

## Essay One - An Introduction to the Celtic Languages (HPCS4002)

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### Tartessian (Southwestern Script)

For the purpose of this essay Tartessian will be explored as a Celtic language, although not all scholars are in agreement that it belongs to this particular branch of the Indo-European family. Celtic names interpreted from stela inscriptions more than two decades ago planted the seed of a new origin theory for the Celts, with the potential to upset centuries of thinking.<sup>1</sup> The age of the Tartessian inscriptions, some dated to the Hallstatt C period and the rest contemporary with Hallstatt D and early La Tène, causes problems with the established idea that the Celts emerged in central Europe, being first materially identifiable in the Gumden district of Austria.<sup>2</sup> The Tartessian inscriptions are found approximately 1200 km south-west of Lake Hallstatt, in the south-western corner of the Iberian Peninsula, the majority recovered beyond the Guadalquivir Marshes, in Spain and Portugal. Albeit limited words and texts carved into stone, the intriguing scripts have been analysed, and the language proposed via several papers and books. Whether Tartessian is eventually in or out of the Celtic language branch remains to be seen, as linguists, geneticists and archaeologists argue varying cases, but for now there is enough for it to be considered within the parameters of this assignment.

When the earliest of these particular stela were being inscribed, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, a lagoon and estuary existed near the mouth of Guadalquivir River rather than the large area of silted wetlands today, and many archaeologists believe that Huelva and its province to have been the location of the acclaimed Tartessos due to the large amount of material evidence found there, although the remains of the city itself or parts of it may be under water now.<sup>3</sup>

Somewhat later than the time frame for the majority of the inscriptions, Tartessos was first mentioned by Herodotus in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC in two short accounts: one in which he states Samian sailors arrived there after having 'passed through Pillars of Heracles', identifiable with the Straits of Gibraltar, and the second in which he names the king of the Tartessians as Arganthonius.<sup>4</sup> Slightly later, Ephorus also noted that the Tartessians operated a lucrative trade in metals such as tin, gold and copper.<sup>5</sup> Strabo's geographical description of the aforementioned Guadalquivir River, known to the Romans as Baetis, has it flowing from 'Silver Mountains' and arriving at the sea via two mouths somewhere between Gades (Cadíz)

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<sup>1</sup> John T. Koch, *Tartessian: Celtic In The Dawn Of The West*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2013) p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pp. 5-6.

<sup>3</sup> González de Canales, L. Serrano, and J. Llopart, 'The Pre-Colonial Phoenician Emporium Of Huelva, ca 900-770 BC', *BABesch* 81, (2006), 13-29.

<sup>4</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, 4.152, trans. by A. D. Godley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1920).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 1. 163.

<sup>6</sup> Phillip M. Freeman, 'Ancillary Study: Ancient References To Tartessos', in *Celtic From The West*, ed. by John T. Koch and Barry Cunliffe, (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), pp. 303-334 (p. 322).

and the Sacred Cape (Cabo da Sao Vicente)<sup>7</sup> He also notes that in the past the river was called Tartessus, as was a city which lay between the two outflows into the sea.

Having considered where, let us put mind to who the Tartessians were. In the once mineral-rich province of Huelva, there is much evidence to indicate that there were newcomers to the scene during the time of the inscriptions in question. Both Strabo and Diodorus are amongst those who link the Phoenicians to Tartessos and to the rich metal industry therein.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, there is also a good case for Tartessos being the biblical Tarsis or Tarshish associated with King Solomon's acquisition of metals and his trading ventures with the Phoenician, King Hiram of Tyre.<sup>9</sup>

Archaeologists have uncovered residential, ritual, and commercial ruins built with new techniques. Clearly, the Phoenicians did not just occasionally visit for trade purposes, they stayed. It appears that 'specialists of all kinds settled themselves, including metallurgic specialists, potters, carpenters, ivory workers, stone workers and masons'.<sup>10</sup> It is in no doubt that the Phoenicians came to Iberia originally for the metals. Silver is mentioned many times in connection with the people and the location, along with copper, tin, gold, and iron. The Phoenicians brought previously unknown skills and technological advances to the area, and it is their hand that is shown in 'the earliest-known evidence of iron and silver metalworking in Iberia'.<sup>11</sup>

They also introduced the Iberians to the potter's wheel, agricultural methods, and more sophisticated ideas around food production, storage, banqueting, trade, and transport.<sup>12</sup> In amongst the thousands of Phoenician pottery sherds recovered, some scrawled with individual graffiti, a 'set of lead weights based on the Phoenician shekel' was found.<sup>13</sup> These weights point to the introduction of a metric system as part of their commercial pursuits in the region. According to Diodorus a new temple was built and 'magnificent sacrifices' to Hercules were offered by the Phoenicians as per their tradition in Tartessos.<sup>14</sup> Although it is not ascertained whether in service to that particular god, many animal remains have been found, some buried in unique ways. Archaeologists, working at the Tartessian site in Turuñuelo de Guareña, Badajoz, have unearthed an intentionally burned and buried two-

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<sup>7</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, Volume II: Book III, trans. by Horace Leonard Jones (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1923).

<sup>8</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library Of History*, Book V. 20, trans. by C.H. Oldfather (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1939).

<sup>9</sup> González, Serrano and Llompart, 'The Pre-Colonial Phoenician Emporium Of Huelva', p.27.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> José Suárez-Padilla, Víctor Jiménez-Jáimez and José L. Caro, 'The Phoenician Diaspora In The Westernmost Mediterranean: Recent Discoveries', *Antiquity* (2021), 1–16 (p. 4) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2021.105>>

<sup>12</sup> John C. Scott, 'The Phoenicians And The Formation Of The Western World', *Comparative Civilizations Review* 78 (2018) 25-40 (p. 36).

<sup>13</sup> Suárez-Padilla, Jiménez-Jáimez and Caro, 'The Phoenician Diaspora In The Westernmost Mediterranean', p.4.

<sup>14</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, Book V. 20.

story building with 'the biggest example of animal carnage in the entire Mediterranean to date' inside.<sup>15</sup>

As evidenced by the archaeological findings, the settlers certainly transformed the lives of the indigenous population residing in the far southwest of Iberian Peninsula. Although the Phoenicians arrived with their own economic and territorial gain in mind, they obviously integrated with the locals and shared their knowledge to the benefit of many without causing conflict. This productive commingling has been described in this way:

Our synthesis of new evidence shows that, at least in the westernmost Mediterranean, Phoenician 'colonies' of the eighth century BC were preceded, in the ninth century, by a presence of Phoenicians in a range of contexts and sites that were not under their political control. Some were perhaps Phoenician districts associated with Indigenous centres, within which Levantine merchants settled on a permanent basis. Other sites, such as sanctuaries located in peripheral areas or Indigenous settlements where Phoenician craftsmen worked, must have experienced a more sporadic or intermittent Phoenician presence. Taken together, they represent the materialisation of complex processes of interaction and negotiation between Phoenicians, led by Tyre, and southern Iberian communities.<sup>16</sup>

Although it was never classed in its time as a civilisation, Carolina López-Ruiz believes we should be viewing Tartessos as 'one of the most thriving pre-Greek, pre-Roman indigenous cultures in Europe.'<sup>17</sup>

With a vibrant Tartessos established, it is against this backdrop that this Tartessian, or Southwestern, script emerges. Throughout the millennia before any text appeared, carved stones, the Middle Bronze Age 'Alentejo stelae' and the Late Bronze Age 'warrior stelae', had been used as significant markers in this area in a similar way.<sup>18</sup> We can conclude from this that the cultural use of deliberately placed cut stone belonged to the indigenous peoples prior to the arrival of the Phoenicians.<sup>19</sup> It is who those indigenous peoples are that is of key importance in placing the inscriptions within a Celtic context.

Some of the earliest mentions of the Celts have them in Iberia in exactly the same area that the Phoenicians made their home. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, Herodotus very specifically placed them in the peninsula beyond the Pillars of Heracles. Note his use of the very same wording as he did for the Samian sailors arriving at Tartessos. He adds to his location of the Celts by

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<sup>15</sup> J. A. Aunió, 'Ancient Civilisations: The Tartessos Mystery Slowly Comes To Light', *Culture EL PAÍS English Edition* (2018) <[https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2018/02/23/inenglish/1519380491\\_087016.html](https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2018/02/23/inenglish/1519380491_087016.html)> [accessed 16<sup>th</sup> November 2021].

<sup>16</sup> Suárez-Padilla, Jiménez-Jáimez and Caro, 'The Phoenician Diaspora In The Westernmost Mediterranean', p.13.

<sup>17</sup> Jason Urbanus, 'A Sanctuary's Final Farewell', *Archaeology* 71.3 (2018) 38–41 (p.38) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26822678>> [accessed 16<sup>th</sup> November 2021].

<sup>18</sup> John T. Koch, 'Celtic From The West Meets Linguistics And Genetics', in *Exploring Celtic Origins: New Ways Forward In Archaeology, Linguistics, and Genetics* ed. by Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2019), pp. 19-37 (p. 26).

<sup>19</sup> Barry Cunliffe, 'Setting The Scene', in *Exploring Celtic Origins: New Ways Forward In Archaeology, Linguistics, and Genetics* ed. by Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2019), pp. 1-17 (p. 12).

calling them some of the 'most westerly dwellers in Europe', living next to the Cynesii or Cynetes.<sup>20</sup> The word Cynetes or Cunetes is a Celtic name used at the time for the group of indigenous inhabitants occupying what is now known as the Algarve and Lower Alentejo regions of Portugal.<sup>21</sup> In the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Ephorus, as quoted in later texts, also places the Celts in Iberia stating that Celtica was so extensive it reached all the way to Gades (Cádiz).<sup>22</sup>

It is a well-known fact that the area is rich with linguistically Celtic place names, albeit possibly dating from the centuries following the time of the Tartessians. The 'briga-line', runs right through the area, just beyond Huleva the proposed location of the city of Tartessos itself. The 'briga-line' defines the extent of the numerous 'briga' endings on place names within Spain and Portugal. This suffix is linguistically Celtic, and has its origins in '*brig*' meaning hill, derivations of which have been used for hills, hillforts, and towns in Iberia and beyond.<sup>23</sup>

Whilst considering these Celts, geographically identifiable from citations and place names originating after the Tartessian stelae and material evidence, one should not forget that the indigenous population had been consistent for more than a thousand years prior to the same. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that these people had their own language, one that had been in use, evolving in its own way, as had their mining and farming technology, for many centuries before the creation of what became known as Tartessos. In his discussion of the script, whilst doubtful of the accuracy of the Celtic label, one scholar acknowledged the Celts in the area, stating that 'Cunetian' might be a more fitting name for the language.<sup>24</sup>

Having now established who the Tartessians were, a blend of indigenous Celts and adventurous, opportunistic Phoenicians, we can examine the stelae. Almost one hundred have been identified with the same script. The Tartessian stela sites are predominantly concentrated in the area once occupied by the Cynetes. A couple lie as far east as Cádiz and Puente Genil, some north of Badajoz, with the furthest at Almorquí, but the substantial majority noticeably overlays the Lower Alentejo regions where the more ancient, uninscribed stelae have been found.<sup>25</sup>

It seems that the Phoenicians brought more than their business acumen and technological experience with them. The writing used on the stelae can be confidently identified as Phoenician in origin. Their consonantal alephat became widespread in other areas too, eventually becoming the basis for Archaic Greek. The script's evolution via the Ugarite script

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<sup>20</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories* 4.152 and 1. 163.

<sup>21</sup> John T. Koch, 'Celtic From The West Meets Linguistics and Genetics', pp. 25-26.

<sup>22</sup> Philip M. Freeman, 'The Earliest Greek Sources On The Celts', *Études Celtiques* 32 (1996) 11-48 (p. 37) <[https://www.persee.fr/doc/ecelt\\_0373-1928\\_1996\\_num\\_32\\_1\\_2082](https://www.persee.fr/doc/ecelt_0373-1928_1996_num_32_1_2082)> [accessed 16<sup>th</sup> November 2021]

<sup>23</sup> John T. Koch, 'Celtic From The West Meets Linguistics and Genetics', p. 26

<sup>24</sup> Steve Hewitt, 'Tartessian as Celtic and Phoenician as a possible substrate?', *Rock Art And Metal: Late Bronze Age Contact Between Scandinavia And The Iberian Peninsula*. Gothenburg University, 15-17 November 2017. Available at:

<[https://www.academia.edu/35795700/Tartessian\\_as\\_Celtic\\_and\\_Phoenician\\_as\\_a\\_possible\\_substrate](https://www.academia.edu/35795700/Tartessian_as_Celtic_and_Phoenician_as_a_possible_substrate)> [accessed 16<sup>th</sup> November 2021]

<sup>25</sup> Koch, *Tartessian*, p. 27.

from the proto-Canaanite, and its impact as part of the Phoenician's overall 'quickenning of western civilization' is well attested.<sup>26</sup>

As sea merchants in the West, they brought Mesopotamian astronomy and weights and measures, as well as their own Phoenician alphabet: a phonetic code (not a pictographic system) to build words. This simplified writing system did not require professional scribes as in Egypt or Mesopotamia, and it could be written on a variety of media. The egalitarian alphabet was (and is) easy to learn—in fixed sequence. A long-distance network of trade involved contracts, correspondence, and record keeping.<sup>27</sup>

The ease with which the script could be used no doubt encouraged the locals of Iberia to embrace and adapt it for their own purpose, including the addition of vowels, as well as use it in their dealings with the Phoenicians. It is the rendered words themselves, not the script, that fall within the Celtic domain, leading to the initial proposal that the language might be explored as Celtic in 1989.<sup>28</sup>

Within the script *a, e, i, o, u, s, ś, l* and *n* are consistently determined. Vocalic redundancy is employed resulting in fixed semi-syllabic signs for *ka, ke, ta, ti, pa* and *pe*. Other signs which occur, but have not been absolutely agreed, due to inconsistency or lack of quantity, are *to, tu, ki, ko, te, po*, and *í*. The six most debated graphemes have been suggested as further semi-syllabics, *pu, ku*, and *pi*, as well as a group of signs which only ever appear before four of the vowels, but seem to alter depending on the following vowel: *bo, te*, and *bu*. It has been observed that more variations occur in the geographical outliers, which is perhaps to be expected. The text itself is written continuously and rarely uses a bar separator.<sup>29</sup> Most of the inscriptions are read right-to-left, or anti-clockwise, but direction is not fixed as some stelae read left-to-right, in which examples of reversed signs are visible.<sup>30</sup> This overall structure, and the graphemes themselves, fit within the norms for a Palaeohispanic script, which, considering the date of the inscriptions, it must if it is to be placed as a predecessor to any scripts within Iberia, especially those with languages known to be Celtic, for the purpose of this exploration:

All Palaeohispanic writing systems are characterized by a similar corpus of signs and the coexistence of both alphabetic and syllabic graphemes: the former were used for vowels and continuous consonants and the second ones for plosives. This syllabic component implies some limitations in the notation of Palaeohispanic languages, such as the impossibility of writing a plosive+continuous consonant group or a plosive at the

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<sup>26</sup> John C. Scott, 'Phoenicians: The Quickenning Of Western Civilisation', *Comparative Civilizations Review* 81 (2019) 36-67 (p.36)

<sup>27</sup> Scott, 'The Phoenicians And The Formation Of The Western World', p. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Koch, *Tartessian*, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> J. Ferrer I Jané and N. Moncunill, 'Paleohispanic Writing Systems: Classification, Origin, and Development', in *Palaeohispanic Languages and Epigraphies*, ed. by Alejandro G. Sinner and Javier Velaza, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) pp. 78-108 (p. 95).

<sup>30</sup> Koch, *Tartessian*, pp. 29-134.

end of a word, even if, from a phonetic point of view, these combinations did exist and might even have had a phonological value.<sup>31</sup>

A large body of words, including verbs, have been deciphered from the inscriptions and many of the phrases correspond with their use as funerary markers, containing personal names; deity invocations; and affirmations that the dead have been carried to the 'highest destination'.<sup>32</sup> Several words are immediately striking as Celtic, such as *Lugubo*, recognisable amongst cognates for a Celtic god: Lugus, Lug, Lugh and Lleu.<sup>33</sup> Linguist John Koch has systematically worked his way through the inscriptions, building a substantial picture of Celticity in the words and meanings.<sup>34</sup>

In terms of adding another piece to the puzzle, we can return to that King of Tartessos specifically named by Herodotus. 'Arganthonios' is decidedly Celtic, and rather apt for a silver-rich ruler. Cognates for silver include *arkanta*, *Arganda* – Celtiberian; *arganto* – Gaulish; *arggat*, *airget* – Old Irish; *argant* – Old Welsh; *aryant* – Middle Welsh; and *arc'hant*, *argant* – Breton. Other non-Celtic, Indo-European cognates include *argentum* – Latin and *rajatam* – Sanskrit.<sup>35</sup>

Despite these findings, a whole picture cannot be made, leaving Tartessian's place within the Paleohispanic, let alone Celtic, languages unconfirmed. Although most of the signs used are nearly identical to later scripts, there is very little evidence for Tartessian after the 'collapse of Tartessos', just two pieces of graffiti in different areas of Portugal dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC.<sup>36</sup> The other problem in placing Tartessian within the Celtic family are the non-Indo-European place names, the other side of the 'briga-line', in the area in which it is found.<sup>37</sup>

Due to disagreement about how it connects to later scripts in Iberia, there are a number of theories about how a Paleohispanic language tree that includes Tartessian might look. For some, Tartessian is the first Paleohispanic script, but critics argue that unidentified Iberian scripts could point to an earlier one, with Tartessian being a subsequent breakaway and unconnected to later ones.<sup>38</sup> At the same time it must be noted that there are enough connections, such as identical signs and vocalic redundancy, to view the South-eastern Iberian script, c. 4<sup>th</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, as a descendent of it, although Tartessian is a non-dual script and the former contains 'dualities for both plosives and continuous consonants'.<sup>39</sup> As contemporaries, the South-eastern Iberian script and North-eastern Iberian script exhibit a shared language. Following on from this, the 'Celtiberian script is clearly an adaptation of the

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<sup>31</sup> Ferrer I Jané and Moncunill, *Paleohispanic Writing Systems*, p. 79.

<sup>32</sup> Koch, *Tartessian*, pp. 29-134.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 195-196.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 29-134.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 148-149.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> Ferrer I Jané and Moncunill, *Paleohispanic Writing Systems*, p. 104.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 91.

North-eastern Iberian script to the specificities of the Celtiberian language', used from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, Tartessian could be a predecessor to Celtiberian.

Just as the arrival of the Phoenicians influenced and orientalised many existing Mediterranean cultures and the Atlantic Fringe, so too the arrival of Tartessian is currently shaking up historical perceptions and Celtic possibilities. It would appear then that the language, probably a marriage of native spoken word and the written script of newcomers, perfectly reflects the wonder of Tartessos itself, 'born of the convergence of two distinct cultural and geographical groups: indigenous Iberians and Phoenicians from the Mediterranean.'<sup>41</sup> Its language links with the Celtic world are proven, but to what extent it shows that 'the Atlantic Late Bronze Age had already been a largely or wholly Celtic-speaking phenomenon', with central European influences on the west being a 'matter of inter-Celtic dialectology', only time may tell.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ferrer I Jané and Moncunill, *Paleohispanic Writing Systems*, p. 91.

<sup>41</sup> Urbanus, *A Sanctuary's Final Farewell*, p. 40.

<sup>42</sup> John Koch, 'A case for Tartessian as a Celtic Language', *Acta Palaeohispanica X Palaeohispanica 9* (Lisbon: Institution Fernandon El Catolico, 2009), pp. 339-351 (p. 340).

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