MEGALITHS AND STELAE IN THE INNER BASIN OF TAGUS RIVER:
SANTIAGO DE ALCÁNTARA, ALCONÉTAR AND CAÑAMERO
(CÁCERES, SPAIN)

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Abstract: Several projects on the megalithic sites in the basin of the river Tagus contribute evidences on the close relation between stelae with engraved weapons and chronologically advanced megalithic graves. The importance of human images in the development of Iberian megalithic art supports an evolution of these contents toward pieces with engraved weapons which dating back to the 3rd millennium cal BC. From the analysis of the evidences reported by the whole geographical sector, this paper is also aimed at determining if the graphic resources used in these stelae express any kind of identity. Visible stelae in barrows and chambers from the 3rd millennium cal BC would be the images around which sepulchral areas were progressively added, thus constituting true ancestral references throughout the Bronze Age.

Keywords: Chalcolithic, megalithic sites, identities, metallurgy, SW Iberian Peninsula

INTRODUCTION

The several works on megalithic stelae we have developed so far shape a methodological and theoretical base of analysis aimed at proving a strong symbolic implementation current throughout the 3rd millennium cal BC in SW Iberian Peninsula (Bueno 1990, 1995: Bueno et al. 2005a, 2005b). Scarce stelae with engraved weapons had been reported so far in this area relative to the available reports referred to northern Iberian Peninsula stelae. The anthropomorphic representations presented in this paper allow us establishing a series of representations —with or without weapons and related to the funerary and sepulchral territories of their constructors during advanced Megalithic times (Bueno et al. 2004a)— similar to some stelae, such as Peña-Tú, containing a bell-beaker dagger and, occasionally, a halberd (Bueno et al. 2005b, 2010).

The definition of groups in the Iberian Peninsula has progressively consolidated (Bueno 1990, 1995; Bueno et al. 2005a). Hence, the existence of centres specialized in the production of this or that stela and statue style has been broadly proven (Bueno et al. 2005a: 627-631). The same occurs with smaller pieces known as ‘idols’ in traditional research, since their formal specialization is clear (Bueno 1992: 596; Bueno et al. 2003; Hurtado, 2008). Furthermore, the existence of workshops with particular productions and recognizable extensions is proven by recent archaeological reports (Calado & Rocha 2007).

Their continuous reference to past images is one of the most outstanding parameters. These are assumed as the justification of the outstanding position of certain individuals along a constant course (Bueno et al. 2007a, 2008a) from the ideology of the earliest farmers (Bueno et al. 2007b) to, practically, the Iron Age (Bueno et al. 2005a, 2010). The similarity observed between this long course and the line of megalithic art is the soundest reference to include the symbolic universe of these visible anthropomorphic references in the ideological framework of megalith constructors (Bueno et al. 2007a).

Craftsmanship and identities are reflection elements in view of the increased data collection which has taken place within the last years. Precisely, the continuity given to the projects we develop in Extremadura allows us contributing pieces to a growing collection, thus enriching its analysis perspectives.

We refer to three study cases with different information levels: the stelae at the necropolis of Lagunita, the stela in Alconétar, and the stela in Cañamero, the first stelae documented through specific research processes and the last stela reported casually. (Fig. 1)

The varieties of all of them diverge from the most extended variety in Spanish Extremadura: the so-called central-western stelae (Bueno et al. 2005a: 630), since they include stylistic resources similar to the commonest stelae and statues in the river Duero area (NW Iberian Peninsula). Hence, we believe that referencing the work by Ph. Kalb (1987) on megalithic sites is suitable, since—as some megalithic architectural sites—the anthropomorphic statues in this sector begin to show signs of the mobility and interchange of ideas in the easily-travelled internal platforms between rivers Tagus and Duero.
STELAE AT THE LAGUNITA NECROPOLIS (SANTIAGO DE ALCÁNTARA, CÁCERES)

The works we have developed so far within the Project “Megaliths and Graphical Markers in Santiago de Alcántara” include archaeological information and volume restitution of two monuments at the necropolis of Era de la Laguna (locally known as Lagunita). The published descriptions and presentations save us detailed explanations on the specific data available on both constructions (Bueno et al. 2006, 2007c, 2008b, 2009a). (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3)

Lagunita III is a chamber including a corridor made out of slate, with a large tumulus whose components —gray quartzite from the mountains, white quartz from
Fig. 3. Left: Lagunita III dolmen after its archaeological documentation and restoration. Right figure: Lagunita I after the study and restoration of its central area.

Fig. 4. Plan of Lagunita III dolmen (Santiago de Alcántara), showing the position and the graphical documentation of the menhir-stela and the smaller stelae in the access of the monument, from Bueno et al. 2007c. Photo by R. de Balbín.

lowlands, and slate from the river —represent the whole local topography (Scarre 2008). This stela-menhir, which must have been located on this tumulus (Bueno et al. 2004b), is one of the first evidences of this kind in SW Iberian Peninsula, now confirmed by the positions of the Lagunita I, Alconétar and Cañamero stelae, studied in
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Fig. 5. Phases of the corridor of Lagunita III during the excavation works, they define the closure of the monuments by the means of a pile of stones, in front of which the stela was placed. Bueno et al. 2008b

Throughout the excavation process, Lagunita III access area was defined as a ritual space of varied structures among which a stony platform — on which food and drink containers were placed — stood out, apart from polished pieces, arrow tips and fragments of engraved...
slate plaques (Bueno et al. 2008b). Two “pits of offering” —similar to those found at the lower side of large-to-huge megalithic monuments such as those found in Ireland— were added in front of this structure.

This kind of platforms is common in SE sepulchres under the shape of plinths, described by Siret as accumulations of “bethel stones” from Los Millares. In our case, anthropomorphic stones of varied shape and small-to-medium size were found in the northern side of the monument (its best preserved façade). We have already dealt with its decoration and typology (Bueno et al. 2006, 2008b).

Now we shall focus on a larger (1 m) sculptural piece found lying on the closure mechanism of the monument. A small pit, whose dimensions exactly coincide with the base of the lying piece, was found on the floor next to the chamber entry. This suggests it was a standing stela in monument use times. However, it was incorporated to the corridor door upon monument closure, thus remaining visible although the monument could then be entered no more. This stela remained as the only evidence of the burial of ancestors, who were still made offers in its external area for unquantifiable time. (Fig. 5)

It is a greenish slate piece, more compact than those in dolmens. In this sense, it coincides with the definition of greywacke. Its right side has been fragmented since ancient times, as breakage is not only completely weathered but also completely covered by decoration, thus producing an asymmetric appearance commonly found in all the pieces described next. Its location when used highlighted its slightly picketed engravings and soft bas-reliefs, since sunlight came from E-SE. These scarcely perceptible engraving techniques and the data available from other monuments in this area (Bueno et al. 2000) support the hypothesis that this stela, apart from engraved, was also painted. (Fig. 6)

Its whole outline was sculpted: the head is represented by a narrowing of the apex, crowned by a small semicircle of cups in the shape of a necklace. Among the adjacent objects, it is to highlight a belt with a wide-U buckle similar to that described in an anthropomorphic plaque at the El Corchero dolmen (Valencia de Alcántara) (Bueno 1988). This coinciding element, like some other previously-analysed coincidences (Bueno et al. 2005a), supports the variety of contemporaneous anthropomorphic expressions in this area. The presence of similar belts in menhir-stelae in southern France (D’Anna 1977) indicates the growing existence of wider relations with the SW Iberian Peninsula (Bueno et al. 2009b).

A trapezoidal-rectangular pectoral or adornment is observed at the upper part of the body. Upward lines may
have been useful to hang it in the fore area, thus repeating the kind of objects found on the neck or upper trunk of other statuary figures in rivers Tagus and Duero.

The soft bas-relief which characterizes this piece and the semicircular shapes found at the lower third of the trunk involve interesting references to larger pieces, among which the menhir-stela at Monte da Ribeira (Gonçalves et al. 1997) is the most outstanding one. Its “feet” (figured by two joined trapeziums) remind of outdoor motifs in Tagus engravings, thus insisting on a relation we have suggested since the documentation of megalithic art in International Tagus (Bueno et al. 2004b, 2009a).

The close relation of the stela with the time evolution of the monument allows us suggesting a chronology: between the second half of the 4th and the 3rd millennium cal BC, according to excavation-reported materials (Bueno et al. 2006, 2007c, 2008b).

In the same necropolis, Lagunita I sepulchre is slightly less elevated. Its complex architecture (still under study) comprises a series of reworks: the earliest monument include a chamber and corridor. Later on, it was destructed and concealed by means of a smaller monument composed by statuary pieces and a grown pile of stones dating back to the Bronze Age, when burials were placed on its stony ground.

The closure of the second monument is indicated by the presence of a triangular-profile stela, which must have been placed at the top of the barrow. It is over 1 m high and made out of compacted schist and greywacke, as the one already described in Lagunita III. Like the latter, it shows a rather pointed head and a softly-picketed rectangular adornment in its central area, which can be related to some clothing elements, including the aforementioned pectoral. (Fig. 7)

Its face drawing is similar to the Longroiva stela: an oval outline with two protruding remarkable ears. Thus, it reminds of the Conxo stela-panel (Galicia) (Peña & Vázquez Varela, 1979), both from the 3rd millennium cal BC, according to its adjacent weapons. (Fig. 8)

THE ALCONÉTAR STELA

Found in a prospection project directed by E. Cerrillo (in press), it is inserted into the ford of the Tagus by Garrovillas. The presence of megalithic monuments in this place has been studied since the early 19th century (Bueno 1994; Bueno et al. 2004a; Cerrillo & González.
Fig. 9. Location of documented barrows at Alconétar, after E. Cerrillo

Recent works, apart from detecting the stela with weapons, have also extended the studied necropolis. (Fig. 9)

Its inclusion in the Leisner catalogue (1959) provided the whole site with a well-deserved importance mainly based on the outstanding trousseaus preserved at the Museum of Caceres. The presence of a green-stone pectoral, as well as of copper tools, is given a new role in view of the stela documentation described next. Among these, a fragment of a copper dagger with trapezoidal short tongue and missing triangular blade end stands out. The association of these weapons to the Bell-beaker period in several funerary sites along river Tagus leads us to date them back to the 3rd millennium cal BC. We must highlight the piece located in a grave in La Salmedina (Madrid) (Berzosa & Flores 2005: 484) and those in caves 4 and 1 in Valle de las Higueras (Toledo); the last dates back to the second half of the 3rd millennium cal BC (Bueno et al. 2005d). Apart from typological variability, La Vera sites (Bueno et al. 2000b) prove their presence in Extremadura within generalized metal-production contexts. (Fig. 10)

This site is therefore added to our knowledge on advanced megalithic times in the interior basin of the river Tagus (Bueno et al. 2004a). Both in Valencia de Alcántara, and Alcántara and Santiago de Alcántara, excavations have proven the extension of megalithic
settlements in their most recent stages (Bueno et al. 2000, 2006, 2007c, 2008b). The C14 dating of the Trincones I dolmen (Bueno et al. 2007c) is an appropriate reference for a culminating moment of their development, which coincides with the materials found in Garroñillas dolmen and, particularly, with the presence of copper and outstanding adornment objects (Bueno 1994, 2000; Cerrillo e.p.).

The next stela was lying on its back at the top of a pile of stones in the closest necropolis to the settlement. Given its vertical position in the ford, the stela can be supposed to have been clearly visible, since the traditional river pass could be observed from its original location. (Fig. 11)

A linear structure with lying pieces was found next to this group of barrows. This structure may correspond to a group of stelae similar to those described in central-northern Portugal sites such as Cabeço da Mina (Sousa 1997).

These interesting discoveries led us to submit an urgent-intervention project related to the reservoir water level, which was finally turned down by the Archaeological Service of the Extremadura Regional Government. Therefore, the damage of the structures which became exposed after a strong water drop can be supposed to be unstoppable under the varied situations of water level rising and dropping provoked by the reservoir system of the Tagus Hydrographical Confederation.

On relatively coarse schist, where the fractures which characterize this kind of rock can be observed, the right side of the stela has been smoothed down, thus enhancing the two natural aspects of this raw material. This contributes volume and different motif visibility. Assuming the E-SE orientation which can be inferred from its final position, maximal visibility was reached with the sun on the west. This dissymmetry is believed to be intentionally related to the interpretation of these statuary pieces (Bueno et al. 2008a), in agreement with the concentration of engravings, and their most remarkable techniques, on its right-hand side. At dawn, its weapons and adornments would gather strength, up to defining its remarkable anthropomorphic presence as the day went by, thus configuring the time of a widely well-known story (Bueno et al. 2008a).

This 1.03 m-high, 0.50 m-wide and 0.14 m-thick piece is practically complete and currently held by the Museum of Caceres. (Fig. 12)

Its head contains a face delimited by oblique lines converging toward the central area, characterized by a rectangular extraction and rounded corners subjected by the afore-mentioned and some other somewhat-softer parallel lines: a similar, but slightly smaller and tighter, motif to that described in the Lagunita III stela. The latter is defined by an abrupt picked and abraded engraving, particularly on its right side, where the line is not only wider but also continues toward its back side.

The next third corresponds to the transition between the rectangular trunk and the head. A small pit, which coincides with the shoulder of the statue, was found at the right-hand side. Its volume is enhanced by remarkable
surface polishing in this area, which contains a marked rectangular incision. In its left-hand side, two oblique picketed lines join a transversal line performed with the same technique. Their position suggests the presence of a belt-fastened sash. However, the belt is highly visible in the right-hand side, but finds no continuity in the area described now, and the horizontal line the sash is fit in remains uncovered. The only reasonable explanation for this is that paint may have completed the belt, higher in the left-hand side according to the perspective used in this figure. However, design reforms cannot be discarded either.

The rectangular trunk of the figure is somewhat prismatic in its right-hand side and clearly lenticular in its left-hand side, thus insisting on the search of a lateralized 3-dimensional perspective. Due to this remarkable treatment differences between left- and right-hand sides, the dagger and right-hand belt are unusually stood out by a previous smoothing-down treatment and preparation absent in its left-hand side. The afore-mentioned preparation can be said to open a ‘window’ on its right-hand side which clearly stands out its belt and dagger. The halberd on the left-side stands out in the coarser area.

Its halberd, handled dagger and belt are rather clear. This set of weapons is enhanced by deep picketing, abrasion and bas-relief techniques, which provide remarkable realism, thus making the described pieces the true main characters in this representation. Each of these elements seems to hover in front of the figure, since the neck adornment, and the sash and its horizontal line were performed with subtler engraving techniques, thus giving rise to the optical effect enhancing these three elements.

The 3 cm-wide belt sets off from the right-hand side of the dagger blade edge, sharply marks the 3-dimensional perspective of the statue, and finally reaches its back side. It was deeply picketed, similarly to the head-trunk separation. The fact that the dagger blade edge shows a different bias to that observed in the belt inner and outer sides confirms that both figures are part of one only gesture. Therefore, it seems that the line of the blade edge was interrupted to trace the belt. It was not until the latter was finished that the right-hand dagger blade edge was continued. This edge is slightly wider from the belt onward.

With a 36 cm-long blade and 10 cm-wide handle, the piece in question was deeply picketed, and strongly abraded in the right-hand part, thus giving rise to a false bas-relief. This systematic work gives an impression of clarity in contrast to the markedly dark background of the schist the stela is made out of. This impression is also enhanced by a final retouch with a metallic object, attributable to a recent intervention. A more shallowly-picketed small cup is located at the right-hand side of the dagger. Its rounded tongue sticks out from a sheath-shaped drawing suggested by the transversal line below the blade.

The last piece in this three-item set is fixed to the left-hand side of the dagger, as the belt is fixed to its right-hand side. However, it is more outstanding, since it was performed on the coarse surface of the left-hand side of the stela: a 22 cm-long sharp triangular blade pointing toward the left-hand side whose lines set off from the dagger blade’s left edge. Abrasion-widened picketing can be observed in the lower part of the blade. Picketing is softer than in the dagger, but the same technique was used. Below the blade and fixed to the new left-hand dagger blade edge, the coarse relief of the base was carved to draw the 32 cm-long handle of this halberd.
The back contains a carved lateral side aimed at enhancing this three-quarter portrait. The continued abrasion of the trunk-head and trunk-belt separation lines, and a vertical polished area with some scattered incisions which may indicate that the clothes were represented by the material’s natural texture on its obverse, support this three-quarter perspective which characterizes the carving of the analysed pieces.

THE CAÑAMERO STELA

Lying on a pile of stones quite similar to that described for the Alconétar stela, the Cañamero stela was also near the homonymous reservoir and within the immediate surroundings of another dolmen whose study and inclusion in the collection of paintings from this municipal district we applied for some years ago. Its location coincides with a megalithic necropolis, as in other previous cases. However, we cannot certainly determine whether this necropolis was close to some settlement. (Fig. 13 and Fig. 14)

As in Santiago de Alcántara (Bueno et al. 2006, 2008b, Carrera et al. 2007), the material traces of settlement found in this territory, as well as graphic painting evidences (the area of Alconétar also includes unverified evidences of this kind) are expected to be confirmed with the ongoing explorations.

Made out of schist, as the previous pieces, the Cañamero stela remained located and under no institutional intervention for years, until P. Diosdado (inhabitant of the village of Cañamero), who was concerned about its disappearance and breakage (in fact, some stone chips had come off its upper part), kept it in a warehouse waiting for its movement to a more appropriate location.

Fig. 13. Reconstruction of the original position of the stelae from Cañamero and Alconétar on their tumuli. Lower figure: the stela from Cañamero as it was discovered. Photos by R. de Balbín (upper) and A. González (lower)
Fig. 14. Location of the stela from Cañamero and its relation with the near waterline and the necropolis

It is 1.10 m tall, 0.46 m wide and 0.36 m thick. Therefore, its total volume is rather similar to those described so far. This figure shows a rectangular body, with a strangulated upper part to separate head from trunk. This strangulation is rather stronger on the right- than on the left-hand part of the figure. The afore-mentioned breakage coincides with the latter part. Its surface is quite damaged and, in fact, progressively turned red along the last years spent in the open air as a result of oxidation.

Its left-hand lateral side was defined by cutting out the symmetric area to the shoulder with a notch. This difference expressly enhances the volume of the right-hand side of the figure. Only thick cups can be found in the face, as in other megalithic stelae in this region such as Nossa Senhora da Esperança (Bueno et al. 2004b).

This short and corpulent shape —with high and wide shoulders—is given by the volume itself of its raw material, adapted with a not-too-exhaustive outline and shape working. Its deep cups are clearly visible in its face, as well as a natural fissure by its chest, which represents the upper edge of a handled blade tool. This 22 cm-long blade was given a striking perspective by means of remarkable carving and abrasion, as a false bas-relief identical to that in the Alconétar stela. The latter shows the same blade size, but different blade orientation. (Fig. 15)

In this remarkably foreshortened figure, the blade tool handle obliquely crosses almost three quarters of the figure’s body, thus enhancing its disproportionate size relative to the figure (Bueno et al. 2005a, 2010). The blade of this bas-relief blade tool is narrower than its handle, which almost seems a coarse wooden stick swollen to pass for a tool handle. Its inner part shows a transversal picketed line below the blade, probably to denote the place where blade and handle meet each other.

Its lower section —most of which must have been stuck in the earth— shows three, perhaps four, remarkable horizontal lines. These lines were firstly picketed and then smoothed down, so they tend to look like a bas-relief. The first is the best preserved one and strangulates the piece’s volume —this is a well-documented system, similar to the Sangusin stela (Salamanca), which shows this protection in a higher part of its body. This protection was then interpreted as a chain mail.

Fig. 15. Obverse, reverse and tracing of the stela from Cañamero.
Photos by R. de Balbín
Short perpendicular lines make up a compact network which may depict a chain mail or protection described better in its back part, located at the low part of its body. The handle of the afore-described tool is below this protection (Bueno et al. 2005a).

This protection continues across the third close to the back right-hand lateral side of the figure, thus highlighting a lateralized 3-dimensional perspective aimed at enhancing one of the piece’s volumes. However, it can be observed that a subtler carving technique was applied on the back-side, where a completely rectangular, wider and compacter network was carved by means of fine incisions. Small aligned cups can be observed below it.

**GRAPHIC REFERENCES AND IDENTITIES BETWEEN TAGUS AND DUERO**

Since the 1980s, changes in the consideration of anthropomorphic representations from the Iberian recent prehistory (Bueno 1987, 1992, 1995) have progressively shaped their association to megalithic structures (Bueno 1995; Bueno & González 1995; Bueno et al. 2005a) and showed they are deeply rooted in the ancestral imaginary which rules the ideology in recent prehistory in southern Europe.

The traditional gap between the so-called ‘idols’ and late Bronze Age stelae as anthropomorphic representations was overcome by the reality of an evolution of graphic contents ruled by human images whose coercive content is visualized through objects and weapons (from axes and crooks in the 5th millennium cal BC to swords and halberds in the late Bronze Age) (Bueno et al. 2005a, 2007a).

Many issues of this long process can be analysed in Extremadura. We shall begin with representations in plaques from Alentejo and then continue with the anthropomorphic references associated to its recent megalithic nature, as we have supported for almost three decades.

A detailed study of funerary architectures has rendered excellent results, in spite of being a field where this kind of representations was completely ignored (Bueno et al. 2000a, 2006, 2008c), thus opening an interesting discussion platform on the location of stelae and statues (Bueno et al. 2007a).

Those described in this paper prove a close relation between stelae and statues with (engraved) weapons and megalith constructors (Bueno 1992, 1995, Bueno et al. 2005a, 2010), thus contributing important connotations that may lead to more integral assessments of pieces whose long ideological course supports continuities rather than discontinuities.

These are the two obvious directions of the conclusions drawn from the pieces presented here. The first is the existence of chronologically advanced megalithic sites, now proven by dates and join of artefacts (Bueno 1994; Bueno et al. 2000a, 2004a, 2006, 2007c, 2008b) by the engraved weapons on the Alconétar and Cañamero stelae.

The second reflection is the introduction of graphic references from nearby environments. Given that the interpretation of reiterative figures in compact sets of stelae such as those in Hurdes-Gata (Bueno 1987; Bueno 1995; Bueno et al. 2005a) as an exhibition of identities turns out to be rather convincing, the varied documents analysed support the existence of interactions between the Tagus and Duero platforms, as shown up by megalith architectures and materials (Bueno et al. 2005c:192-193).

Since several other works contribute analysis arguments, we shall not insist on the first consideration: a stage of megaliths not only used but constructed from the late 4th to the 3rd millennium cal BC (Barroso et al. 2007a; Bueno 1994; Bueno et al. 2004a, 2007a, 2006, 2008c).

Therefore, we shall focus on assessing the graphic references which differentiate these pieces from the central-western group, since —as already stated—this is the commonest group among Extremadura findings.

Carvings on these stelae belong to the NW group: elongated shapes with outstanding rounded heads separated from the body by narrowing or strangulation (e.g., Tremedal, Sangusin or Villar de Ala. However, those in Salamanca and most of those in Portugal tend to have larger sizes, while those in Alconétar, Cañamero and Lagunita follow the reduced-size formula that characterizes the central-western group. (Fig. 16)

The former group generally involves more sculptural work, while the latter stelae usually involve flatter figures. This difference is interesting to understand the subsequent pieces, since their plain interpretation (their sculptural value should not be ignored) is the same as that found in decorated plaques and stelae from the late Bronze Age in the SW Iberian Peninsula.

If clothing and adornments faithfully reflect the status and identity of the group the figure belongs to, Lagunita I and III, Alconétar and Cañamero stelae show up clear differences.

The presence of rectangular adornments or pectorals, and rounded sides fastened by double belts fixing them to the back part in Lagunita III, Alconétar and Cañamero stelae refers to Nave (Cruz et al. 2000) and, particularly, Villar de Ala statues. Besides, the latter and Lagunita I and III stelae share the presence of a rectangular piece, which have been interpreted as short kilts and may represent leather protections for the warrior’s most delicate parts.

The possible armours in Valdefuentes, Tremedal, Ataúdes and Ermida have been interpreted as protection elements. Cañamero stela can now also be added to this list. These protections are represented as linear networks
adjusted to particular parts of the body. The relation of the Cañamero armour and its position with one of the San Martinho (Castelo Branco) stelae is obvious and confirms the hypothesis that the pieces in San Martinho have been reused.

Like in Valdefuentes, bas-relief weapons were performed before the chain mail, which was also devised as a weapon-fastening system. Interestingly, the only weapon detected among central-western stelae, the halberd of Hernán Pérez VI (Bueno 1987; Bueno et al. 2005a), is a bas-relief below the belt. (Fig. 17)

Some halberds were engraved with curves aimed at providing its handle with greater realism (e.g., Longroiva). However, the position which coincides most with Cañamero is Valdefuentes, since the halberd in this case is oblique to the figure and also due to the direction of its blade, in spite of Cañamero’s perceptibly coarser engraving.

The sculptural effort in NW stelae shows another coincidence in the termination of the Cañamero statue. As Valdefuentes, this termination enables to carve up the whole statue. This carving system is also observed in western menhirs, e.g, and wholly engraved stelae such as Navalcán (Bueno et al. 1999), Monte da Ribeira (Gonçalves et al. 1997) and Gargantans (Peña 1982).
The prominent position of the weapons in Alconétar and Cañamero stelae is achieved through their size, technique and placement in the forefront. All these characteristics can also be found in NW statues and some earlier representations (Bueno et al. 2005a, 2010). We have already pointed out that the objects and weapons engraved on stela-panels and statues and stelae since the earliest known representations tend to maximize their size, thus standing for the most remarkable value of the represented human figure. This is a simple technical resource used since the Palaeolithic Art and known as “thematic hierarchization”. Techniques are applied to and focus on the most important object or figure, usually placed in the most prominent place, thus enhancing the clarity of its perception. This explains the bas-relief applied to the weapons, which would provide their profiles with remarkable chiaroscuro effects throughout daily solar exposure, thus enhancing them as their most identifiable element, as in the relief-objects engraved on the earliest Iberian menhirs (Bueno et al. 2008a).

The softest bas-reliefs in the Lagunita III stela indicate a confluence of paints which cannot be ascertained in the present-day situation of these pieces. We cannot leave aside either that working on a dark surface such as schist produces a strong colour contrast which is nowadays highly blended by patina but which surely offered practically-pictorial visual characteristics back then.

The use of this game of colours (black/white, dark green/white, dark red/white) has not been evaluated enough both in this kind of representations and in practically all SW stelae. This carving tradition, looking for colour contrast, is represented best by open-air engravings from the SW Iberian Peninsula (Bueno, 2008).

With weapons crossed in front of the body, the position of the Valdefuentes de Sangusin statue is rather similar to the Alconétar stela, although certain differences can be observed. These are attributable to their different chronology — the latter is estimated to date back to earlier times (Bueno et al. 2005a). The halberd toward the right-hand side and a sheathed sword instead of a dagger: both statues reveal a long warrior representation tradition. The assembled position of the dagger and the halberd is also observed in bas-relief sword-halberd combinations from Algarve. Very convincing data on this mixture of influences which may prove the concentration of anthropomorphic representation (Bueno et al. 2005a) procedures were obtained from the Corgas and Beira statues through the repetition of the same Algarve weapon models, as previously indicated by the Tapada da Moita stela, within the Tagus area (Oliveira, 1986).

With a rounded tongue and also sheathed, the dagger in the Longroiva stela is rather similar to that in the Alconétar statue. In spite of being unassembled, the halberd was placed at the right-hand side of the figure and shows a pointed blade. This dagger-halberd combination and its position is the same as in the Tabuyo del Monte stela, on schist, also showing a sheathed dagger.

The Cañamero stela only shows the halberd, held at the right-hand side, as in the Hernán Pérez VI stela, within the central-western group. Right from the start, this position refers to its knowledge, apart from indicating the presence of the dagger, thus providing further evidence of the presence of halberds in the Iberian Peninsula beyond the number of weapons reported by metallic recounts (Bueno et al. 2005a). (Fig. 18)

The Lagunita I and III stelae show no weapons, thus posing a similar situation to that established for the northern group (Bueno, 1995) long time ago: the contemporaneity of pieces with and without engraved weapons in identical or similar megalithic sites such as the Sejos cromlech. This coexistence indicates possible signs of social hierarchization materialized as stone figures (Bueno et al. 2005a: 634). Thus, chronologies exclusively based on the presence or absence of weapons must be proposed with caution.

The Cañamero stela is achieved through their size, technique and placement in the forefront. All these characteristics can also be found in NW statues and some earlier representations (Bueno et al. 2005a, 2010). We have already pointed out that the objects and weapons engraved on stela-panels and statues and stelae since the earliest known representations tend to maximize their size, thus standing for the most remarkable value of the represented human figure. This is a simple technical resource used since the Palaeolithic Art and known as “thematic hierarchization”. Techniques are applied to and focus on the most important object or figure, usually placed in the most prominent place, thus enhancing the clarity of its perception. This explains the bas-relief applied to the weapons, which would provide their profiles with remarkable chiaroscuro effects throughout daily solar exposure, thus enhancing them as their most identifiable element, as in the relief-objects engraved on the earliest Iberian menhirs (Bueno et al. 2008a).

The softest bas-reliefs in the Lagunita III stela indicate a confluence of paints which cannot be ascertained in the present-day situation of these pieces. We cannot leave aside either that working on a dark surface such as schist produces a strong colour contrast which is nowadays highly blended by patina but which surely offered practically-pictorial visual characteristics back then.

The use of this game of colours (black/white, dark green/white, dark red/white) has not been evaluated enough both in this kind of representations and in practically all SW stelae. This carving tradition, looking for colour contrast, is represented best by open-air engravings from the SW Iberian Peninsula (Bueno, 2008).

With weapons crossed in front of the body, the position of the Valdefuentes de Sangusin statue is rather similar to the Alconétar stela, although certain differences can be observed. These are attributable to their different chronology — the latter is estimated to date back to earlier times (Bueno et al. 2005a). The halberd toward the right-hand side and a sheathed sword instead of a dagger: both statues reveal a long warrior representation tradition. The assembled position of the dagger and the halberd is also observed in bas-relief sword-halberd combinations from Algarve. Very convincing data on this mixture of influences which may prove the concentration of anthropomorphic representation (Bueno et al. 2005a) procedures were obtained from the Corgas and Beira statues through the repetition of the same Algarve weapon models, as previously indicated by the Tapada da Moita stela, within the Tagus area (Oliveira, 1986).

This interesting tendency to grave weapons on menhirs observed in the NW Iberian Peninsula is not in disagreement with the existing deep interactions between Algarve, Alentejo and the internal plateaus, which were given privileged location by the course of the river Tagus (Bueno et al. 2005d).
In these discourses (Bendala 1977; Berrocal 1987), the previous background is ignored or gets lost in the marginality of a bunch of scarcely-analysed prehistoric cultures even before minimal studies get started.

On the contrary, our analysis favours a long-distance ideological discourse mainly rooted in the cult of ancestors originated by the earliest farmers (Bueno et al. 2005a, 2010).

The reality of stelae and statues related to megalithic sites was accepted long time ago (Bueno 1992, 1995), although it still remains unknown for many protohistory-related authors. The stelae presented here and their location outside megalithic barrows contribute a further essential reference (Bueno & González 1995; Bueno et al. 1985; Bueno et al. 2005a, 2010), in this case with pieces with engraved weapons whose carving style and shape are related to the Algarve stelae (i.e., the earliest protohistory-related stelae in SW Iberian Peninsula).

Only the break between the knowledge of recent prehistory and protohistory explains some of the sticking points in the interpretation of these pieces. The most significant of these issues is their relation to funerary monuments. Although this issue exceeds by far our present aims, we shall next contribute some reflections.

The first refers to their obvious association to funerary monuments, which was perfectly argued by Gomes & Monteiro (1977), and dealt with in multiple classic works (Almagro 1963; Celestino 2000; Harrison 2004). The fact that some pieces were documented outside their original position, or that the latter could not be known, should not have influenced a whole-through-a-part interpretation, which is the one which has finally had the highest historiographic repercussion (Galán 1993).

The absent cemeteries and territorial signs in pass-through locations are the elements which—after more than a century of researches focused on descriptions and interpretations based on the framework of Ancient History—have prevailed over more integral considerations contributing contextual references.

Our hypothesis on the success of these interpretations in ideological courses connected to the cult of ancestors and megalith constructors (Bueno 1987; 1992: 1995) has progressively gained consistency with the data obtained through systematic prospecting and archaeological excavations in the Tagus and, more recently, the Guadalquivir areas (García Sanjuan et al. 2006).

Throughout all this time, we have proven the validity of regional megalithic sites, which reach rather advanced Bronze Age times in some necropolis (Barroso et al. 2007a; Bueno 1994; Bueno et al. 2004a, 2006, 2007b, 2008b, 2008c) with the coexistence of chalcolithic and bronze-age structures. This coexistence—which should be known as aggregation, since these sepulchres look for proximity to the oldest graves—leads to the discovery of earlier and more recent stelae, such as those in Valencia de Alcántara and Las Hurdes. Thus, it insists on an ideological course in which anthropomorphic figures played a referential role for generations.

The relation of stelae and fords or passes is the same as that observed between megaliths and transited areas. Their consideration should not leave aside that human settlements need close water sources. Therefore, settlement location is obviously determined by the availability of easy access to this resource. This fact can be ascertained in the area under study since the Upper Paleolithic (Bueno 2009).

Transferring this position to locations close to water sources through gateway communities is a qualitative improvement justified by the absence of housing data supporting such a categorical conclusion. In fact, this assertion is widely overcome in the interpretation of Iberian megalithic sites due to the availability of dwelling evidences which tend to reduce constant transhumance as the only lifestyle in these settlements (Bueno et al. 2002, 2005c).

Dwelling and funerary constructions in Alconétar, Santiago de Alcántara and Cañamero support the existence of stronger relations with their environment, since necropoli were constructed near their habitat (Bueno et al. 2000b) to defend their most vulnerable limit by means of ideological arguments. The presence of stelae and statues with coercive symbols is also observed in earlier menhirs and stelae. These human figures holding crooks, axes, daggers, swords and halberds and placed in visible locations related to deceased ancestors defined hereditary properties and assured the lineage and origin of community (Bueno et al. 2005a).

The specialization of these figures includes elements contributing chronology and origin information. The latter aspect is more interesting to understand the outstanding role of Tagus, since the described pieces do not only justify one of the points of the long course of statuary representations in Iberian recent prehistory, but also consolidate the interactions among varied graphic styles. We suggest that these differences should be interpreted as the expression of identities (Bueno 1992, 1995, Bueno et al. 2005a).

Regarding microanalysis, archaeological data indicate a series of completely new issues on location and visibility, starting point of longer reflections in the position of the most recent stelae.

Our work at the Santiago de Alcántara necropolis already reported (Bueno et al. 2004a, Bueno et al. 2006) the location of menhir-stelae on barrow apices—Lagunita III being the clearest case, since its location was ascertained through excavation.

Other similar signs in the Iberian Peninsula such as the monolith on monument 2 at Orca de Oliveira do Conde (Ventura 1998: 23), the menhir on barrow at Peña de la Abuela (Rojo et al. 2005), or the stela with gravened
weapons in the Palacio III dolmen (Bueno et al. 2007a) prove the use of external devices in megalithic constructions. Their study is essential for graphic discourse evaluation.

The detailed study of the pieces at Santiago de Alcántara and their position in monuments I and II support the hypothesis that these stelae functioned as monument closure devices and future visible reference: the image of the ancestors turned to stone (Bueno et al. 2008b).

The possibility that Alconétar and Cañamero stelae had been placed by the time of monument closure—as supported by data from Lagunita I and III—contributes new arguments supporting the hypothesis that later stelae with weapons (often associated to graves) were representative of the closure of the graves of outstanding social figures, whose graphic representation joins ancestor representation and new references to power and status (Bueno et al. 2000a).

The stelae with engraved weapons analysed in this study show up the transition between the earliest and more recent megalithic sites. Ancestral heritage is still important and becomes the ideological reference for the addition of new burials and dwelling areas.

Territorial long-term use models such as that put forward for the northern group at the Iberian Peninsula (Barroso et al. 2007b; Bueno 1995, Bueno et al. 2005a, 2010) are feasible for the area under study, where the group of stelae from the late Bronze Age cannot be analysed ignoring their long cultural and ideological tradition.

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