

M-93/10 M275  
R-4/14 F 99

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RECUEIL DU  
SEPTIEME  
CONGRES INTERNATIONAL  
DES SCIENCES  
GENEALOGIQUE ET  
HERALDIQUE



SOUS LE HAUT PATRONAGE DE  
SON ALTESSE ROYALE  
LE PRINCE DES PAYS-BAS

LA HAYE  
1964

A.T.A.  
2129

FUNERAL ARMORIAL BEARINGS  
IN THE PROVINCE OF ALAVA IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY

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As is well known, coats of arms of noble persons were not fixed in the early tombs until the 11th century. Certainly the Egyptian tombs show the „cartouche”, name of kings written in hieroglyphs inside an oval. They also established the stelas and after them the Greeks and the Romans who added the name of the person buried.

These stelas have been kept in many places, also in the Basque country, and we shall see some examples at the end of this talk. As a curious thing, one of these stelas with the inscription MINITIA AVNIA SEGON TIFA III S SE, that is: Minitia Aunia segontius filia annorum triginta hic sita est, was found by the inhabitants of the valley of Lana in Navarre and taken as the coat of arms of the valley, collective for all the neighbours, when nobility was granted to all the originals in the year 1665. The coat of arms was duly registered in the book of armory of Navarre.

The early Basque tombs show also these stelas, which have been kept until recent years especially in the French Basque country, but no relation to the person or family buried can usually be found. These stelas are found in cemeteries outside the churches.

In the province of Alava through which so many different peoples have passed for centuries, some dolmens can be found, also Roman stelas, some of them inside the churches, probably taken in the time of building of them, and many tombs of different epochs.

The early tombs were within the churches but unfortunately in many of them the floor was changed to wood, the planks thus hiding the tombs. Notwithstanding many are still visible. The oldest of them is said to be the tomb of the first Lord Count Don Vela and is found in the church of Respaldiza in the valley of Ayala, in front of another like it, meant to be his son's. These are the old type of prismatic tombstones with no inscription on them. The planking of the floor can be seen around them.

Many of the flat tombstones had no inscription at all, other had family armorial bearings and others arms belonging to the clergy (keys and wine vessel).

The place on the tombstone was reserved for the family in the church and in funerals and usually during six months after the death, a funeral offering, consisting of a loaf of bread, one or two candles and a sort of wax taper rolled on a wooden frame or shaped in spiral, were taken on Sundays and holidays, and only the latter but not the offering on workdays, being placed on the tomb during ceremony and duly lighted.

The usual minimum suffrages for a person of nobility (most of the population in the basque villages) was nine high masses, vespers, responsories and other suffrages, usually given for persons of noble quality, as old wills show. There were compulsory legacies for the Orders of the Holy City of Jerusalem and Redemption of Captives, which Orders could take as much as one fifth of the movables in case the legacy was not established in the will.

There were confraternities or brotherhoods whose members had to be noble to be admitted and were compelled to attend the burials and funerals under fine for the confraternity.

In later times some of the richest families had their own chapel in the church and members of their families were buried in them. The coat of arms was usually fixed in the arch of entry and sometimes also in the tombs above which the praying or lying statue of most prominent persons was placed.

At the beginning of the 19th century cemeteries had to be placed outside the churches and after that in bigger villages or towns away from the church, the churchyard thus disappearing. The burial inside the church was abolished except in some particular cases of bishops and very prominent persons. Even those families still possessing chapels in the church had to bury their members in the new cemeteries. Some of the coats of arms found inside the churches are in colour but most of them are simply engraved in stone. Fine works of art can be found in these tombs and chapels though the province is a rather poor one, but many important persons, bishops, canons, ambassadors and captains of the army, wished to be buried in their native places.