

SOURCES OF MONUMENTALITY: STANDING STONES IN CONTEXT (FONTAÍNHAS, ALENTEJO CENTRAL, PORTUGAL)

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Abstract: *The recent excavation at the Fontaínhas megalithic enclosure has allowed us, once again, to confirm the ancient chronologies of this type of monument in the context of the broader regional megalithic sequence.*

Actually, the discovery of Early Neolithic-type pottery and lithic artefacts is generally in accordance with the data obtained, in the last years, on several other sites in the South of Portugal.

The regional character of the Alentejan megalithic enclosures, together with their chronological background, forces us to relate them with the specific pattern of the neolithization of Central Alentejo.

In this context, we re-evaluate the presumed protagonism of the last hunter-gatherers of the Tejo-Sado shell-middens, whose social and cultural complexity, together with their demographic potential, allow us to understand the extraordinary investment implied in the building of these first monuments.

Key-words: *Megalithic enclosures; Chronologies; Neolithisation process*

Resumo: *A recente escavação do recinto megalítico das Fontaínhas permitiu-nos, masi uma vez, confirmar a antiguidade da cronologia deste tipo de monumentos no contexto alargado da sequência megalítica regional.*

No recinto das Fontaínhas, a identificação de cerâmicas e de materiais líticos tipologicamente enquadráveis no Neolítico antigo, confirma o quadro geral que tem vindo a ser definido em outros sítios do Sul de Portugal.

O carácter regional dos recintos megalíticos alentejanos, e o seu enquadramento cronológico, leva-nos a relacionar estes monumentos com os padrões específicos da neolitização do Alentejo Central.

Neste contexto, reavaliámos o papel dos últimos caçadores-recolectores dos concheiros do Tejo e do Sado, cuja complexidade social e potencial demográfico permite justificar o extraordinário investimento que subjaz à construção destes monumentos.

Palavras-chave: *Recintos Megalíticos; Cronologias; Processo de Neolitização; Últimos caçadores-recolectores*

INTRODUCTION

In Alentejo, as well as in Algarve, menhirs and groups of menhirs are systematically associated with Early Neolithic materials (Calado, 2004), an association which now and then is confirmed by radiometric methods (Gomes, 1994; Oliveira, 1997).

These early dates imply, among other aspects, some precocity in the start of the megalithic monumentality. The funerary monuments, which are the best known and the most common type of megalithic structures, seem to be, in general terms, a much later phenomenon. As in Brittany, the reuse of menhirs in dolmens is one of the most unavoidable and eloquent evidences of this “genealogy” (Cassen *et al.*, 2000).

Moreover, the striking parallels between the menhirs of Alentejo and Brittany (Scarre, 1998; Cassen *et al.*, 2000; Calado, 2002), especially the horse-shoe plans of the enclosures and the iconography of the standing stones, recall, in a very suggestive way, the strong analogies between the funerary shell-middens of the Breton shoreline and the Tejo-Sado estuary (Roche, 1962; Arnaud, 1987; Marchand, 2001), opening new avenues in the understanding of the complex dynamics of the Western European neolithization.

In both areas, the earliest monuments are, in our opinion, the result of the absorption of the Neolithic way of life (with or without colonization) by the indigenous late Mesolithic communities (Calado, 2004); pottery and

domesticates are likely to have been imported from the East, but megaliths, absent out of the Atlantic coast, seem to be a development, in a ambiance of change, of indigenous ideas and practices.

Fontaínhas was first published, in the mid-seventies, by a team of geologists working on the geological map of the area of Pavia (Zbyszewski *et al.*, 1977).

However, that work was limited to the location and description of the monument, in parallel with a quite precise plan: no artefacts have been reported, and the same can be said about the two menhirs laying outside the enclosure, which were found in the course of field-walking in the area only a few years ago (Calado, 2004).

Five of the six stones of the enclosure had still their base stuck in the respective socket, though showing different angles of inclination; the central menhir was actually broken in two pieces, but with the base rooted in its original emplacement. The two eccentric menhirs (some 10 m and 70 m apart, respectively) were lying with a slight inclination suggesting, before excavation, that the bases would still be in their original position.

The megalithic enclosure of Fontaínhas is part of a complex of monuments, sharing some general features, and apparently concentrated inside the boundaries of Central Alentejo, with (until now) only two exceptions in the vicinity: Torrão (Elvas) and, very close to Fontaínhas, the Alminho enclosure (Ponte de Sor).



Fig. 8.1. Fontaínhas megalithic enclosure in the seventies (photo Marciano da Silva)

It is clear from the distribution map, that the centre of the phenomenon is located in the surroundings of Évora, the heart of Central Alentejo, where the monuments are bigger, more concentrated, and interwoven with a dense network of Early Neolithic settlements (Calado e Rocha, 1996).

The most common characteristics of the Central Alentejan megalithic enclosures are the horse-shoe shape of the plans (the best-preserved example is Vale d'El Rei, also in Pavia county), the orientation of the open side (to the East), the inclination of the ground (to the East), as well as the ovoid general silhouette of the menhirs.

Other features, also quite common, are the presence of at least one larger standing stone inside the western part of the enclosure, or the motifs carved on some menhirs (mostly crooks, crescents, trapezes and circles, following this order). It is also quite frequent that the enclosures show more massive stones on their western side, suggesting an intentional gradation of size. This same feature has been observed and underlined in most known Breton alignments (Le Roux, 2003; Giot, 1992).

THE EXCAVATION OF THE SITE

Fontaínhas was excavated in the summer of 2005, and partially restored one year later.

The objectives of the excavation were basically the determination of the remaining sockets, in order to allow a proper restoration, and the recovery of artefacts, and eventually ecofacts, in context, in order to collect information about the building and the further use of the monument.

The excavation area has been, attending to the usual financial limitations, organized in order to include only the surviving menhirs: in the enclosure (Sector 1), and around each one of the two menhirs, outside that main group (Sectors 2 and 3).

The excavation was driven by natural levels, with the tri-dimensional register of some particular occurrences.

Most of the menhirs in the enclosure had well-preserved sockets, structured with medium size granite stones, except for menhir 2, with only two stones in the socket (though it was in an almost vertical position) and the central menhir (menhir 1), without stones in the socket (but also with the basal part still quite vertical). In both cases, the logical conclusion was that the structures had been removed by taphonomic phenomena, such as the eventual reuse of the site in Roman times or farming activities until the present.

The socket of the more horizontal one (menhir 6) was sufficiently defined, with some stones inside, as well as a new socket, between menhir 5 and menhir 6, without surviving menhir, but quite well preserved.

It is possible that, outside of the excavated trench, there are still other remains of surviving sockets, whose menhirs might have been taken, probably in recent times, for the building of the existing farm-houses in the Fontaínhas area.

Concerning the two outsiders (menhirs 7 and 8), we can say that both of them were demonstrated to be in their original place. Menhir 7, the more distant, still had its base inside the original socket, with a strong structure of medium size stones, the majority of them being, in fact, reused quern stones.



8.2. The monument during the 2005 excavation. The base of menhir 1 is still inside the socket, as well as menhirs 2 and 3; menhirs 4, 5 and 6 have been removed to allow the excavation of the respective implantation structures

The reuse of quern stones has also been observed, on a considerable extension, in the sockets of menhirs 3, 4 and 5.

The menhir 8, the smallest of all, had no stones remaining in the socket, though its inclined position, taking into account the preservation of the others, seems to indicate that it was leaning in its original place.

The stratigraphy outside the sockets proved to be generally disturbed, either by natural causes or by agricultural practices. In fact, the sandy bedrock was only some 30-40 cm deep.

Underneath the fallen part of the broken central menhir, on the contrary, we found a shallow pit, with darker soil. It is probably of Roman age, if we take in account three roman coins and some wheel-made uncharacteristic sherds found in and around it.

All over the excavated area, until the bottom of the levels, many fragments of hand-made pottery (some of them decorated) and plenty of flint artefacts (mostly bladelets, flakes and nuclei, but also two trapezes and one thick chert blade) have been recovered; this material was mixed with modern materials, mostly in the upper levels.

Close to the surface of the sandy bed-rock, two limited clusters of early Neolithic sherds seem to imply a lesser

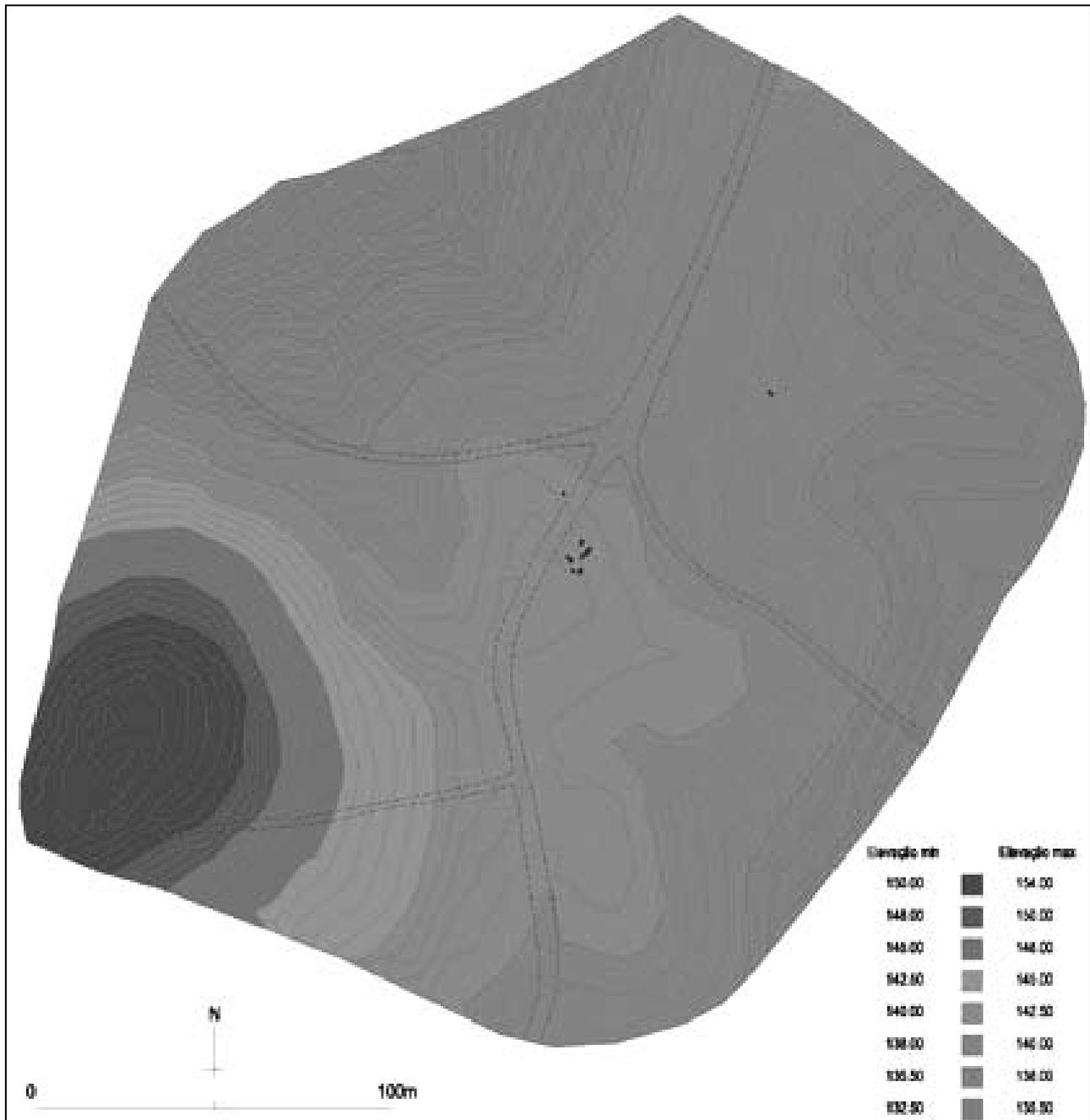
stratigraphic perturbation in the lower parts of the deposits.

Among the ceramic sherds, two carinated bowls have been registered, revealing, together with the chert blade, a Late Neolithic episode, eventually related with the use of the monument; the same continuity of use has been identified in other Alentejan megalithic enclosures and menhirs, such as Cuncos, Pedra Longa or Perdigões (Gomes, 1986; 1994).

THE BEND OF THE RAIÁ

In parallel with the excavation, the study of the monument included intense field-walking in the surroundings, with the objective of establishing the archaeological context of the monument. This one is situated close to the northern limit of the sandy, flat, arid and undifferentiated landscape – tertiary deposits – which extends to the South and to the West, not far from the first outcrops of granitoid rocks which are the hallmark of the Central Alentejan landscapes.

The river Raia, a subsidiary of the left bank of the Tejo, seems to be the most important natural feature in the area of the monument. In economic terms, its large flat valley, with alluvial deposits, still supports rich farming activity.



8.3. Plan of the area around the monument of Fontainhas

It has been in the banks of the river that we found the most expressive prehistoric settlements, broadly contemporaneous with the menhirs, apparently spanning from the Late Mesolithic to the Chalcolithic.

In this area, the Raia follows an accentuated bend, and the Fontainhas enclosure seems to be directly connected, in a North-South alignment, with that conspicuous feature of the landscape.

This fact has already been observed in some important prehistoric cultural sites in Atlantic Europe, apparently articulated with bends of rivers: that is the case, for

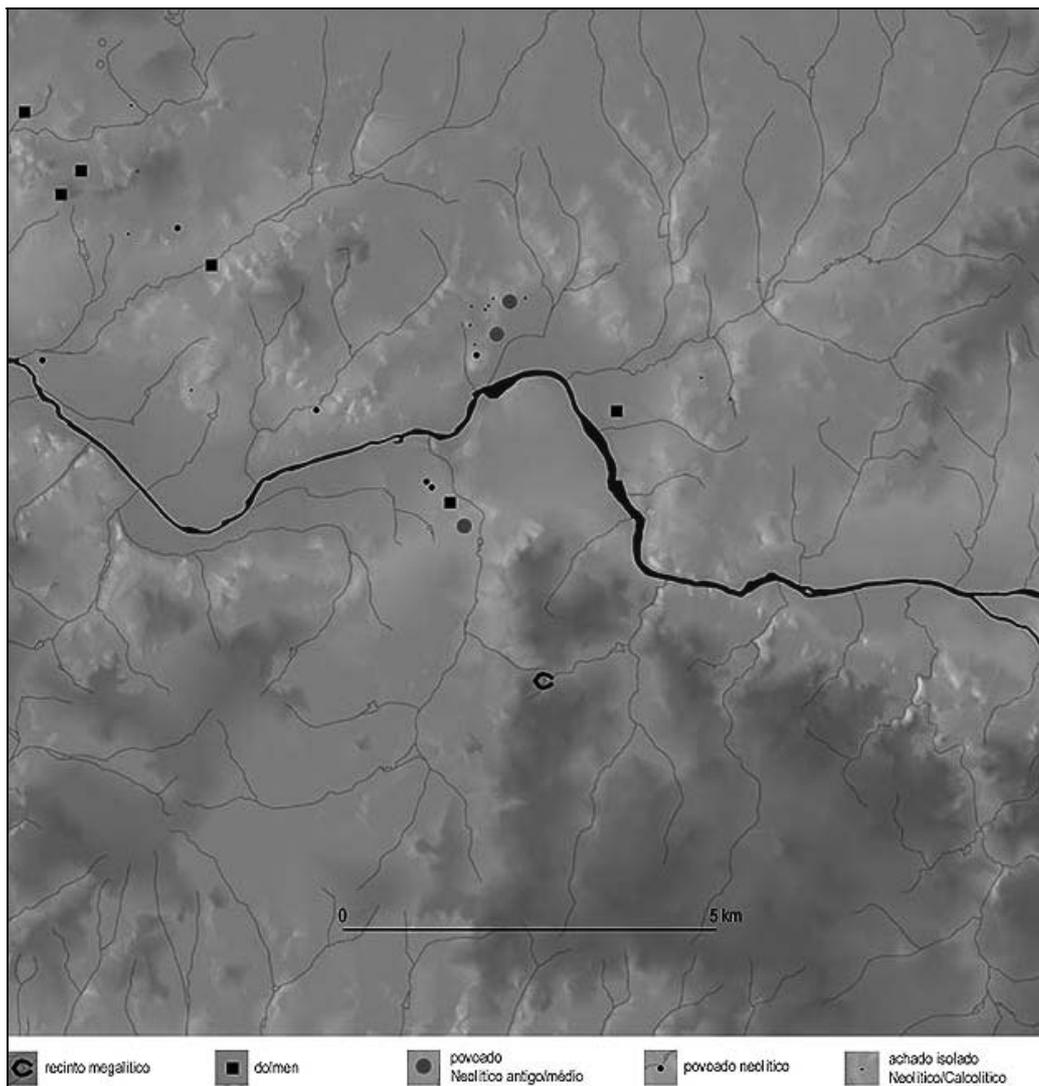
example, with Stonehenge in the South of England, or with the Bru na Boyne monuments in Ireland.

In Central Alentejo, the same kind of landscape features appears to have been the focus for the most important rock art concentrations: Moinho da Volta and Retorta, in the Alqueva Dam Rock Art Complex (Calado, 2003).

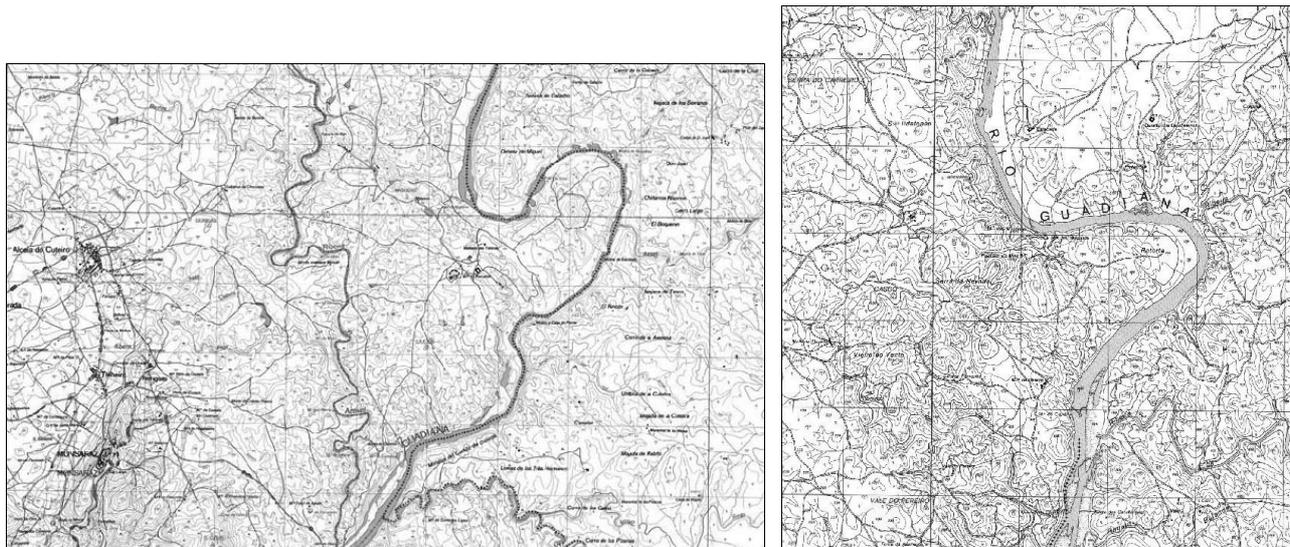
On the other hand, it is quite well established that the careful and apparently meaningful choice of the emplacement of the other megalithic enclosures, in Central Alentejo, took into account aspects such as the hydrographical ridges and the skyline, possibly



8.4. Menhir 8, after the restoration



8.5. The area around the megalithic enclosures of Fontainhas



8.6. The main areas with rock art in the Alqueva complex; 1: Moinho da Volta; 2: Retorta

overlapped by significant astronomical directions (Alvim, 2006).

THE SETTLEMENTS

The study of the area, between the enclosure and the bend of the river, did actually reveal a Mesolithic/Neolithic settlement in a suggestively close articulation with the megalithic monument.

That site, Barroca 1, occupies a large platform with around 8 ha., corresponding to a quaternary terrace, slightly elevated above the level of the river and the alluvial plain next to it. In Barroca 1, a set of 24 test pits, distributed along the settlement area, showed a Middle Neolithic occupation, with post-holes, circular stone lined combustion structures, storage pits with the walls covered by burned clay, together with pottery sherds (mostly undecorated; the decorated sherds are reduced to a couple of exemplars with parallel incised lines and one rim with a single incised line below it), and a large quantity of flint artefacts, namely bladelets, cores and geometric microliths (crescents, trapezes and, above all, triangles).

This association of Middle Neolithic pottery with what seems to be a coherent Mesolithic assemblage, is not yet fully understood, and needs further excavation work. The fact that the same basic association was observed along all the area of the site, does not support the hypothesis of two superimposed occupations, separated in time.

As a reliable alternative, we could be dealing with a Mesolithic community which survived, without too many changes, until the middle of the fifth millennium B.C. and that started its process of neolithization when, around it, other communities had already been farmers and/or shepherds for several centuries.

But the study of the area did also cross the river Raia, to the opposite bank; there, we have identified, close to the limits of the alluvial plain, another Early Neolithic settlement (Chaminé 3), with incised and impressed ware (namely cardial), some flint waste, but, for the moment, no microliths at all.

With which one of them (Barroca 1 or Chaminé 3) should we relate the building of the megalithic enclosure of Fontainhas?

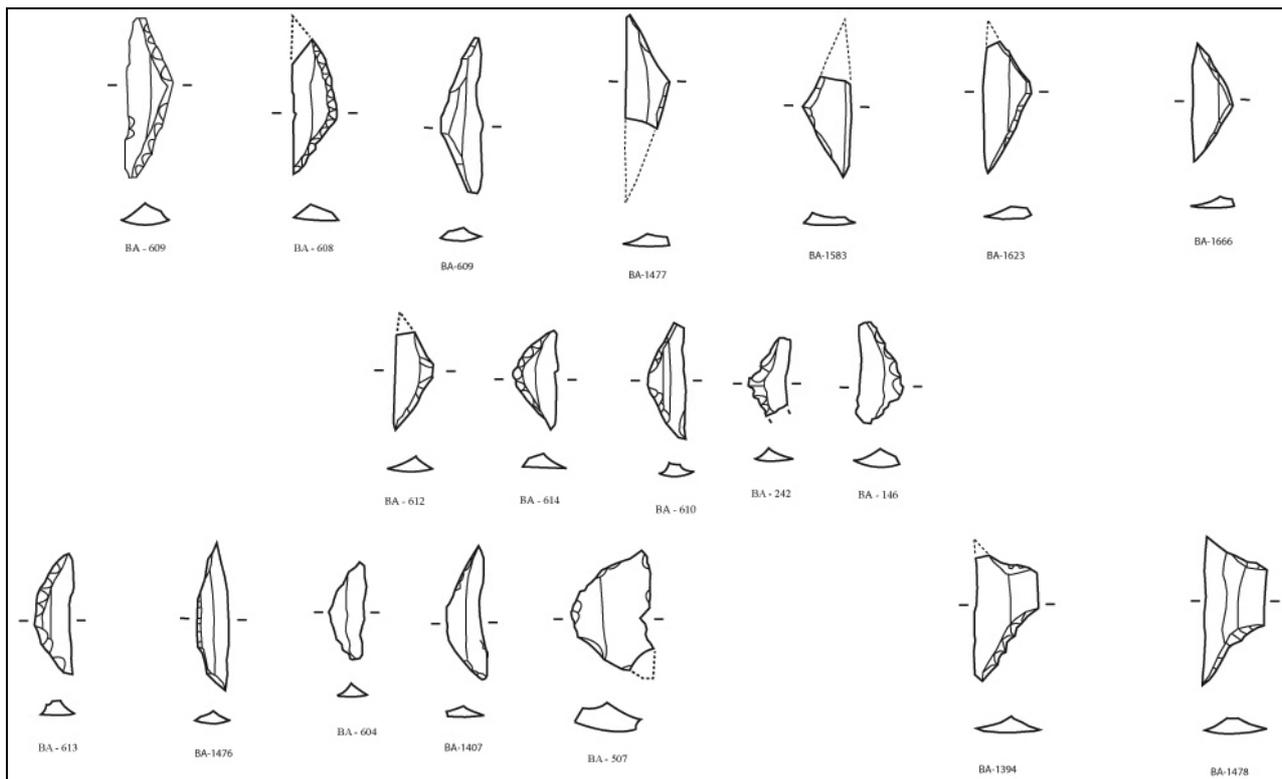
It is early for a definitive answer: dating the Mesolithic occupation of Barroca 1 will, of course, be very useful, and we cannot absolutely exclude the last (and eventually late) hunter gatherers, as the ultimate authors of the monument.

But the materials found in the excavation of Fontainhas – though not eliminating, in a definitive way, the Mesolithic hypothesis – can favour the Early Neolithic occupation as the most plausible: the two trapezes – larger than those found on Barroca 1- and, particularly, the decorated pottery could belong to the first uses of the enclosure.

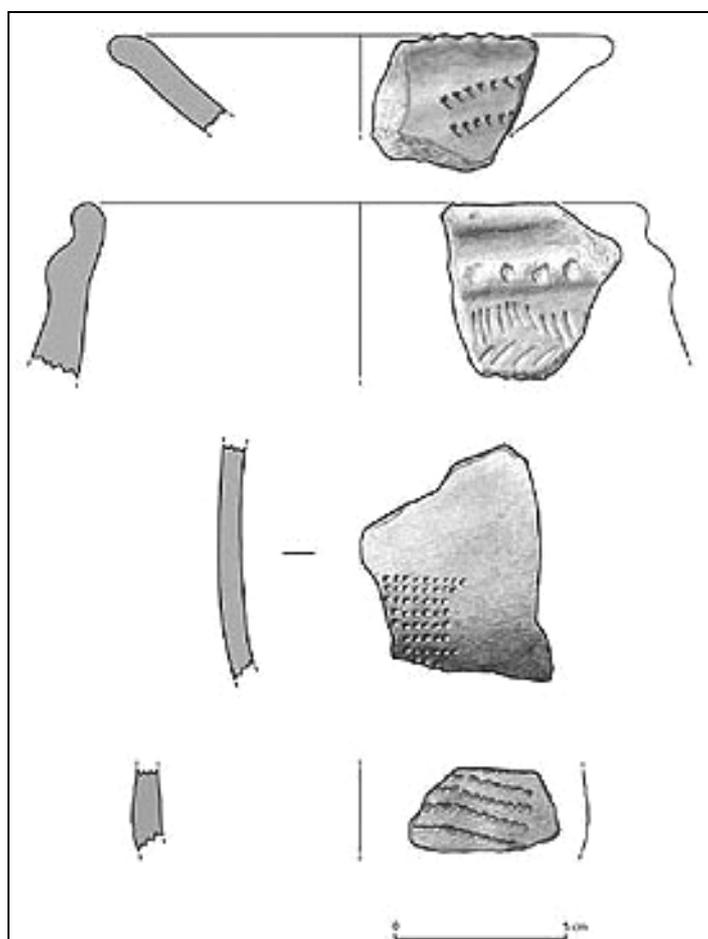
A Neolithic date for the construction of the enclosure is strongly suggested by the massive reuse of quern stones inside the sockets of the menhirs. This practice, known in a smaller scale from other excavated megalithic enclosures (Portela de Mogos and Vale Maria do Meio), has been often observed inside the structures of dolmenic monuments (Oliveira, 1998).

DISCUSSION

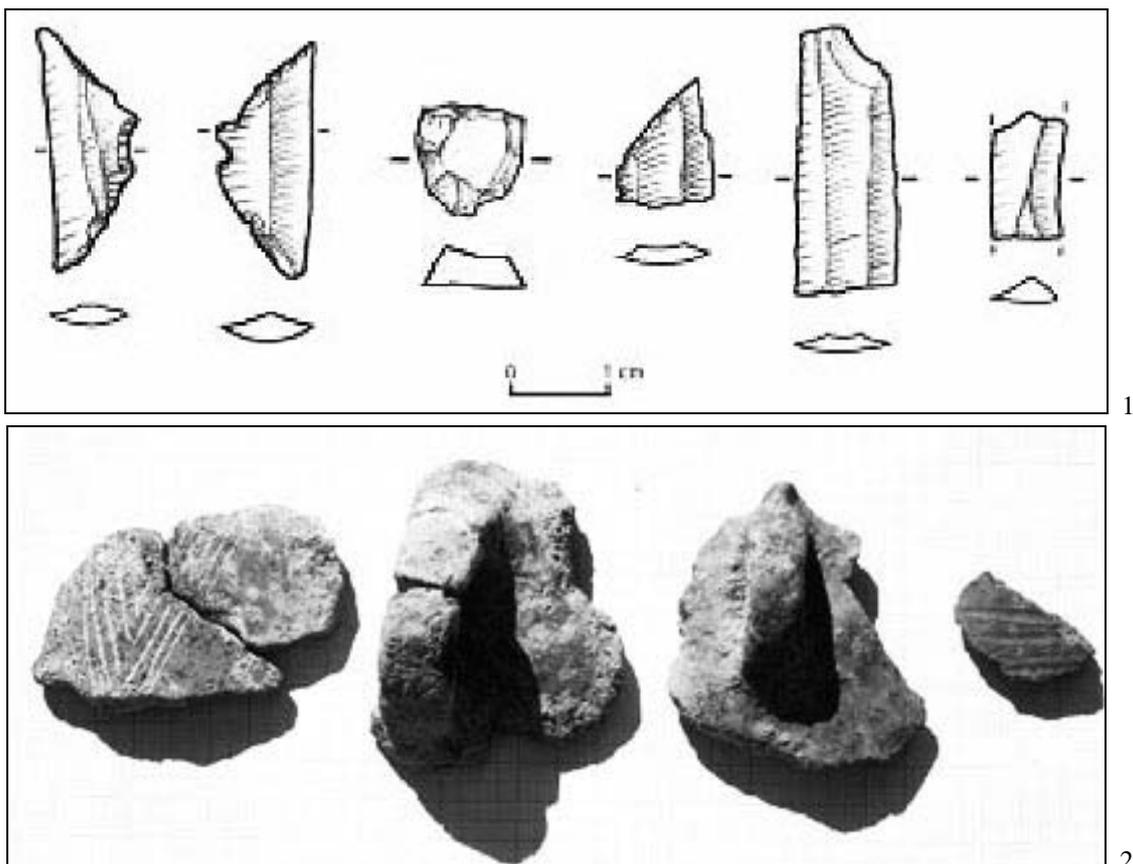
The assessment of the beginning of monumentality as an event overlapping the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition, is common place in northern parts of Europe.



8.7. Geometric microliths from Barroca 1



8.8. Pottery from the Chaminé 3 settlement



8.9. Lithics (1) and pottery (2) from the excavation of Fontainhas

The misleading Portuguese chronology for the menhirs, accepted, without questioning, until the nineties, created a “Berlin wall” in Neolithic studies, with monuments and settlements (because necropolis are still virtually absent) on each side of the barrier.

Early Neolithic societies, at least in Central Alentejo, need now to be conceived as megalith builders, and this requires corresponding answers on the economical, social, or ideological level.

In this last aspect, which, from the viewpoint of the menhirs, is the most relevant, the neolithization of Central Alentejo is not only receiving ideas from somewhere in the East (Levant, Andalucia) but creating new ideas, or at least, new symbols, on a new scale, to express them. The ideological sources for this particular kind of monumentality seem to exist in the Mesolithic traditions, as exemplified by ritual sites like Moita do Sebastião (Tejo) or Vale de Romeiras (Sado), with post-holes or remnants showing, respectively, the symbolic use of the semi-circular/horse-shoe shaped layout (Roche, 1962; Arnaud, 1999).

On the other hand, the similarities between the Alentejan and the Breton menhirs support another direction of relations, rooted in the Late Mesolithic societies, but still alive during the transition process and eventually beyond.

In a regional perspective, it is important to relate the enclosure of Fontainhas with the other similar monuments known in the region: the similarities and the differences may result of the crossing of factors as time, geography and the particular historic contingences.

The discovery of Early and Middle Neolithic settlements, as well as a probable Mesolithic occupation, in the vicinity of Fontainhas, and in a close spatial relationship with it, reinforces the chronology of the monument, giving a very suggestive archaeological context, somewhere around the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition.

This presence, in such an inland context, of Mesolithic evidences gives also some support to reopen the file of the chronological sequence of megalithic enclosures in Central Alentejo. Did that sequence start with the biggest monuments of the core area (Almendres, Portela de Mogos and Vale Maria do Meio), as argued in previous works? Or, on the contrary, did it start with the smaller monuments of the periphery, such as, for instance, Fontainhas, or, not so far from here, Alminho (Deus, 2002; Angelucci and Deus, 2006), where the same chrono-cultural ambience is also being explored?

Even if no definitive answer can be given to this and other questions, Fontainhas and its context are a new example of how studying a megalithic monument can ultimately

deal with the issue of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition in Central Alentejo.

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