

## Excavations and Survey at Monte do Casão, 1990

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[Editor's note: This report was written in 1990 and intended for immediate publication, but it remained in Colin's papers, presumably awaiting inclusion in his intended complete report on the work in Évora. We take the opportunity to publish the report now. Some small editorial amendments have been made by FML.]

### INTRODUCTION

Following the discovery of surface sherds of prehistoric character at Monte do Casão, district of Montemor-o-Novo, in 1988, investigation of the site by geophysical survey and limited excavation was carried out in 1990. The work was conducted within the framework of the Évora Project under the general direction of Colin Burgess; the site director was Anthony Harding, assisted by Melanie Pomeroy. Work took place over a period of four weeks during July-August 1990. The survey was conducted over one week, using only two people; for the excavation, which lasted a further two weeks, up to five workers were employed at one time. The results were positive but of a preliminary nature, because of the limited scale of the work.

The excavators are grateful to the site owner, Willem Ter Haar, for kindly allowing the work to take place.

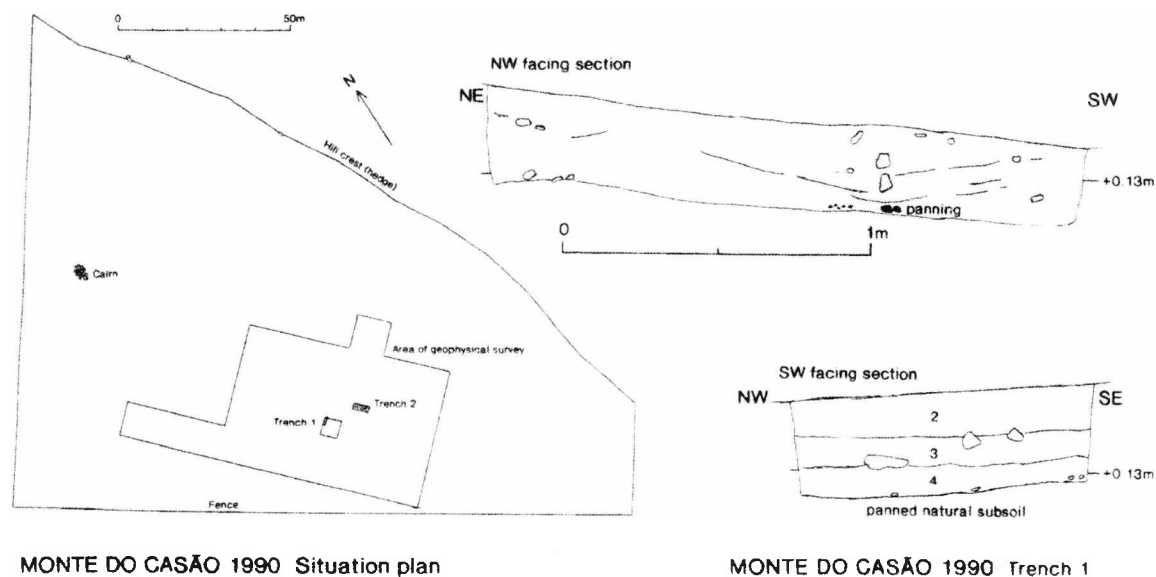


Figure 1. Plan of excavated areas at Monte do Casão, showing the area of the geophysical survey, the position of the trenches and Sondage in trench 1: sections.

### Topography.

The site is situated on the west side of a spur which forms the end of a high ridge, south of and overlooking the valley of the river Almansor (Grid Ref 744 769). The

spur, rising to 312m above sea level, is part of a chain of hills flanking the Almansor valley. To their south lies undulating land which rises again some 2km away; from the site of Monte do Casão there are commanding views to the west and this south-west. The rock outcrop forming the spine of the spur is composed of mixed gneisses and quartzdiorite. Slightly acid and degraded brown Mediterranean soils cover the area. The field in which the site is located is currently kept under grass, with a number of cork oak trees on the upper slope of the spur. The field is harrowed every three to four years, causing disturbance of the upper 30cm. This treatment was last carried out in 1988, shortly before the site was identified.

In the northern part of the field are at least two substantial stone piles, each containing a number of saddle querns. Some of these are of considerable size. Whether they are connected with the other archaeological features of the site, to be described below, is a matter for speculation.

### **Geophysical survey.**

A grid was laid out on the area where a scatter of sherds, stone axes, querns and flint had been found when the site was discovered in 1988, (figures 1 and 2). This grid measured 90 m SE-NW and 60m SW-NE. Of the 54 ten-metre squares thus defined, 28 were surveyed at half-metre intervals using a Geoscan FM18 fluxgate gradiometer linked to an Amstrad PPC512 portable computer. The work of laying out the grid and taking the readings took two people around 3 days.

The site was magnetically 'quiet', and the machine had to be set to the highest possible sensitivity. A number of small anomalies were discovered which may represent significant subsoil features (e.g. pits, areas of burning or fired clay). One feature stood out: a well-defined anomaly runs SW-NE in the southern part of the site for a distance of at least 35m. It is roughly straight but in two places shows a marked divergence or offset from this line. At either end it appears to come to a definite halt; certainly the magnetic anomalies which cause it to show up with such clarity do not continue either up or down the slope of the hill, on the side of which the site lies.

### **EXCAVATION**

**Trench 1** (5 x 5m) was laid out in the area identified as that of maximum concentration of surface material. A small amount of pottery was found in the soil immediately below the surface, but in general the trench was completely featureless.

In order to assess the potential of the trench more rapidly, a small area (c. 1m x 2m) at the W was excavated to a greater depth (0.35m) Although there were indications that at least the upper levels consisted of redeposited material, no finds were made below 0.23m, and most of the soil was archaeologically sterile. The sections of this trench show no archaeological features of any sort, figure 1.

**Trench 2** was laid out so as to cut the broad strip-like anomaly detected in the geophysical survey in the southern part of the site. Measuring 5 x 2 m, it was not all dug to the same depth. In general, only a one-metre strip was worked right down to natural, while in the remainder only 0.14–0.16m of soil was removed. Initially, the

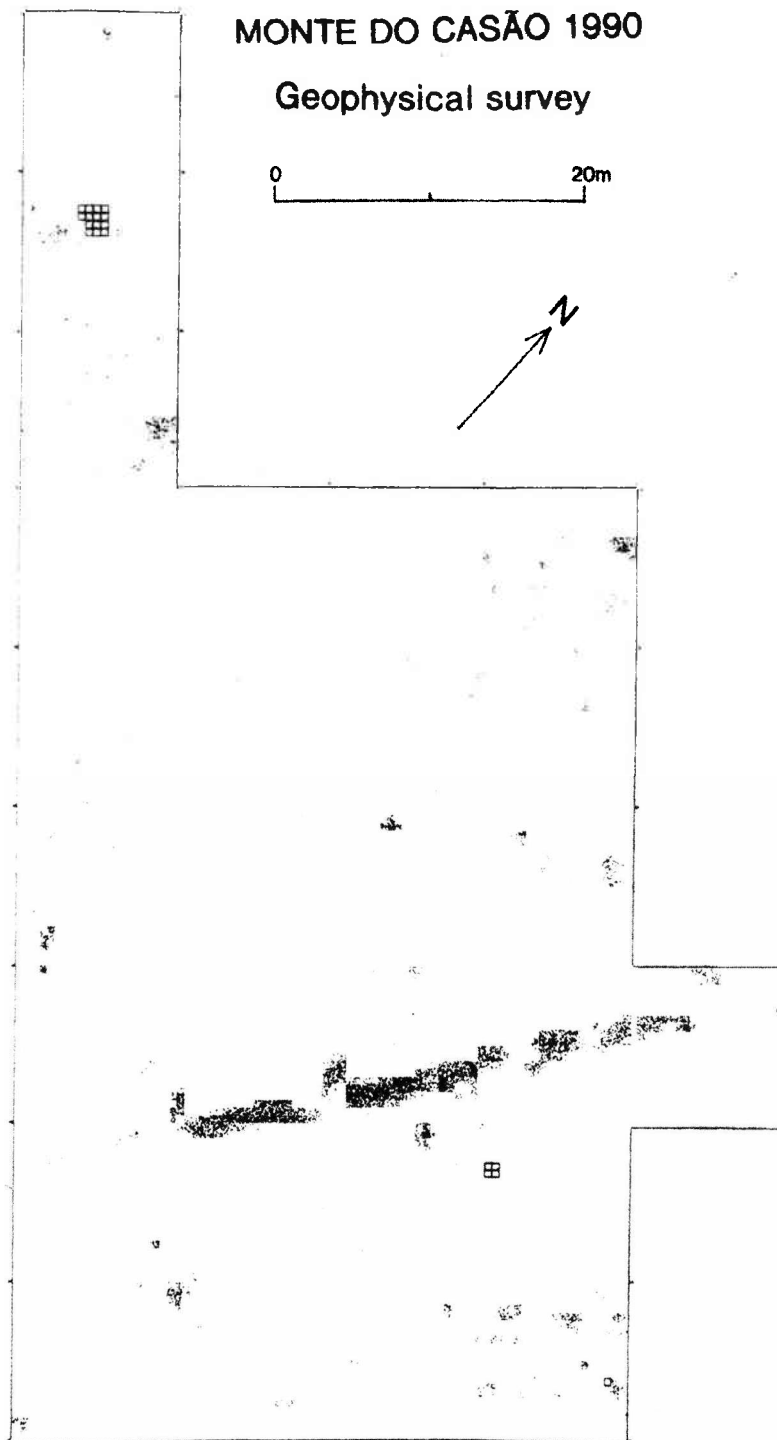


Figure 2. Monte do Casão: geophysical survey.

vegetation and topmost soil was removed (context 101), below which a uniform compact light brown loam extended across the whole trench. This layer, between 0.30–0.32m thick, was excavated in spits of various depths (102, 104–113). The top spit (102) contained many burnt stones and pieces of burnt clay and pot. The removal of this spit revealed a spread of medium-sized stones (5–10 cm in diameter) running diagonally across the trench (103). The removal of the next spit (104) revealed more of these stones sitting within it (106, 109).

At this point the trench was divided in two longitudinally, and only the western half was excavated (figure 3, showing four stages in the excavation). The spread of stone gradually became more concentrated in the middle of the trench, while stone-free areas were either side of it. At a depth of 0.30–0.32 m the stone spread stopped, and a new layer appeared (114). This was a more compact grey/brown loam with some gravelly stones. It appeared first in the southern corner of the trench and then spread across the whole trench, being some 0.10–0.15m deep. With the removal of 114, colour differences between the middle and edges of the trench became apparent, a ditch being present in the central area. At either end of the trench, natural bedrock was encountered (115, 117), a very hard and compact mixture of decayed stone and gravel. The middle of the trench was taken up with a dark brown loamy soil, 0.20–0.30m deep (116). Below this was another distinctive material (119), a compact mottled dark grey soil, varying between 0.10 and 0.30m in depth across the ditch. Both 116 and 119 contained medium to large stones (120, 124), varying between 0.20 and 0.50m in length. They were confined in distribution to the southern half of the ditch feature. Beneath the stones and 119 was a layer of loose brown loam (127), 0.10–0.15m deep, sealing a thin lens of very dark soil and charcoal (128), only 10–30mm thick. It extended across the whole ditch, but was thicker at the southern end, and petered out towards the northern edge. Below this was 129, an orange-brown loam layer 40–100mm deep, with a clayish texture containing bits of degraded stone. This was the primary fill and overlay the natural bedrock.

After the excavation of the ditch itself, the material north of the ditch was excavated down to natural. The 0.30m of soil removed in these two squares (118, 123, 126) formed a uniform layer of compact light brown loam, similar to 101, 102 and 104. Two possible stake-holes were found; one (122), in the north-west sector, was circular, 100mm in diameter and at least 180mm deep and contained a light loose loam fill (121) with two sherds. The other was in the north square (130) and cut into natural, being sub-rectangular, 100 x 120mm and at least 100mm deep.

### **The ditch** (figure 3)

A one-metre wide strip of the ditch feature (125) was excavated as described above. The profile of the ditch was roughly v-shaped with a slight groove at the bottom; it measured 2.20m wide and 1.20m deep. The angle was steeper on the upper, southern, edge and more gently sloping on the northern edge. The cut of the ditch was only detected once the level of natural had been reached, but the section indicated that it had in fact been cut from some 0.20–0.25m above natural. The compact jumble of stones (contexts 120, 124) within the primary fill in the southern half could represent the remains of a collapsed wall which fell or was pushed into the ditch, though no trace of any such structures was detected in the area to the south. It is interesting that the two more organic and dark layers within the primary fill (119 and 128) were both thicker on the southern, upper side of ditch, suggesting that they had also been redeposited in the ditch from this side.

The ditch profile at Monte do Casão is very similar to that recently excavated by the Archaeological Service at the late Neolithic enclosure of Santa Vittoria, Campo Maior, northern Alentejo. At this site there were also a number of large beehive-shaped pits used for grain storage. One may thus speculate whether some of the anomalies detected on the geophysical survey at Casão may not represent similar

features, though only excavation will resolve this matter.

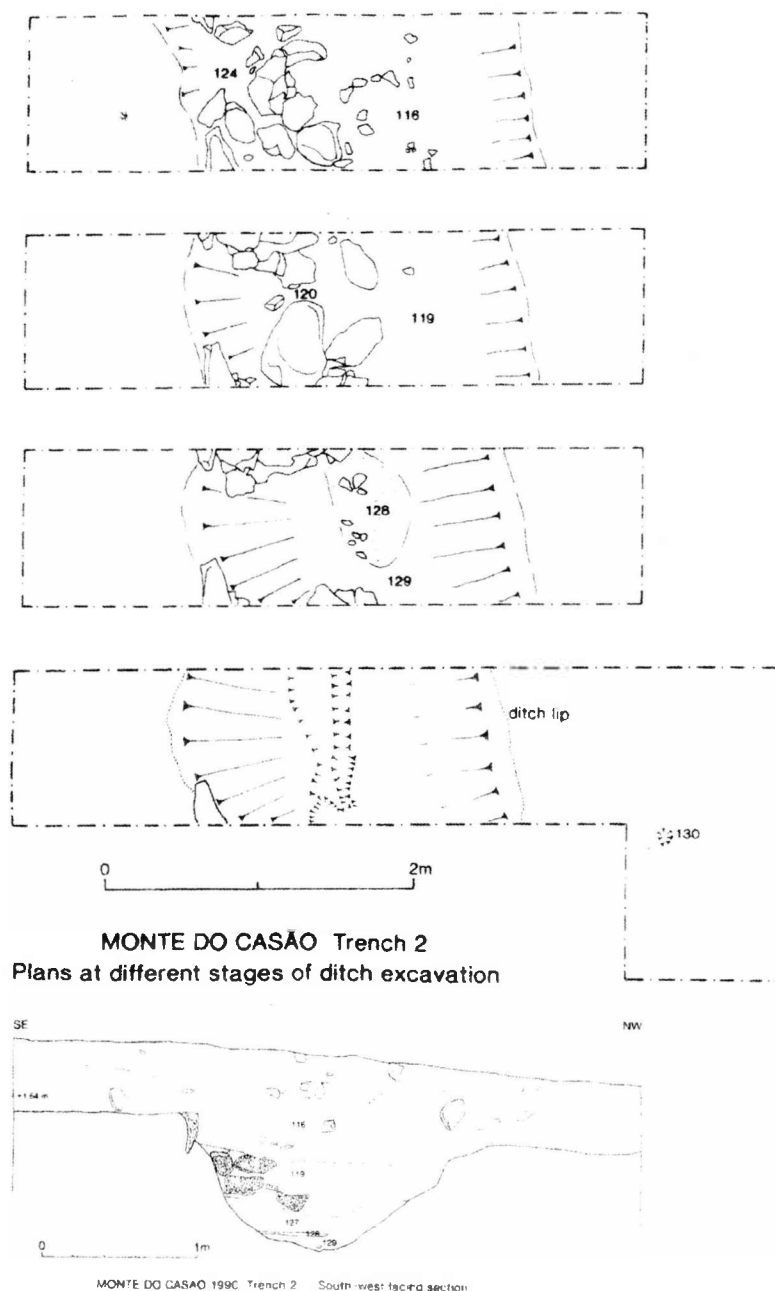


Figure 3. Trench 2, plans at four stages of excavation and ditch section.

### Finds

Pottery was prolific in Trench 2, a total of 23.5kg being recovered from the limited area excavated. It was especially common in upper contexts 112 and 114, and in ditch fill context 116. The sherds seem to be typical of late Neolithic/Chalcolithic wares, and come from straight-walled bowls, and carinated and lugged vessels. Other finds from the trench included the remains of three perforated clay plaques, four stone axes, a well-preserved adze, and a flint blade.

### **Environmental samples**

Soil samples were taken from various layers within Trench 2 for plant macrofossil recovery. They were hand-floated in a bucket, then poured through a 500 micron mesh. Samples from contexts 119 and 128 produced much charcoal. A column was taken for pollen analysis, samples being taken at 50mm intervals from the middle of the north-west section of the ditch profile. All these samples await analysis.

### **CONCLUSION**

The excavation at Monte do Casão successfully achieved its objective of defining a major ditch feature, prolific in sherd material, which had been responsible for the scatter of finds that brought about its discovery in 1988. It is less easy, in view of the limited extent of excavation and the uniformity of most of the rest of the site in magnetic terms, to determine the nature of the site as a whole. The length of ditch, though substantial, is on present knowledge isolated and forms no circuit or other larger pattern. The substantial stones found in it probably emanated from a wall feature associated with it, but this too seems not to have continued beyond the end of the ditch. It thus seems unlikely that the ditch and wall served any well-developed defensive purpose.

Some clue about the general character of the site may come from the large number of querns found in the field where the site lies. These indicate a preoccupation with agricultural production and processing, and it is highly likely that the excavated features at Casão also relate to ordinary domestic activity of the prehistoric period. Certainly there is no evidence for ritual or funerary activity on the site: though a megalithic chambered tomb (Toirais, no. 42 in Lynch, this volume) lies only *c.*1 km away to the west.