script'. It was developed by the Italian scholar Niccolò de' Niccoli (1364–1437) in the 1420s, with the intention of formalizing and standardizing Italic handwriting and type.

Very interesting. Here Ch. mistakes the humanistic cursive script with the Italic types. Had he used *humanistic cursive* throughout in his paper, he would not have subjected himself to ridicule. By the way: Niccoli dies three decades before the invention of printing, and five decades before the invention of Italic types; therefore he could not be the one who standardized it.

It was duly adopted by the Vatican to make communication more consistent and reliable across Catholic Europe

There was no Vatican in the 15th cent., not in the modern sense of this word.

It is incredible too, that both manuscripts survived, as neither was written in the Latin of officialdom and might easily have been discarded.

Ch.'s idea of the Middle Ages must derive from some Hollywood movies.

The only males in the citadel were the abbot, celibate monks and young boys, leaving the women and girls sexually and emotionally frustrated, so they amused and distracted themselves whilst they waited and yearned for male attention to return.

No special comment, this is just comic, as well as revealing.

Page 37

Ferdinand I of Naples (1423–94)

The year of birth should be 1424.

The solution to the codex of MS408 was developed over a 2-week period in May 2017

This brazen self-presentation is inserted in a final note which is supposed to provide the Author's academic affiliation and role. However, it is very revealing. Indeed, the quality of the paper perfectly fits a two-week effort.

Concluding remarks

It remains a mystery how this amateurish "paper" could have passed the peer review of an indexed scholarly journal. A second mystery is the powerful promotional campaign that accompanied the publishing. It was announced with a specific press release by the University of Bristol (removed the day after, when the scandal deflagrated), and also taken up by unnumbered newspapers and news agencies around the world. Even the Linguistic Society of America made an announcement on their Facebook profile (similarly removed some days later).

Since this is a clear case of a peer review system failure, I thought that a detailed debunking was the least thing to do in order to restore our reputation, as linguists.

The only possible alternative explanation that comes to my mind is that this publication is a [Sokal-style hoax](#), perpetrated by someone who wants to test the intellectual rigor in Humanities, specifically in Linguistics, and the ability of the specialists working in this field to prevent bad science from being published on reputable journals.

References

- Cheshire, Gerard (2019). "The Language and Writing System of MS408 (Voynich) Explained." *Romance Studies* 37.1, 1–38. DOI: [10.1080/02639904.2019.1599566](https://doi.org/10.1080/02639904.2019.1599566).
- Friedrich, Johannes (1966). *Geschichte der Schrift unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer geistigen Entwicklung*. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Hall Robert A., Jr. (1950). "The Reconstruction of Proto-Romance." *Language* 26.1, 6–27. DOI: [10.2307/410406](https://doi.org/10.2307/410406).
- Knight, Kevin & Sravana Reddy (2011). "What We Know About The Voynich Manuscript." In: *Proceedings of the 5th ACL-HLT Workshop on Language Technology for Cultural Heritage, Social Sciences, and Humanities*. Association for Computational Linguistics. Portland, OR, 78–86.
- Reeds, J. (1995). "William F. Friedman's Transcription of the Voynich Manuscript." *Cryptologia* 19.1, 1–23. DOI: [10.1080/0161-119591883737](https://doi.org/10.1080/0161-119591883737).
- Tagliavini, Carlo (1962). *Le origini delle lingue neolatine*. Bologna: Pàtron.
- Timm, Torsten & Andreas Schinner (2020). "A possible generating algorithm of the Voynich manuscript." *Cryptologia* 44.1, 1–19. DOI: [10.1080/01611194.2019.1596999](https://doi.org/10.1080/01611194.2019.1596999).