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REVIEW**

# Recent Evidence for a Pre- Portuguese Human Presence on the Azores Islands

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Conventional history has it that the volcanic mid-North Atlantic Azores islands, some 800 miles to the West of mainland Europe, lay undiscovered until encountered by Portuguese sailors during the A.D. 1400s. Still, fourteenth-century maps do show islands in the region, and other indicators of even-earlier human presences are mentioned in the older literature, including for Carthaginians. The present note reviews literature that reports some surprising recently recognized genetic and archaeological evidence. These varied data have inspired fresh claims to the effect that there had been human occupancy in the archipelago long prior to the purported fifteenth-century first discovery on the part of Portuguese mariners, the discovery that was followed by permanent settlement from Portugal. The focus here is on the work of António Félix Rodrigues of the Department of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences and of Science Resources, University of the Azores, Portugal, and his colleagues and their quite unexpected but plausible findings (Pimenta et al., 2013; Rodrigues, 2015a, 2015b; Rodrigues et al., 2015, 2018).

One indirect clue to earlier human presence is the occurrence on Santa Maria and Terceira islands of a variety of non-native house mouse that displays genetic kinship with Norwegian, Icelandic, and northern- and western-British Isles ones (Gabriel et al. 2013), suggesting medieval Norse visits (similar mice are found in the Madeira Islands; Gündüz et al., 2001; cf. a mouse skeleton there was carbon-dated to about A.D. 1036: Rando, Pieper, and Alcover, 2014. Note, too, that introduced least weasels in the Azores are genetically closest to those of Malta, Sardinia, and the Balearic Islands, not to those of Portugal. Those on at least the Mediterranean islands mentioned may reflect ancient Phoenician introduction (M. Rodrigues et al., 2016).

A puzzling finding is that of Spanish geneticists, who—on the basis of human-leukocyte-antigen (HLA) haplotype frequencies—reported, “We unexpectedly found Oriental genes (but Chinese[, not Siberian,]) in the present day Azorean populations, and postulated that the arrival of the genes was before the Portuguese. . . . [Some individuals were] closer to Orientals (continental Asians, like Mongolians and Chinese) than to Europeans and Mediterraneans” (Bruges-Armas et al., 1999. pages 349 and 354). No such Asians are known to have settled on the island post-Portuguese-settlement, which began in 1439. I am not aware of any more recent follow-up of this research. No comparison to Amerind HLAs was reported.

New archaeological evidence of possible early arrivals comes from the Central Azores island of Terceira, especially from around a site known as Grota do Medo (Posto Santo) and was first announced in 2013 by António Rodrigues. A team consisting of A.

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Rodrigues, Nuno O. Martins of the University's Department of Economics and Business Management and the Research Center in Management and Economics at Oporto's Portuguese Catholic University, plus Nuno Ribero and Anabela Joaquineto, both with the Portuguese Association of Archaeological Research, published a paper on the topic in 2015. Human activity is signaled by smallish rock-cut basins (also known from Europe) with seeming feeder channels, large-stone arrangements reminiscent of ancient megaliths, and petroglyphs. A crust of amorphous silica containing organic material that coats one of the basalt-rock basins was radiocarbon-dated, using accelerator mass spectrometry, providing an ante-quem eleventh-century-A.D. time level ( $950 \pm 30$  B.P.), but the features themselves imply much older human activity. There are some seemingly simple petroglyphs near the basin, as well.

Also in 2015, A. Rodrigues published what he designated as megalithic manifestations on Terceira, which he feels hint at kinship with megalithic monuments of the European Neolithic (before ca. 3000 B.C., in the West), Chalcolithic (to about 2000 B.C.), and Bronze Age (to some 1000 B.C.). Structures present include two that resemble widely dispersed European passage graves, involving a roofed stone corridor leading to a chamber, as well as a feature looking like an Irish wedge tomb (see Rodrigues, 2015b). Four large-rock erections on Terceira are compared to Irish portal tombs. Too, there are crude petroglyphs, including myriad cup marks like European megalithic ones. So far, no relevant artifacts have been discovered or dates obtained, but Rodrigues tentatively looks to the mainland early Calcolithic, of about 3000 B.C.

A team including some of the same authors had earlier looked at stepped stone pyramids (*maroiços*)—some with interior chambers—on Pico and (smaller ones) Faial islands (Matos, 2013). Tradition attributes these to nineteenth-century fieldstone clearance, but the authors found puzzling alignments with the summer solstice sunset, as many ancient European megalithic structures also display. Chipped stone tools were recovered, as well as net weights. "Coal" (presumably, charcoal) found in interior chambers was radiocarbon-dated to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; this gives only a minimum time depth for the structures but at least one well pre-nineteenth-century. There are comparable erections in the Canary Islands (Pimenta et al., 2013).

A. Rodrigues et al. (2018) also looked at "cart ruts" on Terceira. A pyroclastic flow covered part of one cart

track, but no relevant eruption had occurred later than one millennium ago. Carbon-14 dating of a placid horizon within one rut came out in the eleventh-century-A.D. level (1025–1190 cal A.D), again providing a minimum antiquity.

The group also investigated three of five rock-cut caves on Terceira that display equinoctial alignments. A comparison of Cave-3 stalactites with ones from a seventeenth-century structure caused the team to conclude for a cave age of from 2000 to 400 years ago, but this method seems dubious to me. However, the possibility of an ancient European-megalithic manifestation in the Azores does not seem outlandish. The geographic distribution of megalithic monuments around Europe strongly implies a primarily maritime orientation (see Cunliffe, 2001), so the means of discovery—capable watercraft—were there.

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