

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Power and alterity: Depictions of the Vascones from antiquity to the middle ages

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Abstract

This article undertakes an examination of the origins and evolution of a discourse of alterity against the Vascones –the alleged forefathers of the Basques – and other Western Pyrenean peoples from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. The methodology employed involves the study of literary references made to these peoples, which are then compared to recent scholarly and archeological evidence. Through this analysis, it becomes possible to evaluate the accuracy of these mentions and interpret them within their specific historical context. The results of this research indicate that mentions of the Vascones during this timeframe were mainly polemic in nature and lacked substantial grounding in empirical reality. Instead, it seems that the underlying objective of these narratives of alterity was twofold: to enhance the social and political standing of their authors and to support their claims to political control over the Western Pyrenees. The abandonment of these interpretative repertoires during the tenth century, coinciding with the emergence of the kingdom of Pamplona and the county-duchy of Wasconia, further emphasizes the connection between the display of these tropes and imbalances in political power between the region and its neighbors. The conclusions of this article directly challenge the underpinnings of discourses that depict the ancient Vascones as entirely alien to the political and religious paradigms derived from the Roman and Christian traditions. In so doing, it thus confront narratives about these “ancient Basques” that are prevalent in contemporary Basque cultural production.

Introduction

Cultural biases populate the space between knowledge and power; and much like any other discipline, the assertions put forth by geographers can hardly escape the predispositions ingrained in the minds that gave birth to them. None better than Strabo, the great author from the Augustan era and the so-called father of regional geography, to exemplify this. As a Greek from a provincial capital, he shared in a picture of the world that took for granted that urban settlements and political citizenship constituted the pinnacles of human achievement. Therefore, when in the

third book of his famous *Geography* he confronted the task of documenting the peoples of northern Iberia – an area he had never visited and whose mountainous terrain prevented its dwellers from developing any remarkable town – Strabo could not contain his disdain. The natives of those parts, he claimed, were frugal and did “not attend to ease or luxury.” Such an unyielding aversion to vice, if painted in a positive light, was one in which hard-nosed conservatives of the first-century CE could have found some appeal, had Strabo not then added: “unless anyone considers it can add to the happiness of their lives to wash themselves and their wives in stale urine kept in tanks, and to rinse teeth with it” (Strab. *Geo.* III, 4. 16). The picture, it soon became evident, was not meant to be a flattering one. Nowhere was his contempt better exemplified than in the unwillingness to furnish further details about these peoples: “I am reluctant to fill my page with their names, and would fain escape the disagreeable task of writing them” (Strab. *Geo.* III, 3. 7). Among the scant communities from these lands he deemed worthy of mention were the Vascones, the alleged forefathers of the Basques.

Strabo’s negative take on the Vascones would mark the inception of a long-lasting discourse of alterity and disdain that spanned from Antiquity through the Middle Ages. For the purposes of this work, I tentatively define alterity as “the consciousness of Self as unique from Other,” a “rhetorically constructed” boundary between groups that is “produced through narrative and other discursive forms” (Glenister 2007: 5–6). In this sense, alterity plays a fundamental role in the creation of collective identities by circumscribing the in-group and differentiating it from the out-group. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) was one of the pioneers in the examination of alterity, highlighting how the establishment of “an ontological and epistemological distinction” between Orient and Occident could justify endeavors by those associating with the latter to dominate and assert authority over the former (Said 2003: 2–3). Despite Erich S. Gruen’s (2011) efforts to moderate this direct association between alterity and stigmatization, even he has been forced to acknowledge an all too common tendency to denigrate the “Other” as a means to assert superiority over it (Gruen 2011: 1). In such instances, alterity decisively contributes to the spread and preservation of prejudices and other “negative attitudes against certain ethnic groups and their members” (Pettigrew et al. 1982: 2), a factor some consider critical for the emergence of discrimination (Pereira et al. 2010; Collins and Clément 2012: 376–7).

Narratives of alterity are part of “the set of descriptions, arguments, and accounts that are recurrently used in people’s talk to construct versions of the world,” playing a crucial role in social actions “such as blaming, justifying, rationalizing, and constructing particular social identities for speakers and those who are positioned as other” (Augoustinos and Every 2007: 125; Jansen 2013: 178). As such, they frequently play a vital role in creating “positional superiorities” (Said 2003: 7), allowing those who utter them to evaluate the “Other” with accord to their own values (Glenister 2007: 7). This process, as Said and Gruen revealed, often results in the “Other” being regarded as inferior (Augoustinos and Every 2007: 129; Reicher 2012: 30). Does this mean that there exists a direct association between embracing certain values and generating distinct discourses of alterity? This is what Kathleen Glenister seems to suggest, stating that narrative motifs first developed in response to questions of alterity at specific historical junctures may resurface when similar

communicative conditions exist (Glenister 2007: 12–3). In particular, one significant method by which these narrative motifs endure appears to be the preservation in these accounts of memorable stories and anecdotes about the “Other” (Andreu and Jordán 2007: 249).

In the ancient Greek and Roman world, the concept of alterity revolved primarily around the notion of “barbarian,” but this does not necessarily mean that encounters between Greeks and Romans and the “Other” were consistently framed in confrontational terms (Burns 2003: 42; Gruen 2011: 356–7). For example, narratives produced by Greek or Roman authorities, especially those that identified the origins of certain populations with myths such as those of Troy or Herakles, might have been fundamental in assigning a place for these groups in the Graeco-Roman system of knowledge, while also allowing locals to maintain pride in at least certain elements of their culture and customs (Woolf 2011: 27–8). In this regard, it is important to note that these discourses likely drew upon sources of different provenance, reflecting an interplay of various traditions – both Graeco-Roman and native – that were only later filtered through the view of ancient ethnographers (Andreu 2009: 218–9; Woolf 2011: 18–9).

And yet, this does not mean that the boundary between “Self” and “Other” at this time remained fuzzy either. Greek geographers were keen on blatantly distinguishing themselves from the barbarians by blaming differences in features such as physical appearance, intellectual capability, or institutional development on the influence of latitudinal zones or *klimata*. Unsurprisingly, these intellectual exercises invariably showed the superiority of Greece’s location (Woolf 2011: 34–5). Conversely, Roman authors appear to have been more comfortable by presenting the “Other” within the inferior strata of a culturally defined scale at the apex of which stood Roman urban civilization (Almagor 2005: 51). In this sense, Susanna Morton (1997) has studied the importance that this “civilizational paradigm” played in the conceptualization of the Latin term *humanitas* and in the process of assimilating non-Roman local elites to Roman-style lifestyles and customs. In this interpretation, the benchmark for assessing the possession of *humanitas* was the emulation of cultural behaviors associated to the Roman center, thus equating this notion with *urbanitas* and, invariably, with *Romanitas* (Morton 1997: 25–6). In other words, this view of the “Other” constructed the “barbarian” as the direct opposite of the “Roman.”

These paradigms were key in the case of the Vascones. The precise spatial contours of the Vascon territory remain a subject of debate, in large part due to the contradictory hints provided by surviving sources (Segura 1997: 59; Larrañaga 2007: 380). This discussion is further complicated because various ideologies have, ever since the Early Modern period, regarded the Vascones as the forefathers of the Basques (Wulff 2009: 30; Duplá and Pérez 2022). However, it is now widely accepted that the ancient Vascones did not occupy the modern Basque Autonomous Region, home to other communities such as the Vardulians or the Caristians, and lived instead in the central and southern regions of Navarre, extending their reach beyond the Ebro to occupy parts of present-day provinces such as Rioja, Álava, and Aragon (Jordán 2006; Armendáriz 2009). An additional challenge in the study of this group lays in the difficulty to associate the communities within this purported Vascon territory with any single material culture or linguistic family (Ramírez 2006: 194–5;

Wulff 2009: 38; Lakarra 2018: 184–5). Confronted with this complex picture, some scholars have posited that “Vascon” could have been in fact a foreign designation introduced by Roman authorities and intellectuals to conceptualize the heterogeneous populations of the Western Pyrenees (Jordán 2006: 84–5; Pina 2009: 212; Wulff 2009: 46).

The goal of this article is to trace the development of narratives of alterity concerning the Vascones over time, from their origins in Antiquity up until their ultimate abandonment in the Middle Ages. In so doing, it will demonstrate how, over the course of centuries, these descriptions were amalgamated into an effective discourse of disdain that bore little resemblance to the reality of the Western Pyrenees and its inhabitants. As Andreu and Jordán (2007) have highlighted, the true value of these allusions lay not in their reliability as descriptive accounts, but rather in their utilization to buttress the social position of their authors as members of a civilized community and to substantiate their assertions of social and political preponderance (Fishbein 2002: 288). Moreover, this study will attempt to explain why this discourse of alterity and inferiority mostly vanished with the emergence of powers of regional significance like the Kingdom of Pamplona and the Duchy of Wasconia at around the tenth century.

The birth of an interpretative repertoire in antiquity

Classical Roman authors

Strabo’s aversion of the Vascones most likely resonated with many of his readers; after all, the Roman educated class, the intended audience of the *Geography*, was as hostile toward the inhabitants of the mountain heights as was the geographer from Amasia. While Roman authors could occasionally complain about the hasty rhythms of urban life and wonder if there existed “anywhere preferable to the blessed countryside” (Horace, *Epistles*, 1.10.13–4), there is no doubting that this image hardly included a peripheral and rugged environment like that of the Western Pyrenees. According to Roman perceptions of landscapes, cities were not only densely populated spaces: they also constituted the last stop in the road to civilization (Varro, *De Re Rustica*, 3.1.1; Morton 1997: 25–6; Arce 2000: 4). Great ranges devoid of major settlements, like the Pyrenees, loomed in their collective imagination as a “different world”: one inhabited by unruly savages, fugitives from the plains, and menacing bandits (Andreu 2009: 219–20; Shaw 2018: 503). In their eyes, the dwellers of non-urbanized areas, especially those from mountainous regions, were perceived as existing still in a primal stage of development and were, thus, doomed to act “on the animal impulse, and [to live] most corruptly” (Strab., *Geo.* III, 4.16).

The Vascones depicted by Strabo aligned seamlessly with this interpretation (Beltrán 2006: 223–4; Andreu and Jordán 2007: 241). However, he was not the only one to uphold such views about the country and its natives. In the first-century CE epic poem *Punica*, for example, Silius Italicus described the Vascones as one of the tribes that had accompanied Hannibal during his campaigns in Italy and whose barbarity was at display in their reluctance to wear helmets (Silius It., *Pun.* II, 356–61). Several decades later, the historian Tacitus underscored the ferocity of

certain Vascon warriors in Galba's retinue (Tac. *Hist.* 4. 33). Somewhat more neutral references include mentions to the *Vasconum agrum* – “the countryside of the Vascones” (Liv. *Ab urb.* XCI. Frag.) – in Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* or Pliny the Elder's fleeting allusion to the *Vasconum saltus* – “the glades of the Vascones” (Plin. *Nat. Hist.* IV. 46). Finally, the *August History*, authored and compiled during the second- and third-century CE, once again highlighted the otherness of the Vascones and acknowledged their proficiency as augurs and soothsayers (*Scriptores Historiae Augustae* 1993: 5. XXVII. 6, 231).

This quick catalog, for all its meagerness, comprises virtually the entirety of the surviving Roman literary output that provides insights into the Vascones. Given these constraints, only some preliminary conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, it becomes evident that these works depict the Vascones as a barbarian people, an inferior “Other” to the Romans, characterized by their ferocity, their lack of sense of self-preservation, or their religious rituals. Andreu and Jordán have suggested that these portrayals should be viewed as concerted attempts to elevate the relative position of the Romans as the epitome of civilization, and to legitimate their rule over these populations as a natural development (Andreu and Jordán 2007: 238; Andreu 2009: 217–8). It is hardly coincidental that the two most damning accusations made against the Vascones originate from an epic poem narrating the most important military triumph of the Romans and from a geographer that considered that his discipline was “essential” to acquire “dominion over land and sea” (Strab. *Geo.* I, 1. 16). The second conclusion – even if this perhaps misled by a defective preservation of ancient sources – is that the region held little fascination for intellectual circles within the Roman Empire (Urteaga 2003: 87).

After reading these excerpts, the reader might expect that both the land of the Vascones and its populace would have managed to evade the influence of Roman lifestyles. Indeed, this has been the traditional viewpoint of many Basque authors (Garibay 1571: 193; Poza 1997) ever since the Early Modern period to which the renowned intellectual Miguel de Unamuno paid lip-service when he called the ancient Vascones “an untamed race in front of the surge of the peoples” (Unamuno 1891: 89). However, contemporary scholarship and archeological findings have fundamentally challenged this perception of the Vascones. It is now undeniable that, following the initial expansion of Roman power at both sides of the Western Pyrenees in the first-century BCE, the region was rapidly integrated into the networks of the empire. Roads were laid out that connected the lands of the Vascones to the Mediterranean coast to the east and to Gaul in the north (Blázquez 2007: 110; Larrañaga 2007: 83–4; Andreu 2017: 559). Urbanization also received substantial support. Roman-style settlements have been identified in Los Bañales de Uncastillo (Andreu 2022) and Santa Criz de Eslava (Andreu et al. 2019), while others were founded in Grachurris and Calagurris, on the shores of the Ebro River, as well as in Oiasso on the Atlantic coast. Although the Vascon filiation of these cities has been contested (Jordán 2006: 96; Wulff 2009: 41) they remain important as regional centers in a network of trade hubs, hamlets, and security posts that punctuated the new ways of communication.

If the imprint of Roman authority was discernible in the urban and territorial planning of the region, then the influence of the empire was also unmistakable in the lifestyles adopted by its dwellers. Elite members of Vascon society appear to have

been assimilated into the Roman provincial administration at an early stage (Ortíz 2009: 472) and to have considered their belonging to the empire sufficiently important so as to bestow Roman names upon their children (Ramírez 2006: 194–5; Larrañaga 2007: 131–2). The multilingualism that seems to have characterized the area in pre-Roman times (Gorrochategui 2006: 134; Ramírez 2006: 194–5; Lakarra 2018: 184–5) gradually gave way to Latin as the latter became a paradigmatic marker of social status (Jimeno 2003: 27; Larrañaga 2007: 525), while a similar shift occurred in the native religious world as it began to intermingle with Roman-style practices (Tobalina 2009: 488). Of course, these trends must have been more acute in the areas closest to the arteries of provincial power, such as the Ebro basin, but their traces have been attested even in the mountainous and more isolated north (Zaldua 2020: 17–8). In summary, the overarching picture of the area during the high empire offers a far-cry from the bleak depiction conveyed by literary sources. Instead of an obscure “Other,” the Vascones appear to have been the inhabitants of an integrated, albeit peripheral, segment of the empire.

Amid the scarcity and the tendentious bias provided by most informants, it is undeniable that the foundation of Pompaelo stands out as the only episode that portrayed the Vascones as more than brutish mountain dwellers. The city, located in present-day Pamplona, had allegedly received its name from Gneus Pompeius Magnus – “Pompey” from now on – (Strab. *Geo.* III, 4. 10), most likely during the Sertorian Wars (77–2 BCE). A conventional interpretation of this event, derived from Plutarch (*Lives* VIII), posited that the Roman general had created this city as a token of gratitude to his Vascon allies. However, historians have recently challenged this long-accepted narrative due to its dubious supporting evidence and the discovery of military camps and artifacts that point toward confrontations in the region (Pina 2011: 143; Martínez et al. 2019: 268–9). Whatever the truth behind the story, though, the connection between Pompey–Pompaelo–Vascones was one that endured (Wulff 2009: 38). Unlike other peoples of the Western Pyrenees like the Vardulians or the Autrigones – mentioned as neighbors of the Vascones, for instance, in Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia* (Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 3. 4) – the Vascones managed to withstand the wave of homogenization brought by the Roman empire that led to the extinction of these ethnonyms by the end of the first-century CE (Gorrochategui 2018: 252). It is highly likely that these stories played a pivotal role in the preservation by keeping fresh associations between the Vascones and significant historical events and characters in the public imaginary (Andreu and Jordán 2007: 249; Glenister 2007: 12–3). In this sense, and although references to them were scarce, they at least succeeded in safeguarding the memory of the Vascones among the erudite intellectuals of the age.

Late Roman Christian authors

Roman Christian authors were even less interested in documenting the Vascones than their early imperial counterparts. For all that is known, the last recorded reference to the Vascones in a non-literary source pertains to the mentions to a certain *Cohors II Vasconum* whose presence in North Africa was last confirmed in the late 150s CE (*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* XVI, 181–2). By that time, this military unit had been in existence for at least a century, had been stationed in

Britain for at least two decades (Blázquez 2007: 130), and it is unlikely that there was anything “Vascon” about it beyond its name (Ramírez 2015: 375). Similarly, no historical or geographical source from the second and third centuries makes any mention to the Vascones or their territory (Andreu and Jordán 2007: 248). In all practicality, the term appears to have faded into obscurity in the last decades of the second-century BCE.

The fact that the term “Vascon” had become a word devoid of content in the real world significantly deflated its utility as a propaganda tool. Narratives of alterity such as those cultivated during the first-century CE played a crucial role in spelling out the core virtues that forged the ideal Roman, but they were equally as relevant as assertions of dominance over those deemed inferior (Said 2003: 2–3; Andreu and Jordán 2007: 215). What was the duty of a responsible ruler, after all, if not to rein in with temperance the “animal impulses” of a barbarian or to make a mountain crossing secure by “civilizing” what had erstwhile been populations “poor and addicted to robbery” (Strab. *Geo.* IV. 6. 6)? Nevertheless, the role of the wild “Other” was better served during the Late Empire by human groups from beyond the Danube and the Rhine upon whom Roman authors imposed their own constructs of “savagery” (Martínez 2015: 49; Diarte-Blasco 2018: 132). In comparison, the peoples of the Western Pyrenees, whose ruling elites had wholeheartedly embraced the ideals and lifestyles of the Romans and who had been compliant subjects since the conquest, no longer fit this narrative.

The difference between the proponents of the empire and the new wave of Christian authors writing in the late fourth century, however, was that the latter were not necessarily seeking political control. Ever since the official endorsement of Christian religion during the reigns of Constantine and his successors, this elite had come to support a notion of “civilization” that not only included previous virtues such as self-control, but also others like reverence to God. The belief that a human could only develop fully after becoming a Christian (Sayas 1985: 45) operated a crucial shift in the worldview of these individuals. It was no longer necessary to look beyond the borders for “barbarians” to subdue; instead, because “civilized” was equated with “Christian,” the non-Christian populations within the empire itself could likewise be cast as “barbarians” (Andreu and Jordán 2007: 238; Martínez 2015: 46). The issue, as Christian apologists in the late fourth century recognized, was that in provinces like Hispania pagans and Christians appear to have coexisted all too peacefully: a trend that infuriated ecclesiastical authorities as it threatened to contaminate their orthodox beliefs (Kulikowski 2004: 40).

It was amid this climate of tension between an officially endorsed exclusive religion and a cultural tradition rooted in paganism that two Christian authors wrote about the Vascones. The first of them was Aurelius Prudentius Clemens, a native of Calagurris – a city referred to as Vascon by the second-century geographer Ptolemy (Ptol. II, 6, 67) – who had held two provincial governorships before returning to the Western Pyrenees. It was after his retirement that he embarked on the composition of a series of Christian poems that would gain significant popularity during the Middle Ages, including the *Peristephanon*, a composition to celebrate Christian martyrs. Hershkowitz (2017: 1–2) and Sáenz (2022: 14) suggest that Prudentius wrote this poem with a Spanish aristocratic audience in mind, and that this layer of society was probably already at least nominally Christian ever since

the mid-fourth century. However, as was the case in many regions of the empire, these *possessores* continued to receive an education grounded in classical pagan models and carried out their Christian rituals in public and private spaces brimming with pagan iconography (Larrea 2016: 226; Hershkowitz 2017: 44). According to the conclusions of these authors, it is likely that the *Peristephanon* was written precisely as an attempt to provide Christian role models for these aristocrats.

Regardless of the exact purpose behind its creation, what is clear is that one of the most studied passages in the *Peristephanon* corresponds to the *Hymn I*, which recounts the martyrdom of two soldiers, Emeterius and Chelidonius, in Calagurris during Diocletian's persecution in the early fourth century. After being tried by Roman authorities for their religion and condemned to death, Prudentius describes the occurrence of a miracle: the ascent to heaven of a handkerchief and a ring belonging to the martyrs. In the aftermath of this event, the poet addresses the gathered Calagurritans – and, by extension, his own audience in the real world:

“iamne credis, bruta quondam Vasconum gentilitas, Quam sacrum crudelis error immolant sanguinem?”

[Do you now believe, dull paganism of the old Vascones, how holy was the blood which cruel superstition sacrificed?] (Prudent. *Perist.* I, 94–5).

Hershkowitz (2017: 56) interprets this allusion to the “dull paganism” of the Vascones as proof of their presumed staunch resistance to the new religion. However, recent archeological discoveries seem to present a landscape that places the advance of Christianity in the lands of the Vascones on a par with that in other nearby regions (Jimeno 2008: 14; Sáenz 2018: 11). In fact, I would argue that the mention to the Vascones in Prudentius' poem, composed more than two centuries after the last use of the term in any administrative capacity, should not be regarded as evidence for the existence of a unique or self-conscious ethnic community. Rather, it most likely was intended to demonstrate the erudition and rhetorical prowess of an author who crafted his verses to resonate with a highly cultured Roman provincial society that was expected to understand such obscure references (Andreu and Jordán 2007: 237–8; Pozo 2016: 101; Hershkowitz 2017: 44). The Vascones of Prudentius' poem stood as a shorthand for the non-Christian “Other” that the provincials had to leave behind to embrace the civilized ways befitting a Roman Christian.

A similar perspective can be applied to the second mention to the Vascones, which emerges abruptly in the correspondence between two Christian contemporaries of Prudentius from the region of Bourdeaux: the poet Ausonius and Paulinus of Nola. In a letter written *circa* 390, Ausonius accused his friend Paulinus of having become distant after his decision to move from Aquitaine to Hispania. Ausonius, wholly stepped in the literature and heritage that were the main markers of a Roman-style education, sent his colleague an irate complaint. He admonished Paulinus for disregarding the rules of propriety due to an old acquaintance and attributed this change in behavior to a prolonged stay in the *Vasconis saltus*, the “woodlands of the Vascones” (Ausonius 1921: 117). Paulinus' answer, this time at least, was quick. “If one free of any wickedness spends his life in

the woodlands of Vasconia, he draws no infection from the customs of his inhuman [i.e., ‘barbarous’] host” (Ausonius 1921: 139).

Taking these allusions at face value might suggest that the lifestyles of the Vascones had not changed one bit since the times of Strabo. However, I would advise against taking Ausonius’ and Paulinus’ words as accurate descriptions of reality. First off, to speak about the *saltus* of the Vascones was a trope that could be traced back to the times of Pliny (Plin. *Nat. Hist.* IV. 46). Secondly, the association between Vascones and a lack of civilization was heavily indebted to Strabo or Silius Italicus, both of whom established a direct link between inhabiting a remote, mountainous land and regressing to a more primitive stage of human development (Beltrán 2006: 220; Andreu 2009: 219–20; Pozo 2016: 126; Sáenz 2022: 9). The only difference was that Ausonius added paganism to the long list of negative qualities attributed to these purported “barbarians.”

It might seem far-fetched to consider that mentions made by two writers at the turn of the fifth century were still shaped by images and interpretative repertoires that had emerged some three hundred years earlier. Perhaps, it could be argued, the Vascones remained as unaffected by Roman influence as the letters of Ausonius and Paulinus could lead readers to believe. However, upon closer examination of the fact that these mentions were part of a private correspondence and that they were accompanied by allusions to other characters from the ancient past like Hannibal or Sertorius, it becomes difficult not to suspect them rhetorical devices meant to adorn a highly erudite text (Sáenz 2022: 11). As Prudentius’ example illustrates, the ability to grasp these abstruse references was precisely what distinguished an aristocrat as an educated, civilized person (Hershkowitz 2017: 44). As for the reasoning behind such unflattering portrait, the very purpose of the text can provide an explanation. Ausonius opposed Paulinus’ ascetic retirement to Hispania, a land he disliked for its perceived associations with extremist and even heretical Christian beliefs (Bowes 2005: 189). Therefore, it was in his best interest to show how unsuitable it was for a true Roman aristocrat to spend time in the province. Paulinus, perhaps out of respect for his former professor, failed to confront such an unappealing image (Hershkowitz 2017: 52). However, the successful career of Prudentius and the presence of those aristocrats that made up his audience could not but disprove altogether this picture of savagery.

The creation of a discourse of inferiority in late antiquity

The decline of the Roman imperial system in the fifth century seems to have affected the lands of the Vascones deeply. While the exact reasons for this remain unclear due to the lack of historical sources and archeological remains, it seems hard to deny that the cities, settlements, and roads that comprised the physical apparatus of Roman control in the region experienced a significant rupture in the mid-5th, unlike what occurred in other nearby territories (Larrea 1998: 109; Pozo 2016: 147–8). One of the consequences of this collapse of central authority was that banditry became endemic, with outbreaks of extreme violence taking place in the central decades of the century (Kulikowski 2004: 182–3; Blázquez 2007: 144). Political control of the land fell to the leaders of regional military retinues who managed to maintain their

positions on a small scale, but otherwise, the territory was fragmented and lacked any kind of internal cohesion (Moreno 2015: 353–4; Martín 2021: 126). Funerary objects discovered in burials dating from the sixth century also suggest the presence of small aristocracies whose ability to exert power beyond their immediate surroundings was limited (Pozo 2016: 285; Quirós 2009: 393; Martín 2021: 110–1).

Nevertheless, events outside the region continued to exert influence on the territory. From the year 507 onward, after all, the Western Pyrenees had become the border between two great successor states of Rome: those of the Visigoths and the Franks. However, probably due to a combination of vigilant monitoring of the frontier and a lack of cooptable aristocratic lineages in these parts, neither of these monarchies proved capable of fully incorporating the inhabitants of the region into their respective kingdoms. Instability, over the course of the sixth and seventh centuries, became a defining characteristic of the country, with the coming and going of armies exacerbating the disorder that had initially set in by the end of the empire (Larrea 1998: 157–8). The Visigothic ruler Leovigild occupied “partem Vasconiae” in 581 (John of Biclar, *Chron.*); the Frankish chronicler Gregory of Tours noted that the “Wascones” had descended from the Pyrenees in 587 “ravaging the vineyards and the open fields” that stretched north of the mountain range (Greg. *Hist. Francorum*, IX. 7); Visigothic and Merovingian leaders like Swinthila, Wamba, Reccared, Dagobert, Charibert, or Rodrigo were all recorded to have been compelled, at one or more times during their respective periods of rule, to march to the Western Pyrenees to restore order and subdue the locals.

It has been argued before in this study that no such thing as a population identifiable with the Vascones had existed in the Western Pyrenees since the second century, either by themselves or by the imperial administration. Therefore, the frequent mentions to the Vascones (or Wascones, as they were known in Merovingian Francia) from the sixth and seventh centuries require a more in-depth explanation. Over the centuries, these accounts have fueled the views of those who like Sabin Arana, the father of Basque nationalism in the late nineteenth century, were prone to picture the Vascones as a community that had resisted Romanization and “could be lessened, but never conquered, by the steel of the bellicose Visigoth” (Arana 1965 [1893]: 155). However, scholars have rejected that the Vascones/Wascones mentioned in Late Antique chronicles could be equated with the pre-Roman Vascones (Wulff 2009: 38; De Brestian 2011: 285–6). Yet, the mystery persists. If not as the sudden revelation of an ancient ethnic group, re-emerging after the contours of Roman power had been cast down, then what explains the sudden resurgence of the Vascones in the documents of the age? In other parts of Hispania, it was political fragmentation of the Roman center that encouraged local aristocrats and intellectuals to resuscitate traditions embodied in ancient ethnonyms (Moreno 2015: 347–8; Martín 2021: 125). But in Vasconia no such regional sources of authority existed. For this reason, I argue, the preservation of this name could only have come from the outside, that is, from traditional narratives of alterity that imagined the Vascon as the “Other.”

Ever since the mid-fifth century, Merovingian and Visigothic rulers had found themselves facing the challenge of legitimizing their claims to rule over what had erstwhile been imperial territories (Díaz 1998: 182). Over the course of the sixth century, this need would lead them to increasingly adopt Roman cultural and

political customs. Following the trend set for them by Roman emperors, kings sponsored poets and chroniclers, erected monuments, promulgated legal edicts, dressed in the garb of the Caesars, and arrogated for themselves a sacral status that elevated them above their noble peers (Díaz 1998: 184; Valverde 2015: 72; Pozo 2016: 181; Pelat 2017: 197–8). This process had significant consequences for the development of Visigothic and Frankish royal power and resulted in a more hierarchical articulation of their respective societies (Díaz 1998: 177). And yet, for all that these proved to be pivotal undertakings for the internal affairs of these kingdoms, the endorsement of the foundational tenets of imperial ideology had also an undeniable impact upon how these courts conceived their own position vis-à-vis other communities. More and more, they came to present their own kingdoms as bastions of order and civilization in contrast to an outer world characterized by chaos and barbarity, a perspective not unlike that endorsed by late Roman imperialists (Pavón 2000: 7; Pozo 2016: 181).

Paradoxical though it was to see the former barbarians transformed into the epitomes of civilization, the most pressing concern for Merovingian and Visigothic authors was to find someone else to play the role of foreign savages. Luckily for them, the peoples of the Western Pyrenees, an unstructured region pestered by endemic instability and whose lack of territorial organization made it difficult to control, presented an ideal scapegoat. A poem from the year 580 written by a Frankish bishop and courtesan named Venantius Fortunatus celebrated the Merovingian monarch Chilperic by listing the peoples that the Frankish king had vanquished in battle. “You inspire fear in the Goth, the Vascon [Vasco], the Dane, the Jute, the Briton” (Fortun. *Carm.*, IX, I). What made the passage novel was the application of the pre-Roman name “Vascones” to the contemporary inhabitants of a territory that Merovingian propagandists identified with the limits of their kingdom (Pelat 2019: 55–6). Gregory of Tours, who was himself a friend of Fortunatus, had no qualms about embracing this revival of the ancient ethnonym, and even to extend its use to refer not only to the territories of the ancient Vascones – located to the south of the Pyrenees – but also to the inhabitants north of the mountain range (Greg. *Hist. Francorum*, IX, 7).

Influenced by these events in Francia, the ideologues of the *Regnum Gothorum* soon came to regard the Western Pyrenees as the abode of unruly Vascones (John of Biclar, *Chron.*). It was Isidore of Seville, the greatest cultural trailblazer in the Visigothic kingdom, however, who would contribute most to fully re-attaching to this name the many connotations – most of them negative – that had been levied against it during Antiquity. In his seminal work, *Ethymologies*, the Vascones emerge as “wanderers” who “occupy the vast emptiness of the heights of the Pyrenees” (Isid. *Etym.* IX, 107–8), a not-so-subtle reference that harked back to the highlanders so detested by Strabo and Ausonius. Soon enough, bolstered by the enormous prestige of the bishop of Seville, the more damning attributes associated to this trope likewise made their expected appearance. Tajón of Zaragoza, writing a letter to his colleague in Barcelona at some time between 653 and 666, spoke of the exploits of the “fierce kin of the Vascones [*Gens effera Vasconum*]” (Aguilar 2018: 197) and Julián of Toledo, in his *Historia Wambae Regis* from the late seventh century denounced both the “ferocity of their spirits” (Jul. *Hist. Wambae Reg.* X) and their partaking in “gathering[s] of traitors, . . . den[s] of disloyalty, [and] assembl[ies] of the damned”

(*Jul. Hist. Wambae Reg.* VIII). Similar rhetorical techniques can be traced in the contemporaneous Frankish *Chronicle of Fredegarius* (*Fred. Chron.*, IV. 78). Thus, ferocity and paganism, just as in the letters of Ausonius and Paulinus of Nola, were enshrined as the features that defined those who opposed the order of the successors of Rome (Sáenz 2022: 7).

It is beyond question that the discourse deployed by Merovingian and Visigothic chroniclers, poets, and bishops against the Vascones/Wascones was a negative one. However, the key question is whether this portrayal was fabricated. To address this issue, it is necessary to tackle two critical aspects. The first one is to assess whether the picture of cultural isolation and paganism projected by these sources aligns with the available historical and archeological record. The second, to determine why it was specifically the Vascones who became the target of the ideological attacks of these two kingdoms.

The answer to the first question seems more and more to approximate a resounding “no.” Martín (2021: 120) and Pavón (2000: 8–9) have both emphasized that there is no basis to assume that ancient cities in the Western Pyrenees like Pompaelo, for all that their political reach had vastly diminished, were not integrated, albeit with a large degree of autonomy, into the political networks of the Visigothic kingdom. The same has been suggested of Calagurris (Martín 1999b: 156). Burials dating from the sixth and seventh centuries showcase a material and funerary culture which, rather than being wholly alien to the customs of its neighbors, appears to have embraced them, albeit within the constraints of its limited resources (De Brestian 2011: 296; Pozo 2016: 39–40; Pozo 2018: 34–5). Accusations of paganism are even less substantiated. Neither Isidore of Seville nor Tajón of Zaragoza make any mention of pagan practices in their descriptions of the Vascones (Sáenz 2022: 24) and while the dwellers of the most isolated districts may have only a very superficial knowledge of Christianity (Lanz 2017: 90–1) this does significantly differ from the situation in the rest of the Frankish and Gothic kingdoms (Chadwick 2001: 649; Caseau 2004: 132–3). Similarly, the activity of the bishop of Pamplona in Visigothic councils, despite being intermittent, appears to have always displayed a wholehearted support for Catholic orthodoxy, something that is also true of the northern Wascones in their deals with the Merovingians (Goulard 1996: 157; Pozo 2016: 332). These results suggests that the so-called Vascones/Wascones, rather than being an opposite “Other” to Franks and Visigoths, inhabited a cultural, social, and religious environment that bore many similarities to that of their neighbors.

The fact that this appears to be the case makes finding an answer to the second question even more critical: why were the peoples of the Western Pyrenees the ones repeatedly targeted by these narratives of disdain? After all, neither the Visigoths nor the Merovingians lacked foreign rivals and had political opposition been the sole determining factor for these attacks, then these other enemies would have made good candidates for suffering the pejorative gaze of their propagandists. However, the Vascones had two crucial advantages over the rest that might explain why it was them that were targeted endlessly by Frankish and Visigothic authors. To begin with, they were a population whose mentions in ancient times were insufficient to support their candidature to be regarded as a civilized people. This was a particularly determinant factor in the sixth century, when the Visigoths and the Merovingian

monarchs were trying to build up their power based on an alleged “civilized” status. In this context, the Vascones were one of the few peoples that could not successfully assert their superiority over these “rehabilitated barbarians.”

The second feature that marked the Vascones as the perfect objects for a discourse of inferiority was precisely their lack of territorial organization, which made their lands appear disjointed and fragmented. The situation was only aggravated by the punitive campaigns of royal armies (Larrea 1998: 589) and led to a problematic integration within the kingdom of the Visigoths and the Merovingians. In turn, these complications reinforced associations between the Vascones and rebellion – a crime that was acquiring religious overtones precisely during those years (Castillo 2014: 92). The conjunction of all these factors and the lack of success on the part of these kingdoms to put an end to them – like the exceptional foundation of a Visigothic center of power by king Swinthila in Ologicus (Isid. *Hist. Goth.* 63, 10; Diarte-Blasco, 2018: 53–56) – created a self-perpetuating cycle. But, in ideological terms, this discourse of alterity against the Vascones attained two invaluable goals for the self-legitimation of Gothic and Frankish kings: it created an incomparable platform for their claims as representatives of order against chaos and, simultaneously, it granted the perfect rationale for their political and military activities in this strategically important border region.

The decline of the discourse of the Vascones in the High Middle Ages

The late seventh century brought great changes to the situation of the Western Pyrenees. The duchy of Wasconia, a Merovingian demarcation created by king Dagobert in 602 and that included the lands between the Garonne River and the Pyrenees, gradually gained *de facto* independence in the second half of the century after Merovingian power fragmented amid ineffective rule and internecine struggles (Pelat 2016: 71). With no permanent Frankish garrison in the area, the region soon fell into the hands of its dukes, who despite being probably of Frankish origin inevitably began to act as spokespersons for the local nobility (Pelat 2017: 199). On the southern side of the Pyrenees, however, the situation was even more tumultuous. During the first decade of the eighth century, one of the crises of succession that had so frequently shaken the *Regnum Gothorum* escalated to involve Arab and Berber leaders from North Africa. These invaders penetrated deep into the Iberian Peninsula, defeated the Visigothic monarch, and brought the kingdom of Toledo to an abrupt end in 711. Over the following years, the conquerors managed to subdue almost the entirety of the territory: Pamplona, as many other cities, entered a pact with the Arabs at some time between 714–8 by which its inhabitants were allowed to retain their customs and government in exchange for tribute (Martín 1999a: 873–4; Larrea 2009: 282–3).

Nevertheless, the Muslim invasion and the fragmentation of Merovingian control led to a novel result in the Western Pyrenees: for the first time, autonomous political centers of importance emerged within the region. The first one, Pamplona, served initially only as an intermediary between Muslim power and its immediate surroundings (Larrea 2009: 295). Only later did it grow in relevance driven by the geopolitical tensions between aristocratic clans that plagued the northern frontier of

Al-Andalus (Lorenzo 2010: 189). Through strategic maneuvering and territorial expansion, Pamplonese leaders managed to carve for themselves a domain that included the ancient city as well as the Pyrenean valleys to the north. Then, the first of them to call himself a king, Sancho Garcés I (?-925), attacked and conquered the territory beyond the Ebro that would eventually be known as Rioja. From that point onward, and up until the reign of his descendant Sancho the Great (c. 992–1035), the Pamplonese monarchy would painfully retain control over these lands against the increasing onslaughts from the Andalusian emirate, first, and the Caliphate, later (Pavón 2001: 23).

The second one was the county-duchy of Wasconia. The autonomy of the ancient Merovingian duchy of the same name came to an end in 769, a year after Aquitaine – a blurry term that included the lands south of the Loire – was incorporated into the rising Carolingian monarchy and a threat had been issued to its duke Lupo (*Annales Laurissenses* 769). However, Lupo's submission appears to have been a half-hearted one at best, and Frankish control of the duchy was made to rely heavily upon the exertion of military power (Pelat 2017: 207–8). Over the following decades, as the influence of the Carolingian monarchy ebbed and flowed, Frankish sources became dotted with plentiful mentions to “Wascones rebelles” (*Chron. Moissiacense* 818). Eventually, the fragmentation of the Carolingian monarchy over the course of the second half of the ninth century left this territory in the hands of local magnates (Martín 1999a: 904; Pelat 2016: 120).

The emergence of these new actors did not fail in stamping its mark upon the ideological sphere. The weakening – and, in the case of the Visigoths, the total collapse – of the two great states that had brought the image of the Vascones/Wascones into being led to a simultaneous decline in the importance of these terms. Tellingly, Arab authors, unlike their Visigothic predecessors, did not recognize any underlying political unity to the Western Pyrenees and lacked any word to refer to “Vascones” as a distinct people (Lorenzo 2018: 187). In contrast, the earliest chronicles from the Asturian kingdom, which were heavily inspired by Visigothic examples, continued to mention the “Vascones rebellantes” (*Chron. Rotense*), but only when the Western Pyreneans resisted their rule, opting for terms such as “Alavenses” to talk about them when the relationships were more amicable (Larrea 2009: 292). This observation aligns well with the idea that the use of Vascones in earlier Visigothic sources was polemical in nature. But if this was the case in Iberia, evidence supports the same conclusion for Francia. Here, the challenges experienced by the late Merovingians and the Carolingians in asserting their authority over Aquitaine saw the entire population of these lands increasingly labeled as “Wascones” (Wood 1994: 175–6; Pelat 2017: 202). It is worth noting that Aquitanians had never up until this point been associated with such term, and that the disappearance of this label once Frankish order was reestablished in the region suggests that these were not allusions based on any kind of ethnic reality. Rather, they appear to have been attempts at denigrating entrenched rivals by applying an existing discourse of otherness to them (Pelat 2016: 87–8; Pelat 2017: n.202).

Despite these internal developments, the most significant difference in the articulation of this discourse of alterity in the High Middle Ages when compared with the landscape of Late Antiquity was the presence of autonomous powers in the Western Pyrenees capable of challenging these pejorative images. In

Pamplona, documents issued in the last three decades of the tenth century in monarchy-sponsored monasteries from Rioja revealed an ideological program characterized by the appropriation of the Visigothic inheritance and a militant defense of Christian religion (Martín 1999a: 877; Miranda 2011: 242). Visitors to monastic centers like San Salvador de Leyre did not fail to praise the religious zeal of the locals, mentioning that all monks “glowed like stars in the sky with different merits and virtues” (Monreal and Jimeno 2008: 104). Even the sculptural iconography, for all its simplicity, bore witness to an undeniable attempt to emulate Visigothic examples (Miranda 2011). The alleged pagan rituals of the Vascones, just as their supposed cultural isolation and barbarity, were notably absent from these representations. Conspicuously absent, also, was the term “Vascones” itself. Could it be that the Pamplonese rulers did not identify themselves with the ferocious Vascones of the chronicles? It seems likely that this was the case. As the monarchy gained power over the eleventh century, the use of the term “Vascones” to refer to the Pamplonese all but disappeared from the chronicles written in neighboring regions.

The process of ideological articulation in Wasconia followed a somewhat different path. After the submission of duke Lupo in 769, Carolingian sources increasingly applied the term “Wascones” to allude to the inhabitants of the duchy. Following the collapse of effective Carolingian control in the region, the dukes that came to rule the area in the ninth and tenth centuries did not outright reject this identification, unlike the Pamplonese monarchs. Instead, they sought to exploit this ethnonym as a means of justifying their independent status and their claims to rule the entire duchy’s territory (Pelat 2017: 209–10). While Gascon – the term itself deriving from “Wascones” – leaders tried to dissociate this name from its previous negative connotations, they were only partially successful. Unlike the always pejorative term “Vascones,” “Wascones” could now sometimes carry neutral or outright positive associations. And yet, the proverbial unruliness and dishonesty of the Gascons was a trope that was to be constantly levied throughout the Middle Ages and beyond (Wade 1980: 27), perpetuating the negative stereotype associated with them.

It is important to note that the inhabitants of the territories that fell outside the grasp of the Pamplonese monarchy and the Gascon dukes, such as present-day provinces of Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia or the mountainous regions of the Pyrenees, continued to bear the prejudices associated to the Vascones/Wascones for a much longer period. The pilgrim Aymeric Picaud, writing as late as the twelfth century, still accused the mountaineers of being “fierce,” claiming that “the land they inhabited was fierce as well, wild and barbarous” (*Liber Sancti Iacobi: Codex Calixtinus* 2014: V, 7, 545) and that their “tongue was utterly savage” (*Liber Sancti Iacobi: Codex Calixtinus* 2014: V, 7, 548). Similar judgements were made by other two contemporaries: “In those mountainous lands, remote and inaccessible, live savage men of incomprehensible tongue, ready for any wickedness, for not in vain do inhuman and unbridle beings live in wild and disagreeable places” (*Historia Compostellana* II, XX). These descriptions clearly echo the negative discourses of alterity developed during Late Antiquity. The differential treatment of the Pamplonese and the Gascons in these accounts likewise highlights the inherently polemic nature of these allusions (Lema 2020: 28–9).

Conclusions

This article has aimed to trace the evolution of a set of narratives of alterity concerning the Vascones, from their origins in Antiquity to their decline in the Middle Ages. I have examined their inception in Antiquity in the context of Roman military conquest, their revival by polemic Christian authors during the Late Empire, the articulation of a full-fledged discourse of inferiority during Late Antiquity and the High Middle Ages, and its ultimate decline at around the tenth century.

I consider that the results of this research demonstrate, when contrasted with available historical and archeological sources, the polemical tone of most utterances made about the Vascones/Wascones since Antiquity. Initially, these stemmed from Roman understandings of social reality (Andreu 2009: 215) and the preservation in public consciousness of significant historical events like the foundation of Pompaelo by Pompey and the ferocity of Vascon warriors (Glenister 2007: 12–3; Andreu and Jordán 2007: 238; Wulff 2009: 38). In Late Antiquity, these references to the Vascones became more erudite, while at the same time translating the previous notions of barbarity into a new Christian worldview (Martínez 2015: 46). However, the chronological confluence of the disarticulation of regional networks of power after the collapse of the empire, the establishment of a border between the Merovingian and Visigothic kingdoms, and the need of these two states to legitimate themselves as representatives of orderly rule all resulted in the preservation and spread of narratives of alterity that targeted the Western Pyreneans. The decline of these tropes following the emergence of the kingdom of Pamplona and the duchy of Wasconia suggests that these were not based upon ethnic difference but were primarily driven by political considerations. In this reading, successive ruling elites since Antiquity employed discourses against the Vascones to both sustain claims to political dominion and elevate their own status, which aligns with current theories about the social dynamics of alterity (Duckitt 2001: 105; Said 2003: 2–3; Glenister 2007: 12–3).

These narratives of alterity have had a significant impact upon the development of Basque identity over the centuries. Joseph-Agustin Chaho – a crucial figure for the development of Basque independentism –, in his *Voyage en Navarre pendant l'Insurrection des Basques (1830–1835)* (1836) believed that the peoples of Basque rural areas still professed an alleged theism of ancient Vascon origin, “without symbols, without sacrifices, without priests and without cult” (Chaho 1865: 233). Others, like the Basque writer Pío Baroja, writing in the 1920s, identified the ancient Vascones with pagans devoted to a naturist religion, who made ritual fires and danced in the clearings of the forests during the nights of full moon, while dedicated entirely to living life to the fullest without contact with strangers (Baroja 2006). Popular festivities and folklore characters like Olentzero, a mythical coalminer who brings presents to Basque children, claim their origin from these alleged pre-Christian traditions. All these traditions delve on the image of ancient Vascones as an “Other” to Roman and Christian political and religious paradigms. Consequently, they are directly entangled in the immense debate about the extent to which it is possible to trust what Roman, Visigothic, and medieval authors wrote about the Vascones (Duplá and Pérez 2022).

I would like to contribute to this discussion by highlighting the part played by narratives of alterity in enabling those who employed them to appear as members “of the moral community of the unprejudiced” (Billig 1988: 145–6). When contemplated from this perspective, it seems clear that interpretative biases against the Vascones allowed other groups and political communities to elevate themselves toward an ideal “civilized” status. Roman authors did it, and so did their Christian, Visigoths, Merovingian counterparts, and even those who claimed to be their medieval successors. In fact, it could be argued that these unique structures of domination, first established by the Romans, carried with them their own set of associated interpretative repertoires (Andreu 2009: 219–20; Pozo 2016: 126; Sáenz 2022: 9).

But why would these endure for the case of the Vascones after the end of the empire? This, I think, was facilitated by the fact that the inhabitants of the Western Pyrenees lived in a relatively peripheral – and during Late Antiquity, territorially unstructured – region and were thus unable to oppose their own claims to “civilized” status. However, once this situation changed during the High Middle Ages with the emergence of more autonomous powers in their territory, this discourse of otherness gradually faded away. It endured in those areas, like Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia, which only became territorially structured from the twelfth century onward. Notions of inferiority, in other words, remained always tightly connected to the way in which power and assertions of political hegemony had been made ever since Antiquity.

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