

"LAW, CULTURE AND REGIONALISM IN
EARLY MEDIEVAL SPAIN"

1992

precio = 420 pts

H- 1417

F 150

VIII

THE ETHNOGENESIS OF THE BASQUES

An investigation of the ethnogenesis of the Basques could legitimately confine its attention, chronologically speaking, to little more than the period of the Neolithic, with perhaps an extension into the Bronze Age. That at least is where the main arguments are to be found in recent discussions of Basque origins, and it could be argued that once the issues relating to that period and its set of problems have been solved, then the question of ethnogenesis is not one that is relevant to the consideration of later phases of Basque history; their surprising survival is perhaps an issue to be discussed but their very existence is not.¹ Unlike any of the other of the peoples of Western Europe, the Basques do not have a formative period in the Roman and immediate post-Roman periods, and thus any discussion of their origins in a strict sense has to be conducted outside the normal framework of models and interpretations employed in studying the history of their more numerous and powerful neighbours. Their social structure and political organisation in the Early Middle Ages looks to be much at variance with those of the other peoples with whom they came into contact. Similarities in these areas would need to be sought in such socio-geographically parallel regions as Albania, Sardinia or parts of the Caucasus. All of this, too, is before bringing the question of language into the discussion. Here no relationships or parallels have been established or accepted whatsoever, and the linguistic isolation of Basque continues to remain total, despite many valiant efforts at tracing its missing relatives.²

The demands of nationalist argument, as much as anything, have led to the focussing of so much scholarly attention upon questions of the antiquity of the people, but extreme as some of the claims have been there are good grounds for putting the arguments about origins into a prehistoric context. Basques are certainly linguistically and to a limited degree physiologically distinguishable from all of the other inhabitants of Western Europe. Numerically small as their number both is and probably always has been, they constitute a race, and of course a non Indo-European one at that. Therefore the basic discussion of their genesis has to be comparable to that on the origins of the Germanic peoples as a whole rather than to that, for example, of the Ostrogoths or the Bavarians. However, that being said, something can be gained from looking at their history in the Early Medieval period in terms of the kind of arguments that have been used by modern historians concerned with the formation of other peoples in Western Europe in those centuries. The application of their interpretative models to Basque society in the period

¹ The questions relating to the origins of the Basques have been discussed most recently in ROGER COLLINS, *The Basques*. Oxford 1986, 1-30.

² COLLINS, *The Basques*, 8-12; For an excellent survey of the arguments from their earliest stages see ANTONIO TOVAR, *Mitología e ideología sobre la lengua vasca*. Madrid 1980. The case for a once wider dissemination of Basque in the Iberian peninsula is firmly countered in JULIO CARO BAROJA, *Sobre la hipótesis del Vascoiberismo*, in his *Sobre la lengua vasca*. San Sebastián 1979, 11-120.



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between the end of Roman rule and the eleventh century can be illuminating both in showing how different the Basques were in comparison to their neighbours, and at the same time raise important questions as to how the distinctive Basque identity did survive, and what were the central and what the peripheral elements in their society, upon which that survival depended.

Such an approach has the additional advantage of getting round the theoretical difficulties outlined above, but does not avoid the practical one of the almost total lack of evidence available for such an enquiry.³ For all of the undoubted antiquity of the language, which can be proved on linguistic grounds, with the exception of a single mid-eleventh century charter no written trace of it can be found before the end of the Middle Ages.⁴ In fact, for the period under consideration not only do the Basques not speak to us in their own tongue, they do not speak to us at all. Until the first appearance of reliable charters with provenances in the Basque regions both north and south of the Pyrenees, which occurs no earlier than the very late tenth century, and the compilation in the same period of a small corpus of genealogies, there are no historical records of any sort that are Basque in origin. The totality of our knowledge of this people, and it is hardly impressive in quantity, relating to periods earlier than the late tenth century comes from notices afforded them by outsiders. Our perception of them is thus to be obtained exclusively through the eyes of literate representatives of other societies that were essentially alien in their social and cultural constitution to that of the Basques. It is thus hardly surprising that reports of them in the fifth to ninth centuries are not only few in number but also uniformly hostile. Their lack of a detectable central authority and the logic of their pastoral economy were largely incomprehensible to their northern and southern neighbours, who resorted to a vocabulary of stock abuse in their references to the Basques, who are consistently called barbarous, savage, cowardly and treacherous.⁵

Simply put, the consequences of this dependence upon non-Basque sources of information is that it is unwise for us to place any reliance upon those sources reporting group or individual motivation or character. The evidence by itself does not enable us to say why Basques as a whole or individually acted the way they did. For that some form of model of their society has to be devised that makes the maximum possible use of what may be taken to be the more or less objective reporting of events in which a Basque participation occurred, but without any reliance being placed upon the contemporary accounts of the causes of their actions. For such a model it is clearly necessary to construct a view of the organisation of Basque society in these centuries. This it will be appreciated is extremely hard to achieve when there are no internal sources of information to be turned to. Moreover, for a variety of reasons there is absolutely no Basque archaeology, and this therefore denies us the kind of access to the Basques that the results of excavation have provided for other parallel non-literate societies, such as the Picts. Instead, and it must be admitted almost in desperation, it is necessary to turn to certain constants in the geography and climate of the Basque regions and also to certain elements that can be shown to be true of Basque society in other better documented periods and which, it

³ The problems of the evidence are outlined in COLLINS, *The Basques*, passim.

⁴ *Cartulario de San Juan de la Peña* (ed. ANTONIO UBIETO ARTETA Valencia 1962), doc. 117 of 1055; COLLINS, *The Basques*, 194–195.

⁵ Hostile remarks directed against the Basques will be found in most of the major Frankish chronicles and annals, notably: Fredegarii Chroniconum Libri Quattuor IV.78; Continuations 47 (ed. J. M. WALLACE-HADRILL, London 1960, 65, 115); Annales Regni Francorum, s. a. 816, 824 (ed. F. KURZE, *MGH SS rer. Germ.* 1895).

may be hoped, can also be taken as applying to the early medieval centuries with at least some degree of probability.⁶

The salient features of Basque activity in the period from the fifth century to the end of the tenth as recorded in the available sources, Frankish and Spanish, are exclusively military in character. Basically what we are told about are raids on settled regions both north and south of the Pyrenees, resistance to various attempts by Visigothic and Frankish kings to impose their authority on the Basques, and Basque involvement in local disturbances, attempted usurpations and other forms of opposition to centralised authority. To a large degree this seems to conform to the modern nationalist stereotyped interpretation of Basque history as being one of continuous resistance to any form of alien domination of the people, and at the same time the preservation of a racial integrity as implied in such unrelenting hostility to all external cultures. Basque opposition to Roman, Visigothic and Frankish rule thus seems to provide the historical mirror image to modern aspirations towards autonomy and the various levels of resistance that go with them. However, the Basques could allow themselves to become better historians without compromising their cultural integrity. The model of continuous resistance, articulated most forcefully by the Spanish historians BARBERO and VIGIL, is a deceptive one.⁷ If it has any validity it is only in the period presently under discussion, and basically only in a part of it stretching from roughly the 570s to the late eighth century. Prior to that in the period of the Roman domination of the Basque regions, which lasted for some four hundred years, what is most striking is the essential normality of provincial life in the Western Pyrenean regions, an impression that is confirmed archaeologically.⁸ Moreover, no divide can be detected between lowland and even urban dwelling elements of this population and those leading an essentially pastoral existence in the mountains. Both groups could be and were labelled together as *Vascones*. Economic ties between the two sectors of the population seem to have been close and mutually dependant. Furthermore, the manpower requirements of the Roman army, at least in the period of the early Empire, look to have tied the Basque mountain dwellers firmly into the wider framework of imperial society.⁹

On the other hand, by the early ninth century the Basques appear once again as more or less integrated members of wider political communities, albeit much smaller in scale than the Roman Empire. These are the Duchy of Gascony, on the northern slopes of the Pyrenees, the Kingdom of Pamplona to the south of the mountains, and further west Basques living in the areas of Alava and probably Vizcaya formed a distinct element of the population of the kingdom of the Asturias. Of the three only the Gascon duchy probably deserves to be qualified as being fully Basque in the sense of having a wholly or predominantly Basque-speaking population, but it of course was only a component part of the wider Carolingian Empire, and may represent a more successful attempt than that of the Merovingians to impose a comprehensible system of government responsible to the central authority on this strategically significant frontier region.¹⁰ At the opposite

⁶ The human and physical geography of the region is best presented in D. A. GÓMEZ-IBÁÑEZ, *The Western Pyrenees*, Oxford 1975.

⁷ ABILIO BARBERO and MARCELO VIGIL, *Sobre los orígenes sociales de la Reconquista*, 2nd. ed. Barcelona 1979; their argument was followed in ROGER COLLINS, *The Basques in Aquitaine and Navarre*, in JOHN GILLINGHAM and J. C. HOLT (eds.), *War and Society in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1984, 3–17.

⁸ COLLINS, *The Basques*, 38–66.

⁹ *IBID.*, 43–47.

¹⁰ *IBID.*, 110–114, 171–179; the classic account, though now much in need of revision, is that of JEAN DE JAURGAIN, *La Vasconie*, 2 vols. Pau 1898–1902.

extreme the Basques, together with the Galicians and the Asturians, constituted the three rival and often conflicting elements in the human composition of the Asturian kingdom, but, although several of the monarchs were of part-Basque origin, they never achieved a cultural dominance here. Only the tiny kingdom of Pamplona, that probably came into existence in 824, was both largely Basque in the composition of its population and not the product of the imposition of external power.¹¹ However, despite their own clearly Basque origin its ruling dynasty never saw itself as in any way ruling a distinctively Basque monarchy. There was never such a title as *Rex Vasconum*. In addition the primary focus of this kingdom, particularly in the first century of its existence, was southwards into the Ebro valley, which had long since ceased to be Basque either linguistically or culturally, and was now dominated by a series of *Muwallad* local potentates.

This brief and synoptic overview of the changing roles of the Basques in the second half of the first millennium A.D. raises some of the important questions that need to be asked. Firstly comes the dual problem of both why the Basques did not impose a distinctive character on those states or portions thereof in which they were the numerically predominant element of the population, or conversely why in such conditions they were able to retain their cultural identity apparently unimpaired? Secondly, and perhaps with a direct bearing on the first set of issues, there comes the question of what Basque society was like in the intervening period, roughly between the late sixth and late eighth centuries, when, apart from a brief period of Merovingian rule, they were largely free from external control and also apparently without any form of central authority of their own?

As, in linguistic terms, the sole non Indo-European race in western Europe and the longest established of any in the continent as a whole, the Basques may be expected to present a potent counterweight to the norms of the dominant forms of society of the majority culture. In terms of language and a vestigial matriarchy they would seem not to disappoint us. But in assessing the available evidence it is important to appreciate how much is dependent upon conjecture, or, more insidiously, upon interpretative models that are founded on expectations of how a paradigmatic non-Indo-European society ought to behave. Thus the actual, as opposed to the anticipated or implied, evidence relating to Basque matriarchal social organisation is extraordinarily limited.¹² Apart from some ironic comments on the part of the Greek geographer Strabo, which were applied to the Cantabri, but which have been assumed to be capable of extension to the Vascones as well, it consists basically of charters relating to inheritance practices and a trace of the survival of matronymic naming in one mid-Pyrenean valley in the eleventh century.¹³ Thus even one of the central and most distinctive features of Basque society in the Early Middle Ages is extremely hard to delineate, or possibly even to prove. Moreover, attention has recently been focussed on other examples of the use of matronyms elsewhere in Europe, in regions otherwise lacking such supposed pre-Indo-European survivals.¹⁴

To a certain extent it is much easier to say what the Basques are or were not rather than what they were. For present purposes it is perhaps worth stressing that Basque social formation looks to have developed from the bottom upwards. It was not dependent

¹¹ JOSÉ MARÍA LACARRA, *Historia política del Reino de Navarra*. 3 vols. Pamplona 1972-1973, vol. I, 1-202; some revisions will be found in COLLINS, *The Basques*, 123-171.

¹² A. ORTIZ-OSÉS and F. K. MAYR, *El matriarcalismo vasco*. Bilbao 1980, with the bibliography given on pages 135-138.

¹³ Strabonis Geographia III.iv.18 (ed. FRANÇOIS LASSERRE, Collection Budé. Paris 1966, 77-78); The 'Benaasque Roll' = Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid, sección de códices 1048B.

¹⁴ DAVID HERLIHY, *Medieval Households*. Cambridge Mass. 1985, 47 and notes 123-125.

upon the existence of an élite or ruling group at its centre to provide a focus around which an identity could be formed. Large scale political structures, such as the Kingdom of Navarre or the Duchy of Gascony came into existence at a very late stage in Basque history and represent the more or less successful imposition of alien forms of social organisation, and were in no sense indigenous creations. Equally interesting is the absence of any survival of a tribal structure, traces of which can be found in other highland areas of Europe. The existence of tribal sub-groupings amongst the Basques may possibly be implied in the period before the Roman occupation of the Pyrenees, but certainly not subsequently, and they may indeed never have existed.¹⁵ Perhaps the only significant division of the population into units larger than the individual family was that, conditioned by Pyrenean geography, into valley communities.¹⁶ This is a distinction that applies principally to Navarre rather than to the coastal lands of the modern Vascongadas. Here, on the other hand, exists a need to explain the origins of the deep-rooted and long-established provincial divisions of Vizcaya, Guipúzcoa and Alava, that seem to be indigenous to Basque society rather than external administrative impositions.¹⁷

The basic building blocks of Basque society were and still are the extended families.¹⁸ Traditionally, and this is at least traceable archaeologically at least from the Late Middle Ages, these were centred on the *Etxe(ak)*, the central residence of the family, by the name of which it was often known. Unlike many other of the societies of Medieval Europe, the Basques seem always to have eschewed the practice of partible inheritance, and their family landholdings passed as a unit from generation to generation. In the process of inheritance no strict system of primogeniture was followed; the current head of the household designated an heir, who could be a woman, from the younger generation. In the earliest extant charters of the Basque region, dating from the eleventh century, it is clear that in many cases a female property owner designated a nephew as her heir.¹⁹ Unfortunately it is by no means clear in these documents that in so doing she passed over the claims of her own children, members of her husband's family group, in the interests of passing on inherited property within her own kin. This, however, represents the classic form of a matriarchal inheritance pattern, and it is at least a reasonable hypothesis that this is what the evidence is indicating here.

Obviously such practices in the transmission of property meant that a substantial number of potential heirs to family land never obtained any. Modern studies have shown that Basque family members who did not inherit could be accommodated together with their own dependants in the central *etxe* or in subordinate dwellings, in some cases former summer pasturage shelters in the mountains.²⁰ But basically such a system of inheritance, allied to the limited capacity of the Western Pyrenees to support a large human popula-

¹⁵ For some of the arguments on the origins of the divisions between the different Basque groups see COLLINS, *The Basques*, 31-37; for an alternative view see CLAUDIO SÁNCHEZ-ALBORNOZ, *Los vascones vasconizán la depresión vasca*, in his *Vascos y Navarros en su primer historia*. Madrid 1976, 72-78.

¹⁶ Some impression of these valley communities will be gained from H. CAVAILLÈS, *Une federation pyrénéenne sous l'Ancien Régime: les traités de liès et de passerries*. *Revue Historique* 105 (1910) 1-34, 241-276.

¹⁷ This is a subject that has received little detailed attention, largely due to the limitations of the available evidence. Generally the later regional divisions are linked to the tribal distinctions recorded by Strabo and other classical geographers: see *inter alia* ENRIQUE KNÖRR BORRÁS, *Para una delimitación etno-lingüística de la Alava antigua*. Ensayo de cartografía a partir de pruebas toponómicas, in *La formación de Alava*. 2 vols. Vitoria-Gasteiz 1985, vol. I, 483-541.

¹⁸ JULIO CARO BAROJA, *Los Vascos*. 4th ed. Madrid 1971, 110-132.

¹⁹ COLLINS, *The Basques*, 193-194, 206.

²⁰ GÓMEZ-IBÁÑEZ, *The Western Pyrenees*, 35.

tion, has meant that the Basques have tended to produce a surplus of manpower in respect of their own economic and social needs. Thus taking an overview of the whole course of Basque history, in so far as we can now see it, a pattern of continuous export of surplus population can be seen.

Place name evidence has suggested, albeit not conclusively, that a more extensive Basque occupation of southern Aquitaine existed in the pre-Roman period than is often allowed for. Similarly, Basque speakers predominated in the plains of Alava in the pre-Roman Iron Age. As is well attested in sources from both north and south of the mountains, the immediate post-Roman centuries were marked by a new Basque expansion into the region south of the Garonne and into the upper and even the middle Ebro valley.²¹ Similarly, in the ninth century Basque settlements predominated in Alava, where they had been culturally overwhelmed towards the end of the first millennium B.C., and by the tenth were playing a central role in the populating of the newly formed County of Castille.²² A disproportionate Basque involvement in the colonization of South and Central America from the sixteenth century onwards, and a distinctive role in the settling of some of the western parts of North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could be related to this same pattern of the exporting of surplus population. In some of the periods in which no such physical expansion of the area in which Basque speakers predominated either occurred or can be detected other mechanisms can be seen to have existed to cope with this problem. For example recruitment into the Roman army on the part of the Basques, at least in the period of the early Empire, looks to have been reasonably substantial, and for later periods the growth of urbanisation and the industrialization of parts of the Basque region provided means of absorbing a larger percentage of the population within their home territories.²³

What is every bit as striking as the Basques' propensity to export themselves, violently or otherwise, is the relative rapidity with which these extensions of their society, even those into areas immediately contiguous with their western Pyrenean homelands, have been assimilated by the majority culture. Thus, as has been mentioned, Alava ceased to be an area in which the Basque language pre-dominated before the beginning of the Christian era. By the commencement of the present millennium this position had completely reversed, but now nine hundred or so years later Basque speakers are once again a small minority in this area. Even more rapid seems to have been the assimilation of the Basque presence established between the Adour and the Garonne in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, which, although vital to the subsequent development of a distinctive Gascon identity, disappears by the twelfth century, if not earlier.²⁴ In Castille, where Basques may never have represented the majority element in the population, a presence that is clearly marked in charters of the tenth and early eleventh centuries, has ceased to be detectable by the end of the latter. Their impact in this area, and indeed in

²¹ For the Basques in Alava before the Roman period and their gradual linguistic absorption see M. L. ALBERTOS, *Alava preromana y romana: estudio lingüístico. Estudios de Arqueología Alavesa* 4 (1970), 107–223.

²² ABELARDO HERRERO ALONSO, *Voces de origen vasco en la geografía castellana*. Bilbao 1977, provides a study of Basque place names in Castille and the documentary evidence for them.

²³ FRANCISCO LETAMENDIA ORTIZ, *Breve historia de Euskadi*. Barcelona 1980, 93–141; JUAN PABLO FUSI AIZPURUA, *El problema vasco en la II República*. Madrid 1979, indicates some of the political and ideological problems created in the 1930s by attempts to transform the innate but inarticulate sense of Basque identity into the foundation of a nationalist movement.

²⁴ This process requires fuller study, though this would be hampered by the lack of documentary records relating to Gascony in these centuries: see COLLINS, *The Basques*, 173.

Christian Spain more generally, survived largely in the continuing use of names such as Sancho, García and Iñigo that were of Basque origin.

The Basques thus present an extraordinary paradox with their remarkable capacity for survival as a racial and linguistic group, matched by an extreme cultural fragility outside a small nuclear homeland consisting of the western Pyrenees and a coastal region between the mountains and the Bay of Biscay. This raises fundamental questions about the nature of the Basque identity. As has been mentioned there is no way whereby the Basques can be defined or could have defined themselves in relation to a political structure or a social hierarchy. Only in the last years of Sancho the Great of Navarre (c. 1032/1035) were all of the Basques ever under a single political authority, and Sancho's monarchy was in no sense self-consciously Basque. As the lack of indigenous vocabulary shows, ideas of kingship are quite alien to Basque social order.²⁵ This, however, does not make them Nature's democrats; effective local authority has probably always resided with the heads of the households or *Etrekon-jaun*.²⁶

If not by political allegiance, then it is quite possible that Basque identity was articulated by the existence of common forms of dress and other features of material and intellectual culture. This was probably the case, and Aimery Picaud's guide for pilgrims to Compostela gives some hint of this, albeit in prejudiced and distorted guise.²⁷ However, for our purposes all too much of this remains obscure. Obviously variety in customs, dress, music and so forth play a vital part in distinguishing different human societies, and the Pyrenees have a rich folklore in all of these respects.²⁸ Doubtless the same was true of the different Germanic societies of Early Medieval Europe. However, this kind of material is very hard to detect historically and is often more liable to change over relatively short chronological spans than those within any given society are willing or able to recognise. Only in respect of some forms of adornment, notably in metal and gems, can there be any hope of modern identification of some of these crucial distinctions in past societies. However, for a variety of reasons there is no Basque archaeology, at least in terms of anything later than the Neolithic period, and, although probably once existing, Basque oral literature and music are now virtually entirely lost.²⁹ The modern music of the Basques, with its remarkably limited repertoire of instruments, may contain features of antique traditions but is largely a creation of the nineteenth century.³⁰ The extremely limited nature of the printing of books in Basque before the present century, not least under the influence of fears of the dissemination of heresy, stifled both composition of literature in the language and the transmission of earlier oral texts. What is so striking

²⁵ See 'Etrege' in RESURRECCIÓN MARÍA DE AZKUE, *Diccionario vasco-español-francés*, 2 vols. Bilbao 1969, vol. I, 265.

²⁶ MAYTE LAFOURCADE, *Le particularisme juridique*, in *Être Basque*, ed. JEAN HARITSCHELHAR, Toulouse 1983, 163–191.

²⁷ JEAN VIELLIARD (ed.), *Le guide du pèlerin de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle*. Macon 1938, 26–31.

²⁸ VIOLET ALFORD, *Pyrenean Festivals: Calendar Customs, Music and Magic, Drama and Dance*. London 1937, remains the best study and account of such traditions, and ranges over the whole extent of the Pyrenees. For the Basque regions it can be supplemented by LUIS DE BARANDIARAN IRIZAR, *Antología de fábulas, cuentos y leyendas del País Vasco*. San Sebastián 1981.

²⁹ One form of monument for which considerable antiquity has been claimed is the Basque discoidal grave marker, but although several extant examples are clearly of late medieval date none can be shown to be earlier. Crudity of carving has sometimes been confused with antiquity. See JOSE MIGUEL DE BARANDIARAN, *Estelas funerarias del País Vasco*, 2nd ed. San Sebastián 1980.

³⁰ JOSE ANTONIO ARANA MARTIJA, *La musique basque*, in *Être Basque*, 361–377; also ANN LIVERMORE, *A Short History of Spanish Music*. London 1972, 151–155, 204–205.

about the Basques in these respects is just how little of what may be called 'high culture' they ever possessed. One clear reason for that is the unchallenged supremacy of Latin and then Romance cultures in the court and urban societies of the Basque regions from the Roman period onwards.

This progressive narrowing of the focus of what is suitable or possible for investigation in respect of the Basque identity leaves us ultimately with the areas of law and of language. By the sixteenth century the Basques had become firmly associated with a number of bodies of regional customary law, known as *fueros*. The two provinces of Vizcaya and Guipuzcoa had their own sets, under which all of their inhabitants lived, whilst those of Navarre were subject to the *Fuero General*.³¹ Alava does not fit so neatly into this pattern, but its *Fueros de Ayala* were applied to a large sector of the provinces' population.³² Under these lengthy sets of rules of law, customary procedures, exemptions and so forth the Basques had a legal system that differentiated them from the rest of the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Castille, within whose borders all those living south of the Pyrenees had been included since 1514. In the French Basque region, or *Iparralde*, the *Coutumes* of Basse-Navarre were recognised by the French monarchy.³³ These various sets of foral law not only differentiated the Basques, at least in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from other groups within the same greater political unit under whose authority they lived, but also provided a focus for the maintenance and growth of a strong sense of regional and racial identity. In this sense the Basque *fueros* played a role analogous to that of the *Code of Lek Dukaghin* amongst the Gheg tribes of northern Albania, where the sense of being under the rules of a common code, also known simply as 'the Canon', could provide the only sense of identity that was supra-tribal in character.³⁴

It is interesting in this context to notice that this particular comparison can be taken further. The province-wide *fueros* of the Basque region are all late medieval in date. Likewise the *Code of Lek Dukaghin* takes its name from its shadowy eponymous compiler, who, if he ever existed at all, must have lived c. 1460/1470.³⁵ Both sets of laws, of course, seem to contain material that is far older in date than the period of their compilation or official promulgation. In the case of the Basque *fueros*, it is, however, very easy to reach back into much earlier stages in the legal history of the people and to look at the various elements from which the codes were constructed. In preceding centuries, reaching back at least to the tenth, numerous *fueros* were issued, mainly by royal authority, but in some cases being the grants of lesser lords. Basically these documents were charters of immunity, often linked to tariffs of compensation for homicide, injury and so forth, and they were conceded to a large number of urban and rural communities. They grew in size and complexity as the Middle Ages advanced. What is striking, however, is that in origin they certainly do not represent a writing down of 'age-old' customary law. In most cases of the granting of *fueros* to an urban community this was done to a new foundation, the elements of whose population were drawn from a variety of different regions. Likewise, in most

³¹ ANTONIO CILLAN APALATEGUI, *La foralidad guipúzcoana*. Zarauz 1975; G. DE BALPARRA, *Historia crítica de Vizcaya y de sus fueros*. 3 vols. Madrid 1925.

³² LUIS MARIA DE URIARTE LEBARIO, *El Fuero de Ayala*. Vitoria 1974.

³³ EURENI GOYHENETXE, *Historia de Iparralde*. San Sebastián 1985, 63–68.

³⁴ For the application and standing of the Canon of Lek Dukaghin in the early part of this century see EDITH DURHAM, *High Albania*. London 1909, 25–38, 199, 342; also WALTHER PEINSIPP, *Das Volk der Shkypetaren*. Wien 1985, 43–48, 147–247.

³⁵ The Canon itself was first written down, in translation, and codified during the brief period of Italian domination: STEFANO GJERÇOV (tr.), *Codice de Lek Dukaghini, ossia diretto consuetudionario delle montagne d'Albania*. Rome 1941; for Lek see DURHAM, *High Albania*, 25–27.

cases *fueros* were not specially devised for the particular settlement. A small number of original or founding sets of *fueros* were extended to become the particular laws of a large number of communities, with minimal modification. Thus for example the *fueros* granted to Vitoria in 1181 were later given to La Puebla de Arganzón in 1191, Orduña in 1229, Salvatierra in 1256, Azpeitia in 1310 and so forth.³⁶ These concessions were largely the product of a mixture of local conditions and hard political bargaining. Despite the strong and emotive hold the great sets of province-wide *fueros* were later to exert on the Basque consciousness of their traditions and separate identity, they actually represent a relatively late stage in the process.

This is simply to say that the Basque identity was not the product of the *fueros*, though these, particularly when they were threatened, could become a subject on which it was focussed. They helped at best to give shape to a pre-existing identity. Ultimately, then, in respect of the evidence that is accessible to us, it is in the matter of language that Basque self-consciousness becomes easiest to understand. Certainly, it is clear that in no case, at least before the modern period, has a sense of Basque identity survived the disappearance of the use of the language. Even in such a traditional 'heartland' region as Navarre, the massive decline in the number of the speakers of the language over the last century and a half has brought about a real crisis in identity.³⁷ Obviously there are, and always have been, certain items of dress and elements of folklore that are quintessentially Basque, but these, as in past centuries, are strictly rural and popular in character. Only in the present century have the problems of an industrial society in decline and the unsympathetic handling of the people and their regions by centralizing governments both north and south of the Pyrenees led to a major urban and Middle class interest in so fundamentally rural a culture.

This enquiry has obviously had to rove over a very wide chronological span in attempting to assemble the materials from which the most basic questions about the Basques can be answered, and even so the conclusions have been largely negative ones. In examining the various elements around which it might be thought that the distinctive Basque identity had formed itself it has been necessary in most cases to discard them, with the ultimate exception of that of language. To this must be added a variety of factors which to the historian may seem imponderable, such as dress, music, and folk traditions, elements that are poorly recorded in our sources and which it must be appreciated have always been very open to transformation. However, it is around such identifying features that a sense of community is developed. It is notable that modern anthropological studies conducted amongst European societies often indicate the stress placed on the impossibility of outsiders being able to understand or to perform both the law and the folk arts of the society under investigation.³⁸ Although it is much harder to delineate the precise outlines of such elements in societies in the past, particularly essentially rural and non-literate ones such as that of the Basques, it is crucial to recognise that they existed and played the leading role in the articulation of group identity.

For the Early Middle Ages in particular the Basques constitute, despite the evidential problems previously alluded to, probably the best documented case of a 'mountain people' in Europe, both eastern and western. Thus some of the theoretical deductions that can be made in their case as to the structuring of their society and the nature of its relations with neighbouring lowland ones could at least be used as working hypotheses in

³⁶ GONZALO MARTÍNEZ DIEZ, *Alava Medieval*. 2 vols. Vitoria 1974, 148–152, 157–163, 171–173.

³⁷ RAYMOND CARR, *Spain 1808–1975*. 2nd ed. Oxford 1982, 556–558.

³⁸ ALFORD, *Pyrenean Festivals*, 80; PEINSIPP, *Das Volk der Shkypetaren*, 43.

the study of comparable but less well depicted peoples. It may thus be possible, for example, to throw further doubt on the theory of the Illyrian origin of the Albanians, at least of the northern mountain-dwelling tribes, and the credibility of Procopius's report that the montagnard pastoralists of Sardinia were merely Berbers exiled by the Vandals might rightly be challenged.³⁹

Obviously, though such comparative applications may be valuable, the prime importance of the study of the nature and origins of Basque social structures comes in the way it helps to explain the behaviour of the Basques themselves and makes their would-be historian less dependent on the hostile accounts of the exclusively non-Basque literary sources. It also makes possible a better understanding of their relations with successive powerful neighbours, from the Roman Empire up to the modern Spanish and French states. To take a precise historical example, whether or not one is willing to believe in an 'independant Aquitaine' in the early 670s, MICHEL ROUCHE's argument that the Aquitanian duke Lupus based his military strength on the manpower resources of the Basques is greatly strengthened by the appreciation that such military recruitment provided a classic way of exporting or economically transferring their surplus male population from the early Roman period onwards.⁴⁰ Although less well documented, other Early Medieval 'mountain peoples', such as the Isaurians in Asia Minor, can be found enjoying similar relations with neighbouring lowland societies.

As the Aquitanian case might indicate, although the ethnogenesis of the Basques, strictly speaking, requires investigation in periods much earlier than those generally under consideration, they themselves had a role to play in the formation of other peoples and social groups with whom they came in contact.⁴¹ Inevitably such neighbours made their own mark on Basque society, but, as is clear, this tended only to take the form of absorbing certain sectors of that society or particular geographical areas but generally making little or no impact on the fundamental features of Basque culture. Here a general conclusion must be that the remarkable vitality of the latter stands in direct relationship to its limitations in material and intellectual but above all economic terms.

³⁹ Procopius, *History of the Wars* IV. xiii. 41–45 (ed. H. B. DEWING, Loeb Library vol. II, 324–326).

⁴⁰ MICHEL ROUCHE, *L'Aquitaine des Wisigoths aux Arabes, 418–781*, Paris 1979, 100–101.

⁴¹ See the article by MICHEL ROUCHE in this volume, and PHILIPPE WOLFF, *L'Aquitaine et ses marges*, in *Karl der Grosse: Lebenswerk und Nachleben*, ed. H. BEUMANN, 4 vols. Düsseldorf 1965–1966, vol. I, 269–306. Certain reservations about the strength and stability of an Aquitanian identity are expressed in ROGER COLLINS, *Pippin I. and the Kingdom of Aquitaine*, in *Charlemagne's Heir: New Approaches to the Reign of Louis the Pious*, ed. PETER GODMAN and ROGER COLLINS, Oxford forthcoming.