

Ancient Languages of Spain

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Introduction

As is well known, the Basque language of the northeast Hispanic Peninsula and the southwest corner of France has no substantiated antecedents. Similarly, ancient Iberian, a preRoman language of Mediterranean Spain and southern France, perceived only through inscriptional material still undeciphered and in some aspects problematical, also has no identifiable progenitors.

Basque and Iberian existed in adjacent and perhaps overlapping areas of the Hispanic Peninsula, however, and a kind of linguistic imbrication may account for the personal names common to both languages as inscribed, for example, on the Ascoli Bronze Tablet.¹ The names on this document are from locations thought to have been situated north of the Ebro river (Aragon), where one would most expect the commissure of the two cultures and languages. Compare, for instance, the following:

| Basque | | Iberian | Basque | | Iberian |
|--------|-----------|------------|-----------|---------------|---------------|
| arrano | 'eagle' | arranes | ezker | 'left hand' | iskar |
| arren | 'lame' | arrenes | gortarzun | 'ardor' | gurtarno |
| adin | 'age' | adin | ilun | 'dark' | -illun(ildun) |
| biur | 'twisted' | biur | urdin | 'grey-haired' | ordun- |
| beltz | 'black' | bels/beles | zuzen | 'right, fair' | sosin- |

It is clear from their occurrence on other Iberian inscriptions that the names on the Ascoli Bronze plaque were not simply Basque, cf.

| Name | Location | Name | Location |
|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| <u>adinbelaur</u> | Tarragona | <u>biuru</u> | Castellón |
| <u>iluradin</u> | Azaila | <u>biurtite</u> | Liria |
| <u>sakariskar</u> | Liria | <u>belasbaiser</u> | Fraga |
| <u>ildubelesban</u> | Iglesuela del Cid | <u>sosinbiuru</u> | Castellón |
| <u>iskerbeles</u> | Ilerda | <u>ordin</u> | Santa Perpetua de |
| <u>ikorbeles</u> | Sagunto | | la Moguda |
| <u>nereildun</u> | Sagunto | | |

A large number of lexical forms are found throughout Iberian territory that appear related to Basque.

An inscription on an earthenware bowl, dating to about 100 B.C. (the time when the bowl was made) from La Granjuela, reads ankisaaren (ankisa aren) followed by several metrological signs. The first word appears to have been a proper Graeco-Latin name, cf. Greek 'Αγχίσις and Latin Anchises,² used in the nominative of the first declension as was customary (Anchisa). In Greek mythology, Anchises was the father of Aeneas.

The word aren appears to be a Basque form found, for example, with proper names as in Miguel-ar-en-a (the village of Miguel). Aren appears in various Iberian inscriptions from Enserune in southern France and throughout Spain. On the La Granjuela, as elsewhere, it seems to indicate the possessor or owner of the bowl.

An inscription from Liria accompanied by a drawing of a battle scene between spear-throwing and shield-bearing men in canoes and a warrior on shore, reads: gudua deistea,³ words comparable to Basque gudu 'war' and deitu 'to call.' The Iberian gudu is also found at the Iberian site of Enserune and elsewhere. Of equal interest is an inscription from Mogente which reads: aiduarbegiabe and contains lexical forms comparable to Basque aidur 'evil' and begi 'eye.'

Several Iberian inscriptions were written in an Ionic Greek alphabet of about the fourth century B.C. The transliteration of these documents offers no particular problems although the language is obscure and so far undeciphered. One of these inscriptions, the Alcoy Lead Tablet is presented here, in part, as further corroboration of the notion that Basque lexical forms appear to occur in the Iberian language.

irike órti garokan dadula bask/buistiner bagarok
 SSSXV turlbai/lura legusegik baéroke iunbaida/urke basbidir-
bártin irike baéer okar tebind balegasikaur isbin/ai asgandis
tagisgarok binike/bin salir kidei gaibiqait
árnai sakarísker

An examination of the text reveals a number of words that could be related to Basque on the basis of phonological similarities. As again the meanings of the Iberian words are unknown the second and crucial part of the operation, semantic similarity, cannot be applied.

Alcoy Lead Tablet

bai, baida
lura
-ísker (sakarísker)
órti
irike

Basque

baita 'also'
lur 'land'
ezker 'left'
ortzi 'firmament'
iri 'town'
iritzi 'to arrive at'

It is interesting to note that the words arñai sakarişker were superimposed over the original writing on the left hand margin of the inscription leaving the impression that the sentence is an instruction, perhaps to later readers, that the document (found in an area where many such texts are read from right to left) should be read from the left.

Another lead plaque, the so-called Plomo'El Solaig' contains the sequence of letters ededur comparable to Basque ede 'to drink' and ur 'water.' The word bidedui on the same inscription appears to incorporate the Basque word bide 'road.'⁴

The list of comparisons between Basque and Iberian could go on but would still only demonstrate the possibility of relationship since the important ingredient in the equation of semantic similarity cannot be established. There does, however, seem to be too many similarities in form as to preclude pure chance.

Further rapprochement between Basque and Iberian is apparent in the congruence of their phonological arrangements. Except in loan words, the phoneme /p/ is rare in Basque and appears to have been even less frequent in earlier periods of the language. The voiceless labial stop seems to have resulted from /t/ + /m/ as in *oroi-men → oroipen 'remembrance' or from a phonological split in which /b/ → /p/, cf. erromako zupi "arco iris" from zubi 'bridge.' The labial fricative /f/ in Basque also appears only in loan words or from another older source. The modification of Latin words in /f-/ incorporated into Basque as /ph/ or /b/ supports this conclusion. Similarly, the labial nasal /m/ seems to have originated in Basque from secondary sources, to have been rare and generally restricted to loan words. In native words it most likely originated in /nb/ through /mb/ to /m/. Some evidence for this is found in the Basque word seme 'son' and ancient Aquitanian (believed by many to have been Basque) sembe-.

Similarly, Iberian names such as adimels and sosimilus on the Ascoli tablet can be easily reconstructed as earlier *adin beles and *sosin bilus, based on the occurrence of these forms in earlier texts.

The absence of word initial r- in both Basque and Iberian (and Aquitanian) is still another indication of the plausibility of inferred relationship.⁵

A number of other affinities between these languages could be mentioned, but the fact is that when all is said and done, the Iberian language has not been and apparently cannot be deciphered on the basis of comparison with Basque. The reasons, I think, are due to diverse external influences that came to help shape the Iberian vocabulary, perhaps not unlike French and more generally Romance influence on English, or Persian on Armenian, etc.

Greek Influence

Greek influence has clearly contributed to Iberian lexical forms. The incorporation of Greek lexical items into Iberian should come as no surprise since, with Hellenic trading centres firmly established along the Iberian Mediterranean littoral as early as the seventh century B.C., the two cultures were in intimate contact. A Graeco-Iberian symbiosis is clearly manifest at various sites such as Emporion and Alcoy, with varying intensity, over several centuries. Apart from the wholesale borrowing of the Greek alphabet at Alcoy and elsewhere, a pair of Iberian ceramic inscriptions read: kuleśuria and kuleśtileis, the initial part of which can, with some assurance, be equated with Greek Κυλιξ [kuliks] and signifying 'Kylix of Uria' and 'Kylix of Tileis'.⁶

The Iberian word sosinbiur (sosin + biur) appears as a likely candidate from Greek Σωσιπολις [sosipolis] 'saving the city' where, perhaps, biur means 'city' in Iberian.⁷

More interesting, however, are a series of Iberian funeral inscriptions that seem to have been written in a kind of pidgin Greek, but employing the Iberian orthographical system. One such document reads:

aretake atinbelaur' antalsgar Fulvia Lintearia

The first sequence are may or may not be a supplication to Ares but take seems composed of Greek ta (article or demonstrative) plus ekei (adverb 'in that place'). The word ekei was employed in Greek as a euphemism 'in another world.' Undergoing crasis, ta plus ekei became in Greek takei. Atin Belaur is an Iberian personal name and antalsgar appears composed of anta (adverb 'make other than it is') plus allassō ('to take one thing in exchange for another, alias'). The substantive allos may have been employed here. The form gar, a conjunction in Greek meaning 'for,' appears to lead to the sequence ant-als-gar 'in exchange for' or 'alias.' Fulvia Lintearia, a Latin name, it seems, was adopted in exchange for the Iberian name Atin Belaur.

Celtic Influence

Celtic peoples moved into the Iberian Peninsula as early as the ninth or tenth century B.C. and occupied regions adjacent to the Iberians, especially along the Middle Ebro River Basin and elsewhere in Catalonia. Along the Ebro the two cultures mingled culminating in what has been described as a Celtiberian culture. During the course of this contact, as one might expect, Celtic vocabulary found its way into Iberian as the following lexical items indicate.

| Celtic | Iberian |
|----------|---------|
| alakko | alako's |
| atinia | atin |
| benna | benna |
| karnitus | kanites |
| surika | suritu |
| tau | tau- |
| tinko | tinko |
| tautio | touto |

The fact that the borrowings did not pass from Iberian to Celtic is clear from the use of this vocabulary outside the Peninsula.

Besides Greek and Celtic contributions, the prospect that other Indo-European languages may have also provided vocabulary for Iberian must also be considered. Roman influences were felt on the peninsula from the end of the third century, B.C. onward. Some investigators have looked to Latin to help explain the southern Iberian inscription generally referred to as the Gador Lead which contains forms such as ego, stari, etesu, tui, interpreting these words by Latin ego, stare, etesius and tui.⁸

Non-Indo-European North African languages have also been considered as possible contributors to the Iberian lexicon, a matter that again would offer no surprises since Iberian mercenaries often campaigned in Africa and Carthaginians occupied Iberian coastal sites between the sixth and seventh centuries B.C., down to Roman times. The frequently occurring form eban in Iberian documentation has been assumed to be related to Afro-Asiatic eban "(grave)stone."⁹

Conclusion

While it is not known when the Iberians as a cultural and linguistic entity first occupied the Mediterranean lands of the Iberian Peninsula the archaeological record is reasonably clear as to the diverse influences that came to bear on that particular geographical area. From Neolithic times on down to the Iron Age Celts and Romans, a continuous movement of peoples from East to West has occurred, altering again and again the Iberian cultural scene and presumably, based on what appears to be lexical forms of diverse origin, the linguistic landscape.

The extent of Basque influence on the language suggests either a genetic relationship, obscured by diverse influence from other quarters (Greek, Celtic, Latin, etc.) or, clearly, two cultures in intimate contact in which lexical borrowings were commonplace and augmented by borrowings from other languages.

In either case, the variegated nature of Iberian has and will continue to plague attempts to formulate a precise statement on the structure of the language and will continue to obfuscate decipherment.

FOOTNOTES

¹Discovered in Rome in 1908 and preserved in the Palazzo dei Conservatori, the Turma Salluitana is one of the most important documents available pertaining to ancient Iberian studies. The inscription, engraved on a bronze plaque, contains the names of thirty Iberian horse soldiers. Their troop (turma) distinguished itself in battle during a campaign in Asculum in 89 B.C. in the Marsic wars for which the soldiers earned the honour of Roman citizenship and their names immortalized in bronze. These proper names have served to identify a number of linguistic units in the Iberian documents of a previous period.

The names on the plaque were divided to correspond to the place of origin of each soldier such as Salluvia or Salduvia, Llerda, and so forth. Not all the place names have been identified but the majority of the troop appears to have originated in northeastern Spain—possibly Aragon—but clearly in the region between the Pyrenees mountains and the river Ebro.

²See Oroz Arizcuran.

³Tovar, A. p. 61.

⁴For these and further examples, see Galera Isern.

⁵For a fuller statement of phonological similarities between Basque and Iberian, see Michelena.

⁶See Siles, J.

⁷Michelena.

⁸See Maluquer and Fry.

⁹Tovar, p. 65.

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