

Basking in the land of the Basques



West view of Castle of San Sebastián drawn by Thomas Driver in February 1814.

By Dr Edward Harris

‘From Santander, he continued east, sailing past San Sebastián to land at Pasajes. During February, before returning thence to Portsmouth, Driver occupied part of his time sketching the environs, particularly the ruins of San Sebastián and its citadel.’ — Ian C. Robertson, 2003

Unlike countries of countrysides, it is easy in Bermuda to look towards the horizon, often in wonder in earlier times as to what lay over that invisible border, or what shipping, foe or friend, might be approaching the island from parts unknown, even as distant as the Basque Country in the

Iberian Peninsula. Maritime places, such as that autonomous region of Spain and tiny Bermuda, share the horizons of the seas and are connected by the waters of the oceans, in this instance those of the North Atlantic, which reach from the Sargasso Sea surrounding our island to those of the tempestuous Bay of Biscay, forming the northern boundary of the Basque Country.

Before Bermudians existed, the men of the Basque Country were long visitors to our side of the Atlantic, much engaged in the 1500s in the cod fisheries of the Canadian Maritimes and in the pursuit of whales, basking unawares in those cold waters. Through those fisheries, the Basques were suppliers of essential oils to the Old World, the Arabs of the century, and some archaeological examples of their vessels have been found in the frigid waters of Red Bay in Labrador. In that regard, it was a pleasure to meet once again with an old friend of Red Bay and Bermuda, the eminent Basque marine archaeologist, Manu Izagirre, who some years ago assisted our National Museum with a project on a shipwreck here of the late 1500s.

Basking in the warm waters of international friendship, I was given several feasts in the Basque Country in private dining clubs, whose members are male and they are the only cooks, though women are often welcome at lunches and dinners. As some will know, such pleasurable events of great hospitality in that region begin at an indeterminate hour and run for several, with multiple courses of food and not inconsiderable amounts of rioja (the national drink thereabouts), finalised with a ‘glass of agua’, which turned out to be the traditional flagon of gin and tonic, the liquid finale to an evening. As perhaps befits their early entry into international travel as working tourists to North America, the Basques have to be among the most hospitable people in Atlantic Europe, or at least they so allowed me to bask in their most friendliest of attentions. Perhaps they could arrange some refresher courses for some of us hereabouts.

In due course, I will explain the relationship between the Basque Country and a modern Bermudian, but it would appear that a shipwreck or two in our waters may have originated in those Bay of Biscay coasts, as the Basques were some of the foremost makers of ships in the Age of Exploration. That tradition continued into recent times, as very high grade iron ore was found in the hills of Bilbao, allowing that riverine city to become a major builder of steel ships, until, like the great yards of Great Britain, that trade migrated, with tremendous regret, to the far Far East. Today, the Bilbao Maritime Museum and nearby dockage maintains vestiges of that once majestic shipbuilding industry.

Another connection, of both society and heritage, is found in the Fay and Geoffrey Elliott Collection at Bermuda through the works of the artist, Thomas Driver, whose descendants are yet to be found in Bermudian families, such as that of Chief Justice Ian Kawaley, and others. Driver was en route to Bermuda, but found he was on a diversion to the north coast of Spain and visited several Basque towns in February 1814, some six months after the last actions in those parts of the Peninsular War, which allied Britain and Spain against the French and their Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. San Sebastián, or Donostia in Basque, was particular hard hit and burned to the ground as a result of post-battle looting in August, 1813. A number of pen and ink sketches were made by Thomas Driver of the scenes of destruction, which were a result of Bonaparte’s attempt to add the Iberian Peninsula to his European empire.

In late November 2012, I was invited to the Basque Country to speak at a conference on archaeological works at the Roman town of Iruña-Veleia, a short distance from the city of Vitoria-Gasteiz, being one of the leading experts in matters of stratigraphy in archaeology, the science that controls the excavation and recording of archaeological sites, and the subsequent analyses of portable heritage from such places. While it would have been easy to bask in the honour in which the “Harris Matrix” is held in such matters, at least with the Basques, the purpose of the conference was to review some of the subjects that have made Iruña-Veleia one of the most controversial sites in the world.

The issue revolves around classes of artifacts found at the site by an archaeological team led by Idoia Filloy and Eliseo Gill, objects of pottery, brick and bone that were reused as writing tablets and inscribed with words and pictures in later Roman times. The information contained on the artifacts appears to have conflicted with presently held views of the origins of the Basque language and other subjects, so much so that some experts declared them to be fakes, forged perhaps by the archaeologists who found them. Apparently without proof, academic or otherwise, the archaeologists have been hung out to dry in the media, which unfortunately is often the fate of the falsely accused, as one Lord McAlpine found recently when he was defamed by the BBC, no less, and ‘twittered’, almost to death.

As to motivation, one cannot ‘follow the money’, as there is, and will likely always be, a dearth of it in archaeology. A preliminary audit would suggest that the archaeologists conducted the excavations to modern standards, particularly in recording, but as artifacts can be moved without losing their integrity, it is difficult to comment on the placement of objects after a “dig” has finished.

Given the complexity of the supposedly forged graffiti, all that one can say at this stage is that if the artifacts are forgeries, that the perpetrators of such a hoax are geniuses of the first order, but who, as archaeologists, would want to claim fame on the basis of such forgeries, when the real thing is usually of a far more abiding interest?

**Edward Cecil Harris, MBE, JP, PHD, FSA is Executive Director of the National Museum at Dockyard.
Comments may be made to director@bmm.bm or 704-5480.**