

THE TRANSMISSION OF THE DESCRIPTIONS ABOUT THE MUMMIFICATION IN THE CANARY ISLANDS: BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION

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Abstract. The mummies from the Canary Islands have been of considerable interest since the 15th century onward to authors of different historic contexts, provenances and professional profiles. They provide information about the well-preserved state of the aborigines' corpses, their funerary context and the specific conservation procedures applied to the bodies called *mirlado*.

The objective of this article is to present different aspects about the transmission of

knowledge of the *mirlado*, which cannot be merely defined as textual reproduction. While some data is collected from previous authors, other is newly introduced. As a result, (re)productive texts combining traditional and innovative elements are composed. This study is mainly based on the application of the philological methodology called textual criticism through the comparison of more than seventy authors / descriptions.

Keywords. Canary Islands. Mirlado. Mummification. Knowledge transmission.

“There are few of the extinct races of man that have elicited more inquiry, or of whom there is less known than the Guanches. Their history is so wrapped in obscurity, and their vestiges so rare, that our speculations as to their origin and manners are principally derived from their embalmed remains, or the questionable authority of ancient writers and travelers.”

William Robert WILDE
(1840: 420-421)

Knowledge about the Canarian mummification—also called *mirlado*—is based on two different areas of research. One is the analysis of the human remains progressively developed by the Forensic Anthropology, and the other is the study of the textual information provided by many authors during several centuries repeatedly alluded by different scholars.

This textual information is the result of the large interest displayed since the end of the 15th century by many people with diverse professional and historical features (explorers, merchants, priests, text compilers, astronomers, naturalists, politicians, doctors...etc.). Forty-three authors or works have been found up to now until the beginning of the 19th century which provide information about this topic. However, this number increases to more than seventy authors if the historiography of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century is considered.

During the First World Congress on Mummy Studies held at Puerto de la Cruz in Tenerife in February 1992 Fernando Estévez pointed out in his lecture about the textual sources of the *mirlado* the great dependence on texts written by the oldest authors and emphasised their often literal reproduction¹. This statement encouraged a detailed research (MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014) about the transmission of all the texts in order to deeply understand their interdependence and the processes of knowledge reception, change and reinterpretation. Following West's words: “it follows that anyone who wants to make serious use of ancient texts must pay attention to the uncertainties of the transmission” (WEST 1973:

¹ “...Lo primero que hay que constatar es la gran dependencia respecto de los textos de los primeros cronistas, historiadores y viajeros. En función de esta dependencia, el denominador común ha consistido en la reproducción, muchas veces literal, de los textos antiguos a los que se le añade, en el mejor de los casos, algún comentario crítico sobre la coherencia de los relatos tomados como base.” (ESTÉVEZ 1995: 59-60).

8). Therefore, the main aim of this article is to focus on the documentation and transmission of the information about the mummies from the Spanish archipelago during past centuries.

The specific methodology applied to this subject is textual criticism.² This is a technique based on the classical philology with its own development in a wide range of disciplines within the Humanities. Textual criticism can be defined as the set of operations exercised on one or several texts altered by various vicissitudes suffered from the moment they were written until they reach us, in order to restore what is considered as their original form—in the Stemmatic Method this is called *Vorlage* or archetype— (BERNABÉ 1992: 2). The main aim of this methodology is to study the history of a text through the comparison of all the different versions emphasising the differences between them.

One of the most important questions to solve was which kind of transmission did the descriptions of the *mirlado* follow. In general, several authors highlight two main types of written traditions: reproductive and productive (SCHENKEL 1986; WINAND 2017)³. On one hand, a reproductive tradition is a conscious attempt at emulating what has been written before. Texts with this transmission are generally faithful respect of the source although not necessarily an exact copy of the original. On the other hand, a productive tradition is commonly associated with change, adaptation, innovation and a certain degree of freedom. However, some authors suggest that the transfer of knowledge between the creator and the recipient usually requires an active engagement on the part of the latter. In Hussein's words "the transmitted knowledge inevitably undergoes changes in content and form when reproduced" (HUSSEIN 2017: 295).

Application of this methodology to the mummification texts from Canary Islands required a previous adaptation. Usually, textual criticism is used to analyse the transmission of a single text repeatedly copied. In this case, dozens of texts are compared and studied in order to track the transmission of diverse information, including contradictory data from several sources and authors. Therefore, the textual extension significantly varies: from texts that only include one phrase of interest⁴, to others that have several pages of remarkable information.

² For an introduction of this methodology applied to the descriptions of the Canarian *mirlado*: MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2012.

³ These types are called by ASSMANN (1995: 4) statically reproductive and dynamically active.

⁴ Such as for example LÓPEZ DE GÓMARA (1554 [1552]: fol. 299v).

Furthermore, textual criticism is normally applied to texts written in the same language, but in this case they were composed, translated or copied in different languages such as Latin, Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, Italian or German⁵. It is remarkable that even literal translations of these texts include outstanding differences compared to the original as will be discussed below.

Texts were compared using as many informative elements as possible, that is, external and internal data. External data for the criterion of time availability for the texts' transmission was essential. This criterion focuses on the date of writing and first publication of the work in order to determine whether they may influence contemporary or later texts, but obviously not those which were written earlier⁶. Internal data included quotations⁷— although mistaken quotations have been also attested⁸— and all the information provided including even minor details that may be considered unimportant⁹.

⁵ Texts hitherto attested in these languages from 1485 to 1803 are the ones written by the following authors—the vast majority of them can be found in MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ (2014: 120-214): in Latin: Diogo Gomes de Sintra; in Spanish: Francisco López de Gómara, Alonso de Espinosa, Antonio de Viana, Antonio Sedeño, Francisco López de Ulloa, Pedro Gómez Escudero, Juan Núñez de la Peña, José de Sosa, Thomas Arias Marín de Cubas, Pedro Agustín del Castillo Ruiz de Vergara, José de Viera y Clavijo, José de Anchieta y Alarcón, Dámaso Quesada y Chaves and Pedro Estala; in Portuguese: Valentim Fernandes Alemão, and Gaspar Frutuoso; in English: Richard Hakluyt; Edmund Scory, Samuel Purchas, Thomas Sprats, Thomas Salmon, George Glas, John Coakley Lettsom, Georg Leonard Staunton, Thomas Bankes, and John Barrow; in French: André Thevet, Claude Guichard, Pierre Bergeron, Jean de Hevqueville and Michel Soly, Antoine Phérotée de La Croix, Louis Feuillée, Antoine François Prévost, Louis Jean Marie Daubenton, Joseph de La Porte, Alexandre Gui Pingré, Sylvain Meinrad Xavier de Golbéry, and Jean Baptiste Geneviève Marcellin Bory de Saint-Vincent; in Italian: Leonardo Torriani; for German see for example: *Allgemeine Historie der Reisen zu Wasser und Lande...* (1748: 40-41).

⁶ MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 21-24.

⁷ The earliest quotation hitherto found related to mummification or *mirlado* in Canary Islands was inserted by Guichard who quoted the publications of Thevet and López de Gómara (GUICHARD 1581: 338). For quotations in the majority of the texts written and published between 1482-1803: MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 28-30 (Table 2).

⁸ For example, Bory de Saint-Vincent quotes Espinosa and Abreu Galindo when, in fact, he obtained the information from Viera y Clavijo (MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 100-101).

⁹ Different kind of examples can be highlighted. One case is when a specific and striking noun or adjective is attested in several texts. For instance, the noun 'worms': some authors explain that the conservation practices were developed to avoid the corpses being eaten by worms favouring their decay (Espinosa, Viana, Sedeño, Marín de Cubas; see MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 47, n.

The main information of the accounts include different topics or aspects about the Canarian mummification that have been taken into consideration: the geographical context¹⁰ or reference to the specific island of the archipelago, the diverse procedures undertaken¹¹, their duration¹² and where it took place¹³, the specialists in charge of this task¹⁴, how the embalmed corpses were called through the centuries¹⁵, several funerary practices (coffins and other equipment, the social differences displayed through them, the position of the bodies...)¹⁶ and the specific places where the bodies were deposited¹⁷.

All this information was registered in tables, organised and compared (for example, using a numerical code) following the textual criticism methodology¹⁸. The result of the comparative analysis was the construction of a *stemma* or transmission tree of the sources from the 15th to the beginning of the 19th century. A first *stemma* was firstly published in 2014 (MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 76 (Fig. 1)).

76-79). Another case is easily attested due to the similar phraseology shared by diverse authors. For instance, when the reiteration of the embalming process is emphasized (Sprats, La Croix, Feuillée, Buffon and Daubenton, Viera y Clavijo; MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 64, n. 145-149).

¹⁰ References highterto attested relate this practice with three Canary Islands: the vast majority of them focus on Tenerife and Gran Canaria, but there is also information about La Palma.

¹¹ Diverse washing techniques, preparation of the corpse (evisceration and other manipulation such as the insertion of diverse substances), drying processes and wrapping using different layers of ovicapids leather girded tight with leather thongs (MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 48-66).

¹² Depending on the source from 15 to 20 days (MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 47-48).

¹³ MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 46.

¹⁴ The embalmers are described as a group of specialists dedicated to this activity. They were men and women with sexual division of labor depending on the sex of the corpse that was going to be treated. They were a separate community of the aboriginal society regarded as outcasts due to their contact with the dead. For the sources of this information and further data: MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 39-46. For the taboo related to the blood in the indigenous societies of Canary Islands: POU HERNÁNDEZ 2017.

¹⁵ The preserved corpses were called *xaxos* by the Guanches (ESPINOSA 1980 [1594]: 45). While the former emphasize their dryness as their main feature, the latter allude to how they were wrapped. And finally, they were also called mummies since the 18th century when they were first compared with the Egyptian embalmed bodies (MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 33-36).

¹⁶ MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 37-39, 66-70.

¹⁷ These places were commonly inaccessible caves; or in the case of Gran Canaria, also tumular funerary constructions (MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 70-74).

¹⁸ See MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 57 (Table 4), 60-61 (Table 5), 74 (Table 6).

An updated version of the *stemma* from the same chronological period is presented here in which ten additional texts / authors¹⁹ have been included (Fig. 1)²⁰. Detailed research provides a wider view of their influence in later authors from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Recorded information about the embalming procedures or the embalmed corpses had different kind of sources. Firstly, oral data from the aborigines' descendants or peasants about how the mummification was undertaken²¹ or also about news from discoveries such as the so-called Cave of the One Thousand Mummies (in Spanish: Cueva de las Mil Momias)²². Secondly, the authors' own experience is included. Some authors visited burial caves and described the embalmed bodies that they directly saw²³. Similarly, later authors who were doctors and / or physical anthropologists analysed and specifically described

¹⁹ These authors are: Claude Guichard (GUICHARD 1581: 338); Pierre Bergeron (BERGERON 1630: 229-230; 255-256); Jean de Hevqueville et Michel Soly (HEVQUEVILLE; SOLY 1629: 255-256); *Allgemeine Historie der Reisen zu Wasser und Lande...* (1748: 40-41); Antoine François Prévost (PRÉVOST 1746: 236; 259-262); Thomas Salmon or more probably an editor who introduced additional information in his Italian translation about the Canary Islands which is absent in Salmon's original work published in 1739 (SALMON 1766: vol 26, 621-624); Joseph de La Porte (LA PORTE 1773: 210-211); John Coakley Lettsom (LETTSON 1778: 81-82); Thomas Bankes (BANKES 1797: vol. I, 422) and Pedro Estala (ESTALA 1797: 168-171).

²⁰ It would take us beyond the scope of this paper to discuss and justify the relationship between the new introduced authors and rest. Furthermore, this is a first proposal which will be analysed in detail in a future publication.

²¹ This is the case of one of the oldest and surely more reliable texts, written by ALONSO DE ESPINOSA (1980 [1594]: 44-45). He assures that he obtained with certain difficulty the information from old Guanches (lit. guanches viejos). Another example is the text written by Thomas Sprats based on the account of a Welsh doctor called Evan Pieugh (or Piew) who in turn said that he obtained his information from elder people of more than one hundred and ten years old (SPRATS 1667: 210).

²² The most renowned text of a discovery of a cave with embalmed bodies is the one written by José de Viera y Clavijo. This was found in Barranco de Herques, in the south of Tenerife (VIERA Y CLAVIJO 2004 [1772]: 178). For the Cave of the One Thousand mummies: TEJERA *et al.* (2010).

²³ One of the most disseminated accounts of a visit to a Guanche funerary cave is the text written ca. 1560 by Thomas Nichols: "Their order of burial was, that when anie died, he was carried naked to a greate cave, where he was propped up against the wall, standing ou his feete. But if he were of anie authoritie among them, then had hee a staffe in his hand, and a vessel of milke standing by him. I have seene caves of 300 of these corps together; the flesh being dryed up, the body remained as light as parchment" (CIORANESCU 1963: 117).

the corpses²⁴. And finally, the main type of source of many texts is the consultation of previous writers. These earlier consulted authors may also be differentiated. The vast majority of them wrote about the mummification in the Canary Islands. However, some writers used also classical authors who wrote about the Egyptian mummification (Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus). This should be understood in an enlightened context in order to make a comparison between both funerary practices.

Information transmission about the mummification in the Canary Islands is a complex process presenting phenomena such as omissions, additions, and different kinds of modifications such as mistakes, emendations and reinterpretations.

The *stemma* helps us to clarify the interrelationships of texts and authors and the data diffusion. Whereas the information written by Fernandes, Frutuoso, Torriani and López de Ulloa did not apparently have any impact in other authors during these centuries, other works were much more frequently consulted and their information shared and spread. This is the case of Alonso de Espinosa whose text was the most copied one. His information was copied either directly consulting his work or indirectly through the descriptions copied by other authors. Other writers as texts compilers Samuel Purchas or Richard Hakluyt were the source of information for a certain amount of authors. Others such as John Barrow did not base his information on earlier authors and obtained it from oral sources, resulting in a striking account which denies any embalming procedure²⁵.

Groups of authors or areas of influence can be distinguished depending on the language in which the accounts were written. The idiomatic and geographical proximity between them and the extension of dissemination of the published (or simply manuscripted) works helped the transmission of certain information just within certain spheres.

²⁴ That is the case of several authors during the 19th century such as Gregorio Chil y Naranjo and Juan Bethencourt Alfonso. They did not only analyse the embalmed bodies, but also pointed out their opining refuting or confirming the information provided by previous authors (CHIL Y NARANJO 2006 [1876-1880]: 123-124; BETHENCOURT ALFONSO 1994 [written ca. 1884-1912]: 296).

²⁵ "The bodies of the Guanches that are found in caverns are said not to have undergone any preparation, but merely to have been wrapped round with goat skins. The dryness of the atmosphere on this island is such that, by a gradual and spontaneous evaporation of the juices, animal substances are reduced to a state of complete rigidity and desiccation. This seems to have been the common mode of interment." (BARROW 1806: 46).

However, the situation is not so simple. From the total of 43 texts / authors hitherto attested (100%): 41'86% of them (18) copied the information from texts in the same language; 27,90 % of them (12) transmitted data from sources written in a different language; and 11,62% of them (5) copied information written both in the same and in other(s) language(s). Remarkable examples are Viera y Clavijo and Bory de Saint-Vincent, who transmitted information from texts originally written in Spanish, French and English. The rest (18,60%, 8) included original information and it seems that they did not copy from any other textual source²⁶.

Tradition and innovation was a substantial part of this transmission. During the 15th and 16th centuries several authors provide original information, that perhaps we may consider more accurate than the one included in later texts due to a greater timely proximity to the aboriginal society. Some writers like Alonso de Espinosa, Abreu Galindo and Thomas Nichols become traditional sources to be reproduced and their information is copied over and over.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, authors such as Antonio de Viana and Antonio Sedeño not only copied some of the the aforementioned authors but also introduced new information in their descriptions, some of which should not be disdained and treated with caution²⁷. Others such as Thomas Sprats, whose text's dependence is not completely clear, also included data not attested in earlier accounts²⁸.

Sharing and transmitting specific ideas or information gave as a result different tendencies in the historiography that have been identified. Some authors added innovative elements to the traditional information they copied. One of the most remarkable phenomena during centuries was Egyptianising the Canarian mummies²⁹.

²⁶ The dependence of Sprats' information from other author is doubtful. For this reason, he has been included in this latter group. See MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 90-91.

²⁷ Antonio de Viana describes, for example, how the corpses were washed with flowers, pomegranate leaves and astrigent herbs; and the latter were introduced in the body (VIANA 1986 [1604]: 62); Sedeño points out, for instance, that the washing was undertaken with boiled water with herbs; that sand and mocan were introduced in the corpse and that the drying process was undertaken with hot or moccan sand; and that the bodies were smoked (SEDEÑO 2008 [written ca. 1575 - 17th century]: 380).

²⁸ Thomas Sprats assures, for instance, that pine bark was used in the washing; also that it existed different drying procedures depending on the season; and that the social status of the deceased was displayed on the different kind of leather used in the wrapping (SPRATS 1667: 211).

²⁹ For an first overview of this issue: MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ (2011); for a detailed analysis: MÉNDEZ-RODRÍGUEZ (2018).

This process consisted in the modification or addition of certain details that came from or were based on the Egyptian mummification, specifically from the descriptions written by Herodotus (II, 85-90) and/or Diodorus Siculus (I, 91). The transmission without criticism of different ideas of this kind of information³⁰ gave as a result inaccurate and unquestioned 'received knowledge' that has lasted until today. One example was the addition of salt to the washing of the corpses due to the supposition of the famous enlightened Viera y Clavijo based on the information provided about the Egyptian mummification by Herodotus. Many authors later copied Viera y Clavijo's data even until the 21th century³¹.

A translation is a type of text that may clearly follow a reproductive tradition since it should be a data transfer from one language to another. However, sometimes it can also contain innovative elements. George Glas' special translation of Juan de Abreu Galindo's text included a peculiar addition not attested in any earlier text. Glas considered the embalmers not only as the specialists who prepared the bodies but also those who built the tombs for the deceased³².

New elements continued to be introduced in the descriptions and publications during centuries. Some of these elements are absolutely bizarre. French naturalist Louis Jean Marie Daubenton, who collaborated with Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, in their *Histoire Naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du Cabinet du Roy* (1749) included bear's fat between the substances applied during the mummification even though bears never existed in the Canary Islands³³.

A much more recent example is Aufderheide's publication *The scientific study of mummies* (2003). In his explanation about this funerary practice, he erroneously

³⁰ Several of these misleading ideas related to the embalmers (such as their consideration as priests, their organizational division of labor and their positive social consideration); the addition of the *tabona* or obsidian cutting tool in the texts as a parallel to the Ethiopian stone from Herodotus and Diodorus' texts; and bowels washing was also mentioned as a procedure undertaken. The reference to excerebration in several texts may be also explained because of this phenomenon.

³¹ MÉNDEZ-RODRÍGUEZ 2018: 289 n. 57.

³² "There were certain persons among them whose profession it was, and who were set apart for the purpose of preparing the dead bodies burial, and making up the tombs." (GLAS 1764: 74; MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 171).

³³ "... Après avoir tiré les entrailles, ils lavoient le corps plusieurs fois de suite avec une lessive d'écorce de pin séchée au soleil pendant l'été, ou dans une étuve pendant l'hiver; ensuite on l'oi-gnoit avec du beurre ou de la graisse d'ours que l'on avoit fait bouillir avec des herbes odoriférantes qui étoient des espèces de lavende, de sauge, etc..." (BUFFON, DAUBENTON 1749: 288).

mistook *gofio*, an aboriginal alimentary product³⁴, as goat butter³⁵ in the list of substances used during the embalming procedures.

A chronologically organised detailed registration of all the most remarkable data included by each author for the first time in the mummification descriptions allows us to obtain a diachronic view which helps us to discern its reliability³⁶.

In conclusion, application of a detailed textual criticism analysis has been essential in order to obtain a detailed perspective of the data transmission about the mummification in the Canary Islands. It has helped us to deeply understand how the information was received, collected, modified and amended during centuries. Defining this complex transmission as productive or reproductive is too general to apply it to all the texts. However, there are two main remarkable features during this diachronic process: tradition and innovation.

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³⁴ Gofio is flour made from roasted grains (generally wheat or maize) or other starchy plants (beans, fern root).

³⁵ "... Two bodies were sufficiently intact to establish that they had been eviscerated and the body cavities stuffed with soil, pine needles, probably goat butter (*gofio*), tree bark, rodent droppings and other botanical, organic and mineral items..." (AUFDERHEIDE 2003: 163). Based on this text, Parra Ortiz included this misconception in his brief description of the *mirlado* (PARRA ORTIZ 2010: 267). After being informed by myself about the misunderstanding, this information was fortunately later revised and removed in the second edition (PARRA ORTIZ 2015: 267).

³⁶ For a detailed list of these elements in the many texts written or published between 1482 and 1803, see MÉNDEZ RODRÍGUEZ 2014: 105-107 (Table 7).

BARROW, J. (1806): *A Voyage to Cochinchina, in the years 1792 and 1793...* London: T. Cadell and W. Davies.

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