

Museography of the Guanche Mummies from Necochea (Argentina)

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Abstract

The acquisition of two Guanche mummies restituted to Tenerife from Necochea (Argentina), has made possible our study of the specimens from the perspective of museum exhibitions. The specimens belonged originally to the old collection of the Casilda Museum (Tacoronte, Tenerife), and were sold to Argentinean businessmen during the 19th century who moved them to Argentina. The body of at least one of the mummies was adapted in several parts so as to present the image of a mummified body. This was a nineteenth century museum practice observed in various parts of the world in order to adapt mummified bodies for public exhibition. The material evidence in this particular case can be observed from anatomical data (the skeleton belongs to two individuals of different sex), and from the use of modern materials totally foreign to Guanche culture.

Introduction

We present data on the museography of two guanche mummies based on XIXth century collectionism. Guanche mummies have been considered from a historic point of view like a symbol of the aboriginal culture of the Canary Islands, the most valuable object, along with crania collections, for anthropological purposes. For this reason, many individuals have looked for them to include mummies in different collections and antique cabinets, implying a commercial traffic, and the trip out of the archipelago in many cases with its consequent loss of context always.

Necochea's mummies story

The mummies represent two individuals, ♀ y ♂, belonging to an archaeological collection, Museo Casilda (Tacoronte, Tenerife) and were sold to a bunch of Argentine citizens in 1899. They arrived to Necochea (Buenos Aires Province) in the decade of 1920s, first to the National College and in the 1970s to the Municipal Museum of Natural Sciences. After 104 years they came back to Tenerife's Archaeological Museum, being the first repatriation of the Guanche mummies scattered in different archaeological collections out of the Canaries.

Museography of NEC-I

NEC-I, diagnosed as a female individual, is the result of a mummified corpse reconstruction.

The anthropological study demonstrated that the content of this mummy belongs, at least, to two individuals of different sex.

Radiology shows two long wooden stakes putted there to prevent mummy collapse.

The macroscopical study (chemical and genetical analyses are being performed now) suggests that the bundle is formed by different types of leather that seem to be the result of a museographic reconstruction adopting the funerary pattern of the aboriginal culture.

Therefore, these studies demonstrate a clear intentional manipulation to get the reconstruction of a mummified corpse.

Something of our museographic history

The idealized reconstruction of mummified corpses constitute a global collectionism practice that was performed in Tenerife too.

Our NEC-I was manipulated by persons who knew the aboriginal mummification ritual with the goal of the exhibition in the Casilda Museum.

Bethencourt Alfonso (XIXth century), physician and researcher of Guanche past, confirmed the manipulation of Casilda's mummies and, regarding specifically this mummy, he stated: "it is completely restored in its envelopes; ... It is also

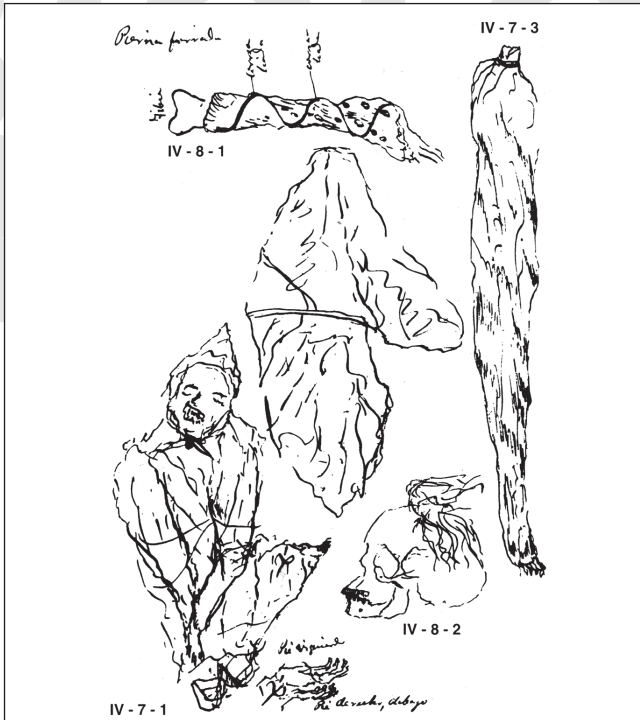


Fig. 1 - Drawing by Bethencourt Alfonso of NEC-1 and NEC-2 mummies.



Fig. 3 - Mummified remains from San Andrés (Tenerife) in the old collection of Municipal Museum.

known that the hand of the restorator reached some of the interior”.

At the beginning of the same century, Sabin Berthelot, French consul in the Canaries, said that other mummy belonging to the Cabinet of Mayor Megliorini, in Tenerife, was composed of several pieces: “under the same bundle were present four or five generations”, and after the finding of a deteriorated mummy showed his disappointment because “don’t have, as Mayor Megliorini, enough limbs to substitute those lost”. Similarly, in Tenerife’s Archaeological Museum does exist a mummy from San Andrés (eastern part of the island) showing a manipulation process performed on different pieces with museographic goals, although the pieces belong to that individual.

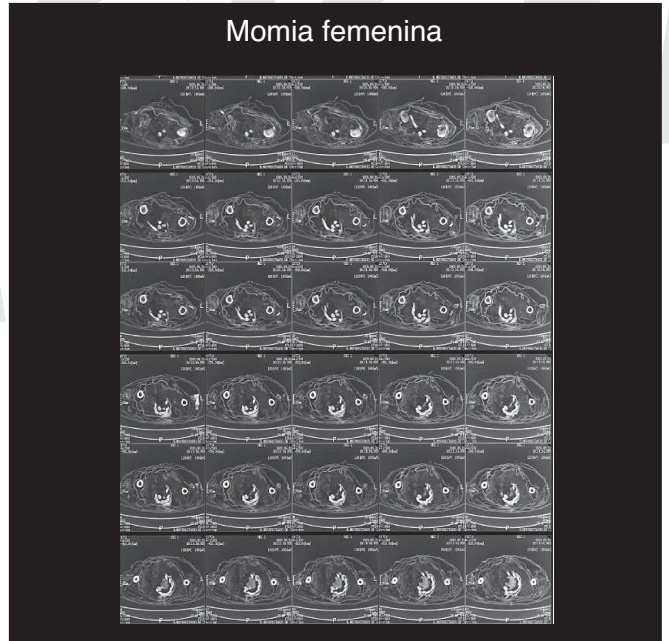


Fig. 2 - CT scan of NEC-1 (thoracic-abdominal level) showing wood marks used for museographic reconstruction.

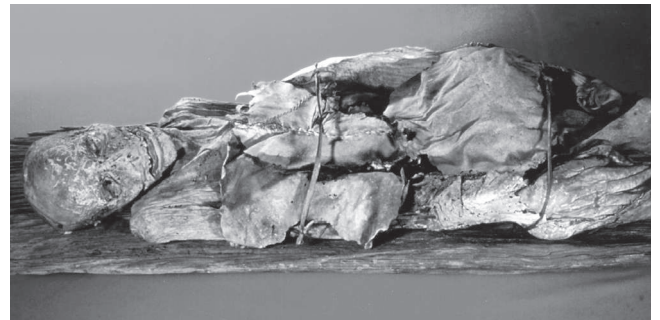


Fig. 4 - Museographic reconstruction of San Andrés mummy performed by Luis Diego Cuscoy (Tenerife’s Archaeological Museum).

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