Archaeology of Burial Mounds

University of West Bohemia, Department of Archaeology

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Archaeology of Burial Mounds

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Before the Barrows: Forms of Monumentality and Forms of Complexity in Iberia and Uruguay[1]

Felipe Criado Boado, Camila Gianotti García & Patricia Mañana Borrazás

Introduction

In other works we have explored the symbolic significance of the explosion of monumental architecture, and have seen how this was the main instrument of a socio-cultural device that made it possible to organize nature and introduce it through social relationships of production and reproduction (Criado 1989b). However, to date we have not explored in detail the explanation of the social and economic circumstances behind the appearance of monumental architecture. This is what we will cover in this text.

A structural analysis of the formal evidence of the monumentalization of death in primitive societies in processes of dissolution and increasing complexity – which are different, but whose strategies of visibilization in time and space have similar features – allows us to explore the substantial features of the first wave of monumentalization that took place on both sides of the Atlantic.

The study forms a part of the joint projects carried out between Galicia (in the northwestern Iberian Peninsula) and Uruguay over the last few years through our different institutions. Both regions have important monumental landscapes in the Atlantic tradition, which have certain similarities yet are not identical. This joint perspective makes it possible to explore two different cultural contexts, which will then provide the arguments that focus on the socio-economic aspects of their origins. The challenge is to show how societies so far apart, in different periods and with different socio-economic frameworks, came up with similar solutions that may be interpreted from within the same conceptual scheme.

The two main ideas we will focus on and discuss are:

1. That this is a discontinuous, non-linear phenomenon, in which the monuments must be considered as the result of a ritual process, and the architecture as a construction project, that served as the foundations for the development of a long-lasting social tradition based on the materialization of the collective memory.
2. The absence of overwhelming evidence showing a purely Neolithic context for the start of monumental activity (understood in the traditional, Childean sense of the term).

In both areas, excavating the barrows using stratigraphic methods has made it possible to explore in more detail the characteristics of a phenomenon which, if not dealt with in this manner, loses its form, and the temporality of the process is diluted. Stratigraphic analysis and dating the different moments identified in this type of record makes it possible to view the barrows as unfinished constructions, multi-episodic in nature, that

[1] This study forms part of the project "*A study of Prehistoric Monumental Landscapes: methodological development and the application of new technologies for the integral management of Archaeological Heritage*", financed by the AECI during 2000–2001.

change in shape and use throughout their lifetime within a social context which while remaining primitive, tended towards the complex.

Hunter-gatherer monumentality in the Atlantic region of South America

The barrows found in South America, known locally as *cerritos* in Uruguay or *aterros* in Brazil, appeared in the second millennium BC (within the context of the late Archaic and early Formative periods). Radiocarbon dating has made it possible to situate the origin of the first *cerritos* at around 2000 BC, they remained in use until the period in which the indigenous population came into contact with Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Bracco et al 2005; López 2001).

The *cerritos* are prehistoric constructions made of earth, circular or extended in shape, with dimensions ranging between diameters of 30 metres for the circular barrows, and 70 metres length for the extended barrows, with heights ranging between 0.5 and 6 metres. They are found in a large area that includes southeastern Uruguay and the high plains of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil). They are directly related to wetland and low-land regions susceptible to flooding, although they are also found in higher zones, mountainsides and hilltops, with more extensive visual control and in direct relation to regional transit routes (Figure 1).

From the very outset of archaeological investigation in Uruguay, an interpretive model was put forward and maintained, according to which the society that built the *cerritos* is recognized as a society of highly efficient hunter-gatherers societies within a highly productive environment (López & Bracco 1994:60). The presence in *cerritos* of the remains of foodstuffs, both animal and vegetable, leads to the recognition of an economy based on the control of a wide range of products, from both land and sea. The main strategy relied on hunting medium to small sized animals (deer, otter, birds, fish and reptiles) and gathering fruits, tubers and roots, including the *butiá* (the fruit of the palm *Butiá capitata*) whose abundance and predictability appears to have played an important role in the economy (Pintos 2001). The presence of maze and bean phytolites appears to indicate the introduction and/or sporadic practice of crop cultivation (del Puerto *et al*. 1999, 2001; Iriarte *et al*. 2001).

This model has been updated in the light of newly found evidence making it possible to situate the society that built the *cerritos* on the first step of social complexity (López 2001; Iriarte *et al*. 2003); there is clear evidence in the recognition of a strengthening of

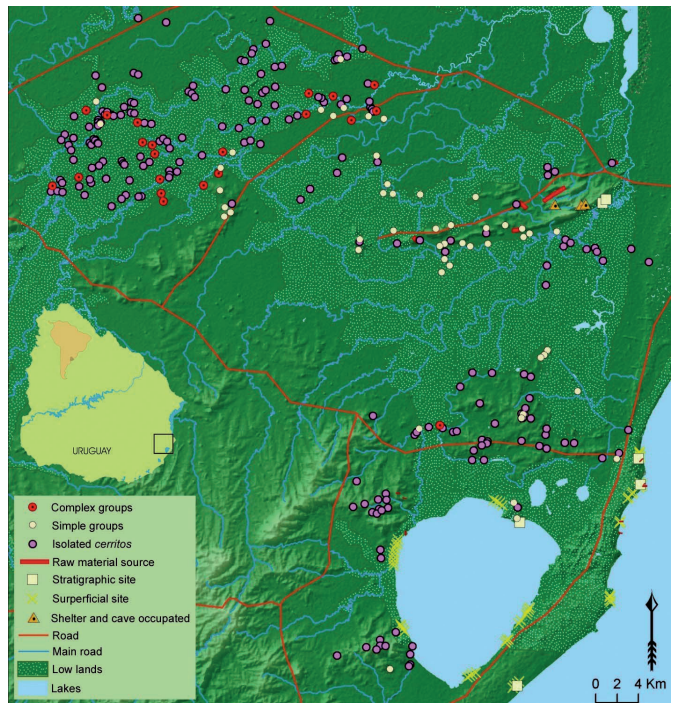

Figure 1. Distribution area of cerritos *in Rocha, Uruguay.*

monumental activity and ceremonial conduct, the diversity of funerary patterns, the complex control over land and sea resources, greater territorial emphasis, and a heirarchized pattern of settlement around 1000 BC. The transformations encountered are an eloquent sign of the social needs of communities whose territorial presence and levels of integration are increasing (López 2001; López & Gianotti 1998; Pintos & Bracco 1999).

The spatial organization of the groups of *cerritos*, seen in historical perspective, reveals the investment of social energy into the construction of permanent structures and increasingly more complex spaces. We already have quite an extensive repertoire of monumental forms and spaces in which specific organizational guidelines and monumental spaces are recognized; these include diferent earthworks: *cerritos*, microreliefs, ramparts, platforms and *plazas* (Gianotti 2000; López & Gianotti 1998; Iriarte 2003; López 2001).

The domestic sphere has been documented both in construction activity and in the organization of monumental spaces, in which the *cerritos* appeared around 2000 BC, together with other archaeological structures such as small mounds of earth whose monumental status is ambiguous, connected with small settlements of hunter-gatherers. These settlements were re-occupied over time. Around 1000 BC they were the backdrop for the intensification of monumental activity, which after the reorganization of domestic space according to a deliberate plan, led to the construction of small hamlets around a central public space (plazas). These included funerary and residential structures and, at times, small accretional midden reliefs used for maize cultivation (Iriarte 2003; López 2001; López & Gianotti 1998, 2001), in the same way as occurred on the other side of the Atlantic (Criado *et al.* 2000).

Another feature that defines the *cerritos* from 1000 BC onwards is the repeated presence of funerary structures. This may be seen in the variability and complexity of burials of humans and animals (*Canis familiaris*) found in them (Gianotti 1998; López 2001). The funerary patterns recognized to date include varieties of primary and secondary

Figure 2. Secondary burial (funerary 'package') from cerrito *CH2D01.*

Figure 3. View of a circular cerrito *in Paso Barrancos.*

burials, with an important presence of funerary 'packages' (small bundles that reveal that once the body had decomposed, the bones were placed together in a shroud and were possibly carried around on the back, as is mentioned in some chronicles, until the final burial), and urn burials (Cabrera 1999; Gianotti 1998) (Figure 2). A new mortuary practice identified is related to the presence of isolated bone fragments with signs of traumatic treatment, such as cut marks, intentional fractures and burnt alteration (Gianotti 1998; Gianotti & López 2005; Pintos & Bracco 1999).

The excavations carried out in *cerritos* have made it possible to see the monumental activity in this case as **episodic** and **accumulative**, forming part of a genuine construction project, and a deliberate planning of space that followed a given conceptual scheme. This idea of an unfinished project may be extrapolated to the individual construction, the *cerrito*, as well as to all of them as a whole (Gianotti 2000). If we focus on the ideal formative history of a *cerrito*, we find that it begins with an initial accumulation of material, sometimes a small deposit of domestic origin, over which other levels accumulate (over a span that ranges from a few to several hundreds of years). This process produces the *cerrito* we see today (Figure 3). The formation progression is not constant throughout its history. Occasionally, spaces which will later be used as a monumental *cerrito* are used as a funerary space, without requiring any modification of the original construction, and occasionally on the contrary, with constructive periods without burials. This indicates that the barrow itself is the final result of a more extensive conceptual scheme, an experience that is living, continuous and dynamic, in which the *cerrito* definitively reifies and continuously re-signifies a way of being in the world.

The definition in other papers of this type of monumentality as *ambiguous monumentality* may be understood as the fact that these societies did not have the economic capacity to sustain the construction of monuments (Criado 1993b); instead, what we intend to argue is that there was a symbolic and social determination to construct a tradition based on social memory, repeatedly returning to the same space, and that through this repetition of practices a monument took shape, in this way leading to a ***specific system of construction as a ritual process***.

The appearance of monumentality in Galicia

Galicia is situated in the extreme northwestern corner of the Iberian Peninsula. The region is fully incorporated within the Megalithic tradition of Europe's Atlantic coastline, in which the first monumental architecture of the old continent was built between the end of the fifth millennium and mid-third millennium BC. It represents the first prehistoric landscape model based on permanent artificial constructions. The monuments are traditionally attributed to agrarian societies, perhaps to the earliest which appeared on the eastern shores of the Atlantic. However, this issue is under debate (Arias *et al*. 2000; Rodríguez 1997). In this case, the opposite occurs to the barrows found in South America, where the phenomenon has traditionally been attributed to societies of hunter-gatherers and fishermen, although probably at specific periods with some type of horticulture. Galician barrows are traditionally placed in the Neolithic period, which implies a production-based economy was in place. This interpretation is open to discussion, most clearly in the earliest stages, where sufficient data does not exist to support such a monolithic interpretation.

In this context, the concomitant presence of shellmiddens in Atlantic Europe and in South America is also important. These constructions, together with the first megalithic structures, are the threshold of complex economies and Neolithic monumentality, and should therefore occupy the corresponding position in the debate relating to the definition of the transition between both periods, and in relation to the origin of monumentality. A debate which must consider them, particularly in the case of the Brazilian *sambaquies* (Gaspar 1998), as the first prehistoric monuments, and in the case of the shell deposits from Atlantic Europe, to at least be considered as 'ambiguous monuments' (something that is not intended to be a monument, but is, or something that is not a monument as such, but attempts to be one) (see Criado 1993b for more details).

The wetlands found alongside coastlines, particularly in the Atlantic, have been considered as one of the areas which, as a result of their fertility, made the development of the first complex societies possible. These regions would have permitted the development of systems for controlling a wide range of resources (from the land and sea), that would have inhibited, delayed and/or complemented other productive strategies (Perlman 1980; Yesner 1980). In any case, although some authors consider these systems to be the essential foundation for the start of complexity (Schnirelman 1994), we believe they are not so decisive. Social complexity appears linked more to a social and symbolic base than to an economic base. A series of examples exist making it possible to observe structural similarities (the same pattern of rationality and similar social relationships of production) between farmers and horticulturist groups and hunter-gatherer groups (Ingold 1986; Schnirelman 1992, 1994; Zvelebil 1986). Amongst other things, this reveals to us that monumentality does not have to be something that only Neolithic farmers were capable of. Hernando (1999:57-59) correctly considers the prejudices upon which the identity of modern western man has been constructed, which inevitably involves a mechanism of reaffirmation based on opposition to an 'otherness' that is wild, untamed and irrational. Perhaps this also explains why hunter-gatherer societies have been historically denied certain abilities.

In the case of the northwestern Iberian Peninsula, the process of conversion to the Neolithic and the acceptance of a production based economy within a wider peninsular

and European framework has been explored (Criado 1989b, 1993a; Criado & Fábregas 1989; Fábregas *et al*. 1997; Hernando 1999). The data provided from excavations carried out on settlements do not make it possible to affirm with total certainty that in the early Neolithic and at the dawn of monumentality in the northwestern Iberian Peninsula there were societies with economies based on the production of foodstuffs. Furthermore, this data points towards a clear continuity and identity between the last communities of epipaleolithic hunter-gatherers and the first farmers. The continuity seems to be affirmed, amongst other elements, by the appearance of regular camps, with a small number of permanent structures and little diversity of materials when compared with later settlements (Lima 2000). This gives rise to a pattern of locations that coincides with areas of settlements and monuments, and with monuments and cupmarks (Villoch 2001). In a temporal sense we see patterns related to the seasons of the year, and strategies based on mixed patterns of subsistence, which reduced the impact of human activity on nature (Criado 1993b). Perhaps this explains why there are virtually no attributes of an agricultural economy visible in the archaeological record.

This continuity between Mesolithic (or epipaleolithic) populations is also evident if we examine data from the Cantabrian region of the Iberian Peninsula (Blas Cortina 1997; Diez 1996/97; Serna 1997), which further supports the theory of a non-Neolithic early monumentality in the traditional sense of the term. However, other interpretations do exist that connect megalithism with a consolidated stage of the Neolithic, and which propose it as a feature that brought about the transition towards a peasant society (Arias 1997). Paradoxically, both proposals may form a part of (or be true within) the same interpretative scheme, if we cease to consider monumentality as a unique, uniform phenomenon, and modify a perspective that privileges continuity for another that relativizes it, and recognizes the breaks and ruptures inherent in all social and historical processes.

Considering the analogies between the cases studied in this work, we present a provisional conclusion: the early stage of the construction of monuments appeared at the same time as complex systems for handling resources, whether based on hunter-gatherer systems, or on agricultural or mixed systems. The first monumental architecture in the north-west appeared as part of what we may refer to as the 'Meso-Neolithic package', and represents a way for artificializing nature that takes the form of naturalizing a culture, a way of introducing the natural world through domestic social relationships (already proposed as a way of understanding the Neolithic in Criado 1989a). We should therefore underline that hunting-gathering, controlling wild resources and complex foraging systems all formed not only the economic base but also the social backdrop for these communities.

As with any transition, this monumentality did not appear suddenly, but instead developed in a 'conservative' manner. Developing combined new shapes with the old order, while maintaining natural rationale (Neolithic in the former meaning, and not in the Childean sense), which is the reason why so many megalithic forms are reminiscent of natural shapes.

However, we need a social cause to explain these processes and this is an inception where our work appears, attempting to rectify the insufficiency of the symbolic-structural or economic explanations we have dealt with to date. Why Mesolithic, Neolithic and/or

ambiguous monuments started to be made? We need to call on a model of social determination that lays down the foundations for purely symbolic explanations. We propose a hypothesis: **the aim was to preserve the previously-existing social order**.

Yet we must make every effort to go beyond this interpretation. In fact, proposals of this kind are widely accepted today. What we now propose is to seek out the social and economic reasons that lie behind this phenomenon. To do so, we will explore a particular case, the excavation of a Megalithic monument our laboratory dealt with recently (barrow 5 in the site known as 'Forno dos Mouros').

Forno dos Mouros 5 (Ortigueira, A Coruña)

Barrow 5 of Forno dos Mouros is in the district of Ortigueira, in the north of Galicia. It is found in the upper part of the *Serra da Coriscada*, a series of mountains at the northern tip of a range that runs across practically all of central Galicia from north to south, and ends to the north in Estaca de Bares. The upper part of this section of the range is characterized by rocky outcrops, flat summits and smooth slopes running from north to south. In the east and west the slopes are much steeper. These features, as well as the specific conditions resulting from the altitude, such as the rare occurence of floods, mean that the range is one of the natural transit routes in the area. It contains the majority of the barrow-like monuments documented in the region (Figure 4).

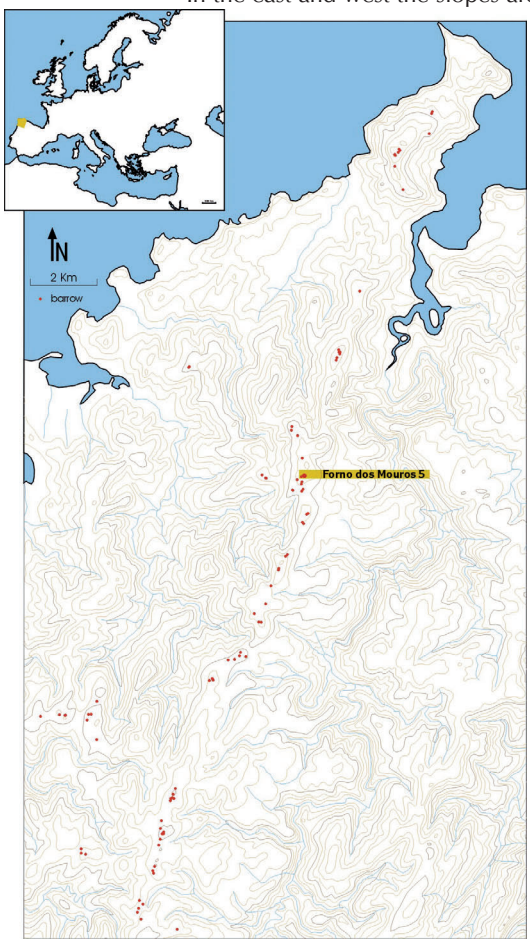

Figure 4. Situation of Forno dos Mouros *5 at the regional level and in its immediate context.*

The site we refer to here forms part of a group of nine barrows, one of the most important in the range. The sites density is related to the fact that this point is low enough for the range to be crossed easily, and is where the natural transit routes intersect. The group of barrows stretches along the northern half of this pass, with the most southern barrow at the lowest, flattest point of the pass. Six more barrows form line heading northwards, and another two towards the west.

Forno dos Mouros 5 is the largest of the barrows on the site. It is to the north, on the highest point, looking out from the northern extreme over an area of smooth slopes defining an arc that runs from the south to south-west, which includes a further 3 barrows from the group. The closest is barely 1 m to the south west (Figure 5), whereas the other two physically and visually enclose this area from the south to the south west.

The purpose of excavating in this site, which was seriously affected, was to obtain precise archaeological information and also to recover it as an outstanding element in the landscape by restoring and enhancing the area, as part of a general recovery proj-

Figure 5. View of Forno dos Mouros *4 (left) and 5 (right) from the S, before their restoration.*

ect for cultural heritage in the region of Ortegal aimed at promoting it as a resource for culture and tourism.

The most surprising result of the excavation at this site was the discovery that the barrow 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 methodology and radiocarbon dating of the most important stratigraphic units, it was possible to discover an interesting fact: the monument was not built in one single process or stage, but instead as part of a complicated cycle involving construction and ritual, with construction as part of the ritual, and the ritual as construction.

The model shown below describes the process in detail (Figure 6):

1. Firstly, **the freestanding chamber was built** (Stage 1). This is formed by seven slabs forming a polygonal chamber open towards the south-east, with an average diameter of 1.5 m and a maximum height of 1.3 m, with a small corridor formed by two blocks of quartz. A slab fully covers the floor of the chamber.
2. It was then put into use, although we do not know exactly how long the use life for this chamber would have lasted.

   Thanks to ^{14}C dating, one sample of fill which was collected from the interior of the chamber (UA 20009) and another from the deposit under the slabs (UA 20010), we know that this was in use around 4,400 cal BC. The organic material found in both deposits was dated using AMS, with exceptional conditions of conservation, without any evidence of filtration or alterations. The first dating indicated that the in-filling of the chamber occured after the slabs had been fitted in place. This made it possible to situate the period of construction and use to between 4552 – 4351 cal BC. The second dating was made for the deposit between the slabs and level B. The physical insulation of this deposit (with its perimeter defined by the chamber and the upper part of the slabs) to some extent guarantees that this final inclusion of organic material was added at the time when the chamber was built, and specifically when this deposit was closed as the slabs were fitted. The dating obtained gives a very precise date for the construction of the chamber, between 4410 – 4306 cal BC (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Forno dos Mouros 5. Radiocarbon dates, Stage 1.

Record nº	C14 BP	Interval cal BC 95.4 % (2 sigma)
UA 20009	5635 ± 50	4579–4570 (0.8 %)
		4552–4351 (99.2 %)
UA 20010	5500 ± 50	4454–4416 (17.1 %)
		4410–4306 (56.9 %)
		4305–4248 (26.0 %)

Both dates become more meaningful when checked and inserted in their stratigraphic sequence, they then give us a greater margin of probability in identifying the date when the chamber was used. The margin where both datings coincide, between 4410–4351 cal BC, could be considered as the period in which the chamber was built, the slabs fitted, and the final tasks toward completing the structure initiated.

3. **The chamber was sealed** (Stage 2). First by closing the entrance with three slabs, and then covering the chamber with stone blocks and constructing the barrow in earth. It was finished off with a surrounding ring. *The monument closed the chamber*. In some way the chamber was *concealed* by the building of the barrow.
4. At a later date, a **second barrow was built over the first** (Stage 3). We presume it contained a large megalithic chamber which was completely eliminated by a collapse of the central section. A corridor between the barrows does remain to the south-east, which reveals the presence of this megalithic structure. Using AMS the first deposit of filling material has been dated from this corridor, with a sample of charcoal recovered directly from the floor of this corridor. These give calibrated dates of around 3103–2899 cal BC, a period that may be related to the beginning of the structure disintegration (at a time when access to the centre of the site was closed off) (Figure 8).
5. Finally, **the barrow was sealed** (Stage 4) with the construction of an interesting protective layer on the southern part of the monument that covers its entire surface. In the northern half it is reduced to a ring of just 1.5 m that covers the most external part of the barrow, with a rough break visible in the transition zone between both.

Figure 8. Forno dos Mouros 5. Radiocarbon dates, Stage 3.

Record nº	C14 BP	Interval cal BC 95.4 % (2 sigma)
UA 21688	4390 ± 45	3309–3237 (7.0 %)
		3170–3165 (0.7 %)
		3115–3115 (0.1 %)
		3103–2899 (92.2 %)

In this example we see many parallels with the American barrows. The stratigraphy of the site allows us to identify a type of construction whose configuration varies considerably throughout its existence: the monument, before being a barrow, functioned for a time with the chamber as the only built element, which led to the construction of a different space (the interior of the chamber) in which burials were carried out. It is a stone structure, which makes it monumental and dissimilar from structures built of perishable materials. At a given moment it was closed, because the chamber, as a con-

struction that had created a space that was concealed from view, a space for social action with restricted access, lost its meaning, became useless, and with raising the barrow led to a construction that placed its significance towards the exterior of the structure.

This process was repeated one thousand years later with the construction of the second barrow, which this time included the reutilization (in reality concealment within the actual barrow) of a previously existing monumental structure, which was undoubtedly one of the first monuments in the area and a reference point in the Megalithic landscape. Despite the lengthy period of time between both episodes, and the fact that the dimensions of the second barrow are twice those of the first, the process for constructing spaces, concealment and monumentalization is repeated. The same constructive pattern is used, which indicates the utilization of the same ritual pattern.

We therefore find that the construction of the barrow as a whole is a discontinuous, ambiguous process, other relevant elements in its construction were concealed. It is this intention and process of concealment that implies the true monumentalization of the site. This is a process that took place over a long period of time, as is shown by 14C dating: the first stage took place at the start of the Megalithic phenomenon with the construction and use of the chamber, an attenuated form of monumentality, whereas the final stage concluded with a truly monumental construction, at the end of the Megalithic cultural period.

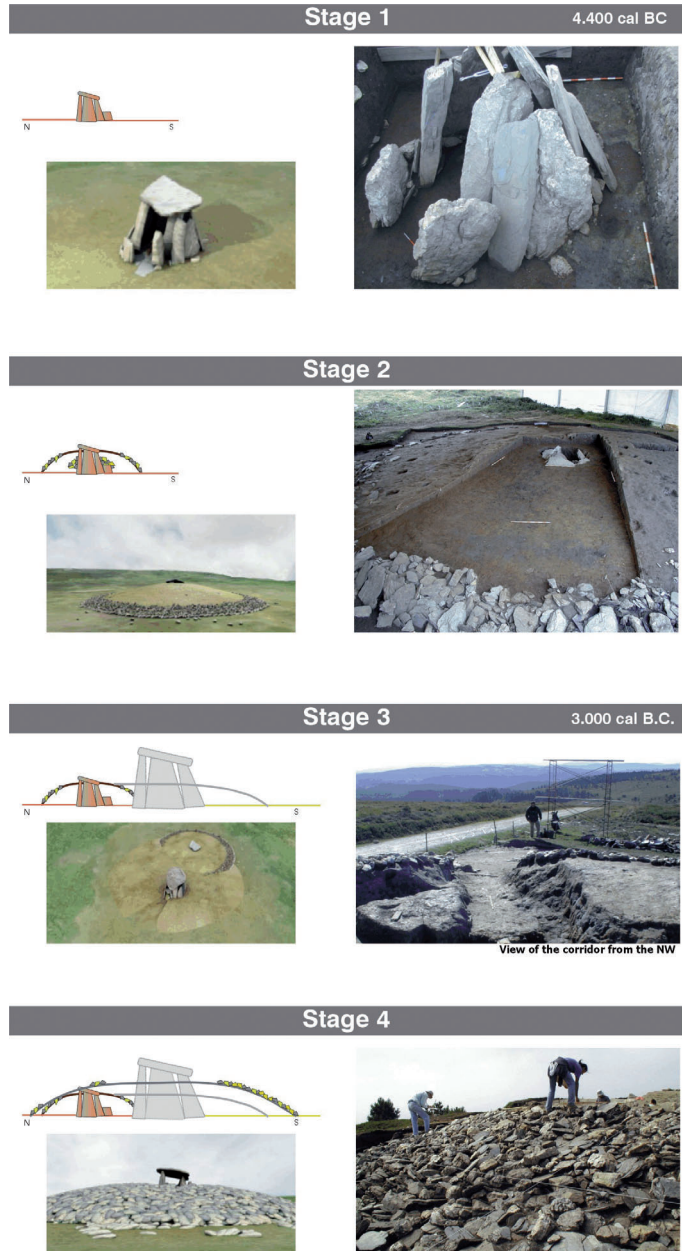

Figure 6. Model showing the configuration of Forno dos Mouros *5 through the different stages of construction.*

On the threshold of social complexity: the human and the natural

Despite recent criticism of the concept, the need has become clear to reformulate the possibly simple and mechanistic concepts that have perceived the Neolithic as a period of economic change and transition towards the production of foodstuffs. The critical perspective adopted by some authors has made it possible to rethink the concept in the light of new interpretations and assume that what occurs in some societies and chronological moments that are heterogeneous and extended over time are a series of symbolic, social and political changes that cannot be constrained to a mere economic and productive transformation. They represent a genuine inflexion point that led to new ways of being and living in the world (Bradley 1993, 1998a; Criado 1989a, 1989b, 1993a; Hernando 1999; Ingold 1986, 1988; Vicent 1990).

Perhaps what best characterizes the Neolithic with regard to previous periods is that **mankind started to think about its relationship with nature**, and realized that the natural and the human leads to new ways of appropriating and transforming nature, this concretized in the formation of complex strategies for controlling the environment according to the conceptual and material capacities societies had available. But in no way it does represent, as has been and continues to be suggested, a total break with the natural order. The natural continues and adopts perhaps even more meaning when awareness of it is achieved.

It is cultural rationality, social organization and the relationships of production that mainly determine the way in which control is exercised and nature is manipulated and transformed (Criado 1993a, 1993b; Godelier 1984; Ingold 1980, 1986). We see changes that did not necessarily imply a fast, direct and one-way route to productive economies. The examples of hunter-gatherers who display complex relationships of production and economies are increasingly stronger; this demonstrates greater knowledge, control and dominion of natural elements. Agriculture and hunting/gathering are two possible strategies within the same pattern of rationality; they are strategies that are complementary, exchangeable, and which may be adopted jointly and/or sporadically (Criado 1993a).

The traditional Neolithic 'package' has usually included the appearance of megalithism and monumentality, emphasizing this new element as an argument to reaffirm the domestication of nature. However, we do not agree that this was universally the case. We believe in situating the beginning of monumentality and its earliest forms (which are ostensibly different in their formal characteristics and techniques of construction, use and maintenance from those seen in later types of monument) within the Meso-Neolithic 'package', in which the earliest monumentality is more in line with 'wild reasoning' and clear, albeit timid and ambiguous, attempts at a social appropriation of nature. In this context, the earliest monuments correspond to a humanization of the wild world, not its artificialization: the emphasis is placed precisely on its 'naturalization'. Perhaps for this reason it is possible to find so many similarities between built structures and natural structures, in which the monumental structures appear to imitate natural forms (Tilley 1996; Bradley 1998b). Apart from formal analogies between the built and the natural (hills, rocky outcrops etc.), the natural forms are usually integrated within the constructions themselves and are used as natural scenes. They indicate a profound relationship between natural organization and that reflected by the monuments, starting with a careful, deliberate selection of its specific placement (Criado & Vaquero 1993). It

is as if despite the monuments being absolutely human forms that alter the surroundings and stand out in time and space, the wish was for them to be genuinely natural.

Furthermore, monumentality considered as a long-lasting social and historic process also reveals breaks and ruptures, marked by peaks of activity and monumental silence, that allow us to propose a model that is neither continuous nor linear (Criado 2002; Mañana 2003). This hypothesis has been tested as the number of reliable 14C datings has increased for Galician monuments as well as those from other regions of Atlantic Megalithism in the peninsula (Alonso & Bello 1997; Cruz 1995; Mañana 2003). The tendency shows how the 2000 years of monumental activity were not a continuous phenomenon, with constant construction work underway, as is normally considered. On the contrary, the barrow appears as an unfinished project, and its stratigraphic history reveals the sequence of episodes of more or less tangible constructive and destructive activity, with periods of building activity and others without, as well as variations in its utilization. This may be clearly identified in the barrow thanks use of a stratigraphic methodology. In this way, archaeological investigation is able to discover a temporality that may be ascribed to the life history of a particular monument, but which is also inherent in the socio-cultural process itself.

And so, instead of conceiving megalithism as something continuous, we should view it as a series of breaks and ruptures: a sequence of short periods of construction possibly followed by others of inactivity. These moments may represent episodes of re-equilibrium through which the economic capacities of the group that built them were brought back into balance after periods of activity and greater socio-economic dynamics. Apart from constituting the materialization of a ritual process, they are the social device through which the excesses of the first complex economies were consumed, thereby leading to a re-balancing of the society, by denying change and maintaining the original balance. In this sense, the monuments may be seen as *potlatches* (as already mentioned in Criado 1989b, although no further reference was made to this point).

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