

GEORGE BORROW AND BASQUE

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The British author and gypsiologist George Borrow (1803-1881) was well acquainted with thirty languages of Europe and Asia, and translated poems and other literary works from these languages. He knew another ten languages, among which was Basque.

His most successful work was *The Bible in Spain* (1842), which describes his adventures to circulate the Bible in the Iberian Peninsula. During his travel of five years throughout the Peninsula, he won a number of Spanish friends and (because of the differences in church) enemies, and a very faithful Basque servant named Francisco. George Borrow was called by the Spaniards Don Jorgito el Inglés.

Chapter 37 of *The Bible in Spain* is devoted to the description of the Basque language and people. In the year 1838, which he calls the most eventful of all the years he spent in Spain, he committed two works to the press. These were the Gospel of St. Luke in the Spanish Gypsy and the Euscarra (*sic*) languages. The Gypsy Gospel was translated by Borrow himself. The Basque translation he used was the one which he procured originally from a Basque physician of the name of Oteiza.

Judging by the present scholarship which linguistic science has made during the last hundred years, Borrow's knowledge of the Basque language was still very primitive, but it contains an interesting remark: All the dialects spoken at present in Europe may be traced to two great Asiatic languages—Sanskrit and Tibetan—the sacred languages of the followers of Brahma and Buddha. The Celtic, Gothic and Sclavonian (Slavic) dialects in Europe belong to the Sanskrit family; while to the Tibetan or Tartar family in Asia belong the Manchou and Mongolian, the Kalmyk and the Turkish of the Caspian Sea, and in Europe, the Hungarian and the Basque partially.

As most of the scholars agree today (despite the authority of Lafon and Bouda), Basque is genetically an independent language and stands isolated, except for (a) the elements which it shared with the extinct Mediterranean

languages before the Indo-European migrations and (b) Romance inflow in historical times, just as Japanese is genetically independent, with later Dravidian, Austroasiatic, Koguri (Koreanic type) and Chinese superstrata.

As for the Basque people, Borrow characterizes them in the following way: The Basques are of the middle size, and are active and athletic. They are in general of fair complexion and handsome features. Their bravery is unquestionable, and they are considered as the best soldiery belonging to the Spanish crown. No people on earth are prouder than the Basques, but theirs is a kind of republican pride. They have no nobility amongst them, and no one will acknowledge a superior. The poorest carman is as proud as the governor of Tolosa. 'He is more powerful than I,' he will say, 'but I am of as good blood; perhaps hereafter I may become a governor myself.' Basque women are famous for their skill as cooks.

NOTES and ADDITIONS:

(1) George Borrow asked Dr. Oteiza, the domestic physician of the Marqués de Salvatierra to translate the Gospel into Basque; when completed, Dr. Oteiza was paid the sum of 8 pounds and a few odd shillings (1837). For a comparison, Borrow's annual salary (1833) was 200 pounds. Herbert Jenkins, in his *The Life of George Borrow* (London 1924), p.217 quotes Borrow's evaluation of the Basque translation: «I have examined it with much attention, and find it a very faithful version. The only objection which can be brought against it is that Spanish words are frequently used to express ideas for which there are equivalents in Basque; but this language, as spoken at present in Spain, is very corrupt, and a work written entirely in the Basque of Larramendi's Dictionary would be intelligible to very few. I have read passages from it to men of Guipúzcoa, who assured me that they had no difficulty in understanding it, and that it was written in the colloquial style of the province.»

Further, H. Jenkins tells us on p.229 of the same book about the fate of the Basque Gospel: «The Basque version can scarcely be said to have been published, it having been prohibited, and copies of it seized on the second day of its appearance. Several orders were received from San Sebastián and other towns where Basque predominates, which could not be supplied on account of the prohibition.»

(2) When I received the letter of invitation from the Euskaltzaindia in March 1980, I was reading books on the Gypsy language, which brought me to the works by Borrow. That he showed interest also in the Basque language was a new discovery for me, and I decided to choose this theme for the Meetings at Gernika - Bilbao. Only later I found a mention of this in a few lines in Luis Villasante: *Historia de la literatura vasca* (Bilbao 1961), §298, which refers to J. Urquijo, «Vascófilos Ingleses» in RIEV, xxv (1934), 605.

Later, Mr. Juan San Martín has kindly sent me an off-print of his article *P. Hualde Maio, Erronkariko «Uskáraren» Lekuko*, EUSKERA, xxiv (1979), 511-519, which has a reference to George Borrow.

(3) When I entered the Basque Country on August 22, 1980, my first pleasure was what a friend of mine at San Sebastián told me: «The number of vasco-hablantes is now half a million, but it will increase to *one* million in five years.» Until the time of Lafon it had been reported that the number was decreasing. This was the first time I heard it *is* increasing. It's really a marvelous thing that a minority language is growing in power and prestige! My second impression was that the guide at Santimamiñe as well as bus lady guides spoke much better Basque than I had expected.

(4) To the list of names of scholars beginning with Schuchardt, Bouda, Trubetzkoy and Lafon mentioned by Professors Tovar, Michelena, Mukarovsky, Jan Braun and the Tbilisi linguists concerning the linguistic position of Basque at the conference held in Hotel Ercilla at Bilbao on August 28, 1980, which seemed to be a fruitful discussion, I would like to add Gerhard Deeters (1892-1961), professor of comparative linguistics at the University of Bonn, a rigorous Caucasist, who after carefully examining Bouda's Basque-Caucasian etymologies never expressed his final word about the genetic relationship. Even among the Caucasian languages, he was far from being convinced of a Caucasian proto-language, and he approved only 18 out of 128 correspondences between North Caucasian and South Caucasian proposed by Bouda. I can neither agree nor disagree, because I don't have enough knowledge yet. But, I would like to point out that, if some scholars propose connection between Basque and Caucasian, the possibility will be geographically like Figure (1), and that the relation can also be chronologically like Figure (2), where genetic relation seems to be less possible.



Figure (1) geographically

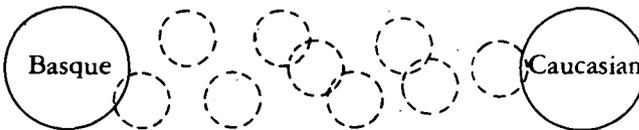


Figure (2) chronologically

LABURPENA

George Borrow, britaniar idazle eta ijitolariak, euskara eta Euskal Herria, arraskata gehien lortu zuen «The Bible in Spain» liburuaren 37. kapituluan aztertzen ditu. Europa eta Asiako hogeita hamar edo berrogei hizkuntza meneratzen zituen Borrowek. Hungaria eta Mongoliako hizkuntzak bezala euskararen jatorria bestelakoa zela argiro ikusi zuen garai hartan. Adoretzu, berjabe eta harroak direla euskaldunak dio britaniarrak.

RESUMEN

El autor británico y gitanólogo George Borrow describe la lengua y el pueblo vasco en el capítulo 37 de su trabajo de más éxito «La Biblia en España» (1842). Conoció treinta o cuarenta lenguas de Europa y Asia. Ya en su época vio claramente que el vasco era una lengua con un origen completamente diferente como el húngaro o el mongólico. El caracteriza al pueblo vasco como valiente, independiente y orgulloso.

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur britannique et spécialiste en bohémiens George Borrow décrit la langue et le peuple basque dans le chapitre 37 de son plus renommé travail: «The Bible in Spain» (1842). Il connaissait trente ou quarante langues de l'Europe et l'Asie. Il voyait déjà clairement que le basque était une langue d'une origine complètement différente comme l'hongrois ou le mongol. Il caractérise le peuple basque comme brave, indépendant et fier.