
**The
BASQUE
HISTORY of
the WORLD**

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*To Marian,
who makes life sparkle*

SEVEN PROVINCES OF BASQUELAND



Introduction: The Island and the World

The Basques are one of the unique people-islands to be found on the face of the earth, completely different in every sense from the peoples around them, and their language, surrounded by Aryan languages, forms an island somehow comparable to those peaks which still surface above the water in a flood zone.

—Lewy D'Abartiaque, ON THE ORIGIN OF BASQUES, 1896

*(A study made at the request of the
London Geographic Congress of 1895)*

“These Basques are swell people,” Bill said.

—Ernest Hemingway, THE SUN ALSO RISES, 1926

THE FIRST TIME I heard the secret tongue, the ancient and forbidden language of the Basques, was in the Hotel Eskualduna in St.-Jean-de-Luz. It was the early 1970s, and Franco still ruled Spain like a 1930s dictator. I was interested in the Basques because I was a journalist and they were the only story, the only Spaniards visibly resisting Franco. But if they still spoke their language, they didn't do it in front of me in Spanish Basqueland, where a few phrases of Basque could lead to an arrest. In the French part of Basqueland, in St.-Jean-de-Luz, people spoke Basque only in private, or whispered it, as though only a few miles from the border, they feared it would be heard on the other side.

Much of St.-Jean-de-Luz, but especially the Hotel Eskualduna, seemed to function as a safe house for Basques from the other side. Spanish was almost as commonly heard as French. But at the little café on the ground floor of my hotel, the elderly hotel owner and her aging daughter whispered in Basque. When I walked into the room, they would smile pleasantly, offer me a suggestion for a restaurant or a scenic walk, and then resume talking in full voice in Spanish or French. As I opened the big glass-and-iron door to the street, I could hear them once again whispering in Basque.

The first time I went to St.-Jean-de-Luz, I arrived by train and was carrying heavy bags. I chose the Hotel Eskualduna because it was close to the train station. It was also inexpensive and housed in a fine, historic, stone building with a Basque flag over the doorway and antique wooden Basque furniture inside. I kept returning there because it seemed that something interesting was going on, though I never found out what. For that matter, it was years before I realized that the hotel had been a center for the Resistance during World War II and that my helpful, smiling hosts were decorated heroes who had been the bravest of people at one of mankind's worst moments.

Everything seemed a little exciting and mysterious in Basqueland. With so much painful and dramatic history surrounding these people, I could never be sure who anyone was, and many Basques told astonishing stories about their experiences during the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and the Franco dictatorship. The silhouette of a long high mountain crest rises up behind St.-Jean-de-Luz where the sun sets, and this mountain, looking too rough to be French, is in Spain. I wrote in my notebook that the mountain, this Spanish border, looked like a “vaguely dangerous mystery.”

I don't feel that way about Spain anymore. I now know that mountain as a benign nature preserve in Navarra near the border. And I have come to realize that the Basque survival in France is, in its way, as impressive an accomplishment as Basque survival in Spain.

In 1975, I stood in the Plaza de Oriente to hear Franco's last speech. I witnessed “the transition” after his death when freedom and democracy and Western ideals were supposed to be established, and Basque violence was supposed to disappear, because it would be unnecessary and irrelevant. But with

Franco's men still in powerful positions and no one daring to remove them, the new Spain fell far short of the open democracy so many had hoped for, though it turned out considerably better than the enduring Francoism many had feared.

But the Basques were a surprise. Had I known more about Basque history, I would have expected this, but I had no idea that their language and literature and music and traditions would burst out like a flower after rain. Nor did I realize that neither Spanish democracy nor European integration would pacify the Basque longing.

FEW PEOPLE KNOW the Basques. What they do know is that Basques are tenacious. In Cervantes's sixteenth-century *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, the Basque, the "Vizcayan," can barely speak Spanish and has a large sword, and tiresomely insists on fighting. "Me kill you or me no Vizcayan," he says.

Four hundred years later, Anaïs Nin, in her erotic short story cycle, *Delta of Venus*, created a character simply called "the Basque." She wrote, "The Basque suddenly opened the door. He bowed and said, 'You wanted a man and here I am.' He threw off his clothes."

Derogatory like Cervantes, laudatory like Hemingway, or a little of each like Nin, in most of the literature and films "the Basque" has always been the same character—persevering and rugged and not even intimating the rare and complex culture, nor the sophisticated and evolved calculations behind this seemingly primitive determination to preserve the tribe.

The singular remarkable fact about the Basques is that they still exist. In 1896, Lewy D'Abartigar observed in his study of their origins:

This people is perhaps the only one in the world, at the least the only one in Europe, whose origin remains absolutely unknown. It is strange to think at the end of the 19th century, which has been so fertile on the subject of origins, that these few people still remain a mystery.

If it was strange a century ago, after Darwin, it seems even more unlikely today with our knowledge of DNA and genetic testing. But the Basques remain a mystery. Even more improbable—something few except Basques would have predicted—is that the mysterious Basques enter the twenty-first century as strong as, in some ways stronger than, they entered the twentieth century. This has been accomplished with more than simple tenacity and unshakable courage, though it has required that they do well.

ACCORDING TO A popular Bilbao joke, a Bilbaino walks into a store and asks for "a world map of Bilbao." The shop owner unflinchingly answers, "Left bank or right?"

This is *The Basque History of the World* because Basques at times think they are the world. They feel inexplicably secure about their place among nations. But more important, Basques, while they are protecting their unique and separate identity, always endeavor to be in the world. No word better describes Basques than the term *separatist*, a term they refuse to use. If they are an island, it is an island where bridges are constantly being built to the mainland. Considering how small a group the Basques are, they have made remarkable contributions to world history. In the Age of Exploration they were the explorers who connected Europe to North America, South America, Africa, and Asia. At the dawn of capitalism they were among the first capitalists, experimenting with tariff-free international trade and the use of competitive pricing to break monopolies. Early in the industrial revolution they became leading industrialists: shipbuilders, steelmakers, and manufacturers. Today, in the global age, even while clinging to their ancient tribal identity, they are ready for a borderless world.

WHEN CAPITALISM was new and New England traders were beginning to change the world, Boston enjoyed a flourishing trade with Bilbao. John Adams ascribed the prosperity of the Basques to the love of freedom. In 1794, he wrote of the Basques, "While their neighbors have long since resigned their pretensions into the hands of Kings and priests, this extraordinary people have preserved their ancient language, genius, laws, government and manners, without innovation, longer than any other nation of Europe."

This is a people who have stubbornly fought for their unique concept of a nation without even having a country of their own. To observe the Basques is to ask the question: What is a nation? The entire history of the world and especially of Europe has been one of redefining the nation. From pre-Indo-European tribes—all of whom have disappeared, except the Basques—Europe shifted through kingdoms, empires, republics, nation-states. Now there is to be a united Europe, touted as a new kind of entity, a new relationship between nations—though the sad appearance of a European flag and European national anthem suggests that this new Europe could turn out to be just a larger nineteenth-century nationstate.

Europeans learned in the twentieth century to fear themselves and their passions. They distrust nationalism and religious belief because pride in nationality leads to dictatorship, war, disaster, and religion leads to fanaticism. Europe has become the most secular continent.

An anomaly in Europe, the Basques remain deeply religious and unabashedly nationalistic. But they are ready to join this united Europe, to seize its opportunities and work within it, just as they saw advantages to the Roman Empire, Ferdinand's consolidation of Spain, and the French Revolution.

We live in an age of vanishing cultures, perhaps even vanishing nations. To be a Frenchman, to be an American, is a limited notion. Educated people do not practice local customs or eat local food. Products are flown around the world. We are losing diversity but gaining harmony. Those who resist this will be left behind by history, we are told.

But the Basques are determined to lose nothing that is theirs, while still embracing the time and cyberspace included. They have never been a quaint people and have managed to be neither backward nor assimilated. Their food, that great window into cultures, shows this. With an acknowledged genius for cooking, they pioneered the use of products from other parts of the world. But they always adapted them, made them Basque.

A central concept in Basque identity is belonging, not only to the Basque people but to a house known in the Basque language as *etxea*. *Etxea* or *echea* is one of the most common roots of Basque surnames. *Etxaberria* means "new house," *Etxazarra* means "old house," *Etxaguren* is "the far side of the house," *Etxarren* means "stone house." There are dozens of these last names referring to ancestral rural houses. The name Javier comes from Xavier or Xabier, short for *Etxaberria*.

A house stands for a clan. Though most societies at some phase had clans, the Basques have preserved this notion because the Basques preserve almost everything. Each house has a tomb for the members of the house and an *etxekandere*, a spiritual head of the house, a woman who looks after blessings and prayers for all house members wherever they are, living or dead.

These houses, often facing east to greet the rising sun, with Basque symbols and the name of the house's founder carved over the doorway, always have names, because the Basques believe that naming something proves its existence. *Izena duen guzia omen da*. That which has a name exists.



Etxea—a typical Basque farmhouse.

Even today, some Basques recall their origins by introducing themselves to a compatriot from the same region not by their family name, but by the name of their house, a building which may have vanished centuries ago. The founders may have vanished, the family name may disappear, but the name of the house endures. “But the house of my father will endure,” wrote the twentieth-century poet Gabriel Aresti.

And this contradiction—preserving the house while pursuing the world—may ensure their survival long after France and Spain have faded.

Historian Simon Schama wrote that when Chinese premier Zhou En-lai was asked to assess the importance of the French Revolution, he answered, “It’s too soon to tell.” Like Chinese history, the Basque history of the world is far older than the history of France. The few hundred years of European nation-states are only a small part of the Basque story. There may not be a France or a Spain in 1,000 years or even 500 years, but there will still be Basques.

THE ISLAND AND THE WORLD

<i>Nire aitaren etxea,</i>	I shall defend
<i>defendituko dut,</i>	the house of my father,
<i>Otsoen kontra,</i>	againstst wolves,
<i>sikatearen kontra,</i>	against draught,
<i>lukurreriaren kontra,</i>	against usury,
<i>justiziaren kontra,</i>	against the law,
<i>defenditu</i>	I shall defend
<i>eginen dut</i>	the house of my father.
<i>nire aitaren etxea.</i>	I shall lose
<i>Galduko ditut</i>	cattle,
<i>Aziendak,</i>	orchards,
<i>soloak,</i>	pine groves;
<i>pinudiak;</i>	I shall lose
<i>galduko ditut</i>	interest
<i>korrituak</i>	income
<i>errentak</i>	dividends
<i>interesak</i>	but I shall defend the
<i>baina nire aitaren etxea defendituko dut.</i>	house of my father.
<i>Harmak kenduko dizkidate,</i>	They will take my weapons,
<i>eta eskuarekin defendituko dut</i>	and with my hands I shall defend
<i>nire aitaren etxea;</i>	the house of my father;
<i>eskuak ebakiko dizkidate</i>	they will cut off my hands,
<i>eta besoarekin defendituko dut</i>	and with my arms I will defend
<i>nire aitaren etxea;</i>	the house of my father;
<i>besorik gabe</i>	They will leave me armless,
<i>sorbaldik gabe,</i>	without shoulders,
<i>bularrik gabe</i>	without chest,
<i>utziko naute,</i>	and with my soul I shall defend
<i>eta arimarekin defendituko dut</i>	the house of my father.

nire aitaren etxea.

Ni hilen naiz,

nire arima galduko da,

nire askazia galduko da,

baina nire aitaren etxeak

iraunen du

Zutik.

I shall die,

my soul will be lost,

my descendants will be lost;

but the house of my father

will endure

on its feet.

—*Gabriel Aresti*

THE SURVIVAL OF EUSKAL HERRIA

Nomansland, the territory of the Basques, is in a region called Cornucopia, where the vines are tied up with sausages. And in those parts there was a mountain made entirely of grated Parmesan cheese on whose slopes there were people who spent their whole time making macaroni and ravioli, which they cooked in chicken broth and then cast it to the four winds, and the faster you could pick it up, the more you got of it.

—Giovanni Boccaccio, THE DECAMERON, 1352

The Basque Cake

The truth is that the Basque distrusts a stranger much too much to invite someone into his home who doesn't speak his language.

—LES GUIDES BLEUS PAYS BASQUE FRANÇAIS ET
ESPAGNOL, 1954

THE GAME THE rest of the world knows as jai alai was invented in the French Basque town of St.-Pée-sur-Nivelle. St. Pée, like most of the towns in the area, holds little more than one curving street against a steep-pastured slope. The houses are whitewashed, with either red or green shutters and trim. Originally the whitewash was made of chalk. The traditional dark red color, known in French as *rouge Basque*, Basque red, was originally made from cattle blood. Espelette, Ascain, and other towns in the valley look almost identical. A fronton court—a single wall with bleachers to the left—is always in the center of town.

While the French were developing tennis, the Basques, as they often did, went in a completely different direction. The French ball was called a *pelote*, a French word derived from a verb for winding string. These pelotes were made of wool or cotton string wrapped into a ball and covered with leather. The Basques were the first Europeans to use a rubber ball, a discovery from the Americas, and they added the bounce of wrapping rubber rather than string—the *pelote Basque*, as it was originally called—led them to play the ball off walls, a game which became known also as *pelote* or, in Spanish and English, *pelota*. A number of configurations of walls as well as a range of racquets, paddles, and barehanded variations began to develop. *Jai alai*, an Euskera phrase meaning “happy game,” originally referred to a pelota game with an additional long left-hand wall. Then in 1857, a young farm worker in St. Pée named Gantxiki Harotcha, scooping up potatoes into a basket, got the idea of propelling the ball even faster with a long, scoop-shaped basket strapped to one hand. The idea quickly spread throughout the Nivelle Valley and in the twentieth century, throughout the Americas, back to where the rubber ball had begun.

St. Pée seems to be a quiet town. But it hasn't always been so. During World War II the Basques, working with the French underground, moved British and American fliers and fleeing Jews on their route up the valley from St.-Jean-de-Luz to Sare and across the mountain pass to Spain.

The Gestapo was based in the big house next to the *fronton*, the pelota court. Jeanine Pereuil, working in her family's pastry shop across the street, remembers refugees whisked past the gaze of the Germans. The Basques are said to be a secretive people. It is largely a myth—one of many. But in 1943, the Basques of the Nivelle Valley kept secrets very well. Jeanine Pereuil has many stories about the Germans and the refugees. She married a refugee from Paris.

The only change Jeanine made in the shop in her generation was to add a few figurines on a shelf. Before the Basques embraced Christianity with a legendary passion, they had other beliefs, and many of these have survived. Jeanine goes to her shelf and lovingly picks out the small figurine of a *joaldun*, a man clad in sheepskin with bells on his back. “Can you imagine”, she says, “at my age buying such things. This is my favorite,” she says, picking out a figure from the *ezpata dantza*, the sword dance performed on the Spanish side especially for the Catholic holiday of Corpus Christi. The dancer is wearing white with a red sash, one leg kicked out straight and high and the arms stretched out palms open.

Born in 1926, Jeanine is the fourth generation to make *gâteau Basque* and sell it in this shop. Her daughter is the fifth generation. The Pereuils all speak Basque as their first language and make the

exact same cake. She is not sure when her great grandfather, Jacques Pereuil, started the shop, but she knows her grandfather, Jacques's son, was born in the shop in 1871.



Jacques Pereuil and his son in front of their pastry shop at the turn of the century. (Courtesy of Jeanine Pereuil)

Gâteau Basque, like the Basques themselves, has an uncertain origin. It appears to date from the eighteenth century and may have originally been called *bistochak*. While today's gâteau Basque is a cake filled with either cherry jam or pastry cream, the original *bistochak* was not a gâteau but a bread. The cherry filling predates the cream one. The cake appears to have originated in the valley of the winding Nivelle River, which includes the town of Ixassou, famous for its black cherries, a Basque variety called *xapata*.

Basques invented their own language and their own shoes, *espadrilles*. They also created numerous sports including not only pelota but wagon-lifting contests called *orgo joko*, and sheep fighting known as *aharitalka*. They developed their own farm tools such as the two-pronged hoe called a *laia*, their own breed of cow known as the blond cow, their own sheep called the whitehead sheep, and their own breed of pig, which was only recently rescued from extinction.

And so they also have their own black cherry, the *xapata* from Ixassou, which only bears fruit for a few weeks in June but is so productive during those weeks that a large surplus is saved in the form of preserves. The cherry preserve-filled cakes were sold in the market in Bayonne, a city celebrated for its chocolate makers, who eventually started buying Ixassou black cherries to dip in chocolate.

Today in most of France and Spain a gâteau Basque is cream filled, but the closer to the valley of the Nivelle, the more likely it is to be cherry filled.

Jeanine, whose shop makes nothing besides one kind of bread, the two varieties of gâteau Basque and a cookie based on the gâteau Basque dough, finds it hard to believe that her specialty originated as cherry bread. Just as the shop's furniture has never been changed, the recipe has never changed. The Pereuils have always made it as cake, not bread, and, she insists, have always made both the cream

and cherry fillings. Cream is overwhelmingly the favorite. The mailman, given a little two-inch cake every morning when he brings the mail, always chooses cream.

Maison Pereuil may not be old enough for the earlier bistochak cherry bread recipe, but the Pereuil cake is not like the modern buttery gâteau Basque either. Jeanine's tawny, elastic confection is a softer, more floury version of the sugar-and-eggwhite macaroon offered to Louis XIV and his young bride, the Spanish princess María Theresa, on their wedding day, May 8, 1660, in St.-Jean-de-Luz. Ever since, the macaroon has been a specialty of that Basque port at the mouth of the Nivelle.

When asked for the antique recipe for her family's gâteau Basque, Jeanine Pereuil smiled bashfully and said, "You know, people keep offering me a lot of money for this recipe."

How much do they offer?

"I don't know. I'm not going to bargain. I will never give out the recipe. If I sold the recipe, the house would vanish. And this is the house of my father and his father. I am keeping their house. And I hope my daughter will do the same for me."



Itxassou cherries

1: The Basque Myth

The Basques share with the Celts the privilege of indulging in unrivaled extravagance on the subject of themselves.

—Miguel De Unamuno quoting Ampère,
HISTORY OF FRENCH LITERATURE BEFORE
THE TWELFTH CENTURY, 1884

THE BASQUES SEEM to be a mythical people, almost an imagined people. Their ancient culture is filled with undated legends and customs. Their land itself, a world of red-roofed, whitewashed towns, tough green mountains, rocky crests, a cobalt sea that turns charcoal in stormy weather, a strange language and big berets, exists on no maps except their own.

Basqueland begins at the Adour River with its mouth at Bayonne—the river that separates the Basques from the French pine forest swampland of Landes—and ends at the Ebro River, whose rich valley separates the dry red Spanish earth of Rioja from Basqueland. Basqueland looks too green to be Spain and too rugged to be France. The entire area is only 8,218 square miles, which is slightly smaller than New Hampshire.

Within this small space are seven Basque provinces. Four provinces are in Spain and have Basque and Spanish names: Nafarroa or Navarra, Gipuzkoa or Guipúzcoa, Bizkaia or Vizcaya, and Araba or Alava. Three are in France and have Basque and French names: Lapurdi or Labourd, Benaferoa or Basse Navarre, and Zuberoa or Soule. An old form of Basque nationalist graffiti is “4 + 3 = 1.”

As with most everything pertaining to Basques, the provinces are defined by language. There are seven dialects of the Basque language, though there are sub-dialects within some of the provinces.

In the Basque language, which is called Euskera, there is no word for Basque. The only word to identify a member of their group is *Euskaldun*—Euskera speaker. Their land is called *Euskal Herria*—the land of Euskera speakers. It is language that defines a Basque.

THE CENTRAL MYSTERY IS: Who are the Basques? The early Basques left no written records, and the first accounts of them, two centuries after the Romans arrived in 218 B.C., give the impression that they were already an ancient—or at least not a new—people. Artifacts predating this time that have been found in the area—a few tools, drawings in caves, and the rudiments of ruins—cannot be proved to have been made by Basques, though it is supposed that at least some of them were.

Ample evidence exists that the Basques are a physically distinct group. There is a Basque type with a long straight nose, thick eyebrows, strong chin, and long earlobes. Even today, sitting in a bar in a mountainous river valley town like Tolosa, watching men play *mus*, the popular card game, one can see a similarity in the faces, despite considerable intermarriage. Personalities, of course, carve very different visages, but over and over again, from behind a hand of cards, the same eyebrows, chin, and nose can be seen. The identical dark navy wool berets so many men wear—each in a slightly different manner—seem to showcase the long Basque ears sticking out on the sides. In past eras, when Spaniards and French were typically fairly small people, Basque men were characteristically large, thick chested, broad shouldered, and burly. Because these were also characteristics of Cro-Magnon, Basques are often thought to be direct descendants of this man who lived 40,000 years ago.

Less subjective physical evidence of an ancient and distinct group has also surfaced. In the beginning of the twentieth century, it was discovered that all blood was one of three types: A, B, or O.

Basques have the highest concentration of type O in the world—more than 50 percent of the population—with an even higher percentage in remote areas where the language is best preserved, such as Soule. Most of the rest are type A. Type B is extremely rare among Basques. With the finding that Irish, Scots, Corsicans, and Cretans also have an unusually high incidence of type O, speculation ran wild that these peoples were somehow related to Basques. But then, in 1937, came the discovery of the rhesus factor, more commonly known as Rh positive or Rh negative. Basques were found to have the highest incidence of Rh negative blood of any people in the world, significantly higher than the rest of Europe, even significantly higher than neighboring regions of France and Spain. Cro-Magnon theorists point out that other places known to have been occupied by Cro-Magnon man, such as the Atlas Mountains of Morocco and the Canary Islands, also have been found to have a high incidence of Rh negative.



Tolosa, typical of Basque towns, was connected to its valley and the seacoast by a river but isolated from the rest of the area by mountains.

Twenty-seven percent of Basques have O Rh negative blood. Rh negative blood in a pregnant woman can fatally poison a fetus that has positive blood. Since World War II, intervention techniques to save the fetus have been developed, but it is probable that throughout history, the rate of miscarriage and stillborn births among the Basques was extremely high, which may be one of the reasons they remained a small population on a limited amount of land while other populations, especially in Iberia, grew rapidly.

Before Basque blood was studied as a key to their origins, several attempts were made to analyze the structure of Basque skulls. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a researcher reported, “Someone gave me a Basque body and I dissected it and I assert that the head was not built like that of other men.”

Studies of Basque skulls in the nineteenth century concluded, depending on whose study is believed, that Basques were either Turks, Tartars, Magyars, Germans, Laplanders, or the descendants of Cro-Magnon man either originating in Basqueland or coming from the Berbers of North Africa.

Or do clothes hold the secret to Basque origins? A twelfth-century writer, Aimeric de Picard, considered not skulls but skirts, concluding after seeing Basque men in short ones that they were clearly descendants of Scots.

The most useful artifact left behind by the ancient Basques is their language. Linguists find that while the language has adopted foreign words, the grammar has proved resistant to change, so that modern Euskera is thought to be far closer to its ancient form than modern Greek is to ancient Greek. Euskera has extremely complex verbs and twelve cases, few forms of politeness, a limited number of abstractions, a rich vocabulary for natural phenomena, and no prepositions or articles.

Etxea is the word for a house or home. “At home” is *etxean*. “To the house” is *etxera*. “From home” is *etxetik*. Concepts are formed by adding more and more suffixes, which is what is known as an agglutinating language. This agglutinating language only has about 200,000 words, but its vocabulary is greatly extended by almost 200 standard suffixes. In contrast, the *Oxford English Dictionary* was compiled from a data base of 60 million words, but English is a language with an unusually large vocabulary. It is sometimes said that Euskera includes just nouns, verbs, and suffixes, but relative to simple concepts can become words of formidable size. *Iparsortalderatu* is a verb meaning “to head in a northeasterly direction.”

Euskera has often been dismissed as an impossible language. Arturo Campi3n, a nineteenth-century Basque writer from Navarra, complained that the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy defined Euskera as “the Basque language, so confusing and obscure that it can hardly be understood.” It is obscure but not especially confusing. The language seems more difficult than it is because it is so unfamiliar, so different from other languages. Its profusion of *ks* and *xs* looks intimidating on the page, but the language is largely phonetic with some minor pitfalls, such as a very soft *b* and an aspirated *h* as in English, which is difficult for French and Spanish speakers to pronounce. The *x* is pronounced “ch.” *Etxea* is pronounced “et-CHAY-a.” For centuries Spanish speakers made Euskera seem friendlier to them by changing *xst* to *chs* as in *echea*, and *ks*, which do not exist in Latin languages, to *cs*, as in *Euscera*. To English speakers, Basque spellings are often more phonetic than Spanish equivalents. The town the Spanish call Guernica is pronounced the way the Basques write it—Gernika.

The structure of the language—roots and suffixes—offers important clues about Basque origins. The modern words *aitzur*, meaning “hoe,” *aizkora*, meaning “axe” *aizto*, meaning “knife,” plus various words for digging and cutting, all come from the word *haitz* or the older *aitz*, which means “stone.” Such etymology seems to indicate a very old language, indeed from the Stone Age. Even though the language has acquired newer words, notably Latin from the Romans and the Church, and Spanish, such words are used in a manner unique to this ancestral language. *Ezpata*, like the Spanish word *espada*, means “sword.” But *ezpatakada* means “the blow from a sword,” *ezpatajoka* means “fencing,” and *espatadantzari* is a “sword dancer.”

Though numerous attempts have been made, no one has ever found a linguistic relative of Euskera. It is an orphan language that does not even belong to the Indo-European family of languages. This is a remarkable fact because once the Indo-Europeans began their Bronze Age sweep from the Asian subcontinent across Europe, virtually no group, no matter how isolated, was left untouched. Even Celtic is Indo-European. Finnish, Estonian, and Hungarian are the only other living European languages that are not related to the Indo-European group. Inevitably there have been theories linking Finnish and Euskera or Hungarian and Euskera. Did the Basques immigrate from Lapland? Hungarian, it has been pointed out, is also an agglutinating language. But no other connection has been found between the Basque language and its fellow agglutinators.

A brief attempt to tie the Basques to the Picts, ancient occupants of Britain who spoke a language thought to be pre-Indo-European, fell apart when it was discovered the Picts weren’t non-Indo-European at all, but were Celtic.

If, as appears to be the case, the Basque language predates the Indo-European invasion, if it is an early or even pre-Bronze Age tongue, it is very likely the oldest living European language.

If Euskera is the oldest living European language, are Basques the oldest European culture? For centuries that question has driven both Basques and non-Basques on the quest to find the Basque origin. Miguel de Unamuno, one of the best-known Basque writers, devoted his earliest work, written in 1884 when he was still a student, to the question. “I am Basque,” he began, “and so I arrive with suspicion and caution at this little and poorly garnered subject.”

As Unamuno pointed out, and this is still true today, many researchers have not hesitated to employ a liberal dose of imagination. One theory not only has Adam and Eve speaking Euskera but has the language predating their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The name Eve, according to this theory, comes from *ezbai*, “no-yes” in Euskera. The walls of Jericho crumbled, it was also discovered, when trumpets blasted a Basque hymn.

The vagaries of fact and fiction were encouraged by the fact that the Basques were so late to document their language. The first book entirely in Euskera was not published until 1545. No Basque had attempted to study their own history or origins until the sixteenth-century Guipúzcoan Esteban de Garibay. Spanish historians of the time had already claimed that Iberia was populated by descendants of Tubal, Noah’s grandson, who went to Iberia thirty-five years after the Flood subsided. Garibay observed that Basque place-names bore a resemblance to those in Armenia where the ark landed, and therefore it was specifically the Basques who descended from Tubal. Was not Mount Gorbeya in southern Vizcaya named after Mount Gordeya in Armenia? Garibay traced Euskera to the Tower of Babel.

In 1729, when Manuel de Larramendi wrote the first book of Basque grammar ever published, he asserted that Euskera was one of seventy-five languages to have developed out of the confusion at the Tower of Babel. According to Juan Bautista de Erro, whose *The Primitive World or a Philosophical Examination of Antiquity and Culture of the Basque Nation* was published in Madrid in 1815, Euskera is the world’s oldest language, having been devised by God as the language of Adam’s Paradise, preserved in the Tower of Babel, surviving the Flood because Noah spoke the language, and brought to present-day Basque country by Tubal.

In one popular legend, the first Basque was Aïtor, one of a few remarkable men who survived the Flood without Noah’s ark, by leaping from stone to stone. However, Aïtor, still recognized by some as the father of all Basques, was invented in 1848 by the French Basque writer Augustin Chaho. After Chaho’s article on Aïtor was translated into Spanish in 1878, the legend grew and became a mainstay of Basque culture. Some who said Aïtor was mere fiction went on to hypothesize that the real father of all Basques was Tubal.

Since then, links have been conjectured with languages of the Caucasus, Africa, Siberia, and Japan. One nineteenth-century researcher concluded that Basques were a Celtic tribe, another that they were Etruscans. And inevitably it has been discovered that the Basques, like so many other peoples, were actually the lost thirteenth tribe of Israel. Just as inescapably, others have concluded that the Basques are, in reality, the survivors of Atlantis.

A case for the Basques really being Jews was carefully made by a French clergyman, the abbot Espagnol, in a 1900 book titled *L’Origine des Basques* (The Origin of the Basques). For this theory to work, the reader first had to realize that the people of ancient Sparta were Jewish. To support this claim, Espagnol quotes a historian of ancient Greece who wrote, “Love of money is a Spartan characteristic.” If this was not proof enough, he also argues that Sparta, like Judea, had a lack of artisans. The wearing of hats and respect for elders were among further evidence offered. From there it was simply a matter of asserting, as ancient Greek historians had, he said, that the Spartans colonized northern Spain. And of course these Spartan colonists who later became Basques were Jewish.

With issues of nationhood at stake, such seemingly desperate hypotheses may not be devoid of political motives. “Indigenous” is a powerful notion to both the French and Spanish states. Both define their history as the struggle of their people, the rightful indigenous occupants, to defend their lands against the Moors, invaders from another place, of another race, and of another religion. In Europe this heroic struggle has long been an essential underpinning of both nationalism and racism. The idea that Basques were in their European mountains, speaking their own indigenous European language

long before the French and the Spanish, is disturbing to French and Spanish nationalists. Unless the Basques can be shown to be from somewhere else, the Spanish and French are transformed into the Moorish role—outside invaders imposing an alien culture. From the sixteenth century on, historians receiving government salaries in Madrid wrote histories that deliberately minimized the possibility of indigenous Basques.

But the Basques like the idea, which most evidence supports, that they are the original Europeans predating all others. If true, it must have been an isolating experience, belonging to this ancient people whose culture had little in common with any of its neighbors. It was written over and over in the records of those who observed the Basques that they spoke a strange language that kept them apart from others. But it is also what kept them together as a people, uniting them to withstand Europe's great invasions.

2: The Basque Problem

There lived many brave men before Agamemnon, but all are overwhelmed in unending night, unmourned and unknown, because they lack a poet to give them immortality.

—Horace, ODES, 23 B.C.

WHEN BASQUES FIRST began appearing on the stage of recorded history, even before there was a name for them, they were observed acting like Basques, playing out the same roles that they have been playing ever since: defending their land and culture, making complex choices about the degree of independence that was needed to preserve their way of life, while looking to the rest of the world for commercial opportunities to ensure their prosperity.

Long before the Romans gave the Basques a name, a great many people attempted to invade the mountains of what is now Basqueland, and they all met with fierce resistance. The invaders were Indo-European Europeans intending to move into the Iberian peninsula. It seems to have been acceptable to the indigenous people that these invaders pass through on their path to the conquest of Iberia. But if they tried to settle in these northern mountains, they would encounter a ferocious enemy.

The rulers of Carthage, a Phoenician colony built on a choice harbor in present-day Tunisia, seem to have been the first to learn how to befriend these people. Carthage began about 800 B.C. as a port city. As its commercial power expanded in the Mediterranean, this city-state with elected leaders and only a small population increasingly relied on mercenaries to defend its interests. By the third century B.C. the Carthaginians had made their way up Iberia to Basque country, but they did not try to settle, colonize, or subjugate the inhabitants. Instead, they paid them.

By this time the Basques were the veterans of centuries of war and were valued as mercenaries throughout the Mediterranean. They had fought in Greece in the fourth century B.C. In 240 B.C., conflict first over Sicily and then over Iberia led to a series of bitter wars between Carthage and Rome. Basque mercenaries fought for Carthage, the losing side, and are thought to have been part of Hannibal's legendary invasion of Italy in 216 B.C. The Basques knew Carthage when it was the greatest commercial center in the world, a city of imposing wooden houses on a hillside facing a prosperous harbor. And they saw Carthage after Rome destroyed it in 146 B.C., when the city was nothing but the blackened stone foundations of burned buildings, the once green hillside sowed with salt to kill agriculture. This taught the Basques to underestimate neither the power nor the ruthlessness of Rome.

ACCORDING TO POPULAR MYTH, their rugged, mountainous terrain made the Basques unconquerable, but it is also possible that few coveted this land. Many passed through, disproving the assumption that their mountains were impenetrable. They are small, but their steepness, the jagged protrusion of rock above the rich green velvet beauty of sloped pastures, gives them false importance, making them appear far higher than the mere foothills of the Pyrenees and minor ranges of the Cantabrian Sierras that they are. In a harsh winter the peaks are powdered with snow, giving them the illusion of alpine scale. But most of the passes, which appear at regular intervals throughout the Basque Pyrenees, are usable year round. In French, the passes of the region are called *ports*, meaning "safe harbors" or possibly even "gateways." The Basse Navarre village of St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port, on the Nive River, is surrounded by imposing peaks. Its name comes from being the rest-and-supply stop before the pass, what seems a thrilling climb up to the clouds. Yet the altitude of the peaks is not quite 5,000 feet, not

as high as the tallest of New York's Adirondacks, and the highest point in the pass below is a mere 3,500 feet at the heights of Ibañeta, before dropping down to Roncesvalles in Spanish Navarra. The other high pass, the Port de Larrau between Soule and Navarra, climbs through rocky peaks so bald it seems to be above the timberline. But it is only 5,200 feet high, and the Port de Lizarrieta, near the Nivelle Valley, has an altitude of less than 1,700 feet, an easy crossing for Celts, Romans, or World War II underground refugees. The central Pyrenees, to the east of Basqueland, have peaks twice the altitude of the highest Basque mountains.

It was not the foothills of the Pyrenees with their brilliant green, steeply inclined pastures, or the cloud-capped rocky outcroppings of Guipúzcoa, nor the majestic columns of gray rock towering above the Vizcayan countryside near Durango, nor the Cantabrian Sierra with its thrilling views of the wide Ebro Valley below, that conquerors coveted. Instead, invaders wanted the great valley of the Ebro where now lie the vegetable gardens of Logroño and the vineyards of Rioja, or the rich lands beyond in Spain, or they wanted the plains of France north of the Adour.



It is uncertain how large an area belonged to the pre-Roman Basques. The fact that their current known borders are edged by lands considered more valuable suggests that the Basques were pressed into this smaller, less desirable mountainous region, that they live in what was left for them.

The perennial issue of Basque history—who is or is not a Basque—obscures the boundaries of pre-Roman Basqueland. The Romans referred to a people whom they called Vascones, from which come the Spanish word *Vascos* and the French word *Basques*. The earliest surviving account of the Vascones is from the Greek historian Strabo, who lived from 64 B.C. to A.D. 24, which was after the Roman conquest of Iberia. But the Latin word *Vascones* is also the origin of *Gascognes*, the French word for the Basques' neighbors in the French southwest. It is not always clear when Roman accounts are referring to Basques and when they are referring to other people in the region. Or were Gascognes originally Basques who became Romanized?

A forceful Roman presence first appeared on the Iberian peninsula in 218 B.C., during the war against Carthage. In the rest of Iberia, the local population was first crushed, then Romanized, but Basqueland was more difficult to conquer. Rebellions continually broke out in Vasconia, not only by the Vascones, but also by the previous invader, the Celts. The Romans sent in additional legions, and in

194 B.C. the Celts, who had never been able to conquer the Basques, were decisively defeated by the Romans. Soon after, the Romans defeated the Basques as well.

Their defeat by the Romans marks the beginning of the first known instance of Basques tolerating Roman occupation without armed resistance. But the reason appears to be that the Romans, intent on more fertile parts of Iberia, learned to coexist with the Basques, and the Basques came to learn that Roman occupation did not threaten their language, culture, or legal traditions. The Romans came to understand that the Basques could be pacified by special conditions of autonomy. The Basques paid no tribute and had no military occupation. Most important of all, they were not ruled directly by a Roman code of law but were allowed to govern themselves under their own tradition-based system of law. The Romans asked little more from Basques than free passage between southern Gaul and the lands beyond the Ebro.

The Basques were left to their beloved sense of themselves, surrounded by an empire to which they didn't belong, speaking a language that none of their neighbors understood.

Crowded into steep, narrow valleys, their society was organized around control of the limited workable land. The needs of this cramped agricultural existence made Basque social structures different from those of societies that lived in ample expanses. The bottomland by the river was usually owned communally. Rights to grazing on the good slopes were administered by local Basque rule.

Leaving the Basques content in their mountains, the Romans conquered the Ebro and fought with each other over it. In 82 B.C., two Roman factions began a ten-year war for control of the Ebro. Sertorius, a battle-scarred warrior, proud of having lost one eye in combat, seized the valley with some local support. In a previous campaign against the Celts, Sertorius had learned enough Celtic to pass himself off in the enemy camp, and he boasted of his ability to penetrate local cultures. But in 71 B.C., the handsome and elegant Pompey, a favorite of Rome and commander of the forces loyal to the emperor, retook the Ebro and founded a town on a tributary, the River Arga. It was to be a strategic fortress, controlling both the plains south to the Ebro and important passes to the north through the Pyrenees. The town, which Pompey, with unflinching immodesty, named Pompaelo, also was intended to be a great outpost of Roman civilization. Later it became known in Spanish as Pamplona.

The few surviving fragments of Pompaelo do not suggest great Roman architecture, but even if it was only a provincial town of the empire, marble-pillared villas, temples, and baths built by the Romans must have been dazzling to the wild mountain Vascones.

At the time of Christ, Strabo wrote of three cities: Pamplona; Calahorra, which Pompey captured from the Celts the year he founded Pamplona; and Oiasona, of unknown origin and today called Oiartzun, a town located between San Sebastián and the French border. To the north, a military base called Lapurdum, thought to have been at the present-day site of Bayonne, began to grow into an urban center.

Roman cities became important to the Basques because the Romans also built an excellent road system connecting all of Vasconia, so that farmers and shepherds could bring their goods to the Roman-built cities to be sold. The Vascones learned to grow Roman crops such as grapes and olives for the Roman market. Rural Basque communities started decorating their villages with Roman mosaics and Roman-style monuments.

Basque mercenaries defended the far borders of the Roman Empire. Basques who fought well for the empire were offered Roman citizenship, a rare distinction until Caracalla, Roman emperor in 211, granted it to all the Empire. A Basque unit served in England, based in present-day Northumberland, and Basques helped defend Hadrian's Wall, which stretched across northern England to keep the Picts and other Celts out. Plutarch wrote that Gaius Marius, the antipatrician commander in whose name the one-eyed Sertorius had taken the Ebro, freed enslaved prisoners of war and made them his personal and fiercely loyal bodyguard. This force was composed of several thousand liberated Varduli, a Basque

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