

THE SYMBOLISM OF POWER IN CENTRAL PORTUGAL LATE BRONZE AGE COMMUNITIES*

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ABSTRACT

The Portuguese “Beiras” constitute an almost unavoidable transit area between Portugal’s northern and south-central regions on one hand and the Spanish Northern Meseta on the other. Thus, in different historical moments (in the widest sense), it functions as a connecting plate between those regions, whose study is fundamental to the understanding of the inter-regional interaction and integration processes that are going on.

The work that has been done regionally during the last two decades allows us to debate some questions regarding the role of power symbolism in the origins and development of local Late Bronze Age communities (*Grupo Baiões/Santa Luzia*) and their interaction with contemporary “culture groups” from the surrounding areas as well as with the Atlantic and Mediterranean commerce networks of the late second and early first millennia BC.

We argue that the adoption and displaying of “foreign symbols of power” are some of the mechanisms responsible for the establishment and enforcing of local elites in an economic network that - we as well argue - is structured as a “wealth finance” system.

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RESUMO

Área quasi-obrigatória de trânsito entre a Meseta Espanhola e o Centro-Sul e Norte Portugueses, as Beiras constituem, em diferentes épocas, como que uma placa-giratória em torno à qual se articulam contactos e interações, para cujo estudo e compreensão o conhecimento dos processos locais se revela fundamental.

Partindo de resultados obtidos nos últimos vinte anos, discutimos o papel desempenhado pela “simbólica do poder” na origem e desenvolvimento das comunidades regionais do Bronze Final (*Grupo Baiões/Santa Luzia*) e suas inter-relações com os “grupos culturais” das áreas envolventes, bem como com as redes comerciais atlântica e mediterrânica, durante o final do segundo e princípios do primeiro milénios AC.

Defendemos que a adopção e ostentação de “símbolos exógenos de poder” constituem alguns dos mecanismos responsáveis pelo aparecimento e implantação de elites locais, no âmbito de um sistema económico que pensamos apoiado no controle da produção e circulação de “bens de prestígio” (*wealth finance*).

1. THE CENTRAL PORTUGAL LATE BRONZE AGE (THE BAIÕES/STA. LUZIA HORIZON). (SOME ARCHAEOLOGICAL FACTS)

We raised before (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1995a.) the question of why we don't have in the culture groups of the upper and middle Mondego basin, from the fourth to second millennium BC, with one possible exception¹, an evolutionary trajectory similar to the ones in the Portuguese Estremadura and Southwest and resulting in complex settlement systems.

We argued as the main explanation the lack of a local stable and reliable food source as the basis for staple finance, as in the Southwest, together with the lack of a rich and diversified agricultural economy that could support the emergence of wealth finance as in the Estremadura (GILMAN, 1987.). Actually, a small increase in social complexity eventually took place, mainly in the Late Copper Age and especially during the transition to the Bronze Age, as it is revealed by the appearance of beakers and metal artefacts (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1994b.) as well as the development

¹ For the problems concerning the *Castro de Santiago Facies* see: SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1989., 1994b. and 1995a.; VALERA, 1992., 1993. and 1994

of a system for volume measurement that arose in the Early/Middle Bronze Age (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1984. e 1993c.).

We suspect that the development of pastoralism with the advent of transhumance can be one of the economic factors behind such events together with a possible network of raw materials exchange (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1994e.). Nevertheless, the continued use of the collective megalithic necropoli during most of the second millennium surely indicates a conservative society.

Now we'll discuss the reasons we think are behind the profound changes in this *status quo* and that come into play by the last centuries of the second millennium BC and the first quarter of the first coinciding with the advent of the Late Bronze Age.

The main transformation suffered by Late Bronze age studies in Portugal during the last decade consists in a change of perspective from metal hoards to habitat sites, their material culture, economic indicators and spatial location. This being particularly true for the Northern half of the country (The Beiras, Minho and Trás-os-Montes).

In fact, the Late Bronze Age constitutes the first time in our study area (the upper and middle Mondego basin²) when we have some evidence for the development of a hierarchical settlement system with small central places, all of them with a dominant location and regularly spaced, and subsidiary sites in between (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1989a: 690-691 and figs. 3.3-3.4, 1994a.; SENNA-MARTINEZ & COELHO, 1994.; SENNA-MARTINEZ & NUNES, 1993.; SENNA-MARTINEZ, ROCHA & RAMOS, 1993.; SENNA-MARTINEZ, *et alii.*, 1993a. e 1993b.).

The radiocarbon dates from Cabeço do Crasto de S. Romão and from Castro de Santa Luzia (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1994a.; VAZ, in press.) allow us to say that at least some of the Late Bronze Age central settlements were already established in our study area, in the last two centuries of the second millennium BC. They occupied strong dominant positions, enabling them to visually control large parts of the region and/or important crossing points in the mountains and river systems (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1989: 644-645, 651 and 1994a.).

The emergence of individual burials - suggested by the findings of Fonte da Malga (KALB & HÖCK, 1979.) and Paranho (COELHO, 1925) together with the final abandonment of the megalithic necropoli³ - is a sure indication that changes are affecting the ideology as well.

² For a description of the regional geographical and geological conditions see SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1995a. .

³ Still in use during most of the second millennium BC (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1994e.).

All the main sites from this phase that have been excavated, besides their natural defensive positions, have dry stone walls that complement them (KALB, 1978.; SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1989a.; SENNA-MARTINEZ & COELHO, 1994.; SILVA, CORREIA & VAZ, 1984. and 1985.). The central settlements have areas between 1.5 and 0.5 hectares, while the smaller ones have less than 100 m² (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1994a: 216, Quadro-II). The houses inside these settlements seem to have been simple huts made of wood branches, sometimes with low wall foundations of dry stone. Fireplaces, either inside or outside them, frequently consist of a clay surface layered over a foundation of sherds and small stones. Loom weights on pebbles and the probable vertical loom structure found inside one hut at Cabeço do Crasto de S. Romão bear witness to textile production.

Pottery can be divided into two different production classes (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1993d.): Fine wares usually with stroke burnish finishing and sometimes decorated with engraved lines (which represent about 40% of the vessels found); and coarser wares that we think are mainly for cooking and storage, and are sometimes decorated on the rim by incision, nail or finger impressions (representing about 60% of the vessels found). It is important to stress the close identity of pottery production between the sites already analysed.

Some of the pottery types present as well as the continued use of sickle blades, groundstone adzes, and saddle querns seem to indicate the possibility of a continuity between this horizon and the local Early/Middle Bronze Age one, as the stratigraphy of the "Sala 20" of Buraco da Moura de S. Romão suggests (SENNA-MARTINEZ, *et alii.*, 1993a.).

Once again regionally there is strong evidence for renewed human impact on the environment, which the radiocarbon-dated pollen sequences from the peat bogs of Serra da Estrela allow us to situate as beginning about 1000-900 BC (KNAAP & JANSSEN, 1991.; KNAAP & VAN LEEUWEN, 1994.). Roughly speaking, this seems to show an intensification process with growing importance of cereal cultivation (probably mainly rye) together with transhumance. Nevertheless, the data from Cabeço do Crasto de S. Romão (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1989a: 200-204, 669, 1994a.) allow us to say that acorn (*Quercus sp. cf. robur*) gathering still represents, at least in some mountain sites, an important part of the subsistence and a probable useful dietary complement in others as we find at Senhora da Guia (SILVA, 1976.). This continuity of acorn utilisation as a food source is consistent with the classic tradition that attributes to the Lusitanians its use for bread making (Strabo, *De Geographia*, III,3,7 in: GARCÍA Y BELLIDO, 1978: 120) and that has been proved possible for the Iron Age galician *castros* (VÁZQUEZ VARELA, 1974-75.; OLIVEIRA, QUEIROGA & DINIS, 1991.). Thus, the available evidence for the local intensive use of acorns indicates a

duration of about two thousand three hundred years (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1994e.).

Data resulting from the study of animal bones coming from the Early/Middle Bronze Age occupation of Buraco da Moura de S. Romão shows that pastoralism⁴ was already well developed during this earlier phase (CARDOSO, SENNA-MARTINEZ & VALERA, in press.) correlating well with the information derived from pollen analysis and thus allowing us to extrapolate this information to the Late Bronze Age.

All of this means that the main subsistence elements present at the Late Bronze Age sites show a marked continuity to the ones we assume regionally for the antecedent Early/Middle Bronze Age (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1993b. and 1993c.).

The presence of moulds of bronze, clay and stone, together with slag fragments documents well the local production of tin bronze metal artefacts at the settlements of Senhora da Guia, Santa Luzia, Cabeço do Crasto de São Romão and Outeiro dos Castelos de Beijós. These attest to the local production of bifacial double looped palstaves, unifacial single looped ones, socketed spearheads and awls. To these types we can add, with some probability of their being locally made, the bronze *fibulae* and rings from S. Romão, Sta. Luzia, Senhora da Guia and Outeiro dos Castelos, as well as the bronze socketed sickles and the gold torques and bracelet from Senhora da Guia (GIL, *et alii.*, 1989; SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1994a.; SILVA, 1986: 165-229, 233; SILVA, SILVA & LOPES, 1984.; TEIXEIRA, 1940.).

The early (c. 1200-900 BC) coexistence of metal artefacts of "Atlantic origin" with *arco serpeggiante* and *codo fibulae* (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1995c.; CARREIRA, in press.), together with the equally early presence of iron blades, bears witness to the first pre-colonial contacts with the "Mediterranean sphere of commerce" (COFFYN & SION, 1993.; SENNA-MARTINEZ, in press b.).

2. METAL PRODUCTION AND SYMBOLIC POWER DISPLAY

The economic system that emerges from the analysis of the available data for the Late Bronze Age Baiões/Santa Luzia Group points to a society where the result of agricultural produce, pastoralism and wild fruits collecting (mainly acorns) is not enough by itself to support an economic growth capable to allow more than a small amount of wealth concentration and, accordingly, little social differentiation.

⁴ Which include predominantly *Ovis aries* but also with *Bos taurus* present.

The picture that emerges is one of a very conservative society in which change came through its integration into a larger economic system incorporating first the Atlantic and then the Oriental spheres of commerce.

The only new economic factor introduced with the beginning of the Late Bronze Age seems to be the valorization of local resources in tin and gold since the basic subsistence staples of the economy were already in place from earlier times⁵. Thus, it can be argued that the local gold and tin mining constituted the *raison d'être* of the trading relations. As suggested by the circulation and local production of the Atlantic bronze models that constitute the overwhelming majority of the metal artefacts in use.

The export route for the local products was probably the Lower Mondego's *ria*, through the sites of Santa Olaia and maybe Conímbriga. The somewhat later Phoenician presence there surely relates to the importance of those two sites as trading ports for the metals coming from inland (ROCHA, 1971.; ALARCÃO & PONTE, 1979.; ALARCÃO & ÉTIENNE, 1979.; CORREIA, 1993; PEREIRA, 1986. and 1990.).

The small dimensions of the central habitat sites⁶, the lack of differentiated house plans or equipment inside them⁷ which could attest to special social status, the general similarity of the sites, all converge to make us believe that they were nodes of fairly similar importance in a settlement system where none of them occupied a dominant place.

Nevertheless the exceptional quality of the bronzes from the "deposit" of Senhora da Guia (SILVA, SILVA & LOPES, 1984.) - namely the three cult-carts, the *furcula* or meat fork, the roasting spits and the seven hemispherical cups, with their possible cross-cultural connections (ALMAGRO-GORBEA, in press.) - points to the existence of a stratified social structure with elites capable of absorbing such prestige items (SILVA, 1990.).

The adoption and displaying of the "foreign symbols of power" (BRUMFIEL & EARLE, 1987: 3) introduced by the Atlantic and Oriental spheres of commerce would have been particularly important for the establishment and enforcing of these local elites.

Since flint sickle blades and groundstone tools continue to be widely used, and field data shows that, as far as we can tell, no agricultural

⁵ At least since the Calcolithic/Early Bronze Age transition (see SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1995c.).

⁶ With a population that would not exceed 500 people and probably was smaller (see discussion of methods of population calculus in VILAÇA, 1994: 592-596).

⁷ With the exception of bronze artefacts which, in the few cases that their context is known, seem to come from foundry areas or from hoards.

revolution can be correlated with the appearance of bronze implements, we think that most, if not all, of the metal artefacts present can be seen in this way. More than a direct influence in the production of subsistence the metal artefacts should be seen as “symbols of power” whose possession and display was crucial to the enforcement of the elites.

The elite members probably controlled the production and circulation of metals (tin and gold locally mined and copper probably imported) and metal artefacts as means to ensure their status and control through a system of “wealth finance”, as defined by Elizabeth Brumfiel and Timothy Earle (BRUMFIEL & EARLE, 1987: 6).

The concern with territory control, especially the natural routes, that we clearly detect in the location of the principal sites, is consistent with the necessity of the elites to control the goods circulation.

A very important symbolic practice (of Mediterranean origin) for the public display of the elite’s power would have been the ritual banquet or *symposium*. Besides the carts, meat forks and roasting spits from the site of Senhora da Guia de Baiões, the careful finishing and great variability - almost a personalization - of the small burnished drinking cups found in every known site bear witness to the early adoption of this practice. The bronze cups also found at Baiões constitute a more refined version of the earlier pottery ones.

The engraved decoration typical of the Baiões/Santa Luzia pottery (SILVA, 1978; SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1989. and 1993d.) is applied mainly to drinking cups and other vessels we suppose used for liquids’ manipulation. The inter-site variability of its motives seems to constitute an early case of “emblemic differentiation” (RENFREW, 1994: 163) thus eventually adding another element to the symbolic expression of status.

We suggested before (SENNAMARTINEZ, 1995a.) a model for the populations of the upper and middle Mondego basin, during the fourth to the second millennium BC, in which the development of social complexity was a slow process, principally because local resources only allowed a modest degree of intensification and interregional interaction.

We think that the transformation of this situation in the late second millennium BC is the result of the catalysing effect of the establishment of the Atlantic network of commerce. This acted over societies having already a well developed subsistence economy through the enhancement of the importance of the local mineral resources (in tin and gold). The local incipient elites were then able to use these resources to establish a system of wealth finance through the control of the production and circulation of metal and metal artefacts.

All the principal sites, through their control over space and circulation routes, would have to co-operate in order to assure that the circulation of

goods, people and transumante flocks flowed unimpeded. Thus, we think that their defences as well as the metal military equipment found do not mean a permanent state of war but constitute the means of an "armed peace" warranting the maintenance of the circulation mechanisms fundamental for the existence of the elites and the economy.

Such a structure of social regulation would make these communities very vulnerable to any change in the commerce networks that they depended on in order to maintain their system of wealth finance.

This is why we think the temporary collapse of the Mediterranean-Atlantic commerce in the middle sixth century BC is one of the reasons behind the collapse (at about that time) of the Late Bronze Age communities of Beira Alta and Beira Interior (SENNA-MARTINEZ, 1995c.; VILAÇA, 1994.)

While the temporary collapse of the maritime trade routes that sustained the social systems of the Portuguese Beiras will affect them beyond repair, other regions of the Iberian Peninsula with more developed economic and social systems will soon recover and see the first real urban settlements appear together with the first State formations. But it will take the Roman conquest for the interior regions of central Portugal to see the late and soon doomed rallying of the Lusitanian tribes.

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