

# A study of ceramics from the Devesa do Rei site (Vedra, A Coruña, Spain)

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**ABSTRACT** The Devesa do Rei site was discovered and excavated in 2001 by a team from the Archaeology Laboratory of the Padre Sarmiento Institute of Galician Studies, as a result of archaeological tests carried out during construction of the Santiago – Alto de Santo Domingo motorway. We present the results of the study carried out on the ceramics found in this Bronze Age site. A formal and contextual analysis of the ceramics is made,

noting the presence of bell-beaker and undecorated pottery, as well as other types with decoration that differs from the bell-beaker tradition, with incision and impression. It is an important location as it is the first bell-beaker site found in Galicia, and one of the few in the Iberian Peninsula, which has an abundance of decorated non-bell beaker pottery with formal characteristics similar to those found in other Atlantic European regions.

## 1. Introduction

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*Devesa do Rei*<sup>3</sup> is situated in the district of Vedra, in the province of A Coruña. It is situated on a hillside that stretches to the southwest, from the range of hills known as the *Pico Sacro* (533 m), *Penedo Branco* (408 m), *Pena do Corvo* (359 m) and *Serra Caldelas* (228 m) and is laid out in a direction running from NW-SE. The site is on an elevation between two hills, at a height of 240 m (Fig. 1).

During excavation work at least fifty structures were documented, belonging to three groups: *structures excavated in horizon B*, with a filling of different types of earth; *structures excavated in horizon C*, with a mineral filling, and *stone structures*, in horizon B, including a stone circle with a small pit, in the centre of which is a standing stone. A shallow trench was found surrounding this circle, together with post holes and other smaller, highly altered structures<sup>4</sup> (Castro and Tabarés, 2003).

Based on the results from samples analyzed at Uppsala, we now have dates<sup>5</sup> for the Devesa site of 5190±55 BP (Ua-20011) [4220-3804 BC cal. 2σ] and 2990±45 BP (Ua-20012) [1380-1051 BC cal. 2σ] (Fig. 1). These suggest that there was activity on the site for a long period during prehistory.

The present work is based on a series of theoretical and methodological proposals contained within the line of research of *Landscape Archaeology*. Two basic concepts are put to use: *Style* and the *Technological Operative Chain*<sup>6</sup>, which are useful as analytical tools and interpretative instruments, in order to characterise ceramic production, detail patterns of formal regularity, and to identify variations within the defined formal model (Prieto, 1999<sup>5</sup>).

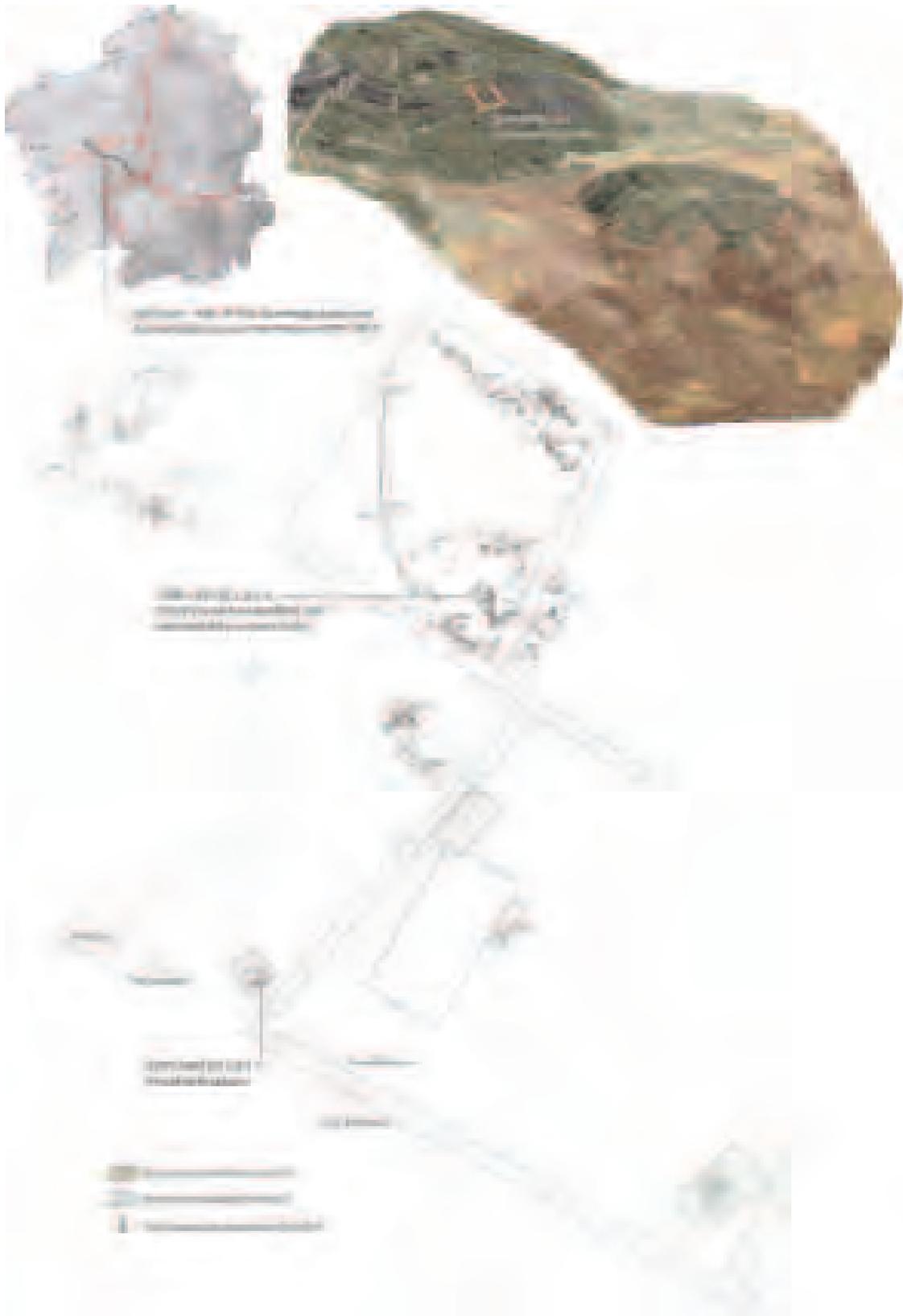


FIG. 1 – Situation of de Devesa do Rei site and excavation plan.

## 2. Analysis

After carrying out an initial study of the material, a total of 2882 pieces have been catalogued (with 95,6% of the material from the excavation site). Of these, 1182 are stone, and 1698 are ceramic fragments, of which only 25% are connected with vessels. The two groups of ceramics we shall deal with are decorated and undecorated pieces (Fig. 2).

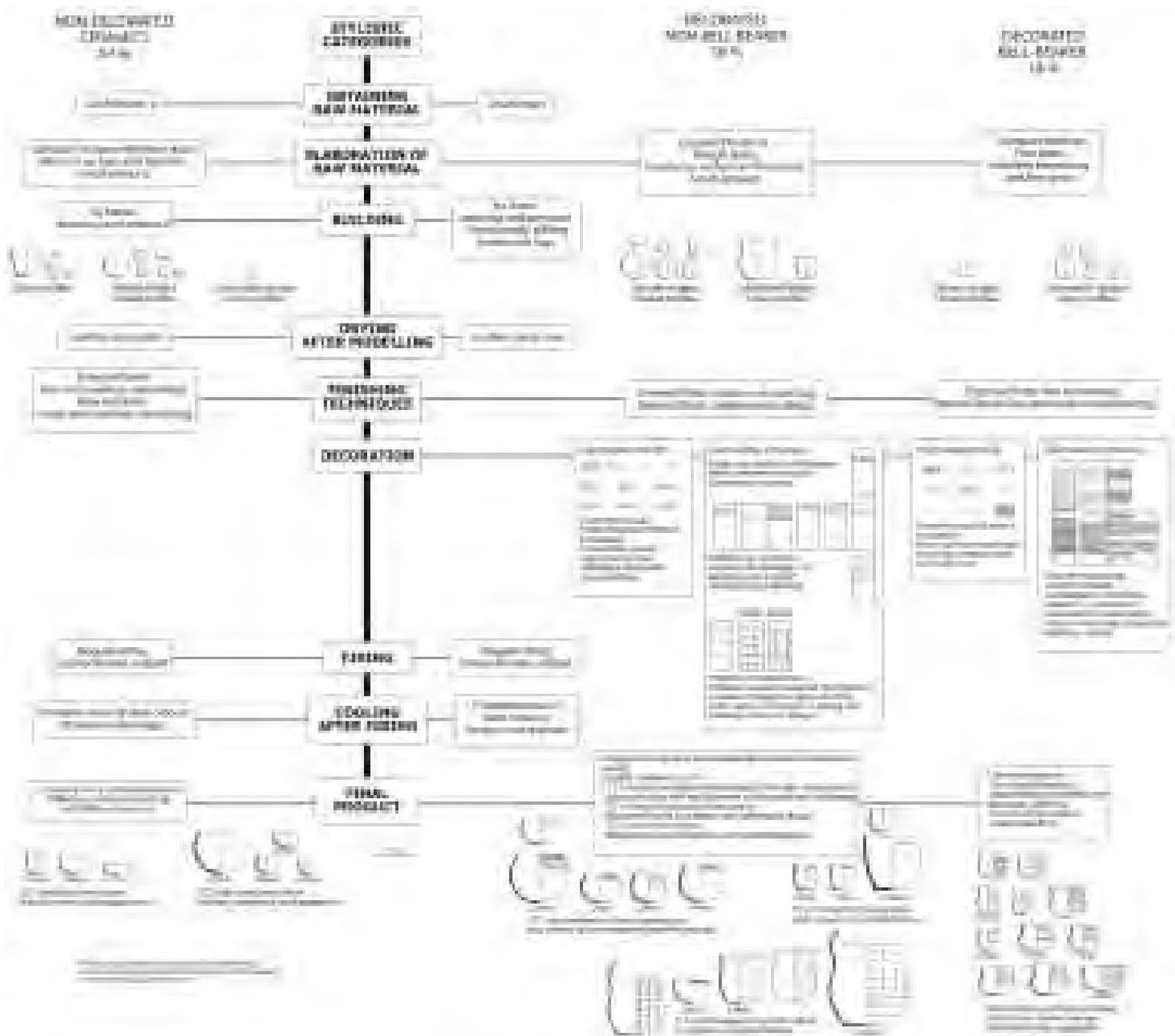


FIG. 2 – Technological Operative Chain.

In the case of decorated ceramics, we found several formal versions<sup>8</sup>, with greater homogeneity between non-bell beaker ceramics than bell-beaker pieces<sup>9</sup>. The differences found are in the morphology and decoration; we may observe three stylistic tendencies in

non-bell-beaker ceramics. The undecorated ceramics have the characteristics of undecorated ceramics that accompany bell-beaker pottery, with two different formal versions<sup>10</sup>.

In summary, we would indicate that there are three main ceramic groups on the site: undecorated pottery, decorated bell-beaker pottery and non-bell-beaker pottery, which correspond to a strategy of formal opposition, allowing us to refer to at least three different *chaînes opératoires* that formed part of the technological knowledge of Bronze Age societies using bell-beaker pottery in Galicia.

On the other hand, non-bell-beaker decorated ceramics are relatively abundant on the site, something which to date is not exceptional in Galician contexts; furthermore, some of these vessels, specifically those decorated with nail marks and circular grooves, are common in bell-beaker contexts from part of Europe, although to date these have not been well contextualised, apart from a few exceptions (Valera, 2000). Their details feature a very different type of decoration to that used in bell-beaker pottery, although broadly speaking they are similar. Vessels of this kind that accompany bell-beaker pottery are known in other parts of Europe, such as the British Isles, where they are referred to as having *fingernailed decoration non-plastic rustication* (Clarke, 1970), France, in the Paris Basin, the Atlantic midwest and Brittany (Salanova, 2000) or in the central interior region of Portugal, where the first example of this kind was found in the Peninsula was found at the Fraga da Pena site, in which these vessels are more numerous amongst the general group of decorated ceramics (Valera, 2000).

### 3. Conclusion: the ceramic and the site

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Taking into account that the aim of this work is only the preliminary presentation of the pottery recovered in a original and innovative site in Galicia, we will start from the idea that pottery analyses can contribute to the archaeological interpretation of a site, but obviously in close connection with the stratigraphical and contextual record that, in any case, will not be deeply considered here as this is not the study object.

So, as a final evaluation, we may progress that there are no well-defined habitational structures at the Devesa site, and that the existing structures may not be considered as funerary, although the structures present reveal that there was frequent activity in prehistory, and intense activity during the bell-beaker period.

Furthermore, the formal differences found in the ceramics may well demonstrate functional diversity at a specific level, in relation to the ceramics themselves, and at a general level, in relation to the site's function. The considerable variety of ceramics found at this site is quite unusual, particularly with reference to undecorated non-bell-beaker ceramics, and the fact that the largest vessels are precisely found within this group.

All of this evidence found at the site and in the material taken from it leads us to believe that this is an area of activity that did not merely function as a habitational settlement.

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## NOTES

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- <sup>3</sup> This site was excavated for Aboal, R y Ayán, X involving a *Programme for the Evaluation and Correction of Archaeological Impact*. This work was carried out by the Laboratory of Archaeology and Cultural Forms of the University of Santiago de Compostela (unit associated with the Padre Sarmiento Institute of Galician Studies, Spanish High Council for Scientific Investigations and Galicia's autonomous government, the Xunta).
- <sup>4</sup> Sites of this type were characterised for Galicia by Méndez (1994).
- <sup>5</sup> C.14 datings for this site were carried out using AMS at the Ångström Laboratory of the Uppsala Universitet in Sweden, calibrated using the CALIB 4.3 programme, developed by M.Stuiver, P.J.Reimer and R.Reimer (<http://calib.org/calib/>), using the calibration curve of Stuiver *et al.*, 1998 and Stuiver, Reimer & Braziunas, 1998.
- <sup>6</sup> The initial term, operational sequence, has been used both as a descriptive tool by the Historical-Cultural trends (Léroi-Gourhan 1965) and as an analytical device, especially by the functionalist tendencies (Binford 1989). Here we have preferred to use it according to more recent proposals, basically developed by the Anthropology of Technology (Lemonnier 1986, 1991a, 1991b, Gosselain 1992), where its potential for interpretation is further explored. Specifically we have followed the redefinition of the concept from the basis of Landscape Archaeology as proposed in Cobas and Prieto 2003.
- <sup>7</sup> The ceramic style from bell-beaker contexts in Galicia has been defined and characterized in Prieto 1999, so, due to the limited space available, we will refer to that publication for further information.
- <sup>8</sup> We have characterized the ceramic style from bell-beaker contexts in Galicia through two concepts: categories and stylistic trends (Prieto 1999, 2000). So that, we believe that *style* is the most abstract level, that allows us to define a pattern of formal regularity comprised by a restricted number of rules and built upon a specific technological knowledge. *Category* is a concept that, while keeping some abstract degree, is formally defined by a series of specific technical choices from the wider technological knowledge, and that is based on internal similarities. We have proposed three categories: bell-beaker decorated pottery, non bell-beaker decorated pottery and undecorated pottery. Finally, the *stylistical trends* are empirical, formal materializations inside each category. However they should not be understood as types or typologies, equivalent variations inside each formal category.
- <sup>9</sup> More specifically, in one of the bell-beaker vessels a manufacturing detail was observed that is rarely seen due to the material being highly fragmented, whereby once the vessel had been made (including its decoration, in the leather state and before firing), it shattered horizontally to the point where the neck joins the belly; the crack was then fixed poorly, with a final appearance as if it were the rim before firing. For this reason the shape of the vessel, a bowl rather than a cup, is quite unusual, with a decorative finish that is too different to consider it as 'typical' bell-beaker pottery.
- <sup>10</sup> Two stylistic tendencies previously defined in Prieto (1999).

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