

Megalithic Simbology and the Definition of Space in Alentejo's plain Neolithic

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Abstract

Hundreds of carefully displayed stone elements are nowadays part of Alentejo's plain landscape. This Megalithic (Mega = Large and Lithos = Stone) features, composed of the first steps man gave to, through architectural achievements, define and give its surroundings a meaning. One can only speculate what their reasons were, what their celebrations were like, and the associations made with a higher entity(ies). Nonetheless, in the last century, some focus was given to these megalithic structures, motifs in bas-reliefs, location and alignments, are some of the properties of these elements that we can use to try to grasp what would compose the system of beliefs in which the world - and therefore the communities - were organized.

Meaning in Stone

Looking backwards

Nowadays, a strong part of the academic world focuses on the studies and interpretation of space. How the power structures design the city, their meaning and how that affects the individual. Nevertheless, in order to have a complete understanding of how contemporaneity/these meanings came to be, one must look backwards, to a time these where these questions were not even asked. Back to the age where mankind first gave serious attention to the physical phenomena. Tried to interact with them, represent them. And, to most of those wonders, were credited to some celestial structure. And so, were given the first steps that man gave towards connecting a space, interpret it, and giving it a meaning.

The previously mentioned concern for the environment around them, and this thirst for knowledge and understanding, brought an universal symbolic language crystallized in stone and space that lasted to the present day. The landscape, and natural geographic phenomena, were probably meaningful to the Pre-Historic man, and we're seen as the work of the Gods (Pereira 2009). Only later, the landscape was altered by man. These alterations built references for comprehension of the "cosmos".

Mother- Goddess Archetype

Uncountable are the number of Venus Statuettes that were, and will eventually be, found. The exaggerated proportions given in these artifacts to childbearing and maternity features can only indicate the high esteem fertility was taken in account (Antl-Weiser, 2009). In this country (Portugal) not one of these sculptures have been found, nonetheless, were discovered some shale totems with some motifs that can associate with the same issue (Pereira 2009) Not only the human birth was a reason for the primitive man to speculate over how the higher entities worked, but also the creation of their surroundings. The stars, the moon; the river and the hills. One universal entity. The Latin writer Apuleio

defines this goddess as "Nature, universal Mother, lover of the elements, ancient daughter of time, sovereign over all the spirit realm, queen of dead, queen of the immortal ones, the single manifestation of all the Gods and Goddesses that are, whose gesture reigns over the dazzling Heavens, over the sea breeze, over the silent mourns from the underworld. She is worshipped in many ways, known by uncountable names and fostered in rites of different natures." (Pereira 2009)

Neolithic Man

The Neolithic age comprehends the time where man already mastered some sedentary technologies as agriculture and animal husbandry (not fully perfected), but also the beginning of copper working. In Portugal this epoch situates somewhere between 5000 and 3000 a.C.. It is exactly in this few thousand years that the Megalithic art sprouts in Alentejo. In this architectural manifest, is where one can verify a unity of ideological/religious belief - the cult of the Mother Goddess.

Here in this essay, I will approach some of the most notorious Megalithic achievements in Portugal. Dating from 4500 to 2500 a.C.. These architectural achievements manifested in isolated, or not, stone structures that are still responsible for human gathering over some important dates as the solstices or equinoxes.

The sub mundane and Dolmens

These ancient architectural features are where we can read ideological sense in the quotidian life of the Neolithic man. “They have been memorials, funerary sites, spiritual centers, places of ceremony, the focus of folklore, and definers of the landscape.” (Oldham) . Due to the large scale of the pieces that compose the megalithic monuments, one can only assume the huge amount of time and human effort to put these together. With this, we can conclude that there was some sort of commitment that extends itself over time and generations. A commitment that carries the value structures that were responsible for managing the way this communities perceived its surroundings. All this expressed in a language that perpetuates these meanings after thousands of years after their creation.

One of the most abundant megalithic monuments in the Alentejo’s landscape is the Anta. Also known as *dolmens*, most¹ of these funerary “*buildings*” were built with 7 stone pieces (Oldham) – giving some sort of magical/religious meaning to this number. These 7 stones would form a polygonal chamber that would be, sometimes, covered with another one. The pieces that compose the monument are called orthostates, and usually, the more preponderant one would be facing the dolmen’s entrance. It is believed that this “main” orthostates, would be the one directly linked with an higher deity (Pereira 2009). Generally, the dolmen’s main chamber would be accessible from outside. For this feature, some of these types of monuments found in High Alentejo are built with a corridor that leads to the realm of dead. This access feature of the Dolmen was always made with smaller rocks than the ones that are part of the “actual” Megalith, their size could vary, being the biggest ones around 18m long (Pereira 2009).

One can also verify that most of the Antas in Alentejo² are placed in the “top” of hills, so, from there (if the landscape was not filled by green elements) the view on the horizon would be quite clear. The celestial beings in the sky would be easy to observe from there, and would also made possible to

¹ All of them ranged with 6 to 9 stones (Oldham)

² Alentejo is the biggest plane in continental Portugal, with an elevation above the sea level ranging generally between to 213m to 487m (Oldham)

align the gate to the realm of the dead, with the pretended otherworldly entity and its coming on the sky

Anta Grande do Zambujeiro

Near the meeting of the two small streams that converge into the modest Valverde river, stands tall the biggest Portuguese dolmen, the Anta Grande do Zambujeiro (Zambujeiro's Big Dolmen). This gargantuan megalithic structure has its chamber formed by 7 rocky pieces, all of them some 6m tall! Its 15m long corridor has one exquisite feature: it is divided in two. Which might imply some ordering in the entering and exiting of the funerary monument. The same way the planets in the solar systems revolve around a Star, so do other megalithic monuments "serve" as satellites to this epicenter. The built density around this dolmen proves itself a great sanctuary (Pereira 2009)

Anta do Tapadão

A few kilometers to the north, we find the Anta do Tapadão, also known as Anta da Aldeia da Mata (Dolmen of the village's woods). Another one of the fine megalithic specimens in high Alentejo. Having its chamber 4m radius and 3.8m high, one of the most fascinating feature about this example, is its precision. The almost perfect symmetry on the 7 placed orthostates, as well as an the headboard one, notoriously plumb. (Pereira 2009) Such as the Zambujeiro's Dolmen, this one is also surrounded in its nearby kilometers, with quite a few megalithic structures, reveals the importance the whole area could had to the Neolithic man.

Rocky phallus and clusters

The menhirs, the most simple kind of architecture accomplishment. A single rocky element that stands in the landscape, materializing its meaning. The essence given to the environment is now materialized in a way that it perpetuates itself to our present day. Their use can go from sightseeing star “equipment”, to “simply” demarking the territory - being it to some ancient geo-political level; being it some less palpable affair, such as creating an cosmic affinity between Earth and Sky, or even – once again, – to represent and celebrate human life and fertility (Pereira 2009)

Besides the implied ideology and belief system in the Megalithic monuments that we just observed, one can see even further, if we zoom out the sight-frame. If we put these two architectural typologies in the same line of reading, one can take a few conclusion: If, the dolmens are associated with death, the underworld, a *chthonic* monument, the menhirs, as “opposed”, with their verticality, aimed to the skies, are *celestial* monuments (Pereira 2009). So, these two different architectural feats compose the two different centers of megalithic belief system. Who would, together, hold represent the ideologic structure of these communities.

Rock Circles

If we already can take some conclusions based on single (not isolated) menhirs, even more one can take from a group of them. These are called cromelechs, or simply (due to the geometric configuration of most of them) stone circles. Professor Thom, in the 60's, while studying some English examples, noted a system of alignments in these cromelechs, in which were used more than one center, granting the plan a geometric complexity. Such as the menhirs, these stone circles could have been territorial marks, and have in their composition celestial alignments that may have been observed from them and used almost as universal calendar. Following their use as a celestial “sightseeing” area (such as the menhirs), and

their mostly circular shape; it is also believed that these monuments could have in them synthesized the cosmic dome. The most interesting possible use for these megalithic complexes, is their use as a sacred place, meant to host rites and celebrations. Places where a community – presumably in such days as equinoxes and solstices, where some alignments are verified - would gather, rejoice, and praise mother earth and father sky.

Cromeleque dos Almendres

Near Évora, stands the biggest and more important cromelech of the Iberian Peninsula. The Cromeleque dos Almendres (Cromelech of the Almendres), has near 100 stones nowadays. According to Mário Gomes, it is presumed that this megalithic complex has suffered a few changes in the course of time. It started by two smaller circles, that now form the “entrance” to this sacred place. In Mid-Neolithic, a few dozen monoliths were added, forming two horseshoe ranks (also concentric) (Varela 1997).

This structure stands tall close to the top of the hill it belongs to, and it extends (the same way the dolmens are faced to) downhill. Giving a monumental panorama sight from the complex. One can also find some small anthropomorphic depictions in menhir 48 and 56. In this last one is also observable a lunar necklace. Menhir 58 provides us with some radial solar motifs. With the alignments and motifs, and all else stated previously on this document, we can assume a “religious superstructure, center on a female super-divinity, idealized, with huge sun-like eyes, the *great Mediterranean mother-goddess.*”

Found in the foundations of some of the menhirs, were found a few millstones (Varela 1997) – as were in some of other megaliths in the south region of the country. This use of an equipment designated to prepare food as a piece that helped materialize these stone complexes, leads one to connect the celebration of celestial bodies³ with earth fertility and wealth. Therefore, hooking up in the same belief frame the economic and the religious elements.

³ Already evident in the solar and lunar alignments present in most megalithic structures.

Cromeleque da Portela dos Mogos

Not so magnanimous, but also quite relevant in the studies of Alentejo's pre-historic man, comes the Cromeleque da Portela de Mogos. This monument, composed originally by circa 40 menhirs, is located only a few kilometers away from the Almendre's Cromelech. The complex is in an ovular shape, with its narrower end pointing east – in which direction follows a small lines of menhirs – and, inside this ovoid form, roughly through its center, there is a line of megaliths that marks the north-south line.

This complex has some menhirs with a few features quite alike the ones found in Almendre's. In 4 of them, one can verify one bas-relief of a somehow human face. Circular eyes and a large nose also blessed with an lunar motif. Menhir 25 has, although, a unique feature: what appears to be a representation of breasts, granting to these phallic (and therefore a masculine) monument, an feminine trait.

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