

Chronicle of an exhibition. Experiencing the *Megalithism in the lands of Granada*. Museo de Sitio de los Dólmenes de Antequera (Málaga), 11th July 2023-11th July 2024

Crónica de una exposición. Vivencia de El megalitismo en las tierras de Granada. Museo de Sitio de los Dólmenes de Antequera (Málaga), 11 de julio 2023-11 de julio 2024

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This exhibition, organized by the Consejería de Turismo, Cultura y Deporte of the Junta de Andalucía, was commissioned by Professors Gonzalo Aranda Jiménez and Lara Milesi (University of Granada). It is open from July 11, 2023, until July 11, 2024.

As I walked into the small Gómez-Moreno room at the Antequera Dolmens Site Museum, I was welcomed by an anthropomorphic-looking character announcing that, from that point onwards, these were lands of Granada megalithism (3500-1000 BC).

I entered a darkened environment to be confronted with a sizable plan of Granada highlighted in a larger topographical map, showing the location of its main megalithic necropolises. It became clear that I was facing a territory not defined by natural borders, but by administrative ones; those artificial limits were extensive to what I was about to see: a fragment of a phenomenon of continental scale, whose historical emergence is briefly contextualized in the text next to the map.

Once I was situated in space and time, I advanced to the initial stage of the narrative, where I met the first researchers responsible for the development of the archaeology of Granada megalithism. Spanning from the late 19th century to the sixties of the 20th century, references (and tributes) are made to the work of Luis Siret, Pedro Flores, George and Vera Leisner, Manuel García Sánchez, Jean Cristian Spahni, José Enrique Ferrer Palma and Antonio Arribas Palau. This historical retrospective, materialized by pictures and portraits, books, personal writing objects, old drawings and plans of monuments and votive assemblages, puts the modern research of regional megalithism in perspective, providing a view of the development of archaeology as a science.

I was then invited to watch a video that marks a narrative shift to contemporary research. It explains in plain language several moments of the excavation of the Panoría necropolis. Explaining the use of techniques and methods from other sciences, the video em-



Fig. 1. Introductory panel to the exhibition (image of the stela with a carved anthropomorph from Fonelas necropolis, Granada). Image GEA. *Cultura material e identidad social en la Prehistoria Reciente en el sur de la Península Ibérica*. Grupo de investigación HUM-065, Universidad de Granada.

phasizes the strong interdisciplinary nature of modern Archaeology. On the one hand, the development of an exhaustive/first radiocarbon dating program established the chronology of construction and use of this necropolis (3595–3450 to 2180-2010 cal BC). On the other hand, the bioanthropological determinations of sex and age of interred individuals demonstrated the presence of natural populations (or at least the apparent absence of selection based on these features). The isotopic analyses documented “egalitarian diets” throughout the vast area of use of the necropolis, suggesting

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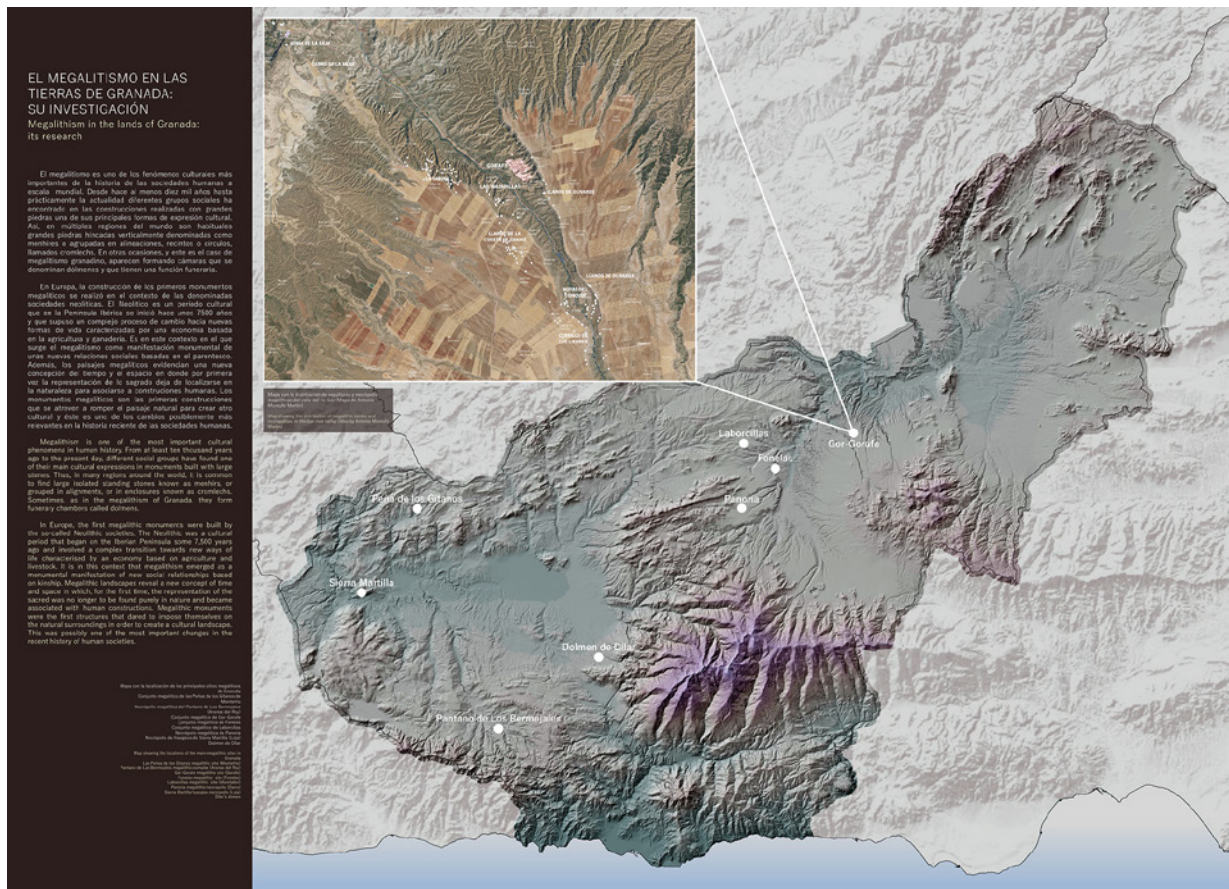


Fig. 2. Panel with the spatial distribution of Granada megalithism. Image GEA. *Cultura material e identidad social en la Prehistoria Reciente en el sur de la Península Ibérica*. Grupo de investigación HUM-065, Universidad de Granada.

social relations of solidarity and reciprocity. It is therefore clear to the visitor that these funerary contexts, not only provide evidence on the beliefs and funerary rituals of these communities but are also a powerful archive of information on many other aspects of their life and social organization.

Beyond this introductory video, we move to the chronological framework for the megalithism of Granada. The discourse is organized thematically around different aspects of the funerary world: the bioanthropological characterization of the populations, the burial/deposition rituals, the architectures and their cosmological correlations, the sets of votive materials and the insights they provide.

Chronology, shown by graphics, plans, and pictures, is one of the main achievements of contemporary research in the region, in particular the somewhat unexpected prolonged use of the tombs established by systematic radiocarbon dating programs. The results of this approach, using new dates and their statistical (bayesian) processing, have changed the perceptions of the time span of megalithic monuments (showing they were still being reused during the late 3rd and first half of the 2nd millennium BC), and revealed a more complex

and diversified scenario for the funerary ritual in the region, allowing new insights about the social relations, as discussed below.

The next section provides information on the demographic and health aspects of the people buried in these necropolises: sex, age, illness, or pathologies, such as those resulting from using teeth as a third hand in some crafts.

The more intangible, but fundamental dimensions of the funerary discourse are next. They are presented through the material aspects of ritualized practices, such as the characteristics of the depositions (collectivism, position and orientation of the bodies, manipulation of human remains). They would be the expression of cosmological views reflected in the architectonic tradition (e.g. prescriptions in tomb orientation), and through the assemblages of votive materials, focusing on their use, meaning, and implications in social terms. All this is presented using short and objective texts, pictures, scenario illustrations, selected archaeological materials, and human remains.

Special attention is paid to the reuse of megalithic monuments in the transition to and during the Bronze Age. Evidence is presented of the intense continuous use of the megalithic necropolises during the Argaric

period (roughly the first half of the 2nd millennium BC), showing the coexistence of different funerary practices. The illustrated recreation of an Argaric individual burial and the exhibition of its typical votive assemblages helps to visualise the contrast between funerary rituals carried out inside settlements and in the megaliths. The associated text, nonetheless, focuses mainly on the latter. A more detailed description of what characterized the former would assist a better understanding of the differences.

The coexistence of collective megalithic ritual and Argaric burial is interpreted as an instance of social conflict, *i.e.* the reuse of traditional megalithic tombs would be an expression of resistance to social change in the context of a more hierarchical society. Whether such a resistance was conscious and intentional or only an intuitive reaction rooted in cultural traditions and beliefs, is not totally clear in the exhibition's discourse. In any case, it provides a scenario of a more complex and non-linear development of the Bronze Age societies of the region, as change is always accompanied by some degree of resistance.

This interpretation falls within a theoretical trend that values processes of social competition, resistance, or social hybridization in the study of past social organizations and which, in archaeology, has been related to the development of the so-called Postcolonial Archaeology. The reuse of megalithic monuments would therefore be a manifestation of ancestral cultural forms, in confrontation with hierarchical political trends expressed by funerary individualism. This is a discourse that confronts a vision in which the Argaric world was a proto-state or a state, with a clear social stratification and coercive economic exploitation (see, for example, Lull, 1983; Lull and Risch, 1995; Arteaga, 2001). The interpretation supporting the exhibition, on the contrary, offers a picture of political instability and an inability of the elites to definitively assert themselves in the face of active practices of resistance to a new social order (see, for example, Gilman, 2013; Ramos Millan, 2013). However, the debate about the social and political organization of the Argaric world is not clearly echoed in the exhibition, which essentially focuses on the commissioners' proposals (which I adhere to).

Moving to the final part of the exhibition, the agency of these monuments in the long term is again stressed. As spaces and places of diffuse ancestral memory, they were used in completely different historical contexts, already completely alienated from original meanings and cosmologies. The last showcase displays materials from the Late Bronze Age, Iron Age, and the Islamic Period found in the megaliths.

The exhibition ends with a 19th-century romantic painting of the Dolmen de Dilar by Martin Rico, bringing us back to the times' approach to megalithism. By doing so, the cyclicity that impregnated the Neolithic worldviews is evoked, as well as the human need to constantly look back in search of identity and understanding. This is also a subtle, interesting, and fruitful



Fig. 3. Vessel with symbolic decoration from Tomb 3 of Fonelas necropolis. Photo António Carlos Valera.

(in my view) insinuation of proximity between art and science.

So far, I have focused on the description of my experience regarding the contents of the exhibition. I always tend to privilege them despite being very aware of their intimate relationship with form. And, here, form plays its role effectively. The dark environment feels appropriate and helps concentration, the graphic and photographic material are of good quality, and excellent illustrations of scenarios and practices help humanize and visualize the ideas and information presented. The selection of archaeological material to be displayed looked a bit minimalist but accomplished its illustrative role. The video has an adequate duration, simplicity, objectivity, and an interesting dynamic, integrating well speech with the choreographies of archaeological excavation. All materials have their respective subtitles, and the texts on panels are synthetic, objective, and accessible. The use of two languages (Spanish and English) amplifies the public. One thing I particularly appreciated is the absence of technological folklore of gadgets to use and buttons to press, and other special effects. Most of the time they tend to divert, and do not add, becoming frequently the protagonists of the exhibitions. I did not miss them at all unless they would have been used to provide what we would call references for further reading. Scientific references would be helpful for that section of the public that would like to go deeper into the issues addressed by the exhibition. Although this is not usual in exhibitions and museums, technology could have an interesting role to play here. Therefore, as a complement to this chronicle, I leave references that cover some of the themes approached (Aranda Jiménez, 2013, 2014, 2015; Aranda Jiménez *et al.*, 2018, 2020, 2022), namely in the aspects regarding the chronology and temporality of the megalithism in Granada and the interpretation of megalithic use as a form of social resistance to change.

In sum, this is a very interesting exhibition about the megalithism of Granada county, carefully planned and executed, and provides a good example of the di-

versity of approaches developed by modern funerary archaeology and of the richness of the funerary contexts, not just to study the human behaviour regarding the dead but also to address many other aspects of social life that are incorporated in that behaviour. In short, it underlines quite well the holistic nature of the funerary archive. It was not specifically designed for experts on the matter, or at least not the Iberian experts but even they will learn by visiting. Being quite useful for students, it mainly addresses the public in a sober but attractive way, representing the effort of the research group *GEA - Cultura material e identidad social en la Prehistoria Reciente en el sur de la Península Ibérica*, Universidad de Granada, to communicate the results of its studies and its interpretative proposals.

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