Memories in Stone: Family History Research in the Western Pyrenees

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“Table of Deceased Fathers and Mothers—Made by Me Joseph Ichante in the Year 1828—Ancient and Modern Memory—Genealogical Inscription.” Aydius, France, Maison Ichante. Photo by Paul Woodbury.
I have the honor to present these scripts and tables and acts and drawings made by myself, Joseph Ichante to the knowledge of my compatriots and companions: nature and the trees. I declare that I have made these works without any schooling except for that which I have learned from nature. Written in the year 1844 at the age of 67 years with gratitude to divine providence that protects me in my old age in this base world to which I salute with the desire for union, peace, health and fraternity for humanity.¹

—Joseph Ichante

I stood in a small grove of trees, which afforded a respite from the misty rain. Streams of fog crept along the valley walls and covered the village of Aydius in foamy white waves. I admired the engravings decorating the Ichante household—the heartfelt expression of a peasant farmer and shepherd. I would never have imagined that my internship and study abroad would culminate here, reading my ancestor’s memoirs chiseled in stone. Yet here I was, thousands of miles from home, alone in a foreign country, away from the pristine comfort of the regional archives, reading Joseph Ichante’s legacy carved in stone in the company of his “compatriots and companions: nature and the trees.”

Sometimes, as historians, we limit ourselves to archival records and miss out on rich treasures of local tradition and oral history that must be obtained through on-site research. My experience in the Western French Pyrenees taught me the paramount importance of interacting with history, not only through archived records, but also through local history, geography, and culture. In an investigation of the Ichante and Coumerilh families, I supplemented more than one hundred hours of research in Béarnaise notarial records with two trips to the Vallée d’Aspe. I discovered that my interactions with local residents and my increased understanding of the local geography provided a rich contextual understanding for the documents I uncovered in archival research. Additionally, I discovered a unique set of stone engravings, providing insight into the lives of Joseph Ichante and his family members.

Render yourself capable of all, for you do not know for what God has destined you.  

—Joseph Ichante

I approached the reference desk and requested another manuscript. The archivist peered over the tops of her glasses and asked, “Where did you learn French?”

“I took two semesters of French classes in preparation for my trip here,” I replied. It was my fourth day in the Department Archives of Pyrenees Antiques, and this was the first conversation I’d had outside of ordering documents and purchasing food.

“You learned French just for this trip?”

“Yes,” I said, smiling. “I wanted to make it worth my time.”

“And what are you researching?”

“I am researching the Ichante and Coumerilh families of the Vallee d’Aspe.”

A voice behind me interrupted the silence of the reading room: “If you are researching the Ichante family, you should search the Revue de Pau et du Béarn.” Startled, I turned to see a woman sitting at a table nearby. She had paused in her research to adjust her camera equipment. “There is an article on the Ichantes in the issue from 1988,” she said, before returning to her project. I turned back to the archivist and raised my eyebrows in surprise; she returned the look.

“In that case,” I said, “in addition to number 3 E 11017, I would also like to consult that issue of the Revue de Pau et du Béarn.”

2. Ichante, “Fait par moi Joseph Ichante an 1837 age de 60 ans . . . ,” lines 9–11.
In the collection had I requested, I found a single testament; but, thanks to my researcher friend, in the journal article I found a goldmine. I discovered that the Ichante home was still standing. In the article, Professor Christian Desplat discussed the life and legacy of Joseph Ichante, the very individual I had been researching. His references led me to other documents in the archive and alerted me to the existence of several engravings which Joseph Ichante had created during his life. These unique engravings set the Ichante house apart as one of the most elaborately decorated houses in all of southern France, leading to its recent designation as a historic monument.

I immediately wrote to a woman I had contacted the previous week, who owned a bed and breakfast in the Vallee d'Aspe. I had planned on visiting the hometowns of the Ichante and Coumerilh families, but now I wondered if there was someone who might know more about the local history of the valley who could help me in my research. She indicated that there was an eighty-year-old priest, Pierre Moulia, whom I might contact. He was an amateur historian and well-versed in the family histories of the valley. I contacted Frère Moulia to request a meeting and received the following response:

My dear Brother Paul,

Of course we should meet! I know all about the Coumerilh and Ichante families. They were very prominent members of the valley community in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Please come stay with me at the monastery in Sarrance this weekend. I will take you to their ancestral homes and we can discuss the rich histories of these two families.

Everyone speaks from the goodness of their heart, but no one dares speak from their spirit.

—Joseph Ichante

On my arrival in Sarrance, Frère Moulia was just finishing a mass for a group of pilgrims traveling to Santiago de Compostela on the "chemin de Saint-Jacques," which passes by the monastery. As soon as he finished, he gave me a warm welcome and invited me to his office. As we walked, he proclaimed, "When I received your letter, I was excited to meet you, and when you walked into

the mass, I felt a connection to your Spirit.” Once we had entered his office, he began asking me about my interest in the Coumerilh and Ichante families. I showed him the pedigrees and family group records that I had compiled for the families. He studied my records with great interest, and requested a copy of my findings for his own collection on the history of the Valléé d’Aspe. He shared some insights on the families, sometimes in French, sometimes in Spanish, often switching midsentence.

“Do you know of any living descendants of these families who continue living in the valley today?” I asked him.

“Yes, there are many, but they carry different surnames.” Seeing my confusion, Frère Moulia explained. “The house is the most important unit in Béarn. It stays intact and it is not divided among siblings. For much of our history, our surnames were not hereditary but were rather attached to the house. With the invasion of French culture, we have lost that tradition. Today, very few know the origin and meaning of their house names, and they misunderstand how they are used.”

In excitement, I rapidly wrote down our conversation, struggling to keep pace with the river of information that Frère Moulia was offering.

Finally, in a quiet moment, Frère Moulia closed his eyes and quoted, “If we want to know what one says in our absence, we need only reflect on what they say about others in our presence.” Isn’t that beautiful? It is written on the wall of Joseph Ichante’s home. I will take you there tomorrow and you will see for yourself. It is on an ornate engraved plaque of the pigeon keep.”

The next morning, I woke to the sound of rain dripping through the slate tile roof into a bucket in the hallway. Outside my window, mist-covered mountains loomed above a small cemetery. Footsteps in the hall announced the approach of Frère Moulia, who opened my door and informed me that breakfast would be served in fifteen minutes. After preparing my things, I descended to the kitchen, pausing for a moment to marvel at the four waterfalls cascading into the central courtyard of the monastery. Frère Moulia and another priest were just finishing their meal. They excused themselves to attend to the morning mass, and invited me to come as soon as I was able so I might hear the ceremony in Basque. After finishing my bowl of hot chocolate, I went to the monastery chapel and listened to the rich tones of monastic chant and the incomprehensible lilt of prayers in Europe’s oldest living indigenous language.

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After reciting the Lord’s Prayer in Basque, Frère Moulia explained, “The Ichante family probably spoke some Basque, as the towns of this valley often interacted with those of the Basque country. Their first language was Béarnaise, and they could usually conduct basic business in French and Castillian. The Aspois would send their children to Basque towns and would receive Basque children in their own homes as part of a system of reciprocal education in work, culture and language. Sometimes if these itinerant children were lucky, they might marry an heir or heiress and remain for the rest of their lives.”

I listened attentively, soaking in every word. Frère Moulia continued: “In fact, I think the surname you are looking for, Ichante, does not sound very Béarnaise. It has a Basque ring to it. There were no individuals by that surname living in these valleys in the fourteenth century. But, by the end of the seventeenth, there was a household with that name in Aydius.”

* * *

*WHOEVER DISPOSES OF HIS PROPERTY BEFORE DEATH HAS PREPARED TO SUFFER GREATLY.*

—Joseph Ichante

While researching the family of Jean-Pierre Coumerilh in the archive, I discovered a series of documents detailing his many financial transactions. At one point, he offered to purchase the entire property of his father-in-law, Joseph Ichante. These types of sales were very rare in Béarn, as the sale of family property was strictly regulated by traditional norms. The owner of a household was not so much an owner as he was a custodian; only after obtaining permission from all interested parties could an heir sell the family holdings. Even though Jean-Pierre Coumerilh offered 1,030 francs for his father-in-law’s property, just three months later he abandoned his intention to purchase the land in favor of his brother-in-law, Jean Ichante, who would have been the rightful heir of the property in the first place. Why would Jean-Pierre Coumerilh attempt to purchase Joseph Ichante’s property only to abandon his intention a few months later?

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Shortly thereafter, Jean-Pierre drafted a last will and testament at the young age of thirty-two. The will was written in the Coumerilh home rather than in the residence of the notary, like most other testaments of the time. One of the witnesses was Louis Harreguy, a surgeon. In the following months and years, Jean-Pierre Coumerilh obtained permission from his priest brothers to sell the Coumerilh lands in Lescun and relocate first to Bedous, then to Accous, then to Issor. Most of the payments for his property transfers were delivered by his wife, Anne Ichante. The large amount of documentation, Jean-Pierre's young age at the drafting of his will, and his declared absence in the settling of his financial affairs suggest that these records leave much of his story unrecorded.

These documents revealed several anomalies with regards to Béarnaise property inheritance. If I had limited myself strictly to the archival research, I may never have discovered the motivations for these unique transactions. However, because I seized the opportunity for on-site research, I was able to piece together the evidence and obtain a clearer understanding. Frère Moulia and other local residents informed me that Joseph Ichante was famous in the valley community for his intricate engravings and for his attempts to reconcile the conflicting aims of his Béarnaise traditions and the ideals of the French Revolution. Though he agreed with many of the ideas of the French Republic, he still lived in a world defined by property inheritance. In an effort to circumnavigate restrictive new laws which mandated partible inheritance among all children, he planned a scheme with his son-in-law, Jean-Pierre Coumerilh, which would essentially fulfill the aims of traditional Béarnaise primogeniture. Jean-Pierre would purchase the property, then sell it to Jean Ichante, the traditional heir.

This still did not account for Jean-Pierre's later actions. However, after hiking up steep inclines on narrow paths to the Coumerilh house nestled in the high mountain valley of Lescun, my aching legs and feet helped me to understand. I began to understand how a fall or an accident in the mountain pastures and the resulting injury might force a young heir to draft his testament in his own home, undergo surgery, send his wife to pay his debts, and purchase land at lower elevations closer to market. I also began to understand how his reliance and dependence on others may have estranged him from his extended family and left him poor and without property at the end of his life. It would

9. Romain Lasalle, Testament de Jean-Pierre Coumerilh, ADPA, 3 E 11060, No. 11
10. Jean Lasalle, ADPA, 3 E 11059, nos. 42 and 172; Romain Lasalle, ADPA, 3 E 11061, no. 146.
11. Romain Lasalle, ADPA, 3 E 11061, nos. 146, 199 and 294.
also help to explain why his children would immigrate to America, since their weak prospects for inheritance and economic success prevented them from marrying.

"Why do you suppose Jean-Pierre Coumerilh moved around so frequently?" I asked Frère Moulia as we continued our ascent into the mountains.

"There are two responsibilities an heir is expected to fulfill when he becomes the master of the family property. First, he must maintain the integrity of the house, and second, he must support his parents and in-laws. Jean-Pierre Coumerilh at first accepted the responsibilities of inheritance. Soon thereafter, for some reason, he abandoned those responsibilities. Regardless of his reason, this would have been interpreted as a betrayal of his duty and he was disowned by his wife's family."

"How did Anne Ichante and Jean-Pierre Coumerilh meet?" I wondered aloud.
"Oh, they surely met at market in Bedous, since both Aydius and Lescun, their hometowns, sold crops there."

Unfortunately, Joseph Ichante’s plan to circumnavigate the requirements of partible inheritance did not come to fruition. Through an elaborate charade, Joseph “sold” his entire family property to his son Jean. However, Joseph was behind on his dowry payments. Since Jean and Joseph had cohabited the house for many years without incident, he was willing to forgive the debt of the payment if Jean would promise to support and provide for his parents in their old age. Unfortunately, Jean and his wife were unable to have children. In order to preserve the integrity of the house, Jean sold the property to his oldest sister and her husband, Martin Lapoumere. Since the property was technically entirely his, Jean could not hold the new buyer responsible to support Joseph in his old age. Jean, Joseph, and their spouses moved into the house of Lagaye-Martine in Bedous, where Joseph died in 1857. However, this did not prevent him from returning several times before his death to continue work on his engravings.

He who has written these devices and composed these genealogical inscriptions is a proletariat of the Nation, friend of the charter and the constitution, who resides in the cherry orchard watching over the sheepfolds of his homeland and respecting the divine providence that protects him in his old age in this base world. He repeats again that I cultivate the tree of the cross for my liberty.

Made for me Joseph Ichante, year 1837, age 60, but friends, I invite you to read these words.

—Joseph Ichante

We drove several miles along into the valley above Bedous until we were positioned above the ruins of the Ichante house.

“This road was put in here fairly recently,” Frère Moulia said as we passed a sign pointing to the Ichante quarter. “Before, you had to hike into the forest for five kilometers. In the 1960s there was an earthquake in the area, and the staircase of the Ichante home collapsed. I was a young priest then and helped

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to carry the wood beams up from the village in order to build the new stairs.” He gestured toward several houses in ruins along the side of the road. “Of the thousands of houses in the valley today, only a handful are inhabited and most are in ruins. The Ichante home too has been abandoned, but you must remember that I knew the family that lived here. I have eaten meals in that kitchen.” Frère Moulia’s expression grew pensive and his voice softened. “It was I who discovered the last resident of the house when he fell and broke his hip. I carried him into town where he passed away at the house of a relative. Though it is abandoned now, it was a thriving household not long ago.” We reached a fence directly above the Ichante property and stood quiet for a moment. The receding mist and an echoing orchestra of cowbells faded into the distance, seeming to take with it the echoes of life that had only just faded away from our hearing. In my eagerness to see the house, I reached out to lift a wire on the fence. Frère Moulia stopped me, and suggested we look for a stick.

“That electric fence is not very pleasant,” he said with a smile. After passing under the fence, we climbed up into an enclosed strawberry patch.

“This garden was built by Joseph and his family,” Frère Moulia said. “The stone is the same that was used in the construction of the new house.” The steps leading down to the elevated garden had long since worn away, and the five-foot drop on either side was not particularly easy to scale. I climbed down first and assisted Frère Moulia in his descent. While making the rest of our descent through a steep field on the side of the hill, he reminisced on his experiences in the Ichante household.

“I remember coming when the wheat was almost ready for harvest. They owned sheep, cattle, and horses. Across the valley over there, you can see the house of Rangole. One of the Ichante daughters married into that household. The Rangole family were goat herders and sold goat cheese. Henri IV was from Béarn, and when he relocated to Paris, he decreed that the Béarnaise goat herders would provide the cheese for the Royal Court. So, the Rangole family and other ‘chevriers’ would make a yearly exodus to Paris.”

We entered a thick stand of trees and discovered the Ichante house. The façade was beautifully decorated with paintings and engravings: soldiers, proverbs, and hymns to the nation. An elaborately carved fountain cover channeled spring water into blue plastic watering troughs. The pigeon keep showed signs of recent habitation by a wild boar. Broken glass windows offered a view of the gutted interior. Though some engravings were damaged, over the door a clear inscription remained: “Table of Deceased Fathers and Mothers—Made by
Above the door and inscribed into the lintel stone, a beautiful engraving detailed Joseph Ichante's genealogy. However, it was not his direct biological ancestry. In the engraving, Joseph carved the name of each owner of the household: Joseph himself, his mother Rose Casaubon, his father Pierre Ichante, his uncle and godfather Joseph Ichante, and a host of other relatives. At the top of the stone, Joseph named his great-grandfather, Pierre Ichante, born in 1673—a man, among others, who had remained elusive in my search until this point. This genealogy of the household confirmed once again that in life and in legacy, Joseph Ichante was dedicated to the preservation of his house, the life of his property, and the continuity of his inheritance.

Wait till the evening to say if the day was beautiful and wait till death to better judge a life.\textsuperscript{16}

—Joseph Ichante

\textsuperscript{15} Joseph Ichante, “Tableau des peres et meres dessedes” (Aydius, France, Maison Ichante, façade, 1828).

\textsuperscript{16} Ichante, “Fait par moi Joseph Ichante an 1837 age de 60 ans . . . ,” lines 4–5.