Vasijas de Barro: Geodesia y Craneometria

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1.

A priest, carrying an ancient skull hidden in his luggage, is detained, in a train station in Bilbao, by a group of republican militia fighters in the early months of the Spanish Civil War, in 1936. The anecdote, equally promising as the starting point for a mystery plot and as the storyline for an irreverent comedy, is mentioned in passing by the Basque anthropologist Joseba Zulaika in an attempt to suggest an alternative history for Basque nationalism, in his 1996 book *Del Cromagnon al Carnaval: los vascos como museo antropológico [From Cro-magnon to Carnival: The Basques as an Anthropological Museum]*.[1] The incident's protagonist was José Miguel Barandiaran, who besides a priest was a dedicated ethnographer and anthropologist, and who would become, decades later, an unusually popular character for someone engaged in such disciplines. The co-protagonist was, of course, the skull: aCro-magnon item recently found by Barandiaran and his colleague Telesforo Aranzadi at the Urtiaga cave, near Bilbao. The anecdote may seem irrelevant to those who are not familiar with the importance the skull eventually acquired in the Basque collective imagination through the scientific hypothesis that derived from its discovery. The morphological correspondence between Urtiaga's skull and the contemporary inhabitants of the Basque Country would conveniently prove the continuity, within the same territory, of the same people since the Epipaleolithic, 'confirming Aranzadi's hypothesis, which suggested the evolution of the Basque man [sic] in his own territory, precisely not through the contact with other races, but through its own, intrinsic, evolution',[2] as written in 1949 by the anthropologist Luis de Hoyos, eventually the founding director of the Museum of the Spanish People. When Zulaika mentions this anecdote he is somehow evoking the possibility that, in the midst of the tensions of the Civil War, facing a suspicious situation such as a priest hiding a skull, it would have been more likely for the militia to confiscate it, preventively, ignoring the priest's academic explanations about its scientific value. This didn't happen, and Barandiaran managed to take the item to the ethnographic museum in Bilbao, from where it was relocated to Museo San Telmo in San Sebastian, where it remains and from where it was used to support, for some time, a typification of Basque race analogous to those being created by anthropology in national and colonial territories, with the help of scientific rethoric of anthropometry, archaeology and other sciences with objective aspirations.[3] In the 1980s, a dating exercise with the method of 'uranium disequilibrium measured through gamma spectrometry'[4] concluded the skull was just 3,500 years old. A demonstrable 'glide of stratigraphic levels' explained the earlier error, which had been polemical for a while. In any case, by that time the Basque ethnotype was no longer the identity basis for the Basque cultural project, by then substituted by aesthetic rather than scientific signifiers, poetic rather than anthropological. Today the caricaturing and denunciation of Basque culture because of its alleged anthropological neurosis has a longer history than the ethnicist condition it undoubtedly suffered.

2.

The famous French Geodesic Mission that in the 18th century brought to what today is Ecuador the first great international scientific expedition, with the objective of measuring Earth's perimeter, had a second edition in 1901: the Second French Geodesic Mission, which adapted the goals of the enterprise to the new times. This second mission was set to recalculate the measurements of the meridian arch, but also, as was precept in all missions from the time, had to collect a large variety of natural and cultural artefacts as additions to the museum and academic corpus from the metropolis. The currency of anthropology as a discipline made it a priority, and the search for and classification of ethnographic and archaeological artefacts was part of every mission initiated in the Third Republic. Young Paul Rivet enrolled as a doctor in the expedition, but, as usual, he was expected to fulfil his task by contributing broadly to the

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[1] Joseba Zulaika, Del Cromagnon al Carnaval: los vascos como museo antropológico, San Sebastian: Erein argitaletxea, 1996, p.28.

[2] Luis de Hoyos Sanz, 'Cráneos paleolítico y azilienses vascos', *Revista de la Academia de Ciencias Exactas Físico Químicas y Naturales de Madrid*, Tomo XLIII, Cuaderno 2, Madrid: Bermejo impresor, 1949.

[3] The photograph of Urtiaga's skull — taken by Sigfrido Koch as part of the inventory of the museum — opens, as an enigmatic visual prologue, the 1976 book on the San Telmo museum, which my work Soft Focus looked at — a work that is now in the collection of the museum (Asier Mendizabal, *Soft focus*, artist's edition, 2011–13).

[4] Jesús Altuna, Concepción de la Rúa, 'Dataciones absolutas de los cráneos del yacimiento prehistórico de Urtiaga', Munibe, 41, San Sebastian, 1989, pp.23–28.

mission. For this purpose, he was trained in palaeontology, entomology, mammals' biology, botanics, mineralogy and anthropology.[5] In relation to the latter, and taking advantage of his medical training, he specialised in anthropometry — the practice of measuring physical features of human bodies and bones as a means to compare and classify. Rivet would eventually become the director of the Musée de l´Homme in Trocadero, Paris, and this museum became the recipient of most of the artefacts gathered by him during his long stay in Ecuador.
The sixth volume of the monumental publication on the findings of the second mission, titled *Ethnographie Ancienne de l'Equateur*[6] and published in 1922, gathered all the pre- Colombian ceramic items that he collected in his travels. 56 photogravures reproduced around a thousand vases, brought together because of their formal resemblances rather than origin or date. Each vase cut out and laid out on the white background of the sheet, ensemble configuring arbitrary constellations, the result of optimising the surface of the print sheet, docking the individual silhouettes onto each other. Involuntarily, it reminds us of the arbitrary nature of classifications, and the necessary submission of all artefacts to a contextual grid, as a background within which they are inscribed.

3.
Gottfried Semper's 1863 publication *Der Stil*which proposed that decorations of on surfaces with geometric patterns are actually the remains of the primeval origin of art, led to an interesting debate in the final decades of the 19th century about the nature of art itself. The recurrence through millennia and through different cultures of geometric patterns such as frets, meanders, chains, braids and arabesques made some authors of the time think of what Semper identifies as the textile origin of architecture, *fossilised*, so to speak, in the ornaments that remain as a repetition no longer connected to function. If the origin of architecture is understood as an evolution of textile, the most immediate protective appendix of humans, then the discovery of a basic technique of threading fabric could create a series of visual patterns (generated by the intertwining of weft and warp) that, with the evolution of the construction and plastic techniques, would translate to other materials and techniques, replicating forms that would no longer be the result of the process itself, but a symbolic remainder of past processes. At a time when a paradigm shift caused by Darwin affected every scientific discipline, the fields of art history and iconology, as well as anthropology and ethnography, were also looking for analogies for evolution as a natural engine. Pottery gave a plausible example for this *materialist* explanation of the evolution of forms: the apparition of early ceramics imprinted on its surface by woven fibres suggests rudimentary forms of basketry are older than fired clay.
It is possible to think of a parallel evolution of both these techniques, in which the sealing of the interior of baskets with clay would result, after an accidental fire, in the serendipitous discovery of fired clay, with the burnt fibres leaving a reticulated texture on the clay's surface. The replica of the braided net would have evolved as an abstract form, symbolic or ornamental. Such way of understanding the evolution of forms, of naturalising the teleological progress of visual representations from a primitive stage to the stage of civilization in which representation frees itself from its debt to material techniques, lend itself to fallacious essentialist approaches. In fact, similarly to how other disciplines embrace positivism as a way to support their worldview rather than transform it, aesthetics also attempted its own version of progress as an implacable natural selection. In this context, the condescendence towards, or even the direct rejection of, ornament as proposed by the modern ethos acquires a troubling inflection. Alöis Riegl, with his 1893 book *Problems of Style*, outlines this danger, trying to save Semper himself: 'the theory of the technomaterial origin of the oldest of ornaments and artistic forms is often attributed to Gottfried Semper. This is done for the same reasons or, rather, with the same lack of reason, that modern Darwinism is identified with Darwin.'[7] As the most obvious refutation of such essentialist faith, Riegl points out that the findings in Palaeolithic carvings with figurative representations of surprising skill that had emerged in recent years in south east France had only been noted in the field of anthropology, and conveniently ignored in the field of art history.

4.
Around those years, anthropology and ethnography embark on a discussion that is, to an extent, analogous to the one Riegl evokes. Paul Rivet, who I introduced earlier as a still-dilettante researcher, archaeologist and anthropologist at the time of his Ecuador trip, would eventually be one of the authors who, following Armand de Quatrefages and Ernest Hamy, his predecessor at the Musée de l'Homme, distanced themselves from essentialist anthropology, which had

[5] These biographical notes and the tone of Paul Rivet's memory are from Alice L. Conklin's book *In the Museum of Man : Race, Anthropology and Empire in France, 1850–1950*, New York: Cornell University, 2013.
[6] Paul Rivet and René Verneau, *Ethnographie ancienne de l'Equateur*, Tome 6 from Mission du Service Géographique de l'Armée pour la mesure d'un Arc de Méridien Equatorial en Amerique du Sud. 1899–1908, Paris: Gauthier-Villars et Cie, 1922.
[7] Alöis Riegl, *Problemas de estilo: Fundamentos para una historia de la ornamentación*, Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 1980, p.2.

been embodied, in its friendliest version, by Paul Broca, and in its most sinister by his academic adversaries Montandon and Gobineau. Rivet, a friend and collaborator of Marcel Mauss's, and whose thrilling biography has as one of its highlights, within the history of France, his role in the resistance to the Nazi occupation, will serve as an example for the opposition to the canonical scientific determinism of early anthropology. The anthropology proposed by Paul Broca and his successors proposed a classification of cultural differences in terms of their physical evolution, as racial unity. Therefore the scientific character of this essentialisation was grounded on the most objective data possible: anthropometry. If natural evolution proposed a change, over time, of physical traits through their adaption to functions that were necessary for survival, the identification of typical anthropometric patrons belonging to each of the races would be the clearest way to tell one from the other. And the comparison of these measurements the most objective way to determine the different stages of evolution of the different peoples. To this purpose, craniometry made a special contribution — specially the measurement of cranial volume. Paul Broca, founder of the École d'Anthropologie, was a fundamental figure for the development of anthropometry and specially craniometry, given his role as a researcher anatomist of the human brain (Broca's area, in the frontal lobe, is named after him). He developed measurement techniques and instruments that a century later would make him a paradigm of the problems of science during those years, through the characterisation that Jay Gould made of him in *The Mismeasure of Man*.[8] The accusation that always hovers over the revision of the discipline, which is also the elusive horizon of my text, is, of course, racism. But this might be a good moment to point out that only in the 1950s authors such as Lévi-Strauss begin to openly condemn scientific racism — a position echoed institutionally by the UNESCO. And as Jay Gould points out in his critical analysis in the dissemination of science, 'Broca was an exemplary scientist; nobody beats him in meticulous care and precision in measurements. With whichright, except from that derived from our own prejudices, could we denounce the incidence of his and maintain that, in actuality, science operates beyond the influence of culture or class?'[9] The question is not to take any blame off the nefarious bias of scientific data interpretations from the past, but to reveal the bias of today's interpretations. Quatrefages and Hamy, as we have said, anticipated the rejection to the racist essentialism already at the end of the 19th century. As Rivet, who took over Hamy at the head of the Musée de l'Homme, they insisted in the importance of the study of the environment, of culture, as an ethnographic method, beyond biological determinism. Therefore their insistence that gathering archaeological artefacts from different cultures was an unavoidable task — one that had to be systematised, starting with the education of future anthropologists. This had been diligently done by Rivet in his formative trip. But the need to recollect cultural artefacts was always conceived as a complement to the recollection of anthropometric data, an exercise they wouldn't doubt on as a source of unquestionable evidences. Quatrefages and Hamy authored, for example, *Crania Ethnica*, a publication in two volumes, in 1882. The visual grouping of *cranias*, in prints or photogravures, laid out on white background, of skulls from individuals from diverse cultures, were common publications until the beginning of the 20th century. Planimetric representations of skulls, in frontal, side and sometimes sky and ground views, were organized on the print in order to make apparent the differences between the items displayed together on the sheet. Telesforo Aranzadi, who was excavating with the priest Barandiaran at the Urtiaga cave, published *Unidades y constantes de la crania hispánica [Unities and constants in the Hispanic Crania]* in 1912 and *Síntesis de cráneos vascos [Synthesis of Basque Skulls]* in 1922; Paul Broca contributes an appendix with the title 'Crânes basques' ['Basque Skulls'] in the *Sur l'Origine et la répartition de la langue basque [On the Origins and dissemination of Basque Language]*, from 1875. During that trip to Ecuador organized to measure the perimeter of the globe, Paul Rivet, besides collecting hundreds of ceramic vases that were added to the collection of the Trocadero museum, gathered 350 skulls and 500 bone remains. He also had time to measure and register over 6,000 animal and human skulls, in what constitutes the biggest sample completed by an individual researcher until then. In the naïve faith of he who wants to guess the evolution of intelligence through the shape of its recipient, there is a correspondence with the formal intuition that assigns so often anthropomorphic metaphors to vases and other containers. Concavity, the capacity to contain or host something, as a symbol that becomes more or less figurative, in the shape of wombs, genitalia or skulls.

[8] Stephen Jay Gould, The *Mismeasure of Man*, New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1981.
[9] *Ibid*., p.106.