

THE CEREMONIAL SITE OF VALE FERREIRO, FAFE, IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BRONZE AGE IN NORTHWEST PORTUGAL*

by

Ana M. S. Bettencourt, Alda Rodrigues, Isabel Sousa e Silva,
Carlos Simões Cruz & António Dinis**

Abstract: This paper presents the results of three archaeological interventions at Vale Ferreiro in the parish of Serafão, (Fafe, north-western Portugal). This may be categorized as an Early and Middle Bronze Age site, used for ceremonial purposes for many centuries. We have exhumed tombs (all morphological and ceremonial terms different from one another), deposits, and many perishable structures whose precise function is difficult to establish.

Taking into account the physical characteristics of Vale Ferreiro and the surrounding countryside (geomorphological aspects, location in relation to water resources, exposure to sunlight, visibility, cardinal points, etc) and the characteristics of the constructions (layout of tombs, building materials, remains, etc), we can infer that those who built and used this site interacted with their environment to such an extent that the space itself became an integral part of the process of identity and memory construction.

Key-words: Northern Portugal; Bronze Age; ceremonial site.

Resumo: Pretendemos divulgar o resultado de três intervenções arqueológicas realizadas em Vale Ferreiro, freguesia de Serafão, concelho de Fafe. Trata-se de uma estação arqueológica inserível no Bronze Inicial e Médio do Noroeste de Portugal, usada como lugar cerimonial, durante vários séculos. Aqui, exumámos alguns túmulos distintos uns dos outros, em termos morfológicos e culturais, depósitos, assim como inúmeras estruturas perecíveis de difícil interpretação.

* Paper presented at the Colloquium *Espaços na Pré-História do Centro e Norte Peninsula* (Spaces in the Prehistory of the Centre and North of the Iberian Peninsula), Beira Alta Centre for Prehistoric Studies, Viseu, 8 – 10 April, 2005.

** Ana Bettencourt: Lecturer, University of the Minho (anabett@uaum.uminho.pt); Alda Rodrigues: archaeologist, Peneda-Gerês Natural Park (aldarod@aeiou.pt); Isabel Sousa e Silva: graduate in the Teaching of History and Social Sciences, University of the Minho (isa150@sapo.pt); Carlos Simões Cruz: MA in Archaeology, University of the Minho (cmscruz@sapo.pt); António Dinis: MA in Archaeology, University of Oporto (antoniopdinis@netcabo.pt).

Tendo em atenção as características físicas de Vale Ferreiro e da sua envolvente (aspectos geomorfológicos, localização face aos recursos hídricos, exposição solar, condições de visibilidade, pontos cardeais, entre outras) e as características construtivas (disposição dos túmulos, materiais de construção, espólio, etc.) inferimos que os construtores e utilizadores deste local efectuaram uma profunda interacção com o meio envolvente constituindo-se o próprio espaço como parte integrante na construção da identidade e da memória.

Palavras-chave: Norte de Portugal; Idade do Bronze; lugar cerimonial.

1. INTRODUCTION

Following the discovery of a tomb and double ditch cut into the sandy clay, during the building of a road at Vale Ferreiro in 1999, the authors of this article have been involved in the excavation of the site since 2003. The aim of these excavations (which are included in the project "*The Reconstruction of the Landscape of Entre-Douro-e-Minho from the middle of the 3rd Millennium to the end of the 2nd Millennium BC*") is to contextualize these finds chronologically and culturally, and also to acquire a perspective of how they were inserted in space as constitutive elements of the Bronze Age landscape.

2. LOCATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

The archaeological site of Vale Ferreiro is located in the province of Entre Douro e Minho (literally, "between the Douro and the Minho") in the district of Braga, county of Fafe, parish of Serafão, and near the village of Godarilhas (Fig. 1).

Vale Ferreiro is a small knoll on the top of a spur (altitude 207m) at the base of the western slope of Mount Agrela in the foothills of the Cabreira mountains. It overlooks the River Ave, less than 1.5 Km away to the north and around 2 Km to the west (Fig. 2).

This area has excellent visibility of the surrounding countryside, particularly of different sections of the Ave basin, and therefore should be considered part of a valley landscape. To the north, around 100m away, it used to be possible (before the modern buildings appeared) to see the valley of a stream that feeds into the River Pequeno, a tributary on the left bank of the Ave. To the west, the visual field is also marked by the Ave basin and, to the east, before the present houses were built, the impressive enclosed valley of the River Pequeno could also be seen, running along the slope of the São Miguel heights.

¹ Approved and financed by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), through FEDER, with the support of Fafe Town Council and Serafão Parish Council.

According to the Geological Map of Portugal, No. 5D, the local rocky substratum consists of granites, without surface outcrops. A detailed study, carried out by a team of geologists, has revealed the existence on a micro-scale of porphyritic granites and numerous veins of milky quartz. There are also red and yellow clays around 200m south of the archaeological site.

There is tree cover, with a predominance of pines, some oaks and occasional eucalyptus. In the immediate vicinity, there are also agricultural smallholdings belonging to villagers.

Although no other late prehistoric remains have been found in the parish of Serafão, new pits cut out of the clay have appeared in the neighbouring county of Guimarães (county of Arosa). These are around 500 metres away, on the northern slope of the knoll of Vale Ferreiro, only a few hundred metres from the River Ave, and thus could have had links with this site.

3. VALE FERREIRO: THE DATA

Over a total area of around 276 square metres, we found a great variety of underground structures. Given the widespread erosion that has taken place here, there is little stratigraphic information; indeed, the level of archaeological occupation has already disappeared, which means that it is only possible to detect structures on the level of the base clay or a few centimeters away from it (Fig. 3). This situation would not be incompatible with occupation during the late Roman or high Mediaeval period, which appears to have occurred at the site and is shown by the presence of a ditch cut into the clay and by pottery remains.

To date we have identified 33 pre-historic structures of different types: tombs, pits and posts-holes, and others that are more difficult to classify.

We have identified at least 4 of the structures as tombs:

Tomb 1 was constructed inside a pit cut into the clay, and measures 2.07m in a north-south direction and 1.85m in an east-west direction. It contained a cairn consisting of mostly blocks of milky quartz, in the centre of which was a cist-shaped chamber, made of highly polished slabs, all, with one exception, showing signs of heavy river erosion. This feature suggests that these orthostats were specially brought from the riverside. There are also three polished stone beams. One of these, placed to the south, is noticeably anthropomorphic; with a little imagination we can easily see in it a head and the outline of shoulders. The floor of the chamber was also covered with two flat slabs. The roof consisted of another large (though not very thick) granite slab. It appears that after the burial the whole stone structure was

covered with loosely-packed sandy clay soil, probably resulting from the opening of the ditch (Fig. 4). From inside the chamber, the body of a male, aged around 15 years old, buried in a squatting position, was found.

Despite all the efforts that had gone into constructing this tomb, nothing else was found inside the chamber. In the earth around the cairn, we found a small fragment of a pottery receptacle, handmade from sandy paste, rough but with smooth finishing on both surfaces and brown in colour (Bettencourt, *et alii* 2002; 2003).

Tomb 2, situated about 4m to the northeast of the previous one, is rectangular, with rounded corners, and measures 3.80m in the north-south direction and 2.90m in the east-west direction, with a maximum depth of 0.58m. Inside this area, a rectangular opening had been made (measuring 2.84m in the north-south direction, 1.60m in the east-west and 1.10m deep): this is the funerary chamber. It was lined with a wall of masonry, the stones joined together with a mortar made of sandy clay between 0.34 and 0.40m thick. The stones used were of four types: milky quartzes (41.9%) of local origin; granite rocks (38.8%), also mainly local; hornfels (16.5%) and mylonites (2%). There are also 8 that have not yet been described. It should be pointed out that the quartzes, with iron oxides, are yellowish-pink in colour. The hornfels, which are mostly silicon-based, were also ferrous and pinkish in colour. Thus, the walls of the chamber would have been quite colourful (intentionally so, we believe), predominantly pink, but punctuated here and there by the green of the silicon hornfels (Fig. 5).

Part of the wall includes fragments of granite millstones, mostly the lower or bedder stones but also sometimes runners, or upper millstones. These were sometimes placed with their milling surface turned inwards into the tomb and sometimes with it turned outwards towards the red sandy clay (Fig. 7).

At the bottom of the chamber, lined with granite slabs, there were also pieces of bedder millstones, a slab with carvings, and a stone, perhaps a stele, which had been partly shaped (Fig. 6). Over some of the flagstones a red dye had been spilled, made of clay, probably of local origin, mixed with some kind of fat or grease that is yet to be determined.

The roof of the chamber would have been of wood, upon which sandy clay would have been placed, thereby explaining the stratigraphy of the filling. It appears that when the wood started to rot, it caused a first collapse of the stones and clay. The depression that was left would later have been filled with stones from the walls, sandy clay and earth, leaving visible only a sub-rectangular mark of brownish earth on the surface.

On the floor of the chamber, to the northwest, on a bed of pink quartz, was found a ceramic vase, of a shape that is only known in southern Europe (Fig. 8.1).

To the west lay a small flat oval-shaped lower millstone with its milling face turned upwards (Fig. 8.3). To the north, under the possible stele, we found one of two gold spirals; the second was found nearby (Fig. 8.2).

The rectangular area, at a higher level, opened only onto the clay, leaving a flat surface between 0.40 and 0.58m wide around the chamber. On the southeast side of this flat surface, there was a small circle of stones of around 0.18m in diameter, which we interpreted as belonging to a "bed" to support something perishable, such as a container. Very probably, after the chamber had been closed, the whole area was covered with sandy clay, making the tomb completely invisible from the surrounding countryside.

The structure which we interpreted as being **Tomb 3** is located around 4m from Tomb 1 and around 7m from Tomb 2. It is basically a hole cut from the clay and partly from a vein of quartz. It is oval in shape, and measures 1.36m in length, 0.68m in width and 0.42m in depth (Fig. 9). Inside, on the base layer, a ceramic vase was found, categorised as shape 10 on the chart of one of the authors of this work. This was found at the southern extremity of the monument (Fig. 9 and 10). It should also be mentioned that some of the quartz from the vein was partly dyed red.

What is possibly **Tomb 4**, to the northeast of the excavated area, is oval shaped, and around 1.40m long in the east-west direction and 1.34m wide at maximum in the north-south direction. At a particular height, this structure was intentionally reduced in size to only 1.08m in length, 0.66m maximum width and 0.58m total depth, while maintaining its oval shape and original layout. On the western side of this smaller structure, at a depth of around 0.15m, we found a cluster of small stones arranged in a semi-circle, which we interpreted as belonging to a possible support for a perishable container (Fig. 11). This tomb was later covered with clay, which made it difficult to identify.

Another important structure is the large one we initially named as **Pit 9**, which is related to a number of post-holes around its edge. It is laid out in an east-west direction and measures 3.12m by 2.06; to the east, there are no such post-holes, which might indicate the location of a possible "entrance". At the deepest part, in the west, which is around 0.54m in depth, the clay was cut into a flat-based rectangular shape, suggesting that it may have formed the bed for some perishable object. To the east of this depression, there is another, but slightly higher up. This one is somewhat irregular on the base, though more or less circular in shape. These two depressions seem to be joined together. The whole structure, which had been considerably dug out of the clay (making it almost subterranean), was surrounded by 11

post-holes; these would mostly have been able to hold oak tree trunks², with a diameter of over 0.20m, indicating that they were robust and probably resistant (Fig. 12). Wheat was found inside, suggesting an offering. With these characteristics, and given the general context, this structure could be a kind of “hut” which may have been used for worship, or a “tomb-house”.

One aspect that seems to be important is the concentration of small and medium-sized pits cut out of the clay around Tombs 1 and 2, and the “hut” or “tomb house”. Given the acidity of the earth in the northwest, it is very difficult to find bone heaps or deposits of perishable materials that could help to interpret these structures. Even so, we cannot help but wonder if these ditches were not satellite structures for burials or votive deposits, somehow related to the larger structures.

Associated spatially to Tomb 1 and the “hut” are **Pits 8 and 21** (Fig. 13, 14 and 15). Both of these are circular in shape, with diameters of around 1m, shallow (between 0.16 and 0.20m) and flat-bottomed. There seem to be two holes for posts related to Pit 21. This was covered by a thick layer of sandy clay, and various layers of its filling contained pieces of coals and fragments of pottery from different smooth vases. In Pit 8, we collected a small flint and a piece from the edge of some vessel of indeterminate shape.

Pits 20, 22, 27 and 33 are apparently related spatially to Tomb 2 (Fig. 5 and 15). **Pit 20**, which is approximately 1m west of Tomb 2, is sub-circular in shape, with an appendage to the south (a hole for a post). It measured 1.33m by 1.10m and was around 0.52m deep. Inside were found only sediments, which have not yet been sifted, and a scattering of coal. Around 0.40m northwest of Tomb 2 was **Pit 22**, sub-oval in shape and arranged in a northwest/southeasterly direction. This measured 1.26m in length, 0.90m in width and 0.42m in depth. It contained only sediments and scattered coals, but has not yet been screened for the presence of seeds. **Pit 27**, located less than a metre south-southwest of Tomb 2, was sub-circular in shape, with a diameter of around 0.90m and 0.32m in depth, and a concave base. Only sediments, as yet unsifted, were collected from the interior, along with various scattered coals.

To the north of Tomb 2, but adjoining it, a small ditch had been cut out of the clay; this was oval shaped, arranged in a north/south direction, and measured 0.82m by 0.65m, with a depth of 0.34m. It contained sediments and seeds, possibly deposited in a perishable container. This is **Pit 33**. South of this tomb, there seems to have been something similar, though the earth here has not yet been analysed. These

² According to anthracology analyses by Isabel Figueiral.

deposits seem to have occurred after the burial, owing to the fact that, the shape of the tomb seems to have been partially cut away by Pit 33 and by the south depression (Fig. 15).

All the structures mentioned are located on the **eastern half of the small knoll of Vale Ferreiro**, although there are also many other ditches and possible post-holes in the remaining area.

4. CHRONOLOGY

The two radiocarbon dates for the site allow us to argue that it was used for several hundred years, between the transition of the 3rd to the 2nd millennia BC and in the 17th-16th centuries BC (that is, during the Early and Middle Bronze Age in North-west Portugal) (Bettencourt, *et alii*, 2003).

TABLE
OxCal version3.5 (Oxford University). INTCAL98 (24,000-0 cal BP)

Vale Ferreiro	Tomb 1	Ua – 19728	3635 ± 50	2150-1870 (95.4%)
Vale Ferreiro	Pit	Ua – 19500	3315 ± 50	1740-1710 (3.4%) 1700-1490 (90.5%) 1480-1450 (1.5%)

5. DISCUSSION OF DATA AND INTERPRETATIONS

Given the nature of the vestiges exhumed and the post-deposit conditions of this site, the first point we can make is that this is a very complex site, difficult to study and to interpret. Thus, this work should be understood as a preliminary attempt at synthesis of a site that raises more questions than it offers answers.

Generally speaking, the existence of stone tombs and ditches, amongst other structures that are more difficult to interpret, indicates that Vale Ferreiro is a special place, where burials and other ceremonial activities were performed. It appears to have been used (according to the radiocarbon dating, at least) for around 300 years.

Bearing in mind, as Julian Thomas (1999) has pointed out, that the funeral rite is a system of communication that tells us more about the world of the living than about the dead, we will try to make some inferences about the communities that built and used the ritual site of Vale Ferreiro from the materials that they left behind.

Firstly, these people **could not have lived far** from the site, given the quantity of fragments of millstones that were used in the construction of Tomb 2, some of which must have been large and quite heavy. Secondly, results of anthracology and capology analyses on the samples taken from different contexts show cultivated plants, which must have grown nearby and which would normally be associated with farming activity. So we know that these people **were farmers** and that they cultivated leguminous vegetables and cereals, such as wheat and barley. Other resources from the area were also used, such as *fabaceas* and oak, probably for buildings, as we can deduce from the results obtained for Pit 9, the one we considered to be a "hut".

The fact that these people **possessed lithological knowledge of the local and regional resources** is evident in the choice of stone blocks that were used for the construction of Tombs 1 and 2 and for the manufacture of the various millstones used in the construction of Tomb 2 or "deposited" in Pit 3; in the use of red clays in the dye found on the floor of the chamber of Tomb 2; and in the use of iron oxides from hydromorphic crusts, found in Tomb 3 and probably used in dye or painting.

While most of the lithical resources used are local, such as the porphyritic large-grain granite, milky quartzes, and red clays, there is also evidence that the communities travelled some kilometers to get ferrous silicon hornfels and green silicon hornfels, which are normally found in areas where tin and wolfram are mined. This seems to reveal excellent knowledge of the region and maybe also of **bronze metalworking**, which would be compatible with the oldest remains of this activity found in North-west Portugal, in the settlement of Sola, from the first half of the 2nd millennium BC.

The different types of burial detected here would also suggest a society with **great social inequality**.

The different kinds of stones used, the amount of time and labour invested by the community in the construction of a tomb, such as No. 2, the deposit of gold artifacts and an exotic vase of southern European origin, would indicate that the person buried here was of high social status. The male figure too (who was deemed worthy of a tomb made of slabs brought from the river, but without any further remains) would seem to have had an important status, though different from that of the person in Tomb 2. On the other hand, those buried in the flat tombs numbers 3 and 4 would have had a different status, perhaps less important, given the small amount of investment required for the building of these tombs.

The great importance of Tomb 2 also lies in the totality of its characteristics which, when perceived as a whole, seem intentionally to **translate in microcosm**

the existing macrocosm (which might be summarized as **a farming metal-working society, which had contacts on a supra-regional level, knowledge of their territory and the skill to exploit it lithologically, and which was characterized by a marked social hierarchy**). Thus it would seem plausible (as a hypothesis perhaps) that the socially important person buried in this tomb may have achieved cult status after death. This would justify the deposit of seeds in Pit 33 sometime after the burial. According to this view, Pits 20, 22 and 27, and the deliberate rites associated with them around Tomb 2, probably date from some later time. But this is still an open question, and requires better grounding, mostly sustained by radiocarbon dating.

As one of the aims of this work is also to “*discuss whether form, as the physical/constructed definition of space, would or not have played an integral and determining role in the definition of experience and the construction of the historical, cultural and social imagination of prehistoric communities*”³ we would like to consider the relationship of the constructed site at Vale Ferreiro with the physical characteristics of its space and surrounding environment.

Firstly the site has good visibility of the surrounding countryside and is also itself visible from higher up. Exposure to sunlight is excellent, as it is bathed in sun from sunrise to sunset. It is also associated indirectly to water, mainly due to the number of streams in the vicinity, which feed into the Ave basin, and also because of the underground river that passes this spot, with sulphurous waters that emerge as hot springs some kilometers away. (It is this feature which has given the nearby village its name: Godarilhas means large *godos*, a colloquial word for river pebbles, which appear at some depth whenever excavations are carried out). Running water is also present, and would have been visible, before the town was built, in the impressive enclosed valley of the River Pequeno in the mountains to the east.

We believe that such characteristics may have played a part in motivating these communities to choose this spot as a ceremonial site. The different archaeological structures in this space do not seem to have been positioned by chance; rather they seem to obey a conceptual logic which to some extent creates a link with the cardinal points. This seems to materialise in the existence of east – and west – facing structures (such as Tomb 4, the “hut” and Pits 4 and 15, which are elongated in shape). Similarly, there are structures arranged from north to south (such as Tombs 1, 2 and 3). It is also curious that the tombs that have been more firmly identified as such are found on the eastern slope of this knoll.

³ Aim of the session *The Experience and Construction of Space*, in the Colloquium *Espaços na Pré-História do Centro e Norte Península*, at which this paper was presented.

The relationship with water, another vital force of nature and one which was extremely important during the sub-Boreal period (a particularly dry phase) when these communities lived, may be seen in the choice of large river slabs for the construction of the funerary chamber in Tomb 1; the presence of some river slabs in Tomb 2; a river pebble found in Pit 8, and in the very location of the site, with visibility of most of the Ave valley, and also of the imposing valley of the River Pequeno to the east, which may perhaps suggest a link between the rising sun and running water, (Fig. 16). However, we cannot elaborate any further on these aspects without descending into mere conjecture.

Whatever, it seems plausible that, at the Vale Ferreiro ceremonial site, the **symbolism of life and fertility is associated with the world of death in a complex mesh of expressions and interconnections that are difficult to determine**. Similarly, the location of the site in the Ave basin, surrounded by water on various sides; the orientation of some of its structures in relation to the sun; the raw materials used, and the characteristics of some of the constructions: all of these suggest that **the physical and environmental features of this space would have played an integral part in the construction of this site**, which was ultimately a carrier of memory and feelings through various centuries, in the context of the Early and Middle Bronze Age in North-west Portugal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BETTENCOURT, A. M. S.; F. S. LEMOS E T. ARAÚJO (2002). The young man of Vale Ferreiro, Fafe (Northern Portugal): an early prehistoric burial, *Journal of Iberian Archaeology*, nº 4, ADECAP, Oporto, pp. 131 – 151.
- BETTENCOURT, A. M. S., F. S. LEMOS E T. ARAÚJO (2003). O complexo arqueológico de Vale Ferreiro, Serafão, Fafe (Norte de Portugal), *Trabalhos de Antropologia e Etnologia*, nº 43 (1-2), SPAE, Oporto, pp. 113 – 132.
- THOMAS, J. (1999). *Understanding the Neolithic*, London, Routledge.



Fig. 1 – Vale Ferreiro in the north of Portugal.

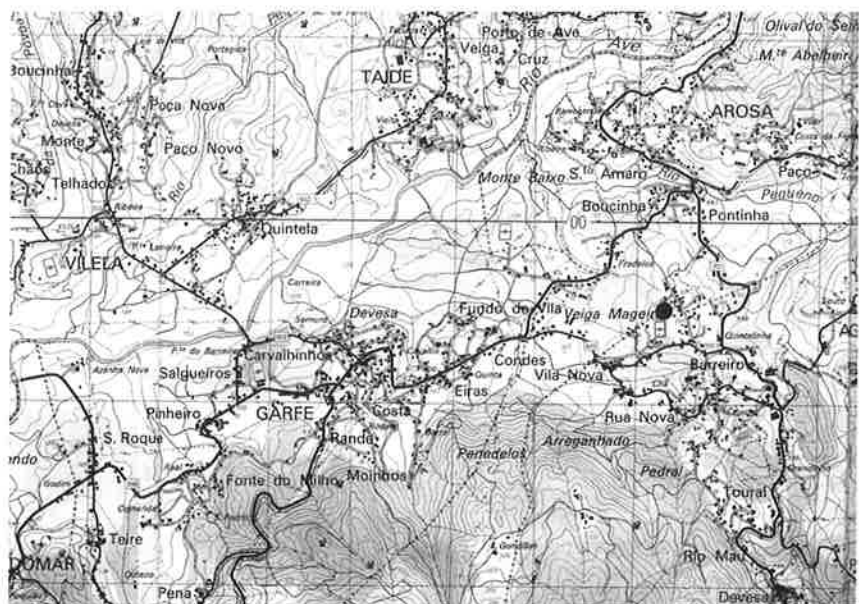


Fig. 2 – Location of the site on the Military Map of Portugal (Scale 1:25.000), showing the many water courses, streams and rivers near the spot.



Fig. 3 – General view of the excavated area.



Fig. 4 – Tomb 1: funeral chamber after excavation of the surrounding cairn.

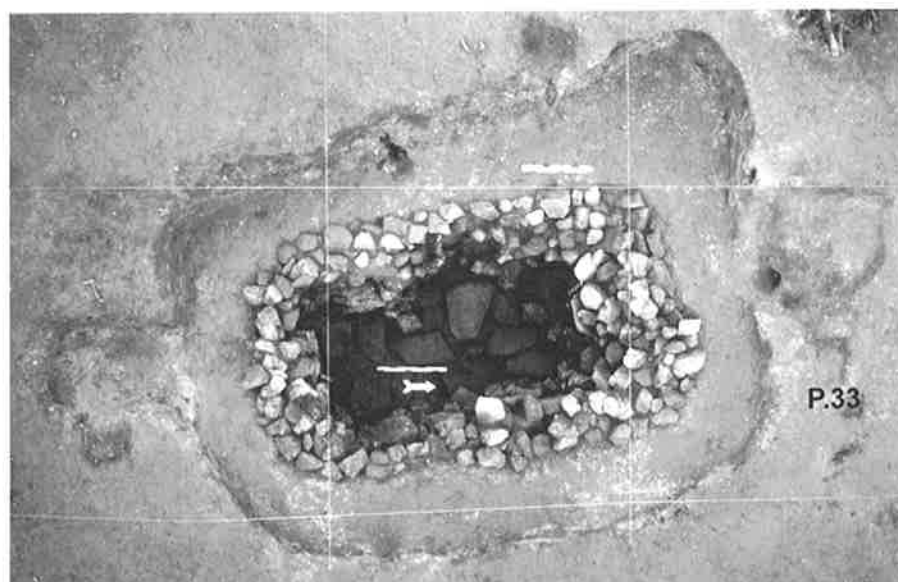


Fig. 5 – Tomb 2 and pit 33: general view.

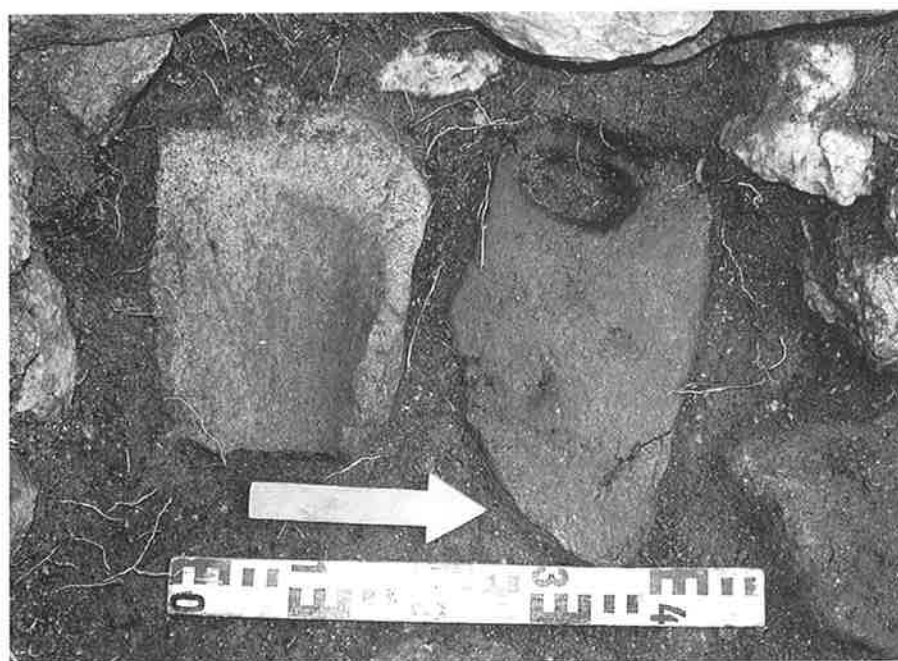


Fig. 6 – Tomb 2: detail of the bottom of the funerary chamber.

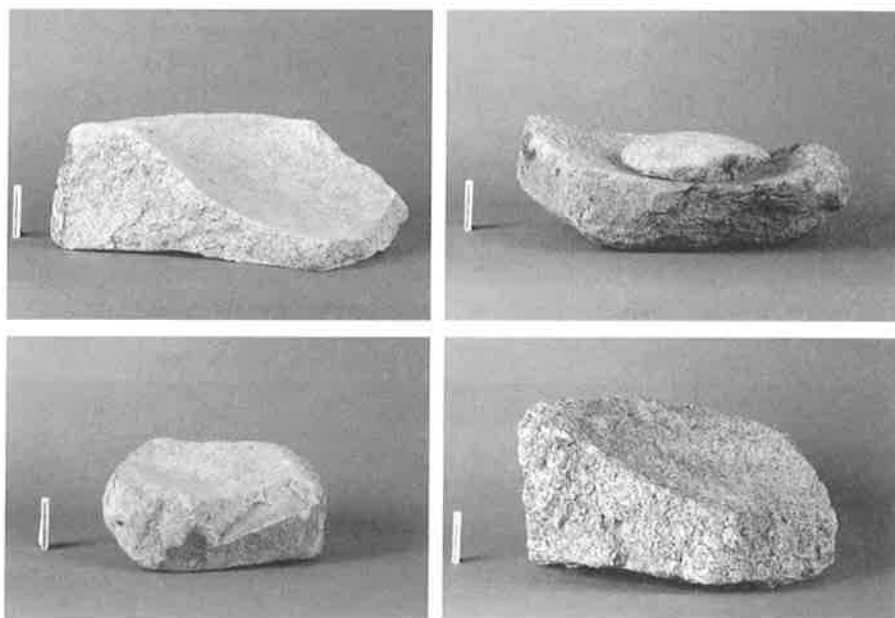


Fig. 7 – Tomb 2: fragments of millstones found in the walls of the funerary chamber (M.D.D.S./phot. Manuel Santos).

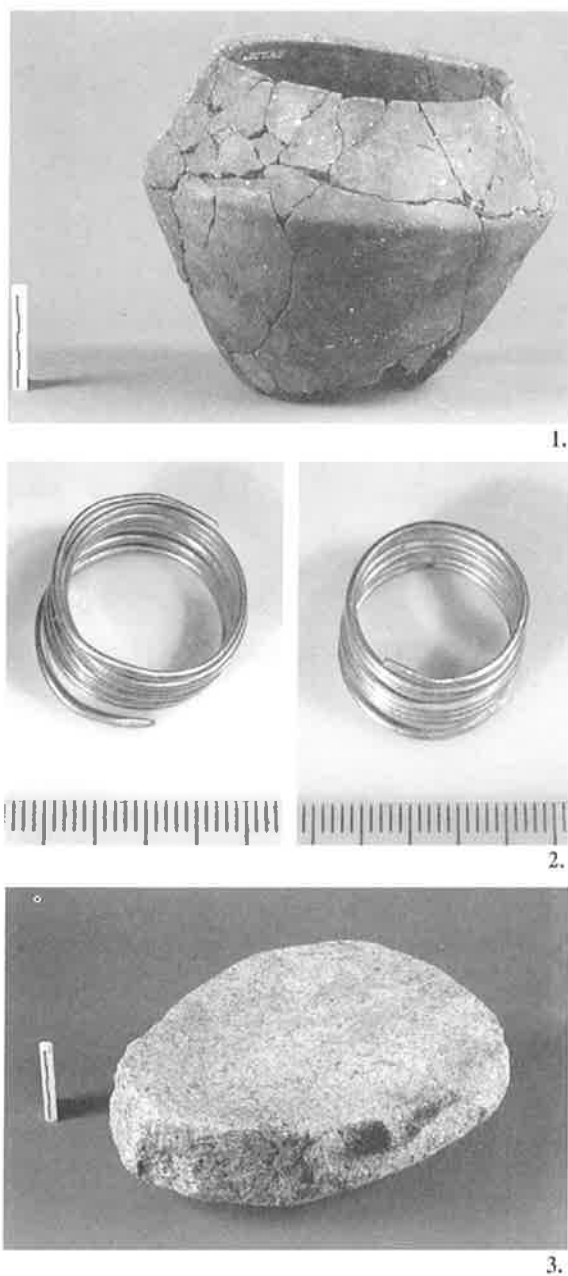


Fig. 8 – Tomb 2: remains from inside the funerary chamber. 1. two-legged conical vase; 2. gold spirals; 3. bedder (lower) millstone (M.D.D.S./phot. Manuel Santos).

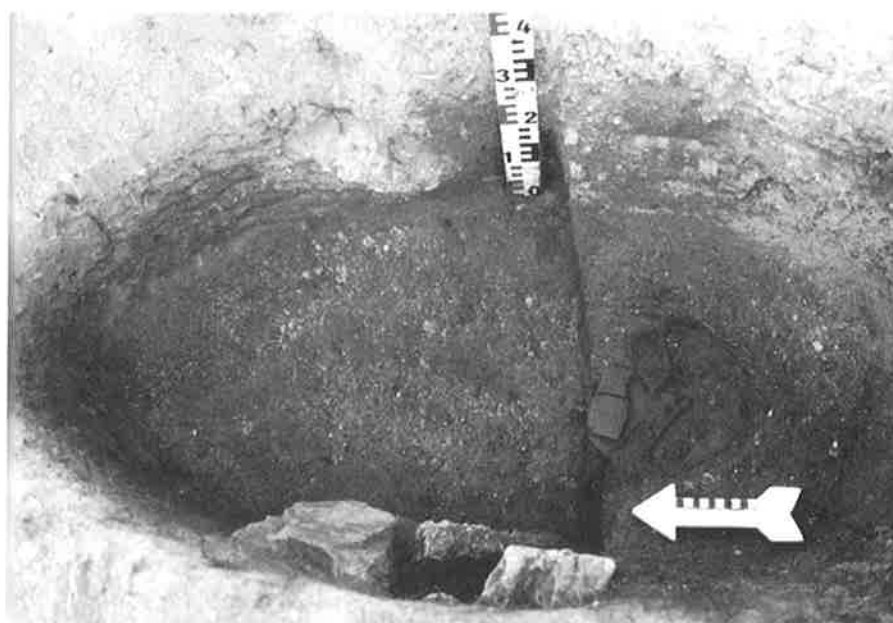


Fig. 9 – Tomb 3.



Fig. 10 – Small pot found inside Tomb 3 (M.D.D.S./
phot. Manuel Santos).

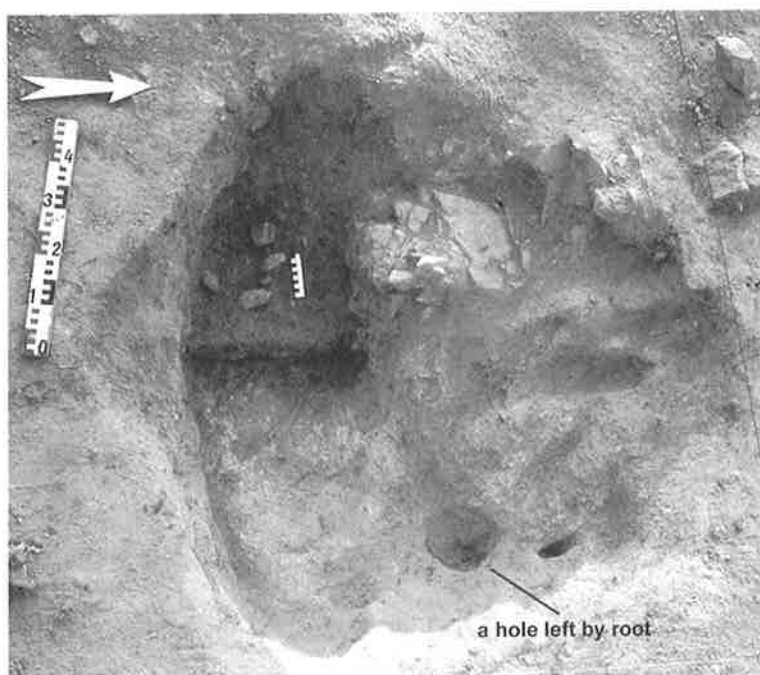


Fig. 11 – Tomb 4. The “stone bed” can be seen to the west.



Fig. 12 – “House of worship” or “tomb-house”.

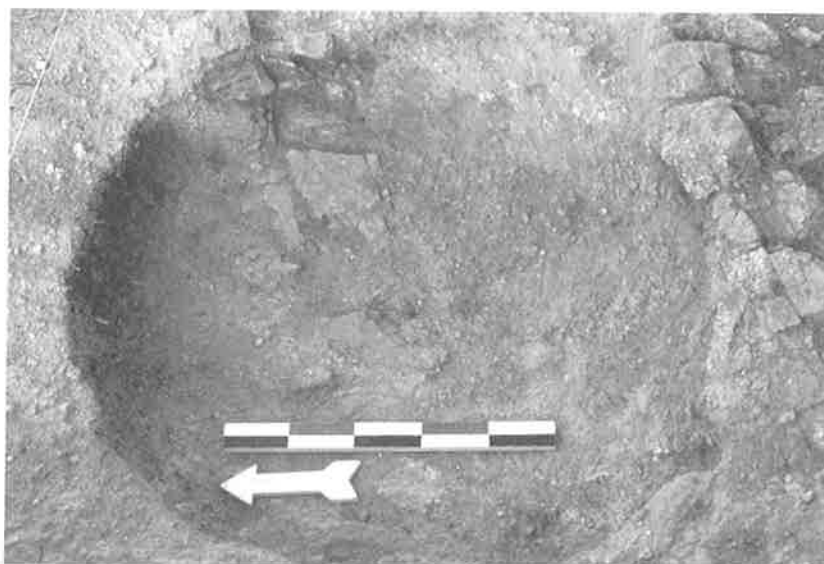


Fig. 13 – Pit 8.

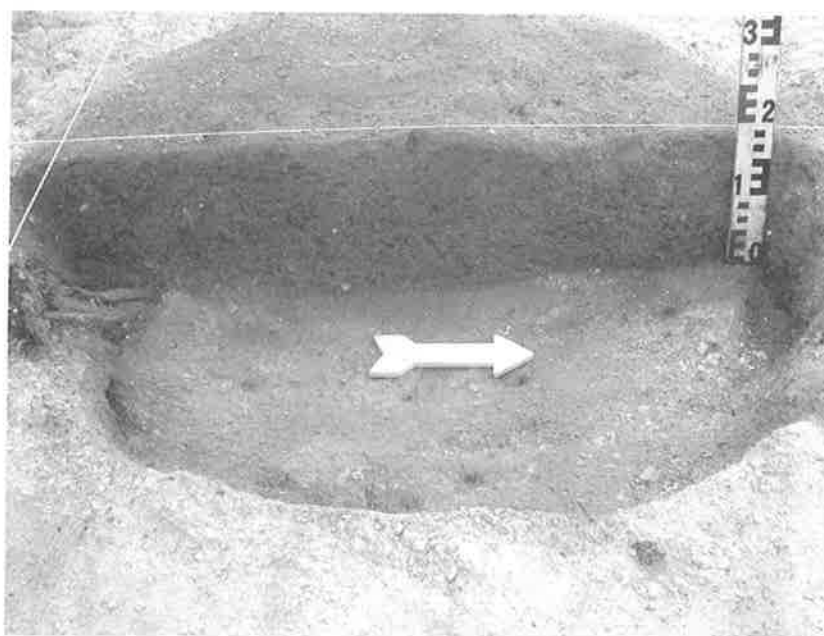


Fig. 14 – Pit 21.

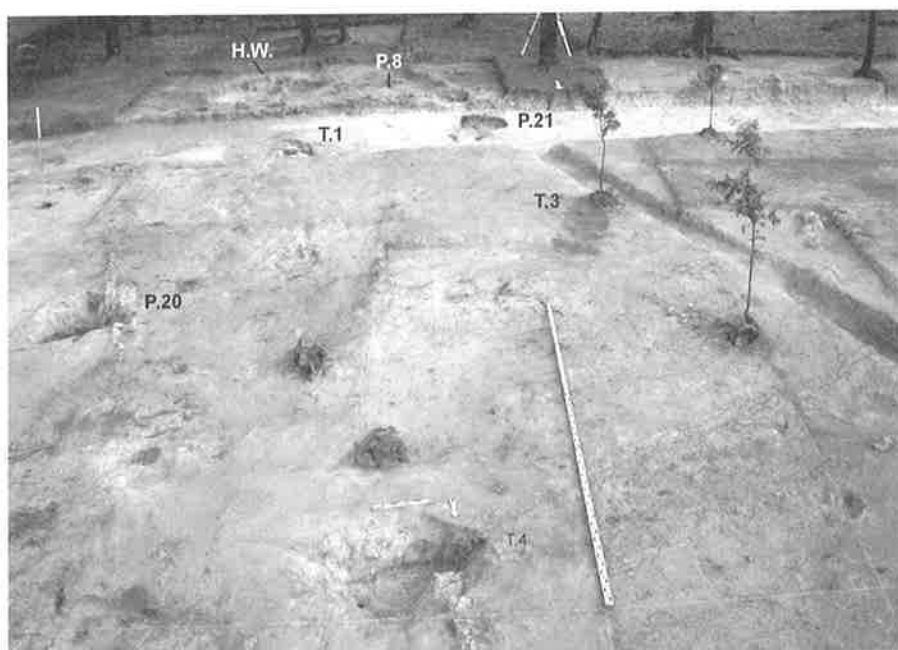


Fig. 15 – Pits 8 and 21 in relation to Tomb 1 and others structures.



Fig. 16 – Valley of the River Pequeno, cutting through the mountain, east of Vale Ferreiro.

