

BEAKER BARROWS (not) for the dead: El Alto I & III, Las Cuevas/El Morrón and La Perica (Soria, Spain)

Sepulcros campaniformes (no) para muertos: El Alto I y III, Las Cuevas/El Morrón y La Perica (Soria, España)

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Resumen

En este trabajo se trata el reciente descubrimiento de un fenómeno peculiar de gran interés en el Calcolítico campaniforme del Valle de Ambrona (Soria, España), que es la existencia de numerosos túmulos que parecen tumbas pero que no lo son. Algunos contienen incluso ofrendas materiales valiosas (finas cerámicas decoradas, orfebrería de oro) pero no huesos humanos. Esta ausencia no puede atribuirse a factores de preservación diferencial, ya que estos túmulos no se sitúan en suelos ácidos, y de hecho se encuentran fragmentos de fauna en muchos yacimientos de los alrededores. Podríamos interpretarlos, por ello, como testimonios de actividades ceremoniales, que en ocasiones incluirían rituales de comensalidad (en el interior de algunos túmulos se descubrieron recipientes rotos intencionadamente). El túmulo se erigiría para señalar y conmemorar en el paisaje tales acontecimientos (¿cenotafios que evocan la muerte de alguien importante lejos de su tierra?) y lugares (localización de rasgos especiales del entorno en sus geografías mitológicas).

Palabras clave: Calcolítico, Campaniforme, Túmulos, Ritual, Soria, España

Abstract

In this article we will discuss on a peculiar and interesting feature recently discovered in the archaeological record of Copper Age Bell Beakers in the Ambrona Valley (Soria, Spain), that is the existence of barrows which look like tombs but they were not. They even include valuable items (finely decorated pottery, gold jewellery) but no sign of human bones. This absence could not be explained by selective preservation of the materials, since those barrows are not located in acid soils, and faunal remains are usually found in other sites of the same area. We could interpret this special finds as the archaeological testimonies of eventual ceremonial activities, perhaps including commensality rituals (intentionally broken pots are found inside them), being the stone mound the commemoration in the landscape of those important events (a possible cenotaph evoking the death of someone important away from his hometown?) or places (the location of special features of the environment in their mythic geographies).

Keywords: Copper Age, Barrows, Ritual, Spain

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this article we will argue on a peculiar trait recently discovered in the archaeological record of Copper Age Bell Beakers in the Ambrona Valley (Soria, Spain), our case study area. The Ambrona valley is located in the southeast corner of Soria province, at the junction of the Ibérico and Central mountain ranges, 1100 m above sea level, in the interior of Iberia (Figure 1). It is poorly drained with areas of former lagoons and wetlands, only one of which still survives, the La Sima Lagoon. It is also a strategic location where the three main hydrographical basins of Iberia meet (Duero, Ebro and Tajo). This fact could perhaps explain the extraordinary concentration of more than 100 prehistoric archaeological sites. In the last ten years Valladolid University, together with the German Archaeological Institute of Madrid, has developed an ambitious and multidisciplinary research project where much fieldwork has been carried out (both surveys and excavations) at different sites, from the Early Neolithic (5300-5000 cal BC) to the Middle Bronze Age (Rojo et al. 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010). Several Bell Beaker sites, both domestic and funerary, have been excavated. Radiocarbon estimations of Beaker contexts available in the Ambrona Valley and other areas of the interior of Iberia belong to the second half of the 3rd millennium cal BC (2500-2000 cal BC).

The structures of Beaker graves in the interior highlands of Iberia are diverse, from single pits, small round barrows, rock-cut caves, to the reusing of Neolithic burials, especially megalithic tombs

(Bueno et al. 2005; Garrido 2000; Liesau et al. 2008; Rojo et al. 2005). Grave goods accompanying the dead (adult individuals mostly placed crouched in primary position) are frequently standardized combinations of finely decorated pottery of certain recurrent forms (typical Ciempozuelos style ceramic ritual set: Bell Beaker, bowl and carinated bowl, carefully placed inside one another), metal weapons (copper daggers, axes, spearheads such as the Palmela type) and, only exceptionally, gold jewellery.

The peculiar feature of the funerary archaeological record of the Ambrona Valley (Soria) that we would like to point out here is the existence of small barrows where abundant Bell Beaker material had been found, sometimes fine complete decorated vessels or even gold ornaments, but no sign of human bones. Obviously they were not tombs, and therefore it is clear that not every barrow could automatically be identified as a burial place, which has been the norm in the archaeological literature, especially when dealing with survey unexcavated finds. Examples similar to those of Ambrona had been also found in other areas of Iberia, which have been interpreted as ritual special commemorative settings (Blanco and Fabián 2010 and 2011; De Blas 2004), as a result of evocative practices linking together absent places, beings or episodes (Blanco-González 2014). Together they show that the whole question is much more complex. But, before trying to suggest possible hypotheses or suggestions we will explain the Ambrona examples in detail.

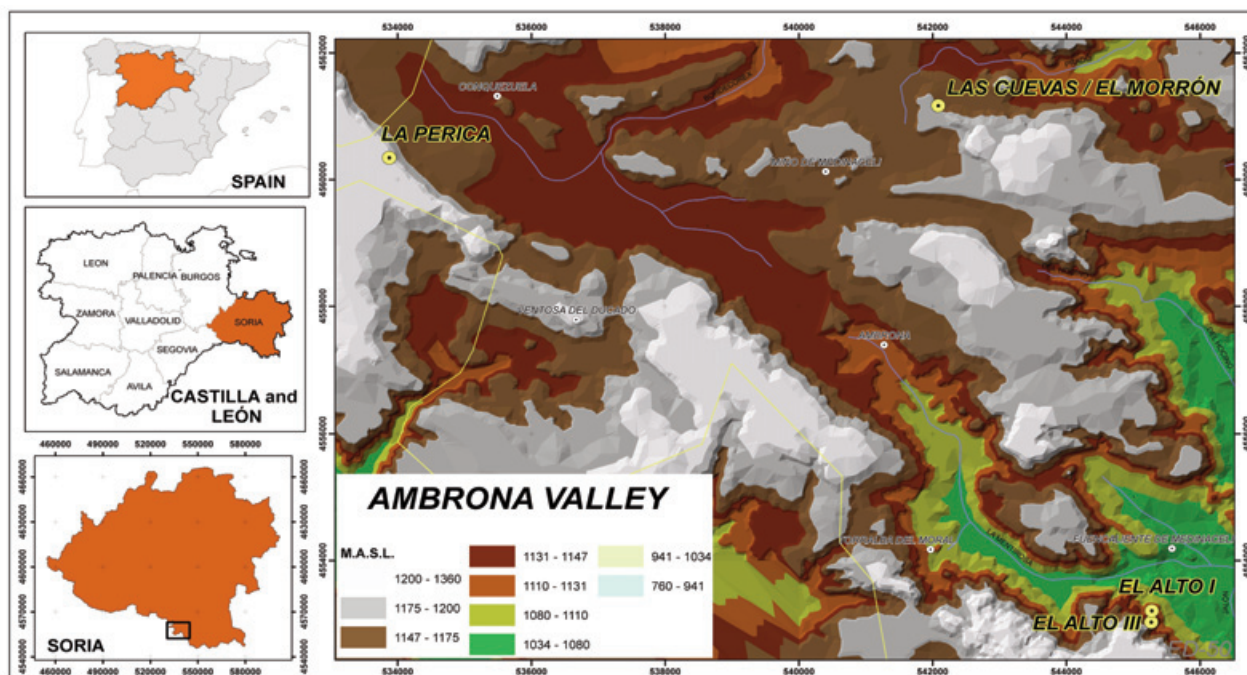


Figure 1. Distribution of the sites mentioned in the Ambrona Valley (Soria, Spain).

2. THE SITES

El Alto I (Fuencaliente de Medinaceli, Soria)

This place was discovered in an archaeological survey across the Ambrona Valley, on top of the Paramo highlands controlling a vast area with important natural routes, as the first part of the Jalón basin and the southern entrance to the Ambrona Valley, and also interesting resources (salt for instance). In the edge of the Paramo a significant concentration of materials was found in the surface, especially a lot of Beaker potsherds. At first we thought it was a domestic structure, the remains of a sort of small hut. But the excavation could not discover any trace of this hut or any other domestic structure. In fact, the place had been completely destroyed by recent ploughing to reforest the area. Unfortunately this activity has destroyed many sites in the Ambrona valley. In fact, the archaeological layer was extremely thin (15-20 cm.), and the natural bedrock was very close to the surface. Half of two Bell Beaker vessels (a carinated bowl and a simple bowl) were found together, directly deposited on that limestone bedrock (Figure 2). Many other potsherds (Beaker decorated and plain ones) and flint remains were also discovered in the excavation, but no sign of human bones, although we carefully sieved all the sediment.

What was this site then?

The severe destruction suffered by this place made it really difficult to draw any reasonable hypothesis about that question and that was our first answer.

El Alto III (Fuencaliente de Medinaceli, Soria)

Around 200 m. from the El Alto I, when surveying the surroundings, we also discovered a Beaker potsherd in a very small mound, which had been also severely damaged by the reforestation activities. This small barrow was not discovered in the previous survey of the area, when the El Alto I was located. A heavy furrow of the ploughing, right in the middle of the barrow, showed the degree of destruction suffered by the site.

When we were cleaning this furrow we soon discovered a complete Beaker bowl and a complete Beaker carinated bowl broken in around 200 small fragments that we could finally restore. Both were very finely made and ornamented pots, especially the carinated bowl, a magnificent piece of the classic Ciempozuelos Style (Figure 3). Given the quality of the materials at first we thought that we were digging a Beaker burial mound, but again when we finished the excavation no sign of human bones appeared, not even small pieces, although we carefully sieved all the sediment.

When the preserved parts of the barrow were dug, many other Beaker potsherds appeared. They curiously belonged to reduced sets of incomplete vessels (eight pots represented in 1/2 or 1/3 of their complete size and profile) (Figure 3). Each of them was probably intentionally broken in pieces, perhaps after being used in the ceremony and then part of those recipients were carefully collected and later deposited in a certain area

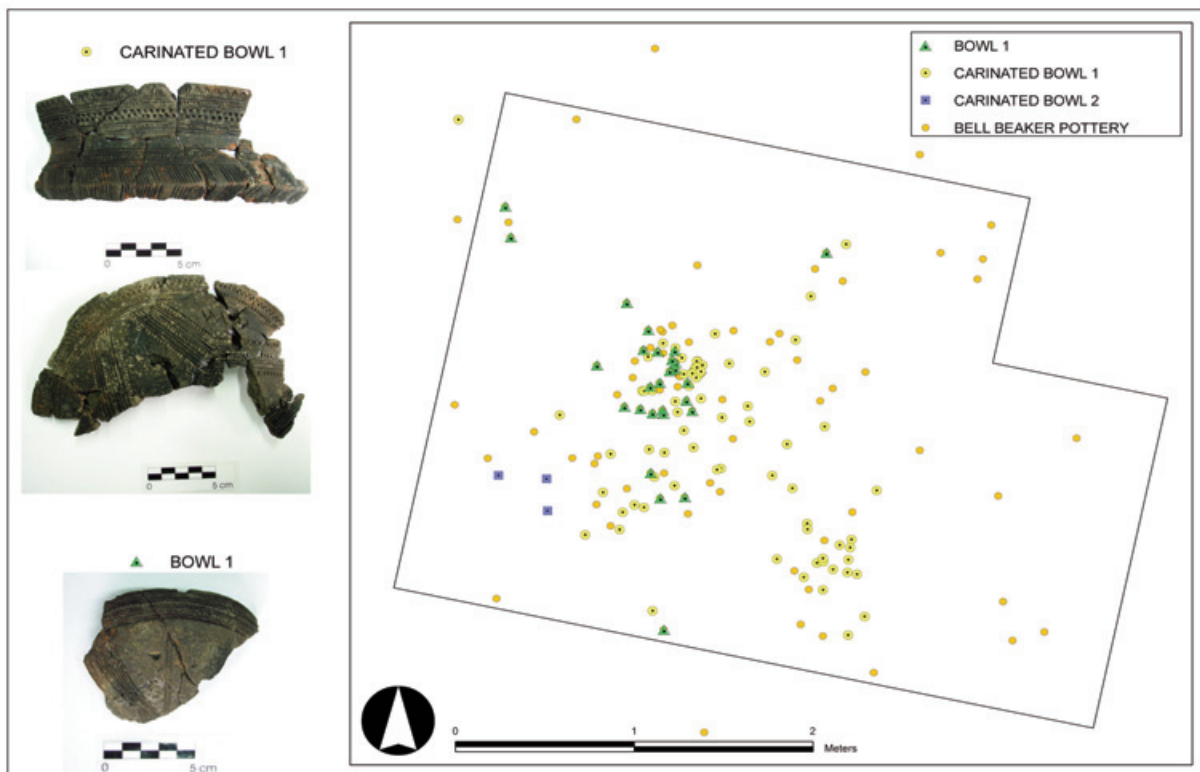


Figure 2. Bell Beaker materials at El Alto I (Fuencaliente de Medinaceli, Soria) site.

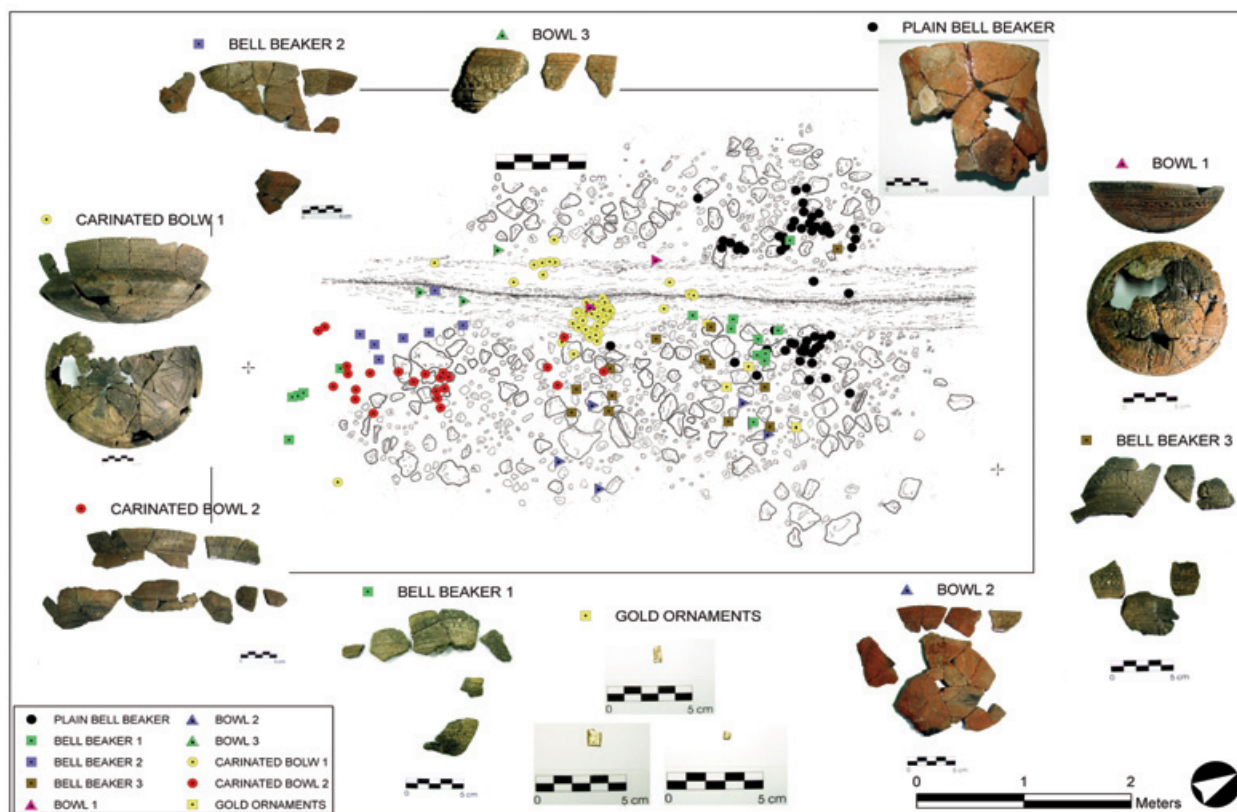


Figure 3. Bell Beaker materials at El Alto III (Fuencaliente de Medinaceli, Soria) Barrow.

of the barrow, during its construction, since those potsherds were found deep inside the mass of the untouched part of the stone mound.

Near the bottom and right on the bedrock three small gold ornaments were also discovered. This sort of materials is not frequently found in Iberian Beaker sites, and always comes from high status graves.

To sum up, this small barrow was built and those significant offerings were deposited not as the grave goods of a burial, as it could be expected, but for other reasons. Two complete Beaker vessels (a bowl and a carinated bowl) and three gold adornments were carefully deposited on the natural bedrock, and then during the erection of the small stone mound covering them, other Beaker pots, but fragmented at that moment in the context of an eventual ceremony presumably held there, were included inside the mass of the mound.

At the same time, this sheds new light on the interpretation of El Alto I, which could originally have been a similar barrow, but completely destroyed by modern ploughing. Nevertheless with the deterioration that this site suffered it is not possible to be sure. What is clear is that both are located in the same outstanding position in the landscape, with a spectacular visibility range, controlling many important natural resources (salt mines, agricultural lands, etc.) and roads. They lack any sign of human bones, and this cannot be explained by preservation conditions, because the area

is not acid and faunal remains have been largely discovered in neighbouring sites and others of the region. Also both mounds have yielded interesting and high quality Beaker materials.

If they were not tombs, what were then?

Are they the only examples in the Ambrona Valley of this atypical pattern?

Las Cuevas/El Morrón (Miño de Medinaceli, Soria)

This site shows a dense cluster of barrows (more than 50) of all sizes, but mainly small ones. We have excavated six of them (Figure 4). The bigger one was a burial mound from the Late Neolithic – Early Copper Age, with just a few human inhumations, the last one deposited in primary position, being the rest manipulated, and scarce grave goods (just a polished axe and a bone awl). Barrow number 2 had just scattered human bones in secondary position, but the other ones lack any sign of human remains. It is quite clear, therefore, that they were not tombs.

Number 3 is perhaps the most interesting one, since it has an important concentration of archaeological materials below the stone mound (around 500 potsherds and 700 pieces of lithic industry), directly deposited on the limestone bedrock (Figure 5). They were just small pieces of pottery (Beaker decorated but mostly plain simple ones), and flint industry (blades,

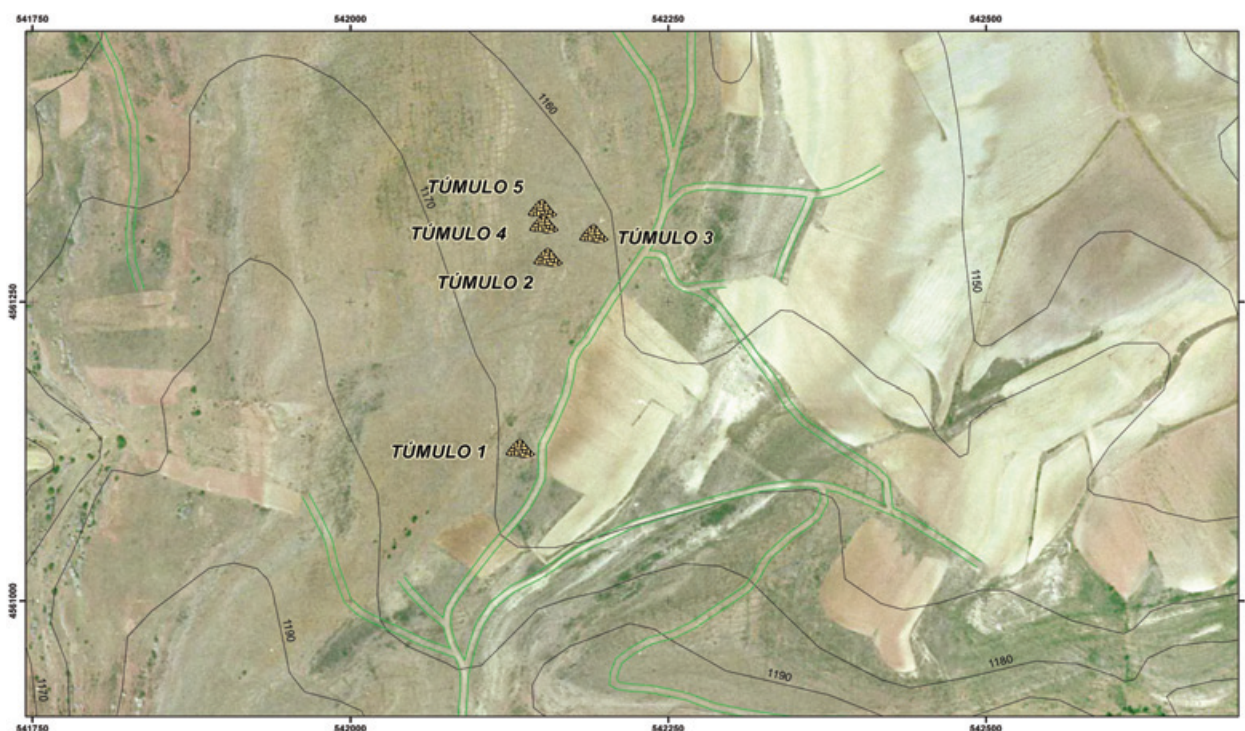


Figure 4. Distribution of the excavated mounds in the Las Cuevas/El Morrón site (Miño de Medinaceli, Soria).

arrowheads), which were deposited there before the mound was erected. Right in the centre of the barrow a kind of cist was found, delimiting with blocks a rectangular space, but again no sign of human bones or any other offering was found inside. However, the existence of that sort of cist perhaps suggests that it could have been a sort of empty grave or cenotaph. Below the mound interesting Early Neolithic material was also found, showing that the area was inhabited at that time too (Figure 5: 5-7).

Barrows 4 and 5 yielded significantly less archaeological materials (53 potsherds and 49 pieces of lithic industry the number 4, and just 4 potsherds and 11 pieces of lithic industry the number 5), which were also found below the mound, but again no sign of human bones was documented. Number 4 had several big limestone blocks deposited below the stone mound, but once they were removed, nothing was found except more archaeological materials (small pieces of pottery and flint) and finally the limestone bedrock.

Barrow number 5 had a small stone mound. When it was removed, a kind of stone stele was found, but nothing appeared in the surrounding area. So we came to the conclusion that it was, in fact, a natural feature of the landscape (a limestone outcrop), perhaps similar to that stele, later monumentalized with that small barrow. As we have pointed out few archaeological materials were found at all (Figure 6).

Finally on top of the Paramo highlands, in the site of **La Perica (Miño de Medinaceli, Soria)**, where a

group of small barrows was visible, one of them was excavated. The place has a spectacular sight of the Ambrona Valley, controlling a vast area (Figure 7). Once again the small mound was covering a space where just tiny pieces of pottery (Beaker decorated and plain ware also) and flint were deposited. No trace of human bones was found.

3. WHAT WERE BARROWS FOR?

We have several examples of Copper Age small round barrows that look like burial mounds, but in fact they are not. This clearly shows that we cannot automatically conclude that barrows are tombs until we have not excavated them.

Barrows are, in fact, monuments, usually built in very special places, which were specifically chosen because of their position in the landscape or for other circumstances, such as the celebration of special events in those locations. A mound marks a place of special significance in the landscape for the people that built them for a number of reasons:

- Because a previous tomb existed there that was finally closed and monumentalized by building a mound covering those burial remains, as it has been the case in several Neolithic collective burials in the Ambrona Valley (Rojo *et al.* 2005).

- Because something important happened there: ceremonies, rituals, etc., which had to be commemorated. The mound would have been a way to mark that place in the landscape, and to evoke those ceremonies every time someone crossed that region.

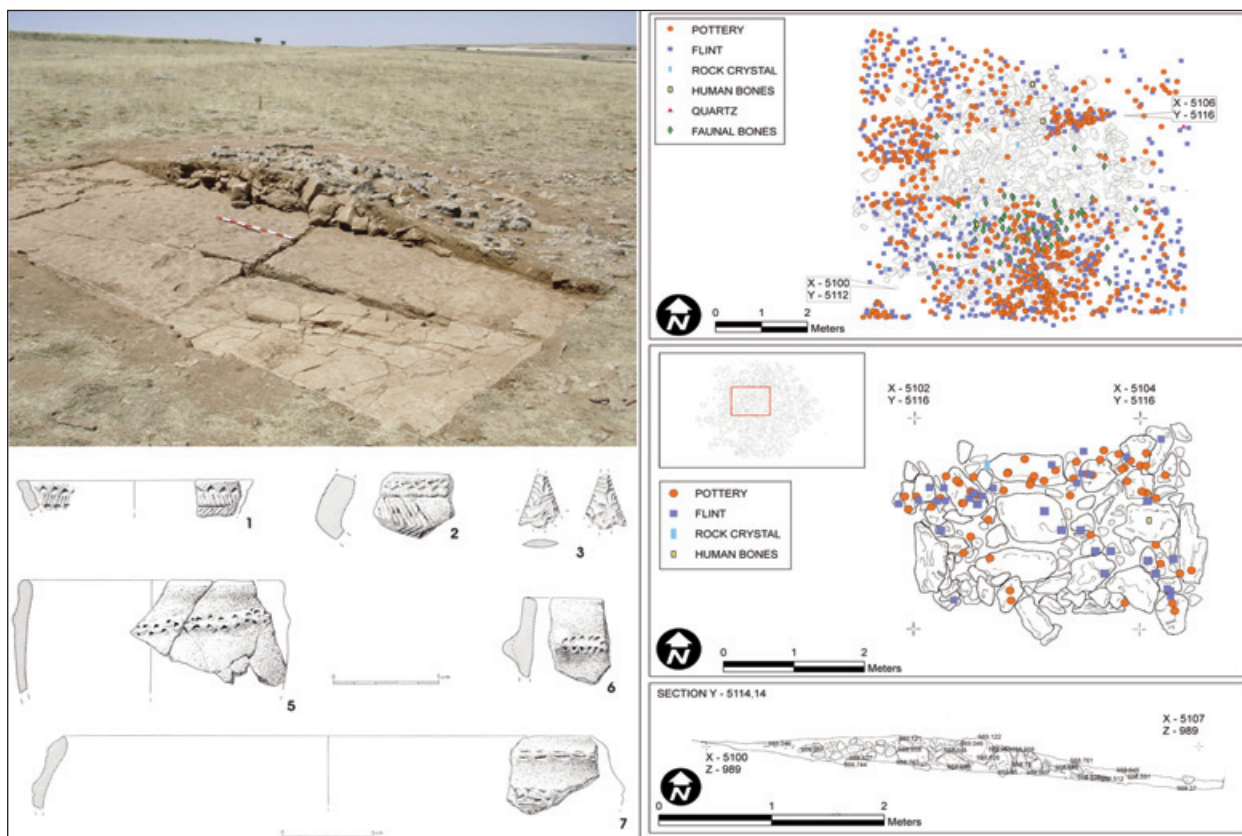


Figure 5. Barrow 3 of Las Cuevas/El Morrón (Miño de Medinaceli, Soria) plan, distribution of materials and selected ones: 1-3. Copper Age (1-2 Bell Beakers), 4-6. Early Neolithic).

- Because that place was a significant part of their mythological interpretation of the landscape, as it has been documented in many societies from the ethnographic record, and has been proposed in the recent interpretation of many megalithic monuments and their symbolical relationship with the topographical and geological features of the surrounding environment (Bender *et al.* 2007; Criado and Villoch 2000; Murrieta *et al.* 2011; Tilley 2004a and b).

This perhaps could have been the case of the La Perica barrow or of the Las Cuevas/El Morrón numbers 4 and 5, especially the last one (Figure 6), where the stone mound just seemed to cover a natural limestone outcrop (a natural stele). But given that at least two of the barrows in Las Cuevas were graves (number 1 and 2), perhaps the other ones lacking human bones could be understood as part of the whole pattern of ritual organization of the site, although they were not tombs at all.

However, even those barrows with human remains did not contain complete bodies, but just scattered pieces of bones disposed in secondary position. Even the last barrow that we have just excavated (number 6) in this site, only yielded two small fragments of human bones but not a single piece of pottery, flint or any other archaeological material. Perhaps all these evidences seem to reflect the circulation of human bones

(Thomas 2000) between different ritual areas of the site, moving perhaps from one place to the other until part of them were finally buried in some of the barrows (for example number 2 or 6).

By contrast, the El Alto I and III barrows both show the deposition of fine decorated pottery (complete vessels or intentionally broken ones) and even desirable and rare objects like gold ornaments (Figures 2 and 3). It seems as if significant rituals had taken place there, on top of the Paramo highlands, a unique emplacement controlling the surrounding landscape, ceremonies that were evoked by marking that place with those barrows. Given that many outstanding Beaker decorated pots have been documented, perhaps we could imagine that ritual special drinks were consumed in those recipients, such as wheat beer or other alcoholic beverages, as it has been documented by several chemical analysis of contents in other sites of the valley and other parts of Iberia (Rojo *et al.* 2006 and 2008). And for that reason the vessels used were finally broken and incorporated to the mass of the mound. The ritual dimension of Beaker pottery and the use of the different forms in ceremonies where special drinks and meals were consumed in a social context of emulation and competition have been extensively studied in the last years (Garrido 2000 and 2006; Garrido *et al.* 2011;



Figure 6. Barrow 5 of Las Cuevas/El Morrón (Miño de Medinaceli, Soria).

Rojo *et al.* 2006). As it has been pointed out, the production of prestigious alcoholic beverages is one possible way to acquire power and wealth. The investment of surplus in the form of beer consumed by certain members of the community in feasts might create obligations, serving as an important instrument for the acquisition of power. Leaders could compete with each other to organize more important feasts, in order to attract external supporters and exchange relationships (Adams 2004, 61; Hayden 1996; Karp 1980). Ethnographic records are rich in examples of the value of beer in “primitive” societies. In many African groups, beer was a valued luxury food, and an indicator of status and wealth that also required a significant investment in terms of grain and labour (Arthur 2003, 516-517).

Beaker commensality rituals took place both in domestic contexts and funerals. Burial ceremonies are the ideal scenario to display social strategies to negotiate or compete for power in groups where stable and institutionalized structures are absent. Families or individuals aspiring to leadership could display all their available resources to the whole community attending the funeral in an effort to defend their interests. Commensality rituals are one of those powerful ideological and political resources which can be manipulated at burial ceremonies, where emotions run high and are particularly malleable (Dietler 2001; Hayden 2009, 39).

We do not know what were those groups celebrating in the places where those barrows were erected, but it seems it was something important for them, if we consider the sort of valuable material items deposited inside- an authentic destruction of social wealth (Bradley, 1982; Tilley 1984, 141). In fact, many of these very special materials, as gold jewellery for instance, are only found as grave goods in certain high status Beaker burials contexts, such as the outstanding single grave of Fuente Olmedo in Valladolid (Martín and Delibes 1989), or the recently published of Camino de las Yeseras in San Fernando de Henares (Madrid), where a complex assemblage of several golden ornaments were

found around the head of a single inhumation accompanied also by very special Beaker pots, decorated with exceptional motifs such as figures of schematic cervids (Liesau *et al.* 2008).

Could those celebrations commemorate the death of a significant person?

Could the Las Cuevas barrow number 3 (Figures 4 and 5) be, in fact, a cenotaph?

Obviously we are not sure about the exact answers and many other explanations could be proposed as an alternative, but it is clear that the archaeological record is much more complex and diverse than we use to assume in our often simplistic western modern interpretations of such a distant and different world as it was 4500 years ago.



Figure 7. Barrow 1 of La Perica (Miño de Medinaceli, Soria), and view of the Ambrona Valley from the site.

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