

ZONA ARQUEOLÓGICA

MOBILE IMAGES OF ANCESTRAL BODIES:
A MILLENNIUM-LONG PERSPECTIVE
FROM IBERIA TO EUROPE

VOL. II



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EDITOR
Enrique Baquedano

EDITORES CIENTÍFICOS
Primitiva Bueno Ramírez y Jorge A. Soler Díaz
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PRIMITIVA BUENO RAMÍREZ AND JORGE A. SOLER DÍAZ (EDS.)

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MUSEO ARQUEOLÓGICO REGIONAL

**Monologues between idol plaques and
schematic paintings in the Sierra de
São Mamede, Portugal**

Abstract

In this text an attempt is made to connect idol plaques, the most singular magical-religious artifacts of funerary Megalithism, with the markings in shelters and on the walls of the Sierra de São Mamede, which dominates the valleys where the dolmens are located. Comparisons are made between chronologies, spatialities and contexts, which seem to distance themselves from the respective graphic messages. For now, amid impossible dialogues, the silent monologues of the symbolic world remain.

Keywords

Idol plaques; schematic art; Megalithism, Sierra de São Mamede.

Resumen

En este texto se intenta conectar los ídolos placa, el artefacto mágico-religioso más singular del megalitismo funerario, con los marcadores gráficos de las paredes de la Sierra de San Mamede que domina los valles donde se construyeron los dólmenes. Se comparan cronología, espacios y contextos para analizar los mensajes de cada versión gráfica. Por ahora en medio de diálogos imposibles, quedan los monólogos silenciosos del mundo simbólico

Palabras clave

Ídolos placa, arte esquemático, Megalitismo, Sierra de San Mamede

Monologues between idol plaques and schematic paintings in the Sierra de São Mamede, Portugal

Jorge de Oliveira*

Contextualizing

Today it is widely recognised that the most singular and realistic megalithic idol plaques seem to have emerged on the peneplain stretching from Pico (altitude 1,025m) in the Sierra de São Mamede and levelling off towards the three most important drainage basins of the south –the Tagus, Guadiana and Sado. I refer, of course, to the idol plaques of sandstone or congeneric rocks where the anatomical details are in relief. If the largest concentration of these precious artifacts is seen in the megalithic tombs of this territory, it is in the same monuments or others in their vicinity that the largest concentration of the other similarly flat idols, mostly made of slate, with predominantly geometric or geometrized decoration, but without expressly relief details, has been identified. If these artifacts, which seem to be native to this region and unmistakably funerary, are so numerous here, their abundance is the result of another uncontested reality: they are from the territory that has the greatest density and concentration of megalithic monuments, at least on the Iberian Peninsula. As far as numbers go, it seems one reality relates directly to the other. For now, we note the originality, density, and diversity of the idol plaques, which theoretically are exclusively funerary, in these lands that flatten out from the Sierra de São Mamede. But what are idol plaques, which others indiscriminately call schist plaques?

As a rule, when in our ignorance we are confronted with realities whose functionality we do not know, but which possess some slight resemblance of form, or come from close contexts, our brain tends to group them together and even, dangerously, confer on them similar functional attributes. To cloud the issue further, whenever no direct functionality for the artifact is immediately perceived, our organizational reasoning, needing to place it quickly in a functional context, usually attributes to it symbolic functions, overlooking more commonplace possibilities. It is thus imperative that we ponder the natural question of whether we are faced with the same symbolic-functional reality in relation to the different materialities, be it the media or especially the graphic message in these funerary artifacts known as idol plaques. Much has been written about this since 1746, when Estevão Liz Velho published and described the first idol plaque (Velho, 1746). But if many have written about the topic, few have done so by directly observing its contexts, a fundamental determinant for a closer vision of a reality that occurred thousands of years ago. Unfortunately, the reflections based on indirect observation of these artifacts, usually through the fogged-up glass of a museum cabinet, have spread more widely and have shaped more ideas, while the less appealing meticulous descriptions of the contexts in which they were collected have been neglected. Even so, it is tempting to try to enter the symbolic world, if symbolic it is, of the first communities to domesticate the land and animals of the fertile valleys of the peneplain

*CHAIA (Centre for the Investigation of Art and Art History) University of Evora

around the Sierra de São Mamede via an artifact so inextricably linked to this region, the idol plaques. If these materialities and the spaces in this region from which they were collected were first described 275 years ago (Oliveira, 2007), after so long we should be more, not less, sure about their meaning. However, probably because ideas have been based more on the indirect observation of the artifacts than on the contexts in which the land preserved them, up until very recently we have been repeating long invented theories that are poorly substantiated (Bueno, Balbin 2009). However, this is neither the time nor the place to go into this matter. Let us turn rather to other equally or more appealing problems that beg deep questions and require serious consideration.

In reply to this speculative environment, we can now after significant prospection and excavation work start developing some lines of thought that may allow us to begin to understand the world of those who, especially from the Neolithic, occupied the Sierra de São Mamede, particularly its most fertile slopes, and produced structures, artifacts and messages that nowadays are considered to be imbued with magical-religious attributes. The engraved idol plaques, one of the artifacts with the greatest symbolic weight in recent pre-history, seem to have emerged on the fertile slopes of the Sierra de São Mamede; and they are distributed in one of the densest, most coherent and morphologically diverse megalithic sets seemingly with the largest number of the most ancient dates obtained till now. It would therefore be natural for their symbolic message not to be limited to sets of artifacts, funerary monuments, and menhirs, but to extend to other scenarios, particularly those that dominated the landscape when it was domesticated by the first farmers and herders thousands of years ago.

From the 1,025m-high vantage point of Pico in the Sierra de São Mamede, the highest landform south of the Tagus, almost 1,000 dolmens and around fifty menhirs can be discerned, so this landscape was densely populated at the time when communities started settling. The Sierra de São Mamede is capped by a quartzite crest in which nature has formed joints, some deep, some less so. This crest lies on a roughly north-east to south-west axis and thus is largely exposed to strong sunlight, particularly on the west side.

If today we are reasonably sure of the position of the dolmens and menhirs in this region, the little evidence of the living spaces of their builders that has been sys-

tematically studied is found only among the granite formations at the stud farm in Alter do Chão (Oliveira, 2007) and in similar situations on the banks of the Sever, in the municipality of Marvão (Oliveira, Pereira; Parreira, 2005) and probably only co-existed with the initial phase. Discreetly built among gigantic granite outcrops that offered protection from the northerly winds, these living spaces contrasted in monumentality with the contemporary constructions of a symbolic nature, at least from their foundational phases, built by the same communities that we know were located at a short distance. We find these realities on the narrow, well-drained plains of light earth near perennial water courses, always within sight of the quartzite crest of São Mamede, which visually dominates the monumentalised valley. And did the first farmers spurn these high lands capped by the quartzites that loom over the soil they now occupy? It seems they did. There are no known dolmens or menhirs above 650m, and no living spaces have been identified either. But, if they are contemporary, these communities found another use for the natural shelters, caves, and walls in these cliffs atop the sierra from which everything can be observed and controlled. If the midway elevation, with steep inclines and poorer soils, was really spurned in favour of the more generous and well-drained soils that narrow on lower levels, the joints in the quartzite crest above were sought by the same probable communities to promote a magical-religious programme that may have been contemporary with and/or complementary to the symbolic messages inscribed on the idol plaques that “protected” the dead in the dolmens that they built on the surrounding lands.

Narrow shelters with schematic paintings in the quartzite crests of the Sierra de São Mamede have been known to us since 1916 (Hernandez-Pacheco y Cabrera, 1916), and seem to have been contemporary with the first agro-pastoral societies that roamed these hills. It might be anticipated that the paintings in these shelters occurred chiefly in the natural concavities that offered greater protection, i.e. it would be reasonable if the humans who wandered these ranges in the 3rd and 4th centuries BC had left behind graphic testimonies to their presence in the joints that they inhabited. In reality, some of these natural openings, such as Igreja dos Mouros or Pinho Monteiro in the parish of Esperança, offer the barest of living conditions to anyone seeking prolonged shelter there. Yet most of the paintings in these quartzite formations are found on more or less vertical walls, as in Relvinha (Marvão) and São Brás

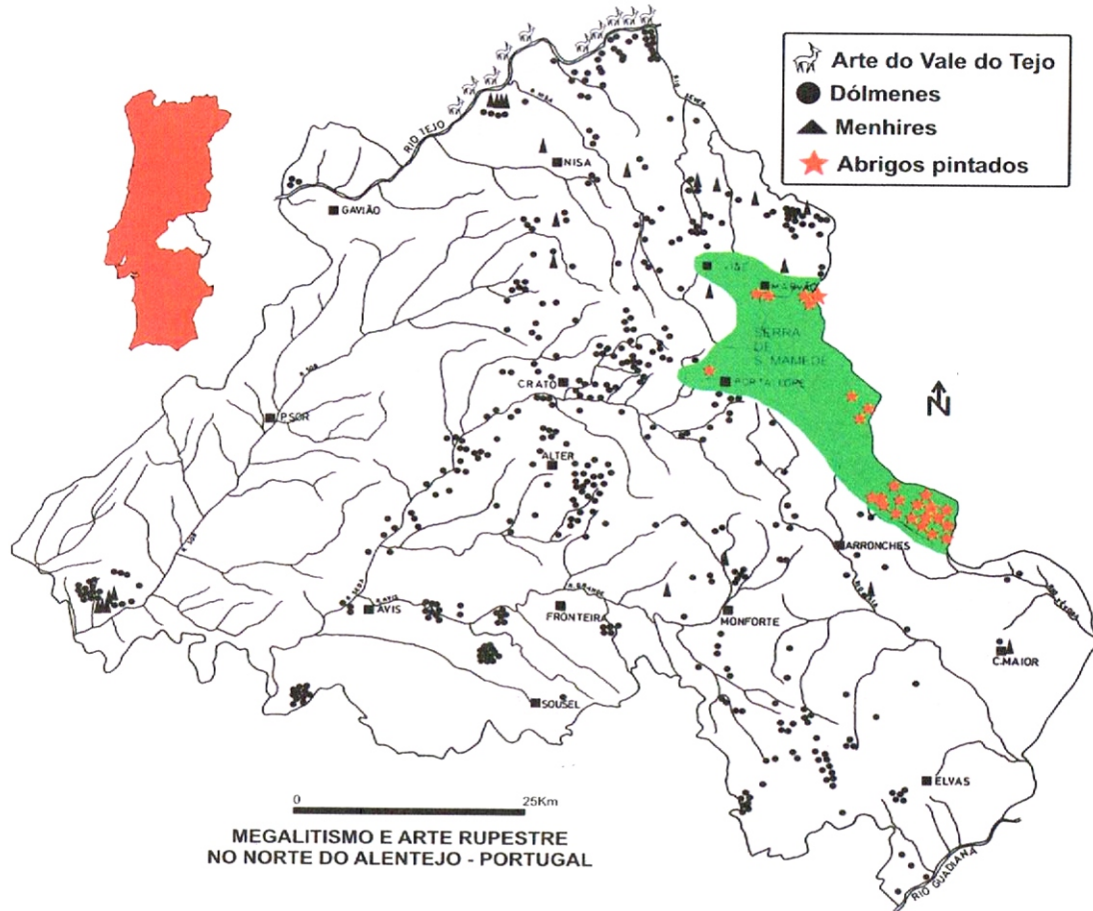


Fig.1. Map of Megalithism and Rock Art in the Northern Alentejo

(Albuquerque), without any protection; or in the narrowest of concavities, which could not accommodate human beings for more than a short time. Excellent examples of this are found in different concavities such as Louçães, Gaviões and Toca da Raposa in the parish of Esperança; in Ninho do Bufo in Marvão; and in Senhora da Penha in Portalegre. The shelter in this sierra with the most diversified and greatest number of paintings is, without a doubt, the Louçães shelter. However, the narrow joint it is in gives onto a tiny space with a steep internal slope, making it extremely uncomfortable for a human to linger there. If Louçães served as a shelter, it could only have been for a short time and in really extraordinary circumstances. The situation is similar in the best-known and first natural opening in Portugal to be scientifically studied, the Gaviões shelter, only a few hundred metres from the former. While the Gaviões shelter is considerably larger than the Louçães one, it

has very sparse living conditions. With an extremely irregular and slippery base, and completely exposed to the elements, it bestows no comfort on anyone seeking refuge for any length of time. However, besides the Gaviões shelter, this is the shelter with the largest decorated area on the outside, the ceiling and the inside walls. The extremely narrow joint in Sierra da Penha, opposite Portalegre, inside which a human only fits with difficulty and in an uncomfortable position, likewise has paintings. This situation is repeated in dozens of narrow concavities scattered over the most unsuspected places in the Sierra de São Mamede.

It has also been observed that when there is a minimally stable shelf outside one of these shelters, complementary artificial structures have been built on it, chiefly in historical periods. This assertion, for want of studies, is only borne out by the characteristics of the structures in front of Ninho do Bufo in Marvão, and in

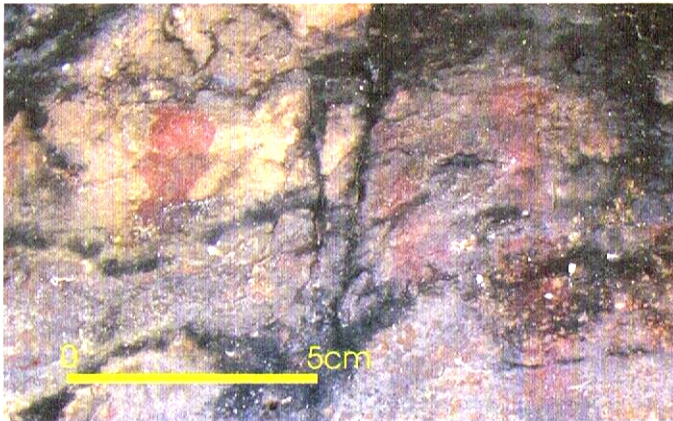


Fig. 2: Top: Dolmen 1 at Nave Fría with Pinho Monteiro shelter in the background (Arronches). Down left: Idol-painting in Pinho Monteiro shelter (Arronches). Down right: "Mask" in Pinho Monteiro shelter (Arronches)

the three short test pits we dug in the Igreja dos Mouros and Gaviões shelters in Arronches. A similar situation, but for different purposes, was revealed by the test pits dug and surveys carried out inside the cave hidden behind the altar in the Chapel of Nossa Senhora da

Lapa near Alegrete in the municipality of Portalegre. While the evidence identified in all the outdoor test pits fits into historic epochs with functions that are directly related to daily rural life, the extension of the Senhora da Lapa shelter was projected to harbour a Christian

sanctuary, whose origins are medieval, if not older than Christianity itself, continuing the pre-historic symbolic decoration seen on the roof of the cave. Fig.3

It is also recognised that there are other shelters in these landforms with better living conditions but no trace of paintings; these shelters face north. Generally speaking, only the joints or walls facing east or south have paintings. It might be assumed that humans were dissuaded from occupying the north-facing joints by the lack of comfort there, but as we have already shown, it seems that what led to the application of paint in these quartzites was not a search for comfort or long-term shelter, but other probably magical-religious factors.

While the direction the joints and walls face seems to be an important factor in whether they have been painted on, we may perhaps find some concordance here with the orientation of megalithic funerary spaces and menhirs. All the menhirs known to us lie on gentle slopes facing the

rising sun, while all the entrances of megalithic tombs obey the same rule, although with slight deviations of up to 15° to the south in the final stage of these manifestations, which is also concordant with the norms that we find in shelters that have paintings.

Chronological position

If there is no doubt that the predominant artistic representations painted on the walls and in the shelters in the Sierra de São Mamede are stylistically and technically attributable to Recent Prehistory, and generically included in the wide spectrum of so-called schematic art, we are not, for reasons we will present, absolutely certain whether they are directly related to the more recent or more distant phases of Megalithism we know existed around them. If we possess a wide battery of absolute dates for ritual megalithic expressions be they funerary or menhirs, which allow us to understand their time phases generically, regarding the region's artistic

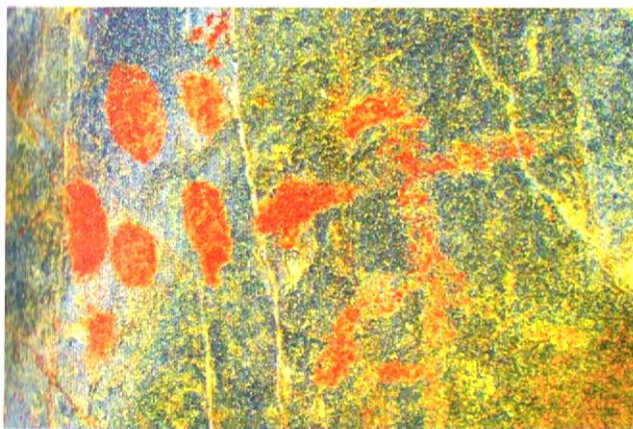
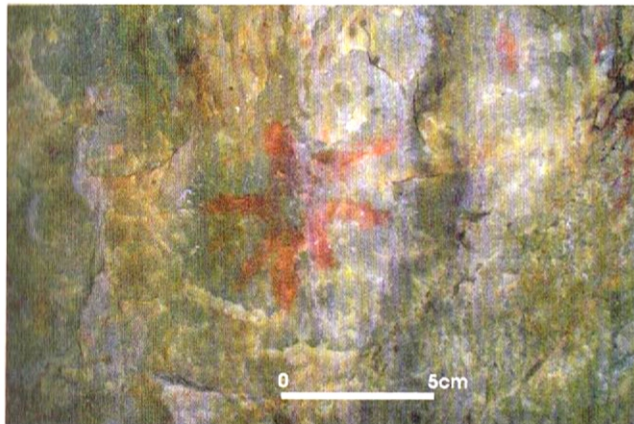


Fig. 3. Top: "Sun-shaped" painting in Pinho Monteiro shelter (Arronches); General view of the paintings inside Louções shelter (Arronches). Down left: Paturieny woman in Ninho do Bufo shekter (Marvão). Down right: View of the test it in Igreja dos Mouros shelter (Arronches)

manifestations, from which we have been unable to obtain direct dates, we are subject to the uncertainties of indirect dating using organic objects from excavations associated with them.

During the work carried out at Igreja dos Mouros shelter (Esperança-Arronches) several charcoal samples were collected, two of which were radiocarbon dated. Charcoal samples associated with small concentrations of orange and white paste, similar to the colours used in the wall paintings, were collected in square E3 located next to the "altar stone" below one of the painted panels, and provided the following age: Beta -336388: 4320 +/- 30 BP, which calibrated at 2 sigma results in the date: Cal BC 3080 to 3060. This date seems to be in line with the materials attributed to the beginning of the Chalcolithic identified in squares E5, E6 and D6, and with the chronologies normally considered in this region for any time in the broad spectrum of so-called schematic art. The other dated charcoal sample was collected at the same monument from the test pit in front of the shelter (D9), inside a structure that appears to be a circular arch. This sample provided the following age: Beta -336387: 920 +/- 30 BP, which calibrated at 2 sigma gives a date in the range: Cal AD 1020 to 1160. This medieval date parallels the date obtained for the surface level charcoal samples collected inside Pinho Monteiro Shelter (Esperança-Arronches), which gave the following age: Beta -296435: 920 +/- 40 BP, which calibrated at 2 sigma results in a date in the range: Cal AD 1010 to 1170. This remarkable match in dates for shelters about 4 km apart is even more relevant when we see that the so-called Christian Reconquest of this area of the Alentejo, by Afonso Henriques' men, would have occurred between 1160 and 1170. It seems that the unrest caused by the military manoeuvres of Christians and Muslims, especially in urban centres, led some to seek refuge in the natural shelters in the area, occupying spaces that others had also sought thousands of years earlier. Although the historical dates for the two shelters we excavated tally, this is not the case for remoter times. While the prehistoric date obtained in Igreja dos Mouros tallies with the age and the cultural horizons generically attributed to schematic art and the materials unearthed in this shelter, it differs by many millennia from the dates and from the sets of artefacts identified in the Pinho Monteiro Shelter, just 4 km away. The two samples collected near the base of Pinho Monteiro Shelter date back to two different occupations, one related to the end of the Palaeolithic: Beta -296433: 9640 +/- 50 BP, which calibrated at 2 sigma

results in: Cal BC 9250 to 9100; the other, Mesolithic: Beta -296434: 8390 +/- 40 BP, which calibrated at 2 sigma results in: Cal BC 7570 to 7460. It therefore seems that man lit fires at Pinho Monteiro Shelter from at least the end of the last glaciation, and in the Mesolithic he once again occupied the place and kindled fires, and also carved flint and quartz near the entrance of the shelter (Oliveira et al. 2012). Later, at the end of the Neolithic and during the Chalcolithic, or even in the early Bronze Age, Pinho Monteiro Shelter was again occupied and some of its users, in addition to erecting a wall at the entrance of the shelter, as interpreted by Mário Varela Gomes (Gomes, 1989), also painted the ceiling profusely, maintaining the schematic theme and colours that vary between red and orange. However, we should be willing to re-evaluate whether all the painted art on the ceiling of Pinho Monteiro Shelter was really executed in the late Prehistoric/early Metal Age, or whether some dates back to the end of the Palaeolithic or the Mesolithic. If that is the case, based on the dates available and the artifacts unearthed in Pinho Monteiro shelter and while we do not have direct dates for the paintings, we should reconsider the chronological-cultural position of at least some art that is considered schematic, which we have generically come to consider as the most recent within Prehistory.

As we have seen, in view of the small number of samples with all the dates obtained indirectly, their time span, and the small set of artifacts that are either attributed to very ancient periods (final Palaeolithic), or more recent times (Chalcolithic) combined with the telegraphic information about the existence of Neolithic and Chalcolithic materials near the entrance to Pinho Monteiro Shelter (Gomes, 1989), the absolute chronological position of the art or arts known in the Sierra de São Mamede remains very uncertain. We will have to consider, in an admittedly syncretic discourse, that the markings on the walls and in the quartzite joints of the Sierra de São Mamede were not, and could not have been executed at the same time and by the same hands. If we attend to the diverse themes, their abundance in the same shelter and geographical space, the different colorations obtained using pigments of different origins, the constant overlays and the different techniques –although these vary only slightly from one to another, we will have to assume that the art in the quartzite crests of the Sierra de São Mamede was executed over a long period of time. It was probably almost as long as the indirect carbon dating suggests. We also need to recognise a

LAB, REF and SITE	Type of sample	Context	Conventional date BP	Cal Date BC / AD (2 sigma)
Beta – 336388	Charcoal	Charcoal associated with concentrations of orange and white	4320 +/- 30 BP	Cal BC 3080 to 3060
Igreja dos Mouros Shelter		paste, below panel with paintings.		
Beta – 336387	Charcoal	Charcoal associated with a semicircular structure outside the shelter.	920 +/- 30 BP	Cal AD 1020 to 1160
Beta – 296433	Charcoal	Sample APM1, on the rock inside the cave.	9640 +/- 50 BP	Cal BC 9250 to 9100
Beta – 296434	Charcoal	Sample APM3, on the rock next to the cave wall.	8390 +/- 40 BP	Cal BC 7570 to 7460
Beta – 296435	Charcoal	Sample APM2, level of charcoal 15cm from the interior surface of the shelter.	960 +/- 40 BP	Cal AD 1010 to 1170
Beta -409560	Human tooth	Human jaw in the interior of the cave	210 +/- 30 BP	Cal AD 1735 to 1805
Senhora da Lapa Cave				

Table 1. Dates obtained in shelters with rock art in the Sierra de São Mamede

lack of artistic expression on surfaces that seem to offer the best conditions yet reveal nothing today, while paradoxically, immediately adjacent areas that are much rougher and more uneven have multiple decorations. In light of this observation we should ponder the possibility that some spaces that are “clean” today previously bore paintings, possibly the oldest; they were probably made with pigments that have since perished but were still visible at the time of subsequent paintings, so were left untouched and only the adjacent surfaces were painted later. Let us also consider the possibility, in light of the directly observed presence of constant picto-

rial overlays, that some of the larger marks with thicker pigments may conceal paintings that were contemporaneous with the oldest dates that we have been able to obtain, for example for Pinho Monteiro shelter, and this could explain the current non-visualization or absence of older art in places where the stratigraphy and absolute dating guarantee that there has been human occupation at least since the end of the Upper Palaeolithic (Oliveira *et alii*.2012).

If our reasoning is correct, we can establish both the proved contemporaneousness of some paintings and the structured occupation of the Igreja dos Mouros

Shelter and with phases of use of megalithic tombs in the region during the late Neolithic and early Chalcolithic, as proved by the abundant dates we have obtained for this region from different tombs (Oliveira, 2020). See the following table with just a few examples of dates very close to the one obtained inside the Igreja dos Mouros Shelter in full association with the paintings there:

Based on this table, we may affirm that between the middle of the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th millennium BC on calibrated dates while the dead were being entombed in dolmens on the lands around the Sierra de São Mamede, and engraved idol plaques, chiefly anthropomorphic but some in slate with geometric decoration, were placed with them, at the top of the quartzite crest,

SITE	Type of sample	Context	Conventional date BP	Cal Date BC / AD (2 sigma)
Igreja dos Mouros Shelter (Arronches)	Charcoal	Charcoal associated with concentration of orange and white paste below panel with paintings and anthropomorph in relief.	4320 +/- 30	3080 a 3060
São Gens Dolmen II (Nisa)	Human bones	Human bones associated with schist idol plaques and geometric decoration.	4340+/-30	3094 - 2914
Horta Dolmen (Alter do Chão)	Human bones	Human bones associated with carved sandstone idol plaque with anthropomorphic decoration in relief.	4390+/-40	3350-3020
Horta Dolmen (Alter do Chão)	Human bones	Human bones associated with schist idol plaque with geometric decoration.	4190+/-50	2930 – 2860
Courelheiros Dolmen IV (Castelo de Vide)	Charcoals	Charcoals associated with schist idol plaque with geometric decoration.	4240+/-150	3335 -2459
Bola da Cera Dolmen (Marvão)	Human bones	Charred human bones associated with mica-schist idol plaque with engraved anthropomorphic decoration.	4360+/- 50	3258-2900

Table 2. Dates obtained from megalithic sites

at least in Igreja dos Mouros shelter, anthropomorphic figures were painted in reddish and orange pigments and sequential marks were scored into white splotches and probably, during the same period, a life-sized human bust was being sculpted in the quartzite.

The graphic messages

It seems that throughout the long megalithic context, but especially in the 3rd and 4th millennia BC, calibrated, idol plaques were repeatedly placed in tombs next to the deceased. These idol plaques were made of sandstone or congenerous rocks common in this region and were engraved with human anatomical features; at the same time there were some simpler examples in slate, with geometric decorations. If the disparities between these symbolic artifacts were not sufficient to generate an interesting discussion, we find other artifacts in association and in the same contexts, which are evidently pregnant with symbolism. They are roughly rectangular or like “stretched skin” in shape and are found equally in complex granite monuments such as the Horta Dolmen in Alter do Chão, and in small, not very expressive slate tombs on the banks of the Tagus, such as the Fonte da Pipa monument in the municipality of Nisa.

These carefully prepared, abundant and exclusively funerary artifacts, some of which were expressively anthropomorphic and which probably originated in this region, must have had deep roots in the mythological complexes of these communities. Based principally on the similarities between the position of their arms and hands when they have them, and the standard gestures of a woman in an advanced stage of pregnancy who for comfort supports her belly with her arms and hands, they are currently widely understood as some Neolithic divinity, intimately associated with fertility, perhaps overlapping with the Palaeolithic “Venuses” of distended breasts and belly. While the anthropomorphic idol plaques, especially those with relief details, may point in this direction, their direct association with other artifacts is more problematic. These are chiefly made of slate with exclusively geometric decoration, although some, admittedly the rarest, show more or less clearly sketched anatomical markings, such as the eyes, nose, and the unusual triangles that scholars of the subject call pubic. A very small proportion of these flat objects, generally the slate ones, have radial eyes, which have a parallel in the vast set of artifacts of bone, limestone or

pottery from the south-west of the Iberian Peninsula that are evidently Chalcolithic. The unusual slate plaque we found in Mitra Dolmen 2, close to Évora, is probably the best illustration of the maternal spirit of these artifacts. In the centre of a roughly rectangular plaque with a decorated border, there is a small human figure engraved with a triangular head perched on a triangular torso with the arms and legs extended. It seems to show a baby boy on his mother’s lap, or, like an ultrasound image, to portray a foetus in its mother’s womb, a not uncommon representation on other media and in other contexts and latitudes among communities that had recently become sedentary.

As we have seen, from the chronological, and apparently the cultural point of view, there is a close relationship between the painted and sculpted shelters of the quartzite crests of the Sierra de São Mamede and the megalithic tombs in the surrounding valleys. It seems the shelters and walls with paintings were not used as shelters for extended periods because they were unsuitable for this ((Bueno Ramírez *et alii* 2004, 2008). As far as we know, only the shelters and walls facing east or south have paintings. In light of these observations we believe that during the period we are dealing with, most if not all of these places would have had a predominantly symbolic, or even magical-religious, function and the paintings in them would have been imbued with this spirituality, where it seems the solar orientation of these places and their command over the monumentalized fields was of extreme importance and probably a determinant in their location. They would thus have been either sacred places or repositories of memories as theoretically they have no other functions.

Thus, considering that the artifacts that were not explicitly functional recurrently found near the deceased in megalithic tombs, generally called idol plaques, are normally anthropomorphs with eyes, nose, hands and arms, and those with geometric shapes have a profusion of triangles, along with –though more rarely– radial or solar eyes, we might suppose that the most recurrent themes in the art decorating the shelters in the sierra overlooking the megaliths would reproduce, profusely, the myths or mythological complexes that justified the most singular votive artefacts found in funerary spaces that were their contemporaries.

So what graphic messages are represented on the walls and ceilings of these shelters? While there are abundant, though not very varied, pictorial messages, it is difficult to find graphic analogies between the symbolic messages we find in the offerings in the dolmens and those identified in the open joints in the quartzite crests. To seek parallels, we first have to identify and describe the anthropomorphic representations. The apparently human representations are always schematically linear and devoid of anatomical details. The head is rarely represented, and when it appears as a point or something resembling a helmet, headdress or perhaps long plaits, which like the arms and legs are always extended away from the torso. In some cases there is a small extension of the torso beyond the top of the legs; whether this is a deliberate attempt to masculinise the figure or the painter's inaccuracy is not clear. These representations are static and painted from the front. The rare expressions of movement are found only in a very discreet form on the ceiling of Gaviões Shelter, in a potential hunting or pastoral scene in which a human figure appears to hold a snare, and in the group of anthropomorphs holding hands represented next to this scene. If we consider the multiple marks like a capital I crossed at the top and bottom, commonly called ichthyiform, as human representations, then it is here that anatomical elements are indeed totally absent. Thus, it seems, we cannot establish any direct parallels with the idol plaques regarding human representation. If any true resemblance between the two graphic messages is to be found, it can only be established between the supposed solar radial representations that occur on the panel at the back in Gaviões Shelter and on the ceiling of Pinho Monteiro Shelter, through which we can draw some graphic parallels with the radial or solar eyes of some Chalcolithic idols and the oculute slate plaques. What stands out most in the idol plaques whether they are in relief or engraved are the faces and their penetrating stare. Among the art created in the Sierra de São Mamede, a painting in Pinho Monteiro shelter in a deliberately dominant position which seems to represent a face, and previous researchers named a mask, stands out. As it has a roughly square outline in which two large points that seem to represent eyes and possibly a mouth stand out, it constitutes the tutelary painting in this space, both for its dominant position and the

communicational relevance it has. It is probably for these reasons that it is the one that shows the most signs of vandalism and at the same time is the one that has the closest graphic and symbolic similarities to its likely contemporaries, the funerary idol plaques. There is another pictogram in Gaviões that appears to be an oculute figure. Thus interpreted, these are the only cases that could be explicitly related to the big eyes that stand out in the megalithic plaques.

Here it is worth mentioning the "Esperança Stela" identified in the early 20th Century by Breuil near the Esperança Shelters during his first visit to the place and which caused such a stir with Leite de Vasconcelos over who owned it. Its exact context is unknown because it seems it would have been near the old path connecting Esperança to Vale de Junco, thus a short distance from the shelters, but also near the foot of the ridge, which is occupied by the Louções prehistoric and protohistoric settlement, and the now destroyed "Cabinhas Stones". Due to its appearance and its belonging to the archaeological context of the shelters, this stela is the idol-like manifestation that is artistically and symbolically closest to the megalithic funerary idol plaques (Bueno Ramírez, 2010:43). Its parallels and relative proximity to the so-called "Crato Stela", which is inscribed at the heart of the relief idol plaques, in which the contour of the head, the striking presence of eyes and nose may establish some magical-religious connection between the artifacts of the funerary world of the dolmens and the symbolic identities that may have been worshiped in the shelters with paintings (Bueno Ramírez *et alii* 2005:595).

The triangle, another repeated image that is a clear marker of identity, especially on slate plaques, is glimpsed only in Pinho Monteiro Shelter in a very imperfect mark, which seems to be a three-sided figure.

If the graphic and symbolic approximation of the clearly anthropomorphic idol plaques to the pregnant woman is borne out, we can indeed establish a close and direct relationship between funerary Megalithism and the art in the shelters via the expressive and, in the national panorama, unique pictogram of the parturient woman of Ninho do Bufo identified in the municipality of Marvão.

In the municipality of Marvão in a narrow concavity open to the west, almost at the top of the fault ripped in the most pronounced quartzite peak that delimits Portu-

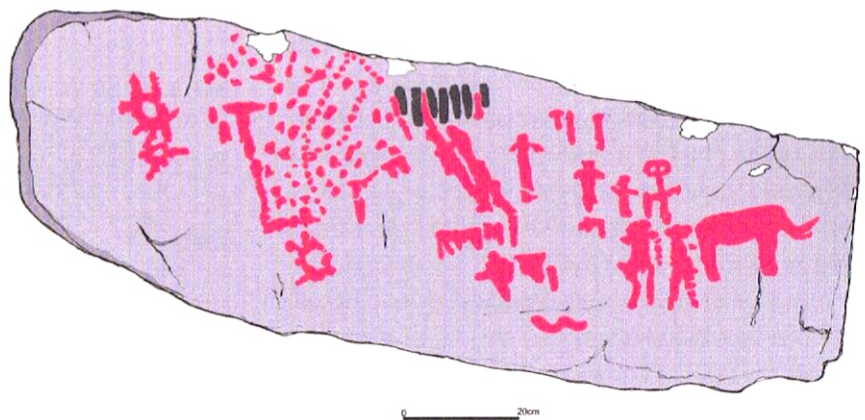
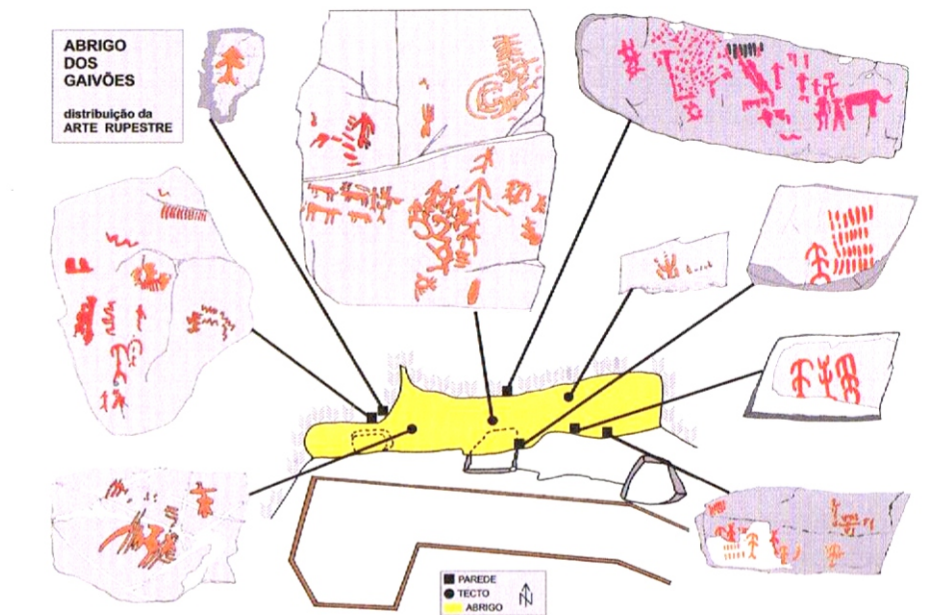


Fig. 4. Top: Showing distribution of drawings of the panels in Gaviões shelter (Arronches). Down: Photo and drawing of the central panel in Gaviões shelter (Arronches)

gal and Spain, there are several radial, cruciform and dot paintings in red and a rare cruciform in white. In the least accessible corner of this small shelter, almost touching the ground, is a vertical anthropomorphic figure, with open arms and legs, and a clearly recognisable head from which a mark extends to the side, which may represent its hair, or headdress. On the very explicit right hand, the thumb seems to be isolated. What is most interesting in this figure is the presence of what appears to be the upper part of another small inverted anthropomorph, consisting of the trunk, arms and head, which appears to emerge from between the legs of the larger human figure. It is not a case, so common in this type of shelter, of superimposed pictograms. It is one painting, done in the same finger-painted colour and technique. It is the representation of a parturient woman with the upper part of the newborn already expelled, its head, arms and part of its torso clearly showing. To the left of the image there are 6 explicit dots, also finger-painted. In the area surrounding this set, thin vertical lines are discernible, also in red and surely painted at an earlier time. The total height of this painting is 11cm and the maximum distance between the arms is 9 cm.

Problematically, this pictogram has been partially erased especially in the lower area, apparently as a result of being touched, but not in an intentionally destructive way, unlike another pictogram which is positioned equally close to the ground and has been brutally scratched, its message no longer perceptible. In other shelters, such as Pinho Monteiro or Gaivões in Arronches, it is clear that the pictograms or panels that stand out most either because they are in a dominant position or easy to read have suffered continuous acts of destruction. In this case, the pictogram appears to have been the continuously selected target of human attention and contact. It is also evident that its surface is more regular than the surrounding rock or paintings. This representation of a parturient women is located in the most protected area of the shelter, somewhat concealed in an inner fold of the natural rock on the left side of the smallest and deepest concavity in the space. It is approximately 50 cm above the current floor. An easily moved loose block of quartzite is found in front of the place where the painting can be seen, making a seat for whoever wants to take temporary shelter there.

The painting of the parturient woman is only exposed to the sun at sunset and is only completely illuminated during the summer solstice.

This painting, which clearly depicts the birth of a human being, is the strongest link we can establish between the symbolic representation of pregnancy by way of the anthropomorphic idol plaques, especially the engraved plaques and the aforementioned slate plaque from Mitra Dolmen 2, and the schematic rock art in the quartzite crests of the Sierra de São Mamede which continually control the surrounding megalithic peneplain.

In light of the above and faced with so many chronological, functional, and cultural uncertainties, there would seem to be more that divides the symbolism of the megalithic funerary objects and the paintings in the shelters in the quartzite crest than can unite them. If they were contemporaries, and surely their lives coincided at some point, they clearly hold distinct symbolic messages. In the valleys where the tombs rise up the underlying materiality is of a spirituality which is theoretically and predominantly funerary and is not mirrored in the graphic messages painted in the joints in the sierra that looms over the valley. Nevertheless, like the dolmens and menhirs that face the sun, only the shelters open to direct sunlight were chosen to guard graphic memories for the future. Amid impossible dialogues, for now the monologues of this symbolic world remain.

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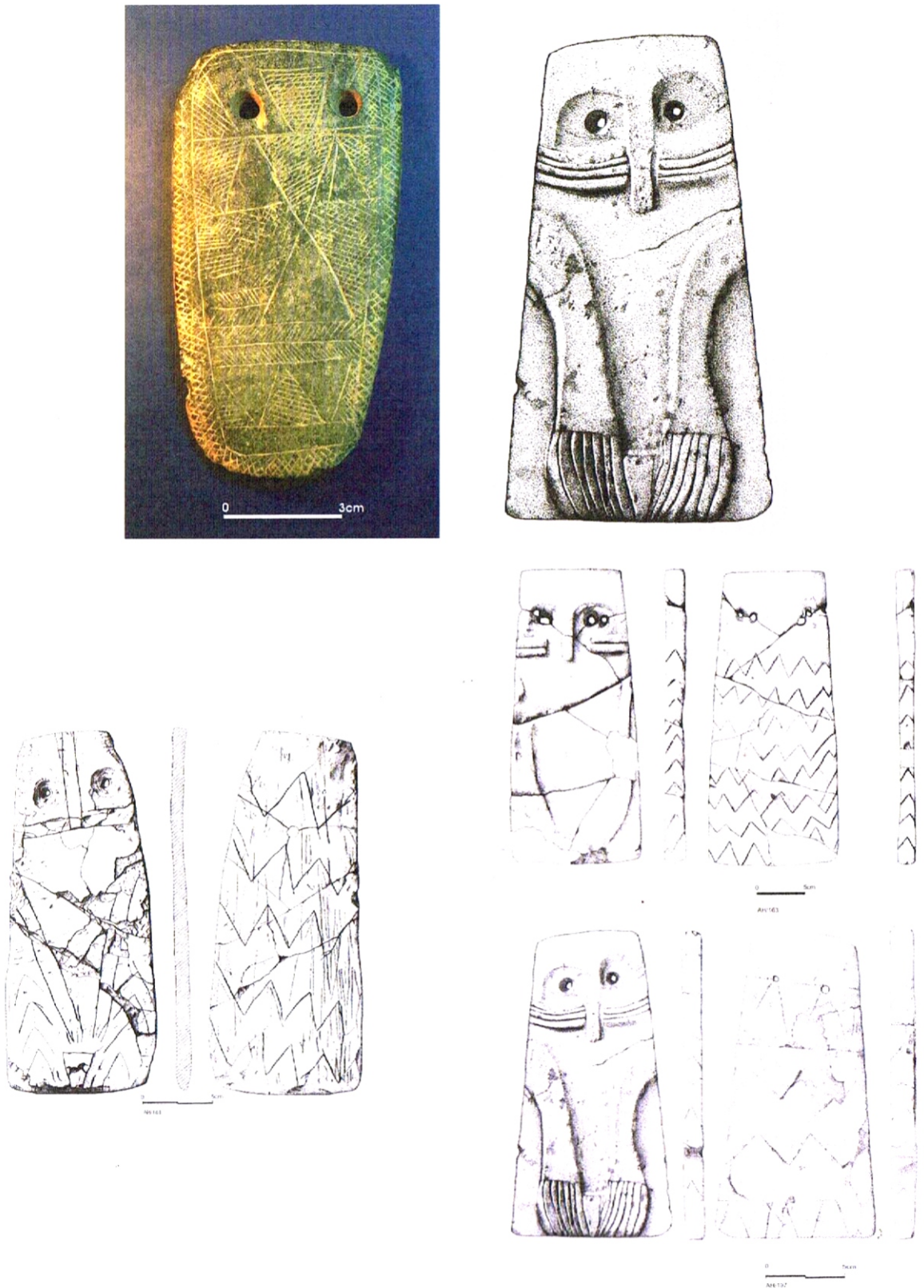


Fig. 5. Top left: Idol plaque in sandstone from Mitra dolmen II. Top right: Drawing of engraved idol plaque from Horta Dolmen (Alter do Chão). Down left: Drawing of an idol plaque in mica-schist from Horta Dolmen (Alter do Chão). Down right: Drawing of engraved idol plaques from Horta Dolmen (Alter do Chão)



Fig. 6 Top: Set of idol plaques in the passage at Horta Dolmen (Alter do Chão)
Down: Different idol plaques from Horta Dolmen (Alter do Chão)

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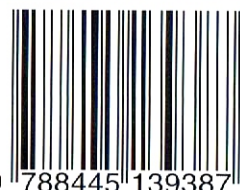
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