

The Possibilities of A Name

Welcome one and all to Cano!

Also known as Lugar do Cano. Vila do Cano; or *de* Cano... Maybe canno, cana...
Cur? Nude!

The reason for certain words is lost in time and in the history of sounds, despite the talent of philologists and etymologists to delight us with such a beautiful archaeology of the senses. It may be that there is no greater purpose behind certain place names, and that someone is called João only because thousands of people since names have been names are called João (and variations on the word). There must have been, somewhere, a place without a name; not even a sound, a whistle or a snapping of fingers, nothing. And so it was very difficult to get there.

Leite Vasconcelos, Pinho Leal and João Falcato were some of the Portuguese scholars who put forward theories — nay certainties! — about ‘Cano’ and so more recently was João Richau, who wrote the first monograph on the village. This publication reveals that Souzel and Cano win the regional prize for the most more enigmatic toponyms. Especially Cano, because it is the oldest settlement.

We know that it served as a base for the Celts and the Turdetani people. One could imagine that, in some Celtic language, *kannoh* was the name given to an ancestral technique for producing straws made from a sweet fibre that, in contact with alcohol, produced a very pleasing effect on the palate. People came from all over to taste the nectar!

We also know that these peoples lived alongside the Lusitanos, their neighbours to the north; we even know that they understood them. *Cahannus* may be the Lusitanian term for the most beautiful flower in the Iberian Peninsula, famous for its vibrant carmine hue, which blanketed the countryside from April to August. Today, we don’t know whether the last of the species still survive hidden away, anonymous and still to be found, who knows whether in the Souzel mountains or in the backyard of some Cano citizen. They're precious!

Then the Romans arrived, with their mania for dominating even the local nomenclatures. In the Latin they brought *Canus*, which was the masculine form of *cane*, today present in the Portuguese word *cãs*, meaning ‘white, silver or white-haired’. This was used to denote a wise and influential old man or elder, important for the foundation of the village. Either that or a harsh winter, when it snowed and everything was covered in white.

But as Latin never simplifies the equation, the Romans also brought the terms *canus*, relating to chanting; *canna*, relating to the reed, but also to a pastoral flute; and *canum* relating to dogs. We should not be surprised if archaeological remains are found in the largest Canodrome in the Iberian Peninsula. It is said that people came from far away to see the famous Cano Greyhounds competing. This was a gambling arena: vast fortunes were won and lost in the ancestral Village of Cano.

And let us not forget the Visigoths and their Gothic language. These named the place after the large population of bats that inhabited the local caves. There is an underground world beneath Cano, with galleries, corridors and enclosures; subterranean streams and waterfalls; and in these specific conditions certain animals have adapted and survived — some from prehistoric times. The Visigothic word for ‘bat’ did not survive, but there are those who claim that ‘land of bats’ would sound exactly like ‘Cá-Nô’.

The Arabs invade! In this case, fortunately, there is documentation. The term *qanāt* means ‘underground irrigation gallery’ — a place name justified by the legendary abundance of water in the region. All the peoples mentioned above settled here thanks only to subsistence farming made possible by the abundance of water. It's precious!

Let us then consider what is lost from a word as it passes down the centuries. In other words, what if the current word was part of a larger one, like ‘dea-con’, ‘Cano-n’ or ‘tou-Can’? If it were not so old, we could also consider ‘Canoe-ing’ or even ‘ba-Cano’ (cool).

Stories of popes, bishops and religious crimes could feature in our founding

fathers' history if the term were 'Cano-nised', 'Angli-Can', 'Francis-Can', 'Vati-Can'.... Or to what travels and adventures would the original term 'Mohi-Can', 'Afri-Can', 'Mexi-Can', 'Ameri-Can', 'Jamai-Can' or 'Mozambi-Can' refer...? Just imagine!

No hypothesis is more unlikely — and therefore stimulating — than that of having its origin in the scientific terminology 'Glycosaminogly-Can'.

Glycosaminoglycans are components of body tissues that make up as much as 30% of their organic material; they are found in our cartilages, bones and cornea; dermis and tendons; liver, lungs and aorta. It is a tenable hypothesis, given that its main function is the retention of water in the tissues, so that they remain moist — an obvious link to the aquifer situation of the Cano region.

This explanation has many aspects to it, but we are not satisfied: the town's proximity to the Spanish border remains to be explored. Cross over it and ask for 'Una caña, por favor' and they'll serve you a beer. The brewing of beer by hand is a centuries-old tradition in the region. Of course, the most famous producer comes from Casa Branca; but the proximity between villages leads us to conjecture about the very remote beer of Cano.

What about the existence of a volcano, now dormant, that the Spaniards would call 'vul-Cano'? — is this not a good theory?

I digress. Will it make any difference to today's Cano dwellers that the name of their village honours a white-haired old woman, water fountains, or a long time ago under the rule of a ferocious pack of dogs? Whether it was a flute, a chant, a cane or a Spanish beer — what difference will it make?

A lot! Because Joana is not Ermelinda and Lucy is not Teresa. And if we give up on definitive explanations, we find that a whole universe of possibilities opens up! To quote Richau: *'To conclude, I would like to point out that a definitive and permanent explanation about the origin and meaning of some place names may never be forthcoming.'* So much the better.

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