
Unconventional Prehistoric Worlds: Untangling the Later Bronze Age in Central Iberia

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The Cogotas I culture (c. 1800–1150 cal. BC) is an unusual test case in Bronze Age Europe with its incomplete definition due to empirical and epistemological difficulties. The idiosyncratic materiality of those small-scale communities is poorly understood because of its unexpected nature. The characteristic evidence is limited to formal deposits and accumulations of secondary residues whose survival was decisively driven by prehistoric social practices. Thus, in the absence of intact activity areas or dwellings, normative burials and representative domestic equipment, alternative lines of enquiry are needed. However, standard interpretative models have proposed mismatching socio-economic accounts or misleading narratives envisioning these societies as regressive and isolated. This updated multi-scalar review covers from the high level of cultural demarcation and territorial representation to the micro-scale stories of human–things relationships. The lifestyles and worldviews in Cogotas I societies entailed the upholding of atavistic habits, a relational cosmology and a strategy of transient durability, which ultimately resulted in their characteristic archaeological invisibility.

Linking the archaeological traces of prehistoric social actions to the interpretations drawn upon them is a difficult task. Too often there are many distorting circumstances mediating the fraction of evidence that has survived, and only occasional contributions succeed in taking these factors into account. This paper explores this intricacy through an extreme case study from Western Europe: the material remains left by peoples who lived in inland Iberia during the Middle and Late Bronze Age (c. 1800–1150 cal. BC), namely the Cogotas I culture. This is a paradigmatic case in point to unravel the complexity revolving around mainstream ways of approaching the past. Cogotas I was a long-lasting phenomenon whose diagnostic item is a decorated pottery style (Abarquero 2005). These distinctive ceramics spread over a huge territory; they mainly affected the Iberian Meseta or central plateau, but also reached distant Atlantic and Mediterranean areas (Fig. 1). In addition, the archaeological remnants

of Cogotas I have been always considered ambiguous and challenging. A huge amount of pre-recession (mostly developer-led) excavations confirm that well-preserved domestic structures, recognizable *in situ* activity areas or normative cemeteries are lacking (see e.g. Alves *et al.* 2013; Abarquero *et al.* 2005; Blasco *et al.* 2007; Díaz-del-Río 2001; Enríquez & Drake 2007; Harrison *et al.* 1994; Jimeno & Fernández Moreno 1991; Rodríguez Marcos 2012). Despite the great deal of attention traditionally paid to this issue, its unfinished elaboration as a study unit is remarkable. Cogotas I was first described in the late 1920s and its modern systematization was achieved by the mid 1980s (Fernández-Posse 1998, 11–24). However, subsequent attempts have contributed implicit and loose terminology or shallow readjustments upon an inconsistent yet unchallenged empiricist basis. While prehistoric entities everywhere have long attained a reasonable consensual definition, uncertainty in Cogotas

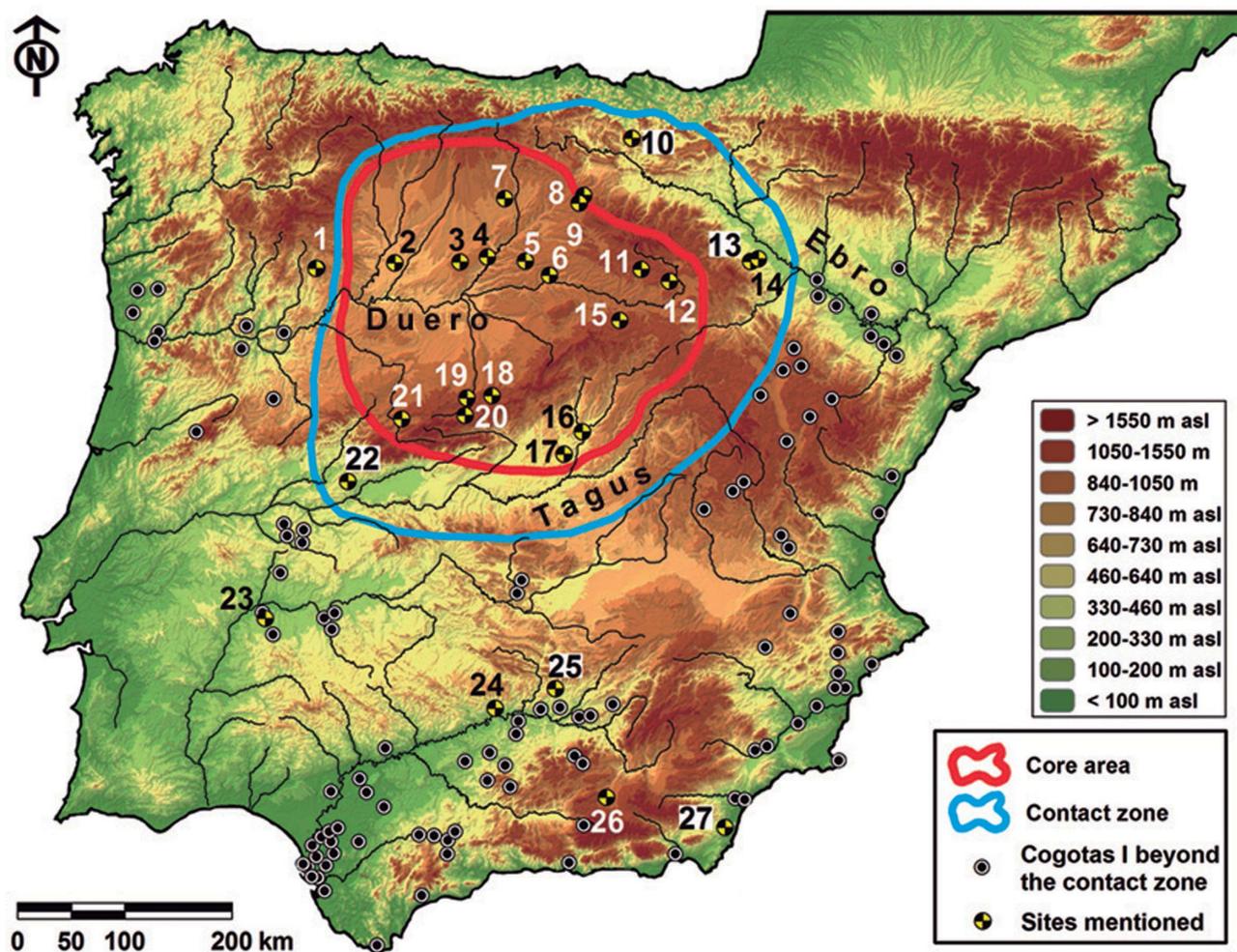


Figure 1. (Colour online) Spatial boundaries of Cogotas I and sites mentioned in the text. 1. El Pedroso (Trabazos, Zamora); 2. Santioste (Oteros de Sariegos, Zamora); 3. Casetón de la Era (Villalba de los Alcores, Valladolid); 4. Pico Castro (Dueñas, Palencia); 5. Cuesta de la Horca (Cevico Navero, Palencia); 6. El Cerro (La Horra, Burgos); 7. Carrelasvegas (Osorno, Palencia); 8. El Mirador (Atapuerca, Burgos); 9. La Revilla (Atapuerca, Burgos); 10. Solacueva de Lacoizmonte (Cuartango, Álava); 11. Cueva Maja (Cabrejas del Pinar, Soria); 12. Cueva del Asno (Los Rábanos, Soria); 13. Majaladares (Borja, Zaragoza); 14. Moncín (Borja, Zaragoza); 15. Los Tolmos (Caracena, Soria); 16. Camino de las Yeseras (San Fernando de Henares, Madrid); 17. La Indiana (Pinto, Madrid); 18. Prado de las Cruces (Bernuy-Salineru, Ávila); 19. Cerro de la Cabeza (Ávila); 20. El Morcuero (Gemuño, Ávila); 21. El Torrión (Navamorales, Salamanca); 22. Boquique (Plasencia, Cáceres); 23. El Carrascalejo (Badajoz); 24. Llanete de los Moros (Montoro, Córdoba); 25. Peñalosa (Baños de la Encina, Jaén); 26. Cuesta del Negro (Purullena, Granada); 27. Gatas (Turre, Almería).

I has gradually increased and its chronological and territorial boundaries are still undergoing substantial revisions (e.g. Abarquero 2012; Esparza *et al.* 2012a). Thus, nowadays different scholars may cite this label to refer alternatively to an archaeological culture or a socio-ecological model confined to Central Iberia, a peninsular tradition of decorated pottery shared by contrasting societies, or even a series of cultural traits unevenly adopted by different groups (Fernández-Posse 1998, 92–4; Micó 2013, 395).

This archaeological manifestation has been the subject of sporadic papers in English (see Arnáiz & Montero 2011, 558) but is poorly known beyond the Iberian archaeological milieu. In the 1990s, seminal papers appeared, such as those by Harrison (1994; 1995), whereas a handbook chapter presented a clichéd and outdated image of those ‘potters and shepherds’ (Fernández Castro 1995, 127–39). Later works addressing an international audience have produced tangential references (Álvarez-Sanchis 2000, 66; Lull

et al. 2013a, 605–7, 611–13; Ruiz-Gálvez 1998, 441); focused on its earlier (Abarquero *et al.* 2013; Harrison 2007, 75–8) or later phases (Blanco-González 2014a; Harrison & Mederos 2000); or tackled limited issues such as the habitat or the funerary realms (Arnáiz & Montero 2011; Blanco-González 2011b; Sánchez-Polo & Blanco-González 2014). Consequently, a non-Spanish-speaking readership may find it difficult to obtain a comprehensive view of this topic. In short, a failure in critically reviewing the foundations of this archaeological entity, a high degree of terminological confusion, a piecemeal dissemination of discoveries and the absence of alternative conceptual frameworks have impeded noting what Cogotas I may provide to current archaeological debates.

This paper is aimed at addressing some of these concerns, offering a fresh and updated synthetic account of Cogotas I. It advocates that such drawbacks and the peculiar inconsistent nature of this archaeological phenomenon are due to a combination of both empirical and theoretical difficulties. The first source of vagueness is its ontological singularity in the overall panorama of Bronze Age Europe: Cogotas I does not meet conventional, deeply rooted expectations and as a result it seems deceptive. The article intends to underline that its very perplexing quality may actually be one of the keys to understanding the making of this material record and the cultural rationale behind it. Thus, formation dynamics involved in this archaeological evidence are tackled here in social terms (Lucas 2012; McAnany & Hodder 2009; Mills & Walker 2008). The second unsettled aspect impinges upon the epistemological inadequacy of some current lines of enquiry when dealing with such tricky material. Interpretive accounts have been posited in socio-political and economic terms (e.g. Abarquero 2005, 53–4; Delibes *et al.* 2007, 120–23; Lull *et al.* 2013a, 612), but they do not satisfactorily consider the peculiar nature of this factual record. In contrast to the archaeology of more explicit and accessible Iberian Bronze Age groups such as El Argar (Lull *et al.* 2011; 2013a, 596–602; 2013b) or Las Motillas (Chapman 2008, 222–35; Lull *et al.* 2013a, 603–5; Martin *et al.* 1993), the absence of fine-resolution data from houses, workshops or graves requires non-standard approaches to gain archaeological insights into the available indirect cues (e.g. Colomer *et al.* 1998). A historiographic overview will show how a series of empiricist premises remain entrenched within Iberian academia and how such an intellectual background is especially inadequate to address Cogotas I. The paper then reappraises this topic in an attempt to release it from its heavy culture-historical wrapping. For this, the theoretical framework adopted here is inspired in recent non-positivist literature on ma-

teriality and the mutually constitutive relations enmeshing humans and things (Hodder 2012; Knappett 2005; Lillios 1999; Lucas 2012; Meskell 2004). Particular strategies of enquiry such as fragmentation theory (Chapman 2000; Chapman & Gaydarska 2007) and the cultural biographical approach to material culture (Fontijn 2013; Gosden & Marshall 1999; Hahn & Weiss 2013; Jennings 2014) are incorporated. Finally, the informative potential of certain extraordinary archaeological events—odd, misunderstood depositions—is realized here, reclaiming their vital contribution to characterizing the wider picture (Montón-Subías 2010). Drawing on well-contextualized recent discoveries and attempting more suitable approaches to the kind of evidence at hand, the paper reconsiders unsettled issues and spotlights disregarded aspects to shed new light on the cultural tenets encompassing the formation of those archaeological outcomes. Thus, varying analytical scales are integrated in a zooming perspective, from the macro-scale of landscape and large questions of cultural definition to the detailed intricacies of making/gathering, handling and disposing of things such as human and animal remains, metals or pottery.

The unsolved definition of Cogotas I

The initial demarcation of Cogotas I in the early twentieth century drew on the *Kulturkreise* or ‘cultural circles’ posited by the Vienna anthropological school, further elaborated until the 1970s by Spanish academics trained in the French and German positivist traditions (Martínez Navarrete 1989, 59–65). A major thread within this disciplinary strand was to trace the expansion of cultures from their centre of inception over neighbouring regions. This was a large-scale goal, but scholars resorted to relatively minor diagnostic keys: formal resemblances between wares became the main criterion to support grand diffusionary narratives (Fernández-Posse 1998, 11–24). Two kinds of pottery decoration acted as type fossils of Cogotas I: the so-called *boquique* and the excised techniques. The former was named after Boquique Cave, in the province of Cáceres (Fernández Castro 1995, 127–9) and is a stab-and-drag ornamentation, executed by punching the tip of a pointed object at regular intervals across the unfired surface of a pot (Fig. 2). The chip-carved technique consists of the removal of clay to design geometric motifs, sometimes encrusted with coloured inlays (Figs. 2B & 3). The prevailing ethno-cultural agenda assimilated the stab-and-drag to autochthonous peoples, whereas the excision was supposedly brought by Hallstattic immigrants (e.g. Almagro Basch 1939; Maluquer de Motes

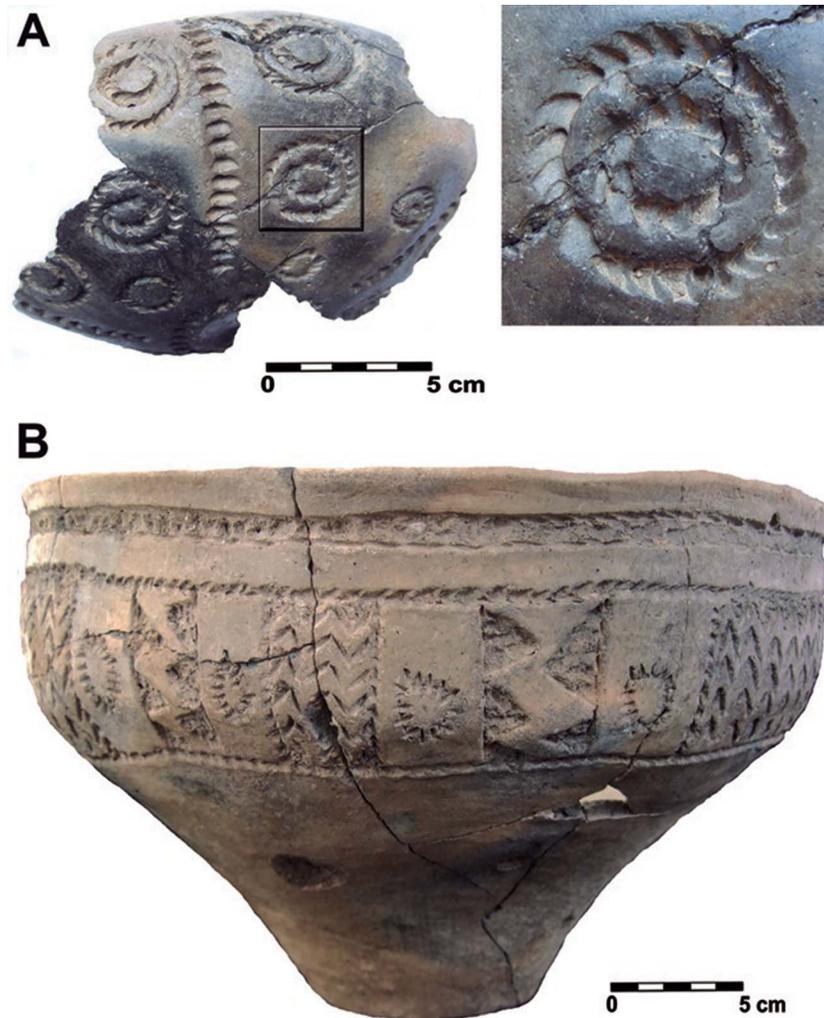


Figure 2. (Colour online) Later Cogotas I vessels featuring stab-and-drag decorations. A. Cerro de la Cabeza (Ávila). B. Bowl 2 from Pico Castro (Palencia). (Photographs: A. Blanco-González.)

1956). This culture-historical advocacy also popularized the stereotyped view of the rude and primitive lifestyles of these peoples and their pastoralist character, argued upon their foreland location and the use of excision, by analogy to marquetry crafts by modern-day shepherds (Almagro Basch 1939, 138–9).

By the late 1970s, such discourses were eventually superseded by a new generation of academics, who sorted out the spatial and chronological boundaries of this grouping and started tackling environmental and functionalist concerns from modern standards. Nevertheless, several empiricist principles have continued to drive investigation. With the advancement of field surveys, decorated ceramics in the Cogotas I style became more accurately mapped (Delibes 1983; Delibes & Romero 1992; Blasco 2002). Since cartographic depictions are effective repre-

sentational media conveying geographic knowledge (Barkowsky & Freksa 1994), such images encapsulate the state of play. Thus, these maps show the underlying notions of congruency and contiguity, which presume the physical—i.e. archaeological—reflection of every single step in any particular historic phenomenon, and lead to identifying distinct study units fixed in space and time. Thus, Cogotas I has since been visualized (Abarquero 2005, 111, fig. 20; 2012, 63, fig. 2; Lull *et al.* 2013a, 606, fig. 33.6) by means of a patchwork of discrete zones (Fig. 1) divided into: a) a unified and unwavering ‘core area’ occupying the whole upper Duero basin and the upper Tagus and Ebro valleys; b) an adjacent ‘contact zone’, intensely acculturated; and beyond this c) a halo of isolated ‘expansion territories’ with scattered findspots in distant parts of Iberia.



Figure 3. (Colour online) Excised vessels from Arenero de Valdivia (Madrid). (Photographs: Museu d'Arqueologia de Catalunya.)

Within the 'core area' the defining normative traits of an archaeological culture have been characterized, such as: small-scale groups with low social stratification (Fernández-Posse 1998; Harrison 1994; Harrison & Mederos 2000); a pastoral livelihood and settlement in non-permanent farmsteads (Blasco 2003; Delibes & Romero 1992; Fernández-Posse 1998); part-time craftsmanship at a domestic scale (Abarquero 2005; Blasco 2012); and the practice of inhumation as mortuary ritual (Arnáiz & Montero 2011; Esparza 1990; Esparza *et al.* 2012a). The peripheral finds consist of modest sets of ceramics featuring Cogotas I-style ornaments within diverse cultural contexts. They were initially linked to transhumant-like movements drawing upon the pastoralist cliché (e.g. Blasco 2001; Delibes 1983), yet social and symbolic motives have been more recently emphasized, such as the exchange of gifts or the circulation of women within exogamic nuptial networks (Abarquero 2005; 2012; Harrison 1994; Jimeno 2001).

Meanwhile, radiocarbon determinations succeeded in dating this evidence correctly to the Bronze Age (Blasco 2001; Delibes 1983; Delibes & Romero 1992). As internal processes of change were pursued, an evolutionary perspective led to subdividing its se-

quence according to the diachronic variability of decorated pottery during the second millennium BC (e.g. Abarquero 2005, 24–6; Blasco 2002; Castro *et al.* 1995, 51–60; Fernández Castro 1995, 132). After successive amendments—the last one in recent years (Esparza *et al.* 2012a)—two main stages can be distinguished. The defining decorations, i.e. stab-and-drag and excision, constitute type fossils for the cultural 'apogee' phase—the Full Cogotas I period—ascribed to the Late Bronze Age (1450–1150 cal. BC). Earlier wares featuring impressed and incised motifs are regarded as a 'pre-climax' preamble, the so-called Proto-Cogotas phase of Middle Bronze Age date (1800–1450 cal. BC) (Abarquero *et al.* 2013, 315; Blasco 2012, 192–6; Esparza *et al.* 2012a). This classification is also supported by changes in different realms such as occupation patterns, depositional and mortuary practices and crafts (Abarquero *et al.* 2013).

In short, in the last four decades modern protocols have been introduced into the research agenda of Cogotas I and its space-time framework is far more accurate. Yet, as several scholars have warned (Díaz-del-Río 2001, 58–76; Fernández-Posse 1998, 238; Martínez Navarrete 1989, 74–107), its empiricist foundations have been readapted rather than challenged and type

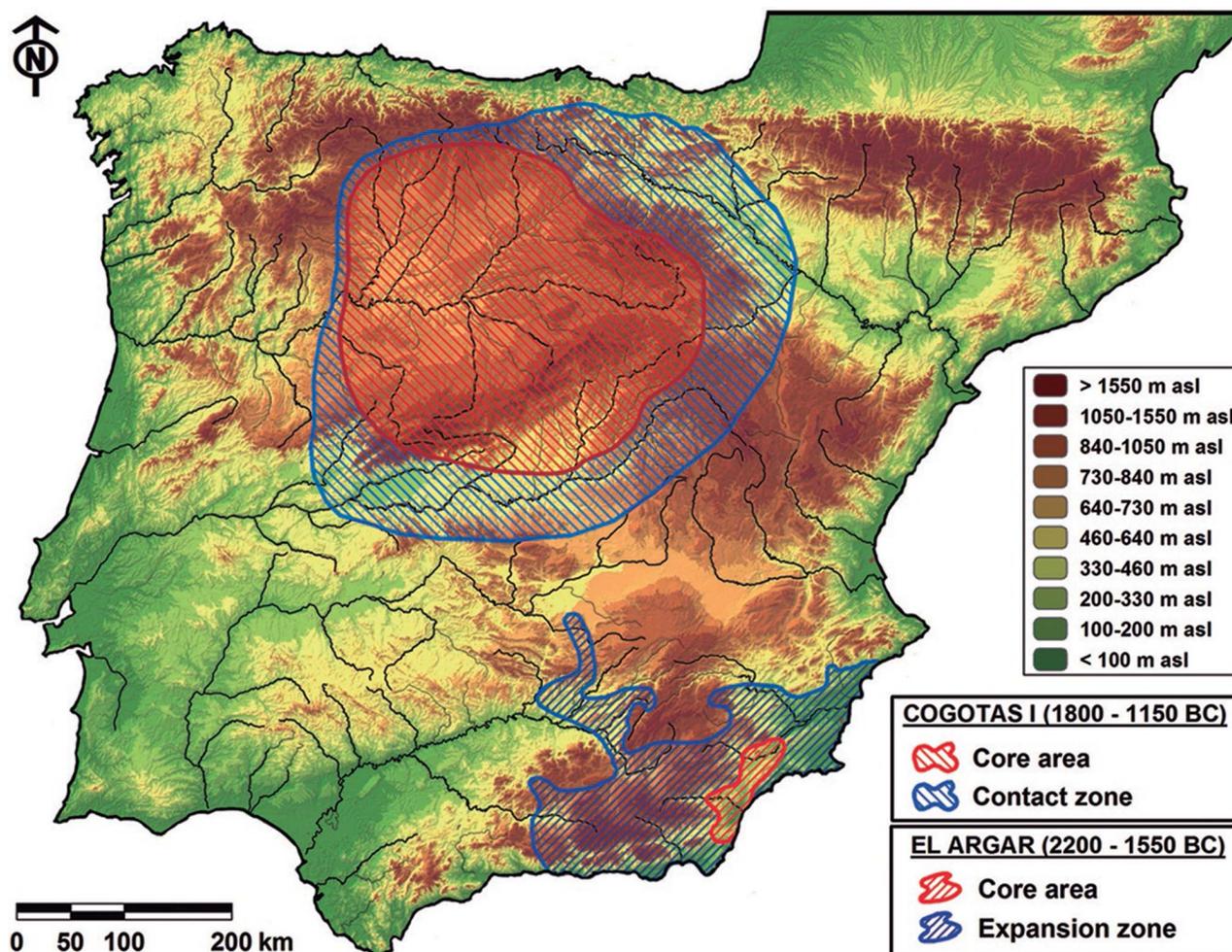


Figure 4. (Colour online) Spatial representation of Cogotas I and El Argar cultures in Iberia as discrete concentric zones. (After Abarquero 2005, 111, fig. 20 and Lull *et al.* 2011, 387, fig. 3.)

fossils are still useful to sort out the evidence. In interpretive terms, this renovation has meant a mere change in the scale of analysis; the protagonists are different, but mechanisms for explaining cultural affinity or divergence remain the same. Thus, when tackling Bronze Age Iberia, overdue colonial and diffusionist pan-European and Mediterranean narratives have been replaced by local or regional ones (Aranda 2013, 101). In fact, El Argar (Lull *et al.* 2011, 387, fig. 3) and Cogotas I (Abarquero 2005, 111, fig. 20), two of the major Bronze Age cultures in Iberia, have been conceived of and mapped in similar terms of spatio-temporal adjacency: core homogeneous areas where the earlier cultural traits supposedly appeared and buffer zones of ensuing acculturation (Fig. 4). A more nuanced image of Cogotas I has been adduced admitting wider permeability (Abarquero 2012, 62–3), but its uniformitarian concentric cartographic model curtails un-

derstanding the presence of its ceramics throughout Iberia. Thus, the 'core' and 'contact' areas amounting to around 134,000 sq. km (c. 51,700 sq. miles) have been delimited without adequately addressing their internal variability (Abarquero 2012, 62–3; Castro *et al.* 1995, 73). From a taxonomic viewpoint (Clarke 1978, 37), this grouping constitutes a polythetic cluster of shared attributes ranging between poorly defined limits and intuitively sorted by affinity upon a single attribute: the frequency of decorated pottery (Roberts & Vander Linden 2011, 8). Indeed, 'mapping archaeological cultures yields misleading representations of spatial variation' (Roberts & Vander Linden 2011, 3) mostly when the criteria of such representations are inadequate, as Cogotas I shows. This mainstream framework is increasingly accruing contradictions and some facts remain inexplicable, such as the speed of the 'expansive' dynamics of these ceramics

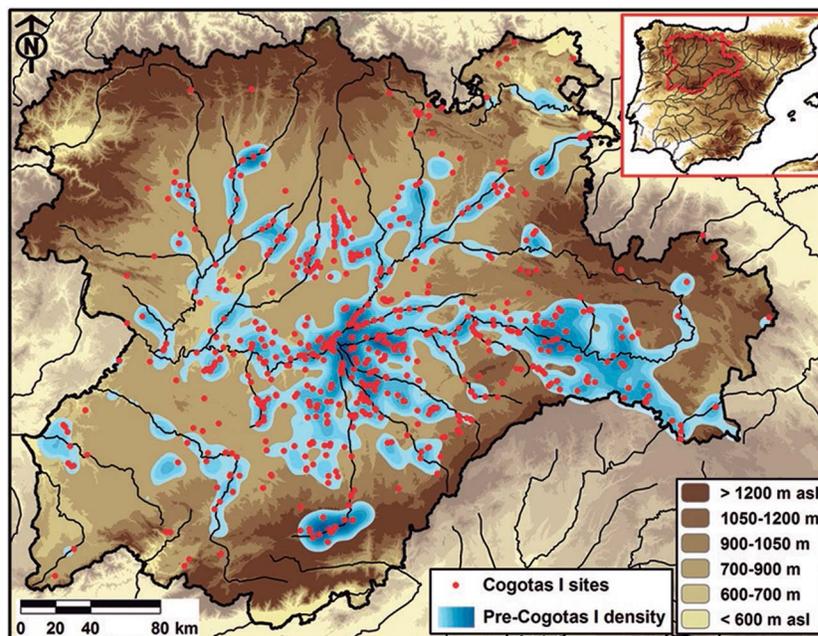


Figure 5. (Colour online) Cogotas I settlement in the Autonomous Community of Castile and Leon and density (kernel) of previous occupations (Early Neolithic–Early Bronze Age). (Illustration: A. Blanco-González.)

in alien cultural contexts. In this regard, some authors (Jimeno 2001, 145–7) have pointed out that sites within the ‘contact zone’ such as Moncín (Zaragoza) (Harrison *et al.* 1994, 159) (Fig. 1, no. 14), and others far away from the ‘core area’, such as El Carrascalejo (Badajoz) (Enríquez & Drake 2007) (Fig. 1, no. 23) or Peñalosa (Jaén) (Contreras & Alarcón 2012, 178) (Fig. 1, no. 25), have contributed pottery ensembles in the Proto-Cogotas style c. 1750–1650 cal. BC (though using long-lived samples), that is, much earlier than expected and close to dates within their supposed focus of inception (Fig. 4). Such a terrain impedes a sound understanding of the interconnections behind such conventional groupings (Roberts & Vander Linden 2011) and serious criticisms (e.g. Fernández-Posse 1998; Jimeno 2001, 140–2; Micó 2013) remain unsolved.

Bronze Age social landscapes in inner Iberia

This epigraph reconsiders three intertwined and complementary aspects of the Iberian Meseta during the second millennium BC: the everyday loci of the living, the places of the dead and a series of elusive contexts which can only now be properly contextualized within an inclusive interpretive scheme. Thus, the first point must deal with the way these groups organized their social relationships. All lines of evidence suggest that they were relatively autonomous communities implementing diversified subsistence strategies based on cereal agriculture and stockbreeding,

depending on particular environmental constraints (Abarquero *et al.* 2013; Blasco 2003; Ruiz Gálvez 1998). Their low demographic densities and fissional mechanisms avoided competition for resources and inhibited any sustained forms of power and social division (Fernández-Posse 1998; Harrison 1994; 1995). Organization revolved around a family cell replaced every few decades, according to the short life expectancy at birth, estimated at c. 20 years (Esparza *et al.* 2012, 290). Its sociality—rights, alliances, obligations—and materiality—domestic implements and the dwelling architecture itself—seem to have been interwoven with the biographies of their members (Blanco-González 2011b; Sánchez-Polo & Blanco-González 2014).

Out of the ecological diversity of inland Iberia, households were located on the sedimentary plains below 1200 m above sea level (Fig. 5); sustainable permanence in the arduous upland ecosystems was only achieved from the early first millennium BC. Thus, these groups settled in the more fertile and easily worked clayey-sandy soils within micro-environments better tolerating the especially harsh Mediterranean summer drought in the Subboreal period: the valley prairies and tablelands close to major and secondary water courses and wetlands with demonstrated agricultural land-use dating back to the Early Neolithic (c. 5500 cal. BC). These were their preferred hotspots (Fig. 5), where they performed episodic but recurrent occupations probably



Figure 6. (Colour online) Open area excavation at the pit site of Cerro de la Cabeza (Ávila). (Photograph: F. Fabián.)

conditioned by soil exhaustion and by their strong impact (Delibes & Romero 1992; 2011; Fernández-Posse 1998, 240). A closer look at these higher densities of Cogotas I sites in the Northern Meseta and a comparison of frequencies between Bronze Age occupations and vernacular later prehistoric phases at these sites (Blanco-González 2011a, 129–31) highlight their coincidence (Fig. 5). Narratives on the European Bronze Age often resort to mediaeval peasantry as an analogy for imaging prehistoric lifestyles, an anachronism already impugned (e.g. Kristiansen & Larsson 2005, 32–3; Kienlin 2012, 18). The widespread idea of people in the second millennium BC as immobile and nucleated farmers must be judged within the mainstream evolutionary and processual paradigm which regards gradual and irreversible milestones as points of no return. However, actually diverse historical trajectories have been recognized. Thus, scarcely circumscribed self-dependent groups implementing subsistence strategies well-suited to their ecological, technological and demographic constraints have been identified across northern Iberia, from the northwest (Parcero & Criado 2013) to the northeast (Colomer *et al.* 1998), including Cogotas I communities (Fernández-Posse 1998; Harrison 1994).

The nature of the habitation traces in Cogotas I deserves reconsideration in the view of some opinions recently proffered (Abarquero *et al.* 2013; Arnáiz *et al.* 2012; Blanco-González 2011b). Despite some attempts to understand the spatial and temporal arrangements of these settlements (e.g. Arnáiz & Montero 2004; Blasco *et al.* 2007; Harrison 2007; Harrison *et al.* 1994), most sites lack incontrovertible evidence of how they were actually organized (Abarquero 2005, 46; Blasco

2003; 2012). Hundreds of hectares have been unearthed by developer-funded archaeology in the last three decades and pit sites can be confidently regarded as the archetypical sites for those seven centuries (Fig. 6). Anthropogenic sediments, organic matter—including animals and humans—and substantial cultural debris accumulated almost exclusively within such gullies and wells (Blasco 2001; 2012; Delibes & Romero 1992; 2011; Fernández-Posse 1998; Harrison 1994; 1995). A widespread functionalist standpoint assumes that such scatters of underground features were multi-purpose storage facilities, the only survivals of open-air hamlets (e.g. Abarquero 2005, 42–7; Díaz-del-Río 2001, 131–41; Harrison 1994, 91–3). There are some exceptional hilltop sites with massive stone enclosures (Abarquero *et al.* 2013, 319) (Fig. 7), but these are also associated with pits. However, in contrast to preceding Chalcolithic and subsequent Iron Age abundant well-preserved houses and activity areas, such evidence is hardly recognizable among Cogotas I. Traces of a handful of wattle-and-daub, relatively short-lived living quarters are known (e.g. Abarquero *et al.* 2013; Harrison *et al.* 1994). Like the pits, huts were backfilled with anthropogenic sediments and do not yield refuse from activities carried out *in situ*. Moreover, their negligible number—c. 30 examples—and usual intense disturbance, i.e. rarity of true ‘occupation layers’, suggest the surviving cases are exceptional remnants (Blanco-González 2011b, 402) and raise further questions.

Before inferring spatial patternings of past activities, some questions need to be addressed (Blanco-González 2014b), such as: why do sunken features predominate everywhere and positive constructions are



Figure 7. (Colour online) A. Bird's-eye view of the hilltop chalk plateau at Cuesta de la Horca (Palencia) delimited to the east by a bank (line of bushes marked by arrows). B. Modern truncation exposing a section of this bank. (Photograph: A. Blanco-González.)

so badly deteriorated? Is this ubiquitous differential truncation due to mere haphazard post-abandonment processes? Were pits filled by accidental natural dynamics? Where did these materials come from? How did they end up within the pits? (Lucas 2012, 88). Beyond the stale idea of pit sites representing 'horizontal stratigraphies' (e.g. Blasco 2012, 190), their formation and taphonomic dynamics are becoming crucial. Thus, the vagaries of accidental recent removal cannot account for the overwhelming prevalence of subsoil features in this particular period (Fig. 6). Nor can infilling of these pits be explained solely by random and natural processes. Such accumulations came from residential and productive areas not yet positively documented *in situ*. These missing contexts may be characterized by their low spatial redundancy and scarce congruency (Brooks & Yellen 1987) resulting from interspersed and iterative activities (Abarquero 2005, 45–7; Delibes & Romero 2011). Finally, human agency behind most pit fills, i.e. the deliberate closure of such sunken features with sediments and debris taken from somewhere else and dumped in there, has been demonstrated in Cogotas I (e.g. Enríquez & Drake 2007, 164–73) and elsewhere (e.g. Colomer *et al.* 1998; Garrow 2006; Hill 1995; Jiménez-Jáimez & Márquez-Romero 2010). In short, these occupation cycles led to no superimposed layers but those represented within sunken features. A pervasive anthropogenic filter responsible for selective samples entering these dug-out contexts may be the soundest explanation. Importantly, archaeological remains are partial, detached and disordered ensembles hardly representative of the original domestic repertoires.

Our understanding of the burial practices among such communities has been radically improved by recent bioarchaeological research projects HUM 2005-00139 and HAR 2009-10105, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and led by Prof. Esparza (Esparza *et al.* 2012a,b). The only mortuary evidence consisted of sporadic inhumations in pits, mostly during the initial Proto-Cogotas phase (1800–1450 cal. BC). A reassessment of such cases (Esparza *et al.* 2012a) has demonstrated that they do not stand for the normative procedure and are the result of complex selection patterns: the anthropological evidence is too scanty (c. 60 individuals) for such a large area and timespan; burial goods are absent, save isolated exceptions (Fig. 8); 35 per cent of the anthropological ensemble consists of dismembered human remains and complete corpses were often carelessly thrown into these pits; whole living populations are clearly misrepresented and the mortuary evidence does not match the expected palaeo-demographic structure¹ (Abarquero *et al.* 2013, 320–23; Esparza *et al.* 2012a, 293). Therefore, the extant human remains in pits constitute a strongly biased sample. Given that post-depositional disturbance or unknown causes affecting mortality tendencies can be rejected as contributory factors (Esparza *et al.* 2012a, 294), we must conclude that they were mainly framed by premeditated cultural precepts. In this regard, a crucial point has been made recently: some secondary human remains in pits feature taphonomic traces of gnawing by canids, dehydration and desquamation, pointing towards prolonged disturbance prior to deposition (Esparza *et al.* 2012a, 322–3; 2012b, 104–13). Thus, the exposure

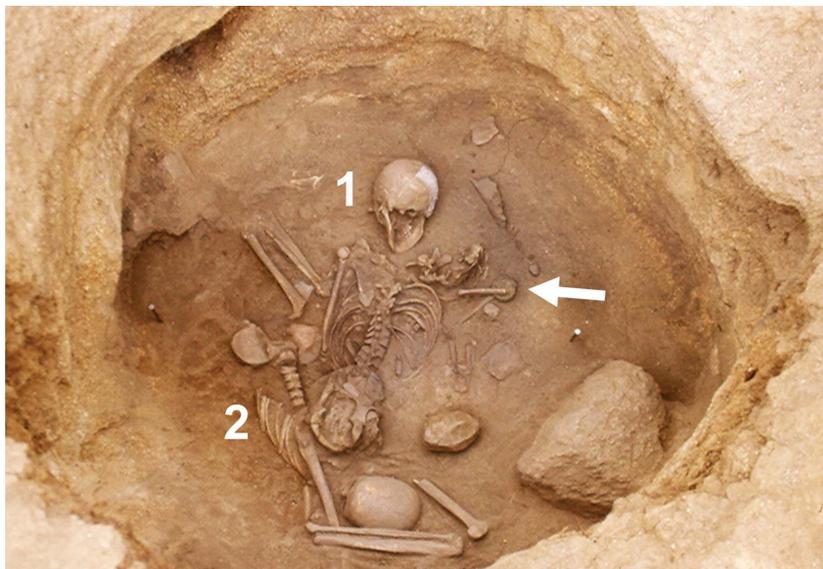


Figure 8. (Colour online) Double pit burial of a young woman without feet (no. 1) and a partial adolescent (no. 2), from Cerro de la Cabeza (Ávila). The woman wore two bronze bracelets (white arrow), a one-off case of indisputable personal furnishings in a late Cogotas I mortuary context. (Photograph: A. Blanco-González.)

of corpses might have been the customary funerary ritual, reserved to persons deceased in ordinary circumstances, i.e. by natural ageing. This led to no archaeological trace except those sporadic and very rare cases of recollection after exposition and subsequent inclusion into pits. Surviving complete individuals likely represent a discriminatory and very partial subset among those numerous deviant cases of *mauvaise mort*, i.e. people deceased in unforeseen circumstances, deserving substandard procedures (Esparza *et al.* 2012b, 114–20). In addition, the manipulation and selective deposition of relics seems to account for the occurrence of dismembered large bones and skulls. Radiocarbon dating has confirmed some disarticulated human bones several centuries older accompanying newly deceased individuals. Thus, during the Proto-Cogotas phase (1800–1450 cal. BC), at El Mirador Cave (Burgos) the remnants of six boiled and cannibalized people of Early Bronze Age date, c. 2480–2280 cal. BC² (Beta-182041), were cached in a pit c. 1700–1600 cal. BC (Cáceres *et al.* 2007, 900–902). During the later Cogotas I phase (1450–1150 cal. BC), a primary individual in a pit at Carrelasvegas (Palencia) was accompanied by some secondary human remains dated to c. 1750–1580 cal. BC (Poz-23435) (Esparza *et al.* 2012a, 309–10). Likewise, at Pico Castro (Palencia) the dismembered bones of a child deceased c. 1400–1200 cal. BC (Poz-16555) were mixed in a pit with the remains of an adult several centuries older, dated to the Proto-Cogotas phase (Abarquero *et al.* 2013, 323; Blanco-González 2014a, 445; Esparza *et al.* 2012b, 120).

Last, it is worth reconsidering here some ancient arcane places such as open-air monuments, caves or severely altered loci dating back to the fourth and third millennia BC holding deposits made by Bronze Age peoples. There is no consensual view upon the purposes and meanings of these occurrences, regarded as funerary, propitiatory, votive or even as acts of desecration (Delibes 2001; Harrison 1994, 86). Thus, some Neolithic tumuli yield Cogotas I items (Delibes 2004; Esparza 1990, 114–16; Esparza *et al.* 2012a, 273–5) but their contextual data have been bewildering until recently. Excavations in 2002 at El Morcuero (Ávila), a barrow erected in the late third millennium BC, illuminated this aspect: over its outer kern was cremated *in situ* a young woman who died c. 1420–1268 cal. BC (GrA 38129), accompanied by two handled vessels (Blanco-González & Fabián 2010, 193–7; Esparza *et al.* 2012a, 274). At the nearby Neolithic passage grave of Prado de las Cruces (Ávila), detached Cogotas I potsherds and cremated human remains from its tumulus (Fabian 1997, 62–4) might be reinterpreted in the same fashion. In El Torrión megalith (Salamanca), a grooved gold bracelet of second millennium BC date was found (Delibes 2004, 223–4). Finally, the narrow granitic cave of El Pedroso (Zamora) might have been reputed as a natural passage grave during the Middle Bronze Age (Alves *et al.* 2013). Its inner chamber, decorated with schematic carved motifs, probably contained Chalcolithic funerary depositions heavily disturbed in the Proto-Cogotas phase, when consumption and deposition were performed within this secluded space

(Alves *et al.* 2013, 23–30). In the eastern Meseta karst regions, several caves have produced Bronze Age funerary finds, such as the pantheon at La Revilla (Burgos) used for several generations (c. 1900–1500 cal. BC) according to radiocarbon assays (Abarquero *et al.* 2005; Esparza *et al.* 2012a, 273). Finally, during the Proto-Cogotas phase, selective depositions were carried out in specific open-air locales of third-millennium BC date which had been subject to large-scale sediment removals in order to dig monumental ditches, i.e. causewayed enclosures (Delibes 2000–2001, 300–301; Liesau *et al.* 2008), or gullies and trenches in the course of benefiting particular resources, i.e. the salt workshop at Santioste (Abarquero *et al.* 2012). Such substantial extractive actions left long-lasting tell-tale marks on the surface (e.g. Garrow 2006, vii; Hill 1995, 52), allowing their recognition several centuries after their abandonment. Thus, at the causewayed site of Camino de las Yeseras (Madrid), a ‘votive deposit’ dated to c. 1760–1450 cal. BC (Beta-184325) contained the whole range of domestic species: articulated portions belonging to five cows, two ovicaprids, a pig, a dog and detached parts of a horse, all carefully placed within Pit 319 (Liesau & Blasco 2006, 83–7; Liesau *et al.* 2008, 99, 107–8). At Casetón de la Era (Valladolid), another Chalcolithic ditched enclosure, a decapitated calf was placed within a small pit (Abarquero *et al.* 2013, 324, fig. 10; Delibes *et al.* 2009, 31; Liesau 2012, 231–3). Another whole calf dated to c. 1754–1536 cal. BC (Poz-35228) was accompanied by a barbed and tanged copper arrowhead within a pit dug into Early Bronze Age layers in the salt exploitation centre of Santioste (Zamora) (Abarquero *et al.* 2012, 234, 270, 328–30; Liesau 2012, 231–3) (Fig. 9).

Engaging with things

This section concentrates on the material remains in themselves as a way of circumventing the challenge of linking artefacts to people who made/handled, used and disposed of them. A series of micro-histories are showcased; they open up new windows into the mutualistic human–thing relationships (Hodder 2012; Knappett 2005; Meskell 2004) which may contribute towards accounting for the idiosyncrasy of these Bronze Age groups.

Thus, metal hoards in inland Iberia are often located in dry-land places lacking an archaeological context (Herrán 2008), as elsewhere across Atlantic Europe (e.g. Bradley 1990; Harding 2007). This has raised concerns on the chronology and authorship of such disposals, but typology and significant associations (Delibes 2000–2001, 297–8; Delibes & Romero 1992, 238; Herrán 2008, 285–9) allow the relative dat-

ing of some cases to between the Middle and Final Bronze Age IIB in the continental sequence. Major multiple finds in the Meseta contain objects with disparate typological attributions, which may indicate the accumulation of things with diverse temporalities (Bradley 1998, 6). In the same vein, several Argaric-type swords are known in northern Iberia (e.g. Herrán 2008, 270–71; Lull *et al.* 2013b, 284, fig. 1). These have been considered local products ‘derived from Early Bronze Age prototypes’ (Harrison 1994, 86), but they may also be true southern imports (Abarquero *et al.* 2013, 317) whose temporal delay between manufacture and deposition points to extended life-histories. Like other European regions (e.g. Brück & Fontijn 2013; Fontijn 2008), it seems sensible that such communities performed selective depositions of distinctive metallic types categorized in diverse ways. Votive sets of Atlantic pieces abandoned in isolated places and local metalwork dumped in daily pits or carefully deposited (Fig. 8) were two facets of the same phenomenon (*contra* Fernández-Posse 1998, 111).

The presence of ceramics from other times and places in contexts of second-millennium BC date may support the above observation. Thus, several cases of excised-ware imports from the Duffaits culture (France) have been identified in Middle Bronze Age caves (Delibes *et al.* 2000, 106–15; Rodríguez Marcos 2007, 371–2). At Cueva del Asno (Soria) an incomplete Duffaits handled bowl (Fig. 10A) was found in a layer with human remains (Delibes *et al.* 2000, 120–22). A shallow pit at El Mirador produced a handful of similar Aquitanian potsherds, a bronze flat axe and the mentioned detached bones at least three centuries older (Vergés *et al.* 2002, 114–16; Cáceres *et al.* 2007, 900–902). In Solacueva (Álava), a cave featuring Late Neolithic schematic rock art, the hilt fragment of a Final Bronze Age II Atlantic-type sword and three golden and silver bracelets were found (Llanos 1991, 130–32). Late Bronze Age contexts have also yielded wheel-thrown central Mediterranean potsherds (c. 1200–1050 cal. BC) associated with hand-made pottery in the later Cogotas I style: Late Helladic IIIB sherds from Llanete de los Moros (Córdoba), plain fragments from Gatas (Almería) and Cuesta del Negro (Granada) (Ruiz Gálvez 2009, 98–102) and even a probable LH IIIC potsherd in a pit at La Indiana (Madrid) (Consuegra *et al.* 2001). Extemporaneous sherds in unaltered Bronze Age contexts are also known elsewhere (Blanco-González *in press*), such as a Beaker sherd within the double burial pit at Cerro de la Cabeza (Fig. 8). The most eloquent case known to date is El Cerro (Burgos) (Fig. 11), recently reinterpreted (Sánchez-Polo & Blanco-González 2014) as a site abandoned through formalized actions



Figure 9. (Colour online) Calf placed alongside a copper arrowhead within a pit dug into Early Bronze Age layers at Santioeste (Zamora). (After Abarquero et al. 2012, 239, fig. 89.)

prompted by the simultaneous death of three young siblings c. 1600–1400 cal. BC (Poz-16556, Poz-16514 and Poz-16604). The procedure included the unusual inhumation of their bodies (Fig. 11, B1 & B2),

the nearby deposition of an articulated cow's leg (Fig. 11A), the decommissioning of a hut (Fig. 11, B3)—also dead like its inhabitants?—and the placement of Beaker and Early Neolithic sherds, the



Figure 10. (Colour online) Distant prototypes for Cogotas I ware and local emulations. A. Duffaits-style handled bowl with chip-carved triangles from Cueva del Asno (Soria) c. 1870–1520 cal. bc. B. Bowl with excised triangles and red inlays from Arenero de Valdivia (Madrid) c. 1450–1100 cal. bc (Photographs: A, Museo Numantino, Soria; B, Museo de San Isidro, Madrid.)

latter clearly piled on top of a backfilled sunken gully (Fig. 11, B5).

Finally, this panoramic account zooms into the micro level of craftsmanship, focusing on the fineware in Cogotas I style as a way of illuminating creative processes. This pottery features eye-catching decorations (Figs. 2 & 3) whose striking resemblances with local extinct or distant wares have been highlighted by scholars since the early stages of research (e.g. Blasco 2003; Delibes 1983; Delibes & Romero 1992; Fernández-Posse 1982; Jimeno 2001; Lull *et al.* 2013a, 606–7; Maluquer de Motes 1956). Thus, the stab-and-drag technique, massively displayed on later Cogotas I vessels (Fig. 2), can be dated back to the Early Neolithic when it was frequently deployed on vessels (Alday 2009, 135–7). These Bronze Age productions also share a suite of decorative choices with the local Bell Beaker Ciempozuelos style (Garrido-Pena 2000, 116–26), including: a) the frequent deployment of incised motifs such as chevrons, herringbones and reticulates or hatched triangles; b) the

extensive decoration of the internal rim; and c) the rubbing of white paste into the geometric decorations (Figs. 12, B2 & 13B). Further ornamental techniques may be traced in exotic contexts. Thus, the likeness between trans-Pyrenean excised motifs (Fig. 10A) and Cogotas I pottery (Fig. 10B) was minimized during the 1980s (e.g. Fernández-Posse 1982), when local evolutionary processes were emphasized, and have been resumed more recently (Delibes *et al.* 2000; Rodríguez Marcos 2007). Some early chip-carved imports have been found in undisturbed Middle Bronze Age cave contexts in the eastern Meseta (Fig. 10A). Precisely this area yields the earliest Cogotas I excised motifs, such as those from Los Tolmos (Soria) c. 1680 cal. bc (Jimeno 2001, 147), featuring alternating excised triangles (Jimeno & Fernández Moreno 1991, 87, fig. 53, no. 903), a widespread theme in Duffaits ceramics (Fig. 10A). The realization of such formal similarities has sustained the view of these communities being very conservative, deeply rooted in their past. However, the cultural mechanisms

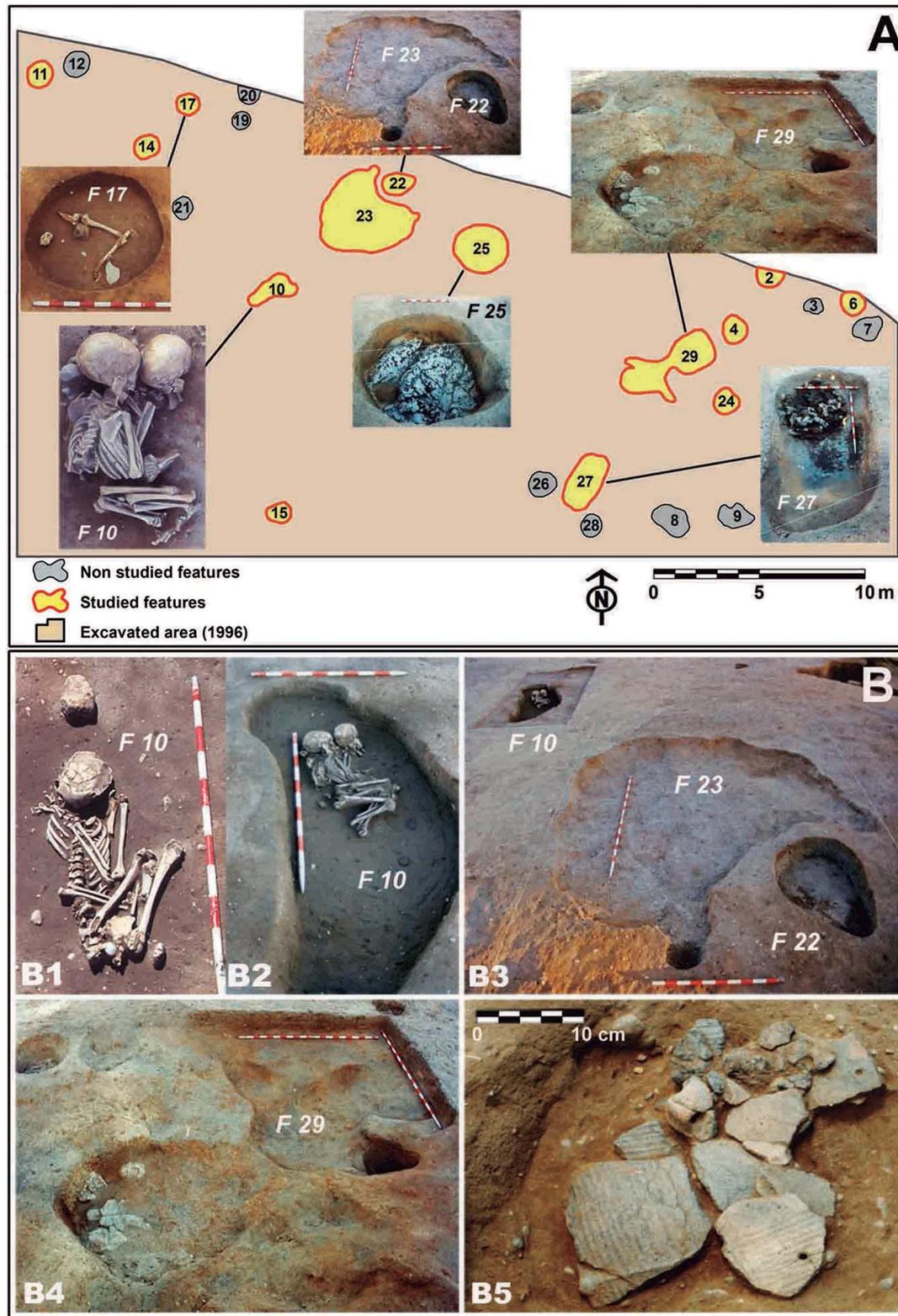


Figure 11. (Colour online) Planned abandonment of sunken features at El Cerro (Burgos), involving a cow leg deposited within F17 (A); the deviant burial of three children in F10 (B1 & B2) close to hut floor F23 (B3); and the placement of Early Neolithic sherds cached within gully F29 (B4 & B5). (Photos: A. Palomino Lázaro.)

Bell Beaker (2600-2000 BC)



Use of similar geometric motifs
e.g. impressed lines of zig-zag

Massive encrustation of
coloured inlays

Cogotas I (1450-1150 BC)



Figure 12. (Colour online) Local prototypes for Cogotas I ware. A. Ciempozuelos-style Bell Beaker carinated bowls from La Salmedina (Madrid) (A1) and from Ciempozuelos (Madrid) (A2). B. Later Cogotas I vessels: Bowl 1 from Pico Castro (Palencia) (B1) and handled jar from Pórragos (Valladolid) (B2). (Photographs: A1, Mario Torquemada, Museo Arqueológico Regional, Madrid; A2, Real Academia de la Historia; B1, A. Blanco-González; B2, Museo de Valladolid.)

that might account for them and the consequences in terms of worldviews have never been considered. Bearing in mind the present state of affairs, such resemblances might be regarded as emulative creations by Cogotas I potters drawing on spatio-

temporally detached prototypes (Blanco-González *in press*).

The last biographical steps of pottery are also noteworthy. Refitting operations at several sites (Blanco-González 2014a; Harrison 2007; Harrison *et al.*



Figure 13. (Colour online) Excised partial vessels made up of conjoining sherds showing opposite pre-depositional alterations. A. Irregular Bowl 3 from Pico Castro (Palencia); B. Bowl from Cerro de la Cabeza (Ávila). (Photographs: A. Blanco-González.)

1994; Sánchez-Polo & Blanco-González 2014) prove that the bulk of potsherds entered the archaeological record in a very partial and detached condition. This suggests a deep mismatch between domestic pottery inventories in use and the scarcely representative archaeological collections. On the one hand, thin-section analyses point to the substantial inclusion of grog temper as a diagnostic technological choice in Cogotas I pottery (e.g. Olaetxea 2000, 84, 90). Therefore, the grinding-up of sherds seems an important diminishing factor in the surviving sample (Fig. 14B). At the site of Moncín, this recycling affects a quarter to a third of all later Cogotas I fragments (Harrison *et al.* 1994, 256–7, 287–9, 529), whereas at Majaladares this may account for the misrepresentation of bases among Proto-Cogotas wares (Harrison 2007, 82). Chamotte is a widely available and effective filler, yet its massive incorporation in these potteries might have responded to cultural reasons beyond mere practicality (Hamilton 2002, 46; Harrison *et al.* 1994, 288–9). On the other hand, not only were the distant ceramics subject to formalities in their abandonment. Certain locally made vessels—both fine and coarse wares—were imbued with sociality and esteemed as such even long after their breakage. Two cases in point are the partial large carinated bowls exhibiting geometric decorations found within pits from Pico Castro (Palencia) (Fig. 13A) and Cerro de la Cabeza (Ávila) (Fig. 13B). Their fracture was probably intentional, and some time elapsed prior to deposition, for conjoining sherds feature contrasting conditions (erosion, calcite accretion and fire exposure) proving diverse post-breakage alterations (Blanco-González 2014a,b). Eventually, both sets of sherds were reassembled and deposited together. In the case of Pico Castro, Bowl 3 was even mended by gluing its sherds with some

perishable adhesive, since it was found refitted and inverted within a pit (Blanco-González 2014a, 451, fig. 7) (Fig. 13A).

In brief, beyond the strongly reduced, incomplete and disarranged condition of habitual cultural remains, certain things were paid special attention. An approach attentive to their final handling and disposal has cast new light on how Bronze Age people engaged with them. Such items seem to have been valuables, accruing important meanings because of their intrinsic materiality (physical oddity, alien origin or contrasting design) or extrinsic connotations (attached meanings and acknowledged social biographies) (Fig. 14B). According to this cultural esteem, they participated in particular episodes of social life and deserved appropriate termination treatment. Some such life-cycles or itineraries (Fontijn 2013; Gosden & Marshall 1999; Hahn & Weiss 2013; Jennings 2014) have been tracked and their final steps were unexpectedly complex. Thus, instead of expeditious and straight abandonment gestures, some protracted sequences of discard have been identified (Fig. 14B), that is, ways of disposing of certain things through consecutive delayed stages which led physical marks on them (Fig. 13).

Reappraising Cogotas I

A multi-scalar reconsideration of Cogotas I can now be gained. This paper first addressed its restrictive definition, whereby one formal attribute—surface ceramic ornamentation, from a minority material, i.e. the decorated fineware—is deployed as a type fossil, becoming the only diagnostic touchstone for a multi-layered phenomenon. The large territory and prolonged currency encompassing the use of Cogotas

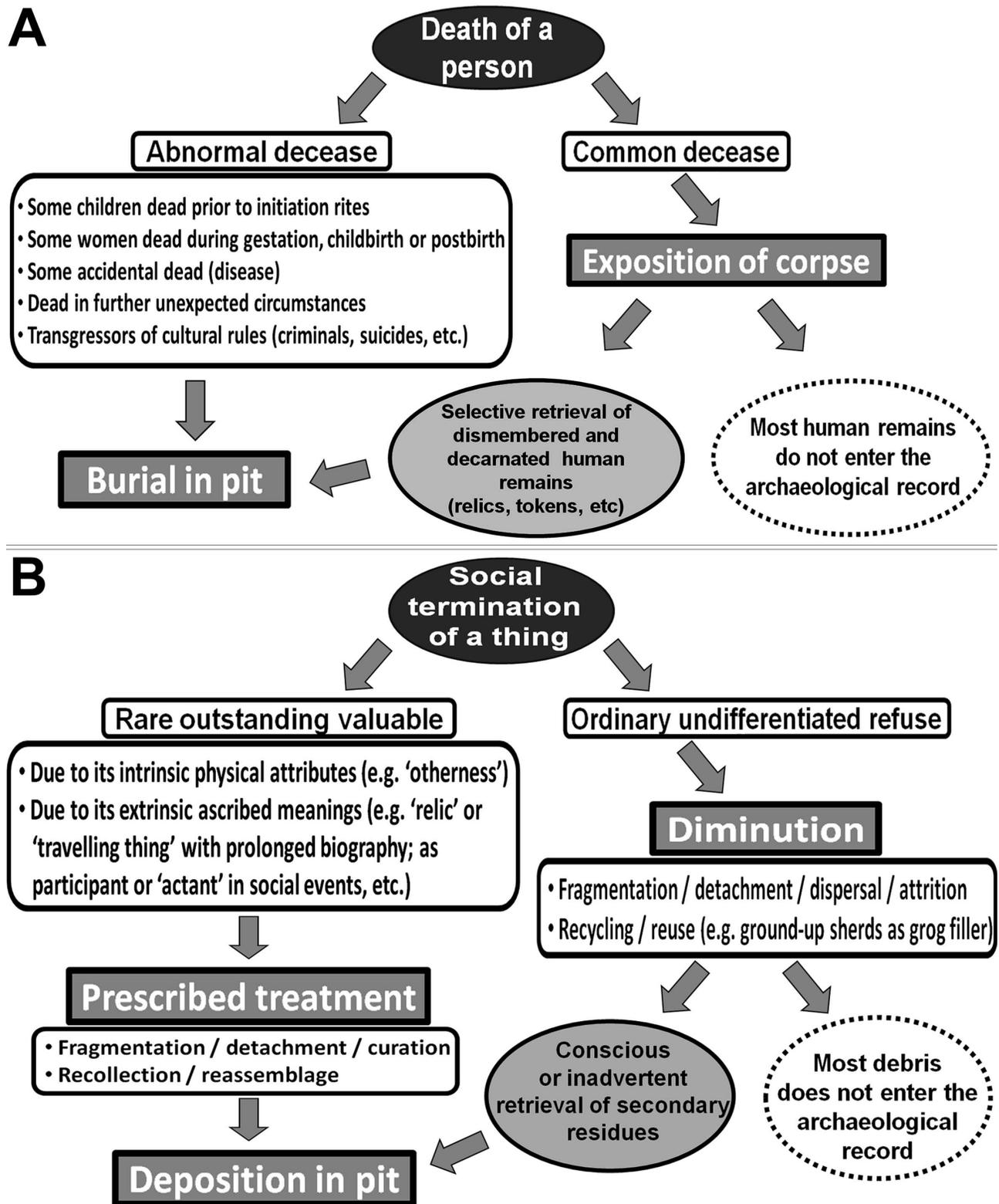


Figure 14. Outline of the final management of the remnants of people (A) and things (B) in the Cogotas I culture. (A after Esparza et al. 2012b, 118, fig. 12.)

I-style pottery suggest an as yet ill-defined suite of social variability and assorted ways of organizing cohabitation. Logistic mobility and the maintenance of extended networks for mutual support and exchange of products, people and know-how were key coping mechanisms to counteract constraining factors, especially agrarian uncertainty (Harrison 1994; Delibes & Romero 2011). These social strategies contribute towards explaining their cultural homogeneity in the absence of any form of stable political integration, as well as the rapid propagation throughout Iberia of cultural choices such as ceramic decoration (Abarquero 2012, 95–101; Fernández-Posse 1998, 115). In this light, it is conceivable that some ‘acculturated’ spots sustained ‘enduring social bounds with the core area’ (Harrison 2007, 186) regardless of their distance. More flexible standpoints involving permeability and certain spatio-temporal laxity may help acknowledge the cultural idiosyncrasy behind this phenomenon. It is better understood and visualized as a far less circumscribed succession of discontinuous hotspots in culturally attractive settings; those lowland hubs featuring optimal environmental conditions occupied in a cyclical fashion (Fig. 5).

Archaeological visibility of these semi-permanent settlements with weak spatial redundancy and congruency is definitely reduced (Brooks & Yellen 1987). However, there is scope for advocating that the restricted traceability of this scanty material imprint was ultimately promoted by cultural activity, i.e. by specific depositional practices (McAnany & Hodder 2009; Mills & Walker 2008), in addition to natural processes. The customary management of any physical remnants of activity among Cogotas I groups entailed their disarrangement, dispersion, eventual reuse and chiefly disappearance (Fig. 14). Thus, dwellings and their associate belongings were systematically erased and recycled; only exceptional cases have survived (Blanco-González 2011b; 2014b), such as the house floor at El Cerro (Fig. 11, B3). Likewise the normative mortuary ritual reserved to ordinary decease implied the exposure and open-air decay of most corpses (Fig. 14A), leading to their obliteration (Esparza *et al.* 2012a). Nonetheless, these orderly depletion gestures were occasionally complemented by accretion or ‘inscription’ (Lucas 2012, 120–23) acts, such as the placement of cherished matters in concrete locations or the methodical closure of every pit (Blanco-González 2011b, 398; Fernández-Posse 1998, 241). This cultural procedure also involved the substandard incorporation in pits or caves of complete or partial human remains of a few individuals, according to unknown criteria—sometimes perhaps because of their social relevance (Esparza *et al.* 2012a,

310) (Fig. 8). Since they did not follow the habitual funerary protocol (Fig. 14A), it seems sensible to think that they had suffered unusual deaths (Esparza *et al.* 2012a). Indeed, these latter occurrences represented the prime factor channelling the incidental selective preservation of the material traces.

This interpretation leads to two important consequences: a) the reassessment of the actual informative potential of this archaeological evidence, and b) the suitability of these sources of information to illuminate archaeological research questions. The first point concerns the ontological status of this material record: almost the entire spectrum of depositional contexts (Garrow 2012; Mills & Walker 2008) is formed by anthropogenic filters: from the rare end-products of human agency, e.g. formally placed deposits of things, animals or humans, to the accidental by-products of everyday activities, e.g. random accumulations of erratic refuse. The central role of pre-abandonment cultural dynamics impinging on the extant available materials must be highlighted here. In both scenarios, cultural items have been removed from their original milieu and lack significant associations in terms of spatial and functional patterning of past activities (Lucas 2012, 91–6, 194). Therefore surviving funerary and domestic contexts in Cogotas I (Fig. 14) are diminished and misrepresentative subsets of the target biological populations and original household repertoires, making them biased sources from which to make socio-economic inferences (Blanco-González 2014b). The most common assemblages contained in subterranean features encapsulate this warning; they are juxtapositions of secondary residues, akin to the concepts of time-averaged aggregates or ‘cumulative palimpsests’ (Bailey 2007, 204–5; Lucas 2012, 112–23). This observation drives away any ‘reflectionist’ temptation, i.e. the fallacious expectation of finding fossilized activity areas frozen at a discrete moment (Chapman & Gaydarska 2007, 71–3; Lucas 2012, 102–3), and suggests that barely explored approaches such as taphonomy and micromorphology may be promising lines of enquiry. On the other hand, this apparently deceiving material record can no longer be understood as the imperfect legacy of an ‘archaeological culture’ in mainstream positivist terms. On the contrary, provided that the appropriate research strategies are implemented, its idiosyncratic nature is itself extremely enlightening on the cultural practices responsible for such archaeological outcomes. In particular, if archaeological stratigraphies are created by people and somewhat incorporate their intentionality (Lucas 2012, 88–91, McAnany & Hodder 2009, 2–3), then Cogotas I offers an incomparable test case for a ‘social stratigraphic’ approach

to depositional practices, i.e. the social interpretation of such episodes. In this light, the widespread chores of erasing/dispersing everyday debris, punctuated by minority gestures of accumulating/interring particular items, constituted the contingent ways of managing those things in this cultural milieu (Mills & Walker 2008).

The second issue pertains to the sort of questions that may be properly addressed. Thus, the empirical corpus at hand cannot be directly interpreted in functional or spatial terms without a previous thorough examination. However, it may provide more direct and crucial data on the underlying cultural tenets pervading these communities and framing their social practices. Thus, these seem to be restricted to transient face-to-face social interactions, leaving few long-lasting conspicuous traces. Indeed, no durable monumental expressions are known in Cogotas I, with the exception of some stone-walled, rather than 'fortified', hilltops (Fig. 7). This mindset may fit a strategy of intended invisibility (Criado 1995, 196–8) whereby any objects participating in social life were endowed an ephemeral lifespan, and once their roles had been fulfilled they were subject to proactive dismantlement and hiding (Fig. 14). A closer look at the everyday lifestyles of these peoples provides further data. Thus, they spent the bulk of their lifetimes and daily experiences in the settings modified by their predecessors for over three millennia (Fig. 5), leaving a ubiquitous footprint (Delibes & Romero 2011). Such preferred enclave areas may also be analytically considered as foci of demographic pulse and epicentres where cultural expressions were forged (Shennan 2000, 819–20). In such hubs the encounter, even unwittingly, with local extemporaneous objects might have been a frequent occurrence. Underground features were dug into sandy loose soils, whose weak sedimentary processes—apart from within the pits—facilitated the dispersal of cultural remains. Thus, cultivation and especially pit digging might have facilitated the retrieval of Neolithic and Copper Age items from the ground (Chapman & Gaydarska 2007, 174; Hingley 2009, 145). Besides that, within their daily radius of action conspicuous landmarks such as megaliths, barrows, caves, altered extractive compounds or ditched enclosures attracted their interest. People in the second millennium BC frequented these locales, where they often extracted ancient cultural material and, during the Proto-Cogotas phase, occasionally deposited contemporary things (Fig. 9). Such places might have been regarded as liminal or otherworldly because of their 'otherness' (Brück 2011, 390), and these practices might accommodate the idea of an 'exchange between the ancestors and the present

people' (Chapman & Gaydarska 2007, 174). In addition, there is also good evidence for the handling of long-distance exotica or 'travelling things' (Hahn & Weiss 2013), such as Mediterranean and Atlantic metalwork, Argaric swords, or Aquitanian and central Mediterranean ceramics, which disprove the view of these groups being isolated and peripheral (*contra* Fernández-Posse 1998, 243).

What do we make of this suite of findings? If some of the occurrences gathered here were rare, exceptional episodes, what is the point of focusing on them? Some scholars have recently asserted the heuristic relevance of the uncommon, deviating archaeological events in accounting for the ordinary and the normative (Fontijn 2013, 185; Montón-Subías 2010, 3). In this vein, the review of a significant suite of ill-defined archaeological contexts allows realizing what can be learnt from them. Thus, prehistoric things outside their original time and space may be envisaged in manifold creative ways (e.g. Brück & Fontijn 2013), beyond the conventional political economy model of 'prestige goods'. Such items have been related elsewhere to esoteric knowledge, genealogical ancestry or mythical cosmogonies (e.g. Bradley 2002; Hanks 2008; Hingley 2009; Kristiansen & Larsson 2005) and this perspective may fit this case study. However, since these items were most likely reinterpreted and integrated into existing cultural patterns (Baltali 2007, 6–7), their otherness should not be overemphasized; their meanings probably evolved depending on contingent circumstances. Fortunately, some such items were finally deposited in Bronze Age contexts, so that their strategic manipulation and final concealment in discrete social episodes have been demonstrated, probably because of their social and ritual potency (Brück & Fontijn 2013). Thus, the cached Early Neolithic sherds at El Cerro (Fig. 11, B5) might have been manipulated as heirlooms (Lillios 1999, 239–44), handed down over generations until their definitive abandonment on occasion of the death of three children, perhaps to invoke supernatural forces (Sánchez-Polo & Blanco-González 2014, 22–3). At Pico Castro (Abarquero *et al.* 2013, 323; Esparza *et al.* 2012a, 120) and El Mirador Cave (Cáceres *et al.* 2007), dismembered human bones belonging to true ancestors were deposited, suggesting heirloom worship. Even some objects elaborated by such groups accrued remarkable reputations and were deemed worthy of highly formalized ways of handling and disposing of them. A growing number of Cogotas I ceramics (Blanco-González 2014a,b), such as those from Pico Castro or Cerro de la Cabeza presented here (Fig. 13), testify to complex, protracted sequences of breakage/detachment, curation/reuse, reassembling and

eventual (re)deposition. Such gestures recall the management of the mentioned human remains through consecutive and delayed steps. Furthermore, domestic animals such as pigs, and especially dogs (e.g. Díaz-del Río 2001, 201–2; Liesau 2012, 229–49), were frequently deposited in pits, sometimes resembling true inhumations (Sánchez Polo 2012). All in all, this series of parallelisms between the life-cycles of living beings and particular things, especially in their latest biographical steps (Fig. 14), suggests that clear-cut divisions between animate/inanimate or humans/non-humans may be misleading in this context. There is room to suggest that these past social practices might have followed alternative ontological categorizations, such as animistic cosmology (Alberti & Bray 2009; Bird-David 1999; Brück & Fontijn 2013).

Finally, the creative aspects of pottery also seem imbued with this kind of cultural principles. Thus, the massive incorporation of old ground-up sherds in new vessels seems a choice consistent with this overall outlook (Hamilton 2002, 46; Harrison *et al.* 1994, 288–9), in which ceramic repertoires that had fulfilled their social roles were appropriate sources for recycling. A much more conspicuous aspect of pottery making is the decorative resemblances between products from other times and places and Cogotas I ceramics (Fig. 12). This may be envisaged as a case for the explicit quotation of extinct or inaccessible crafts (Blanco-González *in press*). This hypothesis had been curtailed by the rigid empiricist criterion of strict temporal continuity, demanding the verification of the intermediate steps between sixth- and third-millennium BC wares and Bronze Age pottery, as if the archaeological record were a faithful reflection of such dynamics (e.g. Fernández-Posse 1982, 149; Rodríguez Marcos 2007, 371). On the contrary, we can expect to track neither direct transmission of craft techniques nor the down-the-line arrival of imports. If we are to understand these similarities, certain spatio-temporal flexibility may prove useful. Thus, it seems clear that the Cogotas I pottery style combined and reinterpreted both local atavistic (e.g. Abarquero 2005, 24–6; Rodríguez Marcos 2007, 357–67) (Fig. 12) and pan-European ornamentation (e.g. Abarquero 2012, 98–101; Blasco 2001, 225; 2003, 67–8) (Fig. 10). In the former scenario, the locally rooted character of these craftworks can be glimpsed from stratigraphic sequences spanning several generations, acting within epicentres of cultural creativity (Shenan 2000, 819–20). Thus, at Moncín (Zaragoza) (Harrison *et al.* 1994, 234–53) and especially at Majaladares (Zaragoza) (Harrison 2007, 65–82), similar preferred themes can be ascertained between Ciempozuelos and Proto-Cogotas wares from superimposed lay-

ers. These mimetic creative processes relied upon the very fragmentary nature of the prototypes, insofar as Bronze Age potters probably copied from detached bits of pottery (Blanco-González *in press*). This might explain why Cogotas I motifs and techniques are always disarranged, fractional and patchy compared to the original Neolithic and Chalcolithic vessels (Rodríguez Marcos 2012, 158). These potters drew upon a diverse array of sources and in so doing their vessels echoed designs in an ever-changing dialectical negotiation between ‘selfness’ and ‘otherness’.

Concluding remarks

The archaeological record of Bronze Age inland Iberia challenges common-sense inferences made by scholars when dealing with non-orthodox material evidence. Despite the increasing factual evidence and the incorporation of novel concerns, concepts and procedures, the research agenda on Cogotas I continues to be driven by resilient positivist standpoints. Some of them have been underlined here: the diffusionist underlying reasoning and the empiricist notions of congruency and contiguity corsetting its spatial representation and hindering the possibility of accepting mimetic creative processes, the mediaeval farmer ideology framing the understanding of prehistoric livelihood and the widespread ‘reflectionist’ and naive ways of envisaging the archaeological record. Cogotas I provides a paradigmatic test case in the face of these assumptions in European later prehistory. Brück & Fontijn (2013) have recently denounced how, to modern eyes, multilayered and permanent villages with *in situ* domestic equipment and graves containing elite paraphernalia seem faithfully familiar remains of second-millennium BC Europe, which hardly require critical assessment prior to interpretation (e.g. Kristiansen & Larsson 2005; Lull *et al.* 2013a). The total absence of such conspicuous features, interpreted in the same conventional fashion, may all too easily lead to an underestimation of seemingly discouraging prehistoric realities (Colomer *et al.* 1998, 53–5).

On the other hand, the implementation of homogeneous and rigid research protocols irrespective of the ontological nature of the material at hand has produced misleading discourses. Thus, the weak traceability of the prehistoric world modelled by Cogotas I communities has led to reinforcing stereotypes, such as their precarious and crude lifestyles, or their consideration as stagnant, insulated and even backward groups with irrelevant contributions in terms of socio-political or technological maturity (e.g. Almagro Basch 1939, 139; Fernández Castro 1995, 132;

Fernández-Posse 1998, 243). The application of standardized top-down interpretive protocols has provided functional, economic and social narratives (e.g. Blasco 2012; Delibes *et al.* 2007; Lull *et al.* 2013a), but they are not as consistent as established views would have it. Thus, the faint evidence of social asymmetry in the mortuary record of Cogotas I cannot be adduced to posit either an egalitarian ethos (Fernández-Posse 1998, 120–22) or the opposite account (Arnáiz & Montero 2011). Indeed, scarcely visible and unstable supra-local polities might have emerged. Moreover, further sorts of transversal intra-group power might have had a stronger impact on individuals' lives (Kienlin 2012, 13; Montón Subías 2007, 249).

If the insights presented here are pieced together, the resulting image of Bronze Age peoples in inland Iberia raises serious suspicion on the allegedly non-problematic nature of their archaeological results. A very different picture emerges, with an overall cultural outline pervading different realms of social practice, from subsistence and craftworks to more esoteric instances. Cogotas I shared its lack of archaeological sophistication with other contemporary Iberian societies (Colomer *et al.* 1998). Such communities deliberately avoided those features privileged by mainstream scholarship—regarded as diagnostic clues of progress—and emphasized the stability and continuity. Thus, those dispersed groups endured for centuries wandering around certain enclave zones, and this very observation disproves the evolutionary pejorative image of post-Neolithic mobility. The avoidance of permanent and nucleated habitation or intensified production and the technological level of these agro-forestry lifestyles (Delibes & Romero 2011; Díaz-del-Río 2001; Harrison 1994) were efficient social mechanisms suited to their ecological and demographic thresholds to face disturbing factors. Their social organization was surely based on transient cells, replaced every few years. These notions of fluidity and ephemerality also permeated their material world, entailing the total defacement and substitution of their physical and immaterial heritage. Thus, once social requirements had been fulfilled, devices were systematically and deliberately decommissioned (Enrriquez & Drake 2007; Fernández-Posse 1998, 241). A particular strategy of long-term invisibility, a long way from a monumental attitude (Criado 1995), might be advocated. In addition, the bulk of materials entered the archaeological record mainly through man's hand, irrespective of their being ritualized depositions or unintended cumulative side effects. No physical degradation processes can account for the differential elusiveness of the fraction that has reached the present day. Therefore, prehistoric anthropogenic filters are to

be identified as crucial contributing factors to both its diminution and preservation. In short, western-modern ideas such as individualism, maximization, profit, alienable possessions, rubbish, political power, wealth accumulation and even monumentality seem clearly inadequate in this case study. The overarching framework covering such social practices might have been a relational cosmology, which highlighted the qualitative and extrinsic properties of their material world (Brück & Fontijn 2013).

Cogotas I may be thought of as a sensitive and unusual proxy for testing the inadequacy of our taken-for-granted conceptual and methodological toolkits to tackle an unforeseen range of heterogeneity and idiosyncrasy in Bronze Age Europe, as already contended (e.g. Brück & Fontijn 2013; Colomer *et al.* 1998). The extant central Iberian evidence informs first and foremost on the management of substances and depositional practices. In order to gain further historical insights, these material outcomes might be considered to be clues, traces or leads, that is, indirect and involuntary marginal sources of information (Ginzburg 1992; Lucas 2012, 26–9). Research would benefit from highly detailed reading of these material trails through bottom-up approaches. Within this renewed agenda, transdisciplinarity might be a key concept. Thus, the meaning of particular surviving things might be better understood through their archaeometric characterization and exhaustively tracking their whole itineraries or life-histories; the formation of available depositional contexts would benefit from micromorphology, taphonomy and formation studies; and bioarchaeological approaches will provide crucial data on genetic affiliation, conditions of life, diet and mobility of people and domestic animals. Finally, what the mentioned prehistoric cultural practices amounted to is currently hard to say. However, in historical terms they worked as a suite of strategies that reinforced the sense of commonality and shared rootedness among those scattered and short-lived cells of sociality, playing a crucial role in maintaining their ways of thriving in the world.

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Notes

1. In pre-industrial and archaeological populations, the higher rates of disease are within the range of 0–1 years, and mortality among pre-adult cohorts (<20 years) gradually decreases with the age. By contrast, the published life table for Cogotas I communities (Esparza *et al.* 2012a, 290) shows that newborns represent only 12 per cent of the total interred sample, and therefore they are underrepresented, whereas values for adolescents continue increasing with the age, so that they are overrepresented.
2. All the radiocarbon dates have been calibrated with Oxcal 4.2 and are expressed at 2-sigma range.

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