



“For a few awls more”. Bone tools in northeastern Iberia Neolithic burials (4th–5th millennia cal BC). A morpho-technical and functional approach



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ABSTRACT

The morphology, technology and function of bone utensils found in seven necropolises in the north-east of the Iberian Peninsula and dated to the Neolithic (late fifth to mid fourth millennia cal BC) are studied through a specific methodology involving technological and functional analyses, which has rarely been applied to Neolithic funerary sites, and is practically unknown in archaeological studies in Iberia. Several interpretative hypotheses are considered and compared, and correlated with the results obtained for other types of implements in the graves. This provides a very precise view of the criteria governing the selection of the bone and lithic tools left as grave goods.

Results show standardisation in the morphology and size of awls and spatulas/smootherers originating from animals of different taxa and size. Many record traces of use on different substances, but a large number do not. Metapodials appear to have been shaped using the groove and splinter technique, followed by scraping with a lithic flake, grinding and polishing, most likely with a smoothing stone. The unsuitability of the supposedly active tip zones of some implements supports a symbolic function for these items.

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1. General introduction

A series of bone tools have been found at seven Middle Neolithic sites in the north-east of the Iberian Peninsula. These are all funerary sites, dated between the late fifth and mid fourth millennia cal BC, excavated at different times in the 20th and 21st centuries; while some, like the necropolis of El Llord, were excavated in the early 20th century, others have been revealed more recently, like Ca n'Arnella in 2012.

Naturally, the tools cannot be studied without an understanding of the archaeological context in which they were found. Background information about the earliest Neolithic remains in the Iberian Peninsula and the first evidence of the funerary practices of those farming communities is therefore necessary.

The earliest evidence available for the Neolithic in north-east Iberia dates back to the mid-sixth millennium cal BC. Until then, this region was occupied by Mesolithic hunter-gatherer communities living in the lowlands and the mountains of the Pyrenees/Pre-Pyrenees and the Pre-littoral ranges. Examples of Mesolithic sites are Cova del Parco, Cova de Can Sadurní, Cova del Vidre, Font del Ros, Balma Margineda and Bauma del Serrat del Pont (Alcalde and Saña, 2008; Guilaine and Martzluff, 1995).

Within this geographic setting, the first evidence of Neolithic settlements is dated to about 5600–5500 cal BC. These occupations were located in caves or near mountain foothills, such as the sites of Can

Sadurni, Cova del Vidre and La Font del Ros (Blasco et al., 2005; Bosch, 2001; Pallares et al., 1997) and also in plains and valleys, near rivers and lakes, which were ideal locations for the farming activity that gradually became the basis for the subsistence of these communities. The lacustrine site of La Draga (Girona) is the most paradigmatic example of this period. Located on the shore of Banyoles Lake, two periods of occupation have been documented to date, with well-preserved wooden dwellings and other structures probably used for storage (Bosch et al., 2000, 2011).

The first Neolithic societies in south-west Europe were mainly characterised by agriculture and animal husbandry. These sites evidence cultivation of wheat, barley (*Triticum aestivum*, *Triticum compactum*, *Triticum aestivum/durum*, *Triticum dicoccum*, *Hordeum vulgare nudum* and *Hordeum vulgare*) and legumes (white beans – *Vicia faba* and peas – *Pisum sativum*) (Antolín and Buxó, 2012; Zapata et al., 2004). They also kept several domestic animal species (sheep – *Ovis aries*, goats – *Capra hircus*, cattle – *Bos Taurus* and swine – *Sus domesticus*) (Tresset and Vigne, 2007). In addition, these groups had mastered pottery-making techniques, and produced lithic industries consisting both of knapped artefacts (blades and flakes used to make a wide range of tools) and ground stone implements (axes, adzes and querns).

There is little evidence of the funerary practices in use during the early Neolithic; only some open-air graves such as the burial in Plaza de Madrid in Barcelona, and multiple burials in caves, including such examples as Cova de Can Sadurní and Cova de l'Avellaner (Blasco et al., 2005; Bosch and Tarrús, 1991; Pou et al., 2010).

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From the late fifth millennium onwards, and particularly in the first half of the fourth millennium cal BC, the evidence of burials increases considerably, especially in areas of valleys and plains. At this time, caves are virtually no longer used for burials.

Two basic grave types are known, with different geographical distributions. One type consists of graves dug in the ground in areas near the Mediterranean coast, and the other is represented by cists or stone boxes, found in inland regions of north-east Iberia and high mountain areas. These two burial types, long-identified in the literature, were largely contemporary, especially in the time between 4000 and 3600 cal BC (Gibaja, 2004).

The importance of the funerary record is not only a consequence of the large number of burials known for that time, over 650, but because hardly any habitation structures have been recorded for the same period. This is thought to be due to two factors: the use of perishable building materials and the destruction of the areas where the settlements may have existed, owing to historical and ongoing farming, industrial and road-building activities.

2. The sites and bone tool assemblages

The bone tools chosen for this study come from seven funerary sites (Fig. 1) in the north-east of the Iberian Peninsula, dated to the middle

Neolithic, between 4100 and 3600 cal BC (Fig. 2). A brief description will be given of each site with basic information that can be amplified by consulting the cited literature.

2.1. Necrópolis de Can Gambús-1 (Sabadell, Barcelona)

The excavations in the Can Gambús-1 sector carried out by the company Arrago S.L in 2003 and 2004 were able to document 47 funerary structures, of which 43 are individual burials and four are double burials (Roig et al., 2010). Therefore, a total of 51 individuals have been documented: 44 adults, six sub-adults and one of an indeterminate age, both male and female. The excellent state of conservation of most of these funerary structures has enabled a new and complete classification of these tombs, with novel contributions about the building process, their structure and shape, their covers, periods of use and closure. In this way it is possible to propose or identify the existence of covers made both with perishable material, like wood and skins, and with large stone slabs placed horizontally to seal the access to some of the burial chambers. This is one of the necropolises in north-eastern Iberia which has yielded the most numerous and varied grave goods: ceramic vessels, querns, chipped and ground stone tools, bone artefacts, macrofaunal remains and shells, as well as an impressive number of beads, which formed part of necklaces and bracelets.

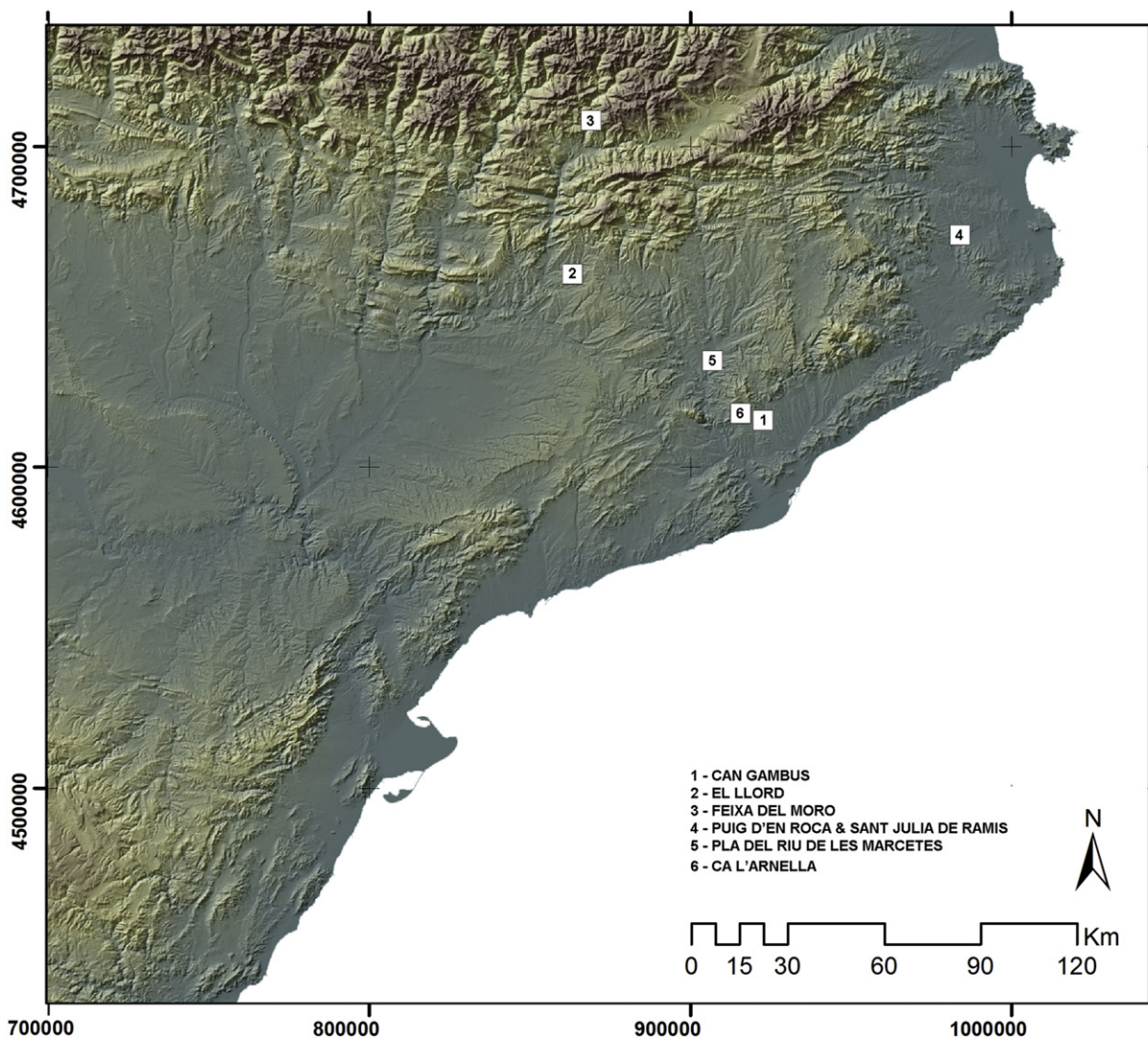


Fig. 1. Map showing the location of the sites studied in this work.

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