

Reuse of ancient megalithics monuments during Metal Ages: the dolmen of Serrinha (Monforte, Portugal)

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Resume:

L'ensemble des monuments mégalithiques funéraires de la région de l'Alentejo (Portugal) présente une grande diversité d'architectures, mais aussi dans leurs utilisations et leurs réutilisations. Bien que souvent non documentées (dans le cas de fouilles anciennes), les collections des musées prouvent leur utilisation entre le néolithique et au moins l'âge du fer.

Le Dolmen de Serrinha (Monforte), récemment mis au jour par les signataires, est un bon exemple de la réutilisation des espaces de nécropole, au cours de l'âge des métaux.

Mots clés: Dolmens; Nécropole; Proto-histoire; Monforte; Portugal

Abstract:

The set of funerary megalithic monuments in the Alentejo region (Portugal) presents a great variety in its architectures, but also in their uses and reuses. Although often undocumented (in the case of ancient excavations), the collections in the Museums prove their use between the Neolithic Age and at least the Iron Age.

The Dolmen of Serrinha (Monforte) recently excavated by the signatories, is a good example of the reuse of necropolis spaces during Metal Ages.

Keywords: Megalithic tombs; Necropolis; Proto-history; Monforte; Portugal

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1. Introduction

The Dolmen of Serrinha is referred to in the Portuguese archaeological literature since the mid-twentieth century (Leisner e Leisner, 1959), as one of the large megalithic monuments of the Municipality of Monforte. It is classified as a site of Public Interest (Portaria 740 – BC/2012, de 24 de Dezembro de 2012), even though only half of its chamber is preserved and its corridor shows significant signs of damage. This dolmen is integrated today into the monuments itinerary of the Municipality of Monforte.

In terms of its location, the monument was erected in an unusual place, when considering the pattern of the megalithism of the Alentejo. That is because it is located at a very low altitude, close to the point where the Almuro watercourse joins the Grande watercourse, in a very flat and floodable area when there are high levels of rainfall.

In topographic terms, the Municipality of Monforte is characterised by gentle slopes in the North, whereas the South/Southeast is characterised by a more irregular relief, due to the presence of large granite outcrops associated to the ancient bedrock, now almost flat having undergone a long period of erosion. The steeper slopes are located close to the streams of Almuro, Ribeira Grande, Samarra, Carrascal, Almadafe, Divor and Têra.

The highest altitudes are registered in the South, close to St^o Aleixo (402m) and in the outcrops East/North of Vaiamonte (393m). The valleys are open, with relatively gentle slopes, and are easily accessible.

From a geomorphological perspective, this area is part of a relatively diverse region, between the S. Mamede Mountain (Serra de S. Mamede) to the North and the Ossa Mountain (Serra d'Ossa) to the South. Monforte is also part of the Monforte – Alter do Chão aquifer system, comprising an area of around 100 km², presenting a rough NW-SW orientation. From a geological point of view, it is a very diverse region, characterised by a predominance of igneous rocks – orthogneisses and granites (Gonçalves, 1975).



Figure 1 – Location of the Dolmen of Serrinha (Monforte, Portugal)

In administrative terms, the monument is located in the Municipality of Monforte, Parish of Monforte, Portuguese Military Map (Carta Militar de Portugal) 1: 25, Sheet 398, with the following coordinates: Latitude: 254 918.539 / Longitude: 229 803.061 / Altitude: 207m (Figure 1).



Figure 2 – The Dolmen of Serrinha, in the initial phase of the fieldwork.

2.-Architecture (Figure 2):

Chamber: It presents four *in situ* props made of granite, on the North side (three supports are missing on the South side).

Corridor: Initially, it was possible to see two of the corridor's props, on both sides. Three cover/prop fragments, fallen in the area of the corridor; one of them is large and it probably used to be the capstone of the chamber, and it shows numerous dimples and rounded cut marks, which were probably made to create a millstone (to do so, it was transported further South). With the fieldwork that we carried out, it was possible to identify two more props, on the North side.

Barrow: no remains were found.

The archaeological work carried out in this municipality, by the authors of this paper, has been showing in the last two decades the systematic appearance of artefacts on the surface. Some of these artefacts are well preserved – ground stone axes and schist plaques (Boaventura, 2001: 67; Endovélico). For this reason, in 2014 and in the context of a new ongoing research project in this municipality, an archaeological survey was carried out in the corridor area, in order to verify if there were (or

not) preserved archaeological layers. Until then, there were no records of previous scientific excavations having been carried out in this monument, only records of past intrusions. However, the presence of artefacts scattered on the outside raised more doubts than certainties regarding the actual state of conservation of the monument.

In 2015, before the start of the second fieldwork season, geophysical surveys were carried out, using the Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) technique, by professor Bento Caldeira, Rui Oliveira and José Borges (Caldeira, et al, 2017), from the Institute of Earth Sciences of the University of Évora (Figure 3), which indicated a few irregularities.

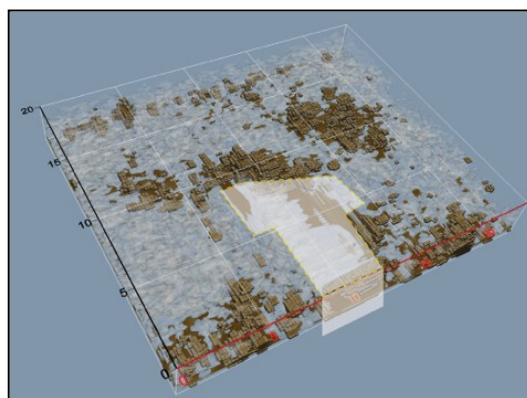


Figure 3 – 3D perspective of the distribution of the GPR reflectivity.

Only the mark registered in the top right corner (Figure 3) provided effective results when it was probed. It corresponds to one of the props of the chamber which was dragged to this location.

3. Understanding the past with today's data:

For security reasons related to the stability of the monument, the fieldwork carried out between 2014 and 2016 focused only on the area of the corridor and the entrance to the chamber (Rocha e Morgado, 2014, 2015, 2016).

The removal of the capstone of the chamber (2014), which had fallen and was then found in the transition area between the chamber and the corridor, immediately exposed an archaeological layer with small bone remains, mixed with rubbish from more recent dates (wires, glasses, buttons, metal bottle caps, etc.) and handmade and wheelthrown pottery, mixed with the gravel that had been placed inside the monument's chamber, at an unknown moment. In general terms, the excavation of the superficial levels revealed a significant disruption, given the mix of contemporary materials, with bones out of context and prehistoric remains.

The lower levels revealed the most interesting results for understanding the different phases of use and alterations that this monument underwent. At this moment, and considering the existing archaeological data (stratigraphy and artefacts) and the absence of radiocarbon dating (which we hope to carry out soon), we can consider the following phases of occupation/use/reuse/destruction of this monument:

- **Phase I – Construction and first occupation: Late Neolithic**

The excavation up until the base of the corridor's props allowed us to determine that these were placed on the layer of thick sands (shingle) created by the river, where the monument was also erected. The props were surrounded by medium/large stones to guaranty their stability.

The remains of the funerary occupations related to this First Phase had been moved around by later occupations, hence only small deposits of human bones and artefacts were found, close to the corridor's props. In terms of chronology, this phase is

likely to be dated to the first half of the 4th millennium BC, considering the artefacts that were found (concave-base arrowheads, slender blades, geometric microliths, pottery, beads and schist plaques).



Figure 4 – Phase I: slender blades.

- **Phase II – The second occupation: Chalcolithic**

The second phase of occupation is probably dated to the second half of the 3rd millennium BC, during the Chalcolithic. The modification at the entrance of the corridor – the addition of one more prop, which reduced the original width – is possibly dated to this phase.

In terms of artefacts, no significant changes were registered, except for an increase in the diversity of arrowheads, an increase in the width of the blades, the presence of pins made of bone and, of course, the presence of large flint spearheads.



Figure 5 – Phase II: large flint spearheads

- **Phase III – The third occupation: Bronze Age**

The third phase of use/reuse of the dolmen of Serpinha occurred during the Bronze Age (2nd millennium BC). To this phase, we can probably associate some recorded architectural modifications, namely the introduction of two props made of greywacke in the separation chamber/corridor, the construction of a hall paved with cobblestones and the presence of a small box made of schist, located inside the chamber.

To this phase are associated also the carenated vases and the small ceramic rectangular boxes, as well as the possible use of chipped stone artefacts from earlier phases, which, because they were kept in use for a long period of time, do not allow us to produce a more precise chronology.

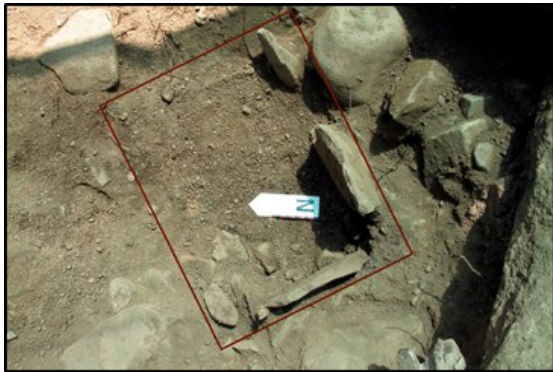


Figure 6 – Phase III: small box made of schist, located inside the chamber.

- **Phase IV – Iron Age reuse**

At an indefinite moment during the first Iron Age (sixth-fourth centuries BC) another reuse of the monument was registered. This probably corresponded to only one burial, in the corridor, above one of the props on the South side. This prop was facing inward, which led to the collapse of the external abutments. The subsequent disturbances to

the site prevent us from producing an objective characterisation of this phase, which is represented by one vitreous bead, and a few shards of wheelthrown pottery.



Figure 7 – Phase IV: vitreous bead inside the corridor.

- **Phase V – Disturbance/destruction episode(s)**

The final chapters of the history of this monument are even harder to situate in time. In fact, the destruction of the architecture of the monument (removal and/or cutting of props and covers) is likely to have occurred at a moment before the second half of the nineteenth century, when dynamite appeared, considering that the props were broken using the traditional wooden wedges. Furthermore, the capstone of the chamber shows evidence of an attempt to break it to make a millstone.



Figure 8 – Phase IV: the capstone of the chamber shows evidence of an attempt to break it to make a millstone.

The props removed from the chamber, the ones amputated in the corridor and the covers are thus likely to have been used as raw-materials for other constructions. These constructions, as we mentioned above, could have included elements of water mills (which existed in the Almuro stream), walls, fences or even for the road that was constructed nearby.

The artefacts found represent very distinct chronologies, from Medieval/Modern times (common or glazed wheelthrown ceramics, coins) to contemporary times (faience, wires, glasses, buttons, metal bottle caps, tins, etc.), which were found deposited mainly in the two upper layers.

Considering the type of architecture and the artefacts collected, the Dolmen of Serrinha fits into the typical typologies of the second half of the 4th millennium BC for this region, characterised here by monuments presenting large chambers, and wide, more or less long corridors. Other examples include the dolmens of Capela de S. Dionísio (Pavia), Cabeceira 1 (Brotas), (Anta) 1 da Ordem (Avis) and Tapadão (Crato). Besides having been used for a long time (until the end of the 3rd millennium BC), their size has also raised interest and curiosity across different times (Rocha, 2015, 2016). And that constitutes the reason why these monuments witnessed successive moments of reuse, intrusion and destruction, which mixed up and disturbed the original occupations, hence raising more doubts than certainties regarding their chronologies.

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