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

Francesco Benozzo

University of Bologna, Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere,
Via Cartoleria 5, I-40124 Bologna, Italy
E-mail: francesco.benozzo@unibo.it

_____

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, stomach', 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*, *curtus* '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 surprise: 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
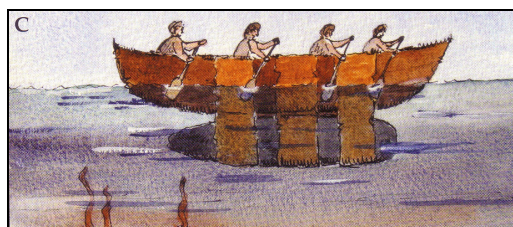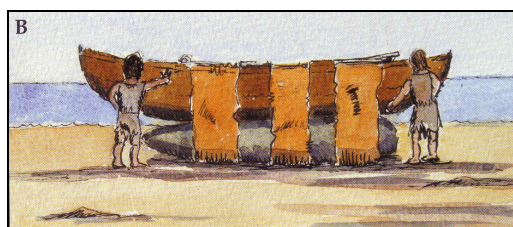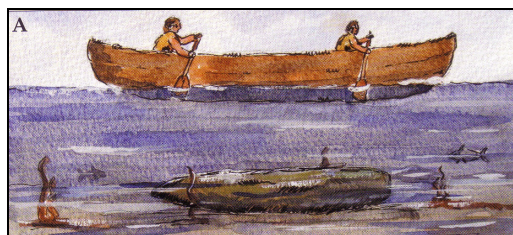
This hypothesis has been advanced comparing a similar technique used in recent times by quarrymen of Herrylock, South-West of Ireland: "it was in this manner in historical times that, in the south east of Ireland on the Hook Peninsula in County Wexford, the quarrymen of Herrylock carved out Old Red Sandstone 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 ethno-linguistic 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.*

References cited

Alinei, M.
2000. *Origini delle lingue d'Europa*. vol. II. Il Mulino, Bologna.

2001. European Dialects: A Window on the Prehistory of Europe. *Lingua e Stile* 36:219-240.

2006a. Darwinism, Traditional Linguistics and the New Paleolithic Continuity Theory on Language Evolution. In *Epistemology, Language & Culture. A Non-Adaptationist, Systems Theoretical Approach*. Proceedings of the Conference, (Brussels, May 26-28, 2004), ed. by N. Gontier - J.-P. van Bendgem - D. Aerts, pp. 121.147. Springer, Berlin-Heidelberg-New York.

2006b. The Role of Motivation (Iconymy) in Naming: Six Responses to a List of Questions. In *Nature Knowledge, Ethnoscience, Cognition, and Utility*, ed. by G. Sanga - G. Ortalli, pp. 108-118. Berghahn Books, New York-Oxford.

2009. *L'origine delle parole*. Aracne, Roma.

Alinei, M. - Benozzo, F.
2006. L'area galiziana nella preistoria celtica d'Europa. *Studi Celtici* 4:13-62.

2007. A área galega na preistoria lingüística e cultural de Europa. *A Trabe de Ouro* 18:333-359.

2008a. *Alguns aspectos da Teoria da Continuidade Paleolítica aplicada à região gallega*. Apenas Livros, Lisboa.

2008b. Origini del megalitismo europeo: un approccio archeo-etno-dialettologico. *Quaderni di Semantica* 29:295-332.

2009a. *Origens célticas e atlânticas do megalitismo europeu*. Apenas Livros, Lisboa.

2009b. Megalithism as a Manifestation of an Atlantic Celtic Primacy in Meso-Neolithic Europe. *Studi Celtici* 7:13-72.

Benozzo, F.
2007. Etnofilologia *Ecdotica* 4:208-230.

2008. Names and Legends of European Megaliths: Evidence of an Ethnolinguistic Continuity from Prehistory. Paper read at the "6th World Archaeological Congress" (Dublin, 29th June - 4th July 2008).

2009. Sounds of the Silent Cave. An Ethnophilolgical Perspective on Prehistoric *incubatio*. Paper read at the «15th European Association of Archaeologists Annual Meeting», *Archaeologies and "Soundscape". From the Prehistoric Sonorous Experiences to the Music of the Ancient World* (Garda, 15-20 September 2009).

2010. *Etnofilologia. Un'introduzione*. Liguori, Napoli.

Cunliffe, B.
2001. *Facing the Ocean. The Atlantic and its Peoples (8000 BC-AD 1500)*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Delaporte, R.
1992. *Geriadurig Brezhoneg-Saozneg*. Cork University Press, Cork.

Frank Mitchell, G.
1992. Notes on Some Non-local Cobbles at the Entrance to the Passage-Graves at Newgrange and Knowth, County Meath. *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 122:128-145.

Henderson, J.C.
2007. *The Atlantic Iron Age. Settlement and Identity in the First Millenium BC*. Routledge, London - New York.

Le Roux, Ch.-T.
1985. New Excavations at Gavrinis. *Antiquity* 59:183-187.

McGrail, S.
2001. *Boats of the World from the Stone Age to Medieval Times*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Mighan, I.G. - Simpson, D.D.A. - Hartwell, B.N.- Fallick, A.E. - Kennan, P.S.
2003. Sourcing the Quartz at Newgrange, Brú na Bóinne, Ireland. In *Stones and Bones: Formal Disposal of the Dead in Atlantic Europe During the Mesolithic-Neolithic Interface 6000-3000 BC. Archaeological Conference in Honour of the Late Michael J. O'Kelly*, ed. by G. Burenhult and S. Westergaard, pp. 247-251.Archaeopress, Oxford [BAR Internation al Series, 1201].

Phillips, A. - Corcoran, M. - Eogan, G.
2002. *Identification of the Source Area for Megaliths Used in the Construction of the Neolithic Passage Graves of the Boyne Valley, County Meath*. The Heritage Council of Ireland, Dublin.

Stout, G. - Stout, M.
2008. *Newgrange*. Cork University Press, Cork.

Sykes, B.
2006. Saxons, Vikings, and Celts. The Genetic Roots of Britain and Ireland. W.W. Norton & Co., New York-London.