

# The necropolis of the Casa Romana do Castro de São Domingos (Lousada, Portugal): a funerary space from the Early Middle Ages

## A necrópole da Casa Romana do Castro de São Domingos (Lousada, Portugal): um espaço funerário da Alta Idade Média



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Paulo André Pinho Lemos<sup>1a\*</sup>, Manuel Nunes<sup>2b</sup>, Bruno M. Magalhães<sup>3,4c</sup>

**Abstract** Between 2017 and 2021 seventeen graves were identified within the research project ‘Excavation, study, and musealisation of the *Casa Romana do Castro de São Domingos*’ (Lousada, Portugal). Human bones are not preserved, most likely due to the notorious acidity of northern Portugal’s granitic soils, although the length of at least two of the tombs indicates that they would have belonged to non-adult individuals. The single asset recovered from these graves was a bronze buckle hoop, possibly as a result of the violation of most of the tombs within a context of a community with scarce economic resources. The funerary architecture of the necropolis displayed three different types of graves, featuring what would have been an older central

**Resumo** No decorrer do projeto de investigação ‘Escavação, estudo e musealização da Casa Romana do Castro de São Domingos’ (Lousada, Portugal) foram identificadas, entre 2017 e 2021, dezassete sepulturas. Em nenhum dos catorze sepulcros escavados foram encontrados ossos humanos preservados, muito provavelmente devido à acidez do solo granítico, apesar do comprimento dos sepulcros mostrar que pelo menos dois pertencerão a não adultos. Foi apenas recuperado um aro de fivela em bronze como espólio associado, o que poderá ter a ver com a violação de grande parte dos sepulcros, mas principalmente com a presença de uma comunidade com poucos recursos económicos. A arquitetura funerária do cemitério permitiu identificar três fases ti-

<sup>1</sup> Araducta – Arqueologia, Unipessoal Lda, Portugal.

<sup>2</sup> Câmara Municipal de Lousada, Portugal.

<sup>3</sup> Departamento de Ciências da Vida, Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal.

<sup>4</sup> CIAS – Centro de Investigação em Antropologia e Saúde, Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal.

<sup>a</sup> [orcid.org/0000-003-0740-2371](https://orcid.org/0000-003-0740-2371), <sup>b</sup> [orcid.org/0000-0002-7029-7773](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7029-7773), <sup>c</sup> [orcid.org/0000-0002-1596-5193](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1596-5193)

\*Autor correspondente/Corresponding author: [paplemos@gmail.com](mailto:paplemos@gmail.com)

area which went on to be gradually expanded, thus giving way to the majority of more recent graves. The proximity of roads is sometimes the main condition underlying the choice of the location of a necropolis and does not necessarily indicate the presence of a religious temple, so finding one in future excavations is unlikely. By analysing existing data regarding other similar structures, it is possible to propose a chronology which established that this necropolis would have been in use between the Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

**Keywords:** Funerary architecture; funerary ritual; human bones preservation; graveyard hierarchization; religious temple.

## Introducción

### *The archaeological investigation carried out at Castro de São Domingos*

Although *Castro de São Domingos* was already mentioned in the 1258 Inquiries, it would not be until the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Father Carvalho da Costa provided the first scientific commentary about this archaeological site (Figure 1) mentioning the remains of a fortification which he believed to date from the Roman occupation (Costa, 1706). In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Augusto Barbosa de Pinho Leal reiterated the same information conveyed by Father Carvalho da Costa. He reported that in

pológicas diferentes, com uma possível área mais antiga e central, a partir da qual foram construídas boa parte das sepulturas mais recentes. A proximidade de vias é por vezes apontada como condicionante para a localização das sepulturas, pelo que não é obrigatória a identificação de um templo associado ao cemitério em futuras campanhas de escavação. Através da análise de paralelos existentes é proposta uma cronologia para utilização da necrópole entre a Antiguidade Tardia e a Alta Idade Média que apenas futuras campanhas arqueológicas poderão ou não confirmar.

**Palabras claves:** Arquitetura funerária; ritual funerário; preservação dos ossos humanos; hierarquização da necrópole; templo religioso.

*Monte do Crasto* some remains of a fortification from Roman times could be found (Leal, 1874). A few years after, while visiting this site, presumably between 1880 and 1882, Francisco Martins Sarmiento included the *Castro de São Domingos* for the first time in the scientific literature (Cardozo, 1947). Similarly to his predecessors in 1887, Augusto Vieira stated that *Monte do Castro* held remains of ancient fortifications which were of Roman origin, judging by the parish's name (Vieira, 1887).

Several authors have also researched on this archaeological site throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Peixoto, 1913; Lanhas, 1971; Silva, 1986; Dias, 1997), especially Domingos de Pinho Brandão, who was the first to collect archaeological materials in 1957

(Mendes-Pinto, 2008) which were deposited at *Museu do Seminário Maior* and studied by Adília Alarcão (1958). Despite these first scientific contributions, *Castro de São Domingos* only met continued research in the years 1994 to 1998, thanks to the campaigns of archaeological excavations led by Marcelo Mendes-Pinto and, later on, between 2009 and 2011, by Paulo Lemos, Manuel Nunes and Joana Leite (Lemos and Nunes, 2015). More recently, from 2017 to 2021, the research project “Excavation, study, and musealisation of the *Casa Romana do Castro de São Domingos*” (Lemos, 2020) picked up on the previous archaeological studies and brought about new information.



**Figure 1.** Geographical location of Lousada.

### *Human occupation at Castro de São Domingos and the discovery of the necropolis*

*Castro de São Domingos* is the largest, best preserved proto-historic settlement

currently identified in the river Mezio basin, which is mostly located in the municipality of Lousada (Porto district, Portugal). The Mezio basin preserves important archaeological remains from the Iron Age, associated with phases IIA and IIB (from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC to the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC) and phases IIIA and IIIB (from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC to the second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC) from the so-called *cultura dos castros* (Silva, 1986). These latter phases were already established in the context of Romanisation, within the *optimum* period (Martins, 1990).

The conquest and destruction of the settlement by the Romans, most likely to have taken place during the Cantabrian Wars (29 to 19 BC), is pointed out by Mendes-Pinto (2008) as the starting point for its spatial organisation, which would lead to the gradual abandonment of the crown of the hill in favour of half-slope platforms. It was in the context of this reorganisation that the Roman housing complex located on the slope facing southeast was built – locally named as the *Casa Romana do Castro de São Domingos*. This building complex revealed an archaeological area presenting a wide Roman chronology (1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD), which featured an Iron Age paved courtyard and a circular house dating back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC (Mendes-Pinto, 2008).

The archaeological excavation carried out between 2017 and 2021, within the context of the research project “Excavation, study, and musealisation of the *Casa Romana do Castro de São Domingos*”, revealed

the existence of several occupations in different periods, from the Iron Age to Roman times. Sixty-three trenches of variable morphologies were also discovered, bearing no identifiable type of orderly organisation (Nunes et al., 2011; Lemos and Pereira 2017; 2018; Lemo 2020). The diversity of shapes and dimensions of the trenches reflect different aspects of their practical function are likely to be associated with a cultural context which is typical of the Late Bronze Age communities (Martins, 1988), and stresses the idea of a certain continuity between this period and that of the Iron Age which was previously advocated by other researchers (e.g., Dinis, 2001).

During the archaeological excavation carried out in 2017, a medieval necropolis was found in the southeast area of the *Casa Romana* and, by the end of the 2021 excavation season, seventeen graves had been identified. This paper aims at studying this necropolis, whose chrono-cultural framework is only now beginning to be better understood.

## Results and discussion

### *Funerary anthropology and the absence of preserved human bones*

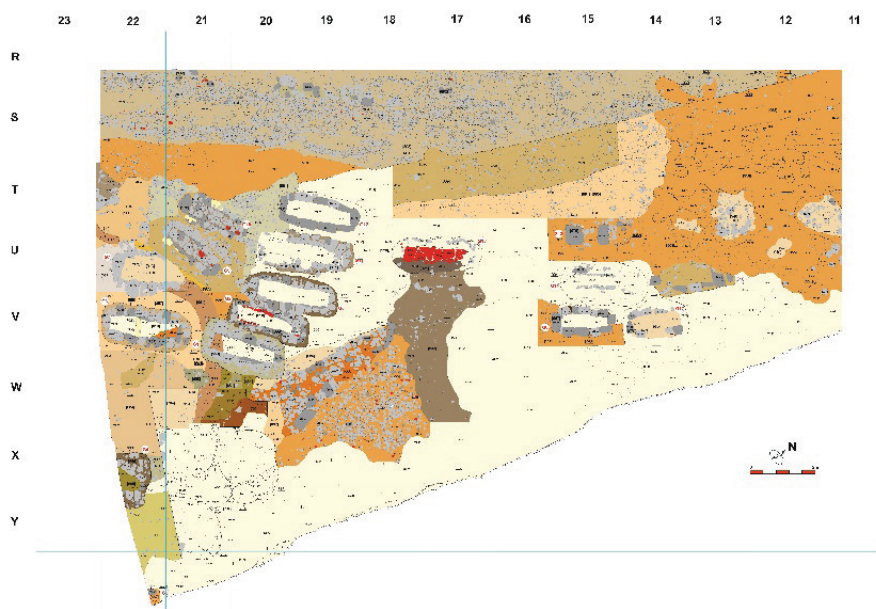
Excavations took place in fourteen of the identified graves (numbers 1, 2, 3, 6 and 8 to 17; Figures 2 and 3). Graves 9 and 10 feature trapezoidal architecture generally following the shape of the human body, whereas the remaining ones displayed a sub-rectangular shape. Although most of the graves were excavated in the natural

soil, layer remnants of circular housing structures from the Iron Age could also be documented in graves 1 and 3. All graves presented flat bottoms and were built using medium to large granite and hornfels rocks (as well as *tegulae* in several of them), partially resulting from its reuse from other Iron Age and Roman structures. Graves 2, 6, 12 and 13 were still covered with granite and hornfels slabs, although in numbers 2 and 6 these slabs were only preserved on the last third of the grave, next to the feet, which was a clear sign of previous violation. In the remaining graves, all slabs were absent.

No preserved human bones could be retrieved from the tombs. Nevertheless, the length of the tombs showed that the majority (12/14, 85.7%) seemed to have been built for adult individuals and at least graves 8 and 17 (2/14, 14.3%) would have been the burial site for non-adult individuals. Once the deposition of the corpse was completed, the graves seem to have been filled with sediment – or so it seemed, judging from the observation of unviolated graves, where the lid was still intact. This shows that the decomposition of soft tissues and bone would have occurred in a filled space. The acidity of the granitic soil may have been the main reason for the absence of human skeletal remains. This is an important taphonomic factor, often resulting in the destruction of human osteological material, being such fact widely acknowledged in other archaeological sites in northern Portugal (e.g., Santos et al., 2016). Acidic soils are



**Figure 2.** Aerial orthophotography of the necropolis from Castro de São Domingos.



**Figure 3.** Drawing of Castro de São Domingos.

indeed the most common agent leading to bone destruction, dissolving the inorganic matrix of hydroxyapatite and resulting in the production of an organic material vulnerable to leaching by water (Janaway et al., 2009). This is a major limitation to the study of the population that once lived in Lousada, preventing any type of analysis of the human bones after the excavation and during laboratory analysis (e.g., estimation of the biological profile, radiocarbon dating, isotopic analysis of diet and mobility).

The pottery found inside the graves came exclusively from deposits accumulated after the burial and dated from the Iron Age and Roman periods. It is worth noting both the absence of offerings and the anonymity of the deceased in almost all graves, which is in line with the prevailing thinking in the Early Middle Ages which entailed the collective conception of destiny and the funerary sacred space relativises the individual burial and grave (Santos, 1992; Branco and Vieira, 2008). Besides reflecting the obvious grave violations after the burials, it may also be related to the funerary ritual itself, whose practice was common in Early Middle Ages contexts from inland populations with scarce resources (Martins et al., 2014).

The orientation of the graves in the necropolis of *Castro de São Domingos* roughly corresponds to the canonical norm (west-east), although most of them display a small southwest-northeast variation (graves 1 to 8 and 11 to 17). As stated by Barroca (1987), each grave

was oriented considering the sunrise and the sunset, which may result in slight axial deviations with a maximum amplitude of 40°. The orientation of graves from medieval times is much less variable than post-medieval ones when the higher density of burial space occupation around Portuguese churches which were used over hundreds of years led to a much greater variation in orientation (Magalhães, 2020).

It is also important to mention the identification of the medieval wall structure [686] circumscribing the southeastern limit of the necropolis. This wall seems to set the boundary of the funerary space, even though only four meters of its length are currently preserved. Displaying a north-south orientation, this structure measures a maximum width of 1.7 meters and a maximum height of 0.5 meters, corresponding to a dry stack of stones and occasional fragments of *tegulae* surrounded by earth.

### *Funerary architecture*

The archaeological excavation showed a relatively homogeneous sepulchral architecture and a careful level of spatial structuration. Nevertheless, there are still differences fitting within the typological classification proposed by Gisela Ripoll (1996). Three different types of graves were identified, as detailed in table 1.

The graves in the necropolis of the

**Table 1.** Grave typologies proposed by Ripoll (1996: 219-224) for funerary architecture in Hispania between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD and found at the necropolis of *Casa Romana do Castro de São Domingos*.

Typology	Period*	Grave number	Description
III B	Phase I Older	15	Grave entirely built with <i>tegulae</i> – of Roman tradition. Only its bottom was preserved, having been built using large fragments of inverted <i>tegulae</i> flanked by small stones which were meant to support the <i>tegulae</i> that defined its side walls.
VII A	Phase II Intermediate	1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16 e 17	Graves built with medium to large size granite and hornfels rocks covered with slabs made of the same materials. Although the lid was absent in graves 1, 3, 8, 11, 14, and 17, its building similarity with the remaining ones allows the assumption of the same typology.
VII B	Phase III Most recent	9 e 10	Graves built with medium to large size granite and hornfels rocks. The bottom is paved with small granite stones and occasional fragments of <i>tegulae</i> . Unfortunately, the lids are absent in both graves.

\* 'Period' refers to the relative chronology within the necropolis of the *Casa Romana do Castro de São Domingos*.

*Casa Romana do Castro de São Domingos* were sequenced side by side and separated by a maximum distance of 0.40 meters, with graves 1, 2, and 6 sharing one of their walls. The organisation of the necropolis suggests three different types of graves, displaying a relatively broad occupational diachrony. Phase I, the oldest, is represented by grave 15 (Table 1; Figures 4 to 7). Unfortunately, this grave has been affected by contemporary mechanised agriculture, which has resulted in the bad preservation of its architecture, and only its base has remained. The grave is isolated and apparently boasts

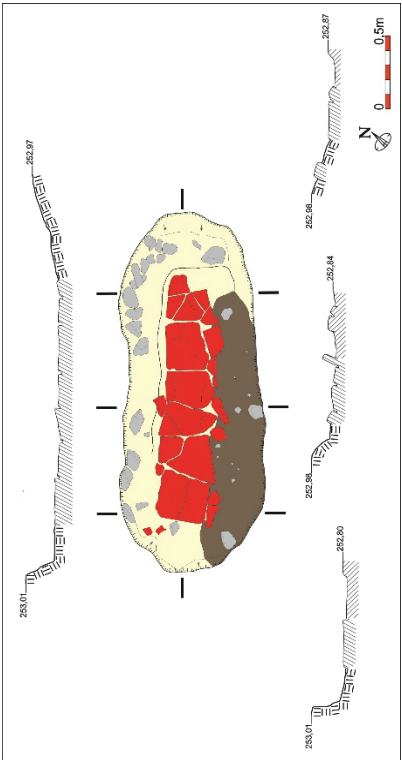
a central position in the necropolis, from which the remaining tombs were organised. Its unusual building characteristics may show an intention to hierarchise the graveyard from a primary burial core, associated with a road or a temple. There could be another hypothesis for the building of these graves, such as aiming for social distinction through architectural differentiation, as it was previously discussed by other authors (e.g., Arezes, 2017). However, the small number of graves excavated so far does not allow for more objective conclusions.

Phase II corresponds to the inter-

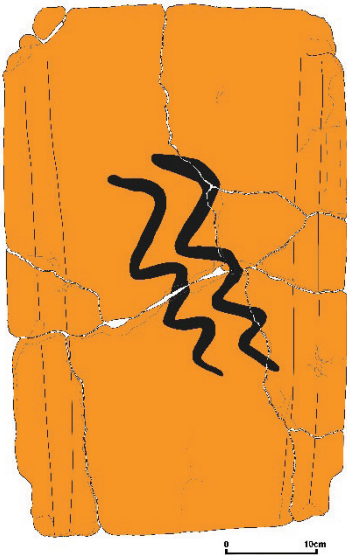




**Figure 4.** Grave 15 from the necropolis of Castro de São Domingos.



**Figure 5.** Drawing and section views of grave 15.



**Figure 6.** Tegula used in the construction of the bottom of grave 15 with an unidentified finger-impressed motif.



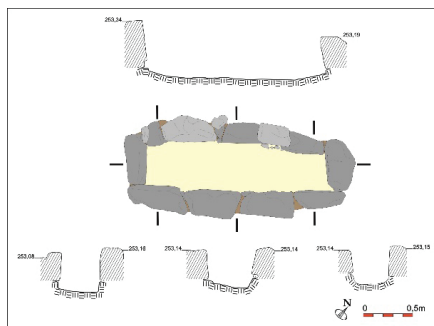
**Figure 7.** Tegula used in the construction of the bottom of grave 15 with an unidentified finger-impressed motif.



mediate phase of occupation of the necropolis and is represented by most of the graves (1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, and 17; Table 1; Figures 8 to 11), which may indicate that this would have been the place where most of the burials took place. It is difficult to establish chronological sequences between these graves, given that there is no record of interconnections among most of them, but at least grave 2 reflects the last moment of burial of this building phase since it partially cut graves 1 and 6. Moreover, graves 11 and 12 display singular characteristics that are worth mentioning. Grave 11 is the only one in the necropolis where archaeological materials associated with the burial were recovered – a bronze buckle hoop with a maximum diameter of 2 centimetres which may have belonged to the deceased's attire (Figure 12). Unfortunately, the buckle hoop is badly preserved and, as in numbers 14 and 15, grave 11 was also severely affected by contemporary mechanical agriculture, causing the cutting of about half the grave, affecting especially its head. It was also possible to identify a threshold of what could have been a door or a window in the walls of grave 12, confirming the reuse of the stone material of older structures in the settlement.



**Figure 8.** Grave 12 from the necropolis of Castro de São Domingos.



**Figure 9.** Grave 12 from the necropolis of Castro de São Domingos.



**Figure 10.** Grave 13 from the necropolis of Castro de São Domingos.



**Figure 11.** Grave 13 from the necropolis of Castro de São Domingos.



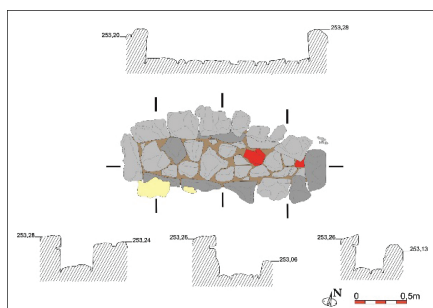
**Figure 12.** Bronze buckle hoop recovered from grave 11.

Graves 9 and 10 are the only ones associated with Phase III (Figures 13 to 15), the last period of occupation of the necropolis of *Castro de São Domingos* and both were registered in layers located above graves 2, 6, 7, 11, and 12.

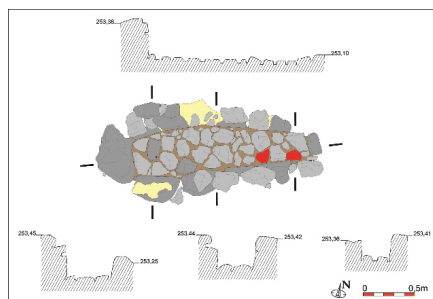
As for graves 4 and 5, located in the southwest limit of the excavated area of the necropolis, they seem to configure a different group of graves, which can only be validated in future archaeological works.



**Figure 13.** Graves 9 and 10 from the necropolis of Castro de São Domingos.



**Figure 14.** Drawing and section views of grave 9.



**Figure 15.** Drawing and section views of grave 10.

### *Location and chronological proposal*

The proximity of roads is sometimes pointed out as a condition for the location

and orientation of rock graves, as was the case of necropolis located along the roads during the Roman period and throughout the first centuries of the Middle Ages (Barroca and Morais, 1983). Especially the Romans built their funerary spaces intentionally far from the world of the living and near roads and passageways. This type of distancing has its roots in the pagan conception of death, according to which the coexistence of the spirit and corpse of the deceased in the burial place could have catastrophic consequences for the living (Barroca, 1987). Conversely, and according to Christian beliefs, proximity between the dead and the living did not pose a problem, in the sense that, after death, the soul leaves earthly life to reach eternity (Baumgartner, 2001; Vieira, 2004). However, this change in the mindset of early Christian communities was a long slow process. Germanic peoples kept the same distance between funerary and living spaces, and this metaphysical interaction with the world of the dead would remain unchanged in Western Europe until the 8<sup>th</sup>/ 9<sup>th</sup> centuries AD when both merged into the same space (Barroca, 1987). Although the organisation of the necropolis of the *Casa Romana do Castro de São Domingos* suggests some kind of ecclesiastical 'supervision', this does not prove *per se* the presence of a religious temple around which the necropolis might have been organised (Vieira, 2004). Even considering that the proximity of death and the living community would enable the salvation of the soul (Baumgartner, 2001; Tente and

Lourenço, 2002), the organisation of burials around churches seems to have been a later phenomenon that would only be generalised at the end of the Early Middle Ages. Until then, the same temple may have had different necropolises under their religious protection in different sites, and not necessarily around the temple (Barroca, 1987). Sarmento (1999) states that *Castro de São Domingos* was named after an old chapel that once stood on top of the hill and was dedicated to that same patron saint. Nevertheless, no remains of such religious temple have been detected, either on the half-slope platforms or at the top of *Castro de São Domingos* (Mendes-Pinto, 1994; 1995; 2008) in any of the archaeological works carried out so far. It is also worth noting that the choice of the location of the necropolis also seems to result from a detailed knowledge of the geological conditions of the area. All graves are located in an outcrop of pelitic hornfels limited to the east and west by similar granite rock outcrops (Novais et al., 2014), whose disaggregation properties allowed for an easy excavation of the graves.

One of the major questions arising from the archaeological excavations carried out so far (and which remains open) is the chronological framework of the necropolis of the *Casa Romana do Castro de São Domingos*. Based on the formal characteristics of the graves, it is possible to establish parallels with other necropolises excavated in Portugal. Such examples are the necropolis of Vale de Condes,

in Alcoutim (Inácio, 2010), Vale dos Sinos, in Mogadouro (Lemos and Marcos, 1984), S. Caetano, in Chaves (Lemos, 1987), São Miguel, in Caldas de Vizela (Queiroga, 2013; Arezes, 2017), or Laranjal de Cilhades, in Torre de Moncorvo (Santos et al., 2016). The graves identified at Laranjal de Cilhades feature the same raw materials as the ones used in this construction, being that the main differences (schist at Cilhades and granite and hornfels at *Castro de São Domingos*), are perfectly justifiable, and result from the need to use local geological materials in both necropolises. At Cilhades there is also a group of rectangular and/or trapezoidal stone box graves featuring scarce artefacts, as in Lousada, covered with transverse schist slabs closing the tombs (Santos et al., 2016). The researchers attributed a chronology between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries to the necropolis of Cilhades, based on two radiocarbon-dated burials, and the stone box graves seem to be the older ones within the necropolis (Santos et al., 2016).

The necropolis of São Miguel, in Caldas de Vizela (less than 12 kilometres away from *Castro de São Domingos*) would have been used between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries (Arezes, 2017) and it also shares typological similarities with the necropolis of Lousada. The fourteen graves excavated at São Miguel were also built with granite rocks of medium to large size, many of which were reused from Roman architectural elements (Arezes, 2017). Several graves also share common walls and the archaeological

materials and artefacts associated with the burials were very scarce. The authors discuss that the individuals buried in graves with a physical connection may have shared kinship (Arezes, 2017), which may also have been a reality in Lousada.

The architectural characteristics identified at *Castro de São Domingos* show that the necropolis may have been in use between the Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages – from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The older housing complex was transformed into a funerary space after the roman settlement was abandoned (between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD), once several graves had affected previous occupations dated from the Iron Age (graves 1, 3, 4, and 7). Furthermore, almost all graves were built using architectural elements from previous Roman housing structures. Unfortunately, the absence of human bones and several other limitations faced by the archaeological excavation at the necropolis of the *Castro de São Domingos* led to numerous questions that may only be compared and discussed with other similar archaeological sites, and a definitive answer might prove difficult to obtain. These limitations may only be overcome with new archaeological and anthropological evidence from future archaeological excavations to be carried out at the site.

## Conclusions

Human bones were absent in the fourteen graves excavated in the necropolis of

*Castro de São Domingos* and the acidity of the soil seems to have been the cause that has contributed the most, as is the case in similar necropolises located in northern Portugal. These limitations hindered the possibility to obtain deeper knowledge about the medieval population that once lived in the area currently known as Lousada. Notwithstanding, the length of the graves, all presenting canonical orientation, showed that at least two of them were meant for non-adult individuals.

Most of the graves have a sub-rectangular shape, while numbers 9 and 10 show a trapezoidal organization following the shape of the human body. Moreover, three different types of tombs were identified, and number 15 seemed to be the oldest, from which most of the remaining ones were organised. The southeast limits of the necropolis were also identified.

The absence of remains of a religious temple around which the necropolis might have been polarised raises the hypothesis of the existence of a funerary space developed near a road, following the Roman tradition. Unfortunately, the complete funerary organisation, typification of funerary architecture and chronology of the necropolis may only be completely clarified after future archaeological works are carried out at the archaeological site.

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