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S O C I E D A D E  
P O R T U G U E S A D E  
A N T R O P O L O G I A  
E E T N O L O G I A



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## A C T A S

(Coordenação de Vítor Oliveira Jorge)

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**Capa:** Rocha gravada de Penascosa, Castelo Melhor (Rio Côa)  
(Paleolítico Superior) (Foto: Vítor O. Jorge)

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# PORTUGUESE ROCK ART: A GENERAL VIEW

by

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**Key-words:** Portugal. Prehistory. Rock art.

## 0. INTRODUCTION

Portugal is a small country, a periphery of Southwestern Europe and of the Iberian Peninsula in particular. Its territory, with *ca.* 92.000 Km<sup>2</sup>, has numerous rock art sites, spread all over the land, but mainly concentrated in the northern area, with the exception of the Tagus valley art complex in the centre of the country, which represents the biggest concentration of holocene rock engravings in Iberia.

Some of the Portuguese sites are simply marginal manifestations of “artistic provinces” which have their main representations in Spain. That is the case of cave Palaeolithic art (so magnificently displayed in the Cantabrian region), of schematic paintings in rockshelters (abundant in Central-Southern Spain), and of some abstract compositions dominated by geometric-like elements (labyrinths, meanders, etc.), so important in the Southern Galician area.

At any rate, Portugal (together with some regions of Spain) possesses something almost unique: its numerous painted passage graves, mainly present in the northern and in the north-central regions, although a rich megalithic art exists all over the country, including engraved standing-stones. The latter may occur in isolation, or in groups forming the so called cromlechs.

Recently (November 1994) an enormous complex of open air engravings was revealed in the Côa valley region, a tributary of the Douro river. It may be considered as one of the most promising rock art areas anywhere in the world. In fact, it certainly contains thousands of engravings, which may be dated from the

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The chronological framework of this paper is based on conventional (uncalibrated) C14 dates.

Upper Palaeolithic to the Iron Age and later.

In chronological terms, the prehistoric rock-art of our country extends from the Upper Palaeolithic (*ca.* 20.000 B.P.) to the Iron Age (around the end of the first millennium B.C.). But, in fact, many rock surfaces continued to be used during the Middle Ages and even in modern times to express an enormous variety of graphic signs.

## 1. METHODOLOGY OF APPROACH

This paper will be essentially descriptive, because its main goal is to present, for a large English speaking audience, a series of facts well known by Portuguese archaeologists. Anyway, we will present here, very briefly, some reflections about how prehistoric art should be approached, in order to avoid some false questions, and to enrich our vision of Prehistory as a whole.

The very field of “rock art” is a conventional one. Obviously, the study of graphic manifestations on rocks only makes any sense if integrated in their prehistoric context, at all levels. Keeping in mind the important studies by Richard Bradley, we must see these clusters of glyphs as a means, among others, of creating a “cultural landscape” — a landscape which was not simply “scenery” for human action, but an organized cosmos. In this sense, the physical pre-existences (like topographic elevations or water courses) or the transformations operated by humans in the landscape (the building of walls or earthworks, or the placing of signs on natural places), would all be significant.

Another point to keep in mind is that, in societies where there are no written records, the meaning of things is necessarily fluid, not fixed in a text once and for all. We know how complex and varied is the construction of memory in oral societies. So, to try to “decipher” the “original meaning” of a given rock art panel (as if it was a Roman inscription, for instance) may be not only impossible, but above all absurd. Looking at rock art, we are facing something which comes from another world — not only do we not know the “intentions” of the first designers of the compositions, but also we ignore completely the transformations of meaning which could be undergone as time went by. Even if we had access to informers, we should place them historically — they could simply be telling us what they think the rock art figures mean, or what they imagine we would like to hear from them. There is no a-historical knowledge, no a-historical truth: only encounters of cultures, of people, and of thoughts, all of them conditioned by a particular set of circumstances.

Actually, we believe that everything made by humankind has, first of all, a

contextual meaning. By this we want to stress that even ordinary activities whose “interpretation” seems obvious to us are extraordinarily complex and meaningful sets of actions. Trying to “reconstruct” them taking only the so-called “archaeological record” as a basis may seem impossible — although the important thing is not to reach a “final truth”, but to avoid simplistic and naive interpretations, of which the archaeological literature has many. For us, Europeans, what we know now about the cosmologies of the Australian aborigines, the South-African Bushmen, or the Southwestern North American Indians, serves as an important element to orient our interpretative imagination. Not to help us to say what our prehistoric “art” could mean or be used for, but to avoid “solutions” which are not plausible anymore.

We have heard very much in some rock art meetings about “altered states of consciousness” and the universal modes of the brain’s work as a way of understanding rock art. This is certainly a fruitful path into this field, but it has its dangers. To explain regularities by very general principles may be like using a key which opens every door at one and the same time. We fear any biological reductionism; we are social scientists and, the more we try to discover cross-cultural regularities, the more we need to pay attention to the uniqueness of human experience.

Above all, in every “science”, we should always keep in mind that to explain everything, to make everything appear coherent, is an illusion; all knowledge is surrounded by an enormous shadow of ignorance. We respect those who only see the “light”; but we should never forget the aureola of darkness from which new questions arise.

Having said this, we shall now turn to the Portuguese prehistoric rock art, making it clear that much research is still in course or unpublished, and that in the next few years the picture presented below will change significantly.

## 2. PALAEOLITHIC ART

Until November 1994, the most significant artistic displays in Palaeolithic style acknowledged in Portugal were the ornamented cave of Herdade da Sala, Santiago do Escoural (Montemor-o-Novo), which was discovered in 1963, and the open air engravings of Mazouco (Freixo de Espada-à-Cinta), detected in 1981. The latter were the first Palaeolithic open air engravings to be known and published in the world.

The Escoural cave is a karst cavity which consists of an elaborate maze of galleries. It is about 37 meters long, measured in a straight line from the primitive

entrance to the present one, which has been artificially opened by a stone quarry. The core of the sanctuary would have been located precisely in the large back room (the size of which contrasts with the exiguous access ways), an area where diverse paintings and over a hundred engravings were executed, the latter being, at least partially, more recent than the former. Adjoining galleries and small compartments have also been utilized in the same way. According to the research team that has resumed study of the representations, they would fit mainly into Leroi-Gourhan's styles II (Upper Perigordian — Early Solutrean) and III (Early Solutrean and Early Magdalenian), although some of them might persist up to more recent phases of the late Upper Palaeolithic or even to post-Palaeolithic times. As to the thematics, it includes animal figures, mostly bovine and equine, and several ideomorphs. The motifs in the first phase show quite a contrast with those in the second and third phases, for their clearness and visibility. Carvings of these latter phases testify to the use of an ever finer incision technique, while at the same time the representations tend to be concealed in hidden areas. More recently, Jordá Cerdá has expressed his view that the Escoural art could be arranged in two phases, one belonging to the Lower and the other to the Upper Magdalenian.

The Mazouco engravings are composed of zoomorphic motifs, using the subvertical rock surfaces as support. These rocks belong to an outcrop of the schist – grauwacke complex and are situated in the vicinity of the confluence of the Albugueira stream with the river Douro close to the Spanish border in far east Trás-os-Montes. The best preserved of these engravings is the one depicting a horse over 60 centimeters long, outlined by a deep streak (scratching technique), contrary to the other two, which show the pecking technique, but it is probable that this was, initially, the actual way in which the big equine was produced as well. This prominent horse presents a cervical-dorsal curve, a very jutting and arched mane, the tail and the hind legs are so arranged as to suggest a certain movement while the front legs are static in contrast, represented entire but very short. One must point out the thickset look of the animal, the belly marked by a double line, the twisted or semi-twisted perspective of the body (in profile) which is given by the two right limbs, and certain aspects which are realistic in the detail, like the jutting of the lower jaw, the front hoofs and the representation of the male genitals. One must add that Jordá Cerdá regards these Mazouco engravings as belonging to the Middle Magdalenian (Leroi-Gourhan's style IV), just like the carved horse of Domingo García in Segovia.

Not far from Mazouco, in the Côa valley and in some smaller tributaries of the Douro river, we now have an enormous amount of open air Upper Palaeolithic engravings, namely on the vertical surfaces of the schist outcrops located on both sides of that valley. This fantastic complex is under study, but unfortunately,

as the media have often reported, it is also menaced by the building of a dam on the Côa, 2,4 Km. south from its mouth. It is our hope that the project of this dam will be abandoned in favour of the creation of a National Park, into which the Côa prehistoric art may be integrated as an universal treasure for humankind.

The main motifs displayed in the Côa river are the horse, the aurochs, the deer and the ibex; often they occur in association and, in some important panels, we can see superpositions which suggest that those panels had, in the past, a very special meaning. The human figure and some "abstract" signs are also present. The engravings were pecked, scratched, or both; at any rate, in many cases it is probable that they were remade several times, as they were accessible to anyone.

It is impressive to consider the Côa as some kind of an enormous "open air cave", and it is obvious that the distribution of the engravings was in relation with all the surrounding landscape. On the other hand, the motifs chosen (namely, the association horse-aurochs) and their mutual relations show that the general ideas of Leroi-Gourhan on Palaeolithic art, considered by some as out of date, may apply here.

Four main concentrations of panels were found in the Côa, respectively, from north to south, at Canada do Inferno, Vale de Figueira, Ribeira dos Piscos/Quinta dos Poios and Penascosa/Quinta da Barca (Rebanda, 1995). Scratched figures, often outlined by a very thin trace, and showing fine, multiple traces in the interior of their bodies, may be found in the Foz Côa region, both in the river valley or outside it, in Vale dos Moinhos, Canada do Amendoal, Canada do Inferno and Vale de José Esteves (Rebanda, 1995); we consider them also of Upper Palaeolithic Age.

It would be premature to say more about so rich a complex, which is, as we said before, already in a phase of preliminary study. At the present moment, the most important point for the Portuguese archaeologists is to have the support of everyone interested in the preservation of rock art heritage in order to reach a final victory against the menace of the building of the Foz Côa dam. Being in the open air, the Palaeolithic engravings of the Côa are of great public interest, because they may be seen and admired by hundreds or thousands of people, as soon as they are studied and prepared for cultural tourists. This is a very different situation from that of the caves, like Altamira or Lascaux, where visitors may wait for one year before they get their permission to get into the caves, for security reasons. Also, in the Côa valley, just as in the site of Siega Verde, in Spain, on the Agueda valley (another tributary of the Douro), we may study how the Palaeolithic people organized the entire landscape on conceptual grounds, and not only the obscure space of the caves. After the Côa, or the Agueda discoveries, along with those of Domingo García in Segovia (Spain), etc., we can imagine that the limestone valleys of the South of France, for instance, where many decorated

caves occur, could also have had in the past important open air engravings or even paintings; the latter ones simply couldn't survive.

As to mobile art found in Portugal, one can only mention a decorated plaque from a Solutrean level of the Caldeirão cave (Tomar), studied by J. Zilhão.

### 3. MEGALITHIC ART

Leaving aside megalithic architecture (in its double status of funerary architecture — barrows and their internal structures — and of that related to the erection of standing stones, single or multiple) and the mobile art which is often found among the burial offerings of passage graves or other collective tombs, one is reduced to the paintings and/or engravings which cover the orthostats of some passage graves or the surface of certain “menhirs” (standing stones). But these — especially the painted orthostats of so many burial monuments — are one of the most important contributions of Portugal to prehistoric art in general.

Actually, together with Galicia, Portugal (mainly in the North and Centre-North regions) has most of the decorated megalithic monuments to be found in the Iberian Peninsula. Besides, it is also in our country, especially in the northern area, that almost every known dolmenic painting can be found; unfortunately, often they are often very poorly preserved. An exception to that situation is the passage grave of Antelas (Ribeira de Frades), recently reexcavated by Domingos Cruz, where superbly conserved paintings may be observed on every orthostat of the chamber. As for engravings, we have found, during the 1994 excavation season, together with other colleagues, a preciously well preserved chamber in Castro Laboreiro, in the extreme North of Portugal. Its name is Alto da Portela do Pau 2, and all its slabs are entirely covered by very fine, extremely thin, geometric motifs, suggesting patterns that can be found in the famous Alentejo schist plaques, in the South of the country.

It is of course simplistic, as in so many other cases, to reduce megalithic art to a set of “primary motifs”, though it might prove useful in a first approach. E. S. Twohig considered the existence in the Peninsula of ten main motifs: human figure; skin skeumorphs; rows of triangles or Vs; vertical serpentlike shapes; horizontal serpentlike shapes; radiate linear motifs; U motifs; an indecipherable element, simply called “the thing”. The first five would be characteristic of Twohig's group 1, or “Viseu group”, and the last six (thus including the vertical serpentlike shapes as well) would belong to group 2, a rather artificial group considering that it includes not only the passage graves situated to the north of the Douro but also a certain number of diverse monuments in the south. This is a



Auroques. Canada do Inferno. Foto: José Gomes Bandeira (15-11-95).

scheme which, although useful, hardly expresses the richness and complexity of the matter.

At any rate, we may say that the so called “skin skeumorph” is one of the most important themes found in Portuguese passage graves; its ambivalent meaning (half animal and half human) is suggested by recent discoveries of Ana L. da Cunha in Anta da Arquinha da Moura, Tondela (Cunha, 1995). That importance is shown by the dimensions of the motif and by the fact that it is always depicted in one of the most important slabs of the chamber, that is, the bottom ones, for those who enter into that sacred space. Another important symbol was, certainly, the so called “thing” of E. Twohig. It probably occurs in different monuments, always in a prominent position, according to a series of formal transformations which don't make the “motif” — if it is the same — easily recognisable. We think that the painted “motif plaque” of Antelas or the engraved “idol” of Mota Grande (Portela do Pau, Castro Laboreiro — this enormous monument is on the Portuguese-Galician border) are probably “transformations” of “the thing” as it is depicted in Chã de Parada 1 (Aboboreira, North of Portugal) or Dombate (Corunha, Galicia).

We have knowledge of passage graves which are only painted, others which, at least apparently, are only engraved, and others still which enclose paintings and engravings. It is obvious that there is no way we can ensure that the monuments where only engravings appear haven't also been painted, and it would be very important for us to be able to distinguish, in each of the monuments that show both paintings and engravings, what is the chronological, symbolic, etc., relation between the two sets of figures. The discovery of engraved standing stones has also been rather frequent after E. S. Twohig wrote her work; one must emphasize the progressive identification in western Algarve of a vast number of menhirs, made out of limestone or red sandstone, with usually conic or ovoid shape and relatively small sized, many of which are decorated with relief (wavy cords or series of ellipses, vertically set). At the site of Caramujeira (Lagoa) such menhirs were connected to a settlement, particularly to its second stage of occupation, so it seems, ascribed to the second half of the IVth millennium B.C.

Perhaps the most surprising element in all of the Portuguese megalithic art is the so-called “deer hunting scene” which covers one of the chamber's orthostats of the Orca dos Juncais passage grave (Queiriga, Viseu). It is a unique case in its composition, but this might just be a consequence of the poor preservational conditions of other such monuments where human (for instance, two men, one of them carrying a bow, in Lubagueira 4, Viseu) or animal (Fontão, Seia) figures can be found; one should also consider the possibility that these elements might occur without being part of any “scenes”, as the two deer on top of the backstone of the Orca dos Juncais, for instance, seem to suggest. The stylistic classification of

those figures itself raises problems for its originality: Abélanet calls it semi-naturalistic; Jordá Cerdá calls upon influences, both from the world of Iberian schematic painting and from Levantine art, to explain the decoration of Portuguese passage graves with human figures; A. Beltrán, finally, thinks that the figures on that particular passage grave are neither schematic nor levantine, and can't really be well fitted into any specific style known elsewhere.

This is a matter that calls for expansion and that would take us very far. But we will just mention the fact that Portuguese megalithic art is a confluence of semi-naturalistic, schematic and abstract motifs, and that sometimes, on the other hand, the “ornamentation” is invasive (towards the surface of the orthostat or even the whole of the orthostats, as it happens in Antelas, Oliveira de Frades), other times it is limited to a few figures, which seem “lost” on the operative area of the stone (this is particularly obvious when it comes to engravings — with the exception of Portela do Pau 2 —, unless we consider the possibility of their original completion with paintings). We are left with an image of a symbolically rather elaborate art, which might even be the manifestation of a “mythology”, but whose plastic realization is rather diversified. On the other hand, the connections between some of its features and the themes of the schematic painting or the open-air rock art, namely that on the Tagus valley, are quite obvious.

#### 4. ART OF PAINTED ROCKSHELTERS

Sites with “schematic” paintings have been found, so far, in two regions in our country: Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro, and Alto Alentejo. The sites of Penas Róias (Mogadouro), Pala Pinta (Alijó), Cachão da Rapa (Carrazeda de Ansiães), Fraga d'Aia (S. João da Pesqueira) and Faia (Cidadelhe, on the Côa valley, Pinhel), as well as other not yet published “rockshelters” on the Douro, are located in the first region; those of Igreja dos Mouros, Lapa dos Louções and Lapa dos Gaivões, all of them in the Louções mountain (Arronches) and the so called Pinho Monteiro rockshelter, in the Monte Novo mountain (same generic area), belong to the second region.

The “rockshelters” of Penas Róias and Pala Pinta and the painted rock surface of Cachão da Rapa show, when compared, a set of very different themes and styles. At Penas Róias, there is a predominance of human figures with arched arms, some wearing head-ornaments, one with arms like wings or like a phi. This motif, the Greek phi like figure, can also be found at Pala Pinta, but the prevailing themes are those of radiate shapes of several types, some of them evoking, according to certain authors, astral connotations; there are also tree-shaped or

branch-like figures which can be interpreted as anthropomorphic stylizations. Both sites referred to present monochromatic paintings in red. This does not happen at Cachão da Rapa, where the *sui generis* (for several reasons) figures show the simultaneous use of wine-coloured red and dark blue. The theme here is of geometric character, with mostly quadrangular (filled inside so as to suggest a reticulated form) or elliptic (some depicting the bigger and the smaller axis) motifs; some of those quadrangular motifs show appendages on their upper part, which sometimes are made of two vertical sets of small horizontal and parallel straight lines. As for Fraga d'Aia, it has revealed a probable "hunting scene", the hunted animal being the deer, which might be linked to the main occupation stage of this shelter (late IV, early III millennium B.C.?), and a frieze with aligned figures in an apparently more recent style (proto-historic?).

The Faia paintings, in red and red wine colours, are located in the Upper Côa (Pinhel), and they show zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures; although they belong to what is generally called "schematic painting", some of them are more "naturalistic" than others, as it often occurs in this kind of rock art, in the Iberian Peninsula. In this granitic area of the valley, some 18 Km from the mouth of the river, the valley has the aspect of a canyon; it is one of the wildest places in Portugal. Some palaeolithic engravings were also found there (Rebanda, 1995).

Among the several known rockshelters in Serra dos Louções, Lapa dos Gaivões is the one harbouring the largest and the most significant amount of paintings, which can be sub-divided into various panels, and which were studied by Breuil in 1916. One must point out the anthropomorphic schematizations, several of them presenting arched legs and arms, sometimes even with three pairs of appendages pointing upwards or downwards; there is also at least one case of protuberances on the upper part of the figure, evoking horns. One can find zoomorphic figures as well, and among these there is one looking like a large bull; there are also deer, a dog, a comb-shaped animal, and serpentlike or zigzag lines, series of dots and lines, etc. In 1961, A. de Castro and V. Ferreira have claimed that there was a figure of an elephant on the ceiling panel. There are also anthropomorphic figures at Igreja dos Mouros, and a branch-like one stands out; as far as Lapa dos Louções is concerned, one might point out figures in phi and in the form of a hand, among others.

At the Pinho Monteiro rockshelter we are once more confronted with the presence of human stylizations, with arched arms and legs, and with I-shaped figures, radiate motifs, one anthropomorphic figure with appendages on top in the shape of horns, another one which has been interpreted as being in a standing position on a quadruped, etc.

It is clear that Portuguese painted "rockshelters", all of them located in the eastern area of the territory, the obvious variety of their themes notwithstanding, are

just a natural extension westwards of the rich Spanish schematic art (or, more specifically, of the Iberian Meseta), in which there are innumerable figurative parallels for the Portuguese cases. Still, it is never excessive to point out the originality of Cachão da Rapa, which resists the several attempts at "deciphering" to which it has been subjected.

## 5. THE TAGUS VALLEY ART

The engravings at this complex, numbering in a few tens of thousands, are located upon the schist-greywacke banks on the shores of the mid Tagus (and some of its tributaries), upstream and downstream of the place called "Portas do Ródão", close to the border with Spain (in whose adjoining territory there are still some engravings to be found), concentrated in 16 main nuclei and spread throughout a stretch of river over 40 kilometers long. They were discovered in 1971 and most of them were submerged, some time later, by an artificial lake created by the Fratel dam. The chronology of this complex has been the object of much debate. Different hypotheses have varied between a broad evolving sequence — from the Epipalaeolithic or Neolithic to the Iron Age (Serrão and others; Gomes and Monteiro) — and a more limited period division, situated between the Epipalaeolithic and the Iron Age (Anati) or the Neolithic and the Bronze Age (Baptista). Be that as it may, we are dealing with one of the largest sets of engravings ever to be executed on open-air rocks, not only in Portugal but in all of the Iberian Peninsula. Most of it is still unpublished, so research would be still quite promising, since a large percentage of the information it contains was recorded just in time, in what was one of the biggest archaeological rescue operations ever to be carried out in our country.

Executed upon the intensely river polished schist-greywacke rocks, and usually on horizontal surfaces, the Tagus engravings have been produced by hammering. Unlike the art of the Spanish Levant, or, to a certain extent, Iberian schematic painting, the themes in these engravings present no identifiable narrative content: in general, we are dealing with very abstract mythograms, with compositions that do not depend upon "scene" representation and that testify to a high degree of graphic symbolism. Even when clearly "recognizable" motifs do appear, such as anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures, it is plain to see that they are part of a "language" which is quite difficult to "decipher" for it consists, mainly, of geometric-abstract signs, using mostly the circle. Simple circles, cup and ring marks, concentric circles, ovals, radiate circles, meanderlike lines and spirals, are the most representative elements on the Tagus valley, and they are

often connected with each other or with anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures. J. Abélanet recently wrote that “the motifs made out of circles and spirals which can be found in great quantity and in an untarnished condition, so to say, on the rocks of the Tagus area, may be considered a genuine Portuguese contribution to the constitution of Atlantic rock art. Such motifs are virtually absent from painting in the Southeast and are rather scarce in the plain of the Guadiana river, and these are regions open to influences coming from the Atlantic coastline”. The thing that draws one’s attention is that even when two or more motifs are clearly and directly connected, they do not express an action (which would therefore imply the time factor) but rather a concept or probably a mythical entity: examples are, among others, rock 12 of the Ficalho site (one of the several sites in this complex) where a schematic anthropomorphic figure seems to be “heaving” a circular radiate figure in his arms (a solar motif?), or rock 241 of S. Simão where another anthropomorphic figure, this time not so schematic, apparently holds up a dead deer. It is possible that the deer, with its circular antlers, has been considered as a symbol interchangeable with the solar one.

The art of the Tagus valley doesn’t belong to one single period, to be sure. There is here a noteworthy diversity in styles, from the seminaturalistic to the schematic, the symbolic, the abstract. But this fact alone does not immediately allow us to construe a period division based on the supposition of a linear evolution, like the one Anati offered concerning “Galician-Portuguese” art, already known before the Tagus discovery. The almost decisive certainty with which some hypotheses concerning this matter have been presented can lead those less prudent into error, not to mention the risk it involves of closing the investigation to a constant effort of revision and to increasing observations. This is so because each style or group of motifs tends to be seen as a sort of “typefossil” characteristic of a certain chronological-cultural stage. Investigation is therefore put at risk, as explained before, threatened with stagnation, especially in the case of the Tagus, for the percentage of engravings so far thoroughly published and commented is still small.

On the other hand, there are, obviously, themes in the Tagus valley which also occur in other artistic “circles” in the Peninsula, like in passage grave art (parietal or mobile), in schematic painting, or in other prehistoric sites or complexes with rock carvings. This makes us aware of the intersection, or complex intersections, which surely must have occurred among those diversified artistic “worlds”. Still, we will always wonder whether, even within a short chronology, the same “meaning” can always be ascribed to a certain motif, regardless of material support and of the specific context in which it occurs. This was certainly not the case. Anyway, we must stress again that one of the most exciting things about Portuguese holocene rock art is the fact that we sometimes find the same

“motifs” or “styles” in different contexts — engraved rocks, painted rockshelters, passage graves — which raises a rich set of questions, being a good stimulus to increase comparative research.

Whatever its internal evolution and the artistic “circles” it might have “influenced” and by which it might have been “influenced”, the art complex of the Tagus shows a strong homogeneity and originality, rendering it, after the Côa, one of the most fascinating monuments of our prehistoric art, despite the difficulties in its study and interpretation.

## 6. ART ON ENGRAVED ROCKS IN NORTHERN PORTUGAL AND IN THE BEIRA REGION

This section covers a vast set of sites with petroglyphs in the North and Centre-North of the country. We are dealing with all of them simultaneously because it is more practical in a short and allusive text such as this one, for the geographic scattering of these sites, together with the thematic, stylistic and technical heterogeneity of the motifs which occur, show that we are faced with a vast “nebula” of difficult classification.

In 1940 Santos Júnior presented a first account of the whole of these sites, where he considered that a small percentage of the engravings then known must be neolithic, while others would belong to the Bronze Age and the majority to the Iron Age; he admitted that some would be mere territorial landmarks. In the 60’s, using a very different methodology, Anati suggested the existence in the art of the Northwest of the Peninsula of a long lasting artistic cycle, and divided the usually called “Galician-Portuguese group” into five stages, between the Epipaleolithic and the Iron Age. The development of investigation brought on by Anati’s work, both in Galicia and in the North of Portugal, would however question the linear evolutionism that underlies his theory. We must point out that, in 1980, A. M. Baptista wrote the following: “(...) most researchers accept (...) the existence of a sole artistic group or cycle in the engravings of the Northwest, but in our opinion this is a working hypothesis which needs more precision”. The following year, on the subject of the vast “sanctuary” of Gião (Arcos de Valdevez), the same A. M. Baptista, though stating this was “a big site in the expansion area of the Galician-Portuguese group”, concludes, later, that “in it the absolute absence of the classic shapes of the Galician-Portuguese group can be seen (...)”. In the sequence of these investigations and reflexions, one of us (V.O.J.) had the opportunity to suggest to the “International Colloquium on Schematic Art in the Iberian Peninsula” (Salamanca), in 1982, that the concept of a Galician-Portu-

guese group should be revised, for it was overtly inadequate to deal with the complex reality it tried to translate. The proof that this suggestion has been accepted is the fact that, the following year, A. M. Baptista presented, at the “Northwestern Archaeology Inter-Universitarian Meeting” (Porto, Faculty of Arts), a most important paper in which, and for the first time, the petroglyphs of the North of Portugal were subdivided into two groups. A third group included fili-form type engravings, done by scratching the rock, unlike the former which were obtained through pecking. Still, it is clear that this proposal was just an initial contribution towards a classification which might be more discriminating. If not, suggestions pointing in this same direction were presented by one of us (S.O.J.) in 1986, in the book called “Povoados da Pré-história Recente da Região de Chaves — Vila Pouca de Aguiar (Trás-os-Montes Ocidental)” (“Later Prehistoric Settlements of the Region of Chaves — Vila Pouca de Aguiar”).

Martinho Baptista’s “Group I” coincides generically, according to the author himself, with the “Galician-atlantic” engravings of Lorenzo-Ruza, both in its coastline distribution and in its themes, which include simple circles, concentric circles, often with a cupmark in the centre and sometimes combined with each other, meanders, straight lines and curves, “proto-labyrinths” and labyrinths, spirals, some weapons, zoomorphic figures, anthropomorphic figures and the so-called “ideomorphs”. Most of the sites in this region are located in Southwestern Galicia (province of Pontevedra), and the Portuguese ones are thought to be peripheral extensions of that group. We must underline the fact that the Galician nucleus is far from being homogeneous. It shows a clear diversity which might eventually go beyond the mere status of “variants” of a group and demand that several groups (and/or artistic stages neatly delimited among them) be created. This would make sense not only because of the represented “themes” (whose “isolation” in this context is always somewhat artificial), but also and especially because of their relative organization (the arrangement of the motifs among each other and regarding the usable area of the rock, i. e., the conception of the whole composition as expressed by the panels).

Among the Portuguese sites ascribed to “Group I”, Bouça do Colado (Lindoso, Ponte da Barca) and Monte da Laje (Valença) should be pointed out, not only for their intrinsic importance but also because they have been subject to careful analysis. At Bouça do Colado there are eight engraved rocks, the largest and most significant being rock 1. In the centre of this particular rock we can find a set of elements consisting of concentric circles, subcircular shapes, cupmarks, a spiral and other lines which A. M. Baptista interprets as being an “idol like” anthropomorphic feminine figure. It is not impossible that we might in fact be dealing with a motif of anthropomorphic character, curiously enough consisting of geometric like elements and therefore displaying an unusual degree of styliza-

tion, higher than that of the so called “idol” of Coto dos Mouros, Villadesuso (Galicia), for instance, as the author himself points out; but this is obviously only a research hypothesis. In the surroundings of the “idol like” figure, still on the same rock, we can find a series of motifs that also have circles as their basic element, along with dots and lines of different sorts, among them “proto-labyrinths”. This is therefore a typical example of geometric-abstract art, in which figures having the circle as their basic element often appear connected among themselves by more or less straight lines or wavy ones, constituting a sort of “web” potentially involving the whole of the rock or a large operative surface. In a peripheral position both on rock 1 and rock 4, there are some quadrangular figures (more precisely a square one and a rectangular one) with a reticulated surface inside, which will be mentioned later on. As for Monte da Laje, what we have there is a large rock where the depiction of two weapons (daggers or short swords) stands out, near which several circles can be found, usually concentric ones and, to the left and the right of the panel, more or less elongated figures cut through inside and described as “idol type” motifs. One of them (motif number 3) has even got exceptional dimensions, elongated and with two circles with a central cupmark at the upper extremity. There is still, among other motifs, a reticulated figure, off-centre when we consider the other motifs on the rock. This association of weapons to elongated figures of “idol form” type (a concept that calls for a further clarifying effort on the part of the specialists) and to circular motifs is very rare, if not unique in the rock art of the Northwest of Iberia. On the other hand, at Monte da Laje there is no evidence (except for the broken line which starts from the “idol like figure” number 19) of that organization which is so characteristic of Bouça do Colado and of some other carved rocks of the NW, wherein the different “motifs” are intertwined by lines forming an intricate tissue which seems to express, symbolically, the multiple relations between the elements of the mythographic “narrative” (in Leroi-Gourhan’s sense).

We must also mention some engravings made public long ago by A. Viana in Alto Minho. Laje das Fogaças and Laje da Chã das Carvalheiras in Lanhelas (Caminha) deserve special attention as do the engravings at Carreço (Viana do Castelo). The ones at Lanhelas are the most interesting, for they present semi-schematic figurations of static quadrupeds, one of which, on the first slab, is in the vicinity of a set of circular compositions that also include sub-quadrangular figures, spirals, etc. The style of these quadrupeds is not far from similar Galician figures.

Martinho Baptista’s “Group II” would spread from the region of Pontevedra to the Beiras, therefore enclosing the North and the Centre-North of Portugal. Unlike “Group I”, it tends to have a more inward distribution. If the former is rather heterogeneous, “Group II”, represented by a large number of sites, is even

more so; it would include carved places that, as we see it, are diversified enough stylistically and thematically to justify a finer classification (even if the future development of investigation might suggest re-groupings). Anyway, the lack of good surveys and up-to-date monographic studies for such vast areas hinders the possibility of envisaging these problems as a whole.

From a thematic point of view, "Group II" presents a wide variety of schematic anthropomorphic figures, several types of geometric motifs (squares or rectangles, often segmented inside; circles with marked diameters; semi-circles in the shape of a "horse shoe"), and other signals like "hooks" (a cupmark prolonged by a straight line that curves at the end), spirals, human footprints, "palettes", swastikas, etc. Among the anthropomorphic figures, we must point out those with bent or straight limbs (in an oblique position, i. e., in an inverted V, or in an horizontal position); there are some special cases like the stylized anthropomorphic figures in the shape of a Greek phi, which A. M. Baptista considers to be of southern affiliation given their frequent presence in sites with schematic paintings, and the cruciforms, which that author sees as extreme stylizations of the human figure, being well aware, of course, of the risk that they might be mistaken for Christian boundary markings, so common in the North of our country.

Among the sites that the above mentioned author includes in this "Group II", those of Gião (Cabana Maior, Arcos de Valdevez) and of Tripe (Mairós, Chaves) deserve special attention. At Gião there are about fifty carved rocks corresponding to exposed surfaces of the granitic bedrock, in the centre of a natural amphitheatre surrounded by a wall made out of big blocks (Gião I); the wall itself presents lots of engravings (predominantly cruciforms) on 27 of the rocks pertaining to it, though these might already be historic. As to the engraved surfaces, according to A. M. Baptista, the noteworthy aspects are quadrangular motifs (sometimes with rounded corners) whose interior is divided by perpendicular lines; anthropomorphic figures in phi; several other schematic anthropomorphic motifs; cruciforms of different types, some of them surrounded by a circle; etc. This author is quite right to inquire "whether the engravings of squares or rectangles with rounded margins, segmented by a line, in some cases by two parallels, cut by a perpendicular, can be typologically anthropomorphic figures as well". In fact, at rock 15 of Gião I for instance, certain rectangular motifs seem to be the result of a complexification of the phi shape by successively adding segmented rectangles, almost like in the world of Iberian schematic painting with certain "tree like" motifs, in which the arched limbs of the simpler anthropomorphic figures multiply themselves (suggesting centipedes). This is a frequent tendency in schematic art: when a certain degree of stylization is reached, it is as if shapes "generate" each other almost "instinctively", through addition or subtraction of elements, thus creating a transmutation which might lead to subtle changes in meaning

(hierarchization of represented elements, for instance); but this might equally be the result of a desire for ambivalence, for voluntary ambiguity (so common in rock art all over the world), producing images which can in fact be interpreted in different ways, suggesting a polysemic character according to their symbolic nature. One might add, to the point about Gião, that outside the amphitheatre we mentioned, a rock has been located (Gião 2) upon which star like motifs and quadrangular figures (in some cases almost circular, given the rounded corners) can be seen, among others. They are segmented inside in four equal parts by perpendicular lines and sometimes there is a dot in each of those parts.

As to the site at Tripe, it constitutes 82 engraved rocks belonging to a set of granitic surfaces inserted in an open space, also like an amphitheatre, that stands over the tilled plain of Chaves, not far from a settlement excavated by one of us (S.O.J.) (though some of these rocks are loose blocks, and some of them are even carved on more than one side). Their iconography includes mostly schematic anthropomorphic figures of different types, among them several variants of the phi shape; one semi-naturalistic anthropomorphic figure; an anthropomorphic figure riding a quadruped; an equid; "horseshoes", circles, small incomplete spirals, human footprints, "palettes", dots, etc. Cruciforms are particularly abundant; compositions made of reticulated figures, so typical of the Gião site, are here, on the contrary, absent. This is why, despite obvious parallels between the two places, one must wait until both are fully published before advancing a global comparative appreciation of the style or styles found in them.

In the wide region that we've been considering in this section there are other rock art sites with carvings obtained through hammering, whose inclusion in one of the two conventional groups mentioned is often quite debatable if not far-fetched. We might indicate the carvings of Monte de Eiró (Penha Longa, Marco de Canaveses) or at Fragas da Lapa (Atenor, Miranda do Douro) or at Mestras (Góis) as examples; we shall at this point refer to them briefly. The carvings at Eiró present spirals that are prolonged into wavy or meander like lines, which in some cases roll back again into a spiral going in the opposite direction. Spirals, serpent like lines and big reticulated motifs are the "themes" that appear to be the most relevant. But a rigorous study resorting to the bichrome colouring method for the detection of other engravings that might still survive at the spot and the occasional time relation between the different motifs is still missing. At Fragas da Lapa we have six panels where meanders occur, as well as spirals linked to each other, a semi-schematic human figure, cruciforms, etc.; but it is panel 3 which presents the most important figure. Not only it has two anthropomorphic figures with phalli, it is furthermore full of quadrangular motifs, segmented inside by straight lines in more or less equal parts; from two of them there starts a proliferation of meander-like lines that spread over the surrounding surface and that

might be connected to other motifs. The themes are quite unique and they bring to mind echoes of megalithic art and of motifs that can also be found in the art of the Tagus or at Eiró, for instance. Yet the tendency towards the connection of several motifs by means of more or less simple or winding lines appears once more, as we had already found in the so called “Group I” of the Northwest. At Mestras we are confronted with a set of three locations where, besides “horse-shoes” and cruciforms, we find quadrangular or rectangular figures, with rounded corners (in some cases almost with an ovoid shape), segmented inside by perpendicular lines. Some of these figures end in appendages, as is quite visible at Mestras III, where one of these motifs has been filled in full and has the shape of a “pallette”. It is rather tempting to establish a parallel between these quadrangular figures of Mestras, segmented inside, and so many other reticulated figures of Iberian schematic art (in a wide sense), motifs that often have appendages like the ones in the big central figure on panel 3 at Fragas da Lapa; it would also be enticing, using Mestras III as a reference, to associate the “pallette” shapes with those reticulated figures and even with the paintings at Cachão da Rapa... but this method of successive particular and impressionistic approaches, which allows certain archaeologists to construe a rather generalizing and learned discourse (with negative connotations), is not ours.

As we observe the engravings done by pecking in the territory of the North of Portugal and in Beira Alta and Beira Litoral, we see that there is such diversity that we can't help wondering whether, even if we admit the existence of certain more or less identifiable “groups”, the consideration of an essential polymorphism (i. e., the existence of themes and styles that spread and constitute a nebula of rock art manifestations where diversified combinations may occur, in each individual case), is not the best interpretation. It is still early, possibly, to move any further into this problem, for exhaustive surveys which require time and specialists are still in order; but we should be open to all interpretative possibilities, and not restrict ourselves, at this point, to two groups, as before we shouldn't have been restrained to only one. Furthermore: we must not force ourselves to build groups, at least those of wide chronological and spatial scope, no matter what. The polymorphism we spoke of is even more obvious if we consider such diverse manifestations as the decorated rock at Ardegães (Águas Santas, Maia) which presents concentric circles and a wide reticulated composition similar to the so-called “written stone” at Serrazes (S. Pedro do Sul); Outeiro Machado (Val de Anta, Chaves), one of the rock art sites with the largest number of engravings in the North of Portugal, containing cruciforms, dots, “horseshoes”, “pallettes”, phi motifs, pairs of dots united by a straight line, and the so called axes; the rock-shelter of Solhapa (Duas Igrejas, Miranda do Douro), with engravings made by pecking and scratching, which have recently been the object of a new study by

M. J. Sanches, etc. Not to mention the diversity of engravings in Beira Alta where, following the work of Celso T. da Silva, a systematic study of the whole is in order. So far, and to our knowledge, only the rocks engraved with human footprint like motifs at Alagoa (Tondela, Viseu) have been studied by means of exhaustive methods (tracing on plastic field sheets after application of bichrome colouring contrast).

Finally, we shall refer to the engravings obtained by the scratching technique, or filiforms. The best known sites are in the Douro valley — Vale da Casa, Vale de Cabrões, Vermelhosa, Vale de José Esteves (Vila Nova de Foz Côa) and Pedra Escrita de Ridevides (Alfândega da Fé) — and in Beira — Pedra Letreira (Góis) and Molelinhos (Tondela). At Vale da Casa, an emergency survey (similar to the one in Tagus, brought on by the construction of a dam) allowed 21 rocks with ancient engravings to be recorded. These are schist-greywacke banks where most of the carvings are done by scratching (there are also percussion made engravings to which we will make no special reference here). We can find the representation of zoomorphic figures (especially horses but deer and dogs as well), anthropomorphic figures, weapons, some geometric figures, and an inscription which reminds us of the “Iberic” style of writing. Although there are many superpositions which make it rather delicate to study these engravings (rock 10, thought the most important in the whole set, was at first an intricate entanglement of forms), this rock art site is one of the easier to date in the country, thanks to its iconography. The horses, even though they show a certain variability, are typical of an Iron Age style, and this is corroborated by the presence of certain types of daggers (called “falcatas” in Portuguese), among other weapons (spears or darts, bows and arrows, a sword or machete, shields maybe). At rock 23 we find a horse rider upon his mount holding a spear and attacking a deer that is surrounded by dogs; this scene (especially because it has the inscription mentioned above beside it) reminds us of similar compositions in “linear art” of the Catalan Pyrenees, which has been studied by Abélanet in his book. The author himself mentions that Portuguese filiform figures seem to insert themselves into the “world” of “linear art” (even though he only refers to Pedra Letreira de Góis); it is, to say the least, an interesting hypothesis. Like Vale da Casa, Vale de Cabrões, Vermelhosa and Vale de José Esteves are all small tributaries of the Douro, located near the mouth of the Côa river. They have hundreds of engravings, some in very spectacular panels facing the Douro, like those of Vermelhosa. War scenes, with depictions of men on horses and with weapons in their hands, are common there. There is an especially interesting case of superimposition on one of the Vermelhosa panels; there, a warrior of clear Iron Age style is depicted on a much older figure of a deer. The style of the latter, with its body filled by fine, thin parallel traces, reminds us of the engraved plaques of the Parpalló cave,

in Valencian Spain. Indeed, there is a lot to do in the rock art research of this region, a real “paradise” for the archaeologist. The so called “Written Stone” of Ridevides shows in (at least apparent) disorder, a large number of symbolic figures, including reticulated ones, scalariforms, straight lines or slightly wavy ones, some elongated and in some cases starting from dots, triangular shapes, quadrangular shapes, cruciforms, etc. A part of the filiform figures are superposed by pecked motifs, at the edge of the panel. On Pedra Letreira, there are also reticulated motifs (two of them with a peculiar morphology, described as having a “shield” form), ladder like forms and triangular figures segmented inside. In some cases we might just be dealing with figurations of arrows with a triangular end; at least in one of them its association to a bow seems obvious. The representation of weapons repeats itself at Molelinhos (whose systematic study has been carried out lately by Ana L. Cunha) where, in the middle of an abundance of motifs of geometric drift, one can see “falcatas” like blades, sickle like blades and possibly daggers, spear heads, etc. Despite the identity of technique, the tendency towards the proliferation of geometric like motifs invading the rock surfaces, and the figuration of weapons (very rare in Portugal on pecked engravings) in several cases, the filiform carvings might also be connected to a wider or narrower chronology, and therefore a more complete study is necessary in order to allow for a wider focus and for a better understanding of their possible relation to other peninsular filiform groups (in the area of Cáceres — Spanish Estremadura — and in the Catalan Pyrenees). It is obvious that we are, at least partially, dealing with protohistoric figurations (Iron Age), but which might of course have more ancient roots and further developments.

## 7. CLOSING STATEMENTS

There are only a few researchers working on our prehistoric art and only in the last twenty years, approximately, have we witnessed the growth of field research with a strong methodological basis. On the other hand, this is one of the domains in archaeology where subjectivism (in the bad sense of the word, *i. e.*, methodological and interpretative improvisation) most easily pervades, as is visible through several symptoms such as overrating of a new piece of information which is then thought of as the “key” to a whole set of problems, the decontextualized comparison of facts in order to establish chronological-cultural conclusions, losing the notion of “scale” that rules certain inferences, the easy slip from descriptive analysis to interpretation suggested by the terminology used (loaded with “subjectivity”) and which is made familiar through repeated use, etc.

The style of description is often (bad) literature prone, manifesting confusion between the object and the method of the investigation. One observes also, and more frequently than not, the use of categoric expressions as if the conclusion reached was the only natural and logical one. Refraining from any exercise of cheap psychoanalysis, this still seems to be something of a subconscious compensation for the natural difficulties the author faces when trying to “interpret” the often so enigmatic prehistoric rock art figures.

“Megalithic art”, “art of the painted rockshelters”, “art of the Tagus valley”, “art of the engraved rocks in the North of the country”, these titles for sections of this paper are in themselves quite an arbitrary classification of the subject of our “rock art”. Sometimes it is based on the type of sites where it is to be found — megaliths, rockshelters — other times, on geographic criteria — Tagus valley, North of the country — which have variable range. None of these themes can be understood by itself, for it is quite easy — as we have underlined above — to find the same “motifs” in different contexts, nor can they be enclosed within the arbitrary historic borders of our country. Of all the groups considered, only the one in the Tagus valley is practically all on Portuguese territory, but even here we find echoes (or origins) of diverse peninsular “influences”.

Notwithstanding the specific methodology required, research on rock art can only profit from its insertion in regional research projects that might unravel the context of settlement and its evolution, establishing an ever more solid framework in which to include those manifestations.

In this paper, as we said before, we merely tried to present a general outline of the subject to a public of English language readers, because it deserves closer attention from our colleagues in other countries, if they want to obtain a more comprehensive view of the Western European rock art. The thousands of Côa engravings, many of them of Palaeolithic age — opening an entirely new way of viewing Palaeolithic art —, the paintings and carvings on the orthostats of our passage graves, and the thousands of petroglyphs of the Tagus valley, to name just three of the matters treated above, are indeed part of an important heritage of humanity, in its early graphic expression.

We need every honest colleague to help us in the urgent study, safeguarding, divulgation and presentation to the public of this unique world heritage, one of the most important features of a country which is so small in its territory, but so diversified in its prehistoric art\*.

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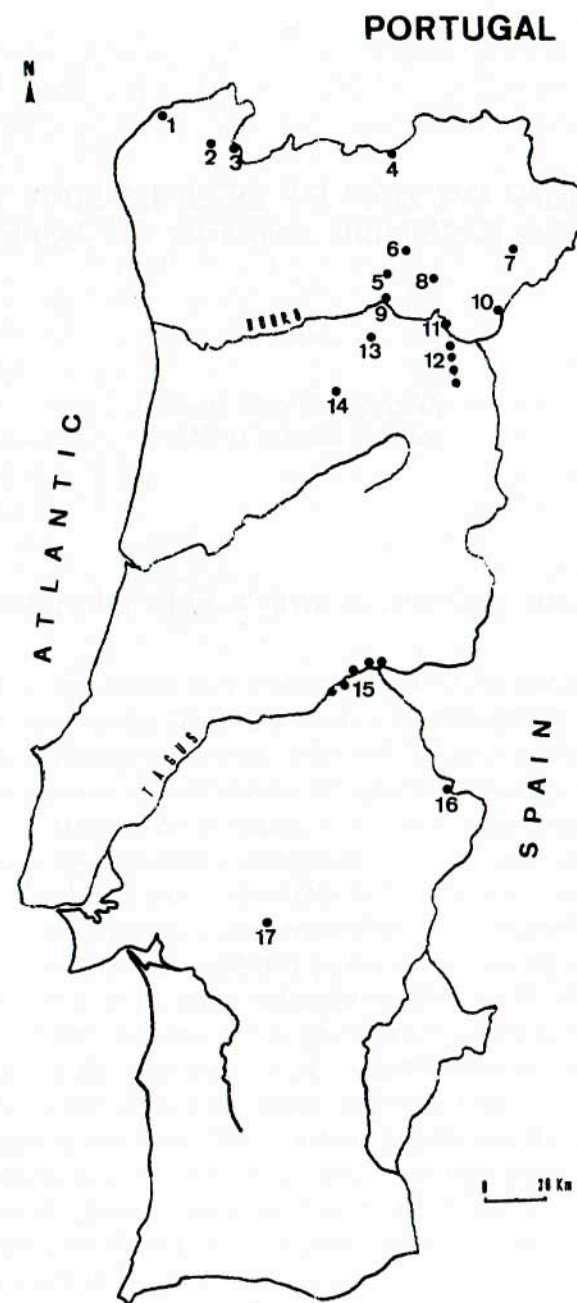
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Some of the main sites and areas mentioned in the text: 1. Monte da Laje; 2. Gião; 3. Bouça do Colado; 4. Tripe; 5. Pala Pinta; 6. Serra de Passos; 7. Penas Róias; 8. Cabeço da Mina; 9. Cachão da Rapa; 10. Mazouco; 11. Vale da Casa; 12. Cõa area; 13. Fraga d'Aia; 14. Juncais passage grave; 15. Tagus area; 16. Serra dos Louçães; 17. Escoural.