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An assessment of the Basque Interpretation Hypothesis of the inscription contained in the Irulegi Hand

Julen Manterola, Céline Mounole

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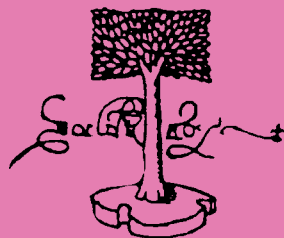
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Uztaila-abendua

Julio-diciembre



FONTES LINGVÆ VASCONVM STVDIA ET DOCUMENTA

SEPARATA

An assessment of the Basque Interpretation Hypothesis on the inscription contained in the hand of Irulegi

Julen Manterola, Céline Mounole

*La mano de Irulegi: reflexiones desde la
paleohispanística y la vascológia*

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Sumario / Aurkibidea

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ARTIKULUAK / ARTÍCULOS / ARTICLES

Egileen eta arazleen sintaxia jite adjektiboen argitan Ane Berro Urrizelki, Leire Sánchez-Dorronsoro	287
Hizkuntzekiko Irakaskuntza Sentsiblearen gaineko usteak: EAEko LHko irakaslegaien iritziak aztergai Artzai Gaspar, Oihane Galdos, Eider Saragueta, Karin van der Worp, Leire Ituiño-Aguirre	321
William Wordsworth's <i>Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty</i>: the poems about Basque mountaineers Haritz Monreal Zarraonandia	347
Gatazka armatua eta genero gatazka bidegurutzean. Jokin Muñozen narratiba begirada feminista batetik Amaia Serrano Mariezkurrena	371
La notación de onomástica no latina en la documentación legerense: aspectos sociolingüísticos Guadalupe Lopetegui Semperena	397
Euskal komiki-liburuak. Goranzko joera baten azterketa Naroa Zubillaga Gomez	421
Kultura zinematografiko bat sortzeko bide luzea: XX. mendeko euskal idazleak zinemaren aitzinean (1910-1980) Josu Martinez Martinez	437
Hizkuntza-ideologiak. Euskararen biziberritzean eragiteko analisi-tresna Miren Artetxe Sarasola	457

Sumario / Aurkibidea

VARIA

La mano de Irulegi: reflexiones desde la paleohispanística y la vascoología [Dosier] Joaquín Gorrochategui, Ekaitz Santazilia (eds.)	485
La mano de Irulegi: edición y comentarios epigráficos y lingüísticos Joaquín Gorrochategui, Javier Velaza	491
Una mano cortada Francisco Beltrán Lloris	503
La inscripción vascónica de la mano de Irulegi desde la perspectiva ibérica Joan Ferrer i Jané	515
Observaciones sobre la inscripción de la mano de bronce de Irulegi Eduardo Orduña Aznar	539
Un enigma envuelto en un misterio: la interpretación lingüística de la mano de Irulegi Iván Igartua	551
Sobre la lengua de la mano de Irulegi: apuntes y conjeturas Eneko Zuloaga, Borja Ariztimuño	565
An assessment of the Basque Interpretation Hypothesis on the inscription contained in the hand of Irulegi Julen Manterola, Céline Mounole	583
<i>Zorioneko</i> y <i>zorion</i>: lo que nos dice de ellos la historia de la lengua vasca Joseba A. Lakarra	597
¿Es la lengua de la mano de Irulegi la antecesora <i>directa</i> del euskera histórico? Mikel Martínez-Areta	617
Idazlanak aurkezteko arauak / Normas para la presentación de originales / Rules for the submission of originals	639

An assessment of the Basque Interpretation Hypothesis on the inscription contained in the hand of Irulegi

Irulegiko eskuko idazkunaren gaineko Euskal Interpretazioaren Hipotesiaren ebaluazioa

Evaluación de la Hipótesis de Interpretación Vasca de la inscripción de la mano de Irulegi

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ABSTRACT

The present article assesses the Basque Interpretation Hypothesis (BIH) of the text contained in the hand of Irulegi. Given that the basic premise of the BIH is the alleged cognacy between *sorion* and the Basque collocation *zori on* ‘good fortune’, this article examines the phonetic evolution of other lexicalized adjective phrases with *on* as a head. The comparative method is applied, by comparing two strings of segments that belong by hypothesis to the same language but represent two diachronic states of the same phrase. The resulting evidence is inconclusive as to whether the compared items belong to the same language, and the Basque ascription of the text is consequently not confirmed.

Keywords: hand of Irulegi; *on* ‘good’; adjective phrases; lexicalization; comparative method.

LABURPENA

Artikulu honek Irulegiko eskuko testuaz egin izan den Euskal Interpretazioaren Hipotesiaren ebaluazio bat egiten du. Hipotesi horren oinarria da kognatu-harreman bat dagokeela idazkuneko *sorion* segidaren eta euskarazko *zori on* kolokazioaren artean; hortaz, artikulu honek *on* adjektiboa duten *Lekuine*, *eskuin* eta *aitoa* sintagma lexikalizatuen bilakaera fonetikoaz aztertzen du. Metodo konparatiboaren aplikazio bat egiten du, erkatuz hizkuntza berekotzat jo nahi diren sintagma ustez beraren bi garaitako egoerak. Ondorioa da ez dagoela aski zantzurik ziurtatzeko bi konparagaiak hizkuntza berari dagozkiola, eta ezin dela baieztatu Irulegiko eskuko testua euskaraz edo haren haide batean idatzia dela.

Gako hitzak: Irulegiko eskua; *on*; adjektibo sintagma; lexikalizazioa; metodo konparatiboa.

RESUMEN

Este artículo evalúa la Hipótesis de Interpretación Vasca del texto de la mano de Irulegi. Dado que la premisa básica de dicha hipótesis estriba en la supuesta relación cognaticia entre *sorion* y la colocación vasca *zori on* ‘buena fortuna’, este artículo examina la evolución fonética de otros sintagmas adjetivales lexicalizados con *on* como núcleo. Se aplica el método comparativo, comparando dos secuencias segmentales que pertenecen hipotéticamente a la misma lengua, pero que representan dos estados diacrónicos del mismo sintagma. El resultado no es concluyente con respecto a la pertenencia a la misma lengua de los elementos comparados, y la adscripción vasca del texto no puede ser confirmada.

Palabras clave: mano de Irulegi; *on* ‘bueno/-a’; sintagmas adjetivales; lexicalización; método comparativo.

1. INTRODUCTION. 2. ARGUMENTS ADDUCED IN THE BIH. 3. A LINGUISTIC EVALUATION OF THE BIH. 3.1. Lexicalized adjective phrases with *on* 'good' as a head: *Lekuine*, *eskuin* 'right (hand)' and *aitoa* 'grandfather'. 3.2. The Basque verb **eradun* 'to give'. 3.3. Discussion. 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS. 5. REFERENCES.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Basque Interpretation Hypothesis (BIH) has been perhaps the most recurrent hypothesis when attempting at the interpretation of the epigraphic text contained in the hand of Irulegi. It has been undoubtedly the most successful hypothesis in gaining the acceptance of the general society, and in the academic milieu too this hypothesis was the first to be explored. According to the BIH, the interpretation of the text may be attempted through our knowledge on historical Basque.

The BIH was sparked by the initial segments of the epigraphic text, transliterated as *sorioneku* or *sorioneke*. The popular science publication edited by Agirre-Mauleon (2022), a book covering the most relevant aspects of the then recently unearthed hand of Irulegi, already includes the core aspects of the BIH. The renowned specialists on ancient languages Joaquín Gorrochategui and Javier Velaza are among the contributors to this publication¹.

This book states that «the hand of Irulegi is in all likelihood the first document written in the language of the Vascon people»², and subsequently emphasizes the importance

1 This paper will not refer to two other works on the same topic that are about to be published (Aiestaran, Gorrochategui et al., in press; Aiestaran, Velaza et al., in press), since their final published versions were not available at the time of its writing. Previous versions of those papers also contain some of the basic ideas of the BIH as herein presented.

2 The Spanish version of this text makes the claim stronger: «the Hand of Irulegi is *undoubtedly* the first document written in Vasconic» (emphasis by the authors of the present paper).

of the text of the hand of Irulegi «in consolidating the proto-history of the Basque language» (Agirre-Mauleon, 2022, p. 78).

The aim of this paper is to set the frame in which the linguistic discussion regarding the BIH should be conducted; an evaluation of the linguistic arguments utilized in support of this hypothesis is consequently presented.

2. ARGUMENTS ADDUCED IN THE BIH

The text in the book edited by Agirre-Mauleon (2022, p. 67) presents the interpretation through Basque as quite plausible, stating that «were it not for its obvious symbolic function and for the location of the discovery –at the heart of the Vascon territory–, it would be possible to consider [sorioneku] as an accidental formal coincidence»; the difficulty for a straightforward interpretation of *-eku* is nonetheless noted. It is also observed that the collocation of both *zori* ‘fortune, fate’ and *on* ‘good, nice’ is attested since the very first long texts in the 16th century in phrases like *zorionean* ‘in good time, fortunately’.

Based on this initial observation, other segments in the text have received, with all due reservations, a tentative Basque interpretation (Agirre-Mauleon, 2022, p. 70): the segments under consideration are most notably *erāukon* in the last line and *ese* in the third. As for *erāukon*, its apparent similarity with historical Basque verb forms and its text-final position have been recalled; the authors admit, however, that the <ř> may represent a rhotic trill, a phonetic trait that does not fit the expectations of a Basque interpretation, given that its hypothetic counterpart in Modern Basque would be *zeraukon* –not ***zerraukon*–, a form of the verb **eradun* ‘to give’. The hypothesis that *ese* may stand for a negative particle correlating with proto-Basque **eze* strongly depends on how convincing the verb analysis for *erāukon* is.

The arguments in favor of the BIH lie therefore on two types of evidence: first, a linguistic observation based on the apparent similarity of the initial segments of the text with the modern Basque words *zori* ‘fortune, fate’ and *on* ‘good, nice’; from this initial observation stems the tentative Basque interpretation of other strings of segments, namely *erāukon* and *ese*. Second, a non-linguistic argument, namely that of the location of the discovery; the geographical context in which the inscription appeared is considered a circumstance that encourages a BIH.

On a terminological note, the BIH as presented by Velaza (2023) in public presentations insists in the use of the term *Vasconic*, avoiding the use of *Basque*; in more recent public presentations, Gorrochategui (2023) has explored other possibilities beyond the BIH, favoring the denomination «epígrafe vascón» over «epígrafe vascónico», a term that implies a stronger stance with respect to the linguistic ascription of the text.

3. A LINGUISTIC EVALUATION OF THE BIH

The position of this paper is that the simple coincidence of a string of segments of an inscription with that of Basque historical words is not sufficient to establish a genetic relationship between the compared items. A more methodologically convenient approach is the comparison of the diachronic evolution of the hypothesized morphological structure with similar structures present in historical Basque. In this regard, adjective phrases with *on* ‘good’ as the head of a lexicalized phrase are most desired, in order to establish a proper ground for comparison. The aim is to follow the classic methodological principle that determines that rules of correspondences are sought, rather than apparent similarities, when comparing languages of the same family in order to establish their genetic relationship³. The idea is that this principle is equally applicable when the *comparanda* potentially represent different diachronic states of the same linguistic item within the same language *continuum*, which is especially useful in language isolates like Basque.

The Section 3.1 defines the morphological and phonetic processes that applied to adjective phrases with *on* ‘good’, as evidenced by the specific diachronic evolution of the place name *Lekuine* and the common nouns *eskuin* ‘right (hand)’ and *aitoa* ‘grandfather’; Section 3.2 presents a historical overview on the use of the verb **eradun* in historical Basque; finally, Section 3.3 discusses the BIH on the basis of the linguistic grounds established previously.

3.1. Lexicalized adjective phrases with *on* ‘good’ as a head: *Lekuine*, *eskuin* ‘right (hand)’ and *aitoa* ‘grandfather’

As established by Gavel (1921, p. 72), the components of the place name *Lekuine* are *leku* ‘place, town’⁴ and *on* ‘good, nice’. The Gascon counterpart of this Basque name, *Bonloc* (Gascon *bon* ‘good’ and *loc* ‘place’), corroborates this etymological analysis. Indeed, the earliest attestations of this town’s name are examples of its non-Basque name, cf. *Bono loco* (Bidache, 1906, no. 56, AD 1194), *Bonloc* (Ostolaza, 1978, no. 219, AD 1270), *Bonoloco* (Zabalo Zabalegui, 1995, no. 44, AD 1273), *Bonus locus* (Ostolaza, 1978, no. 301, AD 1287), etc. According to the EODA (Euskaltzaindia, n. d.), the earliest instance of the Basque name is an example from 1835.

Similarly, the components of *eskuin* ‘right (hand)’ are *esku* ‘hand’ and *on* ‘good’, as surmised by Gavel and accepted by Michelena (1961-1977/1990, p. 149). This etymological hypothesis is corroborated by well-known crosslinguistic parallels: cf. Breton *dorn mat* ‘right hand’, etymologically ‘good hand’ (Ménard, 2023, s. v. *dorn* ‘hand’,

3 Meillet (1925, p. 31): «Ce n’est pas avec des ressemblances de formes qu’on opère quand on compare des langues d’une même famille, mais uniquement avec des règles de correspondances».

4 The meaning ‘town’ is attested in examples such as Lazarraga’s *Igaro ninzan basoti, Iruraizko hermandadean leku on baten aldeti* ‘I crossed the woods, in the council of Iruraiz through a nice town’. This meaning is attested also in Romance languages, cf. Catalan *lloc* ‘place’, ‘town’ (Coromines, 1980-2001, vol. 5, 234b, 235a); Coromines affirms that this meaning is still in use in Gascon as well. Cf. also Spanish *lugar* ‘place’, ‘town’ and *localidad* ‘town’, both ultimately deriving from Latin *locus*.

mat ‘good’). Within the Indo-European family, Buck (1949, § 12.41, s. v. *right*) specifies that «[m]any of [the words] for ‘right’ belong to an inherited group pointing to an IE word for ‘right’ with reference to the hand», and that words meaning ‘good’, ‘straight’ and ‘stronger’ typically enter the composition of the word ‘right’: cf. Latvian *labs* ‘right’, etymologically ‘good’, a meaning still in use in the modern language, and Middle High German *diu bezzer hant* «the better (= right) hand».

In order to explain the evolution from *Lekuon* to *Lekuine*, the default assumption is that a form *Lekuone* existed; the final *-e* stands for the epenthetic vowel that is a regular insertion in local cases such as *Lekuon-e-ko* ‘from Lekuon’ (‘from the Good Town’), *Lekuon-e-ra* ‘to Lekuon’ (‘to the Good Town’), etc. The reanalysis of epenthetic *-e-* is otherwise well attested in the examples of many other place-names, such as *Parise* ‘Paris’, and was triggered by the high frequency of place names occurring in local cases such as adlative, ablative, etc.

The most straightforward phonetic derivation for *Lekuine* may be represented as follows: **Lekuone(ko)* > **Lekuōē(ko)* > **Lekuōĩ(ko)* > **Lekuĩ(ko)* > **Lekuĩn(ko)*; apparently, the historically attested *Lekuine* implies that the reanalysis of the epenthetic *-e-* occurred again. The loss of the intervocalic nasal consonant in the first step of the derivation is regular (Michelena, 1961-1977/1990, pp. 87-88); the subsequent vocalic evolution is similar to that of the word *erraldoi* ‘giant’, an adjective whose origin is to be found in the personal name *Roldane* (one of Charlemagne’s military leaders), with a likely evolution **Erroldane* > **erraldone* > **erraldōē* > *erraldoe* > *erraldoi* (Michelena, 1961-1977/1990, pp. 121, 147). In the last step **Lekuĩ(ko)* > **Lekuĩn(ko)* a re-segmentalization of nasality occurred, a phenomenon well documented by examples like Lat. *lucanica* > Bsq. **lukaika* > *lukainkallukaika* (Michelena, 1961-1977/1990, p. 304).

It is important to note that this place name establishes a specific *post quem* chronology for these changes: first, the town itself was probably founded in the Middle Ages (Orpustan, 2010, § 41), and second, the noun *leku* ‘place, town’, one of the elements in its name, is a medieval loanword from some form that had already undergone dyphthongation of Proto-Romance /ɔ/ (Proto-Romance **l'loku/* > **luecu* → Bsq. *leku*, see Buchi & Schweickard [2008], s. v. and Michelena [1961-1977/1990, p. 167]).

The exact same changes described for the place name *Lekuine* may be posited for an item belonging to the regular lexicon. This is the case of the common noun *eskuin* ‘right (hand)’. The dialectal variants presented by this word (*eskuin*, *eskui*, *eskubi*...) may be explained from **esku-on-e*, again with the epenthetic *-e-* (Michelena, 1961-1977/1990, p. 149): **eskuone* > **eskuōē* > **eskuōĩ* > **eskuĩ* > *eskuin/leskuileskubi*, with a re-segmentalization of nasality in the variant *eskuin*, without it in *eskui* and with the insertion of an epenthetic *-b-* after a labial vowel in *eskubi*.

One other word in which a lexicalized adjective phrase with *on* ‘good’ may be identified is *aitona* ‘grandfather’: according to the EHHE (Lakarra et al., 2019, s. v. *aitona*), *aita on-a* ‘the good father’ (*aita* ‘father’, *-a* ‘the’) lexicalized into *aitona* ‘grandfather’; parallels are found in Rumanian *bunic* ‘grandfather’, *bunica* ‘grandmother’, pet names from

bun ‘good’ (Buck, 1949, § 2.46-2.47, s. v. *grandfather, grandmother*), or French *bonne-maman* ‘grandmother’, *bon-papa* ‘grandfather’. This word is not general in Basque, since other competing synonyms such as *aitaita*, *aitatxi* and *aitañi* exist. Interestingly, some Western varieties present forms like *aitoa*, *aitue*, *aitube*, etc. that bear witness to the loss of the intervocalic nasal: *aitona* > *aitoa*, and *aituelaitube* are explained through changes otherwise attested in these varieties. The medieval chronology of the emergence of the Basque definite article also sets a *post quem* landmark for the creation of these forms. The differences between *Lekuine* and *eskuin* on one side and *aitoa* on the other are only due to the fact that the former are commonly used in local cases, hence the re-analysis of the epenthetic *-e-* and subsequent phonetic processes not exhibited by *aitoa*.

As it becomes apparent from these examples, a collocation N + *on* ‘good, nice’, once lexicalized, has undergone a very specific string of changes. That these processes have been general is well established by the fact that they are illustrated by both place names and common nouns alike (on this topic, see Durkin, 2009, p. 272), and by the fact that those morphological and phonetic processes are independently attested in the language. For the discussion in Section 3.3, it is important to note that Basque *zorion* ‘happiness’ is nowhere near the level of lexicalization presented by the items discussed in this section: texts from the 16th and 17th centuries exhibit a situation in which phrases like *zori onean* ‘in good timing’ are still in use; it is obvious that the meaning of these examples is closer to their etymological meaning than *zorion* ‘happiness’. Moreover, similar collocations are attested in contemporary texts: cf. the near synonymous *ordu onean* and *muga onean* ‘in good time’, based on *ordu* ‘hour’ and *muga* ‘hour, time’. See OEH (Michelena & Sarasola, 1987-2005/2023) s. v. *zorion, ordu onean* and *mugon*; see also Lakarra (2023), who notes the connection of *zorion* to similar Romance expressions like *enhorabuena* ‘congratulations’ (lit. ‘in good hour’).

3.2. The Basque verb **eradun* ‘to give’

As said above, though with many reservations, *erāukon* has been proposed to represent a past finite verb form of **eradun* (Agirre-Mauleon, 2022, p. 70).

It has been assumed since Lafon (1944, I, p. 429) that **eradun* is derived from **edun* ‘have’ by means of the causative affix *-ra-*. The same derivation is involved in a dozen of pairs such as *ibililerabili*, *ikusilerakutsi*, *ikasilerakatsi*, *joanleraman-eroan*... The derived forms of those verbs lost their causative value and got lexicalized from the 16th century onwards: *erabili* ‘make walk’ → ‘use’, *erakutsi* ‘make see’ → ‘show’, *eroan/eraman* ‘make go’ → ‘bring’. With regard to **eradun*, since the oldest texts its etymological causative value is bleached and it means ‘give’ –the semantic evolution from ‘make have’ to ‘give’ poses no difficulty.

The finite verb forms of **eradun* are well attested since the earliest texts in both Eastern and Central texts. It is employed as a synthetic verb or as a tripersonal auxiliary in ditransitive constructions. However, its synthetic use is only found in Eastern dialects. The dialectal distribution of the tripersonal auxiliaries appears to indicate that the grammaticalization of **eradun* as an auxiliary occurred in a period subsequent to that

of Common Old Basque (Michelena, 1981). The diachronic spread of the analytic constructions which may contain **eradun* seems to corroborate this hypothesis (Mounole, 2018).

It is not easy to give a clear-cut interpretation of the **eráukon** contained in the hand of Irulegi, since the elements that surround it are not interpretable for the moment. Nevertheless, its potential relationship with the Basque verb **eradun* is problematic at both the phonological and the morphological levels. To begin with, the loss of the intervocalic *-d-* doesn't seem plausible for that time. Certainly, it is very well attested since the 16th century texts in finite verb forms (cf. Leizarraga or Etxepare's texts...), and even in the first attestations of **eradun: derau(t)zut* (wedding vow used in Beorburu in 1536; Satrustegi, 1987), *daraut* (Etxepare, 1545), *zerauela* (Leizarraga, 1571). This notwithstanding, older texts from the Middle Ages or Aquitanian apparently indicate that in earlier times the voiced plosives were stable.

Regarding the morphology of **eráukon**, three issues must be reported. Firstly, despite the uncertain chronology of the incorporation of the absolutive, ergative, dative indexes to the finite verb forms by means of prefixes and suffixes, their relative transparency suggests a relatively recent development. Secondly, in modern Basque only Western dialects lack an initial *z-* in past verbal forms of the third person (cf. the alternation *eban / zeban* 'he had it'); **eráukon* itself is nowhere to be attested in historical Basque, only *zeraukon* exists in (quite late) texts. Whether third person verbal forms with initial *z-* are innovative or ancient is still a matter of debate, see Zuloaga and Ariztimuño (2023, § 3.7.5) for a more detailed overview on this issue.

The third issue concerns its ending: if **eráukon** has to be related to its Modern Basque counterpart *zeraukon*, the final morpheme *-n* must be interpreted as the past suffix. However, although the chronology of its emergence is not clear, bascologists usually accept that it is certainly the result of a recent development (Gómez & Sainz, 1995; see also Ariztimuño, 2013, pp. 52-58); in previous stages, the present and past forms of the finite verbs were certainly distinguished by means of the prefixes that precede the root, *da-* in the present and *e-* in the past. Moreover, the suffix *-n* may have emerged at least after the incorporation of the personal indexes to the verb.

3.3. Discussion

Section 3.1 has defined the phonetic and chronological details of the diachronic evolution of lexicalized adjective phrases with *on*; if the premise is that the text in the hand of Irulegi belongs to the same language *continuum*, it is necessary to test the validity of the analysis of the BIH for **sorioneku** within this established frame. This comprehends both lexical and phonetic/morphological aspects of the compared items, and cannot be taken separately; acknowledging the whole «Basque pack» is required in order to substantiate a BIH.

The immediate question is whether the analysis of **sorioneku** as an early representative of the historical Basque phrase *zorioneko* complies with that frame, and the answer is negative: if *zorioneko* existed as a collocation 2,100 years ago, the expected regular

outcome would have been something similar to ***zorioiko*; it is difficult to admit that other lexicalized adjective phrases with *on* ‘good’ underwent a series of processes and exhibit multiple variants, while *zori on* remained unchanged. Even under the assumption that *zori on* lexicalized only later, it could have not gone through the Middle Ages without being subjected to the phonetic changes described for *Lekuine*, *eskuin* and *aitoa*. In this regard, it is of the utmost importance to highlight that *zorion* ‘happiness’ did not seem to be lexicalized in the 16th century, as mentioned above.

Hypothesizing a direct match between *sorioneku* and *zorioneko* may certainly be controversial, given the problematic character of the ending *-eku/-eke* as acknowledged by the BIH; however, the same rationale would apply to *sorion*, in the extent that it is admitted that *zorion* entered similarly inflected constructions.

Zori ‘fate, fortune’ and *on* ‘good’ (most probably from *hon*)⁵ may have belonged to the Basque lexicon as independent words for the last two millennia, and their collocation in an ancient text is in principle not problematic. However, the comparison of this alleged ancient collocation with the historical *zori on* (note the 1,600 year gap) encounters a series of inconveniences that need to be properly acknowledged: a) this comparison does not address the relationship of *zori on* with contemporary collocations such as *ordu onean* and *muga onean*; b) the fact that this collocation may have existed 2,100 years ago, while remaining loosely lexicalized and reappearing in the 16th century is somehow striking; c) that the purported meaning of ancient *sorion* coincides exactly with the compositional meaning of its alleged Basque historical components is also puzzling (see Orduña, 2023). The general impression is that historical Basque is utilized as means to decode pieces of a text, but that its decipherment does not entail a deeper understanding of the Basque historical data; this is methodologically undesirable.

For the BIH to withstand some of the above objections, two alternative considerations may transpire as appropriate. A possibility not to dismiss is that the force of analogy and a need for transparency may have repeatedly restored *on* as part of the adjective phrase; however, this does not explain why the same principles did not apply to the common noun *eskuin* (< *esku on*), for example. Resorting to irregular evolutions needs to be explicitly acknowledged in any hypothesis.

One further possibility is to consider that the language represented in the hand of Irulegi is indeed not a direct antecessor of historical Basque –and therefore *sorion(eku)* is not directly tied to *zorion(eko)*–, but some Vasconic language somehow related to Basque. The view defended in this paper is that the little amount of data at our disposal renders vacuous any attempt at the establishment of the relationship between the linguistic realities, hypothetical or not, labeled as Vasconic, Ancient Basque or Aquitanian.

5 Although this Basque adjective is traditionally linked to the suffix *-bon* attested in Aquitanian inscriptions (Michelena, 1954, p. 441), their exact relationship is not clear. In the hypothesis that the evolution of the Basque adjective was **bon > on*, the variant with initial aspiration should be considered innovative; conversely, if *hon* is considered as the more archaic variant, it is necessary to stress that no independent evidence exists for a change **b- > h-* in Proto-Basque.

The question is indeed not nominal or terminological, but substantive: does the inscription represent an earlier stage of historical Basque or not? If the «early Basque hypothesis» is followed, the nominal question fades, and the interpretation through Basque needs to be developed to its fullest, including in the explanation the well-established phonetic and morphological processes described in Section 3.1, beyond the superficial aspects of the comparison.

Conversely, if a more general term Vasconic is favored, interpretations through Basque should be developed more cautiously; either it is accepted that the text belongs to a certain language *continuum*, or it is necessary to admit that a comparison between items of potentially different languages becomes inconsequential. To put it succinctly, it does not seem sensible to preclude the denomination *Basque* from the discussion about the linguistic ascription of the text while using historical data from this particular language for its elucidation. In this regard, the question arises of what linguistic reality the term *Vasconic* denotes. In order to establish that the epigraph is written in Vasconic it is necessary to define the linguistic nature of Vasconic. If this term refers to the set of epigraphic inscriptions found in a certain area, then it is necessary to keep in mind that the arguments for this grouping and consequent denomination are geographic and epigraphic, not strictly linguistic.

At this point it is worth recalling that the BIH as presented in Section 2 maintains that were it not for the location of the discovery, the similarity between *sorioneku* and *zorioneko* could be attributed to a purely accidental coincidence. The position of this paper on this regard is that the geographical context is only secondary when interpreting the text linguistically: the relevant context for its linguistic interpretation is provided primarily by the text itself –and other contemporary potentially related testimonies–, not by the fact that its discovery occurred in an area where presumably Basque (or a Vasconic language) was spoken. Therefore, given that the rest of the text is completely impenetrable to Basque eyes, a possibility very much to be borne in mind is that the similarity of the initial line of the text with some modern Basque words is due to pure chance.

Within the BIH, the potential interpretation of *eraukon* as a verbal form depended heavily on the linguistic ascription fueled by the first line of the text. If the objections in Section 3.2 are added to this, it is apparent that the Basque interpretation of this piece of text becomes highly uncertain as well. The same applies to the graphic sequence transliterated as *ese*.

A final note may be made on the weakness of the BIH, by considering other possibilities for the interpretation of *eraukon* beyond the **eradun*-hypothesis: indeed, positing *erho* ‘to kill’ as the underlying Basque verb would not be any more –nor less– problematic from the point of view of Basque morphology⁶; moreover, the *erho* ‘to kill’ analysis

6 Considering **eranon* as the initial protoform (see Lakarra et al., 2019, s. v. *erho*₁), a phonetic evolution **erao- > erau-* could be surmised, with the problematic ancient loss of the intervocalic nasal and the subsequent vocalic change, both otherwise attested in later Basque.

would perfectly comply with a more general interpretation of the hand, given that the hypothesis that it may represent the severed hand of an enemy, some sort of a war trophy, has been presented as plausible (Beltrán, 2023). The very fact that the linguistic analysis may be accommodated to the alternative cultural interpretations of the hand testifies to its weakness; this is perhaps inevitable, due to the fragmentary nature of the ancient *scripta*, but it is nevertheless non desirable. A wiser scientific approach would be to accept the impossibility of elaborating solid hypotheses with the incomplete data at our disposal.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this paper was to delimit the linguistic playground for a potential Basque interpretation of the text contained in the hand of Irulegi, by establishing some linguistic landmarks –phonetic and morphological– that in our opinion cannot be disregarded. Our preliminary conclusion is that the Basque Interpretation Hypothesis is not conclusive and that the Basque filiation of the text cannot be ascertained. Inasmuch as the linguistic definition of *Vasconic* rests on our knowledge on Basque, a Vasconic filiation cannot be determined either. One of the methodological limitations of the comparative method in historical linguistics is that it provides specific tools that allow one to demonstrate that two given languages are genetically related, but that it is unable to disprove a hypothetical genetic relationship. Similarly, the linguistic processes and analyses provided in this paper show that, with the data at our disposal, it is not possible to certify that some ancient form of Basque is attested in the hand of Irulegi, although by reason of the aforementioned methodological limitations that possibility remains inevitably open, without the exclusion, however, of other equally conceivable hypotheses; among these, the obvious path to explore is its potential link to other Paleohispanic languages, either known or unknown.

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