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EXCAVATIONS AT THE ANTA DA LAJINHA

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The megalithic tombs of Proença-a-Nova

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The investigation of megalithic tombs in the municipality of Proença-a-Nova is a leading component in ongoing research on megalithic tombs north of the River Tagus. This research began in 2012 through the work of the Proença-a-Nova Archaeological Field Camp, and it has continued since 2015 within the framework of the project 'Mesopotamos – Settlement from the 5th to 1st millennium BC between the Tagus and the Zêzere in the Beira Baixa Region'. Proença-a-Nova is part of the Beira Baixa Intermunicipal Community and the Naturtejo Geopark, designated under the International Geosciences and Geoparks Program of the UNESCO (Figure 3.18).

In Portugal, megalithic monuments have inspired a rich historiography and have been the subject of multiple and sometimes fanciful interpretations since the 18th century (Fabião 2016). An important figure in this dynamic tradition of interest and study was Francisco Tavares de Proença Júnior. He was the pioneer of archaeological investigation in the District of Castelo Branco (an administrative division including 11 municipalities that largely coincides with the former Province of Beira Baixa, which included 13 municipalities). In eight years of intense activity (Ferreira 2004), Proença Júnior concentrated his attention on identifying and excavating this kind of monument (Proença Júnior 1910) but owing to his premature death, he only managed to publish one of the almost two dozen megalithic structures he excavated (Henriques and Caninas 2004). His work focused mainly on the municipalities of Vila Velha de Ródão, Castelo Branco and Idanha-a-Nova. The prehistoric burial mounds of Proença-a-Nova, six of which were known at the time, received less attention and were simply listed in his archaeological inventory of the district (Proença Júnior 1910).

Georg and Vera Leisner were responsible for the first effective contribution to the identification of the megaliths of Proença-a-Nova, during their fieldwork in this municipality from 30 August to 5 September 1945 (source: fieldbook held in the Leisner Archive under the custody of the Portuguese General Directorate of Cultural Heritage). In this short period, they recorded the location of many *antas*, and visited some of them, as can be seen from the plans published posthumously by Philine Kalb on behalf of Vera Leisner, namely Chã das Vargens, Covão do Ribeiro, Vale de Alvite, Moita da Galinha and Portela da Lameira (Leisner 1998, figs 77 and 78), as well as photographs of two of them, Covão do Ribeiro (Leisner and Leisner 1956, fig. 57) and Moita da Galinha. They did not return to this region again, choosing instead to focus on the study of megalithic tombs in the Alentejo, Beira Alta and Portuguese Estremadura. Furthermore, Philine Kalb had no opportunity to confirm through fieldwork Georg Leisner's mapping of the locations of the monuments at Proença-a-Nova when she organised the posthumous publication of the *Megalithgräber* volume devoted to the Beiras (Leisner 1998).

Interest in the study of these archaeological sites was only resumed in the last quarter of the 20th century with the launch of systematic and long-term surveys promoted by the Associação de Estudos do Alto Tejo (AEAT) in five municipalities of the current Intermunicipal Community of Beira Baixa (Vila Velha de Ródão, Castelo Branco, Proença-a-Nova, Idanha-a-Nova and Oleiros) (Henriques and Caninas 1980, 1986; Henriques *et al*. 1993, 1995a, 2008a, 2016). A small number of these studies were conducted in the context of environmental impact assessments for wind-power projects (Caninas *et al*. 2011, 2014, 2015) or as academic theses (Caninas 2012, 2019).

The dolmens or *antas* of Beira Baixa are located in a region dominated by extensive areas of metasedimentary deposits, mostly shale affected by three orogenies, in addition to Cenozoic alluvial fan-fluvial deposits of conglomerates, sandstones and lutites. As a consequence, the megalithic structures do not share the same monumentality as the orthostatic granite structures found in other regions of Portugal, but they are certainly the oldest surviving forms of architecture in this intermunicipal community and can be included within the world-famous family of megalithic monuments. Unfortunately, public authorities have ignored them through a lack of awareness of their relevance as perennial resources of transcultural value (Caninas and Custódio 2018), with the notable exception of the municipality of Proença-a-Nova. In the last 40 years, commercial forests for the paper industry have been one of the main causes of the destruction of these monuments in this region (Henriques *et al.* 2008a). Forestry of high environmental value which has had political and institutional support, with species such as cork oak, has also contributed to the destruction of this cultural heritage.

Regional context

Study of the megalithic monuments of Proença-a-Nova has been framed within the broader context of the extensive territory of the five municipalities of the Intermunicipal Community of Beira Baixa (ICBB) (Caninas 2012, 2019). This subregion, which stands at a geographical transition between the north and the south of Portugal, comprises a three-step tectonic staircase with a gradient of altimetric and climatic variation, oriented from north-west to south-east. This begins at the highest points of the Central Iberian Range, in Oleiros and in the north of Proença-a-Nova, and it continues down to the banks of the International Tagus on the Southern Plateau, at Idanha-a-Nova, showing high geo-environmental variability.

Approximately 300 prehistoric funerary mounds, including megalithic examples, have been recorded in the 4000 km^2 area of the ICBB. They present a highly asymmetrical distribution (Figure 3.18). In our opinion, this asymmetrical distribution does not necessarily correspond to variations in the prehistoric economic potential and settlement history of the territory but to differences in conditions of conservation resulting from land-use activities throughout this historical period. Those activities have been more destructive in areas of intensive agriculture and forestry, with better preservation in areas dominated by an agro-pastoral economy (commonly known as *montado*) or in cattle pasture and scrub lands. Moreover, different researchers during the 20th century applied a varying and uneven approach (in terms both of the area concerned, and the method pursued) to the territory of Beira Baixa (Caninas 2012).

In fact, there is a higher concentration of megaliths in the southern area close to the Tagus, mainly in metasedimentary or Cenozoic geological settings (Figure 3.18), which is the area that benefited most from AEAT surveys. The small number of structures currently known that are built of igneous rocks, such as granitoids, or are located in places where those rocks occur in the central and northern part of the ICBB (excluding Penamacor), may be explained by the limited research on this type of monument in that subregion.

In any case, this higher density of monuments shows spatial and quantitative continuity with the known sites immediately south of the Tagus, both in the Alto Alentejo (Oliveira 1997b) and in the Spanish province of Cáceres (Bueno Ramírez *et al*. 2006b, 23), refuting the theory that this region was depopulated in the prehistoric period. Differences are noted in other respects between Beira Baixa and the Alto Alentejo, however, such as the rarity or even absence of non-funerary megalithic monuments, such as cromlechs and menhirs (Oliveira and Oliveira 2000). Of the latter, we are only aware of the examples that were re-used as stelae or integrated in burial mounds during the Bronze Age, like São Martinho in Castelo Branco and Corgas in Fundão (Banha *et al*. 2009).

The extensive Tagus Valley rock art complex is close to hand, and may be partly contemporary with the tombs (Baptista *et al*. 1978; Gomes 2010; see Chapter 5). There are also contemporary settlement sites, located essentially on Cenozoic geological deposits. Taken together, this offers a rare opportunity to correlate the evidence for burials (megalithic tombs) with the carved motifs in rock art, and with settlement sites. It is particularly interesting to study how these different types of site are distributed across the landscape. A model was accordingly developed in one limited area, the so-called 'Fratel territory', a block of land that is defined by two rivers and a quartzite ridge (Caninas *et al*. 2017). This showed that settlement sites occupied the central position, with burials dispersed in the neighbourhood of those sites, and that the Valley 'rock art' lay at the borders of that territory.

The megalithic monuments of Proença-a-Nova and the Moitas funerary complex

The administrative boundaries of the Proença-a-Nova municipality are largely coterminous with key landforms. Covering an area of 395 km^2, the geological setting is dominated by metasedimentary rocks of the Beiras Group (from 610 to 542 My), within which there rises up an Appalachian-type landform, the Talhadas quartzite crest dated to the Lower Ordovician (from 488 to 435 My). Most of this territory can be described as a plateau (below 400 m in altitude), forming the surface of Castelo Branco, which dips towards the south-east where it is dissected by the river network of the Tagus tributaries. This geographic circumscription allows us to consider it an individual spatial unit when studying the archaeological evidence for everyday subsistence activities (from land-use to biotic resource

exploitation), in the same way as the analysis referred to above that was carried out in the neighbouring territory of Fratel (Caninas *et al*. 2017).

The large number of burial mounds (95) reported in Proença-a-Nova in the *Megalithgräber* volume (Leisner 1998) surprised many researchers, but new surveys carried out as part of a review of the municipal archaeological inventory recorded only a third of that amount (Henriques *et al*. 2016). The contrast between the Leisner inventory and the current list (Figure 3.19) can be explained by assuming that the older inventory consisted mostly of unconfirmed information and that not all the monuments that were referred to corresponded to *antas* (Henriques *et al*. 2016). This seems to be supported by the fact that most of the monuments that were actually observed and drawn by the German researchers (Leisner 1998) remain in a similar a state of preservation today to that recorded some 70 years ago (such as Moita da Galinha, Cão do Ribeiro and Cimo do Vale de Alvito). The discrepancy is hence not the result of the destruction of sites in the intervening period.

The current distribution map, which resulted from the surveys conducted by AEAT with the support of the municipality, shows that the tumuli identified so far have a broad distribution across the municipality of Proença-a-Nova, reaching the mountains of the Central Belt. This suggests widespread occupation of the territory, although without more detailed study and in the absence of chronometric dating we cannot establish yet that all these monuments were contemporary. In the mountainous area, small tumuli occur, without evidence of megalithic structures; these may be later monuments, attributable to the Bronze Age. The absence (as far as we know) of complex orthostatic stone structures (chambers, passages and atria) is a common feature of the funerary complexes identified in the contiguous territory of Oleiros located to the north of Proença-a-Nova (Figure 3.18) (Caninas *et al*. 2008a, 2014 and 2015).

Of particular interest is a group of burial mounds located near the villages of Moita do Cabrito, Moita do Grilo, Moita Mateus Alves, Moita Pedro Domingos, Moita do Pinheiro and Moita do Santo. Included in this group of megalithic tombs is the large burial mound of Cabeço da Anta, along with Cão do Ribeiro, Cimo do Vale do Alvito and Moita da Galinha. These sites were discovered and drawn by the German researchers (Leisner 1998), and following their excavation by the AEAT, the municipality integrated them into a walking trail named 'History in the Landscape'. The poor intelligibility of these monuments justified their inclusion in an archaeological research programme which has been executed by the Archaeological Field Camp of Proença-a-Nova. The main goals of this project are the study and (partial) reconstruction of the megalithic monuments to promote public access. We introduce below the preliminary results of this work, which began in 2012 and is not yet completed.

The Moitas burial mounds share a number of significant features. The proximity between the various monuments suggests they may constitute an inter-related set, and that they were either in use together (synchrony) or show continuity through time with the successive addition of new structures. Among the mounds under study, Cão do Ribeiro is located 1 km from Cimo do Vale de Alvito and 1.2km from Cabeço da Anta, while the distance between Cimo do Vale de Alvito and Cabeço da Anta is 400 m. These monuments, along with Moita da Galinha (a tumulus with burial chamber and orthostatic passage, the two differentiated in width and height) and the three severely damaged tumuli of Espinho Pequeno (one of which contains an orthostatic chamber), are all adjacent to the headwaters of the São Gens stream, on the southern side of the small Moitas plateau (delimited by the dark line in Figure 3.20), an association which reinforces their potential connection.

The territory of Proença-a-Nova can be visualised as a triangle, with its main sides delimited by the summits of Serra das Corgas (Central Belt) to the north-west, the Ocreza river and Alvito stream to the east and the Pracana stream with the Mesão Frio tributary to the south-west (Figure 3.19). Viewed in this way, the Moitas plateau occupies a central position. This geographical centrality may correspond to a functional centrality in terms of funerary rituals involving human groups dispersed across the adjacent area, notwithstanding the possibility of a wider regional role beyond the limits of the immediate territory.

Based on the model defined at Fratel (Caninas *et al*. 2017), we suggest that the settlement associated with this group of burial mounds was possibly of a dispersed character and may have been located in the highest and most westerly part of the Moitas plateau, between the Boieiro geodesic point and the urban centre of Moitas, although survey has not yet produced evidence to confirm this hypothesis. The failure to identify settlements may be due to the irreversible damage caused by the construction of houses, roads and an aerodrome in the area. Further mounds have been detected on the ridge marking the edge of the plateau to the south-east, toward the Vale da Mua, near the Ocreza river which is crossed by a routeway that can be traced back to late prehistoric times.

Particular interest arises from the relationship between this group of burial mounds and the word *moita*, or *mouta*, as it appears in older documents (Catharino 1933, 197–8). Both terms share a common etymology with the word mota meaning 'artificial hill', a possible synonym for *mamoa* (burial mound). At the present time, toponyms composed with the word Moita correspond to villages (purple circles in Figure 3.20). Besides these, there are other places bearing similar names, such as Mouta Recome in the neighbouring municipality of Mação, Mouta do Rico Homem (Catharino 1933, 100, 101), and another, Moita da Galinha, which is also the site of one of the Proença-a-Nova tombs (no. 4 in

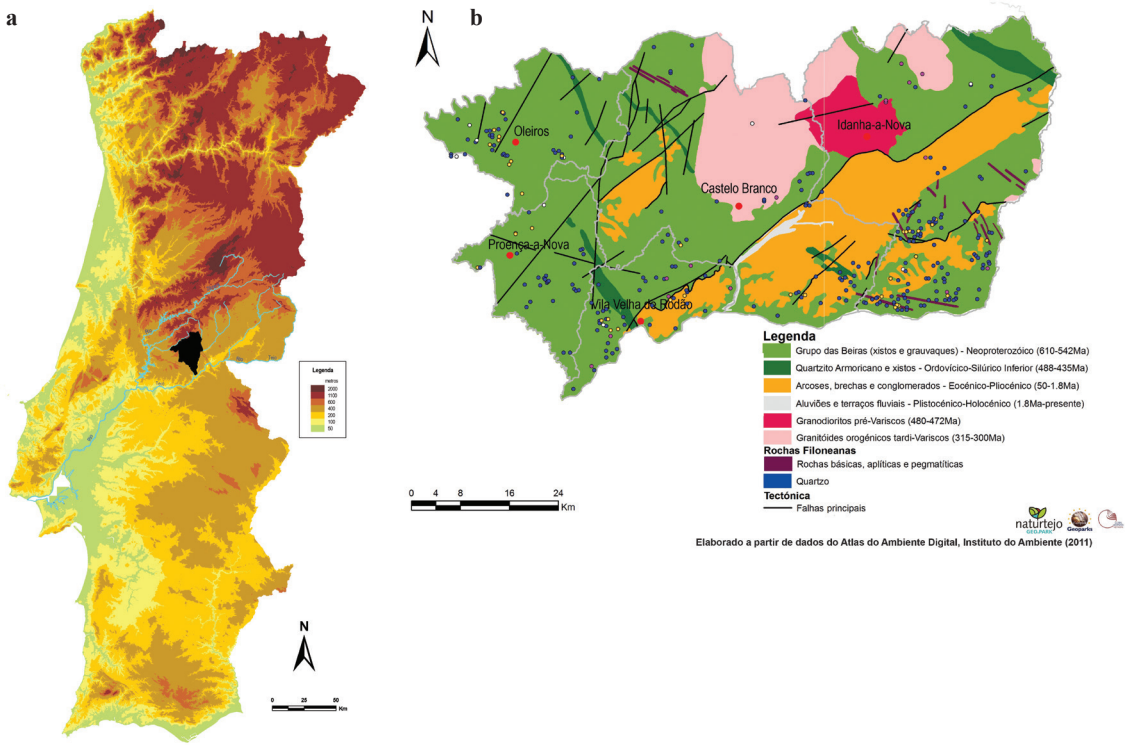

Figure 3.18. a) location of the municipality of Proença-a-Nova (source: http://www.guiadeportugal.pt); b) distribution of burial mounds (blue circles: confirmed tombs, yellow circles: doubtful examples; and white circles: overlapping sites; red circles are the municipal towns) on a simplified geological map of the five municipalities included in this study: Castelo Branco, Idanha-a-Nova, Oleiros, Proença-a-Nova and Vila Velha de Ródão (Source: Naturtejo Geopark and Caninas 2019)

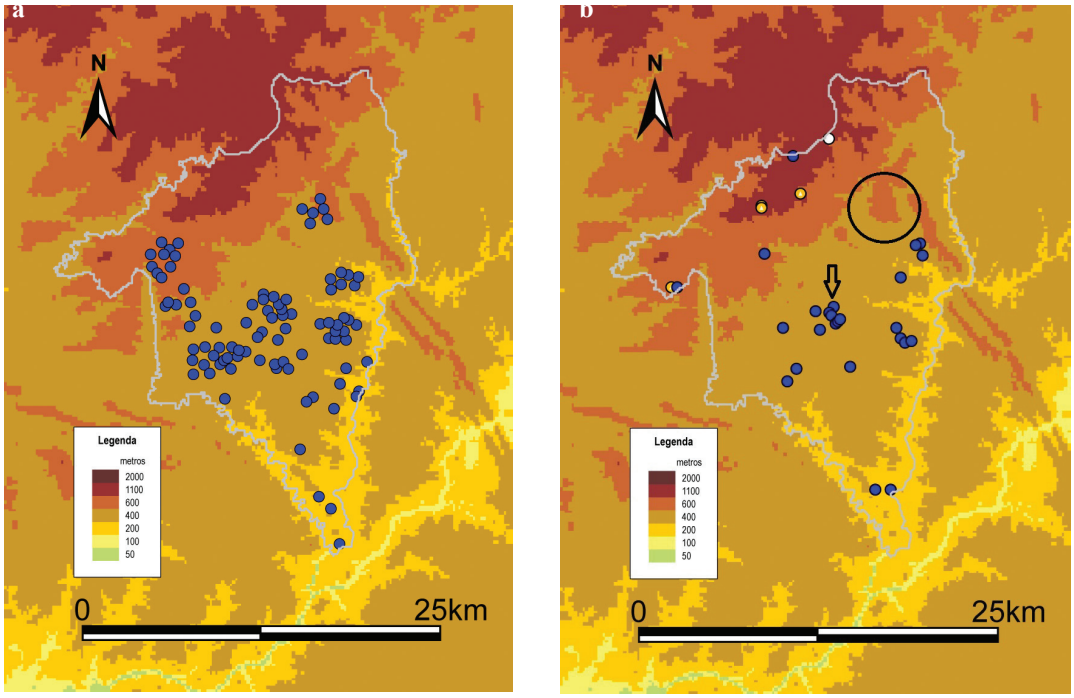

Figure 3.19. a) distribution of megalithic structures (blue dots) in the municipality of Proença-a-Nova according to Leisner (1998); b) current distribution following the work of the Associação de Estudos do Alto Tejo. The arrow indicates the location of the Moitas tomb complex (Cabeço da Anta, Cão do Ribeiro, Cimo do Vale do Alvito, Moita da Galinha and Espinho Pequeno). The circle indicates the possible location of the six mamoas referred to by Proença Júnior (1910)

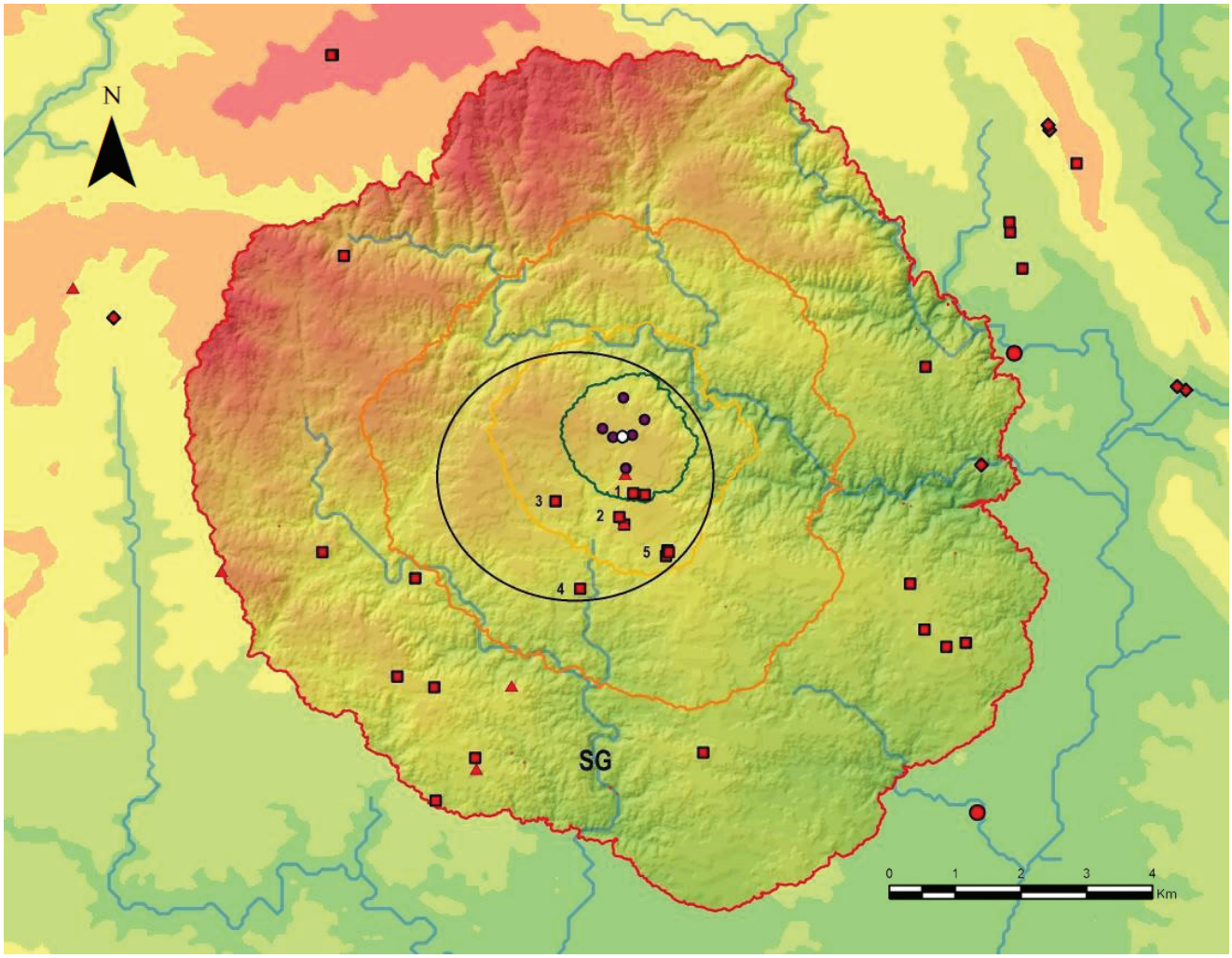

*Figure 3.20. Exploitation zones calculated from a central point within the presently inhabitated area of Moitas. Isochrons of 15 minutes, 30 minutes, 1 hour and 2 hours from an arbitrary point on the Moitas plateau (white circle), calculated through a weighted cost surface based on the algorithm of Tobler (1993) (v = 6 exp [-3.5 * abs (p + 0.05)], where v = speed (km/h) and p = slope (degrees). Red squares: burial mounds of Cabeço da Anta (1), Cimo do Vale do Alvito (2), Cão do Ribeiro (3), Moita da Galinha (4) and Espinho Pequeno (5). Purple dots: villages with the name Moita. SG indicates the São Gens stream, probably called the Mouta stream in the 16th century. The black circle marks the extent of the plateau*

Figure 3.20). This leads to the hypothesis that all Moitas refer to funerary mounds which were destroyed by the modern settlements that now preserve the name. The earliest reference to the use of the word Mouta dates from 1540 (16th century), referring to the Mouta stream (Catharino 1933, 152). It seems likely that this described the modern São Gens stream, in which case Mouta probably denoted the large mound of Cabeço da Anta.

The three burial mounds currently being studied on the Moitas plateau (Figure 3.21) – Cão do Ribeiro, Cimo do Vale do Alvito and Cabeço da Anta – are providing new information. This is due to the fact that the largest monument (Cabeço da Anta) is also one of the best preserved, both its mound, that is unusual in surviving to a height greater than that of the chamber, and the orthostatic structures. These monuments have provided a wealth of new results (as yet unpublished and still under evaluation), regarding both the architecture, and the materials and techniques used in their construction. As observed in other regions of western Europe (Scarre 2007), the use of nearby sources for the stone is common, and is explicable in functional terms, but other materials of distant origin (of the order of dozens of kilometres away) can only be explained by symbolic motivations.

Another notable feature of this group of tombs concerns the varying horizontal and vertical scales of the three burial mounds (Figure 3.22) and their altimetric hierarchy, with the tallest (Cabeço da Anta) occupying the highest position

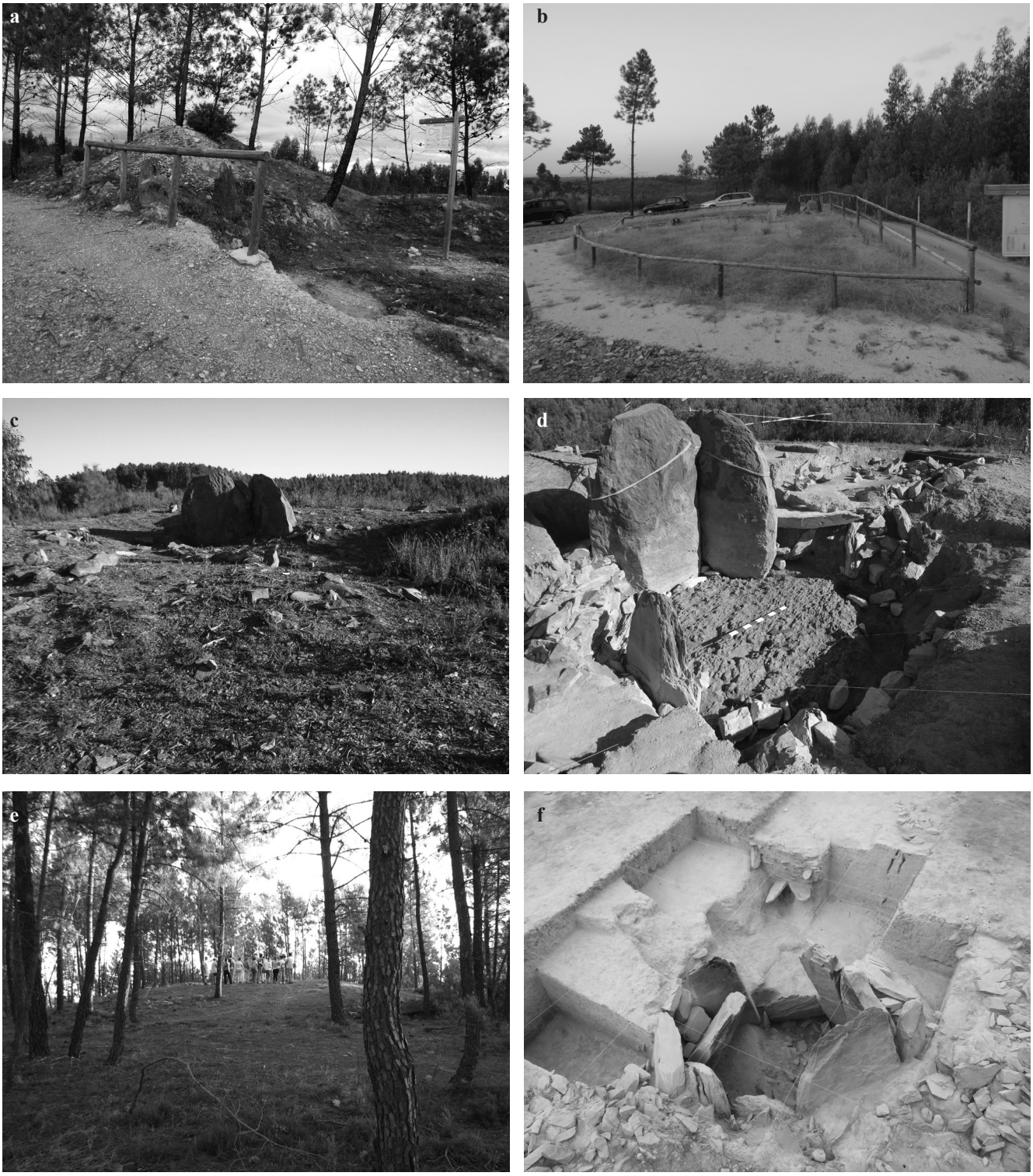

Figure 3.21. Burial mounds excavated at Moitas: a) Cão do Ribeiro before excavation, from the south-west; b) View from the north-east after excavation and partial reconstruction; c) Cimo do Vale de Alvito before excavation; d) Cimo do Vale de Alvito: final stage of excavation of the burial chamber; e) Mound of Cabeço da Anta; f) Cabeço da Anta: excavation in progress in the burial chamber

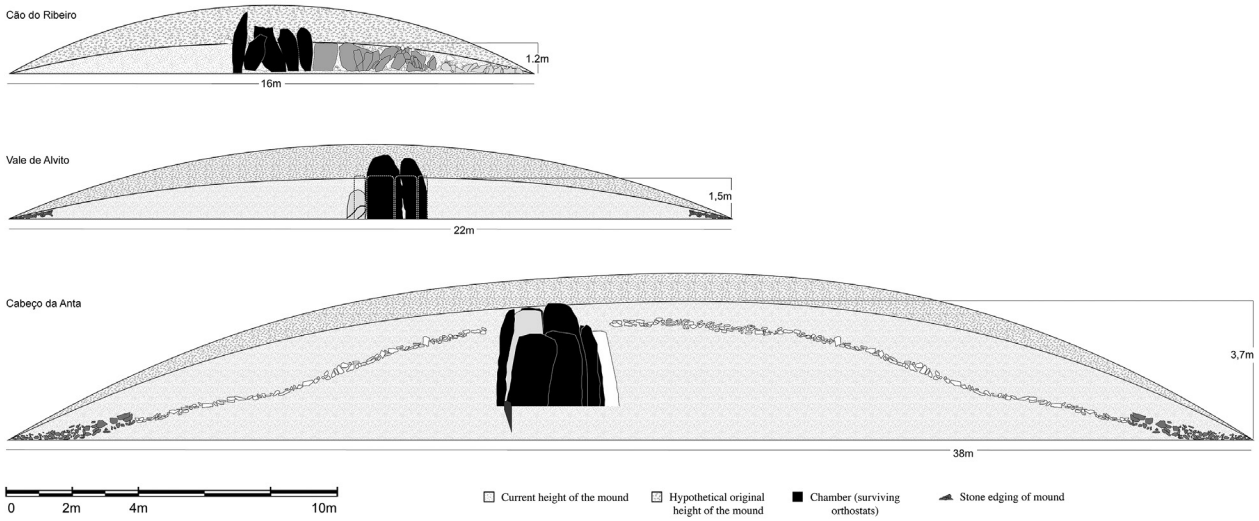

Figure 3.22. Dimensions of Cão do Ribeiro (excavated in 2012), Cimo do Vale de Alvito (excavated in 2015) and Cabeço da Anta (excavated in 2018) showing the relationship between the current height and the estimated original height of each mound. The orthostatic structures investigated up to 2018 are indicated schematically

(385 m) and the smallest (Cão do Ribeiro) situated in a less-elevated spot (368 m), with Cimo do Vale do Alvito placed at an intermediate height (370 m) close to Cão do Ribeiro. A direct correlation between the size of the burial mounds and their topographic prominence can hence be observed. Despite the differences in scale, all of them appear to follow the same structural model, characterised by orthostatic structures (chamber and corridor), with uprights and capstones consisting of metasedimentary rocks of local origin. Clay is the predominant material used for the mounds, while quartz of vein origin is almost completely absent.

Study of these three burial mounds is at different stages of development and it is not yet possible to establish relationships and comparisons between them. Fieldwork has been completed at Cão do Ribeiro but will continue for the next few years at Cimo do Vale de Alvito and Cabeço da Anta. We have, therefore, an incomplete understanding of the group as a whole, especially with regard to the ritual practices at the two monuments currently under investigation. Excavation at Cão do Ribeiro revealed a small chamber made of seven slabs, associated with a medium-sized orthostatic passage roofed by capstones, an unroofed outer passage leading from the edge of the mound within which a ritual structure, flat and formed by pebbles, was found. The excavation also provided useful information about funerary rituals, evidenced by the positioning of a varied set of lithic and ceramic artefacts still under study (Figure 3.23). According to the Leisners, only two slabs from the burial chamber at Cimo do Vale de Alvito survived in what was otherwise a well-preserved mound (Leisner 1998). The excavation has now revealed, however, that the chamber originally consisted of eight stone slabs. It has also allowed the identification of a passage adjacent to the chamber, as yet unexcavated. At Cabeço da Anta, several annual campaigns revealed a funerary chamber of nine slabs, one of which had fractured and fallen inside the chamber, and a closing stone between the chamber and a passage that has not yet been exposed. One of the slabs of the Cabeço da Anta chamber is made of quartzite; its distant origin indicates a symbolic, non-functional motivation. These monuments, like all of the other burial mounds identified in the ICBB (Caninas 2012), show no evidence of a monolithic capstone to roof the funerary chamber.

Throughout this investigation, we have been guided by questions and objectives related to identifying the architecture, the constructional techniques and the origin of the building materials, the chronology of their use, the rituals and symbolic meanings involved, and the integration of these monuments within their local and regional setting. We are particularly interested in the chronological relationship between the three burial mounds and the detailed chronology of their use. To resolve these issues, absolute dates for the initial construction phases will be required, and for any structural modifications (such as are documented at Cabeço da Anta), as well as for phases of ritual or funerary use. It may be possible to determine the chronology of construction through the OSL dating of cobbles used in the foundations of the orthostatic structures, independently of dates for episodes of use derived from charcoal and pottery samples.

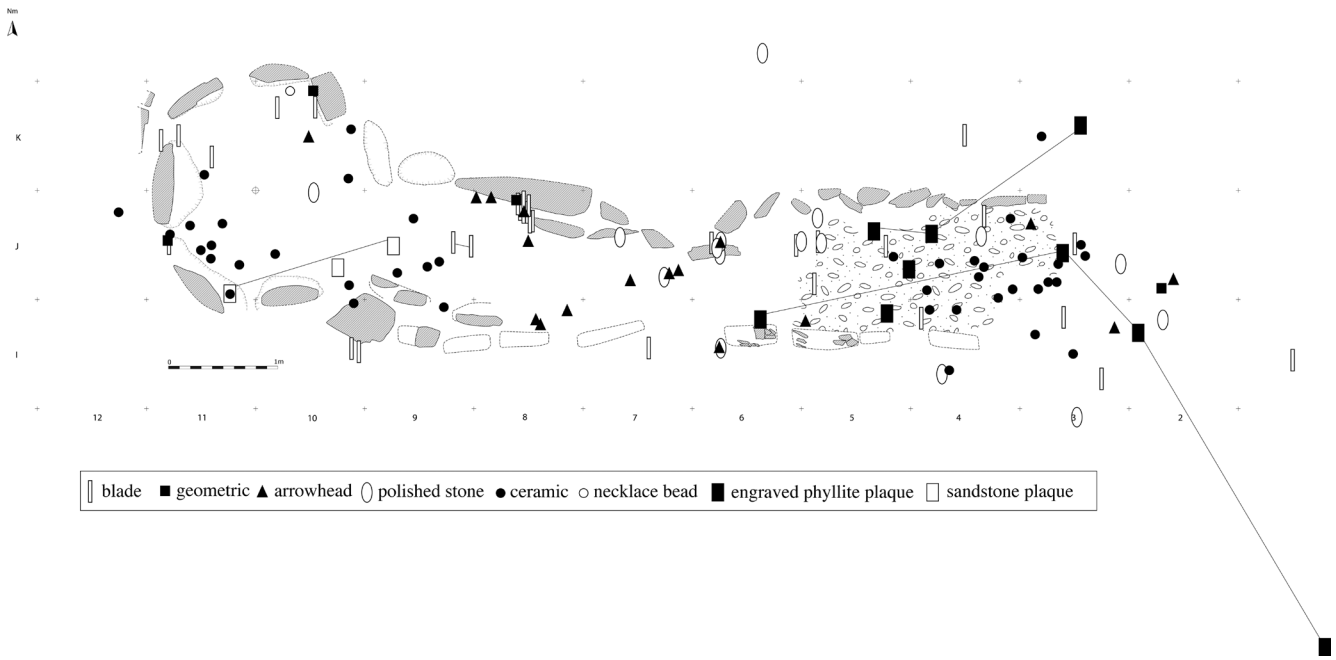

Figure 3.23. Cão do Ribeiro: final plan with distribution of artefacts

Another important objective of this study is to understand the funerary rituals involving primary and secondary depositions. The possibilities for identifying patterns in this particular set of mounds are fundamentally limited by the preservation of material and organic remains, most specifically human remains. In this region, the best conditions for the preservation of remains are found in the horizontal access structures (passages) rather than the chambers, which have tended to suffer more disturbance from later human action. At the Cão do Ribeiro burial mound, now reconstructed and consolidated, the fill of the chamber was very disturbed, but *in situ* deposits were preserved in the covered part of the passage and partially in the unroofed outer passage (Figure 3.23). For example, the presence of fragments of symbolic artefacts (engraved phyllite plaques) in the unroofed outer passage, on a ritual pavement, suggests these were secondary deposits, placed possibly during the removal of primary deposits from the chamber. The passages and atria of Cimo do Vale de Alvito and Cabeço da Anta are sealed and apparently well preserved, and they await excavation. On the other hand, the excavation of the funerary chamber of Cabeço da Anta, which started six years ago, has not yet reached the level of the funerary deposits, and has therefore provided only a limited quantity of votive artefacts. The prevalence of acidic soils, however, precluded the preservation of human remains in the funerary chambers that have already been excavated (Cão do Ribeiro and Cimo do Vale de Alvito), thus denying the possibility of understanding the ritual behaviour inherent in their manipulation. The absence of preserved human remains also eliminated any opportunity for sampling such remains to acquire absolute dates for the use of these tombs.

Another objective is to determine the degree of economic development shown by the groups that built these tombs, in terms of agro-pastoral production, and the consequent pattern of settlement in the surrounding territory. We assume that Neolithic occupation was widespread, although we do not have evidence for specific settlement sites. This is a common problem in landscapes without Cenozoic sedimentary cover. One hypothesis we are considering is that prehistoric settlement sites might coincide with the modern villages that occupy the plateau where the prehistoric burial mounds are found.

A further intriguing avenue for future research is provided by the presence, in two of the three mounds under study, of engravings on the surfaces of orthostats. The typologies of these engravings raise the possibility of connections between these monuments and the rock art complex on the banks of the Tagus and its main tributaries, such as the Ocreza river, which marks the eastern border of the territory of Proença-a-Nova. The identification of engravings and paintings within megalithic tombs, and their relationship to similar motifs in rock shelters or external settings, has been documented with great success by Spanish researchers in the nearby region of Alcántara (Bueno Ramírez *et al*. 2008a). The schistose cleavage structure of the metasedimentary rocks used in these megalithic tombs tends to deteriorate by exfoliation

from the outer surfaces, and this may explain, but only partially, the absence of similar features in almost all of the monuments identified in Beira Baixa. By contrast, specific factors appear to have contributed to the preservation of the engravings at Cabeço da Anta and Cimo do Vale de Alvito, such as the greater resistance of the stone types used in Proença-a-Nova (metagreywackes and quartzite). The engravings on these two monuments are the subject of ongoing research and will be published elsewhere, but they pose important questions about the relationship that might have existed between Cabeço da Anta and the Tagus Valley rock art complex.

Final remarks

The ongoing nature of our study means the results presented here are preliminary in character. A substantial amount of information has still to be acquired about the two burial mounds currently under investigation and we are awaiting the results of studies carried out on specific features already revealed by the excavations. Excavation data have also been made available to students of archaeology and archaeosciences for use in academic theses at different levels. The slow pace of this research by the Proença-a-Nova International Archaeological Field Camp has been intentionally conditioned by a strategy that values the participation of volunteers (for the purpose of practical and theoretical education), the involvement of the local community, and a commitment to engage with the socio-economic development network of Proença-a-Nova.

The study and appreciation of Proença-a-Nova's archaeological heritage, including tombs and other types of sites, is the result of the investment and technical monitoring provided by the municipality. We express our gratitude to the presidents of the municipal executives that made it possible, respectively João Paulo Catarino and João Lobo, and the municipal technicians, Isabel Gaspar and António Sequeira.

A final acknowledgement is due to Ana Carmona (Associação de Estudos do Alto Tejo) for translating this text into the language of Shakespeare.