

# The Restitution of two Guanche Mummies by Necochea (Argentina)

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KEY WORDS: Guanche, mummies, Canary Islands, Argentina, restitution

## Abstract

**Two Guanche mummies from Tenerife along with a complete archaeological collection, were purchased by Argentinean businessmen at the end of the 19th century. The two mummies were kept at the Museo de Ciencias Naturales in the tourist city of Necochea (Buenos Aires Province) since the 1920's. These specimens were restituted to the island of Tenerife (to the Museo Arqueológico de Tenerife, Organismo Autónomo de Museos y Centros of the Cabildo de Tenerife-the government of the island) in September 2003, following two years of negotiation between Spanish and Argentinean officials. The key part of the agreement was carried out by the President of the Organism along with the Canarian Institute of Bioanthropology and the Archaeological Museum, and the Municipality of Necochea and the National Government of Argentina. This paper deals with the story of the mummies and the steps followed by both parts to a successful restitution: indeed, an important development in the history of mummy studies and archaeology.**

## Introduction

Guanche mummies have been a permanent focus of interest for scientists and general public since they were discovered in the XVI century, immediately after the Spanish conquest of Tenerife.

### *The secular spoliation of mummies*

Not only Guanche mummies but all mummies around the world have been suffering spoliation of different types until

very recently and, even today, it is very common in certain parts of the world in spite the laws existing to protect and preserve them.

There are 3 different types of spoliation of mummies:

1. Collectionism: museums in many parts of the world are full of archaeological objects and, among them, mummies are the most valuable. Examples of this are the British Museum, the Musée de l'Homme (Paris), the Pergamon Museum and the Egyptian Museum (Berlin), among many others. Private collectionism has played an important role too.
2. Therapeutical reasons: in the past, and specially during Renaissance, mummies were transformed in a substance so-called *mummi* that was used as the "universal panacea" and as an aphrodisiac product. This fashion lasted until the XVIII century and thousands of mummies were destroyed.
3. Repatriation: although repatriation can not be considered strictly as a type of spoliation it is true that many mummies have disappeared when they were repatriated to different societies for reburial.

### *The secular spoliation of Guanche mummies*

Most Guanche mummies and many other Canarian aboriginal human remains have disappeared along these 5 centuries after the Conquest due to the spoliation by foreigners and by Canarians. The result is the same in both cases: we all have lost an unbelievably rich heritage.

1. Spoliation by foreigners: since the very early XVI century persons coming from outside the archipelago were attracted by the perfect preservation of our mummies. Therefore, thousands of them passed to increase cabinets, museums, and laboratories of the European and American continents: Musée de l'Homme (Paris), Museum of Ethnology and Archaeology (Cambridge, UK), Museo Nacional de Antropología and Universidad Complutense (Madrid, Spain), Redpath Museum (Montreal, Canada), Institut für Anthropologie (Göttingen, Germany), Peabody Museum-Harvard (USA), and Museo de La Plata (Argentina), are few examples. Other mummies disappeared during the bombings of WW II.
2. Spoliation by Canarians:

- Collectionism: many private houses, and even public institutions without competence on heritage, have several important specimens that may potentially contribute to our understanding and knowledge of Guanche past.
- Political reasons: during the 70s and early 80s of XX century appeared in the islands the so-called Canarian radical nationalists that, among other things not to mention here, tried to hide mummies for the scientists. It is the case of a mummy buried in the groundwork of the most important bank of the Canaries.
- Fair: fair to the past, fair to the phantoms, fair to the unknown, or simply shame of the past what is worst yet. This leads to destruction in most cases.
- Fetichism: or individuals believing that every past was better than the present and needing to have something to enjoy that glorious and happy past.
- Vandalism: linked to fair in few cases and ignorance in most of them.

### **The unbelievable and sad story of two guanche mummies and how they arrived to necochea (Argentina)**

#### *The Casilda collection in the XIX century*

D. Sebastián Pérez Yanes, nicknamed Casilda no one knows why, was an important owner in Tacoronte (north of the island) who devoted most of his life to collect different natural and archaeological objects from the islands. These objects conformed one of the most important cabinets of the archipelago, the so-called Museo or Gabinete Casilda. But, as happens many times in this life, the interest of the father may be very different to that of the descendants, and



Fig. 1 - NEC-1 ready to make the trip to Tenerife.

when D. Sebastian died his sons decided to sell the whole collection to the best bidder.

The problem was that only a single voice shouted to stop that atrocity: that of Eugenio de Sainte-Marie, professor in a highschool, who warned the island's authorities and tried to convince them to buy the cabinet (no law to protect the heritage existed at that time).

#### *Argentinians in Tenerife*

As Tenerife's authorities were deaf to the claims and begs of Sainte-Marie, the mummies were sold to a bunch of Argentinian citizens interested in buying the whole thing for increasing the collections of La Plata Museum. This infamy took place between 1898-1899.

#### *The Natural Science Museum of the University of La Plata*

What happens between the arrival of the mummies (along with a cranial and archaeological collection) and their presence in Necochea (Province of Buenos Aires) is completely unknown.

#### *From La Plata to Necochea*

The only clear datum is that the mummies appeared in Necochea in the decades of the 20s of the XX century.

#### *Almost a century in Necochea*

What we know now is what happened to the mummies meanwhile they were in Necochea. A physician (we believe he was a Canarian immigrant) brought them to that spa on the Atlantic shores) from a small village, Tres Arroyos.

1. El Colegio Nacional: the mummies were located firstly in the National School and they remained there for almost 50 years provoking the joy of the students at the same time that they were deteriorating very fast. No research was performed at that time.
2. Necochea's Municipal Museum of Natural Science: Necochea's Municipality and Colegio Nacional agreed to show both specimens in the municipal museum for public exhibition. During those years plane X-Rays and macroscopical studies were carried out on the mummies and the researchers arrived to the conclusion that they were a very special type of mummification, absolutely unknown up to then, in Argentina or, even, in South America. Other conclusion was that the culture making those mummies had a very fine surgery (for sure, they mistaked the wires of a museographic reconstruction with the wires of an orthopedic surgical procedure).

#### **Contacts for the restitution**

*1990-1992: I World Congress on Mummy Studies (Tenerife)*

During the preparation of CRONOS PROJECT, the basis for the that Congress, Rafael González Antón, Director of



Fig. 2 - Dr. Ricardo Guichon (Necochea, Argentina) and conservator Ruth Rufino (OAMC, Cabildo de Tenerife) prepare NEC-2 to be repatriated.

Tenerife's Archaeological Museum, and me were investigating in the Library of Tenerife's Royal Society of the Friends of the Country and discovered what really happened with Casilda's Collection. After informing the President of the Cabildo de Tenerife (government of the island), he contacted a group of Tenerife's Senators in Madrid to make the first attempts in front of the Argentinian Embassy there. But the negotiations didn't succeed at that time.

#### *1995: II World Congress on Mummy Studies (Cartagena de Indias, Colombia)*

One day, during that congress, an Argentinian archaeologist, Paula Novellino, informed Rafael and me that two Guanche mummies were curated at Necochea's Municipal Museum. It was a true surprise because comparing the photographs we concluded that they were those we believed were curated at La Plata, although the state of preservation was poor in comparison with the photographs when they were in Tenerife. She told us to contact with Dr. Ricardo Guichón, a well known anthropologist of CONICET (Superior Centre for Research in Argentina). However, changes in the Argentinian Government and some kind of



Fig. 3 - Extreme flexion of the knees in the Guanche mummy NEC-2.

economical tension between both countries recommended to have patience and wait for a better chance.

#### *2000: Paleopathology Course (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)*

At least for me, it is true that sentence of the Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho, who said in his now world famous "The Alchemist": "...and when you truly wish for something to happen, it is like the whole universe conspires so you can make it happen". And this sentence was true once again: in fact, I was teaching there and after my speech, in the most unexpected manner, a nice and very educated gentleman with a strong Argentinian accent, came to me and told me: "hola Conrado, soy Ricardo Guichón". Everybody can imagine what happened next: we were going in the same direction that, fortunately, this time was the right one.

#### *2001: after the IV World Congress on Mummy Studies (Greenland)*

The true contacts for the restitution came true after that Congress. First, at an academic level because it was absolutely necessary to know the opinion of the Argentinian Scientific Community and Ricardo and his fellow Nora Flegenheimer, also belonging to CONICET, were responsible for that task, meanwhile our President, Mrs. Fidencia Iglesias, and the President of the Cabildo, Mr. Ricardo Melchior, prepared the administrative and political fields. Once we knew that the Argentinian scientists were prone to repatriate both mummies, the next step was to carry out the administrative and political work.

#### *2002: Argentina*

On July 2002, everything was done, including the agreement between Cabildo and Necochea's Municipality ... but, there is always a but, something happened in the most unexpected way ... as always happens before the happy end of a love story. And what was that?. Very simple: the National School (el Colegio Nacional) wanted to take part in the restitution as former "owner" of the already famous Guanche mummies. To solve that, at that moment big



problem, Fidencia, Rafael and I had to go to Necochea in late November of that year, and, after a tremendous weekend in which we, but specially our President, devoted all our strength and souls to diplomacy, we succeeded and a pre-agreement was signed by all the parts meanwhile the whole mass media of Argentina were following the development of the event as if it was a soccer match between River Plate and Boca Juniors.

### **The restitution**

The final three-lateral agreement was ready at the middle of 2003 and the Department of Conservation of our Autonomous Organism of Museum and Centres (belonging to the Cabildo) prepared everything to transport the mummies to their final and permanent destination ... and destiny: Tenerife's Archaeological Museum, place in which they had to be many years before. The conservator, Ruth Rufino, and a team of journalists for making a report of the restitution travelled to Argentina

and there, along with Ricardo Guichón and Nora Flegenheimer, they made all the required works and the mummies, our dear Guanches of Necochea, could finally do a pleasant, safe, secure and nice trip coming back home after 105 years of their non-desired trip to our brother country, on September 2 2003, arriving (due to the long trip) to Tenerife in the glorious morning of September 3. And now, to put an end to this unbelievable, untold until now, and, thanks God, now ended story, permit me, please, to thank with our soul in this international forum the following persons for their effort in the success of this story:

- Drs. Ricardo Guichón and Nora Flegenheimer, researchers of CONICET, who were the true engines of the story and who have suffered more than enough in doing that.
- Oscar Giacobini, Director of Culture of Necochea's Municipality at that time.
- Luis Miguel Municoy, Mayor of Necochea at that time.
- To all Argentinian and Spanish authorities who made this dream to come true.

To all of them, thanks a lot, muchas gracias, grazie tante.