CORSAIRS AND PIRATES

Who are these people who are ethnically neither Spanish nor French, but Basque? Their country is hardly fifty kilometres long. What we do know is that they arrived to the foothills of the Pyrenees thousands of years ago. Their language and blood group, although obviously Caucasian, were those of a different people, with no relation to the Indo-Europeans who dominated Europe.

The early stages

The Basques and the sea

There is not doubt that the Basques are one of the few peoples to have engendered individuals who, due to their love of adventure or enterprising nature, didn't think twice about travelling further abroad than the horizons surrounding them. In spite of the affection they felt for their country, the Basques left home through necessity and due to their taste for adventure, helped by the fact that the sea was so near to them.

With time, and uniting these motives, this part of the Cantabrian coast gave birth to excellent examples of corsairs and pirates who started plying the same seas as their ancestors had sailed on since ancient times, gradually coming to know and, in as far as possible, dominate it. Bur we mustn't forget that privateering and piracy are as old as trade itself, and that they are closely related to maritime traffic.

Traditional tales about the voyages made by Basque sailors and their relations with the north are vast. Mairin Mitchell tells us of the legend which says that the first king of Kerry, in Ireland, was Eber, who came from the north of the Iberian Peninsula. At the end of the Middle Ages, it was accepted that Juan Zuria, the first lord of Biscay, was the grandson of a certain Scottish king, the son of a woman banished from her land by her father.

As Julio Caro Baroja says, this could never be accepted as true in a society with no great seafaring tradition. Nor, without a great seafaring tradition, would Basque seamen have reached Glasgow ant the Orkney Islands on their way north.

But, just as the Basques opened a way for themselves, it became increasingly necessary to defend the land and the sea. The 11th and 12th centuries were deeply troubled and it was during this era that the vikings and Norsemen appeared, the first plunderers to have come as far down as the Basque-French coasts.

The Basque coast from Castro Urdiales to Bayonne has many sheltered bays and it was precisely in those found around Bayonne and in the port itself that the first pirates who arrived our

coasts chose to settle. Bayonne was then, and until the second half of the 11th century, an important area which attracted these pirates, since it was a seaport with a great number of merchants and fishermen, as well as being an episcopal see and meeting point between Aquitaine, Gipuzkoa and Navarra. In fact, the evangelist and founder of the episcopal see, Saint Leon, was decapitated there by Norman pirates in the 9th century.

The Norman threat and these pirate appearances made the Kings realize the importance of defending their own coasts. So, at the beginning of the 9th century, these shelters or ports started receiving their official authorization in the form of "fueros" (provincial prileges granted by the King) with which they founded towns that, as well as for self-defence, served as the point of departure for merchandise in a period of Castilian commercial boom.

The towns

The oldest "fuero" in the country is that of Bermeo, founded in 1082. Gipuzkoan foundations of the time took place as follows: Donostia-San Sebastian, prior to 1180; Hondarribia, 1204; Getaria and Motrico, 1209; and Zarauz, 1237. Later, the following towns were founded: Villanueva de Oiarso, 1230; Monreal de Deva, 1346; Villagrana de Zumaya, 1347; Belmonte de Usurbil, 1371; and San Nicolás de Orio, 1379.

The economic momentum which these foundations produced were already obvious in the 12th century, when Gipuzkoa and Biscay started to take on important economic significance, with their great contingent of sailors and fishermen.

Concentrating ourselves on Donostia-San Sebastian, this was the first "fuero" in the peninsula to have maritime regulations, since it meant the creation of a real maritime code, which was later applied to all the Gipuzkoan municipalities. Thanks to the "fuero", the port of Donostia-San Sebastian became the natural outlet for products from Castile, which, with time, became a great exporter, especially of wool. The marked commercial character which Donostia-San Sebastian was acquiring, and subsequent prosperity, brought pirates and corsairs, always lovers of other people's belongings, to our coasts.

Far from our coasts

The Basque seamen paraded themselves over all the known seas, and some of them were not only merchants. In 1282, a body of Basque volunteers took active part in the conquest of Wales, together with the Anglo-Norman army. As stated by a Genovese chronicler in 1304,..."people from the Gulf of Gascoyne crossed the straight (of Gibraltar), with vessels called "cogs" and went privateering against our ships, causing not a little damage".

In the Early Middle Ages, the Basques acted as transporters for Italian merchants and set up communications between the Mediterranean and other areas in the North of Europe. When the Catalonians needed sea-going vessels, they would normally look for them in the northern ports, such as the Basque Country. This means that it was the Basques who made them, crewed them and, as was customary at the time, rented them out to Kings and foreigners.

Moving from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, Basque seamen were also sighted in 1393, reconnoitering around the Canary Islands or, later, navigating in expeditions to the Gulf of Guinea.

On the subject of Basque marine presence in these areas, we recall that, as Carlos Clavería states, a college of Basque pilots has existed in Cádiz since time immemorial.

With time, Basque participation in the wars between the English and the French in the 14th and 15th centuries became obvious. During the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453), the Basques signed up with French ships, thanks to the different treaties they had signed together.

The Basque Country's commercial fleet became fairly strong. In that 14th century the seamen's union grew increasingly until it established its own Consulate in Brussels, in the "Easterlings" quarter.

But another scenario and other activities call for our attention.

The ships

Naval Construction

Naval construction on the Basque coast dates back to the moment when the Basques started working as fishermen and merchants.

But it was the presence of Vikings and Norsemen in the Adour Estuary which motivated the early development of Basque ships into a war fleet. The first "cogs" appeared in the 11th century, strengthening the principles of the art of navigation, which were followed by the building of all kinds of vessels.

During this first period, and until the mid-16th century, the builders were the shipowners themselves. It was only later that the Basque naval construction industry developes, reaching its height in the 16th century, due to converging factors such as the abundance of oak and beech forests, a maritime tradition, excellent craftsmanship, the existence of ports and the presence of an enterprising middle-class, and the discovery of America, which moved trade towards the Atlantic. Moreover, the Crown adopted a protectionist policy, as can be seen in the regulation made in 1500, where the Catholic Kings state that..."no goods or objects can be loaded on a foreign ship when one of our own ships is available...".

Due to all of this, the Basques were the most highly sought shipowners and, by the 16th century, their shipyards were supplying not only the Basque provinces but the whole state. They made ships for the Crown, for America, for international trade, for hunting and fishing in Newfoundland and for coasting along the Gulf of Biscay.

At the end of the 16th century, there was a slight decrease in the quality of their ships, almost certainly due to the fact that the ships were made to order and that the people who built them were no longer the owners, meaning that they were perhaps less careful with the way they were made. As from this moment we can talk about a naval industry as such.

International circumstances, such as the defeat of the Invincible Armada, for which the King had ordered several Basque ships, had negative effects on this activity, and the 17th century meant a period of crisis for Gipuzkoa and Biscay. However, exactly the opposite was happening in Labourd, and the King's Naval Dockyard was located in Bayonne, where ships were built for the French Royal Army.

The evolution of navigation and naval architecture led to longer and more highly perfected ships being made in the 18th century, mostly by the inhabitant of Mutriku, Gaztañeta. Basque shipyards, and especially the Zorrotza Shipyard, recovered their leadership in the sector, and the 18th century meant a period of recovery with respect to quantity as well as to technical progress. It was at this favourable moment that the Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas started collaborating by promoting naval construction, mainly in Pasaia. At the end of the century there was a period of stagnancy and recession.

Naval construction was a very diversified activity, since it gave rise to professions such as the carpenters, gunboat makers, ropemakers, blacksmiths, sailmakers, etc.

In naval construction, and especially corsair ships, the shipowner played a extremely important part as he would equip, furnish and exploit the ship. Often the shipowners were of important lineage and it was the local nobility, such as Alonso de Idiaquez, superintendent in the Northern Fleet during the 16th century, who would use the letter of marque. But most of them

belonged to the lowest strata of nobility, with medium-sized fortunes, and they would build small or medium-sized ships. They normally came from the Basque ports or nearby areas. Donostia-San Sebastian had professional foreign shipowners and, in Bilbao, the shipowners were traders, whether they were foreign or not.

The shipyards

Common shipyards were simple and normally provisional installations, located on the coast or riverbanks. Royal shipyards, however, were more complex and much bigger.

The country's main shipyards were located around the Adour and the Nervion, and we know that the following existed in Gipuzkoa:

In Zarauz, ships were manufactured in different places, amongst others in Gurarte and in the town's shipyards, next to Zarauz Palace, which were later sold in Seville for the Indies' trade.

In Lezo, Pasaia and Renteria there were shipyards where galleons were built for His Majesty's Fleet. The Royal Pasaia Shipyard was founded in 1597. This is where the "Capitana Real" was built, weighing one thousand five hundred tons.

There were master carpenters in Arcaiza, near Astigarraga, by the stream running past the house of Arámburu, in the so-called "old shipyard".

Donostia-San Sebastian had two shipyards, one on the beach and another in Anoeta.

Apart from these were the long-standing shipyards of Mapil in Usurbil, of Santa María in Motrico, and those of Hondarribia.

Kinds of Ships

The ships which were built in the shipyards along our coasts and which were used at some time by Basque corsairs were mostly the following:

- Cogs. Single-masted vessels, of Nordic origin, widely used in the 14th century, which already had a sternpost rudder, and which were used for both fighting and trading.
- Hookers. Wide vessels of Dutch origin, with a great loading capacity, generally used for transporting and trading.
- Carracks and Caravels. Long, slim vessels, with two or three masts and a maintop, lateen sails which later became square, a single deck and prow ram. Ideal for expeditions, they were mostly used during the 15th and 16th centuries.
- Masted sailing vessels. An evolution of the carrack, with two or three masts, a high deck, great capacity and strength for confronting storms and enemies.
- Galleons. Large tonnage sailing vessels from the 16tn and 17th centuries, sporting a maximum of four masts and a bowsprit with several bridges, extremely well suited to ocean navigation, to which lines and tackle were adapted that would later lead to their evolution. These galleons would race to the Indies and were equal to the galley with respect to gracefulness and agility, once they had adopted round sails.
- Tenders, pinnaces, lateen-rigged vessels, etc. were smaller landing craft, for liaison between ships or patrolling the Fleet, the names of which spread and were given to other small tonnage vessels. Old ships on our coasts were called tenders, and they were used for coastal navigation or other tasks.
- Frigates and clippers. These vessels became quite developed, and were of great size and displacement.

Ships were not built specifically for privateering. Moreover, no great difference was made between war and trading ships until the 17th century. The law only stated that corsair ships, should

be “ships of less than three hundred tons”, and they almost always were, since it was more practical to navigate along the French coast in smaller vessels. Corsair ships could be bought, but they could never be sold to foreigners.

Basque corsairs

Notes

Gipuzkoa has long lived in ignorance of the epopee which many of its ancestors lived along the coast and on the seas, an epopee widely written about by the few descendents of that legion of navigators, fishermen, shipowners and corsairs whose main roles in that period of powerful action came to an end so long ago.

It was enough to let the three last centuries of history pass in silence to almost totally erase Basque signs of identity from the details of sea life.

With respect to Basque corsairs, this silence is understandable, partly due to the obscurity surrounding many of them. The reason for this –according to Michel Iriart- lies in the custom which many shipowners had of burning all the documents related to those who often made them rich. On the other hand, many corsairs only stood out on one single voyage or crossing and this unique piece of information was not enough to find out more about their origins, life and previous and future campaigns.

We must point that corsairs did not arise from a vocation for theft, but for the sea, since fishing was initially their main activity. Born between the mountains and the sea, the latter was so near that many made their lives on it, fishing and trading. Later they armed themselves in defence against the threat of foreign pirates and, only then, started pirating for themselves.

So, more than fishing and trading, corsairs spent more time stealing. “Letters of marque”, that is, the permission which the king gave his seafaring subjects to go after enemies of the Crown until gaining control of the goods they were carrying had a lot to do with this. One King would give a corsair licence to steal and another would hang him for the same thing.

The concession of this permission differentiated corsairs from pirates. The corsair received a letter of marque from royal or government authorities to make war against another nation or to interrupt its commercial traffic. The pirate was a thief who also stole at sea, but with no permission whatsoever.

Letters of marque

Followed by England, France introduced corsair piracy during the first quarter of the 16th century –with permission from the King- against Spanish traffic to the Indies, ignoring the papal bulls and prohibitions of the Council of the Indies and the “Casa de Contratación” (an organism created by the Catholic Kings to regulate commercial traffic with America) in order to fight against Spain’s monopoly of certain colonies rich in silver.

The Spanish King’s desire to prevent robbery and upset their enemy’s trade found a useful manner of doing so, by giving a licence for the assault and robbery of hostil ships to the brave and experienced seamen who inhabited the villages along the Basque coast. The Crown would protect them on the condition that they harass the enemy ships, meaning that the Basques took to this profitable employment, especially outside whaling time.

The first letters of marque were not granted to the Basque-French until 1528, although it must be said that the inhabitants of Labourd worked as anything that came their way: corsairs, pirates, filibusters and buccaneers. With respect to our provinces, we have testimonies from the end of the

15th century, such as the warrants issued in 1497 and 1498 by Fernand the Catholic, permitting privateering to be carried out by Gipuzkoans and Biscayans with no restrictions whatsoever.

Let's take a look at a letter of marque, a perfect example of which is that of the frigate "Nuestra Señora del Rosario", built in the 17th century in Donostia-San Sebastian.

"By virtue of the present document, the said captain, Pedro de Ezábal, in accordance with the Corsair Regulations of 29th December 1621 and 12th September 1624, can start privateering with the said frigate against people of war, to acquire the necessary arms and ammunition, and sail along the coasts of Spain, Barbary and France, fighting and capturing any ships of French nationality they find, due to the war declared with that Crown; any other Turkish and Arab corsairs they can find; and any other ships belonging to enemies of my Royal Crown, under the condition and declaration that they cannot, under any circumstances, go to nor pass the coasts of Brasil, the Terceira, Madeira and Canary islands, nor the coasts of the Indies...

Issued in Madrid, on 28th August, 1690.

I, the King".

The corsairs would give the captured goods to the authorities, Royal Justice or governors of the province.

However, some corsairs continued to steal, sometimes without waiting for the royal bull, and others when the letter of marque was out of date, and even in times of peace between Spain and its enemies. These corsairs were normally not tolerated by convention and would earn the name of "pirates".

Especially in Gipuzkoa, letters of marque were first transmitted by the Donostia-San Sebastian mayor's office itself, until the Consulate took legal charge of the affair years later, and both would judge the legitimacy of each capture entering the port. Later, the Royal Privateering Regulations stated how the loot was to be shared out. According to these rules, artillery and prisoners went to the Royal Justice, while the boat and its merchandise went to the corsair's family, where it was proportionally shared out between the shipowners, captain and crewmen, according to the amount of time which each one had been on the ship.

Where and how they acted

The mens' skill, captains' decision and crews' greed, including that of the shipowners, were conditions that abounded on these ships for privateering and piracy.

Once established as such, the number of Basque corsairs increased rapidly all along the Basque coast, and the range of their activities grew in proportion.

The main bases of the Gipuzkoa corsairs were Donostia-San Sebastian, Pasaia and Hondarribia, and their range of activities spread as far as the English Channel. Later this range grew wider towards the north of Europe, the coasts of America and Barbary, in the north of Africa.

Corsair ships were private property and were chartered by their owners. They were normally chosen for their speed and shallow depth.

Their main method of combat was by boarding, combined with the use of artillery. However, they were not normally heavily armed since they trusted in their victories by boarding, so that the ships they caught would suffer little damage, since they then had to sell them. They normally preferred marauding to stalking that is, navigating in search of victims instead of waiting for them at a certain point, although they would combine the two tactics. At other times they would wait in the port until information reached them about enemy merchants. Corsairs mainly dailed alone, sometimes in pairs and occasionally, when the enemy was strong, in larger groups or small fleets, where the fair sharing of prisoners became difficult and was less profitable.

With respect to prisoners, they would sometimes pretend to be whale hunting and catch English and French fishing boats; at others, they would take command of the merchants' holds

loaded with wine, cloth, silk, tar and resin. The attacked ships would consequently form convoys to defend themselves and obliged the corsairs to organize a multitude of plans in order to take charge of them. Ransom was also a form of loot, that is, the exchange of the prisoners taken by corsairs for money or, on occasions, the exchange of these prisoners for certain others.

Finally, we have to underline the importance of privateering, especially with respect to our coasts, taking into account the number of corsairs that existed.

It would seem that the crews on privateering ships were extremely numerous. In the Gulf of Biscay, and during the 17th century, the golden century of Basque privateering, crews on corsarir ships were proportionally higher than those on ships belonging to the Royal Fleet.

These numbers reduced on expeditions to further-off destinations due to the need for more provisions.

Privateering, therefore, required a great number of crew members and the Basque population wasn't large enough to fulfill this need, meaninig that they resorted to recruiting. Active corsair ships, although great in number, were limited and only went out when ships came back from the sea with other crews on board.

Life on board

The crew

The most important crew member of a large corsair ship was that of the captain who played the role of middleman between the shipowners and the crew members. He was the one who decided whether or not enter into combat and was in charge of discipline on board. The lieutenant captain would substitute the captain in case of his illness or death and would stand a round of guard. The frigate master supervised the nautical steering and administered the provisions. The pilot directed navigation and gave orders to the helmsmen. The Boatswain directed the carrying out of the captain's orders and was in charge of the rigging and protection against fire. His assistant was the guardian who was in charge of cleaning the ship, the smaller boats and the cabin boys. The crew was split into three categories: the seamen, the cabin boys and the boys; the first two looked after the sails and navigation in general and the third were in charge of cleaning, food, strands for rope and the prayers on board ship. In addition to these were the constable, who was in charge of the artillery, the artillerymen, the soldiers for boarding, the carpenter, the chaplain, the clerk and the surgeon. There were two other typical jobs on corsair ships: that of officer in charge of prisoners, who would govern the captured ship until reaching port and sell it, and the frigate supervisor, who controlled everything which took place during the voyage, the behaviour of the crew and avoided fraud.

On simpler ships, this crew was reduced to the essential members.

The crew were either local or from the surrounding areas. They would sometimes come from other parts of the province or even from outside it. Some were even foreign, such as French, Flemish or Irish, although it this wasn't customary. The pilot was often French, for working in the French area and because most Basque-speaking seamen were more experienced with the rigging and rope than they were at piloting. Hardly any of them understood Spanish, while the more experienced sailors were bi-lingual. They came from low social classes and only a minority knew how to write.

Life on board

The day-to-day life of any Basque corsair or sailor on a ship passed as follows:

The crew lived on the deck. There were normally several watches throughout the day lasting four hours each. Work started at sunrise: keeping the decks clean, checking and hoisting the sails, climbing up the masts and tying the ropes. Every half hour a cabin boy would sing the time, accompanied by a Pater and an Ave Maria.

Every morning each sailor would roll up the mat or blanket where he had slept, pull on his clothes, wash himself in a bucket, eat a frugal breakfast (cake, biscuit, garlic, cheese and a few grilled sardines), throw out the water which the ship had taken in during the night, and organize his trunk or chest. This box contained the clothes of any corsair or sailor, comprising a woollen vest, blouse, breeches, cloak or cowl, perhaps a short cape and a hat. They each dressed as they wished and only Basque-French sailors introduced a uniform as from the 17th century. The captains and officers dressed with more elegance.

To satisfy their bodily needs, they would defaecate or urinate over the sea, to do which they would hang from the rigging or plank hanging over the waves which was called the “Komunak” (toilets) or “the gardens”.

The only decent hot meal they had was lunch, and there was a sailor or cook who would prepare food in huge iron cauldrons, set over an open fire. Food was plentiful but monotonous. It included oil, garlic, beans, runner beans, chick-peas with cured meat, bacon, salted cod or sardines, salted meat, wheatcake or biscuits, all of which was stored in the driest part of the boat. Honey substitued sugar and wine was rationed per man and day since it was expensive. They each received their ration in a clay bowl or wooden plate; with a wooden spoon and a dagger completing their utensils. Lunchtime was a moment of great hullabaloo.

They also slept on the deck, each in their own space. Only the captain had his own cabin, and even then only during the last centuries of privateering. Moreover there were no beds, only hammocks.

There were also night watches prior to which prayers would be said. Every following half-hour a ritual song was sung and each hour the helmsman and watch were changed.

The lack of hygiene, crowding on the deck and monotonous food were an excellent hatching ground for illness. Bad nutrition meant that the seamen had hardly any resistance to illness, and the danger of death through an epidemy on the ship was rife. The most common, illness was scurvy, still to be discovered, which was caused by the lack of vitamins. Only the officers had their own personal provisions (figs, sultanas, marmelade, grapes,...) with certain amounts of the necessary vitamins. Syphilis was another very common illness, especially virulent in the 16th century.

The barber was the crew member who normally knew most about medicine. The greatest part of his work consisted in extracting objects, healing, cauterizing and stitching or amputating members. Treatment consisted of bleeding, vegetable medicines,... and his equipment was a mortar, spices, a cutter, medicinal herbs and strong alcohol.

Discipline and prisoners

Sailors on Basque corsair ships could never be condemned to death no matter how serious their crime. So, free from the fear of hard, or extreme punishment, the crew was often wildly undisciplined. However, punishment did exist, such as keelhauling, which was often equivalent to the death sentence. The Basque-French had comparatively harder customs and punishments, with corporal punishment and initiation customs –such as that of tying the newly arrived to the mast and striking them- which survived in spite of being forbidden by the authorities. Murderers had the body of their victims tied to them and were thrown into the sea.

Prisoners were treated kindly, when they were European. Those who hadn’t put up much of a fight were set free with supplies, but those who had put up more of a struggle had their belongings

taken from them. Punishment was given to those who had tried to blow up their own ship during the fight and meant the hangman's rope, although this was later replaced by whipping.

The beliefs

The world of Basque seaman is not as rich in myths and beliefs as it is inland. Traditional Basque seafaring mythology has almost always been similar to that of other seafaring areas, and Basque corsairs have always believed in the same as the other people of the sea along our coasts.

Throughout the Basque Country, there has always been a strong tradition of witches, the ingenious world of sorcery which has little in common with satanism. These beliefs were deeply rooted, not only in the rural and interior Basque Country, but also on the coast.

Zarauz and Getaria...are towns with a deep tradition of "sorginak" (witches), whose traditions, legends and histories were intimately related to everyday life and to the very core of seafaring society. It was often a world half-hidden by fear and the error that these "sorginak", "laminak" or "gaizkinak" (other kinds of witches) inspired. "Direnik, ez da sinistu bear; ez direla ez da esan bear" (Don't believe in them, but don't say they don't exist). The coastal fishermen never mentioned witches, and if women spoke about them while they were fishing, they never caught anything. According to this tradition, witches appeared chasing fishermen and sailors, in the form of waves. In Donibane Lohitzun (Saint Jean de Luz), the "wiches boasted of having flown (from their own village) to Newfoundland; they would climb to the top of the ship's mast and put a curse on sailers and fishermen by sprinkling their bedeviled powder on them". They would also stir up stormy weather, proof of which was the sinking of the "Marticot" from Ciboure. This is what they declared to the French judge Pierre de Lancre in the process which he opened against them.

Other coastal beliefs were the existence of mermaids and "traganarru". This was the storm spirit who, according to Barandiarán, caused "fear amongst men of the sea in olden times and still amongst quite a few in this century".

With respect to mermaids, in 1673 –according to Resurrección Mª de Azkue, Father Feijoo had told her that- a neighbour from Liérganes went in for a swim in the Bilbao Estuary with some other boys. He threw himself into the water but... didn't come back up to the surface and was thought to have drowned. However, six years later, some Cádiz fishermen saw "a human figure swimming through the waves with great skill. Burning with curiosity, they tired to catch the surprising being, which they succeeded in doing, although with difficulty". They then discovered that it was the very same Francisco who had disappeared six years previously in Bilbao. On bringing him home, it is said that he lived strangely for nine years and then disappeared without trace.

I have also found a reference to a mermaid who used to play on the beach in Donostia-San Sebastian and who would sit combing her hair in the sunshine. But, when the English landed on the "Pico del Loro", she escaped.

Lastly, the "iraunsugue" was our ancestors' dragon to which a maiden had to be sacrificed, since it would draw men to it with its breath and eat them. It was an "iraunsugue" that killed the Archangel Saint Michael in Aralar.

The whalers

In pursuit of whales

Whaling and corsairs were intimately related to one another. This former activity was carried out prior to that of privateering, but later led to the latter.

The first Basque corsairs were whalers who alternated between whaling and pillaging their enemies on the Newfoundland fishing shoals, on the strength of their letters of marque. Their cod prizes, for example, were as covetted a booty as the most luxurious merchant silks, gold and the best wine.

Basques and Cantabrians would seem to have been the first whalers, inventors of the whaling industry and, as such, existed in an organized manner from the 7th century onwards.

At first whales were hunted on the Cantabrian coast, when they were making their way back from the frozen North seas, in fishing trips lasting from October to March. The first mention of a whale being sold appears in 1059 in a document in Bayonne. Later documents mention the collecting of whale bones for their use in repairs and the appearance of vats to hold whale oil.

However, by the 14th century, whales were becoming scarce on the Basque coast and the Basques had to go to Ireland and Newfoundland to hunt them.

The latest discoveries made in Canada, with respect to the frequent Basque toponymy of the place, the Basque words used by the Indians and the way in which they harpoon the whales are all evidence that the Basques were the first to arrive and start dealing with indigenous people. So, around the twentieth year of the 16th century, whales were first hunted in Newfoundland, although there is previous evidence of Basque presence in theses lands.

The ships would meet at a place some fifty kilometres from Newfoundland and Labrador, where they would stay until the end of January, since the freezing temperatures obliged them to stop fishing. During these fishing trips, which would last eight months, from spring to autumn, some whaling ships would return home with empty holds, while others either didn't return or lost their load to pirates.

Around the mid-16th century, and mainly during the decades 1570 and 1580, there was an important movement of Basques to Newfoundland, bringing great change to the economic life of the Basque Country.

Basque whaling went into decline from 1585 onwards. That year, which marked the beginning of the war with Great Britain, a great number of ships were requisitioned by the Spanish Armada, to reinforce its insufficient fleet. Three years later, the defeat of this Armada meant that only a few ships set out to fish in Newfoundland.

In addition to this was the peace that was reached between Spain and France in 1598. England, France and Denmark took political charge of the lands and seas of North America. In addition, France sent a governor to Newfoundland. This situation wasn't resolved until the 18th century when, in 1713, in virtue of the Utrecht Agreement, Philip V negotiated a treaty for free fishing in favour of the Basques in Newfoundland, even although there were almost no whales left in the area by that time.

The Basques reacted by privateering more systematically. Years earlier they had already obtained letters of marque from Philip II in order to confront the pirates.

From whalers to corsairs

16th century corsairs and the great corsairs of the 17th century inherited the legacy of those whalers, daring navigators and traders. They benefitted from their techniques, advances and knowledge in all areas of seamanship including, obviously, privateering.

Even in the 16th century, whalers and corsairs were contemporaneous, when not inseparable. Newfoundland's history is ridden with acts of piracy. The Basques suffered attacks from the English, French and Dutch, to which they retaliated. For this reason, during this century, and on request by the Spanish Crown, whalers going to Newfounfland had to be armed. The war of nations took this fight to the very fishing grounds and each ship had a letter of marque, since each in turn was a possible victim of enemy corsairs.

There are certain pieces of evidence to prove this.

In 1555, the pilot from San Sebastian, Pérez de Hoa, in accordance with Captain Juan de Erauso, left on a ship with which he arrived to Newfoundland where he took charge of twelve large French ships loaded with cod and artillery. Both declared that they had taken more than 500 prisoners in Newfoundland, to whom they gave a ship and sufficient supplies for returning to France.

There are also testimonies about Basque attacks on English ships in Newfoundland. Such as the attacks made on Iturain and Lozón in 1555 and 1590, respectively.

However, years later, in 1588, by which time only a few ships were going to Canada, "coming from Newfoundland after having fished cod, in a ship belonging to Bartolomé de Garro, two leagues from cape Finisterre, an English pirate ship made him give himself up and took the boat with all its people, which was a lot of money, to the city of London, where they taken prisoners and imprisoned by the Queen"; to get them back, Spain asked: "we implore Your Majesty to give permission for this town (Mutriku) to give as many Englishmen from amongst the prisoners in province (Gipuzkoa) and Lordship of Biscay, as have been taken of ours, so that they may return freely to the said Kingdom of England and in turn set free the neighbous and natural born men of this town".

The 16th century

The 16th century of our history is dominated by the conflicts which, for political and religious reasons, brought Sapin into confrontation with France and England, causing frequent succesive periods of war and peace which Charles V and Philip II started with these two kingdoms, the stage for which was often the sea.

Basque corsairs were therefore no strangers to these comings and goings, but rather played leading roles in them, sometimes thanks to royal letters of marque, and others through acting on their own behalf.

Generally, we can consider the 16th century, of which there are several testimonies, as the first to have seen the regulation of Basque corsairs.

Two precedents

One of these is the exception made by a certain Antón de Garay, the first known corsair. This Biscayan from the end of the 15th century, started privateering in the Atlantic, and later continued pirating along the coasts of the New World, for which be was executed. The other, in Gipuzkoa, was Juan Martinez de Elduayen, from Donostia-San Sebastian, who did the same thing in 1480. He got hold of three pinnaces from Hondarribia which were carrying French merchandise, "on the strength of a few letters of marque and the reprisals which you say have existed since times of war". The Catholic Kings told him that this affair had been solved a long time previously. Later he attacked a vessel from Bilbao alongside Donostia-San Sebastian, with the help of his relations. This brought him another reprimand from the Kings, who took the prisoners away from him and made him sign an obligation costing a few farthings.

The French enemy

Coming back to the moment in question, during the early 16th century, France was already using letters of marque as a prime weapon in its rivalry with Spain. Corsairs and pirates from La

Rochelle were becoming famous amongst Basque seamen during this century, which was the prelude to the fame they would achieve in the following century. Likewise, the Captain Martín de Iribas had to attack the famous corsair from La Rochelle, Juan Florín –who had taken charge of the treasure which Hernán Cortés was sending from Mexico to Spain, making prisoners of his men whom he took to Cádiz.

Basque privateering was inaugurated during this century, in 1528, when the Spanish Crown declared war against France and England and urged Gipuzkoa to arm as many of its seamen for privateering as possible.

In the Bilbao Estuary, and because of this war, French and English corsairs sometimes intercepted each other's trade and navigation, such as in 1536, when the Consuls of Bilbao sent a letter to the magistrate in Brussels asking for artillery, as a measure of precaution against French corsairs. The corsairs from Labourd were the most important in the Basque Country, operating in all waters with or without permits, even often overlapping into the area of piracy. Famous Basque-French corsairs in this century were Duconte, Harismendi and Dolabarantz.

The Gipuzkoans were indeed armed and took so many French ships that the latter asked to go back to their earlier friendly relations, due to which a common accord was signed between the neighbouring parties in Hendaye en 1536, stipulating a pragmatic warning, according to which both sides undertook, if their Kings declared war, that the first of two to receive notice of the war order or letter of marque would rush to notify the neighbouring party so that it could take the appropriate steps.

During these wars with Spain, France allied itself with the Turkish who had a great empire at the time, were enjoying great prestige and were anxious for expansion, which took shape in the control of commercial traffic and naval supremacy in the Mediterranean. One of the Turkish leaders and pirates was Barbarossa who, thanks to their alliance with France, attacked the Spanish coasts in 1530. Gipuzkoan prisoners were taken by the Turkish, such as a sailor from Deba who had to be rescued from Barbarossa in 1533, for which his native town put up the capital.

This agreement of mutual respect signed between the two neighbours was broken years later when, in 1553, Philip II, who had still not become King, recommended that the San Sebastian shipowners set out to catch some French corsair ships which were bringing stolen goods back to France from the Antilles.

However, due to this permission, the shipowners continued attacking French ships, and, on seeing this, the ships bringing supplies to Gipuzkoa stopped coming.

Four corsairs from Donostia-San Sebastian

In 1554, four corsair captains from Donostia-San Sebastian sailed up different French canals and rivers, capturing several merchant ships and taking prisoners from enemy corsairs to the provincial prisons.

Of these four corsairs, Martín de Cardel, captain and water carrier, penetrated into the Bordeaux Estuary with six ships, assaulting and stealing from the surrounding villages. He brought forty-two large French ships full of artillery and merchandise back to San Sebastian. Domingo de Albistur took over nine large French ships on their way back from Newfoundland, loaded with cod and arms, after having made the warships who were looking after them flee. In addition to this, together with Pablo de Aramburu, he took charge of forty-nine French ships loaded with cod and cannons. Of the four, it was perhaps Domingo de Iturain who was most famous. Like the above-mentioned Garay from Biscay, he started with a small ship, taking a larger and better armed ship prisoner, with which he specialized in stealing the catches taken by British fishing ships in Newfoundland.

Thus continued the attacks by Basque corsairs, until in 1559, when peace was signed with France, thereby establishing peace between corsairs.

Piracy and Basque-French privateering

During the second half of the century, Basque-French privateering was outstanding for several reasons.

In the first place, Basque-French piracy firmly and systematically established itself around this time, according to a series of strict regulations. The judges' passivity also became obvious from this moment on.

Secondly, the dirty trick which the French played on the Gipuzkoans is notorious, since both Kingdoms had signed a peace agreement.

Outstanding in this sense are the corsairs from Saint Jean de Luz and Ciboure who, around 1560, started pestering Gipuzkoan ships in the Newfoundland ports, expelling them without letting them fish; as early as 1559 a writer had said that the inhabitants of Saint Jean de Luz were always highly considered by the Kings of France, because “its inhabitants are extremely warlike, especially at sea”. For example, the pirate and sea merchant from Biarritz, Saubat de Gaston, boarded some ships in 1575 and stripped them of their loads at the outlet of the Adour. Another two pirates, a certain Captain Bardin helped by a certain Motxi who, in honour of their capacity of pirates, also dedicated themselves to pillaging their King’s subjects.

The impassibility of the French Admirality in the face of such facts led the French monarchy to take a position in the affair, ordering that permission only be awarded on previous payment of a deposit, and that their captures be discussed with the Admiralty.

The English enemy

But France wasn’t Spain’s only enemy. As we have already seen, the 1528 permit for becoming armed for privateering also concerned the English enemy, against whom war had also been declared.

Against the British and in times of war, apart from the said Iturain, were Antón de Iribertegui, from Getaria, who occupied an English ship in Scotland, and Urbieta from Orio who, on arriving to London as a crew member on a merchant ship, took over an English ship, killing the crew and selling the ship, after which he had to flee from the law.

England opened a breach on another front. English piracy increased when Elizabeth I arrived to the throne, due to which Spain went to war yet again. This was the reason for maritime confrontation and English support of the pirates who attacked the fleet coming from the Indies, where the English pirates Drake and Hawkins stood out as the first to have taken piracy to America.

Gipuzkoan officers of the Crown have left us vivid records of the actions of these pirates, such as that suffered by Martín de Olazabal, commander of a large fleet which left Havana for Spain, with nine galleons full of treasure and a convoy of almost sixty ships, which was attacked by the English.

The century came to an end with the downfall of Spanish dominion at sea, due to the defeat of the Invincible Armada at the hands of the English, and the effect this had on the Basques. One of the most powerful fleets of the 16th century fell to English naval supremacy.

Even in times of difficulty for our people, our enemity with England was never forgotten. The century also came to an end with an outbreak of the plague in Gipuzkoa, which meant that ships from La Rochelle, which had set out to privateer, were able to arrive to the Gipuzkoan ports, steal and take away merchandise and even fishermen. This was enough for the authorities to request that

ships from all nations be allowed to reach Gipuzkoa, except the English, in order to bring supplies: "so that all nations, except the English can freely navigate and bring sufficient provisions for the survival of the people since, as prices are getting higher every day and the fact that even with money there is nothing to buy for eating, if France stopped coming, great damage would probably be caused through widespread starvation".

The 17th century

The golden century of Basque privateering

The 17th century was a golden century for Basque corsairs. Privateering took on such importance that the Royal Decree of 1621 set down Royal Laws of Privateering –as General Laws- which stated the rules to be followed by those carrying out this profession.

In this century the province of Gipuzkoa was the corsair area of the Basque Country par excellence and, as Otero Lana says, of the peninsula.

Bilbao started controlling trade, and the Bilbao Consulate was created, meaninig that all Basque trade was centred in this town. The economic dynamic of Bilbao put Donostia-San Sebastian out of places as a commercial port and the latter, in order to revitalize its own trade, didn't manage to create its own Consulate until 1682. The reduction in trade and the need for resources made Donostia-San Sebastian into the main privateering port of the Peninsula. This situation brought two groups into confrontation; the owners of ships for privateering and traders, who were against privateering since it frightened off merchants. Between 1622 and 1697, according to Enrique Otero, there were forty-one licenced shipowners in our city and two-hundred-and-seventy-one privateering ships. Some of these were foreign, especially Basque-French, Bretons and Irish.

Hondarribia was the second peninsular port, followed by Pasaia and, far behind the others, Orio, Zarauz and Getaria.

This expansion of privateering meant a logical increase in their areas of action. The traditional areas, such as the Basque coast and the Indies, were still considered as such, while the waters of northern Europe –France, England, the Netherlands and Ireland- spread further north, and others, such as the waters of Newfoundland, were abandoned.

Newfoundland and the seas of the north

We said previously that, by the end of the 16th century, fishing in Newfoundland had started declining due to political reasons. In addition to this was the exhaustion of whale fishing in the great bay, which became evident during the 17th century due, according to some, to the decrease in their number, to their fleeing from being hunted by man or to emigration because of a change in water temperature.

So, the Basques gradually abandoned these lands, although certain documents state that they were still present in Newfoundland during the first decade and even up to the middle of the century we are now dealing with. There were still whales on the Basque coasts, although these were also in decline from the 14th century onwards.

However, this didn't mean a reduction in whale hunts, but rather the opposite, through a movement towards the seas of the north. In 1612, Juan de Herauso, from Donostia-San Sebastian, left for "Groillandt, which is further north than Norway and could provide more abundant fishing". The voyage was a succes and, on their return, they convinced another twelve ships to leave for the same point a year later. On reaching the said coast, two English war galleons robbed them one after

the other aince, according to the people from San Sebastian, the English arrived and made them fish for them, all on the strength of a letter of marque from the King of England.

Years later the Basques were sought out by the English for hunting whales in the Artic, since they were “skilled users of the harpoon”. The English were in charge of the ovens and casks. Twenty-four Basques embarked on English ships under the orders of Baffin, en route for Spitzbergen. From then on, there are several testimonies of the death of Basque seamen at the North pole, to the north of Iceland, and in the Norwegian Sea.

The Basque coasts

The foreign danger

The Basques were not only outstanding corsairs on our coasts, but also had to suffer its consequences themselves.

Dutch corsairs attacked the Basque coast, sometimes even using some parts of it as their own base, and as lookout posts.

The fear of foreign invasion was ever present, as was the case in Donostia-San Sebastian, a fear which increased in 1626 due to the threat of attack by the English. For this reason, an order was given to close off the Urumea river, at the height of Saint Catherine bridge, with a chain and wooden breakwater from the Land Port to the sandbank. However, things did not turn out as planned.

Most active in this sense were the pirates from La Rochelle, who had already attacked the Gipuzkoans by the end of the 16th century.

In 1621, the Gipuzkoans wrote to representatives from Saint Jean de Luz, and the following year to those from Ciboure, asking them for arms and protection against the pirates from La Rochelle, who attacked the Basque coasts almost every winter where they had more than enough to keep them busy. To quell the hard attacks by these pirates, chastising expeditions left for the port of La Rochelle led by corsairs from Saint Jean de Luz, who were backed by Royal permission.

However, our seamen were not always prejudiced since, as Camino said, corsairs from Donostia-San Sebastian captured one-hundred-and-twenty ships carrying merchandise during these years from the pirates from La Rochelle and the Netherlands.

Gipuzkoans in Bilbao

In order to take prisoners, Gipuzkoan and Biscayan corsairs would go to the port of Bilbao, which was usually full of ships due to the moment of prosperity being enjoyed by this town, where they would wait in the vicinity of the Estuary for good Dutch and English prey, which they would then board.

Outstanding was the captain from Donostia-San Sebastian, Agustín de Arizabalo who situated himself at the mouth of Bilbao port and who, in 1658, caught every merchant ship coming from the north of Europe, France, Netherlands and Portugal.

This Gipuzkoan attitude of attacking foreign ships in the Bilbao Estuary, was responded to by complaints, timid at first and then stronger from the Netherlands, which were made to the Consulate in Bilbao. And they were right, since the Gipuzkoans were acting like true pirates, entering into the Biscayan ports as if they were in their own home, to plunder from foreigners with the greatest of impunity.

Attempts at defence

Moreover, as from 1688, light French frigates, whalers which had been equipped with artillery for the occasion, became the terror of the Atlantic coasts. The time when there were most of these ships was when the fight by the French King Louis XIV worsened against the European allies of the Augsburg league, amongst which was Spain. Some of these frigates dedicated themselves to privateering on the Basque coast, so the Consulate of Bilbao and traders of Donostia-San Sebastian took action.

In 1691, the Consulate of Bilbao chartered two frigates to keep watch on the area, who defeated a fleet of French corsairs.

In order to maintain safety on the coast, traders from Donostia-San Sebastian built a frigate in 1690, the command of which was given to Pedro de Ezábal, who lived on the sea front, and who set out to privateer with a royal letter of marque, taking several ships prisoner from amongst the French, which were swarming over our seas and terrorizing them.

Royal instructions for this frigate stated:

"The traders of this City have manufactured a warship of three hundred tons, with forty-two pieces of artillery, called "Nuestra Señora del Rosario", to privateer and guard these coasts against invasions by the French; and, having gone out to sea for this reason, in virtue of the letter of marque issued by His Majesty, manned by people from the land, it has captured many French ships and brought them to the port of this city, from where it set forth; having fought with such courage and good fortune that it has instilled terror and chased the French away from these coasts, as they were infesting the area to such an extent that they were closing the ports, even placing themselves below the cannons of the "Mota" Fort...".

It didn't take the authorities long to realize the advantages of favouring the energies of the Basque seamen, who they started encouraging in order to gain control over them.

Then peace was signed in Ryswick, in 1697, putting an end to the war between the Augsburg League and the "Sun King" (Louis IV).

Joanes de Suhigaraychipi, "Le Coursic"

One of the French corsairs who were then attacking our coasts was Joanes de Suhigaraychipi from Bayonne, better known as "Le Coursic", (the little corsair). He was one of the King's corsairs and won titles of nobility for his feats and services.

His frigate, the "Légère", was authorized to privateer against the Spanish and also against the Dutch. He was so successful that the governor of Bayonne himself paid half the amount towards arming his frigate, which had twenty-four cannons. The resulting operation was so fruitful that he had captured a hundred ships in less than six years. With the support of other people from his family, his frigate, which would leave from the port of Sokoa, didn't take long to become the terror of the English and the Dutch.

One of his most famous feats took place in 1692, precisely in our waters, since it could be seen from the San Sebastian beach. It started at the port of San Antonio, in Biscay, where he saw two Dutch ships coming towards our capital, catching up with them in two days. He caught up with the first, weighing five-hundred tons, with thirty-six cannons and a hundred seamen, which he attacked with a volley of fire. He came alongside it twice, in spite of the difference in size and, damaged, had to retire from enemy fire, which didn't stop him from continuing to harangue the Basque-French. The fight lasted for five hours and was so fierce that there were only eighteen members of the whole Dutch crew left in the end. The second Dutch ship was also sunk. Instead of tragedy, only five Basque sailors died.

A few days later, “le Coursic” returned to sea. No sooner had he crossed the outlet of the Adour, than he was attacked by an English corvette equipped with a-hundred-and-twenty men and sixty-four cannons. The Bayonnese attacked it quickly that it could barely put up resistance. The result of the fight, which began at eight o’clock in the morning and ended at three in the afternoon, was victory for the “Légère”, which took the English boat captive. That victory, celebrated by the public crowded along the banks of the canal, was talked about so much that he ended up giving classes on privateering for equipping more corsairs, all under his command, in preparation of a new Spanish fleet which was getting ready to set sail.

He later captured two Dutch ships in the Gulf of Biscay.

Outside our waters, we mustn’t forget to mention the expedition which he made to Spitzbergen, in the north of Europe, against the Dutch, from which he returned with a load of whales.

In six years he alone caught a hundred merchant sailing ships and, in eight months, with the help of the king’s frigates, a hundred-and-twenty-five. He filled the port of Saint Juan de Luz so full of his spoils, that the governor of Bayonne wrote to Louis XIV: “You could walk from the house in which Your Majesty is lodged, to Ciboure, on a bridge made from captured ships tied one to the other”. This prodigious audacity was linked to the loyalty of a gentleman. Anyone who didn’t keep their word or who was guilty of betrayal, was punished relentlessly.

After several years he started dedicating himself to protecting the Basque-French and Bretons from the English during their return voyage from Newfoundland. He died in these lands in 1694, where there is a headstone stating “Captain of the king’s frigate”, the same person who gave him the authorization to strip one hundred merchants of their loads.

Corsairs in Europe

An unlucky man from Renteria

We have already seen how, in addition to the Basque coasts, the other great stage where the Basque corsairs would go to carry out their acts, was the north of Europe.

Around the years 1626 and 1627, six ships and three tenders from Donostia-San Sebastian took part in a pirate operation around Ireland and Scotland, of which we only know, thanks to J. César Santoyo, owner of the “San Jorge”, commanded by Miguel de Noblecía from Renteria, that the ships acted alone. The first year of the expedition brought no results, because the people from Donostia-San Sebastian in the Irish port of Berchavan who virtually had their prey in their hands, were fightened off by the Irish and came home. The next year, the “San Jorge” set sail once again from the beach of Donostia-San Sebastian and reached the same port as the previous year, where they took on “legal” provisions. They then set off for the west coast of Ireland, hoping to find a catch, but, as they didn’t find anything, they had to resort to finding one on land. They proposed that three Irish traders come on board, one of whom returned to land to pay the ransom for the other two and get supplies for the pirates. But once this had been done, an English warship cut off their retreat and they ended up in prison.

Juana Larando: a corsair widow from Donostia-San Sebastian

As we have already seen, the outstanding role which Donostia-San Sebastian had taken on as a corsair port attracted professional shipowners from all over, as well as sailors from the neighbouring areas to the north of the peninsula and further abroad, people who stayed in the guest houses, between expedition and expedition.

In 1630, Juana Larando, a widow from Donostia-San Sebastian, had a guest house where she would give lodgings to some eighteen adventurers from greatly differing origins, providing them "with everything on credit, until they would come back with a capture and get paid for what it was worth", as is documented in the Tolosa "Corregimiento" Archive.

She invested her profits in a tender or small boat with two partners, one from Orio and another from Donostia-San Sebastian, which they christened with the name of "San Juan". The tender, captained by Juan de Achániz, worked along the French coast and in the "English channel".

During one of its voyages the tender managed to make a catch of twelve thousands ducats. On the return voyage there was mutiny on board; the "San Juan" was wrecked and abandoned and they captured a better, Dutch boat, called the "San Pedro". With this they reached Zumaya, where they sold it for eleven-thousand-one-hundred-and-fifty-five "reales".

The sharing out of the money caused a great uproar. Even the Orio village priest had a share – as he had been asked to say mass for the successful outcome of the "San Juan" venture- as did the interpreter of the resulting court case, then there was the food given to the imprisoned Flemish – before they were returned without a ship- and the price of the sloop in which they sent them back to their country. The result of the division was thus: they gave the widow Juana de Larando three-thousand-six-hundred-and-nine "reales"; Captain Echániz, six-hundred-and-seventy-seven; the interpreter, one hundred "reales", while each corsair only got eighty six "reales", a meager amount for such an exceptional catch.

Royal support

However, it was not all a question of acting on their own behalf and taking risks. Royal backing was also given to privateering during this century, support by the Crown to the Basque corsairs or work to order.

In 1633 the King ordered that a "fleet of ships be formed to privateer against the rebels and enemies of the Royal Crown, in which everyone offering to work would take part as an officer or crewman.

It is testimonies of this type which help us to deduce that not all corsairs came from the coast. It is quite difficult to find mentions in books about corsairs coming from areas in the interior of the province. However, there is evidence of Antonio de Aguirre, from Abaltzisketa; the men from Amezketa, Juan de Zuriarrain or Miguel de Gorostegui; or from Ataun, José de Goicoechea and from Tolosa, Ignacio de Bengoechea, amongst others.

As from 1660, corsair ships from Donostia-San Sebastian and Hondarribia established themselves in Galician ports which they used as a base for their continuous corsair voyages to England, the English Channel and Ireland, destinies more easily reached from these waters.

And so they continued, until peace was signed with France. Gipuzkoa and Labourd signed yet another agreement in 1652, as they had done in the 16th century, in which they established the rules of privateering. According to these, no ships could be taken prisoner from either of their respective ports. Apart from this, the corsairs from both sides could continue with their mischief, attacking one other freely, without this being considered as having broken the truce. The agreement was approved by the Spanish and French War Councils. Its fulfilment was ordered and confirmed in 1667, 1675 and 1694.

"The fear of Great Britain"

Once the peace agreement had been signed with France, the Basque corsairs turned their sights towards England.

According to Camino, more than ever in the decade of the 50s to the 60s “corsairs from Donostia-San Sebastian were famous for terrorizing the seas, instilling fear in all of Great Britain’s seafaring vessels”. Antonio de Oquendo, for his part, assures that “the hostilities which England suffered at the hands of the frigates from Donostia-San Sebastian and Pasaia, was one of reasons which drove them to ask for peace”.

To understand this fear of Donostia-San Sebastian better, we have information issued in 1682 by the Donostia-San Sebastian Consulate, which assured that... “in 1656, there were two ports in this city with fifty-six ships from both the port itself and the province, which carried out hostilities against enemies of the Crown, causing constant serious damage to English navigation and trade, obliging that Kingdom to made peace”.

Fermín de Alberro was one of these corsairs. In 1684, he anchored off Wales, waited and boarded a ship from Bristol, which was going to Bilbao with lead, cloth and plans. The ship entered the Biscayan capital empty, while its load entered the quay of Donostia-San Sebastian, accompanied by the cheers of the whole neighbourhood who had come along to take part in the event.

Corsairs in the Indies

16th century style attacks were still being carried out by the English and French in the 17th century on the weak Spanish fleet, which was now suffering from other problems: the contraband carried out by the former and attacks by buccaneer pirates established in the different Caribbean ports, and mainly Tortuga Island, who, backed by the English and Dutch from these colonies, were the nightmare of all the rich emporiums in the Antilles and of the ships carrying out intercolonial traffic. The name of these buccaneers came from the word “boucan”, the smoked, dried and salted meat which they produced.

Spain’s answer to the problem of contraband in the Caribbean was the concession of letters of marque to corsairs who patrolled along the coast of the colony arresting suspicious foreign ships. The ships and artillery taken were passed on to the Spanish fleet for defending the colonies.

Several Basques stood out notably from amongst the corsairs and pirates in the Indies.

Tomás de Larraspuru

Tomás de Larraspuru, from Azkoitia who was in time raised to the rank of admiral, arrived to the Antilles in 1622 at the head of fourteen galleons and two tenders with an end to cleaning up the enemy islands. Based at Margarita island, he went round the whole Caribbean ridding the smaller islands of the dens belonging to English and French contraband organizations, and setting up the fleets of New Spain and Terra Firme. A year later, he arrived back to Spain with a treasure of almost thirteen million in lingots and fruit, having acquired the fame of being the best general to have governed the fleet. He died ten years later.

Michel “le Basque”

After Larraspuru, the Dutch used their naval power to break Spanish supremacy in the Caribbean, leaving the Antilles at the mercy of foreign attacks.

One of those who wouldn’t be put down was Michel “le Basque” from Saint Jean de Luz. This man set himself up in the second half of the 17th century on Tortuga Island, in association with another buccaneer, “el Olonés”, with whom he carried out some of his attacks. First he took over a

galleon in Porto Bello port, which had a splendid booty. Years later, in 1666, he decided to attack the highly active port of Maracaibo, which was defended by two-hundred-and-fifty men and fourteen cannons, pillaring it and making its population flee. He stole the ecclesiastic ornaments, with the intention of taking them to the church he intended to found on Tortuga Island. The following year, with only forty men, he attacked Maracaibo again and stole an important amount.

Years later, the governor of Cartagena wanted to clean the area of pirates, and sent a small fleet to get rid of them. But Michel "le Basque" only needed a couple of brigantines to take charge of the government ships and return them to the governor with his gratitude.

Michel "le Basque's" vessel was the frigate "la Providence" built in Saint Jean de Luz. It had sixteen cannons. It was manned, apart from Michel "le Basque" and Captain Larralde, by around forty men.

A Gipuzkoan armada bound for Tortuga Island

The problem of pirate attacks in the Indies continued without a solution for several years.

According to a bundle of papers given to me by José Garmandia from the General Indies Archive, some Gipuzkoan shipowners prepared a fleet of frigates to fight against corsairs in the Indies in 1685.

This took the form of a contract with the Gipuzkoan shipowners to prepare a fleet for fighting against the English pirates who were swarming around the Indies. The Indies War Council negotiated with the Gipuzkoan shipowners to get themselves a fleet to deal with the situation. The shipowners were from Donostia-San Sebastian and Hondarribia, and they called in the Count of Canalejas as the admiral of the fleet. Three priests from San Telmo were also given a place on it since "the others didn't understand the Spanish language".

The construction of this fleet was carried out with great speed in the Anoeta shipyard, Donostia-San Sebastian. It comprised the flagship "Nuestra Señora del Rosario y Animas", weighing two-hundred-and-fifty tons with thirty-five cannons, the viceadmiral's ship, "San Nicolás de Bari", with a hundred-and-forty tons, and the tenders "San Antonio" and "Santiago". These ships were manned by a total of four-hundred-and-seventy-seven men.

Once they had reached American waters some of them fled and one of the frigates had to be sold. The fight against the English corsairs took place around Tortuga Island using a ship and a sloop.

But it would seem that the fleet didn't meet the conditions for the fight it was supposed to win, and that the crew was not well enough prepared.

We have no more information about this fleet and therefore do not know what became of it.

The 18th century

French attacks

The century began, as usual, with attacks from French corsairs. In spite of the fact that a frigate had been built in Bilbao in 1692 to defend the entrance and exit of ships from the Abra Estuary, ships were still being plundered in these waters, since the corsairs respected neither the authorized ships nor those of friendly nations. In 1709 and 1710 some ships were attacked when setting out for England and Ireland equipped with the corresponding passports, falling into the hands of French corsairs at the very outlet of the port. Protests from the Consulate brought no results.

With respect to our ships, we have isolated information about how, for example, Juan de Zurriarain from Amezketa, died on a corsair vessel in 1712.

We also know that the Gipuzkoan Delegation went to the King about the "San Julián" case. This boat, which had previously belonged to people from Donostia-San Sebastian, was always robbing thoughout Europe with another name, under the command of a French corsair. As the letter from the Consulate to the Delegation stated, "through swindling and double dealing with the captain and other people, using a flag which they state to be Dutch, hiding that of its nation and the name of the ship".

Basque-French privateering reached extraordinary heights during this period, and especially during periods of war, such as the Seven Years' War, when they were a worry to England, and later during the USA's War of Independence.

Attacks in the Caribbean

Crossing over to the other side of the Ocean we can see that, at the beginning of the century, the Spanish Crown was incapable of surveilling trade with its colonies, and these in turn, rich and developed, had no means of transporting their products to the metropolis. This, together with the Dutch, French and English who had rushed to take power of small Caribbean islands so as to control the area, led to Venezuelan trade being monopolized by foreigners.

But some Basque seamen couldn't resign themselves to this fact and would confront the danger of daring to trade on these coasts. Some, such as the Captain Manuel de Iradi, saw his frigate, called "Jesús, María, José and San Sebastián" no less, being boarded in 1711 by an English corsair, which he was able to fight off with three volleys of artillery and musketry, in this way saving his important load and the voyagers he was transporting.

Philip V then tired to promote overseas trade, forbidding the introduction of any product from America which was brought in by foreign hands and reducing their right to traffic with cocoa by more than a half.

Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas

In 1728 Philip V granted Gipuzkoa the permission to form a Company, which shared its trading profits with the Crown.

On the 25th September 1728, a treaty was signed between Spain and Gipuzkoa and, two years later, the first ships left Pasaia for Caracas.

The Spanish Crown obtained, through the Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas, the security of protecting the coasts of Venezuela from attacks by foreign corsairs and pirates. The Company's ships were armed, which meant that they could dedicate themselves to privateering without abandoning their commercial activities. The Company's corsairs were greatly feared and mainly attacked English and Dutch ships trading illegally.

The Company revolutionized the economy of the province. It took time to get off the ground, until the Gipuzkoans won the trust of the Americans and removed the Dutch from the trade. The benefits didn't take long to appear in the ports of Pasaia and Donostia-San Sebastian, and were also reflected in the construction of ships, which was continuous.

The maintenance of this trading line required corsairs to guarantee the possibility of its development. Even moreso in the times between 1740 and 1748, when the war of Austrian succession made Spain and England into enemies.

The Basque corsairs became a thorn in Great Britain's side, and the latter's corsairs became the natural enemy of the Spanish Fleet, which had regained the level of respect it had enjoyed during the era of the Austrias.

Returning to our corsairs, and mainly to the service of the Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas, of which we have continuous news during these years. Ships such as "San Ignacio", known as "La Peregrina" ("The Pilgrim), or "Nuestra Señora del Coro", "Esperancilla" or "San Juan Bautista", manned by seamen from Ataun, Portugal, Tolosa, Normandy, Extremadura, Villabona, Basque-French and even priets from Donostia-San Sebastian, were a continuous source of information during those years when English prisons were full of Basque corsairs, and the Gipuzkoan coasts became used to seeing its ships bringing back English prisoner ships, loaded with merchandise, such as in April 1744, for example. On this date there is proof that two English ships were taken prisoner, the first with thirty tons of copper and around the same amount of oil, almonds, raisins and Moroccan leather, all worth eighty thousand "pesos", and the second with four-hundred-and-fifty ready-made outfits.

Logically, and moreso in companies of this type, risks were not limited to defending oneself from the "official" enemy. They had to be on the outlook for any danger. So, in 1747, the "Ana Margarita", a Dutch ship bringing provisions to Donostia-San Sebastian, which had arrived to the entrance of the port, and had the coastal pilots at its side, was taken by a corsair xebec from Bayonne which took it to its own city, infringing the existing agreement.

The "Casa de Contratación" and Consulate of Donostia-San Sebastian wrote a letter to the province's delegation in which, among other problems suffered by seven Spanish ships in the port of Bayonne, he states that..."the coasts are full of English corsairs" and, by way of proof that "the natives of this province have not lost their courage" he communicates to the King that the Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas "has armed one of its smaller ships for sailing to the port of Guaira".

They took two days to prepare this ship before it left armed with twenty cannons and manned by sixty men, determined to defend it to the end. In addition, in the same letter, he says that "a corsair vessel is to be built by certain individuales who will arm it and, in honour of Your Majesty, use it to go after your enemies".

The Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas ended up with had fifty ships, most of which had the names of saints, with exceptions such as "Hermiona" and "Amable Julia" (Kind Julia). Some had nicknames by which they were better known, such as "La Peregrina", "El Pingue", "La Chata" or "El Caballo Marino" (The Sea Horse). They transported passengers, mail, books and all kinds of merchandise. It can be said that they were the only means of permanent communication between Europe and America.

But signs started appearing of oncoming decadence. The Royal Decrees of 1776 and 1781 constituted the creation of similar companies, whose rights were similar to those of the Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas. And in 1785, the Real Compañía de Filipinas was founded.

This is the end of the life of the "Compañía" (1728-1785), which covered the most hazardous years of Venezuelan colonial history. By way of an epilogue we would say that it reestablished contact between the two worlds and, as well as commercial dealings, it meant a means of exchanging ideas. It was not by chance, therefore, that Venezuela was the focal point of liberal and emancipating ideas in the Colonies.

For Donostia-San Sebastian this meant that city life was greatly improved, bringing a period of well-being.

However, among its dark moments, was the acceptance of slavery.

The last corsairs

But the growing, highly meticulous interference by the Exchequer started causing hindrance and deducting profitability from the business of privateering. In 1779 the Consulate of San Sebastian proposed the arming of a corsair vessel for the last time.

In 1779 Deba complained that a small English corsair vessel was prowling around its coast, since the town had "no cannons whatsoever", and so was undefended and without gunpowder. The commanding officer of Donostia-San Sebastian, the Marquis of Bassecout, also talks, during these years, of "enemy corsairs infesting these coasts". He also complained about the lack of artillery.

In 1783 Spain and England, who were at war again, this time over Spanish support and the independence of the USA, after a few sea disasters, finally succeeded in signing a peace treaty.

This is when the corsair world which had occupied our ancestors for centuries started disappearing.

However, the last great figures of Basque-French privateering appeared on the other side of the border at the end of the 18th century. They were isolated figures, born for fighting and novelesque adventures, whose lives, according to Iriart, seemed to be taken from the pages of an adventure novel.

Ichetebe Pellot was born in Hendaye in 1765 and his feats spread over all the oceans. He was renowned for his tricks, cunning and daringness.

Following in the tradition of the pirates and old seamen appearing in books, who are almost always mutilated, one-eyed and renegade, was Destebetxo, from Saint Jean de Luz. He was covered in scars from head to toe, thin and ugly, and flat-bottomed since a gunshot had surgically removed his buttocks. He was especially active in the Gulf of Biscay.

The filibuster, Nicolás Juan de Laffitte was born in Bayonne, or Ciboure, according to others. His main headquarters were located in New Orleans and he mainly carried out his work in America.

The end

In 1802, the Registration Law stated that "for a vessel to be able to arm itself for privateering, it must first have advised the Marine Commander", meaning that it lost that touch of unexpectancy.

However, it was not until the "Treaty of Paris" was signed in 1856, that letters of marque, which had not been used for a long time, were finally and officially abolished.

The men from our harbours had to limit themselves to the activities which they had never abandoned and at which they were also experts.

Fate is inevitable, and our modern times have confirmed the death of these ancient corsairs.

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Illustrations

1. Some street names in Bayonne and Donostia-San Sebastian guard the memory and evocation of Basque corsairs.
2. Block and tackle.
3. Wall musket, 16th century.
4. The corsairs would keep their belongings in a chest. This example belonged to a corsair and is now in Biarritz museum.
5. All aboard!. Drawing by Tillac.
6. English spark gun from the 18th century.
7. Different kinds of swords from the 17th century.
8. Basque Sailor.
9. The waters of the Cantabrian Sea have been well known and controlled by Guipuzcoan sailors since ancient times.

10. Engraving depicting a fishing scene in a house in Orio.
11. Prow of the Oseberg boat. Oslo. The Vikings, from Scandinavia, appeared out of the mist, plundering cities such as Worms, Paris, Aguisgran, Maguncia, Lisbon... They would take their victims by surprise. The appearance of the sails of their Drakkar boats on the horizon would fill the inhabitants of the coast with terror.
12. Imprint of the Hondarribia seal.
13. In Bayonne, tradition marks the place where, in 892, and on having been decapitated by Norman pirates, the body of Saint Leon fell after having covered a few hundred metres with his head in his hands. A fountain appeared on the said spot.
14. The seal and shield of Donostia-San Sebastian do not show a fishing boat as do those of Getaria or Hondarribia, but a commercial ship, due to the mercantile character which the town adopted from its early stages.
15. The coast between Zarautz and Getaria.
16. Reproduction of the cog represented in the transept of Bayonne Cathedral.
17. Our waters guard the memory of the corsairs' adventures.
18. During the 14th and 15th centuries, Donostia-San Sebastian was the most important commercial trading area on the Cantabrian coast and the place most frequented by the German traders from la Hansa, known as "sterlings". The name of this Donostia-San Sebastian street is a reminder of a guild or hostal which they must have had there.
19. A forest of beechtrees.
20. Tools for the caulking and confection of sails.
21. Antonio de Gaztañeta (1656-1728), from Mutriko, innovator and forerunner in the field of naval construction, changed the size and shape of the Spanish navy war ships of his time.
22. Carpentry and ironwork tools used for naval construction.
23. The natural form of trees was used to obtain the correct dimensions of the wooden parts making up the boat.
24. Francisco Arrizabalaga, from the Bedua Txiki farmhouse, still has some tools from the old shipyard.
25. Present state of the Bedua shipyard (Zumaia), which was still working up untill a few years ago.
26. Guipuzcoan port. Zarautz.
27. Engraving of Donostia-San Sebastian in 1560, made by Hoefnagle, which shows the shipyard on the Concha beach.
28. The ship "Victoria", 16th century.
29. 14th century cog. Transept of Bayonne Cathedral.
30. Lintel from a house in Orio. 16th century vessel.
31. Frigate from the 18th century.
32. Brigantine from the 18th century.
33. Lintel from Pasai Donibane. (Facsimile)
34. The layout of the Basque-French coast meant that it was advisable to navigate in boats with not too high a tonnage.
35. Basque Sailor.
36. Map of the world by Antonio Lafredi (1580).
37. Small cannon.
38. Dukedom of Navarra and France, 1733. Eight real coins from the reign of Charles III, 1796, 1800 and 1807. An eight real coin from the reign of Ferdinand VII, 1822. Coin from the reign of Henry II of Navarra, 1587. One real from the reign of Ferdinand I of Navarra, 1513?. Two reals from the reign of Philip V, 1721.
39. Extract from the book, "El guipuzcoano instruido". Donostia-San Sebastián, 1780.
40. Sharing out of booty on a corsair boat.

41. The building presently housing the Untzi Museum in Donostia-San Sebastian, was used as a guild and prison by the Consulate of Donostia-San Sebastian.
42. Pasaia, between Donostia-San Sebastian and Hondarribia, was one of the main bases for Gipuzkoan corsairs.
43. Extract from the book, "El guipuzcoano instruido". Donostia-San Sebastian, 1780.
44. English spark gun from the 18th century.
45. Block and tackle.
46. All aboard!. Drawing by Tillac.
47. 16th-17th centuries.
48. Bayonne.
49. The corsairs would keep their belongings in a chest. This example belonged to a corsair and is now in Biarritz museum.
50. Basque corsair.
51. A pack of cards from the house of J. Barbot. Donostia-San Sebastian, 18th and 19th centuries.
52. Kitchen utensils used on board corsair ships were very similar to these.
53. Engraving representing a sailor being thrown into the water several times from the stern platform, another being keelhauled and a third whose hand has been nailed to the mast with a knife.
54. The devotion of sailors to the Virgen of Iciar, goes back to ancient times. According to Juan de Esnaola, a "Sailor's Guild" was devoted to her as early as the 13th century. When he died, Juan Sebastián Elcano left part of his belongings to this virgin and, according to Garibay, boats passing by the Iciar coast would shoot a salute in her honour.
55. A mermaid. Wood engraving from the mid-16th century.
56. The Irish monk, Brandan, set sail in 484 together with another seventeen monks in search of "Delicious Island". When Easter Sunday came round, anxious to celebrate the occasion, they found an island on which to hold mass. When they finished they realised that the island was a whale sent by God so that they could celebrate the rite.
57. Triton. Wood engraving from the 16th century.
58. The dragons of the Basque corsairs mustn't have looked very different from this Leviathan drawn by Hans Baldung in 1515.
59. Whale hill in Ulia. Donostia-San Sebastian. Whales would be spotted from the lookouts along the coast, and the people would be called out to chase them.
60. A book of christenings dating from 1526 in Zumarraga, has a drawing of a skiff with five oarsmen, the skipper at the helm and a harpooner, with an imprisoned whale.
61. Whale capture and hunt.
62. Lintel from a house in Azara street, Zarautz.
63. Whale-bone needle for sewing nets.
64. Gun with wheel, 16th-17th century.
65. Harpoon.
66. Coast of the french basque country.
67. Wall musket, 16th century.
68. Small Cannon.
69. Map of La Rochelle port. Antonio Lafreri (1580).
70. Kheyr-al-Din, better known as Barbarossa, continued the incursions of his brother, who was known by the same name. Allied to the Turkish Sultan, Suleiman, this corsair took many Gipuzkoan sailors prisoner who had to pay a ransom for their freedom.
71. Returning to San Sebastian.
72. 1650 engraving of the Ciboure and Saint Jean de Luz Bay.
73. Execution of the pirate from Bayonne, Saubat de Gaston, next to Bayonne Cathedral. (Drawing by P. Tillac).

74. Mooring ropes.
75. Headstone of Pedro de Zubiaur, from Biscay, a Navy General who was sent to England to negotiate a refund of the money which Drake the pirate had stolen from Spain. Later he also negotiated recovery of the booty which the English corsairs had obtained from the Indies Navy. Likewise, he taught a lesson to the corsairs attacking the coasts of Galicia.
76. Cuba and La Española Islands, Havana, San Juan and Margarita. Gerardus Mercator (1610).
77. Seal of a basque port. 17th century.
78. Shield of the Consulate of Donostia-San Sebastian.
79. Gipuzkoan coast.
80. Hondarribia was the second peninsular port in importance with respect to corsairing during the 17th century.
81. Engraving by De Bry, from 1601, representing a ship surrounded by ice.
82. Map of Spitzbergen. Basque sailors were hired by the English to hunt whales in the Artic.
83. Engraving of La Rochelle port.
84. Map of the port of Donostia-San Sebastian. In the left is Santa Catalina Bridge.
85. Engraving of Bilbao.
86. In 1690, a frigate was built for corsairing and defending the coast of Donostia-San Sebastian against attacks by the French.
87. The horizon has always been a challenge to seamen.
88. Joanes de Suhigaraychipi, "Le Coursic", the famous corsair from Bayonne. (Drawing by P. Tillac).
89. View of Ciboure from Saint Jean de Luz.
90. The house of "Le Coursic" can still be seen in Bayonne, in the street of the same name.
91. Juan Larando's inn.
92. Different kinds of swords from the 16th and 17th centuries.
93. Basque coast.
94. The term buccaneer comes from "boucan", the smoked meat made in the Antilles. (Drawing by P. Tillac).
95. Michel le basque.
96. Map of Tortuga Island.
97. Catalina de Erauso, portrait by F. Pacheco. "La monja alférez" (the ensign nun) (Donostia-San Sebastian, 1592), was one of the four survivors of the Spanish "Jesús María" flagship which was sunk by the squadron of the German corsair Georg von Spilberg, hired by the Dutch, during the battle of Cañete (1615) off the coasts of Chile.
98. Different kinds of swords from the 17th century.
99. Blas de Lezo was outstanding for his attacks on the pirates who were terrorizing Spanish ships in the Antilles.
100. The skull and crossbones, the well-known "Jolly Roger", wasn't the only flag used by pirates during the "Golden age of piracy" (16th and 17th century). More often than not, they would personalize their flags with motifs such as hourglasses, drops of blood, arrows and swords, etc. But, in order to act with as much surprise as possible, pirate ships would often fly false flags. They also used plain flags, with a symbolic value: black for death, red for fight to the end, etc. ("La Connoissance des Pavillons").
101. The first boats left the Company, bound for Caracas, in 1730.
102. Nuestra Señora del Coro, a frigate armed for corsairing by the Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas.
103. Share in the Real Compñía Guipuzcoana de Caracas.
104. A corner of Pasajes.
105. Bayonne was an active corsair port during the whole history of Basque corsairing, even when it had started falling into decline.

106. Engraving of the Deba river estuary.
107. The vicinity of the coast has allways defined the nature of its inhabitants activities.
108. The basque corsairs are already part of that memory.
109. Pasajes.
110. Some Gipuzkoan characters navigated in foreign pirate ships. This was the case of the man from Elgueta Joaquín de Iturbe, “Joaquín Xantúa”, a famous bandit who had been a pirate or corsair in his youth and navigated in two French gunboats. He ended up a prisoner in 1799 in the Mota Castle in Donostia-San Sebastian.
111. Ichetebe Pellot.
112. Some street names in Bayonne and Donostia-San Sebastian guard the memory and evocation of Basque corsairs.
113. Nicolás Juan de Laffitte. (Drawing by P. Tillac).
114. Repairing nets.