

Rendering Death: Ideological and Archaeological Narratives from Recent Prehistory (Iberia)

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Megalithic Rites of North Alentejo – Portugal

Jorge de Oliveira

Summary

This article discusses the main evidence of the megalithic rites that have been recovered over various years of research in the area of North Alentejo, in Portugal. The big chronological gaps identified in dolmens and their connection to the Early Neolithic communities and to the menhirs (isolated or included in the dolmenic structures) are also analyzed. All of the absolute dates obtained up to the present for this region's megalithic monuments are also presented.

Key-words: Megalithic culture, rites, Alentejo, radiocarbon dates.

The macro-space

Up to the present day, the architectural expression of death during the Neolithic in the North Alentejo area (Portugal) is almost exclusively identified in the common dolmens and their distinctive variations, which can have different dimensions, regular or elongated chambers, short or long corridors, and granite or schist as their main construction material. Six hundred and fifty of these monuments, isolated or forming a necropolis are known in the district of Portalegre. To understand their presence or their absence in a particular macro-area of this region, we have carried out various evaluations and published the results in different articles. Naturally, since the spaces for the deceased are near the spaces for the living, their implantation would be directly related to the existence of economic resources. These communities were the first to start depending on agriculture and pastoralism, so it is natural that they would settle on the lands most suitable for agro-livestock development, although in their own specific technological perspective. They thus looked for light and well drained soil, near waterlines of permanent course, where they could develop an agriculture that would be more like horticulture by today's standards.

More suitable kinds of soil for pastoralism were also sought. The soils that are nowadays considered to be of high agricultural interest were clearly rejected. Despite being near waterlines, heavy and usually clayey soils were passed over by the Neolithic communities because they did not possess the technology that would allow them to work these lands. We have thus acknowledged that the soils nowadays classified as classes A and B were explicitly rejected by these communities. Having understood the strategy of the generic positioning of dolmens and correspondent settlements in terms of macro-scale, it is important to attempt to analyze if it is still possible today to identify some ritual standards for the micro-location of the deceased's spaces and other ritual grammars.

The Micro-space

Through an initial analysis, we can observe that the larger megalithic tombs apparently occur isolated. Nevertheless, if we prospect areas where the mechanization of agriculture has been less intense and, therefore, where the landscape is better preserved, in the territory immediately surrounding a dolmen we register other tombs of smaller sizes, usually less visible in the landscape. Although this "inter-visibility" does not always occur, we can consider that isolated dolmens are very rare, and that they are usually organized in necropolises. But, at least in the area in question, these "cities of the dead" rarely have more than four tombs when located on class B and class C soils, and are usually built in granite. The necropolises located in worse agricultural quality soils (classes D and E), are generally schistose, can have a higher number of sepulchers, and one tomb of larger dimensions positioned at a more visible point of the landscape is always identified. It should be acknowledged that these observations result strictly from mere geographic analysis, and chrono-cultural or typological issues were not considered. Therefore, and for now, we are not taking into account if the monuments of one necropolis were all functioning at the same time, or if the filling up of one implied the construction of another.

The positioning of the tombs on a macro-geographical scale having been clarified, it is now important to understand the reason or reasons for one monument to have been built in a certain place and not a few metres away. The theme of necessity and chance was broadly discussed in the 70s by Jacques Monot and it seems that it has been established that "chance" is something that does not exist in biological, let alone in psycho-sociological terms. Therefore, it is certain that one or more reasons, to a greater or lesser extent weighed up and justified by pragmatic issues, or broadly supported by mythological designs, would have existed for a tomb to be built in a specific location.

Answers to this issue have already been occasionally tried out without significant results, being mainly based on astral or merely landscape-related observations. Studies carried out to approach this theme based on archaeological evidences observed in the paleo soils protected by the stone structures of the megalithic monuments' mounds, at the bottom of the respective funerary spaces, or in the re-use of the tombs' elements, are rare. In this article, based on our studies of megalithic funerary monuments carried out over a period of more than thirty years, we will try to gather information that might help us better understand some of the possible rituals, such as the ones that might be at the origin of the tombs, whose location did not result from a work of chance.