

Concealment–monumentalisation in a Neolithic burial mound

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Abstract

The purpose of this poster is to explore the essence of the Megalithic phenomenon through one of its most significant elements: the construction of burial mounds. This is a complex and highly variable phenomenon. By carrying out a detailed analysis of some monuments, we may see that we are facing a cultural expression that corresponds to a formal pattern repeated throughout all its existence.

The argument is presented through a mound from the NW Iberian Peninsula. By using a stratigraphic methodology we may identify the constructive processes and the chronological dating of its different phases, which finally allows to study the variability and regularity of the phenomenon in general.

We will focus on a very specific aspect of the Megalithic phenomenon in the north-western Iberian Peninsula: the construction of the monuments, their social and symbolic implications, and the archaeological methodology making it possible to tackle it effectively.

Megalithic constructions

We view Megalithic mound as a product that resulted from social action, which responds to a series of social and symbolic requirements.

It calls for the creation of spaces, involving both social practices (intentional) and social life itself (non-intentional).

Architecture is therefore a human product that uses a given reality to create a new reality; the built space that is therefore social, which is given a significance, and so is symbolic. It is the combination of different formal entities projected in a spatial manner.

In the process of constructing these spaces, the same spatial concept is repeated, the same 'idea' that is intrinsically linked to the pattern of rationality of a given society, although the specific construction of each of them means that they acquire a specific, unique form, occurring as a result of satisfying specific functional and social demands, as well as the limitations and possibilities of the chosen location.

And so, the model of Megalithic spatiality identified in the north-western Iberian Peninsula features the following elements: it is circular, enclosed and with a dominant central area; it is organised axially, is dissymmetrical, and with the appropriation and signification of natural elements.

These are not static backdrops, but instead are constituted as a social and imaginary construction, in movement and deeply rooted in the culture, closely related to thought processes, social organisation, subsistence, conception and the use of space. The monuments are the result of the accumulation of a series of actions: the formal identification of each of the stages also allows us to identify architectonic oppositions from the Megalithic age, between the exhibition/monumentalisation and the concealment of each of its spaces and elements.

Archaeological Methodology

The aim is to arrive at a description of this architectonic phenomenon according to its own logic, using a method that makes it possible to contrast the models obtained from the formal analysis of the different aspects of a socio-cultural formation. **Method = Structural Analysis.**

Landscape Archaeology offers us the theoretical and methodological foundations to obtain archaeological knowledge from the remains of Megalithic architecture, as it allows us to integrate all of the aspects of the phenomenon: from its situation and relation with the physical environment and the archaeological surroundings, to the actual configuration of the element being analysed, the location of artistic elements, schemes of perception, and visual properties.

Formal analysis = must define the form and organisation of the element analysed.

- Stratigraphic configuration (Harris method) = construction stages = TEMPORALITY
- Spatial configuration = pattern of organisation with regard to the surroundings, spatial relationships, internal articulation in each of the stages identified = SPATIALITY

Perceptual analysis = how each of the different spaces and volumes of the construction are organised on being observed, when moving through them, the visibility strategies of the different spaces (inhibition, concealment, exhibition, monumentalisation).



Forno dos Mouros 5 (Ortigueira, A Coruña, Spain)

This mound is situated in the highest part of the mountain ranges to the north of Galicia, where a large number of sites are concentrated. The most surprising result from this excavation was the tumulus was built over a previously-existing monument. Thanks to the construction of the second monument, the archaeological deposits and original stratigraphy of the first were perfectly preserved. By combining stratigraphic analysis with Harris's methodology and radiocarbon dating of the most significant stratigraphic units, it was possible to reach an interesting conclusion:

The monument was not built at once with a single process or stage, but instead formed part of a complicated cycle of use which involved construction and ritual, construction as part of the rite, and rites as construction. This is the model of the process we have identified:

Stage 1: excavating the land and building the free-standing funerary chamber:

- Creating a space closed off to the outside,
- Restricted use and access: functional predominance of the interior, involving the concealment of the burial itself
- Monumentalisation of this space by creating a stone construction, occasionally with spectacular dimensions

We do not know how long the 'life cycle' of the chamber would have lasted, which C14 dating has shown to have been in use around 4.400 cal BC (at the start of the Megalithic period in the north-western Iberian Peninsula).

Stage 2: the chamber was sealed. First the entrance was sealed with stone slabs, with the chamber finally being covered by stone blocks and the tumulus constructed. The monument enclosed the chamber. In some way the chamber was 'condemned' and 'concealed', by the construction of the tumulus. This monumentalised the burial site but not the burial space, now essentially functioning towards the exterior.

Stage 3: Later, a second tumulus was built over the first. We presume this contained a large Megalithic chamber, which was completely eliminated after the central section collapsed. A corridor still remains between the walls to the south-east of the monument which proves the existence of this Megalithic structure. This was in use around 3.000 cal BC (at the height of the Megalithic period in the north-western Iberian Peninsula).

Stage 4: The tumulus was enclosed with construction of an interesting protective structure, which concealed all of the previous structures and gave it its final, monumental appearance.

Megalithism is not a continuous phenomenon

The generalisation of the stratigraphic analysis and datings for this type of site makes it possible for us to state that the lengthy period of activity identified for this site is not unique. We have to consider the Megalithic phenomenon as a series of 'breaks' (periods of construction followed by inactivity), more than a continuous process of construction.

The monument itself must be considered as an unfinished project (with the superimposition of constructive and destructive stages, construction stages compared to stages without construction), in which its use and function may have varied throughout time, with the interplay of concealment and monumentalisation playing an important role in the different architectonic spaces of the monument.

References

The line of investigation that it is shown in this poster it is explained in:

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