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Ephemeral and cosmological monumentality: the 'strange' ditched enclosures of Chalcolithic south Portugal

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the ephemeral and cosmological expressions of monumentality, by rejecting the construction of monuments as a simple by-product of economic and social change. In the context of the emergence of a productive system and development of social complexification, monumentality may have played an active role in framing social change. An unusual set of ditched enclosures, with sinuous and well patterned ditches characteristic of the Guadiana basin (south Portugal), is used to discuss how monumentality, embedded in cosmological principals, may have been displayed through ephemeral practices of building and dwelling.

Turning the human upside up: the centrality of symbolism

For decades, materialism and functionalism disregarded the mental and cognitive aspects of a past social human entity. Instead, economic, ecologic and material dimensions have been favoured in explaining the historical processes in which the Neolithic and Chalcolithic communities of southern Portugal, and in the broader context of the southwest quadrant of Iberia, were engaged. In a way, these approaches have reduced past human uniqueness to simply a by-product of economic behaviour, turning the human upside down (Fernández 2018).

Although the distinctiveness of humans regarding other species is more a question of level of complexity than of substance, only humans seem to have reached the capacity to imagine something and symbolise it, representing the world through symbols, and to establish complex links between the real (the visible and tangible) and the abstract and represented (the invisible and intangible). That ability turned humans into *Homo simbolicum* (Cassirer 1977; Casini 1987; Mauro 1997; Pereira 1997; Schwartz 2018). From that capacity emerges the force that drives action and that bridges the material and the intellectual, the individual and the social, turning apparent oppositions into dualisms (oppositions that implicate one another). By establishing the centrality of symbolism in the definition of humanity, humans are turned upside up, and their reasoning gains another protagonism, not just in the interpretation but also in the explanation of social life.

The changes generated by agriculture and pastoralism, when integrated in long-term historical narratives are frequently presented as the main reason for the transformation from a condition of 'participation' to a state of more active and intrusive activity designated as 'domestication' (Hodder 1990; Criado Boado 1993; Jorge 1999). However, the focus on the productive system has led to the idea that the relation with the world designated by 'domestication' started only when humanity took control of the natural life cycles of plants and animals and, consequently, started to shape landscapes through architecture. The changes in the relation with the natural world though, started before, and 'domestication' was initially developed in the world of ideas and materialised in artistic expressions and ritual performances. It emerges with the development of consciousness, with the categorisation and symbolic ordering and naming of the world, accommodating the seen with the unseen, transforming Chaos into Cosmos. The 'domestication' of the world is cognitive and symbolic and occurs before agriculture and pastoralism.

When the domestication of plants and animals becomes effective it occurs in a pre-existing symbolic control and ordering of the world that frames it (Bender 1989; Valera 2012a). If Göbekli Tepe is surprising, that is because of the scale reached by the temples, not because of its initial

anteriority to agriculture. In Portugal, as in other parts of the world, the earliest monuments go back to the Late Palaeolithic, when, by added iconography, natural elements like outcrops or caves were symbolically transformed in vigorous memory devices and active social agents. The strange absence of monuments during the Mesolithic might be just a question of perspective. Some arguments for a Mesolithic form of monumentality, associated to shell midden mounds that received human burials and were covered with thousands of small stones, were put forward for Cabeço da Amoreira in the Tagus valley (Bicho 2011). Several authors now converge in considering that the building of the first monuments is related to the world views of the last hunter-gatherers (Cauvin 1998; Cummings 2002), and that monument building could have played a major part in the advent of agriculture and pastoralism. So, when noting that archaeologists studying the Neolithic of Northern Europe '[I]instead of the houses of the living, they find monuments to the dead', Bradley (1998, 9) was just emphasising the idea that the building of monuments is not a simple by-product of the changes in subsistence. On the contrary, as a phenomenon of significant impact in social relations and social change, central to the understanding of the Neolithic way(s) of being in the world, it should be addressed in its own right.

Focus on monumentality instead of monuments

Underlining that centrality, we may say that the Neolithic (also including the period designated by Chalcolithic in Iberian traditional periodisation – for the discussion of the levels of continuity between these two periods see Valera 2018) is, within prehistory, a period of monumentalisation with an investment and a scale never seen before or immediately after.

However, attention frequently tends to focus on the monuments rather than in monumentality. The monument is what physically exists (that can be seen and touched), while monumentality is the intangible category that is inherent to the monument, but goes beyond it, linking it to its meanings (Rodrigues 2001). Monuments emerge from monumentality, that is, from the ways through which abstractions and meanings and specific material realities are reunited. Monumentality integrates the 'imaginal' sphere, a concept developed by Henry Corbin (Corbin 1979) to designate the mediation between the material and the abstract.

Monumentum is related to the Indo-European *men* and to the Latin *monere,* which refers to memory (Rodrigues 2001; Bradley 2002). So, monumentality is the 'imaginal' category that evokes the images of the past and perpetuates their meanings through monuments that appear as forms of external memory. However, understanding monumentality as a symbolic imaginative creation that allows abstractions to gain material form has implications in the concept. It becomes more and more inclusive, allowing us to consider that monumentality is not just expressed by monuments, but also by mobile materials and by practices.

In fact, by focusing on the monuments as material buildings, we tend to privilege the categories of material magnitude and endurance (scale and immobility merged with permanence) and use them in the definition of what is a monument. But monumentality operates at variable scales. It can also generate small scale short living monuments, or it can be present in ephemeral periodic events or it can be behind recurrent social practices, becoming central in conforming the *habitus* and social trajectories. In other words, we may talk about monumental events or even monumental practices. Therefore, monumentality may also be expressed through the ephemeral, and the absence of large enduring monuments does not necessarily implicate a less operative sense of monumentality, only diverse forms of expressing it that might be less enduring in material terms.

Naturally, different social investments in monumentality have different social impacts, for they engage different resources and may result in different achievements, with significant implications in the development of social trajectories. Building large monuments can be risky in the face of the efforts involved. Such efforts are, themselves, of a monumental nature. Monumentality is therefore not just expressed by the physical monument but is also embedded in the process of their creation, for construction and reconstruction are part of the rituality involved in monuments (Evans 1988a; 1988b; Bradley 2002). Which is more monumental? The large, deep and long ditch? Or the amount of people reunited to open it, the effort involved in it, the ceremonial presiding it, the logistics called to support it, and the recurrent practices of intentionally filling it? The physical achievement or the process of achievement? Monuments, and their symbolic monumentality, should therefore not be detached from their processes of creation and dwelling.

But if it is wise not to disassociate the architectonic 'masterpieces' of these Neolithic communities from their processes of production and use, it is also important not to neglect the differences between them. If enduring and large monuments always involve a monumental investment, other forms of monumental investment may well generate ephemeral traces, leaving little evidence in the archaeological record. This perspective embraces performative and dwelling approaches to monumentality (Strum and Latour 1987; Ingold 2000), seen as resulting from active practices conducted by actors, recursively conforming their situated social conditions and levels of complexity (Giddens 2000; Bourdieu 2001). Neolithic communities did not just build a lot of monuments, they monumentalised life. And so, monumentality and monuments are not just related to memory, the ancestors and primordial times. They also incorporate the cosmology that organised life and transformed the chaos into a coherent world (Richards 1993; Benevolo and

Albrecht 2003; Valera 2010) and the ephemeral practices associated with the construction, use, closure and rebuilding of monuments.

This combination of the ephemeral expressions of monumentality, alongside more permanent and lasting cosmological principles, can be perceived in several ditched enclosures in southern Portugal, of which this analysis will privilege a group that presents a patterned design that is so far specific of the middle Guadiana basin, south Portugal.

'Strange' Neolithic monuments in southern Portugal: the sinuous patterned ditch enclosures

By the middle of the 4th millennium BC, western Iberia was entering a trajectory of social complexification where new monumental forms of expression accelerated and scaled up the process until an abrupt decay by the end of the 3rd millennium BC (Valera 2015). This process was non-linear and was characterised by regional diversity throughout the peninsula (see Cruz Berrocal *et al.* 2013 for the Spanish territory), although the southwest saw some of the most dramatic developments.

One of those developments that captures the spirit of the times was the construction of ditched enclosures (Fig. 21.1) that appear in the region around 3400 BC and developed until the transition to the 2nd millennium BC (Valera 2013a; 2015), never to reappear again with the same general characteristics. This well delimited chronology and a general conceptual similarity supported a claim to the use of the concept of ditched enclosure as a heuristic tool to address Neolithic societies in Iberia (Márquez-Romero and Mata-Vivar 2016).

In this context, one specific type of design appeared in the Alentejo region, where ditched enclosures featuring a sinuous pattern then developed. Many enclosures with sinuous ditches have been classified previously (Valera 2012b). Featuring a sequence of lobules, a variety of forms are known, including those separated by linear segments (Type B), those with an undulating form (Type C) and more irregular forms (Type D), but differ from those considered here (Type A).

Type A corresponds to enclosures of circular tendency and delimited by ditches that present a sinuous trajectory, forming sequences of contiguous semi-circular lobules, very well patterned (Fig. 21.2). They may present just one ditch, like Outeiro Alto 2 (Fig. 21.2.6), two concentric ditches, such as Santa Vitória (Fig. 21.2.4), or three concentric ditches, like Xancra (Fig. 21.2.1) or Borralhos (Fig. 21.2.2). At the site of Folha do Ouro (Fig. 21.2.3), the third sinuous patterned ditch is surrounded by an adjacent linear fourth ditch. This is repeated in a fifth and sixth ditch. This situation, of an external double ditch (an inner one featuring a sinuous pattern and the outer one being linear) is repeated in Salvada (Fig. 21.3.1), the only large ditched enclosure of the region (*c*. 18 ha) that presents this kind of sinuous ditch (Valera and Pereiro 2015).

So far, we only have absolute chronology for three of these enclosures (Outeiro Alto 2, Horta do Albardão 3 and latest contexts of Santa Vitória (Table 21.1; Fig. 21.4). The dates are still few to allow an adequate understanding of the temporalities of these enclosures, but the available ones place them in the second half of the 3rd millennium BC (Santos *et al.* 2009; Valera 2013a; Valera *et al.* 2019), while other types of sinuous ditched enclosures, like Type B, are known in the region from the second half of the 4th millennium BC.

They occur in two main topographic settings: in hill tops with 360º visibility over the landscape (Santa Vitória, Outeiro Alto 2 and Borralhos) or in flat topographies in the Beja plain (Xancra, Horta do Albardão 3 and Folha do Ouro). They all have small to medium sizes, no more than 2 or 3 ha, except for Salvada, a large ditched enclosure with more than 16 ha, but for which we do not know the internal complexity.

Cosmological monumentality

Where we have good information about their plans, there seems to be astronomic alignments of the entrances in several of the considered sites (Valera 2013b). The gate of Outeiro Alto 2 is aligned with winter solstice and the gate of the inner enclosure of Santa Vitória is aligned with summer solstice, both at sunrise, while the aligned gates of Xancra and Borralhos are orientated close to the moon large Standstill event, and Follha do Ouro has the gates aligned to the summer solstice, both at sunrise and sunset (Fig. 21.5.1).

On the other hand, for those sites where we have more clear and complete plans there is a significant patterning, especially of the sizes of the central smaller enclosures and of the lobule's sizes (Table 21.2). In fact, Outeiro Alto 2 and the inner enclosures of Santa Vitória, Borralhos (1a) and Xancra have close dimensions (diameters between 20 and 30 m) and have six lobules, except for Xancra, that has four. This patterning is also seen in the sizes of the lobules, which correspond to segments of circles with diameters of 10 m average. Interestingly, this average is maintained in the lobules of the outer ditches in Borralhos and Xancra (Table 21.2). This regularity suggests that the lobule's size is not random and observes a model or norm of building conventions. The cases of Santa Vitória and Outeiro Alto 2 may provide an insight to this archetypal.

In the inner enclosure of Santa Vitória the diameter of the lobule at the right of the entrance is comprised by the angle of the alignments from the centre of the enclosure with the summer and winter solstices at sunrise (Fig. 21.5.2) defining a segment of a circle of 9 m diameter. This size is replicated by the other five lobules.

At Outeiro Alto 2 the same general situation can be observed (Fig. 21.5.3), with some interesting differences

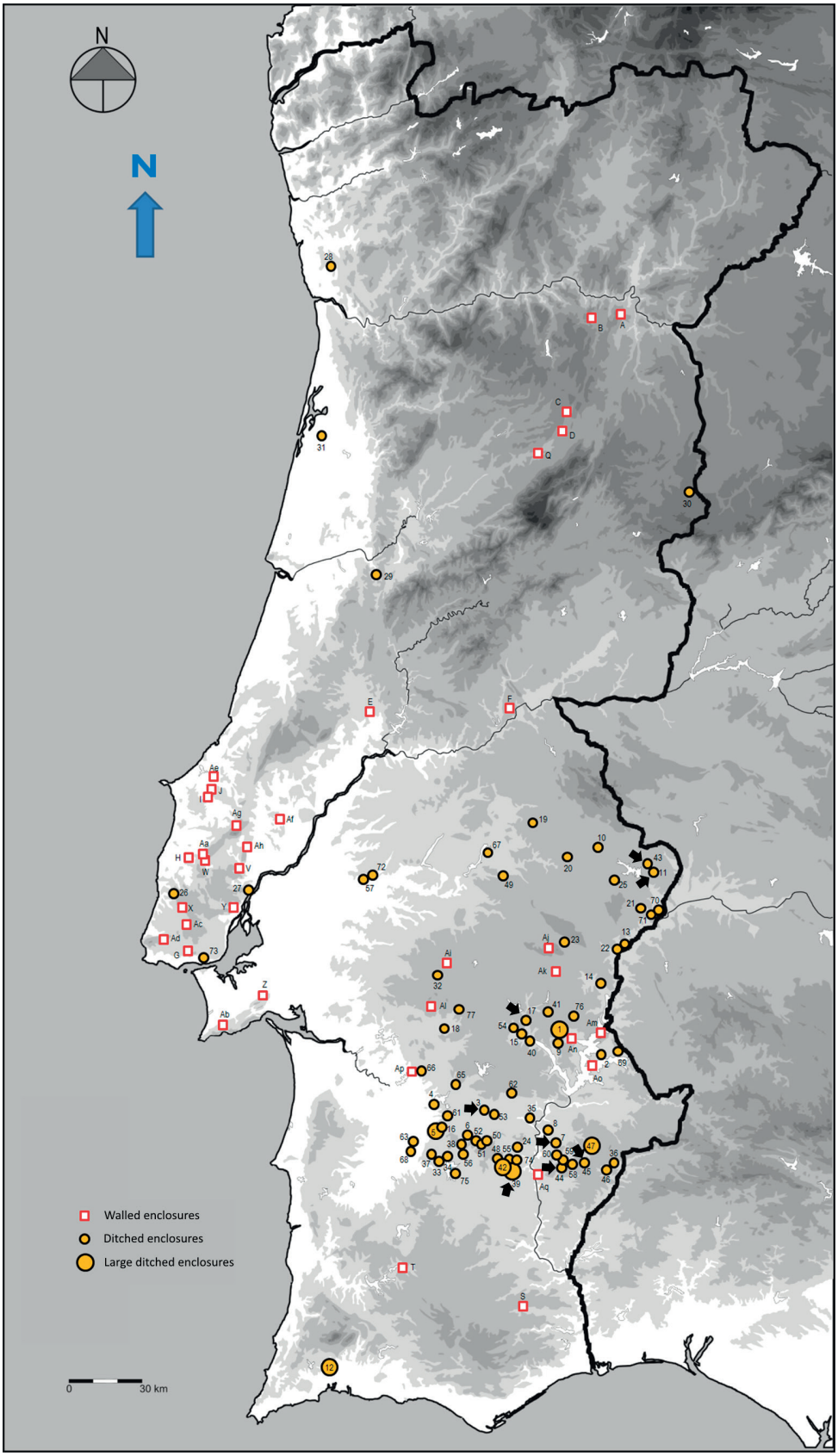

Fig. 21.1 Prehistoric ditched and walled enclosures in Portugal. Arrows indicate the principal sites mentioned in the text.

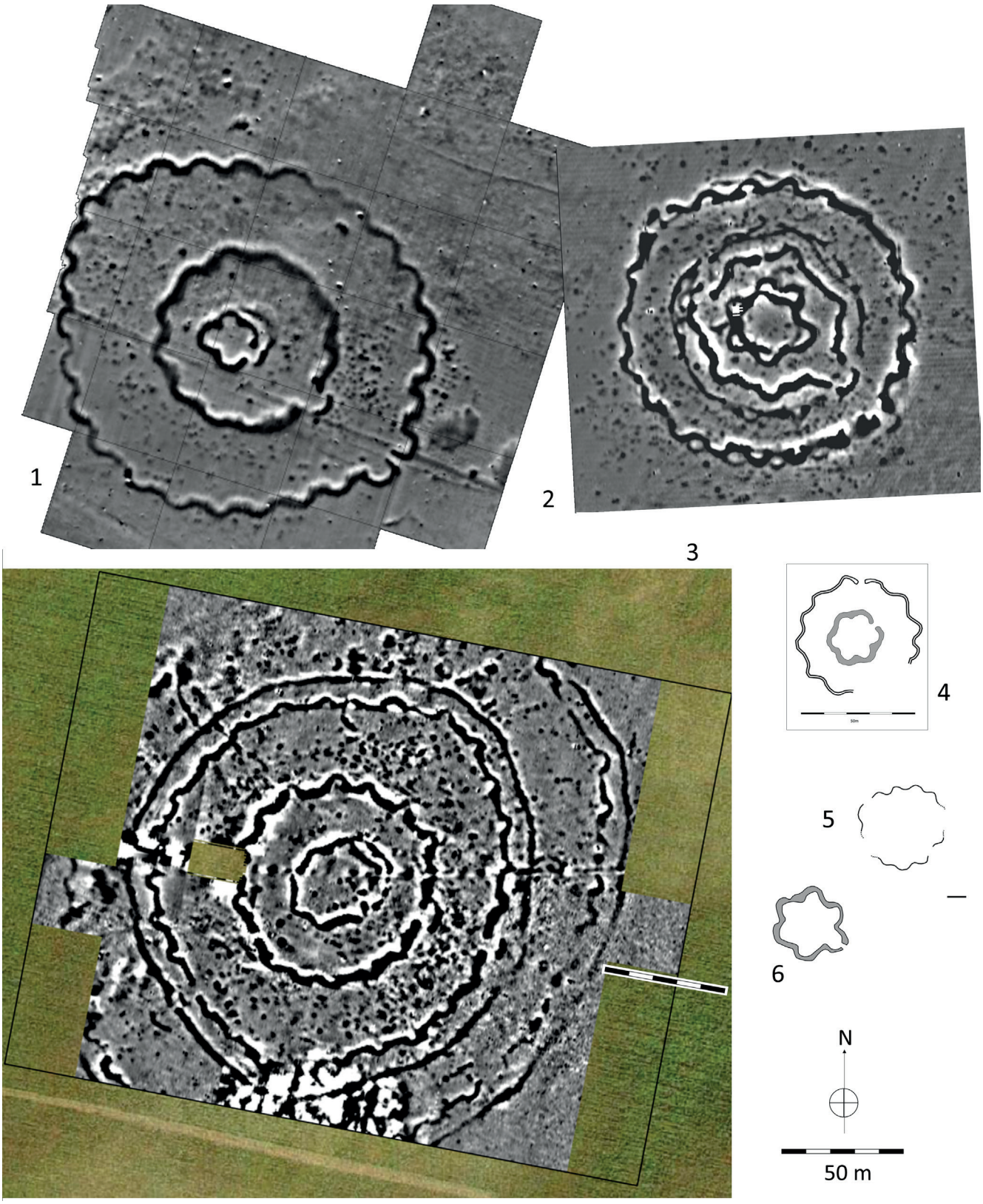

Fig. 21.2 Sinuous patterned ditched enclosures: 1. Xancra; 2. Borralhos; 3. Folha do Ouro; 4. Santa Vitória; 5. Horta dos Albardões 3; 6. Outeiro Alto 2.

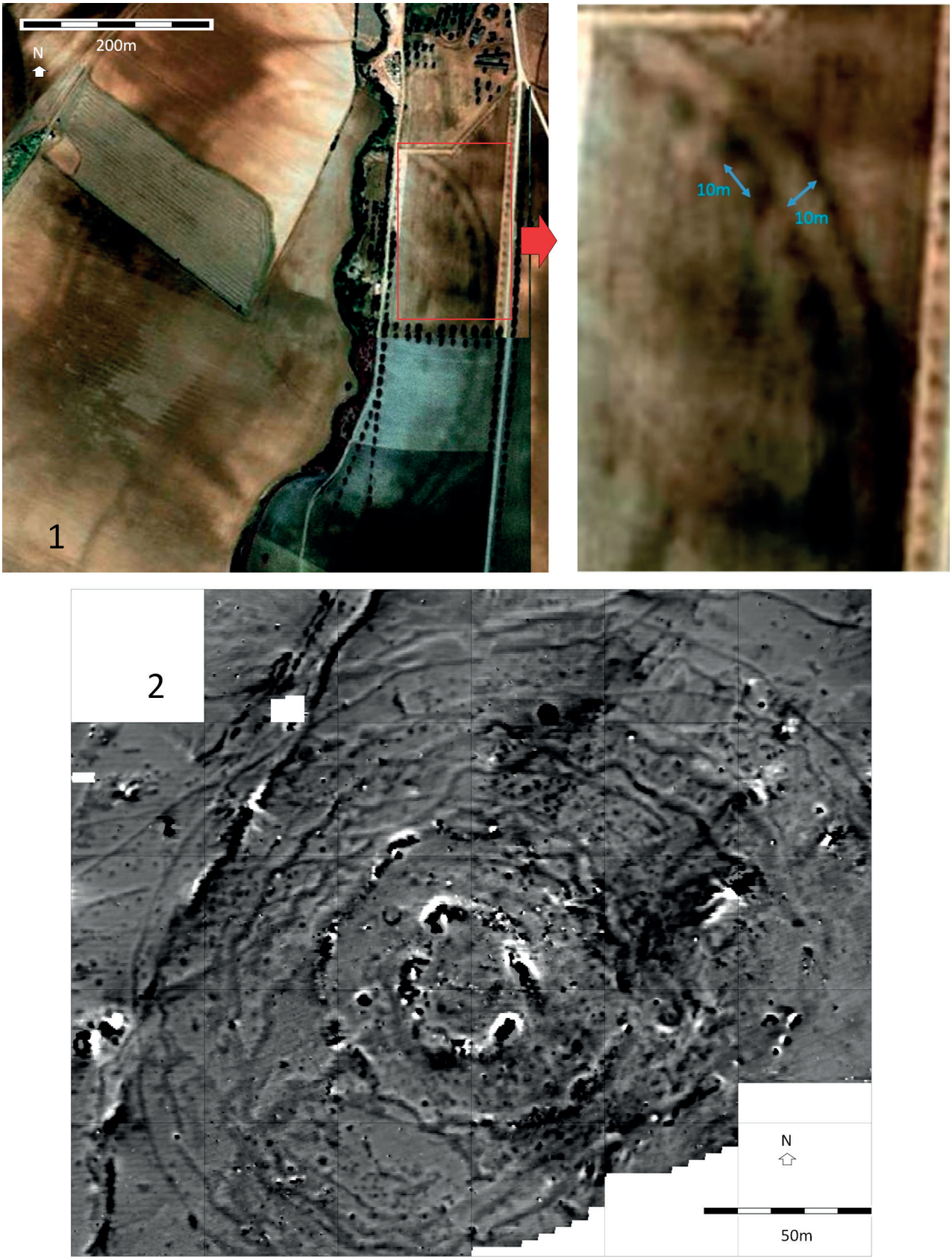

Fig. 21.3 Large ditched enclosures of Salvada (1) and Monte da Contenda (2).

Table 21.1 Radiocarbon dates for sinuous patterned ditched enclosures.

Site	*Lab. Ref.*	*Date BP*	*Cal 2σ*
Outeiro Alto 2	Beta-339604	3920±30	2471–2437 (50.4%) 2421–2401 (19%) 2381–2347 (26.1%)
Horta do Albardão 3	Beta261320	3770±40	2272–2259 (3.9%) 2206–2192 (19.5%) 2180–2141 (72%)
Santa Vitória	ICA18B/1104	3950±30	2556–2521 (19.7%) 2499–2346 (75,7%)
	ICA18B/1103	3630±30	2127–2090 (9%) 2045–1905 (86,4%)
	ICA18B/1102	3620±30	2118–2097 (3.8%) 2040–1894 (91,6%)
	ICA18B/1101	3670±30	2139–1957 (95.4%)

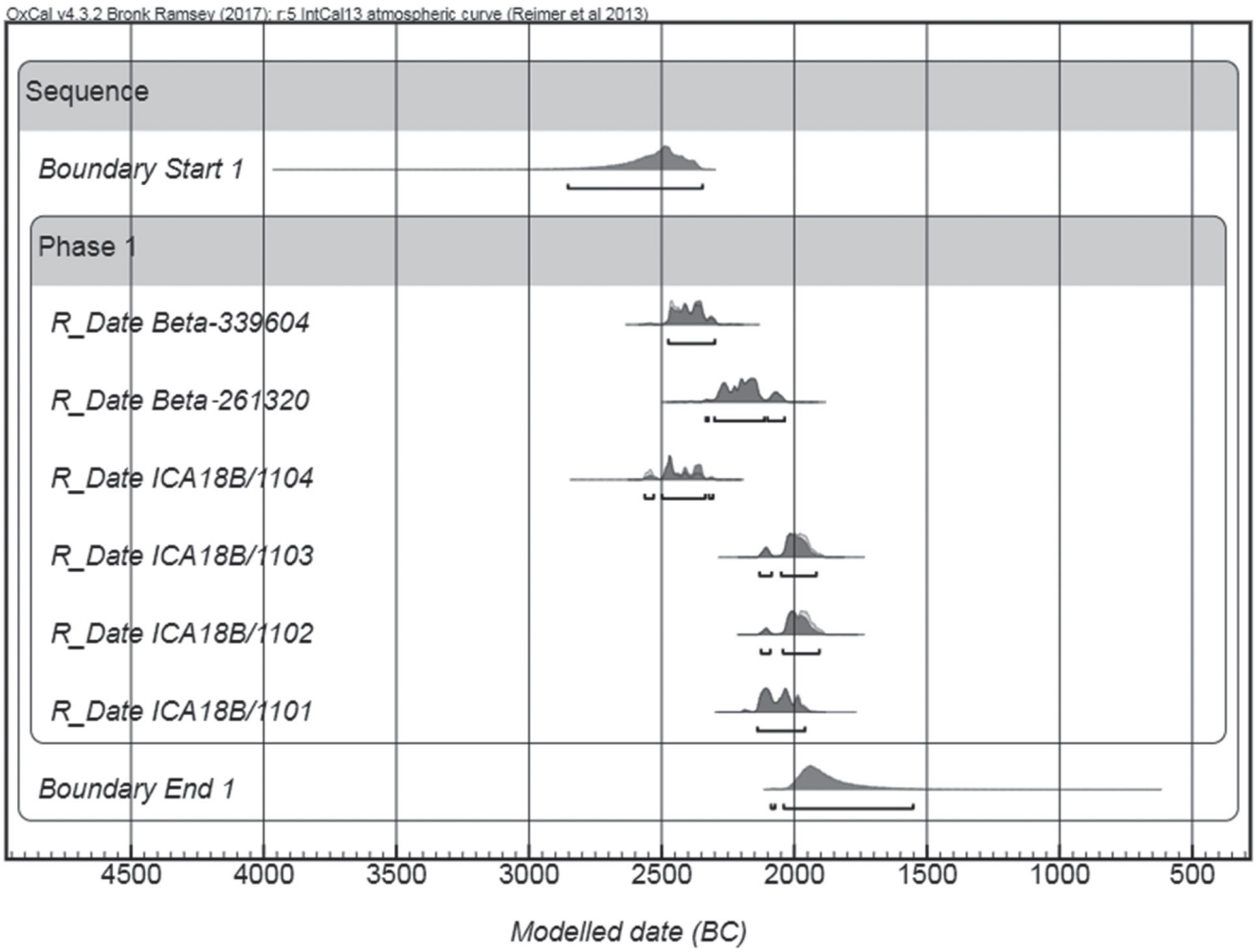

Fig. 21.4 Modelled radiocarbon dates for sinuous patterned ditched enclosures (A_{model}=95.4).

regarding Santa Vitória. Here the gate is aligned with the winter solstice and, while at Santa Vitória it is in the inner curve made by the junction of two lobules, at Outeiro Alto 2 it is in the curve of the lobule. However, the size of the lobules is also comprised by the angle made by the axis of the solstices, defining segments of circles with 11 m diameter and maintaining a proportionality regarding Santa Vitória, seen in the relation between the sizes of the diameters of the enclosures and of the lobules: Santa Vitória with a ditch diameter of 25 m has lobules of 9 m, which provides a quotient of 2.78 (dividing the enclosures diameter by the lobules diameter); Outeiro Alto 2 with a ditch dimeter of 30 m has lobules of 11 m, providing a similar quotient of 2.73.

In sum, both enclosures, that have solstice orientations for their gates, have six lobules that seem to have their sizes related and determined by the angle formed by solstice axis.

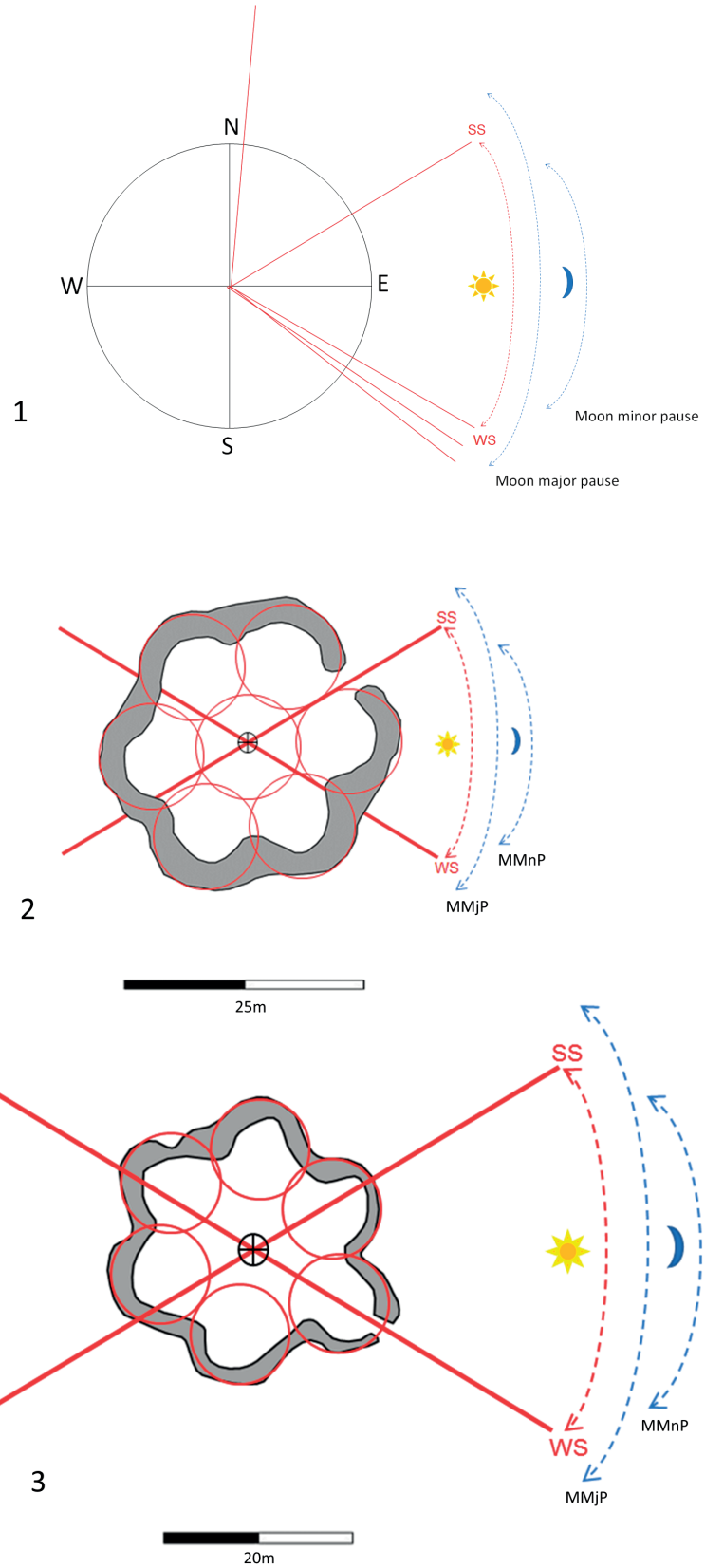

Fig. 21.5 1. Orientation of the gates of the sinuous patterned ditched enclosures; 2. Relation of the size of the lobules of Santa Vitória with the solstice alignments; 3. The same relation for Outeiro Alto 2.

Table 21.2 Maximum diameters (D), number of lobules (Lob.) and lobules diameter (LD) for the ditches of the considered enclosures. Measured in metres.

Ditches		*Ditch 1*			*Ditch 2*			*Ditch 3*			*Ditch 4*		
Sites		*D*	*Nº Lob.*	*LD*	*D*	*Nº Lob.*	*LD*	*D*	*Nº Lob.*	*LD*	*D*	*Nº Lob.*	*LD*
Outeiro Alto 2		30	6	11	_	_	_	_	_	_	_	_	_
Santa Vitória		25	6	9	50	12	?	_	_	_	_	_	_
Borralhos	1a	25	6	10	65	7	10	110	20	10	_	_	_
	1b	40	6	10	_	_	_	_	_	_	_	_	_
Xancra		20	4	10	65	12	10	130/150	27	11	_	_	_
Folha do Ouro		30	7	10	80	14	9	140	26	5/6	160	0	0
Horta do Albardão 3		_	_	_	35–40	?(8)	_	_	_	_	_	_	_

These sizes also seem to be replicated in outer enclosures of the considered sites and even in Salvada, for which we have less precise dimension, the situation seems to be quite similar (Fig. 21.3.1). This suggests that these enclosures incorporate in their patterned architectonic designs cosmological principles clearly rooted in the Neolithic tradition, although they have chronologies from the Late Chalcolithic.

On the other hand, none of the excavated cases (Santa Vitória, Outeiro Alto 2 and Horta do Albardão 3) provided evidences of any kind of physical delimitation (banks, palisades) other than the ditches. The same goes for signs of residential structures while the enclosures were functioning, and material assemblages show clear atypical proportions between categories (usually abundant fauna and pottery and rarity of stone tools, copper tools or residues and loom-weights).

It seems that the ditches were enclosing spaces used for specific social practices, with no significant architectonic elements that would have constrained visibility or have had a substantial visual impact. The elaborated design of the enclosures would not have been perceptible at a ground level, similar to the Nasca geoglyphs, as if they were intended to be seen by other, aerial, entities. The monumentality of the monument appears to have been less in the visual impact of the architecture, and more in the ways it organised space in a cosmological order (Valera 2010; 2013b), in the building processes and in the events that took place there. In other words, more intangible and ephemeral.

Building by segments, achieving by reiteration

Spatial organisation is not independent from time, and architecture is also a temporal manifestation. Not just in a sense that it may assume mnemonic meanings and past evocations, but also in the circumstance that it is related to projections over the future and to a perception and conception of time through periodic events (Richards 1993; Bradley 1998, Silvano 2001). Monuments have their own biographies embedded in the rhythms of daily life of the communities that built, used and contacted with them. In many cases, they do not seem to be built as closed and well-defined projects, but rather become the material remain of social practices. The phase of implementation of collective projects is a moment of aggregation particularly active in the production and reproduction of social relations and may express those social relations in the process itself, invested of impressive monumental significance.

That seems to be the case of the gradual construction by segments that has been identified in several ditched enclosures of southern Portugal, from the earliest Neolithic ones to the later sites, dated from the second half of the 3rd millennium BC. This segmented construction may occur through the slight overlapping of segments with different dimensions or by sequences of tangent segments, and sometimes is documented that, when a new segment is excavated, the previous one is already filled, generating a step by step construction of a boundary that was never a continuous ditch. This practice, documented through excavation in several enclosures (such as Perdigões, Bela Vista 5 and Salgada), is visible in the magnetograms of the sinuous patterned ditched enclosures of Xancra and Borralhos, but only in their external enclosures (Fig. 21.6).

These segments could have been opened and filled by different groups cooperating in producing a layout but obtaining it in steps (more continuous or more differed in time), where the construction process might emerge as a metaphor of the social structure and social relations. The participation in the process, the procedures and practices carried on, may have specific purposes. Each segment may be assumed as an independent project, with its particular monumental expression, being the result of a sequence of projects that established monumentality. If this kind of enclosure may be considered a monument, in the sense it incorporates memory and eventual mnemonic roles, its monumentality results from recurrent ephemeral practices of opening and closing ditched segments (and other associated activities).

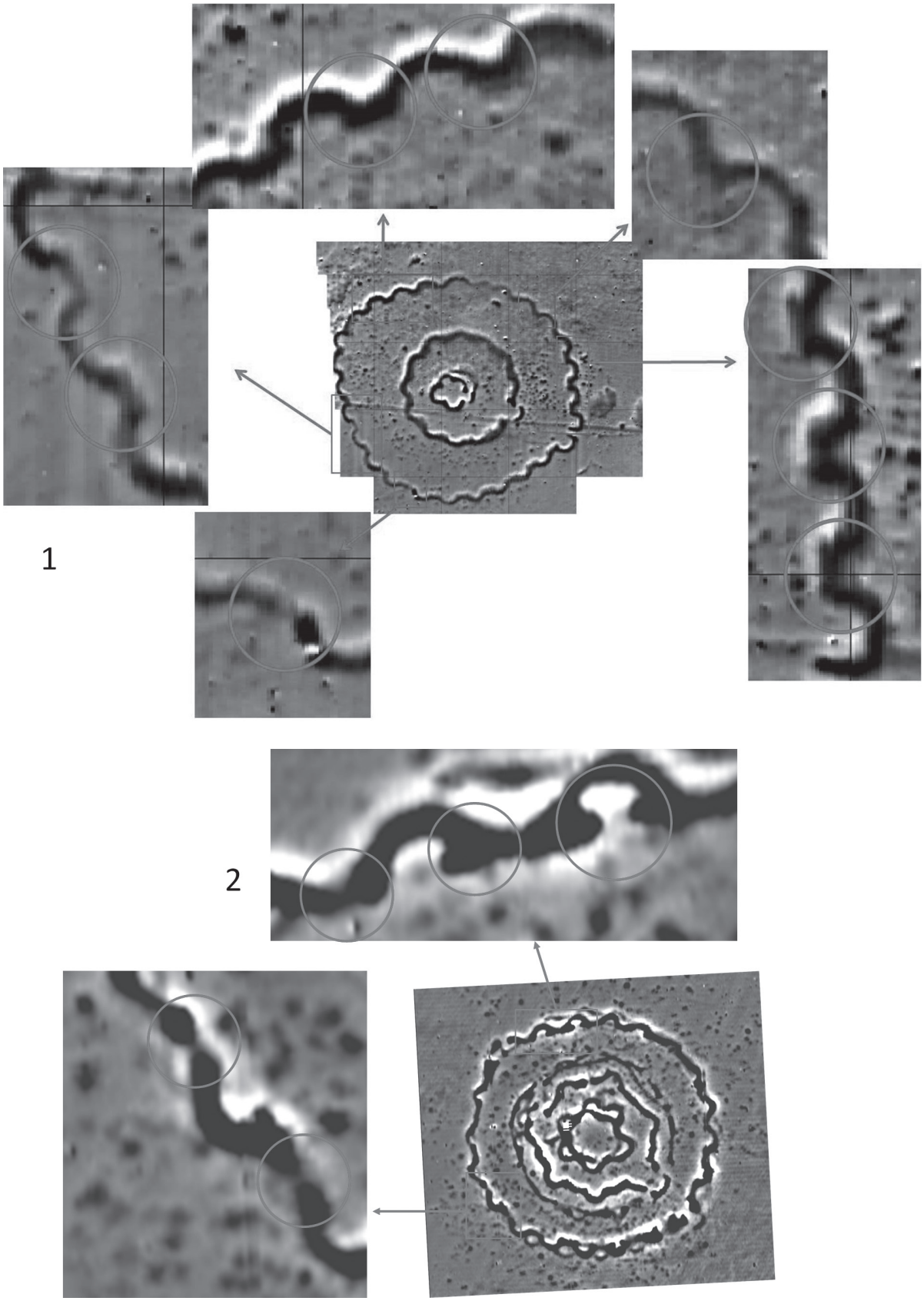

Fig. 21.6 Signs of segmented construction of ditches in Xancra (1) and Borralhos (2).

The monument is not built and then used in routines of ritual performance. It instead emerges from those routines, incorporating metaphorical links to life cycles (death/closure, reuse/rebirth), associating biographies of people and structures, and maintaining a cyclical perception of time (Hanson 1998; Brück 1999), whilst respecting a previous stipulated design. This same interpretation can be extended to the recurrent practices of re-cutting and refilling that are frequently observed in these enclosures.

The periodicity of building

Several ditched enclosures in southern Portugal show evidence of this cyclicality in periodic constructive activity, documented in processes of ditch filling – recutting – refilling, but also in the remodelling of the enclosures.

Perhaps the best example of this periodicity is the set of enclosures of Monte da Contenda (Valera *et al.* 2015) (Fig. 21.3.2). The site, with at least 17 ditches defining several enclosures that are overlapping each other, documents an area with a long and complex history of remodelling events throughout the Late Neolithic and Chalcolithic, with clear distinctive phases of construction, overlapping and with lateral displacements, corresponding to periods of construction, abandonment and reconstruction. Such histories represent periodicity of aggregation and movement, and an attempt to create permanency and memory of a place.

For most of the sinuous patterned ditched enclosures there is insufficient chronological information to understand their temporality, but the fact that there are cases of just one ditch, others with two and others with three or more, suggest there might be chronological sequences in the construction. However, for Borralhos the magnetogram clearly shows several phases of construction (Fig. 21.6), with two different inner enclosures, with several changes in the intermediary one and with a rebuilding of the outer one, with a similar pattern, only with some discrepancies between lobules, allowing the older structures to be seen in some sections.

Memory and ancestry can be maintained by the endurance of a construction, but also by periodicity of rebuilding (Edmonds 1993; 1999). In fact, the construction of monuments is frequently associated to the development of the image of the ancestor (Bradley 1998; Jorge 1999), embedded in a conception of primordial times and cyclical regeneration (Eliade 2016). The idea of regeneration by the permanent reincorporation of the past in the present turned life in a permanent expression of social memories through recurrent periodic practices and rebuilding. Stability and permanence are achieved by repetition and cyclicality.

Conclusion

During the Neolithic in southwest Iberia, ditched enclosures emerged and developed as one of the main forms of expression of monumentality. Some may be planned monuments, following some principles of cosmological order and presenting well patterned plans, as if they conform to shared prescriptions. That is the case of the well patterned sinuous enclosures, presenting one ditch or more (usually concentric) designed with sequences of regular lobules. This type of design is, so far, characteristic of the Guadiana river basin, and this spatial restriction seems to represent a regionalised expression and interpretation of more general cosmologies and social practices.

They were rooted in Neolithic cosmologies, expressing them and perpetuating them through periodicity, recurrence and ephemeral social practices at a time of accelerated changes. The fact that, so far, none of these enclosures that was excavated has provided Bell Beaker pottery (although they have bell beaker chronologies) is worth noting, for it might be revealing a specific form of symbolic resistance. The available data, though, is more suggestive than affirmative, and a blurred perception of these unusual monuments persists. Rather than look at these sites simply as monuments, it is also important to attempt to understand how they enabled social practices. By doing so it becomes clear that many ditched enclosures of southern Portugal assumed their monumental character more through ephemeral and repetitive practices framed by the cosmological order, than from monumental enduring structures, although in some of them these structures were present.

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