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The inscription from Centuripe: language, meaning and historical background[1]

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Introduction

It is an established fact that at least four different languages were spoken in Sicily in archaic and classical times. Of these four languages Greek dominates the epigraphical scene, while Punic is poorly represented. In recent years considerable efforts have been made to elucidate the identity and linguistic affiliations of some of the indigenous languages that were spoken before the arrival of the Greeks and Carthaginians. The evidence for one of these languages comes mainly from the western Sicilian towns of Segesta and Eryx. Unfortunately, this language, which is commonly known as 'Elymian', is very poorly documented. As a direct result of this modern scholarship remains divided over the question as to whether or not it is to be classified as Indo-European.[2]

In the eastern part of the island there is epigraphic evidence for the use of at least one other pre-Greek language, which is usually referred to as 'Siculian'. Before the mid-1960s most attempts to shed light on the identity of this second indigenous language concentrated on a graffito that was discovered in the locality of Centorbi (now called Centuripe) in 1824 and published in 1860.

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[1] In this article the abbreviation *LEIA* refers to Vendryes et al. (1959-). Pedersen, Lambert and Delamarre are used as shorthand for Pedersen (1909-1913), Lambert (1995) and Delamarre (2003) respectively.

[2] Recent discussions of the Elymian language include Lejeune (1969) and Sironen (1995).

The object that bears this inscription is a small wine-jug (*askos*)[3] that is thought to have been made locally during the first half of the fifth century BC.[4] Although its spout has broken off, the main body of the *askos* survives intact. The graffito starts to the left of the original junction between the two parts of the jug, then bends downwards and returns (one line lower) to the point of inception.[5] It ends near the point where the missing spout was attached to the main body. From this some have optimistically concluded that the text is complete. We cannot, however, rule out the possibility that the text ends with a small lacuna in which one or two characters may have disappeared.[6]

The sound values of most of the 99 characters that make up the inscription are unproblematic. There are, however, two significant exceptions. The most important of these is the value of the *heth*-shaped character (⊟) which is used in four or five places. Although this character is usually transcribed as /h/, this interpretation has been disputed (cf. below). The only other difficulty concerns the sound value of the ninetieth character (□), which has been interpreted variously as a rectangular *o-mikron*, as a slightly defective *heth* or as a clumsily incised *wau*.[7]

When these points are taken into account, the graffito from Centuripe can be transliterated as follows:

nunustentimHmarustainamHemitomestiduromnaneposduromHe mitomestiuelHomnedemponitantomeredes[-]inobatome[1-2?][8]

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[3] Many older publications use the term *guttus*. For the designation *askos*, cf. Agostiniani (1992: 141).

[4] On the date see Whatmough (1933: 447): 'middle of the fifth century B.C.'; Schmoll (1958: 25): '5. Jahrh.'; Pulgram (1978: 72): 'fifth century BC'; Morandi (1982: 168): 'nella prima metà del V secolo a.C.'; Agostiniani (1992: 147): 'seconde moitié du VIème siècle av. J.C.'

[5] For good drawings see Whatmough (1933: 446), Morandi (1982: 169) and Agostiniani (1992: 147).

[6] Cf. Schmoll (1958: 26): 'Der 99. Buchstabe steht auf dem abgebrochenen Ausguss, es können höchstens zwei normalgroße Zeichen fehlen.'

[7] Schmoll (1958: 26).

[8] On the sound value of the character transcribed here as /H/ see below.

At first sight, this short text displays some promising features. Thus the contrasting sequences *Hemitomestidurom* and *duromHemitomesti* have led many scholars to identify *durom* as a separate word, and some to draw the same conclusion with regard to *Hemitomesti*. Despite this clue it has proved extremely difficult to extract any coherent meaning from the text as a whole. Precisely for this reason Kretschmer used the graffito as evidence for the non-Indo-European nature of the Siculian language, a view that was endorsed by Ettore Pais in an article that appeared in 1910.[9] Interestingly, many twentieth-century scholars have refused to accept this conclusion. As early as 1899 Thurneysen put forward the idea that the language of the Centuripe inscription was to be classified as a member of the Italic language group. In an attempt to back up this theory he interpreted *Nunus* as a proper name, the sequence *maru* as the Siculian equivalent of Etruscan *maro*, *durum* as a noun meaning 'gift', the sequence *emponitantom* as an imperative plural meaning 'they must fill', and *eredes* as the equivalent of Latin *heredes*. According to this interpretation, the text means something like: "Nunus Tenti(us), the son of Mh. offered this vessel as a [...] gift to Nana; the heirs are forbidden to fill this [...] gift for the purpose of a wine-party."[10]

Since this reading was based on an amalgam of Latin, Oscan, Etruscan and Greek parallels, it is perhaps not surprising that many of Thurneysen's colleagues were unconvinced. It is therefore all the more curious to find that almost all subsequent attempts to make sense of the graffito were based on Thurneysen's initial assumption that its language must have been closely related to Latin, Oscan and Umbrian. By the early 1980s the number of interpretations based on this premise had risen to more than fifteen.[11] The common weakness of these

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[9] Kretschmer (1896: 43 n. 1), Pais (1910: 315-316).
[10] Thurneysen (1899: 212-221).
[11] The most important contributions are surveyed by Schmoll (1958: 26-29). Cf. also Durante (1961), Ferri (1965), Prosdocimi and Agostiniani (1976-77: 247-248), Zamboni (1978: 984-986), Morandi (1982: 168-170), Lejeune (1990) and De Simone (1999: 503).

readings is that, similar to Thurneysen's interpretation, they are all based on an eclectic use of alleged parallels taken from three or more different IE languages. There can be no doubt that this method is methodologically dubious.

The startling lack of progress that was achieved after more than a century of research helps to explain why scholarly interest in the inscription from Centuripe began to lapse from the mid-1960s onwards. An important contributing factor in this process has been the discovery of the so-called 'Porta Urbica' inscription at the locality of Il Mendolito. Unlike the graffito from Centuripe, this new text displays some features (such as a perfect tense in -ed) that look decidedly Italic. Since some further Italic features have also been detected in some other East-Sicilian texts, there are now strong grounds for thinking that at least one of the pre-Greek languages of north-eastern Sicily was related to the Italic languages, and especially to Oscan and Umbrian.[12] As a result of this development, the inscription from Centuripe has been relegated to the periphery of scholarly research into Sicily's linguistic history. In a recent article in which he defended an Italic reading of many Sicilian texts Agostiniani concludes: "Face à cette série de concordances [...] le rapprochement avec ce qui est traditionnellement considéré comme le document le plus important du sicule, l'inscription sur l'askos de Centuripe [...] se révèle plutôt décevant. Le texte ne montre pas de faits dont le rapport soit particulièrement evident avec les traits italiques isolés à Mendolito'.[13] In other words, instead of being regarded as the key text of Siculian linguistics, the inscription from Centuripe is increasingly seen as an anomalous and isolated document.

The foregoing synopsis of twentieth-century research suggests that no coherent and convincing interpretation of the

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[12] See e.g. Parlangèli (1964-65), Durante (1964-65) and Agostiniani (1992). Although De Simone (1999: 502-504) underlines the uncertainties surrounding this theory, he is prepared to accept an Italic reading of two texts from Mendolito.

[13] Agostiniani (1992: 141).

graffito can be achieved as long as no further inscriptions written in the same language are discovered. Despite this, my own inquiries lead me to believe that the language of the inscription can be identified with complete certainty. As we have seen, some scholars have argued that the language of the graffito is non-Indo-European, while the majority view is that it is written in a poorly documented Italic dialect. Against both these theories I will argue that the text is written in a Celtic language and that its presence in Centuripe is to be connected with the use of Celtic mercenaries in the numerous wars that were fought between Greeks and Carthaginians from the early fifth century BC onwards.

2. A Celtic reading of the Centuripe inscription

One of the reasons why so little progress has been made in deciphering the graffito from Centuripe is surely the absence of any discernible interpuncts. This means that the text can only be divided into words and word groups with the help of linguistic criteria. In my view, the following nominal and adjectival endings are found in the inscription: -us (2x), -am (1x), -ŏm or -ōm (5x), -os (1x), -em (1x) and -es (1x). All these hypothetical case endings can convincingly be explained in terms of IE predecessors, with which most of them are indeed identical.

It is far more difficult to discern word beginnings. As we have seen, *durom* (2x) must be a separate word. For the rest, I have come to the conclusion that we should read *Hemito mest i* (three words) rather than *hemitomesti* and *nedem po nitantom* rather than *ned emponitantom* (*pace* Kretschmer and many later interpreters). My linguistic inquiries have also led me to interpret the final /e/ of the inscription as the beginning of a short verbal form of which one or two characters have disappeared in the lacuna at the end of the line (cf. above).

A final problem concerns the sound value of the *heth*-shaped character of which we have four certain examples in our

graffito. As we have seen, this character is usually transcribed as /h/. In what follows I will argue in favour of the hypothesis that it actually represents semi-consonantal /y/, a solution already proposed by von Blumenthal.[14]

If these assumptions are correct, the text should be transcribed as follows:

nunus tentimHmarus tainam yemito mest i durom na nepos
durom yemito mest i uelyom nedem po nitantom eredes
[-]inobatom e[+ 1 or 2 characters?]

It is my contention that this formal interpretation of the text has the effect of making it recognizably Celtic. The following commentary is intended to demonstrate the viability of this hypothesis.

1. *nunus*: the negative prefix *ne-* (Gaulish and OIr. *ni-*; see Lambert 67) followed by the Centuripan counterpart of OIr. *oen* (also *oin*), 'one'. Cf. Latin *nullus*.

2. *tentimHmarus*: nom. sg. masc. of an adjective meaning 'hot-tempered'. For the element *tenti-* cf. OIr. *té* (< *te(p)ent-*), 'hot' (Delamarre 294); for the second part cf. the OIr. adjective *menmar*, used as a variant of *menmnach*, 'spirited, -minded' (both derived from *menma*, 'mind'). Since the only feature that distinguishes *heth* from *epsilon* is the left vertical bar, *-mHmarus* can be explained as an error for *-memarus*. This solution seems to pose fewer problems than von Blumenthal's suggestion that the *heth*-shaped character had two closely related sound values, namely semi-consonantal /y/ and long /ī/.[15]

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[14] Von Blumenthal (1932: 232): "Ich nehme also auch in unserer Inschrift das *h*-Zeichen für einen irgendwie gearteten *i*-Laut". Von Blumenthal's solution was criticized by Schmoll (1958: 29) but endorsed by Pisani (1953: 280) and Zamboni (1978: 984). In my view, it is supported by the fact that a character that is conventionally transliterated as /h/ is thought to represent /y/ in the Messapic alphabet. See e.g. Pulgram (1978: 65).
[15] Von Blumenthal (1932: 232).

3. *tainam*: accusative depending on *yemito*. Cf. OIr. *tain* (originally an ā-stem noun?), 'driving off, cattle raid, herd, flock'. If my interpretation is correct, the form *tainam* must go back to *t-ag-nām*.

4. *yemito*: if my interpretation of *uelHom* is correct (cf. below), we must read *yemi* rather than *hemi*. This reading makes it possible to interpret *yemito* as the third person imperative of a verb meaning 'to hold, to grasp'. See IEW 505, s.v. *iem-*, 'to hold, to hold together'.[16] This root is thought to lie behind OCS *jemati*, 'takes', and Latv. *jemt*, id.
Note that the ending -to is the IE medial ending of the third person singular rather than the old IE imperative ending -tō. See Pedersen II, 348-349.

6. *mest*: instr. sg. of an i-stem noun meaning 'evil' or 'crime'. Cf. OIr. *meis* (also *meiss*), 'evil, damage, ruin', which is thought to go back to *med-ti-*. The root *med-* is also found in OIr. *messa*, 'worse', and perhaps also in *im-rui-md-ethar*, '(he) sins', *imme-ru-mediar*, 'he sinned'.[17] If my interpretation is correct, *mest* goes back to *mesti*.

7. *i*: almost certainly a preposition followed by the accusative. Cf. either Greek *epi* (Pedersen I, 93 and Lambert 104) or OIr. *i*, 'in, into' (Gaulish *in* < *eni*). Since there is nothing to suggest that final -n(i) disappeared in the Celtic dialect of Centuripe, the former possibility is more attractive.

8. *durum*: acc. sg. of a noun meaning 'serf'. Cf. OIr *doir*, 'unfree, lowborn, of servile condition' (adj.) and 'serf' (noun).

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[16] Cf. also Mann (1984-1987: 443) for the suggestion that IE *iem-* is a variant of the well-known root *em-* (Latin *emere* etc.)
[17] For a full discussion of this root see Stokes (1904: 259). Cf. also *LEIA*, s.v. *messa*. Possible parallels in other IE language include Serbian *omediti se*, 'to spoil', and Skt. *pra-madati*. *Pace* Pedersen (1909-1913), II, 121, OIr. *messa*, 'worse', is unlikely to be cognate with Latin *medius*, 'in the middle'.

9. *na*: cf. OIr. *na*, 'nor' (Pedersen II, 252).

10. *nepos*: accusative plural of a (pro)noun meaning 'a person'. Cf. OIr *nech* and Gaulish *nepo-* (Lambert 170 and Delamarre 235), 'someone, a person', both derived from the root nek^wo-.

11. *durum*: genitive plural depending on *nepos*.

12. *yemito mest i*: cf. supra.

13. *uelyom*: cf. Gaulish *uelio-* (Delamarre 311), 'modest, honest', and OIr. *fial*, 'modest, well-bred, honourable, generous', thought to be cognate with Lat. *uilis*, 'cheap, vulgar, ordinary'.

14. *nedem*: acc. sg. depending on the preposition *i*. Cf. MIr. *nia*, 'warrior', a d-stem noun which goes back either to *nēts* (earlier *neits*) or to *nēds* (*neids*). Cf Delamarre 316, on the Gaulish personal name *Vernetos*. For the medial /d/ cf. *eredes*.

15. *po*: nom. sg. masc. of the relative pronoun. Cf. Gaulish *ponc* (< k^wom-k^we), 'when', discussed by Delamarre 252.

16. *nitantom*: genitive plural of an active participle meaning 'fighting, fighter'. Cf. OIr. *nithaid*, 'defeats, subdues', and *nith*, 'fighting, battle'.

17. *eredes*: nominative singular of a noun meaning 'noble, chief'. Cf. perhaps the MIr. *airechtae* (a io-stem adjective), 'noble', which is thought to be connected with OIr. *airecht*, 'assembly, court, leading nobles', and to be cognate with Old Slavic *rešti* (< *rek-*), 'to say' (see *LEIA* s.v. *airecht*). Admittedly, this hypothesis does not explain the initial /e/.

18. *[-]inobatom*: gen. plur. of a tribal name. For the element *-batom* cf. perhaps Gaulish *andabata*, which is thought to mean 'gladiator' (lit. 'blind fighter'; see Delamarre 46). Alternatively

we may be dealing with a tribal name ending in -ates. Cf. Lambert 35 and 58 on the tribal name Atrebates.

19. *e*[--]: cf. perhaps Gaulish *esi*, which seems to correspond to IE *esti*, '(he) is' (Delamarre 167).

If the foregoing linguistic analysis is correct, the graffito from Centuripe is to be translated as follows:

"Let no hot-tempered person seize a herd through a crime against a serf, nor let him seize persons of the serfs through a crime against a well-bred warrior who is a chief of the fighting men of the [-]inobates."

In my view the strength of this interpretation rests in three interdependent features: it is based on parallels drawn from a single group of IE languages, it is morphologically satisfactory, and it provides us with a coherent interpretation of the text as a whole.

Celts in fifth-century BC Sicily?

The main question raised by my reading of the graffito from Centuripe is whether the presence of Celtic-speaking people in fifth-century Sicily can be explained. In my view, Herodotus and Diodorus provide the answer. In his description of the run-up to the battle that was fought between the Sicilian Greeks and the Carthaginians in 480 BC, Herodotus notes that the Carthaginian commander Hamilcar recruited Iberians, Ligurians and Elisykoi (a Ligurian tribe in Southern Gaul) as mercenaries (Hdt. 7.165). Similarly, Diodorus reports that the Carthaginians used mercenaries from Spain, Liguria (*Ligustikè*), Gaul (*Galatia*) and Italy (Diod. 11.1.5). It has been suggested that Diodorus uses the term *Ligustikè* to denote both Liguria proper and the western part of Cisalpine Gaul.[18]

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[18] Gabba (1994: 232).

For the early fourth century BC it is possible to point to Justin's statement (20.5.1-6) that some Gauls enlisted in the service of Dionysius I of Syracuse, and helped him in his wars against the Italiot Greeks. It has also been suggested that the Gauls who sacked Rome in 390 or 386 BC were a band of mercenaries who had intervened in a political struggle in the Etruscan town of Clusium at the bidding of one of the warring factions.[19] Not much later we hear about Celts (*Keltoi*), Iberians and Ligurians being employed as mercenaries by the Carthaginians in their struggle against Timoleon (Diod. 16.73.3).[20]

Interestingly, there is one piece of evidence which suggests that some foreign mercenaries were stationed at Centuripae. The object I have in mind is the well-known soldier's belt from the Sicilian town of Palike, which bears the following inscription: *Phaikōn apo Kentoripinōn anethēke pasi theois*, 'Phaikon dedicated this to all the gods after taking it from the people of Centuripae'.[21] On the basis of typological and palaeographical criteria both the artefact itself and its inscription can be dated to the mid-fourth century BC. For our purposes, their main interest lies in the fact that the belt appears to have been made in Samnium. From this the Italian archaeologist Colonna has concluded that it must have belonged to an Oscan-speaking mercenary soldier who was stationed at Centuripae.[22] Since the mercenary forces used by both sides in the Graeco-Carthaginian wars of the fifth and fourth centuries BC are known to have been ethnically mixed, this ingenious inference indirectly

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[19] Cornell (1995: 315-316).

[20] The presence of many imported luxury artefacts in many North-Italian graves of the fifth and fourth centuries BC has been explained as reflecting an increase in wealth made possible by ample opportunities for mercenary service among the Celtic-speaking population of Cisalpine Gaul (e.g. Vitali 1992: 380-390). Although the archaeological evidence is open to other interpretations (Wilson 2001: 212), the widespread use of Celtic-speaking mercenaries during the period in question is not in doubt.

[21] *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 44 (1994) no. 776, to be consulted with the remarks of J. and L. Robert in *Bulletin Épigraphique* (1964) no. 620.

[22] Colonna (1980-81: 179), followed by Tagliamonte (1994: 148-149) and Frasca (1995: 252).

supports the idea that the wine-jug of Centuripe belonged to a Celtic-speaking mercenary soldier.

I would like to round off my argument by drawing attention to an important advantage of my theory that there was a small group of Celtic speakers in early fifth-century Sicily. As we have seen, the discovery of new epigraphic material during the second half of the twentieth century has made it increasingly likely that the 'Siculian' language of eastern Sicily is to be regarded as an Italic dialect. Since the graffito from Centuripe does not lend itself to an Italic interpretation, it is increasingly seen as anomalous. If my re-interpretation is correct, the graffito *is* anomalous in the sense that it reflects the linguistic background of a small body of recent immigrants. This means that the identification of the language of the text from Centuripe as a form of Celtic has no bearing on the question of which language was spoken in eastern Sicily before the arrival of the Greeks.

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