

# SUMMARY

## STELAE, LANDSCAPE AND TERRITORY IN THE LATE BRONZE AGE OF THE SOUTHWEST OF THE IBERIAN PENINSULA

### Introduction

The decorated stelae of the Southwest are one of the best known and characteristic features of the culture of the Late Bronze Age peoples who inhabited the region which would subsequently lie on the periphery of the orientaling world known as Tartessos.

The objects carved on the stelae are well known, especially in the case of the «warrior stelae», which, together with a human stick figure, depict all the elements of the Late Bronze Age panoply: Herzprung type shields, helmets with crest or horns, swords, spears, bows and two-wheeled war chariots, together with prestige items of dress or personal adornment such as fibulae, mirrors, combs or musical instruments.

But in addition to these, the research also recognises the existence of another type of stele, referred to as «diadem stelae», which can be regarded as the female version of the warrior type. These show a human figure, also stick-like, embellished with some kind of adornment, and sometimes accompanied by a prestige item such as a fibula.

Both types are found over a definite geographical area and must be regarded as basically contemporaneous, although on occasions there have been attempts to see them as phenomena with different origins because there are local precedents for the diadem stelae, the so-called «boulder stelae», but not for the warrior stelae.

### Historiography

Since the first description of a stele was published in 1898, archaeological research in this field has simply followed the general approaches pursued by the discipline as a whole in Spain and, to a large extent, the rest of Europe.

Thus, to begin with the stelae were considered testimony of a nebulous pre-Roman world, which in the course of the 20th century gradually came to be identified with the Celtic invasions from Central Europe. The

main corpus describing the stelae, published by Almagro in 1966, basically adopts this invasionist line, although always tempered by references to the Mediterranean world which is, in the last analysis, the basis of all European cultural periodization.

The discovery in the early nineteen seventies of the material remains of Phoenician colonization in the South of the Iberian Peninsula prompted reconsideration of diffusionist theories. The origin of the stelae now had to be sought in the Eastern Mediterranean, although each author defined the specific origin of the influences on the basis of his particular academic background and perspective. Thus for some they reflected contacts with the Aegean, for others evidence of the acculturation of the Tartessian periphery with the arrival of the Phoenicians and finally for a third group of researchers they related to pre-colonial contacts between the Peninsula and the Eastern Mediterranean.

It was only in the nineteen-eighties, with the evaluation of the internal processes of the indigenous societies, that these diffusionist theories began to be rejected, but then the Atlantic became the source of creative inspiration.

In summarising this picture, one would have to conclude that in the course of almost a century of research virtually no author has considered the stelae as anything other than mere repositories of carvings of prestige objects for which associations and parallels could be found beyond the actual sphere of the stelae. Two fundamental factors, in addition to the dominant diffusionist approach, have affected the scant importance given the stelae themselves:

- In the first place, the stelae have always been regarded as markers or covers of the tombs of important figures in local societies, although it has never been possible to prove this theory, since there are no reliable associations between stelae and tombs. This has meant that the stelae in general have been considered as lacking a context, the assumption being that they had become separated from the burials for which they were created. One effect of interpreting them as an isolated element is that no importance has ever been given to the places where the stelae were actually sited.

- In the second place, a dearth of archaeological remains in the Southwest and the absence in this area of most of the elements shown on the stelae has always made us look outwards, to places where these items are generally found as prestige objects associated with elites. Virtually nothing is known about the Late Bronze Age settlements in the region, or the economic activities carried out by the population. Similarly, the only apparent funerary remains are the theoretical burials which the stelae are assumed to mark, reinforcing the idea that they are a reflection of the power of the region's indigenous elites.

These two factors have always conspired together so that a whole series of aspects have been overlooked by the research, especially those relating to the geographical importance of the distribution of the stelae, their association with different staging posts, and their relationship with the region's meagre archaeological record. *This study is designed to help fill this gap in the research and offer a view of the stelae integrated into a particular context as a starting point for the development of hypotheses based on their cultural relations with the world that surrounded them.*

### Environment and landscape

To do this it is fundamental to examine the geographical setting in which the stelae were sited, since they are primarily defined by their relationship with the landscape.

*Because of the pivotal position of the Iberian Peninsula, between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, the cultures that have developed there have always displayed a certain duality throughout Prehistory. In particular the Southwest, the area of closest contact between the two seas, is especially sensitive to the reception of both types of influences. This is very clear in the period that concerns us and also in the era that follows, characterised by the mythical kingdom of Tartessos.*

Furthermore, the morphology of the Iberian Peninsula itself is another factor that should always be taken into account, because of the fragmentation produced by the successive mountain chains that surround and divide the *high central meseta*, and because the difficulties of communication of any kind are accentuated by the high relief. Movement is very much restricted to a series of traditional routes that have been used from prehistoric times to the present, that traverse a small number of mountain passes and fords.

Thirdly, although palaeoenvironmental analyses of the region are still scarce, such evidence that does exist would appear to indicate that the climatic conditions and the vegetation have not varied substantially since the Bronze Age. Thus the large areas of grazing land, mainly suited to stockraising, which still predominant in the Southwest, can for the most part be projected back to the past. This fact, together with poor soils and the difficulty of maintaining their fertility beyond a few harvests, helps to explain why a settled way of life was slow to develop here.

The combination of all these factors must be seen in relation with the stelae, since the limiting effect of the environment in the peninsular Southwest is considerable.

The general distribution of the stelae clearly demonstrates what we are saying, since a vast majority of them are situated at intersections of the network of tracks in the Southwest, where geographical features such as mountain passes or fords dictated the route, or on isolated heights that visually dominate considerable areas of the surrounding countryside.

On the other hand, in view of the generally poor soils, control of the land as such does not seem to have been a primary reason for erecting the stelae in the positions known.

### Spatial analysis

*It is in this environmental context that the distribution of the stelae in regions such as Extremadura in Spain or Alemtejo in Portugal should be understood. They are mainly found inland and only in a very few cases are they anywhere near the coast. Furthermore, the absence of stelae from the Huelva area, a leading centre of the Tartessian world, would appear to be significant. And it is this fundamentally inland distribution compared with their rare appearance near the coasts, which were much more dynamic at the end of the Bronze Age, that explains the actual existence of the stelae and their striking decoration.*

The analysis of the stelae should consider two aspects:

- Their geographical distribution.
- A study of the objects depicted on the stelae themselves.

In the case of the first, a study of the most significant groups of stelae can provide us with a guide to their function and meaning.

Firstly, the stelae of Upper Extremadura form a coherent group with decoration that, unlike the others, does not include the human figure. They are sited over a wide area around the middle basin of the river Tagus, and are more heavily concentrated near its outlets through the mountain passes to the North and South.

Significantly the stelae decorated with the greatest number of objects, and items considered the most prestigious (chariots, combs, mirrors, etc), are sited in the centre of the basin, while those at the edges display simpler models. This fact can easily be interpreted as a form of spatial hierarchy, expressed by a system of territorial markers, which suggests that the stelae can help us to delimit groups defining a geographical area, even if we cannot yet determine the nature of these groups exactly.

The second example is a group of stelae sited around the river Zújar. In this case they do not appear to define a coherent territorial area, as in the previous case, but are found along the length of the banks of the river and adjacent areas.

The stelae found here present notable contrasts in style, such as the use of different types of shield, and there are also strong indications of regionalization. All of which appears to indicate that this may have been a conflictive border area, and so clearly marked boundaries were important.

The group in this area also includes diadem stelae, the female version of the warrior stelae, and these account for more than 50% of the examples known. They can perhaps be related with the practice of local elites exchanging women, which would also support the contention that this was a border area.

In both cases studied, we can appreciate how the spatially-defining component seems to be inherent in the distribution of the stelae of the southwest, and how some groups even permit a coherent ordering of space that coincides with their internal characteristics.

When we turn this spacial analysis to the study of the items carved and their composition on the stelae, and compare the different elements engraved on those examples that are reasonably complete, the picture outlined above comes more sharply into focus.

A series of combinatory statistical analyses makes it possible to distinguish six groups of stelae with their own geographical personality and which coincide with that observed directly in the spatial study. These groups represent initial evidence, not yet clearly defined it is true, of the existence of a process in which territories in the Southwest became gradually more distinct, during the transitional period of the region's Late Bronze Age, which would result in the establishment of more definite territorial entities in the Early Iron Age, for example Tartessos.

At the same time, the definition of these groups in spatial terms makes it possible to revise one of the major unquestioned assumptions made by researchers in this field, according to which the typology of the stelae can be read in terms of development and, therefore, chronology. Without ignoring the value of this approach, the results obtained enable us to consider the phenomenon as a whole as contemporaneous, and that the main typological differences (presence/absence of the human figure, type of shield, presence of prestige objects of Mediterranean origin), are dictated by geography rather than chronology.

### Regional Context

Another of the major problems of research in this field as a whole has been that the regional context of the stelae has always been contemplated with a certain indifference. Without doubt this has been because of the impression produced by their spectacular display of prestige goods of exotic origin. However, these objects, such as chariots, mirrors, musical instruments, etc., are virtually unknown in the archaeological record of the Southwest.

The archaeological remains of the Late Bronze Age in the region studied, other than the evidence furnished by the stelae themselves and the occasional spectacular hoard, such as that of the Ria de Huelva, are quite

limited. The settlement data are also scarce, except in the case of the Guadalquivir Valley, where the Late Bronze Age (9th century B.C.) marks the end of a population hiatus that began in the Early Bronze Age, and the beginning of a settled way of life, apparently related with what was happening in northern Portugal.

Unfortunately this process does not seem to have taken place in the inland areas and in the South of Portugal, and settlement evidence there is limited and confusing, but in general appears to demonstrate ways of life associated with a mobile economy, based mainly on stockraising and rudimentary agriculture. In most parts of these regions a settled way of life did not finally develop until late in the Iron Age.

This is not to say that these peoples had no links with a traditional territory, with rather imprecise limits and conceived more as an open landscape than as a territory with a definite boundary, but rather that the stelae represent precisely the period of transition between the two concepts of space, perhaps in response to the adoption by neighbouring peoples of a settled way of life and the consequent territorial limits that this implied.

On the basis of this conception of the meaning of the stelae, both their general distribution and their demarcation of the main points on the network of tracks can easily be understood, and so, too, can the fact that the richest and most complex stelae are those furthest from the normal networks of exchange and thus from the circulation of the prestige objects they show. They proclaim, symbolically, that they belong to that same world of social relations, in a process of emulation very similar to that proposed by Malmer for Scandinavian rock art.

### Models

Finally, it is worth putting the stelae into the context of the world that surrounded them and gave meaning to the decoration carved on them, even if these objects never came to be actually owned by the local elites that had them erected.

From the point of view of their integration into the Late Bronze Age in Western Europe as a whole, the position occupied by the stelae was marginal in two respects:

- In relation with the trading networks of the Atlantic world, to which ideologically they certainly belonged, because they are found inland, and were thus remote from sources of innovation and exchange associated with coastal trade in the West.
- And in relation to the trade routes of the Mediterranean, bringing occasional influences, all relating to the sphere of prestige, but that did not basically impinge on the internal structure of these groups.

This two-fold marginal character largely explains the mixture of elements of different origin displayed by the stelae, and that an inland and apparently closed area should be open to influences that today seem very different from each other.

From the point of view of the internal explanation of the phenomenon, the stelae provide us with a clear application of the Peer Polity Interaction model (Renfrew & Cherry, 1986), in that the populations represented by the stelae appear to have developed a common symbolic and conceptual language, each group with a specific code that allowed them to distinguish themselves clearly from their neighbours, but at the same time capable of presenting an image of internal unity to outsiders.

This symbolic language emerges from a process of interaction between the units that make up the system, as is demonstrated by the similarity of the elements engraved on all the stelae, despite their various origins, and the fact that we are not dealing with objects that can actually be related to the archaeological record of the Southwest, but with ideas and information that are incorporated into the decoration carved on the stelae.