

BIOGRAPHY OF A GUANCHE INFANT MUMMY FROM EL SAUZAL

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Abstract. The inventory of bio-anthropological materials in a museum requires descriptive and photographic data, that describe the burial site and provides further information that later helps to contextualize the object or specimen inventoried, as well as facilitates the interpretation of studies carried out. When in 1992, then the Museum of Archeology, the current Museum of Nature and Archeology (MUNA onwards) received the donation of a Guanche child mummy from Antonio

Romero Pérez, the information provided was scarce, as shown by the inventory card from the MUNA. The mummy entered the collection without the recording of any data providing clues about the burial context or location where it was found.

This study aims to fill gaps in the file of a child mummy from the funeral cave named El Sauzal, and to further enrich our knowledge about the Guanche burial behaviour, especially focussing on the treatment of an infant burial.

Keywords. Infant mummy. Tenerife. Guanche. Registry. Child burial.

INTRODUCTION

In 1992, coinciding with the celebration of the First International Congress of Mummy Studies, organized by the Archaeological and Ethnographic Museum of the Tenerife Island Council, this same institution received a donation of a child mummy from a Tenerife collector, Antonio Romero Pérez. The specimen donated had been found in 1975, in a cave in the municipality of El Sauzal, (Barranco de la Negra) when four mountain climbers, among them Antonio Romero Pérez, climbed in the area.

The cave had once been used as a burial place by the ancient inhabitants of the island of Tenerife, known as Guanches. The discovery was made in a time when there was a huge nationalist movement on the Canary Islands, and elements of the indigenous culture were considered important symbols of self-identity, and museums as well as private people were seeking to collect objects from the Guanche. Excavation methods in that time did not comprise a detailed documentation of the burial spot and the finds, thus much information got lost. Any further detailed archaeological investigation would therefore contribute valuable information.

At the moment of the donation to the Museum of Nature and Archaeology of the Tenerife Island Council (MUNA hereafter), an inventory sheet was filled out. The donator however was not thoroughly interviewed, and a lot of information remained with him. Therefore, on the inventory sheet itself only the find spot, “a cave in the municipality of El Sauzal” is indicated (Fig. 1). The Extraordinary World Congress of Mummy Studies in 2018 hence seemed a perfect opportunity to complete the information still available for this child mummy, by researching all accessible sources.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article aims to broaden the knowledge on the infant mummy found in the cave of El Sauzal, and tries to recontextualize this individual by investigating its burial site. It is also attempting to gather new information from different sources that have not been consulted so far.

As a first step, following the interview with the collector, the cave was located. Then the proximity of the cave was inspected. Further detailed information on the burial finds from inside the cave were recorded in another thorough interview with the collector.

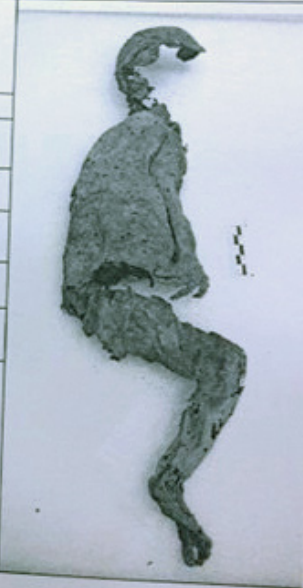
| FICHAS MATERIALES MOMIFICADOS | | | | |
|-------------------------------|---|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| CATALOGACIÓN | | | | |
| Nº REGISTRO | S/N | COLECCIÓN/ MUSEO | MUSEO ARQUEOLÓGICO | |
| PROCEDENCIA | | | | |
| ISLA | TENERIFE | MUNICIPIO | El Sauzal | YACIM. desconocido |
| DESCRIPCIÓN | | | | |
| OBJETO | <p>Momia de Feto partida en tres fragmentos cráneo, tronco y brazo derecho y pierna derecha flexionada. Se conserva menos de la mitad del cráneo y en la cara externa e interna presenta restos de piel momificada?. El tronco y brazo están recubiertos de piel momificada e incluso se aprecian con claridad los dedos de la mano derecha a excepción del dedo pulgar del que solo queda una falange así como los restos de las uñas en los dedos corazón, anular y meñique. En la cara interna del tronco se observa la columna vertebral desde la parte del cuello al coxis, la clavícula y brazo izquierdo flexionado, parte de las costillas izquierdas así como los dos huesos de la pelvis. La pierna derecha flexionada está recubierta de piel momificada a excepción de la cara interna del muslo donde se identifica con claridad el fémur. Se conservan los dedos del pie con restos de uñas en...</p> | | | |
| DIMENSIONES(cm) | <p>Cráneo:10,5 Tronco:20 Pierna: 18,5 11.5 x 6</p> | | | |
| Largo x ancho x alto | | | | |
| PESO | 125 gr | | | |
| TIPO MOMIFICACIÓN | Parece natural | | | |
| MATERIALES ASOCIADOS | no | | | |
| CULTURA | Atribuida a los aborígenes | | | |
| ANTIGÜEDAD | desconocida | | | |
| LOCALIZACIÓN | En exposición en el MNH, Mundo funerario | | | |
| NOTA |  | | | |

Fig. 1. This inventory sheet from the MUNA archive shows the little information gathered prior to this study. The exact find spot and any information of the burial site, such as other funerary deposits in the surroundings or grave goods, are lacking. Photo credit: D. Delgado.

According to the collector and his companions, about 30 individuals had been buried in the cave at the time of their discovery by the mountain climbers. Some of the individuals still did show “rests of their mummification”. From this cave, the MUNA did receive five skulls of adults, one skull of a subadult and one mummified child. For the bioanthropological and anthropometric study of the eight individuals, the standards of Buikstra and Ubelaker, Campillo, Auftherheide and Rodríguez Martín & Martín Oval have been applied, and for the paleodontological study the protocol proposed by Chimenos was used. For the infants, the method of Schour and Massier was followed.

THE FUNERARY DEPOSIT

The burial cave of El Sauzal is located in the municipality of the same name, on the north western slope of the Island of Tenerife, in the Barranco de la Negra (28° 28' 16.4 "N 16° 26' 48.2 "W). It can be found on a cliff opening towards the sea at more than 180 meters above sea level and about 350 meters from the coast.

The natural cave is difficult to access, due to the abrupt slope of the terrain in which it is located, and because of the existing blockade by the current human use of that land. Looking onto the cliff, the cave has two openings, a larger one to the left and a smaller one to the right. Each opening leads to a chamber inside the cave; however, both chambers are not connected inside, and each one can only be accessed through a narrow platform.

The cave is formed of columnar basalt, and both chambers directly receive sea winds charged with salts and iodine, that may have favoured the natural mummification of the bodies deposited in this site. Interestingly, a detailed study of the historical maps of the area revealed that the geographically prominent rock next to the cave was named “Stone of the Dead”; thus the toponymal giving a hint that the funeral deposit was already known prior to the rediscovery in 1975 by the four climbers. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account looting prior to this date (Fig. 2).

Both chambers differ in their size and use. The chamber to the left is of greater height and of lesser depth. Some basalt slabs, still present on the floor, may have served in Guanche times as a floor cover and “insulator” from the soil, to keep the bodies placed on the slabs away from the ground itself and any probable deteriorating material. In 1975, remains of a body in supine position were laying on the floor; and several skulls were found on what appears to be a natural shelf on



Fig. 2. The funeral cave of El Sauzal faces the sea. Today, there is a private property built on the site of the cliff, making the access difficult. It also caused some destruction inside the cave, as a drainage pipe ends inside the funerary site. Photo credit: J.C. Moreno.

the backside of this chamber. The body on the floor was interpreted as the primary burial, whereas the skulls on the shelf in this chamber may have been a secondary burial of members of the same group.

The chamber to the right of this one can be reached via the outside of both caves, following a small ledge with a little slope, at a distance of approximately three meters. It has a smaller access, but in its interior it expands into a wider chamber. The bodies found here were in disorder, presenting only some anatomical connection of some hips and their respective femurs, tibias and fibulae, due to remnants of natural mummification. The looting cited above could be the cause of this disorder, although it could also be a secondary burial. One natural or slightly worked shelf in this chamber served as the burial niche of the mummified child; thus it was well separated from the pile of bones on the floor.

Although, the bones found in this chamber were estimated to have belonged to about thirty individuals, Antonio Romero Pérez transferred only seven skulls and the mummified child. As stated before, they form now part of the MUNA collection.

THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL RECORD

Of the 30 individuals mentioned, only those from the collection of Antonio Romero Pérez have been studied, consisting of 6 skulls and one mummy of a child. The skulls belonged to five adults, (two of them male, three female), to one subadult (between 10 – 15 years old), whereas the mummified child died before reaching the age of about four months. It was not possible to determine the sex of either of the children (Fig. 3).

All male skulls show signs of injuries, either caused by accidents in the difficult terrain of the island or by interpersonal violence. The regenerative markers on the depressions in these clearly indicate survival after the injury, with healed wounds or the beginning of healing. Studying the dentition and other related pathologies such as caries, attrition or tooth wear, the presence of inflammatory or infectious alterations with the loss of periodontal bone support can be observed.



Fig. 3. The main individual of this study is a mummified child, taken out of the cave in 1975 by a private collector. It has completely lost its context, but this study was able to partially recontextualize it, especially to bring it in connection with other individuals once buried in the same cave, which are now also in the MUNA. Furthermore, associated grave goods belonging to this funerary site from the A.R.P. collection were detected.

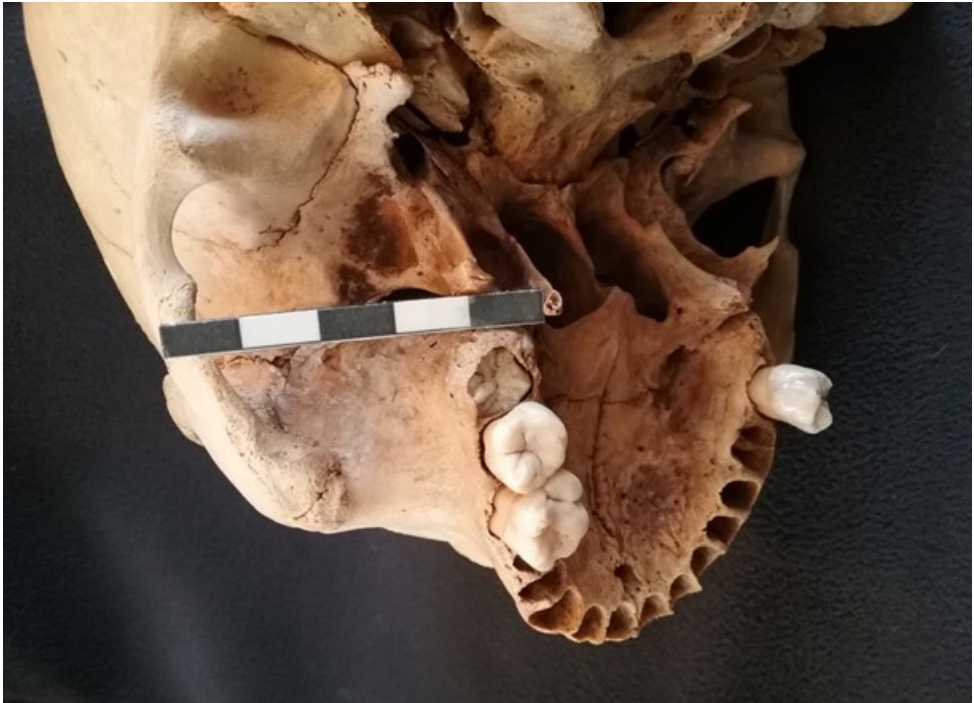


Fig. 4. This image shows a detail of the dentition of one of the skulls that were found in the same chamber of the El Sauzal cave like the child. It belonged to a subadult, the second of the two of this burial site. Photo credit: D. Delgado.

The three female skulls showed loss of hard tissues of the dental crown, mainly because of a parafunctional use of the same, causing the disappearing at the level of the occlusal surface of the crown or the complete loss of teeth, which then allowed bacteria to enter, leading to abscesses. In one of these skulls, severe occlusal wear could be detected, reaching almost the roots in the posterior molars. These dental abscesses, and often their subsequent infection, had to be very painful and possibly did result in serious health problems.

The high frequency of dental wear in these adults can be compared to that of other individuals buried in caves in different areas of Tenerife. One explanation might be the use of one's teeth as a tool for working materials, such as animal skins or plant materials, causing those deformations and abrasions of the teeth.

In no case it was possible to determine the cause of death (Fig. 4).

THE MUMMIFIED CHILD

Separated from all other buried individuals of this right chamber, the mummified child had been placed on a shelf. This child seems to have mummified naturally, as no traces of any application of mummifying materials or procedures were observed. Further, the child is laying on its side, in a crouched position. Unlike the typical Guanche mummy adult burials, it was not wrapped in several layers of goat skin that required a stretched, supine position of the deceased's body.

According to the information provided by the collector, the floor beneath the child was remarkably different from the ground in the rest of the cave, and consisted of finer, clearer soil. It remains unclear if the different soil helped the natural mummification of this child, or if its burial place received special attention possibly in relation to his social position, or if that distinction of the soil is due to other, still unknown, reasons. The micro-sedimentary analysis of this soil has not yet been performed.

In all pre-Hispanic burials found on the Canary Islands, the sub-adult group is poorly represented. Firstly this may be due to the fragile state of children bones that decompose quickly. Another interpretation is that children in this time belonged to a social group with its own characteristics, and they were thus buried in different places compared to adults. As in many pre-industrial societies, the infant mortality rate should have been higher among the Guanches than today. Thus each child burial and its documentation provide valuable information for this topic.

GRAVE GOODS

The burials in both chambers of the El Sauzal cave did receive burial goods. In the left one, a ceramic vessel was found, already broken, but with cooked clay beads, that may once have belonged to a necklace (Fig. 5). Also in the chamber to the right clay beads were placed on the floor. Their number here was even significantly higher, reaching a few hundred. In the left chamber, on one side, obsidian tools were found as well as bone punches and clay beads. Next to those, small pieces of pine wood were found, that once were typical small torches serving to illuminate dark interiors like caves.

Summarizing the observations, the burial ritual in this cave may have consisted of at least two parts: when a new body was placed into the left burial chamber, the previous burial, that formerly occupied this space, was placed into the chamber to the right, the ossuary.



Fig. 5. The deposited burial goods comprised obsidian tools, ceramics and also such a pendant made of several ceramic beads. Photo credit: D. Delgado

CONCLUSION

Child burials in the Canary Islands are still underrepresented in the funerary record. Therefore each contribution helps to broaden the picture on funerary treatments of this part of the Guanche population. This study helped to contribute further information on the burial place of a young individual and its special burial treatment, including the individual's mummification.

Also it was possible to determine a two phase burial ritual, with primary and secondary burials inside the same cave as well as the equipment of the dead with burial goods of different types. Future analysis of the burial ground and a CT-scan of the child will complete these first insights. This study aimed to recontextualize the individual, who had nearly lost all information on its provenance and burial surroundings when entering the collection of the MUNA.

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