Political identities in conflict: the Lordship of Vizcaya in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries

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This work analyses political identities at the end of the Middle Ages in the Lordship of Vizcaya, examining chronicles and municipal documents from the period and considering symbolic or ritual elements such as heraldry in order to determine the different discourses of the day. It will then look at these different ideologies and see how they developed. Although a Vizcayan identity clearly existed, the analysis reveals how the pronounced make-up of each of the estates was superimposed against a background of intense social and political confrontation. The outcome of this confrontation is the apparent triumph of the local nobility over the towns and other groups, and the segregation of local authorities at the start of the early modern period.

Keywords: Lordship of Vizcaya; Vizcaya; Castile; Basque country; heraldry; political identities; towns

Introduction

This article looks at political identities at the end of the Middle Ages in the Lordship of Vizcaya, a territory in the Kingdom of Castile with a number of distinct legal and political structures, mirrored in different ideologies and identities. The objective is to examine their complexity and see where and how they overlapped. This field of research – the study of political identities – is enjoying a certain renewed popularity in Europe, in particular as it relates to urban life and the nobility. Scholars of Spanish medieval history, coordinating their endeavours, are taking a marked interest in these questions. This article will look at a range of sources, both visual and textual, with far-reaching symbolic and ritual political significance, in order to understand the reasons behind the power struggles among the multiple social groups in Vizcaya.

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1On the origins of the Lordship (Señorio) of Vizcaya, see García de Cortázar, “Creación de los perfiles físicos.” For the institutional idiosyncrasies of the territory in the later Middle Ages, Dacosta, “Desarrollo.”


3See the article by Val Valdivieso, “Identidad urbana.” Several monographs on the subject were published later: see Barrio, “Espacios de identidad política urbana”; Jara Fuente, “Definición de la identidad urbana”; Sabaté, Identitats; and Monsalvo Antón, “Culturas políticas urbanas”; or Jara, Martin, and Alfonso, Construir la identidad.
Symbolic representation: the Vizcaya coat of arms and its political use

The coat of arms of the Lordship [Señorío] of Vizcaya serves as a useful point of departure for this analysis. The Fuero Nuevo, printed in Burgos in 1528 (Figure 1), uses the emblem which identifies the territory as its frontispiece: an oak tree past which two fierce wolves are prowling, each with a ram in its jaws. This image expresses the triumphalist dimensions of political identity of the Lordship at the end of the Middle Ages: the territory’s emblematic tree and the wolves represent the pact between the people of Vizcaya and their lord, who, from 1379 onwards, was also the king of Castile. The first edition of this Fuero Nuevo is titled El fuero, privilegios, franquezas [y] libertades de los caballeros hijosdalgo del Señorío de Vizcaya (The Laws, Privileges, Liberties, [and] Freedoms of the Noble hijosdalgo of the Lordship of Vizcaya). In the following pages we shall look briefly at why the twenty-one towns in Vizcaya were discriminated against in this legislation (Title XXX, Law I), from which we can deduce that the residents of the towns of Vizcaya were treated differently from those of the countryside (the tierra llana). However, we will first take a look at the origins of the coat of arms.

The emblem had its roots in the noble house of López (-i) de Haro, although in the surviving Haro seals there is only one wolf, with its jaws open, rather than the two we find in Vizcayan emblems (Figure 2). In 1371, Fernán Pérez, Lord of Ayala, specifically described Vizcaya’s coat of arms as having “a black wolf of Vizcaya.” Later refinements to the coat of arms are worth examining closely, as they reflect distinct political aspects. Just a century after Fernán Pérez’s statement, Lope García de Salazar offered his own interpretation regarding the origin of the shield, relating it to the legendary first Lord of Vizcaya, Jaun Zuria (literally, “the white lord”) and his participation in the equally legendary battle of Arrigorriaga. According to Lope, it was Jaun Zuria who chose the two fierce wolves carrying rams in their jaws, an emblem which his descendants continued to use. Another tradition, endorsed by Florián de Ocampo in his Crónica general de España, links the presence of the wolves and rams on the shield to the participation of Diego López de Haro II (c. 1150–1214) in the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212). However, as we have mentioned before (and is evident from the logic and...
Figure 1. Frontispiece of the princeps edition of the Fuero Nuevo of Vizcaya (Burgos: Juan de lointa, 1528).
Figure 2. Thirteenth-century seigneurial seals (obverse and reverse) as reproduced into two works of Juan de Iturralde y Sutil ("Sello céreo de don Lope Díaz de Haro, señor de Biscaya", p. 257 and "Sello céreo de don Diego López de Haro", p. 292). Above, seal attributed to Lope Díaz de Haro III (Lord of Biscaya between 1254 and 1288). The lower seal is probably that of Diego López de Haro V (c. 1250-1310), brother of the former and founder of Bilbao. This second emblem includes a band of saltires, commemorating Diego López de Haro II’s protagonist in the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa.

In the times of Diego López II, making him the "inventeur de l’apellido et des armoires" of the lineage. In the eighteenth century, one of Salazar y Castro’s manuscripts, Pruebas de la Casa de Haro, folio 4r-v, reproduces two seals attributed to him with these motifs, although one of them, in the form of a heart, in fact reproduces the description offered by Sandoval in the Crónica del inclito emperador de España, 363, that draws on that of Florián de Ocampo.
very different meaning, as it belonged to a new political background in which pacts among the nobility prevailed. This should be seen as part of a redefinition of the contractual relationships in Vizcaya between the nobility and the lord (king after 1379) at the end of the Middle Ages, a hypothesis supported by certain events that took place before the Fuero Nuevo of Vizcaya was promulgated in 1526.

For example, the end of the lucha de bandos (power struggles between lineages) is usually dated to around 1471, in the context of the War of Castilian Succession. However, it was still some time before the conflicts involving the local nobility finally came to an end. The Catholic Monarchs played a decisive role in the peace process, in particular by reinforcing the role of corregidor (a magistrate nominated by the king who had judicial and governmental powers in a specific territory), but also by making the political decision to respect the representative capacity of the Juntas Generales de Guernica (the assembly of the hidalgos of Vizcaya). Perhaps even more significant was the extension of the Capitulado de Vitoria to Bilbao in 1484, recognizing the new local authority framework in Vizcaya. When the Capitulado was extended to the other towns in Vizcaya in 1489 it further addressed the question of their political representation in the Juntas Generales and the possibility of organizing their own assembly, the Junta de villas, though such measures heightened political tensions between the rural populace (the tierra llana) and the towns. The new municipal legislation had brought about a radical change in the political organization of the councils, at least the more important ones, but it did not resolve the issue of town under-representation in the Juntas Generales, marginalizing them from legislative functions and leaving many of the people of Vizcaya without political representation before the monarchs. Mistrust between the two camps was made apparent when, in 1514, the Juntas Generales and the towns sent their representatives to the royal court separately, in response to proceedings at the Burgos Merchant Guild. Of the various conflicts which mark the relationship between the tierra llana and the towns of Vizcaya, we shall concentrate on just one, that of the emblem.

Gabriel de Henao (1611–1704) includes an interesting heraldic digression regarding the wolves on the coat of arms of Vizcaya. He mentions and reproduces two decrees from the Junta de villas, dated 1515 and 1517. In each of them, the towns demand a seal distinctive to that exclusively used by the Juntas Generales, “a seal for all the towns, and city, and in their name, in this way, a coat of arms, and within it a town on top, and an oak with two wolves, and with an epitaph around it in Latin, and that it be a silver seal,” a description in which Henao and Labayru (1845–1904) coincide. Although the request met with some reticence on the part of the corregidor, the Junta de villas finally ordered its distinctive seal to be made.

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12The Juntas Generales (General Assembly) of Guernica was theoretically representative of the whole of the Lordship of Vizcaya and was attended by representatives of the twenty-one towns as well as those of the more than seventy rural designations (the anteiglesias, so called because assemblies were traditionally held in front (ante) of churches (iglesias)). However, despite their economic and demographic importance, the towns were marginalized politically within the Assembly, leading them to create their own version in the early sixteenth century (the Junta de Villas) which would survive until the Concordia of 1630.
14To give its full title, the Junta de villas y ciudad de Vizcaya (assembly of the towns and city of Vizcaya), Colección documental del Archivo Histórico de Bilbao (1473–1500), number 193, pages 589–90.
15Colección documental del Archivo Histórico de Bilbao (1514–1520), number 386, page 1440.
16Labayru, Historia general, IV: 66 and 81. Estanislao Jaime de Labayru y Goicoechea (1845–1904) was the author of the vast and well-documented Historia general del Señorío de Bizcaya, published in Bilbao in six volumes between 1895 and 1903.
although with some variation from the original design,\(^{17}\) which ended up as an arch reinforced with iron bars in the custody of the *corregidor* and the three principal towns: Bilbao, Durango, and Bermeo.\(^{18}\)

The emblem authorized in 1517 did not differ greatly from that of the council of Bilbao in the mid-1300s, the description of which appears on the loyalty pledge of the *hidalgos* and principal towns of Vizcaya to Peter I of Castile in 1356.\(^{19}\) This document also describes the council seals of Lequeitio\(^{20}\) and Durango,\(^{21}\) but not of Bermeo, in spite of the latter heading the representation of the towns of Vizcaya, a subject to which we shall return later.

From the *Fuero Nuevo* (Heading 1, Law XVIII) we can infer that the *hidalgos* believed that there should only be one seal in the Lordship – the townsfolk, on the other hand, wanted two – and that it should be kept securely in the coffers of the *Juntas Generales* in the charge of two deputies, two trustees and the *corregidor*.\(^{22}\) None of the earlier legal codes, of 1342 and 1452, mention anything regarding the seal or the coffers, the change reflecting the administrative advances made by the towns since their foundation.\(^{23}\) Although the towns lacked their own seal,\(^{24}\) they do not seem to have insisted on this issue during the sixteenth century, and the matter was still a subject of dispute between the assemblies of Vizcaya, Gernica and the towns in 1613.\(^{25}\) In any case, it symbolizes the effective administrative segregation that divided the Lordship until the *Concordia* of 1630. The origin of this situation is not well known, but in 1526 this administrative segregation was a fact, because the towns were not willing to participate in the *Juntas Generales* without appropriate representation, which they had called for in 1515, though they seemed to have desisted by 1517. Indeed, the towns were excluded when the *Fuero Nuevo* was passed, where we only find representatives of the *anteiglesias*. To some degree the drafting of the *Fuero Nuevo* might be interpreted as the reaction of the *hidalgos* to the towns’ pretensions of political representation. This is what can be inferred from a memorial erected in 1517 by some merindades (areas under the authority of a *merino*, the lord’s judicial executor) and *anteiglesias*, for having allowed the vote of the town council procurators in the *Juntas Generales*.\(^{26}\)

From the examples above we can surmise that these political identities should be interpreted in terms of aspiration (of each collective’s specific objectives) and appropriation (of space in the political arena). The success of these identity strategies is, moreover, directly related to the degree of cohesion of the political actors and to the degree of institutional formalization that this cohesion could express at any given moment. The next section will attempt to assess the existence and

\(^{17}\) Henao, *Averiguaciones de las antigüedades de Cantabria*, I: 377. Labayru mentions another town assembly (5 September 1514, Bilbao) and describes at length the matters discussed at the assembly held in Durango from 13 to 16 February 1515, *Historia general*, IV: 64.

\(^{18}\) Labayru, *Historia general*, IV: 79.

\(^{19}\) Colección documental del Archivo General del Señorío de Vizcaya, number 2, 14 “with the seal of said council of Bilbao on their backs, on which seal there was an image of a bridge, a castle and a wolf.”

\(^{20}\) Colección documental del Archivo General del Señorío de Vizcaya, number 2, 15 “on which seal there was an image of a whaling boat, a whale and a wolf.”

\(^{21}\) Colección documental del Archivo General del Señorío de Vizcaya, number 2, 16 “sealed with the seal of said council of Tavira on which there was the image of a wolf.”

\(^{22}\) We can also assume this from the printing licence granted by Carlos V on 1 June 1527 in Valladolid and mentioned in the first edition of the aforementioned *Fuero Nuevo* (folio 56r).

\(^{23}\) However, we can deduce the existence of a seal of said brotherhood: folio 52r from Princess Isabel’s unorthodox Fueros oath in 1473, also included in the first edition of the *Fuero Nuevo*. Regarding the oath, see Carrasco, *Isabel I de Castilla y la sombra*, 268.

\(^{24}\) Zabala, “Las Juntas Generales de Bizkaia,” 86.

\(^{25}\) Archivo Foral de Bizkaia, JCR1932/024 (now missing) and AJ01443/005.

\(^{26}\) Archivo General de Simancas, CRC, 10, 2. The conflict encompasses all the jurisdictional, political and legislative aspects.
nature of a common political identity among the towns of Vizcaya before the sixteenth century, although the evidence also suggests that, due to their peculiarities, this common political identity was also limited.

The failure to achieve a common political identity for the towns

The existence of seals pertaining to individual town councils in the mid-1300s reveals their rapid administrative and political development with their lord and later monarch as a direct and permanent interlocutor. None of this contributed towards the emergence of a common consciousness but, rather, it led to the opposite, a multiplication of singularities, evidenced more or less clearly in the distinct assemblies that can be traced. The clearest proof of this is the failure of the Brotherhood (hermandad) of Vizcaya in the fifteenth century, which foundered not just because of pressure from the nobility but also due to the variety of political standpoints and strategies in the towns. In fact, in the second decade of the sixteenth century, the Junta de villas seemed to share little with the essence and objectives of the old brotherhoods, endeavouring to create a new structure based on the political reality of local governance.

Orduña's attainment of city status at some unspecified date probably in the early fifteenth century can be regarded as symptomatic of the intense rivalry between different towns, as it suggests a desire to stand out from the other towns of the lordship, as well as to serve as a shield against the insults of the lords of Ayala. Another example of such rivalry in Vizcaya was the endeavours of Bermeo to preserve its honorific title of caput Bisciae (head of Vizcaya), analogous to the caput Castellae title which the city of Burgos still uses. This honour had been conferred on Bermeo by Fernando the Catholic in 1476, only a few months after the Catholic monarchs had recognized Bilbao's economic and administrative protagonism by conferring on it the title of noble villa (noble town).

Durango was another town with a strong desire for recognition, managing to achieve self-government when it had to contend with different local and regional noble lineages as well as the Brotherhood of Vizcaya itself. This circumstance is no accident, for there is a direct relationship between the establishment of a local political identity and the degree of self-government and internal cohesion of its organisms. As we have mentioned above, political identities clearly aspire to legitimation, and to achieve that must be both contextual and functional. For

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27The Brotherhood (hermandad) of Vizcaya, like its counterparts in neighbouring territories and in the Kingdom of Castile in general, was a militia made up of individuals from different Vizcayan towns, which enjoyed a royal commission to pursue delinquents. Unlike its neighbouring equivalents, the Brotherhood of Vizcaya was practically ineffective at that time due to the activities of the parientes mayores (the heads of the lineages) and the jurisdictional divisions of the territory. For example, in 1415 it was defeated by the parientes with the connivance of the corregidor, Gonzalo Moro, and only in 1463, at a time when the parientes were at their weakest, did it seem to have any effectiveness. See Dacosta, “Desarrollo.” In December 1467, Henry IV of Castile annulled the first Brotherhood of towns of Vizcaya and Castro Urdiales with the tierra liana and Encartaciones and allowed the towns and city to join the Holy Brotherhood (Colección documental del Archivo Municipal de Lequeitio, I: 205–8). For more on the conflictive history of the Vizcaya hermandades, see Orella, “Hermandad de Vizcaya,” or Dacosta, “Porque el fasia desafuero.”

28 Orduna is first mentioned as a city (ciudad) in 1436 in Fernán Pérez de Ayala’s account. Before then it is invariably referred to as a town (villa). The next reference we have found dates back to 1454, although this is in a local document. By 1463, Orduña figures as a city during the reign of Henry IV of Castile. See Colección documental del Archivo Municipal de Orduña (1271–1510), numbers 6, 7, 8, and 9.


example, staying with Durango, we note how, in the mid-fourteenth century, as well as having its own seal, it dispensed with the name assigned in its municipal charter — Villanueva (literally, Newtown) — perhaps because it was hardly adequate for an administrative authority vindicating its identity, status and power, and maybe also its sense of seniority, in the merindad of the same name (Durango). As a result, the town avoided both Villanueva (too modern) and Durango (identical to the name of the merindad) and instead went by the name of Tavira until the seventeenth century.32

From the later fifteenth century, the towns of Vizcaya did begin to work together more often: achieving political uniformity in local government, and regulating archives and the number and functions of municipal clerks. Before the municipal reform of the Catholic Monarchs, links and joint political action between the different towns had been practically non-existent except when the Brotherhood of Vizcaya was occasionally convened. This eventuality contrasts greatly with what had happened in Álava and Guipúzcoa, where the relative success of the brotherhoods sowed the seeds for the respective provincial authorities.33

The characteristic features of the different towns of Vizcaya started emerging, in parallel to those of other Cantabrian towns, from the moment they each received their fuero (municipal charter), generally following the Logroño model, and had a legal structure in place for those that joined the small towns. The fueros evened out the social status of the inhabitants (hidalgos or otherwise), guaranteed individual freedom, abolished inappropriate laws, eliminated collective criminal liability, exempted citizens from military obligations, conferred trading privileges, and increased municipal powers, allowing residents to be appointed to official posts, etc.34

Municipal bylaws before the reign of the Catholic Monarchs provided the inhabitants of a town with a legal structure that differentiated them from the residents of other neighbouring towns. We are referring to regulations regarding fishing, supplies, use of communal land, transport of goods, trading, land allocation, requirements to become a resident, taxes, gaining access to government, etc. These bylaws were subordinate to the general laws emanating from the Crown but, against this common background, they constituted one of the essential elements of local self-government and, as the maximum expression of legislation in the towns, were also the will of the local elites regarding how the town should be governed. That the residents could relate to a local legal structure that specified their privileges constituted another essential element in creating a town’s identity. As elsewhere, this was associated first with the creation of a record of the city, documented in chronicles which endeavoured to explain the origin of privileges received in the past and which would justify its privileged relationship with the Crown.35 Second, this record was linked to the creation of a set of administrative procedures for cataloguing, compiling, copying and archiving of documents under the responsibility of the municipal authorities.

In the Cantabrian region, the only work of the time that could be regarded as an urban chronicle is the so-called Anales breves de Vizcaya. Its last publisher draws attention to the “urban-bourgeois perspective” of its probable author, Sancho Sánchez de Bilbao la Vieja (floruit 1405–36), notary and representative on the Bilbao council. Despite its title, it was events that took place in Bilbao itself that are the connecting thread running through the work, although it also incorporates some incidents that happened in other parts of Vizcaya during the reign of Juan II until 1452.36 The account fits in with the bourgeois conception of history. The facts are arranged...
according to date and become tools which could be used for political purposes to undermine the tradition of the nobles, unwritten except for the writings of Lope Garcia de Salazar.\textsuperscript{37} Nevertheless, for the author, "bourgeois" and \textit{hidalgo} seem to blend into the same, judging by the profusion of news referring to the lineages of Vizcaya, either in direct references or in relation to quarrels between families.\textsuperscript{38} Although it is not easy to draw definitive conclusions regarding the author's mentality, the text's local dimension and urban vision are clear.

In the \textit{Anales}, specific political actors are barely mentioned. There is just one specific mention of "los vizcainos" when they left Bilbao for Burgos to present themselves to the new Lord of Vizcaya, Juan Núñez de Lara (c. 1315–50).\textsuperscript{39} References to political entities or their representatives (\textit{corregimiento, brotherhood, council, lordship law officers}) are also thin on the ground: out of forty-eight references, thirty-seven are related to the repression of \textit{banderizos} (lineage militias). In the \textit{Anales} it is hard to identify value-judgements determining a particular standpoint and, for example, the failure of the Brotherhood in 1415 is narrated in terms similar to those used by the aristocratically connected Lope García de Salazar years later. One can perceive a certain lack of interest on the part of the author regarding the institutions of the lordship, but two revealing references point to a powerful self-awareness centred on Bilbao. The first refers to the summer of 1424, when the Bilbao council imprisoned Íñigo Martínez de Zugasti because his men had apprehended two residents of the town.\textsuperscript{40} Zugasti was a member of the clan of \textit{hidalgos} who held one of the five \textit{fuero} offices of mayor. It was, therefore, an act of repression by the Bilbao council against one of the authorities of the \textit{tierra llana}, an act which seems to convey that the \textit{foral} powers could be challenged by the municipal council, which insisted on having the final say regarding its residents even if they were outside the town boundaries.\textsuperscript{41}

This might seem anecdotal were it not for the fact that the \textit{Anales breves} describe another intriguing and in a sense similar incident when, in 1436, the "Community of Bilbao" expelled Pedro González de Santo Domingo, the \textit{corregidor} of Vizcaya for overstepping the mark and acting in contravention of the town’s privileges.\textsuperscript{42} The \textit{corregidor} had drawn up some decrees which were at odds with the town’s edicts, and which we can imagine were designed to counter control of Bilbao by the \textit{bandos} and destabilize the \textit{status quo} (Map 1).\textsuperscript{43} The Brotherhood, the main coercive tool of the \textit{corregidor}, was structurally weak, and that fact enabled the expulsion to be carried out. As well as the interference of the local lineages in such a grave decision, it is worth drawing

\begin{itemize}
\item Bilbao (26.9%), Guipúzcoa (2.5%) and Vitoria (1.5%), the rest (20%) being devoted to political events in Castile and other kingdoms of the European Atlantic coast.
\item \textsuperscript{37}See Dacosta, "Historiografía y bandos," 124. For the importance of written works referring to political identities, see Morsel, "Sociogenese d'un patriciat."
\item \textsuperscript{38}About 60% of the news refers to these matters.
\item The mention reads "salieron de Vílva los vizcainos para ir a Burgos a don Juan Nuñes señor de Viscaya," Aguirre, "\textit{Anales breves de Vizcaya,}" 57.
\item In the \textit{Anales} we read: "because he was acting in contravention of the \textit{fuero} and against the town’s privileges," Aguirre, "\textit{Anales breves de Vizcaya,}" 151.
\item \textsuperscript{41}In the \textit{Anales breves de Vizcaya}, dated between 3 and 6 August 1485 (see Aguirre, "\textit{Tres documentos inéditos,}" 215–7). Unlike this one, the \textit{Fuero Nuevo} opts for the territoriality of its jurisdiction (Title XX, Law 15; Title XXX, Law 1), although, on the other hand, it confers a personal statute to \textit{hidalguia universal} - including the residents of these towns - that applies beyond the limits of the \textit{foral} territory (Title I, Law 16) and affords ample and effective immunity (Title VII, Law 2). This would cause innumerable conflicts between the people of Vizcaya and other subjects of the Crown of Castile during early modern times.
\item \textsuperscript{42}In the \textit{Anales} we read: "because he was acting in contravention of the \textit{fuero} and against the town’s privileges," Aguirre, "\textit{Anales breves de Vizcaya,}" 151.
\item \textsuperscript{43}Colección documental del Archivo Histórico de Bilbao (1300–1473), doc. 68; Labayru, \textit{Historia general,} III: 594; Díaz de Durana and Fernández de Larrea, "\textit{Acceso al poder,}" 75–7. García de Cortázár et al., \textit{Vizcaya en la Edad Media,} III, 75. Dacosta, "Porque el fasia desafuero," 41–2.
\end{itemize}
attention to the term the Community of Bilbao, although we cannot be sure it refers to anything other than the council itself.

While all these references do not entirely identify the political subjects, and much less the construction of a definite discourse, they do establish a Bilbao identity clearly different from that of other towns, that of the authorities of the Lordship, and that of the Brotherhood. It is highly significant that in 1405 the Bilbao council (represented by the supposed author of the Anales) went before the King of Navarre to resolve a dispute with the inhabitants of Bayonne. The incident is somewhat confusing, but it seems to underline the feeling that Bilbao, a century after its foundation, had to forge its own path, an impression that could well be applied to other Cantabric towns such as Vitoria, Santander, or San Sebastian.

Evidence of urban ideologies can also be found in the local archives and in the Royal Chancery of Valladolid. There are records, especially those from the end of the 1400s, of the numerous disputes between the towns of Vizcaya and those who questioned their privileges, threatened their authority to govern, and usurped their rights. A specific example of the creation of urban memory and its use from a legal and political point of view is the entry entitled La población de la villa de Marquina e la primera quema e otras cosas [The inhabitants of the town of Marquina, and the first fire and other matters] concerning conflicts between the municipal council of Villaviciosa de Marquina and the Ugarte and Barroeta lineages, which controlled the patronage of the parish church of Santa María de Xemein, located outside the town boundaries. The author of the text, perhaps Martin Ruiz de Bilbao, a lawyer working for the municipality at the end of the fifteenth century, explained the town’s foundation against a background of violence and intimidation. He summarized the town’s original privilege, criticized the vassalage of Markina’s parientes mayores to the Lord of Olaso (head of the Gamboa faction in Guipúzcoa), and narrated how

Map 1. Rural and urban Lordship of Biscay in the 15th century.
Source: García de Cortázar et al., Vizcaya en la Edad Media, III, 75.
the town residents were subject to extortion by the Ugarte and Barroeta lineages eager to control patronage of the church that had originally been granted to the townsfolk.\(^{46}\) It was a compilation of arguments put together with the aim of improving the town’s procedural position, and it is possible to detect the frustration that the author faced with a council which included some members who seemed to be in connivance with the parientes mayores. In the end, the council accepted a ruling which was clearly against the interests of the town, a fact that the anonymous author condemns.

Evidence of the emerging identities of these urban communities can also be found in seals and coats of arms.\(^{47}\) We have mentioned the wolf of Vizcaya which appears on the coats of arms of Bilbao, Lequeitio and Durango. There is also the whale adopted by numerous coastal towns (Lequeitio and Ondarroa among those in Vizcaya). This, together with other symbols such as regal attributes, offers proof that a certain shared identity existed.

As in other European urban contexts, the development of procedures for filing, copying, compiling, and safekeeping documents, and the way in which they became powerful tools in the hands of the local elites who governed the towns of the Cantabric area also became symbols of municipal identity. This surely started earlier, though apart from the thirteenth-century recommendations of the Partidas,\(^{48}\) our first record of these developments dates from the late fifteenth century.\(^{49}\) The lack of earlier mentions must be closely linked to how documents were looked after when there was no town hall and officials met, for instance, in the incumbent mayor’s house. The best evidence that such documents existed and that possession and control of them had become an important issue is found in the disputes over access to municipal documentation.

In constructing an identity it is very important to consider council archives as memorial instruments and depositories, which is what they were, in at least three senses. First, as evidence of the devices they contained, in contrast to the local nobility’s lack of such documents. Secondly, because of the direct correlation that exists between the archive and the council, a principle first established in the Partidas, but subsequently reinforced by the Catholic Monarchs, particularly in the well-known Pragmatic of 1500, regulating filing, copying, compiling, and safeguarding of council documents.\(^{50}\) And thirdly when other councils made use of these archives and public notaries, thus creating a network of political exchange and cooperation.\(^{51}\)

Returning to the political identities developed by town councils in the fifteenth century, a few things are clear. First of all, that particularism dominated in the region, there being no clear indication of a common designation for the towns of Vizcaya (or at least for a large number of them), unlike in Asturias, Cantabria, Guipúzcoa or Álava, where this potential was given voice by virtue of the brotherhoods,\(^{52}\) nor in other parts of the kingdom, where other “alternative” political discourses were formulated in the times of Henry IV of Castile as records of speeches in the royal courts show.\(^{53}\) The examples given show a clear lack of political unity between the towns,


\(^{48}\) Partida III: 18, 3 and ff. The Partidas were a Castilian legal code elaborated between 1255 and 1265, during the reign of Alfonso X.

\(^{49}\) Colección documental del Archivo Municipal de Valmaseda, 29.

\(^{50}\) Vaquerizo, “Archivos municipales,” 157.

\(^{51}\) The Marquina council asked the Getaria council for a copy of their town charter in 1497. This is not an isolated case. The Marquina council’s second known document exists thanks to a copy obtained from the Lequeitio council on 5 March 1411. See Colección documental del Archivo Municipal de Marquina, doc. 2, page 9. Munita et al., “En tiempo de ruidos,” doc. 2.

\(^{52}\) Fernández de Larrea and Díaz de Durana, “Construcción de la memoria.”

undoubtedly due to the weakness (or non-existence) of the Brotherhood of Vizcaya. Second, while in Álava, and especially in Guipúzcoa, the towns captured the development of the brotherhoods and managed to impose their authority over the whole territory, dislodging the *parientes mayores* from the *Juntas Generales* of both territories, the 1479 Brotherhood of Vizcaya only managed to unite the towns for two years. As García de Cortázar states, the limited jurisdiction of the towns of Vizcaya stopped the elites from extending their anti-factionalist strategies to the *tierra llana,* from representing the territory politically, and from becoming the only interlocutors with the Crown. Third, in the territories on or near the Cantabrian coast, except in Vizcaya, the lineages were ousted from political power from the moment the reform of the councils’ political structure was brought in. This reform, initiated in Vitoria in 1476 and implemented by García López de Chinchilla in Bilbao in 1484 and afterwards in the rest of the Vizcaya towns, would not prevent the factions from gaining power on councils by becoming part of these institutions. And fourth, the fragments in existence seem to be drafted by specialists in local administrative matters, which raises the question of whether the authors of the Markina or Bilbao texts express the mentality and interests of the political elite of their respective municipalities or whether they are the fruit of frustrated or subordinate political discourse.

Given that temporary or transitory residents (such as the *hidalgos*) scarcely formed part of local political society, to what extent is it legitimate to consider all the inhabitants of a town as genuine townspeople? Neither institutionally nor legally did such residents fit into local political life, at least in towns of a certain size like Bilbao, but political control was accomplished using other mechanisms. The failed *Capitulado* of 1435 against the Bilbao factions, the subsequent expulsion of its *corregidor,* and the institutionalization of the factions at the end of the century reflect the enormous influence of the rich *parientes mayores* on Vizcaya’s main urban nucleus. In the other towns, the meddling of the lineages occurred at all levels, never mind those localities that the *parientes mayores* controlled directly and with the acknowledgement of the public, such as Ochandiano (ruled by the Butron dynasty) or Villaro, ruled by the Avendaño lineage.

There were clearly many different cases, but the tendency appears to have been towards the seizure of control of the towns by the main *parientes mayores,* perhaps with some significant exceptions such as Bilbao and Durango. What is certain is that the towns of Vizcaya were unable to adopt the idea of a “province,” successful in Guipúzcoa and Álava. The nobility of Vizcaya managed to outplay the towns, at least in the battle of political identities. The towns,

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54 One of the reasons for the *hermandad*’s weakness was its lack of legitimacy, an aspect to which the first *corregidor* of Vizcaya, Gonzalo Moro, contributed decisively. He had administered the constitution of the *hermandad* in 1394. In 1415 it rebelled against him over a shipment of wheat sent to Asturias from Vizcaya (Villacorta, *Libro de las buenas andanzas,* IV: 193–94). The *corregidor* asked the main lineages for help to reprimand the *hermandad,* and the king even rewarded Juan de Avendaño for these deeds.

55 Regarding the political representation in the lordship, see García de Cortázar, “Señorío de Vizcaya,” 135–48.


57Basas, “Institucionalización de los bandos.”

58A similar question is posed by Dutour, “Nobles et la ville,” 164.

59Díaz de Durana and Fernández de Larrea, “Acceso al poder,” 75–80. The 1435 *Capitulado* is a compendium of regulations drafted by the town’s merchants and the king’s *corregidor,* which was designed to put an end to the political pre-eminence of the factions and their way of sharing power in local government amongst themselves.
despite pressing for participation in the General Assembly of Guernica and, afterwards, putting forward their own alternative, were politically isolated in 1526. However, residents of some towns, particularly Bilbao, afforded protection by their privileges, secure in the modern emerging state and a background of astonishing economic development, managed to minimize the effects of these obstacles and reap the rewards of the most useful aspect of the Fuero Nuevo, which was universal hidalguía. The town’s merchants, hidalgos outside Vizcaya, would use this privilege whenever it did not harm their lucrative businesses. Should that happen, they could fall back on remarkable ploys comparable to the Breton “sleeping nobility.”\(^6^9\) On the other hand, the sociological triumph of universal hidalguía did not lead to similar successes in the political field: the Juntas Generales of Vizcaya would not be as powerful or as representative as their counterpart in Guipúzcoa in the 1500s.

The link between political identity and institutional reality is evident regarding the towns of Vizcaya. The meddling of the lineages and hidalgos, the failure of the Brotherhood and other institutional defence mechanisms, local peculiarities and, in particular, the different strategies developed by the councils, made it difficult for the towns to develop a common strategy before the sixteenth century, although we find traces of its existence. In any case, towns were not the only emerging political entity at the end of the Middle Ages in Vizcaya.

**Hidalgos and peasants in search of an identity**

The construction of political identities in Vizcaya is closely linked to the distinctive characteristics of the territory’s institutions, some with very deep roots, which can help us identify at least who had a political say in the territory, if not specific identitarian discourses. Thus, it comes as no surprise that, in the fuero of the Encartaciones area (the westernmost of Vizcaya’s seven administrative divisions), known as the Fuero de Avellaneda, it is “the good people” of the Encartaciones, or, in the amended version, “los hidalgos,”\(^6^1\) who conducted proceedings. No town is mentioned in the charter, despite it being drawn up by the corregidor, Gonzalo Moro, between 1394 and 1411, long after the municipal charters for Balmaseda (1199), Lanestosa (1287), and Portugalete (1325).\(^6^2\) In contrast we have the Fuero antiguo de la Merindad de Durango, the equivalent charter for the merindad of Durango. This perhaps also dates from the beginning of the 1400s and it defines, from a criminal law perspective, three kinds of Durango residents: hidalgos, peasants, and commoners, as well as locating the merindad mayor, one of the tierra llana’s offices, in the town itself.\(^6^3\) The political role of the corporation of Tavira de Durango in this document regarding common law rights in Vizcaya is beyond any doubt, and it seems a plausible hypothesis that this protagonism was exclusive, with no room for the other merindad towns which, like Elorrio, Ernua, or Ochandiano, were under the direct or indirect control of lineages like the Múgica-Butró or their rivals. In other words, we perceive a direct link between an institution’s power and its degree of political representation. In any case, it is clear that in the fifteenth century there was already a great deal of political tension between the towns and the other institutions of Vizcaya, even if some were not subjugated to the specific interests of a handful of lineages.

We find the same sidelining of towns in the 1342 Cuaderno de Juan Núñez de Lara, in which the Lord of Vizcaya, together with the knights, squires, and hidalgos of Vizcaya were summoned.

\(^6^1\)Fuentes jurídicas medievales del Señorío de Vizcaya. Fueros, 3 and 20.
\(^6^2\)Fuentes jurídicas medievales del Señorío de Vizcaya. Fueros, 69.
\(^6^3\)Fuentes jurídicas medievales del Señorío de Vizcaya. Fueros, 79 and 83.
to the Juntas Generales. Although later ratifications to the document extend entitlement to the lordship’s peasants and ironworkers, they still fail to mention the inhabitants of the towns. The reason was that the lordship was administratively split into two, the towns and the tierra liana, which would only be subject to the same guidelines when attempts to apply the Cuaderno de hermandad from 1394 and other similar initiatives in the fifteenth century were made. Nevertheless, in this last document both sides are clearly defined and have specific and different political identities, doubtless an outcome of the failure of the Brotherhood of Vizcaya as a political project, although it does not really seem more of a failure than that of the Juntas Generales as an alternative for the territory overall. This institutional duality continued until the 1630s, when a unified authority covering the whole territory was achieved following the successful model of the Province of Guipúzcoa.

Returning to our political protagonists, in addition to the hidalgos and the citizens of the towns we can now add a third group, the peasants, whose political voice had until now barely been heard. They should be classified, according to García de Cortázar, into two categories, the old labradores censuarios of the Lord of Vizcaya (peasants who paid tax to this lord) and other peasants dependent on the towns or the parientes mayores. Although we know practically nothing about them, at the start of the sixteenth century they were pressing for their own voice and political identity. For instance, in 1512, in the jurisdiction of the town of Marquina, a group of fewer than fifty heads of peasant families managed to get their deputies to represent them. A few years later, in 1519, the same peasants demanded political capacity, rejecting the ordinances that the town of Marquina and the Barroeta and Ugarte lineages had agreed upon regarding the Jemein parish.

The 1452–63 Fuero viejo is the definitive proof that two politically separate institutions (the towns and the tierra liana) had been established, sanctioned in the 1526 Fuero Nuevo, which would persist de jure until 1630. The pertinent question now is why the triumphant political discourse in Vizcaya was, at least in appearance, the one that represented the parientes mayores, the hidalgos and the tierra liana at the expense of the towns. Previously we had

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64Fuentes jurídicas medievales del Señorío de Vizcaya. Fueros, 39. The Cuaderno was the first legislative compilation created in Vizcaya, detailing the customs of the Señorío in some thirty-five chapters, with emphasis on the administration of justice and the rights of the lordship and the hidalgos with regard to exploitation of the hills in general and the making of coke.
66Fuentes jurídicas medievales del Señorío de Vizcaya. Fueros, 53.
67García de Cortázar’s estimates indicate that by the end of the 1400s the number of peasants considered tenant farmers (including their families) was about 5000 individuals, that is, 7.5% of the population of Vizcaya, similar to the population Bilbao would have had at that time. See García de Cortázar, Vizcaya en el siglo XV, 82–3 (data revised in García de Cortázar et al., Vizcaya, III: 284–304). Bilbao and Fernández de Pinedo, “En torno al problema del poblamiento,” 332–5.
69Colección documental del Archivo Municipal de Marquina, doc. 45, pages 231–3.
70Munita et al., “En tiempo de ruidos,” doc. 28.
71Fuentes jurídicas medievales del Señorío de Vizcaya, 77 and 81. For a recent translation into English, see Monreal, Old Law of Bizkaia. The best work on this subject continues to be that of Artola, “Fuero de Vizcaya.”
mentioned the timid testimony of the _Anales breves_ or the belligerent attempt to construct an image of the town dweller of the past in the brief chronicle of Marquina. These fragments pale into insignificance when compared to the wealth of data regarding _hidalgo_ political discourse, its sources, its development, and its nuances, a case of exceptional intensity and magnitude which may even have advanced the similarly exceptional phenomenon of making the status of _hidalgo_ universal in the _Fuero Nuevo_.

The interests of the political elites of the towns were quite similar to those of the _parientes mayores_ of the _tierra llana_: in many cases it is easy to identify who was who according to their alliances and relationships. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the intense malicious meddling practices of the main _parientes mayores_ (and even noble houses) in a great many towns, or even their total subjugation. This, at least, is the case documented in Orduña, Plencia, Munguía, Villar, Ochandiano, Ermua, Elorrio, Lequeitio, Ondarroa, or Marquina. Without going deeper into the matter, it is worth asking why, against this background of subjugation, we can detect a strong desire of the _hidalgos_ to construct their own version of the past, particularly, but not exclusively, from Lope García de Salazar. We know a lot about the construction of the family trees of the great lords with interests in Vizcaya, such as the Ayalas or Velascos, but also the lesser _hidalgo_ lineages of Vizcaya. These are constructions of individual memories, of each lineage, but which together also express a collective memory which is openly differential. Moreover, we know that in the 1400s a number of arguments regarding the origin of these houses were circulating in Vizcaya, which should be interpreted as being part of a "new definition of relations with the crown." Together with the legends of the Melusine origin about the house of Haro, in the fifteenth century Lope García de Salazar mentions another legend regarding the founding of the Lordship, updating the story of Jaun Zuria and Arrigorriaga (transformed into don Froom and Busturía, respectively, in the version of Pedro de Barcelos) whose pro-pact translation is more than evident. With this example we can see how identity is malleable and can be adapted. When its functionality is affected by context it varies, changes or becomes popular tradition, with another purpose and audience, with a folkloric character, or it is reworked in a more erudite style. A good example is the legend of the founding of the House of Vizcaya, that of the "Dama de pie de cabra" (The lady with the goat’s foot). Lacking in identitarian value at the end of the Middle Ages, its mythopoeic meaning (feudal hierarchy, civilization, and order) does not correspond to Vizcaya in the late Middle Ages, unlike the legend of Jaun Zuria, but the political context fits well with the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century pact between the region’s nobility.

Other legends tell similar tales. For example, Lope García de Salazar’s _Libro de las buenas andanzas e fortunas_ ends with a lively historical debate about the absolute pre-eminence of the _parientes mayores_ with respect to lay patronage in Vizcaya. The debate centres on the protagonism of their ancestors, who defended the territory from the Arabs, populated it, and built its churches. This particular version of Vizcaya’s history ultimately contradicts the lord or king’s ownership of the churches and their powers in this sphere, insinuating that the patronage rights

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73 Dacosta, “De la conciencia del linaje.”
74 Díaz de Durana and Otazu, “L’autre noblesse.”
75 Monsalvo, “Parentesco y sistema concejal,” 962.
76 Dacosta, “Ser hidalgo.”
77 Dacosta, “De donde sucedieron.”
80 Krus, “Variantes”; Krus, “Muerte de las hadas”; Prieto Lasa, _Leyendas de los señores de Vizcaya_.
81 Dacosta, “E por otra manera”; Juaristi, “Mitos de origen.”
82 Villacorta, _Libro de las buenas andanzas_, Book XXV.
pertained to the great lineages, the first settlers in the territory. However, the most revealing part of Garcia de Salazar’s thesis is the insistence upon the primacy of the hidalgos over the towns, anchored in the mists of time: a vision of social order which excluded freemen and peasants, while defending universal tax exemption for hidalgos as if it had always existed, as promoted in both the Fuero viejo and the Fuero Nuevo.

In contrast to the hazy origins of other entities, whether territorial (such as the lordship) or social (the imprecise origins of the lineages), the municipal charter’s tangibility and symbolism make it an extremely precise historical instrument. The drafting of the fueros of Vizcaya began in the mid-1300s, by when practically all the towns in Vizcaya had already been founded, and towards the end of the century the process was reactivated (Fuero viejo de las Encartaciones, Fuero antiguo de la Merindad de Durango). Such documents were clearly motivated by a desire to define the social order, and were possibly the result of a desire to fix common law conventions in writing, so that they would rank above the privileges that the towns had been amassing since their foundation. Faced with continued granting of municipal charters and privileges from the start of the thirteenth century, the hidalgos who dominated rural Vizcaya insisted on the seniority and pre-eminence of their own legislation. Thus the nobility from Vizcaya was endeavouring to reinforce politically its own distinct (more feudatory) relationship with the lord they shared with the towns, who, from 1379 onwards, would be the king of Castile. The requirement for the lord or monarch to swear to uphold the fueros (its procedure changing with the political context) created a consented political identity of a different nature from that which linked the sovereign with the towns.

It seems evident that the towns in Vizcaya, politically separated due to the interference of the powerful lineages, partisan conflicts and differences of interest and scale, were incapable of organizing a strategy that differed from that of the landowning families of hidalgos. In some cases, like in Markina, this was due to the fact that the inhabitants who solicited the municipal charter in 1355 had all been hidalgos. In other localities it was due to their elites being sociologically connected with or related to the main lineages of the territory, and, consequently, they did not see fit (or were unable) to configure an alternative municipally based identity. The reality of the elites of Vizcaya seems contradictory and prosaic insofar as, at this time, and apart from in Bilbao, it is not easy to see a nobility or a bourgeoisie similar to that of the towns of the Castilian or Atlantic coasts.

Thus we arrive at a series of seemingly paradoxical tendencies. On the one hand, at the end of the fifteenth century, the anteiglesiias, prototypically rural institutions, adopt the administrative council model habitually associated with urban contexts. Meanwhile, the same anteiglesiias were encroaching upon extramural areas previously controlled by the towns. This is the case of Bilbao, which at the start of the sixteenth century saw its jurisdiction reduced to the area which fell inside the city walls. On the other hand, during the reign of the Catholic Monarchs, and in spite of all the foral regulations, Bilbao became the administrative and political capital of the lordship, the authorized office of the corregidor, and the de facto headquarters of the territory’s institutions. It is quite a paradox that the most consequential legal document of the

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83 At the end of the 1400s more than 80% of the patronages in Vizcaya, the immense majority of them being privileges subject to the juros (a type of public debt) system, were in the hands of the parientes mayores of the main lineages. Dacosta, “Patronos y linajes”; Curiel, La parroquia en el País Vasco cantábrico.
85 Regarding swearing the foral oath at the end of the Middle Ages, see Carrasco, “Isabel: Princesa de Castilla.”
87 García de Cortázar, “Sociedad y poder”; Dacosta, “Porque los moradores.”
tierra llana of Vizcaya, the Fuero Nuevo, was drafted in Bilbao in 1526 under the strict vigilance of the corregidor, although in a house just outside the walls.¹⁸

Conclusion

In the previous pages we have examined the genesis and development of distinct political identities in Vizcaya in different contexts characterized by political conflict and tension. We have encountered different identities, observed their internal contradictions and seen how they are related to the strategies of the political actors who formulated them. Such political identities do not follow a single model, but are open and functional in the sense of being activated and evolving according to context. In the case of the towns, such identities were above all aspirational, as greater political representation was sought within existing or new power structures. For the hidalgos, on the other hand, they were centred on the question of legitimization, as they attempted to justify their invasion of the whole Vizcayan political arena.²⁰

The aspects we have examined reflect the existence of relatively coherent and cohesive identities, which are defined by a logic or “grammar” of exclusion regarding the others.²¹ This is why it is difficult to speak of a common identity encompassing all the towns of Vizcaya whose attempts at political alliance through supra-local institutions (brotherhoods, assemblies) fail because of individual strategies and the pressure of the parientes mayores. Similarly, the figure of the lord or king contributes nothing to the identification of a common definition for the towns because the relationship of each with the Crown is established in terms of exclusivity and rivalry. This is demonstrated, for example, in the permanent struggle between Portugalete and Bilbao to reap the benefits of the River Nervión’s iron industry and business development.

The power and visibility of the political identity of the hidalgos of Vizcaya are undeniable, reaching their zenith in 1526 with the far-reaching declaration of universal hidalguía.²² Without a doubt, the attempt to exclude the towns from participating in the government of the territory can be linked to the hidalgos’ triumphant rhetoric, but not exclusively. The towns’ political failure had much to do with the differences of scale and the disparate strategies of their elites, and, above all, with the uneven balance that the monarchs agreed upon, reinforcing the corregidor’s authority and leaving ample, but controlled, room for manoeuvre to the rest of the political players of Vizcaya.

This article has focused on dialectics and the conflict between political expressions in Vizcaya. This does not mean that the matter, at other levels or times, could not be addressed in terms of alliances or political contracts.²³ In an area as specific as the one under analysis, it is evident that a common identity exists among the people of Vizcaya, although this only seems to reveal itself in contexts in which some territorial or jurisdictional grievance presents itself (the case of the Merchant Guild of Vizcaya in Bruges)²⁴ or when participating in the Crown’s

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¹⁸ The “casa de Martin Saes de la Naja” (Fuero Nuevo, folio 4r). This was the head office of the corregidor since at least 1515. Colección documental del Archivo Histórico de Bilbao (1514–1520), doc. 386, page 1362.


²⁰ Baumann and Gingrich, Grammars of Identity/Alterity; Jara Fuente, “Percepción de ‘si,’ percepción del ‘otro.’”

²¹ Díaz de Durana, “Hidalgos e hidalguía” and Anonymous Noblemen.

²² Foronda and Carrasco, Du contrat d’alliance au contrat politique.

²³ In August 1455 Henry IV of Castile prohibited the replacement of the Castile shield with that of Vizcaya in the chapel of San Francisco in Bruges, at the same time as he established the functions and jurisdictions of the consulates of Vizcaya and Castile. Echegaray, Índices de los documentos, 26–32.
expansionist campaigns (in the Atlantic coast region, but also in the conquest of Navarre). Finally, Vizcayan identity is a rather complex concept as a result of the conflicting identities that developed in the Senorio, and it was this complexity and indeed polysemy which allowed the term Vizcayan to end up identifying all Castilians who spoke Basque in times of the Spanish Empire.

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94 Otazu and Díaz de Durana, Espíritu emprendedor, 104–5.


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