

Lawrence Stewart Owens*

Through a glass darkly: Illuminating the conflict between historical and archaeological interpretations of ancient populations of the Canary Islands

Key words: Canary Islands, contact period, conquest, archaeology, history

Abstract:

Canarian archaeology has been dominated by a set of historical texts that have been used to interpret archaeological remains and to contextualise almost all aspects of investigation into the archipelago's prehispanic populations. The current author believes these texts to be heavily flawed in terms of their coverage, biased authorship or date of production, and that the observations contained therein are too readily assumed to be representative of earlier groups. This assertion is explored in the context of Canarian historiography and wider studies of island archaeology.

Zusammenfassung:

Kanarische Archäologie wurde von einer Reihe von historischen Texten dominiert, die dazu benützt wurden, archäologische Funde zu interpretieren und um nahezu zu allen Aspekten der Erforschung der altkanarischen Bevölkerung einen Zusammenhang herzustellen. Der Autor dieser Zeilen ist der Meinung, dass diese Texte in Bezug auf ihre Berichterstattung, ihre voreingenommenen Urheber oder ihr Entstehungsdatum höchst fehlerhaft sind, und dass die enthaltenen Informationen allzu bereitwillig als repräsentativ von frühen (prähispanischen) Gruppen angesehen wird. Diese Annahme wird im Kontext der kanarischen Historiographie und erweiterter Studien der Insel-Archäologie untersucht.

Resumen:

La arqueología canaria ha estado dominada por una serie de textos históricos que han venido siendo utilizados para interpretar hallazgos arqueológicos y para establecer una conexión de prácticamente todos los aspectos de la investigación con la población aborigen canaria. El autor del presente trabajo considera que estos textos presentan errores de peso en cuanto a la transmi-

* Birkbeck FCE, University of London, 26 Russell Square, London WC1B 5ZX, UK;
e-mail: lawrence_owens@yahoo.co.uk

sión de informaciones, a los prejuicios de que fueron objeto sus autores o las fechas en que se redactaron, y que las informaciones que contienen han sido asumidas con excesiva complacencia como representativas de grupos (prehispanicos) tempranos. Esta suposición se analiza en el contexto de la historiografía canaria y de amplios estudios de la arqueología insular.

General Background

The generalities of the Canarian contact period are well known to all with research interests in the archipelago's history/prehistory. Relations between the Prehispanic Canary Islanders (PCIs) and the Norman/Spanish invaders began with slavery and sporadic stability, followed by genocide and deportation, then an uneasy peace. While relations were at least superficially cordial between rulers and ruled, the PCIs became extinct as a biocultural entity as a direct result of European activity. From an estimated population of between 30,000 and 50,000 (Owens 2003: 79-83), only a handful of PCIs remained by the time chroniclers started to take an active interest in reliably recording their cultural and biological characteristics. The language(s) all but disappeared, along with the majority of material culture and social practices, so that all that can truthfully be said to remain of the PCIs are some cultural traditions and certain North African genetic markers (Cavalli Sforza *et al.* 1994). During this period, various slavers, traders, travellers, priests and other interested parties recorded their observations of the fast-vanishing PCIs. What has come down to us consists of fragmentary word/name lists, descriptions and ruminations about the Canary Islanders and their environment, which have been treated with often surprising reverence by past and present generations of archaeologists.

The Classical Tradition in Canarian Scholarship

Like most 19th century historians/antiquarians, early Canarian researchers were raised in a classical academic tradition that placed a high value on textual, typological and stylistic evidence. The discipline was then developed by several generations of antiquarians and 'gentleman archaeologists' who used a strongly historical emphasis for the interpretation of archaeological remains. However, this emphasis on history-based studies has proven to be remarkable durable, and many scholars of Canarian archaeology continue to focus upon historical information as the central narrative for studying any topic from population dynamics to zooarchaeology, despite the fact that the historical sources are often patently inappropriate for such work.

By being located in the 'Mediterranean-Atlantic' (Chaunu 1979: 106) on the fringes of the history-rich Mediterranean, it is perhaps understandable that

early academics would wish to relate their observations to this font of ready knowledge. While there are certainly links to the classical world insofar that the geographical position of the archipelago would make it impossible to be otherwise, the Canaries have little if anything in common with the Mediterranean thalassocracies. The only coherent 'classical' reference to the Canarian archipelago is that in which Pliny the Elder gave the archipelago its name in 77AD, while a Roman presence on the archipelago has been confirmed archaeologically (Atoche Peña *et al.* 1995; Escribano Cobo and Mederos Martín 1996). Other than this fragment and some understudied Arab references (see Owens 2003: 53-55), the only written sources were recorded by the French and Spanish invaders as they witnessed the slow death of indigenous Canarian society in the 15th and 16th centuries AD.

The Historical Materials

There are parts of the world where written histories are so extraordinarily comprehensive that the whole of the lands' occupation can be examined from its earliest days, almost without a break (i.e. the 'Landnam' of Iceland – Smith 1995). However, the Canarian texts are nowhere near as robust. They were written by the invaders rather than the islanders themselves, refer to a short period of time, and are erratic, patchy and incomplete. Even the earliest sources refer to earlier, unrecorded slaving missions that could have acted as a 'post-contact contamination factor' (Broodbank 2000: 15), altering islander behaviour and thus devaluing other contact-period historical observations (see Boutier and Le Verrier 1872: 74, 75 and 123; Mercer 1980: 157-8). Assuming that this was not a factor, however, early Canarian sources are amongst the first mediaeval European records of foreign lands ever made. As comparative anthropology was hardly a late mediaeval speciality, the chances of observers having over/mis-interpreted what they saw are higher than in the case of more culturally-aware explorers, artists and writers from later periods. Even the most close-to-the-events chronicles were recorded by monks whose role it was to baptise the surviving PCIs, and who often relied upon hearsay from soldiers of the conquering forces. As the European soldiery only met the PCIs in battle rather than in their domestic setting, one might legitimately question the accuracy of their reports on social/cultural reports. Lastly, most of the sources were in fact written substantially after the events they describe, while – in nearly all cases – the chroniclers had an agenda, be it evangelistic, apologetic or romantic.

The fact that the early chroniclers relied primarily upon second-hand information comes across very strongly in what are presumably the soldiery's

clumsy justifications for their maiming or slaughter of the islanders (such as the nine foot giant who had to be killed because '...if they had spared him they would perhaps have been all defeated and slain' Boutier and el Verrier 1872: 148; see also 1872: 135). It has also been suggested that the Spanish and French chroniclers deliberately emphasised what they believed to be characteristics of cultural impoverishment in the Canarians, so as to '...justify the Castilian annexation, presenting it as a civilizing favour given by the Europeans' (Morales Mateos 2003: 2). Finally, the fact that the early authors possessed what might charitably be described as missionary zeal does not augur well for the detachment of their writings. Much of the most famous text – by Boutier and Le Verrier – is couched in biblical or classical terms that are patently designed to glorify the islanders as some kind of classical ideal, ripe for evangelistic conversion, while also praising the Christian values of the conquistadors. Despite some humanitarian sentiments, therefore, it is very evident that they supported the mission and believed in the rightness of its core values, despite the social cost paid by the indigenous Canarians. In the past few hundred years, furthermore, as interest in the pre-colonial past has burgeoned, the myth of the 'noble Guanche' (Cionarescu 1961) has worked its way into many histories of the islands, leading to a narrative that is often more romantic mythology than historical/archaeological fact (del Arco Aguilar *et al.* 1992).

Dating of the texts

So far we have speculated upon the reasons why we should be cautious about the sources written at or near the time of the original occupation. However, the fact remains that much of the current dogma about ancient Canarian lifestyle is based upon 'chronicles' written well after the events they purport to describe, that are themselves based on rather shadowy (or vanished) sources that have been reproduced and embellished by various generations of Canarian historians and archaeologists. This inevitably diminishes their value for telling modern historians anything about contact period Canarians, much less their antecedents. Anything recorded about the Native Canarians from the early 16th century onwards is particularly suspect, as this was the period that saw the extinction of the Canary Islanders as a biocultural entity, with doubtless profound effects on their descendants' behaviour. In 1541 Girolamo Benzoni met one of the last Canary Islanders to have lived through the conquests: then in his 80s, he was establishing the sorry precedent of degradation and alcoholism that came to define numerous aboriginal societies in the wake of Europe's colonial expansion (Mercer 1980: 237). By this time, accounts of the conquests

were starting to assume a quasi-mythological character. The texts written by Torriani (1590), Frutuoso (1590), Alonso de Espinosa (1594) and Antonio de Viana (1604, in Martín de Guzmán 1984) date to approximately a century after the last island had fallen to the French, and nearly three centuries after the first European incursions into the archipelago. One of the most widely used texts is even later, written by Friar Juan de Abreu de Galindo in 1632 (translated by George Glas in 1764). The sporadic reappearance of similar pieces of information in various texts suggests that facts were borrowed from earlier tomes; one example of this is Abreu de Galindo's reiteration of Espinosa's rather poetic prose style (Hooton 1925: 4). Continual cross-referencing, reiteration and reliance upon lost works all increase the danger of breeding factoids by recycling half-remembered, selective or inaccurate information, further underlining the vital necessity of exercising caution in selecting historic sources.

Cultural Laboratories, Fossilised Natives and the Isolation Myth

The reliability of historical records aside, we must ask ourselves exactly how accurately they can reflect the actualities beyond (i.e. before) the events they describe. This is the main division point in Canarian research, for while history always has its flaws, these are to be expected, and allowances can be made for subjective bias. However, historical issues should not be allowed to spill over into the – literally – prehistoric sphere. There has been a decided tendency for historians and archaeologists to view contact period populations as conveniently fossilised representatives of their ancestors, thus denying '...their past the potential to be substantially different from the ethnographic present' (Broodbank 2000: 15). This tendency is particularly strong in the inhabitants of island environments, which are often assumed to act as sterile 'laboratories', preserving unchanged the cultural, behavioural and biological characteristics of the very earliest inhabitants (Evans 1973). While the manifold weaknesses in this argument have come under stringent attack, the myth that the ancient Canarians possessed a '...manifestly conservative character' (Diego Cuscoy 1968a: 212, in Del Arco Aguilar 1998), that their society and culture was caught in '...a Neolithic time warp' (Spence 2000: 1) and that '...the ethnobiological picture that they possessed in the 6th, 7th, 9th or 11th centuries is the same as when they arrived on the island and the same that was found by the Conquistadors in the 15th century' (Diego Cuscoy 1968: 212, in Del Arco Aguilar 1998) has proved to be remarkably durable. There are in fact many indications suggesting that Canarian culture was both spatially and temporally variable, even during the period when the contact period texts were

recorded. For instance, the 'Menceyato' system of government and accompanying ancestor worship on Tenerife only appeared in the early/mid 15th century, as the previous system had seen the island ruled by a single leader (Mercer 1980: 197). Gran Canarians are reported to have netted fish in the first decade of the 15th century, but were using fishhooks (made from Spanish metal) by 1443. The Spanish were taken aback in 1468 when they attempted to invade Gran Canaria and were attacked by islanders wielding exact wooden copies of European metal weapons left behind in an earlier raid (Mercer 1980: 186). Another example is the cult that sprang up around the Virgin and Child figure washed up on Tenerife in 1390-1400, as this is clearly outside the remit of ritual behaviour (such as the worship of celestial bodies) observed by earlier historians (op cit 177). Archaeological signatures also support temporospatial behavioural dynamism, such as the clear cultural discontinuities in the ceramic traditions at El Bebedero (Atoche Peña *et al.* 1995), inter-period differences in burial practices on Lanzarote, Tenerife and Gran Canaria (Owens 2003: 67), and the major discontinuities in ceramic traditions on La Palma (Navarro Mederos 1998). Economic variability is also notable, such as the differences in economic signatures between the islands and inland/coastal sites (La Palma – Pais Pais 1996), sites hinting at over-exploitation of natural resources by a steady decrease in the size of gathered limpets through time at the La Palma site of El Tendal (Pais Pais 1996) and differing prevalence of external auditory exostoses (bony ear pathology caused by cold-water exposure, implying diving/swimming) between two major sites of different periods in Gran Canaria (Betancor Rodríguez & Velasco Vázquez 1998; personal observation). It is rather likely that what was seen, heard and recorded in the Canaries during the late mediaeval period was "...merely (a) recent configuration(s) among a vast spectrum of alignments that have come and gone over the millennia" (Broodbank 2000: 15). It would therefore be exceedingly unwise to generalise about pre-contact lifestyles on the basis of contact period histories.

Dating Evidence for the Canarian Archipelago

The problem of representation discussed above worsens according to the temporal lapse between the archipelago's earliest occupation and the arrival of reliable chroniclers. Logically, therefore, the larger the lapse, the less useful historical sources become as mirrors of very early occupation. Because the facilities for dating Canarian archaeological remains were not available until fairly recently, the field lacks chronological structure. To compound matters, most large museum collections of Canarian artefacts and human re-

mains were gathered rather than excavated, with geographical and stratigraphic provenance rarely recorded beyond the area or even island level. Consequently, it is not clear if observed variation is temporal, spatial or social in nature (see Navarro Mederos 1998). It should be noted that while modern Canarian archaeologists employ fully modern methods and techniques, therefore, most of the important collections available for research purposes were not made under such exacting standards and are consequently of limited worth for developing a temporospatial perspective on Canarian occupation.

While the coverage is less than ideal (most resources have been directed at large, flagship sites on the two main islands, and comparatively little attention being paid to smaller sites or islands – see Owens 2003: 68-69), these dates provide a general idea of the date span for the Canarian archipelago, although it should be noted that there is considerable controversy over the earliest occupation of the islands. Some of the very early dates for the archipelago (including Las Palomas, Tenerife, at 5500-6890 BP) were originally believed to have been derived from contaminated samples. The only independent verification of such an early colonisation event was the replacement of Fuerteventura's 'Lava Mouse' by the house mouse around 5,000 BC (Castillo *et al.* 2001: 289-290), but while the species is certainly a human commensal, non-anthropogenic colonisation was also a possibility. However, further suspicions of a very early human presence were raised by the discovery of goat bones dated to between 5,000 and 10,000 BP (Zöller *et al.* 2003) on Lanzarote, which – as goats could not have travelled to the islands unaided – are incontrovertible proof that humans visited the island at some point during this period. While these results are not unequivocal (Carracedo *et al.* 2004 vs. Zöller *et al.* 2004), the fact that dates are constantly occurring in this general range seem to suggest that at least some human activity (possibly a failed colonisation) preceded the bulk of dates that appear in the late 1st millennium BC. The position of the Canary Islands in the global forum of island settlement and archaeology/history will be discussed in future work by the current author.

Having considered these dates, it was decided to present these data as a chart (fig. 1 next page), to depict the actual amount of time to which the historical (written) sources refer. Calculations were carried out using taking the ballpark figure of 500 BC for first human habitation (Onrubia Pintado 1987; Del Arco Aguilar *et al.* 1992: 74; Navarro Mederos 2001) and records kept by Bethencourt's retinue as the first available detailed historical source, disregarding the rather vague Roman references and several fragmentary 14th century references (i.e. da Recco 1341). All the historical information we possess therefore comes from a period lasting from 1402

Historic Information Availability for the Canaries

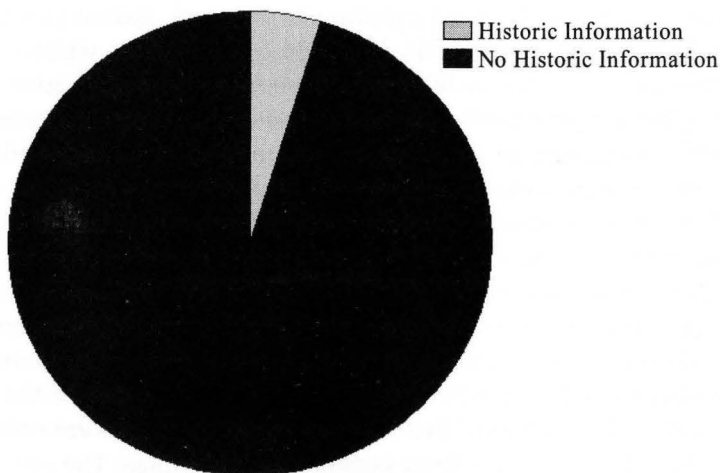


Figure 1: The maximum percentage of time (4,7 %) covered by historical sources in the Canaries (taken from Owens 2003: 62)

till 1496, which constitutes only 4.7% of Canarian occupational history. This is the percentage shown in Figure 1. However, if Zöllner *et al.* (2003) are correct in asserting that initial colonisation may have taken place at some point between 5,000 and 10,000 BP, the amount of time covered by the histories would constitute between only 1.8% (5,000 BP) and 0.9% (10,000 BP) of Canarian human occupation.

These historical sources have provided a bonanza of information for historians of the contact period, and rightly so. The manner in which the native Canarians and Europeans adapted to one another is a dynamic and interesting field (Hernández Marrero 2001). However, a 94-year-long slice of history – anywhere in the world – would be a nugatory sample from which to make any measured assessment of traditions in the populations' antecedents. If something similar were done for Britain, for example, it is vanishingly unlikely that we would be able to derive anything pertinent about the Late Iron Age, the Roman occupation, the Anglo Saxons, the Vikings or the Normans from a scatter of fragmentary observations made in the late Mediaeval period. If Zöllner and associates are correct in their re-dating of the archipelago's original inhabitation to 5,000 to 10,000 BP, however, it would be tantamount to trying to use 94 years' worth of mediaeval information to understand the British Late Neolithic (5,000 BP) or the Mesolithic (10,000 BP) as well as all sub-

sequent periods. This exercise serves to re-emphasise the fact that only the most tentative conclusions about ancient Canarian society can be drawn from the records of its destruction.

Dangerous Histories – Further Implications

Because of this unreasoned adherence to historical texts, and the way in which the islands' past has been studied, the ancient populations of the Canary Islands have failed to rise to their deserved prominence in the academic sphere. This is doubly unfortunate, for not only are we failing to attain our potential understanding of the PCIs and their world, but we have thus reduced the variety of island landscape lifestyle variants that are available to island archaeology. We thus lose the chance to enrich the intellectual topography of a field dominated by Pacific – and, increasingly, Mediterranean – research agendas and issues (Broodbank 2000: 37). Island archaeology's major 'hotspots' are therefore in danger of becoming literally 'insular' in the most pejorative sense of the term. Based on a review of island geography, archaeology and history (Owens 2003: 34-36), it is evident that the Canaries are virtually unique in their configuration and relationships with continental landmasses, as well as in terms of their colonisation/occupation history and of their populations' cultural heritage and environmental adaptations. It is of course true that many modern researchers into ancient Canarian society are using more archaeological evidence, but their work nonetheless continues to be heavily influenced by historical information. As a result, the Canaries have been overlooked by researchers who aim to examine cultural chronologies and population history in order to establish cultural parameters for island archaeology. For example, in the classic edition of *World Archaeology* (ed. Cherry 1995), which deals with colonisation and settlement of islands throughout the world (including the Hebrides, the Bahamas, Iceland, Madagascar, the Pitiussae, the West Indies, Hawaii and Polynesia), there is of the Canary Islands not a mention.

Discussion and Conclusions

The Canary Islanders' place in history is an uneasy one. One of the first native peoples to be driven over the brink of cultural extinction by the burgeoning European thalassocracies, their fate served as the template for much of Europe's colonial development throughout the late mediaeval period (Crosby 1986). While it is true that the Europeans = entropy argument has become dogma in island archaeology (it has been demonstrated that some island societies – including, it has been argued, some Canarian groups – thrived in contact with outsiders) it is the unfortunate reality that the cultural

chasm separating western explorers from the indigenous societies with which they had contact generally proved fatal for the latter. This has been brought into particularly sharp focus where record keeping was both detailed and comprehensive, but should not be assumed to be any the less impactful in cases (such as the Canary Islands) where records were erratic at best. The current author would submit that the boundaries between Canarian archaeology and Canarian history have become inappropriately blurred, and that while the latter field is decidedly buoyant, it has been permitted to intrude too far on the academic studies of pre-contact peoples.

Semantics of record-keeping and chronology are, however, not the sole issue at stake in this debate. It is interesting to note that even if archaeological information is available, it is often ignored in favour of more familiar historical precepts. Even when it is utilised, however, the social aspects of archaeological information are often overlooked. Papers on Canarian material are often limited to description and basic comparison, while even the more wide-ranging research (especially concerning inscriptions and epigraphy) tend to search for mainland parallels without sufficient thought for the society from which they come, and unmindful of the possible time lapse between cultural manifestations in their place of origin and elsewhere. We need to set up chronological structures, and to make greater efforts to contextualise human society within them. The narrative of Canarian prehistory has remained two-dimensional at a time when research on other island groups is burgeoning methodologically and with increased emphasis on social aspects. The “big” questions cannot be answered if we continue to recycle historical texts and make first-level inferences about cultural influence. We need to be focusing upon investigations of temporo-spatial trends in socially relevant aspects of life, such as human ecological adaptation through time, social stratification, the status of the sexes, trends in economy, inter-island socio-economic variation, the evolution of power structures, the development of urbanism, the effect of differing island ecologies on settlement, health patterns and many others that need to be addressed if we are to have a truly holistic image of ancient Canarian society.

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