

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

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## The contribution of Manuel Heleno to the knowledge of the funerary Megalithic in Alentejo

*Leonor Rocha*

### Abstract

The excavations conducted by Prof. Manuel Heleno in funerary megalithic monuments in the Central Alentejo, in the 30's, during the twentieth century, were considered for decades the key to the knowledge of its evolution. This mythical idea naturally originated from the fact that this researcher never published his work. In fact, a review of his fieldwork, conducted recently by the signatory, helped confirm that despite the invaluable contribution that his research represents, the data collected did not unveil the genesis and evolution of the megalithic architecture.

With this work we seek to present his main ideas by comparing them with the results of more recent studies, based on work performed by the signatory and by other researchers.

**Keywords:** Manuel Heleno; Funerary Megalithic; Alentejo; Evolution

### Manuel Heleno: polemics of an archaeologist

The second half of the nineteenth century marks an inaugural step in the Portuguese archaeology, reflecting, possibly with some delay, the global progress of the matter. In Portugal, this process is, to some extent, relatable to the new mind-set in the wake of the political changes of 1834, which allowed the development of a "modern scientific and technological spirit", which was reflected in the cultural field, through the creation of the Thought and Action infrastructures "(Diniz & Gonçalves, 1993-1994: 179).

It is a period of great cultural dynamics, with the appearance of a vast movement of regional and local historiography, of positivist level, which intended to create the basis for the History of Portugal, on scientific grounds. In a more or less general manner, historians interested in local and regional history appeared throughout the country, committed to basing their investigations on sources that were archival, archaeological, ethnographic, etc. This new impetus led to the creation of several societies, related to natural and social sciences that were reflected in the creation of multiple scientific periodical publications, and the emergence of a group of researchers who distinguished themselves by the quality of their work.

Among these Portuguese archaeology pioneers, it is fair to name a few of those that substantially contributed to the advancement and consolidation of prehistoric archaeology in Portugal, especially researchers that were

part of the Geological Commission, Carlos Ribeiro, Nery Delgado and F. Pereira da Costa, Estacio da Veiga, Santos Rocha, among others.

Leite de Vasconcellos stands out for being the precursor of a national project that spurred the Portuguese archaeology, as founder and director of the Portuguese Ethnological Museum. In fact, the project of bringing together, at that Museum, a representative collection of the whole national territory, led him to establish a network of regional informants that in a way, helped to boost the regional archaeology and to make it known.

Manuel Heleno is, in this perspective, a faithful follower of this policy, substantially expanding his action, which often resulted in criticism and controversy within the scientific community. Three factors contributed, in my view, to this situation: his age, his rapid career growth and the "protection" given to him by the existing legislative framework at the time.

In terms of age, it is not now, nor was it then, common for such a young person (35 years old) to be the Director of a National Museum and become an Archaeology Professor at the Faculty Letters of the Lisbon University (39 years old). As I mentioned earlier, obtaining almost unlimited management power of the national archaeology, by virtue of his position as Director of the Museum, brought him various kinds of problems.

According to J. L. Cardoso, "that institution held authority to intervene in archaeological findings that took place anywhere in the country, which, of course, could create friction with local researchers or other Institutions that had legitimate priority over the discoveries" (Cardoso, 1993 -1994: 298).

In fact, the publishing of Decree 21117, April 18th, 1932, Excavations and Lien/Listing of national antiquities, which regulated the archaeological activity in Portugal (Chapter III), gave the Director of the Museum the power to authorize, supervise and suspend the archaeological excavations that took place in Portugal, and also give it the possibility to claim for itself the scientific priority over sites considered most relevant.

This legislation became the basis of all conflicts that began as early as the following year, between Manuel Heleno and other archaeologists, Mendes Corrêa in particular. In fact, 1933 was fruitful in conflicts, between these two archaeologists, that came to be of public domain through the published letters in the daily press, with accusations from both sides. The emphasis behind the criticisms that were made of him where, precisely, his lack of experience and his arrogance.