THE BRONZE AGE IN NORTH-WEST PORTUGAL

Since the 1980s several projects of archaeological investigation into the Bronze Age in the north-west of Portugal have been developed. These consisted of the excavations of settlements and ritual structures, which have made it possible to gather a significant amount of information for the understanding of human presence in this region between the second half of the 3rd millennium and the beginning of the third quarter of the 1st millennium BC.

In the remotest period: the Initial/Middle Bronze (the end of the 3rd and most part of the 2nd millennium BC), there is in geomorphologic terms a diversity of peopling strategies, which shows an effective "colonisation" of diverse landscapes. These patterns of peopling indicate both a movement to the lower slopes of the valleys (downstream from the fluvial basin) and settlements close to the smaller valleys, swamps and damp meadows in higher places (upstream from the fluvial basin). Of the former, the settlements of Pego and Sola (both in Braga) are examples and of the latter they are represented by the settlements of Tapada da Venda/Pedroso (Celorico de Basto) and the first settlements of Bouça do Frade (Baião) and Penedos Grandes (Arcos de Valdevez).

In all cases settlements were made up of perishable structures. Housing areas have been identified...
by the remnants of huts, the holes for pillars, fire-places and open ditches in the ground and in the gravel. They were intended to be of short/medium duration.

The palaeoenvironmental data reveal an increase in human activity leading to the taming of the landscape to allow systematic farming and cattle raising which as a consequence provoked a degradation of the traditional woodland.

Bronze metallurgy began. Crucibles and drops from remelting in the settlement of Sola (Braga) as well as several flat axes discovered at Cova da Bouça in the village of São Bartolomeu do Mar (Esposende).

In the sepulchral world there is much evidence that shows both the diversity and disappearance of collective tombs, which reveals forms
of social organization different from those of the previous periods.

Old megalithic monuments such as the one in Chã de Arcas (Arcos de Valdevez) and in Lage (Vila Verde) were reutilized and new megalithic monuments of great architectural diversity such as Outeiro de Gregos 1, Meninas do Castro 4 (both in Baião), Chã de Arefe (Barcelos) and Vale Ferreiro I (Fafe) were constructed. Tombs built in sub-rectangular cists are well represented in the necropolises of Agra de Antas (Eposende), Monte da Ola (Viana do Castelo), Gulpihares (Vila Nova de Gaia) and in the tombs of Lorde-lo (Viana do Castelo) and Quinta da Água Branca (Vila Nova de Cerveira).

The flat tombs, consisting of hollowed-out rocks, of Vale Ferreiro II (Fafe) and Tapado da Caldeira (Baião) are also of this period. In some of these tombs the remains of skeletons found prove that ritual burials used to take place. Sometimes the dead were buried with their metallic copper, silver or gold possessions. The great symbolic meaning of these artefacts shows the importance they had in their societies. However, the most common objects found were ceramic vessels such as pots, cone-shaped vessels and vases with horizontal rims, normally used in everyday tasks.
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During the Late Bronze (between the end of the 2nd millennium and the beginning of the third quarter of the 1st millennium BC) settlements continued to be built on small hills and hillocks in fertile valleys or in mountainous but sheltered places. However, the appearance of new settlements in the hills, in the mountains, or on highland spurs and on the banks of large rivers seems to imply a greater diversity of peopling patterns than in the previous epoch, in such a way that makes it possible to conclude that there was a hierarchy of settlements, at least in some places.

The settlements of Alto da Cidade (Braga) and Santinha (Amares) are examples of low-lying habitations situated in fluvial basins. Examples of communities in sheltered mountainous areas are Bouça do Frade (Baião), Lavra (Baião) and the last occupations of Penedos Grandes (Arcos de Valdevez) which reveal evidence of a habitation outside the settlement and the utilization of a granitic shelter.

The new strategy for settlements can be seen in the mountainous hills of Alto da Cadeira and of Castelo de Matos (both in Baião) and on the margins of the large fluvial basins of the Rivers Ave, Câvado, and Minho. Barbudo (Vila Verde), Cabanas (Braga).
Castelo de Faria (Barcelos), Castro de Lanhoso (Póvoa de Lanhoso), Coto da Pena (Caminha), Falperra (Braga), Roriz (Barcelos), S. Julião (Vila Verde), S. Lourenço (Esposende) are the best known and show a long diachrony of occupation.

In the north-west of Portugal, it is only in this chronological cultural phase that the first settlements with demarcating barriers appear, as stone walls in S. Julião (Vila Verde) and in Coto da Pena (Caminha), as smaller walls of earth retention in Santinha and as wooden fences in Castelo de Matos and Barbudo.

This phenomenon may be connected with embryonic processes of assertion of groups of power, not yet stable, that needed to affirm themselves by the occupation of an enclosed area of land; walls or fences being symbols that express and create a social/cultural identity, which function as physical marks that guide the movements of people in the landscape.

In some places in the north-west the long period of habitation of some of these walled places for centuries, such as in S. Julião and Coto da Pena, show the success of these phenomena of territorialization, power and identity.

Different settlement strategies led to an increased use of the existing natural resources, namely in the uplands, on the slopes and in the valleys, and may have caused an intense degradation of the primitive forest and the appearance of an open landscape of shrubs and herbaceous plants.

The economy of these communities was based on the exploitation of the resources of uplands and valleys, consolidating an agro-sylvan-shepherd system. It is believed that the Bronze Age people developed the cultivation of summer and winter cereals (wheat, corn and barley), the legumens (peas and broad beans) and the cruciferous (cabbage/mustard) as well as raising cattle, goats, sheep and pigs. Remains of dogs have also been found from this period. Fishing, hunting and gathering were very important activities in social and economic terms. Wild fruits such as acorns, pears, grapes and more likely sorb were gathered. Wax and honey were also collected. In the coastal settlements univalve molluscs, limpets, mussels and oysters were eaten.

Archaeological findings show the existence of local workmanship not only connected with ceramics, but also with weaving and the production of lithic utensils and metalurgy. Handmade ceramics - mostly plain but some decorated with incisions, prints and artistic additions were baked in kilns with reduction firing. Large and medium-sized pots were used to prepare, store and
cook food. It is thought that smaller pots were used to store liquids, but some might have been used directly over the fire for cooking purposes. Some of the finest and rarest pottery found such as the carinal cups, urns and double vases may have had a more restrictive and ritual use.

In this period new weaving techniques seem to have been introduced, as the appearance of the first spindle whorls indicates.

Some of the lithic materials that have been found reveal an opportunistic use of local resources. From the group of artefacts of polished stone, we should point out moulds used in the making of metallic tools, manual mills (saddle querns and grinders), polishers, hammers and axes. From the group of carved objects, it is worth mentioning pebbles, fragments and weights.

Contacts between northern communities and those to the south were more frequent than in the previous period. New metallic tools in bronze (swords arrowheads, daggers, axes, helmets, bracelets, brooches, buckets, spits, wishbones and furcules among many others) were in use and widely circulated and show the development of new philosophical conceptions, rituals and symbolic activities. Glass beads, rare iron artefacts and double cups have also been excavated that show similar changes in people's beliefs and activities.

During this period burial rituals have not been well identified. The discovery of a small cist in the interior of the settlement of Santinha (Amares) and a large vase containing a rare accumulation of burned pine needles seem to indicate a change in burial practice. This may be related to the ritualization of the settlements and with new centrifugal conceptions of space moulded by the demands of farming and cattle raising activities in which the settlement becomes the most important spatial reference.
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