A CASE FOR TARTESSIAN AS A CELTIC LANGUAGE

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For Celtic studies in Britain and Ireland, and the wider ‘English-speaking world’, ancient Portugal and Spain do not often figure as part of the field’s primary subject matter. There is a long-established idea that the Celts and the Celtic languages originated in central Europe and that they spread from there with the Hallstatt and La Tène archaeological cultures during the Iron Age (VIIIth-Ist centuries BC), movements that have usually been envisioned as progressing overland until they reached the English Channel (Collis 2003, 93-132). Therefore, the Celts of the Iberian Peninsula would belong to a separate line of development from those of Britain and Ireland. Whether one believes in a Celtic family tree with an Insular Celtic or a Gallo-Brittonic, Hispano-Celtic would thus not be a particularly close relative of Brittonic and Goidelic (Koch 1992a; De Bernardo 2006).

However, more recently, archaeologists have taken an interest in the Atlantic Late Bronze Age of the XIIIth to VIIith centuries BC (e.g. Ruiz-Gálvez 1998). At this earlier horizon, Britain, Ireland, and Armorica were in direct and intense contact by sea with the western Iberian Peninsula, as can be seen in shared types of feasting equipment and weapons, reflected, for example, in the contents of the mid Xth-century Huelva deposition (Ruiz-Gálvez 1995; Needham & Bowman 2005; Burgess & O’Connor 2008) and the iconography of the ‘warrior stelae’ (Celestino 2001; Harrison 2004). Against this background, Barry Cunliffe, 2001, 261-310, has proposed the origins of the Celtic languages should be sought in the maritime networks of the Atlantic Zone, which reached their peak of intensity in the Late Bronze Age and then fell off sharply at the Bronze-Iron Transition (IXth-VIIth centuries BC).

After reviewing some of the earliest linguistic evidence from the Iberian Peninsula—viewing this from my accustomed perspective based in the early Insular Celtic languages and, to a lesser extent, Gaulish—I have concluded that there is also case to be made from the philological side in favour of an origin of the Celtic languages in the Atlantic west (2009). It should be explained at the outset that an Atlantic hypothesis of Celtic origins does not require a rejection or minimizing of the Indo-European character of...
Celtic (cf. Meid 2008), nor a relocation of the Indo-European homeland to the west. However, once we recognize evidence for Celtic in the western Peninsula as early as the Orientalizing Period of the Early Iron Age (VIIIth-VIth centuries BC), then we confront the likelihood that the Atlantic Late Bronze Age had already been a largely or wholly Celtic-speaking phenomenon and that the subsequent penetration of the region by Urnfield, Hallstatt, and La Tène influences would not be relevant or only relevant as a matter of inter-Celtic dialectology.

In December 2008, the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies launched a research project called ‘Ancient Britain and the Atlantic Zone’ (Prydain Hynafol a Pharthau Môr Iwerydd), or ABrAZo for short. The goal is to bring together linguistic, archaeological, isotope, and genetic evidence to see whether it might now be possible to synthesize a new account of the Celts, a narrative which would embrace the Atlantic Zone as its core rather than as its periphery. We have a growing list of collaborators and correspondents. In the primary research team, I am joined by Professor Sir Barry Cunliffe (Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford), Dr Dagmar S. Wodtko, Dr Catriona Gibson, and Professor Raimund Karl (Bangor University).

The impetus to begin such a project now followed my focus on the south-western inscriptions in 2007-8. The remainder of this article provides a selective overview of these preliminary findings. After reviewing this corpus, my conclusion is that several of the previously proposed Celtic explanations for Tartessian forms—primarily in the work of Correa 1989; 1992 and Untermann 1995; 1997—are plausible. Considering comparanda from Goidelic, Brittonic, Gaulish, and Lepontic, as well as Hispano-Celtic, many further Celtic etymologies for Tartessian can now be set out as worth consideration. The overall density of more-or-less probably Celtic forms within the corpus thus increases significantly. This observation is particularly the case for the longer and best-preserved epigraphic texts. Therefore, it now appears that the more promising working hypothesis is that Tartessian is simply an Indo-European language, specifically a Celtic one. Alternative hypotheses have less in their favour: that the south-western inscriptions are entirely in a non-Indo-European language (e.g. Rodriguez 2002) or that they contain a relatively small proportion of Celtic elements (primarily proper names) embedded in some non-Celtic, probably non-Indo-European, matrix language (Villar 2004).

Even if the south-western inscriptions did not exist, or if we had no idea how to decode their script, there would be reason to think that Celtic was spoken in Tartessos. According to Herodotus (1.163), a very rich king ruled Tartessos between about 625 and 545 BC. He was named Ἀργανθόκλεος. This name, or title, is clearly Celtic based on the word for silver and money arganto-: cf. Celtiberian arkanta, Old Irish airget, Middle Welsh aryyant ‘silver’, Latin argentum, Sanskrit rajatām ‘silver’ < Indo-European *h₂erghntom ‘silver’. Note also the north-western divine epithet in LVGGONI
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ARGANTICAENI (Villaviciosa, Oviedo [Búa 2000, 274]) and the family name of [T]OVTONI ARGANTIQ[VM] AMBATI F[ILIVS] (Palencia [Vallejo 2005, 186-7]). A grave stone for FLACCVS | ARGANTONI [FILIVS] | MAGILANICVM | MIROBRIG|ENSIS in Vettonian territory (Alconétar, Cáceres) shows the continuing use of the personal name Argantonios, in or near former Tartessian territory, during the Roman Period (Vallejo 2005, 186-7). For the first suffix, compare the Celtic divine names Maponos and Epona. Argantonios ‘agent of divine silver’ is closely comparable to the title ARGANTODANNOS found on Gaulish silver coinage. There could hardly be a more appropriate title for the ruler of the silver-based polity of Tartessos during the Orientalizing Period of the First Iron Age.1

Several Greek and Roman references locate the Kunhteı in the Algarve (e.g. Herodotus 4.49, Justin/Trogus 44.4 Cu[n]etes). This name closely resembles the Ancient British place-name Cunětio, which corresponds to Medieval Welsh Kynwydion (< *Cunětiones), the name of the war band of Dark Age Strathclyde (Charles-Edwards 1978, 66-8). The root of these names is apparently Celtic *kū, *kuno-, which literally means ‘dog’, but also metaphorically ‘warrior, hero’. So I suggest that Kunetes in the south-west means, like Kynwydion in north Britain, ‘band of warriors’.

There is Almagro-Gorbea’s 2002 proposal concerning a graffito on a Greek bowl found at Huelva, which he dates to 590-560 BC and reads NIEQWI ‘to [the war god] Nētos’, comparable to the Hispano-Celtic deity Nētos (e.g. western NETONI DEO . . . [CIL II 5278, Trujillo, Cáceres]) and the Old Irish mythological name Níoth. Although this derivation is not without complexities, as Javier de Hoz has emphasized to me, NIEQWI could represent a phonetic form [n´ētōi] or [n´ētūi], the dative of the Celtic theonym proposed.

Gargoris is the name of the legendary savage first king of the Cunětes and Tartessians in the myth of the culture hero Habis preserved in Justin’s epitome of Trogus Pompeius (44.4). This form can be interpreted as corresponding precisely to Old Irish garg ‘fierce, savage’ and ri ‘king’, Gaulish and British rix.

Turning now to the south-western inscriptions, José Antonio Correa and Jürgen Untermann, in their pioneering publications, have already recognized that these contain some elements that appear Celtic, mostly proper names. A list follows in which a few identifications of my own are added.2

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1 In this light and view of relative priority, it is unlikely that Herodotus had been influenced unduly, if at all, by the similar name Ἀργαντιονέας attested in Hellenistic sources for a mountain in north-west Asia Minor near Byzantium (cf. Moret 2006).

2 The texts are numbered following the system of Untermann 1997 (MLH 4).
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aarkuui ἀρκαίλικος [J.7.6] ‘for Argos’, arkobό- ἄρκαι [J.7.7]. The form is attested at Oliveira do Hospital, Coimbra, Portugal (Búa 2000, 481), ARCVIVS at Barcelos, Braga, Portugal (Búa 2000, 359), the place-name Arcobriga, Gaulish Com-argus, Old Irish arg ‘warrior, hero’, Greek ἀρχής ‘guide, leader’.

aibůr[i] [J.3.1], cf. CRISSVS TALABVRI F. AEBOSO-CELENSIS (AE 1952, 42-43, Cáceres); Celtic -rīs (< Indo-European *h3rīg-s ‘king, leader’).


alișne [J.11.5.], cf. Gaulish Alesia, ALISIA, ALISANV ‘to the god of Alesia’ (Indo-European *h3lís-o- ‘alder’); Celtiberian alizos (K.0.1), family name alizokum (K.0.1) are now less certain for this root (Wodtko 2000, 21).

anb̥aṭia ἀμβάκτιος [J.16.2], cf. Gaulish ambactus (e.g. Caesar, De bello Gallico 6.15), ambaxtus ‘servant of high rank, envoy, representative’ (Hoz 2007), Welsh amaeth ‘farmer’, as a personal name Celtiberian, North-west Hispano-Celtic, Lusitanian AMBATVS, also North-west Hispano-Celtic AMBATIO (Albertos 1985, 264), based on the past passive particle of a Celtic compound verb *ambi-ag-tós ‘one sent around’, Indo-European ḥ2entbhi- ‘around’ + *h₂e-g- ‘drive, send’.


3 Owing to the unresolved questions relating to the indigenous pre-Roman languages of the Iberian Peninsula, the term ‘Hispano-Celtic’ as used here may be understood as the more open-ended ‘Hispanic Indo-European’ where the comparanda do not also include forms from Celtiberian and/or another Celtic language to confirm the specifically Celtic affinities of the Tartessian.
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leoine ≔ PalHisp 9 343

kīmbaiti(s) ‘of the people near(er) the ocean’, Hispano-Celtic family name (genitive plural with adjectival k-suffix), preceding baane ‘to the woman/wife’; cf. Old Irish ier, Middle Welsh łyr ‘sea’; Gaulish (Banassac) neddamon ‘of the nearest ones’, Old Irish nesam ‘nearest’.

melesae ≔ PalHisp 9 343

sarunea [J.22.1, 2] ‘Star-goddess’ genitive singular, cf. Gaulish Serona, Serana (Jufer & Luginbühl 2001: 62); the accusative may now be attested as saru?an (Mesas do Castelinho).

tarnekun [J.26.1] Hispano-Celtic family name with baane ‘to the woman/wife’, cf. the Celtiberian family name turanikum, possibly related to Gaulish Taranos (the thunder god), Old Irish torann ‘thunder’, Welsh tara.

tīrtuos [J.1.2], cf. Celtiberian tirtouios, tirtunos, tirtanicum, tirtu, family name tirtanikum, tirtotulu ‘triple’ (Prósper 2007, 24-6), North-west Hispano-Celtic personal names TRITIA, TRITIVS, TRITEVS, Gaulish Trito[s], Tritus, Trito, Old Welsh triti(d) ‘third’, Latin tertius.

uarb ooiir ≔ PalHisp 9 343


usnee [J.23.1] /uχsmai/ ‘in Uxama, the highest/most important place’.

juultina [J.12.3], cf. Celtiberian ultinos, ultia, ultu, ultatunos (Wodtko 2000, 456-8), Lepontic Uvltiauiopos (Prestino).

We may now add the o-stem dative compound name that begins the text from Mesas do Castelinho: tlīlekuulkuu ≔ PalHisp 9 343, cf. TILLEGVS AMBATI F SVSARRVS CIAOB[RS]GIAECO on a tessera from Folgosó del Caurel, Lugo, Galicia, AD 28 (Búa 2004, 387), with Tillegus probably reflecting an earlier *Tillekos. For -ulku, cf. Ogam Irish ULCAGNI =
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Romano-British VLCAGNI < Indo-European *wklwo- ‘wolf, predator’ (McCone 1985).

The preceding names confirm that speakers of a Hispanic variety of Indo-European, in many instances showing itself to be specifically Celtic, were an influential group in the extreme south-west of Europe, in and around Tartessos, by the VIIth century BC. If we now examine longer extracts and some complete inscrptional texts, it is possible to argue that Celtic was the principal language of the south-western inscriptions, i.e., that they are probably not written in some other language with only a relatively small proportion of Celtic proper names. The readings here are usually as published by Correa and Untermann, or very similar, apart from the suggested word divisions. The continuous translations are of course highly provisional.

[J.1.1] ‘Fonte Velha 6’ lokōbō niirabō tōo ārāiai kāltēc lokō|n ane nařkēe koakīšiin|kooolobō|ii te’-e-ro-baare(b)če tasa|šioonii

‘invoking the Lugoues of the Neri people, for a nobleman of the Celtae/Galatai: he rests still within; invoking every hero, the grave of Tašiōonis has received him.’

lokōbō niirabō tōo ārāiai cām|(A|c|++|||)A|+|d|+|A|+-|+|+|+|+|+|+ tōo ārāiai kāltēc lokō|n: the similarity to Celtiberian TO-LVGVEI ARAIANOM [K.3.3] points to a common Hispano-Celtic religious vocabulary linking Celtiberia and the south-west as implied by Pliny (NH 3.13): Celticos a celtiberis . . . aduenisse manifestum est sacris, lingua, oppidorum vocabulis . . . Cf. North-west Hispano-Celtic theonyms LVCVBO ARQVIENOBO (Sober, Lugo), LV-COVB[S] ARQVIENif[S] (Outeiro do Rei, Lugo; Búa 2000, 266-267), and DIBVS M[.] LVCVBO from Peña Amaya, north of Burgos (Marco 2005, 301), LVCBOBO AROVASA[.] (Lugo). Compare also Gaulish and Celtiberian Lugus, Old Irish Lug, Welsh Lleu (Marco 2005).


lokōn nē+[||X|+||], also lokōn [J.57.1], ‘grave, funerary monument’, cf. Cisalpine lokan ‘grave’ (Todi): Indo-European √*legh- ‘lie down’. Alternatively, lokōn could mean ‘oath’, cf. Old Irish lugae (Jordán 2006), or ‘Lugus’ as an accusative singular corresponding to lokōbō.


te’-e-ro-baare OJA+IÔ, also te’-ee-ro-baare [J.18.2] ‘[this grave] has received him/it’: preverb tu + pronoun e(n) + perfect ro + verb *ber- ‘receive, carry’. All elements are well attested in Old Irish compound verbs, though bāre as the third-person singular perfect of *ber- is unique to
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[1.4.2], ‘Benaciate 1’ features a relief sculpture of a woman wearing a (?Greek) helmet with a nose-guard riding a horse side-saddle, together with a few letters of a badly fragmentary Tartessian inscription. [1.4.1], ‘Benaciate 2’, is a stone of the same fabric and thickness with the following anticlockwise inscription: 

iboo-ion asune urbaan ekouine oboar baaara**[ ]**taa oretoo +dio+ax**[ | ]**a9a39a+o| | 

For the ones whom I [this grave] have received, for Asuna, the supreme one, for Ekurine (Ek^w-o-rigni ‘Horse Queen’) . . . deliverance (running under)’; cf. the Gaulish personal name Assuna; Old Irish ech ‘horse’, Indo-European *h₁ekʰwos ‘horse’; Welsh rhiain ‘noble lady’, Gaulish rigani, Cisalpine genitive rikanas, Sanskrit rājāti < Indo-European *r̥gyaṇih₂ ‘queen’, the recurrent Gallo-Roman collocation EPONAE REGINAE ‘to the Horse-Goddess Queen’ (Jufer & Luginbühl 2001, 39-40) with the same two elements as ekouine in the same order, Welsh Rhiannon < *R̥gantonā. With oretoo, verbal noun ‘running under’ (the activity of a horse or wheeled vehicle) > ‘to deliver, save, rescue’, compare Gaulish uoreto-, Welsh gwared, Old Irish fo-reith ‘helps, saves’.

[1.5.1] ‘Barradas’: istæjiboo rinoeboo anakeenake ejiboo /isɛbɔ̃ rí(g)nəbo an(ð)agénako/ ‘to these indigenous queens (goddesses)’; cf. Old Irish rignaib ‘to (the) queens’; Gaulish (Larzac) andognai, accusative andognam ‘indigenous, native, indwelling’, Brittonic (Bath) . . . DEVINA DEJEDA ANDAGIN . . . ‘the divine indigenous/indwelling goddess’ (for alternative explanations, see Schriver 2004, 16-17; Sims-Williams 2007, 16-17), Middle Welsh annyan ‘nature, inborn quality’ < *andoganā, Latin indigena ‘native, &c.’ < Indo-European *(e)ndo-ĝenh₁.

[1.19.2], ‘Pego 2’: ooørir narkεntii $$\Upsilon\Phi\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\alpha\omicron\mu\nu\nu \Upsilon\Omega\mu\nu\nu$$

‘Vorviros: they [the components of the burial] are ?bound/unmoved’, commemorates the same individual who is named again in the genitive in inscription [1.19.1], ‘Pego 1’: li̲r̥nêstakun bané ooñoire bâ*=kar[ke]nii $$\Upsilon\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\nu\omicron\nu \Upsilon\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron$$

For the wife of Vorviros, [a woman] of the Lirnestakoi (?‘those dwelling near the sea’ or ‘the clan of Lirnestos’). [This grave] has received [her]. . .’

baane ‘for the woman, wife’ < *b̥n̥nai (Indo-European *g̥wênh₃a ‘woman’), Early Old Irish dative bein, Gaulish (Châteubleau) ?accusative/dative beni. Tartessian baanon (J.11.4) is possibly the genitive plural, cf. Old Irish ban.
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kotuaratee △[245x722] PAH[245x722] ‘has run under, has delivered/rescued’ < Celtic *ko(m) tu u(p)o rāte, cf. the Tartessian verbal noun oretoo [J.4.2] above, Old Irish fu.rráith, Old Welsh guoraut, gwarawt ‘rescued’ < ‘has run under’ *u(p)o rāte.


[J.12.1] ‘Abóbada 1’: iru alkuu siec nark-entii muba[245x722] te'[245x722] ero-b[245x722]are [gataneate] ‘for the man/hero (*virūi) Alkos or Walkos: these lie unmoving. . . [The grave] has received him, for the wingèd one.’


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[J.7.2] ‘Vale dos Vermelhos 1’ bodyougar... karner-ion ire
OYMYHMOYXHAA* 9AFIGA
‘Bod(w)ogar... the man whose stone funerary monument is built’. Cf.
Gaulish KARNITU ‘has built a stone funerary monument’. For -ion relative,
 cf. Celtiberian ion, Gaulish -io suffixed to the verb as in DVGHTIIIO,
similarly Old Irish cantae ‘(they) who sing’ < *kanonti-io.

[J.1.4] ‘Fonte Velha 2’: gekeui uurke ot*erk*a... ‘... has made a
grave for...’
uurke OYMOHH, cf. Old Welsh guoreu ‘(has) made’, Middle Breton
guere < Celtic *wevraige, Greek perfect third singular έοργε, Avestan
va✉arəza ‘has made’ < Indo-European *wevorgē.

ot*erk*a AHMOH+, cf. Gaulish uodercos, uoderce ‘grave’ (Larzac)
(Delamarre 2003, 326, citing Fleuriot): Indo-European *derk- ‘glance at,
see’. Old Irish derc, also delec, commonly means ‘cavity’ as well as ‘eye’.

A few general observations may be attempted in conclusion:

1. Most of the Celtic forms identifiable in the south-western
inscriptions are well attested and belong to the core vocabulary of more than
one Celtic language.

2. There are numerous Hispano-Celtic parallels, including comparanda
from Celtiberian and the Lusitanian-Callaecian zone.

3. Particularly among the longer inscriptions, the complete ones, and
those with few uncertain readings, the forms identified as specifically Celtic
(or more generally an Indo-European that could be Celtic) are frequent and
those that do not look Celtic are infrequent. It is sometimes possible to
interpret these texts as continuous funerary statements in an Ancient Celtic
language, favouring the conclusion that Celtic is the language of the south-
western inscriptions, rather than another language with isolated Celtic
names.

4. However, that distinction is only of limited significance because, in
either case, Celtic was in use in the extreme south-west of Europe by the
VIIth century BC.

5. That general conclusion could carry important implications for
historians and archaeologists. It reinforces something we have known for
some time, namely that the Celtic languages in the Iberian Peninsula—
possibly unlike those of Gaul and Britain—cannot be explained as the result
of the spread of the La Tène and Hallstatt archaeological cultures of the
central European Iron Age. To find Celtic extensively used so far to the
south-west at such an early date must also call into question the relevance of
Hallstatt’s Late Bronze Age forerunner, the Urmfield cultures, in the
Celticization of the Peninsula. The immediate background and context of the

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earliest attested Celtic language appears, instead, to be the Atlantic Late Bronze Age, a conclusion broadly resonant with ideas expressed by Almagro (e.g. 1995), as well as the new theories concerning the origins of the Celtic languages of Cunliffe (2001) and Brun (2006).

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