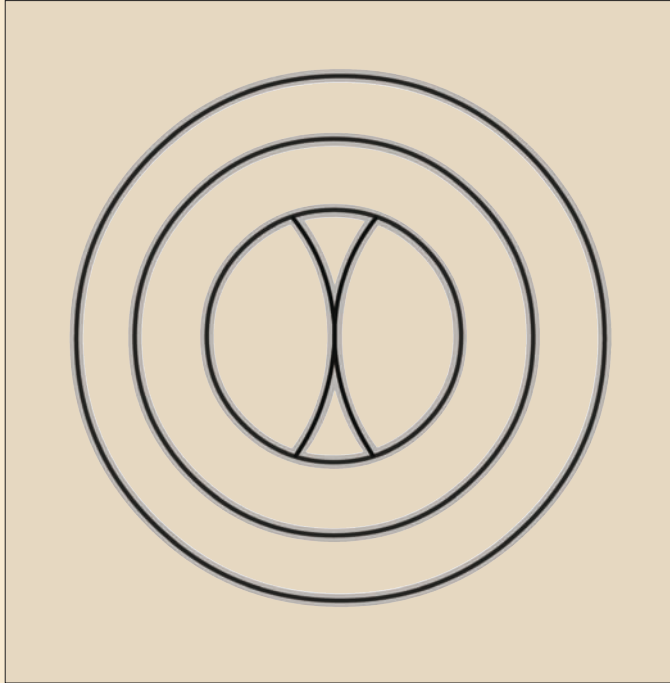


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Hans-Joachim Ulbrich

Canarian "pyramids" revisited – are they pre-Hispanic or recent?

Keywords: Canary Islands, Tenerife, La Palma, Gran Canaria, Lanzarote*, Iberian Peninsula, step pyramids, dry-stone techniques, agriculture, religion, architecture

Abstract:

In the last time several new photos of Canarian step buildings, the so-called "pyramids", were published on the Internet. Besides Tenerife and La Palma this type of rural architecture is since several years also reported for Gran Canaria. This new situation is discussed here. But the big question still remains the same: pre-Hispanic or recent origin?

Resumen:

En los últimos años han aparecido en Internet nuevas y numerosas fotografías de construcciones escalonadas ("pirámides") canarias, por lo que parece oportuno volver a abordar este tema. Además de Tenerife y La Palma, entretanto se han anunciado también tales hallazgos para Gran Canaria. La pregunta sigue siendo: ¿se trata de testimonios de labores agrícolas de época moderna o de construcciones de los aborígenes?

Zusammenfassung:

In den letzten Jahren sind zahlreiche neue Photos von kanarischen Stufenbauten ("Pyramiden") im Internet aufgetaucht, so dass es angebracht erscheint, das Thema nochmals aufzugreifen. Neben Tenerife und La Palma werden solche Funde nun auch für Gran Canaria gemeldet. Die Frage ist immer noch: Handelt es sich um Zeugnisse neuzeitlicher bäuerlicher Kultur oder um Bauten der Ureinwohner?

Introduction

Who visited the northern neighbourhoods of Güímar (Tenerife) before 1998 must have almost compulsorily come across a relatively large area with nine more or less damaged step pyramids (Figs. 2-4). Astonishingly this was for over 130 years no sensation until in 1990 some journalists made a big story out of it after local researchers had rediscovered them already 1987 under scrub. The hype about the Canarian "pyramids" which were discovered also in other regions of Tenerife (Figs. 5, 7, 11), on La Palma (Figs. 6, 8, 17, 18) and on Gran Canaria (Fig. 9, 16) took its course. The small paper in hand cannot re-

*For last-minute information on Lanzarote see Fig.1, the short text on p. 152 and Fig.19.

construct the enormous debate which is led since then [see the bibliography here with a part of the literature, not to speak of countless blogs on the Internet]. The result are two factions: supporters of a pre-Hispanic origin and their opponents. The latter base their opinion mainly on Tejera Gaspar (1994) and Jiménez Gómez & Navarro Mederos (1996) who speak of an accumulation of collected fieldstones and of an emergence in the middle of the 19th century. Inconsequent excavations should prove (eadem 1996: 529, 536 – doubted by Coppens 2007) that below Plane 10 (Fig. 2) of the Güímar pyramids, locally called *Majanos de Chacona*, exist strata reaching back only to this point of time. But there remain numerous urgent questions not only on the Chacona buildings, but also on the many others (Fig.1) which have been examined not at all. Possible burial chambers were up to now not found, but were neither searched seriously. Common to all Canarian buildings, which are now in the focus of "pyramid hunters", is their stepped construction. The different types on the Canary Islands are listed in Table 1 (p. 143).

Step pyramids have a long tradition in the European/Mediterranean area, partly dating back to the 5th millenium BCE. Such an age is not to assume for the Canarian specimens. But are they really all mere stone piles from the 15th to 19th century, erected by Spanish peasants?

Some questions regarding age, construction and erectors

The impression standing in front of the Majanos de Chacona or in front of any other Canarian "pyramid" is each time overwhelming. The first question which arises is: Can this be the work (planning and execution) of a Spanish farmer when he only wants to get rid of fieldstones?

Especially the "pyramids" from Güímar encourage to reflect this. The neutral observer asks oneself why there are stairways and ramps (Figs. 2-4) leading

Fig. 1 - The geographical diffusion of step buildings ("pyramids") on the Canary Islands (●)

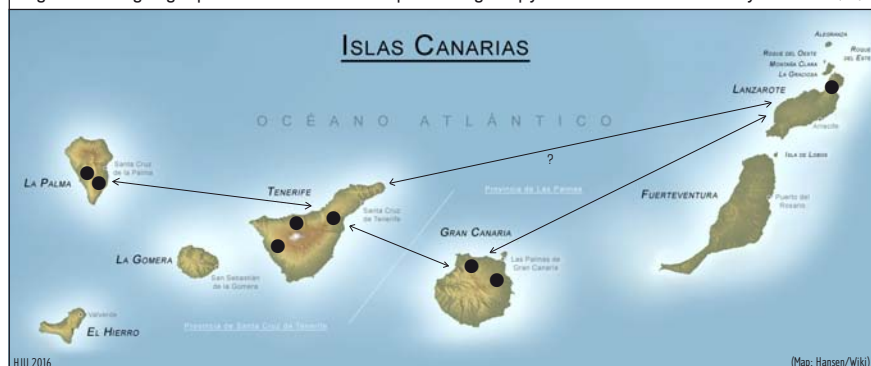




Fig. 2
"Parque Etnográfico Pirámides de Güímar" (Tenerife), inaugurated April 1998:

- ①-⑨ Pyramids (①-⑤ Type A, ⑥ Type C) [⑦, ⑧, ⑨ not restored]
- ⑩ Large elevated, artificial plane with 1-4 steps
- ⑪ - ⑭ Platforms
- ⑮ Sloping ramps
- ⑯ Central "street"
- ⑰ Museum (formerly the Casa Chacona)

Elaboration: H.-J. Ulbrich 2016
 (photo: Grafcan/GoogleEarth).
 Objects 1-16 are considered by some
 researchers as pre-Hispanic.

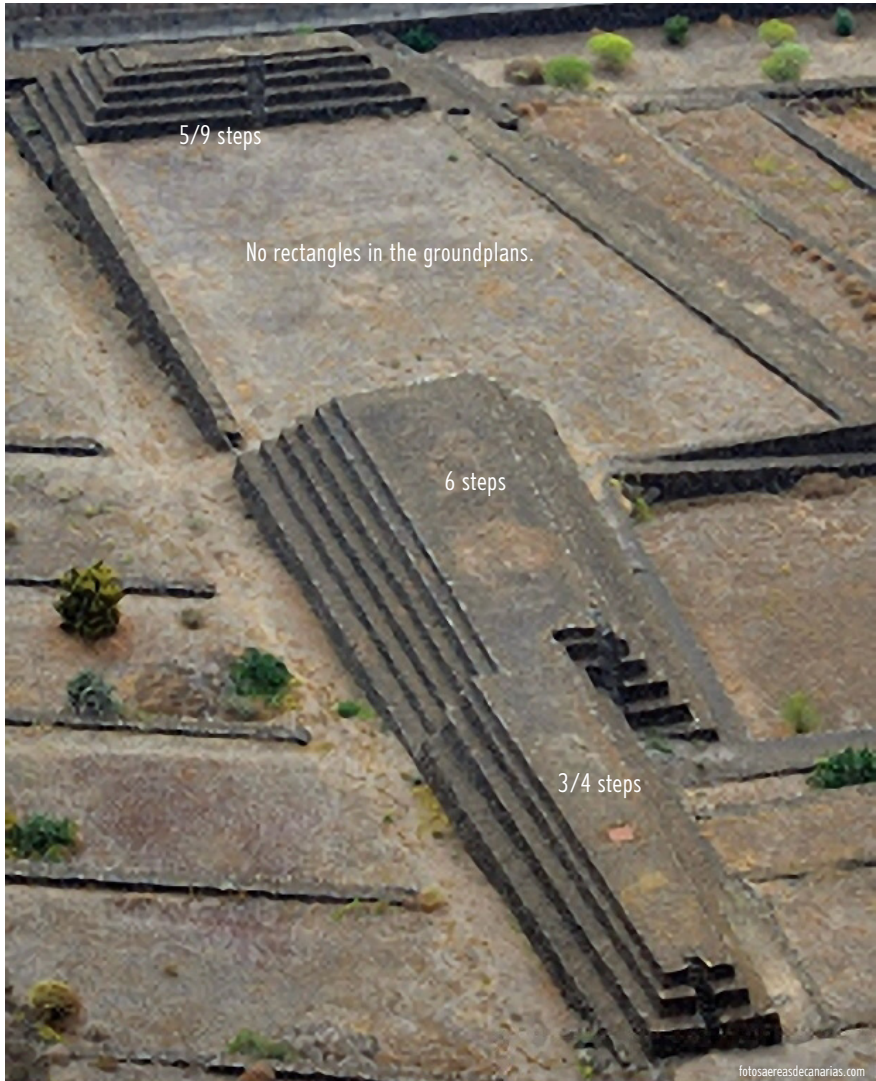


Fig. 3 - A part of the *Parque Etnográfico Pirámides de Güímar* [developed by Thor Heyerdahl & Fred. Olsen] comprising the three northern pyramids, incl. a big horizontal platform (photo: fotosaareasdecanarias.com). In Fig. 2 = pyramids ①-③ and plane ⑩. View NW to SE.

to large platforms when there has never been held a noteworthy event (meeting, festival etc.) on them. If the pyramids were built by freemasons, as proposed by Aparicio Juan & Esteban López (2008), then an even more pressing question comes up. Why should they finance the edification of such a big site only for



Fig. 4 - Pyramid ① (Fig. 2) from Güímar, Tenerife (photo: Raphael Biss). We see one of the many carefully built stairways up close. Are stairs and platforms typical for a *majano*?

Table 1	Typology of Canarian step buildings (vertical design of the "pyramids")
Type A	Uppermost step tabular, no turret on it
Type B	Uppermost step tabular, with turret on it
Type C	Uppermost niveau as stone accumulation, no turret on it
Type D	Uppermost niveau as stone accumulation, with turret on it
Type E	Steps not horizontal, sometimes a reverse tilt, flat top, no turret on it
Type F	Steps not horizontal, sometimes a reverse tilt, with stone accumulation, no turret
The groundplans are normally polygonal or in rare cases oval or bowed. Staircases are widely integrated.	

symbolic purposes? All the more an erection by 19th century farmers is illogical if not impossible as the following list of questions shows.

01 - Why these strange groundplans with no rectangles?

02 - Why the erection downhill (except ③) and not parallel to the contour line?

A constraint for this direction by the nature of the terrain does not exist.

03 - Why ① as the only one with an inclination of its platform downwards?

04 - Why bigger stones at the corners? No ordinary stone pile needs such an unnecessary decoration.

05 - Generally, why should a farmer bother oneself about architectural and artistic questions when his main intention is to gain arable areas and to have good harvests? Does he at all have the sense and impetus for such a long term and demanding project?



Fig. 5 - This step pyramid from Santa Barbara (Icod de los Vinos, Tenerife) belongs to Type C with an accumulation of stones on top of it (photo: Isaac Hernández). View ENE to WSW. The northern corner (here right hand) is sliding down. The quadrangular groundplan resembles a spearhead. For another Type C on Tenerife see fig.7.



Fig. 6 - The step pyramid from Los Cancajos, La Palma, called *Torre Vandama* after its onetime Flemish owner (photo: Rudolf Franz Ertl). It belongs to Type E. Locally also known as "El Guincho". Severely damaged at the southeastern side. The structure on the top of it is the ruin of a modern tower, the *torre*. View NNW to SSE (to the ocean).

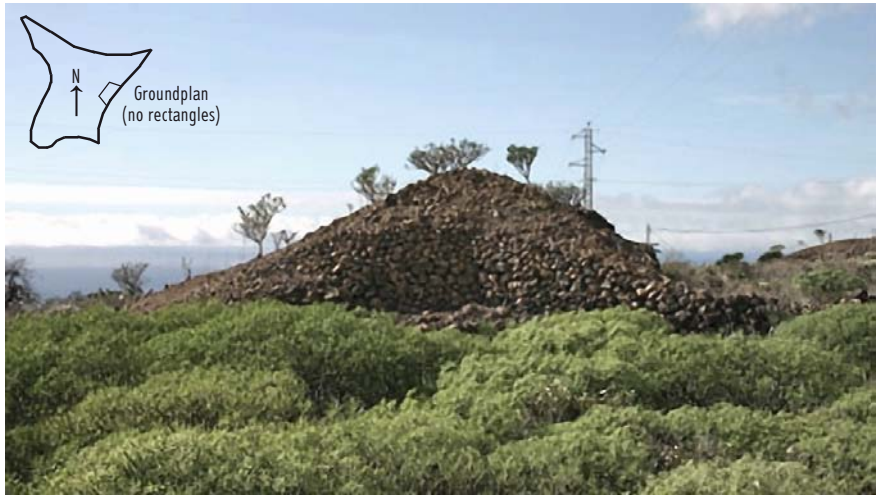


Fig. 7 - Another step pyramid (Type C) from Tenerife, this time from Guía de Isora (photo: Philip Coppens) – with concavities on all four sides and a strange notch on the eastern flank (visible in the photo above). Unfortunately badly damaged, especially the steps. View E → W. The groundplan reminds of fig. 9.

- 06 - Were the pyramids necessary on agricultural grounds? Would it not have been sufficient to use the fieldstones in walls? The pyramids and the walls together represent a big mass of stones which evidently is greater than the amount of fieldstones originally was at this place (Hähnel 1996, Pichler 1997). Apparently in most other regions of the Canaries the walls and small piles around the fields (Fig. 10) were adequate to dispose of the stones. Why then this big effort at Chacona?
- 07 - The complex construction process, which – including the transport of most of the stones from other regions to Güímar – must have lasted for years, and all the more the finishing of such a big site with a topping out ceremony (Span. *fiesta de cubrir aguas / inauguración*) must have had stringently an echo in the talkative local press of the 19th century, but there is none. Why?
- 08 - Has a single Spanish farmer family enough manpower to erect nine "pyramids" and several platforms? Is the construction perhaps the work of a community? And, is it a project of months, years or generations? Is there enough time at all besides the normal duties of the seasons?
- 09 - Would the religious motivation to concern oneself in such a demanding construction not be greater than to realize agricultural aims? Could therefore not a pre-Hispanic religious community be the most likely erector?
- 10 - Where does the 19th c. Tinerfeño from Güímar has this custom and its



Fig. 8 - A step pyramid from Breña Baja, La Palma (photo: Enrique Gil Bazán) – Type B with a small "tower" on the top. Unfortunately damaged.

technique from? In Andalusia, from where many Canarios originate, the Chacona type of the big, accurately built and arranged step pyramid is totally unknown – as on the entire Iberian Peninsula. That means that also Portuguese-born Canarios do not know this technique from their homeland. The site of the Majanos de Chacona (Güímar) with nine step pyramids, five platforms and up to nine steps vertically (Fig. 3) has no parallel in southwestern Europe. A normal Spanish pile of fieldstones is rarely higher than two meters. The Majanos de Chacona reach after all up to 12 meters.

11 - The no-rectangles-architecture can also be observed in most groundplans of the other Canarian "pyramids". What is the agricultural background?

12 - Why do the Canarian step buildings ("pyramids") only appear – up to now – on certain islands (Fig. 1) and there only in limited regions when they are a general Spanish custom?

Conclusions and perspective

We can only hope that the owners of the fincas have some clearing informations (documents, old plans etc.). A mere statement like "We always considered it a majano" would not be sufficient (read below about the real meaning of this word). We have also to admit that not all rural step constructions offered in the Internet blogs are ancient. Nevertheless the observa-



Fig. 9 - Presently there are known five or six one-step "pyramids" of Type C on Gran Canaria. On the above picture we see an example from La Montañeta, San Juan (Guía, Gran Canaria) (photo: FEDAC/Carta Etnográfica de Gran Canaria). One asks oneself why a Spanish farmer should erect with immense efforts a combination of a more than head-high step (the supporting socket) and a comparatively giant second niveau (the stone accumulation) in such a logistically and technically difficult terrain near an abyss? Why not throwing the stones into the barranco? Furthermore, why should a Spanish farmer develop a groundplan with calculated convexities and concavities? A peasant wants to get rid of his fieldstones and does not care about artfully designed pyramids. A building like this one has nothing to do with a normal *majano* as it was built a thousand times on the Canaries (Fig.10). View ENE to WSW. See also fig. 16.



Fig. 10 - This is a typical *majano* as used everywhere on the Canaries; here near San Bartolomé de Tirajana (photo: 4.bp.blogspot.com). All step buildings depicted in this paper are definitely no *majanos*!



Fig. 11 - A rare example of Type F: some steps and stone bands with tilt. Discovered at Cuatro Caminos, Icod, Tenerife (photo: piramidescanarias.tumblr.com). No Spanish peasant develops such a complicated design when planning a simple pile of fieldstones. tions and questions presented here mean a clear plus for the followers of the non-recent origin. To take a stance, the author of these lines has in several cases a clear preference for the pre-Hispanic thesis. Not least because a look on the map (p. 140) lets raise the idea that old-Mediterranean people, who where familiar with step pyramids, touched only some of the Canary Islands during a kind of island hopping; leaving out the other islands.

Perhaps the two factions can come to the compromise that the step pyramids ("structured majanos") of the Canaries have a very long tradition which started probably in the Bronze Age and lasted, remembering the old forms, until the 15th or 16th century – as long as aboriginal Canarian knowledge survived in the society of the Spanish colonists. Nevertheless both factions should deliver more concrete evidence, being open for arguments of the other side! What we therefore urgently need is a program for more excavations and professional age determination, including not only one of the more than 50 step buildings.

The term "majano" is definitely used wrongly in a context with the Canarian step buildings. The binding dictionary of the Real Academia Española describes "majano" as "*Montón de cantos sueltos que se forma en las tierras de labor o en las encrucijadas y división de términos.*" In English: "Pile of loose



Fig. 12 - This building (Canarian Type C) near El Berrocal (Trujillo, Extremadura) is inexactly called *majano* by the local people, ignoring its inscription – which is obviously pre-Hispanic – and the work of a mason regarding the first step (photo: MIK / extremaduravirtual.org). More information at Naharro (2012) who speaks fortunately of an "alleged majano".



Fig. 13 - This inscription of the cornerstone in fig. 12 is difficult to read and to transcript (photo: MIK / extremaduravirtual.org). The sketch shows a first try.



Too fragmentary to dare an interpretation.



Fig. 14 - These two imposing step pyramids, called "Majanos de Bolote", are no longer existing (originally situated near Daimiel, Campo de Calatrava, La Mancha / photo: Fernández-Espartero 2004). The owner of the terrain destroyed them at least 13 years ago in an act of vandalism and the authorities watched deedless – a sad case of unconcern and disdain of the own past. Not one stone is left in the vast monoculture of today. The specimen right hand is something special; it has circular annexes (one with a conic roof), a stone accumulation (2nd niveau) with particular steep flanks and a big platform on the top with kind of a "nose". The other step pyramid resembles the Canarian Type F. Why different construction methods at one place? These step buildings, which apparently emerged at different times and with different styles, are not products of mediaeval or modern Manchegos! The distinct 2nd niveaus of both buildings – stepped differently – demand sophisticated logistics; e.g. the use of temporary ramps and/or scaffolding. No Spanish farmer shoulders this hassle out of his own pocket and without a helpful modern cooperative in the background; and he simply has no time to do that. To call such buildings *majanos* is a really annoying tradition of the Spanish vernacular.

stones which is layed out in agricultural terrain or along with road junctions and boundaries of municipalities". No Spanish dictionary uses the word *escalonado* (stepped) in correlation with *majano*! To label the carefully built Canarian step pyramids not only *majanos* but also *morrás* or *molleros* (Span. for "small stony mounds" / "breadcrumbs → waste") is a serious case of misinformation, vilification, negligence and underestimation – regardless of their grading as pre-Hispanic or recent. It would be the same disrespect if a modern tourist would call the townhall of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria a "meaningless agglomeration of stones".

Everywhere on the world people call something which they cannot explain by using common denominations whose meaning comes nearest to an assumed objective. On the Canary Islands the inhabitants – especially the rural ones –



Fig. 15 - One of ca. thirty step pyramids in the northeast of Sicily, Italy (photo: Nunzio Cartalemi). The close resemblance to the Canarian Type C is striking. Wiercinski (1977: 174), who analysed 31 pyramids in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Mexico, speaks in his cases of sacral buildings which represent the archetype of the "Cosmic Mountain". The latter is a frequent topic of many ancient philosophies and mythologies, spread over the entire world – far away from modern esoterism. Ladders, staircases, steps, axes and especially the conic form played important roles in this context.

called the unknown step buildings *majanos* because they had no other explanation and because they wanted to use a term which originates from their accustomed environment – this apparently until today. This applies also for the stepped *majanos* from continental Spain, astonishing and highly interesting buildings, which were called stone piles because nobody knew their real value and importance (Figs. 12-14). In Catalonia we have a similar linguistic situation regarding megaliths. The simple folks of the Middle Ages denominated dolmens "table of the witch" or "pagan's rock" (Ulbrich 2015: 72).

Yes, there are one-step "pyramids" on the Iberian Peninsula which resemble the Canarian types with irregular or angled groundplans – for example in Extremadura. But there we have also hints that not all buildings of this kind can be recent; figs. 12 & 13 show such an example which has perhaps a late-antique age. Furthermore, the Canarian multi-step pyramids would have impressive competition through the presumably pre-Hispanic "Majanos de Bolote" (La Mancha / southern Central Spain) if these were not destroyed – a



Fig. 16 - Another Grancanarian one-step "pyramide" from Los Pasos de Herrera, Valle de los Nueve, Telde (photo: FEDAC/Carta Etnográfica de Gran Canaria). Type C with a relatively high first step. One can realize unusual notches in the supporting wall, similar to fig. 7. In the foreground a modern wall.

total failure of the authorities, especially of the monument protection (Fig. 14; details in Fernández-Espartero 2004). On Sicily (Fig. 15) we find the Canarian type of step pyramids too. Or should we better formulate it vice versa?

A final appeal: Canarian authorities, politicians, universities and archaeologists should at long last opt for a meticulous scientific series of investigations – after over 20 years of stagnation – to stop the loss of monuments and to reduce fruitless discussions, wild speculations, non-scientific influences and a denial of the own valuable past.

Last-minute information: There are hints that one- and two-step "pyramids" are also existent on Lanzarote (example in Fig. 19). This is considered already in the map on p. 140 (Fig.1). More details are provided in a forthcoming paper.

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Figs. 17 & 18 - Two step "pyramids" from El Paso, La Palma (photos: Manfred Jantzon). Their specialty are rounded corners and a comparatively high execution of the buildings with five or six steps, respectively. To denominate these two buildings "majanos" can only be declared as adventurous.





Fig. 19 - One of several step buildings on Lanzarote (photo: Hans-Joachim Ulbrich).

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