ON PALAEOHISPANIC SCRIPTS: THE HISTORY OF THEIR DECIPHERMENT

The map by J. De Hoz (fig. 1 in this paper) illustrates the extent and complexity of the native epigraphic heritage of ancient Hispania. The Iberian Peninsula during the last centuries BCE was an area with a significant body of native epigraphy of at least three or even more native languages with their own Palaeohispanic scripts. The internal relations of their different varieties and history are still being discussed by researchers.

Keywords: Palaeohispanic scripts, decipherment, epigraphy.

0. Hispanic native epigraphy

This recent map by J. De Hoz (2019: 3) is a good image to help us grasp the extent and complexity of the native epigraphic corpora of ancient Hispania. Indeed, the Iberian Peninsula during the last centuries BCE was an area with a significant body of native epigraphy that depicted at least three or even more native languages, which made use, in most cases, of a family of scripts that is a native adaptation of a Phoenician model. This group of scripts is called Palaeohispanic. The internal relation of its different varieties and their history are still being discussed: researchers have not reached a consensus on many relevant issues, particularly in relation to the very generation of all the varieties (Ferrer and Moncunill 2019 is a good recent overview): De Hoz (2019: 6) expresses the traditional (already Gómez-Moreno 1922: 343 or 1943: 254) and I would venture to say majority view that the adaptation from the Phoenician...
model happened only once and in the Guadalquivir valley, as a consequence of their interaction with the Tartessians (and from there, the new writing would be later exported and adapted for the other epigraphic areas and languages). Ferrer (2017) (see Ferrer and Moncunill 2019: 106ff), though, prefers to think that there were two separate adaptations (one in the North and one in the South), from where all the different varieties originate.  

There are today around 3000 inscriptions if taken all together, some of which can be read and interpreted at a quite acceptable level of certainty. Ferrer and Moncunill’s map (2019: 79) is a good portrait of how these texts are perceived today, how complex an

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1 Ferrer has recently made quite significant contributions to this difficult question. His and Moncunill’s recent review (Ferrer and Moncunill 2019: 25) concerning the current challenges facing researchers in this field are a good summary in my view. After summarizing the proposals of the last few years (Rodríguez Ramos 2004, 2005), Correa (1985, 1992, 1993, 1996, 2005, 2009), Javier de Hoz (1986, 1993, 1993b, 1996, 2005a, 2010, 2011) or Ferrer himself (2017), they offer (2019: 22) their own hypothetical reconstruction of the events that I see sensible in general terms but highly uncertain or difficult to prove at this stage. I feel it unlikely there were two separate adaptations (Northern and Southern) as they suggest, even understanding their reasons to do so.
image researchers are seeing in these corpora, how several types and subtypes of scripts, as well as several languages, are now detected in them, even if our knowledge is imperfect and our interpretation of the inscriptions is indeed multifaceted.

Fig. 2. Ferrer and Moncunill’s map (2019: 79)

1. Historical decipherment process

But that was not always the case, of course. The decipherment process, in fact, started long ago (during the 16th century\(^2\)), but has proven to be quite challenging, since we really cannot even say it is over.

During the Renaissance a sizable collection of strange ancient coins with unreadable scripts was already known and paid attention to, even if just for their perceived artistic value. But little by little an interest began to be developed for the script itself, although the decipherment advanced very slowly for centuries. In any case, and since the initial driving force was indeed the coins, the first significance advances took place among numismatists, such as the Sevillian Antonio Delgado y Hernández (1871–1876) or the German-Basque Jacobo Zóbel de Zangróniz (1879–1880).

\(^2\) See Gómez-Moreno 1943: 251.
Secondly, some attention started to be paid, from the eighteenth century onwards, to other inscriptions besides coins, or to the place names appearing on the coins, leading to initial attempts at drawing a language map of Ancient Hispania, for many reasons, not least of all nationalistic, etc. Most of the initial theories were very speculative, which influenced greatly W. von Humboldt’s in its turn highly influential approach (1821). Even though he identified the importance of a Celtic linguistic layer in Hispania, his most lasting legacy, however misleading, both within and outside Spain, was the belief in a linguistic unity of Hispania, “where a language that was the ancestor of modern-day Basque would have been spoken” (De Hoz 2019: 8). The hypothesis that Iberian and modern Basque are genetically related was born.

These theories converged in E. Hübner’s 1893 *Monumenta Linguae Ibericae*, a systematic compilation of the material and a careful analysis of the inscriptions known at the time. The main two problems of this work were, though, that, on the one hand, dependent on previous works by numismatists, Hübner believed the scripts were alphabetic, and, on the other, he followed Humboldt in his view of a homogeneous linguistic Basque-Iberian landscape of Hispania, even if accepting a somehow marginal presence of Celts.
A few years later, the German-Austrian Hugo Ernst Mario Schuchardt also failed (1907) to progress meaningfully in the interpretation of the texts, since his reading of the script followed the same lines. However, when he later analyzed (1909) the Iberian personal names contained in a Latin inscription, the 89 BCE Ascoli bronze (CIL I², 709), found in Ascoli (Italy), in 1908, he paved the way for our modern understanding of Iberian anthroponymy.

But, indeed, the real ‘Michael Ventris’ of this story was the Grenadian archaeologist and historian Manuel Gómez-Moreno Martínez, who, from the 1920s (1922, 1925, 1943) onwards suggested that this script was actually a semi-syllabary, with alphabetic representation of the vowels and continuous consonants, and a syllabic one of stops, always accompanied by a vowel, not too dissimilar in this respect to the Bronze Age Aegean Linear scripts, that, at the time, of course, were not still deciphered.

His crystal clear explanations on how the idea came into his mind are worth quoting directly (my translation of the Spanish original):

“Then an idea came to me; I put it to the test and obtained a solution, which I could not immediately accept, for my mistrust was great, but after years and years, when outside research and much
new documentation gave a certain guarantee, which has been reinforced, my attempts in the opposite direction proving ineffective; that is to say, to destroy the hypothesis that I had tentatively formulated. It was based on the fact that I had learned from Curtius, when I was studying Greek, the distribution of letters into vowels, mute consonants and semivowels, the latter categories now called plosives and continuants. Remembering it, and being aware by Hübner of Iberian characters equivalent to syllables, although he considered them to be nexuses, I induced to methodize the case according to one of the aforementioned groups, which was precisely that of mutes or plosives.

The already established and firm phonetic correspondences discovered in the Iberian language the five vowels of ours, and also six continuous consonants, that is, \( l, r, m, n \) and two \( s \). There remained the plosive letters, which are subdivided into labial, dental and guttural, and these into weak and strong, that is, voiced and voiceless, eliminating, of course, their aspirated letters because they are not found in the Iberian language. It was in this grouping that the arduousness of the problem lay, and it was the touchstone of my attempt to evaluate it reasonably. The method in force did not satisfy me; there were too many letters left over. On the other hand, in order to constitute them in my way into syllabic signs, thirty were needed, and although in reality only one half appeared in Iberian, this could be due to the fact that the difference between voiced and voiceless letters was not appreciated.

In the end, the solution was found in this way, when it was observed that each sign of the so-called syllabic letters excluded its own vowel behind it, distinguishing itself from the continuous or semi-vowel letters in not being able to be preceded by one of these at the beginning of a word, with very few exceptions. The a priori proof of the system thus organized lies in the legibility of every text and, by counter-proof, the illegibility of false texts. Likewise, in the comparison of Iberian writings with other such writings in Greek and Latin alphabets, whether on coins, as we have been trying to do, or on inscriptions” (1943: 253–54).

Gómez-Moreno also defended a much more complex linguistic reality of the Peninsula than the image postulated by his predecessors, distinguishing not only Indo-European and non-Indo-European regions, but also Celtic and non-Celtic Indo-European areas on the one hand, and Basque, Iberian, and Tartessian ones on the other. This can easily be appreciated already in this map that appeared in his seminal 1922 (p. 344) article, where we can appreciate that many of his ideas would still be acceptable by modern researchers.

He still uses the term “alfabeto ibérico”, including the Celtiberian area in it, but is perfectly aware that this “alfabeto” was used to write different languages: “the two main inscriptions studied, that is, Luzaga and Castellón, correspond to different languages” (1922: 343) (my translation), that is, Celtiberian and Iberian, respectively.

2. Philological research after the decipherment

After the decipherment, it was possible to distinguish the inscriptions in the different languages, particularly those with the most numerous epigraphic corpora, Iberian (today over 2000 texts) and Celtiberian (200 texts or up to 500 if including also one or two sign inscriptions). The first important contributors to Celtiberian research were G. Bähr (1948), J. Caro Baroja (1943), A. Tovar (1947) or M. Lejeune (1955). The constant discovery of new texts was a significantly acute stimulus, especially with spectacular finds.
like the Botorrita bronzes from the 1970s onward, or the ever-growing Iberian corpus, step by step better understood.

With the decipherment, also, the readings became trustworthy and very important carefully edited collections were prepared and published, like the truly monumental *Monumenta Linguarum Hispanicarum* by J. Untermann, with that eloquent plural as opposed to Hübner’s 1893 *Monumenta Linguae Ibericae*, mentioned above, as a clear sign of the progress.

J. Untermann died in 2013 without concluding his work, but the responsibility was continued by the already digital *Banco de Datos Hesperia de Lenguas Paleohispánicas* (*BDHesp*), led by J. Javier de Hoz Bravo from 2005 onwards (http://hesperia.ucm.es/) and ever growing, as a happy outcome of the dedication of a hard-working group of brilliant scholars following the task after De Hoz’s sad passing in January 2019.

All in all, it is absolutely certain that the development of Palaeohispanic studies in general has been possible by the script decipherment, the awareness about the complexity of its varieties and the identification of several language areas.

In their recent general overview of the Palaeohispanic scripts, Ferrer and Moncunill (2019) distinguish a total of four different scripts, which we can group in two main families:

1. The northern script family, composed by the North-eastern Iberian and the Celtiberian varieties.

2. The southern script family, including South-eastern Iberian, South-western (also called Tartessian by some scholars), the Espanca script, and some additional southern texts that cannot be classified either as Iberian or South-western.
All these scripts have a similar corpus of signs with both alphabetic and syllabic graphemes. As Gómez-Moreno saw in his mind 100 years ago this year, and even if the idea was hard for him at first to accept, we know today for certain that the Palaeohispanic scripts were indeed semi-syllabaries: the alphabetic signs were used for vowels and continuous consonants, whereas the syllabic ones represented plosive consonants. Having a few Iberian inscriptions written in the Graeco-Iberian alphabet helped significantly (Gómez-Moreno 1922), as well as the information available in a Latin inscription that includes a long list of Iberian personal names, the so-called *Turma Salluitana* of the 89 BCE Ascoli bronze (*CIL* 1 \(^2\), 709), mentioned above. However, the “decipherment is much less advanced in the case of the southern scripts, in some cases being just at a preliminary stage” (Ferrer and Moncunill 2019: 80).

Researchers are still currently refining their views on how to interpret these texts, with constant additions to our knowledge in a painstakingly slow process. It is possible to notice a lack of uniformity throughout: these inscriptions “show diachronic as well as geographical variations; this is why the number of signs and even their value are not absolutely stable within every script” (Ferrer and Moncunill 2019: 82). This is a state of the art summary of all the varieties today recognized (Ferrer and Moncunill 2019: 81):

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3 The so-called Graeco-Iberian script could be considered the last Palaeohispanic script, even if it is just a quite superficial adaptation of an Ionian variety of the Greek alphabet used to write Iberian in about 30 inscriptions, dated between the late 5\(^{th}\) century and the 3\(^{rd}\) century BCE, and found in a small south-eastern region of Hispania, coinciding with the territory of the *Contestani*, roughly the modern provinces of Murcia and Alicante. In this region this script coexisted with the North-eastern and South-eastern Iberian syllabaries. For no clear reasons, though, during the 3\(^{rd}\) century BCE, this script was abandoned in favor of the more generally widespread Iberian scripts. These texts are written from left to right and when the inscriptions are long, the words are separated by means of two or three vertical dots.

4 All this actually helps only with the northern scripts, which we know in much more detail. This situation also benefits from the fact that the Celtiberian language, which, despite not being completely understood belongs in a comparatively well-known language family (Celtic), is written using northern scripts (two varieties of them).
Traditionally, these semi-syllabaries were thought not to have the capacity to mark sonority in the plosive sounds, as we saw above in Gómez-Moreno’s explanations (1943: 254). But, in 1968, Maluquer suggested that certain variations in some signs that had been considered mere graphic allomorphs with no additional meaning perhaps were rather diacritical signs intended to render more precise phonetic values (finally differentiating voiced and voiceless plosives). The script varieties with this possibility are called “dual”. There is a general consensus today that some of the Northern inscriptions showed this capacity. A similar consensus has not been reached with the Southern inscriptions, though. Ferrer believes a similar system was also in use there\(^5\). As for Celtiberian, Jordán was the first (2005, 2007) to propose something similar happening.

\(^5\) Although with some differences in detail. Other researchers are not still convinced.
This has been confirmed by several signaries found recently, which include the alternative forms in consecutive order, making clear they are different signs altogether. These signaries are a very informative type of inscriptions, since they offer us all the repertoire of signs in a certain variety of the script and provide the ultimate proof concerning whether the script was dual or not.

Based on this, Ferrer and Moncunill (2019) classify the different scripts like this:

- South-eastern Iberian\(^7\) (dual for Ferrer, but this has not reached consensus)
- Espanca script (non-dual)
- South-western script (non-dual)\(^8\)

\(^6\) The first one to be identified as such is the so-called Espanca signary, found in Castro Verde, in the southern Portuguese region of Baixo Alentejo. This signary consists of 27 letters written twice, in two adjacent lines. The 27 letters in the outer line are more perfectly written than those of the inner line, what led to think the inscription actually is what remains of a very old teaching exercise: we keep both the teacher’s and the student’s calligraphic attempt. The first 13 letters match letters of the 22-letter Phoenician alphabet in both shape and relative order. The remaining letters include the other Phoenician letters, slightly out of order, supplemented by five letters seemingly original to the Paleohispanic scripts. This signary does not exactly match any of the known Palaeohispanic scripts, that’s why it is classified as a specific variety, even if clearly Southern.

\(^7\) This script is attested in the Southeast in about 70 inscriptions dated from the 4th century BCE to the 1st century BCE. All these texts have traditionally been considered Iberian, but “the westernmost inscriptions probably contain a different language, or languages, and probably new southern scripts” (Ferrer and Moncunill 2019: 15). The direction of writing is right to left, with a few exceptions, and most texts are very short and with no word separators. However, there are 20 longer texts with separators. This script is not fully understood. The similarities with the Phoenician alphabet and with the North-eastern Iberian script are the best tools to help in the decipherment process. In 2010, Ferrer proposed this script might also display a dual modality. In this case the complex variant would mark voiced plosives, whereas the simple variant would depict voiceless ones. However, this hypothesis is not generally accepted. Variations in the letters are obvious, but their value as possible diacritical signs are difficult to prove without the aid of signaries, which have not appeared in this area.

\(^8\) It is employed in 100 inscriptions depicting an unknown language. They are large stone funerary stelae found in the South-west corner of Hispania,
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- The North-eastern Iberian:
  - extended dual, when dualities affect plosives, continuous consonants, and vowels
  - standard dual, when it only affects plosives
  - non-dual
- The Celtiberian script (western and eastern variants):
  - dual
  - non-dual

with no archaeological context. Therefore, any precise dating is challenging. They could date from a period from the 7th century to the 4th century BCE. Even if this area is called ‘Tartessian’ by some scholars, it does not really correspond with the area attributed to the semi-mythical kingdom of Tartessos. In this sense, some scholars limit the denomination of Tartessian to the core-zone inscriptions of the lower Guadalquivir valley, to the East of this region, using just the denomination of South-western for the texts of this peripheral zone, where the inscriptions written in this script have in fact been found. We do not even know whether both areas did share a language or not. One of the most specific characteristics of this script is the so-called ‘vocalic redundancy’, where each syllabic sign is followed by the same vowel. Also specific for this script is that they are written in continuous writing, independently of the length of the text. Only in a few cases are separators used in the form of a vertical bar. Such is the case in the inscription FAR.06.02 from Mestras. There are **only 15 signs** whose phonetic values are unanimously agreed upon. They represent only half of the total number of signs: the five vowels, two sibilants, the consonants l, n, and r; the velar syllabic signs for ka and ke; the dental syllabic signs ta and ti; and the labial syllabic signs pa and pe. The phonetic values of a similar number of signs (even larger) are a matter of dispute among researchers up to this day.

9 This is the most numerous group among the Northern scripts. There are around 2.250 inscriptions discovered so far, all from the North-eastern region of Hispania and dated from the second half of the 5th century BCE until the 1st century CE. These inscriptions seem to depict texts in Iberian in all cases. With a few exceptions the texts go from left to right.9 Most of these texts are short and do not show word separators. There are about 200 longer texts and, in these cases, they do. 60% of these texts are not dual, whereas about 35% of the total, the oldest texts (5th-3rd centuries BCE) are dual. According to Ferrer, the remaining 5% of texts represent an “extended dual” variety, where the diacritics would differentiate also vowels and some continuous consonants.

10 The Celtiberian script is an adaptation of the North-eastern Iberian script to Celtiberian. It is used in almost 200 inscriptions dated between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century CE. Depending on two different ways to
3. Future tasks

The decipherment process is far from over, technically, especially with the Southern varieties of the script. New and new texts are constantly appearing and the goal of a complete understanding of the signs seems to be getting closer. Researchers are currently also contemplating the possibility that further epigraphic areas or script varieties are possibly there to be identified, what could even change our detailed perception of the different language areas. Of course, a complete understanding of the languages themselves is a goal that feels further afield, particularly with the non-Indo-European languages, but also with what could be considered the best known of them all, Celtiberian, for which there are still so much that we ignore: as soon as a text is a little long and deviate from formulaic contexts we can grasp, the limitations of our knowledge to fully understand it become apparent. In any case, Gómez-Moreno’s rebel and brilliant idea 100 years ago now indeed opened up the road we are still travelling.

Works cited


represent nasals, Celtiberian texts are classified as western (42%) or eastern (58%). Jordán (2005, 2007) identified a possible dual variety for both. In any case, the number of inscriptions is low and this is not completely clear yet, although Ferrer agrees with Jordán. He (2019: 14) calculates 75% of the western inscriptions are dual whereas 70% of the most recent and numerous eastern inscriptions are not. In a few archaic Celtiberian inscriptions (9) we also find cases of redundant writing when syllabic signs are followed by the vowel already included in the syllabogram. 7 of these texts are written in the more archaic western type and only 2 in the more modern and standard eastern type.


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