

The Very Old Folk. Roman Provincial Administration, Vascones, and Epigraphy in H. P. Lovecraft

The Very Old Folk. Administração provincial romana, Vascones e epigrafia em H. P. Lovecraft

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Abstract: On November 3, 1927, H. P. Lovecraft sent a letter to his friend Wandrei. He related a dream that had impressed him with its vivacity, about a threat haunting the mountains of the Vascones. Lovecraft as a *quaestor*, the provincial officials and a cohort of the Twelfth Legion were in the city of *Pompelo* to face it. The story allows an interesting analysis from multiple points of view: the choice of the names for the characters, the chosen date, the description of the celestial vault, the peculiarities of the Vascones or a real ancient inscription that could be behind the whole plot of the dream.

Keywords: Lovecraft; Vascones; Roman provincial administration; *Pompelo*; *Calagurris*; *Hispania Citerior*.

Lovecraft is one of the foremost writers of horror literature of all time. He was born in Providence, Rhode Island in 1890 and died in 1937. He was the author of tales such as *The Call of Cthulhu* that are often considered mandatory reading in his field. His literary production influenced the science fiction and literature ever since². His interest in History and Archaeology, as well as the introduction of real historical themes in his fantastic literature, has often been highlighted. Stories like *Nyarlahotep* (1920) or *The Rat in the Walls* (1923) are an example of this³.

Among his long list of publications is a somewhat unnoticed short story that allows one to test the level of knowledge that the writer had of the ancient world. This story has been ignored in most of the compilations, as it is considered a minor work. Its title, *The Very Old Folk*, apparently does not

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² JOSHI (2004); STRENGELL (2005) 12ff.; 103-105.

³ This topic has been specially studied in FRIGOLI (2010). In *The Rat in the Walls* there is a temple of Cibeles in a roman military camp. HADEN ([2013] 109ff.) has argued that the data in that text prove that Lovecraft read academic works in the field of Archaeology.

refer to any content related to Antiquity, nor has it been analysed by historians who have dealt with the subject of the Vascones and their significance in later literature.

The very old folk

The text contains 2537 words and was written on November 3, 1927⁴. The most common version was addressed to Donald Wandrei, identified under the nickname of *Melmoth*⁵. Wandrei, in a previous letter, told Lovecraft that he was delving into the past of *Elagabalus*⁶, whom Lovecraft calls “cursed little Syrian rat”⁷. Lovecraft replied, explaining that a recent reading of the *Aeneid*, along with “the spectral thoughts incident to All Hallow’s Eve with its Witch-Sabbaths on the hills” produced on him a terrifying dream for its “clearness” and “vividness”⁸. Although he had had dreams related to the Roman world in his youth, they had not been repeated and this one impressed him “with extraordinary force”⁹.

The dream narrative begins in a “flaming sunset or late afternoon in the tiny provincial town of Pompelo, at the foot of the Pyrenees in Hispania Citerior”. According to Lovecraft, the date of the episode must have been during the late Republic, on October 31. The city’s inhabitants were varied, from Romans who wore togas to Romanised natives, “hybrids of the two strains”, soldiers, and members of the tribe of the Vascones. Lovecraft writes in the first person, he feels the dream as if it was a memory of a past life, under the personality of *L. Caelius Rufus*, a *quaestor* destined to the city of

⁴ The text was published for the first time in 1940 in *Scienti-Snaps*, III, 3, republished and corrected in JOSHI et al. (1994) n. 8. All quotations from the story will be taken from JOSHI (1995) 46-51.

⁵ The same story was sent with some variations in other letters to Frank Belknap Long and Bernard Austin Dwyer, but in this paper I will focus only on the text sent to Wandrei, the one that appears in the published abridgments.

⁶ In the tale he is not named that, but as *Varius Auitus Bassianus*, the private name of the Emperor.

⁷ JOSHI (1995) 46.

⁸ BULKELEY ([2016] 52-53) emphasises that this dream was one of the five more impressives in the life of Lovecraft, of the large number of them that he described in his letters.

⁹ JOSHI (1995) 46.

Calagurris. There he coincided with *Sextus Asellius*, the military tribune of the Twelfth Legion and *Balbutius*, the legate of the whole region. At that moment the three were in *Pompelo* along with the governor *P. Escribonius Libo*, who had arrived a few days earlier. The reason for their presence there was that the surrounding mountains were inhabited by a savage race who at that time of the year celebrated hideous rituals that caused dread among the villagers. They “were the very old folk who dwelt higher up in the hills and spoke a choppy language which the Vascones could not understand”¹⁰. These dark mountain dwellers were tinged with mystery and cruelty. Every spring and autumn they celebrated their rites with howls and bonfires. Days before that, some people disappeared and never were found again, victims in their covens. That year, the city had requested the presence of a Roman cohort because a few months earlier, three of these members of the very old folk had died in a brawl in the market of *Pompelo*. The two who survived went back silently to the mountains, and that year there had been no disappearances. Many nights a drumbeat was heard far away that made the people of *Pompelo* think that this break in the routine signalled some kind of revenge against them. The *aedile Tib. Annaeus Stilpo* had sent to *Calagurris* an emissary requesting a cohort to protect them. *Balbutius* refused, but *Rufus* (Lovecraft himself) sent a letter to governor *Escribonius*, who ordered *Balbutius* to go with a cohort, with *Asellius* in command. The crossing of letters had generated such interest in the governor that he decided to go in person. He ordered *Rufus* to do the same. *Balbutius* also came, to insist on his opinion that they should not be there.

Once all were assembled, the arguments of each were restated, but there was no change in the decision of *Escribonius* to act. At that moment a strange beat of drums was heard again. The cohort formed to the east of the city circus, and they began to march northward. *Rufus* was stationed “with the cohort in the provisional capacity of a *centurio primipilus*” and a young local named *Vercellius*, “son of pure Roman parents”, agreed to guide them¹¹. Once they reached the hillside and entered the forest, the ascent of the 300

¹⁰ JOSHI (1995) 47.

¹¹ JOSHI (1995) 50.

men who made up the cohort became very complicated. Suddenly the horses in the rear cried, “they had screamed, not neighed, but screamed...”¹² and several bonfires began to appear on nearby peaks. *Vercellius*, the guide, stole a sword from a *subcenturio* and used it to commit suicide. They began to be attacked by shadows, while the torches of the Romans were blown out by a wind like a beating of great wings. Chaos took over the legionaries. The drums increased their intensity and the fires silhouetted “mad, leaping, and colossal forms of such nameless beasts as had never a Phrygian priest or Campanian grandam whispered of in the wildest of furtive tales”¹³. While the killing was taking place, the governor stated resignedly, “*Malitia uetus - malitia uetus est... uenit... tandem uenit...*”¹⁴. And at that moment Lovecraft woke up. He attributed the dream to subconscious long and forgotten memory. He ends by stating that there is no record of the cohort, but it saved the city, “for encyclopædias tell of the survival of Pompelo to this day, under the modern Spanish name of Pompelona...”¹⁵. The closing formula is “Yrs for Gothick Supremacy” and is signed with the pseudonym of *C · Iulius · Verus · Maximinus*¹⁶.

Historical erudition and errors of classical culture

The first impulse of the neophyte reader of Lovecraft is to interpret these dreams as a mere literary resource of the author, an artificial way of introducing us into a oneiric environment, blurring the boundary between the real and the invented. Modern studies on psychology, on the other hand, go in another direction. On the basis of the modern research on psychology and dreams, Bulkeley explains how the previous investigations “substantiate the idea that Lovecraft was accurately describing dream phenomena with an actual basis in human psychology, although he clearly occupied the more extreme end of the spectrum”¹⁷. Bulkeley, on Lovecraft, states that

¹² JOSHI (1995) 50.

¹³ JOSHI (1995) 51.

¹⁴ JOSHI (1995) 51.

¹⁵ JOSHI (1995) 51.

¹⁶ About racism in Lovecraft, see LÉVY (1988) 26-30; TYSON (2010) 14-15.

¹⁷ BULKELEY (2016) 55.

“Neuroscience has indicated that the sleeping brain has powerful capacities to stimulate visual imagination, conceptual creativity, primal emotions, and early life memories, all of which we find in abundance in Lovecraft’s dreams (...), I propose that Lovecraft can best be understood as an unusually gifted big dreamer who specialized in the exploring the elemental axis of prototypical dreaming”¹⁸. We must accept, therefore, that the dream found in this narrative must be understood not as a literary text but as a real dream that the author had, in which elements of his own fantasy are mixed with real knowledge based on his scholarly readings of the classical world, selected and recovered by his subconscious, all of which was linked to a memory capacity far above normal¹⁹.

In the initial words that Lovecraft dedicates to his friend, he seeks to convey an image of erudition that is not accessible to the average reader. In this way, instead of using usual terms, decides to apply more complicated ones. Probably because it was a private letter addressed exclusively to Wandrei. In this way, he mentions *Varius Auitus Bassianus*, the name of Emperor *Elagabalus* before taking the throne. The same happens when using the name of *P. Maro* instead of *Virgilius* the famous poet, or the one of *C. Iulius Verus Maximinus*, instead of *Maximinus Thrax*.

Something similar happens with the date of the letter and the dream: the heading indicates that it is Thursday 3 November, 1927. Lovecraft says that the dream happened “last Monday night”, which should have been 31 October. Later, in the introduction of the narrative explains, in the Roman way, that “the day was the first before the Kalends of November”. Since the *kalendae* were the first day of the month, the dream also occurred on a 31 October in the past. In this way, the true elements of the dream are reinforced.

As we have seen, Lovecraft had notions about the administrative system of the Roman provinces, before and after the reform of Augustus. Shortly after the end of the Sertorian war, the governors were senators with the title of *propraetor* or *proconsul*²⁰. Both are present in the text: the governor

¹⁸ BULKELEY (2016) 55-56.

¹⁹ TYSON (2010) 11.

²⁰ SALINAS DE FRÍAS (1995) 103; There are some exceptions such as the designation of *Cneus Calpurnius Piso* as *quaestor propraetore*.

is appointed as *proconsul*, but later the “next *propraetor*” is mentioned, apparently in contradiction²¹. In any case, after the conference of Lucca (56 BC) most of the governors of *Hispania* will govern, not as *proconsuls* or *propraetores*, but as *legati cum imperio*, depending on the general who received the province²². But it is not strange that they were called *proconsul* if that was their rank, and even in the *fasti triumphales* of this time, they are cited as *procos. ex Hispania* (CIL I pp. 178-179). If we force the interpretation of Lovecraft, we might think that *Scribonius* was governor with the rank of *proconsul* and his successor, whose identity would already be known by *Scribonius*, would be that of *propraetor*.

It is precisely in that fragment that we find another piece of information: *Scribonius* ordered *Balbutius* to send the fifth cohort, “bringing such prisoners as he might take to Tarraco for the next *propraetor*'s court”. Here, consciously or unconsciously (or, perhaps, according to the subconscious), the writer succeeds again. The chronological element is not random, since the new governors left Rome to their destination in autumn²³, so the moment of entry of the new governor in the province could be perfectly in the dates in which *Escríbonius* was in *Pompelo*. The new governor would be in charge of judging the prisoners, while *Escríbonius* would become a *priuatús* that should return to Rome.

Lovecraft describes the governor and the group of people who accompanied him in the following way: “So here we all were in the mystic sunset of the autumn hills – old *Scribonius Libo* in his *toga praetexta*, the golden light glancing on his shiny bald head and wrinkled hawk face, *Balbutius* with his gleaming helmet and breastplate, blue-shaven lips compressed in conscientiously dogged opposition, young *Asellius* with his polished greaves and superior sneer, and the curious throng of townsfolk, legionaries, tribesmen, peasants, lictors, slaves, and attendants. I myself seemed to wear a common *toga*, and to have no especially distinguishing

²¹ At the end of the republican period there are governors whom the sources denominate indistinctly *propraetor* or *proconsul*, see DÍAZ FERNÁNDEZ (2015) 73.

²² SALINAS DE FRÍAS (1995) 106ff.

²³ GIOVANNINI (1983) 83-90.

characteristic”²⁴. Here we can also specify some things. The governor dresses with the *toga praetexta*. It was not, therefore, an informal occasion, but he was acting officially, as a high magistrate. If the story had been after the reform of Augustus, his official dress would be the “military uniform, and a sword, with which they (were) permitted to execute even soldiers”²⁵.

Lovecraft states that *Libo* was a senatorial proconsul, rather than a “praetorian legate of Augustus”. This statement is not entirely correct since the province in the time of Augustus was not ruled by a praetorian legate, but by a senator of the highest rank, a former consul, with the title of *legatus Augusti propraetore*²⁶. The profile of the governor under Augustus was even greater than the one he had at the end of the republican period. An example of this is that at the end of Augustus' life, the four *capaces imperii* mentioned by Tacitus had only one common position in their *cursus honorum*, that of the governor of the province *Hispania citerior*²⁷. As for the rest of the staff, Lovecraft does not deviate much from the short list of officials that appears in any handbook of the republican provincial administration²⁸: a *quaestor* (a finance officer, elected by the Senate) and one of the legates. The legates were positions privately elected by the governor and replaced him in those civil or military functions that he ordered. In the story, the post of *Balbutius* is limited to being in charge of a legion. Caesar, in his fight against *Ariouistus*, placed his *legati* and his *quaestor* in charge of his legions²⁹. Similarly, Cicero sent his brother *Quintus* in charge of the winter barracks as he was his legate³⁰.

Lovecraft also places on the scene *Sextus Asellius* as a *tribunus militum* on the head of a cohort. Lovecraft's alter ego was a *quaestor*, and therefore a senator. It is striking that at the time of the incursion of the cohort, he was named centurion *primus pilus*. This used to be the centurion of the first

²⁴ JOSHI (1995) 48.

²⁵ Dio Cass. 53, 13, 6 (all translations into English from the classics sources are taken from the Loeb Classical Library except when mentioned).

²⁶ OZCÁRIZ GIL (2013) 113ff.

²⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 1, 12-13; OZCÁRIZ GIL (2016) 101-136.

²⁸ RICHARDSON (1976) 28-31; SALINAS DE FRÍAS (1995) 153.

²⁹ Caes. *Gal.* 1.52.

³⁰ Cic., *Ad Att.* 114 (5, 21). On this topic, see RICHARDSON (1976) 30.

centuria from the first cohort and was the maximum rank to which a soldier could aspire. The position of *subcenturio* that *D. Vibulanus* holds is also unusual. The only case we have found in classical sources appears in Livy³¹. The *cohors amicorum* or the *comites* (friends who acted as advisors to the governor) could be implicitly found in the text.

Furthermore, there are details that try to give an erudite touch on the ancient world and that should be mentioned. One of the most obvious is the use of the Laocoon as an example of anguish and despair: “all the cohort was struggling and screaming in the dark, as if acting out the fate of Laocoön and his sons”, but also the last words of the governor in Latin: “*Malitia uetus malitia uetus est... uenit... tandem uenit...*”. We have not found such a quotation in any Latin sources, but it is remarkable that the words *tandem uenit* seem to appear together only on four occasions³², two of which interest us. One of them relates to the situation of terror caused in North Africa in 205 BC when it was rumored that Scipio was disembarking to attack Carthage³³. The second is even more suggestive: in a dialogue of the Troades of Seneca³⁴, when the city of Troy fell and its women were crying and groaning in pain, in a conversation about despair, the desire to die and not being able to achieve it, and the fear of death, Andromache says that there is still a greater evil to come. At night, when “the seven stars had turned their shining car³⁵; at last long unfamiliar calm came (*tandem uenit*) to my troubled heart, and a brief slumber (*somnus*) stole o'er my weary cheeks — if, indeed, the stupor of a mind all dazed be slumber - when suddenly (...)”. The following verses describe a dream in which a spectral Hector warns her about the danger his son was in. In his description, Seneca uses words like “war”, “torches”, “slaughter”, “flaming”, “weeping”, “disorder”, “shadows”, “ancient blood”. The similarities with Lovecraft’s text are obvious.

³¹ Liv. 8, 8, 18.

³² According to the PHI Latin Texts database (<http://latin.packhum.org/search?q=tandem+uenit>)

³³ Liv. 29, 4, 3, 1.

³⁴ Sen., *Tro.* 440.

³⁵ About the description of the celestial vault in the text of Lovecraft, see below.

In the text, we can see that Lovecraft was familiar with the bronze legal epigraphy. Within *Rufus's* argument to conclude with sabbaths, the following fragment is found: "(...) dooms which ought not to exist within the territories of the Roman People; and to permit orgies of the kind known to prevail at Sabbaths would be but little in consonance with the customs of those whose forefathers, *A. Postumius* being consul, had executed so many Roman citizens for the practice of the *Bacchanalia*—a matter kept ever in memory by the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus*, graven upon bronze and set open to every eye"³⁶. The inscription mentioned actually exists with the reference CIL I² 581 and was found in Tirolo, Italy, in 1648. As Lovecraft points out, it contains the prohibition of the public or private celebration of the *bacchanalia* to the federated cities from the year 186 BC, requiring capital punishment for those who organised them. It includes an exception: if a community believed the celebration was necessary, they could go to Rome and explain their case in front of the urban *praetor* and, with the assistance of no less than one hundred senators, receive a ruling. And, as Lovecraft remarks, it was prescribed that the *Senatus Consultum* should be engraved in bronze and placed in a public place so that everybody could read it (*ubi facillime nosci possit*). Lovecraft's text, therefore, is well selected, however, he makes a mistake. For some reason he only mentions *Postumius*, the second of the two consuls of that year, and not the first, *Quintus Marcius*. In addition, his *praenomen* was not *A(ulus)*, as Lovecraft writes, but *S(purius)*. In the original inscription, there is no doubt about this interpretation. Perhaps Lovecraft was confused about *A(ulus) Postumius*, to which there are notable examples³⁷.

Another noteworthy aspect is the description of the sky³⁸: "(...) and as the torches faded I watched what I thought were fantastic shadows outlined in the sky by the spectral luminosity of the *Via Lactea* as it flowed through

³⁶ JOSHI (1995) 49.

³⁷ Liv., 2, 19-20; Sal., *Jug.*, 36-38. The same *praenomen* and *nomen* carried the consuls of the years 464, 242, 180, 151 and 99 BC, and one of the *tribuni militum consulari potestate* of the year 397 BC.

³⁸ I would like to thank D. Javier Armentia, astrophysicist and director of the Planetarium of Pamplona for his help in interpreting this passage.

Perseus, Cassiopeia, Cepheus, and Cygnus. Then suddenly all the stars were blotted from the sky—even bright Deneb and Vega ahead, and the lone Altair and Fomalhaut behind us”³⁹. Lovecraft’s fondness for astronomy is well known⁴⁰. And it is not surprising that here again, Lovecraft shows erudition. The sky described in this paragraph corresponds to the dusk of 31 October. In 2000 years there is not a significant variation of the arrangement of the celestial vault, therefore that would be the sky *Rufus* would have had above his head at that time. What does vary significantly is geographical latitude. Here we could discuss whether the sky described is that of *Pompelo* or Providence, where the author made most of his astronomical observations. But the latitudes of Pamplona (42.81 N) and Providence (41.82 N) are very similar and, although separated by 5,564 km, the stars would appear the same at both locations. Therefore, one may doubt whether he considered the latitude of Pamplona in his description of the sky. Most likely, and since it coincided with the place he knew best, he could easily write this fragment without considering the issue.

In the same fragment, Lovecraft includes a key piece of information to show his knowledge of astronomy: the reference to the star Fomalhaut. According to the perpetual solar calendar, on 31 October, 45 BC the sun set at 6:02 pm. According to the story, when leaving *Pompelo* it was already the sunset and it is indicated that it took them an hour to reach the hillside. The ambush happened after half an hour of ascent, so it would not be unreasonable to think that the incident would have occurred between 7 and 8 pm. At that latitude, at 7:30 the star Fomalhaut is in the sky only between 24 September and 22 of January.

The selection of the names for the main characters of the story is also interesting. Lovecraft chooses names based on real ones taken from ancient literature and epigraphy, but inserting a different element to make them unique and without parallels. *Tib. Annaeus Stilpo*: the *nomen* has probably been chosen as a reference to the Hispanic origin of the Seneca family from

³⁹ JOSHI (1995) 51. The names of the four stars mentioned (Deneb, Vega, Altair and Fomalhaut) are of Arab origin, and could not be cited in that way in Roman times.

⁴⁰ LÉVY (1998) 19; WILLIAMS (2011) 33-36. Some of Lovecraft’s publications on the subject were included in volume: JOSHI (2005).

Corduba, referred to above. And the *cognomen Stilpus* is probably a reference to the same name philosopher mentioned in some of Seneca's letters⁴¹. *Sex. Asellius*: there are numerous examples of *Asellii* in the Empire, but we have found no case with the *praenomen S(extus)*. *Cn. Balbutius*: There is only one example in Cicero⁴². *L. Caelius Rufus*: Probably refers to a famous *Caelius Rufus* (not Lucius, but Marcus), a friend of Crassus and Cicero⁴³. Again, no brother or relative with the *praenomen L(ucius)* is known. *M. Heluius Cinna*: Lovecraft probably has in mind the name of the poet of the first century BC, *C. Heluius Cinna*, and again changes the *praenomen* to make him different. *P. Scribonius Libo*: In the politics of Rome, the name *Scribonius Libo* was common thanks to a senatorial dynasty that occupied numerous positions between the third and the first century BC⁴⁴. All of them used the *praenomen L(ucius)*, and not *P(ublius)*. *D. Vibulanus*: The *Vibulani* of the *gens Fabia* were patricians and several of them reached the consulate during the fifth century BC. Again, none of them used the *praenomen D(ecimus)*.

It seems clear that Lovecraft had a systematic method for choosing names for roman historical characters. In some cases he uses real names taken from the sources, choosing a different *praenomen* (*Scribonius Libo*, *Heluius Cinna*, *Caelius Rufus*, *Asellius* or *Vibulanus*). He does this even in the only case in which he quotes a real historical personage, the consul *Postumius*. We can also see that, for the names of senators, he was inspired by some of the late republican times such as *Heluius Cinna* or *Caelius Rufus*. He himself states in another letter to Maurice W. Moe in 1930 that “the modern age is none of my goddam business — I am an old man lingering amongst the good old 1900's and the eighteenth century and the Ciceronian aera at Rome”⁴⁵.

The Vascones in Lovecraft's Story

Choosing the Vascones as the context of a dream related to a mystery and old occult traditions is quite appropriate. Since the sixteenth century, the

⁴¹ Sen., *Ep.*, 1, 9; 9, 18.

⁴² Cic., *Clu.*, 166.

⁴³ Plin., *N.H.*, 7, 165; Dio Cass., 42, 25; See Cic., *Pro Cael.*

⁴⁴ Ad. ex. Ap., *Hist.*, 59; Livy, *Per.*, 49.

⁴⁵ LOVECRAFT (1971) 104.

survival of the Basque language in the central and northern half of present-day Navarre, Euskadi and the French provinces of Labourd, Basse-Navarre and La Soule, along with cultural traditions of this area, has attracted the attention of writers and scholars⁴⁶. In this way, a mythology was created presenting the Basques as an indomitable tribe, which had resisted the Roman conquest, since theirs was the only surviving pre-Roman language in Spain⁴⁷. Navarro Villoslada, a Romantic novelist from the nineteenth century in the style of Sir Walter Scott, described it as follows: “Imperial provinces, educated nations, all known peoples bowed and gave in their necks to the whip, rather than to the yoke of the conqueror. The Basques only remained standing and dared to look ahead, and threw the glove at its face, raising a banner of holy freedom on the crest of the Pyrenees. And they knew how to keep it standing up there (...)”⁴⁸. The non-Indo-European character of the Basques brought about theories that were widespread like that they were direct descendants of Tubal, fifth son of Japheth, son of Noah⁴⁹, or that Basque was the language spoken on earth before the Tower of Babel⁵⁰, or a more recent one that many Basque myths date back to the Palaeolithic⁵¹. Much of the popular culture since the end of the nineteenth century has ascribed this mysterious and archaic character to the Basques⁵². But Roman literary sources and academic studies go the other way. We do not find in the classical authors any mention of this supposed resistance, nor does archaeology transmit anything other than full integration into Roman culture. Modern academic studies show the Vascones tribe as an ethnic group that mainly inhabited the territory of the present Navarre, a narrow strip of Guipúzcoa between Irún and the Bidasoa, the western zone of Aragón and part of

⁴⁶ Among the foreigners stands out the work of HUMBOLDT (1821).

⁴⁷ ANDREU (2008) 41-54.

⁴⁸ NAVARRO VILLOSLADA (1947) 914-915.

⁴⁹ MORET (1766) 10.

⁵⁰ CARO BAROJA (1972); JUARISTI (1992).

⁵¹ Barandiarán, great researcher on Basque mythology, considered that the chthonic elements on it had a palaeolithic origin, while the celestial elements would go back to the Neolithic. See ALMAGRO-GORBEA (2013) 419.

⁵² WULFF (2000) 183-211.

La Rioja⁵³. Its main city was Pamplona, the present capital of Navarre. The presence of the Vascones in the classical sources is not scarce, but not as clear as would be desirable⁵⁴.

From this approach to the Vascones, it is interesting to analyse the image that Lovecraft transmits of them. At all times, it seems that there is a duality between the so-called “ancient race” and the Vascones. In some passages they seem to be two totally different groups:

The cause of the conference was a horror that brooded on the hills. All the townfolk were frightened, and had begged the presence of a cohort from Calagurris. (...) the wild people in the mountains were preparing for the frightful ceremonies which only rumour told of in the towns. They were the very old folk who dwelt higher up in the hills and spoke a choppy language which the Vascones could not understand. One seldom saw them (...) every spring and autumn they held the infamous rites on the peaks, their howlings and altar-fires throwing terror into the villages⁵⁵.

The data that reinforces this possibility is that the vascones could not understand their language. Lovecraft thus establishes a duality between the inhabitants of the mountains and those of the “old folk”. However, in other passages, this difference is blurred and it seems that it is not a question of two different “folks”, but a question of gradation, from greater to lesser civilisation or, using the same terminology as Lovecraft, from more to less “old”:

(...) there were whispers that the native shepherds and farmers were not ill-disposed toward the very old folk—that more than one thatched hut was vacant before midnight on the two hideous Sabbaths⁵⁶.

That is, they also participated in these rites. If both groups had been radically different, *Balbutius* and *Asellius* would not be so frightened about a rebellion of the Vascones after quelling the rites of the mountain-dwellers, since the military action was supposed to defend them. As they argued, “we could better afford to antagonise the minority of colonists and civilised natives by inaction, than to antagonise a probable majority of tribesmen and

⁵³ In addition to the classic work of PERÉX AGORRETA (1986), in the last few years the subject has had a great development thanks to the congresses organised by Dr. ANDREU (2006), (2009) and (2013).

⁵⁴ BLÁZQUEZ (2007-2008) 103-150.

⁵⁵ JOSHI (1995) 47.

⁵⁶ JOSHI (1995) 47.

cottagers by stamping out the dread rites". To which *Rufus* responds "that the barbarous Vascones were at best turbulent and uncertain, so that skirmishes with them were inevitable sooner or later whichever course we might take (...). Only participants need be apprehended, and the sparing of a great number of mere spectators would considerably lessen the resentment which any of the sympathising country folk might feel (...)"

This mountain/city duality that Lovecraft presents is also found in the historiography of the Vascones, although it emerged decades after the writer's letter. The bibliography of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries presents the Vascones without too many nuances. It is at the beginning of the 1970s when the terminology is fixed⁵⁷, and the territory of the Vascones is presented divided into two regions. On the one hand, the *ager uasconum*⁵⁸, the southern area, rich in agriculture and with most of the cities. On the other hand, the *saltus uasconum*, the mountainous area that would correspond to the previous description of the mountain-dwellers according to Strabo⁵⁹. Recently this division between *saltus* and *ager* has been discarded by historiography⁶⁰. Undoubtedly, an ethnic group that covered a territory from the Pyrenean mountains to the Ebro Valley, passing through the foothills of the Pyrenees, must have undergone a gradation in the process of Roman acculturation, but this division is not found as such in the ancient sources.

On the language of the Vascones, the Basques have a reputation as archaic in all the literature. So it is strange to find another language older than the Basque in the story. But even today for urban Basque-speakers, the Basque spoken in the rural and mountain areas could be defined as "choppy language which the Vascones (from the cities) could not understand"⁶¹. The endogamy and geography of the Basque territory throughout the centuries have produced a great fragmentation of dialects, which has been especially

⁵⁷ CARO BAROJA (1971) 27-49.

⁵⁸ Liv., 91.

⁵⁹ Plin., *N.H.*, 4, 20; Aus., *Ep.*, 29, 50-52; Paul., *Ep.*, 10, 203.

⁶⁰ ANDREU and PERÉX AGORRETA (2009) 154; 163-164; SANTOS YANGUAS (2008) 165-171; URTEAGA (2008) 171-184.

⁶¹ JOSHI (1995) 47.

intense in the mountainous zone⁶². As Joanes Leizarraga said in the sixteenth century, everyone knows in the land of the Basques how different and diverse is the way of talking from one house to another⁶³. Today, it is not easy to identify the ancient Vascones with the Basque language, since the names and toponyms of their territory in roman times reflect a great mixture of Indo-European, Iberian, Celtiberian and Proto-Basque elements⁶⁴.

We must mention that Lovecraft's story contains several similarities with another famous local story, the Battle of Roncesvalles. Both took place in the same geographical context: the mountain forests of Navarre, with the same attackers (a mass of Vascones) and with a civilised army as the victim, sure of its forces when entering such a place. In one of his letters to Vincent Starrett, Lovecraft confesses that he has an old edition (the ninth) of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, in which he finds answers to his doubts. In this same edition⁶⁵, under the title "ROLAND, Legend of" states the following:

The main incident of this legend is founded upon an undoubted historical event, -the Spanish expedition of Charlemagne (778). The Frankish king, having crossed the Pyrenees and captures Pamplona, was beaten back from the walls of Saragossa. On his return the "Gascons" (Basques) surprised his rearguard, and, according to the testimony of Eginhard, cut it off to a man. (Vit. Car., c.i.)- In which battle were slain Eggihard, provost of the royal table... and Hruodlandus, prefect of the Britannic march. (...) From this work (the Vita Hludowici) we gather that at the time of its composition (c. 840) the Roncesvalles disaster was already the subject of popular tradition(...).

The scene of the ambush as a revenge for the destruction of Pamplona, the massacre and the death of the hero Roland, drawing his last breath as he blew the horn to warn Charlemagne in the Roncesvalles mountains, was part of the European medieval collective memory. The parallel with the death of governor *Scribonius* may be casual, but it is very striking and looks like a reinterpretation of the myth. Any connoisseur of the numerous medieval stories about Roland would link the Vascones with the image of ambush and massacre in a mountainous and wooded area.

⁶² MICHELENA (1981) 291-313.

⁶³ LEIÇARRAGA (1571) introd.

⁶⁴ GORROCHATEGUI (2006) 110-134; WULFF (2009) 47.

⁶⁵ ARCHER (1886) 626.

To conclude, it is necessary to mention that the north of Navarre has for centuries been associated with a famous episode of Sabbaths or “akelarres” that a lover of stories related to witches as Lovecraft was, would certainly have heard about. The most famous trial in the history of the Spanish Inquisition occurred in the town of Zugarramurdi, in northern Navarre⁶⁶. If Lovecraft read anything related to the Spanish Inquisition, he must have known the trial of the witches of Zugarramurdi.

Pompelo and Calagurris: Two cities and a common inscription

As we have seen, the cities of *Calagurris* and *Pompelo* have a primary role in the story. The first, now known as Calahorra, was part of Celtiberians’ territory at least until the Sertorian Wars. It was famous for its final resistance in this war, in which there were terrible scenes of cannibalism that made an impression on literary sources⁶⁷. Later, *Calagurris* is located by Strabo, Juvenal and Ptolemy among the Vascones⁶⁸.

Pompelo, on the other hand, is known today as Pamplona and is the capital of the Chartered Community of Navarre. The city was established probably by *Pompeius Magnus* at the end of the Sertorian wars⁶⁹. According to Pliny, it was a *civitas stipendiaria*, that is, forced to pay taxes, within the *conventus Caesaraugustanus*⁷⁰.

It is necessary to state that this relationship between *Calagurris* and *Pompelo* does not have too much geographical logic. Although there was not much distance between them, the routes of communication known through the *itineraria* and the milestones did not directly connect these two cities. Both were well connected with *Caesaraugusta* and *Asturica Augusta*. But to go from *Calagurris* to *Pompelo*, it would be necessary to make a considerable detour via *Gracurris* (Alfaro, La Rioja), and follow from there the Arga river to the main city of the Vascones (c. 114km)⁷¹. Why not situate the Twelfth Legion

⁶⁶ KAMEN (2011) 263; LISÓN (1992) 89-90; CARO BAROJA (2003) 234-235.

⁶⁷ *Juv., Sat.* 15, 93-96; *Flor.*, 3, 22.; *Oros.*, 5, 23, 14; *Sall., Hist.*, 3, 86-87; *Val. Max.*, 7, 6, 3.

⁶⁸ *Str.*, 3, 4, 10; *Ptol.*, 2, 6, 66.

⁶⁹ PINA POLO (2009).

⁷⁰ *Plin., N.H.*, 3, 3, 24.

⁷¹ PERÉX AGORRETA (1986) 194; 241.

and *Rufus* in *Gracurris* or, more reasonably, in *Salduie*, the seat of the future *Caesaraugusta*?

I believe we can propose an interpretation for this question. In Lovecraft's narrative, *Calagurris* is set up as the administrative headquarters of the region (where the legion and the manager of the finances of the province were located), whereas *Pompelo* is the city where most of the plot happens. This precise scheme is only found in another very different ancient document: in the inscription CIL II 2959.

The inscription, written in bronze, informs that in AD 119, the *Ilviri* from *Pompelo* had a problem that they could not solve by themselves. Apparently they wanted to ensure that they had legal support from the provincial Roman authorities in a trial *aduersus contumaces*. The *legatus iuridicus* of the province, *Claudius Quartinus*, being in *Calagurris*, sent a letter back confirming their capacity to act, and the responsibility of those who had not received the *cautiones*. This letter, dated October 7, was copied on bronze and should have been hanging in the walls of the forum of the city of *Pompelo*. It was discovered in 1582⁷² and lost in a later time, but has been widely studied since then in the bibliography of Roman law, especially in those works dedicated to the legal epigraphy on bronze⁷³.

There are several coincidences between Lovecraft's dream and the inscription: 1. *Calagurris* and *Pompelo* are two of the 179 *oppida* mentioned by Plinius in the province⁷⁴ and the inscription of *Quartinus* is the only one that points a link between both cities. 2. The format, in both cases, is epistolary. 3. The Roman administrative headquarters are located in *Calagurris*. No other data, except the inscription of *Quartinus*, suggests that the affairs of *Pompelo* were controlled from that city. 4. The plot is set in *Pompelo*, and the intervention of Rome takes place at the request of the highest ranking officer of the city: an *aedile* in one case, and the *Ilviri* in the other. 5. In both cases we find legal texts written in bronze of fundamental importance in the history of

⁷² SANDOVAL (1614) fol. 3; MORET (1684) ap. 1.29.

⁷³ D'ORS (1953) 353ff., n. 13; DÍAZ ARIÑO and GUZMÁN ALMAGRO (2009) 231-241.

⁷⁴ Plin., *N.H.* 3, 18.

Roman law: the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus* in Lovecraft's dream, and the *tabula* of *Quartinus* about the trial against the *contumaces*.

Lovecraft could have consulted works such as James C. Egbert's *Introduction to the Study of Latin Inscriptions*, published in New York, Cincinnati, and Chicago in 1896 (p. 359-360), which was widely read. Here and in many other books of legal epigraphy, both inscriptions are mentioned a few lines apart. We cannot assume with absolute certainty that the reading of the letter in the bronze would be in the subconscious of Lovecraft when generating the dream, but the idea is very likely and suggestive.

Lovecraft could not know that decades later U. Espinosa would relate this inscription of *Quartinus* with two other of *iuridici* that were *patroni* of *Calagurris*⁷⁵. The connection of three *iuridici* with a city not being a capital of a *conventus* is unique in the province. Espinosa wondered if, behind this link, an administrative seat of the *legatus iuridicus Hispaniae citerioris* could be hidden in the late first and early second century AD⁷⁶. The strongest evidence for this is the letter of *Quartinus* to the *Pompelonenses*. Although not his intention, here also Lovecraft was ahead of his time.

Conclusion

The relationship between the city of Pamplona and the American literature of the first half of the twentieth century is closely linked to the figure of Ernest Hemingway. The publication of his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926, a year before Lovecraft's letter) made the city and its "fiesta" of San Fermín famous worldwide. Nowadays thousands of foreign visitors travel each year to the city to follow the trail of this Nobel Prize winner. The story *The Very Old Folk* also places Lovecraft in the imaginary of the city. Curiously, both authors are considered the two extremes of the same generation, for their radically opposed styles. As Robert Bloch stated, "It is difficult to believe that Howard Phillips Lovecraft was a literary contemporary of Ernest Hemingway"⁷⁷ Pamplona does not have the same

⁷⁵ CIL V 6987; CIL XII 3167.

⁷⁶ ESPINOSA (1984) 305-325.

⁷⁷ BLOCH (1980) 158-160.

weight in their respective works. But we know that the city had great influence on both of them in a remarkable way.

To an ordinary person, a Roman dream would be nothing more than an anecdote. For Lovecraft's complex mind it meant the opportunity to construct an intricate story which, in the hands of an ancient historian, becomes a treasure to be analysed. The final result is a mosaic of diverse, exciting subjects, masterfully interlaced. We have mentioned the following: 1. The selection of the Vascones, with their aura of being an archaic and mysterious people. 2. The choice of its main city, *Pompelo*, located at the same latitude as Providence, his hometown. 3. The use of a significant date (31 October), with its correct description of the stars and in the correct period for the substitution of the governor in the province. 4. The putting of two words in the mouth of the governor at death (...*tandem uenit*) that may be related to a passage of a tragedy of Seneca where another dream is told and dramatic deaths are used very similar to those in Lovecraft. 5. The reasonable use of Roman names according to their status, changing the *praenomen* in order not to coincide with real historical characters. 6. The division of the society of the Vascones in two: the inhabitants of the mountains and those of the plain, in line with the later historiography of the 1970s. 7. The existence of a clear parallel to the ambush, in the Battle of Roncesvalles, in which the rearguard of Charlemagne was massacred by the Vascones. 8. The location in these lands of the most famous witch story of the Spanish Inquisition. 9. The selection of *Calagurris* as the administrative seat of the Roman authority of the zone. 10. The possibility of discovering in the text the influence of a Roman inscription behind the base argument of the history. For all that, Lovecraft and his *Very Old Folk* are much more than a simple dream. It is an example of how ancient history is continuously reborn in literature and is still alive. It deserves, therefore, a space in the studies of the reception of Antiquity in the literature of the first half of the twentieth century.

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Resumo: Em 3 de novembro de 1927, H. P. Lovecraft enviou uma carta ao seu amigo Wandrei. Nela relatou um sonho que o impressionou pela sua vivacidade, sobre uma ameaça existente nas montanhas dos *Vascones*. Lovecraft como questor, os oficiais provinciais e uma coorte da Décima Segunda Legião estavam na cidade de Pompelo para a enfrentar. A história permite uma interessante análise sob múltiplos pontos de vista: a escolha dos nomes dos personagens, a data escolhida, a descrição da abóbada celeste, as peculiaridades dos I ou uma antiga inscrição verdadeira que poderia estar por trás de todo o enredo do sonho.

Palavras-chave: Lovecraft; *Vascones*; administração provincial romana; *Pompelo*; *Calagurris*; *Hispania Citerior*.

Resumen: El 3 de noviembre de 1927, H. P. Lovecraft mandó una carta a su amigo Wandrei. En ella contaba un sueño que lo impresionó por su claridad, sobre una amenaza alojada en las montañas de los vascones. Para enfrentarse a ella estaban en la ciudad de Pompelo Lovecraft como cuestor, los oficiales provinciales y una cohorte de la Duodécima Legión. La historia permite un análisis interesante bajo múltiples puntos de vista: la elección de los nombres de los personajes, la fecha escogida, la descripción de la bóveda celeste, las peculiaridades de los vascones o una antigua inscripción verdadera que podría estar detrás de todo el enredo del sueño.

Palabras clave: Lovecraft; vascones; administración provincial romana; *Pompelo*; *Calagurris*; *Hispania Citerior*.

Résumé : Le 3 novembre 1927, H. P. Lovecraft envoya une lettre à son ami Wandrei. Il y racontait un rêve sur une menace qui pesait sur les montagnes des *Vascones*, et qui l'avait touché par sa vivacité. Lovecraft, en tant que *quaestor*, les officiers de province et une cohorte de la Vingt-Deuxième Légion se trouvaient à la ville de *Pompaelo* pour lui faire face. L'histoire permet une analyse intéressante à partir de plusieurs points de vue : le choix des noms des personnages, la date choisie, la description de la voute céleste, les particularités des *Vascones* ou une véritable inscription ancienne qui pourrait être à l'origine de toute l'intrigue du rêve.

Mots-clés : Lovecraft ; *Vascones* ; administration provinciale romaine ; *Pompaelo* ; *Calagurris* ; *Hispania Citerior*.