

**THE BLOOMERIES IN TOKEN OF THE BLOOMERY- MASTERS: AN EXAMPLE OF  
POWER ELITE IN THE XVIIth CENTURY BISCAY.  
The case of Lea-Artibai.**

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This paper presents an analysis of the bloomery-masters (*señores de ferrerías*), a specific status group that was not only defined by the social pre-eminence of its members but also in legal terms, inasmuch as they had their own law-code, the so-called "Bloomery Law-Code" (*Fuero de Ferrerías*). Family ties and economic interests, as well as an often common social background, bound together individuals that were, likewise, part of the local and provincial ruling classes.

The importance of these bloomery-masters, derived from the fact that they possessed control over production of a strategic aspect within the Basque economic system, as it was centred on iron-making. This central place of iron-manufacturing has to be understood in connection with the special economic framework of the Basque Provinces, where the development of industry and commerce was significant in comparison with the agricultural weakness, a fact which made grain importation necessary. But also, and most importantly, as the guarantee of the legal constitution and social organisation that had been established in the Biscayan law-code (*Fuero de Vizcaya*), the privilege whereby all the Biscayans were considered nobles.

In this context, the iron industry acquired an additional dimension. From one side, it acted as an economic booster and revenue catalyst, in so far as the variety of the bloomeries' demand – raw material, charcoal, labour and transport services – generated many indirect forms of employments that were often performed by the farmers as a secondary source of income. From the other, the iron industry's emphasis on exportation, which was a necessary counterweight to the importation of foodstuffs in the agriculturally deficient economy, justified the tax concessions and commercial prerogatives of the land, the privileges on which the identity of the Manor of Biscay was built.

Paradoxically, the bloomery-masters had an exclusive law-code in a legally egalitarian society, a fact that shows the economic and social significance of the group. Therefore, it is not surprising that they constituted a power elite, nor is their persistent presence in the local governments as well as in the provincial assemblies.

Research has been conducted in the specific geographic area called Lea Artibai, which was chosen because of the high concentration of bloomeries along its rivers. However, the results of the survey can be extended to many of the Biscayan valleys, inasmuch as the manufacturing hubs were widely spread over the Manor of Biscay. It is exactly this industrial heritage of the valleys and the memory of both the community and the bloomery-masters' power elite, what public institutions are now trying to recover by means of nature trails along historic rivers and the renovation of some ancient mills as interpretative centres of renewable natural energy.

Prosopography allows deepening in the knowledge of the Early Modern Biscayan society through the analysis of the bloomery-masters and their universe, in so far as iron-making had a strategic duty in the social structure of the Manor of Biscay. From this point of view, judicial papers derived from civil actions and notarial documentation stand as the most useful documental resources, as they offer a wide variety of evidence that enables us to build up genealogies, glimpse family strategies and understand the social meaning of being a bloomery-master.

Hiart Urizar Rementeria  
Pre-doctoral scholarship holder by the Researchers Training Programme of the  
Education, Universities and Research Department of the Basque Government  
University of the Basque Country