

Social Inequality in Iberian Late Prehistory

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CHAPTER 1

Advances, problems and perspectives in the study of social inequality in Iberian Late Prehistory

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Abstract

This paper attempts a general assessment of the contributions included in this volume. We examine three main kinds of problems related to the research on social inequality in Iberian Late Prehistory. These are theoretical, empirical and interpretative. Among the first, we comment upon the very definition of social inequality, the taxonomical categories employed in social evolution, as well as the main factors causing inequality, with special attention to labour force mobilisation. Among the second, we highlight some weaknesses of the Iberian archaeological record for the investigation of the subject matter, such as the limitations of the absolute chronology or the settlement record. Finally, we discuss the propositions that have been put forward to understand the forms that social inequality took among Neolithic, Copper and Bronze Age communities, concluding that Iberian archaeologists would much benefit from a comparative perspective.

Key words: Social inequality; Neolithic; Copper Age; Bronze Age; Iberian Peninsula; Historiography; Archaeological Theory; Labour Mobilisation.

Resumen

En este trabajo realizamos una valoración general de las aportaciones incluidas en este volumen. Distinguimos y comentamos una serie de problemas relativos a la investigación de la desigualdad social en la Prehistoria Reciente peninsular. Estos son teóricos, empíricos e interpretativos. Entre los primeros, destacan la discusión del concepto mismo de desigualdad social, las categorías taxonómicas relativas a la evolución social y los factores que la causan, con especial atención a la movilización de la fuerza de trabajo. Entre los segundos, se discuten las principales debilidades del registro arqueológico ibérico para el estudio de este tema, por ejemplo limitaciones de la cronología absoluta y del registro de asentamientos. Finalmente, se valoran las diferentes propuestas en relación con las formas en que se expresó la desigualdad social entre las comunidades del Neolítico, la Edad del Cobre y del Bronce de Iberia, concluyendo que sería beneficioso para los arqueólogos ibéricos un enfoque más comparativo.

Palabras clave: Desigualdad Social; Neolítico; Edad del Cobre; Edad del Bronce; Península Ibérica; Historiografía; Teoría Arqueológica; Movilización de Fuerza de Trabajo.

1.1.- Introduction

This volume is the product of a one day Session organised as part of the IVth *Congresso de Arqueologia Peninsular*, held in Faro (Portugal, 14-19 September 2004). The aim of this meeting was to discuss the subject matter of prehistoric social inequality, a topic that had never before been at the centre of a session in an Iberian archaeology conference.

The geographic coordinates of the volume were already defined by the very title of the conference. Although from the onset our purpose was to embrace all of Iberia, the inevitable limitations on the availability of various colleagues have finally claimed their toll. Despite our interest, the resulting volume does not include contributions dealing specifically with regions like the Atlantic façade,

the North-west or the Balearic Islands. This makes the book slightly unbalanced, geography-wise, towards the South-eastern half of Iberia. However, this does not mean that the Western regions of Iberia are altogether absent from the discussion, as various chapters deal with them more or less specifically (*e.g.* Bueno & Balbín; Ontañón; García Sanjuán). In any case, the picture drawn by the twelve chapters is fairly representative of the geographical variability of the issue under discussion.

In chronological terms, all papers look at Late Prehistory. In Iberia this means the period encompassed between the second half of the Sixth and the beginning of the First millennia cal BC (Neolithic, Copper and Bronze Ages). The chronological framework is justified more on practical grounds, such as a limited availability of time for a one day Session, than on theoretical or thematic reasons.

Undoubtedly, it would have been of the greatest interest to examine the subject matter from the Upper Palaeolithic down to the pre-Roman Iron Age. We nevertheless chose to focus on Late Prehistory, in itself a coherent historical period, and therefore all papers deal with the first farming and metallurgical societies. Contributors were explicitly asked to use long chronological frameworks for their discussions. In the present state of knowledge, this is probably a wise approach to take, since the evidence often lacks enough detail or quality to examine variability within shorter periods of time.

From a thematic viewpoint, the authors of this volume tackle a wide series of issues. These include theoretical problems -like for example, applicability of social evolution taxonomies, centre-periphery relationships, or the sets of factors causing inequalities-, empirical problems -critical assessment of the validity of systems of empirical indicators, empirical testing of hypothesis, quality of the available data-, as well as interpretative problems -comparative inter-regional and diachronic analyses of the economic, social and ideological process involved in social inequality. The second and third sections of this chapter discuss further some of these issues, commenting on the attention and treatment they have received throughout this volume.

A volume such as this is in itself justified not only because of the intrinsic interest of the subject matter, but also because of the lack of a synthesis in English dealing with the entire Iberian Peninsula. The low presence of Iberia within global studies of European and Old World Prehistory has been a recurrent complaint -it could almost be said that a *historical* one- among Spanish and Portuguese colleagues. Of course, there is little doubt that this is partly due to the limited international impact that Iberian archaeological research has had in the past, mainly a consequence of its relatively low presence in English speaking journals. Within the last decade, the international impact of Iberian prehistoric research has improved thanks to initiatives such as the *Journal of Iberian Archaeology*, the increase in the pace of publication of syntheses and collective books in English (*cf.* Fernández Castro 1995; Lillios 1995; Cunliffe & Keay 1995; Díaz-Andreu & Keay 1997; Balmuth *et al.* 1997; Arnaiz *et al.* 2001; Chapman 2003), specialised subject monographs (Ramos Millán *et al.* 1991; Merideth 1998; Peña-Chocarro 1999; Forenbaher 1999; Rodríguez Díaz *et al.* 2001; Hunt Ortiz 2003; etc.) and a growing number of papers in international journals. However, there is still a long way to go. For many specialists both in Spain and Portugal, the practice of addressing research results to an international audience by means of their publication in English is still rather alien. Hence, this volume targets those scholars interested in both theoretical issues and Old World Archaeology, through the presentation of the current state of the art on prehistoric social inequality in Iberia.

The list of contributors suggests in itself the existence of a certain generation of scholars aware of the need to give Iberian Prehistory a wider international resonance. Although some contributors are senior academics, the majority are younger scholars that have developed their research careers well after the end of Franco's dictatorship. Trained by the first Spanish non-normative archaeologists, they have also had a more direct exposure to foreign research institutions and traditions. This is an aspect of the configuration of this volume that is worth assessing within its adequate historiographic context.

Despite some interesting precedents (*e.g.* Arribas 1968), the first studies specifically devoted to the subject of social complexity and inequality within Iberian Late Prehistory were published between the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s (Chapman 1978; 1982; Chapman *et al.* 1987; Gilman 1976; 1981; 1987a; 1987b; Gilman & Thornes 1985; Lull 1983; Lull & Estévez 1986; Mathers 1984a; 1984b; Ramos Millán 1981). These works had two fairly well defined features. First, their almost exclusive chrono-geographical focus was on the Copper and Bronze Ages (Los Millares and El Argar *cultures*) of the Spanish South-east, at that time the only area for which an extensive archaeological record was available. Secondly, the great influence that processual archaeology had on this line of research through the works of British and US scholars like A. Gilman, R. Chapman and C. Mathers. The process of consolidation of research on social complexity in the Late Prehistory of the Spanish South-east has already been sufficiently analysed from a theoretical and historiographical viewpoint (Martínez Navarrete 1989; Román 1996; Hernando 1999) and we shall therefore not dwell on it.

Over the last decade, several Portuguese and Spanish archaeologists have joined this line of work (*e.g.* Díaz Andreu 1991; Micó 1993; García Sanjuán 1999; Guerrero Ayuso 1999; Santos Gonçalves, 1999; Garrido-Pena 2000; Villoch 2000; Cámara 2001; Díaz-del-Río 2001; Nocete, 2001; Ontañón 2003). The interest on the subject matter of inequality has gradually expanded to other Iberian regions, where a more suitable archaeological record has been gradually built. As Garrido-Pena points out in Chapter 7, one of the main efforts made by specialists has consisted in the adaptation of theories and methods previously applied in the research of the Spanish South-east, to the newly recovered archaeological record of other Iberian regions. One of the aims of this book is precisely to reflect those efforts.

In general, contributors to this volume belong to the so-called second and third generations of Spanish post-normative archaeologists (Vicent 2001: xi). These scholars were the first ones to develop a theoretically oriented archaeology, no longer concerned with the critique of culture-history paradigms. Most of them develop processual arguments, occasionally informed by Marxian thought. Some have explicitly Marxist frameworks, while

others -the least- draw on certain postprocessual insights. The impact of non-Spanish archaeology in all of these perspectives can be traced through the most cited foreign authors: Robert Chapman, Antonio Gilman and Richard Harrison, the first three processual archaeologists to work on Iberian Prehistory.

Nevertheless, some discussion is now centred precisely on this theoretical perspective. Interestingly, the issues under discussion are not a direct result of the impact of postprocessualism (which in Spain has had comparatively little penetration) in the study of social inequality, but of the weight of some specific schools of Marxist thought in the current Iberian (especially Spanish) archaeological scene. The first, associated with the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, is known for its outstanding contribution to the current knowledge of the El Argar 'culture', among others. The second involves colleagues from the Universities of Granada, Jaén and Huelva that have published some important studies on Southeastern prehistory throughout the last decades. The reader will have a chance to decide whether their criticisms have a broader interest, beyond contemporary Spanish archaeological debates.

Altogether, a number of relevant theoretical, methodological and empirical issues emerge from the pages of this book. What follows is a preliminary attempt to evaluate them.

1.2.- Theoretical issues

As it often happens with very general (and debated) theoretical concepts, the notion of social inequality is not entirely straightforward – see for example Gilman 1995: 235. Not surprisingly, Raymond Williams *Keywords* (1983) and Tom Bottomore's *Dictionary of Marxist Thought* (2001) lack entries for "inequality" (although they do so for "equality"). An explicit definition is also absent in Price and Feinman's *Foundations of Social Inequality* (1995). In Chapter 2 of this volume, P. Castro Martínez and T. Escoriza Mateu provide an enlightening discussion of the problems attained in defining *inequality* (or need thereof), and some of its archaeological implications. As a human phenomenon, social inequality is sharply present in today's world, and therefore is bound to shape different approaches in one way or another. This is an epistemological issue that underlies much of the theories addressing human social inequality from Anthropology, Archaeology, or History.

It is commonly accepted that at an individual level all human beings are different (*unique, unequal*), mainly due to differences in biology, talent and ability. Suggesting a discussion of prehistoric social inequality in Iberia, our aim, however, was not to engage in a discussion on the irreducible individuality of human identity (or, for that matter, on the non-egalitarian nature of human individu-

als). Instead, our main aim was to discuss social forms of inequality that are specifically human and, furthermore, *why* have they only occurred within *certain* (and not among all) human societies (Anderson 1990: 187; Webster 1990: 346). This is obviously a formidable task that has been at the core of much discussion in political anthropology and prehistoric archaeology throughout most of the XXth century, and this book can only reflect some of the relevant issues involved.

Historically, social forms of inequality have been originated by socially and politically institutionalised mechanisms of economic exploitation. In their most extreme versions, these inequalities (entailing severe differences in the access to the resources and material means that sustain human life) cause, in those people at the lower statuses, serious life threats such as malnutrition, starvation, propensity to diseases, privation of freedom and other forms of mental and physical suffering. As M. Fried affirms "dangerous deprivation of individuals in non-stratified societies usually does not occur until there is a sharp reduction in the standard of living of all. All individuals physically capable of securing food can attempt to do so for there are no barriers between them and the basic resources (...) in stratified societies some members of the society face problems of subsistence different from those who enjoy direct access to basic resources..." (Fried, 1967: 188).

In our view, two elements must be mentioned as part of the notion of social inequality.

Firstly, economic exploitation may, in principle, occur in class and class-less societies. Individuals are exploited when they are forced to spend in production more time than the necessary to produce the goods they consume or when all or some of their productive output is exacted by others against their will. When producers produce their own consumption goods, the exploitation criteria would be to know if and how they also produce for the consumption of others (Elster 1986). Needless to say, this definition creates serious challenges for archaeologists.

In strongly socially-stratified societies, exploitation may cause individuals to be deprived of some of the basic elements that sustain life, hence making inequality insufferable. This leads us to the second element to be taken in to account, namely that human social inequality is a matter of degree: in some societies, inequalities are very mild and rather tolerable for those who suffer them, whereas in some other societies inequalities are brutal and cause extreme suffering to large numbers of people: "gentle, hidden exploitation is the form taken by man's exploitation of man whenever overt, brutal exploitation is impossible" (Bourdieu 1999: 192). Inequality and exploitation have also qualitative and quantitative aspects strongly related to the prevailing political conditions: social inequality has political, economic and ideological dimensions that are not necessarily coterminous (Price & Feinman 1995: 4).

As Castro and Escoriza suggest in Chapter 2 of this volume, we might just as well want to abandon the use of terms such as *equality-inequality*, favouring the *symmetry-asymmetry* dichotomy, and calling inequalities ‘social exploitation’. But when confronted with such concepts, we may also feel the need to categorise them. The above cited authors suggest their own terminology: ‘relative’, ‘partial’ and ‘extensive’ exploitation. Although welcome, these concepts may have both theoretical and operational problems when dealing with the archaeological record and may therefore be as open to criticisms as the term ‘inequality’ itself.

Whether we call them *inequalities* or *asymmetries*, the fact remains that there are and have been forms of extreme social inequality derived from economic exploitation, like slavery, serfdom, caste or class systems and that there is a need to understand the circumstances and factors under which some human societies have developed them while others have not. With such aim in mind, the investigation inevitably arrives to the inception (and early development) of agrarian societies, when options for differential surplus appropriation increased and, consequently, new options for social exploitation developed. The original accumulation of surplus is crucial to understand the origins of aggressive forms of social inequality: without surplus production there are no movements in the concentration and expression of power and no qualitative shifts in economic relationships (Haldon 1993: 46).

To prehistoric archaeology, this field of research poses great challenges. The present book reflects the variety of different solutions and sensitivities to deal with it. We could for example highlight the relative absence in most contributions of explicit discussions on the taxonomic categories widely applied within prehistoric archaeology by neo-evolutionary or Marxist traditions (*e.g.* bands, tribes, chiefdoms, states, or modes of production). These categories are present, but not subject to specific scrutiny regarding their contents, scope and limitations. Some of them were certainly discussed in-depth by Iberian archaeologists in the 1980’s: such was the case, for example, of the controversial notion of *chiefdom* (Ramos Millán 1981; Nocete 1984; González Wagner, 1990; Alcina Franch, 1990) or the Asiatic mode of production (Ruiz Rodríguez, 1978; Gómez Fuentes, 1985). Nowadays, however, the emphasis seems to have shifted towards the discussion of specific factors that motivated and embodied social inequality. These are, for instance, labour control and the monopolisation of the means of production (Díaz-del-Río 2004; Cámara & Molina in this volume), or forms of exploitation and inequality based on gender, to which little attention had been previously paid (Castro & Escoriza in this volume).

Another aspect worth highlighting is the pervasiveness of the current controversy regarding the extent and form of social inequalities among south Iberian Copper Age communities (*c.* 3300-2200 cal BC). There are two rather

opposed views on this matter. According to the first, Chalcolithic social formations were *tributary states* in which central settlements, the residence of the elites, controlled in an exploitative way the agrarian and metallurgical production of peripheral and dependent communities (Nocete, 1984; 2004; Arteaga 1993; 2001; Cámara & Molina this volume). Some of these authors regard the set of communities settled along the lower basin of the Guadalquivir river as a *civilisation* (Arteaga 2001). This somewhat problematic term, frequently used for empire-state social formations based on urban systems, is also occasionally applied in a much more general manner, almost as a synonym of *culture* (*e.g.* by some French prehistorians to Upper Palaeolithic hunters-gatherers). For the second view, these societies did not develop highly institutionalised forms of power and social inequality. Instead, they were organised on communal economic principles, with collective access to means of production and products, and presented undifferentiated funerary ideologies. They would be therefore best described as pre-state societies (Ramos Millán 1981; Gilman 1987a; 1987b; Chapman 1990; García Sanjuán 1999; Castro *et al.* this volume).

Similarly, there is ongoing discussion over the character of Early Bronze Age societies (*c.* 2200-1500 cal BC). For example, the south-eastern El Argar ‘culture’ is regularly described as tributary and stratified, a class society at a State level according to some Marxist views. This State would have been controlled by strongly militaristic elites. Some other authors, including one of us (PDR), disagree with this perspective (*e.g.* Gilman 1998; Vicent 1998). At present, the focus is also set on the extent and intensity of the interaction between such a seemingly pristine tributary state and its neighbouring communities, especially in terms of exchange, metallurgy and militaristic ideology (and practice).

Nevertheless, this controversy becomes less prominent in current research when one moves towards Central and Northern Iberia. Although some disagreements do exist over the scale of complexity, there seems to be a wide agreement that Copper Age societies experienced less sharp inequalities (*e.g.* Díaz-del-Río, Ontañón or Garrido-Pena in this volume). The debate turns in this case to the nature of inequalities in what have been defined as ‘middle-range societies’. The fact that this debate has frequently centred on the ‘State controversy’ can be misleading. Most prehistoric Iberian societies were far from being at the verge of statehood. The analysis of their social dynamics, and their material evidence, should be instructive when compared to the scale of complexity in the so-called states.

One key feature in the study of Iberian prehistoric social inequality is precisely the striking regional variations of social complexity. When observed from a comparative perspective, one of the emerging issues of this volume is the means by which labour force was mobilised and controlled throughout Late Prehistory. This is particularly

clear for the Copper Age, when regional variability in the archaeological record is most salient. The III millennium BC is assumed to comprise the consolidation of a village way of life (but see Márquez in this volume), and most of all, the first generalised horizon of non-funerary monumentalisation crosscutting Iberia.

The existence of powerful chiefs, elites, or dominant social classes is frequently suggested when interpreting this archaeological evidence. All Neolithic, Copper and Bronze Age Iberian societies abound in examples of monumental infrastructures, only achievable through the involvement of a significant amount of labour force. Some contributors consider this evidence as the result of a society that mobilises labour through coercion. They suggest two relatively simple pathways: direct violence, and the generalisation of dependency ties and obligations through debt. Both are conceivable, although not always easy to demonstrate with the currently available evidence. And when so, they are frequently difficult to generalise to all of southern Iberia. Furthermore, as several authors have pointed out, an unavoidable background question arises: why, when placed at the brink of economic exploitation, would producers not just vote with their feet, ostracise the chief or, when persisting, kill him? (Harris 1982: 120-121; Haas 1982: 175; Clastres 1987:116). In the context of the Copper Age, land did not seem to be a limiting factor: fissioned segments could have colonised available areas, reproducing themselves with limited but efficient investments. As suggested, an increase of inter-group conflict could have triggered aggregations, something plausible in some parts of southern Iberia, where fortified settlements arose simultaneously, somehow following a dynamic of *sympathetic explosion* (Díaz-del-Río 2004). However, these means of mobilising social labour are questionable for most of Iberia, where aggregations seem to have preceded any evidence of overt conflict.

In most cases, aggregation patterns result in the construction of monumental enclosures, but these potential centres lack close-by similar neighbours that could suggest inter-group conflict as the triggering cause. In fact, these sites incorporate a significant number of features that are difficult to understand from a defensive logic. As a result, some authors have suggested their role as *monumentalised spaces*. Although pertinent, the emerging debate over the function of enclosures may obscure what we understand as the key aspect in this whole process: the concentration and immobilisation of vast investments of labour.

Our frequent difficulty to argue for effective means of coercion would require exploring other more persuasive means of mobilising social labour. Many of them do not necessarily lack coercive qualities: religious forms are often kind with the believer, but implacable with the sceptical. Structural power, as defined by Eric Wolf (1999), may not be easily traceable in the archaeological record, but its potential should not be dismissed. Not

surprisingly, the majority of Late prehistoric materialised symbols come into play in Iberia precisely during the Copper Age, and their geographical concentration corresponds to those areas with largest enclosures. All this evidence disappears by the Bronze Age transition. It thus seems that certain ideologies were required to facilitate the *massing effect* (Sahlins 1961) of late prehistoric segmentary societies.

Nevertheless, many contributors do acknowledge the importance of analysing *tactical power*: the specific forms “used by individuals and groups to gain resources or advantages over others” (Wolf 1999: 290). Out of all, feasting is the preferred. Recent North American anthropological literature on the topic (e.g. Dietler & Hayden 2001) has been quickly assumed by many scholars. Different feasting mechanisms are used to explain a variety of archaeological cases. Work-feasts, competitive feasts, even potlatch, are mentioned when explaining enclosure building or bell beaker social dynamics.

These interpretations will probably mark future debates, and thus require some comments. The strength of feasting as a generalised explanatory argument depends on the strength of its archaeological evidence. As Hayden (2001: 35) notes, there is a wide range of feasts, all of which leave broad archaeological signatures. Nevertheless, although there are notable exceptions (e.g. Kelly 2001), impressive unambiguous evidence may not be that frequent. In order for feasting to become a powerful explanation, we should previously know what a feasting context would look like. For instance, and among others, a considerable amount of food remains and cooking utensils could be expected, somehow proportional to the amount of individuals gathered. This would be a good device when comparing regional evidence. Variability should inform us on the different effect of feasts as political economic mechanisms. Evidence may be in front of us, and must be highlighted. In the meantime, the use of feasting as a generalised argument can be an illuminating but misleading metaphor.

Altogether, a good deal of the debate concerning the social organisation of Iberian Copper and Bronze Age societies stems from openly diverging interpretations of the same archaeological evidence. The next section comments of the empirical problems posed by an archaeological record that is often fragmentary and ambiguous and to which highly demanding and complex questions are being increasingly asked.

1.3.- Empirical issues

Virtually all authors of this book formulate, at some point or another, a more or less bitter complaint about the limitations of the available archaeological evidence to tackle the study of social inequality. Four main reasons may account for those limitations.

First, for a long time Iberian archaeology had to devote vast efforts to build a chronological frame of reference in which to insert the events and attributes observable in the archaeological record. Until the extension of radiocarbon dating, that did not occur in Spain and Portugal until the late 1970's, the construction of a time frame by means of the formal study of well stratigraphically-documented artefacts (i.e. pottery typologies) was the main and most time-consuming challenge of Iberian prehistorians. This explains, for example, the stratigraphic approach followed in the excavation of a majority of settlements and, consequently, the remarkable scarcity of open-area recordings until the 1980's. Second, the study of wide segments of the archaeological record is a recent phenomenon. Within Iberian Culture-History archaeology, human, botanical or faunal remains were often considered of little or, at most, secondary epistemological value. Thirdly, although the 1980's was the period of the *awakening* of regional surveys and spatial archaeology in both Spain and Portugal (e.g. *Arqueología Espacial* 1984), the energy invested in these projects has often resulted in a relative void when it comes to current interpretations. This seems strange, considering that the analysis of politics is of key relevance to a reasonable understanding of socioeconomic relations in and between groups. Finally, Culture-History perspectives favoured the excavation and study of funerary sites. When confronted with the available evidence, one of the most limiting factors in the study of social inequality is precisely this frequent bias towards the funerary record, as the case of southern Iberia suggests (García Sanjuán 1999).

Yet, the archaeological study of social organisation in general, and of the social forms of inequality in particular, demands a wide and robust archaeological evidence capable of supporting empirical testing relative to multiple economic, social and ideological aspects. Prominent among these are variations in the accumulation of food resources and labour within and between communities, patterns of consumption, gender roles, hierarchical status of settlements, the ideological role of conspicuous consumption, or the accumulation of value in funerary spaces (both in architecture and artefacts).

Interestingly, and despite the limitations highlighted above, a common trait in several contributions of this book is precisely the use of settlement evidence. An excellent example of this can be found in Chapter 8, where Bernabeu, Molina, Díez and Orozco analyse differential labour investments in Neolithic ditch enclosures of the Spanish Levant. In fact, the last decade has witnessed the publication of an important series of monographs that account of extensive and multi-disciplinary research in a number of important Neolithic, Copper and Bronze Age settlements, like, to name but a few, Leceia (Cardoso 1994; 2003), Moncín (Harrison *et al.* 1994), El Castillo (Harrison *et al.* 1998), Gatas (Castro Martínez *et al.* 1999), Fuente Álamo (Schubart *et al.* 2000), Peñalosa (Contreras 2000) or Cabezo Juré (Nocete 2004). This is a

limited but promising evidence of the shift in the way future Iberian research will be carried out.

Undoubtedly, the publication of high quality research on single sites will produce increasingly sophisticated interpretations on the subject of social inequality. For the time being, it is not hard to perceive that the quality of data is rather limited. Although scholars may have highly structured research agendas and robust methodologies, empirical support must be obtained from fragmentary and ambiguous evidences. The currently available record calls for hypothesis building, but rarely allows conclusive testing. This conveys two risks that all contributions to this volume are likely to reflect in one way or another. The first involves the generation of interpretations that lack or have a poor connection between the theoretical formulation of the problem and the supporting data. The second is the temptation to perform disproportionate or openly biased evaluations. Narratives are easily built, but their strength depends on qualified support: often, the gap between hypothesis building and empirical support is too obvious to hide, and too many things have to be taken for granted.

It is quite tempting to apply theoretical models based on anthropological analogies to explain social inequality among prehistoric societies. They frequently create narratives that are coherent in themselves. However, archaeological explanations are not necessarily formulated in this manner. Anthropological and archaeological research carried out over the last century suggest the diversity of intervening causes, situations and trajectories of social inequality. They both call for historically rooted analyses. Theoretical frameworks have key importance introducing structure and rationality in the underlying research premises, but they are important insofar as they vertebrate hypotheses that can be empirically tested. If theoretical formulation is confounded with interpretation, then research becomes a hollow narrative. We should keep a *clinical* relationship with the data: precipitated or excessive interpretations of the data lead to the puddle of sterile discussion.

The imbalance between questions and theoretical formulations, on one hand, and the available information on the other, allows radically different interpretations on the same topics. This probably reflects the early, incipient, character of the archaeological research on this subject matter. It is, however, obvious, that a comparative project requires increased efforts towards high-quality analyses of the archaeological record at both regional and local scales.

Over the last 20 years Iberian Archaeology has learned the kind of empirical record required in order to discuss issues of social inequality. Iberia is a large, complex, and ecologically diverse region. Prehistoric societies, although not necessarily determined by environmental diversity, inevitably had to cope with it. Social and eco-

conomic processes, and their resulting archaeological record, were also diverse. Hence, this can be a key conclusion that any non-iberian reader could draw from the present book. Although this diversity of processes may seem obvious, it has not received proper attention in the context of Iberian archaeological practice: the comparative project put forward by North-American Anthropology has had few supporters in both Spanish and Portuguese archaeologies. Historical -and occasionally cultural-contingency dominates current interpretations, something not necessarily contradictory with a comparative archaeology. While regional studies have allowed an increasingly detailed understanding of local dynamics, comparative analyses beyond them have not been regularly practised. Fragments of past histories can be followed throughout the book, and their variability will come to forth, suggesting both striking regularities and indicative differences. Some contributors do take into account this variability, and their suggestions should have challenging effects in future research. As editors, we think that Iberian archaeology would benefit greatly from one such comparative project. It is true that in the current state of the research of prehistoric social inequality we probably have many more questions than answers. Nevertheless, we do have a rational and legitimate need for a scientific knowledge that can help us to understand such a potent and present human problem.

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