

Macroscopic Study of the Guanche Mummies from Necochea (Argentina)

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Abstract

This study concerns the ritual of mummification and bundling of two Guanche mummies, originally in the old collection of the Museum of Casilda, in Tacoronte (Tenerife), and kept in the town of Necochea, Argentina. Important differences can be seen in the previously known ritual relating to the positioning of the body and the features of the bundles and bindings. An important feature is that one of the mummies is flexed, confirming references to older findings that, unfortunately, were not preserved. The ritual differences observed in these two bodies could be due to gender, adaptation to funerary space, or other cultural reasons.

We present the main characteristics of the funerary ritual used in two Guanche mummies (Tenerife) found during the XIXth century and incorporated recently to Tenerife's Archaeological Museum.

Mummy 1. NEC-1

Female mummy corresponding with an old museographic reconstruction. Bethencourt Alfonso (1912) informs that this mummy comes from Barranco de Badajoz (Güímar) and shows a reconstruction process.

This old reconstruction shows a body in decubitus supinus position, envelop in leathers, marking the body surface and closing on the parietal area. These leathers are fixed with skin strips and are made through the sewing of different size and shape.

Stable isotopes analysis of the leathers demonstrates that they belong to herbivorous, as well as the materials used in the sewing (tendons and skin strips), with the exception a strip of vegetal origin.

Macroscopic and radiological studies show that the body is enveloped in several layers of leather, with the inner part of

the leather on the external surface of the mummy and viceversa (some animal hair is preserved). The high number of layers present in this mummy is a sign of social distinction, typical of a population devoted to live stock. This is the reason of the maximal provisionment of the leather (complete leather, pieces of leather, leather's strip, tendons, bones). The posterior part of the mummy shows a longitudinal sewing closing the bundle.

The whole reconstruction responds to the normal patterns of the Guanche funerary ritual, although the external appearance is only described for other mummy (infant) from Barranco del Pilón (San Miguel, Tenerife).

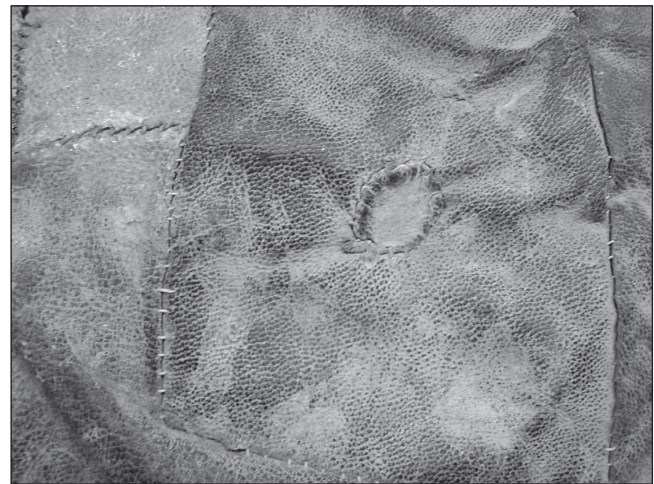


Fig. 1 - Mummy NEC-1. Sewing types.

Mummy 2. NEC-2

This mummy belongs to an adult male from La Orotava (Bethencourt Alfonso, 1912) and, on the contrary of NEC-1, does not show museographic manipulation.

The mummy shows an extreme gonial flexion, unknown in Guanche mummies up to the present (with the exception of the reference of Sabin Berthelot for a female mummy found in Tacoronte that is lost today).

The bundle is conformed by several layers of the animal leather (herbivorous) made with sewed fragments with different types of sewing. These leathers were placed before the corpse was flexed, immediately after the death



Fig. 2 - Mummy NEC-I. Sewing types.



Fig. 4 - Bundle and strips of the head and the neck.



Fig. 3 - Lower limbs.

of the individual. Different strips were used to fix the bundle.

The strips of the lower limbs were placed when the body was still in an extended position and signs of other strips, lost at present, are still observed on the surface of the leathers. One of these strips surrounds the first toe and fix the 2nd, the 3rd and the 4th toes of the left foot, letting free the 5th. This method is described here for the first time in Guanche mummification.

The bundle shows a good adaptation on the right shoulder and upper limb. Several layers of other very deteriorated leathers are observed. The subsection of the leathers in the head is performed with a skin strip girdling the neck.

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