

Report of SAS lecture 11 January 2022 on Zoom

Dressing the (Female) Elite in Copper Age Iberia: The Montelirio Beaded Garments (Valencina de la Concepción, Seville) by Dr Marta Diaz-Guardamino



Artist's impression of the large chamber of the Montelirio tholos soon after interment. Note red painted walls and patches on the floor, possibly cinnabar.

The Montelirio tholos is a megalithic dolmen tomb within the site of Valencina in southern Spain. Excavations in 2007 discovered a complex burial arrangement and the remains of textiles decorated with perforated beads. Marta and colleagues published a report on these textiles in 2016. The manufacture of elaborate garments with beads probably required organized craftsmanship and their use in mortuary practices developed in the Montelirio tholos. Marta had worked at the University of Southampton for several years before moving to Cardiff, and she is now based at Durham University. She has been involved with a large team of researchers from all over the world on the site, which was discovered almost by accident just outside the city of Seville in southern Spain. Funds have been provided by several Spanish institutions together with the University of Bristol and others. The discovery of human remains was made in an area being prepared for construction, and an emergency excavation was undertaken which revealed the archaeological importance and full extent of the site, with many exotic artefacts and hundreds and thousands of beads - an exceptional find. After pressure from various sources, the site has now been preserved.

The site of Valencina de la Concepción is located on high ground overlooking the city of Seville, now 50 miles inland. During the Copper Age (3500 to 1700 BC), this area would have been a marine gulf with access to the sea, but rising sea levels and some reclamation of the land has taken place over the centuries. The fact that this was a coastal site at that time is

important in understanding the archaeology and the role of the site, which covers some 450 hectares, and has been established at the largest and most important Copper Age site in South Western Europe. The excavation uncovered pits of varying dimensions and depths, some re-used for collective burials while others contained single burials; also both stone built tholos and mud built tholos and artificial caves, and a few non-funerary sites. The building of so many tombs and erection of megalithic monuments would have required a lot of labour. This activity has been dated to between 3200 and 2300 BC, representing a long-lasting tradition of collective burials and successive use of monuments. The evidence of display and hierarchy suggests an era of competitive social relations among an elite group, which eventually declined. No clear evidence of permanent settlement, large scale residence or public buildings has been found in the area, although traces of 'negative' structures were found, i.e. pits, some shallow possibly associated with small temporary huts; and ditches were found across the site which are thought to have separated certain areas. Evidence of copper smelting in this area dates from much later than the burials (2750 to 2500 BC); and there is little to suggest that these elite groups were involved in using copper.

The Montelios Tholos

Two tholos were found, the larger massive: 75m in diameter and 147.50m square with a corbelled mud roof; while the smaller was stone vaulted. Both are lined with local slate and were originally painted red. The larger of the two tholos has two chambers (one large and one small) with a very narrow entrance corridor 50m long which was probably originally uncovered, although later a low roof was added which restricted access. The tholos was built into a natural mound and postholes were found inside it, possibly for posts used to build the roof. The larger tomb was dated to the 29th-28th centuries BC and contained a minimum number of 26 individuals (MNI): 17 females, three possible males and six undetermined. Most of the skeletons (22) were articulated and appeared to be 'primary', elite female individuals, some of them clothed in dresses covered with beads. There is evidence of the use of cinnabar on seven individuals – a pigment used at that time for body painting, although this is toxic and could have caused their deaths. The deceased were aged between 18 and 25/35 years old, there were no older adults or children among them. Analysis of the remains has found they had a mainly terrestrial diet, and these Copper Age people show similar characteristics to the earlier local Neolithic population, perhaps signifying there was little migration in this era. However later work on the burials has indicated that some of the individuals were not from the immediate area, suggesting short term mobility perhaps linked with the prestige of the site.

The corridor to the larger tholos contained artefacts such as large vases or urns together with offerings and altars, many made from slate and highly decorated with red colour. It may have been necessary to crouch in the narrow passage: access was difficult and later it appears to have been closed. Besides the many thousands of beads, other exotic and local artefacts were uncovered, for instance 163 amber artefacts including large beads; 10 large ceramic plates, probably for food offerings; 60 arrow heads; 23 bone artefacts and 100 ivory artefacts. The ivory items included elaborate combs decorated with figures of pigs, as well as separate pig figures and acorns. Many non-local flint items were found and also beads and artefacts made from ostrich egg shell, amber, cinnabar, gold, rock crystal, arrow heads, blades and a flint dagger. Nothing made from copper was found (which may not have been

introduced to the area at this time) or variscite, which was then highly prized. The large chamber was excavated under pressure of time as construction was due to start, and the archaeologists did a brilliant job in the circumstances. The bones appeared to be largely undisturbed, although parts of some skeletons were missing; and the individuals all date to a similar time, over a period of approximately 30-40 years. Pieces of cinnabar (a poison similar to mercury) were found among the bodies.

Marta showed us a 3D model of one skeleton from the large chamber which illustrated the distribution of the thousands of very small beads made from shell, together with larger amber beads probably from Sicily. Many sets of beads were still in line which gave a hint of the type of garments they came from. Some of the women were dressed in short skirts while two individuals had full dresses, each containing around 250,000 beads and weighing between 13 – 15kg. A sample of 1741 beads from each of these garments were studied: it was determined that they were manufactured around the date of the burials and that 99% of the beads were made from cockle and scallop shells, probably sourced locally. Using experimental archaeology, it has been estimated that drilling and grinding of the shell beads may have taken some 50,000 hours. The fabric of the garments would probably have been linen, embroidered and then decorated with the beads, which seem to have been threaded in lines. Beads could possibly be used as a medium of exchange, especially those of amber as it's a more valuable material, and were also used as a means to indicate ethnic identity. It is thought that the shell beads were produced by 'unattached' specialists as the style was standardised and comparable to those found on other Copper Age sites. Beaded garments could enhance a person's appearance and identity and would perhaps have been worn by certain members of the elite, for instance priestesses.

This talk was held on Zoom and attracted an audience of over 30, who asked a number of questions concerning the site. The use of beads was a particular focus, and some of Marta's answers suggested directions for future work. Marta has shared another paper from her colleagues, concerning a small group of burials slightly older than the Monteliero tholos, which offers ideas about social organisation at the time and provides a context for these spectacular finds. (*See reference below*)

Many thanks to Marta for sharing her work with us, and we hope to hear more in future about this fascinating site.

Questions

- Q: The females in the main chamber were not laid out very ceremonially, quite haphazard. Why was this?
- M: This could be due to toxicity of the bodies, or they may have been sacrificed. No evidence of coffins or shrouds etc.
- Q: Is there any work to establish how the beads were woven into the garments or could they have been laid on later?

M: Not at present as they were focusing on the production of the beads, but will probably be done at a later date.

Q: Could the beads have been used prior to burial as currency?

M: Some beads were more worn, so may have been used as currency and could therefore be older, but they seem to be mostly around the age of the burials. It is also possible that the garments could have been worn before death.

Q: Please give more information on the dagger found.

M: It became famous on the internet and was found in a smaller chamber as part of a burial of one person known by archaeologists as the “ivory merchant”, a young adult male buried with the tusk of an elephant over his head. The dagger is very finely worked and has an ivory handle and rock crystal blade. This item is possibly from Egypt.

Q: Shells are brittle, how were the holes made?

M: They were probably drilled using flint tools.

Q: Was there anything going on at that time to put the community under stress which may have resulted in the death of these people?

M: There was some climatic breakdown but this was probably after this time. The Western Mediterranean area collapsed due to this. There is no evidence of anything which could have caused such an action and other contemporary burials show no signs of stress. If more settlements could be found in the area, more evidence may help us to establish other causes.

Q: Were any bodies found in other areas with cinnabar on them?

M: Some burials showed signs of body painting but I don't know if it was cinnabar, as other pigments were also used – oxides such as used for rock art. Red had important connotations and is found across sites during the Copper Age, hence the painting of the tholos walls.

Q: But how did this high-status activity come to an end after 900 years?

A: The hypothesis of climate breakdown has been suggested, leading to a collapse of social organization on Europe during the third millennium BC; but there are no specific signs of stress among any of the individuals found in the Montelios Tholos

Thanks very much to Mandy Kesby for her detailed notes on this lecture.

Sarah Hanna

Downloadable reference:

[Garcias Sanjuan et al 2019: Burial practices and social hierarchisation in Copper Age Iberia](#)