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Chapter 11

Writings in network? The case of Palaeohispanic scripts

*Coline Ruiz Darasse*¹

What are referred to as the ‘Palaeohispanic’ Iron Age writings found in the Iberian Peninsula are not alphabetic but have a mixed structure of alphabet and syllabary. In fact, four of the five Palaeohispanic scripts identified are semi-syllabic: some signs, as in an alphabet, stand for the five vowels and others for the three (or four) nasals, one lateral, two rhotics and two sibilants. But, when it comes to stops, the signs are syllabic, standing for open syllables, *i.e.* for combinations of stops and vowels. There is not yet any totally clear explanation for the origin of the syllabism of the Palaeohispanic writings (de Hoz 2010, 505–507); these are a special case in the history of writing and their origins are still an open question.

The chronological evidence for these inscriptions runs from the late sixth century BC to Roman times. Over that period, the populations of the Iberian Peninsula were in contact with various peoples, both Semitic-speaking (such as the Phoenicians from the eighth century BC) and Indo-European-speaking (such as the Greeks since the sixth century BC and Romans with the Punic Wars and the Roman conquest of the Peninsula).

Therefore, it is most probably through contacts with both consonantal alphabets (*abjads*) and regular alphabets that the local populations borrowed and developed their own semi-syllabic forms of writing. They make up a complex and original set of inscriptions that must be considered as a network if we are to understand and reveal their origins. This article is intended to be a state of the art of the origins of the Palaeohispanic scripts: which alphabets or graphic systems are they related to? What are the oldest attestations? My remarks will focus on the scripts and not

¹ This paper has been written as part of the LaScArBx ANR-10-LABX-52 programme. I want to thank Christopher Sutcliffe for the revision of the English text.

the languages. I would like to briefly describe each writing system and explain how experts think they originated, so as to highlight some discordances in this complex orchestration. This presentation mainly follows Javier de Hoz's work (de Hoz 2010, 2011) but also mentions other scholars. For a recent extended presentation, see Ferrer and Moncunill (2019)².

Presentation of the various Palaeohispanic scripts

Five separate writing systems are attested in the Peninsula for the Iron Age. In the south-western part of the Peninsula, the Algarve in modern Portugal, a group of nearly 100 stelae presents what is currently considered to be the oldest evidence of writing in the Peninsula (de Hoz 2010, 371 ff.). But these documents have not yet been precisely dated because none of the stones was found in its primary archaeological context (*ibid.*, 359). Nevertheless, their aspect, their shape and the absence of uniformity in the writing, together with the circumstances in which they were found, all suggest an archaic practice, dating from around the sixth or the fifth centuries BC. A group of 26 or 27 signs is very frequently used (Rodríguez Ramos 2004, 93–94, figs 1 and 2; Ferrer and Moncunill 2019, table 4.1), but there is wide variability among the signs (up to 52 different forms), which are quite often hapaxes (de Hoz 2010, 372; Valério 2016, 117). Most of the inscriptions are written spirally and are to be read from right-to-left. The experts have established that this writing, on stone, uses certain signs redundantly: each syllabic sign is followed by a sign for the vowel although it is already present in the syllabic sign³. This characteristic was first pointed out by Ulrich Schmoll in 1961 and further studied by José Antonio Correa in 1985. Some recent discoveries explain the specific use of this redundancy in the south-western script. In Medellín (50 km east of Mérida in Extremadura), graffiti written on ceramics in the necropolis (dated from the seventh–sixth centuries BC) are to be read in the same direction as the south-western script and without the redundant feature. And yet, in this same necropolis, a stele (most probably of the third part of the seventh century BC) is written with the south-western script and redundant writing (Almagro 2004), just like the group from Portugal. This means that the same writing was used in the same place at the same time but in two different ways. While the regular/semi-syllabic script was in common use on everyday material (like ceramics), the redundant feature was preferred for special writing (and on stone) maybe to give it a more 'ceremonial' appearance (de Hoz 2010, 367). Likewise, it can be proposed that the redundancy of the writing on stone on the stelae of the Algarve may have been for stylistic effect only (*ibid.*, 517) – unless it was a local (and perhaps later) development (Valério 2016, 143).

2 I would like to thank Joan Ferrer and Noemí Moncunill for allowing me to read their forthcoming papers before their publication.

3 For instance, the transcription of the first line of the Bensafrim stele (MLH IV, J.1.1) reads as follows: **lok*ob*oniirab*ot*oafaiak*alt*elok*o**, where the exponent letter corresponds to the syllable and is systematically followed by a vowel of the same timbre.

It is not yet clearly established what the language noted by the southwestern script is, which obviously does not help when it comes to deciphering it. John Koch's proposal to read some Celtic language in the texts of the southwestern stelae (Koch 2009), based mostly on anthroponomy, has not been followed. Although some progress has been made, there is no grammatical analysis of these texts that can provide for comparison with Celtic languages and this hypothesis does not seem to be very helpful to our understanding of the rest of the inscriptions (Ferrer 2016, 40 note 3).

A second form of writing attested is called the south-eastern (or meridional) script, which has 26 signs (Rodríguez Ramos 2004, 99, figs 7 and 8; Ferrer and Moncunill 2019, table 4.1), and clearly seems to be related to the south-western form: they share many signs in common and both are written from right-to-left. Even if the written languages are different, we have to assume that, at some point, the south-western writers interacted closely with the meridional ones (de Hoz 2010, 422 and 519). The south-western and south-eastern scripts have not been completely deciphered; many of the signs are still to be understood and the phonetic value of each sign is still open to debate. Indeed, for other Palaeohispanic writings (north-eastern and Celtiberian), coins with inscriptions in both Latin and Palaeohispanic scripts (Delgado 1871; Vives 1924–1926; Gómez Moreno 1943, 263) or some of the rare Iberian texts written in the Greek alphabet (Gómez Moreno 1922) have helped in deciphering them. For the south-eastern script, experts ascribe values to the signs on the basis that similar ones were used to write the Iberian language, even if, according to Javier de Hoz, south-eastern writing may not have been created especially for this language (de Hoz 2010, 521). We do not know for sure the date of birth of this script (*ibid.*, 423): evidence of it is scarce (only 88 inscriptions are known) and the earliest inscriptions can be dated to the fifth century BC (MLH III, H.8.1 [Córdoba] according to de Hoz (2010, 368), on common ceramic but out of context; MLH III, G.7.1 Corral de Saus [but the dating is based upon the remains of the statues in the necropolis and the inscription could have been written afterwards] and MLH III, G.7.2 lead sheet from La Bastida de les Alcusses [*terminus ante quem*: first half of the fourth century BC]).

We have to mention the existence, in the area around Alicante, of fewer than 40 inscriptions in the Ionian alphabet, possibly from Samos (according to de Hoz 2010, 382). This use of a Greek alphabet to write an Iberian language gave birth to the so-called Graeco-Iberian writing, only attested in the fourth century BC in this very region. This unique situation helped Don Manuel Gómez Moreno, the scholar who deciphered the Paleohispanic scripts in the 1920s, because for the first time a text could be read in Iberian (Gómez Moreno 1922). Slight adaptations were made from the Greek alphabet to match the different values of the Iberian language: for example the addition of a stroke on the *rho* and the use of a *sampi* beside the *sigma* for the sibilants (de Hoz 1985–1986, 291). It is read from left-to-right. Why was this writing used only in this area and never on any other part of the Spanish coast (although

there were Greek settlements elsewhere as at Ampurias or Rosas in Catalonia)? This cannot yet be explained.⁴

The most widespread writing in the Iberian Peninsula is the north-eastern script. Epigraphic evidence for it extends from the region of Murcia to southern Gaul and up to 2000 inscriptions have been identified, mostly on ceramics. The attestation zone is so large that the hypothesis of a vehicular language, noted by this writing, has been proposed (de Hoz 2011, 445; *contra*: Ferrer 2013): it would be used as a means of communication between different Iberian populations. The earliest examples appeared in the fifth century BC with property marks on Attic vases found in Mas Castellar de Pontós, Ullastret (Spain) and Ensérune (France). The north-eastern script is to be read from left-to-right (in the opposite direction to the south-eastern script). It has 28 signs (Rodríguez Ramos 2004, figs 15–34; Ferrer and Moncunill 2019, table 4.1) some of which are similar to the south-eastern ones (comparison in de Hoz 2011, 422–423). This may indicate either a connection between the two scripts or even a common origin (Ferrer 2017a).

Later, around the third century BC, what was most probably the north-eastern script was borrowed by the Celtic populations of the centre of the Peninsula, known as the Celtiberians, and this semi-syllabary adapted to their Celtic language, giving rise to the western and eastern Celtiberian scripts (Ferrer 2005, 975).

In broad outline, the spread of writing across the Iberian Peninsula can be simplified like this: (1) south-western, (2) south-eastern, (3) north-eastern script (with the parenthesis of the Graeco-Iberian script) and finally (4) Celtiberian writings. Of course, we have to mention the sporadic occurrences of Greek and Phoenician alphabets (Zamora 2005, esp. 170 ff.; de Hoz 2014) and the growing presence of the Latin alphabet from the third century BC and that became predominant in the first century BC. In a word, this is roughly Javier de Hoz's theory, which now meets with almost general approval although other proposals have been made recently (Ferrer 2017a for a complete overview).

The question of origins is then to be asked for what is currently thought to be the oldest forms of writing, the south-western and south-eastern scripts.

The origins of the southern scripts

Experts have long agreed that the Palaeohispanic scripts took inspiration from models known outside the Peninsula. Many provenances have been proposed⁵ but in the early

⁴ In February 2018, a new Graeco-Iberian lead sheet was found at La Illeta dels Banyets, a site from which most of the Graeco-Iberian inscriptions originate. Its study will undoubtedly contribute to the knowledge of this so specific writing.

⁵ Such as 'Minoan' for Gómez Moreno 1943, 256 – mainly because it had not been deciphered at the time; John T. Koch proposed a mixed origin between alphabetical and Phoenician components on the one hand and syllabic and Cypriot elements on the other (Koch 2014, 46–47).

1980s Javier de Hoz clearly put forward the Phoenician hypothesis for the origin of Palaeohispanic writings (de Hoz 1983, 1991, 1996, 2010, 488–527).

This hypothesis is consistent with the historical situation, *i.e.* with the implantation of Phoenician trading posts all along the southern Mediterranean coastline of the peninsula, as at Malaka (present-day Málaga), Sexi (present-day Almuñecar) and Gadir (now Cádiz). The first use of a Palaeohispanic script is to be linked to the need to control goods (de Hoz 2010, 281): indeed the oldest graffito known in Palaeohispanic script was found in Huelva (dating from 650–600 BC) clearly showing an <i> (Fernández Jurado and Correa 1988, fig. 2.1). This sign is common to all Palaeohispanic scripts but is not found in the Phoenician or Greek alphabets. It therefore indicates a local form of writing. It has to be understood in a context of growing interactions between local people and incomers (de Hoz 2010, 364; Valério 2016, 141), most probably as an adaptation of a Phoenician *yod*.

Indeed the hypothesis of the Phoenician origin of Palaeohispanic scripts is also consistent with the comparison between the different signs of the Phoenician alphabet and the many signs in the southwestern and meridional style of writing (de Hoz 2010, 623; Ferrer 2017a, 63, fig. 3, who also compares it with the north-eastern script). Seven of about 28 signs were borrowed without changes; nine were partially reinterpreted (Fig. 11.1) and five others were given a new and arbitrary value (de Hoz 1991, 673, 2010, 624).

Obviously we cannot hope to explain with precision each borrowing or creation of a sign (Valerio 2016, 131). A detailed presentation of the different possibilities for each sign has been proposed by Jesus Rodríguez Ramos (2004), Javier de Hoz (2010, 374–385) and Ferrer (2017, 88–89).

Nevertheless, an inscription on a stone slab from Espanca (MLH IV, J.25.1) has to be mentioned at this point. Found in 1987 out of context, its dating is done thanks to the ceramics found around it, dating back to at least the fifth century BC. On it, two parallel lines of 27 signs seem to represent a writing exercise (Correa 1993). The first line, firmly incised, must have been written by a 'teacher'; and the second more hesitant one by a 'pupil's' hand. The inscription can be divided in two parts (Fig. 11.2).

- The first part matches the arrangement of the Phoenician alphabet: thirteen signs all taken from the Phoenician *abjad* and in the same order, which also means there are many missing signs (de Hoz 1996, 175). The signs in this group were most probably taken because they were pronounced in much the same way in Phoenician and in the receiving system (de Hoz 1996, 188).
- The second part gathers adaptations from the Phoenician alphabet with no phonetic logic, plus some inventions required to complete the system. We cannot be more precise about this system because we cannot ascertain the logic of the composition of this group and, as it is merely a writing exercise without any other inscription associated, we cannot tell which Palaeohispanic language it matches exactly.

Phoenician			Hispanic		
1.	ʾ	𐤀	a	𐤀 𐤁	
2.	b	𐤁	pe	𐤁	
3.	g	𐤂	ka	𐤂	
4.	d	𐤃	tu	𐤃	
5.	h	𐤄	?	𐤄	
6.	w	𐤅	u	𐤅	
7.	z	𐤆	o	𐤆	
8.	ḥ	𐤇	te?	𐤇	
9.	ṭ	𐤈	ti	𐤈	
10.	y	𐤉	i	𐤉	
11.	k	𐤊	ke	𐤊	
12.	l	𐤋	l	𐤋	
13.	m	𐤌	pa	𐤌	
14.	n	𐤍	n	𐤍	
15.	s	𐤎	s	𐤎	
16.	ʿ	𐤏	e	𐤏	
17.	p	𐤐	bi?	𐤐	
18.	š	𐤑	ś	𐤑	

Figure 11.1. Comparison between the Phoenician abjad and the south-western (and south-eastern) Palaeohispanic writings (based on De Hoz 2010, 637, table 3.1).

Phoenician			Hispanic		
19.	q	𐤒	ki	𐤒	
20.	r	𐤓	r	𐤓	
21.	š	𐤔	ś	𐤔	
22.	t	𐤕	ta	𐤕	
23.			pi	𐤖	
24.			ko	𐤗	
25.			bo	𐤘	
26.			bu?	𐤙	
27.			ki?	𐤚	
28.			ti?	𐤛	

Figure 11.1 (Continued)

Obviously, this plaque provides a powerful argument for a Phoenician origin of a Palaeohispanic script but Espanca could have undergone also of a Greek influence. Indeed, as in the Greek alphabet, the first sign of the second group of the Espanca plaque, right after the *taw* sign, is a *waw* used for <u> (de Hoz 2010, 493). Then, because of the well-known connections between the Phoenician and Greek alphabets, a Greek origin for the Palaeohispanic southwestern script has been defended by Jürgen Untermann (for instance in Untermann 1990, 136) or José Antonio Correa (Correa 1993). Their demonstrations were based on the fact that some signs in Palaeohispanic scripts could be either Phoenician or Greek, but some could only be of Greek origin (namely the **l**, **n**, **ś** and **ke**) (de Hoz 2010, 496).

Indeed, the idea that the origin or the most important influence in the creation of Palaeohispanic scripts was Phoenician does not contradict the possibility of some influence from the Greek alphabet (de Hoz 2010, 488). But, in my opinion, the hypothesis of a Phoenician origin is almost certain (see also Correa 2005 and Ferrer 2017a, 62) and should prevail over a Greek one:

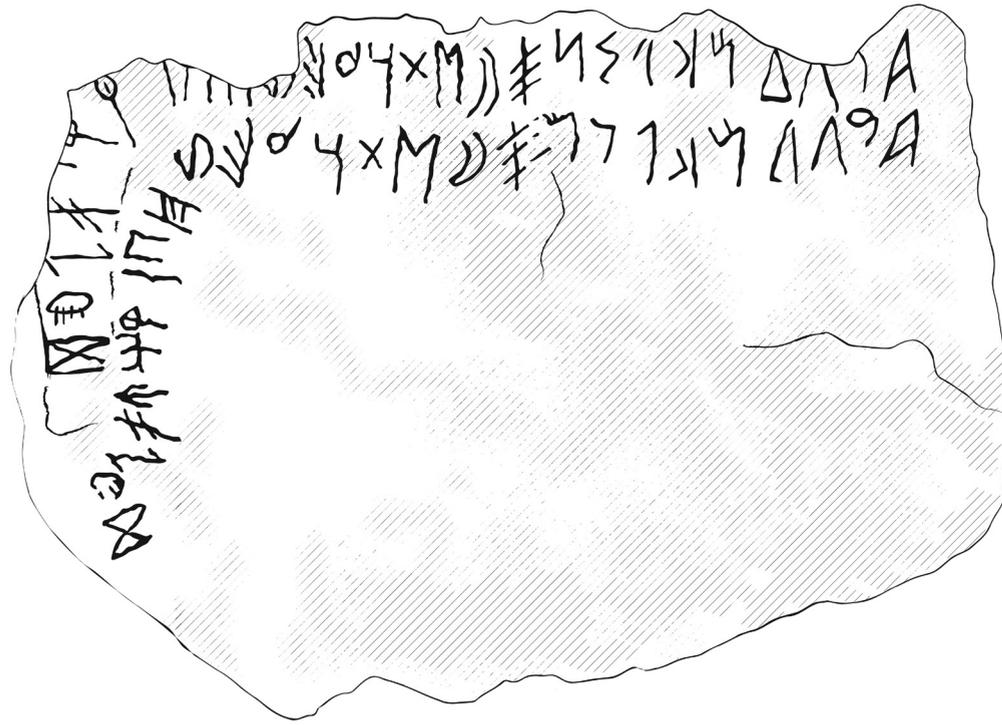


Figure 11.2. Stone slab from Espanca (Sete, Castro Verde, MLH J.25.1). Drawing: P. J. Boyes, based on De Hoz 2010, 637, fig. 3.1.

- because of the earlier evidence of Phoenician settlement in southern Spain (at least the eighth century BC for the Castillo de Doña Blanca near Cádiz: Ruiz Mata 2016);
- because of the choice of signs. In particular some signs adopted to represent vowels are different from the Greek ones (de Hoz 1991, 673). While, as in Greek, the <a> comes from 'aleph, the <i> from yod and the <u> from waw, the choice of 'ayin for writing the sound /e/ is like in Semitic languages and unlike in Greek in which it was used for an omicron. If the model were Greek, all the vowels would have been borrowed in the same way.

New data that cast doubt

The Espanca plaque was a curiosity in Palaeohispanic epigraphy for many years and many have expected that it would provide the missing link between all Palaeohispanic writings thanks to the close connections with both the southwestern and southeastern scripts. Although it was not an exact match for either the south-western or the south-eastern scripts, this was the only evidence of writing schools in the Iberian Peninsula and the only abecedary known until recently.

But in the past five years, Joan Ferrer has worked on sequences, first in north-eastern script and now in south-eastern script, that are thought to represent abecedaries (Ferrer 2014). In this same line of investigation (Ferrer 2017b), this scholar proposes to re-examine a graffito from Villasviejas del Tamuja (Cáceres, Extremadura). This ostrakon (BDHesp. CC.04.03) has long been known (Hernández Hernández 1985) and is thought to date from the fourth century BC (Correa 1996, 68). It bears three signs on face A and seven on face B (Ferrer 2017b). By comparing the sequence on face B of this graffito with the Espanca plaque, Ferrer reveals a similar arrangement of six (maybe even seven) signs in both cases⁶, if we accept the change of direction in writing. The inscription itself looks more like south-eastern writing but other south-western inscriptions have been found at the same site suggesting a western influence in the writing (Ferrer 2017b). All this leads the Catalan author to affirm that the sequence on the Espanca plaque is not random and that there was a Palaeohispanic meridional 'abecedary'. Javier de Hoz had already conjectured this idea in his study of the Espanca plaque (de Hoz 2010, 494) without having formal proof of it.

If we want to go a little further, on the one hand, we observe that the signs on the Espanca plaque and those in Villasviejas del Tamuja stand for a script without any indications about the voiced or unvoiced consonants. On the other hand, we now know that both the north-eastern script and the south-eastern script, from the moment they are attested (fifth century BC) include some 'additional strokes' (more than 'diacritics', Ferrer and Moncunill, 2019) to distinguish the voicing (Ferrer 2012, 2013).⁷ These additional strokes mark the unvoiced sounds in north-eastern script but conversely, and without any explanation for the time being, they seem to mark the voiced consonants in the south-eastern writing. This phenomenon, called the 'dual system', was discovered by Joan Maluquer de Motes in the late 1960s and has been studied systematically by Joan Ferrer for a decade (Ferrer 2005, 2012, 2017a). The earliest evidence for the use of the dual system is on an attic vase from Ullastret dated from the fifth century BC.⁸ Its first appearance is then contemporaneous with inscriptions in the southern part of the Peninsula.

This led Joan Ferrer to suggest a common ancestor to all Palaeohispanic scripts which already used the dual system (Ferrer 2017a). But, even if it is obvious that a complex feature in the script was used in the early times of the north-eastern epigraphy – without any explanation about its origins for the moment, and no

⁶ From the twelfth to the sixteenth sign of the Espanca sequence, that is to say exactly at the junction between the *abjad* group and the innovative group.

⁷ On a few inscriptions from the north-eastern region, this duality distinguishes the vowels as well (Burriel *et al.* 2011, 197–198). Ferrer 2017a, 80 even detects cases of trialism on some north-eastern signs, one of which could be the notation for the aspirate.

⁸ That is why some scholars like Javier Velaza (2006) have suggested the north-eastern script originated in and spread from the northern part of the Peninsula or even Southern Gaul. These suggestions aim to take into account the epigraphic evidence, the chronology and also the density of the Palaeohispanic inscriptions and anthroponomy.

certainty about its primacy over south eastern writing (de Hoz 2011, 213; Ferrer 2017a) – for now, none of the ‘abecedaries’ identified in the north eastern zone is comparable to the sequences of Espanca or Villasviejas del Tamuja.

Comparing all the signs, we can assert, at least, that south-western, south-eastern and north-eastern scripts were inter-related with the latter two possibly being of common (and dual) origin. But, it is still impossible to define a common ancestor to *all* Palaeohispanic scripts, or even to determine with certainty, on such fragile bases, some of its characteristics.

Conclusion

To sum up these very brief observations:

We are sure there were close connections with Phoenicians in the southern part of the Peninsula from the eighth century BC and that they died out with the Punic Wars.

We know of close connections with the Greeks in the southern part of the Peninsula and also on the eastern coast, giving rise locally to the Graeco-Iberian script.

We have some inscriptions on stone in southwestern script the dating of which is unclear but that display archaic features. The dual system is not used in these inscriptions (Ferrer 2016, 75) but a redundant use of the script is, probably with stylistic value.

We have very poor epigraphic documentation for the seventh century BC but it is consistent and it shows an early appearance of a script in southernmost Andalusia.

Around the fifth century BC there are manifestations of writing using complex features such as the dual system (even if in different ways), both in the southern part of the Peninsula and in the north-eastern area, suggesting that an original script for some Palaeohispanic writings was ‘dual’ (Ferrer 2017a). This working hypothesis does not contravene the idea of an origin of Paleohispanic scripts in the south-western part of the peninsula, but needs to be further substantiated.

What can we conclude from all this?

A Phoenician origin for a Palaeohispanic script still seems the best hypothesis.

The influence of the alphabet gave rise to scripts of which we have various examples: the south-western script, the Espanca plaque and the south-eastern script, suggesting that the Palaeohispanic scripts were first developed in the southern part of the Peninsula around the sixth/fifth centuries BC or possibly a little earlier.

Nevertheless, recent developments and discoveries allow us to make progress in the reconstruction of the earliest scripts found in the Peninsula, some of which may have been already ‘dual’ from the start, if we follow Ferrer’s opinion. However, the Espanca case is a good illustration of the complexity of Palaeohispanic epigraphy: we do have missing links but we are unable to identify connections among the links themselves!

We end up with more questions than answers. This indicates the need for more research and for more excavations in the hope of making more discoveries. Palaeohispanics remain a brain-teaser and a stimulus for further research.