

THE INVENTION OF CANARIAN PREHISTORY IN THE 19TH CENTURY: THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

by

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Abstract: This paper analyses how Canarian prehistory was invented in the 19th century. Amongst other aspects, it considers the methodological and theoretical guidelines underlying nineteenth century Canarian archaeology, which was deeply influenced by the European framework. At the same time, it insists in the North African origin of the first inhabitants of the Canary Islands, discarding the North European origin argued by the nineteenth century archaeologists.

Keywords: Prehistory; evolutionism; Cro-Magnon race.

Resumo: O presente texto analisa o modo como a Pré-história das Canárias foi inventada durante o século XIX, explorando-se, entre outros aspectos, as principais linhas oitocentistas de orientação metodológica e teórica. A par destas questões, demonstrar-se-á a origem norte-africana dos primeiros habitantes das Ilhas Canárias, contrariamente à norte-europeia defendida pelos arqueólogos do século XIX.

Palavras-chave: Pré-história; evolucionismo; raça de Cro-Magnon.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will analyze the European influence on the methodological and theoretical features of the Canarian archaeology of the 19th century, and will discuss how this led to the invention of Canarian prehistory by means of the establishment of a body of knowledge. Also, it will show the role of nineteenth-century Canarian Archaeology as a discourse which defined vindictive identities and produced subjects: the

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Guanches¹ seen as European and not as African, and therefore, the argumentation of the early colonization of the Canarian archipelago by great ancient cultures. On the assumption of the superiority of the western's culture, Canarian archaeologists assimilated the western system of concepts, practices, knowledge and beliefs about the remote past, and this led to the mimicry of the European model. There are several factors which help to explain this reality.

First of all, it is important to stress that the history of the archaeology of the Canary Islands cannot be understood without essential and constant reference to its relationships with the international community, especially the European continent. We may, therefore, take as our starting point the rediscovery of the Canary Islands by Europe in the 14th century, an event which paved the way, from the 15th century onwards, for the internationalization of the dispute over the conquest of the islands and their domains. The Norman French, Portuguese, and Spanish Aragonese and Castilians would all intervene in this dispute in an attempt to integrate the Canarian archipelago into their overseas territorial possessions. Later on, the archipelago became incorporated into the history of the modern European colonization of Africa and the Atlantic, with the "key" role of the islands in relation to Atlantic, and specifically American, navigation becoming particularly important during the second half of the 19th century.

This situation ensured that, from the 14th century onwards, the Canary Islands were visited by European intellectuals and scholars, who soon became interested in the study of Canarian antiquities and especially the question of the origins of the first inhabitants of the islands (Farrujia 2004). In fact, the European, and particularly the French, frame of reference played a crucial part in the emergence of Canarian archaeology during the second half of the 19th century. The presence of French authors (such as Sabin Berthelot or René Verneau) on the Canary Islands helped disseminate the main trends in French archaeology (both theoretical and methodological) amongst Canarian authors. Sabin Berthelot (1794-1880) lived in the Canary Islands for more than 25 years and published some of his articles in Canarian journals (*Revista de Canarias*, for example). René Verneau (1852-1938) spent some time at *El Museo Canario* (Gran Canaria) where he studied the anthropological and archaeological material from the ancient Canarian populations and published some of his articles in a local journal, *Revista de El Museo Canario*. At the same time, some Canarian authors, such as Gregorio Chil y Naranjo (1831-1901), Juan Bethencourt Alfonso (1847-1913) and

¹ Although this is the indigenous name for the ancient inhabitants of Tenerife, in the 19th century this term was used in an unifying sense, when referring to the settlers of the Canarian archipelago. According to the chronicles and first written sources, every island was colonized by a defined ethnic group: Gran Canaria by the *Canarii*; Lanzarote and Fuerteventura by the *Mahos*; El Hierro by the *Bimbachos*; La Palma by the *Auaritas*; La Gomera by the *Gomeros*; and Tenerife by the *Guanches*. This ethnical distribution (of Lybic-Berber origin) has only been archaeologically confirmed in Tenerife, Lanzarote and Fuerteventura (Farrujia 2004).

Rosendo García Ramos (1834-1913), had been to Paris, where they had visited academies and cabinets and established relationships – continued later in epistolary form from the islands – with the leading scientific figures of the day, such as Boucher Crèvecoeur de Perthes, Armand de Quatrefages, Teodore Hamy and Paul Broca. This ensured that French publications circulated widely throughout the Canaries

The Canarian authors (even those who did not visit Europe) also read the works of biologists like Charles Darwin (1859) and prehistorians like John Lubbock (1865), Gabriel de Mortillet (1872; 1882) and Boucher Crèvecoeur de Perthes (1847; 1857). That is to say, they read all the major French and English authors who were at the core of the spreading of evolutionist ideas throughout Europe. This meant that 19th century Canarian archaeology was directly influenced, both in its origins and development, by the European framework. However, and contrary to what could be expected, Spanish archaeology developed in the Mainland had any influence on the Canarian authors. Several factors influenced this situation: the absence lack of any links between Spanish and Canarian academic circles, the lack of interest of the Spanish authors on the Canarian matters, and the contacts established between Canarian and French scholars and the early relationship established between the ancient Canarian populations and the Cro-Magnon type discovered in La Dordogne and, consequently, with the French prehistoric environment. Therefore, the Canarian archaeology was more open and receptive to the French scientific world.

It is notable that a European power like Great Britain, with clear colonial interests in North Africa, did not develop archaeological researches on the Canary Islands. Nevertheless, this was due to a very concrete situation: the British sphere of influence in Africa was based essentially in the Eastern Mediterranean, to be more precise in the Upper Nile. In any case, this did not prevent the British from maintaining interests in the islands, in the form of the development of pseudo-colonial trade relations with the Canary Islands. In the case of Germany, another European power present in Africa, *Deutsch* archaeology had neither any influence on the Canarian authors. Several factors influenced this situation: the language barrier, since hardly any Canarian intellectuals spoke German, and as in the Spanish case, the absence lack of any links between German and Canarian academic circles. Therefore, the theoretical and methodological guidelines developed in German archaeology did not have an effect on the Canarian academic world (Farujia, 2005).

2. THE METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK: ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD WORK

From a methodological point of view, nineteenth-century Canarian archaeology revealed a whole series of deficiencies that were characteristic of a time in which

archaeology, as Glyn Daniel has pointed out (1976: 152), first started to see itself as a scientific discipline. The techniques of systematic excavation, field survey, conservation and protection were only developed slowly and with difficulty. The Canarian authors, in this sense, proceeded as antiquarians rather than archaeologists when excavating archaeological sites, since their interests centred only on the recovery of material evidence and they rejected or undervalued information that could be obtained from the actual archaeological context. Their preference for the archaeological object itself, with all its aesthetic qualities, did not require a rigorous methodology that involved documenting the concrete circumstances surrounding the discovery. In those times, archaeological sites were literally “emptied” in the search for objects, and many were rejected, together with the sedimentological and structural data associated with them. This was also the way in which Spanish (Lull & Micó, 1997: 114) and European (Schnapp, 2002: 135) contemporary archaeologists proceeded.

Another factor that should be considered in relation to these methodological issues was the professional background of the Canarian authors, which had a clear impact on the emergence and development of a “cabinet” archaeology, heavily influenced by the anthropological trends in vogue at the time. It is significant, in this respect that Chil y Naranjo and Bethencourt Alfonso were doctors. In addition, the absence of any specific archaeological training, as well as the attitude of the antiquarians themselves, meant that the main focus of the expeditions and excavations centred on the recovery of material remains. Moreover, on most occasions, the Canarian authors delegated the digging or removal of earth to third parties (as was the case with the *enriscadores*), reserving only the interpretative or descriptive part of the discoveries for themselves. The term *enriscadores* was used to describe a person who, in order to show off his skills, would climb and descend the most inaccessible and difficult peaks on the islands in search of archaeological sites, remains and artefacts. For example, Gregorio Chil y Naranjo (in Gran Canaria) and Sabin Berthelot (in Tenerife) used *enriscadores* to obtain mummies from unexplored caves.

This “methodology” above described would remain unchanged in the Canaries until the beginning of the 20th century, as was also the case with Prehistoric archaeology in the Spanish Mainland (Ayarzagüena, 1992: 50), France or Great Britain (Schnapp, 1999).

At the same time, factors such as the status of physical anthropology within the scientific context of the time, the leading role played by Chil y Naranjo and Bethencourt Alfonso (both doctors) in the scientific institutions they headed (*El Museo Canario* and *El Gabinete Científico*, respectively) and the supposed links between the French Cro-Magnon race and the Cro-magnon race documented in the Canaries meant that a substantial part of the field work focussed on the excavation of funeral sites (caves or tumuli), where it was possible to obtain the much-coveted anthropological material needed to elaborate the racial types and classifications that were in vogue at the time.

Having considered these aspects, it is important to point out that from the second half of the 20th century, the approach to fieldwork in the Canaries has seen, slowly and with difficulty, the beginnings of systematic archaeological techniques of excavation, field survey, conservation and protection. Therefore, excavation is no longer concerned with the quick discovery of what is hidden in caves or tumuli.

3. THE THEORETICAL GUIDELINES: EVOLUTIONISM AND DIFFUSIONISM

Evolutionist and diffusionist theories marked the origins of 19th century European prehistoric archaeology and physical anthropology (Trigger, 1992; Johnson, 2000) and, at the same time, the emergence of contemporary Canarian archaeological research, which was deeply influenced by the French frame of reference (Farrujia, 2004). Therefore Canarian archaeological literature of the 19th century was broadly defined on the basis of a combination of evolutionist and diffusionist arguments, mainly as a result of two factors. Firstly, there was the influence of the French frame of reference on the Canarian authors, since the French authors supported diffusionist and evolutionist theses (Coye, 1997: 183-186). And secondly, there was the fact that the Canaries were a group of islands and therefore, according to the world view of the nineteenth-century archaeologists, this physical and geographical situation must have had an influence on the progressive isolation of its early inhabitants. From a theoretical point of view, centuries of isolation prevented evolutionist theories alone from being used to explain cultural change, because it should be remembered, as Darwin had pointed out (1882: 190)... *aborigines, who have long inhabited islands, and who must have been long exposed to nearly uniform conditions, should be specially affected by any change in their habits*. For this reason the foreign and Canarian intellectuals responsible for studying the indigenous Canarian people appealed to both diffusionist and evolutionist theories to explain cultural change. It was inexplicable that human groups who had lived in isolation could evolve at the same pace and in the same way as groups from the African or European continents had done, and therefore diffusionist theses, starting with the mechanism of migration, provided explanations for the similarities observed between the Archipelago and the place of origin or diffusion centre (Western Africa, the Near East, Europe, etc.).

3.1. *The theoretical framework: the making of Canarian prehistory*

Against this background, the theoretical principles of European, and especially French, Prehistoric archaeology were soon assimilated in the Canary Islands. As a

result, archaeological artefacts became “key pieces” in explaining the cultural evolution of the islands from the combined point of view of evolutionist and diffusionist theories. This explains why Chil y Naranjo (1876) claimed the existence of *la edad del sílex toscamente tallado* or *l’Age du silex taillée* in the Canaries (Chil, 1876: 5), thus comparing one of the prehistoric ages of the islands with the Palaeolithic Age, as defined by John Lubbock, or the *Age du renne* or *Age de la pierre ancienne ou taillée* defined for French prehistory by Gabriel de Mortillet. This same theoretical perspective led Chil y Naranjo (1876), Millares Torres (1893) or Bethencourt Alfonso (1912) to argue for the existence of a Neolithic Age in the Canaries, based on the evidence of polished stone artefacts (the main Neolithic fossil group) and rustic pottery from archaeological sites on the islands, or the troglodytism of the indigenous Canarian people. At the same time, a firm belief in unilineal evolutionism led Chil y Naranjo (1901) and Bethencourt Alfonso (1992 [1912]: 304) to refer to the existence of megaliths (dolmens) on the islands (such as the dolmen of Tirajana, in Gran Canaria, or those of Chasna and Candelaria in Tenerife) related to those found in France (as was the case with the Ardeche dolmen). The presence of dolmens was an argument posed by these Canarian authors to link the Guanches populations with the arrival of the Celts. But contrary to their opinion, no dolmens have ever been archaeologically documented in the Canaries. The powerful influence of unilineal evolutionism had simply led them to establish forced archaeological comparisons between huge Canarian volcanic stones and French dolmens.

Together with archaeological artefacts, the presence of the Cro-Magnon race on the Canary Islands was another argument used by the Canarian authors to justify the existence of the Stone Age on the islands. It should be remembered that the contacts that certain Canarian authors such as Gregorio Chil y Naranjo or Juan Bethencourt Alfonso had maintained with France meant that nineteenth-century Canarian anthropology, following the methodological and theoretical principles of French physical anthropology, had adopted raciology wholesale as the main approach towards studying the indigenous Canarian people. Yet, whereas in England and France the scarcity of archaeological data had led archaeologists to resort to conclusions reached by physical anthropologists, linguists and ethnologists on the assumption that ethnology revealed almost everything they wanted to know about prehistoric times (Trigger, 1992: 89, 102, and 117), in the Canary Islands it was physical anthropology and the chronicles and ethno-historical sources (written just after the conquest) that complemented the archaeological information.

This pro-European and vindictive conception of the Canarian indigenous people, conditioned, among other aspects, by the scientific contacts with France, contributed to a great extent towards the assimilation of an ethnocentric concept of the early inhabitants of the islands. The result was that the Guanches were seen as Europeans

(Celts, Iberians, etc.), and not as Africans (Berbers), being this way related to the major European cultures, and therefore, to universal history. The Canarian authors, therefore, also adopted an elitist and partisan colonization model, in accordance with the one developed by the European intellectuals when referring to the Iberian or Celtic presence in North Africa: the great races (such as the Cro-Magnon) were those who colonized the north of the continent, and according to the Canarian authors, the islands (Farrujia 2005; Farrujia & Arco, forthcoming). Nevertheless, it is important to stress that the vindictive conception developed by the Canarian authors was different to the one defined by the French authors. The Canarian authors considered the Guanches as if they were their ancestors, as the first human being of the "Canarian nation". Therefore, the imperialist conception² underlying in the French authors was not even present in the Canarian case.

Having considered these aspects, it is important to point out that nowadays, radio-carbon dating places the early human colonization of the Canary Islands between the 8th and the 5th centuries B.C. These dates have prompted Canarian archaeologists to reject the use of concepts such as *Neolithic* when referring to the archaeology of the islands. In terms of population, there is no doubt about the presence of Berber and Libyan populations (coming from the Sahara) on the Archipelago during its prehistoric period (Farrujia and García, 2005). From the theoretical point of view – and while the nineteenth century was mainly dominated by the technological three-age model –, other models have been put forward by Canarian archaeologists, such as the cultural historical, which was taken to hyperdiffusionist extremes until well into the decade of 1990.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The origins and development of nineteenth century Canarian archaeology, as has already been pointed out, were influenced by the European, and especially the French, frame of reference. Scientific contacts between the Canary Islands and Europe (basically Paris) meant that evolutionist and diffusionist theories defined the emergence of Canarian archaeology.

From a scientific point of view, the evolutionary theories applied in the Canaries, even though positivist, contained significant theoretical and methodological defects in spite of the qualitative advance they represented in relation to the Renaissance and

² The concept "imperialist" follows B. Trigger's (1984: 363) definition: *Imperialist or world-orientated archaeology is associated with a small number of states that enjoy or have exerted political dominance over large areas of the world. As one aspect of this hegemony, such nations exert powerful cultural, as well as political and economic, influence over their neighbours.*

Enlightenment approaches. When foreign approaches were applied, indigenous Canarian cultures were treated as if they shared the same evolutionary development as other parts of Africa or Europe (as was the case in the relationship established between the French Neolithic era and the supposedly Canarian one). In this sense, the cultural evolutionist models simplified indigenous Canarian societies, as they did other past societies, and this explains why the particular or specific features of a culture were not considered important. In addition, evolutionist cultural models took neither contingency nor historical accident into account, preferring to assume that all societies evolved inexorably towards the formation of a state.

Regarding the role of Canarian archaeology as a discourse which defined vindictive identities, it is important to stress that the success of the European archetypes developed for the indigenous Canarian people can be explained by the academic relationships established between Canarian and French intellectuals, by the French presence in the Canaries (in the case of Berthelot and Verneau), and by the way in which their work was disseminated through the Canarian journals (*Revista Canaria* and *Revista de El Museo Canario*). The various island authors applied the European, mainly French, theoretical guidelines, but with clear partisan implications: for them the most important thing was to relate the first settlers on the islands to the major European cultures.

This situation above described, together with the methodological weaknesses of the times, which were characteristic of a period in which archaeology first began to see itself as a scientific discipline, explains why the scientific knowledge of indigenous world that was produced in the Canaries in the 19th century was very precarious and eventually led to the invention of Canarian prehistory (by means of the establishment of a body of knowledge), given that recent research has not scientifically proved the existence of the Stone Age in the Archipelago. Nevertheless, the 19th century generation, led by Chil y Naranjo, did at least introduce a faintly scientific line of enquiry into Canarian archaeological and anthropological research.

It is important to point out that from the second half of the 20th century, the approach to fieldwork in the Canaries has seen, slowly and with difficulty, the beginnings of systematic archaeological techniques of excavation, field survey, conservation and protection. But from the theoretical point of view, the current approach has been conservative, because the cultural historical model – although it is not the only one – is still the most followed.

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