

# Introduction

*Ralph Araque Gonzalez, Sebastián Celestino Pérez and Raquel Vilaça*

**T**HE contributions in this book are the results of research and scientific cooperation conducted within the project “*The Iberian Stelae of the Final Bronze Age: iconography, technology and the transfer of knowledge between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean,*” which was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG, project No. 446739573). The main objective of this international research project, initiated in 2021, was the study of the complex triangular relationship between culture, technology, and communication that is represented by the western Iberian stelae of the Final Bronze Age (henceforward FBA, c. 1200-800 BC) and the Early Iron Age (EIA, c. 800-550 BC). These monuments have been extensively studied with regard to their iconography, typology, geographical distribution, as well as to their socio-cultural interpretations and integration into the ancient landscape (for example, see Celestino 2001; Díaz-Guardamino 2010; Galán Domingo 1993; Harrison 2004; Ruíz-Gálvez and Galán Domingo 1991; Vilaça 2011; see Celestino in this volume for a more complete bibliography).

The innovative approach of this project, which is presented in this volume, encompassed field work as well as the scientific testing of the prevalent hypotheses on tools used for stelae making, complemented by experimental archaeology. The research team included archaeologists, archaeometallurgists, geoscientists, IT specialists, a stonemason and two blacksmiths. For the first time, this research on the western Iberian stelae combined the perspectives of practical craftsmanship with comprehensive geo-scientific and metallurgical analyses,

integrated into micro- as well as macro-scale regional studies. The fruitful cooperation of many experts in the field significantly enhanced the scope of this project and in the outcome, this book contains important contributions to contextualize the ongoing research on stelae (cf. Celestino and Paniego 2021; Díaz-Guardamino 2023).

This abovementioned project culminated in the organisation of an International Workshop Conference, held in Freiburg (Germany) in October 2023. There, in addition to the progress achieved by this research, new works were presented that served to complement some aspects that could not be dealt with in the project and which have also served to enrich this monograph. Furthermore, we have been able to incorporate additional new research that is currently being carried out on the stelae into this volume.

The different chapters of this monograph present and discuss results from various fields of research, encompassing archaeology, archaeometry, experimental replications, visual culture and landscape studies, and petrological as well as geochemical analyses. Moreover, particular Iberian landscapes with (and without) stelae will be characterized and contextualized for a broader understanding of the monuments in their social and geographical settings.

The period between the FBA and the EIA was one of dynamic transitions, far-reaching technology transfer, the emergence of extensive networks between the Mediterranean and Atlantic shores, as well as between the Iberian Peninsula and the world beyond the Pyrenees, bringing about social change and the transformation of some small communities into centralized political entities. This era was full of innovations, contradictions, complex communica-

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**Ralph Araque Gonzalez:** IAW, University of Freiburg. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5541-0048>. Contact: [ralph.araque.gonzalez@iaw.uni-freiburg.de](mailto:ralph.araque.gonzalez@iaw.uni-freiburg.de)  
**Sebastián Celestino:** CSIC, Instituto de Arqueología-Mérida (IAM). <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2050-7090>. Contact: [scelestino@iam.csic.es](mailto:scelestino@iam.csic.es)  
**Raquel Vilaça:** Instituto de Arqueologia. Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Coimbra (Portugal). CEAACP – Centro de Estudos em Arqueologia, Artes e Ciências do Património / FCT. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0019-7256>. Contact: [rvilaca@fl.uc.pt](mailto:rvilaca@fl.uc.pt)

tions, peaceful cooperation between strangers, but also comprised social tensions, resistance to innovation and centralization processes, and violent actions (Araque 2023a, b; Celestino, Rafel and Armada 2008; Aubet and Sureda 2013; Moore and Armada 2012; Ruiz-Gálvez Priego 2015). It should be noted that some authors prefer the term “Late Bronze Age” (LBA) instead of “Final Bronze Age” (FBA), referring to the exact same chronological period.

The stelae in the western Iberian Peninsula are striking expressions of these events and depict symbols that cover most of these core aspects, with artefacts and images pertaining to Atlantic and Central Europe as well as to the Mediterranean region, which incorporated the African and Asian continents into this amalgamation of knowledge and ideas. The theme of technological transfer between craft-people is inseparable from the depiction of technologically complex objects, for example chariots, specialized bronze artefacts (i.e. sheet bronzes, helmets, mirrors, swords), musical instruments, jewellery, and dress, which is represented by fibulae. Moreover, this aspect is expressed in the choice of rocks and the various tools that were used to make stelae.

Furthermore, images of warriors and weapons might represent the conflict and threats that went along with the new connectivity and the exchange of valuable materials in haphazard journeys to distant lands and anchorages. Finally, the inclusion of mystical figures and portentous scenes, or musical instruments and communitarian dances, allows for glimpses into the spiritual, ritual, and festive world of the people behind the stelae. Nevertheless, the actual significance and meaning of these rock art monuments still evade any conclusive interpretation and leave ample space for scientific discourse.

Throughout the contributions to this book, the western Iberian stelae will be examined as multidimensional archaeological subjects. The lithic materials that were used to screen symbolic information in the form of selected objects, the necessary tools and technologies to do so, the positioning in the landscape, and the geographic distribution of the monuments are regarded as inseparable cognitive units. Even their absence in some neighbouring regions, contrasting with their concentration in others, can deliver valuable insights.

The edition of a monograph discussing the stelae and their chrono-cultural aspects, with researchers from various disciplines and with different positions, involves some problems that we have tried to solve as even-handedly as possible. Therefore, for example, we have extended the chronological framework in the title to include those who advocate a more recent chronology for the stelae, or at least for some of them, which would attribute them into the full Iron Age. It has been more difficult to find a consensus defi-

nition that identifies them geographically, given the increasing dispersion of new finds, and finally, we have chosen to refer to them as “decorated stelae from the western Iberian Peninsula”. However, we are aware that the broad geographical framework discriminates against stelae from the north-east of the Peninsula and the south-east of France, but we have preferred to focus them on the geographical environment – the western half of the Peninsula – where they are mostly found. Lastly, we have chosen not to overstate the debate on typologies, as we believe that this subject has been dealt with on numerous occasions and has only provided limited advance for our knowledge of the stelae beyond their iconographic analysis. Moreover, the fact that a large number of stelae are fragmented makes it impossible to draw up a coherent and detailed sub-typology.

Finally, and as it has already been mentioned above, we believe that an important approach in order to advance our knowledge of the stelae is to explore innovative lines of research in order to discover new aspects of the material significance and application of the stelae’s rock supports, their production techniques, their territorial analysis and, as a final objective, their social significance.

In Part I of this book, the western Iberian stelae are presented in the light of new research and updated with recent finds, with regards to their iconography, geographic distribution, and in their cultural as well as intercultural contexts. S. Celestino (chapter 2) introduces the research on stelae with a historical overview and in the light of the rapidly growing number of new finds as well as novel methodological and conceptual approaches.

P. Paniago (chapter 3) provides a revision of the geographical distribution of stelae, as well as of the individual and collective arrangements of the depicted objects by incorporating data from the latest findings, and finally proposes a new and simplified typological classification. He also considers their chronology and the possible relevance of diverse forms of societal organisation behind this distribution.

V. Rammelkammer (chapter 4) presents a reassessment of research on the so-called “diademada-stelae” and “ídolos-guijarros”, which are often considered as female counterparts to warrior representations. She discusses the chronological approaches that often consider the smaller “ídolos” to be significantly older than the “diademada-stelae” from the FBA-EIA and presents a revision of the contexts, typology, and approaches towards these highly characteristic expressions of Iberian iconography in later pre-history.

R. Vilaça and C. Bottaini (chapter 5) investigate the problem of shields, which have not been found in their entirety in Iberia, but are most frequently represented on the stelae. Their study is based on the evaluation of dome-headed rivets that might possibly serve as tangible traces

of actual shields, and presents preliminary results from contextual, archaeological, and material analyses.

G. Pulido-González (chapter 6) analyses the distribution and meaning of the representations of those elements on the stelae which possibly depict objects that were once imported to Iberia. She highlights preferences for particular objects of Mediterranean origin between different areas and intends to detect the likely routes of the arrival of these supposed imports. Moreover, she presents hypotheses why some regions seemingly preferred representing “Atlantic” over “Mediterranean” objects and proposes chronological as well as cultural implications.

Part II presents three distinctive landscapes with stelae (the Portuguese Beira Interior, Spanish Extremadura, and the region of Toledo) as well as one relevant Iberian landscape without stelae, but very close to their epicentres (the Portuguese central Alentejo), with their distinctive geological features that strongly influenced the choices of FBA-EIA artisans. The contributions take into account the rock materials that were used, the iconographies of stelae that emerged in these areas, and their transport and positioning in the landscape with relevance to pre- and protohistoric sites, route systems, rock outcrops, and natural resources. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the monuments in their physical and geographical settings.

R. Ferreiro Mählmann, R. Araque Gonzalez, P. Baptista, P. Paniego, and E. Merino-Martínez (chapter 7) present results from extensive petrological and geochemical studies of stelae and outcrops in the Portuguese Beira Interior and the Spanish Extremadura, with a focus on the Zújar valley. They show the selective patterns for the choices of rocks for stelae and investigate the implications of these material selections with relevance to the underlying knowledge of materials and technologies that had to be applied for rock art making in FBA-EIA Iberia.

M. Osório, P. Baptista, and R. Vilaça (chapter 8) outline the main aspects of the FBA occupation in the westernmost area of the Iberian Central System and the relationship between stelae, sites, metal ores, and the regional lithology, based on a holistic and integrative perspective. They argue that the stone monuments did not only mark specific places in their territory, but were also placed in a way to (re-) structure the cultural as well as physical landscapes.

P. Baptista, R. Araque Gonzalez, and R. Ferreiro Mählmann (chapter 9) analyse the transportation and integration of western Iberian stelae within the FBA landscape of the Portuguese Beira Interior through GIS-based spatial analyses. Visibility and accessibility analyses, petrological studies, labour estimates, and observations from fieldwork and experimental archaeology allow for the contextualization of the complex and dynamic relationship between paths, quarries, ores, and FBA communities.

J. Pereira Sieso, T. Chapa Brunet, P. Andonaegui Moreno, E. Merino Martínez, C. Gutiérrez Sáez, A. Uriarte González, P. A. Saura Ramos, P. Muñoz Moro, Á. Crespo Fraguas, and A. I. Pardo Naranjo (chapter 10) present a comprehensive study of the stelae in the Toledo region, encompassing petrological and geochemical provenance analysis, iconographic and technical studies, as well as the spatial analysis between their locations and natural fords of the Tagus river. This provides exclusively deep insights into this particular landscape during the FBA-EIA and allows for conclusions that might also affect other regions with stelae.

R. Mataloto (chapter 11) introduces the unique landscape of the central Alentejo in Portugal. He presents several sites from the FBA that indicate a complex network of decentralized, however interdependent communities. It is remarkable that there are no stelae recorded from this region, although they are frequent just on the other side of the Guadiana river, in Spanish Extremadura. However, the small metallurgist site of Rocha do Vigio, where a hardenable steel chisel from the FBA-EIA transition has been excavated, has significant relevance for the technologies that might have allowed for the making of stelae from extremely hard rocks. Mataloto also highlights curious parallels between the stelae, steel, and a famous fantasy character from modern popular culture.

The investigation of the FBA-EIA steel chisel from Rocha do Vigio, made with a most innovative material in this southwestern Iberian metallurgist hamlet in such an early period, has important ramifications for the stelae and was integrated into the archaeometallurgical branch of this research. The analytical and experimental approaches towards the making of rock art are the focus of Part III of this book.

By seizing the rare opportunity of analyzing the Rocha do Vigio steel chisel that is most probably contemporary to the FBA-EIA stelae, R. Araque Gonzalez, B. Asmus, A. Richter, G. Vintrici, and R. Ferreiro Mählmann (chapter 12) set out to investigate the toolkit of prehistoric stonemasons. The comprehensive methodology encompasses archaeometallurgical and petrological analyses of the available metallic as well as lithic tools, their replication, and their comparative experimental trial on the same hard rocks that were used for the stelae. The most striking observation is the requirement of steel tools to carve silicate quartz arenites (“quartzites”) that were used for a group of stelae in the Zújar river valley.

In this context, T. Mink (chapter 13), an experienced blacksmith and one of the last very few craftspeople in Europe who masters this process, presents his techniques for making a direct reduction furnace, similar to those found in pre-industrial contexts throughout Europe and the Ibe-

rian Peninsula, and the subsequent extraction of iron and steel from the ore minerals. He became part of this research group after the connection between some stelae and iron technology became evident, and describes the challenges of obtaining hardenable steel with this method.

Archaeometallurgist and bronze caster B. Asmus (chapter 14) analyzed both, the archaeological chisel from Rocha do Vigio and the replicated chisel from the smelting experiment with T. Mink. Therefore, this book presents a blacksmith as well as an archaeometallurgist perspective on bloomery smelting. Asmus compares the metallographic data, examines the smelting variables, and provides invaluable insights into the transfer of knowledge, differences and similarities in bronze- and iron working, and possible adaptation processes by FBA-EIA metallurgists. He argues that at the evidently high level of bronze working skills which prevailed in FBA Iberia, it would have been only a question of time until the properties of a new metal, iron, would be mastered.

Part IV of this book is focussing on theoretical and cognitive approaches towards rock art, thereby complementing the results from material and experimental analyses, geology and landscape analyses, and chrono-cultural archaeological evaluations. The biases of our contemporary views on ancient techniques and forms of representation are directly addressed in this section.

A. Santos (chapter 15) discusses the multiple ways in which the representations of the human body have changed with time in Iberia, beginning with Neolithic and Chalcolithic art, to Bronze Age statue-menhirs, and finally to the FBA-EIA stelae, which become, during this period, the most popular means of representing the human body. Moreover, she states that the problem with the ambiguity of representations of sexual indicators, and even their anthropomorphism, have to do more with interpretation than with analytical methodologies.

C. Huth (chapter 16) provides most important insights from cognitive studies of visual representation and pictorial art, which are unfortunately often neglected in archaeological studies. He shows that the way things are depicted on a plane surface is heavily influenced by cognitive processes which are not so much culturally determined but universal. The “fold out” images of four-wheeled chariots on the western Iberian stela, in Scandinavian or Alpine rock art, or on pottery in various European regions serve as splendid examples, showing that they might have nothing in common except for their universal pictorial appearance.

R. Udochukwu Ucheh (chapter 17) presents the only group of artefacts in this book that is not related to the decorated western Iberian stelae, neither chronologically nor geographically: he introduces the Carved Stone Balls of Scotland, mainly thought to originate from the Neolithic

to the Early Bronze Age, in their cultural and environmental setting. However, these objects also represent an enigmatic assemblage of rock art, they are often made from hard materials with fine carving and manipulation techniques that are still considered astounding within the scope of current analysis, and they are rarely found within datable contexts. This shows that archaeologists working in different fields and regions face similar challenges and we need to connect our approaches in order to advance with our understandings of decontextualized artefacts that evade simplified explanatory approaches concerning their function, meaning, and making.

In summary, the book presents and discusses geo-scientific, archaeometallurgical, landscape analytical, traditional archaeological, anthropological, and experimental data. These are the “hard facts” from where future research can develop and which will hopefully be extended to a base that allows for breakthroughs in chronology, technological studies, and socio-cultural understandings. The interpretative and deductive approaches of the contributing researchers, however, are almost as varied as the involved disciplines and backgrounds. As mentioned above, it is clear that divergent opinions prevail on key issues and full agreements could not be reached (nor was this a major objective), for example on the absolute chronology as well as the social, spiritual, ideological, and other immaterial meanings of the stelae.

Some researchers would rather attribute them to the Final Bronze Age, predominantly based on the artefacts that are represented and on their embedding in chrono-cultural constructs that would make this attribution plausible (for example, Araque Gonzalez 2018, 204-237; Brandherm 2013; Díaz-Guardamino 2010; Harrison 2004). Others would rather assign the stelae to the Early Iron Age, relating them partly to the influence of eastern Mediterranean seafarers, or Phoenicians, and the emergence of a political entity known as *Tartessos* in Iberia (see Celestino 2023; Celestino and Paniego 2023; Celestino and Salgado 2011). Notably, the longstanding use of most of the depicted objects often allows for a generous interpretation in this regard. The phenomena of the reuse or transformation of supports should be discussed, particularly concerning ancient menhirs, and it is important to note that this aspect is not specifically or simply chronological, but involves the very temporality of the stelae and hence goes way beyond it (see for example Vilaça 2021). Furthermore, there are those stelae that display the addition of non-figurative elements, and therefore another (or a new) strategy in the type of message, such as Tartessian writing, often engraved with different techniques and even of opposite orientation.

However, the chronological context is crucial for the subsequent interpretation of their possible socio-cultural

meanings, due to the significant changes and centralization processes that took place from the FBA into the advancing EIA. Were the stelae the testimonials of chiefs, a form of auto-representation, or their funerary monuments, i.e. the memory of the dead, even when the body is missing? Did they hence represent chiefdom societies in a social archaeological sense, and might even hint to the deification of such chiefs? Or were, at least some of them, inspired by religious concepts and hence represented proper divinities, maybe related to the horned gods of the eastern Mediterranean or the Sardinian horned warrior bronze figurines from water sanctuaries (see also Araque 2023a)? Could they have been the symbolic expressions of small, decentralized societies, or of pastoral groups, to communicate abstract concepts or liminal spaces? Do they point to the integration of new customs and reflect the challenges that the influx of people from the Mediterranean brought about, or contrariwise, indicate resistance to them?

These and other questions cannot be answered conclusively in the continuing absence of a significant number of unequivocal primary contexts that could be excavated with state-of-the-art methods, thus most of them will remain open to debate. Without a few *in situ* finds of stelae from the core areas of distribution in their primary contexts, especially their actual chronology remains a debatable matter. This research project provided a highly probable *terminus post quem* for at least those stelae made from silicate quartz-arenites and similarly hard quartzite, which is after the introduction of hardenable steel tools.

However, as if to make things more complicated, the chisel of Rocha do Vigio, which was found downstream from the Zújar confluence to the Guadiana river, is dated to 900-770 cal. BC (see Mataloto, this volume, with bibliography). Hence this insight favours neither direction, as it indeed remains just in the transition between both. Furthermore, iron has been used for small tools in Portugal since the FBA, possibly as early as the 12<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries BC (Jambon *et al.* 2023; Vilaça 2013). Eventually, this could mean either that there was an exceptionally early introduction of iron technology in western Iberia, or that many stelae are younger than it had formerly been anticipated – certainly, further research will be required.

The convergence between the involved researchers and an open, respectful debate, together with combining a variety of approaches and opinions, resulted in the chapters presented in this book. The effects of mutual learning, not only between scholars of different disciplines, bringing together senior and junior researchers, but also between them and the participating craftspeople, opened new trajectories for our future research. Debate is at the heart of any scientific progress, and it is only fuelled by differing opinions that challenge each other. As the scientific data acquisition

and archaeological fieldwork advance, we hope to soon have more valid foundations for our discussion of this most significant time period of Mediterranean and European (pre-)history, of which the stelae are a most impressive expression in Iberia.

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