



Milurteko Ekosistemen Ebaluazioa Bizkaian  
Evaluación de los Ecosistemas  
del Milenio en Bizkaia

## The Tree of Gernika and the Universal Service It Provides

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The Tree of Gernika is the most universal symbol of the Basque people. Located in the town of Gernika-Lumo, in the province of Bizkaia in the Basque Country, it represents the tradition—held by Basques and other cultures—of planting a tree at a site that is sacred, spiritual, or has an institutional component. Different types of oaks and other trees can thus be found next to churches, chapels and other sites that are especially important, such as the *Casa de Juntas de Gernika*, the Assembly House, home to the General Assemblies of Gernika. Originally, representatives of Bizkaia's early regional government would hold their assemblies, or *Batzarrak*, next to churches or chapels under the shade of a tree, which served as a 'witness'. Later, the representatives of these local assemblies were called to the General Assembly of Bizkaia (the provincial parliament) to meet, first outside the Church of Santa María La Antigua, and since 1826 at the Assembly House still in use today. This exceptional building has the curious distinction of being both a church and the meeting place of the Parliament, and continues the tradition of holding religious services before institutional acts. Today, although political functions take place in the building's inner hall, the ceremony in which the Basque regional president, the *Lehendakari*, takes the oath of office, as well as receptions and public ceremonies commemorating institutional agreements, take place under the shade of the Tree of Gernika. This oak (*Quercus robur*) comes from a line of trees which have occupied this place of honour through the centuries: the 'Old Oak', which stood for about 300 years, its successor, which was planted in 1860, and the current tree, which has stood next to the Assembly House since 2005.

The Tree of Gernika, a symbol of Basque freedom and rights, is so deeply rooted that it has its own song, composed by José María Iparraguirre in 1853.

The symbolic power of the Tree of Gernika is such that, when the town was bombed on 26 April 1937 during the Spanish Civil War, the Fascist forces did not dare to destroy this institutional centre, although they had no qualms about bombing and burning the entire residential heart of Gernika, causing hundreds of deaths and devastating the town. Pablo Picasso immortalised this first indiscriminate bombing raid on Gernika's civilian population in his painting *Guernica*.

Today, what one might call the Basque Constitution, the law that defines the competences and organisation of Basque institutions, is called the Statute of Gernika, and is indissolubly linked with the Tree of Gernika.

But beyond its historical and political value, shared by other sacred trees of the historical region of the *Señorío de Bizkaia*, the Tree of Gernika is a symbol of unity for the Basque people. For this reason, its likeness is to be found in hundreds of places around the Basque Country—adjacent to town halls, etc.—and in Euskal Etxeak (literally 'Basque Houses'), Basque cultural centres that are present around the world. These centres were created during the Basque diaspora and by exiles of the wars and armed conflicts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If you travel to America, Asia, Australia or another region and visit a Basque centre, on the outer grounds or in the courtyard, you will sense the spirit of the Tree of Gernika, a tree that serves as a universal symbol of the Basque people.

**More information:**

[http://www.jgggbizkaia.net/home/casa\\_juntas/arbol\\_gernika.asp](http://www.jgggbizkaia.net/home/casa_juntas/arbol_gernika.asp)

[http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%81rbol\\_de\\_Guernica](http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%81rbol_de_Guernica)