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UNIVERSIDAD DE HUELVA

A Monumental Heritage

The Tejo/Tajo International Transboundary Biosphere Reserve has one of the most important megalithic sites in Europe, composed of dolmens, menhirs and other funerary and sacred monuments that dot the meadow around the villages of the region on both sides of the border between Spain and Portugal.

All these buildings date back to a long period between Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods (around 3,000 years BC), allowing us to witness the permanent occupation of the territory and offering a glimpse of the rites and beliefs of the peoples who inhabited it.

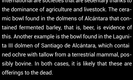
In the fields of Herrera de Alcántara there are the dolmens of Solana, Cerro Marcos, Vereda, Cerro Caldera or the Besmera. One of the most complete is the fortica of Rodeiros, which has preserved the paintings in its interior to this day. A tholos is a circular tomb crowned by a false dome that is usually covered with earth to ensure its stability.

Cave paintings are also of great importance, most of them of a schematic type in a red colour, which decorate the walls of some thirty caves and shelters around Valencia and Santiago de Alcántara. Among them are those of Puerto Roque, included in the Cultural Itinerary of the Council of Europe "Paths of Prehistoric Rock Art", and the Buracio, an 18-meter-deep cave, richly decorated.

"Parade". Tracing of paintings in Cueva de Buracio. Santiago de Alcantara. Cáceres. Authors: P. Bueno and F. Carrera

Sacred rocks

Finally, we must mention the "sacred rocks", large singular rocks, probably associated with prehistoric myths of a magical or supernatural type. The best known of these is the Peña Buraca near the municipality of Piedras Albas.



Ancient landscapes, sacred lands

The personality of the territory in which we find ourselves has been strongly marked since Prehistoric times by the Tejo/Tajo River, which served as a means of communication between the peoples who inhabited its banks, allowing the exchange of goods and knowledge. In this way, the prehistoric village Ventanda thrived thanks to the exchanges with examples such as the megalithic complex of Castelo de Vide and its spectacular menhir de Meada.

The towns that built the funerary monuments in Tagus International are sedentary and agricultural societies, thanks to the dominance of agriculture and livestock. The ceramic bowl found in the dolmens of Alcántara that contained fermented barley, that is, beer, is evidence of this. Another example is the bowl found in the Lagunillas III dolmen of Santiago de Alcántara, which contained ocher with tallow from a terrestrial mammal, possibly bovine. In both cases, it is likely that these are offerings to the dead.

The dominance of livestock and agriculture did not mean the abandonment of older practices such as hunting and gathering. Today we know that acorns were collected from cork oaks and holm oaks, with which various foods were prepared, including flour and porridge.

We are in a period, Neolithic and Chalcolithic (about 5000 years ago), in which humans begin to transform the natural environment they live in. In Extremadura, it is during the period of the transition from the Mediterranean forest to the meadow, with the creation of open spaces to facilitate the practice of agriculture and livestock.

Tracing of Meada menhir. Transcript of the tracing by J. Alcobia.

Funerary monuments

This transformation of the environment is also marked by the construction of funerary monuments with durable materials, such as granite and slate, and the decoration of caves and reference elements of the landscape with engravings and paintings, composing a theory that nowadays allows us to try to understand the lives of our ancestors.

An organized society

The construction of the funerary monuments of Tagus International implies the existence of work planning and a social organization where we do not know the exact roles of each member nowadays. The fact that some of the funerary monuments are grouped within necropolis, among which there are obvious differences in position and size, perhaps offers us indications of a social hierarchy.

In recent years, greater attention has been paid to the role of women in prehistoric societies, with discoveries that allow us to take a glimpse at the participation of women in tasks such as hunting and rock art, activities that until recently were considered exclusive to men. In the burials studied at Tagus International, no human remains have been recovered, which implies that it is impossible to identify the sex of the owner of the trousseau.

Anthropomorphic plaque. Dolmen of Lacohas I. Valencia de Alcántara. Drawing by Primitiva Bueno Ramírez.

What the study of trousseau does allow us is to have a vision of the daily life of the populations that used these objects. In addition to ceramic glasses and bowls containing food and drink offerings, numerous arrowheads and axes made of flint, quartz and slate, jet and quartz beads forming necklaces and, finally, small idols built on schist plates have been found inside the dolmens.

The importance of stars

The thorough knowledge of the natural environment in which the peoples that built megalithic monuments lived was essential to ensure the survival of their individuals. Knowledge based on observation and, surely, transmitted orally for generations.

An important part of this knowledge was the movement of the stars in the sky and, above all, the sun. There are numerous representations of the sun in megalithic engravings and paintings. It is likely that the sun was given a supernatural character and was worshiped as a deity, but beyond its magical aspect, observation of the stars offered the ancient settlers valuable information.

Plant of the Dolmen of Santiago de Alcántara de la Mesopotamia, after its excavation. Drawing by Primitiva Bueno Ramírez.

A study by the Churchill College of Cambridge and the Canary Islands Institute of Astrophysics on more than 50 dolmens in Tagus International found consistency in the orientation of these funerary monuments. All the dolmens studied looked at the eastern sector of the horizon, with a special concentration towards the points where the sun rises on dates close to the autumn equinox. Some of them, such as the Zafra III dolmen, are perfectly aligned with the sunrise on the day of the equinox.

The importance of this date is that it is the time when the rainy season begins after the summer period.

We are still a long way from understanding the meaning and magnitude of the knowledge of prehistoric peoples, but every step taken in their understanding is surprising and wonderful.

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