MEDITERRANEAN GOODS IN "POST-ORIENTALIZING" FUNERARY CONTEXTS OF SOUTHERN PORTUGAL: SOME REMARKS ON CONSUMPTION, PERIPHERALITY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

A significant number of Mediterranean imports have been identified in the so called “Post-Orientalizing” contexts of southern Portugal. Seen as an expression of the peripheral diffusion of materials pertaining to the Mediterranean commercial networks, their specific contexts and the consumption patterns that may be inferred from them point to the fact that such elements were selectively integrated into local social practices.

MEDITERRANEAN GOODS IN “POST-ORIENTALIZING” FUNERARY CONTEXTS

The so called “Post-Orientalizing” Iron Age horizon developed in the interior areas of southern Portugal roughly from the late 6th century to the late 5th-early 4th century BCE. The generic “Post-Orientalizing” designation stems from the diffuse nature that the oriental cultural inputs assume in the region by opposition to the network of coastal sites where the impact of Phoenician commerce and colonization is much earlier and results in the generalized adoption of oriental cultural traits, although these were certainly locally modified and adapted.

The term “Post-Orientalizing” is ambiguous in its sense and unduly emphasizes the foreign materials and cultural elements which are clearly less important in an overall appreciation of such communities than are the local traditions and practices. With its syntactic implications, it also speaks of the assumed peripheral position of these communities in a center-periphery model focused on Phoenician and “Orientalizing” trade centers. It is thus generally admitted that the “Post-Orientalizing” communities of the interior of southern Portugal had little access to the supra-regional trade networks and played a globally unimportant role in the broad historical process of this period.

When studied for its own sake, however, the so called “Post-Orientalizing” Iron Age reveals itself to be a dynamic and multifaceted entity, divided into sub-regional units with different historical rhythms. A more contextual approach to the imported, oriental or "orientalizing" elements, shows also that their introduction is not a passive and accommodative one: imports are fairly standardized and when their specific contexts are analyzed, it becomes clear that they cover specific functional requirements and social functions.

Thus, certain elements such as amphorae and attic pottery are found exclusively in domestic and religious spaces, pointing to particular practices of food consumption and feasting, either in profane or in religious contexts. Most of the imported material, however, was found in funerary contexts, and includes Egyptian/egyptianizing amulets, carnelian beads and pendants, containers for perfumes or oils and especially glass beads, which have even been considered one of the most characteristic elements of funerary offerings in this area. We now turn our attention to a particularly expressive group of such materials, found in the necropolis of Vinha das Caliças 4 (Beringel, Beja).

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THE GLASS BEADS FROM VINHA DAS CALIÇAS 4

Vinha das Caliças 4 is an inhumation necropolis dating to the second half of the 6th century BCE, of which forty seven graves were excavated. One of the most striking features of the necropolis is the presence of negative, ditch-like structures that delimitate precincts around some of the graves, a characteristic that was documented also in several necropoleis recently excavated in the region.

Among the rich and diversified offerings that accompanied the dead a very substantial number of glass beads – at least 794 pieces – were exhumed. A particularly remarkable feature is the variety of morphological and decorative types (Fig. 1), with fairly common ones – such as plane spherical and cylindrical blue ones (Types 2.a.2, 2.a.3 and 3.a.1) or spherical ones with occluded decoration (2.b.2 and 2.b.3) – coexisting with others which are fairly uncommon – that is the case of the cylindrical piece with occlusions and spherical aplications (3.b.1) – or downright rare – the wave decoration in the Type 2.b.1 beads, for example, has parallels only in a few, rare pieces from necropolis in the Ourique region; the tubular beads (4.a.1) may find parallel in pieces from Fonte Velha de Bensafim (Lagos), and the cubic piece (5.a.1) for the moment has no known parallels.

But to the overall goal of this brief contribution there are other, more relevant data concerning the social context of this material that should be noted. First of all, the beads have been identified only in roughly one third of the graves, which could point to an uneven distribution and suggest that considerable value was attributed to the necklaces they composed. Secondly, some graves contained considerable accumulations of beads – in the most striking cases, between 80 and 190 pieces – which would again suggest the preferential association of these beads with individuals of special status. They seem to have been, on the other hand, exclusively associated with women: 59% of the pieces were in adult female’s graves, 6% in a female child’s grave and the remaining 35% were found in graves in which the sex of the deceased couldn’t be identified; no association with masculine remains has been documented.

<table>
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<th>Description</th>
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<th>Number</th>
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</tr>
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<td>5.a.1</td>
<td>Cubical; light blue</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0.13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig. 1. Glass beads from Vinha das Caliças 4 (Beringel, Beja): typology and quantification**

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8 Arruda et al., forthcoming.
9 Santos et al., 2009.
10 Dias, Beirão & Coelho, 1970.
12 For an overall appreciation of morphological and decorative types of Iron Age glass beads in the Iberian Peninsula, see also Ruano Ruiz, 1996.
SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

These observations in themselves have only a limited interest, and they should, in the future, be cross-referenced with data regarding the micro-context of other imported materials, but they suggest a trend that should not go unnoticed: the imported goods – in the case we analyzed, the glass beads – were incorporated into local social and identity discourses and were deployed in the context of practices which were specific to these groups. The role of these communities in the acquisition of these pieces could therefore be envisaged as an active one, and it stands to reason that the absence of other foreign cultural and material elements should also be seen as the product of the local disinterest in them.

Further research and new contextual data is needed to confirm indisputably – or to dismiss – this hypothesis, but it seems not only plausible but also very suggestive that Mediterranean imports may have played specific, standardized roles in local social practices, thus being actively (but selectively) sought after. In this sense, their consumption was a part of local discourses of identity and power, and the analysis of their significance should shift from broad, supra-regional commerce and contact, to the more specific regional context where their original meaning was overwritten by the one that local communities attributed to them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


