

Chris Scarre and Luiz Oosterbeek, *Megalithic Tombs in Western Iberia: Excavations at the Anta da Lajinha*.

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This recent volume, edited by Chris Scarre and Luiz Oosterbeek, stands as the excavation report of *Anta da Lajinha*, a megalithic passage mound in central Portugal dated to the 4th millennium BC. Excavations occurred from 2006 to 2008, funded by a British Academy Large Research Grant. Beyond this, the volume places the findings in their regional, national and international context, thereby offering a rare glimpse in the English language of the prehistoric archaeology of a region that has been too often side-lined for the bolder megalithic landscapes of Brittany, southern Britain and Ireland, despite it being recognised as an early hotbed of activity in the Neolithic and Bronze Ages of western Europe.

The first chapter, simply titled “Introduction” and written by Chris Scarre, is a delight to read. It presents a vivid portrayal of the Portuguese megalithic landscape, demonstrating a keen attention to details that are often unavailable or inscrutable to all but those who grew up among those landscapes. The introduction is largely split into two sections, the first of which is probably the best survey of past research into western Iberian megalithism, from antiquarianism to the present-day, in either English, Portuguese or Spanish. The second section summarises present knowledge of later prehistory of western Iberia. This section is perhaps too short and doesn’t feature the breadth and depth of discussion present in the first section – problems that are not overcome in subsequent chapters either. Notably, when it comes to the issue of Neolithisation, this section presents too much of a monolithic narrative, centred largely on finds towards the south of the country, and ignoring recent evidence from the north. For example, there is no mention of relatively recent research on the site of Prazo in northern Portugal where continuity across the Meso-Neo transition has been suggested along with a model of “selective assimilation” of Neolithic traits by local communities of hunter-gatherers (Monteiro-Rodrigues 2011; 2012). Furthermore, ancient DNA evidence suggests a vastly more complex picture with high levels of genetic admixture between incoming farmers and local hunter-gatherers (e.g., Günther *et al.* 2005).

Subsequent chapters report on the results of the excavation and subsidiary research. Chapter 2, “Excavations at the Anta da Lajinha 2006-2008” by Chris Scarre and Luiz Oosterbeek, describes the passage grave in quite some detail, tracing the history of research at the site before delving into the more recent excavation and its finds – some of which is discussed below and opens up new realms of possibility for how we think about these sites. This is followed by four appendix chapters that complement the excavation report with petrological analysis of the slabs (appendix 2.A), luminescence dating (2.B), sedimentological analysis (2.C) and the description and classification of the ceramic (2.D) and lithic assemblages (2.E). Overall, they provide a very thorough and comprehensive trove of information ready to be analysed and placed in its regional and national contexts.

Chapter 3, by Chris Scarre and Elías López-Romero, discusses the findings in “The regional context”, namely the region of the Tagus valley that extends from the area of the Meseta (Spain), into the Alto Alentejo and Ribatejo regions of Portugal. Extensive reference and comparisons are made with other megalithic sites in these regions looking at aspects such as their architecture, materials used, landscape setting and artefacts found. This chapter is also extended by three subsequent ones focused on the megalithic structures of specific neighbouring regions, namely Proença-a-Nova (chapter 3.1) and Rego da Murta (3.3), as well as on contemporary non-megalithic burials (3.2). Together they add a considerable amount of detail to an already vivid picture of diversity of architectural and depositional practices across a region of about fifteen thousand square kilometres.

This is followed by “Palaeoenvironmental investigations around the Anta da Lajinha and the broader regional context” authored by Charles French, William Fletcher, Marco Madella, Christiana Ferreira, Nelson J. Almeida, Pierluigi Rosina and Chris Scarre. This fourth chapter details the results of geoarchaeological survey, soil micromorphology, pollen, charcoal and phytolith analyses conducted at the site and surrounding valley, while also putting them into the context of Holocene environmental history in Portugal and neighbouring Spain. This is complemented by three appendices covering trench profile (4.1) and soil micromorphological (4.2) descriptions, along with the results of calibration for the two carbon dates from the west trench of Anta da Lajinha (4.3).

Chapter 5 is a thorough survey of “The Tagus Valley Rock Art” complex, written by Sara Garcês and Luiz Oosterbeek. Spread through roughly 120 km of river valley, this rock art complex features in twelve known sites which are fully covered by this chapter. An analysis of the typology and stratigraphy of motifs provides the launchpad for a lengthy discussion of chronology. Their conclusions tie in nicely with the picture painted by the megaliths, namely in placing the rock art into a much wider pattern of landscape occupation that “was characterised by the cycles of mobility of communities among whom pastoralism and hunting remained dominant” (p. 188).

The last two chapters, written by Chris Scarre, look at larger spatial scales. The first of these, “Megalithic tombs in Western Iberia” summarises and provides the author’s insight into the phenomena of megalithism in (mostly) Portugal and Galicia. Covered are the debates around the typology of these structures, the hypotheses that the megaliths are associated with pastoralist forms of subsistence, their questionable early dates, the association between passage graves and painted and engraved art, as well as more general descriptions of the megalithic landscapes in the north and south of western Iberia. More than just a literature review, this chapter places the results of the excavations and subsequent analyses in their wider context and feeds this new data into the above-mentioned debates, providing much food for thought. Chapter 7, the book’s last, locates “The Anta da Lajinha in its international context”, with a particular focus on the question of the chronology of megalithism across the Atlantic façade, especially with respect to the early dates in Brittany.

Beyond its content, the book stands as a testament to how a multinational research team should work and what to expect at publication stage. Research is driven by a broad spectrum of questions that, though characteristic of British archaeology are, unfortunately, not as

ubiquitous within the Portuguese academic tradition. This thirst is quenched by data and information made readily available by the Portuguese collaborators who also push the envelope in terms of methodological breadth and depth. All this is presented with a clarity of language that is not usually found in Portuguese publications. Unfortunately, the book didn't manage to fully avoid the territorialism that, regrettably, is present within Portuguese archaeology. This is most visible in the little attention paid to the megalithism of northern Portugal, especially that of the Beiras regions which lie immediately north of Anta da Lajinha. Even when reading the chapters that focus on larger spatial scales one cannot but leave feeling that there is a gap of either knowledge or megaliths that stretches from the border between Portugal and Galicia down south into Ribatejo and Alto Alentejo – the mentions to Antelas and the Serra da Aboboreira cluster notwithstanding. This, despite extensive research in these regions over the last decades (e.g., Senna-Martinez 1994; Valera 1998; Senna-Martinez and Ventura 2008).

The JSA reader interested in learning more about the skylines of the prehistoric inhabitants of western Iberia may be disappointed. There is a lack of engagement with prior archaeoastronomical work, except for chapter 3.3, which touches upon research published elsewhere (Figueiredo *et al.* 2018), and chapter 6 which cites Hoskin (2001)'s study of the Alentejan megaliths as displaying a “consistency of tomb orientations” (p. 192) complementing the regularity in architectural design. Hoskin's suggestion that these structures align with sunrise between midsummer and midwinter is mentioned, as is the alternative suggestion that they were built to face the rising spring full moon (an idea first suggested by Da Silva 2004, but not referenced in the book). This acceptance of Hoskin's measurements and conclusions, however, is not only uncritical but also somewhat naïve, as I have argued extensively elsewhere (Silva 2014; 2015; 2020). A critical evaluation, accompanied by an extensive literature review, would be much more in line with the incisiveness of the rest of the volume.

As an ontological skyline archaeologist, I am more interested in new ways of thinking – i.e. new ways to conceptualise worlds – than I am in collecting alignments. And in this regard this book has proven to be a treasure trove. Among the many tidbits of insight and data that one could highlight, I want to underline two key points of importance to anyone interested in the cosmologies and ontologies of the Neolithic people that built these structures.

A key conclusion of this study, which is not only aligned but confirms what was suspected by others in central and northern Portugal (e.g., Senna-Martinez *et al.* 1997) is that the main subsistence practice that was associated with these structures was mobile pastoralism. This helps explain why the few identified settlements are small and do not feature lengthy sequences of occupation, nor evidence for mixed farming. This stands in stark contrast with the late Neolithic and Chalcolithic developments of large enclosures which have only recently been identified (e.g., Valera *et al.* 2000). The reason why this is an important point for those interested in ontology is because subsistence practices form the basis upon which we must reconceptualise these megalithic structures not as the outcome of a surplus agricultural sedentary society – as they are still so often conceived as, but rather as the product of mobile, intricately tied to the landscape, pastoral communities. This implies a very different relationship to the environment – including both landscape and skyline – and pastoralism

should therefore form the substrate upon which the ontologies of these Neolithic communities are reconstructed.

To strive towards that goal, one often needs to shift and reshape one's conception of the very nature of the site(s) being studied. New data, as well as fresh insights from the literature review can aid in this process. For example, the careful excavation of the edging of the mound revealed blocks "of columnar form and stood vertically, apparently framing voids" (p. 30) which they suggest may have "supported a series of upright timber posts forming a ring around the edge of the mound" (p. 30). This is a tantalising possibility which that dramatically alters the architectural and conceptual fabric with which we think about these monuments. Our conceptions of them largely focus on the stone structures that withstood the test of time, however the presence of perishable elements may need to be considered not merely as add-ons but force us to reconceptualise the monuments entirely. Dismissing this possibility by suggesting that this finding is unique to Anta da Lajinha may not be a valid option, especially as it may be mirrored in at least one other site in the neighbouring Beira Alta region (J. Ventura, personal communication) and possibly many others.

Another clue that we need to start thinking differently about these sites is the passage of Anta da Lajinha, which this excavation project revealed to be a composite structure with a complex history (pp. 53-62). The short megalithic passage, possibly comprised of little more than four orthostats, was extended by a lithic flooring with possible microlithic uprights. This complex structure, whose original design is difficult to assess due to the lack of clearly marked sockets, then seems to have been "systematically demolished" (p. 57) in what "appears to have been a relatively violent act" (p. 57). The passage of Anta da Lajinha, much like those of other similar sites "would have been too low or too narrow to allow the introduction of a corpse" (p. 215). In effect, alternative means of accessing the interior have been proposed for a number of these structures via timber or other forms of "removable roofing, enabling the chambers to be accessed from above" (p. 215). This pushed the authors, following previous researchers, to suggest the passage as more symbolic than functional (pp. 62, 109, 215), an assumption that has led researchers to suggest that these structures with narrow passages are derivative of the larger granite ones.

What if these observations are not treated as oddities to be merely confined to the realm of the symbolic, but rather as instances of tension between the conceptual framework of the researcher and that of the builders of these structures? After all, access to the inside is not the only possible functional purpose for a "passage" – many others are possible – so why should one immediately assume a symbolic purpose when all the data is indicating is that access was not their purpose. From an ontology where there is no distinction between nature and culture, which may very well have been behind Neolithic conceptions of the world, there is no space for the symbolic since there is no conceptual distinction between the symbol and what the symbol refers to. Therefore, from the perspective of a Neolithic megalith builder a symbolic purpose for the narrow passages would have been as alien to them as the access purpose is to us. The important question to ask is therefore not what symbolic meaning these passages may have had, but what purpose other than access they may have served?

The above points are instances of what Holbraad and Pedersen (2017) called alterity or ontological tension which, when followed, can lead to new (re)conceptualisations that take

our thinking closer to that of the people we are studying. This pursuit is not without stray paths and dead ends but that is where the other pillars of the ontological turn – reflexivity and experimentation – come to the scholar’s aid (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). This isn’t the place to attempt to perform that exercise, however I would like to point *JSA* readers to the already explored alternative function of these passages as lense-less telescopes, enhancing the morning visibility of certain stars at key moments in the subsistence calendars of these communities in ways that may have formed part of ritual initiation ceremonies (e.g., Silva 2015). By no means do I claim this to be the sole possibility, but it is the pursuit of such alternatives that is necessary to push the boundaries of our knowledge.

Whilst on the topic of challenging old concepts to think in new ways, the conceptualisation of these structures as tombs prevails throughout the book – from cover to cover – and is equally patent in the way they interpret everything from artefacts to the sites themselves. Elsewhere, I have argued that we may be hamstrung by continuing to think about these monuments in such a reductionist fashion (Silva in print). As part of the above challenge to ontologically turn our questions and the way we conceptualise these sites, it may pay off to also explore the possibility that their function as graves or tombs may have been completely secondary to their main purpose, much as it was in medieval churches. A tantalising possibility that, no doubt, is worthy of future research.

Despite the above, the volume has created the opportunity to ask the questions I pose above and therefore the opportunity to push forward the boundaries of our understanding – and this is more than can be said of most books. It is a shame that such a beautifully insightful, and unique, volume did not come with an index, which would have been rather useful for reasons that any scholar will resonate with. Nevertheless, this book stands as a singular contribution in two ways: firstly, by bringing western Iberian archaeology to the attention of English-speakers in a very detailed, very contextualised way containing information that is usually only available to native speakers; and secondly because the questions it asks and the information it gives, are illustrative of the contribution the British archaeological tradition can make on Portuguese academia.

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