



Writing on the hand

A bronze hand, 2,100 years old, recovered from the site of the Vascon settlement of Irulegi

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See at the end for sources and other detail

Excavations at Irulegi

On Mount Irulegi, located in the Aranguren Valley, the Aranzadi Science Society, now in its 75th year, excavated and developed the medieval castle on top of the mountain.

However, Irulegi has remained an archaeologically interesting place for specialists. In 2017, the Aranzadi archaeology team began to excavate at the foot of the castle where, in recent years, an Iron Age settlement has been found (42.778826N, 1.514359W). This site is dated to the 1st century BC, at a time before the arrival of the Romans and in the place where the classical sources located the territory of the Vascones.

During the latest excavation campaigns, this team of specialists has recovered a great deal of archaeological material from the daily life of the people who lived in this settlement, but among all this material, an exceptional piece has been extracted from the earth.



This picture is part of a group of 9 scrolling pictures. See below (end of file), or original website.

As Mattin Aiestaran, director of the excavation, explains, "it is a bronze sheet in the shape of an outstretched right hand, and during its cleaning by the Restoration Department of the Government of Navarre, a writing was found on the back".

These palaeo-Hispanic characters are written in a graphic system that predates the Latin system, i.e. before the arrival of the Romans, and which specialists in epigraphy and linguistics have already investigated and defined as Basque (prior to the language of Euskera).

INVESTIGACIÓN DE CAMPO

Distintas disciplinas científicas ayudan a la investigación arqueológica en el terreno.



GEOARQUEOLOGÍA
Mediante 27 sondos se han obtenido muestras caracterizando los depósitos sedimentarios.



GEOFÍSICA
Las prospecciones han dibujado plantas de viviendas, el urbanismo del poblado y zonas incendiadas.



AUDIOVISUAL
Todas las piezas de valor son grabadas y fotografiadas en el proceso de su excavación.



ESTRATIGRAFÍA
La excavación arqueológica ha definido las diferentes unidades en base a la composición de los sedimentos y sus contenidos.



INCENDIO
Un nivel de incendio sellaba y cubría el nivel donde se encontraban los materiales.



CARBONO 14
Se han recogido muestras de carbón vegetal y fragmentos óseos para su datación absoluta radiocarbónica.



ENLOSADO
Está identificado el suelo de la vivienda realizado con grandes losas.



POSICIÓN PRIMARIA
Los objetos recuperados están ubicados en el lugar en el que estaban cuando se incendió la vivienda.



CULTURA MATERIAL
La tipología de objetos metálicos y cerámicos de la vida cotidiana marcan una cronología.



NUMISMÁTICA
Monedas recogidas en las mismas unidades estratigráficas fijan cronologías.



FUENTES ESCRITAS
Las fuentes romanas relatan las campañas entre Sertorio y Pompeyo.

INVESTIGACIÓN DE LABORATORIO

El proceso de restauración y estudio de la mano de Irulegi.



PÁTINA
El óxido del metal generado durante cientos de años es uniforme en toda la superficie de la pieza.



ORIFICIO
El orificio muestra el modo en el que la mano estuvo colgando y que fue fijada con un clavo.



SEDIMENTO
La pieza estaba cubierta con el sedimento propio del monte Irulegi.



COMPOSICIÓN
El análisis químico muestra porcentajes de aleación metálica característicos de la época.



ESCANEO
La pieza es escaneada con láser para estudiar sus mínimos detalles.



SISTEMA GRÁFICO
La epigrafía atendiendo a los signarios nos marca fechas y tipos de escritura.



LINGÜÍSTICA
Sirva el texto en el idioma vascoónico.



TIPOLOGÍA
El estudio tipológico de la pieza, de su forma e iconografía nos permite estudiar paralelos.



SIGNO T
Es exclusivo del mundo vascoónico.

“Sorioneku”

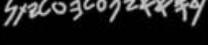
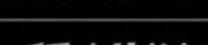
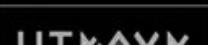
Another of the exceptional features of the piece is its transcription, as expert epigraphers and linguists have been able to read the first word and understand it from today's Basque. "We are able to understand the first word, which is SORIONEKU, but we still cannot decipher the following words", says Joaquín Gorrochategui, professor of Indo-European Philology at the University of the Basque Country. Sorioneku is a clear forerunner of the modern Basque word zorioneko, meaning good luck or good omen (Guardian article referenced below).

Graphic system

"The first document undoubtedly written in the Basque language and written in a sign which is also Basque". Javier Velaza, Professor of Latin Philology at the University of Barcelona.

Javier Velaza, professor of Latin Philology at the University of Barcelona explained during the presentation that "the graphic system in which it is written is peculiar, it is a graphic system derived from the Iberian system, but which has undergone some adaptation to mark a sound or phoneme that does not exist in the Iberian signs, but which does exist on coins minted in Basque territory. Therefore, we can begin to speak from the Irulegi piece of the existence of a properly Basque graphic system in operation at that time".

These data provide really interesting information, as it was previously suspected that the Basques did not use writing to write their own language in antiquity, and that it was not until the arrival of the Romans and with them the Latin alphabet that they began to write.

SISTEMA GRÁFICO	EJEMPLO	REGIÓN	CRONOLOGÍA
CUNEIFORME		Oriente Próximo	3200 a.C. - 100 d.C.
JEROGLÍFICO		Egipto	3200 a.C. - 400 a.C.
FENICIO		Mediterráneo	1200 - 250 a.C.
GRIEGO		Grecia	800 a.C. - actualidad
LATINO		Roma	700 a.C. - actualidad
IBÉRICO		Iberia	450 a.C. - 50 d.C.
CELTIBÉRICO		Celtiberia	200 a.C. - 50 d.C.
VASCÓNICO		Vasconia	150 - 70 a.C.



Joaquín Gorrochategui, professor of Indo-European Philology at the University of the Basque Country, has researched Irulegi's hand and explained at the presentation that this discovery sheds light on the culture of the Vascones and their world. "As an expert in the first reading, I can read and understand the first word SORIONEKU without any problems, but I still cannot read the other signs that follow". Gorrochategui believes that further research is essential as "this piece turns upside down what we thought until now about the Basques and writing. We were almost convinced that the Basques were illiterate in antiquity and did not use writing, except to mint coins".

"This discovery is also important because it sheds light on the culture of the Basques and their world", Joaquín Gorrochategui, Professor of Indo-European Philology at the University of the Basque Country.

Historical context of the site

"The settlement we are investigating was burnt down and subsequently abandoned in an episode of war, during the Sertorian Wars". Mattin Aiestaran, director of the Irulegi site.

The historical context in which this "hand of Irulegi" has been found is the last phase of the settlement, the Late Iron Age, in the first quarter of the 1st century BC. As Aiestaran says, "the settlement we are investigating was burnt down and subsequently abandoned in an episode of war, during the Sertorian Wars". An interpretation based on the combined reading of the data obtained from the C14 dating and the abundant material culture recovered. In this violent context, the village was abandoned, and all the everyday belongings were left under the collapsed adobe houses. "It is fortunate for the archaeologists, since we have a frozen image of the moment of the attack, and thanks to this, we have been able to recover abundant material from their daily life, and it is because of this exceptional situation that we have found an exceptional piece".

Iruegi's hand

The piece was extracted by the archaeologist Leire Malkorra on 18 June 2021 and she put it in her bag with the sediment that covered the writing "when I extracted it from the earth I put it in the bag, without touching the sediment that covered the hand and we deposited it in the Restoration Department of the Government of Navarre, together with the rest of the materials", recalled Malkorra. Its excavation was videotaped and its location recorded with a total topographic station, like the other archaeological materials.

Its inscription was not discovered until 18 January 2022 when Carmen Usúa, a restorer contracted by the Government of Navarre, discovered some letters on the piece that were subsequently interpreted. "When I started cleaning it, I found a series of lines and then a series of dots. I did all the work with a binocular magnifying glass and I immediately realised that I was looking at a piece with writing on it".

"The piece in question is a sheet of bronze whose patina contains 53.19% tin, 40.87% copper and 2.16% lead, which is common in very old alloys, this one in particular would be about 2,000 years old," explained Aiestaran.

The piece was studied at the archaeological repository of the Government of Navarre. The specialists in Palaeo-Hispanic epigraphy and Indo-European linguistics, Javier Velaza and Joaquín Gorrochategui, transcribed the piece and then studied it, certifying that it is a writing engraved in a Palaeo-Hispanic sign, specifically in Basque sign.

Possible interpretation of the piece

"The hand of Irulegi" is interpreted as a ritual epigraph, based on the context in which it was found on the threshold of a residential building. Its morphology and decoration and the appearance of the term *sorioneku* at the beginning of the text suggest that its interpretation is not far from being an apotropaic symbol or a symbol of good fortune. This discovery introduces significant novelties and confirms the existence of a specific graphic system, derived from a variant of the Iberian sign, which has to be called the "Basque sign". It also certifies the use of the Basque language in the geographical area in which it was discovered in a chronology dating from the beginning of the 1st century BC.

Writing techniques used

"Two writing techniques have been used on the Irulegi hand, which is practically unknown, not only in all the epigraphy of Hispania, but in all the ancient epigraphy of the western world". Javier Velaza.

The epigraph on Irulegi's hand indicates the oldest and most extensive text known to date in Basque, and in terms of the technique used, Irulegi's hand is also special. In Velaza's words, "it is a text made using a technique known as *puntillado*", i.e. making the signs with small dots that outline the sign. But one particularity of this piece is that before the stippling, the letters were traced in *sgraffito*, that is, with a sharp instrument and making an incision in the bronze. This is practically unknown, not only in all the epigraphy of Hispania, but in all the ancient epigraphy of the western world".

The repercussions of the new finding for linguistic knowledge of Basque and its possible relations with the Iberian language undoubtedly require in-depth studies to be carried out in the future.

Additional Information

The original source <https://www.aranzadi.eus/la-escritura-en-la-mano> comes from the Basque institution Aranzadi, which introduces itself as *The Aranzadi Scientific Society currently has 2,000 members, of which approximately 150 are researchers from different scientific disciplines, who carry out their research work within the framework of this entity. It is a society that promotes the conservation and enhancement of scientific, historical and cultural heritage as a reference for understanding the evolution of the modern society in which we live* (<https://www.aranzadi.eus/ques-aranzadi>).

Aranzadi is interested in most of the human and natural sciences, from geology to anthropology, astronomy and herpetology. It is funded by the Spanish government and various regional institutions in the Basque Country, including Gipuzkoa (province of San Sebastian), and the city of San Sebastian (Donostia in Basque).

The text has been translated from Spanish with www.DeepL.com/Translator (free version) and corrected "manually".

Some clarifications have been made to the text on the basis of the article published in the Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/15/hand-of-irulegi-ancient-spanish-artefact-rewrites-history-of-basque-language>).

The original post has a video in Spanish which is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hCtLBKAv_I. The video can be seen with English subtitles.

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