Research Article

Antonio Blanco-González*

Microhistory, Conjectural Reasoning, and Prehistory: The Treasure of Aliseda (Spain)

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Abstract: This contribution delves into the ways of archaeological reasoning based on material remains, tackled as minute physical traces or signs capable of shedding light on underlying and otherwise unapproachable past phenomena. This is indeed the basis of Microhistory or the conjectural paradigm in History. This article identifies key characteristics regarding this way of inductive or "bottom-up" inference and demonstrates its prospects when applied to prehistoric contexts. To illustrate this point, the article draws on a case study from the protohistory of Iberia: The treasure of Aliseda (seventh–sixth centuries BCE). This one-off assemblage – a true anomaly in its time, past, and present – was accidentally found in 1920 and has thenceforth been subject to assorted interpretations – mainly as individual burial goods from a feminine tomb – using deductive reasoning constrained by strong prejudices. A recent and comprehensive revision of this issue from an inductive and multi-stranded approach – mobilising several independent lines of evidence – has led to a fresh, sounder, and finer-grained micro-narrative. This case exemplifies a successful microhistorical enquiry, which has tracked retrospectively an array of inadvertent observations – from legacy dataset, new fieldwork, and science-based analyses – to illuminate the deviant circumstances framing this occurrence.

Keywords: Early Iron Age, protohistory, archaeological excavation, evidential reasoning

1 Introduction

The history of archaeological thought in the twentieth century is often drafted as drawing on alternate models, based on competing and apparently exclusive ways of inferring conclusions from the material record (Trigger, 1989; Wylie, 2002). These can be divided into two overarching strategies of scholarly thinking: (1) the realist, modernist, experimental, and hypothetico-deductive procedure, and (2) the humanistic, inductive, and particularistic option. Nowadays, both paradigms have a lot to contribute to archaeology. But, since the early 1980s, their prospects among the academic community have been unbalanced. The initial radical rebuttal of the modernist, natural science-driven paradigm by post-processual archaeology entailed – like among other social sciences (Rosenau, 1992) – the dismissal of deterministic and "top-down" approaches and the explanation of predictable large-scale phenomena (Hodder, 1999). In addition, post-modern relativism and social constructivism challenged this theoretical underpinning (Gergen, 2009), prompting epistemological scepticism and methodological vagueness. By contrast, over the last decade, the increase in the number of practitioners and publications on archaeological science has led some authors (Kristiansen, 2014) to contend that we are enmeshed in an ongoing data revolution in archaeology. This revolution is allegedly characterised by the

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* **Corresponding author: Antonio Blanco-González,** Department of Prehistory, Ancient History and Archaeology, University of Salamanca, Salamanca, 37011, Spain, e-mail: ablancoglez@usal.es

positivistic and realist model, the exploration of big data, and the resumption of magniloquent (neo-diffusionist) narratives. But too many of these mainstream macro-relates rely on the paradox of combining cutting-edge "hard science" with weak evidential reasoning and outdated or misconceived social theory.

As a reaction to this state of the art, nowadays we are facing the emergence of avant-garde contributions embracing eclectic, more pluralistic-oriented narratives from alternative approaches, especially those operating inductively, i.e. "from the bottom up" (Gamble, 2001). Within this intellectual climate, the recent material turn in archaeology – i.e. the growing attention paid to the physicality of things and related ontological concerns (e.g. Knappett, 2005; Lucas, 2012; Vigh & Sausdal, 2014) – has favoured the development of case-based, empirically grounded analyses (Hillerdal & Siapkas, 2015; Wylie & Chapman, 2015). Non-positivist practitioners adhering to this methodologically ambiguous terrain propose more in-depth analyses of well-contextualised evidential bodies. This can be envisaged as an attempt to circumvent over-generalisations or too-wide homogeneous accounts as practiced by the current predominant theoretical strand of neo-processual archaeology. The upsurge of references to Microhistory in recent archaeological literature (e.g. Ribeiro, 2019; Riva & Grau Mira, 2022) is to be set within this scholarly panorama and is more than welcome. Microhistory was initially proposed by Italian social historians (Grendi, 1977; Ginzburg, 1990; Levi, 1991) and represents a sound way of inductive reasoning based on the conjectural or evidential paradigm (Brooks, DeCorse, & Walton, 2008; Brewer, 2010; Davis, 1983; Magnússon, 2003; Revel, 1995). As for the field of archaeology, there has been a paucity of methodologically grounded proposals explicitly drawing on Microhistory, especially by North American historical archaeologists tackling heavily text-based topics (e.g. Beaudry, 2008; Hupperetz, 2010; Janowitz & Dallal, 2013; Orser, 2016; Veit & Gall, 2009). However, prehistoric archaeology – i.e. the study of the most extensive period of the past which has no texts – has rarely benefitted from Microhistory.

This essay brings to the forefront the intellectual backdrop of recent developments and aims at highlighting the prospects for conducting sound research in prehistory by reducing the scope of enquiry. To do so, the article first explores the status of available ways of reasoning in archaeology, distinguishing between deduction and the frequently conflated terms of induction and abduction. Then, it deals with the surprisingly not very fruitful relationship between Microhistory, the evidential paradigm, archaeology, and prehistory. To better discuss these issues in practice, the points made are tested drawing on a research example. The selected case, from the protohistory of Iberia, is an outstanding and well-known jewellery treasure which has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention for generations. Due to its lack of a clear archaeological context, traditional interpretations have considered several hypothetical prehistoric scenarios, all of them constructed from a deductive reasoning. This article aims at discussing how the recent reappraisal of this century-old topic from an alternative inductively oriented approach proves the prospects of microhistorical research in prehistoric contexts.

2 Evidential Reasoning and Microhistory

2.1 Three Ways of Archaeological Reasoning

Reasoning based on material traces is the key task involved in archaeology. To do so, there is a suite of legitimate modes of linking factual observations to interpretive propositions, which may be named "epistemic genres" (Morgan, 2014, p. 289). Rather than mere research instruments or strategies, these constitute plausible competing ways of doing archaeology, with practical and methodological implications. There are three such main modes of archaeological inference: deduction, induction, and abduction.

Deduction treats interpretive claims as the starting point of enquiry and operates from abstractions to concrete observations; an overarching hypothetical statement is enunciated and then the possibilities to reach a particular logical conclusion are tested. This way of reasoning is based on necessary inferences; if premises are certain, then the truth of conclusions is guaranteed. This framework assumes a natural science-based and experimental approach. As a realist and deterministic viewpoint, it presumes that past phenomena were regulated by recognisable principles. Explanatory hypotheses are set based on those principles, and consequences in the material record are anticipated – deduced – and tested. Eventually, this programme in its most

extreme version (Watson, Leblanc, & Redman, 1971) failed because it had been rooted in a misconceived interpretation of science (Gibbon, 1989, p. 117).

In addition to the deductive way, induction is crucial and widespread within archaeology because of the very uncertain and irrecoverable nature of the phenomena under scrutiny (Thomas, 2015, p. 257). Archaeological practice has been permeated by analogical inference from its very beginning (Wylie, 2002), and analogical reasoning is a kind of inductive thinking (Gibbon, 2014, p. 123). It consists of making an unobservable phenomenon more comprehensible by likening it to a more familiar one (Gifford-González, 1991, pp. 219–223). Indeed, a key feature of induction is the way it proceeds from concrete observations to abstract concepts – culture, society, and processes. Conclusions – referred to unobserved and irretrievable phenomena – contain more information than their premises – constricted to particular cases (Vickers, 2014). Therefore, any attempt at attaining knowledge on unobserved realities – such as the past or the present beyond the studied sample – must employ inductive arguments (Salmon, 1976, p. 377). This is why evidential reasoning in anthropology and archaeology most often resorts to induction and abduction, as effective ways of linking empirical observations to interpretive propositions (Shelley, 1996). This procedure relies on social constructivism; researchers acknowledge that their formalisation of the target object and their interpretive accounts are conditioned by their mindset and intellectual milieu (Gergen, 2009). Thus, there is no comprehensive inductive theory and no suite of agreed rules to reach sound inductions (Vickers, 2014). In other words: induction and abduction are non-necessary contingent inferences. Within this epistemological scheme, arguments are not necessarily dependent upon the truth of their theoretical premises, since "it is always logically possible for the premises of a correct inductive argument to be true while its conclusion is false" (Salmon, 1976, p. 377). Actually, they are *ampliative* – i.e. may go beyond what is logically contained in them (Douven, 2011) – and they are affected by equifinality – several logically compatible options may account for the observational basis (Salmon, 1976, p. 378). Induction is discredited among experimental sciences, regarded as the weak sibling of inferential reasoning (Yin, 2003, p. xiii). Inductive arguments may be misleading if misapplied as confirmatory observations or if potential dangers and limitations are not critically considered (Gibbon, 2014, pp. 120–127; Taleb, 2007, pp. 40–58).

The notion of abduction or inference to the best explanation (Douven, 2011; Lipton, 2004; Tschaepe, 2014) was first introduced by semiotician C. S. Peirce to deal with a certain form of inferring risky conclusions that people in everyday life and social scientists regularly engage in. This way of reasoning departs from the observation of an anomaly – as in our case study, see below – and leads to conclusions which do not necessarily follow logically from the premises, but stem from hypotheses which if true, best explain the abnormal facts. This concept was originally restricted to language (Eco, 1981) and limited to the procurement of explanatory hypotheses, but a wider and more flexible general portrayal allows customary application in archaeological reasoning (Bogaard, 2015; Fogelin, 2007; Shelley, 1996). Abduction appeals to explanations, whereas induction appeals exclusively to observations.

Since their initial adoption in the Anglo-American scene in the 1960s, deductive and generalist approaches have become the most suitable formula to overcome the traditional particularistic description and intuitive interpretation of culture-historical archaeology. The reaction against the traditional inductive archaeology was led by the New Archaeology and its epistemologically grounded and formal logic-based agenda (Gibbon, 1989, pp. 29–33; Wylie, 2002). These practitioners committed to the deductive-nomological model of science advocated by logical empiricists and disdained induction as an old-fashioned way of doing archaeology (Watson et al., 1971). Since the late 1970s, this epistemic model has been the mainstream within numerous national disciplinary traditions where it has represented a renewed scientific agenda supported by diverse grand social theories – e.g. structuralism, Marxism, or functionalism (Trigger, 1989). Nowadays, its practitioners envisage this way of doing archaeology as truly revolutionary (Kristiansen, 2014).

The foregoing scheme is to a certain extent an oversimplification with solely a didactic purpose. Neither induction nor deduction can be exclusively identified with ways of evidential reasoning, for example when identifying induction with traditional archaeology (Chang-Ho & Bates, 2010, pp. 104–108). Evidential reasoning involves both forms of inference (Salmon, 1976) and entails assorted strands of information from multiple sources (Wylie, 2002, 2011; Wylie & Chapman, 2015). During the heyday of confrontation between processual and post-processual archaeologies, Salmon (1976) already noted that both epistemic models work together at different instances since the scientific confirmation of hypotheses in the nomothetic-deductive model requires

inductive reasoning. Indeed, empirical enquiry is composed of hypothesis formulation and hypothesis testing. Or as Anderson, Schum, and Twining (2005, pp. 55–60) put it, hypotheses are first abducted from particulars and then tested by deduction and induction. In short, both ways of reasoning have their own crucial role to play in archaeology (Gibbon, 2014, p. 192).

Over the last decade, the analysis of empirical evidence has gained increasing attention due to the emphasis on ontology and materiality (Lucas, 2012; Hillerdal & Siapkas, 2015; Vigh & Sausdal, 2014; Wylie & Chapman, 2015). Thus, the archaeological record is to be tackled from more open-ended and flexible approaches, since "evidential reasoning depends on multiple strands or arguments (…) [and] draws on background knowledge that originates in diverse source fields" and its strength "depends on whether, or how, all these elements can be integrated in a coherent model" (Wylie, 2011, pp. 307–308). In sum, a more flexible, combined paradigm is gaining ground among social scientists (Creswell, 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) – namely among archaeologists – who now argue for a more integrated research framework, drawing on strengths of both inductive and deductive approaches to minimise the frailties of exclusive inferential methods (Chang-Ho & Bates, 2010, p. 105; Thomas, 2015, p. 257). To do so, archaeological practitioners need to decide between giving equal status to deduction and induction or attributing pre-eminence to one of such supplementary strands (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, pp. 19–20).

2.2 Microhistorical Insights from the Archaeological Record

The impact of post-modernism in humanities has entailed a growing unease with large-scale accounts and grand theories (de Chadarevian, 2009). Microhistory encapsulates such an appeal as it involves: (1) a reduction of the scale of observation; (2) a more inclusive approach, attentive to divergences from the norm; and (3) an emphasis on narration as a suitable historical strategy. For the last decades, some social historians have called for a reinvigoration of exemplary narratives drawing on detailed analyses at a smaller scale (Davis, 1983; Magnússon, 2003; Revel, 1995). Microhistory emerged in the late 1970s in Italy as a reaction against the macroscopic and quantitative mainstream led by the *Annales* school. It proposes an inward and high-resolution scrutiny to capture both anodyne episodes of everyday life and exceptional or abnormal occurrences, whose anonymous traces escape conventional documentation (Brooks et al., 2008; Brewer, 2010; Grendi, 1977; Ginzburg, 1993; Levi, 1991; Lightfoot, Martinez, & Schiff, 1998; Magnússon & Szijártó, 2013).

Such historiographical strategy is based on the evidential or conjectural paradigm (Grendi, 1977; Ginzburg, 1990, 1992, 1993; Eco, 1981; Levi, 1991). This is a method of reasoning with immemorial roots in hunting and divination, proposed as an alternative to positivism in the late nineteenth century, when it was applied by art historian G. Morelli to attribute artworks to painters, as well as by S. Freud to psychoanalysis or by Sir A. C. Doyle to detective novels (Ginzburg, 1990, pp. 96–117). Its prime goal is typically inductive, in the original slipstream of philosopher D. Hume's enunciation: "this knowledge is characterized by the ability to construct from apparently insignificant experimental data a complex reality that could not be experienced directly" (Ginzburg, 1990, p. 103). Thus, Microhistory operates looking inwards, from the minute observation of unconscious and apparently trivial details. These represent marginal and therefore too often overlooked trifles – clues, imprints, trails, hints, and symptoms – but they are crucial in the search for deep unobserved phenomena and unforeseen meanings embedded in circumscribed cases, otherwise inaccessible (Lucas, 2012, pp. 26–27). In view of the significant common ground between archaeology and criminal or forensic investigation (Thomas, 2015), tackling the material outcomes of unobservable past occurrences from this toolkit is more than a rhetorical metaphor – it is a heuristic to fully acknowledge the possibilities and limitations of the evidence at hand (Anderson et al., 2005). In fact, archaeology is considered by Ginzburg (1990, p. 117) among those profoundly diachronic disciplines featuring "the ability to forecast retrospectively," since "when causes cannot be reproduced, there is nothing to do but to deduce them from their effects."

Conventional social accounts too often draw upon generalisations from typical standard cases. However, Taleb (2007) has masterly shown the limitations of this perspective when tackling social phenomena, within which "inequalities are such that one single observation can disproportionately impact the total" (Taleb, 2007,

p. 33). Thus, it is key to integrate into our historical narratives those aberrations or unusual cases departing from the normative, modal or average trends (Magnússon & Szijártó, 2013, pp. 19–20). Accordingly, Montón-Subías (2010, pp. 1–4) has argued for paying due attention to the exceptional in archaeology, to benefit from the informative potential of deviant and outlying outcomes resulting from abnormal or substandard circumstances. In Taleb's words (2007, p. 45): "history sometimes cradles, but mostly makes jumps." This idea is in line with the current focal points on human agency, short-term events and eventful narratives in archaeology (e.g. Beck, Bolender, Brown, & Earle, 2007; Bolender, 2010; Robb & Pauketat, 2013) and particularly considering the role of unlikely events in historical trajectories (Montón-Subías, 2010; Sassaman & O'Donoughue, 2015). This will lead to challenge our misleadingly homogeneous accounts, as conventionally elaborated in academia (Montón-Subías, 2010, pp. 1–4). Not in vain, Doyle (1891/2007, p. 485) put in Sherlock Holmes's mouth that "singularity is almost invariably a clue. The more featureless and commonplace a crime is, the more difficult it is to bring it home." This contention is fully in keeping with the microhistorical focus on the "normal exceptional" (Grendi, 1977), i.e. what we consider standard may be an artefact, revealed by the absence of explicit first-hand testimonies due to the inescapable use of indirect, exceptionally preserved documentation. Here the exceptional refers neither to anecdotal evidence – whose use in archaeology to support hasty and weak generalisations has been severely criticised (Gibbon, 2014, p. 125) – nor to disciplinary mirages – i.e. traditionally downplayed phenomena which may have been much more common than thought (Aranda Jiménez, Montón-Subías, & Sánchez Romero, 2015, p. xxiii). Thus, it is vital to truly integrate outliers in the archaeological discourses because such anomalous or discrepant cases may represent genuine testimonies of contingent social agency (Fontijn, 2013, p. 185). Ginzburg (1992) tackled in this way the case of Menocchio, a sixteenth-century Friulian miller condemned of heresy due to his odd and original cosmogony. His distinctiveness had very clear-cut historical limits and highlights how such an extreme case may be representative: (1) in a negative sense, because it helps outlining what should be considered – within a particular context – as being the more frequent and (2) in a positive vein, because it allows circumscribing the latent possibilities of an unobserved phenomenon "otherwise known to us only through fragmentary and distorting documents" (Ginzburg, 1992, p. xxi).

Finally, another key contribution of Microhistory resides in its flexible narrative strategy, suitable to the discontinuous and partial evidence extant from the past (Brooks et al., 2008). Thus, mainstream preformed and all-encompassing narratives provide homogeneous, crack-free accounts, too often based on physical results that might have arisen from different, even scattered and divergent activities and social contexts (Aranda Jiménez et al., 2015, p. 174). By contrast, Microhistory, deeply influenced by the "linguistic turn" and hermeneutics, holds to a particular art of story-writing. Within such micro-narrations, gaps, silences, inconsistencies, and uncertainties are adequately considered and limits between reality and fiction sometimes can even become blurred (Ginzburg, 1993, pp. 23–24). A comparable strategy is also pursued by other sorts of archaeological "thick descriptions," such as the cultural biographies (Joy, 2009, p. 544) or itineraries of things (Hahn & Weiss, 2013, pp. 8–9), aimed at a non-linear discourse made of connected jumps of intermittent information, instead of the unrealistic and unattainable reconstruction of all facts. The so-called Third Science Revolution ideally aims at integrating such perspectives "from below" (Kristiansen, 2014, p. 12). However, in practice, such unifying readings often ignore the incomplete, severely diminished nature of the proxies at hand (Mímisson & Magnússon, 2014, p. 137).

In view of the remarkable commonalities shared by archaeology and conjectural reasoning, it comes as a no surprise the increased attention paid to Microhistory within the field of archaeology (Ribeiro, 2019; Riva & Grau Mira, 2022). This has been especially so in North American historical archaeology, wherein contributions have explored topics such as identity and the biographies of particular individuals (Beaudry, 2008; White & Beaudry, 2009), collective stories of great cities (Janowitz & Dallal, 2013), and mainly the material imprint of everyday life (Hupperetz, 2010; Lightfoot et al., 1998; Veit & Gall, 2009). These proposals combine diverse historical records – including ethnography and textual documentation – to provide richer, more nuanced glimpses into particular cases participating in key historical phenomena. Over the last decade a singularised archaeology has been contended, i.e. a discipline concentrated on the specific singularities of past practices and episodes (Mímisson & Magnússon, 2014; Orser, 2016). In fact, the ontological nature of the archaeological record, with its varied temporalities – including many cases of very short duration (Lucas, 2012, pp. 82–123) – perfectly fits the microhistorical endeavour (Ginzburg, 1993, p. 27).

All in all, highlighting the microcosm is a fruitful way to attain the large lessons discovered in small worlds (Brooks et al., 2008; Ribeiro, 2019). However, most attempts at doing Microhistory from the archaeological perspective have been heavily text-based in nature. Indeed, it is striking the absence of similar approaches to earlier periods and especially in moments that lack textual documentation, namely the reluctance of prehistorians to implement Microhistory (but see Borić, 2007; Cobb, 2015; Riva & Grau Mira, 2022). This is even more surprising in view of the increasing importance of multi-scalar approaches designed to complement the conventional macroscopic evidence seen by the naked eye with the microscopic record (Riva & Grau Mira, 2022; Robb & Pauketat, 2013). This latter is the subject matter of microarchaeology, a set of emerging science-based research lines which seek to decipher this embedded information using instrumentation (Weiner, 2010). Indeed, microarchaeology operates from inadvertent cues, signs, or traces to provide highly detailed, down-scaled stories.

To illustrate these methods, and the limitations and prospects of Microhistory applied to prehistoric contexts, the next section draws on a case study from the protohistory of Iberia: the so-called treasure of Aliseda (seventh–sixth centuries BCE).

3 A Prehistoric Case Study

3.1 The Aliseda Treasure: Discovery and Interpretations

The Aliseda hoard is a stunning assemblage of sumptuary objects unearthed in 1920 in an inland and rural setting in central Iberia: the small village of Aliseda (Cáceres, Spain) (Figure 1a). This startling Early Iron Age set is composed of jewellery and exotica, including local craftworks in the pan-Mediterranean orientalising style and long-distance imports from Egypt and the Levant (Mélida 1921, 1928; Nicolini, 1990, pp. 26–32, 214–217, images 129–133, 203–205, 254–257; Ortí, 1921/2020; Perea Caveda, 1991, pp. 163, 167–179, 198–201). The hoard was accidentally discovered by several humble potters while digging for clay to make tiles in a council-owned plot named El Ejido that housed a pottery workshop (Figure 1b), on the outskirts of Aliseda (Rodríguez Díaz, Ortiz, Pavón Soldevila, & Duque Espino, 2014; Rodríguez Díaz, Pavón Soldevila, & Duque Espino, 2015; Rodríguez Díaz, Pavón Soldevila, & Duque Espino, 2019). Unfortunately, the circumstances of the finding are confusing, partly due to the clash of interests and the then weak protection provided by national legislation regarding cultural heritage and its precarious administrative apparatus. A key figure in this affair was J. R. Mélida, then a

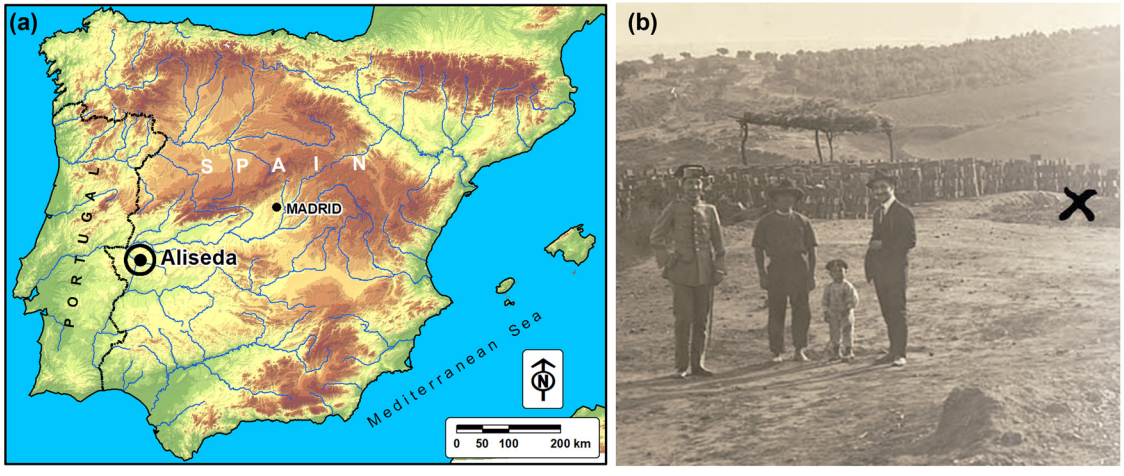

Figure 1: (a) Map of the Iberian Peninsula with the location of the village of Aliseda (Cáceres, Spain). (b) Photograph taken in 1921 by J. Cabré at El Ejido, with an "X" marking the findspot (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2020, p. 66).

professor at the University of Madrid and the director of the National Archaeological Museum (henceforth NAM) in Madrid. Mélida's role was twofold: he managed the issue as a leading representative of the state – very interested in recovering the treasure – and acted as a scholar with strong academic interest in this ground-breaking finding (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2014). He gathered the direct testimony of the analphabet men who found the treasure and several local cultured witnesses – the village's medical doctor and the pharmacist. All confirmed that the jewels appeared at a depth of 1 m in an area of 2 m^2 along a humble stone-made foundation. Some jewels were mistreated or quickly sold by the finders and an unknown number eventually disappeared for good. However, the council and official archaeology entered the scene relatively quickly and were very efficient in recovering most of the assemblage. Indeed, this occurrence must be set within the first steps of archaeology as a maturing academic discipline in Spain and represents one the earliest and most successful efforts by the state to protect antiquities and avoid their illicit exportation – aborted in time on this occasion. The preserved items entered immediately (in 1920) the NAM, and a newly acquired piece did so in 1971. A year after the discovery, in 1921, an official 1-week archaeological excavation was carried out by J. Cabré on the – then severely looted – findspot (Figure 1b). Unfortunately, the preceptive archaeological report remains missing; only a handful of legacy materials have survived and have been recently reassessed and published (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2014, 2015, 2019), including: (1) a series of landscape photographs taken by Cabré; (2) an outlined plan of the village, its surrounding landscape and the findspot, drawn by Cabré; and (3) a letter sent to Mélida by the chemist, who reported Cabré's results. Shortly after the 1921 excavation – once the plot of El Ejido was freed from archaeological wariness – it was urbanised in several periods (1925–1933 and 1990–2010). Archaeological monitoring in 1994 confirmed the truncation of all archaeological stratification. In sum, the protohistoric sumptuary set lacks accurate contextual information, and this uncertainty has fuelled a diversity of scholarly interpretations.

The preserved treasure (Mélida 1921, 1928; Nicolini, 1990; Ortí, 1921/2020; Rodríguez Díaz, in press) – today still curated and exhibited at the NAM – weighs over 1,100 g and is composed of 354 gold, silver, and bronze items, plus several glass chunks and a lithic object totalling some 25 recomposed artefacts (Figure 2) – they

Figure 2: The treasure of Aliseda (source: Spanish Ministry of Culture).

were heavily broken in prehistoric times into multiple fragments and refitted in the 1920s according to what was known in its time of discovery. The majority are golden objects, including one articulated diadem with triangular ends – with gemstones, most of them missing; two hoop earrings and a simple (so-called *nezem*) earring; three necklaces made of some fifty pendants and amulets with glyptic gems; two bracelets; one belt with pieces featuring winged griffins and palmettes; a set of signatory rings with scarabs; and one plate and several clothing overlay pieces. Second, silver objects are one badly damaged Carthaginian tray whose handles exhibit hand motifs and one highly broken storage jar. Finally, the set included a stone polisher with two holes, a bronze mirror, and numerous glass fragments pertaining to a Syro-Phoenician handled jug featuring pseudo-hieroglyphic motifs.

The Spanish scholars responsible for the revision of the treasure and its intra-history (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2014, 2019; Rodríguez Díaz, in press) have produced a masterful synthesis of the intellectual trajectory on the hoard for over a century. From its very discovery, the assemblage has been challenging because of its multi-cultural references – including Assyrian, Egyptian, Hellenic, Carthaginian, Syrian, and Anatolian workmanship – and foremost due to its unexpected and unparalleled occurrence in such an inward and supposedly isolated location in Extremadura. Therefore, the treasure has been a milestone in archaeological research in the Iberian Peninsula ever since and has featured prominently in the archaeological literature. Beyond dispersed publications of regional and national scope (Mélida 1921; Ortí 1921/2020), the finding even reached early international publications (Mélida, 1928). The first accounts regarding the discovery (Mélida 1921; Ortí 1921/2020) posited a Phoenician (seventh–sixth centuries BCE) funerary context: a barrow with an inner chamber containing an imagined yet unverified inhumated woman – based on parallels in Andalusia – with her princely and orientalising burial goods. Mélida (1928) changed his mind after having the chance to show these pieces to Mr. Howard Carter during his visit to Madrid in 1924. The famous English egyptologist envisaged the assemblage as a hidden caché of anachronistic items from assorted origins, likely deposited by the late third century BCE. Subsequently, diverse scholars supported its funerary and feminine nature – i.e. as the burial furnishings of a princess from the state-like polity of Tartessos – or suggested its cultic nature, as part of a sanctuary devoted to a wooden sculpture – a complete and detailed bibliography is available in Rodríguez Díaz (in press).

In a nutshell, early interpretations drew upon two hypotheses (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2019, pp. 28–43) deploying a typically deductive reasoning: (1) a diachronic and later date for the assemblage – i.e. sixth century BCE or later – invoking Punic and Hellenic agency, within an essentialist, nationalist and antisemitic ideology; or (2) a synchronous set – either funerary or ritual in nature – explained by the role of Phoenicians in the seventh–sixth centuries BCE orientalising koine.

3.2 Revisiting the Aliseda Treasure from a Microhistorical-Like Approach

Almost a century after its discovery, the treasure was reassessed by archaeologists from the University of Extremadura (Spain) with funding from a research project (2011–2015) devoted to unveiling its original archaeological context (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2014, 2019; Rodríguez Díaz, Pavón Soldevila, & Duque Espino, 2020; Rodríguez Díaz, in press). Their endeavour aimed at shedding new light on the prehistoric world and circumstances framing such an accumulation and occultation of valuables. This research process also contributed to understanding the socio-economic dynamics that may account for the occurrence of such outlandish luxuries in a remote and inland setting in central Spain, several hundred kilometres away from Phoenician coastal outposts (Figure 1a). This scholarly enquiry has been exemplary in many instances, and its epistemological premises fully adhere to the microhistorical enterprise. Indeed, the investigation operated via inductive reasoning: departing from a range of lines of evidence – including legacy dataset, new archaeological fieldwork, information technology, and science-based analyses – thoroughly tracked as symptoms and cues from the original materiality. This section surveys its *modus operandi* and emphasises aspects concomitant with the inferential procedure of Microhistory.

The first information source explored was the very landscape of the discovery. As explained, the findspot of El Ejido had been severely truncated and distorted in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by the construction of public infrastructures, including a residential quarter and a road. To get a glimpse of this terrain in the 1920s, before its transformations, the researchers undertook a retrospective geographic reconstruction. To do so, they resorted to original legacy materials and documents available in archives and museums related to the official excavation campaign in 1921 carried out by J. Cabré. This task led to identify the mentioned letter from the village's pharmacist to Mérida reporting on Cabré's fieldwork, as well as an outline plan of the finding – with jewels at both sides of a wall – drafted by the local council's secretary in a letter sent to Mélida (Figure 3a). This is how we know that the results of this very short and hardly promising fieldwork campaign were deceiving and ambiguous. However, the excavation confirmed the initial observations made by the discoverers: Cabré dismissed Mélida's funerary hypothesis and he posited instead the presence of "two small and very poor dwellings" (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2019, p. 71).

Another key material was the series of black-and-white photographs taken by Cabré at El Ejido, showing the treasure finders, the pottery workshop and ovens and the whereabouts of the findspot, including its exact location – marked with an "X" (Figure 1b). Since these images also featured landmarks – buildings, lanes, fenced yards, orographic elements, etc. – recognisable *in situ* in the present-day landscape, it was possible to geo-reference them with a total station. Fortunately, the original camera used by Cabré is curated at the Juan Cabré Museum in Teruel (Spain), and thus, crucial technical parameters of the original photographs were recovered. From this information, the precise location of the camera in 1921 was calculated using topographic variables, and these results were combined with historical orthophotographs dated to the 1920s and a high-resolution digital terrain model obtained with a drone. Finally, all this legacy dataset and modern digital cartography was managed in a Geographic Information System (henceforth GIS) to locate the exact findspot of the treasure (Figure 4). It coincides – with a few metres of error – with the location remembered by locals, recorded in a sketch drawn by Cabré and marked on site with a monument. The virtual reconstruction of the landscape of the Aliseda riverbank (Figure 4) shows the likely aspect of El Ejido before its dramatic and irreversible transformation. The findspot was on top of a smooth hillock 1.5 km away from the nearest settlement occupied during the seventh–sixth centuries BCE – the hilltop site of Sierra del Aljibe, excavated in 1995 – and only 150 m away from a similar and parallel hill named Las Cortinas, where an excavation in the early 2010s shed important light upon the treasure´s context.

A second research phase – and a crucial one to contextualising the sumptuary hoard – focused on Las Cortinas. Despite the heavy removal of all protohistoric remnants in the surrounding smallholdings, a plot of 220 m^2 in area had fortunately been preserved untouched. Its urbanisation led to implement an archaeological

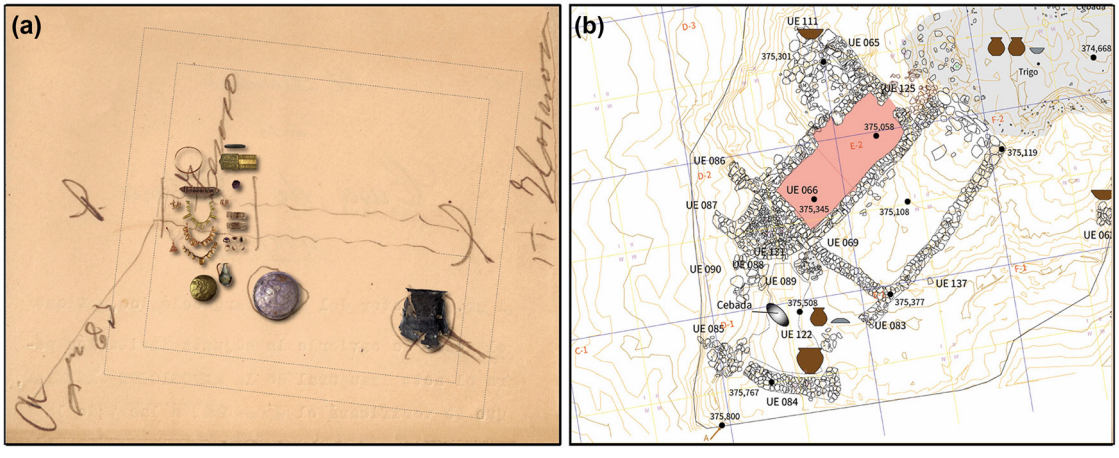

Figure 3: (a) Draft plan of the treasure finding drawn by the council's secretary in 1920, with superimposed photographs of the main items of the treasure (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2020, p. 77). (b) Plan of the archaeological excavation in 2011–2013 at Las Cortinas showing the architectural aggregate, with the central chamber – red soil – interpreted as a sanctuary (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2020, p. 77).

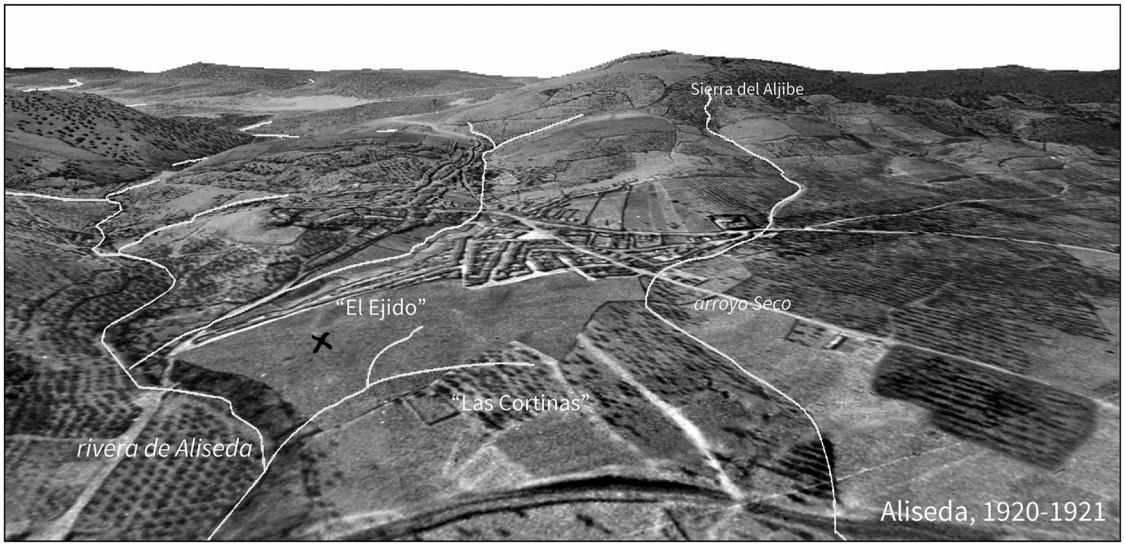

Figure 4: Virtual rendering of the landscape of the Aliseda riverbank in the 1920s, with location of the hillocks of El Ejido (with the treasure findspot marked with an "X") and Las Cortinas (excavated in the 2010s) and the hilltop settlement of Sierra del Aljibe (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2020, p. 71).

rescue excavation, very timely codirected by the researchers from the University of Extremadura (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2014, 2019, 2020; Rodríguez Díaz, in press). The open-area excavation of this sector in 2011–2013 exhumated the flattened stone foundations of an aggregate of buildings superimposed to two shallow gullies, all dated to the late seventh–late sixth centuries BCE (Figure 3b). The large and geminate rock-cut sunken features contained several open-air fireplaces and were filled in with ashy strata containing abundant charcoal, animal bones, charred seeds, and broken pottery – especially consumption fine wares – with organic residues of foodstuff and alcoholic beverages for some 20–40 people, all indicating the practice of repeated commensality celebrations. Indeed, the organic-rich layers were interstratified with archaeologically infertile ones – featuring only pebbles – therefore suggesting the alternation of offering and banqueting activities with phases of inactivity. Noteworthy was the last of such feasts, a collective event in the late sixth century BCE, when a 1 m bronze spit (*obelos*) was ritually abandoned. In short, rather than ordinary refuse dumps, these accumulations of culinary residues can be better regarded as formal deposits – a kind of ritual cumulative *bothros* – resulting from recurrent ritualised gatherings. Importantly, these sunken features are associated with a compound of adjoining stone-made constructions lacking any clear trace of domestic uses. This architectural aggregate included a central small four-cornered building with red soil and whose door was carefully oriented to the northwest, which could be interpreted as a sanctuary or cultic building (Pérez Gutiérrez, Rodríguez Díaz, Pavón Soldevila, & Duque Espino, 2016). This ritual chamber was preceded by a reception hall and had a rectangular storehouse, a semi-thatched domestic space, and a culinary oven attached to it at a later phase (Figures 3b and 5).

The minute observation of symptomatic cues played a major role in deciphering the nature and temporality of social activities performed at Las Cortinas. Thus, the archaeo-astronomical study of the central sanctuary (Pérez Gutiérrez et al., 2016) led to the identification of the very significant orientation of its door: at c. 600 BCE it opened to the dawn of the star Arthur, which – considering the viewshed from inside this building – could be seen at two alternative periods of the year: just before either spring or autumn (Figure 5). This observation was eventually successfully elucidated by the archaeobotanical study of charcoals from firewood yielded by the large gully with commensality detritus. Indeed, most charred vegetal macroremains pertained to branches of labdanum bush (*Cistus ladaniferus*), whose preserved bark – informative of the interrupted growth of the last annual ring – indicates that they were cut just at the onset of its vegetative activity, coinciding with the onset of spring (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2015, pp. 296–297).

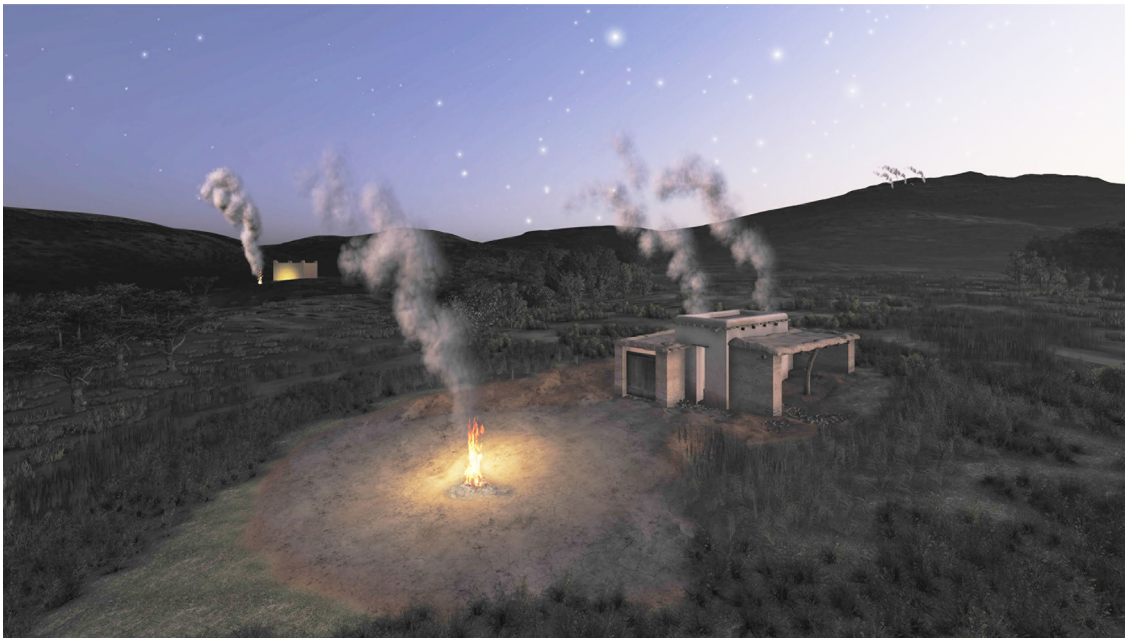

Figure 5: Virtual reconstruction of the ritual architectural compound or sanctuary at the plot of Las Cortinas (Aliseda), after its excavation in the 2010s (foreground) and the nearby similar building at El Ejido (rear side) (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2020, p. 77).

The collation of the above disparate lines of evidence led to posit a new hypothesis to account for the social context and the cultural gestures of accumulation and occultation of the Aliseda treasure (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2014, 2019, 2020; Rodríguez Díaz, in press). Regarding the origin and biography of the sumptuary assemblage, previous contributions (Nicolini, 1990, pp. 26–32; Perea Caveda, 1991, pp. 167–179; Perea Caveda, García Vuelta, & Fernández, 2010, pp. 84–85) had confirmed the heterogenous nature of the set, which includes items of diverse date and whose chemical compositions are disparate. This indicates a protracted cumulative gathering of imports and local-made artefacts, acquired via diverse suppliers and means – e.g. political gifts, exchanged valuables, or commissioned craftworks. These authors (Perea Caveda et al., 2010) also defended – based on size and ornamental motifs – that gendered pieces suggest two genders rather than only feminine pieces. The last updated revision of the treasure (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2014, 2019, 2020) draws on this literature and concludes that the assemblage functionally consists of ceremonial corporal attire and liturgical items (Figures 2 and 6) and discerns three subsets: (1) androcentric jewels, e.g. the golden articulated belt featuring motifs of assertive masculinity – such as griffins, the tree of life or the hero fighting a lion – several large golden signatory rings and perhaps the bronze mirror; (2) gynocentric jewels in gold, such as the diadem, necklaces, bracelets, and earrings, all exhibiting exuberant zoomorphic, astral, vegetal, and flowery motifs – snakes, palmettes, flowers, spirals, the crescent moon, etc. – as potent symbols conveying the concepts of fecundity and regeneration; and (3) a set of non-gendered items and liturgical devices, including the golden plate evoking the sun, the golden clothing pieces, the silver tray and jar, and the glass jug.

As for the functional context of the treasure, a closer inspection of old testimonies and fresh archaeological fieldwork has illuminated these unsolved questions. The nearby settings of El Ejido – the disappeared findspot of the hoard – and Las Cortinas – subject to archaeological excavation and science-based characterisation – were part and parcel of the same ritual landscape. The retrospective geographic reconstruction of this landscape has proved that they were twin hillocks on the Aliseda riverbank. Both locales were very likely to house similar buildings and activities in the seventh–sixth centuries BCE. The architectural compound at Las Cortinas (Figure 3b) can be confidently interpreted as a standalone rural dynastic sanctuary – despite the absence of altars and further ritual paraphernalia so habitual in Phoenician cultic contexts – isolated and dependent of further sites dispersed in the countryside. This ritual estate was probably owned by an aristocratic extended corporate group whose domestic premises located elsewhere, likely in the Sierra del Aljibe

Figure 6: The treasure interpreted as non-gendered liturgical devices and gendered corporal attire implements (jewels) worn by a couple of officiants while performing rituals in the spring equinox. On the left is the Sierra del Aljibe hilltop site and on the right the imagined sanctuary of El Ejido (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2020, p. 80).

hilltop settlement (Figure 4). This compound, far from being subject to year-round domestic occupations, was instead home to the periodic rituals and festivities conducted by members of this prominent household group (Figure 6). These activities crucially involved the commensality and conviviality celebration of the spring – and particularly the spring equinox – as a paramount episode in the annual cycle. The question remains open as to what kind of high-ranked social units – either unilineal lineages or bilateral ramages such as in the house/*maison* model – may have managed and used these ritual settings (Rodríguez Díaz, in press).

The findspot of El Ejido and the treasure can be reframed in more plausible ritual and socioeconomic terms. Thus, we must recall the humble stone-built wall encountered by the treasure discoverers and envisioned – and even drawn – by several educated witnesses in 1920. Following the chemist's epistolary description of the official excavation conducted in 1921, Cabré clearly discerned the poorly made stone foundations of at least two buildings. Thus, the jewels were originally associated with what could be better interpreted as the inner partition wall of an aggregate of buildings – like those excavated at Las Cortinas (Figure 3b) – instead of the inner chamber of a funerary tumulus, an interpretation already rejected by Cabré. The cultic architecture recorded at Las Cortinas is therefore circumstantial evidence that strongly supports the existence of something similar at El Ejido, plausibly envisaged as another sanctuary, managed by an even richer aristocratic faction living in the surrounding landscape. The sacred landscape of El Ejido/Aliseda (Figure 4) was singular due to its red clayey soil and its abundant watercourses, located at a crossroad of diverse paths. In a nutshell, it was a liminal place between sky, earth, water, and fire, where a group of people gathered seasonally to observe the sky, light fires, and celebrate astronomic events performing the conspicuous exhibition of the household patrimony (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2014, 2019, 2020).

According to this hypothesis, the stunning set of jewels was the dynastic and inalienable treasure (*keimelion*) of such a corporate group. Corporal attire items were likely worn by a couple of officiants (Figure 6): a woman and a man who served as sacred priest-like representatives of this high-ranked social segment on special occasions, when they performed rituals accompanied by sumptuary and esoteric – gold, silver, and glass – liturgical furnishings. Such dynastic riches were curated, transmitted, and used in private ceremonies for generations and very significantly included antiques and heirlooms (*archaika*) – such as a golden pendant with an Egyptian Middle Kingdom scarab gemstone (2000–1600 BCE) or the large golden necklace and the

bronze mirror of Late Bronze Age (1300–900 BCE) date (Figure 2). Eventually, the assemblage was disposed of under unknown circumstances in the late fifth century BCE, in a social climate of uncertainty, conflict, and factional feuds so typical of heterarchical and unstable societies (Rodríguez Díaz, in press).

4 Final Remarks

This contribution has surveyed the problem of inferring conclusions from the mute materiality of the past. We have mentioned three major ways of inference in archaeological practice and have underscored the unrealised potential of tackling prehistoric contexts from the perspective of Microhistory, following the avenue already explored by historical archaeology. Microhistory can be a reliable alternative way of doing prehistoric archaeology at a micro-scale vis-à-vis the current dissatisfaction with unifying and all-encompassing macro-narratives of prehistory.

In order to show the limits and prospects of such an endeavour, the article has resorted to a pioneer case of archaeological practice, in an attempt to deconstruct its evidential reasoning. This example is affected by the shortcomings and limitations of being an accidental treasure discovery in the early twentieth century, when Spanish archaeology was still in its infancy. Among these drawbacks is the fragmentary condition of the archaeological remains encountered – the jewels were deliberately and systematically broken, as a way of ritual termination, prior to their abandonment – as well as the partial and incomplete nature of the legacy information on the circumstances of the finding. The century-long debate regarding the archaeological context, nature, function, and final demise of the treasure has followed traditional deductive arguments and has drawn on available circumstantial evidence in a very biased and prejudiced manner (Thomas, 2015). Such a realist and "descending" or "top-down" framework operated from prearranged abstractions – the Tartessian state, the feminine princely burials of Southwestern Iberia – to concrete observations – the shocking jewels from an inconspicuous, featureless, and anodyne findspot. However, the logical consequences of these explanatory proposals were poorly enunciated and anticipated, let alone tested in the field (Gibbon, 1989, 2014). Therefore, such interpretations – lacking much-needed nuances – hardly acknowledged the limitations of the discovery and its archaeological context – its striking silences, inconsistencies, and uncertainties (Ginzburg, 1993, pp. 23–24) – thus leading to deceptive and unsound accounts in funerary terms.

The recent revisitation of this case from an alternative approach and encompassing a wider suite of lines of evidence has been very successful in exposing weak and unquestioned arguments, in challenging widespread yet not fully justified standpoints, and in opening new interpretive options. To do so, researchers from the University of Extremadura (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2014, 2015, 2019, 2020; Rodríguez Díaz, in press) conducted an inductive enquiry bringing together theoretical principles and inferential procedures fully akin to Italian Microhistory, even though they did not explicitly draw on such literature and intellectual inspiration.

The first defining point of this microhistorical pursuit was its detective-like research process, which mobilised a wide and disparate suite of sources and materials. Thus, the research group departed from the thorough re-examination of legacy dataset of early twentieth-century date curated at archives and museums – epistolary documents, drawings, black-and-white photographs, etc. (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2014, 2015, 2019, 2020; Rodríguez Díaz, in press). This scrutiny was really enlightening regarding the circumstances of the discovery and the unpublished results of the excavation led by Cabré in 1921. The second goal consisted in locating with high precision the findspot, while characterising the landscape of the discovery in 1920 and spotlighting crucial aspects of the Aliseda riverbank in prehistoric times. These aims involved approaching an otherwise irrecoverable landscape, modelling it from a kind of "retrospective forecast" (Ginzburg, 1990, p. 117). In doing so, the research team used a smart combination of old datasets – namely the landscape photographs taken by Cabré in 1921 – and digital cartography – available orthophotographs and a high-resolution digital terrain model – all managed via GIS technologies. The third task involved a developer-funded archaeological excavation in 2011–2013 only 150 m away from the geo-referenced findspot. This excavation opened a window into the functional and architectural context of the treasure. Therefore, the researchers resorted to an array of independent lines of evidence, all of them tracked as symptoms of an

unapproachable and unreconstructible pristine context. The subsequent science-based and microarchaeological approaches (Weiner, 2010) aimed at reconstructing "from below" – departing from seemingly insignificant experimental data – a phenomenon that could not be experienced directly. Thus, the archaeo-astronomical study of the central rectangular building led to the identification of its orientation. Likewise, it was possible to discern the consumption of alcoholic beverages in banquets – via chromatography and organic residues in ceramics – and the anthracological study of charcoals preserving their bark led to determine the cutting of firewood at the onset of spring. The minute tracing of these otherwise inadvertent details and their integration into a down-scaled narrative make this procedure comparable to the conjectural paradigm. Finally, the research focus on a deviant or outlying occurrence fully adheres to the microhistorical interest in the "normal exceptional" (Grendi, 1977) and fully integrates the treasure into an interpretive micro-narrative (Magnússon & Szijártó, 2013, p. 20). The treasure of Aliseda is a rare casuistry in two senses: (1) as a one-off case, a stunning and unparalleled accumulation of sumptuary valuables and long-distance imports in Early Iron Age central Iberia; and (2) as an archaeological abnormal outcome, since their final destruction and occultation resulted from substandard or anomalous circumstances clearly diverging from normative or average practices – that normally led to the disappearance and untraceability of such dynastic riches. Yet precisely for being so discrepant, it speaks volumes on the diversity of modes and sources of power in this prehistoric context. As an extreme case, the treasure represents a genuine correlate of contingent social agency (Fontijn, 2013, p. 185) and its singularity is most telling of its original social framework. Indeed, it testifies to the ability and affordability of accumulation and destruction held by the richest corporate groups within this heterarchical society.

In sum, the way of evidential reasoning displayed by this research team (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2014, 2015, 2018 2019, 2020; Rodríguez Díaz, in press) is based on social constructivism, wherein abduction or inference to the best explanation (Douven, 2011; Lipton, 2004; Tschaepe, 2014) plays a key role. Thus, these scholars departed from the observation of a prehistoric anomaly and inferred its plausible causes from their material effects (Ginzburg, 1990, p. 117). Their historiographic art of story-writing resorted to the highly textured narration of unforeseen meanings and nuances embedded in a highly singular and tightly circumscribed – i.e. within very clear-cut historical limits – microcosm that encapsulates recurrent episodes of ritual life, whose scent escapes conventional sources – i.e. untraceable in contemporary dwellings and tombs (Beaudry, 2008; Cobb, 2015; Hupperetz, 2010; Magnússon & Szijártó, 2013; Veit & Gall, 2009). The novel picture attained is finer-grained and far more parsimonious with all available evidential claims. Moreover, the social portrayal of this prehistoric world (e.g. Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2018; Rodríguez Díaz, in press) has fully benefitted from the informative potential of such a deviant yet highly significant and diagnostic occurrence (Montón-Subías, 2010). This microhistorical endeavour (Brooks et al., 2008; Brewer, 2010; Grendi, 1977; Ginzburg, 1993; Levi, 1991; Magnússon & Szijártó, 2013) has been successful in retrospectively connecting a series of marginalised factual observations to interpretive propositions, envisaged as symptomatic clues. This procedure focused on contingent inferences that – far from providing researchers with confirmatory and definitive conclusions – are to be managed as provisional statements abducted from particular observations (Gibbon, 2014, pp. 122–124; Taleb, 2007, pp. 50–58). Compared to previous and competing accounts, this narrative is far more in-depth, since it is empirically grounded on a wider and well-contextualised factual body (Hillerdal & Siapkas, 2015; Ribeiro, 2019; Riva & Grau Mira, 2022; Wylie & Chapman, 2015). The funerary function of the sumptuary assemblage – as surmised by scholars in the twentieth century – can be confidently rejected. Instead of individual, princely, and burial goods, the hoard has been reinterpreted as a collective and heterarchical legacy (Rodríguez Díaz et al., 2014, 2019, 2020; Rodríguez Díaz, in press). The treasure was plausibly managed in its prehistoric context as ritual, corporate-owned, and inalienable paraphernalia – including antiques – passed on within an aristocratic corporate social grouping. The jewels were eventually abandoned in a cultic building/sanctuary, and this occurrence should be better understood as a gesture of conspicuous destruction within a social milieu of factionalism and conflict.

Finally, following the path open by historical archaeology, this article contends that rather than a complementary option, in prehistoric research it is crucial to revalue the dismissed evidence afforded by marginal and inadvertent physical traces (Ginzburg, 1990; Grendi, 1977; Ribeiro, 2019). Moreover, if such a critical scrutiny is performed on prehistoric materiality, this may crucially lead to exposure and re-dimension of consensual and established standpoints (Wylie & Chapman 2015, p. 2) rather than merely supplementing them.

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