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DÍAZ-GUARDAMINO,
GARCÍA SANJUÁN,
& WHEATLEY

THE LIVES OF PREHISTORIC MONUMENTS
IN IRON AGE, ROMAN, AND MEDIEVAL EUROPE

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EDITED BY

MARTA DÍAZ-GUARDAMINO,
LEONARDO GARCÍA SANJUÁN,
& DAVID WHEATLEY

This volume explores the pervasive influence exerted by some prehistoric monuments on European social life over thousands of years, and reveals how they acted as nodes linking people through time, possessing huge ideological and political significance. Through the advancement of theoretical approaches and scientific methods, archaeologists have been able to investigate how some of these monuments provided resources to negotiate memories, identities, power, and social relations throughout European history.

The essays in this collection examine the life-histories of carefully chosen megalithic monuments, stelae and statue-menhirs, and rock art sites of various European and Mediterranean regions during Iron Age, Roman, and Medieval times. By focusing on the concrete interaction between people, monuments, and places, the volume offers an innovative outlook on a variety of debated issues. Prominent among these is the role of ancient remains in the creation, institutionalization, contestation, and negotiation of social identities and memories, as well as their relationship with political ideology in early historic European societies.

By contributing to current theoretical debates on materiality, landscape, and place-making, *The Lives of Prehistoric Monuments in Iron Age, Roman, and Medieval Europe* seeks to overcome disciplinary boundaries between prehistory and history, and highlight the long-term, genealogical nature of our engagement with the world.

Jacket image: Decorated stone of Abamia (Asturias, Spain),
modified after Miguel Ángel de Blas Cortina.

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Preface

This book was conceived during our recent research collaboration, centred on a variety of prehistoric monuments in Iberia. These include funerary megalithic monuments, standing stones, stelae, and statue-menhirs found on sites that frequently show persistent patterns of use and reuse well into 'historic' times. The long-term biographies accrued by some of these places in Iberia are redolent of the complex life-histories known for other sites of north-west Europe, where there is a well-known tradition of research on the cultural biographies of monuments, places, and landscapes. During the last four years our research in Iberia has sparked many conversations and interesting discussions about this topic, outlining two aspects that, in our view, deserved further examination. On the one hand, we were particularly interested in the specific roles that monuments themselves, and the large stones they were made of, had played in the crafting of these long-term and complex place-biographies. Ultimately, we were interested in the active roles of prehistoric monuments in social life long after their initial construction or manufacture. On the other hand, comparable patterns of recurrent use are frequently found in different regions of Europe, and we felt that not enough attention had been devoted to this fact hitherto. The occurrence of this phenomenon in areas other than north-west Europe had not been as widely disseminated in the English language, and this fact had prevented their analysis within a comparative framework.

Therefore, we decided to promote the examination of these questions through a book project. We invited a series of researchers—now the contributors to this volume—to present case-studies of different European regions, exemplifying the active roles played by prehistoric monuments in social life during the Iron Age, the Roman, and the Medieval periods. In order to enhance the overall coherence of the resulting edited volume, we organized a meeting for the authors to present and discuss their contributions in advance. This meeting took place in a session held at the 19th Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists (September 2013, Plzen,

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Megaliths and Holy Places in the Genesis of the Kingdom of Asturias (North of Spain, AD 718–910)

Miguel Ángel de Blas Cortina

INTRODUCTION

Flowing from the Picos de Europa mountain range into the Bay of Biscay (in a SW–NE direction), the River Sella is the main dividing axis of the highly mountainous territory of Asturias, northern Spain, with peaks up to 2,500 metres. The first known human traces in the Sella river basin date back to the Middle Palaeolithic and include remains of thirteen Neanderthal individuals found in the cave of El Sidrón. Archaeological remains dating to the Upper Palaeolithic and the Epipalaeolithic are frequent throughout the region. The adoption of the Neolithic way of life in Asturias was modest. The polished axes found in large numbers and mostly manufactured with rocks imported from other regions, are one of the main sources of evidence to study the Asturian Neolithic. The most noticeable archaeological evidence for this period is, however, the megalithic phenomenon, the earliest monuments dating to the beginning of the fourth millennium BC. Unlike the usual concentrations of barrows and dolmens in other areas of northern Iberia, these constructions are often found on high ground, strategically overlooking the main stretches of well-travelled pathways.

THE SANTA CRUZ DOLMEN

The most prominent Asturian megalith, Santa Cruz (Cangas de Onís), however, differs from the pattern outlined above, as it was placed on a fluvial terrace, on a location often flooded by the Sella and Güeña rivers, which meet here (Blas Cortina 1997a; 1997b) (Figure 11.1). The low altitude and the fair conditions of the optimal Holocene would have provided the basis for a densely forested environment throughout the fifth and fourth millennia BC. Historically, the most populated town of this region has been Cangas de Onís, located in the confluence of the Sella and Güeña rivers, where the best agricultural land is also found. These apt conditions also extend to the adjoining valley of Güeña, home to the sites of Covadonga and Abamia, which bear witness to the interweaving of prehistoric memory and Medieval affairs that will be discussed in this chapter.

It is reasonable to assume that the location of the Santa Cruz dolmen, like that of the town of Cangas de Onís itself, was determined by the confluence of the Sella and Güeña, which marks a point of strategic importance as it operates as the intersection between the sea and Cantabrian Mountains and the pre-littoral strip that controls the east–west circulation. In terms of the Neolithic territorial structure, the dolmen of Santa Cruz was therefore built at a strategically located node of the dispersed settlements between the mountains and the sea-oriented valleys. The large Medieval bridge next to Santa Cruz, built to accommodate a considerable traffic to and from Lucus Asturum, the capital of the Astures Trasmontanos, testifies to the importance of this crossroads in Roman times. At the same time, during the Roman period, the Sella was the border running between the Conventus Asturum and the Conventus Cluniense, and also between the Asturians and the Cantabrians.

With its large barrow, later crowned by the small church that gives it its name, Santa Cruz (Holy Cross in Spanish) is an outstanding megalith that shares the characteristic small passage typical of the megaliths found in the mountain areas of this region (Vega del Sella 1919). Its orthostats are profusely ornamented with geometrical patterns painted in red, carved, and engraved (Figure 11.2), reminiscent of the megalithic phenomenon in the Iberian north-west, where organic elements of the black pigments used for megalithic paintings have been radiocarbon-dated to the beginning of the fourth millennium BC (Carrera Ramírez and Fábregas Valcárce 2006). Furthermore,

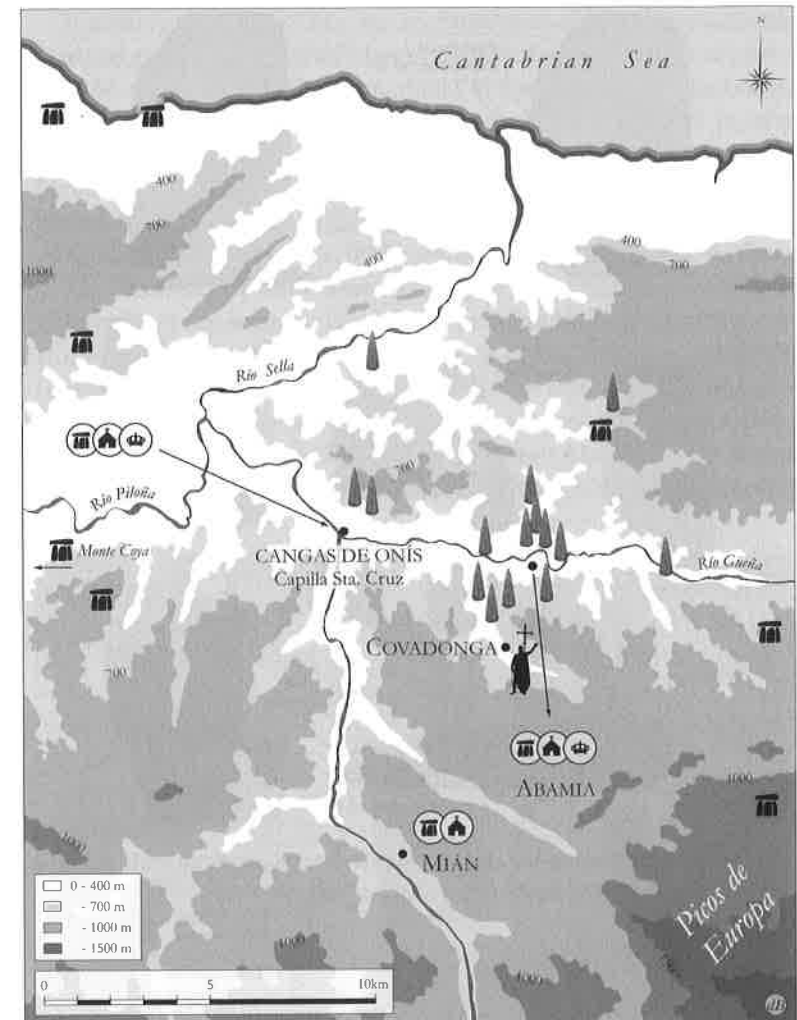


Figure 11.1. Map of the Sella basin (Asturias, Spain), with the location of the places mentioned in the text: Covadonga (with the effigy of the leader Pelayo), Cangas (dolmen, church consecrated in AD 737, and royal place), Abamia (dolmen, church, and royal place), Mian (old church and dolmen). The royal crown corresponds to the places that are related by Medieval chronicles to the earliest kings of Asturias. Map by Miguel Ángel de Blas Cortina.

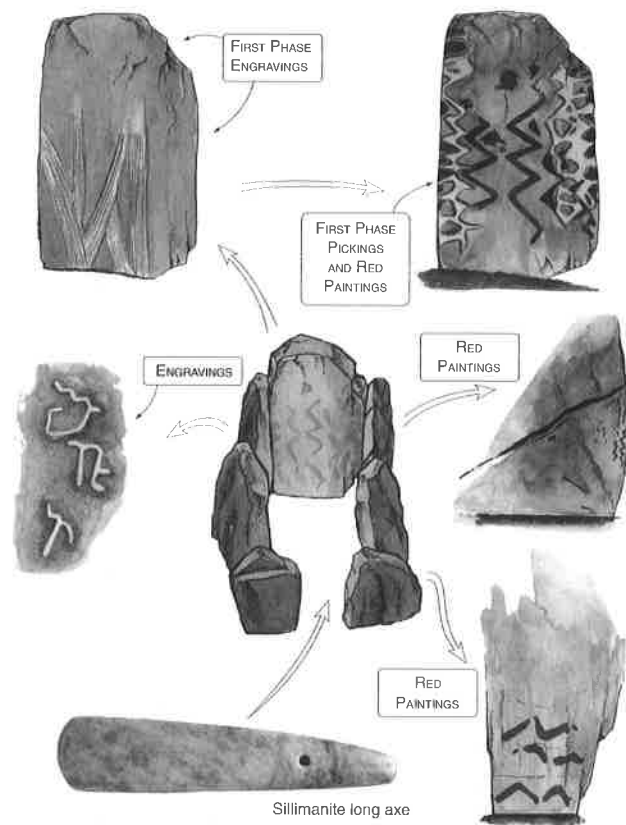


Figure 11.2. Dolmen in the chapel of Santa Cruz (Cangas de Onís, Asturias, Spain). Drawings by Miguel Ángel de Blas Cortina.

there are some engravings in Santa Cruz similar to the 'rolling lines' of megalithic monuments in Brittany (France). This is a coherent feature, taking into consideration the circulation of ideas and goods that seems to have taken place in the Neolithic along the west European Atlantic area, as exemplified by the variscite from Andalucía and Zamora, in southern and western Spain respectively, found in Armorica (north-western France). The funerary assemblage in Santa Cruz is remarkable precisely because of its extraordinary sillimanite axe, which could be related to the magnificent jadeite ones found in the splendid megaliths of Brittany (Pétrequin et al. 2007).

It is likely that Santa Cruz was an elitist mausoleum also used as the spiritual and social centre of a large territory. From this point of view it may be seen as a social device aimed at fostering local cooperation towards the domestication of this land in the Neolithic period. In other words, Santa Cruz may be seen as a gathering place in a region where, because of the complex topography, early human occupation was bound to be dispersed. Either way, the significance of the megalith would survive for millennia, being also remembered in Medieval times.

The discovery of some Roman funerary stelae near the Santa Cruz dolmen does not seem accidental. There are numerous Roman tombstones in the reduced germinal territory of the Asturian monarchy (Figure 11.3). In addition, the large number of Roman stelae along the Sella valley represents the 'reappearance' of funerary practices after a long period, spanning the Bronze Age and Iron Age, for which almost no evidence for funerary practices is found. All those late tombs were

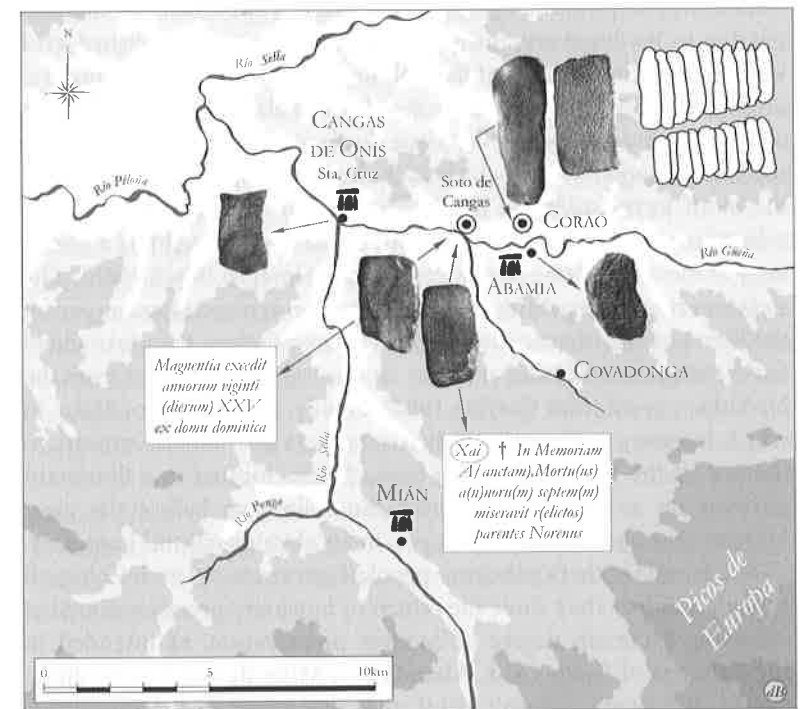


Figure 11.3. Concentration of Vadiniense tombstones in the area of Cangas de Onís. Map by Miguel Ángel de Blas Cortina.

probably for burial purposes, main modality in the Roman world since the fourth century BC (Prieur 1986). Interestingly, the main concentration of funerary inscriptions in the region is located in Corao, near Covadonga and even closer to Abamia.

The epigraphs found in connection with these tombs allude to the *gens vadiniense* settled along the Sella river valley (Diego Santos 1985). In addition, these gravestones evidence the indigenous acculturation under the Roman Empire and the first instances of individuals being commemorated with names and ages. Maybe something to take into consideration is the existence of some Vadiniense people who, around the third century AD, were recognized by Rome as *princeps cantabrorum*, hence becoming beneficiaries of certain civil and administrative freedoms (Mangas and Martino 1997). It could be argued that those Cantabrian *princeps* of Roman times would later become the local nobles at the beginning of the Early Middle Ages.

Another of the few megaliths in the area, the one in Abamia, was erected on a slope of the Gueña valley. There is not much information relating to its discovery, just some human crania and polished axes were found. The remains of the dolmen are still buried underground only a few metres from the church of Santa Eulalia. In the widest part of the chamber the roofing capstone displays several uneven lines and some cup marks, one of which includes two carved lines that cause the motif to resemble the head of a small owl. This was soon considered megalithic, an imagined 'idol of the eyes' thought as a precedent of the stone stelae of western Iberia (Almagro Basch 1966). The stela is certainly megalithic and its decoration is understood as part of the Iberian and Atlantic megalithic art. Nevertheless, the parts added for drawing the bird head are from an uncertain age and not from the Neolithic period (Blas Cortina 1994). Finally, the dolmen of Mián, in which human crania and polished axes were also found, appears to the east of the parish church of Santa María, located in a dominant position on a mountainside over the Sella, just before the river plunges into a series of steep slopes, in an obvious natural boundary.

The burials of the Vadiniense people deserve special archaeological consideration as they show the return to mortuary practices aimed at achieving a certain degree of cadaver preservation, as intended in the dolmens of Santa Cruz, Abamia and Mián during the Neolithic period. We could certainly think that the access to the megalithic structure of Santa Cruz could signify, for the Vadiniense people as well as their Early Medieval descendants, a re-encounter with

ancestors coming from an uncertain mythical past that, despite being largely unknown, carried a very real ancestral power.

PREHISTORIC MONUMENTS AND 'SIGNIFICANT PLACES' IN THE RISE OF THE ASTURIAN MONARCHY

The Arab invasion in AD 711 meant the breaking down of the Visigothic Kingdom of Toledo. Just some years later, around 718, 722 or 733, King Pelayo defeated the Muslims in Covadonga, near Cangas de Onís (Figure 11.4). Maybe this battle was just another skirmish, but the special historiographic attention it received later on, enshrined the Battle of Covadonga as the founding act of the Christian Kingdom of Asturias and, by extension, Spain, and imbued the site with a strong political significance.

Pelayo, the winner in that battle, was a leader between AD 718 and 737 and he is considered a king in the Chronicle of Abelda (*Chronicon Albeldense*) (c. 881) ('The first in Asturias Pelayo reigned at Cangas [de Onís] for nineteen years').¹ The account by a Muslim historian also considers Pelayo a new king governing a new nation (Ruiz de la Peña 1995). In the Chronicle of Alfonso III (*Crónica de Alfonso III*) (tenth century AD) (Gil Fernández et al. 1985), Pelayo is given the status of prince elected in an assembly, still, only a Goth *princeps* hidden in Asturias (Isla Frez 2002). The Visigothic perspective of Pelagius (Pelayo) enabling the Christian Reconquest would be firmly established by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD, when Pelayo is already seen as the main actor of the foundation of the *Asturorum Regnum* in the Asturian mountains, bearing the image of a lord of the Toledo court. The connection between Pelayo and the extinct glory of Toledo will be repeated in order to promote the prestige and legitimacy of the Asturian Kingdom. This would stimulate the new 'visigothism' in the court established in Oviedo at the end of the eighth century AD.

¹ 'Primus in Asturias Pelagius regnavit in Canicas annis XIX' (see Gil Fernández et al. 1985).



Figure 11.4. Victorious Pelayo in Covadonga (*Don Pelayo Rey de Asturias*). Painting by Luis de Madrazo y Kuntz, 1856. Oil on canvas, 227 x 140 cm. © Museum of Covadonga, deposit from the National Museum of the Prado.

Nevertheless, in the Codex of Roda, the eleventh-century version of the Chronicle of Alfonso III (AD 852–910), it is stated that Pelagius was chosen king per *omnes Astores* instead of *gens gothorum* (Isla Frez 2002). The image of the Christian leader was then one of a distinguished member of a regional socio-political structure with a leadership similar to the local nobles during the social division of Europe at the beginning of the Middle Ages (Calleja Puerta and Suárez Beltrán 2002).

Pelayo was succeeded by his son Favila (AD 737–9). The most significant event in his brief reign was the construction in 737 of a small temple dedicated to the holy cross over the homonymous Santa Cruz megalith described above (Figure 11.5). In the foundational epigraph of the temple of Santa Cruz consecrated by Favila, it is stated that ‘by divine order this sacred building rises (*resurgit*) once again’, hence implying the existence of a (recognized) earlier sacred building. Undoubtedly, the special thing about this temple is its erection over a

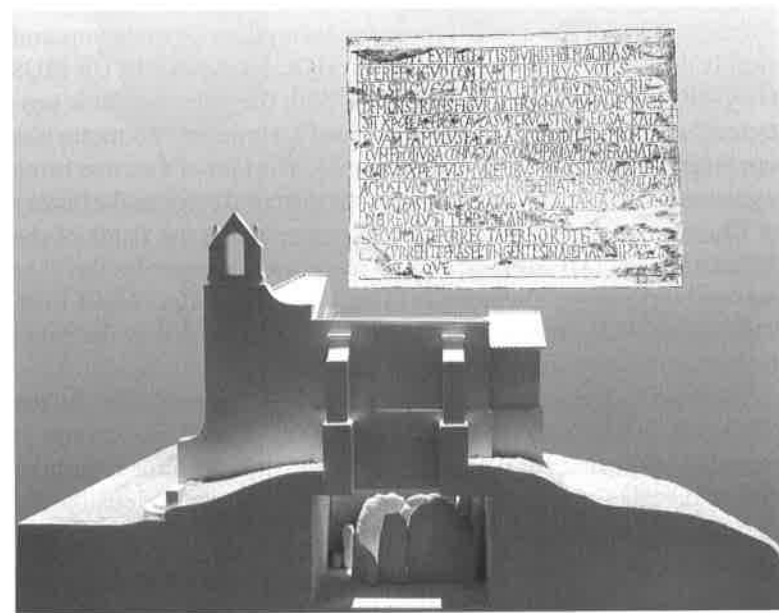


Figure 11.5. Section of mound, with the dolmenic chamber and chapel of Santa Cruz, consecrated as a Christian church in AD 737 under Favila *princeps*, as its foundational epigraph reads. Composite image by Miguel Ángel de Blas Cortina.

Neolithic structure of prominent volume. A description of the chapel made at the beginning of the seventeenth century, claimed that it had an interior 'cave' where Favila's tomb was placed. Also, it stated that people from all over the country used to dig out the soil around it, which was seen as 'a holy body' with healing powers. Furthermore, the same source affirms that the oak cross carried by Pelayo in the epic Battle of Covadonga was kept in this temple. At this point, by a formidable convergence of historic circumstances, the fourth millennium BC Neolithic dolmen of Santa Cruz had become symbolically connected to what later nationalist historiography would see as the stepping stone of the Reconquest and founding act of the Kingdom of Spain itself.

In AD 908, Alfonso III 'The Great' granted the cathedral of Oviedo an extraordinary cross made of gold and gemstones, modelled after Pelayo's oak cross. That cross, known as the Cross of the Victory, became the symbol of the Kingdom of Asturias (also of today's Principality of Asturias, an autonomous region within Spain). Apart from its religious nature, this Christian emblem possessed a historic character. One of the arms of the cross exemplifies this religious and earthly duality through the inscription: HOC SIGNO TUETUR PIUS HOC SIGNO VINCITUS INIMICUS ('With this sign the just is protected'/'with this sign the enemy is defeated'). However, this motto was not originally from the Asturian monarchy. The idea of the cross being a guarantee of success takes us back to the primeval event in the history of Christianity: Constantine's celestial vision, before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge (AD 312), of a cross inscribed 'Conquer by this',² as narrated by Eusebius Caesariensis in his *Vita Constantini* (Schaff 1890, 944). Either way, religion and political symbols merged in the Santa Cruz chapel, visibly raised over a Neolithic dolmen.

The story of the Abamia dolmen is no less remarkable. In the *Chronicle of Alfonso III* (AD 852–910), the church of Abamia is recorded as the first royal mausoleum: 'decessit et sepultus (Pelagius) cum uxore sua Gaudiosa regina in territorio Cangas in ecclesia Eulalie de Velando [Abamia] fuit' (Gil Fernández et al. 1985) (Figure 11.6). The temple was set up in dedication to St Eulalia of Mérida (Badajoz, Spain), a Christian martyr who died in AD 304. In geographical terms, the church is not located in the most optimal place, given that in its

² 'Hoc signo victor eris'.

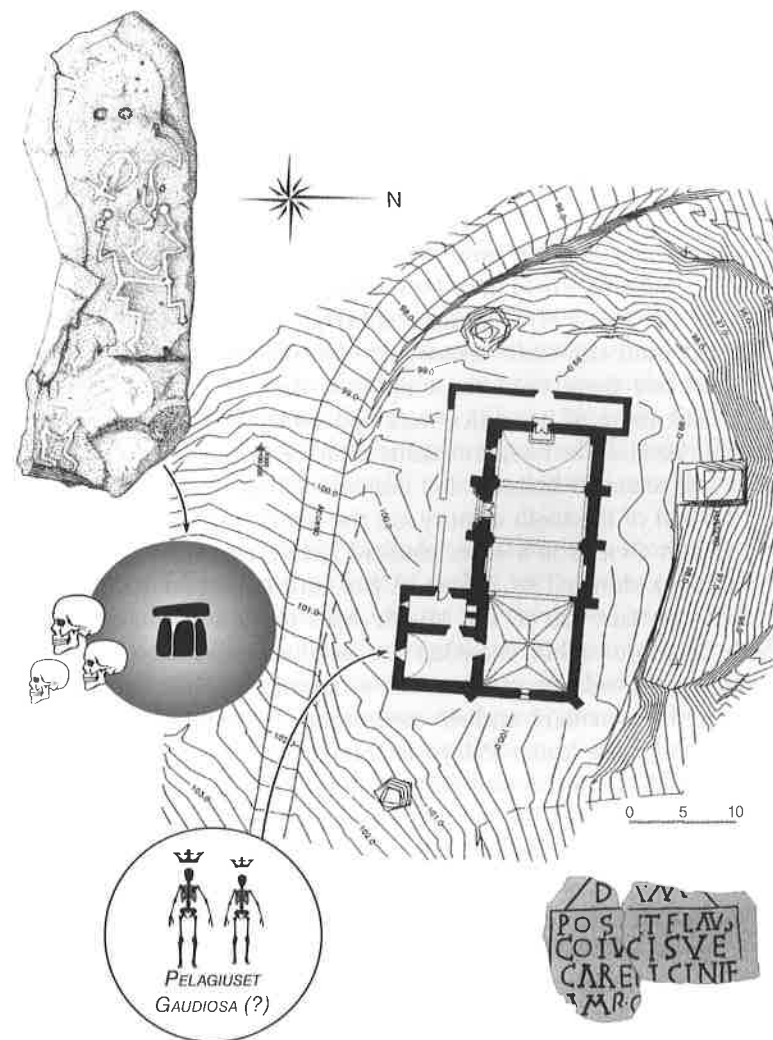


Figure 11.6. Abamia (Cangas de Onís, Asturias, Spain): dolmen with decorated stone, church of Santa Eulalia, tomb of King Pelagius and Gaudiosa (eighth century AD), and Roman tombstone from the same place. Plan and drawings by Miguel Ángel de Blas Cortina.

surroundings throughout the valley of Güeña there are more favourable and prominent areas. Everything indicates that the choice of this location was due to the will of raising the church near the megalith. In this way, the integration of the temple would be substantiated with the monumental Neolithic remains still having at that time the ancestral authority rooted in the worship of unknown forebears.³

Together with other important Christian relics, St Eulalia of Mérida's remains would have been brought to Asturias at the beginning of the Early Middle Ages, although their presence was not recorded until the tenth century AD. During this century and the previous one there were six temples in Asturias dedicated to the saint, and some of her relics were apparently kept there (this was possible because the bodies of saints could be dismembered and each piece still retain its holiness and desired healing efficacy⁴). Since the second half of the tenth century AD, the remains of the martyr were guarded in Oviedo in a silver chest of Arabic execution (Ruiz de la Peña 2006), donated by Alfonso VI of Castile around 1075. It is a well-known fact that in the Middle Ages the possession of one of these illustrious relics exceeded the religious dimension, its value extending towards the political and economic spheres. The importance of the sanctuary and its contribution to legitimize the royal regulation of the leader Pelayo is shown by two key points. First, the conflation of the royal tombs in Abamia with the veneration of the Roman-Hispanic martyr previously fervently worshipped in the Visigothic Kingdom of Toledo. Secondly, the persistent link between Eulalia's holy remains and the Asturian kings.

The available references about the temple of Mián are more succinct. It was built with its cemetery in a high secluded setting, similar to Abamia. Its existence as '*ecclesiam Sancte Marie*' is recorded in a document as early as AD 926. This document does not state the foundational date and so far only some elements of Roman origin have been recorded. The isolation of the temple was always

³ Although there are not any concluding arguments, the discovery of a Roman stela and other materials suggests that the site of Abamia, like Santa Cruz, also possessed a funerary significance in Roman times, before the establishment of Christianity (Ríos González 2009).

⁴ Before the thirteenth century AD the saintliness represented the discourse of the 'insensitive flesh', the only element of contact between God's direct servants and the believers who worshipped them (Vauchez 1990, 327–52).

shared with that of the megalith in whose surroundings it was located. Once again, the same process of syncretism is found along the Sella valley, in a place of remote consecration.

DISCUSSING CONTINUITIES BETWEEN THE NEOLITHIC AND THE MIDDLE AGES

In Atlantic Europe, the contiguity of megaliths and churches, or even sometimes their fusion into one monumental entity occurs relatively frequently, and this can be noticed in some clear examples throughout the Iberian peninsula (Leisner and Leisner 1956, pl. 47). These buildings reveal the reconversion and integration of 'pagan' beliefs and their corresponding material referents into a new religious programme.

In a different way, in other European areas during a short period of the Early Middle Ages, the reuse of prehistoric barrows combined a sense of validation of past behaviours and the power aspirations of the new leaders. Barrows similar to prehistoric ones were also built between the sixth and tenth centuries AD in England, Scandinavia, western Germany, etc. This monumental reactivation of the prehistoric barrow morphology was produced as an answer to funerary Christian chapels, reflecting the opposition of the non-Christian to the elite that was enshrined in the new religion (Van der Noort 1993).

The link between the church of Santa Cruz and its underlying dolmen conveys an irrefutable proof of the Medieval appropriation of ancestral authority attached to the megalith. This appropriation is not only spiritual; it was also desired by a still precarious lineage with royal aspirations. This lineage struggled for power in the context of the political atomization of the surviving Christian strongholds after the Islamic invasion. In that embryonic situation, the state and the Christian church were not completely settled institutions, but rather a group of lords who also included the clerical body. This resulted in an obvious mixture of political and religious power (Calleja Puerta 2000, 40). Therefore, it is understandable that, within the context of the political confusion of the eighth century AD, ideological legitimacy acquired a remarkable importance. Unlike the high and visible position of other churches in the area, the church of Santa Cruz was built in an awkward location, near the dolmen along the limit of the river floodplain.

Without any doubt, the megalith continued imposing, not only its volume, but also its moral influence, and, probably, its quality as an ancestral reliquary in which chronological accuracy was not an issue.

It is reasonable to believe that the Neolithic skeletons, skulls, and bones contained in the megalith were occasionally considered, perhaps even appreciated, as testimony to the ancestors' lives (Testard 2006), the enigmatic relics providing mythical explanations about the past. Following Richard Bradley's expressions (1987; 1993), the eighth century AD in the Sella river was that of 'time recovered' which would allow for 'the creation of continuity'.

In a more uncertain way, but not less eloquently, in Abamia the concepts of megalith, ancient necropolis (possibly Late Roman) and church-royal mausoleum are combined. This site also bore witness to the skeletons of the dolmen and the materialized image of the powerful ancestors with whom Pelayo and Gaudiosa would lie for all eternity. This important example, located near Santa Cruz, evidences, once again, the identification between the past and the power in the present, and the need of a monarchy in the making to connect itself with the primitive authority.

The cases of Santa Cruz, Abamia and Mián recorded in Asturias leave no doubt of the connection between the settlements of the emerging Medieval kingdom, and those hidden prestigious prehistoric places of 'power', whose influence was extended over the centuries. This convergence is further explained by the inclusion of 'pagan' sanctuaries into the Christian world-view. The most obvious of them is, without question, Covadonga.

The origin of the sanctuary of Covadonga is the Sacred Cave opened on a high cliff where there are two strong water upwellings, which constitute the birth of the Deva river. The name of this river is related to the pre-Latin hydrographic name of an aquatic goddess. Scholars agree in that the Covadonga toponym comes from the name Cova Dominica (The Cave of the Lady), found in the *Rotense Chronicle* (eleventh century AD). The scholarly tradition claims that the Virgin Mary was already an object of worship in this place before Pelayo and his famous battle (Carvallo 1695). The mythical quality of Covadonga stems from the contrast between the rocky wall and the water which emerges from it, a phenomenon that must have amazed the first local inhabitants. The belief that water from the cave had fertility powers was still widespread at the end of the nineteenth century AD, and many

infertile women used to go there in order to pray and faithfully drink the miraculous water.

It is believed that the *dominica* from the cave was a supernatural being prior to Christianity. Surprisingly, one of the first assumed signs of Christianization in the region was the Roman funerary tombstone of Magnentia, dead '*ex domu dominica*', an expression meaning 'the house of God': the church (Diego Santos 1977). Alternatively, the epigraph could refer to a specifically local, political or religious power originated within the political structure of the Vadiense people (Barbero and Vigil 1979). There is a further suggestive interpretation that categorizes the *dominica* as a numen of the actual cave of Covadonga, perhaps such belief having re-emerged in the Roman period due to the rooted devotion of the Romans to *fons*, *fontus* and *fontanus*, home to various aquatic deities (Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* 31.29 in Bostock and Riley 1855).

But the significance of Covadonga is not limited to the religious or spiritual sphere, but rather expands into the historic and political one. As a place that was transformed into the birthplace of the Asturian monarchy, Covadonga was therefore not randomly chosen: it was a pre-Christian cult site, with an aquatic numen reimagined as the Virgin Mary. It was the Virgin of Covadonga, who assisted Pelayo in his victory over the Saracens, and it was also at Covadonga where Pelayo, carrying his oak cross, would be later proclaimed king, standing on his shield and being lifted by his warriors (Carvallo 1695).

The Sella offers an illustrative process of conversion of symbolic capital into effective power, building up the group's identity from its mythical background, which would finally lead to political and territorial entities. The remains of those remote funerary rituals in Covadonga, Santa Cruz, and Abamia, are raised over the memory that legitimizes them. The tomb, a sacred place in almost every culture, is always a source of legitimacy once the temporal distance between two events is solved, through the appropriate ritual re-elaboration (Rader 2003). At the same time, the identification of the leaders of the Asturian Kingdom with prehistoric places and remains, inscribes and reinforces their local origin. The best example is the image of an indigenous Pelayo, who was also a faithful believer in the ancient myths attached to the territory. These beliefs, if merely assumed by Visigoth lords who were opposed to the Islamic power and had just fled into Asturias, would have been worthless.

A FINAL REMARK: THE CONTINUITY OF THE
MEGALITHIC SITES AS PARISH ENTITIES

The churches of Santa Cruz, Abamia, and Mián enjoyed a long period of recognition as parish mausoleums: Santa Cruz until the end of the thirteenth or the beginning of the fourteenth century AD, Abamia and Mián until the twentieth century AD. This is a rather significant fact, considering that, during the Middle Ages, the parish was the articulating framework of the rural community. The main components of the parish were the church, the cemetery and the territory, and the parish was also the area of participation in which duties and activities created bonds of solidarity (Gaudemet 1984).

The chronicler A. de Morales gives us an exceptional vignette of the integrating nature of the parish, being himself a witness on a Sunday in 1572 (Morales 1765). He tells us how more than 200 spears awaited driven into the ground around the church of Abamia while their owners attended mass, each spear identifying its owner as a free man. In many cases these men were part of the lowest ranks of the local nobility, known as *hidalgos*.

Many churches were built in places of pre-Christian worship; they kept their integrating capacity in a context of dispersed habitat, for the neighbours always gathered in the churches. These neighbour gatherings served not only as part of the liturgy, but also to discuss and decide in assembly on any issues related to the communal life and the superior power. Finally, churches were also considered centres of justice administration (Ruiz de la Peña 2008). In the parish the sacred is assembled, working the church as a link between the parishioner and the saint's relics, whether real or invented (Lauwers 2004).

At the same time, the cemetery confirms the importance of the parish in commemorating the dead, a place where all generations took root. If, indeed, the funerary realm exceeds its role as emotional anchor, the presence of a cemetery in all the three megalithic sites examined throughout this chapter, proves the reiteration of the funerary practice in three different periods: Neolithic, probably in the Roman Period (Santa Cruz and Abamia) and in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, these practices survived until contemporary times in Abamia and Mián.

Certainly, the difficulty in deciphering coherence in the process lies in tackling the issues of distance and temporal gaps, such as those

existing between the megaliths, the Roman funerary stelae and necropolises, and the Christian churches from the eighth century AD. However, it remains unquestionable that the past provides an intangible source of authority, regardless of practices changing through the years (Bradley 1993).

As for Covadonga, it is still an important site of worship to the Virgin Mary in Asturias. The rocky sanctuary is surrounded by an aura reinforced by many historical and legendary accounts. In addition, the sanctuary offers an intentionally patriotic interpretation, the Saint Cave or Cova dominica and the hazy events of the eighth century AD, which constitute the germinal setting for the Reconquest and the symbol of the Christian restoration in Spain.

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