

Graphical Markers and Megalith Builders in the International Tagus, Iberian Peninsula

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Chapter 10

THE MEGALITHIC TOMBS OF SOUTHERN BEIRA INTERIOR, PORTUGAL: RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS

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Abstract: *In this study, we present the main results obtained during the archaeological survey of a vast area south of Beira Interior, in the region of International river Tagus, followed by the excavation of the more representative and best preserved funerary megalithic monuments. In this way, it was possible to identify several types of monuments and to relate these with the artefact findings, and to develop a model to explain the architectonic succession of funerary megalithic monuments in the region. It was also possible to observe some constructive particularities in some of these monuments, and aspects related to the ritual deposition of remains, herein summarized.*

Key words: *International river Tagus; megalithic tombs; chronosequence*

Resumo: *Neste trabalho apresentam-se os principais resultados obtidos no âmbito da prospecção sistemática de uma vasta região do sul da Beira Interior, região do Tejo Internacional, seguida da escavação dos monumentos megalíticos funerários mais representativos e em melhor estado de conservação. Desta forma, foi possível identificar diversos tipos arquitectónicos, relacionando-os com os respectivos conteúdos artefactuais, que suportaram uma proposta de modelo para a sucessão arquitectónica regional do megalitismo funerário. Foi igualmente possível a observação de particularidades arquitectónicas ou estruturais em alguns destes monumentos, para além de aspectos relacionados com a deposição ritual dos espólios, os quais serão também sumariamente apresentados.*

Palavras chav: *Tejo internacional; megálitos funerários; cronosequência*

10.1. GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

The south of Beira Interior, the region of the International river Tagus, has remained until recently almost unknown in terms of its rich megalithic archaeological heritage. Francisco Tavares de Proença Junior's pioneering research at Urgueira (Vila Velha de Ródão), and at other megalithic monuments whose existence he merely mentioned (Proença Júnior, 1910), did not receive the attention it deserved. Félix Alves Pereira took only a brief interest in the subject: to him we owe the excavation of the Anta Grande de Medelim (Pereira, 1934). Georg and Vera Leisner, in their inventory of Portuguese dolmens (Leisner & Leisner, 1956), mentioned vaguely only three, to the west of Rosmaninhal, and another near the deserted village of Alares, and no further details were given in Vera Leisner's more recent publication (Leisner, 1998).

In the second half of the century only three further monuments were excavated, by O. da Veiga Ferreira and Fernando de Almeida, particularly the important dolmen of Granja de São Pedro (Idanha-a-Velha) (Almeida & Ferreira, 1958, 1959, 1971).

However, there were probably a large number of dolmens in the region which had still not been identified, as suggested by the approximately 90 dolmens listed by the Leisners in the region of Proença-a-Nova, immediately to the west (Kalb, 1990): there seemed no reason why there should not be a similar situation here.

Systematic prospecting of the territory, begun in 1970 and still in progress, has amply confirmed this supposition. In the area bounded naturally by three rivers – to the south by the Tagus, to the east by the Erges and to the west by the Aravil – about 90 dolmens have so far been identified, all hitherto unpublished: about 65 in the region of Rosmaninhal and about 25 around Malpica de Tejo/Monforte da Beira. Most of them are in a good state of conservation, which must be due in part to the low population density, as well as to the utilisation of the soil: ancient holm-oak woods predominate here, and although wheat was extensively grown in the 1960s, traditional, unmechanised methods were still used.

Systematic archaeological cartography of the region, which is still in progress – for it is rare to venture out without discovering a new monument – needs to be followed up by excavations, planned in the medium and long term. These would define the nature of the most important tombs, and be accompanied by research into the dwellings of those who built them. The present paper will only deal with the funerary monuments, which are still the better known; we shall not touch on non-funerary megalithic remains, which include the several known menhirs and cromlechs of the region, nor the artistic component, represented by carved stone panels, often found near the megalithic monuments; all these evidently formed part of a single, indivisible reality, and will be dealt with as a whole in a monograph presently being prepared.

The archaeological prospecting and excavation have been carried out under the auspices of the Associação de

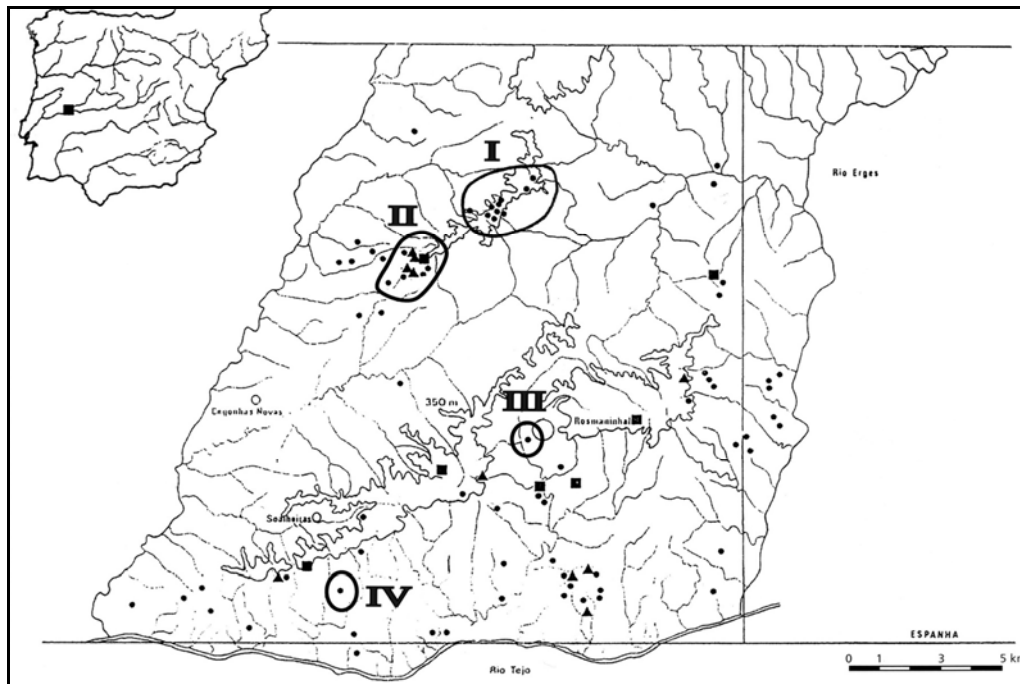


Fig. 10.1. Region of the Tagus near the spanish border showing the monuments and sites: circles, megalithic tombs and *tumuli*; squares, remains of scattered settlements; triangles, megalithic precincts, menhirs and carved rocks. The closed lines indicate the location of the megalithic nucleus of Amieiro (I), the megalithic nucleus of Couto da Espanhola (II), Cabeço da Forca grave (III) and Poço do Bicho grave (IV)

Estudos do Alto Tejo/Núcleo Regional de Investigação Arqueológica, and have received logistic and financial support from several bodies: IPPAR, IPA, IPAMB, and the Castelo Branco and Idanha-a-Nova city councils. Special thanks is due to João Carlos Caninas and to Francisco Henriques, my closest companions in this work, without whom the results presented here would not have been possible. Thanks should also be extended to a vast team of fellow-workers and university students, some of them from the portuguese Open University, who have actively participated since 1993 in the various excavations which I have directed, in conditions which have never been easy or comfortable.

10.2. GEO-ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS; SITUATION OF THE MONUMENTS

The area of distribution of this remarkable set of megalithic monuments (Fig. 10.1), as it has gradually been defined, corresponds geologically to a substrate consisting of outcrops of schist and pre-Ordovician greywackes, part of the Rosmaninhal Formation, with turbidite-conglomerate characteristics. These rocks, in their turn, are covered by detrital deposits, essentially arcogenic sands, coarse-grained and reddish in colour depending on the degree of oxidation, preserved on top of the plateaux formed by erosion; they date from the Eocene or Oligocene (Oliveira, 1992). Finally, particularly on hillsides and neighbouring low ground, there are covering deposits of quartz and quartzite; these, the result

of the decay of paleozoic reliefs, and dating from the transition of the Pliocene to the Quaternary, are characteristic of a semi-arid climate, formed by torrential downpours which occasionally affected the region in this period.

The dolmens are distributed according to two main patterns:

- In some cases, they are concentrated at the top of the plateaux which form the major axes of the landscape, from which they dominate wide areas, dozens of kilometres around, and constitute real megalithic necropolises. Some of the monuments on two of these plateaux have been excavated. On the plateau of Couta da Espanhola, at an altitude of about 300 metres and generally oriented NE-SW, seven dolmens have been mapped, two of which have been excavated, while at the plateau of Amieiro, slightly higher (360-370 metres) and also oriented NE-SW, nine dolmens have been identified and six of them excavated. In some cases, the distance between the monuments is less than 200 metres, so that they are easily visible from one to the other, forming funerary nuclei within the larger necropolis. More often, however, they are between 200 and 500 metres apart, although the nearest monument can still usually be seen from each one.
- In other cases, they are more or less isolated in the landscape, seeming to be submerged in it. An example is the dolmen of Poço do Chibo, situated on low ground in regular, almost monotonous terrain.

10.3. SIGNIFICANT ARCHITECTURAL ASPECTS; FUNERARY RITES

On the funerary component of the finds from the annual excavations conducted since 1993 until 2000 in the megalithic region of Rosmaninhal, the following summary includes data from all the monuments excavated up to now. Some observations on these have already been published (Cardoso *et al.* 1995, 1997a, 1997b, 2000, 2003; Cardoso, 2001, 2004).

1. The inhabited zone would have been dotted with prominent megalithic tombs. These were made even more prominent by their mounds, which were always covered by blocks of milky quartz, a characteristic which even today help us to identify them in the landscape. In most cases this was not a simple coating: the revetment of quartz blocks, fitted one into the other, went deep, making the mounds practically cairns. There was, therefore, a clear intention to make all these burials visible, rather than to hide them (Fig. 10.2, 10.3, 10.4, 10.5); even monuments on low-lying ground, like the anta of Poço do Chibo, where the presence of dolmens would not have been suspected, had a mound with this type of cladding (Fig. 10.6).



Fig. 10.2. Couto de Espanhola 6 after the scraping of the vegetation. It can be seen the sub-circular location of the orthostats, defining an closed chamber, surrounded by a tumulus made essentially of blocks of milky quartz

2. The relatively large number of dolmens on the two plateaux so far studied in detail, imply that these were genuine necropolises, used over many centuries. However, the construction of tombs would have been an exceptional occurrence in the lives of the agro-pastoral communities who settled here in the 4th and 3rd millennia a.C. If the number of tombs seems excessive to us now, this is because we underestimate the time factor, as well as the large population who probably lived here over the centuries. This is the conclusion we can draw from the differences in structure and artefacts seen in monuments sometimes only a few hundred metres apart, as at Couto de Espanhola 2 and 6, both thoroughly excavated. Furthermore, there are no dominant monuments: the diameters of the mounds, which are always small, vary between

18 metres (Amieiro 5) and 10 metres (Poço do Chibo). The construction of any monument would have been followed gradually by another, punctuating the landscape as though it was a palimpsest.



Fig. 10.3. Location of Amieiro 3 in the platform constituted by tertiary deposits. One can note the abundance of blocks of milky quartz around the megalithic structure as a result of the destruction of the *tumulus*



Fig. 10.4. Amieiro 8. One can observe the well preserved *tumulus*, made of milky quartz blocks, of local origin



Fig. 10.5. General overview of the excavation of Cabeço da Forca, in the middle of the *tumulus* made essentially of milky quartz blocks



Fig. 10.6. *Tumulus* of Poço do Chibo, made of milky quartz blocks, very well preserved, in spite of their small size

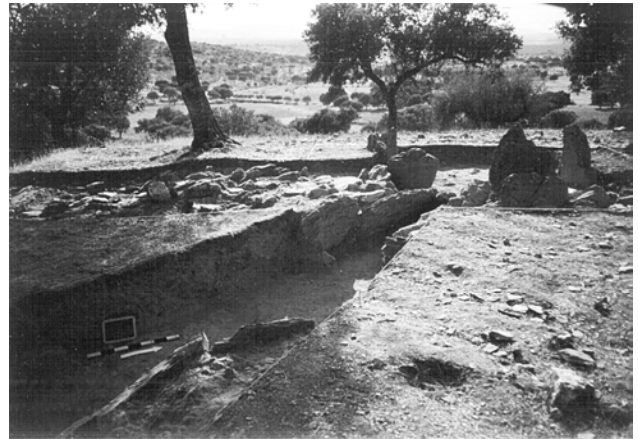


Fig. 10.7. Couto da Espanhola 2, showing the long corridor of the monument, whose small height would not allow its use as the way to the chamber, in second plane

3. Regardless of their type, the dolmens are always built using materials from the site, or at most a few hundred metres away. The schist or grauvaque slabs are always small, rarely larger than 1 metre in length. With sizes like these it would have been impossible to build large monuments, like those in the granite regions of Beira Alta and the Alto Alentejo. This limitation explains why not only the chambers but especially the corridors are so low. In most cases, these could have had only a ritual function; crawling through these long narrow spaces – sometimes more than 8 metres long, as at Couto da Espanhola 2 (Fig. 10.7), Amieiro 2 (Fig. 10.8) or Anta do Poço do Chibo (Fig. 10.9) – whenever there was a new burial in the chamber, especially with the added difficulty of having to carry the bodies to be buried, would have been impractical. This last monument presents small dimensions, with just 3.6 m length, exceptionally including some blocks of milky quartz in their structure. In spite of its small dimensions, the presence of a sub-circular chamber, preceded by a long corridor and a vestibule, setting the entrance, corresponds to an evolved architecture. Such as in Amieiro 2, it is a replicate at a small scale of a larger monument from the granitic regions, which indicates that the geological resources limited the size but not the architectonic characteristics of the monuments.

Direct access to the burial chambers, by partially removing the covering, was therefore necessary whenever a new burial was to be made. This operation was made much easier since no large covering slabs had been used in the construction, due to the lack of such material in the region. The chambers would therefore have been covered with timber and branches, on which were set the blocks of the mound, which were easy to remove. This is not to deny, however, that in some cases the corridor was functional. In Amieiro 3, one of the largest monuments of the region, there are two large overlapping slabs (Fig. 10.10) which seal it off, separating it from the exterior of the monument, where there is a small vestibule, laterally defined by orthostats of decreasing size.



Fig. 10.8. Overview of Amieiro 2 whose corridor, long and narrow, vouches against the hypothesis of a functional use

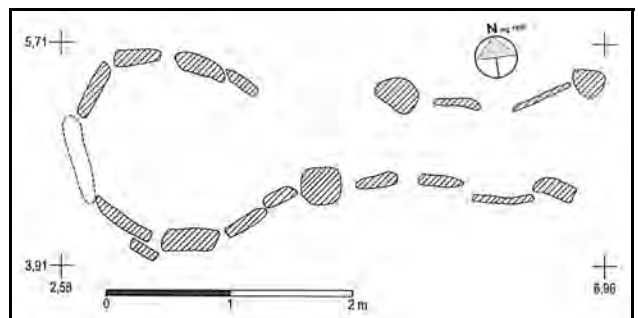


Fig. 10.9. Plant of Poço do Chibo, a monument of small dimensions in spite of including vestibule, chamber and corridor similarly to larger monuments. Some of the orthostats are made of milky quartz blocks unparalleled in other monuments



Fig. 10.10. Overview of the vestibule of Amieiro 3, with the corridor sealed by two transversal slabs



Fig. 10.11. Overview of the chamber of Couto da Espanhola 2, showing an horizontal schist slab over which a tumulation presumably occurred

4. The orientation of the five passage graves so far excavated (Couto da Espanhola 2, Amieiro 2, Amieiro 3, Poço do Chibo and Cabeço da Forca) varies between 100° and 110° ; the exception is anta 2 at Couto da Espanhola, oriented south-east (135°). Considering the monuments were devoid of corridor, the orientation was 90° in Amieiro 8 and 110° in Amieiro 5. This pattern coincides perfectly with that observed by the Leisners in the dolmens of Reguengos de Monsaraz. The results were listed by V. GONÇALVES (1992: 40): of the 69 dolmens recorded, 35 had the same orientation, followed by those oriented south-east (10 examples). The predominant orientation of the corridors to this quadrant relates to the azimuths of the sunrise, the source of Light and Life, daily renewed. To quote Gonçalves (1992: 51), “Death and birth, shadow and light. Did the orientation of the tombs of Reguengos de Monsaraz, like hundred of others, deal with these oppositions? A hope of return, or simply turning one’s back on light/life in the inevitable journey to death and shadow?” We believe that the choice should be the former, since the presence of offerings suggests that in the late 4th/ early 3rd millennium, these agropastoral peoples had a belief in an after-life.

5. Two schist slabs, one in the chamber of Couto da Espanhola 2 (Fig. 10.11), the other in the corridor of Amieiro 3, were used for placing bodies, probably lying on one side with arms and legs bent. This possibility, which has parallels in other similar monuments in the region, is reinforced at Couto da Espanhola by the large number of offerings and personal effects found on the slab.

6. Traces of rituals involving fire are seen at Amieiro 3. There is a small elliptical fire structure at the far end of the chamber of the monument, which served as the base of a hearth (Fig. 10.12). Santos Rocha, in his study of dolmens near Figueira da Foz, noted signs of fire inside, and there are many other examples. Fire served a dual purpose: in addition to its symbolic role of purifying and regenerating the souls of the departed, it would have served the practical purpose of clearing the unhealthy air



Fig. 10.12. Vertical view of the fire structure existing in the chamber of Amieiro 3

in the musty interior of a collective tomb by burning aromatic plants, a necessary purification whenever there was a new body to be buried. This hearth might also be related to partial cremation rituals, as seen for example at megalithic monuments at the Serra de São Mamede, Portalegre (Oliveira, 1997a) and in other megalithic regions of the Alto Alentejo, as in Anta de Estremoz, once excavated by Manuel Heleno and recently published in its results (Rocha, 2005).

7. The small monument of Amieiro 8, horse-shoe shaped, presented in the centre of the chamber a stella oriented towards the entrance (Fig. 10.13) whose height is smaller than the orthostates that define the chamber of the monument. This orientation is similar to the closed chamber with ellipsoid development of Madroñal, Cáceres (Bueno, 2000). The implantation of this monolith in the centre of the chamber has divided it in two almost equal parts able to receive no more than one corps.

8. Two monuments, Amieiro 2 and Cabeço da Forca, presented ritual deposits of polished artefacts. In Amieiro 2, two axes were found deposited in the left side of the

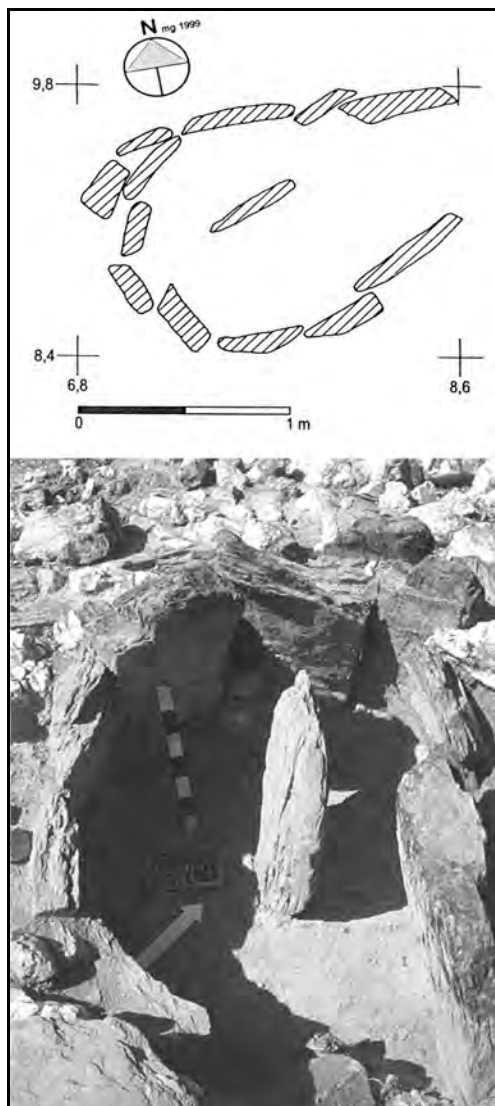


Fig. 10.13. Plant (above) and general overview (below) of Amieiro 8, showing the *stella* placed vertically in his interior and oriented towards the entrance of the monument



Fig. 10.14. Two axes oriented in opposite senses and placed ritually on the left side of the corridor in Anta 2 of Amieiro, closed to one orthostatic in a small niche defined by a transversal rocky layer

corridor, in one small precinct made by one of the orthostates and a small slab placed opposite (Fig. 10.14); in Cabeço da Forca, the deposit was made of about a dozen polished stone artefacts, varying in typology, also found on the corridor.

9. In some monuments it was possible to recognize some reutilizations, either from the late Calcolithic period as from Bronze Age. This was the case of a fragment of archer's brassard collected in Couto da Espanhola 2, which also yielded fragments of carinated recipients from the Bronze Age, and Amieiro 2, with materials belonging to the same diachrony, with emphasis on a plate basis with an omphalus and a copper dagger (Fig. 10.15).

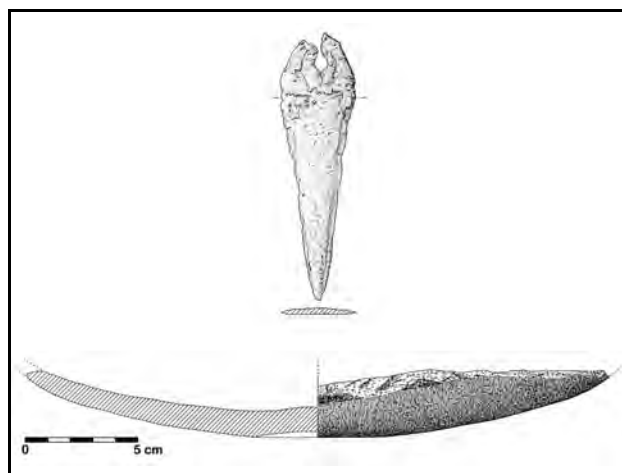


Fig. 10.15. Dagger of copper and fragment of a dish with basal *omphalus* related to reutilization of the chamber of Amieiro 2 in the end of the Calcolithic and Bronze Age

10. Despite the good state of preservation and the architectonic complexity of Amieiro 3 – constituted by the vestibule, corridor and ellipsoidal chamber (Fig. 10.16) there are no artefacts or other finds from its builders or users: os únicos artefactos recolhidos dentro do monumento correspondem a fragmento de taça em calote e a uma ponta Palmela, de tipologia evoluída, reportável a uma reutilização do monumento, tal como os casos já atrás mencionados. No exterior, apenas se recolheu fragmento de artefacto de pedra polida (Fig. 10.17) que pode, contudo, indicar uma violação antiga do mesmo. A situação descrita: the only artefacts collected inside the monument were a fragment of a small bowl and a Palmela point with an evolved typology, that can be reported to a reutilization of the monument in the Late Chalcolithic, such as occurred in previously reported cases. On the outside, only a fragment of an artefact of polished stone was collected (Fig. 10.17). The described scenario cannot be the result of robbery, for there is no sign of this; maybe the materials deposited inside were all perishable – wood, leather, straw, raw materials evidently important at the time, as proved by the rare, and therefore celebrated, cases where they have been preserved.

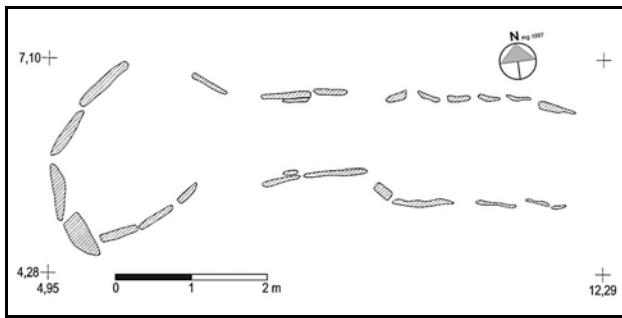


Fig. 10.16. Plant of Amieiro 3 with vestibule, corridor and asymmetric chamber

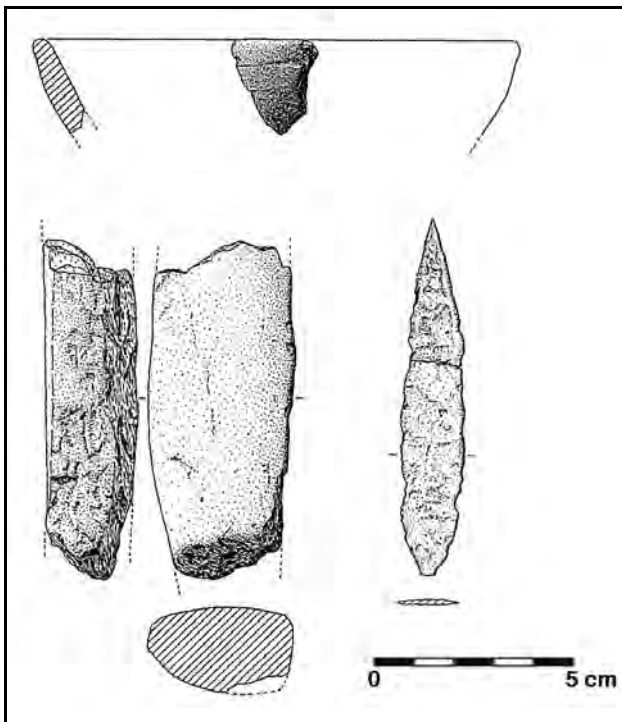


Fig. 10.17. Materials collected in Amieiro 3

11. The prime resource used almost or nearly always in the manufacture of the chipped artefacts was flint. This rock was unknown in the region and it is probable that it was acquired through trans-regional commercial circuits established with the Estremadura, through the important circulation route made by the river Tejo and its tributaries. However, the lack of petrographic studies prevents us to test this hypothesis. On the other hand, the presence of a large plate of carved schist collected in Amieiro 5 a indicates a clear origin from Alentejo (Fig. 10.18), from where the amphibolitic rocks that constituted the polished stone were probably originated (metabasites of green xhists) though the northern part of Beira Interior could also have contributed as supply source. As a matter of fact, the Castro de Santiago, Fornos de Algodres, has yielded true amphibolite ingots destined to local transformation and or exportation (VALERA, 1997). Therefore, the study area could have been functioning as a

core point of trans-regional articulation between both northern and southern, as littoral and interior areas.

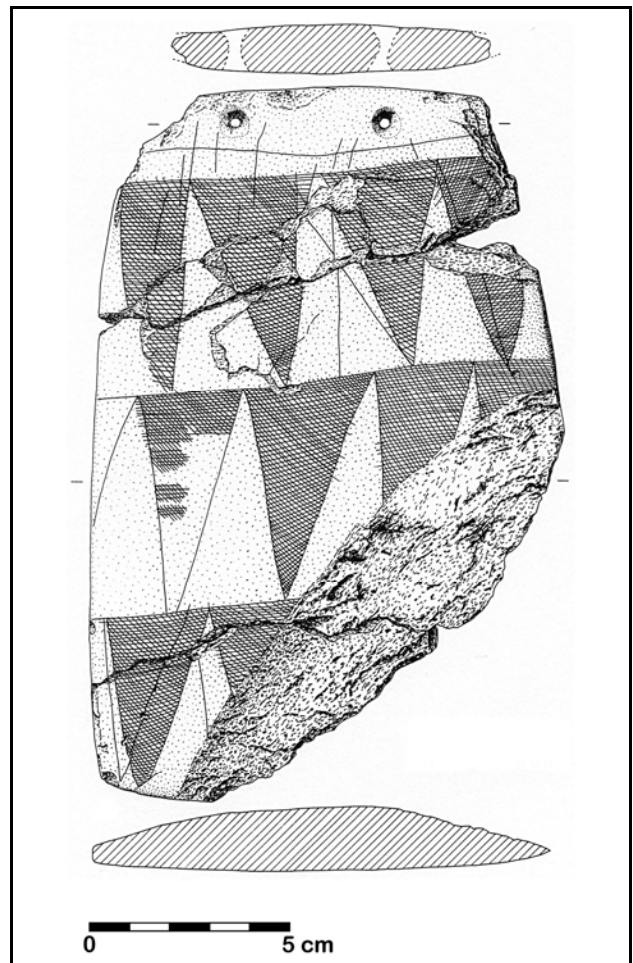


Fig. 10.18. Large schist plaque of Alentejan type collected in the small megalith with a horse-shoe shape of Amieiro 5 a

12. The reutilization of some monuments was accompanied in just one case by the construction of a new structure in the vicinity. This was the case of Amieiro 5 a, an horse-shoe shaped small-sized chamber, from which, 5 meters away, a sub-rectangular cyst (Fig.10.19) was built, in the periphery of the *tumulus*. Such cyst (Amieiro 5b) yielded a fragment of a schist plate of which only the posterior smooth face was preserved and a fragment of a bell-beaker vessel with a pseudo-excise decoration.

13. Archaeological materials were also found in the exterior of some of the megalithic precincts in the surrounding tumuli. Such occurrences can be explained in some cases by recent violations of the tombs; but in other cases they may be related to the presence of ritual depositions related to outdoor ceremonies. One such later case was found in Amieiro 8 because no violation of the tomb chamber occurred but the area outside the tomb structure supplied various materials (Fig. 10.20, nº 4, 5, 6 and 8).



Fig. 10.19. In the first plane, Amieiro 5a in the centre of the *tumulus* made essentially of large quartz blocks; in the second plane, the Beaker cyst of Amieiro 5b

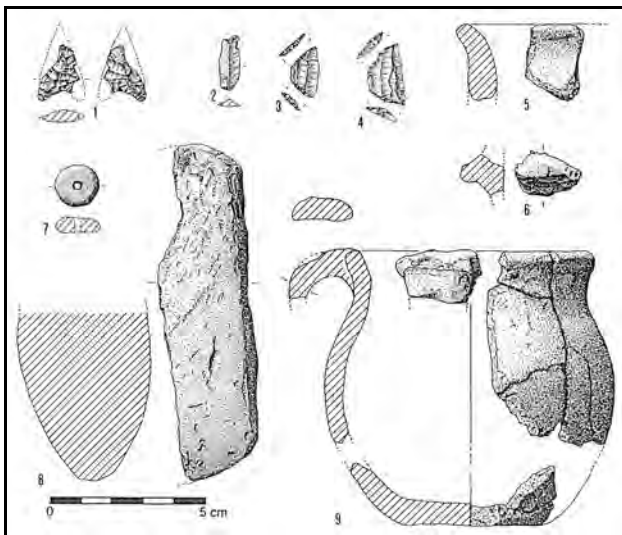


Fig. 10.20. Amieiro 8: remains collected at the chamber and in the *tumulus* including an arrow point of flint with fracture due to fire, a lamella of milky quartz, geometrics of flint, a bead of cornaline, a fragment of an axe with a sub-rectangular section and various ceramics

10.4. TOWARDS A CHRONOSEQUENCE OF THE STUDIED MEGALITHIC TOMBS

From the analysis of the architectural typologies and archaeological remains, the following sequence for the construction of the studied megalithic tombs can be proposed:

1. Close chambers, of small size from the middle of the V/first half of the IV millenium a.C. (Middle Neolithic). This initial phase is represented in Couto da Espanhola 6: the oldest moment of the use of this monument is not documented in the archaeological record; the intermediate phase has yielded a lamella and a rough blade, a segment and a trapeze with a straight basis, accompanied by a sub-rectangular axe, and the late phase supplied another axe, a

adze and several vases, which did not occur previously (Fig. 10.21). To this group of monuments one can associate Amieiro 1, with a polygonal chamber without a corridor (Fig. 10.22); however, the collection of just three uncharacteristic ceramic fragments does not allow further analysis.

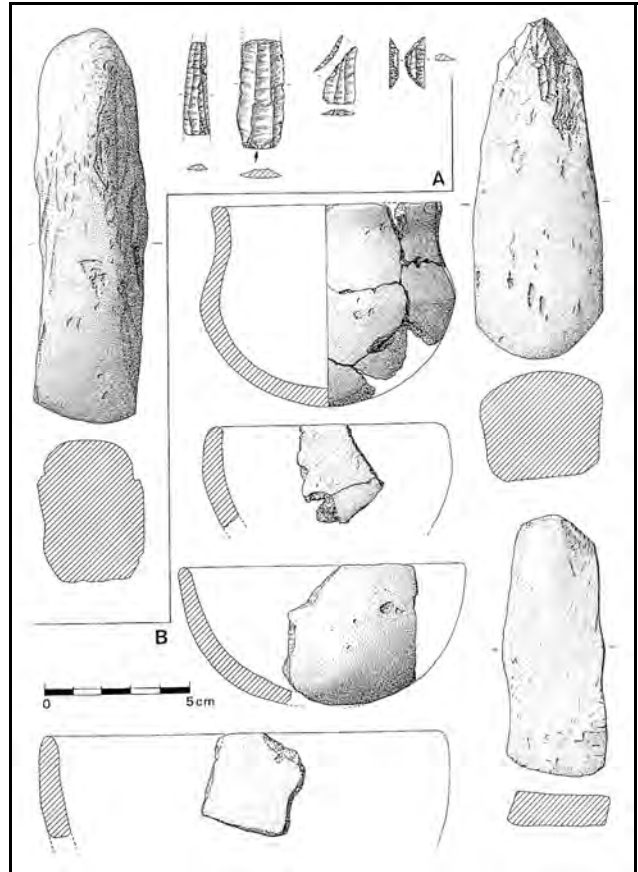


Fig. 10.21. Archaeological remains from the second phase (above) and third phase (below) of occupation of Couto da Espanhola 6



Fig. 10.22. Amieiro 1. General overview of the monument, constituted by a polygonal chamber without corridor. The chamber perimeter is partially defined by the location of the foundations of the disappeared orthostatic elements

2. Small-sized single chambers with a horseshoe plant, with remains from the late IV/early III millenium BC (Late Neolithic/Early Chalcolithic); this was the case of Amieiro 5a, that contained plates of xhist, arrow tips and blades of large dimensions (Fig. 10.18, Fig. 10.23) and Amieiro 8, with a similar plant, where materials from late Neolithic or maybe already Calcolithic were found in the interior of the chamber, represented by a concave-shaped arrow tip fissured by an heat source (Fig. 10.20 n° 1), an additional proof of rituals using fire in some of these monuments.

3. Dolmens with well defined chambers and corridors, contemporary of the previous small chambers (Amieiro 2 e Poço do Chibo), sometimes with large dimensions, having polygonal chambers and long corridors, sometimes with an abundant industry of flint and polished stone (Couto da Espanhola 2), characterized by a remarkable variety of arrow points, blades, geometrics and nuclei (Fig. 10.24, Fig. 10.25).

4. Dolmens with round chambers built by eight or more orthostats with probably a false vault and long corridors, from the first half of the III millenium a.C. (Chalcolithic); it is the case of Amieiro 3 and Cabeço da Forca (Fig. 10.26) whose findings seem scarce almost inexistent in the later, whilst in the former there is a large amount of polished stone artefacts (Fig. 10.27), contrasting with the scarcity of flint stone materials (Fig. 10.28).

5. Small cists, from the second half of the III millenium BC (Late Chalcolithic, Beaker), represented only by Amieiro 5b, constructed in the vicinity of the already existing tomb, Amieiro 5a (Fig. 10.19). It is about the only monument that yielded a fragment of Beaker ceramics decorated with the pseudo-excise technique.

6. Small *tumuli*, from the II millennium BC (Middle and Late Bronze Age), represented only by Amieiro 9, without remains (Fig. 10.29).

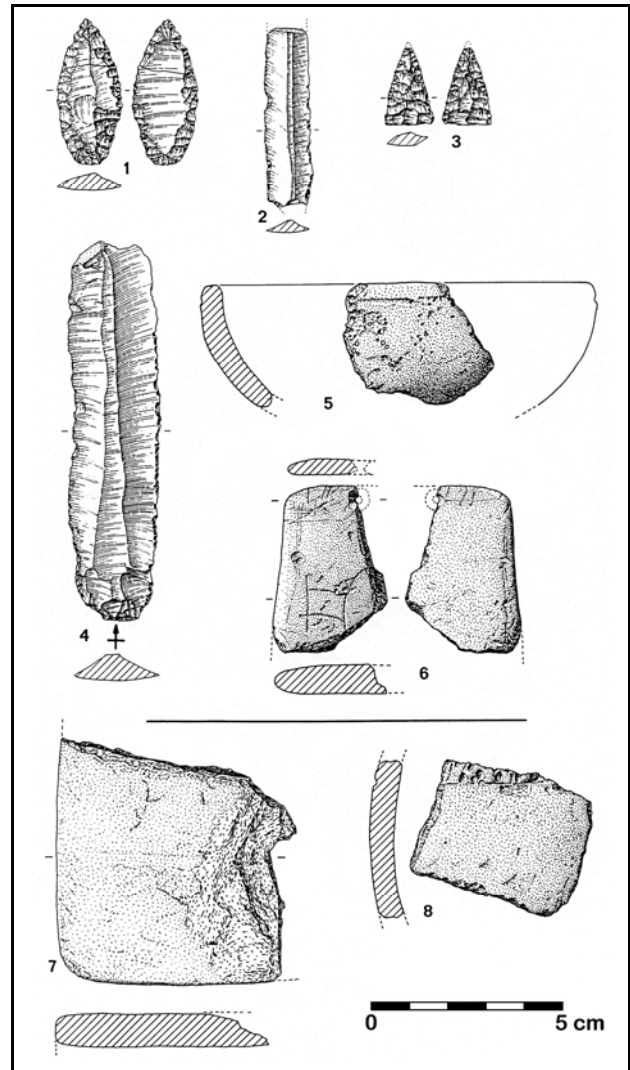


Fig. 10.23. Archaeological remains from Amieiro 5 a (above) and Amieiro 5 b (below)

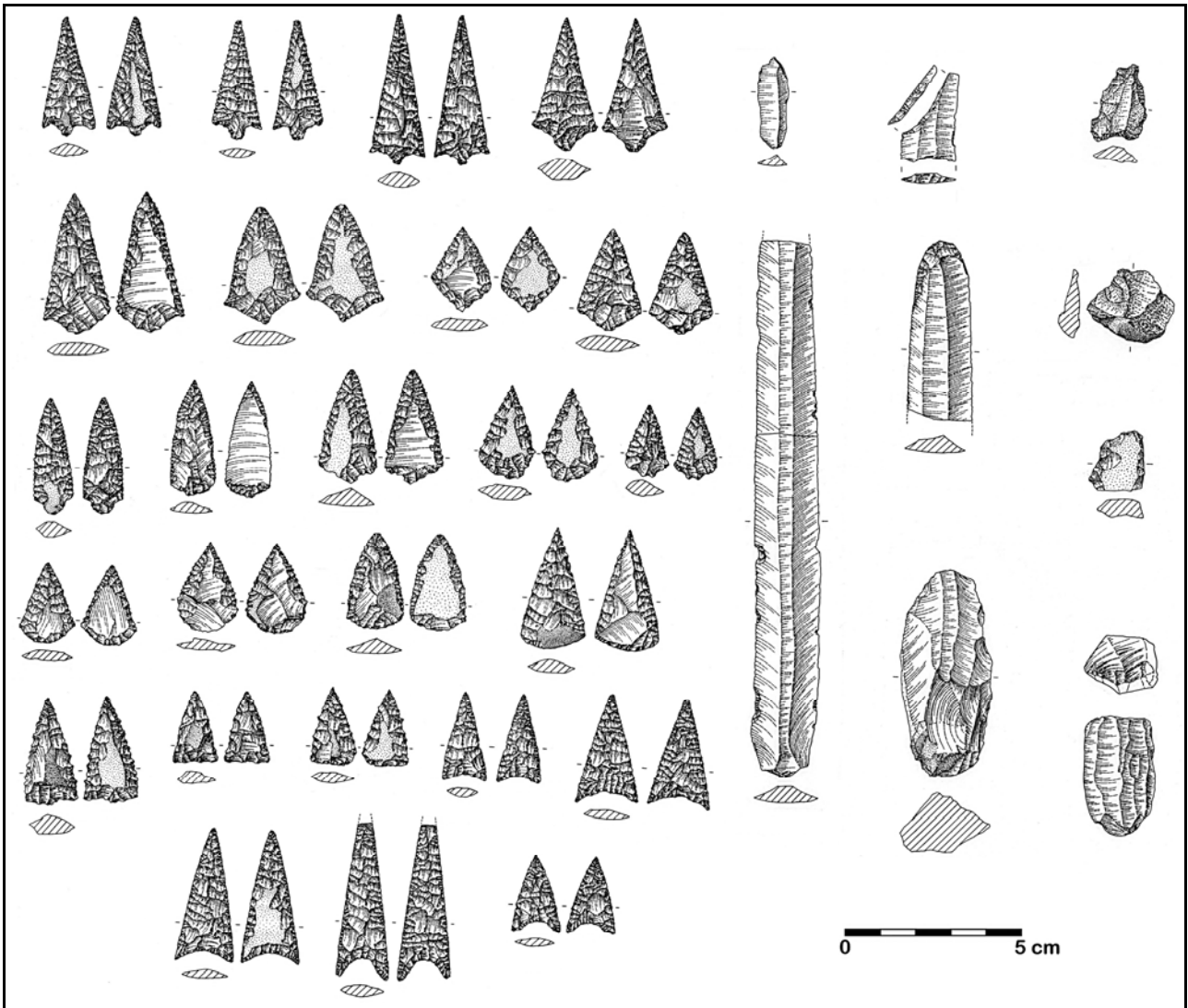


Fig. 10.24. Lithic industry of flint and quartz, collected in the chamber and the corridor of Couto da Espanhola 2

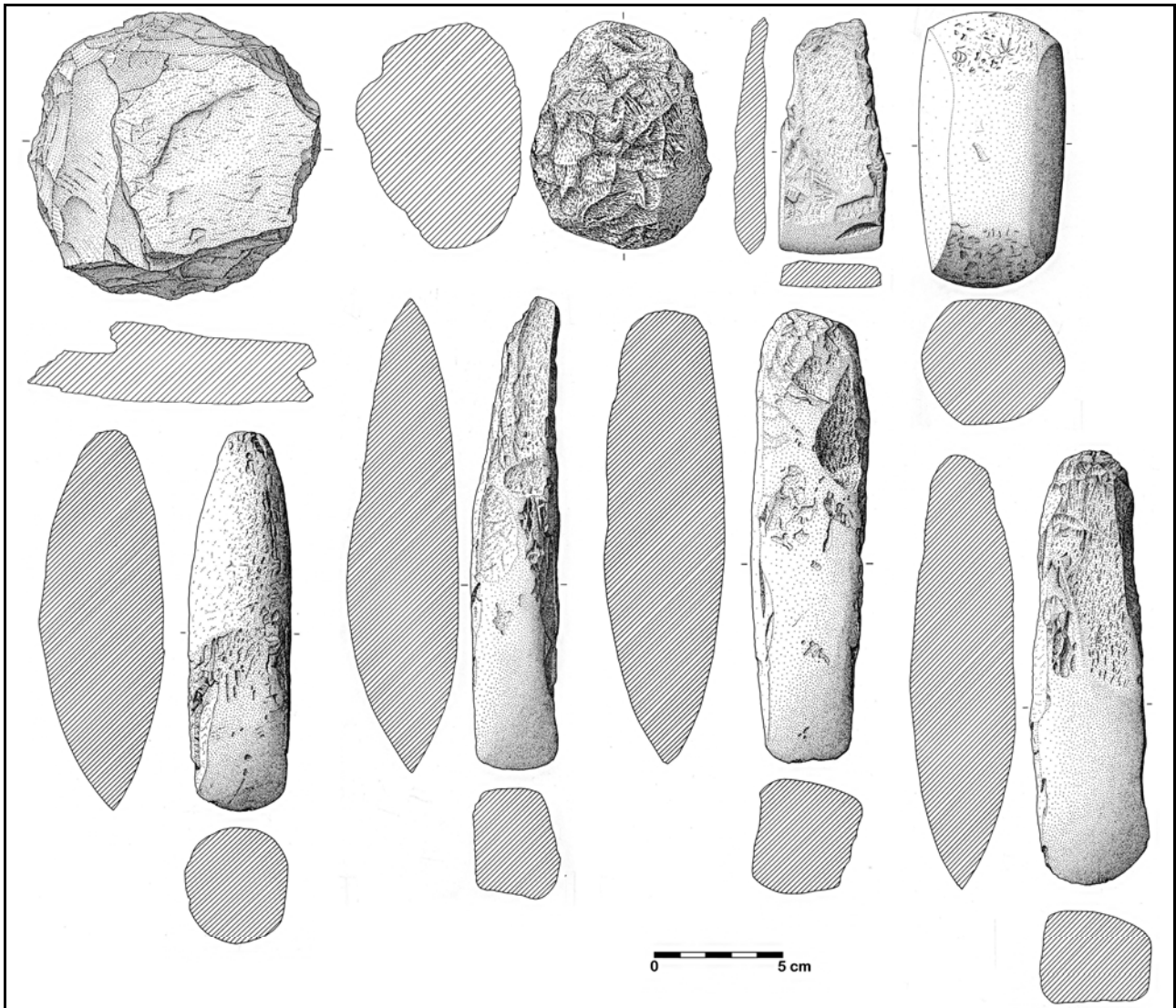


Fig. 10.25. Lithic industry of schist, quartz and amphibolite, collected in the chamber and corridor of Couto da Espanhola 2

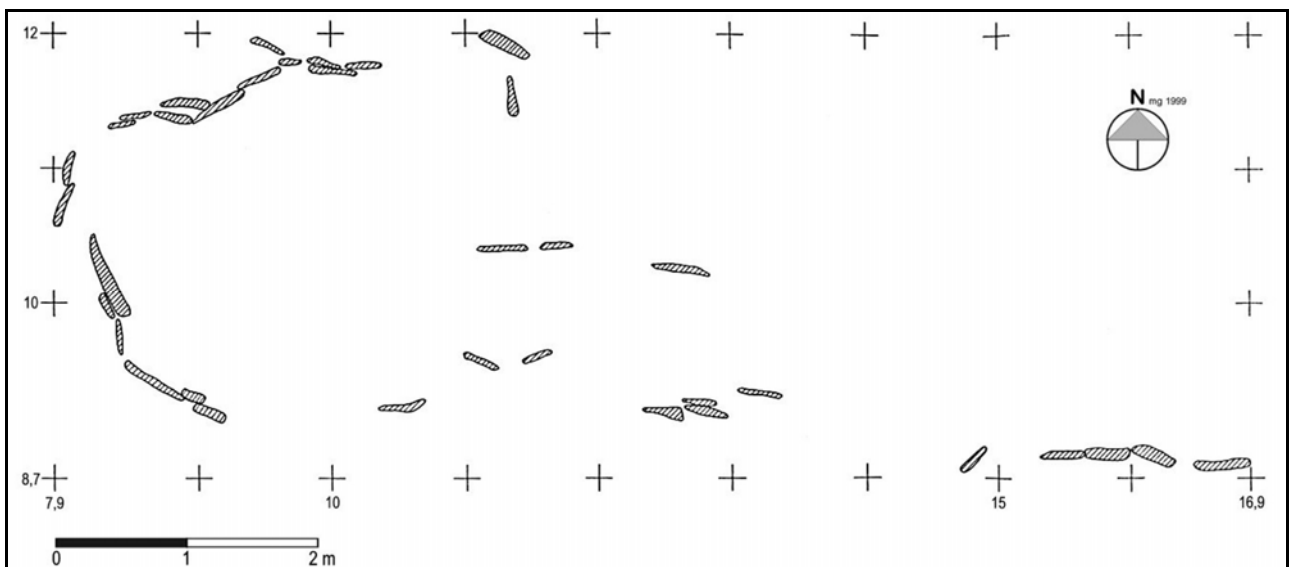


Fig. 10.26. Plant of Cabeço da Forca, having a sub-circular to polygonal chamber and a long corridor

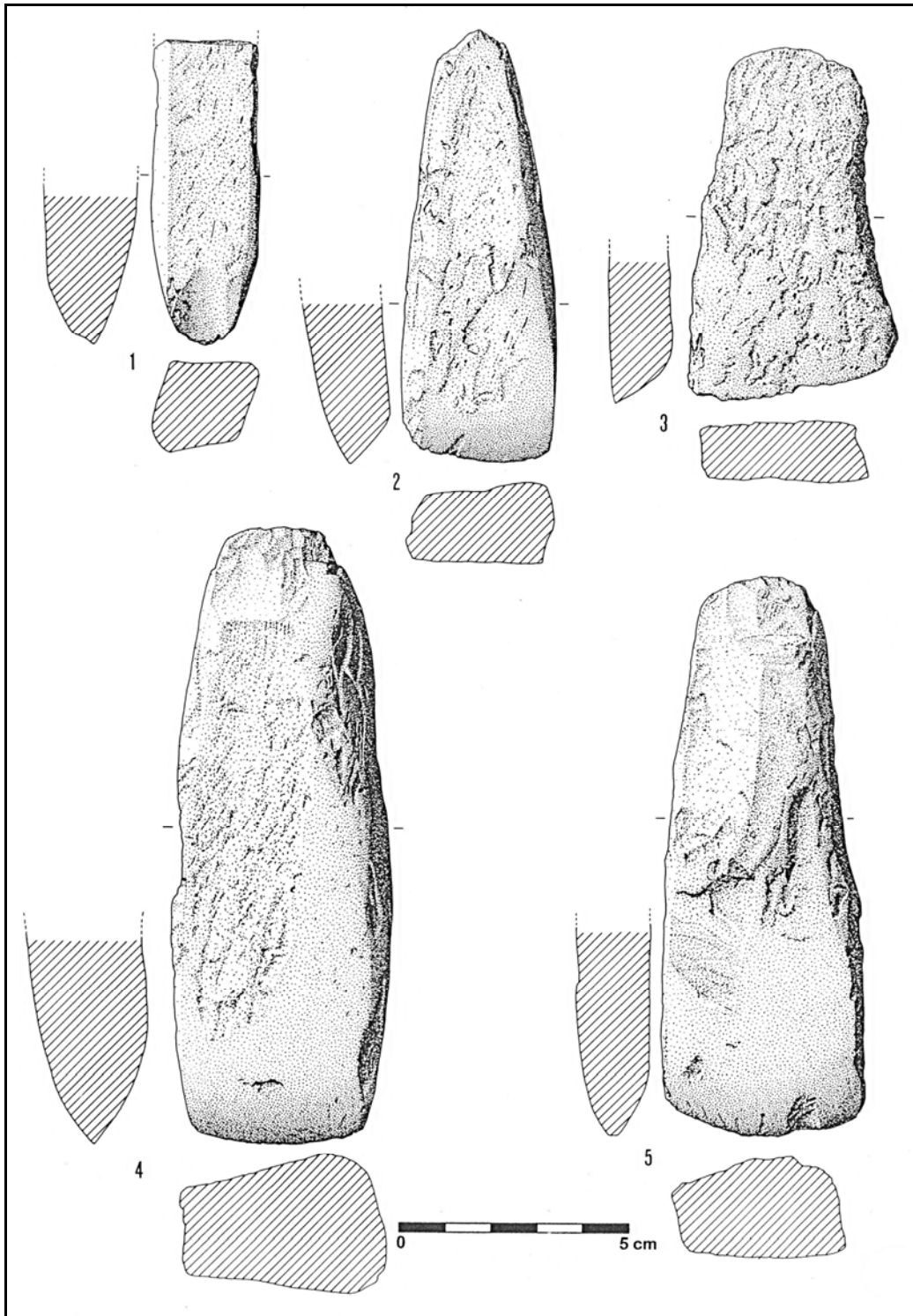


Fig. 10.27. Polished artefacts collected in Cabeço da Forca: 1- incomplete gouge, collected during the scraping of the first layer in the area of the corridor; 2- adze collected during the scraping in the area north of the chamber; 3- adze collected close to the external border of the *tumulus* at the basis of the surface layer; 4- adze collected between two slabs of the corridor and perpendicular to another one, of smaller size; 5- adze collected in the corridor

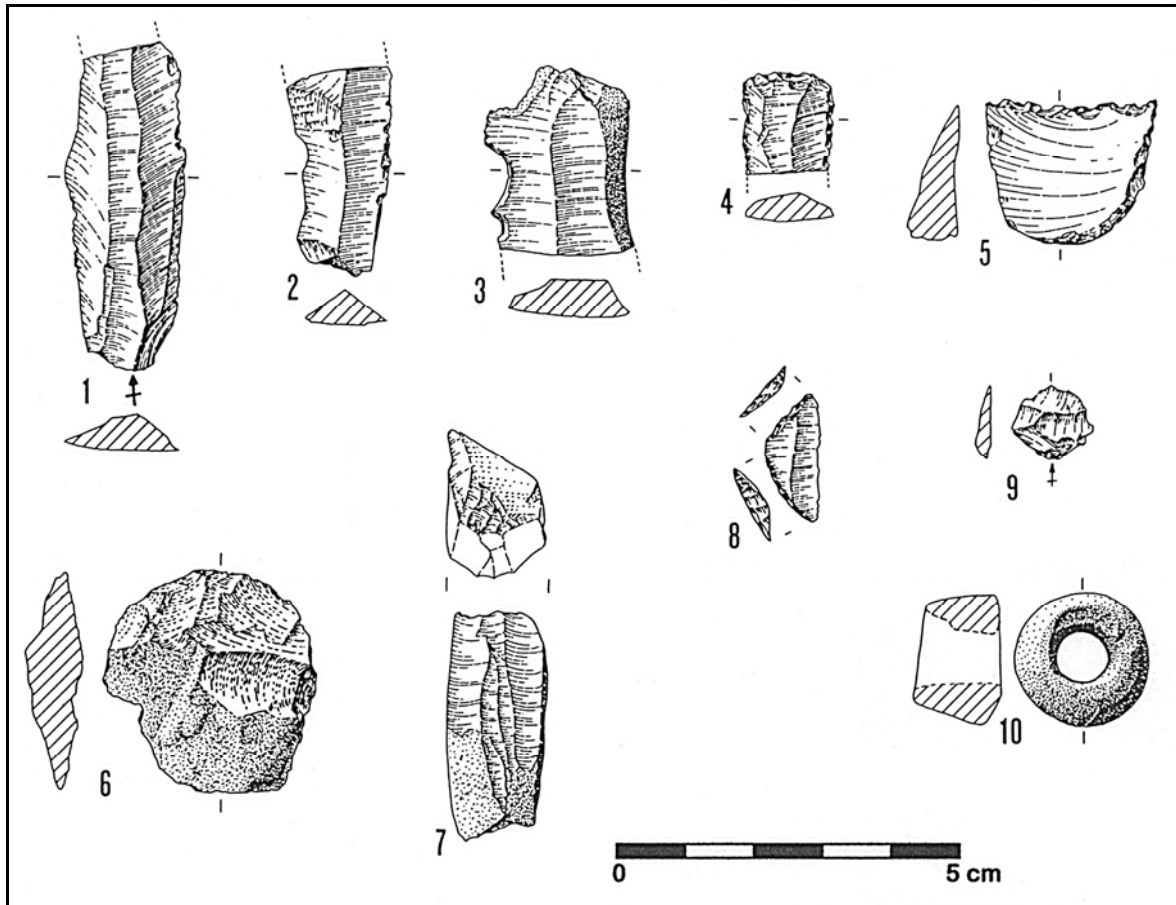


Fig.10.28. Artefacts collected in Cabeço da Forca: 1 to 3- fragments of blades collected respectively inside the chamber (1) and in the northeastern part of it (2 and 3); 4- fragment of blade retouched collected during the scraping of the superficial layer; 5- sickle element with marks of the cereal cutting, collected during the scraping of the superficial layer (Bronze Age); 6- quartz core collected in the area of the chamber; 7- core in rock crystal collected in the chamber; 8- geometric collected at the surface before the beginning of the excavation; 9- ship of milky quartz from the chamber; 10- bead of polished stone collected in the surface layer in the corridor area



Fig. 10.29. General overview of Amieiro 9, a precinct with sub-ellipsoidal shape defined by small slabs placed vertically, covered by a well preserved *tumulus* predominantly of quartz blocks