

The Sardinian substrate lexicon and its Mediterranean comparanda

The Sardinian language has a large number of lexical items that cannot have been inherited from Latin, but likely go back to one or more languages spoken on Sardinia before the Roman conquest (Wagner 1932; 1997, 254–80). The rapid developments in ancient DNA studies, which have shown that there is a significant degree of genetic continuity of the Sardinian population from the Neolithic up to the present day (Chiang et al. 2018; Calò et al. 2021), have made conditions more favorable than ever to uncovering and contextualizing the island’s linguistic prehistory. Proposals for the affiliation of Sardinia’s hypothetical substrate language(s) have included Basque, Etruscan, Berber, and less well-defined concepts such as “Eurafrican” or “Hispano-Caucasian” (Hubschmid 1953; Blasco-Ferrer 1988; Pittau 1995; Argiolas 2020).

Here, I zoom in on one set of Sardinian words of presumed pre-Roman origin whose comparanda show a fascinating distribution, being found in the languages of the Iberian peninsula and Southern France, as well as in Greek and languages of the Balkans. Examples of this Mediterranean-wide distribution include: Sardinian *golóstju*, Basque *gorosti*, Lengadocian *agaloûssès*, Greek κήλαστρος ‘holly’; Sardinian *kèya*, Catalan *sitja*, Old Provençal *setgia*, Greek καίατα, καίαδᾶς ‘(storage) pit, silo’; Sardinian *kòsti*, Basque *gazitgar*, Old Provençal *agast*, Greek ἄκαστος ‘maple’ (Hubschmid 1953, 29, 38–39, 80–82).

Although individual Sardinian substrate words with a Mediterranean distribution have been discussed at various occasions in the past, they have not been treated as a defined group. By a detailed discussion of six words with a similar distribution, I aim to shed light on how they relate to each other and on their implications for the pre-Roman linguistic situation of Sardinia as well as that of the Mediterranean region in general. I will do this by addressing the following questions:

1. Do the comparisons withstand formal and semantic scrutiny?
2. If so, how can the observed distribution be accounted for in term of language distribution and/or contact?
3. What (pre-)historical events could have led to the attested situation, based on current insights from archeological and genetic studies?
4. What implications does the Sardinian substrate lexicon have for our understanding of the pre-Indo-European linguistic situation in the Mediterranean region in general, and in Sardinia in particular?

My results will not only shed more light on the linguistic prehistory of the Mediterranean as a whole, but also constitute an interesting case study on the methodology of substrate research.

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