

Death as Archaeology of Transition: Thoughts and Materials

Papers from the II International Conference of
Transition Archaeology: Death Archaeology
29th April – 1st May 2013

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BAR International Series 2708
2015

Published by

Archaeopress
Publishers of British Archaeological Reports
Gordon House
276 Banbury Road
Oxford OX2 7ED
England
bar@archaeopress.com
www.archaeopress.com

BAR S2708

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ISBN 978 1 4073 1359 7

Printed in England by Information Press, Oxford

All BAR titles are available from:

Hadrian Books Ltd
122 Banbury Road
Oxford
OX2 7BP
England
www.hadrianbooks.co.uk

The current BAR catalogue with details of all titles in print, prices and means of payment is available free from Hadrian Books or may be downloaded from www.archaeopress.com

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THE FUNERARY MEGALITHIC OF HERDADE DAS MURTEIRAS (ÉVORA, PORTUGAL): THE (RE) USE OF THE SPACES

Leonor Rocha

ABSTRACT

The area of Évora, inserted in the Alentejo region, stands out for the quantity and monumentality of its megalithic (funerary and non-funerary). Despite its good preservation condition, in terms of natural landscape and architecture, which could be properly valued in the context of cultural enhancement projects and tourism promotion, we can see that, with few exceptions, these monuments are still doomed to be abandoned.

In this context, the Foundation Eugenio d'Almeida appears as an example of a private institution that has been investing in the rehabilitation and promotion of existing heritage in its estates, as is the case of the Herdade das Murteiras, where archaeological research work took place in 2007.

I hereby present the result of the work done, at this estate, in some of funerary megalithic monuments: two proto-megalithic graves and a passage grave. The work done in these important monuments brought new and important data to the study of funerary megalithic of the region and also on the spatial relationship between the Neolithic settlements and the small megalithic graves.

Keywords: *Fundação Eugénio d'Almeida, Herdade das Murteiras, Funerary Megalithic, Évora, Portugal.*

1. THE PROJECT

In view of the project named “**Restoration and Valorisation of Archaeological Sites of the Herdade das Murteiras**”, archaeological work was carried out by a team of archaeologists associated to UNIARQ/ FLL (MC) and the University of Évora (LR). This project was divided into two research components, the study of the settlement (MC's responsibility) and the study of the funerary megalithic (the signatory's responsibility).

This project there for emerges from the work that these researchers developed previously with the support of the Foundation Eugenio d'Almeida (FEA), namely the allocation of PhD scholarships, which had as its main purpose the promotion and enhancement of the existing archaeological heritage in this estate, FEA's property, by excavating and/or doing archaeological surveys, recovering such sites and proceeding with their musealization, for public enjoyment, by creating a sightseeing tour.

2. THE TIME AND THE SPACE

The Central Alentejo has the largest megalithic spot at peninsular level, known internationally through the numerous papers published by researchers who have worked in this area since the last century (Calado and Rocha, 1996; Calado, 2001, 2004, Gonçalves and Sousa, 2000; Kalb, 1989; Leisner, 1949; Leisner and Leisner, 1959, Rocha, 2005).

Unfortunately, in the recent decades, this region has also been very affected by the construction of tourism, urban, road, agricultural developments, and the construction of dams... that have damaged, and even destroyed, monuments and natural landscapes.

In chronological terms, in this area, the funerary monuments suffer from a serious problem: the absence of dating elements - bones, coals - that allow us to assess the timelines, beyond the findings. Despite this problem, which is difficult to solve, its construction seems to have started sometime during the fifth millennium BC, time at which the proto-megalithic graves were built. Although the currently available data suggests a precedence in areas closer to the coast, a maximum date back to 4500 BC is acceptable.

The funerary monuments identified to date, at the Herdade das Murteiras, are part of the small and medium size category, and they are found to be well preserved.

In landscape terms, this estate has very well preserved natural landscapes, due to being used mostly as pastureland for cattle rather than for agriculture. The Hortinha 1 and 2 graves are located in a transition line between a granite area, with a rugged topography, highlighted and marked by outcrops with little agricultural potential, which develops in the south, and land with smoother topography, related to various geological substrates, with higher agricultural potential, in the North.

In general, the area has abundant granite outcrops, some of which with quite unique shapes, with generally mild topography, in a landscape where the cork-oak hills predominate.

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