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Before the Celts: Cosmology, Landscape and Folklore in Neolithic Northwest Iberia

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Abstract. This paper applies a combined landscape and skyscape archaeology methodology to the study of megalithic passage graves in the North-west of the Iberian Peninsula, in an attempt to glimpse the cosmology of these Neolithic Iberians. The reconstructed narrative is found to be supported also by a toponym for a local mountain range and associated folklore, providing an interesting methodology that might be applied in future Celtic studies. The paper uses this data to comment on the ‘Celticization from the West’ hypothesis that posits Celticism originated in the European Atlantic façade during the Bronze Age. If this is the case, then the Megalithic phenomenon that was widespread along the Atlantic façade would have immediately preceded the first Celts.

1. Introduction

The Iberian Peninsula plays a significant role in the new narratives of Celtic origins stemming out of the ‘Celtic from the West’ school.¹ This school postulates that Celtic culture was formed in Western Europe and it highlights Iberia as the potential source. The oldest attested Celtic language dates from the first millennium BCE and originated in the southwest of the Iberian Peninsula.² It also posits that Celticism originated in the Bronze Age, four to five thousand years ago. This then makes the Neolithic people that inhabited Iberia six thousand years ago the predecessors of these Celts. Studying their cosmology, beliefs and practices, as this paper proposes to do, becomes central to an understanding and contextualization of the rise of Celticism. In so doing,

¹ Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch (eds), *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010).

² For example, see John T. Koch, *Tartessian: Celtic in the South-west at the Dawn of History*. 2nd edition (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2013).

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a multi-disciplinary methodology that can be applied to other European regions, including those more often associated with the Celts, is presented. Finally, this paper highlights a congruence between present-day toponymical folktales and a prehistoric reality, as reconstructed with recourse to the material culture left behind by Neolithic Iberians. Instances of congruence between myth and past realities are often proposed by Celtic scholars and this case study will hopefully inspire many others to be critically sought.

This paper therefore starts by summarising the ‘Celtic from the West’ argument that centralizes the debate over Celtic origins in the Atlantic Bronze Age. It then focuses on the basin of the *Mondego* river in central Portugal, and details what we know of the Neolithic Iberians that inhabited it from about 5,000 BCE to 3,000 BCE. The attention then shifts to the monumental structures that they built: the megalithic passage graves that dot these landscapes. In particular, it will look at the orientation of their entrances and how they reveal the rudiments of the cosmology of their builders by the way they highlight particular elements of their landscape and skyline. Toponymy and folklore are then explored to support, and shed further light on, the identified link between landscape, skyline and the prehistoric record of the *Mondego* valley.

2. ‘Celtic from the West’ and the role of Iberia-

The ‘Celticization from the West’ hypothesis posits that ‘Celtic probably evolved in the Atlantic Zone during the Bronze Age’.³ This is a contrast with traditional accounts that place its origins in the Iron Age of west-central Europe, specifically the La Tène and Hallstatt archaeological cultures.⁴ The traditional origin was supported by the earliest attested Celtic language – Lepontic – in the 6th century BCE just south of the proposed core area.⁵

³ Barry Cunliffe, *Europe Between the Oceans, 9000 BC - AD 1000* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 258.

⁴ See, for example, John Rhys *Celtic Britain* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1882).

⁵ Raimund Karl, ‘The Celts from Everywhere and Nowhere: A re-evaluation of the Origins of the Celts and the Emergence of Celtic Cultures’, in Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch (eds), *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), pp. 39-64, here p. 40.

More recently, however, work done by John T. Koch indicates that an older language was a Celtic language – Tartessian – a language that is well attested to have been in use in the southwest of the Iberian Peninsula from the 8th century BCE to the 5th century BCE.⁶ A recognition of this fact would overturn the traditional narrative by, at least, shifting the origins sufficiently back in time to account for an earlier Celtic language to appear far enough from its supposed origin. But the translation of the Tartessian inscriptions is not the only piece of evidence. Cunliffe and Koch brought together a number of scholars from archaeology, linguistics and genetics together to build their case.⁷

By first looking at the geographical distribution of Celtic place-names, Cunliffe emphasises that ‘Celtic was widely spoken in the Atlantic Zone of Europe and along the great rivers flowing into the Atlantic and was resilient enough to survive in place-name evidence’.⁸ Such a broad distribution would have implied some degree of cultural cohesion along the Atlantic Zone, but a cursive look at the Iron Age period argued for by the traditional Celtic narrative shows this to be a period of collapse, fragmentation and regionalization.⁹ Instead, the rich archaeological record of the preceding periods – the Neolithic and Bronze Ages – demonstrates highly innovative communities with networks of communication between themselves and others.¹⁰ Cunliffe argues that ‘given the extent and intensity of the connectivity, and the complexity of the technological knowledge and belief systems communicated, there

⁶ John T. Koch, ‘Paradigm Shift? Interpreting Tartessian as Celtic’, in Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch (eds), *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), pp. 185-302; Koch, *Tartessian: Celtic in the South-west*.

⁷ Cunliffe and Koch, *Celtic from the West*.

⁸ Barry Cunliffe, ‘Celticization from the West: The Contribution of Archaeology’, in Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch (eds), *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), pp. 13-38, here p. 17. For the geographical distribution of Celtic place-names see Patrick Sims-Williams, *Ancient Celtic Place-Names in Europe and Asia Minor* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006); John T. Koch, Raimund Karl, A. Minard and S. Ó Faoláin, *An Atlas for Celtic Studies: Archaeology and Names in Ancient Europe and Early Medieval Ireland, Britain and Brittany* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2007).

⁹ Cunliffe, ‘The Contribution of Archaeology’, p. 33.

¹⁰ Cunliffe, ‘The Contribution of Archaeology’, pp. 20-32.

must have been a lingua franca', something that would not be possible in the comparative isolation of the later Iron Age communities.¹¹

On the genetics front, work popularized by Stephen Oppenheimer, for example, has highlighted the extensive links between the Irish and British populations and those of the Iberian Peninsula.¹² The major hurdle here has been the lack of a solid chronology for these studies, making it difficult to identify with certainty the cause of this similarity.

'Celticization from the West', incremental as it may be, has not been met without criticism.¹³ In a recent review of the debate, Mikhailova highlights the lack of attention of this hypothesis to, firstly, the linguistically well-established distinction between Continental and Insular Celtic languages and where Tartessian would fit in this scheme;¹⁴ secondly, the presence of Italo-Celtic parallels that the 'out of Iberia' hypothesis cannot explain;¹⁵ and thirdly, the presence of lexical isoglosses shared between Celtic, Germanic and Balto-Slavic.¹⁶ She concludes, quite negatively, that 'the Atlantic hypothesis turns out to be no more convincing than the traditional Central European theory, and one has to look for the actual Celtic "Urheimat" [i.e. homeland] elsewhere'.¹⁷

¹¹ Cunliffe, 'The Contribution of Archaeology', p. 34.

¹² Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British* (London: Robinson, 2007). See also Brian McEvoy, Martin Richards, Peter Forster and Daniel G. Bradley, 'The *Longue Durée* of Genetic Ancestry: Multiple Genetic Marker Systems and Celtic Origins on the Atlantic Façade of Europe', *American Journal of Human Genetics*, Vol. 75 (2004): pp. 693-702; Stephen Oppenheimer, 'A Reanalysis of Multiple Prehistoric Immigrations to Britain and Ireland aimed at identifying the Celtic contributions', in Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch (eds), *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), pp. 121-150.

¹³ Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch 'Introduction', in Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch (eds), *Celtic from the West: Alternative Perspectives from Archaeology, Genetics, Language and Literature* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), pp. 1-10, here p. 2.

¹⁴ Tatyana A. Mikhailova, 'Celtic origin: location in time and space? Reconsidering the 'East-West Celtic' debate', *Journal of Language Relationship* Vol. 13 no. 3 (2015): pp. 257-279.

¹⁵ Mikhailova, 'Reconsidering the 'East-West Celtic' debate', p. 267.

¹⁶ James P. Mallory, 'The Indo-Europeanization of Atlantic Europe', in John T. Koch and Barry Cunliffe (eds), *Celtic from the West 2: Rethinking the Bronze Age and the Arrival of Indo-European in Atlantic Europe* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013), pp. 17-40, here p. 31; Mikhailova, 'Reconsidering the 'East-West Celtic' debate', p. 267.

¹⁷ Mikhailova, 'Reconsidering the 'East-West Celtic' debate', p. 276.

On the genetics front, recent work done on ancient DNA has also revealed a much more complex picture than that posited by the proponents of ‘Celticization from the West’.¹⁸

The problems with the traditional theory have been highlighted for decades.¹⁹ However, Cunliffe and Koch’s hypothesis is probably the first to have been constructed out of so many different disciplines, which is sure to raise the eyebrows of scholars who are more comfortable staying within the confines of their own field of study. Overall, the multidisciplinary nature of their hypothesis has gained academic traction, leading to a series of volumes in a major archaeological publisher.²⁰

The debate is still on-going, and a lot of the detail will certainly be in a state of flux for decades to come. If, however, the central tenets of the Atlantic hypothesis hold true, and the evidence from the Tartessian inscriptions weighs Celtic origins in its favour, then the prehistory of the Iberian Peninsula, particularly of its northern and western coasts, will be central in any future arguments over the nature and process of Celticization.

3. North-Western Iberia before the Celts

This paper focuses on the *Mondego* river basin that forms the southernmost extent of the NW Iberian biogeographical region, and the frontier with the SW region that displays traces of a very different Neolithic culture.²¹ Archaeologically, this was a relatively unknown

¹⁸ See, for example, Lara M. Cassidy, Rui Martiniano, Eileen M. Murphy, Matthew D. Teasdale, James Mallory, Barrie Hartwell and Daniel G. Bradley, ‘Neolithic and Bronze Age migration to Ireland and establishment of the insular Atlantic genome’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* Vol. 113, no. 2 (2015): pp. 368-373.

¹⁹ See, for example, Patrick Sims-Williams, ‘Celtomania and Celtoscepticism’, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* Vol. 36 (1998): pp. 1-35; Simon James, *The Atlantic Celts: Ancient Peoples or Modern Invention?* (London: British Museum Press, 1999).

²⁰ Cunliffe and Koch, *Celtic from the West*; John T. Koch and Barry Cunliffe (eds), *Celtic from the West 2: Rethinking the Bronze Age and the Arrival of Indo-European in Atlantic Europe* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013); Barry Cunliffe and John T. Koch (eds), *Celtic from the West 3: Atlantic Europe in the Metal Ages* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2016).

²¹ Katina T. Lillios, Antonio Blanco-González, Brandon Lee Drake and José Antonio López-Sáez, ‘Mid-late Holocene climate, demography, and cultural dynamics in Iberia: a multi-proxy approach’, *Quaternary Science Reviews* Vol. 135 (2016): pp. 138-153, here p. 140.

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region until the turn of the century, when several rigorous excavations revealed a wealth of prehistoric material both at settlements and monuments, mostly megalithic.²² Out of these works emerged a picture of life in the fifth millennium BCE.

At the onset of the Neolithic (whose mode of introduction is still hotly debated)²³, small communities inhabited this landscape, and sustained themselves primarily on small game hunting and the gathering of wild fruits, such as acorn. Agriculture would have been merely incipient, and perhaps better described as horticulture.²⁴ This was supplemented by the raising of sheep and goat, which had just been introduced to the region. Considering the lack of evidence for occupation of the *Mondego* platform in the summer half of the year, and the pastoral nature of the communities, scholars have suggested that winters were spent in the low grounds of the river basin, whereas the summer half of the year was spent on the high pastures of nearby mountain ranges, in particular *Serra da Estrela*.²⁵ Although the evidence there is scarce, material culture, palynological and antracological evidence all attest to the presence and impact of humans in *Serra da Estrela* during the Neolithic period.²⁶

²² See, for example, António Carlos Valera, 'A Neolitização da Bacia Interior do Mondego', *Estudos Pré-Históricos* Vol. 6 (1998): pp. 131-148; Domingos Cruz, '*O Alto Paiva: megalitismo, diversidade tumular e práticas rituais durante a Pré-história Recente*' (Ph.D. thesis, Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal, 2001); João Carlos de Senna-Martinez and José Manuel Q. Ventura, 'Do Mundo das Sombras ao Mundo dos Vivos: Octávio da Veiga Ferreira e o Megalitismo da Beira Alta, meio século depois', *Estudos Arqueológicos de Oeiras* Vol.16 (2008): pp. 317-350.

²³ Sérgio Monteiro-Rodrigues, 'Pensar o Neolítico Antigo', *Estudos Pré-Históricos* Vol. 16 (2011).

²⁴ Senna-Martinez and Ventura, 'Mundo das Sombras', p. 327.

²⁵ Cruz, 'Alto Paiva', p. 313; João Carlos de Senna-Martinez, M.S. López-Plaza, and Michael Hoskin, 'Territorio, ideología y cultura material en el megalitismo de la plataforma del Mondego (Centro de Portugal)', in A. A. R. Casal (ed), *O Neolítico Atlântico e as Orixes do Megalitismo* (Santiago de Compostela: Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 1997), pp. 657-676, here pp. 663-664.

²⁶ João Araújo, Simon E. Connor, Jacqueline F. N. van Leeuwen, and Willem O. van der Knaap, 'História do fogo durante o Holocénico na Serra da Estrela, Portugal: Resultados Preliminares', in A.C. Almeida, A.M.S. Bettencourt, D. Moura, S. Monteiro-Rodrigues, and M.I.C. Alves (eds), *Environmental Changes and Human Interaction along the Western Atlantic Edge* (Coimbra: APEQ, 2012), pp. 107-114; J. L Cardoso and A. González, 'Testemunhos da ocupação pré-histórica da Serra da Estrela', *Al-Madan* Vol. 11 (2002): pp. 242-43.

Roughly a thousand years later, the first megalithic monuments appear in this region.²⁷ It is not clear whether this was an independent innovation or the adoption of a new form of materiality that might have formed itself further north at the core of the NW Iberian region, or, further along the Atlantic coast in Brittany (the oldest radiocarbon dates associated with these monuments are very similar across this stretch of the Atlantic coast).²⁸ The most common type of monument is a variation of the passage grave theme, also known locally as a dolmen, or *anta* in the original Portuguese. These are not dissimilar to the chambered tombs and passage graves of northwest Europe: they are centred around a polygonal chamber made out of megalithic orthostats, typically seven, nine, or eleven. This chamber then has an entrance with or without a corridor or passage, also megalithic in nature (see figure 1). Both the chamber and the passage were roofed with cover-stones, and the whole construction was surrounded by a tumulus covered in stone. In their heyday, these *antas* would have looked like artificial mounds with a stone shell and a single low opening. A well-resolved chronology for megalithism in NW Iberia has been difficult to establish, due to the scarcity of carbon samples, but generally indicates that the structures in the *Mondego* basin were built between 4,300 and 3,700 cal BCE, even though there is evidence for their continued use beyond this date.²⁹

Due to the acidic nature of the granite soils no bones have been recovered, but it is generally assumed, by analogy to other megalithic chambers elsewhere, that these structures were used as burial places, and possibly also as the setting for associated funereal rites.³⁰ The ritual function of these megalithic structures is highlighted by the presence,

²⁷ Domingos Cruz, 'Cronologia dos monumentos com tumulus do Noroeste peninsular e da Beira Alta', *Estudos Pré-Históricos* Vol. 3 (1995): pp. 81-120.

²⁸ Compare the dates given in Cruz, 'Cronologia' with those in Pierre-Roland Giot, Dominique Marguerie and Hervé Morzadec, 'About the age of the oldest passage-graves in western Brittany', *Antiquity* Vol. 68, no. 260(1994): pp. 624-626.

²⁹ Cruz, 'Cronologia', p. 104.

³⁰ Domingos Cruz, 'Dólmen de Antelas (Pinheiro de Lafões, Oliveira de Frades, Viseu): Um sepulcro-templo do Neolítico final da Beira Alta', *Estudos Pré-Históricos* Vol. 3 (1995): pp. 263–264.

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exclusively in NW Iberia, of forecourts outside the entrance, where objects of a ritual nature have been found.³¹ Another peculiarity of the



Figure 1 – *Orca de Santo Tisco*, one of the passage graves in the *Mondego* basin.

NW Iberian *antas*, by contrast to those found in SW Iberia, is the ubiquitous presence of art within the chamber, either painted or carved, sometimes both, and featuring a variety of elements, some more abstract or symbolic, others depicting realistic hunting scenes. Apart from their funereal and ritualistic functions, Senna-Martinez and colleagues have

³¹ See, for example, Pedro Sobral de Carvalho, ‘A Necrópole Megalítica da Senhora do Monte (Penedono – Viseu)’, *Estudos Pré-Históricos* Vol. 12 (2005).

also suggested that the monuments also marked the winter territory, therefore legitimizing its occupation.³²

4. Megaliths and Stars

The *Mondego* plateau is home to several such megalithic structures, most of which are isolated finds, and therefore harder to contextualize in detail. There is, however, a major cluster, of both monumental and settlement sites, in or around the modern council of *Carregal do Sal* (see figure 2). It has been mostly the archaeological record of this cluster that has allowed the picture described in the previous section to emerge, and we shall now focus on the passage graves of this cluster. There are about twelve recorded *antas* in this cluster, four of a simple nature (i.e. small and without a corridor), and eight featuring a corridor or passage.³³ Their architectural style is very similar, and they are found in close proximity to settlement sites, with at least one of them having been constructed on top of a previous settlement.³⁴

Landscape archaeologists and archaeoastronomers alike are interested in the orientation of the corridors of passage graves with respect to, respectively, topographic and celestial features or events.³⁵ The structures in the *Carregal do Sal* cluster, as well as a few other isolated ones, are all oriented towards the most conspicuous mountain range on the horizon: *Serra da Estrela*, the very same where the Neolithic communities would have spent their summers. This further adds to the role of the mountain range in the cosmology of these communities which might have

³² Senna-Martinez and Ventura, 'Mundo das Sombras'; João Carlos de Senna-Martinez and José Manuel Q. Ventura, 'Neolitização e Megalitismo na Plataforma do Mondego: Algumas Reflexões sobre a Transição Neolítico Antigo/Neolítico Médio', in M. S. Hernández Pérez, J. A. Soler Díaz and J. A. López Padilla (eds), *Actas do IV Congresso del Neolítico en la Península Ibérica* (Alicante: Museo Arqueológico de Alicante, 2008), pp. 77-84.

³³ Fabio Silva, 'The View from Within: a 'time-space-action' approach to Megalithism^[L] in Central Portugal', in Fabio Silva and Nicholas Campion (eds), *Skyscapes: The Role and Importance of the Sky in Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), pp. 120-139.

³⁴ Senna-Martinez and Ventura, 'Neolitização'.

³⁵ See, for example, Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994); Michael Hoskin, *Tombs, Temples and their Orientations* (Bognor Regis: Ocarina Books, 2001); Fabio Silva, 'A Tomb with a View: new methods for bridging the gap between land and sky in megalithic archaeology', *Advances in Archaeological Practice* Vol. 2, no. 1 (2014): pp. 24-37.

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considered the range sacred, not unlike many other cultures, both historical and ethnographical, that conceive of an *axis mundi* and relate it to particularly high places in their surroundings.³⁶

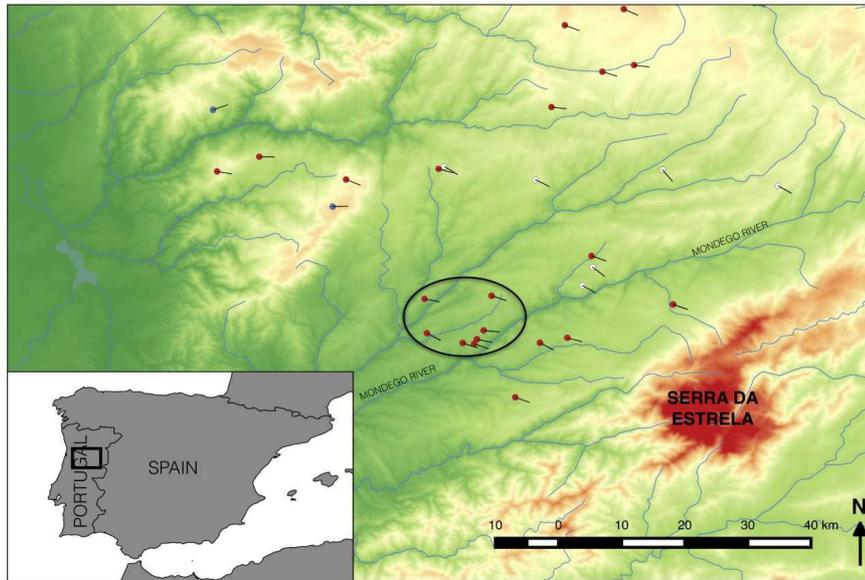


Figure 2 – Map of the *Mondego* river upper basin, showing all surveyed passage graves (coloured dots) with their entrance orientation (line). The cluster under discussion is circled in black, whereas *Serra da Estrela* is also shown. All passage graves marked by the red dots are oriented towards the rising of Aldebaran.

Within this broader topographic pattern, there is a particular region that was being specifically targeted: the only region of the mountain range that can be seen from within all of the passage graves and which does not correspond to its highest point.³⁷ This suggests an ulterior motive that might have superseded, or be complementary to, the topographic alignment. The highlighted region coincides exactly with the position where Aldebaran, the brightest star of the modern constellation of Taurus

³⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Lincoln and London: Bison Books, 1996), pp. 99-102.

³⁷ Silva, 'A Tomb with a View'; Silva 'The View from Within'.

and the fourteenth brightest star in the night sky, would have risen during the period of megalithic construction (see figure 3).



Figure 3 – The view towards the east at dawn at the end of April around 4,000 BCE, as reconstructed using a Digital Elevation Model and Stellarium. Aldebaran, the last star to rise before the sun, is seen to rise directly above *Serra da Estrela*.

Even though stars are always seen to rise in the same place on the horizon, stars that lie this far from the celestial pole go through a period in which they are not seen in the night sky, as they rise and set during daytime. After this period, called the period of invisibility, their first appearance is at dawn, rising just before the sun; this is what is known as the *heliacal rising*.³⁸ During the Middle Neolithic, the heliacal rising of Aldebaran would have occurred towards the end of April or early May, depending of viewing conditions and climate.³⁹

³⁸ Bernadette Brady, ‘Star Phases: the naked-eye astronomy of the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts’, in Fabio Silva and Nicholas Campion (eds), *Skyscapes: The Role and Importance of the Sky in Archaeology* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), pp. 76-86.

³⁹ Fabio Silva, ‘Landscape and Astronomy in Megalithic Portugal: The Carregal do Sal Nucleus and Star Mountain Range’, *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* Vol. 22 (2013): pp. 99–114, here p. 109.

Considering how the wider archaeological evidence suggests that these Neolithic communities would take their ovicaprids to the high pastures of *Serra da Estrela* to take advantage of its summer grazing grounds, and that considerable effort was put into ensuring that all passage graves aligned with the rising of Aldebaran, the first of which occurred in the middle of spring, it is possible that this rising could be a ritual and seasonal marker for this transhumance. Aldebaran's period of invisibility – from late February to late April – would provide the perfect length of time to make preparations for whatever rituals were going to be enacted at the dolmens, as well as to prepare for the move to higher grounds.

5. Toponym

It is not only the archaeological record that supports this correlation between star, mountain range and the pastoral communities of the *Mondego* basin. *Serra da Estrela* translates as 'mountain range of the star'. The origin of this toponym remains obscure, but the mountain's association with a star goes back at least to the 12th century.⁴⁰ Its designation as *Serra da Estrela* first appeared in 1256, where it is clearly stated that it is the name used to describe the mountain range by the communities living on its eastern slopes.⁴¹ An earlier text from 1186 suggests that a variant, *stella*, was used to describe only the region around the highest point of the mountain range.

Concurrently with these terms, others appear that seem to be variants of *Ermínio* (e.g. *Hermeno*, *Ermeno*, *Ermeo* and *Ermio*), usually attached to the common noun for a hill, *monte*. Whereas *stella* appears to designate its highest point, and later the mountain range itself, these variants of *Ermínio* appear to be the official court and clerical designation for the mountain range itself.⁴² Multiple names for the same orographic feature are not uncommon, partly due, according to Hough, 'to the lack of communication between rural societies'.⁴³

⁴⁰ José David Lucas Batista, *Do Ermínio à Serra da Estrela: Notas sobre uma alteração toponímica e outros estudos*. (Manteigas: Câmara Municipal de Manteigas e Parque Natural da Serra da Estrela, 1993), p.13; Fabio Silva, 'A Estrela da Serra: o passado de um topónimo', *Zimbro Dec* (2016): pp. 28-37, here p. 30.

⁴¹ Batista, *Ermínio*, p.13.

⁴² Silva, 'A Estrela da Serra', p.31.

⁴³ Carole Hough, 'Introduction', in Carole Hough (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 1-14, here p. 4.

Ermínio and its variants most clearly have for origin the Latin *Herminius mons*, a term that is known only from two classical texts – *De Bello Alexandrino* and Suetonius’ *De Vita Caesarum*. Many scholars have debated the origins and meaning of this term, and most raise serious questions over its identification with the mountain range we are considering.⁴⁴ Instead it has been suggested that the Latin term applied to the entire *Montejunto-Estrela* belt, which was likely undifferentiated during the Classical period. This is a more general problem in the study of mountain toponyms.⁴⁵

The obscure and unclear etymology of *Herminius* doesn’t shed light on the issue either: it is known as an early Roman family name of possibly Etruscan or Sabine origins.⁴⁶ On the other hand non-academic works and websites tend to connect *Herminius* to the god Hermes, or Mercury.⁴⁷ Borges de Figueiredo has, however, suggested an alternative and interesting etymology.⁴⁸ He argued that the word was formed by joining two Celtic words: *ar* and *meneiu*, the former, according to him, acting as an intensifying element and the latter a common noun for an elevation. *Ar-meneiu* would then have been a local Celtic common noun used to describe any ‘great elevation’. Rowland Jones had previously also made a similar hypothesis, but he posited *hir-mini-iu*, which he translates as ‘the long mountain’.⁴⁹ Curiously, variants of the supposed Celtic original are found associated with other mountainous areas in Portugal, further supporting the hypothesis that this would have been a pre-Roman common noun.⁵⁰ The Latin term *Herminius mons* would therefore have been a tautological toponym, joining two common nouns: an indigenous one – Celtic – with another from the invading culture – Roman.

Ar- and *er-* are well-attested in Celtic languages, both old and more recent, where they are not intensifying elements but prefixes with the

⁴⁴ Silva, ‘A Estrela da Serra’.

⁴⁵ Hough, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Walter Eder, ‘Herminius’, in Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (eds), *Brill’s New Pauly, Antiquity* (Berlin: Brill, 2016).

⁴⁷ See, for example, Ski Resort, ‘Estância de Ski da Serra da Estrela’ at <http://www.skiserradaestrela.com/?cix=622> [accessed 12 April 2018].

⁴⁸ António C. Borges de Figueiredo, *Coimbra Antiga e Moderna* (Lisbon: Livraria Ferreira, 1886).

⁴⁹ Rowland Jones, *The Origin of Language and Nations: Hieroglyphically, Etymologically, and Topografically Defined and Fixed* (London: J. Hughes, 1764), p. 357.

⁵⁰ Batista, *Ermínio*.

meaning of ‘on, upon, over’.⁵¹ This too is attested in the Tartessian language where, according to Koch, they meant ‘over’ and ‘after’, respectively.⁵² *Meneiu* is not, as far as this author is aware, part of the recovered Tartessian or Lusitanian repertoire, but it is similar to the word used by some modern Celtic languages: for example, *mynydd* is Welsh for mountain, whereas in Scottish Gaelic the same word is *monadh*, and in Breton it is *menez*.⁵³ If this Celtic root hypothesis is correct, the meaning might be slightly different from that suggested by Borgues the Figueiredo: instead of any ‘great elevation’, it might have related to something that existed, or happened, on or over an elevation. It could relate to the phenomenon of a star rising ‘over’ the mountain range, but it might more simply relate to the communities living ‘on’ these mountain ranges.

6. Folklore

The link between *Serra da Estrela* and a star appears to have been lost to the Classical writers and the Medieval courts, but this is not to say that it was also completely lost to the local communities. Ethnographers have been collecting folklore in this part of the country since at least the 1890s.⁵⁴ Since then, several folktales that explain the toponym *Serra da Estrela* have been recorded.⁵⁵ A short version, that nevertheless contains all the most common elements, is the one currently on the *Covilhã* City Council website, one of the five municipalities that surround the mountain range:⁵⁶

⁵¹ See, for example, Gareth King (ed), *Modern Welsh Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. xviii.

⁵² Koch, ‘Tartessian as Celtic’, p. 278.

⁵³ King, *Modern Welsh Dictionary*, p. 151; Gregory Zorzos, *Celtic Breton, Celtic Welsh, Scottish Gaelic to English Lexicon* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010), p.20.

⁵⁴ See, for example, João Leite de Vasconcelos, *Religiões da Lusitânia*, Vol. 1 (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 1897); João Leite de Vasconcelos, *Etnografia Portuguesa*, Vol. 1 (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 1933).

⁵⁵ CEAO, ‘Archive of Portuguese Legends’ at <http://www.lendarium.org> [accessed 2 August 2012].

⁵⁶ CM Covilha, ‘Parque Natural’ at <http://www.cm-covilha.pt/simples/?f=2612> [accessed 2 August 2012]; author’s translation from Fabio Silva, ‘Once Upon a Time...: when Prehistoric Archaeology and Folklore Converge’, *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* Vol. 28, no. 2 (2015): pp. 158-175.

People say that the name *Serra da Estrela* was given in the olden days by a shepherd living in an unknown place in the *Mondego* valley. He spent his nights contemplating a star that was so bright that it illuminated the top of a nearby mountain range. One day he decided to take his faithful dog and follow the scintillating light that attracted him so much. After climbing for many days they reached the peak. Impressed by the luminosity of the star the shepherd told his dog: ‘to this place that seems to be favoured by the *astros* [celestial objects] I will name *Serra da Estrela*, and you that accompanied me I shall give the same name’.⁵⁷

Other versions of this story add extra elements or *mythemes*, some of which I have discussed elsewhere, but the core narrative is always the one just given.⁵⁷ This folktale replicates, in slightly different words, the narrative that emerged from the prehistoric archaeological data. It is the tale of a shepherd living in the *Mondego* valley who, upon seeing a particular star rising above a mountain range on the horizon, decides to follow it. The comparison to the Neolithic communities of the *Mondego* basin is very suggestive. They inhabited the same river valley that the shepherd is said to live in, which is where the mentioned cluster of megalithic monuments and settlements is found. Like the hero of the tale, they too could be described as pastoralists. And finally, in both cases, the transhumant movement is triggered by the appearance of a star over the mountain range. In the case of the Neolithic monument builders, it was suggested above that the heliacal rising of Aldebaran above *Serra da Estrela* served this purpose. The similarities between folktale and archaeological narrative suggest that some present-day NW Iberian folklore, practices, and beliefs might be social memories of a six-thousand-year old lifestyle.⁵⁸

7. Conclusion: ‘strange noises from prehistory’

Above, several similarities between a prehistoric reality, as inferred from the archaeological record, and a toponymical folktale that is still being told today were highlighted. This is certainly not the first instance of

⁵⁷ Silva, ‘Once Upon a Time...’.

⁵⁸ See Silva, ‘Once Upon a Time...’ for an in-depth discussion.

congruence between prehistory and folklore.⁵⁹ However, a methodology for this type of cross-disciplinary analysis is not forthcoming, possibly due to the serendipitous nature of such finds. Based on the case of the *Mondego* basin, I have elsewhere provided three guidelines for future studies.⁶⁰ Here, though, I would like to conclude by drawing attention to the last of them: ‘congruence can appear from where one least expects it’.⁶¹

Toponyms are largely used to infer the language of prior settlers of a given region under the belief that they endure for long periods of time.⁶² However, as seen above, they also change and adapt to both local and national circumstances, a point independently raised also by Taylor and Hough.⁶³ This is not unlike folklore and myth, whose narratives shift and adapt to the ethno-history of the community that tells them.⁶⁴ This similarity, and the fact that many folktales are toponymical in function, shouldn’t be surprising, since in the absence of writing, the only way to ensure that toponyms are transmitted across generations is to tell stories about them – some of which would have survived as folktales. Despite this, folklore is barely mentioned in a recently edited volume on place-names and toponomastic methodologies.⁶⁵

Folklore cannot, and should not, be the ‘be all and end all’. As Taylor stated ‘to understand a place-name, when it was coined, by whom and with what motivation(s) in mind, it is important to collect as much information as possible from both’ the environment and the culture that named it.⁶⁶ In our case, studying the environment and ethno-history of the communities that currently surround *Serra da Estrela* would have yielded nothing. The passage graves, and their builders, left a mark on the

⁵⁹ See, for example, Tok Thompson, ‘The Irish Sí Tradition: Connections between the Disciplines, and What’s in a Word?’, *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* Vol. 11, no. 4 (2004): pp. 335-68.

⁶⁰ Silva, ‘Once Upon a Time...’, pp. 169-170.

⁶¹ Silva, ‘Once Upon a Time...’, p. 170.

⁶² See, for example, Sims-Williams, *Place-Names*; Koch et al, *Atlas*; Hough, ‘Introduction’.

⁶³ Simon Taylor, ‘Methodologies in Place-Name Research’, in Carole Hough (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 69-14; Carole Hough (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁶⁴ Silva, ‘Once Upon a Time...’, pp. 166-168.

⁶⁵ Carole Hough (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁶⁶ Taylor, ‘Methodologies’, p. 2.

archaeological record of the *Mondego* basin, around *Carregal do Sal*, a good 34 kilometres away, as the crow flies, from the mountain's peak.

The starting point of the case study that this paper focuses on was the archaeological record. Folklore and toponymy were used to supplement and corroborate a narrative that was fully constructed from archaeological methodologies. This would never have happened had one started by looking at the folktale, or the toponym, and try to make sense of them – unless, of course, one would cast one's net wide enough, both in space and time. However, most often the archaeological or historical narrative is used to corroborate a particular interpretation of a folktale or myth. But myth, like poetry, is prone to be interpreted in a multitude of ways, and not all will be able to hear the strange noises from prehistory.

In conclusion, this paper has illustrated a connection between prehistoric landscape, skyscape, monumentality, present-day place-names and folklore that not only provides an interesting methodology to be applied to other locations (the Welsh dolmens and Irish passage graves immediately spring to mind) but also provides a glimpse of the Iberian cosmology and world-view that preceded, and might have fed into, the development of Celtic.