



Carbonised wooden objects and wood charcoal from an Iron Age feasting context in North-western Iberia: The case study of Frijão (Braga, Portugal)



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ABSTRACT

The site of Frijão in North-western Iberia was occupied during a period between the 4th and 2nd centuries BC and it is a very unique site in the context of the local Iron Age network. Its features suggest that it was a place to celebrate ceremonies related to feasting, in the same context 71 fragments of a riveted cauldron, seeds and fruits, burned bone, pottery and carbonised wooden manufactured pieces were found. These woodcrafts included a handle made of hazel wood (*Corylus avellana*), two fragments of one or more vessels of Rosaceae/Maloideae and four fragments of indeterminate objects made of oak (*Quercus* sp. deciduous) and alder buckthorn (*Frangula alnus*) wood. Other recoveries included fragments of oak charcoal interpreted as the charred remnants of a building made of perishable materials. The study of the archaeobotanical assemblages of Frijão highlighted the difficulties of interpreting the results of carbonised wood samples from fire-events – i.e. to distinguish between firewood and wooden manufactures – and the importance of registering dendrological and taphonomical data to go beyond taxonomical identification.

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1. Introduction

Wood was used in many different ways in the day-to-day life of the Iron Age communities of North-western Iberia (Martín-Seijo and Piqué, 2013; Martín-Seijo and Carrión, 2012; Figueiral, 1995, 1996). This raw material was used to build structures, to make domestic, artisanal, and ritual objects, household equipment, weapons, and even log boats. However, wooden crafts are usually excluded from studies on material culture from Iron Age contexts, and woodworking is one of the least known technological aspects of these communities. This is because investigations have focused on non-perishable materials (Silva, 2007; Parcerro and Cobas, 2004; Rey, 1992; Martins, 1990). The perishable material culture is always the “missing majority” of archaeological data in temperate regions (Hurcombe, 2008). Wood rapidly perishes once it is buried and wooden remains can only survive in waterlogged contexts, through

preservation by carbonisation or mineralization, and indirectly survive as impressions in clay.

Studies of woodcraft items recovered from Iron Age contexts across Europe have focused mainly on pieces preserved by waterlogging (Coles et al., 1978; Earwood, 1993; Carrión and Rosser, 2010). The occurrence of carbonised pieces is uncommon because woodcraft items must make contact with fire, being either intentionally or accidentally charred, although worked wood is rather frequent in Iron Age fire contexts where structural elements and objects are preserved by carbonisation, sometimes broken items or waste debris could even be burned as firewood (Martín-Seijo, 2008; Teira et al., 2012). The action of fire that favoured their preservation could also fragment the original piece preventing their identification as worked wood. In recent years, however, our knowledge of wooden artefacts from Iron Age contexts in North-western Iberia has increased, in particular as a result of their identification during charcoal analysis of archaeobotanical assemblages (Carballo, 2002; Martín-Seijo, 2008; Martín-Seijo and Carballo, 2010; Rey et al., 2011; Martín-Seijo and Piqué, 2013; Martín-Seijo, 2013) and less commonly by recovering them from waterlogged contexts (Alves and Rieth, 2007).

This paper contributes further to this growing body of research by presenting the wooden artefacts recovered from a feasting context at

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the archaeological site of Frijão in North-western Portugal. The exceptional recovery of wood charcoal and wooden pieces linked to this context also provides new insights into an activity which involved the creation and maintenance of social relationships and could be used to redistribute wealth, mobilise labour, create alliances between or exclude different groups, celebrate marriages, commemorate deaths and compensate for transgressions (Hayden, 2001: 30).

The study of the use and manufacture of wooden artefacts from archaeological contexts is integrated in palaeoethnobotany and one of its main goals is to examine people–plant interactions (Ford, 1979; Popper and Hastorf, 1988). The entanglements between plants and people are linked to consumption and production and social life and labour relations and form part of everyday routines and rituals (Van der Veen, 2014). The study of woodcraft end-products provides information about different steps of their *chaîne-opératoire* such as raw material procurement, support configuration and products. Species selected for manufacturing objects or structures are constricted heavily by natural and cultural parameters. The technological information obtained from these wooden workings enlarges our knowledge about tools and skills which are often shared between different materials. Nevertheless, we also have to take into account that not all the manufactured objects were locally produced, these items could be part of exchanges or trade between communities. Finally, it is important to remark that starting the study of plant craftwork activities is of the utmost importance in Iron Age contexts, because there is a great lack of information about all these plant remains.

This paper explores a number of objectives that were addressed by this case study. Firstly, the specificity of the archaeological context of Frijão is presented to encourage a discussion on the difficulties associated with interpreting carbonised wood assemblages; namely distinguishing between woodcrafts and firewood remains. Archaeobotanical data could be used to reconstruct taphonomic processes and to suggest, corroborate or discard interpretative proposals about the origin of the charred remains (Caracuta et al., 2012; Caracuta and Fiorentino, 2014).

A second objective is addressed by looking at wooden material culture in order to deepen our understanding of the Iron Age communities in North-western Iberia. The study of the technical process involved in woodworking focused on the selection of raw material (species, plant part, etc.) and other technical aspects applying the concept of *chaîne-opératoire* (Lemonnier, 1986). Finally, carbonised woodcraft items and wood charcoal are considered together to describe the woodland management practices developed by these communities.

2. The Iron Age site of Frijão

Frijão was located in the place with the same name, belonging to the parish of Cunha, county and district of Braga in Northern Portugal (Fig. 1). The geographic coordinates in the WGS 84 system are: Latitude 41°29' 33" N and Longitude 8°31' 16" W. This site is on a low platform at the base of the South-east slope of Monte Frijão alongside the river valley of Levegada in the Ave basin at an altitude of 140 m.a.s.l. At present the vegetation of the surroundings is highly modified by human interventions including the presence of commercial pine and eucalyptus forests. Other species such as oak, cork oak, heather, bracken and shrubby Fabaceae are also present.

2.1. Archaeological excavation

This archaeological site was discovered in 2003 by Rui Barbosa of Palimpsesto-Estudo e Preservação do Património Cultural, Lda., during clay extraction activities associated with the remodelling of the railway line from Nine-Braga to Braga Train Station. The magnitude of the archaeological findings led to an archaeological excavation in 2004 under the coordination of Sandra Salazar Ralha working for Archeoestudos-Investigação Arqueológica Lda. After these archaeological works the site was destroyed. The results of this excavation were never published and all the contextual information available derives from the archaeological report (Ralha, 2004). Several studies about this site were developed

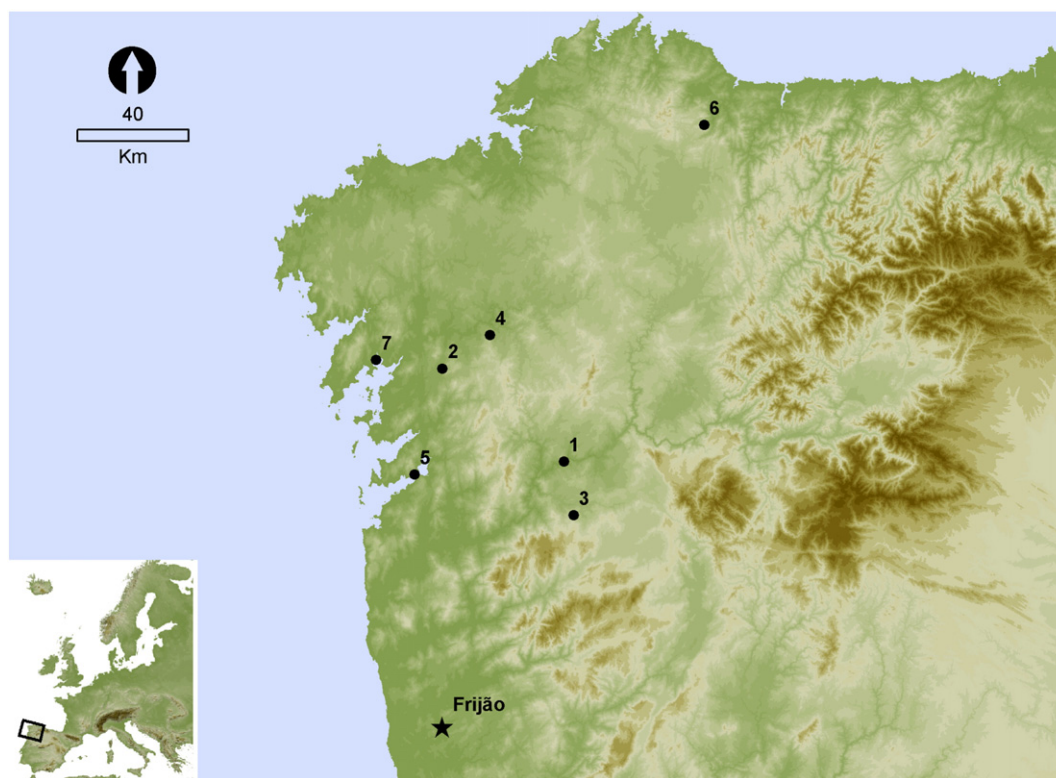


Fig. 1. Location of Frijão (Braga, Portugal) and other Iron Age sites of North-west Iberia cited in the text: 1. As Laias, 2. Castrolandín, 3. Castromao, 4. Castrovite, 5. Montealegre, 6. Castro de Zoñán and 7. Castro Grande do Neixón. Map elaborated by Emilio Abad.

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