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# Some new views of the engraved slate plaques of southwest Iberia

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**A B S T R A C T** The engraved plaques of Late Neolithic and Copper Age Iberia have long intrigued scholars since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This paper develops two models to explain the nature of the plaques' iconography and distribution. First, I explore the close parallels between the design on the plaques and textile weaves. Second, I develop and test the hypothesis that the plaques were heraldic and that they recorded lineage affiliation and genealogical distance from an important ancestor.

**R E S U M O** As placas de xisto do Neolítico Final e do Calcolítico da Península Ibérica têm sido objecto de estudo desde o século XIX. Este artigo propõe dois modelos para explicar a iconografia e distribuição das placas. Em primeiro lugar, exploram-se os paralelos entre a decoração das placas e motivos comumente usados na tecelagem. Em segundo lugar, desenvolve-se e testa-se a hipótese de que as placas teriam uma função heráldica, servindo para registar a filiação numa linhagem e a distância genealógica do falecido a que estavam associadas em relação a um fundador da mesma.

## Introduction

The engraved slate plaques of Iberia are some of the most intriguing representational art of prehistoric Europe. Dated to the Late Neolithic and Copper Age (3500-3000 BC) and found in burials of southern Portugal and Spain, they have long engaged the imagination of archaeologists (Veiga, 1887; Vasconcellos, 1897, 1906; Siret, 1913; Correia, 1917; Frankowski, 1920). The occasional appearance of anthropomorphic features on the plaques inspired most of these early prehistorians to hypothesize that they were representations of the Mother Goddess, whose cult had supposedly diffused from the eastern Mediterranean and whose worshippers brought other components of 'civilized' life, such as metallurgy, to Iberia. Although this model was overturned in the 1960s when radiocarbon dates and their calibration demonstrated that metallurgy and other features of 'civilized' life in Iberia actually predated their 'sources' (Renfrew, 1976), some prehistorians still see the anthropomorphic plaques as depictions of the Mother Goddess (Almagro Gorbea, 1973; Rodrigues, 1986a, 1986b; Gonçalves, 1992, 1999).

In recent years, there have been renewed attempts to interpret the slate plaques by scholars such as Lisboa (1985) and Bueno Ramírez (1992). Lisboa (1985) disputed the Mother Goddess attribution of the slate plaques, for the same reasons as did Frankowski (1920) and Fleming (1969): only a few of these plaques unquestionably depict anthropomorphic figures, and none are obviously females or deities. She focused her argument, not on what the plaques may have represented, but on what they may have meant and on how they may have functioned symbolically and socially. She proposed that the plaques be seen as “ordered and meaningful, in the sense that they are being used to transmit messages” and suggested that “they had a heraldic function not necessarily associated with individuals” (1985, p.193). Lisboa did not offer, however, a test of this compelling model. In a similar vein, Bueno Ramírez (1992) viewed the decorations on the plaques as ethnic identifiers of roughly contemporary groups, and their distribution as evidence of regional exchange systems. While the notion of the plaques as ethnic markers is reasonable, and, indeed, consistent with the thesis of Lisboa, Bueno Ramírez did not take into account other possible mechanisms that might also explain the distribution of the plaques, such as the movement of individuals and groups who may have shared a common idea of how the plaques were to be composed and decorated.

Clearly, studies of the Iberian plaques have moved away from primary focus on their iconography and toward a better understanding their distribution and social significance. However, I will argue that we still need to be attentive to iconography, and that iconography, meaning, and, indeed, function are interrelated phenomena and must, ultimately, to be reconciled. What this paper seeks to do, therefore, is to begin to integrate an understanding of the plaques’ iconography, meaning, and function. I will first explore the idea that the geometric patterning on these plaques depicts or are based on textile weaves. I then develop and test the hypothesis that the plaques functioned as heraldic emblems, and more specifically, as genealogical records. Finally, I consider their role in burial rituals.

This study is based on a database of approximately 680 illustrated plaques from 150 sites published in a variety of sources, the principal one being the multi-volume series *Die Megalithgräber der Iberischen Halbinsel* (Leisner and Leisner, 1943, 1951, 1956, 1959, 1970; Leisner, 1965, 1998). There are, however, many plaques that are unpublished, that have never been illustrated, or that exist in publications that were not consulted. Gonçalves estimates that over 2000 plaques have been recovered (Victor Gonçalves, 2001, personal communication). There are definite patterns that emerge from analyses of this data set, however, and thus, I would argue that it can be used a basis for developing hypotheses and for guiding future research.

### **The Iberian slate plaques: themes and variations**

In their depositional contexts, form, compositional structure, and decorative elements, the slate plaques of Iberia appear to possess a distinctive unity. This coherence was noted as long ago as 1917 by Correia, who explained that relatively few plaques were published because they were so similar to one another (Correia, 1917, p. 29). However, I suggest that their similarity has been overemphasized, perhaps to better fit with the notion that they were part of a singular ideological phenomenon – i.e., a Mother Goddess cult. In fact, no two plaques are identical. In this section, I describe the commonalities among the plaques as well as their variability.

The Iberian slate plaques have been found only in southwestern Iberia and principally recovered in the collective burials typically of the time; these include megaliths, caves, rockshelters,

rock-cut tombs, and corbel-vaulted tombs. In these burials, the plaques are generally found in association with undecorated pottery, flint blades, and unused polished stone tools.

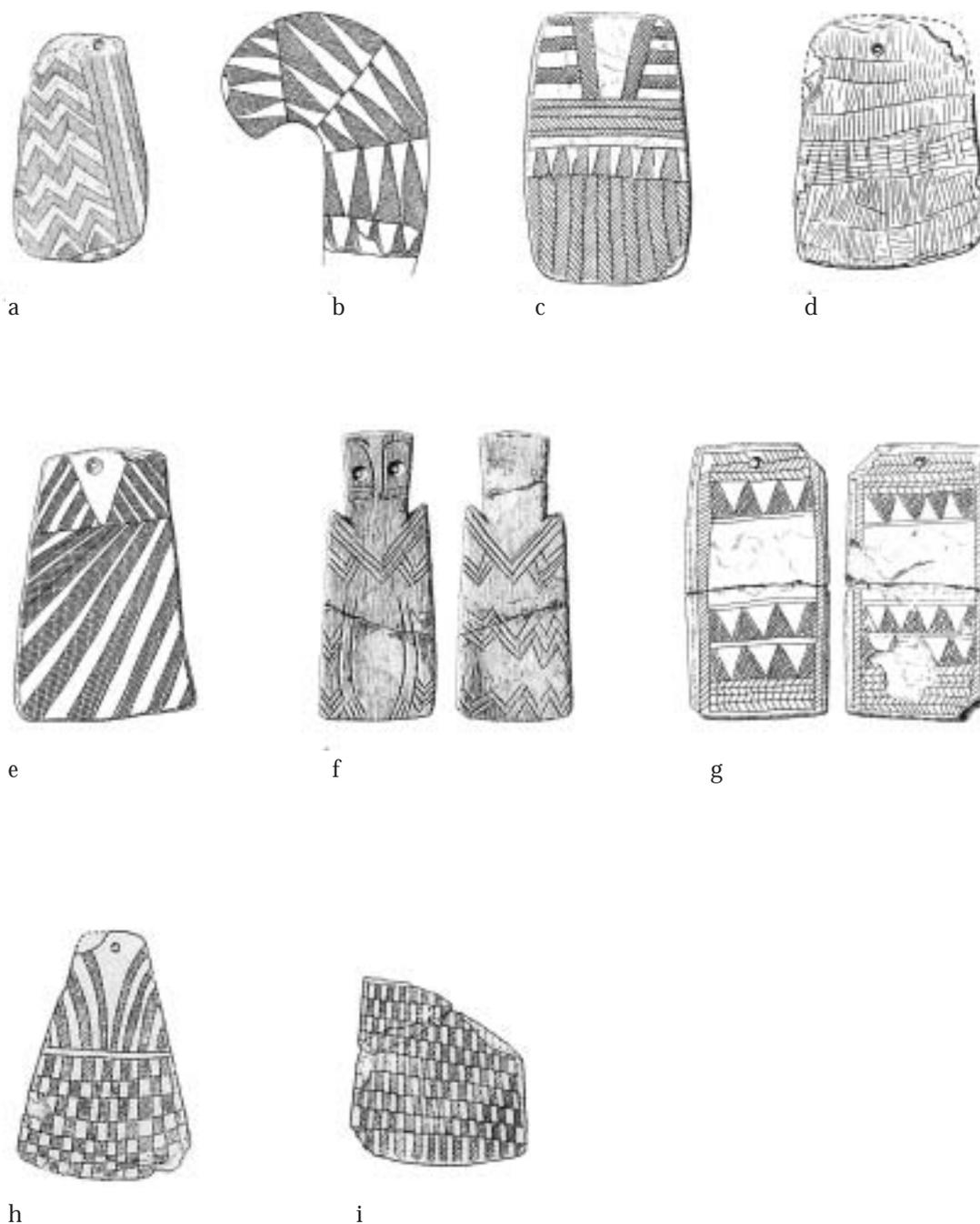
The plaques are not, however, evenly distributed throughout southwestern Iberia. Approximately 50% were recovered in the Portuguese district of Évora alone (Fig. 1). The range in plaque numbers by tomb is also striking. The site of Anta Grande do Olival da Pega (Évora) was found with 134 plaques (Leisner and Leisner, 1951, p. 240), while the contemporary burial of Anta 1 do Cebolinho (Évora) had only 31 (Leisner and Leisner, 1951, p. 276-279). Furthermore, not all individuals within a tomb were buried with plaques. At the site of Cabeço da Arruda 1 (Lisboa), the minimum number of individuals buried was 19, yet there were only 11 slate plaques recovered (Spindler, 1981, p. 224; Silva, 1999, p. 356-357).

In addition, some plaques, principally fragments, have been found at settlements; these sites include Espargueira (Lisboa), Carnaxide (Lisboa), Vila Nova de São Pedro (Santarém), and Zambujal (Lisboa) (Spindler, 1981, p. 224-225). Cabeço do Pé da Erra (Santarém) is another settlement where plaques – both complete and unfinished – were recovered; the site was likely a plaque production center (Gonçalves, 1982, 1983-1984, in prep.).

The precise dating of the plaques is problematic, although the dates that exist place them between 3000-2500 BC (Gonçalves, 1999, p. 117). Their chronology has been difficult to ascertain primarily because late prehistoric burials in Iberia were repeatedly reused, sometimes until the Early Bronze Age, and thus, artifacts and skeletal remains are often found disturbed. Furthermore, the acidic soils of the regions where many of these burials are located do not regularly



Fig. 1 Number of slate plaques in study, by District (Portugal) or Province (Spain). Map also shows sources of amphibolite (in black) (Scale: approx. 1: 4 000 000).



**Fig. 2** Objects Referred to in Text (Scale approx. 1:3)

- a. Plaque from Ribeira de Odivelas (Évora) (Leisner and Leisner, 1959: Tafel 34)
- b. Bacula from Alcolgulo 3 (Portalegre) (Leisner and Leisner, 1959, Tafel 3, 3, 3)
- c. Plaque from Anta da Herdade dos Galvões (Évora) (Leisner and Leisner, 1959, Tafel 34, 2, 13)
- d. Plaque from Anta Grande da Comenda da Igreja (Évora) (Leisner and Leisner, 1959, Tafel 27, 1, 61)
- e. Plaque from Folha da Amendoeira (Beja) (Leisner and Leisner, 1959, Tafel 42)
- f. Plaque from Idanha a Nova (Castelo Branco) (Leisner, 1998, Tafel 75)
- g. Plaque from Cueva de la Mora (Huelva) (Leisner and Leisner, 1959, Tafel 53, 7, 11)
- h. Plaque from Anta 1 da Herdade do Passo (Évora) (Leisner and Leisner, 1951, Est. XXI, 21)
- i. Plaque (fragment) from Anta Grande do Olival da Pega (Évora) (Leisner and Leisner, 1951, Est. XXVIII, 57).

preserve skeletal remains, and thus, direct dating of associated individuals is difficult. Finally, it is clear that some of the plaques were curated and recycled; for example, fragments of plaques are occasionally found reused as pendants (Fig. 2a).

A certain range also exists in the raw materials used to make the plaques. Most are made of slate, although some are made of schist or sandstone. Thus, the term 'schist plaques', the term most often found in the English literature and derived from an imprecise translation of the Portuguese term 'xisto' (which actually means both schist and slate), is not the most accurate term to use to describe these plaques. Although no provenance studies have yet been undertaken to identify the precise sources of these plaques, in general, their raw materials are found in southwestern Iberia (Instituto Tecnológico Geominero de España, 1994).

In their form, the Iberian plaques display a certain consistency. They are generally trapezoidal, roughly 10-20 cm in height and 10 cm in their maximum width (Fig. 3). Yet, there are also some plaques that are rectangular and others that have a composite shape, with a triangular or rectangular form extending from the narrower width.

In addition to the trapezoidal, rectangular, and composite plaques are the 'baculae' or 'croziers' (Fig. 2b). These are crook-shaped objects, made on schist or slate, and they share a common distribution, depositional contexts, and design elements with the plaques. About 40 baculae are known, yet few systematic studies of them have been carried out or published (Ferreira, 1985). Although I focus on the plaques, the baculae are clearly related culturally and stylistically to the plaques and are made of the same materials, and, thus, it is likely that the interpretation of the plaques will be related to that of the baculae.

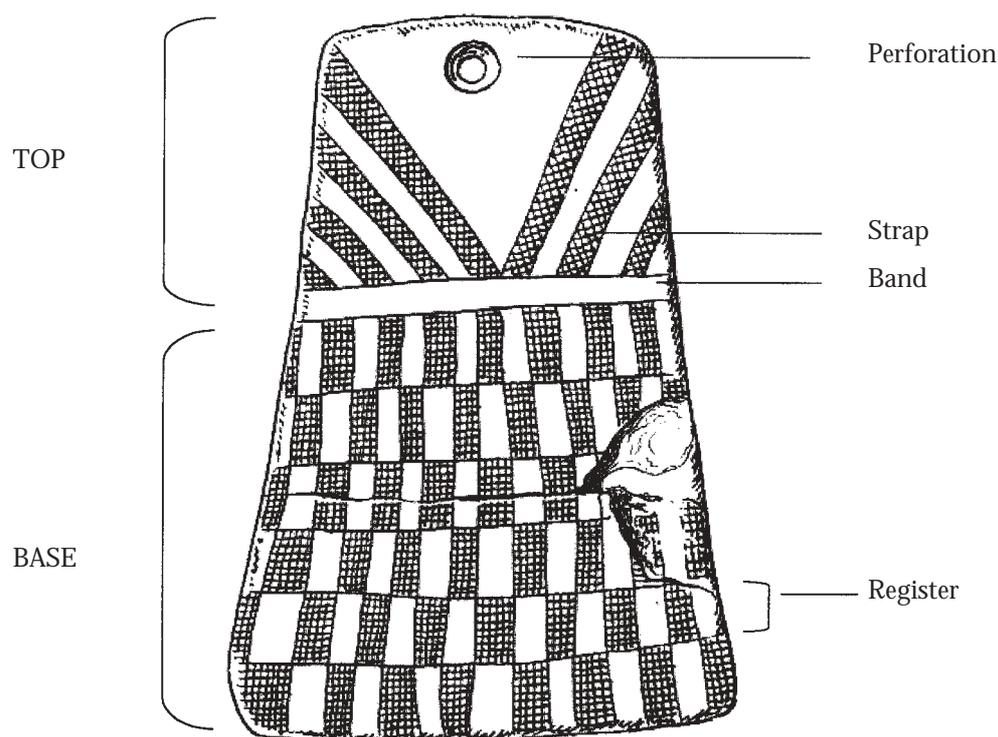
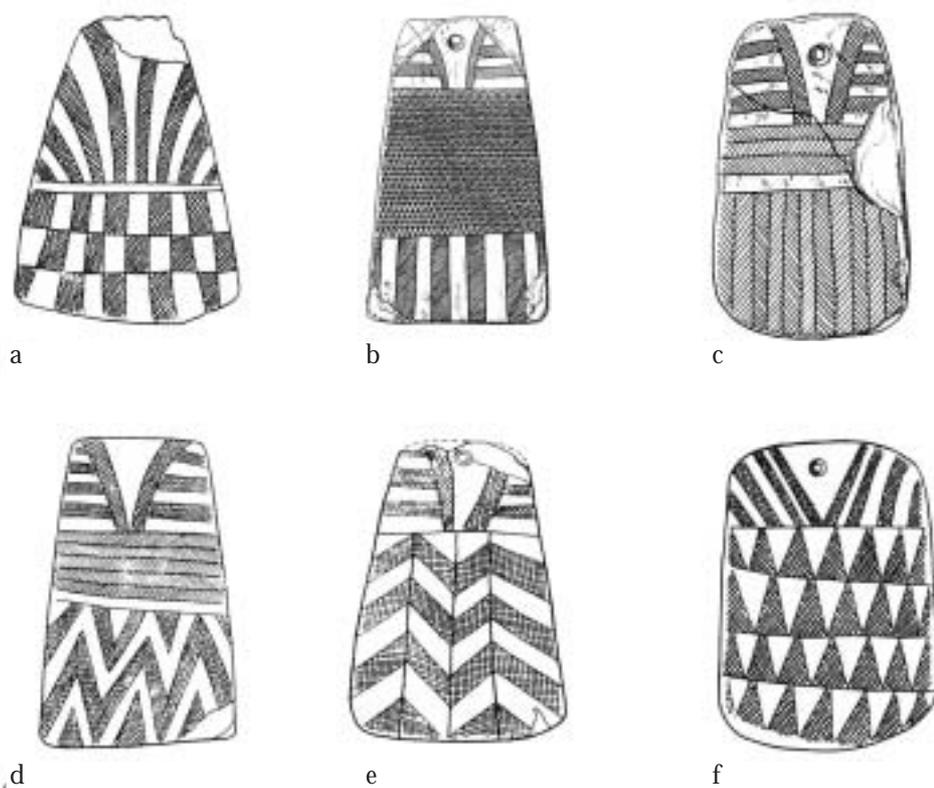


Fig. 3 Anatomy of a classic Iberian slate plaque.

The classic Iberian plaques have a bipartite compositional structure, consisting of a narrower one-third (top) of the plaque and a wider bottom two-thirds of the plaque (base) (Fig. 3). I refer to the narrower section as the 'top' because it is often perforated (with one or two holes), and the plaques appear to have been hung from here (possibly on a person's neck or a post). Vasconcellos (1897, p. 159) noted that on some of the plaques, the perforations are perfectly sharp and give the appearance that the plaque was never worn or suspended. On others, however, a range of wear is evident. The top also has an empty triangular field in the center with bands ('straps'), either horizontal (touching the sides of the triangle) or vertical (touching the top of the base). Sometimes separating the top and base are single or multiple horizontal bands that can be undecorated or decorated with cross-hatching, triangles, or some other geometric design. There are also plaques without this separating band, but with only a horizontal line separating the top from the base. Of the 680 plaques included in this study, approximately 30% display this classic structure. Most of these were found in Évora.

The base is where the decorative elements are concentrated, and one or a combination of six geometric motifs is found here: checkerboard, vertical bands, triangles, chevrons, herringbones, and zigzags (Fig. 4). The checkerboard and triangle motifs are organized generally along hori-



**Fig. 4** Decorative Motifs on Classic Slate Plaques.

- a. Triangle motif, from Anta 1 do Cebolinho (Évora) (Leisner and Leisner, 1951, Est. XXXIV, 16);
- b. Vertical Band motif, from Anta do Carvão (Évora) (Leisner and Leisner, 1959, Tafel 34, 6, 1);
- c. Herringbone motif, from Anta de Santiago Maior (Évora) (Leisner and Leisner, 1959, Tafel 34, 1, 3);
- d. Zigzag motif, from Anta 1 da Herdade do Passo (Évora) (Leisner and Leisner, 1951, Est. XXI, 17);
- e. Chevron motif, from Anta 1 da Herdade do Passo (Évora) (Leisner and Leisner, 1951, Est. XXI, 14);
- f. Triangle motif, from Anta 1 do Cebolinho (Évora) (Leisner and Leisner, 1951, Est. XXXIV, 1).

zontal fields, while the chevrons and herringbones are organized along vertical fields. The zigzag and vertical band motifs use the entire base as their compositional field. Some plaques employ different motifs in different fields and can be considered hybrids (Fig. 2c).

The different motifs display a range in the degree to which they vary in their form and compositional structure. Plaques with the checkerboard motif show no variability; all are classically trapezoidal and bipartite in composition. In a few cases, the checkerboard motif is found in combination with the triangle motif. However, in plaques with chevrons, zigzags, and triangles, there is a great deal of variability. Sometimes the plaque is not divided into two compositional fields, and the rows of geometric motifs usually found on the base are found all over the plaque. Sometimes within the top field, there are rows of geometric motifs that are more commonly found in the base. And, often there are non-standard 'straps' (made by converging lines rather than parallel lines, e.g.).

Another source of variability is in the style of the plaques. For example, while the engravings of most of the plaques appear to have been produced with a strong and firm hand, in which the lines are clear and straight and the geometric motifs are regular in size and shape, other plaques appear not to have been as competently produced (Figure 2d). Whether these plaques were made by beginners, less skilled artisans, children, or were intentionally made to look this way, is unknown.

There are also a few plaques that boldly flaunt the conventions of structure and design (Fig. 2e). Their idiosyncratic quality may reflect the personality or status of the maker and/or the recipient. Or, they may have had some important signifying or symbolic qualities. Whatever the case, their whimsical nature reveals something about the creative aesthetics of late prehistoric Iberians.

Despite the traditional view that the slate plaques represent deities, few depict clear evidence of human or zoomorphic anatomy. In fact, only 43 of the plaques included in this study can liberally be termed 'ocular', and on only 9 of these, are other body parts, such as noses and arms shown. On the faces of some of these plaques are parallel lines below the eyes (Fig. 2f), a feature that has been interpreted as tattooing by some authors (Déchelette, 1907; Siret, 1913). Anthro-/zoomorphic plaques are found principally in certain regions (Évora, Castelo Branco, Portalegre, Cáceres, and Huelva). And, only some of the geometric motifs – zigzags, chevrons, and triangles – are found on these plaques. This suggests that the clear (to a 21<sup>st</sup> century Westerner's eyes) anthro-/zoomorphization of the plaques represents a fairly isolated, though not necessarily unimportant, cultural phenomenon.

## Re-viewing the Iberian plaques

While the interpretation of the plaques as beings may be limited to a small group of them, the key to understanding the basis of the decorative motifs may be found in these 'biomorphic' plaques. Although rarely noted in published references, many of the beings represented in these plaques are clearly wearing clothing (Fig. 2f) (see, however, Frankowski, 1920, p. 26). Furthermore, the decorative motifs on these clothes – chevrons, triangles, and zigzags, are also those found on the non-biomorphic plaques. There are also some plaques that, with their decorated borders, are evocative of woven blankets or rugs (Fig. 2g).

Thus, it seems logical to consider woven textiles, possibly clothing, blankets, or carpets, as the inspiration or basis for the decorative motifs on the slate plaques. All the motifs found on

the plaques are weaves easily reproducible by card or tablet weaving or on a simple loom (Held, 1978; Atwater, 1988). Furthermore, there is a great deal of evidence for a thriving textile industry in the Late Neolithic and Copper Age of Iberia, such as loom weights and spindle whorls, as recently summarized by Castro Curel (1983) and Cardito Rollán (1996). Finally, there are the few preserved textiles themselves. Two fragments of linen (including a fragment painted with horizontal bands) have been found covering metal axes in two Portuguese Copper Age burials (Viana et al., 1948; Formosinho et al., 1953/1954; Monge Soares, personal communication, 2002). Although the actual evidence for textile design is not abundant in Iberia, there are plenty of textiles preserved at Late Neolithic sites in Switzerland and Germany, dated to the same period at the Iberian slate plaques, and all the same patterns found on the plaques are found on these textiles as weaves (Barber, 1991, p. 293).

As is commonly the case with textiles, I would like to suggest that the primary function of the design on the slate plaques was to communicate membership to a social group. I now wish to test the notion that the Iberian plaques were heraldic, a class of material mnemonics recording lineage status. The regular structure of the plaques, the uniqueness of each plaque, the unambiguous nature of many of the components of the plaques, and the relatively small number of decorative elements, all point to such a codified communication system.

### **The Iberian slate plaques as heraldry?**

I make the assumption that the most important information on the plaques was that which was most visible, that is, the design on the base. As a working hypothesis, I propose that lineage affiliation was represented on the base, with horizontal rows of motifs indicating generations from an ancestor. If this were the case, we should expect to see the following:

#### *1. Design independent of material constraints*

More specifically, the number of registers should not be related to the size of the plaque. Otherwise, it could be argued that the raw material imposed constraints on what was drawn. There should be evidence in the *chaîne opératoire* that the number of registers was prioritized over any material constraints.

#### *2. Correlation between number of plaques and number of registers*

In other words, there should be more plaques with high numbers of registers and fewer plaques with low numbers of registers. This is assuming that more people could count themselves as descendants of an ancestor the further back in generational distance from that ancestor.

#### *3. Geographic dispersal*

There should be dispersal over space as register numbers increase, reflecting the dispersal of descendants due to marriage, fission, or population growth.

#### *4. Register sequences within tombs or tomb groups*

Assuming tombs housed people of the same lineage, there should be continuous sequences of register numbers, by motif, within tombs or tomb groups. One might also expect that some burials within tombs or tomb groups were roughly contemporary, and thus plaques with the same number of registers should also be found.

### 5. Dating

Those plaques with higher number of registers should postdate those with lower number of registers, by motif.

There are very few classic plaques with the herringbone (n=1) and vertical band (n=4) motifs, so a discussion of these will not be included. The remaining four motifs that will be considered are those with the triangle, checkerboard, zigzag, and chevron motifs. It should be noted that while the counting of registers on the triangle and checkerboard motif plaques are unambiguous, the counts for the zigzag and chevron motif plaques are somewhat more so. Throughout this study, I have counted the maximum number of engraved horizontal iterations of the motifs.

In this section, I review the data in light of these five hypotheses.

#### 1. Design independent of material constraints?

It is necessary to rule out the determining role of raw material constraints if the design is to be taken seriously on its own. And, when the relationship between the height of complete plaques and the number of their registers, by motif, is examined, an interesting pattern becomes clear. Specifically, there is no correlation between the height of the plaque and the number of registers on that plaque (correlation coefficient for zigzag: -.01; chevron: .27; triangle: .28; checkerboard: -0.10). Large plaques were used to produce few registers, and smallish plaques were used for high numbers of registers. Furthermore, the mean height of the plaques is virtually identical by motif (approximately 15 cm). This suggests that the quarrying and initial forming of the plaque was done to satisfy a basic size requirement, but after then (and perhaps by another person) whatever design needed to be drawn was done so.

Furthermore, when the *chaîne opératoire* of the engraved designs can be gleaned, we again see a priority attached to design over raw material constraints. In a few cases, for example, there appears to have been an attempt to ‘squeeze’ registers at the bottom of the base to produce the desired number of registers (Fig. 3h). These ‘squeezed in’ registers are often irregular in size and in the straightness of their lines. On other plaques, there seems to have been ample room to create an additional register, but this was not done so (Figure 3i). All these observations and analyses suggest that the number of registers on the plaques was of a higher priority than specific material constraints or regularity in design.

#### 2. Direct correlation between number of plaques and number of registers?

When the number of plaques is examined by the number of registers, by motif, some interesting patterns emerge (Fig. 5). In all four motifs, there is an increase in the number of plaques as the register numbers increase, but then this is followed by a sharp decrease. This may simply reflect that it gets progressively more difficult to draw more registers on a plaque. However, a larger piece of slate could have been selected, and indeed rather high numbers of registers were at times drawn up — to 14. What this could also indicate is a process in which the reckoning of generations assumed less importance over time or that people found other media on which to record their genealogies.

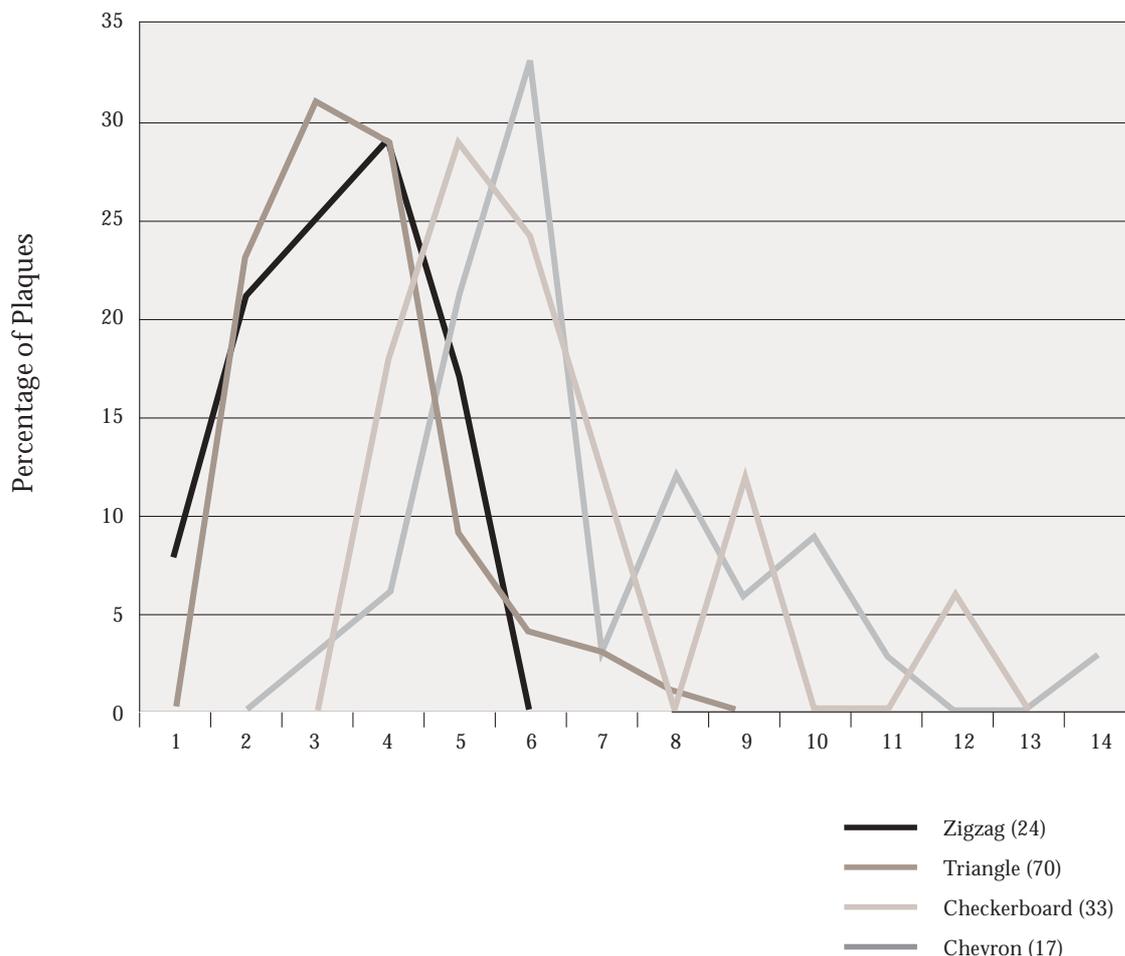


Fig. 5 Percentage of plaques, by number of registers and motif.

### 3. Geographic dispersal?

As the number of registers increases, there appears to be some geographic dispersal of plaques. In Figs. 6a-d are shown the distributions of the lowest number plaque at a site, by motif. For each map, the sites that have plaques with the lowest number of registers (or set of lowest numbers) are highlighted, for ease in reading. In the cases of the chevron, zigzag, and checkerboard, there appears to be some spread outward from a core area in the Evora district. The strongest evidence for dispersal of plaques by lowest number register is, however, in the case of the triangle plaques. For the classic triangle plaques, those with the lowest number of registers — 2 — are only found in eastern Portugal and western Spain; there are none from the Lisbon or Setúbal districts (even when fragments are examined). The lowest number of registers at any given site that appears on the western coast of Portugal are the 3- and 4-register plaques. If taken as evidence for demic diffusion, this suggests the movement of people, possibly the descendants of groups from the eastern half of Portugal, in a westerly direction, following the Sado and Tejo riverways.

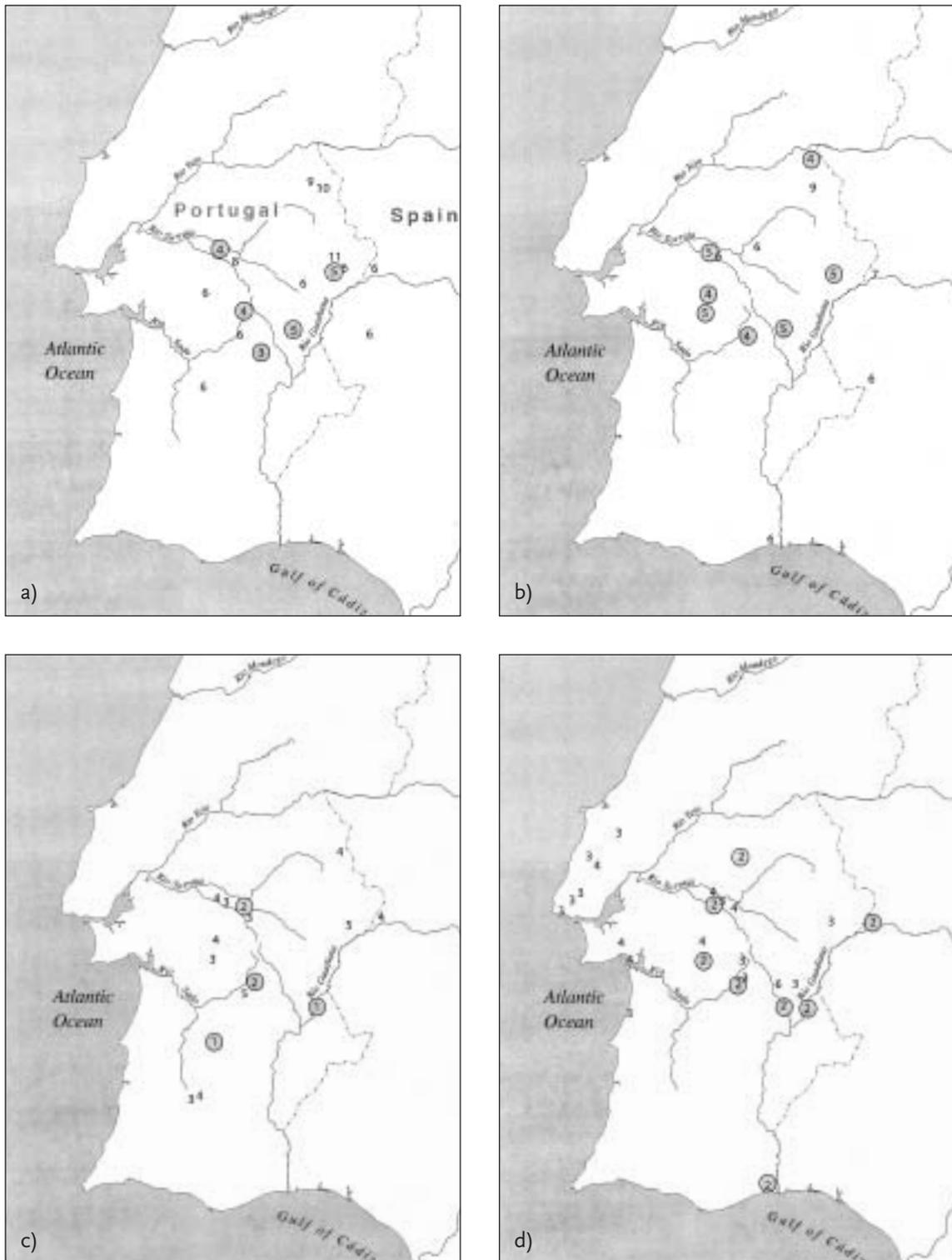


Fig. 6 Plaque distributions, showing plaque with lowest number of registers at site.  
 a. Checkerboard;  
 b. Chevron;  
 c. Zigzag;  
 d. Triangle.

Checkerboard sequences													
Site	Number of registers												
	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
Cebolino 1 (Évora)	1												
Vale de Rorigo 1 (Évora)		1											
Brissos (1 and 6) (Évora)		1	1	1									
Olival da Pega (1 and 2) (Évora)			5	1	1		1	2					
Alto do Poço Novo (Portalegre)			1										
Herdade do Passo (Évora)				3		2							
Carvão (Évora)				1									
Comenda da Igreja (Évora)				1								1	
Torre de Arcas 5 (Portalegre)				1									
Malpica (Badajoz)				1									
Barcarrota (Badajoz)				1		1							
Folha da Amendoeira (Beja)				1									
Caeira 7 (Évora)						1							
Castelo de Vide (Portalegre)							1						
Cabeço (Portalegre)								1					
Sobreira 2 (Portalegre)									1				
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>33</b>

Chevron sequences											
Site	Number of registers										
	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12		
Anta Grande da Comenda da Igreja (Évora)	1	1		1						1	
Herdade do Passo (Évora)	1										
Maxial (Portalegre)	1										
Herdade da Comenda (Évora)		1									
Escoural (Évora)		1									
Brissos 6 (Évora)		1									
Camuge (Portalegre)		1									
Lapeira (Évora)			1								
Ordem 1 (Portalegre)			1								
Jerez de los Caballeros (Badajoz)			1								
Marcella (Faro)			1								
Granja de Cespedes (Badajoz)				1			1				
Lameira (Portalegre)							1				
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>17</b>

Zigzag sequences						
Site	Number of registers					
	1	2	3	4	5	
Folha da Amendoeira (Beja)	1					
Olival da Pega (Évora)	1	2		1	2	
Caeira 7 (Évora)		2				
Herdade do Passo (Évora)		1	1			
Monte Velho (Beja)			1			
Escoural (Évora)			2	1		
Lapeira 1 (Évora)			1			
Capela S. Dionísio (Évora)			1			
Montenegro (Beja)				1		
Comenda da Igreja (Évora)				1		
Brissos (Évora)				1		
Anta da Marquesa (Portalegre)				1		
Anta da Malpica (Badajoz)				1		
Cebolinho 1 (Évora)					1	
Poço Novo (Portalegre)					1	
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>24</b>

Triangle sequences								
Site	Number of registers							
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
Marcella (Faro)	1							
Tholos de Farisoa (Évora)	1							
Escoural (Évora)	2	2	2	1				
Brissos (Évora)	1	1	1					
Olival da Pega (Évora)	7	3	2	1				
Cebolinho 1 (Évora)	1	1	1				1	
Cavaleiros 6 (Portalegre)	1							
Granja de Cespedes (Badajoz)	2	2	2					
Herdade do Passo (Évora)		2		1				
Matalote 1 (Évora)		1						
Vale de Rodrigo 1 (Évora)		1						
Barrocal 1 (Évora)		1						
Camuge (Portalegre)		1						
Pedra Branca (Setúbal)		2		3	1			
Dolmen das Conchadas (Lisboa)		1	1					
Cabeço da Arruda (Lisboa)		1	1			1		
Praia das Maças (Lisboa)		1	1					
Furadouro da Roche Forte (Lisboa)		1	1					
Alapraia 2 (Lisboa)		1						
Caeira 6 (Évora)			1		1			
Oliveira (Évora)			1					
Anta da Velada (Évora)			1					
Palmela (Setúbal)			3					
Praia de S. Torpes (Setúbal)			1					
Cova da Moura (Lisboa)			1					
herdade da Comenda 2 (Évora)					1			
Horta Velha do Reguengo (Portalegre)						1		
<b>Total</b>	16	22	20	6	3	2	1	<b>70</b>

Fig. 7 Plaque sequences, by motif and site.

#### 4. Lineage continuity within tombs?

When plaques in each tomb are sequenced by their number of registers, by motif, intriguing support for the genealogical model can be found (Fig. 7). For the four motifs, there are, indeed, many tombs with continuous sequences or near-continuous sequences, in which there is a skip of only one register. The continuities are most common, however, in the case of plaques with the triangle motif. For these, sequences can be found at Anta Grande do Olival da Pega (Évora), Escoural (Évora), Anta 1 do Cebolinho (Évora), Dolmen das Conchadas (Lisboa) and at a number of other sites in Badajoz and Lisboa. Significantly, Anta Grande do Olival da Pega and Herdade do Passo, have continuous sequences for three of the four motifs. This may represent the fact that the tombs were particularly special burial grounds for chiefly lineages. In addition to tombs, there are tomb groups in which there are sequences, such as Brissos 1 and Brissos 6 (Évora), and at Palmela 3 and 4 (Setúbal). This, too, is consistent with our hypothesis, as one would expect closely related kin to be buried in neighboring tombs.

With regard to sequences in general, all the classic plaques seem to fall into one of two categories: either they occur in continuous (or near continuous sequences) or they occur as isolates (Fig. 8). Very few plaques occur in discontinuous series. And, given that there are many incomplete plaques and fragments that were not counted in this tally, the percentage of plaques in discontinuous sequences could actually be close to 0. In this bimodal distribution, we might be looking at the material expression of post-marital residence rules, in which the members of one

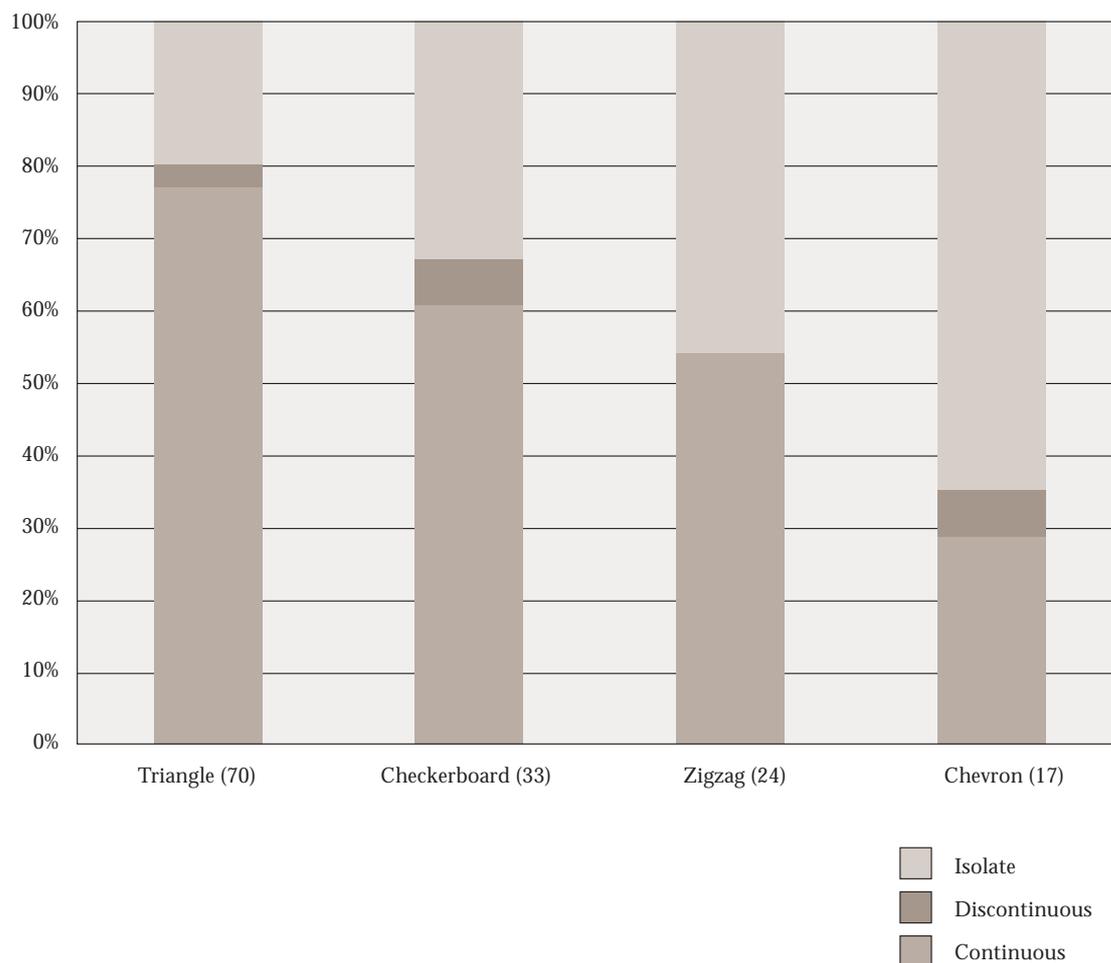


Fig. 8 Percentage of Plaques in Continuous, Near-Continuous Sequences, and Isolates, by Motif.

sex were expected to stay in their natal territory, with members of the opposite sex leaving this territory upon marriage. Only analyses of associated skeletal remains, including DNA work, might confirm this.

### 5. Dating?

Unfortunately, the available data do not allow such a definitive test to be carried out. At the burial site of Pedra Branca (Setúbal), there is a sequence of burials (with plaques) in two different stratigraphic levels: Late Neolithic-Copper Age and Late Copper Age/Beaker. However, the Late Copper Age/Beaker plaques are not of the classic form and are, thus, not useful for our immediate problem. However, the Pedra Branca sequence is significant for establishing a generalized relative dating sequence of the plaques (Ferreira et al., 1975). We can only await the day that plaques and directly datable remains are found in close association in Iberia.

## Conclusions

If the Iberian plaques are indeed heraldic, they would be the oldest examples of objects in the world with clear heraldic properties, predating medieval European heraldry by four millennia (Brooke-Little, 1978, p. 2). This is not to say that the Iberian plaques were models for medieval heraldry. Rather, this suggests that what we have in the Iberian plaques is the fortuitous preservation of heraldic artifacts, which are known ethnographically to have been often made on perishables, such as textiles (Weiner and Schneider, 1989), or inscribed on the body, such as with tattoos (Simmons, 1999).

Heraldic reckoning systems are created to satisfy particular social and political needs, such as to identify individuals in times of conflict or competition or to reinforce social or economic privilege (Davis, 1985, p. 152). The socio-economic landscape of southwestern Iberia in the fourth millennium BC, particularly the Alentejo with its light yet fertile soils and valued stone resources, such as amphibolite (Lillios, 1997), could well have provided the conditions that made it necessary for some groups and individuals to distinguish themselves in order to legitimate access to territory or to resources. By the middle of the third millennium BC, however, those needs apparently disappeared, although the decorative motifs of the plaques persisted in the representational vocabulary of Iberians, probably with new meanings. Indeed, all the motifs on the Iberian plaques are found on later, Bell-Beaker pottery in Iberia (Harrison, 1974, p. 105).

Perhaps the most important issue that remains unanswered and awaits further work on the Iberian plaques is their biographies (Kopytoff, 1986). When were they made – while individuals were still alive or upon their death? Who was meant to see the plaques – the living or the dead?

However, some preliminary interpretation of the function of the plaques can be posed. On a practical level, the slate plaques would have helped the living identify deceased individuals in the collective tombs in which they were placed, and would have been especially useful in those areas where acidic soils destroyed the skeleton, such as in the Alentejo. Perhaps the identification of individuals made a difference in determining the location of subsequent burials or in demonstrating continuity of use. As signifiers, the plaques may have also been viewed to help the dead identify each other and to aid in the reconstitution of their social world in the afterlife.

By distinguishing particular individuals at death, by recording their histories, and memorializing their being, the plaques also created and enhanced social differences. Keeping in mind that a total of 2000 plaques are estimated to be known, and even doubling this number to 4000, within an estimated time range of minimally 400 years, we get 10 plaques produced a year. Clearly, therefore, not every individual received a plaque at death. These social differences are also evidenced in a variety of other ways in the material record of late prehistoric Iberia, such as in the variability of grave good distributions and the concentration of long-distance trade items at some settlements (Gilman, 1987; Chapman, 1997).

The future of Iberian slate plaque studies lies in our taking seriously the need for non-literate people to record and remember their past and ancestry (Marshack, 1991). If the plaques are ever fully 'decoded', archaeologists could justifiably entertain the possibility of reconstructing lineage histories, marriage patterns, and kinship structures of ancient Iberian societies. Indeed, we may be able to learn something about the fine-grained history, however constructed, of a prehistoric people.

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