



Road to encounters: stelae, burial practices and cultural hybridisation at Las Capellanías, Spain

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Although thousands of prehistoric standing stones have been recorded across Iberia, the lack of associated detailed contextual data allows ongoing debate about their possible functions. Following the chance discovery of a ‘diademated’ stela in 2018, excavations at Las Capellanías (Cañaveral de León, Huelva), in south-west Spain, led to the discovery of two more stelae and facilitated the compilation of vital contextual information. Here, the authors explore the association between these stelae, Bronze and Iron Age burials and an ancient route-way, revealing reuse, temporal persistence, geographical connectivity and cultural hybridisation in the widening networks of prehistoric Iberia.

Keywords: Western Europe, Iberia, Iron Age, Bronze Age, stelae, burial practices, pathways

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Introduction

Standing stones (menhirs, statue-menhirs and stelae) are a common feature across Iberia. Several thousand of these monuments have been recorded; displaying a diversity of sizes, forms, arrangements, functions and locations, their use spans six millennia, from the Neolithic to the Middle Ages (c. 5400 BC–AD 1500). ‘Warrior’ and ‘diademated’ stelae (the latter also referred to as ‘stelae with headdress’) are found in south-western Iberia and are traditionally dated to the Bronze Age (c. 2200–850 BC) and Iron Age (c. 850–200 BC) (for catalogues and syntheses see Celestino Pérez 2001; Harrison 2004; Díaz-Guardamino 2010). For decades, the interpretation of those two groups of stelae has been hampered by the lack of clear contextual information resulting first, from the fortuitous nature of most finds and second, from the lack of fieldwork undertaken at the find spots. While various anecdotal, fragmentary and unverified reports are discussed in the literature, suggesting a link with burial practices and/or a role as landmarks, no indisputable evidence existed to confirm or disprove such claims (Díaz-Guardamino 2010: 31–35; García Sanjuán *et al.* 2025).

In this article, we present new evidence demonstrating that both warrior and ‘diademated’ stelae served both as grave markers and territorial landmarks associated with trackways. This evidence stems from the newly discovered burial site of Las Capellanías, located in the municipality of Cañaveral de León (Huelva province, south-west Spain), partly below the Las Capellanías road (Figure 1). The site lies at a short distance (around 100km) from other locations where Bronze Age and Iron Age stelae have been discovered, particularly across the lower Guadalquivir Valley and middle Guadiana basin (Sevilla, Córdoba, Badajoz and Ciudad Real provinces), as well as southern Portugal. These stelae have traditionally been classified, according to the motifs present on them, in three main categories: ‘Alentejan slabs’ (restricted to southern Portugal and showing panoplies of weapons), ‘warrior stelae’ (with or without a presiding anthropomorphic figure) and ‘diademated stelae’ (displaying a prominent, headdress-like motif over the head). However, this classification system does not take into account parameters such as location, context, shape/size of the slab, chronology or geology. The discoveries at Las Capellanías challenge such classification, emphasising the importance of location, context and chronology when studying stelae.

Three stelae have been found at Las Capellanías—the first by chance, the other two during excavations. Two have already been published in detail (#1 and #2; Rivera Jiménez *et al.* 2021; García Sanjuán *et al.* 2025). Upon the accidental discovery of stela #1 in the spring of 2018, a joint research project by the universities of Durham, Gothenburg, Huelva, Sevilla and Southampton was launched to record the stela and investigate its context. Between 2019 and 2021, surface surveys were undertaken in an area of around 5km around the find spot. In June 2022 and September 2023, excavations were conducted at the site, followed by extensive post-excavation analysis of the stelae and associated finds, including restoration, optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) and radiocarbon dating, and bioarchaeological and archaeometric analyses. While the grave associated with stela #2 has been discussed previously (García Sanjuán *et al.* 2025), an overview of the Las Capellanías burial complex is presented here for the first

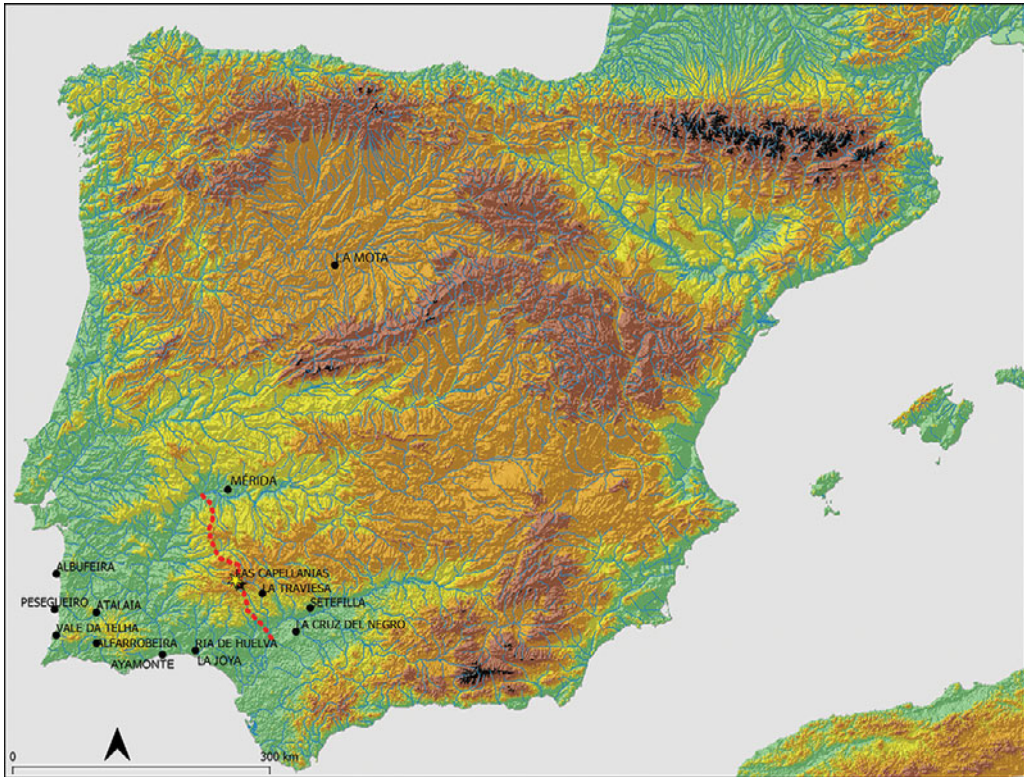


Figure 1. Location map of Las Capellánías, also showing Al Idrisi's itinerary between Sevilla and Badajoz (twelfth century AD) and the main Bronze Age and Iron Age sites mentioned in the text (figure by Timoteo Rivera Jiménez & Leonardo García Sanjuán).

time. This contextual information helps settle a debate that has occupied the literature on Iberian stelae for more than a century.

Burial structures

Excavations carried out in June 2022 and September 2023 in a square of 1250m² revealed 18 burial structures and several more were identified in the surrounding area through geophysical survey (ground penetrating radar and magnetometry) (Figure 2; see also online supplementary material (OSM)). Eight structures were excavated in full; three were largely intact (#7, #12 and #14), the others exhibiting varying degrees of damage by modern or ancient looting (#1a, #1b, #4, #6 and #8). Based on their architecture, three categories of graves were identified.

Structures #1a, #1b and #4 are cist-type tombs consisting of rectangular pits cut into bedrock, lined with vertical slate slabs and originally covered by horizontal slate slabs. In south-western Iberia, these cists were common in the Early and Middle Bronze Age (c. 2200–1550 BC). Structures #1a and #1b were built within structure #1, a circular cairn (5.82m in diameter) made of green ophite pebbles and white quartz blocks, held

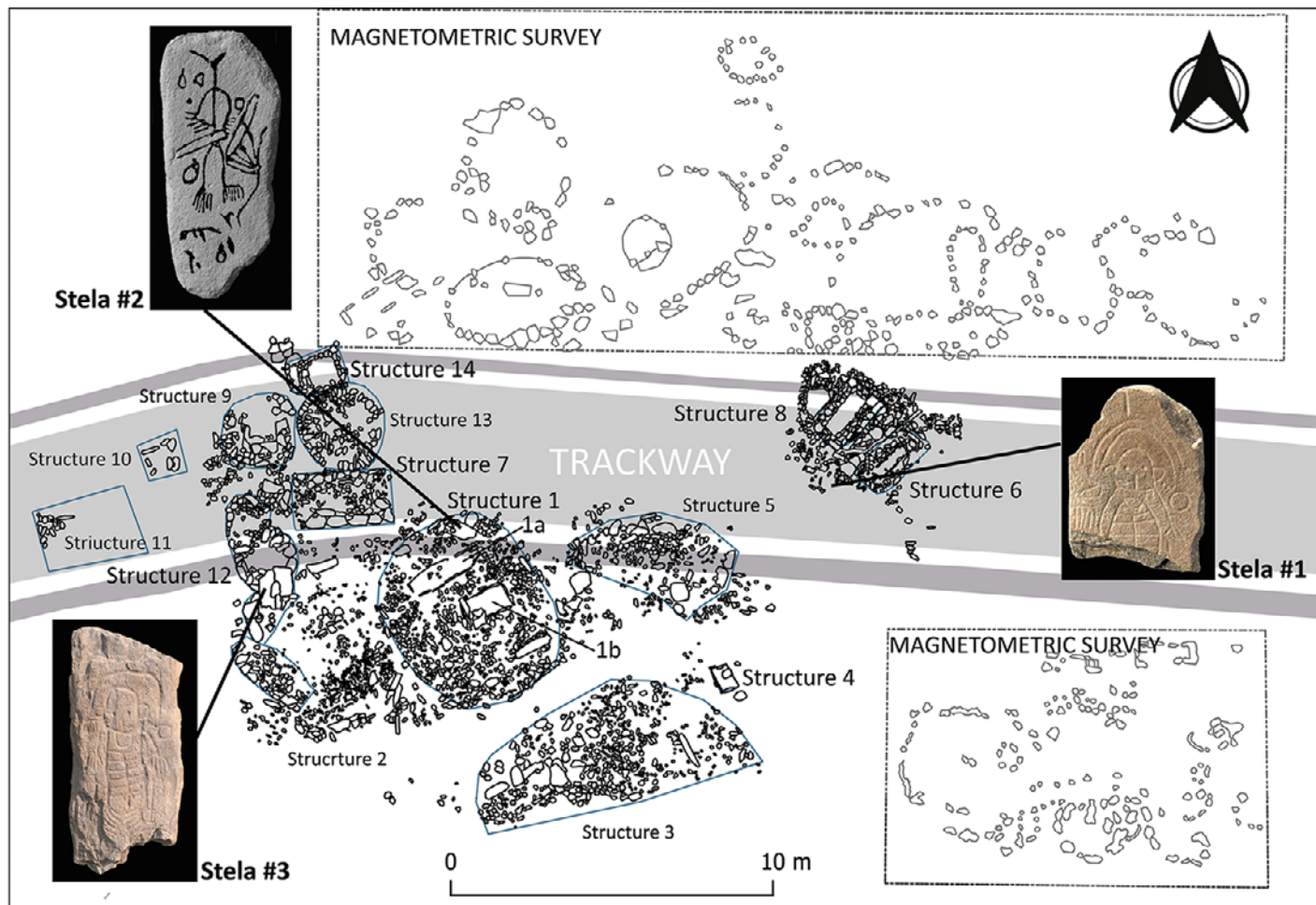


Figure 2. Plan of the site, showing the location of the stelae (figure by Timoteo Rivera Jiménez and Leonardo García Sanjuán).

together by a ring of upright slabs. Structure #1a ($2.31 \times 0.34 \times 0.46\text{m}$) unusually large for a Bronze Age cist and made of purple slate, was completely empty, containing no grave goods or bones. About 0.50m to the north-east of structure #1a, stela #2—depicting a warrior with weapons—was found inserted upside down in the mound. Structure #1b ($1.55 \times 0.85 \times 0.56\text{m}$) (Figure 3A) lies parallel and just south of #1a. It contained two ceramic vessels—an inverted, empty La Cruz del Negro type urn and another containing cremated human bone (minimum number of individuals (MNI) = 1)—and a bronze double-spring fibula. The isolated structure #4, 12m south-east of structure 1, is a small, damaged cist ($0.75 \times 0.35 \times 0.49\text{m}$), still partially lined by slate slabs but missing its capstones. It yielded eight beads and a bronze toiletry set, but no human remains.

Structures #6, #7 and #8 are slab-lined and cairn-covered pits, a distinct funerary type known from the Iron Age, particularly in southern Portugal. These tombs consist of roughly rectangular pits cut into the bedrock, not lined with vertical slabs but surrounded by small horizontally laid ones, then covered with capstones and a stone cairn. The best-preserved example is structure #7 (Figure 4), located just north-west of structure #1, beneath the trackway. It consists of an elongated pit ($1.9 \times 0.8\text{m}$) covered by purple slate capstones and surrounded by a rectangle ($3 \times 1.75\text{m}$) of smaller, horizontally laid slabs. Above this lay a cairn of mixed lithology—white quartz, green ophite, blue-green slates—together weighing about 609kg. The pit contained two large Chardón-type vessels and a high-shouldered bowl, all handmade (see description of material culture below). One vessel held cremated human remains (MNI = 1), charcoal, small bronze items (possibly fibula parts) and pieces of a silver earring. Structures #6 and #8 lie about 15m east of structure #7, directly beneath the track surface (Figure 3B). Both are in poor condition, probably looted but have similar chamber sizes (1.2–1.5m long), delimited by horizontal slabs about 2m long. Structure #6 yielded a small Late Iron Age falcata-type iron knife and cremated bone (MNI = 1). Structure #8 contained a bronze spring fibula, a rectangular iron plate and cremated bone (MNI = 1). Stela #1 stood near structure #6.

The third category of burial architecture includes composite structures. Located 6m west of structure #1, structure #12 (Figure 5A–C) has a complex layout subdivided into #12a, #12b and #12c. Substructure #12a is an oval pit (2m across, 0.9m deep) surrounded by small slate slabs, ophite pebbles and white quartz, arranged radially in the north and longitudinally in the south. It contained the largest assemblage of cremated human bone (958.6g, MNI = 2: one adult and one adolescent), together with a glass teardrop pendant, a spherical bead, a copper bead, pottery sherds and clay fragments. Substructure #12b, adjacent and partly overlapping #12a, is also oval (1.5m across, 0.6m deep) and delimited by slate slabs, it was filled with small pottery fragments, charcoal and cremated bone (MNI = 1). Stela #3 partially covered its northern half. Substructure #12c, further west and subcircular, was not excavated but slate, ophite and quartz were identified within its fill—materials extending beneath the northern ring of substructure #12a.

To the north of structure #1 lies structure #14 (Figure 5D–F), separated by structure #13 (a circular unexcavated feature). Structure #14 is a shallow quadrangular pit (1.23m wide) lined with one stone row and sealed by eight large slate slabs (526kg total).

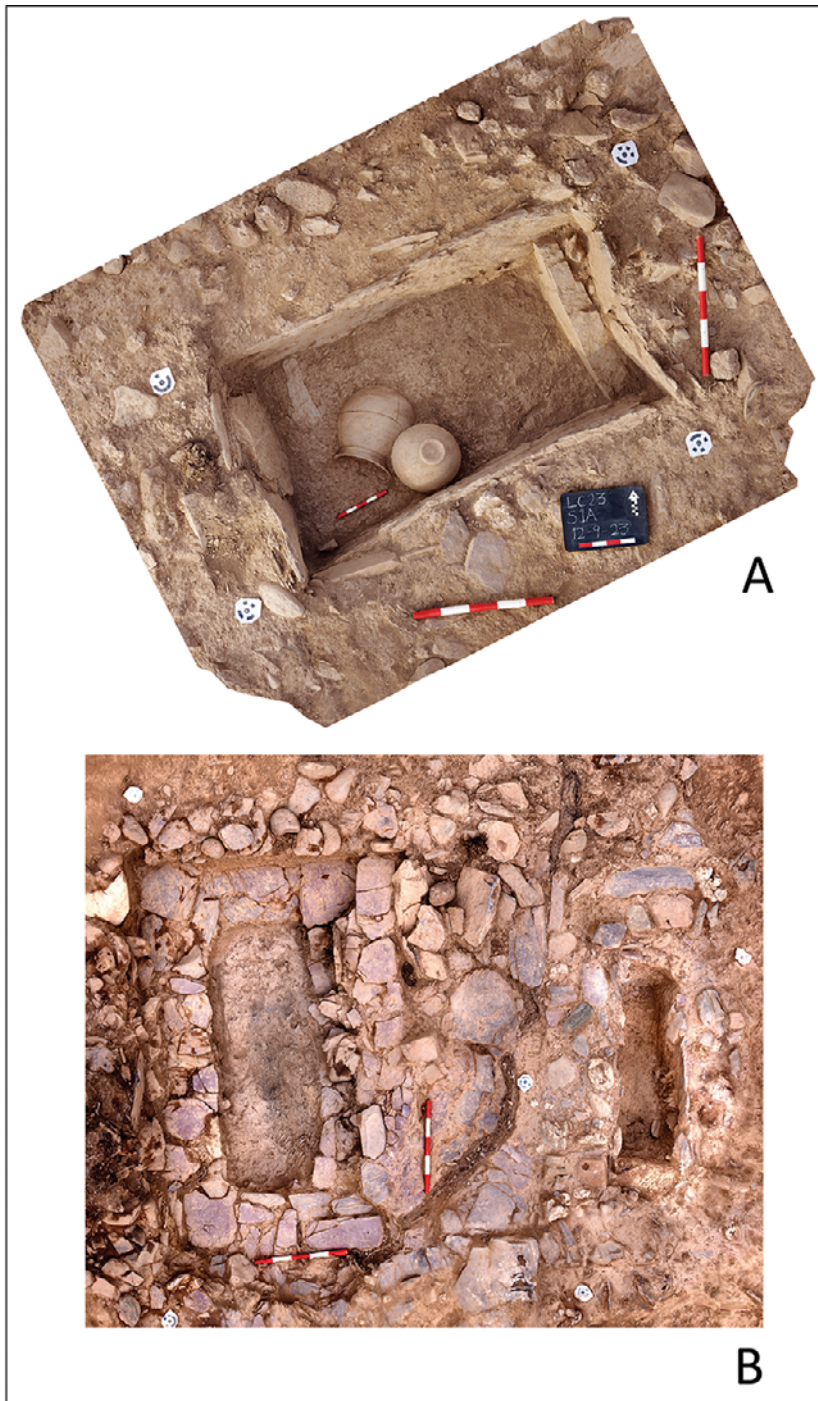


Figure 3. Photogrammetric renderings of structures #1b, (A) #6 (B, right) and #8 (B, left) (figure by Timoteo Rivera Jiménez).

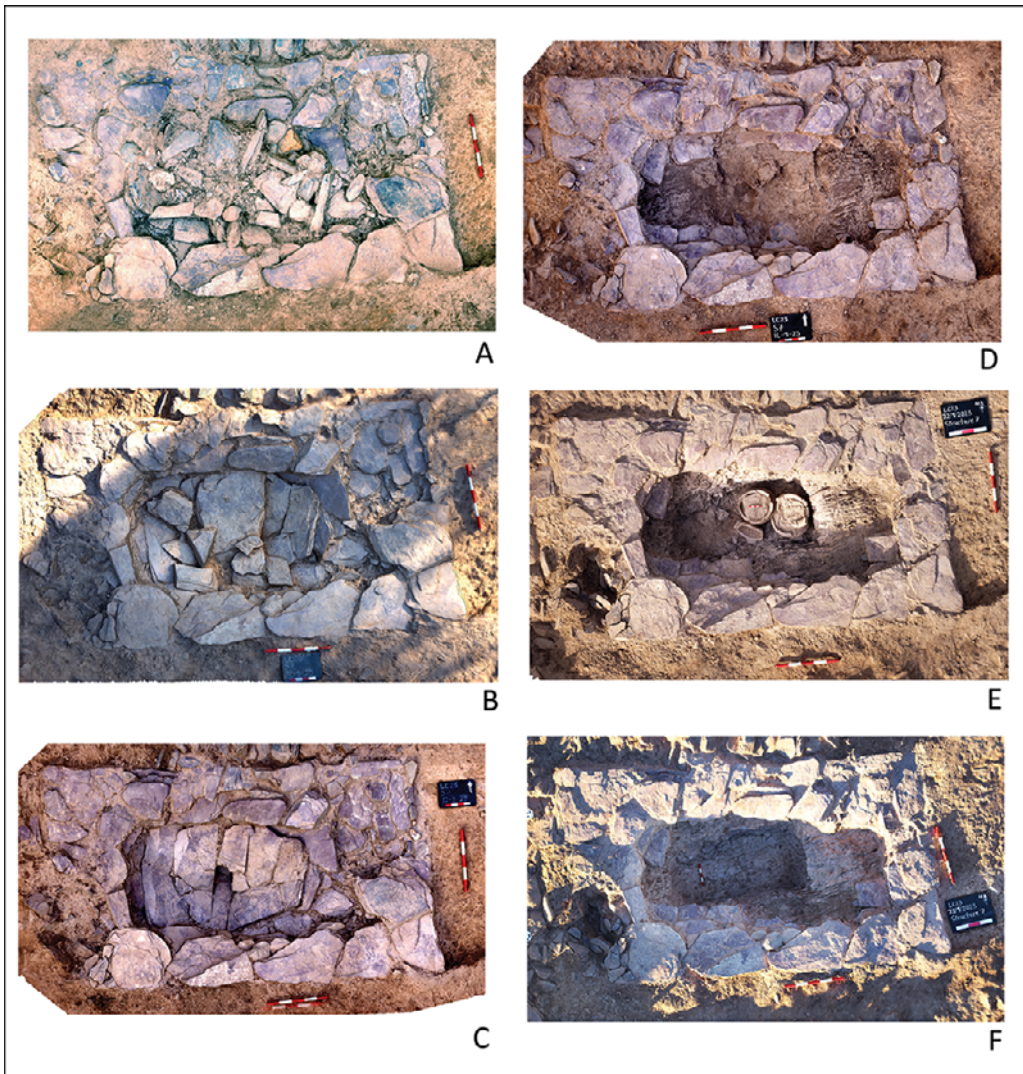


Figure 4. Photogrammetric renderings of structure #7 through the excavation process (figure by Timoteo Rivera Jiménez).

Inside, a single large (approximately 0.40m tall) wheel-thrown Chardón-type urn was found, lying horizontally and containing abundant cremated bone (626.3g, MNI = 1).

Grave goods

The excavated burials yielded seven ceramic vessels (four in structure #7, two in structure #1b and one in structure #14), displaying differences in manufacture and morphology (Figures 6 & 7). All four vessels found in structure #7 were handmade, while those from #1b and #14 were wheel-thrown. The assemblage reflects mixed cultural practices,

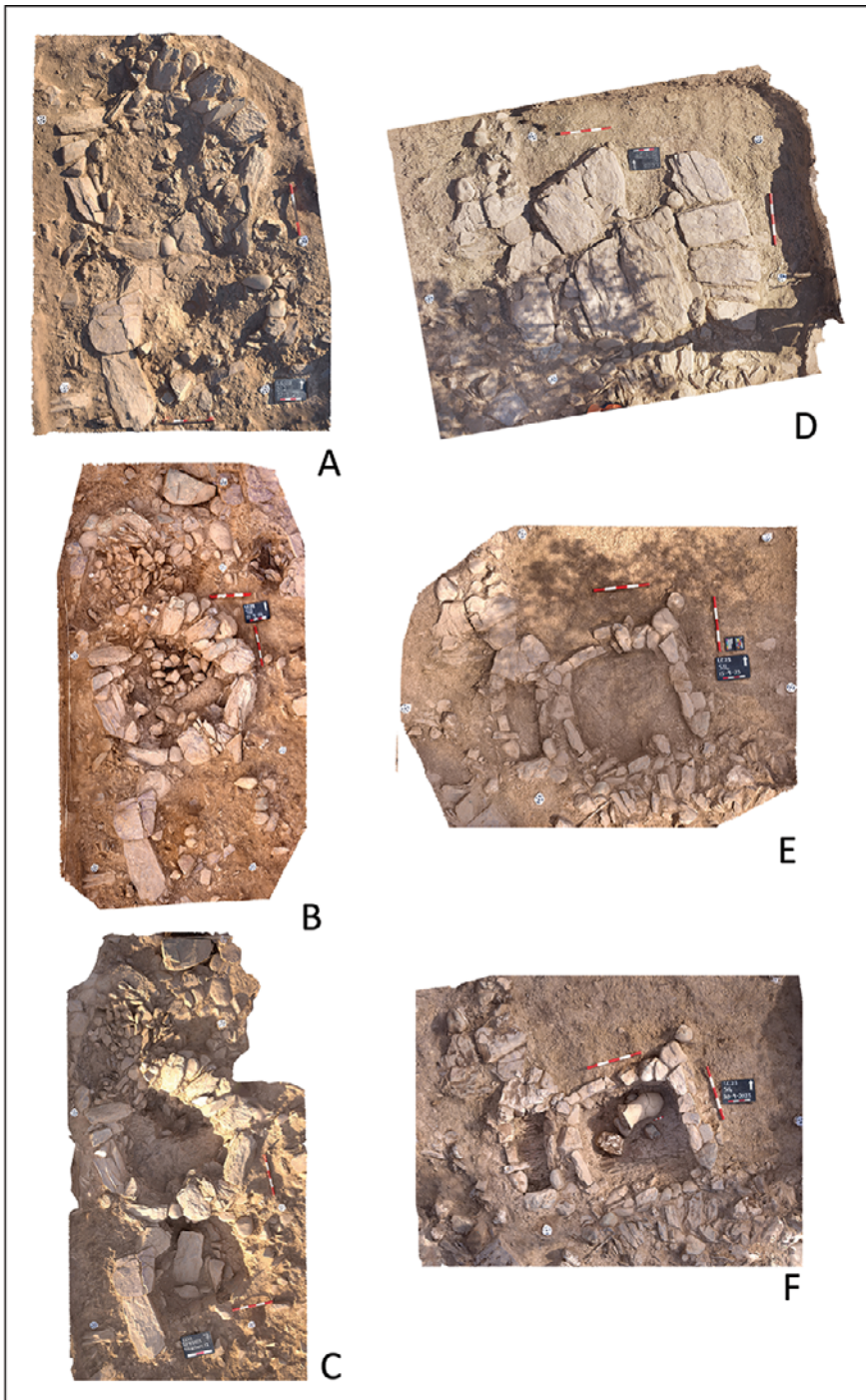


Figure 5. Photogrammetric renderings of structures #12 (A, B & C) and #14 (D, E & F) through the excavation process (figure by Timoteo Rivera Jiménez).

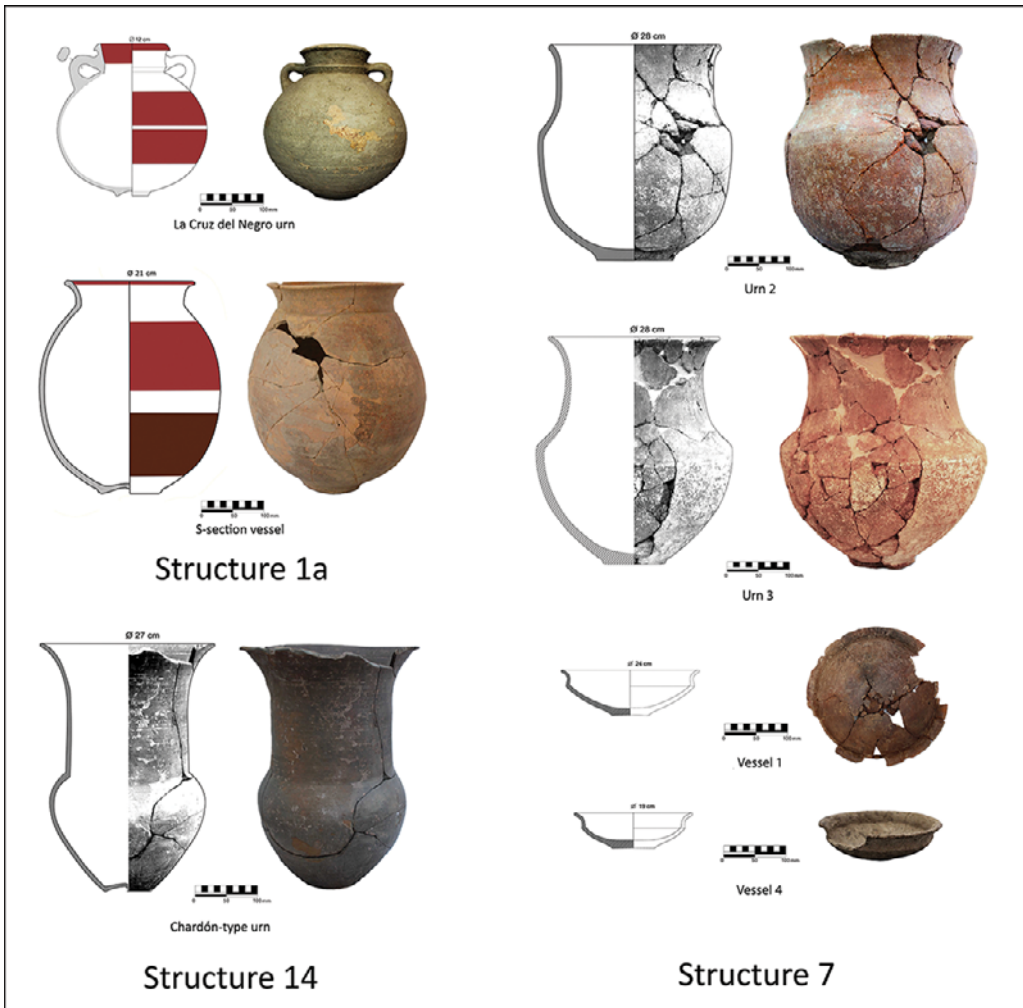


Figure 6. Ceramic vessels and urns found at Las Capellanías (figure by Juan José Lupión Álvarez).

with the coexistence of local Bronze Age ceramic traditions (handmade Chardón-type vessels and high-shouldered bowl) and pottery types introduced by the Phoenicians in the ninth century BC (wheel-thrown La Cruz del Negro type urns). The mixed morphologies, with shapes known in the Late Bronze Age (c. 1550–850 BC) and others newly introduced through connections with the eastern and central Mediterranean (e.g. La Cruz del Negro type urn), aligns Las Capellanías with other well-known sites in southern Iberia (see discussion below).

In addition, a fragment of decorated, handmade pottery was found on the surface during the 2022 campaign, while clearing the cairn of structure 1 (Figure 8). This fragment presents incised lines in two registers: below the lip of the vessel undulating lines cut across each other to form oval shapes resembling eyes, and below this are a series of



Figure 7. Ceramic vessels and urns from: A) structure #7; B) structures #1b (left) and #14 (right) (photographs by Miguel Ángel Blanco de la Rubia).

yielded a bronze toiletry set (Jiménez Ávila & Lorrio Alvarado 2019) consisting of one stylet and two small knives, all decorated with fine incised lines. In the same tomb, small bronze clamps may indicate one or more boxes or coffers. This assemblage is the richest so far excavated at the site and it is possible that a fibula was also deposited in this tomb, though only the pin has survived.

Eight glass and carnelian beads were recovered from structure #4 (Figure 9A), alongside a coarsely worked stone pendant. Two are black fusiform beads with inlays that contribute to the ongoing debate concerning this type of manufacture in south-west Iberia (Gomes 2021; Lončarić *et al.* 2024). Isolated glass ornaments are also present in tombs #1b and #12a. A distinctive teardrop-shaped glass pendant (Figure 9A, no. 7) was recovered from substructure 12a—an uncommon form in Iberian archaeology but comparable to artefacts from other Mediterranean areas—alongside an annular-spherical glass bead and a copper bead.

parallel vertical lines. This decoration has not previously been found in western Sierra Morena (see below).

The metal finds (Figure 9B) consist largely of prestige goods produced and circulated within a regional framework. Structure #7 yielded remains of one silver ‘arracada’ (earring of ‘crest’ type), comparable to those recently recorded in Extremadura and Portugal (see Nogueira *et al.* 2021). These objects emulate larger and more elaborated gold jewels, such as those from the ‘Aliseda Treasure’ (Rodríguez Díaz *et al.* 2019). Bronze ornaments include the complete double-spring fibula found inside one of the urns in structure #1b and the ‘Tartessian’-type belt buckle also from structure #1b. Despite its poor preservation, the buckle can be identified as a passive half with coiled terminals, probably fitted with two hooks. A fragmentary bronze ring-type fibula from structure #6 represents a typical Early Iron Age (*c.* 850–550 BC) prestige item, which was found together with a falcata-type iron knife. The slightly later chronology of these artefacts coincides with the radiometric dates obtained for this tomb (see below). Structure #4

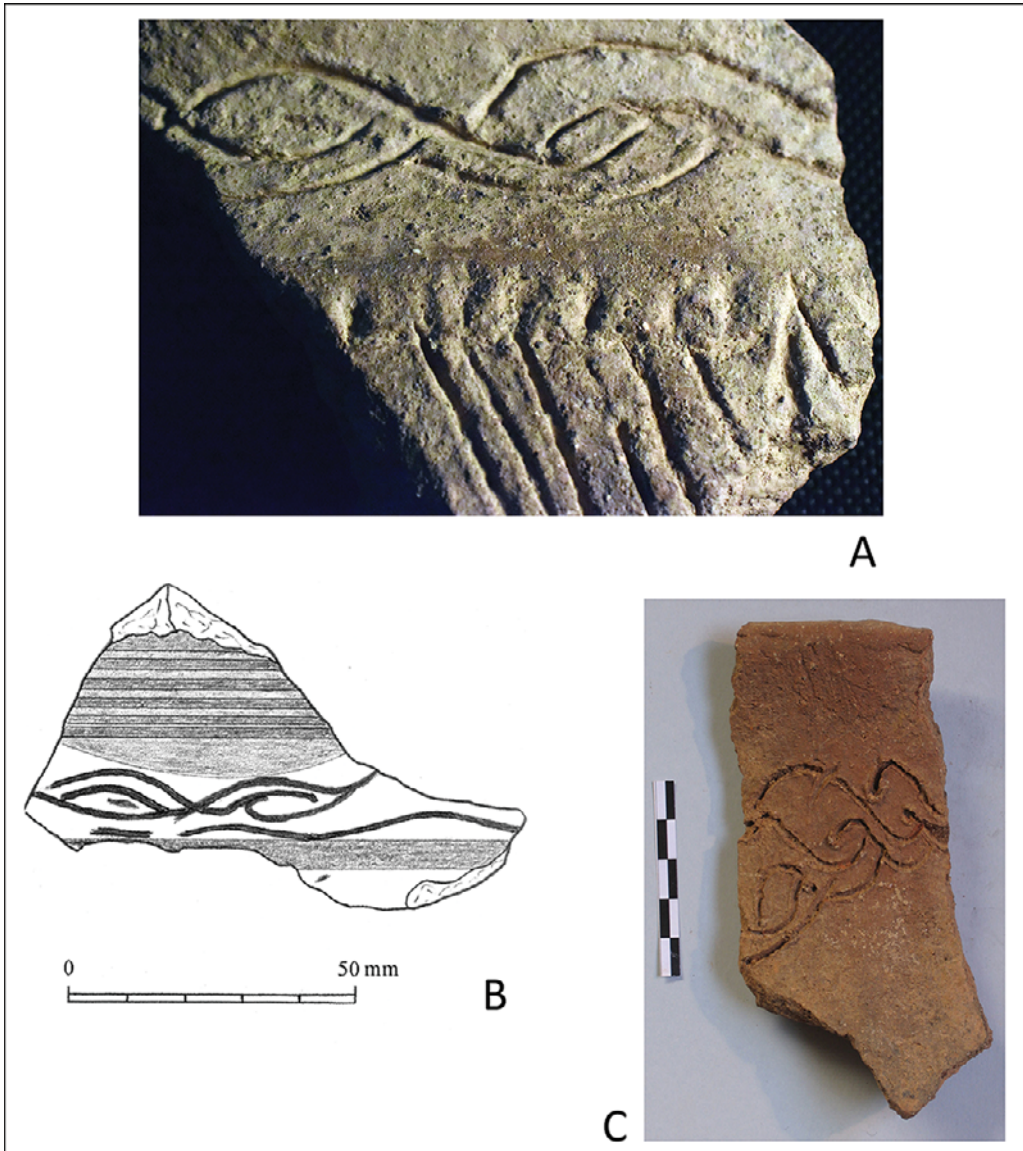


Figure 8. A) A sherd of decorated handmade pottery found while clearing the cairn of structure #1 (the fragment is 75mm high); B) painted wheel-thrown pottery fragment with a similar motif from La Mota (Valladolid); C) incised hand-thrown pottery fragment with a similar motif from Escuela de Hostelería, Mérida (Badajoz) (A: photograph by José Ruiz Flores; B: after Blanco García 2019: 199, fig. 15:2; C: after Jiménez Ávila & Heras Mora 2017: 119, fig. 8).

Bioarchaeology

Demographic information for the cremated human remains from structures #1b, #6, #7, #8, #12 and #14 is shown in Table 1. Almost 2.5kg of cremated material was collected, though the quantity of bone found in each structure varied greatly, ranging from 85.5g

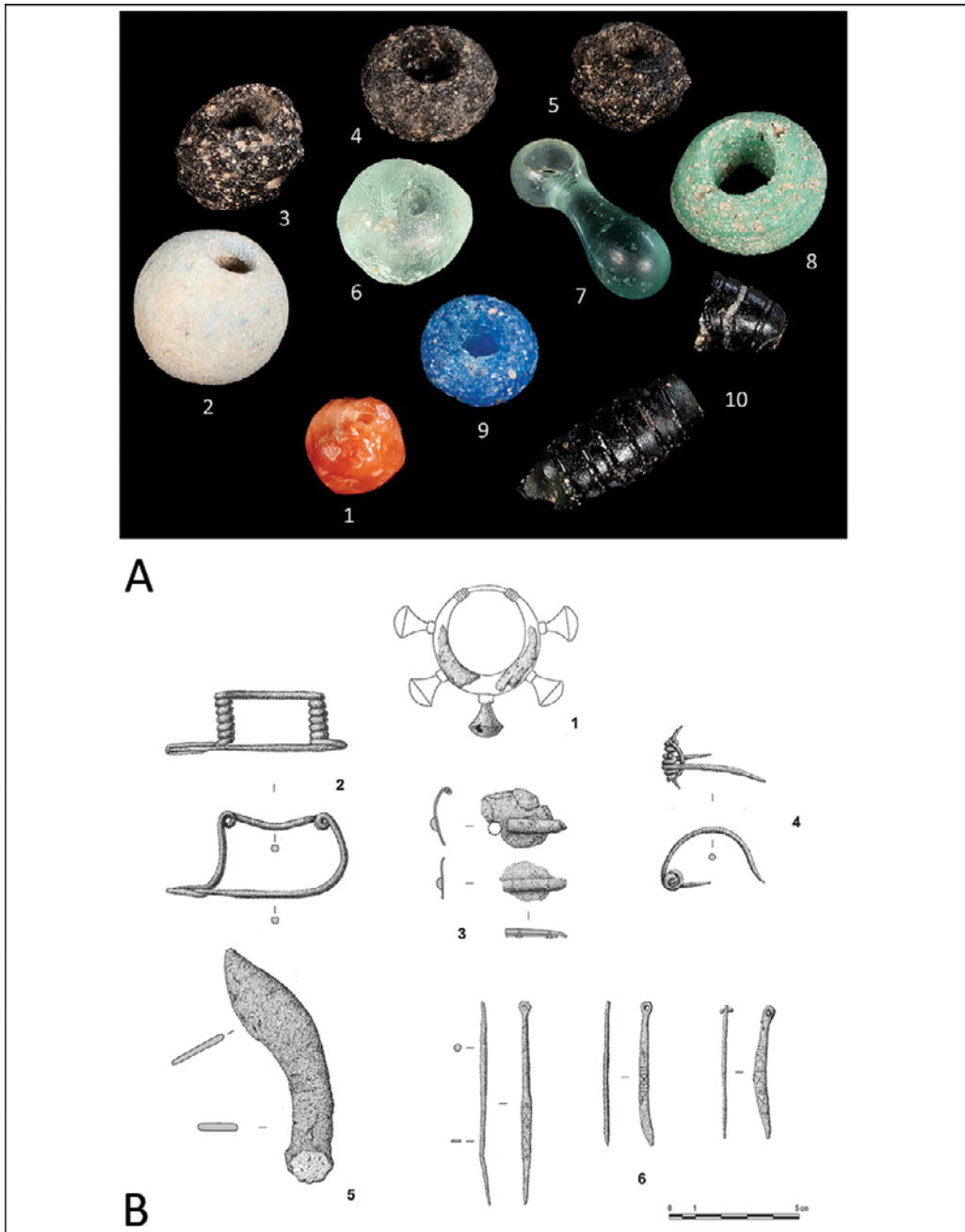


Figure 9. A) Beads: numbers 1 to 5 and 8 to 10 from structure 4; numbers 6 and 7 from structure 12. B) Drawings of metal objects: 1) silver crest-type earring (structure 7) (approximate scale); 2) bronze double-spring fibula (structure 1b); 3) bronze 'Tartessian'-type belt buckle (structure 1b); 4) bronze ring-type fibula (structure 6); 5) Falcata-type iron knife (structure 6); 6) bronze toiletry set (stylet and two small knives) (structure 4) (photograph by David Wheatley; drawings by Marisol Crespo Ros).

Table 1. Summary of demographic data.

Structure	Stratigraphic unit	Total weight (g)		NMI	Age	Sex	Pathology
1B	107	267.2	310.19	1	Adult ?	No	–
	119	42.9		1	Adult ?	No	–
6	122	6.1	157.3	1	Adult ?	No	–
	128	98.5		1	Adult	No	–
	134	52.7		1	Adult	No	–
7	Vessel #3	237.6		1	Adult	No	–
8	114	82.9	83.5	1	Adult ?	No	–
	131	0.6		–	–	–	–
12	Surface	2.7		–	–	–	–
12 ^a	105	658.5	958.6	2	1 Adult 1 Adolescent	No	Degenerative
	121	18.4		–	–	–	
	123	0.6		–	–	–	
	127	239.3		1	Adult	No	
	130	37.9		1	–	No	
	133	3.9		–	–	–	
12b	132	18.7		1	Adult	No	
12c	124	9.0		1	Adult	No	
14	125	626.3		1	Adult	No	Microporosity
Total		2403.89		14			

in structure #8 to 958.6g in structure 12a. Anatomical regions are unevenly represented in the cremated material (using reference values proposed by Gonçalves 2012) and do not match what would be expected from complete individuals. This may be explained by the looting and/or reuse of some burials (#1b, #6, #8 and possibly #12), or by the selective recollection of the bones after cremation, as these burials are clearly secondary in nature with the original place of cremation unknown. All fragments present a homogeneous brownish colour, suggesting firing temperatures between 285 and 525°C, with only a few examples of calcined fragments. However, bone colour may be influenced by variables other than temperature, so these results must be viewed with caution.

In total, a minimum of 14 individuals are identified. Most structures contained only one individual, with the exception of structures #1b (MNI = 2), #6 (MNI = 3) and #12 (NMI = 6). No specific age estimations or sex determinations could be made. The observation of pathological bone was constrained to the identification of slight articular and

non-articular degenerative disease in bones from structure #12a (SU 105) and possible porosity on a cranial fragment from structure #14 (SU 125).

Relative measurements of stable carbon isotopes ($\delta^{13}\text{C}$) were obtained as part of the radiocarbon dating process (Table 2). The $\delta^{13}\text{C}$ values range between -19.2 and -24.3‰ , with an average of -21.6‰ , compatible with a marine fish-based diet (Nash *et al.* 2011), although the closest access to the sea would have been more than 100km away (via a then-present marine bay into which the Guadalquivir River emptied, near modern-day Seville). Some individual values are also compatible with a diet based on C_3 plants but $\delta^{15}\text{N}$ data are not available to qualify this.

Radiocarbon dating

A set of 13 radiocarbon dates were obtained on cremated bone (Table 2). The dates are largely coherent, suggesting a ‘compact’ chronology for the cremation burials, ranging between *c.* 800 and 550 cal BC (at 95.4% confidence), corresponding to the Early Iron Age. Only one sample (SUERC-133557) returned a later date; this sample corresponds to structure #6, in which a falcata-type iron knife typical of the Late Iron Age was found.

A Bayesian model produced using the ChronoModel software (Lanos & Dufresne 2024) narrows down this chronology, offering a start date between 836 and 609 BC and an end date between 706 and 453 BC (at 95.4% confidence), or a start date between either 810 and 713 BC (53%) or 708 and 672 BC (15%) and an end date between 638 and 519 BC (at 68.2% confidence). The dated cremations display a duration ranging from 0–304 years (95.4%) or 9–205 years (68.2%), with activity likely peaking around 620 BC. In general, the chronology of the cremation burials at Las Capellanías corresponds with the early stages of the Phoenician and Greek presence along the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts of Iberia, which is represented by sites like La Joya, La Cruz del Negro and Setefilla, all within 100km from Las Capellanías (Figure 10). This chronology must be understood within the context of what appears to be a long history of activity at Las Capellanías, as two OSL dates obtained from soil samples taken from below stela #2 yielded ages between the late third and mid-second millennia BC (García Sanjuán *et al.* 2025). Therefore, it is likely that the dated cremations represent a later stage in the history of the site.

Discussion

Debate surrounding the function of Iberian ‘warrior’ and ‘diademated’ stelae has persisted due to a lack of precise, high-quality contextual data. The investigations at Las Capellanías demonstrate that both types of stelae are associated with burials, used as markers for burials and for pathways (as revealed for megaliths by Murrieta-Flores 2012). Stela #1 was found next to structure #6, stela #2 was found embedded in the mound of structure #1 (next to structure #1a) and stela #3 was found partly covering structure #12. All stelae were also closely connected to the Las Capellanías trackway: stela #1 was found beneath the road, stela #2 was discovered on its edge and stela #3

Table 2. Summary description of radiocarbon dates. All dates were calibrated using OxCal 4 (Bronk Ramsey 2021) and the IntCal20 atmospheric calibration curve (Reimer *et al.* 2020).

Structure #	Stratigraphic unit #	Sample	Lab. signature	Age BP	Age cal BC (95.4% confidence)	Age cal BC (68.2% confidence)	$\delta^{13}\text{C}$ relative to VPDB (‰)
12a	133	Skull	SUERC-133567	2570±22	805–594	794–772	–22.3
12a	105	Skull	SUERC-133561	2557±19	800–591	793–766	–24.0
12c	124	Long bone	SUERC-133569	2553±24	800–567	794–597	–21.2
14	125	Skull	SUERC-133570	2529±24	790–549	779–575	–24.3
7	Vessel #3	Skull	SUERC-133559	2520±24	784–546	775–571	–23.5
8	114	Long bone	SUERC-133560	2512±25	779–544	772–569	–21.3
12a	130	Long bone	SUERC-133566	2510±21	776–544	770–570	–21.6
6	134	Skull	SUERC-133558	2503±24	775–544	766–567	–20.1
12b	132	Fibula	SUERC-133568	2503±24	775–544	766–567	–19.2
12a	127	Long bone	SUERC-133565	2497±21	771–544	759–552	–21.5
1b	119	Tibia	SUERC-133555	2465±21	758–422	750–520	–19.2
1b	107	Long bone	SUERC-133556	2441±24	750–410	732–431	–22.2
6	128	Long bone	SUERC-133557	2398±21	541–401	510–405	–21.0

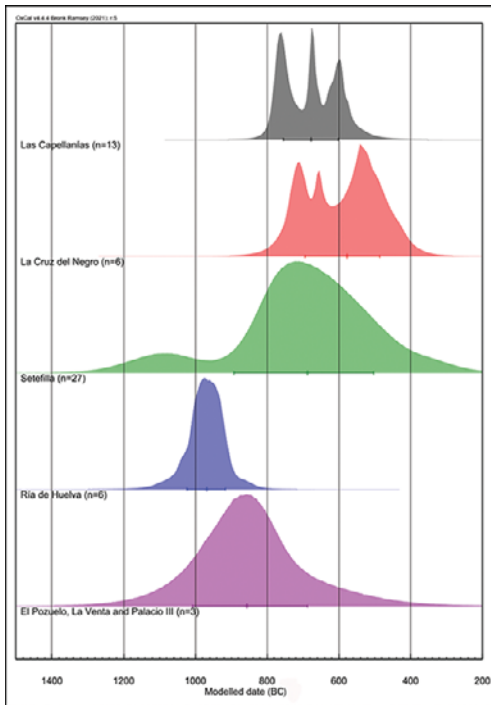


Figure 10. Kernel density estimate of the Las Capellanías radiocarbon dates as compared with other coeval sites in south-west Spain (figure by Francisco Sánchez Díaz).

time frame consistent with the architecture of structure #1, in which this stela was embedded—the radiocarbon chronology of the cremations places structures #6 and #12 largely within the Early Iron Age. As stela #3 was found partly overlaying structure #12, its use (or reuse) may be contemporaneous to or postdate the ages provided by the cremated bones found within the structure (early eighth to mid-sixth centuries BC). While there is still much work to be done regarding the chronology of these stelae, Las Capellanías provides the first secure empirical evidence to frame the discussion—and future research.

The second notable feature is the iconography, certain aspects of which place this site within a broader network of connections extending to the lower and middle basins of the Guadalquivir, Guadiana and Tagus rivers. These connections are evident in the depiction of a possible fibula and/or comb over the right shoulder of the human figure. This motif appears on all three stelae from Las Capellanías and on stelae from Torrejón Rubio 2 (Tagus), Fuente de Cantos (Guadiana) and Ategua (Guadalquivir). The specific way of depicting the warrior's body on stela #2 from Las Capellanías is also observed on stelae from Burguillos (Guadalquivir), Fuente de Cantos (Guadiana) and Aldeanueva de San Bartolomé (Tagus). Further, the presence of a bow and arrows on stela #2 aligns it with a small group of 'warrior' stelae that includes examples from São Martinho 2 in the

barely six metres to the south. The track-way is likely to have been used since at least the Middle Age, as it corresponds almost exactly with the itinerary set by the twelfth-century AD geographer Al Idrisi between the cities of Sevilla and Badajoz, in the lower Guadalquivir Valley and middle Guadiana basin respectively (see Figure 1) (Rivera Jiménez *et al.* 2021). A statistically significant association has also been found between traditional rural pathways and drovers and the location of megalithic monuments in the region (Murrieta Flores 2012).

The analysis of engraved motifs and assessment of stelae 'types' are beyond the scope of this article (for a discussion, see Rivera Jiménez *et al.* 2021; García Sanjuán *et al.* 2025), yet two general features of the Las Capellanías stelae stand out. First, the chronology, potentially spanning from the early second to the mid-first millennia BC. While the two OSL dates obtained from soil underneath stela #2 provide maximum ages in the first half of the second millennium—a

middle Tagus basin, from Capilla 3, Alamillo, El Viso 1 and six other examples located in the middle Gadiana basin, and from Torres Alocaz, Cuatro Casas/Carmona, Montemolín and Écija 3 in the lower Guadalquivir Valley (see Díaz-Guardamino 2010 for detailed descriptions). It can be no coincidence that the main parallels for stelae #1 and #2 are located in the neighbouring Guadalquivir and Gadiana valleys, once connected by the Las Capellanías road.

A long period of construction, use and frequentation is also suggested by the adjacency of the burial structures and their formal variability. The architecture of the burials suggests a gradual ‘beehive’-type pattern of growth, with an early ‘foundational’ construction (structure #1) to which others were gradually attached ‘centrifugally’. The best example of this adjacency pattern is recorded between structures #7, #13 (unexcavated) and #14; the outer limits of these structures were carefully constructed to be in contact without overlapping or breaking into each other. This suggests a diachronic and sequential pattern of conscious (and careful) expansion of the burial area, which, given the relatively short radiocarbon chronology, may have occurred over the course of a few years or decades. The formal diversity of the burials echoes practices documented in the Early Bronze Age (cists) and in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age (Chardón and La Cruz del Negro type vessels used as cremation urns). This reveals Las Capellanías as a place of hybridisation, and ‘glocalisation’ where different cultural inputs—local and ‘global’, were blended into a larger whole: a large necropolis monumentalised with stelae. A similar situation was noted for the Almargen stela, in Málaga (Díaz-Guardamino *et al.* 2020). It is impossible not to connect this phenomenon with the location of the necropolis upon a major communication route.

In terms of architecture and spatial organisation, multiple sites are analogous to Las Capellanías. These are typically characterised by cists or pits surrounded and covered by stone cairns, like structure #1, and delimited by rings of vertically placed slabs. Limiting the scope of the comparison to the south-western quadrant of Iberia, and based on published radiocarbon dates and associated material culture, analogous architecture can be found at necropolises dating to the final centuries of the third millennium BC and first half of the second, like Atalaia, Alfarrobeira, La Traviesa (Early and Middle Bronze Age), Provença, Corte Cabreira, Pessegueiro and Quiteira or Vale da Telha and Nora Velha (and maybe some structures in Atalaia) dating to the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age (see summary discussion in García Sanjuán *et al.* 2025). Many of these Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age necropolises follow a formal pattern already found in the Early Bronze Age (Jiménez Ávila 2003). As at Las Capellanías, their chronology is complex, with periods of persistent use occurring over long stretches of time. Yet these necropolises also differ from Las Capellanías in many ways—especially regarding the presence or absence of stelae and of certain aspects of material culture.

In terms of material culture, the La Cruz del Negro-type wheel-thrown urn found in structure #1b provides a link between Las Capellanías and the eponymous necropolis located in Carmona (Seville), in the lower Guadalquivir Valley, some 140km to the south-east. La Cruz del Negro type urns have been found in Early Iron Age burials across southern Iberia, including the Spanish Levant (Fernández & Moriel 1984), Málaga province (Sánchez Bandera *et al.* 2001) and southern Portugal (Gomes 2018).

The three Chardón-type vessels retrieved from structures #7 and #14 also align Las Capellanías with other Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age burial sites in southern Spain, including Setefilla (Sevilla), also in the lower Guadalquivir Valley, where a ‘warrior’ stela was found covering a grave in one of the burial mounds (Aubert 1997). Another stela of the same type was later discovered at the site of Mirasiviene, just 3km to the east from Setefilla (Díaz-Guardamino *et al.* 2019). Only a few comparable examples have been found for the incised sherd retrieved from the top of structure #1 (Figure 8). One comes from La Mota (Valladolid), in the north of the Spanish central plateau, where a wheel-thrown vessel with a similar painted motif, considered a ‘southern import’, was dated to the sixth–fifth centuries BC (Figure 8B; Blanco García 2019: 199, fig. 15:2). A handmade vessel retrieved in Mérida (Badajoz) provides an incised example dated to the Early Iron Age (Figure 8C; Jiménez Ávila & Heras Mora 2017: 119, fig. 8). The metal artefacts and beads found at Las Capellanías match the typical repertoire of grave goods in ‘Orientalising’ (i.e. dating to the Early Iron Age, when sustained Aegean and Levantine cultural influence was brought to Iberia) necropolises of the Iberian south-west, particularly those with less prominent burials dated to around the seventh century BC.

These material parallels draw a map of connections that run from the lower Guadalquivir Valley, across the middle Guadiana basin towards northern Spain, echoing the geographical distribution of ‘warrior’ stelae (Díaz-Guardamino *et al.* 2020) and the long-distance route connecting south-western and north-western Iberia that the Las Capellanías trackway was part of in the Middle Ages (Rivera Jiménez *et al.* 2021). Thus, the burials at Las Capellanías materialise the communication role this route probably played even in second and first millennia BC. The possible marine diet of some of the individuals buried there between the eighth and sixth centuries BC is probably not unrelated to this, revealing coastal connections and lifestyles.

The broad geographical scope revealed by the architecture, iconography and material culture of Las Capellanías corresponds with the temporal persistence of the site. This can be seen, for instance, in the presence of a La Cruz del Negro cremation urn, usually associated with Phoenician cultural influence, in a cist likely to have been built in the Early Bronze Age and then reused in the Early Iron Age. Early second-millennium tradition and early first-millennium innovation appear to have blended effortlessly at Las Capellanías. Radiocarbon dates on human bone reveal the reuse of old megalithic monuments during the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age in the surrounding Huelva and Sevilla provinces, as in the case of La Venta and El Pozuelo (Nocete Calvo *et al.* 2004), about 40km to the south, and Palacio III, 60km to the east (García Sanjuán 2005; Murillo-Barroso *et al.* 2015) (Figure 10). Therefore, Las Capellanías was not the only ancestral site being reused in the early centuries of the first millennium BC. At this time, exceptional metallurgical and commercial activity was taking place in the Riotinto mining district and the Huelva province more generally. This activity triggered powerful ‘Orientalising’ cultural developments along the Atlantic coast of Huelva, best reflected at the necropolises of La Joya (Huelva city) and Hoya de los Rastros (Ayamonte) (Blanco-González *et al.* 2023). It is unlikely that the cremations found at Las Capellanías were unrelated to this phenomenon.

Conclusion

The excavations at Las Capellanías have revealed temporal persistence, geographical connectivity and cultural hybridisation in burial architecture and artefacts. These investigations provide valuable and novel data for understanding the social and cultural context of the use of prehistoric stelae in Iberia like no other before; and for expanding existing knowledge about associations between communication routes and monuments (see Murrieta-Flores 2012). Located upon an ancient trackway, Las Capellanías opens new horizons for the analysis of interactions between local and ‘foreign’ people between the tenth and sixth centuries BC, a period of intense cultural exchange connected with the burgeoning mining, smelting and trading occurring in the Huelva province and the wider region of south-western Iberia.

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Online Supplementary material (OSM)

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