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Abbildung Titelseite:

Ein Großteil der prähistorischen Grabmäler von Lanzarote (Kanarische Inseln) verfügt über ein sogenanntes Seelenloch. Das hier gezeigte Beispiel aus der Gegend von Máguez gehört zu den wenigen Bautypen mit Mittelstein, die siebenteilig und zugleich symmetrisch angeordnet sind und deren Tubus die Unsterblichkeit des Verbliebenen bei dessen Nachtod-Aktionen unterstützt. (Photo: Hans-Joachim Ulbrich)

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Hans-Joachim Ulbrich

## **An ignored phenomenon – the porthole-slabs in megalithic Canarian burial monuments**

Keywords: burial monument, Canary Islands, Europe, Lanzarote, Mediterranean, megaliths, Mother Earth, porthole-slab, prehistory, pyramid, religion, soul-hole, tumulus.

### **Abstract:**

The following text is a short excerpt of a chapter planned for a forthcoming book about the prehistoric burial architecture of Lanzarote which considers the porthole-slabs (soul-holes) as an important component of the local megalithic tumuli and step-pyramids. The different forms of these mural apertures are detailed and illustrated; examples of other Canarian Islands (Tenerife, La Palma) are described too.

### **Resumen:**

El presente artículo avanza extractadamente uno de los capítulos de una monografía en camino sobre la arquitectura funeraria prehistórica de Lanzarote, que, como elemento esencial, aborda las losas perforadas ("agujeros de ánimas") en túmulos megalíticos y pirámides escalonadas existentes en la isla. Se describen e ilustran las diversas formas de estas perforaciones en la pared y se mencionan ejemplos de otras islas del Archipiélago (Tenerife, La Palma).




### **Zusammenfassung:**

Der folgende Text ist ein kurzer Auszug aus dem Kapitel eines geplanten Buches über die prähistorische Begräbnis-Architektur auf Lanzarote, die – als wichtiges Element – die Seelenlöcher (porthole-slabs) lokaler megalithischer Tumuli und Stufenpyramiden berücksichtigt. Diverse Formen dieser Maueröffnungen werden beschrieben und illustriert; Beispiele von anderen Kanarischen Inseln (Tenerife, La Palma) werden ebenfalls geschildert.

**New horizons for investigations.** In its yearbook *Almogaren* Nr. 51 the Institutum Canarium published an article about a step-pyramid in Tenerife written by Sánchez Romero et al. (March 2020). In this text the authors mentioned the existence of a strange orifice – at the same time an artefact – in the wall of the pyramid (and one in the wall of a neighbouring pyramid) [p. 29-30 / figs. 10, 12], having no explanation (fig. 3 here). Parallely the redaction of the Institutum Canarium received informations from tourists – roaming in the archipelago – about odd pre-Hispanic monuments, some featuring artificial holes in their walls. Circa in May 2021 G. Sánchez Romero published a broader

monograph, this time on the entirety of the Canarian pyramids including the alleged origin of the native erectors – again not being able to explain correctly the holes in the walls (text p.108 / fig. D / p.109 and text p.130 / fig. G / p.131).

In 2020 the IC – internally already tending to acknowledge the true meaning of the holes as "porthole-slabs" and "soul-holes" – was still occupied with restructuring-tasks what made it not likely to resolve the time-consuming Canarian "Seelenloch" (German) problem as early as late 2022; then hoping to be able to publish a book on this issue. The current briefly worded article in hand (March 2022) aims at a situation in which it is not advisable to leave the news market for the big variety of old-Canarian funerary monuments alone to the opaque guesswork which the book by G. Sánchez Romero offers these days.

Porthole-slabs are well-known regarding the research on megaliths in Europe (incl. the Mediterranean islands) and the Near East (rarely in Egypt). The term "porthole-slab" addresses actually lesser the transcendent aspects but more the constructional ones: the widespread simplex  or duplex  or *en bloc*  forms – the respective tubi semi- or fully-circular (other variants on p. 178-184). Generally a funeral structure built of stone (not of wood) – e.g. a dolmen when used as "chambered tomb" – can have such a special exit/access point for the defunct. Not in the focus until lately were cultic portholes not situated in a slab, better described as "soul-holes [older term] placed in walls of pyramids". The latter type is highly important for the understanding of the prehistoric Canary Islands and their people, being a very early manifestation of the adoration of Mother Earth<sup>1</sup>, a relevant part of her rites and a necessary specification for the burial architecture. Furthermore in this context, big natural rocks were gladly integrated into such tumuli and pyramids – surely not a happenstance.

From the late Neolithic up to the Bronze Age one can detect porthole-slabs in burial constructions of the afore-mentioned regions. But meanwhile we have to deal with the fact that earliest traces of man can be found in the Canarian archipelago already around 3000 BC (Zöller et al. 2003, p.21: "fBt horizon > 5 ka old" for Guatiza/Lanzarote). Near the younger end of this timeline, probably in the Bronze Age, megalithic burial monuments and their soul-holes – found in Lanzarote (fig. 1a) and the other islands – provide evidence that the Mediterranean navigation to the west, to eastern Atlantic seas, was considerably older and more efficient than previously assumed. In addition the chronological findings by Zöller et al. fit perfectly to the cultural fingerprint of which the burial practices of the non-Berber old-Canarians<sup>2</sup> are a significant part.

<sup>1</sup> Read also the remarks in Ulbrich (2021: 248) about the possible utilization of the chamber in a Canarian *tumulus à chapelle* as meeting place with the telluric Goddess.

<sup>2</sup> "Altkanarier" – this term was used first by members of the Institutum Canarium.

Old-Canarian soul-holes are clearly not a religious measure of continental pre-Berbers or of nomadic Sahara people, therefore the book by Sánchez Romero has lost an important part of its argumentation [or generally its sense].

Moreover not one Canarian peasant of the 15th to 19th century was able to plan and execute the time-consuming and effortful construction of a big complicated pyramid of more than one floor – although some claimed it. Used these peasants scaffolding? Who cared for the fields when the entire family was occupied with the building of a 9-step pyramid (Güimar)? Where is the logic?

**The function of a soul-hole.** Burial sites like special old-Canarian pyramids and tumuli can ease the contact with a deity for the living (see Almogaren 52 on certain devotion rooms<sup>1</sup> / title page & p. 248). A dead person has other options: Members of a prehistoric pantheon, other supernatural numina and also local nature spirits can have a positive or negative impact on the course the afterlife of a defunct human takes. When a soul-hole exists it can channel his/her dialogues with the underworld, with other spheres – for instance the paradise – and last but not least with a God and/or a Goddess [please see also the respective illustration of this yearbook's title page and the legend in the impressum].

Megalithic non-Berber old-Canarian burial sites feature most likely thousands of soul-holes. But many of these may not be visible because of the loss of their structural integrity, particularly regarding the stone bordure (ring, rosette, etc.) and the *tubus* (Lat.); this due to secondary human alterations or damages and/or dependent of erosion and natural tremors in volcanic islands.

Sánchez Romero (2021: 82) pursues the theory that old-Canarians followed a pronounced sun cult in which pyramids were used for altars and observatories. Which pyramids? Only the big stepped ones or generally the many thousands of grand, medium and small ones with a soul-hole? The plausible rationale that all were used for burials is downplayed. Alas the sun cult seems to be overrated (rarity of sun motifs in Canarian petroglyphs). In contrast the immense benefits which the farmers and pastoralists could deploy through the fertility of the ground and the vital supply of water are totally underrated (see also Ulbrich 2009). These gifts of the local Earth Goddess comprise also the highly important possibility to entomb the defunct people in or above the soil. This process preferably includes the use of soul-holes what allows a better "understanding" of her.

**Elements of a Canarian soul-hole.** The outer part of the hole, often a rosette, has a designed form using stone as medium. It is the task of the erector/architect of a pyramid to mould these visible lithic components after the rules of his community (see common forms on p. 176, 178-184). The deeper inner part, the tubus (air and other matters in a metaphysical sense), is the locus of transcendent happenings and communications, these more or less of a religious nature.



The tubus – leaving the pyramid wall in a 90° angle ( $\pm$ ) – is normally horizontally aligned, but a real unicum is a soul-hole on the slanted "roof" of a pyramid where its tubus (fig. 4) leads down to a lower inward-section. Sometimes the tubus ending allows to see the inner part of a tumulus or pyramid (fig. 1b).

Tubus forms found in the following photos of old-Canarian burial buildings:

- Triangular (both directions  $\blacktriangle \blacktriangledown$ )      Figs. 1, 12, 16;
- Semicircular or curved      Figs. 2 (classic), 10, 14;
- Double-semicircular (= circle)      Fig. 3 (classic);
- Circular, oval (more or less round)      Fig. 4;
- Rectangular (also squarish or conic)      Figs. 5, 6, 8, 11, 13, 15 (conic), 18, 19, 20;
- Irregular      Figs. 7, 9, 17.

It seems that rectangular tubus contours were easier to produce.



Fig. 1a - Multiplex soul-hole, with a flat lintel, tubus slightly triangular, centered in the supporting wall of a small, round and simple one-step pyramid, topstone on the peak (Puerto del Carmen, Lanzarote) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].



Fig. 1b - View into the inner part of the soul-hole & the tubus, ca. 45 cm deep [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].



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Oxford Reference / port-hole slab: A distinctive kind of entrance to a burial chamber, often in a chambered tomb, comprising either a single stone or a pair of stones set side by side, in which a round or sometimes square access hole has been cut. Where a pair of stones is used each has a cut-out in one side which when placed together form the port-hole. Some of the best examples are known amongst Cotswold–Severn long



Fig. 2 - Classic combination of a simplex soul-hole and a cubic base, the tubus semicircular (Monte Corona foot, Lanz.) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].



Fig. 3 - Duplex soul-hole, tubus circular, classic version (northern Tenerife) [Photo: Gustavo Sánchez Romero].



Fig. 4 - Multiplex soul-hole, rosette type, horizontally placed on the "roof" (!), tubus more or less circular (Pico de la Tegala foot, Lanzarote) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].



Fig. 5 - Multiplex soul-hole with a five-stone rosette, tubus squarish (Pico de la Tegala south, Lanzarote) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].

barrows of western Britain and the dolmens of the northwest Caucasus in southern Russia. [Note by this paper's author: The Oxford text does not cover the special variants of the "soul-holes / Seelenlöcher" without a slab, placed in the outer supporting walls of funeral pyramids and tumuli; found in parts of megalithic Europe and the Canaries.] Sánchez Romero, Gustavo; López Arencibia, Santiago; Bello, Abel (2020): Una pirámide/calendario solar Guanche en el norte de Tenerife: referencias históricas,



Fig. 6 - Multiplex soul-hole, tubus rectangular, near the ground (Monte Mina southern foot, Lanzarote) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].



Fig. 7 - Multiplex soul-hole, tubus irregular but clearly as such definable (Tinguatón east, Lanzarote) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].



Fig. 8 - Multiplex soul-hole, upright sized oriel type, stones partly stacked, centered in the supporting wall (Pto. del Carmen, Lanzarote) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].



Fig. 9 - Multiplex soul-hole, 3-stone oriel type with lintel, tubus irregular, near the ground (above Barranco del Quiquere, Lanzarote) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].



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Fig. 10 - Marked by a big stone: simplex soul-hole, tubus quartcircular, broad horizontal base (Guinate, Lanz.) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].

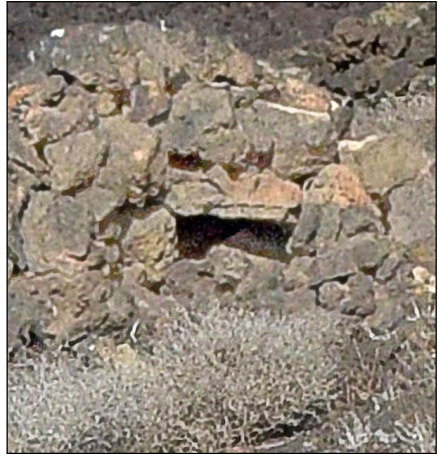


Fig. 11 - Ample multiplex soul-hole of a small tumulus, tubus squarish, big lintel (El Golfo hinterland, Lanzarote) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].



Fig. 12 - Two-part multiplex soul-hole, on-ground-type, deep trigonal tubus, classic in megalithic Europe (pyramid near Barranco del Quiquere, Lanz.) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].



Fig. 13 - Multiplex soul-hole, big lintel + threshold, nearly quadratic tubus in upper half of the wall, help of a mason / see also figs. 14/19 (Tinajo, Lanzarote) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich]

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Fig. 14- Simplex soul-hole, tubus semicircular, base nearly horizontal (Monte Corona SE foot, Lanzarote) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].



Fig. 15 - Soul-hole not with lintel but threshold, the slim tubus is upright conic (Monte Mina south, Lanz.) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].



Fig. 16 - Four-part multiplex soul-hole, upper-wall type, deep trigonal tubus with lintel (Monte Mina south, Lanzarote) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich].



Fig. 17a - Multiplex soul-hole, rosette type, L-form tubus (if not one stone has fallen out); see also general view in fig. 17b (El Paso, La Palma) [Photo: Barbara Kupka]



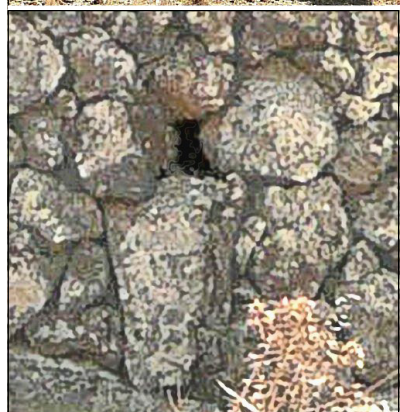
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Fig. 17b - Multiplex soul-hole in step 4 of a big pyramid (El Paso, La Palma) [Photo: Barbara Kupka]. This step-pyramid, well known since centuries and often visited by citizens and tourists, reveals its cultural qualities as prehistoric site by this soul-hole. In fact it is a valuable burial monument – like many other Palmesian pyramids.



Fig. 18 - Multiplex soul-hole in step 2 of a well preserved pyramid, six-part rosette type, tubus rectangular (near Alma de Tacande, La Palma) [Photo: Barbara Kupka]. In the background (right hand) a large two-step pyramid with a significant pile of pyroclasts.



Figs. 19a/b - Finely preserved pyramid, multiplex soul-hole in step 1 of the supporting wall, three-part semi-rossette / this stone bordure placed on a relative prominently integrated stele / the latter downwards conic, the tubus squarish (near Alma de Tacande, La Palma) [Photos: Barbara Kupka]. An earlier paper, describing also an upside down conic stone artefact in Lanzarote (Ulbrich 2014), makes new sense thereby.



Fig. 20 - Longish soul-hole upright placed, eight-part rosette, more or less rectangular tubus with deep view into it; portion of an oriel / see also fig. 8 here, nearly on the ground (Tinguatón east resp. Mña. Quemada north, Lanzarote) [Photo: H.-J. Ulbrich]. An entire view of this *tumulus à chapelle* is available in Ulbrich (2021: 240-241)