

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

CUNICULUS 'RABBIT' — A CELTIC ETYMOLOGY

BALLESTER X., QUINN R.

Departamento de Filología Clásica. Universidad de Valencia. Blasco Ibáñez 32.
46010 - VALENCIA. Spain.

In describing the region of Hispania of the first century B.C.E, the Roman poet GAIUS CATULLUS spoke of “rabbit-filled Celtiberia” (37,18: *cuniculosae Celtiberiae*), a fact which indicates that rabbits were already quite famous in Hispania by that time, at least for their abundance and rate of reproduction, if not for their physical appearance, since they were generally taken to be another type of hare (PLINY *nat.* 8,217). In fact, during the reign of Augustus, these animals were so prolific that they reportedly destroyed an entire harvest on the Balearic Islands, thereby provoking a massive famine (PLINY *nat.* 8, 217). STRABO (3,5,2) corroborates these events and goes so far as to blame the disaster on a single pair of imported rabbits.

Nevertheless, even before the arrival of the Romans in Hispania, this modest little animal was already quite closely associated with the Iberian peninsula, earning itself the notable honor of appearing on Pre-Roman coinage. In ancient times, it was also thought that *cuniculus*, the Latin word for rabbit, came originally from a similar word used in Hispania. In this manner, Hispania was again associated with rabbits by means of the alleged Hispanic origin of the word ‘rabbit’ or κόνικλος, as it was known to the Western Iberians, according to ARISTOPHANES in his epitome (2,416) of AELIANUS’ *Histories of Animals* (13,15). If all of this were true, it could be argued that Roman legionnaires and other travellers of the time

would have spread the use of this word to other languages in Western Europe, such as High Old German (*kūniclīn*, cf. German *Kaninchen*) or Welsh (*conicl*) (ERNOUT-MEILLET 1979: 157).

The Iberian phonology of *cuniculus*

Although the association of the word *cuniculus* with Hispania is quite well documented, it is actually rather improbable that the word comes from an Iberian root. First of all, we do not find any similar phonological sequences in the Iberian language, and secondly, since Iberian probably did not make any morphological distinctions for grammatical gender, we would expect a neuter form, or at the very least, a word that is not so clearly masculine. Finally, we can be quite sure that it is not Iberian in origin if we suppose that the original phonological sequence was [kl], and not [kul].

As a matter of fact, Latin would permit a sequence such as [kl] as a popular or poetic counterpart for [kul] (*saeculum* — *saeculum*; *uinculum* — *uinclum*), in which the vowel functions as if it were a supporting element in this and other similar cases of occlusives before [l] (*poculum*, *stabulum*, *uocabulum*...). In contrast, Greek permits [–kl–] as well as [–kul–], and in fact, in Greek it is written as κόνικλος, which suggests that [–kl–] is the original sequence, which would then be adapted to [–kul–], in an elegant form of Latin, as an overcorrection. Yet it could also have happened that the Greeks took the word from Latin,

and more specifically from a popular form of Latin, rather than from the original Hispanic form. Furthermore, in Latin, the existence of the diminutive suffix *-cul-* (e.g., *homunculus*, based on *homo*, ‘man’; *muliercula*, based on *mulier*, ‘woman’) would have helped to spread the use of the more formal adaptation [kul], given that the most immediately visible characteristic of the rabbit would have been its smaller size, in comparison to the hare. In fact, the Greek name for rabbit is ἡμιλαγός, which literally means ‘half hare’. In any case, there are no parallel forms to be found in the abundant documentation for Iberian lexis, and what is more, the word simply does not sound Iberian.

Perhaps the simplest explanation for the historical association between the Iberians and the word *cuniculus* is that the Romans and Greeks tended to label anything Hispanic as being Iberian, effectively mistaking a part for the whole, in much the same way as the Spanish refer to all Germans as being *alemanes*, even though this word is based on the Latin name for one particular ancient German tribe, the *Alemanni*. The fact is that the word *Iberia*, or Ἰβηρία, and later the adjective *Ibericus*, or Ἰβηρικός, were often used rather indiscriminately in reference to the lands and people of the entire Iberian peninsula, encompassing what are now the territories of both Spain and Portugal (DOMÍNGUEZ 1983: 203–24; GÓMEZ 1999: 159–87). There are some instances of specific ethnological distinctions made by Greek or Roman authors between inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula such as Κελτιβήρων καὶ Ἰβήρων (APPIANUS *Ib.* 31), but this is not always the case, as other sources have testified (STRABO 3,4,19; 4,4,6; POLYBIUS 3,37,10s; PLINIUS 3,4,19, etc.). As a result, it would seem legitimate to assume that when ARISTOPHANES used the word Ἰβηρες in association with κόνικλος, he probably

meant to say that the word *cuniculus* was Hispanic, rather than strictly Iberian in origin. If this hypothesis is correct, the search for the origin of the word becomes much easier.

From the root and the suffix

The root word *cun-*, meaning ‘dog’ is well documented in Celtic and easily recognisable in the Gallic surname *Cunopennus* ‘dog-head / dog-headed’ or in similar surnames in other languages, such as Old Breton *Conkin*, Old Welsh *Concenn*, or Old Irish *Co(i)nchend* (McCONE 2001: 484). McCONE, whose surname interestingly enough also contains the same root and means ‘son of a dog’, states that this same root gave rise to the Celtiberian word UIROCu, which he then relates to *Gurki* in Breton, *Gurci* in Welsh, and *Ferchú* in Irish, all of which literally mean ‘wolf-man’. This proposal is very attractive, in part because of an abundance of totemistic tendencies of that era, especially in the names of persons and tribes in many Indo-European languages (ALINEI 1996: 637).

Returning to Iberia, we find that there are numerous vestiges of totemism in the Hispano-Celtic cultures, such as the use of a wolfskin clothing by heralds (APPIANUS *Ib.* 48). The totemist Minetarian Indians also dressed in wolfskins (FRAZER 1987: 45), as did certain Indian tribes in Texas (FRAZER 1987: 71), and certain Slavic tribes used wolf pelts to clothe newborn babies (FRAZER 1987: 52). Nevertheless, we must likewise note that in Celtiberian there also existed a very common, everyday adjectival suffix, consisting of a velar *-k-* sound, which resulted in endings such as *-ik*, *-ak*, and sometimes *-ok* (cf. APuLOS – APuLOCuM; ATu – AToCuM, etc.). As a result, UIROCu could be simply an adjectival derivative of the Celtiberian form *VIROS* ‘man’¹, rather than a composite form. In this case, the *-u* would be a

¹ And Indo-European, as can be seen in the Latin *uir* ‘man, male’, or the Lithuanian *vyras* ‘man, male’. There are similar analogies in the Latin andronym *Nero* or the Lithuanian *Nerijus*, based on ‘male’ or ‘man’, but also *VIRONIUS*, and the more frequent *VIRONUS*, or possibly even *VIRIUS* and *VIROTI*, all of which are well documented in the Iberian peninsula (*uide* WOODKO 2000: 452).

common nominative inflection for words ending in *-n* (UNTERMANN 1996: 165; WODTKO 1999: 739 and 2000: 451f).

There would appear to be a clearer connection between *cuniculus* and forms such as CoNICuM (a genitive form, if we take UIROCu as our model) and CuNICuM, and the second component of PuRiCoUNICuM. As UNTERMANN suggests, these could be orthographic variations of the same base word (1996: 143, 144). The shortness of the radical vowel seems clear, based on the shortness of the vowels in Latin and Greek (e.g., *cun-*, *kon-*) and the resulting words in Romance languages, such as *conejo* and *conill*, both of which can also appear as surnames in Spain². WODTKO, who has authored perhaps the most exhaustive study of Celtiberian lexis to date, concedes that there may be an etymological connection between CuNICuM and the Indo-European word for ‘dog’, noting the Celtic preference for this root in the formation of andronyms, or names for male persons. There are also other forms that could hypothetically be related, such as CoUNESICuM, and in the Latin alphabet, *COVNEANCVS* and *COVNEIDOQ* (UNTERMANN 1996: 134).

If this hypothesis is correct, then the *-ic* in *cuniculus* could be a variant of the *-k / -ik* adjectival suffix mentioned above, which was abundantly used in Celtiberian, and the resulting combination of *cunic-* would therefore be an adjectival form of ‘dog’ (e.g., ‘canine’ or ‘dog’ used as an adjective). In addition, *-ik* or *-ic* can also be interpreted as a diminutive form, a common pattern in many other Indo-European languages, giving us ‘little dog’ or ‘doggie’. Interestingly enough, GREENBERG (2000: 166) argues a very similar case for *kanak*, the Gilyak word for ‘rabbit’, which he believes to be a diminutive form of

kan, which is, interestingly enough, the Gilyak word for ‘dog’. ERNOUT and MEILLET (1979: 157) also argue that the Latin *cuniculus* can also be interpreted as a diminutive form. The naming of smaller animals with diminutive or affectionate forms is quite common, and similar cases for the word ‘rabbit’ can be found in Polish (*królik*, with an *-ik* diminutive suffix, compared to *zajac* for ‘hare’), or Lithuanian (*kiškis* as a kind of nickname for ‘hare’, compared to the more formal *zuikis*, while ‘rabbit’ would be *triušis*).

Moving on to the next part of our word *cuniculus*, we find that *-(u)l-* is also quite well-documented as a diminutive in Indo-European languages (Gothic *magula*, from ‘boy’; Greek ἀρκτυλος, from ‘bear’), especially in affective languages, such as Latin (*paruulus*, from *paruus* ‘small’) and Baltic languages (Lithuanian *alulis*, from *alus* ‘beer’; AMBRAZAS 1993: 47–67). In general, diminutives are one of the most basic and economic forms of derivation, since their use can nearly double the lexis of any language. In the case of *cuniculus*, if we maintain the second hypothesis of a diminutive element in *-ik* and then a meaning ‘doggie’ for *kunik-*, the inclusion of a second diminutive element with *-ul-* would intensify its meaning, giving us something like ‘little doggie’. This type of intensification is actually quite common, especially with diminutives related to animals or family members (e.g. Spanish *ovejita*, since *oveja* comes from the old Latin diminutive *ouicula*, from *ouis*, cf. also *mamita*, from *mami* ‘mommy’).

Therefore, if our interpretation is correct, the form *cunicultura* would be correct from the etymological point of view. But even if that etymology were incorrect, the word *cunicultura* should be accepted as a normal haplography, in order to avoid an offensive and iterative sequence in *cuniculicultura*.

² The word *conejo* is also used in Spanish to refer to the female *genitalia*, vulgarly referred to as *coño* (lat. *cunnus*). The *-ejo* could be interpreted as a diminutive suffix commonly used in many parts of Spain, even today. This formula fits into the common European pattern which assigns animal names to the *genitalia*, both female (e.g., French *chat* ‘cat’; English *beaver* or *pussy*) and male (e.g., Spanish *polla* ‘hen’; Slavonic *konj* ‘horse’; English *cock*; Valencian *pardal* ‘bird’). Strangely enough, in Spanish, the word for the male organ is grammatically feminine, while that for the female *genitalia* is masculine. This may be due to another common metaphor which compares the testicles to eggs, which could lead to a comparison of the male organ to a hen sitting on its eggs.

And why call them dogs?

Aside from the fact that rabbits could be mistaken for small dogs at first glance, there are two other arguments for accepting an etymological connection between ‘dog’ and *cuniculus*. First of all, we could argue that similarity of appearance is not always a prerequisite in the naming of animals, since there are examples in numerous languages of similar names being used for two very different animals. To give just a few common examples, in Spanish, *puerco espín* ‘porcupine’ means ‘thorny pig’, while *hippopotamus* is a name of Greek origin, which etymologically means ‘river horse’, and the Yakutsk word for ‘reindeer’ means ‘foreign cow’ (FORDE 1995: 391). But perhaps one of the most *creative* comparisons would be the Lithuanian name for ‘dove’, *karvelis*, literally meaning ‘little cow’. Secondly, we as human beings tend to proceed logically, psychologically, and metaphorically from what is familiar to us—that is, from what we already know and understand—towards what is new and strange. A good example of how this tendency operates in language is the description of abstract entities or artificial objects with words related to the parts of the human body. For example, in Hausa *cikī* ‘stomach’ is employed with the sense of ‘inside’, while *kāi* ‘head’ is used to form the reflexive pronoun (KRAFT–KIRK 1990: 338, 225). The word ‘head’ is used to express ‘on, above’ in Abkhaz, Ewe, Finnish, Hausa and many other languages (MORENO 1977: 156). Among the Western Apaches, a car is described as having eyes (headlights), a nose (hood), a forehead (windshield), arms (front wheels), feet (back wheels), guts (motor), etc. (PALMER 2000: 263).

In much the same way then, prehistoric man might well have seen a rabbit for the first time and described the new animal using some reference or comparison to a ‘dog’. After all, the Greeks called the baboon *κυνοκέφαλος* ‘dog head’, and something similar seems to have happened among the Lakota Indians of North American when they first saw a horse and called it *sunka wunka* ‘strange dog’, while the Cree called it

mistatim ‘big dog’. If there is a tendency to label the unknown using the name of something familiar, then what could be a better reference point for new animals than the dog, man’s eternal best friend and favourite hunting companion in Western Europe, since as far back as the Upper Paleolithic, although more recent studies suggest an even older working relationship between man and dog, going back as much as 135,000 years. As a result, it should not come as any surprise to us that a Celtic hunter, upon seeing a rabbit for the first time, might just scratch his head and call it a “little doggie”.

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