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Geographical knowledge and survival of some romantic visions about the Canary Islands

The insular conditions of the Canary Islands, the fact that they are mountainous areas, their climatic goodness, or the fact that they are islands located in the extreme south-west of the known world until the discovery of America, have given them, for centuries, a character of myth, *locus amoenus*, like literary *topos*, sometimes adorned by a romantic worldview. The vision of “revisited” lands that we now have was not held by its contemporaries, and sometimes not until a long time later.

The Canary Islands (especially the islands of Tenerife and Gran Canaria) have been a region of interest since ancient times. Not only because of its importance as obligatory stopover lands in the European maritime routes towards the coasts of the equinoctial and southern regions but also because of its interest for travellers and scientists, given its unique nature and culture. For this reason, since at least the 1st century BC, they have been visited, explored, described and analysed. However, most of the ancient texts that have been related to the islands have a marked mythological character. Even the most passionate authors go so far as to affirm that the mythical Champs Elysees, the Garden of Earthly Delights, the Garden of the Hesperides or Atlantis can be identified with the Canaries. Undoubtedly, the ultimate reason that explains this circumstance is found in the extreme western position of the islands concerning the Ecumene. The eastern myths move towards the archipelago in parallel with the expansion of the Phoenicians and Greeks towards the Strait of Gibraltar, the Iberian Peninsula and Morocco, which become the setting where episodes of the life of the antiquity heroes are located

(Briareo, Melkart, Herakles, Hercules, Perseus, Anteo or Híspalo, among others).

With the fall of the Western Roman Empire, in the 5th century AD, the Ocean ceased to be frequented, routes, techniques and territories being forgotten, among which the Canaries were included. The Middle Ages meant the disappearance of long-distance trade throughout the Mediterranean and the European and African Atlantic façade, so that the islands became part of the unknown world, limiting their knowledge, with corruptions and additions, to the Plinian text and the nesonymy mentioned by Ptolemy, and highlighting the mythical elements. However, the texts by Isidore of Seville (570-636) and the anonymous one from Ravenna (around 800 AD) deserve attention. In that 9th century, myths such as that of San Borondón (the one called for a long time as the eighth Canary Island) appear, and two centuries later the idea of the Happy Islands (al-Jalidat) is consolidated in Arabic literature with Al Idrisi. However, it seems likely that the islands continued to be visited by Spanish-Mauritanian sailors uninterrupted until the Renaissance.

Before the Renaissance “rediscovery” of the islands, four events must be cited: a) the voyage of the Vivaldi brothers in 1291; b) the map by Angelino Dulcert or Dulceti in 1339, in which only the islands of “Lanzarote Marocellus”, “Forte ventura” and “linegi mari” (islet of Lobos) appear; c) the nautical cartography of the Archipelago by the brothers Francesco and Domenico Pizigano, from 1367, in which the seven islands are drawn for the first time, and, above all, d) the edition of the first book on the conquest and first colonization, *Le Canarien*,

a chronicle written between 1402 and 1404, but printed in 1630, recognized as one of the last books of chivalry, where the vicissitudes of the Norman conquest, the disputes between the conquerors, and a rich description of the islands and their inhabitants.

Le Canarien is followed by a wide repertoire of European descriptive texts that, according to the humanist culture of the moment, relate, in addition to the facts of conquest, elements of the culture of the Canaries, and include descriptions and comments related to the natural environment. It is from the sixteenth century when humanist authors who write about the islands do so with a more erudite vision, paying special attention to natural and ethnographic data, and interpreting classical texts. The works by Torriani (1492), Espinosa (1594), Abreu Galindo (1600), Antonio de Viana (1604), or the *Decades* by Antonio Nebrija stand out.

In England, the islands are known through Thomas Nichols' book (*A Pleasant description of the Fortunate Ilandes*), printed in 1583, and Thomas Sprats' description of the ascent to Mount Teide, published in the *History of the Royal Society*, London, in 1667. But it is in the last three centuries when they acquire the rank of a true "scientific laboratory" in which to obtain data and verify hypotheses and theories.

The 18th century was very fruitful for the knowledge of the islands, which acquired a renewed interest both for cartography and natural history as soon as the originality of their biota and their volcanic nature were discovered, to which they were added in a short time the interest in the knowledge of its ancient inhabitants. But the popularity of the islands came with the development of tourism organized by the British from the middle of the 19th century, through the publication of travel books and tourist guides. In 1861 the first boat with tourists arrived on the islands, and before the end of the eighties, together with the archipelagos of Madeira and Azores, they became the most southernmost fashionable health resort in Eurasia.

It is then when the first two organized tourist excursions are defined: the ascent to the Teide peak in Tenerife, which had a long tradition among travellers and visitors since the conquest of the islands; and the excursion to Mount Lentiscal, in Gran Canaria, which began in the early 19th century, and which included the contemplation of the Caldera de Bandama as well as a visit to the troglodyte settlement of La Atalaya and the vineyards and wineries of El Monte.

It is in this historical-cultural context that scientists, travellers and promotional agents of tourist activity establish two of the most important ideas about the inter-

pretation of landscape and the successive human communities of the islands: the vertical staging of the vegetation and the survival of the pre-Hispanic culture.

Alexander von Humboldt and Leopold von Buch, on the one hand, and Christen Smith on the other will be jointly responsible for the recognition and definition of the altitudinal levels of vegetation. And, throughout the 19th century, it was travellers and tourists, including the French Count of Poudenx and the British Charles Edwardes, John Whitford and Samler Brown, who popularized the idea of the survival of pre-Hispanic culture in La Atalaya; relying, for this, on the use of rudimentary techniques for making ceramics, which was interpreted as the confirmation of the continuity of the aboriginal lineage of its inhabitants.

However, although initially both ideograms were developed from a critical spirit, over time they have become for many dogmatic truths that are part of the strongest beliefs of most researchers and the Canarian population (despite existing in the actuality arguments that discuss them). Both have in common that they were conceived from the personal impressions of renowned scientific authorities and famous travellers that have been transmitted and reproduced without discussion, among other reasons, due to their dogmatic acceptance and the scant critical attitude of later researchers; and, undoubtedly, for the magnification and validation to which they were subjected by the influential promotional agents of the early, lucrative and interesting promotion of tourism in the islands.

Alexander von Humboldt formalized and universally disseminated the idea of vertical distribution of "natural" vegetation, adapted to climatic conditions, based on his fleeting five-day visit to the north façade of the island of Tenerife in 1799. He did the same later in some of the great American mountains, which constituted one of his greatest contributions to the scientific knowledge of nature due to the great diffusion of his work. Humboldt, with the corrections proposed by Buch, established, for the north facade of Tenerife, the existence of five staggered floors of vegetation, adapted to ecological conditions.

Underlying its scheme is a vision of static balance between vegetation and climatic conditions and an underestimation of the impact of the intense secular action of its inhabitants on vegetation. The eminent geographer arrived in Tenerife ready to verify "the harmony of convergent forces, the influence of inanimate matter on the animal and plant kingdoms" and to carry out "the description of Nature, the shape of mountains, the growth of plants; that is to say, everything that serves to charac-

terize the island”, and that he missed in the texts of the previous travellers.

Despite the existence of texts that doubted the scientific rigour of these appraisals, it was the Humboldtian bioclimatic scheme, resulting from the acceptance of the adaptation of vegetation to the climatic stratification of the trade wind, which prevailed among later authors. So that until recently, his vision has been collected without any doubt.

For all these reasons, it seems that we are at a time when we must begin to recognize that what, for a little more than two centuries, was accepted as “the explanation of the natural distribution of vegetation” must actually come to be understood as a historical, temporally valid explanation of nature observed during the 19th and 20th centuries, but not as a prior substantive reality.

But these ideas, developed from a critical spirit, over time have practically become dogma among the local scientific community, from which any contribution to the knowledge of the vegetation of the islands is ignored, rejected or criticized (for questioning the Humboldtian vision). It is even frequent that this scheme of the “natural distribution” of the vegetation is extrapolated to times still long before the Spanish conquest of the islands; or that it is used to recreate the environmental conditions of the past as if the millennial action of the island’s inhabitants and their practices had not altered its distribution, composition or structure. But where the rejection produced by the dogmatic application of the Humboldtian scheme turns out to be greater is in those cases that discuss the theoretical altitudinal limits imposed by climatic conditions.

Regarding the potteries of La Atalaya de Santa Brígida (Gran Canaria), Leopold von Buch and Christen Smith incorporated the islands of Gran Canaria, La Palma and Lanzarote into scientific and tourist itineraries, in addition to Tenerife as it had been traditional, with the disclosure of the writings derived from the trip that both made in 1815. Buch draws attention to the Gran Canaria troglodyte town of La Atalaya, which, from that moment, especially due to its proximity to the city of Las Palmas (called Las Palmas de Gran Canaria from 1939) and the Caldera de Bandama, became a place of interest for travellers. Nevertheless, he does not relate the town, or the pottery-making techniques used by its settlers with the aborigines.

The reading of these texts shows the unusual interest that the place aroused and how what later became its most outstanding tourist attributes and values were outlined: the troglodyte habitat, the pottery work, the misery and

begging of its inhabitants and, in general, the alleged survival of the aboriginal tradition in this community. The cave houses and the structure of the town captured much of the attention of the travellers and became a source of admiration. In many texts the interior of the houses is described profusely, highlighting the furniture, especially the abundance of mats, the scarce furnishings, or the high height of the beds. On the other hand, the names of “cave city”, “troglodyte city”, “underground city” or “human burrow” are not uncommon.

Many authors, especially British, described its inhabitants as picturesque, savage, dirty, ragged, beggars, if not thieves. And not a few questioned their origin, relating it to the ancient inhabitants of the Islands, the “Guanches”, but also to gipsies and Berbers. Curiously, this negative vision contrasts with another, especially by Germanic authors, who see in the population of La Atalaya the happy, cheerful, and carefree way of life of a typical community of “good savages”, clean, well dressed, friendly and helpful. In any case, in a generalized way, the texts reflect the agitation caused by the arrival of tourists to the town and the boisterous and loud character of its inhabitants. But there is also a wider consensus when it comes to referring to their ability to make ceramic pieces. Thus, La Atalaya became a world reference for troglodyte habitat and primitive crafts and, from the eighties of the 19th century, a mandatory circuit for travellers and tourist groups visiting the islands.

By way of conclusion, based on the above, we consider ourselves sufficiently supported by arguments to propose that the acceptance of the Humboldtian scheme of the vertical distribution of the vegetation as well as the idea of the survival of inhabitants who preserve the pre-Hispanic techniques of making ceramics in the Gran Canaria site of La Atalaya de Santa Brígida is, to say the least, poorly founded.

To do this, in the first case we rely on the data provided by studies that question the supposed “natural” aridity of the vegetation on the islands of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura and the confirmation of the existence of communities and species not foreseen in the scheme. In the second, we consider that the hypothesis of the scarce consistency of the image elaborated by the travellers of the XIX century from subjective impressions and the solidity of the arguments against this idea offered by recent researchers seems sufficiently reasoned. For this reason, we think that it can be said that both “truths” are more a product of a “sought-after fiction” than of an argued and proven scientific reasoning.