

# LATER PREHISTORIC MONUMENTS OF NORTHERN PORTUGAL: SOME REMARKS\*

by

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**Summary:** This text deals with prehistoric “monuments” in the strict sense, structures which are architecturally prominent in the landscape. We shall be discussing burial mounds, enclosures with stelae or those surrounded by walls or by stone platforms. We are clearly excluding all sites which, although monuments in a wider sense, do not correspond to the above characteristics (rock-art sites, open air settlements, non-monumental graves, dwelling – or storage – places in rock shelters, etc.).

These “monuments” are looked at from the double perspective of their relationship with the landscape, and of their role as arenas of social dispute and consolidation of identity.

**Key-words:** monument; enclosure; territory.

**Resumo:** Neste texto serão abordados os “monumentos” pré-históricos numa aceção estrita: construções com proeminência arquitectónica na paisagem. Serão sobretudo mencionados sepulcros sob “tumulus”, recintos com estelas e ainda recintos murados ou cercados por plataformas pétreas. Estão obviamente excluídos todos os lugares que sendo, numa perspectiva mais ampla, também “monumentos”, não correspondem às características acima referidas (lugares com arte rupestre, povoados abertos, sepulturas planas, lugares de habitação ou de armazenamento em abrigos sob rocha, etc.)

Os referidos “monumentos” serão abordados na dupla perspectiva da sua relação com a paisagem e enquanto arenas de disputa social e de consolidação da identidade.

**Palavras-chave:** monumento; recinto; território.

## 1. BEFORE THE FIRST MONUMENTS

No “monuments”, in the sense of structures intended to be “read” in the landscape, have been recognised from before the middle of the 5th millennium BC.

From the end of the 6th millennium and the first half of the 5th millennium BC we can recognise signs of short-term use of rock-shelters or open air settlements by wandering groups of hunter-gatherers who also made use of some

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elements of a farming economy. The importance of domesticated animals and plants in the broad spectrum of their economies remains to be ascertained – we cannot yet characterise the economic and social profile of the people who frequented shelters such as Buraco de Pala (IV) and Fraga d’Aia, or open air settlements such as Lavra (Sanches, 1977) and Prazo (Coixão, 1977).

It is possible that some groups were responsible for engravings or paintings on rocks, either in shelters or in the open air. If they were, they do not seem to have significantly altered the previous, basically Mesolithic, landscape<sup>1</sup>, thus maintaining a certain continuity with their predecessors.

## 2. THE FIRST MONUMENTS

**2.1.** The first rupture with the Early Neolithic landscape is shown by the appearance of the earliest burials under “tumuli”, from the second half of the 5th millennium BC (Jorge V., 1989). In this phase they consist of a small megalithic chamber, containing one or two bodies, which was closed immediately after the burial. These graves could have been constructed up to the beginning of the 4th millennium BC. In some areas in northern Portugal there were also pit burials or non-monumental graves (without any defining structure), likewise covered by a mound.

These first monuments are found in upland plateau areas of varying altitude, with light, poor soils. They are isolated or in small groups, thinly dotting the landscape. The builders of these monuments are still wandering groups, but their mobility increasingly includes elements of agricultural and pastoral life. From this results a gradual restriction of the territory of subsistence, which would inevitably cause social readjustments. The appearance of the first barrows corresponds with the creation of a new concept of landscape: the cultural emergence of a territory, marked by small mounds which distinguish it, both socially and symbolically.

Regarding these earliest burial sites we can make the following comments:

- Firstly, the closed nature of the burials implies a break between the world of the living and that of the dead. After the closing of the barrows, there could have been rituals around the monuments, but not inside them. The link between the living and the dead is physically tenuous. We do not know how many people could participate in these ceremonies, but given that they took place in the area around the tomb, they could in theory have been accessible, in this initial phase,

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<sup>1</sup> We certainly know little at present of the Mesolithic landscape of northern Portugal. We are beginning to catch glimpses of the Upper Palaeolithic landscape at the River Cóa, which, from the symbolic viewpoint, may not have been very different from what followed it in the same region.

to a varied group of “spectators”.

– Secondly, these tombs were to survive in the landscape for thousands of years. That is to say, they are likely to have attracted ceremonial activities of very diverse types, set in very different social and symbolic contexts. Throughout the period in which they acted as cultural markers of the landscape, these monuments surely served multiple purposes of social cohesion. It is worth remembering here the prolonged lifespan of the megalithic necropolis of the Serra da Aboboreira (Jorge V, 1991), from the end of the 5th millennium to the middle of the 2nd millennium BC. Throughout this time the earliest tombs must have continued to function, side by side with the appearance of new burial mounds and new rituals, as poles structuring successive conceptions of the relationship between the living and the dead.

In summary, the first monuments of the late 5th millennium BC would normally have continued to function beyond their original use, not only as the obvious remains of the past, but also as symbols, constantly reinterpreted to help legitimise a succession of later power structures.

**2.2.** During the first half of the fourth millennium BC there appeared burial mounds of larger size, with a passage and a forecourt area. There were also single-chamber tombs with a passage within the mound. These monuments could appear either in existing necropoli (such as, for example, the dolmens of Chã de Parada 1, Chã das Arcas or Madorras 1) (Jorge V. 1989; Cruz, 1995), or in new areas: transit zones, on lower ground or even near the coast. In this last case, it is possible to imagine that some of the evolved megalithic tombs of the area (e.g. Barrosa, Eireira) were built slightly later – in the 2nd half of the 4th millennium BC – although we lack irrefutable data to confirm this hypothesis<sup>2</sup>.

All the passage graves originated in the 4th millennium BC, and their builders were the first farmers and pastoralists in northern Portugal. That is, theirs was a productive economy, although still fragile and technically embryonic.

We can make a few brief observations on these monuments:

– Firstly, the new monumental architecture links two novel aspects: *collective* burial and a new relationship between the living and the “ancestors”. In fact, the passage grave with forecourt, during its period of use (which is not always easy to determine), allows an exchange between the two worlds. The forecourt is the ante-chamber of an open structure (provisionally open, certainly), inside which were held burials accompanied by diverse (and unknown) rituals. The new structures therefore take on, internally, an explicitly polyvalent character, at the

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<sup>2</sup> We await with interest the publication of the studies by Eduardo Jorge Lopes da Silva (Portucalense University, Porto) on these coastal graves.

same time sepulchral and ritual. The architectural structure is the stage for various practices involving the bones and belongings of the ancestors. In fact with this architecture, the first “rituals of the ancestors” were born into a perspective which necessarily involved establishing and perceiving one’s territory in a different way.

In these “open” tombs, with interiors sometimes richly decorated with engravings and paintings (a fully constructed prehistoric setting) there occurred, paradoxically, secret acts, performed and understood by only *some members* of the group.

– Secondly, during the period when they were in continual use – which may have varied, but which could never have exceeded a few centuries – these open monuments required considerable attention from the groups who kept them open. They also became genuine foci of social cohesion, partly due to the need for constant help and surveillance by the local community. Other contemporary monuments – standing stones or circles<sup>3</sup> – could also have required an appreciable effort of maintenance, but none are so fragile and at the same time so necessary. The passage grave was the repository of the ancestors, within and around which the living permanently remade their identity. It was vital that the structure which actualised the link between the living and their forebears should be kept in working order.

– Finally, we must recall that these tombs did not spring up singly in the landscape – they would have nearly always “cohabited” with other nearby monuments: closed tombs, standing stones, cromlechs, etc. Throughout the 4th millennium BC, monuments of different ages and functions interacted in many ways. In a necropolis such as Aboboreira, the passage grave Chã de Parada 1, built early in the 4th millennium, formed part of a system which included all the other existing barrows. Taken together, they formed a living “body”, fulfilling the need to transform a “socially qualified landscape” into a “stable territory with identity”. In this sense, all the monuments at Aboboreira at the beginning of the 4th millennium BC not only coexisted in a place, but were also culturally contemporary.

### 3. MONUMENTS OF THE 3RD AND THE FIRST HALF OF THE 2ND MILLENNIA BC

One of the most important characteristics of this period, in contrast with the preceding one, is the variety of types of occupied sites. Almost everywhere at this

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<sup>3</sup> The publication of these studies, by Eduardo Jorge da Silva (Portucalense Univ.), is eagerly awaited. The attribution of dates to these monuments is our own, and should be understood merely as a working hypothesis.

time we find settlements with very diverse characteristics – on high ground, on hillsides or even on plains – forming part of extremely varied ecosystems and social contexts. Furthermore, in the second half of the 3rd millennium BC a considerable number of bell-beaker vessels were introduced into tombs of Neolithic origin (Cruz, 1992), which indicates a marked symbolic remodelling of older burial places. This remodelling is clearly seen in the necropolis of the Serra da Aboboreira. Here, between the end of the 3rd millennium and the early 2nd millennium BC, tombs were built within the megalithic tradition, such as Chã do Carvalhal 1 (Cruz, 1992), while other barrows, such as Outeiro de Gregos 1 (Jorge V., 1989), were constructed quite differently, not being seen as imposing features in the landscape. At the end of this period there is a trend towards non-monumental graves for individuals, such as those in the necropolis of Tapado de Caldeira (Jorge S., 1996), dug in completely new areas away from the traditional necropolises.

It is in this context of diverse sites, accompanied by a considerable growth in the number of sacred places containing examples of rock art – not dealt with here – that we shall try to understand the development of some monuments of the Chalcolithic and the early and middle Bronze Ages.

**3.1.** We may begin by looking at a sacred site with anthropomorphic stelae, Cabeço da Mina (Sousa, 1996; Jorge S., in press *a*). This monument stands on a small mound rising above a fertile alluvial valley, on the right bank of the Douro. At the top of the mound is a sub-circular(?) stone enclosure with stelae of Mediterranean affinity (D'Anna, 1998). The date of this site is uncertain – somewhere between the mid-4th millennium and the mid-3rd millennium BC. (Jorge S., in press *b*). The stelae do not have arms, only facial features and elements of adornment or clothing.

What is new in this monument? The recent discovery of cromlechs, probably dating from the 4th millennium BC<sup>4</sup>, leads us to suppose that enclosures of standing stones, which have up till now been relatively unknown in northern Portugal, date back at least to the Late Neolithic, as in other areas of the Iberian Peninsula. However, the Cabeço da Mina site shows two innovations when compared to these other monuments. The first is iconographic: the stelae belong to a group of Iberian stelae of undoubtedly Mediterranean style, and this presupposes a degree of super-regional interaction unusual in this region before the early Chalcolithic, that is before the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC. Secondly, the positioning of this sacred place, in the middle of an alluvial plane, a meeting point in prehistoric times of many tracks which crossed the Douro and its tributaries, lends strength to the idea that this monument acted as the focus of a culturally emergent

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<sup>4</sup> See note 3.

territory. The open enclosure, as a formal and conspicuous space in the valley, seems in its prominence to herald other types of enclosure which were to appear during the 3rd millennium BC.

**3.2.** In fact, from the 3rd millennium BC there are monumental sites in different areas of northern and central Portugal, probably serving a variety of functions. All these sites are distinguished to some extent by a dominant position in the landscape.

In some cases, like that of Castro de Palheiros, (Sanches, 1997), or further south, in Beira Alta, Castro de Santiago (Valera, 1997a) and Fraga da Pena (Valera, 1997b), the sites were constructed on the top of cliffs or crags: the visibility of these geographical features was used to attract attention to the monumental nature of the enclosures which crowned them. Castro de Santiago and Castro de Palheiros were built in the 3rd millennium BC, corresponding to the Chalcolithic in these regions, while Fraga da Pena dates from between the end of the 3rd millennium and the middle of the 2nd millennium, which is the Early and Middle Bronze Age of the region.

Apart from these sites, which maximise and take advantage of the visibility and probable sacred nature of existing rock-formations, other places functioning as monuments are located on the spurs of hillsides, also dominating the surrounding landscape. Examples of this are Castelo Velho (Jorge S., 1993; 1994; 1996 in press *b*) and Castanheiro do Vento<sup>5</sup>. These sites also made use of their dominant position, but here small sub-circular enclosures, marked out by impressive stone terraces, were built where no previous structures existed.

Castelo Velho, the only example studied in detail so far, was conceived at the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC (Middle Chalcolithic) and was maintained, following the same plan, up to around 1300 BC (Middle Bronze Age) – it is thus a particularly long-lived monument.

Traditionally, any sites with the characteristics we have mentioned were considered as walled or even fortified settlements (Jorge S., 1994), but today we may question this generalised interpretation. In fact, new excavations at Castelo Velho, where a ritual structure with human bones has been discovered (Antunes & Cunha, 1998), and other structures of a ritual nature with animal remains have also been identified, have recently obliged us to revise the original interpretation of this site (Jorge S., in press *b*).

Although we cannot generalise from the possibly specific function of Castelo Velho to other monumental sites, it seems that in this case we have a specialised place for ceremonial activities connected to society's dealings with the

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<sup>5</sup> The first archaeological investigations of this site are planned for 1998, to be carried out by a team led by Vítor Oliveira Jorge (University of Porto).

dead and to the symbolic representation of acts linked to survival. Furthermore, at this site the terraces are on the least accessible side of the hill, which goes against any argument suggesting a purely defensive function for the site.

These two types of monumental sites – walled enclosures either crowning prominent rock formations or else on spurs of hillsides – lead us to make the following comments:

**1.** The high-level enclosures mentioned here occupied new and outstanding locations, making good use of their visibility and inter-visibility from a distance: this is particularly clear in sites on rock-formations. Thus the landscape of the 3rd millennium BC began to be symbolically marked in a much more comprehensive way than before. This apparent contradiction – increasingly sedentary societies placing human marks on wider landscapes – is worth reflecting on.

**2.** We should question the function of the prominent position of these sites. What was the use of these monuments placed at “viewpoints”?

**3.** The problem of the function of these sites can be discussed in very broad terms. Whether what we have are walled settlements, ceremonial precincts or any other type of site, it is always possible to justify their foundation and monumental structure by the economic and social patterns of the time.

We must not forget that it was only from the 3rd millennium BC (above all in the Late Chalcolithic and Early and Middle Bronze Age) that a farming economy became established here. Economic growth led to demographic pressure, and the setting up of new and necessarily more limited territories encouraged the spatial delineation of boundaries (Jorge S., 1994; 1996). The proliferation, from the 3rd millennium onwards, of many types of sites (not only monumental ones in the strict sense used here) is certainly a sign that new methods of communication were being used in the setting up of new territories.

Enclosures on high ground, whatever their specific function, punctuated this first agricultural and pastoral landscape. They can be understood as symbolic “heads” of new settlement networks, involving new concepts of time and space. They are the spatial markers of a newly-cultivated country.

**4.** If we wish to narrow the scale of the enquiry and to determine the function of each one of these monuments, we must investigate their specific contexts. However, it is wise to bear in mind the following:

– It seems to us erroneous to invoke the traditional split between tomb, settlement and sacred site, fixing watertight functional boundaries for each archaeological category. Nor, as Bradley points out (1998, p. 150), does it make sense to speak of “ritual landscapes” versus “domestic landscapes”, because such alleged landscapes in fact have a global meaning, one which must be decoded as a whole.

– It will be useful here to try to go beyond the neo-evolutionary view which sees the 4th millennium landscape as principally “ritual” and that of the 3rd and

2nd millennia as primarily “domestic”. In other words, the latter is seen as a place in which the settlement, with its multiplicity of functions, fulfilled the socially cohesive role which had been performed in the 4th millennium by the tomb. If, in a wider sense, all sites are “monuments”, we should all the more reasonably designate the place where a group of farmers and herders live – where they construct their social strategies for daily survival – as a “centre of life”. Furthermore, some settlements were transformed into monuments, in the sense used in this text.

– When looking into each enclosure to find its specific use, we have to be prepared for the obvious: the agricultural landscape produced new fields for social dispute and affirmation of identity, and these may at first be difficult for archaeologists to recognise. Artefacts traditionally classified as domestic (loom weights, clay pots, grinding stones) or structures (hearths, walls, paving) can coexist here, used in the most varied ways. The identification of a specific social context, in the absence of recognised distinguishing elements, takes time and requires the resources for a thorough programme of investigation.

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