

# Rome in the Construction of Basque Identity: Archaeological Arguments

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“The truth is that the real Basque enigma arises from the preservation, rather than the origin, of the language”

Koldo Mitxelena

In recent years, the concept of national identity has experienced a strong resurgence. Nicolas Sarkozy, former French president from 2007 to 2012, launched a debate on a key issue: what does being French mean? It had wide repercussions and reached the whole country through all kinds of means. This debate was not free of controversy and there were well-founded opinions against it but, although it was initially welcomed, many were disappointed with how it developed (Le Parisien, 2009).

In these kinds of debates, anthropology cannot ignore the values of the past and is closely linked to history and archaeology, as has been common for some time. In fact, the major territorial restructuring of the old Europe in the 19th century, with the birth of new nations, was to a great extent founded upon identity constructs based on the historical past. In the case of the independence of Greece from Turkish rule, to mention a well-known event, the memory of the classical period was an asset that helped initial cohesion. This can also be applied

to the Italian Risorgimento, which used the 3rd century BC to argue for the unification of Italy.

But even today, history as a determining factor can also play a key role. This concerns, without going too far, the controversy over the name of the former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia which, when it proclaimed its independence in 1991, chose to be called the Republic of Macedonia and had a confrontation with Greece because of this decision. On that occasion, the archaeological finds in Vergina in the 1970s and 80s, in which the tomb of King Philip, father of Alexander the Great, was discovered, helped reorient the debate in favour of the approaches advocated by Helenians.

The history of Greece, France, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy provides arguments and proof for national origins. Dorians, Ionians, Macedonians, Celts, Gauls, Angles, Saxons, Franks, Vikings, Normans... form part of this history as ancestors of Greeks, Irish, English, French or Danish, to cite some outstanding exponents.



The piers and dry dock of the Roman port of *Oiasso*, Santiago sector, during the archaeological excavations in 1993 (Fundación Arkeolan).

## And Basques? How Have Basques Constructed their National History?

Mainly through the language: *Euskera* (Basque). Language is so determining that they use the word *euskaldun* or *euskalduna* to refer to themselves. The Spanish Royal Academy of Language (RAE) accepts it as a synonym for the term “Basque” but the correct translation is “Basque-speaker”. Etymologically it is the result of conjugating the word *euskal* (Basque)

with the suffix *-dun* (the possessor); in other words, who possesses or has the Basque language. In any case, it is currently used to refer to people who are Basque, regardless of whether they speak *Euskera*.

The Basque identity is, therefore, directly linked to *Euskera*, the Basque language, whose origin continues to be one of the major mysteries of European culture. All kinds of hypotheses have been considered: some of them relate it to Berber languages and others to Caucasian languages or the Iberian language but what is clear is its isolated nature and the link with the language of the ancient Aquitaine inscriptions, dated between the 1st and 3rd centuries AD (Igartua and Zabalza, 2012: 33).

Accepting that it is an isolated language also qualifies the proposal of fully including it among the pre-Indo-European languages, as has been traditionally argued. This pre-Indo-European character has given it the cache of being the oldest language in Europe, an aspect widely shared both by Basque society and other agents.

The truth is that the idea of a very old language that some even date back to the Palaeolithic is widespread. This belief has resulted in an anthropological (physical or biological) equivalence as it also implies that current Basques originated in those remote times and, moreover, an archaeological correlation has been established. For instance, the discovery and interpretation of prehistoric skulls in the Urtiaga cave, found in the excavations conducted in the 1930s (Aranzadi and Barandiaran, 1948), supported the construction of a theory that considered the “Basque character” a local evolution of the Palaeolithic Cro-Magnon.

Certainly there are reasons (founded or unfounded) to consider that the Basque language is one of the oldest in Europe. These arguments are enough to apply this assessment to other fields. If, moreover, in the territory there is a network of major sites from the

Upper Palaeolithic, including significant cave sanctuaries, and we have the contribution of internationally renowned scientists, who reach similar conclusions, the belief that we Basques “do not descend” is perfectly understood, as illustrated by an anecdote cited by the German Kurt Tucholsky (1927). It reads as follows: “A count of Montmorency spoke highly, in front of a Basque, about the antiquity of his name, his lineage, his family; he boasted about the great men he descended from. The Basque replied ‘My Lord, we Basques don’t descend!’”

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It appears as though this ancestral vision is justified; emotionally the Basques attach more value to the hypotheses that support their antiquity while they barely refer to the most recent events. This supports the almost mystical respect for prehistoric research and the low interest in the study of the Roman period of the Low Middle Ages.

This assessment, in addition, is closely linked to the key issues of the identity discourse: if *Euskera* is a thousand-year-old language, one of the oldest in Europe as previously mentioned, why does it survive today?

### What Arguments Have Been Used to Explain its Survival?

As early as in the late 16th century, several authors agreed in considering that the territories of the Basques had remained free of any invader and that, therefore, they were the original inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula. Esteban de Garibay, Juan Martínez de Zaldivia

and many others believed in the equivalence between Cantabrians and Basques, taking for granted that when historical sources referred to the former they also included the latter. Everything complemented with biblical considerations on Patriarch Tubal from whom they would directly descend. Garibay’s statement (CH I, Book IV, Chapter IV, 89) is representative of this current. He argues that “Tubal taught his relations the laws of nature and that the language of Cantabria, now called Bascongada, was the first in Spain, for which there is convincing evidence.”

They more or less advocated the idea that *Euskera* was the first language of the Iberian Peninsula, brought by Tubal and his descendants after the breakup of Babel (Inchaustegui, 2011). It had remained unaltered over the centuries because the Cantabrians (Basques) had withstood any attempt of conquest and domination, as the aforementioned Garibay (CH I, book IV, chapter IV, 77) points out: “Which from Patriarch Tubal to the present had been preserved in this land, without any other language being introduced or any mixing with foreign nations outside its precepts, whether because of the strength of the land or its people or both.”

Although Garibay was soon discredited and his proposals disregarded, the Basque-Cantabrian current and the consideration of the irreducible character of these peoples, along with the theory relating it to Tubal, prevailed for a long time. Among the exponents of this vision we can cite in the 17th century Gabriel de Henao (1689) and in the 18th century Father Larramendi (1728 and 1736). However, this theory had been questioned for some time. In fact, the work of Oihenart (1638) had refuted the equivalence between Cantabrians and Basques, also providing unequivocal data of the Roman presence based on Greco-Latin geography texts. However, the fissure was completely opened with the printing of the book

by the Augustinian Henrique Flórez in 1768 (Flórez, 1768) that refused the identification between Cantabrians and Basques while arguing convincingly for the Roman presence in the Basque Country. Moreover, in the same period, the archaeological finds from the Roman era began, which were limited to the area of Álava.

The discoveries led to reconsidering the effect of resisting the Roman conquest, while the new approach began to take shape: the dual vision of the territory, marked by the water divide. On the southern side, the Mediterranean, the fertile lands and the open horizon of acculturations; on the northern, the Atlantic, the mountain area, with its impenetrable forests where the original essences would have been preserved.

This dual model, structured around the north-south dichotomy, would replace the theory that advocated the independence of the ancient Cantabria against the attempts of domination by the Romans. The proposal successively refined in the light of archaeological finds in the 18th century and, mainly, in the 19th century, finally confirmed the Roman presence in the northern area of the territory. However, in Gipuzkoa and in Biscay, due to the lack of tangible proof, the opposed and differentiated vision prevailed.

Based on this conceptual vision, Julio Caro Baroja formulated his proposal of the *saltus* and the *ager*, which was so influential in later research. Caro Baroja thought that his dual designation (*ager/saltus*) was due to the fact that the Basque land was divided in two: a mountain area and a flat area (Caro, 1971). In another of his works on Basques and their neighbours (Caro, 1985) he resumed the issue and delimited the two areas that make up the territory of the Basques: the *ager vasconum* and the *saltus vasconum*. In his view, “ancient historians and geographers clearly believed that the territory of the Basques comprised two very different parts. In the south, by the river Ebro,

there was the flattest land, suitable for growing cereals, which in a text by Titus Livius, at least, is known under the name of *ager vasconum*. But, apart from this area which is the first known and referred to by the Romans, where there were several major population centres [...], the Basques occupied a completely different territory, known as *saltus vasconum*. The word *saltus* gives an idea of a land of woods, pastures, forest and, to some extent, monstrous areas [...]. Thus, the Basques were present in an area between the banks of the river Ebro, through the *ager*, to the shores of the Ocean, and up to the snowy summits of the Pyrenees, through the *saltus*, which was the biggest part.”

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Based on these opinions, many historians have accepted that the territory of the Basques was divided into two parts: the *vasconum saltus* and the *ager vasconum*. In the south, the *ager*, the flat land, suitable for growing cereals, on the lands by the river Ebro. This area has been defined as more open and permeable to Mediterranean and Roman culture. In contrast, in the north, in the foothills of the Pyrenees, the forest, arid, impermeable *saltus* devoted to grazing and pastures.

However, in the last quarter of the century many archaeological finds have been made that have demanded new approaches to the Roman period in this area. *Oiasso* is the most important site in the research conducted in Gipuzkoa. In the rest of the territory and also in Biscay there have been significant finds; on the coast, those



Roman mine of Arditurri 10, Oiartzun (Fundación Arkeolan).

in Bermeo, Lekeitio, Forua, Ondarroa, Getaria, Zarautz, San Sebastian and Hondarribia in inland those of Orduña, Salinas de Léniz, Oñati and Tolosa, along with Roman remains in the mountain ranges of Aralar and Aizkorri. This panorama radically contrasts with the vision that prevailed until a few years ago of resistant and unconquered territories faced with the military and colonising power of the Romans in Gipuzkoa and Biscay.

### The Development of Roman Archaeology and the Formulation of a New Paradigm

In Irun, from 1969, there have been major Roman finds. The first, including the remains of a necropolis with over one hundred cremation urns and three mausoleums, preserved inside the shrine of Saint Helena, had almost no effect on the issue of the *saltus*, but as research

intensified and the finds continued, the approach had to be reformulated. The harbour, found in 1992 and the first to be discovered in the Iberian Peninsula, definitively contributed to identifying the *Oiasso* cited by Strabo, Pliny and Ptolemy with today's Irun.

News of the find quickly spread and there was the opportunity to examine it with renowned specialists; the collections of items recovered also became a meeting and cooperation point with other archaeologists, providing contrasting assessments. There was agreement on the significance of the discovery, and this receptive atmosphere continued when suggesting equally ambitious complementary actions. Immediately after the first excavation on Santiago Street was completed, other nearby pieces of land were surveyed and the sensational harbour registers were repeated.

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However, the process was slow and complex. Collective identities as a people are usually very rooted and supported by profound, shared, permanent and long-lasting social essences. In the Basque case, the resistance to Rome was recorded in the textbooks available at all levels of the education system, in administrative matters and in any cultural event with historical elements.

The refusal to admit the extraordinary Roman finds in Irun was so categorical and hostile that the Arkeolan Foundation team responsible for the finds prioritised social action over academic action. In the immediately following years this team took any opportunity to talk about the Roman presence: radio,

press, local and regional television channels, lectures, exhibitions and many more outlets. They had firsthand material such as wooden docks that had survived in excellent condition, extraordinary large collections of all kinds of ceramics, wooden and leather items and seeds. This was complemented by a mining heritage in the surroundings, focused on La Peña de Aia massif, with several kilometres of galleries and an underground landscape as a result of the exploitation of silver, copper and iron. The importance of the sites discovered had even an international scope and the fieldwork (urban excavations, soundings and surveys) and studies have continued until the present.

In short, it meant the consolidation of a young Roman archaeology that emerged against the tide of the prevailing historiographical trends but with results that are a benchmark in the Atlantic area of the Empire, both in terms of harbours and mining. An archaeology that, moreover, had to overcome the lack of academic and university frameworks and develop pioneering alternative methods, with a spirit of constant improvement and the aim of informing society about archaeological finds. In this line of work, the opening in 2006 of the municipal Museo Romano Oiasso in Irun has definitively contributed to establishing the new discourse, based on four main pillars:

### **The *Saltus-Ager* Binomial**

As suggested in recent works (Urteaga, 2008), the *saltus* and *ager* model, one of the dearest and most rooted approaches to the Roman organisation of the territory of today's Basque Country, cannot be supported by Greco-Latin sources. The idea of a wet, forest, impenetrable and poorly Romanised Atlantic area, on the one hand, and the fertile, cultivable Mediterranean area with a road network and urban centres, on the other, in which Roman rule spread unhindered. In other words, the duality between the resistant and subjected, indigenous and colo-

nised, *euskaldunes* and Latinised and so many others that have grown under the umbrella of this binomial are not present in the sources used by Caro Baroja, which are Titus Livius and Pliny. However, in terms of the *saltus*, the *vasconum saltus*, it is possible to suggest that it is a specific geographical point: a place located on the Cantabrian coast, at the foot of the Pyrenees, next to *Oiasso* or in *Oiasso* itself, if the *vasconum saltus* is considered as the pass over the river Bidasoa. If we recognise the relation of the *vasconum saltus* with the mining district of La Peña de Aia, it could also be accepted that *Oiasso* was part of the *vasconum saltus*.

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The *vasconum saltus* is, therefore, an economic area related to the exploitation of the mine and the Pyrenees passes. It was later, at the end of the 4th century, when poets, using the stereotype created by the perceived equivalence between the inhabitant of the *saltus* and a ferocious, non-civilised, dangerous inhabitant, created the image of the uncivilised and indomitable Basque (Urteaga and Arce, 2011). But in this case the term no longer has anything to do with how Pliny used it within a territorial administrative enumeration.

### The Externum Sea

With the identity of the *vasconum saltus* re-oriented and the dual version of the territory eliminated, at Arkeolan Foundation and the Museo Oiasso they worked on the line that argues the existence of an Atlantic Roman culture with its own personality in contrast to the models of the Mediterranean Roman world,

which are standardised in the texts and the collective image. The archaeological remains of the Basque transport networks on the northern side form part of this context of Roman culture. The Roman conquest articulated this area and established a network of ports that guaranteed sea communications; the main ports were promoted linked to towns and important transport routes. Moreover, the Romans outlined connections with the Mediterranean through river and land routes that linked both seas.

The research presents a community that expressed itself through a fully tangible Roman culture yet with its own differentiated features. It became a coastal community and opened up to the trade provided by shipping, as it includes important ports such as *Londinium* (London), *Burdigala* (Bordeaux), *Brigantium* (La Coruña) and *Oiasso* (Irun). The settlements on the coast were the meeting point of trade routes that exported the products from the interior and extended their area of influence inland to make goods and cultural stimuli reach places located along the water basins far from the Atlantic. It is the *mare externum* cited in literature as the alter ego of the inner sea, the *mare nostrum*.

### Rome, a Bridge of Access to the Culture of the Hellenistic World

It has been proven that Roman colonisation was not a unidirectional action but brought about a set of dynamics combining the process of integration of the indigenous peoples and the response of Rome in the form of transformations and mechanisms of adaptation to these new realities. Undoubtedly, the area that today corresponds to the Atlantic side of the Basque Country was included in this historical process.

The integration takes the form of the adoption of a single currency and system of weights and measures, the calendar, the political, administrative, legal and economic system, food, clothing, the pantheon of deities, the army and many other aspects.

But the aspect that has been emphasised in the identity discourse, based on finds such as the valve of a Ctesibius water pump in the Roman port of *Oiasso* or the mining topography, as well as elements related to the opening of galleries and the exploitation of materials, has been the belief that these Basque territories also formed part of the network of the very powerful Roman culture and that, through it, they received the technological knowledge of the Hellenistic world. In short, it was a historical phase of extraordinary updating of the indigenous peoples in the Basque area as a result of their integration into the Empire.

### Latin Was Not an Imposed or Compulsory Language

Romans were tolerant with the conquered people, mainly in terms of languages. This is stipulated in the Digest, in a juristic text by Ulpian on the taxes imposed on trusteeships: “The *fideicommissa* can be left in writing in any language, not only Latin or Greek but also Punic or Gaulian, or any other language of other people.” Latin was not an imposed or compulsory language; and, moreover, Digest’s law (which refers to the 2nd century AD) involves the recognition of the practical and actual existence of the use of several languages (and there were many) in the Empire. The inhabitants of Roman Egypt continued to speak Greek and sign their marriage contracts or wills in Greek, although the country’s administration was Roman (Urteaga and Arce, 2011).

In short, Roman culture is the eyes of Narcissus in which the river of ancient Basque history is reflected. The metaphor seeks to emphasise that Romans were the first to describe and name the territory and narrate the lifestyles of the indigenous. Through its sources we know the oldest written data about the Basque geography and its intangible and tangible heritage reveal the colonising impact on the indigenous societies. In the urban settings,

this impact was similar to what happened in the other areas of the Atlantic, which enabled them to update themselves and be at the historical forefront. In the end, for Basques it was an accelerated and intensive course that in less than two centuries enabled them to ensure their survival and emerge better prepared to face the geopolitical situation of the future centuries.

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