

Sounds of the Silent Cave. An Ethnophilological Perspective on Prehistoric “incubatio”

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Abstract: This paper approaches the problem of prehistoric rituals of incubation related to caves and megalithic monuments, considering first of all the words used in European dialects for ‘cave’, ‘burrow’, ‘dream’/‘to dream’, ‘healing’/‘to heal’. In the ethnophilological perspective, where lexical remains are studied as true archaeological finds, a connection is established between these data and vestiges offered by folklore and early written sources, in order to identify an original prehistoric context where caves can be regarded as typical and archetypal *dreamplaces*.

Keywords: Ethnophilology, Palaeolithic Continuity Paradigm, *incubatio*, dreamplaces, prehistoric caves

The aim of this paper is to provide a few examples of the new approach offered by Ethnophilology, related to the problem of prehistoric soundscapes. I would like to consider soundscapes in their necessary counterpart, that is to say the absence of sounds (or, if you prefer, the “silencescape”) of prehistoric caves and megaliths, used in those particular ritual practices known as *incubationes* (incubations).

ETHNOPHILOLOGY AND THE PALAEO-LITHIC CONTINUITY PARADIGM (PCP)

The ethnophilological approach consists essentially in a study of texts (or, better, ethnotexts) and other traces (mainly orally transmitted, such as legends, dialect names, place-names) first and foremost perceived in their continuity with a distant past (BENOZZO 2007b; 2009a; 2010a; 2010b). In doing this, Ethnophilology puts itself in the epistemological frame of the Palaeolithic Continuity Paradigm on the origins of languages and cultures (PCP: see ALINEI 1996-2000; 2003; 2006; and the website <www.continuitas.org>)¹, a new perspective which gives the opportunity of reconsidering the problem of folkloric, dialect, and oral remains. In short, the numerous communities of European dialect-speakers – who later become the “rural masses” – have virtually remained in the silence of prehistory until a short time ago, and their world, their material and spiritual culture have become subjects of special sciences, all marked by the norm ‘substandard’ or ‘subordinate’ or, as formerly, ‘popular’ or ‘folk’ (not only dialectology, but also folklore, ethnography, ethnology, cultural anthropology, popular/folk literature, popular/folk medicine, religion, law, music, art, and so on). This substandard universe, parallel to the cultivated one, represents, as has been pointed out many times, a universe of ‘remains’ and ‘wreckages’. ‘But, in order to define precisely their provenance (remains and wreckages of what?) it is necessary to relate this universe with what is the critical moment of the phenomenon – the moment of its birth, towards the end of the Neolithic and at the beginning of the Metal ages, the beginning of social stratification, the beginning of *history* for élite groups, and the beginning of a new form of *prehistory* for the socially

¹ According to this paradigm, the ‘arrival’ of Indo-European people in Europe and Asia must be seen as one of the major episodes of the ‘arrival’ of *Homo sapiens* in Europe and Asia from Africa, and not as an event of recent prehistory. ‘The differentiation process of Indo-European languages from the Proto-Indo-European common language, reconstructed by comparative linguistics, as well as that of their already separated branches (Proto-Celtic, Proto-Germanic, Proto-Italic, Proto-Balto-Slavic, Proto-Greek etc.) into their presently ‘substandard’, ‘dialect’ varieties, must have taken an extremely long time, and they must have been associated first with the varying episodes of the original migration from Africa, and then – with an increasingly faster tempo as social stratification and colonial wars began – with the varying cultural, social and political stages the new fragmented groups went through in the different settlement areas’ (ALINEI 2003: 38); see also OTTE 1997; OTTE - ADAMS 2000.

inferior groups. The universe whence these various collections of *remains* come – from dialectal ones to those associated with traditional *folk tales* and *myths* – is the universe of the groups who lost their freedom with the beginning of the Metal ages and the establishment of stratified societies. Naturally, it is also a continuation of the preceding universe of the Palaeolithic egalitarian societies’ (ALINEI 2004: 221) (see also ALINEI-BENOZZO 2008: 44-46).

The main consequence of this conclusion – which is in itself a first step in the formulation of a theory of generalized continuity – is that the prehistory merged with dialects does not cease even when they are made literate. ‘If we accept these observations, we shall be no longer able to maintain, *sic et simpliciter*, that old written languages are older than modern dialects. Substandard dialects, on the contrary, represent an earlier layer than written languages, irrespective whether these are modern or ancient’ (ALINEI 2004: 222). This reversed approach is confirmed for example by many studies about the totemic motivation behind several dialect names of animals and atmospheric phenomena, or about the prehistoric motivation of many dialect names of hand-tools and crafts (ALINEI 1985; 2001). In a plenary lecture given at the congress of the World Archaeological Congress which took place in Dublin (July 2007) I offered a representative exemplification of the evidence of a continuity from prehistory given by dialect names and legends related to European megaliths (BENOZZO 2008a).

“INCUBATIO” AS A WAY OF EXPERIENCING DREAMPLACES

Prehistoric *incubatio* – which consists in remaining for a long period inside a cave in order to receive, in a dream, some sort of revelation/inspiration or healing – has to be understood in the frame of a system of beliefs belonging to the human experience of particular places (e.g. natural caves or megalithic monuments) perceived as *dreamplaces* (for this notion cfr., *infra*, MESCHIARI 2010).

As far as Europe is concerned, it is possible to identify a number of ways in which prehistoric men may have made use of cave. Caves were places ‘of sensory deprivation where altered states of consciousness could be induced with the view of gaining access to the world of spirits’ (ALDHOUSE-GREEN - ALDHOUSE-GREEN 2005: 46). European and Asian rock art has already been studied in this perspective, and several examples from Middle and Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic caves have already been pointed out (FRANCFORT 1998; ROGOZHINSKII 2001; CROOK 2002; for the cult of caves in Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, cfr. WATSON - KEATING 2000; BARNATT - EDMONDS 2002; PESSINA - TINÉ 2008: 265-272). Occasionally, scholars argued that in these particular places ritual practices of *incubatio* took places, often relating them with dreamvisions belonging to a Shamanic system of beliefs (LAUFER 1931; TEDLOCK 1991), or with the persistence of rites of passages (for example, ‘in early Nordic cultures, young men were commonly understood to need a kind of dormancy before they stepped out into manhood and that often this would entail their lying about for months at a time near the hearth in a “ritual lethargy” or quasi hibernation’: FLINDERS 1993: 235). In a more fruitful perspective, looking at these phenomena from a social viewpoint which is different from the elitist or sacerdotal one, it has recently been argued that ‘rock art is not an incidental phenomenon which passively records scenes of “primitive gods” from ancient societies, but a material reality integral to the practices and experiences of living peoples’: in this sense, ‘dreams and visions become just as relevant to the study of past societies as archaeological material culture (i.e. pots and tools) and hypothetical reconstructions of language’, because ‘dreams are embedded in people’s engagements with natural places as the oneiric scenes of rock art were powerful visions of otherworlds and the visible manifestation of ancient dreamscapes’ (LYMER 2009: 53, 54).

ETHNOPHILOLOGICAL TRACES OF PREHISTORIC “INCUBATIO”: THE THREE MAIN LEVELS OF EXCAVATION

But, which instruments do we concretely have to argue the existence of *incubationes* in prehistoric times? Obviously we don’t possess any depicted or written source about that, and rock art cannot give us any help in this field. The main point of my paper is the statement that sources studied by Ethnophilology could be regarded as the only material evidence for it (for other examples of the use of words as archaeological finds, see BENOZZO 2010b; 2010d). In order to find elements useful for this approach, one should be able to operate on three main levels:

(1) The first level is the *ethnolinguistic* one: this means that one should be able to find a connection between sleep, dreams, healing in European dialects.

(2) The second level is the *folkloric*: this means that it would be significant to discover legends, related to specific prehistoric sites, where the theme of *incubatio* is structurally present.

(3) The third level is the one documented by *early written texts*: from the point of view of a prehistoric continuity, it means that it would be essential to find documents where practices of *incubationes* were described in more recent times (and – of course – in a different context), but always in correlation with prehistoric sites.

The first level (Ethnolinguistic)

The huge presence of verbs, in European dialects, which contemporary mean ‘to sleep’, ‘to dream’, ‘to heal’, and also ‘to compose poems’ (which means, in other terms, ‘to be inspired’) is remarkable. I limit myself to quote a few examples: in a dialect of Occitan Val Roia the verb *ensongiâr* means contemporary ‘to dream’ and ‘to heal’ (ALIBERT 1976: 255); the same can be observed in the Ladin of Val Badia, with the verb *sugner* (ALTON 1986: 68) Breton *hun* ‘sleep’ means also ‘healing’ in the variant of the Vannes district (DELAPORTE 1992: 65). In the Welsh dialect of Powys (central Wales) the verb *bredwydd* means ‘to dream’, from the Celtic root *BREDW- which in medieval texts means ‘to heal’ (GPC: I, 66). The dialectal Swedish *söva* means ‘to sleep’ and ‘to heal’ (HELLQUIST 1966). Dutch *dromen* ‘to dream’ means also ‘to heal’ in the *Afrikaans* variant (the Dutch spoken in South Africa from 17th century) (WEIJNEN 1966: 315). This last example continues the same root of English *dream* and *to dream*, that is to say *DRAUGMAS, whose original meaning (documented in the old Germanic languages) was ‘illusion, ghost’ (cfr. also Sanskrit *druh-* and Avestic *druz-*) (MANN 1984-1987: 184). Irish *samhe* means ‘to sleep’ and ‘to heal’, and the well known feast of *Samain* (Gaulish *samonios*) is strictly related to legends of rebirth and magical journeys inside caves of the Otherworld (GUYONVARCH 1990). Hebrew *hechelim*, an inchoative form of the verb *chalam* ‘to dream’, means ‘to heal’ (COHEN 1999). Very interesting is the root UNI- of finno-ugric languages: it is in fact continued into Finnish *unelma* ‘dream’, Estonian *uni* ‘heal’ and also Estonian *unikko* ‘*papaver somniferum*’ (SADENIEMI-VESIKANSKA 1990: 204; SSA: III, 372).

In Western Emilian dialects, the term *bernardoun* is used with both the meaning of ‘poet’ and ‘healer’ (BENOZZO 2006-2008: II, 92; 2008b). The Gaelic dialect of the Isle of Skye show the same development: here the poet is named *an choáithe* and the magician-healer *an cheáithe* (BORGSTRÖM 1941: 77). In the Welsh dialect of the Bangor district (North Wales) the verb used for ‘to heal’ is *cerdedd*, and it is related to the name *cerdd* which is the Welsh word for ‘poetry’ (FYNES-CLINTON 1913: 24; HAMP 1999). Coming back to the Northern Italian area, it is noteworthy that in the Ladin spoken around Moena (Fassa valley) *garir un cànt* means ‘to compose a poem’ (CHIOCCHETTI-IORI 2002: 89) (the first meaning of *garir*, from the same root of Italian *guarire*, is ‘to heal’). To sum up, there is linguistic evidence of an original connection between the three activities of sleeping/dreaming, healing and composing poetry (which means, on a more general level, being inspired) (see also BENOZZO 2009b).

In this context it is important to quote a Greek term which is present in three inscriptions found near Paestum (where the colony of Velia was introduced in the 6th century B.C.). In these inscriptions three healers (Oulis son of Aristone, Oulis son of Eulisno, and Oulis son of Ieronimo) are named with the word *phòlarchos*. This word is unknown in the Greek vocabulary, but, following an interpretation offered by COSTA 2007: 94, it is easy to interpret the second part of it (*archòs*) as the Greek word for ‘chief, lord’; with regard to the first part (*phòl*), one can say that it seems to be connected with the same root of the name *pholeos* ‘cave, burrow, hideout, place where animals go to spend their lethargy’ and of the verb *pholeuo* ‘to remain in a cave, to hide himself’. One can also compare it to Old Irish *bol* ‘shelter, nest’, and to the Swedish *böle* ‘lair for beavers’ (*ibidem*). This means that the chief of the colony of Velia is the master of a *pholarchia*, that is to say an initiation-wisdom school with magico-esoteric connotation, where men were healed through the practice of ritual *incubatio*, remaining in the silence of a cave as animals.

Another relevant semantic correlation is the one offered by a few names connected with Latin *incubatio* (an excellent analysis of the original written sources can be found in CANETTI 2009; 2010a): this term means both ‘incubation’ – in the technical connotation here analysed – and ‘brooding of eggs’ (the corresponding verb is *incubare*, continued by Italian *covare*, Sardinian *kuare*, Occitan *coar*, French *couver* ‘to brood’), but in a Southern Italian derivation (Calabrian *cuba*) it means also ‘cave’

(CORTELAZZO - MARCATO 2005: 163), and in the variant *incubus* it means ‘nightmare’ ‘evil spirit’, ‘devil’, ‘ghost’ (see Italian *incubo*, Lombard *lénkov*, Friulan *vénkul*, Old Spanish *encovo*: REW 360). These meanings suggest that: (a) the ritual of incubation was originally connected with the observation of animals’ practices (e.g. lethargy and brooding) and the incubation of men inside caves was probably perceived as similar to the one of birds inside eggs (cfr. also the already recalled connection between the cave of incubation and the lair of animals); (b) it originally happened in caves (the name of the cave itself derives from the practice of incubation in a Southern Italian dialect); (c) during the ritual men came into contact with the world of spirits.

The second level (Folklore)

Passing now to what I have called the folkloric level, one can quote oral tales found in the Nebbiu Region of Northern Corsica. For example the legend of the *Lurcu* (*A fola du Lurcu*), which is situated around the Monte Revincu. According to this legend, the *Lurcu*, a giant-shepherd with long hair, lived near a place named Casta. His house (*casa di u Lurcu*) and his mother’s house (*casa di Lurca*) are two dolmens (dated 3500-2000 BC), separated by a plateau named *Cima di Suarella* where a set of megalithic rectangular or circular structures can be found (dated 4327-4044 BC). It is said that the giant was very clever and powerful. People from the nearest village to his house (Santu Petru di Tenda) decided to kill him: they captured him by means of a stratagem near Bocca Pianosa, a place where the *Lurcu* used to come to drink. In order not to be killed, the *Lurcu* told them two secrets: 1) how to make a special cheese with sheep’s milk (called *brocciu*), and 2) what to do with the rest of the milk when the cheese has been made. He tells them that he received these information in a dream, after sleeping for three months inside a cave near his house (SANTUCCI *et al.* 2004). The connection between a megalithic site and a legend related to *incubatio* could not be more explicit (ALINEI - BENOZZO 2009: 51-52).

A similar correlation can be observed in Wales. In the Cardiff area a legend has been collected about a giant named Cerdden, whose body originally formed part of a Neolithic circle of standing stones, two of which remain. His supernatural ability consisted of the art of building ships that were able to navigate without sailors, and, mostly, in the capability of seeing the future by sleeping for long periods inside a cave beneath the cliff, in order to receive a revelation in a dream (GROOMS 1993: 34).

The third level (early written sources)

In the French area, precisely near the village of Conques (northern region of the old province of Rouergue, now the department of Aveyron), a legend about a gallery tomb (*allée couverte*) dated 4th millennium tells about two giants who were able to rise from the dead when killed, after laying for many days under the megalithic gallery: at the end of this period of *incubatio* they received dream-visions about the future of the territory (IMF: 70). This is an important case studies also for the evidence of a long continuity with practices that are documented in written medieval sources. I am referring to the famous *Book of Sancta Fides’ miracles (Liber miraculorum Sancte Fidis)*, written by Bernard from Angers and dated at the early 11th century (ROBERTINI 2004): here we find many descriptions of ritual practices of *incubatio*, placed just at Conques, the same village where the gallery tomb stands and where – not by chance – a sanctuary dedicated to Sancta Fides was built in 9th century (ASHLEY - SHEINGORN 1999: 32). People used to go there till the late 14th century, in order to lay for many days in a small cave under the sanctuary and to receive cure from the martyr who appeared to them in a dream vision (*ibidem*: 66; CANETTI 2010b).

Several examples of this practice can be found also in the Greek world. For example Strabo describes it as the typical ritual of a temple in Caria (COSTA 2008: 175-176). According to Diogene Laerzio, Epimenides slept for 57 years in a cave, before receiving in a dream the responses by gods (*ibidem*: 177). *Incubationes* occur in Celtic countries as well: the text known as *Sanais Cormaic* (dated to the late 10th century) is the most representative one: it describes the way how a poet can become a poet, by sleeping at least one month in a cave, waiting for a revelation during a dream (BENOZZO 2007a: 23-75).

But I would like to point out, again, that the example of the village Conques is of an extraordinary importance. Here, in fact, we find, in the same place, the presence of (1) a megalithic site, (2) an oral

legend where *incubatio* plays a central role, (3) a written medieval reference about a sanctuary that pilgrims used to reach for obtaining similar (but Christianized) divinity healings. Combining these data with the linguistic ones found in dialect names and verbs, one must deduce, from an ethnophilological point of view, that megalithic galleries and natural caves were used as dreamplaces, that is to say as places where, through experiences of *incubationes*, altered states of consciousness were induced.

INSIDE THE PREHISTORIC CAVE: FURTHER ETHNOPHILOLOGICAL REMARKS

Going back to the main theme of our session, one should consider that an important role was played, in this context, not only by darkness, but also by the particular soundscape of caves, inhabited only by silence and natural echoes (DEVEREUX 2001; for a model of structural correlation between soundscape and landscape, see BENOZZO 2000; 2002; 2004: 45-49). Archaeoacoustical research has occasionally pointed out that in the Palaeolithic and Neolithic caves and monuments echoes from the lithophones or human voices tend to be strongest from rock wall surfaces which contain the famous rock paintings (REZINKOFF 1988; REZNIKOFF - DAUVOIS 1988): 'it would seem that the acoustic properties of the cave were at least as significant to the painters as the art itself, as the position of the art seems to have been dictated by the resonance' (MORLEY 2006: 69). CROSS and WATSON (2006) note that 'studies at Neolithic monuments in the British Isles (c. 3800–2000 BC) have suggested that these places were conducive to the creation of dynamic multisensory experiences, affording acoustic effects such as echoes, resonance and standing waves (WATSON - KEATING 1999; 2000; WATSON 2001a; 2001bb). While it could be argued that these effects are simply a fortuitous by-product of architecture that was originally intended to serve quite different purposes, it seems unlikely that acoustic effects would have gone unnoticed in prehistory'. Specific analysis on quantitative acoustical data have been made about the shape caves, in order to point out the importance of shapes for cave acoustics, and echoes have been mentioned as a phenomenal attribute of certain rock art sites (DAMS 1984; WALLER 1993). Correspondences have also been suggested between deep cave painting placement *versus* locations that resonate at particular musical notes (DAUVOIS 1989). Finally, some authors have suggested that 'caves themselves, and features of caves, were used as sounding devices' (MORLEY 2006: 33).

But I would like to remain, again, on the ethnolinguistic level, looking for evidence offered by the living languages. Let's have a look, for instance, at the words for 'cave' in European languages. The main part of them comes from the Indo-European root *KEL-, which means 'to hide', continued in Latin *celo* 'to hide' and *cella* 'cell', but also in Old High German *helan* 'hell, house of dead people', Old Icelandic *Hel* 'goddess of the dead people', Old Irish *cuile*, which means both 'hiding place' and 'silence', and Welsh *coail* 'dream' (ALINEI 1996-2000: II, 830). In short, the different meanings found in words used for 'cave' coming from the same root, allow to reconstruct an original motivation behind it, where the notions of 'hiding place', 'darkness', 'silence' and 'dream' formed a stratified semantic field which is consistent with the hypothesis of the existence of a prehistoric *incubatio* and of the perception of caves as *dreamplaces*².

Finally, it becomes relevant to quote the word for 'cave' used in the alpine regions, that is to say Italian *balma*, Ligurian and Piedmontese *barma*, French *baume* and other similar ones. This name is also present in many place-names, in a territory that, from the western Alps, reaches Valencia in the South and the Belgian territories in the North. According to FOLCH-PI 1977, this name can be associated with the cult of Saint Magdalene (which of course, as it always happens in similar cases, must represent the Christianization of previous beliefs and conceptions). It would come from the name of the oil connected with her healing capabilities, that is Latin *balsamum*, to be understood as the Christianization of earlier prehistoric rituals connected with the preparation and unction of corpses (JEUNESSE 1997; BENOZZO 2010c): one could remember that Latin *caverna* 'cave' must be connected (as English *cave*) with the adjective *cavus* 'hollow', but – as the dialect Italian names *cataverna*, *cadaverna* indicate – seems to be a continuation of *CATAVERNA, related also to the Latin word *cadaver* 'corpse' (ALINEI 1996-2000: II, 826). The cult of caves is, according to PERONI 1996: 122, 'one of the most conservative elements' of

² The existence of other words such as Italian *grotta*, which continue a Latin form *GRUPTA, seems to confirm that the semantic field of the original word was perceived as a sort of taboo-word: **grupta* is in fact a loanword from Greek *krypté* – from *krýptein* 'to hide' –, and it is possible that, as it frequently happens, this form was a replacement of the original taboo-word, which was presumably, also in Latin, a continuation of the same root *KEL- (ALINEI 1996-2000: II, 830).

sacred landscape, and contemporary folklore related to natural caves should be always considered, first of all, ‘in its continuity with early prehistoric traditions’³. The etymology of the Alpine name for ‘cave’ represents an excellent final illustration of my discourse, as the main feature of Saint Magdalene’s life, according to the many biographies written about her since the early Middle Age (and also, before, according to the reference found in the *Patrologia Latina* [XIII: 155-156], dated to 4th century), is the fact that she remained for 30 years in a cave (named just *Sainte Baume*) between Marseille and Toulouse, where she had a dream revelation that gave her the power of thaumaturgy (MAISCH 1998: 34-35; further data are discussed in ALINEI 1996-2000: II, 826-829).

The importance of this last example collected from living dialects is well understandable: considering that the name of the cave itself, in the variant of the alpine dialects comes from the practice of *incubation* (and remember also the Calabrian *cuba* that I have analyzed before), one may conclude that not only *incubatio* was one of the experiences connected with prehistoric caves, but that caves were precisely identified with this practice. In other words, also etymologically, caves must be identified as typical and archetypal *dreamplaces*.

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³ For the linguistic stratigraphy of these notions, it is relevant to recall what Mario Alinei points out, when he writes that ‘while the notion of ‘death’ can go back to Middle Paleolithic, namely to *Homo loquens*’ first lexical classification and articulation of the universe and of individual and social life, for the notions of ‘burying’ and ‘grave’ we must wait, indeed, for the Upper Paleolithic when, with *Homo sapiens sapiens* and a higher degree of intellectual and cultural development, religion and ritual begin, with the generalization of burial accompanied by the careful preparation of the corpse and the addition of personal ornaments and symbols’ (ALINEI 2008: 15-16): in this sense, one should note that there is a common Indo-European root for the verb ‘to die’ [*MER-], while linguistic roots for ‘to bury’ and for ‘grave’ appear differentiated in the single linguistic families (Celtic, Germanic, Italic, Greek, Balto-Slavic).

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Sounds of the Silent Cave. An Ethnophilological Perspective on Prehistoric "incubatio". Francesco Benozzo. This paper approaches the problem of prehistoric rituals of incubation related to caves and megalithic monuments, considering first of all the words used in European dialects for "cave", "burrow", "dream"/"to dream", "healing"/"to heal". In the ethnophilological perspective, where lexical remains are studied as true archaeological finds, a connection is established between these data and vestiges [Show full abstract]