



LATE ROMAN TOMBS AT TRÓIA (PORTUGAL): THE *MENSAE*

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ABSTRACT

In the Roman fish-salting production center of Tróia (Portugal), one of the largest of the Empire, many mensa tombs have been identified in the last decades in several areas of the site. Since this type of tomb is fairly rare in Portugal and on the Iberian Peninsula, while it is rather common in Roman Africa, they are an unusual feature of Tróia in the late Roman period that may signify a strong African influence due to trade connections also reflected in a significant presence of African imports of fine wares and amphorae in the late contexts at Tróia. This paper will present and discuss the mensa tombs from Tróia.

INTRODUCTION

The archaeological site of Tróia is located on the southwestern coast of Portugal, on a sand spit between the Sado River and the Atlantic Ocean (Figs. 1 and 2). In Roman times, this sand formation was probably still a line of sand islands, and the Roman settlement would have been on the island of Achale mentioned in this area by Rufus Avienus in *Ora Maritima* (v. 182–184).¹ It was certainly on the territory of the Roman city of Salacia Imperatoria Urbs (modern Alcácer do Sal) and across the river from another urban agglomeration, Caetobriga (modern Setúbal), in the Roman province of Lusitania.

Tide erosion and excavations from the 18th century contributed to the early discovery of Roman vestiges along 2 km, the most common being fish-salting vats assembled in production units, but houses, baths, wells, cemeteries, a mausoleum and an early Christian basilica have also been exposed.² Recent research has shown that Tróia is the largest fish-salting production center currently known on the territory of the Roman Empire.³

The Roman settlement of Tróia was occupied at least from the Tiberian period until the 6th century, even though the fish-salting production did not survive after the mid-5th century, the archaeological vestiges being very scarce after this date, a reflex of the dismembering of the Western Roman Empire and the consequent decline in the demand for long-distance exportable goods like salted fish and fish sauces.

Several cemeteries are known in Tróia, as well as a number of late burials over abandoned buildings like fish-salting workshops and the baths, and a great diversity of tombs is known. Cremation was practiced in the 1st and

2nd centuries, and inhumation seems to have been progressively adopted from the end of the 2nd century, to become the only funerary practice by the mid 3rd century.⁴

Among the various types of tomb in use in Tróia in Late Antiquity (plain graves, graves lined and covered with stones, bricks and tiles, amphorae with child burials, stone and brick cases of various types, and, exceptionally, stone sarcophagi) the so-called *mensa* tombs stand out. Given the considerable frequency of *mensae* in Tróia, either rectangular or sigma-shaped, compared to their rarity elsewhere in Lusitania, this funerary manifestation is a characteristic and an original feature of Tróia in Late Antiquity, suggesting close connections with Roman Africa, where these tombs were particularly common.

MENSA TOMBS

Mensa tombs would have been destined for meals over the graves of the dead or for the deposition of offerings of food or perfume. Funerary banquets in which people shared meals with the deceased were a common practice for traditional Romans, and Christian converts continued this ritual, in spite of the prohibition of the Church.⁵

As their name suggests, *mensa* tombs reproduce the table for banquets. Sigma-shaped *mensae* are the most striking and tend to be semicircular, in the shape of the Greek letter sigma (C), reproducing the *mensa lunata* (half-moon shaped table) and the *stibadium*, a couch on which the guests reclined around a semicircular table for banquets. Plain *mensae* reproduce more ordinary rectangular tables.

The earliest *mensa* tomb known dates to the 2nd century CE and was discovered in Cherrchell (Algeria), in the

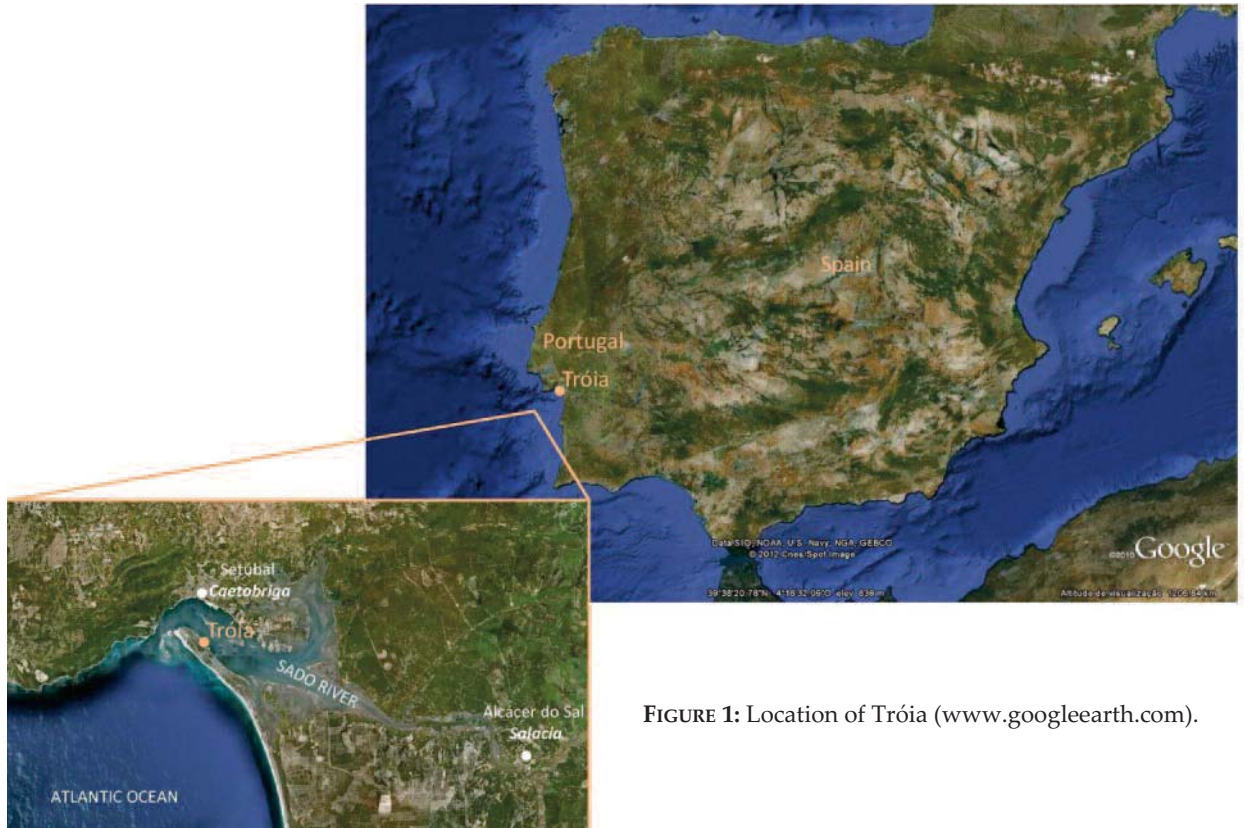


FIGURE 1: Location of Tróia (www.googleearth.com).



FIGURE 2: Aerial photo of the northwestern end of the peninsula of Tróia (photograph courtesy of Tróia Resort).



FIGURE 3: Location in Tróia of mensa tombs mentioned in the text: 1. Area of the basilica; 2. Cemetery south of the Chapel of Our Lady of Tróia; 3. Mausoleum cemetery; 4. Early Christian tomb; 5. Tomb of Ponta do Verde.

Roman African province of Mauritania Caesariensis, with an incineration.⁶ Yet *mensae* only became common in the 4th century, especially in the same area of Tipasa (Algeria),⁷ where they are frequent and continue in use until the 6th century.⁸ According to P. Février, in the inscriptions of this province, the term *mensa* to designate the tomb is frequently used from the early 4th century onward.⁹

In Hispania, the earliest sigma-shaped *mensa* known, with an incineration, dates to the end of the 3rd century and was discovered in Merida¹⁰ but remains an isolated find in that city and region. The most significant sets of *mensae*, aside from Tróia, have been discovered in Tarragona¹¹ and Cartagena,¹² dating respectively from the mid 4th century to the first half of the 5th century and from the end of the 4th century or early 5th.

Mensa tombs are not of a particular religious cult or practice, as the existence of incineration *mensae* prove, but the majority of *mensa* tombs in Tipasa (Algeria) are definitely Christian according to their decoration with mosaics with Christian epigraphs and themes.¹³

THE MENSA TOMBS IN TRÓIA

On the archaeological site of Tróia, *mensa* tombs stand out for their coverings in *opus signinum*, a lime mortar with crushed ceramics.¹⁴ They are either plain or sigma-shaped, and they hold inhumations.

The plain *mensae* are rectangular and slightly convex, with rounded edges and corners, while the sigma-shaped *mensae* tend to be semicircular with a lower central half-circle reproducing the table. Both can have an imbedded marble plaque reinforcing the representation of the table and they cover funerary cases, built with bricks or stones, where the bodies were laid.

In Tróia, *mensa* tombs have been found in different areas of the archaeological site (Fig. 3) and their date and religious affiliation remain a challenge to researchers.

THE MOST NUMEROUS set of *mensa* tombs is in the area of the early Christian basilica (Fig. 4). According to earlier and recent investigations,¹⁵ the cemetery

occupied part of an abandoned fish-salting factory and part of a probable *domus* of the 2nd–3rd century. At least one of the vats of the abandoned fish-salting factory was used intensively and continuously for several burials and finally sealed at some stage with a single plain *mensa* covering. In the compartments of the abandoned *domus*, a number of *mensa* tombs with coverings in *opus signinum*, some of them with an embedded marble plaque, were installed (Fig. 5). In one of the compartments, a second level of tombs was built at a second stage (Fig. 6). Only at a later moment was the basilica built over part of this cemetery.

Since the abandonment of the fish-salting factory under the cemetery is dated to the first half of the 4th century,¹⁶ and the basilica is most probably from the end of the 4th century or early 5th century,¹⁷ this cemetery dates certainly

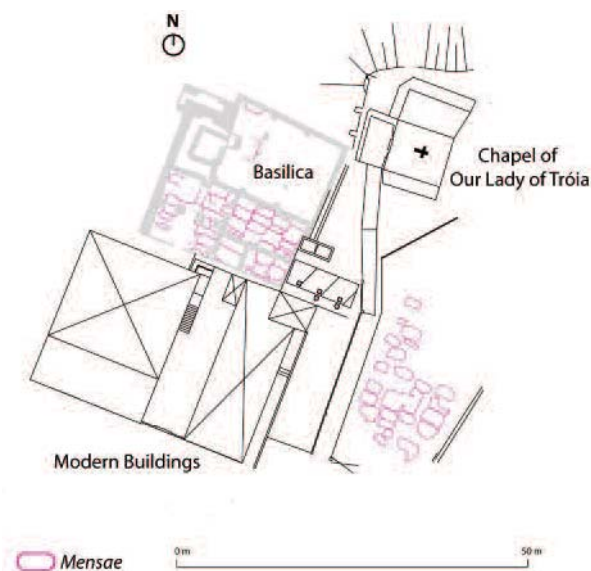


FIGURE 4: *Mensa* tombs in the area of the basilica and south of the Chapel of Our Lady of Tróia.

FIGURE 5: Plain *mensa* tombs in the compartment south of the basilica (photograph by João Almeida).



to the mid- or second half of the 4th century.

The south and southwest compartments have the most numerous set of plain *mensae*, with 36 tombs, and only one small sigma-shaped tomb or rather an unusually horse-shoe-shaped one (Fig. 7), in the second level of tombs. Some of the tomb coverings are large, as they may be as much as 3.70 m long and 2.50 m wide. Would they be collective tombs as the vat from the abandoned factory? None has been excavated.

IN THE CEMETERY south of the modern Chapel of Our Lady of Tróia (Fig. 3, no. 2 and Fig. 4), there are about ten sigma-shaped *mensa* tombs (Fig. 8), along with about 16 plain ones.¹⁸ According to its discoverers, F. Almeida and A. C. Paixão, the observation of a violated tomb showed that its covering was laid on a structure composed of a small mound of boulders bonded with mortar, and the funerary case with the skeleton appeared at a depth of about 1.6 m. The grave goods were just a coarse-ware bowl.¹⁹

Even though this set of tombs is just 15 m away from the one in the compartment south of the basilica, this cemetery has its own individuality due to the type, frequency and dimension of the sigma-shaped tombs.

Although it was possible to deduce that the plain *mensa* tombs from the area of the basilica are highly probably from the mid or second half of the 4th century, this set of tombs, and in particular the sigma-shaped *mensae*, are not dated, and it is not possible to relate them to the small horse-shoe-shaped *mensa* in that area.



FIGURE 6: *Mensa* tombs at two different levels in the compartment south of the basilica (photograph by João Almeida).

FIGURE 7: Sigma-shaped *mensa* tomb among other *mensa* tombs (photograph by João Almeida).





FIGURE 8: Sigma-shaped *mensa* tombs in the cemetery south of the Chapel of Our Lady of Tróia (photograph by Frederico Tatá Rodrigues).

FIGURE 9: *Mensa* tomb of Ponta do Verde (photograph by the author).



It is tempting to consider the cemetery in the area of the basilica earlier than this one, since their prestige deserved a basilica built over or next to them, but there are no facts to prove it.

NORTHEAST OF A large fish-salting factory, behind a mausoleum probably from the 3rd century, on a mound formed by the accumulation of construction debris and refuse, a late cemetery was installed, the so-called Mausoleum Cemetery (Fig. 3, no. 3). It was partially excavated in the 60s and mostly composed of brick and stone rectangular case graves. A new, short, unpublished excavation in 2005 exposed two rectangular tombs with *opus signinum* coverings, demonstrating that *mensa* tombs are not exclusive to the basilica and its surroundings.

A TOMB ON the shoreline, damaged by the tides, in an area called Ponta do Verde (Fig. 3, no. 5), was subject to a salvage excavation in 2011. It revealed a large *mensa* with an *opus signinum* covering over a brick case with a pyramidal lid with stepped bricks that held the skeleton of an old woman (about 60 years old) with her head to northwest and no grave goods at all. The *opus signinum* covering, already incomplete, still kept a small, imbedded, rectangular white marble plaque, and if this plaque was centered, the original width of the *mensa* would have been 2.30m, while its length was preserved and was 3.10m (Fig. 9). The tomb was built against the wall of a building, probably abandoned at the time of its construction, whose function was not identified.

This tomb recalls the *mensa* tombs in the compartments next to the basilica, some of them with small, imbedded plaques of marble, and others of large dimensions, one of the largest 3.10 m by 2.10 m. These similarities suggest a similar date, probably in the second half of the 4th century.

The total absence of grave goods, including any piece related to clothing, suggests it is a Christian tomb in which the body was buried according to the Jewish tradition, simply rolled in a cloth, with no clothing or offerings.

ANOTHER *MENSA* TOMB, highly damaged by the tides, was identified on the shoreline of the estuary (Fig. 3, no. 4). Its head was a fresco painting on stucco showing two dark red Latin crosses bordering a recess, a square hole in the wall, with its border in brick also painted in dark red. Above the recess, possibly a third cross, and the crosses and the recess were framed by a round arch.



FIGURE 10: *Mensa* tomb with an ornamented head and concavity and canal on its covering (photograph by the author).

In the part of the *opus signinum* covering still preserved, a concavity connected to a small canal (Fig. 10) suggests that in this early Christian grave libations typical of traditional Roman rituals were performed, a practice well documented throughout Late Antiquity, with various features for that effect²⁰ and well attested in the early Christian cemeteries of the Iberian Peninsula.²¹

This tomb was built against the northwest wall of an earlier building that must have functioned, in this phase, as a mausoleum or a small basilica. It was not possible to excavate the compartment and date it.

DISCUSSION

The important set of *mensa* tombs discovered at Tróia raises, first of all, the question of their date and of their religious affinity.

According to the superposition of buildings and

occupation layers in the area of the basilica, the *mensa* cemetery of that area is certainly from the 4th century, more likely from the second half of that century. On the other hand, the early Christian *mensa* tomb decorated with Latin crosses should not be so early. The cross motif appears on reliefs and coins from the end of the 4th century, but since it does not appear in the basilica wall paintings, probably dating to the end of the 4th century or early 5th century, this tomb is not earlier than the 5th century, and probably not earlier than the second half of that century, if not from the 6th century. Neither is the chronological relationship between the plain rectangular *mensa* tombs and the sigma-shaped ones clear. If the cemetery in the basilica area presents only a late, small example of these last ones, in the cemetery south of the modern Chapel of Our Lady of Tróia they appear side by side.

All that can be said is that plain, rectangular *mensae* were more common and that Tróia must have had *mensa* tombs at least in the 4th and 5th centuries. It is not such a long duration as at Tipasa, in Mauretania, where they appeared at the end of the 2nd century and lasted until the 6th century, but nevertheless the *mensa* definitely became a common tomb at Tróia in the late Roman period, appearing in many different locations of the long settlement, and probably many more are still hidden under the sand dunes.

The religious affinity of the *mensa* tombs from Tróia is another significant question, considering that there were *mensa* tombs with incinerations that were certainly not Christian in Lusitania (Merida, Spain) and Mauretania (Cherchell, Algeria).

Although the *mensa* tomb decorated with Latin crosses is definitely Christian, no other *mensa* in Tróia has such a straightforward connection to a religious cult.

As far as the *mensa* tombs from the basilica area predating that building are concerned, any affiliation would be possible, considering that in the Roman world traditional Romans and Christians were buried at first in the same cemeteries. Yet, the fact that a Christian basilica was built over part of the cemetery strongly suggests that at least some of its tombs were Christian, considering the Christian tendency to build churches over the tombs of martyrs and saints.

In the case of the Ponta do Verde *mensa*, the absence of grave goods in a large, wealthy tomb entirely built with new standardized bricks also suggests a Christian burial, as well as its northwest-southeast orientation. These features contrast strongly with burials from another cemetery in Tróia, the Cemetery of Caldeira, where graves such as n. 22, dated to the second half of the 3rd century or early 4th century and with an opposite southeast-northwest (solar) orientation had abundant grave goods.²² The simplicity of the Ponta do Verde *mensa* points to a new religious-funerary paradigm, presumably a Christian one.

The architectural affinity of this large tomb, with an embedded marble plaque, to the large *mensae* of the area of the basilica suggests that those should also be Christian.

Surprisingly, in the large Cemetery of Caldeira, with about 150 identified burials of different types, dating from the mid-1st century to the mid-5th century,²³ and with 46% of its tombs with a presumably Christian northwest-southeast orientation, not a single *mensa* tomb was registered, which suggests a selective use of the tomb type in contemporaneous funerary spaces. How to explain this diversity in grave type? Are the more elaborate *mensa* tomb cemeteries destined for certain groups of people, like professional associations? Knowing the Christian affinities of *mensa* tombs in Mauritania, where they are very popular, it is very possible that the *mensa* tomb cemeteries in Tróia reflect the tendency for Christian cemeteries to detach from the pagan ones, as Noël Duval observed in Roman Africa.²⁴

The fact that the *mensae* were particularly frequent and diversified in Roman Africa and that many of them profusely decorated with mosaics and epigraphs suggests that they were adopted on the Iberian Peninsula under African influence. Pedro Mateos²⁵ explains the *lectus triclinaris* and the grave mosaic in the space of the Basilica of Santa Eulália in the capital of Lusitania, Mérida, and other traces of North African influence in the Mérida funerary world by a current of influence introduced through Baetica, the Roman province of southern Spain, with Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts.

Tróia, located on the Atlantic and with great commercial activity, imported significant amounts of African Red Slip Ware in the second half of the 4th century and early 5th century²⁶ and African amphorae represent 50.6% of the imported amphorae in the late Empire, surpassing the imports from the neighboring province of Baetica.²⁷ The *mensae* suggest this large production center also received new people and new funerary practices from Roman Africa.

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³ Robert Étienne, Yasmine Makaroun and Françoise Mayet, *Un grand complexe industriel à Tróia (Portugal)* (Paris: Éditions de Boccard, 1994); Inês V. Pinto, Ana P. Magalhães and Patrícia Brum, “O complexo industrial de Tróia desde os tempos dos *Cornelii Bocchi*,” in José L. Cardoso and M. Almagro-Gorbea (eds), *Colóquio Internacional dedicado a Lucius Cornelius Bochus* (Tróia, 2010) (Lisboa-Madrid: Academia Portuguesa da História and Real Academia de la Historia, 2011), 133–167.

- ⁴ João P. L. Almeida, *A necrópole romana da Caldeira, Tróia de Setúbal: escavações de Manuel Heleno nas décadas de 40-60 do século XX* (unpublished Masters thesis, University of Lisbon, 2008), accessed 27 July 2016, <http://repositorio.ul.pt/handle/10451/362>.
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- ¹² Pedro Sanmartín Moro and Pedro de Palol, "Necropolis Paleocristiana de Cartagena," in *Actas del VIII Congreso Internacional de Arqueologia Cristiana* (Barcelona, 1969) (Roma-Barcelona, 1972), 458; Maria Dolores Laiz Reverte and Maria Carmen Berrocal Caparrós, "Elementos para la datación cronológica de la necrópolis paleocristiana de San Antón en Cartagena," *IV Reunió d'Arqueologia Cristiana Hispánica* (Lisboa, 1992) IV (Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans, Universitat de Barcelona, 1995), 163.
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