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A. R. Disney

Excerpt

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Introduction: The Geographical Setting

Portugal is a small country of just 92,000 square kilometres – approximately the size of Hungary, a little larger than Austria or marginally smaller than Greece. It occupies less than one sixth of the Iberian peninsula's land surface. On any map of that peninsula, it has the appearance of a neat rectangle, extending for some 560 kilometres from north to south and up to 215 kilometres from west to east. Such compactness, and such symmetry, suggest internal coherence. However, while this is an impression that carries some validity it requires considerable qualification.

For much of its history Portugal was a remote frontier outpost, far from the European centre of gravity. On its northern and eastern flanks lay what would eventually be Spain – the country's only, and overweening, direct neighbour. Close by to the south loomed Africa – for long both a danger and a temptation – while to the west stretched vast expanses of open Atlantic. Thus, clinging to the southwestern extremity of Europe, Portugal was separated from everywhere on the continent except Spain; but its inhabitants nevertheless possessed, thanks to their long Atlantic coastline, the opportunity to make counterbalancing contacts across the sea. In effect, Portugal was closely hemmed in by Spain, Africa and the Atlantic – and each exerted its own profound influence on Portuguese history.

There are no obvious geographical reasons why Portugal should be distinct from the rest of the Iberian peninsula. The border with Spain is marked neither by any formidable natural barriers nor by significant discontinuities of terrain or climate. The principal natural regions of Portugal are all western extensions of their counterparts in Spain – of the mountains of Galicia in the north, of the Spanish meseta in Trás-os-Montes and most of Beira Alta, of Extremadura in the Alentejo and of Andalusia in the Algarve. Therefore, as the Portuguese geographer Orlando Ribeiro has expressed it, 'the idea of Portugal's geographical

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individuality as a basis for its political separateness . . . lacks foundation'.¹ Yet, if the regions of Portugal are natural extensions of Spain, with many similar characteristics, their climate and landscape are also strongly influenced by the presence of the Atlantic. This duality has ensured that Portugal, despite its compact size, does not possess a uniform or even particularly coherent internal geography.

The principal geographical division within Portugal is between the north, which is the part most influenced by the Atlantic, and the south where the climate and landscape are largely Mediterranean. The approximate dividing line between these Atlantic and Mediterranean regions runs diagonally in a northeasterly to southwesterly direction along the southern fringe of the Serra da Estrela, the country's central mountain range, and along the lower Mondego valley. Much of the territory north of this line is mountainous, the rainfall generous and the landscape predominantly green. But to the south, where there are relatively few hills, the climate is hotter and drier and the horizons are long and low. The transition between northern and southern vegetation was originally much sharper than it is now. But the actions of man from Roman times onwards, through cultivation and other forms of development, have increasingly softened it.² The divide is now not a rigid one, and some Atlantic characteristics occur as far south as the hills of the Algarve, while Mediterranean elements may be found in certain lowlands and valleys even in Trás-os-Montes.

Furthermore, both northern and southern Portugal are in themselves complex geographical regions with important internal divisions, distinguished from one another by their physical features, climate, demography and cultural traditions.³ Thus, the western or Atlantic north differs in many respects from the interior north. The Atlantic north comprises roughly that portion of the country enclosed by the River Minho, the lower Mondego valley and the southern fringe of the Serra da Estrela. Here, the climate is heavily influenced by the presence of the ocean: there is high rainfall and consequently lush green vegetation. The Atlantic north includes some of the wettest areas in Europe – and for centuries it has been the most heavily populated and intensively cultivated part of Portugal. It was also the cradle of the Portuguese state.

There is a rich tapestry of sub-regions in this Atlantic north. In the Minho, quintessential Atlantic north, the summers are relatively short and mild, the colours gentle, the numerous valleys often surpassingly beautiful. Here arose the city of Braga, seat of Portugal's oldest archbishopric. Further south, near the mouth of the River Douro, is the city of Porto, the country's second largest. Beyond Porto the sandy coastal plains of Beira Litoral stretch south to the

¹ In DHP vol 3, p 434.

² Ribeiro O 1967 p 159.

³ Ibid, pp 144–55.

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Mondego. Inland from this coast, in Beira Alta and in the central cordillera, the land is less productive, population is sparser and the landholdings are larger.

While the Atlantic north has an oceanic climate, that of the interior north is continental. Here in Trás-os-Montes – meaning ‘beyond the mountains’ – and in eastern Beira Alta, the influence of the ocean is much weaker, winters are colder and summers hotter. The light in this area seems harsh in comparison with the Minho, and the ground itself is harder and more unyielding. The upper River Douro bisects the interior north, then flows eastward towards the Atlantic – often passing through deep valleys and spectacular ravines, being fed en route by numerous tributaries. The interior north has a complex of mini-climates, temperatures often varying sharply between the high country, with its stunted vegetation and crags of granite and shale, and the shaded valleys. It is a land of relatively low population density, isolated village communities and few large towns.

Portugal’s ‘south’ begins approximately along the southern slopes of the Serra da Estrela, or central cordillera, and from the left bank of the Mondego. While the country at no point touches the Mediterranean Sea, beyond this line the climate and terrain become increasingly Mediterranean in character – until the Algarve, that most Mediterranean of all Portuguese provinces, is finally reached. To pass from northern Portugal to the south is to enter a different world. The mountains are largely left behind, giving way to the broad and flat expanses of the tablelands, with their almost uniform landscape. Journeying south along the coast, the transition seems gradual, the traveller traversing successively the alluvial plains of the Mondego, the Tagus and the Sado. The limestone hills of Estremadura that separate the first two of these plains attract much rainfall. However, the soils here are notably thin, supporting only such Mediterranean plants as holm oaks, wild olives and various fragrant herbs. Lisbon itself, sited on the north bank of the Tagus estuary, lies in a transition zone. This is clearly evident in the contrasting landscapes of the two ranges closest to it: the Sintra Hills to the north, which form an Atlantic enclave with lush woods and mossy slopes, and the Serra da Arrábida south of the river, which is thoroughly Mediterranean with its scrub and meadow-lands, its picturesque streams and waterfalls. Ribatejo – the Tagus valley – is low-lying with mostly poor quality gravel soils; but it has flood plains and was destined in time to become a region for cultivating cereals, fruit and vegetables and rearing bulls and horses.

South of these transitional zones, as in most of the interior, the climate and terrain are similar to Spanish Extremadura and Andalusia. This is the Alentejo – a land of hot, stifling summers that covers almost a third of the country. The soils of the Alentejo are generally thin. Moreover, because there are few natural features to encourage precipitation, despite the relative proximity of the Atlantic

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Ocean, rainfall is limited. The inhabitants of Alentejo have long engaged in the herding of sheep and the rearing of pigs. Traditionally, many of the landholdings were large, ownership was concentrated and the towns remained widely separated. Instead of the pines, oaks and other deciduous varieties of the north, here there are cork oaks and olive groves.

Between the Alentejo and the coast facing Africa is Portugal's southernmost region, the Algarve. Approaching from the north, anyone entering the Algarve first traverses a range of low hills with craggy peaks of metamorphic rock marking the edge of the tableland. Then they descend into the coastal fringe itself. However, despite the sub-tropical brilliance that helps to make this coast one of the most popular tourist regions in Europe today, the southern Algarve is a land of predominantly poor soils and is naturally covered in Mediterranean scrub. The rural population here is greater than in the Alentejo. Traditionally, it has clustered in towns and villages, for easier access to water and for security from sea raiders. In the Algarve, since Roman and then Muslim times, there has been much use of irrigation.

Such, briefly, is the physical setting of what was destined to become Portugal.

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I

Hunter-Gatherers to Iron Age Farmers

THE EARLY HUNTER-GATHERERS

The beginnings of a human presence in what is now Portugal are lost in the mists of time, but probably go back at least 500,000 years. The first inhabitants were Lower Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers whose simple stone tools have been found in a number of sites, particularly in the central coastal region. They possessed a lithic culture then common throughout western Europe which was associated with *homo erectus*, a hominid predecessor of modern humans.¹ Many millennia later, probably about 100,000 years before the present, there appeared in Portugal the human sub-species commonly known as Neanderthal. A people of heavy muscular build, the Neanderthals hunted in small groups, and their artefacts now lie scattered in various Portuguese sites. A Neanderthal tooth found at Nova da Columbeira cave in Estremadura is the oldest human fossil so far discovered in Portugal.²

Modern humans – the sub-species *homo sapiens sapiens* – arrived in Portugal about 35,000 years ago and spread rapidly throughout the country. They completely supplanted the Neanderthals who, as elsewhere in Europe, became extinct. How and why this happened are teasing questions. Did the Neanderthals, unable to compete, slowly succumb over many generations – or were they deliberately and systematically slaughtered? Was there mixing between the two sub-species, and were the Neanderthals perhaps gradually absorbed into the communities of their rivals? Near Leiria in 1998 a 24,500-year-old child's skeleton was discovered which some scholars believe, on the basis of morphological analysis, is that of a Neanderthal-modern hybrid. If they are correct, it

¹ Freeman L G 1975, pp 664, 700–1; NHP vol 1, pp 43–50.

² NHP vol 1, pp 55–6.

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would be the first real evidence found anywhere indicating Neanderthals and *homo sapiens sapiens* interbred, and perhaps coexisted for several millennia before the latter finally triumphed.³

It was towards the end of the period of transition between Neanderthals and modern humans that the most recent Ice Age reached its peak in the last glacial maximum (LGM) some 18,000 years ago. By then northern Europe was covered by an enormous ice sheet, and much of France and Spain were tundra. Portugal's coast was lapped by polar waters, and the shoreline extended up to forty kilometres beyond its present limits. The limestone hills of Estremadura had become almost treeless; but lower, more sheltered areas, such as the Tagus valley and some stretches of the Portuguese coast, were climatically more favoured and still supported mixed forests. Hunter-gatherer groups killed chamois and mountain goats in the colder parts of Portugal and deer, horse, auroch, wild boar and rabbit in the milder regions. Possibly aquatic foraging took place along the coasts though the evidence is elusive. Human numbers remained small; the population of Estremadura had perhaps reached 500, which was just sufficient to be self-sustaining.

Today, the most striking legacy of this era consists of several thousand Stone Age engravings incised into granite rocks and boulders along a seventeen-kilometre stretch of the Côa River valley, Beira Alta, publicly revealed for the first time in late 1992. These engravings depict mostly animals – especially aurochs, horses and mountain goats – and have been dated variously from between about 25,000 and 10,000 years ago. They constitute the largest and most important concentration of open-air Palaeolithic art so far discovered anywhere.⁴ Subsequent finds in the Tagus basin suggest that the phenomenon was actually much more widespread. Such major discoveries made so recently underline how tentative any conclusions about the Portuguese Palaeolithic must for the present remain.

After the LGM Portugal's climate grew rapidly warmer, and by about 11,000 years ago it was already much like today's. In the same period, a new culture known as the Mesolithic gradually evolved, displacing the Palaeolithic cultures which had persisted for so long. Like their predecessors, the folk of the Mesolithic era were hunter-gatherers; but, in the milder conditions of post-glacial times, they were able to draw on a wider range of food resources. Mesolithic people gathered fruit, nuts and seeds, and also relied to a significant degree on fishing and collecting shellfish. These activities could be carried out by family groups, complementing the ancient but less predictable hunt, the

³ Duarte C 1999, pp 7604–9.

⁴ Personal communication from Professor João Zilhão; also Carvalho A F de, Zilhão J and Aubrey T 1996, p 29.

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traditional preserve of men. To sustain such diversity, a more complex lithic technology was needed – and so the tools of earlier times were now added a great variety of microliths. These latter were often set in grooved hafts or used as barbs and tips for fishing, spearing or trapping. Mesolithic communities were proto-sedentary, occupying the same sites season by season. They built huts on beaches, estuaries and river banks, leaving behind tell-tale middens. They buried their dead in the foetal position, along with funerary ornaments and offerings of shellfish. Most Mesolithic sites in Portugal are located on the Estremadura, Alentejo and Algarve coasts, or in the Tagus, Sado and Mira river valleys. They date from up to 8,000 years ago; but earlier settlements doubtless existed, long since submerged by rising sea levels.

Mesolithic culture predominated in Portugal for over six millennia. In the past, perhaps too readily influenced by distorted views of tribal peoples formed in the heyday of nineteenth-century European imperialism, prehistorians often underestimated such societies. Today, in the light of work by scholars like Marshall Sahlins and David Clarke, the Mesolithic achievement cannot be dismissed so lightly. Mesolithic folk adapted appropriately and highly successfully to the particular conditions they faced. In Portugal, these conditions were such that there was little incentive to change. Mesolithic ways therefore long persisted – even while Neolithic culture was developing elsewhere in Europe. But when Neolithic culture did finally take hold in Portugal it wrought change of revolutionary proportions.⁵

THE NEOLITHIC REVOLUTION

By 6000 BC, agriculture and herding were being practised in many parts of western Europe, patches of forest and grassland were being progressively cleared and populations were clustering in favoured locations to form villages. Polished stone tools, including hafted axes and adzes, entered general use, and pottery became widespread. This was the Neolithic revolution. In Portugal, these changes appeared first on the central and southern coasts, slowly spread to the interior and finally reached the north. A transitional period when Mesolithic and incipient Neolithic communities existed side by side in the country was effectively over by about 4000 BC; then, for some 2,000 years, Neolithic ways predominated. During this era, the cultivation of cereals and legumes and the herding of cattle, sheep and pigs provided the basis for subsistence. Portugal's population increased, and permanent settlements became the norm. In early Neolithic times, these settlements were often located in unprotected

⁵ Zvelebil M and Rowley-Conwy P 1986, p 88; Arnaud J M 1993, pp 173, 182.

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open country; but later, especially in the south, naturally defensive sites were commonly selected, usually in ridge-top locations. Many communities built striking monuments of stone known as megaliths – characteristic symbols of the Neolithic.

The origins of megalith-building have long been debated. The eastern Mediterranean was once widely assumed to have been its birthplace, and as recently as the 1960s scholars argued that the megalith tradition and technology were brought to the Iberian peninsula by Aegean colonists. But this view is no longer tenable, for radiocarbon dating indicates megalithic chamber tombs in Portugal and Spain pre-date anything comparable in the Aegean by hundreds of years.⁶ It now seems likely that megalith-building evolved more or less simultaneously in many different parts of Europe and the Mediterranean, stimulated by social, technological and perhaps ideological developments generated locally. Today some of the earliest and most significant megaliths are to be found in Portugal, where literally hundreds still survive in various forms and sizes. There are tombs covered by mounds of earth and stones, single menhirs, grouped menhirs forming cromlechs, simple dolmens made of large, upright slabs surmounted by capstones and collective passage-graves. Mostly of granite or schist, these megaliths are scattered throughout the country, but are particularly common in Alto Alentejo, the Beiras and Trás-os-Montes. Their appearance coincided with much increased assertiveness over land-ownership as agriculture spread and populations increased. Megaliths may have served as territorial boundaries or indicated the presence of ancestors, so affirming a community's continuity over successive generations. Since building megaliths required labour on a fairly large scale, their presence also implies elite control and organisation. It is also possible that some megaliths had cult significance. Bulls' heads inscribed on rocks in a sanctuary at Montemor-o-Novo suggest a bovine cult perhaps linked to similar cults in the Mediterranean world.⁷

THE METALLURGICAL CULTURES

There was no sudden transformation in Portugal from a Neolithic to an incipient metallurgical culture, but rather a slow, uneven process of adaptation. The soft metals – silver, gold and especially copper – were all known from about 2500 BC. Southern Portugal was one of the first regions in Europe where copper was extracted and then processed into desirable objects. Portugal had been slow to adopt Neolithic technology; but it was quick to enter the Copper Age, a development facilitated by plentiful outcrops of copper ore in the eastern

⁶ Blance B 1961, p 192; Renfrew C 1978, pp 94–101.

⁷ NHP vol 1, pp 113, 136–7, 141–2, 152–3, 158; Raposo L 1989, pp 37, 39.

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Algarve and Baixo Alentejo. Initially, output was small and the items produced were ornamental only; but soon the range of goods expanded to include copper axes, awls, burins, daggers and even primitive saws.

The first metal-workers probably used a process of simple cold hammering, then progressed to annealing. Later, they learned how to smelt, perhaps using methods adapted from ceramics technology – and finally they mastered casting.⁸ The necessary skills were doubtless restricted to particular specialists living near the copper mines; but use of the metal soon spread far and wide, and items of copper came to serve as a kind of currency. Bronze objects, particularly axes, first appeared in Portugal between 2000 and 1500 BC, probably introduced from northwest Europe. By the late second millennium BC, tin was being mined in northern Portugal, and with copper readily available in the south, a local bronze industry was able to develop. But most likely before this, during the Copper Age, there had already occurred what Andrew Sherratt calls the SPR (secondary products revolution). This involved a series of major advances in the techniques of resource production and utilisation achieved in the wake of agriculture and herding, including the adoption of animal traction, the riding of horses, the use of cow's milk for human consumption, the production of wool, the development of weaving, the introduction of irrigation and possibly the use of simple ploughs.⁹ While as yet there is only fragmentary evidence of developments of this kind in northern Portugal, in Estremadura and the south the signs of a Copper Age SPR are clear.

Roughly coinciding with the rise of copper production, bell beaker pottery, aesthetically one of the most attractive ceramic forms of prehistoric times, appeared in Portugal. Bell beakers – so called because they resembled large, upturned bells – were manufactured especially in the Lisbon and Setúbal peninsulas where over 100 sites are known, among them the fortified settlements of Vila Nova de São Pedro and Zambujal.¹⁰ The demand for bell beaker pottery and prestige goods in copper or bronze inevitably led to increased contacts between communities both within Portugal and beyond. An extensive exchange system therefore gradually developed, encompassing a vast area. This benefited certain strategically-located communities and encouraged the formation of new settlements on key communications routes. Because of its central location and its river systems Estremadura was pre-eminent in this process, and its productivity may also have made it an exporter of foodstuffs to drier regions. Exactly how goods were transported in this era, and along which routes they travelled, is only dimly understood. Land routes probably followed ridgeways

⁸ Renfrew C 1978, pp 188–9.

⁹ Sherratt A 1981, pp 261–3; NHP vol 1, pp 176–7.

¹⁰ Harrison R J 1980, pp 9–15, 126–40, 160–5.

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and can sometimes be tentatively traced by the distribution of artefact finds. Seaborne transport is even more problematic, for no Copper or Bronze Age vessels have been found in Portuguese waters, and there are no depictions of vessels in rock art of the kind so common in Scandinavia.¹¹ It has, however, been suggested that the Portuguese *saveiro*, a craft of very ancient design with no keel, rudder or mast, which was still being made early in the twentieth century, may have been related to ships used in these times. In any event, exchange of goods both within the present borders of Portugal and with the world beyond was already extensive by the late Bronze Age. Portugal's mineral resources were attracting outside interest and therefore stimulating interchanges, as attested by numerous finds of imported objects originating from both Atlantic Europe and the Mediterranean. Various Bronze Age metal objects have been found in Portugal from as far away as Ireland.

By the Copper Age, Portugal was a society of small, scattered villages and hamlets. J. M. Arnaud has shown that in the south a typical village of the time occupied between one and five hectares and accommodated some 150 to 350 inhabitants. Smaller out-settlements housed perhaps thirty to fifty persons. Dwellings were simple and built of local materials; several coastal settlements studied in the Sines region of Baixo Alentejo consisted of rather flimsy rectangular huts, each containing a semi-circular hearth. While some villages relied on natural protection, constructed defence works were becoming more common. An early example is Monte da Tumba near Alcácer do Sal, which was occupied continuously between about 2500 and 2000 BC and was protected by a wall surrounding a central precinct. Its defences went through several reconstructions, and in the final stage a central tower was erected.¹²

Later, during the early and mid-Portuguese Bronze Age, further expansion took place – especially into low-lying farming country where at first many open and undefended villages were formed. Then, in the late Bronze Age, increasing numbers of hilltop forts known as *castros* began to appear. It is unclear against whom these *castros* were constructed. Perhaps it was pastoral nomads or wandering marauders, though rival settled groups of similar cultural background seem more likely. There is no evidence of intruders from outside Portugal at this time.¹³ In any event, a degree of interdependence soon developed between the open settlements, which were primarily centres of production, and the *castros*. Some of the former possessed below-ground storage facilities capable of supplying grain well beyond the requirements of their own inhabitants; others evidently concentrated on artefact production or mining. In the north,

¹¹ Johnstone P 1980, pp 87–93; Coles J M 1982, pp 291, 295–6; Raposo L 1989, p 41.

¹² NHP vol 1, pp 169–70, 232–3.

¹³ Ibid, pp 177–8, 188, 247–8.