Words as Archaeological Finds.
A Further Example of the Ethno-Philological Contribute to the Study of European Megalithism

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In studies published in the last five years together with the linguist Mario Alinei, we have approached the problem of the origins of European Megalithism in an ethno-philological perspective, bearing in mind in particular the theoretical frame offered by the Paleolithic Continuity Paradigm (PCP: see www.continuitas.org).

Cumulative evidence indicates that Megalithism has to be regarded as an originally Atlantic phenomenon, born among Mesolithic fishermen societies which is possible to consider as speakers of a Celtic language (Alinei - Benozzo 2006; 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2009a; 2009b); on this topic, I gave a paper at the last WAC congress in Dublin, analyzing in particular folklore and dialect names related to Megalithism (Benozzo 2008). This research is still in progress, and is now approaching the megalithic traditions of central France, Corsica, and Sardinia.

To give an example of the archaeo-ethno-dialectological approach used in these field investigations, I would like to discuss here two more linguistic data, which I have recently collected in Central Alentejo (Portugal) and in Morbihan (Brittany).

1) Near the Portuguese megalithic site of Almendres the name used to indicate a megalithic stone is ventrecurgo: the first part of this word (ventre) means ‘belly’; the second part, unknown in Portuguese, can be linked to the Celtic words for ‘boat’, such as Irish currach and Welsh corwg / cwrgw (at the origins of English coracle). These terms indicate a boat made of skin covered with canvas, already used in the Upper Palaeolithic (it is the kind of boat probably used by the first Neolithic farmers, as pointed out by McGrail 2001: 46), whose name goes back to the Indo-European root *(S)KER- ‘to cut’ (to be compared with Sanskrit carman- ‘skin’, Greek kórykos ‘sack made of skin’, Latin corium, caro carnis, curitus ‘leather, meat, short’: Alinei 2000: 543). If my interpretation of curgo is correct, the meaning of ventrecurgo is then ‘boat’s belly’.

2) This hypothesis is confirmed by the existence of the Breton word bronbag, which is used near Kercado, in Morbihan, to indicate, again, a megalithic stone. The meaning of this word is clear: the first part (bron) is the Breton word for ‘breast’, and the second (bag) the Breton word for ‘boat’ (Delaporte 1992: 6, 10): the sense of bronbag is then ‘boat’s breast’, very similar to the one that we find in Portuguese. The fact that the same name occurs in these two apparently distant areas is not surprising: on the contrary, it is another proof of the existence of an Atlantic compact area from early prehistory (Cunliffe 2001), recently confirmed also from a genetic point of view (Sykes 2006).

After reconstructing the meaning of ‘boat’s breast (or belly)’, we have to find out the original motivation of it (technically speaking, its iconym: Alinei 2006a). I think that a plausible answer is offered by the technique used to carry these big stones (or at least a few of them) from one place to another. I am referring to a hypothesis formulated in order to explain the way of transporting the big stones at the entrance of the passage tomb at Newgrange, which have been identified with rocks belonging to the site of Clogher Head, a place in the eastern coast of Ireland, 20 miles far from Newgrange (Frank Mitchell 1992; Phillips et al. 2002; Mighan et al. 2003). I am also referring to the explanation given for the way of carrying stones to the megalithic site of Gavrinis, in Brittany (5th millennium), not far from the place where the word bronbag has been collected, which have been
identified with rocks coming from Er Vinglé, a few miles in the western part of Morbihan (Le Roux 1985). Geraldine and Matthew Stout summarize the possible way of bringing these stones from one place to the other as follows: “a great skin-covered boat may have had the buoyancy to take a stone quarried beside the sea, to have it lashed to the bottom of the boat, and both boat and stone then lifted with the tide” (Stout-Stout 2008: 11). The following figures show the three main passages

This hypothesis has been advanced comparing a similar technique used in recent times by quarrymen of Herrylock, South-West of Ireland: “it was in this manner in historical times that, in the south east of Ireland on the Hook Peninsula in County Wexford, the quarrymen of Herrylock carved out Old Red Sandstone millstones and transported them from cliff edge to harbour. A typical kerbstone weighing three tonnes on dry land would weigh only half that under water – still heavy but much easier to transport” (Stout-Stout 2008: 11).

It seems reasonable to recognize in the Portuguese word ventrecurgo and in the Breton word bronbag a motivation related to this technique: the etymology of these words indicates that the stone was seen and described as a sort of ‘breast’ – or ‘belly’ – of the boat, and this means that the two words still bring memories, embed in their etymology, of the prehistoric transportation of stones from the sea (this works well in the PCP approach, where European dialects are interpreted in their continuity with languages that were spoken in the Upper Palaeolithic: see Alinei 2001, and his Introduction in www.continuitas.org)

One should emphasize that in a renewed ethnolinguistic and ethno-philological perspective (Alinei 2006a; 2009; Benozzo 2007; 2009; 2010), where linguistic data can be actually studied as archaeological finds (Alinei 2009 theorizes in this sense an “Etymological Archaeology”), these two words represent the only evidence to corroborate an explanation that simply was, before them, a brilliant archaeological conjecture.

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