



The Basque farmhouses of Zelaa and Maiz Goena: New dendrochronology-based findings about the evolution of the built heritage in the northern Iberian Peninsula

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ABSTRACT

The Basque farmhouse, a characteristic building type for north-western Spain, is an architectural solution that allows the combined management of different rural activities. In addition to providing living quarters and a space for a cider press these farmhouses were designed to function as, among others, stable, barn and warehouse. They were often owned and managed by one family, with no links to ecclesiastic organizations. Architectural studies have established that these buildings first were constructed at the end of the 15th century without previous local precedent. This places their initial construction in a calm and relatively secure period, when the wars between the aristocratic lineages which had started in 1418, and which had resulted in assaults, looting and fires, had come to an end. The timing of their first occurrence has led to the interpretation that they represent a building tradition imported from the North. Dendrochronological research initially confirmed their late fifteenth-century origin. However recent restoration work in two previously undocumented farmhouses at Ezkio and Lazkao (Gipuzkoa territory) has enabled a reassessment of this interpretation. The architectural analysis of these buildings shows that their construction plans, which are quite similar, deviates from the general plan according to which the majority of Basque farmhouses were built. The newly identified model, wholly executed in wood with the exception of the roof covering, is based on the repetition of frames and bays. Together these generate the volume of the building, which is larger than the volume of other farmhouses. We collected a total of 81 oak (*Quercus* sp.) samples from both farmhouses and using Basque chronology ARAB9 as a reference established that these represent trees that were cut down in the spring of 1445 and in 1453 respectively. Since construction most likely took place within a few years after the trees were felled, this indicates that Basque farmhouses began to be constructed decades earlier than expected. At that time wars still raged in the Basque Country. If it is true that the political situation determined the degree of diffusion of non-indigenous architectural concepts in this region, the new findings can be interpreted as supporting the hypothesis that Basque farmhouses reflect a regionally-developed building tradition.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Architectural studies in the Basque Country (Spain)

The study of medieval architecture on the Iberian Peninsula mainly has been focussed on prestigious monumental buildings such as cathedrals, monasteries, castles, mosques and synagogues (Torres Balbás, 1949, 1952). A wide variety of studies has been published about this subject from the 19th century onwards. In most of these, buildings

have been analysed from an architectural point of view, focussing on typological and stylistic characteristics (Chueca Goitia, 2001).

Domestic architecture in the Basque Country began to be recognized as part of the built heritage in the 1980's, when detailed architectural studies were included in the rehabilitation plans of the historic old cities. Examples of non-prestigious architecture now are routinely added in such studies because of their ethnographical value and the fact that they contribute to more complete architectural overviews.

Nowadays the scientific study of architecture in the Basque Country has developed towards a more archaeology-based approach, in which the evolution of buildings is considered as a succession of archaeological units. This has profoundly changed the scientific toolbox used in architectural studies. The study of data and materials from all functional

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parts and phases of buildings significantly has improved our knowledge about their initial construction and further development. In addition this more material-based approach is improving the development of conservation and restoration solutions. This development has led to the characterization and classification of Basque farmhouses, which has resulted in new interpretations and firmly has established them as representing outstanding instead of relatively simple rural architecture (Santana et al., 2001a, 2001b).

1.2. The Basque farmhouse

The Basque farmhouse is a type of building that is an integral element of the rural environment of the Atlantic Basque coast. Its concept is expressed through the design of the house and the surrounding land. This design and layout come together to form a self-sufficient farm unit for the farmer and his family. The three-dimensional lay-out of the buildings is based on the model of a single family house: free-standing and compact, without a court yard, balcony or outbuilding. The main

characteristic is the integration of a cider press in the interior, especially in the Gipuzkoa territory but also in the Lapurdi and Nafarroa territories, and in some valleys in the Araba and Bizkaia territories (Fig. 1A). The roof has clay-tile roof cladding, a generally moderate inclination and two slopes. The dimensions of Basque farmhouses are substantial and surpass those of other kinds of vernacular architecture in this and adjacent regions. The advantage of the large volume is that Basque farmhouses next to providing living quarters and enabling cider production can accommodate multiple functions such as stable, barn, warehouse, workroom, apiary and dovecote. This design, in which all functions take place under a single roof, is well adapted to the rainy climate of the area. The concept of the Basque farmhouse also had a spiritual component, which made it into a place of domestic worship with links to nature and mythological beings and to the memories of the ancestors. At the same time it granted identity, rights and duties to its inhabitants, thus regulating the relationships with neighbourhoods and the community as a whole (Douglass, 1969). After their initial construction, in all documented cases their use progressively changed, with

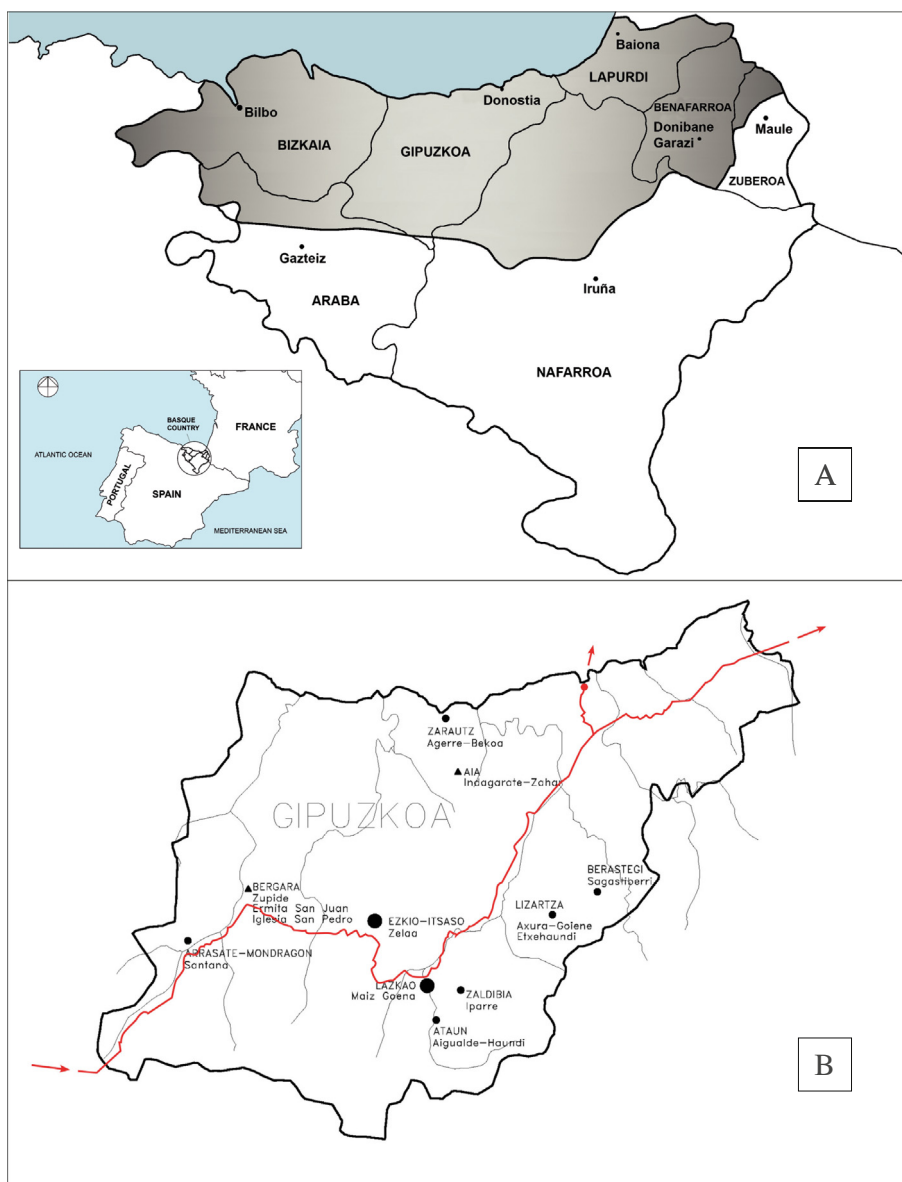


Fig. 1. Spatial distribution of Basque farmhouses. A: General distribution in North-western Spain. B: Gipuzkoa territory map showing the geographical position of dated farmhouses and other sites used in this study; large circles: Zelaia and Maiz Goena farmhouses; small circles: other dendrochronologically-dated farmhouses, triangles: site chronologies used as dendrochronological references. The old Royal Road between Castile and Aquitaine is marked in red. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

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