

INTERPRETING THE “MEGALITHIC ART” OF WESTERN IBERIA: SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

by

Vitor Oliveira Jorge*

Abstract: This paper discusses briefly certain concepts as: prehistoric art, the megalithic phenomenon, megalithic art, and archaeological interpretation. It stresses the need to look at “megalithic art” as a structured whole, integrated in a certain kind of architecture, and not just as a series of particular “motifs”. The most important “themes” of that art in Western Iberia are: the “skin skeuomorph”, the “thing” and some subquadrangular motifs whose symbolic role may have been equally important. Anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures are considered to be minor elements of the megalithic conceptual world. We discuss the relationship between the themes and their localization in the general architecture of the megaliths, which shows that the most sacred zone of the chamber was the area near the backstone, at the far end of the passage grave, and also that, inside the megalithic construction the left side is more charged with signs than the right, suggesting another aspect of the topographic symbolism.

Key-words: “Megalithic art”; structural analysis; interpretation.

Resumo: Neste artigo são brevemente discutidos os conceitos de arte pré-histórica, megalitismo, arte megalítica e interpretação arqueológica. Depois, enfatiza-se a necessidade de olhar a “arte megalítica” como um todo estruturado, articulado com uma arquitetura, e não como uma série de “motivos” desgarrados. Aborda-se finalmente os “temas” que se julga serem os mais interessantes da “arte megalítica” da Península Ibérica: a “pele esticada de animal”; a chamada “coisa”; alguns motivos de forma sub-quadrangular, que tiveram provavelmente um papel simbólico tão importante como os anteriores. Antropomorfos e zoomorfos parecem ser temas menores do “universo conceptual” megalítico. Chama-se ainda a atenção para a relação motivos-arquitetura, relação essa que sugere que a parte mais sagrada do megalito seria a laje de cabeceira e zonas anexas do fundo da câmara. Por outro lado, parece também ter havido uma distinção simbólica entre o lado esquerdo e o direito (em relação ao observador que entrasse no interior do túmulo), sendo o primeiro mais carregado de símbolos do que o segundo.

Palavras-chave: “Arte megalítica”; análise estrutural; interpretação.

* Institute of Archaeology, Faculty of Arts, University of Porto, Portugal.

INTRODUCTION

Iberia is one of the world's richest areas in prehistoric architecture and art; in a short text like this, we are forced to choose just one of the many possible lines of approach of such a diversified subject-matter. On the other hand, the use of the English language as a vehicle to a wider audience – an imposition of the contemporary scientific mode of production – constrains us to reason in a mental universe that is completely different from our own, which tends to reduce some more or less complex ideas to a self-imposed schematism. We hope that the reader will bear this in mind.

Before reaching the core of the paper, we need to deal briefly with four difficult, if not ambiguous, concepts: prehistoric art, the megalithic phenomenon, megalithic art and, finally, interpretation. We must also expose some theoretical and methodological underpinnings of what we believe to be a fruitful perspective of the so-called “megalithic art”.

By convention, we accept as a prehistoric piece of “art” any graphic manifestation (painted, carved, etc.), reliefs or “sculptures” of every sort, or any built monument, regardless of whether or not they were considered to be “art” by the culture that produced them, and regardless of the aesthetic properties they display today to a contemporary observer.

“Megalithism” is an umbrella which covers a wide range of materialities. To approach them, some colleagues seem to be satisfied with the term, accepting a very general, broad unity, typical of western Europe throughout the Neolithic and part of the Bronze Age. Others think that, although the word continues to be used, it is more a source of confusion than a clear concept: its unity has been superseded by the progress of research.

When we consider so-called “megalithic art”, if we leave aside the architecture (including burial chambers, standing stones, precincts, etc.), and the “mobiliary art” of passage graves and other tombs often called “megalithic”, we are left with the carvings and/or paintings made on the orthostats of passages, chambers, kerbs, etc. We can admit that this reality is a residual one, the only one to have resisted erosion out of all the rich imagery that have existed all over Atlantic Europe. In any case, when we look at the three traditional main focuses of “megalithic art” in the western area of the continent (Ireland, Brittany, Iberia), it is their differences and not their similarities that appear to be most relevant. Thus, the very consistency of a “megalithic art” seems to be rather tenuous, if not downright misleading.

Interpretation, in archaeology, deals with the idea of getting sound information from observations made in the material world. Being a social (historical, anthropological) science, this means that we aim to reach conclusions about hu-

man intentional behaviour. That is, we try to attain past social and individual contexts of action and thought from the analysis of contemporary materialities. This aim, in order to be successful, must consider some preliminary, albeit obvious, points.

Being intentional and auto-reflexive, all human behaviour is ambiguous. People may do apparently similar things with totally different ideas in mind; also, human action may have subconscious and even unconscious motivations. Nevertheless, the consequences of one’s behaviour are often unpredictable, particularly when society is relatively open to creative innovation. When people act, they transform the material world around them; but that built environment in turn acts upon people’s social and individual milieu. This interaction, at a given point of space and time, is never completely “free”; it never starts from zero. People construct their social reality and, at the same time, are constantly constructed by it. Every human being, throughout his/her lifetime, has always been encapsulated in a series of given constraints – environmental, social, ideological, technical – which are not passively accepted as such. At a conscious and, also, at an unconscious level, individuals and societies have always tried *to make sense* of their particular trajectories.

In archaeology, we may adopt a predominantly holistic view of society, establishing transhistorical regularities, if not laws, of human behaviour independent of space and time. This line of thought gives great importance to environmental preconditions and underlines the general uniformity of human minds and behaviour. If we could establish a series of connections, of causal linear relations, between actions and their material expression, then the interpretation of the so-called “archaeological record” would be relatively easy. The circulation of meaning between objects and ideas would be assumed to be biunivocal i.e. mutually supportive.

If we look at human and social reality from the opposite side, we tend to stress the importance of contextual conditions and the capacity of human agency to produce ambiguous, diversified action and meaning. People live in a world not of things, but of symbols. From this point of view, similarity in form must always be submitted to careful scrutiny, because it does not imply similarity in function, and above all it does not guarantee uniformity in *intention*. As a human science, archaeology deals with intentional behaviour, not with some kind of predetermined series of actions and reactions between individuals and community, and between each of those and the built environment.

What we call “art” today is the domain, *par excellence*, of ambiguity, or, in other words, of polisemy. The richness of an “artistic” object can be seen in the number of different interpretations it attracts; its quality depends on its power of serving as a basis for re-creation. Anyone who looks at a picture in a exhibition

does not try to figure out just what the author tried to “communicate”, but rather to construct his/her own vision of that particular picture, according to his/her previous private experience.

Now the point is: when we think about “prehistoric art”, or “exotic art”, or “rock art”, may we apply the same individualistic notion of art’s fruition, as set out above? Probably not; we are dealing with other categories of thought. The modern, western notion of art would have been completely alien to other cultures. Moreover, in a pre-literate community the social representation of what the “artist” does may vary enormously, from time to time and from place to place. A set of graphisms made on a rock surface may have been the support for diversified mythological narratives, and no one can be sure that a particular version is “better” than another. There is no fixed meaning, no written testimony about what was the pristine intention of the one who first made such graphisms. So, interpreting “prehistoric art” is not a question of *deciphering*, of finding the code that could give us access to that original “message”. We suspect that such a pursuit would lead us up an uninteresting path.

However at the same time, we cannot also avoid the feeling that between the prehistoric “artist” and us there is something in common; otherwise we would have to deny the very possibility of our conceptualizing the past. History is based in such a bridging process; the mind which conceived the “megalithic” paintings and engravings was not similar to mine, but it was in some way or another *analogous* to mine, allowing some sense to emerge from its contemporary observation and analysis. So, between the past conceived as the Same, and the past conceived as Other, there is a strategic third way, that of looking at it as *Analogous*.

A particular methodology conducts us through this alternative road; and that is the structural approach of “megalithic art”. By structural approach we mean a theoretical framework which presupposes a method; this method starts to be descriptive, using a terminology that seeks to avoid any interpretation in terms of meaning. Description and meaning must remain, as long as possible, two different and separate levels of work, because we assume that, *a priori*, nothing is self-evident, not even a figurative image, like an anthropomorph or a serpent. Such elements may only acquire some rationality when integrated in the particular context where they occur; and we also need to take into account that they are mere empirical manifestations of a general structure which is not physically presented to our eyes. For instance, a serpentiform *is not a priori* the representational image of the idea of a real serpent; it is only a form assumed by an element of a more abstract narrative, where some mythical entity may take the form of a serpent in a conceptual network and in a series of signs that must be ordered as such before we put forward an hypothesis of interpretation. Ideally, it is the whole

of the system which is formed by the totality of the representational items we include in the “megalithic art universe” – the syntax – that may give us some insight into the semantics of each of the symbols and of their peculiar disposition in each case.

Therefore, it is critical not to divide the “megalithic art” into a collection of individual “motifs”, taking as granted that each of them corresponds to a particular, obvious meaning. If we use the metaphor of the text, it is self-evident that, in “megalithic art”, we have elements that play a completely different role according to their mutual display and to their topographic situation in the monument as a whole.

“MEGALITHIC ART”

To begin with, we assume that paintings and engravings were often complementary. Also, many ruins which, today, show no remains of “art”, originally could have been “decorated”. The fact is that, most of the time, we are dealing with residual evidence. Very shallow carvings may have been completely eroded in many chambers and passages which are now seen as “undecorated” monuments. To give just an example, six of the seven orthostats of Mamoa 2 of Alto da Portela do Pau (Castro Laboreiro, Melgaço, Portugal) are covered with engravings; only the fact that they were protected by the chamber’s infill allowed them to survive until the 1992-94’s excavations. If that monument is not covered, as it should be, by a new capstone, its “art” will be destroyed by natural agents within a few years. In fact, in the cases where the capstone disappeared and the orthostats were exposed to erosion – which is often the case – there is little hope of finding any “artistic” remains today. What we wish to stress is that carvings and paintings were more common in Iberian megalithic monuments than was previously believed, and not only in the more monumental examples; “art” seems to have been a constitutional feature of many Iberian dolmens and passage graves, although it was more easily conserved in these latter.

The “art” of the megalithic graves was not an amalgam, nor the result of an anarchic addition of “motifs”, but a structured composition, with architecture and “decoration” forming a unit. This unity is only clear in those cases where the conservation of the engravings and paintings is better.

One of the best examples is the passage grave of Antelas (Oliveira de Frades), Portugal, whose chamber is almost entirely painted. The most remarkable point about this “sacred crypt” is the fact that it was in the bottom of the chamber that the more important signs were concentrated. Amongst the nine orthostats, it is the

fifth, in front of the entrance, and the two which lie beside it (one at the left, the other at the right) that display the greater quantity of elements, together with the depiction of figurative items, like the anthropomorph, or the radial-line motif. In contrast, the orthostats near the passage only display geometrical designs.

Sometimes – as in Dombate and perhaps in Pedra Coberta (Coruña, Galicia, Spain) – the unity of conception in the “decoration” of the chamber and the passage is suggested by the continuity of the geometric painted elements preserved in the lower part of the orthostats. In Dombate the excavator found enough evidence to raise the hypothesis that even the space between orthostats was covered by the white paste that served as a base for the paintings elsewhere, and that these interstices were also painted; thus, the “decoration” formed a *continuum*, at least in the chamber, whose interior presented itself like a space surrounded by a plastered wall.

Some compositions are more complex than others. Certainly, this is often also a matter of differential conservation: we simply cannot, today, perceive the original design of the “art”, reduced as it is to no more than scarce remains.

One of the characteristics of that tendency to make the composition more complex is the division of the surface of the orthostats into different “fields” (horizontal and/or vertical); these fields, in certain cases, are only noticeable in the basal part of the slabs (forming some sort of “skirting-board”), where the (painted) “decoration” was conserved by the deposition of sediments. This division is most remarkable in painted passage graves (Dombate; Pedra Coberta; Antelas; Pedralta, Cota, Viseu, Portugal), and is made by straight lines, although in one case wavy (“serpentine”) lines were used (Padrão, Porto, Portugal). It occurs in the chamber and also in the passage (Dombate and Pedra Coberta).

Another way of creating graphic complexity is to surround the “operative surface” of the orthostat by a series of lines (for instance, vertical, parallel, wavy lines; vertical zigzags; or the elements which E. Shee Twohig called the “saw-tooth motif”). In these cases, the “central” area of the “decorated” surface presents itself as a more or less closed, framed space; and this pattern seems to promote some sort of individualization of the graphic contents of each orthostat. Whether painted or carved, this option is relatively frequent. We observe it in Santa Cruz (Oviedo, Spain), Alto da Portela do Pau 2, Lubagueira 4 (Viseu, Portugal), Pedralta, Tanque (Viseu, Portugal), Juncais (Viseu, Portugal), Fontão (Guarda, Portugal), Chão Redondo 2 (Sever do Vouga, Portugal), Antelas, and Arquinha da Moura (Tondela, Portugal). Up to now, this “framed decoration” is known only in the chambers and it is more frequent in their backstone. This last one is not only the main structural element of the megalith – in architectural terms – but also it was its more sacred element.

Obviously, in other cases, the division of the “decorated surfaces” into fields may not be so clear cut – but it is still present. In fact, the backstone of the chamber of Alto da Portela do Pau 2 is organized into horizontal areas, by successive rows of groups of parallel wavy lines or zigzags, alternating with apparently uncarved zones – creating a pattern that evokes the style of the incised schist plaques of the Alentejo’s megalithic chambers, in southern Portugal. This observation, combined with the anthropomorphic outline of many orthostats, raises the question of whether these structural elements of the megalithic building played a symbolic role similar, in some way or other, to that of the southern small plaques (mobiliary pieces of “art”). It would be easy to put forward the idea that the orthostats, surrounding the sacred burial space of the chamber, also closely linked together, could have been viewed as symbolic replicas of the protecting ancestors.

Anyway, horizontal zigzags (and/or wavy lines) occur in several chambers like Forno dos Mouros (Coruña, Galicia, Spain), Castaneira 2 (Pontevedra, Galicia, Spain) or Rapido 3 (Esposende, Portugal); but we need more detailed data on these examples in order to evaluate their importance as comparative elements for Alto da Portela do Pau 2. Vertical zigzags (or wavy lines) are also relatively common, as in Santa Cruz, Pedra Coberta, Afife (Viana do Castelo, Portugal), Antelas, Chão Redondo 2, and Roza das Modias1 (Lugo, Galicia, Spain). In some cases, they could have played a structuring role: that is, they could have been the essential or central part of the composition itself: Roza das Modias 1 seems a good example. We know of only one example (Pedra Coberta) where vertical zigzags occur in the passage; but obviously, the passage, where it existed, was a more fragile element, where there is clearly very little likelihood for “art remains” surviving.

Having considered briefly some structural aspects like the higher or lower degree of complexity in the overall composition of the paintings and/or engravings of the orthostats, we will now approach the distribution of some particular “themes” in the architecture of the monuments. We assume, as already emphasized above, that this is an artificial way of dealing with “megalithic art”; but, later it will perhaps enable us to reach some interesting conclusions.

Firstly, the “skin skeuomorph”, a painted “motif”. This shows a mixture of features, human and animal. Indeed, it is a very important element, because it occurs on the backstone of the chamber, or on slabs at the bottom of that area of the monument. It could have been a symbol of “passage” between humanity and animality, between “culture” and “nature”. What could be a tail of a quadruped, if it was taken as the representation of an animal’s skin (Juncais), could also be the penis of a supernatural anthropomorphic entity. If we look at the Arquinha da Moura’s bigger example (located at the left part of the chamber), we see a hieratic

figure, with the arms turned down, “protecting” some smaller human representations. It also presents a feature which exists in the example of Lubagueira 4, that is, some sort of “dress” surrounded by a “fringe”. To this more trivial interpretation, we could present an alternative: the Arquinha da Moura figure suggests that the “fringe” surrounds the entire body and arms, evoking the image of someone irradiating light. Could this “motif”, taken in its varied transformations, be the representation of a mythical (male) entity, and/or the graphic conception of a shaman in his diversified states of transition between common (human) life and the supernatural one (nature in the cosmic sense)?

Secondly, the “thing” (a term first used by E. S. Twohig), probably the most enigmatic “motif” of all Iberian “megalithic art”. It is carved, and it has a trapezoidal shape, with a narrower trapezoidal base, and, sometimes, a curvilinear appendix on one side (normally, the right). On one of the slabs of the passage grave of Dombate, it is represented five times, three of them in a lying position, the others almost upright. This repetition on the same slab occurs in a very similar passage grave, Chã de Parada 1, on the Aboboreira plateau (Portugal); here it is represented four times on the backstone. It seems that in the remains of Espiñaredo 10 (Coruña, Spain) it was also represented several times. Contrary to the “skin skeuomorph”, which is always in a vertical, detached, and hieratical position, the “thing” appears to be the reiteration of a very abstract idea, whose importance could lie in this very reiteration, beyond the fact that it was shown on one side (Casa dos Mouros, Coruña, Spain; Dombate, *idem*) or in a vertical position (Chã de Parada 1, Dombate, etc.). When we look at the slab C6 of Dombate, mentioned above, with its five representations, we cannot avoid the impression that we are faced with a symmetrical composition, and not dealing with the result of a successive juxtaposition of the same “motif”.

Thirdly: in four monuments we find geometrical (subquadrangular) “motifs” which may be compared, but whose affinity is by no means proved. One might suspect that they have something in common. In Juncais and in Antelas these elements are painted; in Mota Grande (or Alto da Portela do Pau 9, Castro Laboreiro, in the border between Portugal and Galicia, Spain) and Rapido 3 they are carved. Unfortunately, the brevity of this paper does not permit us to develop this subject further here (see Jorge, 1998), since each case deserves special comment. In any case, they all play an important role in the composition of their respective slabs. Juncais’s “motif” evokes some features of the “skin skeuomorph”, in a more geometric fashion; Mota Grande’s “idol” shares some elements with the Antelas example, but its large base, with a trapezoidal form, recalls the so-called “thing”. We cannot discard the idea that the triad “skin skeuomorph” – the “subquadrangular motif” – the “thing” might have been interconnected in some way or other; but we need more information before proceeding further down this road.

Suffice it to say that these important elements always appear in the chamber, showing a preference for the backstone or the slabs which stand near it. Also, if we consider the two main sides of the passage grave (along a symmetrical axis), it is the left part that is more charged with symbols; the same applies to the antropomorphs and zoomorphs. Therefore, we may put forward the hypothesis that, inside the monument, the area near the backstone and the left part of the structure would have been the most sacred.

The only exception to this rule is the “radial-line motif”, perhaps for an astronomically based religious/ritual reason, assuming that the radial image would have been connected to the idea of the sun (and/or the stars). In fact, since most of the monuments’s entries are oriented to the East (fact that is obviously intentional), the northern (right) area of the megalithic interior would have been illuminated by sunlight for a longer period, when the monument (that is, the burial chamber and passage) was open. This does not imply that the backstone and the slab immediately to its right do not show this “motif” too, confirming that the inner area of the megalithic monument was probably the “heart” of the building and of the “message(s)” that it contained.

From what we have written until now, it follows that the interest of looking at “megalithic art” depends on our capacity to integrate each element into a context. Paintings or carvings are just parts of the general design of the monument, elements of the total building which has a history, from its construction to the present; it is placed in a landscape that also has its own history, etc. No “art motif”, or monument can be interpreted in isolation, because clearly each necropolis forms a system, a network of material signs, even when they are not all coeval, which is often the case. Whatever their history, whatever their relative chronology, at a given point in time a set of elements existed in a space, and they were part of a memory and of a cultural tradition, which was in a process of permanent transformation, receiving input from outside, and transmitting “messages” to local people and to people from elsewhere. These messages did not remain static, but were reworked by the imagination of each social actor.

Our task today, as archaeologists, is to use our methods of observation and recording in order to prevent any relevant detail from escaping, knowing that even when we exert maximum concentration, we are just historical subjects, conditioned by our own experience and perspective. This is why we need to improve our imagination, to the same extent that we increase the rigour of the field methods we use; because we know that sometimes the closer we look at things, the less we understand. This understanding does not aim to capture the pretended “essence” of the object, the ahistorical comprehension of the “truth”, the “initial meaning” of the art. That “meaning” is a construct of our mind. There was no

such original meaning, it changed with the context and the actors involved, throughout time and space. Everything was always in a process of transformation, at infinite levels and scales. Thus, to understand is to maintain a *dialogue* with the materialities that are in front of us, trying to make sense of them, but knowing from the outset that any conclusion, any interpretative suggestion is only a construct in a chain of trials. Knowledge is a process of *purification* – trying to thrust aside the impurity of the banalities that have been thought – and, therefore, a process of *loss* – the conscience that what seems to us more plausible, now, will be discarded in the future as trivial, too. Does this sceptical perspective lead us to some sort of nihilism? I do not think so. We act, we play at science (which in our case, as archaeologists, is a mental and a physical experience) with the same commitment of any other serious game in which we are totally engaged. And when we look backwards, we have the feeling, *malgré tout*, of some kind of cumulative heritage, the notion we now have of the history of humankind in its beginnings. This is the result of a century of work. Amongst other things, we “invented” “megalithic art”; we have tried for generations to “explain” it. It is for pleasure that the dialogue between it and us continues.

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Fig. 1

Above: atomistic (traditional) way of looking at “megalithic art” (E. S. Twohig, 1981, adapted):
1. Anthropomorphic motif; **2.** “skin skeuomorph”; **3.** zoomorphic motif; **4.** rows of triangles or branch-shaped motifs; **5.** “saw-tooth” motif; **6.** vertical wavy lines (“serpentiforms”); **7.** horizontal wavy lines (“serpentiforms”); **8.** radial-line motifs; **9.** circles (single or multiple); **10.** U motifs (single or multiple);
11. the “thing”; **12.** subquadrangular motif.

Below: structural way of looking at “megalithic art” (M. Devignes, 1997, adapted): the scheme shows the plan of the Antelas passage grave (Oliveira de Frades, Portugal) with the topographic distribution of its “art”: graphic complexity increases from the entrance of the chamber to its bottom (backstone - n. 5 - and adjoining orthostats); in the whole of the chamber, the left side is more charged with signs and is more elaborate - especially orthostats ns. 2, 3, 4 - than the right.

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

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