

A History of the Celtiberian Language

Celtiberian, also called Hispano-Celtic, is a continental Celtic language that was most likely spoken into the 2nd century AD. This essay delves into its history, the people who spoke it, and its location. It discusses its relation to the other branches of the Celtic language family and its closest linguistic relatives, while also touching on the gaps in our understanding of the language due to limited historical and linguistic evidence. It briefly mentions the debates as to the Celticity of Iberia and the languages associated with it. Finally, it examines the script the Celtiberians used as well as the archaeological evidence and place-names which give us a small insight into this archaic language.

The term 'Celtiberian' finds its origin in classical sources referring to the Celtic inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula. Settling in the Iberian Peninsula around the sixth century BC, the Celtiberians were marked by their tribal division and their material culture which reflected 'both La Tène Celtic and southern Iberian traditions.'¹ However, Barry Cunliffe mentions the great disconnect between the Iberian Peninsula and the material culture of Hallstatt and La Tène with very little overlap between the two.² A large group, called the Keltibēres, lived in east-central Spain; in the south-west and the north-west, there were the Keltikoi; and in the south-west, there were the Keltoi.³ Some of the tribes attested by classical authors are the Belli, the Arevaci, the Pelendones, and the Berones.⁴ The Romans, when pursuing military expansion into Iberia, came up against staunch resistance from the indigenous people there, a conflict which resulted in the Celtiberian Wars of 154-133 B.C.⁵ The Romans noted the difference between the Iberian population along the Mediterranean coast and those who spoke a Celtic language.⁶ Diodorus Siculus outlined how as a people, they stemmed from both the Celts and the Iberians:

¹ Fiona A. Rose, 'Text and Image in Celtiberia: The Adoption and Adaption of Written Language into Indigenous Visual Vocabulary,' *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 22, 2, (2003) p. 156.

² Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch (ed.), *Exploring Celtic Origins: New Ways Forwards in Archaeology, Linguistics, and Genetics* (Oxford & Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2019), p. 28.

³ *ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴ Bernhard Maier, *The Celts: A History from Earliest Times to the Present*, trans. Kevin Windle (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 78.

⁵ Rose, 'Text and Image in Celtiberia,' p. 156.

⁶ Jordán C. F. Beltrán, 'Writing and Language in Celtiberia,' *Paleohispanic Languages and Epigraphies*, Alejandro G. Sinner (ed.), Javier Velaza (ed.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) p. 240.

...in earlier times the Celts and the Iberians had been enemies but had later come to terms, shared the lands they once fought over and ultimately, having intermingled, accepted the name 'Celtiberian.'⁷

The territory of Celtiberia was situated in the upper Ebro valley and the eastern Meseta, 'roughly the modern provinces of Soria, Zaragoza, Guadalajara, and Cuenca.'⁸ Strabo in his *Geographica*, discusses where one tribe, the Arvacans, lived:

The most powerful, generally speaking, are the Arvacans, who live on the east and south, where their territory joins Carpetania and the sources of the Tagus; and they have a city of very great renown, Numantia. They gave proof of their valour in the Celtiberian War against the Romans which lasted for twenty years; indeed, many armies, officers and all, were destroyed by them, and at the last the Numantians, when besieged, endured till death, except a few who surrendered the fortress.⁹

The relationship between Rome and Celtiberia was determined by bitter conflict with Rome, in its expanding grab for power, eventually conquering and assimilating the Celtiberians into the province of *Hispania Citerior*.

In Iberia, two attested languages were spoken: the non-Indo-European Iberian and an older Continental Celtic dialect. Especially in the indigenous languages of pre-Roman Spain, 'there is abundant Celtic linguistic evidence.'¹⁰ The written evidence is dated from c. 179-50 BC. However, with the discovery of Celtic place-names, as well as personal names, there is evidence that a Celtic language was spoken in a larger swath of Iberia and not just in the attested territory of Celtiberia. It is important to be wary of using these terms too broadly, though. Celtiberian is the only Celtic language confirmed in the Iberian Peninsula in pre-Roman times and in this context, it is acceptable to speak in general of the Hispano-Celtic language. However, since there is onomastic evidence recorded in Graeco-Roman sources for Celtic speakers in other areas and this limited evidence cannot determine 'the degree of dialectization,'¹¹ it is important to make the distinction that 'Celtiberian is Hispano-Celtic, but not all Hispano-Celtic was Celtiberian.'¹² Scholars such as Jürgen Untermann and Ellis Evans argue that only one branch of Indo-European existed in the pre-Roman Iberian Peninsula: Celtic. This would lead to Lusitanian, despite its retention of the

⁷ Maier, *The Celts*, p. 77.

⁸ John T. Koch (ed.), *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia, Vol. 1, A-Celti* (California: ABC-CLIO, 2006), p. 363.

⁹ Strabo, 'Book III, Chapter 4,' *Geography*, trans. Horace Leonard Jones (Massachusetts & England: Harvard University Press, 1927), p. 103.

¹⁰ Cunliffe and Koch, *Exploring Celtic Origins*, p. 28.

¹¹ Beltrán, 'Writing and Language in Celtiberia,' p. 248.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 243.

Indo-European *p, being a branch of the Celtic family tree.¹³ There is also debate as to the Celticity of Tartessian in southern Portugal. However, Patrick Sims-Williams points out that the theory that 'the Lusitanian inscriptions (in Portugal and adjacent parts of Spain) are Celtic is now generally rejected.'¹⁴ To better understand the labels used, it is important to note that Celtiberian refers specifically to the language spoken by the Keltibēres in the eastern Meseta.¹⁵

Barry Cunliffe breaks down the concept of the Indo-European family tree in a helpful manner for understanding how Celtiberian relates to the other languages of Europe:

The Indo-European macro-family has Proto-Indo-European as its trunk and ten primary branches: Greek, Indo-Iranian (whence Sanskrit), Italic (whence Latin), Celtic, Germanic, Balto-Slavic, Armenian, Albanian, and the extinct Anatolian and Tocharian.¹⁶

As these branches of languages began to sprout off and separate, there is speculation that Italic and Celtic separated from Indo-European as one branch before splitting off into their ensuing Proto-Italic and Proto-Celtic branches.¹⁷ One of the challenges of studying an ancient language like Celtiberian is that there are large gaps in our knowledge, not only of the language itself but also its development. How Celtiberian split off from Proto-Celtic is unattested and even on a smaller scale, where Celtiberian belongs within the Celtic branch differs per scholar. That it is a Continental Celtic language is evident due to its geographical location. On the linguistic front, it is a Q-Celtic language alongside Irish, Scots-Gaelic, and Manx. However, basing the classification of a language on a single feature 'proves a poor foundation, especially when half the classification depends upon the preservation of an archaism and the other half upon the trivial linguistic phenomenon of *k > p.'¹⁸ Whatever the case, Celtiberian is considered an archaic dialect and preserves the most archaism of any other Celtic language. It is also believed to have separated from Proto-Celtic at an early date. This does not mean that an early separation from a mother language equates to the survival of more archaism in a language's lexicon.¹⁹

Unlike their Iberian neighbors in the coastal and southern parts of the Peninsula who began inscribing onto hard surfaces in the seventh century B.C., the Celtiberians did not

¹³ Cunliffe and Koch, *Exploring Celtic Origins*, p. 29.

¹⁴ Patrick Sims-Williams, 'An Alternative to 'Celtic from the East' and 'Celtic from the West,' *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 30, 3, (2020), p. 517.

¹⁵ Cunliffe and Koch, *Exploring Celtic Origins*, p. 29.

¹⁶ Cunliffe and Koch, *Exploring Celtic Origins*, p. 21.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁸ Beltrán, 'Writing and Language in Celtiberia,' p. 246.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 246.

practice writing until much later. The surviving inscriptions we have are written in either the Iberian semi-syllabary or in the Latin alphabet; Celtiberian did not have its own alphabet. The Iberian semi-syllabary—or Paleohispanic script—is a script whose graphemes often represent a consonant paired with a vowel—based off a syllable versus a letter. It stems from the Phoenician abjad which was adopted by the Tartessians around the 8th century B.C. and then spread through the south and east of Spain. It is possible that the Celtiberians adopted the script in the 3rd century B.C.²⁰ This is the date that Celtiberian script is first documented and it extends until the first century A.D.

There are around 500 Celtiberian inscriptions, but only 200 are long enough to provide noteworthy linguistic information.²¹

The epigraphic record of the region is limited to 36 non-monetary inscriptions and 47 numismatic legends in the Celtiberian language written in the Iberian script, and approximately 20 inscriptions of the language in Latin script. Most of these were inscribed onto bronze or silver plaques, tablets, or coins, with a few on potsherds.²²

While they have a distinctive Celtiberian character, most of the inscriptions are estimated to have been created after the Roman conquest. As such, they are heavily influenced by Roman models.²³ Much of the corpus belongs to the field of onomastics; many words are repeated. This results in fragmented language and because of that, fragmented knowledge of it as well.²⁴ Despite this, Celtiberian contains some of the longest and most complete texts that we have in an ancient Celtic language.

The Botoritta tablet is one of the most notable archaeological and linguistic discoveries. Found in the town of Botoritta in northern Spain, near what used to be the Celtiberian town of Contrebia Belaisca in Roman times. The inscriptions are written on bronze tablets, designated as Botoritta I, II, and III.²⁵ Botoritta I was once a whole tablet, but side A and side B were broken into two parts and found separately in 1970. It is of a legal and public nature. Side B lists fourteen men with the title '*Pintis* (possibly 'binder')'²⁶ which could describe their roles as guarantors or officials in the legal proceeding reported on Side A.

²⁰ Francisco Beltrán Lloris, Carlos Jordán Cólera, Borja Díaz Ariño, and Ignacio Simón Cornago, 'The Novallas Bronze Tablet: An Inscription in the Celtiberian Language and the Latin Alphabet from Spain,' *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 34, 2 (2021), p. 714.

²¹ Beltrán, 'Writing and Language in Celtiberia,' p. 265.

²² Rose, 'Text and Image in Celtiberia,' p. 159.

²³ Lloris and others, 'The Novallas Bronze Tablet,' p. 714.

²⁴ Beltrán, 'Writing and Language in Celtiberia,' p. 245.

²⁵ Koch (ed.), *Celtic Culture*, p. 232.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 232.

Botorrita II, also called Tabula Contrebiensis, is written in Latin and is able to be fully translated. It relates the legal dispute between neighboring Iberian towns regarding building a canal through one of the town's lands. Because it not only contains the names of the Celtiberian magistrates and the Iberian representatives, but also the names of Roman officials, Botorrita II is dated to be from 87 B.C.²⁷ Written in the Iberian script, Botorrita III is the longest of the Botorrita tablets but also the longest extant text we have in the Celtiberian language. It contains two headlines which have yet to be interpreted, underneath which lie four columns of personal names in the traditional Celtiberian name formula: an individual and family name, sometimes followed by the father or mother's name. The list of names includes not only Celtiberian names, but Iberian and Roman names as well, reflecting the diverse nature of the population of Contrebia Belaisca. Koch claims that 'this mixture of languages is not surprising, since the town was situated near the border of Iberian-speaking territory.'²⁸ An interesting aspect of Botorrita III is that its discovery allowed for the confirmation of theories about specific features in the Celtiberian language, particularly verbal endings with a middle or medio-passive voice that find their origin in Indo-European. This means that the subject is passive and is acted upon by the verb rather than the subject doing the action. In Botorrita III, *auzanto* is the 'third person plural past tense ending.'²⁹ The same verb is found in Botorrita I, in its 'third person singular present tense ending as *auzeti*.'³⁰

Another inscription worth noting is the Novallas Bronze from the second half of the first century B.C., written in Latin. Discovered in the early 21st century, the Novallas Bronze is a fragment of a bronze plaque. It has an irregular shape due to the careless cutting of its lower corners and 11 lines of text which includes 40 words. Unfortunately, due to limited knowledge of the Celtiberian language as well as the damage the cuts have caused to the lines of texts, it is difficult to translate the Novallas Bronze with much satisfaction. What can be said is this:

Its lines are incomplete at their start and, in the majority of cases, also their end. All that can be asserted confidently is that it is an official text, written in Celtiberian language, of a good size, and intended to be displayed in a public space. It is likely, given its characteristics, that it was issued by the local authorities in **turiazu** or **kaiskata** – the two cities closest to where it was discovered – in the final decades of the 1st c. BCE.³¹

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 233.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 233.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 234.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 234.

³¹ Lloris and others, 'The Novallas Bronze Tablet,' p. 721.

Having touched on the most prominent inscriptions, it would be remiss not to mention the ancient Celtic names also found throughout the Iberian Peninsula. For example, the place-names with the Celtic ending *-briga* which means ‘hill, hillfort, town.’³² In his map of Celtic-looking place names, Patrick Sims-Williams lists the common names recorded.

Out of my 153 locations in Hispania with ‘Celtic-looking’ names, 62 included BRIG (or its variants BRIC, BIRIK, BRIS, BRIA), the next most popular string being SEG (or SEK) ‘power, victory’, in 17 locations (12 per cent). Thus the Celtic-looking toponymy of Hispania is heavily weighted toward BRIG and is much less varied than that of areas such as France and Britian.³³

Sims-Williams stresses that this monotony could have been the result of borrowing foreign place-names in a bilingual community which would then spread to non-bilingual areas. He suggests that the Celtic *briga* might have been a term used outside the Celtic-speaking regions of Iberia. This point of view contrasts with the argument we touched upon earlier for a large swath of Celtic-speaking people living in the Iberian Peninsula.

In conclusion, Celtiberian was an ancient Celtic language spoken in the Iberian Peninsula by the Celtic population. It is attested to by classical authors. However, while Celtiberian is attested, other Celtic languages in the region are speculated due to Celtic looking place-names and inscriptions like those of Tartessian and even Lusitanian. However, as of now, these are mere speculation and the theory that Lusitanian is a Celtic language has largely been rejected. Nevertheless, it is important to be careful with using the term Celtiberian in reference to a larger area. Celtiberian inscriptions were written in the paleo-Hispanic semi-syllabary script or in the Latin script. It survives through tablets like Botoritta and Novallas. Our knowledge of Celtiberian is insufficient and unfortunately fragmented, yet it is important to continue searching for answers to better understand the history of Celtic languages in general and Celtiberian in particular.

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³² Cunliffe and Koch, *Exploring Celtic Origins*, p. 28.

³³ Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘An Alternative,’ p. 521.

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