

Palaeo-European studies: languages, writings, epigraphic cultures

*Estudios paleoeuropeos: lenguas,
escrituras, culturas epigráficas*

Francisco Beltrán Lloris 

Grupo Hiberus | Instituto Universitario
de Investigación en Patrimonio y
Humanidades | Universidad de Zaragoza
Coordinator of the AELAW network
fbeltran@unizar.es

The objective of Palaeo-European studies is to undertake interdisciplinary, comparative and comprehensive research into the sets of local languages, writing systems and epigraphic practices that form the furthestmost stratum of written European culture. These are understood as organic systems of knowledge and communicative practice that combine language, script, and support in order to record or transmit messages in well-defined social and ideological contexts.

This is not, then, a strictly new field of investigation. The oldest languages, scripts, and inscriptions of Europe, such as the Etruscan or Iberian for example, have been the object of academic scrutiny for centuries. They have traditionally been addressed separately, however, so that their study has never been structured around a single scientific discipline, nor have scientific journals or conferences focussing on their joint study been created. On the contrary, approaches have predominantly been partial and biased more towards linguistics or history; or they have been regional studies, generally centred sectorally on Hispania, Italy, or Gaul; or they have had specialised foci according to language families (Indo-European, Celtic, Italian) or historical periods (Orientalizing, Romanization...).

Overcoming this scientific fragmentation was one of the primary objectives of the network Ancient European Languages and Writings (AELAW,



IS1407), which is situated within the framework of COST, European Cooperation in Science and Technology. Alongside Simona Marchesini, I have had the privilege of coordinating this network from 2015 – 2019 (<<http://aelaw.unizar.es/>>). Over a hundred researchers from seventeen European countries, specialising in historical and linguistic fields and especially epigraphy, have collaborated towards this objective. The volume we now offer, with the contribution of a select representation of members of AELAW, serves as a letter of introduction to this network of researchers and as a guide and introduction to Palaeo-European studies.

1. Palaeo-European

The term ‘Palaeo-European’ is not new. It has occasionally been used, although with different meanings, to refer to the most remote linguistic strata of the continent and, specifically, to prehistoric languages which pre-date writing and therefore lack texts, hypothetically identified through toponyms and, in particular, hydronyms. This is the meaning of the term ‘Alteuropäisch’, coined by Krahe to denote the intermediary link between common Indo-European and languages like Germanic, Italic, Celtic, Baltic, Illyrian, and Venetic (Krahe 1954; 1962; 1964). In Spanish (and other languages), this was translated as ‘ancient European’, but the term ‘Palaeo-European’ has also been used (Ballester 2007).¹ This term also enjoys some popularity in general interest articles from the internet to designate — albeit in a rather confusing way — the languages that were spoken in Europe before Indo-European ones.²

Unfortunately, it has so far proven impossible to identify unequivocally the continent’s prehistoric linguistic strata, nor to determine with any degree of certainty the precedence of some linguistic families with regard to others, nor the location where they were formed or originated, let alone to identify

1 For a reformulation of the idea of Palaeo-European as Archaeo-Indo-European, Villar *et al.* 2011.

2 See ‘Paleo-European languages’ on Wikipedia: “The Paleo-European languages, or Old European languages, are the mostly-unknown languages that were spoken in Europe prior to the spread of the Indo-European and the Uralic families...”. The term, nevertheless, is applied — a little incongruously — to languages like Iberian, Etruscan, Minoan, Germanic... (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paleo-European_languages>, 17th August 2019).

each of these hypothetical languages consistently and convincingly. The furthest linguistic past of the continent remains shrouded in mist.³

We, therefore, prefer to use the term Palaeo-European to designate the earliest historical languages of the continent, documented by texts — as scarce and brief as they are — which it is possible to characterise with at least a degree of robustness. The prefix palaeo-, when applied to languages, scripts, or ancient epigraphic cultures, does moreover possess a solid tradition both in Italy (Palaeo-Italic, Palaeo-Sabellian) and in the Iberian Peninsula, whose early languages and epigraphic cultures (Iberian, Celtiberian, Lusitanian, Vasconic, and the language of the south-west or ‘Tartessian’) have been consistently designated ‘Palaeo-Hispanic’, as the discipline that studies them has been termed ‘Palaeo-Hispanistics’.⁴

We will therefore employ the term ‘Palaeo-European’ to designate all of these closely interconnected sets of linguistic, written, and epigraphic realities that form the earliest written stratum on the continent, as well as the discipline that studies them.

These sets share the fact that the majority of their texts are barely intelligible and it is impossible to translate confidently the languages in which they are written, although some are much more accessible than others. Various factors contribute to these limitations: specific writing systems, some still incompletely deciphered; a generally restricted number of documents, that ranges between half a dozen inscriptions and over two thousand, except in the case of Etruscan, which has over 10, 000; texts which are almost always short — many very short, of only two or three signs — consisting above all of personal names and with little lexical or syntactic information; and isolated languages like Iberian, or without living relatives like Etruscan, Raetic, and Lemnian, or with living relatives but very distant in time and space, such as the earliest Celtic languages of Lepontic, Celtiberian, and Gaulish.

It is precisely these particular characteristics that make it essential to study Palaeo-European texts from an interdisciplinary, comparative, and

3 It is therefore subject to fragile and speculative theories such as Vennemann’s, according to which the oldest substrate of western Europe would be Vasconic (Vennemann 1994; 2003; Hamel and Vennemann 2003).

4 An introduction to Palaeo-Hispanistics in Sinner and Velaza 2019. Palaeo-Hispanic studies are structured around the regular *Coloquios sobre lenguas y culturas paleohispanicas* (I, Salamanca 1974–XIII, Loulé, 2019), the journal *Palaeohispanica* (1, 2001–20, 2020) and the databank *Hesperia* (<<http://hesperia.ucm.es>>).

comprehensive perspective. For poorly known languages, establishing the archaeological context, understanding the functionality of the support, comparing better-known contemporary epigraphic practices, and historical contextualisation of the document are usually as useful for identifying the meaning of each inscription as linguistic analysis and the comparison with other related languages.

It is also these characteristics that contribute to distinguishing, within the continuum of ancient written languages and cultures, these Palaeo-European sets from languages without writing, on the one hand, and from literary written cultures or cultures with Mediterranean reach, on the other. Compared to the former, Palaeo-European sets are characterised by possessing a more or less extensive written record; compared to the latter, by a lack of (preserved) literature and a merely local reach, although in cases like Gaulish, Iberian, and Etruscan they influenced wide geographical regions and neighbouring communities came to share them.

The boundary that separates Palaeo-European sets from languages lacking a written record — that is, attested onomastically — is not always easy to trace, since it depends only on the existence or otherwise of inscriptions, and this is a fact that can be controversial and may change. For example, in the case of the ancestor of modern Basque — Vasconic-Aquitania — despite the onomastic nature of the majority of linguistic information available about it, it is usually included among Palaeo-European sets because a certain consensus exists about the possibility that it possesses some texts (though only short numismatic legends) and even its own script variant (Gorrochategui in press; Beltrán and Velaza 2009).⁵ In contrast, Ligurian and Dacian are excluded because the inscriptions supposedly written in these languages are generally considered Celtic, in the Ligurian case, and Latin, in the Dacian.⁶

In terms of literary written cultures, such as Greek and Latin, the methodological differences are obvious. Although both are European and possess rich epigraphic corpora, they present very different problems for research and possess, furthermore, fully established specific scientific traditions. Their languages, moreover, are perfectly comprehensible thanks not only to hundreds of thousands of inscriptions but also to the rich literary tradition preserved through a cultural and linguistic continuity that persists into modern times

5 See the chapter by J. Gorrochategui in this volume.

6 *AE* 1977, 672 = *AE* 1995, 1301: Decebalus per Scorilo. On languages attested only onomastically, see the chapter by A. Falileyev in this volume.

in the Romance languages and modern Greek. This rich documentation also reflects the role that both played as universal written cultures on a Mediterranean level, in clear contrast to the purely local reach of Palaeo-European sets.

They are also clearly distinguished from the Phoenician-Punic written culture. This culture certainly coincides with Palaeo-European ones in being documented only through inscriptions, with a similar number to Etruscan, and in lacking a literary tradition, although in this case it was lost due to a lack of cultural successors. It can obviously also be considered a European culture because it put down roots for over eight centuries in regions like the south of Hispania, Ibiza, Sardinia, Sicily, and Malta. It nevertheless fits into a historical formation with a Mediterranean reach which traces its roots to the Syro-Palestine of the second millennium BCE, which expresses itself with a Semitic language, related to Hebrew and very far from the Palaeo-European languages, and which possesses its own specific research tradition.

Once the differences are highlighted, however, it is useful to bear in mind that these are only methodological and up to a point conventional, since — as indicated above — all of them, whether languages without writing, Palaeo-European sets, or Greek, Roman, and Phoenician cultures, form part of the same continuum with continuous relationships and exchanges that affected writing systems, epigraphic practices, and linguistic contacts. In all those are areas Palaeo-European written cultures are enormously indebted to the Phoenician, Greek, and Roman epigraphic cultures.

Something similar may be said of other Mediterranean linguistic-epigraphic sets, be they African or Asian, whose research contends with similar methodological difficulties and problem areas. This is true of Libyan in the north of Africa and some Near-Eastern ones, above all from Asia Minor, which, alongside Phoenician, Greek, and Latin, should always be taken into consideration in Palaeo-European studies.⁷

The nucleus of Palaeo-European epigraphic cultures extends through Italy, Hispania, and Gaul — with a Balkan, Thracian, and Lemnian appendix — and developed fundamentally between the eighth and first centuries BCE. Another two should, however, be included among them, despite having arisen at a very advanced stage from the third and fourth centuries CE at the periphery of the Classical world, without contact with the others. They both,

7 An introduction to Mediterranean linguistic diversity in Neumann and Untermann 1980.

however, also possess epigraphic evidence and their own script: the Germanic runes and Celtic Ogham.

All these languages, the writing systems used to set them down, and the inscriptions that they produced form an invaluable part of European cultural heritage whose study, dissemination, and preservation have not until now been addressed holistically.⁸

2. AELAW

The specific objectives of the AELAW network included to establish a well-defined list of the different Palaeo-European languages and to estimate the volume of inscriptions written in each of them. To this end, a census of languages and another of inscriptions was created.

Distinguishing the languages posed specific problems, above all in areas in which the inscriptions document such close linguistic forms that it is not easy to elucidate whether they are different languages, consecutive stages of the same language, or local variations. This problem is accentuated by their scarcity, but, paradoxically, can also be complicated by an abundance of inscriptions, as the Celtic and Sabellian languages respectively illustrate well.

In the case of the former, documented via some 2000 inscriptions, besides the best-known sets such as Gaulish or Celtiberian various problems need to be resolved, such as the existence in Great Britain of a Brythonic variant different from Gaulish; the possible identification as Celtic of the language attested in the south-west of the Iberian Peninsula; the Celticness of Lusitanian; the detection of possible regional variations in the Gauls; and the differences between Lepontic and Cisalpine Gaulish in Italy, among other questions. In the case of the Sabellian languages, of which a thousand inscriptions are known, the challenge consists of structuring this complex family, which is documented, furthermore, over a fairly long period of time, which comprise, as well as Oscan and Umbrian, the oldest or Palaeo-Sabellian variants (South Picene, Palaeo-Umbrian, Pre-Samnite...) and the most recent (Paelignian, Hernican, Marsian, Sabine, Marrucinian, Vestinian...). These problem areas were addressed at two AELAW conferences, the proceedings of which are in the process of being published: The linguistic classification of ancient Celtic

8 For example, the monograph by Woodward 2010, derived from the renowned Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the World's Ancient Languages (Woodward 2004), only considers the Sabellian, Etruscan, Venetic, Continental Celtic, Nordic and Gothic languages — alongside Latin and Greek — among the ancient European languages.

languages and dialects, organised by Eugenio Luján and Anja Ragolič in Ljubljana (April 2018)⁹ and *Defining Sabellian Languages and Cultures*, held in Rome in February 2018 and co-ordinated by Enrico Benelli, Simona Marchesini, and Paolo Poccetti.¹⁰

Without being exhaustive, the current roll-call of Palaeo-European languages documented in writing can read as follows: in Hispania, Iberian, Celtiberian, Lusitanian, the language of the south-west — also called ‘Tartessian’ — and Vasconic, the precursor to modern Basque and related to the ancient Aquitanian from the south of France; in Italy, Lepontic, and Cisalpine Gaulish (which David Stifter suggests should jointly be called Cisalpine Celtic), Raetic, Camunic, Venetic, Etruscan, Faliscan, Messapic, Oscan, Umbrian, and other Sabellian languages (pre-Samnite, Palaeo-Umbrian, South Picene, Oenotrian, Sabine, Marsian, Volscian, Hernican, Vestinian, Paelignian, Marrucinian...) that are still in need of systematisation; in Sicily, Elimian and Sicel/Sicanian; in France and its environs, Gaulish, as well as the aforementioned Aquitanian; in the Balkans, Thracian and Lemnian; and finally, on the periphery of the Classical World, the Germanic of the runes and Insular Celtic in Ogham script.¹¹

Naturally, the possibility cannot be dismissed that this list may grow with the discovery of a new inscription in any of the ancient European languages that until now have only been identified through onomastics: Turdetanian, Ligurian, Brittonic, Dacian, Illyrian..., or in areas that until now have not provided inscriptions in vernacular languages, but which were in contact with writing from an early date, such as, for example, the Balearics, Corsica, and Sardinia.

The task of compiling the census of Palaeo-European inscriptions cannot be considered complete, as we lack the necessary instruments to establish an exhaustive list without ambiguities — that is, databases that are critical, complete, and always up to date, which are rather rare in the Palaeo-European

9 <<http://aelaw.unizar.es/events/linguistic-classification-ancient-celtic-languages-and-dialects>>.

10 <<http://aelaw.unizar.es/events/una-definizione-delle-lingue-e-delle-culture-sabelliche>>.

11 <<http://aelaw.unizar.es/database/languages>>, ongoing.

sphere.¹² Despite this, and rounding numbers, we can estimate its total volume exceeds 18,000, of which more than 10,000, probably 11,000, are Etruscan. Among the 7000 remaining, the groups that stand out are the Iberian (*c.* 2250), Gaulish (*c.* 1000), Oscan (*c.* 800), Venetic (*c.* 700), Messapic (*c.* 600), Celtiberian (*c.* 500), Faliscan, Elimian and Lepontic (*c.* 400), Raetic, Camunic, and Thracian (*c.* 300) and that of the south-west of Hispania (*c.* 150), with the rest numbering under 100 inscriptions. It should be borne in mind that the most recent quantifications tend to count inscriptions composed of one, two, or three signs, which in several of the groups indicated are very numerous, and in some cases can make up half or even more of the total inscriptions counted (Celtiberian, Gaulish, Lepontic, Raetic, Venetic, Raetic, Elimian...). The only exception to this tendency is Etruscan, in which — for the very reason of the wealth of its record — it is unusual to count the shortest inscriptions, which are numbered confidently into the hundreds, if not thousands. These estimations are naturally based upon the inscriptions published, to which many more as yet unpublished inscriptions should be added — particularly those incised on pottery — as well as those that could appear in the future.¹³

The quantification of Palaeo-European epigraphy reveals the extraordinary concentration of documents yielded by various regions of Italy, from which originate over three-quarters of the current census (*c.* 14,000), compared to only 3000 or so from Hispania, 1000 from Gaul, and at most 300 from the Balkans. This concentration continued in the Imperial era, a period in which almost half of Latin epigraphy comes from Rome and Italy (Beltrán 2015, 136-141). Epigraphic density is a factor that could impact the chances of identifying languages and dialectical variants, and which obliges us to ask how far the linguistic fragmentation or homogeneity that we claim for certain regions are objective facts or the consequence of the characteristics of our documentation. To put it another way: how far does the linguistic diversity that we can see in Italy, and the identification of multiple Sabellian variants, depend on the enormous profusion of Italian epigraphy (and the abundant ethnonymic information)? And how far does the apparent homogeneity of Gaulish mask dialectical variants that the documentation available does not

12 Among these, *Hesperia*, still incomplete, dedicated to the Palaeo-Hispanic languages (*Hesperia*, <<http://hesperia.ucm.es>>), and those devoted to inscriptions in Lepontic (*Lexicon Leponticum*, <<http://www.univie.ac.at/lexlep/wiki>>) and Raetic (*Thesaurus Inscriptionum Raeticarum*, <www.univie.ac.at/raetica/wiki/Main_Page>). A collective approach to the problems posed by epigraphic databases in De Santis and Rossi 2019.

13 <<http://aelaw.unizar.es/database/inscriptions>>, ongoing.

allow us to detect? It should be borne in mind that the Gauls and the Sabellian regions have both yielded around a thousand inscriptions, despite the former being much larger than the latter.

As already indicated, from the methodological perspective, there are two common features shared by Palaeo-European studies developed within the AELAW network: on one hand, the consideration of language, script, and epigraphic culture as a communication system that should be addressed in its entirety; and, on the other, the conviction that each of those linguistic and epigraphic sets should be considered in the general context of Palaeo-European and Classical written cultures, thus contributing to overcoming the traditional fragmentation of research which was discussed above.

The different tools that the COST programme put at the disposal of its members, in particular the Training Schools and the Short Term Scientific Missions, served both those purposes. The former enabled a comprehensive approach to the Palaeo-European linguistic and epigraphic sets from Hispania, Gaul, and the Balkans initially (Epigraphic online databases & languages and inscriptions outside Italy, Jaca 2015),¹⁴ and afterwards from Italy (Pre-Roman languages and inscriptions of Italy, Verona 2016).¹⁵ The latter strengthened the links between the different research groups via brief residencies primarily directed towards young researchers so they could train in areas of investigation that are different from their specialities.¹⁶

Finally, the integrated study of language, script, and epigraphy has found a concrete output in the AELAW Booklets series, which seeks to provide introductions to each of the Palaeo-European sets paying attention to each of these three dimensions — an objective that serves as the seed for the central section of this volume.¹⁷

14 <<http://aelaw.unizar.es/events/aelaw-first-training-school-jaca-september-2015>>.

15 <<http://aelaw.unizar.es/events/aelaw-second-training-school-verona-september-2016>>.

16 <<http://aelaw.unizar.es/events/>>, three calls.

17 <<http://aelaw.unizar.es/publications/>>, <<https://puz.unizar.es/277-aelaw-booklet>>.

To date, those related to Celtiberian, Iberian, Lusitanian, Raetic, Gaulish, Faliscan, Etruscan, and Cisapine Celtic have been published, and those dedicated to Vasconic-Aquitanian, Ogham, Messapic and Thracian are well advanced.

3. The book

This book builds on the conference held in Rome under the title *Lingue e scritture paleoeuropee: sfide e prospettive degli studi / Palae-European Languages and Epigraphic Cultures. Challenges and Research Approaches* (13-15 March 2019), the structure of which is largely retained.¹⁸ This is a multi-lingual work with contributions in English, German, Italian, and Spanish.

It is structured in three very different parts. The first one, after a historiographic introduction, addresses diachronically the development of Palae-European epigraphic cultures, with particular attention paid to interactions with the Greek and Roman ones. The second part presents the different sets of Palae-European languages, scripts, and epigraphic cultures. The third one analyses writing systems.

The first part begins with the chapter “Historiografía y estado de la cuestión” by M. J. Estarán and J. M. Vallejo, which reviews the research undertaken from the eighteenth century to the latest contributions by the AELAW network. Another four chapters follow, of which the first two are dedicated to the rise of the first scripts and epigraphic cultures in central Italy and Magna Graecia: E. Benelli, “Formazione delle scritture alfabetiche in Italia centrale. Riflessioni sul caso dell’Etrusco e alfabeti connessi” and G. Boffa, “La nascita e l’evoluzione della cultura epigrafica in Magna Grecia: documenti, temi, sfide e prospettive”. The following chapter addresses Palae-European epigraphic cultures in their dialogue with other Mediterranean ones, “External influences: ‘Hellenization’, ‘Romanization’, ‘Mediterranisation’ (6th - 3rd cent BCE)”, in which D. Maras reflects on epigraphic genres and acculturation, J. Velaza presents the oldest stratum of Palae-Hispanic epigraphies, and D. Nonnis explores the relationship between craft and writing in the Latin documentation. Finally, F. Beltrán addresses “El impacto de Roma sobre las culturas epigráficas paleoeuropeas”, which closes the first section of the book.

The second part compiles eighteen contributions that analyse each of the Palae-European linguistic and epigraphic sets in a uniform structure that includes: presentation of the language, distribution and chronology of the inscriptions, characteristics of the epigraphic culture including quantitative aspects, relationships with other written cultures, writing systems, personal

18 <<http://aelaw.unizar.es/events/lenguas-y-escrituras-paleoeuropeas-retos-y-perspectivas-de-estudio>>.

onomastic formula, methodological problems and research prospects, and a final bibliography. Within this part, the first section is dedicated to Italy: V. Belfiore, “Etrusco”, C. Salomon, “Raetic”; L. Rigobianco, “Falisco”; D. Stifter, “Cisalpine Celtic”; A. Marinetti, “Venetico”; P. Poccetti, “Lingue sabelliche”; S. Marchesini, “Messapico”; and J. Prag, “The languages of Sicily”. The second section concerns Hispania and Gaul: E. Luján, “El sudoeste de la península Ibérica”; J. Velaza and N. Moncunill, “Iberian”; F. Beltrán and C. Jordán, “Celtibérico”; D. Wodtko, “Lusitanisch”; J. Gorrochategui, “Vascónico-aquitano”; and A. Mullen and C. Ruiz Darasse, “Gaulish”. The third section is dedicated to sets from the rest of Europe: W. Sowa, “Thracian”; T. Looijenga, “Germanic / Runes”; D. Stifter, “Insular Celtic / Ogham”; and finally, A. Falileyev, who in “The silent Europe” considers the languages attested onomastically. The Camunic and Lemnian sets are missing, which for different reasons could not be included in this volume.¹⁹

Finally, the third part analyses writing systems. First are the epichoric scripts from Italy under the charge of D. Maras, “Scrittura epicoriche dell’Italia antica” and from Hispania, by J. Ferrer, “Las escrituras epicóricas de la Península Ibérica”, and, lastly, the different uses of the Greek and Latin alphabets: “Adaptaciones del alfabeto griego”, by I. Adiego and “Adaptations of Latin alphabet”, by I. Simón.

It remains only to thank everyone who has helped get this complex volume across the finishing line to publication a little more than a year after the conference on which it is based was held, as well as the members of AELAW who entrusted its publication to the journal *Palaeohispanica*, which thus celebrates its twentieth anniversary by demonstrating its commitment to Palaeo-European research.

Firstly, thanks to each and every author for meeting the deadlines and following the editorial standards with discipline and rigour. Secondly, to the reviewers, for sending their feedback punctually and always with positive input. Thirdly, to the editorial team of *Palaeohispanica*, which I am honoured to co-ordinate alongside C. Jordán, and which includes B. Díaz and M. J. Estarán, as well as J. Herrera who has helped with publication and G. de Tord who has written the congress report. Finally, I would like to thank all the institutions that have helped make the Rome conference and this book possible: to the Escuela Española de Historia y Arqueología en Roma, partic-

19 On Camunic, Tibiletti Bruno 1978 and 1992; on Lemnian, Agostiniani 2012.

ularly to J. R. Urquijo, its director, and J. Á. Zamora, on whose support we can always count, as well as the Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, in the person of its director, V. Nizzo, which hosted the conference sessions in 2019; the Institución Fernando el Católico of the Provincial Council of Zaragoza, in the persons of its director C. Forcadell, and its technical secretary, Á. Capalvo, who — as well as this book — has made twenty years of Palaeohispanica possible; and last but absolutely not least COST European Cooperation in Science and Technology (IS1407), in particular the two officers assigned to the AELAW initiative, R. Magli and S. Voinova, on whose support we have always been able to count, for helping us in this remarkable scientific and human adventure that has been and is the Ancient European Languages and Writings network.

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