

THE PHYSICAL LOCATIONS OF CANARY ISLAND AND SAHARAN „LIBYCO-BERBER INSCRIPTIONS.”

In April 1981 I accompanied members of Institutum Canarium on a short visit to the Canary Islands. Numerous inscriptions were seen in El Hierro and very few in Grand Canary (Barranco de Balos). A light-hearted talk was given at the annual symposium of Institutum Canarium in May this year, under the title „Anmerkungen über die Fundorte kanarischer und saharischer Felsinschriften”. The following notes arise from a request by Institutum Canarium that I attempt to commit to paper roughly what was said at the time.

The term „Libyco-Berber“ used in the title is thought to be that most commonly in use, whatever its presumed or actual inadequacy. I mention in passing other expressions which have been employed, such as Ancient Saharan (speaking of the Canaries), Tifinagh (also speaking of the Canaries) and Tifinagh for all Saharan texts and Guanche for all Canary ones. They will have served to cloud the issue and to confuse the minds of readers, especially in the Canary Islands.

It must be stressed that these remarks will be almost exclusively about Canary Island inscriptions: they will also be based largely upon impressions gained from extremely localized study. Subsequent finds could well alter them drastically. More finds there certainly will be, especially by fit and determined parties, willing to undertake systematic research in one small area at a time.

Canary terrain has impressed me to no small degree, since it is basically (in the western isles) more precipitous and uneven than almost anything I have yet encountered in the Sahara. The sides of steep, inhospitable barrancos („oueds“, „koris“) would require quite enough concentration per se, without additional hazards to individuals whose balance is affected by kit which has to be carried along. Man-made walls and huge quantities of cactus barriers, plus other scrub, make it even trickier to move around freely.

Small comfort is to be gained from any supposition that the carvers themselves may have been reluctant to scale heights which a modern team would have problems reaching: the caves of Ain, Tarsil, Morocco, were reported to be out of reach in the nineteenth century (J. D. Hooker & J. Ball, 1878, 300—301), while O. M. Stone compared these with others in Tenerife (1887, I, 356). The difficulties of physically checking all the available rock surface are enormous. To attempt to work alone is certainly not without risk, as I found in La Palma to eastwards of El Paso.

Following in late afternoon a barranco which ran on and on, it was suddenly apparent that that daylight was fading: the barranco ended in a steep rock wall ahead and it was a matter of deciding whether to return by the same tortuous route (a time-consuming procedure) or to try to ascend one side or the other by a route whose difficulties could not be gauged more than a few metres ahead amid thick grass and trees. The latter course was imprudently adopted and heavy rain started to fall when I was only a short way up the left bank. In a few moments everything became a sea of mud and only the fortunate appearance of a metal pipe — which I was able to use as a guide-line as well as a hand-hold — led me to a point from which I was finally able to gain the summit of the bank.

In retrospect, it was foolhardy to have gone out alone in such country, the terrain being precipitous in the extreme in places. Injury, with partial or total immobilisation, might well have inconvenienced a good many others in addition to myself, notwithstanding the proximity of the village.

Below are listed some impressions of the positioning of inscriptions seen in El Hierro, dividing them into two main categories, „alphabetic“ and „ideographic“, according to the terminology of P. Hernández Hernández (1977, 173: cf. J. Alvarez, 1964, 69, who suggests „lábico“ and „simbólico“ for El Julan).

Alphabetic type.

- 1) Single lines of symbols appear to run mostly „up“ or „down“ a vertical surface. They will tend to run „upwards“ or „downwards“ (rather than across) on a surface which is nearly horizontal.
- 2) Parallel lines of symbols, forming a kind of composite block, seem to occur on vertical surfaces (for type, cf. H. Nowak 1981b, Hoyo Blanco).
- 3) Inscriptions can occur beneath a marked overhang, i.e., sheltered from the elements (Candia). This is common in the Sahara, where shelter from the sun probably played an important role. And still does.
- 4) They can be out of reach of humans, other than giants, standing on the ground below, i.e, on the „portal“ of a cave-mouth, as at Tejeleita.
- 5) They can be adjacent to the mouth of a cave or rock shelter (Fig. 1).
- 6) Most are not sheltered from the elements, notably the sun. In the Sahara it is common to find fairly recent texts (Tifinagh translatable inscriptions) in shady spots.
- 7) I saw none adjacent to rock art, or to what is commonly classed as such. In the Sahara, rock art and inscriptions are sometimes associated (L. Galand, forthcoming).
- 8) The symbols are large by comparison to most seen in the Sahara: some viewed at La Caleta were between 7,5 and 8—9 cm across, measured vertically.

9) Apparent odd symbols were seen on two occasions (Fig. 2). They were very faint indeed. Ignoring the single „O“, the other inscriptions ran across a vertical wall in a horizontal plane, its symbols being ca. 5 cm high, measured top to bottom. May both be unfinished texts? If so, might this suggest the presence of visiting engravers, forced to depart in a hurry?

Ideographic type.

- i) Are far more untidily carved in relation one to another, being jumbled and out of alignment.
- ii) Appear fewer in number in any one context, say three or four only.
- iii) Seem larger generally than those seen in the majority of „alphabetic“ cases.
- iv) Occur alongside untidy „abstract“ rock art to which their relationship, if any, is unknown to me (El Julan).
- v) Do they appear only on surfaces which are more horizontal than vertical?

N. B. In the case of both the above types: —

- A) There are very many fewer symbols in any one line than in certain Saharan examples.
- B) No relationship of either type to water-points was observed. In the Sahara this relationship is evident.

Third type (?).

While viewing symbols on flattish surfaces running gently downhill towards the sea at El Julan, in company with J. Krüss though distant from him by some 80 metres at the time, the very dark line of symbols in Fig. 3 was noticed. Running uphill/downhill about 65°/115°, the general impression was one of extreme neatness, though not clear enough for the exact nature of each symbol to be made out. They were smaller than anything else mentioned hitherto. The composition was partly of symbols I have seen neither before nor since, though J. Alvarez appears to illustrate examples of some of them (1964, 21 : 24 : 52) or at any rate of approximations.

A reliable method of copying was not to hand, nor did numerous photographs produce the desired result. J. Krüss and I therefore attempted to copy them, working quite independently and without consulting each other: the results are shown at Fig. 3 and I am grateful to J. Krüss for most generously making available his own notes.

We had seen two parallel lines of symbols, plus rock art, below and on the seaward side: on the way uphill, numerous „ideographic“ symbols and prolific rock art occurred. My impression of the symbols in Fig. 3 is that they might belong to a category apart from the two main types postulated above. It is reasonable to suppose that they may — from the inclusion of

symbols not seen by myself in any other Canary context, other than in literature — contain a message or idea in a different language to that of the so-called „alphabetic“ type. This would indicate a Canary Island situation something akin to that of the Sahara to-day, where Tifinagh (modern) texts are understandable by Tuareg (not always without difficulty), while the older „Libyco-Berber“/„Ancient Saharan“ inscriptions are not.

Regarding the scant symbols adorning the rock walls at Barranco de Balos, Grand Canary, I think these occur in positions roughly typical of a good many Saharan ones, without insisting on the differences between tifinagh and Libyco-Berber/Ancient Saharan. Here, however, we reach the major hurdle in attempting to make truly valid comparisons between Canary Island and Saharan inscriptions.

The reason is very simple; in the seeming absence of any precise breakdown of the type of sites at which Tifinagh and Libyco-Berber/Ancient Saharan texts are known, dividing them into these two arbitrary categories, one intelligible to modern Tuareg and the other not being so, extreme caution is needed, prior to drawing sweeping conclusions. Even though certain tendencies may seem apparent, a great deal more field work, both in the Canaries and in the Sahara, is an unavoidable prerequisite to further analysis.

These notes are written in late December 1981. Had it been possible to delay their submission for publication by even two months, information as to definite tendencies in the positioning of Saharan inscriptions might well have been possible to formulate, even in draft format. The sketches used as figures appear, in each case, to show the general nature of Canary symbols rather better than available photographs or colour transparencies.

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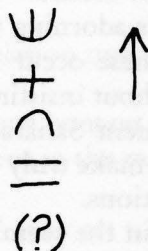


Fig. 1 A text seen on 3 April 81 while travelling between two barrancos with H. Nowak. It is about 1,5 m above ground level and to one side of a rock shelter obscured by modern masonry. The top symbol is about 4 cm wide and the arrow points up the vertical rock surface.

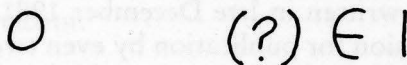


Fig. 2 Two separate (unfinished?) markings. It is conceivable that the left-hand symbol might be „rock art“ rather than part of an inscription.

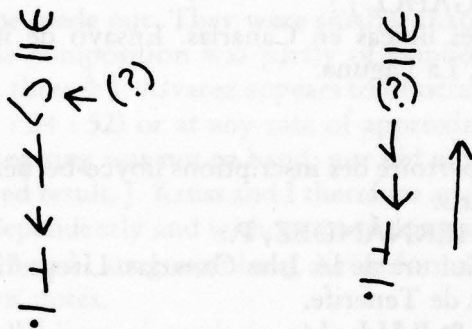


Fig. 3 Symbols seen at El Julan with J. Krüss on 2 April 81. The left-hand set is copied by hand from the handwritten notes of J. Krüss. The right-hand set is my own attempt to reproduce what was seen. The arrow points to ca. 65°, uphill and away from the sea.