



Book Reviews

MEGALITHIC TOMBS IN WESTERN IBERIA: EXCAVATIONS AT THE ANTA DA LAJINHA, EDITED BY CHRIS SCARRE AND LUIZ OOSTERBEEK

Oxbow Books. 2020. 243pp, 168 B&W and colour figs, 19 tables, hb ISBN 978 1 78570 980 7, £45.00

This is a meaty volume. It brings together a detailed report on an Anglo-Portuguese excavation of a megalithic tomb in the Beira Baixa region of Portugal to the north of the middle Tagus valley, with an ambitious regional study of such tombs expanding from the immediate borderlands of Portugal and Spain to the whole of western Iberia and beyond as far as Brittany. It touches on important, long debated issues on the chronology and evolution of megalithic tombs in south-west Europe, coupled with the extent to which the earlier megalith builders were mobile pastoralists, as well as long-distance contacts between them and other areas of western Europe.

The tomb of Anta da Lajinha has been known to archaeologists since 1939, but it was only in 2006–8 that the editors organised and carried out excavations on the site. Although badly damaged by wildfires and stone robbing, the polygonal chamber of overlapping orthostats was sufficiently preserved for its plan to be visible under a 0.8m high and 10m diameter mound. The mound was ringed by angular stone blocks resting on the mound's edge, with traces of some voids between these blocks, suggesting the possibility of upright timber posts around the mound. Beneath the mound was a truncated forest paleosol. The existence of a 'passage' leading from the chamber to the edge of the mound remains a possibility and it may have been intentionally demolished. There were no preserved animal or human bone remains. Artefactual material was scarce, mainly Neolithic and later Bronze and Iron Age pottery, the latter possibly deposited during a period of re-use. Luminescence dating from the basal layers of the chamber gave dates for construction dating to the early fourth millennium BC. The report on the excavations is highly detailed and carefully illustrated by photographs and line drawings, enabling the reader to follow the arguments regarding the tomb's structure and construction, along with locations of the artefactual material. Attached to the report are appendices on the luminescence dating, the (local) petrology of the tomb's stone slabs, stratigraphic and sedimentological analyses, and the pottery and lithics found. The excavators have clearly extracted the maximum amount of evidence from this disturbed site. A separate chapter is devoted to the palaeo-environmental fieldwork in the local context of Anta da Lajinha, combining geoarchaeological survey with soil micromorphology, pollen analysis and study of charcoals and phytoliths. This research supports the inference of a

decline in local forest cover (the result of climatic oscillations?) before the first evidence for the adoption of food producing subsistence strategies, but the lack of any clear and marked impact of such strategies on the local landscape. In contrast there is evidence for an intensification of agro-pastoral activity in the Final Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods.

The regional context of Anta da Lajinha, detailing the forms, distributions, chronologies, materials and both historical and recent fieldwork on, and analyses of, Neolithic tombs, is covered in one chapter divided into four sections. The first section, titled 'The regional context', divides this synthesis into four 'geographical units', two each north and south of the Tagus, and is a clear and well-illustrated presentation of the evidence, noting in particular how Anta da Lajinha is part of a broader group of similar tombs, both formally and structurally. The second and fourth sections drill down in more detail to the megalithic tombs and recent excavations in the municipality of Proença-a-Nova and in the Rego da Murta tomb complex in the Nabão valley. The third section fills out the regional context by focussing on non-megalithic disposal of the dead from both the Early and Middle Neolithic, the latter burials being collective and contemporary with the earliest megalithic tombs in the early fourth millennium BC. Among these collective non-megalithic burials is the Bom Santo cave, where isotopic and aDNA analyses support the inference of 'a complex mixture of human groups with different provenances and not a simple colonisation of depopulated areas by immigrant farmers'. As a whole this chapter could have been a little better integrated, perhaps with a paragraph or so linking the first section to the other three, and to the later chapter on the rock art of the Tagus valley. Not only are there megalithic tombs in close proximity to rock art sites, but there are also stylistic similarities between art motifs on these rocks and inside some of the tombs. More than one author in the past has argued that the same people were responsible for the art and the construction and use of the tombs, and that they were mobile pastoralists.

The book draws to a close with two chapters that take us from local to medium-range contexts of Anta da Lajinha to coverage of megalithic tombs across the whole of Western Iberia and to the 'international' context of Atlantic Europe and Brittany in particular. From the Algarve in the south to Galicia in the north, there are three general categories of megalithic tombs, namely polygonal chambers with overlapping orthostats (of which Anta da Lajinha is a classic example), passage tombs with circular chambers of edge-to-edge orthostats and circular 'tholos' tombs with corbelled or domed roofs. These and the local variations on the basic forms have been known and studied for over a century but, as is pointed out here, questions of the dating still require more detailed resolution. Tholos tombs are well dated to the third millennium BC, while polygonal tombs began to be constructed and used in the fourth millennium BC (including evidence of radiocarbon dates on the pigment of painted motifs within megalithic chambers). There is also some evidence for standing stones pre-dating the collective stone tombs and being constructed in the fifth millennium BC. In both the north and south of Western Iberia there are examples of various kinds of closed

structures covered by mounds: in the north these seem to be dated to the fifth millennium BC, preceding the appearance of passage tombs in the early fourth millennium BC, while in the south there are examples of what are called small 'protomegalithic' stone chambers for which there are radiocarbon dates at the same time as the earliest passage tombs. As has been argued by others in recent years, there is no clear and universal evolutionary sequence from 'simple' to 'complex' tomb plans and use. Stepping up to the international context the evidence is given for connections between Iberia and Brittany, especially stylistic similarities in pottery and participation in the exchange of jadeite axes.

Taken as a whole, this book is an important source of both evidence and synthesis of the megalithic monuments of western Iberia in their local, regional and international contexts. Working with what can clearly be badly preserved tombs, let alone the acidic soils that inhibit the survival of human and animal bones in them, are clearly major challenges, as is the difficulty of locating and excavating well-dated and stratified deposits. In this case the authors have made great efforts to present their fieldwork data in ways that enable it to be interrogated by the reader, as well as acknowledging the limitations of this data. They have also been well served by their publishers.

Bob Chapman

Department of Archaeology, The University of Reading, UK

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