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An approach to prehistoric shepherding in La Gomera (Canary Islands) through the study of domestic spaces

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ABSTRACT

The present research, included in the project “A history of shepherding on the Island of La Gomera”, investigates the historical development of shepherding on this island from prehistoric to modern times, and from a social, economic, territorial, ecological, and cultural perspective. Within the framework of the project and its multidisciplinary approach, we present the initial phase of the archaeological study, which aims to delve into the management and consumption of livestock during the island's prehistory. In order to track this “culture” from an archeological standpoint, residential contexts have been proposed as a first stage in the survey, as they have not so far been addressed as an important issue for the archeology of La Gomera.

To this end, thirteen archaeological sondages have been carried out in five separate points of the island. Exhumed archaeological materials relating them to the stratigraphic context of each domestic space are analyzed. Data from the consumption of food, especially those from the livestock, has been studied. The text provides preliminary information on shepherding and management of the island territory by ancient Gomerans.

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1. Geographical and historical frame

With its 378 km², La Gomera is the second smallest island of the seven comprising the Canarian Archipelago. However, it is also a most rugged one (Figs. 1 and 2). As with the rest of the archipelago, the origin of the island is volcanic. The basal complex has been dated at 15–20 Ma (Anguita et al., 2002; Carracedo, 2011). La

Gomera is the only island which has not seen any volcanic activity throughout the Quaternary, giving erosion an important role as a landscape shaper. The insular topography is characterized by deep ravines in a radial pattern around the island. A high and relatively smooth central plateau reaches an altitude of 1487 m at *El Alto del Garajonay*.

The island is influenced by the trade winds (*alisio*) coming from the Azores anticyclone, which differentially affects the insular geography depending on its orientation. This climatic condition aids the development of extraordinarily diverse vegetation throughout the island: the north-eastern half with short, steep slopes, and the south-western half with longer, gentler ones. Authors normally refer to three major bioclimatic belts. On the top central area there is a dense *monteverde* (evergreen cloud forest or *laurisilva*), characterized by high humidity, winter mists, and many tree species

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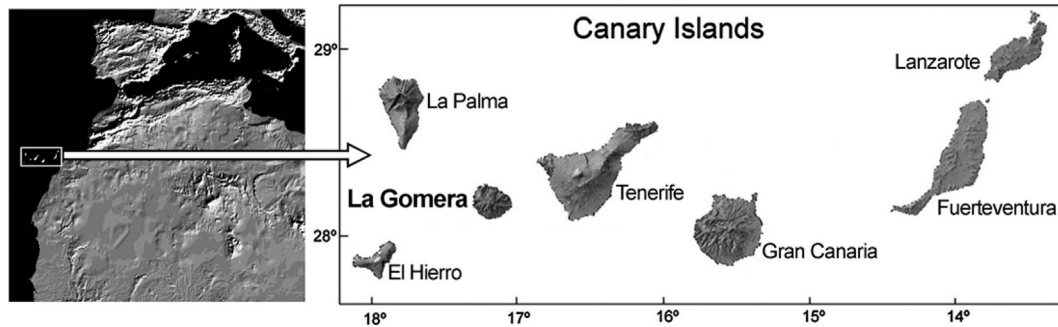
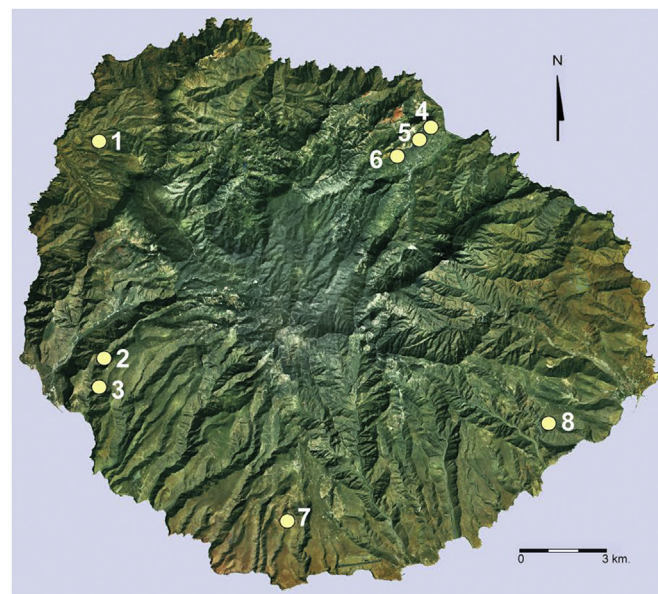


Fig. 1. Location of the studied area.



Sites	Location	Municipality	Altitude	Number of sondages
Las Cuevas de Herrera González (1)	Tazo	Vallehermoso	143 m.	3
La Cueva del Cerrojo (2)	Gerían	Vallehermoso	655 m.	2
El Sobrado de Los Gómeros (3)	Gerían	Vallehermoso	527 m.	2
La Cueva Honda (4)	El Tabaibal	Hermigua	450 m.	1
La Cañada de La Gúrona (5)	El Tabaibal	Hermigua	525 m.	2
El Cabezo Castilla (6)	Ibo Alfaro	Hermigua	600 m.	1
El Cejo de La Virgen (7)	La Vizcaina	Alajeró	450 m.	1
El Lomito del Medio (8)	Casas Caídas	San Sebastián	376 m.	1

Fig. 2. Map of La Gomera and selected archaeological sites for the background study.

(*Ocotea foetens*, *Apollonias barbuiana*, *Laurus novocanariensis*, *Persea indica*, *Morella faya*, *Erica arborea*) (600–1487 m). Below this area is the domain of *thermophilous* forest with a moderate climate (200–600 m). Its composition usually presents clumps, dense thickets and undergrowth, as well as a high diversity and richness of species, namely *Convolvulus floridus*, *Hypericum canariense*, *Olea cesariiformes*, *Pistacia atlantica*, *Retama rhodorrhizoides*, *Cistus monspeliensis* or *Spartocytisus filipes*. Among these, *Juniperus turbinata* ssp. *canariensis* and *Phoenix canariensis* stand out.

The third altitudinal belt, the *basal vegetation*, is considered semiarid and its soils endure erosion and drought. The lower the altitude, the more the size of the species is reduced (0–200 m). This

is the domain of *Euphorbiaceae* (Arozena, 1991; Gil-Rodríguez et al., 1992; Fernández-Palacios and de Nicolas, 1995; Santos, A., 2008; Nogué et al., 2013).

It is estimated that human populations had arrived in the Canary Islands by the middle of the first millennium BC, coming from a North Africa Berber context (Navarro-Mederos, 2001). Europeans established contact with the archipelago during the 13th century, and by the end of the 15th century (1489) the conquest of La Gomera was finalized (Díaz and Rodríguez, 1990; Morales, 1994). Europeans introduced a manorial system, and the natives from La Gomera underwent a very slow and difficult acculturation process (Aznar, 1983, 1985; Lobo, 1984; Martínez, 1993; Baucells, 2014).

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