

ARCHIVES OF THE LIVING CANARY ISLANDS

HOW MUCH MEMORY CAN A PLANT HOLD?

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Catalogue Text / Research Version 2026

THE WEDDING OF THE PLANTS

SINGLE CANTO

„No lo dudéis: la Flor es una boda;
El cáliz es el tálamo y el lecho;
Los pétalos, lucidos y de moda,
Son las cortinas, que el capullo han hecho,
Y el gran misterio encubren; la aula toda
Se perfuma de olores hasta el techo;
Y el néctar, que la abeja allí codicia,
Es el pan de la boda y la delicia.”

“Do not doubt it: the Flower is a wedding; The calyx is the marriage bed; The petals, bright and fashionable, Are the curtains drawn before the bud, Concealing the great mystery; the whole room Is perfumed with scents up to the ceiling; And the nectar coveted there by the bee Is the wedding bread and the delight.”

José de Viera y Clavijo, stanza 13 of the poem
“The Weddings of the Plants”

LAS BODAS DE LAS PLANTAS

CANTO ÚNICO

Los desposorios de la amable Flora (1)
cantar en un vergel es mi deseo:
templa su voz mi lira, y suave implora
para el Epitalamio (2), no a Himeneo (3);
sino al que la Botánica (4) ya adora
por Numen fiel, al inmortal Lineo,
al primero que vio en las plantas todas
los sexos, los amores y las bodas.

El Reyno vegetal será su imperio.
Que soberanamente se dilata
Por uno y otro fértil hemisferio;
Donde el Árbol, Arbusto, Yerba, y Mata,
Bajo de su glorioso magisterio,
En un sistema de concordia grata,
Con Especies, con Géneros y enlaces
Forman Familias, Órdenes y Clases

NOTES

(1) Goddess of flowers.

(2) Nuptial song.

(3) The god who presided over and was invoked at weddings.

(4) Carl Linnaeus, Swedish knight and illustrious inventor of the ingenious sexual system of plants. He is the author of many works on botany; here, however, I wish particularly to recall the two entitled *Sexus* and *Sponsalia plantarum*.

To sing of the marriage of gracious Flora (1) in a garden is my desire: my lyre tempers its voice and gently implores, for the nuptial song (2), not Hymenaeus (3), but the one whom Botany (4) already worships as a faithful deity: the immortal Linnaeus, the first to perceive in all plants the sexes, loves, and weddings.

The plant kingdom shall be his empire, extending its sovereign rule across both fertile hemispheres; where Tree, Shrub, Herb, and Bush, under his glorious doctrine, in a system of harmonious concord, through Species, Genera, and their connections, form Families, Orders, and Classes.

Flora is both the Roman goddess and a personification of the plant world; epitalamio denotes a wedding or bridal song; Himeneo/Hymenaeus is the deity of marriage. Lineo refers to Carl Linnaeus. The text thus alludes very directly to Linnaeus's famous sexual system of plants: plants are anthropomorphised as lovers who marry. For Archives of the Living, the final line is especially fruitful: "los sexos, los amores, y las bodas" – "the sexes, the loves, and the weddings." It shows particularly well how botanical classification was historically narrated through human ideas of sexuality, love, and marriage. In this work, the great Enlightenment scholar and naturalist of the Canary Islands combines poetry with genuine science. He uses the form of the octava real (a stanza of eight hendecasyllabic lines with a fixed rhyme scheme) to explain the then still relatively new biological system of Carl Linnaeus. Linnaeus had recognised that plants, too, reproduce sexually. Carl von Linné

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ARCHIVES OF THE LIVING CANARY ISLANDS

NOTE ON THE RESEARCH

The Canary Islands are an archive of isolation. Volcanism, wind, drought, altitude, and the spatial separation of the islands have produced plants whose forms appear like answers to extreme living conditions. Some store water; others reduce their leaves, develop thorns, or form powerful root systems. Some exist only within an astonishingly small geographical area.

Yet the plants tell more than natural history. They carry traces of human use, Indigenous knowledge systems, colonial appropriation, healing practices, trade, and mythology. The dragon tree bleeds when it is wounded. The tabaiba protects water within its body. The cardón transforms itself into a defensive architecture. The palm becomes food, fibre, roofing, rope, and sweet sap. The tajinaste grows where volcanic ash, cold, sun, and wind make life seem almost impossible.

In Archives of the Living, these plants are therefore not understood as botanical objects. They become individuals and are given names – almost terms of endearment. Naming creates proximity. A species becomes a counterpart.

DRABARI

(Dracaena cinnabari Balf. f.

Socotra Dragon's Blood Tree)



BOTANY

Dracaena cinnabari Balf. f. belongs to the family Asparagaceae (asparagus family) and to the genus *Dracaena*. The species is endemic to the island of Socotra in Yemen. Its characteristic form is created by a robust trunk and a densely closed, repeatedly branching crown that, in older specimens, takes on the shape of an upward-opening or inverted umbrella. One of its most striking features is the deep-red resin that can be produced following injury to the plant tissue and has been known for centuries as "dragon's blood." This resin forms part of the plant's defence mechanisms and has a complex chemical composition. *Dracaena cinnabari* is not alone in this respect. The Canary Islands dragon tree, *Dracaena draco* (L.) L., also belongs to the genus *Dracaena* and produces red "dragon's blood" when injured. The two species are therefore botanically related and share this extraordinary characteristic, although their resins are not chemically identical. Studies show species-specific differences in their terpenoid profiles, and the resins of *D. cinnabari* and *D. draco* can also be distinguished analytically. It is precisely this relationship that forms DRABARI's botanical bridge to the Canary Islands. *Dracaena draco* is closely associated with Macaronesia, especially the Canary Islands and Madeira, but also occurs in north-western Africa. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) lists *D. draco* as Endangered. *Dracaena cinnabari*, in turn, is endemic to Socotra and is classified as Vulnerable. Through

evolution, adaptation, and endangerment, the two dragon trees connect island and dryland habitats that lie far apart.

HISTORY

The story of DRABARI is a story of travel – although the tree itself is bound to an exceptionally limited habitat. *Dracaena cinnabari* grows on Socotra, yet its red resin travelled far beyond the island along trade routes. “Dragon’s blood” has been traded since antiquity as a medicinal substance, a dye, and later also as an artistic material. Historical terminology must, however, be treated with caution, because over the centuries resins of different botanical origins were sold under the name “dragon’s blood.” Alongside *D. cinnabari* and, later, *D. draco*, plants of the genera *Daemonorops* or *Calamus*, *Croton*, and *Pterocarpus* also supplied red resins. Socotra and the Canary Islands meet here in a remarkable way. Socotran dragon’s blood was among the early sources of the prized material; later, the red resin of the Canarian *Dracaena draco* was traded as well. Analyses of historical artworks have identified resins from both *Dracaena* species. Dragon’s blood was used, among other things, as a red colourant in varnishes, transparent glazes, and paints. A plant is wounded. Its resin is collected. The resin leaves the island. It becomes medicine, commodity, colour, and finally a component of other images. For Archives of the Living, this transformation is especially significant: the plant is not only represented – it could itself become a material of representation.

MEDICINE

Dragon’s blood has a long history of medical and ethnomedical use. Historically, such resins were employed, among other things, in wound treatment, as astringent and haemostatic agents, and for a range of complaints. It is important to distinguish between traditional use, pharmacological experiments, and clinically demonstrated efficacy. Historical classification is further complicated by the term “dragon’s blood,” because resins from different plant species were traded under the same name. This very ambiguity is culturally significant: “dragon’s blood” denotes less a single botanical substance than an idea, formed over centuries, of an extraordinary red plant material.

PHARMACY

The red resin of different *Dracaena* species contains numerous phenolic compounds, including flavonoids and related classes of substances. Its intense colour is based on specific chromophores; at the same time, the chemical profiles of different dragon-tree species differ. In *Dracaena draco*, phenolic constituents and characteristic flavylum compounds have been investigated, among other substances. Comparative analyses also show that the terpenoid profiles of resins within the genus *Dracaena* can be

species-specific. For DRABARI this means: the “blood” of *Dracaena cinnabari* and that of *Dracaena draco* may look similar to the human eye, but chemically they are not the same. Their poetic kinship therefore has a scientific boundary. And it is precisely this boundary that makes it interesting.

MAGIC AND MYTH

The name “dragon’s blood” transforms a physiological reaction of the plant into a story. The tree is wounded – and appears to bleed. The intense red of the resin became a starting point for ideas of dragons, blood, wounding, healing, life, and death. With *Dracaena cinnabari*, the Arabic designation *dam al-akhawayn* already evokes the idea of the “blood of the brothers.” In the Canary Islands, another particularly powerful narrative developed. The Canarian *Dracaena draco* was later associated with the ancient myth of the Garden of the Hesperides and its guardian Ladon. In Greek mythology, the Hesperides guard the golden apples at the far western edge of the world. The dragon, or giant serpent, Ladon protects the garden. Ancient authors such as Hesiod, Apollonius Rhodius, and Apollodorus transmit different versions of this myth. One point, however, is crucial: *Dracaena draco* does not appear as a botanical species in these ancient texts. Only later legend-making connected the Canarian dragon tree with Ladon. According to this later story, the blood of the slain dragon falls to the earth, and dragon trees grow where its drops touch the ground. The repeatedly branching crowns of old dragons could additionally be associated with the many heads of the mythical guardian. Two archives thus overlap: the cultural memory of myth and the biological memory of the plant. The red resin connects the two plant worlds. Myth therefore does not simply “belong to the plant.” It travels, just as the resin and its meanings travel. People see a plant. They see a red liquid. They call it blood. And they begin to tell stories. Myth does not explain the plant. Rather, the plant’s unusual appearance repeatedly brings myth forth anew. The tree bleeds. The dragon dies. The story lives on.

IMAGE ANALYSIS

In the painting, *Dracaena cinnabari* can be read less as an object of botanical study than as a vulnerable body. An injury is visible on a branch in the upper part of the tree. Red resin emerges from it. It does not remain confined to the wound: the blood-red liquid seems to run down the tree and ultimately spreads across the ground around the trunk. The actual production of plant resin is pictorially intensified. A botanical phenomenon becomes a bodily experience.

The red shifts the plant out of the realm of the purely vegetal and closer to the human body. The tree suddenly has a wound. It loses “blood.” Vulnerability becomes visible. Yet vulnerability does not mean weakness here. The resin is produced precisely in

response to injury and is involved in the plant's defence processes. What appears in the painting as blood loss therefore also has a protective biological function. The red area around the tree intensifies this ambiguity. It can appear as a pool of blood, but also as the spread of a substance that has been collected, traded, used medicinally, and even turned into artistic colouring material for centuries. The wound leaves the body. It becomes landscape.

FLORILEGICAL NARRATION

DRABARI speaks of injury and survival – but also of kinship, distance, and memory. The geographical shift becomes part of the story. *Dracaena cinnabari* and *Dracaena draco* are two different species from regions that lie far apart. Nevertheless, both belong to the genus *Dracaena*, both are associated with dry island or peripheral habitats, and both produce the extraordinary red resin that humans have called “dragon’s blood.” The evolutionary relationships among tree-forming dragon trees are complex; outward similarity does not automatically mean the closest phylogenetic relationship. A connection thus emerges between Socotra and the Canary Islands that claims neither geographical identity nor botanical sameness. It is a relationship through kinship and difference. The red resin becomes the connecting medium. A wound makes visible what was previously hidden within. Injury becomes resin. Resin becomes medicine. Medicine becomes commodity. Commodity becomes colour. Colour becomes myth. Myth becomes memory. The “blood” of the tree thus links plant and human, Socotra and the Canary Islands, botany and myth, healing and trade. At the same time, DRABARI asks an uncomfortable question: why might we begin to perceive a plant as a kindred being precisely when it does something we can compare with our own bodies? It is wounded. It seems to bleed. And suddenly we recognise vulnerability. The florilegical narration, however, reverses this anthropomorphic gaze. The tree does not deserve attention because it resembles a human being. Its own form of life, its evolutionary history, and its capacity to respond to injury have value in themselves. DRABARI thus becomes a portrait of vulnerability – but equally of regeneration and of relationship across great distances. What emerges from a living being when it is wounded? And what of it remains as memory?

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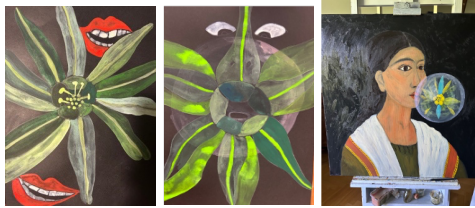
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EUBA 1, 2, 3

(Euphorbia balsamifera Aiton)



Tabaiba dulce · Balsam Spurge

BOTANY

Tabaiba dulce is a succulent, strongly branched shrub of the family Euphorbiaceae (spurge family). Its leaves appear mainly during more favourable, wetter periods and are shed during the summer dry season. In the Canary Islands it characterises dry coastal regions and volcanic landscapes in particular and can form extensive stands of tabaiba. It can be seen throughout the dry coastal zones. It grows where almost no other plant wants to grow, clings to every rock, and survives in extremely dry ravines. It may be lush green or completely bare. It creeps along the ground and adapts to the wind. And sometimes it seems to want to be a tree. Tabaiba dulce must cope without water for much of its life. During the dry season, the stem takes over photosynthesis because it contains chloroplasts. A detailed historical and ethnobotanical study is provided by F. Hernández Romero (2014), "El chicle de látex de tabaiba dulce (*Euphorbia balsamifera*) Tabay®, el chicle de las Islas Canarias." *Euphorbia balsamifera* Aiton (German: Balsam-Wolfsmilch; Spanish: Tabaiba dulce) is currently not threatened with extinction on Tenerife. Like all spurges, however, *Euphorbia balsamifera* falls under CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). This means that wild plants may not simply be dug up, taken away, or traded internationally without the required permits.

HISTORY

Tabaiba dulce is one of those plants whose significance arises not from monumentality but from closeness to everyday life. Historical sources and ethnobotanical studies document many uses of its latex and other plant parts. It therefore has an established place in Canarian popular culture and is distinguished from other, markedly more aggressive and toxic spurge species. The name, for which numerous spellings exist (tabaiva, tabaliba, tabayba, tabayua, tabayva, taybayba, thabbayba, tobaiba, tobaibo, trabaya, tubayba), comes from the old language of the Guanches, which is related to Amazigh/Berber languages. Like all *Euphorbia* species, tabaiba dulce releases milky

latex from even the slightest wound; unlike the latex of some other tabaibas, it has historically been regarded as comparatively mild. In 1945, the Canarian entrepreneur Augusto Hernández Rodríguez actually filed an official patent for the industrial production of chewing gum from the latex of *Euphorbia balsamifera*. The brand was called Tabay.

MEDICINE & PHARMACY

The latex was traditionally used in Canarian folk medicine. Such uses belong to the realm of historical or ethnobotanical knowledge and are not recommendations for self-medication. Traditional use of tabaiba dulce as a laxative has also been documented. The Indigenous population also used the plant as a kind of chewing gum. It was formerly chewed to strengthen the gums, stimulate salivation, and treat warts and corns. The stems were scored with a stone so that a few drops of sap could emerge. The following day, the small dried globules could be removed and chewed. Children made their own chewing gum from it. They collected a larger quantity of sap in a tin, made a small fire underneath, and when the sap began to simmer slightly like milk, stirred it with a stick and shaped it into a small ball. It did not taste particularly good, but was said to help against thirst when travelling for long periods in the heat. With a little sugar mixed in, it even became a small treat. The famous naturalist Viera y Clavijo (1731–1813) also described this practice: “This milk, which is abundant in all parts of this shrub, is a gum-resin that quickly coagulates in the sun; and since it then loses the slight acidity it may possess in its liquid state, our countrymen often chew it with pleasure to stimulate salivation and strengthen the teeth.” (“Esta leche, de que abundan todas las partes de este arbusto, es una goma resina, que se coagula prontamente al sol; y como entonces pierde la corta acrimonia que puede tener en su estado de líquida, la suelen mascar con gusto nuestros paisanos para desalivar y fortalecer la dentadura.”) Gaspar Frutuoso (1522–1591) had already reported in *Saudades da Terra* that the thickened sap of the tabaiba was placed in the mouth because it was believed to have a cleansing effect on the teeth (cited in *Wonderful Tenerife*, n.d.). Spurges produce latex as a complex chemical defence system. In the genus *Euphorbia*, terpenoids, lipids, proteins, and enzymes, among other substances, have been described. Composition and toxicity, however, differ considerably between species. The white plant milk appears paradoxical: visually soft, almost nourishing – chemically, however, a highly effective protective system.

MAGIC AND MYTH

With EUBA, myth arises less from a major inherited narrative than from the contrast between the plant’s properties. A plant in a landscape of scarcity carries liquid within its body. What appears barren contains something white, fluid, and hidden. The plant thus

becomes an image of preservation: not everything that looks dry from the outside is empty within.

IMAGE ANALYSIS

The succulent forms appear as reservoirs. The plant organises its body around the problem of water: absorbing, preserving, losing, and sprouting again. The work can therefore be read as a portrait of quiet resilience. Survival is enabled not by expansion but by reduction. In the two watercolours (EUBA 1, 2), mouths, or even the suggestion of a face, appear. In EUBA 3, an Indigenous woman of Tenerife (a Guanche woman) is depicted looking to the right and blowing a chewing-gum bubble in which EUBA can be seen. The Indigenous inhabitants of Tenerife called themselves "Guanches" (historically also recorded in sources as Guachinec or Guachinet). She wears a cloak with patterns associated with this culture, as well as a contemporary tattoo. Along the side of the Guanche woman's neck, a vertical sequence of geometric signs runs across the skin. The tattoo is not a reconstruction of a historically attested Guanche inscription, but an artistic imagination. It combines forms inspired by the Libyco-Berber inscriptions of the Canary Islands with a freely developed visual language that also refers to Basque language fragments. Hidden within this imaginary encounter of different ancient linguistic and sign worlds are LOR and GENTZA. The Basque lor refers to blossom and the breaking open of new life. Gentza, by contrast, is not a historically attested Guanche or Basque word for peace; within the artistic narration it is set as an imagined sign for peace. The individual signs function not merely as letters but as carriers of meaning: root and uprightness, circle and sun, movement and unfolding, connection, balance, and earth. The position on the neck is deliberate. At the place where breath, voice, and language leave the body, writing becomes directly corporeal. The signs follow the anatomy of the neck from top to bottom, forming a trace between thinking, speaking, and feeling. What could be spoken is inscribed into the skin. The tattoo thus becomes an imagined memory. It does not claim a historical connection between Basques and Guanches. Rather, it opens a poetic in-between space: What if words travelled across centuries and across the Atlantic? What if signs from different cultures encountered one another and produced new meanings in the process?

LOR – blossom. GENTZA – imagined peace.

On the Guanche woman's body, they condense into a quiet message: life should be able to unfold – in peace.

FLORILEGICAL NARRATION

EUBA speaks of preservation. It grows where water is precious. It reduces itself when conditions become difficult and begins again when they improve. Its “sweetness” is therefore not naïveté. It is a survival strategy. Perhaps resilience does not mean always appearing strong. Perhaps it means knowing what must be preserved. EUBA carries memory not in monumental forms, but in its milky sap. It stores water in a dry landscape, sheds its leaves when survival requires it, and sprouts again when conditions allow. Adaptation here does not become stasis, but the ability to begin anew again and again. For centuries, its latex was used and chewed and associated with healing or cleansing effects. The plant thus crosses the boundary between landscape and body: what flows through its vessels enters the human mouth – the place where breath, language, and memory arise. In the painting, this movement continues on the neck of the Guanche woman. The imaginary signs LOR and GENTZA connect plant and human, past and present, inherited and invented memory. Lor, the blossom, stands for life’s capacity to unfold anew even under difficult conditions; Gentza becomes an imagined word for peace – not as a historical claim, but as a wish. The tabaiba thus becomes an image of resistant tenderness: it survives drought, gives something of itself, and begins again. Its story reminds us that cultural as well as vegetal life is not passed on unchanged. It travels, transforms, and leaves traces.

Between root, skin, and language, an imaginary archive emerges: the hope that life can unfold – in peace.

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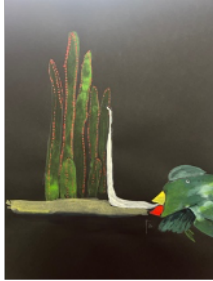
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EUCA

(Euphorbia canariensis L.)



BOTANY

EUCA is an endemic succulent spurge of the Canary Islands. Its upright, angular shoots, usually with four to six ribs, form large candelabra-like structures. Paired spines sit along the ribs. Old plants can form enormous structures covering many square metres. Their shallow roots allow them to absorb small amounts of rainfall quickly. The inflorescences, or cyathia (complete inflorescences although they look like single flowers), appear in the upper parts of the shoots; three-part capsule fruits develop from them. Although EUCA resembles a cactus, it does not belong to the cactus family.

HISTORY

Together with various tabaiba species, EUCA characterises the cardonal-tabaibal, a distinctive vegetation formation of the dry Canarian lowlands. Historically, its latex was used, among other things, in the practice known as “embarbascar”: plant parts were placed in coastal pools to temporarily impair fish and make them easier to catch. The plant thus connects landscape history with a history of local resource use.

MEDICINE & PHARMACY

Like other Euphorbia species, EUCA contains a white milky sap (latex). It protects the plant against herbivory and injury and can strongly irritate the skin and mucous membranes. Contact with the eyes and mouth should be avoided. Despite its hazards, the latex was used in folk medicine for various complaints, including externally for skin problems or toothache. Because of the irritating and toxic properties of the latex, these historical uses should under no circumstances be understood as medical recommendations. In humans it can severely irritate the skin and mucous membranes and can be toxic if ingested. The contrast between the white, milk-like fluid and its

aggressive effects makes the cardón particularly interesting from both a cultural-historical and artistic perspective.

MAGIC AND MYTH

EUCA does not possess a single dominant mythological narrative comparable to the drago. Its myth lies in its form. Many bodies grow closely beside one another. Spines mark their boundaries. Yet protection arises within this apparently forbidding system, because other plants can find refuge between the shoots. EUCA can provide climbing plants and other species with protection from herbivory. The defensive plant, of all things, becomes a protector.

IMAGE ANALYSIS

The vertical shoots against a black background form an architecture of repetition and difference. Each individual shoot has a boundary; together they create a space. EUCA can therefore be read simultaneously as body and community. The spines say: up to here. The plant's interior says: here you may stay. To the right of the seven shoots, a white liquid (white latex) appears, flowing from one of them directly into the mouth of the vieja fish, more precisely the vieja colorada (*Sparisoma cretense*), a parrotfish. In the Canary Islands, including Tenerife, it is traditionally valued as a food fish. Only the front part of its body is shown, meeting the right edge of the sheet.

FLORILEGICAL NARRATION

EUCA speaks of life under conditions of scarcity – and of boundaries. It stands where water is precious, the sun can be relentless, and the soil promises little. Yet instead of withdrawing, it grows upward and multiplies. One body becomes many bodies. Individual shoots become a community. EUCA preserves what is essential to life within. It stores water, protects its surface, and marks distance with its spines. Survival does not always require openness. Boundaries are often understood as the opposite of community. EUCA tells another story. It protects its own body – and precisely through this creates a protected space for others. Between and beneath its shoots, sheltered microhabitats arise in which other living beings can find refuge. Its many columns stand beside one another like bodies that give each other space and yet belong together. In Archives of the Living, EUCA thus becomes an image of a community that does not deny its vulnerability. Resilience here does not mean invulnerability. It arises from adaptation, protection, and connectedness. Its white milky sap carries the same ambiguity. What protects the injured plant can irritate and harm outside its body. Protection and danger, proximity and distance, lie directly beside one another. EUCA asks: Can care require a boundary? Perhaps openness does not mean having no limits.

Perhaps a “no” is not the opposite of community, but sometimes its precondition. A boundary can separate – but it can also preserve, protect, and create a space in which other life becomes possible. Not everything that protects itself closes itself off. Not everything resistant is hard. Not everything that sets a boundary excludes others. Perhaps only those who can also say no are able to protect.

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PHOCA

(Phoenix canariensis Chabaud)



Palmera canaria · Canary Island Date Palm

BOTANY

Phoenix canariensis is an endemic palm species of the Canary Islands. It is dioecious: male and female flowers grow on separate individuals. The palm can grow more than 20 metres tall and live for several centuries. Its powerful crown consists of numerous pinnate leaves that can reach several metres in length. It is one of the archipelago's most important botanical symbols and is officially the plant symbol of the Canary Islands.

Although *Phoenix canariensis* is globally classified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as Least Concern (LC), the natural populations in the Canary Islands are under particular conservation pressure. The principal threats include hybridisation with *Phoenix dactylifera*, the loss of genetically original populations, changes to natural habitats, and introduced pests such as the red palm weevil (*Rhynchophorus ferrugineus*). The conservation concern surrounding the Canary Island date palm therefore relates less to its worldwide presence – it is frequently cultivated internationally as an ornamental plant – than to preserving its genetically and ecologically distinct wild populations in the Canarian archipelago.

HISTORY

PHOCA is an extraordinary cultural archive. Archaeobotanical evidence shows that *Phoenix canariensis* was already used intensively by the Indigenous population. Its fruits served as food; fibres were processed into textiles, mats, cords, and other objects. Plant remains have been found in domestic and storage contexts. On La Gomera, a

differentiated vocabulary developed for individual plant parts and products. The sap of the trunk is called guarapo; ripe fruits are known, among other terms, as tamaras; individual leaves as pencas; and the leaf ribs as pírganos. Language itself thus becomes a plant archive.

MEDICINE

The significance of the palm lies less in a single medical application than in its comprehensive role as a resource for life: food, fibres, building material, shade, and sap. Its cultural history shows that the modern separation between useful plant, landscape plant, and cultural symbol can be applied only to a limited extent to traditional knowledge systems.

PHARMACY

The sugar-rich palm sap, guarapo, is traditionally harvested and processed. On La Gomera, the production of palm syrup, or “miel de palma,” remains part of the cultural heritage today. The Government of the Canary Islands explicitly identifies the extraction of guarapo and palm honey as part of the species’ economic and cultural significance.

MAGIC AND MYTH

The palm does not need an invented myth. Its actual history is strong enough. People eat its fruits. They weave its leaves. They build with its fibres. They obtain sweet sap from its trunk. They give its individual parts their own names. In this way, a plant becomes part of a language. And when this knowledge disappears, it is not only botanical diversity that dies. A part of human memory disappears as well.

IMAGE ANALYSIS

Against a deep-black background rises a Canary Island date palm – PHOCA. Its powerful, scale-textured trunk forms the central axis of the image, while the green fronds fan out above. Orange fruit clusters glow among the dark green foliage. On the right, a stylised phoenix nestles against the trunk. Its grey-black body seems to merge with the structure of the palm. Red-orange flames emerge from its open beak. Further forms of fire accompany the trunk and finally break through the horizontal ground line: below the visible landscape, a single flame continues into the black depth. The connection is both pictorial and linguistic: Phoenix is not only the genus name of the palm, but immediately evokes the mythical phoenix – the bird that burns and rises anew from its own ashes. The botanical designation thus gives rise to a second, mythological level of narration. Fire does not appear solely as destruction. It becomes a sign of transformation, renewal, and return. Palm and phoenix merge into a single being: plant becomes bird, foliage becomes plumage, and the trunk seems to form a body poised

between rootedness and departure. The flame below the surface of the earth is particularly significant. It carries the fire into the invisible realm where the roots lie. Renewal is therefore not told as a superficial fresh start. It comes from depth – from origin, memory, and what remains preserved beneath the visible surface. In the context of Archives of the Living, PHOCA thus becomes an image of the paradoxical simultaneity of endangerment and persistence. The phoenix does not promise invulnerability. It must pass through fire in order to emerge anew. The central question of the painting might therefore be: What must be preserved so that, after loss, something can grow again?

FLORILEGICAL NARRATION

PHOCA speaks of living on. Its botanical name, *Phoenix canariensis*, already carries a story that takes form in the image. The phoenix appears between the palm's fronds and trunk as though it were not a guest of the plant, but part of it. Plant and bird merge. One is rooted; the other could fly. Both speak of the capacity to continue living after loss. Yet PHOCA does not tell a simple story of immortality. Even a plant that grows worldwide in gardens, avenues, and cities can become vulnerable where its own history began. In the Canary Islands, the question is not simply whether *Phoenix canariensis* continues to exist, but whether its original populations, genetic distinctiveness, and relationships with its habitat are preserved. The fire-breathing phoenix carries this ambiguity into the image. Fire can destroy, but it also stands for transformation. The flames move along the plant's body and reach beneath the earth. Where we can no longer see, something seems to keep glowing. Perhaps this is precisely where the archive of the living lies. Not everything that seems lost has disappeared. Memory can persist beneath the surface – in seeds, roots, genes, landscapes, stories, and names. Yet return does not happen by itself. It requires conditions in which new life can become possible. PHOCA therefore does not ask whether life is immortal. It asks what we must preserve so that life can renew itself. The phoenix rises from the ashes. The palm grows from the earth. Between them lies the responsibility to ensure that return remains possible.

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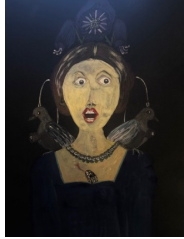
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TAPI

(Echium auberianum Webb & Berthel.)



Tajinaste picante

BOTANY

Tajinaste picante is the commonly used Canarian name for *Echium auberianum*, an endemic species of Tenerife. Its habitat is extremely limited: the species grows in the island's high-elevation zones, predominantly above about 2,000 metres, including Montaña Blanca, Minas de San José, and other areas of the Cañadas del Teide. Individual plants can even occur at elevations between 3,000 and 3,500 metres. It colonises open volcanic surfaces, scree, scoria, and lapilli with sparse vegetation cover. *Echium auberianum* is a high-elevation endemic found exclusively on Tenerife; the Spanish Ministry for the Ecological Transition describes the species as rare and, in a recent image description from Teide National Park, as threatened and very scarce.

HISTORY

TAPI initially tells a different story from the palm or the dragon tree. There is no comparable grand history of trade. No world-famous substance. No monumental age. Its significance arises precisely from its limitation. A plant exists only on one island. And within that island, only in an extraordinary high-altitude zone.

MEDICINE

No established traditional medicinal use of *Echium auberianum* stands at the centre of its documented significance. Precisely for this reason, a medical history should not be attributed to the plant merely because other members of the genus *Echium* have been used ethnomedically. This absence is itself important: not every plant must be useful to humans in order to deserve protection.

PHARMACY

From a pharmacological perspective, too, findings concerning the genus *Echium* should be distinguished from findings specifically documented for *Echium auberianum*. In the

context of Archives of the Living, the plant is therefore not legitimised through potential pharmacological usefulness. Its value lies first of all in its existence.

MAGIC AND MYTH

TAPI has no known major myth either. But perhaps its habitat generates a new one: a small blue flower grows in a landscape we tend to associate with fire, lava, stone, and ash. The volcano stands for destruction. The blossom answers in blue.

IMAGE ANALYSIS

At the centre of the oil painting, a female figure appears frontally against an almost black background. Her face and neck emerge brightly from the darkness. Her wide-open eyes look directly at the viewer; her mouth is open. The expression remains deliberately ambiguous: it may convey astonishment as much as alarm, a call, a scream, or the moment just before speaking. It is precisely this openness that generates strong tension. The figure does not seem passively portrayed, but rather to be reacting to something. Above her head appears the blue flower of *Echium auberianum* Webb & Berthel., the *tajinaste picante*. The plant is not naturalistically embedded in its habitat, but detached from it and directly associated with the human figure. It can be read as headdress, crown, thought, or sign. Through its position, it seems almost to grow out of the woman's head. The botanical portrait and the human portrait overlap. This connection gains another dimension through the biology of the plant. *Echium auberianum* occurs naturally only on Tenerife. Its populations are concentrated in the island's high-elevation zones, usually above 2,000 metres. The species grows there on poorly developed volcanic soils, particularly scoria, lapilli (small pieces of rock ejected during a volcanic eruption, approximately 2 to 64 millimetres in diameter – larger than volcanic ash but smaller than volcanic bombs or blocks), and pumice. Its leaves form a low basal rosette and are covered with long bristles; the Spanish environmental ministry describes this hairiness as an adaptation against excessive water loss. An elongated blue inflorescence rises from this resilient rosette. Two pigeons sit to the left and right of the head. Their approximately symmetrical positions frame the face like two companions or guardians. Yet the centuries-old cultural legibility of the pigeon as a symbol of peace stands in disturbing contrast, within the painting, to a highly contemporary technological experiment.

The Russian neurotechnology company Neiry is developing so-called bio-drones under the designation PJN-1: living pigeons implanted with neural interfaces. According to the company, selected brain regions are electrically stimulated in order to influence the bird's preference for a particular flight direction. The animals also carry electronic modules and camera technology. Initial test flights were announced in 2025; broader

claims about performance and operational readiness have so far come largely from the company itself and should therefore be treated with appropriate caution.

This fundamentally changes the meaning of the two birds. The pigeon remains a symbol of peace while simultaneously becoming an image of a technologically manipulable living being. Freedom and control suddenly inhabit the same body. Against this background, the woman's open mouth acquires another possible meaning. Is it wonder at the plant? A scream at the sight of the pigeons? Or an invitation to the viewer to take a position? The painting gives no answer. It holds the moment in which beauty and threat, nature and technology, autonomy and human control collide.

FLORILEGICAL NARRATION

TAPI begins with a plant, but leads far beyond botany. *Echium auberianum* is a child of an exceptionally restricted habitat. The species occurs naturally only on Tenerife and is adapted to the extreme conditions of the volcanic highlands. Drought, intense sunlight, strong temperature fluctuations, and barren volcanic soils have helped shape its form. The plant thus becomes a living memory of its place.

The two pigeons introduce a completely different relationship between humans and non-human life into the image. The Russian neurotechnology company Neiry is experimenting with so-called bio-drones: living pigeons implanted with neural interfaces. Electrical stimulation of specific brain regions is intended to influence their direction of flight; in addition, the animals can carry electronic components and cameras. Possible civilian applications mentioned include infrastructure inspection, environmental observation, and search-and-rescue tasks. Yet the same technology inevitably raises the question of military use. A steerable living being that can fly, navigate, observe, and carry technical components possesses characteristics that could in principle also be relevant for reconnaissance, surveillance, or other military purposes. It is precisely this possibility that makes the choice of the pigeon in the painting so disturbing. The cultural symbol of peace suddenly carries within it the possibility of war. Free flight becomes steerable. The animal becomes a carrier of technology. The living being risks becoming an instrument. TAPI thus brings two very different concepts of the living into confrontation. TAPI is protected because its unique form of life, developed over long evolutionary time, is meant to be preserved. The pigeon, by contrast, is technologically altered in order to make its natural abilities available for human purposes. Between plant and animal stands the human being. The human view of nature therefore appears contradictory: we admire it, study it, and attempt to protect it – while at the same time controlling, changing, and instrumentalising it. The pigeon intensifies this contradiction because it has represented peace for centuries. Of all bodies, its body can now become a biological-technological system whose possible applications extend into surveillance and war. The florilegical narration thus expands the question of species

conservation into an ethics of the living: Is it enough to preserve life from disappearance? Or does protection also mean recognising its autonomy and its right not to be fully available to us? TAPI places plant, animal, human, and technology within a shared field of tension. The endemic plant carries the memory of its volcanic habitat. The pigeon carries our cultural idea of peace – and at the same time the frightening possibility of its reversal. Perhaps this is the central paradox of the painting: “The symbol of peace could become an instrument of war.” And with this, TAPI asks an even more fundamental question: “What right does a living being have not merely to survive, but to remain itself?” TAPI and the two pigeons mark two poles. The plant embodies a form of life whose particularity has emerged precisely from its autonomous evolutionary history. The bio-drone, by contrast, embodies the idea that a living organism can be technologically rewritten and its body functionalised. The woman’s frightened or astonished expression lies exactly between them. Perhaps TAPI therefore ultimately asks not only how we can preserve threatened plants, but something far more fundamental: How much life of its own do we allow the living? And perhaps preservation means not only protecting a species from disappearance, but allowing it to remain what it has become through its own history.

The plant carries the memory of place. The woman carries the memory of culture. The pigeons carry the contradiction of the present: symbols of peace – turned into instruments of control.

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THE ISLAND AS ARCHIVE

Together, PHOCA, DRABARI, EUBA, EUCA, and TAPI do not form a botanical inventory.

They form a web of relationships.

PHOCA – Phoenix canariensis – survival, sustenance, and transmission. DRABARI – Dracaena cinnabari – blood, injury, and regeneration. EUBA – Euphorbia balsamifera – preservation, healing, and use. EUCA – Euphorbia canariensis – boundary, resistance, and protection. TAPI – Echium auberianum, tajinaste picante – intrinsic value, autonomy, and control.

Together they tell of a landscape in which life emerges under conditions that simultaneously shape it, limit it, and make it unique. Volcanism destroys – and creates new ground. Isolation generates uniqueness – and vulnerability. Drought forces storage. Altitude forces adaptation. Evolution responds with forms that could arise only from the particular conditions of this island world.

Yet the island is not only an ecological archive. Plants are named by humans, collected, eaten, used medicinally, cultivated, protected, and furnished with stories. They become food, remedy, material, symbol, and memory. Natural history, cultural history, and personal history overlap within them.

PHOCA tells of the Canary Island date palm and of how a plant can provide food, material, shade, and knowledge. Its uses connect generations and make the plant a bearer of cultural practices.

Through the red “dragon’s blood,” DRABARI leads to ideas of injury and healing, myth and medicine. The red sap makes the plant body appear almost human: the plant can be wounded, it “bleeds” – and closes its wound.

EUBA tells of a plant whose milky sap was used, preserved, and transformed into everyday knowledge. In it, survival in a dry landscape meets the human capacity to observe and transmit the properties of a plant.

EUCA makes protection physically visible. The columnar, defensive growth of the Canary Island spurge creates boundaries and places of refuge. Protection appears here not as passivity, but as an active strategy of life.

With TAPI, the perspective finally shifts. *Echium auberianum* lives in the extreme volcanic highlands of Tenerife. In the painting, the plant is accompanied by two pigeons. The traditional symbol of peace encounters a disturbing technological present: experiments that attempt to turn living pigeons into steerable “bio-drones” by means of implanted neural interfaces raise the question of how far human control over other living beings should extend. Conceivable applications of such technologies can in principle also reach into the domains of surveillance, reconnaissance, and war.

The symbol of peace could become an instrument of war. TAPI thus extends the story of the threatened plant into a broader ethics of the living: protection may mean more than preserving a species from disappearance. It may also mean granting a living being a right to autonomy and to not being entirely available for use.

PHOCA, DRABARI, EUBA, EUCA, and TAPI therefore tell of five different relationships between human, plant, animal, and landscape: using, remembering, healing, protecting, and controlling.

The florilegical narration of Archives of the Living therefore asks not only: Which plants are disappearing? It asks: Which relationships disappear with them? Which forms of knowledge are lost? What happens when relationship turns into control? And which stories must we tell so that we begin to perceive the living once again as a counterpart – and not merely as a resource?

RESEARCH NOTE

The botanical, historical, medical, pharmacological, and cultural-historical information in this section of the catalogue was assembled as part of the artistic research for Archives of the Living and was researched, structured, and supplemented with the assistance of ChatGPT.

The texts make no claim to completeness and do not replace specialist botanical, medical, or pharmacological literature. Historical healing practices and ethnobotanical uses are presented exclusively in their cultural-historical context and do not constitute recommendations for use.

Rather, the research follows the artist's curiosity: it asks what stories open up behind a plant once we begin to pay attention to it. Scientific findings stand alongside history, mythology, folk knowledge, personal associations, and artistic interpretation.

Readers are invited to follow these traces further – and to become curious themselves.