

# Walking in a Way: Some conclusions of the recent Pré-history in Alto Ribatejo region

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## ABSTRACT

*The present study bases on data collected from a set of megalithic sites, which are grouped in a quite small space and apparently isolated from other archaeological remains of the kind. With aid of the Geographical Information System, three key concepts have been obtained: Landscape, Perception and Action to express the relationship between the scenery – the stage of human actions; the concepts – man's conception of his own surroundings and practices – real actions carried out.*

*The methodology used was based upon recent technology enabling the digital reconstruction of the site in lab as well as treatment and analysis of the data available (Figueiredo, 2006).*

## INTRODUCTION

The monuments described in this paper are located in map number 287 “Alvaiázere” on Mesozoic limestone lands (Cunha, L., 1990), in a depression between Nabão and Zêzere rivers, northeast of S. Saturnino and Vale de Rodrigo and south of Serra de Alvaiázere (Cunha, L., 1990).

In this region, we found conglomerates, sandstone, limestone, dolomite limestone, marl limestone and marls from the Cretaceous and Jurassic periods, as well as the red sandstone from Triassic. Also to the east, we observed some patches from the Pre-cambrian period (Lithological map, Atlas of Portugal, 1:1000 000).

However, the lack of a more accurate geological map and of more precise limit descriptions didn't allow us to recognize a clear boundary among these formations. To the left of Alvaiázere (North-south bound) there is a limestone mountain range where Dogger strata can be found (Romariz, C. *et al.*, 1987). This lowers down southbound up to the Nabão River, which lies to the west. The monuments are located in a plain with a class 2 slope, between 4% and 8%, between Nabão and Zêzere rivers (Topographic map, Atlas of Portugal, 1:1000 000). The implementation zone is around 200 and 230m high. At this level, there is a small creek (Rego da Murta), which used to be much larger in prehistoric times. The monuments are located on the left banks of this creek, which is a tributary of the Nabão River and which might have been used as a passage to this region.

Around these monuments a set of small steep hills can be observed where archaeological remains with similar characteristics have been found (Figueiredo, 2006). Up to the 90's, this area was perceived as belonging to a different “world” other than the neighbouring areas. It was associated with funerary practices almost exclusively related to burials in caves.

Based on data proceeding from these stations chronostratigraphies were built as if two different traditions were at stake, one proceeding from the *cardial* (Alto Nabão) and the other one from the use of macrolithics (called Langdocense) (Tagus and Zêzere) (Oosterbeek, 1994a).

Only in the late nineties, previous models could be reviewed with basis on the new data collected as a result of the discovery of Olas menhir (Tomar) the dolmen I and II of Rego da Murta (Alvaiázere) (fig. 1 and 2) as well as the results of research by TEMPOAR – Territory, Peopling and Mobility in Alto Ribatejo (Oosterbeek *et al.*, 2003).

The use of Geographic Information Systems allowed us to register a set of practices that match, both in terms of artifactual disposal and rituals performed, with cave sites located in the surroundings, contradicting the models presented before for the prehistory of this region.

## PARALLELS AND CONNECTIONS BETWEEN MEGALITHIC MONUMENTS

The spatial study of Rego da Murta monuments (Figueiredo, 2005; 2006) and the artifact collection registered allowed the establishment of a contextual relationship with the rituals performed in those caves.

The different monuments that constitute the Rego da Murta area would made part of this site which, over time (as for other sites) has been structured and associated with symbolic mechanisms that might have been inherited from their ancestors (Bradley, 1998a: 20; 2005). These mechanisms evidence the beginnings of specific space architecture, which would eventually lead to the construction of artificial architectural elements that originally had a close relationship

with the surroundings. It was in such a complex place like the one we have inhabited – dwelling – in the words of Heidegger (Inwood, 2000; Ingold, 2000) for the last four years and which has been chosen by prehistoric populations to build these monuments, that we have observed an unquestionable relationship between the landscape, the site and each of the architectural structures observed and registered. In this sense, this transformation space seems to relate the different natural elements in the landscape with the constructed monuments, either by the addition dynamics (Figueiredo, 2005) or by the abandonment of acts and/or concepts. Besides, the construction of any new monument would correspond to an association with the occupation plan of the pre-existing monuments and probably with all ancestral mechanisms.

Connecting all data and comparing with portable objects registered in Dolmen I of Val da Laje (Oosterbeek, 1994a), in Dolmen of Foz do Rio Frio, in Nabão caves (Oosterbeek, 1987a and b; 1988; 1989; Zilhão, 1992; Cruz, 1997) and in surrounding stations and according to absolute datings obtained (Figueiredo, 2006), we can conclude that the first occupation of Dolmen I of Rego da Murta took place in a moment that matches with the time of depositions in Cadaval Cave and Ossos Cave. Furthermore, it seems that the first depositions of Dolmen I of Val da Laje belong to a time that is prior to this moment, and they are similar to layer C3 of Dolmen II of Rego da Murta, which has not been dated yet, but was included by us in Medium Neolithic. These datings are also consistent with the occupations registered in Nossa Sra da Lapa Cave and in Cadaval Cave (idem, 2006).

The consistency of Dolmen I of Rego da Murta with the two abovementioned caves is confirmed by the exhumed artifactual analogies including high-diameter (around 20 cm) ceramic vases, which are not common in megalithic monuments known in the region (Oosterbeek, 1994a), by the presence of containers with “almagre” remains, nipples and “denticulated” edges by digital pressure mostly found in Cadaval’s cave (Oosterbeek, 1985: 150-151), and the records of polished artifacts which, however, are most abundant in oldest layers of Dolmen II of Rego da Murta and in Dolmen I of Val da Laje.

As far as rituals are concerned, some similarities of the burials of the remains of Dolmen II of Rego da Murta with Ossos Cave can be observed. This cave has revealed as for the time of Dolmen II do Rego da Murta the presence of a set of successive bone layer depositions: a deeper layer containing lower limbs, an intermediate layer containing upper limbs and a surface layer containing skulls. Each of these was covered with several earth layers. The artifacts have been placed around the cave entrance (Cruz, A. e Oosterbeek, L. 1988).

The Dolmen II of Rego da Murta reveals bone stacks arranged in an apparently random way (fig.3), which were deposited in different regions of the dolmen, covered with earth and confined by small stone structures (fig. 4), which in early phases can be compared with remains of older occupations of Dolmen I of Val da Laje (Oosterbeek, 2004b) that were associated with a quite reduced set of artifacts, essentially composed by polished objects, halberds and vases with dotted marks, also registered in the caves. Artifacts were arranged next to these structures and in some cases integrated in the bone stacks (Figueiredo, 2004). Most skull fragments were identified in a first stratigraphic unit posterior to the deposition of stone structures themselves as though they were crowning the depositions (Figueiredo, 2004). Although the existence of primary burials may be admitted, bones would be gathered in bone stacks in a posterior phase, like in Ossos Cave (Cruz e Oosterbeek, 1988).

These same connections are evidenced by the type of architecture and in the relation with the other monuments. In the first point we may observe, either in caves, specially in Ossos Cave and in Rego da Murta monuments, as well as in Dolmen I of Val da Laje, a quite small access (about 1m wide), which went down due to the irregular level of the soil, being less than 1m high in the entrance, confirming what Oosterbeek (1994b: 145) called a veneration structure.

In the Ossos Cave that restriction seems to have been built by a set of “subsidence blocks”. In the second point, the several monuments seem to be arranged in nucleuses, keeping a close distance among each other. This can be found in dolmen I of Val da Laje, which is higher than the other dolmens that constitute the nucleus, the dolmens and menhirs of Rego da Murta (fig. 5), as well as in the Cadaval and Ossos Caves, being the remaining Nabão caves located 150m apart from those (idem, 1994b).

After the Calcolithic occupation phase of Dolmen II of Rego da Murta, which also took place in the Ossos Cave, the dolmen I of Rego da Murta was used, having the dolmen II been completely abandoned. Although there is no reference to dates, the several caves, including the one of Caldeirão (Zilhão, 1992), as well as Dolmen I of Val da Laje, evidence reoccupations which go as far as the Bronze Age. Analogies with streamlined vases, schist plaques and some adorns can also be found.

## CONCLUSIONS

The use of geographic information systems as well as other space analysis techniques allowed the detection of arrangement patterns, which would not be perceived to the naked eye or with other traditional mechanisms. This technical tool showed that the different sites (caves and dolmens) do not differ very much from each other presenting macrolithics in almost every marked depositions and a number of materials that evidence a certain cultural continuity. Adorns and ceramics, albeit specific prehistoric features, are also very similar in both places. The same happens with rituals where synchronic depositions of Ossos Cave and Dolmen II of Rego da Murta seem to follow the same pattern.

The process involved herein, although allowing social and economical conclusions to be drawn, seems to base upon an alteration of man-environment relationship in which man shifts towards himself and his relationship with his ancestors. Therefore we cannot ascertain that there is a "cave world" (Oosterbeek, 1994) in the Nabão valley or any cultural preference for a certain kind of ritual structure or a functional difference between both structures. In fact, a great architectural variety can be observed in Alto Ribatejo as well as a diverse burial pattern resulting from the various foreign contacts of the region during prehistoric times, with the temporal process in which depositions occurred and with the geomorphological constraints of landscape, which favoured the use of caves and other cavities and the construction of megalithic monuments without necessarily involving a socio-cultural division between the groups which used them.

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**FIGURES**

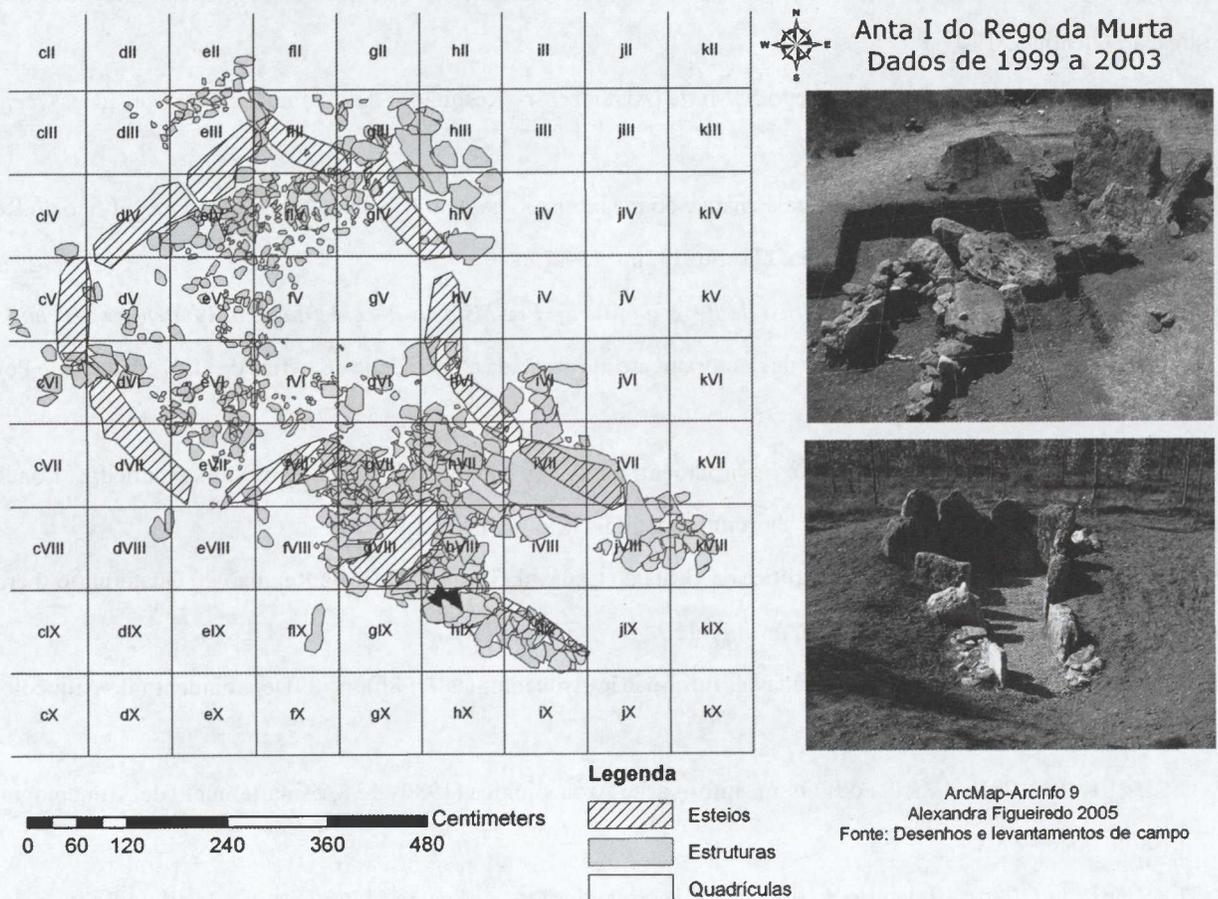
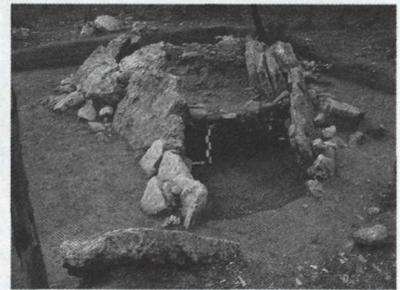
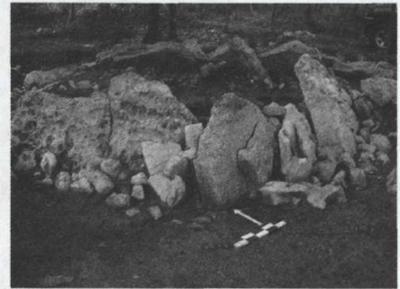
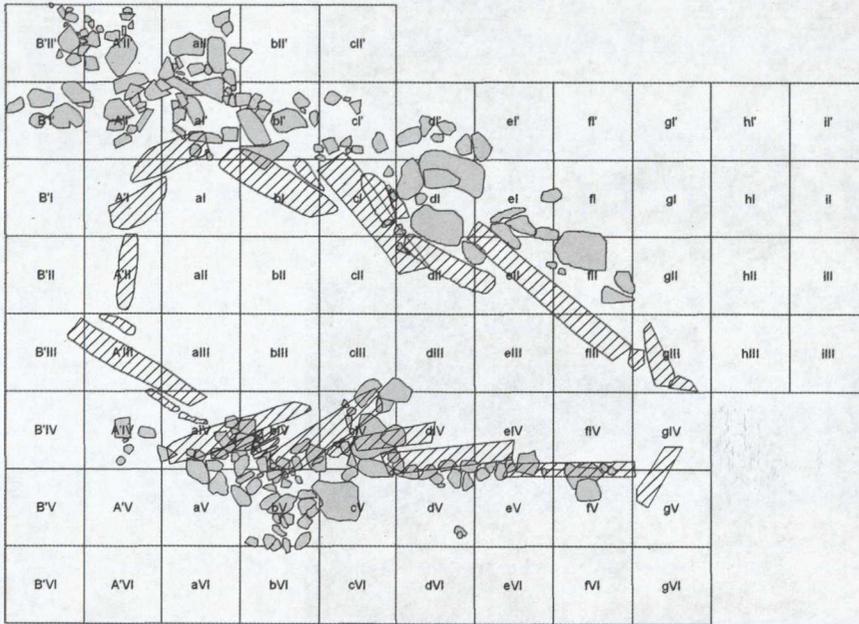


Figure 1 – Left: vectored image of Dolmen I of Rego da Murta including all registered structures and grid system. Right above: Two photographs of the monument taken during excavation work in 2003; down: after restoration in 2004.

Anta II do Rego da Murta  
Dados de 2003 a 2005



Projeção da escavação  
Anta II do Rego da Murta  
Quadrado 1:1 metro

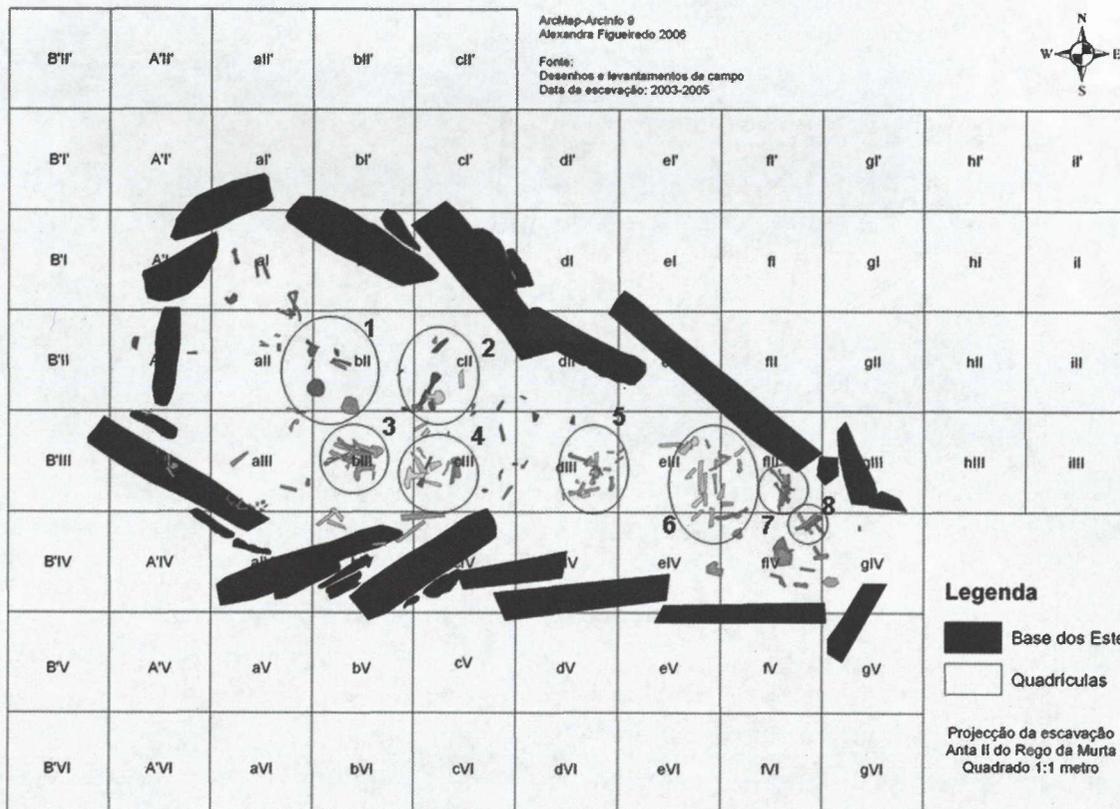
**Legenda**

- Base dos Esteios
- Quadrícula
- Contrafortagem

ArcMap-ArcInfo 9  
Alexandra Figueiredo 2006

Fonte:  
Desenhos e levantamentos de campo  
Data da escavação: 2003-2005

Figure 2 – Left: vectored image of Dolmen II of Rego da Murta showing buttresses and grid system. Right: Two photographs of the monument; above: Southeastern view during excavation in 2003; below: Eastern view in 2004.



ArcMap-ArcInfo 9  
Alexandra Figueiredo 2006

Fonte:  
Desenhos e levantamentos de campo  
Data da escavação: 2003-2005



**Legenda**

- Base dos Esteios
- Quadrículas

Projeção da escavação  
Anta II do Rego da Murta  
Quadrado 1:1 metro

Figure 3 – Vectored image with the bonés groups.



Figure 4 – Image of the sector of the group five where we see the structure that confined the bones.

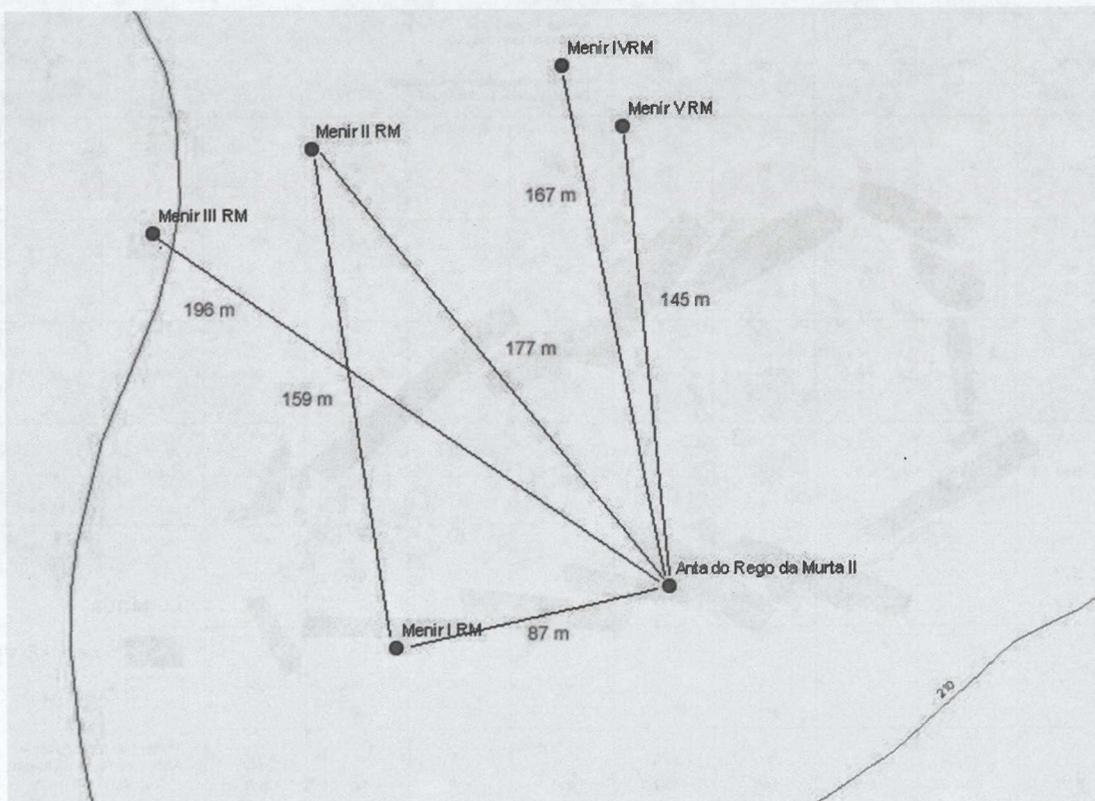


Figure 5 – Vectorized image of the location of the diferent monuments of Rego da Murta site.