THE EARLY MEDIEVAL NECROPOLIS OF MÓS
(Torre de Moncorvo, Bragança, Portugal)

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I. Introduction

1.1. Geographic localization

The village of Mós is located in the region of Trás-os-Montes and in the municipality of Torre de Moncorvo (Bragança). Today it's a small village but during the period of the Christian Reconquest, this place would have played a preponderant role in the defence of the river Douro line.

Fig 1 – Geographic localization of Mós.

1.2. Historic context of Mós

Mós foundation occurred between the end of the 9th century and the beginning of the 10th following the campaigns promoted by king Alfonso III of Asturias, leading the border line to definitely to Douro river. Mós was integrated into the Reconquest process and was part of a line of castles and small walled sites which, benefiting from well-positioned strategic positions, to defend the Douro river border. If at first Mós played an important role in defending the Douro line against Muslim threat coming from the south, in a second moment, it was one of the first defences of the constant conflicts with Leon and Castile (Barroca, 1990).

Fig 2 and 3: Illuminations details of the Codex “Cartigas de Santa Maria”, carried out by Alfonso X, king of Castile between 1252 and 1254.

II. The Necropolis of Mós

2.1. The finding

In 2007, following the construction of a soil support wall next to the church of Santa Maria de Mós several tombs were discovered (9th-13th centuries). During the archaeological works taken by Arqueohoje, lida 39 graves in the rocky substrate and a burial in a simple pit grave were identified. Only 23 graves were excavated.

The necropolis of Mós is located outside the medieval village wall. The church of Santa Maria de Mós erected in the 16th century was constructed over part of the necropolis and possibly above an ancient space of cult.

Fig 4 and 5 – Graves in a cross-cutting did during the construction works.

2.2. Funerary Anthropology

The majority of the graves revealed an anthropomorphic configuration (n=18; 78%). Other forms include non-anthropomorphic oval shape (n=4; 18%) and one grave was impossible to classify because it was damaged (4%). Three graves present inside some shale slabs attached to the walls.

Fig 6 – Grave 4, oval shape and with shale slabs inside.

Fig 7 – Frequency of graves types in Mós.

All graves were covered with shale slabs. Seven presents a stele made of a shale slab placed in the vertical. Stelae were signalling the grave and none of them had inscription.

Fig 8 – Grave 10 with an anthropomorphic configuration.

The sample includes 18 skeletons in primary position, 1 reduction and 4 ossuaries. Some primary burials (n= x) had 2 shale slabs flanking the skull and one supporting the head (like a pillow). They were all deposited in supine position. Almost no funerary spoil were found. Male skeleton 8 stands out by a button and an iron spearhead recovered over his right iliac bone. The spearhead could be related to the individual’s cause of death, but bones poor state of preservation didn’t allow any further conclusion.

Fig 9 – Grave covered. No soil inside.

Fig 10 – Shale slabs covering the grave.

Fig 11 – Shale slabs covering the grave.

Fig 12 – Iron spearhead over the right iliac of male skeleton 8.

III. Conclusion

Mós was considered a center of power in the medieval time. Its importance is also revealed in the place of death. Typologically the necropolis of Mós presents grouped and aligned graves excavated in the rocky substrate, with a common west-east orientation. These graves can be associated with an earlier church, that was referred in the inquiries of 1258. If so, this relationship could express a control of the burial rituals by the ecclesiastics (Martin Vigo, 2012: 173). The absence of spoil associated with the burials is well documented in these medieval necropoles where the Christian ritual excludes offerings and the individual were shrouded (Barroca, 1987). The presence of this necropolis reflects the strong demographic development achieved in this important phase of the Christian Reconquest.

Bibliography:


** Martin Vigo, M. 2012. Ritual, social memory and landscape in Early Middle Ages. concepto de no mal repliegues entre el mundo de los vivos y el mundo de los muertos. Apuntes, 115: 117-127.


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