

THE FOUNTAIN OF BERRIOZABALETA

CULTURAL HERITAGE OF BIZKAIA

Since the dawn of history, one of man's enduring preoccupations has been to assure his water supply. But it was only in the 18th century when his requirements began to increase substantially, largely as a result of the new doctrine of hygiene. Elorrio was no stranger to this process, and as the need for water grew, new supply lines were laid and new fountains built in the town.

During the 19th century, the idea of personal hygiene took a much greater hold on the public mind, and many new washing-places and fountains sprung up all over Vizcaya. Curiously, Berriozabaleta fountain was not, as might be expected, a public initiative promoted by the local town council or a local inhabitants' association, but was in fact a private commission by someone who wanted to be remembered – and there's no doubt he achieved his ambition – for the magnificent gift he made to his birthplace.

Manuel Plácido de Berriozabalbeitia (Elorrio 1775 – Madrid 1850) was born in the Berriozabalbeitia caserío (farmstead), to the right of the path that leads to the fountain. After finishing his studies, he obtained a place in the Administration of Peru, where a successful career culminated in his participation in the negotiations for the country's independence. On returning to Spain in 1828, he settled to managing his affairs and properties and to helping his family.



In 1833 he completed the palacio now sited on the left of the path leading to the fountain. This first project sowed the seeds of a much more ambitious plan. After completing the palace, it was decided to build the fountain and a washing- place with its own access path. The old hermitage of Santa Catalina was disassembled, moved to the zone and rebuilt here from the foundations up. As well as paying for the work, Manuel Plácido also made some very generous contributions to the upkeep of the new buildings. This enlightened indiano (as emigrants returning from South and Central America were subsequently known) was quite clearly anxious to improve the lot of his fellow citizens, as well as making his home district more attractive and agreeable. His touching desire to be remembered with affection





An architect from Elorrio, with ties to the promoter's family, was chosen to do the job. Originally from the neighbouring province of Guipúzcoa, Miguel de Elcoro Bereceybar studied at the Academy of San Fernando in Madrid. This is his most interesting work, comparable to anything done by his better known colleagues.

Judging by the work done here, Elcoro was a strictly neo-classical architect, proving himself to be a faithful follower of academic guidelines based on symmetry and pure geometric figures.

The fountain is set in a watercourse in the lower part of the district. The site was clearly chosen with the intention of improving the landscape. Certainly the view from the beginning of the path is very impressive. Pillars placed at 5 metre intervals accompany the path as it descends towards the fountain. The fountain itself is roughly halfway down the path and slightly to the right; the reservoir is a little further down. A semicircular terrace, often compared – and rightly so - to a Greek theatre, looks out over to the mountains of Amboto, Alluitz, Aitzxiki, Unzillaitz and Mugarra and marks the end of the pathway.

The fountain is the central motif of the monument. The front part mimics the juxtapositioning of volumes used in the palace and the hermitage. The volumes are rounded, simple and harmonious, unadorned except for the smooth panels and a metal spout in the shape of a lion's head, from which water falls onto a jutting, rectangular basin. On either side, three steps lead up to thermal basins. Backed against the two solid side pieces, a large semicircular wash-basin fans out to give meaning to the whole construction. Further back, a semicircular wall closes the area in and provides shelter for seven benches to give the monument a proper scenic dimension as well as providing the locals with somewhere to meet.

So the architect was not just looking to create an adornment that was refined, cultivated and modern for its time; he clearly intended to add details designed to enhance comfort and endow the monument with a more rational use. The fountain is conceived solely for use by humans. The front part has four pivots at either side linked by a low wall that guards the first three steps and makes it difficult for animals to wander in.

Complements like the ashlars set alternately around the washing-place as kneelers and in front of the spout to collect water and as backs to the benches are all neo-classical in inspiration. The idea is to find beauty through the rational, through proportion and harmony.

The fountain's undoubted interest and value led the Provincial Council of Vizcaya to restore it in 1992 and 1993.

