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COMMUNICATING WITH THE GODS: SUPERSTITION ON FUERTEVENTURA AND LANZAROTE

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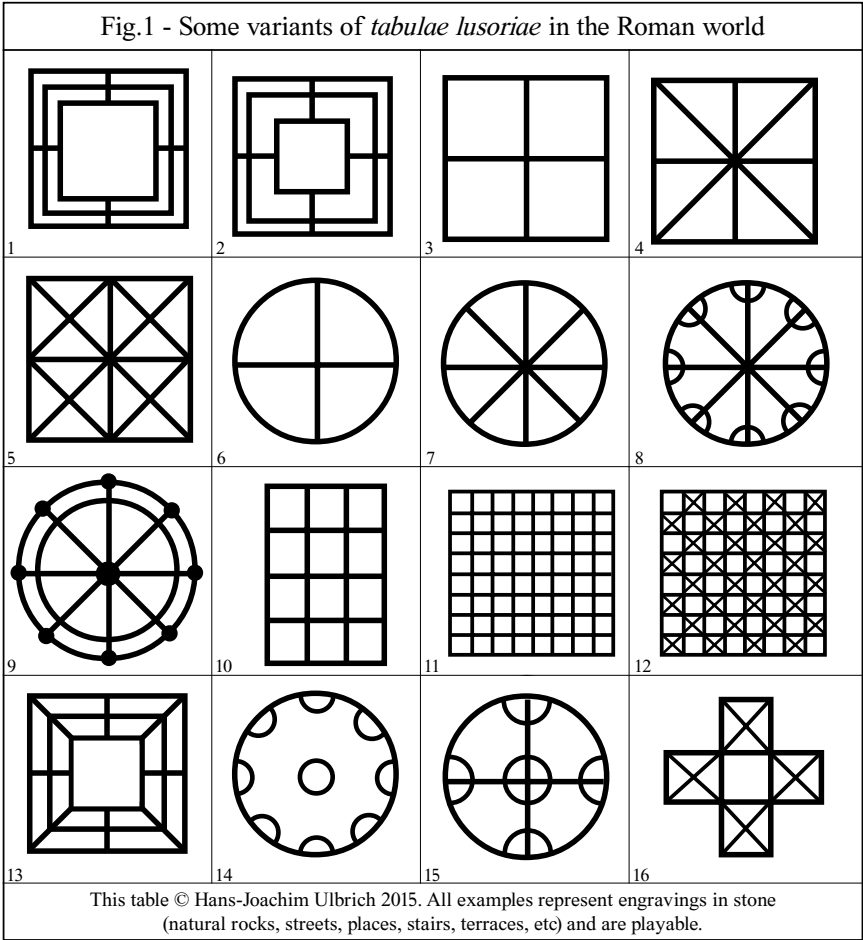
To understand the special forms of superstition which were practised by Lanzarote's and Fuerteventura's aborigines, the Mahos, we first have to take a closer look at the eastern Canary Islands during the centuries around Christ's birth.

Geographical and historical background

In ancient times the demand for purple dye, the royal colour, was immense. It was also one of the reasons to explore the northwestern African coast: We remember, for example, the Insulae Purpurariae, small islands and reefs near Mogador (today Essaouira, Morocco). But already before the beginning of the Christian era the animal source, the marine Muricidae snails, *Bolinus*

brandaris and *Hexaplex trunculus*, formerly known as murex, began to become scarce in many Mediterranean regions. Clever Phoenician, Roman and Punic businessmen searched for a vegetal replacement and found it besides some unproductive plants in dying lichens, in Macaronesia mainly *Rocella tinctoria*. Therefore exploration and collecting also took place in the direction of the newly found or supposed islands near the African coast (Ulbrich, 2004a). Other red pigments which were used in kitchens, for example for sauces and nutritional preserves, and in the fishing business of southern Iberia (Bernal and Domínguez 2012) apparently did not qualify as a substitute for purple.

Fuerteventura and Lanzarote, both arid, are the most northern and eastern of the Canary Islands. Their smallest distance to the continent is around 100 km (Cape Juby, Tarfaya, southern Morocco). Most likely they were the first of the seven big Canary Islands which were exploited by these entrepreneurs. And we have evidence for this: the epigraphy with Libyco-Berber, Latin and Neopunic scripts.



Antique scripts on Lanzarote and Fuerteventura

During the last 300 (or 500 / not cleared) years BCE small waves of proto-Berber colonists, either alone or accompanying Punic, overlayers prehistoric non-Berber people on the Canary Islands. My hypothesis is that the Berber increase got a push especially on Lanzarote and Fuerteventura when the entrepreneurs sent Berber labourers to these islands to collect lichens during the period 100 BCE–430 CE. There is no doubt that these visitors could write in Libyco-Berber and/or Latin and/or Neopunic script(s). They were acculturated by the ruling Roman and partly Punic classes on the continent, from the early province Africa, installed 146 BCE, to the later Mauretania Tingitana and Mauretania Caesariensis, whose merchants' expeditions to the Canaries were probably terminated by

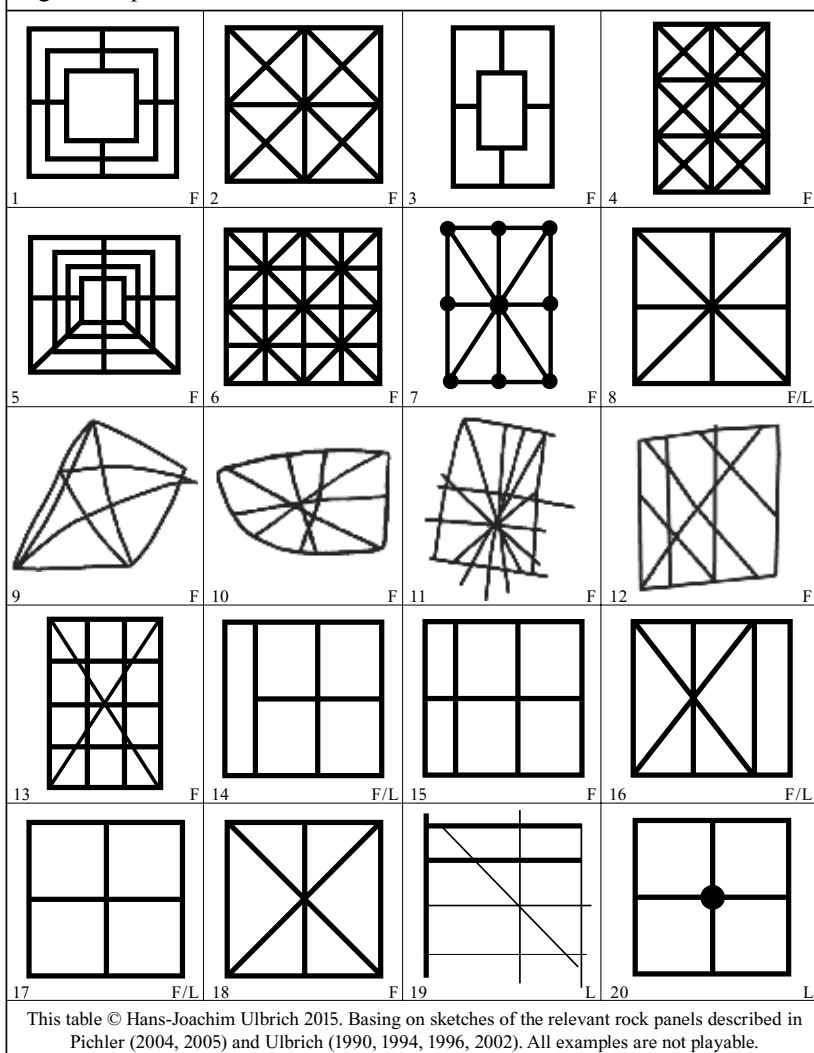
the intrusion of the Vandals in 429/430 CE. Furthermore, it is a fact that Latin rock inscriptions occur on the Canaries only on Fuerteventura and Lanzarote (here abbreviated F/L). The lichen collectors used mainly the basaltic rocks to engrave their names. But we can strongly suppose that they also taught the islanders to write and that they mixed with them by marriage, meaning that some of them did not return to their African homeland. We have to consider also the long intervals between the ships picking up the raw lichens. In any case the Roman culture and the ability to write in Latin script had reached the eastern Canary Islands and their aborigines.

We should now have a short look at the scripts used then on the two islands (applying the current terms of the Institutum Canarium, Vienna):

- Libyco-Berber (LB) - Proto-Berber script used in northern Africa and on the Canaries (several versions)
- Latino-Canarian (LC) - Special form of the Latin cursive used only on F/L (three versions)
- Berbero-Latin - A mixing of LB and LC only on F/L (several versions)
- Neo-Punic - Only very few examples on F/L (Ulbrich 1999, 2004b)

LB and LC scripts are by far the most common on the rocks of F/L, so it is not too daring to say that the people who were in command of these scripts had the greatest impact on this pelagic culture. The spoken language seems to have been at that point of time a kind of pidgin which consisted of Latin, Berber and Phoenician/Punic words (Ulbrich 2004b: 40); these were 'written' confusedly in all three main scripts on the rocks. Very old words originating from the first prehistoric, non-Berber colonists were in the minority. It is also clear that the influence of the visitors was not restricted to scripts and languages alone; other cultural aspects were surely transferred too. And that leads us finally to the superstitions of the islanders and the magic which was attributed to some signs and pictograms.

Fig.2 - Graphical variants of *tabulae lusoriae* on Fuerteventura and Lanzarote

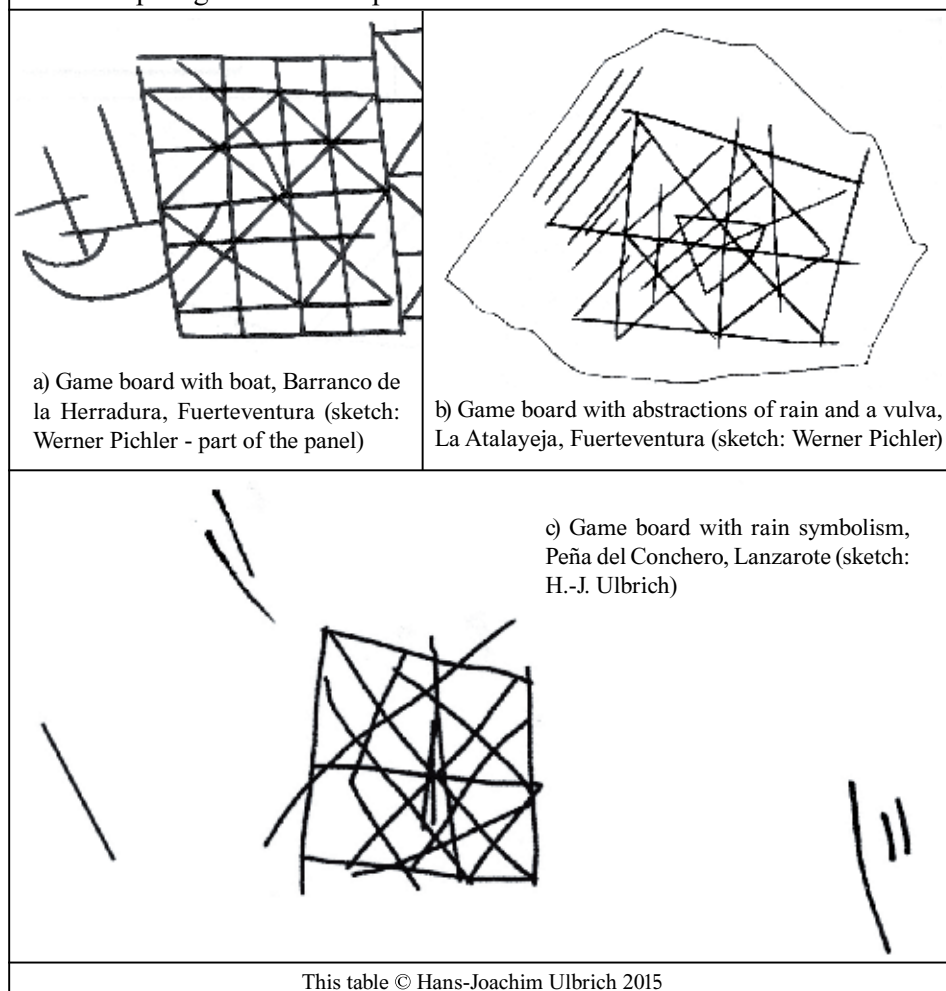


The role of the *tabulae lusoriae*

To say it somehow unprecisely: the invention of tabular games with pieces, which in the Roman world were summarized as *tabulae lusoriae*, in most cases cannot be attached to a certain point of time or to certain persons. Generally seen it is a worldwide phenomenon, although some European forms have a Roman or Arabic origin. The names and graphic versions are countless: Three/Nine/Twelve Men's Morris (English), *mérelles* (French), *alquerque* (Spanish), *Mühle* (German), *filetto* (Italian), *feldja* (Algerian Berber), *naukhadi* (Indian), *shax* (Somalian), etc. For an overview see Bell (1960) and Uberti (2012); for a graphical impression see Fig. 1.

This kind of diversion was very popular in all strata of the Roman and Phoenician/Punic societies. No

Fig. 3 - Ancient game boards combined with other symbolically used pictograms on rock panels of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura



- 'Boards' too small to be played.
- Design not executed according to the rules of a game.
- Often totally confuse structure (as in fig. 2: parts 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 19).
- Engraved on vertical or sloping panels.

Superstition and religion

There must have existed a purpose of the games which lies beyond simple diversion and fun. Authors were most likely the islanders, as we will see; the collecting crews and their game playing and also their real game boards delivered the graphical patterns. The aborigines realized that certain games could be played as hazard, which although forbidden under Roman law was popular in the private world. Why then not copy and use the patterns as symbols for luck, happiness and prosperity without playing the game? The situation of the aborigines with frequent

wonder that household servants, seamen and soldiers especially liked to play the different board games when not on duty. There can be no doubt that on the ships which transported the lichen collectors *tabulae lusoriae* were played intensively. And it should also be clear that the collecting crews continued to play them while stationed somewhere. Why then do we find games of this kind carved into the rocks of F/L, but mainly not in a manner which would allow people to play them? Pichler (1996, p. 137) states that at least 70% of the games on Fuerteventura are not playable; for Lanzarote I can say that none of the game graffiti found so far is playable.

After examining the rock art sites one can establish several reasons why most of these engravings had no practical object:

- Positions for the players too uncomfortable

droughts and occasional locust plagues advanced such superstitions. Magic symbols which could be presented to the gods, begging for good luck in weather, harvests, cattle and last but not least children were certainly highly welcome. For Fuerteventura Pichler (1996, p. 149) noted corresponding symbols – games and pentagrams – influencing the future to the good.

Who were the gods to be worshipped? Chroniclers of the Spanish *conquista* reported for F/L that the aborigines prayed to the sun and the stars; but there is strong evidence that also – and in particular – the great Mediterranean mother goddess belonged to the pantheon.

My hypothesis is supported by the fact that the game symbols appear not only alone but also in combination with other symbols and pictograms, e.g. those for rain (part of the so-called linear-geometric rock art style of

F/L), sexual organs (vulvae, perhaps phalli too) and boats (see fig. 3). Another point is that the Mahos thought that potentiating in the form of doubling and multiplying symbols or their elements leads to a higher magic value for a graffito (see fig. 2: parts 9, 14, 15, 16 with an added compartment/rectangle).

It is striking that Fuerteventura has distinctly more game boards and more variants of these on its rocks than Lanzarote. Is that a hint that Fuerteventura had more visitors and more aboriginal people in ancient times? Was Fuerteventura richer in dying lichens? The discussion of these questions must be left for a forthcoming article.

The Mahos were evidently great followers of pragmatic syncretism. The use of apotropaic elements in their rock art was practised long before the appearance of Roman-aculturated visitors from North Africa. So some more symbols with magically positive effects on the daily fight for survival would fit perfectly in a development of faiths and superstitions which had already lasted for over 3.000 years.

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