Multiple burials on pit graves from Recent Prehistory at Southwest of Iberia: The cases of Monte do Vale do Ouro 2 (Ferreira do Alentejo), Ribeira de S. Domingos 1 and Alto de Briches 3 (Serpa)

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Introduction

The consecutive works of rescue Archaeology have revealed new data about the funerary practices of Late Prehistoric communities of southwest of Portugal (Alentejo). The archaeological sites studied in this work were excavated by three archaeological enterprises (Omniknos, ERA Arqueologia SA and Palimpsesto), at different locations of the district of Beja. These correspond to Monte do Vale do Ouro 2 (Ferreira do Alentejo), Ribeira de S. Domingos 1 (Briches) and Alto de Briches 3 (Sã Salvador) (Fig. 1). According to the archaeological reports (Miguel & Godinho 2009; Alves et al. 2010; Moro Barreiro & Figueirôo 2013) at all sites were multiple burials on pit graves. The chronology of the structures varies from Late Neolithic/Chalcolithic to Bronze Age.

Materials and Methods

Monte do Vale do Ouro 2:
Pit 97 – burials [9701], [9702] and [9703], and a few decidual teeth;
Pit 102 – burials [10202], [10205] and [10207], and a few scattered bones from stratigraphic unit [10200].

Ribeira de S. Domingos 1:
Pit 1 – anatomical connections [807], [808] and [809], the burials [812], [813] and [814], and the scattered bones from stratigraphic unit [806].

Alto de Briches 3:
691 – burials [661] and [656], the anatomical connections [639] and [668], and the ossuaries [453], [469], [637] and [659].

Non-adults: at age death estimation (Smith 1991; AlQahtani et al. 2010). Adults: assessment of age at death (MacLaughlin 1990; Schaefer et al. 2009) and sexual diagnosis based on cranial features (Ferembach et al. 1980; Buitkra & Ubelaker 1994) and long bones (Wasterlain 2000). The laboratory results and the field data were also articulated.

Results and Discussion

- Structures had multiple burials, most of them in anatomical connection allowing to match the few cases of ossuaries or scattered bones with each respective individual.
- Minimal number of individuals varies between 3 (pit 691 at Alto de Briches 3), 4 (pit 97 and 102 at Monte do Vale do Ouro 2) and 5 (Ribeira de S. Domingos 1).
- Several inhumation positions identified: dorsal, lateral (right and left) and ventral decubitus and foetal position. The orientations were diverse: W-E, E-W, NW-SE, SE-NW and S-N (Fig. 2; Table 1).

- Both sexes and adults and non-adults are present. No discrimination by sex or age was detected (Table 1).
- Traces of fire found in several bones of the 3 individuals from pit 97 of Monte do Vale do Ouro 2 confirmed by FTIR analysis (Thompson et al. 2009), showing the possibility of inconsistent exposure to a low intensity fire. However, this cannot be interpreted as a practice of cremation (Fig. 3).
- Pit 102 of Monte do Vale do Ouro 2: Two lateral superior incisors (Fig. 3) display lingual sulci on the cement-enamel junction, probably resulting from the continuous friction of some kind of thread or wire. This represents evidences of non-masticatory use. Some occlusal and proximal sulcuses of the posterior and anterior teeth have been interpreted as a consequence of activities: weaving, basketry, production of nets, ropes and fibers, being the teeth used as a third hand (Lorkiewicz 2011).
- At Alto de Briches 3 some bones were rearranged, in some cases still with the soft tissues. This probably occurred for various reasons: ritual manipulation, space requirement or taphonomic agents (Rodrigues et al. 2012).
- In the same site, on the flat grave excavated inside of pit 691, a skeleton in ventral decubitus was possibly inhumed in some type of perishable material that allowed the preservation of its position (Fig. 2).

Final remarks

A new investigation perspective has been developed at the region of Alentejo's Late Prehistory. The emergence of new data about burials in pits, hypogreaves and ditches reveals the complexity and heterogeneity of prehistoric funerary practices. The studied sample, although small and limited by taphonomic agents, contributes to a better understanding of the funerary contexts of this territory. Nevertheless, it is important to continue the investigation of Funerary Anthropology and Paleobiology of these populations, since the comparison between coeval osteological collections from different structures of Southwest of Iberia can help to comprehend the diversity of funerary solutions and practices.

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*Figure 1 – localization of the studied area.

*Table 1 – Results of the studied bones from the archaeological sites.*