

THE RITUALIZED USE OF DOGS: CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THEIR ROLE IN THE MORTUARY BELIEF SYSTEM OF THE ANCIENT CANARIANS

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Abstract. This paper explores the ritual use of dogs in the funeral practices of the ancient Canarians. Specifically, the material refers to two premolars that were individually associated with mummies 11 and 18, both coming from Guayadeque ravine. Taking into account that only two cases have been recorded within the

extensively known mortuary repertoire on the island, this is a clearly an unusual funeral behaviour. An attempt is made to unravel the meaning of this special kind of evidence. As it has been well attested in many other chronological contexts, such pieces must be understood as objects with a great symbolic sense.

Keywords. Pre-Hispanic period. Funeral Practices. Dogs. Mummies. Beliefs.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the framework of the mummies' collection research project that is being developed by El Museo Canario, two extraordinary discoveries reflect the addition of dogs' teeth inside the funeral bundles. This study explores some of the roles that dogs had among the ancient Canarians, focusing on these dental pieces. Such pieces tell us a story of the people to whom they were linked. It is possible that they were intended to act as companions or guardians in the journey to the underworld, with the same role as when the dogs were alive that is, used for physical and spiritual protection, although other possible functions are also explored. These special scenarios may represent an exceptional source to understand the bonds between the ancient Canarians and their dogs.

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

A detailed description of the individuals is provided, as well as the analysis of the dogs' dental pieces accompanying them. The sex of the individual was estimated according to the morphology of the cranium and pelvis (Buikstra & Ubelaker, 1994) while its age at death was estimated based on the state of epiphyseal fusion and dental wear (Buikstra & Ubelaker, 1994; Chimenos *et al.*, 1999). This study also represents the first zoo-archaeological data concerning to the pre-Hispanic funeral practices in Gran Canaria.

2.1. Mummy I I

According to the cranial and pelvic morphology it corresponds to a female, aged around 15 years as is evidenced by the fusion state of the epiphyses, eruption process and development of the dental pieces. Soft tissue preservation is limited to some ligaments, portions of the scalp, as well as skin and nails in the upper extremity. The corpse was shrouded in an extended position with both hands resting on the proximal end of the femurs, following the usual pattern. For the shroud only animal hides were used, possibly from pigs, consisting of two large layers of skins made of smaller pieces sewn together (Fig. 1). Radiocarbon dating places her death 7th century AD (Beta - 468990 1370 ± 30 BP, (95,4%) 608-688 cal AD).

A few centimetres from the left pubis shows an upper left third premolar premolar of a canid (*Canis familiaris*) (Fig. 2). It is the only non-human item associated with the individual, and its position must correspond, approximately, to that occupied at the time when the corpse was wrapped.



Fig. 1. View of the mummy I I.



Fig. 2. Detail of the maxillary left third premolar of a dog.

2.2. Mummy 18

In this case, the anatomical representation degree is very low, since, additionally to the skin shroud, the mummy only preserves the lower half of the body (femurs, tibias, fibulas and both feet). Considering the size of the tibia and from the use of discriminant functions analysis developed for the population of Gran Canaria (González, *et al.*, 2000), it could be considered a female in accordance with the structure shown by the rest of the bones. Regarding to the age, only non-senile adult status can be assigned. Radiocarbon dating places her death around 5th-7th century AD (Beta-539727 | 500 ± 30 BP, 532-639 cal AD [85.0%]-608-688 AD cal [10.4%]).

As a singular feature, next to his right femur, in the medial region, she has associated a humerus of a perinatal (43.2 ± 2.33 weeks), being an exceptional case among the mummies of Gran Canaria (Fig. 3). The corpse was wrapped in, at least, five large layers of animal skin, of which only the first four retain the side seams.

This mummy has also a dog tooth located in the medial area of the right tibia, although in this case it is not in direct contact with the human remains but introduced between the folds of the funeral wrap. The tooth is a maxillary right fourth premolar (Fig. 4), placed between the first and the second skin layer that wrapped the corpse.



Fig. 3. Human perinatal humerus associated with mummy 18.



Fig. 4. View of the mummy 18 with the tooth marked in yellow. To the right, detail of the maxillary right fourth premolar.

3. DISCUSSION

The exceptional finding of these two pieces of dogs' teeth, included intentionally inside the funerary bundle, gives these mummies a special meaning, as they are the only two known cases in Gran Canaria. Should we then understand them as a highly symbolic expression that only affects the examples alluded to for any special reason or as an anecdotal fact with respect to the funeral practices of the ancient Canarians?

To analyze this issue we must consider the role of dogs among the aboriginal societies of the Archipelago. As in many other contexts, the relationship between these animals and people is set full of meanings, some more tangible and others more abstract in nature, not mutually exclusive (Lauwerier, 2004).

In the Pre-Hispanic society of Gran Canaria dogs live with the people who cared for and fed them. They are used for protection, guardian of the settlements, as an invaluable aid in the tasks of shepherding, etc. But sometimes they also have negative connotations, for instance when in a feral state they attack the herds killing the animals, threaten the people, as recorded in the ethnohistoric sources, or violating the tombs to devour the corpses. In the collective imaginary of the ancient Canarians there were evil spirits that appeared in the form of a woolly black dog that were called Tibicenas (Morales, 1978).

In addition to this, dogs play an important role in ritual activities, specifically in those relating to funeral practices. In different chrono-cultural contexts dogs are included in the graves with a sense of companionship or guide animals, with the

same function of protection and companion that the animal would have had in life (Morey, 2006). In this same sense, the presence of dogs in the funerary aboriginal sites of Tenerife has been interpreted. There the findings, basically skulls or teeth, are frequent (Diego, 1951, 1955, 1968). This important spiritual service attributed to dogs in the case of Tenerife has been related to the outstanding role that they would play in the work of grazing, as the basis of the Guanche productive system.

The examples of Gran Canaria also refer to isolated teeth, both premolar of the maxilla, resulting in a highly specific selection. However, the fact they are associated with women appears to clash with the supposed value attributed to dogs roll in the shepherding activity, since in general term the grazing tasks seems to be a male occupation.

Perhaps it could be better to consider the teeth in an apotropaic sense of personal protection. They may have been used as amulets or talismans to ensure the safety of their owners, as has also been described for the continental Amazigh population.

But, why it does only affect women? There is no doubt that the presence of these pieces inside the funeral bundle is the result of a particular symbolism linked to dogs, but at the same time it is an evidence of the personal identities of these two women, and perhaps also of their collective identity.

The fact that it is about two women of childbearing age, one of them accompanied by a bone of a perinatal individual, places us in a scenario that is sometimes undervalued, but of great social repercussion: the high rate of female and perinatal mortality that this society must have suffered (Santana *et al.*, 2019). It should be noted that within the variability of meanings attributed to dogs among African Berber populations, the consumption of their meat is closely related to young women in the pre-nuptial phase (Mansouri, 2015). Thus, their meat is considered suitable to promote the fattening of brides, preparing them for their reproductive function, a custom that also occurred in the aboriginal populations of Gran Canaria (Rodríguez, 2000). Its consumption is also used to prevent diseases and even the effects of witchcraft during the period for the bride-to-be. Therefore, from this evidence there seems to be an evident relationship between young women and dogs, linked to guaranteeing and overcoming the dangers that represent the period of gestation and childbirth, within the framework of the biological reproduction of these human groups. From this perspective, it is possible that the two teeth were linked to that protective or propitiatory role related to the reproductive function of women.

4. CONCLUSION

The concern to guarantee the biological and social reproduction of the ancient Canarians is a constant throughout its existence. Death truncates fertility and perhaps, with these two pieces they tried to minimize the negative consequences that this entailed for the group.

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