

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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ANTHROPOMORPHIC IMAGES AS ORIGINS OF ANCESTOR'S "CAVES". THE STELE-MENHIR OF ANTA DO TELHAL, ARRAIOLOS. EVORA. PORTUGAL

P. Bueno Ramirez,¹ R. de Balbín Behrmann,¹ L. Rocha,² J. Oliveira²

SUMMARY

It is a fact that in Europe menhirs, stelae and statues and their origin, configuration, and maintenance in funerary megalithic spaces play an important role. The wealth and variety of anthropomorphic expressions in the Portuguese Alentejo form an interesting case study. The documentation of the engraved Anta de Telhal stele-menhir opens a new line of investigation. This is useful to reflect on the connectivity between open and closed architectures in Southern European megalithism. The movements of stones between them indicate a *longue durée* process, of which the manipulation of images on the ancestral stones is one of the clearest arguments for the creation of the past's ideology.

Key words: Megaliths. Stele. Menhirs. Engravings. Neolithic. Iberian Peninsula

RESUMEN

El papel de menhires, estelas y estatuas en el origen, configuración, refacturas y mantenimiento de los espacios funerarios megalíticos, es un hecho en toda Europa. La riqueza y variedad de las expresiones antropomorfas del Alentejo portugués constituye un interesante caso de estudio. La documentación de la estela-menhir grabada del Anta de Telhal, abre una línea de investigación para reflexionar sobre la conectividad entre arquitecturas abiertas y arquitecturas cerradas en el megalitismo del Sur de Europa. Los movimientos de piedras entre unas y otras apuntan procesos de *longue durée* que tienen en la manipulación de imágenes en piedra de los ancestros uno de sus más claros argumentos de creación de ideología de pasado

Palabras clave: Megalitos. Estelas. Menhires. Grabados. Neolítico. Península Ibérica

INTRODUCTION

The undeniable role of menhir, stelae and statues in open areas, with possible agricultural links, is completely different from the hiding of these pieces during the megaliths' construction (Bueno & Balbín, 2006). The image of darkness and basically being a cave is sought after in the artificial construction of megaliths. The use of anthropomorphic objects is one of the basic references for this. This way the past's value is transferred to the area where the ancestors are deposited. Moreover, probably the past of the lineage that holds the funerary space is reclaimed. The different evidences that have been found in the Iberian Peninsula (Bueno et al. 2007a) show the importance of gathering images from the past in the "cave" where the ancestral remains of a family or lineage will rest forever. This process of taking decorated elements that come from visible areas, in order to take them to a world that will never be seen is one of the references of the ancestral sepulchre's symbology.

Collective effort has always been analysed through studying megalithic monuments, however it should be extended to the wide group of stones that form groups in the open air. They were amplified, re-shaped and altered, including transfers of stones probably to other precincts and surely to megalithic monuments. The "connectivity" between them is a convincing argument for the establishing

of symbolical relations between both cultural products. The precincts could be areas for collective gatherings and the dolmens funerary areas for specific lineages or families. Segregation from what is public, in order to maintain private prestige, was used to create and sustain a mythical past.

These processes have got *longue durée* evidences that suggest the social acceptance of the moving of collective pieces to the funerary spaces of certain groups. Mentioned acceptance implies that the decorated objects in the megalithic precincts were open to access. It also implies physical help in the dragging and re-positioning of the menhir, stelae and statue-menhir and finally, an agreement regarding their use in funerary areas of more restricted access.

These mechanisms can easily be connected to management systems of the very funerary remains. The stones are moving just as much as the human remains are. In fact, the close relationship between the stone as an element and the human body contributes to a convincing image of every element being valued and interpreted as a body and, therefore, as an ancestor (Bueno et al. 2005a, 2008).

The origin of understanding the funerary universe in this way, associated with bug stones, is perfectly perceivable during the first moments of production groups' settling. The increase of data available for the analysis of megalithic statuary in Alentejo is inseparable from the abundant presence of old menhir in the area. The generation of

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