

## FUNERAL PRACTICES IN THE PROTOHISTORIC NECROPOLIS OF ARTEARA (GRAN CANARIA): A HERITAGE UNDER DISCUSSION

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**Abstract.** We make an approach to the funerary world of the protohistoric populations of the Canary Islands using as a reference point the Tumular Necropolis of Arteara, located on the island of Gran Canaria, a site from which we analyse its peculiarities and the different interventions to which it has

been subdued. In addition, we intend to show the information provided by different specialist to know various questions about the rituals used in the protohistory of the islands, to finally analyse the current state of the site, its management and dissemination of that specific type of archaeological heritage.

**Keywords.** The Canary Islands. Cultural Heritage Management (CHM). Tumular Necropolis. Funerary World. Archeology.

### I. INTRODUCTION

In the Canary Islands, Protohistory constitutes the first stage in its cultural development and covers from the first human establishment, around the beginning of the first millennium BC, until the fifteenth century A.D., moment in which the

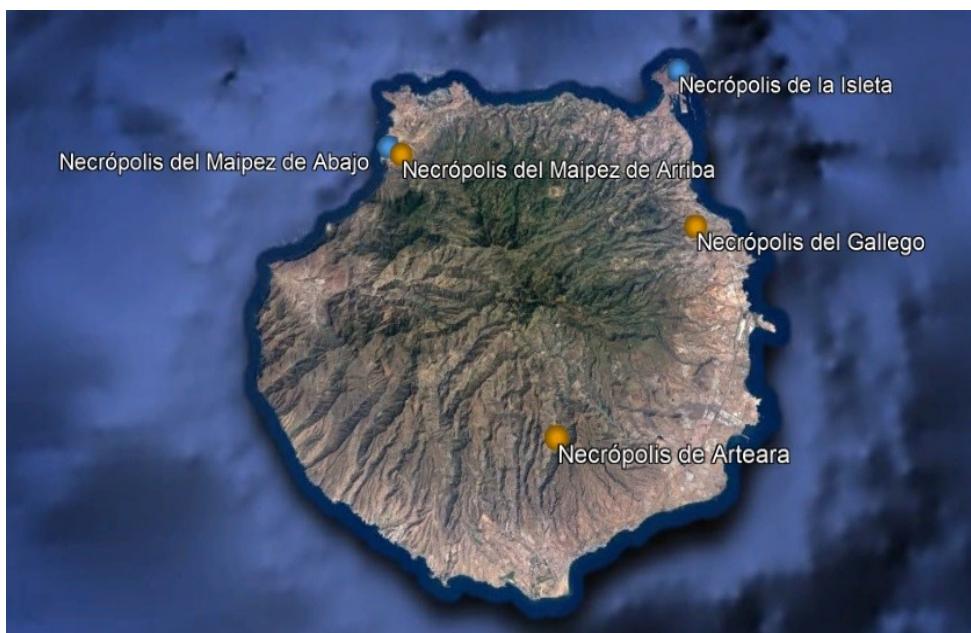
historical stage begins after the Norman-Castilian conquest that ended the indigenous Canarian cultures. Of the many questions that this stage for research presents, one of those that arouses more interest is the one referring to the cultural and ethnic origins of the initial population that colonized and insular space that, in addition to its oceanic character, occupied and eccentric position with respect to the great Mediterranean civilizations of the late Antiquity. This remoteness would force the colonists to develop in a relative cultural isolation, putting in pace cultural systems characterized by a technological stage that has been called *forced Neolithic* (Atoche et alii, 1997), being forced to reorient certain cultural fields, such as the subsystem Technological or ideological. Precisely in this last area we will try to analyse one of the archaeological elements that constitutes one of the most outstanding patrimonial resources of the island Protohistory of the island of Gran Canaria, the Tumular Necropolis.

During the protohistoric stage the seven major islands of the Canary Islands were populated by people with similar cultural bases, although each ended up showing its own characteristics; precisely one of those peculiarities was rooted in funeral practices that, in the case of Gran Canaria, generated the construction of a necropolis where complex burial rituals were put into practice using tumular structures.

Referring to the research area for the island of Gran Canaria, it is necessary to start not with the theoretical dates of human occupation but with the radiocarbon results currently used by archaeologists. The oldest dating that is available corresponds to a site located in the central area of the island, in the Roque de Cuevas del Rey, which dates to the third century A.D. This chronological reference is considered doubtful since it was obtained in 1957, at which time they began this type of analysis, to which is added the impossibility of contrasting said date with new test in other laboratories when the exact location and the material associated with those simples analysed. The remaining dates that have been obtained in the island in different archaeological sites and materials have contributed later dates that show a relative continuity until the Castilian occupation of the island. At present, perhaps the most pressing problem affecting archaeological research is the large number of emergency archaeological interventions that are carried out motivated by the implementation of nearby infrastructure or in archaeological areas; the speed that this type of archaeological intervention requires prevents systematic tasks from being carried out that allow adequate documentation of the affected archaeological sites.

In Gran Canaria, the Tumular Necropolis were generally located in areas near the coast, in the so-called Malpais, except in some cases as represented by the Necropolis of Arteara, located on the landslides caused by the collapse of the mountain slope from La Cogolla. Both in one case and in the other they are in landscape environments that favor that the tumular structures are confused and integrated with the environment. Although the existence of several tumular necropolis is currently known, there is also evidence of the destruction of others, as was the case of the one located in the Isleta or the loss of much of that of the Galician, having applied only to two of those sites some type of intervention oriented to its musealization, those of Maipés de Arriba and Arteara (Fig 1); It is precisely in the last of these necropolis where we have confused our interest in response to the particularities that it presents both from an archaeological and heritage point of view.

Heritage derived from funeral practices constitutes a type of heritage whose recovery and use are under discussion in recent decades as a result of new ethical and legislative trends arising from the Declaration of Human rights, especially after



**Fig. 1.** From the great Tumular Necropolis of Gran Canaria, made with Google Earth. Blue the missing and orange the existing ones.

the Second World War. In the field of Archaeology, respect for human remains in mortuary deposits and sacred artefacts has become stronger; as is the case in the United States with the Tombs and Repatriation of Native Americans Act of 1990, which has allowed indigenous communities to recover the remains of their ancestors deposited in different museums in the country, such as the Smithsonian (Washington DC), and be exhumed again. The Canary Islands have not been removed from this trend, having recently raised a debate within the scientific community, encouraged by an exhibition showing a sculpture titled Threshold 2017, by artist Teresa Correa, that recreates a well built with bones from aboriginal canaries donated by the Canarian museum. The controversy originates from the use of human remains of archaeological origin assigned by said entity that fulfils the functions of provincial museum, together with the moral and ethical aspects of the use of these human remains for that purpose. As a result of this situation and due to the lack of protection to date of this type of materials, it was present in the new Law of Cultural Heritage of the Canary Islands published in the Official State Gazette number 140, of June 12, 2019, a articulated that indicates the respect that must be had towards this type of patrimonial property and the treatment that they must receive, although waiting for a specific regulation in the near future.

## 2. THE TUMULAR NECROPOLIS OF ARTEARA

Trying to understand the funeral practices developed in the necropolis of Arteara requires a brief comment about were the funeral rituals and the different types of burial that were put into practice in protohistoric Gran Canaria. In that sense, the use of caves as a funerary enclosure was a common fact throughout the archipelago, which in the case of Gran Canaria could be both natural and artificially excavated; in those places the body of the deceased was deposited on deposits or wooden structures, then the entrance was sealed. Along with the previous ritual, outdoor burials were also carried out, especially in spaces where there were accumulations of rubble called Malpais, sites where the abundant rocks were used to lift mounds of variable morphology. The bodies were deposited wrapped in a mortuary bundle inside a cyst that was covered with a tumular structure, usually individually; although there was also the case of double or collective deposits. In general, the burial mounds were concentrated in large necropolis, although some examples of isolated burial mounds are known as the Cañada de los Gatos site, in the municipality of Mogán or the Maspalomas necropolis, in San Bartolomé de Tirajana.

A third type of funeral ritual, still Little known, is the one that was located at the Cendro site consisting of burials of new-borns inside ceramic vessels, which was initially interpreted as a result of a birth control process. Subsequently, it has been considered a ritual derived of influenced by the interaction that should have existed between the Canarian indigenous cultures and the Phoenician-Punic culture established in the western Mediterranean (BERNAL and ATOCHE, 2008:199).

From rituals that we have listed, we will analyse the one that was developed in the tumular necropolis of Arteara, an archaeological site located near the town of Arteara in the municipality of San Bartolomé de Tirajana, south of the island of Gran Canaria. The space where it sits is irregular, product of the collapse of the mountain of La Cogolla, an erosive process that led to the appearance of what is called the Malpais in the Canary Islands. This rough terrain was used to locate a tumular necropolis using the rocks of the place to lift the funeral structures getting them confused with the surrounding landscape. Together, the site constitutes an archaeological complex of great heritage value that holds the category of Heritage Asset (in Spanish BIC) in decree 1966/1973, of July 5.

In the necropolis of Arteara, 820 tumular structures have been counted, which makes it the site of these characteristics that contains the largest number. It covers an approximate Surface of about 2kms<sup>2</sup> delimited by the remains of a wall that possibly surrounded the entire site, which has been granted a symbolic value as an element that would serve to separate the profane space from the funerary environment (VV.AA., 2001:66).

In all likelihood the Arteara necropolis was already known several centuries before it was discovered for archaeological research by the population that settled inside the island in the wake of the Castilian conquest of the fifteenth century A.D. From the 19th century onwards, it was documented by V. Grau Bassas (Grau Bassas et al., 1980: 12-13), a nineteenth-century scholar who focused his interest in the external morphology of the tumular structures and in the recovery of human bone remains that they contained; however, his systematic study did not begin until the 70s and 80s of the last century by R. Schlueter, a researcher who proceeded to the cataloguing, excavation and investigation of the deposit, formulating a series of hypotheses in relation to the funeral practices that took place there (Schlueter; 1977-1979 and 2009). In recent years the Company Arqueocanarias S.L. has carried out new archaeological interventions base on the previous results obtained by R. Schlueter, which were announced in a report dated De-

ember 2012 and delivered to the Island Council of Gran Canaria. It indicates that a Project aimed at delimiting the site, intervening in certain burial mounds base on the archaeological potential they presented and collecting all possible data was launched.

## 2.1. Chronology

The first chronological references associated with the necropolis of Arteara were obtained during the work of R. Schlueter from radiocarbon analysis; these are two very different dates, one of VIII B.C. and the other of the XVIII A.D. This C14 analysis was carried out at the University of Gakushuin (Tokyo, Japan), discovering years later that the results obtained by said laboratory were not reliable when showing erroneous dates, so it was necessary to perform new analyses in another laboratory that would allow to contrast the initial results and their degree of reliability. Arqueocanarias S.L. obtained in his last intervention samples of the same burial mounds that were previously being dated from samples of plant tissue from two mortuary bundles which provided chronologies located between that VIII-IX and XI-XII centuries A.D., these dates are those they are currently considered more in line with the archaeological contexts present in the Arteara site.

The breadth and the varied funerary context presented by the site, together with the aforementioned dates, are indicative that the necropolis was in use for a long period of time that covers not only part of the protohistoric stage but also much recent dates that reach the twentieth century, when the area was used to inhumate the dead sailors who could not be buried in holy fields, due to ignorance of the religion they processed or have a different one from the catholic, considering this necropolis a land of pagans (Schlueter, 2009:44). This prolonged use makes it difficult to determine its chronology exactly, which is why it is currently only possible to establish some estimates that can only be specified when more data are available from a larger number of burial mounds.

## 2.2. The funerary tumulus

Undoubtedly, the main patrimonial value of the necropolis of Arteara is tumular structures, funerary constructions whose research has led to the development of different hypotheses that, in some cases, raise the possible existence of social differences between the individuals buried in those structures and those that were in caves.

The tumular structures are made up of two distinct parts, the infrastructure and superstructure. The first is the hidden space located inside the tumulus constituted by a cista or pit where the bodies were deposited individually or collectively. The superstructure, on the other hand, includes the construction that rises above the cista or the pit by means of the accumulation of different types of materials coming from the most immediate environment, such as rocks and earth, and that acquires different forms whose typological study allowed R. Schlueter (Schlueter, 2009, p. 53-55) differentiate up to nine different types of these funerary structures.

The subsequent intervention of Arqueocanarias S.L. generated a new typological classification based on the fact that “...tombs do not respond to different models in terms of a specific form, beyond the tumular aspect, but to specific attributes of the constructive conditions” (ARQUEOCANARIAS S.L. 2012: 199), specifying the presence of four types of structures; specifically (Fig. 2):

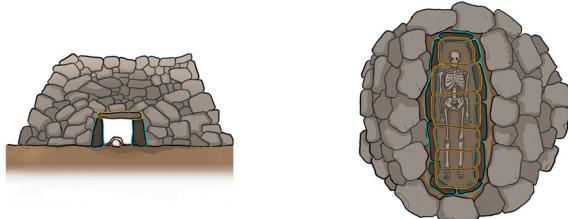
- Type 1: Tumulus with a truncated conical shape and a circular trend plan whose height exceeds 50cm. from the cista.
- Type 2: Tumulus with a shape similar to type 1 (“turret shape”) but with an oval tendency and with a lower height when not rising from the cist.
- Type 3: Tumulus that take advantage of the great rocks of the environment, fruits of the collapse of the mountain, generating around it the cyst that would contain the body.
- Type 4: Unlike the previous ones, a tumulus should not be considered, as it was treated in the initial interventions of R. Schlueter; since it consists of the use of a rock shelter that is conditioned as a funerary zone, sealing its entrance with rocks of the environment. Due to this morphology of the structure we would talk about a burial in a cave.

### **2.3. Funeral practices: the treatment and deposition of corpses**

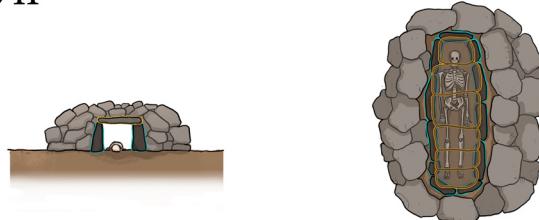
In the tumular necropolis, human remains are usually located in an advanced state of deterioration, turning them into extremely fragile elements because bodies were deposited in a cyst, not buried, and covered by a tumular structure affected by both water leaks from the rain as by the action of heat or that of animals such as rodents. To this we must add the continuous plundering that these structures have suffered (Arqueocanarias S.L., 2012: 211; Schlueter, 2009:68).

Following this condition in the last archaeological intervention carried out by Arqueocanarias S.L., the information collected to date of this tumular necropolis

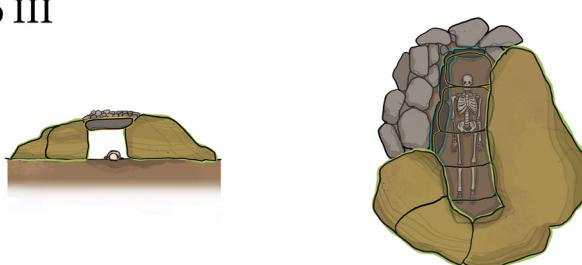
### Tipo I



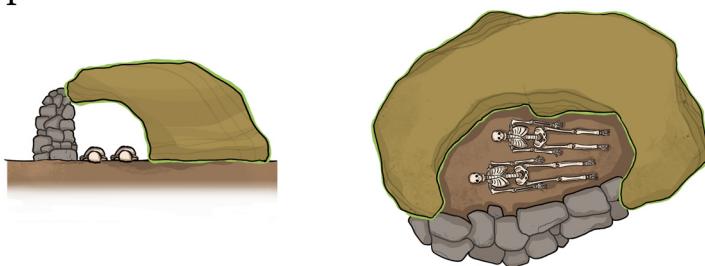
### Tipo II



### Tipo III



### Tipo IV



**Fig. 2.** Adaptation of the Tumular typology, according to the data presented by Arqueocanarias S.L.

was renewed, allowing a closer approach to. The rituals that could take place there. In their results they present a series of conclusions that, together with previous studies by various specialists, allow us to know this funerary environment located in Arteara.

With regard to the treatment applied to the bodies of the deceased during the protohistoric stage, the most common practice was called by the chroniclers as mirrored, which began by washing the deceased with hot water and cooked herbs, to later perform in some cases a belly opening on the right to remove the viscera from the bottom of the ribs. The brains were also removed from the top of the head and the tongue was removed. After the extraction, the body was filled with a mixture of sand, ground pine husks and mocan pomace to proceed to sewing. Next, the body was smeared with butter and placed for fifteen days in the sun during the day and at night in the smoke until it was able to dry it out. With this method the corpse would reach the level of "xaxo", obtaining a thin and dry body (Arco, 1981:22).

Although the peeler was the most common practice of treating corpses, it is considered that in the case of tumular burials the bodies did not receive any type of treatment for their conservation (Atoche, Ramírez and Rodríguez, 2008:150), considering that the body was simply wrapped and deposited in the cista. In any case, that state of deterioration with which the bodies buried in the tumular necropolis have reached us makes it difficult to know if any of them received a preservation treatment; the Discovery in the necropolis of Arteara of remains of plant or animal tissues indicates the existence of funeral bundles, wraps that would be sealed with straps to the body, especially in the ankles, knees and elbows, causing the body to acquire a forced position with the head down. The widespread use of this type of coating seems to be attested by the low displacement of the bone elements inside the cyst and the pressure shown by the aforementioned areas of the body due to the use of belts. Along with the above, a common feature in protohistoric funeral rituals was the intention that the body of the deceased did not directly touch the ground, interposing different elements, plants or even slabs of rock.

As regards the placement of the body, in the necropolis of Arteara they usually show a supine position, which is the most common in the funerary rituals of the entire archipelago, although in some specific sites the placement of the corpse in flexed lateral decubitus position (Atoche, Ramírez and Rodríguez, 2008: 149). The question of the orientation of the bodies in the tumular necropolis has tended to be a resolved traditionally, indicating that the structures had an orientation in an

east-west direction. However, recent studies in Arteara have attested that there was no fixed orientation, adapting the structures to the irregular environment in which they are located.

Finally, it is necessary to highlight the fact in this type of funeral constructions the body is not accompanied by trousseau, an element whose absence makes any comparison with the rituals practiced in the caves difficult and to ensure the presence of factors indicative of the existence of differences social. In the necropolis of Arteara a single example is knowns, with collective burial constituted by a minimum of thirteen adult and child individuals, in which artefacts such as fragments of ceramic vessels, lithic elements and remains of domestic fauna that could be considered a funerary trousseau. Although this space was initially classified as a burial mound, recent Works (Alberto and Barroso, 2014, min. 52:21), assimilate it more to the funerary environments in caves, being sepulchral spaces where they are found Ajuares accompanying the bodies.

### 3. PATRIMONIAL INTEREST OF THE NECROPOLIS OF ARTEARA

The necropolis of Arteara is owned by the municipality of San Bartolomé de Tirajana, who has ceded its management under a contest to a private Company for four years extendable in Exchange for a rental. Arqueocanarias S.L. It is the Company that owns the concession, taking care of the research, conservation, protection and dissemination activities of this site. Since 2001 there is an interpretation centre that emerged from the need to safeguard the environment and spread this heritage asset, in whose rooms the results of the Works carried out by R. Schlueter are shown through models, explanatory panels and videos. Although the centre was completed in 2001, it was not opened to the public until 2014 after a rehabilitation of the infrastructure, necessary due to its prolonged abandonment. With the current Administration of Arqueocanarias S.L. and despite the years that have passed and the Deep reconditioning of its facilities, the museum discourse has remained unchanged since its inception, thereby showing a notable lack of renewal based on the data obtained by the management Company after having spent several years archaeological intervening in the site and that they have modified aspects as significant as the chronology or the typological variants of the tumular structures.

Despite the use of these discursive tools, already obsolete by the information provided, the routes that go into the site itself from the interpretation centre stand out in its favor. These allow to know different facets of the environment with dif-

ferent information panels which carry different types of data that are of interest to understand the area in which they are located, these provide data from historical, geographical or biological points of view, such as the flora and fauna prevailing there. The highlight of this part of the site is the low visual impact caused by these types of trails by having generated smaller stones from the surroundings making in some cases difficult to distinguish the route itself, in contrast to mimicking so well with the well-known Malpais, it does not allow it to be accessible to all types of people, especially those with motor dysfunction.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The archaeological heritage of funerary character located in Arteara serves as one of the few bastions that still exist today of this type of tumular necropolis in Malpais, being also the only one with a non-volcanic origin. This site provides a series of essential characteristics for society, both in the scientific and profane community in the field.

From the archaeological point of view, it allows us to carry out various anthropological analyses to know the society that existed on the island before the Norman-Castilian occupation. Among his contributions the most prominent would be the knowledge of the funeral rituals present on the island, along with the possibility of comparing it with other types of burials, highlight that of the caves being the most numerous and with greater continuity known to date. This type of information, together with the possible bioanthropology studies that are gaining strength at present, could help to know when different aspects of this culture and even the origin of these are being the only island of the Canary archipelago with this type of funeral structures.

Regarding to cultural management, this site if it adapts adequately to current needs, updating its data and ever modernizing with new tools and methods of dissemination, would become a springboard to Project our culture abroad due to uniqueness of the site itself. This would come to provide various types of benefits both cultural, with the approach of the information that would transmit both to the inhabitants of the island and foreigners, along with other material resources, such as economic ones being an island with great importance in the tourism at international level, being one of the great attractions when offering visitors a cultural contribution, which together with other sites and the network of museums of the Cabildo allow diversifying the range of leisure of these tourists.

## Gratefulness

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