HOW TO DECIPHER PETROGLYPHS: EXAMPLES FROM ITALY, FRANCE, PORTUGAL, SCOTLAND AND SOUTH AFRICA

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SUMMARY
Using examples from five countries, this paper describes how to read petroglyphs written as rebuses, first by decomposing into Old European syllabary, then by deciphering into Finnish, lastly by translating into English. The first step separates a rebus into basic syllables by referring to a chart of syllable shapes. To easily read these syllables requires a Finnish dictionary spelled like Old European. Scribes employed a number of ways to simplify spelling, such that they could write 1500 words with one syllable, or 8000 words with two syllables. The oldest example comes from Bilzingsleben in Germany. The next four are Aurignacian in France, Camonican in Italy, Tartessian in Portugal and Pictish in Scotland.

RIASSUNTO
L’articolo prende in esame cinque gruppi di incisioni di diversa provenienza geografica - Francia, Valcamonica (Italia), Portogallo e Scozia - offrendo spunti di decrittazione delle figure rupestri.

OLD EUROPEAN SYLLABARY
Many petroglyphs are a form of writing called a rebus, made from letters arranged to look like a recognizable object. For example, if an image looks somewhat like a man, but not really a man, then most likely it is a rebus. With practice, anyone can employ a chart of letter shapes to decompose a rebus, and then read the results with a custom Finnish dictionary. This paper shows how to do it.

The greatest concentration of rebus petroglyphs occurs at Val Camonica in Italy, where half the images are rebuses. I hope some of you will take the opportunity to find an intriguing image and try to decipher it.

The script at Val Camonica is a syllabary called Old European, first identified by Marija Gimbutas in Language of the Goddess (1989). It occurs throughout the world except Australia and the South Pole. The script barely ever changes, so the syllabary from Val Camonica can be applied to many other locations.

Old European is a consonant-vowel syllabary with eight vowels and eleven consonants, shown in Figures 1 and 2. The first figure shows the syllabary before the introduction of curved lines, the second that of Val Camonica with curved lines. The language is Finnish, which exhibits vowel harmony for A-Ä and O-Ö. For unknown reasons, the written language has remained relatively static for hundreds of thousands of years, just adding new words.

Scribes employed several measures to simplify writing. First they compressed all double letters into a single letter, and diphthongs into the first vowel. Then they dropped internal D, J, H and T. Lastly they dropped the final consonant of a syllable. The only terminal consonants of a word in Finnish are -N, -T, and occasionally -S, all of which can be reconstructed from context.

These simplifications allow 1500 words to be spelled with one syllable and 8000 words with two syllables. In practice, nearly every word is either one or two syllables. Most syllables allow only slight rotation before they change into a different syllable. A few without a mirror image indicate which direction to read the script. Old inscriptions and rebuses always read left to right, top to bottom, but newer inscriptions may read right to left (Figs. 1 and 2). To illustrate how scribes employed these letters, I will start with a very old inscription whose letters are all straight lines.

GERMANY: DECIPHERMENT OF BILZINGSLEBEN SICKLE HANDLE WRITTEN 350 THOUSAND YEARS AGO
The oldest securely dated inscription comes from the settlement of Bilzingsleben in Thuringia in central Germany, excavated by archaeologist Dietrich Mania in the 1970’s. Built 350,000 years ago, the settlement yielded bones of H. heidelbergensis, a slender human with large cranial capacity. The site had three round dwellings with hearths by their entrances. Animal bones belonged to elephants, rhinoceroses, horses and buffaloes. Among the artifacts, two had inscriptions. Microlithic tools such as awl and sickle did not fit the Acheulian tradition, so this culture he called Clactonian.

The campsite had equipment to kindle a fire. For hunting large animals, they employed a heavy spear weighted toward the tip and thrown with a leather
strap to achieve high velocity. For small animals, they used a small, pointed throwing rod; when thrown, it rotated around its centre of gravity like a boomerang. The inscription on the bone sickle handle consists of four letters that read left to right. The scribe chose letters that read the same, either right-side up or upside-down. It says the scribe plans to make a blade with magic skill. If this blade was made by gluing razor-sharp microliths into a slot in the handle, then the magic skill would be formulation of the glue. This secret recipe was eventually lost, only to be re-discovered in 2005 by Lyn Wadley: mix one part powdered red ochre and three parts sticky tree sap, glue the parts together, cure over low heat for four hours.

Old European syllables
TA TE-RA TE. / TE-RA TE TA.
Finnish decipherment of Old European
Taion terä teen. / Terä teen taion.
English translation of Finnish
With magic skill a blade I will make. / A blade I will make with magic skill.
Italian translation of Finnish
Con abilità magia una lama farò. / Una lama farò con abilità magica (Fig. 3).

South Africa: Decipherment of Pinnacle Point Cave Epitaph Written 163 Thousand Years Ago
From Pinnacle Point Cave in South Africa comes the next example of Old European writing, the oldest epitaph in the world, written on a piece of polished ochre, and then buried in the floor. It has an exceptionally precise date of 163 ± 3 ka. A H. sapiens skull found nearby makes this the earliest secure date for H. sapiens. These modern people arrived by boat, possibly from Brazil. Paleoanthropologist Curtis Marean recovered the stone in 2005, along with blades, bladelets, points, Levallois flakes and heat-treated silcrete - a suite of designs and technologies completely foreign to Africa. On its polished surface, the scribe wrote with discrete syllables that read left-to-right. Unlike the previous example, the scribe chose letters that read differently when held upside down. It memorializes the death of a family, rather than an individual (Fig. 4).

Old European syllables
1 PE MA / MA NA I.
Finnish decipherment of Old European
Iha pe’e maan / maahan näet tät.
English translation of Finnish
Lovely family of the earth / in the ground you will face east.
Italian translation of Finnish
Bella famiglia della terra / nel terreno si dovrà affrontare est.

The language is Finnish with characteristic vowel harmony. The script is sophisticated, the culmination of thousands of years of use. In all the years since, neither script nor language has changed significantly, which completely contradicts all the tenants of language evolution. If Finnish has been nearly constant for 430,000 years, then it may have been nearly constant far longer, spoken by H. erectus, H. neanderthalensis and H. habilis. If so, then not only writing, but all language may descend from Finnish, one tongue to bind them all.

France: Decipherment of Chauvet Cave Inscriptions Written 35,000 Years Ago
The third example from France begins to blend letters together. In the spring of 2015 a replica of Chauvet Cave opened amid well-deserved acclaim. Inscriptions by Aurignacian mammoth hunters appear here and there, such as two above the panel of aurochs, horses and rhinos. Once you know what this writing looks like, they can be found in all the painted caves of France and Spain, sometimes as inscriptions like this, but more often as abstract shapes like the antlers of a deer (Fig. 5).

“Dense ground mist, a storm covers with hail.” Thus begins the first inscription above the panel, scratched through an orange crust that covers the wall (Fig. 6). On the first inscription, the scribe merged letters together, like cursive writing. In order to read it, the letters must be pulled apart. This technique of joining letters to make figures began with Aurignacians and reached its zenith amid the petroglyphs of Val Camonica and Pictish Symbol Stones.

Old European syllables, punctuation added
1 TI MA U, SA PE TA RA.
2 MI SA LI, 10 LI RE NI RA.
Finnish decipherment of Old European
1 Tiheä maa u’u, säät peitteää raen.
2 Mie sain lihoa, 10 lihat re’iin. Nyt rauha.
English translation of Finnish
1 Dense ground mist, a storm covers with hail.
2 I got meat, 10 pieces of meat on a sled. Now there is peace.
Italian translation of Finnish
1 Foschia densa terra, una tempesta copre con grandine.
2 Ho avuto la carne, 10 pezzi di carne su una slitta. Ora c’è la pace.

Italy: Decipherment of the Rose of Val Camonica from 1900 BC
The third example is from Italy, the Rose of Val Camonica, a rebus that resembles a fig leaf amid rows of fig trees in an orchard of nine trees. The four lobes and stem have two meanings: a deeply-lobed fig leaf and a fruit-laden tree of figs, called honey figs. I don’t know the meaning of the nine trees.

Fig trees may have been introduced by Minoans from Crete between 2000 and 1750 BC. Cato the Elder listed five kinds of figs grown in Italy, which grow well in the south and reasonably well in Val Camonica on south-facing slopes (Fig. 7).

Old European syllables
TU SE MA E ME LE.
Finnish decipherment of Old European
Tuo sen maan ehot me’et lehot.
English translation of Finnish
This land produces excellent honey figs.
Italian translation of Finnish
Questa terra offre ottimo miele fichi.

1 The secret was lost until 2005, when Lyn Wadley deduced how it was made by examining the residue on backed blades. “When water was mixed with fresh Acacia gum and red coloring in the first stage of manufacture, it formed successful glue after it was heated – the stone inserts could not be pried from their shafts. Wet resins require more loading agent than drier resins in order to make them manageable.”
PORTUGAL: DECIPHERMENT OF ABÓBADA WARRIOR STELE FROM 650 BC

The fourth example combines writing with a complicated rebus made by Tartessians in Portugal. Their history begins in Turkey. According to Roman sources, after years of drought, Phrygians in Turkey abandoned their country between 705 and 700 BCE and sailed in convoys across the Mediterranean, looking for well-watered land. Most settled in Italy, France or Spain, but some settled in southwestern Portugal, a people we call Tartessians. Here they made a good living by supplying food, leather goods, textiles and charcoal to miners in the copper mines near Cadiz, operated by Phoenicians. This arrangement ended abruptly when Carthage conquered the region around 500 BCE, shut down the mines and expelled both Phoenicians and Tartessians.

Tartessians cremated their dead, buried the ashes in urns in the ground, and erected funeral steles for their deceased. The most famous of these is the Warrior Stele. The most confident date for the stele is 650 BC, two generations after the arrival of Tartessians in Portugal. The script uses the same Etruscan in Italy, and almost identical writing.

Archaeologist Amilcar Guerra found the stele in 1998 among Roman ruins outside Almodóvar, and a replica now displays at the Museum of Southwestern Inscriptions at Almodóvar. The most confident date for the stele is 650/625 BC, two generations after the arrival of Tartessians in Portugal. The script uses the same rules for spelling and grammar as Iberian in Spain and Etruscan in Italy, and almost identical writing. The inscription continues by describing a ceremony at dawn atop a boulder on a nearby hill.

The scribe tells how Iron Jaw, now called Hill of Marble (Mäen Lun), traveled in a sleigh3 with his army to the end of the border woods to engage an army from Sea Storm (Merta Sää). One god they prayed to was Turri, meaning ‘Luck’, an epithet of Thor, god of storms, who ostensibly protected their enemy.

On a sleigh I have you went to the land by the end of the border woods of our dilapidated country. But Hill of Marble tested Luck when Sea Storm’s thousands broke.

Iron Jaw’s luck held, the tide of war turned, and Broken Oar (Rii Airis) and his army fled from the border land. Our war turned Broken Oar from the land of ours. Lastly, the scribe observes how war transformed people into men.

War made us; it produced men. The warrior looks strange because it is a rebus, composed of letters arranged to look like a recognizable object. Every element is writing; to make a rebus as complicated as this warrior required great skill (Fig. 9).

The complete text has seven lines:

Line 1 reads left to right with reversed letters (Fig. 10).

Tartessian, arranged to read from left to right

1 KA ME, TA RA MA ME, SE SO; NI SI NE TA TE.
2 TA TU TU ME TA, TA TA LY SA.
3 NO RA LE PA MÀ, TA KO, PÀ JÀ PO KO.
4 RE MÀ ME-NI MA PA-LÀ RA PU ME RÀ MA.
5 VA MÀ LU KO TU-RI, KU.
6 ME-TA SÀ TÚ RI.
7 SO-ME PO RI A-RI MA ME.

SO LA ME;

7 LÒ MI.

Finnish decipherment of Tartesssian

1 Kaa’at meiän, taian rajan maan meiän, sen soa; niin soiit ne taion tehon.
2 Taoit tuhat tuhat meiän taion, tähin taian lyhyen saajan.
3 Noia rauan leuan: paahan mäen, tahohon koin, pää jää poait kohsin.
4 Re’en mà, monit maahan päällä rajat puut meiän rähjät maat.
5 Vaan Mäen Lun koe Turrin, kun
6 Merta Sään tuhat ri’oi.
7 Soamme pöyi Ri’i Airis maan meiän.
Soan loa’i meiät;

7. löi miehiä.

English translation of Finnish

1 You toppled for us, wizard of the border ground of ours that wages war;
then you bound them in magic enchantment.
2 You forged thousands and thousands of us with magic skill, star wizard with a short jaw.
3 Wizard with an iron jaw: from the boulder of the hill, in the direction of dawn, the chief shall leave the sons at dawn.

The scribe added additional information in the drawing itself.

[To safeguard the journey, I inscribe a scepter of Ra the sun god in your right hand and a crescent moon of the goddess in your left, which will also carry your bow and arrow. Armor will protect your chest, a pleated kilt your lower body, and greaves your shins. Around the portal to the next world I will inscribe magic words of protection, beginning with your favorite horse.]

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2 Abóbaba mixes Iberian and Latin to make Apo papa meaning ‘All Father’.
3 Sleigh may actually be a cart or chariot. An inscription on a vase from Poland circa 4000 BC pictures a 4-wheeled cart, yet calls it a sleigh.
Tuori means ‘Thor, Luck’. Men. His name as Hand, then became clan champion, the greatest of Hand of the Realm, who provided thousands of men.

The words would sing the part of Tuori (Fig. 11). At the funeral ceremony, an appropriate person ceased, while the second was a response from onlookers. Each image is a rebus, comprised of many syllables that form two or three phrases. The reason for separate images of complicated inscriptions in rebus form, called symbol stones. The syllabary of symbol stones matches that of the syllabary of the Eagles of Tuori, provider of thousands of men as Hand, then our family champion as well; the greatest man of all.

In place of a head is an eagle. It is a farewell song from Tuori, who jokes that by lying here naked he must indeed be fading away (Fig.12).

The divided rectangle inscription is drawn like a body lying on its back with both arms folded across the chest. In place of a head is an eagle. It is a farewell song from Tuori, who jokes that by lying here naked he must indeed be fading away (Fig.12).

The Z-rod inscription, a broken spear placed on the body of Tuori, is a response to Tuori’s song, a eulogy sung by onlookers. It calls Scotland ‘a land of treasure, a land of rainbows’. This phrase is very important, because the great map-maker Ptolemy of Alexandria called the Pictish land Caledonia, which comes from Kaare-toen-ia meaning ‘Rainbow-true country’.

‘You court a land of treasure, a land of rainbows, summers of peace on earth forever.’

Pictish syllables of the Z-rod
RI-MA RA-SE,
MA KA RI,
KE-SE RA MA KA.

Finnish translation of Pictish
Riiat maan rahaisen,
maan kaarinen,
kesei rauhan maahan ka‘en.

English translation of Finnish
You court a land of treasure, a land of rainbows, summers of peace on earth forever.

Italian translation of Finnish
È corte una terra di tesori, una terra di arcobaleni, estati della pace sulla terra per sempre.

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Fig. 1 - Old European syllabary before curved lines, plus a crib sheet arranged by geometry.

Fig. 2 - Old European syllabary from Val Camonica with curved lines

Fig. 3 - Bilzingsleben sickle handle with inscription that reads the same in either orientation.

Fig. 4 - Pinnacle Point ochre 81770 image and transcription.

Fig. 5 - Photograph of Chauvet Cave panel with aurochs, horses and rhinos. Inscriptions appear as white letters scratched through an orange crust above the black animals.

Fig. 6 - Transcription of two inscriptions above aurochs, horses and rhinos.
Fig. 7 - Transcription of Rose of Val Camonica, from rock 24 at Foppe di Nadro.

Fig. 8 - Photograph and drawing of Warrior Stele. Museum of Beja.

Fig. 9 - The inscription begins with the warrior himself and ends with writing around the perimeter. The warrior is a rebus made from syllables.

Fig. 10 - Transcription of the stele.

Fig. 11 - Photograph of Birnie Symbol Stone and transcription of eagle symbol.

Fig. 12 - Transcription of the divided rectangle and Z-rod.