

SOUTH-WEST IBERIAN EARLY IRON AGE: A THEORETICAL HYPOTHESIS

A theoretical common-place states, amongst others by L. R. Binford, is that «the form and structure which characterizes the mortuary practices of any society are conditioned by the form and complexity of the organizational characteristics of the society itself»¹. However this is partially denied by archaeological practice in several instances. The social interpretation of mortuary remains, and their burial structures, is only possible if we possess the minimal information of that living society.

The burial practices (and procedures) of South-West Iberian Early Iron Age 8th-5th cent. B.C. can exemplify such a case². In fact in the state of our present knowledge of this 'strictly localized' proto-historic culture, we have no more than necropolis containing cremations. Since 1969, we have been looking for settlements but, as yet, none have been found³.

In a 2,600 Km² area, systematically searched, more than 50 necropolis were found but no trace of human settlements can be connected with them.

Let us see what we can infer on the basis of such an undiversified body of evidence, exercising just an elementary analysis of burial remains.

Necropolis of the South-West Iberian Early Iron Age include epitaphs in the oldest Iberian script⁴, but it should be noted that no known necropolis provides more than two or three inscriptions; in spite of being formed by thirty or forty tombs, in each necropolis there are only two or three tombs individualized by epigraphic stones. Beyond the inscription there is not any social differentiation of the mortuary ritual. We have found tombs with an inscription but no burial furniture and, on the other hand, there are tombs without inscription but with an exuberant, rich and significant set of burial furniture. These are of both local and East Mediterranean origins.

The topographic and architectural analysis of each tomb, in the same necropolis, could hypothetically give us an idea of social complexity and, in some way, of the hierarchical structure of that society. In spite of the short chronological spectrum of each necropolis and of its architectural homogeneity (shape, dimensions, and stone materials) we can only say that it recalls the idea of an egalitarian society which is not, historically, acceptable.

¹ L. R. Binford, «Mortuary practices: their study and potential», *Memoirs of the Society for American Archaeology* 25, 1971, p. 23.

² S. P. M. Estácio da Veiga, *Antiguidades monumentaes do Algarve* IV, Lisboa 1891; A. Santos Rocha, *Memorias sobre a Antiguidade*, Figueira da Foz 1897, pp. 143-159; M.^a M. Alves Dias, C. M. Beirão e L. Coelho, «Duas necrópoles da Idade do Ferro no Baixo Alentejo: Ourique», *AP*, 3^a s., 4, 1970, pp. 175-219; M.^a M. Alves Dias e L. Coelho, «Notável lápide proto-histórica da herdade da Abóbada - Almodôvar», *AP*,

3^a s., 5, 1971, pp. 181-190; L. Coelho, «Epigrafia prelatina del SO. peninsular português», *Actas Salamanca*, pp. 201-216; M.^a M. Alves Dias e L. Coelho, «Objectos arqueológicos de um túmulo de incineração da necrópole proto-histórica da herdade da Favela Nova, Ourique», *AP*, 4^a s., 1, 1983, pp. 197-206.

³ M.^a G. P. Maia, excavating at the mining place of Neves-Corvo, Castro Verde, recently found a house-like structure.

⁴ M. Gómez-Moreno, *La escritura bástulo-turdetana (primitiva hispánica)*, Madrid 1962.

The evidence of rich burial furniture, with several objects from the eastern Mediterranean, can imply that the cremated individual had in some way trade connections. However this can not give us an idea of his social hierarchical standing. Likewise the iron weapons found in a grave can not assure us of any individual's military role.

If we had settlement evidence for each known necropolis we could much more easily draw the ties between the living society and the burial evidence. Thus, perhaps, we might find that a necropolis only contained a small part of the population of the settlement —a specific rank within it.

The fact that each necropolis is a *continuum* of associated graves of cremated individuals supports the idea of the presence of an horizontal social structure (*stratum*) in each necropolis.

The theoretical positions, held by ethnologists, are based on the assumption that an important individual needs to be important simultaneously in the spheres of society, economy and politics. If this happens, the convergence of the evidence of these three functions in society should produce a large grave, full of precious objects. If these three categories are not found in the same individual one can not expect the society to produce a tomb that would present a non-existent reality.

Nevertheless one can find a hierarchised society in which the highest *status* is not represented particularly by external *ornamenta*, but might be indicated by the presence of an epitaph which could represent the true *status* evidence in each necropolis. The economic function could be in the hands of another social group beyond the political ruling class; or, otherwise, the economic power could be shared both by those who provide the economic function and those warrior's descendents still holding the political control.

Homer's *Odyssey* provides one case, the «Pheacian society»⁵, where the leading class, although still having ideologically the privileges of an economically strong group do not have the means to provide the practical needs for this. The economic wealth is in the hands of the new rising social group, the mariners, who however have not yet even thought of replacing the old «aristocracy». Nevertheless, it is clear that the typical «aristocratic» functions (such as the military and the guardianship of the old religious principles) are no longer required. The «new group» has even found for itself a God and urban forms others than the old palaces.

A social model, like the «Pheacian society», could be tried, as a theoretical key, on the organizational structure of this almost unknown south-western society.

In the Portuguese proto-historic necropolis and since the inscriptions are not yet deciphered, we have to look for answers among the burial furniture but we are conscious that this traditional procedure can never give us a complete and concrete answer. At the same time, we are looking for an urban centre, as an initial condition for the development and transmission of writing.

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⁵ *Odys.* VIII, 1-13.