A changing world: settlement dynamics, territory and sociopolitical transformation in West-Central Iberia during the first millennium b.c.e. 

Some observations from an ongoing research

AIMS AND SCOPE
The research we are developing now is a very ambitious one, but necessary and feasible. There is already a long history of investigation about the Protohistoric occupation of the region comprised between the Tagus and the Mondego rivers. But, despite the existence of a very interesting amount of empirical data, this data is not evenly distributed along the territory, neither quantitatively nor qualitatively.

With this project, we pursue the construction of an explanation model for the evolution of the strategies and modes of occupation and economic use of a vast territory, but with a closer look to a more restrict regional area, the Middle Tagus basin, a region we investigate since the 1990s. This endeavour can be materialized in a set of specific objectives, from a rigorous collection of the available empirical data and the definition of the relevant descriptive criteria necessary to the subsequent analytical process, to the extensive knowledge of the resources that existed to be exploited by each community in different periods of the chronology framework and in distinct geographical and geomorphological settings.

THE EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND
The first large project to be undertaken in our study area was the one conducted by Raquel Vilaca during the late 1980s and the early 1990s, centred in the eastern part of the area (the Beira Interior). We may consider her research as a milestone in the process of knowledge acquisition regarding the regional protohistoric past, with a fundamental influence over the following investigation. This influence is very well quantified by the growth of projects we saw in the last two decades, although showing some tendency towards a more refined focus on the study of the Protohistoric period.

The Middle Tagus region received the attention of the researchers from the middle of the 1980s, and especially during the last decade of the twentieth century and the years of the current one, centred at the Instituto Politécnico de Tomar and the Mação’s Instituto Terra e Memória. Several sites were recognized and excavated, but a lot of work remained unfinished, mainly concerning the systematization of the territorial data and the production of an evolutionary and explanatory model. On the other side, much of the information gathered covers only a fraction of the period under investigation, its beginning (the Late Bronze Age). Unfortunately, the empirical data related to most of the first millennium BCE (the Iron Age and the Roman Conquest phases) is still very scarce and only three years ago we started the systematic study of an Iron Age walled settlement in this region.

In what concerns to the westernmost part of the study area and the majority of the lands to the south of the Tagus, the outlook is not better: there is a lot of information not very well systematized (especially in the Lisbon area) or very good data from a specific territory (the Santarém area and its vicinity). This vast region has received the attention of researchers such as João Luís Cardoso, Ana Margarida Arruda, Elisa de Sousa, and João Pimenta, among others. However, in most of the cases the compilation and analysis of the available data rarely goes further than the empirical material basis, although the research team directed by Ana Arruda has already produced several territorial analytical studies but focused on the Iron Age.

In short, there is by now a lot of information and research effort on the Protohistoric settlement patterns of the Iberian West-Central area but most of it was produced outside of a systematic regional investigation framework or, being this the case, without enough chronological extent to allow a better understanding of the evolution of the occupation of the territory.

METHODOLOGY
The methodology applied to this investigation is guided by two main goals, the acquisition and analysis of the empirical information, and the creation of the explanatory model. For the accomplishment of the first goal, raw data was gathered into a database of loci chronologically linked to the period of time under scrutiny, a relational database constructed from scratch that contains relevant geographical, geomorphological and economical information necessary to the development of an archaeological approach.

The analytical process is based on the most recent techniques and methods of Geographic Information Systems, whose results are assessed in the context of the historical evolution of the exploitation of the territory. All the entries of the database are classified under a system of evaluation of the confidence degree of the available information.

The analysis of the empirical basis is more detailed in the Middle Tagus basin, the region where we have been working since the late twentieth century.

The final explanatory model of the occupation strategies in the different geographic settings and of their historical evolution will rely on the results of the analytical methodology but must integrate a very strong interpretive factor, because we consider historical modelling as a fundamentally interpretive process.

EXPECTED RESULTS
As we stated before, despite a considerable amount of archaeological data already collected, there is still a lot of work to be done in the investigation of the Protohistory of the west-central area of the Iberian Peninsula. To be a little more specific, we lack a broad spectrum approach that covers the exploitation of a large territory in a way similar to what was already done in other regions of the Iberian Peninsula, where studies starting in the Late Bronze Age and ending when the Roman Empire was firmly established are common. The investigation we are developing is the first one that will result in an archaeogeographical approach of the Protohistoric past of this region, a study that covers a period of time of more than one millennium, a period of time in which several stages of transformation are perceived, what was already done in other regions of the Iberian Peninsula, where studies starting in the Late Bronze Age and ending when the Roman Empire was firmly established are common. The investigation we are developing is the first one that will result in an archaeogeographical approach of the Protohistoric past of this region, a study that covers a period of time of more than one millennium, a period of time in which several stages of transformation are perceived, some of global scope, others with just a limited incidence. This project is not about the systematization of the empirical data and the production of an evolutionary and explanatory model.

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