

BURIAL PREHISTORIC CAVES IN THE INTERIOR BASIN OF RIVER TAGUS: THE COMPLEX AT CANALEJA GORGE (ROMANGORDO, CACERES, SPAIN)

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Abstract: During the last years we conducted an excavation project in two caves and a small shelter at Canaleja Gorge (Romangordo, Cáceres, Spain). Although the stratigraphy was not optimally preserved in all the caves, we could document three funerary spaces that comprise a long chronological sequence, from Early Neolithic to Chalcolithic. In this paper we discuss the relationship between burial caves and megaliths in the region, by considering a common social and cultural background for both kinds of sepultures.

Keywords: burial caves, Neolithic, Chalcolithic, megalithic sites

Resumen: Durante los últimos años hemos realizado excavaciones en dos cuevas y un pequeño abrigo de la Garganta Canaleja (Romangordo, Cáceres). Aunque la estratigrafía no estaba conservada en todos los contextos excavados, fue posible documentar tres espacios funerarios que comprenden una dilatada secuencia, desde el Neolítico Antiguo al Calcolítico. En este artículo, discutimos brevemente la relación entre las cuevas sepulcrales y los megalitos de la región, considerando que existe un trasfondo social y cultural común para ambos contextos.

Palabras clave: cuevas funerarias, Neolítico, Calcolítico, megalitismo

INTRODUCTION: MEGALITHIC SITES AND BURIAL CAVES

Up to the last two decades, the study of Late Prehistory in the interior basin of the River Tagus was linked to the study of megalithic architectures. One of the most remarkable advances within the last decade was the renewal of traditional approaches on megalithic sites focused on the wide diversity of formulae found at sepulchres (Bueno *et al.* 2008b), both regarding their construction techniques and typology (Bueno 2000: 73). The current exhaustive review of megalithic sites is also showing up the complexity behind the organisation of the prehistoric sites in this region. In fact, it has been widely admitted that, as well as a widely varied typology in Tagus megalithic necropolis, they are inserted in the landscape in multiple ways.

Thus, the heterogeneity documented in this regional context extends the possibilities of locating non-necessarily megalithic funerary designs. In this sense, the information on burial caves published in geographical areas next to the interior course of the River Tagus (such as the megalithic heritage in Alentejo or Beira regions) suggests that burials in natural caves may find their correspondence at the other side of the Spanish border. This would link funerary traditions in this area to those documented in the high Tagus basin (Jordá & Mestres 1999; Jiménez & Alcolea 2002).

However, the Extremadura stretch of the River Tagus renders scarce and uncertain data on burial caves in many cases or ambiguous chronologies set solely from surface materials or excavations at caves with dug-up sediments. In many cases, it was information collected from ancient

sources (Cerrillo & González 2007: 33) which lack enough archaeological base to contribute a more appropriate interpretation. The study of funerary caves in the Extremadura basin of the River Tagus demanded the detailed analysis we have just begun at the set of natural caves at Garganta Canaleja (Romangordo, Cáceres). The two excavation campaigns developed in three caves in this valley allowed us documenting successive burial spaces integrated into a long sequence comprising from Early Neolithic until Chalcolithic times in an area with megalithic manifestations.

The different research projects developed in this sector of the River Tagus have revealed its occupation by prehistoric communities in very different ways (Fig. 1). On the one hand, the interior drainage at Campo Arañuelo contains well-known evidences of population which show continuity at least along the Early Neolithic (González 1999; Cerrillo & González 2006: 186) with well-determined occupancy in the 3rd century BC also corroborated by the presence of some megaliths, cave paintings and settlements in this territory. Among all these evidences, the most well-known sepulchre is that in Guadalperal, excavated by Hugo Obermaier at the beginning of the 20th century and subsequently published by Leisner (Leisner & Leisner 1960). On the contrary, lower-intensity works have been developed in the southern margin of the River Tagus. Some habitat evidences are recognizable, but also stations with schematic paintings and burial caves. A more exhaustive documentation work on cave art was completed at the National Park of Monfragüe and revealed a remarkable concentration of stations dating back to a long time period which comprises from Late Prehistory to advanced times in Protohistory (Collado & García 2005: 48-49). In

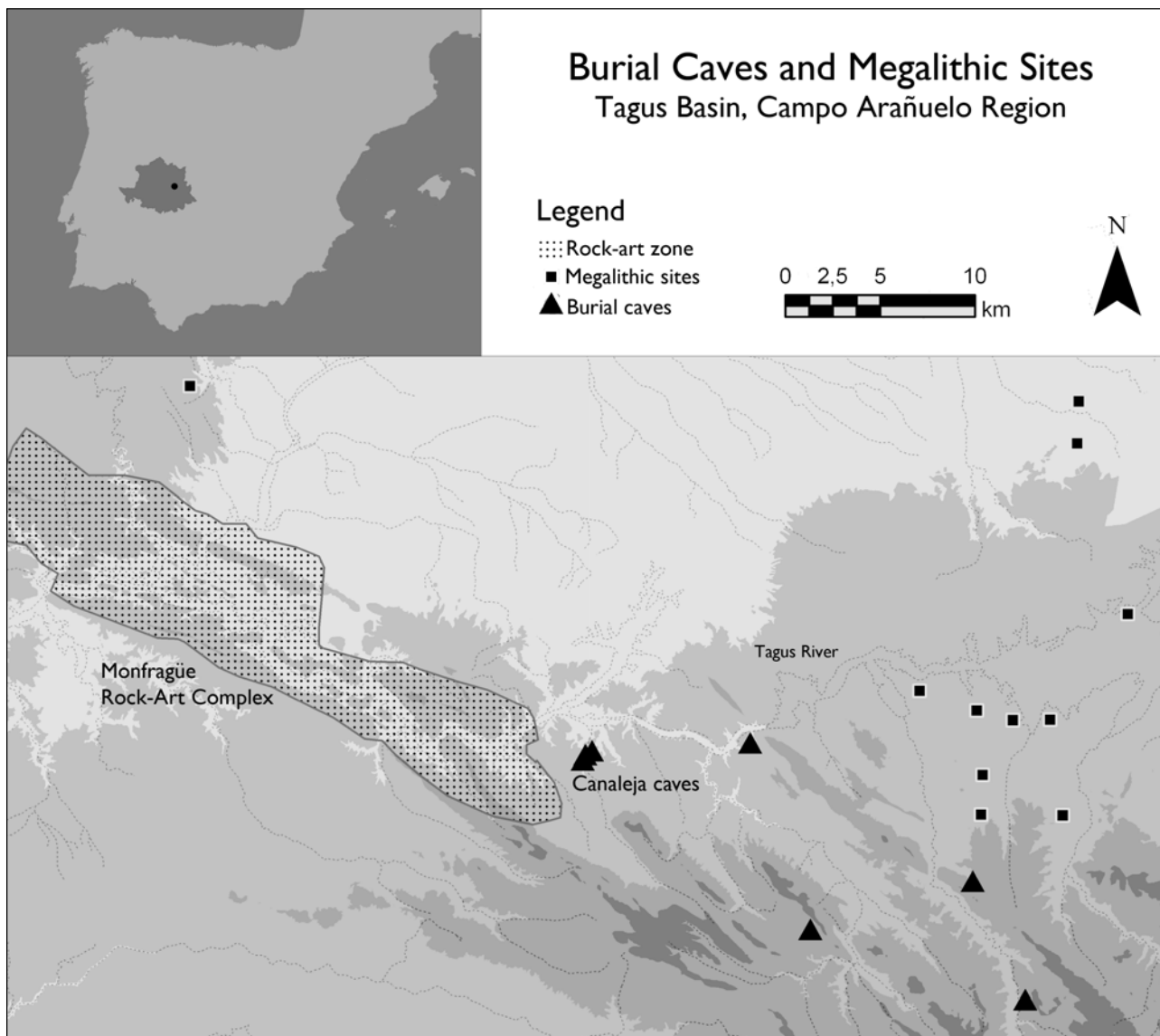


Fig. 1. Location of the study area and its relationship with dolmens and the rock-art complex of Monfragüe

short, data from field studies in this margin of the River Tagus already forecast that a research project developed in this area may connect different archaeological manifestations which have been interpreted independently up to date.

The coexistence of megalithic sepulchres and burial caves in the same territories is a common feature in the whole western Europe: both manifestations were present in the same territories and active at the same time. This complementarity can be observed in almost the whole Iberian Peninsula, except in some eastern regions such as Valencia, where cave burials were a common practice and references to megalithic sepulchres are practically unprecedented (Soler 2002). On the other hand, the number of well-known cases in western Iberian Peninsula raised the interest of Portuguese researchers in this problem, reflected by the common use of the expression “*Megalitismo de grutas*”¹ (Gonçalves 1978), used to

¹ In Portuguese, literally: “megalithic burials into caves”.

emphasise the similarities observed in both contexts regarding their internal organisation and grave goods.

The apparent opposition between constructed and natural spaces (the latter a priori involving no funerary connotation) has led to varied interpretations. Some authors interpret this opposition according to a specific system of social relationships, thus understanding that caves are due to an egalitarian conception of burials, against the innovative idea of funerary spaces in megalithic sites, apparently linked to new ways of social organisation and territory exploitation. This interpretation has been tinged by other authors, who support the existence of different cultural traditions according to the model applied (see Tomé & Oosterbeek in this volume). However, as García Sanjuán (2006: 152) has pointed out for western Andalusia, the archaeological evidence provides no evidence which allow admitting or rejecting any of these interpretations. Thus, as we shall discuss later on for the interior area of the River Tagus, caves and dolmens can be suggested to be one only cultural reality,

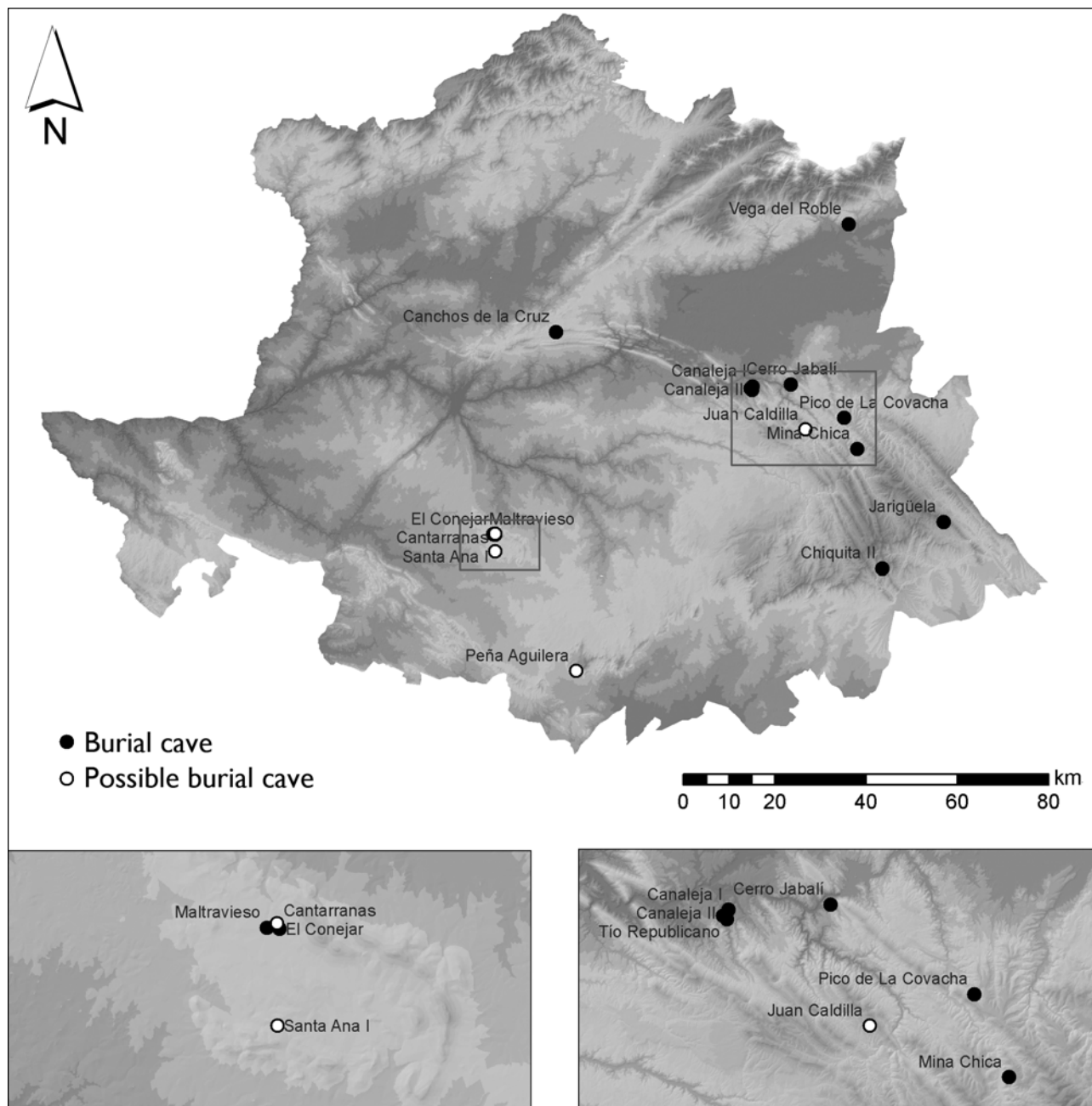


Fig. 2. Burial caves and possible burial caves in Cáceres province (after Cerrillo & González 2007)

and that megalithic sites are actually a landscape formalisation of a latent funerary discourse in the earliest Neolithic communities which continued up to the Bronze Age.

DATA

Our works in this Tagus environment focuses on Garganta Canaleja, an area of the River Tagus located in the eastern side of the province of Cáceres. Garganta Canaleja is a small stream at the southern margin of River Tagus. Geology in this area is mainly composed by slates, among which some thicker limestone strata are occasionally found. Precisely, Garganta Canaleja is located in the lower part of one of these strata, in contact

with slates, around 2 km from the mouth of this stream into the River Tagus. The valley Garganta Canaleja goes through is flanked by strong slopes which uncover a powerful limestone flank at its base and in the western margin.

The caves of La Zorra and Tío Republicano, located in Garganta Canaleja, had already been studied in a previous catalogue (Algaba Suárez *et al.* 2000). Nevertheless, topography and cave analysis works reported no archaeological evidence of occupation in any of them (Algaba *et al.* 2000: 18). Our works focus on the latter cave, as well as on another two: previously-identified nearby caves showing some Neolithic materials. In the case of the former cave, no archaeological cut has been carried out so far, given its internal scarce sedimentation,

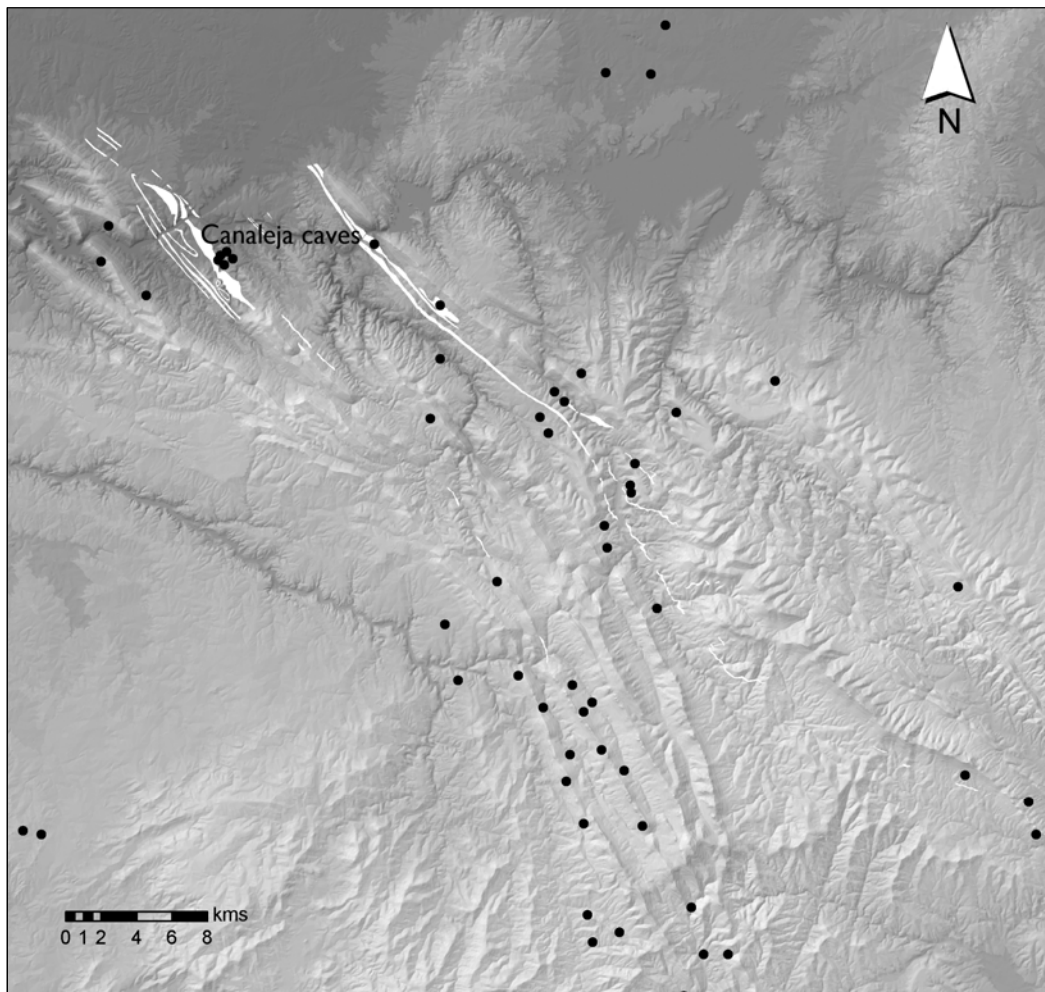


Fig. 3. Caves and shelters around Canaleja area, the white stripes represent the limestone geological background

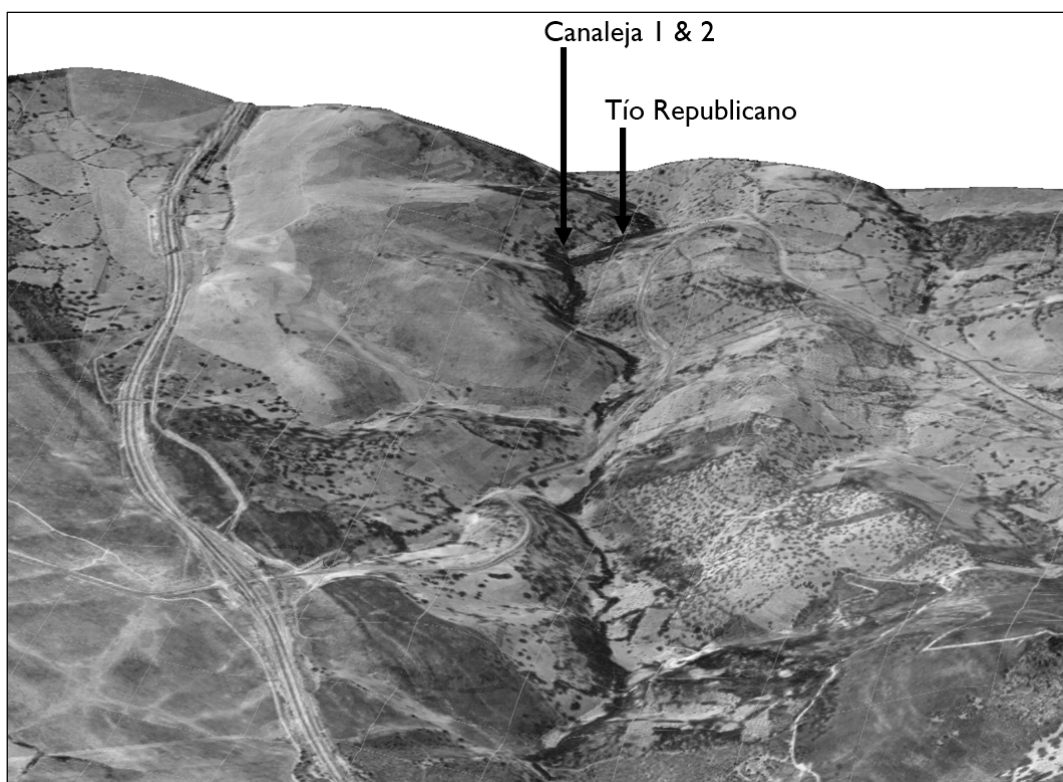


Fig. 4. Three-dimensional view of Canaleja Gorge and location of excavated caves

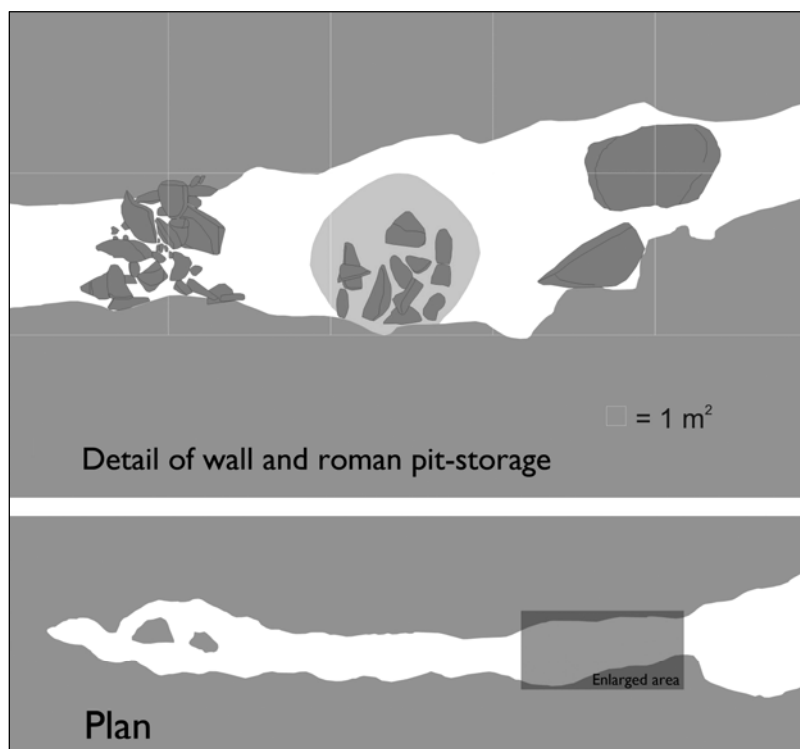


Fig. 5. Plan of Canaleja 1 and documented structures

although the presence of small ceramic fragments was observed in its interior.

Canaleja 1

The cave in Canaleja 1 is the largest one in the whole set of caves located in this valley. It is located at the base of the limestone cliff, in a depression slightly elevated over the course of Garganta Canaleja, and its entry is hidden by the vegetation growing at the bottom of the valley, as it presumably occurred throughout its funerary use.

The cave follows a W-E longitudinal direction, with a narrow corridor leading to two consecutive small natural chambers (around 23 meters long and 1.5 meters wide). (Fig. 3). In spite of the cave dimensions, no preserved stratigraphic record could be found anywhere, since it had been partially dug up in Late Roman times, when the cave was turned into an agricultural chamber. The first stretch (the access corridor) was completely dug up; indeed, Roman materials were located on the base clay of the cave. We could only report the presence of a closure wall near the middle of the corridor in which some Neolithic ceramics and fauna bones had been included, although no chronology could be estimated. On the other hand, the most internal sectors show the result of multiple limestone collapses composed by small- and medium-size blocks and, thus, better stratigraphic preservation. However, their excavation revealed no large differences relative to the access area, in spite of the fact that a lower density of modern materials was observed.

Occupation seems to have begun in Early Neolithic times, according to the presence of decorated ceramics

(especially through the so-called boquique technique), related to those already reported in other archaeological sites in the province of Caceres and the nearby shelter of Canaleja 2. These materials can be dated back to the time interval between the 5300 and 4500 BC, according to proposals at regional level (Cerrillo 2005).

The finding of human remains was constant throughout the excavation of the whole cave, thus proving a funerary use which could not be reconstructed, not even in its most basic aspects. Unlike the sample extracted from Tío Republicano, bones contributed no evidence of flesh removal such as cuts or fire marks. The bone material was dated to obtain a referential chronology for burials. It was completed on the parietal bone of an infant and its result was 3989-3775 BC (see Table 1). This fact reveals that the cave was already used during a large part of Late Neolithic times, contemporaneous of the oldest megalithic sepulchres in the Tagus basin such as Azután (Bueno *et al.* 2005) or Tremedal (Ruiz-Gálvez 2000), as we shall discuss later on. The collection of some geometrics and flint blades can be related to the funerary occupation in this period, with all the restrictions imposed by stratigraphic conditions (Fig. 6).

Beyond this dating to the 4th millennium BC, the cave kept on being used as a sepulchre throughout the 2nd millennium BC, as proven by the presence of highly stereotyped materials in the calcolithic funerary record. Lithic industry is characterised by an important presence of different kinds of arrow points made out of tabular flint, probably of local origin. Large blades are also rather frequent: made out of black flint and often fragmented due to sediment removal (Fig. 7). The presence of

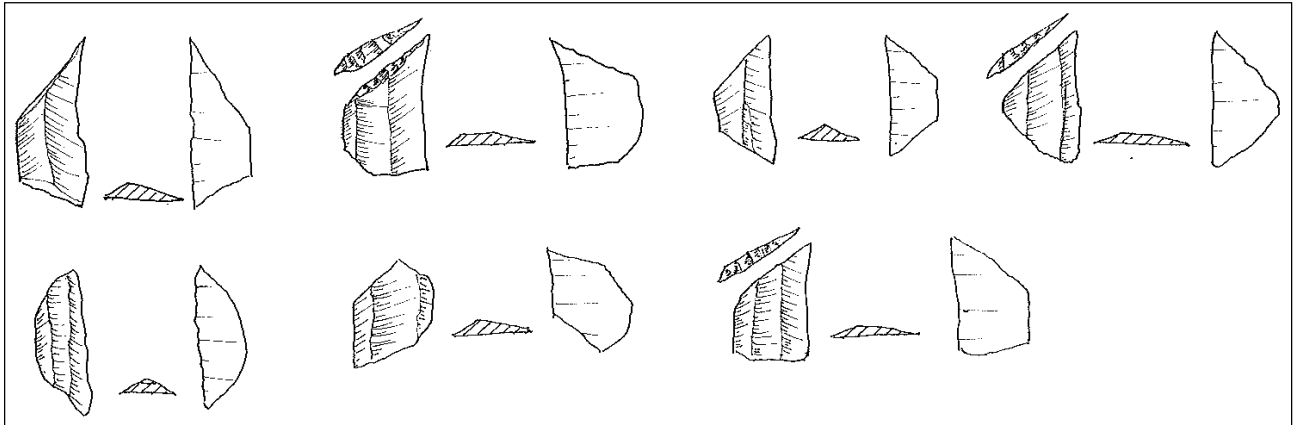


Fig. 6. Geometrics from Canaleja 1

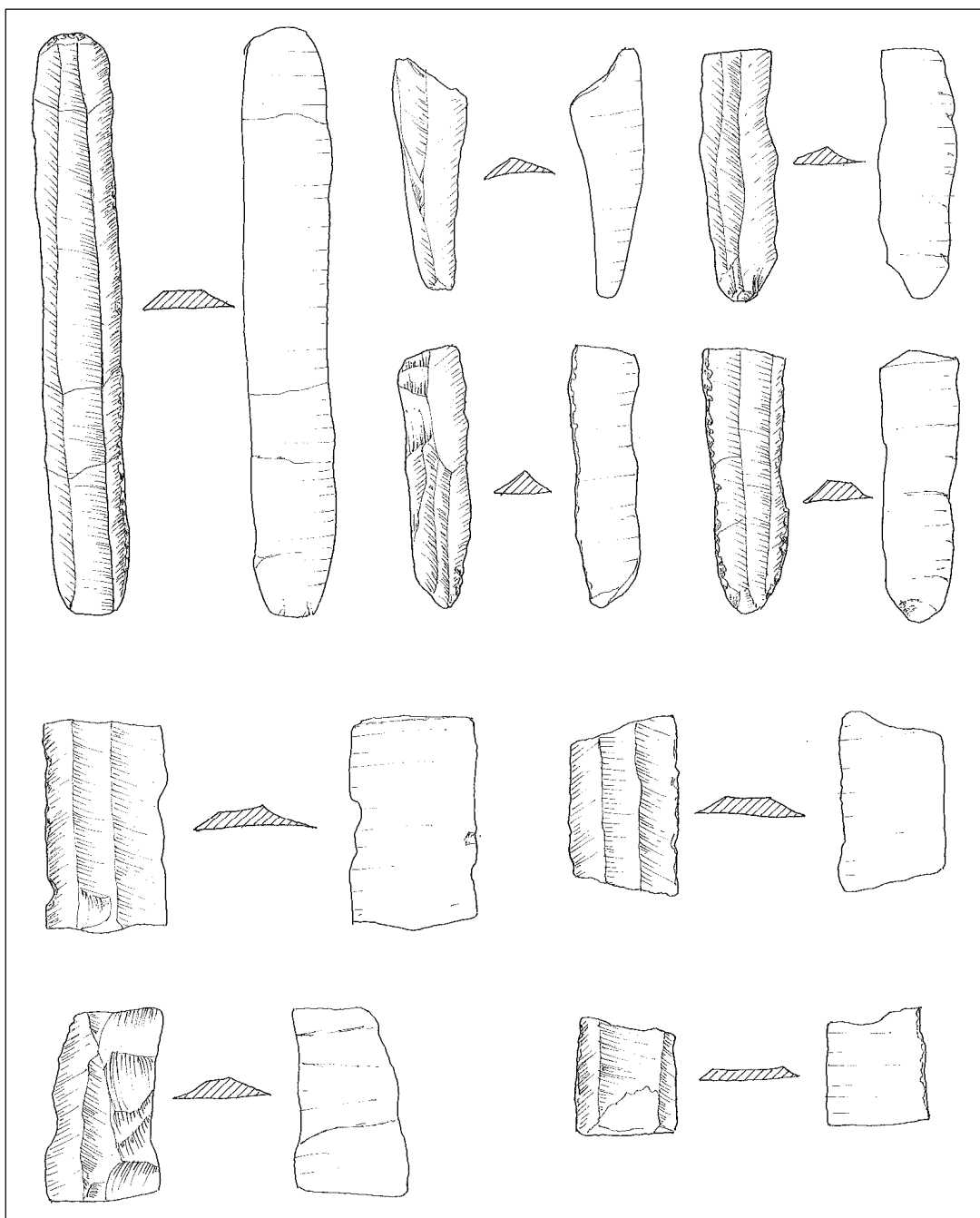


Fig. 7. Flint blades from Canaleja 1

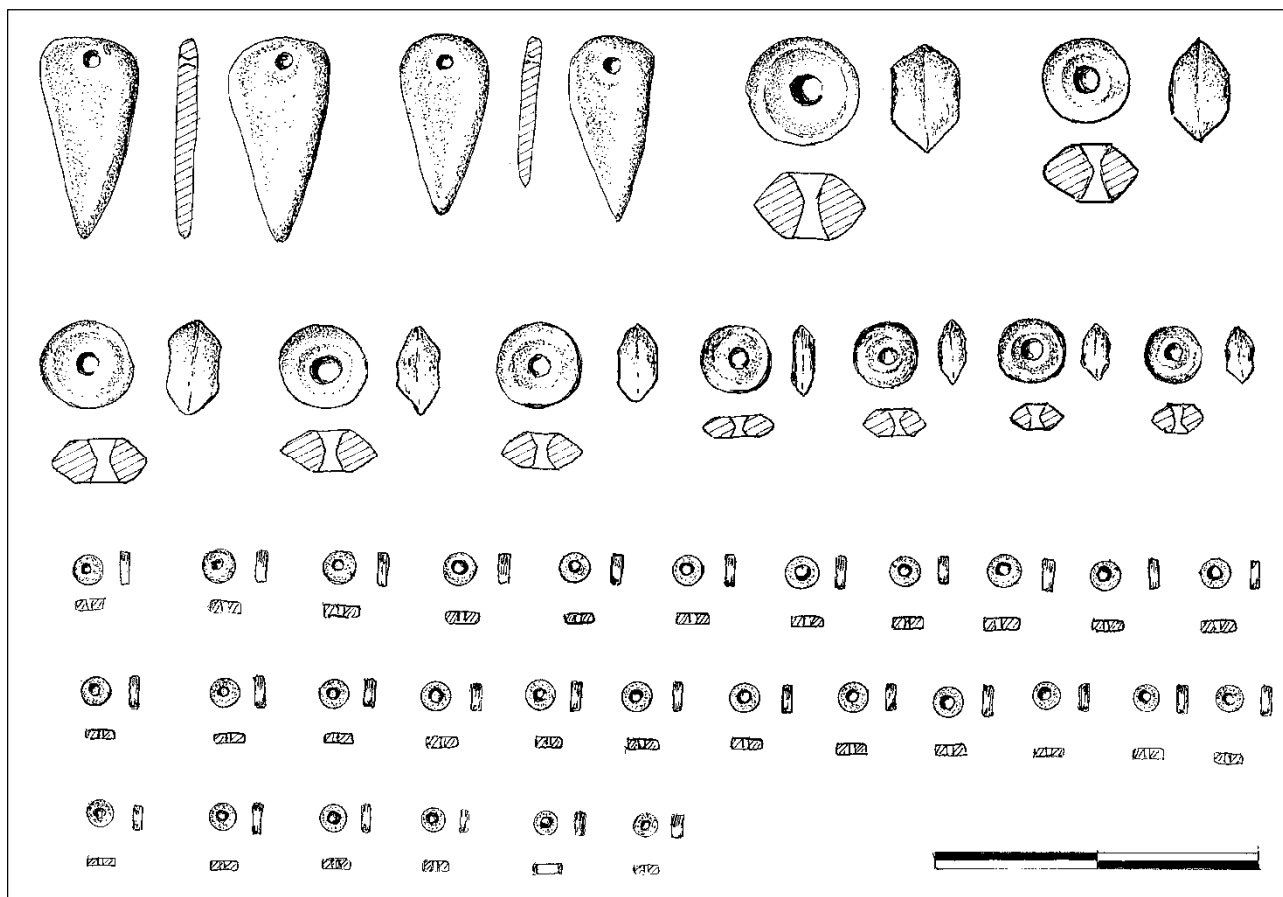


Fig. 8. Necklace beads and pendants from Canaleja 1

Table 1. Absolute datings from Canaleja caves (when bones, stable isotopes are provided)

Site	Material	Sample	Date BP	Date cal BC	d15N	d13C
Canaleja 2	Charcoal	Beta-214600	8740 ± 40	7940 – 7611	–	–
Canaleja 2	Charcoal	AA78257	6203 ± 44	5300 – 5043	–	–
Canaleja 2	Bone (human tooth)	–	Not dated yet	–	9,46	-17,7
Canaleja 1	Bone (human parietal)	Beta-202343	5000 ± 40	3944 – 3695	–	-18,8
Tío Republicano	Bone (human rib)	Beta-261508	The sample did not provide collagen	–	–	–
Tío Republicano	Bone (human rib)	Beta-270937	The sample did not provide collagen	–	–	–

halberds or daggers, represented by some distal fragment, is also outstanding. On the other hand, some polished materials were collected (e.g., fibrolite adzes and gabbro, and even a small gouge).

Personal adornment elements are frequent. Numerous small chlorite necklace beads were collected (chlorite can be found in nearby geological environments such as

granite). Some triangular slate and bone pendant were also found (Fig. 6). Together with these, we have also recovered some adornment elements made out of the material generically known as “green stones”. These adornments, of apparently-exogenous origin, were not always made out of variscite. During the packaging works for the delivery of the materials to the Museum of Cáceres, an additional piece which had gone unnoticed in

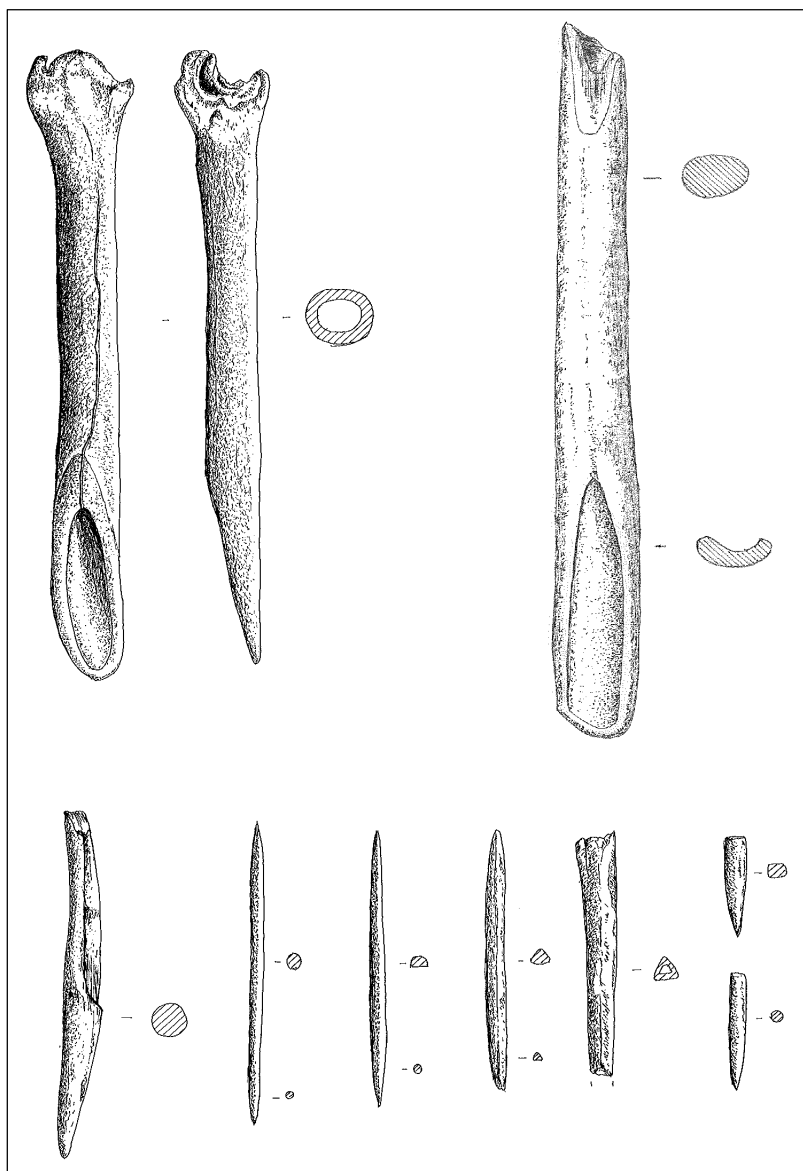


Fig. 9. Bone artefacts recovered at Canaleja 1

the first material classification was also identified: a fragment of a zoomorphic figure, probably a rabbit, recognisable in other chalcolithic sepulchres in the western Iberian Peninsula, both in megalithic sepulchres and caves. These figures are progressively more and more frequently reported in the western areas of the province of Caceres, as shown by the cases of Cruz del Pobre (Villanueva de la Vera) (Bueno 2000: 52) or the cave at Vega del Roble (Valverde de la Vera) (Cerrillo & González 2007). This kind of figures (rather commoner in Alentejo region) is likely to be related to the interchange also denoted by personal adornment elements.

The wide variety of grave goods made out of bone is an outstanding feature (Fig. 7). However, due to preservation reasons, they are not always possible to be identified in the megalithic sepulchres in this region. This variety of bone objects is composed by 2-point needles, sticks, and even some scraper of certain size also reported in cave burials in the Iberian Peninsula (Gutiérrez *et al.*

2002; Martín *et al.* 2004), non-megalithic mounds (Bueno *et al.* 1999) and also in some megalithic sepulchres exceptionally well-preserved such as the monument 3 in Santa Margarida (Gonçalves 2003: 132).

Finally, the possible use of the cave during the Bronze Age should also be considered, as suggested by the presence of some ceramics with carved decoration and the brushing techniques used for surface polishing. These occupancies may well have been coetaneous to those registered in quartzite shelters in the region such as Peñas María or El Escobar (Almagro-Gorbea 1977; Cerrillo & González 2007).

Canaleja 2

Canaleja 2 is not actually a cave but a small hole produced by dissolution at the base of the limestone cliff, in the place of contact with the slate. Therefore, its dimensions are rather reduced and the covered area

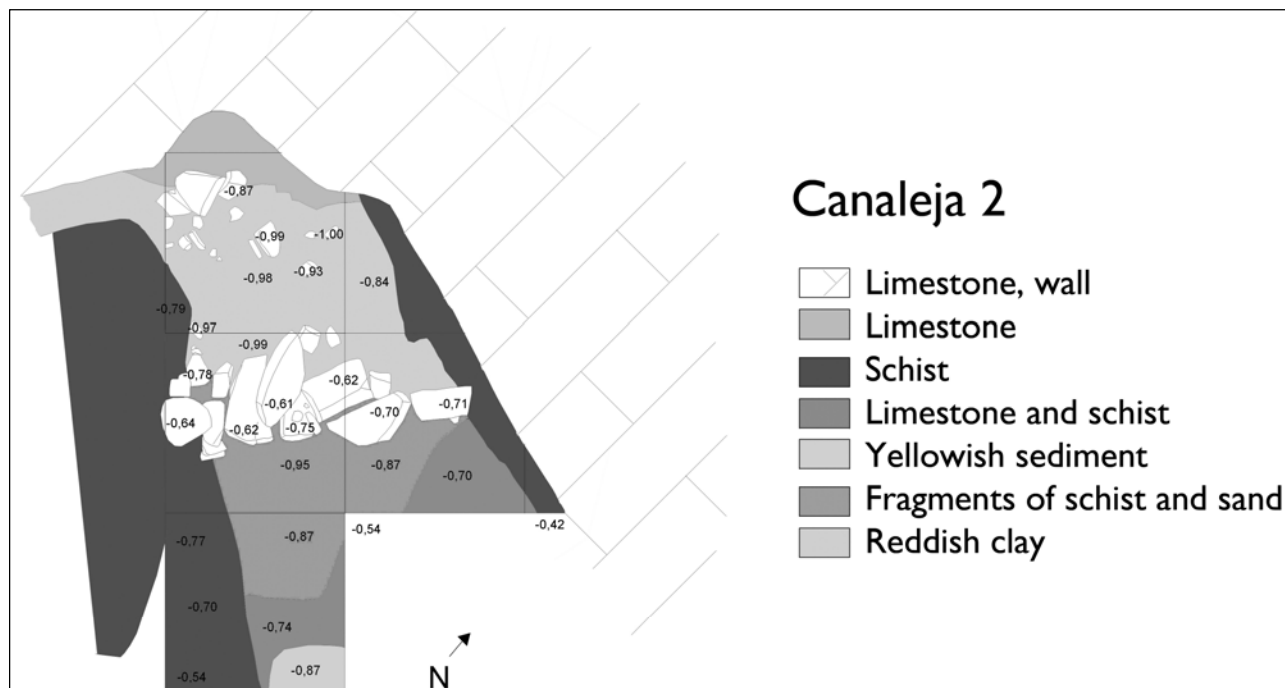


Fig. 10. Plan of Canaleja 2 shelter

scarcely reaches 4 m². Its dimensions are likely to have been the reason for it going unnoticed and not dug-up, unlike the previous one. Some occupancy stages could be identified in this reduced space: the most recent one was found to date back to the 17th century through the finding of coins and ceramics. This material was completely isolated from prehistoric occupancies by a level which seemed unaltered. According to sediment conditions, at least three occupancy levels which may date back to the Early Neolithic and Mesolithic were observed.

Funerary remains gather in level 3, the most recent one, although some human teeth could be collected in the underlying layer by means of filtration processes. It must be highlighted the fact that this level of the shelter was closed to the exterior by a wall of slate slabs and mud which must have definitely aisled the cave from the exterior during its use (Fig. 10). The osteologic material also proves the deposit, in the shelter, of at least three individuals, according to anthropological analyses (Barca 2007). Remains are rather scarce and comprise around 20 small bones (except the jaw of an adult male). The anatomic units which also seem to be represented are part of a lower limb, some phalanges and vertebrae. On the other hand, the infant individual and the young individual are represented by scarce bones.

Reduced sample size and the fact that most represented bones are of low size lead us to believe it was a place used for primary deposition from which the largest bones were withdrawn (a rather common practice in the sepulchres of other areas in western Europe). This shelter can be considered as a space linked to flesh removal from corpses following a process of natural decomposition (Dowd 2008: 307). The move of bone remains to other sepulchres is well-documented in archaeological

literature and that some proposals support this practice since the earliest Neolithic times in the Iberian Peninsula (Delibes *et al.* 1999: 432).

Stable isotope analysis was completed on an adult male tooth. The δN15 value (9.46) seems to suggest that an important part of the diet of this individual was constituted by resources from a marine area. However, many objections can be made to this interpretation of this value. From a statistical viewpoint, this value is slightly significant. Therefore, a general interpretation on the feeding source of this community solely based on this value seems rather simplistic.

None of the elements near the bones was accompanied by grave goods, except two small pierced snails which may have been part of personal adornments. Bones seem to have deposited just on the remains of a habitat from Early Neolithic, as shown by the carved ceramics collected. Besides, this may be the dating assumed for this osteologic material: Charcoal collected in the immediately lower level rendered an absolute chronology of 6203 ± 44 BP (5300 – 5043 BC). Boquique-decorated ceramics comprise bowls of certain size (Fig. 11). On the other hand, the lithic industry is only represented by small blades.

Below the fourth occupancy level, a new level was identified (level 5). It contains scarce pieces associated to a hearth near the cave walls. Carbon dating in this level renders these occupancies around the 8th millennium BC (Arias *et al.* 2008), thus in agreement with those in El Conejar cave (Cerrillo 2005: 64), within this area. This dating locates the occupancy of this cave around Mesolithic, an unprecedented period in the interior basin of River Tagus.

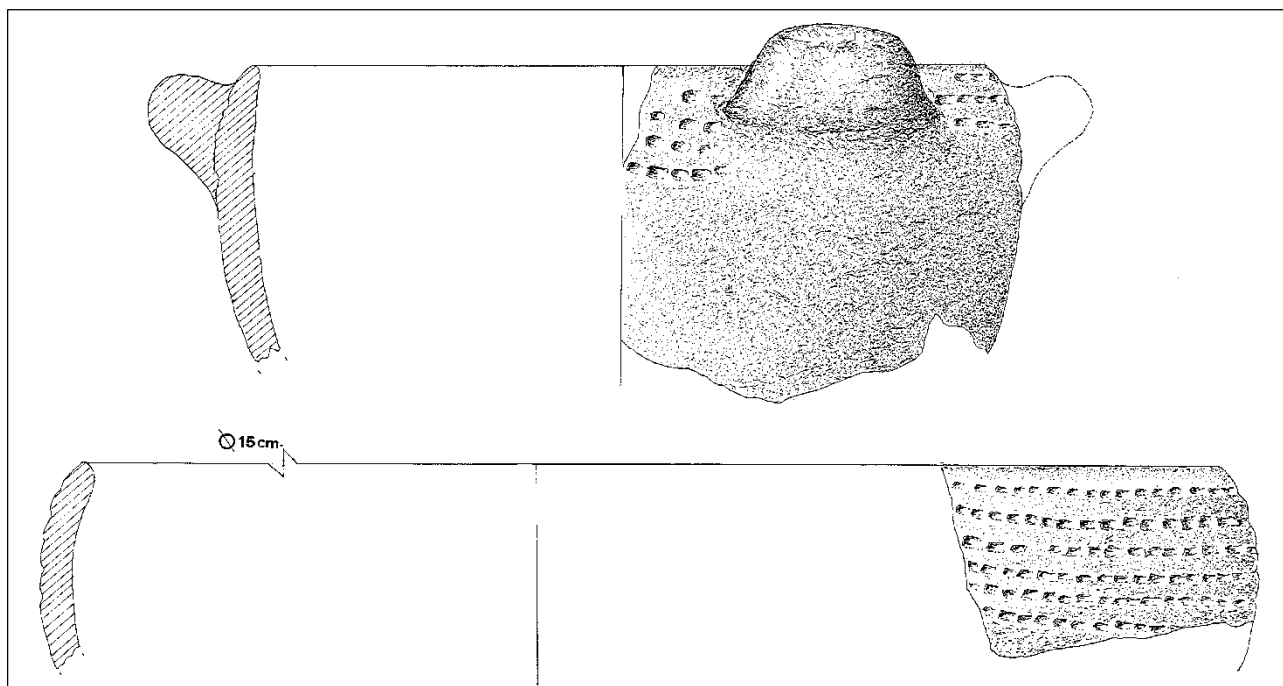


Fig. 11. Boquique-decorated bowls from Canaleja 2

Tío Republicano

The cave Tío Republicano has a more prominent location than the previous ones. It is located midway between the hill base and hilltop, in the same limestone cliff as the previous ones, although with greater visibility. Nowadays its entry appears completely cleared and access demands ascending among limestone blocks. It comprises one only room (Fig. 12), which is the origin of a small entry which progresses only some meters into the wall. The digging of limestone blocks and natural colmatation processes formed a 5-m² cubicle at the right-hand side of the entry. This cubicle may well be the result of emptying the sediments and have been used as a burial pit, since the remains were deposited on the natural rock, with no kind of recognisable organisation. No anatomic connections or disposition pattern for certain anatomic parts were apparently observed: only two skulls in an acceptable preservation state, although highly fragmented, were found at the burial base. Strikingly, the ossuary includes fauna remains. However, whether their inclusion was deliberate or fortuitous (in the latter case being part of other funerary contexts) could not be determined.

The complete sample is currently under analysis, which shall allow us approaching the minimum number of individuals deposited, although the first estimation already suggests a certain number of individuals. The osteologic material collected was in a rather fragmentary state, apart from having possibly been subjected to some kind of thermal treatment, as shown by the colour of most bones. This feature shows that the cremation of remains may have been aimed at corpse flesh removal, although further evidence is to be contributed by current analyses. On the other hand, the cremation traces present in bones are not found in grave goods, which seem to have

received a different treatment. Therefore, they may have been deposited at the same time of bones, once they had already been partially incinerated.

Up to date, rituals with partial incinerations had only been reported in the south-western Iberian Peninsula, where some examples have been pointed out (Idáñez 1986). However, these cases have extended to the field of natural caves through the report of several cases in the Iberian Peninsula throughout the last years (Agustí 2002; Gutiérrez *et al.* 2002). In the Spanish Extremadura, the use of fire as a ritual element has been pointed out as a possibility for certain sepulchres in the complex at Valencia de Alcántara (Bueno 1988: 206). This fact already suggests that the thermal treatment of certain corpses may be due to more practical questions such as flesh removal (Pascual 1990) and, therefore, may be a rather more functional than ritual aspect, thus independent from the kind of sepulchre. However, a more detailed analysis shall allow determining if bones had been burned when they were still covered by organic material or if, on the contrary, this activity was developed after organic material decomposition (Larsson 2003).

Bone incineration is precisely one of the obstacles found when performing absolute dating, since the laboratory could extract no collagen from the two apparently non-incinerated bone samples. For this reason, so far we can only estimate a chronology according to the reduced number of grave goods found. Collected sherds belong to small, open-shaped, smooth-surface bowls, which apparently were already fragmented upon deposition (Fig. 13). Scarce lithic instruments accompanied these grave goods: only an arrow point of concave base made out of probably-local flint (Fig. 14). Finally, the presence of personal adornment elements must also be pointed out:

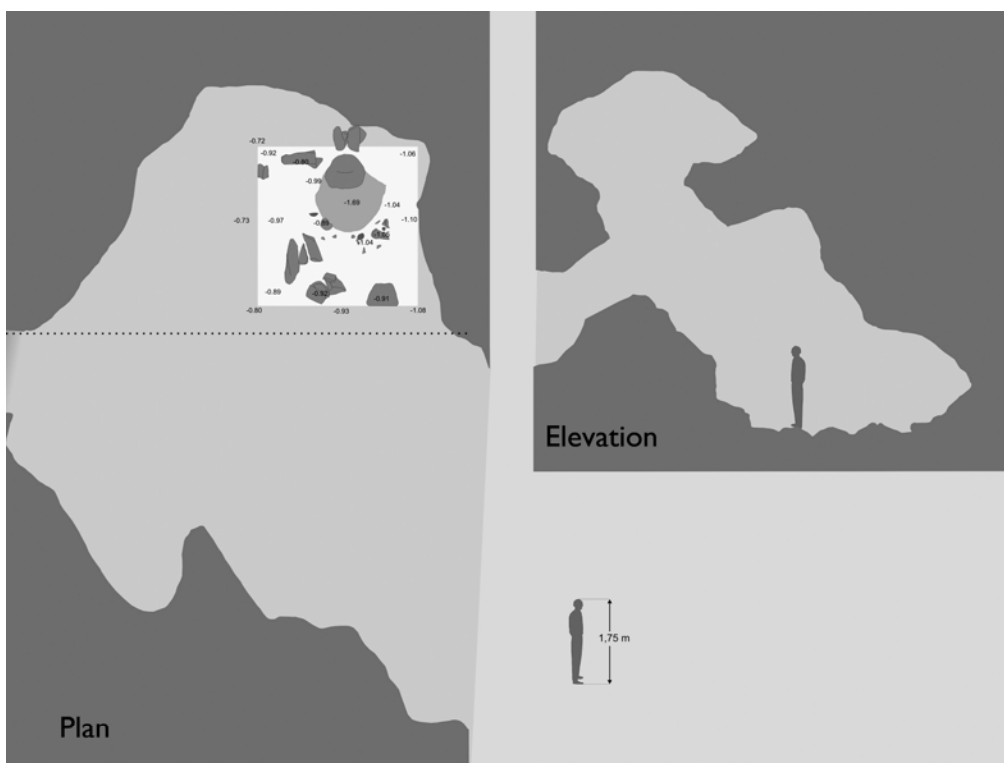


Fig. 12. Elevation and plan of Tío Republicano, showing the excavated area

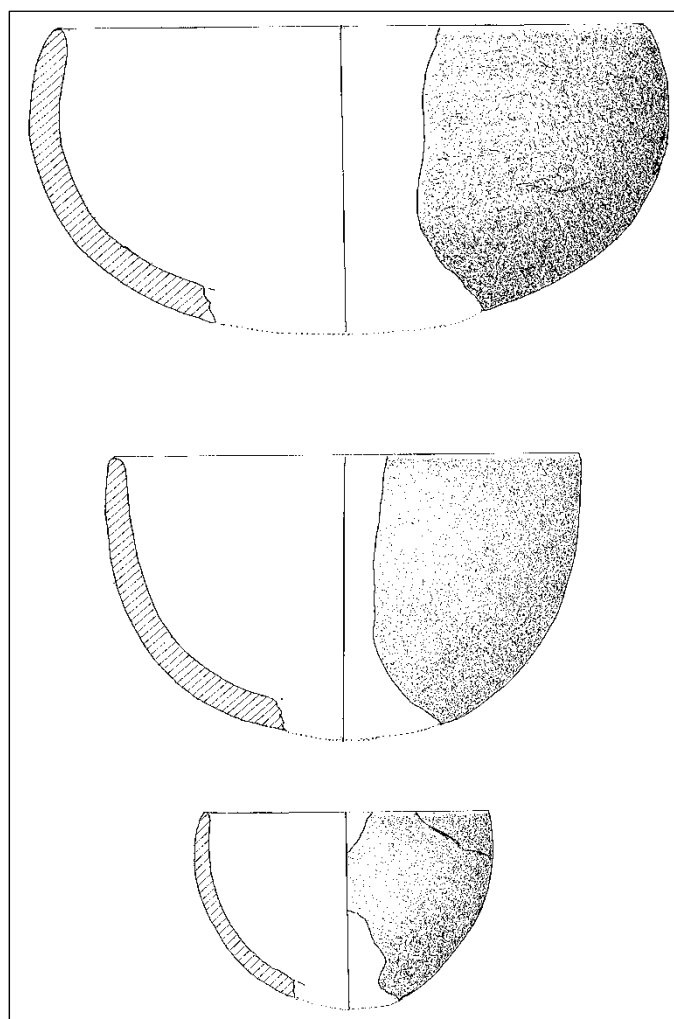


Fig. 13. Pottery from Tío Republicano

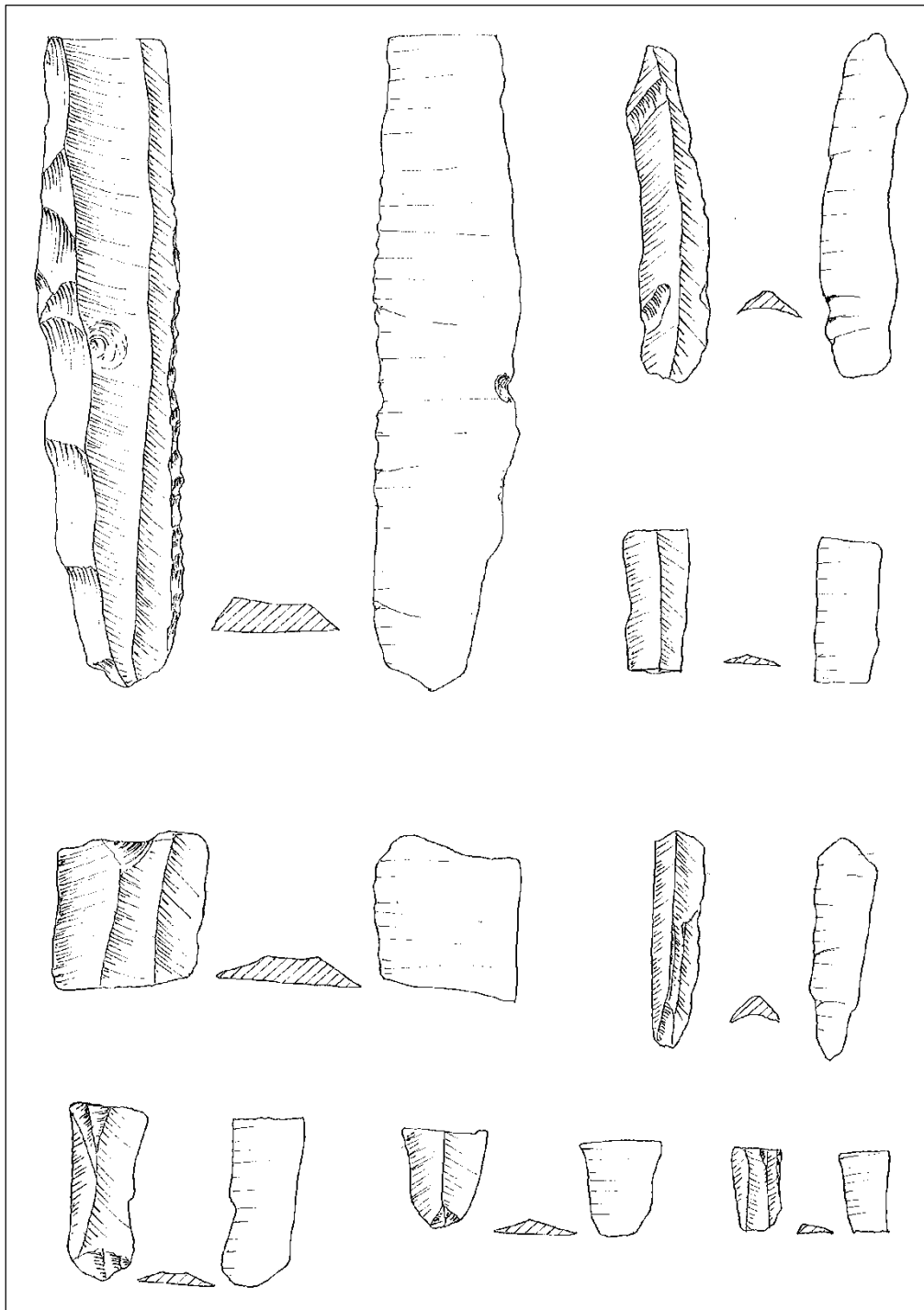


Fig. 14. Flint blades from Tío Republicano

almost exclusively a triangular pendant (possibly variscite) made out of green stone. Undoubtedly, the most innovative element is a cut-out bone plaque in which the shape of the so-called “Almeria idols” or Portuguese “chatos” has been suggested, although this terminology seems rather inappropriate (Gonçalves 2004: 172). Piece cutting suggests the shape of the head and shoulders by using a representation technique also present in several plaque idols (Figs. 15 and 16). This kind of bone figure (usually made out of slate) must have been more frequent in megalithic tombs, although the scarce preservation conditions of the bone material would have

favoured their disappearance. On the other hand, we deal with apparently local manifestations, therefore far away from the ways of interchange of this kind of symbolic elements observed in the whole western Iberian Peninsula.

Finally, the ossuary was completely sealed by means of a deep more-than-40 cm-thick clay layer. This surface hosted the last occupancy from the Bronze Age, identified through sherds located in the narrow entry and the cave’s interior space, which appeared dug-up by zoogenic movements.

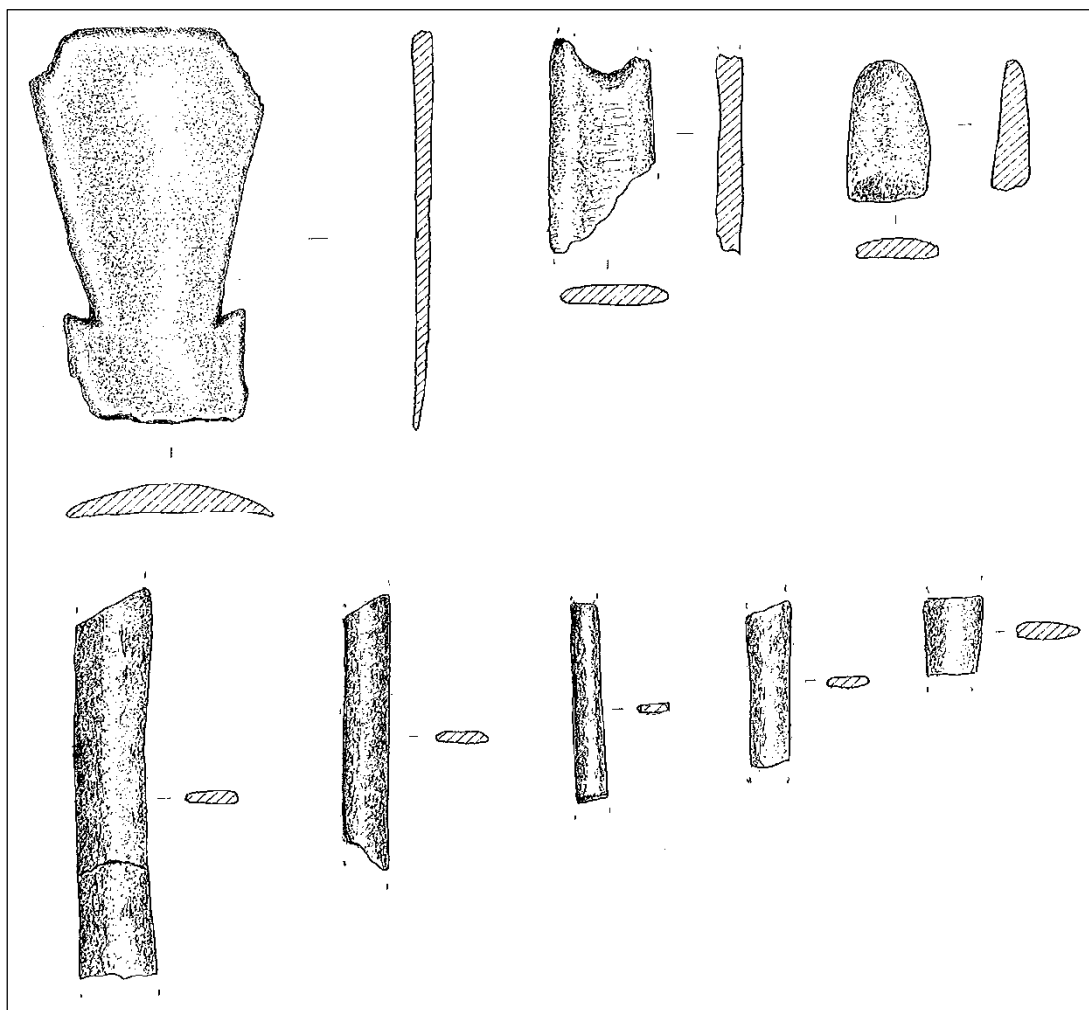


Fig. 15. Bone artefacts recovered at Tío Republicano, including the idol (upper left)



Fig. 16. Bone Idol from Tío Republicano (Photo by B. Sánchez)

Other nearby caves

As already pointed out, cave burials constitute a further peculiarity in the funerary record of prehistoric communities in the interior course of the River Tagus. Its acknowledgement is conditioned by the preservation of the bone material in certain lithologies. Thus, many granite, slate, or quartzite shelters may have been used as sepulchres. However, funerary uses are not easy to be identified nowadays, unless certain grave goods are identified as personal adornment or votive sets (Cerrillo & González 2007). The work on old sources and the analysis of the available archaeological information allow us adding some more cases in different locations of the Tagus basin. The earliest ones come from 16th-century literary sources: writer Lope de Vega describes a cave burial in the transit area between the Tagus and Duero basins. After this, more sepulchral caves have been recognised through different 19th century texts. On the other hand, many of these funerary contexts have been altered in recent times, thus hindering documentation in agreement with research needs. This handicap also affects a high number of megalithic sepulchres in the interior basin of the River Tagus, which has always hinder the identification and description of complete population groups. Some exceptional cases (such as the Azután

dolmen) only allow a partial approach to this kind of evidence.

The deposition of the dead in ossuaries necessarily involves a more complex ritual exercise, clearly observed from the 4th millennium onwards, if we bear in mind the data contributed by studies of Portuguese caves. Although the practice of burials in ossuaries cannot be discarded in previous times, as some authors suggest (Tomé & Oosterbeek, in this volume), the continuity of this burial system along the 3rd millennium is assured and even along the bell-beaker culture times, at least for some sectors of the Tagus interior basin (Jiménez & Alcolea 2001). The use of the first rooms of Maltravieso (Tagus valley) as collective ossuaries in the Bronze Age is widely known, under similar form to those already depicted for Neolithic communities (Cerrillo *et al.* 2009). Although Maltravieso is well-known for its Palaeolithic paintings, current research scarcely values the most recent ceramic materials, which are associated to a series of surface ossuaries (Callejo 1958). The lack of archaeological documentation and the ambiguity of materials have led to debate regarding their dating: either to the Neolithic or the Bronze Age. It was not until very recent times that a more precise chronology could be determined. (Cerrillo 2008; Cerrillo *et al.* 2009) Our study led us to conclude that ceramics associated to ossuaries are more recent than proposed in other evaluations and reach the Latest Bronze Age, in agreement with the findings in other locations of the Spanish Plateau (Esparza 1990). These data integrate well within a trend of reuse of Neolithic funerary and Chalcolithic spaces, as suggested for the basin of River Duero at the end of the 2nd millennium BC (Esparza 1990).

Likewise, the finding of decontextualized human bones in a cave near Maltravieso known as El Conejar suggests this cave may have been used as a sepulchral cave at some point (Cerrillo & González 2007). In short, these data are scarcely conclusive when it comes to propose a timing for the model of cave burial and even less for other more concrete aspects such as necropolis organisation or the structure of buried populations. Nevertheless, the set of caves with osteologic material widens when historiographic references such as the cave Alía or data from the cave Mina Chica are borne in mind (Cerrillo & González 2007). These also contain human bones in a limestone break at the cave entry. The remaining locations come from contexts identified from surface grave goods.

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

One of the most striking aspect from our works in Garganta Canaleja is that burial caves are used along the whole Neolithic and Chalcolithic sequence, possibly offering different corpse-treatment modalities. The burial sequence recognised during our excavations is the same, and also slightly older than that revealed by earlier megalithic sepulchres used for long time periods (see for

instance the nearby case of Azután or Montehermoso, and the long set of dated occupancies published). On the other hand, it is interesting to ascertain that these sepulchres contain previous agricultural and farming documentation since the Early Neolithic, as shown by the palinological analyses published for Canaleja 2 (Cerrillo *et al.* 2007). That is: these burials agree with communities with a certain degree of permanence in the territory, which have recurrently used these caves, maybe according to certain use tradition.

On the ossuaries in Tío Republicano and their interpretation

The lack of osteologic material in sepulchres is, so far, one of the main lacks of Prehistory in the interior basin of the River Tagus. The absence of bones in burials is generally explained by soil acidity. Up to date, the remains in Azután are the only which have allowed some advance in our knowledge of the kind of populations buried in dolmens (Bueno *et al.* 2005), in spite of the fact that the partial withdrawal of the tomb hinders a sequential reading of the burials. On the other hand, these problems were also faced during the excavation of Canaleja 1, since sediment withdrawal allowed the recognition of no burial pattern. Only the excavation at Tío Republicano allows the first contribution of a complete population with no stratigraphic alterations.

On the other hand, ossuary structure fully reflects one only population apparently involving no selection of its integrating individuals, since it is composed by individuals of different gender and age, in which no differential treatment are allowed for particular individuals. Ossuary structure, as in all cases in the Iberian Peninsula, seems to hold around 10 individuals (there are some rather infrequent exceptions to this) and rarely exceed 30. Only some exceptional cases (Vegas 2007) seem to reflect more complex behaviours including wide groups of individuals from one or several communities.

In spite of the fact that these data would allow admitting the egalitarian nature of these groups, the continuity of this burial method until the Bronze Age would prove that funerary practices go beyond different types of social relations and may conceal more specific beliefs and rituals (Shennan 1982) than the individual himself within the group. Unlike individual burials, ossuaries are a “social product” generated through a series of flesh removal and manipulation processes well-documented and appropriately reported in archaeological literature. Although bone cremation traces in Tío Republicano do not allow determining if fire was used for corpse flesh removal, ossuary preparation can be assured to have involved some preparation of the remains. The most direct consequence of ossuary formation, as some authors point out (Lucas 1996; Soares 2003: 217) is a dissolution of the individual identity within a wider social group which gathers those belonging to the same large community: that of the ancestors in a broad sense. Admitting the condition of ancestors entails at the same

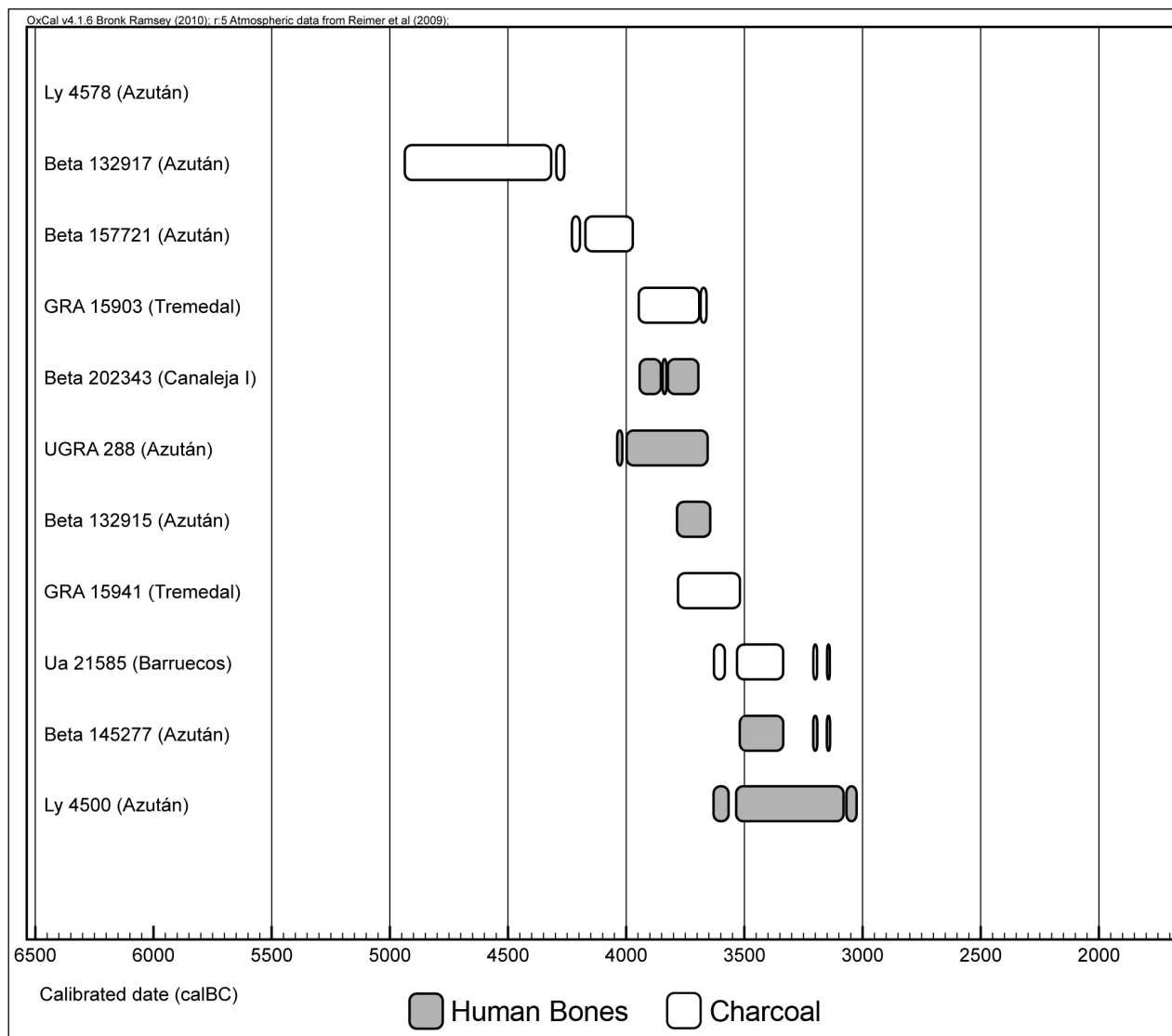


Fig. 17. Absolute datings for Neolithic funerary contexts from Tagus basin. The graphic includes Los Barruecos (settlement) as a reference

time an important time load. Ossuaries turn into past forms but at the same time, as social products, involve unavoidable impact on those who generate them. As Thomas (2000: 657) points out, ossuaries may have not been a passive and closed element but a way for continuous representation and reassuring of the identity of the living.

Although we do not know most of the context cases with human bones in dolmens, grave goods and cave organisation suggest that the kind of burial practiced in caves is transferred to dolmens regardless of the container. Affinities between both spheres are actually more evident than that one might think. Firstly, given the recurrence of uses shown by both caves and megaliths throughout a long time, the burials in both may play a similar role in the expression and symbolic definition of social relations, as shown by grave goods.

Grave goods can clearly show the transition between the Neolithic tradition and a new tradition at the 3rd

millennium BC, which show some incorporations to standard equipment. Firstly, the scarce testimonies we dispose of nowadays prove that standardised grave goods are deposited together with ossuaries, although the inclusion of new grave goods which were not present in the oldest cave ossuaries is also observed. The deposition of symbolic or personal adornment elements made out of exogenous materials increases in the archaeological record remarkably, thus emphasising that communities buried in caves had access to goods interchange with the same regularity as those buried in a megalithic sepulchre. A significant testimony is the appearance of green necklace beads, generally described as made out of variscite, which clearly reproduces this kind of interchanges.

Dolmens and caves: a common background

The frontier between natural caves and megalithic sepulchres may have been more diluted than initially thought. Thus, the ritual developed in their interior and

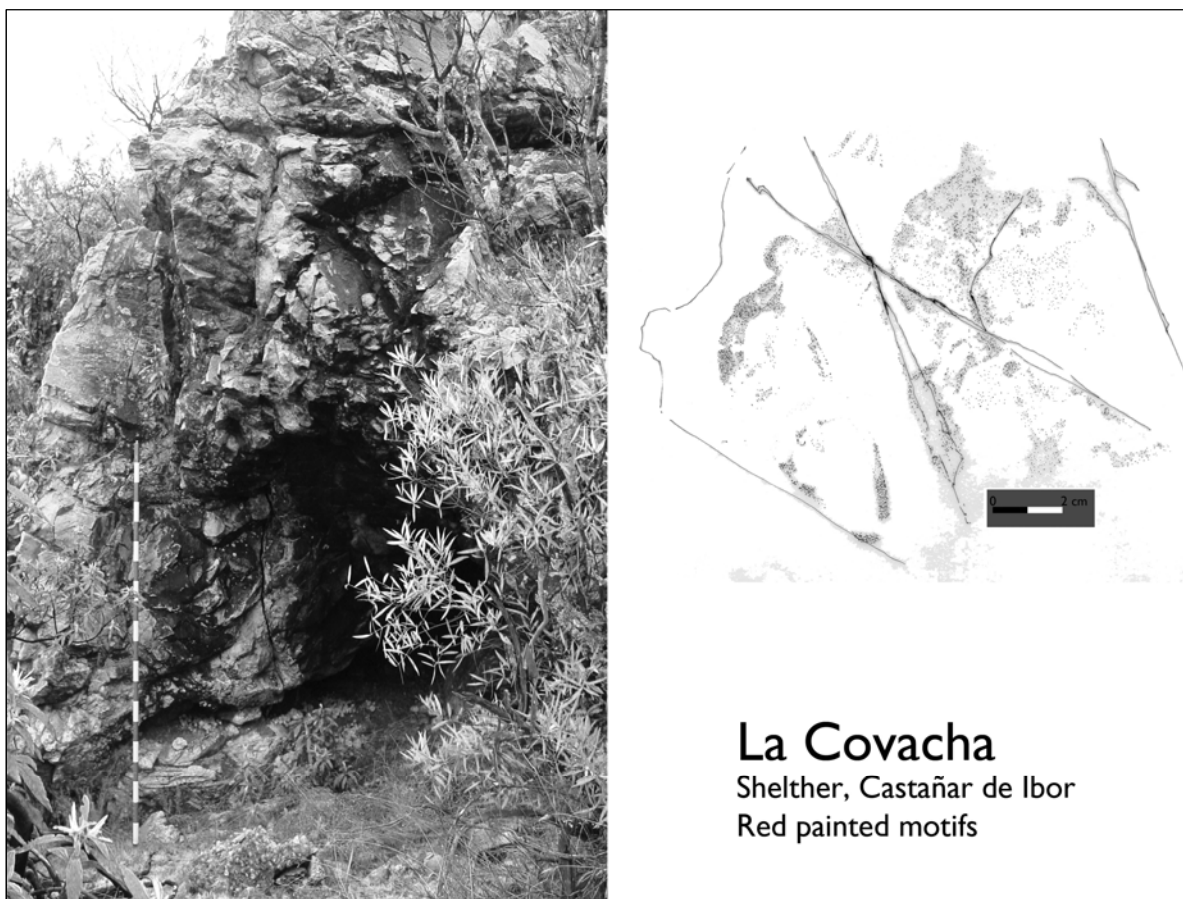


Fig. 18. La Covacha (shelther entrance) and anthropomorphic paintings located at the entrance

the experiences associated to both contexts may have been rather similar (Barnatt & Edmonds 2002: 113-114). Although in practical terms there is a great rupture between both spheres, the existence of certain similarities also stands out. So far, it seems that megalithic sepulchres cannot be explained through comparisons with caves according to the social cost involved by their construction. A definitive argument for the coexistence of both kinds of sepulchres can be found when comparing absolute datings. Several datings from megalithic sites have been published in the interior basin of Tagus River during the last years, describing a sequence that starts in the beginnings of IVth millennium (Fig. 17). Although, datings from burial caves are rare in the Spanish Tagus River basin, several contexts from Portugal have been published (Soares 1994, Duarte 1998, Carvalho *et al.* 2003) showing the temporal coincidence with megalithic sepulchres since the Middle Neolithic.

Both of them share the way sepulchres are condemned and closed. Closure walls —probably related to their funerary use —were identified in Canaleja 1 and 2. Nowadays, after the reading of old documentation, a large number of these caves is known to have been closed by walls which isolated the sepulchre from the exterior. Thus, we deal with places that cannot be revisited and whose ritual function, at least in the interior of the sepulchre, ceases at a particular moment and for a rather prolonged time period. In the case of Canaleja 1 and 2,

these walls —which may have isolated the sepulchre from the exterior at certain times —have been partially identified.

The most marked difference is that caves seem to resign formulating a territorial discourse in the sense of tumular masses in megalithic sepulchres. In the Tagus basin attention is drawn on certain strategies for sepulchre concealing (López-Romero 2007: 88), which somewhat disagree with the widely-extended belief that explains the prominence of sepulchres as a way of social and territorial expression in societies which use them as territorial axes.

Another argument which should be taken into account is the fact that some graphic manifestations are frequently associated to funerary deposits in caves, which leads us to think that —like certain megalithic art in the interior basin of the River Tagus is associated to megalithic sepulchres (Bueno & Balbín 2002) —some of these decorated shelters in this region may have hosted collective sepulchres. This direct association between human bones and grave goods, on one hand, and cave paintings, on the other (Cerrillo & González 2007) has been documented in some cases (e.g., the shelter of La Covacha or Cueva Chiquita). Bearing this experience in mind, we have recently proposed that some decorated granitic shelters in this sector of River Tagus may have been employed as sepulchres.

Thus, it is not complex to support this association, due to the existence of similar themes in many analysed monuments in the interior basin of the River Tagus, with referential absolute dating which agrees with the time period in which some of these sepulchral caves were active. The decorative systems of the slate dolmens we know frequently lead us to the same patterns of these small shelters (Bueno *et al.* 2008a; González & Cerrillo 2008), whose relation with the habitats has been shown up in multiple occasions. Los Barruecos site is a clear example of this. Excavations documented an occupancy sequence which goes from the Early Neolithic to the Bronze Age (Cerrillo *et al.* 2006) and is undoubtedly related to a wide representation of stations of cave art with paintings and carvings (Sauceda 2001). As we have pointed out for other sites (González & Cerrillo 2008), some of these shelters (most of them void of sediments nowadays) are likely to have been used as small sepulchral chambers; especially if we bear in mind that the Museum of Caceres reported partial remains of at least one burial in a shelter from Los Barruecos in 1983.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Cave burials were, up to date, one of the most badly-known environments in the Extremadura basin of the River Tagus. The work recently developed in Romangordo opens a new possibility to approach a funerary reality directly connected to the megalithic sites, the most outstanding element in the Neolithic and Chalcolithic funerary world in this region.

Collective burials in caves are undoubtedly a funerary sign of clear Neolithic origin in the whole western Europe. Its continuity beyond the theoretical barrier of the 3rd millennium BC can be understood as a sign of continuity, which —when compared to certain landscape conceptions— turn out to be rather plausible. On the other hand, the analysis of the population dynamics along the 4th and 3rd millennia BC already reveals some substantial changes. The last years have witnessed advance in the understanding of population models in the 3rd millennium BC. From the viewpoint of landscape organisation, different strategies of exploitation and different habitat manners have been observed. These underline the diversity of situations observed in this territory: from fortified villages with associated megalithic necropolis to small fortresses in either flat lands or privileged defensive locations.

We can conclude that no significant differences were observed between the material equipment of the communities buried in sepulchres and those opting for cave burials. As shown by Tío Republicano, a specific ritualisation of funerary contexts seems to have taken place since the 3rd millennium BC. This ritualisation may be explained by a certain complexity of social practices, together with increased agricultural activity in this territory. Bone manipulation, due to either ritual or functional (flesh removal) reasons, entails in any case an important symbolic load: producing an ossuary gathering

the different “individuals” of the community. The ritualisation observed in funerary spaces dating back to the 3rd millennium BC, at least in this sector, is possibly showing up the existence of symbolic mechanisms for social regulation, as previously indicated, aimed at reinforcing the social structure.

In the interior areas of the Iberian Peninsula, the most recent proposals opt for the existence of kinship relationships before bell-beaker period (Díaz del Río 2006: 71). The organisation of communities of this kind for the construction of enclosures throughout the Spanish Plateau is plausible according to these proposals. The absence of large habitat centres in the interior basin of the River Tagus, at least of the size we know for the basin of the rivers Guadiana and Guadalquivir, enables to speculate with an organisation of small groups which develop social relation and environment exploitation manners which are already latent in the agricultural communities of the 4th millennium BC (Cerrillo 2005: 162), now reflected on burials such as ossuaries in caves.

With the reduced number of data on Neolithic and Chalcolithic populations documented in this sector, research on the social relationships in these communities becomes a rather complex task, especially in the case of ossuaries such as Tío Republicano, where the multiple previous manipulations of the remains hinder the accurate recognition of the individuals bones belonged to and the kind of grave goods they were accompanied by. In short, data from new funerary contexts would be necessary for the evaluation of social relations according to a richer range of indicators. One of the basic problems faced by research was determining if there are different cultural or social traditions in the use of caves. We have attempted to contribute to this issue through the discussion of the agreements observed with megalithic architectures.

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