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2,000 Years of History Destroyed:
Archaeological Destruction at Nabarra's
Castle Square in Pamplone

Blanca Garza

During the Persian Gulf war on cultural property, many of us diligently faced television sets displaying scud patriot missiles exploding in the sky above the Middle East. NATO's attack on Yugoslavia's cultural and historic sites is just another example. Through complex satellite networks these wars were brought home to us in the form of a computer game. Meanwhile, beneath the blazing fire and military jargon, the world's cultural patrimony was being destroyed. The human suffering was clearly devastating, but, too, the destruction of our past is massive and ignored.

But armed conflicts are not the only wars we have to worry about; nor is the illicit antiquities market the only threat to our cultural patrimony. Governments too can and do destroy material culture that challenges the official story or gets in the way of multi-billion dollar contracts -- or both. This is the case of the archaeological deposits unearthed in Nabarra over the past years and that the occupaying powers, claiming they were of "little value," have destroyed, damaged or covered up. At this very moment, the Nabarrase people are witnessing the destruction of an important archaeological site in their ancient city of Pamplone (Iruñea, in the Basque language (1)) to convert the Castle Square (Gazteluko Enparantza) into an underground parking lot, a project of the City of Pamplone. For years the City of Pamplone is denying that there is any historical presence of value beneath the Castle Square. But the undergoing works at the Castle Square have unearthed Roman and medieval remains -among these, a high, massive wall which lays across the area beneath the square where the parking lot is to be built. The City of Pamplone is choosing to keep secret the conditions and fate of this important archaeological site, a historic and cultural patrimony of Pamplone, Nabarra, and the world.

Although the parking lot works were not approved until January 29, 2002, Nabarra's Culture Ministry allowed works at the Castle Square to start in August 2001. During "Phase I" trees were uprooted, the pavement was removed and stones with decorations were dumped. Then came the bulldozers carting away mounds of earth at pre-dawn. No archaeologists were present and there was no inspection made of the removed material, which was simply taken away in trucks and dumped on the Beriain garbage landfill.

Ongoing works at the Castle Square. Photo courtesy of Diario de Noticias, Nabarra.

They (the bulldozers, not the archaeologists) unearthed several building remains, including two convents from the 13th and 16th centuries. Later, a survey of the area occupied by the Castle Square located a Roman stratta and the first remains excavated were reported. Traces of walls, presumably of residential units, remains of a workshop,

a coin (138 year AC), a bronze box, and fragments of ceramics were recovered in September 2001, according to the Culture Ministry.

More Roman remains were found in January (Diario de Navarra, January 15, 2002), among them, abundant pottery fragments (1st to 5th century AC), personal items, a paved roadway, a black and white mosaic (2nd century AC), four tombs with remains of at least five individuals and a thermae or bath houses complex. A high, massive wall was discovered on January 11 but no details have been released by the Culture Ministry to this day. "The origin of the great wall continues to be an enigma," reported Diario de Navarra in the April 18 edition.

On January 11, the Culture Ministry signed an authorization to have the thermae, a black and white mosaic, some pavements and other Roman remains removed from the site "to continue the archaeological excavation of the area" (Diario de Nabarra, January 15, 2002). The Culture Ministry resolution was contradicted by the statements of Trama's archaeologists who acknowledged the importance of the Roman thermae depends on whether they remain in situ (Gara, March 2, 2002). Many artifacts found inside the thermae have been already removed from the site because they are damaged, according to the Culture Ministry.

Archaeological remains unearthed at the Castle Square. Photo courtesy of Diario de Noticias, Nabarra.

By March 7, more than half a million archaeological fragments had been found beneath the Castle Square (Gara, March 7, 2002). Three cemeteries, two Moslems and one medieval, were found between February and March 2002. On April 7, the newspaper Diario de Navarra reported that a Roman bone workshop had been unearthed. Excavators recovered animal remains and personal items, including a hair comb made of animal bone.

On March 21, a wall waiting identification and dating was brought down (Gara, March 22, 2002) by a bulldozer carting away earth beneath the Castle Square. Identifying the archaeological remains beneath the square is in the hands of Trama, a favorite contractor of the government of Nabarra.

Members of a grassroots group, the Platform for the defense of the Castle Square, and the sciences society Aranzadi searched through the Beriain dump in hopes of gaining some raw, but contextless, data about Pamplone. In March 2002, the Platform exhibited the material ("human remains, ceramics of diverse style, and a Roman artifact") they recovered from the dump.

Aranzadi, which are suing the Culture Ministry for "plundering of an archeological site" (beneath the Castle Square), conducted a physical examination of the remains they recovered from the dump. A report by Aranzadi released in March states that 75 percent

of the archaeological remains beneath the Castle Square were taken away from the site or destroyed (Gara, May 28, 2002). According to Aranzadi, the remains identified dated primarily from the Roman period to the Modern Age. The sciences society's report states they do not know whether remains from the Iron Age and/or prior to the Roman period have been found.

A grassroots group, the Citizen Initiative for the Defense of Culture Heritage, called for the dismissal of the Culture Minister Juan Ramon Corpas Mauleon and the Culture Advisor Jesus Laguna (Gara, March 8, 2002). The Platform for the defense of the Castle Square announced (Diario de Noticias, April 18, 2002) they have informed UNESCO about the archaeological destruction going on at the Castle Square. The Platform proposed (Diario de Noticias, April 6, 2002) the creation of a commission of experts in archaeology and history to evaluate the excavated remains.

A preliminary report by a commission of archaeologists (Gara, May 18, 2002) on the excavated remains below the Castle Square concludes that the parking lot project should be abandoned because of "the historic-cultural importance of the remains." According to the report, "the renovation of the Castle Square should not have taken place given the preliminary report [by Trama] and the results of the land survey." The commission propose the creation of a museum in situ. Manuel Martin-Bueno (professor, University of Zaragoza), Jesus Liz (professor, University of Salamanca), Jose Antonio Abasolo (professor, University of Valladolid), Julio Nuñez (professor, University of the Basque Country), and Xavier Dupré (deputy director, Spanish School of History and Archaeology), are members of the commission.

Popular mobilizations against the parking lot project started immediately after "Phase I" took off in August 2001. Grassroots efforts sprouted and bloomed. Activists angered the City by demanding a referendum.

Policeman beating female protestor. Photo courtesy of Gara.

But the City did not halt the works, which proceeded amid protestations thus, increasing suspicions that it either has something to hide or just doesn't care.

The City tried to stop a popular initiative to hold a referendum on the parking lot. But in spite of the obstacles placed by the City, a referendum was held on September 29, 2001, and a majority of the voters (94%) expressed their overwhelming opposition to the project. The Municipal Council of Pamplone temporarily stopped the works on February 22, 2002.

But what story does the Castle Square's soil hold? What do its excavations reveal?

Knowing to what archaeological evidence shows, the official historians claim that in the 3rd-5th century, the area (Pamplone) inhabited by the Vascons[2] was only nominally subject to Roman rule. But dig after dig, find after find, the archaeological remains that have been excavated beneath the Castle Square, as well as at several other locations[3]

in Pamplone, show that Pamplone was extensively Romanized, and an important and rich civitas of the Roman Empire.

Roman General Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus "The Great" needed a camp for his troops who were at war with Roman military commander Sertorius and he set up camp at a Vascon settlement in Pamplone. Gradually, Pamplone (f. 75 BC) grew until it became a large Roman city with a forum, a meeting place for public affairs, where its leaders and citizens met to make decisions about the building and maintenance of their infrastructure, public works and services, water deposits, bridges, walls, paved streets, theatre, markets and bath houses, among other things.

Pamplone developed its own distinctive vitality favoured by its strategic situation (considered a 'gateway to France'), as it lies south of the Western Pyrenees, on the river Arga, whose valley provides access to the pass of Roncesvalles (Orreaga). Pamplone, paid rent to Rome for protection while it maintained its political sovereignty. In 778, Charlemagne, on this return from Zaragoza, destroyed the city walls and looted the city's dwellings. Charlemagne then continued on his journey until reaching Roncesvalles where he was defeated by the Vascons in the historic battle of Roncesvalles.

A re-interpretation of the history of Nabarra and a re-examination of the archaeological evidence in the last thirty years have changed Nabarra's historiography of the 2nd-8th century, according to Nabarrase historian Tomas Urzainki Mina (4).

It is the confrontation, in the low Roman Imperial period, between the ecclesiastic and administrative hierarchies of the middle and lower Ebro valley, on the one hand, and the bishops and the civil and political powers of the area surrounding the Pyrenees, the upper Ebro valley, on the other, which further brought apart and finally separated these two worlds.

Christian monasticism looks, from the evidence available (5), to have been confined to the upper Ebro valley, according to Juan Manuel Tudanca Casero(6), far from the symbiosis of the Roman state and Christianity as the official religion of the Empire, where the ecclesiastic authorities will take over the public activities and patronage, and the Church will eventually replace the Roman administration. The ascetic life first, and the monastic life later, embraced by the "possessors" of the area surrounding the Pyrenees, had their own characteristics in the upper Ebro valley with clear social and geopolitical repercussions. It is this area which is notable for the number of its monasteries --Leire, Alaon, Albeida and San Millan, and many other smaller ones, all of which were famous for their intellectual brilliance.

The "possessors" in the area surrounding the Pyrenees became the protectors of that society and their monasteries. The political and military classes of the upper Ebro Valley originated among them. The leadership which fought the Barbarian invaders and later created the monarchy of the Kingdom of Pamplone was born out of the symbiosis of the Vascons, the monasteries, and the "possessors."

"The tradition of Prudentius of Calahorra has nothing to do with that of St Isidore of Seville," Urzainki Mina asserts. "The first adapted Christianity to the universal history and to an ascetic and rural praxis; the latter, to the Imperial and aristocratic powers now in the hands of the new holders of power, the Visigoths."

It is not a pretty picture. An article by Urzainki Mina, *The hidden truth of Pompaelo (La verdad ocultada de Pompaelo)*, Gara, February 8, 2002) is very disturbing as it reveals the ugly truth that culture propaganda in Nabarra has been attempting to hide.

"The text published by the great historian Jose Maria Lacarra sixty-years ago, and interpreted with exactness by Jose Gaztanbide, Martin Larraioz and Lacarra himself, among others, has been ignored, distorted and misinterpreted by the people exercising control over the culture of Nabarra ... the normality and coherence of this document, which discovers the Pamplone of 1,500 years ago, unmasked the falsity of a Pompaelo (Latin for Pamplone), they insist it was a marginal area dominated by the Visigoths and others," writes Urzainki Mina.

The text(7) he refers to is *De Laude Pampilone Epistola* (Letter in praise of Pamplone), a description of the city of Pamplone written in the 5th century by one of its citizens. This epistola appears after the text of a letter sent in the name of the western emperor Honorius (395-423) to the troops of Pamplone in 408 and preserved in Pamplone itself. The anonymous author of the epistola gives an account of the city's Roman material defence, which included the 84ft high walls with their 67 towers.

De Laude Pampilone's description of Pamplone and its political sovereignty fits together with the archaeological evidence of the necropolises from the 6th and 7th centuries found in Iruña, Aldaieta and Buzaga.

Of great importance, the author of *De Laude Pampilone* conceives Pamplone as the whole territory of the civitate pampilonensium and not just the city. He writes about Pamplone's river basin, about the region (Vasconia), and the mountains, as he expresses a conscious sense of belonging to the Roman world. This obviously contradicts the official historians' hypothesis that Roman civilization in Nabarra was totally confined to the cities.

The epistola's phrase "if opulent Rome serves the Romans, Pamplone didn't abandon her own people," is a clear message of self-esteem and realism with a political overtone, writes Urzainki. "It links Rome with opulence and the aristocratic while it relates Pamplone to the protection of its citizens. This ideological legitimation was sustained by the kingdom of Pamplone and later the kingdom of Nabarra, states Urzainki Mina.

On September 17, 2001, Nabarra's Culture Minister Juan Ramon Corpas confessed that Pamplone was inhabited by citizens of the Roman Empire "for a much longer time than some writers had claimed," (Gara, September 18, 2001). Moreover, archaeological evidence shows that Pamplone was three times larger in the Roman period than the official historians claim.

Maria Angeles Mezquiriz, an "expert" archaeologist and former director of the Nabarra Museum, told *Diario de Navarra* (January 19, 2002 edition) "I was wrong in my hypothesis; there was more Roman settlement" in Pamplone. Mezquiriz, now on Trama's payroll, said the *thermae* complex excavated beneath the Castle Square "surprised me greatly."

The questions about the City's handling of the archaeological destruction at the Castle Square abound. Foremost in everyone's mind is the history of these remains, and to what degree the people of Nabarra will be permitted to determine their fate. Many Nabarrase citizens believe that the destruction going on at the Castle Square symbolizes the cultural barbarism and the anti-Basque culture policies(8) of the ruling right-wing government of the UPN, a branch of Spain's ruling Popular Party. The people responsible for this destruction ought to be charged with crimes against the history and culture of Nabarra, which must not go unpunished. No nation in the world should tolerate the brazen destruction of its past, and neither should Nabarra.

June 2002

Blanca Garza is a writer and political activist. She lives in Nabarra.

- (1) The Basques of Nabarra gave their city the name of Iruñea, according to historians.
- (2) Vascon is a name derived from the Roman word, *gascon*, meaning Basque.
- (3) Excavations next to the Pamplone Cathedral and within its cloister between 1956 and 1972 unearthed a *domus* (a Roman villa) and a public market with a fountain and a chapel dedicated to local deities, remains of a wall, and bath houses.
- (4) Tomas Urzainki Mina, *La verdad ocultada de Pompaelo*. Gara, February 8, 2002.
- (5) *Translatio Sanctorum et Alodiae*. In *Acta Sanctorum Mense Octubris*. vol:IX, pp. 645-6
- (6) Juan Manuel Tudanca Casero: *Evolución socioeconómica del alto y medio valle del Ebro en época bajo imperial romana*. - Logroño: Gobierno de La Rioja [u.a.], 1997. (Historia). Universidad de Zaragoza, Diss.
- (7) Text in J.M. Lacarra. 'Textos navarros del *Codice de Roda*,' *Estudios de Edad Media de la Corona de Aragon*, vol I (1945) pp. 268-70.
- (8) The government of the ruling UPN has concentrated on enforcing a number of petty and arbitrary restrictions. Among them, 1) On January 8, 2001 the government of Nabarra banned the *Auñamendi Encyclopedia* from the Internet and put on hold a subsidy of 12 million pesetas for the society of Basque studies *Eusko Ikaskuntza*, a research institution and the publisher of the *Auñamendi encyclopedia*. Nabarra's Vice-president Rafael Gurrea said the information about Nabarra provided in the Basque encyclopedia is "false" and that a government subsidy for *Eusko Ikaskuntza* is on hold until the research organization "reviews" the text, which Gurrea called "offensive." 2) The directors of 255 Basque private and public schools issued a manifest in December 2000 "against the political campaign that attempts to discredit the schools that provide education in the Basque language." The document, sent to the Spanish Education Ministry and its regional offices in Nabarra, denounced the "manipulation and lies" by the political parties which try to link the Basque education system with ETA. Spanish

politicians claim that Basque schools (ikastolas in Basque language) are training ground for future ETA activists. 3) Also in December 2000, the government of Nabarra issued a decree restricting the use of the Basque language in the public administration. The Basque language was banned in the so-called "mixed" (bilingual) area of Nabarra, whose population speaks Basque or/and Spanish. Streets signs in both Basque and Spanish were replaced with signs in Spanish only.