

THE 'EXCEPTIONAL FINDS' OF IRUÑA-VELEIA (ÁLAVA): SYNTAX OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL FORGERY

Los 'hallazgos excepcionales' de Iruña-Veleia (Álava): sintaxis de una falsificación arqueológica

Ignacio RODRÍGUEZ TEMIÑO

Conjunto Arqueológico de Carmona. Junta de Andalucía. Avda. Jorge Bonsor, 9. 41410 Carmona (Sevilla).

E-mail: ignacio.rodriguez.temino@juntadeandalucia.es

Recepción: 31/10/2016; Revisión: 3/02/2017; Aceptación: 23/03/2017

ABSTRACT: In 2006, news broke of the discovery of ostraca bearing text in Latin and Basque, as well as Christian drawings, during the 2005 and 2006 excavation campaigns at the Iruña-Veleia site in Álava, Spain. In 2008, these pieces were shown to be fakes. The 'Iruña-Veleia case', as it has come to be known, has been the subject of several partial studies, primarily focused on the forgeries. This paper will analyse it from a contextual perspective. To this end, it first defines the general pattern, or 'syntax', followed by historical forgeries. It then applies this syntax to the Iruña-Veleia case, reviewing how it unfolded in the academic, political, institutional and social spheres. In each one, the syntax showed certain oddities, mainly due to the social context in which the events took place and their link to nationalist identity, a subject related to the content of the forged specimens. Despite this link, however, in this case it cannot be concluded that nationalism was the driving force behind the forgery.

Key words: fakes; nationalism; Basque Country; mass media.

RESUMEN: En 2006 se dio a conocer el hallazgo de unos ostraca grafitados con palabras en latín, euskera y dibujos de temática cristiana en las excavaciones realizadas en el yacimiento de Iruña-Veleia (Álava, España) en 2005 y 2006. Posteriormente en 2008 se demostró que tales piezas eran falsificaciones. Este caso, conocido como "caso Iruña-Veleia", ha sido objeto de algunos estudios parciales, centrados sobre todo en las falsificaciones. Sin embargo, este trabajo analiza este caso desde una perspectiva contextual. Para ello se ha definido previamente el patrón habitual de las falsificaciones históricas, al que se ha denominado "sintaxis". Posteriormente se ha aplicado al caso Iruña-Veleia y se ha observado su evolución en los ámbitos académico, político e institucional y social. En cada uno de ellos esta sintaxis presenta ciertas peculiaridades debido sobre todo al marco social en el que se ha desenvuelto y su vinculación con la identidad nacionalista, tema relacionado con el contenido de las falsificaciones. Sin embargo, no puede concluirse que en este caso la vinculación nacionalista haya sido el motor de la falsificación.

Palabras clave: fraude; nacionalismo; País Vasco; medios de comunicación.

1. Introduction¹

¹ This paper was made possible through funding under R&D project DER2013-48826-R *Bases para articular una respuesta jurídica eficaz contra el expolio arqueológico* (Terms for creating an effective legal response to archaeological looting), subsidised by the Spanish Ministry of the Economy and Competitiveness.

Located less than a dozen kilometres outside Vitoria-Gasteiz (Álava, Spain) (Fig. 1), the Iruña-Veleia site encompasses a cultural sequence spanning from the first millennium BC to mediaeval times. The settlement's best-known period was the classical epoch. Both Pliny (*NH* III, 26) and Ptolemy (*Geog.* II, 6, 64) mention the Caristian *oppidum* of



FIG. 1. Map of Spain with location of the archaeological site of Iruña-Veleia.

Veleia, the leading exponent of Roman urbanism in the Basque Country and one of its greatest assets for archaeological research on the classical period, its precedents, and the transformations undergone since the 3rd century AD.

This paper is based on the inauthenticity of the 'exceptional finds', allegedly discovered during the 2005 and 2006 excavation campaigns at the Iruña-Veleia site. The finds included more than 400 ostraca with etched words in Latin, Basque and Greek, Egyptian hieroglyphs, and drawings of various subjects, including Christian ones, dating from the 2nd to 5th centuries AD, according to the excavators' report². This made them the oldest examples of Christian representations in the West and pushed the first signs of written Basque back by several centuries. In 2008, an *ad hoc* Scientific Advisory Committee on the Iruña-Veleia Project, set up by the Provincial Government of Álava—hereinafter DFA—, which owns the site and is responsible for archaeological heritage in the province, deemed the finds false³. However,

² http://www.araba.eus/publicar/Informes/Veleia_Inf_30.pdf.

³ In academia, fraud is defined by the *intention to deceive* as compared to error or carelessness (Franzen, Rödder and Weingart, 2007: 3).

far from subsiding, the controversy continued almost up to the present today, especially on social media.

The world of contemporary forgeries of artefacts is highly heterogeneous, and the term is used to describe a variety of intentional forms of manipulating such goods. As a result, except in relation to archaeological historiography, the study of such forgeries is often overly generic, based on compilations of casuistry (Kurz, 1967, amongst others). The present paper will place special emphasis on their syntax (Jones, 2015). Indeed, forgeries often follow a well-known pattern, beginning with the initial presentation of the fake, followed

by its acceptance, the subsequent emergence of doubt and, finally, its rejection. This syntax is the product of the confrontation between two groups: believers and critics. In the case of the 'exceptional finds' of Iruña-Veleia—hereinafter, the Iruña-Veleia case—, the factions are known as the *veristas*—who advocate the truth of the finds— and the *falsistas*—who believe they were fakes—. Although the syntax was broadly followed, there were certain notable deviations, due to the fact that the fraud took place against a background involving identity aspects to which Basque society is quite sensitive.

This paper aims to rise above this conflictive dynamic, in order to focus on the peculiarities resulting from the social context in which the events occurred. The Iruña-Veleia case is not unique in the history of Spanish archaeology; on the contrary, it is one of a long line of similar events (see Montes Bernárdez, 1993, for the most recent ones). However, unlike in many other cases, the perpetrators were not motivated by national pride or the desire to see a given historical theory prevail, but rather by much more prosaic issues, hidden behind appeals to essential myths of Basque nationalism.

To address this issue, I have taken a contextual approach to the interaction between experts and

certain public authorities influenced, but not irrationally conditioned, by a nationalist ideology. Interestingly, the study of such cases does not end with the exposure of the forgery, but rather a closer examination of the actual events with a view to providing a unique vision of archaeology itself and contemporary society (Mora, 2011; Grafton, 1990: 67).

In light of the vast number of reports issued on this case, there is no need to analyse them individually, an endeavour that, in any case, lies beyond the scope of this paper. Except for the expert evidence requested by the Court of First Instance n.º 1 of Vitoria-Gasteiz, on which a gag order was issued, the rest of the reports are available on the websites of the DFA and the association SOS Iruña-Veleia⁴. All were accessible as of 5 June 2016. Where necessary, specific ostraca will be identified with the reference code used by the excavation team, as listed in the Ostracabase on the SOS Iruña-Veleia website⁵.

This paper will distinguish between responsibility and commission. A natural or legal person may be responsible for something reprehensible without having been the party that actually committed it and vice versa. I believe the people responsible for the forgery are those who oversaw the excavations; it is for the judges to delimit who actually committed it. It should be noted that, to my knowledge, nobody from the company Lurmen has admitted to forgery. Nevertheless, in this case, one might well apply the philosophical principle of Occam's razor, whereby, all else being equal, the simplest explanation is usually the most likely.

2. Stage one: presentation of the hoax

The Iruña-Veleia site had been the subject of sporadic archaeological interventions in the 1950s and 1970s. Beginning in 1994, the excavation campaigns were regularised under Eliseo Gil Zubillaga. In 2001, they acquired financial backing under a

⁴ <http://www.araba.eus/publicar/Veleia/> and <http://www.sos-irunaveleia.org/informes>.

⁵ <http://www.sos-irunaveleia.org/arqueologia:arqueologia>.

ten-year agreement to promote the Iruña-Veleia III Millennium Project, developed by the private firm Lurmen SL, owned by Gil Zubillaga himself and Filloy Nieva. The agreement, approved by the Basque Culture Department, was funded in equal parts by the public companies EuskoTren and Euskal Trenbide Sarea –hereinafter, ETS– (Gil Zubillaga and Filloy, 2004). In 2002, the DFA granted Lurmen SL a permit to temporarily occupy the Iruña-Veleia site in order to conduct the aforementioned project. This meant carrying out the necessary excavation campaigns and recreational cultural activities to exploit the site. The agreement was exceptional, unique in terms of its timeframe and funding, both within and outside the Basque Country.

With this agreement, the aforementioned public companies sought to replicate the public relation success of the financing of the restoration of the Vitoria-Gasteiz cathedral and its famous 'Abierto por Obras' [Open for Construction] campaign (Fernández Florez, 2007). Thus, the Iruña-Veleia site joined the ranks of the select group of generously funded archaeological projects expected to complement their research goals with a dash of spectacle. This strategy, which was heavily mined by the excavating team at the Atapuerca site (Burgos) (Hochadel, 2013), has resulted in several unedifying episodes for archaeology as an academic discipline. In this regard, the feverish searches for the mortal remains of various historical figures, from Christopher Columbus to Federico García Lorca, by way of Velázquez and Cervantes, stand out for their media impact. The controversies sparked by the search for these figures' final resting places, over which much ink has been spilled for months at a time, have eluded not only any sort of academic rigor, but also the most elementary principles of contemporary archaeology, from common sense to a sense of the ridiculous. This would not be possible without the complicity of the media. Indeed, the media have honed their ability to surprise, emphasising the new, exotic or unusual; not only have the boundaries between entertainment and information been blurred, but the predominance of the former comes at the expense of the latter, of what is

important, of what matters –or should matter– to the people (Rodríguez Temiño, 2007).

As is often the case with such events, the tone tended to magnify the finds, comparing them with other known discoveries, in keeping with the 'science by press conference' model (Lewenstein, 1995) based on transforming the site and its finds into spectacle. An elaborate production makes it easier to pull off the deception and commit the fraud, especially when the party financing it is seeking an immediate return in terms of public relations.

Historical forgeries can be divided into different groups based on the publicity surrounding the first stage, i.e. the emergence of the forged artefact. Forgers who are solely seeking financial gain from the object's sale eschew publicity and avoid talking to the media. The *modus operandi* in such cases is similar to that of other forgeries, such as the counterfeiting of money or identity theft, requiring discretion. However, there are other types of forgeries for which the primary motive is public recognition of the forger for the demonstration of a theory or the contribution that the forged object makes to a given cause. In these cases, which are by no means mutually exclusive with lucrative economic interests resulting from the recognition achieved, the public presentation of the object is key to the endeavour's success.

The present case resembles this second type, although the motives may have differed. The first stage of the syntax of the Iruña-Veleia case was achieved through the media. Following leaks to various newspapers⁶, in June 2006, two press conferences were held to announce the existence of the exceptional ostraca. At the first one, held on 8 June 2006 at the Lakua hotel in Vitoria-Gasteiz, Gil Zubillaga was accompanied by the excavation team's advisor,

⁶ See, for instance, the articles published in *El Correo*, 27 May 2006, "Hallan en Nanclares inscripciones del cristianismo copto de hacia el siglo III" ["Coptic-Christian inscriptions dating from around the 3rd century AD found in Nanclares"] or in *Gara*, 10 June 2006, "En el yacimiento de Iruña-Veleia también han aparecido textos en euskara del siglo IV" ["4th-century Basque texts also found at Iruña-Veleia site"].

J. Santos Yanguas, a professor at the University of the Basque Country (hereinafter UPV/EHU). Special emphasis was placed on the early manifestations of Christianity reflected in some of the ostraca from the first set. Mention was also made of two virtually unknown experts –R. Cerdán, presented as a nuclear physicist, and M. Rius, allegedly an Egyptologist at the University of Barcelona– both of whom supported the initial conclusions.

The news of the discovery of the oldest signs of Christianity in the West was taken up by the press, especially the local media, which found the story that the finds told especially appealing and devoted detailed reports to it several days in a row to expand on the news. These reports were based on interviews with the diggers and other specialists.

At the second press conference, held on 15 June, the Basque linguists H. Knörr and J. Gorrochategui –also professors at UPV/EHU– joined Gil Zubillaga to announce, with great excitement, the existence of the ostraca with Basque texts, i.e. those from the second set. More than two hundred people were invited, and the announcement was toasted with champagne. The press conference made the front page of the 16 June 2006 edition of *Gara*: "Los textos hallados en Iruña-Veleia están escritos 'inequívocamente' en euskara" –"The texts found at Iruña-Veleia are 'unequivocally' written in Basque"– the headline ran. The editorial, "Iruña: iragana mintzo zaigu" –"Iruña: the past talks"–, showed signs of irrepressible nationalist pride.

Thus, the press revealed that the finds had mainly been made in two places: in the *domus* of Pompeia Valentina, where ostraca with Latin texts and Christian motifs were unearthed during the 2005 campaign, and in the *domus* of the Mosaico de los Rosetones, which stood across from the former, and which yielded ostraca with Basque texts and Christian motifs in the 2006 excavation campaign.

The first stage of the 'making of' of this *fake-buster* had been successfully accomplished. Sufficient ink had been spilled to prove it.

The parallels between this case and the case of the Zubialde paintings, which, in 1991, rocked the field of prehistory in Álava and around the world,

cannot be ignored. That year, a press conference was held to present the “mayor hallazgo prehistórico del País Vasco” [“the most important prehistoric find in the Basque Country”] (*ABC*, 13 March 1991, “Descubiertas en Álava unas pinturas rupestres de trece mil años de antigüedad” [“13,000-year-old cave paintings discovered in Álava”]). As at Iruña, the authenticity of the finds was endorsed by the presence of three of the Basque Country’s leading cave painting specialists. However, when the preparations had already begun to turn the site into a museum, international specialists called the paintings’ authenticity into question. Simply seeing the photos had sufficed for them to conclude that they were fake. A subsequent, more meticulous study commissioned by the Provincial Council itself from the investigators who had initially endorsed the find corroborated the inauthenticity of the entire group of paintings in more detail (Altuna, Apellániz and Barandiarán, 1992). The press has cited the feelings of frustration and embarrassment arising over the Zubialde forgeries as an unsuccessful precedent for the Iruña-Veleia case.

3. Acceptance of the hoax and the causes thereof

Although the speakers counselled caution at the press conferences, the strongest calls came from the Euskaltzaindia –Royal Academy of the Basque Language– and the head of the Basque Culture Department herself⁷. However, they failed to curb the widespread euphoric tone.

Gorrochategui (2011b: 248-251) and, subsequently, Santos Yanguas (2014: 300-302)⁸ have

⁷ See the articles published on 10 June 2006 in *Berria* (“Zuhurtasuna Iruña-Veleiako aurkikuntzaren gainean” [“Caution urged with the Iruña-Veleia finds”]) and *El Diario Vasco* (“La consejera vasca de Cultura pide ‘prudencia’” [“Head of the Basque Culture Department calls for ‘caution’”]).

⁸ Interview with Juan Santos Yanguas in *El Diario Vasco* on 13 June 2006, “Veleia por ahora sólo revela que en el siglo III se conocía el cristianismo en Euskadi” (“For now, all Veleia shows is that Christianity was known in the Basque Country by the 3rd century”).

pointed to two features of how the Iruña-Veleia case was presented in 2006 that allowed the site’s research team to complete the second stage of the forgery syntax with ease: verisimilitude and credibility.

The latter stemmed from two key factors: the professionalism of the research team at the Iruña-Veleia site, whose academic behaviour to date had been entirely consistent with the usual standards of professional archaeology, and the scientific support with which the finds of the previous year (2005) had been presented. Mention was made of studies conducted at foreign labs to ensure the ostraca’s authenticity, specifically, C₁₄ tests carried out in France and analyses of the patinas of the etched surfaces at the University of Groningen (Netherlands)⁹.

The verisimilitude afforded to the ‘exceptional finds’ requires further explanation. Gorrochategui and Santos Yanguas were taken in by the use of original artefacts to etch the texts and simple drawings –despite the conspicuous nature of some of them–, a fairly standard practice in good forgeries (Jones, 2015: 374). They were also particularly swayed by the explanatory framework used to justify their mass discovery.

The first set of ostraca had primarily come from a closed room, a depositional unit that had been sealed off by a collapse. Because they were engraved on potsherds from an earlier period and dry bones, it was interpreted as a storage room for different types of old media used to perform writing exercises in Latin and for drawing scenes of daily life. The hypothesis, advanced from the start, is that the family that lived in this home had a *paedagogium* with a tutor of Egyptian origin tasked with teaching Latin and instilling Christian values in the children of the owner of the *domus* and, perhaps, in those of other wealthy families of Veleian society too. In the other home, the *domus* of the Mosaico de los Rose-tones, the ostraca, although spread across multiple

⁹ *El Correo*, 8 June 2006, “Los laboratorios de Toulouse y Groningen certifican la validez y la cronología de la pieza” (“Labs in Toulouse and Groningen certify the validity and chronology of the piece”).

stratigraphic units, were equally abundant. Unlike the first set, they bore Basque inscriptions about everyday subjects, as well as religious inscriptions and likewise Judeo-Christian figurative motifs. In this case, the interpretation offered by the excavators was the possible existence of an *ecclesia* in which the people of Veleia were both indoctrinated and taught to write in their own vernacular.

I am aware that, with ten years' hindsight, it is much easier to find fault with the bases for the alleged verisimilitude and credibility. Consequently, I do not intend to make value judgements regarding anyone's involvement, but rather will simply continue with this review of the syntax of the forgery.

A closer look at this 'making of' reveals, *prima facie*, the suspension of critical judgement in the interpretation of these keys in those people who, one way or another, participated in the staging of the hoax in good faith. Clearly, importance was not given to the 'false impressions' suggested by the factors on which the verisimilitude and credibility of this *fakebuster* were based.

In order to identify the 'circumstantial paradigm' (Hoving, 1996) in the Iruña-Veleia case, i.e. the resistance that forged artwork kindles in experts and that would ordinarily trigger a more critical view in specialists, one had to look not at insignificant details (as is typically done in cases of art forgery), but rather significant ones: the thick strokes hinted at a series of oddities.

Let us begin with the explanation that lent cover to the archaeological record, the idea of a *paedagogium*. With the exception of Gorrochategui (2011b: 243-246), who expressed some surprise that the famous Egyptian *paedagogo* would teach Latin rather than Greek, and Alicia Canto, who, in a 2008 Celtiberia.net blog entry entitled "Iruña-Veleia. Archivo gráfico y temático de los grafitos" ("Iruña-Veleia: Graphic and thematic record of the graffiti"), questioned the suitability of etching as a method for teaching/learning writing¹⁰, almost no one else

¹⁰ <http://www.celtiberia.net/es/biblioteca/?id=2372>.



FIG. 2. *Terra sigillata* ostracon depicting the Calvary. Note the inscription *RIP* above the main cross (Phot. DFA/AFA).

has cast doubt on this interpretation. It has even been accepted by prominent defenders of the ostracon's authenticity, such as Rodríguez Colmenero¹¹, R. Frank (2011: 17 ff.) and Martín Elexpuru¹². For Rodríguez Colmenero, there are indications of the presence of one Saul of Tarsus in Veleia between the 4th and 5th centuries, a proselytising missionary with obvious teaching skills, who founded a school for children of the settlement. He thus reinterprets the ostracon with the Calvary and the inscription *RIP* on the central cross as an exercise in which a pupil might have engraved *R(ex) i(udeorum)*, resulting in the acronym *RI*, to which the teacher would have added the *P* (for *Passio*) (Fig. 2).

It should be noted that the possible existence of a *paedagogium* in Iruña-Veleia is not necessarily strange. Previous excavations had already unearthed graffiti (Santos Yanguas, 2014: 300 f.) and even writing instruments, such as a *stilus* and possibly the

¹¹ <http://sos-veleia1.wdfiles.com/local--files/colmenero/Colmenero.pdf>.

¹² www.veleia.com/adjuntos/veleiaNoticias/49_adjunto1.pdf.

hinge of a *tabella cerata* (Gil Zubillaga, 2002: 134), materials that support this hypothesis.

However, there was strikingly little agreement between what is known about educational mechanics in Greco-Roman times and the archaeological record of Veleia. The use of ostraca in learning processes has been demonstrated, and earlier interpretations that held that they were mainly preferred by students 'in the poorest circles' have been discredited (Bonner, 1977: 165). Today, this preference is ascribed to established trends in certain parts of the Empire (Criboire, 2001: 151 f.); however, the difference in the writing techniques used between known ostraca, mainly in Egypt, and those in Veleia is eye-opening.

The preferred tools for such exercises included, amongst others, *tabellae ceratae*. Indeed, the *Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana* (Dickey, 2012: 195) refer to the case of a student who complained that the wax on his tablet was hard and, thus, difficult to write on (*cera dura est. mollis debuit esse*). Quintilian's exhortation (*Inst.* 10. 3.31) to keep the wax in good condition to facilitate corrections likewise bears abundant testimony to their use. Certainly, potsherds were also used to write on, but with brushes and ink. Witness the monumental work consisting of the potsherds from the *Mons Claudianus* (Bingen *et al.*, 1997) or those gathered in other collections from Egypt (Grafton Milne, 1908). Therefore, the use of potsherds that, moreover, according to the excavators, dated from one or two centuries earlier, for students or their teacher to engrave writing exercises seems, at the very least, strange in light of what is known, not to mention dysfunctional. So too, as J. Gorrochategui argued soon after, was the use of capitalisation, when lowercase letters were the norm (*El Correo*, 18 November 2006, "Los asombrosos hallazgos de Iruña-Veleia" ["The amazing finds of Iruña-Veleia"]).

Separately, the texts engraved on the ostraca from Veleia are also inconsistent with other artefacts of proven educational use. Contrary to Rodríguez Colmenero's assertion, the existence of alphabets and lists of numbers does not conclusively prove the existence of an ancient school. Missing are the lists

of words divided into syllables and word-building exercises, so common in the early educational stages (Criboire, 2001: 160-180). One would think some might have appeared amongst the more than two hundred specimens found in the *domus* of Pompeia Valentina. Likewise, although lists of gods, mythical characters and even emperors abound, save for a few anachronistic aphorisms, there are no texts by Homer or other authors the repetition and copying of which was one of the cornerstones of learning (Quintilian, *Inst.* 10.1.15), both in the early and later stages of education¹³.

Finally, the collection's consistency also arouses suspicion. Virtually all the ostraca concern the earliest stages in the educational process. It is as though this *paedagogium* had limited itself to the –deficient– teaching of the rudiments of writing and a handful of historical and religious concepts, with no further development. However, research on specimens related to ancient teaching underscores the absence of the modern concept of gradual development in learning; instead, following an initial introduction to the rudiments of reading and writing, upper-class students proceeded directly to advanced levels, whilst lower-class students remained where they were (Kaster, 1983). Additionally, classes were not separated, but rather were taught in the same space at the same time. Consequently, one would expect a greater plurality of inscriptions, with longer texts reproducing fragments of classics, none of which were found.

Thus, whilst the existence of a place of learning for the children of Veleia is plausible, the design of this explanation shows signs of a constant that runs through the Iruña-Veleia case: a lack of adequate knowledge about the classical world. If, as I. P. Medvedev (2014) has argued, excellent scholars are usually excellent forgers, the opposite should also hold.

The appeal from the start to archaeometric analytics is also a powerful sign that there was something to hide. At the presentation, it was suggested that the ostraca recovered in the 2005 excavation

¹³ For example, *O. Claud.*, II, 413, with a free composition about Diogenes.

campaign had been subjected to a specific analysis that proved their age and, thus, their authenticity (Barandiaran, 2010: 28-29). This could be concluded not only based on the media reports, but also on the people who participated in the presentations without having been part of the excavation team. It seems strange that a (presumably) rigorously kept archaeological record would be subjected to such testing, that the archaeologists would appeal to the irrefutability of the experimental sciences before anyone had even questioned the authenticity of their finds. This would be another constant throughout the case.

The behaviour of Gil Zubillaga and his team following the alleged discovery of the ostraca was similarly anomalous, especially the obscurantism surrounding the fact that the ostraca were identified not during the excavation process, but rather during the potsherds' processing (Barandiaran, 2010: 81-85; Gorrochategui, 2011b: 257). In short, all of these things should have sounded the alarms or, at the very least, triggered a certain sense of disbelief amongst those who, in participating in the presentations, would have had direct access to that information. It is worth recalling that in other cases, such as that of the so-called Gospels of Judas and of Jesus' Wife, it was precisely such anomalous and evasive behaviours that raised widespread suspicion in academia (Schenke Robinson, 2015).

In my view, there are several possible causes that, to different degrees, together explain why the experts failed to give due attention to the impressions of inauthenticity they must have had. First, there was the very uncertainty of the moment and, perhaps, more limited access to the relevant information than might be assumed. Some of the people involved (Gorrochategui, 2011b: 248 f.; Santos Yanguas, 2014: 302) have also mentioned the desire to believe they were true. Such finds opened interesting avenues of research regarding fundamental myths in Basque nationalism, something that is in no way socially or politically irrelevant. As Grafton (1990: 95) has noted, we generally show less critical discrimination when dealing with artefacts that coincide with our assumptions and desires.

The alleged contribution of the 'exceptional finds' of Iruña-Veleia was inarguably related to two fundamental aspects of Basque historiography, so-called *vascocantabrisimo* –Basque-Cantabrisim–, which has long been in its final throes, and the early Christianisation of what is today the Basque Country, both stories that a certain segment of Basque society longs to hear (Azkárate, 2003; Gorrochategui, 2011b: 260).

Separately, this case has been dealt with as a case of individual misconduct, with repercussions in the academic, professional, administrative and criminal spheres, by those responsible for the fraud. However, this type of forgery is more complex; it requires not only subjects to carry out the hoax, but also a social context that is conducive to it (Franzen, Rödder and Weingart, 2007).

The relationship between archaeology and nationalism is inevitable and even natural (Kohl and Fawcett, 1995: 3); however, it is also complex and quite prone to manipulation. This can take place in two scenarios. The first consists of hard manipulation, in highly ideologised political systems or moments, the requirements of which directly shape the official archaeology conducted for the state, such as at the height of Francoist Spain after the Spanish Civil War (Díaz-Andreu, 1995: 46 ff.). The second type of manipulation is much subtler, as these needs are more diffuse. The control over archaeology is achieved indirectly, through less blatant means, which, although seemingly banal, are equally effective. These might include grant policies that favour certain research projects over others or the publication of books in which the historical object projected onto the past is the present-day idea of a nation (e.g., Bazán, 2002), along with the subsequent inclusion thereof in school curricula. In this second model, the lesser political interest in archaeology leads to its displacement from the priority areas of public action. That, in turn, impacts funding and the resources allocated to the management of archaeological heritage, rendering careers in archaeology more precarious.

Díaz-Andreu (1995: 49 ff.) has pointed to the critical role played by the Basque nationalist agenda

in archaeological research from the late 19th century until the Spanish Civil War. Following the war, the nationalist influence continued to make itself felt, only this time it was Spanish nationalism. However, since Spain's transition to democracy in 1978, there have been only a few minor attempts at nationalist interference in archaeological research (Díaz-Andreu, 1995: 52), which have run up against the professionalism and independence of archaeologists and researchers (Santos Yanguas, 2014: 267). In the Basque Autonomous Community –hereinafter CAV–, there are no known cases of attempts by public authorities to influence or directly interfere with the agendas of research groups; there is likewise no evidence of the presence of archaeologists willing to act according to the ideological dictates of the CAV, were it to have any. Whilst none of this prevents the existence of 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995) or the acceptance and persistence of nationalist mythical ideology in society, in my view the events at issue here were far removed from the model of hard nationalism.

Finally, Alicia Canto was right when she alluded to the endemic lack of interest in Spain for epigraphy as one of the reasons for the hoax's initial success in the Iruña-Veleia case. This lack of interest has led to a dearth of experts in this discipline in the country, even in academia¹⁴.

4. The emergence of doubts

The finds stirred interest in certain online forums, which assiduously followed each new development (Barandiaran, 2010: 45-48). Three stand out in this regard: Celtiberia.net (www.celtiberia.net), Terrae Antiquae (www.terraeantiquae.com) and FiloBlogia (<http://filoblogia.blogariak.net/>). In the first, the very day the press conferences were held, a post entitled 'Iruña-Veleia I' went up to track the news. It was not long before the first doubts began to emerge. Some users thought it was

¹⁴ *El País*, 28 November 2008, "Epigrafía y los poderes de Internet" ("Epigraphy and the power of the Internet").



FIG. 3. Common ceramic ostrakon with text referring to the genealogy of Anchises. Note the presence of the mathematical symbol of implication (double arrow) (Phot. DFA/AFE).

strange that such a diverse set of ostraca would be found together; others questioned the authenticity of ostrakon IR 11422 (Fig. 3), which did not use the Latin spelling of Anchises and for its use of a mathematical symbol of implication –the double arrow–. Canto, an active user on both Celtiberia.net and Terrae Antiquae, joined the discussion noting that, on the Calvary piece –ostrakon IR 12108 (Fig. 2)–, the inscription over the cross of Jesus read *R(equiescat) I(n) P(ace)* as opposed to the traditional *I(esus) N(azarenus) R(ex) I(udaeorum)* (Barandiaran, 2010: 46-48). The ostraca with Basque graffiti were likewise questioned, even before they were presented in public, on FiloBlogia ("Euskarazko idatzirik zaharrenak Iruña-Veleian?" ["Are the writings from Iruña-Veleia the oldest ones in Basque?"]) (Barandiaran, 2010: 56). However, this blog did not question the specimens' authenticity, only their antiquity, due to the modernity of the lexicon used. It is impossible not to link this rejection generated in cyberspace with the first doubts expressed in the Basque academic world, even though this link was never explicitly acknowledged.

Much later, it was learned that, around that time, Gorrochategui penned a letter to the then director of the Museo Arqueológico de Álava, a convinced *verista*, expressing his misgivings regarding the artefacts' authenticity (Barandiaran, 2010: 50-53), which presaged his subsequent scepticism.

The next episode came in late 2006, when several professors from UPV/EHU openly expressed to the media their reservations regarding the alleged antiquity of the inscriptions on the ostraca¹⁵. However, these reservations were not yet decisive, as other researchers continued to defend the finds' authenticity in the media¹⁶.

Late 2006 brought a rebuttal, also picked up by the media, in defence of the piece's authenticity. In a press release, the excavation team and their advisors once again took refuge behind the archaeometric analyses conducted of the patina to assert the antiquity not only of the artefacts, but this time of the inscriptions and drawings they bore too¹⁷.

The main development in the Iruña-Veleia case in 2007 was the departure of three of the team's archaeologists¹⁸. Through them, it was learned that the ostraca had not been identified during the excavation process, but rather 'discovered' during the

cleaning stage (Barandiaran, 2010: 61-63). By the end of the year, doubts regarding the forgery of the ostraca were being expressed in academic circles, such as the 2nd Koldo Mitxelena Chair Conference (Gorrochategui, 2011a). The entrenchment and lack of progress in the research being conducted by Gil Zubillaga and Filloy Nieva's team fed these suspicions, although nothing decisive was done until early 2008.

5. The academic rejection: a series of oddities

The situation underwent a remarkable turnaround in the second half of 2007, when the new head of the Department of Basque Language, Culture and Sport at the DFA sought to clear up the mysteries surrounding the Iruña-Veleia case. In response, Gil Zubillaga and his team submitted a document to the Provincial Assembly of Álava in support of the research, leaving the door open to the performance of additional analyses with a view to organising a public exhibition of the entire collection in 2009 (Barandiaran, 2010: 94-96).

However, the response was not as expected. In January 2008, a Scientific Advisory Committee was set up for the Iruña-Veleia project, which, in practice, was tasked with clarifying the authenticity of the 'exceptional finds'. The committee had thirteen members, mostly from UPV/EHU, along with officials from the DFA and Gil Zubillaga on behalf of the excavation team. At the same time, reports were commissioned from other specialists outside the Basque Country. The unusually large number of participants in the committee was striking, as was the considerable presence of foreign experts, especially in the field of archaeology. Given the history of the controversy over the past year and a half and the positions staked out regarding the authenticity of the finds, the exaggeratedly large committee seems to be symptomatic of an overreaction. The inclusion on it, testifying against Lurmen's excavations, of certain researchers who had until recently continued to defend the historical significance of the finds reinforces this feeling.

¹⁵ *El Correo*, 18 November 2006, "Los asombrosos hallazgos de Iruña-Veleia" ("The amazing finds of Iruña-Veleia") and *El Correo*, 20 November 2006, "Veleia: los arqueólogos primero" ("Veleia: Archaeologists first").

¹⁶ *El Diario Vasco*, 9 November 2006, "¿Por supuesto que aparecerán más inscripciones en Iruña-Veleia!" ("Of course more inscriptions will appear at Iruña-Veleia!"); *El Correo*, 21 November 2006, "El filólogo Henrike Knörr replica que Veleia 'revolucionará' la historia del País Vasco" ("The philologist Henrike Knörr responds that Veleia will 'revolutionise' the history of the Basque Country").

¹⁷ *El Correo*, 25 November 2006, "Los análisis científicos ratifican la autenticidad de los hallazgos de Veleia, según los arqueólogos" ("The scientific analyses ratify the authenticity of the finds at Veleia, according to the archaeologists"); *El País*, 26 November 2006, "El yacimiento de Veleia apuntaba maneras desde hacía tiempo" ("The Veleia site had been promising for some time").

¹⁸ *El Correo*, 9 February 2007, "Tres de los diez arqueólogos de Veleia abandonan por sorpresa las excavaciones" ("Three of the ten archaeologists at Veleia unexpectedly quit the excavations").



FIG. 4. *Terra sigillata* ostrakon depicting a nude female figure (Phot. DFA/AEA).

The reports and opinions reviewed by the committee can be neatly divided into two clear groups, the first led by Gil Zubillaga and Filloy Nieva and the second by UPV/EHU. The first group largely consists of reports seeking to explain the archaeological record system used at the Iruña-Veleia excavations or related to the archaeometric techniques applied to the potsherds for the patina analysis. In contrast, the reports in the second group, which are critical of Lurmen's actions at the site, fall into three areas: reports assessing the archaeological methodology used by the excavation team; philological reports on the inscriptions in Latin, Hebrew, Egyptian hieroglyphics and Basque, as well as reports on the figurative representations; and reports criticising the archaeometric techniques used at the site. The content of the reports and opinions in this latter group is decidedly more doctrinal, which lends them greater authority.

The methodology followed in the archaeological activity was criticised by both committee members and external experts. This criticism nurtured the impression of conceptual gaps in the team's understanding of the formative processes involved in stratigraphy, with the ensuing effect on the reliability of their interpretation of the stratigraphic sequence and its dating. The iconographic study of the ostraca

bearing domestic, civic or religious drawings yielded similar conclusions regarding the specimens' inauthenticity, although it was the least conclusive of the submitted reports. One iconographic aspect that called the attention of the experts was the treatment of female figures, both dressed and nude, whose attire and voluptuousness reflect contemporary patterns that are incompatible with what is known to date about the classical period (Fig. 4).

The reports on the archaeometric analyses were especially significant, although not so much due to their content per se as to their role as irrefutable evidence of the ostraca's antiquity and authenticity. The research team had

first performed certain analyses at the site, over the course of 2005, to date the strata from which the finds were unearthed. They subsequently performed additional analyses to show that the cation ratio of the *ductus* made by the incisions, in the process of writing on the potsherds and bone, matched that of the rest of the potsherd surface. As the cation ratio was the same, the patina on the surface of the artefact and the inside of the groove matched and, thus, the graffiti could be deemed original. This was the conclusion reached in R. Cerdán's reports¹⁹.

However, the committee experts found a lack of original data supporting this conclusion: the documentation provided was unusable. Thus, new tests were performed on a selection of ostraca to determine the existence, or lack thereof, of matching patinas. For most of the tested specimens, the spectroscopic response of the unaltered surface of the ostrakon and that of the studied strokes did not match, offering reliable proof that they were recent²⁰.

¹⁹ http://www.araba.eus/publicar/Informes/Veleia_Inf_20.pdf; http://www.araba.eus/publicar/Informes/Veleia_Inf_21.pdf; http://www.araba.eus/publicar/Informes/Veleia_Inf_03.pdf; http://www.araba.eus/msginet2/Informes/Veleia_Inf_53.pdf.

²⁰ http://www.araba.eus/publicar/Informes/Veleia_Inf_24.pdf.

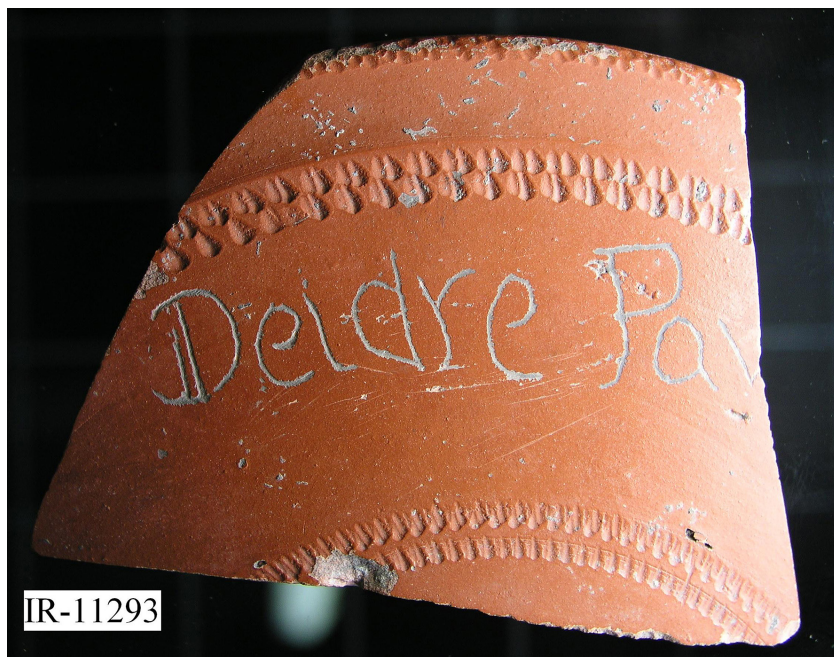


FIG. 5. *Terra sigillata* ostrakon bearing the inscription Deidre Pa[v] (Phot. DFA/AFA).

Shortly after the committee concluded its work, news broke on one of the online forums following the twists and turns of the Iruña-Veleia case that Cerdán's reports were false. This suspicion was later confirmed by the laboratories that had allegedly performed the analyses (Barandiaran, 2010: 143-148).



FIG. 6. Ostrakon with text in Basque (Phot. DFA/AFA).

Undoubtedly, the area that aroused the most interest was that related to epigraphy, hieroglyphics, and Latin, Hebrew and Basque linguistics. In this field, the primary evidence of forgery consisted of anachronisms, as well as glaring errors in Latin grammar that suggested absolute ignorance of the language on the part of the forgers: more than Latin expressions, the inscriptions consisted of clumsily Latinised Spanish (Gorrachategui, 2011a and 2011b; Santos Yanguas, 2014).

In this area, the palaeographic anachronisms stand out, including the combined use of upper- and lower-case letters, for example, on the *terra sigillata* ostrakon bearing the word *Deidre* –IR 12099 (Fig. 5)–, which, making matters worse, is a contemporary female Irish name. The use of commas and other punctuation marks, like the use of modern mathematical symbols indicating logical implication, point in the same direction.

Similarly surprising were certain anachronistic spellings. For instance, the *y* –*yod* in Hebrew– used in the names *Yavhe* and *Yav* on some ostraca –IR 3361, IR 3362 or IR 3363– would never have been used in antiquity, as Hebrew names beginning with *yod* were transcribed in Latin with the Latin *i*. This same problematic use of *y* was detected in the spelling of *Cayo* –IR 13380– for the Latin name *Caius* or *Gaius*. Spellings such as *Anquises* for *Anchises* were likewise impossible. In the same vein, versions of names that were morphologically unlikely in Latin, or even Spanish



FIG. 7. *Terra sigillata* ostracon with Egyptian hieroglyphics (Phot. DFA/AFA).

prior to the 11th or 12th century, were also found, such as *Pluton* and *Varron* –IR 11429; IR 11417– or *Marte* –IR 12379–. The Basque texts used the *z* –*zure*, *zutan*– (Fig. 6), when somewhat later Aquitanian epigraphs use *s*. On the whole, the spelling, phonetics, morphology, syntax and lexicon of the Basque allegedly used in ancient Veleia offer clear evidence that they in no way pertained to the Basque in use in the ancient period as a whole.

Just as anachronistic were the Latin transcriptions of the names of Egyptian royalty, such as Ramses and Seti –IR 12388–, which do not match what is known about ancient Egyptian and which differ in their details from their Greek transcriptions, too. The names of the queens Nefertiti and Nefertari –IR 12391; IR 12392–, for instance, in addition to having been forgotten in Greco-Roman antiquity, are modern transcriptions, known only in the 20th century. Moreover, the hieroglyphics are generally not coherent expressions, but rather mere collections of symbols (Fig. 7).

As already noted, the Latin epigraphs from Iruña-Veleia lack syntax and are rife with solecisms. They include virtually no sentences, except for a few maxims and sayings that, compounding matters, are not from the classical period. Of all the findings, these sayings are the most obvious evidence of forgery. In addition to the well-known motto of the Jesuits, *Ad maiorem dei gloriam* –IR 12390–, they include the equally well-known saying *Homo*

proponit / sed Deus disponit –IR 11811–, attributed to Thomas Kempis. Finally, the phrase *Si vis pacem, para iustitiam* –IR 12394– literally adorns the façade of the International Court of Justice in the Hague, modelled after the ancient *Si vis pacem, para bellum* attributed to Vegetius.

The Scientific Advisory Committee met for the last time on 19

November 2008. Its final session was devoted to laying out the conclusions of the different sectorial reports. It is worth noting Gil Zubillaga's tacit recognition of the possibility that the ostraca had been forged by third parties, although he did not sign the meeting minutes²¹. That afternoon, the Scientific Advisory Committee presented its conclusions to the Basque Language, Culture and Sport Committee of the Provincial Assembly of Álava, where both the head of Basque Language, Culture and Sport at the DFA and various members of the Scientific Advisory Committee had the chance to present their views²².

The immediate consequence was Provincial Government Order 499/2008, of 19 November, revoking Lurmen's permit to conduct excavations at the Iruña-Veleia site, as well as its permit to temporarily occupy it. This was widely covered by the press, which stressed the content of the reports, especially those of the UPV/EHU faculty members, and the DFA's desire to more actively manage the site²³.

²¹ http://www.araba.eus/publicar/Actas/afadfa_iv_Akta_2008_11_19.pdf.

²² <http://www.sos-irunaveleia.org/sesion-de-la-comision-de-cultura>.

²³ *El Correo*, 20 November 2008, "Estalla el escándalo de Iruña-Veleia por la falsedad de los hallazgos" ("Scandal erupts over fraudulent Iruña-Veleia finds").

6. Reasons for the forgery

The first surprising feature of the Iruña-Veleia case was how little control was exercised over the situation from November 2006 on, when the first suspicions casting doubt on the authenticity of the ostraca were made public. Although the press reported that the finds had received the full support of the DFA, despite the Basque Government's counsel to the contrary²⁴, there are no signs of political manipulation of the implications of the find.

It cannot be inferred from the minutes of the meetings of the Basque Language, Culture and Sport Committee of the Provincial Assembly of Álava that dealt with the Iruña-Veleia case that any political group, nationalist or otherwise, adopted an especially interested position in defending the authenticity of the finds or to benefit from them. The Partido Socialista de Euskadi –Basque Socialist Party– seems to have defended the *verista* theses, but without any sort of ideological involvement. In this regard, it is worth recalling that the Scientific Advisory Committee was set up when the DFA was controlled by a coalition of *abertzale* –in Basque, 'patriotic' and, thus, by extension 'Basque nationalist'– parties and that it was they who exposed the forgery.

Therefore, it would seem that in this case the government was not exerting any pressure on the archaeologists to support a given ideological position, as has been the case in many other places (Kohl and Fawcett, 1995). On the contrary, I think there is sufficient evidence to suggest just the opposite, i.e. that the archaeologists pressured the public authorities. Their motive was neither to make a name for themselves in academia nor to nudge research towards postulates that they alone defended against the rest of the academic world, for their previous postures were

fully consistent with the standard lines of research (Gil Zubillaga, 2002). Rather, the reason is to be found in questions of a professional nature: the need to ensure the advantageous situation guaranteed them under the agreement with EuskoTren and ETS, unprecedented in Spain.

The aforementioned press items show that, although Gil Zubillaga publicly denied having been pressured by EuskoTren to present the finds, 'people close to him' acknowledge that such pressures did exist. *Gara* reported that the agreement and the generous funding provided under it had encouraged the emergence of the 'exceptional finds', suggesting that at some point the agreement's continuity may have been in doubt. The 18 December 2008 edition of *El Correo* –"El Tribunal de Cuentas criticó en 2001 la ayuda de EuskoTren a la empresa de Gil" ["In 2001, the Court of Auditors criticised the funding provided by EuskoTren to Gil's company"] reported that the Tribunal de Cuentas del País Vasco (Court of Auditors of the Basque Country, hereinafter TCPV)–, the body that oversees public spending, had criticised the agreement. The TCPV considered it inconsistent with the aims pursued by the public rail company and criticised the fact that it had been awarded without a public tender, which would have ensured the application of the principles of publicity and free competition and in which other companies, in addition to Lurmen, might have participated.

The purpose of that agreement had been to promote the image of EuskoTren, on the heels of the successful financing of the restoration of the Vitoria-Gasteiz cathedral (Barandiaran, 2010: 13 ff.); however, it did not seem to have achieved that goal to date²⁵. Consequently, there was a situation of privilege, an unstable relationship and a need to promote the agreement's sponsor. If these

²⁴ *El Correo*, 23 November 2008, "Así se montó el calvario de Veleia" ("The making of the Veleia Calvary") and *Gara*, 18 December 2008, "El PSE insinúa que la alta financiación de Veleia 'estimuló' los resultados" ("PSE [Basque Socialist Party] hints that the heavy funding for Veleia 'encouraged' the results").

²⁵ In a personal e-mail dated 26 September 2015, A. Barandiaran told me that in some of the interviews he conducted for his work people familiar with the process had acknowledged that EuskoTren had not been pleased with the promotional return it was receiving as a result of the agreement. However, as he was unable to corroborate this information by other means, he decided not to include it.

indications are true, then it would be reasonable to think that the idea for the forgery was conceived then. Obviously, if something spectacular was needed to quell the doubts, of EuskoTren and others, and to push the Iruña-Veleia excavations to the centre of the social debate in the Basque Country, the best solution was a series of finds that would revive two parts of the arcana of the mythical content of Basque nationalism: the Basque language and Christianisation. As noted earlier, artefacts had previously been found at the site that made it possible to construct a cover story to justify the appearance of the 'exceptional finds'.

Although in the world of archaeology, this case may seem strange and anomalous, in scientific fields such as biomedicine, where competition for funding to conduct costly research is fierce, fraud and manipulations are quite common. Referring to the case of Woo Suk Hwang –who published ground-breaking work on the creation of human embryonic stem-cell lines–, Franzen, Rödder and Weingart (2007) have argued that Hwang cannot be dismissed as a 'black sheep' in a milieu dominated by a strong deontology, but rather that the system itself pushes scientists towards and encourages behaviour that is hardly consistent with the supposed academic standards. The media's tendency to report only the most egregious cases gives the impression that all other research is conducted through scientifically irreproachable channels, which is increasingly untrue.

7. A new stage in the syntax: the reply

This is where the syntax of forgery usually ends, with the academic community deciding by a broad majority that a fraud has been committed. However, the overreaction of the parties involved in a matter that was not academically, politically or socially vital or a priority, but which nevertheless was not inconsequential from an ideological and emotional point of view, has left a long string of consequences that have left the Iruña-Veleia case pending in court. Given the generally parsimonious nature

of legal actions, the matter seems unlikely to be settled any time soon²⁶.

The cultural authorities and corporate sponsors filed criminal charges, accusing the management of Lurmen of fraud and damage to archaeological heritage. For now, the courts have ruled against EuskoTren and ETS in the fraud cases brought by them. In the four motions for dismissal entered in the cases, the judges and magistrates have declined to classify the events as fraud on the grounds that for fraud to exist there must be sufficient deception to mislead the target of the fraud, which then engages in a transfer of assets –in the present case, money– that, in the absence of said deception, it would not have undertaken. As the agreement between Lurmen and EuskoTren or ETS was signed in 2001, this essential criterion for the crime was not met and, therefore, the cases were dismissed. This reality is recalled in rather inappropriate language in a decision handed down in the Order of 14 May 2010 of the 2nd Section of the Provincial Court of Álava.

Thus, the only outstanding case is the one brought by the DEA against Lurmen for damage to archaeological heritage and fraud, which is being heard by the Court of First Instance n.º 1 of Vitoria-Gasteiz. This area has witnessed new developments.

In 2009, a replica Roman latrine created by Gil Zubillaga was discovered. Used by Lurmen for recreationist activities, it was painted with drawings and words similar to those found on the ostraca. This led the DEA to commission graphological reports to establish the possible authorship of the forgeries, the main conclusion of which was that a single brain had guided the steps of the instrument in both cases (Barandiaran, 2010: 171-178).

More recently, the aforementioned Court requested reports from the Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural de España –Spanish Cultural Heritage Institute, hereinafter IPCE–, the Ertzaintza (Basque

²⁶ *El Correo*, 8 June 2016, "La Fiscalía de Álava pide prorrogar un año la instrucción de la causa de Iruña-Veleia" ("The Public Prosecutor's Office of Álava asks to extend the preliminary investigation for the Iruña-Veleia case one year").

police) and the DFA, in order to complete the preliminary proceedings opened for the case. From the first body, it sought to know whether there was indeed incontrovertible evidence of forgery; from the second, it wished to know who might have caused the alleged damage; and from the third, it requested an economic assessment thereof.

The IPCE report revealed that, in the analyses conducted of a set of 39 specimens, traces of recent metals, such as steel, were found inside the engraved strokes on 36 of them, along with specks of gold, possibly from a wedding band worn by the person who had made them. They were thus classified as contemporary. As for the remaining three pieces, in one case the graffiti were classified as original, in another, as possible, and in the third as original but retouched.

Only bits and pieces of information are available regarding the other two reports, but based on what is known, the Ertzaintza expert report found evidence of crime in the forgery of most of the 400-450 ostraca classified as 'exceptional finds', as well as evidence of irreversible damage to archaeological heritage, due to the artificial modification of potsherds and other items to generate expectation regarding their interest. As for the perpetrators, the report mentions Lurmen's 'permanent team', with varying degrees of responsibility for each crime. Needless to say, the fingered parties rejected the validity of the Basque regional police report²⁷.

Finally, according to a report by the DFA, the value of the damage is estimated at around €240,000 or €270,000²⁸, an amount that, even without knowing the content, I find quite high. The standards for appraising damage at archaeological sites are based on objective criteria and certain parameters that do not seem to have been met in this case (Rodríguez Temiño, 2012).

In May 2017, the Court of First Instance No. 1 of Vitoria-Gasteiz issued an order (the final pre-trial

²⁷ *El Correo*, 4 December 2015, "Eliseo Gil se defiende y dice que el informe policial sobre el fraude de Iruña-Veleia 'carece de pruebas'" ("Eliseo Gil defends himself, says the police report on the Iruña-Veleia fraud 'lacks proof'").

²⁸ <http://www.zuzeu.eus/kultura/zalantzak-dizkit-ertzaintzaren-iruna-veleia-ko-txostenak/>.

step) formally charging Eliseo Gil and two other people.

Once the committee published its opinion, Gil Zubillaga's response was defiant²⁹. He embarked on a dogged quest to counter the negative reports with new ones that backed the allegations filed by the company in relation to the aforementioned provincial order. The number of reports swelled as a result of new reports submitted to justify the authenticity of the finds in the criminal proceedings and to society at large. In all, 53 reports, opinions and expert evidence reports have been prepared in what may be the best-documented forgery case on record.

The reports that are favourable to Lurmen can be divided, based on their content, into those defending the appropriateness of the excavation methodology applied by Gil Zubillaga and his team in their campaigns at the site; those focusing on linguistic and epigraphic considerations; archaeometric reports; and, finally, technical forensic reports that question the conclusions of the handwriting tests.

The reports in the first group emphasise the pertinence of the excavation strategy and record system. The reports contain only generic considerations and do not attempt to rebut the objections lodged in the opinions submitted to the committee. Therefore, they cannot really be considered substantiated contributions, regardless of who endorsed them.

That the excavations conducted by Lurmen, which were comparable to others carried out in Álava, Spain and abroad, were methodologically adequate is no doubt entirely true. Never before had proceedings been opened against Lurmen for poor archaeological practice, and its previous excavations have been used normally in the study of the Roman world in Álava.

However, this methodological adequacy sheds no light whatsoever on the authenticity of the ostraca. Nor has it been explained why, following the discovery of the wealth of finds of this nature at the site,

²⁹ *Soitu.es*, 20 November 2008, "El director del yacimiento de Iruña Veleia dice que el informe de la Diputación se basa en opiniones" ("The director of the Iruña Veleia site says the provincial government's report is based on opinions").

the team did not take the logical measures to document them *in situ* during the excavation process itself.

Gil Zubillaga's appeals to scientific validation of the finds have been a constant in the Iruña-Veleia case from the start. Whilst the forgery of the reports commissioned from Cerdán in both 2006 and 2008 has overshadowed these appeals, it has not put an end to them. The post-Cerdán period began with reports intended to cast doubt on the analytics of the committee's research group and observations made with magnifying glasses.

For the *veristas*, the concept of 'scientific' oscillates between the nature of the archaeological record as a source of authenticity and archaeometric analytics, the results of which are only considered conclusive when they support their positions. Gorrochategui (2011a and 2011b) has reflected on the value of scientific evidence, that is, evidence based on the application of experimental techniques, compared to the conclusions drawn from the deductive tools of philology and linguistics. His arguments are perfectly acceptable. The rules of the philological evolution of languages are a sufficient guarantee to establish the inauthenticity of the inscriptions, without the need to resort to laboratory tests.

The language issue follows the same pattern as the others, although with certain nuances due to the varying degrees of knowledge the reports' authors have about their subjects. Rodríguez Colmenero, for instance, offered new readings of the most problematic terms, thereby mitigating the appearance of blatant forgery arising from their anachronism. He agrees with many of the inconsistencies identified by the committee, but finds a certain justification for them in the existence of a *paedagogium*, and because they are the results of writing and life-drawing exercises. Both he and E. C. Harris engage in an exercise of belief in the authenticity by failing to find satisfactory answers for the reason for the forgery³⁰.

³⁰ *Gara*, 18 November 2015, "Es imposible falsificar los 400 grafitos de Iruña-Veleia" ("It is impossible to forge the 400 graffiti of Iruña-Veleia").

The reports focused on Basque philology emphasise the lack of contemporaneous epigraphic records to play down the committee's criticism of aspects related to grammar, phonetics and spelling. Possible vestiges are adduced that are impossible to rebut for lack of conclusive evidence. This documentary void encourages interpretations that run contrary to the evolutionary paradigm of Basque and open a philological fault line, interpretations with a clear significance for the ideological core of *abertzalismo* –Basque nationalism–, but which can hardly be used to prove the authenticity of the set of ostraca. Gorrochategui (2011b: 261) has admitted that the hoax might have prospered much longer had the forgery included only words in Basque, due to the difficulty of establishing known parallels.

All the participants in the academic debate over the Iruña-Veleia case know perfectly well that, in the current context, when a large group of widely acclaimed academic experts, such as the members of the committee, reach a categorical conclusion regarding an issue on which no one has challenged their expertise, filing reports with a court or posting them to websites are not the right way to reopen the doctrinal debate.

The time for reports –although not for expert evidence– in this area has passed. The way forward lies in publishing in prestigious, high-impact academic journals. The most recent papers published by *veristas* (Frank, 2011, 2012; Iglesias, 2012; Silgo, 2012) do not even begin to meet the necessary requirements to reopen the debate on the authenticity of the 'exceptional finds' from Iruña-Veleia. In the meantime, it must be acknowledged that the academic debate is in checkmate –to borrow the magnificent metaphor used by Rodríguez Colmenero– and that the syntax of forgery in this case has concluded, even if it remains ongoing in others. Indeed, the fact that the people in charge of the 2005 and 2006 excavations have not made any serious attempts to publish the ostraca in a journal of any prestige is, in my view, a tacit acknowledgement of the forgery.

In 2010, the Iruña-Veleia site was reopened to the public with a new master plan and an agreement

signed by the DFA and UPV/EHU, placing the university in charge of coordinating the work at the site for the next ten years³¹.

Meanwhile, the *verista* faction has not resigned itself to silence, despite its scant academic credit, mainly by embracing conspiracy theories. Having retreated to the blogosphere, its members struggle to keep the social debate alive. In 2009, they launched the platform *sos Iruña-Veleia*, which was followed by other websites³². This proliferation of online sites and their activity suggest that the syntax of forgery in the social sphere will not end in the near future, despite the setbacks suffered by the theses of the *veristas* and the main parties involved in the real world.

In this regard, one aspect is particularly significant. The plurality of opinion forums has not encouraged an enriching debate. On the contrary, there has been a trend towards polarisation: contact between the members of the different factions is rare and any information that might conflict with the group's interests is discredited. The *verista* websites act not as spaces for dialogue but as bulwarks and echo chambers for the feelings of victimhood that bring the group together.

In 2012 and 2016, respectively, the first and second editions of the International Conference on Iruña-Veleia were held in Vitoria-Gasteiz, organised by the *verista* associations Euskararen Jatorria, *sos Iruña-Veleia* and Martin Tipia. At the conferences, experts from different fields ratified the authenticity of the ostraca deemed to be false. These actions were reinforced with appearances in the media and mobilisations before the DFA, the courts and the site itself, intended to show that the Iruña-Veleia case was far from over. However, there is little academic or majority social support for their claims. Today, the media hardly pay any attention to the Iruña-Veleia case at all.

In this regard, it is worth noting how news about the Iruña-Veleia case is treated in media such as

³¹ *Gara*, 6 October 2009, "La UPV coordinará el Plan Director del yacimiento de Iruña-Veleia para 'alumbrar una nueva etapa'" ("UPV will coordinate the Master Plan for the Iruña-Veleia site to 'illuminate a new period'").

³² www.sos-irunaveleia.org.

Berria, whose sympathies for the *abertzale* ideology are well known. This newspaper has supported the doubts regarding the authenticity of the 'exceptional finds' almost from the start, both in articles by Alberto Barandiaran and Íñigo Istiz and in cartoons by Zaldieroa. This positioning has undermined social support for Lurmen's team, helping to minimise the confrontation. A feature story was published on the matter in the 5 June 2016 edition of *Berria*, ten years after the first news broke, entitled "Hautsa hauts gainean" – "The ash of ashes" – (Fig. 8). The story, which describes the exhaustion of the *verista* faction and the judicial ordeal plaguing the core members of Lurmen, defines the state of the question. Although more news can be expected following the court decision, the Iruña-Veleia case is virtually over.

8. Conclusions

One of the priority interests for considerations of archaeological work today is the relationship between archaeology and political power. This relationship, which grows especially acute in deeply ideologised social times, manifests in many ways. At first glance, the Iruña-Veleia case would seem to meet these parameters, given the social context in which it took place and the subject and purpose of the forgery. However, I believe it can be plausibly concluded that the case is only superficially related to Basque nationalism.

The sensitivity to nationalist topics in Basque society clearly did influence the initial acceptance of the forgery, inhibiting responses based on the impressions of inauthenticity that the ostraca gave off in the eyes of experts. However, once that early moment had passed, and especially once debate began to be encouraged outside the Basque Country, the response was overwhelming. The overreactions of both institutions and experts may be related to that initial inhibition and the sense of having been duped.

The labour conditions of professional archaeologists are very difficult to assume in the quest for a lifelong livelihood; perhaps that is why the few



FIG. 8. Front page of the 5 June 2016 edition of the newspaper Berria.

possibilities that do arise to achieve professional stability are generally seized upon. Obviously, that does not justify forgery, but the precarious conditions in which the profession is carried out cannot be ignored, conditions that become increasingly unstable as the practitioner advances to each new life stage.

The press has played a very important role in this case, albeit for various reasons. First, most of the

media relayed the 'spectacular' news—first of the 'exceptional finds' themselves and then of the forgery controversy—without independently investigating the claims. Indeed, the media outlets most enthusiastic in their reporting of the original story of the 'exceptional finds' were possibly also the ones to react most virulently upon learning of the forgery. Second, there has been no division in the written press between *falsistas* and *veristas*. Where as the clearly *abertzale* newspaper *Gara* may have shown some scepticism in reporting on the forgery, *Berria's* support has been fundamental to the *falsista* faction.

The Iruña-Veleia case has likewise shown that the syntax of forgeries involving historical objects linked to interpretations with identity implications does not end in academia, but rather lives on in certain social circles for which that symbolism is important, as it feeds mythical elements resistant to academic rigour.

Finally, I believe that the forgery of the 'extraordinary finds' has already received enough social and academic criticism, with an obvious impact on Gil Zubillaga's personal tangible and intangible property. Adding a criminal conviction would not only violate the principle of using such serious proceedings only as a last resort, but moreover would not contribute to undoing the social harm caused. This recourse to the courts is even more surprising as

there is no evidence that any sort of administrative proceedings were opened to recover the clearly misappropriated sums, such as those supposedly used to pay for analyses that were never performed, a far wilder approach than criminal proceedings.

Bibliography

- ALTUNA, J.; APELLÁNIZ, J. and BARANDIARAN, I. (1992): *Estudio de las pinturas de Zubialde (Álava). Resumen de los resultados*. Vitoria: Diput. Foral de Álava.
- BARANDIARAN AMILLANO, A. (2010): *Veleia afera*. Donostia: Elkar.
- BAZÁN, I. (ed.) (2002): *De Túbala a Aitor. Historia de Vasconia*. Madrid: La Esfera de los Libros.
- BILLIG, M. (1995): *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage Publications.
- BINGEN, J.; BÜLOW-JACOBSEN, A.; COCKLE, W. E. H.; CUVIGNY, H.; KAGSER, F. and VAN RENGEL, W. (ed.) (1997): *Mons Claudianus. Ostraca graeca et latina II* (N.º 191-416). Cairo: IFAO.
- BONNER, S. F. (1977): *Education in Ancient Rome. From the elder Cato to the younger Pliny*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd.
- CRIBIORE, R. (2001): *Gymnastics of the Mind. Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*. Princeton: UPP.
- DÍAZ-ANDREU, M. (1995): "Archaeology and nationalism in Spain". In KOHL, P. L. and FAWCETT, C. (eds.): *Nationalism, politics, and the practice of archaeology*. Cambridge: CUP, pp. 39-56.
- DICKEY, E. (ed.) (2012): *The Colloquia of the Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana*, vol. 1. Cambridge: CUP.
- FRANK, R. M. (2011): "Repasando a Joseba Lakarra: observaciones sobre algunas etimologías en euskera a partir de un acercamiento más cognitivo", *Arse*, 45, pp. 17-64.
- FRANK, R. M. (2012): "Bibliografía de 'Repasando a Joseba Lakarra: Observaciones sobre algunas etimologías en euskera a partir de un acercamiento más cognitivo'", *Arse*, 46, pp. 101-108.
- FRANZEN, M.; RÖDDER, S. and WEINGART, P. (2007): "Fraud: causes and culprits as perceived by science and the media", *EMBOreports*, 8, pp. 3-7.
- GIL ZUBILLAGA, E. (2002): "De bestias míticas y montañas infranqueables... El largo proceso de ocupación de un territorio (De la Prehistoria al final del mundo romano)". In BAZÁN, I. (ed.): *De Túbala a Aitor. Historia de Vasconia*. Madrid: La Esfera de los Libros, pp. 21-71.
- GIL ZUBILLAGA, E. and FILLOY, I. (2004): "Del pasado a nuestros días: Algunas reflexiones sobre el ejercicio profesional de la Arqueología en el territorio alavés". In PÉREZ GONZÁLEZ, C. and ILLARREGUI, E. (coords.): *Arqueología militar romana en Europa = Roman military archaeology in Europe*. Valladolid: JCYL, pp. 297-304.
- GORROCHATAGUI, A. (2011a): "Las Armas de la Filología: la cuestión del Vasco Antiguo y hallazgos de Iruña-Veleia". In LAKARRA, J. A.; GORROCHATAGUI, J. and URGELL, B. (eds.): *Koldo Mitxelena Katedraren II (Gasteiz, 2007)*. Vitoria-Gasteiz: UPV, pp. 41-70.
- GORROCHATAGUI, A. (2011b): "Hic et nunc. Falsificaciones contemporáneas. El caso de Iruña-Veleia". In CARBONELL, J.; GIMENO, H. and MORALEJO, J. L. (eds.): *El monumento epigráfico en contextos secundarios. Procesos de reutilización, interpretación y falsificación*. Bellaterra: UAB, pp. 241-261.
- GRAFTON, A. (1990): *Forgers and Critics. Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship*. Princeton (New Jersey): PUP.
- GRAFTON MILNE, J. (1908): "Relics of Graeco-Egyptian Schools", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 28, pp. 121-132.
- HOCHADEL, O. (2013): *El mito de Atapuerca. Orígenes, ciencia, divulgación*. Barcelona: UAB.
- HOVING, T. (1996): *False Impressions: The Hunt for Big-Time Art Fakes*. London: André Deutch Limited.
- IGLESIAS, H. (2012): "Les inscriptions d'Iruña-Veleia: Analyse linguistique des principales inscriptions basques découvertes", *Arse*, 46, pp. 21-82.
- JONES, Ch. (2015): "The Jesus' Wife Papyrus in the History of Forgery", *New Testament Studies*, 61, pp. 368-378.
- KASTER, R. A. (1983): "Notes on 'Primary' and 'Secondary' Schools in Late Antiquity", *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 13, pp. 323-346.
- KOHL, P. L. and FAWCETT, C. (1995): "Introduction". In KOHL, P. L. and FAWCETT, C. (eds.): *Nationalism, politics, and the practice of archaeology*. Cambridge: CUP, pp. 3-20.
- KURZ, O. (1967): *Fakes: Archeological materials, paintings, prints, glass, metal work, ceramics, furniture, tapestries*. New York: Dover Publications Inc.
- FERNÁNDEZ FLÓREZ, M. del C. (2007): "Restauración de la Catedral de Santa María de Vitoria: Abierto por Obras", *Cercha. Revista de los Aparejadores y Arquitectos Técnicos*, 92, pp. 72-78.

- LEWENSTEIN, B. (1995): "From fax to facts: communication in cold fusion saga", *Social Studies of Science*, 25, pp. 403-436.
- MEDVEDEV, I. P. (2014): "Excellent Scholar, Excellent Forger – the Case of Karl Benedict Hase". In BAK, J. M.; GEARY, P. J. and KLANICZAY, G. (eds.): *Manufacturing a Past for the Present*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 144-155.
- MONTES, R. (1993): *Falsificaciones arqueológicas en España*. Málaga: Algazara.
- MORA, G. (2011): "Falsarios y el concepto de lo falso: pasado y presente de las antiguas excavaciones al coleccionismo privado y el comercio de antigüedades". In *¿Hombres o dioses?: una nueva mirada a la escultura del mundo ibérico*. Madrid: MAR, pp. 261-278.
- RODRÍGUEZ TEMIÑO, I. (2007): "Arqueología a diario". In *Patrimonio Cultural y medios de comunicación*. Sevilla: Junta de Andalucía, pp. 164-179.
- RODRÍGUEZ TEMIÑO, I. (2012): "Propuesta para la valoración de daños en yacimientos arqueológicos", *Patrimonio Cultural y Derecho*, 16, pp. 275-293.
- SANTOS, J. (2014): "Los 'hallazgos singulares' de Iruña-Veleia: de la ilusión al fiasco". In MARCO, F.; PINA, F. and REMESAL, J. (eds.): *Fraude, mentiras y engaños en el mundo antiguo*. Barcelona: UAB, pp. 295-309.
- SCHENKE ROBINSON, G. (2015): "How a Papyrus Fragment Became a Sensation", *New Testament Studies*, 61, pp. 379-394.
- SILGO, L. (2012): "Sobre tres nombres aquitanos: Epigrafía y filología", *Arse*, 46, pp. 85-100.

