

## BEYOND DEATH: FUNERAL RITUALS OF MEDITERRANEAN ORIGIN IN THE CANARY PROTO-HISTORY

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**Abstract.** Upon the arrival to the Canary Islands in the first millennium B.C. of the first colonizers, a suggestive interaction was established between continental settlers and oceanic islands that gave rise to cultural adaptation phenomena and the appearance of specific characters in the Canary Island Cultures. The changes affected both socio-economic and technological patterns as well as

religious beliefs and funerary rituals, scope of the latter in which we analyze two of the practices witnessed among the protohistoric canaries that incorporated symbolic norms in which their origin can be traced Mediterranean and the transformations that they experienced after their implantation in the Canary Archipelago mummification or 'mirrado' and the new-borns sacrifice.

**Keywords.** Archaeology. Proto-history. Canary Island. Funeral Rituals. Cultural diffusion.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Continental humans who in the first millennium B.C. set in motion the colonization of the Canary Archipelago originally had an agro-pastoral socio-economic structure, contextualised in a technological environment of the Bronze final-transit to Iron Age with influences of the Phoenician-Punic Culture established in the western Mediterranean since the end of the II millennium B.C. The interaction between continental inhabitants and oceanic islands, mediated by the insularity syndrome, gave rise to cultural adaptation phenomena that transformed the original model. As a consequence, specific characters appeared that established differences between the different island cultures that arose throughout the archipelago, generating what we have called “*endemismos culturales*” (Atoche, 2008: 335), models of cultural behaviour integrated by the mixing of Libyan elements, Phoenicians, Punic, Romans and Canaries.

Undoubtedly, island fragmentation encouraged the unique development of different Canarian population groups, while the forced adaptation to island ecosystems led to the activation of extreme technological solutions, such as the cutting of volcanic rocks, forming protohistoric communities mediated by environmental conditions and the relative isolation, which placed them in a technological stage that we have called “*Neolítico forzado*” (Atoche, Martín & Ramírez, 1997: 15), in which lithic objects carved with imported metallic elements coexisted, as different contexts have shown archaeological sites in Lanzarote or the islet of Lobos.

There are numerous indicative evidences that throughout the more than two millennia that the protohistoric stage<sup>1</sup> lasted there was the emergence of novel cultural characters in the context of a process that maintained those that best adapted to the conditioning factors and the availability of resources imposed by insular biogeography. This process of adjustment and cultural adaptation to the insular space resulted in a change of identity of the colonizing populations, which, if they were continental ‘Libyans’ became to ‘canary’ insular. The transformation affected both socio-economic and technological patterns as well as funeral beliefs

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<sup>1</sup> In the Canary Archipelago, archaeological activity has shown human settlements existence dating from the X century B.C. (Atoche & Ramírez, 2017), moment from which and until the XV century A.D. the protohistoric period develops (Atoche & Ramírez, 2001: 43).

or rituals, the latter area in which we intend to analyse two of the funeral practices attested among protohistoric canaries, mummification or 'mirlado' and the sacrifice of new-borns, which incorporated a set of symbolic norms where it is possible to track both their Mediterranean ancestry and the transformations they experienced after their implantation in the Canary Archipelago.

## 2. FUNERAL RITUALS AMONG PROTOHISTORIC CANARY ISLAND

In the Canary Islands, the study of protohistoric funeral rituals requires a prior critical analysis of ethnohistoric sources, a set of chronicles and other contemporary texts and subsequent to the Norman-Castilian conquest of the XV century A.D. that they do not always provide objective information, as evidenced in J. de Viera y Clavijo (2016 [1772-1783]: 189), the first historian of the Canary Islands, who when referring to transits and more specifically to death, assured that the canaries lacked of «[...] nociones de la inmortalidad del alma ni más ideas de otra vida que la presente», affirmation that if it is true, it forces us to question why the protohistoric canaries dedicated so much effort and care to the bodies of the deceased, making them even accompany by garments made up of objects sometimes of such aesthetic quality that should have served as indicators of prestige. Precisely on the basis of the quality of some garments applied to the bodies, modern research has proposed some hypotheses about the social position that the deceased could have in life, giving the funeral spaces a prominent role in the historical interaction, beyond the strictly ritual or religious, contributing to the reconstruction of the socio-economic structures of the Canary Island cultures.

The possible existence of social differences expressed through the funeral ritual they were already indicated by some of the ethnohistoric sources. That is the case of Fr. J. de Abreu Galindo, who, in the XVII century A.D., he described in some detail the inequalities that in his opinion characterise the protohistoric society of Gran Canaria, based on the funerary rituals they practiced: «Tenían entierros los canarios, donde se enterraban de esta manera: A los nobles y hidalgos mirlaban al sol, sacándoles las tripas y estómago, hígado y todo lo interior. Lavándolo primero, lo enterraban; y el cuerpo secaban y vendaban con unas correas de cuero muy apretadas; y, poniéndoles sus tamarcos y toneletes como cuando vivían y hincados unos palos, los metían en cuevas que tenían diputadas para este efecto, arrimados en pie. Y, si no había cuevas, procuraban hacer sus sepulturas en lugares pedregosos que llaman malpaíses [...] Algunos nobles enterraban en ataúdes de cuatro tablas

de tea, y las pilas mucho mayores y de mayores piedras.» (Abreu, 1977 [1602]: 162-163). In a similar sense, the chronicle of F. López de Ulloa, dated to the mid-century (circa 1646) says that, «La gente noble no se enterraua con la uillana, sino que cada especie destas tenía su lugar señalado; el noble se enterraua con las insinias de tal, y el uillano también.» (Morales, 2008: 316).

Abreu and Lopez texts not only pointed out the differences that existed between the ruling class and the less favoured classes in the contemporary times of the late medieval conquest of the XV century A.D., but also reflects what the funeral practices were like, constituting a point of references research even if it still about issues that are under discussion due to structural problems originated in the type of research that have been developed, very focused on the anatomical or pathological characters of human remains and largely disconnected from the cultural context that gave rise.

The ethnohistoric sources also collect some details of the funeral rituals in the field of offerings or libations. Fr. J. De Abreu Galindo himself said that «Cuando morían, tenían esta costumbre y orden en sus entierros, que había hombres y mujeres que tenían oficio de mirrar los cuerpos, y a esto ganaban su vida, desta manera que, si moría hombre, lo mirraba hombre, y la mujer del muerto le traía la comida; y si moría mujer, la mirraba mujer, y el marido de la difunta le traía la comida; [...]» (Abreu, 1977 [1602]: 299). This is a statement questioned by subsequent research, understanding that the presence in the funerary spaces of islands such as la Palma of elements such as milk vessels ('gánigos') does not constitute proof of existence of food offerings to the deceased, considering them simply elements of grave goods (Tejera & González, 1987: 74)<sup>2</sup>. From our perspective, we consider it necessary to rethink that question, at least as a plausible hypothesis, if one takes into account that ethnically and culturally the Canarian cultures originally come from the context of ancient Mediterranean cultures where that type of funeral practice was widespread and linked to a cult ancestral to the deceased, common to many of the ancient Mediterranean religions, such as the Egyptian, the Pheno-Punic or the Greco-Roman (Niveau, 2006: 38).

Faced with the previous ethnohistoric information, obtained in some cases through direct contact with the indigenous themselves, although at a terminal mo-

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<sup>2</sup> Other projects where the role that food could play in Canarian Funeral is mentioned are those of M.<sup>a</sup>C. del Arco *et alii* (2009) or J.A. Zamora (2015) for the Phoenician – Punic culture.

ment in the development of island protohistoric cultures, modern archaeological research has provided some data in relation to funeral practices, focused on the different types of burial. The North African cultural miscegenation that was at the origin of the religious beliefs that the Canarian protohistoric populations possessed undoubtedly influenced the funerary rituals they practiced, so if we except Lanzarote and Fuerteventura, where archaeological activity has only been able to recover a few remains of humans, the most widespread funeral ritual in the protohistoric Canary Islands<sup>3</sup> used as a funerary space the natural caves, cracks boarded with dry stone walls or artificial caves (hypogeum), sites where the bodies were deposited in supine position on wooden planks, both in shape individual as collective, without fixed orientation, sometimes in niches or carved shelves or delimiting with rocks the outline of corpse, a form of ritual that was implanted in North of Africa after the arrival of the Phoenician colonizers (Lancel, 1994: 61). In addition, on the island of La Gomera (Hermigua) and, to a lesser extent, on those of Tenerife (Cueva de Chabaso) and La Palma (El Espigón), together with the previous rite there have been examples of depositions in the flexed lateral decubitus position, proper African ritual older than the previous one and whose presence in the islands supports the hypothesis of the survival in the Canary Islands of numerous African elements and of different degrees of acculturation among the human groups that settled in the archipelago.

Partial cremation was practiced on the islands of El Hierro and La Palma (Tejera & González, 1987: 50 and 76), a rite that in North Africa also owed its introduction to the Phoenician colonizers. In Gran Canaria and Tenerife, children's burials are present in ceramic containers, which repeat a ritual similar to what is known for the Phoenician contexts of Ibiza, Huelva -where they survive in Roman times (Alcázar et alii, 1994: 36-47) (Fig. 1) - or the Kerkouane (Tunisia) (Fantar, 1988: 59). In Gran Canaria, the archaeological site of the Cueva Pintada de Gáldar has been identified as a North African *haouanet* excavated in the manner of Punic hypogea, highlighting the relationship between other sites on the island of Gran Canaria, such as the Cenobio de Valerón or Cuatro Puertas, and the funerary spaces present in the Phoenician colonies of the West (Balbín et alii, 1995: 28).

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<sup>3</sup> Except for some exceptions represented in the tumular necropolis of Gran Canaria or in Tenerife (Cueva de los Guanches), where the burial was carried out in graves with the corpse in direct contact with the earth (Atoche et alii, 2008: 175).



**Fig. 1.** Child burial in amphora. IV century A.D. Eucaliptal Necropolis (Punta Umbría, Huelva) (Huelva museum) (Fot. P.Atoche)

On the island of La Gomera, the tumular burials located in the Fortress of Chipude and in the Garajonay mountain stand out, spaces where «... los muertos se inhumaban en posición supino, a veces flexionados, colocándose en cuevas con escaso ajuar funerario y sin ningún tipo de mirrado» (Tejera, 1984: 42). Something similar has been indicated for the island of La Palma, where the deceased would have been deposited in natural caves, accompanied by clothes made in some cases by weapons (Tejera & González, 1987: 74).

Gran Canaria is the island of the Canary Archipelago where the most elaborate funerary practices were probably developed during the protohistoric stage, although there are aspects common to the rest of the islands, such as that the corpses are deposited in the supine<sup>4</sup> position or that they are not placed directly on the ground, conditioning the place by preparing a bed with plant elements, placing wooden planks, stone slabs or simply by levelling the ground. The bodies were dressed in garments like those they used in life, wrapping them in a shroud made of layers of ovicaprines or pig skin, occasionally dyed red, and vegetable

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<sup>4</sup> Excepcionalmente, in "El Hormiguero" (Firgas) the lateral decubitus position has been documented (Arco, 1993: 63).

reeds of palm or reed. As on the island of Tenerife, sarcophagus were manufactured by emptying tree<sup>5</sup> trunks, highlighting the presence of extensive tumular<sup>6</sup> necropolis usually located in 'malpaíses' near the coast, except in some cases such as that represented by the necropolis of Arteara (San Bartolomé de Tirajana), located in the landslides caused by the collapse of the slope of the mountain of La Cogolla. In these places, the abundance of rocks was used to lift mounds of variable morphology, which covered the cyst in which the bodies wrapped in a mortuary bundle were deposited, usually individually, although there was also the case of double deposits or collective. M.<sup>a</sup> C. del Arco (1976) made a difference of some variants in this rite determined by the morphology of the tumular structure, not having found the presence of mummified<sup>7</sup> but yes the use of fire, an element of which the aforementioned researcher ensures that «[...] jugó un papel en el ritual que ha afectado a espacios más o menos amplios, [...] por lo que el espectro interpretativo y simbólico resulta complejo, pudiendo abarcar desde fuegos purificadores hasta comidas rituales [...]» (Arco, 1993: 67). From our perspective, fire should be related to the realization, during the funeral ceremony, of libations and offerings of objects and food, as well as the possible celebration of ritual meals. At the bioanthropological level, in the Maspalomas necropolis, dated between the second half of the XII century A.D. and the end of the XIII century A.D., the presence of burials in cysts and pits has been documented, with the corpse in a supine position, ensuring the existence of a certain homogeneity (*sic*) among the individuals buried there, identifying few children and/or adolescents (Alberto & Velasco, 2008: 244).

Finally, also in Gran Canaria it has been evidenced in the site of El Portichuelo (Cendro, Telde) (Fig. 2) the presence of burials of neonates inside ceramic vessels associated with remains of burned ovicaprines and ceramics, which have been

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<sup>5</sup> Sarcophagus use in the Mediterranean was late; the Phoenicians, despite their early contacts with Egypt, do not begin to use them until the end of the third millennium B.C. and for the components of the social elite.

<sup>6</sup> In this same Congress a member of our research team, P.F. Méndez, presents the communication 'Funeral practices in the protohistoric necropolis of Arteara (Gran Canaria)' in which he approaches the funerary world of the protohistoric populations of Gran Canaria.

<sup>7</sup> From ritual perspective, in the Canary Islands mummification seems reserved only for those funeral rites that had the caves as the last bode of the deceased, a circumstance that, together with their apparent scarce extension, has served to consider that it was a conditioned practice by social and ethnic differences.





Fig. 2. El Portichuelo (Cendro, Telde, Gran Canaria) (Fot. P.Atoche)

considered (Cuenca *et alii*, 1996, 103) as the archaeological finding of the news provided by some ethnohistorical sources about the practice of female infanticide among the Paleocanarian populations (Abreu Galindo, 1977 [1602]: 169; Torriani, 1978 [1592]: 115), so it would be about child burials resulting from immolations in response to a demographic crisis and/or environmental degradation. R. González and collaborators have interpreted that finding as a «[...] cementerio, cerrado y apartado del conjunto habitacional; el carácter específico de cementerio infantil con enterramientos en vasijas parece corresponder en todos sus extremos a la definición de *Tofet* [...]» (González *et alii*, 1998: 72), so we would be facing an element of clear Phoenician-Punic cultural ancestry.

In Fuerteventura there is very little information related to protohistoric funeral practices, establishing three types of rituals from the known funerary spaces as they are in caves, outdoors in burial mounds or outdoors in *cistus* (Lecuona & Atoche, 2008: 188). These would be joined by a fourth type that would incorporate those places where the presence of human bone remains has been recorded in the absence of an archaeological context that allows establishing its chronology. Of the known funerary findings, probably the one that has aroused the greatest



interest is the one located in the Cueva de Villaverde (Garralda *et alii*, 1981), a cavity initially used as place of habitation and where two individuals, an adult and a child, were buried in a pit with the shape of an oval tendency delimited by means of an alignment of rocks of different sizes. The adult was placed in a supine position, with the head tilted to the right side and the arms parallel to the body; the child was below the previous one, in a fetal position on his right side, placed transversely in relation to the adult's head and shoulders, a provision that, in the opinion of his discoverers, would constitute evidence of the intention that both individuals remain with a *post mortem* physical connection.

On the island of Lanzarote, archaeological data referring to funeral practices are also scarce (Atoche *et alii*, 2008: 177)<sup>8</sup>. Among the known funerary sites highlights the necropolis of the Cueva de Montaña Mina (San Bartolomé) (Martín *et alii*, 1982; Garralda, 1985) where a collective burial was organized in two areas, one inferior and one superior; in the first of which the bones were scrambled while in the second seven skulls and some long bones accompanied by a small trousseau constituted by fragments and ceramic vessels, a bone punch, a cylindrical collar bead made of rock and several shells of perforated marine molluscs. Its excavators considered that it was a funerary space reused over time, forcing the deceased previously deposited to make room for the new ones, which would explain the strange disposition of the bodies, at the bottom of the cave, with skulls store on a half-height shelf and post-cranial skeletons piled on the floor of the cavity. On that island the presence of tumular funerary structures has also been noted, although this has not been proven reliably.

### 3. THE MUMMIFICATION PRACTICE OR 'MIRLADO'<sup>9</sup> AMONG THE PROTOHISTORIC CANARY ISLANDS

In the funerary practices context described, two rituals have been documented that present as a more outstanding cultural aspect the fact of incorpo-

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<sup>8</sup> In this same congress, our research team presents a communication that analyses the reasons that can explain the lack of funeral evidence in the islands of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura (Atoche, Ramírez & Rodríguez, '*The Demographic Enigma of the Protohistory Populations of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura*').

<sup>9</sup> The ethnohistoric sources of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries refer occasionally to this designation to the Canarian funeral practice intended for the conservation of corpses.

rating a set of symbolic norms in which it is possible to track both their Mediterranean ancestry and the transformations they experienced after their implantation in the archipelago. We refer to mummification or 'mirlado' and the new-borns sacrifice.

Regarding the type of mummification evidenced among the protohistoric inhabitants of the Canary Islands, it is a practice that was considered by historiography as a curious cultural phenomenon with important unknowns related to its origin, although the most recent research has qualified it as a loan religious, with a close cultural origin that would be in the procedures for the treatment of corpses practiced by the Phoenician-Punic culture in North of Africa, and a distant origin that would be found in the mummification techniques used in Pharaonic Egypt during the Low Epoch (Atoche *et alii*, 2008: 143-144). Both Egyptian and Canarian practice would seek to artificially preserve the body using certain techniques and applying desiccant and preservative substances, elements that did not always achieve the intended results, which explains why the archaeological activity has been recovering both mummified remains and cadaveric remains (Fig. 3).

Only the islands of Tenerife, Gran Canaria and La Palma<sup>10</sup> have provided examples of 'mirlado', although Fr. J. de Abreu and T.A. Marín de Cubas towards the end of the XVII century A.D. also mentioned their presence in Lanzarote and Fuerteventura. «[...] sus difuntos los mirlan de que tienen cuevas de ellos de grandes rumazones sin estar apollados y envueltos en pieles, [...]» (Marín de Cubas, 1986 [1694]: 151). It is a practice that has been linked to a specific type of funeral ritual that used the caves as funerary space and that has been considered conditioned by social and ethnic inequalities (Arco, 1976: 22), so that researchers like E.A. Hooton or I. Schwidetzky came to affirm that two different forms of mummification occurred among the Guanches, which were distinguished according to whether or not abdominal dissection had been practiced. This would have its explanation in the existence of social inequalities in the island population, in such a way that the evisceration would be applied only to the bodies of those individuals that belonged to the highest social levels. Modern bioanthropological studies have been able to witness the evisceration or the extraction of the brain in the view-

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<sup>10</sup> In La Palma, the preserved evidence of mummification consist only of some remains of skin adhered to bone elements (El Espigón, Puntallana) and a mummified hand (Pais, 1996: 69-70).



**Fig. 3.** Tenerife mummy. National Anthropology Museum (Madrid) (Fot. P.Atoche)

point, a fact that marks differences with respect to the oldest Egyptian mummification and approximates that practiced during the Low Epoch or when the Phoenicians of the Near East influenced by Egypt after several millennia cultural and commercial contacts<sup>11</sup>.

In Canary Protohistory the bodies that were 'mirlados' were applied substances characterized by their conservative or desiccant properties, such as lard, coarse stone, pumice, lapilli, sand, heather, pine, aromatic herbs such as 'orijama' and astringent as the 'mocán' and other endemic species that distance themselves

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<sup>11</sup> In the Phoenician culture the practices tending to the conservation of the corpse, in addition to the other elements of the Egyptian funeral ritual, are present although they do not seem to have had the same meaning that they had in the pharaonic society. The Phoenicians imitated the use of sarcophagus from the Egyptians, attesting to the end of the third millennium B.C. among the members of its social elite, the oldest being those recovered in the royal necropolis of Biblos, which were inspired by Egyptian wood and rock sarcophagus, who began using them from the Old Kingdom.

from the materials used by the embalmers of the pharaonic Egypt. In the same way, the mortuary envelope also varied, elaborated mainly with ovicaprine skins by the Canaries in front of the Egyptian linen, or the symbolic norms on which the ritual was based, which in the Canary Islands do not seem to present a context, as far as the notion of divine refers, as elaborate as that which occurred in ancient Egypt. However, there seems to be a certain relationship of origin between the Egyptian mummification and the Canary Islands, which would have had North of Africa as a development framework within Libyan-Phoenician<sup>12</sup> populations; it would be a phenomenon of religious loan that, according to intentionality and attitude, approximates what J. Alvar (1993: 5) described as 'spontaneous loan', a process in which the adoption of foreign elements occurs as they are necessary for the restructuring of the religious system. Therefore, the Canarian 'mirlado' would constitute a reinterpretation of the North African Phoenician-Punic rite, the result of a process of adaptation and loss of the original Egyptian and Phoenician meanings. It would also be an interpretable ritual based on prestige, an explanation to both the information collected by the chronicles of the late medieval conquest and the high quality of the elements used in the ritual point in some of the specimens that have been preserved in Gran Canaria, with shrouds of well-tanned skins and sewn with tendons or strips of leather, exceptionally painted with various shades of red, brown, ochre, yellow and white in one of the wraps from Arguineguín (Galván, 1998: 67), with geometric motifs of red colour, circular perforations and sometimes, a combination of red dyeing on the front of the skin and incised parallel strokes and flaking on the reverse. From Acusa comes a corpse whose cushioning was done with a double wrap, first with a mat woven with vegetable fibers that was fitted with a second layer of sewn ovicaprine skins (Torres & Atoche, 2008: 44) (Fig. 4).

The 'mirlado' procedure was collected by different sources, from the chronicle of A. Cedeño (Morales, 2008: 380) to Fr. J. de Abreu Galindo, the latter assures that:

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<sup>12</sup> People who possessed a heterogeneous culture mixing ancient Mediterranean-African traditions with later elements of Phoenician-Punic origin, miscegenation that in the Maghreb gave as an ethnic-cultural result to Phoenician Libyan, ethnonym that Pliny the Elder collects in his *Natural History* (V, 24) and those that Diodoro (XX, 55, 4) and Tito Livio (XXI, 22; XXV, 40) define as a mixture of Punic and Africans (López & Suárez, 2002: 117 y 128).



Fig. 4. Gran Canaria mummy with skin shroud and plant tissue (Fot. P.Atoche)

«Y la manera de mirrar los cuerpos era que llevaban los cuerpos a una cueva y lo[s] tendían sobre lajas y les vaciaban los vientres, y cada día los lavaban dos veces con agua fría las partes débiles, sobacos, tras las orejas, las ingles, entre los dedos, las narices, cuello y pulso. Y, después de lavados, los untaban con manteca de ganado y echábanles carcoma de pino y de brezo y polvos que hacían de piedra pómez, porque no se dañasen. Y, estando el cuerpo enjuto sin ponerle otra cosa, venían los parientes del muerto, y con cueros de cabras o de ovejas sobados los envolvían y los liaban con correas muy luengas, y los ponían en las cuevas que tenían dedicadas para ello, cada uno para su entierro; y esto tenían los inferiores del rey, que donde quiera que morían, se enterraban en su cueva que tenían para su sepultura; pero el rey, donde quiera que moría, lo habían de llevar a su sepultura, donde tenían sus pasados; a los cuales ponían por su orden, para que se conociesen; y así los ponían fajados y sin cubrirles con cosa encima.» (Abreu, 1977: 300).

Finally, it should be noted that linked to the 'mirlado' seems to be the contact taboo, which would affect all those whose activity was related to the funerary environment, discriminated by extending the taboo of death to those who came into contact with a deceased (Freud, 1991: 48). In the Canary Island societies, the application of this taboo seems to emerge from the living conditions of the embalmers, people who lived apart from the rest of the population according to those indicated by A. Cedeño [1507?]: «Hauía hombres y mujeres diputados para ser amortajadores y enterradores que eran respectados provilísimos en la república / a los quales las demás jente negaba el comerçio i trato.» (Morales, 2008: 380). As can be deduced from the text, women were also in charge of preparing the deceased, an indicative circumstance that the Canary Islands constituted a society where gender roles and gender separation were well defined.

#### 4. DEMOGRAPHICAL CONTROL, A RITUALIZED PRACTICE?

Demographic control in societies with the characteristics that are supposed to the Canary protohistoric populations could make the difference between the survival of the community or its disappearance. In the Canary islands, the first news about the existence of possible demographic control refers to the indigenous society of Gran Canaria and we owe it to Fr. J. de Abreu Galindo, who pointed out «[...] que son tantas las mujeres que en estas islas nacen, [...]; mas antes el multiplicarse tanto la femínea generación dio ocasión a los canarios que hiciesen estatuto y ley, de matar todas las criaturas hembras que naciesen, como no fuesen los primeros partos, que reservaban para su conservación.» (Abreu, 1977 [1602]: 154-155). The same information was later echoed by T.A. Marín de Cubas, who said that in Gran Canaria «[...] havia mas mugeres que hombres, y hubo numero de dies para uno, tenian lei establecida de matar todas las hijas que naciesen, como no fuese la primogenita, porque habiendo en la Ysla catorse mil familias, y huviese años esteriles morian demasidamente unos por otros [...]» (Marín de Cubas, 1986 [1694]: 261). The reason that could explain the choice of the female gender to apply this demographic control can be found in M. Harris and E.B. Ross, for whom «[...] el método más eficaz de control de la población de que disponían las poblaciones paleolíticas era el infanticidio directo o indirecto de las hembras» (Harris & Ross, 1991: 42).

The archaeological activity developed in the Canary Islands has provided some evidence that seems to point to the past existence of this type of practice for de-



mographic control. That is the case of the Cendro deposit (Telde, Gran Canaria), where a good number of contextualized new-born remains have been recovered in what could be a necropolis. The corpses were «[...] depositados en el interior de vasijas cerámicas y rodeados de una anormal abundancia de fragmentos óseos animales y distintos restos cerámicos» (Cuenca *et alii*, 1996: 137). The identification of these remains with the practice of infanticide could have its remote origin in 'molk', a ritual present in the Phoenician-Punic society that consisted in the sacrifice of children and neonates, which were buried in ceramic containers, sometimes after being incinerated, with which authentic necropolises were constituted such as that of Carthage 'tofet' (Fig. 5). This custom was adopted by the Libyan populations of North Africa in contact with the Phoenician-Punic colonies, maintaining it even during the Roman occupation, along with its endurance in time than for C.G. Wagner. (1992: 18):



Fig. 5. Carthage or Salambó Tofet (Túnez) (Fot. P.Atoche)



«[...] puede intentar ser entendida como resultado de la flexibilidad que un procedimiento como la ritualización brindaba para posibilitar diversas formas de instrumentalización de tales sacrificios infantiles. Así, si la presión demográfica y las tensiones reproductivas parecen haber constituido los factores de fondo a lo largo de todos estos procesos, al igual que con los restantes infanticidios no ritualizados practicados ampliamente durante la Antigüedad y enmascarados bajo la rúbrica común de una alta mortalidad infantil, el impacto de la regulación ha podido ser dirigido (por la capacidad manipuladora de las élites sacerdotales) hacia objetivos diversos y apremiantes en según que coyunturas, que sitios y que épocas.»

Infanticide may also have been practiced in Tenerife if we consider the information provided by J. Bethencourt, who says that in the mid-19th century they were discovered in Charco del Bautisterio (Barranco del Boxo. Arico), five ceramic containers each of which it contained the skeleton of a child (Bethencourt, 1991 [1884-1912]: 109); that finding does not currently provide more information.

Along with the previous one, another measure of demographic control among the protohistoric canaries could be that of gerontocide, like what is observed in other pre-industrial societies such as the Inuit (Bailón, 2011: 5). Its posible presence on the island of La Palma seems to point T.A. Marín de Cubas, for whom the 'palmeros':

«[...] eran mui pusilanimos en sus enfermedades primero se dejan morir que admitir remedio ni alivio de alimento diciendo vacaguare, que significa ia me quiero morir, y esto con vos lastimera, y luego le hacian su cama de pellejos en la cueba onde havia de quedar difunto, y le tendian mui tirado, y ponian la caveza hacia el norte, y alli junto le ponian un ganigo o barreñoncillo pequeño lleno de leche, y antes de morir le tapiaban la puerta con pared de piedras mui ajustadas.» (Marín de Cubas, 1986 [1694]: 274).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Trying to reconstruct the world of beliefs, the type and character of the rites or the meaning of the symbolic manifestations of a protohistoric culture that disappeared more than six hundred years ago is extremely complex, since not all of these activities left a material reflection of their past existence. To the previous difficulty must be added the one that represents the fact that the investigation that has dealt with the subject has followed too often the information provided by the

ethnohistorical sources, without going into deep analysis and contrasting its veracity. But in addition, the attempts made to locate in the nearby African continent the possible sources of origin of the religious system attested among the protohistoric canaries have obviated the Mediterranean beliefs and rituals that ended up in North Africa as a result of more than a millennium of miscegenation Libyan-Phoenician and Roman-Berber, concentrating too much on the current Berber civilization, which is chronologically remote from island cultures almost two millennia and is heavily influenced by Islam.

From the aforementioned it follows that in order to approach the knowledge of the universe of beliefs and the eschatology of Canarian protohistoric cultures, we can only count on two sources of information that we must harmonize, the so-called ethnohistoric sources and archaeological sources, which provide two different types of data; the first, referred to the field of ideas and funeral practices and the second to the set of artefacts related to those ideas and practices.

In this approach it will also be necessary to take into account the obvious presence of parallels with the Mediterranean cultures that colonized the North of Africa in late Antiquity, especially the Phoenician-Punic and Roman, which in their contact with the various African Populations gave rise to an interesting and productive phenomenon of ethnic and cultural miscegenation.

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