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RESEARCH ARTICLE

No time to die: Radiocarbon chronology of the funerary monument of El Amarejo 1 and burial practices during the Bronze Age in the Southern Meseta, Spain

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Abstract
This paper presents the radiocarbon context of the megalithic monument El Amarejo 1, situated in the corridor of Almansa in the southern region of La Meseta in Spain. The monument was constructed using small and medium-sized masonry, comprising a short corridor and two separate chambers in which burials were carried out. The results of the ^{14}C analyses of each of the 11 individuals documented indicate that the monument was in use between approximately 1900 and 1200 cal BC. Bayesian modeling of the radiocarbon dates allows for the proposition of hypotheses regarding the construction, utilisation dynamics, and abandonment of the monument. The combination of these new data with the analysis of the ^{14}C dating of other burials from the Bronze Age of La Mancha reveals a complex and heterogeneous panorama. The evidence presented and analyzed in this paper suggests that burial practices associated with fortified settlements and their domestic areas shared space and time with the construction of megalithic monuments located near settlements.

1. Introduction

Stone structures were commonly used to create funerary spaces in various parts of the world during recent Prehistory. This practice was especially common during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods on the European continent (Laporte and Scarre 2015; Laporte et al. 2022; Müller et al. 2019; Schulz Paulsson 2019). Recent discussions have taken place regarding the origin and duration of this architectural tradition in the Iberian Peninsula based on extensive radiocarbon series and their statistical estimates (Lozano Medina and Aranda Jiménez 2018; Pardo-Gordó and Carvalho 2020; Fernández-Crespo et al. 2021; Aranda Jiménez et al. 2022; García-Sanjuán et al. 2022; Linares-Catela 2022). Archaeological evidence shows that the first megaliths appeared on the Atlantic coast in the 5th millennium BC and gradually spread over a large part of the Iberian Peninsula. Throughout the 5th and 4th millennia BC, a wide variety of structures were constructed for different purposes and traditions, including collective burials and individual graves. For instance, a comprehensive study on tholos megalithic tombs has analyzed their appearance and evolution in the southern region of the peninsula (Aranda Jiménez et al. 2020, 2021). This work has shown that this type of structure was in use during the Chalcolithic, although many of them were intensively reused during the Bronze Age and even in historic times, as previously proposed (Lorrio Alvarado 2008; Barroso Bermejo et al. 2012; Aranda

Jiménez et al. 2017). This evidence suggests that these monuments can be considered landmarks connected to the landscape and to the memory of the different human communities that have occupied the same territory over the centuries and millennia.

After over 100 years of research on megaliths in the Iberian Peninsula, the distribution map seems clear (Leisner and Leisner 1943; García-Sanjuan et al. 2022). The greatest concentrations of these structures, especially the funerary ones, have been documented on the Atlantic façade, Cantabrian range, Pyrenees, and Southern Iberia, especially around the Guadalquivir valley and in the Southeast. No megalithic tombs had been documented outside these regions, especially in the eastern part of the Iberian Peninsula. In this vast region, the lack of granitic rocks would make it difficult to find large orthostats with which to build monuments (Pericot García 1950; Tarradell Mateu 1965; Llobregat Conesa 1965; Muñoz Amilibia 1985; Soler Díaz 2002). Some of these researchers have suggested that the karstic geological substratum of the eastern Iberian Peninsula favoured the use of natural caves as necropolises. Other researchers have linked the "megalithic culture" to the development and expansion of metallurgical technology, arguing that megaliths have only been documented in areas where there were copper-bearing veins, which were not present in Eastern Iberia (Fernández Vega and Galán Saulnier 1986). With similar reasoning, J. Lomba Maurandi (1999) suggested that the limiting factor was the Segura River basin, which would have acted as a natural boundary between the Los Millares culture in the south, which is characterized by an important megalithic phenomenon, and the northern regions, where collective burial rituals in caves predominated.

From a sociological point of view, some researchers have suggested that the absence of complex societies in the eastern part of the peninsula would have limited the development of megalithism, which in the south is linked to hierarchical societies (Jordá Cerdá 1958). Several researchers have argued that the consolidation of Neolithic traditions in the eastern area, characterized by using caves as burial sites (Bernabéu Aubán et al. 2001; Soler Díaz 2002), would have limited the spread of megalithism to this area.

Thus, the central and eastern parts of the peninsula were absent from the megalithic monument distribution maps (Leisner and Leisner 1959). However, later works (Bueno Ramírez 1991; Bueno Ramírez et al. 2002, 2004, 2005) have highlighted the importance of this architectural and funerary tradition in the central Meseta, especially in the province of Toledo. Recently, evidence documented in various parts of the southern Meseta has revealed the existence of an architectural tradition based on the monumentalisation of burials. It is in this tradition that we must place the evidence that has recently been found at the site of El Amarejo 1.

2. Archaeological background: The funerary monument of El Amarejo 1

El Amarejo 1 funerary monument was excavated during September and October 2021 due to the imminent construction of a high-voltage tower. The archaeological site is located on the side of a small hill near the town of Bonete (Albacete, Castilla-La Mancha) (38°51′32″N, 1°21′04″W, WGS84), situated in the eastern part of the southern Meseta. It is close to the Almansa Corridor, a historical route that connected the centre of the Iberian Peninsula with the Mediterranean Sea (Figure 1). The monument is located at an elevation of 933 meters above sea level and at a height of 15 meters above the surrounding terrain. The stone used in the construction of the tomb is limestone from the surrounding area. It has gastropod and bivalve impressions that point to a geological age of the end of the Lower Cretaceous and the beginning of the Upper Cretaceous.

The burial area is enclosed by a large stone wall. It consists of an ellipsoidal structure measuring approximately 18 square meters (6.8 × 3.8 m along its main axes). During the excavation, several walls made of large stone slabs were discovered, separating different chambers. Chamber 1, located at the northern end, had a polygonal floor plan and a usable area of 1.6 square meters. To the south of this area, several vertical slabs separate Chamber 2, which extends into a narrow corridor and has a usable area of 2.4 square meters. The stones that form the walls of both chambers and the corridor are of medium size (the largest measures 75 × 55 × 45 cm) and are erected vertically. Although the state of preservation of

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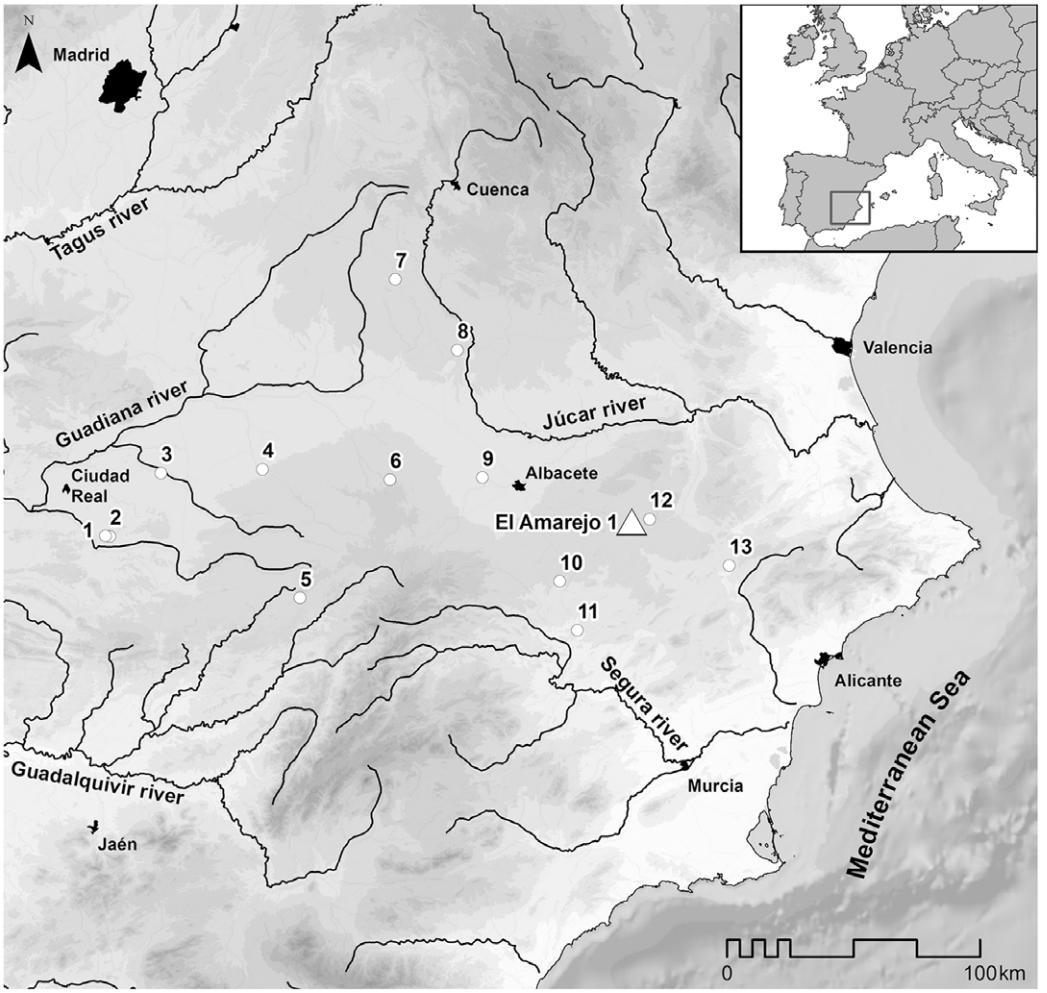

Figure 1. *Location of the funerary monument of El Amarejo 1 and other sites with Bronze Age funerary evidence in the southern Meseta (1. Bocapucheros; 2. Cerro de la Encantada; 3. Motilla del Azuer; 4 Motilla de Santa María del Retamar; 5. El Castillejo del Bonete; 6. Morra del Quintanar; 7. Los Dornajos; 8. El Cerro del Pelao; 9. El Acequión; 10. Peña del Gigante; 11. Tolmo de Minateda; 12. Cerro de El Cuchillo; 13. Cabezo de la Escoba) (Base map produced from SRTM 90m Digital Elevation Database v4.1 and World Ocean Base ESRI ArcGIS Map Service).*

the monument is not optimal, it can be considered that the ceiling of the funerary spaces must not have been much higher than what is preserved (ca. 75 cm). During the excavation, no traces of earthen mortar were detected, indicating that the structure must have been built in dry stone. The burial deposit was covered by several stone slabs, which can be interpreted as part of the roof of both chambers. Inside the structure, there was a semi-oval space of about 5.8 square meters on the eastern side, which was not used as a burial chamber. No human bones, grave goods, or roofing materials were discovered inside.

Several stones were documented around the main structure, with the majority arranged horizontally and placed in concentric rings. The space between these rings was filled with earth, gravel, and a few ceramic fragments, which can be interpreted as an anthropic deposit. The terraced arrangement of the rings and the characteristics of the fill allow us to consider the existence of an oval mound measuring approximately 6 × 8.6 meters (ca. 44 sq m), which would surround and cover the burial spaces (Figures 2–3).

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Figure 2. *Aerial view of the monument of El Amarejo 1 during the excavation process.*

During the excavation of these two chambers and the corridor, 3020 human remains were discovered. Of these, 1186 were anatomically identified, revealing the high degree of fragmentation caused by the collapse of the cover and other post-depositional changes. Only teeth, phalanges, carpals and some femora and humeri were complete or partially complete (Sancho Peris 2023). Even though some long bones were found in anatomical association, only Individual 6 was documented in the primary position, although it was altered by the roots of the vegetation that covered the site. The state of preservation of the human remains could suggest they are secondary deposits and the transfer of part of the bodies long bones and skulls from other deposits. However, the presence of other human small anatomical parts points to primary burials that would have been disarticulated and piled up next to the wall of the chambers as new burials were made.

The minimum number of individuals (MNI) was estimated by evaluating the frequency of each bone type and anatomical part represented, as well as considering laterality and bone maturity. In Chamber 1, the MNI was determined to be 5 based on the presence of 5 left femura and 5 left humeri from adult individuals. Similarly, in Chamber 2, the MNI was determined to be 5 from the identification of 4 adult left femura and 1 left femur from an infant individual. The bones exhumed in the corridor did not show any repetitions or incompatibilities, leading to an MNI of 1. In summary, it has been determined that there are 11 MNI, including 10 adult individuals of various ages and one infant (1–6 years old). Sex estimation was based on the dimorphism observed on the femura (Krogman and Isçan 1986). The remains from Chamber 1 may correspond to three male and two female individuals. In Chamber 2, the size and gracility/robustness characteristics suggest that two of the adult individuals would be male and the other two female, making it impossible to estimate the sex of the infant. Based on the same criteria, the individual in the corridor can be identified as an adult male.

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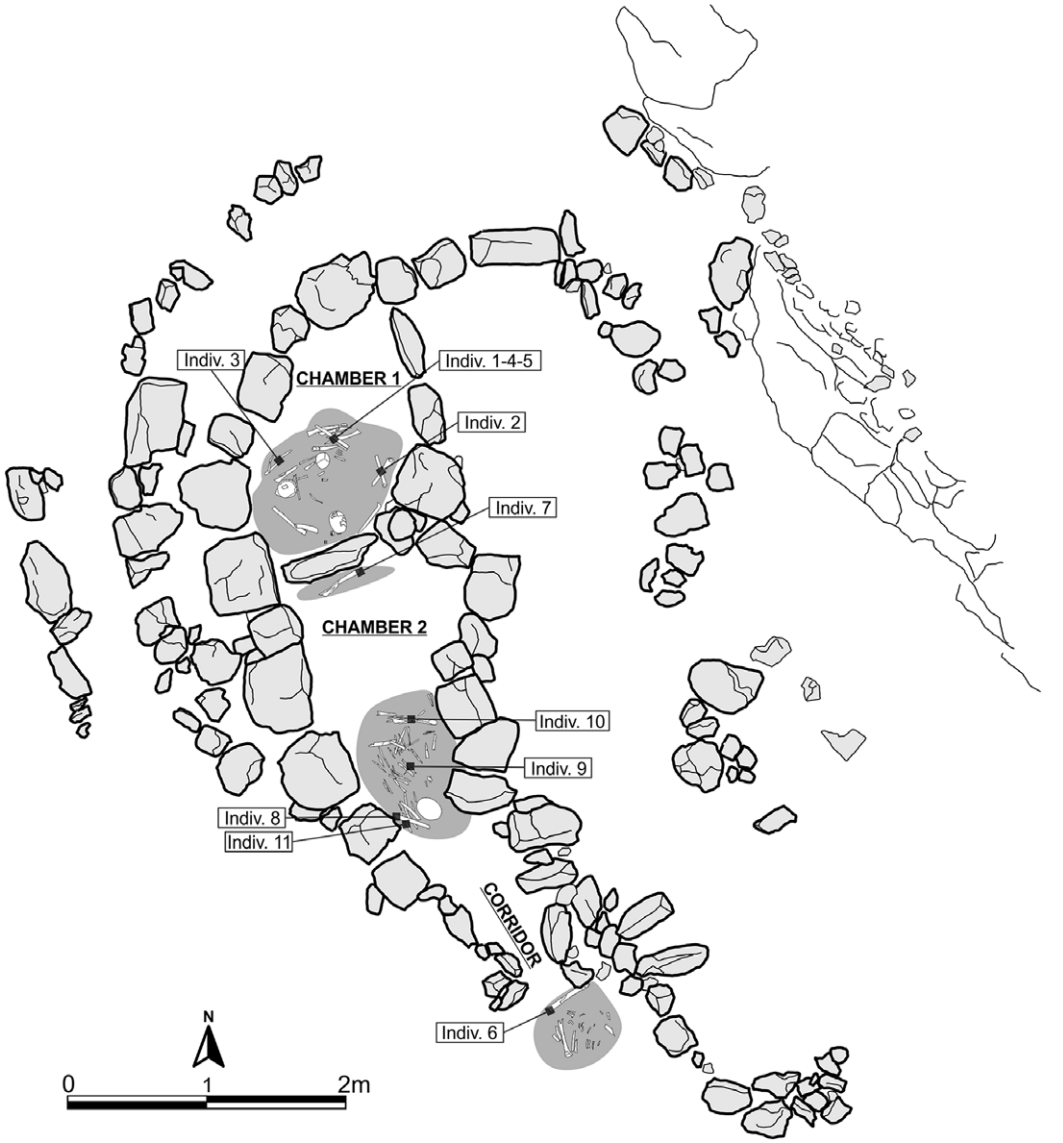

Figure 3. *Planimetry of the funerary monument of El Amarejo 1 with an indication of the location of the samples selected for ^{14}C dating (in gray, area of dispersal of human bones).*

Along with the human remains, some objects were found that should be interpreted as grave goods (Figure 4). These include several personal ornaments such as necklace beads made of shell, stone, lignite, glass, and gold, as well as two bronze objects (a double-pointed punch and a possible earring) and several pieces of flint. Among the latter, it is worth noting the presence of a fragment of a blade, type characteristic of Chalcolithic grave goods in the region (Soler Díaz 2002; García Atiénzar and de Miguel Ibáñez 2009). However, in several nearby Bronze Age settlements (Broncano Rodríguez and Blánquez Pérez 1985; Hernández Pérez et al. 1994) the persistence of these type of pieces has been likewise documented. In different contexts, the presence of these flint blades has been interpreted because of recycling old items (Jover Maestre 1997; Martínez Fernández and Afonso Marrero 2012). Another significant piece in relation to the chronology is the

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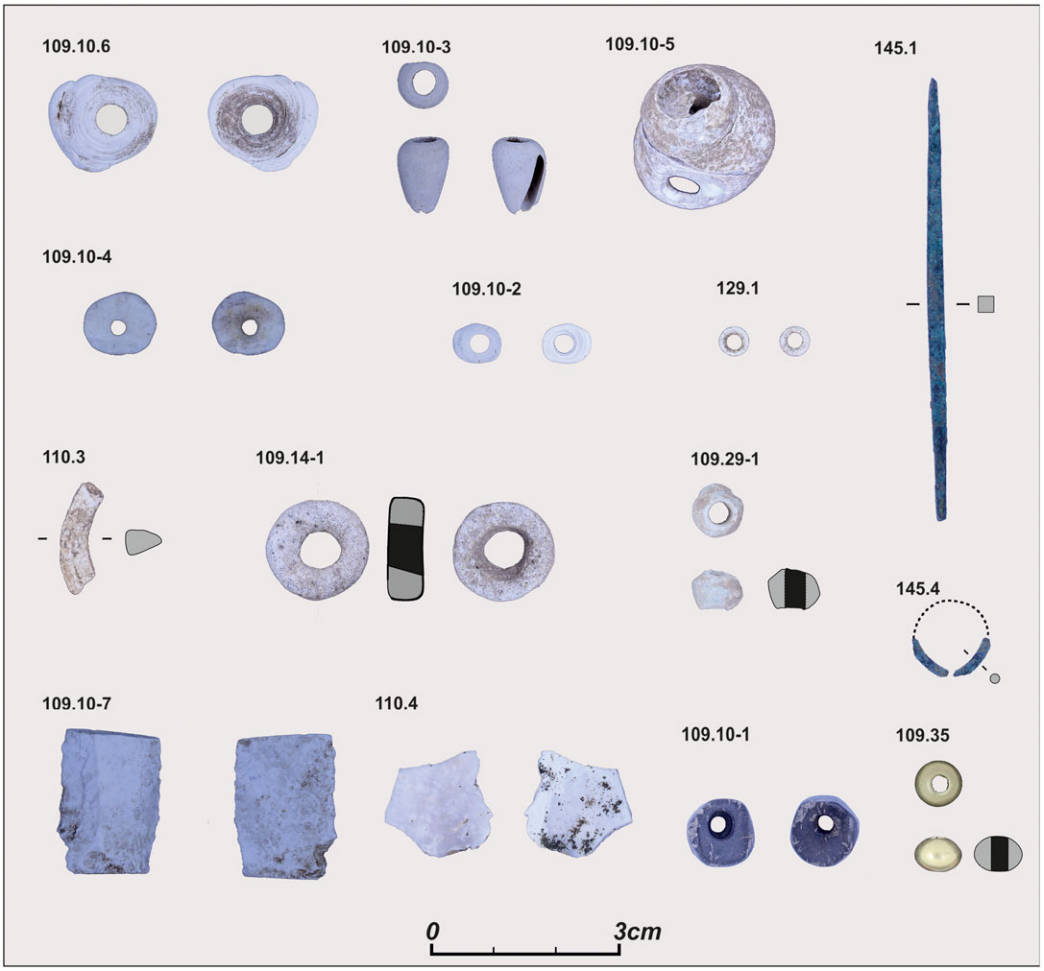

Figure 4. *Grave goods located in the funerary monument of El Amarejo 1.*

glass bead. The analysis carried out (Bettineschi et al. 2024) has identify it as glass faience thanks to stereomicroscopic observations and SEM imaging. From a typological perspective, it is a light blue biconical bead, very similar in shape and dimension to the faience from of the Early Bronze Age unearthed throughout Europe (Sheridan et al. 2004; Tite et al. 2008). Its classification as glassy faience, however, supports a later dating, starting from approx. 1700-1650 cal BC onwards, as testified different types of beads recovered in northern and central Italy in context dated in Middle Bronze Age (Santopadre and Verità 2000; Bellintani et al. 2005).

3. Material and methods

Sample selection was carried out following the osteoarcheological study, once all remains had been identified at the anatomical, sex, and age levels. A total of 11 samples were taken, 10 from identified adult left femura and one from the right femur of the infant individual. This strategy ensured that sampling avoided duplication and that the MNI of buried individuals was analyzed.

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3.1. Collagen extraction

Bone collagen extraction from all samples was carried out at the ANTARQBIO laboratory of the Universitat de València (Spain) using the Longin method (Longin 1971) with an added ultrafiltration step (Richards and Hedges 1999). Following surface cleaning, the samples were immersed in 0.5 M HCl to remove the inorganic fraction and kept at ca. 5ºC. After the demineralization process, the samples were rinsed three times with highly purified deionized water (less than 1 µS/cm) until a neutral pH was achieved, following the methodology of Salazar-García et al. (2021). Subsequently, 0.5 mL drops of HCl were added to the sample tube filled with deionized water until an acidic solution with a pH between 2 and 3 was obtained. The samples were then gelatinized in a heater block at a temperature of 70°C for 48 hours. The solubilized samples were then filtered with a 5 mm EZEE© filter, followed by an ultrafiltration step using >30 kDa Amicon© ultrafilters in order to retrieve the best-preserved collagen molecules for analysis. The ultrafiltered sample solution was frozen at a temperature of ca. –25ºC in a regular freezer, and just before transferring it to the freeze-dryer they were placed in an ultra-freezer at –80ºC to avoid any of it melting during the process. The samples were then lyophilized in a 4.5-liter Labconco FreeZone™ freeze-dryer at –50ºC for 48 hours. Prior to analysis the extracted collagen was weighed, stored in microcentrifuge tubes, and its yield calculated (Ambrose 1990; De Niro 1985).

3.2. Radiocarbon dating

Radiocarbon dating of the collagen was carried out at the Curt-Engelhorn-Center Archaeometry GmbH (Mannheim, Germany). Sample material was combusted in an elemental analyzer (EA) to produce CO_2. The CO_2 was then catalytically converted to graphite. ^{14}C was analyzed using an in-house MICADAS type AMS system. The $^{14}C/^{12}C$ and $^{13}C/^{12}C$ isotope ratios of samples, calibration standard (Oxalic Acid II), blanks, and control standards were measured simultaneously in the AMS. The $\delta^{13}C$ value was obtained from the isotope determination in the AMS system with a typical uncertainty of 2‰. This value can be affected by isotopic fractionation in the ion source and during graphitization and is used only for fractionation correction. Therefore, this value is not comparable to that obtained by stable isotope IRMS and should not be used for further data interpretation. ^{14}C ages were normalized to ^{13}C=–25‰ (Stuiver and Polach 1977) and calibrated using the IntCal20 atmospheric dataset (Reimer et al. 2020) and OxCal 4.4 software (Bronk Ramsey 2021). The presentation of the data (Table 1) follows the recommendations of Millard (2014). The C:N ratio of collagen fell between 3.3 and 3.5 (DeNiro 1985), so it is considered to be of good quality. The standard deviations are relatively small; the only sample that differs is that of Individual 9, although the result is consistent with the rest of the assemblage and the data are consistent with what has been recorded at nearby and contemporary sites. All samples have a relative collagen content better than 1%, except Individual 5.

4. Results

The calibration of the 11 ^{14}C dates from El Amarejo 1 indicates that the monument was in use for a prolonged period, spanning approximately from 1900 to 1200 cal BC (Table 1; Figure 5). No discernible internal order is observed, nor is there any correlation between the different funerary events. To enhance the temporal analysis of the monument, we consider that the use of Bayesian statistics (Bronk Ramsey 2008, 2009) can facilitate a more nuanced interpretation of the different events, despite the inherent limitations of the method as discussed by Buck et al. (1996). In the case of megalithic tombs, which exhibit diverse processes of construction and modification, as well as a succession of collective burials, the application of Bayesian models has been demonstrated to be a valid method for determining the chronology of periods of funerary activity, the temporal boundaries or duration of each phase, the identification of periods of activity, the intervals between phases, and the periods of disuse (Schulz Paulsson 2019; Díaz-Navarro et al. 2022; Linares-Catela 2022).

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Table 1. *Calibrated radiocarbon dating of the El Amarejo 1 (OxCal v.4.4 Bronk Ramsey 2021; r: 5 IntCal20 atmospheric data from Reimer et al. 2020)*

No.	Age/ Sex	Archaeological info	Lab. ref. MAMS	^{14}C age [BP]	Std	δ^{13}C AMS [‰]	C:N	% yield collagen	Cal BC Probability 68.3%	Cal BC Probability 95.4%
1	Adult/ Male	Chamber 1 UE 105+109.3	63348	3528	17	–16.9	3.3	1.4	1895–1875 (21.4%) 1844–1820 (26.7%) 1799–1778 (20.1%)	1930–1868 (36,1%) 1850–1772 (59.3%)
2	Adult/ Male	Chamber 1 UE 109.11	63351	2995	16	–21.6	3.4	3.5	1212–1188 (22.3%) 1179–1155(23.7%) 1148–1127 (22.3%)	1257–1246 (1.6%) 1229–1112 (92.9%) 1090–1085 (0.5%) 1063–1060 (0.4%)
3	Adult/ Female	Chamber 1 UE 109.19	63352	3096	17	–16.1	3.3	2.6	1411–1383 (32.5%) 1341–1311 (35.8%)	1422–1368 (44.8%) 1357–1296 (50.6%)
4	Adult/ Male	Chamber 1 UE 109.4	63349	3168	16	–17.5	3.3	2.8	1492–1482 (13.3%) 1450–1421 (55%)	1497–1471 (25%) 1464–1412 (70.5%)
5	Adult/ Female	Chamber 1 UE 109.5	63350	3133	17	–18.3	3.3	0.8	1436–1397 (68.3%)	1448–1383 (82.2%) 1341–1315 (13.2%)
6	Adult/ Male	Corridor UE 112	63353	3247	18	–10.4	3.3	1.9	1532–1498 (61.8%) 1471–1465 (6.5%)	1538–1491 (71.1%) 1485–1449 (24.4%)
7	Adult/ Female	Chamber 2 UE 106.1	63354	3181	17	–13.3	3.3	3.1	1495–1477 (26.7%) 1457–1428 (41.6%)	1499–1422 (95.4%)
8	Adult/ Female	Chamber 2 UE 127.1	63355	3245	21	–6.6	3.4	2.8	1532–1497 (53.9%) 1474–1461 (14.3%)	1540–1444 (95.4%)
9	Adult/ Male	Chamber 2 UE 127.10	63357	3404	30	–1.8	3.3	2.2	1741–1709 (24.9%) 1700–1667 (24.6%) 1658–1632 (18.8%)	1868–1850 (2.9%) 1770–1617 (92.5%)
10	Infantil/ Undet.	Chamber 2 UE 127.6	63356	2983	17	–15.0	3.5	2.2	1260–1198 (55.6%) 1171–1165 (4.6%) 1142–1132 (8.1%)	1267–1154 (82.1%) 1149–1126 (13.4%)
11	Adult/ Male	Chamber 2 UE 145.2.9	63358	3320	17	–10.7	3.3	1.9	1614–1600 (16%) 1586–1544 (52.3%)	1622–1534 (95.4%)

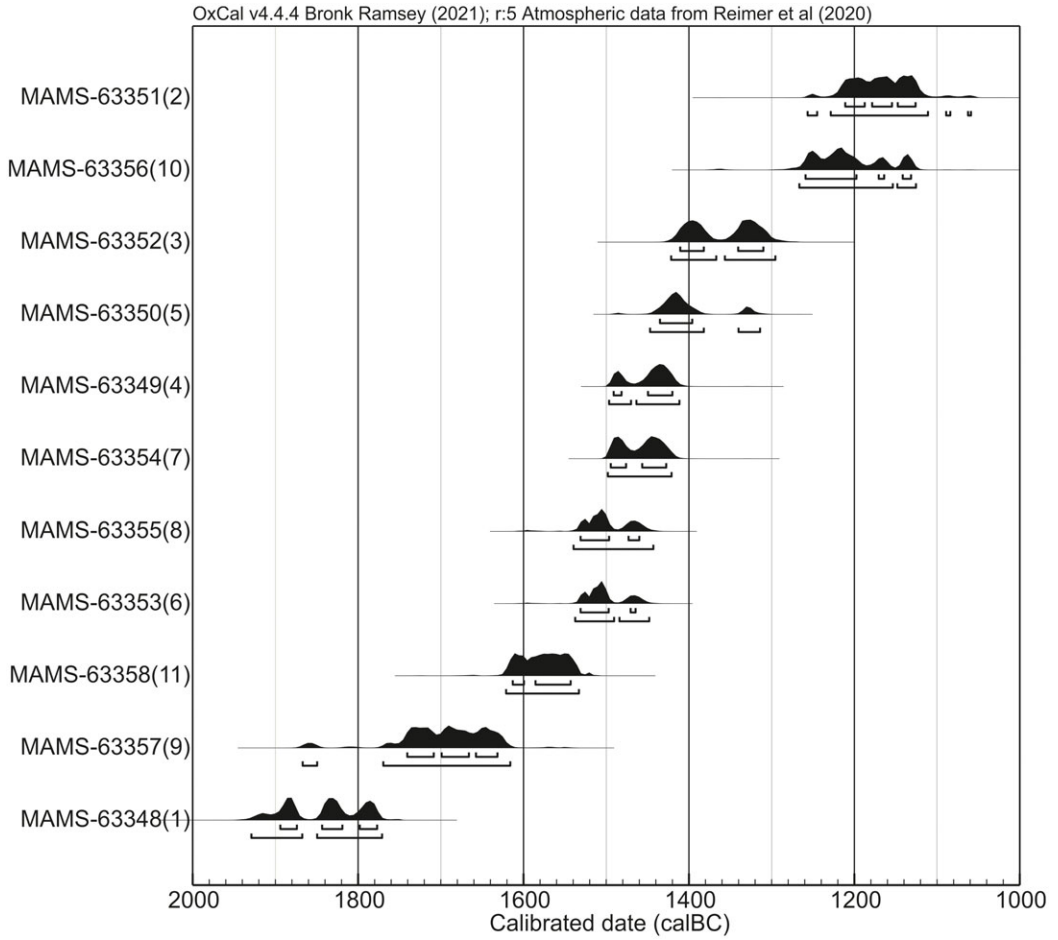

Figure 5. *Calibrated radiocarbon dating from El Amarejo 1. The numbers in parentheses after the laboratory code refer to the code of each individual (OxCal v.4.4 Bronk Ramsey 2021; r:5 IntCal20 atmospheric data from Reimer et al. 2020).*

A first Bayesian model assumes that there is no temporal sequence between the burial events and their corresponding dates. Assuming it is uniformly distributed, this model allows us to generate estimations for the beginning and end of the burial activity using the OxCal Span function (Bronk Ramsey 2009). The results suggest that the beginning of the burial activity could be dated between 1904 and 1784 cal BC, with a 68.3% probability, while the end could fall within the period 1203 and 1089 cal BC (Supplementary Material 1.1). In terms of calendar years, the monument would have a relatively long duration, spanning between 571 and 670 years (68.3%) (Figure 6; Supplementary Material 1.1). Accordingly, given the estimated MNI of 11 individuals and a 25-year generation length (Wang et al. 2023), it can be posited that only one interment occurred every 2.2 generations.

The dates are not distributed sequentially over this prolonged period, indicating that the burial chambers may have been used simultaneously. This suggests that the architectural separation between the chambers allowed for passage between them, possibly by shifting the vertical stone slab separating them (Figure 9a). However, it cannot be ruled out that there was an independent access to Chamber 1, given the degree of preservation of the structure, which would not have been preserved in the stratigraphy. As previously mentioned, only one individual was found in primary

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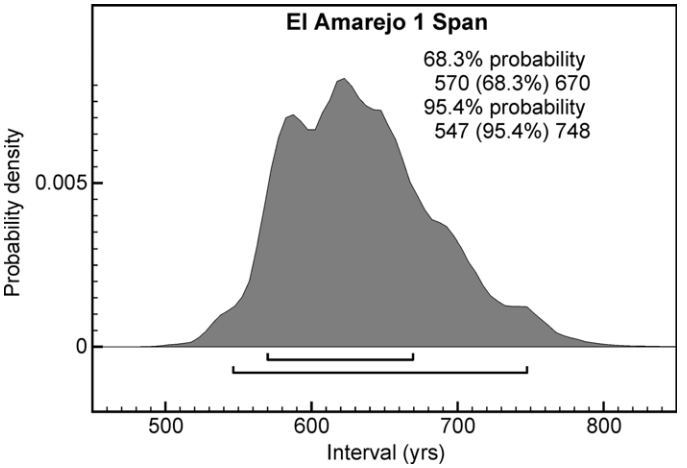

Figure 6. *Probabilistic range for the duration of the funerary events of the El Amarejo 1 monument.*

position inside this monument. Additionally, several long bones, including the dated femura of individuals 1, 4 and 5, were found together, which could indicate the transformation of the burial deposit. The modification of the deposit is also indicated by the absence of human bones or grave goods in certain areas of both chambers (see Figure 3). This confirms that the space was altered during the later burials.

Given the archaeological information and the continuous modification of the funerary spaces, as well as the division of the monument into two chambers, it is possible to consider the alternative hypothesis that both spaces could have functioned independently. This hypothesis assumes that there was no temporal relationship between the use of each of the chambers. To test this hypothesis, we suggest a second Bayesian model that treats each chamber as an independent entity (Figure 9b; Supplementary Material 1.2). Furthermore, by using the sum of probabilities (Bronk Ramsey 1995, 2009), we were able to evaluate the strength and duration of activity in each chamber, as well as identify gaps in their temporal development (Figure 6).

If we apply this hypothesis (Figure 7; Supplementary Material 1.2), the start of the funerary use of Chamber 1 (Individual 1) would be between 1890–1775 cal BC (68.3%). After a period of over 300 calendar years, three burials (Individuals 3, 4, and 5) were recorded in close succession, each separated by one generation. The burial of Individual 2, which could be between 1268–1212 cal BC (68.3%), is dated after a new time hiatus. Chamber 1 would have a relatively long use, between 522 and 637 years (68.3%). The use of Chamber 2 began between 1700–1622 cal BC (68.3%) with the inhumation of Individual 9. This event occurred over 100 years after the start of Chamber 1. After about a century without inhumations, a new inhumation (Individual 11) must have taken place. More than two generations later, individuals 6 and 8 were buried simultaneously. Like for Chamber 1, the final burial (Individual 10) occurred after a prolonged period of inactivity, estimated to be between 1265–1198 cal BC (68.3%). The duration of funerary use for this chamber is estimated to be between 377 and 501 calendar years (68.3%), which is shorter than that of Chamber 1. The correlation indices for each date and for the model of two independent sequences are approximately 100%, showing their consistency.

Finally, the $\chi 2$ test (Ward and Wilson 1978) was performed by combining the dates provided by individuals 2 (Chamber 1) and 10 (Chamber 2) using the OxCal Combine function (Bronk Ramsey 2009) (Figure 8; Supplementary Material 1.4). The result –T'=0.3(5% 3.8)– shows a clear temporal proximity between the last burial events of each chamber, being practically contemporaneous with the second half of the 13th century cal BC.

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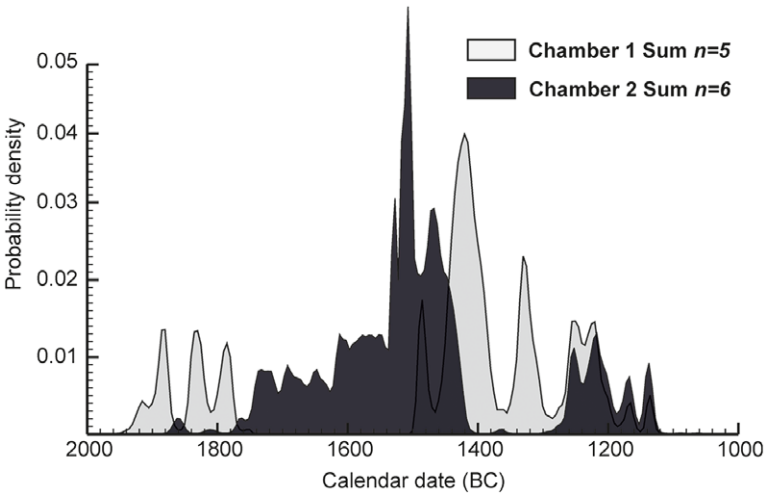

Figure 7. *Sum of probabilities of the radiocarbon dates of each of the chambers of the funerary monument of El Amarejo 1.*

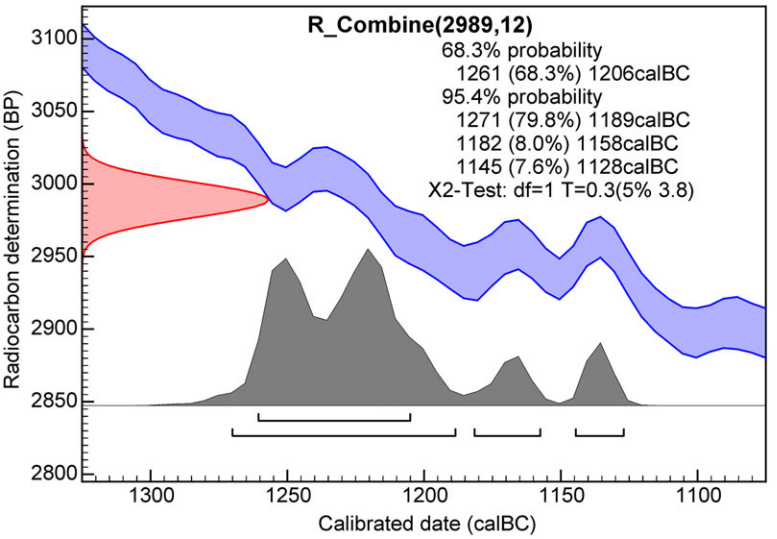

Figure 8. *Result of the contemporaneity test of the dates marking the end of use of each of the chambers.*

5. Discussion

5.1. La Mancha Bronze Age funerary practices: chronological synthesis

The funerary monument of El Amarejo 1 was used and abandoned within the historical dynamics of what is known as the La Mancha Bronze Age. This period was characterized by several aspects, including the development of an extensive network of settlements, most of which were fortified. These settlements were referred to by different names such as motillas, morras or castillejos (Martín Morales 1984; Nájera Colino 1984; Martínez Navarrete 1988; Fernández-Posse et al. 2008) and were located near watercourses or lagoons (Martín Morales et al. 1993; Aranda Jiménez et al. 2008; Benítez de Lugo Enrich and Mejías Moreno 2015). Funerary practices have been identified in several fortified

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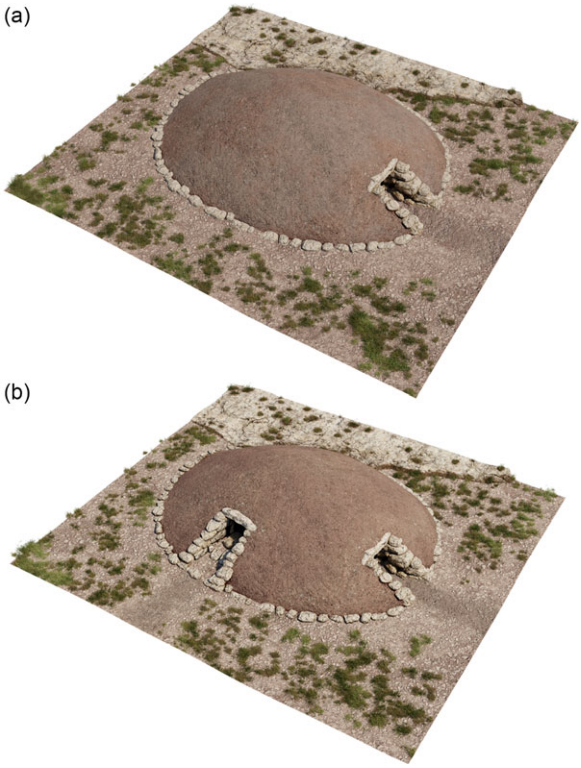

Figure 9. *Virtual reconstruction of the funerary monument of El Amarejo 1. (a) Hypothesis 1, in which a single access to both chambers is proposed. (b) Hypothesis 2, in which the existence of two different accesses to each chamber is considered.*

settlements, showing significant heterogeneity (Benítez de Lugo Enrich 2018). This contrasts with the apparently uniform funerary practices of neighbouring cultures, such as the Valencian Bronze Age (de Pedro Michó 2010; Jover Maestre and López Padilla 2011) and El Argar (Lull Santiago 2000; Molina González et al 2019; Lull Santiago et al. 2021). However, in the latter culture, the persistence of chalcolithic practices has been documented (Aranda Jiménez et al. 2018).

To provide a context for the site of El Amarejo 1, we will summarize nearby evidence related to funerary events (Supplementary Material 2). We have used the data published by other researchers (Salazar-García et al. 2013; Balsera Nieto et al. 2016; Balsera Nieto 2017, 2022; Nájera Colino et al. 2019; Sánchez Meseguer and Galán Saulnier 2019; Benítez de Lugo Enrich 2022) and collected from the IdeArq database to assess their chronology. Statistical modeling has been performed for each site (Supplementary Material 3), both for the complete dating series and for those related to funerary events. However, in cases where the dating series has already been statistically analyzed, we have preferred to keep the suggestions already published (El Acequión: Balsera Nieto et al. 2016; Balsera Nieto 2017, 2022; Motilla del Azuer: Nájera Colino et al. 2019). Similarly, we excluded ^{14}C dates that were considered incoherent by other researchers (Nájera Colino et al. 2019: 322). With this proposal, we aimed to generate statistical estimates for the beginning and end of the occupation of the sites and their funerary events. The duration of these events in calendar years has been estimated using the OxCal Span function (Bronk Ramsey 2009).

In the site of Bocapucheros (Almagro, Ciudad Real) (Benítez de Lugo Enrich et al. 2022) different rooms were identified in a complex relationship below the covering mounds of approximately 30 m in diameter (Figure 11a). The construction of the monument seems to have begun in the Late Chalcolithic (Bell Beaker), although its use continued until the Bronze Age. This is supported by published dates

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($n = 2$) that place the burial between 1872 and 1692 cal BC (68.3%) (Supplementary Material 3.1). However, it will be necessary to await the final publication of the site to establish its chronological range, owing to abundant human remains in various chambers.

Another case is Castillejo del Bonete (Terrinches, Ciudad Real), a monument built in a natural cave covered with large blocks of stones. A complex series of interconnected galleries were built around the cave. A large burial mound, 24 m in diameter, covers the entire monument (Figure 11b). Funerary evidence varies from double burials to secondary deposits (Benítez de Lugo Enrich et al. 2014; Benítez de Lugo Enrich and Esteban López 2018). A minimum of 20 individuals have been estimated (Benítez de Lugo 2018), of which only four have been dated. Although the sample size is limited, it is possible to estimate the burial use between 304 and 480 calendar years, between 2539 and 1707 cal BC (68.3%) (Supplementary Material 3.2). However, considering these dates along with those obtained from non-human samples ($n = 8$), the monument could have had a much longer life, between 1185 and 1308 calendar years, starting at the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC (Chalcolithic) and ending around 1454 cal BC (Supplementary Material 3.3). The comparison of these two periods shows that the burial event, although of longer duration, would have been in the central moments of the monument's use.

The closest settlement to El Amarejo 1 with ^{14}C dates is El Cerro del Cuchillo (Almansa, Albacete) (Hernández Pérez et al. 1994). Burials were found in the domestic areas of the fortification or on the outer platforms (De Miguel Ibáñez 2002). The dating of four of these individuals has recently been published (Balsera Nieto 2022). With the limitations of the number of individuals dated, it can be proposed that the burial event occurred over a period of approximately 118 calendar years, between 1949 and 1836 cal BC (68.3%) (Supplementary Material 3.4). This period is consistent with dating of long-life samples ($n = 9$) obtained from habitat contexts (Hernández Pérez et al. 1994) and their statistical modeling, which places settlement occupation between 1941 and 1814 cal BC (68.3%) and an estimated maximum duration of 168 calendar years (Supplementary Material 3.5).

At La Motilla de El Acequión (Albacete), six inhumations have been documented (2 adults, 1 infant II –7-12 years– and 3 infants I –0-6 years–), four of which have been dated (1 adult and 3 infants), all of them were recovered from pits without grave goods (Balsera Nieto et al. 2016). These burials are stratigraphically placed in phases 2 and 3A-3B and are dated between 2126 and 1801 cal BC (68.3%), with a duration between 187 and 311 calendar years (Supplementary Material 3.6). Bayesian modeling performed on all dates ($n = 24$; Balsera Nieto et al. 2016; Balsera Nieto 2017) shows a sequence divided into 4 phases: the first three with a continuous occupation between 2280 and 1760 cal BC (68.3%) and the fourth with a reoccupation dated between 1410 and 1230 cal BC (68.3%), in which no funerary events were documented.

At least 65 individuals were identified at La Motilla del Azuer (Daimiel, Ciudad Real; Figure 11d), mostly found in individual graves (simple pits, pits lined with slabs and stones, or pithoi for children). All age and sex groups were represented (Nájera Colino et al. 2010, 2012). The bodies were deposited in flexed lateral decubitus position. While women were buried on the right side, men were buried on the left side, with some exceptions. Only one-third of burials had grave goods. In most cases, they consist of a single object, usually a ceramic vessel (Nájera Colino et al. 2012). There are 24 valid dates for human remains, corresponding to 22 individuals (samples from two individuals were duplicated) (Nájera Colino et al. 2019, Table 1; Supplementary Material 3.7). The beginning of funerary practices (phase 1; $n = 2$) could be dated to the end of the 3rd millennium BC –2203 and 2051 cal BC (68.3%)– in connection with the foundation of the Bronze Age fortified site. For phase 2 ($n = 7$), the burial dates are distributed between 2072 and 1885 cal BC (68.3%). In phase 3, the phase with the highest number of events ($n = 8$), burials are dated between 1901 and 1671 cal BC (68.3%). Finally, for phase 4 ($n = 5$) a duration of burial events between 1619 and 1391 cal BC (68.3%) can be proposed. Considering all dated burials, a duration between 643 and 767 calendar years, between 2171 and 1398 cal BC (68.3%), can be proposed. This is the site with the largest radiocarbon series in the region ($n = 70$), which has allowed the proposal of five phases (0: 3080–2890 cal BC; 1: 2200–1950 cal BC; 2: 1950–1875 cal BC; 3: 1875–1600 cal BC; 4: 1600–1350 cal BC) consistent with funerary events (Nájera Colino et al. 2019).

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Other burial contexts have been documented during the Bronze Age in La Mancha, although they lack radiocarbon dates. La Motilla de Santa María del Retamar (Argamasilla de Alba, Ciudad Real) was occupied between 1950 and 1894 cal BC (68.3%) (Supplementary Material 3.8). Four burials in slab or masonry pits were documented, but human remains were found in only three; none of them had associated grave goods (Colmenarejo Hernández et al. 1987). Another outstanding site is El Cerro de la Encantada (Granátula de Calatrava, Ciudad Real; Figure 11c), which was occupied between 2367 and 1494 cal BC (68.3%) (Supplementary Material 3.9) (Sánchez Meseguer and Galán Gaulnier 2019). This is a fortified settlement in which more than 70 burials have been documented, both in simple pits and cists or pithoi. They were accompanied by important grave goods, such as ceramic vessels, weapons, copper tools, and ornaments (Martín Morales 1984; Romero Salas and Sánchez Meseguer 1988; Monsalve et al. 2014). Another case is La Morra del Quintanar (Munera, Albacete), which was occupied between 2254 and 1576 cal BC (68.3%). A few inhumations were documented in pits. The bodies were placed in the right lateral decubitus position, and all age and sex groups were recorded (Fernández-Posse and Martín Morales 2007). An ivory bracelet stained with ochre and an archer's bracer with silver rivets are the only grave goods of note. In El Tolmo de Minateda (Hellín, Albacete), three individual burials have been documented in pits and in association with domestic spaces (Cánovas Guillén 2023). Burials have also been reported in the settlements of Cerro del Pelao (Díaz-Andreu García 1994) and Los Dornajos (Galán Saulnier and Poyato Holgado 1978; Galán Saulnier 2016).

Although unrelated to the Bronze Age in La Mancha, we should mention other funerary contexts built far from the settlements. One of these is the collective burial at Peña del Gigante (Tobarra, Albacete) within a monument built with large stone slabs. Nine individuals were found inside the monument, whose grave goods consisted of cylindrical bone ornament, fragment of a metal needle, and ceramic vessels characteristic of the Bronze Age (López Precioso and Jordán Montes 1996). We could also mention the burial of three individuals in the artificial hypogeum of Cabezo de la Escoba in Villena (Alicante) (Cabezas Romero 2015), where gold and silver jewelry of Argaric origin was found.

5.2. La Mancha Bronze Age burials: phases and sequence

The volume of radiocarbon dates for burials ($n = 47$; Supplementary Material 2), as well as their relationship with different habitat contexts, allows us to propose a burial sequence for the Bronze Age in La Mancha (Figure 10). These funerary practices would have a clear precedent in the use of caves and small shelters as multiple burial sites during the Late Neolithic/Chalcolithic. This ritual has been documented at the end of the 4th millennium BC in different areas, such as Abrigo del Tobar (Letur, Albacete) (García Atiénzar and de Miguel Ibáñez 2009) and Cerro Ortega (Villanueva de la Fuente, Ciudad Real) (Benítez de Lugo Enrich 2018). Recently, the existence of a Chalcolithic hilltop settlement has been documented in Vilches (Hellín, Albacete), where disarticulated human remains have been found. This finding opens the possibility of burial practices within settlements dating from the first half of the 3rd millennium BC (García Atiénzar and Busquier Corbí 2020).

From the beginning of the Bronze Age (around 2200 cal BC), there is evidence of the generalization of settlements throughout the plain of La Mancha in different geographical locations and with different architectural styles. At this time funerary findings are associated with the settlements of El Acequión and La Motilla del Azuer (Phase 1), while the monumental tomb of El Castillejo del Bonete could have been built earlier, during the Bell Beaker period. Some authors have suggested that the high number of settlements cannot be explained exclusively by the demographic growth of local populations (Balsera Nieto 2017). According to this author, this increase would require an external contribution, proposing the hypothesis that the genesis of the Bronze Age in La Mancha involved populations from other neighbouring areas, specifically the middle and upper Tagus valleys, which moved to this region and found new settlements. This hypothesis has been proposed in parallel with a possible migration from the Southwest to the Southeast of the peninsula during the Early Bronze Age (Lillios et al. 2016). In this regard, it should be recalled that in tomb 4 of El Castillejo del Bonete a female individual with an

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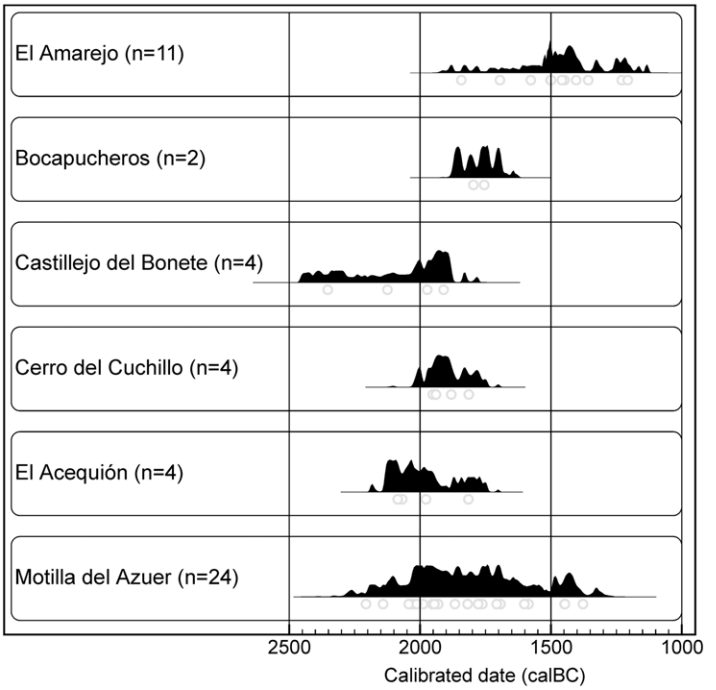

Figure 10. *Sum of probabilities of the funerary events documented in Bronze Age sites in La Mancha (dots indicate the median of each radiocarbon estimation).*

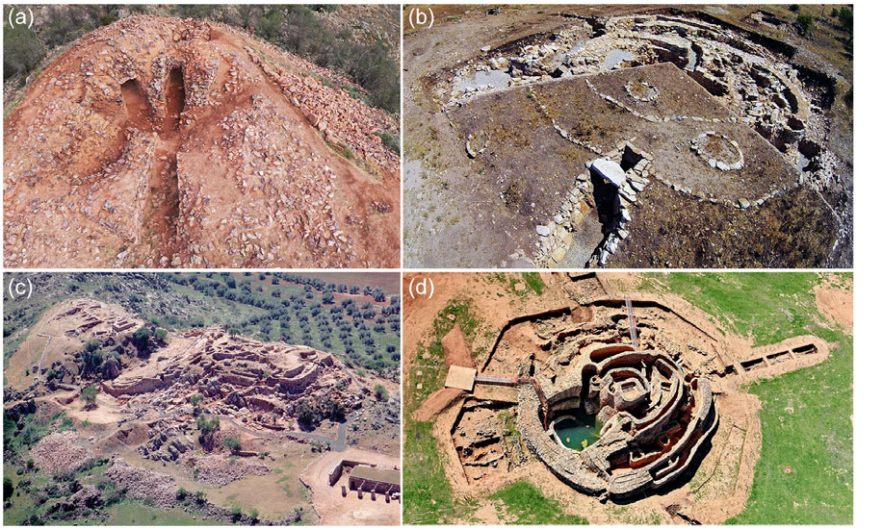

Figure 11. *Aerial images of (a) Bocapucheros; (b) El Castillejo del Bonete; (c) El Cerro de la Encantada; (d) La Motilla de Azuer (a–b: Photographs by Luis Benítez de Lugo Enrich; c: personal photographic archive of Prof. Dr. José L. Sánchez Meseguer; d: Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha).*

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isotopic signature suggesting input of marine protein in the diet (Salazar-García et al. 2013) and a male individual with steppe ancestry (Olalde-Marquínez et al. 2019) were recovered. This case could indicate a multiregional population contribution, as has been proposed for other Bronze Age sites and regions (Villalba-Mouco et al. 2021). Coinciding with the beginning and early phases of the Bronze Age in La Mancha, the climatic event 4.2 ka BP (2350–1850 cal BC) developed, characterized by extreme aridity (Magny 2004; López-Sáez et al. 2014). Some researchers (Benítez de Lugo Enrich and Mejías Moreno 2015; López-Sáez et al. 2014) have proposed that the dry climate during the Early Bronze Age forced these communities to settle in enclaves close to water resources. Thus, motilla-type sites may have originated from the need to access water from aquifers in times of drought.

During the first centuries of the 2nd millennium BC, the period of maximum aridity, a greater funerary intensity is observed, both within the settlements (La Motilla de Azuer –Phases 2-3–, El Acequión –Phase 3– and El Cerro del Cuchillo) and in the monuments (El Castillejo del Bonete and Bocapucheros). Recently, it has been suggested that some sites, such as El Cerro de la Encantada –Phase 3– or Los Dornajos, may have been the result of monumentalization and ritualization practices during this period (Benítez de Lugo Enrich 2018). It was at this time, around 1800 cal BC, that the monument of El Amarejo 1 was built. This greater funerary intensity is contemporary to the peak development observed in the settlements. For example, at La Motilla del Azuer important structural remodeling of the walls and expansion of the fortifications occurred during phase 2 (1950–1875 cal BC) and especially during phase 3 (1875–1600 cal BC) (Nájera Colino et al. 2019). At El Acequión, this period coincided with the most stable period of occupation (Phase 3: 2065–1755 cal BC), with the reinforcement of the inner wall and the beginning of the construction of the outer fortification (Balsera Nieto 2017). Pollen analyses carried out at La Motilla del Azuer show that this period of expansion is linked to a progressive increase in rainfall, which favoured the recovery of the forest. In this moment, anthropization of the environment increased, in addition to a greater pastoral pressure (López-Sáez et al. 2014).

Shortly after this date, around 1700–1600 cal BC, burial practices ended at most sites. At the same time, some settlements, such as El Acequión and El Cerro del Cuchillo, were abandoned, and others show important architectural changes. This is the case for La Motilla del Azuer (Phase 4) where a major internal reorganization is documented (the storage rooms disappeared and the well in the eastern courtyard was filled in). The site remained in use until 1350 cal BC. In this phase, the last funerary events are documented, but they are less numerous than in the earlier phases (Nájera Colino et al. 2012). Around 1400 cal BC, El Acequión was reoccupied, although no more burials were documented (Balsera Nieto 2017). Contrary to what happened at other sites, the funerary monument of El Amarejo 1 continued to be used, showing a greater intensity of use during the Late Bronze Age (1550–1250 cal BC).

5.3. La Mancha Bronze Age burials: Social and historical perspective

The funerary practices of the Bronze Age in La Mancha are heterogeneous and diverse. From the beginning of the Bronze Age around 2200 BC, different traditions can be observed throughout the plains of La Mancha, ranging from individual burials under dwelling floors, which were already documented in Bell beaker contexts, and which were frequent in the neighbouring culture of El Argar, to monumental funerary mounds, in which the collective component is the most important.

In this complex context, El Amarejo 1 shows a different type of ritual from what has been considered common in Bronze Age burial practices in La Mancha. The funerary monument is located 1.2 km from a hilltop settlement, also known as El Amarejo. A Late Bronze Age chronology was proposed for the settlement, based on the presence of decorated pottery typical of the Cogotas I horizon (Broncano Rodríguez and Blázquez Pérez 1985). The proximity and contemporaneity of both sites would argue that the inhabitants of the settlement were responsible for the construction and use of the tomb. In the same way, in El Castillejo del Bonete the existence of a nearby settlement has also been suggested (Benítez de Lugo Enrich and Mejías Moreno 2016). El Amarejo shares other characteristics with this

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site, but also with Bocapucheros (Benítez de Lugo Enrich 2018; Benítez de Lugo Enrich et al. 2022): their location at elevated sites and close to natural corridors; their proximity to settlements; or their persistence in the landscape for more than several centuries, which must have made them landmarks for Bronze Age communities settled in the immediate area. Indeed, some of the features of these sites can be found in the Neolithic and Chalcolithic megalithic monuments of the Central Meseta (Bueno Ramírez 1991).

Apart from El Castillejo del Bonete (Odriozola Lloret et al. 2016) and La Morra del Quintanar (Martín Morales 1984), the grave goods documented in Bronze Age burials in La Mancha are associated with low social value. This contrasts with the finds recovered from El Amarejo 1, where some artifacts suggest the participation of this community in long-range exchange networks. This difference must be framed within the social dynamics that developed after *ca*. 1550 cal BC (Molina González 1978; Castro Martínez et al 1996; Jover Maestre et al. 2016; 2021; Jover Maestre and García Atiénzar 2024) and the continuity in the use of El Amarejo 1 during the second half of the 2nd millennium BC. This period witnessed significant changes that affected all aspects of society. The most important is the abandonment of many settlements or the restructuring of habitat patterns, a change that had a particular impact on the culture of El Argar but also on the Bronze Age in La Mancha. This paradigm can be found at the site of Cabezo Redondo (Villena, Alicante), located 50 km from El Amarejo 1. During this period, Cabezo Redondo became a large settlement that functioned as a centre for the production and redistribution of raw materials and/or processed products (Hernández Pérez et al. 2016). Among these products, we can highlight the extraordinary concentration of glass beads (Barciela González et al. 2021) and gold objects (Barciela González et al. 2023), which show extraordinary similarities with the grave goods documented in El Amarejo 1 and that connect these sites to the long-range exchange networks and trade circuits of the central and western Mediterranean (Kristiansen 2018).

6. Conclusions

The funerary evidence at El Amarejo 1 was distributed in two small and well differentiated chambers. The state of preservation of the monument does not allow to know if the access to the chamber 1 was through the main corridor and the displacement of the slab that separates it from chamber 2, or if there was a second independent access that has not been preserved. The chronometric analysis of the 11 identified individuals has shown that the oldest burial took place in chamber 1 around 1900 cal BC. From that moment on, the burials took place one after the other, without it being possible to establish a chronological order or a specific sequence. The end of the burial use of both chambers seems to be synchronous and can be placed around 1200 cal BC. Considering what has been observed in nearby areas, it is impossible to exclude that the monument was built earlier and that it was reused during the Bronze Age. In any case, the absence of dates or grave goods from the Copper Age does not exclude either the construction or the use of the structure in that period, as has been proved in other cases located in southern Iberia, such as La Navilla 1 in Pantano de los Bermejales (Arenas del Rey, Granada) (Molina González et al. 2019) or Los Eriales (Laborcillas, Granada) (Milesi García et al. 2023). In this sense, it could be considered the possibility of a cleaning of all evidence of previous funerary use and its reuse in later times.

The funerary monument of El Amarejo 1 is a new proof of the heterogeneity of the funerary traditions of the Bronze Age in La Mancha. During this period, burials have been documented in settlements, both within their domestic spaces and in areas associated with their fortifications, as well as in monumental tombs located near the settlements. This variability is documented since the Early Bronze Age –end of the III millennium cal BC– and especially during the first half of the II millennium cal BC. From this date, however, the funerary activity of many sites ends. On the other hand, El Amarejo 1 continued to be used for several centuries during the Late Bronze Age. The technological characteristics of several grave goods point to this chronology, revealing the participation of the communities that used this tomb in the long-range exchange relations that developed during the last moments of the II millennium BC.

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