

ON THE CONSERVATION OF THE BASQUE PEOPLES

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The Basques inhabit the valleys and mountains of the western region of the Pyrenees. They constitute a perfectly definite ethnic group, both in their racial characters and in their traditional culture.

The eminent anthropologist Collignon summarized his studies on the Basques in these words: 'There exists over the whole extent of the country in which the Basque (Euskarian) language is spoken a special race without analogy with and other known group.' Another well-known anthropologist, Dr. H. V. Vallois, noted among the Basques very notable anatomical peculiarities, and an unusual ratio in their blood groups.

This singularity of the Basque physical types descends from remote times in the region of the Pyrenees. The human remains in the neolithic dolmens of the Basque country present anatomical characters resembling those of the modern type; this led the eminent prehistorian Hugo Obermaier to think that of the numerous pre-Aryan peoples in Europe during the neolithic period we have only positive knowledge of one—the Basques.

Going back to even more ancient times we may say that the late palæolithic population of the Pyrenees is permeated

by the Basque type, as appears from the study of the crania found in the cave of Urtiaga.

The Basque people is no less well characterized in its cultural aspect. Its language, very different from that of other peoples, is thought to be the last survival of those which were spoken in Europe before the introduction of the indo-european languages.

The legal system and the social and political structure of the Basques differ notably from Roman and Germanic Law which have chiefly dominated the peoples of Western Europe. Historians of law are agreed that in private as in public law the Basque codes of the Middle Ages reveal a social background quite different from that of neighbouring countries.

Many Basque beliefs and customs reveal a very peculiar world of ideas, saturated with prehistoric memories. The mythology, which presents persons and subjects depicted in the palæolithic rock-paintings of the Pyrenees, convinced Dr. V. Velhard that the Basques remain the only European people which can be related with the Stone Age artists.

The economic mode of life, like the rural arts and industries, exhibits clear prehistoric echoes and survivals.

By maintaining itself always aloof from all movement of culture, the Basque people has preserved many remnants of its ancient peculiarity, linked now with a high degree of civilization. It is therefore considered as a pre-aryan survival and a living record of a distant past, and consequently its existence and conservation have a special importance for anthropological and ethnological studies.

The states which have come into being in the neighbourhood of the Pyrenees during historic times, have displayed a constant inclination to suppress the peculiarities of the Basque people, which have been accentuated since the middle of the last century.

The response to this attack has been the formation of cultural societies and social and political groups, fundamentally Basque. The happy consummation of this process was the creation of the autonomous Government of Euskadi in 1936. This organization has instituted a wide programme designed to create an atmosphere favourable to the development of the indigenous culture. But the forcible expulsion in consequence of the recent civil war in Spain has been followed by the suppression of Basque cultural institutions such as the Society for Basque Studies, and of all the means of protecting and encouraging genuinely Basque life.

Subjected to-day to two States—France and Spain, whose influence for uniformity is very great, the Basque people tends to lose its identity and to disappear as an ethnic group. It is therefore urgent to impress on the Governments concerned the necessity of adopting measures to secure the conservation of Basque culture.

With regard to the Basque people must be recalled the address a century ago, by the historian of Béarn, A. Mazure, to the French authorities about the Basque language: 'Do not condemn to extinction, for the benefit of the French Language the widespread concept of a language which Cæsar and three imperial centuries after him, failed to convert to the speech of Rome; which has resisted the Goths, the Saracens, and all the neighbouring dialects, for ten centuries. The administration should show some toleration for the ancient speech of the Cantalèri. It should extend to it the admirable attention which have been devoted of late years to the conservation of historical monuments. The ancient mode of speech is truly the most precious monument of any country.'

We must insist that Governments should respect and protect the ethnic elements of the Basque people, not only for its antiquity, but for its scientific interest.