

THE BASQUE PEOPLE OF THE MIDDLE AGES

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Prelude: Origins

It is quite well proven nowadays that Basques are the most pure native Western European population, tracing their roots at least to the Magdalenian hunter-gatherers of late Paleolithic.

It seems also quite clear that ancient Aquitanians, living south and west of the Garonne river were also Basque-speaking, as inscriptions and toponymy show. Caesar himself said that they were not Gauls but Iberians.

Still the name Basque comes from the tribe of the Vascones who lived south of the Pyrenees, grossly in what is now Navarre and northern Aragon. This name became widespread in Medieval times to refer to our people, still we call ourselves Euskaldunak: those that speak Euskara (Basque); and our country Euskal Herria (people or nation of the Basque language).

During most of the period of Roman occupation, Basques quietly accepted the rule of the Empire, which allowed them to almost totally self-rule their territories.

Bagaudae and de facto independence in the late Roman period

Apparently it was the spread of feudalism that woke Basques from their passivity. Unlike in the previous period, when the Basque territory had been just too poor to be exploited but for some mineral resources, the Roman aristocrats now had become land-hungry and every piece of productive land was susceptible of being appropriated in the context of an economy and society that was every day less urban and more rural.

Since the second half of the 4th century and along all of the 5th century, the phenomenon of Bagaudae had arisen precisely in the area of Basque population, though at times it became extensive to other regions as well. Inner limes have been identified in the periphery of the Basque-speaking region of the time, starting from the mid-4th century. These limes are characterized by the abundance of mints, a very significant finding in a period when money was scarce and was used almost exclusively to pay the armed forces.

Eventually, the Empire also found it difficult to control the peripheral plains (Ager Vasconum).

In 407 Basque troops under Roman leadership (Didimus and Verinianus) reject Sueves, Vandals and Alans when they tried to cross into Hispania for the first time. In 409 nobody opposed their passage. The Germans occupied the rich provinces of southern and western Hispania (Baetica, Lusitania, Gallaecia) but ignore the Basque territory which they only used as passage.

Et domuit Vascones - War with the Visigoths

Scared by the loss of control of the West and the declared objective of the Vandals to invade Africa by sea, Rome conceded those territories to the Visigoths (themselves sacking Rome at that time) in quality of foederati. The Visigoths reached Hispania in 416 and achieved their objectives very effectively in a short time: The Sueves became confined to mountainous Gallaecia, while Alans and part of the Vandals were annihilated (some Vandals did achieve their dreamed invasion of Africa, though).

Still the Visigoths, who installed their capital in Tolosa (Toulouse), weren't able to subdue the Bagaudae. Soon the term Vascones replace the more generic references of Tarraconensis and Aquitania. During all their history, each chronicle of every Visigothic king ends with this sentence: et domuit Vascones ("and subdued the Basques") but it is precisely the continuity of that pretension that better testified the persistence of Basque independence.

The Duchy of Vasconia

Basques of this period are still largely Pagan and their leaders or political organization aren't known, as they were also illiterate. It is not until the Duchy of Vasconia or Wasconia is organized by the Franks in the north (Gascony), that the first known monarchs of the Basques appear in history.

Lop II (Basque Otsoa , meaning Wolf) is the first Duke referenced as exclusively governing Vasconia/Gascony, reigning around 770. But the Duchy was previously united personally to the Duchy of Aquitaine (note: this Aquitaine beyond the Garonne is not the same than that of Caesar nor the region that nowadays bear the name in SW France but the post-Visigothic Duchy of that name, with capital in Toulouse). He is known as Lop or Loup II because Loup I (Lupus) reigned in both Aquitaine and Vasconia in aprox. 675-700.

Duke Eudes (Odo) of Aquitaine and Vasconia, known as "the Great" and a descendant of Lupus I, suffered the impact of Muslim invasion and while he defeated them at the Battle of Toulouse, he was then attacked by Charles Martel as well. Muslims renewed their efforts and Eudes was defeated near Bourdeaux. At this point Eudes couldn't but call for the help of his dreaded enemy, Charles, who gained fame and power defeating the Muslim invaders at Poitiers (732).

The Dukes of Aquitaine still kept their independence and resisted Frankish attempts to subdue them but eventually they were defeated by Charlemagne. At some point, before 768 Lupus II (Lop, Otsoa, Loup) became the first known Duke of Vasconia (also called Wasconia or, later, Gascony), independent from Aquitaine, and started a dynasty that ruled the territory sovereignty until the 10th century. Still a formal bond of vassallage tied the Duchy to the King of the Western Franks (later French) and this eventually gave path to its full incorporation to France after being dismembered in the late 10th century and suffering the hardships of the Hundred Years' War.

It is not well known the linguistics of the period but on the other hand, quite clear that the original Basque language was ceding territory to a Romance tongue of marked Basque influence: Gascon. Eventually Basque got confined to the SW corner of the the territory, what is now known as Pays Basque by the French and as Iparralde (the North) by Basques.

The Southern Basque Country: between Muslim and Frankish influence

The southern part of the Basque Country was after the Muslim invasion stretched between the two influences. Some pacted with the invaders and a Muslim native dynasty arose at Tudela soon: the Banu Qasi (heirs of Cassius), that, thanks of the support from the mountains, consolidates their domain in 816. The Mountain, with its traditional capital of Pamplona (known as Iruinea , "the city" or "the capital", to Basques) seemingly maintained their independence after Poitiers but the situation is not clear.

Roncesvaux (Orreaga)

The battle of Roncesvaux (known as Orreaga by Basques) in 778 was one of the major defeats of the great Emperor of the Franks. Charles had started an expedition to take Barcelona and Saragossa from the Muslims, after the local governors had agreed to swap sides. He had no problem in Barcelona, which became the capital of the newly formed Hispanic Mark, but he failed at Saragossa, where Charles and his many soldiers could not capture the well defended walls of the city.

When he retreated, he dared to destroy the protective walls of the city of Pamplona, placed in the only western route between Saragossa and the mainland, maybe doubting of the loyalty of Basques or maybe because he thought that it could fall to Muslims. Aggravated by such an aggression, the Basque clans organized an ambush in the mountains. The exact site of the battle is not known but the date is recorded in several sources: August 15th of 778, at sunset.

After the main part of the army had crossed the passage, the rearguard, formed by some of the best Frankish knights, leaded by Roland, was ambushed and annihilated. When Charlemagne could turn back and reach the place of the combat, he could only find the bodies of his soldiers and horses, and probably a multitude of vultures flying over it.

The Kingdom of Pamplona

Between 778 and 905 the situation was still obscure. But since consolidation of the Banu Qasi in Tudela (816), it seems very reasonable to consider that Pamplona was also self ruled. About this time the quasi-mythic figure of Eneko Aritza (Iñigo Arista in the Spanish sources) appeared as the first recorded king of Pamplona. This local dynasty governed in Pamplona and nearby regions until 905, when a dynastic change seems to have happened.

On this date, year 905, the extension of the Kingdom can be verified, though we still have to rely on rival Leonese sources. It seems that Pamplona at the start of the 10th century extended from the original Aragon territories in the central Pyrenees to Biscay in the west and most of Rioja in the southwest.

This region of Rioja (Errioxa), rather romanized and agriculturally very rich, would become at times the Royal residence (many kings are buried in Nájera/Naiara) and also the main point of friction with the Leonese and later Castilian Neighbors. It would also be the place where both Castilian (modern Spanish) and Basque were first written on paper... in the same paper. Castilian is, along with Gascon and the virtually extinct Argonese, one of the Romance languages that bears a clear and strong Basque influence.

The structure of the early Pamplonese state is similar to that of other Western European countries of the time, with a Court or Curia exerting centralized administration and lords in charge of local administration. Still the feudal model never consolidated in Pamplona where noblemen were before anything else appointed administrators that could easily be revoked by the King.

Sancho III Garcés the Emperor

Near the end of the 10th century this king, called the Lord of the Basques in Muslim chronicles, reached the throne of Pamplona. Through marriage, he also inherited as well County of Castile and exerted clear influence and even direct military protection in Vasconia (Gascony) and Leon. Governing directly or indirectly everything from Santiago to Bourdeaux, it's not any mystery why he has been called the Emperor by some, though he never used that title himself.

Near the end of his reign, a dramatic change happened in Al Andalus: the last Ummayad Caliph was deposed and the territory became divided into multiple emirates called taifas .

The first partition

Soon the ambitious Fernando, who also inherited the crown of Leon and Ramiro, managed to incorporate the small counties of his brother Gonzalo and place them in the domains of García. The battle of Atapuerca, near Burgos, in 1054, ended the life of García and gave many western territories to Castile-Leon.

The heir of García, Sancho IV, was assassinated by his brothers, giving opportunity for the intervention of Castile and Aragon to divide the Pamplonese territory among them.

The Restoration: the Kingdom of Navarre

Nominally at least, the Kings of Aragon, heirs of Ramiro, are also Kings of Pamplona, though this name soon changes to Navarre (from Basque Nabarra: plains, brownish), initially referred to the rather plain and not quite green (Mediterranean climate) lands south of Pamplona.

But Alfonso, the Battler, not having heirs, decides to give his domains to the military orders. This decision is not accepted by his subjects, neither Pamplonese nor Aragonese, and gives way to the restoration of the Basque kingdom under a new dynasty.

García Ramírez, the Restorer, becomes the new King of Navarre, soon claiming the lands that Castile had annexed previously and that were still inhabited majoritarily by Basque speaking people. He also has to face the dynastical claims of the Aragonese dynasty, now reinforced by their union with Barcelona.

Still, García and his son, Sancho the Wise, manage to liberate the western territories. García takes back the western provinces, what now constitutes the Basque Autonomous Community in Spain, then roughly known as Alava or Alaba. Sancho manages to recover all the original territory of Pamplona, not without difficulties.

Navarre in the time of Sancho VI the Wise

But Castile keeps promising to the lords of Rioja the feudal ownership of their domains, while the Church systematically takes a anti-Navarrese stand, interested as it is in the Reconquista against Muslims. A task that is now out of reach to weakly-Christianized and mostly uninterested Navarre.

Eventually Sancho of Navarre and Alfonso VIII decide to ask King Henry II of England for his arbitration. Alfonso just present as grounds for his large claims to be the conqueror of Toledo and heir of Sancho III. Meanwhile the Navarrese delegation on the original belonging of those lands to Navarre and the "proven loyalty of their naturals", thanks to which they could be recovered.

The arbitral sentence of the English monarch was based in the convenience of peace, in order to keep the expansion of Christianity, and basically allowed each one to keep what they had taken by the force of arms. Rioja is hence lost for Navarre but it could keep the western Basque provinces, still unorganized as such. Though the sentence is not respected initially, two years later, in 1179, the two kings sign a peace in the same terms. This peace lasts only two decades.

Navarrese right: the Fuero

As I have mentioned before, feudalism never rooted in Navarre and all institutions, though not very well regulated resemble more what we would call today a constitutional monarchy than the typical feudal system of the time.

It is precisely in this stage when the traditional law takes written form: the Fuero. This is not a single law but rather local laws, officially promulgated by the King, that are completely different to those of other neighboring regions, allowing self-government and eventually considering that the power of the very King is not but a delegation of the people.

This fact was proven earlier, when Sancho IV is elected by the army in Atapuerca (only to be killed soon after by his envious brothers), is proven again when García the Restorer is chosen without looking at his dynastical pedigree and contravening the will of his antecessor, and will be proven in all its force later, when the legitimate heir, Jaime of Aragon is rejected in

favor of Theobald of Champagne in a major attempt to keep the independence of the kingdom.

The second partition (Castilian invasion). Birth of the western provinces

Going back to the facts of history, in 1199, Alfonso VIII of Castile, benefiting from an absence of Sancho VII the Strong, decides to attack Navarre again. He put siege to Vitoria (Gasteiz) and Treviño (Trebino). Eventually, unable to send an army for combat, Sancho allows these fortified places to surrender. Vitoria did but not Trebino, what caused the revenge of the Castilians making of it a separate county under Castilian feudal law. This situation still persists and Trebino, though totally surrounded by Basque autonomous territory is still annexed to Castile-Leon despite the will of its naturals.

But for this exception, Castile, in order to control more easily the new territories, allowed them to be self-ruled under the traditional Fuero or Navarrese law. Still today the King of Spain at the start of his mandate must swear fidelity and respect to these particular laws, though their meaning was greatly downgraded in the 19th century.

The western ex-Navarrese territory was divided by Castile in three provinces: the County of Alava (Araba), the Lordship of Biscay (Bizkaia) and the Province of Guipúzcoa (Gipuzkoa). The three had very similar Fueros that allowed self-government and independent taxation. Despite of the fact that Castile exported most of its wool production through Basque harbors (mainly Bilbao, officially founded in 1300 specifically for this purpose), the customs border was always between the provinces and Castile, having nothing of the kind looking to the sea or "France".

Navarre under the Champagnes (1234-84)

As mentioned above, at the death of Sancho VII the Strong in 1234, Jaime of Aragon claimed the throne of Navarre but was rejected by the people and nobility. Instead, Theobald of Champagne was named new King. With Theobald I and his son, Theobald II, the formalization of the traditional law (Fuero) proceeded and Navarre finally had a written corpus iuri that was no longer just customs of obscure origin and local laws of lands and towns.

One of the most significative customs officialized is that each new King must be raised on a shield by a group of noblemen, symbolizing that his dignity is not that of divine origin but rather expression of the will of the community.

Theobald II is the first known monarch to give oath of respecting the Fuero to all the people of the Kingdom of Navarre, an act that was repeated since then by every other king. The fact that the Fuero and the very Royal dignity was emanated from the people is a situation without comparison in all of Medieval Europe, as the very Magna Carta promulgated by John Lackland in England is, at least formally, a concession from the King to his subjects and to noblemen, very different from the Navarrese case.

A very important concept to understand about the Navarrese Medieval democracy is that most of the population of the kingdom (and even more in the western provinces, regulated by similar laws) were acknowledged as hidalgos or infanzones (esquires), even if they own nothing but a rural house, a piece of land and a herd of sheep and work the orchards with their own hands. These peasant nobility, the wide majority of the subjects of the Navarrese King, had full right to participate in the estamentary Court (Parliament) of the Kingdom and in the local governments as well. The western provinces (now belonging to Castile) had no estamentary representation but an almost purely democratic one.

Union with France (1284-1349)

From Joan I (1274-1305) until Charles I (1322-28), Navarre experimented a union with France. Joan I inherited the Kingdom while still a minor, which awakened again the ambitions of Castile and Aragon. Additionally she faced a civil conflict between the bourgeois and noblemen in the Pamplona. Queen Mother Blanche decided for the lesser evil and asked the King of France, Philip IV, for help of arranging marriage between her daughter, the young queen, and the son of of the French (also named Philip). Philip IV designed a governor, Beaumarchais, that was rejected by the nobility and the War of the Navarrería broke apart. A French army then intervened, destroying the Navarrería (the stronghold of the nobility) and killing all its inhabitants (Navarrese and Jews). Meanwhile, a Castilian army reached the border, marching in support of the nobility, but eventually retreated.

This resulted in direct government of Navarre by Philip IV, who ruled ignoring the Fuero. But an alliance of knights and townsmen, leaded by an old association of infanzones, whose motto was Pro Libertate Patria Gens Libera State (for the freedom of the nation, people be free), rebelled and fought against the French direct rule. France intervened with massive forces, strongly repressing the rebels who nevertheless persisted in their fight.

Navarre under the Evreux (1328-1441)

The situation wasn't solved until the dynastical crisis of 1328 in France. When Charles IV (I of Navarre) dies, the English monarch then claimed the throne of France which could not be inherited by a woman, in virtue of the Salic law, (thus giving way to the Hundred Years' War). But this was not the case in Navarre. Joan II, married to Philip of Evreux, could be claimed by the Navarrese as legitimate queen, finally riding of the French problem.

Her son, Charles II the bad (1349-87), tried to recover the western territories by means of intervening in Castilian inner affairs. For several years he managed to keep Gipuzkoa and Araba. Earlier he intervened in the French wars, claiming even at some time the throne of France for himself. His policy was rather pro-English, anyhow.

Another foreign adventure in which Charles the Bad involved the Basque Kingdom was an exotic and badly known campaign to claim Albania for his brother Louis, who had married the Queen of Sicily. The expedition parted in 1375 but apparently Louis had already died in combat before the time they arrived.

His son Charles III the noble (1387-1425), unsatisfied by the unsuccessful interventionist policy of his father, showed a much more cautious attitude.

Internally, the Fuero was developed and consolidated, manufacturing and commercial activity rose and, lacking a harbor due to an earlier Castilian earlier, they use Bayonne (under the Earl of Labourd, who was often the English King) for that purpose.

Muslims (specially around Tudela) and Jews were recognized as special situations. There were few rare problems. Their situation was excellent until the Castilian invasion. And racist attitudes were repressed strongly by the state.

Also, for the first time, feudalism appeared in strength. The right of hereditary transmission of the Kingdom was, against all precedent, formalized and also large feuds were created out of public patrimony and royal privileges. The upcoming civil wars can not be understood without this feudal degeneration, that also existed, though less markedly in the western provinces.

The Trastamaras (1425-79)

With Queen Blanche (Blanca) (1425-41), who interrupted the male line, the Trastamaras of Aragon intervene again. John (Juan) of Aragon seduced and married the young Queen and took over the government of Navarre, initially as king consort and later as regent of his son Charles IV (Charles of Viana). But when Charles reached age majority, with the pretext of a testamentary recommendation of Queen Blanche, suggesting that he shouldn't assume the throne without the advise of his father, John kept the title of King and left Charles only as governor, quite irregular.

Eventually John married again, to the an important Castilian noblewoman, Juana Enríquez, later the mother of Ferdinand of Aragon, and even designed her as governor of Navarre, displacing Charles.

Charles couldn't bear it anymore and he rejected this measure and attempted to raise all Navarre against the Aragonese dominion. Yet, the Kingdom appeared divided between two noble factions (Beaumonts and Agramonts). Civil war arose, becoming an endemic, along with continuous foreign interventions and the extension of the unrest to the western provinces under Castile (here the factions are called Gamboa and Oña).

Charles was captured, departed and finally died in suspicious circumstances. But the Baumont loyalist faction supports then his sister, Blanche, who was also eliminated. The crown passes then to another sister, Leonor, who married Gascon of Foix, Viscount of Bearn. Now the Agramont support her but she was also suppressed.

In a letter to his daughter Leonor, some time before her death, John of Aragon confessed that she had become an obstacle for his own projects, which focused on his youngest son Ferdinand who would eventually be known as "the Catholic", the first actual ruler of Spain.

The House of Foix

Since Ferdinand doesn't have any legitimacy to the throne of Navarre, after the death of Leonor, her relative, Francis Phoebus (1479-83), still a young kid was crowned King under the protection of his mother, Magdalene of Valois. For some time peace seemed to have been reached and a truce was signed at Aoiz (Agoitz).

But the civil war soon arose again until in 1483, when after the boy king died, his sister Catherine assumes the throne. Her marriage with John of Labrit would eventually bring peace to the Kingdom. But Ferdinand of Aragon kept intriguing and sustaining his illegal claim to Navarre.

Luis de Beaumont supported Aragon but was finally expelled, thanks to the intervention of Cesare Borgia, son of the Pope Alexander VI, and brother-in-law of Labrit.

During this brief period of peace, John started reconstruction and major reforms but these were aborted due to Spanish invasion of 1512.

The third partition (Spanish annexation)

In 1511 one of many holy leagues intended to expel the French from Italy was formed around Pope Julius II, and included Ferdinand of Aragon (and regent of Castile), Henry VIII of England and the Republic of Venice. Louis XII of France is excommunicated and Navarre finds itself in the middle of an international conflict.

Determined to invade Navarre, Ferdinand made demands to John seeking a casus belli. The agreement with France was easier as they settle with neutrality. Ferdinand demanded a bull from Pope Julius II that would excommunicate the Navarrese monarch. Not having obtained it, he simply falsified one.

In the Spring of 1512 Ferdinand raised a large, supposedly to fight against France but actually invade Navarre. Resistance, though brave, was useless, specially with the English at Bayonne cutting any succour from the French. Despite the lack or balance between the two forces, not a single town surrendered without having the Castilian army size them. Only some of the Beaumont faction leaders were present in the Castilian among all Navarrese.

After some months of Castilian occupation, Labrit returned with an army, recruited in the territories, Basque or Gascon, of his sovereignty north of the Pyrenees. This army reaches Pamplona but couldn't take the city from the Duke of Alba.

In 1513, The Navarrese Court was forced to sign a pact that allowed, as happened in the western provinces, Ferdinand to keep the nature of the Kingdom. Ferdinand sworn the Fuero ... but would do as he pleased.

The Navarrese people didn't actually accept the domination and hoped to eventually restore their independence. Castile actually occupied militarily the territory for several centuries and carried on a systematic repression.

In 1516 and 1521 Henry II, son of John and Catherine, tried to liberate the main part of the Kingdom again. In both cases he was supported by popular uprisings, especially in the second, when the people benefitted from a temporary lack of Castilian garrisons which allowed them to arise in favor of the legitimate King even before his army crossed the mountains to attack. In Pamplona, Íñigo de Loyola, commander of the Castilian forces who later founder of the Jesuit Order, was forced to find refuge in a castle that was just built.

In this occasion, independence was at reach, as all Navarre was liberated by the allied army of Henry II. Yet, Asparros, the commander of the liberating army, committed major errors, licensing the infantry and putting siege to Logroño. Finally he was defeated at Noain (June 30th of 1521) by a Castilian army of triple his size.

The resistance remained active and in the following year 200 Navarrese were besieged and killed by the Count of Miranda at Amaiur. The Navarrese banner also was waved at Hondarribia (Fuenterrabía) when more than one thousand Navarrese took this border and coastal town and its fortifications.

Epilogue: The still independent Kingdom of Navarre in the North

Centuries before, after the fracturing of the Duchy of Wasconia and the first partition, when the Restorer García managed to achieve again the independence of Navarre, he also managed to incorporate it into the Basque-speaking county of Labourd (Lapurdi). This was brief, as the English would soon take Bayonne and half the coastal towns. The remainder continued to belong to Navarre under the common name of Lower Navarre. This small territory, along with the other possessions of the Labrit monarchs, kept the name and fame of Navarre after 1512. The capital though was moved to Pau, in the romanized Bearn.

Another piece of the Basque-speaking territories, the Viscounty of Soule (Zuberoa) remained semi-independent for long time under Bearnese protection as well.

In the displaced Navarre, the Labrit Kings, who tried unsuccessfully twice to liberate the south, kept the reforming processes that they had started in Pamplona. This reformation eventually reached religion and Navarre became the southernmost country to adopt Protestantism as its official religion. In this context, the first Basque literature arose with Bernat d'Etchepare and Johannes de Leizarraga. He latter translated the Bible into Basque, when the bible was translated to other European languages.

Bearn and the other possessions of the Kings of Navarre would become very actively focused on Reformation, which caused some internal conflicts but mainly problems with its powerful neighbors: Catholic France and Spain .

Eventually, this process would culminate with the last King of Navarre, Henry III, owner of many feuds in France and leader of the Huguenot party in this country, becoming himself King of France (as Henry IV) after a rather forced conversion into Catholicism. He was believed to have said then the famous sentence: Paris is well worth a mass .

Though Henry kept Navarre separated from France for the duration of his reign, which was also done by his son Louis II (Louis XIII of France), upon the death of this monarch, Navarre was finally incorporated to France. This did not mean that it lost its self-government, as the other Basque provinces belonging to France didn't, and from then the Kings of France formally entitled themselves also as Kings of Navarre

The special autonomous status of the Basque territories would only be destroyed in France with the Revolution, in 1791, and in Spain with the first Carlist War of 1833.

But that's another story.