



Tracing the chronology of neolithic pit and stone box burials in North-eastern Iberia



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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out how to approach the chronology of an archaeological funerary practice, through a specific case study: the Neolithic “Pit Burials” funerary horizon of the northeastern Iberian Peninsula. Towards the end of the fifth millennium cal BC, the communities settled in this region began to systematically bury a large part of their population in individual, occasionally double, pits or stone boxes burials. Clear similarities have been documented with other neolithic European funerary horizons, such as the “Chasséen” in France or the “Cortaillod” in Switzerland, that suggest that it could be a larger-scale phenomenon. However, up to now the chronology of “Pit Burials” has not been fully defined, so describing and explaining this phenomenon both regionally and globally has been difficult. This paper fills this gap by presenting, on the one hand, new unpublished radiocarbon dates, addressing the methodological possibilities of statistical analysis and Bayesian modelling of radiocarbon dates in order to specify the chronology of funerary contexts. The results presented here not only show the chronology of the “Pit Burials”, and its relationship with the other similar European burials, from this methodological point of view for the first time, but also the methodological advantages of these statistical tools in order to specify the chronology of any other archaeological funerary practice.

1. Introduction

1.1. The historical problem

Towards the end of the fifth millennium cal BC, the communities settled in the NE of the Iberian Peninsula began to systematically bury a large part of their population in individual, occasionally double, pits or stone boxes. The archaeological record of this period is characterized by its richness regarding the funerary contexts and by its scarcity in relation to habitat contexts, which have been practically undocumented. Such is the importance of the presence of these graves in this region,

more than 650 funerary structures have been documented up to now, that this period has originally been called the “Sepulcros de Fossa” (in English “Pit Burials”) horizon (Bravo et al., 2015; Gibaja 2003 and 2004; Gibaja and Clop, 2012; Gibaja et al., 2010; Martín, 1998; Martín et al., 2010; Martí et al., 1997; Oms et al., 2014; Roig and Coll, 2007, 2010; Roig et al., 2010). However, the chronotypological homogeneity of these tombs has not been fully resolved.

The knowledge regarding funerary practices previously to this moment is very scarce. This is mainly due to two reasons: on one hand, few burials have been safely documented and, on the other one, the determined chronology of most of them is approximate, since not many

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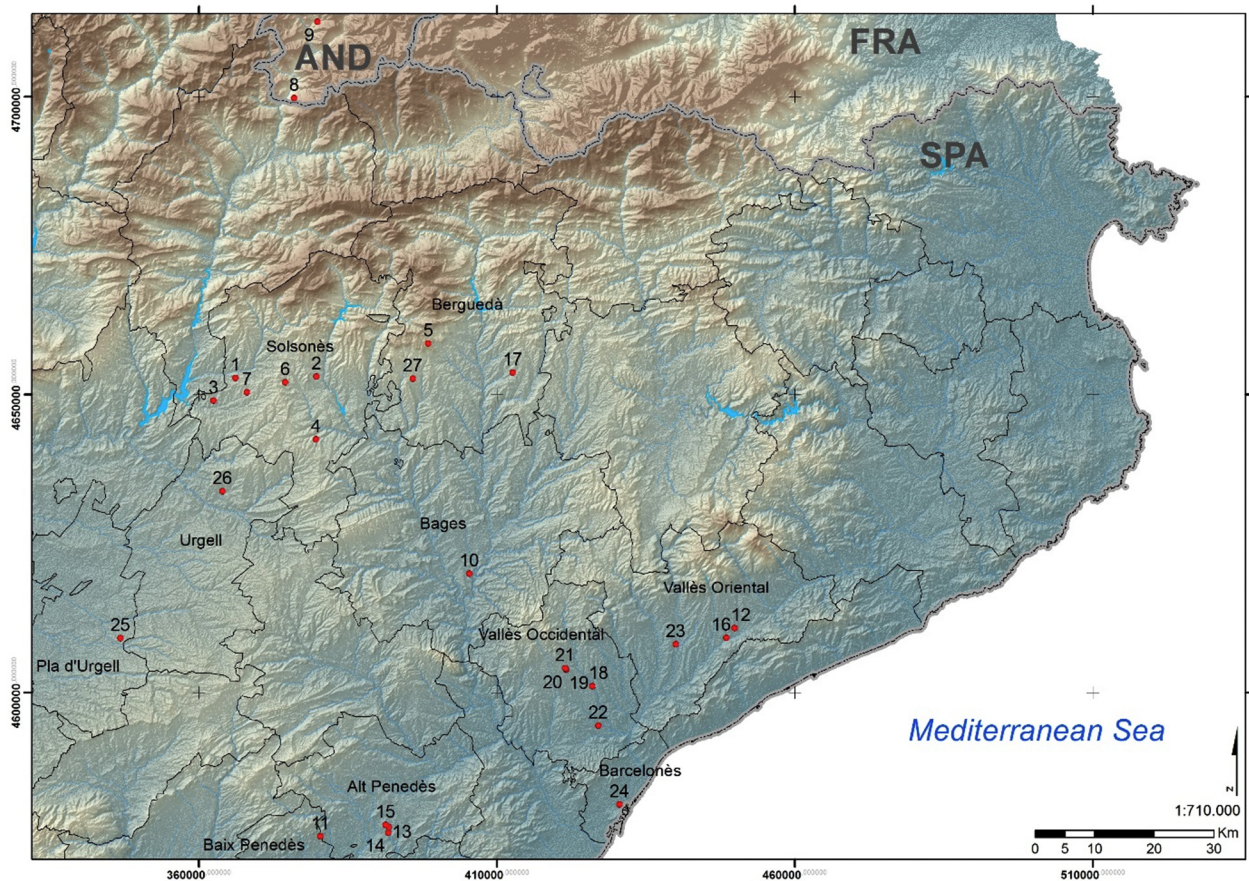


Fig. 1. Location of sites with analyzed dating in this work (1. Ceurú, 2. El Vilar de Simosa, 3. Costa dels Garrics de Caballot, 4. Solà III, 5. Serrat de les Tombes, 6. Megalit del Sr. Bisbe, 7. Llord, 8. Feixa del Moro, 9. Tomba de Segudet, 10. Pla del Riu de les Marcetes, 11. Hort d'en Grimau, 12. Camí de Can Grau, 13. Pujolet de Moja, 14. La Serreta, 15. Els Cirerers, 16. Bòbila d'en Joca, 17. Ca l'Olaire, 18. Can Roqueta, 19. Bòbila Madurell, 20. Can Gambús 1, 21. Can Gambús 2, 22. Els Mallols, 23. Ca l'Estrada, 24. Carrer Reina Amàlia, 25. La Plana del Torrent, 26. Povia and 27. Tomba del Moro).

absolute radiocarbon datings have been carried out, and the chronological attribution of most of the burials have been based on their constructive characteristics and the few elements associated to the grave goods of the dead.

In the framework of our research project, an extensive program of absolute datings on the different types of these burials in this area -they are cave burials, graves excavated in the ground and stone structures (pits or stone boxes) also excavated underground and sometimes covered by tumulus- has been initiated, as well as a review of the characterization of its constructive typologies.

Previously to our dating program, only about 40 of the 650 burials of this type documented in the NE of the Iberian Peninsula had been dated. In addition, the samples were often not from the buried individual, but from several elements (seeds, charcoal remainders, etc.), that supposedly were considered associated to the burial. If this situation gave rise to several doubts concerning the chronology of these funerary practices during the Neolithic, the situation got worse when we tried to compare the radiocarbon dates from the different types of burials. Indeed, most of the radiocarbon dates came from caves and pit burials and only in just 7 cases they were from stone box burials.

However, in spite of the fact that, both the number of radiocarbon dating in general and the number coming from stone box burials type in particular is scarce, researchers usually have stated that all of these funerary structures belong to the same temporal gap. From these presuppositions, numerous proposals, interpretations and comparisons related to these funeral practices have been made (Martín and Mestres, 1996; Miró, 1994; Molist et al., 2003; Muñoz, 1965; Oms et al. 2012 and 2016; Remolins et al., 2016; Ripoll and Llongueras, 1963; Ten,

1980; Vaquer et al., 2013).

From our point of view, we consider that most of these proposals are too risky due to the scarce available chronometric information. Therefore, in our dating program we decided to obtain a significant number of new radiocarbon dates from stone box burials, not only in order to be able to evaluate their degree of contemporaneity regarding the other types of graves, but also because they have been considered the prelude to the later megalithic world, characterized by collective inhumations in dolmens, hypogea and caves (Balaguer et al., 2011, 2013; Castany, 1991; Cebrià et al., 2013; Tarrús, 2002; Moinat and Chambon, 2007).

Moreover, we have also considered important to evaluate the chronological differences between these stone box burials from the north east of the Iberian Peninsula and similar documented graves in the south of France and Switzerland during the same period (Chambon, 2016; Moinat and Chambon, 2007; Schmitt, 2015; Vaquer, 2007, 2014; Vaquer et al., 2007, 2012; Zémour, 2013). The basic goal of this comparison is to evaluate whether it is a common phenomenon that occurs at the same time in all of these geographical regions, or if it is a staggered practice in time and space.

These chronological questions have been addressed through the statistical analysis and Bayesian modelling of radiocarbon dates (Bayliss and Bronk Ramsey, 2004; Bronk Ramsey, 1994 and Bronk Ramsey, 2009; Buck and Meson, 2015; Buch and Millard, 2003; Wenginger et al., 2001). The advantages of this methodological perspective to specify the chronology of archaeological contexts have been presented by multiple publications in recent years (Bayliss et al., 2015; Dye and Buck, 2015; Wardle et al., 2014), also in terms of funerary practices (Aranda and

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