Skeletons in the ditch: funerary activity in ditched enclosures of Porto Torrão (Ferreira do Alentejo, Beja)

Filipa Rodrigues
Bolsa de Doutoramento
Crivarque Lda., Universidade do Algarve, Portugal
1 | Location
2 | Geomorphology
3 | History of the discoveries
4 | Enclosed area: Vale do Ouro Stream left bank
5 | 3 East Sector double ditch system
6 | Skeletons in the ditch
   6.1. The context
   6.2. The interpretation: questions and doubts
7 | Funerary activity in Porto Torrão ditched enclosures
The Porto Torrão archaeological complex is situated in Ferreira do Alentejo, near the city of Beja.

(38°04’ 28.03” N; 8°07’35.80” W)
Porto Torrão: Geomorphology

Alentejo Lowlands

West: Sado hydrographic basin
South: Serra do Caldeirão
North: Serra de Portel
East: Serra de Barrancos
Porto Torrão: Geomorphology

Alentejo lowlands = “Superfície de Beja”

- perfect flattening, with scarce residual relief
- average altitude = 80 – 180m

Courtesy of EDIA, SA
1) Drainage system poorly developed
2) Small number of temporary and permanent watercourses
3) Main permanent watercourses: *Canhestro*, *Capela* and *Vale do Ouro*

Cuts the archaeological site
**Porto Torrão:**

**History of the discoveries**

- Layer 3: pre-Bell Beaker (3035 – 2650 cal BC)
- Layer 1: Bell Beaker Period (3335 – 2800 cal BC)

**Quadro 1 - Datas de Radiocarbono**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ref.lab.</th>
<th>Ref.amostra</th>
<th>Tipo</th>
<th>Δ13C (‰)</th>
<th>Idade (BP)</th>
<th>Data calib.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ICEN-38</td>
<td>PTR/82-IB2</td>
<td>Ossos</td>
<td>-22,51</td>
<td>4020±110</td>
<td>2885-2310 cal. AC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICEN-55</td>
<td>PTR/82-IB3-A</td>
<td>Ossos</td>
<td>-19,93</td>
<td>4290±50</td>
<td>3335-2800 cal. AC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICEN-56</td>
<td>PTR/82-IB3-B</td>
<td>Ossos</td>
<td>-20,31</td>
<td>4300±80</td>
<td>3350-2660 cal. AC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICEN-60</td>
<td>PTR/82-IB1-B</td>
<td>Ossos</td>
<td>-20,36</td>
<td>4200±70</td>
<td>3020-2645 cal. AC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICEN-61</td>
<td>PTR/82-IB1-A</td>
<td>Ossos</td>
<td>-17,34</td>
<td>4230±60</td>
<td>3045-2655 cal. AC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Arnaud, 1993)
Porto Torrão: History of the discoveries

Ditch 1 = Late Neolithic
Ditch 2 = Chalcolithic/ Bell Beaker Period

2003 rescue excavation (Valera and Filipe, 2004)

Legend
- Early 1980’s (Arnaud, 1982, 1993)
Porto Torrão: History of the discoveries

Porto Torrão archaeological complex

Legend
- 2009-2010 EDIA Rescue Excavation (Crivarque, Neoépica, Archeoestudos, Era, Styx)
- Early 1980’s (Arnaud, 1982, 1993)
- Enclosed area

Porto Torrão: Courtesy of EDIA, SA
70 ha
500 ha

Monte do Carrascal
Monte do Pombal
Horta João da Moura
Monte do Cardim

INTERNATIONAL MEETING
RECENT PRE-HISTORY ENCLOSUERES /FUNERARY PRACTICES

crivarque
Porto Torrão: Enclosed area: Vale do Ouro Stream left bank

Small tunnels which interconnect both ditches. Opened simultaneously, in order to fulfill a common purpose.
Porto Torrão: Sector 3 East double ditch system
Porto Torrão: Sector 3 East double ditch system – outer ditch

- Ditch refill
- Structure
- Ditch reopening
- Colluvium
- Circulation of water? (laminated sediments)
- Phreatic level
Porto Torrão:
Sector 3 East double ditch system – outer ditch
Sedimentation process with a complex stratigraphic sequence, which features different structures and occupation levels, within successive and intercalated deposits of both anthropogenic and natural origin.

Thus, the filling process of such a structure can have different dynamics and probably different meanings, all within the same chronocultural stage.
Porto Torrão: Stratigraphic sequence of the inner ditch
Porto Torrão: Stratigraphic sequence of the inner ditch

- Parallel positive structure built in the center of the ditch
- Partially truncated by a soil profile which provided the few Bell Beaker pottery fragments recovered in this area
Porto Torrão: Stratigraphic sequence of the inner ditch

Occupation Level 2

[32043]
Porto Torrão: Stratigraphic sequence of the inner ditch

Occupation Level 2

- 2 different types of combustion structures:
  
a) Paved surface of irregular morphology, composed of rock fragments;
  
b) Circular structure, molded into the sediment itself
Porto Torrão:
Stratigraphic sequence of the inner ditch

A large number of sherds were recovered around these combustion structures, along with lithics (including knapping area) and a faunal assemblage, featuring mammals and a less amount of malachological remains.

Organized distribution patterns were identified:

a) Degree of preservation of the remains suggests a rapid sedimentation process;

a) Few post-depositional processes would have altered the original position of the finds.
Porto Torrão:
Stratigraphic sequence of the inner ditch

Waste Dump Area
[32021]
Waste Dump Area
159 animal bones and bone fragments were recovered and tree-dimensionally piece-plotted, in a rather restricted area;

- Ecofacts on the central axis of the ditch, even if the structure is some 6m wide at this depth;

The arrangement and preservation of these elements indicates a moment of rapid sediment deposition, a hypothesis supported by the horizontality of this sedimentary unit, along with the horizontality and spatial distribution of the ecofacts.
Porto Torrão: 
Stratigraphic sequence of the inner ditch

Occupation Level 1
[32044]
Porto Torrão:
Stratigraphic sequence of the inner ditch

Occupation Level 1

Pit-hearth set upon the top of 1m thick colluvial deposit
Porto Torrão:
Stratigraphic sequence of the inner ditch

Anthropic deposit
[32067]
Porto Torrão: Stratigraphic sequence of the inner ditch

- deposit similar to the bedrock, which in this area is a soft rock, locally known as “caliço” for its similarities with lime;
- deposit stops abruptly near the interfaces of the ditch;
- Formation of the deposit clearly anthropic and shows signs of fire exposure (reddening).
- 3.50m deep;
- Thickness less than 1m;
- Excavation area = no more than 7m².
Porto Torrão: Skeletons in the ditch

- Parts of human skeletons mixed with faunal remains, sherds and stones;
- Human bones formed disorganized heaps and bore evidence suggestive of defleshing.
Porto Torrão: Skeletons in the ditch
Porto Torrão: Skeletons in the ditch
Porto Torrão: Skeletons in the ditch

Skeletal Part Representation (by age groups)

Minimum Number of Individuals sorted by age group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MNI</th>
<th>Subadult</th>
<th>Young Adult</th>
<th>Adult</th>
<th>Indeterminable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sexing of the remains has not been possible

(Orte, 2010)

Age (years) of Subadult individuals

- 4 yrs. + 12 mo. to 6 yrs. ± 24 mo.
- 7 yrs. ± 24 mo.
- 10 yrs. ± 30 mo.
Spacial distribution of the remains (by age groups)
Interpretation? **More questions and doubts than answers and certainties...**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Doubts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dump?</td>
<td>Why do we have human bones in anatomical connection?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emptying a funerary area?</td>
<td>If so, why are there more faunal remains than human bones?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannibalism?</td>
<td>Cut marks or any other form of forceful dismemberment were not visible to the naked eye</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Problem:** high fragmentation degree of the collection in addition to the fact that most bones are missing the extremities

**MAIN QUESTION:**

**Is this a primary or a secondary deposition?**
Funerary activity in ditched enclosures of Porto Torrão

Legend
- Inner ditch 3 East Sector
- Hypogea_Tholoi
- Tholoi
- Tholos
- Burial pit
- Enclosed area

Courtesy of Neoépica
Valera, 2010
Funerary activity in ditched enclosures of Porto Torrão

Problem: absent radiometric dating of each context

Variety of funerary activities

Inside enclosed area
- Burial Pit
- Individual or Double
- Non-Megalithic

Outside enclosed area
- Hypogea
- Tholoi
- Collective
- Non-Megalithic
- Megalithic

Inner Ditch 3 East Sector
### Funerary activity in ditched enclosures of Porto Torrão

#### Relative dating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Late Neolithic</th>
<th>Copper Age</th>
<th>Bell Beaker Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sector 1 and 3 West</td>
<td>Pit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sector 1</td>
<td>Pit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sector 3 West</td>
<td>Pit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sector 3 East</td>
<td>Ditch</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monte do Cardim</td>
<td>Tholos</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horta do João da Moura</td>
<td>Tholoi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monte do Carrascal</td>
<td>Hypogea</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monte do Pombal</td>
<td>Tholos</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Inner ditch of Sector 3 East: 3rd millenium BC (possibly second quarter);
- Ditch burials: Chalcolithic; Bell Beaker Period;
- Collective funerary monuments: different phases of the monument’s use extending from the end of the 4th millenium until the beginning of the Bell Beaker period.
### Funerary activity in ditched enclosures of Porto Torrão

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector/ Site</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Indeterminable</th>
<th>MNI</th>
<th>Excavation</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sector 1 e 3 West</td>
<td>Inside</td>
<td>Pit</td>
<td>1 -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>1 - 1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Neoépica (2011) – Final Report, copy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sector 1</td>
<td>Inside</td>
<td>Pit</td>
<td>1 -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- - -</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Neoépica (2011) – Final Report, copy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sector 3 West</td>
<td>Inside</td>
<td>Pit</td>
<td>2 -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>1 2 1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Archeoestudos (2009) – Final Report, copy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sector 3 East</td>
<td>Border</td>
<td>Ditch</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>2 - 3 1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monte do Cardim</td>
<td>Outside</td>
<td>Tholos</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>1 - 1 7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Era, Arqueologia (2009) – Final Report, Copy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monte do Pombal</td>
<td>Outside</td>
<td>Tholos</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>- -</td>
<td>6 1 2 -</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>Era, Arqueologia (2009) – Final Report, Copy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>34 1</td>
<td>12 2</td>
<td>96 7 48 38</td>
<td>238</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Identified but not excavated structures:
- Horta do João da Moura – 3 Tholoi
- Monte do Carrascal – at least 2 Hypogea and 1 Tholos

### Sexual Diagnosis
- **Female**: 79%
- **Male**: 15%
- **Indeterminable**: 6%

### Age Groups
- **Adult**: 60%
- **Young Adult**: 20%
- **Subadult**: 16%
- **Indeterminable**: 4%
Despite the human remains appear throughout the entire archaeological complex, there is a clear prevalence of this type of context outside the enclosed area.

And that is compatible with the notion of a relatively well bounded necropolis.

Without absolute datings a social reading might be risky, however:

- if synchronic, it’s possible to admit a social differentiation;
- if diachronic, the hypothesis of a cultural change can be drawn.
All these empirical data are compatible with the idea that ditched enclosures have acted as aggregation sites in a specific territory, where phenomena of social differentiation necessarily occurred, regardless of the subsystem that sets off that differentiation (economic, political, symbolic).

And the different solutions/ funerary activities already known also demonstrate a culturally diversified society.
António Valera, NIA Era Arqueologia
Edia, SA
António Faustino de Carvalho
Neoépica
Pedro Souto
Armando Lucena
Isaura Duarte

CRIVARQUE team:
Gonçalo Lopes
Marco Andrade
Paulo Godinho
Daniel Silva
Joaquim Pinhão
Cátia Silva

Anthropologist: Iris Naire Otte