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# PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS ON FORMS OF SPATIAL ORGANISATION AND CONSTRUCTION TECHNIQUES IN LATE PREHISTORIC SITES (CHALCOLITHIC/BRONZE AGE) OF THE TYPE OF CASTELO VELHO AND CASTANHEIRO DO VENTO (VILA NOVA DE FOZ CÔA) – RESEMBLANCES AND DIFFERENCES IN COMPARISON WITH MEGALITHIC AND SIMILAR CONSTRUCTIONS\*

by

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**Abstract:** On the basis of their experience of work at the prehistoric sites of Castelo Velho, Freixo de Numão (directed by SOJ – studied since 1989) and Castanheiro do Vento, Horta do Douro (directed by VOJ, JMC, LSP, ASC – studied since 1998), both in the municipality of Vila Nova de Foz Côa (Upper Douro, Portugal), the authors reflect on the main construction techniques and forms of spatial organisation seen there. They draw a parallel with similar questions raised by the so-called megalithic “funerary” monuments, attempting, by contrast, to understand the underlying issues behind the design of the walled “enclosures” of the Chalcolithic and Middle and Late Bronze Age vis-à-vis the orthostatic “crypts” (dolmens under mounds) of the Middle and Late Neolithic. These initial conclusions, based largely on experience in northern Portugal, are admittedly schematic and speculative in nature.

**Key-words:** Prehistoric architectures; passage graves; monumentalized hills.

**Resumo:** Com base na sua experiência de trabalho nos sítios pré-históricos de Castelo Velho, Freixo de Numão (dirigida por SOJ – estudado desde 1989) e de Castanheiro do Vento, Horta do Douro (dirigida por VOJ, JMC, LSP, ASC – estudado desde 1998), ambos no concelho de Vila Nova de Foz Côa (Alto Douro português), os autores apresentam reflexões sobre as principais técnicas de construção e de organização do espaço ali observadas. Fazem uma comparação com questões semelhantes levantadas pelos chamados monumentos

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“funerários” megalíticos, tentando, por contraste, entender as linhas-mestras dos recintos murados do Calcolítico, Idade do Bronze antigo/Idade do Bronze médio, relativamente às “criptas ortostáticas” (dómens sob mamoa) do Neolítico médio e final. Estas conclusões preliminares, largamente baseadas na experiência obtida no Norte de Portugal, são por ora assumidamente esquemáticas e teóricas.

**Palavras-chave:** arquiteturas pré-históricas; monumentos megalíticos; colinas monumentalizadas.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: A WAY OF SEEING

When we look at a construction – a way of introducing an artificial human order in space, and understood as an indivisible set of meanings (semiological reality) and “practical” objectives (functional reality) – we must consider the following:

- the pre-existing conditions; the reasons for the choice of the site; what there was on the terrain, and how and to what extent it was adjusted or transformed to fit the new structures; what is local and what is from elsewhere. It should be remembered that any outstanding feature which was preserved, whole or in part, in the “constructed” space was by this very fact no longer a natural element, since it had become part a component of the design itself, as meaningful and important as other totally constructed elements, such as walls.
- the raw materials used in the construction as related to its “design”, that is, to its general conception as a body set up in a certain place;
- the design itself, which, in the case of archaeological sites, nearly always consists of a series of alterations, of varying degrees of importance, superimposed over a period of time;
- to the extent that the chosen design transformed the pre-existing space into a place with meaning (or altered the previous meaning of a place), and to the extent that the organisation of space is always a way of expressing, on a human scale, cosmic visions and values, to try to understand, by explanatory hypotheses, the mental patterns – plans and behaviour – which might underlie a particular constructional organisation;
- the scale of the construction being studied, its extent relative to the surrounding area, and its topographical significance (the meaning of its position in relation to other landscape features), its visibility, the “territory” surrounding it; its degree of monumentality and durability, and whether it was made at one time or required constant maintenance, etc.;
- a question: the result – the archaeological reality being studied, seen as a plausible interpretation of what might have existed in the past, taking into account that the site is the present product of the combined actions, over time, of human beings and nature – does this come from the addition of successive designs, of constructions relatively independent of each other, or on the con-

trary was it always based on an overall plan, even if this was subject to changes? That is, was there an additive logic at work, as happens nowadays (megalithic monuments with mounds, single or in groups, the groups included in necropoles, for example), or was the logic a “totalising” one, including a particular area from the outset – a hill, for example – with the intention of giving it “meaning” as a whole? In other words, what was the logic of the design in relation to what existed before, what was the scale of the project and what was its overall intention, what were the phases of its “development” – the changes constantly carried out in relation to previous constructions? the construction techniques used, closely related to the chosen and available raw materials, the shapes (curved/straight; low/high; closed/open to the landscape, or with “windows” opening onto it, etc. – “filled” or “empty” areas) and the intended pathways or circuits in the terrain, both at the site itself and in the immediately surrounding area, as related to the obstacles of different sizes which might have impeded human passage.

Although all such generalisations are reductionist, there has to be an awareness that in an oral society ways of knowing and ways of doing are intermingled: social reality is constructed, negotiated and reproduced in practical action.

Constructional action, being visible and durable, and providing a frame for human life, is the ideal, perhaps the only, way to establish meaning and order, that is, to “legislate” about reality – the life of the community – in a society where meaning can only be memorised, embodied, not written. This set of “rules”, without which no society can function, materialised – implicit – in constructed bodies of space, acts not only as a device for establishing and stabilising meaning (the significance, for example, of the scenarios where the various social roles are played out), but also as an element which creates social cohesion and identification within the group and in relation to other groups. This is therefore an essential tool for communication in an oral culture, one without a specialised locus for standardising and decoding messages, where everywhere, every “place” is a “text-book” on the meanings of human existence and action.

In societies which are not desacralised, as ours has become (that is, in societies where space has not – yet? – been transformed into something inert, and ultimately into a market value, a commodity, divisible into units and with a price, like time), there is reason to believe that space on earth, whether inhabited, wild, or somewhere between the two, can only be understood with reference to the macrocosm, that is, to a system of correspondences between the local and the global, between “heaven” and “earth”, which in their regularity (the movement of the stars) create a spatial and temporal order, defining human actions.

In this sense, constructions would also be devices for establishing “readings” or visions of these correspondences, giving temporal and spatial meaning to the actions of people and groups, actions which are obviously always oriented to these two vectors, space and time.

A sense of order in time is thus established, as well as the ability to predict, which is repeated, reinforced, communicated and consolidated by the practical activity of individuals, regulated by collectively accepted rhythms, in a fixed scenario within a space that has to a greater or lesser extent been transformed. Since there is no reading, writing or texts, “only” orality, memory and recounted (interpreted) tradition, meaning is better reproduced when it is not simply theoretical “knowing”, but practical “know how”, embodied and experienced among other bodies from the worlds both of Man and of Nature.

Action and meaning go together, and are shaped in the spaces and pathways set up in the terrain of everyday life. This is what makes architecture fundamental for the archaeologist, and for the prehistorian this aspect is decisive too. If order – the (ideal) sense that a society wishes to “impose” on space – is shaped in “constructions”, then to study them, even indirectly, is to study the possible conceptual frameworks within which past lives were played out.

Here, it would be more interesting to consider a sort of dialogue between the land and the human action, between physical conditions and dwelling intentions, in the sense of Tim Ingold (2000).

Without interpretative models of these conceptual frameworks, the work of the archaeologist lacks meaning. It is reduced to the mere collection of rarities or “antiquities”: ingenuous stories (“interpretations”) are later added, usually spontaneous projections (unreflective, common-sense and essentially a-historical) of our current experience. To practice archaeology in this way is to describe and classify objects without ever going further – that is, never to rise to the challenge of explaining the radically problematic, that which resists understanding: and surely it is this which is the proper role of any science. This “past”, of course, is a product of our own point of view, an ongoing interpretation. It is negotiated, filtered through “proof” – that is, through recorded observation, verifiable by third parties.

We give the general, conventional name “past” to present realities – archaeological sites, narratives, for example – whose organisation (exhumed or related, and hence to some extent our construct), escapes our present logic of inhabiting, of creating public spaces – of organising space and of giving meaning to acts – but which nevertheless we want desperately to understand.

At an archaeological site all the information is of interest, but it is structures that what we have to consider first, since they provide the framework for all the other observations – of sections, micro-contexts and artefacts. That is, we must first

understand the design of the site and of its transformations, so that we can pour into it, as though into a mould, the artefacts and other “finds”: it is only by reference to the whole architectural mechanism (communicational, semiological, etc.) that we can find any possible meaning.

This means moving beyond a prehistoric archaeology framed by stratigraphies, layers, phases of occupation, micro-structures, micro-contexts, etc. While properly valuing all these elements (for we should not be excluding, but including, changing the scale of interest), this other archaeology fits them into a more general system, namely the overall understanding of a site as an affirmation of order – a statement – at a certain point in the territory, or rather as a palimpsest of statements, superimposing fixed or semi-fixed scenarios and reshaped over time.

At any prehistoric site we must remember that what we are faced with is archaeological, the product of a series of changes – and these changes are still taking place as a result of our study (which might possibly be having a greater impact on the site than anything it has previously undergone!). Only the scientific imagination, supported by technical knowledge of building and by ethnological data, can allow us to conceive of structures on the basis of superimposed ruins.

But this imagination (which will some day, we hope, be supported graphically by computer simulations) is essential for the prehistorian. This is indeed a problem for the whole of archaeology and history, but here it assumes a critical importance. If we only pay attention to what is present at each site, we miss what is most important, since we are only observing a tiny part of what was once there. What is most important is precisely what is not there, and what we have to imagine. If we only pay attention to what is “evident” at a prehistoric site, we are reduced to minute details, to partial observations, to interpretations confirming the expected, and to enumeration of finds and natural contexts as fixed frameworks. The challenge for the prehistorian is to make the great effort of mental reconstruction, but without falling into fantasy and invention, keeping within the bounds of the plausible according to the knowledge currently available – to try to “see life in movement” in the remains of a place (or a series of places) now abandoned.

Students, even the most advanced, who take part in excavations only get really enthusiastic when they unearth “material” (“finds”, remains of artefacts). It is a conceptual version of the question which those visitors still unaware of archaeology ask us at a site: “What have you found here?”. To which we would like to reply, “Nothing, because the most important thing has always been visible – traces of walls. It just involves looking around to see what is here, what there is to be discovered – the remains of an ancient place, which was obvious at the outset for a practiced eye. Of course pieces of pottery and other things appear everywhere, as would be expected.”

That is, the objects or small structures unearthed in particular strata, levels of occupation, etc., even when abundant, are generally in themselves insignificant or purely abstract (apart from pieces of very rare types), as long as they cannot be linked to the structures which shaped the place as a specific piece of architecture. It is only this that can give them meaning, by setting them within a framework, for without this frame there can be no mental cartography, no references – we are lost in abstract space.

What does it matter to us if this space is full of “rich finds”? – very little, if we cannot grasp their relationship with the structures of the site and their changes over time. At the mercy of unreferenced materiality, of finds merely mapped by Cartesian coordinates or according to micro-contexts (fireplace, combustion structure, foundations of hut, etc.), we are at the level of pure abstraction, unable to truly imagine the objects; we are adrift in a sea of unconnected data, unable to organize it into a representation of meaningful space. To continue like this is to remain stuck in a small-scale, collectionist archaeology, obsessed by objects, in the worst tradition of the 19th century or even earlier.

In our excavations, therefore, we tell new students: our aim here is not to find objects, nor even to unearth structures – it is to understand the logic of the spatial organization and of the techniques used in its construction by prehistoric people, by the architects of four or five thousand years ago. This is what gives meaning, perhaps even some dignity and social justification, to our activity: we are not picking up bits and pieces, not even beautiful pieces – rather we are anatomists of structures, which we partly dismantle, conserve and restore so as to understand how they were made, and what we can infer from these data about how the space was conceptualised.

This special area of prehistoric archaeology aims to arrive at some level of understanding, of theoretical and practical knowledge, such as to enable us today, if necessary, to experiment by building such a place ourselves – a Neolithic passage-grave, for example, or a Chalcolithic walled enclosure – anew, from the ground up.

## 2. NEOLITHIC (“MEGALITHIC”) NECROPOLIS AND CHALCOLITHIC (“COPPER AGE”) ENCLOSURES

What has all this to do with late Portuguese prehistory, with the places where meaning(s) were registered – monuments, enclosures, stelae, “rock art”, etc. – and in particular with the comparison between megalithic necropolis and walled enclosures with which this paper is concerned? We shall now outline an approach to this question.

If we construct a comparative framework for megalithic necropolis and walled enclosures (the latter are usually more recent, although we know that necropoles

may have “continued in use” into the Chalcolithic and Bronze Age) we soon find pairs of opposites (here numbered according to convention from I to XII, in which the first term [A] applies to passage graves under mounds and the second [B] to walled enclosures). For the first term (A) we are mainly using as reference points our work in the Serra da Aboboreira (from 1978) and on the plateau of Castro Laboreiro (1992-1994), which some of us are better acquainted with; for the second term (B) our references are to Castelo Velho and Castanheiro do Vento, which are the framework for this paper.

Thus we find:

### I

A – Additive logic: that is, design and construction from mound to mound, within the same nucleus or necropolis;

B – Embracing logic: that is, a plan which includes at least the entire upper part of a hill, thereby turning the whole into a monument (see following items);

### II

A – “Respect” for pre-existing outcrops of stone etc., with monuments built away from the main topographical features – these are usually preserved as a setting for the constructions;

B – Encroachment of the monument into the very heart of the visible outcrops, which serve as “quarries” or are kept as elements within the structures themselves. The alteration of the “natural” is here more radical than in A;

### III

A – Loose structuring of each assemblage of individual barrows, allowing free movement between the monuments (mounds) without any “frontiers”, that is, without linear physical barriers, either straight or curved, to separate the space;

B – “Compact” structuring – walled enclosures with a variety of internal and external structures and “entrances” or passages, sometimes in concentric lines, but where the “entrances” in the various lines of walls are not aligned with each other (those in the first line being further out than those of the other, as seen in Castelo Velho), necessitating indirect paths into or out of the main enclosure. This compartmentalised organisation (with walls, platforms, ramps, etc.) implies a series of restrictions on movement;

### IV

A – Monuments (mounds) scattered over a whole area, sometimes grouped (those more recent may even be positioned near earlier ones), sometimes isolated (in

pairs or even singly). There are necropolis (Alvão; Castro Laboreiro) with a single dominant monument, at the highest point and visible from all sides, which was obviously intentional;

B – Construction concentrated in certain places, for example hills or ridges, with the most important structures very often at the summit, clearly visible (this does not mean that there was no monumentalisation of nearby slopes, or that by their particular prominence these could not create imposing features in relation to certain surrounding areas). The arresting effect – a kind of visual magnet – is so clear that we often say that this type of place would be the least suitable for a small group to defend with the technology of the time, exposed as these high places would have been and allowing possible enemies plenty of time to try different plans of attack;

#### V

A – Simple axial layout: the organising axis of the monument (in the case of individual passage graves) is: courtyard – passage – chamber, with the furthest part of the chamber, the backstone, seen as the inmost and most “sacred” spot in the monument;

B – Multiple axial layout: the monument is organised around a number of possible axes, allowing a number of possible combinations of movements and meanings in relation to the “actors” (the mobile scenario) within the scenario (fixed or semi-fixed). The paths, opening or closing relatively easily, the monumental passages or entrances which could be spectacularly closed (thus turning into monuments, spaces long blocked off), the hollow structures which could become solid, the multiplicity of possible movements – all create axial complexity, a stage for a vast number of possible performances;

#### VI

A – The least accessible part of the monument, its “nucleus”, is dark, limited, closed, circumscribed: it is the space usually called the “burial chamber” (though the passages, when well preserved, also often contain significant burial remains);

B – The most hidden or inaccessible part – the inner enclosure or central area, prominently placed – is open, spacious, with many “entrances”. This does not imply that the enclosure, or other secondary enclosures, did not have walls of a certain height, limiting the view over the landscape to particular “entrances”, thus creating “view-points” to the horizon, with or without astronomical alignments (as at Stonehenge). In this case, a sort of “tower” placed in the core of the space of the precinct could be crucial for an elite to separate itself from the “common people”. From that restricted, higher space, a small group could see more than the others, and could also be seen;

#### VII

A – The materials used are large, roughly worked slabs (orthostats, lids), along with slabs or stones for facing and buttressing. Some mounds are completely of clay. But in concept these monuments are essentially “monolithic”;

B – Stone is used, sometimes in the form of large blocks more or less roughly hewn, but the main material is small stones, surrounded by clay and with the use of perishable vegetable matter. The whole concept is plastic – detailed or even quite extensive changes could be made relatively easily. The maintenance of these highly adaptable earthen structures in itself implies not so much an idea of permanence, but of constant malleability and change. Thus the many “passages” or “entrances”, often “blocked”, were certainly never all “open” at the same time, but rather were the result of alterations;

#### VIII

A – Externally, these monuments imitate “nature”: they are artificial hills, created by the architect, with a “crypt” above ground (though occasionally slightly dug into the soil). That is, even though the facing layers were visible at the time of building, they would later probably be more or less covered by vegetation. They were thus a kind of game: they imitated relief features of the landscape (as though relics or other “deposits” were being placed “within” the earth), but they were different, in their regularity and in the dynamics of their control of the landscape. They were at the same time in continuity and discontinuity with the land around them;

B – These monuments are clearly and obviously “superimposed on nature” (note that this notion of “nature/culture” would have no meaning, as a modern dichotomy of our own culture, to prehistoric peoples): they are ostentatiously artificial, genuine large-scale artefacts. In Castelo Velho, for example, excavations have revealed genuine prehistoric stonefaces – places where slabs had been cut away and where work stopped at a certain point, leaving a rock surface half-altered by human action, as can be seen in open air quarries for particular kinds of stone (such as Plussulien in Brittany for dolerite);

#### IX

A – These are simple, closed microcosms, directly related to relics of the “ancestors”, of symbolic departed beings. They thus express in material terms, even in the durable materials used, a certain timelessness (stone often being considered holy because indestructible);

B – These are complex, open microcosms, where some sort of “metaphors” of vital activities may have been performed: that is, “imitations” of the acts of daily

life (as though in an “ideal settlement”). They expressed materially something which, though durable, seems less connected with the idea of timelessness than in A, since it demanded, as we have said, constant maintenance and adaptation – it may have been connected with the negotiation of meaning in a society which, though not leaderless, had no obvious formalized political power;

## X

A – There is generally no obvious connection with particularly fertile agricultural land. On the contrary, many necropoles are situated in thin, unproductive land (and have survived because of this). There are exceptions, of course, but we are mainly considering large groups rather than isolated monuments. In northern Portugal these “large groups” – decaying today along with the rest of our heritage – are found in uplands too poor for agriculture – according to present conditions, obviously, but in general terms the idea can be applied to earlier periods;

B – These are situated near to and overlooking river valleys and fertile agricultural land. As mentioned above, this panorama would allow specific viewpoints to be selected in the enclosure, to act as “windows” onto the surrounding landscape. They would not be so much places with a “view over the plain”, but rather would allow a variety of different perspectives of more or less distant horizons, the nearest of these obviously being the fertile river basins. This can be seen at Castelo Velho de Freixo de Numão and at Castanheiro do Vento de Horta do Douro, as well as at Los Millares (Almeria, south-eastern Spain) and Zambujal (Portuguese Estremadura);

## XI

A – Inside, there is a set of symbolic markers (“megalithic art”), which are an integral part of the architecture. This can be clearly seen in the great Irish monuments such as Knowth and Newgrange, but it is also found in the Iberian Peninsula. One of us (VOJ, 1998) has shown that, although the remains are scanty, this structuring is quite clear. “Megalithic art” can thus never be treated as a series of motifs which are independent of each other and of their support and position in the architectural group – as some positivist descriptions still do, in endless lists of (supposed) “data” which do nothing to help us question or understand reality, but are only unconnected data, “more of the same”, an effort fed by its own vacuity. The chamber obviously contained far more painting or carving than the corridor, and the most important part of the symbolism was connected with the furthest part, the backstone. Everything in “megalithism” points to a “uterine” concept of space, closed, hidden, dark, sheltered from view, with access limited to a few community members. The “art” serves to accentuate both this concept and the different levels of consecration, from the outer to the innermost;

B – These sites have slabs with “rock carvings” (cup marks, spindle shapes, etc.), which sometimes seem to have been taken from larger panels, or else look like miniatures or references to (“citations” of) such groups of “rock art”. In Castanheiro do Vento, for example, there is a “monumentalised passage” near the so-called “bastion D”, covered with graphic symbols, both on the outer surface (facing east) and on the inner (here, with cup marks and spindle like shapes). If we consider these places as settings for a wide range of depositions (or “deposits”), we can see the placing of these signs as a very deliberate act – it is no accident that they are where they are. Of course, once we have fully studied a site rich in these “symbolic markers” we will be able to try going a little beyond this kind of simple general statement;

## XII

A – These sites contain sets of artefacts (in the strict sense of portable objects) which were carefully selected to accentuate the exoteric nature of the internal spaces. In the courtyards outside the monuments too, and in and around the mounds, there are other deposits. However, we need to develop an archaeology directed at this kind of “meaningful complex” and not just at large structures, on the one hand, and at the objects in them, on the other – as though the former were containers of the latter rather than the whole consisting of meaningful sets of changes made on material and (micro-)space. This applies to any area of prehistoric archaeology, which instead of being a process of contextualisation, of understanding what is unique, is usually, as Hodder has said, a process of decontextualisation, to facilitate the production of general ideas which normally support the interpretative status quo, i.e., a domestication of the past, making it a sort of a simpler version of the present;

B – These have sets of artefacts which seem to “imitate” everyday life, and to be very extensive and varied, thus giving the naive or illusory impression that we are looking at “settlements”. When we go into the details, however, this “Asterix village syndrome” collapses. For example, the large container with seeds from the main enclosure at Castelo Velho de Freixo de Numão: this contained pieces of vases, but they had been deliberately placed there after having been broken, and were not the result of large storage pots cracking within the structure, as a less scrupulous excavation might have concluded. Thus this was not a functional store-space for keeping foodstuffs, but a deposit with a symbolic function, like many other elements of this site. In general, the fastidious trilogy: settlement (= village); burial place; ritual (religions) site, should be avoided in prehistoric archaeology. The living in their “daily activities”; the “dead” or deceased; and the living in their “religions intervals” – this is actually a ridiculous oversimplification of human life in any time/region.



Table summarising the above comparative schemes in simplified form:

A	B
<b>Necropolis of megalithic monuments with mounds</b>	<b>Walled enclosures (monumentalized hills)</b>
I Additive logic (the group grows monument by monument)	Embracing logic (from an initial "plan", which tends to influence the whole surrounding area)
II Preservation of outcrops (pre-existing shapes used as a framework)	Construction on outcrops using them as "quarries" as a way of monumentalising the sites
III Loose structuring – space free for movement between monuments, without fixed linear barriers (without frontiers)	Space compartmentalised by walls, platforms & ramps, establishing series of barriers limiting movement – compact structuring
IV Monumental units scattered around the area, though arranged in groups, necropolis, etc.	Structures concentrated on hill-tops and hill slopes, thus monumentalising those "natural" places
V Simple axiality: the organising axis of the monument is courtyard – corridor – chamber, the backstone being the most hidden place	Multiple axiality: the monument is arranged around many possible axes, permitting many combinations of movements & meanings relative to the "actors" in the scenario
VI The most inaccessible place, the cor or nucleus of the monument (the chamber) is dark, restricted, closed, circumscribed	The most inaccessible place, the central enclosure ("fortification") is open, spacious, with many "entrances". But it may possess a sort of "tower", or visible device located above the rest of the space around
VII The material used are large roughly-finished (orthostats, lids) along with small stones, slabs (for facing or buttressing) and earth. Some mounds are only of clay. Essentially monolithic in concept	Stone is used, sometimes as large slabs, blocks or outcrops more or less roughly hewn, but the main material is small stones, coated with clay; and use of perishable vegetal material. Enormous quantities of clay and much water needed. Essentially plastic in concept
VIII Externally imitative of "nature": they are artificial hills, with a "crypt" above ground created by the "architect"	Monuments superimposing "nature": ostentatiously artificial
IX Closed, simple microcosms, in direct relationship with the relics of the ancestors. Expressing a degree of timelessness	Open, complex microcosms, where "imitations" of vital activities were enacted (as though they were "ideal settlements"). Requiring constant maintenance and adaptation
X No obvious relationship with particularly fertile land	Facing & overlooking river basins & fertile agricultural land
XI The internal space has a set of symbolic markers ("megalithic art" as an integral part of the architecture)	Including slabs with carvings (cup marks, spindle like shapes, etc.)
XII Containing sets of carefully selected artefacts emphasising the exoteric nature of the interior space	Containing sets of artefacts which "imitate" daily life; the sets are extensive & varied. Present-day observers may be deluded into seeing "settlements", a concept which is not a rigorous one

### 3. TECHNIQUES – SOME REMARKS

When we free ourselves from an "archaeology of evidence" and can accept a "problematising archaeology" – in close relationship with the development of field-work, the basis of all archaeological endeavour, without which our writing falls into gratuitous speculation – we are suddenly aware of the materiality of sites, and of the specificity of each (both in general and in each particular micro-space) as an infinite variety to be explained and understood. This is not so much to find a "truth", but, more realistically, a plausible explanation. We are no longer obsessed by "finds", by "occupations", by (pseudo-) stratigraphies, by chronological and functional explanations – by objects reduced to the preconceptions of our consciousness. What challenges us above all is the layout of each site, its general design, its architectural pattern(s). These patterns, related to cognitive models, to socially accepted values, were put into practice through raw materials and construction techniques. But the buildings themselves helped to "built" these "stateless societies".

In the case of places such as Castelo Velho or Castanheiro do Vento, the first important idea to grasp is that, a priori, much of what was most important in the past is no longer there. In other words, and because this "most important" is the product of our imagination, we must think of the site as the final result of set of human and natural changes, avoiding seemingly simple, obvious explanations, since these are usually mere commonplace projections of our own 21st-century mentality.

We now know about Chalcolithic people that:

- they certainly had some sort of a "plan" and a direction for their work, whatever the degree to which different group members were able to share in these decisions, to affect them – in other words, whatever the structure of power underlying these societies, which were neither "headless" nor probably had hereditary chiefs;
- implicit here was a certain labour force – that is, the ability to mobilise a considerable number of people, at least at certain times of the year. But, unlike "megalithic monuments", these sites required constant maintenance and adaptation, which would imply a deep and shared interiorisation of duties, techniques and patterns of work;
- they dug down as far as the base rock (which is schist, in the cases referred to here), exposing it, taking the clay they needed, and breaking up the outcrops to obtain not only large blocks, but especially thin slabs, used for the base of walls, as though drawing a full-size plan of a site on the site itself;
- they made various structures or depositions in the anfractuosidades (natural or adapted) at the base of outcrops. The great surprise at Castelo Velho

(thanks to extensive and intensive excavations) has been to show that when the site seems to be totally excavated down to the level of the base rock, structures and many other elements of human origin continue to appear, sometimes “disguised” by pavements of clay which an unwary researcher could mistake for an apparently sterile “base” level;

- they certainly brought large quantities of clay from nearby sources, for filling, levelling, building walls or coating stone foundations, thus shaping the site as a “humanised” place. The architecture was, above all, one of earth, of clay, which would have imprinted its colour and texture on everything – unless we accept the possibility that these walls, like vases, were incised and/or filled with colour. This is much probable.
- they laid a stone base on the ground surface. This is what excavations mostly show today, but it is simply what remains of the points where structures of earth and perishable materials were erected, the complexity of which we can only attempt to imagine. The “low”, non-monumental appearance of the remaining “walls”, their “openness” to the landscape, is deceptive – these “walls” are often a kind of foundation, merely bases for what is no longer there. How do we know this? Simply because they would have been of no use as they are, and because we often find in well-preserved places enormous quantities of clay used for coating, or preserved through having been accidentally baked by fire, still with impressions of branches or of the surface of floors or walls. And because we do not find the mounds of rubble which would be expected if the walls had been of stone. What is usually found along the outside of these low walls is not debris (nor even foundations excavated in the bedrock though the sites are in ruins), but structured embankments, and this was another fundamental lesson from Castelo Velho and Castanheiro do Vento. They are buttresses, much more monumental and extensive than those surrounding and supporting megalithic chambers, but on their own scale just as deliberate, well-made and durable. These are structures like the walls (or “ramparts” or “bastions”), and we need to dismantle them, at least in some sectors, to understand how they were made. These buttresses or embankments are probably found in other Chalcolithic so-called “fortified settlements”, and may have been misinterpreted as “rubble”, which makes sense when imagining high stone walls, but not with the more diffuse, “popular”, vernacular architecture of clay. Such clay construction has been disregarded, not being considered as “noble” as stone building of varying degrees of finishing, but it is in fact much more “ecological” and “ergonomic”, because, unlike stone, it is highly malleable. Interpreting former real structures of embankment as fallen parts of walls (debris) archaeologists

make a double (and tragic) mistake: they do not understand these architectures as they were, how they looked like, and therefore they “rebuilt” (“restore”) them according to a form (high walls of exposed stone) that they never had in the past. It is the “prestige” of monumental walls in action in the minds of modern archaeologists; this means a terrible heritage damage; they made stone foundations with slabs, which affected the shape of what was built above them. These foundations have stone wedged’s filling emptings or supporting slabs perpendicular to the respective external lines (straight or curved), sometimes arranged sub-vertically (with one of the larger sides against the wall) or else “lying down” (with one of the ends against the wall) or even sometimes radially. Supporting slabs in embankments may also be arranged with the larger sides parallel to the wall (giving the false impression of rubble); using a reductive but perhaps expressive image, the whole scheme which we have just outlined was made like a fruit cake, with clay (with other small elements added to give it consistency) as the dough, and stones – the dried fruit – in the required position overlapping each other, with some pieces supporting others as required. Everything would soon have collapsed if the slabs, small wedges or supports, clay, walls and embankments had not been an articulated system; although curved lines predominate in these structures (most of the so-called “bastions” in Castanheiro do Vento, or in the central enclosure at Castelo Velho, for example), straight lines were also used. Sometimes this was to define significant breaks in the plan, as in the outer edge of the upper platform at Castelo Velho. Here, in September 2002 (for the first time, as far as we know, in this kind of work) rectilinear walls were unearthed which linked important architectural features (outcrops, “bastions”, for example, situated at points where the direction of the construction changed), outlining an entire platform. In a later process, these walls were “disguised” as a “monumental ramp” under enormous quantities of stone, eliminating or changing their possible dramatic effect (topographic and visual). But even during their construction and use (before the “petrification” which covered them), they did not have a vertical exterior surface: instead there was an embankment or buttress against them – they would have been so fragile that without this support they would have stood for only a short time. This means that the formal regularity of these walls was above all a methodical choice, a means to “impose” “rational” lines on a site, lines which were not even made to be seen, since they were to be engulfed in a larger mass of clay and stones. Here we come to something which may appear banal – how a design, a

construction, leads us to choices of taste and to questions of mentality, thus giving us much greater access to the “mind” of these prehistoric individuals than sets of artifacts, which, today as in the past, are minimal elements of actions extremely difficult for us to imagine. When we are speaking of statistical studies of dozens or even hundreds of thousands of objects, of course, things are different, because then we can perceive (although with the serious risk of decontextualization...) highly significant patterns of behaviour. But on the usual small scale of our work, constructions and their techniques are the conceptual frame, preserved in the landscape, through which we can best perceive the wider intentions of our ancestors, rather than through a fine decorated vase or some other piece so pleasing to our museological obsessions or aesthetic sensibilities. And it is this “lesson” that we constantly try to give to students on our annual excavations. Seeing these places as a system – evolving over time, obviously – of architectural changes and of depositions of objects of various kinds, seems to us the most productive way. We cannot observe them as scenes of “daily life”, in terms of mere survival activities – this would be a projection onto the past of our own functionalist mentality in its simplest and most “domestic” version. Contrary to what primary materialists may think, there was never any such thing as “pure survival”. What in general (in detail, the frontier human/animal is a very complex and debatable issue) distinguishes us from other animals is what many authors traditionally termed “culture”, depth of meanings, complex algorithms of action, for, as Heidegger said, it is only human beings who know that they are going to die. In this sense, all of human life is regulated by systems of meaning related to ways of manipulating the world – that is, to constructions and objects; these do not so much reveal actions as mediate a multiplicity of meanings, including negotiations of power. Power, as Foucault made clear, is not only the political power of big decisions: it is seen in the daily mutual negotiations of human beings, in the space that each person has for manoeuvre (for example, in the sense that everyone knows that they can place an “object” with a particular shape and technique of manufacture in a “space”, and it will stay there and not be removed or “subverted” by anyone else). How would a place be “made”? What choices would anyone have for implementing or altering a “plan”? How would the rest of the group be persuaded to agree to a particular option? Unlike in contemporary architecture, there were no artists and contractors, executives and employees. There certainly would have been a whole “system of command”, but obviously not set down on paper – rather it may have been negotiated in (constant?) arguments and above all put into practice through

actions in the territory itself, actions which would always have been the final materialization, and also the decisive moment, of such negotiation.

This is, after all, what happens in a present-day archaeological excavation, which almost mimics the “prehistoric scene” in reverse. There are no absolute powers: even the members of the team directing the dig must constantly negotiate among themselves the choices to be made, and have to negotiate, through explanation and persuasion, with the other participants – who cannot adopt a passive attitude – what seems the best way of doing the work. Everyone knows the cost of this, the constant effort that it demands. These sites, in the past as in the present, were and are places of dispute, altercation and concerted action. They are living sites, places with a long life-span, at least for those who for whom they are not merely containers of “pieces”, or “sights” for tourists – that is, for us archaeologists, who try so hard to give them meaning, generously spending the best of our physical and mental energy to make them explicit, interesting, to our fellow-citizens.

Will “the public” and “the bureaucrats” (who are, respectively, the ebb and flow of our actions) understand this? We believe that in many cases, if we persist, they will, although it often seems unlikely. Despite (or perhaps because of) the kind of spectacular society that we live in, we can still see and appreciate what is worthy and genuine.

On visiting the sites, those who had initially disagreed with some of our theories on Castelo Velho or Castanheiro do Vento accepted the evidence that we have found and have tried to interpret. Perhaps the reader of this text may do so, too.

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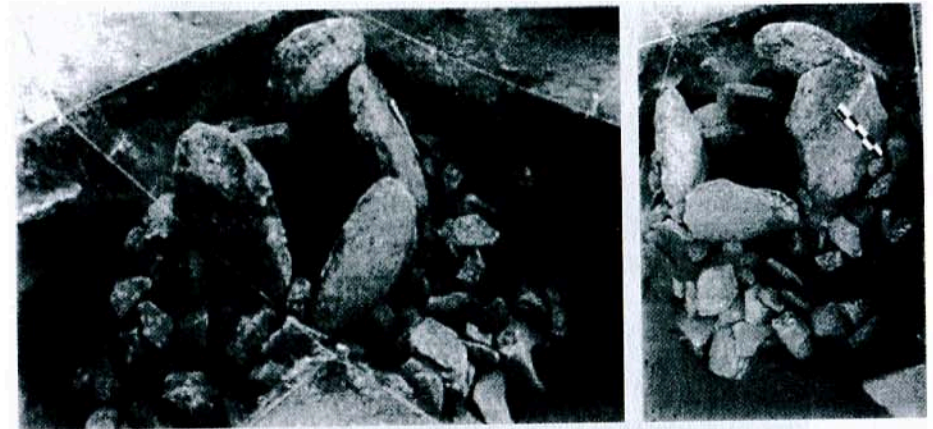


Fig. 1 – Furnas 2 (Aboboreira, district of Porto). Small megalithic chamber. Excavation and photos: V.O.J.

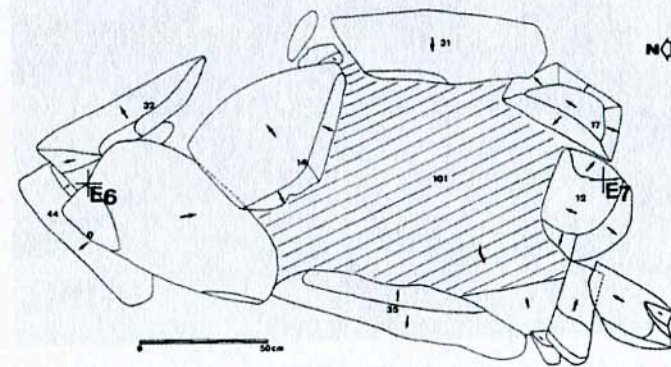


Fig. 2 – Mina do Simão (Aboboreira, district of Porto). Small megalithic chamber. Excavation and plan: V.O.J.



Fig. 3 – Alto da Portela do Pau 1 (Castro Laboreiro, district of Viana do Castelo). Small megalithic chamber. Excavation and photos: V.O.J. *et al.* (see bibliography, 1997).

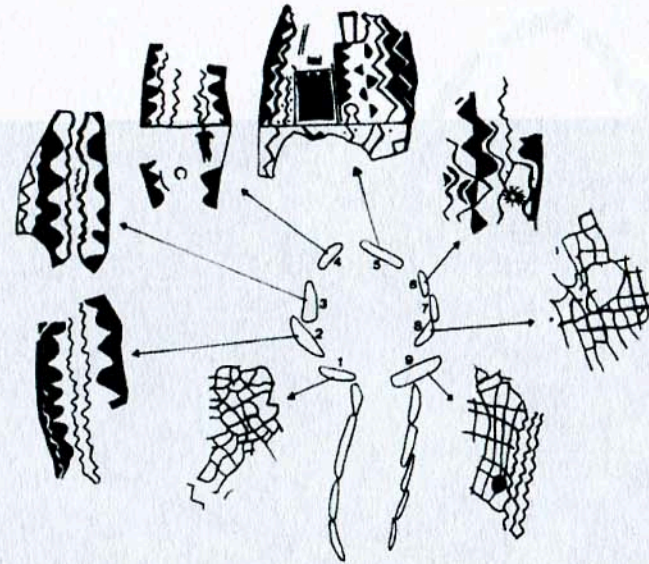


Fig. 4 – Increasing complexity of the paintings of the passage grave of Antelas (Oliveira de Frades, district of Viseu) (see Jorge, 1998), from the entrance to the backstone of the chamber.

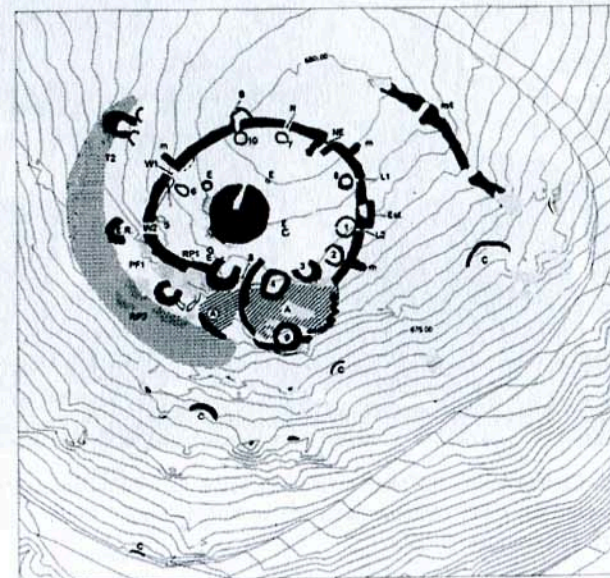


Fig. 5 – Castelo Velho de Freixo de Numão (V.ª N.ª de Foz Côa) (district of Guarda) – Schematic plan of the top of the site around 2.500 b. C. Excavations and interpretation: S.O.J.



Fig. 6 – Castelo Velho de Freixo de Numão: aerial view of the inner precinct (2003) (above); small container near the so called “tower” (inner precinct) (below). Excavations: S.O.J.

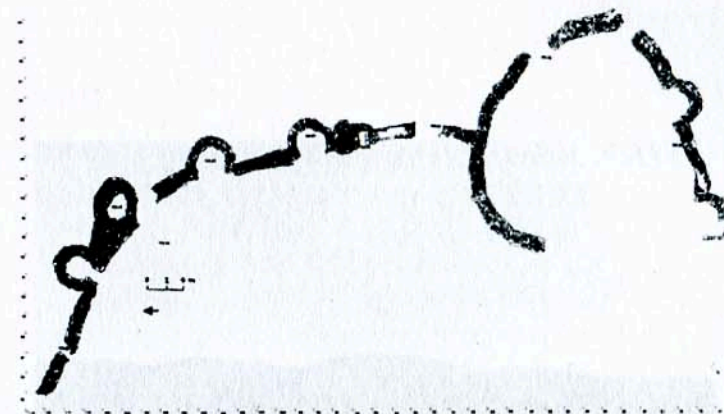


Fig. 7 – Castanheiro do Vento, Vila Nova de Foz Côa (district of Guarda). General sketch of the main structures uncovered until 2003's campaign: to the left, wall of a precinct with 4 “bastions”; to the right, “secondary” precinct with 2 “bastions” turned south. Excavations: V.O.J. *et al.* (see bibliography).

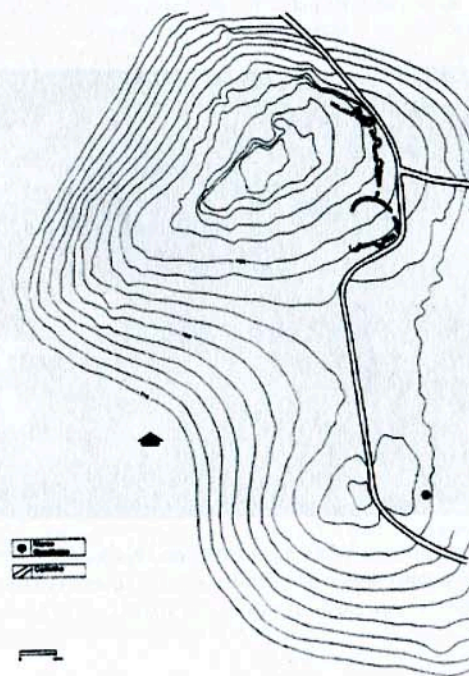


Fig. 8 – Castanheiro do Vento: general schematic plan of the walled substructures after the 2003's campaign of excavations (V.O.J. *et al.*). (see bibliography).

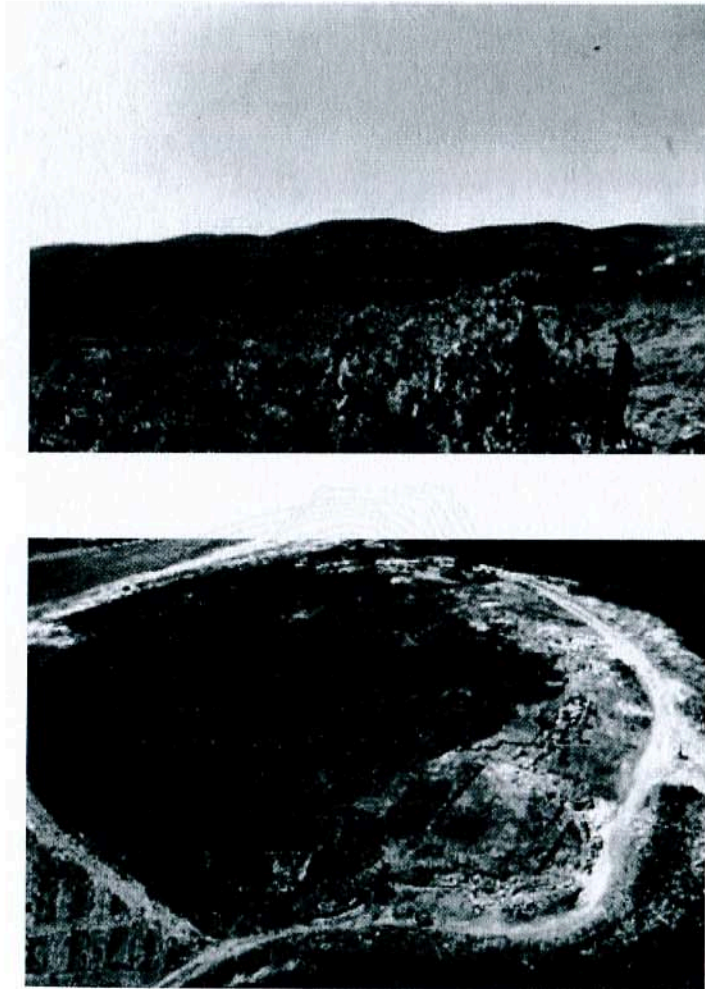


Fig. 9 – Castanheiro do Vento seen from the Teja's basin (above, in the centre of the photo) and from the air (2003) (below). The secondary precinct is clearly noticeable in this image (right). (V.O.J. *et al.*).