

ESTUDOS ARQUEOLÓGICOS DE OEIRAS

Volume 30 • 2022



Editor científico: João Luís Cardoso

CÂMARA MUNICIPAL DE OEIRAS
2022

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ESTUDOS ARQUEOLÓGICOS DE OEIRAS

Volume 30 • 2022 ISSN: 0872-6086

EDITOR CIENTÍFICO – João Luís Cardoso
DESENHO E FOTOGRAFIA – Autores ou fontes assinaladas
PRODUÇÃO – Gabinete de Comunicação / CMO
CORRESPONDÊNCIA – Centro de Estudos Arqueológicos do Concelho de Oeiras
Fábrica da Pólvora de Barcarena
Estrada das Fontainhas
2745-615 BARCARENA

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ORIENTAÇÃO GRÁFICA E
REVISÃO DE PROVAS – João Luís Cardoso e Autores
PAGINAÇÃO – César Antunes
IMPRESSÃO E ACABAMENTO – Grificamares, Lda. - Amares - Tel. 253 992 735
DEPÓSITO LEGAL: 97312/96

A CONFERÊNCIA DE MARTINHO DE MENDONÇA DE PINA E DE PROENÇA HOMEM DE 30 DE JULHO DE 1733 NA ACADEMIA REAL DA HISTÓRIA PORTUGUESA, OU O PRIMEIRO ENSAIO PRÉ-CIENTÍFICO SOBRE A ANTIGUIDADE DOS DÓLMENES

THE LECTURE GIVEN BY MARTINHO DE MENDONÇA DE PINA E DE PROENÇA HOMEM ON JULY 30, 1733 AT THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF PORTUGUESE HISTORY, OR THE FIRST PRE-SCIENTIFIC ESSAY ON THE ANTIQUITY OF DOLMENS

João Luís Cardoso¹

'In the 18th century the Royal Academy of Portuguese History, founded in 1720 by King João V, introduced, for the first time, proper historical investigations to replace the, shall we say, monastic literature on which all historical and archaeological research had hitherto been based'

Emilio Hübner, 1872, p. 3

Abstract

Until the middle of the 19th century no monuments attributed to prehistoric times were identified in Europe, given that the notion of Prehistory, associated with the antiquity of the human species, only emerged by then. Notwithstanding, some 120 years before Martinho de Mendonça de Pina e de Proença, from the Royal Academy of Portuguese History, had already reached some coherent conclusions regarding prehistoric monuments, despite lacking the scientific basis that could lead to their correct interpretation.

His essay on dolmens, which was the subject of the lecture he gave at the Royal Academy on July 30, 1733, embodied, 300 years ago, a genuine desire to explain the observable reality in rational terms, rejecting ancient dogmas or beliefs of religious or profane nature. This is indeed one of the most relevant aspects of his contribution, as he sought to determine antiquity of dolmens on the basis of objective criteria. To this end, he valued both the biblical information and the empirical evidence he had observed.

Keywords: Martinho de Mendonça de Pina e de Proença; Dólmens; Portugal; Eighteen century; Royal Academy of Portuguese History.

1 – DOLMENS IN THE PORTUGUESE IMAGINARY

In 1912, José Leite de Vasconcelos gave a paper to the International Congress of Archaeology, held in Rome, on the importance of toponymy for the knowledge of the prehistoric settlement of Portuguese terri-

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tory. For this purpose, he relied on toponyms related to megalithic monuments, or the mounds that sometimes still covered them, such as *Anta*, *Antas*, *Antela/Antelas*, *Antinha*, *Arca/Arcas*, *Arcainha*, *Mama*, *Mamaltar*, *Mamoa*, *Mamoinha*, *Mamunha*, *Orca*, *Pála*, *Paradanta*, *Paradantas*, *Perafita*, among many others.

A thorough study of all the toponyms related to the presence of dolmens in Portuguese territory and their linguistic explanation was published by the ethnographer and archaeologist Luís Chaves (CHAVES, 1951). It was thus possible to demonstrate the occurrence of such toponyms in a broad and generalised manner throughout the country, which revealed, in J. Leite de Vasconcelos' view, the greater or lesser intensity of the prehistoric settlement, depending on the regions. Their present-day abundance would be proportional to the population density in prehistoric times in the various Portuguese regions (VASCONCELOS, 1912, p. 156) (Fig. 1).

However, acceptance of this possibility was rightly challenged by Virgínia Rau, who argued that the referred toponymic abundance, being only of medieval and modern origin, simply resulted from the demographic density of the current population (RAU, 1952). This would explain the large number of toponyms in the Minho region, which is currently the most densely populated. For this author, the counterproof of this conclusion would be the remarkable presence of the many dolmens – more than three hundred – identified and explored by Manuel Heleno in the region of Coruche / Montemor-o-Novo, which, because it is a sparsely populated geographical area, features scarce traces of such monuments in its toponymy.

The updated distribution of dolmens in Portuguese territory (Fig. 2) proves her point, as there is an evident contrast between their presence on the land and the number of corresponding toponyms, in sparsely populated regions such as the Alentejo, where the word *anta* and its derivatives predominate, while toponyms such as *orca*, *arca*, *mamôa* and their derivatives are characteristic of inland central and northern Portugal.

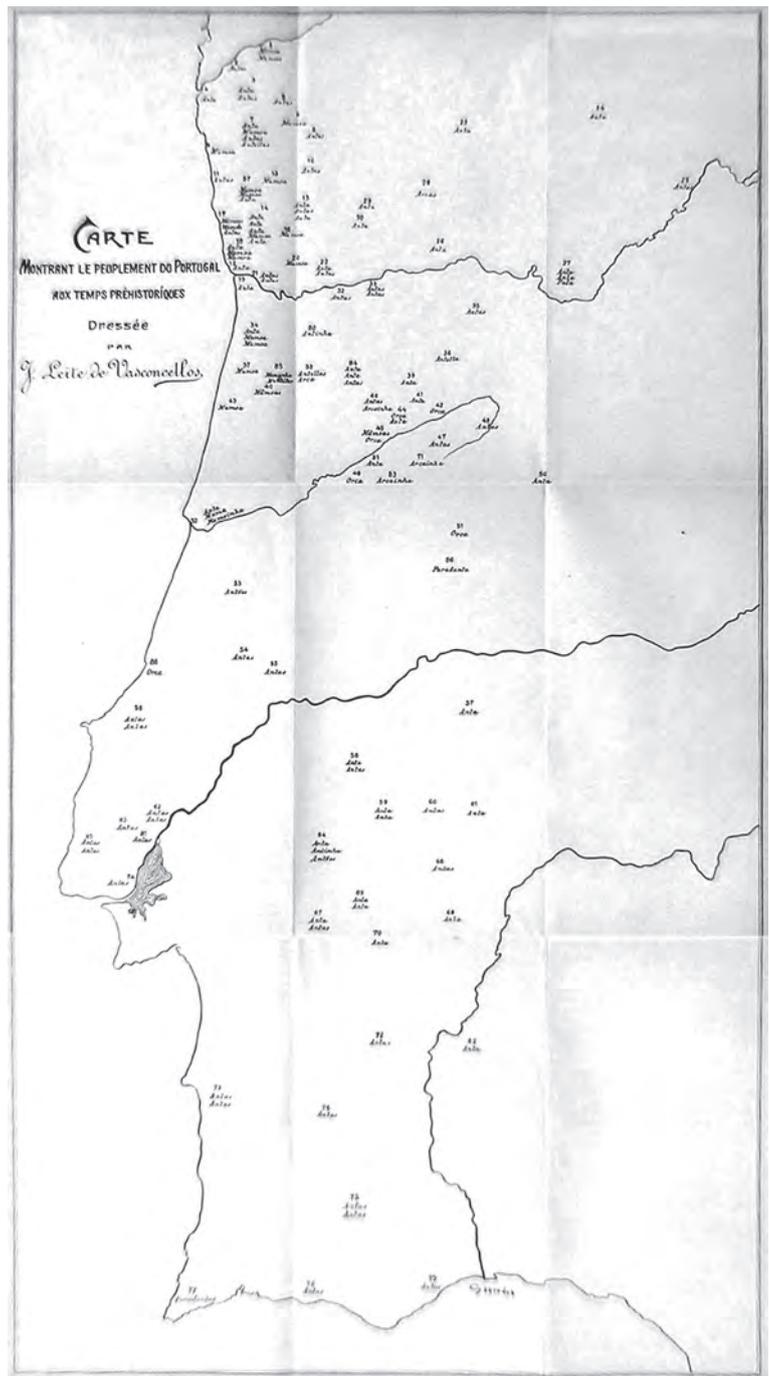


Fig. 1 – Distribution of toponyms related to the word *anta* and correlative words in the Portuguese territory (after VASCONCELOS, 1912).



Fig. 2 - Distribution of dolmens (black circles) in the Portuguese territory (after KALB, 1980).

We would stress that names such as *orca*, *arca*, and their derivatives can be explained by the morphology of the monuments themselves, resembling a stone box consisting of a number of upright stones with a capstone (*chapéu* or *mesa*) resting on them, while the term *mamôa* is explained by the cases where the corresponding tumuli are still preserved. These tumuli consist of mounds of earth or stones, with a hemispherical shape, resembling women's breasts.

Regarding the word *anta*, the explanation for its origins appears to be more complex – it is a word of erudite origin, although it has been popularly and broadly adopted: 'The Latins referred to the large, square columns that garnished the entrances to the temples and palaces as *antae*; it may well be that the monstrous rocks overlooking some remarkable localities, and through which roads ran, were metaphorically called *antas* (...)' (VITERBO, 1798, *Anta*, p. 120). Hence, the popular designation would have an erudite origin, of architectural nature, as pointed out by Leite de Vasconcelos (VASCONCELOS, 1897, p. 25, 252, 309). This author, discussing the meaning of *antas*, considers it a synonym of *arae*, associating them with altars and thus

following the interpretation of Martinho de Mendonça de Pina e de Proença, a Royal Academy scholar who had addressed the same issue decades earlier, as we shall see further on.

Antas, *mamôas* and their derivatives would therefore be the words used to designate the dolmenic monuments that dotted the territory, since at least the 9th century, as stated by Viterbo: ‘From the 9th to the 12th century, many documents were written in Portugal and Spain, in which *mamóas*, or *mamúas* are called *mamólas*, in accordance with the Latin used at the time’ (VITERBO, 1799, Mamóia, p. 109), based on examples from 13th- and 14th-century Portuguese documents. This author also emphasises that the use of this group of toponyms for territorial delimitation has been a fact since at least the Early Middle Ages: ‘The proceedings of the 569 Council of Lugo state that King Theodomiro defined the limits of the bishoprics and churches according to the ancient towns, hills, or castles, vel archarum confinia’.

A document from around 760, not specified by Viterbo, reads as follows: *Pro ut dividit cum alias Villas per petras fixas, & mamolas antiquas*. Many other cases could be quoted, such as those referred to by José Leite de Vasconcelos, in the previously mentioned study (VASCONCELOS, 1912, p. 258) or in his preceding one, from 1897, where he also addresses the etymology of *anta* and *orca*, as mentioned above.

Virginia Rau adds some more examples of the archaic use of these two groups of toponyms, in documents from 1156, 1165 and 1171, showing their full use in the 12th century as visual references for the delimitation of lands (RAU, 1952, p. 217, note 1).

While this is more common in the lands north of the Tagus, following the Reconquest and the Christian settlement of the lands south of the Tagus, the same practice was adopted in territories that lacked delimitation at the time, resorting to the same type of visual markers. Such is the case, referred to by Rui Mataloto (MATALOTO, 2020), of the 1276 municipal charter of Monsaraz, granted by King Afonso III, in which a dolmen is mentioned as a boundary mark of the municipality area: ‘and it reaches some *antas* of an *arca* from ancient times’ (Fig. 3). It is interesting to note the correlation between the two designations: *antas* in the sense of a portal, as previously mentioned, defined by upright stones (the struts), combined to form a structure called *arca*. It is also important to note its attribution to ‘ancient times’, whose antiquity was unknown but taken for granted.

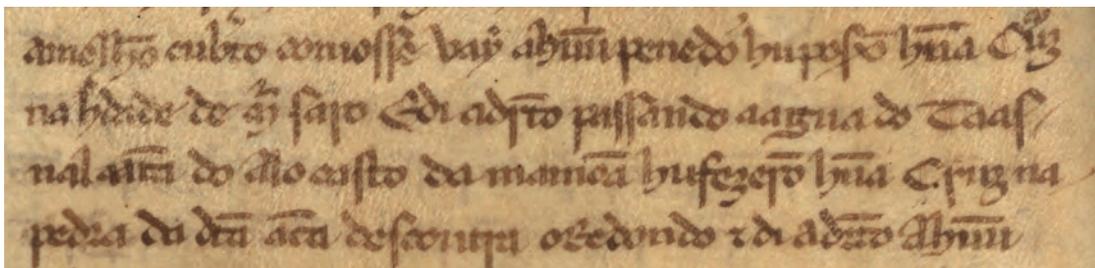


Fig. 3 – Excerpt of the municipal charter of Monsaraz, granted in 1276 by King Afonso III, in which a dolmen is referred to as a municipal boundary mark (after MATALOTO, 2020).

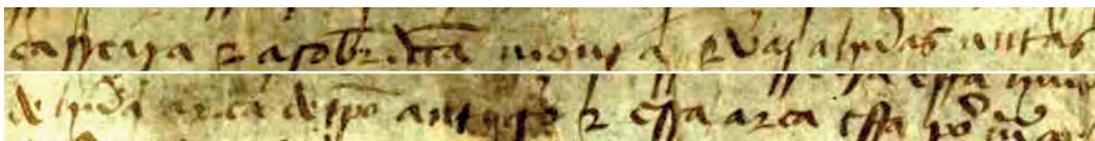


Fig. 4 – Excerpt from the municipal charter of Redondo, granted in 1318 by King Dinis in which a dolmen is referred to as a municipal boundary mark: ‘the *mamoa* hill where a cross was carved on a stone of the said *anta* of Redondo’ (after MATALOTO, 2020).

In other official documents from the Alentejo region, also enhanced by Rui Mataloto, such as the municipal charter of Redondo (Fig. 4), there are references to a Vale da Anta, in the municipality of Redondo, corresponding to the existing *anta*, after which the estate where it is located was named (MATALOTO, 2019). In the charter of this municipality, granted in 1318 by King Diniz, there is a mention to ‘a cross carved on the stone of the said anta, which stood on top of a *mamoa*’. This highlights the clear association of the two designations: the *anta*, as a portal-like stone structure, placed in the centre of the *mamoa* that originally covered it entirely, and as we nowadays know. The said cross is still visible today (Fig. 5), sacralising a monument whose existence was eventually subordinated to the major symbol of Christianity. Actually, comparable cases of appropriation of ancient monuments by Christianity can be observed all over medieval Europe, resulting from an effort to integrate and legitimise them. Once raised by ‘heretics’, their purification was imperative in order to keep their symbolic relevance intact (MORTILLET, 1866).

Indeed, the idea that dolmens were associated with pagan beliefs persisted in the popular imagination for a long time, and in some cases until the present day. One of the most obvious cases is the Pedra dos Mouros dolmen (Sintra), which, until the beginning of the 20th century, was annually visited by people attending the



Fig. 5 – Cross carved on the Colmeeiro dolmen (Redondo), probably the one referred to in the municipal charter of Redondo granted by King Diniz (after MATALOTO, 2020).

Senhor da Serra pilgrimage. A 1907 photograph by J. Benoliel (BOAVENTURA & CARDOSO, 2014, Fig. 5) documents this particular devotion linked to the prehistoric monument (Fig. 6), which would be tied to a practice intended to propitiate female fertility: women who wanted to become pregnant slipped along the larger upright stone, in direct contact with its surface (verbal information provided by the much missed archaeologist O. da Veiga Ferreira, who witnessed it in his youth). Referring to the same dolmen, Vergílio Correia points out exactly the same practice, but omitting its ritual character, merely stating that the monument would be ‘used by the joyful pilgrims for some “butt sliding” exercises’ (CORREIA, 1913, p. 351). In fact, the same slipping and rubbing ritual practice was identified in France, along with climbing (SÉBILLOT, 1902, p. 176), both coexisting, as we have shown, in the case of Pedra dos Mouros. This practice may have a propitiatory meaning, favouring female fertility, as previously mentioned, or as an omen of marriage: Luís Chaves referred to the slipping practices observed at this dolmen as ‘proof of experience and divination of lovers or suitors’ (CHAVES, 1951, p. 112), which would not lack a playful component, as stated by this author.

Similar events may also occur on natural boulders: some cases have been identified in Portugal, at Povia da Lanhoso and Prazins (Guimarães), among others mentioned by Luís Chaves (CHAVES, 1917, p. 59), who quotes Leite de Vasconcelos.

Another toponym related to dolmens in Portuguese territory, clearly reminiscent of pagan practices of a propitiatory nature, was also referred to by Chaves and derives from the architectural characteristics of the better preserved dolmens, with the struts still covered by a horizontal capstone, not unlike a table and suggestive of the shape of an altar. Indeed, we are referring to the word ‘altar’, with its variants: the ‘Altar de Vale de Fachas’, or ‘Mamaltar de Vale de Fachas’ (Viseu) is a renowned dolmen from the Côta region since the well-known study by José Coelho (COELHO, 1912) (Fig. 7), to which other toponyms of the same family could be added: *Mamaltar / Mama do Altar* and *Pedra de Altar* or *do Altar*, in the Beira Baixa region, as pointed out



Fig. 6 – Photo of the Pedra dos Mouros dolmen, Belas (Sintra), taken by J. Benoliel on the day of the Senhor da Serra pilgrimage in 1907 (after BOAVENTURA & CARDOSO, 2014).

by Luís Chaves (CHAVES, 1951, p. 97). The architectural similarity between certain dolmens and altars explains the propitiatory practices of pagan origin involving dolmens and recorded in medieval times. These practices were related to the success of the harvest: as recently as 1951, and according to Leite de Vasconcelos, Luís Chaves mentions ‘the example of a dolmen, near Pinhel, where the firstfruits of the year are burnt (...); then, based on the direction of the smoke, the oracle of the agricultural crops is revealed, concerning the lands to which the cremated firstfruits belonged; depending on the direction, to the right or to the left, the year is good or bad’ (CHAVES, 1951, p. 112). One could easily replace the modern augur by the Roman or pre-Roman one, to have an impressive idea of the survival of this cult, probably since pre-Roman times, until modernity.

Burning firstfruits on top of dolmen capstones as if they were rural altars, in the scope of tithe practices, was therefore a divinatory practice that reached recent times, as pointed out by Luís Chaves. Given the interest of the testimony recorded in 1758 in the *Memorias Paroquias* [lit. parish records], concerning the dolmen of Paranhiera, near the town of Soutelo (Vila Verde), with similar characteristics to the previous example, it will be transcribed again herein, as recorded by Pedro de Azevedo (AZEVEDO, 1903, p. 270, 271):

‘In this parish of Soutello there is an antiquity in the locality of Cachada and it seems to be a round stone ten or twelve palms in diameter, of appropriate thickness, set over seven stones at a height of six palms above the ground; judging from its roughness it would be a hard task, even for two hundred men, to set it in place and thus it would seem to have been formed within the earth and possibly uncovered by the rains over time (and it is called ‘paranhiera’), which is a suitable analogy in this province, considering its presumed use; it served for the sacrificial burning of the fruits, like Abel did, because after setting apart the tithe they took some of the remaining fruits and set them on fire and the smoke that came out of them was observed; if it rose straight up into the sky they believed they had tithed well but if the smoke drifted sideways they thought they had tithed badly and they tithed again’.

These practices, which could be observed throughout the countryside year after year, undoubtedly influenced the interpretations of the first scholars who addressed the meaning of the dolmenic structures in Portugal. That was the case of Fr. Martinho de São Paulo who, in a 1571 letter transcribed by Fr. Manuel de São Caetano Damásio (DAMÁSIO, 1793, pp. 3, 4), interprets the dolmens of the Serra d’Ossa range as altars erected by the Lusitanians, in celebration of the victory over the Roman armies: ‘after the battle, they offered sacrifices to their Gods in thanksgiving for the victory’.



Fig. 7 – Cover of the monograph on the *mamaltar* of Vale de Fachas (COELHO, 1912) (original and photo by the author).

A similar interpretation was put forward by Manuel Severim de Faria, who, during his journey between Sernancelhe and Ranhados on November 24, 1604, referred that the dolmens located near the township bearing the name of Antas, near Sarzedas, were used for 'gentile sacrifices' (SERRÃO, 1974, p. 109-110).

Actually, the tradition that links dolmens with altars or their use as such dates back at least to Roman times. Romans were well aware of these altars, as suggested by Leite de Vasconcelos, on the basis of a toponymic reference included in the Antonine Itinerary: *Ad Septem Aras* refers to a place in the Olisipo – Emerita route, and may indicate a location where seven or several dolmens were situated, given the use of the number seven with a symbolical or magical value, widespread throughout Europe, expressing the notion of sets of homologous elements associated with the notion of quantity (VASCONCELOS, 1912, p. 208).

To sum up, the sacralisation of natural rock masses or archaeological structures was quite common in Portugal and also in Spain and dates back to times before Christianity. A comprehensive study of this phenomenon, with regard to sacred rocky outcrops, has recently been conducted by Martín Almagro, placing its genesis in protohistoric times, in association with the Celtic presence (ALMAGRO GORBEA, 2015), persisting during the Roman period and reaching modern times.

Anyhow, the magical significance of dolmens in Portuguese popular traditions is not negligible. Without going into detail on this interesting subject, we would point out that, in popular imagination, dolmens are very often associated with supernatural spaces, with enchanted moors or moorish maidens, who 'live there, spell-bound in punishment or guarding mysterious treasures' (CHAVES, 1917, p. 62). This association is clearly registered in toponymy throughout the country, from north to south, e.g. the case of the aforementioned Pedra dos Mouros in Belas.

The above described conceptual framework concerning dolmens in popular imagination persisted until today. Only exceptionally, and by way of the casual recovery of human bones, were dolmens associated with their primordial burial use, e.g. the case of a 'Moorish grave' reported by Santos Rocha, in the municipality of Figueira da Foz (idem, ibidem, p. 68).

On the other hand, the attribution to St. Torpes of the well-known grave located at the mouth of Ribeira da Junqueira, on the coast south of Sines, is related to another set of factors, of erudite and ecclesiastic origin, at the roots of the first archaeological excavation of a prehistoric site in Portuguese territory, or possibly even at European level (CARDOSO, 2017).

From the 16th century onwards, studies concerning Classical Antiquity and their authors were already widely known by scholars, who used them exhaustively as a means of integrating the information resulting from these readings in the interpretation of monuments whose true antiquity and purpose had not yet been revealed by archaeology (SERRÃO, 2015). Even though the typology of this particular grave is unknown, everything suggests a small dolmen or dolmenic cist, which still kept two struts in the 18th century. This arrangement was sufficient for considering it the burial place of the Christian martyr St. Torpes, whose body would have washed ashore in the very spot where he was buried. The sepulchre was explored in 1591; a detailed record of the works was kept and the archaeological and anthropological remains were stored in a chest. The document concerning its opening, dated February 6, 1695, has been preserved (Codex 146 of the National Library of Portugal – BNP) (Fig. 8). The grave site was marked by a *cruzeiro* [stone cross], dated 1793, of which only the base still remains (Fig. 9). A schist plaque stands out among the archaeological remains recovered at the time. This plaque was illustrated in the aforementioned 1695 codex (Fig. 10), and is perhaps the oldest international publication of a prehistoric cult object, subsequently illustrated in the 1746 work by Liz Velho on the life of St. Torpes (VELHO, 1746). Coincidentally, this item, which can be dated back to Late Neolithic, around 3300-2900 BC, is part of the most characteristic and iconic group of artistic



Fig. 9 – Base of the stone cross [*cruzeiro*] erected in 1793 at the mouth of the Ribeira da Junqueira, south of Sines, to mark the site of the tomb of St. Torpes (photo by J. L. Cardoso).

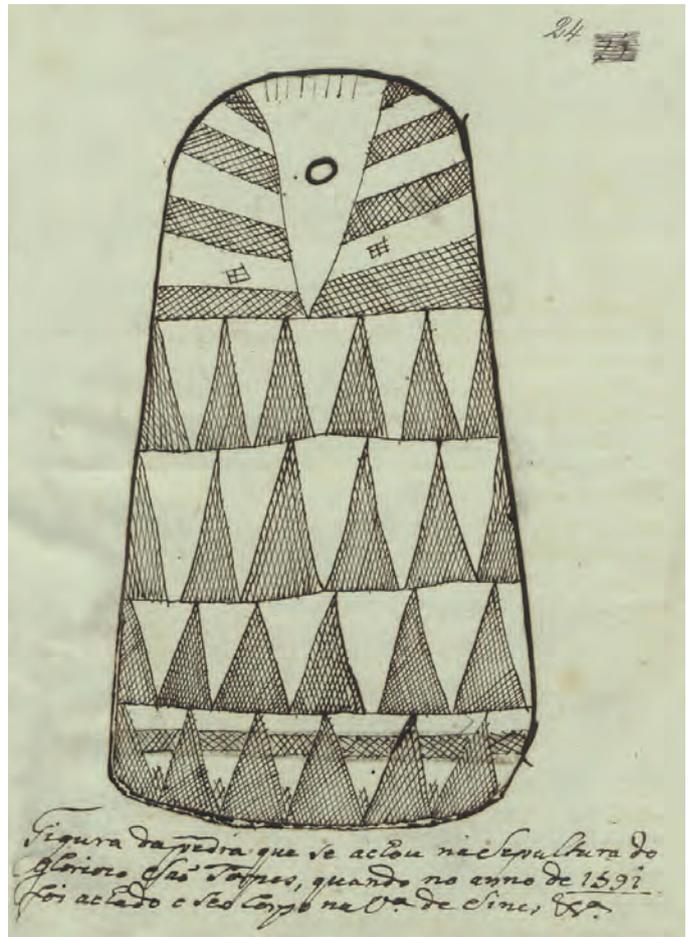


Fig. 10 – Quill pen drawing of the schist plaque found in the alleged tomb of St. Torpes, included in BNP Codex 146 and dated February 6, 1695. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first illustration of a prehistoric symbolic object anywhere in the world (courtesy of BNP).

productions of Portuguese prehistory, the famous decorated schist plaques, which Leite de Vasconcelos referred to as ‘chapões’.

It is worth mentioning that the document written in 1695 and, more probably, the book by Estêvão de Lis Velho, were necessarily known by Fr. Manuel do Cenáculo. The latter, by then already appointed as Bishop of Beja, conducted excavations in the coastal dunes of São Torpes on his pastoral journey of October 9, 1791, in an attempt to find what might have remained of the first temple devoted to the preservation of the relics, the true nature of the prehistoric grave having been forgotten. And in fact ‘when I made some excavations in those places I found in the interior of that beach the remains of thick and very ancient walls; and close to the sea I personally discovered many graves, and pieces of bronze, in the difficult sandy Médos [coastal sand dunes] (...)’ (CENÁCULO, 1949, p. 427). Actually, the walls could have been Roman and the graves could have been Bronze Age cists, just like the ones that have recently been found there (SILVA & SOARES, 1981). Later on, during the pastoral visit conducted along the coast of his bishopric, seeking to know the territory and its people, while gathering elements for its *History*, the bishop once again performed excavations at the mouth of the Ribeira da Junqueira, on the morning of July 28, 1794 (DEUS, MATIAS & VALE, 2016, p. 36), a year after the

erection of the aforementioned stone cross. However, before this *cruzeiro* was erected, another cross already existed there, as recorded in the 1758 *Memórias Paroquiais*: ‘At the mouth of this Ribeira de Junqueyra, which is on the beach, there is the tomb of St. Torpes, marked by a cross (...)’ (AZEVEDO, 1903, p. 268).

It is important to note that the tradition of associating saints’ graves with dolmens has yet another example in the dolmen or *lapa* of São Fraústo (a popular variant of Fausto), near the town of Torrão. A niche was built above the dolmen to hold the saint’s image, as observed and published in 1897 by J. Leite de Vasconcelos (in CHAVES, 1951, p. 109).

2 – THE PAINTED ROCK ART PANEL OF CACHÃO DA RAPA IN THE PORTUGUESE IMAGINARY

The painted rock art panel of Cachão da Rapa, on the Douro River (municipality of Carrazeda de Ancieães) is a remarkable example of how early Portuguese populations felt attracted to an unexplainable past, which, as we know today, is an artistic manifestation from prehistoric times (3rd millennium BC). The 1728 *Recreação Proveytosa* by Custodio Jesam Baratta, an anagram of João Bautista de Castro, refers to this panel in the following terms: ‘We had better (...) turn our eyes to that famous and great slab, which is located at Cachão, close to the Douro. In it we see certain black and red paintings nuanced by the checkerboard arrangement in two frames, with fine and ill-shaped strokes alike, that are preserved in the same form since time immemorial; and the natives say that these paintings age over time and others are renewed. Behold this prodigy.’ (BARATTA, 1728, pp. 257, 258). This information, as stated, was taken from Father António Carvalho da Costa’s *Corografia*, 1, p. 436 (COSTA, 1706, p. 436). Actually, this granite outcrop, situated some 25 metres above the bed of the River Douro, was long known to the local population, shrouded in legends and mysteries to such an extent that it was believed that a cleric who dared entering a cave located beneath the rock, in the year 1687, was forever speechless, such was his fright, and was thus unable to report what he had seen. These prodigies were reported to the Royal Academy by Antonio de Sousa Pinto and the Rector João Pinto de Moraes. The academician Father Jerónimo Contador de Argote relied on this documentation when writing the report published in 1734, in the second volume of his *Memorias para a Historia Ecclesiastica do Arcebispado de Braga* (ARGOTE, 1734), filled with other information of archaeological nature concerning the Roman remains recorded in the territory of the archbishopric. In fact, this distinguished Theatine priest systematically used in his famous work the reports sent to Lisbon by the provincial academicians and now kept at the National Library of Portugal, as stated by Manuel Heleno, in his Archaeology lessons at the Lisbon Faculty of Humanities (in CARDOSO, ed., 2013, A 164 1958-1959, p. 278).

Argote’s account is illustrated with a beautiful copper engraving by Debrie, in Baroque style, dated 1735, probably the first illustration of rock art in the world (Fig. 11). This fact would be enough to justify its mandatory inclusion in any Prehistory or European Archaeology manual, which unfortunately is not the case, due to the poor international visibility that the archaeological research developed in Portugal ever had, until recently. We would point out that this important archaeological monument, after having been accurately located by Possidónio da Silva (SILVA, 1887), fell into oblivion until, in 1930, J. R. dos Santos Júnior conducted a detailed graphic survey of the site (SANTOS JÚNIOR, 1934). The paintings, preserved outdoors for over 4000 years, can still be admired today (Fig. 12). The existence of a natural bituminous matter, apparently exuded from the granite rock, may have contributed to the preservation of the paintings, which were left above the existing railway tunnel when the Douro railway line was opened.



Fig. 11 – 1735 copper engraving by Debric depicting the prehistoric painted rock of Cachão da Rapa (Carrazeda de Anciães), included in volume 2 of the *Memorias para a Historia Ecclesiastica do Arcebispado de Braga* (ARGOTE, 1734). This is the world's first illustration of a prehistoric rock art site (J. L. Cardoso's own exemplar and photo).



Fig. 12 – Early 1970s photo of Cachão da Rapa, displaying the painted geometric motifs (MFS/JLC archives).

Santos Júnior excavated one of the small platforms consisting of earthy deposits, adjacent to the cliff, and found numerous fragments of handmade Chalcolithic ceramics, some of which decorated (op. cit, Fig. 10). Hence, these fragments are coeval with the paintings and were integrated in the assemblage of ceramic vases recovered at the base of the cliff, during an excavation reported in the document sent to the Academy, which specifically mentions that ‘fragments can still be found (...)’ (ARGOTE, 1734, p. 488). Undoubtedly, some of these fragments were recovered by Santos Júnior, more than 200 years later, in the same location.

3 – ON THE CONFERENCE HELD BY THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF PORTUGUESE HISTORY ON JULY 30, 1733

Significant and intensive research was carried out by the academicians all over the country, especially in northern Portugal. Moreover, the documents and records from the monasteries' registers concerning the remains of archaeological materials, especially Roman, were also not neglectable. An obvious emulation was thus created in their spirits, engaged in well-defined objectives, which they pursued with commitment and in a consistent manner. The results thus obtained were further enhanced, in the south of the country, by the efforts of other academicians, particularly the Marquis of Abrantes, with regard to the antiquities of Alcácer do Sal, the ancient *Salacia*, and Santiago do Cacém, the Roman *Merobriga*. In the lecture he gave at the Academy on July 31, 1721, the marquis published an epigraph dedicated to Asclepius by a doctor from Pax Iulia (Beja). And many other examples could be invoked, evidenced by the correspondence to and from the Academy, already partially published and above referred to.

The aforementioned movement of erudite interpretation of the remains of the past, based on reliable historical sources, conducted by the Royal Academy and led by some of its most active members, deliberately oblivious to any remnants of the historically unsupported popular tradition possibly associated with those remains, accounts for the lecture given by Martinho de Mendonça de Pina and Proença Homem, usually referred to as Martinho de Mendonça, on the subject of dolmens (GOMES, 1964, p. 17), during the academic meeting of July 30, 1733 (PROENÇA, 1733) (Fig. 13), promptly published in the *Memórias da Academia* in the same year (Fig. 14).

This distinguished academician, who published nothing else on this subject, despite his activity in the Academy being known since its foundation, was mainly known for the pedagogical aspects of his studies, exemplarily expressed in his work *Apontamentos para a educação de hum menino nobre* [lit. 'Some notes on the education of a noble youngster'] published in 1734 and dedicated to the Marquis of Alegrete (PROENÇA, 1734), who at the time was the Secretary of the Royal Academy, in charge of the organization and publication of the academicians' works. The importance of this work on such an innovative theme was the subject of Joaquim Ferreira Gomes' doctorate in Philosophy at the University of Coimbra. Gomes was a member of the Portuguese Academy of History. His PhD dissertation includes a detailed biography of the author (GOMES, 1964) and an interesting assessment of this conference, which is the core subject of the present contribution.

Martinho de Mendonça was in possession of important documental support, as was usual among his contemporaneous academicians, which allowed him to sustain and discuss, based on the exhaustive analysis of the texts, the meaning of megalithic monuments and their antiquity, which was the purpose of his paper. It is important to state right away that he fully achieved his goals, since his text, far from being a flabby and inconsequential exercise in erudition, pursued a logical path that allowed him to reach very concrete conclusions, as we shall see.

His objective is explained at the very beginning: 'Even though so many and so diligent writers have enhanced Portuguese antiquities, they nevertheless left some space for the modern ones, in which they may exercise themselves, as there are still many monuments left unexplained, among which I think the most considerable seem to be the very ancient and rude altars found in various parts of Portugal and commonly called *antas*, and because they were devoted to sacred uses, according to tradition and to our own conjectures, they shall not be left out of the subjects addressed by those who are writing part of the Sacred History of Portugal' (PROENÇA, 1733, p. 1).

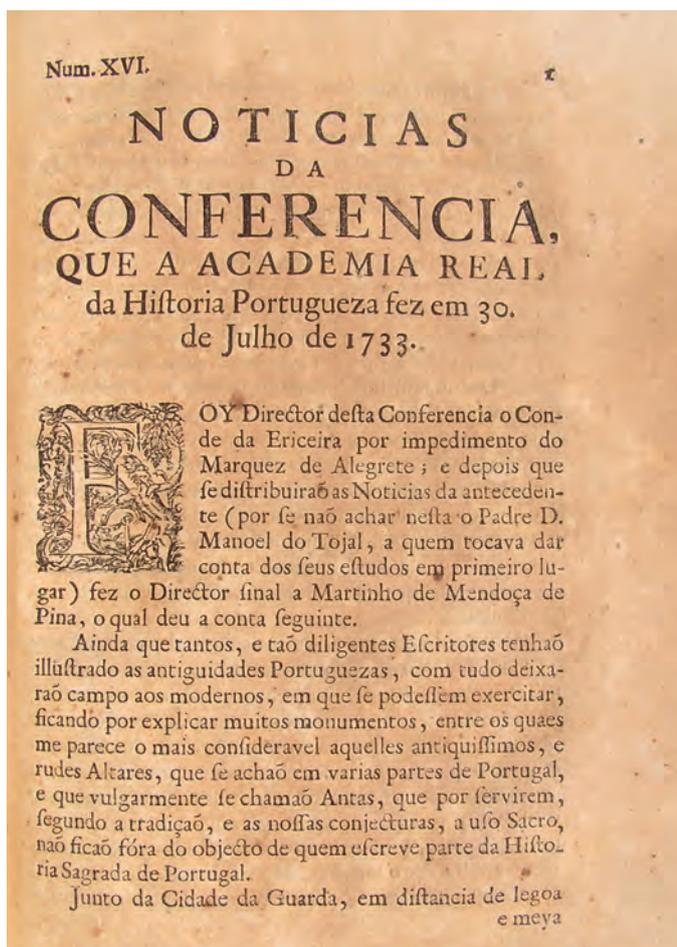


Fig. 13 – Printed first page of the lecture given by Martinho de Mendonça at the Royal Academy on July 30, 1733 (APH copy, photo by J. L. Cardoso).

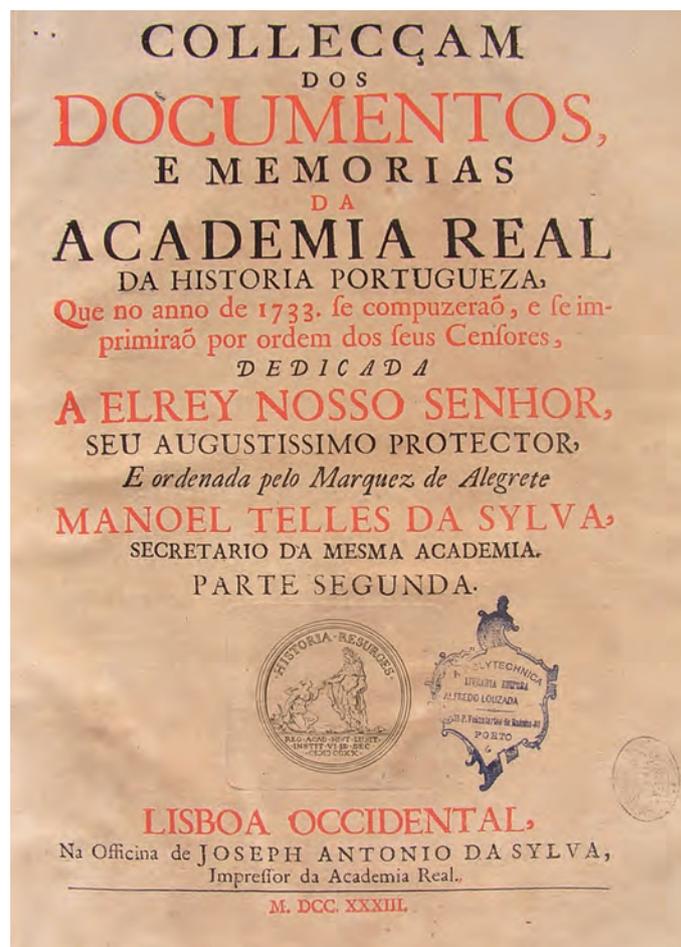


Fig. 14 – Cover page of the *Coleção dos Documentos e Memórias da Academia Real* volume concerning the year 1733, containing the text of the lecture given by Martinho de Mendonça on July 30 (APH copy, photo by J. L. Cardoso).

And what were the conjectures that he presented in the 22 pages of his paper and how were they sustained, within the framework of his intended demonstration, supported by a remarkable proficiency in the essential languages for that purpose, including Hebrew?

1 – Firstly, he justified the conclusion that ‘Nobody can see five or six large upright stones and a large capstone on top of them, and doubt that it is an artificial building and not a product of nature’ (p. 3). He thus concluded that the human origin of these structures was unquestionable (something that was not obvious at the time; let us recall the interpretation of fossils, regarded as Nature’s games), and established comparisons with the great constructions of Peru, where there were also no traces of iron tools.

2 – Next the author points out that no classical author has alluded to these monuments, ‘nor discusses their purpose and use’ (p. 4), which increased the difficulty of the debate, dismissing the funerary nature of the monuments due to the characteristics of the stones, which are smooth and suitable to ‘perform holocausts’ (p. 4), involving fire ceremonies. He thus associated the name ‘Antas’ to the Roman porticoes with square columns, quoting various Latin authors on the subject, especially Vitruvius, who in Book 3, chapter I

'addresses the *antas*, considering them parastades' (p. 7). Therefore, in this matter the explanation contained in the aforementioned Viterbo dictionary was preceded nearly 70 years before.

3 – Proceeding to discuss the period during which the dolmens were built, he concluded that they date back to the time before the Arab invasion of the Iberian Peninsula, 'because the Mohammedans have no altar, nor does their law allow them the practice of sacrifices (...) there being no notice of such an antiquity in Arabia, or in the other provinces of Asia, or Africa, where the Mohammedan sect still exists' (p. 8).

Nor did they seem to be the work of the Germanic peoples who occupied the Iberian Peninsula, for 'when these nations arrived, they already knew Christ and did not practice idolatry (...) ' (p. 8). The references to the Scandinavian monuments were also not neglected, adding that dolmens do not display the runic inscriptions seen on the monuments of Scandinavian peoples nor do they have any likeness to the latter, 'although in this matter we speak less surely' (p. 9), given the difficulty of accessing the authors of the runic literature 'that are searched in vain in the best bookshops of Portugal, Castile, France and Italy' (p. 10). This care confirms that he was a meticulous and serious author, who only presented his conclusions after a careful analysis of all the available documentation, which is evident throughout the entire text of the lecture.

Furthermore, he adds that dolmens could not have been the work of the Romans, nor of the Greeks ('on the subject of whose colonies a thousand fables have been written', p. 10), judging from the quality with which stone was wrought, and also because, if that were the case, it would be difficult to explain why they were still standing, considering how the Christians tried to destroy the buildings of idolatrous peoples like Romans and Greeks.

Neither do they result from the work of the Phoenicians, for if this were so, it would be natural to find them in seaports, and not inland, in hilly areas. He thus concluded, by eliminating all other hypotheses, that 'dolmens clearly show the roughness of the century in which they were built, and that they belong to those golden ages, in which the iron hidden in the bowels of the earth had not yet carved or shattered the shapeless products of nature (...) ' (pp. 10, 11).

4 – Hence, dolmens were constructions predating any of the aforementioned peoples and could only be related to the ancient inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula, the last people of the Mediterranean basin who abandoned 'the worship of an almighty God' (p. 13) and adopted polytheism. Thus, the primitive altars, 'which were first dedicated to the true God, rather than to false divinities' (p. 14), would be represented by the dolmens, which 'have their origins in the most remote antiquity, and in the first inhabitants of ancient Lusitania, who still lived scattered over the hills' (p. 14).

The antiquity of the construction of the dolmens, in which the use of iron implements was not observed, is indeed in accordance with the passage from Exodus (chapter 20) referring to the making (while the Tabernacle was not prepared) of 'an altar of stone, that was not cut with iron (...) to distinguish them from the idolaters, who made exquisitely carved altars using chisels (...) ' (p. 15). In view of the above, he concluded that the dolmens of the primitive Lusitanians would be an imitation of the ancient altars, 'successively erected by the Patriarchs using rough stones (...) ' (p. 15).

Another evidence of the antiquity of the construction of dolmens was the fact that they were not usually located on the top of the hills, like the altar to the true God made by the Israelites near the Jordan, concluding by analogy that 'it is not a reckless conjecture to believe that our dolmens were dedicated, by the first inhabitants of Lusitania, to the true God, adored by Israel and worshipped by the Christians' (p. 17). 17). This tradition lasted until long after it had been replaced in the regions from which it originated, which can be explained by the great distance and isolation of the populations inhabiting the far western parts of Europe.

From his conjectures, the author concluded that ‘one can state that dolmens are the oldest artificial monument in Hispania, and perhaps in the whole world, because no other building can be found to which such antiquity can be attributed. We have said artificial monument, because the petrified shells, which are found on some hills, and which can be seen all over the vicinity of Lisbon, are nature’s monuments left by the universal flood, and ancient medals of the deluge’ (p. 19).

5 – The text of this lecture evidences the critical spirit of Martinho de Mendonça and the care and rigour with which he used all the documentary sources available to him, in an exercise of erudition, which, unlike many of his contemporaries, really had a well-defined and consequent purpose. Actually, on the basis of the available information – and there really was no other to which he could resort – he was able to demonstrate the antiquity of the construction of the dolmens by populations predating the oldest peoples with writing in the Iberian Peninsula, attributing them to the Lusitanians. He was also led to consider, like most scholars of his time, that the dolmens were altars, even due to the etymological nature of the word *anta*. But, as mentioned above, this was not the main merit of our academician’s study. In fact, and at least among the Portuguese scholars – usually ecclesiastics – who, in the 16th and 17th centuries, referred to the use of dolmens, it was commonplace to associate these monuments with altars, even due to the propitiatory / divinatory practices that were performed at certain dolmens every year, around the time when firstfruits were harvested. As previously stated (FABIÃO, 2016), the new element introduced by Martinho de Mendonça, and which surely had consequences among the cultivated elite of his time, was what he was able to demonstrate. And this was not that the dolmens were altars, because such an idea had long been acquired. His innovation, supported by texts that were deemed credible at the time, was the assumption that dolmens were built by communities originating from Judea, worshippers of a single God, who maintained their cult upon arriving at this far end of the known world. In the meantime, this cult had been abandoned in the regions from which they came, following the widespread adoption of polytheistic practices. It has already been said that this argument may have had consequences for the cultivated elites of his time, who saw in the demonstrated monotheistic religious practice of their ancestors another argument to legitimise their own religiosity, which was also based on the worship of a single God.

Another important consequence underlying Martinho de Mendonça’s speech was the advantage of the far western populations having retained their traditions inherited from the texts of the Patriarchs of the one God, keeping them intact, and sheltered from the new pantheistic ideas, which by then prevailed in more cosmopolitan lands.

6 – The close relationship established between the ancient pre-Roman populations that built dolmens and the inhabitants of the Promised Land at the time of the Old Testament was further underlined by evidence that we would now call archaeological and that only then was enhanced: we are referring to the practice evidenced by the dolmen builders, according to Martinho de Mendonça, of intentionally refusing to use iron tools to work the stone, thus setting themselves apart from the idolatrous peoples who achieved more regular constructions by using such tools. Indeed, the dolmens not only did not show traces of iron implements, but also, due to their apparent imperfection and roughness, respected the construction features that they were supposed to show, on the part of those who followed one single God. The affiliation of the Lusitanians was thus established among the peoples who, coming from Judea, would be at their origin, and the connecting thread between both consisted in the common fact of worshipping one single God.

This could easily lead to the conclusion that the Portuguese, as descendants of the Lusitanians, are of Jewish origin, which, at a time when the Inquisition was still quite active in Portugal, persecuting all those who

did not adopt the Catholic faith, could lead to an insurmountable contradiction in the logic of its own mission. At a time when all works meant to be published were subject to prior censorship, it is interesting to note that the interpretation that might possibly weaken the action of the Inquisition was made possible by the Academy itself. Actually, the Academy was exempt from complying with that mandatory prior censorship, since it had an internal mechanism for that purpose – the ‘censores’, who were renowned academicians and the brethren of the author of this lecture. Can one glimpse in this detail any desire to manifest the independence of the Academy in its scientific and literary activities?

To answer this question, we must first bear in mind that the author of this lecture had been a familiar of the Holy Office since January 23, 1722, i.e. for more than 10 years. Shortly afterwards, and at his request, he was included ‘among the privileged familiars’, a distinction granted June 19 of the same year. He was, therefore, an important member of the Inquisition, and therefore had its full support in what he wrote, even if it could produce unfavourable interpretations. This contradiction did not go unnoticed by his contemporaries – nor by Jaime Cortesão nowadays (GOMES, 1964, p. 48, note 2), such as Cavaleiro de Oliveira, and was assumed by Martinho de Mendonça as the ‘estrangeirado’ [lit. influenced by foreign cultures] that he was, as we shall see further on (GOMES, 1964, p. 48, note 1).

6 – MARTINHO DE MENDONÇA, AN ACADEMICIAN OF HIS TIME

It is important to know the personality and relevance of Martinho de Mendonça in the society of his time, in general, and in the Royal Academy, in particular. We have mainly resorted to the information provided in the work of Joaquim Ferreira Gomes (GOMES, 1964, p. 18 ff.), who drew heavily from his biographer, the author of the *Elogio Fúnebre* [eulogy], José Gomes da Cruz, besides a few others, such as Manso de Lima, in addition to the information contained in other sources especially the *Colecção dos Documentos e Memórias da Academia Real*.

By the time he gave this lecture, Martinho de Mendonça was one of the foremost academicians of the Royal Academy (Fig. 15).

Having obtained the degree of Bachelor of Philosophy at the University of Coimbra, he interrupted his studies probably due to health issues. But his love for learning was such that while still a teenager he devoted himself to the study of Mathematics, Greek, Public Law and Philosophy during his stay at his parents’ farm, near Guarda, which housed a rich library. He was so dedicated to his studies that he became ill. According to his biographer, José Gomes da Cruz, his father was ‘forced to order him to stay away from books’ (op. cit. p. 20). Once re-established, and as was usual with some noblemen of his time, he decided to improve his knowledge of the world through a Grand Tour, attending foreign courts. After Spain, he travelled to France and Italy, eventually reaching Austria and Hungary, eager to serve in the war against the Turks. When he was almost twenty-four years old, he fought in the Battle of Belgrade, on August 16, 1717, where he took a banner from the enemy, which earned him the recognition of both the commander of the imperial army, Prince Eugene of Savoy, and the Portuguese ambassador, the Count of Tarouca, who attached him to his majorat in Portugal. After the war, he visited Prague and Leipzig, where he published a panegyric in Latin dedicated to Prince Eugene, in 1718. He then moved on to the Netherlands, where he was appointed ‘Master of Mathematics and other sciences’ to the Infante Dom Manuel, the brother of King João V, for the whole of 1718. From there and accompanying the Infante, he went to Paris, where he attended ‘the literary societies’. The king eventually ordered his brother to return to Portugal, but the latter preferred to go to Germany instead. Martinho de

Mendonça, aware of the royal wishes, chose to return to Portugal. It is known that he resided at the Court on March 4, 1720, and participated actively in the foundation of the Royal Academy, drawing on all the knowledge amassed during his European tour. In this regard, it is important to recall his own words: 'I left Portugal and wandered almost all over Europe; while on my way I tried to get some news of the most modern systems. I had the opportunity to talk with Wolfio in Saxony and with 'sGravesande in Holland, whose lectures provided me with some light on the ingenious systems and principles of Leibnitio and Newton (...)' (in GOMES, 1964, p. 24). As this author rightly points out, Martinho de Mendonça was thus turned into one of those *estrangeiros* who had so much influence on the Portuguese cultural environment of the time. He combined the novelities of the Enlightenment with political, social and religious conservatism, which explains his 1722 request to be admitted to the Court of the Holy Office, where he was immediately accepted, embodying the tensions and contradictions of the 18th century in Portugal.

It was in this context that he stood out as an academicien of the Royal Academy, his European education and some of the friends he met during his tour having significantly contributed to this, which facilitated his admission to the Court. One afternoon in 1719, in the presence of the king, 'he was asked about (...) several points of grammar, philosophy, history, criticism, geography and mathematics with good success' (op. cit., p. 25), and his merits quickly became widely known. By the middle of 1720, the King entrusted him with the Royal Library, and it was in this manner that he naturally took an active part in the creation of the Royal Academy, founded on December 8, 1720. He was actually appointed by the king as one of the 50 founding academicians.

His role in the Academy and in academic affairs was significant. In the very first year of its existence, he showed intense activity: as a result of the distribution of the 'academicians' assignments', i.e. the tasks entrusted to each of them, he was requested to write a history of the reign of King Duarte, in Portuguese, along with a History of the Archbishopric of Braga and of the Bishopric of Lamego, in Latin. Concerning the former, it is known that the work was at a very advanced stage when he passed away; regarding the other works, we know that over the years he used to report to the Academy on the progress of the works he was conducting, as an elected academicien, but which were actually carried out in collaboration with other academicians, particularly the provincial ones. Interestingly enough, the study of documents in registry offices was combined with the compilation and analysis of Roman inscriptions, during his journey across Beira Interior in 1721, as reported in the lecture of August 14, 1721. We would highlight the research carried out at Idanha-a-Velha, the ancient *Egitania*, from where he sent several Roman inscriptions to the Academy's Secretariat. This intense activity justified his appointment to speak on October 22, the king's birthday, usually attended by the Academy, at the royal palace. On this occasion he announced that the history of the reign of King Duarte was ready, though still awaiting some documents from the archives. However, it would never be published; the other two works were being prepared by 'their erudite authors'. He praised the merits of King Duarte, the first to attach a library to his palace, and highlighted the coeval period of cultural development, comparable to what was being experienced at the time, following the foundation of the Academy. This speech was reproduced as soon as 1727, in the *Historia da Academia*, written by the Marquis of Alegrete (SILVA, 1727, p. 376-381).

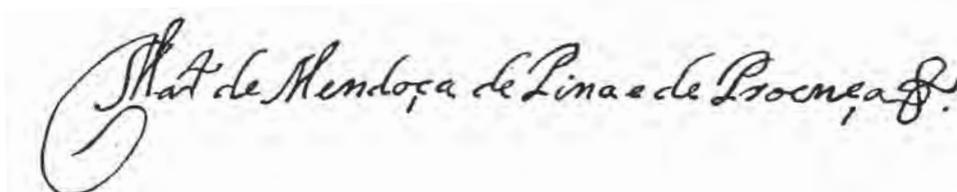
A handwritten signature in black ink on a light background. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. It begins with a large, ornate initial 'M' that loops back. The text reads 'Mart de Mendonça de Lima e de Proença' followed by a decorative flourish.

Fig. 15 – Martinho de Mendonça's signature (in GOMES, 1964) (J. L. Cardoso's own exemplar and photo).

In 1725 his participation in the Academy was insignificant, the same occurring from 1726 to 1729, busy as he was on a diplomatic mission to Spain to deal with the royal marriages of the sons of Kings João V and Philip V, among other matters. His presence was nevertheless important, and certainly as a result of his mission he was appointed to speak at the Conference of September 7, 1729, on the Queen's birthday, held at the palace as usual. This conference was transcribed and published in volume XI of the *Colecção dos Documentos*.

In 1730, his participation in the Academy's activities continued to be very discreet, but with two aspects of undeniable interest: the first one concerns the copying of 'some characters sent to him by Manoel Garcia de Oliveira, Captain-general of the Ajuruoca Mines, informing him that they were found inside a small cave in Sertão, next to his district' (Colecção dos Documentos, vol. IX; GOMES, 1964, p. 40). This evidences his interest in documents of ancient chronology and uncertain nature or meaning, such as these characters, which was subsequently fully confirmed by his lecture of July 30, 1733. His second contribution in 1730 consists of his analysis (censorship) of the *Historia genealógica da Casa Real Portuguesa*, considered sensible and balanced, worthy of an academician concerned with 'the care for historical truth', as stated in the reprint of volume 1 of the said work, in 1946, under the direction of M. Lopes de Almeida and C. Pegado (GOMES, 1964, p. 41). His interest in the Academy persisted despite his reduced physical presence, reporting in writing on the progress of the studies entrusted to him; his report was read at the conference of April 12, 1731. In 1732 he attended the conference held on June 26, again reporting on the progress of his works.

In 1733, he attended the Academy twice, the first time on January 23, to resume his account of the progress made in the *História do arcebispado de Braga*, written in Latin, providing details of the research, the transcription of documents, and the need to obtain copies of other documents.

He spoke again on July 3, 1733 to give an account of the conference we are now discussing in detail and which, concurring with Joaquim Ferreira Gomes, is considered his most important academic contribution. Its impact on the cultivated society of his time was significantly disseminated through the account published in the *Gazeta de Lisboa*, no. 36, of September 3, 1733 (in Gomes, 1964, p. 46, note 1), which is transcribed below, due to its obvious interest:

'During the conference held by the Portuguese Royal Academy of History on July 30 (...) the academician Martinho de Mendonça de Pina, His Majesty's librarian, read a highly erudite speech about the antiquity and use of the dolmens (or altars) made of large rough stones and shaped like square tables, which can be found in some parts of this kingdom, and were used to perform sacrifices and burn the victims during the first centuries of the World; all interested persons are kindly requested to inform him of any notice they may have of such monuments, with a description of the places where they are located, and the measurements and other circumstances they may observe'.

In fact, neither Martinho de Mendonça's life antecedents, nor his subsequent trajectory, could have predicted this contribution, which is also surprising due to the clarity of the results obtained, which was rather uncommon in his time.

The lecture given by Martinho de Mendonça at the Royal Academy on July 30, 1733 is indeed one of the most original and consequential contributions written on the subject of megalithic monuments in Europe during the first half of the 18th century. The author sought a plausible explanation for their existence by systematically exploring the documentary record available at the time, from both sacred and profane sources. It is, therefore, an exemplary case of 18th-century European research on prehistoric matters, known only to a very limited number of Portuguese researchers, and nearly always in a very superficial way (CORRÊA, 1947; SANTOS, 1987), or, with rare exceptions, only highlighting some aspects deemed more relevant (COSTA, 1868; GOMES, 1964; FABIÃO, 2016). We have now attempted a systematic and, as far as possible, exhaustive

analytical approach to the content of this remarkable document, duly embedded in its time and bearing in mind the personal trajectory of its author, leading to the development of new conclusions and highlighting for the first time its real importance within the framework of the historical studies of Portuguese Enlightenment.

The archaeological studies concerning the Portuguese territory, opportunely initiated at the Royal Academy by Martinho de Mendonça, were not continued by him, as he left for Brazil in 1733 and remained there until 1738, holding the position of Royal Commissioner and subsequently the challenging post of Governor of Minas Gerais, facing difficulties whose resolution would prove to be beyond his willingness, preparation and understanding. Upon his return to Portugal, in early 1738, the monarch's assessment of his performance was not unfavourable, and he was immediately appointed a member of the Overseas Council, where his activity is documented by numerous assessments. He also resumed his position in the Academy, being elected censor for the year 1739, and eventually becoming its Director, according to his biographer, José Gomes da Cruz, who wrote his eulogy (in GOMES, 1964). He also resumed his position as librarian of the Royal Library, and was appointed as a judge of the Supreme Court, and also as Intendant of Diamonds.

A royal decree of August 28, 1742 appointed him Chief Keeper of the Torre do Tombo royal archives. He died on March 12, 1743, due to illnesses caused by the many engagements and works in which he had been involved, worsened by his delicate health. He was buried in the chapel of Quinta do Pombo, near Guarda, where one of the banners he had conquered in Belgrade was hoisted. (GOMES, 1964, p. 89, note 6).

7 – EPILOGUE

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, and even into the 19th century, dolmens were invariably associated with altars of the Druids. This is broadly mirrored, even in the 19th century, as an expression of Celtic culture. Even in Portuguese territory, learned travellers echoed this scenario, e.g. W. M. Kinsey, who in 1828 referred to a dolmen observed near Arraiolos as a druidic altar like those known in England (KINSEY, 1828, p. 481), mistaking it for a cromlech, a situation that the published engraving of the aforementioned monument helps to clarify (Fig. 16). In this regard, he invokes the testimony of Hautefort, his French contemporary, in relation to what the latter would observe between Pégões and Vendas Novas.

This state of affairs was only gradually changed, at the turn of the first

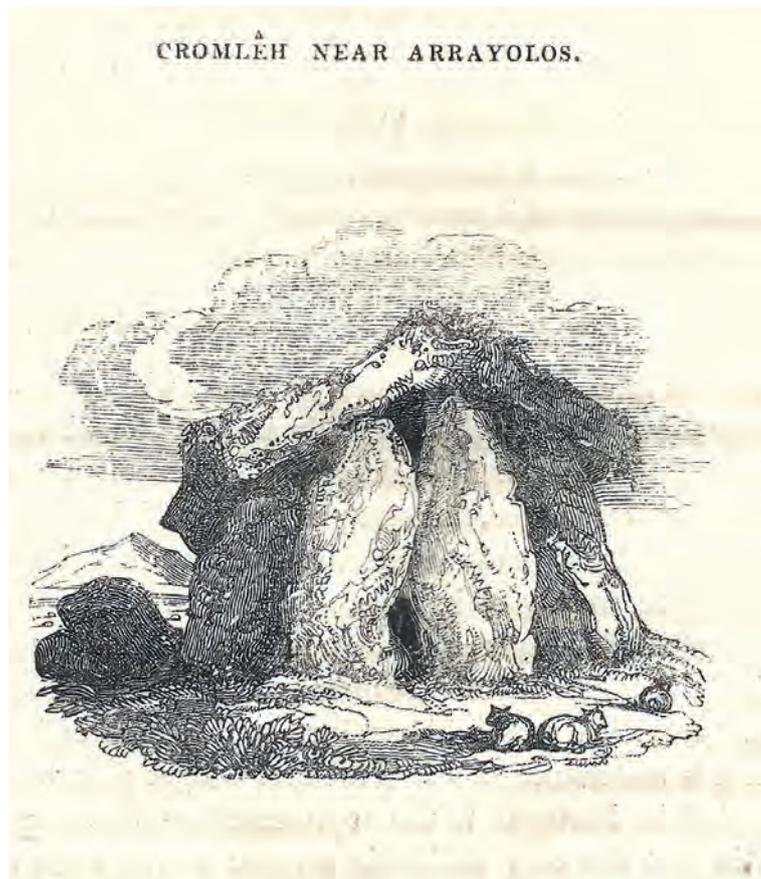


Fig. 16 – The dolmen seen by W. M. Kinsey near Arraiolos (KINSEY, 1828, p. 495) (J. L. Cardoso's own exemplar and photo).

half of the 19th century; one of the first synthesis works on dolmenic constructions in Europe already rightly referred to them as graves (BONSTETTEN, 1865). We would stress that this work preceded by only three years the first Portuguese scientific publication on the same subject, by Francisco Pereira da Costa (COSTA, 1868), in which he described the results of excavations conducted in dolmens of the Castelo de Vide region. The author also refers rather extensively to Martinho de Mendonça's lecture, definitively dismissing the theory according to which dolmens were altars, as the latter admitted, in line with the times in which he wrote.

And yet, at the end of the 19th century, there were still those in Portugal who claimed that the dolmens were altars; however, this anachronism is not an argument to diminish the worthy and relevant work of Father Joaquim José da Rocha Espanca (ESPANCA, 1894), which is the result of a certain lack of understanding of the emergence of an unsuspected antiquity for the human presence, proven by science (Fig. 17). Actually, in the Portugal of the late 1800's, this tireless researcher of the Alentejo antiquities was not alone, as he was joined by some other individuals, whether churchmen or not. The interpretation we are addressing here probably became even more marked in the minds given the existence of a remarkable number of dolmens – about twenty – converted into chapels, or with associated chapels, according to the study carried out by O. da Veiga Ferreira and collaborators (FERREIRA; LEITÃO & NORTH, 1980), followed by a more complete one (OLIVEIRA; SARANTOPOULOS & BALESTEROS, 1997). Some of them are quite renowned, e.g. the enormous dolmen-chapel dedicated to St. Diniz, currently located in the centre of Pavia (Mora) (Fig. 18).

Finally, we would point out that both purposes – the simultaneous use as burial places and places of worship – are not mutually exclusive. In the eyes of 18th- and 19th-century literates, such a conclusion would not only be possible, but also probable, as indeed Martinho de Mendonça made clear, when stating: 'if these were tombs, our conjectured interpretation of these constructions as altars would still be valid, for altars and the temples of idolatry originated from funerary monuments'.

Not wishing to delve too much into the discussion of these conjectures, it is nevertheless important to mention that a number of dolmens explored in recent times in the Portuguese territory did yield some evidence of a combined use in time and space. But the ignorance that archaeologists struggle with nowadays is not lesser than the one Martinho de Mendonça had to face, with undeniable success, due to both his mastery and humility.

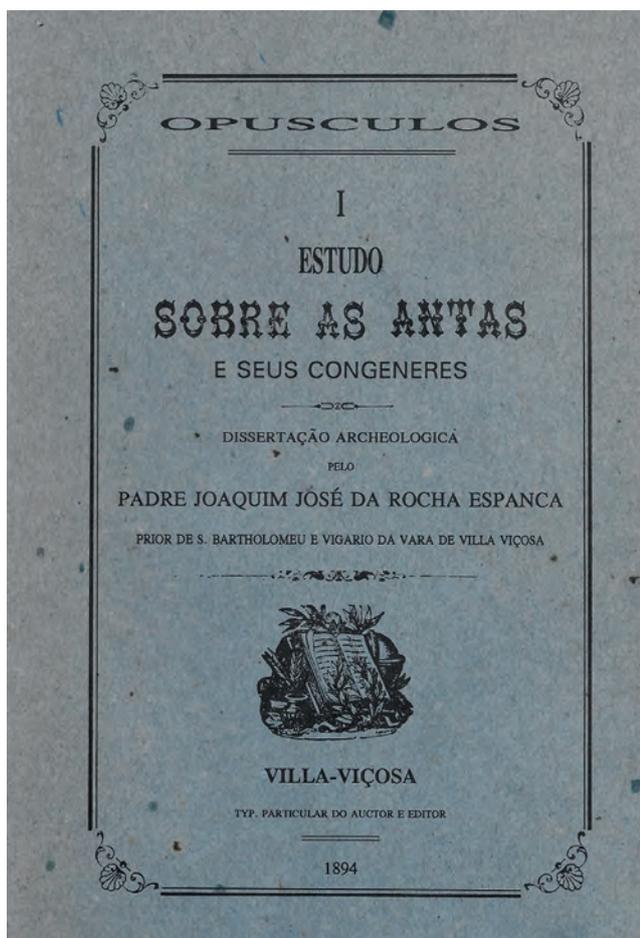


Fig. 17 – Cover of the booklet on the subject of dolmens, by Father Joaquim Espanca (ESPANCA, 1894) (photo by J. L. Cardoso).



Fig. 18 – Anta de São Diniz, in the centre of the village of Pavia (Mora), converted into a chapel. From left to right: driver Serrano, from the Geological Survey of Portugal, O. da Veiga Ferreira, Konrad Spindler and Georges Zbyszewski (OVF/JLC archives).

His attitude is clearly evidenced by the words with which he concludes his lecture (PINA, 1733, p. 22): 'The imperfection, and lack of news, and of the necessary books, with which we write this report, compels us to ask not to print it but only to ask for news and descriptions of all the dolmens that may exist in Portugal, and the places where they are located, so that another, more erudite academician may address this matter with greater accuracy.'

Martinho de Mendonça's lecture on the dolmens, absolutely innovative for his time, in terms of scope and nature, aroused the interest of the academicians; one can imagine their curiosity and surprise at being confronted with a completely new and unsuspected reality. This motivated the interest for the research of dolmens on the part of other academics, within the Academy itself: the very next year, in the conference held on April 1, 1734, one can read that 'Fr. Affonso da Madre de Deus Guerreiro reported to the Secretariat of the Academy (...) a collection of records, including the one pertaining to 315 dolmens, of which a specific account shall be prepared to be forwarded to the academician who asked for this information' (NOTÍCIAS, 1734, p. 5; CORRÊA, 1947, p. 121). Unfortunately, the name of the said academician is not known, and, above all, neither are the whereabouts of this inventory, the first archaeological inventory made in the world (CARTAILHAC, 1886, p. 149). It would certainly prove to have great historiographical value if one day it were to be found among the documentation of the Royal Academy still kept in the National Library of Portugal.

After this successful initial impulse, the Royal Academy's interest in the study of dolmens faded, in line with the decline of its activities. However, this interest did not disappear: shortly afterwards, Fr. Manuel do

Cenáculo, already the Bishop of Beja, a position he took up soon after the downfall of Pombal in 1777, revived the interest in these monuments (Fig. 19), which also existed, albeit rarely, in the Baixo Alentejo region. This is evidenced by the information referred to by Pereira da Costa, included in the correspondence sent to the prelate of Beja by Father José Gaspar Simões, Prior of São Teotónio (Odemira) (COSTA, 1868, p. VII) and kept at the Library of Évora. Indeed, this correspondence contains information about dolmens, and its publication would be extremely interesting, considering the extraordinary wealth of archaeological information from the Roman period contained in Cenáculo's recently published documentation concerning Santiago do Cacém (DEUS, 2016).



Fig. 19 – Dom Frei Manuel do Cenáculo Vilas-Boas (1724-1814). Oil on canvas.
Lisbon Academy of Sciences (photo by J. L. Cardoso).

In the light of the above, it would seem reasonable to say that the Royal Academy was an important means of disseminating contributions to the knowledge of prehistoric antiquities in the present-day Portuguese territory, despite the limitations imposed by the very nature of the conceptual framework of the time. The only material remains that seemed to predate Classical Antiquity were the dolmens, viewed as altars and considered by Martinho de Mendonça to be the work of the Lusitanians, not unlike what happened beyond the Pyrenees, but in this case being attributed to the Celts. However, in the Portuguese case, this erudite academician went further: having noticed the absence of iron tool marks in the cutting of the monoliths and their evident rusticity, he associated them to the Hebraic constructional tradition referred to in the Old Testament. This observation led to the conclusion that the dolmens were built by isolated communities originating from Hebrew lands, which, in this western end of Europe, kept their traditions, associated to the cult of the only God, which persisted until the Roman conquest. Even if this conclusion was likely to enhance these direct ancestors of the Portuguese, it had another obvious consequence: the Portuguese thus had distant Hebrew origins, at a time when the Inquisition still had considerable power and ascendancy in Portugal. It would be interesting to ascertain the coeval relations between the Royal Academy and the Inquisition. Still, the Academy benefited from royal protection and was sheltered from the censorship rules for the publication of works imposed in other cases.

Portugal may therefore be considered as a pioneer in Prehistoric research on a worldwide level thanks to the lecture given by Martinho de Mendonça at the Royal Academy on July 30, 1733, and published in the same year, concerning dolmenic monuments, rightly believed to be among the oldest constructions of Humankind. Indeed, and as we know now, in Portugal these monuments may date back to the beginning of the 4th millennium BC, in the case of dolmens, and to the 5th millennium BC in the case of some menhirs.

The publication of the rock paintings of Cachão da Rapa, beautifully illustrated in a copper engraving made by Debrie in 1735, was equally pioneering, at European level. These paintings can be dated back to the 3rd millennium B.C. and were preserved by chance, reaching our days. To the best of our knowledge, they were referred to for the first time in 1706 by Father António Carvalho da Costa, in his famous *Corografia*, and later on by Cristóvão Jesão Barata (a.k.a. João Bautista de Castro), in 1728. Such publications convert the academicians Martinho de Mendonça de Pina and Proença Homem, and Father Jerónimo Contador de Argote into pioneers of prehistoric archaeological studies at an international level. These two references regarding 18th-century research on the times before writing are enough to make the Royal Academy an indisputable reference in the field of Portuguese archaeological historiography.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Armamdo Lucena, for the translation into English that he carried out with the availability with which he always accepts my requests, despite the short period of time to fulfill them

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