

Rituals and death cults in recent prehistory in Central Portugal (Alto Ribatejo)

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ABSTRACT – *The present paper aims to give a general outline of new data that contributes to a better understanding of cults and rituals in Alto Ribatejo, central Portugal, during recent prehistory. The Megalithic Complex of Rego da Murta is the only megalithic set known so far in the Upper Nabão region, and is therefore of crucial significance to understanding the population dynamics of the people who inhabited this region. The excellent preservation of deposition contexts – especially those in Dolmen II of Rego da Murta, and its relative proximity with the cave contexts – makes it the perfect case study for understanding the burial rites performed in this period.*

IZVLEČEK – *V članku predstavljamo nove podatke, ki omogočajo globlje razumevanje kultov in ritualov v Alto Ribatejo v osrednji Portugalski v mlajši prazgodovini. Megalitski kompleks Rego da Murta v regiji Nabão je ključnega pomena za razumevanje populacijskih dinamik. Odlična ohranjenost depozita v dolmenu II v Rego da Murta in bližina jamskega konteksta omogočata natančno analizo pogrebnih ritualov.*

KEY WORDS – *Central Portugal; Neolithic; Chalcolithic; rituals; megalithism; caves*

Introduction

Until the late twentieth-century, the whole Alto Ribatejo region was considered part of a different cultural world, whose population descended from the ‘Cardinal impressed pottery’ culture and performed their burial rituals inside caves; characterized as diverse as deposition from those in megalithic monuments recorded in the neighboring regions. The lack of knowledge of megalithic monuments in this area, as well as the records of artefacts found in cave burials and their apparent dissimilarity from monuments observed farther south, such as Dolmen I at Val da Lage (Oosterbeek 1997), led researchers to divide the Alto Ribatejo region into two ‘worlds’ – one of caves (Nabão River region) and one of megalithic monuments (Tagus River region) (Cruz 1997; Oosterbeek 1997). It was only after the first Rego da Murta monuments were found – at present, a set of eleven megalithic monuments – that the reformula-

tion of this theory was proposed in a doctoral dissertation, 2006 (Figueiredo 2006a).

As well as being located in the occupied area of the caves, these monuments reveal well-preserved contexts, particularly as far as bone remains is concerned.

The megalithic complex of Rego da Murta

The Megalithic Complex of Rego da Murta is comprised of a set of stone monuments which fits with the chronology from the later Neolithic to the early Bronze Age periods, within an area of about 1km², on the right bank of the Rego da Murta stream.

It stands on Mesozoic limestone terrains (Cunha 1990), which form the whole mountain range of Alto

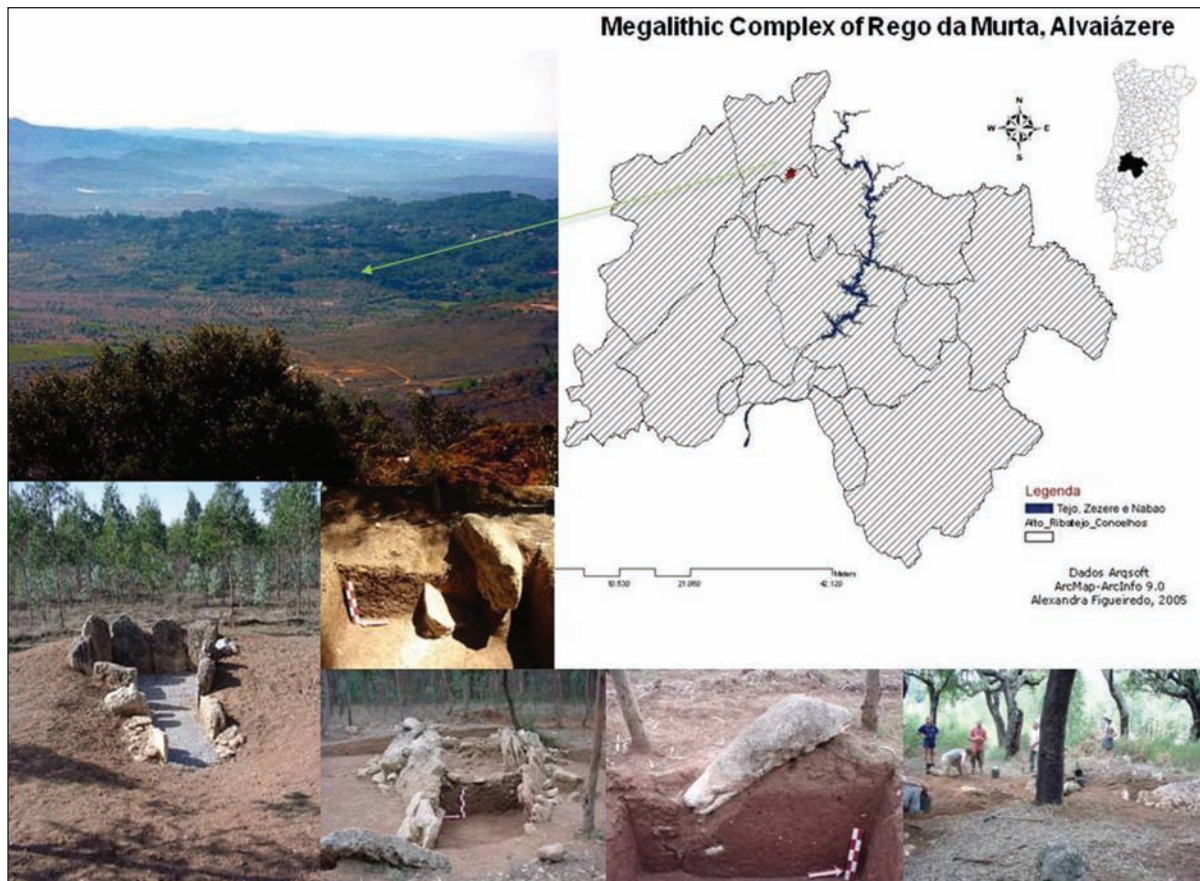


Fig. 1. The megalithic complex of Rego da Murta is situated in southern part of Alvaiázere country in Central Portugal.

Nabão, in the plain between the Zêzere and Nabão rivers. From the administrative point of view, it is situated in the inner centre of Portuguese territory, in the parish of Ramalhal, Alvaiázere county, Leiria District (Fig. 1).

Among the monuments marked (see Fig. 2) two dolmens – Dolmen I and Dolmen II at Rego da Murta – stand out (the last one is in an excellent state of preservation) and several small monoliths in which lithic material remains have also been exhumed.

The two dolmens differ morphologically; however, they fit the typologies established for those observed in central/southern Portugal. Both have a medium-size chamber and corridor and are built with limestone ortostats from outcrops in the region. However, in Dolmen I at Rego da Murta the chamber has a separate corridor, its ortostats are larger and there are two in the head. Dolmen II at Rego da Murta is an *allée couverte* type structure; there is no clear distinction between chamber and corridor.

The several papers already published on these monuments (Figueiredo 2002; 2003; 2004.a–h; 2005.a,

b; 2006.a, b; 2007.a, b) include them, as far as burial rituals and materials recorded is concerned, in a cultural context similar to that of contemporary occupations observed in caves identified in the region which can be paralleled with Gruta dos Ossos and Gruta do Cadaval (Oosterbeek 1985).

The small menhirs, also made of limestone, are small belly-shaped monoliths (rounded on one side and flat on the other) resulting from natural polishing of the surface of limestone rock and the cutting of rock outcrops. These are distributed in a circle around Dolmen II, delimiting a symbolic space, with the megalithic monument at its centre (Fig. 3).

As well as the menhirs, silex artefacts made of *chert* – a material found in the region – were found. These are mainly flints and cores, most of them without retouches or traces of usage. Near Menhir II, a small deposition consisting of a great number of seeds (still to be identified), silex materials and a small ceramic fragment was found. These depositions differ from the dolmens. These contain silex materials stemming from external areas to known mineral beds in the vicinity of the monuments, presenting a type of flint

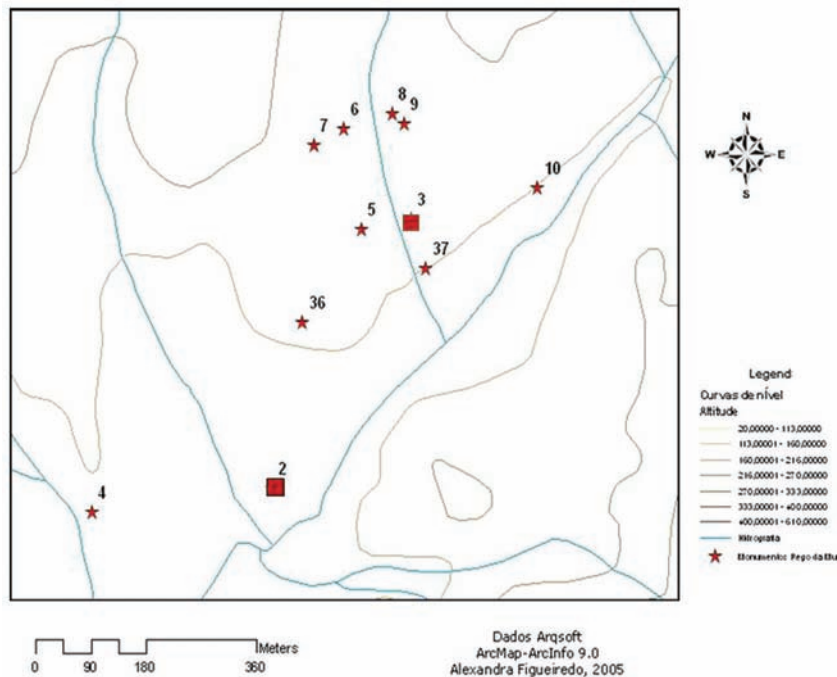


Fig. 2. Distribution of the monuments in Rego da Murta: 2. Dolmén I; 3. Dolmén II; 4. Dolmén III; 5.-10. and 36. Menhires; 37. Monolith.

of better quality, more characteristic of southern areas, near the River Tagus, as is the case of deposits at Rio Maior. The materials exhumed from Dolmen II include numerous arrowheads of different types and halberds, as well as collar beads, some of them identified as being made of crisoprase (raw material which cannot be found on Portuguese territory) (Gonçalves 2006). Associated with lithic and pottery materials is an interesting and significant bone industry, which contributes to understanding Portuguese archaeological contexts. Dolmen I at Rego da Murta, not so well preserved, evidences occupations characterised by larger pots and a lithic

remains in Dolmen II are concentrated in pits crowned at the top by a pile of stones (Fig. 4). Most artefacts are deposited inside the pit together with the bone remains; the pottery items being inverted at the top of the mound near the first layer of stones, topping each context. Similarly, the skulls also seem to be at the top of bone remains, dominating the cluster, followed by long bones. Around the bone deposition, other artefacts can be seen in a somewhat random arrangement. However, some of the remains examined suggest that the deposition followed an overall scheme. For example, so far, all polished artefacts (axes and adzes) have been found

close to the orthostats, both on the right and left-hand side. Also, the fauna found in Dolmen I was collected close to the orthostats or in the central area of the monument near the rounded structure identified as a support structure for any symbolic object (possibly a wooden monolith) which can be connected with the late Neolithic (Figueiredo 2006a) (Fig. 5).

So far, no anatomic connections in any of the monuments have been detected, considering that burial rituals between the late Neolithic period and early Bronze Age evidenced in the megalithic monuments of the Alto Nabão region are associated

Absolute datings were obtained through AMS bone dating techniques.

Dolmen I of Rego da Murta (first occupation phase)

Beta-90001	4520± 40 BP	3360 to 3090 calBC (5310 to 5040 calBP)
Beta-189998	4490±60 BP	3360 to 2930 calBC (5310 to 4880 calBP)
Beta-190003	4400 ± 40 BP	3270 to 3240 calBC (5220 to 5190 calBP)
Beta-190002	4370± 40 BP	3090 to 2900 calBC (5040 to 4850 calBP)

Dolmen I of Rego da Murta (second occupation phase)

Beta-190000	3640 ±40 BP	2130 to 1900 calBC (4080 to 3850 calBP)
Beta-189999	3510±40 BP	1940 to 1730 calBC (3880 to 3680 calBP)

Dolmen II of Rego da Murta

Beta-190007	4190± 40 BP	2890 to 2630 calBC (4840 to 4580 calBP)
Beta-190004	4290± 40 BP	2930 to 2880 calBC (4880 to 4830 calBP)
Beta-190008	4060± 50 BP	2860 to 2810 calBC (4810 to 4760 calBP)

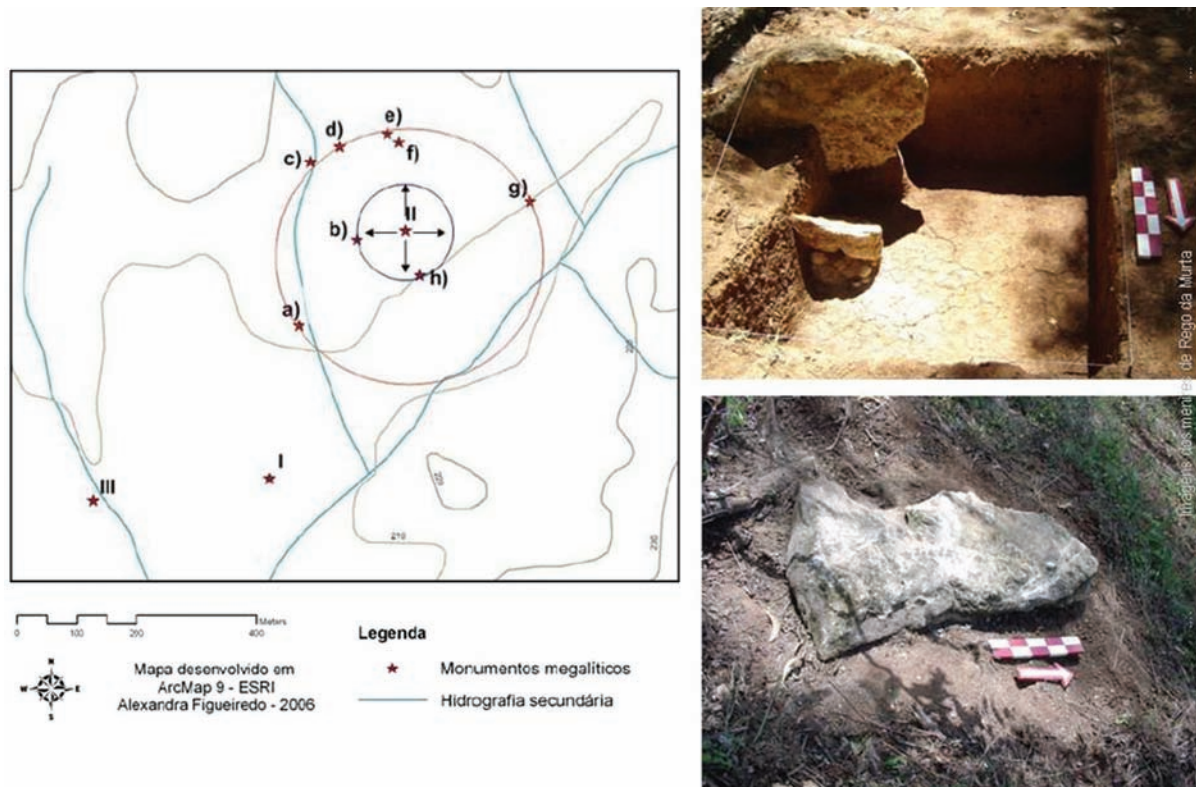


Fig. 3. Rego da Murta. Two small limestone menhirs (*d* and *f*) which circled the dolmen *II*.

with secondary depositions. This possibility is confirmed by sedimentary analyses which allowed the detection of a humus soil layer inside the monument, but not outside, which leads us to consider it an imported layer. This layer covers the whole burial assemblage; some isolated pottery fragments have been found which do not match any of the other elements found in the monument or at similar sites, where relatively complete pottery vessels have been found. This leads us to consider the possibility of materials and sediments having been transported from a previous burial location. In addition to the archaeological interpretation, some of the bones examined by the anthropology team (*Silva et al. 2005; Silva 2005; 2006; Pinto 2008*) reveal traces of manipulation, indicating the presence of previous rituals (Fig. 6). Also, we found non-cremated bones and small amounts of bones cremated to different degrees, but without a direct connection with the assemblages identified. It is worth noting that the number of complete long bones is very low and almost all of them are fractured. In addition, the data obtained enable us to sustain that there was no selection of individuals; each ossuary consists of bones of different age and sex in an amalgam, as if they came from a sort of common trench or collective burial site. Even if this possibility is considered, new studies will be needed to support these data. The

procedure of transporting materials, sediments and bones from a primary burial area to a secondary area is described in other studies of archaeological sites in the region (*Oosterbeek 1997*) and may be a possibility considered for pit burials in the Nabão caves (Fig. 7). Gruta dos Ossos (Tomar), located a few kilometres south of the Rego da Murta complex, is an example thereof (*Oosterbeek 1987; 1993*). It is a relatively small cavity extending west, where five stratigraphic layers have been observed (*Oosterbeek 1987.80–81; 1993.10–27; Oosterbeek and Cruz 1991.280–281*). Among them, two anthropic levels have been identified: one located in layer IV corresponding to the inhumation by the wall of the cave, and the other, possibly a more recent one, between layer I and III dated Beta-189996, 4240±40 BP (3020–2890 calBC at 2 sigma); ICEN-465, 4630±80 BP (3628–3100 calBC at 2 sigma) and I-17368, 4460±110 BP (3400–2880 calBC at 2 sigma) comprising an ossuary containing several individuals. The primary deposition was confirmed by the presence of articulated bones. This cave has revealed a series of successive burials characterised by the initial presence of decontextualised bones of the lower limbs from several individuals, followed by burials of the upper limbs and, finally, the skulls – arrangements similar to those in Dolmen II at Rego da Murta. Between these deposition, earth layers could be obser-

ved. The artefacts were dispersed close to the entrance cave (*Cruz and Oosterbeek 1988*); similar artefacts have been found in Dolmen I at Rego da Murta.

In the vicinity of this cave is the Gruta do Cadaval (Tomar), which also shows some consistencies with the data already provided. It is a cavity which can be divided into two separate spaces, marked not only by the cave's internal morphology, but also by the two burial types observed: a collective one located near the entrance (just as in Gruta dos Ossos) and an individual one located in a more interior room, older than the former. The authors who studied it found evidence of 19 stratigraphic units, of which two correspond to the following burials: Layer C (collective burials) and D (single inhumation) (*Oosterbeek 1985*). Layer C was dated Beta-189995, 4550 ± 40 BP ($3520-3350$ cal BC at 2 sigma), and I-17241, 5180 ± 140 BP ($4354-3732$ calBC at 2 sigma). This level revealed the presence of a set of 'surface' burials 'without or virtually without a sedimentary layer' associated with a lithic industry of silex and amphibolite (consisting of polished, oval- and trapezoid-section artefacts, blades and bladelets without retouches and crescent-shaped microliths), incised pottery (with line and zig-zag motifs), long-neck notching edges and crenated vases parallel to those found in the Rego da Murta dolmens (Fig. 4), and also artefacts including woven objects and ribbed vases similar to those found in Gruta dos Ossos and Morgado Superior (*Cruz 1997:220*). Layer D was dated ICEN-803, 5390 ± 50 BP ($4350-4045$ calBC at 2 sigma) and

ICEN-464, 5160 ± 50 BP ($4212-3817$ calBC at 2 sigma). The single grave was observed in the second room on a block slumping which had been reset to receive it. Associated with the burial, various vases have been exhumed containing decorative patterns similar to those of the early Neolithic (sac-shaped and 'acacia leaf' print decorations), holed shells (*Theodoxus fluviatilis*), of polished stone artefacts, unretouched blades and bladelets, and trapezes.

Although the authors considered that, with the initial datings (ICEN-464, ICEN-803 e I-17241) the layers could not be identified (*Oosterbeek 1997*), the last dating obtained in 2003 (Beta-189995) of layer C enables us to match it with the earliest phase of Dolmen I at Rego da Murta.

Despite the scarcity of osteological data from other contexts in the region from which we can draw conclusions on the nature of the rituals practised during the early occupation stages of the megalithic monuments, it is possible to consider for the Calcolithic period the use of rituals based on pit depositions. Further south, by the River Tagus, other pit structures can be seen, either associated with atypical stone structures such as the Monumento dos Colos (*Baptista 2006*), or separately, such as the pits in Quinta do Paço (*Caron et al. 2005*), or connected with great natural rock blocks standing out from the landscape and overlooking the River Zezere, such as the Monument 5 at Jogada (Abrantes) (*Cruz 2003; 2004; 2006; 2007*).

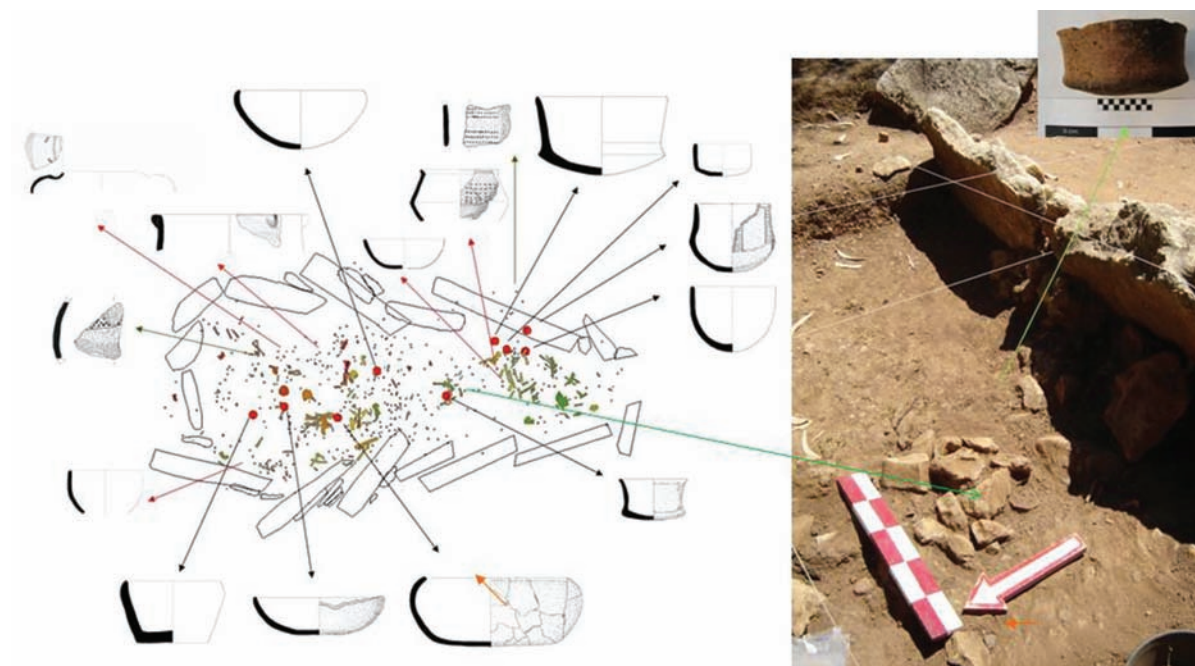


Fig. 4. Rego da Murta. Pottery distribution in dolmen II.

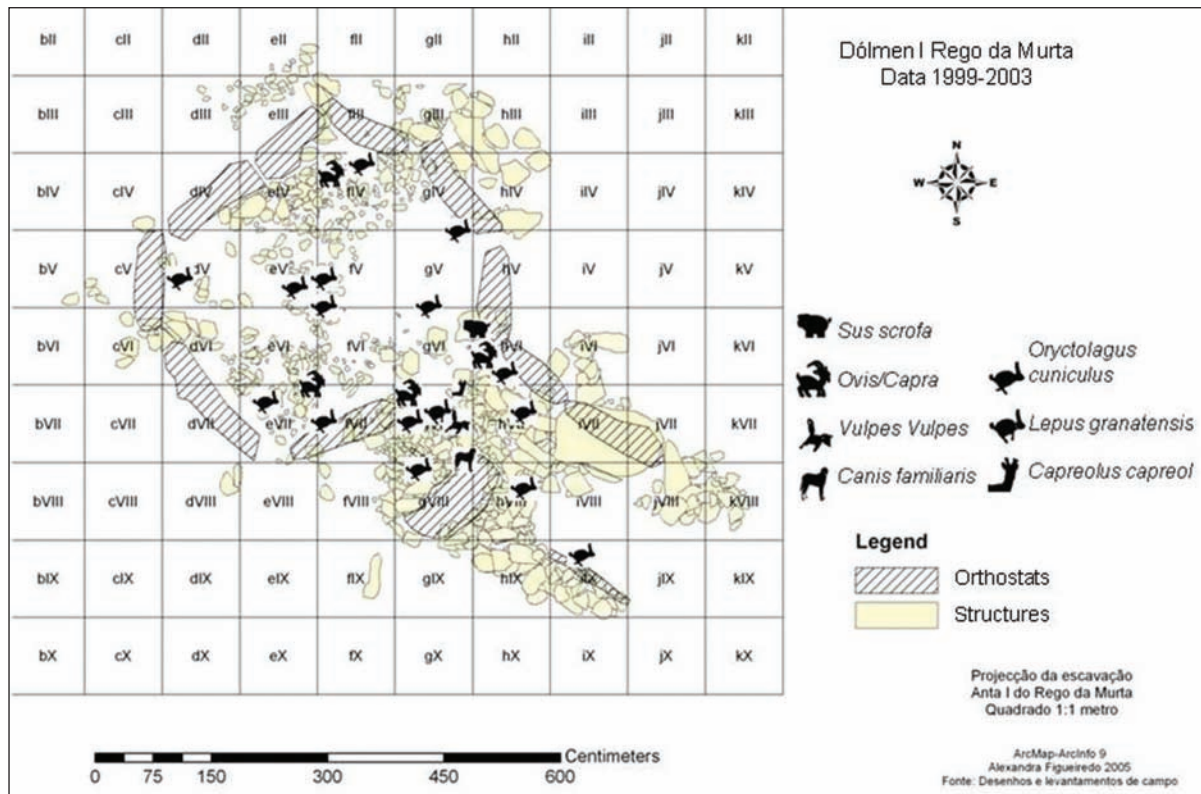


Fig. 5. Rego da Murta. Distribution of faunal remains in Dolmen I.

Anyway, all the data that we have to interpret rituals practised in the region lead us to consider the hypothesis of a behavioural change during the middle Neolithic characterised by a transition from primary burials to secondary pit burials, both in caves or in structures such as megalithic monuments. In some cases, these depositions would be covered by a stone structure, crowned at the top by skulls and some significant artefacts, within a global symbolic process.

Conclusion

In order to understand cults and rituals in Alto Ribatejo (Central Portugal), we can conclude that dolmens, especially those with corridors, are the most numerous and have the richest artefact and bone depositions. Although no consistent bone remains have been obtained in Zezere and Tagus region due to soil acidity, the amount of material observed in these monuments is very similar to those located in limestone areas such as Rego da Murta; Anta I at Val da Laje, Abrantes, by the Zezere River was considered to contain about 100 individuals (Oosterbeek 1997). As for caves, and in line with the chronological table observed in megalithic monuments, this number appears to be around 30 (Schalling 1995).

In the period prior to these constructions, the number of individuals is quite low, given the single burials observed in the first cave depositions. This situation observed in the Alto Ribatejo region during the early Neolithic has been also observed in proto-megalithic monuments identified throughout the whole peninsular: single burials accompanied by a very limited number of artefacts (Leisner 1965; 1998; Silva and Soares 2000.128) combined with animals, ochre and, in some cases, the use of fire.

As we go through the Neolithic in Alto Ribatejo, we can observe the presence of other burials, of a more collective nature, structured in more or less organised ossuaries related to rituals involving the disinterment of old depositions. This transfer ritual might have had numerous symbolic-sacred or even socio-cultural meanings which at some point started to be included in the cult practices of these populations. It is by this time that these cults started to be performed outdoors, both in the dolmens and in relatively atypical structures.

As far as cults and rituals in menhirs are concerned, most of the cases observed in the Alto Ribatejo region relate to areas containing burial monuments such as dolmens or pits. The same applies to other regions of Portuguese territory, where they are also

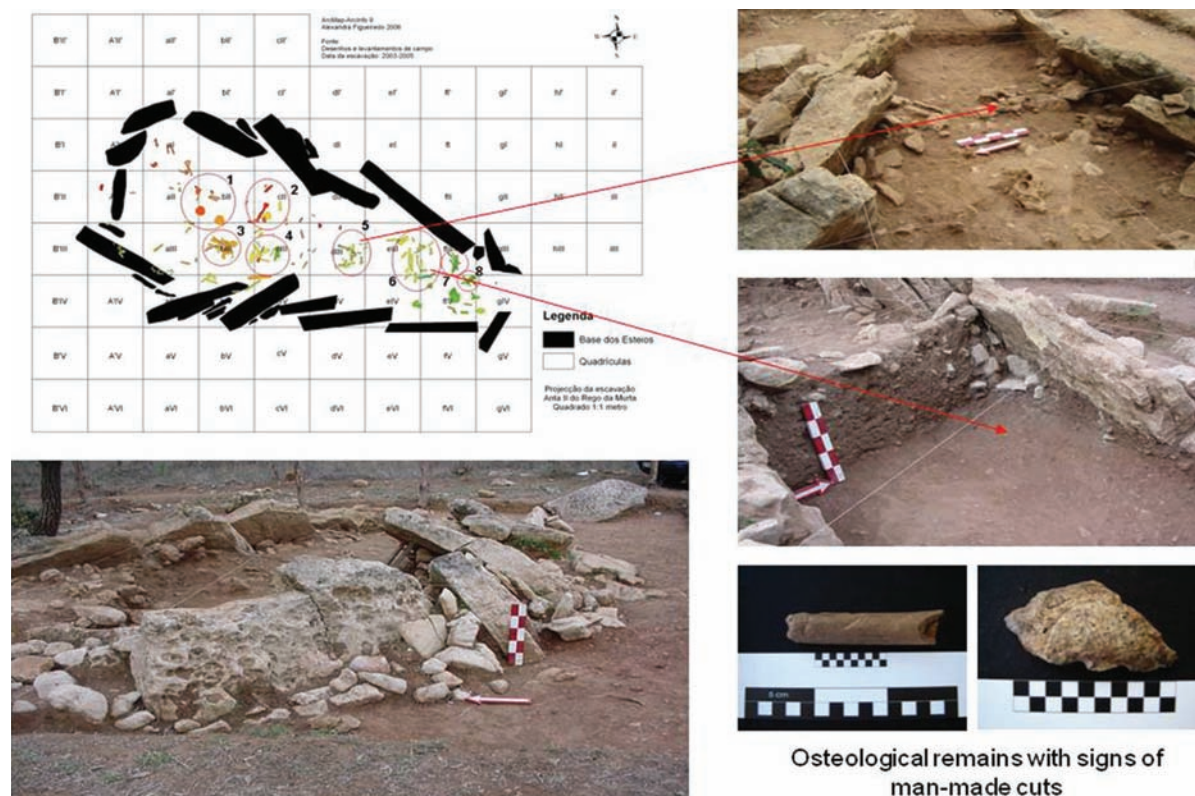


Fig. 6. Rego da Murta. Dolmen II. Distribution of human bone remains. Cut marks are visible on some bones.

considered as boundary or identity markers of these areas (Jorge 1977; Silva and Silva 1994; Leisner 1944; Almeida 1979.14; Bénéteau 2000), having only a marginal role in the understanding of the spatial-symbolic assemblage.

In Rego da Murta, procedures related to menhirs are still far from understood; however, there is no doubt that they are limited to a certain area where certain symbolic rituals and practices occurred, including debitage processes. The same happens with the set of menhirs at Quinta do Paço located at a few kilometres' distance further south (Caron *et al.* 2005). The remains observed (sets of menhirs and tombstone-menhirs associated with megalithic pits and artefacts such as schist plates spread across a relatively small area grouped in clusters and associated with vestiges of fire) lead us to connect them with symbolic rituals and concepts in the Rego da Murta set. The artefacts recovered in the vicinity of the menhirs also consisted of flints and cores mainly from the debitage of small nodes, with a significant percentage of cortex and barely any retouched artefacts (Caron *et al.* 2005).

If we consider menhirs and dolmens as part of the same spatial set, we can say that there was a clear intention in the choice of each object, as well as its

structure and manufacturing material. The rituals performed, such as the mere activity of making the artefacts or their deposition in the outer area of the monument, as well as inside the dolmens or even related architectural constructions, followed very specific rules. These depositions were perpetuated over time, and new structures and practices were added according to needs or rituals.

An in-depth analysis of the data leads us to conclude that, specially for Dolmen II at Rego da Murta, the different deposition moments (based on the absolute datings obtained) occurred within short periods of time (20 years on average) and reveal contexts containing artefacts of a wide range of typologies – a clear reflection of the intentions and ways of life of those ancient times. As far as we have observed, these depositions show unique characteristics that allow us to distinguish between each of them within the monument. Although this is not the main focus of this research, we recognise that this will be possible only if we consider that the choice of artefacts deposited by the communities was intentional and they were intended to convey a clear message.

Considering that the adoption of megalithism might have emerged from favourable structures, the causes may be related to social aspects, because the basic



Fig. 7. Cadaval cave in Nabao region.

parts of the puzzle (first, large-scale architectural structures requiring vast human resources; location in circulation or space-delimiting areas; rapid adoption by several communities; association with symbolic and mostly external artefacts with a relatively small number of individuals; the long occupation period of these monuments, and precise deposition procedures, among others) suggest collective, occasional contexts perceived by the surrounding environment. In the words of Debra Gold (2000.197) “(...) a secondary burial operates at a number of different levels and may create or transform the social environment as much as it reflects it”; it also requires greater “collaborative work” and is a process that “involves multiple corpses requiring specific physical

treatment and thus brings together the living and the dead in a powerful and protracted way.”

Apparently, the social aspect is obvious – the message passed on is acknowledged and perceived by local as well as external communities. Adoption is only accomplished if it is perceived and considered by the populations as necessary or effective for the purposes intended. Whether for sacred or profane motives, it must be respected and integrated into the population’s habits, and this is only possible within a society that confers meaning on it. Innovations could be assimilated and practised for the purpose of social integration in a wide contact network adapting symbolisms and concepts from neighbouring communities which, in their turn, had already adapted them from others by means of a sort of *universal language*. In addition, fashions would emerge that would change the practices adopted, eventually leading to entire communities adopting new habits. The practice of these innovations (activities, rituals and objects) would thus be shared by neighbouring communities in order to establish social agreements for integration into a *wide community*.

Megalithic monuments would then become a means of conveying that message, thus justifying the time and effort invested in the constructions and surround-

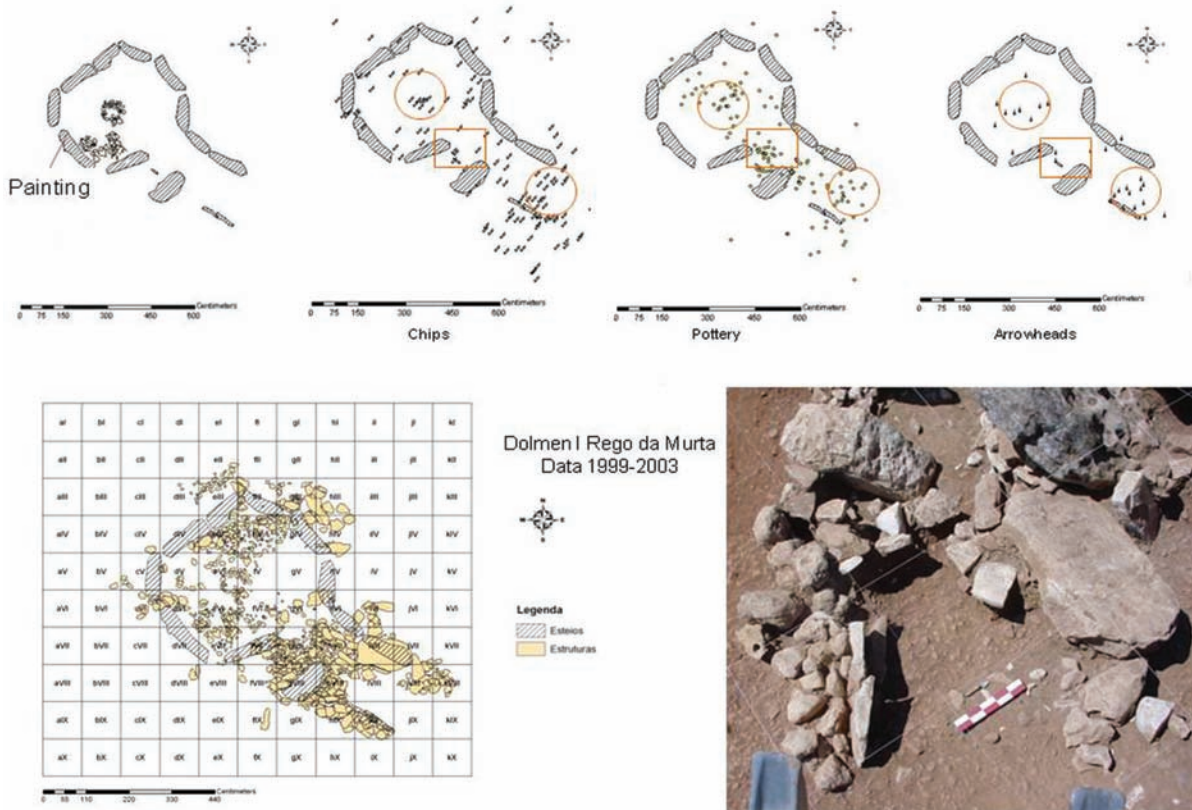


Fig. 8. Rego da Murta. Dolmen I. Paintings, pottery, arrowheads and flint debitage distributions.

ding area. The symbols (materialised in artworks and artefacts) – ideological conveyors – would be deposited in the interiors together with the ancestors (which would reinforce the intention and legitimate the action). In fact, these were not everyday burials, but symbolic practices with socio-religious meanings shared by the whole community.

These ‘innovations’ are not really new; some concepts applied to dolmens might have already been used in previous cult situations in cave burials, but around the 5th millennium were transferred and

adapted to the first monuments without having totally abandoned cave burials. After its exteriorisation, new structural elements were added, with the use in the Calcolithic of natural elements such as large outcrops, small discrete architectural structures indistinguishable in the landscape, or single pit depositions, whether or not associated with wider spaces containing menhirs. It was a phase of people’s conceptualisation of nature (*Guilaine 1998*) which was reflected in the economy and culture, but especially in the socio-religious system.

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