

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

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Death as “life’s mirror”?

Funerary practices and trajectories of complexity in the prehistory of peasant societies of Iberia

João Carlos SENNA-MARTINEZ

Abstract

In Iberia, between Middle Neolithic and the Late Bronze Age, funerary practices will suffer transformations that encompass the main structural change of society. I.e. such changes sometimes allow and can even substantiate periodization options. In this paper we propose to discuss such dynamics, their archeographic visibility and consequences to the construction of social models.

Key-Words: Western Iberia, Prehistory of Peasant Societies, Funerary Practices, Social Models.

Besides iconography, the main window that allow us to peek into social change and complexity transformations in Iberia during the Prehistory of Peasant Societies (i.e. the historical phase that encompasses the period of time between Early Neolithic and the Late Bronze Age) is funerary practice.

This prehistoric phase can be divided into two long-duration trends: (1) the one we can generically call “Neolithic” and which we perceive as encompassing part of the so called Chalcolithic period; (2) the Bronze Age with some aspects of the Late Chalcolithic.

1. In the Beginning

If we accept Gimbutas proposal of the role of a “Goddess” in the origin of a “*matrifocal and probably matrilineal, agricultural and sedentary, egalitarian and peaceful*” society (Gimbutas, 1996, p.9) then we must think how this general model can or can’t be adapted to the actual conditions of Iberia regions in the times and historical phasing of pre-urban peasant societies.

The Early Neolithic in Iberia is not uniform across its different regions. As it will happen during the lapse of time encompassing the existence of its prehistoric peasant societies (from Early Neolithic to the Late Bronze Age) Iberian regional diversity will be the rule. Namely, the extent of the Neolithic agricultural component will vary profoundly from area to area in Iberia, with cereals being the latecomers for its central and northwestern areas (Zapata, *et al.* 2004).

Even in the Levantine area (the shores of Cataluña and Valencia) it seems that the early agro-pastoralists to arrive coexisted for a time with “indigenous” mobile hunter-gatherers, till these last ones are “converted” to the new ways (*Id.*; Fairén-Jiménez, 2007).

Resumo

Na Península Ibérica, entre o Neolítico Médio e o Bronze Final, o tratamento da morte sofre transformações que acompanham as grandes rupturas estruturais das sociedades. Isto é, permitindo e substanciando, por vezes, opções de periodização. Propomos uma reflexão sobre estas dinâmicas, a sua visibilidade arqueográfica e respectivas consequências para uma modelização social.

Palavras-Chave: Ocidente Peninsular, Pré-História das Sociedades Camponesas, Práticas Funerárias, Modelos Sociais.

Funerary practices of Iberian Early Neolithic societies are not yet very well known, namely in Portugal. If we take as representative the case of Castelo Belinho’s Neolithic village in Western Algarve (Portugal) it shows an estimated population of “...between thirty and fifty people...” and fourteen documented graves, interspersed between the eight habitational structures excavated (Gomes, 2012, p.113-115) with a presumed social organization that possibly “...relied on a communitarian model based on several household units...” (*Id.*).

In the Spanish Mesetas a few recent finds show a similar funerary situation in the Early Neolithic with scarce and isolated graves, mostly in pits, always in domestic open air habitats or within caves (Rojo-Guerra and Garrido-Pena, 2012).

Similar burials are known at the Moura and Serpa areas in Alentejo, but at later dates.

Most of the pit burials occur in negative structures of inverted bell shape like grain silos usually are. This situation probably implies re-use of previously existing silos but can also have a link with the metaphor for life regeneration that the concept of seed storage implies (Williams 2003, 242).

Whenever their conservation state allows a complete contextual analysis, this type of burial implies structures that were closed thereafter, i.e. which were not opened again to dispose new individuals.

In Castelo Belinho, the possibility of a spatial layout of the funerary pits and houses according to probable “*astronomic orientations*” (Gomes, 2012, p.115), eventually of a seasonal calendar nature, opens the door

to a possible correlation with what happens with the development of megalithic monuments from the Middle Neolithic onwards.

2. From Middle Neolithic to the Chalcolithic: In between Megalithism.

Since the transition to farming and pastoralism occurs at a different pace and in multiple forms, in the different regions of Iberia, combined or not with hunter-gatherer practices, it's by no means a sure thing that agriculture is everywhere in Iberia a pre-condition to the emergence of the construction of megalithic funerary monuments. In several areas it can be argued that animal husbandry predominates (namely ovi-caprids) together with different degrees of what we can call horticulture, hunting and gathering. Such is the case of Central Portugal (Senna-Martinez and Ventura, 2008b).

What the different regional scales of agriculture and animal husbandry adoption have in common with specialized gathering (such as acorns as in Central Portugal – *Id.*) is the development of a proprietorial attitude toward land (Fairbairn, 2000), leading to what we have called the passage from “*use-territories*” to “*occupation territories*” (Senna-Martinez and Ventura, 1999).

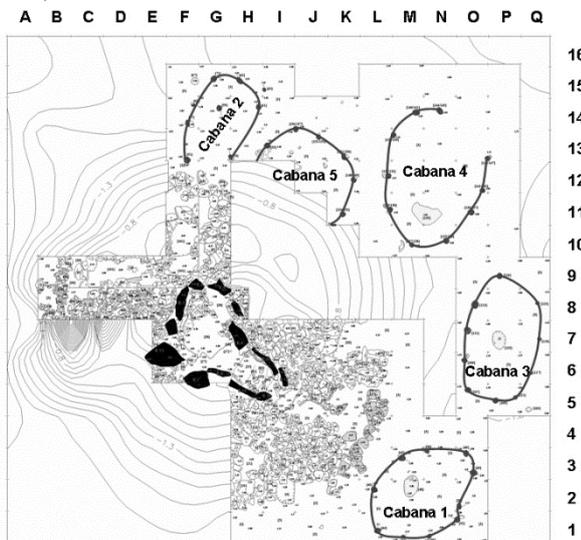


Figure. 4.1: The Middle Neolithic Dolmen of Folhadal built over the hut remains of an Early Neolithic habitat.

We defended this to be the probable main reason for the emergence of Megaliths (fig.1), which marks the transition between Early and Middle Neolithic in the Mondego's Platform in Central Portugal (Senna-Martinez and Ventura, 2008a), and we think that reasoning can be extended to the other Iberian areas where early funerary megaliths evolved.

Critical resources imbalance and social dispute can be said to be behind the development of formal disposal areas for the dead (Chapman, 1981, p.80) as a form of legitimizing territory ownership. Ad monumentality to this equation and funerary monuments can be related

either to land cultivation, pastures and or foraging rights, alone or all together, so being capable of a multiplicity of socioeconomic combinations encompassing a large spectrum of resources that have in common a new territorial approach.

Several areas in Iberia see this happen between the last quarter of the 5th millennium BC and the first quarter of the 4th. In Atlantic Iberia – Central and North Portugal and Galicia – as well as the interior plateaus the season of critical resource availability would clearly be winter. Then lowland pastures and fall foraging would support both flocks and men and complement whatever contribution a small-scale agriculture could provide. In Beira-Alta plateau acorn recollection was proved to be such an important winter resource whence toasted and stored (Senna-Martinez, 1995; Senna-Martinez and Ventura, 2008a and 2008b).

Fall acorn and other winter fruits gathering and processing seems to go together, in several Iberian regional areas, with the period (fall and winter) when building of megalithic tombs took place, either we agree with the solar hypothesis for their orientations (Hoskin, 1998, 2001) or take into consideration other proposed astronomical orientations (Silva, 2012).

In the Mondego's river interior basin (or plateau) fall and winter seem to be the seasons when lowland habitats were in use (Senna-Martinez and Ventura, 2008b) bringing into being the regional seasonal pattern of transhumance between lowland and highland pastures that persisted into contemporary times (Martinho, 1981).

The return to earth and rebirth metaphors for burial that go together with the agricultural cycle as metaphor (Williams, 2003) can be used to explain the birth of megalithic tombs as a natural cave replacement in burial, and also explain why in many areas of Iberia where natural caves exist these were in such use for the Prehistory of Peasant Societies duration and sometimes longer. For instance, ritual similarities between megalithic burial and cave burial in Portuguese Estremadura led Victor Gonçalves (1978) to support the concept of “cave megalithism” to emphasize such similarities (Boaventura, 2009).

Late Neolithic and Chalcolithic will bring both some trend confirmation and transformations to megalithism and burial practices.

The first transformation that occurs is in terms of scale. While the small monuments of Middle Neolithic seem to imply that not all the elements of the community that built them would be buried there (Senna-Martinez and Ventura, 2008b, p.325) the large passage-grave tombs of Late Neolithic (fig.2), now built in greater numbers, could accommodate a much larger number of burials accompanying the Neolithic “demographic revolution”. These later monuments also imply a larger community for their construction with more time and more hands needed. The calculations made for the Beira-Alta dolmens show a multiplication by more than three of the required time and work-force between Middle and Late

During the Late Neolithic and the Chalcolithic, the Iberian SW is also the area where iconographic expressions of a feminine symbolic entity, that we can think of in terms of Gimbuta's (1996) "goddess", largely occur together with other expressions of "the agricultural cycle as metaphor".

In between cromlechs, megalithic chamber tombs astronomical orientations, and astronomical alignments of structural components in some ditch-limited enclosures, most of the symbolic components associated with life and death in these communities can be viewed as components of the symbolic of the agricultural cycle as metaphor we already discussed. These symbolic expressions probably reflect a long trend world view, we can call Neolithic, that we think characterize this first stage of the Prehistory of Peasant Societies.

Antonio Gilman's idea that "...the intensification of copper age collective burial rites [...] is meant to mediate the incipient social differentiation of the third millennium." (Gilman, 1987, p. 29) accommodates well the new evidence provided by the proliferation of the recently discovered ditch-limited enclosures as architectural multifunctional expressions within the regional settlement systems. A late and transitional² example is provided by the small funerary (?) enclosure of Bela Vista 5 (Valera, 2013).

3. The Bronze Age, between change and continuity

3.1. The First Bronze Age³

Around the beginning of the last quarter of the third millennium BC, changes in several aspects of early Iberian peasant societies can be detected, pertaining mostly to their social organization and symbolic systems, and marking the beginning of the Bronze Age (Senna-Martinez, 2009). These are not uniform across the different Iberian regions but, nevertheless, allow us some degree of generalization, namely three discontinuities in the field data materialise these changes: (1) the decline, abandonment and restructuration of settlement systems; (2) the end of megalithic collective burial; and (3), linked to the above mentioned two, the emergence of a new symbolic system is revealed by the fading of feminine iconographic representation, the development of an andriarcal iconography, and the role of metal weapons and jewellery as social markers of prestige and power (Senna-Martinez, 2007, p.120).

The rise of an individual treatment in death as opposed to the megalithic collective rituals is clearly marked in the Peninsula southern half, namely the Southwest, the Argaric areas and Mancha. For the Atlantic Estremadura,

² In the sense that it presents both vestiges of the "neolithic" practices together with what we can call an individual "prestige" central pit inhumation of a woman.

³ For the sake of simplicity, we consider in this paper the Bronze Age divided into a First Bronze Age [encompassing the traditional Early (EBA) and Middle Bronze Ages (MBA) – c. 2250-1250 BC] and a Late Bronze Age (LBA – from c. 1250 BC up to regional beginning of the Iron Age – c. 850 BC in the southern half of the Peninsula and c. 450 BC in its Center and NW).

Portuguese Beiras and Northern Meseta things are not as clear cut because of the "parasitic" reuse (Jorge, *et alii.*, 1997) of megalithic tombs and continuity of use of natural cavities⁴ (fig.4).

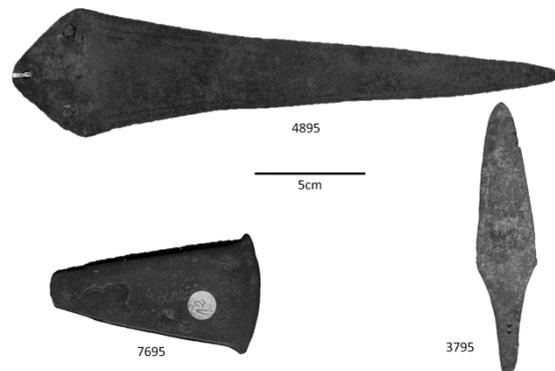


Figure 4.4: Halberd, Palmela point and axe of arsenic copper. Part of the large set of metallic artefacts and pottery vessels from the EBA individual burial from Gruta das Redondas in Central Portugal.

Nevertheless, the individual burials from Montelavar (Sintra – Harrison, 1974) and Gruta das Redondas (Carvalho de Aljubarrota – Natividade, 1901) and other known cases from the Portuguese Beiras, in parallel with the "parasitic" reuse of megalithic monuments – as in the case of the later Beaker burial in the corridor of Orca de Seixas (Senna-Martinez, 1994a) – indicate a tendency to such individual treatment. For Beira Alta, new burial types under small and non-megalithic tumulus are other examples of such a tendency (Cruz, 1998; Cruz, Gomes & Carvalho, 1998a e b).

In the North of Portugal, namely in Minho, individual treatment of the dead is clear. Examples range from a few exceptional burials – for instance in the case of Quinta da Água Branca cist burial – to simpler situations in what concerns grave goods as in the Vale Ferreiro necropolis (Bettencourt, Lemos e Araújo, 2002; Bettencourt, *et al.* 2005). In this regional area and besides the generalized individualization of funerary ritual there exists a broad polymorphism of building solutions ranging from "parasitic" reuse of megalithic tombs to the internal variety detected in various necropolises, such as Vale Ferreiro.

Once lost the architectural monumentality of the Neolithic megalithic tombs it becomes harder to identify the existence of post-inhumation rituals as their visibility diminishes. Nevertheless, in the Argaric and Southwest cultural areas we already have an abundance of evidence for commensality rituals associated with almost the complete range of burial types (Aranda Jiménez e Esquivel Guerrero, 2006, 2007; Gomes *et al.* 1986; Gomes, 1994; Alves, *et al.* 2010). Such a possibility also

⁴ As for instance in the case of the recently revised and republished set of materials from Furnas do Poço Velho (Cascais – cf. Gonçalves, 2009: 135-137).

exists, in Northern Portugal, for Monumento 1 of Outeiro de Gregos (Jorge, 1990) with its peripheral structure.

In Iberian First Bronze Age another generalized transformation in burial ritual concerns the kind of grave goods that accompany the deceased. While in the Late Neolithic and Chalcolithic the burial space can be seen as an extension of the domestic space – where the range of grave goods replicate the ones used in the living quarters (Senna-Martinez e Ventura, 2008, p.342; Senna-Martinez, López Plaza & Hoskin, 1997, p.666) – in the First Bronze Age only a few items were chosen.

The situation is clear cut namely in what concerns pottery where a very limited ranges of vessel types have funerary use and sometimes they are predominantly produced to such use⁵ (fig.5).

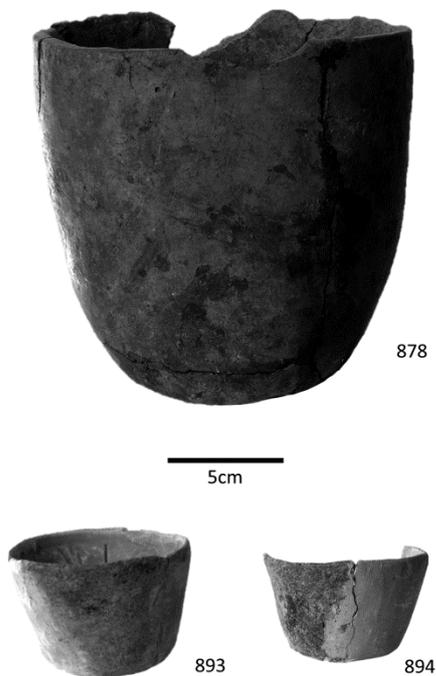


Figure 4.5: Tronco-conic vessels. Part of the pottery offerings from the EBA individual burial from Gruta das Redondas.

Besides specially produced pottery vessels, the distinctive mark of “elite burials” mainly consists of metal artefacts: (1) weapons for the male ones (halberds, tongue-daggers, Palmela points, tongue-swords, , in the EBA and, in the MBA, axes with large cutting-edge, riveted-hilt swords, riveted daggers, and long tanged points), as well as jewellery (beaten gold diadems, sword-handle decoration, and “archer brassards”); (2) utensils for the female ones

⁵ As, for example, in the case of the so called Siret’s type 6 (Castro Martínez, *et alii.*, 1993-94: 102), the tronco-conic vessels of Central an Northern Portugal areas (Senna-Martinez, 1993 e 2000: 107) and the “rippenvase” or “zonenvase” from the Southwest (Schubart, 1975: 46-49).

(knives, awls) and also jewellery (mainly in beaten gold-plate and rarely in silver – diadems, finger rings, bracelets or dress applications).

The scarcity of the items produced in copper or arsenical copper – we don’t even need to mention the very few items in gold or silver – and their main association as funerary offerings of a select few burials⁶ since the EBA, all points towards a non-technomical character for this early metallurgy of Iberia (Roberts, 2009, p.472).

The EBA is the period when the first situations of metal artefacts ritual deposition as land or water “deposits” – as material sacrifice or “death” of the deposited items – occur (Senna-Martinez, 2009). In almost all the registered occurrences these deposits are constituted of halberds blades (fig.6), rarely with a few other items that can, nevertheless, include a few jewellery items.

Parallel to their funerary or ritual deposit, these exceptional “packages” of weapons and jewellery items can appear as iconographic depiction, either *per si*⁷ or (less often) as paraphernalia of the first “power anthropomorphic representations”⁸ that extend into the MBA.

From this EBA metal “package” the first long daggers (or tongue-swords) and principally the halberds (fig.6) constitute supra-regional types of artefacts that either as part of “deposits”, a funerary item or an iconographic depiction clearly illustrate this new “discourse of power” (Senna-Martinez, 1994b e 2007).

Being a supra-regional symbol, the halberds nevertheless show different regional treatment alongside Western and South Iberia. They seem to function as a way of regional elites being “*a la page*” while maintaining different regional representational idiosyncrasies. So and without pretending to be exhaustive:

- (1) Galicia and Minho regions will see “deposits” marking land and water inter-areas points of transit (cf. Leiro, Rianxo – Meijide, 1989) as well iconographic representation in petroglyphs (Costas Goberna, *et al.* 1997);
- (2) in Eastern Trás-os-Montes and part of Zamora province we will have only land and water “deposits” (Senna-Martinez, 2006) with stelae close by, as in the cases of Valdefuentes de Sangusín (Salamanca – Santonja Gómez and Santonja Alonso, 1978) and Longroiva (in *Beira Transmontana* – Almagro, 1966), as two clear “power figures”;

⁶ Even in the Argaric Southeast which is the socially most complex area of the Iberian Peninsula (Castro Martínez, *et al.* 1993-94).

⁷ This is both the case of the engraved stone schist slabs covering cist-burials in the Southwest First Bronze Age (Early and Middle – Barceló, 1991; Gomes & Monteiro, 1977) as well of the Galician petroglyphs (Costas Goberna, *et al.* 1997).

⁸ As in the case of some stelae and menhir-statues from the Portuguese Beiras and Trás-os-Montes (Sanches & Jorge, 1987; Jorge & Jorge, 1990) as well as the stelae from the Southwest (Barceló, 1991; Gomes, 1994; Gomes & Monteiro, 1977).

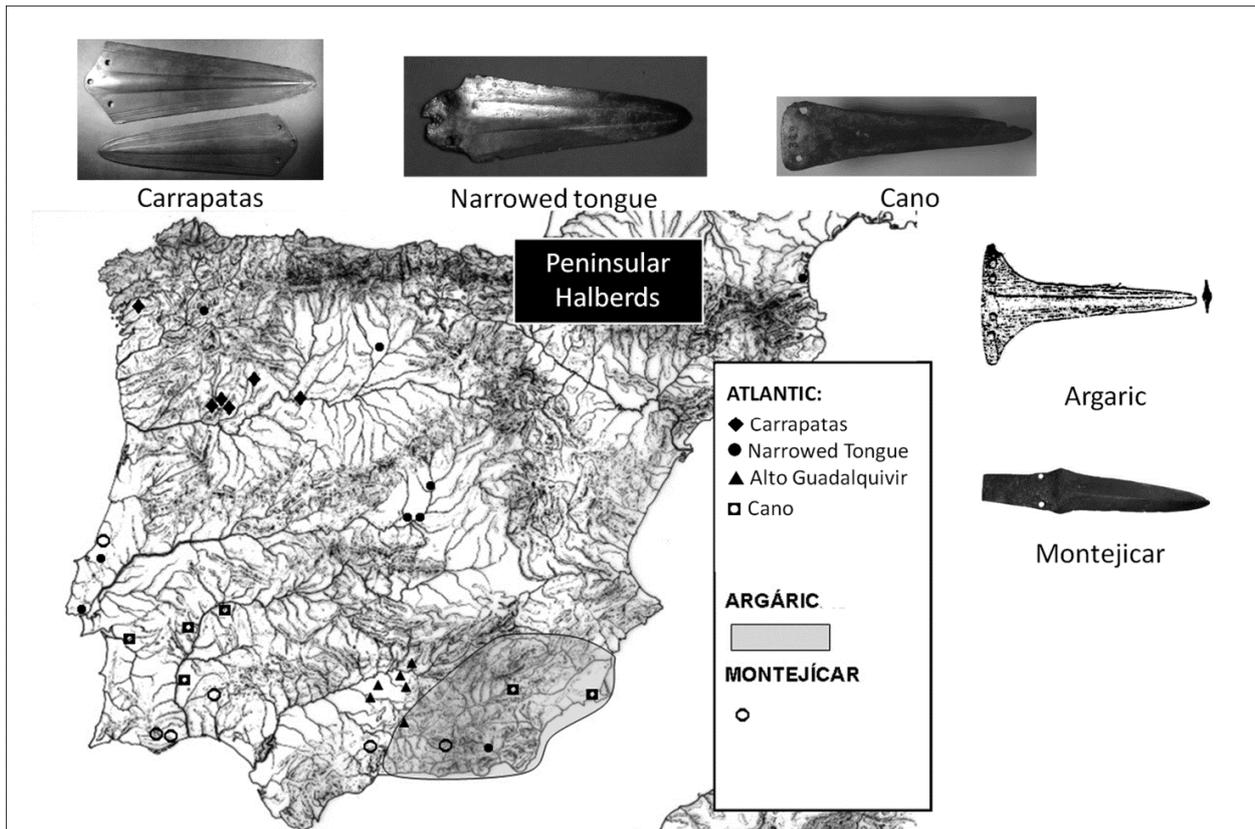


Figure 4.6: Halberd types distribution from the Iberian Peninsula (cf. Senna-Martinez, 2007, fig.1).

(3) in the Southwest (Alentejo and Algarve) cases of a probable land “deposit” (Cano, Sousel – Carreira, 1996) coexist with funerary depositions (Vale de Carvalhos – cf. Arruda *et al.* 1980; Antas, Tavira – cf. Senna-Martinez, *et al.* 2013), an habitat site (Castillo de Alange – Pavón Soldevila, 1994) and pictographic depictions in stelae and schist slabs to cover inhumations (Senna-Martinez, 2007, p.124-5, fig.4);

(4) the Southeast (the so called “argaric area”) privileges funerary depositions (Castro Martínez, *et al.* 1993-94).

In Iberia the MBA – c. 1750-1250 BC – will see the disappearance of the halberds as a “symbol of power”, being replaced by flat axes, with large cutting edges in relation to the butt, that in the Iberian Northwest (Galicia, Minho and Trás-os-Montes) are designated as of “Bujões/Barcelos” type (Senna-Martinez, *et al.* 2013). Found either in “ritual deposits” (from the Northwest to the Estremadura in Central Portugal), or as funerary offerings (mainly in the Argaric area – Castro Martínez, *et al.* 1993/1994) this occurrence also replaces the halberds by axes as “symbols of power”, that seem to uphold the same symbolic meaning (Senna-Martinez, 2009).

The only regional area in Iberia where we have consistent data hinting to hereditary social status coming into being during the 1stBA is the Argaric Southeast.

Three infant and juvenile burials with metal offerings, one from Peñalosa (Burial 5-CE VIIa – Contreras Cortés, Sánchez Ruiz and Nocete Calvo, *Eds.* 2000, p.212) and two from Cerro de la Encina (Burials 8 and 10 – Aranda Jiménez and Molina González, 2006, p.52-53 and Table I), the last two including pieces of gold and silver jewelry, together with a clear spatial differentiation of the dead – with elite habitat areas as well as tombs occupying the habitats acropolis – testify to probable hereditarily social status and clear social stratification (Aranda Jiménez and Molina González, 2006; Jaramillo Justinico, 2004).⁹

The Argaric situation contrasts strongly with the observed realities of other Iberian regional areas, where infant and juvenile burials are very rare and prestige items conspicuously absent. This situation hints to most of the Iberian regions being organized into loose polities where non-hereditary social status was mostly acquired during each individual lifespan, within probably very small local/regional elites that monopolized production and consumption of scarce prestige items.

⁹ This is not the place to a full discussion of the type of political organizations present in the El Argar Culture Group. Nevertheless, we tend to accept the recently expressed position of Aranda and Molina that Argaric polities should be perceived as multiple “... political units of a regional nature controlled by power centres such as Cerro de la Encina, El Cerro de la Virgen or El Argar itself...” (Aranda and Molina, 2006: 58), that we should preferably call “chiefdom”, still close to a “tribal” basis (Fowles, 2002), rather than “state” as pretended by Risch and Lull (1995).

3.2. The Late Bronze Age. The end of a cycle.

The generalization of binary bronze production¹⁰ to all Iberia regions is probably one of the turning points at the beginning of the LBA in this peninsula.¹¹ In the funerary realm, nevertheless, metal becomes rarer, accompanying the proliferation of incineration and urn-burial as the preferred way of body disposition.

Besides cremation, in the Iberian Southwest, recent research has proved the continuation of pit inhumation as one of the LBA funerary practices (as in Casarão da Mesquita 3 e Monte da Cabida 3 – Soares, *et al.* 2009) up to now with no funerary goods associated.

In the lower Tagus and Atlantic Estremadura region the dominant funerary practice is incineration and urn-burial, as registered in the Tanchoal, Meijão and Cabeço da Bruxa necropolises (Kalb and Höck, 1982 and 1985; Corrêa, 1933-35). Nevertheless, natural cavities continue to be in use as burial ground¹² and in its southern extremity exists the only case of reuse of an emptied Chalcolithic tholos as the prestige grave of two male individuals (Spindler, *et al.* 1973-74; Vilaça and Cunha, 2005; Harrison, 2007).

With the exception of Roça do Casal do Meio, the absence of prestige grave goods is the rule where the only known cases of metal deposition consist of a very few exemplars of simple bronze bracelets.¹³

Incineration and urn-burial are also the dominant practices in Central and North Atlantic Iberia with deposition either in small cists or pit. In the first case and in Beira Alta there exist cases of six aggregated cists in a shallow round monument (as in Paranho necropolis – Coelho, 1925) or single cists inserted into a small round stone cairn (for example the Moinhos de Vento 3 and Fonte da Malga monuments – Senna-Martinez, 1984; Kalb and Höck, 1979) or the construction of small megalithic cists inserted in a low cairn (Casinha Derribada – Cruz, Gomes and Carvalho, 1998). In Beira Alta the only case of known metal goods is a bronze bracelet that accompanies the ashes in one of the Paranho cists.



Figure 4.7: The LBA individual funerary monument of Moinhos de Vento 3 in Central Portugal (Senna-Martinez, 1984).

Similar is the situation for Northern Portugal and Galicia, with cremation and urn-burial gradually implemented (Bettencourt, 2008).

The overall picture for Iberia's LBA, with cremation becoming the preferred form of body disposal associated to an almost complete lack of burial offerings, suggests the loss of importance of burial as a means of status enhancement and thus its transfer to other forms of representation, namely in the realm of the living. The generalized reconfiguration of settlement systems that occurs in the beginning of the LBA in Iberia opens up new spaces and opportunities of social representation (Jorge, 1995). Of these new opportunities the banquet or "symposium" surely occupied a preeminent place (Senna-Martinez, 1996).

From the communal bearings of the Neolithic under the agricultural cycle as symbolic metaphor, through status and male power figures development during the 1stBA, burial practices of the LBA constitute the end of a cycle that will only be fully transformed again in Iberia when Roman domination will extend urban transformation to all of its regions. But that is another story.

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¹⁰ Binary bronze production generalization can be radiocarbon-dated to the last quarter of the second millennium BC almost everywhere in Iberia (Castro Martínez, Lull and Micó, 1996) namely alongside the Atlantic Facade from the Northwest (Bettencourt, 1999, 2001; Sampaio and Bettencourt, 2011) through the Portuguese Beira Alta (Senna-Martinez, *et al.* 2011), Beira Interior (Vilaça, 1997) to the Southwest (Soares, *et al.* 2007).

¹¹ In terms of scale of production this is clearly a period where some intensification occurs alongside generalization.¹¹ Nevertheless the generalization of binary bronze production did not significantly change the scale of local ateliers still functioning at a household level and for systems largely of auto-consumption and little circulation (Senna-Martinez, 2005). Metal in Iberian LBA was still a luxury prestige item even within more complex social formations and with more typological and formal variety.

¹² Sometimes since the Neolithic as in Abrigo Grande das Bocas (Carreira, 1994).

¹³ Single or in bundles as in Tanchoal (Kalb and Höck, 1995).

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