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From Marks to Ogham: Rethinking Writing in Gallaecia

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Abstract

This article suggests that past and present marking systems present in what today is Galiza and Northern Portugal—a region to which we will refer to as Gallaecia—are what could be labelled as a "living fossil" of a primordial form of nonlinguistic writing intimately related to genealogical knowledge, social relations and hierarchies, territoriality and mnemonics, encapsulating large amounts of oral information in apparently simple graphic designs. The thesis of the nonlinguistic character of primitive ogham is also developed, proposing that it be understood within the set of early mnemonic devices developed to "store" sets of genealogical, mythical and territorial information also linked to magical and prophylactic uses.

Key words

Galiza, Northern Portugal, Marks, Ogham script, Writing integrationally defined.

> *Os galegos actuaes descemos espritoalmente dos galegos primitivos, porque a vida do noso país endexamáis foi interrumpida por enteiro, e dahí que os diversos* logos *de Galiza sexan simpres evolucións dun mesmo* etnos. *Por eso as pedras ouriceladas dos nosos montes teñen para nós, baixo a súa forma natural, un engado creador de mitos, e, ao pousarmos os ollos no segredo dos petroglifos, sentimos que o pasado revive en nós como non poderia revivir en calisquera investigador forasteiro. Ali está o pensamento dos nosos proxenitores. Ali, nas pedras ouriceladas dos montes galegos, vive a cruz e o circo, como siños irmáns. Como as estrelas e o sol, a noite e o dia, a morte e a vida. Enxendrounos a preocupación cósmica, axuntounos a proteición dos deuses, compenetrounos o cristianismo, e ainda hoxe viven xuntos por un aceio de inmortalidade.*
> —Castelao, *As cruces de pedra na Galiza* (1950: 30).

Introduction

Nonlinguistic writing is deeply rooted in human behaviour and can be studied in the context of animal ethology. The first section of this study focuses on the understanding of nonlinguistic mark-making and its relation to territorial and social relations, as a basis to approach the wide historical record of marks present in Gallaecia for over six millennia within the framework of evolutionary ritualized restraint mechanisms that minimize the occurrence of potentially lethal intraspecific aggression. The relation between avoidance and boundary definition strategies—which reduce the expense of energy and risk of injury—and the use of nonlinguistic signs that require 'reading' and 'writing' skills is considered both in human and nonhuman animals, taking into account ethological and ethnographic evidence, in the light of natural selection pressures that favour nonkilling behaviour.

The use of nonlinguistic writing in much of the European Atlantic region before the introduction of alphabetical scripts, and the nonlinguistic character of primitive Ogham in particular, is suggested, proposing that it be understood within the set of early mnemonic devices developed to 'store' sets of genealogical, mythical and territorial information also linked to magical and prophylactic uses. The idea that only at a later stage would Ogham be adapted for use as 'writing proper' as a consequence of direct contact with other scripts is also suggested. These ideas will be commented on at the end this article, while its main section seeks to survey the continuity of mark making in Gallaecia during several millennia, including their extensive use in border petroglyphs, funeral stones, property marks on trees, animals or other objects, magical or protective signs, etc. The combined archaeological and anthropological data from this large time span reinforces the importance of marks in the avoidance of direct confrontation for millennia, possibly prefiguring some of the initial functions of linguistic writing systems, and provide clues on what kind of forms and functions could have characterized Gallaic nonlinguistic writing.

Writing Integrationally Defined

Symbolic behaviour is certainly one of the key aspects in the configuration of human evolution. Ginzburg (1983: 88; see also 1979, for the original) explained how humans, after thousands of years of hunting pursuits, learned to give meaning and context, making complex calculations, to the faintest traces of unseen quarry: prints, droppings, scent deposits, hair or feathers, snapped twigs or pressed grass. This ability "permitted the leap from apparently insignificant facts, which could be observed, to a complex reality which—directly at least—could not" establishing narrative sequences (ibid., 89). Ginzburg suggested that our track-reading ancestors could have been

the first story-tellers "because only hunters knew how to read a coherent sequence of events from the silent (even imperceptible) sign left by their prey" (ibid.) and that this emerging narrative, through the millennia, led to the invention of writing as it is currently understood. From mere traces, changes in the environment caused by beings that were no longer present, our ancestors could reconstruct narratives of past realities with the utmost detail, reading the stories 'recorded' by humans and other animals, grounding the course of their activities within a marked landscape. Tracks, a form of sign in the semiotic tradition, direct us to the object or being that created them, thus representing it, and, in Ginzburg's thought, it would only be a matter of time for these representations to be transformed into abstract indexes referring to animals or humans as mental concepts in the early beginnings of mnemonics.

The connection between the origin of writing and the 'reading' of tracks is by no means new. In fact, Chinese tradition associates the origin of its script with The Yellow Emperor's court recorder Cang Jie, who would have found inspiration in the marks left behind by birds and animals and the markings on animals themselves, realising that the graphic reproduction of the tracks or marks could be used to represent and keep record of the game in the Emperor's lands (Lewis, 1999: 197-202, 273). As a consequence of this myth of origin, Chinese philosophy of writing used to present characters as organic entities closely associated with bird traces and animal tracks and calligraphy itself was seen as correlative to marks produced by animals (Sterckx, 2002: 98-100). It is the association of writing systems with spoken language (and the perceived superiority of written language in relation to other forms of symbolic communication, including orality and mnemonic devices, which are predominant in the apparently 'nonliterate' societies) that has moved us away from recognizing alternative hypotheses for the emergence of reading and writing and its relation with the continuity of nonlinguistic marks as a form of recording, reading, and writing complex human knowledge, including narrative.

Michael Haberlandt (1900 [1898]: 82) stated that, "[i]n all cases, the strongest support for science is the *art of writing*, which, in its widest meaning, is to be found amongst every tribe on earth." No human collective can therefore be labelled as "nonliterate" as "[e]very pictorial sign is, in a sense, an element of writing." According to Haberlandt, who specifically mentions property marks that would also serve to obtain protection or defence, the sequencing and regulation of such signs provides the basis for ideographic or pictographic writing, regardless of the linguistic or nonlinguistic character of the representations. As Perrin (2011: 630) explains, the fact that a certain form of nonlinguistic 'writing' cannot be mechanically verbalized does not mean it cannot contain other complex information or manifest stimuli that can be neurologically processed or otherwise responded to within a certain cultural context.

Landaburu (1998: 50-59) challenges the idea of writing as a product of urban 'civilized' specificity calling to our attention footprints as a key for understanding the context of writing in 'nonliterate' cultures, namely in nomadic, hunter-gathering, fishing or pastoral societies. 'Urban writing,' as Landaburu refers to the graphic representation of oral language, is not the only form of 'writing,' pointing out that marks such as "footprints in mud, human and animal scent or broken branches are all traces, and these marks become signs to those who are able to interpret them" (1998: 50-51). The primitive notion of a mark established a direct relation between the mark itself and the event that led to its creation (especially when the mark has been left intentionally, as is the case with animal scent or scratch marks). But such a link is also established by marks produced by humans, in all cases with a functionality related to identification and territory, that developed to anchor complex mnemonic uses as in the case of the Ojibwe birch bark scrolls (*Wiigwaasabak*) which have persisted until the present time.

Therefore, Landaburu (1998: 51) presents two distinct semiotic systems: "that of orality, which uses voice as a means of communication, and the mark-message, that uses our hands", arguing that while the former has a greater signifying capacity, as words are complemented by expression and other nonverbal elements of human communication, the latter has the advantage of its durability and transportability (see also Tenreiro Bermúdez, 2007: 366). In a certain way, the current supremacy of "urban writing" is due to the articulation of both systems, but it has done so through the deterritorialization and de-identification of signs, which are reduced to a form of relatively mechanical transliteration, uprooted from a particular landscape or environment:

> Writing was part of the territory. The first cultures to use writing would cover their territories with their texts, continuing the ancient practice of nonliterate peoples to 'cover' every single portion of their lands, associating names and narratives to them.
> The alphabet represented a rupture with this value of previous semiotic systems. Articulating sound instead of meaning, writing was deterritorialized representing what all of Humanity has in common—voice—making it impossible to distinguish a particular land or history (Landaburu, 1998: 57)

In Landaburu's view (1998: 59), the rejection of 'urban writing,' namely the Latin alphabet, by many indigenous peoples of South America and elsewhere is partially driven by the ancient association between marks and the group or people who produced them, in this case with the Western colonizer. Marks used in body paintings or tattoos, pottery, textiles, etc. are mainly used to identify the mark holders or makers. To many peoples, alphabetical scripts con-

tinue to be the marks of their oppressors. The full identification of 'urban writing' with what the field of linguistics has labelled as 'writing proper' is both ethnocentric and anthropocentric, as it dismisses the use of nonlinguistic marks, which are clearly not a distinctively human phenomenon:

> The widely accepted linguistic definition of writing has contributed to the questionable assumption that speech must have preceded writing. If one accepts such a definition, one is constrained to grant that spoken language came first and is the ground upon which writing developed; after all, as it has been strictly defined, full writing cannot exist without speech, while we know that speech can and does exist without writing so defined. Every human community across the earth uses spoken language while use of 'writing proper' is not universal. But if we are less exclusive in our definition of writing we can see clearly that throughout human history, all peoples have used *marks* of some kind (Perrin, 2011: 632).

Perrin (2011) has developed a comprehensive approach for the understanding of marks within an integrational definition of writing. Perrin challenges the linguistic definition of writing that excludes anything beyond the representation of speech, as well as the separation between 'writing' or 'writing proper' and so-called 'proto-writing', a distinction that assumes a developmental process linking the former and the later, in which 'writing proper' would be the ultimate stage of evolution. Based on Harris' (1995: 4) definition of written communication as "consisting in the contextualized integration of human activities by means of signs", Perrin (2011: 633) broadens this understanding, positioning human mark use as a development of environmental, territorial and resource marking common to other species. In the context of integrationist study of writing, he suggests the "[s]tudy of marks and marking behavior is united by the role such marks play in integrating the behavior of many species in time and space—a role which exhibits no necessary relation with spoken language" (ibid.). Writing integrationally defined would encompass marks used both by humans and other species, as well as linguistic writing, the latter alone exclusive to our species as the only one to have developed articulated spoken language. This vision breaks the conventional assumption that speech preceded writing, as we know not only that all peoples have used marks of some kind throughout their existence, but also that many nonhuman species share common marking behaviours (Perrin, Evans and Yatsenko, 2010: 15).

Ginzburg (1983: 88) highlights how for millennia humans paid close attention to marks produced by animals. This was a matter of survival as hunter-gatherers relied on their mark-reading abilities not only to find prey but also to avoid becoming the prey of certain animals, or to avoid potentially-lethal conflict with neighbouring human groups. Marks or tracks left by animals (including other humans) establish a nonarbitrary relation be-

tween signifier and signified, to the extent that the experienced 'reader' can distinguish the tracks of an individual animal from others of the same species, also introducing abstraction and conceptualization of category and instance as marks are separated in time and space from the mark maker. Interestingly, tracks were read in a linear sequence that "could be 'mapped' conceptually to a sequence in time, if for no other reason than the fact that any hunter following tracks has to physically cross the same territory as his prey" (Perrin, 2011: 625) enforcing an ordered experience:

> The likely relationship between millennia spent reading tracks in sequence and the emergence of sequential and aligned character order also deserves serious consideration, as does the possible role of animal tracks in the emergence of writing systems utilizing impressed clay tablets, to say nothing of the use of seals for impressions (ibid.).

Even though many animal marks—such as foot tracks—are unintentional, ethology also provides a wealth of information on intentional animal marking: bears score tree trunks and cave walls, cats scratch areas where they are instinctively stimulated to do so, male deer rub the velvet from their antlers against trees, and many other species leave urine, feces and other scent marks. Perrin (2010: 29-35) argued that these behaviours are part of a functional system of intraspecies communication and organization based on territorial distribution, hierarchy, aggression and avoidance. Marks facilitate the process of defining a group's or an individual's territory through determined borders in physical space and also help establish hierarchical relationships in social 'space'. In both cases, marks are crucial to the operation of restraint mechanisms that reduce the probabilities of intraspecific killing.

As identified by zoosemiotics, the main function of intraspecies communication, besides courtship and food-related signals, is directly related to mechanisms that prevent or minimize lethal aggression such as ritual displays of aggression, recognition of boundaries, threat or warning signals and metacommunicative signals, essentially regulating how and when animals interact with one another. An example suggested by Perrin (2010: 34-35) is the competition for mark placement (scent or visible marks) on trees, whereby animals try to make marks as high as possible—pandas actually invert their bodies against trees to raise their urine scent marks even higher, as the higher a mark is placed the larger the size of the animal would appear to be when 'read' by competitors:

> any animal that encounters the mark will be able to determine if it is larger or smaller than the mark-maker based on whether the mark is higher than any it is able to make. Because of the common correlation between size and dominance (larger animals often dominate smaller ones of the same species)

> the relative positions of multiple marks on the same tree can provide some indication of 'hierarchy' in a given area (2010: 35).

Fry, Schober and Björkqvist (2010) consider ritualization and restraint mechanisms among human and nonhuman animals during intraspecific aggressive interactions as a result of natural selection pressures that favour nonkilling behaviour. As intraspecific killing is rare across species, a wide range of alternatives that exclude or minimize physical aggression and agonistic situations are present. These include strategies such as noncontact displays, forms of ritualized aggression, definition of boundaries, dominance hierarchies, and avoidance, which reduce the expense of energy and greatly reduce the risk of injury (ibid., pp. 103-104). Marks are crucial in the definition of territorial boundaries and in the expression of dominance and subordination, reducing the possibilities for serious injury due to intraspecific aggression.

As Perrin (2011: 627) points out, the fact that signs used by humans (marks on boundary stones, trees, doorways, seals, flags and banners associated with territory, heraldic devices, etc.) have been closely tied to the definition of territory, identity, collective organization, hierarchy and social integration, opens the door to exploring human mark making within the larger context of animal marking behaviour and the wider framework of evolutionary restraint mechanisms that reduce potentially lethal aggression. Following this line of argument, "the use of visible marks by humans is simply a highly developed outgrowth of the environmental marking common to many animals", "establishing lasting and communicable relationships by organizing space and objects within it" (Perrin, 2010: 29). This is clear when studying the human use of nonlinguistic marks which serve "for the identification of territory and the people, animals or objects within it" and which, when related one to another, are "used to regulate power relations and interactions involving kinship or affiliation" (ibid., p. 24), involving complex hierarchies of dominance and submission. In fact, human ritualized behaviour "is organized and integrated through the display of a system of signs" that indicate the dominance of the mark-maker in a certain area:

> They communicate to outsiders, potential trespassers or guests alike, that the area has been claimed in some way. The presence of the mark might stimulate strangers to avoid the area, or cause them to engage in ritualized behavior if they enter it. Furthermore, when marks are known across a wide geographic area, and a mark-maker from one place then displays the mark when going to another, it can be recognized by others, enabling them to identify the stranger in some fashion. Determinations regarding who is a guest and who is a trespasser can in many cases be directly related to whether a given mark is recognized, and what behavior is thus stimulated.

Human handprints (positive or negative representations) are recurring designs in cave art from the Upper European Palaeolithic and in places such as Chauvet, scratch marks left by bears were covered by marks made by humans. Human marks of this period not only appear on bone fragments—some of which will be discussed later—but also, as Perrin (2011: 625) points out, "on the surface of sculpted animals and within the areas delineated by engraved or painted animal bodies." And up to our present time we continue to see a universal (or nearly universal) human tendency to place marks on trees or to cover with graffiti the surroundings of public toilets, which could be traces of instinctive behaviours related to territorial demarcation and scent marking. Thus, the relations between marks and the environment in which they are found are crucial to any understanding of their importance as cultural manifestations in the wide range of phenomena that will be explored in this study—from boundary stones to lapidary signs, mnemonic devices, property marks, and apotropaic or prophylactic marks.

For a *Corpus Signum Gallaecia*

The first examples of mark use in the peninsular Atlantic have been documented as such by Lisboa (1985), Bueno Ramírez (1992) and Lillios (2002, 2003, 2008). The authors were puzzled by the hundreds (perhaps even thousands) of engraved stone plaques found in Late Neolithic burials (3,500-2,000 BCE) across SW Iberia (See Figure 1). Lisboa (1985: 193) was the first to offer an explanation of the recurring geometrical designs that viewed the inscriptions as "ordered and meaningful," and considered them as having a "heraldic function". Bueno Ramírez (1992) also considered the design patterns of the stone plaques as ethnic identifiers and Lillios (2002: 142) held that they were representations of textile patterns with heraldic value, a class of material mnemonics recording lineage status and affiliation through a system of decorative elements. Following the structure of the plaques, affiliation would be "represented on the base, with horizontal rows of motifs indicating generations from an ancestor" (ibid.) Following Lillios' interpretation (documented through an online database of plaques called ESPRIT"[1]), the base rows would indicate lineage, or generational distance between individuals; the next set of horizontal lines could represent a mark of cadence (individual within a generation: 1st son or daughter, 2nd, etc.); and the straps could indicate gender. These semasiographic representations could also be common to designs in some Gallaic stone stellae (Almagro Basch, 1972; also in Lillios, 2008: 138, Fig. 4.17a

[1] Visit the *Engraved Stone Plaque Registry and Inquiry Tool* at: <http://research2.its.uiowa.edu/iberian/>.

and b) and it has also been suggested that the replacement of stone plaques for ceramic pottery in burials around 2,000 BCE could indicate the transition toward a new material medium in which to make these designs—Lillios suggests that pottery designs throughout the Atlantic Bronze Age and Iron Age are worth reconsidering in the light of this approach.[2]

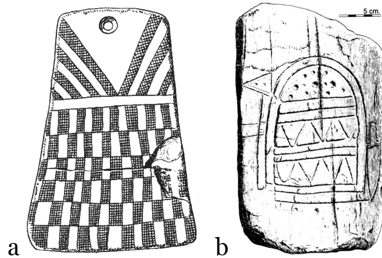

Fig. 1a. SW Iberian slate plaque (Lillios, 2002: 139, fig. 3). The motifs in the lower half may represent a register of lineage, varying in row number and pattern (triangles, chevron, vertical bands, zigzag, herringbone, etc.). 1b. Stellae from Tabuyo del Monte, León (Almagro Basch, 1972).

According to Lillios (2002: 149), the SW Iberian plaques "would be the oldest examples of objects in the world with clear heraldic properties", identifying conflicting or competing individuals and groups and legitimating access to territory or resources. This practice consistently exemplifies "the need for non-literate people to record and remember their past and ancestry" and, if appropriately "decoded", in Lillios' view, could allow for the reconstruction of lineage histories, marriage patterns, and kinship structures in ancient societies that show no evidence of familiarity with the practice alphabetical writing.

Placed in burials, marked plaques would help identify and memorialize individuals at death through their personal histories and those of their lineage, also establishing social distinctions in relation to power hierarchies. The pattern of burial placement could indicate their use as signs demonstrating continuing use of a burial site and its associated territory by a group, or to help the dead reconstitute their social world in the afterlife (Lillios, 2002: 149). In Lillios' view (2003: 146), the lineage affiliation and genealogical histories recorded through engraved designs objectified inherently ephemeral memories in a process critical to political identity and thus power, based on the control of resources and alliances:

[2] Following Lillios's presentation ("Marks, Art, or Writing? The Engraved Plaques of Neolithic Iberia") at the 1st Signum Conference on Mark Studies," Stockholm, Oct. 18-19, 2012.

> Memories are not primarily about revisiting the past, but are about defining the present and managing the future of individuals and groups within meaningful, yet shifting, contexts. Thus, the control of memory and objects of memory is an important component of power. (Lillios, 2003: 146)

In a more recent work, *Heraldry for the Dead*, Lillios (2008: 5) argues that the social changes in the Late Neolithic "would have instigated profound changes in mnemonic practices in order for groups to maintain and legitimate rights to [...] economic and symbolic resources". These practices would include the "mimesis of ancestral landscapes" and the creation of spaces of liminality between the living and the dead, transcending normal time and space. The continuity of borderlands as places of liminality not only to express the territorial limits of social groups but also to bind bordering groups together during special occasions and for certain purposes (public hearings, assemblies, fairs or ritual offerings) has been discussed by many authors (Ferro Couselo, 1952; Edwards, 2006 [1990]; Pena Graña, 2010 [1991]).

As Lillios pointed out, similar patterns with possible mnemonic value are also present in NW Iberia—including a number of geometrical designs and stone plaques in megalithic burial sites and more recent Gallaic stellae (Almagro Basch, 1972; Vázquez Varela, 1990: 64-66, 113). Design patterns similar to those from SW Iberia, in terms of both style and technique, have been found recently on flagstones from the Gallaic "Castro de Formigueiros" (Lugo). Even though these designs appear in an Iron Age hill fort it is unclear if they are of coeval manufacture or reutilized materials from a previous settlement (see Meijide Cameselle and Vilaseco Vázquez, 2009).

On the banks of the Mao river, just over a mile away from the Formigueiros hill fort, Pablo Novoa Álvarez (2011, personal communication) discovered another large stone with linear petroglyphs, very similar to those identified as "lithostriptic" by Santos Júnior (1980, 1984) in "Prado da Rodela" (Trás-os-Montes, N. Portugal, see Figure 3), which Fell (1984), in a controversial analysis and attempted translation, interpreted a as a vowelless Ogham inscription ('*Ogam consaine*'). Regardless of the validity of these claims, such lithostriptic petroglyphs show strong similarities with a wide range of nonhuman environmental marks. If not an alphabetic script, as some authors have considered it to be, lithostriptic petroglyphs such as these may well be human territorial marks based on or resembling those left as traces by other species, such as bears and wild cats.[3] Other petroglyphs placed in boundaries actually represent hands or footprints (Ferro Couselo,

[3] For other Gallaic examples of lithostriptic petroglyphs see Ferro Couselo (1952: 165-167).

1952: 75, 162), which are common in stone art throughout the world (see García Quintela and Estêvez, 2000, 2010).

Fig. 3. Petroglyph from Prado da Rodela (Santos Júnior, 1984: 11)

A key finding from the Gallaic Iron Age comprises a series of golden torc neck rings buried at the end of the 1st century BCE and discovered at the "Castro de Labradas" (Zamora) featuring a number of marks. Perea and Rovira (1995: 482, fig. 13-19) identified as many as seven distinct mark designs, stamped through notches and punches (Fig. 4).[4] This is the first time such a feature has been identified on Gallaic objects, even though similar marking could certainly have passed unnoticed in the past—thus demanding a revision of our assessments of existing materials. Perea and Rovira believe that the marks would "refer to possession by a family or 'kin' group" or, otherwise, by a group or series of individuals with territorial ties, but that they probably have no connection with the indication of craftsmanship or maker, as this would be unlikely within the context of Gallaic social organization (ibid.). The basic elements of these torc marks are close to those presently used in Eastern Galizan and NE Portuguese mountain communities, namely Múrias de Rao and Rio de Onor (discussed in this article). Ceramic marks have also been found in *terra sigillata* in the context of Roman occupation (Caamaño Gesto, 1979; Caamaño Gesto and López Pérez, 2006).

[4] Marcial Tenreiro Bermúdez directed me to the work of Alicia Perea, and this author kindly shared precious information regarding this subject.

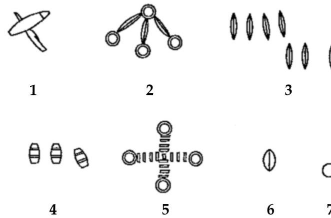

Fig. 4. Marks stamped in torcs (Perea and Rovira, 1995: 481, Fig. 12a)

The Gallaic region is especially prolific in petroglyphs, with a vague and controversial chronology due to constant additions over thousands of years. The so called *Grupo galaico de arte rupestre* ("Gallaic rock art group") incorporates over 500 petroglyphs, which have been associated with different periods of the Neolithic, Atlantic Bronze Age, and Iron Age (Sobrino Buhigas, 2000 [1935]; Peña Santos and Vázquez Varela, 1996 [1979]). Frequent designs include geometrical motifs such as cup-and-ring marks and concentric circles and figurative elements such as weapons, horses and deer. In his *Petroglifos de término* [border or territorial petroglyphs], Ferro Couselo (1952) demonstrated the continuous use and reuse of petroglyphs as border markers until recent centuries, which makes it difficult to make clear differentiation attempts between inscriptions that, while separated by millennia, share common design patterns (see Sapwell and Spry-Marqués, 2010; Newman, 2009).

The use of boundary markers, consisting of inscribed stones, wood posts or trees, was common among Pre-Roman populations and continued through Roman times into the Middle Ages, surviving up to our time (Ferro Couselo, 1952: 14, 178, 185). These markers are considered 'monuments' (from the Latin, *monere*, to warn) as they indicate boundaries, warning possible trespassers. In fact, it is also common that megalithic burial sites are positioned in existing territorial demarcations, suggesting a continuity of boundaries in the Gallaic region for millennia (ibid., 29; Pena Graña, 2010 [1991]: 30-35, 155) or, otherwise, the reference to megalithic burials or landmarks as boundaries. A document from 760 CE quoted by Ferro Couselo (1952: 22) evidences how megalithic stone burials continued to be used as boundary markers: "*petras fixas et mamolas antiquas*" ("standing stones and ancient tumulus"). In any case, the importance of claiming the memory of the dead as a source of power and identity, explained by Lillios (2003, 2008), is consistent with Pliny the Elder's expression "*terra nullo magis sacra merito, quam quo nos quoque sacros facit*" ("nothing makes land more sacred than what makes us sacred", in *Iustinus: Trogi Pompei ...*",

LXIII 154), and continued during the Middle Ages, as mark use was especially prominent on tombstones. The remains of the ancestors sacralise the land and its borders; they protect the people, objects and animals within the territories they demarcate, turning borders into places of liminality, where offerings to the deities of the land and encounters to resolve disputes would take place. Significantly, periodical fairs (*óenach*) would commonly be held in border territories across the Celtic world functioning as liminal spaces which are neutral regarding jurisdiction and offer protection from the deities and the ancestors (Edwards, 2006 [1990]: 97; Pena Graña, 2010 [1991]: 185). In fact, borderlands would frequently remain uncultivated (Ferro Couselo, 1952: 43-45) and would be visited rarely, in special occasions.

Newman, in a study of blade-marks in the Iron Age and early medieval periods, noticed how these intentional grooves were produced on cross-slabs, high crosses, bullaun stones, Ogham stones, inauguration/assembly stones, all "icons of tribal and cultural identity, and, moreover, most of them are sacred" and "in one sense or another all of these stones mark boundaries or points of transition, be they political and religious boundaries or personal, biographical transitions from, say, layman to king" (2009: 425-426). In various instances, marked stones warn

> the traveller that they are now in border territory [...] emitting very clear signals of ownership and the force of arms, the importance of boundaries as places of assembly where laws and treaties were enacted and renewed suggests that the blade marks on the stone should be considered against this backdrop (ibid., 427).

It is interesting to note how the word 'mark,' from Proto-Indo-European *merǵ-, has a clear semantic value that refers both to 'boundary,' 'borderland,' 'frontier' apparently evolving through 'sign of a boundary' to 'sign in general,' even though the relation could also be opposite, evolving from the signs placed in boundaries to the boundaries themselves. Ferro Couselo (1952: 67) traces an important connection between marks placed in borders with those of the agropastoral societies which inhabited the demarcated territories: "some of the signs may have originally been herders' marks taken from the branding irons used on their cattle". He also establishes a link between these marks and those used as signatures in Medieval and Modern documents, the tombstone marks of Santa Maria a Nova in Noia and contemporary marks (or *siglas*) used in fishing communities up to present times. Ferro Couselo actually supports a claim by Santos Graça, who explored the marks of fishing communities in his *Inscrições tumulares por siglas* [Burial sign inscriptions] (1942), stating that the use of these marks would be much older than alphabetical writing (1952: 188).

Ferro Couselo’s view that the roots medieval and contemporary Gallaic marking practices go back well beyond the introduction of alphabetical scripts had been suggested by other authors. Casas (1936: 74, 78-79) pointed toward the similarities between the marks from 14th century gravestones from the Santa Maria a Nova church and cemetery in Noia (Figure 6) and the Neolithic petroglyphs from the same area. Casas was also able to establish a connection (p. 80-83) between these medieval examples and contemporary usage, citing the extensive works of Santos Graça, thus emphasizing the continuity in use. In fact, Erías Martínez and Vázquez Gómez (1994: 254) were able to apply the hereditary mark composition rules still present in some small fishing communities of modern Gallaecia to a 15th century gravestone found in Corunha’s San Francisco cemetery.

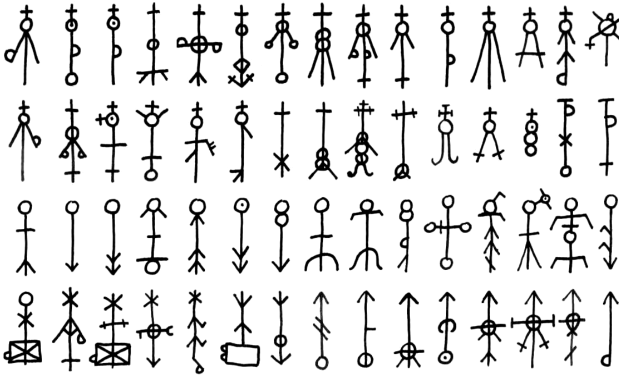

Fig. 6. Schematic representation of some marks from Santa Maria a Nova (in Noia) following various authors.

The incredibly large number of medieval gravestones featuring marks in the Santa Maria a Nova cemetery—over 500 examples, including personal, craftsmanship and heraldic marks, with only a few examples of epigraphic inscriptions—made it the subject of a large volume of academic literature (Chamoso Lamas, 1949; Risco, 1962: 742-745; Ferreira Priegue, 1987; Torres Reino, 1991; González Pérez, 2003), even though the same kind of gravestone marks can also be found in smaller numbers elsewhere in Galiza (Crunha, Fisterra, Muros, etc.). In keeping with the common European phenomenon, older stones tend to present one or more family or individual identity marks—some stones seem to have been reused by subsequent generations, which

would incorporate new marks on the same stone—while later examples sometimes include alphabetical initials or epigraphic content and the more recent ones disregard the mark completely. The same applies to the craft marks of the various guilds, sometimes complementing an individual or family mark. It is interesting to see how the logic set forth by Perrin (2010) in which a subject (a thing marked) and a predicate (the mark) underpins linguistic syntax applies to the correlation between individual identification and trade (craft/guild) or territorial (family) marks in a way similar to names and surnames: *André Ferreiro* ('Andrew Smith') or *José Monteiro* ('Joseph Hunter') and *Maria de Noia* ('Mary of Noia') or *Joám de Cangas* ('John of Cangas').

Beyond the extremely large number of masons' marks present in much of Galizan medieval architecture—specially in the abundant Romanesque and Gothic civil and religious examples—that have already been studied in detail by numerous authors,[5] Noia's marks, and other funereal examples (Erías Martínez and Vázquez Gómez, 1994: 249, 254; 1998: 307, 310, 318-320;), are arguably "extremely complex marks, that evidence an evolution based on the progressive superposition and aggregation of elements" (Ferreira Priegue, 1987: 132) that individualized the mark as it passed on through the generations. In his study of heraldic emblems, Menéndez Pidal (1993: 37) considers the gravestone marks from Noia in the context of semiotic systems, highlighting the collective character of their creation and maintenance in a cohesive framework where "individual contributions are not conducive to disaggregation as extravagant features are non-existent or reduced to the minimum"; the final goal is not to create inscrutable signs only to be read by the initiated few but rather for the marks to be understood by the whole community.

In addition this funereal usage of family or individual signs, Ferro Couselo (1952: 52-53) and other scholars have documented a continued use of collective identity marks on stone, mostly as border markers between parishes or *coutos* (jurisdictions) that were recorded in various archives, including the *Catastro of Ensenada* (a large-scale census conduced in 1749). It is extremely interesting to follow Ferro Couselo's explanation (1952: Ch. 2) of how the denomination of

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[5] de la Torre Martín-Romo (1988) and Filgueira Valverde (1988) provide a detailed historical and bibliographical account on the study of masons' marks in Galiza, namely under the auspices of the Ponte Vedra Archaeological Society. To quote some examples of works on this subject: Martínez Salazar, 1901; Domínguez Fontela, 1935; Taboada Táboas, 1986, 1988; Rodríguez Fraiz, 1988; Valle Pérez, 1988; Fabeiro Gómez, 1988a, 1988b; González de Fresco, 1988; González Pérez, 1988a, 1988b; Reimóndez Portela, 1988; Soraluce Blond, 1988; Trigo Díaz, 1989, 1995. Property marks in buildings referring to religious orders have also been studied by Carro Otero and Masa Vázquez (1987) and Villaverde and García Otero (2008).

one of the main political entities of Mediaeval Gallaecia, the *couto*,[6] is actually derived from the term *cautos lapideos* (Latin *cautes/cautum*) or boundary stones (popularly referred to as *pedrafita*, *chantada*, *marco*, *padrão*, *couto* or *coto*), where the boundary marks defining and perhaps also protecting a territory's limits ended up designating the territory as a whole. Marks have also remained in use as a prophylactic and identity component of communal buildings, including baking ovens, mills, bridges, and chapels, protecting both the goods that were produced, manufactured or transported through these infrastructures and those who built them and held the rights of use (Costas Goberna and Pereira García, 1999; Rodríguez Fraiz, 1988: 43).

Galizan literature is rich in interpretations of these marks. Castelao (1990 [1950]) was the first author to develop a systematic study of the sign of the cross in Galiza (*As cruces na Galiza*[7]), recording the occurrence of this sign since pre-historic times to the present. Castelao (p. 28-29) relates the diversity of variations of the cross in pre-historic and medieval Galizan petroglyphs with the contemporary marks of Póvoa de Varzim and suggests that their reproduction in places of pilgrimage (which are usually in borderlands) is due to their combined votive/prophylactic and family/clan identity value, that made them similar to cattle brands: "The remote origin of this kind of sign must be sought in the human instinct of *being different* and there is no doubt that the marks-coats of arms which are transmitted through inheritance create pride among the men that have something to *mark*..." (1990 [1950]: 29, emphasis in the original). Risco (1962: 742-744) considered that the signs found in places such as Noia could be related to alchemy and astrology. Chamoso Lamas (1949) drew the connection between the corporate guild marks from Noia and Ržiha's (1883: 265-266) theory of mathematical derivation following a set of geometrical base patterns[8]. Ferreira Priegue (1987) contextualized Noia's marks in late medieval and early modern European maritime commerce (as had other authors regarding other parts of Iberia, see Rodríguez Herrero, 1974: 28-31; Salvador Esteban, 1995), without disregarding their prophylactic and magical properties that not only indicated ownership but also protected marked objects. Finally, López Gómez (1995) discussed some of the symbolic aspects that link human marking behaviours with the concepts of space, passage, presence and identity, fol-

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[6] The "*coutos*" were virtually free from the King's authority and existed as quasi-independent micro-states within their borders.

[7] The volume follows a previous book published in 1930 regarding the stone crosses in Brittany (*As cruces de pedra na Bretaña*) as part of a research endeavour in which common elements of the material culture of the Atlantic/Celtic world were explored.

[8] On Ržiha, see also Alvarado Planas (2009) and introduction to Ržiha (2010) [French ed.].

lowing Ferro Couselo's (1952) dissertation on marks as boundary delimitation elements. The actual convergence between magical/prophylactic functions and those of family-property-territorial identification becomes clearer when looking at contemporary mark usage.

Marking practices in the present provide one of the most interesting fields of inquiry in Gallaecia as it is one of the few areas in Europe where traditional marking systems remain in use in a relatively well preserved form. Several studies have mentioned the presence of marks throughout the territory of Galiza and Northern Portugal, including those of Múrias de Rao in the Ancares region—where house marks (see Figure 7[9]) are used not only on doors and tools but also on wooden sticks to demarcate sections of common land or trees belonging to a certain family within communal forests (González Reboredo, 1990: 86-88; González Pérez, 1988).[10] Tree marks maintained their relevance in the Gallaic territories up to the present time due to the persistence of communal lands, owned collectively by the inhabitants of a certain village or parish and that cannot be sold or divided. In spite of this status, individual families (*casas* or houses) had the right to grow and usufruct trees in the forests (most commonly chestnut trees, heavily relied upon in the traditional diet), that need to be marked as they were grown next

[9] González Pérez (1998: 191) presents the names of the basic forms that made up the marks from Múrias de Rao: *talha* ('carving,' a vertical slash), *escaladoiro* (semicircle), *pé de pote* (jar foot), *anela* (ring). Even though only thirteen marks remained in use in the community, the fact that designations for each element remains in living memory is indicative of a much wider use that allowed complex combinations throughout a more extensive territory. In Rio de Onor in Trás-os-Montes similar tally sticks (called '*varas*' or '*talas*') are inscribed at the Village Council to keep record of elections, fines, common land use, etc. (see Dias, 1984: 84) and in other regions of N. Portugal marks are prominent in agricultural devices such as yokes (see Leite de Vasconcellos, 1881). Wooden tallies from Rio de Onor are part of a permanent exhibition at the Portuguese Museu Nacional de Etnologia. See <http://mnetnologia.wordpress.com/destaques-monstrinha-no-mne/6-exposicao-permanente-a-tala-de-rio-de-onor/>.

[10] Other authors have studied the use of marks in rural communities elsewhere in Iberia. One example is Violant i Simorra (1949: 410-414, 1958) who documents the usage of the designation 'house mark' in the Catalan Pyrenees, even though traditional marks were replaced by alphabetical anagrams during the first half of the 20th century. Violant i Simorra also defended the idea that the origin of these traditional signs could be traced back to Bronze Age representations that subsequently led to writing systems: "in a first phase, these signs would serve as amulets to counter evil influences on the animals that carried them (...), and at the same time they could also be totemic or prophylactic signs that identified the primitive clan or family, and later on they would become alphabet-like signs referring to the family names of contemporary marks, that use the modern alphabet, keeping the ancient pastoral tradition" (1958: 150).

to those of other houses and others sharing the communal property. García Ramos (1909: 59-60) recorded this practice in the areas of Lalim and Estrada with the name of *postas*,[11] while the same legal figure (*poznera*) has actually been incorporated as common law in Asturias (see Tuero Bertrand, 1997), with the particularity of reproducing the bases for mark usage (and actual examples) in an official parliamentary record (*Boletín Oficial de la Junta General del Principado de Asturias*, N.º 455, March 9, 1997, pp. 12-13; 34; 46). Names of basic forms in Asturian languages differ very little from those used in Galiza and N. Portugal: *parrilla* ("grill"), *pata de pita* ("chicken foot"), *xugu* ("yoke"), *felechu* ("fern") o *felechu invertíu* ("inverted fern").

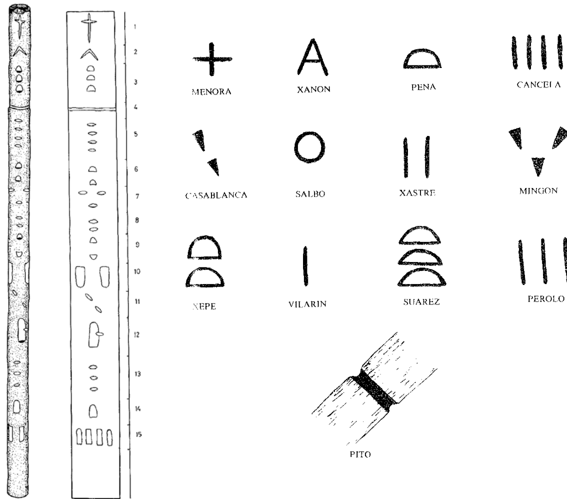

Fig. 7. Marks from Múrias de Rao (Ancares), in González Pérez (1998).

[11] "En los partidos judiciales de Lalín y la Estrada correspondientes á la provincia de Pontevedra, recogimos una costumbre practicada desde tiempos muy antiguos en los montes comunales. Se conoce con el nombre de *postas*, o plantaciones de arbolado, que hacen los vecinos, generalmente de castaños, logrando por este hecho hacer suyos el árbol y los frutos. Aun cuando se divida el monte, el plantador del árbol conserva su propiedad, cualquiera que sea la porción en que radique, pero sólo por el tiempo que el castaño ó roble viva, pues al secarse ó talarse se extingue el derecho. No se conocen precedentes ni orígenes á tal costumbre, que en las comarcas citadas tiene carácter de generalidad, se practica desde tiempo inmemorial y cuenta con el respeto y sanción de los habitantes de aquellos pueblos."

But it is the fishing communities of Póvoa de Varzim and neighbouring towns and villages in Northern Portugal and A Guarda in Southern Galiza, both in the Minho River area, that have received greater attention (for a complete bibliography on the former, see Lopes, 1979). While in Northern Portugal marks ceased to be used in the mid 20th century with the transformation of the relatively small fishing communities into larger towns, in A Guarda we have been able to conduct a small survey in recent years of which some preliminary results will be shared here.

The first two studies on the marks of Póvoa de Varzim and other small fishing communities of Northern Portugal were conduced by Santos Graça, who published a chapter on the matter in his 1932 ethnographic study *O Poveiro*, later expanded into a full book in his 1942 *Inscrições tumulares por siglas* (Burial sign inscriptions). Santos Graça begins his 1932 chapter with a bold statement: "Marks are the writing of the *Poveiro*" (inhabitants of Póvoa), who "can read them with the same ease as we have reading the alphabet" (1932: 23). But the primary function in the community was to draw a semantic relation between the mark and the *alcunha* (traditional hypocoristic forms) of the family and the individual names (Silva, 1984: 190, 197, 202)—both families and individuals where referred to in the communities after their bynames and not conventional names or surnames.

Reluctance to use both alphabetical writing and signatures, instead of marks, and formal names and surnames, instead of hypocoristic forms, could certainly be a form of avoidance, as both systems escape from State individual identity standardization procedures set in place in the 19th century for enhanced control, mainly regarding taxes and military conscription—civil registers are initiated at this time, imposing standards on how people should be named and how they should sign. Interestingly, during the field study in A Guarda, attempts were made to verify claims that marks had at some point been registered in the local *Comandancia* (Merchant Navy Offices) but nothing was found. Early birth and marriage records from the 19th century (that require the signatures of the deponents) were also examined at the Public Registrar to see if marks had also been used as signatures, but this was not the case. As the emerging State bureaucracy made its way into the communities, it seems that attempts were made to sidestep this outside element by keeping the traditional identity forms (family marks and bynames) within the inner circles of the social groups.

Marks were used everywhere—fishing nets, oars, compasses, sails, tools, washhouse stools, baskets, clothes, gravestones, domestic items such as plates, bottles or chairs, doors, etc.—and have both a property and an identity or heraldic function. Matos and Bandeira (1968: 30) pointed out that it was common for fishermen to use embroidered linen shirts where the paternal

marks would appear on the left side and the maternal marks on the right side. Marks were also used on property boundary stones and house doors. Alonso (1985: 396; 1997), who recorded close to 200 marks from A Guarda[12], featured a reproduction of an old house door which includes the mark of the owner together with religious (chalice) and magical (pentagram) emblems, which evidences the combined prophylactic, magical and identity/property function.

Each mark was formed by a finite set of defined shapes and belonged to a certain family—Graça registered 83 family marks in 1942, while Filgueiras (1995) expanded the registry to close to 200, including a larger number of fishing communities. Within the family, every individual had their own mark that was derived through long-established rules adding certain modifying elements (*piques*, "slashes"), so that anyone in the community could know exactly to whom a mark would refer. The eldest son (or daughter in some cases) would add one *pique* to the main family mark, which was considered a precious family heritage, followed by two *piques* by the second son and so on until the youngest, who would usually inherit the original mark of his father together with most of his belongings. This is the opposite rule from heraldic practice, where the firstborn would inherit the unchanged arms of his father, and is due to the fact that the youngest son would frequently be the one who remained in the family home and took care of his parents, being awarded the "*melhora*", or best portion of the inheritance. The character of these concise brissures was also conditioned by the fact that marks on objects passed on from one generation to another should be easy to modify, so that one mark would necessarily contain its predecessor.

The system could be described as set of rules for individual and family identification wherein a relatively small set of radical or root elements (the 'ground form') is modified by a series of prefixes, suffixes, affixes or desinences (variations) following basic rules of association. Establishing a parallelism with linguistics, we could consider that genealogical morphemes would be the basic semantic element, indicating a certain kin group within the community. These mnemonic sememes—associated with the family name—are generated by a series of semes that through established desinences indicate crucial knowledge such as ancestry or descent, genealogical distance or fraternal position (first-born, etc.) deriving from a number of lexemes that identify individuals (through their *alcunha* or byname) and trace existing relations among them, defining hierarchical positions within a generation and referencing those preceding and coming after them.

[12] The collection was almost completed by Ferreira (1995), recording a total of 340 marks.

Interestingly, the root figures encompassed a reduced number of basic shapes (approximately 17-22) which in most cases share common denominations across the Atlantic coast of Galiza and Northern Portugal: *risco* (stroke), *cruz* (cross), *estrela* (star/asterisk), *pé de galinha* or *pé de passaro* (chicken or bird foot), *arpão* (harpoon), *meio arpão* (half harpoon), *âncora* (anchor), *grada* (stand), *cálice* (calyx), *cálice aberto* (open calyx), *cálice emborcado* (inverted calyx) *circo de salomão* (Solomon's cross), *quatro* (four), *espinha de peixe* (fish bone), *tesoura* (scissors), *pena* (feather), *grade* (grill), etc.[13] Users within the community would use these denominations to describe a particular mark in a fashion close to that of armorial style: *meia pena e cruz*, *cruz pique e cruz*, *estrela, dois piques e cruz*, etc. (Graça, 1942: 25-31) also showing a tendency to read marks sequentially, namely in those which are constructed along a vertical or horizontal base line or through the aligned juxtaposition of elements, very similarly as to certain scripts (i.e., Ogham). Because of this, authors such as Silva (1984), Bandeira (1985) or Matos and Bandeira (1968) also placed these marks within the domain of heraldry, not only because of the social functions they perform but also because of the system itself, which uses common elements such as the addition of brissures (*piques*) to distinguish each individual within a sibling group.[14]

Fig. 8. Genealogical design by Graça exemplifying mark derivation in P. de Varzim.

[13] Basic mark shapes from Póvoa:

[14] If compared to the medieval marks from Noia or other contemporary European examples, the marks of these fishing communities remained fairly simple. We have not been able to gain direct insights on what rules guided simplification but Graça (1942: 20) explained that after the third generation the original grandfather's mark, if unused, would be retaken, or combined with the mark of the maternal grandparents. Unfortunately, none of the genealogical 'mark trees' that were produced in the A Guarda field study revealed such practice.

Graça (1942: 16) argued that the relatively small set of basic shapes—approximately 20—was inspired in certain animals (or animal footprints), plants or celestial objects, and Filgueiras (1966: 11) even suggested that certain elements—such as *penas* ('feathers') or *pés de galinha* ('chicken feet')—could be related to the traces left by birds on the long sandy beaches from which fishing expeditions would depart. Graça also established connections not only between the property and identity marks of the fishing communities of the Gallaic region and the abundant examples of medieval mason's marks but also with the region's Neolithic inscriptions (1942: Ch. VI and VII). Graça defended the idea that Neolithic stone inscriptions such as those found in burial mounds of the Alvão mountains of Northern Portugal would not necessarily be alphabetic signs, but rather individual or family marks indicating the bond between certain burials and their territory and a particular human community with their ancestors. He also supported the idea that it was these marks and their usage that could have later led to the development of alphabetical writing systems, but highlighted that "the persistence and wide use of marks until our time, when the alphabet is also available, demonstrates their usefulness" (1942: 74). Graça concluded his work stating that

> There was a need to *mark* so that the identity of individuals and objects could be recognized—and symbolism emerged to represent them.
> This was, in some form, the first form of writing and, as we believe, the form that is found in the stones from various pre-historical burial sites, particularly from the Neolithic.
> And so, the possibility of reading the marks vanished with the last generation of the tribes that produced them (1942: 81-82).

Marks also had ritual, prophylactic and magical functions (Graça, 1932: 30-32). As a form of rite of passage, the mark of the newly wedded man would be made in the church vestry, usually at the time during which he would take that mark as his own. Marks were also made on church or chapel doors after votive processions or pilgrimages, such as those to Santa Tegra (in A Guarda, North of the current border with Galiza, see Figure 9), which had its door literally covered with marks, or Nossa Senhora da Bonança, in Fão (studied by Freire, 1967), and also in church alms boxes, to record a promise fulfilled on behalf of a family or a crew.

Three additional types of marks were in use within these fishing communities—namely *marcas de peixe* (fish marks), *balizas* (buoy maks) and *divisas* (boat emblems), used by boat crews to identify their catch, their nets in the sea and their ships from ashore respectively—but none of these had the same social or symbolic significance, perhaps with the exception of the *divisas* that also had an evident prophylactic character and that, in the past,

could have been related to larger kinship groups within the communities. In fact, boats in A Guarda, such as *gamelas*, much smaller than those used in Póvoa de Varzim that were mostly signs of collective ownership, frequently displayed the mark of their individual owner on the bow of the boat (*testeira de proa*) or in the middle of the port and starboard sides (*cujias de babor e estribor*). In A Guarda, Alonso (1997: 100) adds a fourth type of mark called *marcas de nós* (knot marks), which were used to identify nets through knots grouped or separated in specific patterns, sometimes also adding coloured strings in between. This kind of mark can readily be compared to those present in Andean societies since 3,000 BCE and up to present times (the Incan *quipu* or *khipus* "talking knots"), and some authors have already considered these to represent more than mere numerals (Urton and Brezine, 2005)[15].

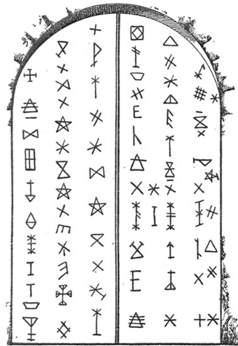

Fig. 9. Chapel doors from Santa Tegra (A Guarda), covered with Galizan and Portuguese Marks.

Finally, Mörling (1989) and Alonso Romero (1996: 119-120) also discussed the patterns designed by the fishermen of Ons Island on the bow of their boats consisting in lines, zigzags and dots (see Fig. 10), and the former author considered these as possible remnants of a system of marks or script:[16]

> The use of puncture writing on the *dorna* [a local type of boat] is a trace of the archaic usage that only remains as a tradition [probably unknown to the present mark makers]. The fishermen of Ons Island simply emulated the writing system that their ancestors saw in other contexts and applied on their boats (Alonso Romero, 1996: 120).

[15] Visit the *Khipu Database Project* at <http://khipukamayuq.fas.harvard.edu/>.
[16] On nets and woven marks as basis for graphical marks with the study, see Morozov and Simonov (2010) for comparison with Finno-Ugrian Permian Pas Signs.

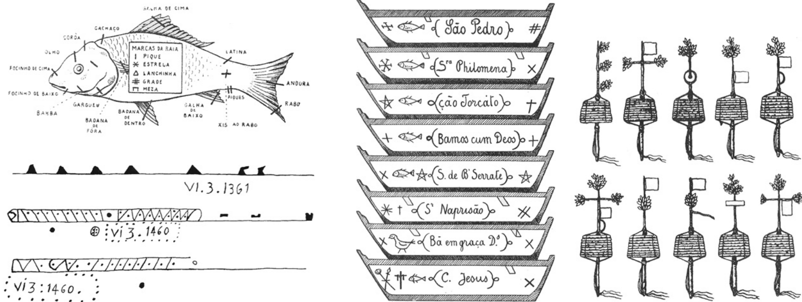

Fig. 10. Examples of fish marks, boat emblems and buoy marks (Graça, 1932 and Alonso Romero, 1996).

In his 1942 study, Graça pointed toward the existence of the same kind of property marks that were in use in Póvoa de Varzim in other Galizan fishing communities such a Bouças, Baiona, Cangas and Vigo, but we have only been able to find current evidence of their continuing contemporary use in A Guarda. Some of our interview subjects in A Guarda also recalled the existence of marks in the fishing communities of Moanha, Ogrobe, Bueu and Marin and also in the rural areas of Goião and Portela, where trees, horses and cattle were branded. Subsequent research, such as works by Filgueiras (1966, 1996) were able to trace the relations of these marks beyond their immediate geographical context, establishing connections with those used in other parts of Europe, namely in the Nordic and Germanic cultural sphere.[17] Filgueiras was shocked to find virtually identical marks to those of NW Iberia in Copenhagen's *National Museet*—which continue to be exhibited, as verified recently—and also discussed the formal resemblance with runic scripts (1966: 20-24).

The marks of A Guarda show no differences from those recorded in Póvoa by Santos Graça in the 1930s, except for the fact that they continue to exist today. As some of the specific literature is revised (Rodríguez Vicente, 1983, 1984; Alonso, 1985, 1988, 1997; Ferreira Lorenzo, 1995; Alonso Romero, 1996), only some additional details will be offered to complete this picture. In our fieldwork in A Guarda, informants pointed out that in the early 20th century there would have been approximately 500 fishermen in the community, all recognized users of their own marks, which were generally know by all: "If there was any doubt, the base mark of each house would reveal who a person was". Because of this, it was extremely important for

[17] For a similar study in a German fishing community, see Ebbinghaus (1961).

marks to follow the rules of derivation and “to be careful to stick to the original design of the *house mark*, as it was called” (Xosé Bieito Rodríguez González, personal interview). Even though marks were mainly used by fishermen, other people in the community also used them, such as those repairing nets or preserving and selling fish (mainly women), builders, farmers, etc. In any case, mark use strongly set the boundaries of the social group regarding outsiders, namely those who did not live directly or indirectly on fishing, whom in Póvoa were referred to as *peixes de couro* (leather fishes), a designation that, interestingly, did not cover fishermen from neighbouring Galiza, “to whom these warnings and restrictions did not apply” (Graça, 1942: 45).

Graça (1932: 28-30) records how in Póvoa de Varzim women would count equally in the sequence of differentiating marks between brothers and sisters, regardless of their actual usage—if a man was the third born after two sisters his marks would feature three “piques”. Ferreira Lorenzo (1995: 9) explains how in A Guarda marks were also not exclusive to men but common to all who owned nets. Women who had inherited nets and instruments would use their own mark establishing a partnership with a *meeiro*, a fisherman who did not own his own equipment, and who would go to sea splitting the catch or the profits by half. It was not completely uncommon that after marriage a husband would take on the mark of his father-in-law, adding the variation that would correspond to his wife, who inherited her father’s equipment, thus abandoning the actual use of his own mark. This was especially the case, as Graça (1932: 30) points out, when the family into which the man married had only daughters and a large volume of equipment—on which the mark would have to be changed.

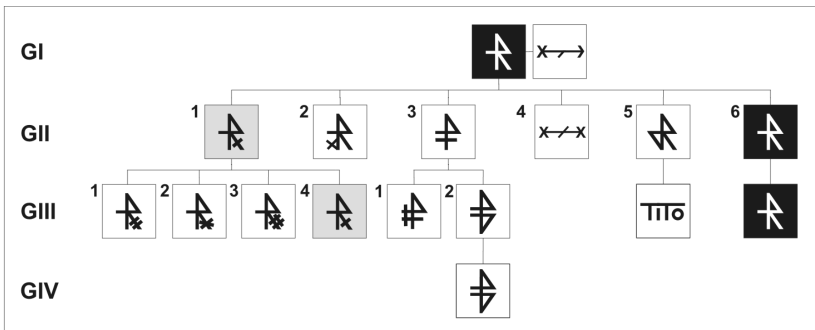

Fig. 9. Genealogical mark-tree from the author’s field work in A Guarda.

In Figure 9 we reproduce a genealogical representation of mark usage, transmission and derivation across four generations. Our informant, 'Tito,' was part of the third generation (GIII) and the first of his grandfather's descendants to adopt an alphabetical mark, inspired not by his actual initials (JBRG) but by his byname. 'Tito' himself, now in is sixties, explains that it was extremely rare for a son not to take his fathers base-mark out of rebelliousness or poor father-son relations. If this were to occur, rejecting the family mark was taken as a serious offense and a father would go as far as disinheriting his descendant. In this tree the customary rule of the youngest brother inheriting the father's mark can be recognized (highlighted in black and grey) and the tendency to use derivation elements (*piques*) that maintain the previous basic mark within the new composition is also self-evident throughout the various family branches. Even though we were not able to completely clarify the apparent anomaly of the 4th son in GII, it seems that this individual, 'Moro,' would have taken a variation of the mark of his mother or his maternal grandfather; as the head of the family, Benito Rodríguez Castro was using in the late 19th century both his own mark and that of his wife. In GIII and GIV fewer individuals actually adopted marks, due to disuse in the community or changing professional backgrounds.

Even though marks ceased to be used in Póvoa de Varzim and other fishing communities in Northern Portugal and Galiza during the first half of the 20th century, in A Guarda their use continued up to our present time, in spite of the sharp decline. The increasing presence of alphabetical initials shifted mark design—first using the initials of the given name instead of brissures to complement the family mark and then substituting the original basic mark altogether for the initials of given names and surnames, which are also supplanting traditional bynames and family names. And changes in materials—from wood and cork to plastic and other synthetic materials—changed the traditional incision techniques for marking (Ferreira Lorenzo, 1995: 7). Increased reliance on new technology and changing working conditions, where ship owners would provide all necessary equipment (compared to traditional practices where each sailor would provide their own net and instruments) also accelerated the decline in use. Most of the younger generations who continue to live on fishing no longer work in the closer coastal areas but in distant seas where their marks are no longer known and cease to be functional. In contrast, we have numerous accounts of how nets were lost at sea, sometimes 70 miles away up or down the coast, and fishermen from other communities would identify the marks as being from A Guarda or Póvoa de Varzim, returning the property to its rightful owners

(Ferreira Lorenzo, 1995: 8;). Here, as in other places, marks only make sense in an environment and social group where they are able to transmit meaning.

Interestingly, Graça (1942: 37) pointed out how in the fishing community of Buarcos—more loosely bound to tradition and where schooling had a greater presence—had started to substitute *piques* that individualized the family mark with alphabetic initials in the 1930s. In A Guarda, some active fishermen in their fifties still use traditional marks and many younger people are able to indentify those in use, but only the older members in the community are truly able to recognize the whole system of family marks and the relations between them. Also, usage has shifted from prominence on all objects of daily life, and even on house doors or clothes, to limited presence on fishing tools and instruments. For this reason, it is urgent to initiate further research that can solve and clarify many of the questions left unanswered by this superficial exploration.

Discussion: A Gallaic Script?

The debate on the use of writing among the Celtic peoples (of which the inhabitants of Gallaecia were a part) goes back to Julius Caesar's reflections in *De Bello Gallico*. In *De druidum genere* (6.XIV) Caesar explains how memorization of massive amounts of information in lyrical forms played an important role in druidical training, which could last up to 20 years, and the rejection of rendering this knowledge into alphabetical writing, which is in fact used (apparently using Greek characters) for other matters:

> Nor do they regard it lawful to commit these to writing, though in almost all other matters, in their public and private transactions, they use Greek characters. That practice they seem to me to have adopted for two reasons; because they neither desire their doctrines to be divulged among the mass of the people, nor those who learn, to devote themselves the less to the efforts of memory, relying on writing; since it generally occurs to most men, that, in their dependence on writing, they relax their diligence in learning thoroughly, and their employment of the memory (6.XIV).[18]

In other instances (1.XXIX), Caesar also recounts how the Helvetii used Greek characters to record statistical records and census. Thus, by no means

[18] *Neque fas esse existimant ea litteris mandare, cum in reliquis fere rebus, publicis privatisque rationibus Graecis litteris utantur. Id mihi duabus de causis instituisse videntur, quod neque in vulgum disciplinam efferri velint neque eos, qui discunt, litteris confisos minus memoriae studere: quod fere plerisque accidit, ut praesidio litterarum diligentiam in perdiscendo ac memoriam remittant*. Cf. myth of Thoth and Thamus in Plato's *Phaedrus*.

can we assert that Celtic peoples were unfamiliar with alphabetical writing—which they both used for certain purposes and prohibited for others—or that other forms of nonlinguistic or mnemonic 'scripts' were not in use. As we have explored in previous sections, if we adopt an integrational definition of writing it makes no sense to characterize any human group as nonliterate, so the question we should be asking is what kind of writing were the Gallaic peoples using other than occasional texts in alphabetical scripts borrowed from neighbouring cultures.[19]

Long-held assumptions regarding literacy and linguistic writing as related to Celtic peoples have also permeated the study of the origin and significance of the Ogham script. Even though there have been no findings of Ogham inscriptions in Gallaecia, besides Fell's (1984) controversial claim mentioned earlier, it is interesting to critically review some of the existing literature on this subject in light of the new perspective on writing that has been brought forward here and the continuous use of marks in the region over thousands of years.

The vast majority of Ogham inscriptions from Ireland, Scotland and Wales have been dated between the 3rd and 6th century CE, being gradually replaced by the Latin alphabet. The approximately 400 known inscriptions occur on stone monuments which serve as boundary or territorial markers that record genealogical histories. For Plummeer (1923), the study of the placement of such stone monuments across Ireland suggests that the border function was prominent, and inscriptions serving as statements for territorial claims. Even though not all have been deciphered, most inscriptions are in Old Irish or Pictish and consist of lists of personal names and formulaic words regarding genealogical and clan affiliation: X son of Y, X son of the clan of Y, X son of Y of the clan Z, X son of Y descendant of Z. This usage is consistent with both mythological and recorded applications of Ogham as a system of keeping track of extensive genealogies and lists of goods and property.

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[19] Classical authors included a number of references regarding mark use by allegedly nonliterate European peoples. Tacitus' account in *Germania* (10, 1-3) is a good example: "Augury and divination by lot no people practise more diligently. The use of the lots is simple. A little bough is lopped off a fruit-bearing tree, and cut into small pieces; *these are distinguished by certain marks*, and thrown carelessly and at random over a white garment. In public questions the priest of the particular state, in private the father of the family, invokes the gods, and, with his eyes towards heaven, takes up each piece three times, and finds in them a meaning according to the *mark* previously impressed on them" [*Auspicia sortesque ut qui maxime observant: sortium consuetudo simplex. Virgam frugiferae arbori decisam in surculos amputant eosque notis quibusdam discretos super candidam vestem temere ac fortuito spargunt. Mox, si publice consultetur, sacerdos civitatis, sin privatim, ipse pater familiae, precatus deos caelumque suspiciens ter singulos tollit, sublatos secundum impressam ante notam interpretatur*].

Vendryes (1948) suggested that the origins of Ogham would be in a form of keeping tallies, and related it with contemporary systems of recording cattle numbers, a view previously shared by Thurneysen (1937). This view is reinforced by the structural order of Ogham characters in groups of five which could relate to a numerical system with base 5 and 20. The more than 100 scales or Ogham variations recorded in the *Ogam Tract* (*In Lebor Ogaim*), which is part of the *Book of Ballymote* or *Leabhar Bhaile an Mhóta* that contains genealogies, mythologies and histories of Ireland, also sets a firm ground for the use of Ogham as a mnemonic system to record large lists of information of various kinds. Among these scales the manuscripts records the bird-ogham, colour-ogham, agricultural-ogham, water-ogham, cow-ogham, etc. The water ogham (*Ogam Uisceach*), for example, relates each character with a varying number of every type of waterway or source: one, two, three, four, five streams, weirs, rivers, wells, etc., and could be used either to record environmental features (sources of fresh water were extremely valuable) or directions, while other variants such as the ox-ogham or cow-ogham were more likely related to commercial transactions, rating cattle by types or qualities and numbers. A herb-ogham could be used as a mnemonic device to remember applications of medicinal herbs in relation to specific illnesses. The joint system, combined with the names of clans, families and individuals (that could have first been recorded through specific marks and later on by alphabetical inscriptions), provided a form to prompt and memorize any relevant knowledge or information: genealogies, properties, territorial limits, transactions, legal judgements, geographical directions, medicinal remedies, etc. Wooden rods would serve both as proof, and as mnemonic devices for memorization and information retrieval.

Irish mythology also accounts for the use of Ogham in recording large quantities of information. In one instance, explained in the *Baile in Scáil* (The Phantom's Vision), Conn Cethchathach, king of Ireland is visited by the god Lugh who recites a poem that includes the list of the future kings of Ireland who will follow him until the end of time. Conn's poet Cesarn, unable to memorize it immediately, recorded the list using mnemonic Ogham signs using four eight-sided and twenty four foot long rods of yew. The signs would prompt the recital of the names following the strokes incised on the yew pieces. Another account from the the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* depicts the use of Ogham as a border marker, when the Ulster hero Cúchulainn writes an Ogham inscription on an oak sapling single-handed, standing on one leg and with one eye closed. The inscription, planted in the ground as a taboo (*geasa*), conveyed that if his feat was not matched Fergus mac Róich's armies would be unable to go beyond the point where the inscription was left. Also in the same cycle, a similar narrative explains how a stone pillar with an

Ogham inscription in iron sets a taboo for any warrior approaching it bearing arms, Cúchulainn's reaction being throwing the pillar into a pond.

There are many other mythological accounts on Ogham use. In close parallelism to Bellerophon's story in the *Iliad*,[20] Corc mac Luigthic travelled to Alba for an encounter with Feradach, king of the Picts. In a perfidious attempt to have him murdered, his shield had been blazoned by an Ogham inscription calling for his assassination, but the message was altered by Feradach's poet Gruibne, who noticed the plot, and Corc was instead welcomed among the Picts and offered the king's daughter for marriage. This narrative is especially interesting as it shows the use of Ogham in the context of a shield, which historically has been a means of expressing identity. Another story where Ogham also serves as an identity and property mark features Cúchulainn is his search for the three sons of Duil Dermait. In return for providing his boat, Cúchulainn gives the king of Alba a spear with a unique Ogham inscription (Cúchulainn's mark?) that would enable the visiting king to take Cúchulainn's seat in the Ulster's royal court in his absence.

Some authors such as Carney (1975) propose, in view of the late dating of the existing Ogham stones, that the alphabet must have appeared as a cryptic form of alphabetical writing produced at the time of the Roman invasion, inspired by existing scripts and designed to prevent its understanding by the invaders. Other authors such as Macalister (1997 [1936]) defend the view of the independent origin of the script. While Vendryes (1948) and Thurneysen (1937) considered that the alphabetical use of the signs could have emerged at a later stage from an adaptation of a much older system of tallies, Macalister related Ogham with a system of hand signals that could either be expressed through gesture or inscribed in wood and that would not necessarily be linguistic in nature. This claim is based both on the arrangement of Ogham characters in groups of five signs with sequences of up to five strokes—which could be easily represented with our hands—and the description of several Ogham variations in the *Ogam Tract* (*In Lebor Ogaim*). These include three forms of finger spelling, namely the foot-ogham—articulated by placing the fingers (one, two, three, four or five) to the right or to the left of the shinbone, aligned diagonally or straight—, the nose-ogham—similar to the previous one but using the ridge of the nose—and the palm-of-hand-ogham—which articulates

[20] In Homer's account, Proetos, king of Argos, had sent a message to his father-in-law in Lykia. The message indicated that Bellerophon, who was carrying it, should be killed. The reference to *sēmata* (σήματα), refers to semasiographic symbols or signs that could be read but not to lexicographic alphabetical characters (*grammata*). On this issue, see Introduction in Foley (1999) and Bryce (2006: 14).

several forms of striking the hand against wood (number and angle of strikes). It is not difficult to see in these forms a system of mnemonic gestures.

This sort of hand gesture systems would be by no means unique, as many other instances have been recorded throughout the world, from those depicted in Trajan's column or the medieval conventional gestures of the *Sachsenspiegel* or the Buddhist 'teaching mudra' used when reciting *sutra* (which literally means 'thread' or 'string') and commonly seen in the representations of the Buddha, indicating communication and explanation of the *Dharma*.[21] Cusack (1868) had already related Ogham with the Andean *khipus* as a form of *memoria technica* which continued in Ireland in various forms such as simple handkerchief knots, arguing that the use of strings or sticks "as a vehicle for recording ideas by conventional marks, appears very ancient; and this in itself forms a good argument for the antiquity of Ogham writing" (1968, Ch. X). Cusack also quoted O'Curry who stated "that the pre-Christian Gaedhils possessed and practised a system of writing and keeping records quite different from and independent of the Greek and Roman form and characters", supporting the view that alphabetical equivalences would be a more recent adaptation perhaps related to Christianization.

Even though stone monuments including Ogham inscriptions are mostly dated between the 3rd and 6th century CE, it is quite certain that Ogham started to be used much earlier than the first stone examples of which we have record today, and that wood was the primary medium for inscription (Lehmann, 1989: 169). Unfortunately no examples have survived, probably due to the environmental conditions of the Atlantic regions where Ogham was likely present. In view of this possibility, our hypothesis is that Ogham, as it is currently understood in its alphabetical form, has its origins in much older practices of mnemonic writing (in the wider sense of this term expressed earlier) than those described by the existing literature. These practices would be related to the transmission of genealogies, territorial delimitation and accounting or property records and precede the introduction of alphabetical scripts by centuries or even millennia. Authors such as Newman (2009: 434-435) suggested a common ancestry between Ogham and blade-

[21] In the Vedic tradition priests would use a knotted cord to measure fire altars. As in other knot writing systems (i.e., Andean *khipus*) the gesture of teaching (*vitarka mudra*), similar to that of twisting flax and guiding it onto a spindle, could be reminiscent of the reading of the thread (the *sutra*), that through its knots revealed a flow of memory that expressed traditional knowledge (I am indebted to Oliver Perrin for these insights). For more on hand gestures, see Barasch (1987) and visit Heidelberg University's project on Computer-assisted detection and analysis of medieval legal gestures at: <http://hci.iwr.uni-heidelberg.de/COMPVIS/research/gestures/>.

marks present on border stones, which also relate quite clearly with nonhuman animal environmental marking, wondering if the stroke alphabet could "segue into an already existing tradition of making one's mark, one's sign, with the slash of a blade [...]. The significance of a person's signature cannot be understated, particularly if it occurs on an object or in a place that has, through association, become historically and/or symbolically charged".

While in the surroundings of the Irish Sea this form of mnemonic script progressively incorporated elements of alphabetical writing and eventually drew equivalences between each sign and specific letters or phonemes, it seems that in Gallaecia this did not occur, clearly separating the spheres of mnemonic devices—which continued to operate with progressively reduced meaning until our time—with that of alphabetical writing, recurring to the Latin script taken from the Roman invaders, who had a far stronger and more lasting influence than in Éire, Alba or Cymru. In any case, the likelihood that wood tablets were the preferred medium for inscription (as trees continue to be in most of rural Galiza) makes it impossible to know for certain if a form of Gallaic Ogham with an alphabetical or component was ever developed or in use.

Final Remarks

Ferro Couselo (1952: 20) traced the relation between borders and their marks with ancient deities, being the basis for property, family and nation or tribe. We have also seen a consistent use across the ages of marks as indicators of individual and group identity, usually in relation with specific territories and designed for others to "read" and be warned on limits, properties and kin groups. From the study of animal marking practices and hypothetical early hominid marks, we can see a complexification of systems of writing integrationally defined evolving toward mnemonic devices that allow for the encapsulation of large corpora of knowledge. The core data recorded through these devices remained in the arena of genealogy, myths of origin, historical feats and rights of property that tie a group to a specific territory, and serve as proof and warn potential trespassers or pretenders. In this sense, mark use remains in the scope the functional grounds for intraspecific communication identified by zoosemiotics: recognition of boundaries, threat or warning signals and metacommunicative signals, all related the prevention or minimization of potentially lethal aggression.

Considering that intraspecific killing can easily jeopardize the existence of small interdependent communities, shifting them toward extinction, extended communicative abilities and related cultural practices such as border and social definition significantly reduce uncertainty mitigating the pressure of lethal potentiality, allowing for individual survival and group continuity while ex-

plaining the evolutionary trend of diversification and complexification of communication mechanisms. 'Marking,' 'writing' or 'reading' oneself out of potentially lethal aggression offers greater chances of survival. If evolutionary selection has favoured mechanisms for rule-based ritualized restraint such as marking practices related to territory, the increasing complexity of hominid societies would have also lead to the increasing complexity of these mechanisms. Thus, it could be argued that the basic forms of hominid mark-making, probably common to other animal species, would have become more and more complex as selection pressures favoured behaviours reducing human lethal potentiality while enhancing nonkilling propensity. This would account for the emergence of complex natural human language and linguistic writing.

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