From the Origins: The Prehistory of the Inner Tagus Region

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BAR International Series 2219
2011

Published by

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

BAR S2219

From the Origins: The Prehistory of the Inner Tagus Region

ISBN 978 1 4073 0777 0

Printed in England by Blenheim Colour Ltd

All BAR titles are available from:

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

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THE EARLY NEOLITHIC OF THE "COUDELARIA DE ALTER" IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MEGALITHISM OF NORTHERN ALENTEJO REGION – PORTUGAL

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***Abstract**: This article focuses on the results of the work carried out in Early Neolithic habitats and dolmens located at the "Coudelaria de Alter" (Alter Stud Farm). The materials found at the habitats are compared against some others identified at the funerary spaces and the relationship between the presence of menhirs in dolmens and the sites attributed to the Early Neolithic of Northern Alentejo is highlighted.*
***Key words**: Early Neolithic, dolmens, Coudelaria de Alter, Portugal*

***Resumen**: Este artículo se centra en los resultados del trabajo desarrollado en los habitats y dólmenes del Neolítico Antiguo localizados en la "Coudelaria de Alter". Los materiales localizados en los habitats se comparan con otros identificados en contextos funerários, resaltándose la relación entre los menhires situados en dólmenes y los asentamientos atribuídos al Neolítico Antiguo en el Norte del Alentejo.*
***Palabras clave**: Neolítico Antiguo, megalitismo, Coudelaria de Alter, Portugal*

Alter do Chão, a municipality in Northern Alentejo, is home to the *Coudelaria de Alter*, a Stud where the famous Alter Real, a strain of the Lusitano horse, is bred.

Following an invitation from the former Director of the "Coudelaria", Dr. Costa Ferreira, we started a research project in 1999 aiming to study and identify the archaeological heritage existing in this large stud. The project was developed until 2005, its end having coincided with the restructuration of the "Coudelaria" in 2006. The "Coudelaria de Alter" was founded in 1748 by king D. João V, next to the extinct parish of S. Bartolomeu do Reguengo, about three kilometres from Alter do Chão. It is an almost unique example in the landscape of Alentejo, as its eight hundred and fifty hectares, which are mainly used for the grazing of horses and mares, are totally walled, thus making it a highly restricted access area. Adding to this access control, the lack of intensive agricultural practices, so common in Alentejo during the 20th century, ripping the soils up to the rock, with the consequent destruction of innumerable archaeological remains, enabled the preservation of such an abundant archaeological heritage within the "Coudelaria". However, and probably due to the access restriction to these lands, no bibliographic references to the existing archaeological testimonies were known. Thus, our project began with a systematic survey of the area, and, simultaneously, with an intense, although fruitless, bibliographical research. In fact, the existing literature on the municipalities of Crato and Alter do Chão, either by Farinha Isidoro, or by Georg and Vera Leisner, or by Mário Sáa on the Roman road network, did not provide any relevant information of archaeological interest on the area of study. Nor did the writings of senior researchers, such as Leite de Vasconcelos. We then undertook some research work at the manuscripts section of the Public Library of Évora where we found a manuscript, without date or signature, entitled "Antiguidades de Alter do Chão" (Antiques from Alter do Chão) (B.P.E. Cód. CIX/1-16, nº 67). Judging by the calligraphy, the colour of the ink and the type of paper, this manuscript seems to be dated from the end of the 17th century or from the beginning of the 18th century. The document refers to a remarkable ensemble of archaeological testimonies, paying special attention to dolmens, namely to the "Anta do Reguengo" ("Reguengo" dolmen) and to another one located in the "Coutada do Arneiro". These toponyms are currently within the area of the stud farm, and, as the field surveys later confirmed, some of the identified dolmens could in fact be those referred to in the manuscript of the Public Library of Évora. Once the bibliographical research was concluded, the survey works would reveal surprisingly high density of archaeological testimonies, of which are worth mentioning seven dolmens, several sites of prehistoric habitats, ensembles of granite outcrops with schematic rock-art, several graves excavated on the rock and the ruins of the "Igreja de S. Bartolomeu" (Saint Bartholomew's Church).

In view of this surprising archaeological richness, the Direction of the "Coudelaria" decided to promote several actions aiming at the evaluation of the archaeological potential identified during the surveys and, subsequently, at a detailed study of the selected reservoirs. From amongst all those identified and studied under the abovementioned research project, only the ones referring to the Neolithic will be referred to in this article. Due to their singularity and abundance, diverse *loci* of habitats, the "sanctuary" with rock art and seven dolmens are worth mentioning.

Survey works and archaeological excavations within the area of the "Coudelaria de Alter" revealed a continuous and uninterrupted human occupation of this space. This anthropization is thought to have begun with the hunter-gatherer communities, whose testimonies are mainly recognized on the banks of the two main waterlines. However, the landscape is marked by the remains of the first communities of farmers and shepherds.

Fig. 1. “Coudelaria de Alter” location

Within the eight hundred and fifty hectares of this property, there seems to be three units where archaeological evidence has been found. In all of them, the Neolithic testimonies outstand among the other remains. Due to the diversity of testimonies**,** the “Reguengo” unit is the one that can be considered as an Archaeological Complex. Being the focus of our research, it is the source of all our interpretations and reflections. The other two units – “Vale de Carreiras” and “Espera d’El Rei” – separated by “Várzea Grande”, can be considered as territories with their own dynamics and anthropic specificities.

The incipient agricultural technology of the first Neolithic communities, still unable to exploit hard soils, forced them to work softer and well drained soils, found mainly in the “Reguengo” area, at the north-eastern edge of the “Coudelaria”. But these soils were also the most adequate for grazing, especially for a reduced number of cattle, which matched the economic structure of these communities, dependent on hunting and gathering as they were. As strange as it may seem, only recently was it acknowledged that the recesses and the shelters protected by huge rock outcrops, preferably located near springs or streams, in soft slopes, facing South or West, with good visual control but, at the same time, hidden by the outcrops were the chosen locations for the first farmer societies to settle their habitats. The unit of “Reguengo” fulfils all the requirements for the settlement, even if seasonally, of the first communities who were taking the first steps in soil management and animal domestication. Let us now briefly describe the main sites researched.

HABITAT AND “SANCTUARY” OF “REGUENGO”

Due to their geographical proximity and the collection of artefacts exhumed, both the Habitat and the Sanctuary of “Reguengo” are to be interpreted under the same cultural context. Further excavations in the area will certainly provide information about the continuity of occupation, connecting the two sites. The outcrops framing these two Archaeosites constitute a continuous line, those located in the central area being slighter, though, showing what seems to be a gap. The gap that is currently observed owes probably more to recent dumps, than it does to the natural morphology of the landscape. We should not forget that around the “Pedra da Águia”, the greatest outcrop of the region, mainly on the Northern side, the prehistoric level was only detected at a depth of more than one metre The permanent occupation of the area and, above all, the destruction of the village of “Reguengo”, in the 1940s, followed by the soil breaking and the use for grazing purposes, have deeply changed the natural physical relief of the area.

During the early Neolithic, shelters were built around the “Pedra da Águia”, in particular on the southern and western sides, as it is shown by the structures and materials identified there. These habitats were raised and isolated by a rocking paving made of small- and medium-sized setts of granite, probably covered by a mixture of straw and soil, a mixture still used today in some shepherds’ shelters. A wooden structure would stand next to the outcrops, supported by more or less vertical posts,

Fig. 2. Structures of "Reguengo" Habitat – Coudelaria de Alter

Fig. 3. Furnace for Food at "Reguengo" Habitat – Coudelaria de Alter

which would support a waterproof roof revetment made of vegetation, animal skin, or both. To avoid the flooding of the living spaces as a result of draining waters running down the surface of the outcrops, the first inhabitants of "Reguengo" built canals, about 20 centimetres wide and 30 centimetres deep. These canals followed the outer profile of the batholiths, conducting the undesired water away from the shelters. Inside the area that would have been covered, it was possible to identify a part of a fireplace, protected by large blocks of granite, acting as a firewall. The base of the fireplace was paved with small pieces of granite and quartzite, which would work as heat accumulators. The heat fractures and the colour of these pieces showed that intense and extended fires must have occurred. Against the thermoclasts, there were at least part of the bottom of two furnaces to cook food, similar to those that were identified on the banks of the river Guadiana, in Xarez 12 and Carraça 1 (Gonçalves, 2002), only to mention here those recognized in the interior of Alentejo. These furnaces were moulded in clay, with pieces of pottery embedded, and burnt multiple times, which seems to indicate many reconstructions or functional mouldelings. The base of the two furnaces was covered with blocks of rock, acting as heat accumulators. We don't know if the upper parts of these furnaces were also covered with clay when full of food or if they would only be used as a base for roast meat. The furnaces are oval-shaped, about sixty centimetres long, forty centimetres wide and, even today, twelve centimetres deep. The walls are less than eight centimetres thick. The best-preserved furnace presents a narrow opening on one of the edges all along the wall, probably acting as a respirator. If that was its function, then the furnace would be closed with clay. We are, thus, in the presence of furnaces in which, at least, their tops would be rebuilt each time they were used to roast game meat. This way of cooking is still common among the hunters. The so called "coelho à caçadora" (rabbit hunter's style) is cooked in the field in the following way: the entrails and the skin of the animal are taken out. The meat is sprinkled with salt, laurel leafs or rosemary and wine, and then wrapped in the skin. The meat is put in a hole dug into the ground and covered with a thin layer of soil. A fire is then lit over this "furnace" and is kept burning for about two hours. When the fire is extinguished, the soil is removed and the dried skin is taken off. The rabbit is ready to be served.

Within the area of this habitat, over the rocking paving, but above all, around the fireplace, several pieces of cutting flint were found, which indicates that there, while waiting for the meal to be ready, flint instruments were patiently cut. The abundance of pottery sherds, not directly connected, recovered from the soil that covered the rocking paving of the fireplace, led us to conclude that the regularization level of the ground of the hut, probably made of straw and soil, was periodically redone without removing the waste. Not being completely sedentary, these communities would walk around different territories, cyclically returning to their former habitats. They would have to rehabilitate their space, by renewing the covering and rebuilding the ground of the hut. The effort put into the rainwater drainage reveals that, at least during the rainy season – autumn and winter – the current area of the "Coudelaria" was occupied by these Neolithic communities.

About fifty meters to the south of the shelter we have been describing lies the "Sanctuary" displaying rock art. The archaeological materials identified here during the excavation exhibit characteristics identical to those collected from the drillings around the "Pedra da Águia" (Eagle rock), even though in less quantity, which is consistent with the fact of its being used for rituals and not for living. The only identified piece that is not consistent with this magical and religious place is an element from a millstone, which was found on the surface, standing against an old olive tree. Out of the archaeological context, it is easy to perceive its transportation and reutilisation, probably as a shepherd's seat. Seven small egg-shaped shingles, commonly called "ovinhos" (little eggs), are the most significant and expressive lot of artefacts identified at the base-level of the area excavated at the "Sanctuary". With no signs of percussion or functional attrition, these shingles can have a symbolic meaning or, as already suggested, they could have been used as sling stones, a hypothesis which, nevertheless, we don't easily accept in this context. As a

matter of fact, a relationship held with the magical and religious atmosphere of the place where the stones were found seems to us more reliable. Furthermore, it is not unusual to find similar stones among the collections of artefacts related to witchcraft, for divination purposes, the so-called "pedras de lançar" (something like throwing stones).

The other materials collected from the "Santuário" consist of three sherds revealing prehistoric characteristics and miniscule pieces of cutting flint, buried in more superficial layers of humus soil. Due to its small size, these pieces could have come from a nearby *habitat*. Among the found, it is worth mentioning the SPH 33 one. It is a plain pot sherd, with a slight thick edge. This piece is similar to the sherds HR124 and HR65, collected from the superficial layers of the *habitat* described above, which points to more recent contexts, as to the set of artefacts attributed to Early Neolithic period, identified in the layer of the furnaces and the rocking paving of the hut, located near the "Pedra da Águia". The excavation carried out in the "Santuário" aimed to identify materials that could provide a credible chrono-cultural positioning to the rock art engraved on the outcrops. Unfortunately, it was not possible to establish any reliable relationship. The seven shingles can hardly be used as a chronological boundary, since they occur in contexts extending from the Early Neolithic to the end of the Calcolithic, both in *habitats* and, predominantly, in megalithic funerary contexts. Notwithstanding, we have to recognize that the artistic expressions engraved on the outcrops, described above, especially the astral symbols carved on Rock 20, find similarities in the portrayals shaped on menhirs from megalithic sites located in the surroundings of Évora, which, according to the excavators, are dated from the early phases of the Neolithic. If this relationship and chronological positioning are correct, we can consider that the people who cooked in clay furnaces, who had the ground of their shelters covered with rocking paving, who used profusely decorated pottery, were the same who carved the pits and the astral symbols on the rocks setting or a magical and religious space named "Oliveiras do Feitiço" (Witchcraft Olive Trees).

Within all the excavated area, it was only possible to identify material susceptible of radiometric dating in the habitat, on the rocking paving, and near the pottery with incised decoration. It is a horse tooth. However, due to its deep symbolic meaning to the History of the "Coudelaria", and in accordance with its Head Office, we decided to preserve it, not submitting it to a destructive dating process. Concomitantly, the "Coudelaria de Alter" intends to carry out DNA testing so as to compare this sample with the existing database. This option was also reinforced by the strong possibility of finding other datable materials, on further enlargement of the excavation area. Thus, in the absence of absolute dating, we have to draw comparisons with identical sites located in the interior of Alentejo. The Neolithic Site of "Valada do Mato" located in the surroundings of Évora and studied by Mariana Diniz, can be the most significant example to establish a comparison, while the results from the works carried out on the Guadiana valley are not completely available. We can find similarities between "Valada do Mato" and the Habitat of "Reguengo" at the "Coudelaria de Alter" as to the surrounding environment, the rocking paving of the ground and, above all, to the set of artefacts composed of pottery decorated with incisions, impressions, applications and a lithic industry of flake-shaped flint. (Diniz, 2001)

A sample of charcoal collected from the interior of a "combustion structure" at "Valada do Mato" provided a date calibrated at 2 sigmas of 5040 – 4790 BC. (Diniz, 2001 a). Although recognizing the constraints imposed by a date, the date is, nevertheless, of great help in establishing the chronological positioning of the communities of farmers in the Northern Alentejo region. Knowing that the prehistoric record identified around the "Pedra da Águia" is extremely homogeneous, that it is probably dated from the middle of the V millennium BC and that it may result from a relatively short period of occupation, will enable us, further on, to draw some comparisons both with the archaeological evidence of "Porta do Tempo" *Habitat* and with the megalithic tombs studied within the area of the "Coudelaria".

"PORTA DO TEMPO" **HABITAT**

During the Early Neolithic, the settlement of habitats in the area of the "Coudelaria", at least at "Reguengo", occurs among all the largest granitic formations, and most of them around the two megalithic burials here located: the "Horta" Dolmen and the "Soalheira" Dolmen.

Surveyss were also carried out amidst the multiple outcrops located near "Porta do Tempo", which have exposed several shelters from the Early Neolithic period, as well. The name of this site could have been the result of the corruption of the word "templo" ("temple"), since this was the gate leading to one of the most direct paths to the "Igreja de S. Bartolomeu" (saint Bartholomew's Church). The "Toca da Raposa" (Fox-earth) outstands from the other shelters due to the abundance of materials yielded and by its structure. This *habitat* seems to have

Fig. 4. "Toca da Raposa" Habitat – Coudelaria de Alter

Fig. 5. Floorplan of "Toca da Raposa" Habitat – Coudelaria de Alter

been occupied in two distinct phases, at least. The excavation of the site in stratigraphic units and the identification of the phase of occupation in cross-section profiles was unfeasible due to the much reduced soil compaction and, most of all, because of the weakness of the soil. On the other hand, during the excavation we observed spots of slightly humus soil, extending down to the rock, this meaning that intrusion or violation of the area must have occurred. The perception of, at least, two periods of occupation results from the evidence of two groups of materials with distinct features, mainly pottery, fitting different chrono-cultural contexts. In more superficial layers and, thus, richer in humus we essentially recovered bowls, plain pot sherds, with a significant number of thick edges. Their diameter varies from 20 to 40 cm. Beyond this layer, we recovered sherds decorated with all the known variations – incisions, impressions and applications –, as well as sherds of "cardial pottery".

Unfortunately the decorated pottery was much more broken, making it impossible, in most cases, to define their diameter accurately. In the rare cases in which it was possible to project the piece of pottery, we recognized closed shapes whose diameters were circa 25 cm. The pottery spoon registered with the number TR30 may also belong to this context. Most of the lithic tools were recovered from the rocking paving, in association with decorated sherds. The axe TR24, of sub-circular section and perforated edge is included in this group. The remaining lithic industry is composed of flakes, cores and pieces of cutting flint. This *habitat*, well protected and hidden by the outcrops, with a good visual control over the valley that extends west, presents a structure of rocking paving similar to the one identified in the *Habitat* of "Reguengo", five hundred meters far from this one. Likewise, it was necessary to drain the rainwater that flowed over the surface of the outcrops outside the hut that was built here during the Neolithic. The inhabitants of this hut found a more efficient and ingenious solution. While the occupants of the shelter next to the "Pedra da Águia" would only excavate drainage ditches, the occupants of the "Toca da Raposa" chose to use thin blocks of granite, from the natural cleavage of the outcrops, to build structured ducts that followed the perimeter of the main batholiths, collecting and draining the waters to the exterior of the *habitat*. In most of the way, these ducts are set directly on the base rock, being most likely contemporary to the first phase of occupation.

During the excavation works, which were undertaken during the winter of 2005, we had to cover the whole areas of this shelter with a waterproof canopy. Not aiming at developing experimental archaeology, we became aware of the important role played by the rainwater drainage, and when we uncovered the Neolithic ditch we could see that it still worked, preventing the habitat from being flooded. The rocking paving did not cover the whole area of the shelter. This lack of rocks is perfectly understandable on the eastern halves of the squares O10 and P9, where the base rock is more regular and occurs at the same height as the rest of the rocking paving. However, on the other half of these squares and in the excavated area of O9, the base rock is found at deeper levels, revealing a significant collapse with a notorious absence of rocking paving. In this space**,** where there is a lack of elevation rocks and regularization of the floor of the *habitat*, we identified, attached to the rock,

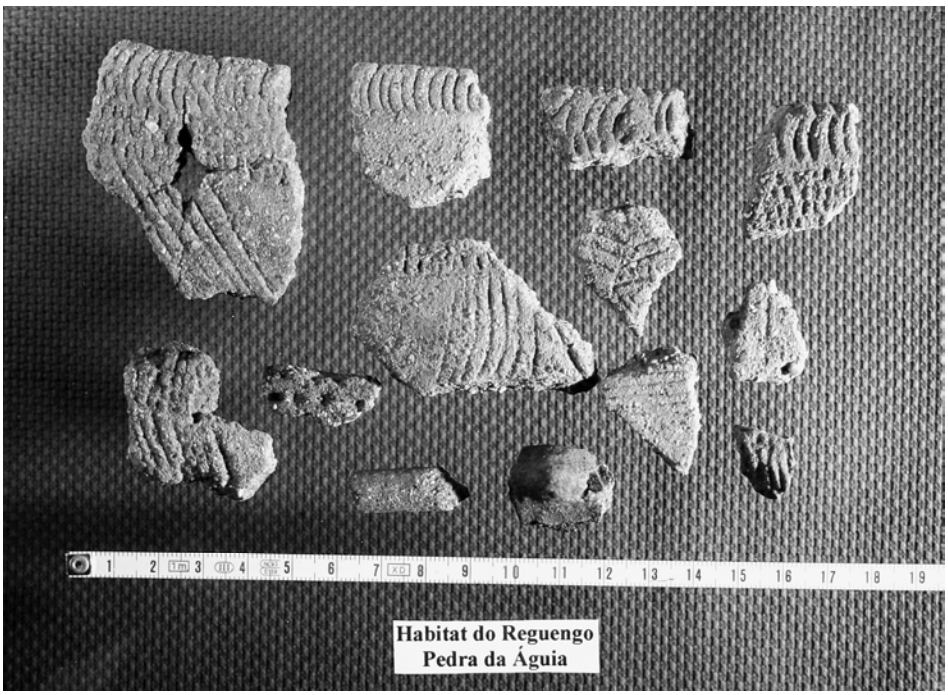

Fig. 6. Sherds dating from the Early Neolithic period form "Reguengo" Habitat – Coudelaria de Alter

Fig. 7. Sherds dating from the Early Neolithic from "Toca da Raposa" Habitat – Coudelaria de Alter

the base of a fireplace formed by a bulky slab of clay. Its current irregular shape and the signs of multiple fractures resulting from the continuous exposure to high temperatures make it impossible to determine its precise total perimeter and original shape.

It was impossible to identify any organic matter suitable for dating around the base of the fireplace, probably as a consequence of the acidity of the soil. The base seems to be located at the same height as the older materials attributed to the Early Neolithic. However, it lies exactly on the area where the major mingling of the soil occurred, exactly where there is no rocking paving, which makes it difficult to determine whether the base of fireplace belongs to the more ancient living context or not.

A structured hole for a post was identified in square O9, on the edge of a rocking paving spot, which seems to be contemporary to the initial occupation of this shelter.

From the description above, the Locus "Toca da Raposa", within the area of the Habitat "Porta do Tempo", may have undergone two occupation phases, corresponding to two different moments of the Neolithic. The fist one can be attributed to the Early Neolithic and is contemporary to the fist occupation of the "Pedra da Águia". The second moment points to a posterior phase corresponding to the Late Neolithic, or even to the Early Calcolithic.

The excavations on the other shelters investigated in the area of the "Porta do Tempo" Habitat also revealed prehistoric occupation dating back to the Early Neolithic.

Locus 1, nested in outcrops, is limited north by a low wall which links the two more distant outcrops, allowing the complete closure of this habitat area. In this area, lying against the southern outcrop, only a small ditch cut in the gravel was identified, perhaps because the effects of the rainwater drainage over the outcrops were not so intense. Apart from this, only a small spot of rocking paving was found, which was probably destroyed during the medieval occupation of this area. The reduced number of

Fig. 8. "Soalheira" Dolmen and Menhir – Coudelaria de Alter

Fig. 9. Small menhir located at the entry of the chamber of "Soalheira" Dolmen

prehistoric findings, composed of decorated pottery sherds, pieces of cutting and fragments of flint flakes is consistent with an Early Neolithic context.

Locus 2 of "Porta do Tempo" presents a structure of rocking paving similar to the one described above. Here we also found a draining ditch cut in the gravel, lying against the largest outcrop that protects the western edge of this area. Located on a steep slope, the superficial layers of this *habitat* present evident signs of trickling water, the presence of modern and contemporary materials as well as prehistoric plain pot sherds, other open-shaped sherds and some others with signs of "carenas" probably medium-sized. A fragment of an unfinished sandstone idol-plate was also recovered. In this layer we found a cylinder-shaped sherd (LOC2 150), showing a transversal perforation, which could have been a part of a loom weight dating from the Calcolithic. Sherds decorated with incisions, impressions and applications were collected beneath the layer of loose soil and through the level of the rocking paving. The chipped stone industry is composed by flakes, burins, cores and pieces of cutting flint. A part of a polished stone axe (LOC2 51) was also found in this context. Special importance is given to a green stone pendant (LOC2 35)

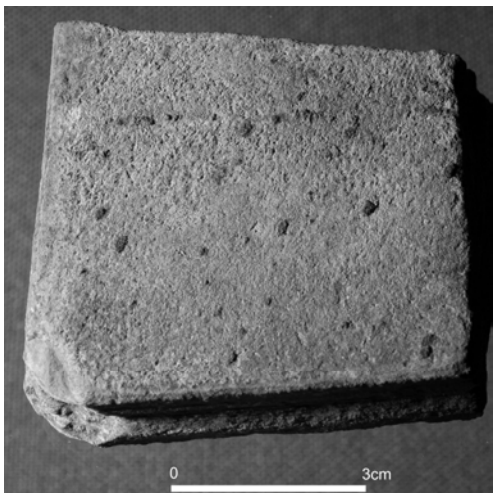

Fig. 10. Fragment of schist plate from Locus 2 of "Porta do Tempo" Habitat – Coudelaria de Alter

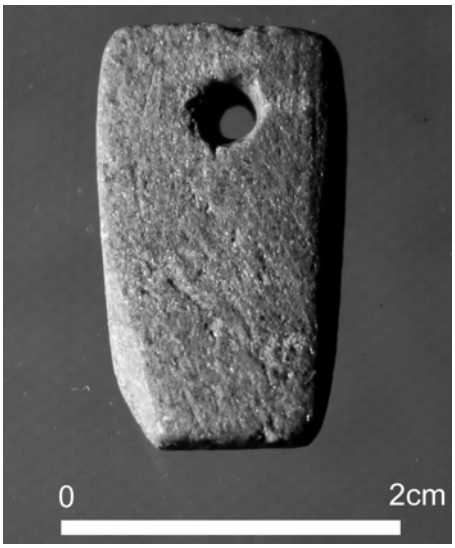

Fig. 11. Pendant from Locus 2 of "Porta do Tempo" Habitat – Coudelaria de Alter

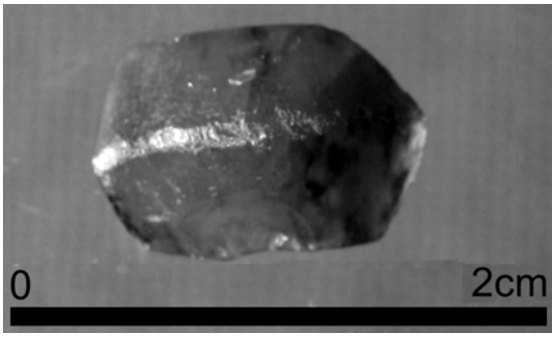

Fig. 12. Necklace bead from Locus 2 of "Porta do Tempo" Habitat – Coudelaria de Alter

and to a fragment of an unfinished sandstone idol-plate (LOC2 192), due to the similarities that can be established with those occurring in megalithic funerary contexts.

Apart from these habitats, there are other sites that witness material features of the Early Neolithic, as well as of later moments of the prehistoric period, even though the last ones are in a lesser quantity. These sites are located both in the area of "Reguengo" and bounded by the granite outcrops in the vicinity of the megalithic necropolis of "Vale de Carreiras". This association and spatial interconnection re-collocate unsolved issues already detected in other sites, especially in the Northern Alentejo region.

MENHIRS AND DOLMENS

Within the area of the "Coudelaria", and apart from the habitats, we also know seven megalithic tombs. At least three of them include phallic menhirs in its structure. Although having a reduced number of available dating for menhirs, among which outstands the date attributed to the "Meada" Menhir, located in Castelo de Vide, which in calibrated dates at two sigmas, may range between 5010 and 4810 BC, it seems to be consensual that menhirs preceded the megalithic tombs of the dolmen type. If we accept this antecedence, the presence of menhirs in the interior of dolmenic funerary structures, which is a recurrent example, may have, at least, three possible explanations. The simplest one would highlight the economy of resources, that is, the builders of the dolmens would make use of stones already cut in the construction of the tombs. A second hypothesis would be that the inclusion of the menhirs would be due to some sort of ritual, forcing the builders of the dolmens to remove menhirs and include them in their structure. The third hypothesis would be that the dolmens were built at the same place where the menhirs already stood, including them in their structure and maintaining the sacralization of the space. Probably, all three hypotheses can coexist. However, and irrespective of the existence or non-existence of menhirs in the building structure of the dolmens, a set of dates is already available for some time now, dates which, nevertheless, are thought to be too old and which were collected in the interior of dolmens located in Northern-Alentejo and in the Spanish "Extremadura". These dates, likely to be close to the date of "Meada" Menhir and, at the same time, to the dating already established for *habitats* from Early Neolithic, make us go back, in calendar years, to the 5th, and sometimes, to the early 6th millennia BC. In fact, many explanations have been given so as to minimize the impact of these ancient dating on the traditional interpretations provided as to the origin of Megalithism, which is always thought to have occurred in the middle and, mostly, in the Late Neolithic. Indeed, most of the available dating for dolmens corresponds to the 4th and 3th millennia, in calendar years, but most of them were obtained from bone material. However, nowadays it is fully accepted that those tombs had a very long and useful life, with clear signs of re-use, rehabilitation and developments. A relevant question to be answered is whether the dating obtained from bone material corresponds to final moments of use or to the time of foundation. We all know how hard it is to find remains of bones suitable for dating, in schisty or granitic soils, soils that due to their acidity completely destroy the organic matter. Probably, we have been dating bones from the end of use of these tombs. We have to say that the more ancient dates, thought to be abnormal, invariably result from pieces of charcoal that have systematically been collected in the base of the monuments or beneath their tumulus, when well preserved. These datings have always been rejected, as they were against the accepted theories, and were thought to correspond to Pre-Megalithic occurrences, thus being much older than the construction of the tombs.

The inexistence of works in habitats from the earliest Neolithic in the same area where ancient dolmens – with known dates – are located, together with the recent availability of absolute dating for Early Neolithic contexts, may have contributed to the absence of interpretative proposals directly connecting dolmens, menhirs and habitats of the first communities of shepherds/farmers.

The works we carried out within the area of the "Coudelaria" seem to facilitate that relationship, despite the fact that, for the time being, those works are based on a restrict number of elements. Let us now focus on the comparison that can be drawn among the findings

Fig. 13. Vessels from "Horta" Dolmen – Coudelaria de Alter

Fig. 14. Schist plates from "Horta" Dolmen – Coudelaria de Alter

recovered from the "Horta" Dolmen, five hundred metres from the "Porta do Tempo" *Habitat*. In the interior of the funerary chamber, revisited several times, we identified nine sherds decorated with incisions, impressions and applications, directly corresponding to the decorative motifs of the sherds found at *Locus* of "Toca da Raposa" and at Locus II of the "Porta do Tempo" *Habitat*. If these similarities were found in the sherds from the "Reguengo" *Habitat*, located fifty meters far from this dolmen, we could be led to think that some contamination by entrainment had occurred. However, this hypothesis is not to be considered since the distance between the two sites is significant. The sherds from the "Horta" Dolmen, AH330, AH331, AH332, AH333, AH225, AH327, AH318, AH287 and AH293, and those from the "Toca da Raposa", TR325, TR560, TR559, TR313, TR106, TR452 and TR211, among many other examples, present obvious and expressive similarities. The same happens with the perforated stone axe AH185, from the "Horta" Dolmen and with the equally perforated stone axe TR24, found at "Toca da Raposa". But the more significant examples were identified at the Locus II of "Porta do Tempo". A green stone pendant, LC2 35, was found at the base level of this small shelter, where decorated sherds, pieces of cutting flint and flake lithic industry normally occur. A fragment of what seems to be an unfinished sandstone idol-plate (LOC2 192) was recovered from more superficial levels of this shelter, in carrier soils. As illustrated by the examples above, there are too many similarities that cannot be ignored between the materials from the chamber of the "Horta" Dolmen and the materials found at the *Habitat* of "Porta do Tempo", undoubtedly from the Early Neolithic. Thus we can establish a close relationship between the users of the *Habitat* and the builders or the first burial of this dolmen. If we are able to establish clear relationships to this dolmen, by means of the collections of artefacts, offering evidence of very remote moments of the Neolithic, at the

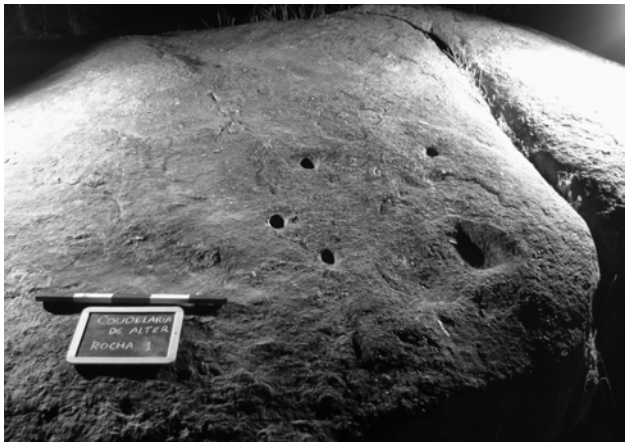

Fig. 15. Stone with pits from "Reguengo" Sanctuary – Coudelaria de Alter

"Soalheira" Dolmen, at the "Várzea Grande" and at the Dolmen nº2 of "Vale de Carreiras", we can find phallic menhirs as part of the corresponding tomb structures, which belong to remote moments of the Neolithic too. Before these facts, the question to be asked is: when were the megalithic graves built in this region? Certainly after the erection of the menhirs. However, having found material, mainly pottery, attributable to the Early Neolithic in the interior of the dolmens, where in time can the menhir period be placed? The "menhiric" phase must have occurred not much earlier than the emergence of dolmens, since the dating from charcoal collected in the base of dolmens and under their tumulus, as "Castelhanas", "Cabeçuda" and "Figueira Branca", in Marvão, and even the "Joaninha" Dolmen, in Cedillo, can be settled within the chronometric dating boundary already available to the *habitats* of the Early Neolithic. The same happens with the date attributed to the "Meada" Menhir. Based on this data we shall have to accept that

the practice of menhir erection did not last long, these monuments having been rapidly included in the megalithic graves. The phase of the menhir erection must have been ephemeral. Otherwise, there must be another explanation for the very ancient dating of the dolmens and the presence of pottery from the Early Neolithic in their interior. The thesis of translocation defended by Leonor Rocha (Rocha, 2005) makes sense, but it does not offer any answer as to the question of the ancient dating obtained beneath the tumulus. In previous studies, and based on evidence, we demonstrated that some of the dolmens that we studied in the Northeast of Alentejo had been built over prior *habitats*, where there were fireplaces and storage bins (Oliveira, 1997 e 1998). However, that situation was not observed in the monuments that we studied in the "Coudelaria". In fact, the sites of the *habitats*, located at the surroundings of the dolmens, are well defined.

Despite the fact that our findings are still inconclusive, as a great deal of work must still be undertaken and many questions to be answered, it is our belief that the amount of evidence collected is large enough to reject the hypothesis that the builders of these dolmens were the same who chose the outcrops of the "Toca da Raposa" or of the "Pedra da Águia" to raise their shelters, while they developed the first farming techniques and learnt to take care of the herds, between the VI and V millennia BC. The major problem to tackle refers to the relative dating of the emergence of menhirs. If they already existed before the construction of the first dolmens, then we have to consider at least two phases during the Early Neolithic. An older phase, when the menhirs were erected, followed by another one when the megalithic tombs were built, which includes the menhirs in their funerary structure. An alternative to this interpretation may be accepted provided that, in the future, there be an accurate definition for Middle Neolithic To reanalyse all these issues, it is necessary to extend the areas of excavation of the habitats and, above all, to find datable materials to help us clarify, with precision, the periodization of the Neolithic in the interior of Alentejo.

English version by Isabel Margarida Saianda

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