

# THE RITUALIZED USE OF DOGS: CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THEIR ROLE IN THE MORTUARY BELIEF SYSTEM OF THE ANCIENT CANARIANS<sup>1</sup>

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## OBJECTIVES

In connection with the mummies' collection project that is being developed by El Museo Canario, two extraordinary discoveries reflect the addition of dogs' teeth in the funeral bundles. This study 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 No. 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 unusual funeral tradition.

## MATERIAL

### Mummy 11

According to the cranial and pelvic morphology it corresponds to a female, aged around 15 as is shown 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 extremities. 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 skins made of smaller pieces sewn together (Figure 1).

Radiocarbon dating places her death in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD cal. (1370±30 BP, 608-688 AD cal).

A few centimetres from the left pubis shows a tooth of a canid (*Canis familiaris*), specifically a third left upper premolar (Figure 2). It is the only non-human item

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associated with the individual and its position must correspond, approximately, to that occupied at the time when the corpse was wrapped.



Figure 1. Mummy 11



Figure 2. Maxillary left third premolar of a dog in mummy 11.

### **Mummy 18**

The representation degree is 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 (1), it could be considered a female, in accordance with the gracile structure shown by the rest of the bones. Regarding the age, only non-senile adult status can be assigned.

As a singular feature, next to her right femur, in the medial region, she has a humerus of a perinatal associated ( $43.2 \pm 2.33$  weeks), being an exceptional case among the mummies of Gran Canaria (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Human perinatal humerus associated with mummy 18

In this case, the corpse was wrapped in, at least, five large pigskins, of which only the first four retain the side seams: made by sewing with a strip of skin that alternate their position on the flanks.

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. The tooth corresponds to a maxillary right fourth premolar (Figure 4), placed between the first and the second skin that wrapped the corpse.



Figure 4. Maxillary right fourth premolar of a dog in mummy 18

## DISCUSSION

The exceptional finding of these two pieces of dogs' teeth, included intentionally inside the funerary bundle, represents 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?

For this we must consider the role of dogs among the aboriginal societies, because 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 (2). In the pre-Hispanic society of Gran Canaria dogs lived 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 or violating the tombs to devour the corpses. In the collective imaginary of those populations there were evil spirits that appear in the form of a woolly black dog that in Gran Canaria is called Tibicena (3).

In addition, dogs play an important role in ritual activities, specifically in those relating to funeral practices. In different cultures 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 (4). In this same sense, the presence of dogs in funeral aboriginal places in Tenerife has been interpreted, where the findings, basically skulls or teeth, are frequent (5, 6, 7). This important spiritual service attributed to dogs 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 that they are associated with women appears to clash with the supposed value attributed to dogs role in the shepherding activity, since in general that 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 funerary 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. It should be noted that within the variety 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 (8). 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. 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 a 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. Death truncates fertility and perhaps, with these elements they tried to minimize the negative consequences that this entailed for the group.

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