

RITUALS AND DEATH CULTS IN RECENT PREHISTORY IN CENTRAL PORTUGAL (ALTO RIBATEJO)

by

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Abstract: The present paper aims to give a general outline of the new data contributing to a better understanding of cults and rituals in Alto Ribatejo, central Portugal, during recent prehistory. The Megalithic Complex of Rego da Murta is the only megalithic set known so far in the Upper Nabão region, therefore being of crucial significance to understanding the evolutionary population dynamics that inhabited this region. The excellent preservation of deposition contexts, specially those occurred in Dolmen II of Rego da Murta, and its relative proximity with the cave contexts, makes it the perfect case study for understanding a perception of action and the burial rites performed in those ancient times.

Keywords: Rituals; Megalithism; Caves; Central Portugal; Neo-calcolithic.

Resumo: O artigo que se segue pretende apresentar de forma resumida os novos dados existentes para a compreensão dos cultos e rituais registados na zona do Alto Ribatejo, Central-Portugal, durante a pré-história recente. O Complexo Megalítico de Rego da Murta é o único conjunto de monumentos megalíticos conhecidos até agora, na zona do Alto Nabão, sendo extraordinariamente importante para a percepção das dinâmicas das populações que habitaram esta região. A excelente preservação dos contextos de deposição, sobretudo ocorridos na Anta II de Rego da Murta, e a sua proximidade relativa com os contextos de gruta, caracterizam-no como a opção perfeita para a percepção das ações fúnebres e dos rituais desenvolvidos nesta época.

Palavras chave: Rituais funerários; Megalitismo; Pré-história recente.

Introduction

Until the late twentieth-century, the whole Alto Ribatejo region was considered part of a different cultural world, whose population descended from the cardinal and only performed their burial rituals inside caves; characterized as diverse as deposition from those in megalithic monuments recorded in the neighboring regions. The lack of knowledge of megalithic monuments in this area, as well as the records of artifacts found in cave

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burials and its apparent dissimilarity with the monuments observed further south such as Dolmen I at Val da Lage (Oosterbeek, 1997) led the researchers to divide the Alto Ribatejo region into two “worlds” – the one of caves and the one of megalithic monuments (Cruz, 1997; Oosterbeek, 1997). It was only after the first Rego da Murta monuments have been found – presently a set of 11 megalithic monuments – that the reformulation of this theory has been proposed in a doctoral dissertation, 2006 (Figueiredo, 2006a).

As well as being located in the occupied area of the caves, these monuments reveal well-preserved contexts, particularly as far as bone remains is concerned.

The megalithic complex of rego da murta

The Megalithic Complex of Rego da Murta is comprised of a set of stone monuments which fits in with the chronology from later Neolithic to early Bronze Age periods, within an area of about 1km², on the right bank of the Rego da Murta stream.

It stands on the Mesozoic limestone terrains (Cunha, L. 1990), which form the whole mountain range of Alto Nabão, in the plain between the Zézere and Nabão rivers. From the administrative point of view, it is situated in the inner centre of the Portuguese territory, in the parish of Ramalhal, Alvaiázere county, Leiria District (see figure 1).

Among the monuments marked (fig.2) two dolmens – Dolmen I and Dolmen II of Rego da Murta – stand out (the last one is in an excellent state of preservation) and several small monoliths in which lithics material remains have also been exhumed.

Morphologically, the dolmens are different from each other; however they fit in the typologies established for the ones observed in the Portuguese central/southern territory. Both have a medium-size chamber and corridor and are built with limestone ortostats from outcrops in the region. However, in Dolmen I of Rego da Murta the chamber has a separate corridor, its ortostats are larger and there are two in the head. Dolmen II of Rego da Murta is an *allée couverte* type structure; there is no clear distinction between chamber and corridor.

The several papers already published on these monuments (Velho, A. 2002; 2003; Figueiredo, A. 2003; 2004 a-h; 2005 a,b; 2006 a,b; 2007 a,b) include them, as far as burial rituals and materials recorded is concerned, in a similar cultural context to that of contemporary occupations observed in identified caves of the region which can be paralleled with Gruta dos Ossos and Gruta do Cadaval (Figueiredo, 2006a).

The small menhirs, also made of limestone, are small belly-shaped monoliths (rounded on one side and flat on the other) resulting from natural polishing of the surface of limestone rocks and the cutting of rock outcrops. These are distributed in circle around Dolmen II, delimiting a symbolic space, with the megalithic monument in its middle (fig.3)

As well as the menhirs, silex artifacts made of *chert* – a material found in the region – were found. These are mainly flints and cores, most of them without retouches or traces of usage. Near of Menhir II a small deposition consisting of a great number of seeds (still to be identified), silex materials and a small ceramic fragment was exhumed. These depositions differ from the dolmens. These contain silex materials stemming from external areas to known mineral beds in the vicinity of the monuments, presenting a type of flint of better quality, more characteristic of south areas, near of the River Tagus, as is the case of deposits of Rio Maior. Materials exhumed from Dolmen II include numerous arrowheads of different types and halberds, as well as collar beads, some of them identified as being

made of crisoprase (raw material which can't be found in the Portuguese territory) (Gonçalves, H, 2006). Associated with lithic and pottery materials, there is an interesting and significant bone industry which contributes to understanding the Portuguese archaeographic contexts (illustration 1 to 7). Dolmen I of Rego da Murta, not so well preserved, evidences occupations characterised by larger pots and a lithic record, consisting of big blades and flints of different types (illustration 8 to 11). We believe that this apparent dissimilarity between Dolmen I and Dolmen II of Rego da Murta is due to the differences in occupation chronologies: Dolmen I evidencing occupations from late Neolithic and early Bronze and Dolmen II from the medium/late Calcolithic.

Absolute datings have been obtained through AMS bone dating techniques.

Dolmen I of Rego da Murta (first occupation phase):

Beta – 190001 Cal BC 3360 to 3090 (Cal BP 5310 to 5040); 4520 +/- 40 BP

Beta – 189998 Cal BC 3360 to 2930 (Cal BP 5310 to 4880); 4490 +/- 60 BP

Beta – 190003 Cal BC 3270 to 3240 (Cal BP 5220 to 5190); 4400 +/- 40 BP

Beta – 190002 Cal BC 3090 to 2900 (Cal BP 5040 to 4850); 4370 +/- 40 BP

Dolmen I of Rego da Murta (second occupation phase):

Beta – 190000 Cal BC 2130 to 1900 (Cal BP 4080 to 3850); 3640 +/- 40 BP

Beta – 189999 Cal BC 1940 to 1730 (Cal BP 3880 to 3680); 3510 +/- 40 BP

Dolmen II of Rego da Murta:

Beta – 190007 Cal BC 2890 to 2630 (Cal BP 4840 to 4580); 4190 +/- 40 BP.

Beta – 190004 Cal BC 2930 to 2880 (Cal BP 4880 to 4830); 4290 +/- 40 BP.

Beta – 190008 Cal BC 2860 to 2810 (Cal BP 4810 to 4760) or Cal BC 2750 to 2720 (Cal BP 4700 to 4670) or Cal BC 2700 to 2470 (Cal BP 4650 a 4420); 4060 +/- 50 BP.

The burial rituals

A significant point in the study of Rego da Murta megalithic monuments relates with the rituals performed and the different deposition contexts observed. Although not so obvious in Dolmen I due to its relative destruction, bone remains in Dolmen II are concentrated in pits crowned at the top by a pile of stones (fig. 4). Most artifacts are deposited inside the pit together with the bone remains; the pottery items being upside down at the top of the mound near the first layer of stones, topping each context. Similarly, the skulls also seem to be at the top of bone remains, dominating the cluster, followed by long bones. Around the bone deposition other artifacts can be seen in a somewhat random arrangement. However, some of the remains examined suggest that the deposition followed an overall scheme. For example, so far all polished artifacts (axes and adzes) were found close to the prop walls, both on the right and the left-hand side. Also the faun found in Dolmen I has been collected close to the prop walls or in the central area of the monument near the rounded structure sustained by us (Figueiredo, A. 2006a) as a support structure for any symbolic object (possibly a wooden monolith) which can be connected with the late Neolithic (fig.5), in Dolmen II, the depositions of the faun also have connection with the big groups of human bones (fig.9).

So far, no anatomic connections in any of the monuments have been detected, considering that burial rituals between the late Neolithic period and early Bronze Age evidenced in the megalithic monuments of the Alto Nabão region are associated with secondary rituals. This possibility is confirmed by the sedimentary analyses which allowed the detection of a humus soil layer inside the monument but not in the outside, which leads us to consider it an export layer. This layer covers the whole burial assemblage, some isolated pottery fragments have been found which don't match with any of the other elements found in the monument or in similar sites where the relatively complete pottery vessels have been found. This leads us to consider the possibility of materials and sediments having been transported from a previous burial location and its disposal inside the dolmens. In addition to the archaeological interpretation, some of the bones examined by the anthropology team (Silva et alii 2005, 2006; Silva, A. 2005, 2006; Pinto, 2008) reveal traces of manipulation which indicates the presence of previous rituals (fig.6). Also we found non-cremated bones and small amounts of bones cremated in different degrees, but without direct connection with the assemblages identified. It is worth noting that the number of complete long bones is very scarce and almost all of them are fractured. In addition, the data obtained enable us to sustain that there has been no selection of individuals; each ossuary consists of bones of different age and sex in an amalgam as if they came from a sort of common trench or collective burial site. Even if this possibility is considered new studies will be needed to confirm these data.

This procedure of transporting materials, sediments and bones from a primary burial area to a secondary area is described in other studies on archaeological sites of the region (Oosterbeek, 1997) and may be the possibility considered for pit burials in the Nabão caves. Gruta dos Ossos (Tomar) located at a few kilometres south of the Rego da Murta complex is an example thereof (Oosterbeek, 1987; 1993). It is a relatively small cavity extending West where five stratigraphic layers have been observed (Oosterbeek, L. 1987: 80-81; 1993: 10-27; Oosterbeek, L. e Cruz A. 1991: 280-281). Among them two anthropic levels have been identified: one located in layer IV corresponding to the inhumation by the wall of the cave and the other, possibly a more recent one, between layer I and III dated Beta 189996 4240+/-40 BP / 3020-2890 cal BC 2 sigma; ICEN 465 4630+/-80 BP / 3628-3100 cal BC 2 sigma and I 17368 4460+/-110 BP / 3400-2880 cal BC 2 sigma comprising an ossuary containing several individuals. The primary deposition was confirmed by the presence of connected bones.

This cave has revealed a series of successive burials characterised by the initial presence of decontextualised bones of the lower limbs from several individuals followed by burials of the upper limbs and finally the skulls – arrangements similar to those in Dolmen II at Rego da Murta. Between these deposition earth layers levels could be observed. The artifacts have been disposed around, close to the entrance cave (Cruz, A. e Oosterbeek, L. 1988); similar artifacts having been found in Dolmen I at Rego da Murta. In the vicinity of this cave there is the Gruta do Cadaval (Tomar) which also shows some consistencies with the data already provided. It is a cavity which can be divided into two separate spaces marked, not only by the cave's internal morphology, but also by the two burial types observed: a collective one located near the entrance (just like in Gruta dos Ossos) and an individual one located in a more interior room, older than the former. The authors who studied it found evidence for 19 stratigraphic units, of which two correspond to the following burials: Layer C (collective burials) and D (single inhumation) (Oosterbeek, L. 1985).

Layer C was dated *Beta 189995* 4550+/-40 BP / 3520-3350 cal BC 2 sigma and *I 17241* 5180+/-140 BP / 4354-3732 cal BC 2 sigma. This level revealed the presence of a set of “surface” burials “without or barely without a sedimentary layer” (Cruz, A. 1997: 220) associated to a lithic industry of silex and amphibolite (consisting of polished, oval- and trapezoid-section artifacts blades and bladelets without retouches and crescent-shaped microliths), incised pottery (with line and zig-zag motives), long-neck notching edges and carenated vases paralleled to the ones found in the Rego da Murta dolmens (fig.7) and also artifacts containing weaving objects and ribbed vases similar to those found in Gruta dos Ossos and Morgado Superior (idem, 1997).

Layer D was dated *ICEN 803* 5390+/-50 BP / 4350-4045 cal BC 2 sigma and *ICEN 464* 5160+/-50 BP / 4212-3817 cal BC 2 sigma. The single grave was observed in the second room on a block slumping which has been reset to receive it. Associated with the burial various vases have been exhumed containing decorative patterns similar to those of early Neolithic (sac-shaped and “acacia leaf” print decorations), holed shells (*Theodoxus fluviatilis*), round- or oval-section artifacts made of polished stone, unretouched blades and bladelets and trapezes.

Although authors have considered that, with the initial datings (*ICEN 464*, *ICEN 803* e *I 17241*) the layers would not be able to be identified (Oosterbeek, 1997), the last dating obtained in 2003 (*Beta 189995*) of layer C enables us to match it with the earliest phase of Dolmen I of Rego da Murta.

Despite the scarcity of osteological data of other contexts, in the region, from which we can draw conclusions on the nature of the rituals practised during the early occupation stages of the megalithic monuments, it is possible to consider for the Calcolithic period the use of rituals based on pit depositions. Further south, by the river Tagus other pit structures can be seen, either associated with atypical stone structures such as the Monumento dos Colos (Baptista,2006), or separately such as the pits in Quinta do Paço (Caron, et alli, 2005) or connected with great natural rock blocks standing out from the landscape and overlooking the river Zêzere such as the Monument 5 at Jogada (Abrantes) Cruz,2003; 2004; 2006; 2007).

Anyway, all data that we have to interpret rituals practised in the region lead us to consider the hypothesis of a behavioural change during the middle Neolithic, characterised by the transition from primary burials to transfer rituals and secondary pit burials, both in caves or in structures such as megalithic monuments. These depositions would be in some cases covered by a stone structure, crowned at the top by the skulls and some significant artifacts, within a global symbolic process.

Conclusion

In order to understand cults and rituals in Alto Ribatejo (Central Portugal) we can conclude that dolmens, specially those with corridor, are the most numerous and the ones having the richest artifact and bone deposition. Although no consistent bone remains have been obtained in Zêzere and Tejo sites, due to soil acidity, the amount of material observed in these monuments is very similar to those located in limestone areas such as Rego da Murta; Anta I at Val da Laje, Abrantes, by the Zêzere river containing about 100 individuals Oosterbeek, 1997). As for caves, and in line with the chronological table observed in megalithic monuments, this number appears to be around 30 (Schalling, M. 1995).

In a prior period to these constructions, the number of individuals is quite lower as a result of single burials observed in the first cave depositions. This situation observed in the Alto Ribatejo region during the early Neolithic has been also observed in the protomegalithic monuments recognised throughout the whole peninsular territory: single burials accompanied by a very limited number of artifacts (Leisner V. 1965; 1998; Silva e Soares, 2000: 128) conjugated with animals, ochre and, in some cases, the use of fire.

As we go through the Neolithic in Alto Ribatejo, we can observe the presence of other burials, of a more collective nature, structured in more or less organised ossuaries related with rituals involving the deburial of old depositions. This transfer ritual might have had numerous symbolic-sacred or even socio-cultural meanings which from a given point in time started to be included in cult practices of these populations. It is by this time that these cults started to be performed outdoors, both in the dolmens and in relatively atypical structures.

As far as cults and rituals in menhirs are concerned, most of the cases observed in the Alto Ribatejo region relate with areas containing burial monuments such as dolmens or pits. The same applies to other regions of the Portuguese territory where they are also considered as boundaries of demarcation or identification of these areas (Jorge, V. 1977; Silva, F. e Silva, A. 1994; Leisner, G. 1944; Almeida, C. 1979:14; Bénéteau, G. 2000), having only a marginal role in the understanding of the spatial-symbolic assemblage.

In Rego da Murta, procedures related with the menhirs are still far from being understood; however, there is no doubt that they are limited to a certain area where certain symbolic rituals and practices occurred including debitage processes. The same happens with the set of menhirs at Quinta do Paço located further south at a few kilometres' distance (Caron et alii, 2005).

The remains observed (set of menhirs and tombstones-menhirs associated with megalithic pits and artifacts such as schist plates spread across a relatively small area grouped in clusters and associated with vestiges of fire) lead us to connect them with symbolic rituals and concepts in the Rego da Murta set. The artifacts recovered in the vicinity of the menhirs are also consisted of flints and cores mainly from the debitage of small nodes with a significant percentage of cortex and barely any retouched artifacts.

If we consider menhirs and dolmens as part of the same spatial set we can say that there has been a clear intention in the choice of each object as well as its structure and manufacturing material. The rituals performed, such as the mere activity of making the artifacts or its deposition in the outer area of the monument as well as inside the dolmens or even related architectural constructions, followed very concrete rules. These depositions perpetuated across time and new structures and practices were added according to needs or rituals.

An in-depth analysis of the data makes us conclude that, specially for Dolmen II at Rego da Murta, the different deposition moments (based on the absolute datings obtained) occurred within short periods of time (20 years in average) reveal contexts containing artifacts of a wide range of typologies – a clear reflection of these intentions and lifestyles of those ancient times. As far as we observed, these depositions show unique characteristics that allow us to distinguish between each of them within the monument. Although this is not the main focus of this research, we recognise that this will only be possible if we consider that the choice of the artifacts deposited by the communities has been intentional and they wanted to convey a clear message.

Considering that the adoption of megalithism might have emerged from favourable structures, the causes may be related with social aspects, because the basic parts of the puzzle (first large-size architectural structures requiring vast human resources, location in circulation or space-delimiting areas, rapid adoption by several communities, association with symbolic and mostly external artifacts with a relatively small number of individuals, the long occupation period of these monuments, precise deposition procedures, among others) suggest collective, occasional contexts perceived by the surrounding environment. In the words of Debra Gold (2000) “*a secondary burial operates at a number of different levels and may create or transform the social environment as much as it reflects it*” also requires a bigger “collaborative work” and it is a process that “*involves multiple corpses requiring specific physical treatment and thus brings together the living and the dead in a powerful and protracted way*” (idem, 2000, 197).

Apparently the social aspect is obvious – the message passed on is acknowledged and perceived by local as well as external communities. Adoption is only accomplished if it is perceived and considered by the populations as necessary or effective for the purposes intended. Be it for sacred or profane motives, it must be respected and integrated in the population’s habits and this is only possible within a society that confers meaning to it. Innovations could be assimilated and practised for the purpose of social integration in a wide contact network adapting symbolisms and concepts from neighbouring communities which, on their turn, had already adapted them from others by means of a sort of *universal language*. In addition, fashions would emerge that would change the practices adopted eventually leading to entire communities adopting new habits. The practice of these innovations (activities, rituals and objects) would thus be shared by neighbouring communities in order to establish social agreements for integration into a *wide community*.

Megalithic monuments would then become a means of conveying that message thus justifying the time and effort dedicated to the constructions and surrounding area. The symbols (materialised in artworks and artifacts) – ideological conveyors – would be deposited in the interiors together with the ancestors (which would reinforce the intention and legitimate the action). In fact, these were not usual burials but symbolic practices with socio-religious meanings shared by the whole community.

These “innovations” are not really new; some concepts applied to dolmens might have already been used in previous cult situations in cave burials, but around the 5th millennium have been transferred and adapted to the first monuments without having totally abandoned cave burials. After its exteriorisation, new structural elements have been added, with the use in the Calcolithic of natural elements such as big outcrops, small discrete architectural structures undistinguishable in the landscape or single pit depositions whether or not associated with wider spaces containing menhirs. It was a phase of Man’s conceptualisation of nature (Guilaine e Zammit, 1998: 120-125) which reflected itself at economical and cultural levels but specially in the socio-religious system.

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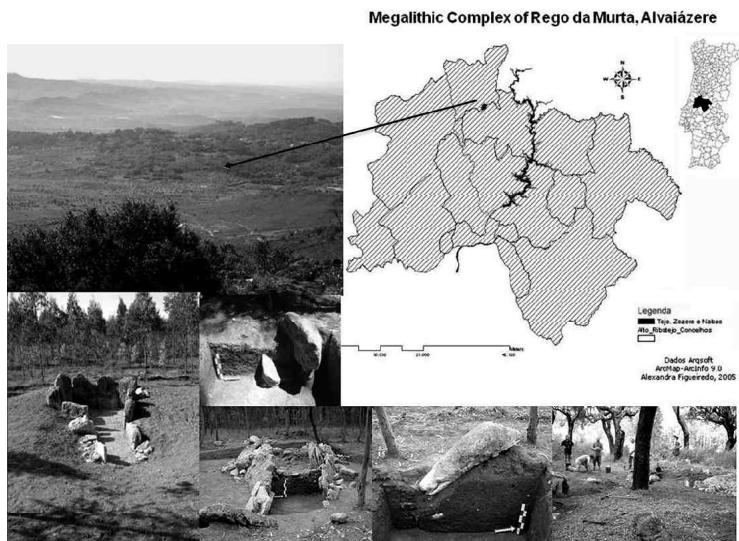


Figure 1 – The megalithic Complex of Rego da Murta is situated in the inner centre of the Portuguese territory, in south of alvaiázere country. in the image we can see a view from the landscape and some monuments that compose the complex.

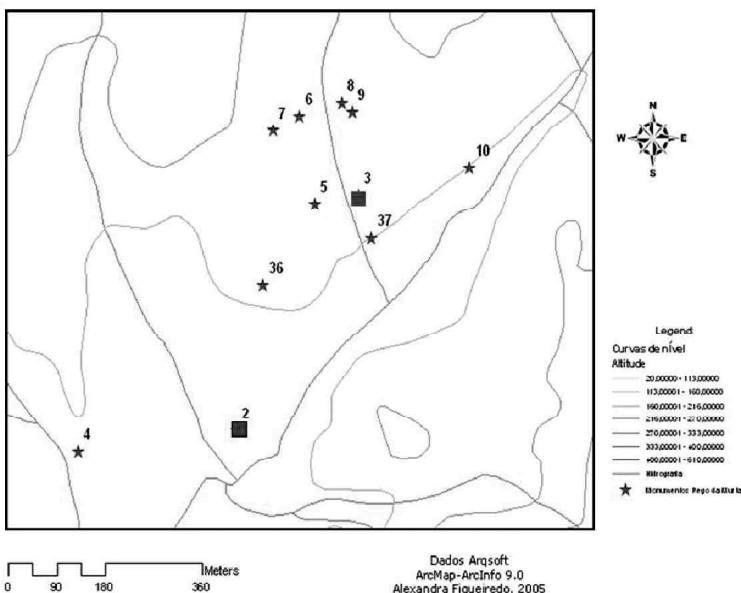


Figure 2 – Distribution of the monuments. nº 2 Dolmén i of rego da murta; nº 4 Dolmen II of Rego da Murta; nº 4 Dolmén iii of Rego da Murta; nº 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 36 – Menhires; nº 37 – monolith with roman and prehistoric depositions.

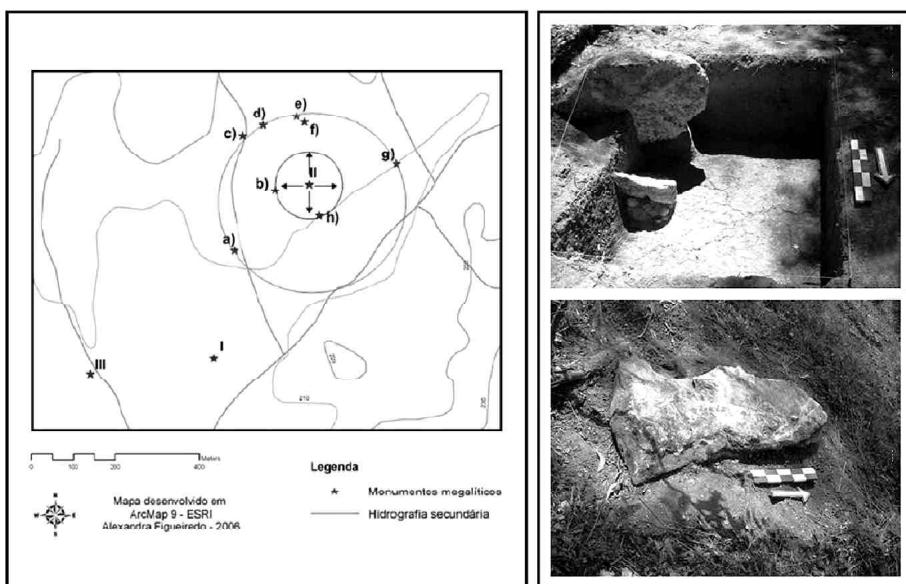


Figure 3 – Two small menhirs d) and f), made of limestone, that surround the Dolmen II of Rego da Murta. They are connected and made a perfect circle in the model presented above.

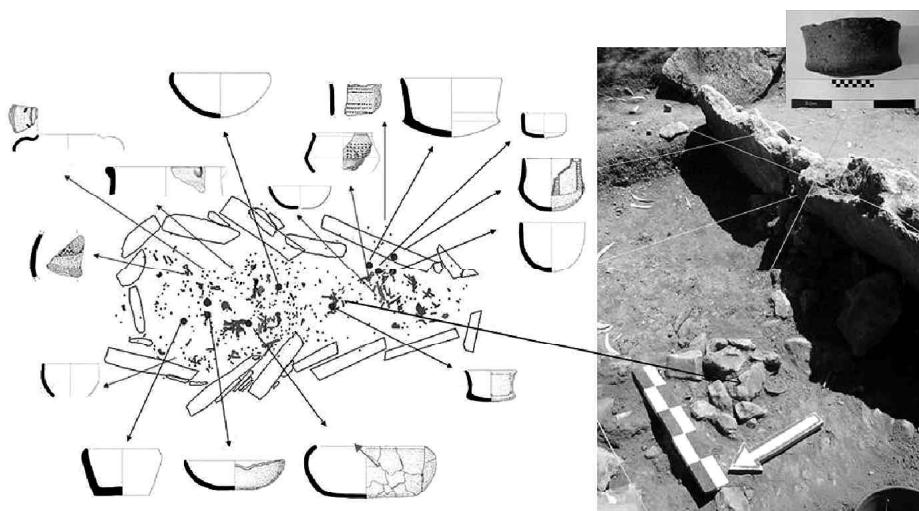


Figure 4 – Draws of ceramic material and its distribution in Dolmen II of Rego da Murta. At right image we can see one of the condoned structures above one pits deposition.

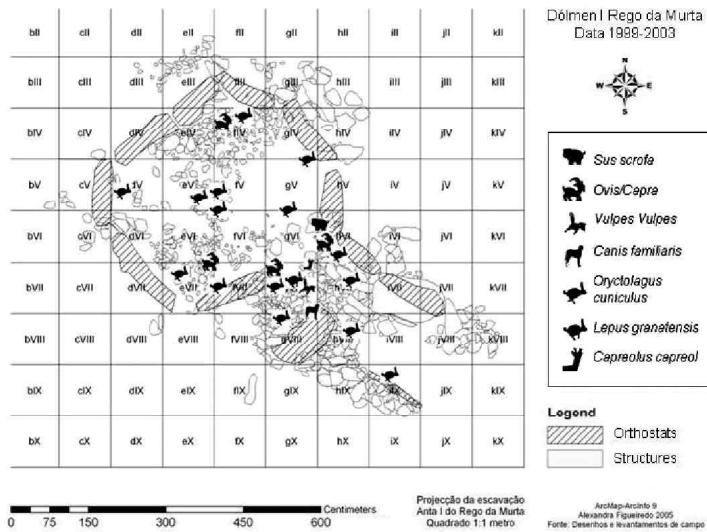


Figure 5 – Dolmen I of Rego da Murta with the distribution of type of faun remains in side of monument. We can easily see that they are connected with the central chamber structure and close to the ortostats.

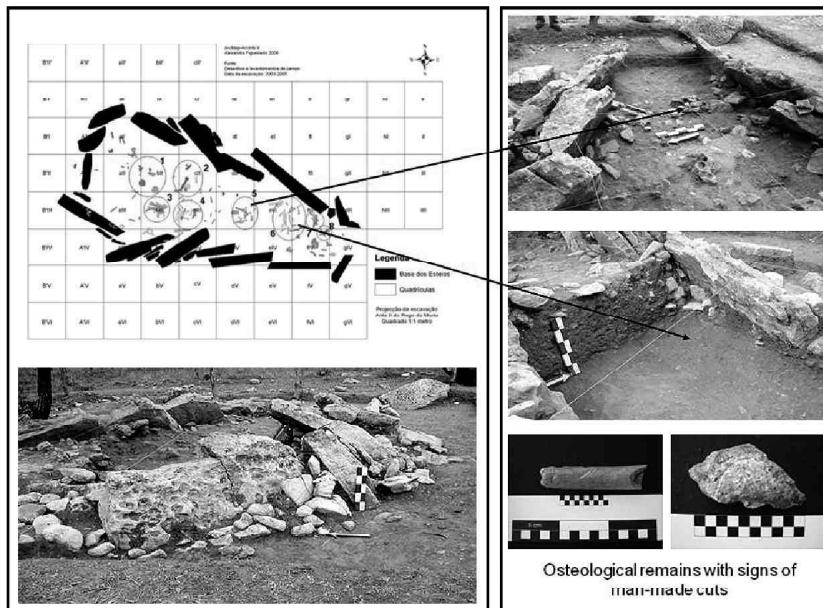


Figure 6 – The dolmen II of Rego da Murta and bones remains. In the inferior right corner we can see some examples of osteological remains with signs of men-made cuts.

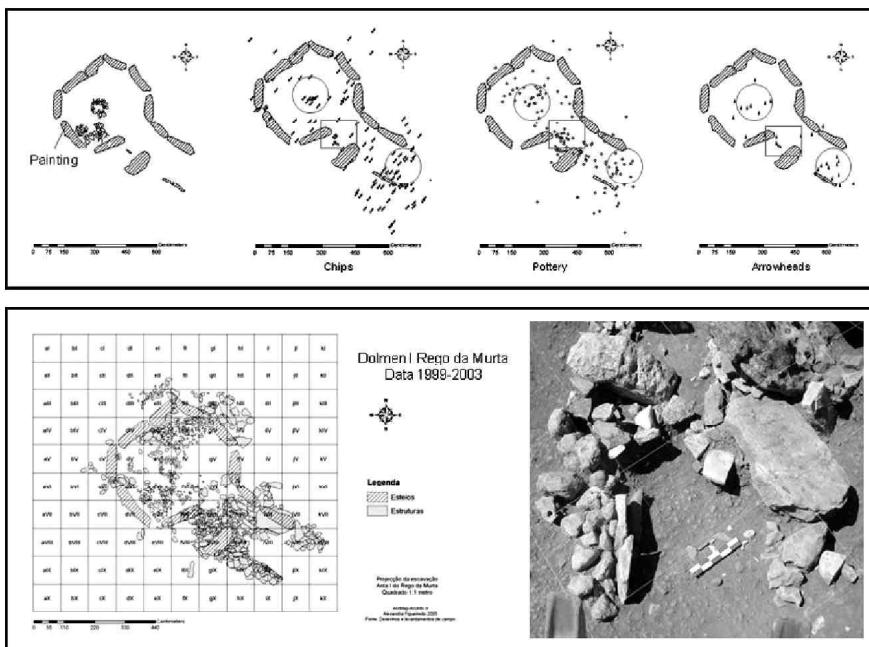


Figure 7 – Dolmen I of Rego da Murta. In up we see the distribution of chips, pottery and arrowhans. In down image we can see all the structures founded and an image of the hall.

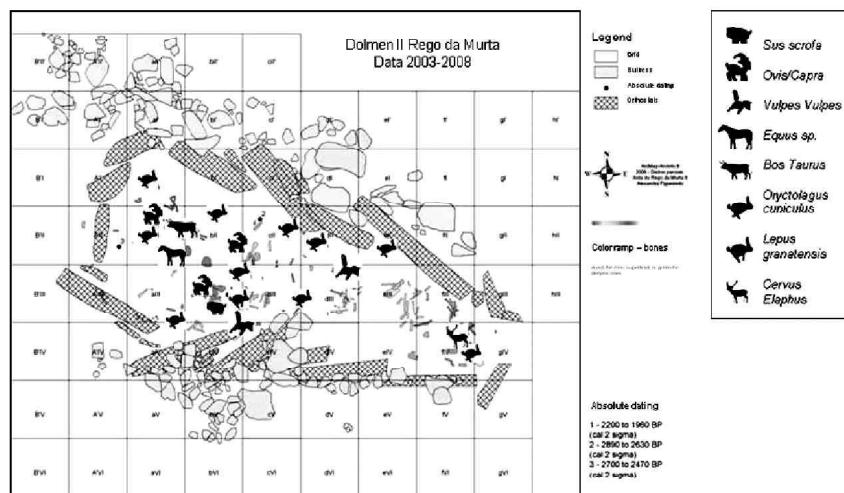


Figure 8 – Distribution of fauna remains in the Dolmen II of Rego da Murta.

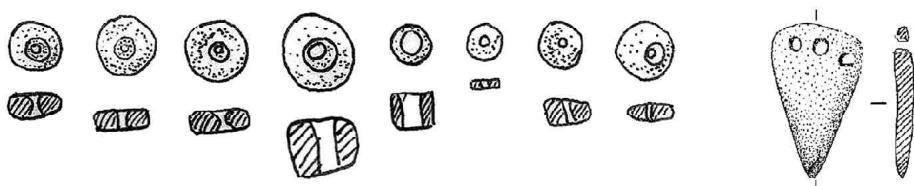


Illustration 1 – Material draws from Dolmen II of Rego da Murta:
collar beads and hanging ornament.

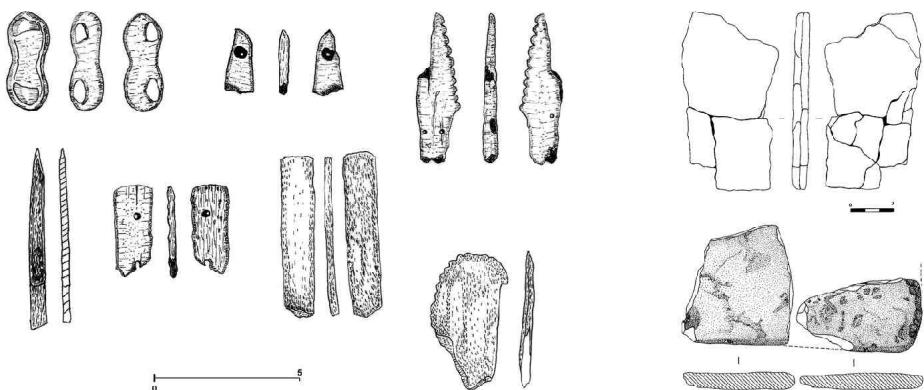


Illustration 2 – Material draws from Dolmen II of Rego da Murta: bones artifacts and schist plaques.

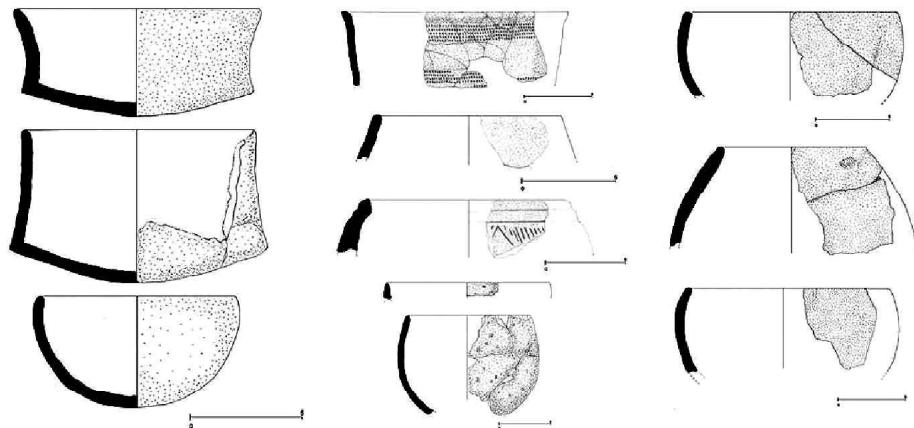


Illustration 3 – Material draws from Dolmen II of Rego da Murta: pottery.

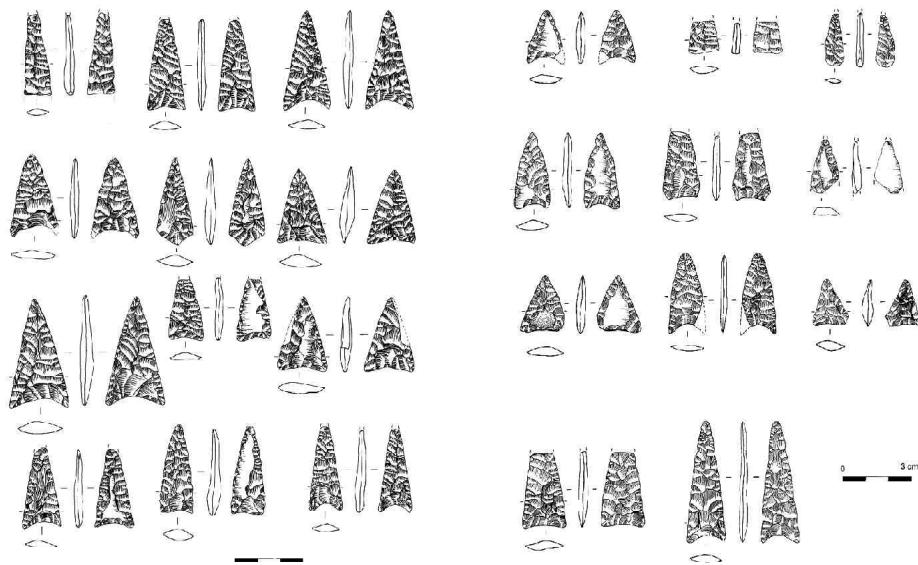


Illustration 4 – Material draws from Dolmen II of Rego da Murta: arrowheads.

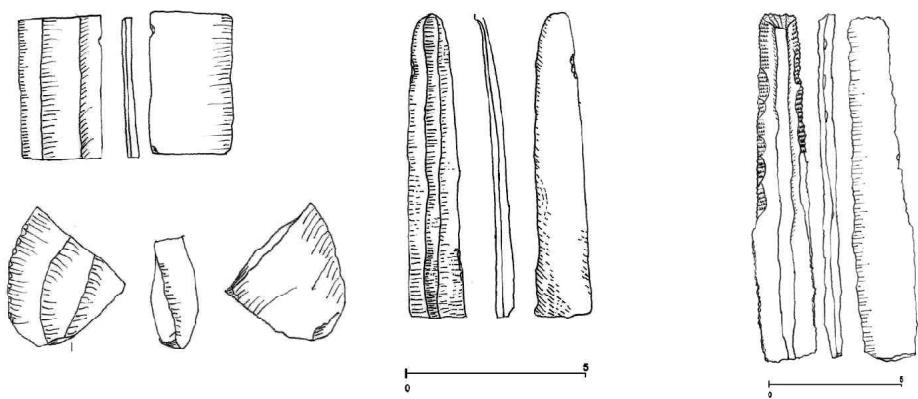


Illustration 5 – Material draws from Dolmen II of Rego da Murta: Flints.

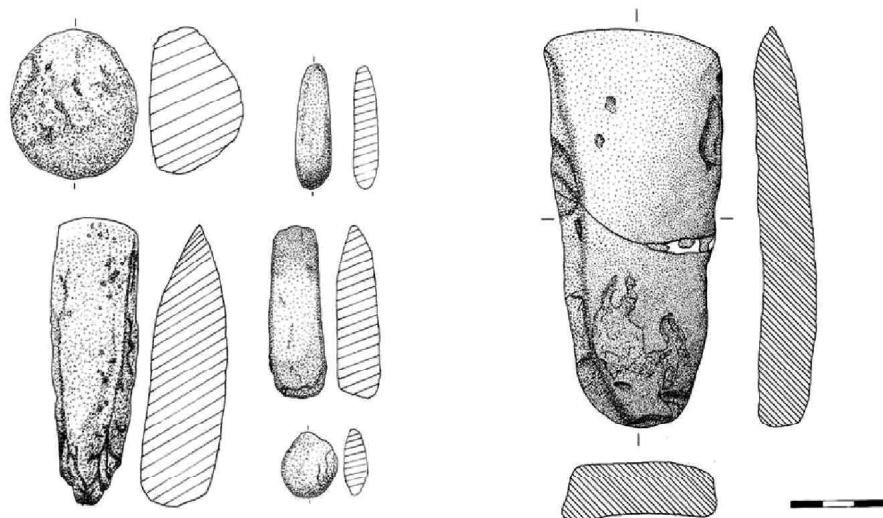


Illustration 6 – Material draws from Dolmen II of Rego da Murta: Polish axes and other artifacts.

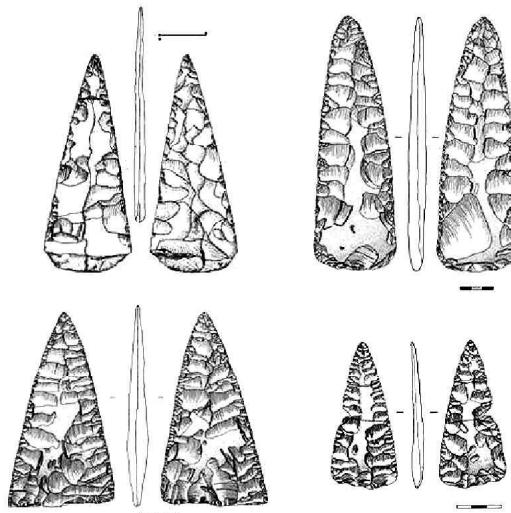


Illustration 7 – Material draws from Dolmen II of Rego da Murta: halberds.

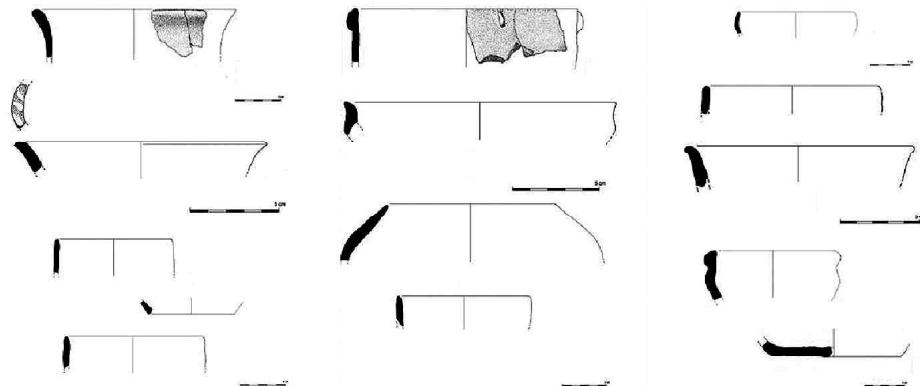


Illustration 8 – Material draws from Dolmen I of Rego da Murta: Pottery.

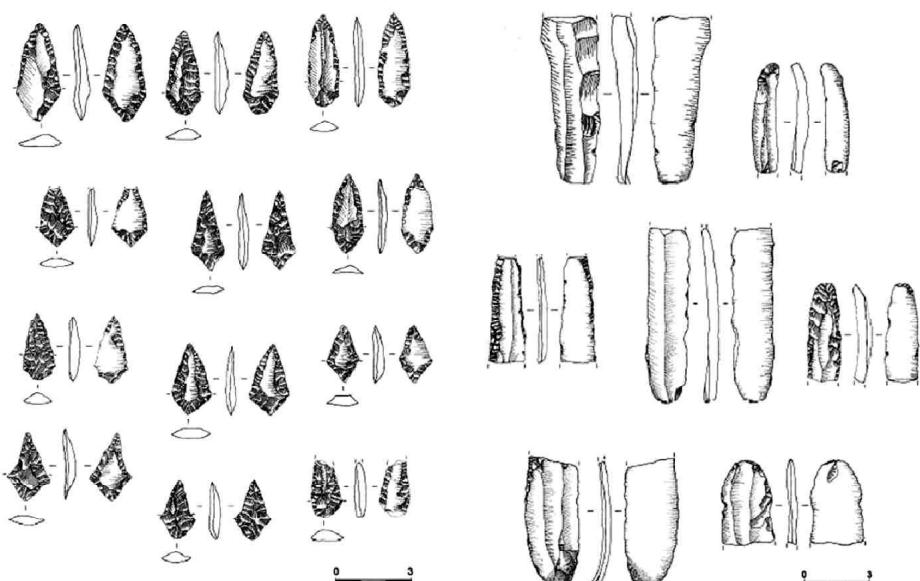


Illustration 9 – Material draws from Dolmen I of Rego da Murta: Arrowheads
and flints.

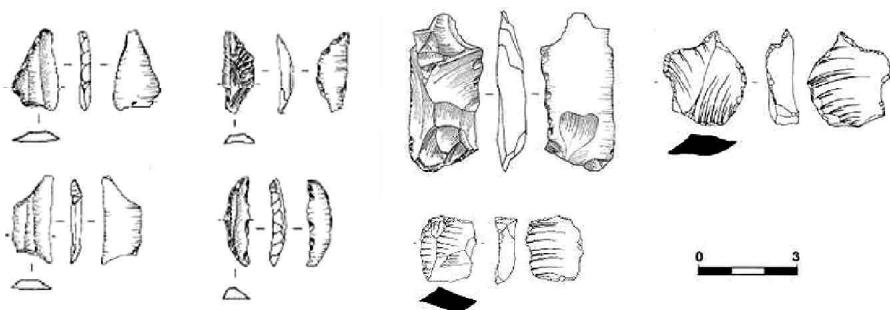


Illustration 10 – Material draws from Dolmen I of Rego da Murta:
microliths and chips.

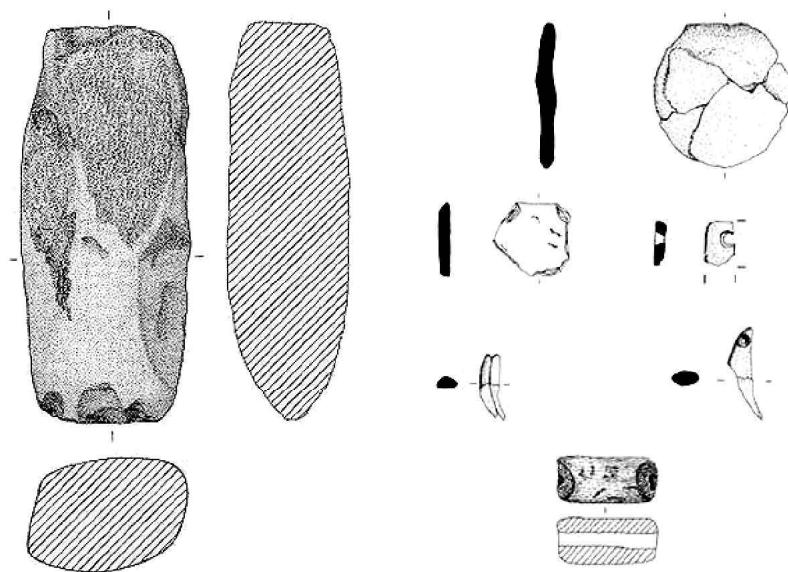


Illustration 11 – Material draws from Dolmen I of Rego da Murta:
Polish axe and some adornment material.